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# SECRETS TO A MILITARY MARRIAGE

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# Growing Up Military Defines a Child for a Lifetime

SOCCKER SENSATION MIA HAMM, PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE JOHN MCCAIN AND OTHER FAMOUS BRATS DISCUSS THE MILITARY LIFESTYLE'S IMPACT ON THEIR LIVES.

by Andrea Downing Peck

**T**he dictionary defines “military brat” as a child from a military family, but understanding what makes growing up military unique requires examining the caldron of ingredients – frequent moves, transient friendships, exposure to different cultures, races and beliefs, and a sense of mission – that blend together to define a military brat’s childhood. Today, nearly 900,000 children are being raised in active duty military families, according to 2008 Department of Defense statistics.

While the label “military brat” disappears at adulthood, the experience of growing up military marks a person for a lifetime. An estimated 15 million Americans are former military brats. Included in those ranks are the famous; Senator John McCain, actresses Jessica Alba and Marcia Gay Harden, and sports stars Shaquille O’Neal and Mia Hamm, as well as the ordinary; perhaps your child’s baseball coach or Girl Scouts leader.

Donna Musil, an Army brat, knew her childhood made her feel “different” from her civilian peers. As a child, she had moved 12 times in 16 years, spent time overseas, and made a final move to Georgia to finish high school, two weeks after her father, a military judge, died. It was not until two decades later when she reconnected with high school classmates from Taegue, Korea, that Musil realized she shared her differences with the military brats who shared a similar childhood.

A filmmaker, Musil set out to create

a documentary that would capture the essence of growing up military. For six years, Musil interviewed adult brats of all ages and ethnicities to record their first-person accounts of the military brat culture and occasional struggles to fit in as adults.

Musil’s award-winning film, “Brats: Our Journeys Home,” has been screened on military bases and in cities throughout the country and overseas. In the process Musil and countless other brats have gained an understanding of their past and found a place they can call “home.” (To learn more about the movie, go to [www.bratsfilm.com](http://www.bratsfilm.com).)

“I really learned there are 15 million people out there just like me,” Musil said. “I am not alone. I wasn’t crazy to think I was a little bit different from other American kids. I was like the American kids who grow up as I did. It was a wonderful feeling.”

Military brats may be unable to give a one-word answer when asked, “Where are you from?” Musil said, but they do share a place of origin.

“Our home is not a place,” she said. “It’s each other. It’s a shared experience rather than a piece of real estate.”

Brats are bound together by common experiences that transcend branch of service, rank or duty station. They often take similar strengths into adulthood. While some military children are scarred by the transient nature of their childhoods, most brats are thankful for a lifestyle that taught them tolerance toward other races and cultures, fostered a sense of mission and patriotism, and

introduced them to the world outside America’s borders.

“One thing we do well is succeed,” said Musil, who practiced law prior to launching her writing and film career. “We’re taught how to work hard and how to push ourselves and to try to succeed. What we have to work on a little bit is learning how to trust, learning how to be intimate, learning how to let go of control.”

*Military Spouse* spoke to a few of the nation’s most successful and famous military brats to find out the impact growing up military had on their lives.

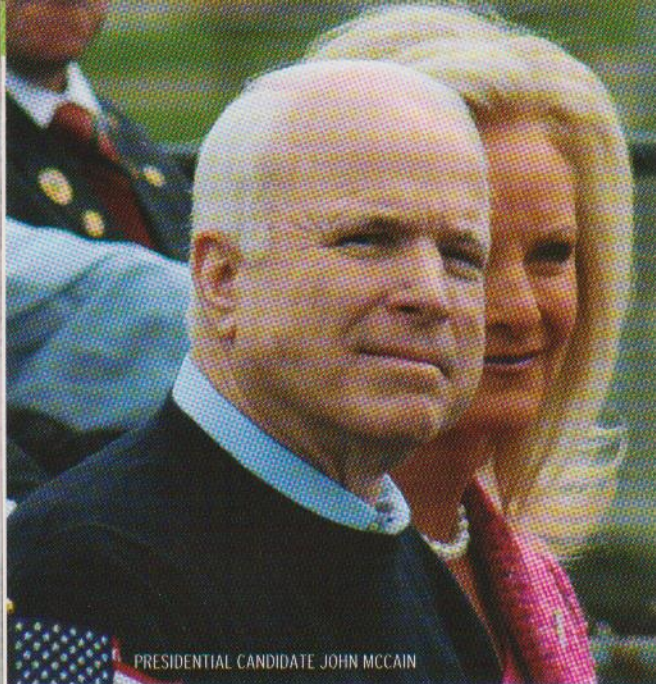
## JOHN MCCAIN

Republican presidential candidate John McCain could arguably be called the U.S. Navy’s most famous “brat.” McCain’s grandfather and father were the first pair of father/son four-star admirals in the Navy, and McCain followed in their footsteps. He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1958 and spent 23 years in the Navy, including five and a half years as a prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, before retiring in 1981 with the rank of captain. McCain was born at Coco Solo Naval Air Station in the Panama Canal Zone and spent his childhood moving between US Naval bases.

