

'Only My Sisters-In-Arms Understand'

An active-duty Navy veteran and VFW member shares how a nonprofit in Colorado helped her connect with like-minded female veterans

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While dry-docked aboard the USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) during the initial shutdown brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Miranda Williams came across an interesting Facebook post.

Williams, who spent most of the pandemic in deployments to the Indo-Pacific region with the Navy's "Air Wing of the Future," Carrier Air Wing 2, had created and administered a Facebook page for other women veterans seeking camaraderie.

While browsing her page, a post by a fellow female veteran introduced Williams to the Military Sisterhood Initiative (MSI), an online peer support network for female veterans whose membership exceeds 4,500 members.

"I checked it out and found it was something I wanted to be part of," said Williams, a member of VFW Post 5867 in Lakeside, California, near San Diego. "I joined in April 2020, and my first impression was that there were lots of women like me in the initiative — women who wanted the camaraderie of other women veterans."

Williams's need for that connection with other female veterans is the reason Colorado-based Challenge America created MSI in 2016.

Challenge America is a national nonprofit leveraging technology and the creative arts to improve the lives of veterans and their families.

"We had conducted a lot of research on women veterans but had never had a program specifically for them," Challenge America's Executive Director Dallas Blaney said. "We hosted focus groups and decided it was a thing that could have a positive impact on that population."

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Through Challenge America, which was created in 2009 in Basalt, Colorado, and oversees multiple programs like MSI, Blaney added that female veterans are offered a platform they can trust and stand behind.

“I think the greatest impact this program has is creating a network for women veterans that they can trust,” Blaney said. “Women veterans, from our research, don’t trust many platforms or even men, but they trust themselves, and this platform provides that level of trust.”

Through MSI’s current platform, women veterans like Williams are welcomed to summits and online meetings that offer a means to forge friendships by sharing stories, playing games, hosting book clubs, cooking and chatting about an array of topics.

For the lieutenant commander, a more than 27-year active-duty Navy veteran who served aboard the USS Ronald Reagan (CVN-76) in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2009, MSI provides a safe space to unburden herself.

“I appreciate the friendships, support and shared experiences MSI affords women veterans,” Williams said of the platform. “While I have shared experiences with my brother veterans, too, there are some stories and struggles that only my sisters-in-arms understand.”

Steadily growing its reach across 50 states and 21 countries in its six-year history, MSI, Blaney says, will soon surpass 5,000 members and add several useful workshops in 2022.

“As we continue to build our membership, we want to create workshops that women veterans will want to participate in,” Blaney said. “Aside from the benefits our platform already offers them, we hope to add career workshops, health and wellness workshops and job advancement strategy classes moving forward.”

This article is featured in the 2022 March issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for the VFW magazine.