

# CAREER MARINE



**If you know Karen Riecks (Eagles Preserve), you're keenly aware of the confidence that radiates from her. There is a calm, lightheartedness to her demeanor, but she carries herself with structured discipline.**

**It might surprise you to know this friendly, unassuming lady earned the rank of lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps before retiring – and received a Meritorious Service Medal with two stars, a National Defense Service Medal, and three Letters of Appreciation along the way.**

BY SCOTT GRAISON, STAFF WRITER

**Karen's career was headed in a different direction before the military came into play and changed her life for the better forever.**

"I grew up in a family whose mindset was that women were to be teachers or nurses. I spent a year as an educator, followed by a job with Proctor & Gamble."

Selling products for the massive conglomerate, Karen did a lot of traveling and enjoyed that aspect of her role immensely. Eventually, she returned to school for her

master's degree in religious education, followed by teaching for a year.

However, Karen found herself feeling directionless when none of these materialized into a lifelong career. "I was waitressing at a ski and golf resort and tutoring on the side. Then I wound up tutoring the son of a Marine Corps recruiter in Boyce City, Michigan," said Karen. "I became intrigued by the idea of military service, and the student's father told me to go talk to the recruiter in my native Detroit, Michigan."

She did, and the journey of Karen Riecks, "military marvel," began to unfold.

When Karen entered officer training during the early 1970s, she found a military organization where men dominated the headlines – and the glory. While she was segregated from her male counterparts during training, that didn't stop her from excelling immediately. Only 10 percent of the 41 students in Karen's basic training

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class received a regular commission, which she received when she finished second in her class at Quantico, Virginia, earning the rank of second lieutenant.

Still, it took a while for Karen to realize that she would be a good, long-term fit for the Marine Corps. “It took about five years for me to really learn about the Marine Corps, realize I now finally liked getting up in the morning and going to work, and realize that I wanted to commit to the Corps for a career,” Karen explained.

Her first occupational specialty was a meteorologist after being trained at Lakehurst, New Jersey, site of the famous Hindenburg crash. How does weather play a role in military objectives? “Land forces aren’t likely to go into battle without air cover, so the weather has to be determined for an optimal outcome. Weather extremes can be prime for a battle, but they can also negate a mission,” said Karen.

An example of that can be seen in Karen’s recollection of a mission that occurred in May 1980. Helicopters were deployed to get the hostages out of Iran, but the mission failed horribly: All the



**Earlier in her career, Karen (front row, far right) put her servant leadership skills to work by co-leading this training class of female Marines.**

helicopters crashed due to a massive sandstorm. “While I wasn’t directly involved in the tragedy, my neighbor across the street was one of the Marine pilots. It’s a sobering reminder of the impact a naturally occurring phenomenon can have a disastrous effect on military operations,” she reflected.

As her time as a weather officer came to a close, Karen attended the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, to study in the computer man-

agement systems program. Unsurprisingly, she earned another master’s degree, this time in computer systems management.

Karen also made several other detours in a career that saw her rise in rank and responsibility. She stopped in places like Yuma, Arizona; Okinawa, Japan; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Kansas City, Kansas before arriving at her final destination in Washington D.C., where she spent the final 13 years of her military tenure.

According to Karen, one of the greatest roles she held started in 1987, when she was selected by name to head up a new information office and tasked with the mission of installing the first-ever network at Headquarters, Marine Corps. “Later, from 1991 to 1998, I managed the office responsible for the development and ongoing modification of all computer systems supporting Marines, except personnel and pay system,” said Karen.

These systems included recruiting, assignments, promotions, casualty, retention, awards, special family needs, and retirement – just to name a few! “I managed a \$15 million annual budget for

**Karen’s parents looked on proudly during a ceremony honoring her promotion to lieutenant colonel in 1990. Karen credits her success to God’s guidance in her life.**





**Top Left:** Karen's father, who served as a USMC pilot who flew aerial reconnaissance during World War II, pictured here flying a photography mission above the Pacific, was proud to tell friends that his daughter served in the Marines. By the time she retired, Karen outranked him!



**Left:** Karen's highly decorated military career included two Meritorious Service medals with two stars, a National Defense Service Medal, a Sea Service Ribbon, several expert marksman-ship badges, and more.

operations, plus \$1 to \$2 million budget for research and development," remembered Karen.

Her military journey came to an end on September 1, 1998, when she was placed on the retired list. By that time, she had earned the rank of lieutenant colonel, receiving a Meritorious Service Medal with two stars, a National Defense Service Medal, and three Letters of Appreciation for her work. Karen has since attended reunions with the "weather folks," as she calls them, and still keeps in occasional communication with her fellow officers.

It's easy for Karen to pinpoint the life

lessons she learned during her service. "I learned to have confidence in myself," said Karen. "Today, I know I can execute any task I'm assigned. I can see a situation and, if no one is taking control, I know I can step in and execute the task."

When it all started, she went into the Marines lacking focus and direction. After completing her service and having plenty of responsibility, Karen had become a decorated visionary. It's what shows on her face today, and it's easy to see why.

After all, Karen has a motto in life, which she simply, but confidently expresses: "I'm a Marine. I can do that."

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