

WE ARE NOT INVISIBLE

*Twenty-six women veterans from varied branches of
the service share the enlightening stories of their lives before,
during, and after their military service*

S. FABIAN BUTALLA

HELLGATE PRESS



ASHLAND, OREGON

WE ARE NOT INVISIBLE

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Published by Hellgate Press
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)

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Hellgate Press
PO Box 3531
Ashland, OR 97520
email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Cover & Interior Design: L. Redding
Cover Photo: Dallas Smith

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available from the publisher on request

ISBN: 978-1-55571-953-1 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1-55571-954-8 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the United States of America

First edition 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is dedicated with gratitude to the twenty-six women veterans who were willing to share their life stories before, during, and after their military experiences... and to the women who have served and are now serving in all branches of our country's Armed Forces.

In Memoriam



Bridget Mary Cronin

September 12, 1968 - March 17, 2019

Those who knew and loved Bridget Cronin will forever hold her in our memories with great respect. It is with deepest gratitude to this amazing, talented woman, without whose creative genius and selfless service which she devoted to assisting, promoting, and honoring women veterans, this book would not exist.

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Acknowledgments

SEVERAL DEDICATED WOMEN have been instrumental in the creation of this book, beginning with Bridget Cronin, Founder and Executive Director of the Ars Bellum (Arts of War) Foundation in St. Paul, MN.

Ars Bellum provides evidence-based art therapy for veterans dealing with PTSD, and has developed a specific women-only program for veterans who have experienced military sexual trauma (MST).

Ars Bellum joined forces with the Women Veterans Initiative, the 23rd Veteran, and the Minnesota Department of Veterans of Foreign Wars Charitable Association, which provided funding for this project.

In June 2017, Bridget attended the National Association of Women Veterans Coordinators held in Minneapolis, where she learned of a public awareness campaign being held in the state of Oregon, called “I Am Not Invisible” (IANI). The campaign involved a traveling display of professional, poster-sized photographs of several women veterans from various branches of the service, who have joined the group called IANI (“I am Not Invisible”) because they feel or have felt that feeling of “invisibility” regarding their military service. The photographs are presented on large easels and they can fill a conference hall.

Bridget enthusiastically enlisted the aid of other women veterans organizations, and she was assisted from the start by Army veteran Angie Batica, who became the spokeswoman for the Women Veterans Initiative.

Professional photographs of the individual women veterans who were involved, as well as group photos, were fully the work of Twin Cities photographer Dallas Smith. The display traveled throughout the state of Minnesota in 2018.

The goal of the campaign is to shine a spotlight on women veterans whose contributions, experiences, and needs are too often ignored, or overlooked socially, politically, and legally. Many face significant barriers and challenges in accessing health care and other services while also experiencing a lack of recognition unlike their male counterparts.

“We want to increase awareness and conversation about the broad spectrum of experiences women veterans have had—both good and bad—and we want women veterans to know they are recognized, they are honored, they are supported.” One of the key goals of the project and statewide tour was to connect women veterans to the local community-based resources (and groups who do support them and can provide practical help for women veterans if they know who they are).

First contact with the author of this book came in May, 2018, when Sandra Fabian Butalla visited the display in Chisholm, MN, and was immediately struck with a feeling of respect and honor toward the women depicted in the photographs.

Much credit must be given to former Marine Sergeant Chris Magnusson. She was monitoring the exhibit the day author Sandra Butalla first viewed the display. Chris, who is currently the Regional Librarian for the Arrowhead Library System, based in Mt. Iron, MN, a board member for the Women Veterans Initiative and several community and veterans’ organizations, contacted others in the IANI group, and Sandra became involved.

A great deal of assistance was provided by Col. Laura Ludwig, who served as the liaison between Sandra and the IANI women veterans. Her rapid response to questions and tasks was invaluable in the production of the manuscript for this book. She is very dedicated and involved in numerous women veterans organizations. Her enthusiasm and contributions to this book are inestimable and greatly appreciated.

Photographer Dallas Smith has donated the copyright privileges and permission to print her wonderful photographs and front cover photography for use in this book, and for that we are most grateful.

