

USAA

MAGAZINE

A MEMBER'S GUIDE TO FINANCIAL SECURITY

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YOU
NEED**

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MYTHS
BUSTED**

**STUNG BY
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COVER PHOTO: RYAN ETTER



Growing Up MILITARY



Donna Musil relaxing in the backyard in Fort Bragg, N.C., in the late 1960s.



Jacey Eckhart's family bound for Korea.



Jacey Eckhart

Jacey Eckhart is an Air Force brat and Navy wife. Her book, *The Homefront Club: The Hardheaded Woman's Guide to Raising a Military Family*, has been heralded as an upbeat, how-to manual for military spouses.

BY JACEY ECKHART

ONE OF THE CLASSIC signs of military bratitude is the telltale fumbling for an answer to the innocent question, "Where are you from?"

Regular people say things like, "Ohio" or "San Diego." Like other military brats, I tend to recite the litany of where I was born and where I graduated from high school and where we were stationed the longest and where I lived most recently. I stop this fascinating journey of self-discovery only when I notice that my listener's eyes have glazed over. Then I mumble, "Ohio." Or "San Diego."

This isn't a good feeling. Sometimes I find myself wondering if my own three military kids will also fumble for answers to this most basic of questions when they are adults. Or will they be saved from military brathood by the powers of Facebook and Vonage, mobile phones, texting, geographic bachelorhood and all those episodes of "Army Wives"?

While different generations of military brats experience military life in unique ways, filmmaker and Army brat Donna Musil has witnessed many more similarities between the generations during the filming of "BRATS: Our Journey Home." Not only did patterns emerge among the 500 military brats she interviewed for the project, but military kids still come up to her to thank her for saying the things they couldn't put into words about their military lives.

"I've been showing the film for people from 12 to 80," Musil says. "A lot of the stuff is the same. A lot of the stuff will always be the same."





Donna's father, Louis "Bud" Musil, then a major and JAG officer with the 8th Infantry Division in Bad Kreuznach, Germany, sees his youngest daughter, Tisa, off to school in 1970. Musil, now deceased, retired from the U.S. Army as a lieutenant colonel.



Donna and Tisa Musil on a layover in Hawaii on their way from Fort Mason, Calif., to Seoul, Korea, in 1973.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAY NG



Donna Musil



That shouldn't surprise us much. Kids with a parent in a war zone will always worry. Kids who live overseas will always be a bit more culturally savvy than their stateside counterparts. Kids will always, always hate to move away from their friends.

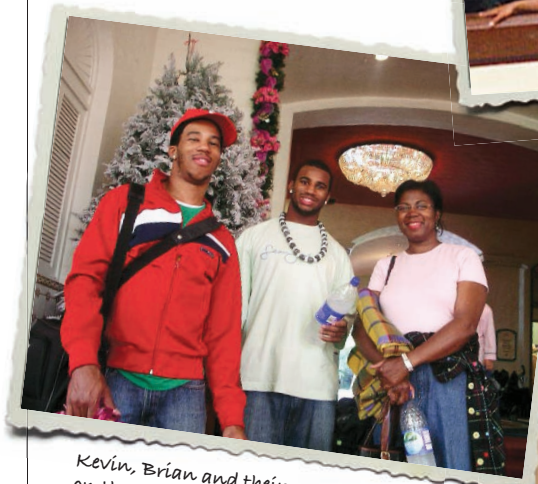
"It's harder than you think for a middle schooler or a high schooler to move," says Navy brat Kevin Calhoun. "I definitely think you become a chameleon. You move in, go neutral, learn to blend with everyone else." For Calhoun, this meant that he had to change sports when men's gymnastics wasn't available at his new high school. It meant that when he found out his school needed trombonists in the band, he learned to play trombone. By his senior year, Calhoun had learned to blend in so well that he stood out, as his election as president of his high school class will attest.

Calhoun's younger brother, Brian, had a different experience with military life. Brian didn't change to suit the military; his father bent the military schedule to accommodate Brian. Many military families accomplish this by pushing a moving date forward or backward to accommodate the beginning or ending of school. The Calhouns took on a geographic bachelor tour.

"I was a freshman when my dad got orders to Japan," Brian remembers. "We had a family sit-down. He gave us the option to move or not to



Kevin and Brian Calhoun, ages 6 and 3, at Disney World in Orlando, Fla., with their dad, Andrew, in 1987.



Kevin, Brian and their mom, Brenda, on the steps of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu in November 2005. Brian led the University of Wisconsin football team to a win over the University of Hawaii by rushing for 149 yards and a touchdown.

