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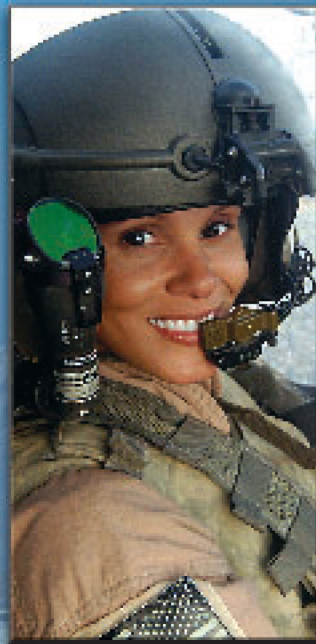
Women Chopper Pilots Take to Afghan Skies



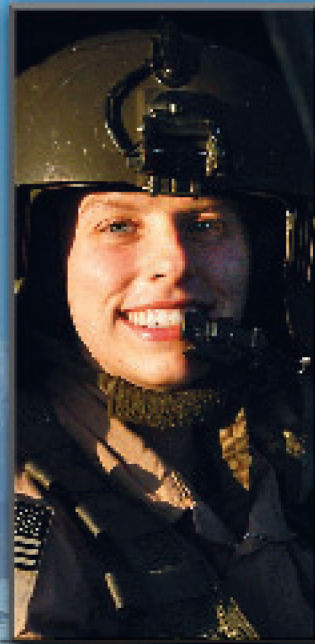
Capt. Casey Martinez



CWO 4 Christy Graemer



First Lt. Nicole Smith



Capt. Laurie Aardappel



First Lt. Holly Burke



Capt. Charlotte Hildebrand



Capt. Jennifer Mondillo



Second Lt. Kristen Deyer

As an embedded journalist with the U.S. Army in Afghanistan, I bounced from base to outpost, traveling by helicopter, courtesy of the Army. Getting on and off, whether a big CH-47 Chinook or a UH-60 Black Hawk, it was almost always a hot load—engines running, rotors spinning, with the pilots appearing as mysterious, helmeted, visored figures behind the reflecting cockpit Plexi-glas. The rear crew, too, are helmeted and visored, but out of the aircraft, directing the loading with hand motions over the deafening noise of the engines and rotors. It's all nameless and faceless, and it's all in a hurry, as they're doing their job, and there's no opportunity to talk with the crew. On one such Chinook hop, I caught a glimpse of blond hair hanging out from under the back of one pilot's helmet, and it triggered

a realization that women, chopper pilots for two decades in the Army, would indeed now be flying in a combat zone.

If there is a recurring sentiment among women pilots, it is that flying a chopper is just a day's work. They don't want to be treated special or to be singled out for being a female in what is still a community in which men far outnumber women. In that sense, they did

not offer stories of combat, nor particularly think it important to stress those stories, perhaps going overboard not to make their own experiences any different from the male pilots. What interested me more was the motivation and process of each to pursue a career and adventure in what was only a generation ago an exclusive men's club and of which they are all now working members.

Text and Photographs
By Paul Avallone

Capt. Casey Martinez—Commander, Company C, 2-10 Aviation Regiment, 10th Mountain Division

The first thing that struck me about Capt. Martinez was her demeanor—firm, direct, calm, confident and surely the one in charge, which in turn becomes the lasting impression.

Martinez is the middle of three sisters—the oldest a geologist, the youngest an interior designer. “Someone had to carry on the family tradition,” she laughs, speaking of her military roots, which include a great grandfather in the Mexican army, a grandfather in World War II and her father (West Point class of 1974), now a retired colonel. Her father attended her own West Point graduation (class of 2000), and pinned her three wings: Airborne, Air Assault and Aviation. Two years out of West Point, Capt. Martinez married now-Capt. Robert Stanton, a former classmate she did not meet until their senior year when he was first captain, the highest cadet rank at the academy.

Martinez’s first experience with combat was in Iraqi Freedom 1, from February 2003, as a Black Hawk pilot with the 101st Airborne. “I’m very proud to have been a part of that. The whole magnitude of it,” she says. “The rule book just went out the window. It was game on.”

