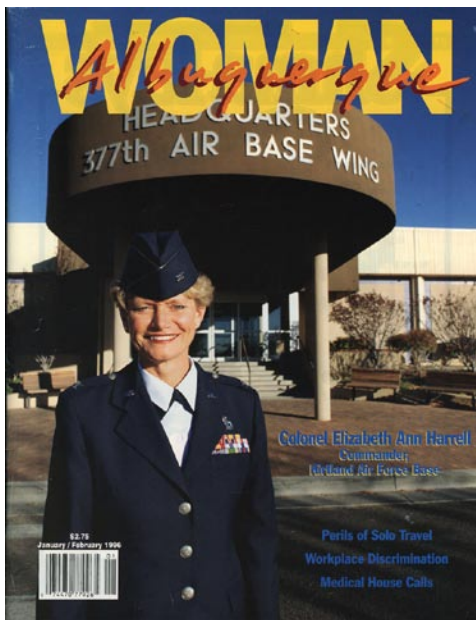


Colonel Elizabeth Ann Harrell

COMMANDER

Kirtland Air Force Base



The Wing Commander at Kirtland Air Force Base is Colonel Elizabeth Ann Harrell, the first woman to hold that post. Up to now it's been a male province.

Kirtland is a major installation, in military parlance, and a major opportunity for Commander Harrell. "This is a key command. It's a great opportunity to hold this job at this time in my career," says Harrell.

One of the reasons Kirtland is considered a major installation is that it supports more than 150 tenant units or associate organizations—in 1993 Air Force Materiel Command took over base operations, and the 377th Air Base Wing, Harrell's, runs the base (thus called the host command,) but other organizations (such as Sandia National Laboratories, Phillips Laboratory, the Air National Guard, the Defense Nuclear Agency, and The Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center, among many others) also work out of Kirtland—but have their own hierarchies. Most bases have one or two commands, some have more, but if Kirtland doesn't have the most, it's way up there. "This of course makes command an interesting process," says

Harrell. "There are 3000 in the wing. The balance [of 20,000 people who work at the base] do not work for me. You have to be a diplomat and do much by influence and persuasion. "If any attribute is valuable... it would be getting along... getting people to cooperate... and we do have a cooperative attitude."

It was through the ranks of the aircraft maintenance field that Harrell has risen to her present rank and position. From her bio, provided by Kirtland, she seems to have been promoted, trained, and moved around to various bases at fairly regular intervals. To an outsider, she seems to be on a "normal" track. Even so, she admits she's had a few advantages.

Her parents were both career Air Force—in fact, they met in Burma during World War II. Her father was a fighter pilot in the China-Burma-India Theater and her mother was a flight nurse working in China. It was a "great romance". Her brother went to the Air Force Academy, and is now a Colonel and Vice Wing Commander at Mountain Home AFB in Idaho. Her sister served in the Air Force, also, but left and has just become an attorney.

Colonel Harrell's four years in college at Emory were the only time in her life she has not been in the military. At that time, the military academies did not accept women, and she guessed if they had, she wouldn't have had even that much civilian experience. But, she didn't feel pressure to join the military, and didn't seriously consider the Air Force until after college.

Her second advantage was being assigned to aircraft maintenance. "I was put in a non-traditional field for women right at the start. It had been open to women, but not a lot of women were in it. I've worked for men who wanted me to succeed—not that they necessarily wanted it to be 'easy'!" she says with a smile. "I was able to work with truly outstanding non-commissioned officers. They trained me (I don't have a technical background,) took extra time, and taught me about how to deal with people."

What about women? In combat? Is there anything they can't do?

"At the moment, women are not in air combat control or para-rescue. I'm not privy to why women are included or not," Harrell says. "Overall, however, women have done as well, or as poorly, as the men."

"Women in combat is as much a social issue as a military one," Harrell continues. "What we've done is appropriate... We've done a good job."

As for gays and lesbians in the military, "It's a challenge to try and be fair to everyone and to be open-minded," says Harrell. "The policy we have is working. The military is a big institution, no different from the American public. We do a good job of educating people. Our program is an acceptable one. We're working hard to make it work and serve the nation effectively... People are people."

And Shannon Faulkner and her efforts to be the first woman to attend a state-supported all-male military college? "Of course, I don't know her," Harrell answers thoughtfully. "I don't think she received proper counseling... perhaps because of her background, her age... The situation reflects poorly on everyone involved."

Harrell's personal experience, on the other hand, has been a good one. Interestingly, she didn't feel she had to do better than men. She counts on her own strong internal drive. "I have been treated fairly. It's been a fair trade; I give back fair work."

The times she has felt extra pressure to perform well she believes happens to us all. "When you're new, you—everyone—has to reassure others things will be OK."

In 1976 when she entered the military, lots of things were not as open for women as they are now. "The military is not known for being ice breakers," Harrell says, "but it is opening career fields all the time." They make the changes they feel are appropriate, with caution and training.