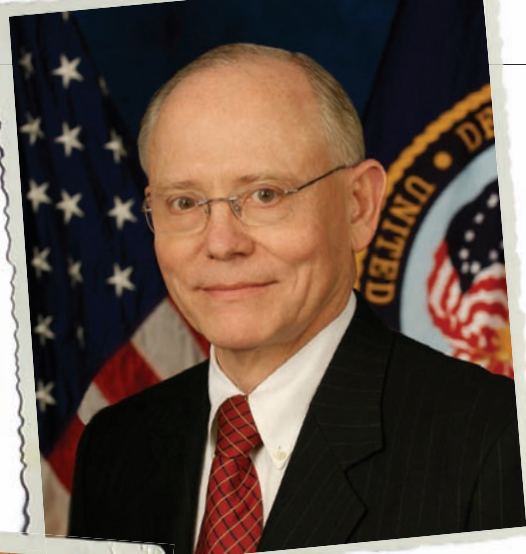


Brian Calhoun

PHOTOGRAPHY OF DONNA MUSIL AND FAMILY COURTESY OF DONNA MUSIL

PHOTOGRAPHY OF BRIAN CALHOUN AND FAMILY COURTESY OF ANDREW CALHOUN

James Peake, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, holding a press conference.



James Peake, Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs.



move. I was adamant about staying. I was on varsity for track, basketball and football."

The family decided that the best thing was for Dad to do an unaccompanied tour in Okinawa. "My dad didn't hesitate at all. He did it," says Brian.

Not that it was easy. Brian gives his mom a lot of the credit. "No matter what, it's hard not seeing your dad for a year," he says.

His dad returned from that tour at an especially important time for Brian. He was getting noticed as a college football prospect. During the recruiting process, Brian received hundreds of offers from colleges. "It was a pretty stressful time, but exciting," says Brian. While his dad was stationed close to home at Naval Station Great Lakes during his junior year, he was transferred to Virginia during his senior year. "My dad was always

there for me when I needed him," says Brian. This meant that his dad would jump on a plane from Virginia to Chicago, then drive the rest of the way to get to the Friday night football game, then rush back to the ship on Saturday night. That year, Brian's dad only missed two games out of nine.

Now a running back for the Detroit Lions, Brian says, "I'm proud of being a military kid. I wouldn't change it. I wouldn't be the type of young man I am without my mom and my dad."

Older generations of military brats are also benefiting from a new appreciation of how military life affected them and an even newer ability to heal some of those childhood breaches. It is not uncommon for military brats to visit former war zones like Vietnam or Korea either with their fathers or alone to try to understand that part of their families' military life.

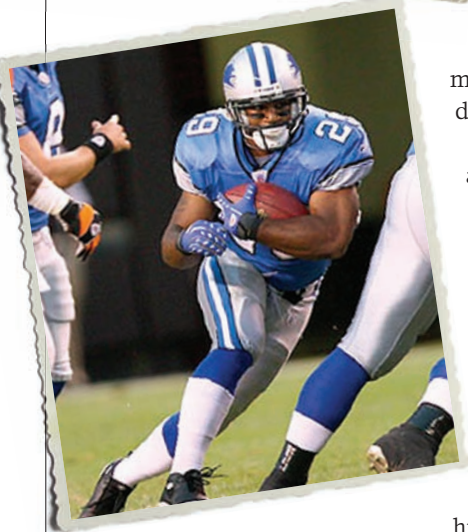
Current Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs James Peake was raised in overseas military communities. As a fourth-grader, he remembers the family attending Retreat every Friday night. "I have vivid memories," says Peake. "It was a small installation and all the troops came out in dress uniforms. They would play Retreat and lower the flag. It reminded you of what we're all about."

During his own military career, Peake had the opportunity to go back and see houses he had lived in as a boy. One of his greatest experiences was renting a car in Japan and returning to his old neighborhood to find some of the boys he used to know. "One little old lady held onto my arm so tight she almost broke it off when she found out who I was," he says.

