

Shared Reminiscence

Military Mothers and Grandmothers to War

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This scene begins at Fort Douglas Circle in Salt Lake City, Utah, on the 9th of December 1990. Buses were lined up around the circle, ready to load over 700 members of the 328th General Hospital attached to the 7th Medical Command and all of their gear. This Army Unit had recently been deployed for service to support Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm. As the psychologist in the unit, I was part of it. The first stop was to be Fort Carson, Colorado for a week of out processing.

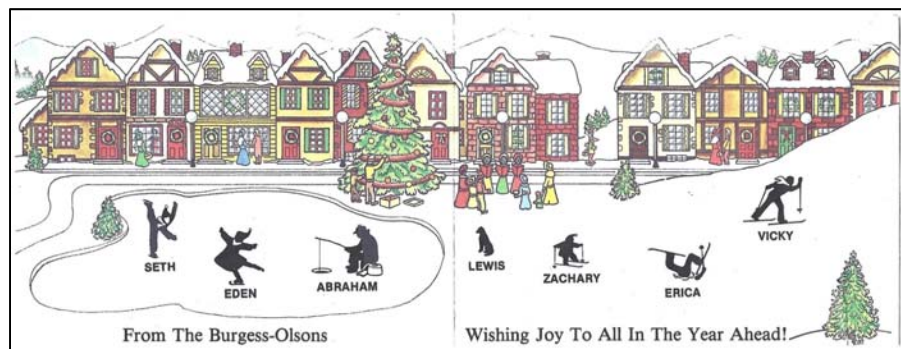
I worked in private practice as a psychologist, along with four other jobs and was leaving five children behind alone. Their father lived out of the state and we were divorced. My oldest daughter, Eden, came home on her own from Wellesley College in Massachusetts to care for her sister and three brothers. She was in ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps for College) at the time and I told her that one soldier does not quit the military so another can go to war. She came home anyway.

Everything was stressful, including my finances. I had to write the following letter to my creditors, which was humiliating:

As of 6 December, my Army Reserve Unit, the 328th General Hospital, has been called to active duty to support Operation Desert Shield. This change in my employment will reduce my income by two thirds. As a result, I will not be able to meet my financial obligations to you as they now stand. I would like to work with you on either restructuring or deferring my debt until I can return to civilian life. I will contact you as soon as my situation permits.

Thus there were also financial challenges.

It was so difficult to leave my home and especially just before Christmas. I usually had Christmas well-organized before December, thank goodness. It was difficult to observe and help the members of my Unit, in so much as I was in emotional turmoil. Added to everything else, my own Mother had committed suicide in January of this same year, and I was still feeling the effects of it.



Vicky going away for Christmas

Because I was in emotional turmoil, it was challenging to observe and help the others. Looking back on it over two decades later, it is still very emotional. However, we all left our lives for the cause. We went to war so we might have peace? We watched out for and cared for each other then and even after we returned. It was just as one sees done in the war movies.

There were more than twelve Grandmothers in the 328th Army Hospital Unit, and most were nurses. At that time, nurses could go into the military for the first time at age forty-five. For all other inductees, the age limit was thirty-five. Other women in our unit were dietitians, techs, social workers, etc. One woman was both an attorney and a nurse.

The high number of grandmothers in this unit was unique. Marrying young and having a baby in a woman's teens is common in Utah culture. Therefore, it is understandable that women can easily become grandmothers while still serving in the military. I was the same age as these grandmothers, but I married later and did not start having my children until after I was twenty-five.

Emotions ran so high and thick that you could almost cut the air. One of my fellow soldiers who happened to be a nurse took me aside and asked what to do with her six year old daughter who was experiencing a wide variety of reactions, including not being able to sleep at night.

“Let your daughter have her feelings,” I suggested. “Validate her feelings and do not let her stuff them.”

Over twenty years after the war, this friend related to me that this was the best advice I ever gave her. Her daughter almost immediately was able to cope with her absence. It is gratifying even today to have received this compliment.

