

PORTRAYALS OF THE MILITARY SPOUSE IN POPULAR MEDIA

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Guest Editorial

To be honest, I never thought I would be a military spouse. I didn't grow up with servicemembers in my immediate family or friend group. My grandfather fixed helicopters for the Korean War effort. His son, my father, was an outspoken "hippie" and anti-war activist, and I myself adopted a lot of those same ideals well into my mid-twenties. But when I met my now-husband in law school, shortly after he commissioned into the Marine Corps as a soon-to-be Judge Advocate, and left my job as an associate two years later when we married, I unwittingly embarked on a journey that would challenge my notions of what it meant to be in and affiliated with our modern military.

For better or for worse – it has been argued it both ways – most modern Americans don't have a clear concept of what life as a military family entails. Less than 10% of our current population has ever done active service in any branch, and while that does touch their immediate friends and family in a vague and nebulous sort of way, the ripple effect essentially stops there.¹

Thus representations in media of military families – particularly of spouses and significant others – are often inaccurate,

unrealistic, caricature, misleading, or even hurtful. Many of the spouses I solicited for input in preparing this article told me they no longer consume media about the military, finding it too "cringeworthy." Perhaps this is because in war movies, families and significant others exist as accessories to the men who serve, and rarely have a spotlight shined on them in their own right.² The stereotypical "wartime girlfriend" or "military wife" in such films is often depicted as critical of the war effort, codependent upon the person who is serving, emotionally fragile, and even unfaithful. For a modern example, take Sienna Miller's portrayal of Taya Kyle in *American Sniper* or Amanda Seyfried as Savannah Curtis in the romance *Dear John*.³

Perhaps the most hurtful stereotype within the military community itself depicts women as fat, lazy homewreckers who spend all of the combat benefit pay on makeup and designer handbags. The terminology among servicemembers and spouses for this type of usually-woman is the extremely derogatory "dependapotamus."⁴ The *dependa* is always

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/05/the-changing-face-of-americas-veteran-population/>

² <https://www.militaryspouse.com/spouse-101/hollywoods-love-affair-with-military-romance/>

³ Lionsgate (distributed by Sony Pictures), 2010.

⁴ A portmanteau of "dependent" and "hippopotamus." The term "dependent" is borrowed from the IRS but carries its own psychological

a woman, and she's in it for the money; her ultimate goal is to sit at home, jobless, popping out children and generally being worthless, having long since lost all sex appeal since landing her servicemember and putting a ring on it.⁵ Considering that in reality, allowances for housing and subsistence are set to reflect actual cost-of-living in the location – not to mention recent surveys indicating that one in eight military families struggle with financial and food insecurity – this characterization is based far more in misogyny than reality.⁶

In total fairness, depictions of servicemembers themselves are also often one-dimensional. They are almost always portrayed as white, male, infantrymen; any number of top box office hits will bear this narrative out.⁷ Whereas the reality of active duty service in modern America is much more diverse, both by race and gender identity, as well as MOS. Today, our all-volunteer military is more highly educated, more likely to be married, more female and less white than the draft-era military.⁸

The other end of the spectrum is when media tries so hard to make the “military experience” accessible that it becomes a wildly inaccurate pseudocartoon in line with

CBS's *JAG* or *The Unit*, and to a certain extent the vintage show *Major Dad*. Believe it or not, the Department of Defense has a vested interest in these portrayals, as they are often the most widely-available form of engagement by the public with the “military experience,” actively attempting to influence perception of servicemembers in a way that matches with reality in an attempt to ameliorate the civil-military divide.⁹

One film that defies these stereotypes on the warfront and home front alike is *We Were Soldiers*.¹⁰ Mel Gibson portrays Army Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, commander of the then newly-created air cavalry in the Battle of Ia Drang. His unit is racially diverse, and the spouses are as well. Many have their personal lives glossed over but we are given a fairly intimate view of the Moore family's home life. Madeleine Stowe portrays his wife Julie. Although – true to the time period, the mid-1960s – Julie is a stay at home mother to six children, she also is treated as an independent person. She and her husband practice different faiths, a fact they do not hide from the children. She feels comfortable challenging him, both jokingly and seriously, within the confines of the home; and commiserates with the other spouses who live on base with her. She also understand the inherent leadership which falls to her in her husband's absence, notably taking responsibility for the personal delivery of telegrams to the unit's widows informing them of their servicemembers' passing, rather than allow a callous and impersonal handling of the same by the cab

connotations, and I have found it can be off-putting to many newlyweds.

