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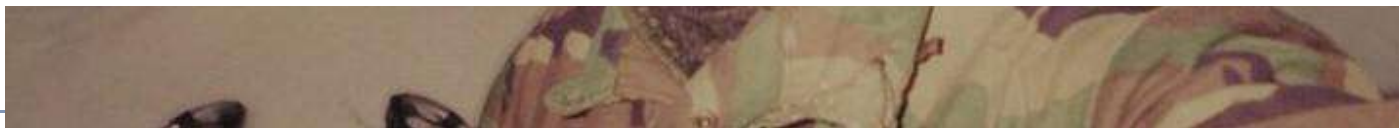
Disruptive Women: Rushing Through Barriers

Help me break barriers for the next generation.

BY TECHNICAL SGT. BONNIE RUSHING, USAF

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Challenge after challenge, women overcome barriers in traditionally male-dominated fields and organizations. Allow me to tell you my story. I am Technical Sgt. Bonnie Rushing in the United States Air Force and I am a woman warrior. I faced challenges from the very beginning of my time in the military during training, and in operations. Not only have I overcome every obstacle along the way, I have emerged on top. Let me take you through my journey as a woman warrior and plead for your aid in continuing culture change.

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I arrived at basic military training in July 2009. During this time, the female airmen received an unwelcome and inappropriate brief from a staff member. To summarize, this female training instructor stated that we would only be one of three types of military women: those who are unreasonably aggressive, those who identify as gay, or a “mattress.” This introduction to life as a female service member did not sit well with me.

As I continued my aircrew training and survival, evasion, resistance and escape (SERE) school, I continued to face challenges. At SERE, cadre explained the reality of being a deployed woman and how the enemy would treat us if captured. Females endured a different type of resistance training.

When I finally made it through almost two years of pipeline training, I was proud to become a Special Operations aircrew linguist. The Special Operations and aircrew community is predominately male, so I continued my creativity by overcoming new obstacles. One of the three airframes on which I became a mission operator and eventually flight instructor and evaluator, for example, did not contain operational toilets. These aircraft only had urinals. Since I was the sole female crew member during many of my more than 700 flight hours, I had to think outside of the box for solutions.

I quickly had to learn how to operate sophisticated technologies, aircraft systems, signals equipment and aircrew terminology. During exercises and deployments, I felt that I had to truly work hard to prove my worth to the crew since my presence added extra layers to logistics and lodging requirements. During my time in special operations, I was continuously asked personal family planning questions by individuals who had a hand in deciding the future of my career.

After long days of flying, training pipeline students, and completing administrative tasks, I spent what little spare time I had left completing my bachelor’s degree. Additionally, I studied multiple languages extensively, and became a qualified linguist in Spanish, Tagalog and Brazilian Portuguese.

These challenges forged me into the disciplined warrior I am today. Let me brag for a bit about my successes: I graduated at the top of my “Aircrew Fundamentals” class and Tagalog course at the Defense Language Institute, where I earned the Provost’s Award. I was hand-selected to be a flight instructor and evaluator incredibly early in my career and became the first female linguist instructor at the Special Operations Squadron formal training unit. Additionally, I was the first linguist to fly onboard the MC-130J and eagerly volunteered for its first deployment. I have earned several quarterly and annual awards all the way up to the Air Force Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance Agency’s Airman of the Year. During Professional Military Education (Airman Leadership School and Non-Commissioned Officer Academy) I excelled—I am a two-time recipient of the John L. Levitow award, Distinguished Graduate and top of my classes. Furthermore, I graduated from the National Intelligence University’s Master of Science of Strategic Intelligence program as a Staff Sergeant (E-5), which is incredibly rare.

Do you want warriors like myself in our armed forces? Do you think diversity is important? If so, please help me out. We all need to support a vital culture change to remove obstacles for women so they can focus on their missions and not on the navigation of these same challenges. Help me break barriers for the next generation.

Here is the solution. We must challenge outdated stereotypes that tend to paint women as weak when we are so much more than that. Equal opportunity programs need more visibility and support must be effectively deployed widely. Parental leave should be regarded as essential for both parents to strengthen work-life balance and family planning equity. Salaries should be standard by position to close the gender wage gap.

Over time, unconscious biases will change, and women will become widely accepted as peers in more fields and organizations. Please share my story and help us mold the future of our country and workforce. Our future is looking bright... we just need your help!

Technical Sgt. Bonnie Rushing, born in 1985, was raised in Glen Burnie, Maryland, and joined the United States Air Force in 2009. Bonnie has a Master of Science degree in Strategic Intelligence from the National Intelligence University and enjoys studying foreign languages and competitive ballroom dancing. The views expressed do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Intelligence University, the Department of Defense, the U.S. intelligence community or the U.S. government.

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