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Whether
earthquakes
will stay
our

GX HERO: 1LT Nicole Smith

Story and photos by Paul Avallone

IT WAS SUMMER. Hell hot, temps above a hundred, in the hilly desert of Kandahar province in southern Afghanistan. It was late afternoon, and two U.S. Apache helicopters had been dispatched for a firefight to provide close air support—meaning, shooting up the enemy. Apaches are AH-64 attack helicopters. Gunships. They are two-seaters, with the PC (pilot in command) in the back and the co-pilot up front with a better view, responsible for the weapons systems and navigation.

In the lead Apache, CW4 Paul Kuklish was the PC, 1LT Nicole Smith his co-pilot. Five minutes from the firefight, a master caution light went off. That's a land-as-soon-as-possible light. Below was bad-guy country. Taliban country. The Apaches reversed course and headed for the nearest U.S. outpost. A couple of minutes later, a second master caution light went off. Another land-asap light. They pushed on. A minute later, the second Apache radioed that smoke was coming from CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith's aircraft. "That's not something you play with," 1LT Smith relates. "We landed." In the middle of nowhere. They shut down the engines. Zeroed all the sensitive electronics—radios, navigation devices and weapons systems made unusable should they fall into the enemy's hands. They locked the cockpit canopies and ran for the concealment of some trees. Their only weapons, the 9-mm Beretta pistol each carries and the M-4 rifle each brings aboard the aircraft.

Their downed Apache was a sitting duck, a prime target, and the few trees offered little protection for CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith. The second Apache flew cover overhead. As 1LT Smith tells it, "It was a very surreal experience being on the ground in the middle of Taliban country, and it really gave me an appreciation of how the ground guys feel having an Apache overhead. It did give us a sense of security."

Command in the rear had been notified of the situation, but there was confusion, and the Downed Aircraft Recovery Team (DART) hadn't been put into the air yet. Two hours later, the sun had dropped, CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith were still alone on the ground, and the overhead Apache was running low on fuel. It was not a viable option for that chopper to return to base and refuel while leaving the pilots with no support during the one-hour turnaround. Instead, the second Apache landed . . . to pick up the pilots. The only problem, Apaches, remember, are two-seaters. Two, period, no more. An Apache taking on two more passengers means the hitchhikers will have to ride on the outside. And that's what CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith did: they climbed on the skin of the Apache, one on each side, and with the snaplink carabiner that pilots wear on their web harness, each safety-clipped into the handhold on its side. The Apache took off, with CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith holding on in the hurricane winds of the rotor blades spinning within reach just above their heads. It was a 10-minute flight to the nearest U.S. outpost, where CW4 Kuklish and 1LT Smith were dropped off and the Apache refueled, to return to fly watch above the downed aircraft until the DART team arrived.

"In hindsight, it was a blast," says 1LT Smith of the experience. "At the time, it was scary. I was thinking, 'I cannot believe I am doing this.' " For good reason. It's just never done. Called "self-extraction," the procedure is taught in the post-flight school Apache phase of training, but as a hypothetical, not an actual hands-on exercise. Pilots who have been flying Apaches for 15-plus years can only speak of one

other instance of an actual self-extraction: when the pilots of a Kiowa observation helicopter that went down in Iraq were picked up and extracted on the skin of an Apache. But 1LT Smith's was the first for Afghanistan and a first for a female pilot.

Firsts or near-firsts are nothing new for 1LT Nicole Smith. According to her fellow pilots, she is one of no more than a dozen female Apache pilots Army-wide. And she's the very first African American female Apache pilot. Tested and boarded, she came out first on the Idaho National Guard Order of Merit List to attend flight school. 1LT Smith is not one who accepts precedents as roadblocks. As with most high-achievers, her attitude starts with the family upbringing.

"Both my parents are my role models," 1LT Smith says with pride. "They've been married for 43 years, and they've worked very hard every single day of their lives." Her father is a machinist for Mack Trucks; her mother is a shipping clerk. "They've always instilled in me that I could do whatever it is I wanted to do."

