

First-female-paratrooper-spotlights-women-in-the-army (GDF)

When Guyana Defence Force (GDF) Private Melika Scotland recently became the first local female paratrooper, it was bittersweet news for retired Staff Sergeant Beverley Somerset, who had been repeatedly denied from participating in the course almost three decades ago.



Beverley Somerset

Retired Staff Sergeant

“I was denied the opportunity three years in a row—from 1980 to 1982. I wrote the [GDF] administration but they did not respond and after the three years. I was getting older so I decided not to apply again,” Somerset, 54, told Stabroek News recently.

Scotland created history recently when she became the first woman to graduate as a paratrooper at the Headquarters of the 31 Special Forces Squadron at Base Camp Stephenson, Timehri. She was given a standing ovation by her male peers. She was one of 36, including three Officers, who graduated from the first paratrooper’s course to be conducted by the Special Forces since 2002

Somerset, also known as ‘Thriller,’ retired in 1996 as a training staff sergeant. According to her retirement sheet, she was highly respected throughout the army and always had the confidence of her superiors and was a good example to all female soldiers. “I felt proud when I read in the newspaper about the first female paratrooper but I would have been ever more proud if I had gotten the opportunity to do it,” she said.

But Somerset was not a woman to give up easily and she applied to become the first woman to climb the 6,700 ft Mount Ayanganna. She was allowed that opportunity in February, 1992, when she was part of the team led by then Captain Wilbert Lee. “I made it, even as some of my male counterparts dropped out. And when I see that, I was determined to make it and I did it,” Somerset said.

While there are some who may think that the army is not a place for women, and especially those like Somerset who did not go through the Cadet Officer's Course (she joined as an ordinary soldier), the retired Staff Sergeant does not agree. "If I could have done it again I would have done it," she said, "The army taught me a lot and I would like to someday write a book about my experience." Somerset was 18 when she joined the army and she served for 25 years. During those years, she always liked to challenge men and one of her most memorable experience was climbing the mountain.

Most of her career was spent training civilians to be soldiers. She spent almost 15 years at the Tacama Training School in the Berbice River. She trained many of the officers in the army today. Previously, before going on to the cadet course everyone had to be part of the normal recruit course. "I would recommend the army for any woman; one for the discipline; [and] two for them to acquire a skill and develop themselves..." she said.

Presently, Somerset is the welfare officer of the ex-GDF Association of Guyana and this sees her visiting a number of former members who can no longer help themselves.

She enjoys her work, especially at Christmas, when she can take some cheer for them with the assistance of the group's overseas members. To this end, Somerset appealed for assistance for former Warrant Officer Cleveland Walcott, also known as 'Joey,' who was a jump master in the army. She said it appears as if he was forgotten after giving his service and "putting his life in danger for his country. He is presently incapable of doing anything for himself. When he was training out young soldiers to become paratroopers, the entire country gave him the thumbs-up. Now, he is almost bedridden, nobody cares."

She also had some advice for Private Scotland as she urged her not be intimidated by her male colleagues as they sometimes feel women are inferior to them and this must be proven wrong.

While she said she is not happy with what is happening in the army-several members have been charged with murder and other crimes-Somerset would not comment on the issues.