

The Joys and Harms of Military Caregiving

Written by Julia Welland

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JULIA WELLAND, APR 23 2025

In February 2025, the seventh Invictus Games was held in Vancouver Whistler, Canada. Founded by Prince Harry in 2014, the Games are an international adaptive sports event which aim to “inspire recovery, support rehabilitation, and generate a wider understanding and respect for those that serve their country”. The 2025 event brought together around 550 (physically and mentally) injured military personnel and veteran contestants from 25 nations, who competed across 11 adaptive sports, including alpine skiing, wheelchair rugby, wheelchair basketball, and swimming.

In 2017, I attended the Toronto Invictus Games. At the time, my research was focused on service members’ and veterans’ ‘positive’ affects towards their military lives and their relation to militarism. In broad terms, militarism can be understood as “the social and international relations of the preparation for, and conduct of, organized political violence” (Stavrianakis and Selby 2013: 3), and in these respects can be thought of as both a structure and ‘logic’ of global politics. Whilst attending the Games, however, I was struck by the centrality of the military family to both the competition itself and to the dominant narrative of recovery and rehabilitation that circulated. The ‘military family’ I invoke here is not the broader military family that is sometimes referenced in terms of a ‘warrior brotherhood’ or wider military community, but rather a more literal understanding of the term, encapsulating a (presumed) heteronormative, nuclear (military) family structure.

Reading over my research trip notes, there are references to the depiction of the military family in the opening ceremony of the event; to ‘military wife’ and ‘military mum’ t-shirts worn by contestant family members; to a spontaneous standing ovation taking place in response to news of a contestant’s partner who was about to give birth; and to the repeated mantra that it is *the whole family that serves*. This latter sentiment was shared by many of the contestants who I spoke with; most of whom identified their immediate family – spouse or parents in particular – as the most important support system in their lives.

This identification of the family as a crucial support system is in many ways unsurprising. Although historically overlooked – by both the military and the state – in relation to its significance to military preparedness and war-making, military families are now subjected to various ‘family readiness’ policies, as well as increasingly expected to ‘pick up the slack’ when it comes to veterans transitioning out of the armed forces, or meeting the care needs of physically or mentally injured service members and veterans (inter alia Howell 2015; Wool 2015). In this respect – and drawing on a rich scholarship by feminist political economists (inter alia, Rai et al. 2014; Picchio 1992; Elson 1998; Bakker 2007) – the reliance of the military on the families of its current and former members can be understood as an extension of the reliance on, and (gendered) expectations of, families and households within capitalist states more broadly.

In the context of the families of Invictus Games’ contestants, however, what is required and what is expected of them is oftentimes exponentially more than their civilian or (un-injured) military counterparts. This is because, by definition, contestants taking part in the Games have experienced some form of physical or mental injury. While these injuries can be relatively ‘mild’, with a full recovery to an individual’s previous physical and/or mental health expected, there were also contestants who had experienced chronic, serious, and complex physical and mental injuries, including limb loss, paralysis, loss of sight, post-traumatic stress, and traumatic brain injury. Such injuries may require a lifetime of care, with the specific needs and demands of the care intensifying as both the injured and familial carer

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age. The medical anthropologist Zoe H. Wool has referred to this both expected and open-ended care from military families as *after-war work for life*. To put it another way, for military families dealing with serious and chronic injury, this is not a short-term 'bump' in an otherwise smooth life path, or an acute period of pain, labour, time and investment. Rather, it is a radical and permanent reorientation of both the injured and caregiver's lives.

As my own research expanded to take account of not just service member and veteran contestants' affective experiences of, and affective relation to, militarism, but also the experiences of military families – and military caregivers in particular – I became increasingly aware that it was not just 'the whole family that serves', but that it was the whole family that were worn down, worn out, and depleted by the demands of military life. In my conversations with military caregivers, some of the tasks taken on in the aftermath of a loved one's injury *in addition* to 'regular' domestic labour and childcare included: new caring responsibilities towards the military member of the household; attending medical appointments; keeping track of what medications are being taken and when; organising and managing adjustments made to the household to ensure its safety and liveability in light of the injured family member's changed physicality and/or mobility; negotiating the paperwork, administration, and layers upon layers of bureaucracy in (attempting to) access some form of disability support from the state or Veterans Association; and having what Kathleen Lynch has referred to as "a 24-hour care map" of what is required in this (new) daily reproduction of life. As one wife of an Invictus Games contestant I spoke with simply put it: "It's exhausting".

While none of the above amounts to a spectacularised moment of 'breaking point' or 'falling apart' (Rai 2024), it does point to a gradual wearing down and wearing out of the overwhelmingly feminine bodies responsible for keeping life going against a backdrop of insufficient support or welfare programmes from the military or state. At the same time, however, just as all the contestants I spoke with framed their military experiences in a positive light, irrespective of the harms they may have encountered through their service, none of the military caregivers I spoke with described their caregiving negatively, or as explicitly causing them harm. Rather – and as others have pointed to – the labour involved in caring for and supporting an injured service member or veteran was framed as something that was taken on willingly and undertaken as an act of *love*.

Furthermore, the act of caring itself also provided a vector for 'positive' affects and sustaining experiences, including feelings of joy, fulfilment and solidarity. As one contestant wife told me, it was through meeting her partner and taking on the formal role of his 'carer' in relation to the Invictus Games that she became immersed in the life of adaptive sports and had met the people, and got involved with the support networks, she has. This immersion, and the relationships she has formed through it, has enhanced her life at the same time as it has exhausted and depleted her.

It was these simultaneous experiences of harm and depletion and pleasure and joy, experienced by military caregivers (and, indeed, by military personnel and veterans themselves) in relation to military life, that speaking with Invictus contestants and their familial caregivers revealed to me. That their intimate entanglement with military power was both the source of their harm *and* what sustained and replenished them. What, then, is the significance of these two seemingly contradictory experiences of military caregiving? Why do I think that it is important to take account of it?

Most straightforwardly, recognising not just the (caring/domestic/emotional) labour performed by military families – and military wives and mothers in particular – but the *harm* experienced through the doing of this labour, provides another example of how the costs of war and the costs of militarism as a structure of global politics seep and diffuse through communities and social worlds – touching, shaping, and depleting bodies and lives oftentimes located far from where the military violence is assumed to be taking place. Less straightforwardly – and perhaps more troubling for those seeking to dismantle military power and the structures that support it – if this harm and depletion experienced by military caregivers should be taken account of, so too should their joys and pleasures. Military caregivers articulate feelings of not just exhaustion and frustration, but of fulfilment, joy and solidarity. In these respects, it is not just military personnel who affectively invest in militarism and experience sustaining effects from their intimate relations with/to it, but military families and caregivers too.

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As uncomfortable as it may be to those committed to working towards a world not organised or structured according to the violent logics of military power, there is a need to recognise that not only do many individuals hold emotional and affective attachments to militarism, but also that militarism itself provides sustaining material and immaterial support to individuals and communities. I no longer think it is possible to imagine and work towards a world 'after' militarism without recognising and taking seriously both the harms and the joys that emerge from it – and *who* gets to experience them respectively.

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