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Glass Half Full

Life in the Coast Guard can be quite dangerous for any active service member. Being put on duty can include very dangerous tasks such as being put into the middle of the sea to take down an illegal smuggling operation. For many Coast Guardsmen, this line of work involves putting their lives at risk and spending time away from their families. It may seem like this is a trivial issue, but how can a Coast Guardsman being away from their family affect their family's wellbeing?

People believe that there are so many military families out there, and many, if not all, are doing fine. The issues regarding the presence of only one parent for a majority of the time are greatly overlooked. In reality, living as a child in a military family can be quite difficult because, in reality, it is similar to being raised by a single parent most of the time. This lack of a parent in the house causes a deficit in the amount of attention that the child receives, which is crucial in their youth. There are many positives and negatives of having a parent in the military or Coast Guard. Before recently, not many services were provided to members of the military and often, if something threatened the income of the family, the entire family could be put in jeopardy depending on how tense the family's situation is. In the partial government shutdown in early 2019, many Coast Guardsmen and other members of the military were unable to provide for their families because they were receiving no income. This put many of these families at risk and in

the following cases, we will see how having parents away from the house can affect families in the long-term.

Many families are separated from one of the parents because of their deployment in the military, which includes branches like the Coast Guard. Many statistics show that these families tend to suffer greater consequences due to this. Specifically, children, especially young children, usually show more aggressive behavior in school because they don't have a healthy relationship with the military parent. According to PRB.org, when a member of the family goes into the military, children usually experience negative effects such as "anxiety, behavioral problems, and stress," which often last years after the initial deployment. (PRB) These negative reactions can be traced back to the lack of a relationship with the mother or father. An even more extreme example of the effects of a family member enlisted in the military comes from the National Institute of Health, concerning a three and a half-year-old boy, named Coy, son of an active duty father and an Army Reservist mother. Trenton James of the NIH reported that the mother said Coy would get "so angry he would kick his older sister in the face or kick the dog." (James) Later on, as his relationship with his father diminished even further, Coy went on to make even more threatening statements, like telling his mom that if he were to "kill [her], [he] would not have to follow [her] rules." (James). Coy's mother attributed these negative reactions to the absence of his father, claiming that there was nothing wrong with Coy before his father left for the military. Coy's change in behavior after his father left for the military is a prime example of the lasting effects that deployment can have on young children. Since Coy's father wasn't able to bond with Coy, Coy wasn't able to gain the life experiences and lessons that he would've been taught by his father. He most likely uses this as an excuse to lash out at his family and as a result,

causes this decline in behavioral maturity that we can see. Through these two articles, we can see that child behavior can decrease greatly when one of their parents is deployed and on active duty. However, the extent to which a child is affected by a parent being in the military can be traced back to the environment that the child is being raised during that time (next paragraph).

In an interview that CNN spokesperson Anderson Cooper had with a woman named Kayla (last name unknown), Kayla discusses how their family was affected by the government shutdown of January 2019. She talks about how she was unable to keep her son in daycare while her husband was away in the Coast Guard because their family didn't have enough money to pay for all the services that they couldn't afford anymore. Growing up in a household without a father and a restriction on items due to wealth could have a very negative effect on Kayla's son — just like Coy. Situations like these can be found almost anywhere in the United States, and all of them can be seen as situations where the child could grow into negative behavior and a hatred for the people around them. In this interview, Kayla talks about how they are barely holding on because some people are helping them and others are not. Things are even harder for them without her husband in the house because she is, when it comes down to it, caring for her child as a single mother. Kayla says that she might have to return gifts that she bought for her son because of the tight situation that they are in, which could have a long-lasting effect on her son. There were no indicators of being raised in a poor environment for Coy. But Kayla's son is being subjected to the conditions of Coy in addition to growing up in a tense monetary situation where he may not receive some of the things that Coy did. But it seems like Coy's situation might be an outlier. After his outbursts of anger, on the occasion that his father visited their home, Coy would receive spankings from his father because his father "[seemed] to expect Coy to act more mature

than his age and to do what he [was] told.” (James) In response to this, Coy would react in further outrage, inciting even more animosity between the two.

