



Female Warriors

WRITTEN BY LADY 6

Some people devote their lives to discovering a truth outside themselves. I am committed to discovering a truth within myself and the soul which lies at the heart of it all. My truth is that I am scared and brave, fragile and indestructible, open and closed, and I have the ability to exist on several different emotional planes all at once. I know I many of you may be thinking I am some sort of female version of Highlander, and as awesome and fulfilling as that would be for the male reading audience, I regret to admit that I am nothing special at all. I am a voice among many, indistinguishable against the others.

I stood at attention, approximately 3 feet in front of my Sergeant Major's desk, and he told me to stand "At Ease", which is the farthest thing from the way I was actually feeling at the time. I was incredibly nervous, and feeling very vulnerable. As I waited for him to speak, I watched him absentmindedly finger his Mason ring for a few moments before beginning his monologue. "Not ever...will I be responsible for putting a female instructor in that school. It's not because you're not good enough, it's because it is not the place for a woman in the military." He was referencing a recent nomination (based on performance) for me to become an instructor in a school that was considered very prestigious in the military community which I was part of at the time. He paused, and then asked if I had any questions. I said I did not. Later that same day, I spoke with the First Sergeant of my Company, and as she patiently listened to me tell her very honestly what had happened, I started to get the feeling that she wasn't going to give me the sympathy I expected from a female in a high ranking leadership position in the military. I expected her to be enraged, to take action immediately to right this clear expression of bias against me based on my sex. She did none of those things. In a very controlled voice she said, "Where one door closes, a window opens." It was all of my willpower not to cry at that moment.

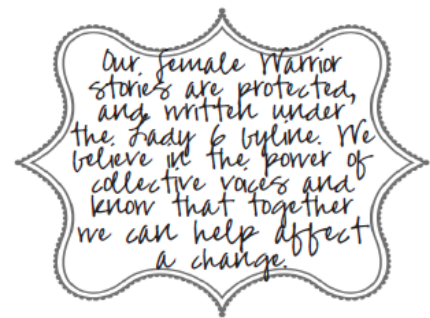
This experience in 2005, at a very young age, when I thought I was making a move to advance my career in the military, was a significant blow to my enthusiasm about being a female in the military. It shattered most of the ideals that remained in my head that there was fair and just treatment out there for men and women alike in the military. I was disappointed in that Sergeant Major, my own leadership for not standing up for me, and in myself for not standing my ground. Maybe things had been different if I had no one else to worry about but myself. Reality was that I had an infant and a toddler at home, and my husband at the time had just got out of the military and was unemployed and cheating on me. Reality was that I stood there in front of those desks that day and didn't stand up for myself, violating my own secret code of ethics, thinking I should keep my mouth shut and head down and just be grateful I have a steady paycheck and benefits for my family. Reality is, being a woman that believes in the equal opportunity is just not always compatible with being a good mother and wife. I'm not saying that men don't also make those tough choices and painfully sacrifice. It's just different for a woman, and that is the bias of which I am guilty. I can only tell the story firsthand from a woman's perspective.

When people find out that I was active duty for over 10 years, I'm often asked about opportunity for women in the military, and of course recently they ask about women in combat. I had the unique opportunity to serve on the ground in combat with my fellow servicemen (and a few rare women). Nestled in a very intimidating and mountainous hell, I attended a prestigious military school that is incredibly selective for woman. Of the 80 active duty women with which I entered this very tough

