Simmons, 41, oldest brand-new soldier in Nevada Guard

By Sgt. 1st Class Erick Studenicka
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RENO – She's already pretty confident what nickname she will receive from the drill sergeants at basic training.

But the inevitable jokes and kidding are not likely to deter Rhonda Simmons in her quest to complete basic training and advanced individual training this spring and finally become a full-fledged soldier. Enlisting on Dec. 11, 2008, at age 41 years, 134 days, Simmons is the oldest initial female enlistee in Nevada National Guard history. She is set to complete her 88M truck driver military occupation training just weeks before her 42nd birthday, the maximum age allowed for initial enlistees under current Army regulations.

Simmons said she felt as if she had received a second chance on a lost opportunity when she heard about the 2006 Army regulation that extended the maximum age of a new enlistee from 40 to 42.

"I always had a desire to join the military, but then I got intimidated and was talked out of it in high school," said Simmons at her first-ever drill at the Reception Company. "Then I got married and had a son. My 40th birthday passed and I thought I would never get a chance to join the military.

"Then I was super-excited to hear the age limit was raised to 42. I couldn't get it out of my mind to finally join. Life has its detours – I wasn't going to run out of time with this opportunity."

Simmons left for basic training February 25 at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo. After basic, she will attend 88M advanced individual training before joining her assigned unit, the 593rd Transportation Company.

Simmons' military occupation will closely mirror her civilian employment. She has been a freight driver for United Parcel Service for five years and is probably right when she says the tasks at AIT will not be as difficult as putting 150-pound chains on her UPS tractor trailer, by herself, on Donner Summit during a snowstorm.

Sgt. Richard Samson of the Recruiting and Retention Battalion, who enlisted Simmons into the Guard, has no qualms about her completing her initial training and performing her duties with the 593rd.

"She might be the oldest initial recruit we've had, but the bottom line is, she is going to be a great asset to her unit and the Nevada Guard," Samson said. "She is physically fit and intelligent, and her civilian work background is a perfect fit for the 593rd."

Rhonda Simmons, 41, at her first Nevada Army Guard drill with the Reception Company on January 25, is the oldest initial female enlistee in Nevada National Guard history. She is set to complete advanced individual training in July and join the 593rd Transportation Company as a truck driver. *Photo: Sgt. 1st Class Erick Studenicka*

Simmons said she does have some "little fears" as she begins her Nevada Guard career, but the support of both her employer and family has helped her prepare for her foray into military life. She is married to architect Brady, and she has one son, Jonathan, 17.

"My son said 'You go, Mom!'" Simmons said. "Sometimes my family or co-workers will ask 'why now?' but they also realize I regretted not going into the military at an earlier age. Everyone supports my decision, and they are proud of my commitment."

The previous record for oldest female initial enlistee was held by Sgt. Oreana Henry of the Medical Detachment. Then-Pfc. Henry was 39 years, 353 days old when she enlisted in 2006 and 40 years, 210 days old when she completed all of her initial training in 2007.

Despite the fact she was the oldest female in her platoon, Henry sailed through basic training and recorded the highest physical fitness score in her company with 336 points on the extended scoring table.

When Simmons returns this summer as a full-fledged specialist, she promises to fit right in with the Nevada Guard crowd. She's a Harley-Davidson enthusiast and a member of the all-women's motorcycle club "The Desert Curves."

For now though, Simmons realizes it's time to leave the Harley in the garage and focus on her military training.

"It's going to be hard to keep up with the younger generation, but making it in the military has always been my desire," she said. ■