

The Literary Club
October 24, 2022

The Man of the House
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Standing beside my mother's white coffin, the military headstones of the Jefferson Barracks National Cemetery stretch in geometric patterns in every direction. I remembered this open grave 39 years earlier, when my father, Lt. Col. Stanley J. Kremzar, was buried. After spending 33 years in the Army Air Corps and then the Air Force, he died of lung cancer in 1967 at age 61. Our life, like many career military families, was nomadic and, during WWII and Korea, filled with long periods of separation and worry. Although this is a personal story, it is simply an example of the unseen pressures on the spouses and children of military families

Living with the separation anxiety caused by the absence for months and years of the soldier, sailor, or airman during times of war causes unique family pressures. In my family, Dad was overseas for more than two years during World War II between my ages of 7-9 and again during the Korean War during my ages of 13-16. Whenever he was gone, as the only child, I was given the ill-defined responsibility of the man of the house. Mother never complained about the military lifestyle. However, she had to deal with her own angst about the safety of her husband while raising a son in a series of short-term living situations.

When World War II started, Dad had already been in the Army Air Corps for 17 years as an enlisted man. We were living in comfortable quarters on the 'Enlisted' side of the Army Air Corps Scott Field, Illinois, and our first move occurred when we relocated to the officer side as he was promoted to 1st. Lieutenant. He was given his overseas orders in 1942 for the middle of China as Maintenance Officer of an airbase flying transports over the Himalayas to India. Since we no longer had official connection to a base in the U.S. the Army gave us 30 days to vacate our housing. All our furniture

and possessions except for two footlockers and assorted luggage were placed into long-term storage

The three of us drove from Illinois to Utah where Dad was to report to his assembly location near Salt Lake City. As we said goodbye at the gate of vast area of tents surrounded by barbed wire, Dad turned to me with his hand on my shoulder and said: "Mikey, you are now the man of the house, take care of your mother while I am gone." My 7-year-old instincts were to hug him, but I stood at attention and gave a slightly teary response of: "Yes sir!"

Since we were now homeless, mother decided to drive on to California since she might be able to see Dad again on his way out of the country. We arrived in a Los Angeles experiencing an economic boom. The presence of several military bases, many defense contractors, and the major shipping ports made for an overcrowded, bustling city. The search for any kind of housing for the two of us started in Venice with a two-car garage equipped with bed, chair, hot plate, but no plumbing. After a couple of months, she found a small cottage in Santa Monica with one-bedroom, adequate kitchen, and a real bathroom. This meant two different schools for me. The first was an old, overcrowded building where the educational focus was standing in line. I completed 2nd grade without any memory of classroom work. However, the second school was nice, suburban school focused on arts and crafts. The 3rd and 4th grades were fun without the ordeal of learning reading, writing, or arithmetic.

Typical of many other families, we lived with the constant angst of not knowing if your husband and father was alive. Dad's letters informed us that his base was bombed routinely by the Japanese, so the threat of being part of a casualty report was real. Any cars that parked near our cottage caused mother to look for the obvious military detail that might bring the worst possible news. Dad was a faithful writer, but his letters took a month to arrive. With all of this, I was a real nuisance trying to do my duty to protect my mother as commanded by my father. Mother certainly did not need any help and had to deal with a son who was rude to guests that might seem to be too friendly. I had a secret plan that, if my dad was killed,

I would drop out of school, get a job, and provide family support. A laughable idea from a child trying to find a way to deal with the wartime uncertainties.

After the war ended, we met at the top of an escalator in the LA train station. My parents embraced like every other re-uniting couple. He had lost 20 pounds and, with my nearly three years of growth, didn't seem as big as I remembered. Dad grabbed me by my shoulders and exclaimed about how big I was before I could give a little homecoming speech about doing my duty. However, I can still recall my overwhelming sense of relief and freedom that I was no longer man of the house

Finding housing is a typical challenge for military families, and we were no exception. Dad's postwar assignment was back at Scott Field. All the housing on the base was filled so we lived for a few months with my grandmother and her husband in their two-bedroom cottage – parents on a rollway and me on a cot in the dining room. Mother's frantic search led to a two-bedroom furnished flat on the second floor of a house with kitchen downstairs. After about six months, a nice rental house with one bedroom and an attic room was found, and all our furniture came out of storage. This presented me with three new Illinois schools from 4th to 5th grade with varying degrees of educational interest. The first was the hardest since my California sojourn had left me a full year behind in math. Fortunately, the third school starting mid-way in 5th grade was the quite good and our house was adequate.

In early 1950, Dad was assigned to Japan with the expectation that mother and I, then 13, would join him promptly. We said goodbye in Union Station in St. Louis. Once again, even with the expected shorter separation, Dad admonished me: "Mike, you are the man of the house. Take good care of your mother." This time with no teary feelings I responded as programmed with a snappy: "Yes sir!" However, those nasty North Koreans invaded South Korea in June 1950, and all relocations of dependents to Japan were canceled. The only advantage for this separation was that mother and I stayed in the same rented house, and my schooling followed the normal path up through Freshman in high school. The disadvantage for her was

that I became a teen – ages 13 -16, with all the trappings and traps accorded there to. Although I had a somewhat more balanced view of my role as “man of the house,” I kept track of where she was, and how safe the house was every night.

