

flat daddy

Behind every
soldier is a family.

DIRECTED BY NARA GARBER & BETSY NAGLER

PRODUCED BY NARA GARBER, BETSY NAGLER & PEGGY SUTTON



Synopsis

ONLY 1% OF AMERICANS CURRENTLY SERVE in the U.S. Military, and their families have borne the disproportionate burden of more than a decade at war. Many have turned to “Flat Daddies” and “Heroes on a Stick,” life-sized cardboard cutouts of their husbands, wives, parents and children serving overseas, to ease the pain of repeated deployments. Using these two-dimensional surrogates as a connecting thread, *Flat Daddy* follows four such families over the course of a year to explore the lasting impact of the war on those left behind.

In Woodbury, Minnesota, Donna Winter and her husband Lowell assume custody of their two- and three-year-old grandsons when their son and daughter-in-law deploy to Iraq. Devin and Dylan initially cry themselves to sleep at night, and Donna is forced to transition from the role of doting grandmother to that of full-time working mom. As the boys gradually adjust to a home very different from the one they left behind in Texas, Donna worries about how they will cope when their parents return for an 18-day leave, only to depart again. Jelissa Román-Stephens of The Bronx used to depend on her husband for everything, but she is surprised at how quickly she becomes self-reliant when left to manage on her own with their four-year-old daughter, Sabrina. When “Papo” comes home on leave, his natural tendency to take charge disrupts the new life his wife and daughter have built in his absence. Can their marriage adapt to Jelissa’s newfound independence and a surprise extension of Papo’s deployment? Fifteen months after her son, Nacho, was killed in action, Marina Vance of Henderson, Nevada orders a Hero on a Stick in his image. She is determined to honor Nacho by marching with it in the Las Vegas Veterans Day Parade, even though she still often finds herself overcome with grief. Will she eventually be able to move on for the sake of her six surviving children? Andrea Bugbee of remote Caribou, Maine relies on two Flat Daddies to keep four-year-old Jorja and three-year-old Josiah company while she juggles multiple jobs and the responsibilities of two parents. She is overjoyed when her husband, Andrew, returns from Iraq, but real-life Daddy has difficulty reconnecting with his wife and kids. Andrea hopes the family will find its balance again, but she also knows that by the time they do, Andrew will almost certainly be preparing to redeploy.

Employing probing interviews, intimate verité moments, vibrant images of the American landscape and personal photographs taken by the families themselves, *Flat Daddy* presents four unique perspectives on the war effort and the varied repercussions of deployment; together, they weave a nuanced narrative of the challenges military families face in post-9/11 America.





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Filmmaker Bios



Nara Garber CO-DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Nara is a documentary filmmaker who divides her time between directing, shooting, and editing, often wearing several hats on the same project. She currently directs and produces short-form documentaries for Carnegie Hall and has directed projects for Sotheby's, Citigroup, Altria, The Point Foundation and the political satirists, Billionaires for Bush. Nara's work as a DP has appeared on HBO (*Making the Crooked Straight*) and PBS (*NOW with Bill Moyers*), and her Best Cinematography

award in the 2008 Asian American Film Lab's 72 Hour Film Shootout is a testament to her ability to frame a shot with no sleep. In 2009, Nara toured military bases in Iraq while filming Susan Cohn Rockefeller's *Striking a Chord*, and she heard first-hand from many of the men and women serving there that deployment is hardest on the families back home. Nara holds a BA from Harvard and an MFA from Columbia.



Betsy Nagler CO-DIRECTOR, PRODUCER, EDITOR

Betsy is a Brooklyn-based writer and filmmaker. Her producing and directing credits include work for the website of the Working Families Party, for the television show *Blue's Clues*, and short narrative films selected for the Seattle and Chicago Film Festivals. In 2005, she completed *'do*, a documentary on how people feel about their hair that received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts through the Brooklyn Arts Council Community Arts Regrant Program. Betsy

earned her BA at Stanford and her MFA at NYU. She has taught sound recording, documentary filmmaking and editing at NYU, Brooklyn College and the Katherine Gibbs School, and has worked as an editor on pieces for Carnegie Hall and the Working Families Party. She has also worked as a location sound person for 17 years on movies, TV shows and commercials, including *The Daytrippers*, *The Sopranos*, and *The Good Wife*.



Peggy Sutton PRODUCER

For her first film, Peggy directed and produced the non-fiction feature, *SQUONKumentary*. Selected for the 2005 NY IFF Market, *SQUONKumentary* also screened at the Three Rivers Film Festival, Rehoboth Beach International Film Festival and the 2006 Bend Film Festival. Over the past 17 years, her work as a script supervisor has ranged from big budgets

like *Men in Black II* (2nd unit) to indies such as *Pollock* to TV shows on NBC, HBO and PBS. Peggy received her B.S. in Writing for TV, Radio and Film from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University.





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Filmmaker Bios (cont'd)



Selina Lewis Davidson EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Selina has produced more than 13 nationally broadcast independent documentaries. These include: Hard Road Home, (dir: Macky Alston, PBS' Independent Lens, 2008); Occupation: Dreamland, a verité portrait of American infantrymen serving in Fallujah, Iraq (dirs: Garrett Scott & Ian Olds; theatrical release, 2005; 2006 Independent Spirit "Truer than Fiction" Award; Sundance Channel, 2006); George Ratliff's critically acclaimed Hell House (theatrical release 2002; Sundance Channel, 2003); Questioning Faith (dir: Macky Alston; Cinemax/Reel Life); Escuela (dir: Hannah Weyer; PBS/POV); Boomtown (dir: Bryan Gunnar Cole; PBS/POV); and Family Name (dir: Macky Alston; Freedom of Expression Award, 1997 Sundance Film Festival; broadcast on POV & nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Historical Programming). Selina is also Co-Founder of GreenHouse Pictures with producer Nancy Roth.



