

Service to country built on sacrifices

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Injury and death are constants with military service - whether it's 1943 or 2010.

They can strike at any time, especially during war.

They are blind to nationality, religion and gender.

But there are countless other sacrifices service members make because they wear the uniform.

Some are obvious, such as time away from family - whether it's for routine field training or a combat deployment.

Likewise, both genders have seen marriages and relationships break down in the wake of repeated deployments.

Then there are sacrifices that statistically are more likely to be borne by the women who don the nation's uniform.

Sometimes these sacrifices come in the form of shortened careers.

Other times, it is more insidious, demanding steep prices paid through no fault of the service member other than the fact she dared to serve.

And sometimes, in those instances, a price is paid that challenges even distance and time.

A sacrifice of time

Wanda Kay North always had a touch of wanderlust.

Growing up in Jacksonville, Fla., she saw the military as a path toward seeing the world.

"I wanted to go into the Navy, but they weren't accepting officers with two-year college degrees, which is what I had," said North, who now lives in Savannah. "But the Air Force was."

She entered the Air Force Reserve in 1986.

"The idea of becoming a flight nurse really intrigued me," North said. "Plus, it gave me the opportunity to travel the world like I wanted to."

For three years, she would learn how to take her skills as a civilian nurse and convert them to a military occupational specialty treating patients aboard the Air Force's large flying hospitals - the C-141.

Back then, she said, it truly was just a commitment of one weekend a month and two weeks a year. Then in December 1989- just days before Christmas - the magnitude of what she had done finally hit home.

Her medical unit was activated in support of Operation Just Cause in Panama.

Suddenly, North found herself flying on a winged-hospital straight into the fog of war.

"It was the first time in my military career where I really realized what I had committed to," she recalled. "It was a very somber flight. Going in was scary. We didn't know what we were going in to."

By the time her plane landed, their patients consisted of mostly orthopedic injuries - busted knees and torn ligaments - resulting from bad landings after parachuting during the cover of night into the Central American nation.

The serious injuries, mostly from small arms fire, had been loaded onto another plane long before her flight hit the tarmac.

"I don't think we were as prepared as they are now," she said. "The Reserves' whole mission has changed."

It's national pride that keeps her serving 23 year later, but it hasn't been without loss.

North, now 48, has missed countless holidays, birthdays and precious time with her extended family.

Love, marriage and service

Bobbie Stallings scarcely met the physical requirements to join the U.S. Navy's Women

Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service when she went off to basic training in 1950.

"You had to be 21 years old and at least 100 pounds," she said. "I barely squeaked through."

Stallings was always a slip of a thing. She had just turned 21 and only recently graduated from college.

But the daughter of a Naval officer was determined.

"I think I saw the Navy as offering me a lot of security and independence," said the retiree,

who now lives in Savannah. "I don't think I thought much beyond that."

She loved the idea of moving around - as well as the sense of adventure the Navy offered. But that life was dramatically different for men and women. Back then, women were restricted to clerical positions and nursing jobs - tasks society already considered traditional for women.

Pregnancy was out of the question.

"Back then if you became pregnant, you were immediately discharged," Stallings said. "And, as I found out, if your husband was transferred, they gave you an honorable discharge."

The junior officer had been swept off her feet by Robert, a dashing Naval pilot she met while they were both stationed in Norfolk, Va.

But shortly after they wed, he was reassigned to Pensacola, Fla.

That's when Stallings found herself becoming an officer's wife instead of transferring with him as a lieutenant junior grade on the path to a successful career.

"Too many (women) showed up pregnant at their new duty stations, and I guess the Navy decided it wasn't worth the expense," she said.

The couple never had children. Stallings got a civilian job teaching.

"I was terribly disappointed at the time," she said. "But eventually it just became another phase of my life."

Today, dual station assignments are common - some military couples have even shared quarters during deployments.

Him, me or deployment?

Other trends are emerging for women as conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan continue.

Among the more alarming: a disproportionate divorce rate.

Women make up about 11 percent of the 1.8 million service members who have deployed since 2003.

But according to Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, female service members are "bearing the brunt" of military divorce - at a rate three times higher than men.

Experts say it is effecting the overall increase in divorce rates among deployed service members, which was at an all-time high of 3.5 percent in 2008.

Between 2005 and 2008, Army women experienced a 2 percent increase in divorce, while at the same time, female Marines saw a 3 percent increase in failed marriages.

Maggie Martin, a Savannah resident who left the Army in 2007, met her husband when they deployed together during the invasion of Baghdad.

They kept the relationship a secret and married once they returned stateside.

With his contract up, he was in the process of leaving the Army. But because he was her non-commissioned officer, the Army didn't take the fraternization, or the marriage, well.

"They really wanted to punish him," Martin said. "They tried to get me to testify against him but I never would."

In the end, Martin was the one who felt the wrath for the relationship - she was given an Article 15 counseling statement and got demoted to private, despite qualifying for a raise and promotion to corporal.

A few months later, it was her turn to get out of the Army. The couple were talking about starting a family when more repercussions hit.

