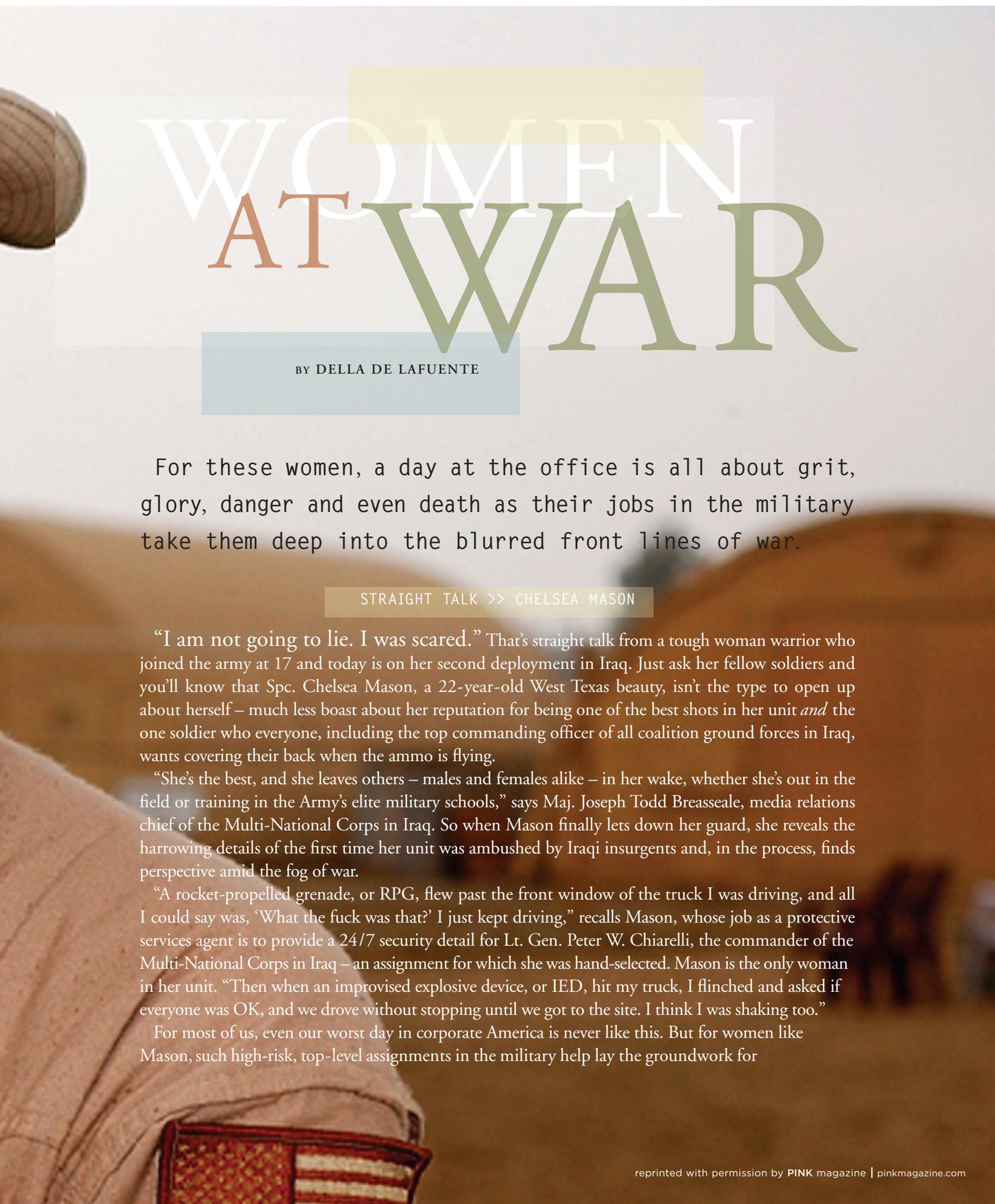


STAFF SGT. STACY PEARSALL, WHO SHOT SEVERAL IMAGES IN THIS FEATURE, WAS NAMED MILITARY PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR BY THE DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE IN 2003. A BOMB BLAST LEFT HER WITH A 30 PERCENT HEARING LOSS IN ONE EAR



WOMEN AT WAR

BY DELLA DE LAFUENTE

For these women, a day at the office is all about grit, glory, danger and even death as their jobs in the military take them deep into the blurred front lines of war.