On the day we departed from Fort Douglas, one woman, a Captain who was a dietitian and a Grandmother, was trying to celebrate her birthday. Unfortunately, few of us felt like celebrating. She was eventually assigned to serve as a chief clinical dietitian for SHAPE, which was home base for eighty-five international generals from North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) headquarters located in Brussels, Belgium, where their families received their medical care. SHAPE had lost their dietitian to Saudi. She liked working there. It was a professional advantage. She worked from early December until late March never having to be concerned about what to wear. Fatigues and boots were the order for each day.

The timing was poor for her as she was going to move from Salt Lake City, Utah into a newly built home in Park City, Utah. All her children were coming home for Christmas, including two sons in college and her daughter, a graduate of the U. S. Naval Academy who lived in Rhode Island with her husband, who was also active U. S. Navy and their two young sons. The Captain was really excited about having her whole family together. Her mother came and took over the family's Christmas celebration.

Another woman, a nurse, left four granddaughters from age three to twelve. Their mother, a nurse, was also in our unit. Those children and four other grandchildren from another son of this grandmother were all crying, saying “Please do not go to war.”

The son, husband and father stated that “My mother and wife are going to war. But really I am the warrior in the family” (he was a member of the Air National Guard). When they left he took over the responsibilities of the family, and thus the children became very close to their father. Even as adults they are still very close to him. Two of his daughters eventually went into the military.

A social worker and a nurse not only left her biological grandchild but she was also a “Bonus” Grandmother to four children and six grandchildren her current husband had from a former marriage. She married her second husband just before she was deployed to Desert Storm. They had set the date at

the end of December 1990 but had to move it up in order to be married before she departed. She was married in her BDUs (Battle Dress Uniform).

Another grandmother was both a nurse and an attorney. She was activated to Germany and assumed a key role in developing a casualty contingency plan which became a model for all Europe. She received special recognition for providing pro bono legal services to military personnel and their families at that time.

Two decades after we returned home, I interviewed twelve grandmothers from the 328th General Hospital, and everyone expressed unique yet similar experiences.

We travelled all night and arrived at our first stop, Fort Carson, Colorado, on 10 December 1990. One night, I remember the drawing of names among us to see who would go to the battle front. It was a poignant moment, as I realized that some of us might not be coming home.

Our unit was divided into 25 sections. Some of the unit members were assigned to replace US soldiers in Europe who had already gone to the battle front. Others were selected to go on to Saudi Arabia. I was assigned to the Landstuhl Army Regional Medical Center in Landstuhl, Germany to work with a Battle Fatigue Unit.

At that point, we were mainly dispersed throughout Western Europe. Afterwards, it was reported that most of the grandchildren felt better knowing their Grandmothers were in Europe and not on the front of the war.



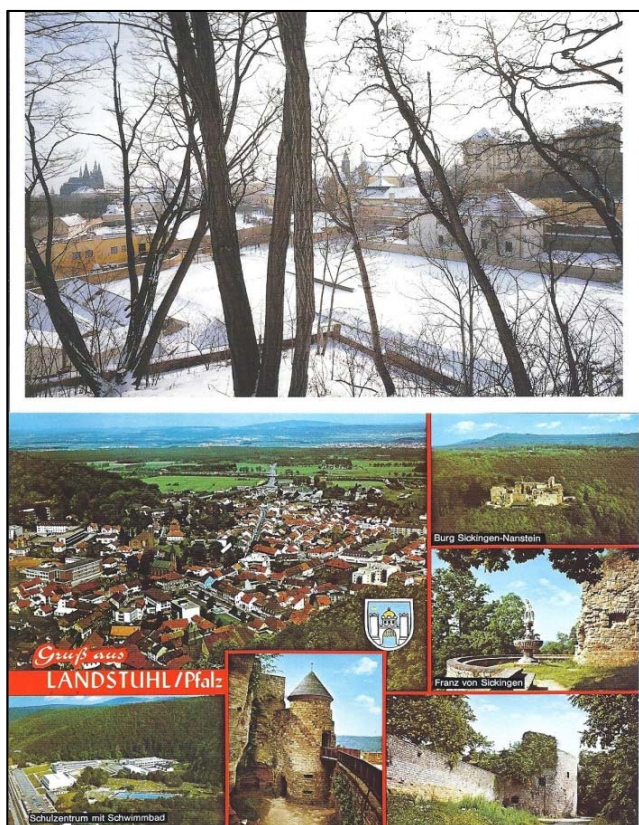
Dr. Colonel H. Frank Edwards, my boss at Landstuhl

Landstuhl was a great assignment (we often said there is no Stuhl like Landstuhl). My Commander was Colonel Frank Edwards. It was great working with him. He and his wife Joyce “kinda” adopted me. They frequently had me to their home for dinner. We are still friends and occasionally visit each other. They live in Nashville, Tennessee.

