

We're Military "Brats," Not Heroes, Champs, Little Soldiers, or Fledglings

An Op-Ed about an Outsider's Attempt to Rename a Proud American Culture

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Can you imagine the outrage if the USO bought thousands of copies of a non-vet's book about how it feels to be a vet, then paid him to traipse around the world singing songs about a war he never fought, while unilaterally renaming vets "Hero Volunteers" and treating vets with PTSD as if they were defective and just not "resilient" enough?

That's what's happening to 15 million Americans who have grown up in military families.

For as long as anyone can remember, these proud citizens have called themselves military "brats," but recently, a small group of non-brats has been trying to "rebrand" this 200-plus-years culture into "CHAMPS," or "Child Heroes Attached to Military Personnel." In my opinion, with very few exceptions, those 15 million military brats are not happy with this rebranding effort.

To the non-military-connected, the word *brat* may have negative connotations, but to the military child, it has just the right amount of spunk necessary to make it through the next move, the next deployment, or the next sacrifice for the Military Mission. When these children leave the military, by way of graduation or their parent's retirement, there are hundreds of brat alumni organizations, websites, blogs, and Facebook pages through which they can keep in contact with all the friends, teachers, coaches, and dreams they had to abandon over the years in the name of duty, honor, and country. It's their one "root." Now, Debbie and Jennifer Fink and their "Operation CHAMPS" initiative are trying to take that root away.

No one really knows where the term *brat* originated. British military children were called both "British Regiment Attached Travelers" and "barrack rats," which could've been shortened to brats. Poets referred to military children as brats as far back as 1707. Some think it just means "a child." Others have come up with creative acronyms like "Bold Responsible Adaptable Tolerant." Wherever it originated, it stuck, and millions of people who grew up in military families (from America, Britain, Canada, Australia, etc.) call themselves brats.

On November 24th, the Finks issued a statement denying attempts to "reject or denigrate the term BRATS," but a multitude of interviews and publicity materials say otherwise. In a 2012

USO article by Joseph Lee, Debbie Fink said, “We declared our independence 236 years ago and it’s about time our Little C.H.A.M.P.S did the same.”

Why would anyone try to disenfranchise a proud culture to which they don’t even belong? The Finks claim a goal of their “public health and education initiative” is to help civilian children “understand” military children. They have managed to convince some heavy-hitters behind their efforts, from the USO to the Red Cross to First Lady Michelle Obama. The USO sent the Finks on a world-wide book tour to military base schools in Europe and Asia. Unfortunately, there are few civilian students attending those schools who need to be enlightened by the Finks. This oversight is not surprising, since neither the Finks, nor most individuals leading current military child organizations, grew up military.

Here’s how it seems to work. The Finks wrote a \$10 children’s book, *The Little C.H.A.M.P.S,* and sell an accompanying \$399 “CHAMPKit.” Their for-profit company, Harmony Hearth, LLC, owns all the rights to the book and kit, and is trademarking “CHAMPS.” The Finks solicit donors to buy the books to “give away” through the non-profit. I can only assume the non-profit buys the books from the for-profit. We’re not talking about a couple hundred books. We’re talking *thousands* of books.

The Finks say they donate the “profits” from their for-profit book sales to the non-profit. So why didn’t they just publish the book through the non-profit? Only the Finks know, because the public can’t see their for-profit salaries or expenses. Perhaps they received advice from the book’s illustrator, Walter Blackwell, who resigned in 2008 as CEO/President of the National Veterans Business Development Corporation after a Senate inquiry. According to a 2008 *New York Times* article by Elizabeth Olson, “A Nonprofit for Veterans Is Faulted On Spending,” the Senate reported that the money spent on helping veterans start and expand new businesses was dwindling, while its executives spent thousands of federal dollars on “expensive dinners, luxury hotels, first-class travel and high salaries.”

There always have been, and there always will be, individuals and organizations that try to profit from the military and military families. Some of them provide real services in return and some don’t. In my opinion – as a proud Army brat who moved twelve times across three continents, went to eleven schools in thirteen years, watched my father go to war (then die eight years later when I was in high school), and as an adult brat who has spent the last 15 years trying to raise awareness of the culture, contributions, and challenges of military brats – the Fink’s “Little C.H.A.M.P.S” initiative does not.

Some choose to believe the Finks are well-intentioned. All I know for sure is that I spoke with Debbie Fink in 2011 before she finished her book. She told me she was originally going to entitle it, “The Little Brats,” but the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC) told her they wouldn’t endorse any book with “brat” in the title. I explained what the word meant to our culture. I shared with her our own initiatives, including our cultural competency workshops, traveling art exhibit, and BRATS Clubs for military children attending civilian schools. I sent her a copy of the documentary, *BRATS: Our Journey Home* (which is owned by the non-profit, Brats

Without Borders) and she promised to send me a working draft of her book. I never received it. A year later, *The Little C.H.A.M.P.S* was published and the Operation CHAMPS initiative was launched offering the book and free babysitting for military families by college students. In the past week, MCEC has officially withdrawn support for the “Little CHAMPS” program.

Make no mistake – this is not just about a *word*. In my opinion, “rebranding” military brats to “CHAMPS” marginalizes and disenfranchises millions of Americans of all ages, races, and walks of life, in order to sell a product. Meanwhile, dozens of small groups and non-profits run by and for brats with programs and materials based on real research and actual experiences, are ignored – organizations like Brats Without Borders, the Military Brat Registry, the Military Kid Art Project, Books for Brats, the Museum of the American Military Family, Overseas Brats, the BRATpin, Operation Footlocker, Brightwell Publishing, Military Brats Online, United Children of Veterans, the American Overseas Schools Historical Society, and more. Some of these organizations have been around for three decades, quietly helping their fellow brats, young and old, while the well-intentioned USO sends interlopers like the Finks on world tours and thinks they have done something special to help military children. They haven’t. Because at the end of the day, military children still don’t have “anyone who understands them,” because they have been alienated by groups like the Finks from the only ones who do – *their fellow brats*.



Donna Musil is the Executive Director of Brats Without Borders, a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofit founded in 1999 to provide educational outreach, support, materials, and research to enrich the lives of Military “Brats” and “Third Culture Kids” of all ages (Federal Tax ID #: 58-2486120). She is also the Writer-Director of *BRATS: Our Journey Home*, the first documentary about “growing up military,” as well as a non-practicing attorney, with an ABJ in Journalism and a JD from the University of Georgia.

For more information about Brats Without Borders, see www.USAbrat.org.

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