

# The Girl Next Doorgunner



when she said, "I don't know anything about helicopters, but I REALLY want this job, and I'm willing to learn."

She walked out of the interview not knowing if she would get the job or not. Then she received a call from the company asking, "Why aren't you working with us? You were supposed to start two weeks ago!" It turned out that the letter containing the company's offer had been misplaced on a secretary's desk. Fortunately, the mistake was rectified and Katie got the job.

So, "the girl next door" becomes "the girl next doorgunner." Prior to serving as a contractor, Katie had no "gunner" experience. Now, she trains crew chief/gunners for a living, having learned the "gunner" part on the job in Afghanistan. The "crew chief" part she learned working in El Paso, which led to opportunities traveling stateside and exotic locales overseas (Ukraine and another 'Stan country).

All her training and experience has served Katie well, making her possibly the most experienced woman in the Russian-helicopter world of Mi-8s, Mi-17s as well as Mi-24/35s. A self-described "far from prissy girl," Katie is undaunted by being the only woman in "a man's world."

"I grew up racing go karts, shooting a bow and arrow, and was the only girl in A&P school," she explains. "But, going to Afghanistan was an eye-opener. I get stared at a lot by the local nationals." Most of the local nationals, serving their country, are not used to a female "crew chief" (being the ONLY female aircrew member).

Needless to say, Katie knows she's in a hostile environment when she's on duty. "I carry my Glock 19 every day," she explains, "My M4 is kept in a secure location until I fly, or unless I want it. They're my best friends while I'm overseas. I love the M4 full-auto model."

Katie's small arms training came courtesy of prior-Army friends, a military qualification course, and ongoing company qualification annually. On the job, her weapons training included courses in how to use and maintain the Russian PKM heavy machine gun, AK-47s, and on particular flights, the Dillon Aero M134D Gatling gun.

"We (contractors) are trained by fellow co-workers who completed the Dillon Aero School," Katie said. "We learn the disassembly for cleaning and inspecting the weapon system. Then we have hands-on training for the installation and preflight on the helicopters. Once all previous tasks are completed, we go to the range for qualifications."

Just so you don't get the impression that Katie's work involves training Afghans as crew chiefs on Mi-17 helicopters for sightseeing ventures, I need to tell you that her group's mission is classified, but is likely to result in contact with well-armed and highly motivated opposition.

I admire Katie. I found her to be delightful to work with and talk to, and once I found out that we're from the same area in Southwest Iowa... well, we're neighbors! So, I'm sorry, Chris, I couldn't use the title, "Beauty and the Beast." It just had to be, "The Girl Next Doorgunner."



Katie on the job in Afghanistan ...in the belly of "the beast."