

“The Retirement of LtCol. Melinda Grafton U. S. Air Force” occurred at the Women’s Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery on Dec. 11, 2015. Melinda and her boyfriend (Army Veteran) Mike Lestingi are very special to me and dear friends--and they will be very happy with the posting of the highlights of her special day. They will be able to send it to the many people—family, friends, active and retired military, etc., who came to her well-earned retirement, and they in turn to *their* family and friends, as well as those many friends and colleagues she met and served with during her 26-year military career that were unable to attend. I was privileged she asked me to “retire” her along with her friend, retired Air Force Major General Eder, a former officer she once served with.

Of particular interest is how I chanced upon Mike and Melinda. A couple of weeks after I ran into Mike at a local Irish Pub (Beckett’s), and got to know him and like him, I had the pleasure of meeting his friend Melinda. Because she was in civilian clothes at the time, I had no way of knowing and was very pleasantly surprised to learn not only that she was in the Air Force, but that she was an Lt.Colonel as well! A day or two after that initial meeting Melinda asked if I would like to be her “guest” on July 27th, 2013 at the Korean War Memorial for the *60th Anniversary of the signing of the Korean War Armistice*.

Not knowing what being “*her guest*,” meant, I replied to the effect that I had been to the *50th Korean War Anniversary* with my Brother Jim—who, together with a third, now deceased Brother, Rich—all served in Korea. I then told her I was tentatively planning to be there for the *60th Anniversary*, but would be honored to attend with her and Mike. She then asked me to be at the Pentagon parking lot early on the morning of July 27th for “*screening*” before boarding military busses to the Korean War Memorial.

On that day I parked at the Pentagon and met both Melinda (wearing her Air Force uniform), and Mike, and was duly “screened,” “as in “*Airport Screening*.” As Mike and I were boarding the bus, Melinda, informed us she had to leave for a short time but would meet us at the Korean War Memorial.

When Mike and I arrived at the Memorial I was amazed at the huge crowd of Veterans and scores of dignitaries. Then I was totally surprised when Mike and I were escorted by a member of Melinda’s staff to the front of this huge gathering and seated in the *second row, center stage*, directly in front of the speakers’ podium. My beloved Marine Corps Band was playing behind and slightly above the podium.

But was I even *more* surprised to learn for the first time that *President Obama* was to be the guest speaker, right there at that podium directly in front of us. Now I knew *why* I had to be “screened” before arriving there!

Seated in a first row seat right in front of us was Marine Corps Chief of Staff *Maj. Gen. Michael Regner* who I had met before, and literally dozens of other American and Korean Generals and Admirals. Other government senior officials filled out the first and second rows. I also noticed that directly in front of me were two empty seats that I paid no particular mind to until here come's Melinda escorting a middle-aged couple and she sat them in those two empty seats before joining Mike and me as the "Program" began. After the Band played some great music, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, and other U.S. and Korean dignitaries made brief remarks, Secretary Hagel introduced *The President of the United States*. And there he was right in front of us! And, as usual, he made an eloquent speech. Midway, he made this statement, and here's where our Melinda comes in:

"Korea reminds us that our obligations to our fallen and their families endure long after the battle ends. To this day, 7,910 Americans are still missing from the Korean War. And we will not stop working until we give these families a full accounting of their loved ones. Like Sergeant First Class William Robinson—26 years old—missing for 63 years. This week, in Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, the Robinsons will welcome their Uncle home and finally lay him to rest—with full military honors. And here today, to pay honor to him, Mr. and Mrs. Robinson, will welcome their Uncle home."

Then he pointed to the front row and asked Mr. and Mrs. Robinson to please stand up. Yes, they were the couple Melinda escorted in and seated in front of Mike and myself after she left to pick them up at their hotel and escort them to this ceremony. Not only that, but she did all the preparatory work before that to locate and bring them there!

