

Navy mom: Living with the military

by [Debra Bendis](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

Like many Americans, my family will celebrate July 4 by sharing a picnic with friends. After the usual greetings, jokes, and anecdotes about our children, we'll no doubt find time for a political discussion. And since most of us are Democrats living in a very Republican county, my husband and I won't have much trouble triggering a good argument with strong opinions. We are also children of the 1970s, after all, shaped by that era's skepticism about the military and government. We went to peace rallies as students, and later took our children to nuclear-freeze demonstrations. I know I can provoke a strong reaction if, for example, I pretend to defend Bush's revival of the Star Wars missile defense project.

And yet topics of patriotism and the military look different to me this July 4. Last year, my 18-year-old son made a four-year commitment to the navy. That makes me a navy mom. And that makes the military part of the family.

Close-up observations have not exactly erased our unease with the military or shattered our stereotypes. Boot camp, for example, was full of grueling and unusual challenges that seemed cruel and unnecessary. My son told us about recruits standing for hours, or until they fell over; about recruits left to "tough out" the bleeding that followed the extraction of wisdom teeth; and about others who were pushed beyond exhaustion to the point of delirium.

When boot camp "graduation" arrived, we were introduced to military pomp and ritual and protocol. After hearing little to nothing from our sons and daughters for nine weeks, we parents were naturally eager to see them. But we were kept waiting by two hours of navy formalities that made one strong point—our sons and daughters now belonged to the U.S. Navy. The ceremony also confirmed that the military still likes to link itself to a supreme deity who seems to have a special fondness for America. Gun drills alternated with renditions of "God Bless America." Orders echoed across the gymnasium. There were bells ringing and flags waving. I was glad when it was over.

The Great Lakes Training Station was on alert that day, because the U.S.S. Cole had just been attacked. Extra guards stood at the entrances. Parents, sensing the tension on base, understood that their young sailors would face similar dangers.

Despite these realities, I've also had to admit that there are positive aspects to the military experience. Many recruits, like my son's roommate, are grateful to be in the military and off dangerous city streets. For these sailors, the military is a better option than anything back home. Those who cannot afford college are earning college funds through their service in the military, or are learning skills that will give them a vocation or prepare them for schooling later.

The navy includes teenagers from every state and every ethnic and racial background. It is diverse in a host of ways. Some recruits are parents, and have joined the military in order to be able to financially support their children. Other recruits are learning English as they learn military life.

The most dramatic admission I have to make, however, is that joining the navy has been good for my son. For the first time in his life, he's made a major commitment and has set about fulfilling it. He is proud of having surmounted the mental and physical challenges of boot camp. (He doesn't share my outrage at the physical abuse.) A boy who had spent much of the last two years in his room with headphones and video games has become physically fit. As his 16-year-old sister said in surprise when she saw him after boot camp, "He's buff!"

He seems grown up in other ways too. Before the navy, communication between parents and son was confrontational, or conducted in sound bites as he passed through the house on his way out. Ironically, it was during boot camp, when no phone, e-mail or visits were allowed, that we began a regular and wonderful slow-mail correspondence. In his letters, we saw evidence of a steady and positive attitude. After three weeks: "Well, this boot camp thing is pretty rough, but I know it will get better in a week." And then: "I ran a mile in under eight minutes!" or "I'm the leader of my team, making sure that jobs are completed."

At home, our son had struggled to organize his possessions, his homework and his time. He was not ready for or interested in college, and we were sure that negotiating the next year together would be difficult. He was pushing limits, making mistakes in judgment and arguing against all restrictions. Although we would not have chosen the navy for him, it seems to have helped him grow up.

He cleans and irons his clothes, reports on time for work, follows through with tasks. We could not instill the self-discipline necessary for effective study, but the navy did. His superiors required a sign-in for study hall and held out a system of free-time rewards and restrictions. This tightly structured schedule led to his best academic efforts. Best of all, he gained self-confidence. He is proud of his work, and asks superiors on the ship where he is stationed to train him at “whatever you have for me.” He has set goals for his own performance and promotions, and is putting aside money for college in addition to what the navy will give him.

After this experience, I’ll be expressing some different opinions this July 4, and raising some new questions. Do we liberal babyboomers realize, for example, that the military is offering an opportunity to many young Americans that they cannot get elsewhere? Have we recognized that many young adults need and respond to a regimented, highly structured life when they have not succeeded and cannot succeed at other vocational endeavors? If, as Christians, we reject the military entirely, can we propose an alternative? Perhaps it’s time to offer a civilian volunteer service for young adults. This could be a required or optional service, but it would accept and train the diverse crowd of non-college-bound youths or provide an interim experience for those who are not ready for the next step.

How do we recognize the valid criticisms of the military and military policy and at the same time support the work of thousands of young Americans? Until I knew a sailor well, I tended to think of military personnel as a distant group of people whom I didn’t need to know. Now I realize that “our” servicemen and women are not only the children of friends and neighbors, but idealistic, enthusiastic and hopeful young people. They are convinced that they are “serving their country.” How do we respond to that claim?

I also can’t escape the fundamental questions that Martin Cook raises in this issue. What is the military for? Can Christians support it? What is defense and what is aggression? When are we willing to use force?

Some of my friends muffle their criticism for my sake, while older friends, those who know about military service firsthand as soldiers and spouses of soldiers, are solicitous and supportive. But I don’t want a moratorium on criticism of the military for the sake of a navy mom. We will serve the soldiers, the nation and the world better if we confront those difficult questions about what matters to us as Christians, about the purposes of the military, and about how to convey our values to the soldiers we respect and love.