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[Home](#) / [News](#)

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First female Silver Star recipient has Bowling Green roots

By JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com Jun 16, 2018

Leigh Ann Hester outside Camp Victory in Iraq, about a month before returning home in 2005.

Submitted

After making history as the first woman to receive the Silver Star for valor in combat since World War II, a Bowling Green native has no plans to stop serving her country any time soon.

Leigh Ann Hester, who grew up in Bowling Green and attended Greenwood High School, has served two tours of duty in Afghanistan and one in Iraq.

Hester, who now works for the Franklin (Tenn.) Police Department as a narcotics officer, said via email she was always interested in joining the military.

“Growing up I loved shooting guns and just being outdoors,” she said. “My uncle and grandfather were also veterans, so that had some influence as well.”

When she was 18, she met with recruiters but didn’t enlist until after she completed one year at Western Kentucky University, Hester said.

Hester decided to enlist in the Kentucky National Guard so she could be a military police officer.

At the time, Hester said, women couldn't be assigned to units designed to engage in direct ground combat.

“When I first enlisted, I chose to be an MP because I believe it was one of the most physically demanding jobs that a female could do in the military,” she said. “I also knew I wanted to become a police officer later as well so it just helped (me) prepare for that even more.”

The deeds that earned her a Silver Star came March 20, 2005, during her tour in Iraq, when a convoy of semi trucks her unit was tasked with defending was ambushed outside Baghdad. With over 50 insurgents attacking from all sides, she and a fellow squad leader eliminated the threat with help from another squad leader and support from gunners in nearby Humvees.

Though three were wounded, no American soldiers were killed in the skirmish.





Shortly after returning from Iraq in 2005, Hester joined the Franklin Police Department and currently works with the department as a narcotics officer, which is a great job for her because it allows her to continue serving her country, she said.

In 2014 and 2015, Hester was on active duty again, this time on a second tour in Afghanistan, serving in a cultural support team, Hester said.

Cultural support teams accompany Army Rangers in other countries and talk to women in situations where local culture might deem women talking to male soldiers inappropriate, she said.

Hester said she's happy that, since receiving her Silver Star, the military has since lifted its restrictions on women serving in combat.

“Where I was limited to what (military operational specialty) I could choose at the time, women now have no limitations. It has been a long time coming and many women have fought for fair treatment and equal rights within our ranks,” she said.

“Although I don't think of myself as a trailblazer, I can only hope that my actions were considered and helped open more doors for women in the military today.”

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