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Letters from a Military Brat

Dad never seemed to be around long enough before he was shipped out again

By Kat Avila | Web Published 12.11.2004

In a patriarchal and militaristic society, servicemen are the focus of the media; you rarely read about the people they are connected to, namely their wives (or husbands) and children who will share the servicemen's post-war adjustment or maladjustment. I grew up on military bases during the Vietnam era with other children whose fathers were in the service. Going to war was just a part of your father's job. Then you went to school and learned that human history is a never-ending series of wars.



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My most vivid memories from that time include learning of my neighbor and classmate Angelica's father's death during the war and watching Japanese communists fervently protesting the Vietnam War outside the secure gates of the base where my dad was stationed in Japan. As the military intervention in Iraq continues, a new generation of families follows military service personnel around the world.

What follows is a reprint of a piece I did for JADE Magazine two years ago which touched on interracial marriages between Asian women and American servicemen; it has been edited for

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"I MISS YOU, DAD": LETTERS FROM A MILITARY BRAT

My mom was in one of her garage-cleaning moods and found several letters I had written to my dad when I was eight years old. At the time, he had been assigned to the repair ship USS Ajax (AR-6). The ship's home port was U.S. Fleet Activities, Sasebo, Japan, once the home of the Imperial Japanese Navy. We lived there in off-base housing for over three years before he was transferred again.

As a military brat, it just seemed normal for dads to be away for months at a time. They were these strange men in uniform who sailed back in our lives periodically with their arms filled with woodcarvings from Manila and Subic Bay in the Philippines, jade from Hong Kong, dolls from China, and treasures from other mysterious ports that beckoned with entertainment and shopping districts filled with bars, nightclubs, and black markets. You wrote letters as often as you could so your dad wouldn't be left empty-handed at mail call.

"June 9, 19XX. Dear Dad, I do everything wrong every time. The last time I spilled milk on the table, chair and my clothes. I had hard whip with mom's hand. The next day I broke the door for dishes. I again had a hard whip with mom's hand. Mommy had to take the car to the garage. Because the car made too much noise. And mommy was sick at one night. She has too many troubles to worry. I'm pass. I'm going to 3rd grade in September. I have about 13 goods on my report card. My 3rd grade teacher

is Miss Seilfing. I know because is says on the back of the report card. I have 3 or 4 bad on my report card. I'm writing a letter to Mrs. Ueoka today. God bless the U.S.S. AJAX! I miss you, Dad."

I suppose my mom had a lot to worry about. The rigors of military life require servicemen's wives to be as self-reliant as possible. Our moms had to virtually single-handedly raise their families since our dads were away so often.

"June 18, 19XX. Dear Dad, How are you today? We are all very fine over here. It had been raining, almost all day. This morning our bathroom made loud noise and it stopped. Then after that we made four Father's Day cards, and one letter. Mommy receive your savings bonds. Mommy is not taking me to the bank. Because I can't write so good. Today Mommy is paying rent. I'm writing this letter for Mom. We God bless you dad."

My mom never quite outgrew the need for her children to write letters for her, to answer the telephone and the door, and to talk to store clerks. Then it became outright clever of her to claim she didn't know much English when she didn't want to be bothered by somebody.

"June 25, 19XX. Dear Dad, How are you today. We are very fine. It was a very sunny day today. We was very hot in the house. So we went to the movies today. We went to the Snack Bar then we went home. We went home at 4:00 in the afternoon. Mommy was sick yesterday. She had a high fever. She couldn't clean the house. All she did was cook and wash us. Mommy always bought

japanese ice cream. We always have sweets every day. Mommy always says not to eat too much sweets. We miss you Dad. We hope you come home. When you come back we will go to the beach. We God bless you."

Dad never seemed to be around long enough before he was shipped out again, just when you were starting to refamiliarize yourself with his face. You drove down to the shipyard to wave goodbye. You and your sister and your brother and your long-suffering mother were always waiting for this man to come home.

Kat is currently reading African-American writer Yasmin Shiraz's "The Blueprint for My Girls: How to Build a Life Full of Courage, Determination, & Self-love," a copy of which should be in every teenage girl's room.

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