

Sarah McConnell: (singing) This is Bring the Boys Back Home recorded in 1971 by Freda Payne. It's one of the hit songs heard on the radio during the Vietnam War that addressed the conflict. (singing) I'm Sarah McConnell and today on With Good Reason. We'll talk about and hear some of the songs that formed the soundtrack of the Vietnam War. (singing)

Sarah McConnell: In their highly acclaimed book, We Gotta Get Out of This Place, authors Doug Bradley and Craig Werner explore how the US troops turned to music as a way of connecting to each other, and to the world back home. And also as a way of coping with the complexities of the war they'd been sent to fight. Werner and Bradley interviewed hundreds of Vietnam veterans, and their testimony taps into memories of an often overlooked component of the war, the musical soundtrack.

Sarah McConnell: Craig Werner is Chair of the Department of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Doug Bradley was a journalist in the US Army in Vietnam, and works with Vietnam veterans. With good reason, associate producer Elliott Majerczyk, spoke with Craig and Doug about the music of the Vietnam War.

Elliot M.: Craig, besides writing this book on the music of the Vietnam War, you and Doug co-teach a course on the Vietnam War at the University of Wisconsin. One of the lessons you try to impart to your students is that there is no such thing as "The Vietnam experience."

Craig Werner: That's right. There were two million experiences of Vietnam, and the first thing you have to know in understanding the story of any Vietnam vet, is what we call the three Ws. When somebody was there, it was very, very different being there in the early years of the war when Kennedy was president. In the craziness of the Johnson administration, and in the Nixon years when the mantra was nobody wanted to be the last guy killed in Vietnam, you need to know when someone was there, you need to know where they were, were they places where they were fighting the Vietnamese army or the Vietcong, and you didn't know what they did.

Craig Werner: In the book, we interviewed between two to 300 vets, and some of them were infantry men, and some of them were journalists, and some of them were field bakers, and some of them were dog handlers, they did hundreds and hundreds of different things.

Elliot M.: Doug, you served in Vietnam. What were your three Ws?

Doug Bradley: My three Ws were I graduated from college in May of '69, had a student deferment, lost that deferment upon graduation, and by March of 1970 I was in the army, and the following November of 1970, I was in Vietnam. My three Ws are 1970 and 1971, this is the Nixon secret plan to win the war, Vietnamization,

turn the ground war over to the South Vietnamese, bomb the north Vietnamese into submission and get them to the peace table. Craig was right, if we're leaving, then don't do anything that's going to put us at risk, nobody wanted to be the last GI killed in Vietnam.

Doug Bradley: So 70 and 71, the air condition jungle for me. I was in the rear at the largest army base in the world at that time, Long Binh Post, which was about 15 miles northeast of what was then called Saigon. During the day I worked with and for the Brass at army command headquarters, I was a Journalist, an Information Specialist. Anybody that was there the same time as I was, even though we're deescalating the war, if they're a grunt, if they're flying helicopters, different experience, different war. But for me it was trying to keep the morale of the soldiers up, trying to keep ourselves together, trying to stay alive.

Elliot M.: Your book focuses on the music of the war, but it was a time even back then in the '60s when technology allowed music to be everywhere in Vietnam, and the army brass was actually supportive of playing popular music.

Craig Werner: They gave us creature comforts, I mean, we were the rock and roll generation. Radio was our internet. We all listened to the same soundtrack, whether you were in Vietnam or not. They had armed forces, Vietnam radio, they had substations around the country. Donut Dollies GIs would have. Local stations there were pirate radio stations. There were live acts, there were touring acts, there was James Brown. The army wanted to make sure that they made it accessible because they knew that was one of the things that we treasured and valued. I think what they didn't know was all the different ways that it connected, sometimes separated but also rooted us, and in some cases made us even a little more rebellious.

Doug Bradley: In some ways foremost, it provided a link to home. It reminded people of their girlfriends, their wives or their connections with their high school or college friends. And secondly, it helped units come together in Vietnam. We got a lot of stories about particular units that had their own sound track. Guys would play tapes and dance with each other or if they were fortunate enough to have a Donut Dolly or a nurse around they would dance with them. And third, it helped them think things through, help them make sense of situations that really didn't make much sense to them at the time.

