

# WOMEN KICKING GLASS

**Celebrating a history of Norwich University and Vermont College women destroying barriers.**

STORY BY ZACK BENNETT

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Norwich University's founder Captain Alden Partridge was an advocate for women's education, but it took 155 years for it to happen.

When Captain Partridge founded the American Literary, Scientific and Military Academy in 1819, he created a progressive—and controversial—liberal arts curriculum that included modern languages, political science, engineering, agriculture and military science. Equally radical, Partridge advocated for women to be allowed to attend institutions of higher education.

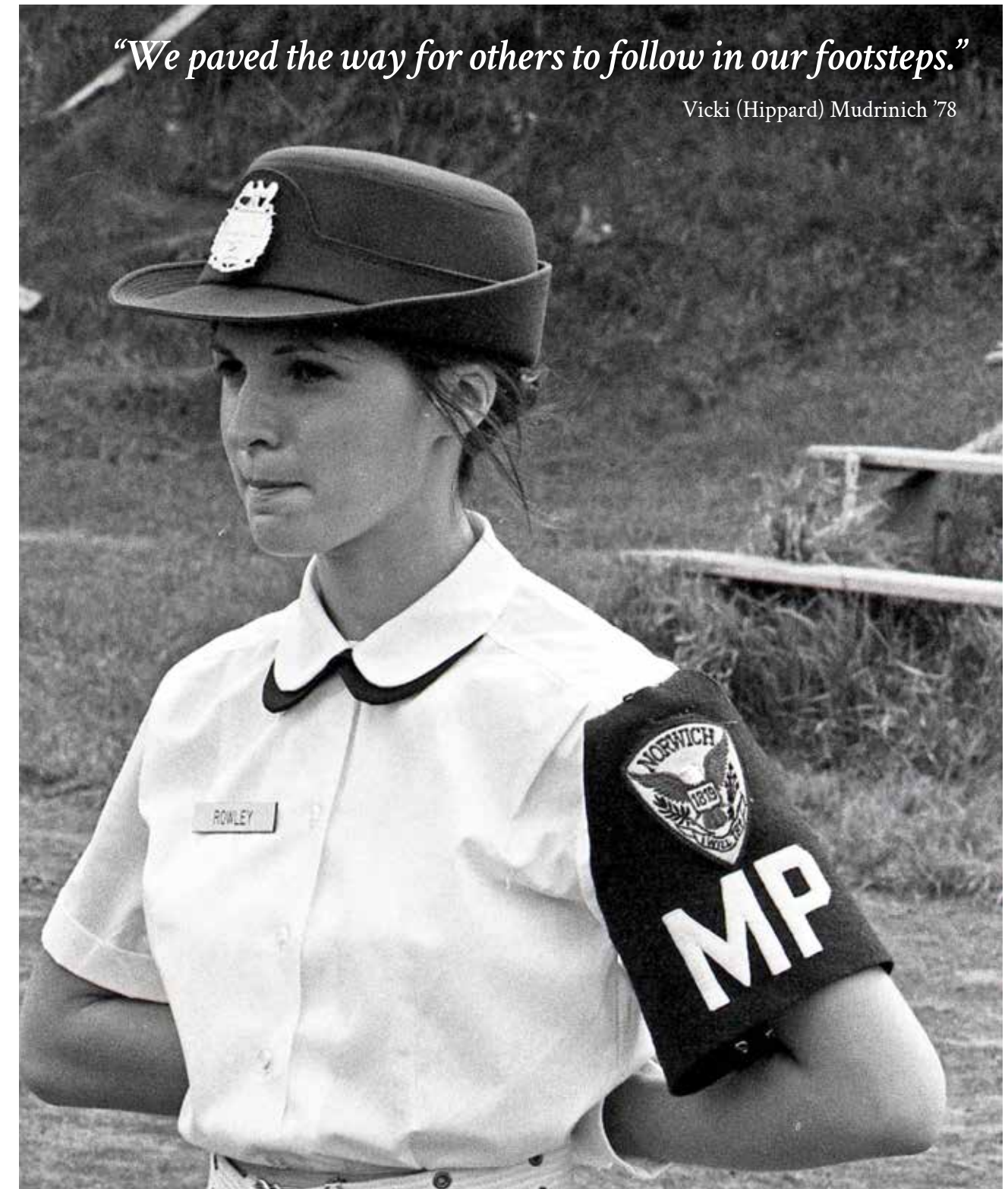
In the first half of the 19th century, the general public's attitude was that there was little need for women to be educated, especially at the college level. Partridge recognized the value and need to improve women's access to educational opportunities. As early as the 1820s he offered his support to the Middletown Female Seminary in Middletown, CT. The boarding school for young women offered "every useful and ornamental branch of education" and was a forerunner to what Partridge envisioned, and later attempted to replicate at Norwich.