The 3rd Brigade, 10th Mountain Division (Light Infantry) deployed to Afghanistan in March 2006, with Martinez then commanding Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 2-10 Aviation. After a couple of months in country she was moved to command Company C and its 10 Black Hawks and the pilots, crews and support personnel. “As a female in command, or doing what’s always been known as a man’s job, you have to prove yourself competent,” she says. “You don’t get the benefit of the doubt. People are ready to look at the female as the weak link. If my husband and I both walk into the same room—we’re both captains, we’re both company commanders—people will look to him, expect him to be right, first. A female has to prove herself. Once you do, you’re in.”

Martinez is quick to clarify, “I can honestly say that I’ve never been discriminated against for being a female in the Army. If I got chewed out, it’s because I deserved it for [a] lousy job, not because I’m a woman.

“It’s interesting being a girl in the Army, because you can never be one of the boys. No matter what, no matter

Paul Avallone served in Afghanistan as a Green Beret in 2002–2003 and spent most of 2006 there as an embedded journalist with the U.S. Army and the Coalition forces.



how hard you work or what you do—it’s not discrimination—you’re treated for the quality of your work, but never the same, like guys. I have more guy friends than girl friends,” she says, “but you’re never really fully part of the club.”

CWO 1 Christy Craemer—Company A, 7-158th Aviation Regiment, 244th Brigade, Army Reserve

With nine years on active duty, six as a captain and about to be promoted, then-Black Hawk pilot Christy Craemer pulled the plug and got out. “I got fed up with not being able to fly,” she explains. “I just had bad luck of the draw—wrong place, wrong time—as far as getting the job that I wanted. I came in to fly, and I was staff more than I was anything else. And I was just not interested in continuing in that line.”

Craemer’s father was an Army sergeant major, but out of high school she turned down an ROTC scholarship and did not even apply to West Point. It was in her junior year at the University of Texas, San Antonio, that she stumbled onto ROTC through a friend, and she never looked back, getting her degree in geology and a commission as a second lieutenant along with a slot in flight school.

Flying is what she loves, and, “As a commissioned officer in the aviation community, your primary purpose is not to fly,” she says. “It’s to take care of soldiers. Officers are like managers in the civilian world. Warrant officers are like technical experts. They’re the ones who fix things, or fly the aircraft.”

Unhappy with the amount of flight time she was getting, Craemer sought the challenge of the corporate world, where she is now a successful account rep for nationwide industrial supplier Grainger, living and working out of Colorado. After about a year, “I really missed flying,” she says. “Flying helicopters is really expensive on the outside, and I figured I would go back into the Reserve.”

CWO 1 Christy Craemer

The helicopter unit nearest to her home is the 7-158th Aviation Regiment in Fort Carson, Colo., and it’s a CH-47 Chinook unit, so Craemer exchanged her commission for warrant officer status and returned to flight school for Chinook training. “I get the best of both worlds,” Craemer admits. “I get to fly and get to do the Army stuff every once in a while and then when I get enough of that, I’m done with that for the weekend, and I go back to being a civilian and enjoy having time off and having my scheduled day job.”

That scheduled day job presently is flying full time in Afghanistan—her Reserve unit deployed there in September 2006. She only made the transition to Chinooks a year earlier, and she remains a chief warrant officer 1, but she’s already a pilot in command—a testament to her piloting skills and the confidence of her fellow pilots. As for the male-female pilot divide, “There is no difference as far as one pilot to the next is concerned,” she insists. “We can’t do everything; the female form is different from the male form. But, to fly a helicopter, all it takes is motor skills and mental skills. Flying a helicopter does not require musculature that is different or anything along those lines.

“I want to be a pilot, I don’t want to be recognized because I’m a female, that I’m special. We’re not special. I think that most women in the military just want to do our jobs like everyone else does, and we want to do the best that we can at it.”



First Lt. Nicole Smith



First Lt. Nicole Smith—Company C, 1-183rd Aviation Regiment, Idaho National Guard

Female helicopter pilots are rare in the Army, black male pilots are rarer still, and black females are but a handful. There are perhaps a dozen women Army-wide flying the AH-64 Apache, and by everyone’s reckoning, only one black female—1st Lt. Nicole Smith, whose Idaho National Guard company deployed from its Boise base to Afghanistan in mid-2006.

