

I Heard My Country Calling

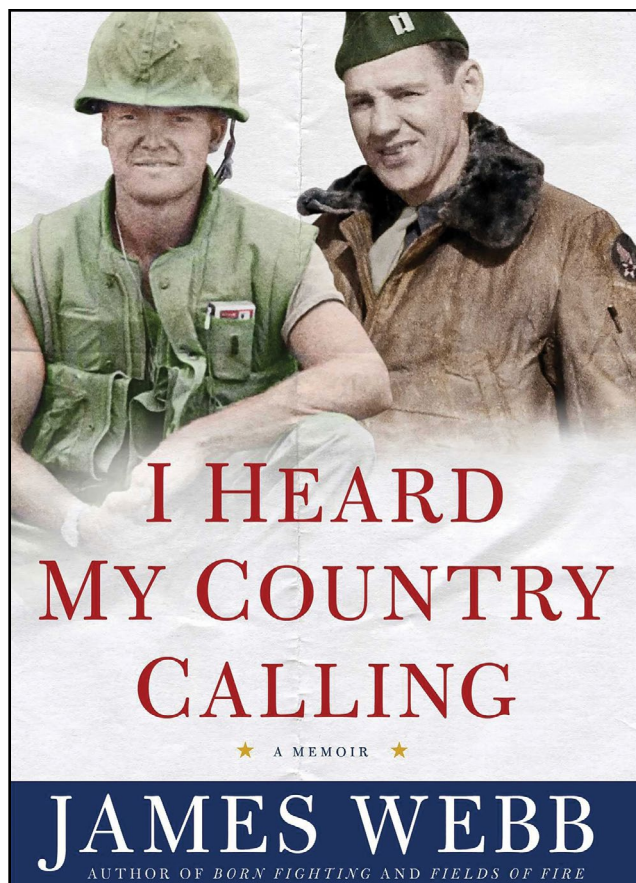
A Memoir

James Webb, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2014, 400 pages

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I Heard My Country Calling: A Memoir is James Webb's deeply moving recount of his life as a "military brat" and as a Naval Academy midshipman, from the immediate post-World War II period through the height of the Vietnam era. It was during this time that an insecure America, entrenched in a deepening ideological cold war with the Soviet Union, adopted and maintained a large standing peacetime military. Webb shares experiences from his childhood and early adult years on growing up in a military environment. The real purpose of his book, however, is less about storytelling—although the stories he tells are mesmerizing—and more about sharing what it truly means to grow up and serve in the military.

The book, as seen through the eyes of a young, innocent child who matured well beyond his age, is about the emergence of a whole new societal sector—the American military family. As Webb points out, that new permanent sector now encompasses a part of the all-volunteer fighting force, complete with family members, a unique basing and housing infrastructure system, robust family support programs and entitlements and, most noteworthy, the development of a new American subculture. His book could not come



at a more appropriate time as the military enters into another budgetary drawdown phase.

Having lived the part of a military brat, the author remained in the insular military environment after being accepted to, and attending, the United States Naval Academy. Webb—a combat veteran, noted author, former U.S. Senator, and Navy Secretary—is expertly qualified to speak about life as a military brat, which is actually a term of endearment for those of us who have lived that life.

Although the brats can be easily overlooked, they are an absolutely essential part of the Nation's all-volunteer force. His message is loud and clear—as the government squabbles on how to downsize its military force, it would be an abhorrent shame to make military families the bill payers through the dismantling of the hard-fought support programs and entitlements that took so long to develop. These are programs and entitlements military families not only deserve but also have truly earned. And, they serve as important retention tools geared toward retaining our more experienced military members.

Although some may consider it to be extravagant, Webb asserts the military support apparatus should not be disassembled. The truth of the matter is, the all-volunteer force does not serve “voluntarily.” The nation's service men and women, many of whom are married, work extremely hard and deserve their benefits. Those who serve knowingly sacrifice certain personal freedoms; they serve at the discretion and the needs of the service; and they cannot simply quit their jobs. In fact, some enter into contracts lasting a minimum of eight years. Service members must serve where told—including at various locations throughout the globe—and serve to fight our Nation's wars. Ultimately, for those with families, family members can either be a willing part of the experience, or their disagreeing actions can lead to warriors leaving the service.

In his memoirs, Webb recounts a stressful time when, as a child in St. Joseph, Missouri, he, his mom, and his siblings were separated from his father, who was serving overseas during the Berlin Airlift, and again, later, when his dad served an unaccompanied tour in Texas at a base that had no family housing. The challenge was further exasperated by the fact that although St. Joseph was his father's home of record, the family had limited ties to the area. The reader can grasp an inkling of what the author went through, especially those who were brats during

this era when military families were often left to fend for themselves while the Soldier went away on deployment.

