

# WORTH THE WAIT.

**OUR ANNUAL NEWSLETTER.**





# THE WVN NEWSLETTER

2014

EXPANDING THE AWARENESS OF WOMEN VETERANS AND THEIR NEEDS.

## A MESSAGE FROM THE WVN COORDINATOR

by Viviana Marcotte

Our mission continues at the WVN to reach the 32k women veterans that live in our state. We have made incredible strides as women veterans and as a network in regards to our needs and growth. Every woman veteran I meet brings something incredibly powerful to this sisterhood. Women who continue to serve their communities and shine a light for women who have served past and present and the sacrifices that we have all made. It has been an amazing experience to see city after city erect memorials in the name of women in the military and an honor to host events throughout the state specifically for us. In this past year we have seen a trailblazing that we have never seen before. Accomplishments from female marines graduating from infantry school to the Navy promoting the first female four-star admiral. There are wonderful advances and there are also issues that we must still bring to the surface and address. Homelessness among women veterans and childcare continue to be the main struggles that we are faced with. Through it all, we continue to push through these issues and make sure our women who have served in our past conflicts and those who are yet to come home have the best resources possible. If you know of a woman who has served in our military make sure they are registered into the network. We have some great events coming up in the fall/winter and into next year. Remember you are not alone, and no call or question is too small. All the best.



## 6TH ANNUAL WOMEN VETERANS' CONFERENCE WAS A BIG SUCCESS.

This year's women veteran conference was a great success. Keeping our tradition of hosting this vital event throughout the state, the conference was held in Dudley, MA on the scenic campus of Nichols College. Massachusetts Department of Veterans' Services Secretary Coleman Nee welcomed over 300 women veterans and introduced the speakers in attendance: Congresswoman Nikki Tsongas and Representative Peter Durant. Tsongas greeted the women veterans in attendance and spoke about her ongoing advocacy for women in the military. "Women are playing increasingly vital roles on the front lines of our battlefields. 14% of the Army is now female, a figure that is expected to rise to 25% by 2025, and women will see their combat roles expanded further in the years ahead pursuant to the Defense Department's welcome review of women in combat. Our female soldiers should

be provided the same level of protection and resources as their male counterparts."

Congresswoman Tsongas also spoke on one of the key issues that she is consistently bringing to the forefront, "I've been compelled to focus on the



epidemic of sexual assault in the military. This is a deep-rooted and widespread acceptance of unprofessional, inappropriate and criminal behavior. At best, it is willful denial or head-turning on the part of too many military leaders. Recent studies have revealed that as many as 1 in 5 women leaving military service report that they have experienced some form of Military Sexual Trauma (MST). By the Pentagon's

own estimate, as few as 13.5% of sexual assaults are reported.

The number of women in the military is growing, expected to rise to 25% by the year 2025. Directly prior to his departure, former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta lifted the ban on

women serving in combat, opening avenues of advancement for so many brave female soldiers to rise through the ranks of our Armed Forces. This is a step toward enacting real change on several levels, including the issue of sexual assault, as well as

allowing our military to tap into a resource of highly skilled soldiers. What we do not want to happen is for the issue of MST to deter talented soldiers from serving and inhibit military readiness."

Congresswoman Tsongas also spoke on the development of gender-specific body armor to ensure that this life saving technology properly fits and protects all of our service members.

Our keynote speaker this year was US Marine Corps Veteran Mariette Kalinowski. Sergeant Kalinowski, a U.S. Marine Corps veteran of two tours in Iraq and noted author and writer, delivered a powerful and moving keynote speech at the opening ceremony. She shared experiences during her tours in Iraq as a marine and as a woman in combat. During her first tour in 2005, Lance Corporal Kalinowski served as an individual augment to the 2nd Military Police Battalion, Alpha Company, and served as a Browning M2 .50cal machine gunner on convoy security. Kalinowski was appointed as a noncommissioned officer in charge of a Class IX supply yard with 1st Marine Logistics Group. She earned a Navy Achievement Medal for her management of a \$25 million inventory, increasing efficiency of order fulfillment, and encouraging professional education of her junior Marines.

Kalinowski graduated from Hunter College in 2011, Cum Laude, with a Bachelors of Arts in Language, Literature, and Criticism. She graduated in May 2013 from the Hunter College MFA fiction program. Her short story, "The Train," appeared in the fiction anthology "Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War." Her opinion pieces have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Daily Beast*, and *The Brooklyn Rail* among others. She has also appeared in the documentary *Service: When Women Come Marching Home*, and the Maurice Decaul stage play *Lioness: The Pride of America*.

