MILITARY BRATS:
A Living Study in Race Relations
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Abstract

In 1948, President Harry Truman issued Executive Order 9981, desegregating the United States military. Much has been written about the Order’s effect on soldiers; almost none about the powerful effect it has had on generations of military children, who began living in the same neighborhoods and attending the same schools, churches, and playgrounds – twenty years before the Civil Rights Movement exploded. Racist speech was also prohibited and defiant children were immediately reported to their parent’s commanding officer, who could reprimand or demote their parent. How did this shape the racial attitudes and identity of military children? How have they benefitted and what have been the biggest challenges transitioning out of the military? How might their experiences provide a window into possible solutions for other areas torn by racial strife? These are just a few of the questions “Military Brats: A Living Study in Race Relations” will discuss.

Keywords: military brats, integration, experiment, generational
A Living Study in Race Relations

Military Brats

Panel 4: What is Veterans Studies?

Welcome to VA Tech’s 3rd Annual Conference on Veterans in Society
Executive Order 9981

...there shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed forces without regard to race, color, religion, or national origin.
“BRATS: Our Journey Home”
(BOJH_RaceClips1_102615_w)

Video Transcript, excerpts from BRATS: Our Journey Home, written & directed by Donna Musil, narrated by Kris Kristofferson:

- **Morten Ender**, Professor of Sociology, Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership, the United States Military Academy at West Point: *The military is the only place in American society where black people and Hispanic people routinely boss around white people.*

- **Valerie Anderson**, Army Brat: *You were blue or you were green or you were khaki and you were American.*

- **General H. Norman Schwarzkopf**, Army Brat: *I never looked at somebody as a black officer. I looked at them as an officer. I never looked at someone as a black soldier. I looked at them as a member of the Army, uh, and we were a team.*

- **Olga Ramos**, Air Force Brat: *The other thing that is very unique, I think, to growing up on a military base is the fact that you don’t have control over who your neighbors are. And it forced an integration in neighborhoods that really, even in the United States today, you don’t see.*

- **George Junne**, Chair, Africana Studies, University of Northern Colorado: *In the military, on those bases, when I was there, zero tolerance for race and racism. It didn’t matter what you thought, you could not act on it. The soldiers could go out and have their little riots and do everything like that, but it better not be in the school system.*

- **Kris Kristofferson**, Narrator: *This may be one of the reasons brats – forty percent of whom are minorities – routinely outscore their public school peers. Why three times as many of us get college degrees.*

- **George Junne**: I scored in the 97th percentile of the Scholastic Aptitude Test. It means only three percent of people in the United States did better than me that particular year.

- **Kris Kristofferson**, Narrator: *But only his military teacher in Germany told George’s parents he was college material. His civilian teachers in New Jersey didn’t seem to notice.*

- **George Junne**: They said I was a good student. I dressed well. You know, that’s one of these kinds of things. You know, he might be black but he dresses real nice.

- **Peter Grammer**, Army Brat: *I’m sure on an individual basis there is prejudice, but on the whole there isn’t. And I feel like when people from different backgrounds and races have to live together and work together on a daily basis to where they really get to know each other, they really understand that one group is not any less capable than another group and some of those prejudices start to, start to disappear.*

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Daughter of Tuskegee Alumnus

Michelle Green, Air Force Brat

"Places we can't go?" are you allowed to go live nearby? Why can't go too? That I can't go too?

Why are you going to all white people?

On the school bus of the school bus when you me on the school their faces looking at.

"I can remember"

Off-Base Was a Different Story
The proceedings of the Third Conference on Veterans in Society discuss the impact of military service on families and individuals.

One attendee, Olga Ramos, reflects on her experience in the Air Force and the challenges she faced as a service member. She mentions her pride in serving her country, even though it sometimes felt like a struggle.

Another attendee, June, shares her experience as a spouse of a veteran. She discusses the importance of family support and the impact of war on family dynamics.