My job was to work with a Battle Fatigue Unit in Landstuhl. Some of my most complicated battle fatigue patients in this unit were Vietnamese soldiers. When they were children, they escaped from Vietnam to the United States. As adults, they were drafted into the U.S. military and became soldiers in the Gulf War, fighting for the country that fought against their homeland. No wonder they were in the Battle Fatigue Unit. They felt very conflicted, and so did I.

If Desert Storm escalated, the Army’s plan was to send me to Berlin, Germany to establish a Battle Fatigue Unit in the US Military Buildings there. I was very much aware of the US Military holdings there, as I had lived in Berlin for a number of years on two different occasions, as a Mother and an Army Officer. I gave birth to two babies in an Army Hospital origin-

nally used by the Nazis for their infamous experiments on people in Berlin. I was also commissioned as a 1st Lieutenant there. Thank goodness the war did not escalate enough to open Berlin up as a Battle Fatigue Unit.



Pictures of Landstuhl

During my deployment, I received letters from friends and family. It helped to have such reports. One, a male college friend of mine, and a high ranking military officer, reported on my children.

I have spoken with Eden a few times and stopped in to visit for a while. The house was in one piece, things looked organized, well cared for, and in good order. Morale seemed pretty good and no one appeared to be starving or depressed. They strike me as a very resilient bunch, although I imagine they talk a little tougher than they really are. I sense they miss you very much and are concerned for your safety and early return. I will stay in touch.

My Mother's Sister wrote to me and said:

I'm glad your children are as grown up as they are. I think you have done a good job in giving them self-confidence and making them as independent as they are. You should be proud of them and I know you are. I hope you will be home soon and can look back on this time as just a different experience.

Each of my five children wrote many interesting letters to me that seemed to verify the above reports: Eden, age 20, sent a card, *"wish you were here not there. But you could be on the moon or at the bottom of the sea. I'd miss you any place you were, if it were not with me! But any place you are, you know you're always in my heart!"*

Erica, age 18, a first year biology student at the College of Idaho, wrote:

Last Friday my school had a "Support the Troops Rally" at which I was asked to speak. I went to the rally and found that it was more pro-war then pro-troops. I declined to speak and left. I hope you do not think less of me. I really do not agree with this war and refuse to wear, red, white and blue ribbons. However, I do have a yellow ribbon tied to my dorm room door for you. I presented your book, "Sister Saints," in my class and I am selling copies of it. I have been having a hard time with Eden. She is being such a wench! When I was home, she had removed all of your stuff from your room and from off your desk. She is so possessive of everything in the house. She won't let me touch anything. She seems fairly depressed. She expressed to me that she needed to be a kid again. Maybe you could talk to her about her feelings if you get a chance.

Ironically I tried to call Erica when the War actually started. She did not hear the telephone because was she was watching it on TV.

Seth, age 16, a Ballet Dancer, sent a note, *"The house just isn't the same without you. Please come home soon. You are missed by everyone I know and even people who I haven't met, give me support."*

Abraham, age 13 wrote:

President Bush just announced the war today. I think it's kind of stupid. My question is why are we in this? I think the Arabs should deal with this themselves. I made the Eighth Grade Headmaster's List. Eden is being herself and is ok. She is nice to us and still has her moments. Today Zachary celebrated his birthday. For being the King of the day, he is being all right.

Zachary, age 10, also wrote to me:

Oh by the way Utah is one of the first states to have an abortion law saying that in some cases if you were not raped or something like that you cannot have an abortion. How do you feel defending a country that has a law like that? I guess I do not have to ask.

