

Gardenia
DUTY

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gatekeeper press

Columbus, Ohio

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Gardenia Duty

Published by Gatekeeper Press
2167 Stringtown Rd, Suite 109
Columbus, OH 43123-2989
www.GatekeeperPress.com

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ISBN (paperback): 9781642370485
eISBN: 9781642370492

Printed in the United States of America

Dedication

To the generations of those who reported for duty,
and to the families that served with them.



Acknowledgments

Nostalgia is like a grammar lesson: you find
the present tense but the past perfect!

—Owens Lee Pomeroy

Nostalgia. This is an emotional word that conjures body language from a slow sweet smile, eye rolls or a furled brow that delights the dermatologist reaching for a Botox needle. I believe it is an underrated emotion but also one that requires balance. Mental health professionals also validate the value of coping in the present by looking at the past to find hope for a future outcome. It can remind us and regroup our sense of purpose.

So, when I began to pursue the story of what became **Gardenia Duty**, I chose to marry the relationships of the adults of the Silent Generation with the Baby

Boomer descendants. This would create the social setting of the prospering America during a relatively peaceful time. Each generation would look through the eyes of a child and the eyes of an adult.

Fortunately, it is at the root of my own childhood that I knew where to draw my research. To weave the story's perspective from the young adult sisters reliving the past through the eyes of a child allowed me to use stories of many people. To educate my own perspective about the angst of the adults that were influential in my childhood, I dove into the dominant male military world of 1950s and forward. As I progressed, it softened the edges of my own painful and happy nostalgic memories.

As in the book, I started out dissecting my late stepfather's military records and mementos, which allowed me to ask relatively informed questions to the many Vets, including my own Tin-Can sailor father. Their uniforms were retired, but often a baseball cap with a military logo alerted me to their presence. The Goose Creek Tin-Can Sailor Chapter graciously endured my prodding. I would meet shipmates of my dad's and even developed deep friendships with a few. I explored the decks of the USS Laffey at Patriots Point. The familiar smell of diesel mixed with grey paint sent my nostalgia into overdrive. I spent time in Jacksonville Beach, Florida to launch myself into the mind of a grade school girl navigating her way as a military dependent in the 1960s.

GARDENIA DUTY

I treasure the many glory day chats that revived the boyish spirits over a beer at ship reunions or an American Legion hall. The vulnerable confessions of the trials and tribulations of raising families under the strain of the Cold War helped me flesh out the tender undercarriages of these masculine souls.

At the announcement of “free wine for all the blondes at the bar” at a local Olive Garden, I met and became part of the Thursday lunch gang of Jack Connerty. He became so dear to the heart of my story, I promoted him to Chief in my book. His best friend, Richard *Santa* Stanley, amused me and welcomed me with that first free glass of wine. (Lynn Stanley, you’re a saint!) Thank you also to Jerry and Marla Wickerham, Dwight Cargile of American Legion Post 147; John Long, who shared the photos of the recovery of Gemini VIII from the deck of the USS Leonard F. Mason (see next page); and especially to my father, Ret. LCDR Eugene Hall; and late step-father, Command Master Chief Robert Hardegree.

But, as pointed out in the story, behind all these men were wives and children. The ones who waited and kept the family together during a husband’s absence. There has to be a thank you to my mother, Jeanette Hardegree and my three sisters because without the experience of being a real ‘package deal,’ my story would lack a realistic flare.

My mentor and writing coach, Shari Stauch, conceived the basic idea of this story and kept me motivated to never abandon ship. Her confidence in Gatekeeper

KATHLEEN VARN

Press has finally laid the keel of my cover and launched the pages of the journey of the Higgins family. Of course, my husband, Steve Varn, gave me much needed R&R and escape with my camera underwater when the words would freeze.

I hope this book inspires readers to look into the amazing stories of their families and ancestors. I have a new appreciation of the messiness of life, but how something as simple as birth order can be a key to untangling it.

For me, the result has been profound, and I've discovered, as I hope you will, that the definition of family isn't limited to blood but to those whose hearts are so big, they prepare us to become the watchstanders at the helms of our own lives.

Thank you to generations of those who reported for duty, and to the families that served with them. I salute you...



Reader Discussion Guide

Reading this selection in your book club, or planning to? Here are some discussion questions about **Gardenia Duty** to get you going...

1. Similar to Louisa May Alcott's novel, **Little Women**, the core family consists of a military father/step-father and mother of four daughters. As in real life, birth order tends to contribute to childhood experiences. Are there situations and/or characters you can identify with, and if so, how?
2. **Gardenia Duty** is told from male and female voices, both child and adult. Are there situations and/or characters you can identify with, if so, how?

KATHLEEN VARN

3. Bobby and Rose's moral and social development occurred post-WWII and The Great Depression. What cultural influences shape their actions, especially before they marry?
4. The sisters were born into a family whose lifestyle was governed by their father's and stepfather's US Navy careers. Eventually, the oldest daughter pleads with her stepfather to find a way to put down roots in Charleston, SC. Do you think the frequent relocations had a negative impact on the childhoods of the girls? In contrast, did it provide a positive impact in their bonding?
5. Just like Bobby's role on his naval destroyers, Rose managed the family routine during his absence at sea. Each sister's role mirrored seniority and chain of command to their mother. Do you think it contributed or hindered the relationships?
6. Hollywood and television series centered on what was called "The Traditional Middle Class" family life. Do you think divorce was a social hurdle for the sisters in childhood or in adult choices?
7. The book introduces Bobby turning 18 and facing registering with Selective Services due to the military conscription still in existence. This launches him to leave his childhood home

GARDENIA DUTY

and eventually crosses paths with Rose and her daughters. The author uses Bobby's voice to show him develop from a young boy to ultimately a family man. Do you think his ability to walking into an instant husband/father situation was influenced more by his career or by values from his parents?

8. The gardenia bush that had been nurtured in the family home creates a thread in the story. The irony of a gardenia being a locally developed flower and its resilience reflects the parenting of Bobby and Rose for the sisters. Is there a family symbolism that you can relate to like the gardenia's subtle infusion from the family garden?
9. In spite of the long-distance relationships between the sisters, do you think the military family lifestyle preserved their ability to pull back together in crisis?
10. Are there any books that you would compare this one to? Why?

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