

Anticipating the Pink Sky  
By: Megan Rakoczy

Constantly on the move, no time to stop and smell the flowers, always in a rush, always on the run, this is the way of the human race. Now what if we throw in there a requirement to move every three years? What would life look like then? Maybe a bit chaotic, maybe we would all be more open to change, more open to different, maybe we'd have more friends, or maybe we wouldn't bother to make any. This could be an awful way to live, it could be an amazing way to live, or maybe a little bit of both. A concept that seems like a distorted reality is all too real for military families and their children; it is all too real for me.

Being a military brat is a lifestyle that is chosen for you. From day one you have no say over the places you will go in the next 18 years of your life. We move all over the country, all over the world, every two to three years. Our parents get deployed, and with each new location we are constantly being reintegrated into different parts of society.

With no stability, how can a child ever grow up normal, not have social problems, overcome fear of abandonment, anxiety, depression? It's something that many military children and teens battle everyday, but is often overlooked. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, "Children in military families experience high rates of mental health, trauma and related problems. Military life can be a source of psychological stress for children. Multiple deployments, frequent moves and having a parent injured or die is a reality for many children in military families." Studies have shown that 1 in 4 military children experience depression and 1 in 5 face academic challenges. Between the years 2003

to 2008 the amount of mental health visits of military children doubled from one million to two million over a five-year timespan. There are some things that kids grow out of and others problems that don't show up until many years later. That's how it was for me, it wasn't until my late teenage years that I looked back and recognized where my struggles came from.

When I was 3-years-old my dad was out to sea and I surly missed him because while hanging out with my grandpa I asked him, "Papa will you be my dad?"

"You already have a dad," he said.

"But he's gone right now," I said.

"What will happen when he comes back," Papa said.

"Well then you can go back home," I said.

This was my first experience with abandonment, yes I had a dad that loved me very much, but when you are so young you do not understand what work is. When you wake up one-day and your dad, or mom, isn't there you don't know what to think or how to feel. Everyone around you becomes your support system, trying to distract you from the things that are missing. You become a part of a community that is different than any other. All the other military families around you become a part of your family. You are there for one another, you laugh together, play together, cry together, try to make everyday as special as the last, attempting to escape the reality of the missing family members and the job going on behind the scenes. In the long run I don't think that fear of abandonment is still something I am apprehensive about. Though my dad was gone a lot in my younger years, when he was home he

always made sure to provide us with amazing experiences, and eventually we understood why he had to leave for long periods at a time.

To make time apart easier my dad and I came up with this little thing to know while he was away we could still be with each other. See when I was little I loved the color pink, and spending the first three years of my life in Hawaii, I saw a lot of sunsets. Well you know sunsets; they turn the sky into an array of colors, soft tents of orange, yellow, purple, and of course pink. What I bet you didn't know is that those pink skies are mine, I claimed them as soon as I learned how to talk. While dad was out to sea and the days shifted to night I would look at the sky and know my dad was looking at it too. When he came home he would tell me how he looked at my sky every night. He said he would tell his shipmates, "See that pink sky, that's Megan's sky." I found comfort and peace in sharing that with him.

Though I overcame abandonment, as I enter school and begin to pick up on the fact that we were moving a lot, social problems started to kick in. Not all of us, but some of us, go through this constant battle with ourselves, trying to decide if we are going to allow ourselves to get attached to people, only to be ripped apart from them in a few years.

By the time I was 11 I had been to seven different schools, in six different states and one other country. When I was young I always really enjoyed moving. I loved being in new places, meeting new people, going to different schools; every year was a new adventure. It wasn't until about fifth grade that we ended up back in a place that I didn't want to leave. From that point on each move got harder. I was at

the age where I was building real friendship and making memories that I thought I would cling to forever.

It is when you are a year into your sixth new school, friendless; sitting alone at the lunch table thinking about all the people you've ever sat with. You think about your best friend from your old school, then you start to freak out because you can't remember what they look like, you can no longer hear their voice, you realize you have lost a bond you thought could never be broken. At some point life starts to feel meaningless because there is no longer a will to love, you are tired of the pain that comes with saying goodbye. That's where I'm at now. Two years into college and I can count my number of "friends" on one hand. I find myself alone quite often. Sometimes I try to make plans to hangout with people but they never seem to come through. When the opportunities come up to be social at home with my roommates, I find myself instead disappearing in my room, trying to avoid any contact, any chance that I might decide I actually like these people and in a few short years have to leave them again. On the outside I have it all together, I smile everyday and try to bring up those around me, I encourage friendships, tell people being alone is no way to live, but in reality I am just a big hypocrite. I am too depressed, too anxious, to socially inept, that I don't have it in me to take my own advise.

