



## MY LIFE MY STORY



**Luana**



**United States Army**

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Something I will never forget is when we had a truck go off the road and a tree went through the cab. I got in the cab with the young sergeant trapped inside and stayed with him as he died. That was one of those helpless moments.



I was born in northern Texas. I am the third child of four children and part of a military family. I grew up on Air Force bases all over the world, including Tripoli, Libya. My father retired from the Air Force, and we moved to Reno in 1971. By then, I was in the sixth grade and had attended five different schools.

Jumping around schools was tough. There was no such thing as common core, so no matter where you went you were either ahead or behind. It was not a time where the civilian community wanted to get to know military people. People

were always asking us where we were from because we had a different way of talking. We got ridiculed for using “Yes, Ma’am” and “Yes, Sir.” When they asked where I was from, I would say, “Originally or recently?” It depended on what answer they were looking for.

By the time I was in high school, I had already decided to go into the military. I graduated from Proctor Hug High School in 1977. I was already on my way to basic training the night my class received their diplomas. I had received mine two days earlier in the principal’s office.



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I enlisted in November of my senior year of high school. I talked my mother into it when I was seventeen. I told her that if I enlisted before December, I would then be eligible for the Vietnam Era GI Bill. That way, if I ever went to college, I would have the GI Bill.

That was her selling point--that I would have money for college if I ever wanted to go. I was never, never, never, going to college.

I flew through basic training. I was a squad leader because of my knowledge, and I knew how to march. I was an E3, but I wasn't allowed to wear it until about four weeks later, when you put your stripes on.

I enlisted as a satellite communications ground station equipment repairman. It was a high-tech electronics field. It was unusual for women to get into those fields.

I didn't have any experience in electronics, but I excelled in science. My tests were good, and they said I could be anything I wanted except infantry. I was at Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training and basic electronics training. I was then transferred to Fort Gordon, Georgia where I completed advanced communications training. I'm a "systems thinker" and have a good memory for how things work.

The one really negative incident I experienced at Fort Gordon was being sexually assaulted by an Instructor/NCO from the Signal School. Even though I suffered a concussion and was hospitalized for three days, I did not report the assault for fear that reporting it could damage my military career.

From Fort Gordon in July of 1978, I was assigned to Camp Roberts, California. It was probably the least Army place you could be. There were only about twenty-five of us assigned at the SATCOM Station.



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We lived in the civilian community in Army-leased housing. Duty was limited to our work shifts of twelve hours on and twelve hours off keeping communications working between the Pacific theater and the continental United States.

As 1979 was coming to a close, I was starting to think about reenlistment and needed to pick up a secondary MOS. I only had the first specialty. They all recommended that you get a specialty in an administrative field. They were more plentiful, and promotions were easier. I had just made E5.

I qualified for Chaplain's Activity Specialist, otherwise known as a Chaplain's Assistant. In February 1980, I left Camp Roberts and went to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey for six weeks of training. After a couple of weeks leave, I left for assignment to South Korea in May 1980.

I was originally supposed to be in the southern part of the country. The vehicle in which I was traveling to my assignment was stopped because of a civilian uprising in the city of Kwan Ju. After several tense hours and observing South Korean soldiers fighting rioters, we returned to the replacement center in Seoul. The following day, I was sent to Camp Page in Chun Chon about twenty-five miles south of the DMZ. Camp Page was at the top of what they called the Eastern Corridor. We were southwest from the Punchbowl.

I was a chaplain's assistant which meant I was the administrative person for the chapel on Camp Page, and I supervised the assistant at Camp Long which was just to the south. I reported to my boss who was the command chaplain for the Area II Support Command.

By the time I went to Korea, I was in an Army that was an Army of specialists. After basic training and until I went to Korea, I had never touched a weapon. Once you left basic training, you were a specialist.



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When I got to Korea, life was quite different. You knew immediately when you landed at the airport. There were armed guards. Your first night, you heard sirens, gun fire, the crowds, and you get that nice waft of tear gas every so often.

