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Of Adolescence & Adulthood

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Non-fiction

Getting Hitched

BY [SUTTON R. STOKES](#)



SUTTON STOKES AS COASTGUARD

If you were following US news in early 2003, during the troop movements and buildups just prior to the beginning of the current Iraq war, you may have noticed stories about the crop of brand-new

soldiers who had never considered military service until just after the events of September 11th.

Reporters gravitated to these fresh-faced, recent recruits, and again and again we heard versions of the same story: glued to their televisions on that awful day, these young people decided that their country needed them not as filmmakers, economists, programmers, or teachers, but as frontline troops.

It made sense. Though US leaders asked only that Americans keep shopping (and call 1-800-TIPS with any anonymous denunciations that popped into our heads), it was obvious from the spontaneous blooming of flags, the long lines at blood banks, and the legions of well-wishers cheering the rescue efforts at Ground Zero that much of the nation shared a desire to, somehow, "do something." Small wonder that such a mood manifested itself among a certain segment of America's youth as a willingness to shoulder a pack and rifle, regardless of whether or not they were likely to see action against those responsible for the Twin Towers attack.

For the year following September 11th, US military enlistments trended sharply upward. The end of the 1990s had been a slow period for military recruiting, with 1999 the worst year ever for at least one branch of the armed services, but the period from September '01 through September '02 showed a dramatic turn-around: even with increased recruiting goals, the Army and Air Force met their quotas months ahead of schedule, with the other services close behind. Reenlistments were up as well, with the Navy setting its all-time retention record in April 2002.

Now, as the US military reels from one public relations blow after another, it may be that this trend will slow or reverse itself. Right now, it's too early to tell. But it is also important to keep in mind that people join the military for intensely personal reasons, only partly influenced by world events. Military officials, in fact, discount the possibility that a "September 11th effect" improved their recruiting numbers, instead describing the increased interest in military careers during that time period as a predictable side-effect of the stumbling US economy.

This raises a host of questions. In a sluggish economy, do more people choose military service cynically, figuring that they won't find a job anywhere else? Or is it rather that, when the economy is booming, the prospect of easy money in the civilian sector makes it harder for people to hear a call to service that many of them would, otherwise, answer? And what's the nature of that call, anyway? We call it 'service,' and when the troops are coming home from a combat zone, there's no question that they've risked--and lost--a lot. But do all the young men and women who enlist do so out of a sense of self-sacrifice--is there really something else that they could be doing? Something that will give them and their families full medical coverage, comfortable housing, and some modicum of prestige or status in their communities?

Or are money and other benefits only a small part of the thinking that goes into a decision to sign yourself away to Uncle Sam?

To call these questions confusing and challenging isn't even the half of it. I should know: I'm still at something of a loss to explain why, at the age of twenty, I left college and signed up for a four year hitch in the Coast Guard. Now, I know the Coast Guard is not exactly the Marine Corps. Also, in 1995, the possibility of being sent off to war seemed small, to say the least (although I might as well point out here that Coast Guard units have seen action in every [major US conflict](#), and that the Miami-based patrol boat I was assigned to from 1997-1999 has been in the Persian Gulf since last spring).

Still, even joining a relatively 'safe' service like the Coast Guard was quite a leap for someone like me. Child of the middle class, with left-leaning parents, graduate of a private Quaker [high school](#)--virtually everything about me made my decision to duck into a recruiter's office a statistical anomaly. Even

today, with enthusiasm for uniformed service relatively high, people from lower income backgrounds are over-represented among military enlistees; of those, only about twenty percent identify politically as anything other than Republicans. [John Lehman, "Degraded into a trade," Washington Post, 26 January 2003, B7]

Then there's my personality: occasional short haircuts notwithstanding, most people I know don't seem to peg me as the military type. Those who have gotten to know me in the years since I left the service, in fact, often find it hard to believe that I could ever have been in any military branch, even if it was "just" the Coast Guard. I don't know if this is because they think I'm too skeptical, too independent, too free-spirited, or maybe just too weak to last for long in an authoritarian environment. Whatever the reason, there seems to be something about me that many people have difficulty reconciling with what was, apparently, once-upon-a-time, my willingness to wear a uniform and bear arms.