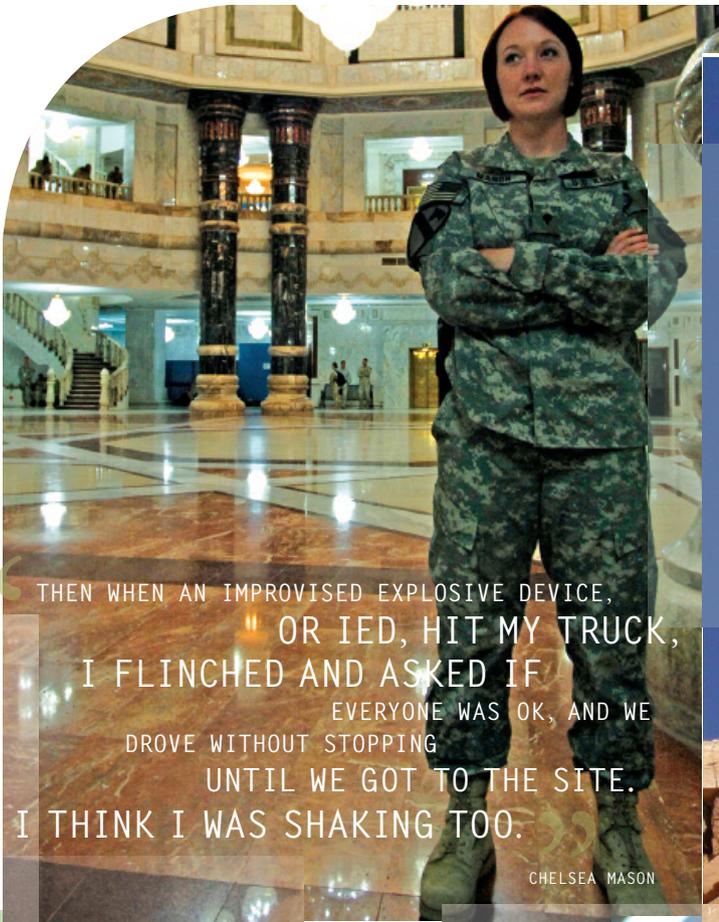
STRAIGHT TALK >> CHELSEA MASON

“I am not going to lie. I was scared.” That’s straight talk from a tough woman warrior who joined the army at 17 and today is on her second deployment in Iraq. Just ask her fellow soldiers and you’ll know that Spc. Chelsea Mason, a 22-year-old West Texas beauty, isn’t the type to open up about herself – much less boast about her reputation for being one of the best shots in her unit *and* the one soldier who everyone, including the top commanding officer of all coalition ground forces in Iraq, wants covering their back when the ammo is flying.

“She’s the best, and she leaves others – males and females alike – in her wake, whether she’s out in the field or training in the Army’s elite military schools,” says Maj. Joseph Todd Breasseale, media relations chief of the Multi-National Corps in Iraq. So when Mason finally lets down her guard, she reveals the harrowing details of the first time her unit was ambushed by Iraqi insurgents and, in the process, finds perspective amid the fog of war.

