

## **Learning and Growing through Military Service**

Pelham City Manager Gretchen DiFante served in the Air Force Reserves from 1983 – 1993. She was with the 908 Tactical Airlift Group at Maxwell AFB in Montgomery for the first four years. When she moved to New York, DiFante joined the 924<sup>th</sup> Tactical Airlift Group at Niagara Falls., NY. Both units flew C-130 cargo aircraft, and their missions involve transporting troops and supplies wherever and whenever they are needed.

DiFante was a Staff Sergeant in Public Affairs, with the primary responsibilities of writing stories for the base newspaper and handling media inquiries. Her group also handled requests to tour the base and flight line, conducted the base tours and hosted visiting dignitaries.

When she was stationed at Maxwell, DiFante worked many active duty orders because she had a set of skills that could easily translate to several departments. This allowed her to get to know a large number of people. “The reserves are filled with military members who have come off active duty. Maxwell is the Air Force’s headquarters for the Air War College, Squadron Officer’s School and the International Officer’s School, so military members from all over the world come to Maxwell for training. Many retirees find their way to the 908<sup>th</sup>, and during my tenure there I got to know people who had fought in Vietnam and Korea. I had the privilege of working with outstanding leaders who taught a young college student many of the lessons about leadership that impact me today,” DiFante said.

“While I was with the 914<sup>th</sup> in Niagara Falls, this little conflict called Desert Storm broke out because Iraq invaded Kuwait and Saddam Hussein wanted to stay there, and everything about military public affairs changed forever.

“In 1970, the US. Military adopted a Total Force policy which completely changed the job of the national guard and reserve making the military much more dependent on these reserve forces. Desert Storm was the first war since the adoption of the Total Force policy, and our unit was immediately activated and sent to the United Arab Emirates for six months. The only people left behind were the eight of us working in public affairs. We were put on active orders and tasked to ‘deal with the media, and push out positive stories.’ Basically, we were to follow our training.

“Then something happened. CNN sent a reporter named Wolf Blitzer to Baghdad, and CNN started broadcasting live from the street, around the clock; and for the first time in history, the American public was able to follow the happenings of a war before the military PR professionals could spin it and send it out to the public via the media.

“I can honestly say, our phones at the base did not stop ringing from about 0600 to 2200. They rang off the hook—all of them. We had no Air Force base near us, so every reporter from Lower Canada to Syracuse, all the way to the Finger Lakes region called us to get clarification about what Wolf Blitzer had just said on CNN. Family members, friends and even civilian employers of our entire deployed base called constantly asking for clarification of what Wolf Blitzer just said. It was non-stop. If we didn’t answer the phone, they would show up at the base, trying to gain access. There were dozens of these incidents daily. In the end, our small cadre of public affairs airmen and NCOs were privately wishing a scud missile would disable Wolf Blitzer just enough to shut him up. Of course, Wolf was the first of many members of the media who would go on to cover war time activities in the middle of a war zone. Everything we learned in our training had become obsolete overnight, and we had to make things up as we went. It was exhausting, stressful and exhilarating at the same time.

“Because of the Total Force initiative, the hundreds of civilian employers and the military spouses had never faced such an immediate and long-term departure of their loved ones or employees, and they all had questions. The military reserve and national guard across the nation were not prepared to answer those questions. Spouses thought their loved ones were going to lose their jobs, some couldn’t figure out how benefits worked and some were making far less money while deployed than they did in their civilian jobs. A few civilian employers quit paying deployed military members rather suddenly. It was a scary time for family members and a stressful time for civilian employers. There were no plans or policies in place, and everyone was confused.

“Our unit saw seven babies born while their fathers were at war, and I swore that I would never put myself in a position to be separated from my children to serve during a war. It is a huge sacrifice, and one I was not willing to make. Our first child was born in September 1992 and my enlistment was up in July 1993, so I left the reserves, and took a great deal of knowledge with me,” said DiFante.

Three of DiFante's five children have served in the military. "Our son served in the Marines, and two of our daughters are still serving in the Air Force. Our daughter, Nina, is a Staff Sergeant working in Command Post at my former unit in Niagara Falls. She just got a job offer to become an active reservist. It is a great job, and she will have the opportunity for both an active duty and a reserve retirement. Our daughter, Lauren, and our son-in-law Gavyn, are both Technical Sergeants stationed at Eglin AFB in Fort Walton, FL. Lauren just finished her tenth year and reenlisted after making a decision to retire with the Air Force. They have been on deployments to the Middle East, and Gavyn has been to the Netherlands. They are parents to our two granddaughters, ages 2 years and 2 months. They are willing to make the sacrifice I wasn't willing to make. I am proud of our children who have chosen to serve this country in the military and the sacrifices they continue to make."

DiFante is grateful for her time in service. "I would not trade ten years as an Airman for anything. I have enjoyed returning to Lackland AFB in San Antonio, Texas where all enlisted members of the Air Force must go for Basic Training and watching my daughters graduate. During Lauren's graduation, I even snuck over to my squadron's running track to get in a quick run. It was amazing how small the track seemed to me as an adult reflecting back on being there during my own basic training.

"The military taught me a lot about self-discipline and sacrifice. As a reservist, you have to give up an entire weekend every month and work 12 days in a row every month. It is not easy, especially when you are a full time working parent. It was the people from all over the world with whom I had the opportunity to work who taught me about leadership, humility, more sacrifice and reinforced a strong work ethic instilled by my parents.

"One of the most impactful leaders I've ever worked with was Major Smith. Major Smith had served as a helicopter pilot in the Korean War, and he was very quiet and stern, and he was one of the most respected officers on our base. I got to work for him for 60 days, and I constantly asked him questions, wanting to soak up every bit of knowledge and advice he had to share. One day he looked at me and said, 'Airman, you ask me more questions in a day than anybody ever has in a full week, and you never shut up.' I was startled and started in on a quickly devised apology. He looked at me in that steely way he had

and said, 'I don't mind really, but at the end of every week, I want to know what you learn from all the questions you ask.' I can tell you that our Friday conversations were wonderful, and he laughed and joked, which was not his typical demeanor. He really shared not only his experiences in Korea, which were powerfully emotional, but he shared about successes and failures of parenthood, leading teams, what it felt like to be afraid in a war zone and have the responsibility of leading others into battle. I have never forgotten this experience or Major (he went on to become Colonel) Smith. From this experience I learned that it's just as important to share with others the impact they have on you as it is to be impacted by them. That kind of communication builds relationships that have a 'forever impact' on who we are as people. That kind of relationship allows you to sew a little piece of the other person into the fabric of what is your personality. It supplements and complements who you are."