Her efforts for the past several years, right up until the day of her retirement at Arlington, was to work with others at the Pentagon whose mission was and is to find the missing veterans of *all* our recent wars. Finding Staff Sergeant Robinson's remains (and his living relatives) was but her latest success story.

After the ceremony, Mike, Melinda, and I, accompanied by my Brother Jim, took Mr. and Mrs. Robinson to lunch at the *National Press Club* where Jim is a member, enabling us to get to know the Robinson's and more about their nephew, a lot better. What a memorable day!

That's the kind of exceptional work Lt. Col. Melinda Grafton performed day in and day out during her career. Just as her counterpart Military Women do EVERYWHERE and EVERY DAY! That's why we attended her deserved military retirement at The Women's Memorial.

Jerry Merna
03-14-16

LT. COL. MELINDA F. GRAFTON RETIREMENT CEREMONY

11 DECEMBER 2015

(Pictorial by Gerald F. Merna; photographs and program by Melinda's staff, family and friends delineated below
(Majority of photos from Melinda Grafton's Facebook Page)



Women in Military Service for America Memorial Arlington, Virginia

Official Party, Volunteer Ceremony Participants & Support Staff:

Honoree: Lieutenant Colonel Melinda F. Grafton, United States Air Force

Guests of Honor and Speakers: Major General Mari K. Eder, United States Army (Retired); First Lieutenant Gerald F. Merna, United States Marine Corps (Retired)

Proffer: Major Liz Norris

National Anthem: Master Sergeant Amaani Lyle

Narrator: Master Sergeant Cohen Young

Planner: Camille Hambey

Planner/Music: Captain Deborah Hatala

Logistical Support Staff: Major Craig Cherek, Captain Prial, Technical Sergeant Tia Jenkins, Technical Sergeant Melissa Rush, Briana Ontiveros

Honor Guard: Joint Base Andrews Honor Guard

Official Photographer: Staff Sergeant Kristen Duus, USAF; (Additional photographs provided by Joe Lestingi, Michael Lestingi, Kathleen Bis, and other attendees and guests)

Family Members and Special Guests: Myra Grafton, Stacy Grafton, Katy Grafton, Jay Grafton, Karen Wright. Beth Robbins, Briana Ontiveros, Michael Lestingi and Oded Meyer



SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

***Ceremony Officiated By
Major General Mari K. Eder, USA, Retired
&
1st Lieutenant Gerald F. Merna , USMC, Retired***

Welcoming Remarks

Arrival of the Official Party

National Anthem

Invocation

Remarks by Major General Eder

Presentation -- Defense Meritorious Service Medal

Remarks by First Lieutenant Merna

Retirement Order

Certificate of Retirement

Certificates of Appreciation

Special Presentations

Flag Presentation Ceremony

Lt Col Grafton's Remarks and Presentations

Departure of the Official Party

Reception Immediately Following

LIEUTENANT COLONEL MELINDA F. GRAFTON, USAF

Lieutenant Colonel Melinda F. Grafton is the Director of Public Affairs, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA). DPAA is responsible for the fullest possible accounting for our missing personnel to their families and our nation. Lt. Col Grafton led the communication team in releasing information for over 200 service members being accounted for from past conflicts. She also engaged with media to amplify stories to inform audiences of our mission, while



executing the strategic communication effort during the accounting community's reorganization.

Lt. Col. Grafton previously was the spokesperson for the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics. She developed and executed communication plans that resulted in successful press conferences and media engagements across the acquisition, research, and logistics spectrum.

Lt. Col. Grafton was the Commander of the 655th Air Expeditionary Squadron (AES). The 655 AES provided specified administrative control over approximately 800 Airmen who served in Joint Expeditionary Taskings (JET) and Individual Augmentee (IA) taskings in Regional Command (RC) East, Sharana Afghanistan. The 655th provided expeditionary combat support to United States and Coalition Forces operating in Afghanistan.

