

MARTINSVILLE BULLETIN

Captain to address roles of past, present and future soldiers

Sherri Sharpe to be keynote speaker at Veterans Day ceremony Saturday



Capt. Sherri Sharpe stands in front of a Chinook CH 47 D helicopter she commanded in Iraq.

Sunday, November 2, 2008

By HOLLY KOZELSKY - Bulletin Accent Editor

Today's soldiers face a very different situation than those of generations past, said Captain Sherri Sharpe, but they could stand to learn a few lessons from their predecessors.

Sharpe will be the keynote speaker Saturday at the Martinsville-Henry County Veterans Day Ceremony, which will be held at 11 a.m. at Martinsville Middle School.

Veterans from World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam, among other wars, are expected to come to the event. "The combat they saw and the combat I've seen are far different things, and their stories are far different than mine," Sharpe said.

"I feel very honored to be in the same room with some of those people." She said that today's recruits voluntarily enter the military expecting to go to war. It wasn't always that way in the past.

"The veterans of wars gone by didn't have a choice," she said. "Many were drafted. Some did volunteer (in times of peace), but then there was an attack on the country."

Sharpe entered the military before the attacks of Sept. 11. "War was not even on the radar. I never imagined that I would go to combat," she said.

"The kids (now) who are raising their right hand and taking that oath know what the future holds for them: Going into battle. ... It says a lot about their courage and their moral fiber that they're even taking the oath," she commented.

Combat has changed, she said, but so has the value placed on family.

Sharpe said that she thinks soldiers of wars past had much stronger family ties and dedication than today.

"In my little gap of the generation, divorce is very common in the military," she said, whereas in the past, "family was central." Soldiers knew they could serve their duty and then "come home to their family."

"Being able to separate your professional life from your personal life, and appreciate what you have in life" is the key to keeping family strong despite the separations and trials military families endure, she said.

"Being able to serve your country, then come home and move on with your life, is a lesson they (today's soldiers) need to draw from" (the soldiers of the past).

Sharpe, 31, is a 1995 graduate of the pioneer class of Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership at Mary Baldwin College, where she now serves on the board of trustees. The program began with 42 students, she said, but only 22 graduated.

Sharpe served in leadership positions in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2003 and has earned an array of medals and commendations. She was a CH-47D/F Chinook Heavy Lift Helicopter Company Commander.

The Chinook is "the biggest helicopter with two rotors," said Lt. Col. Ret. David King, the ROTC teacher at Martinsville High School and coordinator of Saturday's ceremony. "You don't have a physical command of that unless you have the moral courage and physical ability to do that."

Sharpe gave up command Dec. 27 and moved from Texas to Virginia, where she now is a Military Science III Branch Chief at the Virginia Military Institute, where she teaches ROTC. She was selected in August for eventual promotion to major.

"Aside from missing the helicopter, in many ways it's totally the same. I'm still working with soldiers, maybe (they are only) cadets but still (they are) officers in training." The classes are fast-paced and the group is tight-knit, she said.

"It still keeps me on my toes, but it's different to be on the other side of the podium." Now that she has "more free time," she is working on her master's degree through Norwich University. She also recently completed her second marathon, this one with the Marine Corps in Washington, D.C.

Her father, Doug Sharpe, is retired from the Henry County Sheriff's Office. He then spent two years training Iraqi police officers in Iraq. He returned from that mission in July. He and his wife, Shirley, live in Martinsville.

Sherri's mother and stepfather are Pat and Phil Handy of Martinsville. Her younger brother Stephen still lives in Martinsville.

The ceremony Saturday will color guards from the county and city sheriff's offices and the Martinsville Police Department. Albert Harris students will participate, as well, to the backdrop of more than 20 historic service flags and 10 flags from veterans organizations.