 Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Posted on Sun, Mar. 22, 2009

## Back Channels: Saluting women's long tradition of military service



By Kevin Ferris

Inquirer Columnist

Six years ago, at the start of the Iraq war, U.S. Air Force Capt. Andrea Hooper was stationed at the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait. In a month, the once-quiet facility had grown from 2,500 personnel to more than 30,000. Thousands more were pouring in en route to Iraq.

It was the job of Hooper and her team to ensure the troops had a place to eat and sleep, and that they were fitted out with decontamination equipment because of fears of a biological attack.

With Saddam Hussein lobbing missiles at the base, Hooper remembers going two straight weeks in chemical gear, even spending several nights trying - unsuccessfully - to sleep while wearing a gas mask.

"It was surreal more than anything," she recalls.

Today, the war veteran and former Peace Corps volunteer is a mother of two - Henry, 4, and Adeline, 2 - living in Newtown Square. Her husband, Will, is a Marine reservist and pilot on active duty at Willow Grove Naval Air Station. Hooper completed her military obligation last year, but is currently looking for a Reserve unit to join.

"I want to go back in," she says. "I really can't stop thinking about it. I'm still young, I still have so much to give, and I just love that aspect of service."

That desire to serve sums up a new documentary in which Hooper appears, *Women in the Military: Willing, Able, Essential*. It's the sixth in a series of educational videos produced by the Pennsylvania Veterans Museum ([www.paveteransmuseum.org](http://www.paveteransmuseum.org)) in Media, where Hooper serves as a board member. Other films have covered the European and Pacific theaters of operation during World War II, the 101st Airborne's "Band of Brothers," humanitarian efforts during the Vietnam War, and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Board chairman Bob McMahon says the Tuskegee project has been the most popular so far, but he expects *Women in the Military* to generate as much enthusiasm among the thousands of schools and ROTC programs that receive the museum's free films and lesson plans.

With good reason. The film accomplishes what many history courses cannot, covering all of America's major conflicts - from the Revolution to today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan - in one 59-minute video. The film opens with a look at the women of earlier conflicts who acted as cooks, nurses, or laundresses. Then there are the "Molly Pitchers" who stepped up to replace wounded men, as well as a number of women who disguised themselves as men so they could fight.

The early parts of the video are packed with little-known facts about women who deserve more attention, such as Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, the Army's first female contract surgeon and a POW during the Civil War. Walker is the only woman awarded the Medal of Honor.

But the best parts are when the vets speak for themselves, starting with Ruth E. Richardson, who served in the Navy during World War I.

"We really need to hear, in their own words, what they've seen and experienced," says director Susan Sherwood.

We hear from Anna Mae V. Hays and Jeanne Holm, respectively the first female one-star and two-star generals, who both served during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.

Hays received her commission in 1942, and was named head of the Army Nurse Corps during Vietnam. Holm, author of *Women in the Military, An Unfinished Revolution*, says real advances for women came once the draft ended. "They suddenly realized they needed women," she says.

Kathleen Fennell talks about the intensity of nursing duty during Vietnam, when the only time for reflection came while in the shower. "It dawns on you that you can't get the blood off your hands," she says.

Rhonda Cornum, now a brigadier general, was captured during Desert Storm. "When you're a prisoner of war, the only real thing you have left . . . is freedom of what to decide, what to feel, and what to think," she says. That meant avoiding things too painful to think about, like her daughter at home.

The professionalism and courage of Cornum and others during the first Gulf War led to greater acceptance of women in the military among the public, and opened doors for Marine Vernice Armour, the first African American woman to become a combat pilot, and Capt. Dorothy A. Watkins, of the Pennsylvania National Guard, who inspired her son Joshua to join the Guard. Both are in Iraq now, Sherwood says.

Andrea Hooper wants to contribute again to the long line of service that dates back to the Revolution.

She says, "Having been in the Peace Corps and in the military, and having lived so much of my adult life overseas, I know that the greatest thing we can give in this world is service to others."

---


Contact Kevin Ferris

at 215-854-5305 or [kf@phillynews.com](mailto:kf@phillynews.com).

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.philly.com/inquirer/columnists/kevin\\_ferris/20090322\\_Back\\_Channels\\_\\_Saluting\\_women\\_s\\_long\\_tradition\\_of\\_military\\_service.html](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/columnists/kevin_ferris/20090322_Back_Channels__Saluting_women_s_long_tradition_of_military_service.html)

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.