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May 2022

Telling Her Story

Flight Nurse Volunteers for Trip Honoring, Thanking Women Veterans

BY MELANIE PADGETT POWERS
ENA CONNECTION CONTRIBUTOR

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Teri Cambpell, MSN, RN, CEN, CFRN, PHRN, FAEN, (left) tours monuments in Washington, D.C., with veteran medic Jeannie Adams during the Operation HerStory trip

Campbell and other volunteers at the Vietnam Women's Memorial

Throughout U.S. history, women have served in wars and conflicts. But women who served in the World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War eras have received little recognition for their military service — some even robbed of being called veterans by their own country at the time — and often did not receive medals conferred to men for similar military service.

They faced discrimination when trying to access benefits such as the GI Bill, and often faced

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preserve segregation.

“The women of these eras served in a time when it wasn’t just about lack of opportunity. There was incredible systemic and cultural malignment and degradation of their sex,” said Elisabeth Pennix, co-founder of Operation HerStory, who is a current Navy Reservist and a U.S. Navy attorney who served in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay.

In October, 93 women who served during Vietnam and earlier conflicts were recognized with a historic Operation HerStory flight. The one-day trip from Chicago to Washington, D.C., was the first time many of these senior veterans were thanked for their service — or surrounded by so many other women veterans from their respective generations.

“We felt like it was time to bring women together to tell them how critical their service was. They put their hands up and served in these adverse conditions,” Pennix said. “Our whole mission at Operation HerStory is to make women veterans visible, help give them their day of recognition and honor them for what they contributed.”

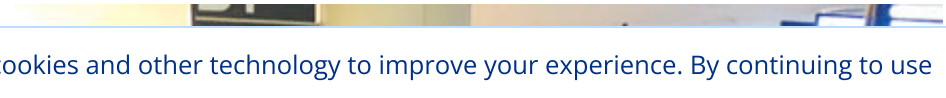
ENA member Teri Campbell, MSN, RN, CEN, CFRN, PHRN, FAEN, was a medical volunteer for Operation HerStory, which included active-duty women from Illinois who served between 1940 and 1975.

Campbell, a flight nurse with the University of Chicago Aeromedical Network and frequent presenter at ENA educational events, volunteered twice before on similar D.C.-bound flights of veterans. On those trips — consisting almost entirely of male veterans — she was part of a medical team assigned to a smaller group of veterans as they traveled around the nation’s capital.

For Operation HerStory, Campbell acted as a guardian for Jeannie Adams, a veteran medic who served at an Alabama military hospital during the Vietnam War, treating wounded soldiers returning to the United States.

Campbell said her time with Adams will have a lasting impact on her.

“She’s this tremendous beam of sunshine and positivity and has done so much for veterans since she’s left active service, with volunteerism and fundraising,” Campbell said.



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The Operation HerStory trip helped thank women veterans for their service

“We spent the entire day together, and we were like schoolgirls. We could not get enough of each other.”

Campbell learned Adams helped raise money to build the Women’s Military Memorial, which opened in 1997 at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, across the river from Washington, D.C. Adams is currently the treasurer and a board member of National Women Veterans United and was nominated as an American Red Cross of Greater Chicago “2022 Hero.”

In an interview, Adams said the Operation HerStory experience made her feel like “queen for a day.”

“So many people in our society do not realize or recognize women served and still serve in vital roles in the military, same as men do,” Adams said. “Many of my family and friends didn’t know I was in the military during the Vietnam era until I enlisted in the Air Force Reserves in 1986. I must admit that I may have been at fault, as I didn’t talk about it.”

That era in U.S. history was a difficult and confusing time for many, she said.

“Returning men were ostracized and not welcomed back, and us women were invisible.”

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that time did not enjoy the public support service men and women do today.

Her stories "really impressed upon me the emotional toll these soldiers encountered in addition to their physical injuries," Campbell said. "And although [Adams] was very proud of her contributions to the Vietnam War, there was so much shame and so much social stigma that it was really crushing."

While in Washington, Operation HerStory participants visited the war memorials on the National Mall, watched the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery and heard women generals discuss their own service and thank the women for their military commitment.

Campbell had visited Washington before but seeing the national war memorials through the military women's eyes was a unique and special experience.

"Many of these women vets served in so many support roles because at [that] time it was unusual for women to be in leadership roles," Campbell noted. "[They] served such vital, supportive roles, but they were the unsung heroes."

In addition, the women who served during Vietnam faced the scrutiny of family, friends, neighbors and the public.

"They already did not get support from society for being a part of this war," Campbell said, but on top of that, their work was more in the shadows because they were women. "But it would have been impossible, had they not been there to fill those logistical and support roles."

As Campbell watched the veterans take in their war memorials, she could feel the "pride they were exuding — that finally somebody recognized their contributions, somebody finally publicly is saying 'thank you, you're valued, you're appreciated and we could not have done this without you.'"

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Campbell cheerfully posed with a veteran also named Terry

Boarding their flights home, the Operation HerStory women were excited to receive another surprise. The organizers handed each veteran a bundle of letters, reminiscent of how important "mail call" was when they served in the military. Each woman's packet was individualized with letters from family, friends and schoolchildren thanking them for their service. At baggage claim in Chicago, the women were surprised again as their loved ones and volunteers lined the corridor, cheering them, holding up thank you signs.

Campbell and Adams have stayed connected.

"It's just been this joyful relationship," Campbell said, describing her participation in Operation HerStory as an enormous honor.

"A lot of these women are tremendous role models to my generation and to my daughter's generation. They fought barriers that women now can't even imagine. ... I was so grateful to meet these trailblazers."

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