



# TRAILBLAZER AND PIONEER:

GWEN SHEPPARD HAS ALWAYS AIMED HIGH

**Gwen Sheppard isn't just a trailblazer, she's a pioneer.**

As a child of an Air Force family, Sheppard grew up living in various places throughout the country, but it was during a visit to the Air Force Academy in the 1960s that she discovered where she wanted to land. She knew that one day she wanted to be an Air Force cadet.

At the time, only men were allowed in the Air Force Academy, but her parents supported her dream. Then the military did, too: in 1975 President Gerald Ford signed legislation that lifted the ban on women entering the service academies. Sheppard recalls that the process to enter the academy took more than a year and she was almost disqualified due to having flat feet. She pushed forward with determination, pointing out that she never had an issue with her feet and

excelled in sports. She received a congressional appointment capturing her dream of being admitted to the Air Force Academy.

The military institute was challenging, with 4,000 cadets, but only 26 women of color. Sheppard stayed for two years before transferring to North Carolina State University, where she joined Air Force R.O.T.C. She found R.O.T.C. too easy, thanks to her rigorous training, so she enlisted in the Air Force Reserve while she completed her Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering.

Eventually, Sheppard's military career would take her from being a cadet, to serving as a U.S. Navy Seabee officer, to becoming the first African American and woman to command Wisconsin's beloved Air Force Reserve's 440th Civil Engineer Squadron.

Sheppard served in the Missouri Air

National Guard and the California Air National Guard before being commissioned as an Ensign in the Navy Reserves in 1989. She served in various positions with Naval Mobile Construction Battalion (NMCB) 17, the PHIB "Seabees" Amphibious Construction Battalion 1, NMCB 25 and Engineering Field Division Pacific Division.

In September 1997, she transferred to the Air Force Reserves to serve with the 440th Civil Engineer Squadron. She was deployed to Kuwait in 1999 and was recalled to active duty in 2003 in support of Operations Iraqi Freedom, where she served as an Engineering Officer at Baghdad International Airport. While in Iraq, she led the construction of a field hospital that is much like the ones being erected throughout the nation to care for COVID-19 patients.

One of the shining moments

of Sheppard's career was single-handedly developing a first-of-its-kind software during her time in the Air Force Reserve Civil Engineers. The program imported data from officer records to be analyzed by command staff. She presented the program to leadership at the Pentagon, and once it was implemented it impacted every Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard officer under the rank of colonel.

Sheppard was the only woman and African American officer in the 440th Civil Engineer Squadron. She says she always knew that her career would eventually lead her to being the first at something. She held a high bar for herself, and carried with her a lesson that her parents instilled in her at a young age: that she had to be ten times better than her counterparts to be considered equal. Like in any organization, she acknowledges that there were times when she had to rise above challenges she faced being a woman of color. Sheppard credits her commanding officer's leadership as being an important component to what propelled her to become a history maker. He was a mentor for her, treating her like a member of his own family.

After 27 years of service, Sheppard retired from the military. She reflects on the women mathematicians in the movie, *Hidden Figures*, and their performance of calculating complex formulas in order to send man to the moon. Like the women in *Hidden Figures*, she did not allow any sort of opposition hold her back – that the mission was always greater.

Sheppard continues to remain active in the veteran's community. She is a past commander of the Milwaukee Women's Jane Delano Post 448 of The American Legion and she served as third vice commander of The American Legion Milwaukee County Council. She is a member of the VFW, AMVET Post 60, PVA Wisconsin Chapter, Veteran's Community

Relations Team and serves on the Milwaukee Stand Down, Inc.'s board of directors which helps homeless and at-risk veterans.

In 2011 Sheppard participated in an Air Force Wounded Warrior Team Trials in San Antonio, TX where she picked up archery. Sheppard enjoys all the math archery brings like angles, speed, distance, precision, and that there's no room for error. She competes in the Master Division (age 50+) and has won multiple gold medals. She became certified to coach other wounded warriors in the sports of air rifle shooting and archery.

Sheppard now competes in the Wounded Warrior Games, spearheaded a Veteran Air Gun program and tournament in

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Milwaukee through the Paralyzed Veterans of America Wisconsin Chapter, and this summer, she was set to compete in the National Veterans Golden Age Games in Madison, Wis. However, due to COVID-19's national health emergency, the Golden Age Games were canceled.

Sheppard's best advice to fellow veterans is to stay busy, find something that you feel passionate about and stick with it. Don't be scared to try new things. For now, Sheppard will hit the road with her service dog, Zorro and find a good spot to fish.

