



BW BUSINESS WOMAN

MAGAZINE

When **Women** Go to **War**

Embracing New Frontiers:
Quality and Quantity

When Women Go To War

From the Front Line to the Home Front

Contributed by Sherry Saunders

Photo courtesy of, Defense Visual Information Center, Army

On the Front Line

On November 14, 2003, seven months into her one-year deployment in Iraq, the five-ton truck Specialist Antoinette Scott was driving to the Baghdad Airport when it was hit by an explosion. Shrapnel entered the left side of her face, breaking her jaw and damaging a main blood vessel to her brain. Scott kept control of the truck and got the soldiers she was transporting to the airport safely before seeking medical treatment. After initial medical care in Germany, Scott, a mother of four, returned home with her jaw wired closed and bearing both the physical and mental scars of war.

Women make up ten percent of the military forces deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan — wars with no established front line. The reality is there are no safe areas in these conflicts and as of the first of October 2006, 66 women have been killed and many more, like Antoinette, have been wounded some incurring permanent disabilities.

The important role of women in the military has grown steadily since the Vietnam War where eight women lost their lives. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of September 2005, there were 202,049 women in the military services or 15 percent of all enlisted personnel and officers. Almost 150,000 of these women have served or are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Women make up about 15 percent of the Army and six percent of the Marine Corps, the two military branches providing most of the ground troops in Iraq. Women serve as truck drivers, medics, pilots and military police officers, dangerous jobs in active war zones.

The danger these women face on a regular basis is reflected in the medals many have been awarded. Dozens of women have been awarded bronze and silver stars for valor — and many more wear the newly minted Combat Action Badge, which is given to troops who have been in direct contact with the enemy. In addition to other commendations, Scott received the first Purple Heart



awarded to a woman in the District of Columbia. Despite the growing numbers of women in the military and their growing successes and demonstrated ability to do the job, women soldiers face special challenges, both at war and at home. Last year, nearly one-fifth of the women in the National Guard and Reserves reported having been sexually harassed according to a 2004 study by the Defense Manpower Data Center in Virginia. And deployment to a war zone

seems to exacerbate the problem; 17 percent of women who reported sexual harassment had been activated prior to taking the survey, versus 15 percent of non-activated women.

According to Scott, she and the other women serving in her Army National Guard company were fortunate that soldiers in their group — men and women — were like family and she never faced any sexual harassment although she knows that it happens. She attributed the supportive nature of her company to the fact that they had worked together for so long before being deployed. In fact, she reported that the men were very protective of the women in the company.

On the Home Front

When soldiers return home to their families and communities after serving in a war zone, many face new problems such as loss of limbs, hearing or eyesight, digestive disorders, mental health challenges. According to a poll by VoteVets.org Action Fund released in October 2006, of service men and women who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, many encountered emotional and physical health problems as well as economic hardship, indicating that the impact of their service extends beyond their tour of duty. One in four veterans experience nightmares and 21 percent felt more stress now than before they left for war.

Reuniting with family is a sensitive situation for all returning members of the military, but for women it is

Photo courtesy of, Sgt. Garrison, Army

particularly difficult. Because women are viewed as the care givers in society, they often do not receive the care they need to make the transition from soldier to mother and/or wife. The Department of Defense warns that returning troops and their spouses may experience emotional detachment and intimacy problems; they may have difficulty reasserting family roles; and abandonment issues can resurface. Babies may cry when held by the returning parent, young children may experience guilt or fear about separation and teenagers may seem apathetic and moody after the initial family reunion. All of these issues are a heavy burden for returning parents to bear.

Leaving for Iraq was particularly hard for Antoinette Scott. She left four daughters including a six month old baby at home with her husband Donahue. "I missed my baby's first tooth, her first word and her first step. I missed it all," Scott lamented.

For the first four or five months after her return Scott felt detached from her family and left interaction with the children and household tasks to her husband and mother. "I found myself hiding behind my injuries because I didn't know how to come back and fit into my own family."

"I also had a very short fuse; I felt very stressed and developed high blood pressure. My husband encouraged me to get counseling and that has helped. It is hard living with the physical scars but I have always been into self improvement and getting re-involved with my church has helped me move forward with my life," she said.

Women veterans leaving the military, also face problems reentering the work force. Physical injuries, stress and changing interests often mean the need for a new career direction. Antoinette, who had previously worked as a nurse, is now starting a home based health and wellness business. "I am currently putting in about 25 hours a week," she reports. "But I am going to be increasing my hours very soon." Not only does this career meet her physical needs but it also allows her to spend more time with her children.

The military attempts to assist those coming home with post-deployment assessments and individual transition plans. Unfortunately, many women veterans do not self-identify as veterans for varying reasons and therefore do not receive the benefits which they have rightfully earned and could ease some transitions. There is assistance for soldiers leaving the military such as the VA's Center for Women Veterans. The Department of Labor and the VA provide a Transition Assistance Program seminar that includes career



counseling. But much more ongoing assistance is needed not only to help returning women veterans but all who have served in our armed services.

As BPW/USA's *Women Joining Forces – Closing Ranks, Opening Doors* (WJF) program moves into its second year, the need to assist women veterans return to productive careers, family lives and community involvement is even more apparent. Antoinette attended the kick-off press conference for the program and received one of the first BPW/USA memberships for women veterans. "I

am thrilled to have been one of the first program members and have enjoyed attending some of the local District of Columbia events, meeting other members and networking," she said.

In June of this year, BPW/USA launched the BPW/USA Career Center, an online job board customized for women and veterans. This site also allows employers with women- and veteran-friendly policies and practices to highlight them. Women and veterans use the site at no cost. Visit today at <http://careers.bpwusa.org>

Recently, Antoinette attended the first year anniversary celebration of WJF, speaking as one of "The Faces of WJF". "When I learn about programs and benefits, I share them with other female veterans who are in my network," she said from the podium.

She urged the luncheon attendees to support programs like WJF and women veterans in general. Many representatives of corporations and organizations with veteran programs flocked to Scott during the networking dessert buffet, which followed the event. "My duty now is to educate and support my military sisters who are coming after me."

Antoinette's story is just one of many. Take a moment and thank a woman veteran for her service. Learn how you can support female veterans. Visit www.womenjoiningforces.org for a When Women Go to War timeline.

Photo courtesy of, SSgt. Randall, Marine Corps.

