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What are Jewish Mothers Doing in the Military

By Seymour "Sy" Brody, National Editor

In war (as in Iraq) or in peace, you will find American Jewish mothers in the military. Why? We found some of the answers at one of the annual lectures sponsored by the JWV Department of Florida with the support and cooperation of the Jewish Education Commission of the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County and by Temple Emeth of Delray Beach, Florida.

Two women in today's military gave some answers to about 150 people, which included many women veterans. Col. Wendy Fontela, USMC, and Maj. Debra Powell, USAF, both of the Southern Command in Miami, FL., are on active duty and are mothers.



Col. Wendy Fontela raised the question of "What is a nice Jewish girl from Brooklyn doing in the Marine Corps?" She has been in the Marine Corps for 28 years and celebrated her 31st wedding anniversary on the day she spoke.

She was mobilized for Desert Storm and currently serves as Legislative Affairs Officer at the Southern Command. Her husband and herself have two sons, who are both in college. The boys are 20 and 22 years old.

She joined the U.S. Marine Corps, because she considered it a challenge. "It's a challenge and a career for anyone to be in the military," she said.

As she stood before the audience in her olive-green skirt-suit, looking authoritative and youthful, she said to the women veterans present, "My experience of service pales, when compared to yours."

Col. Fontela recounted some of her experiences and how things have changed over the years. "When I entered the service," she said, "a girdle was a required uniform item. I was in an organization that had little use for mothers. In 1977, you still needed permission to get married. The saying was. "If you were supposed to have a spouse, we would have issued you one." She said, "Today women serve in all fields except those that are direct ground combat. We are no longer women Marines. We are Marines!"

Maj. Debra Powell also spoke during the program and is the head of the Requirement Section for Reserve Affairs for the Southern Command.

She is the mother of two boys, ages two and four. "Being Jewish, in my experience, hasn't affected my career," she said. "It is a great career and has opened opportunities that I don't think I would have had." She also faced no discrimination as a female.

Maj. Powell said, "I want to thank the women veterans sitting here today and Colonel Fontela, who paved the way for me. Thanks to you, I had no roadblocks. I am grateful for the way you paved the road."

The military was an opportunity for her to go to college. After graduating from high school, she entered the University of Florida's Air Force Officer Reserve Training Corps. Her friends thought she was crazy for enlisting.

Major Powell ended her remarks with this patriotic statement: "I will do what it takes to secure our country for my children and grandchildren."

There are many Jewish women in the military service. Many of them are mothers. Each one has her reason for being "a Jewish mother in the military."

The Second Time Around

By Irving Luban, JWV Post 569

Memory recalls a disquieting yearning, a yearning that had found a comfortable niche in my psyche and just would not let go. At times it quietly percolated; at times it flared. But then, just before my 87th birthday, it produced a burst of intense fervor to satiate that yearning; a time to dare reach the unreachable, a time for action. But at this stage in my life was it not enough to have had a very happy 45 years of married life with my love that produced three great children and two beautiful grandsons. Isn't that what life is all about? And still alive and breathing after losing half a lung to cancer; not to mention the steel ball replacing the bone-to-bone crushing pain in my left shoulder joint, now, every movement free of pain. Isn't that enough? So what is this yearning, this gut wrenching rebellion, this incessant imposition for a 'payback' time? Israel, a tiny spot on the map surrounded by enormous lands with vast population whose major resolve is to hurl it into the sea. Yearning focused on what to do to help, help Israel's survival. It came in the form of a small brochure, "VOLUNTEERS FOR ISRAEL."



Accepted as a volunteer worker in the Israel Defense Force (IDF), I stand before the Supply Sgt. who issues my well-used, well-worn but clean army shirt. And commiserates ... too big. My pants ... too long. My boots ... two sizes too big. And quickly, brings back fond memories of my 5-year stint in the US Army, over 60 years ago in World War II. Oh, the boots, how much heavier they are now. So off I lug gear and equipment to my new home for four weeks - a small room with 4 double bed bunks and six roommates, also volunteers. No 5-Star resort this; the mess hall is more than a quarter of a mile (exactly 1300 feet away) down a steep hill; shower and bathroom facilities 200 chalky, sharp, pebbly path feet away. All this in Army Communication Unit a stone's throw from Ramla, an Arab village 30 miles south of Tel-Aviv. So I begin the first day with the possibility that my constant yearnings, my inner conflict will be appeased... for the moment I start work, one soldier will be free to visit his family...a small portion of my "payback" time. And so, to my work.

In a unit of 5 volunteers our first assignment was to repair the marred, scarred tank helmets and their inner communication wiring. Nothing is wasted; everything is recycled. We were given detailed instruction on rewiring the padded ear phones inside the incoming battered helmets. Nervous and clumsy, we struggled with phone-thin wires, tiny screws, minute silver terminals, but, when the down-line inspector approved my work, great elation overcame the accumulated aches and pains and weariness of the rugged terrain over which by now my much heavier boots trod, mile after mile. Somewhere in that army camp I lost 12 pounds. Suddenly, the unit shifted to another job.

We were instructed how to repair 9-foot flexible tank antennae, composed of seven hollow metal rods, about 13 inches long. The slightest nick or bend makes the entire antenna inoperable. Our job was to thread the inner hollow tubes with strong flexible cord enabling the entire antenna to be folded into compact units for easy storage.

Easy to learn ... we then proceeded to produce a record 60 units a day, a days work consisting of two and one half hours of work in the morning and the same in the afternoon with a 15 minute tea-break in each period.

On the last week of our stay we were bussed to a tremendous hangar-like warehouse filled from floor to ceiling with large wooden crates, each holding 200 gas masks, all for 3 to 8-year-old children. My job was to tightly cover the canister containing the filters. It was essential that the cover fit exactly and that a new date (2002) be put over the old. Many of the masks dated from previous wars. Of all work done, this last job was the most gratifying, and I flushed with pleasure at each approval of my finished units. If ever in use, they were in perfect condition.

And the challenge comes to an end, my yearnings subdued, and a few outstanding dues paid up, but the slate is not clean yet. My mind wants to stay for another tour, but my body says no, no, no. So I leave a country and its people in crisis fighting for its survival. Also with a few indelible impressions.

Children with shoulder slung M-16 rifles. Everywhere; on streets, on busses, in huge bus stations; guarding hotels, restaurants, public meetings and mostly, their very warm welcomes when they became aware were are volunteers from far-off countries.

Completely wrapped in wonder, I was amazed how many Christians, young and old so heartily volunteer "to help Israel survive." Two out of my four roommates were Christians - Timo from Finland and Ian from South Africa. And in the next room, two from Canada, one from Australia and one from Belgium. A most heartfelt and welcome emotion hard to control for a Jewish volunteer.

A bus full of us on a trip to see a Jerusalem historic sight. Five miles from the Jerusalem Bus Terminal the bus driver received orders to turn the bus around and visit another sight. Four hours later he was ordered to return to the bus station and let some home bound soldiers off. While we were at the other sight, a bomb had exploded killing the terrorist and other people, but passing the spot we saw no signs of blood, no bone parts, no torn flesh - every inch was scrupulously clean; people, soldiers were going about their business.

Peace? Not in my lifetime and doubtful in my children's, yet I'm convinced that no matter how long peace will be in the coming, the country of Israel and its people will continue going about its business, the business of living. As for me, who can tell if yearning begins to agitate again and if my body is willing, a celebration for a third-time-around trip is in the offing...on my 88th birthday.