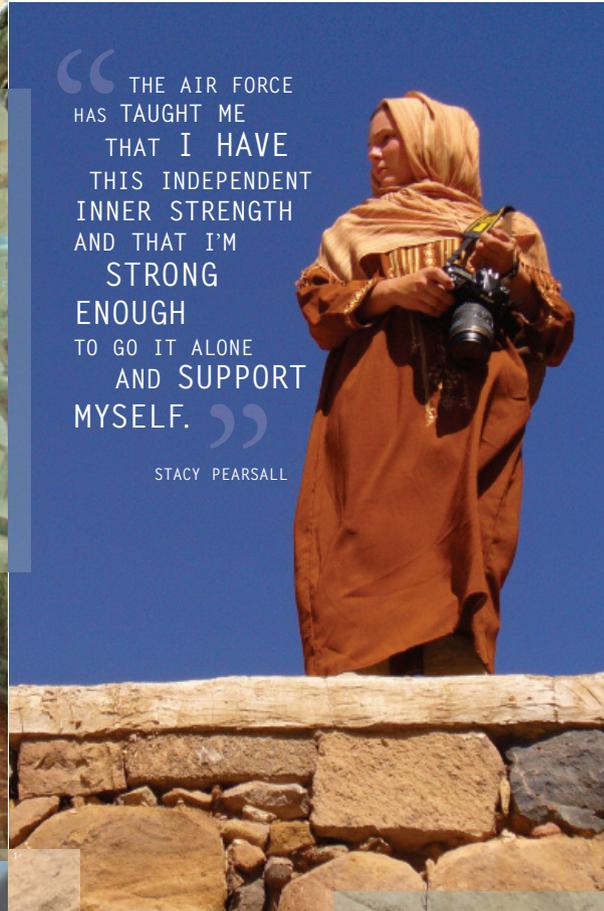
“A rocket-propelled grenade, or RPG, flew past the front window of the truck I was driving, and all I could say was, ‘What the fuck was that?’ I just kept driving,” recalls Mason, whose job as a protective services agent is to provide a 24/7 security detail for Lt. Gen. Peter W. Chiarelli, the commander of the Multi-National Corps in Iraq – an assignment for which she was hand-selected. Mason is the only woman in her unit. “Then when an improvised explosive device, or IED, hit my truck, I flinched and asked if everyone was OK, and we drove without stopping until we got to the site. I think I was shaking too.”

For most of us, even our worst day in corporate America is never like this. But for women like Mason, such high-risk, top-level assignments in the military help lay the groundwork for



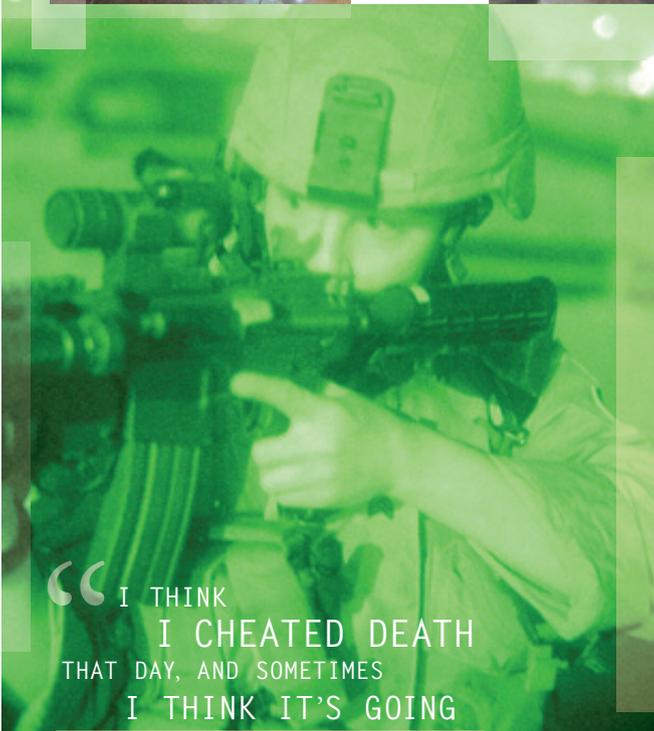
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“ I THINK
I CHEATED DEATH
THAT DAY, AND SOMETIMES
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TO COME BACK
TO HAUNT ME.”

LEIGH ANN HESTER



“ IF YOU'RE
FOCUSED ON
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VIJAY GALLARDO

their long-term career success in the armed forces and beyond. For others, awards and commendations that honor women for their personal contributions in wartime help illustrate the power and potential of women to get ahead and advance professionally in their fields.

STAR POWER >> LEIGH ANN HESTER

One such stellar soldier is Sgt. Leigh Ann Hester, on the verge of fulfilling her dream to become a law enforcement officer in her community following a nearly one-year deployment in Iraq. Hester also happens to be the most highly-decorated woman of the Iraq war – the first woman since World War II to be cited for heroism in close battle and to receive the Silver Star, the nation’s third-highest medal for valor. She was presented the medal in June 2005 for displaying exceptional bravery in attacking what was later determined to be some 50 Iraqi insurgents who had ambushed her convoy.

