Sally Murphy
First Female U.S. Military Helicopter Pilot
by Martin J. Pociask

HFI: When and where were you born, and what can you tell us of the early years?

Murphy: I was born Sally Dale Stonecipher on January 11, 1949, and raised in Prairie Village, Kansas. I loved the suburbs of Kansas City, the small towns, and rural countryside.

I had a nearly idyllic childhood: loving parents and an older sister. I was a tomboy. A better-than-average student, I attended Shawnee Mission West High School in Overland Park. I was very blessed with great hand-and-eye coordination and spatial orientation.

At that time, there were not any high school sports for girls, so I participated in the next best things. I played golf, was a Girl Scout, was a cheerleader in high school, and took as many physical education classes as I could.

My parents instilled a belief that I could do anything as long as I worked to make it happen. The problem then, in the 1960s and '70s, was there were very few women role models; women were still new in colleges and fairly new to anything other than nursing, office work (read “secretaries”), and teaching. We were on the cusp that was changing, but did not know.

HFI: You attended Kansas State College of Pittsburg [now Pittsburg State University, in Pittsburg, Kansas] and then joined the Army.
**Murphy:** KSC was my hometown college. Just two hours from home, but more importantly it was the town my parents had grown up in. I was studying to be a history teacher.

Since times were changing and I was growing up to the realization that there were more choices, I was beginning to have second thoughts. One day at the post office, I picked up a recruiting brochure entitled *Begin as an Executive.* It was a Woman’s Army Corps [WAC] recruiting tool. It worked for me. After a delay and much consideration, I decided to apply.

**HFI:** Tell us about making the final decision to join the Army.

**Murphy:** For a couple of years, I teetered between teaching, marrying, and seeking a commission in the Women’s Army Corps. In the early ’70s, women were still excluded from being directly in the Army.

As it turned out, life is not a straight line but rather a wandering path. I experienced a short marriage and rejected teaching before I joined the WAC.

After interviews, a physical exam, and a period of mulling, in 1972, I sat in my car in Junction City, Kansas, just outside Fort Riley and right in front of one of those drive-up mail boxes. I had my completed Army paperwork in hand, read my oath out loud to myself, signed where appropriate, and tossed it in the mailbox. I did not realize it then, but turned to the Army as a first step to financial independence and an adventure of my very own.

**HFI:** You went into the Women’s Army Corps and received intelligence training in 1972.

**Murphy:** Commissioned a second lieutenant, I attended the WAC Officer Orientation Course at Fort McClellan, Alabama. It was a unique experience. It was probably the only place in the world where women soldiers outnumbered men, where “ma’am” was the common address of respect rather than “sir.” After the WAC training, I attended the Military Intelligence Basic Officer’s Course and Tactical Intelligence Course at Fort Huachuca, Arizona.

**HFI:** During that training, the Army flight program opened to women candidates.

**Murphy:** I read of the change and opportunity in *Stars and Stripes.* I was one of three women considered by Military Intelligence and Aviation to attend at Fort Rucker, Alabama, the first Initial Entry Rotary Wing Course open to women.

As it turned out, I ended up being the only woman in the class and graduated on June 4, 1974, as the first woman Army helicopter pilot. My initial training was in the TH-55, a very small, two-person helicopter often tagged as being “made by Mattel,” the toy maker.

We transitioned to instrument training in the UH-1, the Bell Huey. That experience was more challenging and a bit strange. Not only had we not yet qualified in the UH-1, but the focus was on learning to fly under instrument conditions rather than learning the aircraft.

Once instrument training was completed, we learned the UH-1. We learned the aircraft and emergency procedures and began some operational training. The final phase was the tactical flight phase, also in the UH-1.
HFI: After graduation?

Murphy: Two days after graduation, I married a Vietnam-era helicopter pilot who was fundamentally important in helping me make my decision to apply for flight school and was a cheerleader for bucking me up through that and many other challenges through the years to come.

I transitioned into the U-21, the Beechcraft Queen Air, a twin-engine, turboprop airplane with adequate cargo space for intelligence signals equipment that provided surveillance through communications collection [signals intelligence, or SIGINT]. The training in airplanes began with small Cessnas and the Beechcraft Bonanza and went onto the primary aircraft.

In my case that was the Queen Air, but others qualified in the Grumman Mohawk (OV-1).

It was during that period that I met Jean Ross Howard, the director and soul of the Whirly-Girls and associate of HAI. The commander of Fort Rucker, Maj.Gen. [William J.] Maddox, was a friend and strong supporter of her activities.

Jean was on post for public relations purposes, and she provided me with my membership credentials. I had not heard of this wonderful group of women helicopter pilots until then. It was fascinating to learn of the worldwide membership and individual stories of women in such a narrow field in 1974.

Over the years, I attended some symposia, luncheons, and house parties with several of the women and became increasingly flattered to be considered a Whirly-Girl. Several of their speakers rank among the best I have ever heard.

HFI: Your first operational assignment was U.S. Army, Europe, as a member of the 330th Army Security Agency Company (Guardrail IIA) that flew RU-21 aircraft.

Murphy: We conducted SIGINT missions along the intra-German border as part of the deterrence to Cold War aggression in Europe. The flying was the best of my career. We flew at altitudes requiring supplemental oxygen masks, while we electronically surveilled the Warsaw Pact to the east.

