



**SENIOR AIRMAN
AMANDA MARTINO
UNITED STATES
MARINE CORPS
UNITED STATES
AIR FORCE
GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR
Operation Iraqi Freedom
Operation Enduring Freedom**

Amanda Martino was born on June 7, 1984 in Lindenhurst, on Long Island. She was born into an Italian family, “very loud and very loving.” Her dad had dropped out of high school to enlist in the military, and served in Vietnam before becoming the head of maintenance for a large company. As the youngest of three siblings, Amanda is the first female in her family to serve in the Armed Forces. She loves the military, its traditions, its esprit de corps, its discipline and values.

Amanda attended a Catholic high school, St. John the Baptist. She enjoyed dance, lacrosse, and cheerleading. After graduating high school, Amanda went to college, but “I realized I wasn’t truly happy, something was missing. My best friend at the time told me, go talk to the Marine Corps.” After finishing her junior year she dropped out to join the Marines. Her parents were not happy. They urged her to complete college. “I didn’t listen.”

She joined the Marine Corps in 2005. On April 17, 2005 she left for Parris Island. She was 20 years old. “I was lost, I didn’t know who I was. I needed to prove to myself I could amount to something.”

Boot camp was “the most challenging thing in my life. At the time, I hated it. They would spit in your face, degrade you. They would tell you you’re nothing.” Amanda was always put on the “quarter-deck”, always in trouble. She was, after all, a New Yorker, she laughs. “Yet, it was an experience I don’t regret. At the time I hated it, but now I appreciate it. I get it. It’s all about instilling discipline, learning to follow instructions.”

“That was when it got real. When you start seeing your own injured, disoriented, sent home. That’s when you realize this isn’t a joke.”



From boot camp she went to training at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. Unlike deployment, in training the sexes are kept separate, a concept Amanda thinks is wise. “It eliminates distractions. Keeps your mind focused on your training.” Her drill instructors were all female. The age of her companions ranged from 18 to 26, which meant there was a large gap in maturity between the youngest and the oldest. For many of her co-trainees, especially the youngest from small towns, it was a “new world”.

Amanda, who had started working part time jobs at age 14, had already learned a lot of the “life skills” and how to get along with others, and “the meaning and value of hard work and responsibility.” She found her “strong personality and outspokenness” an asset among the male Marines. “If you want to be a part of that group, that family, you have to work for it.”

Amanda became a field wireman, MOS 06-12. She was schooled in her specialty at the Marines’ Air Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms in California. “It’s the largest Marine Corps base in the world because they don’t know where the base ends and the desert begins.” Here she was taught the necessary skills for wiring up equipment, setting up



telephones, repairing gear, and tapping into phone lines.

From there she was stationed at Camp Pendleton for four years or so, in the 1st Marines Division. She was always on the ready to be deployed. Eight times, nine times she was put on alert, and told she was going to deploy, with no deployment. To improve her

chances she decided she would learn radio operations. She was sent to the 1st Intelligence Battalion, where she received top-secret clearance. Next, she was assigned to the maintenance shop where she learned everything about radios and radio operations.

In March 2008 Amanda was deployed to Fallujah, Iraq. It was snowing on the day she landed; the next day's temperature was 103 degrees Fahrenheit. "It's crazy, but that's the desert." In June she was assigned to the Lioness Program, the first combat all-female group. She spent two weeks being trained on searching female Iraqis, and how to spot IED's. She also took language classes to be able to speak with the citizens.

At Ramadi she worked during July 2008 at one of the gates, searching vehicles and training female Iraqi police recruits. "Working outside the gates, a scary experience. We didn't know what was about to come through our gate. You never knew what was going to happen."

She was sent to help build the intelligence building. "We ran all the wires, conduits, put in the main switchboard, everything." The work was done at night. "Pulling duty 'outside the wire' was the most difficult job – but working at night on the Intelligence Building was hard – I'm not a night person."

Amanda finished her Iraq tour and came back home in March 2009. She went back to college and earned her BA in English at SUNY Stony Brook. She got a good job as the general manager of two gyms. "But something was missing in my life.... I need the military life. I love the structure. It helps me stay focused." A friend suggested she talk to an Air National Guard recruiter. "I told her I wanted police...I wanted to deploy."

She started reserve duty on June 28, 2012 with the Air Force Air National Guard at Stewart Air Base in Newburgh. A week before Hurricane Sandy hit she was informed she was being assigned, and so she gave notice to her employer and drove down to Texas for four months of field training in light infantry tactics, security work, combat-related skills, military police techniques. In January her sergeant told her, "Martino, you're deploying in May." She went to Camp Smith in Peek-

skill on the Hudson for a week where she underwent training in IED's, convoy skills, patrol and search. In June 2013 she was at Moody Air Force Base learning how to use the Crew Remote Operating Weapons System (CREWS), controlling the gun outside the vehicle with a joystick from inside.

On June 21, 2013, she was once again deployed, this time to Bagram Air Force Base, Afghanistan.

She found Air Force deployment totally different than her Marines experience. "Our Air Force mission was outside the wire. We patrolled the streets, did softknocks, intelligence raids. Talked to the Maliki

[Tribe] over there, dealt with the locals through translators." One of their translators, Freddy, was Afghan but had been raised in New Mexico.