Not all children with parents in the Coast Guard and military fare as poorly as Coy and his family did. I sat down with Cathy Freitas, the wife of an active Coast Guardsman, and talked to her about her experiences with her family while she was at home without her husband. Cathy was born and raised on the Big Island in Hawaii. She was used to staying in one place for a long time because she was stationed in a place that was relatively remote. However, after she met her soon-to-be husband, Cathy knew that she would be entering a life where she would be forced to move around constantly. She and the rest of her family have been moving around for a long time because they have had to move near the Coast Guard station where her husband was deployed. She mentioned, however, how thankful she was that the Coast Guard has given them the opportunity to move around, noting that “[they] have gone places [they] most likely would not have gone before. [They] have met people that [they] most likely wouldn’t have met and they have become a part of the family.” Though the Coast Guard can have negative effects on children, as seen before, it can also be beneficial for the entire family. Moving to different places has given Cathy’s family the opportunity to explore the world, which she claims she would have never done if not for the Coast Guard. Unlike the situations explained before, Cathy’s family is faring much better because they were able to keep in close contact with their father often. Cathy says that her husband would call her at 2 AM saying “Hey, I’m in Singapore! What time is it there? [...] I only have 10 minutes!” Cathy has realized the good that comes with having a member of the family in the Coast Guard, and her family has been able to keep a good relationship with their father even though he is away for some of the time. Many military

spouses in the past have complained about not being able to spend enough time with their spouse, but recent developments and increased healthcare in the military have allowed families to fare better. For instance, Cathy brings up the services that the Coast Guard provides to their family, such as improved healthcare and services for her child with special needs.

According to Military.com, “While Tricare is technically not an insurance company, it [...] [helps] military families receive healthcare and pay medical bills.” (Military.com) Cathy backed this idea, saying that “Overall, everything that [her family] has needed, they have covered. There were just a few circumstances that they covered something, and then something with Congress changed, and then they no longer covered it.” Sometimes Tricare changes their policies sometimes back and forth, “it can be very frustrating, however, you just roll with the punches, figure out what works for you,” according to Cathy.

The youngest of Cathy’s children is 7, and she is diagnosed with epilepsy. Having a child with special needs while having the father out serving in the Coast Guard seems like it would be a quite difficult task to pull off. But pull it off Cathy does. She explains that it can be a little bit challenging to have a child with special needs in their situation, but there are support systems that the Coast Guard has put in place to help families support their children when they might not be able to provide support by themselves. For instance, there is a program in the Coast Guard called the Special Needs Program. The Special Needs Program gives families the locations that families can travel in order to meet the child’s needs — in Cathy’s case, it was San Francisco. Cathy remarks that “coming [...] to the San Francisco area was a blessing because [her] youngest has special needs, and a lot of her needs are being met here, in this area.” Having to take care of a child with special needs can cause many hardships for Cathy, but she and her family have dealt

with the highs and lows of Coast Guard family life and have adapted to each of their situations. Cathy, in addition to her current job at Target, works as one of the ombudsmen for the Coast Guard station. This means that she answers some of the questions that Coast Guardsman spouses may have and can point them in the direction they might need to go to get other questions answered that she may not be qualified to answer. She considers herself a “redirector” in this scenario, and she believes that she can help spouses who may have more trouble dealing with life as a military family.

In another interview with a Coast Guard spouse named Summer Pelland, NBC anchor Danny Freeman asked her how she would prepare for the government shutdown, as her husband would not be paid. In the interview, Summer is almost brought to tears because she is so distraught that her husband and other Coast Guardsmen are still protecting the country without pay during a time of hardship and they are not being recognized for their sacrifice. Summer and her daughter, Delaney, have had to deal with being home without the father, Jeff. Normally, Coast Guardsmen are deployed for around 3 months at a time and can move around quite often. The effect that Jeff’s absence has had on Summer and Delaney is quite clear. However, unlike the sources mentioned earlier, Summer seems to be the one who appears more upset about Jeff serving during this time where the family is not getting much income. This is most likely because Delaney cannot really comprehend the gravity of the issue that her family might go through and how they might have to work much harder in order to stay where they are.

