



Melody Mitchell in military gear. (Inset): With her husband.

## SPECIAL REPORT

## Measuring up ... and then some

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plane he worked on. My dad would also take me to the Air Shows, and I would love to see, hear, and feel the planes overhead. It all left a lasting impression, even when we moved from Louisiana to California, I would see incredible planes like the B-2 Bomber fly overhead when the students were outside for recess. Although I didn't want to be a pilot, I loved planes.

Yet, I did not grow up, saying that I wanted to be in the military. My parents always talked as if their sons, my two younger brothers, would join the military, and then as a surprise to us all — I decided to join the military, not them. When I was a little girl, I wanted to be a detective or a movie star. I could not choose until I decided I would be a movie star that played a detective. I did not pursue an acting career, but ultimately I did become a detective for the Air Force when I joined the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI).

**AT:** You have served in different areas of the Middle East. What was your most challenging posting?

**Mitchell:** Challenging can be both positive and negative. All of my deployed assignments have had their challenges and successes. My most challenging deployment was probably to Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2010. There were many aspects and experiences I loved. I didn't even mind the frequent rocket attacks as I had a great mission and team. However, what made it challenging and stressful for me was my own personal stress, the pressure I put on myself, and challenges with my leadership.

Whereas, my deployment to Jordan was especially challenging yet exciting because, with a small team, we built a functioning detachment from scratch. In two weeks, we went from not even having an office to writing security reports. The base leadership empowered my team and me to really integrate with the building base and lead security efforts.

I would also like to point out what has not been a challenge. Being a woman working in the Middle East, my American colleagues will often ask if men from the Middle East 'work with me'. I am proud to share with them that I have never had a problem. I am treated with the utmost respect in all my dealings. I deeply value the mentorship, and relationships built with all of my colleagues. I value their acceptance of me, and I sense they appreciate my dedication to the mission. I have a tremendous amount of respect for all whom I worked with and continue to partner.

**AT:** What has been the biggest take away from your career in the armed forces?

**Mitchell:** I am surprised I lasted this long. I do not fit the typical military mold. But more and more I'm seeing that any person can contribute, have a meaningful career, and accomplish the mission. My biggest takeaway may be similar to anyone working in a large organization. It is not enough to do the job and look after the people assigned to you. You can be motivated and dedicated, but you must also ensure you look after your career and learn what is necessary to promote, etc. It is important to get networks and sponsors and not appear to be too independent and self-sufficient. If you are a minority, you must be pro-active to ensure you have the same access and opportunities as those in the majority group. I think the hardest lesson for me to learn, and it did impact my career was to ask for help. I always knew I was

part of a special community, but it took me a long time to understand that I can turn to that same community for assistance. I wasted a lot of time trying to prove myself to myself and others when I could have asked for help.

Now that I may be in the twilight of my military career, I'm fierce in my determination to ensure minority leaders have the tools, network, and support needed to be successful in the Air Force. I value creating environments where others know they can ask for and get the support they need.

**AT:** What brought you to Kuwait?

**Mitchell:** In 2011, I spent a year stationed at Ali Al Salem Air Base as the AFOSI detachment commander supporting security and force protection for base personnel and assets. I returned in June 2014 when assigned to the Office of Military Cooperation — Kuwait. My husband and I also enjoyed living in Kuwait, so I extended for the 3rd year.

When I was searching for a new assignment, I wanted a career-broadening assignment to focus on being a Middle East specialist at any embassy in the region. When I learned the Foreign Military Sales for the Kuwait Air Force was available, it made so much sense to take that assignment and stay longer. I had a lot to learn in this position, and the experience gained from already living in Kuwait helped. I extended for the third year and am eligible to retire in 2020. If I retire, we may try to stay in Kuwait.

**AT:** How did you get involved with Lean In? And what made you establish a network in Kuwait?

**Mitchell:** I want first to specify that my experience with Lean In is my personal experience, and although there is a SECDEF Directive from 2015 that allows Department of Defense (DoD) members to participate in Lean In Circles in the workplace and duty day, this is not an official endorsement. These views are mine and do not reflect the United States Air Force nor the DoD.