How did she do it? She followed her gut.

It started out like any other day on patrol in Iraq, but her instincts told her that something up the road was terribly wrong. On that steamy March day just outside Baghdad, she saw some erratic movements from the vehicles in front of her carrying supplies and U.S. troops. Her military police company’s job was to protect and provide security for such armed services processions on a daily basis. But on the war-torn streets, where U.S. troops find themselves in the middle of an often undefined urban combat zone, the unusual scene unfolding before her was a telltale sign that there was trouble ahead.

“I could see smoke and what all of a sudden became heavy gunfire from what initially looked to be about 10 insurgents popping up from trenches and taking potshots at us,” explains Hester, a 24-year-old member of the 617th Military Police Company of Richmond, Ky. According to Hester and other military accounts, insurgents attacked using rifles, machine guns and RPGs. Hester and her group killed 27 insurgents while protecting about 10 American troops, according to her award citation.

“We didn’t have any choice but to get out and go on foot. We put ourselves in real danger,” Hester says in her tough-talking, Southern twang. She’s a former store manager at Shoe Carnival who’s been back home in the Nashville area since October 2005. “I think I cheated death that day, and someday it’s going to come back to haunt me.”

BREAKING THROUGH THE FRONT LINES >> KIMBERLY WALKER

A 1994 Pentagon policy bars women from serving in units most likely to see ground combat. But as more women move beyond support and administrative roles in the military, they are assuming leadership and high-profile positions that put

them directly in the combat zones: patrolling bomb-ridden highways, standing duty at checkpoints while shouldering M-16s and raiding insurgent-controlled houses in Iraqi towns. For many of the approximately 202,000 active duty women serving our country, half of whom are mothers with young children, cheating death is an all-too-common occurrence. Hester estimates that her group encountered some 30 roadside bombs during her nearly 12-month deployment in Iraq. About 15 to 20 percent of the unit’s 178 soldiers are women, she says.

In fact, the dangers facing women at war today have become increasingly evident as the number of serious injuries and deaths in the combat zone grows. At press time, 53 women (see page 96) in the armed forces have died in the Iraq war, which has claimed the lives of at least 2,528 American troops. Meanwhile, more than 200 female soldiers have sustained combat-related wounds requiring amputation or long-term rehabilitation.

With increasing danger, however, comes increasing opportunity. In her 22 years in the U.S. Marine Corps, Master Gunnery Sgt. Kimberly Walker of Camp Lejeune in Jacksonville, N.C., says she’s seen and benefited from the expanding prospects for women in the military. “This is how much things have changed: When I came into the Marines and went into boot camp 20 years ago, women Marines were given classes on how to wear makeup – and on etiquette,” says Walker, 40, a newly divorced mother of six children, ages 7 to 20, who is currently working on her master’s degree in human resources management. “Now the women train separately from the men and they go to the rifle range, maintenance and everybody runs three miles. Before women ran just 1.5 miles. When I went to boot camp we didn’t do any of that!”

Earlier this year, Walker became the first female master gunnery sergeant – and the first African-American woman – overseeing combat service support. In 2003 she was awarded a Bronze Star for meritorious achievement in managing combat operations while serving as the senior enlisted adviser and operations chief of the Marine Logistics Command Support Detachment-1 at Central Command in Iraq. According to her award citation, Walker, as the “consummate professional,” overcame all challenges facing the command and fostered a climate of professional innovation that led to the smooth transition of a new command in a combat environment.

