

Living with Grief

The Military Model for Children and Grief

By Bonnie Carroll and Major Judy Mathewson

Ever heard the term brat? You might think it's slang for a kid who's acting up, but in the armed forces, it's an affectionate term for those children who have become a part of the American military from birth. They are the proud offspring of our nation's military members, serving in their own way by living a life dictated by the missions of our national defense policy. They have learned that constant moves, gaining and losing friends on a regular basis, adapting to exotic cultures and coping with foreign languages are the norm. The profile of Women's World Cup Soccer star Mia Hamm says it all – it lists “All over” for her home town – and then goes on to explain in parenthesis that she was an “Air Force kid”. That term applies to thousands of children around the world, and their story would not be complete without an examination of how they cope with one very harsh reality of life in the military... the tragedy of sudden death.

Now imagine sitting in your Department of Defense School (“DoDS”) classroom overseas, your fifth school in eight years of elementary education, listening to your math teacher but preoccupied with the global situation and its impact on your family. Your dad is “TDY” (on temporary duty) serving in a war zone, and you are worried for his safety. Quite a load for a 13-year-old to carry, but one that all the kids in your DoDS class understand. They share your pride but also your concern.

Then it happens. The door to the classroom opens and the school nurse steps in. Everyone is tense, and fears the worse. A name is called, but it's not yours. Susan collects her books and heads for the door. She glances back and you do your best to give her a reassuring smile. You don't see her again, because the news that came that day was word her father had been killed in a land you can't even pronounce, near where your own dad is serving. You have a mixed reaction of sadness for her and fear for yourself. How close it was to being you. You hear later that Susan left quickly with her mom and little brother for the States for a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery. They came back to Germany only long enough to pack up their belongings and figure out where to go. Rumor had it they wound up back in the little Midwest town where Susan's mom had grown up, to live with Grandma for a while and try to "sort things out".

You can't imagine what this must be like. What would Susan do? How would she make friends? Would these new friends understand what life is like in the military, moving every few years, being part of a global mission, living on a base and going to schools with kids who had lived similar lives? How could you be taken away from everything familiar, from all your friends and from the world that you had grown up in, the world of the "brat" right when you need familiarity and support the most? It's all too much to comprehend, and you say an extra prayer at night for the safety of your own father and for a peace that will render him impervious to harm.

In this chapter, we will examine the traumatic loss experiences of the children of our military, and the ways in which they handle the stresses and challenges they face. We'll

share with you the tremendous strides that have been made in recent years through organizations such as the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS) and its annual Kids Camp in Washington, DC, and the support offered to families by the armed forces.

The military does a wonderful job of memorializing those who die in service to this nation. There isn't a person in this country who wasn't moved as little John-John Kennedy rendered a tiny salute as his father's casket passed, pulled by the Army's caisson, through the rows of uniform headstones standing in quiet formation at Arlington. Or, likewise, had a dry eye when his own ashes were strewn into the ocean from a Navy ship in a traditional military burial at sea. It is part of our culture, even if viewed from afar. It is the ending to so many war movies – the widow in black clutching the tiny hands of her children as the folded flag is presented and taps is played. In the world of cinema reality, this is the last time we see the stoic widow, and we are never privy to the struggle as she packs up their toys for the move or finds a new home in which to raise them alone.

For children, understanding the ceremonial aspects of a military memorial brings context to an event that has shattered their young existence. It is the final pronouncement that their parent was part of a greater whole, that the work he or she set out to do will continue, and that there is an enduring strength that will gently guide the family through the difficult days ahead. This is part of the dream of eternal life. In his commencement address at West Point, General Douglas MacArthur spoke of the “long gray line” of

soldiers who had gone before and now stood in silent watch over soldiers during battles yet to be fought. There is continuity to a death in the armed forces, and the ceremonies children participate in provide a foundation in this understanding that has been critical to their ability to cope.

