

State Representative Connie Pillich

Memorial Day 2010

Village of Glendale

I was asked to speak particularly about women's experiences in the military.

That is a tall order. For every experience I had was of course a woman's experience, from my very first day on active duty when I locked my keys in my car and had to get an SP to break in to retrieve them, to the tense moments in West Berlin when terrorists attacked a favorite GI hangout, injuring three of the young airmen in my squadron.

I thought a little historical perspective would help set the stage.

Although it wasn't until 1948 when all women in service were given permanent status, women have been serving our nation since its very inception.

In the Revolution, we were battlefield nurses, cooks, and saboteurs. Molly Pitcher, who was a water bearer, may have been the first American woman to serve in combat, when she took her husband's place at the cannon, after he was shot.

In the War of 1812, nurses first served aboard a ship.

The first documented case of a woman disguising herself as a man to

serve was Elizabeth Newcom in the Mexican War, around 1846. In the Civil War, women on both sides of the war disguised themselves as men in order to serve.

1500 nurses during the Spanish American War, in 1898 showed such exemplary service that Congress created the Army Nurse Corps.

Women's roles in the military expanded during World War I, with tens of thousands of nurses (including 18 African American nurses), bilingual telephone operators who worked near the front in France, stenographers, and Navy yeomen. More than 400 military nurses died in the line of duty.

In World War II, 67 Army nurses were captured by the Japanese and held as prisoners of war for over 2 and a half years. 16 Navy nurses were held from 5 to 37 months. Women served in many capacities: aircraft ferriers, test pilots, communications, intelligence, supply, medicine, mechanics, drivers, and so on, in the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and even the Marines.

In 1967, Congress lifted the 2% cap on the number of women permitted to join the military, and led the nation by mandating equal pay. And in 1970, the first woman earned a star.

Now women can enter most career specialties and are not discharged for getting married or becoming pregnant.

But a timeline doesn't tell the whole story. Women have had some unique challenges in the military.

For instance, when I first started in ROTC, our uniforms had skirts. No pants. Even on cold wintry days. The men never had to worry about freezing like that!

Sometimes I was not just the only woman in the room, but the only woman in the building! As such, I was under greater scrutiny. Enormous pressure to perform not just well, but excellently. Sometimes that really surprised people. Like the day I earned the marksmanship award. Although it is a difficult achievement, I was not the only one to earn it on the firing range that day. But I was the only one that everybody knew about. Had I done poorly, everyone would have known about that, too.

On occasion, I was virtually ignored. In those cases, I just had to speak up that much more loudly.

As a woman, I had higher living expenses – unlike my male colleagues, I could not get a roommate. There weren't any women available! And that also sometimes made it very lonely.

In today's military, women serve in practically every way imaginable. I doubt that some of those challenges are any different today. But there are new, more serious challenges.

Even though Congress has NOT repealed its prohibition on women serving in direct combat duty, women are doing so. In Iraq and Afghanistan,

women trained for and assigned to support roles are now going out on patrol. They must go, because in the Iraqi and Afghan cultures, local women cannot interact with our male soldiers. Women soldiers must do this.

Unfortunately, the women who are tagged to go on these patrols are not always properly equipped, trained, or integrated into the team. Shannon Morgan, an Army mechanic, was abandoned by her team in the middle of a fire fight. Hers is just one of the compelling stories of the women who are going into some of the toughest combat situations in the war.

From our increasing role in combat and close combat support, women are suffering injuries, both physical and mental such as post traumatic stress syndrome. One in seven women will suffer military sexual trauma. Few VA Hospitals provide medical services to women veterans.

I think the challenge before us is to recognize that in today's warfare, there is no front line. Missiles and mortar can hit a camp distant from "the battle". In today's war, 51% of the soldiers are in the Army reserves. Soldiers who never before would have encountered combat, are doing so today. And 20% of all of our soldiers are women.

Women are as instrumental to our national security as men. We could not conduct the mission of the military without us.

Fortunately, the military's focus on leadership – great leadership,

teamwork, and professionalism -- has not changed. Military leaders from the top general to the youngest second lieutenant, all appreciate the importance of women in service. They get the job done with the ALL the people they're given. So in spite of the remarkable and unique challenges women face in the military, I am confident that women will continue to serve, to do so honorably, and to help us get the mission done.

I salute all of our veterans today, pay particular homage to those who have died in service, and thank those currently serving us – both the women *and* the men.