

# Cultivating Change: **LIONESSE** Impact Report

**LIONESSE**

**A Feature Documentary**

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[www.lionessthefilm.com](http://www.lionessthefilm.com)



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# Cultivating Change: LIONESS Impact Report

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## Summary

Since its release in 2008, LIONESS has contributed significantly to the mainstreaming of the movement to recognize and respond to the needs of American servicewomen returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. As a catalyst for military-civilian dialogue, the film has led to tangible change in a number of arenas by framing an important but largely invisible issue in meaningful human terms. Among the film's notable accomplishments is the activation of policy discussions between the Department of Defense (DoD), VA, and the House Armed Services Committee over how to document the service of women soldiers in operational missions outside their military occupations. This is crucial because it affects women's ability to establish "service connection" for conditions related to their military service and thus their ability to receive appropriate VA benefits.

The film has also played an important role in support of recent legislation affecting healthcare for women veterans, namely the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act which was signed into law by President Obama on May 5th, 2010. Other significant changes resulting from our outreach are the adoption of LIONESS as a training tool nationwide within the VA healthcare infrastructure, and its use in an innovative pilot program in North Carolina designed to support rural veterans by offering evidence based, best practice behavioral health training to non-VA mental health and primary care doctors

The purpose of this report is to illustrate how documentary filmmaking can be part of the process of social change. To that end, the report is framed by the following questions: How did our outreach work create the conditions for substantive change? What role did the approach we took to our subjects, story, and strategic partnerships play in our success?

## The Film



*Sgt. Michelle Wilmot, Ramadi, Iraq, in April, 2005.  
Photograph by Spc. Miranda Mattingly.*

LIONESS tells the story of a group of women support soldiers who went to Iraq in 2003 as clerks, mechanics and engineers and returned home as part of this country's first generation of female combat veterans. Our goal in making LIONESS was to use the power of their stories to focus attention on the military's below-the-radar expansion of women's roles into combat, a historic shift that continues to unfold in Iraq and Afghanistan. LIONESS is the first film to represent this country's rapidly growing population of women combat veterans.

While based in the Sunni Triangle, the women in our film were regularly attached to all-male combat units

with the mission of defusing tensions with Iraqi women and children as part of an ad hoc Army program called "Team Lioness." With the rise of the insurgency, they ended up fighting in some of the bloodiest counterinsurgency battles of the Iraq war. Yet these women's stories were never mentioned in news accounts of these battles.

Through intimate verite scenes, journal excerpts, archival footage and interviews with commanders, the film follows this original group of Lionesses as they resume their lives back home and confront the reality that they were called upon to do the one thing they were told they would never do: engage in direct ground combat. The practice of assigning women to all-male combat units is ongoing in both the Army and the Marines. However, because the combat exclusion policy

remains in place, these women return to a society that does not fully understand or acknowledge the roles that they played. LIONESS bears witness to their hidden experiences and creates a space in the national conversation for their voices to be heard.

## Story and Approach

When we started work on the film in 2005, we were in the darkest days of a highly unpopular war. As filmmakers, we were looking beyond the headlines and pursuing a narrative we believed would emerge as nationally consequential. Women soldiers were rewriting the rules on the battlefield and this development was treated, at best, as a footnote in the mainstream press. Our challenge was to find a story that embodied this pivotal moment and issue.

Since neither of us come from military backgrounds, we were starting from scratch. We began with two cold calls. One was to Captain Lory Manning, USN (Ret.), Director of the Women In the Military Project at the Women's Research and Education Institute (WREI), and the other to Brigadier General Wilma Vaught, USA (Ret.), President of the Women in Military Service for America Memorial (WIMSA). To an extent that we could not have anticipated, both meetings were critical



*Shannon Morgan on her parents porch in Mena, AK. 2008.  
Photograph by Stephen Maing.*

to the project's future success. Capt. Manning suggested that we look into a group of Army women referred to as "Lionesses, and Gen. Vaught, after concluding that our goal of making a film on the issue of women in combat was worthy of her support, provided us with "top cover" as we sought access to our subjects and their commanders through the Office of the Army Chief of Public Affairs in Los Angeles.

When we first met the Lionesses who had served with the 1st Engineer Battalion, 1st Infantry Division in Ramadi, they had been back in the U.S. for a year and it was clear that what they had experienced in Iraq was only part of the story; the rest was unfolding in their lives back home. As we began filming, we found that our ability to gain access to their daily lives and personal stories was

directly related to our attitude of discovery. We never assumed we knew what life was like for these women. Instead, we tried to understand the logic of their world and the choices they had made. We were especially interested in their competence, viewing them as important historical actors rather than victims. Once the women understood this, they came to trust our intentions and became collaborators in the filmmaking process.

Although we personally opposed the invasion of Iraq, our intent was not to use the film to make a partisan argument about the validity or execution of the war. The military is the largest public institution in the United States and as citizens we felt it was important to learn more about how it operated and who was serving in our name. Without this sort of understanding, the national conversation about war and the role of the armed forces in our democracy becomes impoverished. In fact, we knew the Lionesses' experiences in Anbar province had far reaching implications, not just in terms of the counterinsurgency effort in Iraq, but as a compelling example of the larger need for a national security strategy that focuses more on human security and less on coercion. Our aim was to create an intimate portrait with the dramatic power to move audiences and foster meaningful dialogue about what women have been doing and the larger issues their service raises.

Our non-polemical approach gave us a credibility with our subjects that would prove invaluable during the outreach phase. All five women from our film enthusiastically participated in both festival and community-based screenings. Their collective support, despite differences in rank, education and political persuasion, set a tone of shared openness and constructive dialogue that was critical to the success of our outreach and engagement.

