

By Christopher Burnett | Staff Writer

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## Post celebrates Women's History Month

March is Women's History Month.

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Combined Arms Center Chaplain (Col.) Barbara Sherer honored trailblazing women who paved the way for future generations and told of her personal interactions with several significant women from modern military history during the annual Women's History Month luncheon March 13 at the Frontier Conference Center.

Sherer said one definition of a trailblazer is a person who marks or prepares a trail through a forest or field for other people to follow. She said the people who follow the trailblazer have a smoother time moving down the path after the first person cut the trail.

"For myself, as a woman in various careers typically held by men, I have a some firsts," Sherer said. "First female chapel deacon at Princeton Seminary, first female pastor in Stillwater, Okla., first female armor brigade chaplain, first female deputy division chaplain, first female division chaplain deployed to combat, first female U.S. Military Academy chaplain."

Sherer said there were other firsts for her, but thought the audience got the point she was making by reciting the list. She said other women had gone before her and cut a trail to follow.

"When there are so few of you, almost everything you do is a first," Sherer said. "Today, I want to talk about being second and what trailblazers inherently do for you."

Sherer said her time as U.S. Military Academy chaplain allowed her to meet many of the women who had been cadets in the first class of 1980.

"I heard the stories of animosity and hostility directed at those first women students. But, 50 percent of that first group held on, fought the battles and graduated," Sherer said. "Although it was still tough, those trailblazers helped establish that women were no longer a novelty at West Point."

Sherer said the second class with women cadets was 1981 and included retired Brig. Gen. Becky Halstead, the first female graduate from West Point to reach general officer rank. She said women now make up 20 percent of the Corps of Cadets.

"West Point is still challenging for female cadets," Sherer said. "But, it's challenging in the same way it is for the men — physically, academically and high expectations of one's leadership skills."

An ordained Presbyterian minister, Sherer, grew up in Springfield, Mo. and was first commissioned in 1984 as an Army Reserve chaplain. She entered active duty in 1992 and has subsequently served in significant assignments such as strategic planner and media specialist with the Office of the Chief of Chaplains, aviation brigade chaplain, cavalry division brigade chaplain and serving as both a deputy division chaplain and a division chaplain.

Sherer is a graduate of the Chaplain Officer Basic and Advance Courses, the Command and General Staff Officer Course, Army Force Management Course and the U.S. Army War College. Following her completion of the Army War College, she served as deputy commandant of the U.S. Army Chaplain Center and School, USMA chaplain and is now the senior chaplain at Fort Leavenworth.

Sherer finished her undergraduate degree at Southwest Missouri State University (now Missouri State University) and then pursued graduate work. She said Andrea Pfaff Ahlers was a trailblazer who made the time working toward her master's degree at Princeton Theological Seminary a focused educational experience.

"Andrea was a mentor at Princeton who had persevered over a 15-year period by confronting issues related to women students simply being respected and recognized," Sherer said. "By the time I arrived on campus there were no longer issues regarding female clergy. My mentor spent lots of her energy fighting to simply be there. And, I spent most of my energy studying and preparing to serve a church."

Sherer said if it were not for trailblazing women like Ahlers, she would not have had that opportunity to complete a master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary and a doctorate in education from Oklahoma State University. She said her church congregation in Stillwater, Okla., supported and encouraged her application to the military Chaplain Corps.

"This was 10 years after the first women had become Army chaplains," Sherer said. "The first two women had such a difficult time that they didn't make a full career of the service. The third was retired Colonel Janet Horton, who blazed the trail for many of us."

Sherer said trailblazers make it possible for those who follow them to not be concerned with subjective qualifiers unrelated to objective issues or spend an entire career literally fighting to simply survive. She said trailblazers should always be thanked for their courage and endurance.



PHOTO/ PRUDENCE SIEBERT, FORT LEAVENWORTH LAMP

Guest speaker Combined Arms Center Chaplain (Col.) Barbara Sherer shares her message about trailblazers and following those who paved the way during the Women's History Month luncheon March 13 at the Frontier Conference Center. Photo by Prudence Siebert/Fort Leavenworth Lamp

"Those few times when I have been the trailblazer have made me appreciate those many more times my path was eased by someone who went before me," Sherer said. "What a difference it makes when you can focus on doing your best, have a positive sense of professional self-worth and genuinely afford others the benefit of the doubt."

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