Elliot M.: Music is the universal language and really does break down barriers. Well, let's start with a countdown and we're going to reverse the order by starting with the number one song.

Doug Bradley: We Gotta Get out of This Place, by The Animals, the Vietnam veterans national anthem.

Elliot M.: Why do you call it the national anthem?

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Craig Werner: That's what they call it. I mean, it came out in '65, written and intended for the Righteous Brothers as a followup to, You've Lost That Loving Feeling. And The Animals who were coming up from a hardscrabble life in New Castle to London see this as their emancipation song of getting out of the ghetto and getting on with the new life. But then it's in Vietnam and it's very literal. We had 365 day tours, 12 months for the army, 13 months for marines, so you knew when you got there the day you were leaving. That notion of getting out of that place and the urgency of that song and how it captivated that feeling was just surreal, it was universal.

Craig Werner: All of us would lock arms and shout the lyrics at the top of our lungs. It's played at every Vietnam vets reunion, it just captured that moment in their lives when staying alive and getting out of a harmful situation as the most important thing. (singing)

Elliot M.: I heard they actually changed the last line of that song.

Craig Werner: I was there clasping arms with guys and singing that and shouting it. We changed, there's a better life in the USA because that's where we were headed we hoped. It speaks for itself, but it's got this emotional power and connectivity, that was it, that was the bullseye.

Doug Bradley: Another thing that was a real surprise to me in 1966, that was a year when the Beatles and the Motown were at their peak, but the number two song for the Vietnam soldiers was a one hit and wonder.

Craig Werner: Well, talk about one hit wonder, I'm still trying to figure that one out. Sergeant Barry Sadler's Ballad of the Green Berets, it was number one for five, six weeks running, sold millions of copies, ended up being the record of the year. This is the generation of the sons of World War II dads. They had to stop fascism in Europe and the Pacific. We had to stop communism in Vietnam, so it's our time to serve, this is our calling. (singing)

Elliot M.: Actually at the end of this song, the soldier that they speak about gets killed.

Craig Werner: Ultimate sacrifice, that's right.

Doug Bradley: It was either one of the most mentioned and lauded songs that we heard about, or derided, and there was frankly a little more derision. We interviewed a guy in our book, Jim Curts a guy who was an ROTC student at Madison, had an obligation when he graduated, got through law school. So this guy is a law school graduate, he's made a captain, he ends up in Vietnam in 1966 with The Big Red One. The song that motivated him that whole time was the Ballad of the Green Berets. He thought it was going to be like going to Wisconsin. We were going to march down the field, get into the end zone, win the game, save the victory. Well, after a very, very, very rough year in Vietnam, Jim Curts' attitude

changed, and he told us later that, that song was nonsense, he can't listen to it anymore. He says, especially that part at the end where the guy dies and his wife puts the metals on his son. He said, it's nonsense.

Elliot M.: Well, that was a very almost finger pointed song, but some songs had a completely different resonance in Vietnam than back in the USA. Let's take this song, the Psychedelic classic. (singing)

Doug Bradley: Purple Haze by Jimi Hendrix. That was the song that shows how different the meaning of the song could be for vets in Vietnam, soldiers in Vietnam and on the home front. I played with the rock and roll band at the time and when we played Purple Haze in Colorado, that was a drug song, it was about a kind of LSD. In Vietnam, it had many other levels of meanings. One of the biggest ones was it spoke about the smoke grenades that would lead helicopters in the landing zones. Hendrix had been a member of a paratrooper unit, and he was a terrible soldier, but he knew what he was talking about. And many, many of the people we talked to said that Jimi Hendrix sounded like the war and a line like, excuse me while I kiss the sky, meant something different if you were stoned in America or if you were jumping out of an airplane in Vietnam.

Sarah McConnell: You're listening to With Good Reason, a conversation between associate producer, Elliot Majerczyk and Craig Werner and Doug Bradley, authors of We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of The Vietnam War. Here's Elliott.

