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A Profile in Courage

Sergeant Ashley Eileen Towers is one of those women you read or hear about and admire for their acts of bravery and heroism in fields initially deemed for males. Her decision to join the military was her first act of courageousness – what was initially intended as a meeting with the National Guard for her brother to decide whether to join, ended with Towers also enlisting on impulse.



Joining the Army National Guard in 2008 within the Military Police, Towers was set on getting as close to the action of combat as possible for a woman during this time period. Her basic training for this position took place in Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri over a duration of approximately six months. Her basic training experience is a time she recalls with fondness – a reassurance in her decision to enlist.

Shortly after returning from basic, Towers was deployed to Iraq to assist in the transition from Operation Iraqi Freedom to Operation New Dawn. Ashley's service in Iraq took place around the time US troops were pulling out of Iraq and returning control to the country; however, this did not exclude her from the threat of violence and warfare. On a mission in Kuwait, Towers's convoy was struck with a hand-thrown explosive device. Ashley was driving an up-armored MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected Vehicle) during impact. She sustained several injuries from the incident, including a fractured sternum and sprained clavicle, but these injuries did not prevent her from fulfilling her duty in the moment. When asked how she felt during the situation, Towers recounts like a true soldier:

Things could happen at any time – things do happen at any time. But you just have to believe in the cohesiveness of your unit. Your training really just takes over.

Towers credits her basic training for her ability to handle situations such as this one. Her recollection of her feelings during this incident reveals the engrained sense of duty and discipline instilled in soldiers.



Sergeant Towers pictured in the same MRAP she was driving when an explosive device was thrown at her convoy.

Towers's contributions in Iraq extended beyond these efforts – she also held a lead role in assembling leader engagements, necessitating frequent contact with Iraqi police and Army. In addition, she notes in the interview her assistance in medical clinics, and her involvement in distributing food, basic necessities, and toys to local children.



Sergeant Towers pictured providing food and toys to local Iraqi children

After returning home from her deployment in Iraq, Ashley had a few years to readjust to normal life. Ashley describes her return home as difficult in terms of re-adjusting to the sense of “freedom” after becoming so accustomed to her strictly structured days overseas – she noted the necessity of relearning self-discipline. Towers went on to mention, however, that this transition did allow her time to finally process all that she had witnessed and experienced overseas. She described her return home as an overall positive experience, but it was not without its challenges. One such challenge she faced was the resulting feeling of estrangement from her close ones who did not share her military experiences. She also described her distortion of time – the sense that

everyone was the same and time had stood still back home, while time had passed and she had changed dramatically overseas.

In 2014, a few years after her return from Iraq, Ashley decided to extend her active service in the Guard and voluntarily deployed to Guantanamo Bay. Ashley recalled her excitement for this opportunity to see things from a different part of the mission – off the battlefield. Towers' primary duty while in Guantanamo Bay was overseeing the camps, which included her involvement in the Joint Task Force and the Joint Detention Group. During her service in Guantanamo Bay, Towers's hard work did not go unnoticed. She was awarded Senior Listed Person of the Quarter after being nominated to represent her sector. She was chosen for this award out of approximately 1,500 soldiers from all sectors of the military – making this a prestigious and impressive award that also resulted in her subsequent opportunity to dine over breakfast with former White House Chief of Staff, General John Kelly.

When asked what she gained from both overseas deployments, Ashley ruminates on both her personal and professional growth:

I feel like in Iraq I developed more as a person as part of a team, because everything you did was as part of your team, part of your squad, part of your platoon. And I think that's where I was really solidified as being one part in this group that has the same goal; whereas in Guantanamo Bay, I had a lot more personal growth because I was a little older and I knew what my goals were when I came home – I knew the things that I wanted to accomplish for myself in addition to being part of a team. The job [in Guantanamo Bay] was very different. It allowed more room for me to think about what kind of person I

wanted to be in the military – what kind of leader I wanted to be, how I wanted to interact with my peers.

Sergeant Towers also provided interesting glimpses into some of her domestic missions during the interview, such as her New York call to duty during the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy. Towers's involvement in the rescue efforts was nothing short of heroic: she recounted rescuing a family of ten from their flooded home as well as a wheel-chair bound individual from an upper-level apartment. She reflected fondly on these missions, noting the fulfillment and satisfaction derived from seeing the instant gratification on the faces of the individuals she's helped. She also noted the different nature of domestic missions compared to overseas missions, such as the sense of helping your own people, rather than fighting an enemy. While this mission brought joy and fulfillment to her, it was the one mission that she said caused her the most fear – as she had never witnessed such devastation and floodwaters before.



Sergeant Towers and her subordinate pictured with the family of 10 she helped rescue while on mission during Hurricane Sandy aftermath

When asked to explain her time in the military in terms of being a woman, Towers had a lot of insight to share. She recalled her initial feelings of having to “prove herself” to her male counterparts when first entering the military, especially in her position. She went into further detail, having explained how men enter the military with a different mindset than women – without the need to compensate for perceived weaknesses or inferiority due to societal gender norms. Towers did point out, however, that being a female in the military wasn’t her main focus:

I didn’t want to be good for a female, I wanted to be good overall. I wanted to be able to do everything that a male was doing and not ever have anyone be able to say that I accomplished or did something by a different standard.

Towers described her treatment in the military, in terms of gender, as equal to her fellow male soldiers. She expressed that she felt fortunate to be treated the same as everyone else and held to the same standards by her drill sergeants and superiors.

When asked how her time in the military has impacted her life, Towers reflected on how her military experiences have been the forerunner in shaping her life thus far: “I don’t know if I would have ended up here at The Citadel if my life hadn’t followed the path that it’s followed since the time I enlisted.” She went into further detail, touching on the personal and professional relationships she formed within the Guard, explaining the resulting opportunities she gained from these connections – such as her upcoming trip with fellow soldiers she met overseas, as well as her experience working with Homeland Security before deciding to return to school. From life-long friendships to new career opportunities, Ashley shared the many ways in which the military has shaped her life. She believes wholeheartedly that her time in the military has

both prepared her and led her to where she is meant to be, including her present course of study at The Citadel: “I want to be able to feel fulfilled as a person. For me that really just means going after my goals and meeting them, and I think that I found that here.”

After living in different parts of the world, Sergeant Ashley Towers is now residing in Charleston, South Carolina. She is attending The Citadel, where she can maintain her connection to the military while double-majoring in Intelligence and Security Studies, and Criminal Justice. Upon graduating, Towers plans to pursue a career in the Intelligence field. It appears Ashley’s valuable contributions are not over yet.

