



LOCAL

## She's retired, but this Army midwife has never stopped serving

BY CHRISTA GALA  
*Correspondent*

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CARY — During much of her 24-year military service, retired Col. Jeri Graham helped deliver babies as a member of U.S. Army Nurse Corps. Graham, 74, of Cary now works to protect veterans' rights and is a life member of the Military Officers Association of America. Here, she talks about being a woman in the armed forces and how we can all do a better job of appreciating those who have served our country.

*Q: What made you decide to join the Army?*

A: When I entered the service in 1978, I was 35 years old. I was a single parent with two young daughters. I had gone to the nurse midwifery program at Meharry Medical College in Nashville, Tenn., and we did all of our clinical work at Fort

Campbell in Kentucky. That's where I really got acquainted with military medicine. I kept in touch with my Army friends and colleagues and was recruited into the Army Nurse Corps. I just really loved taking care of our service members and their families.



*Q: What was it like to be a woman in the military in the 1970s?*

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A: At that time, the ability to come in as a parent and to come in with children, that was relatively new. That followed the ability to even be married in the service. There was a requirement early on (in the early '70s) that if you became pregnant, you were out of the service, so I think I came into the Army at a good time.

*Q: What challenges did you face?*

A: I think one of the things I loved about being in the military is that it was a good equalizer in terms of ethnicity, racial and gender issues. I think we really set a standard for that type of advocacy in the nation. We're a very diverse service. Not all of it came so easily over the years, but I think we set a very good example. We had good respect from the medical community, and we had very good working relationships.

***Q: You retired in 2002. What do you do now?***

A: I still teach at military hospitals, but now I try to care for service members and their families in a different way, and that's to advocate for the issues and the legislation that affects them. It's just a different way of being a nurse.

***Q: What issues are veterans most concerned about today?***

A: There are issues related to their medical care. Many of them are VA patients and of course that's a federal program. However, there is a lot of communication and coordination, and we are fortunate now to have a Department of Veterans and Military Affairs to make sure we're protecting their benefits that they have served, fought for and been deployed for.

***Q: How can Americans do a better job appreciating veterans?***

A: I think we do a really good job on the holidays. I think to be aware of issues that pertain to veterans, particularly when it comes to those who have been wounded or disabled, and to advocate for the legislation that supports those programs.

Other issues that are important where I feel we're doing a good job is recognizing that today there are many more women veterans, so they have the same issues as their male counterparts.

***Q: Are we doing a good job of taking care of veterans?***

A: I like to think so. I think you should always be looking for opportunities for improvement. Every part of the government is always in some kind of competition for budget, and I think we just have to be mindful of that. I did serve on the

governor's Veterans Affairs Commission for four years, and I got very familiar with all the issues that that commission looks out for. There is a lot of efficacy work on the behalf of veterans.

I think looking out for the currently serving is important and looking out for our guard and reserve is also important. I'm comfortable knowing that there are so many legislators that are very supportive of our veterans in the state.

***Q: You were awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine last year. What was that like?***

**A:** It was for community service – what I did in military-related organizations. And also, for example, I led a group of volunteers that provided vision screening in New Hanover County for eight years. We were volunteer vision screeners and performed about 6,000 screenings a year. It was a lot of community service and looking out for veterans on the Veterans Affairs Commission.

*Do you know someone who should be a Tar Heel of the Week? Email [tarheel@newsobserver.com](mailto:tarheel@newsobserver.com).*

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## **JERI GRAHAM – TAR HEEL OF THE WEEK**

**Born:** May 8, 1943, Governors Island, N.Y.

**Residence:** Cary

**Career:** Served 24 years as a nurse widwife in the U.S. Army

**Family:** Married to retired Col. Ed Baisden; has six children, 14 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren

**Education:** Bachelor's degree from at SUNY Plattsburgh; master's degree from Boston University; studied midwifery at Meharry Medical College.

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