In the 1830s, Oberlin College in Ohio, Wesleyan College in Georgia, Stephens College in Missouri, and Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts were among the first to offer higher education to women. In 1935 Partridge published a prospectus publicizing a seminary in Norwich, Vermont for young ladies. It advertised that women would be allowed to participate in some of the Norwich University classes and lectures cadets attended. Unfortunately, this revolutionary proposal did not generate adequate public interest, and plans for a female seminary at Norwich were abandoned.

While Partridge's seminary for women did not come to fruition, he supported the establishment of Newbury Seminary, a coed institution founded in 1834 in Newbury, VT. In time a portion of the school moved to Massachusetts and became the School of Theology at Boston University. After the Civil War, another portion of the Newbury school branched off to Montpelier and became known as the Montpelier Seminary and eventually Vermont Junior College.

During the 1940s Vermont Junior College admitted both men and women. With cultural shifts in post-WWII America, young women began setting their sights on professional careers. In 1953 Vermont Junior College became an all-women's institution offering two-year programs in subjects such as secretarial science and nursing. In 1958 it was renamed Vermont College.



Lynn (Rowley) Davis '79, Military Police Company

*"We paved the way for others to follow in our footsteps."*

Vicki (Hippard) Mudrinich '78





The "original eight" in 1974 comprised four freshmen and four upperclassmen, who were their cadre.

With just 12 miles separating the schools, Norwich University and Vermont College had a close relationship, as did their students. Vermont College women regularly attended dances and other social events at Norwich, resulting in many marriages between VC and NU students. As they entered the 1970s, both schools faced declining student enrollment. The emergence of community colleges eroded interest in Vermont College. Norwich's enrollment was impacted by a trend toward co-education and anti-military sentiment in the wake of the Vietnam era. A merger of the two institutions was proposed to create efficiency, improve academic programs, and extend the existing cooperation between the schools.

*"In May 1974 the Board of Trustees approved a proposal allowing the housing of 4-year female students on the Northfield campus and an effort be made during the ensuing years to integrate them into the corps system."*

The agreement was signed in January 1972, and with that, Norwich became a two-campus institution. Vermont College was to retain its name and operate as a civilian division for women, while Norwich would be a residential campus for men offering "male military training and a Corps of Cadets."

Women enrolled in two-year programs at Vermont College could now take classes toward a four-year degree at NU. The result was Norwich's dramatic transformation into a co-educational institution with civilian students learning alongside the traditional Corps of Cadets. Each day, students were bussed between the Montpelier and Northfield campuses for classes, social events, and athletics. Before long, the plan to keep male cadets and female civilians living on separate campuses was revisited. In 1973 a group of students petitioned President Loring Hart to be allowed to live on the Northfield campus and join the Corps of Cadets.

*Excerpt from the Norwich University Women Kicking Glass Oral History Project. This publication was created to mark the 50th anniversary of women living on the Norwich Campus and joining the NU Corps of Cadets. This HERstory shares experiences of Norwich alumnae, as well as those of Vermont College alumnae prior to the 1972 merger. To purchase your copy, visit [alumni.norwich.edu/womenkickingglassmerch#order](http://alumni.norwich.edu/womenkickingglassmerch#order).*

The landmark Title IX Act of 1972 furthered the argument for women to be allowed in the Corps. The federal law prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. This legislation had a profound impact on the integration of women into American military schools. In 1973 the University of North Georgia and Virginia Tech were the first senior military colleges to accept women into the Corps of Cadets.

President Hart embraced Title IX, and with two of the six senior military colleges opening their doors to women, he supported the Vermont College women's request to do the same. In May 1974 the Board of Trustees approved a proposal allowing "the housing of 4-year female students on the Northfield campus and an effort be made during the ensuing years to integrate them into the corps system."

President Hart reached out to current Vermont College students and women who had been admitted to Norwich for the fall of 1974. "This year we are accepting women in the Norwich University Corps of Cadets," he wrote. "The Corps, which is the backbone of the military segment of the University, is, in effect, a self-governing student body within a military framework. As a member of the Corps you would be expected to conform to the rules and regulations under which it operates, and to wear the Norwich uniform during regular school hours and on certain ceremonial occasions."

