

## Meet the Laboratorian - Major Lucia More

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Major Lucia More is the Laboratory Director of Erhling-Bergquist Hospital at the Offutt Air Force Base. Her career provides an exciting example of the many opportunities for laboratory specialists. She has been involved in a wide variety of activities in the United State Air Force (USAF) including a stint as the laboratory consultant for all USAF laboratories in Europe (one in Turkey, two in Italy, three in England, and four in Germany). She was in that position on “9/11” and was subsequently heavily involved in providing support for bioterrorism threats at all those bases.

### **What got you interested in pursuing a career in laboratory science?**

I was interested in biochemistry but wanted a job that would pay well enough for me to support my family if necessary. The information about Southwest Minnesota State’s Medical Technology program sounded like it would be interesting as well as provide a good salary. Little did I know where that instinct would lead me.

### **Where did you attend medical technology school?**

The college courses were at Southwest Minnesota State College in Marshall, MN (now Southwest State University) and I did a 12 month internship at Sioux Valley Hospital in Sioux Falls, SD. I graduated in July 1976; I can’t believe it’s been 28 years already!

### **What do you like most about your job?**

I learn new things every day. As a clinical laboratory scientist I get to learn about the new advances in laboratory medicine such as in coagulation testing. As the laboratory manager I evaluate new methods and improvements and determine whether I can implement them in my lab. I feel like I can make my little corner of the world a better place every day.



### **How does the laboratory at Offutt AFB support the U.S. military and the citizens of Nebraska?**

We provide routine clinical laboratory services to active duty and retired military personnel and their families who live in this area. We are a Level-A (Sentinel) Laboratory in the CDC’s Laboratory Response Network (LRN). We work closely with NPHL to prepare for a local bioterrorism attack to handle specimen processing. We are also a Homeland Defense Laboratory for the USAF and are equipped with instrumentation to identify potential agents of bioterrorism.

### **What is unique about a career in the military?**

Laboratorians with bachelor’s degrees in clinical laboratory science enter the USAF and are placed into management positions. Their first assignment is usually at a larger facility where there are multiple laboratory officers (laboratory managers in civilian terms); giving them time to learn how the military works and how to be a manager from a more senior laboratory officer.

Enlisted technicians are trained by the USAF after basic training. Trainees selected for the laboratory course are the highest scorers on the entry exams. After six weeks of basic training they attend a 17 week Phase I didactic course. Phase II takes place in a medical treatment facility that has inpatient beds and is a nine month course of classes and on-the-job training. After graduation the students receive an assignment to another laboratory. After one year of experience they qualify to take the MLT exam to receive certification as a two year degreed technician.

### **What is the biggest challenge you face in your job today?**

We experience all the same things civilian labs do: completing the workload in the most efficient manner possible, determining how to get the test done most economically in-house or at a referral lab, maintaining regulatory requirements, complying with CAP/FDA/JCAHO standards, maintaining performance improvement programs, quality assurance programs...all the things a civilian lab does. In addition to our “peacetime” mission, we have a “wartime” mission: maintaining our training for possible deployment to an expeditionary medical facility on the other side of the world. We have an annual two day medical readiness training in the field in which we set up medical tents and practice what we do when deployed. We carry patients on litters, decontaminate the patients, and treat their “injuries” all while wearing our chemical warfare gear (including gas masks). We learn security procedures so we can protect ourselves in a hostile environment. We are all qualified to fire either a rifle or a handgun. We also are required to maintain a healthy weight and fitness level and are tested annually. Part of our job is the

awareness that we may be told to go somewhere hot and sandy for an extended period of time without our family. Although this sounds crazy, it's an adventure. There are many benefits to being in the military including medical benefits, educational benefits, and if you make it a career, a retirement pension.

**What are the biggest changes you have seen in the lab since you started?**

The explosion in development of testing for biological agents. The military was already working on sturdy or hardened portable PCR machines for use in the field when the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attack took place. Since then, advances have escalated in developing hand-held "point-of-care" type instruments to identify chemical and biological agents for first responders.

**What would be your advice to a first-year med tech?**

Consider a career in the military. You can be a laboratory officer in the Air Force, Army, or Navy. If you have good people skills, are organized, can work well with others, like structure, don't mind wearing a uniform, and enjoy staying fit, this is the job for you. If you've been frustrated by the limitations to advancement within a civilian hospital, the military will give you more responsibility and opportunity to grow than you can imagine. The most difficult decision is whether you can live with moving every three or four years. You must learn to adapt to any environment, to find things to do in the area you live and enjoy it. A positive attitude is a must!

I entered the USAF 15 years ago because I wanted job security and no one else out there was offering the pay and benefit package that the USAF was. I was 35 years old and had three young children. I only had to commit to three years; I figured if I didn't like it, I'd leave after that. Staying was the best decision I've ever made. Fifteen years later I've had the pleasure of living in New York, Minnesota, Texas, Germany, and now Nebraska. The Air Force sent me back to college to get a master's degree, and paid my tuition, books, and usual salary. It's been a great adventure!