Overall, the conference highlights the diverse experiences of veterans and their families and the importance of understanding and supporting each other.

Video transcripts from the event include "Brats: Our Journey Home" and "General H.R. Norman Schwarzkopf: Brat's Eye View." These videos provide insights into the experiences of military children and the impact of war on families.
Racist Speech Criminalized

Sociologist Charles Moskos
Integration in a Sea of Jim Crow
Stateside military bases were "islands of
I got the doors lined up. I had a little pocket knife. Because

When I first went to Kaserlautern High School, all

white kids. All day long they would us,

sitting there getting my lunch — and I look up and there is

restating in the gym — they had music that was playing. I'm

They had this black guy and this white girl dancing. I said, "Oh, my God,"

That was 1956. — George June

They danced. They sat down, and nothing happened.

When the shit happened, I'm out of here. And the song went on.
Braids of Color Outperform
Don't feel as stereotypes...

Limited by racial...

Don't presume racism...

Appreciate the bigger picture...
A New Framework

This...

...or this

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Major General Oliver W. Diallard
3rd Annual Veterans in Society Conference...
Virginia Tech and all the attendees at the
Btats Without Borders thanks...
MILITARY BRATS: A Living Study in Race Relations
Presented by Donna Musil, ED, BWB
For the 3rd Annual Veterans in Society Conference - VA Tech (11/12-14/15)
Fri, 11/13, Panel 4: What is Veterans Studies? (1:40-3:10 pm, 15 minutes)

#1 – Intro Thanks

• Thank you – Jim Dubinsky, Marcia Davitt, Heidi Nobles, everyone at VA Tech – for inviting me to participate in another Veterans in Society Conference. It’s an honor to be here again.

• I will be talking today about a group of people who have been ignored in most discussions about race/diversity: Military Brats. They shouldn’t be. I believe they are a “Grand Experiment” in race relations. An experiment in which they inadvertently participated, and a beacon of hope for us all … if we’d just pay attention.

#2 – Just Another Army Brat

• I’m one of those brats. I spent the first sixteen years of my life moving twelve times across three continents. In 1976, when I was sixteen, my father died of service-related illnesses. Two weeks later, we moved to Columbus, Georgia, where I spent my senior year in a public school which had only been integrated for five years. You could feel the tension in the halls.

• Twenty years later, I reunited with classmates from a Department of Defense school in Taegu, Korea. Although we physically looked like Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, I noticed that our experiences, insecurities, even our accents were like the cookie-cutter houses in which grew up. That’s when it occurred to me that Military Brats were a living study in race relations, but no one seemed to notice.

#3 – Executive Order 9981

• On July 26, 1948, President Harry Truman signed Executive Order 9981, abolishing segregation in the Armed Forces. This was essentially eighty years after the Civil War, three years after World War II, and twenty years before the Civil Rights Movement.
#4 – DoD Schools Act Quickly

- As expected, there was a lot of resistance – from Congress, the country, even the military. But in less than three years, all on-base DoD schools were integrated. Military children began living in the same neighborhoods, and going to the same schools, churches, and playgrounds. Here are few clips regarding race relations from the first feature-length documentary about growing up military, BRATS: Our Journey Home.

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#5 – Off-Base Was A Different Story

- Off-base was a different story. And it still is, in many respects. But Truman’s Executive Order only applied to federal schools. At the time, there were approximately thirty thousand military brats going to segregated off-base schools.
• In 1954, of course, the Supreme Court ruled school segregation was unconstitutional in Brown v. Bd of Education of Topeka. But like my senior high school in Columbus, Georgia, many cities refused to comply. Michelle Green, the daughter of a Tuskegee Airman, was living on an Air Force base in Biloxi, Mississippi, in the mid-sixties. She and her sisters were the only African-American kids going to an off-base Catholic school. She had to ride a military school bus through poverty-stricken neighborhoods. As you can imagine, it was quite confusing. In fact, many brats have had difficulty interacting with civilian America about racial issues – as children and as adults. Here are some more clips from the BRATS film.

