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## Military Service Helps Forge Long-time Friendships, Support System

By Jennifer Wake



Long-time friends (left to right) Peggy and Robert Houlahan, Donna and Thomas Pearson, and Edwin and Rae Humann have been meeting regularly for more than 65 years, after the couples' husbands met during World War II flight training. Photo: Jennifer Wake

In 1943, at age 18, Moraga resident Edwin Humann was sent to Thunderbird Field outside of Phoenix, Ariz., for flight training. He found himself away from anything familiar, but he soon met fellow flight cadets Thomas Pearson and Robert Houlahan. Their friendship - along with that of their three wives (Rae, Donna, and Peggy) - has lasted more than 65 years.

"Our personalities brought us together," Pearson says. "We got along and had an immediate bond because of the trials and tribulations of going through the program as cadets."

But that didn't make military life easy.

When Peggy married Robert Houlahan, she says she knew nothing about military families, but with each transfer to a new town (or country), she says they were always warmly welcomed.

"I practically raised our kids alone," she says. "We got along just fine because we helped each other out. They had a structure in place. I can't tell you how many times I took pregnant gals to the hospital to have babies because their husbands were deployed."

Pearson's wife, Donna, agrees. "Anytime we were transferred, which was

roughly every three years, we were part of that family."

But times have changed since World War II, when Americans pulled together when loved ones were drafted in mass.

"There was a big difference between World War II and Vietnam or Iraq," Houlahan says. "People were behind it."

Although troops involved in wars like Vietnam, Korea, Iraq and Afghanistan, have not had the same type of support from fellow Americans as was seen in World War I and II, several things have remained constant: An immediate bond is created among these service men and women and their families, and long-time military families continue to give back to this extended family through outreach and volunteer efforts.

The Pearsons live at Air Force Village in Riverside, Calif., from which many in the military are deployed to Iraq. "We send them off and we're there to cheer when they return - even if it's at two in the morning. There is definite support - a bond in the military," Pearson says.

Houlahan's wife, Peggy, volunteers in the Listener's Program at the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. For three hours each week, she offers support for patients whose families live far away.

"We are all Depression Babies and understand sacrifice," Rae Humann says. "My mom would put cardboard in our shoes and paint them black."

The couples all agree that military life is different today. "Reservists are called in, and the family stays in the general community," Donna says. "Back then, it was expected for wives to participate in base activities, but very few wives worked back then; it was a different atmosphere. My daughter is part of a wives' club and has a hard time getting women to help."

"All of my daughters work and have careers," Rae says.

That is where volunteer programs and outreach from non-profit organizations can help. Over the past several years, hundreds of organizations have been established that offer financial and emotional support to service personnel and their families, either directly, or through care packages and letter writing campaigns.

Lafayette resident Jon B. Rogers, who served as an officer in the U.S. Army from 1954 to 1957, is president of The Rogers Family Company - one the nation's leading importers and roasters of branded gourmet coffee and tea. Over the past four years his company has sent 500,000 bags of coffee to overseas troops, including those deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rogers is a longtime supporter of Operation Gratitude - a non-profit organization that sends care packages and personal letters of appreciation addressed to U.S. Service Members deployed in hostile regions such as Iraq and Afghanistan, and on military ships at sea. This month, Rogers' company is partnering with Operation Gratitude in a "Letters to Our Troops Contest." Letters received from the contest will be included in more than 70,000 Operation Gratitude holiday care packages.

"Sometimes, the gesture that touches a Soldier, Marine, Airman or Sailor the most is a simple, heartfelt thank-you," says Rogers. "It's impossible to underestimate the pride a member of our military feels when they receive a letter or an e-mail addressed 'Dear Hero.'"

For Pearson, it's important to remember that the military is an all-volunteer force. "They are asking for second tours of duty because they see the good they are doing, the schools they are opening up."

"There is no longer a mass entry," adds Houlahan. "These men and women have said 'I'll put my life on the line for my country'."

For more information about Operation Gratitude's "Letters to Our Troops Contest," go to <http://dearhero.opgratitude.com> and click on the "Write a Letter" button.



Moraga resident Rae Humann points to a picture of her husband, Edwin, taken with his World War II flight squadron in 1944 Photo Jannifer Wake

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