Poet/musician Sarge Lintecum has also donated copyright privileges and permission to print his poignant and stirring poem titled “Invisible

Soldier” for use in this book, and it is a perfect addition for which we are honored.

I am greatly indebted to the women veterans who have agreed to share their stories in this book.

The twenty-six women veterans whose stories comprise this book, and I will be forever grateful to the late Bridget Cronin for her inspiration, creativity, and devotion to helping women veterans.

Technology assistance by Dustin Miller of Tech Bytes in Eveleth, MN was greatly appreciated during the preparation of the manuscript for this book.

My deep gratitude goes to Hellgate Press for their acceptance of this manuscript for publication. Their guidance was invaluable and their patience was limitless.

WE ARE NOT INVISIBLE

Introduction

THAT WOMAN WHO just passed you on the street. The lady who lives down the block. The girl sitting next to you on the bus. The mother of those two children at the park. Your grandmother. Your own mother...any or all of them may very well be or have been veterans. Most of them have rarely, if ever, talked about their service to our country. Many families have been totally surprised to learn that a female family member has served in the US military.

There are more than 29,000 women veterans in the state of Minnesota alone, and no doubt, similar numbers in many other states around the country. They are everywhere, and like their male counterparts, they too have served in America's military. Most of them left their homes and families around eighteen years of age and were sent for training all over the U.S. before being transported to faraway places with sometimes dreadful conditions or the horrors of war. But they were part of something much bigger than themselves, and they were well-trained for the jobs they performed. Regardless of their assignment, it was crucial to the U.S. military machine, and they were needed. Yet, many rarely, if ever, talk about it.

When they returned to civilian life, having left their friends from the service, the job they specialized in, and the structure of military life after several or many years, they they could no longer wear their uniform,, which was for each of them, their identity. Try to imagine the reality of what it is like to try to fit back into their former life or to try to create a new path. For many, re-integration as a civilian was and still is one of the primary causes of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which plagues so many veterans.

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Twenty-six American women were eager to share their true-life stories.

Each of their stories comprises a unique chapter, as her life unfolds. Their first-hand portrayals of the negative struggles and positive rewards of their service to our country has been a pleasant journey down “Memory Lane” for many of these women. For some others, it forced them to dredge up their long-held traumatic memories that in a way proved cathartic as it was no longer lodged deep inside, and at last prompted a few to seek professional help, which has turned into something very positive for them.

These noble women have served in several branches of the military throughout the United States and in countries around the world. They have joined together in a group called “I Am Not Invisible” because they all share the common hope that their stories may inspire others who, like themselves, have experienced a feeling of “invisibility” regarding their military service, and to enlighten the general public who remain, on the whole, unaware of the service rendered by our American women veterans.

Preface

TWENTY-SIX WOMEN, each with a different story, yet with some similarities. Their backgrounds vary, as do their life experiences, but they all have one thing in common—they all left their homes and families at an early age and willingly entered into the military service of their country.

Browsing through the daily newspaper one northern Minnesota spring day in 2018, I noticed a picture of a woman as part of an article. Looking closely, I saw that it was actually a photo of a “poster-sized picture” of a woman, and it appeared to be on an easel for display. The article provided details of a traveling display titled “I Am Not Invisible,” which was touring the state of Minnesota. Its purpose was to promote awareness of the contributions that women veterans have, and still are, making to the United States military.

As the author of two published books (*The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and *Warbirds in the Cloak of Darkness*), both of which are true life stories of Minnesota Airmen who had amazing and highly dangerous experiences during World War II, naturally I was interested in how and why the women veterans in the display came together. The article mentioned there were more than thirty, and it provided dates and locations where it could be viewed. My curiosity was aroused and a few days later, I went to the Minnesota Discovery Center located in Chisholm, MN.

I was directed to the large second-story hall. Circling the perimeter of that room were tall easels, each of which supported a 2'X3' professional photo of a different woman. They were alike in that each woman was wearing black. There was a sentence or two below every photo, identifying the woman, and briefly describing her military service.