Elliot M.: There's a song that I interpreted as a overt antiwar songs by Country Joe and the Fish, and it was adopted by Marines who are not necessarily antiwar, it's an indication that the pro war hawks versus the antiwar doves often does not really reflect the reality of what the GIs experienced.

Doug Bradley: That's true. And there was one moment where one of the guys we talked to when I ask him, how many of you were opposed to the war? He thought about it for a minute and he said, "By the time we'd been there a year, all of us." But the fact was that was really reflected in the music and in I Feel like I'm Fixin' to Die by Country Joe and the Fish had very different meanings for the vets. (singing)

Craig Werner: When we went out to California to interview Country Joe for the book and he met us at the Bart Station in Berkeley, first thing he said to us was, "I'm a veteran first and a hippie second." Who Knew Joe McDonald was a vet? Now his service in the navy, predated Vietnam. But it grounded him in the ethos of being in a situation you have no control over your life, your military job, your assignments. So as Joe related to us, the reason he wrote that song was for gallows humor and soldiers got it. I mean, the main thing is he still gets hate mail today, but Joe knows that that's gallows humor. That the situation is so bad you have to find a way to laugh about it. Let's blame the powers that be, let's try and take them down by being a reverend in the ways we can as soldiers.

Craig Werner: We talked to some of the most Gung Ho soldiers in the war, guys that still believe we probably could have won that war. They would play that song to get their soldiers jacked up, to get them ready. For them it was this kind of anthem.

Elliot M.: Some of the songs did make it into films about the Vietnam War. You know that great song by Nancy Sinatra, These Boots Are Made For Walking, Stanley Kubrick used it in Full Metal Jacket. So let's hear it a little, and then get your take on it. (singing)

Elliot M.: I'm listening to that and trying to put my mind in the mind of a Vietnam soldier, and it has a completely different meaning.

Doug Bradley: Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of those songs that it doesn't have to be the whole song, it's not an English test that you're taking. It's if a part of the song resonates and if you're walking countless, countless miles through jungle, through mountains in Vietnam, your boots matter. These Boots Are Made For Walking, so never in a million years occurred to most people in the home front that that song would speak to Vietnam vets like it did.

Elliot M.: Could you talk about how music was an entry point for vets who might be reticent to talk about their experience?

Craig Werner: Well, I think you just put your finger on probably one of the most shameful legacies of that war, and that is that we blame the veterans for losing the war. We didn't bring them home, we didn't help them heal, we didn't listen to their stories. And what we found out and discovered just serendipitously one time at a Christmas party at a vet center was that, whereas many of these guys and women still couldn't talk about the experience, didn't feel people would listen or be invited and they wouldn't get attacked, we asked them about a song, and in asking them about a song, they started to come out and talk about the experience. I think that's what we've pretty much most proud of, of the book is that we feel in many cases we'll help some of these folks to get home for the first time.

Doug Bradley: We began every interview by asking, did you have a song? And often it was just like turning on a faucet. Often we've talked to people for two hours about their experience and when we've done public presentations, there's always somebody who comes up afterwards and says this is the first time they've talked about Vietnam publicly in their life, and the music opened something up that I think it's very nearly impossible to get to any other way.

Elliot M.: The last part of your book is about the Vietnam veterans coming home or back to the world as they called it. One of the most important songs of that era, it's still constantly played, was inspired by letters that a GI wrote back home.

Doug Bradley: Marvin Gaye's, What's Going On.
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Elliot M.: Could you tell that story?

Craig Werner: Well, his brother, Frankie Gaye, he's in Vietnam, '67, '68, tough years to be in Vietnam, tough years to be black in Vietnam, and our form of communication, we couldn't text anybody or send an email. We wrote letters and it was therapy. It was therapy for Frankie Gaye, because he wrote letters home to his folks, never thinking his important brother Marvin was paying any attention, and Frankie was telling what he saw, telling it like it is.

Craig Werner: The war wasn't going right, morale was low, race was bad, drugs were rampant, the enemy was everywhere, but Marvin Gaye is reading the letters. When Frankie gets home, Marvin cancels a tour and there he is. He did what a lot of people didn't do, and that was, he said, "Look, if you want to talk, I'm here to listen, I'm not going to judge, but if you've got something, it'd be helpful for you to talk. I'm here to listen." And boy did he talk.

