

Washington Post, March 15, 2003, Pg. 1

### **In The Field**

## **In This Woman's Army, Combat Now Part Of The Duty**

By Mary Beth Sheridan, Washington Post Staff Writer

35th KUWAITI BRIGADE, Kuwait, March 14 -- Perched on her cot, Charisma Henzie rips open a box sent through military mail and pulls out a white stuffed cat. Press here, reads the instruction on the belly, and she does. "Happy 26th birthday!" croaks a baritone, a recording of her father's voice. "A cat for Kuwait!"

Henzie grins. The cat will have to be sent home, of course. But for a moment, it distracts her from the things that clutter her mind these days. Like getting shot down over Iraq.

Henzie, an Army chief warrant officer, flies CH-47 Chinook helicopters, the big haulers that resemble green school buses with rotors front and back. In a war, her company could be ferrying soldiers into battle, dropping reconnaissance teams behind enemy lines and zipping into Iraqi territory to refuel Apache attack helicopters.

Women are not assigned to front-line ground combat, but Henzie knows that combat could assign itself to her. She will fly with three door-gunners in the back manning M-60 light machine guns and carrying flares to deflect missiles. For a worst-case scenario, she'll pack a Beretta M-9 pistol.

"When we take off in the Chinooks, we'll be flying into combat territory. It's a reality," shrugs Henzie, a native of Edwardsville, Ill.

Henzie's five barracks mates in Female Room No. 1 here at a makeshift U.S. base know they could come under fire. Some embrace the thought.

Sgt. Mikaela Fahey, 23, a graduate of the Army's Air Assault School, is a mechanic who might be pressed into duty as a door-gunner. Sgt. 1st Class Cyndee Carnes, 36, expects she will drive into Iraq close behind advancing U.S. troops to work at a helicopter operations center. Sgt. Chris Cossette, 27, a mechanic, will be driving in a convoy, too. She tries not to think about snipers.

As the United States prepares for war with Iraq, more women are doing combat-related jobs than ever before. After the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Congress expanded opportunities for women in the military, allowing them to fly most combat aircraft. Women now make up 15 percent of active-duty forces, compared to about 1 percent at the end of the Vietnam War.

But the military remains the ultimate male business, a place where America's gender conflicts stand in sharp relief. Women continue to fight for respect.

To be in the field with the occupants of Female Room No. 1 is to feel the constant, subtle tension of these pioneers -- women going to war. It is evening, and the women warriors are comparing their tattoos.

Fahey, the daughter of a mechanic on Boston's metro rail system, sports a fist-size eagle-and-American-flag tattoo on her back. Henzie has a Coptic cross on her leg. A spiky black bracelet encircles the wrist of Cossette, a laid-back Westerner from Gillette, Wyo.

They are young women who grew up admiring their Vietnam vet fathers, longing to fly, decorating their rooms with Marine posters offering adventure. They were told they could do anything. Their brothers got tattoos; so did they.

At the same time, observes Henzie: "You gotta keep in touch with your girl side." When the combat boots come off, the feet light up. Ruby red. Glittery, bubble-gum pink. Pearly white.

"It's funny, every Army girl I know paints their toenails," muses Henzie. There is a reason for this: Fingernail polish must be in neutral colors in the Army, but no one can see inside those tan desert boots.

The bright polish is a rare touch of beauty in a grim panorama.

The women belong to F Company -- "the Big Windy" -- of the Army's 12th Aviation Brigade out of Giebelstadt, Germany. The unit has been living in a broken-down Kuwaiti barracks west of Kuwait City for about a month.

Here, women and men share the same squat toilets that stink of sewage, the same showers with the smashed porcelain floors. In the barracks rooms, the beige paint flakes off like dandruff. An overhead fluorescent light pops on each morning at 6:30.

Like the men, women work 15-hour days and eat the leathery chunks that pass for Army beef. They walk around laden with six magazines of ammunition, two canteens, a six-pound flak jacket and a gas mask kit that looks like a school lunchbox, plus a biochemical suit in a satchel, a flashlight and pocketknife in the vest and an 8 1/2-pound M-16 rifle slung over the shoulder.

But women make up less than 10 percent of the company; there are just two Female Rooms. For the most part, they don't seem to mind being a minority. In fact, the younger women integrate traditional male and female culture without a blink. Fahey sits on her cot one night and talks about being a door-gunner. She is a mechanic, like her dad and brothers, but hopes to do double duty in war. "I think it would be awesome, get me into some of the action," she says. When firing a machine gun, she confides, "you get a rush."

Soon, she slides into her camouflage sleeping bag. She drifts off into door-gunner dreams, her teddy bear at her side. A few nights ago, some F Company men plotted a nighttime commando raid. The objective: Female Room No. 1. They wanted to lie outside the door and listen to the women discuss sex. In the end, the mission was canceled.

"I know you talk about that stuff," an officer told Henzie.

Dude, the women don't talk about that stuff, Henzie replied.

