

Staff Sgt. Kat Kaelin
(left) and 1st Lt.
Caroline Cleveland
in Afghanistan,
February 2012.

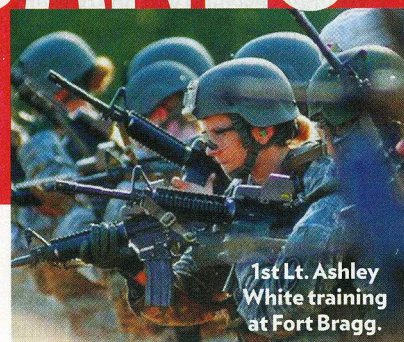
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WOMEN
AT WAR
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REAL-LIFE GI JANES

AS THE NATION DEBATES COMBAT ROLES FOR WOMEN, A SELECT FEW HAVE QUIETLY SERVED ALONGSIDE THE SPECIAL FORCES, TAKING ENEMY FIRE IN WAR ZONES AND RISKING THEIR LIVES FOR THEIR COUNTRY

In pitch black, as Kat Kaelin and her unit of Army Special Forces made a stealthy advance on the walled Afghanistan compound of suspected terrorists, gunfire suddenly pop-pop-popped the quiet of the Ranger regiment's night raid. "Our [bomb expert] was climbing up the side of the compound when a guy came out and shot, then pushed his wife in the doorway as a human shield," Kaelin, just 23 at the time, tells PEOPLE now, four years later. "There were rocket-propelled grenades going off. I found a

secure spot and dropped to one knee with my weapon ready." But her job in the shadows alongside the Army Rangers was more complicated than the M-4 rifle strapped in front and the M-9 Beretta handgun at her hip. For the Nevada National Guard staff sergeant, first trained to drive military-equipment trucks in Iraq, now carried other vital tools on these secret, sometimes deadly missions into Taliban and Al-Qaeda hiding places: Jolly Ranchers and a purple or green head scarf. "It would be the middle of the night, and



1st Lt. Ashley
White training
at Fort Bragg.

the women and children in these compounds would be so scared," Kaelin says. The candy in her pocket showed that she wasn't there to harm the little ones or their mothers. "I would pull out my scarf, undo my chin strap, and they'd get all big-eyed. They never see American women."

Even at home, few people know about women like Kaelin. In August

2011 Kaelin and 19 other elite female soldiers deployed alongside the Army Rangers for a nine-month stint in the combat zones of Afghanistan; one (see sidebar) was killed in action, and six were wounded badly enough to be sent home early. Publicly, however, the Army didn't talk about any of them.

While women make up 15 percent of active-duty military and accounted for 88 of the 5,353 "hostile death" casualties from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, they were formally banned from ground-combat units until that ban was lifted in January 2013. As commanders in each of the services have until Jan. 1, 2016, to open all roles to women or justify why a certain military job should remain male-only, the story of Kaelin's team is only now coming to light in the book *Ashley's War: The Untold Story of a Team of Women Soldiers on the Special Ops Battlefield* by Gayle Tzemach Lemmon. (Reese Witherspoon has secured the movie rights.) "Women were in combat from day one in Iraq and Afghanistan," says retired Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli, explaining the semantics of the ban versus the reality in the field. "We could not 'assign' them at the platoon level, so we 'attached' them to units. And there was not a woman out there who did not do amazing stuff."

Caroline Cleveland was one of them. The Military Police team leader was languishing on ceremonial support in Germany ("a 21-gun salute with cannons when the general retired was not what I joined the Army to do," Cleveland says) when, in early 2011, she grabbed the chance to try out for a new 20-woman "Cultural Support Team" to work with Special Ops in Afghanistan, where local religious customs inhibited male soldiers who were hunting terror suspects door-to-door in homes filled with women. Cleveland, Kaelin and the other CSTs—including Ashley White, who would become their first casualty—got a year's worth of training for men's Special Forces boiled down to about seven weeks. Based at Fort Bragg, N.C., the fitness testing was known among the women as "100 hours of hell"—mara-



