

## War deployment tests military women's faith

Judy Gross | Feb. 28, 2011



Army National Guard Sgt. Carolyn Schapper with children in Bayji, Iraq (U.S. Army Public Information office)

Life is never the same when a woman comes home from war. For the thousands of female veterans who have seen firsthand the horrors of combat, it is not so easy to move on past memories. Even women of strong faith find dark and terrifying times test their beliefs.

Beyond the obvious physical wounds are dark, invisible ones they will remember for the rest of their lives. Sexual abuse and post-traumatic stress disorder affect a high percentage of women who served in war zones.

"There were times when I prayed God would take me in my sleep," Maj. Leslie Haines said. "I became spiritually dead." A military police officer, Haines had back-to-back deployments.

First she was sent to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, which she called a "morally depleting experience" caused by her experience of witnessing the appalling abuse of prisoners of war. She recounts being cornered by a major who raged at her because she wouldn't do something she considered wrong. "It wasn't like I could pick up my ball and go home." A month later, she was sent to Iraq.

There were reports of sexual assault problems in the unit in Iraq to which she was assigned. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reports that 22 percent of enlisted women have screened positive for military sexual trauma, compared to 1.2 percent of men. Haines was aware of a commanding sergeant major who was allowed to retire after admitting to the rape of a female soldier. "The military is male-oriented," she notes, "and women are afraid to talk about their abuse."

A Caregiver and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010 contains provisions to help women veterans by providing training for mental health professionals who care for those struggling with sexual trauma. When an exhausted and injured Haines came home, she tore off her dog tags and said, "Never again!"

Medically discharged, Haines went home to Florida with the idea of reentering a "normal" life with a job and friends. She soon found that was impossible. "When I came back, I was totally different. Friends were not the same, I was not the same."

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She lasted one week in her old job before fleeing to Indiana, not because she had ever been there, but because her grandparents had once lived there and she thought she could find refuge. Haines had no goal, no plans. Eventually, she found herself in a Lutheran seminary where she was ordained a deacon. She now directs Lutheran Military Veterans and Families Ministries in Fort Wayne, Ind., which creates programs for returning soldiers and their families. Along the way, she discovered the Victory Noll Sisters and adopted them as her grandchildren. Through them, she found her future and healed her past. Sr. Rita Musante, her spiritual director and administrator, now living with 99-year-old Sr. Callista Ley and others in the convent, embraced the hurting soldier and provided a safe place.

The convent also provided Haines' ministry, giving her unused space at the Victory Noll motherhouse in Huntington to hold marriage and family retreats.

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As this article was being written, Haines sat at Ley's bedside as she faded from life.

The loss of her friend has deeply affected Haines, but the former military police officer said she has found her mission and reason for being. "I know how it felt when I came back," she said. "I didn't want anyone else to not have someone to listen to them."

One outgrowth of military equality is the opportunity for women to be fully involved as combat soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, there is a price to pay. Women soldiers are armed and loaded with the same 60 pounds of equipment men carry into battle. Because of a lack of facilities in battlefield conditions, females often do not drink sufficient fluids, become dehydrated and suffer kidney damage.

Master Sgt. Trish Bunting, an Air Force public affairs photographer, first went to Iraq shortly after the U.S. invasion. She traveled around the country for six months, telling the stories of airmen stationed there, documenting foot patrols. "I have to say those were the most challenging for me. When you go outside the wire, you are completely geared up." In addition to the possibility of ambushes, Bunting was explicit about another part of her experience.

"For the guys, going to the bathroom is easy. Women have all of their armor, weapons, camera gear, etc., on. In order to go to the bathroom, we have to almost completely disrobe." This became a "showstopper" at times because the women had to have someone keep watch for them while their gear was off. "We became so vulnerable to anything and everything. I didn't want to have to go to the bathroom; so many times I wouldn't drink anything after we left our duty station."

