

# Getting to Know the 43rd Chief of Signal

## *A path marked by travel*

**Laura Levering**

*U.S. Army Signal School*

It isn't uncommon for a service member to be well-traveled, but to be 45 countries well-traveled?

In many ways, the 43rd Chief of Signal and Signal School Commandant, Col. Julia M. Donley, isn't your average leader. And although she can attribute much of her travel experience to opportunities that have come with military service, Donley's love for exploring is deeply rooted.

"My whole life has really been about traveling, and so it really started when I was about 2 months old," she said.

### **The Early Years**

Born in Louisiana to two college professors, Donley moved to her parents' home state of New York shortly after birth. An only child, she developed a penchant for learning about other cultures. That fondness continued to grow well into her teenage years and beyond, largely due to experiences she had along her journey.

At age 15, Donley moved to the Czech Republic with her parents, whose decision to take a sabbatical led to more cultural exposure. During her senior year of high school, Donley was accepted into a program that enabled her to study abroad in Russia, which further deepened her passion for travel and learning about other cultures. When it came time to decide what to pursue post-high school, pursuing higher education was inevitable. Her career path, on the other hand, was not.

"I'd always knew I wanted to serve the country in some way, but for the beginning part of my life, I thought I was going to be in the State Department and be a diplomat," Donley said.

Heeding advice from her father's best friend, a Vietnam veteran, she researched several Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) programs and was offered a scholarship to George Washington University (GWU) through Georgetown University's ROTC.

"I had always wanted to live in D.C., so it worked out," she said. "And that's how I joined the Army... I had no idea what I was getting into."

### **Career Path**

While at GWU, Donley did a second study abroad in Russia and commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Signal Corps in 2000, earning a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs (Russia and Eastern Europe). She later earned her Master of Arts in Security Studies (with a focus on Russia) from Kansas State University.

"Because I had spent so much time in the Czech

Republic and Russia, I was really interested in that part of the world and the relations we have with those countries," Donley explained.

"When I went to Russia, I expected it to be like

eastern Europe, and it, really is not. It's a very difficult place, but I find it fascinating."

As for her reason on "going signal," she admits it wasn't her first choice, but looking back, it was likely the wisest. Donley recalls being introduced to technology at a very young age, acquiring her first computer when she was only 4 years old, "which nowadays is normal, but back in 1982, was not normal," she said.

"Really, from the time I was 4 up until last week, I've been helping my parents with computers, so I've been their 'sigo' for about 42 years of my life," she said, half-jokingly.

### **Past, Present, Future**

As Chief of Signal and U.S. Army Signal School Commandant, Donley doesn't just wear a multitude of hats; she *is* (represents) them. Donley views herself as the custodian of Signal Regiment's history, representing 164 years of legacy.

"I stand to remind everybody of the sacrifices, the innovations that we made, the forefront of communications that we were at... all the great things that the Signal Corps has done that we should be proud of, and of the lessons learned," she said.

In the present sense, Donley manages all things doctrine and training related, ensuring Signaleers are trained and provided the training necessary to "provide the unified network of today." She oversees nearly 600 instructors who train approximately 11,000 Soldiers each year, who make up a fraction of the Regiment's more than 55,000 Signaleers worldwide.

With an ever-evolving force, Donley constantly looks to the future.



*Col. Julia Donley sailing on the Chesapeake Bay in July 2015, celebrating her mom's 70th birthday. Pictured with Donley are husband, Kevin, and parents John and Betty Onufrak. (Courtesy photo)*

“To say that we’re in a unique period when things are changing so fast is kind untrue because things always change so fast for the Signal Corps,” she said. “This is just the latest era of innovation in the Regiment. Donley went on to say, “We need to keep learning and keep striving to provide the unified network.”

On a more personal level, Donley’s mind is never too far from the past. A mere 22 years ago, Maj. Gen. Janet E.A. Hicks made history by becoming the first female Chief of Signal. Donley is only the second, although she doesn’t consider herself any more remarkable than the “next female.” Instead, she remains encouraged by the “females of the future” – the ones who refuse to give up and continue to break barriers.

“I am so proud and humbled by the lieutenants today who are in the infantry, who are armor, who are not even thinking twice about it and just serving in positions that were not open to me – and I would not have wanted to be – back in 2000,” Donley said. “But they’re doing it today, and one day we’ll stop counting, and it won’t be a thing anymore.”

### Leadership

Donley’s leadership style is undeniable tied to her broad, cultural experiences. Having been to an estimated 45 countries, some due to work and others for leisure, Donley learned early on through her travels that teamwork is critical to success.

“You absolutely have to work together, especially in the Signal Corps; otherwise, the link is never going to come in, because it takes two ends,” she said.

And although her position requires that she spends a copious amount of time in offices and meetings, Signaleers around the world can expect to see Donley in person at some point. Traveling isn’t just a leisurely passion for this Chief of Signal. It’s a way to connect.

“It’s so important to have that face-to-face interaction to see how [Signaleers] are doing as opposed to



Col. Julia Donley shakes hands with a Soldier from 307th Expeditionary Signal Battalion-Enhanced following a physical training session. (Courtesy photo)

reading reports,” she said. “I’d rather have that personal interaction and experience what they are experiencing.”

Whether Donley meets in person, through an email, or across some other communications line, the message she hopes to send remains clear. It is one of pride and inspiration.

“We have been the ‘Regiment of ‘Innovation for 164 years, and it’s important to remember the lessons of the past, but we continue to evolve, and we don’t stand still,” Donley said. “I hope that I’m someone who demonstrates that you can do this and that this is a job you want to do ... I want to show people that it’s fun, it’s rewarding, and that they can really have a great experience in the Army, because I’ve had a great experience.”

### Married Life

Donley met her husband, Kevin, while stationed in Germany. A fellow Signaleer, Kevin is retired and living his best life as the cellar master for a winery in Northern Virginia. The couple owns a home in Virginia they affectionately refer to as “Distant End Farms,” named after their Signal roots. They have two cats and two chickens.

As for when Donley plans to join her husband at the winery full-time, the answer remains to be determined.

“I was told to stay in until it isn’t fun anymore, and so here we are – 24 years later, and it’s still a lot of fun.”

Learn more about Donley’s military service, read her bio [here](#).



Donna Ayers, shows Col. Julia Donley artifacts from the life of her great aunt and “Hello Girl,” Olive Shaw, following a dedication ceremony of Grace Banker’s Veteran Memorial Marker in Brooklyn, New York. (Photo by retired Col. Linda Jantzen, National Defense University)



Col. Julia Donley with her husband, Kevin, at the 164th Signal Corps Anniversary Ball June 15, 2024. (Courtesy photo)