

Veterans Day: From combat to the ambulance, she brings calm in the crisis



It was Peri Rogowski's first day of combat in Iraq. Crowded into a makeshift shelter made of cement blocks, she looked around at her 12 other soldiers – most of them 18 and 19 years old – scared and crying as enemy mortars began falling.

On day one, she had to demonstrate the style of servant leadership she's still known for.

"I knew I had to help ease their panic and stress," Rogowski says.

How she got here

Every veteran has their own reasons for joining the armed forces. Rogowski joined to have lunch with her dad.

Rogowski's father served in the U.S. Air Force for 13 years before leaving to become a radio DJ and earn more money. Life didn't go as planned.

"After my dad left the Air Force we became very poor," Rogowski says. "I remember him always saying if he'd stayed in the Air Force, we would've been better off."

At 18, she knew she had to excel on her college entrance exams to qualify for scholarships. Sick on the day of the tests and fearful she hadn't passed, Rogowski finally asked her dad why he hadn't at least joined the reserves to keep his benefits.

He said, "I'd love to, Peri. But I'm too shy to go back in now."

So Rogowski made a promise.

"I told my dad if he joined the reserves, I would enlist and eat lunch with him every day until he could retire," she says.

Her father retired with full benefits, and Rogowski never left the military service she grew to love.

A woman in charge

Rogowski would go on to become the first female command chief at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base and the first chief sergeant master for the Indiana Guard Reserve (IGR).

"As the first female command chief, I had some unique challenges," she says. "A lot of people were not used to having a woman in a leadership position. I had to work hard to prove myself, and I think everyone was able to see where my heart is, which is taking care of my people."

Rogowski was the first female reservist in her position to be awarded a Bronze Star, which she earned for brokering an agreement between the Air Force and the Army that saved billions of dollars, created the largest joint combat base in history and sent nearly 400 Indiana soldiers home early.

Inspired by her Turkish mother's belief that you help others before you help yourself, she continues to improve the lives of others and support other team members, especially in times of crisis.

A state and nationally certified EMT, Rogowski works part time with IU Health Methodist Hospital, providing medical support at events like the Indy 500, Indiana State Fair and Colts games.

"Serving is in my DNA," Rogowski says. "That's where I get my energy. It was a privilege to help bring positive leadership and smart decision-making to a war zone and I tried to make a difference while there."

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