Her experience has also included the war fighting missions of AWACS, B-52, A-10, F-16 and Headquarters European Command. Her Air Force career has spanned the additional career fields of Current Operations Officer, Section Commander and Manpower Management. She has provided public affairs support for Operation ALLIED FORCE, Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM and Hurricane Katrina Relief Operations.

Her awards include the Bronze Star, three Meritorious Service Medals, two Joint Commendation Medals, one Joint Achievement Medal, four Air Force Commendation Medals and Achievement Medal.



My Last Parade

Let the bugle blow

Let the march be played

With a forming of the troops

For my last parade.

The years of war and the years of waiting

Obedience to order, unhesitating

Years in the States and years overseas

All woven in a web of memories.

As many good friends and exotic places, too

In the waning sunlight begin to fade

With the martial music of my last parade.

My last salute to the service and base

Now someone else will take my place

To the sharp young airman marching away

I gladly pass the orders of the day

Though uncertain of what my future may hold

Still, if needed – before I grow old –

I'll keep my saber sharp, my powder dry

Lest I be called to my duty by and by.

So let the bugle blow

Fire the evening gun

Slowly lower the colors

My retirement has begun

MAJOR GENERAL MARI K. EDER, USA, RETIRED

Major General Mari K. Eder retired from the U.S. Army in May 2013 with 36 years of dedicated service to the nation. A Pennsylvania native, Maj. Gen. Eder grew up in Stoneboro, PA, graduating from Lakeview High School. She earned a bachelor's degree (Cum Laude, with honors) and master's degree in English from Edinboro University and a master of Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, PA.



Maj. Gen. Eder commanded at every level in the Army, from platoon through division level. She was selected for progressively challenging positions culminating in several executive leadership assignments at the highest levels. Her last assignment was as the first Commanding General of the U.S. Army Reserve Joint and Special Troops Support Command, headquartered in Salt Lake City, UT. She previously served as the first full-time Deputy Chief of the Army Reserve, and developed the Reserve communications enterprise, including recruiting and marketing communications and legislative liaison, led the nationwide Army Reserve Ambassador Program, and guided public affairs, community relations, and family support programs. Prior to this assignment, she served on the Department of the Army Staff at the Pentagon as the first full-time Deputy Chief of Public Affairs, during the period of initial operations in Iraq. She has had additional joint experience, serving with the U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, where she was assigned as the Deputy Director of Public Affairs. There she directed theater media relations during NATO operations in Kosovo and at the inception of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. She served as Chief of Staff for the Reserve Forces Policy Board in OSD (Reserve Affairs) from 2002-2004.

She is the recipient of numerous civilian and military awards and recognitions. Her military awards include the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit (with Oak Leaf Cluster) and the Meritorious Service Medal (with 5 Oak Leaf Clusters.) Maj. Gen. Eder was named an Honorary Member of the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General Corps in 2011, an honor only accorded to two other individuals previously. She received an honorary doctorate from her alma mater, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 2014.



The Air Force Song

**Off we go into the wild blue yonder,
Climbing high into the sun;
Here they come zooming to meet our
thunder,
At 'em boys, give 'er the gun!
Down we dive, spouting our flame
from under,
Off with one helluva roar!
We live in fame or go down in flame,
hey!
Nothing'll stop the U.S. Air Force!**

FIRST LIEUTENANT GERALD F. MERNA, USMC, RETIRED

For the average person, completing one career in one's lifetime is quite enough – not so for Gerald F. (Jerry) Merna of Arlington, VA. Jerry successfully completed three careers in 51+ years, while receiving two academic degrees from The George Washington University by attending night school for 15 years.

Enlisting on his 17th birthday in 1947 with two years of high school, Jerry rose to the rank of First Lieutenant “the hard way,” coming up through all the enlisted ranks, one at a time, throughout 22 years of dedicated service.



