



MY LIFE MY STORY



Kimberly



United States Army

Kimberly

I never planned on being a soldier, and I never planned on making it a career. I just fell into it, and I stayed in because I loved the people and the sense of purpose. The Army was and still is my family.

I was born in the Midwest in the mid-60s. My father was an air traffic controller in the Navy, and initially, my mother was a homemaker; however, when I was older, she obtained her RN license. We were stationed in multiple states on the east coast, finally landing in Florida. After a few years, I had a sister and a brother.



After serving for almost ten years, my father separated from the Navy. He then began working for the Federal government as an air traffic controller in Nebraska.

I consider Nebraska home. I graduated from the university with a degree in broadcast journalism and a triple minor in Spanish, English and history.

All my life, I wanted to be a writer; and as I got older, I was focused on being an overseas correspondent. During my junior year in high school while working for the radio station at the state fair, the booth next to mine were recruiters from the Army K9 Corps. I started talking to them; and for some reason, I started thinking maybe I should join the military. It was a broad leap for me, but my rationale was that a basic understanding of how the military works would in some way help me in broadcast journalism.

My mother and I went to a recruiter, and I decided to pursue joining the Army Reserves. I was sixteen at the time. I had a heated discussion with my father. He said that his daughter was not going to join the military and especially, not the Army.



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He based his opinion on his experiences when he served in the late 60s and early 70s. Women were not treated very well, nor for that matter thought very highly of. It came down to the only way my father would sign off on my contract was if I agreed to be an officer. I really had no idea about the military's hierarchy, so I said, "Ok, whatever." And that's how I connected to ROTC.



When I turned seventeen, I applied for the Military Police as my specialty. I graduated from high school and immediately went to boot camp at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. It amazes me how naive I was and how thankful I am that my parents never put any barriers in front of me.

I'm at basic training, and I've never shot a weapon before. I was athletic, but hated running; and I'd never done a push up, but I flourished. I ended up graduating as "Trainee of the Cycle." I came home, started college, and started drilling with a reserve MP unit. During the summer of my freshman year of college, I attended MP training.

My junior year of college, I started the two-year ROTC program, but still drilled with my MP unit. The summer of my junior year, I went to ROTC training in Washington. At some point prior to my departure for ROTC training, one of the instructors mentioned that there was a "jump" slot open for Airborne School and asked was I interested? There again, being naïve, I was like, "Ok, what the heck!" A lot of the guys had been competing for the slot, so why not? Which then led to Airborne School at Fort Benning in August.



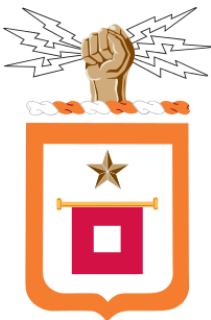
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My vivid memories are of excitement and overcoming fear. I remember as I prepared for my first jump, I was like, “Well, shit; how many people have died from this...not many.” I wasn’t terrified. I returned to Nebraska to finish my senior year of college, and it was time to decide if I wanted to stay in the Reserves or compete for one of the active duty slots. I applied for active duty and surprisingly, I was selected.



In the late 80s, I am commissioned a second lieutenant. At some point during my junior year, my mother had enlisted in the Army Reserve Nurse Corps, and she was the one that administered my oath of office which I thought was very cool.

Next, I had to select a branch. I didn’t want to be an MP. I wanted communications, Armed Forces Network, or public affairs because that was what my degree was in. My ROTC advisor recommended the Signal Corps which I requested. Later, I discovered that the Signal Corps was “military speak” for Information Technology. I didn’t know that until I reported for active duty.



I’m on my own now, driving to Augusta, Georgia with very little cash and a credit card with a limit of about \$500.00. I had never checked into a hotel myself, never driven that far by myself; I had no cell phone, no GPS and yet, no fear. I am in for a wide awakening at the Signal Corps basic course.

I am slapped with math and electronics. It was probably the lowest point in my life. I could barely jump a battery. I received a D on my first electronics exam, the first time in my life I had ever failed at anything. I remember being crushed, but I figured it out.

After six months of school, I was assigned to Panama. I boarded a plane and was on my way to the 1109th Signal Brigade.



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My first job was as OIC of the technical control facilities that managed the long-haul communications in and out of Panama, military speak for the U.S. Army's version of AT&T.