He details a time of his father's return following a lengthy deployment and the excitement little James felt knowing that his father would soon be home—and the sudden induction of fear as he realized his dad could be leaving again. The awkward return episode was reminiscent, as I am sure it has been for countless family members, of similar events when their parents returned from war or deployments—or, for the unlucky few, of the excruciating pain when told their parent or friend was not coming home. I remember the day I was playing badminton in Heidelberg, West Germany, when my parents told me that Sgt. Eddy Mello, 19, was killed in Vietnam. Eddy was our next-door neighbor at Fort Dix, New Jersey. In fact, as a teenager, Eddy built a model B-17 airplane for me and tacked it to my bedroom ceiling.

Fellow military brats form an immediate bond with the author as he recounts his experiences while growing up, to include the eventual efforts by the military to attempt to accommodate families, such as the building of on-post housing. Unfortunately, it took a tragedy—the Gander plane disaster, during President Reagan's tenure—before families that lost direct ties to a base could still remain in on-base housing. Most will recall the entrances or stairwells many of us came to know, love, or hate. Webb also shares stories about attending on-base schooling in an old troop barracks. The classes were separated by wall dividers, which reminded me of my days at Fort Dix, when I had to lean forward in my seat in order to hear my teacher over the sounds of the other classrooms that were collocated in the bay.

The sense of what it means to live the life of a brat is emotionally evident throughout the book. Dependents, which later evolved to the term family members, grew up with the fear of never knowing when a parent would be called away. Many experienced a feeling of not knowing where they really belonged since most really had no real “hometown” but perhaps several former hometowns. They also faced the prospect of how international news of the day would impact them as parents deployed to Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, or the families moved for overseas assignments to areas such as South Korea or Europe. Among the challenges Webb spoke of was the role military members and their families played in serving as “America's ambassadors” and the importance

of not creating an “ugly American” image. Webb and his family accompanied their father on an assignment to the United Kingdom in the early 1950s. By their nature, young people, to include servicemen, tended to “swagger” in their ways and “boast” during conversations, Webb observed. He goes on to say that it is important for Americans to be sensitive and empathetic toward others as he recounts a story in the British Isles. The people there, as in other places around the globe, suffered horribly from past wars to an extent very few Americans have ever experienced.

The author also details his experience at the Naval Academy and some of his life lessons from that time period. Although cynicism may be a term many military leaders would prefer to supplant, it is perhaps one that is appropriate for his experiences. He speaks of the Academy’s focus on strict, exacting discipline, which can, at times, be overly stifling and unnecessary. In exchange for the free education, he said the Nation is provided leaders who can see past politics and partisanship and are able to guide the nation through its hardships. Ironically, however, Webb served as a U.S. Senator for only one term, dismaying many who may view him as a quitter.

Webb also addresses ethics during his Academy experiences, adding his view that West Point’s honor code is somewhat unrealistic, and the *no toleration* clause is unreflective of how people really behave and act in the *real* world. Why enforce a principle that is simply non-existent beyond the academy’s walls? He also presents a stinging argument advocating the academies’ need to relook their honor code expulsion policies, pointing out that people can turn their lives around for the better.

Webb elaborates upon an interesting issue, which some may find uncomfortable, that arose during a confrontation Webb had with a civilian academy professor. The question was whether career military officers should seek “safe,” low-risk bureaucratic jobs even if it meant receiving “less pay” upon leaving the service as they continue their comfortable lifestyles during their peak

productive years? Shouldn’t career military leaders continue taking risks and resume challenging leadership ventures after serving in the military? The philosophical question, then, is: Are America’s retiring officers, with their wealth of experience, many of whom are still in their late forties, letting their nation down by assuming “safe” and quiet existences in semi-retirement while they could still be contributing and helping solve the Nation’s problems? By mentioning the episode in his book, and cleverly protecting himself from criticism by mentioning how insulted he felt by the civilian professor’s words, Webb’s account makes one contemplate whether the professor’s arguments should be relooked even today. In fairness, as Webb recalls his father’s retirement from the Air Force at age 51, he observes that there may be little recourse or opportunity for those who would still like to face post-military challenges in the private and public sectors. Reflecting upon this as a recent military retiree, I often wonder myself how valued my military experiences really are in the private sector.

Perhaps the most emotional part in the book is when Webb’s father passes the proverbial generational baton on to his serving son as he departs to Vietnam. The symbolic gesture occurs as one generation of honorably serving veterans ends their careers and hands over the reins to the new, awaiting, and invigorated future generation of military leaders. This passing of the colors within the family—often acted out by a simple salute or some soft words at a father’s retirement ceremony or a son’s induction—is repeated over and over again throughout the country. It always remains a painful but proud moment in the lives of military families.

I Heard My Country Calling: A Memoir is a delightful, mentally therapeutic, and engulfing book. Anyone who lives, or has lived, the life of a military brat can quickly relate to the author’s experiences. The book provides a sigh of relief in knowing that there are others who really understand the unique life brats live or have lived. ■

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