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Aviator's Dual Missions: Fly Copters, Guide Pilots

By Steven Komarow, USA Today

12th AVIATION HEADQUARTERS, Northern Kuwait - Concetta Hassan is very much the 60-year-old grandmother she appears to be, boasting about her family and looking forward to retirement.

But she's also ready to fly her Chinook helicopter into war with Iraq. "I love my job," she says. Chief Warrant Officer 4 Hassan, of B Company, 159th Aviation Regiment, is one of the most unusual soldiers preparing for battle in this desert just a few miles south of the Iraqi border. Before you ask, you know her story will be unique. She doesn't disappoint.

"I was a hairdresser," says Hassan, a native of Canton, Ohio. "All I wanted in life was to be a good mother and good wife." Then tragedy struck twice. First, her daughter was born with a genetic heart defect that required surgery. Then, at age 31, her husband suffered a disabling heart attack.

"We floundered and lost everything," she says. She saw a way out when a client, the wife of a retired sergeant, was talking about the military life. In July 1975, at age 32, she enlisted.

It was a time when women's roles in the Army were tightly restricted, and she was put into a staff job. Six years later, she applied for flight school and made it.

For years, she flew the UH-1 Huey, the all-purpose helicopter first used during the Vietnam War. In 1993, she switched to the giant CH-47 Chinook that she flies today. The Chinooks are cargo and troop helicopters that often fly to front-line positions. Machine-gunners ride on both sides and at the tail.

Hassan's unit is temporarily assigned to the Army's V Corps in Kuwait. She also has flown in Honduras and Korea. Along the way, in 1986, Hassan's story became the subject of a made-for-TV movie starring Patty Duke and Joseph Bologna. She and her husband marked their 40th anniversary in February.

She says she didn't expect to be flying this long. But she has enjoyed the Army life. The only complaint that crosses her lips during an interview is that the Army supply system can't seem to come up with the Diet Pepsi that she craves.

As she nears retirement - Army regulations will push her out at age 62 - Hassan sees her role as a mentor for young pilots, especially women. "There was a lot of discrimination when I came in," she says. "It has gotten a lot better.

"When females join the military, that's what I try to impart to them. You know, the only thing stopping you is you. ... There's no goal that you can't reach."

Capt. Sarah Stoddard, 26, says she never expected to find someone like Hassan in her company. Stoddard was a new lieutenant, fresh out of flight school, when Hassan "helped me find my role as a leader in a male-dominated environment," she says.

Hassan isn't finished. Now serving as the safety officer of the company, she'll fly less than other pilots in the 16helicopter unit. But all pilots must be ready for war.

After more than 27 years in uniform, she says the fear is still there, the fear she'll not make it home to enjoy her three children and four grandchildren. "I want to be around to enjoy my retirement," she says. "I have faith in God and know that God is on our side."

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