Susannah Ludwig EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Susannah was recognized as a "visionary independent producer" when she was awarded the Mark Silverman Fellowship by the Sundance Institute in 2003. Her recent credits include: Stolen (funded by the Jerome Foundation, NYSCA, the Roy W. Dean Foundation and the Women in Film Finishing Fund; Audience Award, Sarasota Film Festival and Best Documentary, Avignon/New York Film Festival; theatrical release & broadcast on PBS' Independent Lens, 2007); Close Up: Photographers at Work (Ovation TV, 2008); Self Portrait with Cows Going Home and Other Works: A Portrait of Sylvia Plachy (Grand Jury prize, Best Short Documentary, 2008 Seattle International Film Festival); My Mother's Garden (dir: Cynthia Lester, MSNBC, 2009); and Animas Perdidas (dir: Monika Navarro, funded by ITVS). Susannah is the Executive Producer/co-creator of a new documentary series, BOOMTOWN, set to air on Planet Green/Discovery Networks in January 2011.



Mark Orton COMPOSER

Mark is a composer working in the media of film scoring, concert music, and radio drama. He is a multi-instrumentalist, performing on all manner of guitars, keyboards, and percussion. He is the co-founder of Tin Hat, a San Francisco Bay Area based composer/improviser collective with six critically acclaimed albums. Mark has written scores for dozens of films — documentary, feature, and fine art — and has composed music for modern dance, theater, experimental radio, video/art installation, the circus, and the concert hall. His film composing credits include Sweet Land, The Good Girl, Everything is Illuminated, Mine, and Beyond Conviction.





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Directors' Statement

ON SEPTEMBER 30, 2006, *The New York Times* ran a front page article inspired by the Maine National Guard's statewide Flat Daddy program, complete with a color photo above the fold. In the picture, a young boy plays on a swing set alongside a life-sized cardboard cutout of his deployed father. The image was absurd and haunting at the same time.

Cut to June of 2007: Betsy and Nara meet at a party of a mutual friend. Betsy is a well-rounded filmmaker who primarily records sound for a living. Nara is a cinematographer transitioning back into directing. Betsy proposes joining forces to collaborate on a film about Flat Daddies, and Nara, recalling the *Times* photograph worth the proverbial thousand words, doesn't hesitate. One week later, we pile into Betsy's 1996 Toyota Camry with a trunk full of gear and a radiator that, unbeknownst to us, is preparing to self-destruct in Connecticut, and set off for Maine.

During that five-day trip, we discovered not only that we had enough in common to keep the conversation flowing across four state lines, but also that we shared a passionate desire to learn more about the increasingly fragmented country in which we live. Like many Americans, neither one of us had been directly affected by the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan or even knew a member of the Armed Services. It was therefore with both excitement and trepidation that we arrived for our first interview at Maine National Guard headquarters in Augusta. Sergeant First Class Barbara Claudel, Director of the Family Program, humored our many questions but finally said, "Don't ask me; ask the families." And that is what we have done.

Since we began this film, we have met military families across the country who were for the war and against the war, families who feel that their patriotism requires them to be apolitical and those for whom it compels them to speak their minds; families who have lost loved ones, who are struggling to maintain a household and raise children with one suddenly single parent, who refuse to watch the news for fear of what they might see. The bravery and resolve of these flesh and blood individuals quickly put the cardboard cutouts in their place. By the time we completed our first trip, Flat Daddies were no longer the central focus of our film but symbols of the painful void at the heart of each family with a loved one serving overseas.

We feel privileged to have gotten to know these families, whose stories are far from over. The end of the war in Iraq will place new demands on families with veterans who must reintegrate into civilian life during tough economic times; other families will confront separation once again as troops redeploy to Afghanistan. If *Flat Daddy* brings these stories to a wider audience, fostering dialogue that transcends partisanship and new ideas on how best to support military families, we will consider our road trip a success.

Production Notes

FLAT DADDY had its World Premiere at the DOC NYC Film Festival on November 6, 2011. *Flat Daddy* is made possible in part with public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts, a state agency. The film was sponsored for the 2008 NYSCA Individual Artists Grant by the Brooklyn Arts Council. *Flat Daddy* is fiscally sponsored by Women Make Movies.

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Outreach

“I think it is important to get the stories out of the strength behind the soldier. We are often the lost voice. My husband is currently serving his sixth tour... Watching the trailer of your movie gives me hope that there are people who still haven't forgotten we are at war... Just wanted to thank you and your crew for not forgetting all of us who were left behind.”

– Jennifer from Texas (via the *Flat Daddy* mailing list)

70% OF AMERICAN MILITARY FAMILIES reside in civilian communities rather than on military installations. Since service members make up only 1% of the population, however, these communities have little understanding of the invisible scars returning service members carry, or the complications that prolonged separation creates for the entire family. They therefore find themselves unprepared to provide the kind of support that military families need.

We believe that *Flat Daddy's* accessible, visual storytelling provides a tool to open lines of communication between America's civilian and military populations and spark discussion about ways to ease the disproportionate burden borne by military families. We are organizing a series of outreach and engagement screenings around the country to 1) connect military families with each other and with civilian families in their own communities, and 2) provide communities with the resources they need to help military families cope with the economic, psychological and emotional hardships created by deployment, which often persist as veterans reintegrate into civilian life. In order to ensure the success of these screenings, we are building on relationships we established over the course of making the film by partnering with national organizations, such as the National Military Family Association, and local ones, including the Maine National Guard Family Program, military Family Readiness Groups, regional chapters of the Blue Star Mothers of America, veterans groups, religious institutions, schools and women's groups. We are simultaneously organizing a separate series of screenings for policymakers at the local and national level.

An expanded outreach section of the *Flat Daddy* website will complement our community screenings and stand as a resource on its own. The enhanced site will include all of the materials needed to host a local screening independently in addition to a page of links to organizations around the country that serve military families.

