Retired Army Full Bird Colonel Cynthia Blevins

1. Why did you want to serve in the military?

As a kid growing up in rural SC and witnessing a great deal of racial inequalities, I recall telling my mom that I'm going to be a lawyer, so I can help improve prejudice. I graduated high school and was off to Shaw University in Raleigh, NC. I was determined to be a lawyer and then life happened. I became pregnant and couldn't run track, so I had to quickly come up with a plan B. After having my daughter over the summer and returning to begin my Sophomore year, I was still uncertain how I was going to pay for college. I recall one day walking to class and being approached by the ROTC instructor. He assured me the Army would pay my college and send me to law school if I commit to 8 years. I was hesitant at first, but he was so convincing and told me I would never find a better career where I could travel the world and meet new people from all walks of life. I was excited, and the day came during my senior year when I received my Branch. I was disappointed I was denied an educational delay to attend law school after working so hard to get accepted. I was assigned as an Ordnance Officer and was so upset, but once I completed my training and joined my first unit, I couldn't imagine serving in any other branch. A few years later, I was offered the opportunity to go to law school because the Army was short lawyers. I was enjoying my Branch, so I declined the opportunity to become an Army lawyer and continued my career as an Army Logistician.

1. What was your greatest challenge while serving in the military?

I think for me the greatest challenge was always having to prove myself everyone I arrived at a new assignment. Regardless of my evaluations and promotions, I was always looked upon initially as incompetent. It took me several months to gain the recognition that most white males receive on Day 1 of arriving to the unit, but because I was female and black, I can't possibly know what I'm talking about. I took pride in hitting their egos. Once I became a field grade officer and worked with so many colonels and generals, they quickly knew my capabilities and I was sought out by different leaders to serve on their staff, however, the fact that I was a black female was always intimidating for some men. I was constantly battling against males on my staff who were threatened and attempted to destroy my character.

1. How do you feel about the kneeling from some NFL players?

I feel a sense of pride because what many fails to understand is the kneeling isn't a sign of disrespect to those who serve or the flag, it's a sign that blacks in America are under attack and we are simply trying to raise awareness to police brutality. I do not feel the players who kneel are dishonoring the flag or our military.

1. What was your most significant military accomplishment being an African American woman in a male dominated field?

I've had so many great accomplishments, but the most heartfelt was being selected to command the largest company in the Division with the most diverse mission in the country. I recall interviewing for hours and thought to myself that I wasn't going to be selected because I was the only black against five white males and one white female. We all wanted that Company and after several months, I recall being called into the Brigade Cdrs office and I'll never forget his words: Cyndi, I want you to be humble as I share with you the Company you were selected for, congratulations Delta Company Commander. I yelled in excitement and thanked him for making the best decision. I promised him he would never regret it. He informed me 5 of the 6 Battalion Commanders voted for me and he told me to make them not regret their decision. I was the first female to ever serve as Company Commander of that unit and I was glad to be selected to lead the greatest Soldiers in the Army.

1. What are the unique needs of the military and how do these needs vary amongst military families?

We ask a lot of our military families and they remain steadfast, unwavering and resilient supporters of our men and women who serve. My children are strong and resilient people. My daughter attended four different high schools due to military relocation and my son attended five different elementary schools and regardless of the constant reassignments and deployments, they put on a happy face to support our ever-busy military lives. Our families are indeed our greatest strength and inspiration and if it wasn't for their love and support, we would not be able to protect this great country.

1. How did deployment affect military marriages?

Deployments are tough for everyone involved. I truly believe the right support system must be established if the marriage is going to survive. I recall my first deployment to Saudi Arabia in 1998 and I was a young 25-year-old married female who had only been back from Korea for a year and was off again, away from my spouse. This led to serious breakdowns in communication and ultimately led to the end of our marriage. My ex-spouse wasn't supportive and didn't try to understand the military culture and way of life. As I remarried a few years later to a military member this time around, I immediately felt the difference in acceptance, understanding and support. The deployments were tough but being assigned in separate geographical areas was also stressful on our marriage, however, we knew the commitment we made to serve our country and we always made a point to not go over a month without seeing one another, except during deployments of course. I kept the children with me and my husband became the geographical bachelor. I have seen so many marriages ruined by deployments and it's tough, but my spouse and I made it work for over 15 years and we were both able to retire last year and now have all the time to spend with our three children.

1. How was transitioning from military culture to civilian culture for you and your family? The transition was easy as we never lived on a military installation because we wanted our kids to be as normal as possible and interact in an environment that resemble most of America. Mommy and daddy served, but our children didn't and ensuring they received a both of both culture was important. My husband and I are both retired and do not work so the civilian culture from that perspective is amazing. I have great friends and neighbors that have made the transition to civilian life such an amazing process. We are now living our beat lives because we don't have the stressors of having our day planned out with little to no opportunity to take a break and regroup before moving on to the next mountain to climb. I wouldn’t say it was hard, I would say it took some readjusting for sure. We plan for retirement and when it happens, you get a sense of accomplishment, but also a sense of emptiness. I find it easy to get caught up in military operations after being separated. I was still being contacted for guidance and input for former units, Officers, and Soldiers. I had to eventually cut it off as it was draining me and that was the reason I retired, to be a stay at home mom focused on my children. I definitely miss not having to pay a co-pay for doctor visits and medication. I feel that I've made the transition as seamless and stress free as I possibly could and while I miss serving my country, I enjoy being a mom to my son more.