Here is what they talk about: their weddings, ones they've had or dream of having; the jobs they hope to get on leaving the Army: photographer, physical therapist, pastry chef.

They talk about their families. Carnes, a former county jail supervisor from Santa Rosa, Calif., is thinking of her four children, who range from 15 months to 14 years. They were so worried when she left. Carnes assured them she had a very, very safe job. Mommy won't even be assigned a rifle, she said.

Tonight she is kneeling on her cot, pushing 30 bullets into each magazine of her M-16. "Loading rounds is so dirty," she remarks, wiping off her hands.

Carnes's husband, a crew member on an Army Black Hawk helicopter, is about to leave home, too, for duty in the gulf. An aunt will watch the kids. "I'm glad I didn't have to be there to see that," Carnes said with a sigh.

The women talk about Army life. About basic training. About the irritating West Pointers and their "boys club" mentality. About how guys sometimes get off much easier than women for the same infractions.

In many ways, the Army has aggressively spread the message that women should be treated equally. "Sexual harassment is a form of discrimination" warns the calendar hanging in the administrative office here.

But treating women badly isn't outlawed. Carnes, who oversees seven people in the helicopter operations center, notices men sometimes talk right over her. Her blunt, no-nonsense manner of speech stuns some colleagues, and she feels that some simply hate answering to a woman.

"Most people won't come right out and tell you you shouldn't be in the military 'cause you're a woman," she said. But she knows that's what they're thinking.

That belief goes beyond a few guys in F Company.

Debate still flares in Washington over women's role in the military. Some of the questions are the same as ever: Are they physically strong enough for combat? Will they undermine the cohesion of units? Will Americans be able to bear the sight of women in body bags?

Not that women haven't given their lives in American wars. More than 300 died in World War II, many of them nurses who suffered illnesses; 15 perished in Vietnam. Five Army women were killed in action in the Gulf War, and nine others died in accidents. Two Navy women were among the 17 sailors who died in the terrorist attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000.

Women are still not allowed in most jobs on the front lines in infantry, armor, artillery and Special Forces. During the Clinton administration, a Defense Department women's advisory committee called for more such positions to be open to women, but military leaders said that could hurt combat readiness.

In Female Room No. 1, opinions are divided. "Yes, I think women are strong enough. I know they could do it," says Henzie. But she feels that introducing women to the macho infantry ranks would be trouble.

Cossette disagrees. Women who chose the infantry would fit in, she says. "I don't think the girly women would do something like that."

During Air Assault School, Fahey slid down a rope from a helicopter with 45 pounds of gear on her back. She has no interest in lugging 100 pounds as an infantry soldier.

However, she says, "If they said I couldn't be a door-gunner, I'd be mad." Henzie, in her green flight suit and baseball cap, walks to the chow truck for breakfast. "Hi, Chuck," a male officer calls. Henzie grins. Some of the men can't quite call her Charisma. "It shows I'm one of the boys," she says.

Henzie is accepted in this mostly male world. She is relaxed and self-confident and swears like a trooper. More to the point, she shares her colleagues' passion for flying. "You get in a Chinook, it's like being in a Cadillac," she says.

The Chinook is so long -- 98 feet -- that the pilots fly with a two- or three-person crews that watch for traffic, monitor the cargo and handle the machine guns.

"She's the best pilot we got," says Staff Sgt. Wayne Clark, instructor of the crew teams. "She's a woman. She listens to the guys in the back. Some of the [male pilots] are hotshots."

Henzie has ached to fly since she was a kid watching planes take off from Scott Air Force Base near her home in Illinois. When she graduated from high school, she considered flight school, but it was expensive and her grades weren't good. Her stepfather, a Vietnam vet, suggested the Army.

Now helicopters are her life -- her domestic life, even. Henzie's husband is a Chinook pilot in another part of F Company. "Chopperchic" is part of her e-mail address. When she got married, the ring bearer's pillow had a tiny Chinook etched in beads.

\* Use FILE/PRINT to print document \* Use FILE/SAVE AS to download \* Use BACK button to return to previous web page

She knows the perils. A Black Hawk crashed just three weeks ago in Kuwait, enveloped by swirling sands at night on a training mission. All four occupants were killed. Henzie knew one of the pilots.

One recent day, Henzie was at the controls of a Chinook, flying over the endless beige expanse of northern Kuwait. Below was an awesome array of U.S. military might: M1 Abrams tanks, Bradley Fighting Vehicles, trucks, spaced as though on a giant chessboard.

Henzie flew on over the desert.

"That's the Black Hawk crash there, at 11 o'clock," the co-pilot said. Henzie gazed down. From the air, the site resembled a doused campfire, a circle of charred embers surrounded by sand. Her heart dropped.

"Wow," she said. Death is one subject no one talks about in Female Room No. 1.

Copyright Washington Post 2003

USAWOA Online 3/25/03

**[ Use browser's BACK button to return to previous web page ]**