I walked slowly around the room, stopping in front of each picture. They all looked happy. It appeared that the group had served in most all branches of the military. Some were young, others were still actively serving, and there were those who had completed their service some time ago. I was so focused that it wasn't until I reached the last easel when I realized how quiet it was in the room. I was lost in my thoughts of each of these women and the sacrifices they have made for our country. Then I was immediately struck by the sobering recognition that I was alone in the large hall. No one else was there to view that powerful display.

At that point I was greeted by Chris Magnusson, the woman in charge of monitoring the event. She had sat without a whisper behind a table in the far corner of the room, allowing me to view the entire display uninterrupted. We introduced ourselves. Chris explained the purpose of the "I Am Not Invisible" initiative, and I was both impressed and saddened to think that any woman who has served our country should ever feel that her service was overlooked or dismissed. Case in point—I was the only visitor in the room at that time.

I told Chris about my two published books and I said that someone should write a book about these women. She was instantly excited about that suggestion, and even more so when I added, "Each woman's story could be a chapter in the book."

Needless to say that one thing led to another, and the wheels began to turn. Then others involved in the initiative contacted me and offered to assist in any way. I simply could not turn my back on them, and I threw my hat in the ring, knowing that I may be able to help them in promoting awareness of the service of all women veterans.

Thus began my journey into the lives of twenty-six of the women pictured in the traveling display.

It has been my honor to interview, collect, and organize the stories of each of the wonderful women who were willing and able to share their experiences. Any departure from the truth or actual facts by any of them or myself is purely unintentional.

All of the stories which are told by the women in this book are as they recall them. Some may make you smile.

Some may make you sad.

Some may shock you.

Together, their stories may enlighten and inspire those who endeavor to read them.

WE ARE NOT INVISIBLE

ONE

Corinne Anderson



SSgt Corinne Anderson
US Air Force, 1997-2002

I WAS BORN on August 3, 1977, and grew up in a very small South Dakota town named Carthage.

My parents divorced when I was around five years old. My mother dealt with domestic violence in her first marriage, which affected my view of the world at a young age. My mother remarried and worked three jobs. Alcoholism, workaholism, and violence definitely influenced my desire to strive to be healthy, educated, and prosperous.

My upbringing helped me to become very independent and resourceful. I went to the University of South Dakota for a year after high school, but I was not satisfied with student loans and a lack of direction. I dropped out of college and went to Colorado Springs to move in with my cousin.

As time passed, we had shared ideas about what our next steps would be. I was reminded of my own declaration, made out loud during my senior year that “I was going to join the Air Force and move to Hawaii.” My cousin Dawn and I had both thought previously on our own about joining the military. We both wanted higher education, but we did not want to go into a lot of debt. We were adventurous and loved to travel, and we felt that we had the support to follow through with our decisions at that time.

I had another female cousin who had joined the Army, and a few uncles who had served in Viet Nam. After exploring other branches of the military, I still was leaning towards the Air Force. I heard that the Air Force was the hardest to get into, and it had the best sleeping quarters and food. I felt that it was the right fit for me, and my cousin agreed.

My family was pretty shocked when they heard the news of our decisions, and my mother was nervous, but Dawn and I were accepted by the USAF and off we went to Basic Training in Texas.

We arrived at the base in San Antonio on December 3, 1997, and we were pleased that it was clean (as some were reported to be not so.)

Training was a blur! I remember waking up five minutes prior to revelry almost every day, then scrambling to get going! There was lots of running, an abundance of yelling, and no sugar for the first five weeks. After the five weeks were up, I retaliated by drinking two Cokes and a few candy bars in a short time. I soon paid the price by suffering the unpleasant effects of sugar overload, and had no one but myself to blame.

Our ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) test score determined what we would be qualified for in our military duty. Dawn and I joined “open general,” meaning we didn’t know what training we would be going to prior to joining. I heard that the California reservists had a year-long waitlist in the area of Video Production, which I was very interested in. Needless to say, I was extremely happy when I learned that it was my assignment. Dawn was sent to Texas, then to Japan.

I was sent to technical school at Ft. Meade, MD., where it was five months of pushing to the limits. We ran at 3:30 a.m. three times a week, and had cleaning requirements plus eight hours of class a day. It was extremely exhausting and expansive at the same time. I have never been pushed so hard in my life!