McCain says the values of “duty, honor, country and respect and love for this nation and a willingness to serve and, if necessary, sacrifice for it” were passed down to him from his father and grandfather.

“There’s very little doubt that people





PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE JOHN MCCAIN

who serve in the military devote their lives to the service of their country, a cause greater than their own self-interest," McCain said, "and that becomes instilled in military families as well. They are part of the service and sacrifice."

Like most military families, McCain's mother, Roberta, took on the role of solo parent during her husband's absences. She obviously handled the task well. McCain says one of his favorite childhood memories is being in the car with his older sister and younger brother as his mother moved them across the country while their father was serving during World War II.

"Not only was it not a bad experience for us," McCain said, "but she made it a very lively one for us by stopping at numerous historic places along the way."

McCain says the value system he formed in childhood and strengthened through his own military service remains engrained in him today.

"My values are still those that I learned from my family and from my friends and associations with people in the military," McCain said. "The greatest experience of my life in many ways and the worst experience was being in prison. It was a very difficult time, but I had the privilege of serving in the company of heroes and I observed a thousand acts of courage and compassion."

If he becomes the nation's 44th president, McCain says he will bring

into office the desire "to make sure you always do the right thing" — a value instilled in him by his family and military service.

"Sometimes you are tempted to take a shortcut or even violate your own standards that you believe in," he said. "I think my military heritage and my father and grandfather have been an important item in making sure, while it may not be the most popular, you should try to always do the right thing. I have not always

succeeded in that, but at least I have had that goal."

#### MIA HAMM

The all-time leading scorer in international soccer competition, Mia Hamm, helped lead the United States to two Olympic gold medals and two World Championships during her 17-year career. Considered the greatest female soccer player of her generation, Hamm has been a champion off the field as well, heading the Mia Hamm Foundation.

Hamm's father, Bill, was an Air Force pilot, and Hamm says she valued the sense of community that came from living on a military base. In her earliest years, Hamm hopscotched between duty

moving, there was just that sense of this is what we do. I think that had the biggest impact on me."

Col. Bill Hamm went to flight school in Selma, Alabama, and later served as an instructor in a pilot exchange program. Hamm says her father's time in Selma during the height of the civil rights movement, and his experiences teaching foreign pilots in the U.S. exchange program, created a free-thinking mentality that was passed on to his six children.

"He had to have an open mind and listen," Mia said. "It had a huge impact on us growing up. We were very much freethinkers and allowed to express our opinions. My dad said, 'if you want people to listen to you, be educated.'"

Bill Hamm also passed on a sense of mission to his daughter. Inspired by the death of her brother Garrett in 1997 from complications related to aplastic anemia, Hamm formed The Mia Hamm Foundation, which has been instrumental in increasing awareness about the bone marrow registry. The organization also works to promote initiatives for young women in sports. Hamm, who first honed her soccer skills on Air Force base youth teams, wants to see opportunities for female athletes continue to grow.

"Whether these young girls have a career in athletics isn't what is important," said Hamm, now the mother of twin daughters. "It's the lessons and the things they learn about themselves

"My values are still those that I learned from my family and from my friends and associations with people in the military." - John McCain

stations, spending time in Alabama, California, Italy and Virginia before settling in Texas. Hamm credits her military upbringing for instilling the self-sufficiency that enabled her to join the U.S. national team at age 15 and graduate high school early to enroll at top-ranked University of North Carolina.

"Having to do certain tasks on my own wasn't a big deal," she said, "because we did that a lot. In regards to

and how to interact with other people through sports that's important."

Hamm, who is married to Los Angeles Dodger Nomar Garciaparra, says a childhood spent on military bases, where life comes to a standstill each day during the raising or lowering of colors, has left her with one gripe when attending a sporting event.

"When you are at a game, it's a pet peeve of mine when people don't stop for



the national anthem," Hamm said. "They continue to walk to their seat. [Standing still] is an easy sign of respect for everything involved, not only the people who serve, but the freedoms and choices you have in this country. It's an easy way to stop and reflect and appreciate all those who have gone before and those who continue to preserve those freedoms."

#### NEWT GINGRICH

Former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich was one of the architects of the Republican Party's "Contract with America," which in 1994 helped return the party to the majority in the U.S. House of Representatives after a 40-year absence. Gingrich represented the Sixth District of Georgia for 20 years until retiring from Congress in 1998. An author and historian with a doctorate in modern European history, Gingrich remains a strong voice of the political right.

