

September 2007
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The Official U.S. Army Magazine

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Earning the Badge

On Being a

“Brat”

Story by Ms. Rachael Tolliver

IN the early 1990s Donna Musil, a labor lawyer turned writer, was surfing the Internet and came across a Web site about kids she had gone to school with while she was in Korea. Her father had been in the Army and her family moved a lot.

“It was exciting,” she said. “I contacted some of the kids, and we

Ms. Rachael Tolliver is the associate editor of the Fort Knox, Ky., “Turret.”

had an impromptu reunion, but it was then that I realized who I was.”

She said the reunion gave her answers to questions and nagging doubts she had had for years. So she started developing a movie script to document who she is and where she came from.

Ms. Musil is one of millions of Americans who are known as “military brats” — children who grew

up on U.S. military bases and posts and sometimes struggled to fit into a society with which some brats have little in common.

Her father was stationed at Fort Knox, Ky., in the mid-1970s, where he was a military attorney and judge.

Ms. Musil has told the story of the little-known subculture of military brats in a documentary she called “Brats: Our Journey Home.” It was a seven-year labor of love, she said. The documentary was shown recently at the historic State Theater Complex in Elizabethtown, Ky.

She made the movie with the help of a crew of military brats, to let other brats know they belong to a unique subculture of America and that they aren’t alone.

“It’s a documentary, not an exposé or a recruiting film,” she said. “Some of the things brats face when they get out into the ‘real’ world are different from what nonmilitary kids leaving home and entering college or the workforce face. There are so many common threads for us, like



◀ Donna Musil, seen here (at left) as a teen-aged Army “brat” living in Korea, wrote and directed the documentary film “Brats: Our Journey Home.”

Ms. Musil made the film to let other “brats” know they belong to a unique American subculture, and that they aren’t alone.

growing up with a sense of mission.

“Our parents aren’t in the military for the money, but the sense of mission,” Ms. Musil said. “But, in the real world people are motivated by money, and that can be hard to take. In the military, things are basically black and white, but the real world is full of gray areas.”

Singer-songwriter-actor Kris Kristofferson, who was an Air Force brat, a former Army helicopter pilot and Rhodes scholar, narrates the film and allowed the project to use his

music. And Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf (Ret.) describes his experiences as an Army brat and the father of brats.

Other people introduced in the film are average people who represent a wide area of America. The common thread for all of them is the experience of being a military brat, and the way that has shaped their lives. But there are other connecting threads.

“Some brats don’t collect anything, and don’t ever unpack things because they think, ‘What’s the point?

We’re going to move again soon.’ Then others collect everything and don’t throw anything away,” said Ms. Musil.

For producer Tim Wurtz, a brat who also spent some time in the Army in the early 1970s, the movie is about telling other brats they have a home, too, and it’s in people, not places.

“Because of the way we grew up, we are disassociated with geographic locations,” he said.

According to Mr. Wurtz, leav-



▲ Michele Green (at left) who’s featured in the documentary, spent several years of her childhood at Fort Knox, Ky. Here she enjoys a Sunday outing with a fellow “brat.”



▲ During the first Gulf War Army “brats” could be seen at virtually every Army installation worldwide, showing support for the Soldiers who were deploying to, or returning from, the war zone.



▲ Though living in foreign countries, Army “brats” stay in touch with American culture through such things as school and sporting events.

ing the military culture after growing up in it and stepping into the “other” world, can be a shock.

“When I came Stateside to go to college, I was at a loss. I had never come in contact with rich people. And I have spoken with other brats who have had the same experience. I didn’t know how to use a pay phone, because I never needed to use one — that was before cell phones were available.

“When I walked into a supermarket with my cousins I automatically

pulled out my ID card, but there was no one to look at it, so I quickly put it away. I had never walked into a supermarket and not needed to show my ID,” Mr. Wurtz added.

But Mr. Wurtz, who earned a degree in international studies from the University of Denver, and has written and produced various feature films and TV movies, said growing up in the military had its advantages. “It was a more structured way to grow up. I knew what to expect. The people changed, but the environment didn’t.”

By moving around the country and traveling overseas, military children learn that there is more to

the world than America. They tend to develop a sense of community from being around the military.

For all the differences between growing up in the military verses in the civilian world, Ms. Musil said it’s been her experience that there’s very little discussion about the lifestyles and feelings of brats.

Saying goodbye to friends, family, coaches, the reputation one develops at a particular school — all of these things are very traumatic, she said. “The minute you get everything all built up, you lose it all again.”

But she has discovered through question-and-answer sessions at screenings of her documentary, and through e-mails and letters, that the

By moving around the country and traveling overseas, military children learn that there is more to the world than America.

▶ Though “brats” tend to move around a lot, school events and such special occasions as graduation ceremonies help build bonds that last a lifetime.

film is opening dialogue between military children and their parents.

“It helps the rooted and uprooted to connect,” she said. “If you didn’t move around, and your kids do, then you don’t understand why they think the way they do or do the things they do. If you did move around as a kid, and your kids don’t, then you don’t understand why they think the way they do, or do the things they do either.”

For more information about Ms. Musil’s documentary, visit www.bratsfilm.com, or www.bratsourjourneyhome.com.

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- Trailer
- Filmaker
- Purchasing the DVD
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