

The GSN welcomes a new director

Penny Pierce, PhD, may be new to USU, but she was part of the university mold long before she arrived on campus three months ago.

After all, the seasoned military officer has served in foreign lands, broken barriers, and taught in American universities for the past three decades.

Coming to Bethesda and mentoring others who have done the same, was a homecoming for USU's new director of the Nurse PhD Program.

"I'm thrilled to be a part of this great community, because I'm surrounded by so many brilliant minds with a passion to serve," she said. "Military nurses share a special kinship, and this feeling pulsates through USU's halls."

Part of the connection Pierce feels toward her students, comes from knowing the difficult courses each will follow as the future leaders of military medicine. The retired colonel from the Air Force Reserves helped carve their paths when she became the first nurse corps officer to command an Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron in 1986.

"Life was really exciting at that time because it was a new role and the prevailing view was that women were not suited to leadership – especially in a flying squadron," she said. "I was making a difference, taking care of troops and changing attitudes."

Pierce was also accomplishing a life-long goal on those missions, hundreds of feet in the air. The hard-charging flight nurse helped people like her father – a World War II veteran, who was wounded on Bataan and later captured by Japanese troops.

"My father did not receive proper medical attention and was basically left for dead," Pierce said. "He ultimately survived the POW camps but went through life-long trauma. His ordeal definitely inspired me to choose nursing, because I wanted to make sure other servicemembers received the care they deserve."

She is still motivated by this goal and continues to pioneer breakthroughs today. Pierce is the principal investigator for several ongoing studies focusing on military women's health, post-deployment physical and emotional health and retention.

"I love my work, because servicemembers are such a dedicated group of people," she said. "They volunteer for some of the world's most dangerous jobs and manage to stay committed despite the hardships and sacrifice. Understanding their experiences

underlies my research as well as my desire to educate future scientists and scholars to carry this important work forward.”