"I've been in the Air Force during interesting times. It's changed a lot. The Air Force, the military service, is a wonderful opportunity for women. The opportunity is not given to you... but it's available. The Air Force tries to be an organization that everyone can advance in... It's a unique opportunity. The environment is challenging and enjoyable."

What exactly are these unique opportunities, for women? "A wide variety of jobs such as personnel, and financial planning, to loading weapons. The Air Force spends loads of time training and they give responsibility commensurate with ability, often right away."

Harrell has never regretted choosing the Air Force, or wondered about choices outside the military. She says she has no fantasy career. But like many women with demanding careers, there are choices to be made and things are not always easy.

"At 42, is there something? There's always a cost... for anyone. Homemakers, women who have children... Our generation is more 'aware'. Our parents didn't have the 'information barrage' we have today. But, I am very focused. And it's not just a 'military' issue. For our parents, who lived through the depres-



sion era, the World War... by the time they were 30, they had done, experienced, seen, put up with a lot—more than me. They raised three children in a strict environment. A premium was placed on responsibility and achievement... doing your best. There wasn't a lot of time, or money, for questions like—Who am I? What is happening? Am I going in the right direction?"

Colonel Harrell is divorced and has no children, but she does have two hunting dogs—pointers. "Pointers are the dog to have in Alabama," the state she calls home. She smiled, "They're called The Pointer Sisters."

Her husband was also on active duty, which made life difficult. "Is the military responsible for my divorce?" Harrell repeated the question. "That's hard to say."

With her job, aircraft maintenance... "There's lots and lots of long hours. Lots of temporary duty... being away from the home station... travel. It's hard to say if this contributed to personal issues." She stops a moment. "Is this any different for any woman?... Working full time?"

Who are her heroes, heroines? Military or not. Her greatest influence? "I'm a big fan of Jeanne Kirkpatrick [former ambassador to the United Nations.] She's a good example... of what a smart, interested person can do in and out of government. She's well-intentioned, contributes to our country. She's a useful person. Teddy Roosevelt: an interesting person, an interesting time. Both are charismatic—different from each other, but right for their times."

And her greatest influence? "My parents, of course. We're a close family." They believed in responsibility, achievement, producing the best product, giving something back. Everyone should. "But not everyone is geared to the military. The opportunity for national service should be open. Americans don't like to be told something is mandatory.

"Two chief master sergeants taught me how to supervise people... Some is natural, but. They were superior supervisors... very effective at getting the most out of people."

What's in store for the future? The military? Harrell herself?

What's the biggest problem? "Downsizing* it's a challenge. Smaller forces, smaller budgets. We need to be careful to ensure monies and people are put against what's really important."

Harrell has been in the military almost 19 years, which means next year (at 20 years in) she has her first opportunity to retire with full benefits. On the other hand, her appointment as commander of Kirtland could be an indication she's on a promotion track to Brigadier General.

"That's hard to predict," she says, laughing out loud, "but no time soon. Normal promotion consideration for Brigadier General is around 22 years. I'm just at 19."

A Command posting usually lasts 18 months to two years to give as many people as possible the opportunity to hold command billets. Colonel Harrell's next posting would most likely be the Pentagon as she



hasn't had a tour there—and it's usual to have one.

Does she plan to retire at 20 years? "No plans... but it's an opportunity to re-evaluate—Have I done the right thing? Am I working too hard?" She pauses. "I can't imagine my father ever asking that." Harrell laughs ruefully. "My parents wouldn't have asked."

Harrell has implemented a policy of wearing battle dress once a week—after all they are in the business of preparing for war. For her interview with Albuquerque WOMAN she was dressed in her BDU (battle dress uniform,) consisting of camouflage shirt and pants tucked into shiny black combat boots. At the end of the interview, when asked for final comments, she replied " I love animals, antiques, really good food, and expensive clothes."

A woman in command of Kirtland Air Force Base: a thoughtful, personable, smart, approachable person, Harrell's experience and comfort in the military are evident. She seems a good choice from a military standpoint—and a good role model for the rest of us.

Author's Note

I was aware of this interview on several levels—before, during, and after. As a child of the '60s and a person with no interaction with the military and a general distrust of government candor, I fully expected to get the company line on many of the issues we discussed—and in particular on sensitive issues like gays and lesbians in the military, and her point of view about Shannon Faulkner. And I says something to that effect up front: "I have a list of questions and it's up to you to answer or not as you see fit."

Colonel Harrell really surprised me. It was the first time in any interview where the interviewee started by asking about me and the magazine I was writing for. At no point did I get the blank face of the military, or a refusal to answer any question. She was always thoughtful and pleasant, even when I asked questions I'm sure she's been asked thousands of times.

My sense is that she knows exactly where the "company line" is and can be candid right up to it. If she was manipulative with me, it was very well done. She told me a couple of things "off the record" and of course made me feel like she'd shared state secrets, which she had not done. If she "stone-walled" me, it was done graciously and with great charm. She's a brilliant choice to interact with the public. Perhaps, she is the new face of the military—and if so, she's a great one. – ph