Bunting, a member of the Military Council of Catholic Women, said, "I thought my faith was good when I deployed," but until she got to Iraq she hadn't seen the "true colors of my faith." Meeting Iraqis face to face, Bunting discovered her deep respect for them. "I saw their entire existence as putting God first in everything. They believe that all of their possessions are because God willed it.

"Then I look at how most Americans are. I am speaking about myself here as well. I see how whatever we have

is never enough. We want the newer car, the bigger house; we want money, nicer vacations. We want, we want, we want. We seem to expect God to adjust to us, instead of us adjusting to God.?

During this experience, Bunting had a revelation. ?I suddenly saw what is really important in life. Love, family and being happy with just that.? On one particular patrol outside the protected zone, a wave of fear overcame her, bringing thoughts of ?What if tomorrow is my last day?? She found herself thinking of those who would be most affected by her death. Thoughts of never seeing her husband again or her children fulfilling their dreams, and the anguish her parents would feel taunted her over and over. After the desperation, new thoughts came flooding in, bringing a new and different kind of faith. ?If it is your will, Lord, I am here to serve you.? She accepted the possibility of her death. ?I was OK with dying, maybe because I knew I would die in the service of my country. That?s what I had signed up to do. I wondered, ?Wow! Did that really come out of my thoughts?? I had changed. I don?t know what happened or why, but I knew my faith was suddenly stronger.?

Bunting?s new certainty allowed her mind to be at ease and to focus on her mission. Now stationed in San Antonio, she says she knows she was meant, for whatever reason, to go through a crisis of faith and come out of it with a clear vision.

Carolyn Schapper enlisted in the Army to learn a foreign language and establish more credibility as a woman in the national security field. Her goal was to work with the National Security Agency in Washington.

Schapper served with the Army National Guard in military intelligence from 2002 to 2008. When the Iraq war began, she was already a sergeant based in Salinas, Calif., and had earned a master?s degree in international relations. She still wasn?t prepared for the life she would lead in Bayji, Iraq.

Schapper went on approximately 200 combat patrols and was one of the first women with ?boots on the ground? in the area. Her primary job was to talk to the locals and get a sense of what was going on.

Being a female on a small infantry base is still unusual. Schapper shared bathrooms and showers with men and was the only female who lived in a house with 20 men. ?I stood out like a sore thumb on base,? she said.

As the only Catholic on her team, Schapper said her faith was tested on more than one occasion. A visiting priest made it to the base only once a month. She laughs when she remembers how once she served the wine and had to finish what was left in the chalice. ?I got a buzz after being deprived of alcohol for so long.? The men she served with were usually too embarrassed to sing the hymns, so Schapper often was a soloist.

Still, ?I always found something in Mass that spoke to me,? she said. ?I can?t say I?m the best Catholic, but Mass did give me some peace in a place where there isn?t any.?

One thing that tested the soldier and made her feel isolated in her beliefs was the prayer circles most of her team went into before a mission. She never participated. ?To me, these prayer circles before a mission were almost insulting to the Iraqi people. We had gone into their country and were asking for protection from them?

?I did not believe in prayer circles for our safety. I do not believe God favors one side over another in war. I don?t even think God wants to be involved.?

In the transition time after deployment, Schapper said she felt ?how foreign home seemed.? She used the services of the Department of Veterans Affairs for help with adjustment issues. She also joined the online community of Grace After Fire ([www.graceafterfire.org](http://www.graceafterfire.org) [2]), a female veterans? support site started by Kayla Williams. Schapper met Williams in Washington, where they both live. ?I did blog anonymously soon after I came home regarding what I was going through. ... Being able to say exactly what I was feeling to a faceless audience that understood and supported me without question was probably the biggest help in my transition,?

Schapper said.

What would the former soldier tell a woman contemplating joining the military? ?There is no one thing. It is personal for everyone. Other than that, do what you must to respect yourself at the end of the day.?

[Judy Gross is a freelance writer from Tallahassee, Fla.]

**Judy Gross also wrote two other pieces for *NCR* on military issues.  
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