

A Year of Firsts for Female Vets

In honor of Women's History Month, here are several feats accomplished by remarkable female veterans over the last year

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Last year saw a number of firsts for female veterans across the country. From the deep southern lands of Alabama to the Great Lakes bordering Minnesota and the mountain ranges of Nevada, female veterans etched their names in the histories of the nation's military services.

For Women's History Month, VFW salutes all female veterans and honors their service by capturing some of the most historic and trailblazing moments achieved in 2021 with this compilation of feats.

SOUTHERN COMMAND WELCOMES ARMY GENERAL AS ITS FIRST WOMAN LEADER

The first woman to stand at the helm of U.S. Southern Command, headquartered in Doral, Fla., was named to the position in October.

Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson, 57, who last commanded the U.S. Army North, became the first woman to head SouthCom — and only the second female four-star U.S. military general to head a U.S. geographic combatant command.

MINNESOTA AIR NATIONAL GUARD NAMES FIRST FEMALE STATE COMMAND CHIEF

Lisa Erikson was rewarded for her remarkable 32-year military career in October during a ceremony at the Minnesota Air National Guard headquarters in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Erikson, who was promoted to the rank of Air Force command chief master sergeant at the ceremony, became the first woman to be promoted to state command chief in the history of the Minnesota Air National Guard.

Being elevated to the senior enlisted position, Erikson will now be responsible for leading

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

and managing about 2,000 airmen at two separate wings and one headquarters across the state of Minnesota.

Erikson began her career as a jet engine mechanic on C-141 cargo aircraft before moving into administrative roles such as training manager, personnel systems manager and recruiting office supervisor. She also served as a senior noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the 148th Medical Group, a role she served for 10 years.

UTAH NATIONAL GUARD PROMOTES FIRST FEMALE BRIGADIER GENERAL

Charlene Dalto became the first female member of the Utah Army National Guard to receive the rank of brigadier general during a May ceremony at Camp Williams in Bluffdale, Utah.

Dalto, who is now the commander of the Utah Army National Guard's Land Component Command, had previously commanded the Utah Army National Guard's Medical Detachment since

February 2018. She served her first 20 years in the military as an enlisted soldier, achieving the second-highest rank serving as a master sergeant.

Dalto also served another 18 years as a first lieutenant for the Army Nurse Corps, deploying to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in support of Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm in 1990.

TRAILBLAZING ADMIRAL AND HALL OF FAME FEMALE DIVER RETIRES

As one of the first female and Filipino-American divers to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy, Rear Adm. Bette Bolivar retired in July after more than 30 years of service to her country.

Bolivar, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1985, commanded the safeguard-class rescue and salvage ship USS Salvor (T-ARS-52) from 1998 to 2000, becoming the first woman to command Mobile Diving and Salvage Unit 1, which she led from 2003 to 2005.

She deployed to Afghanistan for a 12-month tour in 2006 with Task Force Palatin, serving as the officer-in-charge of the Counter Radio-Controlled Improvised Explosive Device Electronic Warfare program.

In 2005, she also joined a small cadre of Navy female divers when she was inducted into the Women Divers Hall of Fame.

FIRST LATINA EARNS EXPERT INFANTRYMAN BADGE

When Army 1st Lt. Maria Eggers, 24, completed a five-day rigorous test in April, she became the first woman and Latina to earn the Expert Infantryman's Badge at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas.

To earn the badge, Eggers had to navigate terrain until 4 a.m., march 12 miles while carrying

full armor, equip for a chemical attack and disassemble a weapon in a specific amount of time.

The 1st lieutenant, who represented the 3rd Cavalry Regiment, not only earned the coveted badge but did so while qualifying at the highest level — True Blue.

Eggers's feat is another benchmark for female veterans, as fewer than 100 in the entire Army have received the badge since combat roles were opened in 2016.

WEST VIRGINIA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD PROMOTES FIRST FEMALE GENERAL

Army Col. Michaelle M. Munger stepped into the history books when she was promoted to brigadier general in December at the West Virginia National Guard Joint Forces Headquarters drill hall in Charleston, W. Va.

In front of colleagues and her loved ones, Munger became the first female general officer for the West Virginia Army National Guard in the state's history.