Smith’s father did an Army stint as a draftee long before Nicole was born, and an older brother made a career in the enlisted ranks; but Smith, a high school prom queen voted most likely to succeed by her classmates, never gave the military a second thought. The youngest of six siblings, she was the first to get a college education, earning a degree in biology at Penn State University. At 24 and bored with her job in a medical lab, but with student loans she was anxious to pay off, Smith enlisted in the Army Reserve for its

college loan repayment incentive. “I was just going to join the Reserve for my six years to pay back my loans and then get out and move on with my civilian life,” she says. “After I got in, I liked it, and I was good at it. I think a lot of people find, and I sure did, whether you like it or not, the Army ... will force you to set new standards for yourself.”

Deployed to Bosnia in 2003 with her Civil Affairs unit, Smith met the pilots of the Idaho Guard Apache unit deployed at the same time and she was inspired to push herself to become a pilot herself. Back home Stateside, it wasn’t so easy just to get a foot in the door. A Pennsylvania Guard recruiter laughed at her, and other aviation units on the East Coast were reticent

Women in Aviation Support

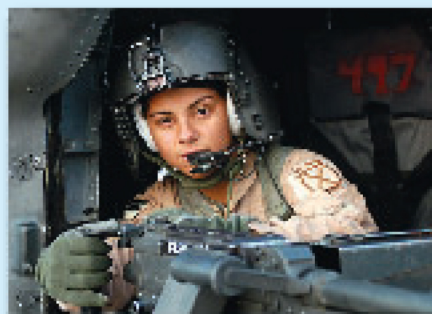
Women are also filling support positions both in the aircraft and on the flight line. I met three women in these positions on Kandahar Base.



Spc. Kerinne Schenk, from Grants Pass, Oregon, is a Black Hawk crew chief who enlisted in the Army directly after graduating from high school. She already had a tour in Korea before deploying to Afghanistan.

Spc. Schenk is the only female crew chief in her company, and she has more than 400 hours logged flying.

There is no question that she loves the Afghan deployment but doesn't think she'll make the Army a career.



PFC Cassandra Wong's military occupational specialty (MOS) is mechanic—wheeled vehicle, not helicopter—but gunners are in short supply—the choppers can't fly without them—so she volunteered to fill a position. She loves it—to the point of seriously considering seeking a warrant officer position in Aviation if she stays in the Army. "It's going to be hard to go back to the motorpool," she says. The most important aspect of being the gunner on a Black Hawk? "Simple," she says. "Keep your surveillance."



Spc. Tracy Bledsoe is an Apache armament mechanic (MOS 15X), responsible for the maintenance and loading of the gunship's weapons. She is with the Missouri National Guard, the 1-135th Attack Helicopter unit, and she volunteered to deploy to Afghanistan with the neighboring Tennessee National Guard Apache unit, Rogue Troop, 4-278th Armor Cavalry Regiment. She loves her job, is good at it, and can talk the specs and pros and cons of the Apache all day long.

about taking on a female sergeant E5 to send to Officer Candidate School (OCS) or the Warrant Officer Candidate Course and then flight school. Her new friends in the Idaho unit challenged her to come out there, take the flight physical and flight aptitude test and present herself to the state's flight board. Boarded, she came out first on the order of merit list, and from there it was OCS, then flight school (number two in her class, she was an honor grad), and Apache training, followed within months by deployment to Afghanistan.

In between, a romance developed with one of the unit's pilots, Maj. Douglas Smith, who had flown the Apache's predecessor, the Cobra, as an instructor pilot during his nine years of active duty before going home to Idaho and its Apache Guard unit, where, among other things, he is a maintenance test pilot. Lt. Smith (her maiden name is Washington) and Maj. Smith married upon her graduation from Apache training. In Afghanistan they are separated: he is a staff officer at the flight task force HQ at Bagram Base; she is flying combat missions out of Kandahar. With 17 years of attack helicopter flying compared with his wife Nicole's year and a half, Maj. Smith laughs at the irony of it. "It's the Super Bowl of my military career," he says,

"and I'm on the sidelines, and she's first string," flying Apaches—high tech, lethal gunships, with a 30 mm gun under their bellies and rockets and Hellfire missiles on their stub wings. "In Aviation, especially attack Aviation," Lt. Smith says, "there is a certain ideal you have when you visualize what you think an Apache pilot is—a certain level of testosterone. You would not picture me."