I read the book 'Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead' by Sheryl Sandberg when published in 2013. It changed my life and immediately my friends and I started a Lean In Circle. A Lean In Circle is a peer support/mentorship group, ideally around 8-12 persons that meet regularly for support, growth, and accountability. Women in law enforcement within the military are even more of a minority and face additional challenges. We were worried that we would be stopped, so we ensured we met in the headquarters cafeteria, and we invited men to be a part of the Circle as well. We connected, learned, and grew together. It helped us through challenging times, and we felt supported. When I deployed, I created another Circle and continued to enjoy the camaraderie and connection gained by these peer-support groups.

When I moved again to Kuwait, I noticed a Kuwait network did not exist. After about a year or so, I created a Circle at the US Embassy Kuwait and a personal Circle. In 2015, I was invited to meet with the Secretary of Defense Ash Carter and Sheryl Sandberg. He invited women representatives of service branches and ranks. I traveled from Kuwait to be there, and we also met with Gen (Retired) Ann Dunwoody, the first woman four-star general, and the then-Secretary of the Air Force Deborah James. The SECDEF hosted a Lean In Circle, listened to our concerns and then held a press conference to declare the DoD support of Lean In Circles to promote retention of women in the armed forces. That

was a huge moment for me knowing that future military Circles could be supported and not blocked. Overall we are a brother and sisterhood in arms; we are stronger as a team when we work together. When women feel more supported and less isolated, they are willing to take on more responsibilities and challenge themselves even further.

Quite motivated, I returned to create additional Circles in Kuwait by founding the Lean In Kuwait Network. In 2016, we grew large enough to qualify to join the Lean In Regional Leaders Program. That gives us access to additional support from Lean In and an amazing network of other Regional Leaders. We meet annually at a Lean In Leaders Conference, most recently this last August.

**AT:** How active is Lean In Kuwait?

**Mitchell:** We are active and growing. Right now, we have about 20 Circles meeting monthly, and we have a few pending additional Circles coming on board next year. Our primary focus is to identify and support Circle Leaders to create regularly meeting Circles for sustained personal and professional growth. I intend to create a sustained environment where women can learn together, encourage each other to get outside their comfort zone, take risks, and support one another through the good, the great, and the challenging times too.

**AT:** You work on gender equality — what is your perception of the role of women in Kuwait?

**Mitchell:** I cannot speak to the overall role of women in Kuwait, as with any culture, the answer is vast and complex. I can say that for those women I have met and worked with, I'm quite impressed by their drive, motivation, and dedication to their ambitions. Although I do see additional challenges women face here due to laws and social norms, there is a lot more in common than one would assume between US and Middle East culture. As women, we face many similar gendered challenges, and we also have similar hopes and dreams.

I have also been pleasantly surprised at how open men in Kuwait have been to engage in conversations about bias. I led a few recent co-ed discussions on "50 Ways to Fight Bias". A Lean In developed program to raise awareness on what bias is and provide concrete tools and ideas to counter it. Sometimes, in the US, I sense men and women may not want to acknowledge bias because they see it as weakness; however, here every one is open and there is always a great discussion.

I'm especially fond of working with women in law enforcement and the military. My dream future job would be to "Enhance the capacity and capabilities of women in Middle Eastern Security Services". This is in alignment with the UNSCR 1325 promoting Women, Peace, and Security. I've been fortunate to lead some initiatives to partner Kuwait policewomen with US military women for subject matter expert exchanges. Nothing makes me happier than women bonding over shooting, self-defense, and other tactics and techniques.

**AT:** How do you look back at your journey in the military?

**Mitchell:** I look back with appreciation at the sense of responsibility, service and partnership I have built while working for a cause. I have had some pinch-me moments when I have thought 'I really get paid to do this'. I remember walking on the beaches of Oman or flying over Baghdad in a British Puma (helicopter) at a lower altitude than a Blackhawk, thinking "I get paid to do this!". I have had so many exciting moments. I have had a terrific career.