In August 1974, 155 years after Captain Partridge founded the institution, 71 women moved into Gerard Hall on the Northfield campus. Some were incoming freshmen in a four-year degree program. Others had been enrolled in a two-year program at Vermont College and were now pursuing a four-year degree. Among them were eight women, four upperclassmen and four incoming freshmen, who formed the first female cohort in the NU Corps of Cadets.



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### THE "BUS SOCIETY"

When Norwich University and Vermont College initially merged, a "bus society" formed as students travelled between the Northfield and Montpelier campuses. Joining them was academic advisor and Spanish professor **Nadine Nunez-de-Cela**, a Montpelier resident. Nunez advocated for fully integrating women into Norwich by placing them on campus instead of forcing them to commute.

For economic and practical reasons, President Hart endorsed this proposal. An ad-hoc committee of students, cadets, faculty, and staff selected Nunez-de-Cela as Norwich's first dean of women, assistant commandant of cadets to coordinate women's campus life in partnership with the Commandant's Office. In a 1974 article in *The Guidon*, Nunez-de-Cela said she saw the presence of women making Norwich better – better academically because of diversity of opinion, better socially, and better in matters surrounding the Corps. She was described as "very realistic" in her views surrounding the University's community, and as someone who wanted to "see what we already have at Norwich utilized, broadened, and developed for the benefit of all."

### WOMEN JOIN THE RANKS

Among the 71 women who moved into Gerard Hall that fall was **Diane (Gionet) Halliday '75**. She was one of two upperclassmen who became cadre and mentors to Norwich's first-ever female cadets. The group was called L (Lima) Detachment considering there were too few women to form a full company. Once L Detachment was on campus, *The Guidon* described Nunez-de-Cela as hoping to see "All these divergent groups respect, understand, and cooperate with each other for the

general success of the entire Norwich community. This is the spirit of rapport that has to prevail if Norwich is to survive this transitional period."

Freshmen **Irene (Nadeau) Mills '78** and **Vicki (Hippard) Mudrinich '78** were two of the young women in Lima Detachment. "You have to prove yourself every day, that you can do a good job," recalls Mills. She quickly proved that she could and was awarded Regimental Rook of the Month as a member of the Regimental Military Police (MP) Company. In a *Guidon* article surrounding this accomplishment, it was written that "Miss Nadeau's accomplishment was on a greater scale considering that MP company is a much larger company than Lima. Thus, competition was steeper." Mills would continue her dedicated work while on campus and was additionally recognized with the AFROTC Leadership Ribbon through the Arnold Air Society.

"It may have been a gamble on the part of the administration – and we were definitely an experiment – but it worked," says Mudrinich. "We paved the way for others to follow in our footsteps." She saw the military as a career where "Opportunities for women were promising, and where the pay was equal to that of men." She attended Norwich in pursuit of her career goals, and



Diane (Gionet) Halliday '75, first woman to graduate from Norwich and first to commission in the U.S. Air Force.



Irene (Nadeau) Mills '78 during commencement on The Hill.

a 1974 "News from Norwich" article quoted her as saying, "Each girl must prove herself in an environment that is downright hostile for a while. The pressure is on all sides to prove that she can perform as well as the male cadets in every phase of education and military training."

Mudrinich proved herself time and time again. She, like Mills, was a member of the Military Police Company, and additionally earned the rank of captain in HQ Company. Throughout all of it, she maintained an A average in the classroom and held the highest GPA in the Corps during her senior year. In recognition of her efforts, she was awarded the Distinguished GMC Cadet Ribbon for her performance in AFROTC.

Though the institution had only become totally open to women in the past few years, Norwich was beginning to draw international attention. **Sussan (Shahin) Coley**

*"It may have been a gamble on the part of the administration – and we were definitely an experiment – but it worked."*

'83 was one of 27 Iranian Imperial Navy recruits when she began at the University in August of 1979. The Shah of Iran at the time saw value in increasing female representation in his country's armed forces and offered pathways to American higher education for recruits. Coley remembers sentiments expressed by fellow Iranians under the Shah's initiative. "We were like celebrities, and because of that, continuously our commanders were encouraging us to watch what we said, what we did. Our uniform was impeccable. Our hair, every single hair had to be tied in place. It was all perfect. Yes, it was very, very high pressure, but I guess all of us knew that," she says.

