



NVFP Freedom News

Telling the story of Freedom as told by the Veterans who preserved it.

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“Why We Do What We Do...”

I recently had the opportunity to speak with a group of graduates representing our various military academies. At the end of my presentation, I was approached by Mr. Van Warren, a Class of 1986 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He had been inspired and shared with me an article he wrote in the Fall of 2006 which was never published. After having read it and wiping some tears away, I asked his permission and received it to share his article with you. The picture of the striking cadet below is of 2nd LT Emily Perez and her story is what Van passed on to me.



“Nathan Thornburgh, a Time Magazine reporter, recently published an online article, *A Death in the Class of 9/11*. It’s a eulogy to 2nd LT Emily Perez, the first female West Pointer to die in the war in Iraq. 2nd LT Perez is a member of the class of 2005, which is also known as the Class of 9/11 since these cadets were plebes when September 11th awakened America to this new war on terrorism.

Mr. Thornburgh had also previously written about the Class of 9/11 as they were about to graduate in May 2005. While his article is a well written tribute not only to 2nd LT Perez and to the other members of the Class of 2005, the most revealing aspect to the article was Mr. Thornburgh’s own articulation about what West Pointers do-what they are all about.

He discovered during his month long assignment about the qualities of these young people, who on any given day, might be mistaken for your common college students except that they chose the path of West Point. He discovered that that decision was all the difference.

It was the difference of those who volunteered to serve others and country. It was the difference of those who found challenge in aspiring to a higher academic, physical and moral standard, rather than floating in the sea of human mediocrity. It was a difference of those who, while recognizing their own frailty and faults, understood the greater calling of their time, and despite their own internal misgivings, seek the greater common good of a higher calling. Thornburgh notes, "I finally was able to articulate something that I had only vaguely sensed before: This thing that West Pointers do—parading in unyielding formation, shining already gleaming boots, enlisting to sacrifice their lives on some unknown and unloved territory far from home—is not done out of ignorance, but out of faith. They have faith that the American values and resourcefulness do not lend themselves to meaningless death. They have faith that not only is freedom worth fighting for, but that we do not fight for any lesser end.

As I head next week to my 20 year Reunion at West Point, I cannot help but to think about those currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. While those of us who are fortunate enough to be able to attend will enjoy renewing friendships and gloating about our families, our minds will definitely be with those soldiers, marines, sailors and airmen whose bravery and uncommon valor are exemplified every day in the life and death struggles in the streets of Iraq or the barren mountains of Afghanistan. Duty, Honor, Country is well served."

Van Warren

USMA Class of 1986

Apex, NC

2nd LT Emily J. Perez' hometown was Fort Washington, Maryland. She was a member of the 204th Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade, 4th Infantry Division, US Army, out of Ft. Hood, TX, serving in Iraq when, on September 12, 2006, her humvee was struck by an improvised explosive device. Her mother, Vicki Perez, said the following of her daughter's service and sacrifice, "In her eyes her greatest accomplishment was living every minute of her life serving, taking care of others and loving it."

Hello Girl!

*"I was a member of the first
women's combatant unit in the
US Army."*

Oleda Joure Christides, Signal Corps, AEF Chaumont, France 1918--1919.



This is a painting by Michelle Christides of Oleda Christides, nee Joure, in front of Caserne Damremont, General Pershing's HQ for 2,000,000 American men of the First Army. It was from here that about thirty of the 223 SC women who served in France, connected the front lines to the general command. WWI was the first war in history for which technology allowed this to happen.



The Hello Girls were called "combatants" in WWI -- the first Army women to be so-called because they served in France in response to General Pershing's emergency appeal for bilingual women telephone switchboard operators. They were enlisted and sworn in, but when they returned to the US after the war and asked for their Victory medals, they learned they could not have been. Army regulations stated only "males" were sworn into the Army although most of these women had been sworn in twice. This is my mother's story:

They called us "the Lost Generation" and I thought that meant the slaughter of the Great War until I realized in the decades to follow the extent of injury to those of us who had survived. I was called a "combatant" by Ernest J. Wessen, who, in his capacity as civilian personnel recruiter at the War Department, organized the telephone units upon receipt of a requisition telegram from General Russell, adjutant to Pershing. He states in his affidavit that he took it upon himself to interpret General Pershing's order as ". . . at last, women were to be allowed to serve overseas in and as a part of the Army . . . quite aside from the nurse corps. . . . New in Washington, I asked no questions, proceeded to organize and train the units in the best manner I knew how . . . through the A.T. & T. company.

"You were actually combatants with no military standing, and under International Law I hate to think of what would have happened to you had you been captured," he wrote. ". . . the big thing is . . . you folks were actual combatants, and so recognized by Pershing when he decorated one of your number for bravery under fire."

I have in my possession a booklet of statements issued by all our commanding officers in the AEF, for Christmas 1918, commending our service as indispensable to the victory a month earlier. When I was sworn in and sent "over there" aboard a troop ship, the war, it was rumored, would last ten years, and I, like my brother, took an oath that I was in "for the duration."

