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Combat and Come Back: Bergan Flannigan '08, Purple Heart Recipient



In January 2013 Pentagon Chief Leon Panetta lifted the ban that prohibited women from serving in combat, opening up thousands of front-line positions to female service members. But even before the ban was lifted, women were serving as military police, medics, and intelligence officers who were often part of units on the front lines.

Bergan (Arsenault) Flannigan was the top military graduate in the Class of 2008 and was commissioned into the U.S. Army Military Police. “At that point it was as close as I could get to being in the Infantry,” she says. While at Norwich, Bergan met and married Thomas Flannigan '07, also Army MP.

After completing her Military Police training, Bergan reported to Ft. Stewart, Georgia, and was almost immediately deployed to Kandahar, Afghanistan. As a first lieutenant, Bergan found herself leading troops on the front lines, serving in the same military police company as her husband.

Tom, also a 1LT, was the executive officer of the 293rd MP company in Kandahar. Bergan commanded the company's Spartan Patrol, responsible for commercial neighborhoods in the city. She and her soldiers were in the thick of it daily. “Our job was to help them create police stations, learn the different tactics of patrolling their communities, and implement different regulations and rules,” Bergan says. Eight months into her deployment, and on her last mission before a two-week leave, Bergan was on a foot patrol through a market when she was struck by an anti-personnel IED. She lost her right leg above the knee. “The world just exploded,” she recalled. “Your ears just ring you and don't feel anything.”

Bergan credits the medics on patrol with her for saving her life. After initial treatment in Afghanistan, she was flown to Germany and then to Walter Reed Army Hospital in Washington, D.C. Bergan was awarded the Purple Heart by her commander in Afghanistan before arriving at Walter Reed. “I had already lost my right leg, and they were trying to save my left one,” she says. “But once I got to Walter Reed, I decided I was going to stay in the Army.”

She was in and out of the hospital for two years and had more than 20 surgeries. Despite the amputation and adapting to a prosthetic, Bergan resumed active duty. After completing the 3.

Military Police Captain's Career Course in 2011, she and Tom were stationed in Hawaii. She was assigned to a unit that spent the majority of time traveling around the Pacific. Between the long flights and time away from home, Bergan decided it was time to leave the military in 2013.



Bergan's long-held dream of a career in the Army was coming to an end just as she learned she was pregnant. "Life can have different plans for you, and it can be really hard. No matter how tough or how smart you are, the challenges of being in the military, of being deployed, of being wounded, of combat stress, and coming home from that are huge challenges to figure out on your own or in a relationship." She returned to her home in upstate New York while Tom remained on active duty in Hawaii. They divorced shortly after their daughter was born. "You know when you get deployed there is risk but when it happens to you, you don't know how to deal with it."

Now a full-time mom, Bergan spends time with her family including her twin sister, Bethany, also a 2008 Norwich alumna. She stays active taking care of her daughter, and herself. "I spend a lot of time at the gym. I can't do some things in the way I used to. I was an avid snowboarder, and I ran a lot. I can still do those things, but at a different level."

Reflecting on her journey and lessons learned along the way, Bergan says, "The first step is to get out there...you will surprise yourself by how you are able to adapt to different things. There are so many ways you can get help when you're struggling. Find something different to do in your life. Find something you never thought you would be able to do and do it."

Records documenting women's history and experience at Norwich are available through the University Archives. <https://archives.norwich.edu/>



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