Following a tour as the Marine Recruiter for Rockland County, NY, he volunteered for Korea in 1952. Jerry saw action both as an Anti-Tank Assault (ATA) Section Leader with Weapons Co., 1stBn, 5th Marines and later as a Platoon Sergeant with Easy Co., 2nd Bn., 5th Marines, both units with the First Marine Division. He was commissioned a Second Lieutenant while he was the Legal Chief at Headquarters Marine Corps, at age 36 and then a Master Gunnery Sergeant. He volunteered for Vietnam and served 13 months as the Assistant Division Adjutant for the 3rd Marine Division where he was promoted to First Lieutenant. He earned numerous decorations and awards, including two Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medals, both with Combat V's, the Combat Action Ribbon, and two Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry awards, one with Palm (Unit Award) and the second with Bronze Star (an individual award). Upon his return to the U.S. Jerry was assigned to the Marine Air Reserve Training Detachment, Andrews Air Force Base, MD, and served as the Adjutant and Casualty Notification Officer until his retirement in 1968.

Jerry then began what was to be his second career – 18 years with the U.S. Postal Service (USPS). He was commissioned in the *Postal Career Executive Service* (PCES) as the Executive Assistant to the Postmaster General. Upon retirement for the U.S. Postal Service, he began his third career as the Advertising Director, and later Vice President, for two large defense-related associations in the Washington, DC area.

Jerry now is fully retired and is a mentor to many military members across the services.



“My Name is Old Glory



I am the flag of the United States of America. My name is Old Glory. I fly atop the world's tallest buildings. I stand watch in America's halls of justice. I fly majestically over great institutes of learning. I stand guard with the greatest military power in the world. Look up! And see me! I stand for peace - honor - truth and justice. I stand for freedom I am confident - I am arrogant. I am proud. When I am flown with my fellow banners. My head is a little higher. My colors a little truer. I bow to no one. And am recognized all over the world. I am worshipped - I am saluted - I am respected. I am revered - I am loved, and I am feared. I have fought every battle of every war for more than 200 years: Gettysburg, the trenches of France, Normandy, the deserts of Africa, the cane fields of the Philippines, the rice paddies and jungles of Guam, Okinawa, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Guadalcanal. Iraq and Afghanistan. And a score of places long forgotten by all but those who were with me. I was there. I led my airmen - I followed them. I watched over them. They loved me.

I was on a small hill in Iwo Jima. I was dirty, battle-worn and tired, but my sailors and Marines cheered me, and I was proud. I have been soiled, burned, torn and trampled on the streets of countries I have helped set free. It does not hurt, for I am invincible. I have been soiled, burned, torn and trampled on the streets of my country, and when it is by those with whom I have served in battle - it hurts. But I shall overcome - for I am strong. I have slipped the bonds of Earth and stand watch over the uncharted new frontiers of space from my vantage point on the moon. I have been a silent witness to all of America's finest hours. But my finest hour comes when I am torn into strips to be used for bandages for my wounded comrades on the field of battle, When I fly at half mast to honor my soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen, And when I lie in the trembling arms of a grieving mother at the graveside of her fallen son. I am proud.

**My name is Old Glory.
“Dear God - Long may I wave.”**





LtCol Melinda F. Grafton, USAF



Mr. Joe Lestingi, Invocation



1stLt Gerald F. Merna, USMC w- Melinda



MGen Mari K. Eder, USA (Ret) with LtCol Grafton



MGen Mari K. Eder, 1stLt G.F. Merna, LtCol Melinda F. Grafton



LtCol Grafton awaits retirement ceremony



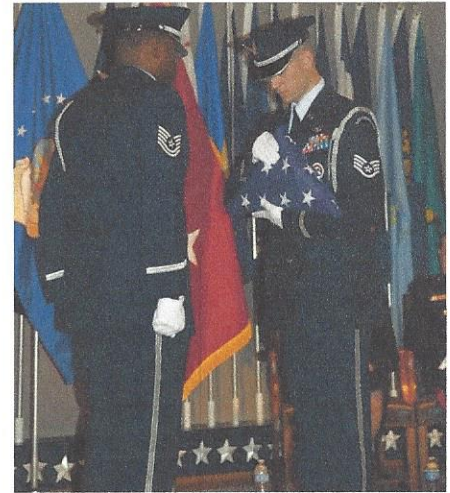
Colors on Stage of Women's Memorial, Arlington National Cemetery