The son of an Army colonel, Ging-

"I would rather have the chaotic, disorganized and undisciplined young Americans who are not necessarily part of a military culture become more like Army brats than I would have Army brats become like people who may not have a very organized life as a lesson available to them," he said. "I actually believe now that I have had a fairly long life that a lot of stuff is black and white. Things like 'clean up your room' actually mean 'clean up your room.'"

#### "HELOISE"

You may not know this military brat by her given name, "Ponce" Kiah Machel Cruse, but newspaper columnist "Heloise" is well known to decades of readers of the "Hints from Heloise" column that appears in more than 500 newspapers nationwide.

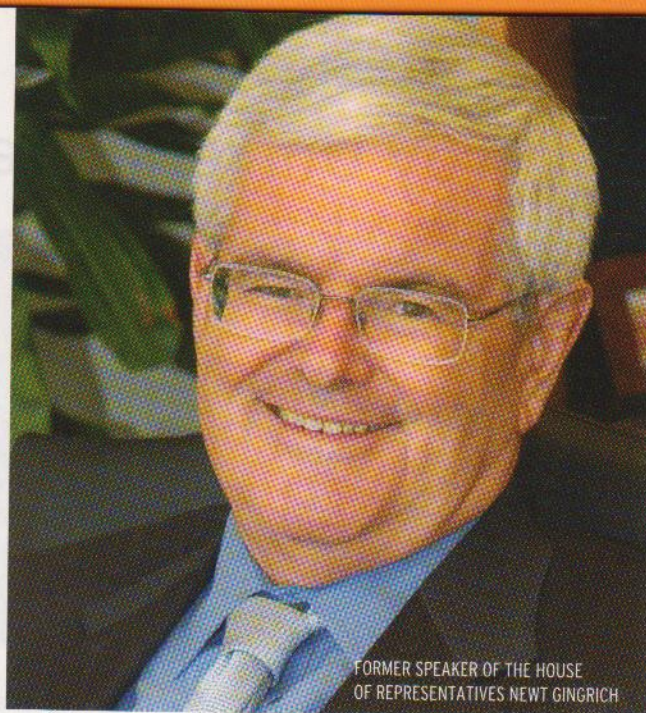
living in Hawaii. The original Heloise knew how to make do, once using beet juice to dye a tablecloth an orchid color for a wives' club function in China after testing the color on her hair.

Heloise says learning how to improvise and adapt are lessons a military childhood provides.

"The training you get, it's not official," she said, "but the experiences you go through, the situations you handle. What it did for me is I can walk into a room, into a hospital or business center, any place in the world. I may not be able to speak the language well, but I can take care of myself. That's part of what growing up military teaches you."

Like many military brats, Heloise also carried with her into adulthood a sense of patriotism. Not wanting to "give in" to terrorists, she refused to cancel speaking engagements immediately after 9/11, opting to drive from Texas to Indiana, if necessary, to fulfill her contract. She also declines payment when speaking to military organizations and promotes military families whenever possible in her speeches and writing.

"It's not a secret club or anything, but civilians cannot understand what it means to be a military family," she said. "I don't care how many TV shows they watch or how many movies they see. It's not their fault. It is the same as that I can't understand somebody who is raised on a farm, butchers their pig, and eats it for Sunday dinner." **MSM**



FORMER SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES NEWT GINGRICH

**"Far and away, growing up in the Army and experiencing that life was the most important, formative experience of my entire life." - Newt Gingrich**

rich spent his youth in Fort Riley, Kan., France, Germany, and Fort Benning, Ga. He credits growing up in the Army with instilling in him a passion for military history as well as providing him with the tools, skills and determination to succeed as an adult.

"Far and away, growing up in the Army and experiencing that life was the most important, formative experiences of my entire life," Gingrich said. "I learned to say, 'Yes, sir' and 'No, ma'am.' I learned to be respectful and courteous and I learned I had an obligation to others, whether it was my family or my neighborhood or my team."

As common in many military families, Gingrich's childhood included strict discipline and rules of behavior. Today, Gingrich clearly sees the value in his upbringing.

Heloise, whose father was an Air Force colonel, says her father's military service allowed her to be a witness to history. The family was stationed in Hawaii in 1959 when it became the nation's 50th state. She also lived in an Arlington, Va., apartment overlooking the Pentagon and Washington Monument when President Kennedy was assassinated and when Martin Luther King led the March on Washington in 1963. A few years later, Heloise served on the student council when her white junior high school integrated with the nearby black junior high.

"Those are some of the things I now look back at and realize, 'wow, that was pretty darn historical,'" Heloise said.

Heloise's mother began the newspaper column of household hints and lifestyle tips in 1959 when the family was