We learned lighting, audio, video recording and editing. Back in the day, they didn't expect us to be a journalist as well. We were fortunate to have some fun with our creativity during that period of physical, emotional, and mental challenges.

My senior high school declaration that I would join the Air Force and move to Hawaii manifested itself four years after I had graduated. A guy I knew told me that there was a position open in Hawaii and I must apply for it. I somehow just knew that I was going. I was at my mother's house when the letter arrived, informing me that I did, in fact get the assignment. My mom was nervous about my going, but I was screaming with joy! The Air Force was sending me for a three-year special duty assignment there from 1999 to 2002.

When my plane landed in Hawaii and I walked outside, I was greeted with the smell of flowers. I didn't know there was a place that looked or smelled like Hawaii. I loved it!

Unfortunately, my video training wasn't utilized much there. The war in Iraq had started and I dealt more with secure briefings for staff and executive level officers.

During my free time, I was able to go sailing, snorkeling, hiking, deep-sea fishing, and I tried surfing. Although I was afraid of heights, it was on my Bucket List to try sky-diving. One day I did it! Then I didn't sleep for a week.

I was never deployed outside of the United States.

I wasn't sure if I was going to stay in the military after my first tour of duty. I was on the fence. As it turned out, a coworker of mine was in the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 when it was hit by a plane. Afterward, I had a lot of anxiety about reenlisting. The fear of the unknown and terrorism so close to home had really worn on me during my last year in the service. I thought about cross-training into another field, but I ultimately decided to give civilian life a go with the college money I had earned from the military.

I feel that I gained a lot of personal growth during my military service from Boot Camp to Advanced Training, then my time served in Hawaii. Having been raised in a small town, I was exposed to different cultures while in the service. I learned discipline and a work ethic. While in Hawaii, I was doing my best to be my best. I knew I would have to strive to be on my own if I left the military, and I could not fail. I needed money for school,

and at the time, I had no back-up plan. I did leave the service and spent eight months soul-searching at my mom's house in South Dakota.

I did not want to work in video production, as I had done in the service, because commercial software was different from that of the military, and I felt that I no longer possessed the skill set necessary.

I went to school at Aveda Institute, then worked as a makeup artist for Estee Lauder for a year. After that, I got a job working in the travel industry for two years and worked technical support for nine years with the help desk and online technical support.

I eventually went to Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, MN, where I completed my Communication degree. I am currently working as a contractor in tech support for HVAC.

I am proud to have served my country. I realize that everyone joins the military for different reasons, but in the end, every one is serving their country. I made a decision to join the military for multiple reasons: education, travel, and patriotism. Women make up a small percentage of the military, so it does make some sense why we are not as noticed. Males have been dominant throughout human existence. We really need to have a voice for women. Empowerment and awareness are only going to strengthen society's perception toward the treatment and equality of women.

My message to other women veterans who have felt or who are feeling a veil of "invisibility" regarding their military service is this: We live in a time where women have the most opportunity ever! It's only going to get better from here on.

Eleanor Roosevelt had some of the most inspirational quotes that resonate with me (and hopefully with you too.) Here are a few of them:

"No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

"You must do the things you think you cannot do."

"You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop and look fear in the face. Then you are able to say to yourself, 'I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along!'"

TWO

Susanne Aspley



Sergeant First Class Susanne Aspley
US Army Reserve, 1983-2005

I HAD A WONDERFUL childhood, growing up in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. I spent a lot of time outside. My dad would pile my brother and me, along with our two bulldogs, Spike and Fritz, in the car, and he would take us to Roubideox Pass, where he taught us how to shoot a bow and arrow and a shotgun. I drove minibikes up and down the roads between ditches with my brother. We climbed Chimney Rock, hiked the Wildcat Hills, and ran up and down Scottsbluff National Monument.

In the late '70s my dad worked as a country doctor at the county hospital, and my mom was an RN. My dad worked days, 7:00-3:00 a.m., and my mom worked 3:00-11:00 p.m. So, it was always my dad, my brother, and I when we got home from school. One stormy night when we should

have been safely in the basement, we begged my dad until he gave in and pushed us up on the garage roof to watch a tornado with binoculars, and it was spectacular! By the time my mom got home from work, the tornado had passed, and we were all safely asleep.

