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Tripler's Nguyen plays for the U.S. Armed Forces Volleyball Team

**by Leslie Ozawa
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HONOLULU—On most days, you'll find Capt. Trang Nguyen in her green Battle Dress Uniform at her desk, hitting the phones to coordinate military training activities for the 1,200 Soldiers working at Tripler Army Medical Center, Hawaii's pink landmark nestled halfway up the Koolau mountains. From there, she can gaze south for a spectacular view of Oahu's southern coastline, and beyond, wisps of surf streaming in from the balmy, blue waters of the Pacific Ocean.

Yet only a few months ago, this lithe, unassuming captain was worlds away, literally twice removed. Most recently in May, she donned the black and gold jersey of the All-Army Women's Volleyball Team. Yelling at her teammates, she was digging volleyballs off the gym floor, helping her team trounce the Air Force and Navy/Marine Corps Teams, 4-0 at the Armed Forces Volleyball Championships at Fort Lewis, Wash.

"It was an unbelievable season for the women's volleyball team and for myself as a player," said Nguyen. "We had players ranging in rank from a Private First Class to captains, from all over the globe, from Korea to Germany to Texas. It's been 10 years since the Army last won a gold medal."

What with the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), fewer Soldiers tried out for this year's team, said Nguyen. "I've been lucky. In the past 10 years in the Army, my commands have allowed me to try out and play for the all-Army team four times."

Nguyen's specialty is playing the libero, the designated back-row player who can freely go in and out of games as a ball-control specialist and not be counted as a substitution. Her prowess on the court got her selected as one of five Army Soldiers to the U.S. Armed Forces Volleyball Team. This was the first time she was selected to represent the United States on its CISM women's volleyball team.

A week later, both the U.S. Men's and Women's Volleyball Teams then traveled on from Fort Lewis, Wash., to Kingston, Ontario, this year's venue for the volleyball games sponsored by the Conseil International du Sports Militaire (CISM). Since 1948, CISM has conducted tournaments around the world in a variety of sports "to develop friendly relations between the Armed Forces of member nations," according to its website (<http://www.cism-milспорт.org/eng/welcome.html>). The U.S. women's team finished third in that tournament, garnering the bronze medal, with Italy coming in first and the Netherlands second.

Even that is quite an honor, Nguyen said. The U.S. is usually at a disadvantage at these games, because the team's players change from year to year, depending on what active duty players are available during the tournament time window of May and June, especially now, with heavy U.S.

military commitments around the world. “The Italian team,” said Nguyen, “is pretty much intact from year to year and some of the teams even have players who have played professionally.”

Nguyen herself has always been strictly an amateur. A first-generation Vietnamese, she came to the U.S. while still an infant in 1975, when her family fled the communist takeover of Vietnam. As a child, she grew up in Galesburg, Ill., where her family was one of only three Vietnamese families in the small town 180 miles southwest of Chicago. But that didn't stop her from shying away from sports, where she lettered in track and volleyball for her high school teams. Even now, she is a volleyball enthusiast, playing the game up to five times a week in local leagues around Oahu.

So what else has Nguyen been up to, during the past nine months? Last winter, she found herself in Pol-e-Charkhi, Afghanistan, where she was medical operations officer for the 136th Regiment's Mobile Training Team for 12 weeks, as part of Task Force Phoenix. For three months, she helped develop course materials and classes for a Combat Medic course for more than 80 Afghan National Army soldiers in a makeshift classroom heated by a small wood-burning stove. For this, she received another medal, this time an Army Commendation Medal. But that's another story for another time.



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