Through this multi-tiered approach, we hope to provide military families with opportunities to share their experiences, and to convert the empathy and good will of civilian audiences into concrete action and lasting support.





Comments from the Flat Daddy Mailing List and Facebook



Thank you for giving us families a voice. My husband is currently in Afghanistan on a 9 month deployment. When he returns home next spring he will have been gone 13 - 14 months. Many people don't realize that these soldiers are gone from home months before they leave the country for training...Often the families are forgotten about by their communities. We are six hours away from the armory where Carl drills at, totally isolated from military support...I am certain there are many other families like us across the country.

—Karen FOLKSTON, GA



My husband is a SF [Special Forces] soldier in the U.S. Army. We are facing our 8th deployment...3rd to Afghanistan. I don't know what we would do without our Flat daddy. We now have a 3rd child and she will only be 7 months old when Daddy leaves, so I know we will be taking Flat daddy with us everywhere we go to make sure she recognizes his face when he comes home. Thank you so much for all you do.

— Holly FT. BRAGG, NC



We LOVE our flat daddy and have taken him to important events that our Airman is missing! I watched the trailer this morning and cried... thank you for sharing a little bit of what the children face when loved ones are deployed.

— Courtney SEATTLE, WA



I think it is important to get the stories out of the strength behind the soldier. We are often the lost voice. My husband is currently serving his sixth tour. We are a young married couple, only 25, so you do the math... Watching the trailer of your movie gives me hope that there are people who still haven't forgotten we are at war... Just wanted to thank you and your crew for not forgetting all of us who were left behind.

— Jennifer TEXAS



I am a mother of 2, my son is 2 1/2 and my daughter is 1. This will be my son's 2nd deployment and my daughter's 1st. Currently my husband is training for a month and it has been very difficult for my children. They are always asking for their daddy, and don't understand why he's not here...I can't wait to see your documentary. I think it will be very educational for all military wives new and old.

— Diane WASHINGTON



If you look under my photos, you can see photos of my little sister taking photos with my flat daddy. She takes it everywhere with her while I am currently deployed.

— Robyn UNITED STATES ARMY



I think it's great that there is a movie being made, so that people know what we are going through! Maybe people will understand what it is like to have someone overseas, to never know when you [will] see them again, to think that that last kiss may be the last one forever, to think that you might have to explain to your kids that Daddy isn't coming home...And even though our loved ones are home with all of their limbs doesn't mean they're back here and normal. They have nightmares and cry and scream late at night...I just think people should know what we all go through not just during a deployment but after too.

— Melissa DAVENPORT, IA



WOW! I have my flat daddy hanging in my room. It has been there for 2 years and two deployments, one to Iraq and one to Kuwait, and will still be there next year when he leaves again! The trailer for this movie brought tears to my eyes!

— Beth VENTURA COUNTY, CA

OFFduty

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2-D daddy

Life-size cutouts are keeping families connected

(or mommy!)

Stories by Jon R. Anderson
jonr@militarytimes.com

Donna Winter knew she and her husband would need help taking care of their two toddler grandkids when her son Michael and daughter-in-law Christina — both Army medics — deployed to Iraq for a year in 2007.

So the Minneapolis office manager enlisted the two best people she could think of: her son Michael and daughter-in-law Christina.

Meet Flat Daddy and Flat Mommy, life-size photo facsimiles for military families fighting to keep things together through the long absences of deployment.

The poster-board brainchild of an Army spouse, the idea is simple enough: Blow up a photo of a camo-clad loved one to help the kids feel connected.

"It was absolutely fabulous for the boys," says Winter. "It gave the kids a constant reminder. They didn't forget what their mom and dad looked like."

And, while understandably stiff, Flat Mommy and Daddy could be kind of fun, too. Dylan, then 2 years old, and Devin, then 3, toted the head-and-shoulders cutouts of their mom and dad everywhere.

"At the Minnesota State Fair, you get everything on a stick, so we called them Heroes on a Stick. The kids would carry them in their stroller and sometimes even take them on the rides. Whenever it was

time for a picture, the kids would say, 'We have to go get Mommy and Daddy.'"

'Flat Daddy' the movie

The Winters are among four military families who invited New York filmmakers Betsy Nagler and Nara Garber into their homes to explore how these 2-D doppelgangers have become parental placeholders for deployed moms and dads.

"They're a little eerie, funny and poignant all at the same time," Nagler says.

The film is one of 31 new movies making their big-screen debuts at this year's GI Film Festival in Washington, D.C., on May 9-15.

But where most military documentaries focus on the boredom



and bedlam of life and death in a combat zone, "Flat Daddy" is an intimate portrait of the sacrifice and struggle of those left behind. More than an exposé on the strange practice of poster-board parents, it's an embed into the living-room trenches and bedroom bunkers where real life must somehow continue.

The first Flat Daddy

Cindy Sorenson of Bismarck, N.D., is credited with creating the first Flat Daddy in 2003, when her husband deployed to Iraq with his

Army National Guard unit.

Drawing her inspiration from the 1964 children's classic "Flat Stanley," Sorenson created the life-size cutout Flat Dave to help ease their then-13-month-old daughter, Sarah, through the separation.

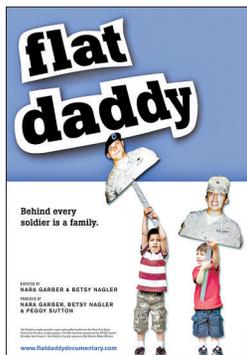
When Elaine Dumler, an author and motivational speaker, heard Sorenson's story, she included the idea in a book on how families can cope with deployment.

Slowly, she says, it has been catching on ever since.

"Flat Daddy was created primarily to help smaller children recognize and interact with a deployed parent when they return," Dumler says. "That is the practical reason, and it has had amazing results."

So far, more than 9,000 cutouts have been made through her website, flatdaddies.com. Printed on sticky-backed paper, the prints cost \$50, but more than 3,000 have been paid for by a steady stream of donations.