HFI: After completing the Military Intelligence Advanced Officer’s Course, you were assigned to Fort Riley, Kansas, as the S-2 of the then-forming 1st Aviation Battalion, 1st Infantry Division.

Murphy: I served as the activating battalion’s S-2 and headquarters company commander, its first. This stateside assignment focused on preparing U.S. forces to return to Germany in case the Cold War crumbled and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had to defend against a Soviet attack. It is where I learned to be a soldier. After command, I served in the division G-2 as the training officer and collection manager.

Our son, Sean Ryan, was born in February 1980. He ultimately followed his parents’ example and commissioned as an Army officer upon graduation from college. He served as a logistician for wheeled vehicle maintenance, parachutist, and commander in the 82nd Infantry Division in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Fort Bragg until his death in 2009 following a parachute failure on a training mission.

HFI: In V Corps’ G-2, you were an operations officer and managed force modernization.

Murphy: My first experience in planning for the fielding of new equipment was at Fort Riley, but the experiences in V Corps were the realization of such planning. Among several ground intelligence systems, there was one helicopter-mounted system called Quick Fix. Direction-finding sensors mounted in Hueys were used to detect and target enemies.

During that last tour in Europe, I was selected to serve as the commander of the 62nd Aviation Company, the Royal Coachmen. The Coachmen provided general support to V Corps headquarters with UH-1, OH-58, and C-12 aircraft and ran the Maurice Rose Army Airfield in Bonames, Germany.

HFI: Upon return to the states as a major, you attended the Armed Forces Staff College and then served in the Headquarters, Department of the Army, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Force Development Office for Intelligence Systems. What were your duties?

Murphy: My main responsibility was for the Army’s UAV [unmanned aerial vehicles] program, including the Aquila program until its cancellation, and the development of newly emerging requirements. I wrote, staffed, and received approval for the first joint requirements plan for unmanned aerial vehicles, its master plan. That document was submitted by DoD to Congress as its plan for the development of UAV efforts.

Following this work, I applied for a Congressional Fellowship, which allows a serving officer to facilitate congressional actions of interest to the Department of Defense. Though not selected, it was telling that of my few required references, I chose Jean Ross Howard. She graciously wrote the most touching endorsement. I chose her, of course, because she was a role model and very well regarded.

HFI: After selection for battalion
command, you were assigned to IX Corps at Camp Zama, Japan, where you were given comparable opportunity by serving as the Corps aviation officer and commanding the 78th Aviation Battalion (Provisional), the only U.S. Army aviation unit in country.

**Murphy:** The battalion was a general support unit for IX Corps and staffed to be largely self-sufficient in its maintenance, operations, and airfield operations. The unit provided general air transport, medical air transport, and VIP support throughout the region. It had two C-12, or Beechcraft King Air, five Hueys, and three Blackhawks at the time. The organization was one of a kind, and it was the face of Army aviation in Japan.

Although certified and expected to fly the C-12, I chose to remain with the Huey. Once again reoriented and retrained by the best trainers in the world — Army warrant officer pilots — I was able to remain closer to the airfield we ran and the bulk of the unit’s operations and soldiers.

**HFI:** After that command, you were assigned to the Joint Staff, J2, as a team chief, deputy director of intelligence and operations officer in the National Military Joint Intelligence Center, where 24/7 intelligence operations provided information to senior military and civilian leadership, contingency and crisis operations, and planning support. What exactly did that entail?

**Murphy:** My responsibilities included routine watch requirements, meaning leading my team that was keeping an eye on the world for any activity requiring senior notification or action. I assisted in establishing focused teams for emerging crises and in training the entire effort after creation of standardized operating procedures.

While serving in the organization, I was selected and promoted to colonel and knew for a fact that it was the end of my aviation assignments. I was glad that I had selected a last Huey flight in Japan with a very good friend, because it was most probable that it would be my last one forever.

**HFI:** Following attendance at the U.S. Army War College, you returned to the Army staff.

**Murphy:** This was yet another assignment built from my experiences in force modernization and relying on both my aviation and intelligence experiences. I served as the chief of the Army Intelligence Master Plan and the director of intelligence, futures, which focused on maintaining and improving the Army’s intelligence force: personnel, equipment, and organizational structure.

There are air and ground components to this challenge, including the existing and proposed airplane-based surveillance and targeting platforms and the impacts of air-based systems from the other services and intelligence agencies. It also still included the relatively new integration of UAVs into the force.

It was from this job that I retired on July 1, 1999, after nearly 27 years of service. I would have loved to continue to fly, but was unaccustomed to paying to fly. I took a job in defense contracting, where I used more of my staffing and force modernization experiences than either intelligence or aviation knowledge.

**HFI:** What advice do you have for young people starting out on their helicopter adventure or on their careers, in general?

**Murphy:** There is not enough space in your document for all I tend to say when asked, but primarily it is a recommendation to get up every day and do the best you can. Set goals, but don’t limit yourself by adherence to a strict plan because the unexpected can often present better opportunities and satisfaction.

If you chose a career that is male dominated and historically closed to women, don’t be surprised when it is often harder than you think is fair. Seek opportunities that will both satisfy you and demonstrate your abilities.

Never believe those who tell you something can’t be done or has never been done before, because that is looking to the past and you are the future.

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