

APO  
San Francisco  
96525

Growing Up In The Military

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

by Jim Grubbs

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The following chapter is an excerpt from  
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Growing Up In The Military***  
by Jim Grubbs

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## **Chapter Five** ***California Dreaming***

It must be mid-day! The sun is shining brightly through the window. My suitcases still sit unpacked. I have no idea where I am and my body has no idea what time it is. I'm famished. I must have slept right through breakfast and lunch. I trip down the hallway and stop short of falling down the stairs.

Now I remember. I'm in Japan, someplace called Kanto Mura Family Housing Annex. I can't even pronounce it yet. Just the day before, I was in California and the day before that back home in Illinois. I stop for a moment and

contemplate the word “home”. Wherever I am now, this is “home” and I better get use to it. I finally find a clock. It says 4:00. Can it possibly be that late in the day? I look outside. The sun is just rising in the east. That is the east isn’t it? It’s four o’clock in the morning!

Jet lag is bad enough when you travel across country, but when you traverse more than nine time zones in a single day it leaves you completely confused. In my case I was almost exactly a half-day out of synch.

The house or perhaps I should call it an apartment had all the necessities. Standard issue military furniture stood in all rooms of the house. Good metal stuff, none of this wimpy wood furniture for our people!

It was another three bedroom unit, with rooms about the size of those in Wherry. All of the bedrooms and the full-bath were upstairs. The living area and kitchen were downstairs along with a half-bath. There was only one door. It was reinforced steel to withstand the typhoon winds that would visit from time to time. While there were no basements, the units were raised several feet higher than normal to accommodate the high waters that often accompanied the high winds.

At least each of these apartments had their own doorway. Each unit consisted of a four-plex, but everyone had their own upstairs and downstairs. We had an end unit on the street so we had only one common wall with the neighbors.

There was a grand common in the front formed by our unit and two others set at ninety degree angles to each other. We did have a pretty nice back yard too. No trees though—well, there were trees but they were as young as Jon.

Kanto Mura was a “presento” from the Japanese government to the U.S. military. Another large housing complex located close in to Tokyo appealed to the 1964

Olympic committee. It would make a nice Olympic village for the athletes and was conveniently located. A minimal amount of work would restore these post-war units to acceptable accommodations.

The government offered to build an equivalent housing area farther to the west on land occupied by the Chofu Air Station. All that remained there was a small force of Japanese Air Self Defense personnel. The airstrip itself had been inactive for a number of years.

So it grew from a relatively flat parcel of land. Hundreds of identical buildings, networked by a series of paved roads. There was a shopping area and a modern school complex. Put a ten foot high fence around it and you've got yourself a military family housing annex.

The units were well constructed if lacking in individual charm. The craftsmanship was second to none. These buildings were designed like Frank Lloyd Wright's Imperial Hotel...built to withstand whatever came their way. They ultimately were destined for the same fate as Wright's grand hotel.

The rest of the family came to life at some point. I guess my dad had long ago adjusted to his new environment and it was about time for him to get up any way. I didn't know that the next adjustment would come as we sat down to breakfast.

For whatever reason, I dearly love fresh milk. I can drink it a gallon at a time. That is, I could before I left the states. The only whole milk available to military personnel in Japan comes in cans from the states. It's in limited supply and is expensive. The local dairies are not considered to meet our health standards, so local products are forbidden. The result is a little number known as reconstituted milk. It's a modern day version of powdered milk. About the only

difference between the two is that the milk is reconstituted by the military and sold ready to drink. You don't have to mix it yourself. There are some vitamins added but the taste got left somewhere back in Hawaii where the milk was dried. The result is white water, often with an odd taste to it that as best we could ever identify is caused when they bubble the vitamins through it.

This is the stuff that would sit on my corn flakes for the next two and a half years! It was so bad that when Jon was old enough to drink it, we had to bribe him by putting chocolate syrup in it. To this day, he has to have chocolate in his milk.

I don't remember when I weathered my first typhoon, but I do recall that it wasn't long before I felt the first earth tremor. They were a regular occurrence, though none of them were particularly severe during my time there.

