

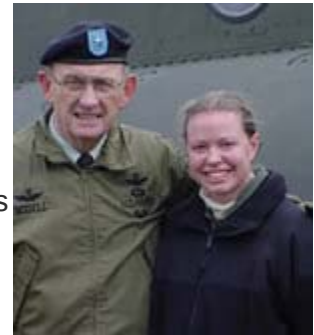


Sherri Sharpe '99 Lands Military Helicopter on Campus

By Dawn Medley

2004-01-23

The crowd that had gathered on the slope above Mary Baldwin's lower athletic field heard it before they saw it. Then the large Chinook helicopter — as big as a bus, its two sets of long blades churning — appeared, completing its journey from Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia. The waiting Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership cadets knew who was at the controls: one of their own, Army Capt. Sherri Sharpe '99, who had made far tougher landings in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. No one was shooting at her this time. "The things she has been able to do after graduation are the things that show us we can have our choice of jobs in the military," said freshman cadet Jasmine Padua, holding onto her uniform hat to keep it from blowing away in the bitter wind Thursday, January 22.



Sharpe, who flew combat duty in Afghanistan and, most recently, Iraq, has been back to Mary Baldwin several times to talk to students and share her experience. This was her first trip to campus in the cockpit of the U.S. military's biggest helicopter: 50 feet long and weighing 13 tons. "We've been trying to get the helicopter here for three years now," said a smiling Sharpe, wearing Army green. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Sharpe shuttled supplies, including food, water, ammunition and mail, from Kuwait into neighboring Iraq. She volunteered for the dangerous assignment, which sometimes included transporting soldiers and Marines killed in action back from the front lines. "The fact that she has done two tours in just four years is inspiring," said senior VWIL cadet Betsy Torres. "That's not a common thing."



As a Marine reserves member, Torres has seen a Chinook up close before, but she had her first ride in the aircraft Thursday. She joined Sharpe and several other cadets for a trip to Virginia Military Institute where Sharpe planned to speak at a student chapter meeting of the Army Aviation Association of America. Unlike Torres, most people have seen Chinooks only on television news flying through the Iraqi desert or in desolate stretches of mountainous Afghanistan. Dozens of area residents slowed their vehicles and stopped to talk with Sharpe and tour the helicopter during its stop in Staunton.

In April, Sharpe was profiled on NBC's "Today Show" as part of a segment on women in the Iraq war. That tour was likely not her last, though. She said she expects to complete an advanced aviation course and be deployed to Iraq again in 2005. "I want to keep flying these things for a long time," she said.



[Professor Gordon Bowen Web site](#)