U. S. Air Force Color Guard



Color Guard Presents Arms to begin ceremony



Folding of the Coiors



Flag is presented to LtCol Grafton



Mr. Mike Fowler, Defense POW/MIA Acctg. Agency, makes a special presentation



MGen Mari K. Eder U.S. Army (Retired) and LtCol Melinda F. Grafton, U. S. Air Force



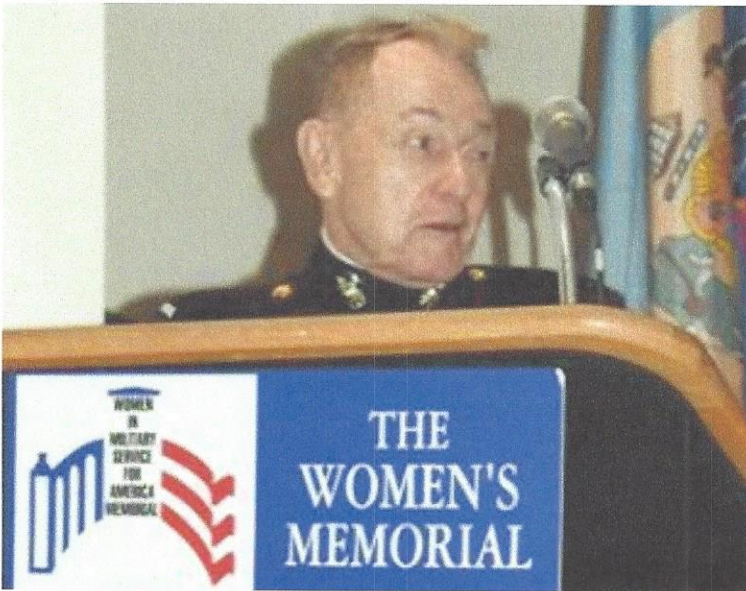
Commemorative Flag is presented to Lieutenant Colonel Grafton



MGen Eden USAF (Ret) with LtCol Melinda Grafton



Lt. Merna, LtCol Grafton and MajGen Eder Retire LtCol Grafton



Lt. Merna gives his remarks



LtCol Grafton expresses her thanks and gratitude



OFFICIALLY RETIRED!!!



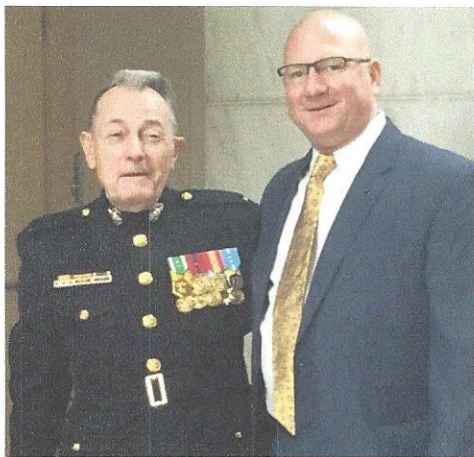
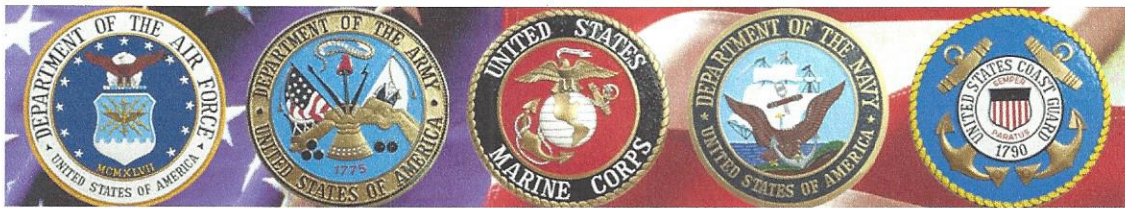


