BOOK REVIEW

Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress
by Mary Edwards Wertsch


That my father and I both grew up in "U.S. Marine Families" used to be a hot topic only with my therapist. Recently, however, Marine families have become a most marketable commodity: first Pat Conroy's novel "The Great Santini" and the subsequent film based on it; then the television sitcom version, "Major Dad;" and now Mary Wertsch's "exploration of the long-term psychological effects of growing up in warrior society."

"Military brat" was a term we answered to but never used; Wertsch, being an "Army brat" herself, is entitled to do so. Her book contains much introspection and recollection, but she is at her best as anthropologist, looking into the lives of other military families. A good investigative journalist, she interviews all the appropriate sources: over eighty of her baby-boomer contemporaries, military fathers and their wives, civilian therapists and Defense Department social workers.

For the hundreds of thousands of children who grew up in military families and who lived significant portions of their childhoods on military bases, there are dozens of telling vignettes and anecdotes that ring true--as true as the scenes in "The Great Santini" of pre-dawn departures in the family car laden with possessions, beating the traffic en route to a new posting. As true as the bitterness of a father's disappointment when his son decides not to follow him into the military. And as true as the rigid, well-understood etiquette that "Upstairs" (Officers) never fraternizes with "Downstairs" (Enlisted personnel) neighbors and that their children do not become friends.

Two aspects of Wertsch's "Fortress" were particularly surprising: First, the amount of truly pathological behavior (in addition, of course, to the basic premise of the trade): severe and widespread alcoholism; child abuse, both verbal and sexual; wife-beating and outrageous authoritarianism. I experienced father-absence, frequent relocation and pressures to conform but never thought them in the least unusual or lamentable. If Wertsch's litany of abuses is accurate, it is hard to imagine how the American military has been able to function.

Secondly, it was a revelation to hear from the "invisible daughters" of military families. At least until very recently the military was an exclusively male-oriented society, and it was tough enough for a young man to come through such a childhood with his sensitivities still intact. Coming from a family of three boys I never considered how psychologically devastating "growing up in the Marines" must have been for a girl.

Fighter pilots are always in vogue--from Robert Duvall's Bull Meacham in "The Great Santini" to Tom Cruise's Maverick in "Top Gun"--but one of my minor quibbles with Wertsch is the over-representation of fighter pilots and their families. While it does have an air arm, the Marine Corps is principally structured for amphibious warfare; there are many more Marine bureaucrats than pilots. Even the Air Force has infinitely more desks than planes.
As amateur anthropologist—particularly as an acknowledged *participant* anthropologist—Wertsch is on solid ground. But the last part of her book attempts to establish a cause-and-effect relationship between military upbringing and later life, establishing personality traits and social skills common to all "children of the fortress." Authoritarian, patriarchal families in civilian society are not dissimilar to Wertsch's military families, although the social contexts are different.

My prototypical Marine Officer was not heroic, larger-than-life Chesty Puller, nor bad-boy Pappy Boyington and his "Black Sheep" aviators, nor pugnacious Bull Meacham (and certainly not the air-head played by Gary Lockwood in the 1960's series "The Lieutenant"). He was my father, a successful career Marine who retired in 1971 as a full Colonel. I went to Canada the same year (1969) he took his Marine battalion to Viet Nam. The emotionally unexpressive man (himself the son of a career Marine) who practically disowned me also later adapted successfully to civilian society, earned a Ph.D. in American History, cried with me at my younger brother's funeral, and allowed me to become his good friend. I never looked on him as significantly different from his peers, and I think that he is more representative of the contemporary American officer corps than Bull Meacham and the alcoholics and child-molesters who populate Mary Wertsch's book.

The armed services may well be monoliths, brooking little internal dissent, but they are made up of many talented, frequently humane *individuals*. Reining in the military does not require demonizing its members but, rather, recognizing that these are large organizations with the usual array of personalities and talents of any large, bureaucratically managed institution in civilian society. Individuals are not metaphors for their institutions, and "personalizing" the military obscures the basic problem of its excessive hold on American society. Romanticizing its members ("Major Dad, "Top Gun") or demonizing them ("Military Brats") deflects attention from the military's mission to the personalities of those who carry it out. And they are, paraphrasing Leonard Cohen's poetic description of the appearance of the Nazi horrormaster Adolph Eichmann, "...medium ....medium .... medium... What did you expect? Talons? Oversized incisors? Green saliva?"