After two years of the Korean War blocking travel to Japan, Dad worked out a transfer to Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines where we could join him. I learned this in the only voice contact available to us – a phone call patched through to a local amateur radio operator. Dad announced the transfer and the good news that we could join him soon. My immediate response was that I understood that he and mom wanted to be together, but my freshman year in high school had been great with sports, grades, and girl-friend. Without any forethought, I proposed that I could live with my friend Chuck until they rotated back to the states. With remarkable restraint, Dad said: “We thought you might feel this way. We really don’t want to be separated but understand your feelings.”

Once again, all our furniture and most of our possessions went into storage. Mom got me so involved with the packing and arrangements that I forgot about my plan to stay behind. She and I drove to California again – this time with me sharing some driving to San Francisco.

The trip to Manila was 21 days onboard a troop ship with a few cabins and stops at Guam and Kwajalein. I shared a cabin with a Navy doctor and dozens of vials of mosquito larvae destined for Kwajalein, and mom was in a cabin with two other wives joining husbands. Meeting Dad at the dock was just like meeting him in 1945 except that it was mother running down the gangplank to meet him. I trailed along, but this time, Dad looked up at his 3” taller son, shook my hand and said: “I guess we can’t call you Little Mike anymore.” My homecoming speech about delivering my mother to him was swallowed in the crush of other arriving passengers and general melee at the dock. It became obvious from the beginning that Dad and I did not know how to talk to each other. My self-image as a 16 year-old was closer to 21, and his view of me was closer to 12.

The metaphor for our revived father-son relationship came after only a week in our nice three-bedroom Florida style home on Clark Air Force Base. Dad came into my room after dinner and closed the door. His countenance was serious, and my mind raced about what I could have done in such a short time to be in trouble. He reached into his pocket and took out a half dozen condoms in various shapes and colors and laid them on my desk. He said: "Do you know what these are for?"

If I said "No" I would get an extremely embarrassing sex education lecture. If I said "Yes" I would get a morals and behavior lecture. There was no good answer here for Mike. So, I stammered the safest response I could think of: "...umm... sure, the guys have talked about them." He looked a little relieved, and then with the same stern countenance said: "Then you know two things. One is that these will keep you from getting a disease, and two, it keeps you from getting a girl in trouble. Do you understand that?" As quickly as I could to end the conversation, I said: "Yes sir," He finished by saying: "Then we know that if either of these two things ever happen, you were too dumb to be my son. Got that?" My mind exclaimed: "Oh shit," But I responded in my most manly way: "Yes sir!"

High school at Clark Air Force Base was great. We had 24 in the high school grades with 6 highly qualified teachers – better than most private schools. Because of the heat, we went to school only until noon and had the rest of the day for swimming, golf, basketball, and general good times. Life was good.

About the close of my sophomore school year, Dad announced that he was being reassigned back to the US. Again, my spontaneous answer was that I knew that he wanted to go back and mom certainly with him, but I was getting a great education here and life was a lot of fun for me. I could stay with my friend Bill for another year. Dad promptly informed me that this was not a discussion agenda. He said: "Cut the shit soldier, we are all going home."

We did go back to Scott Air Force Base but the decision was to find housing in town so I could back to the same high school as my freshman

year. A two-bedroom rental house became our last home for my final two years of high school and college years. Dad retired following 33 years of active-duty military service as I graduated from college. Mom and Dad moved to Florida and Dad helped build the only house he and mom ever owned – a nice two-bedroom Florida ranch with big sun porch.

Sadly, the Air Force physical exam did not detect a spot on his lung, and he died of metastasized lung cancer just nine years later. As he was dying, I flew from Cincinnati to be with him and mom at the hospital on MacDill AFB. Holding his hand and leaning close, I told him: “Dad, don’t worry, I will take care of mom.” He squeezed my hand and died moments later.

Little did I know that when Dad died, his very nice retirement salary died with him. Mother at age 58 was left with only his \$10,000 GI Life Insurance and the house – not even Social Security. So, for the next 39 years I was, again, “man of the house” making sure mother was physically and financially comfortable. The other separations and anxieties about watching after her were simply training for that challenge. Fortunately, I was able to visit her several times a year and guide her from house to nursing care. Also, P&G had been good to me, and the financial burden was manageable – with a wife that supported me at every step.

This brings the story back to the beginning. As I watched my mother’s coffin being lowered into permanent rest with my father, our family history of separations raced through my mind. Although my beliefs do not include ghosts or spirits circling around cemeteries, I experienced a strong sense of presence. Standing at the foot of the open grave I was compelled to speak out loud: “Dad, I’ve taken care of Mom and brought her back to you. My duty is done – God bless you both.” For the first and last time, I had said my little speech of homecoming. The feeling of relief was as palpable as it had been when I was a child. The reward was a distinct feeling that Dad was saying “job well done.”