The political landscape shifted dramatically with the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. In April of the next year, all Iranian diplomats and students were



ordered to leave the U.S. within 48 hours. Coley was forced to return to Iran, only to realize that living under the oppressive Khomeini regime was unsustainable. Her determination to return to Norwich sparked a movie-like sequence of events that involved befriending passport employees and pretending to be a maid. With the support of the Norwich community, aided by Vermont Senator Patrick Leahy, Coley returned to The Hill nearly a year later to complete her studies.

While a majority of the student population is involved in the Corps of Cadets, not all choose military careers, instead opting for the public, private, or non-profit sectors. **Tina (Judd) Christiano '83** was one of those who chose a civilian's path after her time in the Corps. "I was raised by a single mom who instilled in me the confidence to stretch limits and break barriers," she says. "She was always encouraging me to venture to places where women weren't visible, so I was more than intrigued when Norwich opened their doors to women."

Her new experience at Norwich provided a platform for monumental growth. Christiano eventually built a successful company surrounding the manufacturing industry and is now owner and CEO of Secondary Solutions Inc., a multi-million-dollar business whose employee base is built of 75% women. "I have been referred to as intimidating, direct, and honest," says Christiano. "Getting doors opened took plenty of prying and pushing, but determination was in my corner."

When **Wendy (Sampson) Bluemmert '89** arrived on campus, she was prepared for a military lifestyle. She arrived on The Hill with an AFROTC scholarship, but quickly learned that she did not have confirmation of continued funding after her first year. Bluemmert wasted no time enlisting in the Army National Guard and spent her summer training. Commandant Anthony Carbone '58 caught wind of this, and personally called the Army requesting that she return to college. He said they would find a solution to her financial problems and kept his word.

Now back at Norwich, she was in a world that did not share many similarities with her hometown of Union,



Vicki (Hippard) Mudrinich '78



Wendy (Sampson) Bluemmert '89

New Jersey. "Parents put a lot of pressure on Black kids to go to college in the 1980s," she says. "Most of my friends went to HBCUs [historically Black colleges and universities]. But I chose Norwich and there was no diversity." She remembers seeing only eight other Black students in her class on arrival day; by graduation, she would be the only one remaining. Bluemmert dove into Corps life and her studies, driven by the same determination that led her to the National Guard when she could not afford school. In 1986, Bluemmert etched her name into Norwich history as the third woman and first Black woman to earn the rank of Rook 5, leading freshmen Rooks through their first year of Corps training.

Many who have walked The Hill have shared Bluemmert's drive and determination. When **Jana (Hurst) Raymond '90** was asked why she wanted to fly, her answer was "why not?" Unfortunately, this was a question Raymond was forced to tackle repeatedly when military recruiters were slow to encourage her desire for flight and service. One Navy recruiter, however, saw something special in her and assisted her in the application process for Broadened Opportunity for Office Selection and Training (BOOST). If she was successful in training, she would be guaranteed a four-year NROTC scholarship. The daunting statistic, though, was that the program had a 50% fail rate. "Every position I wanted, from air crew, to avionics electrician, to diver, was closed to women," she says. "I ended up going in non-rated, with the assumption that I would finish BOOST and get my scholarship."

Her assumption was right. She was in the 50% that completed BOOST and was accepted into Norwich University. "At Norwich, I always felt supported," says Raymond. "When I told Bruce Stewart [admissions director] I wanted to fly in the Navy, he didn't look at me like I was crazy. When I told Don Wallace [engineering professor] I wanted to double major in math and mechanical engineering, he told me how I could do it."

**Tracey (Jones) Poirier '96** was yet another driven young woman when she first walked onto campus. In her studies, she majored in both English and communications. Her work was recognized with a Rhodes Scholarship, making her the first-ever – and to date, only – Norwich student to receive the world's oldest graduate scholarship. "Norwich teaches us a lot of things," says Poirier. "I think the most



important is the ability to simply take action, even in the absence of guidance. We aren't ones to be idle or come up with reasons for why something can't be done." She remembers finding a way to push forward, even when the odds might have been daunting. "No excuse, SSG," was probably the most used phrase of my Rook year. It didn't take a lot to figure out that no one wanted your excuses, they just wanted to know how you were going to fix it."

Poirier was promoted to brigadier general in 2023 and became the first female general officer in the Vermont Army National Guard. "I doubt anyone who knew us as Rooks would have believed my roommate Kim Hamilton '96 and I would end up generals, but Norwich women always seem to be able to defy expectations."



Civilian women at Norwich in 1980.

