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An Airman's Story and final message from CMSgt MacDonald

While looking through the Veterinary Services history archives, I came across this letter written by **Airman 3rd Class Dianne Martin**. I knew you'd want to read it:

*Gunter Air Force Base
Montgomery, Alabama
June 22, 1959*

Dear Mom and Dad,

It was really wonderful to talk to you the other night. I will try to explain as clearly as possible all that I know concerning my being taken out of the Veterinary Specialist Course.

In our Fourth week of the basic medical course, at Lackland they let us write down any three medical sub-fields that we wanted to go into and also three places where we would like to be stationed. A few weeks beforehand they had explained what the work in each of the many sub-fields involved. I thoroughly understood when I wrote my choice down that the veterinary field was primarily concerned with food inspection.

Here in the Air Force we have few live animals. The sentry dogs of course, horses on the bases that have riding stables, and lab animals where research is being carried on are the only live animals. We give rabies and distemper vaccinations to the pets of Air Force personnel. The veterinary services also treats diseases in the pets that are communicable to man, this by a policy of preventive medicine, we conserve man power by treating the animals as soon as the disease is brought to the vet's attention and preventing the diseases spread to man if possible.

I repeat that the main job of the Veterinary Services is inspection of all the food that is to be consumed by military personnel. They inspect the animal before it is slaughtered, the slaughtering methods used on the meat, and the transportation of the product to storage houses or chow halls. They also inspect fruits, vegetables, eggs, dairy products, bakery goods, and the chow hall themselves.

The idea of this type of work appealed to me very, very much so it was the only choice that I made. Naturally I wanted to go on to school so Gunter was my only choice of base as this is where the school is located. I went to my class sponsor, Sgt. H{x}, and explained that I made only one choice because I desired this field very much above all others. He said he would do all he could to see that I got the assignment. On graduation day our orders were read to us and I was told that I was to attend the Veterinary Specialist Course at Gunter. I sat around Lackland for a month pulling yard detail and finally received my official orders. I shipped out the third of June and arrived at Gunter the same day. I was interviewed by our Squadron Commander, Capt. Sl(x), and we discussed my assignment. I then found out that I was the first WAF ever to go into the veterinary field. Capt. Sl(x) got me a job at the Dept. of Vet. Training and the next day I went to work. I was to work there until my school started on July 6. I was given this particular job so that I might be a better idea of what my school would be like. The first day there I was interviewed by a Major, a SMSGT and the Colonel who heads the department. They all asked the same questions and said the same things. Naturally they wanted to know why I wanted this particular school. I tried to explain as well as possible my desire for this type of work. My interviewers explained the problems that I presented to them and they tried to discourage me. Their resentment for a WAF in the school was quite obvious. I noticed it especially during the interview with the Colonel.

The instructors were used to teaching all male classes and they didn't look forward to teaching some of the hours with a WAF in their midst. Particularly the hours dealing with animal husbandry. My interviewers also told me that once in the field my job might involve difficult physical labor and inspecting work in slaughter houses where I would be subjected to the foul language of men of below normal intelligence who normally do this type of work. Of course this did not deter my desire for the field and I told them so.

I was put to work doing odd jobs and a few days later was sent to another section of the department to help prepare hand-outs for the coming classes. I really enjoyed this and when I wasn't stapling them together I spent my time looking them over and reading some of them. All that I read were very interesting and all I could learn of the work I was to do fascinated me. One of the airmen whom I worked for had the job of inspecting food for the officer's Club. He let me accompany him to look at the products in the trucks and explained what he was doing as he inspected. I appreciated this very much and found it quite interesting.

A few days later when payday came I reported for pay call and I was told to stay afterwards to see the Squadron Commander. After pay call, Marlene Hollenback, the other WAF assigned to the school and who had just come off leave a few days earlier, and myself were both ushered into Capt. Sl(x)'s office and told that we were being kicked out of the school. The Capt. said that a regulation had just been sent down from Washington, D. C. prohibiting the assignment of WAF to the veterinary school. This was really a blow and Marlene and I both were unable to control our emotions and we cried in the Capt.'s office.

We were then sent to see Capt. Tr(x), head of the Department of Education for the medical schools. He was to reassign us to another course. During my

interview with him and through other sources I have been able to piece together much of what was involved in my assignment to the school and my ultimate elimination from the course.

It now appears that Airman Hollenback and I were being used as guinea pigs by Lt. Col. Ti(x), the man who was in charge of giving the assignments to graduates of the Medical Technical School at Lackland.

