



The Patriot-News

AS I SEE IT ANDREA HOOPER

Women serve proudly in U.S. military roles

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Did you know that Civil War veteran Dr. Mary Edwards Walker was the only woman to ever be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor?

Or that Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester of the Kentucky National Guard was awarded the Silver Star for fighting her way out of a trench in Iraq in 2005?

If you don't know these names, Women's History Month is the perfect time to learn them.

The history of women in the U. S. military is full of unknown facts, unheard of individuals, and amazing acts of bravery and sacrifice.

Women followed men to the battlefields as far back as the Revolutionary War, and an estimated 400 women were killed in combat during the Civil War.

Some women held extremely unconventional positions, even disguising themselves as men, to pick up a rifle and fight.

I, too, have been in some unconventional positions as a woman, both as a Peace Corps volunteer in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, and as a Personnel Officer in the United States Air Force.

In Kyrgyzstan, a largely Muslim country, the culturally defined role of women was menial and women were generally demoralized.

Having spent two years with fabulously strong, courageous women, I can tell you -- the women run the country. But the women in my village also helped me learn the vitality of life as a mother and a wife, roles our society has not looked upon so favorably in the recent past. They taught me that not only was it OK to stay home and be a nurturer, it was an amazingly satisfying role.

As an officer in the Air Force, I focused on other aspects of my womanhood. I learned how to be a leader and a follower. I learned how to complete missions in the midst of unfamiliar and sometimes chaotic situations.

While in Egypt in 2001, I was the liaison officer between the Egyptian and the U.S. forces.

In Kuwait, during the buildup and execution of Operation Iraqi Freedom, our base numbers increased from 2,500 to more than 30,000 in one month. I was pushed out of my comfort zone, forced to "adapt and overcome."

The role of women in the United States and in the military continues to evolve. We have been provided freedoms and opportunities that allow us to be mothers and military officers, playing both roles in the same day.

We want to consider ourselves "equal" to men, but through my observations, I believe we carry with us an awareness and sensitivity to human interactions that set us apart. In these troubled times in a chaotic world,

women's unique qualities of service critically enhance our nation's ability to help bring the world to a better place.

The Pennsylvania Veterans Museum, which is dedicated to telling the story of war through veterans' eyes, recently produced its sixth educational military film: "Women in the Military: Willing * Able * Essential."

During this Women's History Month, take time to learn about women's service and to thank the 2.5 million women who have served.

ANDREA HOOPER is a captain in the U.S. Air Force and a board member of the PA Veterans Museum: www.paveteransmuseum.org.

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