STIFEL

A Conversation With Some of Our Female Veterans for Military Appreciation Month



It's no secret that the women at Stifel are incredible. They work hard every day at the office — and as some of them are also veterans, I wanted to share their stories in honor of Military Appreciation Month.

At Stifel, we want to support our troops all year round. Not only have we been working to create a networking group for veterans, but we also recently volunteered with Little Patriots Embraced in April to pack deployment packages for a thousand military kids. While we know these efforts are the right thing to do, they also hold personal meaning to us, as our firm has many military service veterans. And so, this year, in honor of May's Military Appreciation Month, we're also shining a spotlight on our associates' time in service.

Five of the female veterans at the home office, including Michelle Daniel (Operations, Reorg Department), Wanda Richerson (Operations Associate, Advisory Operations, Account Services), Kimberly Smoot (IT Support Technician), Sophia Kelley (Human Resources Business Partner), and Twana Jackson (Operations, Reorg Department), shared with me the stories of their time in the military, the challenging transition to civilian life, and more.

Finding Camaraderie in the Military

Michelle, Wanda, Kimberly, and Sophia decided to join the military after high school because they weren't sure they were ready to go straight into college.

"I was actually planning to attend college in Florida when I decided to join the Navy instead," recalls Sophia. "My family and friends were shocked by the change of plans, but they were very supportive."

"I told my parents that college wasn't for me, but little did I know at the time that in basic training, I would be sitting in a classroom for nine hours a day," Wanda says about her decision to join the Army.

Meanwhile, Kimberly took the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test and performed so well that recruiters from every branch reached out to her. Like Wanda, she ultimately chose the Army.

"Everyone looked at me like I was a dead woman walking," she laughs as she reflects. "It was hard for my parents to hear that I was going to Iraq at the age of nineteen. They were terrified, and the truth was, so was I."

But Kimberly was ready to fulfill her obligation, despite the fear. Once in the Army, she worked hard and learned a lot on the job. Not only did she serve on a small team that went to civilian ports to oversee the loading and unloading of military ships, but she also spent time teaching Iraqis how to run their rail system and digitizing information.

Throughout it all, she found plenty of support in her team and eventually came to view them as her second family, especially as she discovered that relationships with those outside the military were not as easy to forge and keep.

"It was hard to get the timing right for phone calls," she says. "For example, if I had to leave in an hour, I couldn't afford to be in a certain headspace and have conversations that pull me out of what I had to do. It wasn't just my life at stake. It was my team's too."

Wanda, too, agrees on the immense value in the camaraderie between her and her team. "Those types of friendships don't go away after you leave the military," she says. "I'm still friends with many of those I was stationed with today."

Along with strong relationships, they all acknowledge they've carried discipline, time management skills, and structure into their personal and professional lives today.

"The military does not change people. Instead, it shows you who you really are," says Kimberly. "In settings where you are outside your comfort zone and have no control, the natural you emerges. I was constantly challenging myself and doing what needed to be done. It taught me about who I am as a person."

"My time in the Marine Corps taught me to take responsibility for myself and my actions, make timely decisions, and be 100% dependable," adds Michelle. "All of those skills now play directly into my work at Stifel."

Twana and Sophia share similar sentiments.

"Being in the Army teaches you what being a team really means," reflects Twana. "I had joined after seeing all the 'Be All You Can Be' commercials in the eighties. I wanted to be all I could be at 18, and the Army helped me become a loyal and responsible leader."

"Military service is difficult, demanding, and usually dangerous, but the camaraderie in the military is unmatched," adds Sophia. "My nine years in the Navy allowed me to hone personality traits and skills that helped shape the person I've become. I've cultivated the ability to meet challenges, be a leader, be disciplined, be dependable, and set an example for everyone around me."

Returning to Civilian Life

But transitioning from such a tight-knit community to civilian life can be incredibly challenging, especially since most people don't understand what it's like to be in the military, and that kind of strict, disciplined lifestyle does not translate easily.

"When you leave the military, there are classes on transitioning into civilian life," Michelle explains. "But the only way to really transition is to dive in and just do it. You apply military training to adapt to your surroundings and new life."

"It was hard because I was returning home to a mostly non-military family," Kimberly adds. "Many people didn't understand what it was like or know what questions to ask. You feel like you have to start over and figure everything out from scratch."

"Thankfully, my husband and many of my friends were still on active duty, so I still felt connected to the military in many ways," says Sophia. "Their support helped me transition from military to civilian life."

Even so, the shift into a new job on top of lifestyle changes can be tricky.

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"It wasn't uncommon to get a job and expect everyone to follow all rules as we had in the military," Twana says. "We had to learn to be flexible and adapt when there were exceptions to those rules."

Kimberly found it difficult getting hired as a logistical manager and ended up switching careers. Even so, she had to get used to the glass ceiling in the civilian world.

"In the military, things are more transparent. You know what it takes to get promoted to the next level, and you can be more direct in your approach," she reflects. "In the civilian workforce, I can be the most efficient, tactful, and productive employee, but that means nothing regarding getting a promotion. I actually saw more women and minorities given difficult tasks and holding positions of power in the military than I have in a corporate setting."

"I was in the military for three years the first time I went in, and I struggled with trying to find work and adjust to my new life. After six months, I went back and did another four years of service," Wanda adds.

The Military to Stifel: One Family to Another

But Kimberly, Michelle, Sophia, Wanda, and Twana eventually found their way to Stifel.

After leaving the military, Michelle decided to enter the banking industry. When a colleague quit and went to Stifel, she followed suit. Michelle immediately appreciated the firm's small, family-like feel and has worked at Stifel for over twenty years. She even helped Twana find her way to Stifel, and they're now extremely close friends.

"I loved the accountability, the camaraderie, and the sense of purpose in the military," Michelle says. "Every day, I woke up with a purpose. I knew what I was accomplishing in the military impacted people's lives, whether they realized it or not. I chose the Marine Corps because I felt they were the best, and I'm here at Stifel because I feel this firm is the best. People at Stifel come together to help clients. You care about your colleagues. They become a lot like your family."

Although Kimberly is a little newer to Stifel, she, too, has loved her four years here, citing programs like the Women's Initiative Network (WIN) as a major perk.

"Finance tends to have a specific look because people reach out to their network – and if your network is small, most people in it probably look like you. I was the only female on my team for around two years," Kimberly shares. "I'm happy to have WIN. It makes me feel more included overall. It's nice to have some feminine time and energy and hear different stories across the board. Many places where I've worked didn't have a program like WIN, so I appreciate seeing that here at Stifel."



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WOMEN'S INITIATIVE NETWORK