



The U.S. Navy seemed like a natural fit for **John Ramirez** who was on his high school swim team, enjoyed being around the water, and needed some help paying for his education. He was also used to frequent moves with his parents who served in the Army.

Ramirez enlisted in 1992, first working as an aviation structural mechanic in a E-2C Hawkeye Squadron and later moving to a EA6-B Prowler Squadron for a three-year stint as a reservist. A 1997 transition to the Army National Guard prompted a job change to combat engineer and brought his total years of service up to an even dozen with duty stations that included the Naval Air Station Norfolk, Andrews Air Force Base, and the Pentagon.

“I had two deployments during my career,” said Ramirez. “One was in the Navy off the coast of Bosnia. We were the first over the horizon for missile launch and execution, and I remember 12 on/12 off flight operations. In the evening when the sun goes down over the horizon, it’s a near seamless transition from the ocean to the sun with a kaleidoscope of colors and other ships outlined in a dark black hue.”

Those years of service helped Ramirez earn two associate degrees, three career study certificates, a bachelor’s in business management from George Mason University and a master’s in business administration from Bellevue University. He had a successful career in the banking industry before deciding to move in a different direction. Ramirez now works as a Loan Specialist in the Culpeper Office, delivering Community Programs that will benefit residents of 22 counties in central and northern Virginia.

“I started working with the VA to assist veterans like me and then learned about a financially geared Rural Development opportunity,” said Ramirez. “My work with Rural Development allows me to help better communities, serve our government in the United States, and make it a better place to live and work.”





Though he wasn't a naval aviator, Single Family Housing Technician **Stephen Adams** played a pivotal role in getting those planes airborne during a deployment to the Persian Gulf at the height of Operation Enduring Freedom. You might not hear that story if you stop by his desk at the Virginia State Office, but it's just one of many great examples of heroes among us on the RD team.

"It goes back to that old 'Top Gun' movie," said Adams. "When they talked about putting the Alert 5 on the CAT, that was the aircraft sitting on the catapult ready to launch within five minutes. That's pretty much how I spent my entire deployment as the only Close-in Weapon System chief petty officer for two battle groups.

"I ended up making a total of five visits to five different ships, including the Nimitz, that submitted casualty reports. In each case, I was usually able to help them find the problem within 24 hours.

"I earned three different medals and a little bit of a reputation out of that assignment, so I thought it was a pretty good time. I didn't do it for the medals. I liked being able to fly around and help people."

That's just one of many highlights of a 26-year military career that almost played out entirely on land. His father had served in the Army in Vietnam and Adams fully intended to follow in his footsteps when he visited a recruiter in Boone, North Carolina, with two high school friends.

"I scored really high on a lot of the technical aspects of the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), so it opened up all kinds of different programs for me," said Adams. "The more we talked about it though, the more we thought that we shouldn't lock ourselves into the Army just yet. The only other one we could get to talk to us was the Navy recruiter in West Jefferson. He gave me a list of things that I would qualify for in the Navy based on the ASVAB scores and I thought they looked interesting."

The Navy also offered an option to complete boot camp at a higher grade (E-3 instead of E-1) and then advance to E-4 after his initial schooling. Adams worked on the computer and radar systems that controlled the ship's weapons, starting with the guns and later adding a designator for missiles. He quickly rose through the enlisted ranks before receiving his commission as a chief warrant officer in 2001.

During those years, he served aboard two guided missile destroyers, three aircraft carriers and one guided missile frigate that protected U.S. interests around the world. Adams' first ship, the USS Towers, had seen action in the Vietnam War and was sunk as an artificial reef off the coast of Hawaii in 2002. His last was the USS Enterprise, the Navy's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier and the world's longest naval vessel.

While he was attached to the USS The Sullivans in 2004, then CW2 Adams decided to apply for a limited duty officer position that demanded worldwide assignability and played to his strengths in technical leadership and management. His final post before his 2008 retirement was with Commander, Undersea Surveillance, at Dam Neck, Virginia, working to detect, classify, and report information on submarines and other contacts of interest.

"I wanted to go as far as I could before I retired and advancement came much faster on the LDO side than in the chief warrant officer track," said Adams. "People have asked me if I would still join the military if I had it to do all over again and I was like, 'Oh yeah, no hesitation whatsoever. I would sign up again in a heartbeat.' It was probably the best decision I ever made."



When Marshall Woods says he's a team player, he really means it. The former college athlete felt a duty to serve his country and found himself drawn to the organizational structure of military units who set high standards for performance and accountability.

"There's nothing like that team mentality where you know everybody's working towards a goal and is mission oriented,"

said Woods. "I guess I gravitated to the Army because some of the jobs interested me along with benefits like education and training."

He enlisted in 2008 as a financial management technician and graduated from the Airborne School at Fort Benning, Georgia, before deploying to Afghanistan in 2010. His outstanding performance in that theater earned him the Afghanistan Campaign Medal with Campaign Star, National Defense Service Medal, Global War on Terrorism Service Medal, and two Overseas Service Ribbons.