⁵ For a humorous look at this otherwise damaging stereotype, see the adult coloring book “Brenda the Dependa.”

https://books.google.com/books/about/Brenda_The_Dependa.html?id=EJ2YzgEACAAJ

⁶ <https://www.mfan.org/topic/food-insecurity/military-food-insecurity-statistics/>

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https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1006&context=war_and_society_theses

⁸ <https://www.prb.org/resources/americas-military-population/>

⁹ <https://taskandpurpose.com/opinion/media-portrayal-service-members-veterans/>

¹⁰ Paramount Pictures, 2002.

driver originally hired by base leadership to perform this task. And her friends rally around her with this task. She comforts them when they are in need, and they do the same for her, exhibiting a realism and resilience often left on the cutting-room floor for most war movies.

Perhaps the most popular and polarizing television example to date is the Lifetime TV drama *Army Wives*, which takes place on and near the fictional Fort Carson.¹¹ For the boon it has done in presenting a “behind the scenes” view of MilSpouse life to the general viewing public, criticisms from those of us who live adjacent to active duty are multitudinous and pointed, and the show abounds with tropes.¹² Kim Delaney portrays Claudia Joy Holden, wife of a general, yet welcoming and gracious towards “lower ranked” wives. Her character remains steadfast and nurturing throughout the series. Catherine Bell plays Denise Sherwood, a former nurse practitioner whose character continues to grow, develop, and overcome inner adversity throughout the series. In particular, she stands up to an abusive son, survives infidelity, and returns to work at the local hospital. Roxy Leblanc, played by Sally Pressman, is a former bartender turned MilSpouse. She marries quickly and brings two kids from two different fathers onto post with her. (The only saving grace for her character is that they didn’t make her a former exotic dancer!) Roxy is opinionated and rough-hewn, although decent and friendly. Brigid Brannagh plays Pamela

Moran, who is herself a former Boston PD officer. Her husband struggles with debt and many of their worries revolve around his fears over losing his special forces spot. She is a vulnerable woman but thinks quickly on her feet; she’s often the group’s problem solver. And last but not least, the show portrays a male spouse, a character type seemingly always absent from many other depictions of military spouses. Roland Burton is the husband of Colonel Joan Burton, and is employed as a psychiatrist at the post’s hospital. His struggles take a narrative backseat, however, to his wife’s post-traumatic stress disorder and their almost-divorce.

Of course some representations are best because they are tangential to the fact. Take the story of contestant Beca Lyne-Pirkis from 2013’s run of *The Great British Bake Off*.¹³ Although not in any way integral to her skill as a baker, Beca’s spouse serves in the Royal Army Medical Corps and she participates in the Military Wives’ Choir of Cardiff. Not much is made of her home life, except that she mentions testing her confections on her husband and his unit members. She also mentions having run several marathons. In interviews since appearing on the show, Beca has revealed that she got into baking when their oldest daughter was six months old because she was seeking out a new challenge, and has since launched her own Welsh-language cooking show.¹⁴ As a viewer, it is lovely to see a MilSpouse succeeding at her own passion, without so much to-do being made

¹¹ Lifetime network, 2007 – 2013.

¹²

[https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Series/Army Wives](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Series/Army_Wives)

¹³ PBS, 2013.

¹⁴ <http://www.glasgowtr.com/life-travel/my-life-after-the-great-british-bake-off-beca-lyne-pirkis-is-set-to-star-in-a-new-television-show-10149/>

of the servicemember's daily life or career. It's no wonder she became a fan favorite.