Kalinowski spoke about her love for the military, for country, and the unfortunate virus that plagues our nation's military: MST (military sexual trauma). Above all Sergeant Kalinowski gave a message of endurance and strength through adversity. She shared how she found healing through the arts and

through her writing, and reminded every woman veteran that there is a light at the end of the tunnel and various forms of healing. She left us with a message of how important it is for us to share our experiences which connected with the theme of the conference, "Express Yourself."

The day consisted of 7 workshops by dynamic speakers to include: Writing with author Kirsten Holmstedt of "Band of Sisters" and "When Women Come Marching Home", Art Group, Music Group, Knitting Group", State/Federal Benefits, Improv/Acting, and Financial Education. There were over 67 exhibitors at the conference who donated their time to provide resource information to the veterans in attendance.

The WVN will be hosting the 7th Annual Women Veterans' Conference at UMASS Lowell. Save the date: **June 13th 2015.**

# You're invited



Join us for this 10th annual event to honor women veterans of the past and present

## 2014 OUTSTANDING WOMAN VETERAN OF THE YEAR

with the Deborah Sampson Award

**Thursday, November 6th, 11am-1pm**

MA State House, Memorial Hall, 24 Beacon St, Boston

All Veterans and their families invited to attend.

Refreshments will be served.



If you know of a Woman Veteran in your community who you would like to nominate for this prestigious award contact the WVN or visit [ma.gov/vets](http://ma.gov/vets) for a nomination form today. **Deadline is October 17th.**

The MA Governor's Advisory Committee on Women Veterans and The Women Veterans' Network cordially invite you to its 27th Annual Luncheon

## A TRIBUTE TO THE VIETNAM ERA WOMEN VETERANS

**Saturday, October 18th, 11am - 2pm**

Lombardo's, 6 Billings Street, Randolph, MA

Including a New England Roasted Turkey Dinner

[ served at noon ]

and Jewelry Sale & Drawing



## RESERVATION DEADLINE IS OCT. 14TH

For tickets:

June Newman 781.849.3226 | [juniebug@beld.net](mailto:juniebug@beld.net) or  
Stephanie Landry 781.925.4486 | [stephanie.landry@comcast.net](mailto:stephanie.landry@comcast.net)

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

## Waitress to Combat Medic.

— SGT Cassandra Benes  
US ARMY OIF & OEF Veteran

“Doc” is not a nickname given to every medic, it is an earned honor. Earned through the bloodshed of war and combat. It is a name that when heard in a low or monotone voice makes me smile, while screams of its use still haunt my ears and send chills throughout my body. Only two weeks into my first deployment in Iraq, I earned my place amongst a mainly all-male infantry regiment as their “Doc”. This is my story of how I became “Doc”, a female Combat Medic. ★ It was late summer of 2006; I was 23 years old and a waitress in my hometown of Newton, Massachusetts. Why did I join the Army? I get asked that all the time and I give them a common answer that most veterans do such as; to further my education, to travel, get out of town, or college just wasn’t for me (at the time). However, the real reason was because I wanted to be a bad-a\*\*, GI Jane, save the day super soldier. I even cut all my hair off when I got to basic training. ★ It was one of the best decisions I have ever made, to join the Army and become a Combat Medic. A lot of people say, “You mean a medic right? Because women can’t be actual Combat Medics”. I usually just give an irritated looking smirk and try and give them the benefit of the doubt that their ignorance was not intended to be malicious. My response is also usually short “two deployments as a combat medic with an infantry battalion”. When the time came for deployment in July of 2007, I was given a very unique assignment. I was plucked from my support battalion role as a hospital medic to become a line medic attached to 2-12, an Infantry regiment. I arrived to find less than a dozen females inside this unit in various other jobs such as supply, truck drivers, or fuelers. However I was the only female medic that would be going out on daily missions with one of the companies and EOD. ★ My welcoming was less than enthusiastic. The first couple of weeks, I spent either on mission or inside my room. Mealtimes were lonely. I would get a plate from the chow hall and return to my room to eat. During missions I would sit in my truck or walk with my guys in silence. I didn’t know what depressed me more, the bombed out streets of Baghdad, or the quiet, awkwardness of fellow soldiers pretending you