"It is a long road, and [it] doesn't happen overnight," Munger said during her acceptance speech. "If you do your best, if you grow where you're planted and take those hard jobs that develop you as a leader, you can also become a general, too. It's not easy, but it's achievable."

During Munger's 27 years of service, she has served in every component of the U.S. Army, which includes active duty, the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard. She also spent time working for the National Guard Bureau and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.

ALABAMA AIR NATIONAL GUARD NAMES FIRST FEMALE GENERAL

On the first weekend of June last year, then-Air Force Col. Tara McKennie made history when Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey and McKennie's daughter pinned the new brigadier general insignia on her uniform during an historic ceremony in Montgomery, Alabama.

McKennie, 49, of the 187th Fighter Wing, became both the first woman to be a general in the Alabama Air National Guard and the first black woman to be a general officer in either component of the Alabama National Guard.

Ivey praised McKennie for the groundbreaking moment, adding, "You have truly made history being both the first female and first African-American general officer for the Alabama National Guard. Thank you for your service to sweet home Alabama."

NEVADA AIR NATIONAL GUARD NAMES MAJOR AS FIRST FEMALE

INSTRUCTOR PILOT

Childhood dreams became a reality for Air Force Maj. Sarah Spy in June. Spy, 37, made history by becoming the first female flight instructor pilot for the Nevada Air National Guard.

“It’s pretty exciting,” Spy said of her new position. “It’s kind of mind-blowing that there’s still firsts to be had in women in aviation, but I got one.”

A Kent State University graduate, Spy has completed various pilot trainings and more than 4,500 flight hours, as well as served multiple deployments and more than 750 hours as a co-pilot.

Spy’s promotion came after finishing instructor pilot school in May, which upgraded her position to C-130 Hercules commander for the 152nd Operations Group for the Nevada Air National Guard, based at the Reno-Tahoe International Airport.

FIRST WOMAN JOINS INFANTRY IN IOWA NATIONAL GUARD

After completing basic training in September, Army Pfc. Taylor Patterson broke gender barriers by becoming the first enlisted female infantry soldier in the Iowa National Guard.

Patterson, who joined the National Guard in June 2020, now serves with C Company, 168th Infantry Regiment, after successfully becoming the first female to enlist and complete infantry training.

The training, which takes place in both the classroom and the field, requires a grueling 10 weeks and three days of basic training, as well as 12 additional weeks of advanced individual training.

“There obviously were a lot of guys who didn’t think the females were able to do that,” Patterson said via a news release published by the Iowa National Guard. “But I am proving it to you.”

FIRST WOMEN GRADUATE FROM MARINE CORPS BOOT CAMP

The graduation of dozens of women from the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, Calif., in May 2021 marked a groundbreaking moment in military history.

The women, part of Lima Company, 3rd Recruit Training Bn. — the camp’s first-ever coed company — became the first to graduate from boot camp training in the history of the Marine Corps.

Since Congress ordered the Marine Corps in 2019 to make its two boot camps at Parris Island, S.C., and San Diego completely coed, the graduation in May marks the first of many to come.

FIRST FEMALE SAILOR COMPLETES NAVY SEAL TRAINING

In the Navy's long and illustrious history, no female had ever completed the grueling 37-week training course to become a Navy Special Warfare combatant-craft crewman (SWCC) — until now.

Although unidentifiable, a routine military policy for special operations forces, the female sailor was one of 17 sailors to graduate and receive their pins in July. She also was the first of 18 other women to succeed in trying out for a job as a SWCC or SEAL.

NAVY SELECTS FIRST FEMALE TO DIRECTLY BEGIN AS F-35C PILOT

Navy Lt. j.g. Suzelle Thomas is the first woman in that service to go directly from flight school to flying F-35C Lightning II aircraft after earning her Wings of Gold in October.

While there are currently three women in the Navy who have transitioned from other aircraft to fly the F-35C, the Navy announced in November that Thomas is the first to have her initial assignment be an F-35C squadron.

AN ALL-WOMAN CREW GUARDS THE TOMB OF THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER

For the first time in its 84-year history, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington, Va., was guarded by an all-woman team of three sentinels in September.

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier had been continuously guarded for 30,769 days before an all-woman changing of the guard occurred under the direction of the 38th Sergeant of the Guard.