Countless more have been made as do-it-yourself projects and through local installation photo departments, Dumler says. "It's usually the fun side that helps it catch on," she says. "The service member can be a part of photos and occasions while gone that they can't be a part of in real time."



More on
the 2011
GI Film
Festival
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GI FILM FESTIVAL PHOTOS

Dylan and Devin Winter pose with their Flat Daddy and Flat Mommy, Army medics Sgt. 1st Class Michael Winter and Staff Sgt. Christina Winter, during the Winters' Iraq deployment in 2008.



In a scene from "Flat Daddy," 3-year-old Josiah Bugbee reads to a life-size cutout of his dad, Army National Guard Sgt. Andrew Bugbee.

MAKE YOUR OWN

In her book "I'm Already Home ... Again," Elaine Dumler introduced thousands to the idea of Flat Daddies. Some of her tips for making your own Flat Daddy:

2-megabyte minimum

Use the highest resolution setting possible when taking your Flat Daddy picture. A 2MB file "helps it enlarge without getting grainy," she says.

What to wear

Have service members dress in the uniform they will be returning in. This makes a big difference in helping children recognize their mom or dad at the homecoming.

Local printing

While websites such as flatdaddies.com will make you a Flat Daddy for a fee, local bases and armories often can print blow-ups big enough for free. If you tell them what you're doing, commercial printers may cut you a deal as well.

Tip forward

When taking photos posing with a Flat Daddy, tip it forward slightly to avoid glare.

More tips

Go to www.imalreadyhomeagain.com.

Foam-board army

The Maine Army National Guard has issued some 1,500 Flat Daddies and Mommys — and even Flat Dad Sons and Daughters — since 2005.

"I have seen flat soldiers in weddings, at the birth of children, at plays, birthday parties, beaches, bars and many other strange but

wonderful places," says Master Sgt. Barbara Claudel of the Maine Army National Guard Family Support Program.

When her own son, Sgt. Nicholas Claudel, went to Afghanistan in 2009, a Flat Nick "sat with us in the living room and dining room throughout his deployment," she says. "He would never have been forgotten, but sometimes it was just nice to wake up and say good morning to him."

When the Tennessee Air National Guard's 134th Security Forces Squadron deployed to Iraq last year, every family member got a Flat Daddy or Mommy.

"Kids take them to church, sporting events — just about everything," says Capt. Joe Keith, a spokesman for McGhee Tyson Air National Guard Base in Knoxville, Tenn., where the unit is based. "It's the next best thing to being there. It never takes the place of the service member themselves, but it sure helps the kids not forget the smile or the freckle or the dimple on the face."

Fighting 'suckitude'

"We spent a long time preparing the kids for the fact that Dad was leaving, and we thought this was a fun way to focus on how much our family loves each other rather

than the suckitude of the deployment," says Marissa Stewart, who made a Flat Daddy when her husband, Army Staff Sgt. Jared Stewart, deployed to Iraq in 2008.

She launched a blog — A Year with Flat Daddy — so her husband could see his kids grow up from afar, as his cutout was posed in a seemingly endless stream of photos.

"I wanted him to know that we were OK, and that we were staying strong as a family even though he wasn't right there with us," she says in one of her blog entries. "Even when things were less than ideal (stolen car and hospital stay, anyone?) he could see that we love him and think of him often."

Even if sometimes that means poking some friendly long-distance fun at him, as well.

"I like to goof off, a lot. My husband? Not so much. Bwahahaha, now I get to make him goof off by proxy. And much like Halloween gives you an excuse to dress like a crazy person and eat ridiculous amounts of candy, Flat Jared lets me get away with all kinds of stuff people would normally give me weird looks for."

Part of the family

Donna Winter is excited about seeing the "Flat Daddy" movie. Garber and Nagler are planning screenings across the country as part of an effort they hope will build bridges between military families and the civilian world.

Meanwhile, the Flat Daddy and Flat Mommy of Winter's soldier son and daughter-in-law remain as much a part of her family now as when they first rolled off the printer four years ago.

"I can't let them go. They're propped up against the wall in our formal dining room," says Winter, with their friendly-ly-slightly-frayed perma-grins smiling atop their weathered sticks.

While her husband says it's "kind of creepy," she doesn't intend to pack them away anytime soon. In fact, she confides, she's even considering putting the grandkids on a stick.

"I really do miss those little ones." □

Flat Daddies keep memories alive for fallen soldier's family

When Army Capt. Brian "Bubba" Bunting went to fight in Afghanistan in 2008, his toddler son, Connor, was soon looking up to a smiling life-size cutout of his dad.

It was a gift made possible by a donor to flatdaddies.com, which prints the head-and-shoulders pictures for military families.

"He carried his 'daddy' around the house, hugged it, kissed it, and even danced with it," says Connor's mom, Nicki Bunting.

"When my husband returned home for R&R, my son instantly recognized him at the airport. He ran up to him and hugged him so tight. I know it was the Flat Daddy that helped him to recognize his father that day, as the last time he had seen him in person he was only 11 months old."

Connor's dad was killed in combat a few days after returning to Afghanistan.

"Shortly after I was notified of his death, I was ecstatic to learn that I was pregnant with the R&R baby we had been hoping for. I immediately knew that I would have our Flat Daddy with me as I delivered our precious baby. I wanted Mommy and Daddy to be the first things for

him to see as he entered this world," Bunting says.

"As I labored, I was able to look at my handsome husband's face in front of me. It was better than just a picture. It was like he was right there with me. Seeing him gave me the strength to get through the labor and delivery and welcome our miracle child. His first photo is with Mommy and Daddy, just as it should be."

Now the founder of Bubba's Belly Run, an annual fundraiser that has collected more than \$100,000 for war widows and families of the fallen, Bunting has made it a point to pay forward the gift she received.

