**Gold Stars**

(by Gail Hosking)

I’ve known about Gold Star families since living with my grandmother in Ramsey, New Jersey on New Street back when I was in high school. She spoke about the banners families used to put up in windows starting in World War I to pay tribute either to a family member at war, or one killed in action. Blue to gold. It was a way to honor and acknowledge sacrifice. She should know this importance, having lost the West Point officer she was engaged to in World War I; and then decades later, her oldest son, my father, in the Viet Nam War. Even to this day, Gold Stars remain a source of remembrance and awareness.

I have a gold star on my fake bamboo tree in Rochester, New York where I live. The star with my father’s name on it once hung on a Christmas tree in the White House and then sent to me by Dr. Jill Biden after the holiday. Many civilian friends ask about it with no idea what a gold star represents. It’s another reminder how deep the divide between the military world and the civilian world.

I have known about war too since I was born at a base hospital in Fort Campbell, Kentucky. My soldier father was wounded there in a bazooka accident during a practice for war. All the men in front of him were killed. He fought in World War II and carried shrapnel in his legs till the end of his life. He was, as they say in the military, “a lifer.” Whenever we had to move to another base and I cried about it, my mother always said, “We’re military, Honey, and that’s the way it has to be.” I heard my father’s war stories of The Battle of the Bulge, the 509, his witness to death and destruction, his narratives about fellow soldiers. He taught me to polish my shoes, to be on time, to finish what I start, and to do my best. He taught me discipline. We were stationed in Germany during the Cold War, lived through the Korean War, and then witnessed the Viet Nam War up close and personal with his death near Song Be in March of 1967. It was his third tour of duty there with the Special Forces. He was 42. I was 17. The week before his death, he sent me a string of pearls for the prom.

In a recent speech, Dr. Jill Biden talked about the sacrifices of Gold Star families, how their husbands, fathers, brothers, (and now mothers and sisters) are often separated from births, graduations, and other celebrations when they must leave behind their families for the sake of the greater good. They put our country’s security above their own. These families put their chins up and their shoulders back, no matter what the country asks of them.

After my father laid his body on a Viet Cong prisoner with a live grenade to save his team, I lived a civilian life and was surprised at how little my friends knew. The Medal of Honor was something they thought you “won,” not received for what the Greeks called a “metis moment,” when in a matter of seconds, you give up your life for others. The civilians I knew had no idea about blue envelopes with an APO address up in the corner, no idea about the invisibly wounded at home, nor what it feels like to carry the burden of absence for the sake of the whole country. They had no idea either about the weight of boundaries with a base separated from civilians, The Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain, The Black Wall. Nor how war bleeds into our lives with the past ever present with such things as soldier’s heart. shell shock, combat fatigue, PTSD. In that way, “Come home in glory,” rarely happens at this end.

It’s only in the last few decades that I have discovered the importance of that pin. I first received mine at a D.C. gathering of Sons and Daughters in Touch, a grassroot group created for those who lost a parent in the war. After our trip to Viet Nam, we stood near the Black Wall on Father’s Day and felt, perhaps for the first time, no longer strangers in our own country. Standing there under the summer sun, I felt sympatico with other military families, with history, and with the burnt offerings of our families sacrifices. I wish only that banners were still hung in windows today so the country would be reminded that these people have families. Civilians wouldn’t have the luxury of forgetting and ignoring.

I come from men in uniform and army bases with barbed wire and no trespassing signs. I come from a place where everyone salutes the flag at 5 PM whether you are a child on a bicycle, a woman hanging out laundry, or a soldier ready to leave for war. I come from a place of purpose, where children are *troupers* and secrets are kept because the world depends on it. I come from a place where soldiers disappear, and children learn not to ask where they go. I come from an island in the middle of civilians, a place easy to sweep under the rug as though it doesn’t exist. I come from the world of nomads, mission, and service at the bottom of existence.

To be an army brat is also to know war, not because you’ve been there, but because you read the letters arriving from a foreign country. You watch the news with a full heart. You see the photographs and listen to war stories. You stand side by side with your father in front of photographs at Dachau only miles down the road from where you are stationed. As he points out the crematoriums and emaciated men in striped pajamas, you imagine him trying to tell you why he sometimes must leave you. Maybe he does this because he knows you might never fully understand otherwise. You might never comprehend why he might die for the sake of others.

If it weren’t for my grandmother, Luella Hosking, and my New Jersey sister Elizabeth Evans, my father’s grave behind the Dutch Reform Church in Paramus might go unnoticed by many except for a few local vet groups or a Boy Scout troop. For years my grandmother planted red geraniums and a small flag on his grave. Now my sister continues the tradition. Thirty-one years after my grandmother’s oldest son was killed, her grave sits right next to his. When they lowered her casket into the earth and I saw how the dirt from my father’s space mixed with the dirt from his mother’s, I knew right then that war is experienced by everyone in the family. In the end, the earth took back its own; and what my grandmother had to live with came to a quiet end. No blazing sunsets or sonorous trumpets for her. Just a mother with her son’s remaining green beret still left in his childhood dresser.

After the memoir I wrote about my father was published, a young wife of a vet told me how grateful she was because her husband had never talked about the war before he read it. “But,” she said, “who I really want to know about is “that woman.” She meant my mother. She meant that talking about the families is long overdue. A silenced chorus of women and children exists on every base and from every war.

Up to that point I had not considered writing a sequel, which involved my mother and how war affected her life. A mentor of mine encouraged me as well because, “Afterall,” she said, “Your mother was part of those wars your father fought, the complications he brought home.” She argued it was a narrative that had political, gender, and economic overtones. Yes, I had to agree. We were part of his story.

In Hanoi with Sons and Daughters in Touch, I sat with my sisters in an ice cream café and imagined our parents looking down on us. Our father might have asked about our mother if he were there, and we would have to tell him that she didn’t do well when he left, that she wasn’t good at finding her own way, and that she died an old woman at the age of fifty-four. She had faithfully followed him for years from base to base and integrated into military life. I’d tell him that she’d be surprised to know we were traveling in Viet Nam because back when she was alive, you might as well have asked us to fly to the moon. Though the land of explosions and napalm had disappeared to the underground like a mirage, my mother might have mentioned she’d heard the army was still looking for the missing in action. She would say that it didn’t matter whose bones were found. “We have all suffered,” she’d whisper.

An editor once told me that Viet Nam was passe. I imagine he was young, never had been to war, and had no appreciation for sacrifice. I wondered then as I do often now, why I keep writing about all this like a prayer thrown into the cosmos. Is it because anniversaries are the time to tell war stories? Is it because our country is long past the war that killed my father, but not really? Is it because I can’t bear the silence? We are on to the next wars in foreign deserts and craggy mountains, with an all-volunteer army. These Gold Stars we talk about today attempt to honor that sacrifice, and at the same time, remind our country of the families at home. Otherwise, so much of history is left out. As the writer Tom Bissell once wrote in Harper’s Magazine, “a body bag fits more than just its intended corpse.” To ignore this is to create amnesia, and that, believe me, has dire consequences. We today still need to talk about these gold stars. To hang banners in our windows. We still need to honor the families. We need to break the silence.

Gail Hosking