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Middle School English

Personal Narrative

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### Diary of an Army Brat

I woke up to the sound of artillery for four years straight. Grafenwoehr is an Army training base in Europe, so artillery was always booming in the background, an on-again, off-again sound of thunder that newcomers might mistake for a coming storm. It rattled our windows, and it rumbled the floor. At first, the dull clatter made me look to the sky too. It made me wonder if we were at war and I just didn't know it. When you're eight years old, a lot of things are confusing.

From ages five to eight I lived at Fort Lee, Virginia, but I didn't hear artillery there. I rode a two-wheeler and my best friend's name was Jenny, spelled with a 'Y.' I started elementary school at Ft. Lee, but halfway through my third-grade year, my parents announced just before Christmas that we were moving overseas to West Germany to the training base situated east of the Black Forest. For several months we lived in a Gasthaus, or guest house, while my parents looked for a rental home in the village. All of our belongings, minus the things we packed for the long plane ride, would stay in storage until we found a more permanent place to live. That meant all of my favorite toys and stuffed animals were jailed for months. The only consolation prize was the big snowfall that occurred that Christmas. The snow was so deep that we could dig tunnels from one end of the yard to the other without disturbing the surface layer. No one needed toys when playing outside was more enjoyable.

Over time, I discovered that time spent with friends in West Germany was no different than time spent with friends back in Ft. Lee, though there were a couple of key differences. The playgrounds on base were like the playgrounds in America, either wooden or multi-colored iron structures, but there was a special open field where old war-torn Army tanks went to die, allowing kids to play on them. Several of the retired tanks had an open hatch so the most curious kids could snuggle down to sit in the actual seat of the tank driver. None of the controls or buttons worked, but that didn't keep us from pretending they did. Also, if you were on base at five o'clock each afternoon, no matter the weather, you were expected to stop what you were doing and place your right hand over your heart as the National Anthem rang out from speakers that hung on poles amid the trees. Cars came to a stop and drivers got out to salute the nearest flag. People walking down the sidewalk stopped. Kids on the monkey bars dropped to the ground, stood up, and did the thing we were all supposed to do: Hand over heart, facing the flag that was in view. If you couldn't find a flag, the 140-foot water tower in the center of the base was suitable. I always wondered what the Germans thought of that, especially the ones whose houses were flush against the outer fences of the base. Surely they heard our anthem every afternoon at five, and surely they caught sight of us standing rigid and solemn.

The four years in West Germany, which is what the country was called before the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, were some of the most pivotal in my childhood. Living in a foreign country meant you were eager to explore but also eager to return to familiarity, a constant tandem of adventure and security. I loved our German home, but I equally loved being on the Army base surrounded by American voices, American food, and the American anthem every afternoon at five. By the time I was in fourth grade, the artillery was so commonplace in my

body's rhythm that it didn't startle me anymore. Though I have a handful of memories from earlier in my childhood, it is this timeframe - from age eight to twelve - when my childhood memories are the strongest.

In July 1998, years after my dad retired from the Army and I was on summer break between my sophomore and junior year in college, I went with my parents to see *Saving Private Ryan* in the theaters. It's an epic Steven Spielberg story set during World War II, just after D-Day. The story follows Captain John Miller, who's been ordered to find and return home Private James Ryan. He is the last surviving brother of four who were fighting in the war, so to spare the mother the extreme grief of losing all of her children, Captain Miller and his men must traipse through war-torn Normandy and endure their own losses of life to save this one man.

Until that day in the theater, I had never seen my father cry. Not once. Not even the silent choking back of tears or sorrow. However, at the end of that film, the entire audience was a mess, my tall, stoic father included, sniffing and outright bawling. At that moment I realized the gravity of my heritage. I came from a long line of men who wore the uniform, from both grandfathers, a handful of uncles and cousins, to my own father. Even though I had no intentions of enlisting, I knew that being an Army Brat wasn't something that ended with my father's retirement in 1992. It stayed indefinitely. It lingers. It's a unique, unsuspecting, tender pride that shows itself during the playing of the National Anthem, when I see a Veteran outside the grocery store handing out poppies on Veterans Day, and when I listen to "Taps" play at my father's own funeral. For me, military service is an unmatched honor. There are many, myself included, who aren't called or willing to wear the uniform, but growing up in that world has been one of the most meaningful experiences of my life.