

Press Kit

Women At War
Forgotten Veterans
of
Desert Storm

A documentary film by
Christie Davis & Dennis Davis

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TRT: 77 minutes

Format: Digital Video, shooting

Exhibition: Digital Video, SD

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

The feature documentary "Women At War: Forgotten Veterans of Desert Storm" takes an intimate look at women soldiers' wartime experiences on the toxic battlefields of 1991's Operation Desert Storm and their heartbreaking battles with Gulf War illnesses since they've returned home. Carol Williams and three other female veterans fight the Veterans Administration for proper treatment and benefits in their search for answers to their mysterious Gulf War illnesses. They wonder why they've

been abandoned by the government they've risked their lives to serve. Over twenty years later, their war isn't over.

250 WORD SYNOPSIS

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Ten years in the making, this film is told through veterans' interviews, never-before-seen archival footage and present day vérité scenes. "Women At War" weaves a story of empowerment as these women veterans become activists in Washington, DC, fighting for veterans' funding. Many are physically disabled by their "invisible" illnesses. Despite their physical damage, they enter research trials at Georgetown University and lay their bodies on the line during vigorous Gulf War illness testing at the Miami, Florida VA. These female veterans discover healing when they offer up their experiences to help other veterans.

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Of the 697,000 U.S. troops who fought in 1991's Gulf War, more than 40,000 were women. At that time, it was the largest deployment of women in U.S. history. Operation Desert Storm was a toxic battlefield where Scud missiles exploded, chemical alarms went off, oil well fires turned day into night and there was the smell of ammonia in the air. And there was no rear line—women soldiers drove trucks, were MPs and found themselves in combat situations, vowing not to go back to their children in body bags.

Despite secret shots and pills soldiers were forced to take, often causing them to become ill, these women did their jobs, because it was their opportunity to put into use all of their military training. They did not expect to find that sexual assault and rape by other soldiers were part of the hazards of war.

1991's Operation Desert Storm was "quick, very, very quick." Carol Williams, the main character of the film, comments: "When we came home we had all the parades, we were heroes. And now we're sick, nobody pays us any attention." Confined to a wheelchair with multiple illnesses, Carol struggles to keep up her spirits and be outgoing, despite her condition and her fights with the Veterans Administration that wants to deny her benefits. Being the only female patient in her local VA hospital only adds to her difficulties.

Gulf War illnesses affect over 250,000 of the soldiers who served in 1991's Operation Desert Storm. It is a multiple symptom illness that includes persistent memory problems, chronic headaches, widespread pain, gastrointestinal problems and other chronic abnormalities. The veterans' physical complaints are often dismissed as "it's all in your head" or "stress."

In a search for answers as to why she keeps falling, Carol Williams travels to Washington, DC and joins a research project at Georgetown University Hospital that's trying to discover a marker for Gulf War illness. There she meets up with Julia Dyckman, who was in the same unit as Carol during the Gulf War and suffers from similar illnesses. Dr. James Baraniuk, head of the research project, has discovered that spinal fluid contains a protein that may be helpful in diagnosing Gulf War illnesses. Carol and Julia undergo lumbar punctures, known as spinal taps, and offer their spinal fluid for the research effort.

Gulf War veteran Denise Nichols is also in Washington, DC looking for the truth behind Gulf War illnesses at a meeting of the VA's Research Advisory Committee, charged with funding worthwhile Gulf War illness projects. She implores the committee that the veterans need their help, with so many Gulf War veterans now sick and dying. Denise is joined on Capitol Hill by fellow Gulf War veterans' advocate, Venus Hammack, in seeking votes for Gulf War illness funding. Denise comments, "We're not paid lobbyists. We're not getting paid travel and expenses. We're here with the heart and soul, trying to make a difference." They meet with Congressmen, including John Lewis of Georgia, in a push for continued committee hearings into the truth behind Gulf War illnesses.

At the Miami, Florida VA, Carol joins with Denise and Venus in a research project run by Dr. Nancy Klimus, exploring the possible genetic origins of Gulf War illnesses. The three female veterans, hooked up to IV's monitoring their blood and a computer tracking their respiration, each embark upon a strenuous stationary bicycle experiment to monitor their physical responses. Denise and Venus, tired and exhausted, make it through the bike ordeal. But Carol, determined to be a part of the research project, faces her greatest test yet.