I fell on the ice and cut my cheek bone. There is a scab but it does not hurt. It is really annoying. Also that is how I feel about my Mom leaving to war. Writing this is bringing tears to my eyes but I have not got any tears on the keyboard yet. I have been growing and I have been losing weight. I hope this is a long enough letter for you. I love and miss you. Love, Zachary



From left to right: Erica, Zachary, Abraham, and Seth. Eden is seated in the front.

From my diary, December 1990, I reflected:

Christmas Day. I am without family. I am on active duty stationed in Landstuhl, Germany. I am waiting for a call from home to hear about the Christmas my children had without me. They probably cannot get through. The mail has been delayed at Frankfurt, Germany. I spent today and last night writing letters to people I care about the most.

I wrote in January 1991:

A month after Christmas, I received a video of the children celebrating the day. It was wonderful. I had a belated Christmas party in my room and showed the film with Christmas treats to interested others.

At least I have a room of my own. I am learning to be alone with myself which is not that bad. I am "ok" company. It seems weird, but I might grow to enjoy this life though it certainly is not as fulfilling as home. It is all a paradox.

Other things I appreciate here is time alone, not hurrying so much, I have more time to think clearly and focus, not so much time on the telephone, time to read, watch the news on TV, time to exercise and time to reflect my situation generally and specifically. In Germany, I have only one job outside the home. At home, I had five jobs.

Rain, rain, rain. It is all it ever does here. I either want a quick war or a quick resolution. The latter would be better. The sun goes down at 4:00 p.m. and comes up at 9:00 am. I want to go home.

While I was in Germany, I occasionally visited Prague, the Capital of Czechoslovakia. It was fabulous and wonderful. It is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. I shopped and toured. The stores would open in the morning, and then would shut down as soon as they sold all their supplies. It is a land full of new promise as with the old. Prague was one of the few European Cities that was not bombed during World War II. The buildings were old and beautiful, like stepping back into time. The city showed new awakenings of freedom and possibility, like a 24th Century glow. I would like to bring my children here to visit this city.

Little did I know that my son, Abraham, would become an attorney and serve in the military in Germany, then meet and marry a woman from Romania, a neighboring country to both Germany and Czechoslovakia.

I wrote in February 1990:

Eden seems to be adjusting better. She claims she is more in control now and is proud of it—A Chip Off the Old Block. I explained to her that Erica was overwhelmed by Eden's coming in and taking over my desk, bedroom, money, etc. and claiming it was all hers. It seemed to eradicate me. Sometimes Eden and I are so goal directed that we fail to consider feelings. I shared this with her and she seemed to understand.

I admitted and discharged my first Battle Fatigue Unit patient in the last three days. I admitted him, helped him cope and sent him back to Saudi.

I noted in Early March 1990:

Two very different Churches have been supportive of me while I have been gone. The Unitarian Universalists, an anti-war Church, had listed me and my address in their newsletter to encourage the members to send me letters. Their minister, Barbara Hamilton-Holdaway, sent me frequent letters. Those letters meant a lot to me. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a more war supportive Church, had a Ward Dinner honoring me and other Ward members who were serving on active duty.

The news is always well controlled. It is difficult to assess what is really happening. I have no idea where our units are located in the Gulf. There is no sense of terrain in any of the reports. It seems evident that the Iraq missile capability was underestimated, and early reports that their air force was "decimated" now appear overly optimistic. I think the public will be supportive as long as military reports have credibility.

My memory of the Vietnam opposition is that the bitterness set in after the deaths of both government credibility and a great many casualties. I suppose this will be a monument to all the usual things for which wars are fought. I hope something is learned. A hell of a lot of the weaponry Hussein has was blithely sold to him by the U.S. and European entrepreneurs.

This is a very complicated war. I have a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science. I was a Political Science intern in Washington D.C. I was married to an Egyptologist and now I am a Gulf War Veteran. I have tried to envision an ending to the war that promises stability, but I am having a difficult time figuring out such a scenario. We cannot shape the Middle East to our ways. We do not understand them.

