

## Trying on a New Uniform

*Active-duty nursing offers a less traditional career.*

By Angela M. Martinelli, PhD, RN, CAPT

Gone are the days when all nurses wore stiff, starched whites. My nursing uniform is now a military one, and it identifies me as an officer of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, an elite group of medical professionals whose jobs are anything but traditional.

While most nurses are familiar with the career opportunities offered by the army, navy, marine corps, and air force, fewer are aware of the options presented by the smaller uniformed services, such as the commissioned corps—the country's largest and only federal public health service. According to the Commissioned Corps Web site ([www.usphs.gov](http://www.usphs.gov)), more than 6,000 officers serve throughout the federal government in agencies as diverse as the Indian Health Service (part of the Department of Health and Human Services) and the Department of Homeland Security. Commissioned corps nurses perform traditional clinical services as well as conduct research, develop national policy, and review and approve drugs and medical products.

I began my active-duty nursing career at age 31 when, after receiving my master's degree, I joined the Air Force Nurse Corps. From the air force, I transferred to the army and then to the Commissioned Corps.

Active-duty nursing is a good fit for individuals who want to serve their country and stay with the same employer while still enjoying mobility. Missions, locations, and duty options vary among the services. To find out which service best matches your career goals, see *Online Resources*, at left.

There are some factors to consider about a career in uniform.

**Education and qualifications.** Some services enlist nurses with associate's degrees, but they all require officers to have a bachelor's degree in nursing. Nurses with an advanced degree can rapidly progress in rank. For those seeking an advanced degree, the military branches and the commissioned corps may help pay for education and training. Joining any uniformed service grants benefits under the G.I. Bill, which covers a portion of education costs, and some services offer full-time, long-term training and education.

According to its Web site, to join the commissioned corps, nurses must be U.S. citizens younger than 44 years of age able to pass a physical examination. They must also have a "have a current, unrestricted professional license (if applicable)."

**Benefits.** I've found a major advantage of nursing in uniform to be the ability to move up the career ladder and transfer among services without losing benefits. Service benefits are competitive and offer some advantages not found in standard practice. Nurses in uniform are paid in accordance with the military system, meaning that everyone receives "basic pay"—the main component of an individual's salary—as well as "special pay" for specific qualifications, such as operating room or anaesthesia specialties, or events, such as overseas duty or hazardous assignments. In addition, nurses receive

### Online Resources

The following Web sites offer information on nursing careers and the benefits of serving in the uniformed services.

Air Force: [www.airforce.com/careers/healthcare/careers.php](http://www.airforce.com/careers/healthcare/careers.php)

Army: <http://armynursecorps.amedd.army.mil>

Navy: <http://navy.com/careers/officer/healthcare/nursing>

Public Health Service Commissioned Corps: [www.usphs.gov](http://www.usphs.gov)

Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, Graduate School of Nursing: [www.usuhs.mil/gsn](http://www.usuhs.mil/gsn)

Military pay: [www.defenselink.mil/militarypay/index.html](http://www.defenselink.mil/militarypay/index.html)

G.I. Bill: [www.gibill.va.gov](http://www.gibill.va.gov)

allowances for food, housing, and other needs, and most of these allowances are not taxed. Some nurses may also collect extra pay based on their specialties. In every service, nurses receive standard military benefits, including free medical and dental care, 30 days of paid vacation each year, and generous retirement benefits.

**Challenges.** You may be called upon to respond to national and international emergencies on little notice. Uniformed nursing demands flexibility in travel, duty locations, and the services provided. For example, one responsibility of the Commissioned Corps is to provide medical services to underserved populations, some of which are in remote, isolated locations in the United States and abroad.

Active-duty experiences can be life-changing. For example, when I was in the air force, I participated in an exercise known as REFORGER (short for RETURN of FORces to GERmany). Conducted annually during the Cold War, REFORGER involved airlifting thousands of forces from bases in the United States to forward bases in Germany. Once there, the soldiers

took part in field training exercises. The nurses received field training as well, and the knowledge they gained of nursing during combat is being used today in Iraq and Afghanistan. Active-duty nurses get a front-row seat to history. While I was in the army, I cared for soldiers wounded in Operation Desert Storm in 1991. More recently, I was deployed to Ground Zero in New York City soon after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks to care for rescue workers and survivors. In October 2001, I was sent to care for those affected by anthrax in Washington, D.C.

For nurses who are looking for an alternative to ordinary work, a life in uniform may be the cure for the common career. t

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