Craig Werner: When they got done with the conversation and he started the letters, Marvin said, "I'm not an artist, I can't paint a picture. I'm not a politician, I'm not going to run for office, but I can write music." The beauty, the power, the resonance of what's going on is that the entire album is really about Frankie Gaye Vietnam Veterans Odyssey of returning back to America because this is the kind of odyssey that men like Frankie Gaye are on, can they get back or they keep going in this circle. (singing)

Elliot M.: Let's end with the song by Jerry Butler from that time that's a reflection of the obstacles of any returning vet, be it Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan.

Doug Bradley: Only strong survive by Jerry Butler, the Ice Man, a member of the impressions along with Curtis Mayfield, who wrote a great album about Vietnam, Back to the World. But I think that Jerry Butler really hit one of the core messages that was true for the vets in Vietnam and is true for them as they continue today.

Craig Werner: And we had a great story in the book Elliott with a guy, Ben [inaudible 00:22:59] from a small town in Wisconsin and when he got to his unit in Vietnam, again it's another one of these stories. The guy, he knows he's going to get drafted, so he enlists the signup to try and get a military job that'll keep him out of Vietnam, and of course there's no guarantees with that. He ends up in Vietnam. Fortunately he eventually ends up instead of a lot of heavy duty in the field work because he was going to be a combat engineer, he becomes a clerk because he knows how to type.

Craig Werner: When he gets to his new assignment right there at his unit on top of the barracks there is the sign Only the Strong Survive, that's their slogan, their mantra. Well, that takes on literal implications for him because this is a guy, like many vets, comes back home, starts to self medicate, wasting his life, and one night he sat with a bunch of his other Vietnam vet buddies and he gets

plastered. He's coming home and his parents have had it. His father throws him out of the house and Ben's singing only the strong survive. Sort of forgetting maybe all the connections and maybe what the message of the song is. And his father grabs him by the shoulders and looks him in the eye and says, "What the hell are you doing?" And it was that moment for him, like we had guys talk about other moments. It was listening to Marvin Gaye or if it was hearing Country Joe, that something clicked. He just decided, I've got to be strong, I've got to survive, I've got to get on with my life, that song made the difference. (singing)

Elliot M.: Is listening to the music and talking about the music a safe place to discuss the war, and are you finding there is more discussion about the war than there was about 10 or 15 years ago?

Craig Werner: Yeah, I believe so, and people keep telling us that they feel comfortable, they feel safe. They don't feel like they're going to get jumped, whether they were a protester or whether they were a decorated veteran. I do believe it's helped this conversation along. Sorry to say, I think it's too late for not just the 58,000 names on the wall, but the two or three or four times as many men and women who died because we didn't listen to them and listen to their stories and bring them home. I do hope that with... I sometimes refer to this as America's second civil war, that as we maybe try to find the things that pulled us apart over a century ago, that we also look at what brought us apart as a country 40, 50 years ago. We can come together and heal those wounds, because that's the only way we're going to move on, and we're not moving on I think very well.

Doug Bradley: Yeah, now as then the music tells human truths that go a lot deeper than the simplifications, the battles, the us versus them of way too much of our political conversation.

Elliot M.: Well, Craig and Doug, we got to get out of this place. It is such an informative and moving book. Thank you for speaking with me today.

Doug Bradley: Thanks for having us.

Craig Werner: Thank you, Elliot. (singing)

Sarah McConnell: That was With Good Reason Associate Producer Elliot Majerczyk, speaking with Craig Werner and Doug Bradley about their book, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The Soundtrack of the Vietnam War. This is With Good Reason, we'll be right back. (singing)

Sarah McConnell: I'm Sarah McConnell, this is With Good Reason. In 1965, Morley Safer was the CBS television correspondent in Vietnam, that year he filmed the search and destroy mission by the US marines.

Morley Safer: This is what the war in Vietnam is all about.