didn’t exist. Who could really blame them though, think about it. It had been drilled into their heads, into everyone’s heads, military and civilian, that women didn’t belong side by side with them on “the front lines”. They were just as shocked as I was that I was there and probably scared beyond all words that if in fact they got hurt, would I be able to save them? They were scared. What I never would admit to them was that I was scared also. ★ I cannot for the life of me remember and tell you what I did all day yesterday but I can, still to this day, give you a play by play of everything that occurred the day that changed everything for me in Iraq. We had just left the FOB when I was faced with my first two casualties. Gunshot wound to the upper right shoulder, through and through. It was as if my hands knew what to do before my brain did. I knew what had to be done, I was fast, and I was good. The second casualty was brought to me on the hood of a Humvee. As I jumped up there, I slipped right off, it was covered in blood, I got up again, wedged my foot under a handle. Gunshot under right armpit exited through the left armpit. I would later find out that it went through his heart. He died with his head in my lap before we even hit the gate. That was, and is still very hard for me to think about. As I walked back through the main hallway I was met by nearly my whole company. “Hey Doc”, “Good Job out there Doc”, “Thanks Doc”, they had accepted me. In their eyes I had been put through a real life, blood and combat test, and I passed. However, to me the price that was paid will never have been worth it. My deployment with 2-12 went on, countless more firefights, IED’s, more casualties, and more bloodshed. There were laughs and good times too, however. These guys became family. ★ I came back to the states at the end of December 2007, and we deployed to Afghanistan in June of 2009. I was not attached to my former 2-12 infantry family as I was last deployment. I was assigned to the Aid Station on FOB Fenty in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, but I yearned to back out with my guys on



mission. In July of that deployment I started back out on missions with 2-12 again. I wasn’t just the medic this time; I helped with radio, and slung ammunition up to my gunner as he went through it. I am telling you, you have no idea how much strength a woman can have when the bullets are flying, adrenaline pumping, RPG’s whizzing past your truck. ★ On January 26th of 2010, we were on route to FOB Blessing, just before the town of Asadabad, my truck got hit. We were hit with multiple RPG’s to my gunners turret, the side of the MRAP between myself and my driver and on through the front windshield between my driver and TC. I remember the initial explosion but I cannot tell you how many times we were hit. An RPG hit my gunner’s turret and a plume of smoke and a fire ball came down the turret as well as my gunner. We were all med-evaced to the Craig Joint Theater Hospital on Bagram Airfield where we continued to be encircled on trauma tables by swarming medics and doctors. There were a lot of things that could have happened a lot worse that day, I will just simply say that I am alive, and extremely thankful every day for that. ★ We returned to the US in May of 2010. We had come back home with fewer than we had gone with. It was a very tough deployment. In August of that summer I had started dating one of the soldiers from 2-12, CPL William Hoeksema. Unfortunately I had orders to PCS to Walter Reed Army Medical Center for December of 2010. It was a difficult transition for me. I was leaving so many friends and bonds, a group of brothers and family. I got to Walter Reed in Washington DC and quickly fell into a bit of depression. I missed the comradeship, brotherhood, the stupid crap that goes on every day that only you and your fellow soldiers will ever understand. What was harder was, few females had ever been in my situation, so I found it even harder to find a friend that could relate to me. ★ I continued my Army career on the East Coast and was a part of the closure with the Command Team at Walter Reed in 2011. I finished out the rest of my time, at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. I had continued a long distance relationship with my boyfriend, William (Billy), the entire time I was on the east coast. In January of 2012, I was pregnant with our first baby, I moved back to Colorado to be with him and on June 27th 2012 I gave birth to our beautiful baby girl, ►

Chloe. Since then we have moved back to my home state of Massachusetts to be close to my family. Last year, I was diagnosed with a rare form of Vasculitis, Wegener's Granulomatosis. I am currently undergoing chemotherapy as well as, many other medications for this. There is no cure only the hope for remission. Some days are good days and some are not. Some days I can barely walk and it's hard to get around.

