



Railsplitter Obituary



Jill Morgenthaler

31 March 1954 – 23 February 2019

Jill Morgenthaler, a retired Army colonel who was Illinois' homeland security chief under former Gov. Rod Blagojevich and a 2008 Democratic challenger to U.S. Rep. Peter Roskam, died on a scuba trip Saturday in the Dominican Republic.

Ms. Morgenthaler, 64, who was awarded the Bronze Star for leadership in Iraq and assigned to U.N. peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, also was a popular speaker.

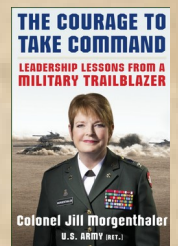
She was “a true American hero who touched thousands of women through her leadership book” “The Courage to Take Command,” her brother Jeffrey Morgenthaler wrote on Facebook.

Ms. Morgenthaler was in the Dominican Republic to celebrate the birthday of her husband, Kerry Chambers, according to her friend Maureen Cunningham, who described her as a master diver.

“She had finished the scuba dive, and she was on the boat, and she said she didn't feel well, and she fainted,” Cunningham said. “They could not resuscitate her.”

Ms. Morgenthaler had had a pulmonary embolism about 15 years ago, according to her daughter Jamie. “We suspect that may be what happened while she was diving,” she said.

Ms. Morgenthaler's daughter described her as “absolutely fearless. She could walk into the flames of hell and be excited about it. She had no doubt about herself or the ones she loved and just did life the way she wanted to.”





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“She came into politics as a political outsider who had amazing experience in the real world, and her enthusiasm inspired women. Her strength gave them the courage to believe that they could do anything,” said Kitty Kurth, Ms. Morgenthaler’s former spokeswoman. After writing her book and becoming a speaker, she “just never stopped achieving her dreams and helping other people understand they could achieve their dreams.”

“And she was a badass,” Kurth said. “She was a badass with a good heart.”

During Saddam Hussein’s trial, Ms. Morgenthaler ran the media center. In her book, she described a staredown as he was leaving court.

“Even though I was wearing a long-sleeved blouse and long skirt, he looked at me as if I were a bimbo just waiting to serve him,” she wrote. “I stared right back at him and straightened my spine while planting my combat boots firmly into the dirt.

“Finally, he broke eye contact and snapped out a command in Arabic that caused the guards to burst out laughing.”

She asked what he said and wrote that they told her: “Kill her.”

The daughter of a Marine, Ms. Morgenthaler grew up in different spots around the country, went to Penn State University and the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Cunningham said.

She served 30 years in the Army, where “she was one of the first women to enter an experimental class for women in the U.S. Army ROTC and train as an equal with men” at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, according to her website.

Ms. Morgenthaler described the lonely and sometimes harrowing experience of being a “first” in a speech. “In that experimental bootcamp, there were 83 women heading to a military post of 50,000 men,” she said. The men slung obscenities at them. One knocked her aside.

After boot camp, she said she was ordered, over her protests, to appear in a “Miss Foxhole 1975” pageant. She strode onstage in a blue, cotton dress — the only dress she had — after other women contestants who’d danced and sung for 5,000 hooting men. She said they started grabbing her legs and commenting on her body: “I had gone from being a member of the squad to just a bunch of body parts. I stepped to the front of the stage, and I flipped them the bird. I flipped off 5,000 men. And then I did an about-face. I marched off the stage.”

A male soldier in a dress wound up being crowned, she said, and “there never was a Miss Foxhole 1976.”

Ms. Morgenthaler was the first female military intelligence commander on the border between North Korea and South Korea, the first woman to be battalion commander of the 88th Division and the first female brigade



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commander of the 84th Division, according to the Pritzker Military Museum & Library. She was awarded a Humanitarian Service Medal for her work with Kosovar refugees, Cunningham said.

While a junior officer in Korea, she found “the same men who fell all over themselves to sweet-talk me at night would try to avoid saluting me during the day.” She told one recalcitrant GI: “You’ve forgotten how to salute. Well, that’s OK because I can show you.

“I made him salute over and over and over again,” she wrote. Word spread “that you probably should just salute Lt. Morgenthaler or she’d waste your whole afternoon.”

After retiring, she served with the Army Reserve and helped coordinate the emergency response after the 2008 shootings at Northern Illinois University that killed five students, according to Kurth. She also worked at Argonne National Laboratory as a division director and emergency response manager.

“She was a mom not only to my brother and I and all of our various pets,” her daughter said, “but also to all of our friends and to anybody that didn’t have a family or she felt needed her.”

A baseball fan, she sported a Cubs tattoo on her arm, Cunningham said. She was an expert cheesecake maker and loved going to the theater to see musicals, including “Mamma Mia.”

Ms. Morgenthaler lived in the northwest suburbs with her husband. Other survivors include her son Neal and sisters Terry and Sharon. Funeral arrangements are pending.



BAGHDAD, Iraq -- Col. Jill Morgenthaler offers Liberty some milk before preparing a new home for her out of a television box. Three pest control managers climbed the Al Faw Palace ceilings and chipped away at the base of a patio column to rescue the trapped kitten. Colonel Morgenthaler is a public affairs officer for Multinational Forces-Iraq. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Karen Petitt)