Speaker 6: [foreign language 00:28:23].

Morley Safer: The old and the very young. The marines have burned this old couple's cottage because fire was coming from here. Did you set fire to these houses here?

Speaker 7: No, we were just off to the left here when it was burning.

Morley Safer: Were you getting fire from them?

Speaker 7: Somewhat, not too much. A slow sniper fire.

Morley Safer: The day's operation burned down 150 houses.

Sarah McConnell: We tend to remember the male correspondence in the Vietnam War. People like Morley Safer, Dan Rather, Anchorman Walter Cronkite, but women journalists who covered that war are rarely given their due. Our next guest is Joyce Hoffman, a professor of journalism at Old Dominion University. She's interviewed more than a hundred Vietnam reporters for her book, *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam*.

Sarah McConnell: What was the experience of women journalists in Vietnam? There might have been more men than women, but were they respected by their editors and told get in there and do it?

Joyce Hoffman: No, not at all. I think that the... And early on, women who went to Vietnam went on their own because their editors would not give them the assignment. Later in concert with efforts by the feminist movement, women were increasingly assigned to Vietnam, but only again with great reluctance and most often with strict orders that they were not to cover the battlefield. That they were supposed to be whatever at the cocktail parties at the embassy and covering the political situation and human interest stories.

Sarah McConnell: In all fairness, at that time, the men were just trying to protect them, right?

Joyce Hoffman: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. And that was an attitude that was shared by the male hierarchy in newsrooms and by the military, and unfortunately by a number of their colleagues surprisingly enough.

Sarah McConnell: So, when you interviewed some of the men for your book, you found some of their attitudes toward the women or what you'd call sexist?

Joyce Hoffman: Well, yes. Even the noted author Michael Herr who wrote for *Esquire* during the war said something to the effect of the girl reporters if left too long in Southeast

Asia, invariably grew bored, distracted, frightened and unhappy. Well, I thought that that was a real put down and that's in an otherwise really distinguished piece of literature.

Sarah McConnell: That's so interesting, and maybe it's true and maybe the men did too.

Joyce Hoffman: Exactly, exactly. I think there were times when the men were terribly unhappy. I mean how could you not be when you saw the mayhem and the chaos of battle. Men peg these characteristics as decidedly a feminist. The one thing that I will say about... The one area in which there was almost universal agreement among the women who covered the war was in their disdain for the women's movement. I would say their attitude towards the feminist movement ranged from indifference to I'd say downright hostility. What do I need them for?

Sarah McConnell: Among the many female correspondents in Vietnam, you focused primarily on 15. How did you choose them?

Joyce Hoffman: I began in 1956 when a young journalist named Gloria Emerson was working at William Randolph Hearst Journal American as a fashion writer, the only job that most women could get on newspapers in those days. She went off to Vietnam for two different reasons, and I loved both of them and I think both of them were emblematic of what would later drive women to Vietnam.

Joyce Hoffman: That was, she wanted to be a journalist but didn't know how, and she was chasing romance. She had met a dashing young CIA man at a cocktail party in New York. He was home from an assignment in Vietnam and about to return. He wrote her what he told me were a few, hello, how are you letters? And on that basis she took off for Saigon, and landed on his doorstep without ever having let him know that she was on her way.

Joyce Hoffman: She wrote probably only two stories, three stories altogether, but it demonstrated how difficult it was for women to get that assignment. When I look at some of the very remarkable stories that I have told in my book, I'm taken in very much by Frances Fitzgerald, the author of *Fire in The Lake*, probably one of the most important books written about Vietnam. She was both a product of the American aristocracy and the daughter of the number three band in the CIA. She wrote the first sociological study of the war and came to the conclusion that we could never win it because we did not understand Vietnamese culture. And one of the other women was almost unknown in the mainstream of American life, her name was Ethel Payne, and she worked for the *Chicago defender*, one of the major black newspapers of its day. The white press in general ignored black society, and so when Ethel Payne went to Vietnam, she focused on what black soldiers were doing.

Joyce Hoffman: Ethel Payne was also, I think the first woman to cover the White House and she made quite a name for herself over the years, she's an extraordinary figure.