"I knew how grateful I was to have been a recipient of such a kind gift and how much it meant to our family," Bunting says. "I wanted to be able to give that gift to other families as well."

While loved ones are lost, their memories never have to die, she says. "Both of my sons now have a Flat Daddy in their bedroom, and I know this will forever keep an image of their father in their head. There is no better gift to me than the gift of memories." □



COURTESY OF NICKI BUNTING

Nicki Bunting poses with her newborn son, Cooper, and the Flat Daddy of her late husband, Army Capt. Brian "Bubba" Bunting, in 2009.

Flat Daddy (Documentary)

By Ronnie Scheib

A Flat Daddy Documentary production in association with Bloom in Pictures, Do Films, Lucky Penny Pictures, Flourish films, Greenhouse Pictures. Produced by Nara Garber, Betsy Nagler, Peggy Sutton. Executive producers, Selina Lewis Davidson, Susannah Ludwig. Directed by Nara Garber, Betsy Nagler.

With: Andrea Cole, Andrew Bugbee, Jelissa and William Stephens, Michael and Christina Winter, Marina Vance.

Impartiality has largely lost its street cred as a criterion for documentary truth, since the “other side” of most issues is so widely disseminated. But in the case of Nara Garber and Betsy Nagler’s docu about “Flat Daddies” (aka “Heroes on a Stick”), life-size photo cutouts that substitute for shipped-out soldiers in family portraits or around the dinner table, a great deal of restraint is required to do justice to a subject that at first seems utterly grotesque. Following four families cohabiting with portable, two-dimensional parents, this in-depth, cable-friendly docu offers a unique perspective on the cost of war.

Once the geographically and ethnically diverse families have been introduced, the film’s focus shifts to various members’ attempts to adapt to changing dynamics. The cutouts increasingly rep an artificial equilibrium upended by the return of the flesh-and-blood originals, particularly soldiers who are on leave and will shortly redeploy. One soldier comes home to a suddenly empowered wife more than capable of fulfilling his previous household functions. Another finds it difficult to assume a position of authority after being passively carted around in cardboard form at the whim of his pintsize offspring.

Camera (color, HD), Garber; editor, Nagler; music, Mark Orton. Reviewed on DVD, New York, Nov. 30, 2011. (In Doc NYC.) Running time: 82 MIN.

The screenshot shows a web browser window displaying a review on the Variety website. The page title is "Variety Reviews - Flat Daddy - Film Festival Reviews - Review by Ronnie Scheib". The Variety logo is prominent at the top left. Below the logo, there's a search bar and navigation links. The main content area features the title "Flat Daddy (Documentary)" by Ronnie Scheib. A short paragraph of the review is visible, starting with "Impartiality has largely lost its street cred as a criterion for documentary truth...". To the right of the text is a small photo of two children sitting on a bench. Below the photo are "Watch It" and "Queue It" buttons. On the right side of the page, there are social media sharing options (Email or Share, Print, RSS Feed, Bookmark), a "Get Variety" section with links for Mobile, Digital Edition, and Newsletters, and a "Subscribe to Variety" button. At the bottom right, there's a section for "VARIETY CONFERENCES" listing various events.

When Daddy is made of cardboard

By Robert Knox
Globe Correspondent

Plymouth Library will screen “Flat Daddy” this Father’s Day weekend, a documentary film that takes its title from a practice that illustrates how hard it is for families to stay connected when a spouse and parent is serving overseas in America’s wars.

As the US military increasingly relied on Reservists and National Guard units to fight wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, many military families made life-size photographic cut-outs of their loved one serving overseas. Called “Flat Daddies,” the big cardboard pictures, often mounted on sticks, are held up in family photos, installed in chairs for family meals, and carried around by children at play.

Filmmakers Nara Garber and Betsy Nagler say 70 percent of American military families live in civilian communities rather than on military bases.

“And these communities,” say the New York-based filmmakers, who will attend Saturday’s screening and lead a discussion afterward, “often have little understanding of the invisible scars returning service members carry, or the complications that prolonged separation creates for the entire family.”

Though America’s post-Sept. 11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are winding down, some local fathers — along with mothers, daughters, sons, brothers, sisters, and other loved ones — will still be missing from Father’s Day family get-togethers. And while cheers and celebrations may greet returning units from war zones, veterans say too little attention is paid to their families.

“What is ignored is what the family at home was going through,” said Brian Sullivan of Plymouth,

who served as a first lieutenant during the Vietnam War. “They don’t focus on the sacrifices, the hurt, the pain, and the worry and responsibility that the wife bears.”

While Sullivan was in Vietnam, his wife, Betsy, was nursing a newborn and taking care of three other children when an official-looking green vehicle parked in front of the house. “She saw that car and her heart dropped out of her chest,” Sullivan said. His wife thought it was a military vehicle come to bring her the bad news she was dreading to hear.

The wife of a Massachusetts National Guard lieutenant who recently served in Afghanistan and was gone from the household for 18 months, Gail O’Rourke

The screenshot shows the BostonGlobe.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for HOME, TODAY'S GLOBE, NEWS, YOUR TOWN, BUSINESS, SPORTS, LIFESTYLE, A&E, THINGS TO DO, TRAVEL, CARS, JOBS, REAL ESTATE. Below this is a search bar and a main headline: "TORONTO has HOLLYWOOD TOO." The article "When Daddy is made of cardboard" by Robert Knox is featured, dated June 14, 2012. The article text is partially visible, starting with "Page 2 of 2 -- 'Most of the time you won't know there's a military family in your neighborhood,' O'Rourke said last week. 'When you find out, you have to do something.'" There are social media sharing options for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. To the right of the article, there are advertisements for L.L.Bean and Inside Boston.com.

of Plymouth characterized a spouse's active deployment as "a huge invasion of family life."