When in processing at Camp Page, the first sergeant said, "You are the NCO in charge of the quick reaction force to protect a sector of the installation." I went from electronics geek to being responsible for two squads, crew-served weapons, and a mission to defend and protect the troop medical clinic and to hold until relieved. I said, "Yes, First Sergeant."

Thankfully, I know a little bit about marksmanship. I had qualified with an M16 when I was eight years old. My dad taught us all to shoot. I knew marksmanship; I knew weapons; but things like defensive parameters, fire and overwatch and squad maneuvers were so out of my depth of knowledge.

My supervisor was a chaplain and a veteran in the Korean and Vietnam wars. The chaplain taught me what I needed to know. He would put the counseling in session sign out on his office door, I would go in, and he'd draw a map of the troop medical clinic and mark where you needed to place your people and the crew-served weapons to have effective fields of fire. I learned small unit tactics from the chaplain. I took it very seriously.

We had rioting. The whole country was under martial law. Our mission was to support the South Korean Armies that were assigned to the DMZ. We were within artillery range of the North Korean Army.

My job was to go wherever the chaplain went. If the chaplain couldn't go, I would go in his place. If the chaplain was going, I was his bodyguard. My first chaplain, LTC Schmidt, knew what the job was. He taught me. It was rough.





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I always made it my mission as an NCO to teach soldiers. Overall, it was a good experience with only a few hiccups.

We were always in the field, always doing something. Even when we were on Camp Page, we were on a very high alert setting. It was very stressful. We lost people.

In March 1981, I was transferred to Seoul. It was totally different from Camp Page. I was assigned as the Senior NCO of the 8th Army Retreat Center. It was on Yongsan, and the 8th Army Retreat Center was on Dragon Mountain. It was beautiful. We had actual rooms for billets and an award-winning dining hall. It was the best dining facility in the 8th Army. I didn't know what to do with myself, and I didn't think, I deserved the position.

Before getting to Korea, I tore up my foot and ankle taking a misstep on some stairs. Duty at Camp Page and delayed medical care left me with chronic pain and instability in that foot. I also started having some headaches and migraines. When I got to the 8th Army Retreat Center, I was having a lot of issues.

In 1980, they didn't know what PTSD was. I was on a downward spiral in depression. You take somebody who was raised with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility and then; they go through something where they feel like they didn't meet the test, and you reward them by sending them someplace like the 8th Army Retreat Center. Well, that kind of hit me and pushed me over the edge.

Early one morning after having the worst headache I'd ever had in my life, I ended up taking an overdose of all my headache medication. I thought that was the only way I could get out of pain.

I did NOT want to die, I wanted to end the pain. I woke up and was taken to the 121 evac hospital. I spent about three days in intensive care and was transferred to the psychiatric ward.



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I spent about three weeks there and was medical evacuated. I was brought back to Letterman's Army Medical Center because I had such a short period of time left in my enlistment. Basically, I was warehoused in the military medical company in San Francisco until I was discharged.

I could have reenlisted if I had wanted to at that time, but I had lost any idea of wanting to reenlist in the active duty Army. It was like okay, I'm alive, let's move on. I came back to Reno to go to college. That never, never, never thing.

Thirty days after I left active duty, I enlisted in the Nevada Army National Guard. I was also attending Truckee Meadows Community College. I went back to electronics a little bit and got an associate degree.

I transferred to the University of Nevada Reno. I was going to get a bachelor's degree, go into the senior ROTC program, and go back into the Army as an officer, but I needed to take my commissioning physical.

They said my hospitalization in Korea and Letterman's and the injury to my foot and ankle made me ineligible to be commissioned, but there was no problem with me staying in the enlisted ranks. Go figure?



By this time, I had been promoted in the National Guard. I was an E6. I went back into communications at first and then went into the area of nuclear, biological, and chemical defense (NBC). I became an NBC NCO for my company and my

battalion. I spent eleven years in the National Guard in Army aviation.



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I eventually ended up completing my Bachelor of Science in health education with distinction. In 1990, I had gotten hired by the Nevada State Health Division as a health educator and a health policy analyst.