The burial services are filled with tradition. A funeral director highlighted this when he related an incident that occurred when a family was left unprepared for the many ceremonial aspects of the graveside service. It seems that while the family had been forewarned about the folding and presentation of the American flag, the mournful playing of taps by trumpeters in the distance, and the fly over of three aircraft in a “missing man” formation, they were not aware there would be a 21 gun salute. This salute consists of three volleys, each fired simultaneously by 7 riflemen, and on this day, it was to take place on a hillside behind the seated mourners. One military-caliber rifle is loud... 7 fired at once are deafening. The family sitting in their chairs at the graveside on this sunny, quiet afternoon is when the first volley sounds, but none so much as Grandma, sitting in the front row, who is so startled that she faints, falls forward, and almost goes headfirst into the open grave. As people are now scrambling to grasp at her ankles and pull her back from the brink and it seems things can’t get more chaotic, a little boy in the back row jumps up and announces with childlike certainty, “THEY’VE SHOT GRANDMA!” This is certainly a scene you wouldn’t see played out at your average civil burial service.

Military memorial services are, indeed, steeped in traditions and it is often out of the mouths of babes that we hear the most honest descriptions. Garrett Schmidt, only nine-years-old at the time of his father's death in an Army C-12 crash, remembers the services this way, "The funerals are mostly when everyone cries and when everyone remembers how many good times they had with the person. When the soldiers brought in the coffin and laid it down, many people including me laid down flowers and other nice things. Yes, the funeral is always one of the hardest parts, and there's never a funeral when no one sheds a tear." He went on to describe the burial, "After the funeral, the triangular shaped flag was given to us from the soldier. The taps song was played from the trumpet. In the future you never actually get over it, you still get sad and emotional once in a while. But you do feel a little better after a few years. If I think back, I could remember a lot of things he taught me like how to ride a bike, how to tie my shoes and how to read. My Dad was a great guy and I wish he were here in person. But I know, in my heart, he's always there with me."

Garrett's view of the funeral is simple – those who cared about his dad were given a chance to remember the life that was lived, those he served with in the military honored the life he selflessly gave his nation, and Garrett himself held close the memories he had of his dad. But in the end, we do know that our loved ones remain always in our hearts.

What happens to the military member strongly impacts the family – from housing to school to social contacts to living conditions to support systems. But as quickly as the support is there and taken for granted, it can be cruelly ripped away when a traumatic

death of the military parent occurs. If a child is attending a DODS, they have a bit of a cushion in the care and understanding received in the immediate aftermath. If the military dependent is attending an off-base civilian school, the impact is even more difficult in that teachers and counselors may not understand the military culture. They may not realize that the term "dependent" now means living more and more "on the economy". What was once a "paycheck" now becomes a complex web of "entitlements" and "death benefits" granted from the military and the Department of Veterans Affairs. They watch as their remaining parent, who had never been able to start a career due to the constant moves, now struggles to navigate a maze of perplexing paperwork. The family becomes dependent on each other for support and activities. Once the dynamics change so dramatically in a military family due to a death, families sometimes find themselves in total chaos and uncertainty determining new family roles. The child who was once the little son of the "hottest fighter pilot on base", proudly wearing Dad's patches on his tiny leather-like flight jacket and sleeping in his "flight suit" pajamas, now finds himself "the man of the house" with no father to come watch his soccer games. One such boy could not have been prouder when his father was named "Army Aviator of the Year". Two months later, Dad was killed in a test helicopter crash, and they moved – away from the Army he had grown up around, away from the sound of rotor blades, and away from the other kids who understood and were envious of his father's national distinction. No one in his new school understood. No one had had a parent die. In an attempt to be "normal", he would shrug off inquiries about where his Dad was by parroting what he heard so many classmates say, "My parents are divorced. Dad doesn't visit us." It was accepted. But it wasn't the truth and left him feeling hollow inside. Eighteen months

after his Dad's death, this boy attended the TAPS Kids Camp while his mom went to the National Military Survivor Seminar. He finally found kindred souls in his fellow "brats" -- kids who could relate! As he sat in a circle listening to other stories of proud boys and girls who had lived the life he knew so well and then lost it all, he finally found a kinship. What a sense of healing took place. When it was his turn to speak, he shared without hesitation the pride he had for his father, the shock of hearing he had been killed, the fear of moving away, and the confusion of his new school. *Everyone understood.* It was liberating and normalizing.