The spouses portrayed by Apple TV's *For All Mankind* are perhaps among the most realistic I myself have seen in any fictional presentation.¹⁵ In this alternate history drama depicting the Soviet-era space race and the decades that follow, we get intimate glimpses at the test pilot's wives (and one husband!) and their efforts to keep households together, find personal fulfillment, struggles with substance use and infidelity, and putting on a "brave face" when things seem to be falling apart. Although there are some overused tropes such as the distraught wife and mother, waiting for dire news to arrive by squawk box – or worse, television broadcast – or classic female jealousy between the stay at home mother Karen who loses her son and Tracy the former pilot turned wife turned astronaut, there is much positive that outshines these dark spots.¹⁶ The ways in which Karen keeps difficult news to herself knowing that her husband is dealing with bigger problems on the moon, and the safe space she finds in leaning upon Wayne as an "outsider" to the group of women who attempt to gather about her in comfort, show her character growing beyond the expectations set out for her in the early days of the show as a "classic" ideal astronaut's wife. In later seasons, Karen and Ed Baldwin have adopted a daughter from Vietnam, and Karen has purchased and successfully renovated a popular dive bar the astronauts used to frequent. And while

infidelity – such as she ultimately commits – is oft made too much of in fiction surrounding the MilSpouse narrative (driven by an erroneous belief that the stressors of military-adjacent life make cheating more prominent) she makes it clear it was a not a choice made rashly or out of a surplus of emotion.¹⁷ She is truly depicted as an individual person with her own goals, desires, and feelings, as well as a level head on her shoulder.

Here's the reality: Military families aren't one-size-fits all, but we are among the most resilient members of modern American society. The spouses I have known have been by and large professionals, either unemployed or underemployed by circumstance, or else holding down a dream job yet living apart from their servicemember.¹⁸ About 5% identify as male. Many of us do not have children, and those who do find that they function at least some portion of the time as working single parents, running entire households and school schedules on top of full-time work at a graduate-degree level. We have negotiated leases, bought and sold houses, birthed children, said goodbye to loved ones and pets, fixed plumbing and lawnmowers, and more single-handedly when our servicemember spouses are deployed. We have struggled with substance use, job loss, infertility, elder care, child care, and self-discovery. Near-constant relocation creates a lot of instability, making it difficult to obtain

¹⁵ Apple TV, 2019 to present.

¹⁶ <https://www.whattowatch.com/features/for-all-mankind-and-the-astronaut-wife>

¹⁷ <https://www.militaryspouse.com/military-life/is-cheating-more-common-in-a-military-marriage/>

¹⁸ At the officer level at least; I cannot speak directly to life as the SO of an enlisted servicemember. The unemployment rate for military spouses hovers around 8%, compared to a 2.4% national average for similar demographic group.

or keep a job; causing children if they exist to uproot friend groups and change schools often; and can be quite lonely. All of us exist to a certain extent in a state of loneliness and isolation, for even when we make civilian friends we may feel that our particular stressors are poorly understood (no matter how many times we explain what the acronyms mean!) and search for belonging and meaning in our lives beyond what our spouses' choice of career can offer.¹⁹ When we find ourselves misunderstood by civilian peers, we tend to "lean in" to each other for understanding.

Perhaps this is why some MilSpouses have taken to creating their own media and thrust it into the world, in hopes that Average Joe and Judy will stumble across it and see with fresh eyes; or at the very least, provide comrades with a mirror to their own experiences. Podcasts, blogs, tiktok channels, and more abound with content and thirst for followers. Most notable among these are comedienne, and IG and TikTok user, Ashley Gutermuth's hilarious content (also featured on Jimmy Fallon), who also picks up litter every day while running, and promotes spouse-friendly businesses each Friday on her platforms.²⁰

As with most things in life, media reflects reality poorly and holds at best a clouded mirror up to the truth and complexity of life. My recommendation? If you want to get to know a military spouse, try talking to one! You might find we have more in common than not.

The author is Native Texan, a family attorney and former Rotary Club president, currently residing in Northern Virginia. She has been married to an active duty Marine officer for 11 years, during which she has moved seven times, earned two separate law licenses, endured one deployment, and several family losses. They are expecting their first child in July. Special thanks to the Military Spouse Professional Networking Facebook group and its members, and the United States Marine Corps for the opportunity to expand her worldview more than she ever thought possible.

¹⁹ <https://www.moaa.org/content/publications-and-media/news-articles/2019-news-articles/Loneliness,-Unemployment-Among-Top-Concerns-for-Military-Spouses,-Survey-Finds/>

²⁰ ashleygutermuth.com