

What does a Woman Veteran Look Like?

Introducing the stories of 12 women veterans — a small segment of the many women who have served our country and communities.





Women Veterans of McHenry & Lake Counties

CONTINUING TO SERVE!

William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 recently has endeavored to raise awareness of women veterans in the region. This special publication has been created to support and recognize the women who have served, continue to serve and who otherwise give back to our communities every day.

What does a women veteran look like? As you will see on the pages that follow, each woman profiled has a unique story regarding how she committed her life to serve our country. These small glimpses into their lives are meant to provide some understanding of who they are today and how the military has impacted them.

Some women found military service to be their second chance at life. One woman gained pageantry experience while simultaneously advocating for homeless female veterans. Many sought funds for education and made the most of the degrees they earned after enlistment. Others who were wounded – physically, mentally and/or spiritually – turned those negative experiences into positive ones by finding fulfilling career paths and choosing to help others who have suffered similarly.

Though their experiences vary, one commonality of the entire selection of veterans is the willingness of these women to continue to serve their communities, whether through their civilian careers, their extensive volunteer engagements or by simply raising their families in the communities they have come to love.

Each woman also has found that the discipline, training, education and life skills learned through military service have benefited her greatly. Many continue to use their military training to guide, coach and instruct others in their career, family and community. Just as each woman was changed by her service, so also has she changed the world with her service.

There are now more than 2 million female living veterans in the U.S., according to a 2021 publication by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Women serve in all military branches and divisions.

As we acknowledge the many achievements of these women veterans, which often required extraordinary effort and sacrifice, we also celebrate them. To show our gratitude and respect, we intend to continue to increase awareness of women veterans, enhance their status and recognition, and expand access to veteran services and resources.

Join us in recognizing the women veterans of our communities. Realize that they are all around us, though many are silent about their service. Encourage them to be visible so they, too, may be honored for their sacrifice.

And may the women veterans not included in this publication still feel our gratitude for their service to our country.

**Thank you to ALL our women veterans,
William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171
www.LegionCrystalLake171.org**

"We are two million strong. We are mothers, sisters, friends, partners and wives. We are advocates, bosses, students and survivors. We are all eras and branches of service. We are women. We are Veterans. We Are Not Invisible!"

~ The Center for Women Veterans, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

LALENA “ZOE” MAGNETTA

Branch: Navy, 2002 - 2012

Rank: EG 1st Class Petty Officer

Home: Grayslake



Zoe spent more than a decade in the Navy, notably serving deployments aboard the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS John C. Stennis, participating in Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Later, she was selected to serve as a recruit division commander at Recruit Training Command Great Lakes before she was honorably discharged in 2012.

But Zoe has never stopped serving, and she's never stopped giving back.

In 2018 and 2019, she competed in Ms. Veteran America, an annual event that showcases women veterans still serving their communities and advocates for homeless women veterans and their children.

Her second year, Zoe succeeded in placing second runner up, but it was the competition's platform that was truly dear to Zoe's heart.

As a young teenager, she spent time living out of a tent and sleeping in the desert with no safe place to call home.

Zoe worked hard to earn her GED, and she applied for the Navy's delayed entry program. From there, her life turned around.

Being able to advocate for women veterans as an ambassador for Ms. Veteran America was a great opportunity, Zoe says. Today, she continues to advocate for veterans as an active member of VFW Post 2245 in Grayslake, serving as a trustee and post service officer.

She also serves as board president for Keeping Families Covered, a nonprofit that helps identify diaper need and provides essential items to families.

"Organizations like KFC are near and dear to my heart because I do know what hardship looks like as a child," she says.

In 2020, Zoe was appointed by the mayor of Grayslake to serve on the board of trustees; she was elected in 2021 and continues to serve her community.

Zoe has an MBA and a master's in global supply chain management, which she uses in her employ as a senior training specialist at Siemens in Buffalo Grove.

She lives with her husband, Michael, a retired U.S. Navy Command Master Chief, and has two stepchildren and three grandchildren.