training, I was one of 5 left at the end. It was heartbreaking to see the other women fail or quit, but it taught me that I was completely capable of empathy and cold indifference simultaneously. That was one of the finest groups of women I had ever known, and we didn't even know each other's last names. They all laughed uncontrollably at me while in the back of a 2 1/2 ton truck, wearing about 80 pounds of gear, attempted to relieve myself in a very inadequate ziploc bag from an MRE. It was a bumpy road, and we had not slept in about 2 days, so it was probably funnier to us at the time than it would be to most. Later that night we did an exercise which required us to strap on protective headgear and literally fight each other with a blunt weapon. My opponent was built like a collegiate lacrosse player, and she was one of my favorite women there, which of course made me start to have a nearanxiety attack at the thought of having to hurt her. The rules included that if we were not "fighting" each other with what the instructors considered appropriate effort, a male instructor (of impressive stature, I might add) would intervene and motivate us by striking us in the face and sides of the head. As I suffered repeated blows to the head, my eyes tearing from the impacts and my skin on fire as I imagined that a stream of blood was pouring down my face, all I could think about was the other woman. Was she okay? I hope she understands the precise strikes that I landed, that I didn't want to hurt her, and I hope they are not hitting her as hard as they are me. After being evaluated and cleared for a severe concussion, I got a chance speak to her many months later after it was all over. She didn't make it through the training, and I was not allowed to speak to her about it anyway. Though she was full of regret for not making it through the training, we

spoke as if we had known each other our whole lives. We both agreed that such an aggressive combat role for women in the military was simply against the nature of women.

Although I met the requirements to finish the training in 2008, I again found myself having a conversation with a Sergeant Major that I did not know. His purpose was to explain to me that although they were impressed with my ability during the training, I had been too honest during my psychological evaluation, and I was considered too high risk to be ultimately selected for this different job opportunity (which is the whole reason I was there). He asked me why I was not married, to which I responded that I have been a little too busy to date. The Sergeant Major advised me that I should probably be married by the time I come back and try again, because the review panel that decides admission into this elite unit views a woman in the military who is not married as a threat to the workplace. I was stunned at the blatant disregard for my dedication to duty, and appalled that again I was experiencing such an extreme form of discrimination. With all of the grace I had acquired over the years in these situation, I thanked him for the opportunity to train, told him I would not likely be back, and I did not want to work for an organization that is blind to my performance unless I'm married.



There were many times throughout my time in the military that I was encouraged to get married to project a more stable image as a leader. I not so naive to believe I am isolated in these experiences of discrimination. This is an ongoing issue in the military, and my only purpose in writing this is awareness. The effects of events like this were a hardening of my exterior, both in my professional and personal life. I now face challenges as a civilian trying to find a place to fit in outside the government. It affects my confidence still at times, and I often find myself thinking back to replay those events (amongst many others) in my head.



1948: The Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948 grants women permanent status in the Regular and Reserve forces of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps as well as in the newly created Air Force.

These are women who will overcome their struggles and take control of the road to becoming the woman they have always aspired to be. Finding themselves as friends, mothers, wives, sisters, aunts, mentor, pillar, daughter, lover, and so much more; striking resounding chords that inspire a feeling of belonging to the silent symphony playing in the background. I speak to, for, with female veterans. Tell me your story at femalewarriors@womenwhorise.org.

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The first three women to complete Marine infantry training graduated on November 21, 2013, national symbols of the growing push to integrate women into front-line combat units, and potent reminders of the barriers that remain.

Active Duty Women Serving Today: 214,098

Percentage of the Military: 14.6%

Number of Female Veterans: 1,853,690

Though the gender difference is not as evident as the civilian population, female Service members are at least twice as likely to be single parents, compared with male Service members, in both Active Duty and Reserve components. Of Service members who ever deployed to OEF/OIF, single parents make up 17 percent*

The current projected percentage of U.S. Veterans who are women is 10 percent**

In Federal Year 2009, the average age of women Veterans was 48 years, compared to 63 years for their male counterparts**

In FY 2009 and FY 2010 PTSD, hypertension, and depression were the top three diagnostic categories for women**

About 1 in 5 women seen in VHA respond "yes" when screened for Military Sexual Trauma (MST)**

*Information from the Department of Defense, Report on the Impact of Deployment of Members of the Armed Forces on Their Dependent Children, 2010

**Information from the US Dept of Veterans Affairs