For O'Rourke, who works full time, the hardest part was managing the everyday needs of active teenagers, the rides to sports and other after-school activities — along with being the only adult in the house when things got tough. She lost power for five days after last year's tropical storm. Another challenge is making do with less money because her husband's income was reduced to half its ordinary level.

And then there's the underlying issue that "Flat Daddy" focuses on — being alone in a world that forgets what you're going through.

"Most of the time you won't know there's a military family in your neighborhood," O'Rourke said last week. "When you find out, you have to do something."

People do things at the start — offer rides, shovel snow — but they forget how long an absence lasts, she said. They say, "If you need anything, just call." But the stresses of everyday life don't allow for such "reach out" calls, she said.

"They won't call," O'Rourke said of stressed and too-busy military spouses. "Don't wait to be asked."

Garber and Nagler began making their film after reading a newspaper story on how many military families with absent members were using "flat" representations of missing members to ease the pain of repeated deployments. The images may be present when they share phone calls on Skype or read e-mails from an absent parent or share a family gathering with relatives.

The big pictures also help small children recognize a returning parent after an overseas deployment — the solution to a sad, long-noticed problem: Some children don't recognize Daddy when he comes back home from the war.

"It becomes an important tool for them," Nagler said last week.

The film follows the lives of four such families for a year to explore the impact of war on their lives.

"People feel their story has not been told, that their sacrifices are not understood or appreciated," Garber said. "Raising children as a single parent and working can be a very lonely and isolating experience."

Garber and Nagler also know from the responses to previous showings that "the film makes people want to talk," Garber said.

Plymouth veterans agent Roxanne Whitbeck and reference librarian Bev Ness — the library and the veterans services departments collaborated on getting the word out on the film — said they are glad to see a film focusing on military families come to town.

In the era of the volunteer army, only 1 percent of Americans serve in the military, they noted. "We should support that," Ness said. "If they didn't volunteer, it could be your son or mine."

Flat Daddies are no substitute for the real thing, of course. Back home since the recent return of his unit, the 181st Massachusetts National Guard, First Lieutenant Michael O'Rourke is adjusting to how much his teenage children have grown up during his absence, Gail O'Rourke said. Some of their interests have changed. Her husband is reconnecting, taking guitar lessons with one of his children,

teaching another to drive.

O'Rourke said her family did have a large photographic cutout of her husband. "We had a lot of fun with it," she said. She even brought it to school for one of the children's events. But the fun has limits. Her daughter, now 16, was adamant that she not bring it to her school, O'Rourke said.

The film will be shown Saturday at 6:30 p.m., with refreshments beforehand beginning at 5:30. The showing is free, but reservations are required by going to www.plymouthpubliclibrary.org or calling 508-830-4250.

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Flat Daddy

Life-size photos help reassure soldiers' children, and filmmakers explore the dimensions of their coping. **by Corinne Purtill**

"This Flat Daddy doesn't talk back," 4-year-old Sabrina says as she strokes a life-size cardboard photograph of Sgt. William "Papo" Stephens affixed to her bedroom wall in the Bronx.

"I have a other daddy far, far away," Sabrina Stephens continues, explaining to the camera, "and he can't come back because he's saving the world."

Sabrina and military families like hers are the subject of *Flat Daddy*, a documentary directed by New York City-based filmmakers Betsy Nagler, '90, and Nara Garber. With producer Peggy Sutton, the

co-directors have submitted a cut of the film for consideration in the 2011 Sundance Film Festival and will be seeking distribution in festivals and television.

The film examines the issues facing military families by reporting on a quirky phenomenon that surfaced during the wars of the past decade: the Flat Daddy. The smiling headshot of Sgt. Stephens in his military uniform is one of thousands of cardboard images of real servicemen

and -women who are stationed overseas. The cardboard look-alikes reside in military homes around the country, helping children, spouses and parents cope with the absence of a family member.

Flat Daddies were distributed in 2006 by the Maine National Guard to the families of members deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Other private companies and service organizations caught on to the trend. SFC Graphics in Toledo, Ohio—the largest manufacturer—has delivered more than 7,500.

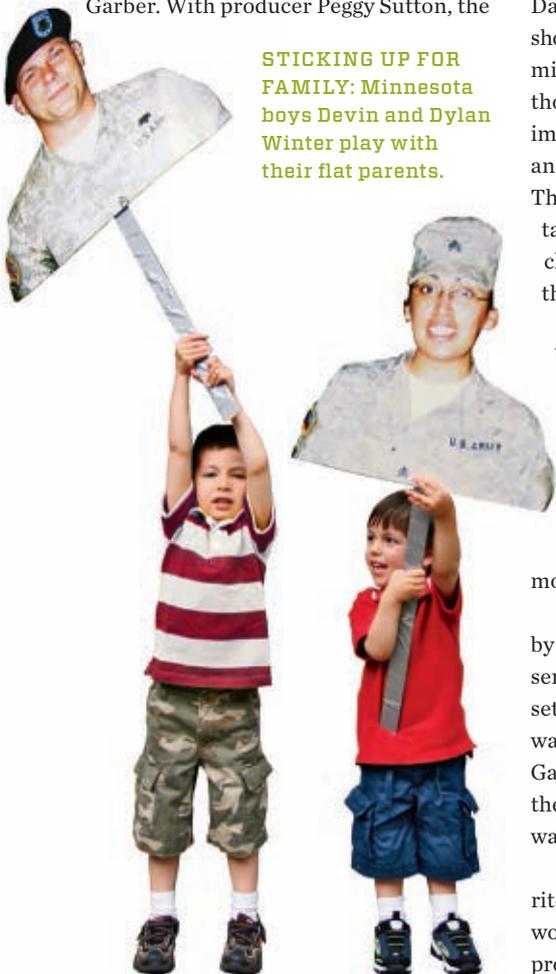
In September 2006, Nagler was struck by a photograph in the *New York Times* of a serviceman's young son playing on a swing set with his Flat Daddy. Not long after, she was introduced through mutual friends to Garber, a cinematographer who had seen the same photograph. Both filmmakers wanted to explore the story further.

