

The gunfire never really stops. Rounds from the training ground a few miles away shake my windows while I do homework. Sometimes they're loud enough that I stop writing for a second. Then I keep writing.

"Just training."

I've thought those words so many times that I don't think about them anymore.

Elementary was the first time I learned about 9/11. Our teacher let us watch news videos from that day with the towers, smoke, firefighters, police officers, and ordinary people helping others. My elementary brain understood that 9/11 was the day America was attacked and the day when hero like people helped others in need. As I grew older, though, 9/11 became more complicated. However, learning more didn't make my American pride disappear.

For most people, after the lesson, the classroom bell eventually rings. For me, the lesson follows me home.

My dad is a soldier. Technically. He wears the uniform. He deploys. He trains with soldiers. But as an Army chaplain, he doesn't carry a gun. Though, he gets late night calls during movie night. Sometimes he has to leave in the middle of our family vacation. He comes home exhausted, and even grocery shopping takes longer because he stops to catch up with people he knows. His job is to listen.

In elementary school I thought serving America meant being willing to fight for it and risk your life for it. My dad showed me another kind of service. Taking care of the people who are willing to do that. Soldiers come to him with marriages falling apart, fear before leaving home, things they have seen, things they regret, and sometimes questions without answer. He cannot fix most of them. He listens anyway. That wasn't the version of the American military I learned from a textbook.

Living overseas has given me another one. I've lived both inside America and outside it. In Alaska, America surrounded me. Although not the lower 48, Alaska showed American pride with their truck flags and city parades. In Germany, I can leave an American military installation and enter another country in minutes. Inside the gate are American schools and uniforms. Outside are German villages, another language, and people who see my country differently than I do. Living outside America made me notice America more. Before Germany, I didn't notice the English or the American flag as being special. But in Germany, crossing onto the base made those things change from German to English and German flags to American flags. Symbols of home started connecting Americans overseas together. It also made me think about the people on 9/11 coming together to help one another

9/11 showed me in elementary school patriotism through heroic acts. But now, I have learned that patriotic acts don't need to be large and heroic. A cardboard box for example. As a Red Cross officer, I helped initiate care packages for soldiers away from home in Kuwait. Soon, boxes covered my living room, with candy and handwritten notes scattered around me. We stuffed them with toothpaste, granola bars, chocolate, candy, and pieces of home. However the boxes didn't feel patriotic nor did the things inside the box. Until a letter came back saying

“Thank you for bringing home to us.”

I didn't carry a gun. I didn't wear my dad's uniform. But I found a role that I can play.

I am proud to be American because I have watched Americans take responsibility for one another. I saw it first through the firefighters, police officers, and ordinary people who helped others on September 11. I have seen it in soldiers who serve, military families who sacrifice, communities that remember deployed service members, and my dad, who listens when people

need him. These examples have taught me that patriotism is about caring for the people who make that country worth defending.

September 11 happened before I was born, but I have grown up seeing what came after it. Stronger gates, deployments, training grounds, military families, and people willing to leave home in service of a country they believe is worth serving.

It's not the guns outside my window anymore. I hear the people behind the training. The soldier preparing to protect our country, the parents who will return to their families, and the people my dad listens to when service becomes difficult.

The gunfire outside my window still hasn't stopped. But I don't call it "just training".