The TAPS Kids Camp, held annually over Memorial Day in Washington, DC, offers opportunities for children between eighteen months and twenty-one years to meet other young people whose parent has died while serving in the armed forces, regardless of the cause of death. This Camp honors the deceased military member and is a personal tribute by the surviving children. While the youth are attending their Camp activities, the surviving parent is networking with other National Military Survivor Seminar attendees, learning about grief and loss, post traumatic stress, and benefits they may qualify for as military dependents in a factual and helpful atmosphere. They realize their child/children are safe and cared for by trained adults who understand the importance of group support for kids experiencing highly personal and emotionally traumatic life-changing losses, to include a parent *and* way of life. The losses are overwhelming, but their children are simultaneously being nurtured and educated about the stages and emotions of grief.

The children participate in organized grief work activities facilitated by bereavement specialists who have a connection to the military. Members of the Honor Guard squads from the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force serve as mentors along with an assortment of volunteers ranging from the Chief of Army Casualty for the Military District of Washington, who entertains the children with balloon animals to the wife of a former Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, who lovingly guides the children on a tour of the funeral home she directs. These volunteers attend training prior to the camp that includes a discussion of coping strategies to best support each child's age, stage of understanding, needs, and loss.

"TAPS has been a gift to everyone involved: parents, volunteers, and most especially the children. The friendships continue over the years as each youth follows their own path of healing. Knowing they are not alone in their pain, it is safe to reach out and talk about what MIGHT have been", Gwen Perry-Crawford, volunteer social worker, stated after her high-energy level involvement.

As research suggests, mourning for a childhood loss can be revived at many points in an adult's life when it is reactivated during important life events: graduation, marriage, the birth of a child, etc. One of the most obvious examples is when the child reaches the same age as the parent who died.¹ The adult TAPS mentors/facilitators "pair up" to serve as role models, a sort of "big brother or sister" and a loving ear for these children. Activities include artwork, aerobics/bodywork, a discussion of the children's losses and

¹ Polumbo, 1978

coping strategies to create a new life without a parent in the military, and all the culture and traditions of that former way of life.

Five-year-old Georgianna Eyre shared, “My daddy died in a plane crash on February 4, 1997. I was very sad. Sometimes I am still sad. But my mommy found TAPS and I got to meet other girls and boys who had lost a parent too. I had fun at the Kids Camp. We got to play games. I got to make some things to help me remember my Daddy. I made a memory book, and a dream catcher. The dream catcher catches the bad dreams and lets the good dreams come through. Now I have a lot of new friends. Thanks TAPS for making a fun Kids Camp!”

From the moment the youth arrive, they are honored as survivors of an uncertain future and their grief is recognized in a safe and secure environment that allows them to find and understand their similarities as military dependents. Nineteen-year-old Gabrielle Tarmy related, “Personally, I had no friends who had lost a parent. I was facing a very dramatic change in my life. However, my family and I have dealt with and overcome each new situation and change with the bravery my father instilled in us. At TAPS, I met others like me, celebrating their fathers and saluting them for their bravery and hard work. We got to express our love for them, and make friends who shared the same experiences and feelings. We got to know that we are not alone. TAPS allows us to share our loss and show our appreciation for those we love.”

As part of the grief work, the youth learn about all the emotions of grief, to know that their feelings are normal ones in reaction to the abnormal situation of a sudden, traumatic death of a military parent. Addressing their emotional, spiritual and physical needs, the TAPS kids write letters to their surviving parent to tell them how much they appreciate them as well as miss and love the deceased parent. Additional healing occurs during story time, when our Chaplain shares stories such as the soaring eagle who spirals ever higher until he is no longer visible to the eye, but still powerful and alive. A very emotional balloon release also gives the children a chance to see in yet another tangible example the way their messages go up and up and up... until they disappear from our limited physical sight.

Tears are respected as each child shows a picture of their deceased parent and identifies the particular branch of service and how their parent died. Rachel Thomas described her experience this way: "My PaPa died in a plane crash on September 22, 1995. I remember that morning, I was sleeping and then my mom screamed. When I went into her room she told me an Air Force plane went down and my PaPa was flying that day. Later my mom told me that PaPa was dead. I don't like remembering it but my mom says it's ok to cry. It's been a long time now and I'm doing really well. Going to the TAPS Kids Camp helped me a lot. It helped because all the kids had lost a mom or a dad, too. It wasn't embarrassing to cry and if I was sad everyone understood why. I used to just keep everything inside but at the TAPS Kids Camp, it exploded. That was ok because everyone understood. Since then I have been feeling a lot better. I still miss my PaPa,

though. Thanks for everything, TAPS!” Talking is painful. Silence is more painful. Pain has everything to do with silence.

