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Review

## The Lost Tribe

Local screening of a new documentary about growing up in the military draws a packed crowd — and for good reason

By Gregory Epps

Tuesday, Jul. 25, 2006

**On a Tuesday night** in Virginia Beach, documentary director Donna Musil did not expect to pack a crowd to the rafters of the Central Library auditorium.

Screening her film in our region, Musil could expect a decent turnout, but she never imagined she'd be turning people away at the door and watching folks drag in extra chairs, or use the auditorium's steps as seats.

But director Musil, an Army brat herself, had found herself in brat country. Her documentary, *BRATS: Our Journey Home* was a big hit with an enthusiastic local crowd.

There were laughter, tears, sounds of surprise, and murmurs of recognition as the audience watched and listened to stories that mirrored their own in many ways. Strong local interest aside, *anyone* can relate to Musil's sympathetic narrative, and her acclaimed film is simply a well-done documentary.

Featuring rare archival footage, "home" movies shot in foreign lands, and the expert observations of sociologists and psychologists, the eye-opening *BRATS: Our Journey Home* delves into all the ups and downs of life as a military brat.

Musil reveals the largely unseen life of the young military dependents mostly through the words of the brats themselves, as narrator (and Air Force brat) Kris Kristofferson guides the viewer through a fascinating exploration of America's "lost tribe" of at least 15 million people whose shared experience has built a nearly-hidden subculture.

As adults now proud to be called "brats," they explain the difficulty of answering the common question, "Where are you from?"

General Norman Schwarzkopf and Kris Kristofferson share their brat stories, which are no less amazing than the stories of everyday folks like Olga Ramos and Laird Knight, who further embody the joys and angst, and the strengths and failings of children who had no choice but to serve their country's needs above their own.



Military brats say racism is rare in the communities because of the commonalities of their experiences.

**BRATS: Our Journey Home**

(Documentary)

Directed by Donna Musil

Narrated by Kris Kristofferson

Rating: 4 stars

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Director Musil addresses, but doesn't overly dwell on the stress, depression and alienation suffered from frequent household moves, often-harsh parental discipline, high expectations, the brutality of war, and the prolonged absence of parents.

*BRATS: Our Journey Home* devotes equal time to the positive, revealing its subjects as generally confident, task-oriented, worldly, tolerant and proudly self-reliant. There's little racism among brats, who, like their parents, existed daily in the orderly, *integrated* world of life at military bases and outposts all over the world.

Many brats become highly accomplished achievers and overachievers. You may think of Kris Kristofferson as *merely* a popular singer/songwriter and actor, but his resume also includes Rhodes scholar, Golden Gloves boxer, and U.S. Army helicopter pilot.

Aware of his membership in an exclusive tribe, Kristofferson points out, "My childhood has shaped me in ways that I'm only beginning to understand."

The roots of *BRATS: Our Journey Home* began in 1998, when Donna Musil was inspired by a book by Mary Edwards Wertsch entitled *Military Brats: Legacies of Childhood Inside the Fortress*.

"I discovered I was not alone," says Musil, who says that it also taught her, "Why I was the way I was."

The humble director admits she has "lofty goals" for her "little film" which include fostering a community with a commitment to peace. But maybe her goals are not so out of reach.

Already, Musil's film, like Wertsch's book, is encouraging a community that's just beginning to become self-aware and gain its voice. As result, our military's family-services departments are becoming more sensitive to social issues.

Reunion groups and Internet sites are bringing brats together for the first time. Aided by efforts like this documentary, America's lost tribe is finally gaining a sense of home through each other, and uniting with the scattered siblings of their borderless family. •

**Locate other military brats, or purchase copies of this film for personal or institutional use at [www.bratsourjourneyhome.com](http://www.bratsourjourneyhome.com).**

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