



Celebrating 50 years of NU Trailblazers!

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Sisters on the Hill: Mary and Ellen Van Orden '79



Mary E. VanOrden

Mary Van Orden



Ellen M. VanOrden

Ellen Van Orden

1975 marked the first year of official rook training for freshman women at Norwich. The six female recruits in the Class of 1979 were Donna Lee Rix, Robin Bickford, Cathy Hall, Marie Zebrowski, Lynn Rowley, and **Mary Van Orden**. Mary was a history major in Army ROTC, a clarinet player and the first women in Norwich University's Regimental Band.

Mary's older sister, **Ellen, also Class of 1979**, was a civilian biology major and member of the Norwich Symphonic Band.

Making the Dean's List all four years, the Van Orden sisters were active at Norwich beyond academics. During her junior year, Ellen represented the university as a Maroon Key Student Ambassador. Mary was a literary contributor to the Chameleon for four years and editor for two. She was also a Guidon staff member and managing editor for the newspaper in her senior year. Both women were members of the Norwich Grenadiers Jazz Band.

The band brought Mary and fellow musician, Andrew Bibb '79 together outside of practice. They were married in 1979, had six children, and enjoyed 44 years together before Andrew's passing in 2023. Ellen married Michael Ammel, NU'78, also a member of Band Company.

Mary and Ellen may have inherited a love of music from their father, Carlos, who was a professor of business at Norwich from 1973-1979. According to Mary, "My parents loved anything to do with the band. My Dad was a clarinet player. My husband and I met because we sat next to one another in band. My sister, Ellen, played in the symphonic band and her husband, Mike, was in Band Company. My father was always interested in the march downs, probably because four out of five of us played an instrument at Norwich."

More about the Regimental Band: Formed by Captain Alden Partridge in 1820, Norwich University's regimental band has been an integral part of the daily life of cadets for more than a century. Partridge believed music was a critical aspect of education and provided scholarships for student musicians to play at mealtimes and events while having the "same chance for study and improvement." The first band included two drummers, two fifers, two clarinet players, one bugler, and one bass drummer.

Truman Bishop Ransom was one of the band scholarship recipients and eventually followed Partridge as the second president of what is now Norwich University. Since the 1920s, band members have been known as Zoobies. In its early days the band was housed in the lower floors of old Jackman Hall. It is generally believed that "the Zoo" came about because of the bars placed on the windows for security.

Records documenting the history of women at Norwich and the Regimental Band are available through the University Archives. <https://archives.norwich.edu/>



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