Sarah McConnell: Was she sent to Vietnam by her publisher?

Joyce Hoffman: Interestingly enough, she's probably the only woman who was assigned to do the story. Women asked for the assignment, begged for it, pleaded for it, but Ethel Payne's editor came to her and said, how about it? And when she was asked why? She said, because I'm the best they had.

Sarah McConnell: Tell me the story of the woman who's pictured on the cover of your book, Kate Webb.

Joyce Hoffman: Kate Webb probably made in roads where no other woman had. She was born in New Zealand, worked as a journalist in Australia and just left her job one day to go on vacation, wrote a letter of resignation and went on to Saigon and was ultimately hired by United Press International. She is one of the few women who is quoted in the histories of the Vietnam War, mostly for her observation about what the American Embassy looked like on the morning of the Tet Offensive and she described it as a butcher shop in hell.

Joyce Hoffman: She's also very well known for her work in Cambodia. The danger for journalists was just unbelievable, and Kate herself was captured along with several colleagues and held for 23 days.

Sarah McConnell: Isn't she the one who's obituary appeared in the New York Times when she was in captivity?

Joyce Hoffman: Yes, the charred remains of a woman's body was found and it was presumed to have been Kate. Her obituary, of course, appeared in the New York Times and in newspapers around the world. In fact, a funeral was held for her in Australia. When she's released and finally has a chance to call her office in Cambodia. The person who answered the phone thought it was just a sick, sick joke and hung up on her. Because of course they had all been mourning her in the last week or whatever.

Sarah McConnell: What about Dickey Chappelle? She was the only American female reporter killed in action.

Joyce Hoffman: Yes. Dickey began her career as a photo journalist in World War II. The men were really... The male reporters were quite offended by her presence on Okinawa. When word got out that she was there, the commander said, "Get that woman the hell off that island, and when you find her, shoot her." But of course that never happened. And so she went to Vietnam quite early on, and over the years she became quite enthralled with the marines. In fact, at one point she went through basic training with the marines wanting to know, she said, how it happens that a group of men are melded into a single unit in a single mindset with a single goal. And wanted to be right where the action was. She said, as a photographer, that's the only place for her to be.

Joyce Hoffman: For Dickey war became a kind of narcotic, and on this final trip of hers in 1965, she was old enough to have been their mothers. In fact, some of the marines she met knew her through their fathers who had been on Okinawa and on Iwo Jima during World War II. Her papers are held now by the Wisconsin Historical Society at the University of Wisconsin. And in the midst of all those papers, I came across a poem about battle by the poet Robert Service.

Joyce Hoffman: It was a celebration of war and wartime, and I've always wondered what on earth was she thinking about when she put that piece of paper into the typewriter and type the lines of that poem. I'm going to just going to read a few lines of it. But if there's horror, there's beauty wonder. The trench likes gleam and the rockets play, the flood of magnificent orange yonder is a battery blazing miles away, where the Russian is singing a great shell passes. The rifles resentfully bigger and brawl. And here I crouch in the due drenched grasses, and look and listen and love it all.

Sarah McConnell: Wow. How did she die?

Joyce Hoffman: A booby trap exploded and she took the shrapnel. Dickey's last words were said to have been, "I guess it was bound to happen."

Sarah McConnell: The fascinating thing is that she's just not that different from many men, not all men love battle, not even the majority, but some do.

Joyce Hoffman: Well, the title of her book, which really offended her, but her publisher insisted on it was What's a Woman Doing Here? She wanted the title to be The Things I've Seen, and was appalled that the emphasis was on her gender. But someone said to her, "Well, the battlefield is no place for a woman?" And she said, "Well, it's no place for a man either." But if we want to stop war, we have to be able to have people understand how horrible it really is.

Sarah McConnell: What about Laura Palmer's story? She was there when the helicopter was taking off during the evacuation of Saigon.