### CIVILIANS ON THE HILL

Norwich's women have been defying expectations for decades, regardless of their field. **Karen (Rowe) Broadmeadow '83** was a classmate of Christiano who arrived at Norwich as a civilian through Vermont College, where she earned an associate degree. "My most enduring memory of Norwich is its sense of community," she says. "The camaraderie formed within various

communities, including the civilian student population, Dewey Hall residents, and fellow business students, laid the foundation for lasting friendships."

She married classmate and current Norwich University President, LtGen John J. Broadmeadow '83, USMC (Ret), and his military career would take the family around the world. The foundation she formed at Norwich allowed her to excel in her roles, even if they changed every few years. She has worked for Fortune 500 companies, HBCUs, and in MCI WorldCom's Corporate Employee Relations. Outside of her professional career, she has given much of her time and efforts to volunteer causes like the Carlsbad Education Foundation Board of Directors in California, the Joint Spouses Conference in Hawaii, and the 2017 Navy-Marine Corps Ball Committee where she raised more than \$450,000 for the Navy-Marine Corps Relief Society. "Being an advocate for military families, especially during wartime, can be a challenge but also offers deep rewards," she says. The Department of the Navy recognized her efforts in 2020 when she received the Distinguished Public Service Award.



Beth (Carson) Veach '93, graduate of Norwich's Adult Learning Program.

**Beth (Carson) Veach '92** has held the Norwich spirit since even before her time at the institution. Her father passed when she was only five, and her mother became the first-ever female deputy sheriff in Lorain County, Ohio, as she now worked to support her family. The family adopted the song, "I Fought The Law, and The Law Won," as something like a theme song. Veach would eventually enter

the workforce in a male-dominated field, just like her mother, when she was one of two women in Columbus, Ohio, to become an investment banker.

Sometime later in life, Veach eventually moved to Vermont. Her husband came home with an advertisement he had torn out of a newspaper which highlighted Vermont College of Norwich University's adult distance learning. "He said, 'Beth, you know, you said you wanted to finish your degree. Do you think you'd want to look at this?'" Veach remembers. "My first reaction was, 'Oh my gosh, these are the schools that advertise on the back of a pack of matches, right?' But then I started researching and I was so impressed." She was surprised that this institution was right in her backyard. "I got to know about the military part of the school, how old the school was, the rich history – Norwich really has stayed true to their history," she says. "I was shocked that a school that had achieved so much and turned out so many successful graduates, that was on the cutting edge a few years earlier allowing women in the Corps, was right here. I couldn't be happier that it turned out that way."

Much like Veach, **Michele Turner M'12** pursued her degree online; though, unlike when Veach enrolled in distance learning, online education was no longer seen as potentially dubious. Turner garnered plenty of experience throughout her career, working in high-level roles at places like Microsoft and Amazon, but wanted to further her education through a master's degree and found the online format to be her best option. "I decided that since I've been doing this business continuity thing for decades, why don't I get credit more on the educational level," she says. She began scouting schools and found a couple, "But what made Norwich stand out was that when I looked through the information, it wasn't just structured as a checklist of academic requirements, there was really a sense of family. A sense of 'We will do this together.'" She remembers thinking that "If I'm going to get it, I'm going to get it here."



### INTO THE FUTURE

Norwich University was one of the first senior military colleges to admit women. This feat was accomplished two years prior to the federal service academies accepting females, and 25 years before Virginia Military College admitted women by Supreme Court order. Today, the tradition of strong women at Norwich continues. Approximately 30% of undergraduate students are female and nearly 20% of the Corps is comprised of females. The women that fill the ranks – those like **2024-25 Regimental Commander Sophia M. Righthouse '25**, the seventh woman in this role, and astronaut hopeful **Amrutaa Vibho '26**, a highly touted academic in the Corps – continue forging the path that many others began in the early '70s. Norwich University has been innovating and a driving force in the creation of leaders since Captain Alden Partridge founded his academy in 1819. With a 50-year track record of trailblazing, accomplished alumnae, and current students like Righthouse, Vibho, and countless others, Norwich women will continue to "kick glass" on The Hill and beyond for generations to come.

*You can purchase WKG merchandise, read profiles of trailblazing women, and support the Women Kicking Glass Scholarship by visiting [alumni.norwich.edu/womenkickingglass](https://alumni.norwich.edu/womenkickingglass), or by contacting the Norwich Office of Alumni Engagement at (802) 485-2100 or [alumni@norwich.edu](mailto:alumni@norwich.edu).*