Our televisions were virtually useless. The Japanese use a different channel assignment scheme. There was no Armed Forces Television and the only English language shows were on government owned channels that were beyond the reach of our sets. Radio became a good friend, but "my music" was only on a few hours each day.

One of the big attractions of coming to Japan for me was my desire to operate my ham radio station from a foreign country. Stations outside of the United States are sought after for contacts by the half-million or so stateside hams. It would ultimately turn out that all I could do was listen.

Everything related to the military that happens in Japan is governed by a status of forces agreement. That's the case in other countries around the world where we have military bases. Amateur radio is a very small part of the agreement.

According to those in the know, a very influential group of individuals who had a vested interest in the Japanese

communications industry were concerned that military men and women would use ham radio to circumvent the telephone service for overseas calls. It's not unusual for military personnel to run such "phone patches" from remote overseas locations. In many instances it is the only link back home.

These influential men managed to have two restrictions incorporated in the status of forces agreement. First of all, only military men and women and U.S. civil servants would be issued licenses to operate on the amateur radio frequency bands. They were specifically forbidden from being considered amateur radio operators however and are referred to as "Auxiliary Military Radio Stations". They are forbidden from contacting local Japanese hams and they are not allowed to run telephone patches.

The problem was that I was a dependent, not a member of the military myself. The specific nature of the language in the agreement prevented me from ever receiving a license while I was in Japan. Ultimately, I did volunteer my time at the base MARS station-the military organization that operates throughout the world to pass routine "health and welfare" messages from military families around the world to their friends and relatives back home. Since these operations occur on military frequencies and under the direct control of the U.S. government, they are not subject to control by foreign governments.

The difficulties I encountered affect only a very, very small number of dependents. But I'm sure that other dependents have run into restrictions that kept them from participating in an activity that would have been considered routine stateside.

I did spend many hours listening and also assisted with the administration of the military radio club there. From my

short wave listening point just outside the iron curtain I had an excellent opportunity to monitor broadcasts from Russia and China. This was at the height of the Viet Nam war and offered a perspective on world politics that few experience.

By summer's end, we were pretty much settled into our new quarters. We did little exploring outside of the near by bases. It was a real hassle just driving from one place to another. The maximum speed limit is 60 km/h or about 36 mph and that only on the expressway into Tokyo. More typical posted speeds were below 20 mph. The snarled traffic on the crowded roads often was lucky to maintain half that speed.

Dad had purchased the smallest American car he could find to take with us. We maneuvered around the area in a Rambler American 220. When we got it out into the local villages, you would have thought we were driving a Cadillac.

Even though my sixteenth birthday was just weeks away, I would not learn how to drive for another two years. Dependents could be licensed to drive on base only at 16, but that seemed silly since you could walk from one end of the area to the other in just a short period.

Throughout the summer I retained a positive attitude about being in Japan, but almost as quickly as our transfer had come I was hit with a feeling that would dominate my life for the next year.

While school registration is pretty routine for millions of children in the United States, military kids always seem to be in a new system or switching from DoD schools to civilian classrooms or vice versa. Something about registration this year triggered some very negative feelings within me. Every friend I had was more than eight thousand miles away. I had met no one during the summer. For the third time in

three years I would be going to a new school. Many of the things I had enjoyed doing were not available to me here. I had enough.

The situation that developed is not pleasant to look back on. Basically, I completely withdrew into my room during non-school hours. School was nothing more than somewhere to spend about six hours every day. There wasn't anything wrong with the school or the people. It just wasn't my school and my friends.

My grades suffered noticeably. At the end of the first semester I had two Bs and two Cs in my academic subjects. It wasn't a lack of understanding the material, it was a total unwillingness on my part to do anything more than just complete assignments at the lowest level possible and still maintain average work.

I developed one friendship with an equally backward young man. Today we'd be called nerds. Back then, we were just weird.

During the year I worked on a plot to get back stateside. I had read about National Science Foundation scholarships that allowed students to study advanced math and science topics during the summer between their junior and senior years in high school. Participating universities around the country provided the instructors and the housing.