Joyce Hoffman: Laura has the most incredible story. Without a shred of experience, she got a job doing a radio for ABC News. She is certain that she got it because she was a woman. This would've been in 1972, there were a number of actions by women, and she was certain that the word came from New York, hire the woman. And so she reinvented herself as a radio reporter. And then as the war was winding down in April of 1975, she was on one of the last helicopters out and she sat in the helicopter next to her friend Robert Chaplin, who had been in Vietnam since the 1940s on and off covering the scene there for the New Yorker. And they sat together holding hands and she thought, here we are the oldest and youngest and we're leaving.

Sarah McConnell: Well, Joyce Hoffman, thank you for sharing your insights with me today and With Good Reason.

Joyce Hoffman: Thank you, Sarah. It's been my pleasure. (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Joyce Hoffman is a Professor of Journalism at Old Dominion University, and the author of *On Their Own: Women Journalists and the American Experience in Vietnam*. (singing)

Sarah McConnell: Since the Vietnam War, more and more women in the United States armed services have been put on the front lines of combat, and some of them have been mothers, including my next guest, Mona Ternus. She's a lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force Reserve and commander of the 911th Aeronautical Staging Squadron. She was assistant dean and medical researcher at George Mason University, when she decided to survey mothers who were sent to war, who have adolescent children. She was surprised at how profound the effects of deployment are, especially on the teenage children.

Mona Ternus: I was activated for a year, my husband was active duty, he was in military, he was in Iraq. And my daughter was 15 in high school, and I thought, oh, what am I going to do with my daughter? And so, I had to figure out how I was going to take care of the family. My daughter didn't do things perfectly, and she had a hard time after that year. I think she got involved with some people who weren't really good for her and she didn't want to finish high school, her grades were slipping. I was very alarmed by that, and I really felt like all the moves that she had to go through during high school. How much more difficult is it going to be for somebody who has a mom who goes off at times to war, comes back and kids that have to move around? And that's what got me really intrigued in it.

Sarah McConnell: So you were most alarmed for her instability at home when your husband was deployed?

Mona Ternus: That's right. He went in at the very beginning of the Iraq, Afghanistan conflict, and he was gone, and he was in special operations. So he was the guy kicking down the door in Fallujah, and I didn't always know what's going on with him. So when I was activated, it was just, I'm driving home one evening, Wednesday afternoon, and they call and they say, "Is this Major Ternus?" And I say, "Yes." And they say, "Well, by order of the President of the United States you need to report on Monday." And I thought, okay, and I said, let me pull over and you can tell me the whole thing because I was driving, and that's how I heard.

Sarah McConnell: I'm shocked that you faced this double deployment with children. I know you knew there was a possibility, but it still must have taken your breath away?

Mona Ternus: To some extent, but because you know it's a possibility, and I had been in the military. I knew it was always possible. I knew we had gone to war, I knew what

my husband was off doing these operations. I think it was actually more difficult to my husband, and he said the same thing, "Don't they know I'm deployed? Don't they know they have one of us, they don't need both of us?" And I said the same thing to him, "Don't you know I'm in the military too?" So it was funny but I did kind of know. I mean, I'm a nurse, I'm a critical care nurse. I'm a trauma nurse. Those are the kind of skills that are needed in war.

Sarah McConnell: So tell me about your daughter's reaction, did she just take it in stride?

Mona Ternus: No, I think she was angry, and I've seen a lot of the different adolescent reactions in the study. Either they're very angry, or they get very isolated and very quiet, or they cry and then they're very sad. I think she, to some extent was prepared because she had been left before. That sounds maybe surprising to a lot of people, but I think one strong point about military kids is they learn to adapt.

Sarah McConnell: So in this case you were sent to Andrews Air Force Base, where did your daughter stay?

Mona Ternus: Well, in this case we went through lots of scenarios. Does she stay where we were living with friends and wait till my husband gets back? Which is an option many people choose, or does she come with me to Andrews knowing that wherever we are located, I may be gone for a little period of time, and she's going to have to fend for herself.

Mona Ternus: So, the plan this time was that she came with me. We found an apartment in Arlington within walking distance of a good high school. I had to get her into a high school within like one week. That was probably the scariest time since the first day I brought her to the new high school, and I get back and she's not there. I throw on my jeans and I'm racing out, getting in my car, looking around DC and Arlington for her, and she finally calls, "Oh, I met friends, I'm going out, blah, blah, blah." First day of school.

