

**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
RHONDA CORNUM
16 NOVEMBER 2012**

**UNSUNG HEROES
INTERVIEW WITH RHONDA CORNUM
NOVEMBER 16, 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the military?

RHONDA CORNUM: Actually I joined the military to do research. I had my Ph.D. in biochemistry, and I wanted to do research, and I had to do some non-profit thing and it was an opportunity to live in San Francisco. That's why I joined.

QUESTION: When you joined, what was the general attitude to women serving in the military?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I would say that when I joined the attitude about women in my particular specialties, which was medical research, was pretty accepting. I didn't feel discriminated against, or singled out in any way.

QUESTION: Did it have a different set of standards because it was a medical profession?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, being in the medical profession, in particular in a research institute, and in a city where you don't do the typical military things people think about, we weren't in the field, we weren't driving tanks, we weren't, you know, climbing the forty foot towers, we weren't jumping out of airplanes. So, every year I would do something, some school, to remind myself I was really in the Army. I did the expert field medical badge, and I did airborne school, and things just to remind yourself that you really are in the Army. [LAUGHS]

QUESTION: What was your principal occupation?

RHONDA CORNUM: For most of my career I was a physician. I spent my first four years doing research, but then I went to military medical school in Washington. The rest of the time a physician, a flight surgeon, then to urology training, and a surgeon and then a commander.

QUESTION: What is the job of a combat flight surgeon?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, a flight surgeon in general does primary care for primarily aircrew and sometimes their families. When you're in combat you go with the unit and do the same thing. It's an interesting thing as it turns out, primarily psychology and personal relationship issues, because we're talking about a whole pile of really healthy well-screened young people.

QUESTION: Was that your personal occupation during the Persian Gulf War?

RHONDA CORNUM: That certainly was. I went out as the flight surgeon for an attack helicopter battalion. I went out with all the maintenance people, and the pilots, and the administration and just took care of them. I had five medics. We took care of everybody that was in the unit and we also did whatever they needed us to do.

QUESTION: Is that a dangerous occupation?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, in general it was not dangerous, I mean, most of the time you just are training. Once you're actually in combat, this is back in '91, we always sent a Blackhawk to follow the Apaches when they were doing the attack mission. We did that because we were very far out, we had auxiliary tanks, and we always were concerned that if there was a shoot down, or if there was, you know, just a mishap that we needed to be there to extract the pilot. So we were doing what we would call internal search and rescue all the time.

QUESTION: Were you ever involved in any of those rescue missions?

RHONDA CORNUM: Fortunately we never had that happen. I was involved in a number of accident extractions where somebody, you know, actually just had an accident, had a bad landing, rolled over, something like that. But we were very fortunate and we didn't have any mishaps until my aircraft got shot down.

QUESTION: Can you tell me about what happened that day?

RHONDA CORNUM: Sure, that day in February, 27th February, somebody had called our operating center and said, there's been an F-16 pilot shot down, you guys are the only people with helicopters anywhere near, can you go get him? They said he's got a broken leg but he's on his radio, we know where he is. So, we thought, what a cool mission. So they got in my Blackhawk and two Apaches to get this guy, you know, we took a couple pathfinders, those infantry guys that are especially trained for that sort of thing. The idea was we're going in, the Apaches will circle, we'll land our Blackhawk, we'll put this guy in a stretcher, get him in the Blackhawk and take off, and there we go. That was the plan. Unfortunately no plan survives contact with the enemy. What we didn't know, in hindsight, was that he really got shot down and bailed out right where the enemy was. We got within about a kilometer of him and the ground just opened up and started firing at us and, you know, we all banked and tried to leave. Unfortunately, they shot down my Blackhawk.

QUESTION: Can you tell me about the crash?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, there's not much to tell that I recall. I was only about 15 feet off the ground and so I remember thinking, I'm going to die right here. I mean, I've done a lot of accident investigations and I knew this was going to be an unsurvivable wreck. So I just recalled what my grandfather had said, and he was a Marine at Iwo Jima, and he said, Rhonda, there's a lot worse things than dying. There's living with dishonor. And I thought, well, at least I'm dying doing something honorable. And that was all there was, I mean, there was no more time, and splat.

QUESTION: What was your condition?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, when I came to I didn't know what my condition was. In fact, I thought I was dead. But I decided if I wasn't that I would get myself out of this wreck, because I could sort of see myself, I thought, looking down you know, I saw darkness, wrecked helicopter, and a body lying there. So I tried to get myself out from under some pieces of this thing. Then I couldn't turn over and I was sort of taking stock of why that might be. When I tried again and looked up, there were five guys with guns pointed at my head. So I knew pretty much I wasn't dead and that I was a POW.

