



PHOTOS BY SASCHA PFLAEGING

"When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans"

When: Opens Friday, with 6-8 p.m. public reception; runs through Dec. 14
Where: Visual Arts Center of Richmond, 1812 W. Main St.
Info: (804) 353-0094; www.visarts.org

Sgt. Shirley Wright U.S. Army

"For a woman to be in the military, you have to stand your ground [with men]. Look, no, I'm not a piece of meat for you to have whenever you please. I'm a soldier. I deserve that respect. And I still deserve respect as a woman."



Staff Sgt. Debra Fulk U.S. Army

"Yes, you have to have a voice [as a female soldier]. You have to stand up for what you believe in. You have to pursue. You have to persist. If I give up, what about the people who come behind me — the other females, my grandchildren?"



Sgt. Maj. Andrea Farmer U.S. Army

"I grew up in New Jersey in the inner city, and it was poverty-stricken. I came from a very religious family. . . . I decided in 1982 to enlist, and my family was excited for me because they knew that . . . I didn't have a good chance of having a great career."



Maj. Lori Sweeney U.S. Army, retired

"I had this really interesting experience of working with this doctor who had been the personal surgeon to Saddam [Hussein] at one point. He was not a die-hard Saddam loyalist. He was a prisoner, but they allowed him to do surgery because the need was so great."

Women of war

Exhibit puts faces with stories of female military personnel

BY ROY PROCTOR
Special Correspondent

More than 180,000 American women have been deployed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "When Janey Comes Marching Home," which will open Friday in the True F. Luck Gallery at the Visual Arts Center of Richmond, gives faces and voices to 40 of them.

The faces eyeball viewers in 40 large color portraits of female soldiers, sailors, Marines, guardsmen and reservists. The portraits were shot mostly at military bases on the Eastern Seaboard by Richmond freelance photographer Sascha Pflaeging.

One measures a whopping 50 by 60 inches. The others — 30 by 40 inches — command attention as they establish dialogues across the gallery spaces.

The 40 women speak in the texts of accompanying wall panels that present excerpts from extensive oral histories recorded by Laura Browder, the Virginia Commonwealth University playwrighting professor who conceived the exhibition.

The women's stories are varied. They speak openly about motherhood, sexual harassment, day-to-day life "outside the wire" in Baghdad and the pressure to continually prove themselves in an arena that traditionally has been a male preserve.

"When Janey Comes Marching Home," subtitled "Portraits of Women Combat Veterans," grew out of Browder's 2006 book, "Her Best Shot: Women and Guns in America."

"One of the book's themes was how controversial the idea of women in combat has been since Revolutionary War times," Browder said. "Here we are in the middle of two wars in which, to date, more than 180,000 women have been deployed to combat zones. Clearly something big is happening."

More than 100 American women have died in the current wars, and six times that number have been wounded.

Two years ago, Pflaeging and Browder began discussing a magazine article in which she would interview women deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and he would photograph them.

Then Ashley Kistler, who organized "When Janey Comes Marching Home" as her swan song as the arts center's curator before becoming director of the Anderson Gallery, persuaded them to opt for a gallery show instead.

"I think this is a very timely topic to address," Kistler said. "Women in the military is a topic that is just beginning to be tackled in a concerted way, and the collaborative nature of this show is very special. Laura was very resourceful and tenacious in setting up contacts within the military, and that was an amazing feat in itself."

Browder conducted 46 interviews, 85 percent of them with active military personnel who were photographed in their uniforms. The rest, who were no longer on active duty, were photographed in civilian clothes in their homes.

"One of the women we approached became a stripper since she got out of the Army," Browder said. "She was very interested in telling her story and being photographed at first, then thought about it and pulled out."

"Most of the women wanted to get their stories out. A lot of women in the military feel that the civilian world doesn't understand their experience at all. They feel that the public doesn't realize the very hazardous conditions under which these women work."

Browder encountered some surprises.

"I was really surprised at the



Capt. Gabriela Ordonez-Mackey U.S. Army

"Adjusting . . . to that feeling of just being confined was pretty dramatic. . . . It's almost feeling like you're a caged animal, that you know you can't leave because outside that gate are people who hate you and what you stand for."



Staff Sgt. Chanda Jackson U.S. Army

"I deployed the second time . . . and I still couldn't truly answer why we are really there. I mean I can give you an answer. Is that answer acceptable in my mind? No. But we're here to do a job, and I signed up for it. I'm going to do what I'm called to do."



Laura Browder and Sascha Pflaeging have collaborated to produce the exhibit "When Janey Comes Marching Home."

Browder said. "They made it clear that the military offered them a better life."

Several women showed up for the interview with their babies, and Browder was struck by the ease with which some of them compartmentalized motherhood.

"The mommy mentality left

me as soon as we got on that bus and started flying to Cherry Point [Marine Corps Air Station in North Carolina]," one told her.

Browder and Pflaeging said their show has no agenda.

"Doing this exhibition wasn't about having a pro-war or an anti-war stance," Pflaeging said.

"Our approach was to give these

women a voice and to document what their lives were like."

Browder added: "We wanted to show the wide range of these women. We talked with women ranging in age from 19 to their mid-40s."

Both stress the value of their teamwork.

"We could not have done this if both of us were men," Pflaeging said. "It was very important for a woman to do the interviewing because these women would feel much freer opening up to a woman."

"When Janey Comes Marching Home" was created with the help of five grants totaling \$41,000. It will tour after it closes here Dec. 14, but the tour schedule has not yet been firmed up.

Roy Proctor, a freelance writer and theater director, retired in 2004 as the art and theater writer for The Times-Dispatch. He can be reached at royproctor@aol.com.



Staff Sgt. Shawntel Lotson U.S. Army

"They also bring in the minors. The mother instinct kinda comes out, but at the same time, hey, these people are trying to blow you up, too. But that mother instinct comes in because you have a child crying, 'I want to be with my father.' But you can't."



Sgt. Jamie Rogers U.S. Army

"As a soldier, you feel like you cheated death. There were two soldiers I knew very, very well who didn't come home to their families. And you're like, 'Why am I here?' You gotta reflect and say, 'This person died so I can do what I need to.'"



Sgt. Jocelyn Proano U.S. Marine Corps

"I called my mom every day: 'Hey, how's the baby, what is she doing?' She wasn't walking and talking when I left and, all of a sudden, she's babbling 'Mamma.' . . . I cried on the phone when I heard her talk; it was sad, but it was so amazing at the same time."



Master Gunnery Sgt. Constance Heinz U.S. Marine Corps

"I can remember going to Honduras — 2,200 Marines, and I was the only female. Everybody wanted to tip-toe around me. 'You don't need to tip-toe around me,' I'd say. 'I can use a bush just like you use a bush.'"



Sgt. Chalina Seligson U.S. Marine Corps, IRR

"I'm actually getting out pretty soon. I'm going to a school for international relations. This deployment really sparked that. I just want to be a part of that somehow. I haven't really fine-tuned the direction yet, but I know it's somewhere in international relations."



Staff Sgt. Keisha Williams U.S. Army

"In the maintenance company, and on the base itself, we had a lot of females — you know, plenty of moms, even grandmothers, in the National Guard and Reserve. So you were able to have, as I like to say, 'women talk.' . . . That was a good thing."