Sgt. 1st Class Chelsea Porterfield also became the first woman to hold the position of sergeant of the guard, which she helmed on Sept. 29.

MONTANA ARMY NATIONAL GUARD BOASTS FIRST WOMAN SNIPER

Considered one of the most grueling, individually focused training courses in the Army, the sniper school introduced its first female graduate in November.

The soldier, whose identity is to remain private per protocol, was the first woman to graduate from sniper school, meant to produce soldiers capable of infiltration, advanced marksmanship and more, at Fort Benning, Georgia.

The unidentified woman is an infantry soldier from the Montana Army National Guard. She joined the Guard in December 2020 and earned a slot at sniper school while in infantry training due to her "superior performance" and marksmanship, according to an Army press release.

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), associate writer for VFW magazine.

Photo captions:

(Top Row, L-R)

Air Force Senior Master Sgt. Jeffrey Pinger, left, of the 148th Fighter Wing Maintenance Group and 148th Fighter Wing Command, poses with newly appointed Chief Master Sgt. Lisa Erikson, the first female to command the Minnesota National Guard, on May 15, 2021. Photo by Master Sgt. Jason Rolfe; Army Brig. Gen. Charlene Dalto is pinned brigadier general by her daughters during a ceremony at Camp Williams, Utah, on May 1, 2021. Afterward, Dalto assumed command of the Utah Army National Guard's Land Component Command. Photo by Spc. Alejandro Lucero; Rear Adm. Bette Bolivar, commander, Navy Region Northwest, gets her one-star shoulder boards attached by her father, Ted Cereno Bolivar, and sister, Jeni Bolivar-Ventresca, in 2013. The Hall-of-Fame diver retired in July. Photo by Nardel Gervacio; Navy Capt. Beth Regoli, left, joins Navy Lt. j.g. Suzelle Thomas following Thomas's naval aviator winging ceremony at Naval Air station Meridian on Oct. 29, 2021. Regoli, Thomas's mentor, passed her Wings of Gold to Thomas. Thomas is the Navy's first woman to directly select F-35C Lightning II postgraduate training after earning her Wings of Gold. Photo by Penny Randall;

(Middle Row, L-R)

Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson, commander, U.S. Army North, speaks to soldiers of D Co., 3rd Bn., 187th Inf. Rgt., 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, on Dec. 24, 2019, at a Mobile Surveillance Camera Site in Del Rio, Texas. Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Eaddy; U.S. Army Sgt. 1st Class Chelsea Porterfield (left), Sergeant of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, gives a brief history of the Tomb Sentinels to Israel Defense Forces Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Aviv Kohavi (second from left) at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Va., on June 21, 2021. Porterfield is the first female to hold the position of Sergeant of the Guard. Photo by Elizabeth Fraser; Air Force Col. Tara McKennie is promoted to the rank of brigadier general at the Alabama National Guard's 187th Fighter Wing, home of the Red Tails. Brig. Gen. McKennie's new rank was pinned on by her daughter (left) and the Governor of Alabama, Kay Ivey. Brig. Gen. McKennie made history as the first female general officer in the Alabama Air National Guard and the first black female general officer in either component of the Alabama National Guard. Photo by Spc. Cody Muzio;

(Bottom Row, L-R)

Army 1st Lt. Maria Eggers, who became the first female from the 3rd Cavalry Regiment to test and earn the Expert Infantry Badge, trains on the medical lane on April 6, 2021, at Fort Hood, Texas. Photo by Pfc. Johnathan Touhey; Air Force Maj. Sarah Spy, C-130 Hercules pilot for the 152nd Airlift Wing in Reno, Nev., sits in the flight deck of a C-130 on March 7, 2021, at the Nevada Air National Guard Base in Reno, Nev. Spy, who knew she wanted to be a pilot when she was 8 years old, became the first female instructor pilot for the Air National Guard after completing her instructor pilot course in 2021. Photo by 152nd Airlift Wing Public Affairs; Army Col. Michaelle M. Munger was promoted to the rank of brigadier general on Dec. 2, 2021, in Charleston, W. Va. Munger became the first female general officer in the history of the West Virginia Army National Guard and will serve as special assistant to the Adjutant General for the West Virginia National Guard. Photo by Edwin L. Wriston.