

16 Things You Might Not Know About Tammy Duckworth

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On January 3, Democrat Tammy Duckworth was sworn in as the freshman senator from Illinois. A combat veteran with a PhD, she has an impressive history of overcoming adversity with grit and humor.

1. SHE HAD AN INTERNATIONAL CHILDHOOD.

Ladda Tammy Duckworth was born in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1968. Her father, Franklin Duckworth, was an American Marine who had served in World War II. The Vietnam War then brought him to Asia, where he stayed to work with refugees for the United Nations. In Thailand, he met Lamai Sompornpairin, a Thai native of Chinese descent, and they got married. Soon Tammy entered the picture, followed by her brother, Thomas.

Franklin's work for the UN and various international companies took his family all over Southeast Asia. During the first 16 years of her life, Tammy lived in Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia (then the Khmer Republic), Singapore, and Hawaii. Life was chaotic at times: "I remember my mother taking me as a very little kid to the roof of our home in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to look at the bombs exploding in the distance," Duckworth [wrote in Politico](#). "She didn't want us to be scared by the booms and the strange flashes of light. It was her way of helping us to understand what was happening." Duckworth's family fled Cambodia in April 1975, [two weeks before](#) the Khmer Rouge took over the capital.

By 1982, the Duckworths were living in Singapore, where Tammy attended the Singapore American School. She excelled academically—[skipping ninth grade](#)—and athletically, playing volleyball and [medalling in shot put](#) for the varsity track team.

2. IMMIGRATION DISCUSSIONS HAVE A PERSONAL RESONANCE.

When the company Franklin worked for was sold, he lost his job, and the Duckworth family moved to the United States. But Lamai, a non-citizen, initially could not enter the country. Teenaged Tammy and her younger brother, Tommy, were [separated from their mother](#) for six months while Lamai navigated the American immigration system. Duckworth has supported comprehensive immigration reform during her time in the House, [tying the issue](#) to family values and women's rights.



3. SHE KNOWS WHAT IT'S LIKE TO NEED HELP.



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Her family settled in Hawaii in 1984 because, [Duckworth has said](#), “[T]hat’s where we were when the money ran out. We couldn’t go any further.” Franklin, then in his 50s, had a difficult time finding work, so teenaged Tammy got an after-school job and Lamai took in sewing, which she completed in the family’s studio apartment. During her time at Honolulu’s McKinley High School, Duckworth relied on reduced-price school breakfasts and lunches and her family tried to make it on food stamps. “I remember to this day at the grocery store, we would go and count out the last five brown \$1 food stamps—I still remember the color,” [Duckworth said](#) in August.

[Duckworth says her family’s struggles](#) with poverty give her extra motivation to fight for working families and to support government safety nets and strong public schools. When she encounters Americans who have lost their jobs or who are suffering through a weak economy, Duckworth says, “I understand the challenges they’re facing, because I’ve faced them myself.”

4. SHE WENT TO COLLEGE THANKS TO STUDENT LOANS AND GRANTS.

By the time Duckworth was applying to college, her family remained in a financially precarious position. “The summer before I started college,” she told [the Democratic National Convention](#) in 2016, “my parents walked everywhere instead of taking the bus. Once a week, they would hand over \$10 to the university housing office, a deposit so I could move into the dorms in the fall.” Government-funded Pell grants, waitressing, and student loans helped Duckworth to graduate from the University of Hawaii in 1989 with a bachelor’s in political science.

5. SHE WANTED TO BE AN AMBASSADOR—BUT FELL IN LOVE WITH THE ARMY.



Tommy Duckworth with a World War II vet. Image credit: [Wikimedia](#) // Public Domain

After finishing undergrad, Duckworth moved to Washington, D.C., to pursue a master's in international affairs at George Washington University. She wanted to enter the foreign service in hopes of eventually becoming an ambassador—her dream [since she was a child](#)—and the school had among the highest passing rates for the foreign services exams at the time. While at George Washington, Duckworth noticed that many of her classmates were active or retired military personnel, and “I just naturally gravitated toward those folks as my friends,” [she said](#). These friends encouraged her to try ROTC, and Duckworth joined in 1990. “I was interested in becoming a Foreign Service officer; I figured I should know the difference between a battalion and a platoon if I were going to represent my country overseas someday. What I didn't expect was to fall in love with the camaraderie and sense of purpose that the military instills in you,” [Duckworth wrote in Politico](#).