QUESTION: And you were injured?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I didn't know how badly I was injured at the time. But then some guy reached down and stood me up and that dislocated my already broken arm. Then I kind of looked down and took stock of myself and I had two broken arms, and it turned out an anterior bad leg injury, and I'd been shot, but that was from the back so I couldn't tell that. So there we are.

QUESTION: And these guys...?

RHONDA CORNUM: These guys just took off my helmet, that's when they knew I was a girl, because my hair came out. They took off my flak jacket and my weapon, stole my camera, took my wedding ring off my chain around my neck and then they grabbed me by the hair because leading me by the arm was so exquisitely painful, so they took me by the hair and drug me down to some bunker to get interrogated.

QUESTION: What happened to the rest of the crew on the helicopter?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, at that point I thought I was the only survivor and it was an eight man crew. So I was feeling pretty fortunate, actually, and pretty alone. And so I got taken out of that bunker and taken to someplace else. As we were walking between these two experiences, there was this group of Iraqi guys standing around, and this circle of them kind of opened up and they threw me in the middle of it. I went to my knees, and once again, you got to understand, you got two broken arms, you can't catch yourself. I was happy I didn't fall on my face. And I looked up and there was Sergeant Dunlap. Sergeant Dunlap was one of the pathfinders. I've never been so happy to see someone in my whole life. It is amazing how important companionship is on your side. So that was good. As it turned out, there was one other survivor. He didn't get brought to the prison where we were until the next day. But, five guys were killed.

QUESTION: Can you talk about the incident that happened when you were captive?

RHONDA CORNUM: We had been thrown in the back of a truck to get taken to wherever we were going, turned out it was a jail in Basra. And so there was me and Sergeant Dunlap in the back of the truck and about maybe six Iraqi guys. As we're bouncing down the road, one of them decides that this is his opportunity to molest me and tries to unzip my flight suit, which, you know, I have no way to protect myself. He puts his hand down my shirt and tries to get my whole thing off and I can see what's coming. But it hurt so bad when he tried to get my flight suit off my arms that I screamed and he stopped. So it became really obvious at that point that it was not an acceptable behavior for anyone, and if I was going to make noise he wasn't going to do it.

QUESTION: It relates to the fear that society has of putting women in combat.

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I think the fear that society has about that is twofold. One is that a reporter actually asked Sergeant Dunlap what he thought. He said, well, here it comes. And he was going to have a hard time obviously, watching this happen. But he wouldn't have had any easier time watching it happen to another man. And probably the likelihood of it happening is not that different. And no one's trying to prevent men, however, from going into dangerous situations because it might happen. They were trying to prevent women from going into dangerous situations because it might happen, that's all it is. It's an unfortunate and very negative thing, but probably at the hands of the enemy it's not as horrifying as at the hands of supposedly your friends and comrades, and so, it's just another bad thing that the enemy can do

to you. They can do a lot of bad things. They can shoot you, they can kill you, they can torture you, there are a lot of bad things, and this is just one of them. What I said to myself is if it doesn't keep me there longer, it isn't absolutely excruciating, and it doesn't kill me, it probably falls into the B pile of importance.

QUESTION: You said in an interview that the incident didn't really make that big of an impression on you.

RHONDA CORNUM: No. I separate things I want to do into the A, B, and C piles. A I will absolutely do, B I'll do when I have time, C I'll never do. My whole life kind of goes like that, and so if it's really really important, like I was going to get shot again, or I was concerned there was a mock execution, and, you know, you don't know what's a mock execution until the gun at the back of your head gets clicked and it doesn't blow your head off. So if it wasn't one of those kinds of things, then really, I wasn't going to spend a lot of my time on it.

QUESTION: There was a mock execution?

RHONDA CORNUM: Yeah, when Sergeant Dunlap and I were kneeling there facing each other, I was happy that I had seen another American, but at this point the guys take out their pistols, and for all I know it was mine, and put it to the back of our heads and they start shouting, and we think, they're going to kill us. The gun goes off, I mean, the trigger goes click and nothing happens. So they stood us back up and we got taken to the next place. I think the idea was maybe we would talk more at the next place if they did that.

QUESTION: POW life....