ASHTON KRONER

(with service dog Ariel)

Branch: Marine Corps, 2007 - 2015

Rank: Field Radio Operator

Home: Crystal Lake



While she was in elementary school, Ashton Kroner stayed up late watching television (without her mother's approval) and saw a Marine recruitment commercial. She woke up her mother and brought her to the television to explain her excitement.

Unfortunately, by the time they reached the television, the Jerry Springer Show was airing, and her mother was not pleased. However, that experience was the impetus for Ashton's focus on becoming a Marine.

When she graduated from high school, Ashton enlisted and went to boot camp in Parris Island, N.C. She was a field radio operator, and her first deployment was to Camp Lejeune, N.C. Then she spent 10 months in Iraq, where she met her husband. They married in 2010. Her next deployment was seven months in Afghanistan. From 2012 to 2015, Ashton was a Marine recruiter in Albany, N.Y., and Middleton, N.Y.

Today, Ashton Kroner works for the Road Home Program at Rush University Medical Center, which is dedicated to the mental health and wellness of not only veterans, but also service members, members of the National Guard, reservists and their families. It offers intensive outpatient programs, in-person therapy and

counseling, and family care and support at no cost and regardless of discharge status.

"I am a professional friend maker," says Ashton, whose full-time job as outreach manager includes attending events and expos to introduce veterans and their families to the Road Home Program.

"As a Marine Corps veteran, I have seen and experienced firsthand the challenges of coming back home," she continues. "I struggled with finding my purpose outside of the Marines. Since coming to the Road Home Program, I have seen the veterans that come through our program leave in a better place than when they first walked through our doors. I have heard the testimonies from the veterans' family and friends of how they have hope again. The Road Home Program has given me the opportunity to help the veteran community. It has given me a purpose."

Besides helping individuals in the U.S., the Road Home Program also serves those in Mexico and Europe.

Ashton and her husband live in Crystal Lake with their young son and two German shepherds.

ROBIN CZAPLA

Branch: Navy, 2017 - Present

Rank: Hospital Corpsman Second Class Petty Officer

Home: Bull Valley

Robin grew up in Colorado and attended Colorado State University, graduating with a bachelor's degree in sports medicine in 2015. She joined the Navy because she always wanted to serve, but she also wanted to see the world. The Navy has taken Robin many places in the U.S., including Maryland, Rhode Island, San Diego, Texas and Illinois.

Currently, Robin works at Naval Station Great Lakes where she handles the medical in-processing for recruits with immunizations. During the summer busy season, she immunized 900 to 1,100 recruits per day with her team of 20 people. Work hours for Robin and her team are 4 a.m. to noon daily. No breaks are allowed when it is busy.

Still, she loves her career – and helping others.

"I am passionate about what I do," she says. "I am also passionate about helping veterans through Operation Wild Horse."

Veterans R&R Operation Wild Horse is a nonprofit located at the Bull Valley Equestrian Center. Its mission is to improve the lives of veterans and active-duty military.

During Memorial Day, 9/11 and Veterans Day parades and programs, Robin has led the Riderless Horse, which

represents those who have lost their lives in battle. The horse features an empty saddle, with boots in the stirrups facing backwards. This symbolizes and honors those who have fallen as they look back on the troops. Robin also will participate in the September 2022 Vietnam Wall Memorial in Harvard.

Robin's involvement in Operation Wild Horse stems from her lifelong love of horses, especially mustangs.

"When I moved to Maryland, I was asked to exercise a mustang named Sonny at a local barn," says Robin. "As my time working with Sonny was coming to an end as I was changing duty stations, I decided to fulfill my lifelong dream of owning my own horse, and I bought him! Having him in my life has opened up so many more opportunities."

Today, Sonny and Robin live on the property that hosts Operation Wild Horse. Both continue to serve veterans and active-duty military.



KATE DOPITA

Branch: Army National Guard, 2007 - 2015

Rank: SPC Specialist

Home: Cary

Raised in Youngstown, Ohio, Kate joined the Army National Guard in Ohio in 2007. At the time, she did not have a career direction and lacked funds for college.