Expressions say it all as Jerry congratulates his very dear friend Melinda, (more a second Daughter) upon her retirement





Lt. Merna, LtCol. Grafton, Melinda's daughter Myra Grafton, and Son Jay Grafton, with MGen, Mari K. Eder



"Two Dudes:" Jerry Merna - Mike Lestingi



A special cake for a special Lady

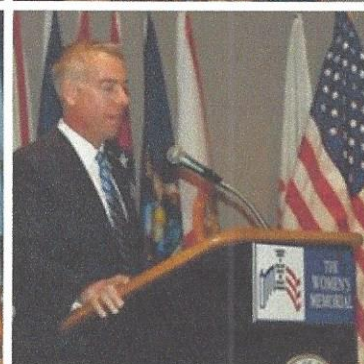


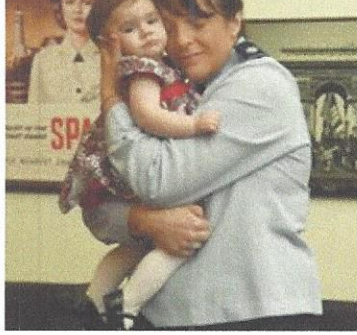
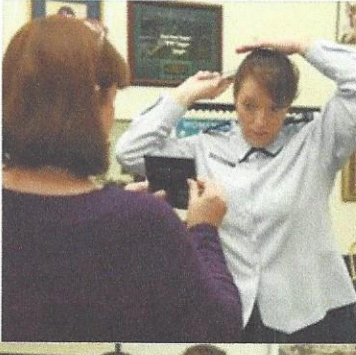
"Yeah, he LIKES Cake!"

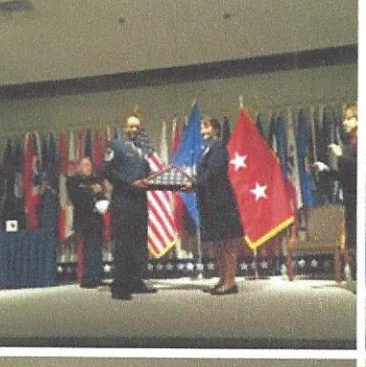
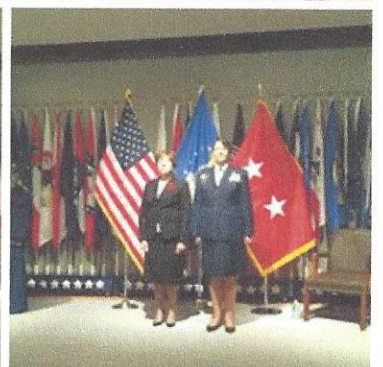


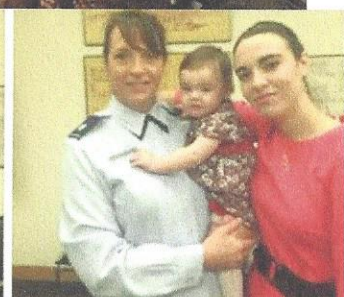
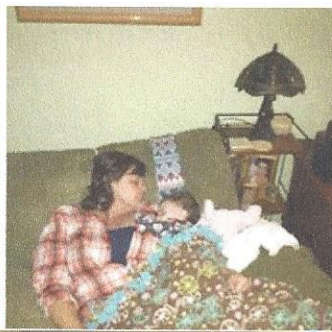
Jerry Merna with daughter, Linda Merna Figura* Melinda with Dr. Kathleen Bis and Mr. Amir Afkhami *(These two Photos by Dr. Kathleen Bis)