## **Production Funding and Support**

LIONESS was executive produced by Chicken & Egg Pictures in association with Impact Partners and co-executive produced by Diana Barrett of The Fledgling Fund and Sarah Johnson Redlich. Additional funding was provided by the Sundance Documentary Fund, New York State Council on the Arts, The Fledgling Fund, Rockefeller Family & Associates, Open Society Institute, and private donations. The film's production budget was \$460K and the outreach budget was \$80K.

Our fundraising strategy for the LIONESS production budget was a multifaceted approach that combined foundation grants, individual donations, and private investor money into a hybrid financing structure. It can be broken down into four distinct phases.

### **1) First Money In – Friends, Family and Filmmakers**

Like many independent filmmakers, we took on the lion's share of the financial risk during the early stages, relying on family, friends and ourselves. Having identified the fundamental outline of our story, we shot enough footage to create a trailer that reflected our vision for the film.

### **2) Trailer to Rough Cut- Production Support from Foundations and Investors**

With a trailer in hand, it was much easier to look for funding. We knew raising the full budget all at once was not realistic so we applied for midsized grants from a range of entities, including social issue media funders such as Chicken & Egg Pictures and The Fledgling Fund. During this phase we were awarded grants from Chicken & Egg, The Fledgling Fund, Rockefeller Family & Associates, and New York State Council on the Arts. While we always retained full editorial control, we found the dialogue with our social issue funders especially useful. They helped us by looking at rough cuts and asking questions about our narrative. This open, supportive exchange was crucial as we tested and refined our ideas.

Once we had a rough cut in hand, our fundraising picked up real momentum. While preparing to submit to festivals, we received a second round of grants from The Fledgling Fund and Chicken & Egg Pictures, a large grant from the Sundance Documentary Fund, and funding from additional investors.

### **3) Finishing funds**

We proceeded with our online and sound mix while we raised our final post production monies. Chicken & Egg Pictures and The Fledgling Fund brought our film to the attention of Impact Partners, which invested in the film enabling us to complete the film in early 2008.

## **Launch and Distribution**

LIONESS screened at festivals nationally and internationally including Tribeca Film Festival, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Human Rights Watch International Film in London, Independent Film Festival Boston among others. Awards received include the Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award at the 2008 Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, Military Families Award at the GI Film Festival, and Vietnam Veterans of America Award for Outstanding Achievement in Documentary Film.

Following the film's critical acclaim (Powerful – LA Times, Heart wrenching – NY Magazine, Stunning – Hollywood Reporter) and positive reviews on the festival circuit, we pursued a hybrid strategy that involved splitting up the rights and self-distributing DVDs off the film's website. We





Michigan Theater, Ann Arbor, MI.

licensed domestic broadcast rights to the PBS series *Independent Lens* and the film was broadcast nationally in honor of Veterans' Day in November 2008. According to PBS, the November broadcast alone was viewed by 791,000 and received 215 media placements. These figures do not include additional viewership and media resulting from the encore broadcast on PBS on June 2, 2009.

We also participated in ITVS' Community Cinema program, a program of free community screenings for selected *Independent Lens* documentaries in 50 cities and towns nationwide. The purpose of each screening is to bring together citizens, organizations, and public television stations to encourage dialogue and action around important and timely social issues.

Our broadcast and participation in ITVS' Community Cinema program created a national and grassroots awareness that significantly bolstered our outreach efforts. Given the economic climate, the limitations of the theatrical market and the rapidly shifting distribution landscape, our choices maximized not only our outreach efforts, but also the mar-

keting of the film. Through community screenings across the country, we connected with our core audience of soldiers, veterans, military families, the Department of Veterans Affairs, veteran service organizations, and military medical and mental health care providers. The presence of the filmmakers and their subjects at screenings created a lively and compelling context for the audience to connect with the film, generating strong word of mouth and driving DVD sales.

We sold DVDs licensed for home use, community use, and public/educational use directly to our core audience from the film's website. Netflix, a California-based company handled fulfillment, billing, customer service, inventory storage, and accounting for a small fee. *LIONESS* was sold exclusively from our website for a year until, in October 2009, New Video released the film on its Docurama DVD label. We have retained the right to sell DVDs off our website and continue to generate additional revenue through sales for educational, community and home use. In addition, we sold digital rights to New Video and *LIONESS* was released on iTunes, Amazon (download to own/rent) and other digital platforms in Fall 2009.

## **LIONESS Outreach and Engagement - A Process Informed by Strategy**

When *LIONESS* was released, the movement in support of women veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan was just starting to take shape. Having attended the Working Films Content+Intent Institute at MASS MoCA in 2007, we had some ideas of how we would approach outreach. We recognized that we needed to cultivate opportunities that would align us with an emergent network of activists. Our key funders understood that our outreach work would have an element of discovery and unpredictability. To allow us to take advantage of time-sensitive opportunities, both The Fledgling Fund and Chicken & Egg provided additional outreach funding outside of their regular funding cycles. This made an enormous difference and has paid dividends in lasting impact. Additional outreach funds came from the IFP regrant NYSCA award and Rockefeller Family & Associates.

In collaboration with Chicken & Egg Pictures and The Fledgling Fund, we had our first outreach meeting in February of 2008 in New York. In addition to funders, we invited several activists and media consultants. We came away from the meeting acknowledging the difficulty of having conversations about women soldiers and veterans. After five years of war, their experiences were still not part of public discussions about the war. The usual approach would not work.

## State of the Issue

From the outset with LIONESS, we found that most people were unaware of women’s integral involvement in the war in Iraq and unfamiliar with the combat exclusion policy. No grassroots movement or constituency-based organization focusing on women in the military or women in combat existed. There were plenty of national anti-war groups, some of which had women veteran members, but their goal was primarily to protest the war and US foreign policy. Although the nation had moved on from a Vietnam-era ambivalence about the armed forces, when the US invaded Iraq in March 2003, the percentage of Americans with direct military experience or family members in uniform was at its lowest point ever.