Perhaps an Intermediary, trusted from both sides to coordinate all the needs from both sides might be a solution. Group meetings do not seem to be effective. My suspicion is that someone equally despotic is waiting in the wings and that is not comforting. Islam

seems to be a terribly oppressive and unyielding mind-set and it is probably naïve to assume that all would be rosy without Hussein. Let the Arabs solve their own problems. Let us not become dependent on their oil.

Because of the lack of medical personnel, the Salt Lake City, Utah area suffered while we were away due to so many of us being deployed in the Gulf War. Over 700 medical personnel, including nurses, is a lot to take out of one area. Governor Michael Leavitt pleaded and insisted that President Bush let us come home. The Salt Lake City, Utah area is suffering from the lack of medical personnel due to so many of us being involved in the Gulf War. Then it happened! On the 18th of March 1991, I left Landstuhl and flew to Frankfurt with my 328th fellow soldiers. There were about 128 of us. As our bags were being loaded onto the plane, we saw the loading crew being very rough with our belongings. I yelled out the bus window, "See you in the hospital!" We passed by our plane when our bags were being loaded. After my comment, they were far more gentle with our bags.

One nurse and grandmother that had been with us from our Utah Hospital Unit injured herself. She fell down, jumping across a huge cement ditch while carrying all her gear at Landstuhl, just outside our dormitory. She had first joined the military at age fifty, as there was such a need for nurses. She tried to join the military previously, but her request was denied.

We arrived in Fort Carson, Colorado on the 19th of March 1991. There were endless lines to get through to out process. Before we left, we were all given complete physical examinations.

My daughter Eden took a bus from Salt Lake City to Fort Carson and met me on my arrival to Fort Carson. We stayed in a motel together during this out processing. It was good to see her again, and I thanked her for all she had done. My unit and I returned to Fort Douglas, Utah on the 24th of March 1991. We were glad we were in the same reserve unit and could continue to see each other in the future.

Our reunion was both joyful and yet stressful, and our emotions were especially intense. As the psychologist of the unit, I experienced the feeling, and I also had to observe and deal with them in others, which was very difficult. Reunion is part of the deployment cycle, which includes separation and reunion. Separation and reunion is challenging, but it gave all of us a chance to grow.

The nurse who fell only stayed in Utah with her family for one and a half weeks. Her headaches were so severe from her fall that she was required to return to Fort Carson for treatment. When she got back to Fort Carson she was also assigned to a transportation company. The service needed nurses desperately. Often nurses who are ill continue to work and their therapy is designed around their job.

This woman stayed the rest of the year, 1991, in Fort Carson. She ultimately took medical leave to care for her mother, who suffered from Alzheimer's in Bluefield, West Virginia.

Her son called her late one night while she was in Fort Carson and asked when she was going to return home, as he wanted to get married and have her attend his wedding. She flew to Utah on occasion and cooked for his wedding, then froze the food and came back for her treatment at Fort Carson. Talk about a helicopter mother.

What a woman, what a nurse. She managed to be discharged and get a medical leave from the doctors at Fort Carson and then flew home to Utah. There she was treated at the Veterans Hospital. She sent for her mother in West Virginia and moved her into her home in Utah, where she stayed until she died ten years later. She also attended her son's wedding. She claimed that grandchildren often fared better than children of mothers at war. Most of the grandchildren had both parents at home.

The grandmother whose daughter-in-law also went to war injured her right wrist while lifting her duffle bag with all of her MOP Gear, getting ready to come home from Frankfurt, Germany. She did not

tell anyone what had happened until she arrived at Fort Carson. She came home with the rest of us and then went back to Fort Carson for hand surgery. After the surgery she suffered from RSD/Reflex Sympathic Dystrophy. She did not return home to Salt Lake City again until just before Christmas of 1991, where she was a patient at the Veteran's Hospital for two more years. The army also put her to work while she was there as they did the former nurse. This was the three to eleven afternoon shift as House Supervisor for the Hospital. She also developed two computer programs that helped them keep track of the nursing staff.

The SHAPE Dietitian came back home from Belgium, relaxed in her comfortable new mountain home near Park City, and wore anything she wanted. She even got to attend her son's college graduation. Everything of hers from the Salt Lake City home where she had lived for thirteen years was piled in the basement of her new home. After all this, she concluded that she had learned that she can do anything. She actually said, "There is nothing I can't do." And she also added "The best thing I have done in my life was join the Army Reserves."

