

### *Upsetting the Ranks*

As she walked into the room, surrounded by men, she knew this was going to be a life changing experience; not only for her life, but also for many others. The smirks, gestures, and blunt remarks forced her to be reminded that she was not accepted here. She was simply tolerated, because she had to be. "If I hear one more call for a meeting *about* the women or *for* the women or *because* of the women, I'm going to get sick!" exclaimed a male cadet (Dolan). This is the mindset Andrea Hollen had to overcome as she entered the first coed class at West Point in 1980 ("Chronology of Significant Events").

This was not the first gender barrier Andrea Hollen had faced in her life. Hollen played the piano, guitar, and French horn in high school, where she was not permitted to participate in the marching band because she was a girl. But just four years later, she entered the once all men's military school, West Point.

While attending the Academy, most teachers and classmates treated the woman with respect, but some were hostile. Hollen once cheerfully saluted an upperclassman with a "Good morning, sir!" He retorted, "It would be a good morning if you were all gone, bitch." This demeaning and ignominious remark did not dishearten Hollen however, because "I wanted to be an ultimate citizen, and involvement in the military seemed to be the strongest way to express that," (Malamud). Hollen was a patriotic and idealistic young woman who was loyal toward her country and duties. She worked hard in school to keep up with the men and show the strength and ability of women. She graduated number ten in her class as a National Merit Scholar (Dolan). This was a feat not taken lightly by her fellow male classmates.

Andrea Hollen demonstrated moral courage by standing up against adversity in a time and place where she was not accepted. Regardless of her personal struggles and losses, her perseverance made an important mark in history that will forever affect women across the nation. Fighting for the equality of women was never Hollen's ambition. "I don't think I had ever uttered the word "feminism" before I went to West Point," says Hollen. "So I was deeply shocked by the level of hostility toward women." Through her daily actions and choices, she portrayed altruistic behavior that in turn gave women the courage to enter the army. Yet even though the military was now part of who she was, Hollen discovered another facet of herself that once again would affect prejudices throughout America.

In 1992, Andrea Hollen announced her resignation from the military by stating, "I fell in love with a woman...I'm gay" ("Andrea Hollen"). For a long period of time, in our world's history, homosexuality was considered a mental illness. Not until 1986 was *homosexuality* removed entirely from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM). There was a hatred, mainly derived from fear, of many of these wonderful individuals who stood up for their sexuality. The country, particularly the military, had not and still does not fully accept homosexuals. There was also a large stereotype that homosexuals were not capable of being good soldiers (Hereck). This type of discrimination, wicked and crude, is what Hollen stood up against. A specific example is the hypocritical "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, that asks soldiers to be honorable and patriotic, but also to live a lie. Hollen said, "I decided to [resign] because I cherish the Cadet Honor Code and I could not imagine dissembling and equivocating my way through the rest of my career." This was one of the most difficult and

courageous decisions she had to make. She stated, "I felt stripped of my sense of identity! Everything I had worked for, I lost. But it would have been an indignity for me to live my life that way."

In contrast to Andrea Hollen's life, my generation has had an entirely opposite experience. I have witnessed women run for President of the United States, serve their country diligently in combat, and seen states like Connecticut and Vermont legalize gay marriage. I, as a teenager, cannot fully comprehend the enormity of Hollen's decisions to stand up against both gender and sexual prejudices because I have not fully lived it. Here and there I will get glimpses into what these antagonizing moments of her life might have been like. For example, I am a dancer and have many gay friends. My friends from school criticize and taunt them and cannot fathom why I would hang out with *them*. This insensitivity is astonishing to me. I did not know how to stand up against someone who sees another human being's life as "wrong." But my gay friends are not any different from me or my friends at school and do not have a right to be treated any differently. Hollen's choices have inspired me to always make the moral decision, not the popular or easy one.

Moreover, I want to major in political science. Many politicians have led careers full of lies, scandal, and deceit. Hollen has shown me that to be successful I can still be honest. She stayed true to herself when she quit the army. There are many moral people in the world who stick to their beliefs and follow their conscience, just like Andrea Hollen did. I want to grow into a person of sound character who has the courage to think my own thoughts and the strength to defend them.

“Courageous,” as some would put it; “crazy,” as others said. But Hollen was both and neither of these things. She was an exemplary woman who not only broke down barriers, but began movements toward equality. Hollen entered the military for the same reason she left it: integrity. Her advice to others facing discrimination is to “tell the truth— as clearly, respectfully, and gracefully as possible!” Andrea Hollen demonstrated moral courage by following her judgement and listening to her heart.

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