*Army Nurse at work in Vietnam, 1971.*

Despite a lack of widespread public knowledge of or activism around the role of U.S. servicewomen overseas, there existed a latent network of American women Vietnam veterans, who had done important work in the 1980s and 90s on behalf of military and veteran women. These women, most of whom served as nurses on or near the frontlines in South Vietnam, had felt invisible when they came home. But unlike previous generations of women who had served in WWII and Korea, these women drew on values of gender equality circulating at the time to assert their claims. They advocated for government benefits and sought respect within the national veteran community and

public acknowledgment of women’s military service. Through their advocacy, a small but critical infrastructure dedicated to women veteran healthcare was created as part of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Given their expertise, many of these activist nurses took jobs as service providers within the VA.

This network was reactivated by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and many of its members, having experienced the consequences of invisibility themselves, identified the ambiguity of the policy governing women in combat as a problem leading to inequities in care for this next generation of women vets. Concerned, they would become the film’s strongest advocates within the VA system.

By reaching out to this older generation, we were able to expand support for an issue that the left has always cared about: women’s rights and gender equity, and in so doing unite disparate political audiences in conversation about the citizenry’s role in overseeing the military. This kind of coalition building was a critical component in helping us create synergy between the film and the nascent movement on behalf of OIF and OEF women veterans.

## Strategy

Our outreach strategy was premised on the belief that the grey zone in which women had been operating in Iraq was the source of many of the serious challenges women faced as soldiers and veterans and which have serious consequences on both human and institutional levels:

- **Inadequate training:** Due to the combat exclusion policy, combat training is not available to female soldiers aside from what they receive in basic training. Yet the recent wars have demonstrated that in conflicts without a clear frontline, support troops (both male and female) need specialized training in combat tactics similar to what soldiers in all-male combat arms units receive.
- **Inadequate documentation:** Women who have served and/or are currently serving alongside combat units in Iraq and Afghanistan must receive recognition for their work. This is crucial because it affects women’s ability to establish “service connection” for conditions related to their military service and thus their ability to receive appropriate VA benefits. For most veterans,

getting official military documentation that proves his or her personal participation in a specific combat incident is difficult. But for members of an ad hoc program like the Army's Team Lioness, which exists solely at brigade level and is not yet a doctrinal program, proving one's status as a female combat veteran is even more difficult.

- **Lack of understanding of mental and physical health care needs of women veterans:**

The VA projects that the number of women veterans accessing care will more than double in the next five years. The vast majority will be of childbearing age, have served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and have unique mental and physical health care needs that are not adequately served by a system based on a male model of care.

- **Limits to potential leadership roles:** The ban on women in combat is a major factor affecting opportunities for promotion and selection for command. Given the centrality of combat experience to advancing up the ranks of the military, the lack of official recognition of women's combat service limits their ability to progress to senior leadership positions. This in turn reduces their ability to shape national policy. In a post-9/11 world, credibility on military and national security issues is increasingly necessary for those who hope to succeed in public positions, especially elected office.

Given the complexity of the issues arising from the problem we defined—ambiguity around women in combat—we decided that most effective starting point for our outreach strategy was to focus on women veteran's healthcare. Some of the most compelling scenes are part of Lioness Shannon Morgan's story. A country girl from Arkansas, she ended up fighting alongside the Marines in some of the bloodiest firefights of the Iraq war. She openly discusses the severity of her post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how it prevented her from going back to school to pursue a college degree. Audience reaction to Shannon's narrative, echoed by other women's stories, confirmed our intention to position the film as an educational tool – an empathy engine – to expand the image of the “combat soldier/veteran” to include women.

## The Importance of Publicity

With support from The Fledgling Fund and Chicken & Egg Pictures we used our festival launch at Full Frame and Tribeca to jumpstart our outreach and audience engagement. We saw the two as intertwined. Having a successful festival launch would enable us to accrue a “media” credibility that would only enhance our outreach. To manage this we used part of our outreach funds to hire Julie Cloutier, a publicist, from Sunshine Sachs. She was our strategy collaborator as we developed and managed our messaging for the major festivals. The challenge was to keep the press local since we wanted to save the national media attention for a possible theatrical release or broadcast premiere. Julie skillfully managed the national press interest, generating a few carefully selected pieces, including one by a reporter from Reuters, and holding many others off until a national release date was confirmed. The concentration on local press allowed us to test and refine our messaging. We learned the press was focused on the fact that women were being sent into combat in violation of official U.S. policy. However, we also learned how to bring the message back to the unfair consequences for women veterans when their service is not fully recognized.

We felt it was important that our subjects see the film first, before it was screened publicly at film festivals. In early March, we invited the five women to travel to New York City for a private screening of the film, a media training session, and lunch at the New York office of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA). This prepared them for press interviews around the festival screenings in April and May and for subsequent outreach events.



*Spc. Rebecca Nava in the arms room at Fort Riley, Kansas.*



## Crucial Opportunities Emerge

In April, as we were learning about the infrastructure that did exist for women veterans healthcare, we heard about an upcoming national event focusing on women veterans' issues sponsored by the VA's Center for Women Veterans. The Center, one of the key institutional sites for advocacy around women veterans' issues, is underfunded, understaffed and constantly balancing issues of public perception and healthcare privacy.

We viewed the conference as a good opportunity to get the film in front of those working in the field of women veteran

healthcare and asked Capt. Lory Manning from WREI to facilitate an introduction to the Center's director and associate director. After discussing our project with Dr. Irene Trowell-Harris and Dr. Betty Moseley Brown, we were invited to screen the film at the National Summit on Women Veterans' Issues.

