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# OFFduty

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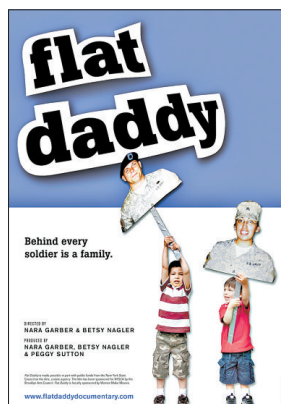
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# 2-D daddy

Life-size cutouts are keeping families connected

## (or mommy!)



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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."



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](http://www.imalreadyhomeagain.com).

### Foam-board army

The Maine Army National Guard has issued some 1,500 Flat Daddies and Mommies — and even Flat 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-if-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." □



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

COURTESY OF NICKI BUNTING