Chapter 12

Everyday Stories of a Militarized Childhood

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Introduction(s)

Heather: I’m Heather. I’m the oldest of the Smith siblings. I was born in 1964, in Germany, where my Dad was part of Canadian NATO forces. My sense of myself as a “base brat” is central to my identity. When I tell people where I was born, I inevitably add that the hospital I was born in was a remodeled S.S. barracks on a British Army base that still had the gun racks in the hallway (not that I would remember this of course, but it is part of my personal mythology). I lived on military bases until I was eight, then we moved off base when posted to Ottawa. In 1974, we moved to the City of St. Albert, just outside of Edmonton and we were never posted again (although there had been discussions of a posting to Wainwright when I was 14, this posting never transpired).

I’m now an academic, and a critical feminist at that. But I’m still an army brat. I still can’t watch TV that shows men and women of the Canadian forces coming home from Afghanistan, being greeted by their families, without flashing back to 1971 and a hanger in Calgary, waiting for my Dad to come back from Cyprus. And I still remember being desperately afraid of a nuclear war, having grown up on stories of when Dad was put on alert during the Cuban Missile Crisis. As an undergraduate student, I believed in “peace through superior fire power,” but my original decision to go to graduate school was based on a desire to solve the problem of nuclear deterrence. And while I’ve left nuclear missiles behind, my past and my personal mythology continue to shape who I am.

Maureen: I am Maureen, the middle child. When I read the initial cut of my sister’s bio, I thought I had nothing to say in terms of how I personally relate to the military. Upon further consideration, I realize that was completely and utterly untrue.

It begins quite literally at the beginning. My full name is Maureen Patricia Smith. My father provided me with my middle name after the Princess Patricia Light Infantry. So, from day one, I was and am a daughter of the military. I am younger than Heather but older than Ross. I currently work as a professional actor and certified teacher.

Being raised in a military family reverberates in my present life. For example, I can respond immediately to a 24-hour clock. I pride myself on never being late (we were taught that being on time means being ten minutes early!). Some of my childhood toys were Dad’s supply parachutes and his pith battle helmet. My teenage years involved wearing a military jacket because I thought it was cool. I drove my father’s version of a safe and practical vehicle: a giant green Suburban. Life in general involved a great deal of maroon and khaki. My unsuspecting new boyfriends were regularly greeted at the door by an intimidating figure dressed in some variation of military garb, at full attention, either with or without a firearm. Remembrance Day brings me to tears for many reasons, but in part because I remember proudly watching my father march and bellow his orders to his colleagues in past ceremonies, and this sense of control and order was fascinating. I was taught to physically defend myself from a young age and perhaps this was a guiding force to my eventually achieving a black belt in Taekwon-do (ITF). I can split wood, start a fire with flint, and, in a pinch, build a lean-to. I have been to numerous air shows, watched my Dad jump out of airplanes, and have even taken a ride in a military helicopter. I own, and take with me everywhere, my Swiss Army knife, a gift from my father. I hate camouflage on kids. It just is not a fashion statement. Anymore. Irony lives.

And when I think about the function of the military—generally, that is to fight, my notion of it, my connection to it, my preference for it, I am entirely disenfranchised. I do not want my children to enter the military, I don’t understand how men and women leave their families in the name of nationalism, I cannot watch the stories on the news, and I will flip past anything in the newspapers involving war. In many situations, a child will follow in the career footsteps of a parent. I followed my mother. Following my father’s career was never even on the table as an option.

Ross: I’m the youngest of the three siblings and the only boy, which means my experiences were fairly different from my sisters. I