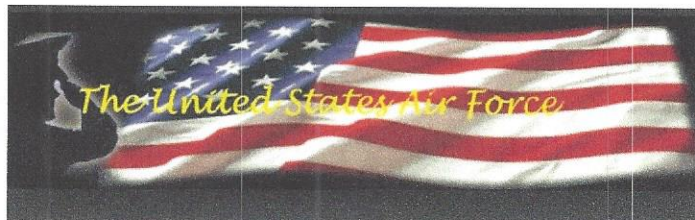














L: Gerald F. (Jerry) Merna with Melinda and Daughter Linda (Merna) Figura



Melinda and Friend at Air Force Memorial



Melinda with Friends



Joseph Lestingi



(Partial invocation written and read by Joseph Lestingi at Lieutenant Colonel Melinda Grafton's Retirement Ceremony at the Women In Military Service For America Memorial, Washington, DC on Friday, December 11, 2015. Joseph is the father of Michael (Mike) Lestingi, U. S. Army Veteran and devoted boyfriend of Melinda).

Let us always remember we are forever in the presence of God as we gather to recognize and to celebrate Lieutenant Colonel Melinda Grafton's 26 years of committed, courageous, dedicated, devoted, faithful, loyal, and outstanding service in the United States Air Force and to our country. Thank you for safely bringing all of Melinda's family and friends from near and afar to celebrate her many achievements. And thank you for bringing Major General Mari K. Eder and Lieutenant Jerry Merna into Melinda's life as friends and mentors and for having them preside at her retirement ceremony today as we gather to wish her Godspeed in the next exciting phase of her life. Please continue to bless with good health and good fortune Melinda's children, J.W. and Kirsten, her beautiful granddaughter, Ainsley, sister, Carrie, and brothers, Frank and Mark. We know Melinda's parents, Fay and George, who are now with you, have smiling faces and great pride in their hearts. And in a similar way, we ask you to recognize Melinda's many fellow officers, enlisted service men and women, and civilians who are here today. All citizens are very fortunate to have persons of such character serve in the defense of the greatest country on earth. Because of their service, citizens of the United States enjoy untold freedoms which are often taken for granted. Melinda throughout her distinguished service was deployed many times. We remember and celebrate her many efforts in highlighted assignments from rescuing Katrina victims and coordinating rebuilding efforts in New Orleans, to commanding more than 800 airmen in Afghanistan, and most recently as Public Affairs Officer for JPAC, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command whose motto is "Until they are home".

(Partial remarks of First Lieutenant Gerald F. Merna, U.S. Marine Corps (Retired), at December 11, 2015 retirement of Lieutenant Colonel Melinda F. Grafton, U.S. Air Force).

Melinda is one of almost two million women veterans. Of these, over 300,000 have served on land, at sea, in the air and on space missions. From the American Revolution to Panama, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq, women have served in some way in every conflict. History tells us that 33,000 women served in World War One and almost 500,000 took part in World War Two. During the Korean era 120,000 women were in uniform and 7,000 were deployed in theater during Viet Nam. During Desert Storm seven per cent of the total U.S. forces deployed were women - over 40,000 of them. Military women, including Melinda, have fought and died in Iraq and Afghanistan - more than in all the wars since World War II. According to the Department of Defense, over 230,000 have served in the Middle East since 2001, over 650 have been wounded and 120 have died. OUR own Melinda *is* among those who have served this country –proudly and voluntarily - since its beginning. She was successful because she was not only good at what she did, but excelled at it, primarily because she was proud to be a member of the United States Air Force, serving her country as so many outstanding women did before and with her, knowing she was still setting the standards for those who would come AFTER her. She is and was one of those amazing women who do amazing things. Lt. Colonel Grafton, this Marine salutes and congratulates you, and is honored to have been asked to officially “retire” you today, confident in the knowledge that you will continue serving your country, family, community and friends the only way you know how to, lovingly, patriotically, thoroughly, and successfully.



GFM: 03-14-16