There's this term military families use called the "military itch." It means that after we hit a three-year mark in one place we feel like we have to move, like staying any longer isolates us. It's time to move on to something new. I have this itch bad; I get bored of places really fast, and am always looking for a better spot to go. When it comes down to it, a place is only as good as the people you know in it. My eagerness

for new is really just me trying to run from the hassle of having to build fresh relationships and risk any more heartache.

In an flawed way I find comfort in the fact that I'm not the only one who feels like this, it is reassuring to know that your not alone in your struggle. Many children that grew up with this life style feel the same. My childhood best friend, Holly, now 20, whose father served in the United States Navy, says, "Because I moved around a lot I got used to it being just me and my sister. I began to kind of keep to myself as I got older. Now that I am in college I see myself doing pretty much the same thing, keeping to myself and just sticking with the few friends that I already made, instead of reaching out to new people." Holly and I grew up with similar family styles. A few times we were lucky enough to be stationed in the same place but even when we were separated, managed to stay friends. We both have become rather introverted, we do better when we are alone and get anxious in crowds, yet battle some sort of depression when we find ourselves alone.

Though this has become a social problem for us, it is not the case for every military child. My friend Kennedy, age 19, says, " Being an Air Force brat, I have lived all over the country. Being submerged in completely new and different communities my entire life has given me the opportunity to become adaptable to not only change, but also environments. " She goes on, " I'm a social butterfly, I always have been, and I honestly believe that to be the case because of the life style I have lived." Kennedy took each move as a new experience, and though she has such a positive outlook on everything, that's not to discount the fact that she has had her problems too. After moving high schools, in the middle of her junior year, she herself face a period of

depression because of having to go through the stress of adjusting to a new school and making new friends as an upperclassmen. Looking back she doesn't regret the experience, "Being forced to make new friends every 2 to 3 years... thank goodness for that, because the ability to adapt to change is a skill that a lot of people never get the chance to truly acquire, but it is a skill that I will forever possess and appreciate." Kennedy has been able to overcome the hardships in her life and use them to grow, even moving once again to attend college in Texas; she has been able to remain that social butterfly.

My friend Amanda, now 27, grew up as a Marine Brat. Living the military life style has left her in a place of detachment, she doesn't have many problems socially, but is very unmaterialistic and doesn't hold tight to her relationships and locations. "Being a military child has allowed me to adapt quickly to new environments and people. Having to move every two years of my adolescence made it almost a requirement to adjust and acclimate quickly. To go along with that, I'm not a sentimental person and do not feel rooted to any one place or person, while it was always a bummer to leave 'new' friends I found joy in the process of moving and starting over again."

Though I myself am in this constant battle of balancing the anxiety that comes with making friends in a new place and the grief of trying to let go of the old ones. I have enjoyed each and every location I have lived in and could not imagine my life without the impact of each one of those places.

I have seen the world, I have family in more places than I can name off the top of my head, and I have done more than most people get to do in a lifetime. I don't

take a single one of these experiences for granted, I have had an amazing life but the road was not always easy. At the end of the day, the road isn't easy for anyone. It is not only military children that face depression, anxiety, abandonment, and social problems, kids with different backgrounds do too. However, there is a correlation to the military kid lifestyle and issues we face as we progress through life.

I may never have a place to call home, or friends that will be forever, but the life style I grew up with is one that I can't imagine trading for anything. People have told me they have never left the state, or have gone to the same school their whole life, that is such a foreign concept to me. I wonder where I would be today if I didn't have the worldly experiences I have had. Perhaps I would still be depressed, but I wouldn't have amazing memories to remind myself to be thankful for the little things. I don't know who I'd be without experiences that have shown me what this world has to offer, that there is life to be lived, and love to be given. My problem isn't a lack of love, it is not wanting to accept it out of fears from my past, but one day I'll overcome that. I find ways to smile, mostly through trying to help others be happy, being the light in a persons life that may be darker than they let show. Sure on the surface I am not happy, and underneath there is struggle, but inside I truly have so much joy. It comes to me as I watch the sunset, as the sky goes from crystal blue to a soft pink, it's the same sky my dad sees, the same sky Holly, Kennedy, and Amanda see. We are thousands of miles apart yet always have something to look up to, something that connects us, this is my joy and if you have that, life is something to live for.

