

Better late than never

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Single again, Blake needed a job. "I couldn't type, so I joined the Los Angeles Police Department," she says.

Then she laughs at herself, acknowledging that she had chosen two such masculine careers, the military and police work. "I walked a beat in downtown L.A.," she says with pride.

In 1949, the United States began recruiting ex-GIs for the Reserve. Blake, along with 100 male police officers, signed on.

This was the beginning of her troubles with the LAPD. Her superiors ordered her to resign her military commission, saying that a female police officer connected to the military would bring disgrace to the department.

"There was a homosexual stigma on military women," Blake explains. "I refused to resign. Why should I resign?" She frowns. "I hadn't done anything wrong, and I was not homosexual."

During the year and a half that she continued in that position, she was unable to get any kind of promotion. "The men of the department felt that women should be beneath men, both literally and figuratively."

Then, to her surprise, Blake involuntarily was recalled to active duty in the Army Criminal Investigation Division. Her assignment was to investigate Women's Army Corps members for homosexuality.

"I had to follow orders, no matter how I felt about them," she says. "I did my job, and I did it well."

Blake did her job so well that she was sent to Japan in 1953 to investigate the 300 members of the Tokyo Women's Army Corps Detachment. "I was placed in a horrible position. I was investigating old friends and felt like I was betraying them."

Women who were found to be homosexual were separated from the military with "dishonorable" or "other than honorable" discharges. "They were cast out from society," Blake explains. "It was horrible for them," and I can see the memory is still horrible for her.

Yet, she felt compelled to follow orders. "I'm an honest soul, and I did my job to the best of my abilities," she asserts. "It didn't take much to investigate in those days."

By the end of that assignment, Blake found herself under investigation for homosexuality. The accusation didn't stick, but her military career was soon over.

She returned to her job with the LAPD, where she was promoted to sergeant in 1967 working in forgery/bunco. No woman ever had been promoted above the rank of sergeant.

Out of 5,000 officers in the LAPD, Blake estimates 130 were women. Women's jobs in the department were very limited, even though women like her were allowed to carry guns. In fact, Blake herself was an expert marksman.

During that time, she was elected president of the Police Women's Association and got an inside look at management. She saw that women systematically were discriminated against in opportunities and pay.



Fanchon Blake taking aim during her Army years

By the early '70s, feminism was revolutionizing American life. Gender-based discrimination was finally illegal, and Blake knew it.

She became an active thorn in management's side, agitating for change within the police department. "I had to fight for everything I got, and I didn't get much," she says.

Blake wrote letters of complaint and spoke up at meetings. "My life was hell."

Then, in 1973, she filed an official sex discrimination complaint with the Federal Commission for Equal Opportunity. "I knew my life was on the line," she recalls.

"Women just didn't do those things in the LAPD."

As soon as the suit was filed, Blake's phone was tapped, and she was tailed by cops from internal affairs. "I was in fear for my life," she says.

"The men in the department hated my guts," she says, recalling the terrible strain. "Nobody would

talk to me—no one."

In October 1973, Blake had a stroke on duty. No one would help her. She was not allowed to leave her work to go for help.

By the time she finished her shift and got medical help, she was blind in one eye and numb on her right side. She recovered from the stroke and retired from the police force in February 1974.

All this time, Fanchon Blake still thought she was straight. She had married three times, trying to find a man she could be happy with.

She had a son, which she thought at the time proved she was heterosexual. She tried to make herself appear more feminine than was her nature.

"I even went to the Powers School of Modeling to eliminate my masculine swag-

ger," Blake laughs, "but they asked me to leave." I can attest that her handsome swagger is still intact.

"All this time, it didn't dawn on me that I was a lesbian," she recalls. But one day, her angry third husband shouted at her, calling her a "queer bitch."

Blake was surprised at her own reaction. Instead of being furious with the insult, she thought about what a strange thing that was for him to say.

She recalled how homosexuality had been a recurring theme in her life.

She knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what. She



Blake at 80

over in Edinburgh, Scotland, where Blake met a lovely Scottish woman who proved Ralph's point.

"It was spectacular!" she declares, recalling her first time having sex with a woman. "And there was no going back."

At long last she came out in 1977 at the age of 56. "It was incredibly liberating," she smiles.

Blake made up for lost time and started going to gay bars and meeting women. One night when she was out dancing, she bumped into another policewoman.

"I asked her how many of us there were," Blake says, recalling all the bad old days. She has had a number of relationships with women since then.

Then, after six years, her lawsuit finally was settled.

She was awarded \$50,000, and the LAPD was forced to promote six women to lieutenant immediately, hire 1,800 more women and reassign women according to their qualifications.

Mayor Tom Bradley and City Councilor Patricia Russell threw a huge party for her. "The lawsuit had cost the city \$2 million, and when they lost, they threw me a party," she ponders.

Kimber Williams of Eugene's *Register-Guard* is writing a book about Blake's life. When I say what a fine movie her life would make, she laughs and says, "I admit I dream of Sigourney Weaver playing my part."

Her personal ad has brought just one reply, but she is eager to leave our interview to get back home and respond to the caller. "I don't want a one-night stand," she grins, "unless that's all I can get." ■

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All smiles the day she won her lawsuit

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