Military family life was uncharted territory for them. (Nagler's résumé included work on *The Sopranos* and the children's program *Blue's Clues* in addition to her



DOCUMENTARIANS: Nagler and Garber film a Veterans Day parade in Las Vegas.

STICKING UP FOR FAMILY: Minnesota boys Devin and Dylan Winter play with their flat parents.



own documentary work.) As they traveled the country interviewing military families, they realized that their story was less about cardboard effigies and more about families' multidimensional private battles to endure a loved one's deployment. "It's a film that's very much about absence and what this does to families," Garber says.

The changing face of American warfare poses challenges for families. National Guard and Reserve units have been called to active duty at an unprecedented rate during the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many of these citizen soldiers have dependent children living at home, and they are far less likely than career service members to live on a military base or near other military families who can offer empathy and support. "The soldier ethic rubs off on the families," Nagler says. For those waiting at home, "There's a real sense of, 'This is my job.'"

That was the case for Donna and Lowell Winter of Woodbury, Minn., who raised their two grandsons (then 3 and 2) during the 15 months their son and daughter-in-

COURTESY BETSY NAGLER (2)



CLOSE COMFORT: Josiah Bugbee reads with the flat version of his deployed father, Andrew, at home in Caribou, Maine.

law, both Army sergeants, were deployed in Iraq. Donna had ordered cutouts of the boys' parents (in Minnesota, they're known as Heroes on a Stick) when she got a call from Nagler. The filmmakers followed the Winter family during a year when the

increasingly tattered Heroes on a Stick accompanied the boys to birthday parties, the mall Santa Claus and the Minnesota State Fair. Michael and Christina Winter returned home safely in November 2009.

For Donna Winter, the film is a chance

to help other American families understand the sacrifices soldiers' families make. "I hope when people see [the film] they realize how important it is to stand behind those military families who are left behind," she says. "It doesn't matter where you stand politically. You always have to support the kids who are left behind." ■

CORINNE PURTILL, '02, is a freelance writer based in New York City.

DOC NYC, 2nd Edition: More Is More

By Daniel James Scott

The magic word of this year's DOC NYC was "more": more days, more films, more panels, more filmmakers in person, and more people to enjoy the festivities. With 50 features and 42 shorts, the festival transformed the normally discreet IFC Center into a frenzy of activity. Any day saw its share of larger-than-life figures—Werner Herzog, DA Pennnebaker, Albert Mayhew and Barbara Kopple among them. Larger in number, however, were the emerging filmmakers whose works were fortunate enough to be selected into the program.

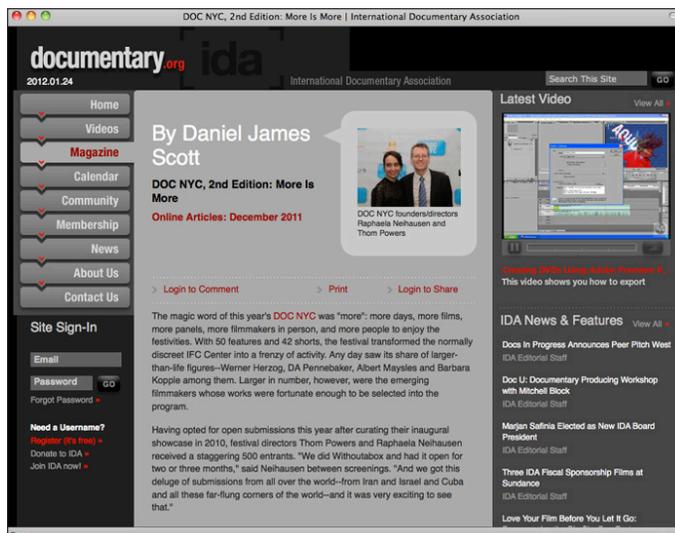
Having opted for open submissions this year after curating their inaugural showcase in 2010, festival directors Thom Powers and Raphaela Neihausen received a staggering 500 entrants. "We did Withoutabox and had it open for two or three months," said Neihausen between screenings. "And we got this deluge of submissions from all over the world—from Iran and Israel and Cuba and all these far-flung corners of the world—and it was exciting to see that."

Kicking off the festival with a screening of Herzog's *Caos*, that occurred in order to highlight the filmmaker's work in prison and his role in the perpetration of an hour-long film. Through

a glimpse of American life that few of us would care to examine. Rather than condemn or endorse Texas' criminal justice system, he encourages us to consider the systemic forces that drive people to extremes and, in the case of capital punishment, strip them of their humanity.

Few issues provoke the problem of "media fatigue" more than the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, directors Nara Garber and Betsy Nagler manage to sidestep that obstacle through their nuanced focus in *Flat Daddy*.

Interweaving the stories of four military families throughout the US, *Flat Daddy* explores the ways in which each of them copes with the absence of their loved ones—particularly, their use of "Flat Daddies," or "Heroes on a Stick." These life-sized, cardboard cutouts of servicemen and women help families connect with their relatives during their deployments. For the Stephens family in New York, the Winter family in Minnesota and the Bugbee family in Maine, Flat Daddies serve as transitional tools to help children remember their parents once they return from their deployments. For the Ramirez-Vance family in Nevada, they unfortunately serve as a more lasting reminder of a son killed in combat. *Flat Daddy* captures the lesser-told stories of everyday Americans fighting the war within.



After the screening, Herzog cleared up a misperception about his film. "There is this mood out there [that] 'We are going to see an issue film about capital punishment.' But the film is not a platform for that. The film has many other issues, many other elements. I didn't want to narrow down the perception of the audience."