Another woman who was an administrative technician, suffered from Battle Fatigue with Post Traumatic Syndrome Disorder features. Before Desert Storm she had huge personnel and family challenges. After Desert Storm, our unit was in constant change and re-organization. She understandably suffered professional stress and burn out. She claimed that grandchildren often fared better than children of mothers at war. Most of the grandchildren had both parents still at home. She aptly referred to herself as a grandmother in combat boots.

Even in a few months, everyone changes. People will not be exactly as you remembered. Old problems do not disappear. It is important to stay flexible and adjust gradually. Readjustment may take up to eight weeks or longer. Above all, loved ones need to be talked with. Communication is the basis for healthy, growing relationships.

Soon after I returned home, my youngest son Zachary got Osteomyelitis, a serious infection of the bone. In order to stay out of the hospital, he had to be inoculated every six hours for weeks. I could not bring myself to do this to him. My army buddies took over the job. One or another of the nurses showed up to my home every six hours.

The experience was comforting to me and very endearing, as an example of how loyal army buddies can be. My relationships with the women with whom I went to war are deep and enduring. A group of us met together about once a month for several years. We called our group "the Colonel's Club," as we were all Colonels.

My Unit, The Second General Hospital, Landstuhl, Germany, received the Army Superior Unit Award for our work during the Persian Gulf War from 18 August 1990 to 11 April 1991. I wore this Superior Unit Emblem (ribbon) on my uniform. On 12 March 1991, I was also given a Scroll of Appreciation for providing invaluable service to the 7th Medical Command during medical operations in support of Operation Desert Storm.

Due to my service in the Gulf War, I was invited to become a member of the International Woman's Forum. At the spring conference that year in Washington D. C., I attended a banquet under the Lincoln Memorial and sat at the table with some of the women. We introduced ourselves, and something unexpected happened.

I told them about my daughter, Eden, who left Wellesley College to care for my younger children when I left to serve in Desert Storm. As a result, she was not being allowed to graduate with her class. The woman sitting next to me leaned over and said, "Tell her to apply." Somehow I did not feel the need to question this woman. That night in my hotel room, I called my daughter and told her what happened.

She said “Mom, I have told you so many times that it will be impossible for me to graduate.” I told her to apply, she took my advice and did so. She was allowed to graduate.

The week after the women’s conference I received a magazine from Wellesley. On the cover was a picture of the woman I sat next to at the Woman’s Form Conference Banquet in Washington D.C. She was listed as the major financial officer of the college. I sensed her authenticity and was grateful to be able to help my daughter achieve something good that she really wanted and deserved.

Later on Eden became a Captain in the United States Army, serving in Texas.

After I returned home from Desert Storm, I moved every year, and still do today. This was my only symptom of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Just before the war, I lived in the same home for nine years. I was raised in the same home from birth to college.

Somehow, in spite of it all, me and mine were well cared for during the incredible experience of Desert Storm by various relationships.

I like the former army motto Army—Be All You Can Be! The Army certainly helped me to be all I can be.

Typically, women have supported men in wars and replaced men in their civilian jobs. They have had roles such as producing war materials. Wars have helped women out of their domestic confinement. Today, military women have opportunities with equal pay to raise their status, which I greatly needed and appreciated. Military life allowed me to do one job, instead of five, and it offered mothers and grandmothers heroic roles denied to us in regular life.

War is both tragic and complicated. Often the rich, the powerful, and career politicians are the main ones to gain. They do not die in wars. Wars always injure or kill the innocent. The innocent are often used as weapons. War does not combat evil, it hurts the innocent. Often the innocent are the ones who suffer. They often died. The innocent, not the leaders, get punished. Is there anything that merits a violent response? Not blood for oil, not blood for anything. War is not a tool of peace. War is not a necessary evil. In this war, there was Western intervention in the Middle East trying to defeat a cruel, possibly psychotic leader and make his people think like us. Even being an Army Colonel, I am against war and violence. They do not accomplish anything.

