

# Month of the Military Family: Teen memoir on war shocked, awed, won awards

By Tom Conning

## Teen memoir on war shocked, awed, won awards

Her mom was proud and excited on the drive to Carnegie Hall to see her daughter honored for her award-winning writing. And, just before Michaela's memoir would be read to an audience of strangers in New York City, she read the gold-medal entry and was flooded with memories of her own life as a military child.

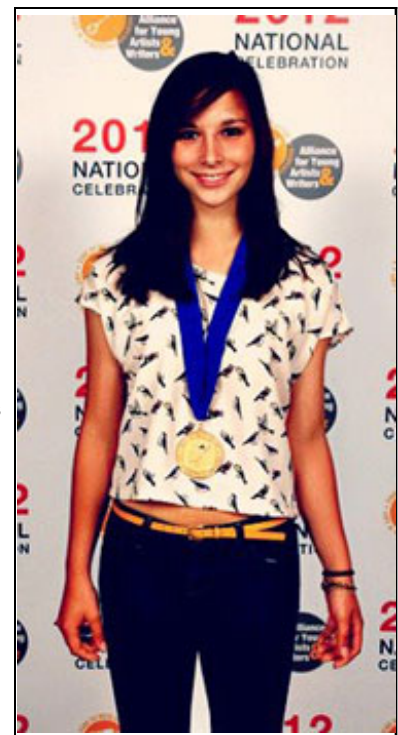
Michaela Coplen was about to be celebrated for her personal memoir that had earned a gold medal in the national Scholastics Arts competition and would then be selected for publication. But the emotions and detail of the memoir created a particularly personal reaction in her mother. Col. Lorelei Coplen, deputy director of The War College's Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute described a flashback to her own experience when her father deployed to Vietnam, as she read her daughter's words:

"For the first six months, you pray every night. It's not until month seven that you realize no one is listening."

"You wonder why war exists. You can't fathom why a human being would seek to hurt another human being, to push a button or pull a trigger and kill without honor. At month eight you discover the horrible, selfish, animal blackness within your soul when you realize that you could care less who wins and who suffers and who is hurt and who dies, as long as your mom comes home."

"... You hate your mom for leaving you alone and you hate yourself for hating her. So you blame the army that has pulled you around like a marionette since before you were born. Your path was chosen for you, and you are helpless to change it. You can either adapt to this life, or end it."

"You never mention any of this in your correspondence to your mom. In fact, you never mention it to anyone. Remember, you're ten years old. It's your job to be sunny and happy and tell cheesy jokes and make everyone laugh so that they'll please just stop yelling at each other. You get really good at acting in front of a crowd. When you're alone in your room, you teach yourself to cry without making any noise."



**Michaela Coplen wears her national Scholastic Art and Writing gold medal that she won for her memoir "Fourteen Months on the Home Front." Michaela travelled to Carnegie Hall in New York City to accept the award in June.**

Michaela's story was her mom's story. It could be the story of many military kids.

"I started writing this story and it was alright, but it wasn't very honest," she said, describing what started as a creative writing assignment last year at Carlisle Area High School. "So when I went back to revise it, I was, like, let's stop kidding myself, it's about my life. So I revised it so that it was more of a memoir."

Michaela said she was grateful for the opportunity to share insights about military children. "Just the fact that people think it's worth reading and publishing -- and I'm definitely grateful that I'm getting the message out to a broader audience," she said.

Writing is fun and therapeutic, according to Michaela. "It's really a defining issue for me and while I don't want to write the same thing over and over again, I do think that what I write is colored by my experience," she said.

"For a military child, of a military family, this is probably not all that unique," said dad Rick, a professor of Economic Development at the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. "It's just exceptionally well expressed" he said.



A 16-year veteran of the military family, Michaela is a writer, an actor, a soccer player, and horseback rider.

**Michaela appears in the play "Bye, Bye Birdie" at Carlisle Area High School in March 2012.**

Michaela stays busy with extracurricular activities because they help military children through transitions, she said. "If you're moving from place to place, usually every school has a sports team that you can join and every school has a debate club or quizbowl team," she said.

"So if you focus in those areas, then you have something no matter where you move."

Her mom's deployment made her more independent and that has helped in school and other activities, said Michaela. "It gives you an edge in having a crazy life and trying to find success in that chaos."

**Michaela controls the ball during the spring 2012 soccer state**



**championships. She was a team captain for the fall 2012 season.**

The award ceremony for Michaela's memoir, "Fourteen Months on the Home Front," won a Gold Medal in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards national competition. Her memoir was one of 70 selected for publication from 200,000 submissions of art and writing; it will appear in the book, "The Best Teen Writing of 2012."

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