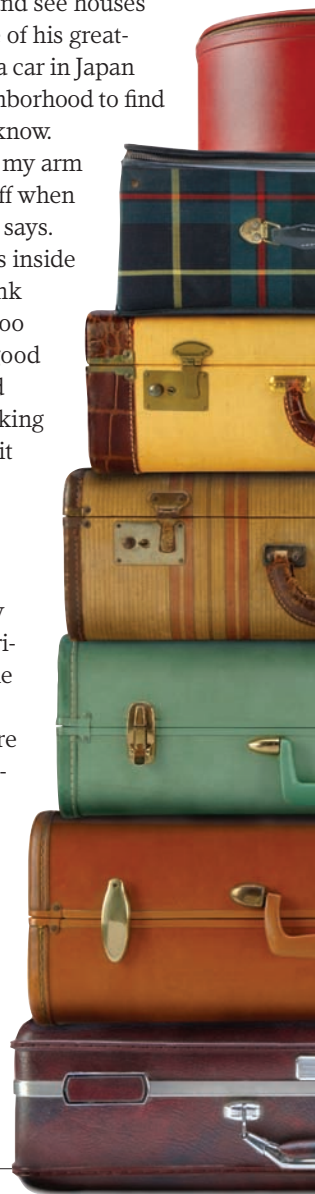
Peake raised his own kids inside the military and doesn't think of the experience as being too terrible at all. "Sometimes good experiences come from bad experiences," he says. "Thinking back on it, I wouldn't trade it for nothin'."

Even though we military parents are getting better at seeing how military life affects our kids, we can't allow ourselves to take their experiences for granted. "One of the toughest jobs in the military is being a kid because you are trying to form your personality through all this," says Musil. "The more people can understand it, the more they can deal with the fallout. We have a responsibility to understand those challenges that brats face and try to make life easier for them."

Perhaps we start with something as simple as



Brian Calhoun takes the handoff and is on the move against the Cleveland Browns during a 2007 pre-season game.



teaching our kids where they are from. When people ask my kids where they are from, I'll teach them to answer that they are from the Navy. I'll stop my own fumbling and start answering that I am from the Air Force — like other kids are from the Army or the Coast Guard or the Marine Corps.

I'll have to hope that in those few words other people will understand that my children and I are from houses that all look alike. We're from pilots in flight suits who unfold from tiny convertibles and moms in combat boots and

fatigues. We're from stereos blaring from the barracks and that full aisle of ramen noodles at the commissary.

Most important, we are from people who sometimes put themselves in danger because they believed in something bigger than themselves. We will have to trust that others will understand that we are the people who went along with them on that ride — and that has made all the difference. ■



★ MARRYING THE MILITARY ★

My sister grabbed my arm and stopped dead on the hot sidewalk. "Oh, man, is he a hunk," Mary breathed. Yeah, "hunk." That's a direct quote. It was 1979. What can I say?

"Oooh ahhhhh," is what I said at the time. I let my 13-year-old eyes linger on the big beefy airman running by in a USAF T-shirt.

Mary instantly saw I'd lit upon the wrong hunk. "Not him," Mary snapped. "HIM!" She pointed to a guy with a ZZ Top beard riding by on a motorcycle.

I should have known right then it was a very bad sign. Not for her, for me. She would end up very happily married to a guy on a motorcycle. I would end up happily married to a guy in the military.

This was not my plan. I didn't set out to marry my sailor because he was a sailor. I think I married him because he was sweet to my grandmother and because he made me tremble when he kissed me. I married

him because this one young man in uniform made every other guy I knew seem like so much less in comparison.

My sister says I shouldn't be surprised at my happily ever after. She reminds me that the brain is a pattern-making, pattern-repeating device. According to her, it isn't any wonder that I ended up with a military guy who looks, acts and works just like our military dad. It isn't any wonder she ended up with a guy who was enlisted in the Air Force and when he got out, bought a motorcycle and grew out his hair until he looked like Dusty Hill.

"Face it, kid," she said. "We were doomed by our biology."

I don't think it is that simple. Not every military kid gets the hots for anyone in a uniform. But I do think there is something unspoken happening when military brats choose to join the military themselves or marry into it.

I think sometimes we choose this life because we are comforted by the familiar geography. The guards at the gate. The ships at the pier. The conversation-stopping sound of freedom soaring over the house. These military markers speak the language of home to me and mine in the same way that



civilians hear home in the hot gust of a Santa Ana wind or smell it in the jambalaya or see it in the light of a crocus shooting through snow.

Now that my husband has been in for 22 years, we toy with the idea of a life after the military. We plan aloud to settle near a military base somewhere, telling our families we want to be close to the medical facilities or the commissary benefits. But my sister only nods and smiles her secret smile. I know she is picturing me as a little old lady peering over my steering wheel, stopping my car on base to allow some Marine or a SEAL or an airman race by in running shorts.

"Oooh ahhhhh," she knows I'll croon to my old lady self. "What a hunk." — Jacey Eckhart