I concentrated my efforts on several programs in the St. Louis area. My efforts were rewarded with an acceptance to two different programs. I had created my own ticket back stateside, or so I thought. My old junior high math teacher had even offered to look after me for the summer inviting me to stay with her family if I liked.

To make a sad story short, a new base transportation officer refused my request for space available travel stateside. Over the years a dozen or more DoD students in



Japan had qualified for the same type of NSF scholarship and they had all been allowed to travel at military expense. This man felt it to be an inappropriate use of military funds and stood steadfastly by his decision. Though it was appealed up the chain of command, the military in typical fashion let the lower decision stand.

For the first time since I had arrived in Japan and probably for the first time in several years I faced up honestly to the reality of my situation. It didn't make any difference what I wanted. Even excellent academic achievement wasn't going to make my wishes come true. I was stuck here for at least another year.

All the anger that had been building up began to fester. Since I had few friends, I couldn't even take it out on them. I think mom got the brunt of it. A cheery good morning from her was met by my icy, "says who!" response.

History will record that the worst of the rebellion only lasted a few weeks. Finally, I allowed my old ways of adjusting the freedom to surface. I was going to make my senior year worthwhile if it killed me!

I don't think my friend Don had any idea of what was going on. During the first few days after school opened, I was attending organizational meetings for the school yearbook and newspaper. I tried out for the debating club. I authored a proposal to build a school radio broadcasting station that was approved.

For the first time I got involved in class activities after school. I'm the party responsible for the giant golden football that appeared in the homecoming parade sponsored by the senior class. The construction of that float is where I learned how to cuss like a sailor.

I had also auditioned for a slot on Armed Forces Radio doing a rock and roll show that is fully chronicled in its own chapter.

The teen club became a frequent hang-out. I got to know the guys in the local bands and helped them with their electronic gear. I remember how a friend of mine built the first “fuzz box” in Japan. We became instant heroes with the musicians!

Through my newspaper work I met several friends that were really quite good photographers. That led to many hours at the hobby shop working in the darkroom.

I don’t think I missed a single football or basketball game that year. They even let me introduce the players at some of the home games. My work on AFRTS had made me a minor celebrity.

You could find me at the base theater just about every time there was a new feature. I saw the Beatle’s “Help” movie about seven times before it left the islands. I even went to the school and teen club dances, though I still used the camera as a crutch. “Just here to take pictures and listen to the music,” I’d tell my friends. I don’t think I ever danced once.

Even though school didn’t begin until after 8:00 I usually hopped a ride with dad on his way to work at 7:00 or rode my bike in early. I seldom was home before 5:00 and then only long enough to have dinner and confirm my plans for the evening. Nobody had to remind me to be home at 10:00 p.m. Usually, within minutes after that time, my head was sound asleep on the pillow. It was a peaceful sleep, the kind you have when you’ve had a full day filled with enjoyment. I looked forward to every new day with the same enthusiasm as the day before.

My grades soared. I posted straight As one term and fell only one short the rest of the time. A call to the principal's office one day was to inform me that I had been selected for the National Honor Society. I won an essay contest during fire prevention week but never got my prize of a transistor radio. The presentation was scheduled at the same time I had to be at FEN to record my radio show. My English teacher thought I should cancel the show to accept the award. I thought differently.

Obviously, a busy Jim was a happy Jim. Somehow my school work not only got done, but I excelled at the same time. Still there was a strong desire to return stateside. I just no longer allowed it to cheat me of the time I had to spend here.

Yet another change had taken place in the Grubbs family at about the same time. Much to everyone's surprise, my mother gave birth to my sister. She was born just a few weeks before my 17th birthday. Her own military experiences would be limited, but she would still get to tell people that she was born in Japan, which often results in the comment, "but you don't look Japanese."

Music plays a big part in many of our lives. Dependents often identify strongly with particular songs. The Chofu class of 1967 is no exception.

There is a tune written by John Phillips about a young person's dreams of California that became popular while I was in Japan. There are times when those words still haunt me. In fact it was as I was writing this book that the Beach Boys paid tribute to the beauty and long lasting popularity of this Mamas and Papas classic by recording it and releasing it to a new generation of followers.