"The National Guard offered tuition funds and a sense of discipline along with a brotherhood/sisterhood I was really needing at 17 years old," she says. "I needed guidance and wanted to belong to something of importance and respect."

During her time in the Guard, she transferred to Illinois and attended Worsham College of Mortuary Science, graduating in 2012.

That same year, Kate was hired by Davenport Family Funeral

Home & Crematory.

Today, she is a funeral director/embalmer for the family owned and operated company, which has three locations in Lake and McHenry counties.

Kate has been a member of the Rotary Club of Crystal Lake Dawnbreakers, supporting and serving community locally and globally.

In 2017, Kate married Tim Dopita, who works as a firefighter and paramedic. The couple met at a brewery in Milwaukee, and they returned this year to celebrate their fifth anniversary.

With two young sons, Kate is a very busy mom. Family time includes lots of exploring the outdoors with the little ones.



PATTY KLOP

Branch: U.S. Marine Corps Reserve,
1994 - Present

Rank: Colonel

Home: Wauconda



Patty Klop is one of the very few, the very proud, to be a Marine Corps colonel.

The Marine Corps has the lowest ratio of women of all the U.S. military branches at 8.9 percent from its current active-duty strength of 174,808 and reserve strength of 33,148. Out of 651 active-duty colonels, 36 are female. Out of 233 reserve colonels, 22 are female – including Colonel Patty Klop.

Although Patty is immensely proud of her 28 years of service and is still serving in the Reserves, her illustrious career hasn't always been a pleasant one.

She recently shared her personal story of enduring post-traumatic stress disorder at "Walk a Mile in Her Boots," a women veterans event hosted in August by William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 at Veterans R&R Operation Wild Horse in Bull Valley.

In April 2006, she returned from a 7-month deployment to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. It was then that she first exhibited signs of PTSD: uncharacteristic anger, anxiety, depression, irritability and hypervigilance.

A second deployment in 2009 – this time to Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom as the mortuary affairs officer-in-charge – further burdened her mind.

"Before my combat deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan, I felt civilized, like a house broken,

domesticated pet; mainstream normal and fully functional," she shared at the veterans event. "Following my combat deployments ... my PTSD symptoms made me feel like I was bitten by a wild animal infected with rabies, feeling agitated, snappy and irritable ... I also felt far from God."

Things came to a head in 2019, when familial problems interlaced with other burdens, which caused Patty to suddenly resign from a 16-year teaching career during which she taught adapted physical education and health to students with disabilities.

Patty sought out help, but it wasn't until earlier this year, when she spent seven weeks at an inpatient treatment center at a VA facility in Cincinnati, that she felt fully whole again, in body, mind and spirit.

"By the grace of God, I am a new woman, inside and out, and I feel amazing," she says. "I was able to rewrite the script of my life with a bright future ahead of me."

Now, she feels convicted to share her story, with the hope that it will aid those who struggle with PTSD in silence. She is an advisor for Freedom Fitness America, a nonprofit dedicated to training military professionals to be "fit for the fight and life."

"I want to be an encouragement, an inspiration and possibly an example for other service members to follow," she said at the veterans event.

Patty has two master's degrees and multiple personal trainer certificates. Her personal military decorations are extensive and include the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with two gold stars.

Patty lives with her husband, David, and their two sons in Wauconda.

Learn more about her story at <https://freedomfitnessamerica.org/patty-klop-advisory-group-member-1>.



MELISSA L. HAWKINS

Branch: Marine Corps/Marine Corps Reserve, 1999 - Present
Rank: Battalion Sergeant Major, 4th Combat Engineer Battalion
Home: Wauconda

As the youngest – and only girl – of her family, Melissa felt the pull to join the Marine Corps to challenge herself. She sought out a female recruiter to help her prepare for the role, and she enlisted into the Marine Corps Reserve in 1999.