6. SHE MET HER HUSBAND THROUGH ROTC.

Duckworth also fell in love with a fellow cadet named Bryan Bowsbey. Bowsbey had spent [five years as an enlisted soldier](#) before going back to school at the University of Maryland and beginning the training to become a commissioned officer. As a graduate student, Duckworth was also older than most of the other cadets in ROTC, who were undergraduates, and she and Bowsbey hit it off—after a rocky start. [She told C-SPAN](#) in 2005, “He made a comment that I felt was derogatory about the role of women in the Army, but he came over and apologized very nicely and then helped me clean my M16.”

7. SHE HAD ACADEMIC AMBITIONS ...



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While working on her master's degree, Duckworth [took a job](#) assisting the curator for Asian history at the Smithsonian, putting together anthropological exhibits on Asia. Intellectually excited by the work, she began considering pursuing a PhD. Her boss insisted that the best school for scholars focusing on Southeast Asia was Northern Illinois University, so Duckworth went to DeKalb, Illinois, to check out the school. "I went and fell in love," [she told *Chicago Magazine*](#). "I did not know I was a Midwesterner until I got there. I just fell in love with the people."

After being accepted at the school, Duckworth packed her things and moved to Illinois. Bowsbey followed, and the two were soon married.

8. ... BUT THE ARMY TOOK PRECEDENCE.

After receiving her Army Reserves commission in 1992, Duckworth selected helicopter pilot as her first-choice assignment. It was one of very few combat roles available to women at the time. "I was going to get the same rank, the same pay, and I wanted to face the same risks [as male officers]," [Duckworth said](#). In 1993, she suspended her doctoral education to attend flight school at Fort Rucker in Alabama, where she spent a year. [The only woman in her unit](#), Duckworth knew she couldn't show any weakness to her male colleagues. She logged more hours in the flight simulator than any other student, she says, and [finished in the top three](#) of her flight class of 40—and those top three got to become pilots of Black Hawk helicopters.

Returning to her Army Reserves unit in Illinois in 1994, Duckworth became a platoon leader and was soon named first lieutenant. She was deployed to Egypt for a NATO training mission in 1995, but upon learning her unit was being deactivated, Duckworth switched to the National Guard. Then, from 1996 to 2003, Duckworth worked toward her PhD while holding down various civilian jobs, serving her leadership role in the National Guard, and keeping her flying skills sharp. [Duckworth said](#), "In order to maintain proficiency I must fly 96 hours each year. I worked during the day and flew one or two nights each week."

Making captain in 1998, Duckworth went on to [spend three years](#) as commander of Bravo Company, 106th Aviation of the Illinois Army National Guard, but she was about to transfer to another unit in October 2003 when she learned that the 106th, known as the Mad Dogs, was being called up for duty. Duckworth refused to be left behind, pleading with her battalion commander to be included with those deployed. When the Illinois National Guard decided they needed more soldiers to deploy than initially planned, Duckworth got her wish. She shipped out for Iraq in December 2003.

That meant Duckworth left her academic career behind. Having finished her classes, Duckworth was in the midst of writing the proposal for her dissertation when she deployed to Iraq. She would not finish her political science doctorate.

9. SHE EXPERIENCED A TRAUMATIC ORDEAL ...



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Duckworth was one of only a handful of women to fly Black Hawk helicopters during the War in Iraq. “I love controlling this giant, fierce machine,” [Duckworth has said](#). “I strap that bird on my back and I’m in charge of it and we just go, and it’s just power.”

Duckworth had been serving in Iraq and Kuwait for nearly a year when the Black Hawk she was copiloting was attacked by Iraqi insurgents on November 12, 2004. Chief Warrant Officer Dan Milberg was flying the helicopter with Duckworth in the seat beside him when a rocket-propelled grenade exploded beneath the cockpit. Duckworth struggled for control of the aircraft, but her feet couldn’t work the pedals. She didn’t realize that both her feet and the pedals were gone. Milberg managed to land the helicopter safely, at which point Duckworth lost consciousness. “I assumed at that point that she had passed,” [Milberg told *Mother Jones*](#). “All I saw was her torso, and one leg on the floor. It looked like she was gone from the waist down.”

Milberg and others carried Duckworth away from the burning chopper and soon put her into a medical evacuation helicopter, which flew her to Baghdad, where surgeons amputated both her legs—the right leg a few inches below the hip bone and the left just below the knee. They set the bones in her shattered right arm and sealed her cuts. Under heavy sedation, she was then airlifted to the Landstuhl military hospital in Germany, and quickly transferred to Walter Reed in Maryland, where her husband met her, keeping vigil by her bedside until she awoke days later. Ultimately, Duckworth underwent over 20 surgeries and retained only partial mobility in her right arm. She remained at Walter Reed for a year, undergoing surgical procedures and fighting through physical therapy.