We were lucky to have this singular event occur in the early phases of our outreach. Held every four years, the Summit is a national gathering of the community of women veterans, service members and healthcare providers. In one fell swoop, we were able to introduce ourselves and the film to our stakeholder networks and have an opportunity to better understand their needs. Recognizing this as a crucial opportunity, we went to Rockefeller Family & Associates and asked for a special grant to fly three of the five women in the film to Washington, D.C. We also wanted to use the trip to bring the *Lionesses* and the film to the attention of Congressional members and the appropriate committees. The Rockefeller money, combined with existing funding from The Fledgling Fund and Chicken & Egg, allowed us to spend two days prior to the Summit taking the women around to meet with lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

Five years into the Iraq war, concerns about veterans' issues were fresh in the minds of Congressional members, and we had some very good meetings, including one with Representative Susan Davis (D-CA), chair of the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Personnel whom we invited to the Summit screening. We also had a private meeting with the Advisory Committee on Women Veterans, an expert body that assesses needs of female veterans and makes recommendations to the Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs and members of Congress.



*Congresswoman Susan Davis greets Rebecca Nava and Ranie Ruthig following a screening at the National Summit for Women Veterans' Issues.*

## National Summit of Women Veterans' Issues, June 20-22 2008



*Brigadier General Loree Sutton congratulates the women in the film.*

At the Summit, *LIONESS* was shown before an audience of over 400 people including women veterans, VA employees, and representatives from veteran service organizations, veteran nonprofits, and Department of Defense health officials. It was extremely well received. Enthusiasm for the film was shared by Rep. Davis who not only came to the screening but spontaneously joined the *Lionesses* onstage afterwards. Her remark that the film was "a timely, important work that every American should see" got a standing ovation from an exultant crowd.

This screening marked the first major turning point for our outreach. Under the imprimatur of the Center for Women Veterans, we connected with key stakeholders, namely veteran healthcare providers in the VA. Many of them were nurses who, as described earlier, had served in military hospitals in Vietnam and fought hard for women veteran rights and recognition in the 1980s and 1990s. Having laid the groundwork for public acceptance of women's expanded roles in the military, they immediately saw the film's potential as an educational and activist tool, and became champions of the film.

Indeed, following the Summit, we were immediately besieged with requests for screenings by Women Veteran Program Managers in the VA system around the country who had seen the film and wanted to bring it to their state.

## Partnerships Igniting Action Around Veteran Healthcare

After the June 2008 Summit, we formalized two primary partnerships:

- **The Center For Women Veterans:** An advocacy office within the VA, the Center's primary mission is to review VA programs and services for women veterans, and assure that women veterans receive benefits and services on a par with male veterans, and encounter no discrimination in their attempt to access them.
- **Disabled American Veterans:** A 1.2 million member non-profit veteran service organization dedicated to building better lives for America's disabled veterans and their families, DAV has become a significant advocate for legislation supporting the issues of women veterans.



Ernest Martinez, Arizonaans for Piastewa, introduces LIONESS at a community screening at VFW post in Phoenix, AZ, August 2008.

As mentioned earlier, in the run up to our broadcast, we participated in ITVS's Community Cinema program in October 2008. This entailed local screenings followed by panel discussions in nearly fifty cities around the country. Panelists included the filmmakers, subjects of the film, and/or experts in women veteran issues. One of the exciting aspects of this process was that we were able to bring new partners to ITVS, namely the VA's Center for Women Veterans, Disabled American Veterans and American Legion's Women's Auxiliary, allowing ITVS to extend its programmatic reach to new audiences.

The ITVS Community Cinema screenings of LIONESS were a resounding success. The film proved to be a powerful tool for fostering conversation between two disparate groups: civilians, with an abstract understanding of the military, and veterans, who often feel misunderstood by the wider public. The Lionesses' stories resonate strongly with military and non-military audiences alike because they address the human experience and cost of war, albeit from a female perspective. In addition the film focuses on the present and future and does not allocate blame. Thus, it creates a space for viewers who hold opinions from across the political spectrum to freely engage and share their perspectives without fear of being judged. This has the effect of promoting open and varied discussion with audiences allowing each to be educated through the other's perspective. This atmosphere is captured in a report submitted to ITVS about the Community Cinema event in West Hollywood in October 2008:

LIONESS was well attended by veterans both male and female. The screening brought in a full house with people sitting in the aisles and standing in the back of the room. The audience and panelists talked in detail about "the shift" to women in combat and what

that means. Discussion topics included veteran benefits, what the audience should do to support returning veterans, and signs/symptoms of PTSD and other issues. Many of the female veterans shared stories of their service and a long discussion took place about sexual trauma. There was a healthy exchange about the reality of these occurrences, what is being done about it, and what changes are necessary. Non-military audience members appeared horrified by the matter-of-factness of this conversation. I.e. it happens and that's that. The conversation shifted when a male soldier stood-up and said, "I don't want you to walk away from this thinking that all women are assaulted and all the men in the military are free to do as they please." He went on to talk about the need for psychological evaluations to be implemented as part of the recruiting process. This began a conversation about how the military could reduce the number of traumatic events occurring between soldiers and weed out those (male and female) that cannot handle the mental impact of war.

This report on the ITVS event demonstrates the need for an ongoing military-civilian dialogue and suggests how conversations around a film can lead to public awareness out of which can come ideas for action.

## The Center for Women Veterans and its State Affiliates

By summer 2008, efforts were being made by the VA and its state affiliates to recognize and prepare for the growing influx of female veterans. Responding to the flood of invitations generated by our appearance at the Summit, we took the film out on a screening tour of the VA circuit. LIONESS was the featured program at the first ever California Women Veterans Conference, sponsored



*Dr. Betty Moseley Brown, Associate Director of the Center for Women Veterans at the VA, at the LIONESS screening on Capitol Hill.*

by the California Department of Veterans Affairs in Sacramento, in August 2008, as well as at similar VA conferences and meetings in states such as Utah, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Florida, Illinois, New Hampshire and Maine. This cycle of screenings culminated a year later in September 2009 when we were invited to screen the film at the "Evolving Paradigms II Conference" in Las Vegas, NV, a large conference for VA and DoD veteran healthcare providers sponsored by the Department of Veterans' Affairs, Veterans' Health Administration, and the Women Veterans Strategic Healthcare Group. Its purpose was to refine the system of post-combat care for all those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. The

screening was attended by over 3,000 people with Shannon Morgan, the main character, present to answer questions afterwards and speak further about her experiences.