At the end of the film, remembering the recent history of the Agent Orange exposures in Vietnam and World War II's nuclear bomb experiments on U.S. GIs, these Desert Storm women veterans passionately cry out for truth in Gulf War illnesses: end the cover-ups and give veterans the help they deserve and need. As Carol says, "If we could just get some justice, we'd be alright."

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The journey began ten years ago when my partner/husband, Dennis Davis and I went to a convention in Atlanta, GA of Desert Storm veterans suffering from Gulf War illness. There we met the eight main women in our film. An immediate and personal bond of trust was formed—these veterans blossomed on camera and told us stories of their lives as Desert Storm soldiers and now as sick veterans. These interviews have become the heart of the film.

Carol Williams, a mother of two and often in a wheelchair, soon became the focus of the film with her outspoken observations and outrage at how the VA system is mistreating female Gulf War veterans. She opened her home to us in Macon, GA and was able to share the most intimate and personal details of her life on camera.

Since we started filming "Women At War: Forgotten Veterans of Desert Storm," the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have seen more women serving in the military

under combat conditions. The modern military is comprised of approximately 15% women. When they come home, they face problems with homelessness, PTSD, and suicide as did their Operation Desert Storm fellow veterans. It's tragic that so little has changed for women veterans and veterans as a whole in the past 20 years.

During the filming, I saw first hand how the VA has mistreated the female veterans in our film over the years and made it a mission to convey the women's sense of betrayal and outrage to an audience.

The struggles and stories of these women veterans are being told for the first time. Female veterans often fade into the woodwork when they come home. But these Gulf War women are on the front lines with their outspoken words, courageous actions, loyalty, and sacrifice. Over twenty years later, their war is not over. Like the myth of Sisyphus, they keep pushing that rock up the mountain and start over again when it falls to earth. A disturbing and appalling metaphor of these brave and relentless female Gulf War veterans who battle on, with broken bodies, determined to win their war.

Their strength and courage has inspired me as a director. I feel honored to be able to give voice to these veterans' continuing struggle and I share Carol's hope—"if we could just get some justice, we'd be alright."

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CREDITS

Written & Directed by

Christie Davis

Produced by

Christie Davis and Dennis Davis

Director of Photography

Dennis Davis

Editor

Dennis Davis

Original Music

Dennis Davis

CAST

Carol Williams

Denise Nichols

Venus Hammack

Julia Dyckman

Rose Evans

Vanessa Jackson

Brenda Gomez

Shary Sheerin

Maureen Holland

FEATURING

Georgetown University Hospital

Dr. James N. Baraniuk

Murugan K. Ravindran

Vance Watson

Washington, DC

Congressman John Lewis

Congressman Ed Perlmutter

Miami VA hospital

Dr. Nancy Klimas, MD

Lottie Cason

Anita Potter

Dr. Arthur La Perrioe

Carl Vinson VAMC, Dublin, GA

Betty S. Line

Rhode Island Women's Memorial

General Wilma Vaught

Veterans Support Food Bank, Warwick, Rhode Island

Joseph Debritto Jr.

Wayne Huff

Macon, GA

Dr. Harvey Jones

Amy L. Danielly

M.H. Hammond Jr.

Carol's family, Macon, GA

Stanley Williams

Matthew Brereton

Carolyn Simmons

Archival footage and photos

Department of Defense

Julia Dyckman

Kristen Miller

“Sun’s Gonna Rise”

Written by Ruth Moody

Performed by The Wailin’ Jennys

Courtesy of The Wailin’ Jennys

Additional music

Footage Finders

Additional footage

Jordan Davis

Grants

Roy W. Dean Grant

Fiscal Sponsor

International Documentary Association

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FILMMAKER BIOS

CHRISTIE DAVIS (Director/Writer/co-Producer)

Filmmaker Christie Davis lives in Los Angeles, CA. Currently, she and husband/partner Dennis Davis are releasing their first feature, “Women At War: Forgotten Female Veterans of Desert Storm,” a documentary that explores women veterans’ experiences during 1991’s Desert Davis Storm and their subsequent battles with Gulf War illnesses. The film won the Roy W. Dean Grant, awarded to films that are “unique and make a contribution to society.”