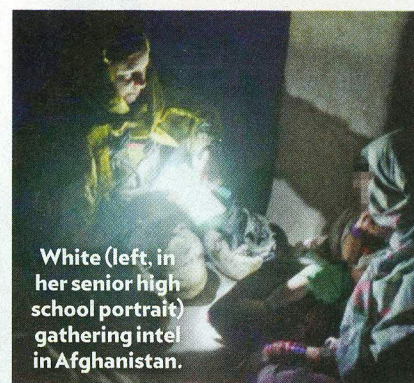
ASHLEY WHITE

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WHITE, 24, WAS KILLED BY A HOMEMADE BOMB ON A NIGHTTIME MISSION IN AFGHANISTAN. HER FAMILY HAD NO IDEA OF THE DANGERS SHE FACED

White's mom, Deborah White, 60, a school-bus driver from Marlboro, Ohio, talked to PEOPLE about her daughter

Ashley was the firstborn of twins. She went fishing with her brother [Josh] and loved cross-country and track. At Kent State University she joined the ROTC. The camaraderie and the sisterhood clicked with her. That's where she met Jason [Stumpf, whom she married in May 2011]. She graduated a second lieutenant and joined the National Guard. Even when she was trying out for the [Special Forces] program, she never talked much about going to war. She said, "Don't worry about me. I'm with the best of the best." Every Sunday she'd call. In her last conversation with her brother, she sounded scared. A few days later I was in the kitchen making cupcakes and the phone rang. I can still see [Ashley's father, Robert] walking across the backyard, shaking his head. I said, "How bad is she hurt?" He



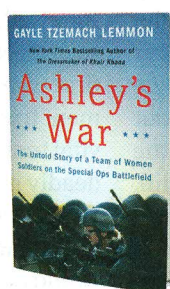
White (left, in her senior high school portrait) gathering intel in Afghanistan.



With mom Deborah at her wedding in May 2011.

said, "She's not hurt; she's gone." And that's what we live with every day. I make it through most of my days, and at night I usually cry and then go to sleep. They took us to Dover Air Force Base when they brought her body home. We were blown away when her commander told us what she was doing. She was 5'2", 122 lbs., carrying ammo and jumping out of helicopters. We had no idea that she was out there right alongside the Rangers on night missions. I'm very proud. We lost quite a daughter. When they were done with their tour, the seven [team members] came to our house to tell us about Ashley. They told me how Rangers nicknamed her Muffin. They said, "She was hard as a rock on the outside and

soft as butter on the inside." She never put any of her ribbons on her dress uniform. She had no desire to show off. She probably is up there shaking her head now because of the book and the movie rights, going, "Why? I just did what I was supposed to do."