As LIONESS made its way through the VA network, its initial currency was as an educational tool shown to staff at VA Medical Centers where healthcare providers were unfamiliar with the experience of female combat veterans. The VA's State Women Veteran Coordinators were very vocal about promoting the film as a much-needed method of "sensitivity training." In addition, the film increasingly assumed use as a therapeutic tool in a clinical setting. Vet Centers, a distinct department within the VA, began requesting the film frequently as did private veteran care facilities.

I believe your film will be of great benefit as a sensitivity training tool for all health care workers who deal with female veterans. Until now the reference point has always been the male veteran but because so many women are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan having played "unique" roles, health care providers need to understand female veterans in this new context. They need to be sensitized to the new reality, and your film does exactly that.



It is a catalyst for understanding the shift that has taken place with women's roles in war and the kind of understanding they need when they return. *Personal communication from Peggy Mikelonis, ARNP-C, MS, CAN, Lead Women Veterans Program Manager VISN 8, Women Veterans Program Manager Tampa.*

By the end of the year, the VA, through the office of the Women Veterans Strategic Healthcare Group, had received so many requests for the film, that they made a bulk purchase of over 300 institutionally licensed copies of LIONESS for every VA Medical Facility Library across the country.



Lioness Shannon Morgan with Peggy Mikelonis, Army Nurse, Vietnam '71-'72, and Lead Women Veterans Program Manager, VISN 8, at the VA's Evolving Paradigms Conference, Las Vegas, NV, September, 2009.

Following that purchase, the VA's National Vet Center Office, which oversees more than 200 Vet Centers in communities nationwide, issued a directive recommending the film as an effective resource for their clinicians whose mission is to provide readjustment counseling and outreach services to veterans who served in a combat zone. Since then, individual Vet Centers have been purchasing DVDs licensed for community use from our website.

Our partnership with the Center for Women Veterans, and by extension with state women veteran coordinators at VA facilities across the country, has led to LIONESS becoming institutionalized as an educational and clinical component of women veteran healthcare at the VA.

## Department of Defense/Defense Centers of Excellence (DCoE)

Early in our outreach we developed contacts at the newly formed DCoE, the DoD office set-up to partner with the VA and oversee treatment for soldiers dealing with psychological health and traumatic brain issues. Given DoD's sensitivity to the "women in combat" issue, we understood that any formal opportunities for engagement would take time to develop. Our patience soon paid off as multiple opportunities emerged.

- **DACOWITS Screening, Washington, DC** (Defense Department Advisory Committee on the Status of Women in the Services) May 2009.
- **Force Health Protection Conference Screening and Panel, Albuquerque, NM** – August 2009.
- **Walter Reed Army Medical Screening Screening and Panel, Washington, DC** – December 2009.
- **Joint Defense/Veteran Audiology Conference, Orlando, FL** – February 2010.

## Disabled American Veterans and the Road to Capitol Hill

Following up after the screening at the VA Summit in June 2008, Rep. Susan Davis' office contacted us about arranging a bipartisan screening on Capitol Hill. We knew this was an invaluable opportunity to get the film and the issue of women veteran healthcare in front of decision-makers in Congress. We dedicated many hours to planning the event. Joining us in this process was Joy Ilem, assistant national legislative director of the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), who had seen the film at the Summit. She offered to work with us, and Rep. Davis' office, to build interest in a Hill event. Joy and her colleagues at DAV were excellent partners, providing us with inside knowledge of the legislative process and ongoing advice on how to navigate the subtle politics involved in bringing a project like this to fruition.



We also invited DAV (along with the Center for Women Veterans) to be one of our outreach partners for our ITVS Community Cinema screenings in advance of our November broadcast. This entailed DAV sending representatives to screenings to participate on post-screening panels and distributing resource materials. ITVS also posted a link to DAV on the Independent Lens/Lioness website and added DAV branding to the film's discussion guide and facilitators' guide. DAV representatives appeared at a number of Community Cinema events, including Boise, Tacoma, Charleston, San Diego, Miami, Phoenix, Evansville, and Boston.

In December 2008, ITVS came on as a third partner, offering support for travel, lodging, lunch, and publicity for the event. We worked closely with ITVS' director of communications Dennis Palmieri. Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) also came on board, and we began to gather real momentum for a late March 2009 screening and panel discussion.

During the period, we learned a lot about how issues are brought to the table on the Hill. In the case of veterans' affairs issues, we came to understand the crucial role veteran service organizations (VSOs) in shaping legislation based on their direct experience with their veteran membership. Their credibility as issue experts enables them to facilitate the introduction of testimony into the official record at hearings and more generally to have significant input into the content of a bill in their particular area of expertise. This was the case with DAV which had good relations with staff members on the House and Senate committees on Veterans' Affairs. We also learned the value of patience if you want to pursue legislative change. Eventually, we were able to marshal even more resources and fully coordinate our plans with internal developments in the House Veterans' Affairs Committee (HVAC).

Timing was also critical. During the period that we were making preparations for the screening, a bipartisan group of lawmakers including Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD) were busy writing bills that addressed women veterans issues, including a bill (S. 597/H.R. 1211) called "The Women Veterans' Healthcare Improvement Act." Our VSO partners on the Hill, DAV and IAVA, knew this legislation was about to "be dropped" and that a screening in late March would raise awareness about the issues and publicize the bills.