I'm not from California. In fact since I last flew through San Francisco on my return from Japan, I haven't even been there. But those words, particularly for military dependents, seem to appeal to people no matter where they call home.

During my senior year at Chofu High School, the senior class lobbied for and received a lounge as part of our special upper-classman privileges. With only 80 some students in the entire class, the lounge was seldom crowded. We enjoyed playing music there, even if it was on a record player borrowed from the library.

Those were often times of sharing and many times we shared stories of our friends and experiences at other bases where we had lived.

Perhaps the most profound discussions revolved around the feelings we had about being overseas and what we missed most about the states.

Bill was a "real" surfer from California, or at least that's what he wanted us to think. Mike was a musician, longing to be somewhere near one of the music capitals of the world. In 1966 he would have much rather been in London than Tokyo.

Even several of the Japanese-American students yearned for Honolulu or in some cases the west coast. Even they seemed to be products of more Western culture than Eastern.

We all missed cruising around, the freedom of life beyond the gates of military installations and the normal teen age indulgences. Some of the more spirited drifted into Japanese bars and night clubs and usually ended up in trouble.

Otherwise it was a life that revolved largely around school activities and the teen clubs with an occasional outing to an event in downtown Tokyo.

Teen clubs are an interesting institution. There's nothing quite like them in civilian society. With an absence of arcades, dance halls, concert theaters and such, they served as everything from game rooms to grand ball rooms. I suppose that in some large cities the YM/WCA, Boys Club, CYO and other organizations may approximate the atmosphere.

It was our hang-out and yet even there the military influence was strongly felt. Often the degree to which the rules were enforced depended on the person in charge, but generally the rules were meant to be kept. In my own opinion that was a pretty good idea.

Nearly every weekend included one or more dances at a base nearby. Sometimes a long bus ride was required, but you went because there wasn't much else to do.

True, movies were only twenty-five cents each with four different features each week and a "sneak preview" on Saturday night at a few of the theaters. The only problem with those was that if you went to the sneak preview, a few weeks later you lost out because you had already seen the movie.

It seemed that many people were just putting in their time waiting to go somewhere else. Almost all of us knew that graduation would be the last we would see of each other and that's generally held true. It's hard to hold a reunion when your class is scattered to the four winds with no common bond.

I'm not real sure how younger people react in an overseas environment. My best guess based on my own experiences with military life in general is that as a youngster you don't know any other way. Moving, new friends and schools, different customs are all a way of life. You don't

think of it as being different because you have nothing to compare it to.

In your teenage years you begin to have a sense of the outside world. In my case it was perhaps a bit more vivid because I had the chance to spend almost six years in one locality. The bulk of that time included living off-base and attending public schools.

From my vantage point now, I wish I could return to those years in Japan. I certainly would have done a lot of things differently during my first year there. I'm not so sure that I would have changed much my senior year, but I wish I had realized just how good things were then. I knew I was having a good time and enjoying life but I don't think I came even close to understanding just how good my life was then.

A number of people surveyed for this book describe a very special feeling of closeness to their overseas dependent friends. It seems to be something that endures the test of time and distance more than any other type of friendship. One woman told me that she has never been able to connect with people in the same way she did while her family was overseas.

We were all at a vulnerable age. I think most of us felt close to our immediate families, but teenagers often want and need more than just the love they get at home. They need to be part of a group. They need to belong. All of us were far away from our old friends. Deep down inside we probably suspected that life would be different back stateside when we returned. When we allowed it, those around us overseas wanted to help fill the void. It was as if we somehow knew we were different but couldn't quite put our finger on why.

If you take a glance at the 1967 "Hosho" yearbook from Chofu high school, you won't have to flip through very many pages to find one of the pictures of me. Perhaps the

*APO San Francisco 96525*

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one I'm the most proud of is one of the strangest. On the "senior superlatives" page you'll find me down on all fours dressed in my maroon and white school spirit sweater with a lovely young lady sitting on my back, beating me over the head with a bat. The headline reads "The Friendliest Guy At Chofu High". I had come a long way from the young man who locked himself in his room only a year before.

This book is available for purchase from **Amazon.com**