

NEW RESEARCH: THE ORIGINS OF THE TERM 'BRAT'

In 2008, Dr. Grace Clifton, staff tutor in education at the Open University, shared with TACA the conclusions of her research into the educational experience of army children attending secondary schools in the UK since 2002 (click [here](#) to read the abstract, and [here](#) to read more about her findings, theories and recommendations). Since then, Dr. Clifton's research has included looking, with the US Army, at the origins of the term "brat" in connection with military children, and she has now generously contributed the synopsis of her findings to [TACA](#).

Clifton: "Historical documentation relating to life in the British Army shows that married soldiers could be divided into two categories. Firstly, a soldier could marry with his commanding officer's permission, which would ensure that his marriage was recognized – his wife and children would be allowed to live in barracks and would be provided for by regimental funds. This was known as marrying 'on the strength,' as the wife was able to exist 'on the strength' of the regiment (Trustram, 1984; Venning, 2005). The number of marriages that received the permission of the commanding officer was limited so that the regiment would not have to provide for too many dependents, with estimates suggesting that only 6 per cent of the soldier population was permitted to marry 'on the strength.' Marriages not receiving the permission of the commanding officer meant that wives and children lived beyond the life of the barracks and often had to eke out a difficult existence with little or no money provided by the serving soldier.

In his satirical play *The Recruiting Officer*, first published in 1707, George Farquhar pens a song about soldier life in which he refers to dependents not living on the strength of the regiment:

*"We all shall lead more happy Lives,
By getting rid of Brats and Wives,
That scold and brawl both Night and Day;
Over the Hills and far away ..."* (in Jeffares, 1973:46)

It is quite possible that this is the earliest recorded use of the term 'brat' specifically in relation to military families (although it should be noted that 'brat' is a pejorative term that could be used to refer to any child).

At the end of the eighteenth century, the term 'barrack rat' was used in the United Kingdom (Richards, 2003). Various stories about life as a child in army barracks can be viewed at the British Army Child archive [The Army Children Archive, TACA] (see <http://www.archhistory.co.uk/taca/livestimes.html> [and elsewhere on the <http://www.archhistory.co.uk> website]). It is entirely possible that the term 'barrack rat' was constricted to become the term 'brat' that we know and use today, although Ender (2002) suggests that 'brat' could be an acronym of the term 'British Regiment Attached Traveller,' which would certainly fit the history of army children being seen to be 'on the strength' of the regiment. In the United Kingdom, the term 'pad brat' is sometimes used in preference to 'military brat' – with 'pad' referring specifically to the quarters or accommodation provided by the army for use by the families of military personnel."

REFERENCES

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