Mona Ternus: She certainly adapted, made friends her very first day there, but also got in trouble down the line because she made friends sometimes a little too easily, was a little too trusting and maybe didn't have the street smarts for a big city.

Sarah McConnell: It is so hard to parent teenagers no matter what the circumstances are. I can only imagine what it feels like when you can't be there every waking moment.

Mona Ternus: It really is hard because as a mom with a teen, you want to have eyes on all the time, and you really can't all the time. So I'm leaving the house at five, I don't get home till after dark and she's got to go to school, get home, fend for herself, and then has those hours with no eyes on from a parent, ain't that scary?

Sarah McConnell: So what stories did you hear from other mothers when you did the survey?

Mona Ternus: Stories about the difficulties of choosing who their kids are going to stay with, who's going to be a good role model? Where would I want my kids to be? I didn't hear a lot about not wanting to do the mission or not wanting to do the job, people wanted to go. They want to take care of their families, but this was also their work in the world and they wanted to do it.

Sarah McConnell: So tell me about the study itself. When did you conduct it? Who did you speak with? And how many?

Mona Ternus: I surveyed 77 women, all active duty reserve guard, officer enlisted. Looked at what was their relationship with their adolescents before, during and after, and did they see a change in their adolescents' behavior before and after. A couple of women did call me and say, "Is this survey for real?" One woman said that she spent four hours writing out her answers to the questions, and then she looked at it for two hours before she hit the submit button, because that was so much of her experience, so she was pouring into it.

Sarah McConnell: What did you learn about the effects of deployment on the teenage children of these 77 women?

Mona Ternus: What surprised me the most is I looked at the adolescent risk factors like fights and drug use and suicide, all the different things that could happen to kids. I asked the women, did they see this in their kid before deployment? Did they know about it during deployment? Did they see it after deployment? And 75% of the women said that there were zero of those behaviors before deployment. After deployment, 75% of the women said their children had one to 10 of these risk factors, and that surprised me, that it was just totally flipped.

Mona Ternus: Now, when mom came back, I did find that the nutrition went up, their diets got better, they weren't eating junk food and they were exercising, they were getting out more, but one thing that was not impacted my mom's return home was the dropping grades. And students that had been A students, B students went to C, D, F.

Sarah McConnell: Did sometimes the women report their children detached from them?

Mona Ternus: Yes. That was one of them too, the way we'd just get isolated, they'd be withdrawn. They wouldn't want to talk to their other family members. They wouldn't want to take part. There was also a lot of resentment, you missed Christmas, you missed my birthday, you missed me moving into college, my first dorm. Moms would feel guilty about that.

Sarah McConnell: What do you think the most helpful thing is? The military could put into practice to support these deployed mothers and their children?

Mona Ternus: I think we have to realize that we have a lot of nontraditional families nowadays. We always think of what they do for the family as the nuclear family and a lot of programs are built on the traditional nuclear family. We have a lot of different kinds of families today and a lot of blended families. I think we need to pay attention to that as well, so I think that's an area where they can grow.

Mona Ternus: They are doing pre deployment events and post-deployment events with the family where they bring them together, at a nice place and they talk about what they may be going to experience or what they did experience depending on if it's before or after, and I think those really help. Then you can invite whoever the members are that important to you and are the touchstones in your life.

Sarah McConnell: Well, Mona Ternus, thank you for sharing your insights with me today and With Good Reason.

Mona Ternus: It was my pleasure, thank you for your support.

Sarah McConnell: Mona Ternus is a lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force Reserve, and commander of the 911th Aeronautical Staging Squadron. She conducted the study when she was a professor at George Mason University.

Sarah McConnell: Major support for With Good Reason is provided by the law firm of McGuire Woods and by the University of Virginia Health System, using advanced cardiac imaging to better diagnose conditions before they become serious health issues, uvahealth.com. With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia humanities. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk and [inaudible 00:51:20]. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. For the podcast, go to withgoodreasonradio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell, thanks for listening.