



An officer and businesswoman: Former Army bomb tech now plies skills in leather repair

By Lindsay Melvin

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Lt. Col. Nora Garono swapped her Humvee for a minivan as she started her mobile leather repair business, Fibrenew. Now, instead of disposing of bombs, she drives around repairing leather chairs and automotive vinyl. Her military career recently included a two-year stint in Iraq as a senior adviser to an Iraqi general.

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Lt. Col. Nora Garono doesn't have to see "The Hurt Locker," the 2008 Academy Award-winning film about a U.S. military bomb squad in Iraq -- she's lived it.



COURTESY OF NORA GARONO

Lt. Col. Nora Garono is shown during her second tour in Iraq. She still serves as a Reservist with a unit based in Nashville.

During the Persian Gulf War, two spoons attached to a 1,000-pound explosive on a dusty road in Baghdad would send the Germantown resident and her unit to dispose of the improvised explosive device, or IED.

Like the movie, Garono's Explosive Ordnance Disposal team, better known as the bomb squad, had the risky task of inspecting possible explosives and disarming them.

But unlike the thrill-seeking lead character in "The Hurt Locker," who's better with bombs than people, Garono, despite her tough demeanor, has an endless sense of

humor and is extremely likable.

"It's very hard to get into. You have to be smart enough and stupid enough," said the former bomb squad commander, who was with the elite unit for four years.

"They're the smartest, they're the brightest," said Michael Malko, a retired Marine bomb tech living in Florida.

Malko met Garono during bomb tech training, where all branches of the military come together.

Garono was the first female bomb tech Malko had encountered, and he ended up serving with her in Iraq.

You don't just need to get along with your coworker when you're working with unstable material, he said.

"You're trusting them with your life," Malko said. "I'd serve in her command any time. She was a good, fair leader."

Garono, who describes herself as "39, again," has since swapped her Humvee for a minivan, from which she runs her mobile leather repair franchise, Fibrenew.

Her days are now spent refurbishing beat-up, cigarette-pocked leather seats around the Bluff City, rarely sharing with her clients that she can also disarm booby traps and retrieve chemical weapons.

Garono returned to Memphis in August, after a nearly two-year stint in Iraq, her second tour there.

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The mobile business she recently started has been a perfect match for the Reservist, who's not accustomed to sitting still.

The long list of places she was stationed during her 25-year military career includes South Korea, Italy, Germany and the Middle East.

"I was a little bit of a tomboy, but not much of a risk-taker," recalled Garono, an attractive woman who still has a rugged tomboyishness.

It's hard to imagine the quick-witted, Harley-Davidson-riding officer as the shy bookworm she was in her hometown in Ohio.

Secretly, she longed to escape from being ordinary, and joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps.

After receiving a full scholarship to Kent State University through ROTC, Garono became a commissioned officer in the Army, where she let her alter ego shine.

First, by applying to Airborne school, where she spent three weeks jumping out of airplanes.

By the time she earned her wings, out of 1,000 officers in her academy, only 30 were women.

"I had to prove I could pull my weight, quickly," said Garono, who in the 1980s was among only a handful of women in the military.

Soon, she was looking at the bomb squad to soothe her adventurous itch.

While serving in the military intelligence unit, intercepting signals in South Korea, her office was stationed next to the bomb squad's, which also housed the closest toilet.

"I told them, 'I want to join the bomb squad, but the most immediate thing I want is to use your bathroom,'" she said.

Garono was 23 when she was accepted into the unit.

"My mother had a fit," said the officer, whose siblings are doctors and lawyers.

When she was called into action during the first Gulf War, Garono thought she'd be in and out, and neglected to inform her parents.

They figured it out when their daughter appeared on CNN, being interviewed about booby traps blocking humanitarian efforts in the region.

During Garono's most recent tour in Iraq, she no longer was dealing with explosives.

Instead, she was embedded with the Iraqi army as a senior adviser to an Iraqi general.

But an American woman in a leadership role in Iraq could have been an explosive situation if Garono hadn't won over the Iraqi general.

"He made me a daughter of his house to offer me protection," she said.

Now, as a Reservist with a unit in Nashville, Garono says it has been an exciting journey, but not always an easy one. She made a lot of sacrifices serving her country.

Before she left for her second tour in Iraq, she was married and had a dog. While she was gone, her dog passed away, and her husband left.

"I still really miss that dog," she joked.

Garono withdrew from active duty for a few years, after a young soldier under her command committed suicide.

"You hear a lot about (post-traumatic stress disorder). I was probably dealing with a little bit of that," she said.

About 5.2 million people are diagnosed with PTSD during a given year, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

When she returned to Memphis, she found virtually zero support as she wrestled with the guilt of that soldier's death, she recalled.

"You can't talk to family and friends who haven't been there," she said.

Garono has since found that support at the Memphis Veterans Medical Center.

And as she follows her new dream of owning her own business, she relishes the idea of fixing something that is broken.


"I also get to use power tools, and that's cool," she said.

-- *Lindsay Melvin*: 529-2445

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