

Irene Zoppi, Gulf War Veteran

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Description

Colonel Irene Zoppi has served in the U.S. Army for over 25 years, from active duty to the reserves. Zoppi talks about her experiences in the military, including her role in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and how she balances being in the reserves with her family life and job as a college professor. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

Keywords

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CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

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Transcript

Irene Zoppi, Gulf War Veteran

Col. IRENE ZOPPI: My name is Irene Zoppi. I am a veteran from the Gulf War.

In my civilian sector I teach. I'm a professor and I love mentoring and I love working with my students. I have adult learners. And that is awesome. I can see their life and what they go through, and pay it forward. Help them to achieve themselves like somebody helped me to become who I am today.

When I went to active duty, the first assignment was to go to English school. They felt that officers from another ethnicity, or another background, another culture, another language needed the language skills and also how to work in a culture that is American, very different from your own heritage.

From that training in English school, I passed, you know, flying colors and everything else. I went to military intelligence school in Arizona. And after that I went to the Gulf War.

This was a first war after the Cold War. Cold War have just finished and Berlin Wall had just come down, now this is the first war in years.

FAITH DANIELS, reporting: In the news, Iraqi invaders are meeting stiff resistance but appear to be in control of Kuwait this morning. The U.S. considers military options and pushes for economic sanctions.

ZOPPI: Now U.S. have to encounter a big hurdle within the war, is to work to the diplomatic sanctions, or will we go to combat?

I was a special security officer and I worked with telecommunication centers. And my job really as a special security officer is getting classified information to the net, understanding the classified information, label it, and then disseminate it as fast as I can.

As a general staffer, you're able to work straight with the general and see all kinds of great leaders coming in and out and how the general make decisions. And that for me as an-- formative years, an officer, really impacted me to see how the general operates.

We were in a war zone. And you can hear bombs constantly-- as a matter of fact the first days when the

war came through, we were already in Saudi Arabia and there was, Scuds, alerts, and I can hear the Scud missile alert that-- that can be devastating.

I think that every time we jumped and went to a location and remember, war is not static, you cannot stay in one area, you can continue to move especially in convoys. So we will go where the general will go. And so every time the general moved to another location, we went with the general.

And therefore, for him to know what is the combat, he needs to be listening to everything. So we were right there in combat with him.

We were stationed right there where the oil fields were burning and every night the sky was always dark. The Valley of Death, which is all the vehicles where they were burned and everything else on the exit, when the Iraqi were trying to leave. And some of them, you know, they were stealing all kinds of stuff and leaving Kuwait. And, you know, you actually smell all that. And the oil fields, you can see all the oil fields burning and there was nothing you can do, all that oil being burned.

I was there during the liberation. Yes. It was awesome. I remember a little kid came and was a girl. And she looked on my uniform and I told her that I was an American soldier. But I was from Puerto Rico, she was more confused. Said, "You mean that you're from Puerto Rico? And you are an American soldier? And you came here to save us?" Then she said, "You are awesome!" And I said, "Yes, I'm from Puerto Rico." And she was so excited.

I think I left active duty in 1995. But I can continue being in the military to their reserves. So it was a decision made for family. In the reserves, I'm a colonel. I'm a chief of staff. I'm able to then jump as a civilian and do my job and then go back into my uniform and go out for duty, which I'm not only proud for but very-- it's an honor to serve and to give back.

It's been twenty-six years in the military and still married to the same guy. So it can be done, and you can have children and you can work. It's just the same thing. It's just priorities, you've got to achieve them and you got to work as a team.

As a professor and a teacher and a mentor and a coach, military have helped me a lot to have the discipline and to understand about prioritization of things, understanding people.

I understand why people do certain things and why, and don't judge them. I appreciate them for what they can give and then help them if they want to get the proper training or support so they can achieve themselves to the higher level.