

Walk with the wounded, an Army Chaplain's life

By Simone Pringle
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - More than 3,700 U.S. soldiers have been killed in Iraq since U.S. troop deployment began on March 19, 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Defense. So many of these fallen soldiers have had their stories told via television broadcasts, memorial services and newspaper articles.

Rarely are the stories of their caretakers told.

"Once I got there, I had to figure out what my job was and it came to be bringing hope, praying with people and their families. You go to work every day and do the best you can," says Rev. Felicia Hopkins, an associate pastor at St Mark's United Methodist Church in El Paso, Texas. She is also a recently retired chaplain major in the United States Army Reserves.

Hopkins served a 13-month tour in Landstuhl, Germany, in March 2003 until late February 2004 as well as an additional seven month tour in the U.S. at William Beaumont Army Medical Center in Fort Bliss, Texas.

"[The ministry team] counseled the soldiers, people who couldn't find their families. We ran a clothes closet for discharged

soldiers. We also kept the hospital staff's morale up, because these people still have families back home, but have to work," she recalls.

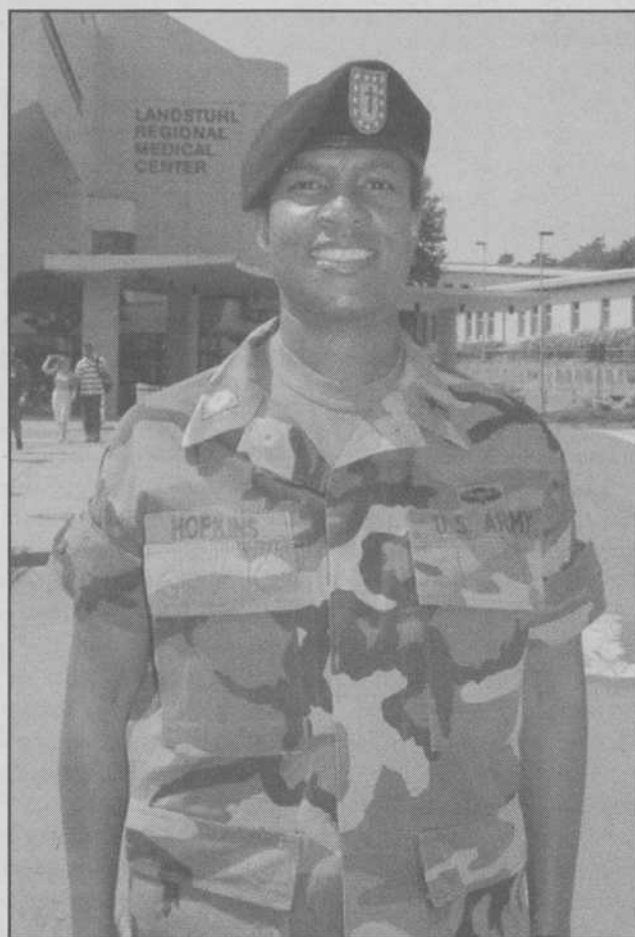
Being away from her own family, including her husband Douglass and her two sons, Samuel, 12, and Adam, 9, Hopkins worked 14 to 16 hours a day with the patients in the trauma unit, the intensive care unit and the surgical area on the fourth floor and the 600 medical professionals that went with her.

Ecumenism was the goal when it came to spiritually counseling the wounded and dying patients.

"There were five chaplains and I took care of all Protestant patients. We hired a Catholic priest that worked in Germany who spoke English, Jewish patients were allowed to visit nearby synagogues, the hospital staff brought in an imam for Muslim patients," she said.

The hospital where Hopkins worked, Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, the largest overseas U.S. military hospital, was a stopping point for all injured soldiers, civilians and contractors.

"Our job was to either send people back to the war if their injuries were minor or if their injuries were severe, we would send them to Walter Reed Medical Center,



Rev. Felicia Hopkins served as a chaplain in the U.S. Army.

Brook Army Medical Center, and Bethesda Medical Center and then they'd go home," she said.

Several prisoners of war that received media coverage went through Landstuhl.

"We prayed over Jessica Lynch and the other prisoners of war that came through our hospital. There were two pilots that came in. We took

care of all kinds of people. There were soldiers from Germany, Italy, Korea, all of those people came in on the way to wherever they were going."

Tours of duty are harsh on the mind and body, she said.

"Some people can only do three months, four months. I did 13 months overseas, and seven when I got back. It's

amazing looking back years later and seeing how much trauma you took on. I looked at all the things God took me through and realized that God took me through that for a reason."

Despite her feelings that there is a purpose and reason for everything in life, Hopkins pointed out, "I'm a retiree, the Army's been good to me, but when we went to war, we thought we'd be doing the world this great service. But when we didn't find what we came there for, the weapons of mass destruction, morale really dropped. I mean, we left our families, our lives back home and for what?"

