



I am an American Soldier

By Myra Valentine

This past spring I sat in the stands at Ft. Jackson anxiously waiting to see my daughter graduate basic training. My heart soared with pride and humility knowing that she would soon enter the ranks just as I had done so many years ago. As the ceremony got underway, a female soldier smartly presented herself to the crowd of excited family and friends that filled the bleachers. With precision military decorum, she bellowed out The Soldiers Creed:



I am an American Soldier.

I am a warrior and a member of a team.

I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values.

I will always place the mission first.

I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit.

I will never leave a fallen comrade.

I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills.

I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself.

I am an expert and I am a professional.

I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat.

I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life.

I am an American Soldier.

I was moved to tears, but my mind couldn't help but digress to a different time. Thinking of my first duty assignment at Ft. Riley Kansas, in the winter of 1980. I remember being in my NCOIC's office and picking up The Code of Conduct. A small pocket size document that contained six articles that outlines the obligations of military personnel if ever in harm's way. It

is an anchor that President Dwight D. Eisenhower instituted in 1955 to help those captured in war to bear true alliance to the cause and stay the course as a POW.

I thumbed through it and went back to Article I – “I am an American fighting *man*,” it read. I smirked out loud. My NCOIC asked me what it was all about. I held up the pocket document and declared that I was not a *man*. Over the course of the next 6 years I would be reminded many times that I was not included in Article I of the Military Code of Conduct, nor were my sisters in arms. One such time was when we had a new soldier come to the unit that was previously assigned as a medic to the Green Berets at Ft. Benning, Ga. He wore his green beret for about a month after he in-processed. He just couldn’t put it away even though regulations dictated otherwise. I watched NCO’s, First Sergeants, and Commanders simply turn a blind eye. It was as if there was some sort of unspoken pride that openly displayed a status symbol to his military prowess.

A few months later, a new female soldier reported in a maroon beret. I passed a couple of guys in the company area and over heard them talking, making statements that “she needs to take that shit off!” I was taken back a bit, but more and more I overheard the men in the unit having similar conversations. I was at the company for afternoon formation and I saw her. I approached and introduced myself. I was so curious as to who this “*heretic*” was. She wore short-cropped hair, unlike I had ever seen before. Her uniform was impeccable, with jump boots that shined like glass. But most of what I remember was her presence warm and strong. It was obvious to all that she had been assigned to an 82nd Airborne Unit because of the maroon beret she proudly displayed. But to the male soldiers, it was as if she had stolen their lover and was welcomed with nothing but disdain.

I learned later the particulars, through a conversation we had of how she was reprimanded for reporting to the unit in the maroon beret. I couldn’t help but think about the famed Joan of Arc, and how during her sentencing, she was given a choice of how she would die. Either she could be hanged wearing women’s clothing or burned alive wearing the armor she wore leading her country to victory. She chose the latter.

The military my daughter now serves in today is much different than in my time. Women are now allowed in combat and soon will be amongst the elite of the elite in 2015. Truly, we are embarking on a military force to be reckoned with. A force where American men and women are guardians of our way of life and are prepared to die in its defense willingly. Article I of the Military Code of Conduct *now* states:

*I am an American, fighting in the forces, which guard my country and our way of life.
I am prepared to give my life in their defense.*