



Above: Melody Mitchell (third from left, back row) with Lean In team in front of Kuwait Towers. At left: Melody Mitchell in uniform — standing tall.

Measuring UP ... and then some

Lt Col Melody Mitchell speaks to Arab Times about opportunities for women in the United States military, the challenges they face, her own journey, takeaways from her career, and Lean In Kuwait.

Patriots & peers
Lean In to duty ...
mentorship

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Photos courtesy of Melody Mitchell



A hundred years back, it would have been unheard of women taking on active deployment or serving in combat positions in the armed forces and this even though women have served in the military in different roles in history. For instance, during the American Civil War, women helped the war effort as cooks and nurses, while some brave hearts disguised themselves as men to fight on the front lines. Some women also worked as spies sneaking out information past unsuspecting British troops. In 1914, women managed to challenge social and cultural norms and joined the militaries of several countries in the West in large numbers and more diverse roles. In 1917, Loretta Walsh was the first woman to enlist in the military as a woman. Fast forward to the Second World War in which women worked in non-combatant roles with several hundred serving as field intelligence agents. In the 1970s, most Western armies, including the United States, started allowing women to serve in active duty in all military branches. Today, women in the United States Armed Forces serve alongside men in a variety of roles establishing a legacy of service.

Lt Col Melody H. Mitchell has served the United States Air Force for two decades. As a federal agent, she spent most of her career in security and counter-terrorism and protecting assets and people from danger. A natural leader and go-getter, and passionate about gender equality and empowerment Lt Col Mitchell went beyond the call of duty and touched lives through her roles as a TedX Speaker, Middle East Specialist and, in her personal capacity, as Founder of Lean In Kuwait. During her long years in the Middle East, Lt Col Mitchell worked on communications and contextualized information by building relationships based on trust both within her immediate community and with the locals. Her years in the Air Force helped her develop a strong sense of service, and to build a community of like-minded

people who feel connected to something larger than themselves.

Lt Col Melody Mitchell's family is not new to military service. Her father was in the Air Force long before her parents met, and it was expected that her younger brothers would join the military. But Melody, the daughter who grew up in an all-pink bedroom with dreams of becoming either a detective or a movie star went against the tide and joined the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI).

Lt Col Mitchell's extensive deployments in the Middle East have given her experience and extensive knowledge of the region. Her most challenging deployment was in 2010 in Kirkuk, Iraq, a region believed to be sitting atop four per cent of global oil reserves, with Arabs and Kurds claiming it as their own. Her years in the region have been enriching and eventful and contrary to popular perception, she has never faced any challenges working with the local male population, who have accepted her for her skills and experience. Lt Col Melody Mitchell's relationship with Kuwait began in 2011 when she was stationed at the Ali Al Salem Air Base as the AFOSI detachment commander for a year. In 2014, she came back to join the Office of the Military Cooperation in Kuwait, a department she continues to work for. Lt Col Mitchell is passionate about leadership and gender equality, and about empowering other women to embrace leadership. Her need to promote and raise awareness about gender equality led her to set up the first Lean In Chapter in Kuwait.

Here, Lt Col Melody Mitchell speaks to Arab Times about opportunities for women in the United States military, the challenges they face, her own journey, takeaways from her career, and Lean In Kuwait.

The views expressed in this interview are Lt Col Mitchell's own and do not reflect the views of the Air Force or Department of Defense.

Arab Times: What inspired you to join the armed forces?

Mitchell: Initially, I sought out funding for college. The Air Force awarded me an Air Force Reserve Officer Corps Training (AFROTC) scholarship that enabled me to go to my college of choice, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) with the Air Force paying my tuition.

Once I became a cadet and learned more about the military, I developed a sense of service. I appreciated being part of a community of like-minded people who feel connected to something larger than ourselves. I liked the idea of having a job guaranteed once I graduated and the responsibility of contributing to the security of our nation.

AT: Did you choose not to fly?

Mitchell: I had the opportunity to fly, but what is great about the Air Force is that there are so many different career fields. I felt the pressure a lot to be a pilot, but I didn't think it is me. I loved solving puzzles and being a detective when I was growing up. I think that is why it seemed such a perfect fit to be a federal agent in the Air Force. Moreover, anything you see in regular society, you are likely to see it in the Air Force. We are a self-contained community. You see it in the Navy as well, especially on aircraft carriers – it is like a whole city on a ship.

AT: How easy or difficult is it for women to join the armed forces in the States? How equal is it in terms of opportunities?

Mitchell: A woman and a man have equal opportunities to join the armed forces in the United States. There is no difference with genders in a successful application; if one passes the military standards, they may join.

With regards to opportunities, now all fields are open to men and women. Over the years, the military removed barriers to the application of unique fields. Women may now serve in combat, special forces, rangers, and infantry positions. Women can serve in submarines as well.

AT: How strong is mentoring in the United States Air Force?

Mitchell: From my limited perspective, I cannot speak on behalf of the Air Force, I am aware of at least one formal online mentoring program in the Air Force, where mentors and mentees can connect on the internet even when not geographically co-located. Then there's informal mentorship where a more senior ranking person elects to support someone more junior. The amount of this happening tends to depend on the career field and the ranking officers taking the initiative and time to support others. Mentoring is critical to success in the Air Force. It is necessary to seek guidance to learn the Air Force culture to learn what is needed for the Air Force to consider future potential. There are also now several unofficial online communities where members can seek mentorship and support. I help run an online Facebook group that now has 9,800 members. It is for active duty, reserve, guard, or retired Air Force officer women.

AT: What is needed to join the armed forces? Apart from a spirit of service, what are the other conditions needed?

Mitchell: Every service has its own requirements and standards to join as a military member. There are also different qualifications to join as enlisted or an officer, or members can serve in the Reserves or National Guard capacity as well. Everyone has their own motivations for joining and they can if they qualify.

AT: How grueling is training for women?

Mitchell: This question really varies on the person and type of training, mentally or physically grueling? It all depends on the amount of mental and physical preparation and stamina for each member. Training that might be grueling for me may be easy for another woman and vice versa. Training can also be grueling for men too, and training can be grueling for anyone and everyone but what matters most is getting through it. Once complete, it is worth it. Grueling is not necessarily a bad thing; many women welcome the challenge.

AT: Why did you join the Air Force?

Mitchell: My dad influenced me indirectly to join the Air Force. My dad was in the Air Force long before my parents met. Later he worked for the government as a civilian. When I was a little girl, I had an all-pink bedroom, and yet I had a framed picture of an A-10 Warthog, the

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