

## They Made Us Strong - by Deborah Rickert

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We were a pretty typical family and right up until the morning of September 11, 2001 we remained just that. My husband Bill was traveling that morning, but I had confirmed he was safely on the ground in San Diego. I was en route to pick up my boys from school to keep them close to me as the hours passed. We, along with the rest of the country, watched and waited to see how the events of the tragic day unfolded. I didn't know it then, but that was the day that we became a military family.

If you watch even a little television, you have surely seen the Army Recruiting Campaign Commercials.

The 60-second spots show conversations between parents and children discussing their choice to become a soldier. Though there is a hint of uncertainty in the eyes of these parents - understandable after ten years of war - their pride is unmistakable.

The young man or woman looking self-assured in their Army Greens has made a transformation from child to soldier in an apparent short period of time. The commercial ends with the phrase that always strikes at my heart: "You made them Strong, we'll make them Army Strong."

Perhaps the obvious reason for my call to attention when hearing that phrase is acclaimed actor and military advocate, Gary Sinise, who is often heard quoting it. Through the organization that I founded nine years ago, I have had the privilege of working closely with Mr. Sinise to produce "Rockin' for the Troops," a day of celebration and support for military, families and veterans held at Cantigny Park in Wheaton, Illinois.

The event has helped to raise millions of dollars for the cause, and Gary and his Lt. Dan Band always leave the crowd with a sense of good old-fashioned American pride. He has been dubbed the "Bob Hope" of this generation of American military, and he deserves every accolade bestowed on him. So naturally, I would smile when I hear his voice reiterating the Army's commitment to strengthening the young men and woman in their charge.

But something about the ad nagged me for a long time and I just couldn't put my finger on what that was. Like the itch you couldn't scratch, it would be there every time I heard the phrase.

What was it about that phrase that was so perplexing? I found myself reflecting on what it was actually saying. "You made them strong..."

We did? What did we do that made them so strong? I don't remember any one particular thing that would allow me to take credit for preparing them to be made 'Army Strong.' In fact, we were a "normal," middle income, suburban American family like any other. We worked hard to balance life and work, but at the center of our world were our three growing, sometimes challenging, yet typically boisterous young sons.

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Our oldest son Dan, a senior in high school, like many young Americans was profoundly impacted by the events of that day. With his father out of town and no other family members nearby, he was suddenly the "Man of the House."

Remembering all of the times that his father would travel and say to him "you're the man of the house while I'm gone," Dan evolved into a different person that day. No longer the wise cracking teenager, he now solemnly watched as his country suffered a devastating attack. We all lost a large part of our innocence that day in a matter of hours.

Dan pursued an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point and four years later was commissioned a 2nd Lt. in the United States Army. Our family watched; their pride evident as he swore his oath to defend the Constitution of the United States.

Perhaps he didn't notice but amidst the pride his parents wore that glint of uncertainty, and maybe even fear, as to what the future might bring.

My son's courage, along with that of a whole new generation of young Americans ready and willing to place themselves between myself and a dangerous enemy, inspired me to begin Operation Support Our Troops - America ([www.osotAmerica.org](http://www.osotAmerica.org)).

It was my hope that we, as Americans, would treat this generation of military differently than we had in the past and show support for these troops and their families.

While Dan progressed through his years at West Point I became friends with many military families and watched as they sent their loved ones off to one of the many fronts that we were now fighting on. With awe, I wondered how they remained so strong through the long deployments - and often weeks of no contact.

More often than I can recall, when I would ask how or where they mustered the strength, a mother or father would say to me "I'm strong because they are strong." That sounded impressive, but honestly, I had no idea what that actually meant... until that day came for me.

It was a crisp Colorado morning. Buses were lined up and waiting to load a wave of soldiers for the beginning of what would be a long journey to their "home away from home" for the next year.

My soldier had not wanted me to be there to say goodbye. As a young Lt., he felt that a weepy mother of his own to deal with would impair his ability to instill confidence in the families of the men and woman in his charge.

Nonetheless, there I was, with a promise to be strong and not shed a tear. He was the picture of calm professionalism. Where had he learned that? Hesitating perhaps only briefly as I hugged him hard and choked out "come home safe, Honey," he said goodbye.

Through the next 12 months I began to understand.

Whatever it was that we had done to make him strong, it was his strength that would carry me through the fear, the pain of separation, and the heartache of loneliness for that person you love so deeply.

All too often, I am now asked that same question I once asked of other military parents. It was only after seeing Dan's reassurance and pride in what he was doing, unyielding positive spirit and sense of humor, and witnessing his own humble courage, that I acquired my strength.

The phrase emphasizes how we "made them strong," but in actuality my strength comes from my sons.

We raised our boys no different than any other loving family. We provided them with the love and support as they have provided us with the joys and memories - and several speeding tickets. The decisions they have made were all their own and their strength never ceases to amaze me.

As our second son Dave followed shortly behind Dan to also pursue a military career, we again looked on proudly as our little boy became a soldier. That familiar echo of fear and uncertainty reemerged, but was soon quieted after witnessing his confidence and self-assuredness.

In a military family, everyone serves.

We have encouraged our sons to serve in their own individual ways. We always emphasized that "what you are is a gift from God, but what you make of yourself if your gift back to God."

So when our youngest son Joe decided to forgo a military career - perhaps because he'd already participated in several mock training events initiated by his more than willing older brothers - he filled a role that was essential to our family. Joe became the rock that we all came to lean on. When our other sons are absent, Joe's reminds us of the strength we have as a family to hold together, even when we're far apart.

As my work in Operation Support Our Troops - America, Inc. has grown from my dining room table to encompass multiple warehouses and even larger venues; my husband and sons continue to be my source of strength and inspiration.

They know firsthand the long hours, sleepless nights, and constant juggling act I've maintained running both a household and a non-profit organization.

Like any working mother there are still days when I feel fear or anxiety and doubt my own ability to "hold it all together." But looking at the men they have each become, I am quieted with the assurance that the values of faith, family and love will continue to give me the same strength it has given them.

*Deborah Rickert has two sons serving in the army and is the founder Operation Support Our Troops - America, launched from her kitchen table in 2003. She has dedicated her time and energy to helping troops by collecting donations of snacks, toiletries and other comforts not readily available to soldiers and sending the comfort kits overseas. Since then, the organization has raised millions of dollars for the military and their families, and shipped more than 35,000 care packages to deployed service members*