Meanwhile, the GAO (Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress), was conducting a major investigation into the VA's delivery of services to women veterans and the VA itself was busy adopting a series of internal policies aimed at enhancing primary care for women. All of this activity led to a heightened awareness of women veterans' issue in veteran and military circles in the winter and spring of 2009, and helped to set the stage for our event on Capitol Hill.

## LIONESS on Capitol Hill

On March 31st, with the help of our partners, we achieved a major goal in our LIONESS outreach campaign. We screened a 20-minute excerpt of LIONESS before a standing room only crowd of key Congressional members and their staff, veteran service organizations, activist leaders interested in issues affecting military and women veterans, and press. Opening remarks were made by Representative Bob Filner, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin (D-SD), Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA) and Rep. Judy Biggert (R- IL). They were followed by Patricia Harrison, CEO of PBS, Dr. Betty Moseley Brown,



Staff Sgt. Ranie Ruthig speaks about her experiences in Iraq in the House Veteran Affairs Committee Room while Major Anastasia Breslow and Shannon Morgan listen.



At Press Conference, Senator Murray announces her comprehensive bi-partisan legislation to prepare the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for the influx of women veterans who will access care there in the coming years. From l to r, Staff Sgt. Ranie Ruthig, Major Anastasia Breslow, Senator Murray, Shannon Morgan and Rebecca Nava.

Associate Director, Center for Women Veterans, and Paul Rieckhoff, Executive Director, IAVA. Following the screening, four of the women from the film, Shannon Morgan, Ranie Ruthig, Anastasia Breslow, and Rebecca Nava discussed the impact of their experiences in Iraq before a rapt audience.

Later in the day, the Lionesses joined Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Senator Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) at a press conference on the Senate side in support of S. 597/H.R. 1211.

One measure of LIONESS' impact was the new networks of support it created. On the Hill, we felt that we were witnessing the coalescing of a movement around the latest

generation of women veterans. Many of the key stakeholders were there, from active duty soldiers and veterans to lawmakers and staffers to VA and DoD employees to policy experts and researchers. We heard over and over again from people around the country that they wanted to come to be present for the event, with some travelling from as far as Korea, California, and Florida to be part of the experience.

After this event, as a result of the film's uniqueness and visibility, we became a kind of clearing-house for a wide range of people trying to connect around issues relating to military and veteran women, especially those who have served in Iraq. The next stage of our outreach campaign involved taking the energy of that day and extending it as far as we could into the circuits where policy decisions are shaped and professionals are trained to deal with this current generation of veterans' challenges.

## Impact of Capitol Hill Event

### 1) H.R. 952: The Combat PTSD Act

Our Hill event led to a number of important developments. Rebecca Nava was invited to provide testimony to the House Veterans Affairs' Subcommittee on Disability Assistance as part of a legislative hearing on "Compensation Owed for Mental Health Based on Activities in Theater Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, H.R. 952." The purpose of H.R. 952 was to clarify and expand the definition of "combat with the enemy" to cover anyone serving in a "theater of combat operations." The subcommittee invited Lioness, Rebecca Nava to state her views, based on her personal experience, on the issues surrounding VA's application of the definition of combat and its effect on processing claims for veterans suffering from PTSD. (At the time, Becky's disability claims had been denied three times.) At our request, DAV assisted Becky in the preparation of her testimony.



Lioness screening on Capitol Hill, March 31, 2009.

In addition, all of the women in the film were invited to participate in a roundtable held by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs on May 20th that focused on "The Growing Needs of Women

Veterans: Is the VA Ready?” The purpose of the panel was to gather information and views regarding the VA’s plan to implement enhanced services for women veterans.

## 2) H.R. 1211: The Women Veterans Healthcare Improvement Act

This act mandates improvement of gender specific healthcare at VA facilities for women veterans and provides funding for this purpose. LIONESS was cited by speakers at a number of House and Senate hearings over the spring and summer. In one hearing in the Senate, Sen. Patty Murray referenced the film and the press conference and shared Shannon’s story of not being believed she had been in combat when she first applied for benefits at the VA:

<http://murray.senate.gov/video/090422-vetshealthqanda.mp3>

At another Senate hearing on women veterans’ health care, LIONESS was referenced by representatives from various veteran service organizations as a film that should be required viewing in all VA facilities.

On June 23, 2009, the House of Representatives passed the Women Veterans’ Healthcare Improvement Act (H.R. 1211): <http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c111:h1211>:

The bill was referred to the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee where it was passed as part of The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act 2009 Veteran healthcare bill (S. 1963).

President Obama signed the bill into law on May 5, 2010.

## 3) Connecting the dots: Documenting Women’s Service on DD214 Form

In addition to facilitating change at the VA via the House and Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees, our film had a direct impact on the work of the House Armed Services Committee. Immediately following our Senate press conference on 3/31/09, at her request, the women in our film spent an hour talking privately with Rep. Susan Davis (D-CA), Chairwoman of the Military Personnel Sub-



*Dr. Patty Hayes, Women Veterans Health, Strategic Health Group, VA greets Major Anastasia Breslow. March 31, 2009.*

committee of the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), and Deb Wadda, Majority Staff Director for the Military Personnel Subcommittee. The focus of the conversation was on whether or not the women in our film had earned their combat action badges (badges awarded by the Army to those from Iraq and Afghanistan who have served in combat) and whether their work as Lionesses had been recorded on their DD214 form (an official military document, like a resume, which is supposed to be a complete record of a service member’s time in the military, awards and medals, and other pertinent service information such as promotions, combat service, and military occupational specialty identifiers), and

if the fact of absence of documentation had affected their ability to prove any service-connected disability at the VA. (Only one of the five women in our film has received a Combat Action Badge and Rebecca Nava’s disability claim had been turned down three times).