Capt. Laurie Aardappel—Company D, 2-10 Aviation Regiment, 10th Mountain Division

If anyone's blood runs Army green, it's Black Hawk pilot Laurie Aardappel's. Her father was a colonel in Armor, now retired, and her three siblings are all ROTC—an older brother in the Medical Service Corps, presently studying to be a physician's assistant; an older sister in the Nurse Corps; and a younger sister still in college. Aardappel's own ROTC was at Pacific Lutheran University, in Tacoma, Wash. "I knew from the very beginning that I wanted Aviation," she asserts.

In flight school Aardappel hoped to graduate into the OH-58 Kiowa, but there were no slots available in her class for the observation helicopter. But Aardappel is perfectly happy flying Black Hawks, in particular, in the challenging



Capt. Laurie Aardappel

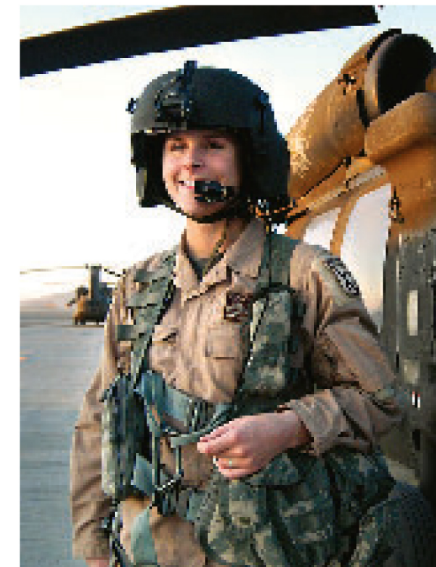
combat environment. "But," she admits, "the ultimate challenge would be flying special ops, with the 160th." And, like so many female pilots, a smile follows and a shrug; the 160th has yet to be opened up for women pilots.

Fitting in the theme of Aardappel's blood running Army green, her husband is also a career officer. Capt. John D. Aardappel is in Air Defense, in 10th Mountain, the same as Laurie, and deployed at the same time to Afghanistan. He's stationed in Bagram, she's in Kandahar, hundreds of miles away.

With her pedigree, the question comes up: Did her colonel dad pin her gold bars at her commissioning and her wings at her flight school graduation? Of course. And that's not to mention that he was a guest speaker at that graduation.

First Lt. Holly Burke—Company D, 2-10 Aviation Regiment, 10th Mountain Division

Fellow Black Hawk pilots at Kandahar, Holly Burke and Laurie Aardappel are friends, but if Aardappel's course into the military was through family pedigree, Burke's was the opposite. There is no military in her family. Of her two older sisters, she says, "They're sorority types—as girlie as they come." One is a successful businesswoman, the other a physician's assistant. Her fraternal twin brother is a fi-



First Lt. Holly Burke



Capt. Charlotte Hildebrand

is very academic, very technical, and I can memorize and learn just as well as a guy can."

No doubt about that. Not only is she flying in a combat zone, she's been given the responsibility of shops platoon leader of Maintenance Company.

Capt. Charlotte Hildebrand—Medevac pilot, Task Force Centaur, Bagram Base, Afghanistan

At 30 years old, Capt. Charlotte Hildebrand has been flying Black Hawks for seven years. She has her senior wings, which are earned after six years and at least 1,000 hours flying. She has also accumulated more than 400 hours as a pilot in command. That experience, along with being on the cusp of promotion to major, landed her in the last place a pilot who loves to fly wants to be—staff; in this case, Aviation Task Force Centaur.

nancial consultant, with a degree from the University of Massachusetts, Lowell—not a thing military about him.

Burke's own inspiration to consider West Point as a college option was a chance visit to her high school by a former student, then a West Point cadet, who spoke to her class about the academy. "She wasn't a stereotype, what I thought a girl going into the Army would be," Burke says. "She was on the track team and swim team, same as me."

