

On Target: Illinois Guard Human Resource Officer was Air Force's first female sniper

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SPRINGFIELD - Story by: Army Staff Sgt. Brian Vorce, 139th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

Illinois Air National Guard 1st Lt. Jennifer Weitekamp seems like a mild-mannered, polite and professional human resource specialist to most of those who roam the hallways of the Illinois National Guard headquarters in Springfield, Illinois.



But underneath those refined mannerisms, Weitekamp could put a bullet through an enemy's head from nearly a mile away. Such is life for the Air Force's first female sniper – friendly and easy-going on the outside, but with killer skills inside.

In 2001, Weitekamp, then Senior Airman Donaldson, fresh out of basic training, volunteered to attend the Air National Guard's pilot Counter Sniper School conducted by the National Guard Marksmanship Training Center at Camp Joseph T. Robinson,

North Little Rock, Arkansas. Initially, Weitekamp was not allowed into the course because it was not open to women. A couple weeks before the start of the course, school officials decided to let her attend, inadvertently making her a trailblazer.

On April 14, 2001, Weitekamp completed the course, becoming the first woman to complete a U.S. military sniper school - the first female sniper in the Air Force.

"They asked for volunteers for this training program, and I really wanted to go, so I volunteered," Weitekamp said. "It wasn't until after I volunteered that I was told I couldn't go because I was female."

After being allowed to attend, Weitekamp said she wasn't sure what the course would entail or how hard it would be, but she wasn't going to quit.

"The school was not easy and there were days I wanted to go home." Weitekamp said. "I was the first woman to go through, it was because of that and the opportunities it would open up for future women that helped me get through the training and kept me motivated."

Weitekamp will tell you that she's many years removed from her six years in the Air Force's Security Police. She'll tell you that she joined the ranks of the human resources staff to help service members with job-related issues.

Few human resources professionals have their own rifle with sniper scope.

Since Weitekamp graduated from Counter Sniper School, it has moved to Fort Bliss, Texas, and has been renamed the Close Precision Engagement Course. In 2012, 11 years after Weitekamp graduated, the ninth female graduated from CPEC.

Now 18-years into her career with the Illinois Air National Guard, Weitekamp has propelled her through the enlisted ranks and into the commissioned ranks. She's been deployed multiple times and earned many awards and accolades.

Weitekamp, a lifelong resident of Illinois, joined the Illinois Air National Guard as a member of the security forces squadron while still in high school and attended basic training the summer after graduation. She later earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's of education from the University of Illinois system.

Weitekamp said she chose security forces because she planned to go into law enforcement in her civilian life. However, her devotion to her service, as well as the growth of her family led to her working full-time for the Air National Guard. Weitekamp lives near Springfield with her husband and three children.

During her six years in security forces, Weitekamp spent nearly three years on active duty, deploying several times in support of Operations Noble Eagle and Enduring Freedom. After a stint as a paralegal, she started work in personnel. It was working in this role for the 183rd Air Operations Group that Weitekamp applied for and earned her commission to second lieutenant. She now works as the supervisory human resources officer for Illinois' Joint Force Headquarters' Human Resources Office.

Weitekamp received her commission after serving 15 years in the enlisted ranks, where achieving the rank of master sergeant. She said taking the officer route was a way to take her career on a new path and to serve more people.

"I try to be selfless, doing what's right for others," Weitekamp said. "I feel grateful and lucky to be where I am."

Weitekamp said her experience at officer training school was challenging because she had limited contact with her family, only able to call them a couple of times during the eight-week course. Weitekamp completed the officer course Oct. 1, 2015, at Maxwell-Gunter Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama.

Weitekamp said her husband brought the family to see her when able, and the family is supportive of her service, but it is always difficult leaving them behind.

"I have been on multiple deployments and attended multiple extended schools for the military while being a mom. It is very painful and hard to leave them every time," Weitekamp said. "We video chat while I am away and talk as often as possible, which helps."

Weitekamp's career is filled with accolades. She was Security Forces Airman of the quarter in 2001, and she was named Honor Guard Member of the Year in 2015. Weitekamp said her most cherished award is the 183rd Fighter Wing's Col. Philip Quintenz Leadership Award, which she received in 2012. She said it was nice to be recognized by the fellow members of her unit as a leader.

Weitekamp said she hopes she is making her family proud through her service.

"I think it's helped me a lot putting others first," Weitekamp said. "I'm trying to be a role model for my kids and for others."

Weitekamp is an active member of the National Guard Association of the United States, the National Guard Association of Illinois, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, her local blood bank and her church.

Despite her many accolades and volunteering her time for her unit, Weitekamp said she owes her success to others. She credits her father-in-law with convincing her to initially enlist, the Staff Judge Advocate at the base legal office who persuaded her to become a paralegal, and various supervisors throughout her career for making her a better Airman.

"The Air National Guard has provided me with way more benefits than I could ever repay," Weitekamp said. "I have received my college degrees, I've had the opportunity to deploy and make my mark on history. I serve my community, and I have a full-time job."

Weitekamp plans to serve with the Illinois Air National Guard until her retirement. Once she has a target in sight, she rarely misses.