This line of questioning had come up after the screening and it raised an important issue—there is no mechanism in place within the military to properly document service member participation in operational missions outside of the requirements of their military occupation. In the case of combat support troops (female and male), it means there is no record of their contributions aside from the jobs they were sent over to do such as mechanic, logistics, heavy equipment operator. As a result, they face significant challenges when they come back in proving they have done what they



say they have done (e.g. experienced combat), which in turn impedes their ability to qualify for disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

A few weeks after this meeting, we learned that House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Filner had convened a private meeting with women veteran activists and healthcare workers to discuss the importance of getting women's combat service recorded on their DD214 forms. At the meeting, the film was mentioned as a catalyst. One respected Vietnam woman veteran activist told us afterwards that the film had "jumpstarted a conversation about inequities reflected in the DD214 by putting a human face on the problem, making it impossible to deny." Our film, she said, has "ignited interest in discovering what is at the root of the disconnect."

The significance of LIONESS' acceptance within the DoD as a reference point for experiences of a new generation of women veterans cannot be underestimated. As Jennifer C. Schingle, Associate Counsel at the Board of Veterans' Appeals, writes the many women veterans are unfairly burdened or blocked from accessing their benefits due to DoD's handling of a soldier's service documentation. Referencing the experiences of the women in our film she explains:

There are a number of reasons for these documentation challenges, the greatest being the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) policy that prohibits the assignment of female soldiers to units whose primary mission is to engage in direct ground combat operations....This lack of combat recognition not only damages a female soldier's pride and future military career, it damages her potential to prove service connection should she later be diagnosed with PTSD as a result of the combat action. *Jennifer C. Schingle, William and Mary Journal of Women and the Law, Fall 2009.*

#### 4) Policy Impact: The National Defense Authorization Act 2010

As a direct result of our work on the Hill, the House Armed Services Committee included recommendations for the Secretary of Defense in a report accompanying the National Defense Authorization Act 2010. The report did three things:

1. It directed the Secretary of Defense to review the way the armed forces manage and document service personnel (such as the Lionesses) who are asked to participate in operations outside their job specialty.
2. It expressed concern over lack of documentation of this additional service and requested creation of an identifier of this Lioness service that would be put on their DD214 forms. In effect, creating a military Lioness specialty.
3. It urged DoD to make sure that women receive systematic training prior to deployment that takes into account their "unique" mission as Lionesses.



*On May 5th, 2010, President Obama signed the Caregivers and Veterans' Omnibus Health Services Act into law while Senator Patty Murray looked on.*

To read this section of the National Defense Authorization Act report, visit:

[http://www.rules.house.gov/111/CommJurRpt/111\\_hr2647\\_rpt.pdf](http://www.rules.house.gov/111/CommJurRpt/111_hr2647_rpt.pdf), pp. 315-316

One of the important things to note in the House report is that the language, while starting off discussing Lioness soldiers and women veterans, goes on to raise the larger issue of all service members who are called into off-MOS duties in exigencies while serving on active duty. As one of our partners pointed out to us:



The review being ordered, and the report it will produce, stand a large chance of actually changing DoD policy, and may be backed by statutory changes as well. Down the line, when a woman or man serving as a clerk or mechanic is called on to take a hazardous assignment in harm's way outside her or his training and MOS, training will be required beforehand, and a documentary record will be made of that training and that hazardous assignment...this will make a huge difference to these veterans and to DAV when we try to help them get their rightful benefits.

#### 5) Policy Impact: Department of Defense Report on Lioness Program

The DoD response to House Report 111-166 was delivered to the House Armed Services Committee in March 2010. The report did not recommend any changes be made in terms of tracking and recognizing female service members who support combat contingency operations or perform duties outside their MOS asserting that "the military services have multiple processes already in place to appropriately document and recognize members performing duties throughout their respective chains of command." DoD's report on the Lioness program, however disappointing in terms of its refusal to address training and documentation concerns raised by HASC, is its first formal acknowledgment of Army and Marine servicewomen participation in search and engagement activities in Iraq. We view it as the opening salvo in what promises to be an extended discussion between lawmakers and the Department of Defense over changes to the policy governing women in combat as the Iraq war winds down.

### Lessons Learned

**Face to Face Contact** – As efficient as email can be at times, we found that there is no substitute for actual face-to-face contact. Whether you are building trust within the world of your story or creating outreach partnerships, meaningful collaboration requires personal exchange via one on one meetings and phone calls, at least in initial phase of relationship building. Technology and social networking are invaluable tools at the right stage of a project, especially in terms of building an audience, but they are not a substitute for actual co-presence with another person.



*Filming Major Kate Guttormsen, Fort Stewart, GA. 2007.*

**Story Choice** – Our story choice worked on multiple levels of impact because it went beyond the headlines to a less obvious choice – women combat veterans. In selecting a story, it is important to find one that symbolizes an issue for the long term.

**Storytelling** – We made a conscious choice when editing the film not to preach to the choir. If we had built a solution into the film from the beginning, we would have gone nowhere because the solutions were part of collective set of dialogues that the story ignited.

**Credibility** – The importance of filmmaker credibility in dealing with our subjects at all levels of involvement was paramount. Conducting our work with integrity not only distinguished us

from mainstream press – which isn't always obvious to individuals on other side of the camera – but also produced results favorable to our outreach. The fact that we had developed such a close relationship with our subjects and had such depth of knowledge of the subject compared to many in the field, we were, in initial phases, identified with the emergence of issue. On the one hand, that allowed us to advance the impact at all the right moments but it also meant we needed to oversee most of it. We could not outsource the outreach to third party and achieve the same impact.

