

## State Set to Commemorate Female Veterans Memorial

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Female veterans waited more than 13 years to have a symbol representing their service to the country installed at the state Capitol. The wait ended one year ago when a large bronze statue of a military woman was placed about 50 feet from the West Virginia Veterans Memorial. Nearly one year to the date, the statue will finally be officially commemorated. The statue was sculpted by Charleston artist Joe Mullins, who also sculpted the four servicemen in the veterans' memorial.

The newest piece is the only statue of a female on the Capitol grounds. "You don't see anything honoring the women," said Keith Gwinn, cabinet secretary of the Department of Veterans Assistance. "They're an important part of the veterans and of the military. We thought this would be a good way to honor our female veterans." Gwinn said the Legislature passed a resolution in 1998 to do just that. But it would be 12 years before such a memorial would make its way to the Capitol Complex and another year before it would be finished. "It was one of those things where it was very hard to narrow down to a statue that would represent females of all eras," Gwinn said. "That's where the controversy came up." He said after the contract was awarded to Mullins in 1999, some of the veterans groups weren't happy with artist's design and "didn't feel like it represented a lot of the veterans."

He has heard many compliments and few negative comments since the statue was installed last year, he said. Bronze plaques were installed on

the statue's base Tuesday in honor of women in different eras of service. The statue cost about \$200,000. Mullins, who couldn't be reached for comment, said in an interview last year the figure was representative of a female service member from about 10 years ago, around the time of the beginning of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. He didn't intend her to be part of any particular branch of the military as her style of dress is common to all branches.

At about 8 feet tall, she is eye level with her brothers-in-arms at the Veterans' Memorial. She stands in a relaxed pose wearing a T-shirt tucked into fatigue pants, which are creased and bloused over her combat boots, and a utility belt strapped with pouches. She carries a flagpole that will bear the flag of the various service branches on a rotating basis. Her face has hard lines but shows a woman with purpose. Her body has subtle curves that accentuate her athletic physique. She looks similar to the growing number of women signing up every day to join the military.

Col. Paige Hunter, a human resources officer with the West Virginia National Guard, got her first look at the statue Tuesday during a visit to the Capitol. Hunter, who has been in the Guard for nearly 30 years, will be leading the Pledge of Allegiance during Friday's unveiling. "She's awesome," Hunter said of the statue. "I really like it. I think they did a very nice job representing what we do in the military." Hunter, 50, was deployed with the Air National Guard to the Middle East from summer 1990 to April 1991 during Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. It was the first time her unit had been deployed since the Korean War and the first time women had been sent on a deployment, she said. She was among a handful of women who made the trip.

"You don't think about it at the time," she said. "You do what you're ordered to do and what you're trained to do. When you join, you just want to serve; you support and defend your country. You don't think

about all the other stuff." Hunter came from a military family. Her father served in the 130th Airlift Wing for more than 30 years. She was among the first group of females to go through the course at Camp Dawson in Preston County for youth leaders. She said the course gave her a taste of the military life. The colonel said she was inspired by her father's service and that of the women who served in previous conflicts. She called the women who served before her "true pioneers." "They paved the way for people like me to serve however I wanted to serve," she said. "We're just following in their footsteps."

She is excited about Friday's ceremony. "It's a day of remembrance," Hunter said. "It's bittersweet. We so appreciate the support we receive from the community, but of course we also want to take that time to reflect on those who have made the ultimate sacrifice and, of course, remember those who are still in harm's way." The unveiling will begin at noon at the statue. Warrant Officer Siobhan O'Flaherty, who served in Operation Enduring Freedom, and Pfc. Miriam McCaw, who served in World War II, will give remarks. Rep. Shelley Moore Capito, Sen. Joe Manchin, Gov.-elect Earl Ray Tomblin, first lady Joanne Tomblin and a representative from Sen. Jay Rockefeller's office also are scheduled to attend.

*[This article has been lightly edited for clarity.]*