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, it's just that you have no control. And that's the hardest thing about it. You just have no control. So what you have to do is find something you can control, and what you can control is what you think about. So I chose to think positive things, like, I was going to be grateful I was a POW, as opposed to being dead. I remember when both my arms were broken, but I remember my finger started moving, I thought, well, they may be pointing the wrong way now, but they'll probably be fixable. When I was in the cell the first night, and I'm taking stock of myself, and I'm realizing I've lost blood somewhere, and I was feeling really weak and dizzy, I thought, well, maybe my spleen got injured, or my liver or kidney or something. Then I remember being grateful that, well, at least I've got enough blood in my circulation to perfuse my kidneys, because I have got to pee. So you just have to find something that you can be grateful for or control. And so, when I was in Baghdad, I said, I don't know how long I'm going to be here, but I'm going to learn some Arabic. You just have to take control of whatever is left to you.

QUESTION: Were you aware before this incident of the nurses that were taken prisoner in World War II?

RHONDA CORNUM: None of the history of women in the Army had ever flashed across my brain. I've learned a lot since then, because I met a lot of them, but I didn't know anything about that at the time.

QUESTION: What were your feelings when you were out of there and reunited with your family?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, certainly I was very grateful, and I was just anxious to get back home and get back to my normal life.

QUESTION: Women were not supposed to be in places where they could get shot at or captured at that time.

RHONDA CORNUM: I thought it was interesting that all of a sudden people asked what I thought about women in combat, because everybody had fears, apparently. I'm not sure if everyone did, but certainly the people in the media did. There seemed to be a lot of attention being paid to the fact that I had in fact been in combat, gotten wounded, gotten captured, gotten out, and what did I think about that experience. And I think there was some hope, in some factions, that I would say, oh, we should never let women go. I thought exactly the same thing I thought before, that you set the standards and whoever meets them does what they want to do. It was an all-volunteer force by the time I was in. So if that's not what you want to do, then don't join the military. I just was amazed that anybody could still think that we should have, you know, rules on gender. I don't think we should change the standards to accommodate people, but I don't think we should discriminate against people because of those types of things. So, I do think that having had the experience and coming through it quite successfully, I did certainly pave the way for combat exclusion for women fighters, you know, the following year.

QUESTION: What happened to the pilot?

RHONDA CORNUM: Oh, Bill Andrews was the guy that we went to go get, and he was captured as well, and he did have a broken leg, and he got taken with us to Baghdad ultimately and we got released at the same time. He went back to flying in fighters, and in fact he flew over Iraq again, in the more recent war. He has since retired and is a professor, I believe, at the National Defense University.

QUESTION: And what did you do after that?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I came back and the first year I went to Air Command and Staff College, which is the mid level education that officers have to go to. I spent a year in that, and that was a good year because I had a lot of time to do physical therapy kinds of things. I went to the gym everyday and got back to my pretty much usual state of fitness. When I first got back I had both arms fixed, then when I could use crutches, I got my leg fixed, and once I could drive and stuff, I went back to work. Then I spent one more year at Fort Rucker being a flight surgeon so that my daughter could graduate from high school, then I went to surgery training in San Antonio.

QUESTION: Was it your idea to go on that mission?

RHONDA CORNUM: Yeah, I was a better trained emergency provider, so if I knew somebody was injured, yeah, I would go. So yeah, I volunteered to go, because I was the right person to take care of the problem that was at the other end.

QUESTION: Mothers were being deployed for the first time in the Persian Gulf War. You are a mom, what kind of special sacrifice does that entail?

RHONDA CORNUM: I think it's really insulting to think that children will miss their mothers more than their fathers, and I think it's equally insulting that fathers will miss their children less than mothers will miss their children. The reason there weren't women sent who were mothers

before, is that if you had children in the prior war, you got kicked out. Even when I came in the service if you got divorced you were kicked out if you were a woman and had custody of your children. That has changed considerably. Yeah, it was interesting they didn't kick men out who were sole parents but they kicked out women.

QUESTION: What sorts of things were women permitted to do in the Gulf War that they couldn't do even when you joined?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, during the Persian Gulf War I think there were a lot of things that happened, like with me. There was not supposed to be a woman assigned at that level. They were supposed to be maintained at the brigade level, or at the division level, but not down to the battalion level. So when we would have some dignitaries come visit, you know, my battalion commander would kind of recommend that maybe I go somewhere, the motor pool or something, so that we wouldn't have them notice that I was there. [LAUGHS]

QUESTION: How did you feel about that?

RHONDA CORNUM: I felt like that was better than getting sent to the division staff, or something, I mean, I knew that I had been assigned there, I had orders that sent me to the 229th Attack Helicopter Battalion, but I knew that there were some not very forward thinking people who would've gone and done something about that, so I was fine with that.

QUESTION: You wanted to be there?