As strange as my friends may find it now, my parents were astounded when I broke the news to them. I can't say for sure that they'd ever made any conscious effort to push me away from military service, but, if not, I think that was probably because they assumed they didn't need to. My mother was born in Germany during WWII, and has always been horrified by uniforms and the sound of marching feet. My father did a one-year Army hitch between WWII and Korea, and while he spoke fondly of some aspects of it, I also learned at a relatively early age that his barracks had been the scene of a shooting and a suicide. Together, my parents had marched against the Vietnam War, read the Pentagon Papers, and shared the national sense of disillusionment as evidence of the government's willingness to lie and risk lives for political gain mounted steadily. Why would any child of theirs join the military?

I expected my parents' skepticism, and I had some convincing, rational-sounding explanations at the ready. I told them that I felt a call to public service, that the GI Bill would help me pay for college, that I figured I could save lots of money living on a military base, and so forth. At the time, **it sounded convincing**, and I'm pretty sure I even believed most of it myself. Looking back on it now, though, my arguments remind me of nothing so much as the coldly clear logic with which a teenager can enumerate all the reasons why his parents should include him on the cell-phone plan or give him the family station wagon instead of trading it in, and which is nothing more than a disguise for the real reason: because deep down in his guts, for all sorts of reasons related to sex and reputation and strength and the thrilling possibility of how the future could turn out if only he could just get this one thing-- deep down, for reasons he's powerless to understand, he simply wants it.

What was it that I thought I would be getting? In the broadest possible terms, I thought I was joining a sort of police/fire department of the sea, and that my daily activities would consist largely of law enforcement and rescue operations. The painting over my recruiter's desk helped me keep my focus: it showed two Coasties with shouldered shotguns springing onto an idling powerboat. I wanted to do **things like that** so badly I could smell the gun oil. I'll admit it, I fantasized about myself in uniform, a heroic figure: Sutton rappels to the deck of a fleeing smuggler's boat; Sutton deftly **maneuvers** a motor launch through towering waves; Sutton is so determined to find the **missing** child that his partner must physically restrain him from diving into the frigid water one more time.

As I look back now, it feels like I wanted these sorts of experiences experiences of risk, danger, and valour--because I wanted to be somehow marked by them. I wanted scars, whether physical or psychological ,and I wanted to wear these scars as medals, as proof that I had put myself to some sort of test and been found what? Grown up? Alive? A man?

Needless to say, none of my fantasies came true. If I'd bothered to find out a little more about the Coast Guard before signing up--specifically, if I'd understood just how much time I would spend on big ships cutting circles in the ocean, far out of sight of land<I might have had a slightly more realistic

picture of what I'd actually be doing: riding out a hurricane with a dead radar; riding out a hurricane with a functioning radar; riding out a tropical storm with a puking, six year old Cuban boy curled up on the floor of the bridge. I did, however, get used to the smell of gun oil.

I once read that, when chimpanzee family groups are on the move, the adolescent males travel at the edge of the pack. They are, quite simply, looking for trouble: young, untested, and, by dint of their youth and lack of status, unattractive to the group's females, the adolescent males are purposely putting themselves in harm's way. This improves their odds of getting to prove themselves against an enemy--a predator or a member of a rival group--and so move up in the group's social hierarchy.

I know it's a mistake to throw around too many words like "purposely" when talking about animals; I suppose a primatologist would point out that these males are acting entirely instinctively, and that it is important to realize that the young chimp has no understanding about what sort of consequences might result from being "in harm's way."

Still, I think I can identify with those chimps. However hard it is for me to pin down exactly why I joined the military, I know it wasn't because I passionately wanted to interdict illegal immigrants (much the opposite, in fact), fight the war on drugs, or enforce fisheries laws. I know I didn't mind being perceived as someone devoted to such missions, but I didn't really give much thought to what it would be like to be involved in executing them--my hopes, thoughts, and emotions concerning this step I was taking were much more personal than that. Honestly, it is those anxious, eager young chimps who provide the best analogy for what I was feeling: driven, by forces and urges I couldn't begin to fully understand, out to the edge of the pack, looking for trouble with no clear idea of what I'd find or, really, why I was looking for it in the first place.

Last spring, as I read about the newly gung-ho young men and women who had unexpectedly left schools and jobs and families (who never saw such a decision coming) marching off to war, I wondered if any of them understood their own reasons for enlisting any better than I understand mine. I wondered if any of them felt like a young chimpanzee, too.