

From Cheerleader To Air Force To A New Life

by JULIE ROSE



[Enlarge](#)

Julie Rose/WFAE

"I had to learn to deal with it on my own," Victoria Blumenberg, 25, says of the stress of her deployment to Iraq with the Air Force Reserves. Here, she visits a restaurant in Charlotte, N.C., with Pete Kneski.

August 30, 2011 from WFAE

text size **A A A**

The second part of our series about the challenges female veterans face as they transition back into civilian life.

What happens when a teenage girl spends her formative years in the military — tracking terrorists, enduring rocket attacks and holding her own in a rough, male-dominated environment?

The skills that make an excellent airman don't always match what the world expects of a young civilian woman.

Victoria Blumenberg was a champion cheerleader in high school.

"I was on dance teams. I did all of that girlie stuff," she says.

But while her girlfriends went off to college, joined sororities and kept up with fashion, Blumenberg joined the Air Force Reserves and did four deployments. At 18, she was an intelligence analyst giving top-secret briefings to air crews in Kuwait and, later, in Baghdad.

"And now I don't paint my nails every day, and I don't do my hair every day," she says. "I never wear makeup unless I'm going out. I'm just not really into that," she says with a laugh — and a sigh.

If Blumenberg seems a little weary, that's because it can be exhausting being a young woman in the civilian world after coming of age in the military. She loved her no-fuss life in uniform, and thought she'd always be an intelligence analyst — even after her last deployment in 2007, which entailed six straight months of 12-hour days and the constant threat of rocket attack.

"I would do every bit and more, if I had been given the opportunity," Blumenberg says. "I would probably have been back there three more times by now."

After that last deployment in Baghdad, Blumenberg fell into anxiety, depression and alcoholism. She thought it might be post-traumatic stress disorder. But she was leery of getting a diagnosis, afraid that she would lose her top-secret clearance.

In late 2008, Blumenberg was arrested for driving while intoxicated; she worried that the incident could end her military intelligence career. She was 23 years old, and she felt her life was falling apart.

Related NPR Stories



Female Vets Navigate Post-War Stress, Home Duties

When they return, many female veterans will pick up where they left off, as mothers and caretakers.

"I went home and overdosed on Ambien," she says. "I woke up two days later in the hospital, and was sent to basically a psychiatric facility for a few weeks after that."

Blumenberg says the Air Force Reserves couldn't promise she'd stay in intelligence, so she took an honorable discharge. Then she began building her civilian identity from scratch, enrolling at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, to study geography and political science.



Female Veterans Breaking Silence, Beating Trauma

A former U.S. Air Force member talks about surviving military sexual trauma, homelessness and PTSD.

But the anxiety, one symptom of her PTSD, is always there.

"I always try to take different routes to and from school, and I try to avoid going to the same place at the same time every day, and establishing patterns," she says. "But there are certain places

that you can't get around. Like, there's no real escape if you see a car coming at you head-on or something."

On some days, Blumenberg can't bring herself to leave the house. She's learning to cope, even managing a 3.9 GPA. But her social life is a different story.

Her friends are mostly other male veterans on campus. On one recent night, they met up at a nearby bar, and the talk turned to planes — the merits of C-130s against the newer C-17s.

"C-130s were my plane," Blumenberg says.

She's wearing makeup this night — purple shadow on her large cat eyes. She's pretty, bubbly and animated when she's at ease. But dating veterans hasn't worked out. Blumenberg says the instant military connection tends to mask the fact they often have little else in common. And civilian guys can't seem to handle her military baggage and PTSD. At least that had been the case, before she met Pete Kneski.

"You know, she's tough, but she looks really pretty," he says. "So it's like, that's a cool combination."

Kneski and Blumenberg met online; they've been dating for a few months. She's his first girlfriend who has served in the military.

"Vickie is maybe a little bit different being a veteran, you know with PTSD and all that kind of thing," Kneski says. "She has so much emotional swing going on in her own self, she has to be very careful with kinda what she allows herself to feel."

Blumenberg wonders about her ability to be a good girlfriend, wife or even mother someday, because she never really learned how to be a nurturer.

"You know, the military never nurtured me when I was feeling weak, or hurt, or whatever-have-you," she says. "I had to learn to deal with it on my own, and come back to my job the next day, and perform my duties to make sure that everyone lived."

Blumenberg says she sometimes feels like that was a lifetime ago, and now she's starting over — in her career, her relationship and whatever comes next.