It is currently screening at film festivals and special events.

The 2005 documentary short “Beyond Babylon,” which Christie wrote, directed and co-produced with Dennis Davis, looks at the true cost of war from 536 BC to the war in Iraq. The award-winning film screened at festivals around the world including Los Angeles International Short Film Festival, Expresión en Corto, DC Independent Film Festival, and Vision Fest '06 in NYC. “Beyond Babylon” is included on Academy Award Winner (“The Panama Deception”) Barbara Trent’s DVD of her short film “Soldiers Speak Out” and is part of her filmmakers collective www.GoodFilms.org.

In addition, Christie is developing the narrative feature “Breach of Honor” (Nicholl Fellowships Quarter Finalist, Carl Sautter Semi-Finalist, Sundance Institute Finalist), a war story/thriller about Gulf War veterans. Her narrative short film, “Friendly Fire,” about a veteran with Gulf War illnesses screened at several film festivals. “Jesús,” a music video by Christie Davis and Dennis Davis, won an AFI/SONY “Visions of America” video award.

DENNIS DAVIS (Director of Photography/Editor/Composer, co-Producer)

Dennis Davis is a multi-talented cinematographer, editor, musician, composer, singer-songwriter. Currently, he's the DP, editor and composer for the documentary feature "Women At War: Forgotten Veterans of Desert Storm."

In addition, he shot, edited and composed the score for "Beyond Babylon," a documentary short that screened at film festivals world-wide. His song "Regret To Inform" plays under the end credits of Barbara Trent's documentary short "Soldiers Speak Out." As co-owner of Chris/Den Productions, he's filmed many award-winning theatrical productions including Julie Harris's "Belle of Amherst." Dennis won an AFI/SONY "Visions of America" award for the music video "Jesús."

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CAST BIOS

CAROL WILLIAMS

Petty Officer, U.S. Navy

Carol is disabled with Gulf War illnesses and home bound 80% of the time. A mother of two children, she currently she lives in Macon, GA with her husband Stanley. "He has never been in the military but he says he sees combat everyday since he's been taking care of me." Carol is a Gulf War veteran who served 12 years in the military.

DENISE NICHOLS

Major, U.S. Air Force

Denise has been a tireless veterans' advocate on the frontlines of Gulf War issues since the early 1990s. She's testified before Congress and pushed for continued medical research on Gulf War illnesses. A retired Air Force flight nurse with a Masters degree, she served in the Vietnam era and during 1991's Operation Desert Storm. "It's a twenty year war so far. I ask how much longer?" Denise lives in Denver, CO.

VENUS HAMMACK

Sergeant, U.S. Army

Venus has been a Gulf War veterans advocate for twenty years representing sick veterans interests before Congress and the Veterans Administration. She served in the military for 24 years during the Vietnam era and 1991's Gulf War. "During the war, soldiers were given shots and pills without their consent; in research trials at least they give us consent forms to be guinea pigs." Venus lives in Lowell, MA.

JULIA DYCKMAN

Captain, U.S. Navy

Julia served over 30 years in the military. In Vietnam, she was a nurse aboard the USS Sanctuary, a hospital ship. For the past twenty years, she's testified before Congress and the Institute of Medicine on behalf of other sick Gulf War veterans. "We Gulf War veterans need to improve our quality of life even if we never get totally better." Julia lives in Harrisburg, PA.

ROSE EVANS

Sergeant, U.S. Army

Rose grew up in a military family and served 21 years from the Vietnam era until 1991's Gulf War. She has helped other veterans as a member of the Rhode Island Veterans Food Bank and Women's Memorial Committee. Although she suffers from PTSD, "When 9/11 hit I wanted to go back to war but because of my mental and physical state I was told I couldn't." Rose lives in Rhode Island.

VANESSA JACKSON

Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps

Vanessa is a Gulf War veteran who served 8 years on active duty in the U.S. Marine Corps. When she came home from Operation Desert Storm, she became a counselor for homeless veterans at the Veterans Resource Center, sponsored by the Black Veterans For Social Justice, Brooklyn, NY.

