

# Hometown Heroes

## Pam Kirchoffer: One of few Marine Corps women

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Retired Marine Corps Warrant Officer Pam Kirchoffer spent the last three years of her 21-year career working in the Headquarters Marine Corps Office of Programming at the Navy Annex located next to the Pentagon in Washington, DC.

On a normal day, she reviewed current and new policies and procedures that affected the rest of the Marine Corps offices to ensure everyone understood and implemented them. That day changed September 11, 2001.

With her husband working at Quantico, she dropped off her two children at daycare and hoped on an airplane at Reagan National Airport for a conference in Kansas City, Missouri. During the flight, the plane made an unexpected U-turn and landed in Indianapolis. "We thought it was a medical emergency at first. They were jerking on seat belts checking everybody," she said.

After they landed, the pilot said America is under attack, telling them about the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. "I'm right away thinking of my babies and my husband is on active duty."

The Pentagon was still smoking when she arrived back in DC. The plane that hit the Pentagon clipped the antenna of the Navy Annex before it hit the pentagon.

At that moment, she decided she didn't need to be in the military anymore. "I did my time. When you leave your children in a situation like that, it's time



Pam Kirchoffer is a 21-year retired veteran of the United States Marine Corps. She is seen following her graduation from Basic School at Quantico, Virginia, in 1996.

to retire."

Kirchoffer had a stellar career in the Marines.

From Sartell, Minnesota, she joined the Marine Corps in 1981 because she worried that if she didn't do something, she wouldn't leave.

There weren't many women in the military at that time, Kirchoffer said. There was one female to every 30 male marines.

She was assigned to the dispersing office, where she would help make sure everyone got paid. It was a guaranteed contract. "A lot of people go in open contract and it's whatever the needs are in the Marine Corps you qualify for, they will put you in."

Between May and July 1981, she did boot camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. Parris Island was eight weeks. Women didn't do formal infantry training. She didn't do the famed Parris Island Crucible, which is a 54-hour final test of combat scenarios, obstacle courses, sleep deprivation and long marches. She only observed the weapons training.

She said women were taught what they could and could not do.

She remembers that women were not used to eating three times a day and they had the same diet the men did. "They were much more active in boot camp than we were, and I think all the women gained weight in boot camp. I felt like half of the platoon got put on weight control before we graduated to get our weight back down to Marine Corps limits."

From July to September of 1981, she trained at Camp Johnson, the home of the Marine Corps Combat Service Support School, within Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. They train Marines in vital support roles like administration, logistics, supply, and finance.

Her first station assignment was in Okinawa, Japan, for 13 months. She was with the Third Force Service Support Group. "Beans, bullets and band-aids. We're storing your extra bullets back here. We've got your medical back here, we're feeding you back here, and we're paying you back here. That's all happening in the rear. We're not doing actual combat. That was in the front," Kirchoffer said.

At times, she was distributing personnel checks in various locations around Japan. She carried a weapon even though women weren't trained in weapons.

At Mt. Fuji, she said she was the only woman on the base with 5,000 men.

She remembers getting out of the vehicle and hearing, "Oh, It's a female Marine."

She said the lack of women was irritating at times. "It was always hard to get those female relationships because we were so few to begin with and there are so many areas where there are no women."

In 1982, she began serving in Albany, Georgia, at the Marine Corps Logistics Base.

"I didn't even know we had a base there. I thought it was Albany, New York," she said.

"In the civilian world, you can be off a dime or a nickel. We had to be balanced to the penny every month, and within 24 hours of the end of the month, we would report all business we did to the US Treasury," she said.

She met her Niles husband there. He was in the computer field. On March 9, 1984, they married.

"There are not many of us," she said about couples in the military.

In 1984, she returned to Okinawa for one year because Niles was transferred there.

In 1985, they were both sent to Kansas City, Missouri, to the Marine Corps Finance Center. It's now Defense Finance Accounting Services. They were in compatible fields. He was in the computer field and she was in the finance field.

"My field couldn't work without his field. So, wherever he could go, I could go," she said.

Kansas City was a consolidation of all information for all 23 Marine installations around the country.

It was there her husband got orders to be a drill instructor, so they returned to Parris Island in 1988.

In 1991, she went to Camp Pendleton in California. She was asked to join a team of 14 people on the Marine Corps Disbursing On-Site Examination (MCDOSSET)/Marine Corps Administrative Analysis Team (MCAAT) where they would travel to all Marine Corps units west of the Mississippi and overseas to ensure Marines were properly paid and administrative procedures and regulations were properly reported and implemented.

Marines that went into combat hadn't been paid in years, she said. Not since the Vietnam War almost, and they audited every

Marine to make sure they got the pay they should have gotten.

In 1998, the couple went to Camp Lejeune. It was there she became a warrant officer 1 and 2.

It was a difficult transition for some. "My boss in that office when I was a gunnery, if I would tell him something, and if I ask him something, he would give me an answer and say good to go gunny. Now, I come back and answer that question as a warrant officer from that same office, he would say 'how do you get that? What makes you think that?' I said 'Do you think I did a brain dump when I put the bar on?'"

Her husband was sent out on a deployment, but when he returned, they were transferred to Quantico in 1999. She worked in the dispersement office there too.

She then transferred to Headquarters Marine Corps Office of Programming.

She recalls walking through the Pentagon seeing all the heads of all the military branches sitting in their offices. Her role was to represent the Marine Corps in different projects.

She would review policies and procedures and determine how it would affect the Marine Corps and whether it would work or not. If it was approved, it was handed down to the rest of the Marine Corps where they would be told how to implement it.

Her military leadership skills come naturally. Her mom, Lorna, was the leader of her girl scout troop. Kirchoffer gravitated to leadership positions in girl scouts in areas from community service projects to camping, which prepared her for the Marines. "It taught you independence. You'd go to camps and you didn't have your parents there, so you had to develop friendships."

Her dad, Dr. Gerald Nestel, was a professor of industrial science at St. Cloud State University. He was a Master Mason and later a Shriner. He led community and college activities. "Everybody gravitated to him. He was gentle, yet strong. We really looked up to our dad."

She was president of the Student Council at Sartell High School. "I was not an athlete in school, but I could get people together and get them to work towards a common goal. I could corral people and motivate them to do different things," she said.

Kirchoffer was also a member of Jobs Daughter of the Eastern Star. She



News Observer photo/Jason Queen  
Pam Kirchoffer retired after a 21-year career in the United States Marine Corps.



United States Marine Corps veteran Pam Kirchoffer climbed the ranks to chief warrant officer before retiring in 2002. Her parents, Gerald and Lorna Nestel, are shown pinning her Warrant Officer bars on her uniform when she was promoted in 1996.

served as the president of her club. The club focused on character building, leadership and service.

She looks back on her service time positively. "I enjoyed my time. I enjoyed the travel. I met my husband during that time. I found myself during that time. It helped me develop my leadership skills a little more. It gave me a new way to look at the world. It made me who I am today. It gave us the life we have today."

She added, "The Marine Corps allowed me to travel and see places I would have never seen on my own. There were so many things I would have never done or had the opportu-

nity to do if it hadn't been for the military. And so many people that I have met."

After retirement, she worked for the Marine Corps as a civilian government budget analyst at Headquarters Marine Corps in DC. Her husband retired from the Marines with 20 years service in 2002.

She and her husband moved to Blue Ridge in 2019 where he has worked at New Blue Home and Gift for seven years helping with home furnishings designs.

In her free time, she likes spending time with daughters Victoria and Samantha.



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