

Valerie's Legacy

In the military, when a young man or woman leaves us, they are never truly gone. Their life force is carried on by the people who loved, learned and worked alongside them. For women in the military, this truth is even closer to their hearts. As a minority in the military community, women lean on each other heavily for mentorship, camaraderie, advice, friendship, and support. This is especially true among women in the aviation community and is perfectly exemplified by the life of Lt. j.g. Valerie Delaney.

Valerie and two other Naval aviators, Lt. Cmdr. Alan Patterson and Lt. j.g. William McIlvaine III, perished when their E/A-6B Prowler crashed during a low level training mission in Washington state on March 11, 2013. Since her untimely passing, there has been an outpouring of love and support from all over the world and all branches of the military. Many of those sharing in the grief from this tragedy, would not be the leaders they are today without the experiences they had with Valerie.

Valerie Delaney was a 2009 graduate of the United States Naval Academy and a Maryland native. While a Midshipman, she fully embraced the rigors of academy life, balancing an Aeronautical Engineering degree with a minor in French, and playing on the Varsity Lacrosse team. She also sang in the Glee Club and had extra leadership responsibilities as an upperclassman. During the summer of 2008, she helped mold the new class of 2012 from civilians into Midshipmen. Plebe summer training is meant to be a learning experience for both groups. For the incoming freshmen, they must learn a new way of life, a new vocabulary, how to wear uniforms, and how to act like a future Navy officer. For Valerie and the other seniors, this was their first opportunity to put three years of leadership training to the test. Ensign Michael

Courtney Vandament

Callahan, a member of the class of 2012, remembers that time well, saying, “Val as a detailer, mentor, and leader demanded the most from us out of anyone, and that is because she demanded so much from herself. She was incredibly driven and embodied the idea of leading by example in the hall, in the classroom, and subsequently in the fleet. She inspired us constantly through her drive and work ethic, and no one ever had to question whether she was giving 100% to every endeavor.”

Valerie took on each task and challenge she was presented with a passion to do her absolute best. She would humbly accept her mistakes, learn from them, and readily teach others those lessons to help them stay on the right track. Her life motto was “Adapt and Overcome.” She used the phrase to overcome obstacles and keep moving forward after setbacks. Most importantly, Valerie made sure that she was always available to help someone in need; whether it was with academic, professional, or personal struggles. In a sermon she wrote and delivered on July 4, 2010, she told the congregation that, “leadership can be learned and developed, but it is a true gift.” Those who knew her are the first to say that she was not only blessed with the gift of leadership, but she embodied it wholly, and was generous in sharing it with others.

Delaney believed that it was very important for women to have a female role model, especially in the aviation community. Lt. j.g. Erin Rawlick, a Navy pilot, attended the Academy a year behind Delaney. They were brought together through their shared love of lacrosse and singing in the Glee Club. They bonded quickly and developed a great friendship and support system that lasted beyond the walls of Bancroft Hall. Rawlick fondly recalls, “Val continued to encourage and mentor me throughout the Academy and was one of the main influences over my decision to become a pilot. Her determination and dedication to success in aviation was always mind-blowing to me. She worked so incredibly hard throughout flight school, and yet she still

Courtney Vandament

managed to find the time to give me a call and write letters filled with words of encouragement.” Through Delaney’s own journey to find a role model, she became one herself, influencing both her family and the countless men and women that crossed her path in both the military and civilian worlds. Valerie lived, loved, and worked with the passion and dedication that she envisioned a true role model would.

On June 6th, 2013, Valerie was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery. In attendance were her family, friends, and military personnel spanning up and down the ranks. The true testament of her impact on others could be visibly seen on a nearby table where over 200 gold and silver Aviation wings were on display. These small uniform badges represented the enormous effort and sacrifice necessary to successfully complete the rigorous training required to become a military aviator. All the wings had been earned and worn by women in the aviation community and sent to honor Valerie’s life from all over the world. Some of the wings were dull from 30 years of wear, some had engravings on the back from loved ones, and some even came from the Air Force and other different branches of the military. Many were from people who knew Valerie, yet others were from strangers who understand and truly felt the bond among women in aviation. When fellow female aviators presented the wings to Valerie’s parents, they said, “There are not many women in military aviation. As the youngest generation of junior officers, we understand our success depends on the support we give each other. To be successful as a minority we must not only reach forward to seek mentorship, but also reach back to support and inspire those behind us. “Mom” (Valerie’s call sign) understood this better than anyone and was a source of strength to girls both older and younger. Individually, these wings represent amazing personal accomplishment; together, they celebrate the strength we give each other and the collective strength of all female aviators.” This amazing collection of wings will be on

Courtney Vandament

display at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery in her honor.

Valerie Delaney was always a strong shoulder for those who needed her most. She was a constant support for her family; for her mother through a battle with cancer; for her sister through the tragedy of losing a child. Delaney always knew exactly what to say that would truly help the heart heal and ease some of the pain. She comforted her sister with the words, “Don’t be so upset. PJ wouldn’t want you to be.” These were the words of encouragement that helped her sister move forward and heal. With Valerie’s passing, her husband, Lt. Sean Delaney believes that these same words will help those who cared for Valerie. To him, she was also telling her loved ones, “Don’t be so upset, I wouldn’t want you to be.”

Although Lt. j.g Valerie Cappelaere Delaney was taken from this Earth early, her life was long enough to inspire and impact the lives of many people. She will be greatly missed, but she will also be celebrated forever in the memories of those leaders she helped to mold and influence. As the young officers proudly told her family at the funeral, “We leave our wings with Valerie and carry her with us in the sky.”

Postscript: Valerie Delaney was promoted posthumously to Lieutenant and awarded the Navy Achievement Medal for her dedication and passion for the aviation community and her service to the nation.