Capt. Burke (then Holly Mitchell) met her future husband in their freshmen year at the academy. Both of their class of 2004 standings were high enough that they received their first choice of branch, Aviation, and they attended flight school together. Still unmarried, they both chose 10th Mountain, and were assigned to Fort Drum, N.Y., in August 2005, because, Burke laughs, "It was the only place on the board that had two slots." They married in January 2006 and deployed together to Afghanistan two months later. As luck would have it, most of their time deployed has been together, stationed at Kandahar Base.

Burke believes that the Army as a whole, not only Army Aviation, is a man's world. It does not affect her because, she says, "I only compete with myself—not with men, not with others. Male or female, you're never going to be better than everyone. I don't come off as a super competitive type, so I'm not a threat to the guys. Aviation may be a man's world, but a female can also maneuver the controls. Aviation

Capt. Jennifer Mondido



would like to continue her education and get a law degree or a Ph.D. in philosophy, move into a career designing public medical policy or in hospital administration.

Capt. Jennifer Mondido—Company B, 2-10 Aviation Regiment, 10th Mountain Division

A first generation American, Capt. Mondido is proud of her Philippine heritage. She is proud of her brother, a Marine who has done three tours in Iraq, and proud of herself for having been selected for an ROTC scholarship and participating in the simultaneous membership program, serving as an

enlisted specialist in a Civil Affairs Reserve unit while in college ROTC. Multifaceted, at Rutgers University she majored in visual arts/photography, was on the crew team, all the while in ROTC, graduating with a bachelor of fine arts degree and her commission.

Mondido is flying exactly the aircraft she wants, the Black Hawk. "I don't have the personality for the Apache," she says of the gunship. "The Chinook is too big for me, and the Black Hawk, it's the sexiest helicopter." She's aware that the technical flying part of Aviation is really the realm of warrant officers, while commissioned officers are the management. "I feel I have the common sense of a warrant, but I really like leading. I've always led. From playing sports, I've always been captain or co-captain."

Career-wise, Mondido is looking forward to getting a command, "Either a flight company or support company, I don't care," she says. "If not, and I get out, I'll definitely go Guard or Reserve."

Second Lt. Kristen Beyer



Hildebrand's parents had careers as Naval officers, her mother a nurse and her father in Intelligence. She was commissioned through ROTC, with a major in medical ethics and is branched Medical Service Corps, as are medevac pilots. (The Army will soon branch them all Aviation.)

Even though she was the only female in her flight school class back in 1999, Hildebrand does not see Aviation as a man's world. "Men and women in Aviation complement each other," she says. "They have different leadership styles. Women communicate better and men are more decisive." She is quick to add, "I have never experienced gender bias, not in the Army."

Hildebrand may spend most of her time in Afghanistan on staff now, but she still tries to fly a mission at least once every couple of weeks. "It's strange," she points out somberly, "you're flying over women who are wearing burqas and are completely covered up, and here the U.S. Army has given us an opportunity to fly helicopters. I realize I'm given the opportunity a lot of women in the world are not. And that motivates me to do the best job I can for the Afghan people."

Getting promoted to major will mean even less flying, so Hildebrand is juggling different options for the future. She

Second Lt. Kristen Beyer—Company B, 2-10 Aviation Regiment, 10th Mountain Division

The youngest of the pilots I met, Lt. Kristen Beyer, just 24, had only graduated from flight school a few months earlier. She was also the tallest, at six feet, with the athletic physique of the competitive swimmer she was in both high school and at West Point (class of 2005).

Lt. Beyer's going to the academy was something of a fluke. Her Tucson, Ariz., family isn't military, and, she says, "Nobody thought I was going to be in the military." But her grandfather insisted she had to apply to the academy, and she had interned in the local congressman's office—so it all fell together. Her intention at West Point was to branch Military Intelligence, until rotating the summer of her junior year with an Aviation battalion, and that's when she knew she wanted to be a pilot.

"I didn't join the Army to kill people; I came in to help people," she says. She flies Black Hawks. "Since I had to be in the Army for five years anyway, I'm glad I picked something that I love to do. Sometimes I'll be flying, and I think, I can't believe they're paying me to do this!" ★