



**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH
VERNICE ARMOUR
23 NOVEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the Marines and what did your parents think about it?

VERNICE ARMOUR: So why did I join the Marines, that is the most famous question. For those that know my history, I was in the Army reserves, enlisted at first. So when folks said why did you go Marines? I said I was looking for the next challenge. I had already been a police officer, and since I'd already been in the Army that cancelled the Navy and Air Force. If I was looking for the next challenge it was all about the Marine Corps. Kidding [LAUGHS]. I can't help but say that joke. But no, one mission, one goal, one team, we're all in it together. The true reason that I wanted to go Marine Corps, is yes, esprit de corps, it's tough and elite. My grandfather was a Montford Point Marine and he enlisted back in 1942. The Montford Point Marines are like the parallel to the Tuskegee Airmen for that era for the Marine Corps and my dad was three tours Vietnam as a crew chief on the [CH]46. So I wanted to be third generation Marine Corps.

QUESTION: How did your parents react?

VERNICE ARMOUR: My dad said I don't want you to go in the Marine Corps baby. I said, well dad, why not? He's like, well, I was in the Corps, I knew how women were treated. I just don't want my baby being treated that way. I said dad, I understand where you're coming from. Number one, I'm going to be a pilot and I'm going to be an officer, not saying that that's going to be easy, but it'll give a little latitude to try and make some type of change. And if I don't do it, who's going to? At some point somebody has to take the steps forward to change things from how they are to how we really want them to be. So I said, I know you don't want me to do it, but I'm doing it. He just wanted me to be happy. My parents, they just wanted me to be happy. So I've probably given them all their gray hair.

QUESTION: There are people who thought that women didn't have the toughness to be Marines. What are your thoughts on that?

VERNICE ARMOUR: There are still people that feel like women don't have what it takes to be a Marine. And that's okay, because women are there, women are Marines, we serve by the side of our brothers, and we always will. Women are more than willing, more than able, more than capable to do the job that they're signed up to do, and it's not a job, it's a calling. United States Marine, you know, leader of Marines. And I'm honored to have served, and if you can meet the standards, just like any of the other guys, then you're capable to do the job. That's what we do.

QUESTION: General Mutter said that during World War II enough women joined the Marine Corps to allow the U.S. to win the war in the Pacific. What are your thoughts on those who came before you in the Marine Corps?

VERNICE ARMOUR: My thoughts on those that came before is I'm standing on their shoulders. You know, the trailblazers, whether it was the male, female, black or white, the pilots or infantry, I'm standing on some amazing shoulders and especially those women like Annie Grimes, or some of the first women to enlist or be an officer. One woman actually became an officer because on her application it said she was a male. That's the only reason the packet went

through, right, so just some of the amazing stories. I can't even imagine what I would have done in some of those circumstances. So one of my favorite phrases is, to whom much is given, much is required. They lay the foundation for me and I have to keep laying the foundation on that legacy so those young shoulders behind me have a path to walk on.

QUESTION: What sort of obstacles did you face personally?

VERNICE ARMOUR: Folks ask me all the time did you have obstacles, discrimination, sexism, racism, and I said people have tension all the time, whether you're married and you have an argument with your spouse or one of your friends, tension is normal. So, because somebody didn't say hi to me in the morning, or I found out about a party on Friday night the weekend after, or there was this friction, it could've been because I had short hair, because I smiled in the morning, because I had a motorcycle, because I bench press more than them, or because I'm black, or a woman, or gay. It could've been all of those. But I wasn't going to spend my time trying to figure out why John didn't say hi. I had a mission to focus on and the moment I took my eye off of that mission lives were at stake. So, I like to say acknowledge the obstacles, don't give them power.

QUESTION: What made you want to serve your country?

VERNICE ARMOUR: I think I've always been led to lead a life of being a civil servant. You know, giving back to the community. At the age of four I knew I wanted to be a police officer that rode a horse downtown and I had my eyes set on that. When I got in college I saw the military as a way to help me get to that goal, because you couldn't be a police officer until you were 21. I was 18, so I was looking for that strategic edge. While involved in ROTC, I saw a black woman in a flight suit. Mind you, after I made the flippant statement that black people don't fly and I didn't want to go to the aviation tent. It's about access and exposure. What do we have access to, what do we have exposure to, especially our young generation. Role models, when I saw that woman in the flight suit, it changed my complete perspective and planted a very strong seed. Because of that I'm here today and have had the experiences that I've had. So that's why it's even more important for me to be out there and be in that flight suit and talk about technology and aviation, because you never know when you're planting that seed.