BRENDA GOMEZ

Sergeant, U.S. Army

Brenda served in the military for 12 years as a Motor Transport Operator. She has been involved with veterans groups and concerns in Rhode Island, including DAV, VFW and service on the Advisory Council for the Veterans Affairs Committee, Rhode Island House, despite her disabilities from the Gulf War.

SHARY SHEERIN

Sergeant, U.S. Army

Shary was a supply and chemical specialist in the Army where she served for 19 years. She lives in North Carolina.

MAUREEN HOLLAND

Colonel, U.S. Army

Maureen supervised 2,000 nurses during Operation Desert Storm. As the Providence Journal wrote, “By the time she came home she’d earned a Bronze Star and the respect of the Saudi military.” The colonel serves as an advocate for female veterans in her home state, Rhode Island.

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PRODUCTION NOTE

VA Helps Veterans—When A Camera Crew Is Around

In “Women At War: Forgotten Veterans of Desert Storm,” there’s a serio-comedic scene of our main character, Carol Williams, at the Veterans Administration’s Hospital in Dublin, GA, trying to get a prescription filled.

The female clerk outlines the entire bureaucratic ordeal, including committees, Carol would have to go through to get her prescription. In the end, even though she had made a special trip, Carol wasn’t able to pick up her prescription and would have to go see her doctor again. It was a mind-blowing display of the obstacles a veteran has to go through just to fill a prescription for a skin condition.

Off-camera, as we were leaving the VA parking lot, a VA person ran up to the car and handed Carol her filled prescription through the car window! Obviously the powers-that-be at the VA medical center didn’t want us showing that Carol had an unproductive VA experience.

The power of the media to galvanize unresponsive bureaucracies like the VA to do the right thing is amazing. Carol often would have us call her VA hospital just to put the pressure on if they were holding up her benefits or treatment. It’s very sad that fear of media exposure is what it takes to get a veteran the help she needs and deserves.

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PRODUCTION NOTE

Ten Years Later

It's been ten years since we first met the women in our film at a convention of the National Gulf War Resource Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

My husband/partner, Dennis, and I attended the convention with our camera, hoping to meet female Gulf War veterans to be part of a documentary project about their experiences during the war. The eight women who came forward and told their emotional stories on camera have become the heart of this documentary. We'd never met them before but a bond was forged that continues to this day.

Ten years later – Despite the recent move from SD video to high-definition, the original interviews of these women are still as fresh and relevant, poetic and emotional as they were ten years ago. The form the heart of the film.

Ten years later - Although women soldiers are now in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, they faced many of the same problems Gulf War women faced: sexual assault and rape in the military, homelessness when they come home, suicide, problems with treatment and claims at the Veterans Administration.

Ten years later – The search for answers to Gulf War illnesses still goes on. Gulf War veterans still seek treatment and compensation for their debilitating illnesses. And look forward to the day when the truth on Gulf War illness is revealed: What happened to us during the war that affected our health and has led to a massive dislocation of our lives and those of our families. Too many female Gulf War veterans are now disabled and dying.

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PRODUCTION NOTE

Operation Desert Storm: 1991 and Its Aftermath

In 1991, 697,000 U.S. soldiers, along with coalition forces from nearly 40 countries, deployed to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm, determined to remove Saddam Hussein's invading Iraqi army from the oil-rich nation of Kuwait.

Nearly 50,000 U.S. female soldiers deployed to the desert battleground of the Persian Gulf War. Although technically serving as "combat support," these women soon found there was no rear line in the Gulf to protect them from combat situations.

Operation Desert Storm was a toxic battlefield. Female soldiers came under fire in a hot dusty world of oil well blazes and Scud missile attacks. They experienced exposures to bio-chemical weapons, oil well fires, anthrax inoculations and depleted uranium that sent many into casualty field hospitals.

Ticker tape parades and cheering crowds celebrated the return of soldiers from Operation Desert Storm. Over twenty years later, the war's not over for many of them.

Nearly a quarter million Gulf War veterans are seeking treatment and benefits for Gulf War illnesses. Female veterans suffer from multiple war-related illnesses, only to be told "it's all in your head," or "we have nothing for female veterans with children."

Today these women, disabled, some confined to wheelchairs, struggle to care for their families and search for answers to their debilitating illnesses. Their voices cry out for help: Why have we been abandoned by the country we laid down our lives to serve?