"I found out I was getting stop-lossed," Martin said, referring to the military practice of holding soldiers beyond their contracted agreement dates and forcing them to deploy.

The couple tried desperately to get pregnant as her second deployment date approached.

She said they even went to a fertility clinic.

When the medications the doctors gave her prompted "false positive" readings, Martin's husband asked her to employ it as a stall tactic.

"But I felt that was too sneaky," she said. "I told him, I just have to do it. I have to deploy.

And that's when the relationship fell apart."

She said they spent her 2005-06 deployment fighting on the phone.

"I still wonder was the relationship bad from the start?" Martin said. "Was he the bad person, was I a bad wife? Or was it because of the deployment?"

More than a code of silence

And sometimes, the high cost of service goes even deeper than curtailed careers and broken marriages.

In 2009, the Department of Defense reported 3,230 sexual assaults in the armed services.

It was an 11 percent increase over the previous year, when 163 sexual assaults were reported in combat zones alone.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America reported only 8 percent of the military's sexual assailants in 2007 faced prosecution, compared with 40 percent in the civilian sector.

For military women, it means the statistical chances of them being sexually assaulted are at least one in three - nearly double the civilian rate.

"I believe the people in the military don't know how bad it is," said Anu Bhagwati, executive director of the Service Women's Action Network and a Marine Corps veteran. "There is not only a code of silence, but also blatant ignorance."

Bhagwati believes the actual number of sexual assaults service-wide is probably closer to 15,000.

"It's not an issue of them not caring, but more of an issue of them not knowing," she said.

"Why? Because military sexual trauma is not on the minds of commanders who are mobilizing (regularly) on a national scale."

She contends that high-ranking leaders may pay lip service to ending military sexual trauma through mandatory "dog and pony" shows for the troops, but such efforts do little to actually end the assaults.

"Education and training doesn't get down to the lowest levels," she said. "Junior enlisted service members need to be targeted."

And much like in the civilian world, reporting an assault comes with strings attached.

"The thing I found more irritating, in a lot of ways, was not the command climate, that generally was really good ... I knew if I came forward, they would have been responsive," said Kayla Williams, an Iraq veteran and author of "Love my Rifle More Than You: Young and Female in the U.S. Army." "It was my peers who were not supportive. If I complained about an incident ... the response was generally, 'Don't ruin his career just because you can't take it.'

"To me, it was a subtle indication that (they) didn't think a woman's career in the military mattered as much as a man's."

Innuendoes, rumors

Lisa Semcho, who enlisted in the Army in 1987, wasn't a typical recruit.

Happily married for 10 years and the mother of two boys, she went into the military to prove her dad wrong after he wouldn't let her join the family business - she wanted to prove that women could do anything men could do.

But Semcho quickly discovered she attracted more attention among the ranks for her blonde hair and good looks - and not for her ability to do her job well.

At her first station assignment, Semcho said her first sergeant announced on her first day with the platoon that she was "not to be bothered with."

"He announced that I was a married woman and no one was to bother me, or they would answer to him," said the Savannah resident.

Semcho knew he meant well. But it didn't help her case as a female in the male-dominated JAG office during an era where fewer than 10 percent of the soldiers were women.

"Hardly a week went by that I wasn't propositioned, or had marriage proposals," she said.

"But most of the men respected the fact that I was happily married."

It didn't help that she advanced through the ranks, making sergeant in two years.

"We heard a lot of rumors, that I must be doing something or sleeping with someone to get ahead," she said.

Semcho's husband, Dan, didn't like all the talk, even though he knew it to be lies.

"He knew me and knew where I was every night," she said.

Semcho said she sometimes felt ostracized by the Army wives who felt threatened because she spent so much time with their husbands.

Eventually, the wear and tear on family life prompted her to retire after eight years.

To this day, she considers herself fortunate to have an experience that was limited to innuendoes and rumors.

'Indispensable to the mission'

In April, the debate about the role of women in the military resurfaced as the Navy announced plans to begin stationing women on board submarines beginning in 2012. The announcement came 16 years after the Navy first began allowing women to serve on surface ships.

It's a decision debated even among female veterans.

"I'm old and I'm wise enough to know there are too many damn temptations to have men and women cut off from the world like that," said Nellie Schmidt, 94, a Savannah resident who served in the Navy's Women Accepted to Volunteer Emergency Service during World War II. "I think it has more possibilities for going astray."

Meanwhile, the role of women in combat remains an unspoken issue.

"The American public doesn't pay much attention to the war over there. They only see fleeting glimpses or forget about it," said Lory Manning, director of the Women in the Military Project for the Women's Research & Education Institute in Washington, D.C. "But when you start talking about what women are doing over there, you get this, 'What do you mean they are shooting guns?'"

But in many respects, it's a debate the military can't afford the public to explore - even as the Department of Defense struggles to curb divorce rates and sexual assaults.

"We can't re-look at it because we can't function without women in combat," Williams said.

"We did our jobs and proved ourselves good at it. Take a look and see what we have done.

We have proven we deserve to be there.

"Not only do we serve as equals to men, in certain situations we are indispensable to the mission."