“Only a small percentage of women serve in the Marine Corps,” she says, noting that what sets Marines apart is their distinguishment as warfighters. “Twenty years ago, less than 5 percent of the Corps were women; today, it’s 9 percent. As a young woman, I knew that the Marine Corps expected high performance and high standards, and I had to push myself beyond my comfort zone to show that I was one of the best. Marines are driven to be the best. And this is the mindset I have maintained throughout the entirety of my career.”

In the last 23 years, Melissa has held various positions of authority. She has had the opportunity to serve in units throughout the U.S., plus overseas, including a deployment to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

In addition, she currently is assigned to 4th Combat Engineer Battalion, 4th Marine Division as the battalion sergeant major. She is the first female sergeant major to serve in the 4th Marine Division, the primary infantry component of the Marine Corps Reserve. In addition, she currently is assigned as the senior enlisted advisor for the Human Performance Branch, which has allowed her to combine both her



“If it wasn’t for strong mentors and those who continued to push me, I certainly wouldn’t be where I am today.”

civilian and military careers for the benefit of the total Marine Corps.

Melissa currently is the only female sergeant major in the Marine Corps Reserve.

“If it wasn’t for strong mentors and those who continued to push me, I certainly wouldn’t be where I am today,” she says.

Melissa has been the recipient of numerous awards throughout her career. Her personal decorations include the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal, Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal, and various other service and campaign medals.

Melissa, a native of Baltimore, Md., lives in Wauconda with her husband and son. She holds a doctorate in physical therapy and works in Lake County as a physical therapist, specializing in sports medicine.



Sarah's family moved from just outside New York City to Woodstock when she was in seventh grade. After high school, she attended Southern Illinois University, but she wasn't sure what she wanted to do with her life.

Her older brother joined the Marines, so she considered the military, ultimately selecting the Army because it offered her more opportunity.

"Joining the military was the best decision I ever made," says Sarah. "I don't know who I would be if I didn't join the Army. It gave me direction, showed me what I did and didn't want to do. As a medic and soldier, some really difficult things happen. But you work on it together – after all, 'misery loves company.' And eventually, you laugh together and celebrate getting through it."

Boot camp was at Fort Jackson, S.C., and upon completion, Sarah was stationed at Fort Drum, N.Y., before



SARAH CAIN

Branch: Army, 2000 - 2006

Rank: Sergeant

Home: Woodstock

being deployed overseas. A unit needed four more medics to be mission ready for Kosovo, so Sarah volunteered. She met her husband while they were both serving in the 10th Forward Support Battalion during the Kosovo tour. They were then stationed in Germany for four years. From there, Sarah deployed to Iraq twice with the 30th Medical Brigade.

Today, the couple lives with their 12-year-old twin boys in the same Woodstock house in which Sarah was raised. The Cain family property includes a large garden for vegetables and herbs as well as a fruit orchard – all of which come in handy for Sarah's newest calling: volunteering for Veterans Path to Hope in Crystal Lake.

"I learned late in my life that my calling was to serve," Sarah says. "The Army gave me purpose. Now, I assist veterans and their families in accessing help, hope and health."

VPN guests often can find fresh flowers, apples and produce courtesy of the Cain family gardens.

Helen and her husband, Matt, met in Iraq while serving as sergeants in the Army Reserves as Military Police Officers.

It was also during her deployment that Helen, a native of Darien, Wis., suffered an injury and became a disabled veteran.

However, because of her encounters, she found her calling in the medical field.

For 13 years, Helen has worked as a nurse in various settings, including acute wound care, telemetry and family practice. She has been a family nurse practitioner and advanced practice nurse since 2017, and she has a master's degree in family practice nursing from Chamberlain University.

In 2021, she founded Complete Family Wellness to serve as a



HELEN MUCHOW

Branch: Army Reserves, 2001 - 2007

Rank: Sergeant, Military Police

Home: Cary

mobile primary care practice. In part, her company provides services to local veterans and first responders while being mindful of their busy schedules and maintaining their privacy. She hopes to have an "ambulance on the go" outfitted by 2023 so she can drive to a residence and invite family members into her vehicle for personalized attention. She believes families should have access to high-quality, personalized health care in the safety of their own homes.