Starting in 1993, I went inactive in the National Guard; so I could finish my master's degree in public administration which I completed in 1995. Then, I went on to earn my doctorate in political science and public health policy in 2003. My mom was glad I got my doctorate. That would be the last graduation she'd go to.

In 1996, I went back into the guard and was transferred to the Army Reserve in an E9 slot as an Emergency Preparedness Liaison Officer assigned to the Nevada team. I was the only NCO. There was an Army Reserve O6, an Air Force Reserve O6, a Navy Reserve O6, and me, an E7.

I transferred in 2005 to the Retired Reserve. By that time, I was called Doctor more than I was called Sergeant.

In 2011, the administrator in the state health division came to me and said, "I have a reporter who wants to talk to you. They want to know about Veteran's suicide." He said, "Would you please look into this?"

Aside from my military career and my professional career, probably the thing I am most proud of is writing one of the nation's first studies of suicide among military veterans at the state level.

I completed the first study in 2012 for the State of Nevada and did two follow ups to that study. It got some attention with the governor and the legislature. Programs were put in place, and reporters started to pay attention.





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A researcher with the Veteran's Administration contacted me wanting to know about my study and what we did because he was working on a similar National study. We could share data and compare notes. They

thought my conclusions were novel. We started to work closer together with a suicide prevention program and focused on the communities.

At the time, Nevada's numbers were higher than the national average which was twenty-two veterans a day. We've seen the rates come down and hold steady in Nevada for veterans and non-veterans.

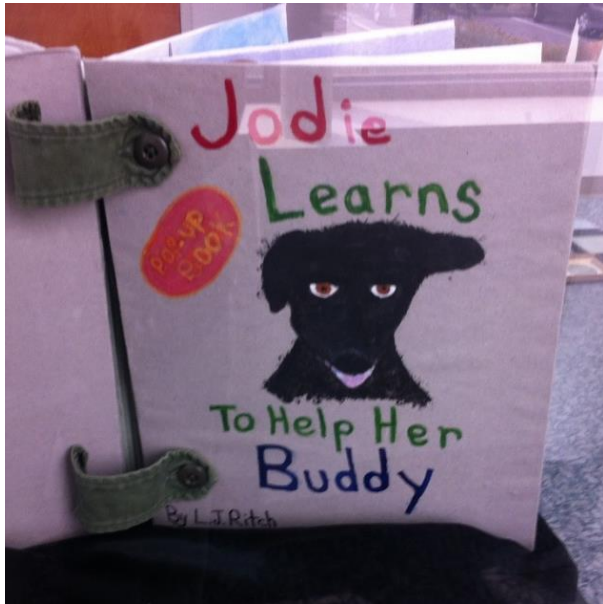
In 2011 when I was asked to study veteran suicide, I actually came for treatment at the VA. After a very stressful time at work, responding to disasters and leading the state's response to the H1N1 pandemic, I needed help. I was angry and depressed, and I didn't know why. This time, I actually asked for help and got treatment here. By 2012, I knew there was a treatment that would work and was working for me.

I AM a survivor. I have chronic PTSD. I knew I survived. There were people along the way who had helped me and people who would listen. The word had to get out. Veterans needed to know there were people to help them. I got involved. I'm proud of that study and what I could bring to it from my experiences to help others.

Before I wrote that study, I had never told anyone that I was a suicide survivor. There was so much shame associated with it. Thinking of suicide is an attempt to end your pain, both physical and mental.



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PTSD is a real thing, a real illness. There is real treatment and help. It only took me thirty years to figure out what the illness was and how to get treated for it. I got my treatment here at the VA. I went into see my primary care provider and said that I was tired of being angry every day. I went through the treatment program, and it has helped a lot.

Along the way, I discovered the arts as a means of healing in my life. I

participate in art programs through the Reno VA and the David J. Drakulich Foundation. I have won several awards in the National Creative Arts Festival, including a national third place for my handmade book, *Jodie Learns to Help Her Buddy*.

Art and the humanities help me to live each day with something interesting and beautiful to do. It is my path to social connectedness to other veterans and my community.

I am doing art, weaving, and writing poetry. I have a dog and a cat to take care of now. I have a life.

