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## Karen Anderson awarded Steel de Fleury Medal for contribution to the engineer regiment in Afghanistan



Karen Anderson, deployed to the Afghanistan Engineer District-South from March 2009 to December 2012, was presented the Steel de Fleury Medal Nov 21 by Afghanistan Engineer District-South Commander Col. Vincent Quarles. (USACE Photo by Karla Marshall)

KANDAHAR Airfield, Afghanistan – Backing away from a challenge is not in her character, neither is doing something half way. Karen Anderson, the tenacious executive officer, was recognized Nov. 21 with a Steel de Fleury Medal for those character traits and the many behind-the-scenes contributions she made to the Afghanistan Engineer District-South and Army Engineer Regiment during her nearly four-year deployment to Afghanistan.

The de Fleury Medal is an award of the Army Engineer Association and was named in honor of Francois-Louis Teissedre de Fleury, a French engineer in the U.S. Continental Army during the Revolutionary War.

According to the AEA, there are four levels of the de Fleury award. The Steel Medal is presented to junior soldiers and civilians whose selfless service provided the Engineer Regiment with support. That support assured mobility, enhanced protection, enabled expeditionary logistics, and built capacity in order to provide commanders with the freedom of action needed to win full spectrum operations in an era of persistent conflict.

“It is an honor and a privilege to have the engineer community recognize me for my contributions to the overall Engineer Regiment,” said Anderson who deployed from the USACE Northwest Division in Portland, Ore. “I have given 100% of my effort to the district during

my tour and without the support of the command teams, OICs (area officers in charge), operations office, human resources office, special staff and the joint visitor bureaus staff throughout the district’s AOR (area of responsibility), I could not have executed my tasks nor contributed to the District’s mission so successfully.”

“Many people do not know the extent of Karen’s responsibility or her dedication to the district’s mission,” said Lt. Col. Stephen Bales, Anderson’s supervisor and the district’s deputy commander. “Her willingness to go the extra mile to get the job done right despite every challenge that came her way is unparalleled.”

Being an executive officer is often a thankless job, but to Anderson, she was well-suited to the role as she has held a variety of positions in many disciplines.

“I started my career as an active duty airman in 1985,” said Anderson. “My Air Force career laid the ground work for what was to come as I held a myriad of positions to include Aerovac Specialist, Mortuary Affairs, Patient Affairs Advocate, and Hospital Systems Manager.” All of which required attention to the smallest detail and a compassion for people who were hurting.

“Helping people through hard times was really rewarding, but emotionally draining,” said Anderson. “After four years, I needed a break.”

Anderson left active duty in 1989 but continued to work for the Air Force another 11 years as a civilian.

“I was a mission planner at Holloman Air Force Base High Speed Test Track but as the years passed, I wanted to return to a people-focused job,” she said.

That drive to make a difference eventually led to a position with the Oregon State Police Major Crimes Unit. Anderson became a crimes analyst and prepared case data for use by the state’s district attorneys.

“I can’t say that culling through crime scene information and pulling together data for trial was ‘fun,’ but it was very gratifying to contribute to the pursuit of justice,” she said.

Learning to look through the prism of right versus wrong, and to not rely on emotions when making decisions has been instrumental in fulfilling her role as the executive officer at the district.

“There are times when we all want things to be a certain way because it is simply what we want,” Anderson said. “I often hear folks complain about the choice of food, lack of entertainment, insufficient transportation, etc., but like them I had to remind myself that I’m not in Afghanistan solely for my benefit. There’s a bigger mission that must be accomplished, Soldiers to support and my comfort always came second to the district.”

Anderson also said that deploying is not for everyone.

“We all make sacrifices to come here and work. Being separated from my family is difficult but I feel honored and privileged to serve. There are few opportunities for civil servants to serve in a contingency environment. My opportunity offered me the chance to routinely think outside the box to execute the mission.”

When she returns to the U.S. Anderson will work a second time for a previous Afghanistan Engineer District-South commander. “Once again I will have the privilege of working for Col. Anthony Funkhouser who was the district commander in 2010-2011. Now he is the Northwestern Division commander in Portland, Ore., where I deployed from in 2009.”