The fall of 1979 was difficult for me as my dad got a better job offer and our family moved to Minnesota. I started ninth grade at Minnetonka, and I hated it. It was horrible being a farm kid moving to a different community, especially at that age. I couldn't wait to graduate from high school and leave.

Four years later, I did just that. I chose to join the Army Reserve because they offered the job I wanted—photojournalist—and they had a great college benefit: the GI Bill.

I was inspired to join the military by several relatives who themselves had served over the years. I am a descendant of a Revolutionary War vet, and the tradition continued as my grandfather was in WWI and my uncle in WWII. My father served during the Korean War and my brother joined the Marines. I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself, and the military provided that. My family and friends were very supportive of my decision.

Two weeks after high school graduation, I left for Basic Training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which lasted from June-August of 1983. My drill sergeant told us, "You join the military for one of two reasons. You are either running from something, or you are looking for something." I guess I was doing both.

One time during Basic, I was assigned KP duty for the day. At the end of the evening, I went into the freezer and took a delicious frozen cheesecake that unfortunately turned out to be for the general's retirement party the next day! I sneaked back to the barracks and ate the entire cheesecake in the latrine stall.

At 5:00 a.m. the following morning during PT (exercises), as I was doing sit ups, I rolled over and puked out the entire cheesecake! My staff sergeant asked what was wrong. I told him what I had done. He made me do more sit ups.

Another time I was supposed to climb up a rope, run across the rafters, and jump into a sand pit. I was trying to climb the rope and my drill sergeant was encouraging me until I told him, "I can't!" He got so mad at

me, and screamed, “Never say the word ‘CAN’T!’ Get up that God damn rope now!” I was up that rope, across the rafters, and down in the sandpit before I realized I could do it!

After my Basic Training, I was sent to Fort Ben Harrison, outside Indianapolis, for Advanced Training. I attended PSYOPS school (Psychological Operations) at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and NBC school (Nuclear, Biological, Chemical Warfare) at Fort Carson, Colorado. My first six years in the Reserve I was with the 13th PSYOPS as a journalist. But I never worked in NBC, which is probably a good thing because I am terrible with math! (Blast-radius-wind direction-wind speed—argh!)

I also trained at numerous places throughout my career—all over the U.S., as well as in Panama and Honduras.

When my contract was up with the Army, I got my Bachelor’s degree from the University of Minnesota in 1988, and was accepted into the Peace Corps for two years in Thailand. I served in a small fishing village from 1989-1991. I was assigned to community development, and I taught English to school children. I worked on small projects like a duck farm and well digging.

In 1997, I rejoined the Army Reserve and served as a photojournalist again. I deployed to Bosnia (1997), twice to Kuwait (1998 and 1999), and to Guantanamo Naval Base (Gitmo) Cuba (2002).

While deployed, I handled media interest in the Islamic detainees arriving at Gitmo and helped manage the media in Kuwait during the “No Fly Zone” years of 1998 and 1999, as well as public affairs in Bosnia.

At the end of my service in the 88th Army Reserve Command, the last few years were absolutely horrible because of the MST (Military Sexual Trauma) which I was subjected to and reported, but no one believed me. The man eventually went to prison on a different charge of child rape/trafficking charge, but it was pure hell because everyone refused to believe me.

I retired in 2005 after serving twenty non-consecutive years. I am now a writer, and my website is *aspleywrites.com*.

In spite of the tribulations I faced in my final years while in the military,

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I am proud of my service and would do it all over again in a heartbeat. I feel “invisible” as a veteran, but I didn’t serve for the public accolades. I served because I loved the people I was with, and I love my country.

My message to other women veterans who have felt or who are feeling a veil of “invisibility” regarding their military service is this: It happens all the time, but don't take it personally. Most people don't overlook us because they think we are less than men, only because they are not used to women in the military. They simply need a reminder that women do indeed serve.

I also want all veterans to know that there is help if you are struggling. You are not alone.

Keep that hope—and yourself—alive.