**Become a Credible Source for the Press** – Our credibility with the press derived both from the film and its critical reception as well as from the video op-ed we created for the New York Times which debuted on the front page of the Times’ website on Veterans Day in 2008. We became a source of credible information for print reporters from national newspapers and wire services such as the New York Times and A.P. This enabled us to help shape how stories related to military women were reported, such as the four articles about women in combat and women with PTSD published as part of the New York Times’ Women At Arms series between August and October 2009.

**State of Movement** – With LIONESS we were ahead of the curve. We often found ourselves knowing more about the subject of what women were doing in Iraq than anyone else including many members of the military, the VA and Congress. At times the evolving nature of the issue made it hard to design a campaign but it also provided opportunities.

**Flexibility** – Be adaptive in executing your outreach strategy. Funders value predictability but we tried to remain open to a change of strategy because changemaking is a process that, optimally, takes on a life of its own. Even if the film is completed, filmmakers need to keep observing the world of their subject and how best to act within that world. Partnerships can take time to nurture and for opportunities to emerge. The more that can develop organically from the world of your story the better. The earlier your film merges in the evolution of a movement, the more flexible you should be.

**Funding** – One of the challenges we faced in outreach phase was a lack of money to follow up on opportunities. Invitations to testify on the Hill, for example, involved travel and lodging for women in our film which at the time we did not have funds to cover. The women themselves could not afford to pay out of their own pocket. In addition, for filmmakers outreach is labor intensive and not usually remunerative.

**Importance of Collaborating with Broadcaster** – In this changing marketplace, broadcasters still have significant resources that can be brought to bear on your film’s debut on television and greatly amplify your outreach work as we saw with the Community Cinema program and ITVS’ support of our work on Capitol Hill.

**Screenings on Capitol Hill** – Make sure the Member hosting your event sends out a “Dear Colleague” letter, bring the subject(s) of your film along so that they can speak directly to Members and staffers after the screening; and identify the most credible advocates working on your issue on the Hill and work with them to guarantee that key representatives from related nongovernmental organizations attend and blog about your event.

**Documenting Your Impact** – One of the challenges of documenting the impact of our outreach and engagement work has been the sensitive nature of our subject matter. Veteran concerns are, to a large extent, healthcare concerns and require respect for privacy. We chose to document things that were intended to be public, such as the panel discussion on Capitol Hill (which we cut into an eight minute bonus feature for our dvd), and we decided not to make public the conversations that were more usefully left private.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The LIONESS outreach campaign began prior to the emergence of any formalized movement advocating for women veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the impulse for action at a grassroots level was coalescing, it had not yet manifested itself in the public imagination. When LIONESS was introduced to the stakeholder communities early on in our outreach campaign, it was immediately embraced as a representative narrative that gave meaning and urgency to a marginalized equity issue.

A key challenge we face as filmmakers doing our own outreach work is the question of how to create conditions for that work to continue as we move on to other projects. We have been

struggling to keep up with requests for substantive information about military and veteran women as well as invitations for screenings and speaking engagements. Finding a way to maintain the momentum LIONESS has achieved remains an ongoing concern for us.

One step we have taken to help sustain the activism LIONESS ignited is to train the women in our film to be spokespersons for the needs of military and veteran women. Early on we traveled with them to most of the conferences and community screenings but now they are comfortable enough to do it alone. We attribute their ongoing commitment to the demonstrated potential of the film to help military and veteran women. Shannon and the other women have witnessed firsthand the powerful emotions LIONESS has unleashed at screenings. They have come to understand how their story stands in for the stories of many women. This realization has given them the courage to speak publicly about their experiences. Within the community of women veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan, this kind of capacity building is still very much needed.

While we hope LIONESS can continue to raise awareness, we also hope that the act of storytelling, as exemplified by the five women in our film, can open the door for other veterans, both women and men, to come forward, tell their stories and receive the validation and recognition they deserve within their families and communities.

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## **Appendix: Summary of Accomplishments**

As we write this, two years after the start of our outreach and engagement campaign, we continue to measure and track the ongoing impact of LIONESS in three different areas: usage within the nation's veteran healthcare infrastructure, promoting substantive legislative change on Capitol Hill and contributing to policy discussions regarding the disconnect between policy and reality in role of women soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### **1) Veteran Healthcare**

- Over 400 copies sold to VA facilities (bulk and single sales) to VA facilities across the country
- Institutionalization of LIONESS as reference point for military and veteran women's experiences within Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense.
- Over 75 copies sold to Vet Clinics across the country
- Ongoing screenings to sensitize and educate VA and private healthcare workers to the reality of women combat veterans
- Screenings in almost every state in the country reaching out to veteran communities and their families
- Letters, emails, phone calls, and blog postings citing use of film in veteran sensitivity training and support groups.
- Connecting an older generation of women veterans to a new generation.

### **2) Legislative Impact on Capitol Hill**

- H.R. 952 – Expands the definition of “combat with the enemy” to cover anyone serving in “theater of combat operations.”
- S. 1963 – Increases funding and improve healthcare at VA facilities for women veterans. Bill passed as part of Caregivers and Veterans’ Omnibus Health Services Act 2010. Signed into law by President Obama on May 5, 2010.

### 3) Policy Impact

- House Armed Services Committee – Experiences of women in our film focused the Committee’s attention on fact that no mechanism is in place to document servicemembers participation in operational missions – like Lioness missions – outside their stated military occupation.
- House recommendation sent to Secretary of Department of Defense recommending establishment of formal procedures to document the off-MOS work performed by female combat support troops as “Lionesses.”
- DoD report to House Armed Services Committee (March 2010) formally acknowledges Army and Marine servicewomen participation in female search and engagement activities in Iraq. Denies need to improve documentation.

### 4) Continued Civilian-Military Dialogue

- Ongoing screenings of LIONESS at community centers, VA facilities, cultural centers, and both military and veteran healthcare conferences.
- Outreach has influenced communication between Department of Veterans Affairs and Military and DoD Healthcare offices.