One evening shortly after I arrived in Panama, I was outside my facility when I observed a white light going by about two hundred yards away. I ran inside to find my platoon sergeant and he says, "LT that's a ship going by." That's how close we were to the Panama Canal.



Panama was a fantastic assignment. I traveled throughout Central and South America, learned how to scuba dive, fished in the Panama Canal and grew up. A slot opened up for jungle warfare school, highly restrictive to women, (another example of being in the right place at the right time) and I took it.

While in Panama, I married a man who was in the Navy. We explored getting joint assignments but were unsuccessful. We decided that I would resign my commission.

I submitted my resignation; however, my paperwork was placed on hold because our Brigade Commander was changing out. My new Commander called me into his office. He asked why I was resigning.



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I explained to him my inability to get a joint assignment, and he asked what would it take for him to keep me another year. He added that he would like to give me a Company Command—I was floored. Usually you get command after you are a captain and have been to the officer advanced course. He picks up the phone and calls my branch manager in DC. Two days later, she had assignments to Virginia for both my husband and me after I completed Company Command.

During the 1990s, tensions were escalating in Panama because of General Noriega. City-wide demonstrations were common. A lot of stress and a lot of long, long hours. As the political situation progressed, the US government started relocating everyone onto the military bases and shipping family's home. It was chaos.



When we were alerted for what became Operation Just Cause, we weren't too concerned as we had gone through alerts before. I was a company commander.

It was nighttime, and I went over to the barracks to get the soldiers up and out to their locations. At one point in the night, we could hear AC-130s, and we knew that we were invading. In some ways, it was a relief. Something was happening.

After almost four years in Panama, I headed to my officer advanced course; and somewhere in there, my husband and I divorced.

Since he was no longer in the picture, I decided that instead of the pre-negotiated assignment to Virginia, I wanted Fort Bragg. I negotiated with my branch manager that I would go to Korea for a year and then, I could go anywhere I wanted.



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I was part of 1st Signal Brigade at Camp Humphreys, Korea about an hour south of Seoul, a communications-electronics organization focused on supporting microwave communications. The Company Commander was a pig. Luckily, my first sergeant saw the writing on the wall. His mission for the rest of my tour was to keep the commander on travel as much as possible, which he successfully did and saved my career.

I was the only female officer on my installation for most of my tour. Most people assigned to Korea are there for a year, and if married, are unaccompanied. As you can imagine, there was a lot of mischief going on, and I wanted no part of it. It was lonely time for me; I didn't go out and socialize. I did a lot of PT and took advantage of every flippin' USO tour there was every weekend, and I was all over Korea.

Next stop, Ft Bragg. This was the early 90s. I was assigned as the signal officer for the 18th Aviator Brigade. I'm a captain now and had my small signal platoon providing tactical communications, as well as base communications to the Corps Aviation Brigade. I didn't know squat about tactical comms because for the last five years I had been assigned to strategic units. In theory, it was similar, but the equipment was completely different.



Once again, opportunity comes out of the blue. I get a phone call from a Signal Battalion Commander that I had worked with during the XVIII Airborne Corps deployment to Miami in support of Hurricane Andrew relief efforts. He offered me a company command. I appreciated it, but I had already had command, and it was unusual for someone to have two.



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He said that he was impressed with how I had managed a new equipment fielding and wanted me to consider it. My branch manager said that it would be stupid since I had already punched that ticket. Why would you want to risk screwing it up? I thought, I'm not going to screw it up and decided to take it.



I'm also back on jump status. When I was at jump school, I had little trepidation about jumping; but now it's six years after jump school, I could have peed my pants on my first jump with the Corps. I survived.

If getting a second Company Command was not a fluke, another opportunity crossed my path when I was able to go to jump master school—a very competitive school at Fort Bragg. Somehow, I found out that there were slots opening up in the Special Forces School, so I asked my aviation Brigade Commander to make a call for me. Surprise, I get in. This was the first-time females were allowed in the SF course. Two other women and myself showed up for the first day of training, and the guys were like “What the ****? Why are you here? Maybe to serve us breakfast?” Initially, they were cocky, thinking that either we were going to try to “get over” or that we would soon fail out of the course, as there was a very low first-time graduation rate. As the days went by, their attitudes changed; and we earned their respect.



