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Warrant Officer Joseph Is Lone Woman At Front

By Helene Cooper, Staff Reporter Of The Wall Street Journal

ASSEMBLY AREA HAMMER, Kuwait -- The first thing Warrant Officer Laquitta Joseph did the other day was find the private who inadvertently -- and foolishly -- had dirtied up her truck with a broken oil-leaking transmission differential.

She found the culprit sitting in a tracked armored vehicle. Pfc. Michael Golino was drinking Gatorade and shooting the breeze with three other privates. "Pvt. Golino, I got that differential," Ms. Joseph said, quietly. "But before I let you take it, I'm going to yank you out of this track and throw you on the ground."

Twenty-five minutes later, she's leaning against her truck, sipping a Coke and flipping through a J.C. Penney catalog. She is dressed head-to-toe in desert camouflage fatigues, and has a gas mask strapped to her leg and an M-16 on her back. "I think my summer color this year will be sky-blue," she says, inspecting her dust-covered fingernails. "It makes you look so nice, when you pick a summer color that's sheer and springy-looking."

Here at one of the army's most forward desert bases, a few miles from the Iraqi border, feminine trappings are scarce. This is a man's world, where the guys urinate out in the open and thumb through Hot Rod or Maxim magazine, ogling photos of bikini-clad women. There are a few women here, but most fill traditional female roles: cooks, clerks and administrators. U.S. law bars women from ground combat, so while the men practice maneuvers for fighting Iraqis, the women work in support roles, knowing they will be far from the front lines if the shooting starts.

Except for Ms. Joseph. She's one in a million: a woman in a ground combat unit. As the warrant officer for the 317th engineering battalion of the third brigade combat team of the Army's Third Infantry Division, Ms. Joseph is responsible for making sure the equipment works -- the minefield-clearing machines, the 14-ton bridge-building contraptions and the M113 armored personnel carriers. That makes her one of the most "forward" women in the Iraqi theater, traveling right behind front-line combat engineers who, if war starts, will clear minefields and build or blow up bridges. If something breaks down -- and in all likelihood, something will -- Ms. Joseph will go to the front line to find the problem and figure out what it will take to fix it.

"Combat engineers have always been a male-dominated field," says Col. Robert "Buffalo Bob" Tipton, the commander of the engineering battalion. "She's going to be more forward than most of the men."

Known to all here as "the chief," Ms. Joseph, who is due to be promoted to Chief Warrant Officer in coming months, glides through camp using a potent mixture of honey and pepper. She wheedles suppliers out of needed parts by literally batting her eyelashes imploringly.

When she took Pfc. Golino's differential to a nearby camp to get it fixed, she got the mechanics to take the extraordinary step of cleaning it for her and properly draining its oil. That's what Pfc. Golino apparently neglected to do before he hoisted it into the back of Ms. Joseph's truck, spilling a puddle of oil.

It was 30 minutes to quitting time, so lead mechanic James Van Zandt clearly didn't want to clean the differential first, and he wasn't too thrilled about fixing its seal, either. But Ms. Joseph gave him her trademark stare, eyelashes fluttering, a full 15 seconds worth. Mr. Van Zandt sighed.

"Why am I doing this for her?" he says. "Because she's so sincere when she asks." Then, unasked, he helps her clean the oil puddle in her truck.

A native of Beaumont, Texas, the 35-year-old Ms. Joseph is the daughter of a former Army cook and enlisted herself after graduating from high school and attending college for a year. During the first Gulf War, she served in Saudi Arabia. She has a 12-year-old son and is engaged to marry a military police officer currently stationed at Camp Doha in Kuwait.

She says the guys she deals with didn't know what to make of her when she arrived here two months ago from Fort Benning, Ga., where her unit is based. "They said, 'A female with combat engineers? Who did you [tick] off?' " she recalls.

It didn't take them long to appreciate having her around, though, because she has a sweet-talking knack for securing whatever parts her male comrades need. "We were short a big 2,500-gallon fueler for the battalion," says Col. Tipton, referring to a gasoline tank. "She found some at Camp Doha. And the same thing happened with a part [a flatbed for a truck] we're not even authorized to have -- she got three of them for us."

"She uses the motto, have smile, will travel," says Maj. Charles Samaris, her immediate superior. "Especially if it's a guy -- she can talk her way into getting anything."

Big brown eyes are her weapon of choice, which is why she kept her contact lenses on through a recent sandstorm, a decision she soon regretted. Sand scratched her cornea, sending her scurrying back to her glasses, which elicited a torrent of ribbing from the guys.

To the drivers and mechanics who work for her, she's both a sounding board and a taskmaster. When Pfc. Golino got brushed by a Humvee recently, she fluttered around him like a mother hen until he got medical help for a minor injury. When she was assigned a new driver fresh from New York, who had never driven in the desert, she plopped the driver, Pfc. Juanita Santana, behind the wheel of a Humvee and told her to hurry up and get used to driving on the sand. "You may have to drive into Baghdad," Ms. Joseph told the terrified private, who now wheels around the desert with confidence.

To help herself get through the long, hot days, she fantasizes about things at home -- preparing a spaghetti dinner with Italian herbs or soaking in her bathtub with a glass of white zinfandel.

She sleeps in her truck to get privacy from the guys, which is why she got so mad at Pfc. Golino. "I do feel really bad about this, Chief," he tells her, again and again. "I drained that thing for a long time." Ms. Joseph gives him the stare. "You got me dirty," she says. He apologizes again. The stare continues. "Okay," she says finally. "I forgive you."

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