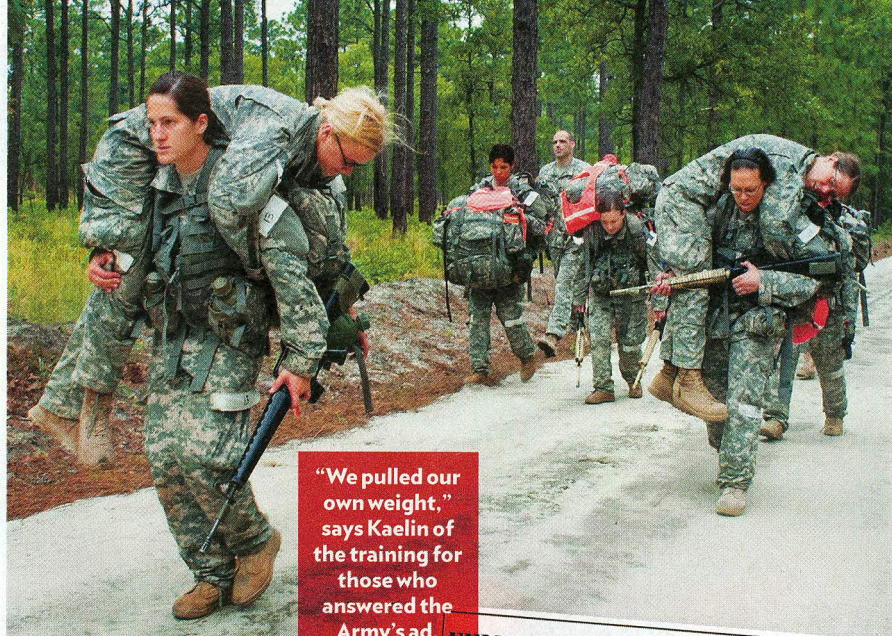


thon marches in full gear, obstacle courses with 30-ft. walls and “buddy carries” of their peers’ dead weight. “Every single footstep was no-fail,” Cleveland, now 27, says. Kaelin would chant to herself, “It can’t be me. I’m not going to fall out.”

They called themselves girls (“Girls’ versus ‘women’ is not the fight I’m going to fight,” says Cleveland), wore makeup and served as one another’s cheerleaders. White, the “sweet and kindhearted quiet professional,” Cleveland says, “gave us all our center.” That was a dead-serious commitment to the mission. “In the high school lunchroom, I don’t think I would have found these girls,” says Cleveland. “But on CST-2 we were all duty-driven to fulfill our purpose.”

Once overseas, the women were nicknamed by some men the Pink Team, but Cleveland and Kaelin say their male peers showed them respect. “There were some good ol’ boys and there was a period of feeling each other out, but what they said to us was, ‘Just do your

job,’ and we didn’t want to screw up,” says Kaelin. With a lot of on-the-job training and without publicity—in part because nothing Special Ops does is publicized, but also because, says Kaelin, the Pentagon doesn’t want Americans hearing “that their daughters and mothers and sisters are out there fighting”—the women were out nightly with strike forces, fast-roping



“We pulled our own weight,” says Kaelin of the training for those who answered the Army’s ad.

FEMALE SOLDIERS

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“nimum Requirements”



off helicopters hovering above insurgent strongholds or charging over mountain terrain on foot. They rounded up women and children to search and question. The intelligence Cleveland, Kaelin and the others coaxed from their subjects—how many men were hiding inside, where explosives were planted—would prove lifesaving to the Ranger regiment. It was a daisy chain of explosives that killed White and two Rangers during a raid in Kandahar Province. But Lemmon, in her book, details several instances where the intelligence the women gathered uncovered deadly traps.

Kaelin, who left a young daughter at home when she deployed, says compassion helped on the job. Her voice breaks remembering that night when an Afghan mother was shot dead in front of her young son after his father made her a human shield. “He was a little boy, barefoot, his clothes were so thin. The dust from the chopper felt like needles against the skin, so I covered him; he clenched onto me supertight. I wanted to take all the children home, make them feel

**‘It sure
felt like
combat.
I’m extremely
lucky to
be alive’**
—1ST LT. CAROLINE
CLEVELAND



protected.”

And then it was time to go home. The women of CST-2, including White and the six wounded, had, by then, all earned Combat Action Badges. The survivors remain close with one another and with the male Rangers both Cleveland and Kaelin (who have since left the military) call “brothers.” Kaelin, who had seven CST bridesmaids at her 2014 wedding, is now a married at-home mom to three girls, one of whom she named after White. Cleveland will start physical-therapy school in August. “A lot of us felt like we had the experience of a lifetime in CST and couldn’t feel fulfilled again in any lesser role,” says Kaelin. Perhaps more women will get that chance. As Lt. Gen. John Mulholland, head of Army Special Operations Command, said at White’s Oct. 30, 2011, memorial service, she and the rest of the women “absolutely will write a new chapter in the role of women soldiers . . . and every single one of them have proven equal to the test.”

**By Sandra Sobieraj Westfall and
Elizabeth McNeil**

“I took the flag from the flagpole the night Ashley died,” says Kaelin (left, with Cleveland in Afghanistan), “and carried it with me on missions.”