Herzog's position must have been music to the ears of the journalists featured on the next day's "Meet the Press" panel, which included Eric Kohn from indieWire, John Anderson from Variety, Alison Willmore from the A.V. Club and Jason Spingarn-

Mon papa plat, ce héros

Le « flat daddy » reproduit en photo le buste d'un soldat américain parti en Irak ou en Afghanistan. Il est choyé comme un doudou par l'enfant de l'absent. Quitte à ce que le portrait, au moment du retour, suscite plus d'émotions que le père humain

AMAURY DA CUNHA

Ce sont des photographies de soldats américains mobilisés en Irak ou en Afghanistan. Elles ne sont pas destinées à être rangées dans le portefeuille ou collées sur le réfrigérateur. Et pour cause ! À échelle humaine, découpées soigneusement, puis contrecollées sur un support en mousse, ces *flat daddies* (papas plats) ou *flat mommies* (mammans plats) accompagnent les familles de soldats dans tous les moments de la vie quotidienne afin de surmonter l'épreuve de la séparation.

Au barbecue du dimanche, au match de baseball, entre le doudou et l'animal domestique, les enfants promènent cette étrange image qui représente leur père ou leur mère affichant un sourire aussi impeccable que leur uniforme.

« J'ai mon flat daddy tout le temps avec moi. Mais j'ai aussi un autre papa et il est très loin. Il ne peut pas venir car il est en train de sauver le monde en Irak », raconte Sabrina Stephens, 4 ans, face à la caméra de Nara Garber et Betsy Nagler, dans le documentaire *Flat Daddy* réalisé en 2011.

L'idée de cette image fantôme provient d'un conte pour enfant écrit en 1964 par Jeff Brown et illustré par Tomi Ungerer : un jour, Stanley se cogne malencontreusement contre une armoire et s'en trouve tout aplati. Pour ne pas cesser d'exister, Flat Stanley se glisse dans des enveloppes et voyage ainsi à travers le monde.

En 2003, Cindy Sorenson, dont le mari est engagé en Afghanistan, décide de s'inspirer de cette histoire et d'offrir aux familles désunies des posters géants de leurs parents mobilisés. Cette opération, relayée par Elaine Dumler, une coach spécialiste des questions de séparation en temps de guerre, voit le jour en 2006, grâce à la garde nationale du Maine qui met en place gracieusement un programme d'aide aux familles. Sur le site Internet dédié (<http://flatdaddies.com>), elles peuvent télécharger l'image de leur soldat parti au front et, cinq semaines plus tard, le voir revenir dans une enveloppe géante, couché sur du papier glacé.

Est-ce là un usage inédit de la photographie ? « Les flat daddies sont des objets photographiques qui s'inscrivent dans une tradition déjà séculaire des supports photographiques à usage mémoriel », explique Clément Chéroux, historien de la photographie et conservateur pour la photographie au Musée national d'art moderne (Centre Pompidou). Par-delà la question de la matérialité, ces images renvoient aussi à une tradition qui date de la première guerre mondiale. Dans le nord et l'est de la France, ainsi qu'en Belgique, des studios de portraitistes proposaient aux familles de poilus des portraits dans lesquels le père parti à la guerre apparaissait en médaillon grâce à un système de montage rudimentaire. »

Si la fonction des flat daddies consiste à garder une image de l'absent afin que les enfants puissent le reconnaître à son retour, elle ne se limite pas à ce territoire familial. « Le flat daddy est un hommage au soldat, mais il permet aussi de sensibiliser l'opinion publique », expliquent les réalisatrices Nara Garber et Betsy Nagler. Depuis que les États-Unis n'ont plus d'appelés, seulement 1 % d'Américains servent dans l'armée. Il est donc facile pour les 99 % restants de perdre de vue la guerre et son impact. »

Ces flat daddies suscitent cependant d'étranges confusions entre le vrai et le faux. Dans le film *Flat Daddy*, une séquence montre le retour d'Irak du sergent Bugbee, à qui l'on a accordé une permission de dix-huit jours. L'accueil à l'aéroport est troublant. Sa fille l'embrasse, mais elle garde dans ses bras son flat daddy. Et après qu'il est rentré chez lui, on le découvre, quelques jours plus tard, dépité, les yeux rivés sur son téléphone portable, tandis



Dylan et Devin Winter, élèves par leurs grands-parents, brandissent leurs « flat parents ».

qu'en face de lui, sa femme et sa fille lisent une histoire au... flat daddy.

« On est ici dans le grotesque et le ridicule ! » s'esclaffe Elisabeth Roudinesco, psychanalyste et historienne, quand on lui montre un flat daddy déjeunant dans un fast-food avec ses enfants ou au milieu d'un terrain de foot. « Ces flat daddies sont influencés par une psychologie de bazar : présentifier la personne absente et cultiver l'idée absurde qu'avec son simili, ce spectre mortifère, on peut reconstituer sa réalité. A mon sens, c'est une source de folie potentielle ! Il est possible que l'invention de ces flat daddies soit liée au fait que l'armée américaine n'a plus rien d'héroïque, puisque c'est à l'occasion des guerres inutiles d'Irak et d'Afghanistan qu'on les a créés. »

Substitut grossier ? « Poignante métaphore de l'absence », selon les réalisatrices du film ? Ces flat daddies restent des objets équivoques. Des figurations d'absences ou de morts à venir : les familles gardent chez elles la même image hyperréaliste d'un soldat qui sourit, qu'il soit toujours de ce monde ou tué au combat. ■

Le soldat Andrew Bugbee est de retour. Il est accueilli par ses enfants et son image grandeur nature.



Confection du flat daddy à l'image du soldat Michael Winter. COURTESY OF BETSY NAGLER & NARA GARBER



Elaine Dumler, spécialiste des questions de séparation en temps de guerre, a contribué à populariser les flat daddies.



Le sergent Barbara Claudel (au volant) est responsable d'un programme d'aide aux familles pour la Garde nationale de l'Etat du Maine.

Le fils du soldat Bugbee, Josiah, reste proche de son flat daddy.