Ever since they started putting WAF through the basic medical course they have had a problem caused by girls who wanted to go into a field where only men were being assigned. Aero-med, Air-evac, Physiological Training, Preventive Medicine, Medical Equipment repairman and Veterinary were these fields. Recently quite a few WAF had asked for the veterinary field. I suspect that Col. Ti(x) finally decided to assign a few to this course just to see what the result would be. Airman Hollenback and I were the two chosen. It was not a regulation but rather a type of unwritten law that before had prevented Col. Ti(x) from making such an assignment. He knew that we would either be accepted into the course and therefore serve as a precedent for future WAF or that the unwritten law would be stated in an official regulation and WAF would be forever barred from the course. Of course, as you know, the latter was the result and Col. Ti(x) has his answer. This would not have been the result if it had not been for the action taken by Col. Le(x), the head of the Department of Veterinary Training here at Gunter.

Before I was sent down here, Col. Ti(x) corresponded with brass here at Gunter to make sure that there were no reasons why I couldn't be assigned to the veterinary school. There is a rumor that he even proceeded to Washington, D. C. to verify his findings. Apparently Col. Le(x) was not one of the men consulted here at Gunter, because from source I can not disclose because I was not supposed to know, I have been informed that as soon as he received a copy of my official orders he called the head of the Department of Veterinary Services in Washington and talked him into sending down the regulation. I suspect that he gave the same story to this man as he did to me when he tried to discourage my entrance into his school.

This is the story: WAF are not physically capable of carrying out the work of a Veterinary Specialist because it sometimes involves the moving of large and heavy crates of food during spot inspections made of a large shipment of goods. Col. Le(x) stated that if I were assigned to a small base where I were the only Veterinary Specialist I would have to do this heavy work by myself which he claims would be impossible. He also tried to impress me with the idea that he thought a woman couldn't do the inspection of intestines of freshly slaughtered animals and the other things that are required of a Veterinary Specialist during slaughter house inspections. The men at Washington must have been too busy to investigate a situation such as I have created and therefore I imagine that they accepted the Colonel's story with out question and passed the regulation he asked them to.

When I was interviewed by Capt. Tr(x), I wanted to know who had caused my elimination from the course. He was very cooperative and told me all he knew of the situation. He even showed me the telegram stating the regulation that was received from Washington or some higher command. Capt. Tr(x) was very understanding and I told him all I could about my desires and feelings toward this type of work. I think he is the man that truly understands my reason for

selection of this course and also my emotions caused by my expulsion from the curriculum.

There is no justification in the points in Col. Le(x)'s story. In the first place, after graduation I would naturally be assigned to a base where WAF are stationed. To my knowledge all of these bases are large enough so that there is more than on Vet. Spec. on the veterinary team. Therefore I would always have some one to work with me in any heavy work involved. I will create a hypothetical case in which I will be the only Veterinary Specialist at a base. Say that I actually did have to move some heavy crates. I feel that I would be clever enough taking into consideration my great determination to do the job adequately, to move the crates in some manner, for example, the use of simple machines such as the pulley or lever.

I probably wouldn't even be assigned too much inspection work anyway considering the other phases of veterinary work that I know I am capable of accomplishing with the greatest degree of efficiency that the standards of the Air Force demand. I am referring to the care of dependent's pets, laboratory animals, and the large administrative task connected with the field of inspection.

I think I have sufficiently disproved the points I suspect Col. Le(x) of using in persuading Washington's decree.

It seems that I can do nothing about this situation because in the service you have to go through channels and even the first person in my chain of command, the barracks sergeant, was against my being assigned to the school in the first place. Even Capt. Tr(x), who knows the situation, would not offer to help me.

It looks as if I am doomed to become a Pharmacy Specialist, my new assignment. This school also starts July 6, but it is much longer than the vet course.

If God grants me the necessary spiritual, mental, and physical health for the job, and if it is His will, in civilian life I am going to become a doctor of Veterinary Medicine.

This story is much longer than I thought it would be so I will close for now and write again soon and give you the rest of the news. If there is anything about this that is not clear or if there is anything you are wondering about please write and ask. Please take care of yourselves for your son and daughter love you very much.

Dianne

Dianne's parents appealed to a U.S. Senator, who engaged HQ USAF. In the end, the Veterinary Services leaders stuck to their position that the 908 business was not for females because "*the environment and tasks are beyond that which females would be expected to live in or physically capable of performing*". These technicians would be "*assigned to remote areas and to packing houses, wharves, and slaughter houses*". Dianne was reclassified as a Pharmacy Tech. The first female airman to graduate from 908 school was not until 1968. Times have certainly changed. Today's Public Health Apprentice Class is 60% female.