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To graduate from the three-week training program, you had to pass the JMPI, jump master personal inspection, which is what most people failed. You had to be so precise, only allowed so many errors. As I was testing, I remembered my Brigade Commander taking a chance on me and making that call for me. He didn't ask any questions because he believed in me. I take my JMPI and fail. Not only do I fail, but I fail in front of all these SF guys and failed my Brigade Commander. Everyone knows what a big deal this is. My roommate made some calls; some jump master friends came over to the house. We practiced over and over. The next day, I get one retest. I pass, and all the SF guys came over and high fived me.



The lesson: believe in yourself and know when to reach out and ask for help. I get my jump master certification. After a year with the Aviators, I take command of Delta Company, 50th Signal Battalion. I was the first female commander for that Company.

During my tenure, my Company assisted units with deployments to Somalia and Haiti. I had one of my worst bosses in my entire career and yet the best boss. He was my best boss because he taught me how not to lead, how not to motivate people, and how not to treat people. His method to motivate and lead people was to demean and scream, acts that tend to make you not rise up. It was a good lesson.



I ended my tour at Bragg as the 35th Signal Brigade S1 and was reassigned to Pensacola, Florida.



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While at Bragg, I started dating a man who is now my husband of nineteen years. He was retiring from the Army and wanted to relocate to Panama City Beach, Florida.

While coordinating my next assignment, serendipity strikes again when a newly created position becomes available as the Deputy Commander of the Defense Photography School in Pensacola, Florida, a very unusual assignment close to Panama City Beach, so I took it.



The Commander at the photography school was an Air Force Lt Col, and I was the XO. I was the only female Army officer on the base yet again. My take-away from this assignment was witnessing young men and women develop their self-confidence. It was not lost on me, nor my staff, that many of our students were from broken homes, poverty, never experiencing a kind word or encouragement.



All it took, was the simplest thing—“nice looking uniform, boots look great,” and they are coming out of their shells. That part of the job was so rewarding. I was there almost four years, promoted to major and married.

I had already been to Panama and Korea, and decided it was time to see Europe. I worked a deal for orders to Mannheim, Germany for a year as the Secretary for the General Staff.



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Then, I was transferred to the 509th Signal Battalion in Italy where I had assignments as S3 and XO. It turned out to be one of my best assignments. My husband and I traveled everywhere. These were the days before GPS and cell phones; so there were numerous trips where we were lost, but it was just another journey.



After Italy, I was assigned as the Inspector General at Fort Gordon for about two years. Most people avoid the IG like the plague, but I made it mine and took an active role in mentoring the young officers and non-commissioned officers. My staff and I focused on developing a relationship with our leadership so that they would come to us with questions before they made mistakes that resulted in an IG complaint.



I also implemented the first ever IG online survey. By now, I realize that I've evolved into a "lifer"; and I would remain in the Army until retirement.

I was promoted to lieutenant colonel and surprisingly selected for Battalion Command with the 102nd Signal Command in Wiesbaden, Germany. I was there for two years and then to the Pentagon.



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While serving with the Army G6 staff, I was selected for colonel and the War College, which quite frankly I thought was a typo. After a year at the Pentagon, I went for my master's degree at the National Defense University in DC.



After school, my mentor convinced me to work for him as the Defense Information Systems Agency field office commander in Miami which supported U.S. Southern Command. I had a small but loyal team, and we did a lot of big things while working a lot of long hours.

There was always something going on in Central and South America: hurricanes, coups, gangs, earthquakes. I traveled monthly throughout the region. The highlights probably were Colombia

and Guantanamo Bay prison. We also planned the communications installations for a new HQ and supported Haiti during their earthquake. Our team moved mountains.

I was coming up on another move, and my only option was back to DC. I was so tired, exhausted; I was done. I had more than twenty years active duty, and seventeen of those years I had been on call 24/7.



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I stayed in the military, not because of the actual work; but because of the people I worked with and the travel. The IT stuff I didn't care about. Half the time I didn't know what they were taking about. The joke was "get your crayons out and draw me a diagram."

I told my husband I was tired, and it was time to retire. In retrospect, it is sort of ironic that I started my career in Panama; and now, I was ending my career supporting military operations in Central and South America.

I didn't plan on being a soldier. I didn't plan on loving my job, and I certainly did not plan on serving twenty-six years. I just seized the opportunities that crossed my path.

My husband's family had a beach house in Panama City Beach, Florida. We put everything in storage and settled into the beach house to figure out where we were going next. I thought it would only be for a few months; and laughingly, I only brought one suitcase. We ended up being at the beach for almost a year before we decided on calling Reno our home.