HEAVY METTLE WOMAN >> VIJAY GALLARDO

Though Congress and the American people remain divided over what roles women should play in combat, many women soldiers proudly talk about their ever-changing roles in the war and the powerful responsibilities they hold. “I’ve known I wanted a career in aviation from the day in my sophomore year when I was a cadet at West Point and I took my

KENYAN AIR FORCE WOMEN
GIVE EACH OTHER SOME WORDS
OF ENCOURAGEMENT BEFORE
MEETING THE DEPUTY KENYAN
ARMY COMMANDER IN NAIROBI,
KENYA, ON SEPT. 23, 2005

PHOTOGRAPH BY STAFF SGT. STACY PEARSALL



first ride in a Blackhawk helicopter,” says Capt. Vijay Gallardo, a second-generation Mexican-American from Stockton, Calif., who today pilots a Blackhawk helicopter for the Combat Aviation Brigade, part of the 101st Aviation Division stationed outside Tikrit. At 26, she’s on her second deployment in Iraq. “It’s what really sold me on aviation. I was intrigued because being in the air and seeing the earth from that vantage point is amazing.”

Aboard her helicopter, Gallardo oversees missions by providing security and surveillance, delivering supplies, and escorting and transporting VIPs. She’s responsible for up to four aircraft and their associated crews of up to 16 people.

“There are many opportunities for women in the military, but we’re still the minority. It’s still a man’s profession in many ways, but you deal with it,” says Gallardo, the daughter of Mexican immigrants who’s eyeing a possible move into military intelligence. She also has started investing in real estate with her sights set on one day owning a small business with her family. And she’s recently begun working on a master’s degree in international relations. “You can do the best you can and that will speak for itself,” Gallardo says. “If you’re focused on success, there’s no way that you won’t succeed.”

THE BIG PICTURE >> STACY PEARSALL

For Staff Sgt. Stacy Pearsall, PINK cover woman and aerial combat photojournalist in the Air Force’s 1st Combat Camera Squadron based in Charleston, S.C., the military has provided a wide lens with which to take in the world – earning her an Air Force Commendation Medal with Valor within a month of her arrival in Iraq for heroism displayed during the Battle of Abu Ghraib in fall 2003. And she was again deployed to Iraq this past summer. “Part of me is ready to go back, but on the other hand, there’s a part of me that drives down the road and if my car hits a soda can, I freak out,” Pearsall says.

In her job, Pearsall, 26, has played a key role in supplying more than 8,000 photographs of historical sites and other locations that help provide intelligence in the war. In Iraq, she conducted both ground and aerial photography from inside convoys and helicopters. Yet no military job there is without danger. Pearsall volunteered to document the tent city of Abu Ghraib just seconds after a grenade attack was launched against coalition forces. She went unseen documenting the uprising. Her quick response allowed the 1st Armored Division leadership to examine the incident to plan future operations in this danger zone. Additionally, Pearsall braved great danger when documenting a school opening with the 414th Civil Battalion. As Pearsall left the school, an IED detonated a short distance away, sending shrapnel flying through the air.

“When we first started hearing about the IEDs, it was because they would explode and an ambush would happen right afterward,” Pearsall says. She quickly exited her vehicle, verified the safety of other personnel and began documenting the military response in the aftermath. Her photographs of the scene and the vehicle damage facilitated investigations by security personnel. Her prompt action and humanitarian regard led to her commendation. Now this newly married airman (her husband also is in the Air Force) has her sights set on making the leap into

WAR >> REPORTERS

Three journalists tell us about chasing news in the combat zone.



COURTESY OF CBS NEWS

“I continue to go there with full knowledge of the risks involved because I feel a sense of duty and responsibility to Iraq, and all involved there. But I also feel privileged to be able to tell this story.”

LARA LOGAN

chief foreign correspondent, CBS News and 60 Minutes



COURTESY OF CBS NEWS

“I’ve been to Iraq four times [in three years]. Few stories have been more fulfilling to me than being able to interview Iraqis who just voted for the first time in their lives. We literally were seeing history unfold. I would go back – despite the dangers.”

TERI OKITA

L.A. correspondent, CBS Newspath, a national broadcast news service for the network’s local affiliate stations



COURTESY OF CNN

“I fell in love with Baghdad. For me, it’s that you see the worst that humanity can do to one another, and yet, at the same time, you see the best that people can do.”

