

## Julie Cox Kennon '83

### Most of us with three children

ages six and under are making sandwiches, tripping over toys, and savoring what little sleep we can find. Few of us are flying missions into Baghdad. Even fewer still are flying missions into Baghdad then returning home to a day job as a radiologist. The exception to that rule would be the recipient of this year's Harpeth Hall Distinguished Alumna Award, Julie Cox Kennon. Julie is a highly respected diagnostic radiologist specializing in women's imaging. Her "second job" of 22 years, before retirement as a Lieutenant Colonel in 2012, was as a pilot in the Air National Guard. She was, in fact, the first female pilot in the 105th Airlift Squadron in the Tennessee Air National Guard and among the first women to fly combat missions. To say that Julie is a trailblazer is accurate but somehow feels inadequate. She has helped pave the way not only for all women in the military but for all women who have been told you can do this or that but not both. Julie has demonstrated, with grace and humility, that one can achieve excellence in two disparate fields at the same time, while also raising young children.

This ability to navigate between different spheres manifested itself early in Julie's life. In her freshman year at Harpeth Hall, she was an alternate for the mile relay team that won the state championship. Not long after, Julie was hit by a car while riding her bike, and the damage to her leg was such that she couldn't run competitively again. Julie responded by taking up theater, singing and dancing in the ensemble for such performances as *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma*. She jokes that she still knows all the words to those songs, though her story reveals values that run far deeper. Resilience for one. Multidimensionality for another.

Graduating Harpeth Hall, Julie attended Stanford University where she initially studied to be an engineer but gravitated instead toward medicine. Neither of her parents were doctors, but she had worked one summer at a pediatrician's office and had felt at home within that community and setting. She decided to pursue radiology as a specialty primarily because the practicing radiologists she knew had high rates of job satisfaction, but the fact that radiologists work in shifts would also prove conducive to Julie's second career—as a pilot.

Whereas medicine was uncommon in Julie's family, flying was not. Her grandfather was a B-25 pilot who served in World War II. His plane was shot down over the Adriatic Sea in 1943 with no survivors. Julie's father, who was only seven when the crash occurred, went on to fly in the Marines before becoming a commercial pilot for American Airlines. Julie was eager to take up wings as well. During her freshman year in college, she went to the Nashville airport where they were offering first time flights for only \$10. One time up and Julie was hooked. She spent the next two summers earning her



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by Varina Buntin Willse '95

license through Stevens Aviation and commemorated her graduation from Stanford by taking her parents and grandmother on a flight over the Bay Area.

“It's one of the best office views in the world,” Julie says of flying, but it was also the aerodynamics of flight that appealed to her. “It's amazing how you can break the bonds of gravity,” she marvels, still taken with the concept after all her years in the cockpit. Though flying was fun for Julie, she wanted more purpose for her newfound skill. She was two years into medical school at Vanderbilt when she learned that she could join military flight school through the Air National Guard and still retain a civilian job. At that time, in 1990, women were allowed to fly KC-135 tankers but not C-130 turboprop transport aircrafts, and so Julie applied to the air refueling squadron in Knoxville. The rule changed roughly a year later, however, and when it did, Julie promptly registered to fly C-130s. Speeding her way through medical school by overloading her schedule, Julie was ready when an

officer slot was made available to her. She took two years off between medical school and residency to complete pilot training in Texas, where she was the only woman in her class of twelve, and to complete survival school in Washington, where the percentage of women capped at about five per cent. Returning to Nashville, Julie spent the daylight hours focused on her residency and nights and weekends focused on flying. Her first overseas mission was in 1992 when she flew a C-130 Hercules into Bosnia to deliver pallets of food and water.

Julie's career as a C-130 pilot has since taken her to every continent except Antarctica and Australia. Her most dangerous missions have been into Iraq, though her plane was hit by a bullet in Bosnia. She claims that it “doesn't count because we didn't know we had been hit until we landed.” (One could argue otherwise.) During these missions, her responsibility was to transport goods and, in many cases, U.S. officers, some of whom were wounded. She jokes that she was the “Army's taxicab service.”

The missions, some of which lasted as long as six months, did not detract from Julie's success as a medical practitioner. As a medical student, she was the recipient of the Roentgen Ray Award for Excellence in Radiology in 1991. In 1996-1997 she served as Chief Resident at Vanderbilt University Medical Center and has since served as Site Chief at St. Thomas Hospital, Tristar Women's Imaging, and now at Centennial Medical Center. She has published articles in medical journals and continues to see patients when performing biopsy procedures. Throughout all of this, she has been an active community member, friend, and mother to her three children: Cole, Will, and Isabel, who is a Harpeth Hall class of 2015 graduate.

Scanning images at Radiology Alliance



Julie with sons Will, Cole and daughter Isabel

DISTINGUISHED ALUMNA

**2526.4**

Total flying hours

**1132**

Number of C-130 sorties  
(aka dispatches)

**21**

Years practicing medicine so far

**22**

Years flying for the 105th Airlift  
Squadron, Tennessee Air  
National Guard

**13**

Months in pilot training

**6**

Years as a student  
at Harpeth Hall

**2**

Number of sisters at  
Harpeth Hall

**150**

Miles hiked in the Warner Parks  
to prepare for Mt. Kilimanjaro

**25**

Years in same book club

**too many to count**

Number of honeybear  
Christmas ornaments

Now, as an empty-nester, retired Air National Guard pilot, and experienced radiologist, Julie is keen to live in, and be thankful for, the present moment. The ambition she felt in her youth isn't gone—she just climbed Mt. Kilimanjaro in February—but she now feels less impelled to get everything perfect and is inclined to “give myself a break.” After a lifetime managing the demands of two high-stress careers and three children, she most certainly deserves the break. She also most certainly deserves our recognition as this year's Harpeth Hall Distinguished Alumna Award recipient.



105th Airlift Squadron

