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Women in the Military

PHOTOCOPY  
PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY AT GROUNDBREAKERS LUNCHEON  
HOSTED BY THE WOMEN IN THE MILITARY MEMORIAL FUND

MRS. CLINTON: -- are active duty military or retired military, Members of Congress, other supporters of this memorial. I particularly want to thank Good Housekeeping and AT&T for the major commitments they have made (inaudible) and others who have already been recognized, and I want to join in the appreciation for Wilma Boggs (phonetic) who has been the driving force behind this effort.

We were sitting at lunch, in the few minutes that Wilma has given any of us to eat and I told her how pleased I was to be part of this effort and honored to be the honorary chair, and that I had just been thinking about an experience I had which seemed somehow connected with this incredible lunch that we are having; and I told Wilma about it and she said, "Well, you have to tell everybody," and I took it as an order, which seems to be the way to deal with Wilma.

And it was that -- gee, now, it was probably 19 years ago -- 1975 -- I decided that I was very interested in having some experience in serving, in some capacity, in the military. So I walked into our local recruiting office. And I think it was just my bad luck that the person who happened to be there on duty could not have been older than 21, was in perfect physical shape.

So I sat down, and I said, you know, I wanted to explore. I didn't know whether I thought active duty would be a good idea or reserve, you know, maybe National Guard, something along those lines. I was already a lawyer and I thought there were some roles I could perform. I was like going on and on, you know, trying to justify my existence.

And then this young man looked at me and he said, "How old are you?" Well, "27." Silence. He looked at me. And, in those days there, before I learned how to wear contact lenses, I had these really thick glasses on. He said, "How bad is your eyesight?" I said, "It's pretty bad."

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He said, "How bad?" I said, "This is embarrassing."

He said, "How bad?" So I told him. He said, "That's pretty bad." And he finally said to me, he said, "You're too old; you can't see; and you're a woman." And then he went on; and, since this is the birthday of the Army, I will tell you what the rest he said was. This man -- young man -- was a Marine. He said, "But maybe the dogs would take you."

I said, "This is not a very encouraging conversation, so maybe I'll look for another way to serve my country."

I tell that story because, like many of the women in this room, that was not an isolated incident in my life; and although many of us who have continued to pursue our interests and tried to make our contributions in both civilian and military life push those feelings far in the back and kind of just overlook those experiences and, in the words of a dear friend of mine, "soldier on," no matter what the consequences or the odds might be, it is a fact that -- as we are here today celebrating this memorial and honoring the nearly 2 million women who have served since the Revolutionary War, in every possible way, to support our military and, as Senator Dole said when he quoted that wonderful book of Steven Ambrose's, "in ways that made winning the wars that we have fought as a country possible" -- that there have been a lot of obstacles overcome.

We have come to a point in history where we can be talking about this memorial because so many of you -- many women and many men who supported women in the military against often tough odds -- have been willing to stay the course and it is thrilling to see the final barriers fallen, so that women will be judged by who they are and what their contribution is as opposed to being stereotyped on the basis of their gender.

And, for all of the retired military women who are here, we are so grateful for your groundbreaking. We are so appreciative of what you have done, sometimes drawing public attention but, more often, just day after day establishing a standard of excellence and professionalism on which we could build to the point now where we have so many women in major positions of responsibility, including our Secretary of the Air Force, who is here; and it is very important to thank the

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people who have made this possible -- many who are here, others who are no longer with it.

It is a time in our country now for all of us to take stop and to give thanks, as we move into the future.

When my husband and I were in Europe, starting by honoring those who had been in the Italian campaign, including his father and including many women who -- although there in support capacities, often as nurses -- were on the front lines in a brutal, brutal conflict that knew no boundaries, we saw the graves of women who were nurses in hospitals that had been bombed just as they were doing what they could to ease the pain of that particular campaign.

We went from there to England, where we honored flyers -- American airmen -- who, again, were supported on the ground, as General Eisenhower said, by so many women who made it possible for those brave men to fly the missions that were necessary, night after night.

In the two months before the invasion of Normandy, over 2,000 planes and 12,000 airmen lost their lives. And one of the personal highlights for me was standing, as my husband, as the Commander in Chief, reviewed British troops with his military aide from the Air Force by his side marching with him -- a young woman major -- who carried herself, and carried all of your hopes, with such confidence and grace.

And, from there, on to the USS George Washington, where we saw an extraordinary display of technological excellence but also real, human accomplishment, and knew that there would soon be more women to join the 11 who were already there, who were there because they were part of a large community of 6,000 dedicated members of our military who had important tasks to perform every minute of the day.

And then, on to Normandy. And I hope that all of you had a chance to share the feelings that those of us who were there were able to experience because it was an extraordinary historic moment to be able to pay honor to those who had come before, many of whom were still there on those beaches, under those white crosses and those Stars of David, but many others who had come back. Some had never been back before.

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But every veteran we spoke with had the same reaction -- that they knew why they had fought, because we had had 50 years of peace because of their efforts. And the women who were there -- the active duty women, the retired women -- were there as full participants in that honoring that they so richly deserved.

But one of the things we can do to pay tribute to all that has gone before is to make this memorial not just a beautiful building -- which it will surely be, if you have seen the renderings of it -- but to make it a living memorial that enshrines the sacrifice and contribution of women and really represents one more step toward recognizing that all of us in this greatest of all democracies had a role to play, a contribution to make, and that women who choose to make their contribution through the military should finally, as Pat Schroeder has fought for year after year, be given the chance to serve their country to the fullest of their God-given abilities.

That's what this memorial says to me. That's what I hope it will say to our sons and our daughters. And I hope it will serve as a reminder to all Americans that women have played this role since the beginning of our nation and they will continue to do so in greater numbers with greater responsibility because our country is honoring its past by building toward a bigger, better, brighter future for everyone.

Thank you very much.

Q Mrs. Clinton, we thank you for those words. You couldn't possibly know how much it meant to us when you agreed to be our honorary chair. It's meant a lot to the Foundation, our women veterans, and to the women who serve today because, from the thousands of requests she receives, almost on a daily basis, this First Lady chose this project as one of the very, very few projects that she would lend her support to in such a significant way.

The support for this memorial started early for President and Mrs. Clinton because Arkansas was one of the first states to donate money. During those years when all states were suffering with budget problems, and still are, then Governor Clinton, as he did his line item review of the budget, said, "We've got to fund the Women's Memorial," and the money came.

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Mrs. Clinton, we have this gift for you, to remember this time spent with us, and it's in an easy-open box.

As you might expect, it's an advertisement for the memorial -- your own memorial scarf.

And, in addition, we have this cap and, if we don't see the Commander in Chief out there jogging with it (inaudible).

MRS. CLINTON: And we were supposed to say -- I forgot -- that the coins go on sale in July.

Q (Inaudible) looked at it. Now, it would be a great honor for us if you would join me in presenting an award to each of our groundbreakers.

First, representing the almost 13,000 women pioneers who raised their right --

(End of tape.)

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