In his eight years of active duty, Woods also received four Army Commendation Medals, five Army Achievement Medals, and two Good Conduct Medals. He was able to put his athletic skills to work as well while still on active duty. Woods is a five-time member of the U.S. Army Men's Slowpitch Softball Team and was twice selected for the U.S. Armed Forces Softball Team. The four-time gold medal winner received those accolades twice as team captain.

Woods is grateful for the financial assistance he received to obtain a bachelor's degree in project management and a master's in human services counseling (life coaching and counseling). Woods says he believes in the mission of Rural Development and thinks USDA does important work. He now works in the Virginia State Office as a loan assistant for Community Programs while studying for a doctorate in education leadership on his own dime.

"I know the impact USDA has had on rural development because I was born and raised in a small town in Virginia," said Woods. "It's not just about food and healthcare. It's also about essential services like clean water and sanitation. I thought it would be awesome to work at a place that I knew could positively impact my community and eventually even my friends and family."





With his family history, you could say that **Jason Harter** was destined for military service. His paternal grandfather was in the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division in World War II and his maternal grandfather served in the Navy in Korea.

While both branches had a lot to offer, Harter decided to write a new chapter in the story by joining the Air Force. His Army grandfather wasn't too happy with the decision but couldn't dispute the benefits of joining the only branch with an affiliated academic institution to give him a jump start on his education.

"All of my training and schools were applied to my associate's degree in criminal justice through the Community College of the Air Force," said Harter. "I just had to take core courses like math, English, and speech."

Family also played a big role in his choice of occupational specialty. Harter traveled to 34 states and eight countries for training and security force assignments at Lackland (Texas), Minot (North Dakota), and Robins (Georgia) Air Force bases as well as Sather Air Base and the Baghdad International Airport in Iraq.

"My great uncle was the very first helicopter pilot for the Tennessee State Patrol, so I had an interest in police work because of him," said Harter. "I've always had a protective instinct too, so that just seemed like a good fit for me."

Harter guarded Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles in Minot and helped protect the main airport hub in Iraq, ensuring safe travels for troop maneuvers, prisoner of war handoffs, and foreign and US dignitaries. He also provided security for three Army convoys from Baghdad to Taji, earning an Air Force Commendation Medal for his service in that theater. Harter later retrained in combat arms, becoming the noncommissioned officer in charge of that unit with oversight for training about 6,000 people per year on eight small arms weapons systems. His team was responsible for the armory and maintenance of all those weapons as well.

Harter made the difficult decision to leave the Air Force after a nearly 11-year career due to a series of spinal and knee injuries and a thyroid condition related to Iraq's burn pits. Unfortunately, those injuries also prevented him from transitioning into a planned career in civilian law enforcement. He worked at the Veterans Administration and Job Corps, which falls under USDA and the U.S. Department of Labor, before landing at the Social Security Administration.

"I kind of had to reinvent myself after I got out of the service," said Harter. "I used the 9/11 GI Bill to get my bachelor's degree in business administration with a specialization in human resources. Then, I pushed through to my MBA with a focus on healthcare administration in 2013.

"I was the very first 9/11 GI Bill Yellow Ribbon Program recipient at King College (now university). My picture was on pamphlets and other promotional materials at that time. My supervisor in Georgia, who is now the commander of security forces at Arnold Air Force Base, called and said, 'Why are you on a billboard in Nashville?'"

Today, the former staff sergeant is an area specialist for Community Programs in Virginia's Lebanon Sub Office where he uses those protective instincts to look out for residents of the 10 Southwest Virginia counties in his coverage area. He says the job change has allowed the unofficial "poster child" for military education to better use the degrees earned through those benefits.





It would be an understatement to say that **Virginia State Engineer Dave Kolmer** comes from a military family. His father and uncle served in the Army. His brother, wife, niece and nephew were in the Air Force and another nephew is a Navy test pilot.

“I’m most proud of my own three kids who all enlisted in the Virginia Air National Guard of their own accord,” said Kolmer. “Daniel was in the ammunition career field. Maggie served in intelligence and Stephen still works avionics on the F-22.”

Kolmer served in all three components of the Air Force (active duty, Air National Guard, and Air Force Reserve) during a military career that included one tour for Operation Iraqi Freedom and numerous temporary duty stations around the world in support of Air Force missions.

Along the way, he gained valuable work experience in engineering design and construction, airfield pavement evaluations, logistics management and air base facilities management as a base civil engineer. Kolmer also held a squadron command and served with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in a combat theater, receiving the Bronze Star Medal with Star Device and numerous other awards along the way.

The registered professional civil engineer retired at the rank of lieutenant colonel in 2013 and transitioned to federal civil service, working for the Army Corps of Engineers, Defense Logistics Agency, and the Department of the Army. In fact, his current job with USDA RD is the only civil service position the Richmond, Virginia, native has held outside of the Department of Defense.

“I love my current job and am proud to serve my fellow Virginians,” said Kolmer.

