

Documentary spotlights life of military 'brats'

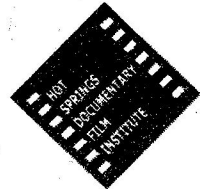
EDITOR'S NOTE: The following review was provided by Glenda J. Cooper, director of faculty affairs for the college of medicine at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock, a member of the Hot Springs Documentary Film Institute screening committee, and a former military "brat."

So, where are you from? This is an easy question for 95 percent of you, but for military dependents, also known as "brats," the answer is "anywhere."

We never will belong to just one place. We belong to each other.

Brats are from a state of mind, a string of memories, and a jumble of shared experiences from every continent, except Antarctica.

We moved, following our father's career, sometimes as many as 20 times before we were 18. General Arnold Schwarzkopf, a "brat" and com-



Reel Opinion

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mander in chief of the Coalition Forces in the 1991 Gulf War, tells people he was born in New Jersey, but raised in the military. Good answer. Welcome to the world of the military brat.

While the documentary "Brats" was made for a niche audience, others will find it a fascinating look into positive and negative sides of military dependent life. Nobody knows how the term "military brat" began, but most of us use the term proudly - it implies gumption and a certain hardiness needed to survive in this "off the grid" culture of magic and loss.

As a 5 percent subset of the population, we are an invisible lost tribe, third-culture kids who led the nation in educational

test scores, no matter the age, race, gender or family income bracket.

Travel and discipline created a rich environment for learning.

Donna Musil, a "brat" and the film's director, has created the only documentary on this subject. It has been shown at military family reunions all over the country. Emotional reactions bubble up for those who felt lost and now were found. Finally, there is some kind of understanding of the past and productive self-reflection!

As the film details, a history as a brat helps explain some feelings of distance with friends, problems with commitment in relationships, a wandering spirit, an empathetic accord with diverse cultures, overachieving personalities, lack of racism, and a moral certitude that can turn others away.

Two of the better-known military brats who contributed

to the film are Schwarzkopf and Kris Kristofferson, who gently narrates this difficult story and provided original songs to the production.

There are interviews with psychiatrists, scholars, and authors, as well as former military brats who help explain the narcissistic nature of a military family, centered on the father's career rather than what is best for developing children. More often than not, the military parents grew up in stable, rural environments while their children have wildly different childhoods.

Conflict often ensues, but in the end, they are forgiven. With harsh discipline, brats grow up feeling that if they misbehave it could negatively impact the father's career. Everything was reported to the base commander.

Also, if there were problems with excessive drinking or spousal abuse, a wife felt she

could not ask for help because counseling would have been reported to a base commander, who would drop it in the father's "efficiency report."

Military life was very much an authoritarian, socialist community. There was socialized medicine. We shopped in the same places, so racism was proscribed. And life on the base, or "fortress," was carefully defined. When they left their dependent status at 18, brats often said they felt like they were being abandoned.

Imagine living in post-war Japan or Germany or pre-war Iran. High school students stationed in Nuremberg after World War II took field trips to the trials after the war, witnessing history. All who lived overseas were immersed in other cultures and religions.

Brats may have envied kids who grew up in one place and understood their place within a community, but they got to

travel and have hundreds of friends. Life was not a tragedy. It was a blessing. Being an outsider gives one a perspective that spurs curiosity, creativity, and risk-taking. But, it can also leave a hole in the soul until a reconnection is made.

With the Internet and the founding of more than 250 alumni groups from 50 countries and a museum in Wichita, Kan., in the works, brats can now connect, or reconnect, and feel like they've come home to that state of mind.

When brats join other brats, their gifts become visible, even to themselves. Few people knew us, saw us, or understood us. With this compelling documentary, even non-brats can get a taste of what it was like to be in service to America while growing up.

"Brats: Our Journey Home" will be shown at 5:05 p.m. Wednesday, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 29.