10. ... BUT MAINTAINED HER SENSE OF HUMOR.

When Duckworth first woke up from sedation and saw her husband at her bedside, she didn't cry. She recalled, "I said three things when I woke up in Walter Reed. 'I love you.' 'Put me to work,' and 'You stink! Go shower!'" Bowsbey was relieved; her body was broken, but Duckworth's personality and spirit were very much intact.

Duckworth has adopted a joking approach to her injuries, wearing funny t-shirts that say things like, "Lucky for me he's an ass man." Her husband isn't as fond of the shirt as Duckworth is. She told *GQ*, "[H]e's thrown it away at least once, and I've pulled it back out of the garbage can and worn it." Another t-shirt reads, "Dude, where's my leg?"

"I can better honor the struggle that my crew went through to save my life by having a sense of humor about it," Duckworth has said.

Duckworth also makes use of her prosthetic legs for tasks other than getting around. During a June 2016 House of Representatives sit-in designed to force a vote on gun control legislation, Duckworth worried security would begin confiscating members' cell phones, so she hid hers inside her prosthetic leg. She also joked to *GQ* that she sometimes hides Sour Patch Kids candy in there, and she enjoys using her prosthetics to make a fashion statement—she ordered special ones that can accommodate a 2-inch heel.

11. SHE CELEBRATES THE DAY SHE ALMOST DIED.



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Duckworth calls it Alive Day. Every year on November 12, she tries to get together with the crewmates who saved her life. On the first anniversary of the attack on their helicopter, Dan Milberg, Duckworth's fellow pilot on that mission and one of the men who carried her to safety, called her in the hospital at Walter Reed, saying, "It's almost 4:30 in Iraq. In five minutes you're going to be shot down." They shared a moment of gratitude. The next year, Duckworth had just lost her first congressional campaign, and Alive Day helped pull her out of her disappointment over that loss. The crew continued to meet every year, excepting 2008, when all except Duckworth were deployed. In 2009, Duckworth had begun a job with the federal VA, and her crewmates flew to Washington, D.C., where she gave them a tour of the Capitol and the White House. During her first Alive Day in Congress, in 2013, Duckworth gave a speech on the House floor, thanking by name the men who saved her life. "You can choose to spend the day of your injury in a dark room feeling sorry for yourself or you can choose to get together with the buddies who saved your life, and I choose the latter," Duckworth told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2006.

12. SHE BECAME INTERESTED IN POLITICS WHILE RECUPERATING.

Duckworth calls Walter Reed the "amputee petting zoo," and has noted it was a popular place for politicians to have a feel-good photo op. While she was rehabilitating at Walter Reed, Duckworth met a number of politicians who came to visit the patients, and she also struck up a friendship with former senator and Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole, who was in the hospital as a patient. But it was only after her Illinois senator, the Democrat Dick Durbin, invited her and a number of other wounded veterans from Illinois to attend the 2005 State of the Union that she began to consider a political career of her own.

Younger service members who were being treated at Walter Reed had started coming to Duckworth for advice and help navigating pay issues and medical care, and Duckworth used her new connection to Senator Durbin to advocate for these soldiers and their families. Her passion and persistence made such an impression that Durbin suggested she run for office. After talking it over with Bowsbey, Duckworth decided to launch a campaign for Congress. In

the 2006 race for Illinois's 6th district, Duckworth won the Democratic primary but lost to Republican Peter Roskam in the general election by [less than 5000 votes](#).

13. SHE'S WORKED TO IMPROVE SERVICES FOR VETERANS.



*Duckworth being sworn in as Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs of the Department of Veterans Affairs.
Image credit: Wikimedia // Public domain*

After losing her first Congressional race, Duckworth became the Director of the Illinois Department of Veterans' Affairs, serving from 2006 through the beginning of 2009. While running the Illinois state VA, she created a mental health hotline for suicidal veterans and instituted the nation's [first mandatory screening for brain injuries](#) for all members of the state National Guard returning from service overseas.

