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## A Few Good Women

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PHOTOS BY: Joe Crimmings and Alison Sickelka

For the women of Iowa State Naval ROTC, shooting an M-16 with the guys in the morning and hitting the mall with the girls in the afternoon are just parts of another day.



A small girl in a red Mickey Mouse sweatshirt stands in a field, holding a shotgun. Next to her, a silver-haired man leans over to whisper in her ear. A warm spring breeze blows across the Ohio farmland, pushing long tangled curls onto the little girl's dirt-smudged face. She impatiently brushes them away and tightens her grip on the gun.

"Look, Jacqi. A little to the left of that tree there," Granddad says in his soft-spoken drawl.

The old man in a flannel shirt kneels to be level with the 7-year-old. Granddad has always said all children should know how to use a gun. Or else they can get hurt. He taught her daddy to shoot, and now he works with Jacqi. She is only a few inches taller than the shotgun—her hands can't even reach the trigger. So Granddad helps her lift the gun and rest the stock on top of her shoulder.

"There. See the fox?" Granddad whispers.

The little girl nods and presses her cheek against the gun butt. She squints down the barrel of the gun. Jacqi draws in a deep breath and holds it, her cheeks puffed out. She grips the gun, straggling to keep it steady, as her eyes focus on the sight. She pulls hard on the trigger.

The recoil of the gun throws Jacqi backward, almost knocking her off her feet. Granddad catches her before she falls to the ground. Jacqi giggles as the fox, startled but unscathed, runs away. The foxes always get away. She has trouble steadying the gun while pulling on the trigger. But it doesn't matter. Jacqi just enjoys shooting—the power of the gun, the thrill of firing, and being able to do it (mostly) by herself.

This desire for action and the thrill of being independent remains strong in Jacqi as she grows older. When it comes time for Jacqi to choose a college, Granddad suggests she look into universities with ROTC programs because the military could provide her opportunities for action and independence. She decides that a military career could be a great fit, so when she enrolls at Iowa State, she joins the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps.

Jacqi is among a small group of female students involved in military programs at Iowa State. Out of 79 students in Naval ROTC, she is one of only 11 women. The women face the challenge of being part of an overwhelming minority, preparing for a career that has for so long been male dominated. Despite these obstacles, they see a future for themselves in the military, and they're taking the first step in that future here in Ames. For each woman, however, there's a unique story explaining how she got to this point.

The distant rumble grows louder as it approaches. Seven-year-old Amy Christy dashes out of the woods to the clearing by her house. Her brothers jump from the tree house and join her. She looks up, scanning the clear Virginia sky. "There! Look!" Her green eyes widen in wonder and amazement as an airplane flies overhead. Amy and her brothers jump up and down, waving their arms.

Every afternoon a Concorde, the fastest commercial plane in the world, flies over Amy's house toward the airport. She knows this plane is special. Amy never misses a chance to see it. She wonders if the people on board can see her. She wishes she could see them. She imagines them sitting in a cabin decorated like a fancy restaurant. From the ground, the plane looks like the size of a quarter to Amy. It must be very high, in space even. How did it get up that high? Amy wonders if the people on board could see the stars. Some day, she promises herself, she will find out.

Planes continue to fascinate Amy as she grows older. During the summers, she volunteers at air shows—directing planes, cleaning runways. Before her senior year of high school, she spends a week at the Air Force Academy. And it only reaffirms what Amy has known for years: she wants to become a pilot.

**Amy** takes her place alongside five other girls in front of the giant mirror. She dabs on a little makeup. **She still wants to look feminine while in uniform. Cute and professional.**





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That's why when Amy enrolled at Iowa State, she also joined the Naval ROTC program—her first step in ending up in a cockpit someday.

During her first week at Iowa State, Jacqi attends NROTC freshman orientation. It's an opportunity for her to get acquainted with the program and meet some of her peers. There are 30 freshmen starting NROTC—Jacqi is one of only two women in the group. All the freshmen are paired up with a NROTC upperclassman who serve as their mentor during the year. Amy is assigned to be Jacqi's mentor. The two hang out on the weekends and quickly become good friends. And over the course of that first year, Amy helps Jacqi adjust to the nuances of both college and military life, including early-morning physical training.

*Beep-beep-beep-beep.* Amy quickly switches off her alarm, not wanting it to wake any of her sorority sisters sleeping nearby. 5:40 a.m.—Only five hours of sleep. A cool breeze drifts through the room's open windows. Now for the hardest part of getting up: putting bare feet on the cold tile floor. Amy tiptoes between the rows of bunks. Fifty other women, the slumbering sisters of the Kappa Alpha Theta sorority, are wrapped in bright-color comforters and fuzzy blankets in the beds around her. Not one stirs.

The house is unusually quiet as she rushes downstairs to get ready. It's Tuesday, so, just as she does three times every week, Amy has morning physical training at the Rec. She quickly changes into her Navy exercise gear, bounds down the stairs, and jumps into her car.

Physical training begins promptly at 6 a.m. with stretches. Amy and the other students in her battalion are lined up in neat rows on the green turf, bending over to loosen their hamstrings. Following the stretching, the midshipmen have a mile-and-a-half run. Amy sings in her head to keep pace—*You can do it, put your back into it*—pushing herself to improve her time. She figures there is no point in getting out of bed this early and not getting a good workout.

