

# VFW Salutes Women Veterans

## America's largest combat veterans organization salutes female veterans of past and present during Women's History Month

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While celebrating Women's History Month, VFW is commemorating women veterans for their service and contributions to military history. Women have been an essential part of America's military and continue to push boundaries to overcome decades of obstacles.

Here are some stories of just some of the women and events that have made history in the military.

### **WOMAN NAMED ENLISTED MARINE EXPEDITIONARY FORCE LEADER**

A woman was tapped last year to serve as the senior enlisted leader of a Marine expeditionary force, a first for the Marine Corps.

Sgt. Maj. Joy Kitashima was selected as the Okinawa, Japan-based III Marine Expeditionary Force command sergeant major. Kitashima, who was the first woman to become an enlisted leader of a Marine expeditionary unit, is an Iraq War veteran.

Kitashima, a native of Bloomington, Indiana, enlisted into the Marine Corps in May 1996 and started her career as a military police officer. As a sergeant major, Kitashima served as command enlisted leader of Marine Air Control Squadron 4, 5th Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company, 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, II Marine Expeditionary Force Information Group, Marine Corps Installations Pacific and 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, according to her Marine Corps biography.

During a speech after accepting the position in March 2023, Kitashima told troops of III Marine Expeditionary Force that she has their "best interest in mind" as the enlisted leader.

"Everyone is a leader. There's an expectation of discipline among us, and III MEF has

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incredible discipline,” Kitashima said. “That’s why I was excited to come back here. I want to lead by example, I want to lead with purpose, and I want to lead with a sense of duty. I want every single one of the Marines in III MEF to feel the same three things.”

In 2014, Sgt. Maj. Lanette Wright served as the first woman to be an enlisted leader of a unit as a part of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Wright was the senior enlisted advisor of the Command Inspector General Office, 2nd Marine Logistics Group.

### **WWII VETERAN ACCEPTS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

An Alabama woman and World War II veteran received a lifetime achievement award in March 2023.

Romay Davis, 104 and a former Army private, received the first Women Who Shape the State Lifetime Achievement Award from This is Alabama and the Alabama Media Group. The award is designated for women “who make a difference across Alabama,” according to This is Alabama. Davis was among the 855 black women who served in the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion. The unit sorted mail in Europe until March 1946.

In 2022, Davis, originally from Virginia, received the Congressional Gold Medal, the top civilian award given by the U.S. Congress, for being a part of the battalion dubbed “Six Triple Eight.”

### **GENERAL INDUCTED INTO WOMEN’S HALL OF FAME**

Last year, a Maryland Army National Guard general was inducted into the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame.

Maj. Gen. Janeen Birckhead, a veteran of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, is the adjutant general of the Maryland National Guard. She is the only black woman leading a state military, according to NPR. However, Birckhead is not the first black woman to head Maryland’s military — the first was now-retired Maj. Gen. Linda Singh.

The Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame was established by the Maryland Commission for Women and the Women Legislators of Maryland. The hall of fame honors significant women of Maryland.

Birckhead was inducted into the Maryland Women’s Hall of Fame during a ceremony at the Government House of Maryland in Annapolis, where she was recognized by Gov. Wes Moore.

When she was inducted, Birckhead was a brigadier general and commander of the Maryland Army National Guard. Moore promoted Birckhead to major general shortly after her hall of fame induction.

“The adjutant general is the leader of Maryland’s military, and I am very confident in Janeen’s ability to do just that — lead,” Moore said when he announced Birckhead as a nominee for the position. “Her record proves her readiness to serve at the highest-ranking military position in the state of Maryland.”

### **PAINTING DEPICTS FIVE WOMEN OF NATIONAL GUARD**

Last year, a painting was unveiled in honor of women in the Minnesota National Guard.

Charles Kapsner, of Little Falls, Minnesota, painted the image, which depicts five women who had served with the Minnesota National Guard. The painting, titled “On the Guard,” was displayed at the Minnesota State Capitol and the Minnesota State Veterans Cemetery in May 2023. It now resides at the Minnesota Military and Veterans Museum, located at Camp Ripley, about 100 miles northwest of the Twin Cities.

The oil painting shows five female troops: Spc. Ashley Barber, Capt. Katie Morsch, 1st Sgt. Takeisha Hunt, 1st Sgt. Jessica Stiffarm and Staff Sgt. Mahsima Alkamooneh. One in five members of the Minnesota National Guard are women, according to the organization.

In an interview with CBS News, Hunt said it was “absolutely phenomenal” that women are being recognized by the Minnesota National Guard.

“It just makes me happy, especially that I’m here and anybody else could have been in this spot. To know I was selected to be a part of this is absolutely amazing,” she said.

Hunt added that it was heartwarming to see the painting.

“Regardless of how long I’m in the Minnesota National Guard, I’ll always be in the Minnesota National Guard with this painting,” Hunt said.

During an interview with the Minnesota National Guard in 2021, Kapsner said that even though he is the artist, the painting is about the five women and their stories.

“It pays homage to these fine women who were major influencers in my life,” Kapsner said. “And now the five ladies in the painting are the influencers.”

### **NEW DECAL HONORS WOMEN VETERANS**

The California Department of Veterans Affairs announced the release of a brand new license plate decal (see above on page 30) in honor of all women who have served in the military.

The Foundation for Women Warriors helped offer the license plate decal as an option for drivers in the Golden State. The emblem depicts a silhouette of a female military service member saluting, along with a U.S. flag inside a star. The logo also states “Woman Veteran.”

The Foundation for Women Warriors said the decal was designed by artist and Air Force veteran Jan Kays. In an interview with KFMB-TV CBS 8 in San Diego, Kays said the idea behind her design was to show strength of women who served in the military.

“Designing something outside of yourself is easy, but designing something for yourself is hard because you put a lot of pressure on yourself to get it just right,” Kays said.

Also, in a KFMB-TV interview with Foundation of Women Warriors CEO Jodie Grenier, the Marine Corps veteran claimed women are the fastest-growing segment of the veterans population.

“I think a lot of people probably scratched their heads and said, ‘Geez, we probably should have done this sooner, but glad that we are doing it now,’” Grenier said. “This is just another way to not only recognize their service but also to have the community recognize women that have served.”

*This article is featured in the 2024 March issue of [VFW magazine](#) and was written by [Dave Spiva](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.*