

Inspirational Women of Today



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Tammy Duckworth, Guardian of Freedom

During the 1960s and early 1970s, an estimated twenty-five thousand to one hundred thousand mixed-race children were born in Southeast Asia to American servicemen and native women. The men came to the region to fight in the Vietnam War. Most returned to the United States when their tour of duty ended, leaving their Asian families behind. Some servicemen remained in Asia rather than abandon their new families. But no matter the circumstances, life was not easy for Amerasian children. They were considered inferior and discriminated against. Some were sold into slavery, and others were forced to live as beggars on the streets. Even those whose fathers did not abandon them were mistreated. Tammy Duckworth was among the latter group. “I was not treated very well,” she admits. “The only biracial children that existed in Southeast Asia at the time were children of American servicemen and native women. That was not a positive background to have.”²²

An International Childhood

Ladda Tammy Duckworth was born on March 12, 1968, in Bangkok, Thailand, to Frank Duckworth, a US Army captain, and Lamai Sompornpairin, a Thai woman of Chinese descent. Tammy’s brother, Tom, was born two years later. Frank Duckworth was stationed in Thailand when he and Lamai met, fell in love, and wed. The only problem was the groom already had a wife and family in Virginia. Vowing to make things right, upon his military discharge, he went

back to Virginia to get a divorce, leaving his Asian family to live with their Thai relatives.

Tammy's relatives were quick to flaunt their superiority and belittle her appearance and tall stature. Worse still, they taunted her with the prospect that her father would never return. But one year later, he returned. He got a job in Bangkok as a communications expert. The Duckworths moved into their own apartment and lived a comfortable life. Tammy went to kindergarten in a Thai school, where she learned to read and write Thai, her first language. In the next few years, she would also become fluent and literate in English and Indonesian.

Tammy's father did not stay in any job very long. Nor did the family live in one place for an extended period. In 1974 he took a job in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, moving the family there. At the time, Cambodia was engaged in a bloody civil war. In fact, the children often sat on the roof of their home watching bombs light up the sky. Their parents told them the explosives

Duckworth did not have an ideal childhood. Life was not easy for Amerasian children. They were considered inferior and often discriminated against.



were beautiful fireworks. Nevertheless, the danger was real. Two weeks before Cambodia fell to rebels in 1975, the family returned to Bangkok. A year later, when Tammy's father got a job managing an expatriate community in Jakarta, Indonesia, they moved again. They remained in Indonesia for seven years, which was the longest period that the family had ever lived in one place. But when Frank's employers sold the community to another company, he lost his job. Unable to find suitable work in Indonesia, he moved the family to Singapore. However, he did not find a job there either, and the family soon ran out of money. They returned to Bangkok in 1984, but their circumstances did not improve. Believing life would be better in the United States, the Duckworths decided to move to Honolulu. Tammy's mother, however, was not a US citizen and could not enter the country legally without the proper paperwork. So when the plane took off, she stayed behind.

Life in Hawaii

Without her mother, it became Tammy's job to care for the family. This was not easy. When they arrived in Honolulu, they were broke. Without the help of social services, they might have become homeless and food insecure, which is why as a US senator, Duckworth is a staunch defender of social safety net programs. Indeed, Tammy and her brother depended on subsidized school lunches to survive; nonetheless, they often went to bed hungry.

Making matters worse, their father's lack of employment dragged on. So, sixteen-year-old Tammy took on multiple jobs to support the family. Each day after school, she handed out flyers to tourists on the beach, earning \$3.35 an hour for her efforts, and she dodged traffic in busy intersections selling roses to commuters. She also scavenged the beach for coins and bills that beachgoers dropped. And she and some local boys challenged tourists to beach volleyball games, convincing the mainlanders to

bet on the game, which Tammy and her buddies invariably won. “Hustling for cash,” she confesses, “became a way of life during my teenage years in Hawaii.”²³

“Hustling for cash became a way of life during my teenage years in Hawaii.”²³

—Tammy Duckworth

In this way, she kept the family fed and the bills paid. But between her jobs, going to school, being a member of the school’s varsity track team, and studying, she was overwhelmed. Meanwhile, after more than six months, Tammy’s mother finally gained permission to legally enter the United States. Almost as soon as she

arrived, she took up sewing to earn money, and she pressured her husband to work as a doorman for tips. Her presence eased Tammy’s burden, allowing the teen to focus her energy on graduating from high school and going to college.

In 1985 Tammy enrolled in the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Right before the first semester began, her father got a good job as a federal food inspector in Virginia, and the family moved there. This time Tammy stayed behind. She did well in college. Between student loans, grants, and a part-time job working as a waitress in a Thai restaurant, she was able to pay tuition and support herself. She explains, “Coming from nothing, this really felt like something.”²⁴

Duckworth earned her bachelor’s degree in 1989. Inspired by the American ambassadors she witnessed helping refugees in Southeast Asia, she dreamed of becoming a diplomat. A graduate degree in international affairs could help make this happen. So she applied to and was accepted by the George Washington University in Washington, DC.

Finding Her True Calling

Duckworth moved to Washington, DC, in 1989, beginning the next stage of her life. Just as she had done in the past, she worked while attending school. In the spring of 1990, she was laid off from her most recent job. A friend suggested she join the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) and attend basic training camp for the

Women Airforce Service Pilots

Tammy Duckworth was not the first woman to pilot a military aircraft. Women pilots have a long history in the armed forces. Over one thousand civilian women, known as Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs), served as noncombatant pilots during World War II. They were the first women to fly US military aircraft. They piloted every type of aircraft and in total flew more than 60 million miles (97 million km). They ferried troops and supplies in and out of combat zones and served as flight instructors and test pilots. In fact, in 1944, WASP test pilot Ann Baumgartner was the first woman ever to pilot a jet aircraft.

Thirty-eight pilots were killed while serving as WASPs. But because the WASPs were not considered an official part of the military, those killed while serving were not entitled to military burial rights. Nor did surviving WASPs receive veteran benefits.

When World War II ended, the WASPs were disbanded. In 1977 surviving WASPs were finally granted military status, which entitled them to the same benefits as other veterans. They were further recognized in 2009 when all WASPs, both living and dead, were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for their service.

summer. Duckworth thought it would be a good way to save some money; plus, she liked the idea of the physical challenge. “That’s how I made the best decision of my life—a decision that started me down the path to my true calling,”²⁵ she says.

She spent the next eight weeks in Fort Knox, Kentucky. Even though she was extremely fit, basic training was a challenge. But she loved it. She loved the idea of serving her country. And she appreciated that soldiers rose through the ranks based on their ability and experience rather than their racial or economic background. To fulfill ROTC requirements, she continued attending training camps for the next two years. In 1991 she met her future husband, Bryan Bowsbey, a fellow cadet, at training camp. Like Duckworth, he was older than most of the other cadets, who were almost all undergraduate students. Bowsbey had previously served as an enlisted soldier in the army and was a member of the Maryland National Guard when he enrolled in college and ROTC.

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www.nadiasinitiative.org

Nadia's Initiative is an organization Nadia Murad founded to fight human trafficking and the genocide of the Yazidi people. The website offers information about Murad's life, the work she does, the Yazidi people, and the work of the organization

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