"We were always on alert. Every day we had rocks thrown at us, spit on. We didn't trust anyone... they're not scared of our heavy weapons.

"At first it wasn't real. We were just there. But then it started getting real. We had two squads. We were on day shift, the others on night shift. Day shift was safer; no one does anything to you during the day. They always attack at night."

Their sister 'flight' got hit with an IED. Their Delta gunner was injured and sent home. The driver suffered a major concussion and was also sent back. "That was when it got real. When you start seeing your own injured, disoriented, sent home. That's when you realize this isn't a joke."

August 10, 2013: "We're parked on the side of the road. I was Delta gunner. Outside a Maliki's home, I got hit with an IED. I remember the explosion. I remember the smoke." Comrades told her she had hit her head. She had a concussion. "Sergeant told me, I kept on saying 'I'm OK. I'm OK.' I'm OK. I'm OK', a hundred times...I guess I was in shock." They gave her medication. She couldn't feel the left side of her body. She was on a stretcher in the back of the truck. Everyone piled in. They headed to base, where Amanda was put in an ambulance, and driven to the hospital.

Her 1st Sergeant said, "call your parents." She called her father, and found out they were at the movies. She told him she was OK but had to go to the hospital and would call again after finding out more. "My parents freaked out, told everyone – so now everyone's freaking out, going on Facebook...."

Although badly bruised, her X-Rays showed no broken bones. She had mild Traumatic Brain Injury, and was kept at the TBI Center a week. "I didn't want to be there at the hospital – my



guys were out there. I couldn't understand the concept of 'rest'." She was discharged but put "inside the wire" and not sent out onto deployment.

On September 5, 2013 there was a night raid. "Our sister platoon was attacked. We pulled cover while they're in this firefight." They lost a great soldier, a 23-year old staff sergeant, Todd "TJ" Loblaco, Jr. . "I'll never forget that night." They had a couple of days off. Then it was back outside the wire. "Now our 'pucker factor' is really going. We're angry now. Before we'd try to integrate, do our best to deal with the Afghan locals. It's hard now to accept things...."

It was the middle of October, the end of Ramadan. They're put on twelve-hour rotations because the end of Ramadan "is when things happen...." October 18, 2013: "On the side of the road we see this vehicle driving back and forth. It was weird. It was a motorcycle-borne IED and he drove right into our Charlie truck. I was Delta. Six of us suffered mild concussions. The Afghan was blown up. We all had to go to the hospital." Because it was Amanda's second TBI two weeks' rest was prescribed.

Amanda admits she was fearful. She had two strikes against her, and the third strike could be the last. And it could hit any time. She still had two months left on her tour. She didn't want to go back outside the wire. They were given gate guard duty for the rest of the tour, cleaned up the base, packed up, and shipped everything back to the States.

Amanda arrived back home on December 13, 2013. It was emotional returning to see her mom, dad, sister, and good friends from home. "I didn't want them worrying about me any more.... That was difficult for me. I'm over there doing my job but I'm worrying about them over here, worrying about me. That's not good. You have to stay focused."

Amanda went to graduate school and achieved her degree in Sports Management at Adelphi University in May 2015. She went back to work as manager of the gym, when her sergeant called her to let her know about an awesome opportunity: the NBA was looking to hire military veterans with a sports background. Martino is now executive assistant in the NBA's In-

ternational Department of Basketball Operations and reports to work at the executive offices in mid-town Manhattan. "I have my dream job." She is thrilled to go to South Africa for a special program run by the NBA for kids, called "Basketball without Borders". Other programs are envisioned, for Asia, Europe, and the Dominican Republic.

Amanda still trains one weekend a month at Stewart Air Base. "I love the military. I love what it represents. I'm a lifer. I need the structure, I like doing different things. It's like a nice change of pace. I put on the uniform; I'm still deployable. I love being with others at the base who think like I think."

Amanda admits it is not easy going back to "normal reality". She struggles with the constant replaying in her mind of the night she was first hit, visualizing the scene based on what others told her had happened. She still sometimes wakes up in the middle of the night, often feeling angry. Angry that an unknown shadowy man had knocked out a part of her life. "Angry we never caught him. Angry what happened to TJ. I'm still trying to work through this."

She still gets nightmares. Anxiety attacks, flashbacks. One week after she returned home, while driving on the Long Island Expressway, she saw a man who had pulled his car over and was out on the shoulder, praying. She had a panic attack. She didn't remember she was in New York. Another time she was driving on the Southern State Parkway and saw a shiny object on the side of the road. She had to calm herself down because her mind went right back to Afghanistan.

Everyday experiences are sometimes hard for her to relate to; birthday parties with kids popping balloons, loud noises, crowded subways.

Amanda received the Purple Heart at a ceremony in Afghanistan. Despite her trauma she has no place for regret.

"I was doing what I was supposed to do. I did my job, I did my duty. You have to move on. But that's easier said than done. You have to constantly remind yourself you're back home, in America." America. Land of the free and home of the brave.