The youngest of six siblings of a blue-collar family in a small town in Pennsylvania, 1LT Smith was the first to receive a college education. An older brother joined the Army and recently retired after 20 years, and her father had completed a three-year stint in the military. "He was

PROUD TO SUPPORT MAJ Doug Smith, of the Idaho Army National Guard and husband of 1LT Nicole Smith, is amazed by his wife's ambition and dedicated service.



drafted way back when," she says. "I never disliked the military, I just never planned on joining; it wasn't something I saw in my future."

High school prom queen and voted "Most Likely To Succeed," 1LT Smith went to Penn State with the intent to become a doctor. "In my junior year," she remembers, "I decided I didn't want to go to medical school. I didn't want to spend the next eight years in school. I still liked science, and I thought I might like research." She graduated with a degree in biology and got a job working in a lab, "just doing testing," she says, "and it was the most boring thing you can imagine." At the same time, she had school loans to pay back, and she was determined to pay them off herself, without turning to mom and dad or anyone else to help.

The Army Reserves had a program of student loan repayment for a six-year commitment. 1LT Smith was 24 and she enlisted, and she makes no bones about her motives. "I was just going to join the Reserves for my six years to pay back my loans and then get out and move on with my civilian life," she says. "I got in, and 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 push you to your limits. It will force you to set new standards and new limits for yourself."

1LT Smith first joined a Civil Affairs unit. Or, as she calls it, "the really hands-on, helping the people" side of the Army. Civil Affairs may be the touchy-feely side, but it's a part of the Special Forces community, which means Airborne, which means that 1LT Smith had to become parachute qualified. She deployed with others from her unit to Bosnia in 2003, and it is there where she met her first female

wings. And finally, it was her then-fiancee, MAJ Smith, who, after her completion of the Apache qualification course, and just months from their mobilization to Afghanistan, put a gold ring on her finger.

Military Aviation is a male-dominated field, and 1LT Smith wants to be accepted on an equal basis. She should not fret. First, none of the pilots in her unit have any hesitation about her flying front seat with them. More importantly, all aviators know that there is no way to fake the flight aptitude test or to rig the flight physical, both of which have to be passed before one can be boarded, and board members themselves are not ones to send to flight school Soldiers they wouldn't trust to be their own co-pilot.

"In Aviation, especially attack Aviation," she admits, "there is a certain level of testosterone; there is a certain ideal you have when you visualize whatever you think an Apache pilot is. And, you would not picture me." Five-foot-three, petite, with a face that a photograph defines far better than can words like "stunning" or "gorgeous."

"You do get attention, because people see, number one, you're a female pilot. And there are a small number of female pilots. A fair number, but still small. For me, a black female pilot, that number starts to shrink down; and then to top that off, a black female Apache pilot."

It does not take brute strength to fly a helicopter, though, and it certainly doesn't matter what color your skin is. Flying a helicopter takes motor coordination, quick thinking, high intelligence and cool nerves. With the advanced electronics, navigation, communication and weapons systems of the Apache, the skill is more cerebral

I can't remember on that mission how much ammunition we expended. There was a time, the sun started to go down, and it almost looked like the valley was like a Christmas tree with the twinkly lights on it . . . It was probably the scariest . . . most awkward, awesome, amazing thing—1LT Nicole Smith

helicopter pilot. The pilot flew Blackhawks—utility helicopters, the troop carriers. 1LT Smith had always had a distant interest in aviation but, like the military before, she never really considered it a possibility. She credits that female pilot for "getting the wheels turning," she says. "Maybe I can do it," I was thinking."

An Idaho Guard Apache unit was also deployed to Bosnia, and 1LT Smith spent time with those pilots. "I thought to myself," recalls 1LT Smith, "if I want to fly helicopters, I want to fly the one that's the coolest." The Apache.

During her deployment with the Idaho Apache pilots, she met MAJ Doug Smith. The two returned to the States after deployment with a long-distance relationship, Pennsylvania to Idaho.