Billy has been a most patient and nurturing caretaker. I love him beyond words. He has been my rock and best friend through it all. What makes me get up every day, smile and keep pushing through is the love and adorable grin that my daughter has on her face and the love and complete affection and devotion that Billy has for me. ★ Today my father has my Purple Heart. A wounded Vietnam Veteran, his Purple Heart was lost

years ago and I felt he should keep it and we'd share it. I had an amazing Army career. A very unique and adventurous one. I was lucky in so many aspects; unlucky in some. I learned so much about trust, loyalty, courage, and love. I am now responsible for sculpting and molding a beautiful little girl into a respectful, loving, and strong woman. I know that life is a gift; everyday should be lived that way.

## My Journey. – Mary Gallagher, US AJR FORCE Veteran

I joined the Air Force in May 2001 and I had two reasons for joining. I wanted to take advantage of the GI Bill so I could finish my undergraduate and I came from a military family. My father served in Korea and my two brothers served as well (one in the Army and the other in the Navy). My Uncle was a member of the famed "Flying Tigers" in WWII. From a young age I was taught the importance of service both to the Nation and our community.

I deployed several times, once to Afghanistan and twice to Iraq. I was wounded in Iraq in 2009. The coolest deployment I had was to the Pentagon where I worked at the NSSO (National



Security Space Office). My military occupation in the Air Force was Intel Analyst and the bulk of my duties were to brief Special Ops units. I think the most significant thing I would like to share was how lucky I was to have several female mentors when I first joined the Air Force. They not only took the time to help set goals, they became my friends and two of which I still a big part of my life. I am truly lucky.

Being a woman in the military is a lot easier now than it used to be, but there are always obstacles, especially regarding the issue of Military Sexual Trauma. I have experienced and witnessed it. Unfortunately some leaders tolerate it

while others don't. There's no consistency. The main goal within our military should be to get everyone, every unit on the same page about this serious issue.

Coming home has been the biggest challenge for me. It took me a longtime to adjust and feel like I was really home again. I felt I was falling into a dark and sad place after returning from deployment but the key is to recognize this and seek help. I would tell other female vets that you don't have to suffer in silence. Once I registered into the VA here in Boston I went to the Women's Clinic which helped so much. They have a great staff and really take the time to show the way home. Also, inform other women veterans to register into the Women Veterans Network, there are so many people out there waiting to help.

## NEW EVENTS FOR VETS.

– Gail McAuliffe, US ARMY Veteran

What is music Therapy? Therapy that uses music provided by a board-certified music therapist to address specific non-musical goals, such as physical, psychological, cognitive, and social functioning. Music therapists are trained musicians, with a degree in the practice of music therapy.

We are currently running a pilot program here at the Chelsea Soldiers Home in collaboration with Resounding Joy and music therapist Rebecca Vaudreuil. Some of you may remember Rebecca from the Women Veterans' Conference in June.

New to our community involvement, we are working with Habitat for Humanity on Women's Build project. This will be an exciting opportunity for women to build together for other women in the community.

The date will be announced soon in a flyer. Habitat for Humanity offers single mothers an opportunity to own their own safe homes where they don't have to worry about where they are living. This opportunity is very special because although the recipient of the home may not be a women veteran, she will be a struggling single mom. We will need about twenty volunteers. Please keep this in mind and look for the information which will be available soon.

NEWS  
&  
Updates

**Music Therapy**  
at Chelsea Soldier's Home  
**WVN Annual Luncheon**  
Sat Oct 18th  
**WVN Appreciation Day**  
Sat Nov 6th  
**Women's Build Project**  
**2015 WVN Conference**  
June 13th | UMass Lowell

# Q & A

Megan from Revere, MA asked:

**Does the state offer a peer to peer program for veterans who are dealing with court issues?**

Yes. The MA Department of Veterans' Services Jail Diversion Program helps veterans who have legal issues. They are there to help provide support, help link veterans with the necessary services that may help them to become rehabilitated. They work hand and hand with local police, courts and jails. They also have women veteran peer-to-peer specialists available. For more information contact: Carolyn Jette Peer Specialist SHARP 857-259-2127.