Next, the midshipmen rotate through 75 push-ups and 150 crunches. During their rest periods, they shout encouragement to each other. Amy breezes through the crunches—push-ups are her weakness. She slows as she nears the end of her set, her muscles growing tired. One of the guys in her unit drops beside her, matching her push-up for push-up while cheering her on. "Come on, Amy, you can do it. Just five more." Amy grits her teeth and powers through the last five. After a two-lap cool down and more stretches, a sweat-covered Amy heads back to her sorority house.

It's just after 7 a.m. by the time she gets home. Amy has class in less than an hour. She rushes upstairs to hop in the shower. A few women with 8 a.m. classes are stumbling out of bed and into

the bathroom, sleepy-eyed in pink pajamas and fuzzy slippers.

Amy finishes showering and heads to her room. Opposite of her desk and white dresser is her closet, a third of which is devoted solely to her uniforms. She pulls one of the uniforms out and dresses. Brightly shined shoes. Perfectly pressed black pants. A black uniform coat closed over a starched white shirt and bowtie.

Dressed, she heads back to the bathroom. "Ooh, you're in your spiffy uniform today!" says one of Amy's sorority sisters who passes her in the hall. Amy takes her place alongside five other girls in front of the giant bathroom mirror. She pulls her wet, shoulder-length hair into a bun and dabs on a little makeup. She still wants to look feminine while in uniform. Cute and professional. The women around her are all dolled-up, with hair curled, eyelids lined, the works. Hair spray hangs in the air as the group crowds the mirror.

Now ready, Amy rushes downstairs and out the door. Class starts in 15 minutes, and she has to catch the bus to her building. It's just the beginning of a long day.

All Naval ROTC students are expected to carry a strenuous course load, and they have to possess a strong math and science base. The students on scholarship, such as Amy and Jacqi, have to take calculus I and II and physics 221 and 222. All NROTC students have to take all the naval science classes. These requirements are in addition to the classload the students take for their specific majors.

After her morning classes, Jacqi heads over to the Armory for required study hours. Two of the guys in her unit are lounging on the couch in front of the TV, zoned into ESPN. One looks up and smiles. He has to give Jacqi some shit.

"Is that shirt appropriate, Chilcoat? Showing a little skin?"

"Oh, you know you like it," she says, laughing.

The guys always have a comment or two. Jacqi is the only female midshipmen in her class, and there are no women in the class below her. As a result, she's often treated like a little sister. The NROTC guys can be very protective. The previous Saturday night at a house party, Jacqi was dancing with a guy she had met earlier in the evening. After the song ended, one of the guys in the unit pulled her aside and said, "You shouldn't be dancing with that one. He's no good." Jacqi's status as the only woman in her grade in ROTC also causes the men to treat her differently in other ways. If the guys are having problems with their girlfriends, they talk to Jacqi. If they're having trouble deciding what to wear or what clothes match, they talk to Jacqi. And when the unit wanted signs to post around the Armory before the Army-Navy football game, they asked Jacqi to

make them because she has better handwriting.

The experience of being one of the few women in a group of men isn't an experience Jacqi and Amy will leave behind after graduation. Currently, the active duty Navy is 14.8 percent women, while 20 percent of the Naval Reserves are women. And for Amy at least, that reality is something she will deal with in the not-too-distant future.

The next morning, Amy and Jacqi meet at the Armory and climb in Amy's car for a quick trip to Starbucks before their 8 a.m. class. As they drive out of the parking lot, Amy mentions that she's stressed out over the three-hour flight exam she is taking later that day. The exam is part of the application process for flight school. She wants to become a helicopter pilot who flies search-and-rescue or support missions—flights that do not involve direct combat.

All this thinking about the future has Amy wondering if Jacqi has given any more thought to what she wants to do after school. She knows Jacqi is interested in medicine and wouldn't shy away from combat.

"What kind of medical service do you want to provide?"

"Emergency medicine. It'd be cool to be on a warship and get to travel all over. Plus if you can help a soldier to be able to fight another day, you're helping more people because he's protecting his country."

"What? Did you read that out of a brochure? You dork."

"Shut up. Well what do you want to do – fly helicopters? Oooo, look at me, I can fly!"

The girls laugh as they head inside for coffee. Amy orders a mocha, while Jacqi goes with a cappuccino. The conversation resumed as they headed back to the armory.

"It would be awesome to be land based but get to go out to sea" Amy says. She thinks this arrangement would make it easier for her to both fly and raise a family. For all women in the military, the family question can be particularly perplexing.

"Jacqi, do you ever think about having a family and being in the Navy – that kind of stuff?"

"Not really," Jacqi said. "I mean, I want to have a family eventually. But I want to do what I want to do first. Having kids is a huge thing. I'm only 19. Do I have to focus on that? I'll get around to it when I get around to it. I wouldn't mind being 40 or so before I start a family."

While the future may not be perfectly clear for either Jacqi or Amy, both of them know the Navy is going to be a challenging but integral part. It's still a male-dominated field, but these women will definitely make their mark. **e**

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