



Dear Reader

by Garry Vardon-Smith

At the risk of starting this column like an AA meeting; my name is Garry and I am an Army spouse. Now to the un-enquiring mind that simple snippet of information means very little; it does however contain an amazing amount of information, so let me elucidate. My name is Garry, normally a male name, spelt with two Rs, it is in its traditional form, that means I am not named after Gary Cooper, so I was born in the early 60s or possibly not in America, where the famed cowboy had been butchering perfectly good boys' names since the late 50s, and oh the Army spouse bit! Most interestingly and exactly the whole point of my even attempting to write this article is the ARMY SPOUSE bit! Well, I hear you say and the point is, well I am told around 15% of the US military is female, or around 200,000 servicemen, or 1 in 7. 1 in 7, that's a surprise I hear you say, well another surprise is that a significant proportion of those good ladies will be married or intending to marry men! And ... I hear you say? Well, when anyone mentions army spouses (I need to check on my concordance for the plural of spouse here) does anyone think husband! Well do they? AAAH you now see where I am coming from, spouse can mean husband or wife (from the Latin to promise or betroth, spondere) but it really means wife and as far as I can see whether it's from the military side or organizations around it, only means wife, officer's wife, wives clubs, mother and toddler, well mums, etc.. Now my point is not to decry this at all, I think all of the above groups and more, help with the Army life tremendously and especially with small children, but what I am saying is what on earth are the 200,000 or so men out there, married to our gorgeous gals in green (and blue green, what is that color and blue) doing and why aren't they a voice for action and motivation like our ladies who lunch!

Well then, where are you and what are you doing and could we do more, that's the point. Now I know we are outnumbered 7 to 1 by the feminine side of the house but 15% is a significant proportion of any group (ask Al Gore) and 200,000 people are a potential huge mover for change (colonial Boston had around 7000 people in 1773 and the whole of North America was only 275,000 strong).

Do we not face the same issues as our spousal colleagues: the dreaded PCS, identifying a 'portable' career or settling for something below our qualifications and experience like the ladies have had to do for years? Are not many of us stay-at-home dads caring for our offspring, the hunter-gatherer on hold? Yet rarely, if at all, does anyone hear from the mythical army husband. This can only mean one of two things - one, we are incredibly contented with our lot and like a cat sit back and relish those working all around us, or two, we don't have a voice because traditionally we didn't exist! The military historically was male and their spouses trudged along behind us, tending our injuries and keeping house at the rear of the column with the pack animals (such fond memories)!

My view, my mewling in the wilderness if you will, is that the latter is true and we don't have a recognized voice and as such it started me on my winging and whining to MSCCN and Kate in particular and then inevitably, directly it leads me here to this piece and my communication to you men.

Well boys, this is it, money in the mouth time, we have the possibility of a column every month, we or me can talk about the things that directly affect us and what we can do about it, we can be agents for change and add our shoulder to the heavy burden our ladies have been working under since 1869 (when the 14th amendment gave Black males the right to vote but still denied all women the same rights, until 1920 with the 19th amendment (what was so important about 15, 16, 17 and 18?! Now universal suffrage was huge and I am sure even with my elevated sense of self-importance we won't approach such a big deal, well maybe, possibly, but even if we can just influence decision makers to see beyond the army wife (God bless her) and include the sometimes hidden contribution that the dads and lads add to the effectiveness of the US military then we will be making huge inroads. Not forgetting the fact that 200,000 men have needs and the discounts, sponsorship. and the other spin-offs that can accrue from mass action shouldn't be overlooked; companies have deliberately targeted women because in the main they shop for the families and spend the 'lionesses' share of the household disposable income. Well who's to say it should stop at Victoria's Secret, well actually hang on there (let's let them keep that one!) Cabelas, Modells, Bass Pro, Golfing (did I mention golfing) all come to mind as 'Male centric' and possibly vulnerable to 200,000 active males!

Locally I am thinking we could arrange male focused, Army/Navy/Airforce/Marine (Coasties?) Dad and toddler groups, I'm not suggesting that little Jonnie is possibly up for that Nebraska hunting trip yet but dad's fishing and BBQ sounds good and possibly better than coffee? I am not even talking about taking the focus off the Mom's groups or families but adding a dimension of male camaraderie and shared experience; after all even I have discovered I like baking (basically because if I didn't we wouldn't bake!) so what about it guys are we ready, can we make a difference and are we the change we have been waiting for?

As my final thoughts wind down and as you struggle to get you feet wet wading through your own deepest thoughts, I thought that being male it would be nice to have some rules for this column and as it's the first one I thought I would lay them out for your critique and feedback, so here we go.

- 1) I promise I will write about one thing that I feel strongly about from a male spouse perspective
- 2) If I hear from another human being I will add your concerns to the debate and answer your mail
- 3) I will try to be informative and humorous, there is no evidence that life is serious
- 4) I will desperately try not to offend anyone, but if I do, I never meant it that way
- 5) I love and support my Active Duty Family Component and try to make her life more bearable (after all she does live with me) with little niceties, I thought I would try and pass on those to inspire others, It might be a recipe, a review of a uniquely male gadget, or a bargain wine – yes real men do drink wine
- 6) I am also a US resident alien, not a citizen yet, that makes job hunting uniquely difficult, something a lot of other spouses (male and female) share and I will add this to the heady mix
- 7) I am English by birth so you must forgive my propensity to wax lyrical about things, and spell and write differently to y'all (as the license plate says of Texas, I wasn't born here but I got here as quick as I could).

So fella's that's the pitch -- will you help out? I know it's unusual for men to be in the minority at anything but us being a silent minority just isn't right!