RHONDA CORNUM: I wanted to be there, absolutely. When Iraq invaded Kuwait and I got called that night to ask if I would be willing to go with this unit, because I knew the pilots, and I knew the commander, and we got along well, and they had confidence in me and so I said, sure, I'd be honored to do that.

QUESTION: Things changed dramatically for women after 9/11. What is different now for women?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I think what's different now is that every time a woman does something it's not an exception to a rule. It's not a first. That people are recognizing that women are just like everyone else. There are many who are really good at what they do, and really serving with great courage and distinction, but it isn't something like it's so exciting that it's a girl. I think the biggest difference is they're just considered Soldiers, that most people don't make a distinction anymore, I mean, people don't worry about having a female commander anymore. There used to be some trepidation about that among troops and I think that's gone away. They've realized there's some great female commanders, there's some crummy ones and it has nothing to do with whether they're female. There's great male commanders, and there's some crummy ones and I think people don't spend very much time thinking about it.

QUESTION: For the young people, this is just the way it is.

RHONDA CORNUM: Which I think is a great thing. I mean, you don't find very many men doing some things in our society either. You don't find very many male, I don't know, elementary school teachers. But the fact there aren't very many doesn't mean that we have a law that prevents them. We just let people do what they want to do and are both educationally and physically, and emotionally prepared to do.

QUESTION: What sorts of things are women doing now that they weren't doing 20 years ago?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, they're being surgeons and members of the staff on the forward surgical teams, which they weren't allowed to do originally. Those are the little teams that set up very far forward to do emergency surgery only if someone's not stable enough to be evacuated back to a camp that supports hospitals. They're flying everything we have. They're on submarines as I understand. There are a number of specialties, obviously not the infantry yet, but a number of other specialties that were previously closed. They're pretty much doing whatever they came in to do and they have more choices when they come in.

QUESTION: For the first time we're seeing women suffering combat injuries.

RHONDA CORNUM: Yeah, and I remember the first time there was a female patient who was an amputee who came through Landstuhl because I was the commander in 2003 to 2005, and that was a big emotional event for some of the staff, because they had not seen badly injured women. We had one woman who came in and, I mean, we really thought she was not going to make it. We did everything we could do. She was one of the people that had the part of the skull removed so the brain could swell and not get squished. They had just never seen a case like that in our intensive care unit. And, by the way, we did evacuate her back, and she did walk out of Walter Reed and got married. But it was a big emotional event. Eventually everybody that worked there just sort of said, people come in and go through and we really didn't pay that much attention. But the first couple, it was hard on the staff. I remember talking to a couple of my staff members about that and it's, you know, no sadder, it's just different.

QUESTION: One hundred and fifty plus women have lost their lives in Iraq and Afghanistan. What does that say about the role of women in today's military?

RHONDA CORNUM: I think the fact that we've had 150 women killed in the war says that war is a dangerous occupation, and that we embark on them seriously, realizing that every one of those cases is someone's daughter, someone's girlfriend, someone's wife, someone's mother. But that should be true about every war, because every one of those men that was killed was somebody's son, somebody's husband, somebody's boyfriend, or somebody's dad.

QUESTION: Women have had to fight for the right to fight. What does that struggle say about their determination?

RHONDA CORNUM: Well, I think the women who were in the military in the past were really the heroes of this whole thing, I mean, they just went in against ridiculous odds and were truly discriminated against. You couldn't get VA benefits, you couldn't retire, you couldn't get married, and were restricted to some menial things, and they persevered anyway and got those restrictions lifted, you know, one good example at a time. They were the heroes of this whole thing. I realized that when I participated in the WIMSA Memorial, that we just, who came later, kind of take it for granted that we've always had this. It's kind of like the right to vote. We take it for granted, but you know, women were granted the right to vote after African Americans. So we just take it for granted, which is in some ways a good thing, unless someone tries to reverse it.

QUESTION: Why is a place like WIMSA important?

RHONDA CORNUM: We think WIMSA's important because it documents the history. Many people didn't know women were doing anything important in wartime. So it's important to

document the history that serving the Nation is more than riding a horse with a sword or carrying a rifle.

QUESTION: Is there anything we didn't talk about that should be in this documentary?

RHONDA CORNUM: No. In terms of male versus female, probably the nicest thing anyone ever said to me, complimented me, was my Sergeant Major at the combat support hospital. He was talking to a group of people and he said, you know, there are women that I would like my daughter to grow up to be like, and there are men that I'd like my son to grow up to be like, but I would like both my daughter and my son to grow up to be like Colonel Cornum. As a commander, having the senior enlisted guy in your unit think that about you is about as good as it gets regardless of your gender.