

# *June Willenz, Champion of Women in the Military, Dies at 95*

She didn't serve in the military herself. But she saw the armed services denying equal benefits to female veterans, and she crusaded to make a difference.



June Willenz in an undated photo. She was an advocate for women in the military at a time when they were largely ignored. Credit...via Willenz family

By [Katharine O. Seelye](#)

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June A. Willenz, a longtime human rights activist and champion of women in the military, died on May 3 in Bethesda, Md. She was 95.

Her daughter Pam Willenz confirmed the death. She said Ms. Willenz had had a heart attack after emergency hip surgery.

Ms. Willenz was an advocate for women in the armed forces at a time when they were largely ignored. Her 1983 book, "Women Veterans: America's Forgotten Heroines," provided one of the first comprehensive examinations of women in the armed services. It exposed inequities between men and women and led to congressional hearings, as well as to improved benefits, services and career opportunities for women.

As devoted as she was to women veterans, Ms. Willenz never served in the military herself. Her focus on the subject was sparked by a broader interest in social injustice.

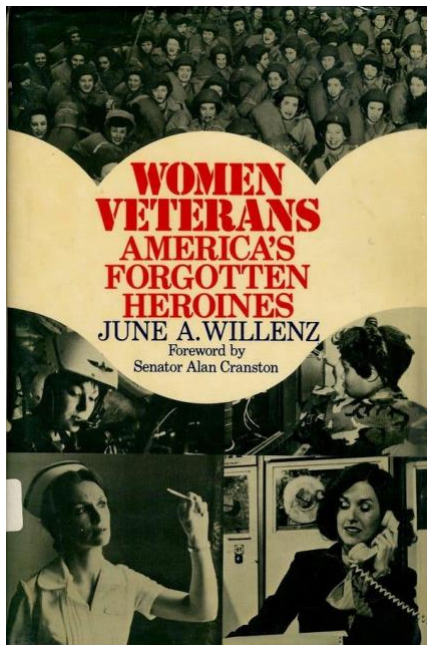
“She had files of causes she wanted to be a part of,” Pam Willenz said in an interview. “If anything crossed her path with a human rights or social justice element, she wanted to dig deeper and see what she could do about it.”

Causes that drew her attention ranged from rape victims in Africa to the mistreatment of pets in the United States.

But her biggest cause was striving to achieve equality and recognition for women and other marginalized people in the armed services. She brought veterans’ voices into the civil rights movement. She was the first woman to lead a presidential subcommittee on disabled veterans; she developed the first Legal Aid project for veterans with discharge problems; and she worked with Congress to create special offices for women and members of minority groups within the Veterans Administration, now the Department of Veterans Affairs. She even wrote one-act plays dramatizing the conflicts confronting women in the military.

She was also the driving force in establishing the [Women in Military Service for America Memorial](#), at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia. The memorial honors women who have served in the nation’s armed forces since the Revolution.

Such a memorial was “long overdue,” Ms. Willenz said when Congress approved the idea in 1986. The memorial was dedicated in 1997. “Women wrote a very marvelous page in our history,” she said.



Ms. Willenz’s book “Women Veterans,” published in 1983, exposed inequities between men and women in the armed services and led to congressional hearings and to improved benefits, services and career opportunities for women.

June Adele Friedenbergs was born on Dec. 17, 1924, in Brooklyn. Her father, Benjamin Friedenbergs, was a civil engineer, and her mother, Sara (Horowitz) Friedenbergs, was a homemaker.

June grew up in Brooklyn. She graduated from high school at 16 and initially attended Brooklyn College. Planning to become a doctor, she transferred to the University of Michigan and received a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 1945. She switched gears and earned her master's degree in philosophy, also from Michigan, in 1947. She then enrolled at the New School for Social Research in New York, where she continued to study philosophy.

There she met Eric Willenz, who was also a student, and they married in 1951. They divorced in 1968, and he died in 2018.

In addition to her daughter Pam, Ms. Willenz is survived by another daughter, Nicole Willenz Gardner, and a grandson.

Her interest in the military developed after college, when she served as a columnist for Stars and Stripes, the newspaper of the armed forces, and worked as research director on a special project for the Department of Labor on the employment of women veterans.

From there she joined the [American Veterans Committee](#), a liberal organization formed during World War II as an alternative to more conservative military organizations. The committee opposed segregation in the military and compulsory military service.

Ms. Willenz was appointed its executive director in 1965 — she was the first woman to lead a veterans' organization — and held the post until the committee disbanded in 2003.

Under her leadership, it focused on the rights of thousands of mostly minority veterans who had been less than honorably discharged during the Vietnam era. Some were discharged for minor offenses like smoking marijuana and had difficulty finding employment.

In 1977, President Jimmy Carter, seeking to heal wounds from the Vietnam War, [established a program](#) to upgrade many of those discharges to general or honorable. (His order did not apply to those who had been separated from the military for violence or desertion from a combat zone.)

As a result of Ms. Willenz's activism, the Veterans Administration formed its first advisory committee to assess the needs of women veterans; Ms. Willenz was a member from its founding in 1983 until 1986. She testified often on Capitol Hill, urging Congress to upgrade benefits and expand career opportunities for women and others in the military.

She later broadened her focus to include all women caught up in war, including civilians and refugees, and she wrote and testified often about their plight. For 22 years she was

chairwoman of the [World Veterans Federation's](#) committee on women, which championed women's rights in peacetime as well as wartime.

The state of Maryland named Ms. Willenz to its [Women's Hall of Fame](#) in 2011.