Hopkins shared in the question many Americans have been wondering since the war began.

"Thirty-six thousand soldiers have died and I wonder, 'what was it for?' I don't think we'll ever know. I look at people we took care of. People don't really know why they had to be injured. I think that's sad."

She received one or two days off a month.

"When you're working like that for an explainable reason, then yes, that's fine. But once you start working like that for no reason, it gets tiring."

Many soldiers and mili-

tary officials have been called back to serve additional tours of duty, but Hopkins said her return is not likely.

"If I didn't have my kids, I would have stayed because it was my job. It was hard to find replacements for us. But when you have a family, it's already a huge sacrifice. I'm done technically. They have called some retirees back, but it'd be extremely hard for me to go back. I quit, and I ended up getting retired because I had more than 20 years of service. But honestly, I couldn't go back because my boys couldn't take it."

The best part of her job, Hopkins said, was the people and the lifelong impressions they make.

"You don't care for the bureaucracy, you don't really like being the go between [the Army and soldiers' families] and dealing with death daily. But I was called out of my unit and I made lifelong friendships with those people," she said.

She has written a book reflecting her experiences as a chaplain in the U.S. Army. "It's basically stories from different people I met, helped, served with in the war, 16 stories in all," she said. The book, yet to be published, is titled, "Footprints on My Soul."

Gap closing: Helping women, minorities advance in science

Special to Sentinel-Voice

In a coordinated stab at one of higher education's most pressing problems, some of the country's largest university systems pledged recently to cut in half the achievement gaps for minority and low-income students on their campuses over the next eight years.

The announcement comes at a time of deep concern that, from everyday undergraduates to the ranks of elite faculty, America's colleges and universities don't look much like the country as a whole.

That point also was underscored by a study tracking the representation of women and minority faculty in elite science departments, which found minorities are making little progress moving up the ranks. Women are faring noticeably better than five years ago, but still trail well behind men.

The 19 public university systems committed to halving by 2015 two key gaps

separating low-income and minority students from others — the rates of attending college and of graduating.

Nationally, Whites aged 25 to 29 are twice as likely as Blacks and three times as likely as Hispanics to have a college degree. And by age 24, high-income students are eight times more likely to have a bachelor's degree than low-income ones.

"Our nation's fastest-growing populations are our nation's lowest achievers," said Tom Meredith, Mississippi's commission of higher education. "So we agreed something had to be done."

The plans are potentially important for several reasons.

They include the giant state university systems of California, Florida, New York, as well as the City University of New York. Overall, the group educates about 2 million undergraduates, and about one-third of the nation's low-income and mi-

nority, four-year college students.

"If they're able to turn their system patterns around, it will have a massive impact," said Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust, a Washington-based group that is partnering in the program.

The systems also have committed to holding themselves accountable by publicly reporting detailed data

on their progress, including figures that generally have not been released, such as graduation rates for low-income students.

The question is whether the universities will go beyond the piecemeal approaches like summer recruiting and mentoring programs that have typified higher education's efforts to increase diversity so far. They insisted they would.

Extravaganza

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entertainment talent until 1976.

Black Extravaganza's showcase performances were held at Doolittle Center, Dusty's Playland, Nellis Air Force Base and the Las Vegas Convention Center Rotunda. The 1973 "What Color is Love" show at UNLV was the most renowned.

This memorabilia collection by Black Extravaganza Productions provides a nostalgic glance back, reminis-

cent of an era in Las Vegas when Blacks were seeking recognition amidst a booming glamour town.

This division between the banned and the allowed heated racial tensions on the Strip between Blacks and Whites. Another dynamic was the Civil Rights Movement being led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the NAACP and other freedom-fighter groups.

On March 26, 1960, through the efforts of the

Acknowledging the K-12 system isn't entirely to blame, the systems said they would work together to wrestle with fundamental obstacles on their own campuses.

Those include rising tuition and living costs, financial aid that is used to lure high-achieving students but doesn't get to the neediest, and reforming the giant, introductory courses where

many students are lost.

College leaders added the effort has nothing to do with affirmative action, but rather with hard work to get college-ready students into and through college.

Plans for reaching the goal will vary from state to state. Louisiana, for instance, will work to improve high-demand courses and expand a tuition discount program

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NAACP, Nevada Gov. Grant Sawyer, City of Las Vegas Mayor Oran Gragson and other civic-minded individuals, segregation died on the Strip. But, it was only after the threat of a march on the Las Vegas Blvd. Strip to protest and bring national attention to the unfair treatment and racist hiring policies against Blacks preventing them from holding significant jobs in the lavish hotels and plush casinos.

This new beginning for

Blacks in Las Vegas was something exciting, a great accomplishment. Though no minor footnote in history, it compels questions about Black Las Vegas: Who were they? and Where were they going as a people?

The story of the local Black community's growth, struggles and victories is the heart of the presentation that offers insight and encourages celebration.

For more information call 229-4800.