Soon after his inauguration, President Obama [appointed Duckworth](#) the Assistant Secretary of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs of the federal Department of Veterans Affairs, where she worked primarily on public relations and created an online communications office in hopes of using the internet to better reach young veterans. In 2012, Duckworth was elected to Congress, defeating incumbent Joe Walsh to take the seat in Illinois's 8th District. During her time in the House, she backed legislation to support veterans, working to pass the [Clay Hunt Act](#), a bill aimed at reducing suicide among returning service members. The bill became law in 2015.

14. OPPONENTS HAVE ATTACKED HER MILITARY SERVICE ...

During the 2012 Congressional race, Joe Walsh, the Republican incumbent, [lashed out](#) at Duckworth, suggesting she wasn't a "true hero" because she talks too much about her military service. Asserting that John McCain's political advisors had to pressure him to talk about his own military service, Walsh then attacked Duckworth, saying, "I'm running against a woman who, my God, that's all she talks about. Our true heroes, it's the last thing in the world they talk about." Some years earlier, Duckworth had [told *The Washington Post*](#), "I can't avoid the interest in the fact that I'm an injured female soldier. Understand that I'm going to use this as a platform."

Duckworth had also faced anger in some quarters when she criticized the Iraq war during her 2006 campaign. "I think [invading Iraq] was a bad decision," [she told *The Washington Post*](#). "I think we used bad intelligence. I think our priority should have been Afghanistan and capturing Osama bin Laden. Our troops do an incredible job every single day, but our policymakers have not lived up to the sacrifices that our troops make every day." However, Duckworth reiterated her pride at serving her country in uniform, stating that, despite believing the decision to invade Iraq was an error, "I was proud to go. It was my duty as a soldier to go. And I would go tomorrow."

15. ... AND THAT OF HER ANCESTORS.

During her 2016 senate campaign, the military service in question was not Duckworth's own but that of her ancestors. During a debate with her opponent, Republican incumbent Mark Kirk, Duckworth proudly asserted, "My family has served this nation in uniform going back to the Revolution." [Kirk retorted](#), "I'd forgotten that your parents came all the way from Thailand to serve George Washington." Democrats quickly condemned the remark, with a spokeswoman for the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee calling it "offensive, wrong, and racist." Kirk later [apologized on Twitter](#).

While Duckworth's mother is a Thai native, her father's family has been in the United States since before it became a country—and at least one such ancestor was a Revolutionary War

soldier. Following the line of her paternal grandmother, Duckworth's fifth great-grandfather, [Elijah Anderson](#), served in the Virginia militia under Captain John Bell during the Revolution. Following her paternal grandfather's line, Duckworth seems to be related to Aaron Duckworth, who [may have served](#) as a private during the Revolutionary War.

Duckworth's own investment in the US military comes from her father, Franklin, who left his small Virginia town at 15 and [lied about his age](#) to enlist in the Marines. He served in World War II, earning a Purple Heart when he was [wounded at Okinawa](#). Franklin went on to serve in Korea and Vietnam, passing his military values onto his children once he'd reentered civilian life: Tammy's younger brother also has a military record, having spent eight years in the Coast Guard.

16. SHE DOES NOT GIVE UP.



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When she was deployed to Iraq in 2004, Duckworth's doctoral studies fell by the wayside. Recovering from her injuries and helping other veterans became her focus when she returned stateside, but Duckworth [told *Chicago Magazine* in 2012](#) that "One of the greatest disappointments in my life is that I ran out of time; I just didn't finish [my political science PhD]." While her new career in government work kept her from returning to Indiana to study, it also shifted her interests. Duckworth started an online PhD program in Human Services while she was working as the Assistant Secretary for the federal VA. She continued to chip away at her doctoral work after being elected to the House of Representatives, and after six years of effort, Duckworth [graduated with her PhD](#) in 2015. [Her dissertation](#) looked at the use of digitized medical records among doctors in Illinois.

Perhaps that kind of determination shouldn't be surprising from a woman who wouldn't let the amputation of both her legs keep her from serving in the military—or even from flying. While injured veterans are usually discharged, Duckworth petitioned to remain on active duty—switching to inactive duty when she started doing political work. [As soon as June 2006](#), she was working intermittently as an aviation safety instructor for the Illinois National Guard while also conducting her first congressional campaign. She [finally retired](#) from the military in 2014.

She even got her wings back: [In 2010](#), Duckworth secured her license to fly a fixed-wing airplane. By 2014, she was flying helicopters again. Small ones, not military copters, but the return still felt triumphant. She [told the *Daily Herald*](#), "When I got back in a helicopter, it felt like home."

January 10, 2017 - 4:00pm



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