In addition to direct family care, Helen plans to host classes for parents on various topics such as ADHD and diabetes in her Lake in the Hills office, which will open this fall.

Helen and Matt have three children, ages 14, 10 and 9. Family time for Helen includes visits to the stables in Woodstock and sharing rides with her children on her horse, Majesty.

NICOLE EISENRICH

Branch: Air Force, 1997 - 2002

Rank: E-5 Staff Sergeant

Home: Lake in the Hills



A native of Rockford, Nicole is the youngest of six children. Three of her brothers and one sister followed their father's example and joined the Marine Corps.

Nicole, however, chose to join the Air Force after high school graduation, and she became an armament specialist on F-15s and F-22s at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Nicole and her load crew were recognized multiple times as "Load Crew of the Quarter" for their excellent teamwork and capabilities. After 9/11, Nicole's enlistment was extended for a year.

After service, Nicole attended Illinois State University. She earned a bachelor's degree in occupational safety, and she currently serves on the advisory board for the occupational safety department at ISU.

As area vice president/senior risk control consultant at Arthur J. Gallagher, Nicole specializes in construction and provides risk control consulting services to clients across the country. She also coordinates and successfully runs the internship program for risk control and enjoys mentoring the up-and-coming young professionals over the course of the summer.

For more than six years, Nicole has overseen a program through Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association

that provides fitness memberships, personal training and monthly events to local disabled and qualified veterans. The Healthy Minds Healthy Bodies (HMHB) program has provided services and camaraderie for more than 350 participants since 2013.

"It's my way to give back," she says. "I enjoy coordinating wellness activities and monthly fellowship for veterans and their families."

Veterans are provided park district fitness center access for one year (for themselves and a friend or partner) and will be a member of HMHB for life, Nicole says. The program also includes personal trainers, social activities, networking and resources.

"This can be a big step in improving mental health, overall wellness, self-confidence and socialization for the participants," Nicole says. "It is an active group with amazing participants."

Nicole continues to be an example of Air Force core values: "integrity first, service before self and excellence in all we do." She is driven to being an active veteran in the community. She most recently participated in "Walk a Mile in Her Boots," a program hosted in August by William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 that highlighted female veterans.

MELISSA DOWNEY

Branch: **Army National Guard,
1993 - Present**

Rank: **CW3**

Home: **Lake in the Hills**



After a visit to Washington D.C. where she saw a Gulf War "welcome home" celebration, Melissa was inspired to join the military. That encounter, coupled with the realization that the college funds provided in exchange for her service would be helpful, fueled her to enlist in the Army National Guard.

Once she turned 17, she tried to enlist, but due to a heart condition at birth she was delayed until December 1993, when she swore her oath at the Chicago Military Entrance Processing Station (MEPS). She graduated from high school in 1994 and headed to Army Basic Training at Ft. Jackson, S.C.

Melissa was deployed for 19 months to Kuwait and Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003-04, spending more than 15 months in theater.

In 2010-11, she was activated as rear support for her unit for Operation New Dawn. She was deployed to Kuwait again in 2014 under the Global War on Terrorism. She also participated in Operation Saber Strike in 2018 in Poland.

On the home front, she was activated for the Red River Floods in 1995 in North Dakota, as well as 2008 to southern Illinois.

During her nearly 30 years of service, she has been in the Army National Guard in two states; been part of

six different brigades; and completed five leadership schools – including Warrant Officer Candidate School at the age of 39.

Today, Melissa is the senior food service advisor to brigade leadership. She also works for the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs as a Veteran Service Officer, helping veterans, dependents and surviving family members apply for benefits.

She also has been a Victim Advocate since 2008 and an on-call volunteer for the SHARP program (Sexual Harassment Assault Response Program).

Melissa, a single mother to her 17-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, has an associate degree from McHenry County College; a bachelor's degree from Columbia College of Missouri; and a master's degree in counseling from Northern Illinois University.