I knew you'd also want to know what happened to Dianne, so I found her, mailed her a copy of her 1959 letter, and asked if she's mind sharing with us the rest of the story. Sure enough, she wrote back:

July 29, 1999

*Michael R. MacDonald, CMSgt, USAF
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Dear Bob,

How strange to read a letter I had written nearly 40 years ago. I'm not sure I even have a copy of it anywhere. Not being accepted into Veterinary Services was a great disappointment to me. I had hoped to be the vanguard of women in this arena and would have done everything possible to prove they could perform in a most exemplary manner.

I served as a pharmacy specialist at Andrews AFB Hospital in Maryland until completion of my enlistment in Dec. of 1961. I did enjoy the hospital environment and the interaction with patients and was proud to serve in that field.

Returning to my hometown of Deer Lodge, Montana, I became a receptionist for an optometrist. Though I had an excellent boss and I adored working with the patients, this was, unfortunately, a dead-end job with no place to advance.

I had a strong desire to go to college since I was 11 years old. I had conscientiously saved while in the service but it was not enough. I needed a better paying position but this looked difficult with only a high school education.

With reluctance I left the optometrist's office, took a correspondence course for airline reservation agents and was hired by Northwest Airlines in 1965. I chose to take a job in New York City just to experience something different. What a strange world for a Montanan to enter. This paid better but it also cost much more to live in New York. I continued to save what I could.

Although there was opportunity for advancement, the work itself was not very rewarding. A most miraculous event (to me anyway) occurred at the time—Congress passed the cold war G.I. Bill and I was eligible. It only provided \$100.00 per month toward educational expenses but with my savings and the now more easily obtained college loans, I knew I was on my way to a higher education.

I returned to Montana where I could attend school much more economically as a resident. My sight was set on veterinary medicine, but after a year the reality of the situation set in. It wasn't so much that I would be into my 30's before I would graduate, of greater concern was that my indebtedness would be fairly significant.

I switched to microbiology with a primary goal of becoming a hospital lab technician. One of my specialties in the National Registry of Microbiologists was Food, Dairy and Sanitation Microbiology. This made me well qualified as a county health inspector and had I chosen to work in that arena I'm sure it would have been very similar to the jobs performed by the Air Force Public Health Specialists.

In college I met future husband and graduation was followed by marriage. I worked in a microbiology research lab on campus while my husband finished his last year of an engineering degree.

We moved to Great Falls in north central Montana where he had a job waiting for him. We agreed I would be a non-working mom while we raised our daughter. We both are avid outdoors people with our principle activities being canoeing camping, hunting, and hiking. We have canoed for over a quarter century and have been certified canoeing instructors since 1982. We even helped establish the first canoeing instruction for the disabled here in Montana. (It's been done previously in some other states)

If one cherishes the outdoors as we do, then one must go beyond just enjoying this type of recreation. A person must be committed to protecting the environment, the wildlife and preserving recreational opportunities. This commitment has lead us into extensive volunteerism. We participate in many conservation and sportsmen's organizations. Our life is a series of meetings, letter writing, testimony before the legislature, contact with the media, occasional speaking engagements, and other involvement's that activists must perpetrate to enlighten and inspire others to preserve what we Montanans call THE LAST BEST PLACE.

Although I did not become a veterinary specialist in the Air Force, and I did not achieve a degree in veterinary medicine, and I used my microbiology degree very little, my experience in the Air Force and my college education were not wasted. Both were excellent preparation for the demands of the volunteer work my husband and I have been engaged in since the early 80's. Well-known author, Stephen Covey describes volunteerism as the rent we pay for occupying our spot on earth. That is how I spend a great deal of my time—paying the rent. Though I did not achieve exactly what I hoped for and there have certainly been failures along the way, I take pride in having made some worthwhile contributions to my corner of the world. My husband has retired early o devote even more time to his commitments. Our grown daughter leads a productive life in another Montana City.

I realize this is too long for reproduction in a newsletter; it is mainly for your information. Just summarize to the extent that is appropriate. It was a delight to respond to your inquiry since it forced me to look back over my life.

I feel vindicated knowing that a large number of the new personnel in the Air Force Public Health field are women. I wish each one of them a successful and regarding career—and the guys too. I also wish you the very best in your new position. I am sending a copy of this letter to Dan Montgomery.

Best regards,

Dianne L. McDermand

A3C Dianne Martin is precisely the kind of Airman we need in today's Air Force – enthusiastic, mature, responsible, articulate. I wish every student airman could possess her qualities and could follow her example.

And, like Dianne, I wish each of you success. Your work makes airplanes fly.



Mac