QUESTION: There are more women in the Marines now than ever before. What sort of things are these women able to do now that they couldn't do 20 years ago?

VERNICE ARMOUR: What women can do today is amazing compared to even when I came in. Some of my mentors when I first came in, I was a lieutenant, they were a lieutenant colonel and they didn't even shoot a rifle or carry a rifle when they were going through officer candidate school. When I first enlisted in the Army women couldn't be combat pilots. What I did for my service couldn't be done when I first enlisted, so, just the changing of history and it's evolution even during my lifetime. The going away of Don't Ask Don't Tell, it's just amazing. Now we have women going to the school of infantry, for the United States Marine Corps of all services. You know, how amazing. We have the Lioness who are over in Iraq and Afghanistan who are patrolling right along side the men. What I want most for our women is to be trained to the same standards. Don't just put us out there without the same training that our male counterparts are getting. And that's kind of what's happening right now. We get a certain amount of training, but it's not the same like going through the school of infantry and all the different courses. So I have no doubt that women will be able to do these things and many more.

QUESTION: Why helicopters?

VERNICE ARMOUR: You asked the question, why helicopters, right? Truth be told, I wanted to fly jets when I was first coming in. I studied my butt off. I made jet grades, but I was ranked number four and there were only two jet slots that week. The top two guys wanted jets, which meant the third and fourth guy, me being number four, did not get jets, so I went off to Helo land. I was devastated for a little while, I just couldn't believe that I'd worked so hard to get jet grades but here I am not flying jets. I said, well, if I have to fly helicopters I want to fly the baddest thing out there. That was the Cobra. I knew that even if there was only one Cobra, number one guy gets to pick whatever it is they want. So I made it my business to study my butt off. So when others were going to the beach or to the club or hanging out, I was in the books. And I fly Cobras.

QUESTION: Tell me about the firepower on a Cobra.

VERNICE ARMOUR: The firepower of the AH 1 Whiskey Super Cobra attack helicopter is absolutely amazing, and right now we're upgrading to the Zulu, which has even more capabilities than the Whiskey model that I flew. Glass cockpit, the optics, the camera, how far it can see or identify that something is there now, but recognize that target. I'm just trying to figure out what do I need to do, who do I need to talk to to get a ride in that thing. But the firepower, the hellfire missiles, the tow, the rockets, the guns, and I used to like to make the analogy of the Cobra being like a wasp, you know, it's like, it's in, it's out, zinging. It might not have had all the fancy things that maybe the Apache or some of the other aircraft out there had, but I tell you what, it all boiled down to the Marine behind those controls.

QUESTION: What is the Cobra's job?

VERNICE ARMOUR: The main mission of the Cobra is close air support. So supporting those troops on the ground when we have raids, when we have convoys, reconnaissance missions, gathering intel, forward looking as over the horizon. It didn't have armor to keep it from being pierced, it can be pierced by small arms, so we still had to be careful, but just the sheer firepower and protecting our troops from ambush and taking out buildings where enemy are hiding, it's an amazing piece of gear.

QUESTION: What does close air support mean?

VERNICE ARMOUR: In those terms, when you're watching an old Vietnam film and you're seeing the Hueys come in with the rockets or the napalm, Cobras do not have napalm, but that kind of mission, where we have troops in contact, we can see the enemy, we're taking them out — and I know this sounds kind of gruesome I think, now just hearing myself say it — that's one of the main missions of the Cobra. And when the enemy hears that aircraft coming, they move.

QUESTION: How do you process the danger of flying that kind of aircraft?

VERNICE ARMOUR: The only armor is around the actual seat of the two pilots. There's no armor on the outside of the aircraft. I remember the very first night flying over that border for the first time. It was just a small little barbed wire fence, but this diminutive little fence separated two huge worlds. I was counting down, three, two, one, we're in Iraq, and it was just so quiet. Surreal. I could actually feel my body trying to shrink back into the armor a little bit because we weren't in radio contact yet with our friendly ground forces. And I remember

thinking, okay, how far forward are we going to fly without having any contact. If the enemy shot us down no one would know where we were. There was a division of four of us and it coined a phrase for me, focus and transform your fear to fuel. I could just explode like a grenade or I could bring all that fear back in and focus like a laser burning through steel. Because again, lives were at stake and we had a mission to do. So, in that moment, you really fall back on your training and focus on what we're really there for. And that it's not about us, it's about those lives on the ground.

QUESTION: Does anything stand out as a particularly dangerous or hard mission?