## DEBORAH SAMPSON – THE NEXT GENERATION.

Growing up we all learned about the great pioneers like Paul Revere and many others but very rarely did we learn about the women who also fought in defense of our freedom during the American Revolution. Deborah Sampson fought in the American Revolution disguised as a soldier and enlisted as Robert Shurtleiff. During one of the many battles she fought in, Deborah received a gash from a sword on her thigh just below the groin. Afraid her true gender would be discovered by a doctor, she extracted the pistol ball herself with a pen knife. Unfortunately Deborah fell victim to an illness where she was carried to the hospital and lost consciousness due to a severe fever. At the hospital,



they soon discovered her true identity. Casssandra Silva, a 4th grader from Edgartown Elementary School was invited to present Deborah Sampson as a class project. “I found it inspirational that she had the courage to dress like a man to serve our country. In my speech, I talked about all the courageous things Deborah did during the war especially when they found out she was really a woman. I can’t imagine what it must’ve been like, fighting in the war and having to hide and pretend you’re a man. If I could send a message to the women that have served in the past like Deborah and women that are serving in our military now it would be: Thank You for your sacrifice, courage, and service our country. You’re all heroes.”

## NEW BEDFORD HONORS WOMEN VETERANS

– Katherine Splinter, US ARMY Vietnam Veteran



In 2008, New Bedford City Councilor Linda Morad invited a number of women veterans together to ask of interest in getting a monument dedicated to honor the service of women veterans. The answer was overwhelmingly positive. New Bedford recognizes her veterans with monuments and needed services, such as the Veterans Transitional House and the Sean Brooke House, a permanent housing facility for veterans in need. But recognition of women veterans was lacking. This committee of female veterans planned a memorial to honor all military women. But, the plans were put on hold because of the financial crisis that rocked our country.

In late 2012, the committee was called together and their plan was back on. A design was chosen and the challenge was to raise \$34,500 by November 2013 for a dedication of the memorial on

Veterans Day. A couple of the challenges were getting permission to use the artwork we chose and permission from the National Park Service for the site at Fort Rodman. We couldn’t meet the November 2013 deadline and rescheduled the dedication to Sat. May 2014, the day before Mother’s Day.

Committee members were Col. Grace Regan, USAF Nurse, Vietnam era, Priscilla Fonseca, USAF, Korean, Kathy Splinter, USA Nurse, Vietnam, Kathy Luiz whose mother was a WWII Army Nurse in Europe after D Day, and Linda Morad a City Councilor.

From the beginning of our plans, the support has been strong and enthusiastic. We heard from women veterans from as far away as Texas. “Long overdue” and “it’s about time” were repeated over and over. Some of the letters were very moving. In the end, we raised all the money. The support from our brothers in arms was heartfelt and much appreciated. Except for a grant from the City of New Bedford, all the money came from private citizens or private organizations.

On dedication day we were gifted with perfect weather. We hoped for a ‘good’ turnout and were overwhelmed

## WHAT’S NEW AT THE VA?

– Kim Adams, RN, US ARMY Veteran

There is a new Women’s Health Medical Director at VA Central Western MA Healthcare System. VA Central Western MA Healthcare System, Leeds, MA, is pleased to announce the addition of Nicole Kirchen, MD, MPH to our staff as Women’s Health Medical Director and Primary Care Provider.

Dr. Kirchen’s area of interest includes the provision of quality healthcare to women. As Women’s Health Medical Director, she is highly committed to ensuring that quality healthcare is provided to the women veterans at the VA’s main campus in Leeds, and the community based outpatient clinics in Fitchburg, Greenfield, Pittsfield, Springfield and Worcester.

Women Veterans interested in knowing if they are eligible for VA healthcare can call the VA Health Benefits center toll free at 1.877.222.VETS (8387) or online: [va.gov/healthbenefits/apply/index.asp](http://va.gov/healthbenefits/apply/index.asp)

Women already enrolled in the VA healthcare system may call the VA Central Western MA HCS Telephone Care Line at 1.800.893.1522 to schedule an appointment with Dr. Kirchen.

For questions about the Women Veterans Program, please contact Kim Adams, RN, Women Veterans Program Manager at 413.584.4040 ext. 2240.

when over 300 showed up. The unveiling produced gasps and tears from the audience. It was truly a memorable day.

This journey has helped me appreciate just how far we have come as women who served. As an Army Nurse, I saw women working as nurses or corpsmen. I knew only one female doctor. I was pretty ignorant of the history of women’s service. I am blown away by the courage and patriotism demonstrated routinely by these women. I knew I would be working as a nurse. But so many women joined without that security. And in spite of all the harassment, difficulties and roadblocks of serving in the military, women continue to sign on the dotted line. They are they fastest growing population in the military. I am so proud to have served. I am so proud to meet other women who served. And cherish the time I spent with them, hearing their stories. We truly are a Band of Sisters.