• Video Transcript, excerpts from BRATS: Our Journey Home, written & directed by Donna Musil, narrated by Kris Kristofferson:
  - General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, Army Brat: Well, you know, I’d have some people come in sometimes over in the Gulf War and say oh gosh, we got to solve this cultural problem. See, the Arabs think this way and we think that way and we’ve got to prove to them that we’re right. And I thought, that was kind of cheeky when you consider that our culture at that time was 214 years old and theirs was 5000 years old, and we’re going to tell them we’re right and they’re wrong?
  - Laird Knight, Army Brat: I pledge allegiance to every human being I ever run into anymore. I support everybody’s rights, not just America’s rights.
  - George Junne, Army Brat, Chair, Department of Africana Studies, University of Northern Colorado: One of the difficulties is that, not only is stereotyping coming from non-blacks, but also it’s coming from blacks.
  - Kris Kristofferson, Narrator: When Michelle was in college, she was asked to give a speech at an important event.
  - Michelle Green, Air Force Brat: This was to be a big deal – to have a student deliver the keynote. And so I was a bit concerned about what do I talk about. What experiences would you like me to share? I’m kind of new to this. And she said, well, you know, tell them a little bit about your background, your growing up in a broken family and the inner city and the struggle you had to overcome, and academically what it took for you to achieve, and the hardship. And this is the kind of story she was looking for. And obviously this was not my story.
  - Kris Kristofferson, Narrator: This does not mean we’re not proud of our cultural heritage or don’t want to explore it.
  - George Junne: I’m not trying to avoid race. I’m a black male. And so I’m not trying to say it’s not important, because there’s a lot of history and culture that’s very important, … at least for me and my family. But that’s not the primary thing of who George Junne is. It’s who am I? Am I a good person? Do I treat people well?
  - Olga Ramos, Air Force Brat: I’ve absolutely been accused of acting white by different individuals that are part of different Hispanic communities. And I consider that an enormous insult to my character simply because you shouldn’t have to act any way just because of your culture or your ethnicity or your race or any of that. You should just be exactly who it is that you are.

#6 – Racist Speech Criminalized

• One of main challenges replicating this Grand Experiment is the First Amendment – freedom of speech – which military families don’t really have. On base, racist speech is criminalized. If a military teen is heard using racial epithets, it’s reported both to his parents and their commanding officer. So most brats, including myself, grew up rarely hearing racist speech or experiencing racial divisions.
• This is a tough one. It goes to the heart of our democracy. But this experiment – and in other place like Germany after World War II – has shown that improving race relations may require some kind of speech restrictions.

#7 – Decrease Intergenerational Racism

• In my opinion, the most significant outcomes of this Grand Experiment is that, with the right combination of the carrot and the stick – it looks like we may be able to decrease intergenerational racism in one generation.

• Why do I say that? Because this open view about race among military children has persisted, even while new families come into the system and bring their prejudices right along with them.

• Most presume that if a child is born with racist parents, the odds that that child will also become racist are high. But because on-base military families can’t choose where they live or voice their bigotries in public, our research shows that it doesn’t take long before the children begin siding more with their peers than their parents – even when their parents are privately racist. This extends to interracial dating, as well.

#8 – Brats of Color Outperform

• The second most significant outcome of this Grand Experiment, in my opinion, is how well military brats of color have been succeeding, educationally. For years, military kids have been outperforming their civilian peers. Regardless of their parents’ educational and financial background. Regardless of being raised by single parents. And seemingly in spite of multiple moves, deployments, and combat-related trauma.

• Some believe this is due to the military’s emphasis on education. Others think DoD teachers are superior. I think Truman’s Executive Order leveled the playing field and lifted the yoke of racism as much as any piece of legislation can. I think these children truly feel judged by the content of their character, rather than the color of their skin, and perform accordingly. Hopefully, one day Brats Without Borders can get the support we need to scientifically test this theory.

