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A new breed of gunner

As a present day modern aerial gunner, Airman 1st Class Vanessa Dobos has little in common with gunners from World War I. Though Dobos does fire a massive machine gun from the deck of a ... well ... helicopter, perhaps her greatest distinction is the fact she's a woman — the Air Force's first female aerial gunner.

While her job as an enlisted aircrew member on the HH-60 helicopter may be different, Dobos is remarkably similar to her predecessors. She wants to fly.

Unexpected start

Raised in the small town of Valley View, Ohio, her interest in the military was sparked by her father. Described by Dobos as a "history buff," her dad talked a lot about America's past heroes while they often watched classic war movies.

" He instilled in me so much respect for our country's past heroes," she said.

Near the end of her senior year in high school, she found herself talking to a recruiter. She told him she wouldn't consider a job if it wasn't flying-related.

" I had no intention of joining," she said. "I didn't realize how few enlisted aircrew jobs there were."

Nothing appealed to Dobos until another recruiter mentioned a career field that had just opened to new recruits — 1A7X1, or aerial gunner.

" Just the title caught my eye," she said, and to her parents' surprise, as well as her own, she signed up that day.

Under pressure

A few months later, Dobos found herself in basic military training and later at the basic aerial gunner course at Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M. She was not aware she was on her way to becoming the Air Force's first female gunner until midway through training.

" I went from being another airman in the crowd to someone who people would always be watching and analyzing," she said. "In some ways, I was afraid that people in the helicopter world were already prepared to be disappointed in me. I figured there were some people with hard feelings about a girl in the job. I was determined not to let them down."

And she didn't.

As a member of the 66th Rescue Squadron at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., Dobos "mans" a .50-caliber machine gun aboard an HH-60 Pave Hawk. Her main role is caring for the guns and other defensive systems. However, she's also responsible for briefing passengers and helping other crewmembers with the weapons, defensive systems, hoist and other equipment.

It's the job her predecessors from World Wars I and II performed as they flew in their bombers through the flak-filled skies swarming with enemy fighters. It's the job she's prepared to perform in her helicopter during combat rescue missions while receiving enemy ground fire and dodging rocket-propelled grenades. But that's not a reasonable comparison, according to Dobos.

" I really love my job," she said. "I enjoy learning about the history of my career field, but I don't compare myself to gunners from [World Wars I and II]. Those men deserve a lot more credit than I do."

— 2nd Lt. Chuck Widener