



Photo by David Slone, Times-Union

Women veterans were honored Saturday during the annual Rotors Over Mentone event at the Lawrence D. Bell Aircraft Museum. Pictured (L to R) in front of an American Huey 369 are: RaeAnn Panther, Air Force; Sally Nichols, Navy; Lenora Stump, Army; Rhonda Rife, Army; Jennifer Felzien, Army National Guard; Eugenia "Genie" Nixon Fulkerson, Donut Dollie; and Marjorie Rogers, who worked at the Bowmar factory in Fort Wayne from 1962 to 1964 while men were serving overseas.

Women Veterans Honored At Mentone Annual Event

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served their country in various capacities during wartime over the centuries - from being on the front lines to helping take care of those

who were fighting or working in the factories while men were overseas.

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Saturday morning, during the sixth annual Rotors Over Mentone at the Lawrence D. Bell Aircraft Museum, women veterans were honored for those sacrifices.

Eugenia "Genie" Nixon Fulkerson spoke about being a Donut Dollie from 1968 to 1969, and Rae Ann Panther discussed serving in the Air Force from 1974 to 1981.

"The old, chubby lady you see here today is not the person who joined the military 40 years ago," Panther said. "So, when I was 19, I decided I wanted to join the military because John F. Kennedy said, 'And so my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.'"

Women have always been a part of any conflict, she said, wanting to find the solutions.

"They would follow them to camps, they would follow them and feed them and dress their wounds," she said.

One of the earliest indications of women joining the military was in 1775. She said three women from Massachusetts dressed in men's clothes and served in the military. In 1901, the Women's Nursing Corp was established. In 1972, there was a ratio of 30 men to one woman in the military. By 1976, it was 13 to one, she said.

"So in 1974, when I began my career, I knew I wanted to go into law enforcement. I loved dogs and I decided that this was what going to be what I wanted to do. Fortunately, the military

agreed with me. Unfortunately, they did not have the clothing for us women," Panther said.

Regardless of how the clothing didn't fit, she said she wasn't a fashion model and didn't care what it looked like. She just wanted to serve her country.

She became a drug dog handler and enjoyed it. Her first base was March Air Force Base in California, quite different from her hometown in upstate New York. When she got assigned to Korea, it was even more foreign to her, but she loved everything about it.

Her next base was in Italy, and she found it to be "Heaven on Earth." When she became pregnant, she had to decide if it would be her son or her job, and she chose to be a mom.

"So at the age of 25, I was out of the military and I decided that nursing might be a good idea because in nursing I could go and be a psychiatric nurse or a med-surg nurse or work in school. I could do a lot with this degree. Fortunately, the G.I. Bill did provide me with this education," Panther said.

Concluding her remarks, she said, "We, as Americans, are seeing that there are people who want what we have. And on the other coin's side, there are people that want to take what we have and destroy it. I might be 60 years old, but I'm not going to stand here and let somebody take my country from me. I served, I sacrificed and this is my United States."

She challenged the crowd attending the program to "ask what you can do for your country."

Fulkerson graduated from Indiana University in 1967 with 25 job offers. All the male graduates had to deal with the Draft Board first. She picked a job landing her in Lafayette, writing for a "conservative newspaper editor who gave me job assignments like 'Go find some dirt on the Purdue Peace Union,'" she said. "What kind of assignment was that?"

She also wrote about the graduating Miss Purdue University of 1968, a title recognizing leadership, scholarship and service. The titleholder planned to join the American Red Cross and go to Vietnam as a civilian volunteer.

"A female civilian volunteer in Vietnam? Be part of the major event of my generation?" Fulkerson said. "All we had to do was have a college degree, be under 25, be a wholesome girl-next-door type. We didn't carry a weapon or know how to shoot. We promised to smile every day, staff a recreation center, play games, be a helper, do our best to raise morale and ride helicopters to the combat zone."

She said it was the greatest job in the world. A helicopter would pick the Donut Dollies up at dawn, who were determined to find the 19- and 20-year-old G.I.s in the field.

When the Donut Dollies in their blue uniforms were on scene, the servicemen could relax because they knew their command didn't think anything bad was going to happen for at least the next three hours, she recalled.

"We didn't have to find every Airman or every Mid-

shipman. We often couldn't find any Marines, but we sure tried to reach every Army fighting unit and remind them they were important to a lot of people who weren't able to stand in our shoes," Fulkerson said.

She said the peak of commitment for the Donut Dollies was 1968 to 1969, the years she served.

"Of the 59,000 names on the (Vietnam Veterans Memorial) Wall in Washington, 38,000 are listed for '68 and '69," she said.

Fulkerson said many Donut Dollies had tougher assignments than she did. She never saw blood or a body bag.

"Vietnam was to us a full year of living as commanded to love one another. Everyone we worked to was committed to the well-being of the man standing beside him," Fulkerson said.

She said the Donut Dollies were totally committed to every "man that stood before you," and the sounds of a helicopter could suddenly bring it all back.

Other women who served in the military or during war time also were recognized.

This year also marks the 40th anniversary of the start of the Bell Aircraft Museum. Board Vice President Ron Barker read the names of past and present board members.

The program also included an invocation by Pastor Michael Wilhite; placing of the colors by the American Legion Post 49, Warsaw, colorguard; and a performance of the national anthem by select band members from Tippecanoe Valley High School.