VERNICE ARMOUR: I can tell you about the mission that ended up meaning the most to me and I didn't know it at the time. We had been out for a little over an hour and we got the call that troops were in contact, they were pinned down. Because we'd been out for a little over an hour we knew we only had 20 minutes of fuel left and we'd be taking out another target that had missiles and bombs cached in them, so we really wanted to destroy it, because those bombs could later be used as IEDs, Improvised Explosive Devices, on our troops. And, you know, I felt an acid bomb explode inside of my stomach because I knew the troops needed us up there. We headed up to the north of the cemetery, we circled around, we were able to track down the target and pull the trigger. Our last and only missile on the aircraft did not come off. Recalibrated a couple things, pulled the trigger one more time, it came off, took out the building. We landed almost out of fuel, completely out of ammo. Great, Marines came home that night. But several months later I was in the hospital standing in line for a routine doctor's appointment and I was talking to the Marine in front of me and I said, why are you here? He said, I have some shrapnel in my left leg. I said, wow, shrapnel, were you recently deployed? He said, yes ma'am, Iraq, Eleventh MEU. I was like, hey, I was in the Eleventh Marine Expeditionary Unit, I was your Cobra air support! He goes, oh. You fly Cobras? He questioned me, like wait a minute, women don't fly Cobras. I was like, no. I fly Cobras. And he said, man, you wouldn't believe we were in the cemetery, we were pinned down, a Cobra came in and shot a missile. I said, wow, wait a minute! That sounds like a mission I was on. When we paired it up, it was the same missile, same aircraft, same mission. We were screaming and clapping and hollering in the middle of the hospital. Then he just stopped and he looked at me and he said, ma'am, you saved my life.

QUESTION: People say they don't fight for their country, they fight for their buddies. What does that mean to you?

VERNICE ARMOUR: Why do we fight? You know, it's really about our community, our neighbor, and yes, our brothers and sisters in arms. When we're out there, and you're tired, and you don't want to go on, or things are going on back at home, those men and women, brothers and sisters who are by your side and have your back, you're there for them too. You want to make sure everybody comes back. Unfortunately, everyone doesn't, but that's why we try so hard.

QUESTION: How do you process it when something bad does happen?

VERNICE ARMOUR: Most of the time we call it compartmentalization, you put it in that little ziploc bag, you zip it up, and you go out there and you do it again. Earlier I talked about the Cobra, and it not having that much armor, and especially on the outside. When you have a guy that's 30 days out from coming home and a round goes through the Plexiglas of the cockpit and hits him in the throat and he doesn't come home, or a missile explodes next to another one and it

takes my colleagues down, you have to go back out because you don't want any more to happen. Those men and women on the ground are depending on us to go out there. At the end of the day we're all fighting for a country that we love, that we're blessed to be in, and we'd all do it over again.

QUESTION: When you're flying, how many helicopters are you with?

VERNICE ARMOUR: When Cobras are out there flying, they fly either in a section or division; section is two, division is four. In the midst of combat, it's usually a division that goes out. Rarely would we ever send just a section into some kind of combative situation. It's usually a division.

QUESTION: Many women have been killed in this War on Terror. What does that say about the kind of dangers women are facing in the military today?

VERNICE ARMOUR: Whether we want to say that they're in direct combat or not, we are. And as soon as you go into Iraq, you have walked into a combat zone. There are no frontlines and I'm sure plenty of folks have been saying that. It's like walking into a sponge. You could be a cook, on a convoy, and you get ambushed. Or you could be on your main base and enemy come to your forward operating base and you find yourself in contact situation. So, the combat that women are facing today is the combat that has never been seen by women before. And that's not to take away from the women who were in Vietnam or World War II, who saw different aspects of combat as well. This is not the first time that women have been in combat. But to this extent, it is. So, you know, when women are strapping on rifles and flak jackets and helmets and night vision goggles, and doing some of the special operations, it puts us in a very different situation that we've never been in before. And again, I know women are capable, and they're ready for it, we've been ready for it. Now it's just for us to continue the mission.

QUESTION: The media images get the public more used to the reality. How important is it for the public to be exposed to these images?

VERNICE ARMOUR: It's important for us to get the true reality of what women are doing in the military out there. It's imperative that our American community sees the true experience of what our women are going through and what they are accomplishing everyday, period, end of story. It's doing a disservice to not show that. We serve honorably by the sides of our brothers everyday, just like they do. So when we come back and we go to the Veterans Administration, the VA center, we want to have representation there as well. So our community, our neighbor, our country is going to have to get behind us and, you know, it's not the government that has to take care of veterans when they come home, it's the Nation that has to take care of us. It doesn't say USVA, it says United States of America on every uniform. When a woman is homeless her kids are homeless, people can't believe that there are homeless women veterans. We can take care of the woman veteran, but her kids aren't allowed to stay in the same facility. What woman is going to leave her kids? So, we end up having homeless families on the streets. Does our American society need to hear these stories? Absolutely. Absolutely, because women are veterans and we have to take care of all of our service members, past, present and future.