She volunteers with Veterans R&R Operation Wild Horse in Bull Valley; fosters dogs with the Animal House Shelter in Huntley; and with her children, serves at the Lake in the Hills Food Pantry. In her spare time, she loves to play softball.

One of her favorite quotes is from Colin Powell: "A dream does not become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination and hard work."

KARRIE HODGES

Branch: Air Force, 1997 - Present

Rank: Master Sergeant (E-7)

Home: Woodstock

Karrie is a third-generation military female. Her mother was part of the 440th Airlift Wing out of Chicago, and her paternal grandmother was part of the Women's Army Core (WAC) during WWII.

Karrie is still actively serving with the Air National Guard in Madison, Wis., but she plans to retire this year, having served her country for 25 years.

During her years of service, Karrie has been stationed in England and temporarily assigned to Korea, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Karrie grew up in Mundelein, but her family moved to McHenry County where she attended Woodstock High School. When a high school acquaintance reached out 20 years after graduation, the couple reconnected. They married, and Karrie now has an 8-year-old son along with two grown stepchildren.

Karrie attended Northeastern Illinois University and

earned a bachelor's degree in biology. She has been employed at GE Healthcare for more than nine years. As a clinical data manager, Karrie collects data from medical research projects, analyzes it for trends and ensures that it's kept secure and reported accurately.

When not working or serving her country, Karrie can be found riding horses with her son and volunteering with Operation Wild Horse. The program is part of Veterans R&R, a nonprofit that provides a safe community where veterans, active-duty military and their families can build a significant mustang-human bond that allows barriers to fall, communications to enhance and trust to form.

Karrie also is a cancer survivor and actively supports cancer research and awareness.



DONNA RASMUSSEN

Branch: Navy, 1981 - 1986

Rank: 3rd Class Petty Officer

Home: Crystal Lake

After high school, Donna – an avid runner – moved from her home in the suburbs of Philadelphia to Delaware.

One day, her run was interrupted by a terrible thunderstorm. She unexpectedly escaped into the local Navy recruitment offices. Four days later, she was on her way by plane to boot camp in Florida.

"In retrospect, turning into that building was the best thing that could have happened to me at that time," Donna says. "If I hadn't been jogging, if it hadn't been storming, if there wasn't someone in that office, I would not be right here right now and none of the wonderful things that I have in life in this moment would have happened. And I can say I served my country."

During her years in the Navy, Donna was one of few women on her team and on her ship, the USS Dixon-AS 37. She received a Good Conduct Medal during her service.

After she completed her service, Donna married and lived in San Diego raising her three children and running her own furniture restoration business. She now lives in Crystal Lake. Her children are 29, 27 and 24.

Donna has dual associate degrees from McHenry County College, plus a bachelor's degree in elementary education from National-Louis University in Elgin. She has been an advocate for students with autism, which hits close to home because her 27-year-old son is on the autism spectrum. She also has been a program manager for Youth Employment Services for young adults with disabilities and an intensive case manager for adults with epilepsy and/or traumatic brain injury.

Currently, Donna works as assistant executive director and financial literacy educator for Consumer Credit Counseling Services of Northern Illinois.

Donna also works with Veterans Path to Hope to provide workshops on credit counseling, financial literacy and budgeting.



In gratitude and to honor Women Veterans and all who have served our country, William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 conceived this publication. Many people and organization were involved in bringing the idea to reality. We would like to recognize a few of the individuals and organizations that have contributed as sponsors and supporters.

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More information can be found on the William Chandler Peterson American Legion Post 171 website: www.LegionCrystalLake171.org.

What Does a Women Veteran Look Like? See inside!



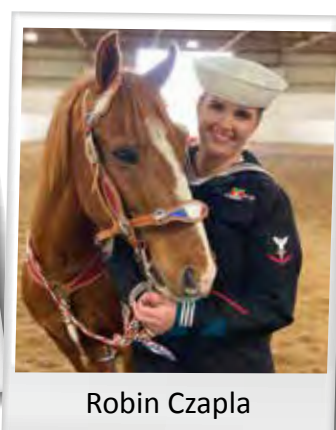
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