

Spotlight: Denise Rayder

First, I have to say—I don't particularly enjoy talking about myself. But here I go.

I was raised in Oliver Springs, Tennessee, and graduated from Oliver Springs High School in 1984. In 1988, I enlisted in the United States Air Force, leaving for basic training on October 24 of that year.

After basic training, I attended Imagery Processing Technical School at Lowry AFB, Colorado. Upon graduation, I was assigned to Detachment 1, 480th Reconnaissance Technical Group at Howard AFB, Panama. There, I provided imagery support to Tactical Analysis Teams conducting counterdrug operations throughout Central and South America, as well as to the Joint Special Operations Task Force and deployed U.S. combat units during Operation JUST CAUSE. During my time in Panama, I met my husband, and in 1991 we welcomed our daughter, Tabitha.



My next assignment took me overseas to the 496th Reconnaissance Technical Group at RAF Alconbury in the United Kingdom. While stationed there, I supported Operations PROVIDE COMFORT, PROVIDE PROMISE, and DENY FLIGHT. In 1993, I gave birth to my son, Kristopher.

When my tour in the UK ended, I requested assignments in the southern United States—but the Air Force had other plans. Instead, I was assigned to Minot Air Force Base, North Dakota (which, last I checked, is not a southern state). There, I provided photographic support for the 5th Bomb Wing and the 91st Missile Wing. My work during a Nuclear Operational Readiness Inspection and a major Defense Nuclear Agency exercise earned praise from senior leadership. I was also selected as the alert photographer for Minot's Missile Alert Facilities, where my team's imagery was essential to Strategic

Arms Reduction Treaty requirements. During this time, I also went through a divorce.

After experiencing plenty of cold North Dakota winters, I was finally assigned to a southern base—Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. (And yes, I still don't enjoy talking about myself.) While there, I provided photographic support to NASA and numerous federal agencies following the tragic Space Shuttle Columbia accident in 2003. I also produced imagery critical to establishing long-term AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missile upload procedures for the B-52H.

My next-to-last assignment was with the 1st Combat Camera Squadron at Charleston AFB, South Carolina. During this time, I deployed to New Orleans to document Department of Defense and federal Hurricane Katrina relief operations. I was later deployed to Camp Victory, Iraq, where I photographed complex U.S. Air Force Explosive Ordnance Disposal procedures.

My final duty assignment brought me to Las Vegas, Nevada, where I supported Presidential- and Secretary of Defense-directed special projects on a diverse test and training range. In 2012, after 24 years of service, I retired from the Air Force and returned home to Tennessee to spend time with my parents.

After retiring, I continued my education and earned my Associate degree in Business Management as well as a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration.

In 2015, I was blessed with my granddaughter, Sydney, and in 2020, my grandson, Ayden, was born. I currently work as the receptionist at the Ben Atchley State Veterans' Home, where I have served for the past 12 years. I am also working through the VA to become a certified peer sponsor to assist with military transition support.

Today, I cherish time with my mother (my father passed away in 2018), my German Shepherds, and especially my grandchildren.

And while I may not love talking about myself, I am incredibly proud of the journey.

