

# Janey

## Women Warriors of Iraq & Afghanistan

### Victorious Woman - November 2010



Nearly every culture associates men and masculinity with leadership, fighting for one's rights, and even gun ownership. So what does it mean when women are warriors and heroes?

*Women warriors?* The words fly in the face of typical descriptions of women who are often portrayed as relatively helpless and in need of a man or the government to survive. *Women heroes?* Hero isn't quite the word usually used to describe brave, strong women.

Between cultural constraints and the media, the subtle but clear message about men and women has always been that only men can *and should* be aggressive, competitive and willing to fight for their values and beliefs. "Where does that leave women?" wondered author Laura Browder.

Browder found answers in the over fifty interviews and conversations she had with women combat veterans for in her book, *When Janey Comes Marching Home*, with photographs by Sascha Pflaeging. In it Browder shines the light on our fighting women who currently serve in the U.S. military, or who have served, in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So what does woman warrior and hero "Janey" look like? According to Browder, women who serve in combat deal with the same problems that challenge nearly every other woman in the world has regarding motherhood, marriage, power, strength, guilt, sexism, and judgment. The similarities surprised Sergeant First Class Keisha Williams who got to know some Iraqi women, and said, "It made me realize we all have the same common ground, no matter what we believe. We all want to take care of our families; we want a better life, to be healthy, to live each day to the fullest." And yet, Browder says, because of Janey's military service, "The issues they are dealing with are not only difficult but so complex." The Janey interviews showed the multi-faceted aspects of their problems, and Browder says she "became emotionally drawn in by the realization."

Many people wonder what makes a Janey join the armed forces. Browder found that for some it was an almost natural choice. Master Sergeant Lisa Whipple was a tomboy as a kid. When in junior high, during Desert Storm, she listened to the news and thought about the bravery of the soldiers. She says she "realized that those were the people that were making our country great...and I wanted to be able to do that." So she joined the Air Force. Captain When Carla Campbell was six years old, the United States invaded Grenada. The soldiers inspired her and she decided then to become one of them; Carla joined the Army shortly after turning eighteen.

But it was different for other women. Sergeant Jocelyn Proano was born and raised in a New Jersey ghetto. She said she was always getting in trouble before joining the Marines. She admits she joined because she "just wanted to get out, get some adventure, travel, go out to war, do the whole nine." On the other hand, Staff Sergeant Phyllis Magee-Lindsay was married with two children when she joined the army shortly before turning



thirty-five. By then she'd earned a master's degree and worked at the National Archives in Washington DC and the SC Department of Archival History. She enlisted because her second child had considerable medical needs and she needed a job that would pay health care. She got in just under the age limit; they called her "Grandma Lindsey."

Initially Browder wondered if Janey is marginalized by the masculine nature of the military? Browder thought she would be, but to her surprise, that isn't the case. According to Judith Matteson, director of the U.S. Army Women's Museum, that's only because there's a need for soldiers. She told Browder, "The military never changes its attitudes toward women because it wants to – only because it has to."

In the military, Janey learns to speak up and stand up for herself. She says that the military experience "creates a real sense of identity" because it demands that Janey knows who she is and her purpose in life. First Sergeant Shirley Wright figured it out pretty fast. She was one of only three women in "a big warehouse full of infantry men...sleeping cot to cot." She tells other women to stay in control and ignore what the men say. She warns them, "If you let them manage you, they're gonna keep doing it. And for a woman in the military, you have to stand your ground: 'No, I'm not a piece of meat...I'm a soldier. I deserve your respect. And I still deserve your respect as a woman.'"

Unfortunately, women in the military still have to deal with sexism. Staff Sergeant Debra Fulk worked with a male first sergeant who she believes didn't have a lot of experience with women subordinates. Fulk thinks he didn't know how to handle her and admits she "ended up getting a reduction in rank" for standing up for herself. Fulk eventually earned her rank back, but it was an uphill battle because she says there are plenty of men who have the same mentality about women.