The TAPS Kids have an opportunity to learn about the great sacrifices their parents made as military survivors and the price of freedom by touring Arlington National Cemetery, the Vietnam and Women's Memorial, the Pentagon and the Caisson at Fort Meyer (home to the horses that pull the funeral carriages). They have also been special guests of the Headquarters Marine Barracks and treated to private performances by the United States Air Force Honor Guard Silent Drill Team and the Joint Forces Color Guard.

Allison Burris, at age four, was immensely proud of her father's service. She shared, “My Daddy was Major Andrew Scott Burris. He was a soldier in the 82nd Airborne Division. My Mommy and I were very proud of him. My Daddy was my best friend. He played with me all of the time and made me feel like I was the most important little girl in the world. Everybody said that I had the best Daddy ever. My Daddy was killed June 13, 1997. My Mommy had to tell me that my Daddy was an angel and he would always be with us but that he could never come home and play with us again. My Mommy and I cry a lot together. We both miss him very much. I pray to my Daddy all of the time but I wish that he could come back. I miss him very much. At the TAPS Kids Camp I got to meet a lot of other little boys and girls whose Mommy or Daddy is in heaven so I don't feel like I am the only one who doesn't have a Daddy. I love my Daddy very much and will never forget him.”

During one Camp, the children created a special wreath and participated in the formal wreath laying ceremony on Memorial Day at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. While the other Veteran Service Organization wreaths were made out of silk flowers and all bore a striking resemblance to each other, this wreath stood out. It was lovingly made of small handprints, traced and cut out of red, white and blue construction paper and then inscribed with secret messages to their deceased parent -- messages they must have felt certain would reach their destination if left in such a hallowed place. One of those messages showed a previously unspoken appreciation, "Dad, Thank you for the camping trip", and another offered a blanket apology, "I'm sorry I wasn't better." In their own way, each completed something left undone or unsaid and in doing so, eased a pain. The wreath was placed with great pomp and circumstance by two of the children, elected by their peers for this honor, and accompanied by uniformed Honor Guardsmen. After they carefully laid the wreath, the Honor Guard rendered a dignified salute, a send off to the messages and an honor to the recipients, and the spectators, heretofore silent, erupted in heartfelt applause of support and love for these precious survivors.

The Camp also includes fun and friendship-building opportunities such as a private dinner at Planet Hollywood, which is a treat for everyone, and pool parties at the hotel. By the end of the Camp, the young people come to understand what a hero/heroine their parent was – and still is – not only in their own hearts, but in the eyes of a grateful nation.

Amanda Tarmy, age 10, wrote, "I went to the TAPS Kids Camp, a place where people who have lost a loved one in the military can go to be together. TAPS helped me a lot,

because now I know there are other people going through all the changes and differences I'm going through too. In TAPS, there's also fun stuff like going to the Capitol and White House and seeing two parades and on and on and on. A hard thing was leaving all the friends you make, but at the tip of the end you say, HEY! I just realized I'm a survivor. So when you learn that and you will, just always remember that.”

That is the message – learning that we can survive the pain, cherish the memories, and gain strength from walking side by side down this painful road called grief with those who understand and care. There is much that can be learned from our military culture, including honoring the *lives* that were lived rather than focusing so much on the *death* that occurred and finding comfort and kinship in the genuine understanding of those who have experienced a similar loss. The dignity and ceremony of a military burial service, with all its history and traditions, provides a tangible and visible symbol of honor, dignity, and respect for a life lived. It also provides a fitting final salute that brings closure to one chapter and, with the help of programs like TAPS, a beginning to a new chapter of healing and comfort.

As the folded flag is ceremonially presented by the soldier to the family and the casualty case file is completed, the military gently passes the emotional care of the survivors to TAPS, knowing they will be in the safety of an understanding group of those who have been there before them. General John Shalikashvili, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said, “We [in the Defense Department] cannot do for you what you can do for yourselves, and that is gently guide those who come after you through this journey called

grief.” The children are proof of the tremendous power this empathy has to heal and
comfort. # # #