Major Roy J. Coles, Signal Corps, wrote on May 17, 1921 to several State veterans' bonus boards: "[I was] . . . during the final few weeks as Chief Signal Officer on General Pershing's staff . . . I am in the very best position to know of the sacrifices and devotion to duty shown by these heroic young ladies, who gave up everything, placed themselves subject to the strictest kind of military discipline, braved the perils of the submarine infested seas and shared the hardships and privations which come to an army in a theatre of operation shoulder to shoulder with officers, enlisted men and nurses without murmur and without complaint. . . . Their orders with which they had no option but to comply, sent them in their soldiers' uniforms to all parts of the theatre of operations of our Army, and the hardships, privations and dangers which they were called upon to endure were of as common occurrence as those in the case of the average officer and soldier, and I bespeak for these three hundred and fifty young ladies and for each of them, every consideration which individuals, bodies, states or the nation may see fit to give to any part of our armed forces during the recent war.

"General Pershing and Brigadier-General Russell, the Chief Signal Officer of the American E. F., during all the period of the war, have already lavishly praised the loyalty, devotion to duty and spirit of self sacrifice with which . . . the female Telephone Operating Units were imbued, and I am certain that they would feel as keenly as do I any intimation that these ladies were other than a part of the American Expeditionary Forces in the fullest sense of the words and of the phrase. Yours very truly, Roy H. Coles, Major Signal Corps."

Congress issued a citation to Grace Banker, Chief Operator, for leading eight Operators to the front in the final drive of the war to reduce the St. Mihiel salient. Their barracks caught fire from the bombardment, and they had to be threatened from Chaumont HQ, via the telephone lines they were connecting to the front, with court-martial for disobeying orders to leave their switchboards immediately. They left, but came back an hour later to woman the remaining one-third of the switchboards. All our operators had volunteered to go to the front. We thought they were lucky to serve there.

I saw sights of the wounded I shall never forget -- the looks of black despair on their faces. I saw the terrible toll of war. And now, after all these years, and all that's happened, it does seem as though our idealism was naïve. "Saving the world for democracy," has a hollow sound. And yet, as Erich Maria Remarque wrote in *All Quiet On the Western Front*, we don't fight for ideas, we fight for the people we love. We learn, strangely, we learn to love everybody when under the extremity of murder and maiming. I saw the young German soldiers, polite, well-behaved, some of them only teenagers, others you knew were fathers, and when I read Remarque's book over a decade later, it gave me the words for what I had seen had given me new ideas -- ideas that I haven't his gift of writing to convey, and which few can hear or are willing to.

And even if these scenes of youth were given back to us we would hardly know what to do. . . . We might be amongst them and move in them . . . But it would be like gazing at the photograph of a dead comrade . . . the man himself it is not . . . the communion, the feeling of comradeship with the things and events of our existence, which cut us off and made the world of our parents a thing incomprehensible to us-- for then we surrendered ourselves to events and were lost in them, and the least little thing was enough to carry us down the stream of eternity. . . .

Today we would pass through the scenes of our youth like travellers. We are burnt up by hard facts; like tradesmen we understand distinctions, and like butchers, necessities. We are no longer untroubled-- we are indifferent. We might exist there; but should we really live there?

We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men, we are crude and sorrowful and superficial-- I believe we are lost.

I read Remarque's words with a shudder of recognition. I saw this happen to my older brother. But I saw it in so many men of my generation; I saw it in France, where I lived nearly a decade after the Second World War. Perhaps, only because I am a woman, I escaped to love.

Sixty years later, in 1977, thanks to our fighting spirit, fifty of us were still alive when Merle Egan Anderson of Seattle, who had led our fight all this time, was offered help by a young attorney, Mark Hough. He took our case once again to Congress. In 1972, a men's unit of Railway Engineers, who had served in Russia, had won a lawsuit against the government for the same reasons. Nobody had told them either that their Army uniforms and oaths were not real. Mark Hough pointed out their case had been decided by the Courts. Congress capitulated to what they had said about us once-- that they had been "grateful."

Brigadier-General Arthur Wolfe came to my home and gave me my honorable discharge in 1978. My husband, Chris, who had helped me fight for so long, said: "We live for moments like this." Thank you, Mark, I fought for you in the same spirit as you fought for us sixty years later. And as Ernest Wessen said, "I want to see or hear grandchildren say . . . 'My grandmother was a member of the first women's combatant unit in the United States Army,' and be able to back up their claims by reference to the laws of this country."

The full story, based on my collection of documents from many of the Signal Corps women and on my interviews of three before they died, exists in an unpublished book that has also been adapted to a film script for a history documentary with the hope that someday it will be published or broadcast. *All images and text are copyright Michelle Christides, 1976, 2004.*

Our New Name

You may have noticed the “C” missing from our name. With a world-class land plan, imbedded with visionary, world-class art, and managed by an organization focused on a nationwide vision, “To tell the story of Freedom as told by the Veterans who preserved it,” it is only fitting that the organization’s name carry the same significance. As of May 2007, the organization’s official name is The National Veterans Freedom Park Foundation. Please visit our web site under the new name www.nationalveteransfreedompark.com.

An Upcoming Event

You may have noticed that the feature articles in this edition were focused on female veterans. There is a reason. Your NVFP staff is currently planning a very significant event, to be held sometime this Fall. It is our intent to set up podcast and email communications workstations at the Park on a scheduled day during that period, and, with the help of a temporary staff of our 21st Century version of “Hello Girls,” use that day to allow students and various members of military families, as well as the public-at-large, to stop by and send messages of support and well-being to our troops serving overseas. We are calling the day Operation Chatter Box. Watch our web site and your email messages for more detailed information on this day’s events as the plans unfold.