

University of Iowa student enlists as first female Iowa National Guard Combat Engineer

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JOHNSTON, Iowa - In May 1959, the Iowa National Guard stood up its very first combat engineer unit, with the conversion and re-designation of the 224th Engineer Battalion in Burlington, Iowa. More than 55 years later, combat engineers are again making headlines, as Megan Reaska (ree skah) became the first female to enlist as a Combat Engineer (Military Occupational Specialty: 12B) with Company A, Brigade Special Troops Battalion, 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division in Davenport.

Reaska, 20, a University of Iowa sophomore, enlisted Dec. 21, becoming the third woman to join an Iowa National Guard combat arms unit. Cheney M. Spaulding, 18, of Fort Dodge, Iowa, enlisted in September 2015 as a Survey Meteorological Crewmember (MOS: 13T) and Dakota A. Doocy, 17, from Lone Rock, Iowa, enlisted in October 2015 as a Field Artillery Firefinder Radar Operator (MOS: 13R). Both Spaulding and Doocy are members of the 1st Battalion, 194th Field Artillery, Iowa Army National Guard.

Reaska, who was born in Illinois and moved to Washington, Iowa in 2003, moved back to Illinois with her father after attending the eighth grade. She graduated from Northwest High School in Justin, Texas, a Dallas-Fort Worth area suburb, in 2014. She also played basketball for the NHS Texans.

Before deciding to attend the University of Iowa, her father put a strong emphasis on joining the military immediately out of high school. When Reaska mentioned joining the Iowa National Guard during her sophomore year of college, her dad was enthused. He told her how proud he was, but warned she had to mentally and physically prepare herself for the training.

"My father is my best friend who I thoroughly respect and strive to be like someday," Reaska said. "For him to strongly encourage joining the military made me seriously consider it. After my first year at the University of Iowa I began to think about the military more frequently, but I also wanted to attend school.

"Fortunately, the Iowa National Guard allows me to do both. I want to continue on the tradition of service, as did my grandfather and uncle, and make my family and country proud," she said.

"Both myself and my office partner, Sgt. 1st Class Less, worked together as a team to enlist Megan," said Sgt. 1st Class Brandon Keeler, a recruiter at the Iowa City National Guard Readiness Center. "She's very smart and very driven. We both knew she was an ideal applicant because of her interest and passion for the military, her willingness to serve, and obviously her willingness to take a semester off to get the training to do what she wanted to do.

"I have no doubt she will be successful, because of who she is. She will definitely be a great asset to the Iowa National Guard," he said.

Reaska was originally interested in becoming a Medical Logistics Specialist (68J). When she completed her physical, she and Sgt. 1st Class David Mongar discovered there were zero training slots for 68Js in 2016. Mongar then sat down with her and discussed a few other options, including the 12B MOS.

"She was very excited about the position," Keeler said, "but didn't know she was going to be their first female until after she swore in."

While she looks forward to completing her Bachelor's degree at the University of Iowa, she is also considering joining the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC), becoming a second lieutenant and then continuing her career within the military. By joining the Iowa National Guard, Reaska will receive up to 100% of her college tuition paid through the Iowa National Guard Education Assistance Program, and will also receive a monthly stipend from the G.I. Bill, upon completing Basic Training and Advanced Individual Training.

Besides the numerous volunteer hours she gives back to the Iowa City community, including the Ronald McDonald House and Table to Table, Reaska is also a member of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority. Their philanthropy includes a program called Girls on the Run.

"The program shows that girls can do everything males can, which is now kind of ironic," Reaska said, "since I just joined the Iowa National Guard as a Combat Engineer, which is a male-dominated job.

Reaska said being the third female to enlist into combat arms positions with the Iowa National Guard is a "mind-boggling feeling. It stuns me, but I am very proud to be one of the first few. I strongly encourage more females to join, as there's no better feeling than proving to others you're capable of doing the same things as any male.

"The honor I feel to be the first female to enlist as a Combat Engineer in Iowa is indescribable. I also think joining the combat engineer field would be an experience I would remember for the rest of my life. The skills I learn while in training. I'll carry with me forever.

"Besides" she said, "who wouldn't want to learn to build things and then blow them up?"

Reaska will attend her first National Guard drill in January, with Company C, Recruit Sustainment Program, in Iowa City. She'll attend basic training at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., in July, immediately followed by 15 weeks of Advanced Individual Training there. She's taking off the fall 2016 semester and plans to return to the University of Iowa in time for the spring 2017 session.

Combat engineers provide expertise in areas such as mobility, counter-mobility, survivability and general engineering. Their job duties include: constructing fighting positions, fixed/floating bridges, obstacles and defensive positions; placing and detonating explosives; conducting operations that include route clearance of obstacles and rivers; preparing and installing firing systems for demolition and explosives; and detecting mines visually or with mine detectors.

On Dec. 3, Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced that beginning in January 2016, all military occupations and positions will be open to women, without exception. For the first time in U.S. military history, as long as they qualify and meet specific standards, the secretary said women will be able to contribute to the Department of Defense mission with no barriers at all in their way.

"They'll be allowed to drive tanks, fire mortars and lead infantry soldiers into combat," Carter added. "They'll be able to serve as Army Rangers and Green Berets, Navy SEALs, Marine Corps infantry, Air Force Para jumpers, and everything else that was previously open only to men."

Though more than 111,000 positions had opened to women in uniform since 2013 until now, Carter said, about 10 percent of military positions -- nearly 220,000 -- had remained closed to women. This included infantry, armor, reconnaissance, and some special operations units, the secretary said.