As fate would have it, the operations officer of the Idaho Guard Apache unit made 1LT Smith an offer: Come to Idaho, take the flight aptitude test and the flight medical physical, get boarded, and if she did not come out high on the Order of Merit list, just stay in the Reserves, no harm, no foul. This was 1LT Smith's opportunity to become an Apache pilot.

She didn't just come out high on the list, she came out on top, first. Then, after successfully completing Officer Candidate School, at graduation, her brother, still active duty enlisted then, pinned her Second Lieutenant gold bars on and rendered her first salute. It was her father who, at her graduation from flight school, pinned her Aviation

than physical. The testosterone only comes into play in the warrior spirit of attack flying. The desire to fly into the fray, first, and the emotional ability, second, to pull the trigger. Women aren't supposed to have it.

1LT Smith doesn't disagree. "Men are just men, you accept who they are," she says. "For women, you have to find a balance between maintaining your femininity [and being able to] do the job that an Apache pilot has to do. When we get called out on [Quick Reaction Force] missions, we get called out because there is someone out there in trouble—there's a fellow Soldier of mine out there in trouble. There's someone's son or daughter in trouble. And it's my job—it's our job—to go and help them."

In the end, it's neither testosterone nor estrogen. For 1LT Smith, it's adrenaline. "It gets your adrenaline going," she says, "anytime you get called up for a mission. Once you get in the aircraft, you're able to harness that adrenaline into positive energy. 'I think the first time you pull the trigger . . .,' she hesitates, choosing now her words carefully. "When you pull the trigger and shoot at someone, it changes you in a way. And I don't want to say you lose anything, but it takes a lot. I don't think it's something most women would choose to do."

That's not meant as a put-down; 1LT Smith does not consider herself better than her fellow female pilots who fly Blackhawks, Chinooks or Kiowas and not Apaches. "They want a mission where they're helping



BREAKING BARRIERS
1LT Nicole Smith stands with her Apache helicopter in Afghanistan this past winter.

people, or transporting people or transporting equipment," she says. "They don't want to be put in a position where you have to make the decision or do some of the things I have had to do."

Meaning, pull the trigger.

She is asked about the real thing, and she shares one mission. Two Apaches launched to aid American Soldiers caught in a firefight. Her back-seater, the Pilot in Command, is again CW4 Kuklish. "We got launched to secure the area because there were some Soldiers wounded and needed [assistance] and the medevac aircraft could not get into the area. As soon as we got radio contact with the ground guys, we crested a ridgeline and immediately started taking fire. It was in the summer, so it was still full of vegetation—trees and all that. The bad guys were hiding; the good guys were also hiding. I know, for all crews over here, before we will shoot anything, our key thing is to find out where the good guys are. That's more important to us more than anything."

The guys on the ground were able to talk the two Apaches onto the enemy positions and, "We just pummeled them pretty much," 1LT Smith says. "I can't remember on that mission how much ammunition we expended. There was a time, the sun started to go down, and it almost looked like the valley was like a Christmas tree with the twinkly lights on it; like almost everyone that lived there came out, had a gun and were shooting at us. It was probably the scariest and, at the same time, the most awkward, awesome, amazing thing."

They managed to suppress the enemy and get the medevac choppers in to get the wounded out. Mission accomplished. Combat mission accomplished. In Iraq and Afghanistan, women are flying Blackhawks, Chinooks and even Apaches into combat.

Naturally, a buzz is gaining momentum around 1LT Smith, and she is seizing this opportunity. She says it allows her "to inspire and encourage any other female, any other young girl, any other woman out there to do whatever it is they want to do." It may not be flying Apaches, she admits, "It may not be flying helicopters; it may not have anything to do with flying. But whatever that thing is that you want to do that people [say] you can't do or that girls don't do . . . I want to encourage them to do that."

To inspire and encourage. Not something that 1LT Smith planned for herself when she realized she hated her "boring" lab job and started her road to Army Guard Aviation. Female helicopter pilots are rare to begin with, African American even more rare, African American females rarer still, and African American female Apache pilots . . . well, there's 1LT Nicole Smith. In late February, 1LT Smith returned home with the 1-183rd Aviation Battalion. And even she's not sure what comes next. **GX**