In the book, *Not Your Father’s Coast Guard*, author Matthew Mitchell explains the tough situations that Coast Guardsmen have to go through when they’re deployed. Many different operations are described in the book, such as Operation Blast Furnace, where in 1986, the DEA

and a Bolivian anti-narcotics group had to take down cocaine laboratories throughout Bolivia. However, both of these groups were unable to complete the operation themselves, so they had to call in the help of the Coast Guard. Having been called into this situation as the only group that was able to help, the Coast Guard is shown in this book as being the “savior” that other organizations need, as mentioned before. Being involved in operations like these could take its toll on the families of the Coast Guardsmen.

If we go back to the case of Coy, we can see no sign that his father was ever involved in large operations that would cause any additional increase in negative behavior in Coy. It is important to see the difference between Coy and the Pelland family, however. Coy’s attitude toward his mother was driven by one thing — attention. Everything he did, he did for attention from his mother that he was not getting from his father. As he told psychiatrists, “I would never kill Mom. I love Mom. I want her to pay attention to me but I don’t like what she tells me.” Some might consider Coy’s behavior psychotic because of his lack of a relationship with his father. Remember how I said Coy’s case might be an outlier? It’s not. Coy is not the only one who has had a rough decline in behavior and attitude because of having a parent in the Coast Guard.

As stated by PRB.org, “Among children up to age 5 of military families, other research has shown anxiety tantrums; school-age children will have mood changes and problems at school; school issues; and physical symptoms that do not have a clear physical cause.” (PRB.org) Understanding that other children experience similar feelings to Coy depicts a pattern that is easily recognizable. When parents “neglect” their children by staying away in the military, they impose upon their children the burden of growing up with only one parent and half of the love

they would have received otherwise. In this quote, we can see that it is mostly children who are affected by their parent's presence in the military. In the same vein, an article by Ifstudies.org concurs with the information given by this article. The article mentions that children under 11 showed "worse emotional conduct, more peer problems, and greater need for mental health services than their counterparts in non-deployed families." (Ifstudies.org) This is easily seen in Coy's case and is understandable due to the circumstances in which the children find themselves in. Having one less parent could scar children because it could make them think much worse of the parent that was away and could deprive them of the attention that would come with having a second parent more present in the house. Going back to two of the cases, Coy and Kayla's son will both have to experience the lack of a parent for a while longer, and this could lead to further distress and tough times for their families.

Relating to Summer Pelland's case, an article from Ifstudies.org states that "Presumably due to the stress of solo parenting, spouses also exhibited a decline in parenting satisfaction over the deployment cycle," followed up with, "the spouses suffered elevated symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD." (Ifstudies.org) What is interesting to note here is that the spouses are the ones that would also face PTSD. But, you may wonder, what is there to make the spouses face PTSD if they are not the ones who are on duty? The answer may lie in the stress that these spouses go through parenting their children all by themselves for a majority of the time. Since they are forced to hold all the jobs and responsibilities that come with being a parent, it could be hard to transition from life with a partner to life alone. It is interesting to note that in addition to PTSD, two more very common symptoms of stress are present — depression and

anxiety. These symptoms can also have an effect on the children, as sometimes the parent would not be able to contain their feelings, and would lash out at their child.

Having to be in a Coast Guard household can be difficult for all members of the family. The spouse has one of the hardest jobs in this situation, which is taking care of the children while their significant other is away as well as looking out for their own health and the safety of their partner. The children must also learn how to adapt, which can be very difficult for children of young age, and this can often result in lashing out and very negative behavior and attitude from the child. However, life in a Coast Guard family is not all bad. Being able to move around to different locations sometimes trumps the effects of being without a parent. As Cathy Freitas said in her interview, “It’s definitely given me opportunities that I really wouldn’t have gotten being a small-town girl from the Big Island. I most likely would still be on the Big Island. I probably wouldn’t have left the rock if not for the Coast Guard.”

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