ARWA DAMON

correspondent, CNN’s Baghdad bureau

ONLINE PINK EXCLUSIVE!
FOR MORE FROM OUR INTERVIEWS WITH THESE
WOMEN WAR JOURNALISTS, SEE PINKMAGAZINE.COM



ABOVE: WHILE MILITARY MEMBERS VISIT A LOCAL YEMENI FAMILY'S HOUSE, CUSTOM DICTATES THAT THE FEMALES REMAIN IN THEIR HIJAB, A TRADITIONAL BLACK OUTER GARMENT

One Woman's War

Before she became infamous and was demoted to colonel, Gen. Janis Karpinski was a trailblazer. The first female general ever to command troops in a combat zone. Even won a Bronze Star. And now with a career on the skids, she's known mostly as the lady general of Abu Ghraib, the site of abuses inflicted on Iraqi detainees by U.S. troops under her command. Her crime? She was cited for exercising poor oversight at the prison and for failing to remind soldiers of the Geneva Conventions' protections for detainees. She's written a book about what happened, titled *One Woman's Army: The Commanding General of Abu Ghraib* (Miramax Books, 2005).

BEFORE ABU GHRAIB

"A lot of female soldiers and some men, too, would come up to me and say, 'Can I have a picture taken with you because you're the first female general?' and I'd say, 'Yes, absolutely!'"

"I had general officers calling me saying, 'Would you consider this job or that job?' And I told them the only job I would take is the chief of staff or the operations officer's job. [One officer] said, 'I don't think we've ever had a female fill any of those positions.' So I said it's long overdue, and he said, 'You're probably right.'"

AFTER ABU GHRAIB PHOTOS WENT PUBLIC

"My name was used from the beginning in conjunction with those photographs. People come up to me and say, 'Hey, aren't you that lady general from Abu Ghraib?'"

Her reality: "I'm offended by the photographs just like every other American, and I feel bad for the soldiers who are sitting behind bars because I say they could use a lot of company. There are a lot of people who knew what they were telling these soldiers to do was wrong."

WOMEN AS WARRIORS

"We know what happened to Jessica Lynch. She and other women being taken hostage showed that women were in a position where they could be kidnapped, ambushed and even killed. As a result, Lynch became the face of the warrior serving. So not to discredit her but to remove her from the spotlight, they replaced her with Lynndie England, smiling and posing for photos with the dog leash. Is this what really happens when women serve in the combat zone? It's not true."

the civilian world and working as a photojournalist after she hits the 10-year mark in the Air Force.

"I have this urge to be a foreign correspondent for somebody and do what I'm now doing for the military on the civilian side," Pearsall explains. "The Air Force has taught me that I have this independent inner strength and that I'm strong enough to go it alone and support myself because I'm kind of a tough girl!"

MEANINGFUL WORK >> TEMPIE DEVERS

Naval Petty Officer Tempie Devers of Bakersfield, Calif., says she joined the Navy after high school because she had a passion to make a big impact in the lives of those she cares about, and because she had a deep fascination with scuba diving – an interest she shares with her father. "I wanted to prove that I could do this, and I wanted to work hard in order to pave the way for other females," says Devers, a technician assigned to the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Mobile Unit 2, which detects, recovers and disposes of unexploded and exploded bombs or other devices. During her six-month deployment, Devers successfully completed more than 160 missions in which she and her team disposed of some 40 IEDs and more than 900 other unexploded

“ BEING ABLE TO SAVE SOMEBODY'S LIFE ON A DAILY BASIS, ESPECIALLY INNOCENT PEOPLE, IT DOES SOMETHING TO YOU - IT CHANGES YOU. ”

TEMPIE DEVERS

devices, saving thousands of lives. In May 2006, she was awarded the Bronze Star with Combat for heroic achievement in connection with combat operations against the enemy. "When someone tells me I can't, I work that much harder to make it happen," she says.

When she arrived in Iraq, Devers says she tried not to think that things would be a certain way, and she tried to keep an open mind. "When I first came into the Navy I was drawn to the excitement and the challenge," she says. "Now that I've been in-country in Iraq, no matter how much negative media there is about the war, I know the soldiers over there are making a difference. Being able to save somebody's life on a daily basis, especially innocent people, it does something to you – it changes you." But with so many things that could go wrong while she's handling such lethal weapons, Devers says you can't think about it. "You have to think only about the things that you can do that can go right!"