When Sergeant First Class Gwendolyn Lawrence was deployed she was a fairly new bride and a new mother. She says it was really tough. Her rank was unfairly knocked down and she fought for two years to get it back. She agrees that there is considerable sexism in the military, and wonders, "Why do we, as females, got to keep re-proving and re-proving ourselves?" But she also says that when a Janey succeeds, other women notice. "We jump for joy," Lawrence says, "Because we're saying to those who went before – your prayers ain't in vain. It's slow, *but it ain't in vain.*"



The strong feminist attitude becomes common to Janey, especially during deployment. Without it, the interdependence the soldiers need to survive becomes severely compromised; injury and even death easily becomes a very likely outcome. But because women become so self-sufficient and confident in themselves and their abilities and because, as Browder says, "no one comes home without wounds," there are many reasons why the return to civilian life challenges Janey:

**Marriage and Relationships:** The divorce rate among women returning from deployment is three times higher than that of men. When Janey returns from combat, very often her spouse or partner presumes she'll be the same person who left; that is never the case. They also presume Janey will be satisfied with the previous status quo; she usually isn't. For example, the spouses of both Sergeant Shirley Wright and Sergeant First Class Lawrence told them to choose the army or their marriage. Neither could understand why their spouses refused to adjust, and both resented having to choose one or the other; they chose the Army.

**Motherhood:** When Janey joins the military, and especially since 9/11, she usually understands that her job takes her away from her family for a year or more at a time. While Janey is comfortable seeing herself as a soldier first and woman second, that attitude doesn't always sit

well with others. Unlike a generally sympathetic attitude toward men who leave their families for war, there is little sympathy woman who deploy, especially when it's a second or third tour of duty. So while dealing with all the gut-wrenching emotions related to being away from her loved ones, Janey also has to deal with judgments levied from all sides: family, friends, neighbors, media, and more. In addition, when Janey returns, she isn't given the same respect-for-service usually given to men who return from combat.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): While the military finally addresses PTSD for veterans, when returning from the field, Janey doesn't feel comfortable acknowledging to anyone that she might be – *or is* – suffering from PTSD. It seems that while Janey is just as affected by the horrors of war as any of the men, she seems to be expected to take it in stride. That expectation makes Janey feel strongly judged. It's as though other's think that because she's a mom who is back with her children that should wipe out everything else. As a result, Janey seems to be afraid that if she admits to PTSD she'll be seen as an unfit mother. So Janey keeps her feelings inside and doesn't get help, although she thinks it's unfair. That inequality was also recognized by reporter Joshua Kors, telling Browder, "A lot of the men tell me that when they're about to explode, they leave the house, get themselves away from their children, and come back when they're ready to deal." But Kors acknowledges, "Women don't have that luxury."

Leadership: Browder says that she was most impressed by how much Janey thinks about values and leadership. Being grounded in values and skilled at leadership can be the difference between life and death – for Janey and those in her command. Browder said the women often ask themselves how they can better live by their values and improve their leadership style. Army Staff Sergeant Shawntel Lotson learned that when deployed "the soldiers wanted to feel like they were safe...had family away from their family." Lotson's style allowed for that support because she says if she didn't, "They won't do for you...where soldiers get treated badly, they have no respect for their leadership."



Finally, not every Janey has been in favor of the war in which she fought. But everyone who has been deployed knows how important it is to know they are supported by the citizens whose freedom they are defending. So no matter how she felt about the fight, every Janey asked Laura Browder to make sure she delivered one clear message: **SUPPORT THE TROOPS!**

As of today, there are over 225,000 women currently serving in the U.S. Military and 1.8 million women veterans. Among U.S. military women serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, 121 have died. Each November the United States honors its military warriors, both with a single day of remembrance (Veterans Day) and throughout the month in ceremonies both large and small.

**The Victorious Woman Project honors all our military men and women. This month we also pay special tribute to every Janey who is or who has served. We thank you for your service and your many sacrifices.**

**May God bless you, keep you safe  
and return you to a life of health and happiness.**

When Janey Comes Marching Home: Portraits of Women Combat Veterans includes a gallery show, book, and documentary film by author Laura Browder and photographer Sascha Pflaeging. It includes pictures and oral histories of fifty-two women who fight for the freedom of the United States citizens. Learn more at <http://janeycomeshome.com>.