#9 – Other Benefits

• All this living together… not constantly hearing racist speech… moving internationally… seems to have changed the way military brats look at the world. They don’t presume racism as quickly, even when people are being racist! They appreciate the bigger picture, especially if they’ve lived overseas. They’ve seen all kinds of people living in poverty. They’ve been outsiders for reasons other than race. They feel less limited by racial expectations and stereotypes.
• As one non-brat said in Mary Edwards Wertsch’s book, *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress*, minority brats seem to have a “different tape playing” in their heads; a tape full of positive feelings and self-esteem that is less daunted by racism.

#10 – Belonging Issues

• Of course, it’s not all happy and rosy. There are bigoted brats, but they do seem to be the minority. The biggest challenge – for all brats – seems to be “fitting in” racially if and when they leave the military. Often, they don’t – with their civilian friends, their extended family, sometimes even their own parents (especially if those parents didn’t grow up military themselves).

• This can make a brat feel very alone – and for good reason. According to Abraham Maslow, “belonging” is the third most important human need. Only food and safety are more important. A human being actually needs belonging more than they need self-esteem. And lack of belonging can lead to depression, drugs, even suicide.

• What’s frustrating is that brats in power don’t raise awareness of these issues. I’m not sure why. Perhaps, because of all the moves, we don’t know how to build community. Perhaps some don’t know the Military Brat Culture exists. The military doesn’t teach it. Non-military-brat parents don’t teach it. Some groups purporting to support military children actually seem to advocate against it. Maybe some of these powerful brats feel their success is due more to their specialness than their military brat background. Who knows? Whatever the reason, we don’t support each other in the way I wish we would. Maybe in time, that will change. I hope so.

#11 – It Matters

• Why does all this matter? It’s obvious. Racism, xenophobia, fear of the unknown… is killing people. Another reality we might want to heed is this: demographics are shifting and people have long memories. But most of all, I think it matters because racism is a huge waste of human potential. We need all children to be the best they can be, regardless of their race, creed, or color.

#12 – A New Framework

• We need a new framework for fighting racism. It’s ironic, an institution formed to kill is also teaching people how to get along. I think Truman’s Executive Order 9981 is teaching lessons we’re not hearing. I remember listening to a French minister on *Charlie Rose* discussing the Muslim teenagers who set fires across Paris a few years ago. The more he talked, the more I realized they were TCKs, Third Culture Kids. Like brats, they didn’t fit. They were caught between worlds. They were trying to find a place to belong.
• What if we took this military model and transferred it to Jerusalem? Built a neighborhood and filled it with half Palestinians and half Israelis. Gave every family a house and a job. And like military bases, had one school, one playground, and one church, where different services were held at different times. Impose two conditions. One, no racist speech. Two, they’re assigned a house. If they break the rules, they lose that house. How long do you think it would take for those children in those families to start thinking differently than their parents?

• Perhaps I’m being idealistic. Perhaps I’m being naïve. Perhaps. But considering the state this world is in – isn’t it worth a shot?

#13 – Major General Oliver Dillard

• I’d like to dedicate this presentation to the late Major General Oliver W. Dillard, who died last earlier this year in June at eighty-eight years old. Major Dillard was the fifth African-American general in the United States Army, where he served for thirty-four years. General Dillard was a combat veteran in both Korea and Vietnam, and served in both the segregated and integrated armies. He had a lot to say about this topic. He and family will be featured in my new documentary, *Truman’s Kids*.

• I wish he could be here with us today. His daughter, Diane, is here, along with Lora Beldon, Director of the Military Kid Art Project. We’re all working together on the first Military BRAT Art Camp, with Virginia Tech’s Jim Dubinsky and Heidi Nobles.

#14 – Thank You

• Thank you for listening. I’m in the early stages of making a documentary about this subject, *Truman’s Kids*. If like to help or join our efforts, please let me know. Thank you!