QUESTION: So these women aren't asking for help because of their kids?

VERNICE: Depending on where a woman would ask for help if she's homeless and has kids, that can put her in a precarious situation, because you have child protective services. Are they going

to let the kids stay in the custody of the mom when they're homeless? Just the fear alone of not knowing whether that would happen or not is going to keep somebody from going many times. So they just try to take care of it themselves. But again, that's what veterans do. We take command of the situation, we use our leadership and we try to figure it out, which is why it's so hard for our service members to ask for help. They're so used to being the ones helping others that they don't even ask for help. So, I implore our American society, don't wait for a veteran to ask you for help, figure out how you can help them before they have to ask, because the need is there.

QUESTION: Injuries are much more serious for women now.

VERNICE: Today's veteran is able to survive experiences because of the technological advances of the medical industry. And that goes for the outside and the inside. Again, our American society needs to know that these issues exist, because we have to educate corporate America that, hey, it's okay to hire our veterans that might have what they see as a disadvantage. That veteran has figured out a way to add strengths. Just because you're missing a limb doesn't mean you're incapable. So how can we get our society, our Nation to stand behind our veterans with disabilities that we're uncomfortable with. It's hard to see a man or a woman walking down the street with both legs gone. But we don't have to feel sorry for anybody. What we can do is support each other to the best of our ability. Our unemployment rate for veterans shouldn't be higher than the national average, but it is. So I ask what are we going to do about it? I got out there, I started my own company, and it's up to us to create jobs for each other as well, which is helping other veterans start their companies, it's been an amazing journey. I absolutely love what I do and I'm able to touch so many more lives coaching and talking to corporate America and it's bigger than I ever would have thought imaginable.

QUESTION: We're not used to seeing women sacrifice to the degree that they do now.

VERNICE: The definition of the word sacrifice is giving up something of lesser value for the greater good. Women have done this unselfishly for centuries. When a woman has to sacrifice for her kids, her friends, her community, the greater good, whatever it has been for the most part, she has stepped up to that. Her sacrifice is not a sacrifice, it's a willingness, it's a desire to matter, to do more, to be more, and this military frontier is just one more way that women have stepped up to that call of duty of mothering, nurturing and taking care of her Nation.

QUESTION: What does it mean, fight for the right to fight?

VERNICE: Fighting for the right to fight is an interesting statement. I was in Wyoming and I was going to the Veterans Center up there and I drove down this long drive and when I got to the building there were the flagpoles and this granite block outside. It said the price of freedom is visible here. I'd never seen that before. I'd always heard the price of freedom isn't free, but the price of freedom is visible here. Wow.

QUESTION: What would you like people who are watching this film to know about the women you served with?

VERNICE:

What I want everyone listening to the sound of my voice to know is that the women I served with were amazing, brave, courageous, gutsy, loving and honorable.

QUESTION: What does it mean to earn the title of Marine?

VERNICE: To earn the title of Marine, I can honestly say the two proudest moments of my life was when I walked across that stage and I got my badge and became a police officer in Nashville, Tennessee, and the second moment when I walked across that parade deck with the U.S. Marines across my chest, you know, that Eagle, Globe and Anchor. What it means is that I have done something that less than 1% of the population has done. So being a Marine has absolutely completely changed my life, and I'm a much better woman for it. I can honestly say that. Semper Fi, do or die [LAUGHS]. Oh, and once a Marine, always a Marine. That's right.

QUESTION: Fly girl, what does that mean?

VERNICE: Honestly, fly girl was not my official call sign in the Marine Corps, it was junk. My commanding officer gave me that call sign. I was like sir, what were you doing looking at my junk in the trunk anyway, right? We were talking fly girl. I was at an air guard unit and they had a patch and it had fly girl on it with the wings, and I was oh, that's cool. I started wearing them when I would speak and people started calling me by that name, fly girl. I was like hey, wait a minute. That sticks. What it said to me even more was that it's not about Vernice Armour, they're not going to remember a name. It's going to be just like that woman in that tent that day for me. I don't know her name, don't know anything about her, I don't know where she's from. But because of her, I'm sitting here doing this and having the experience that I did. People aren't going to remember my name. Those young boys and girls aren't going to remember my name, but they are going to remember that there's a fly girl or a fly guy inside of them.