

Leadership ACHIEVEMENT Award

COL. (RET.) KIM CAMPBELL '97

By Jeff Holmquist



Col. (Ret.) Kim (Reed) Campbell '97 calls it a completely unexpected turning point in her life.

Moments after watching the Space Shuttle Challenger explode after lift-off, the preteen's professional trajectory was instantaneously altered.

Prior to that tragedy in 1986, she'd been a social butterfly with no clear goal in life.

"I wasn't driven," she says. "There wasn't anything I was going after, and I was just along for the ride in school."

Like someone flipping a light switch, however, Campbell suddenly decided she wanted to follow in the footsteps of the heroes who'd risked everything to explore the heavens.

Now, almost 40 years later, Campbell shares the successes and challenges of her subsequent personal and professional journey, which hasn't yet included the job of astronaut. Instead, Campbell's inspirational story is rooted in her development as a military leader and the unexpected career detours that helped shape her.

These days, Campbell is a leadership coach and author dedicated to helping the next generation navigate the complex road to becoming more effective leaders. So, it's no surprise that she is among the inaugural honorees selected for the Association of Graduates' Leadership Achievement Award.

"It's very humbling," she says of the

honor. "Because if you look around at Air Force Academy graduates, there are many who are excelling in leadership roles in the military, in the business and corporate world, and in charitable organizations. It's just an honor to be recognized among that group of incredible Academy graduates."

FAMILY LEGACY

Prior to the Challenger disaster, Campbell says she had "zero interest" in joining the military or enrolling at the Air Force Academy, where her father, Chuck Reed, graduated in 1970.

But when her father shared that several U.S. astronauts had begun their careers as USAFA cadets, Campbell set her sights on gaining an appointment.

Campbell would join the Civil Air Patrol at age 13 to give her a leg up in the USAFA application process. She eventually went on to leadership roles in her local unit.

She took up cross-country running in anticipation of the physical challenges that would await her as a cadet. Her father even installed a pull-up bar inside the family's bathroom so Campbell could improve her upper body strength.

"By the time I got to the Academy, I could max the pull-ups," she proudly reports.

Despite the hard work, Campbell received a rejection letter from the Acad-

emy. She was devastated.

"The rejection hurt," she admits. "I could have quit on my dream. But sometimes the things that aren't on our bio or resume are things that really make us stronger. It provided me motivation."

Her father's Academy classmate Dana Arbaugh '70 encouraged her not to give up. Campbell launched an impressive letter-writing campaign, mailing at least one letter each week to the USAFA Admissions Office updating its staff on the steps she was taking to improve her standing as a prospective cadet.

Her persistence paid off. In early June, just days before the Class of 1997 arrived for Basic Training, Campbell received an acceptance letter. Campbell had made alternate plans to accept an ROTC scholarship and attend the University of California-San Diego in the fall, but she headed to Colorado Springs instead.

LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

When she arrived at the Academy, Campbell committed herself to thrive, not just survive. During her cadet career, Campbell would serve as the Cadet Wing superintendent and then finally the Cadet Wing commander, a leadership role her father had ascended to as a firstie.

After graduating No. 1 in military order of merit with the Class of 1997, Campbell became a Marshall scholar and finished two master's degrees in business

administration and international security. She then became an A-10 Warthog pilot, earning the callsign “Killer Chick.” She would go on to fly 375 combat hours during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Campbell admits that letting go of her dream of becoming an astronaut was disappointing, but she doesn’t regret how her career evolved.

“We set goals for ourselves, and we have these dreams, but then sometimes our priorities change,” she says. “When I went on to fly the A-10, I found my passion and purpose in supporting our ground troops. I really saw where I was making a difference in helping our ground troops get home safely.”

In 2003, as Campbell was supporting ground troops in Baghdad, her A-10 was heavily damaged by enemy fire. Despite initial fears that she might have to eject over enemy territory, Campbell brought the aircraft safely home thanks to her wingmen. Having wingmen you can trust is critical to a leader’s success, she adds.

The harrowing experience provided another leadership lesson and the title for her future book, *Flying in the Face of Fear: A Fighter Pilot’s Lessons on Leading with Courage*.

“We have this view of how we want things to turn out, but there’s going to be this path of ups and downs and challenges,” she says. “Those moments made me stronger, even if I didn’t see it in the moment.”

OFFERING INSPIRATION

During her 24-year military career, Campbell served as a squadron commander, operations group commander, Air Force senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, military assistant to the under secretary of defense for policy, and instructor in the Department of Military and Strategic Studies at USAFA. The support of her wingman at home, husband Scott Campbell ’95, was a huge key to her success, she says.

Campbell’s final assignment was as director of the Center for Character and Leadership Development at her alma mater. Guiding leadership



Col. (Ret.) Kim “Killer Chick” Campbell ’97 in front of an A-10 Warthog. Col. Campbell flew 375 combat hours during operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. (Courtesy photo)

and character education for the Cadet Wing was a full-circle moment for her.

“It was an opportunity to give back,” she says. “It was more than a job for me. It was something that I’m passionate about.”

During her tenure as director, which ended in 2021, Campbell particularly enjoyed sharing stories and wisdom from life’s journey so far.

“When I started out, I had this idea that leadership was, ‘Put on this tough exterior, have the answers, be strong, credible and capable,’” she says. “I do think credibility is important, but I’ve also learned that human connection builds trust. You just need to be authentic to who you really are and connect with people on a human level.”

NEXT CHAPTER

Campbell currently serves as managing director of Victory Strategies, a leadership development firm working with companies and organizations nationwide.

“We’re bringing together these world-class practitioners ... people who have been there and done that,” she explains. “We speak from experience, we speak from success, we speak from failure. We speak from the opportunities we’ve had and the challenges we’ve faced and share that with businesses and corporations.”

She also continues to inspire the next generation as a mentor for current and future USAFA cadets, as well as Civil Air Patrol cadets. In addition, she speaks regularly to nonprofit organizations that encourage women and girls to pursue careers in aviation. 