

The Story of Shannon Kent



Shannon Kent while deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

Born in Oswego, New York, but raised in Pine Plains by her parents Stephen and Mary Smith, her youth was spent playing volleyball, running track, and riding horses. In fact, her talent for language started on the polo field: she learned Spanish so that she could converse with the stable hands.

Shannon Kent, on the left over 14 years ago; and Mariah Smith on the right, more recently. Photo courtesy of Mariah Smith/Instagram.

Mariah Smith, her younger sister, shared her love for horses with Shannon often training and acting as her mentor. “Since I was 5, she was always out riding with me, showing me new things.”

Shannon never lost her passion for horses, and she and Mariah often talked about



opening a ranch someday that would offer equestrian therapy for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and children with emotional and developmental issues.

Shannon Kent and Mariah Smith riding horses. Photo courtesy of Mariah Smith.

“Shannon and I were raised in a family of badassess,” her sister continued. Her father was a New York state policeman who would go on to be the third-highest ranked officer in the state, and her uncle was a firefighter in New York City. Both were first responders on 9/11, something that propelled Kent toward military service. Her brother is in the US Marine Corps.

Her family has a tradition of selfless service, and to say that they are all talented in their respective fields would be a gross understatement. Smith recalled Navy and US Air Force recruiters coming by the house as early as Kent’s senior year of high school.

Kent graduated from Stissing Mountain Junior/Senior High School in 2001 and gave college a try at her mother’s request. To no one’s surprise, that didn’t last long. By 2003, she was talking to a Navy recruiter about how she could best leverage her talent for language in the service.



Joe Kent holding a photo of his wife Shannon on her first deployment. Photo by Marty Skovlund Jr./Coffee or Die Magazine.

This is where the legend surrounding Kent began. It was 2007, and very few special operations personnel were willing or able to go speak to Iraqis out in the city in a low-visibility capacity. So Kent taught herself



human intelligence techniques and, already fluent in seven languages, would go out and develop targets for the task force. Most importantly, she was fearless.

As her reputation grew, she started going out on raids with American special operators..

Unbeknownst to Kent, this is also where she met her future husband, Joe Kent, for the first time. Joe Kent was assigned to 5th Special Forces Group in Baghdad at the time. “She was a woman in SOF before there were women in SOF,” Joe Kent said.

Shannon Kent crashed onto the special operations scene headfirst, and didn't slow down once getting in. According to Joey, a special operations intelligence professional who asked that his last name be withheld, Kent, after returning from her first deployment, was one of the first, if not *the* first, females to volunteer for and successfully pass the new Naval Special Warfare Direct Support Course.

The course was a month long and involved timed ruck marches, advanced training in close-quarters combat, and a variety of other foundational skills that are required to serve alongside Navy SEALs. Joey explained that women in the SEAL teams was a new concept at that point, and that she "set the benchmark to bring other women into the program."

It wasn't long before she gained the respect and trust of the SEALs. "Her professionalism and knowledge of tradecraft got her noticed," said Joey. "She wasn't afraid to step up; she had that A-type personality."

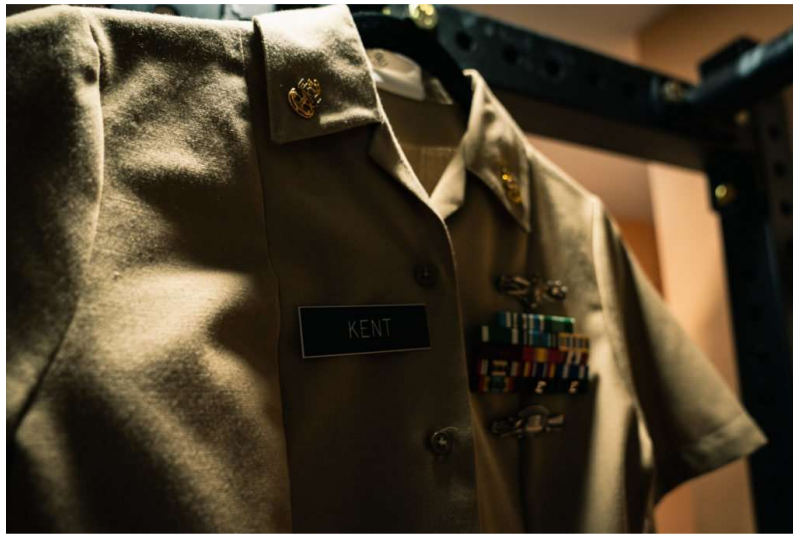


Shannon Kent on a deployment while assigned to a special missions unit. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

Indeed, her positivity, humility, and humor in even the most difficult of training events made her shine above the rest. *Coffee or*
Attending a selection for a special missions

unit puts you in the company of a lot of high-caliber people. Joe Kent was one of them. Joe has the confidence of an Army Ranger-turned-Green Beret but the laid-back demeanor of someone raised in the Pacific Northwest. His curly hair and runner's build first caught Shannon's attention as they made eye contact while she was backing her truck into a parking space, which resulted in her denting another vehicle.

"She sorta just looked at me, looked at the car, and shrugged," Joe recalled, with a laugh. "I was like, 'All right, this chick's pretty cool.'" A mutual friend, also an Arab linguist, formally introduced them shortly after.



Shannon Kent's khaki Navy uniform hangs in her basement. Photo by Marty Skovlund Jr./Coffee or Die Magazine.

The two married in 2014 — on Christmas Eve — and with Shannon already in her 30s, starting a family as soon as possible was on the agenda.

With both of them frequently gone, it was difficult to find

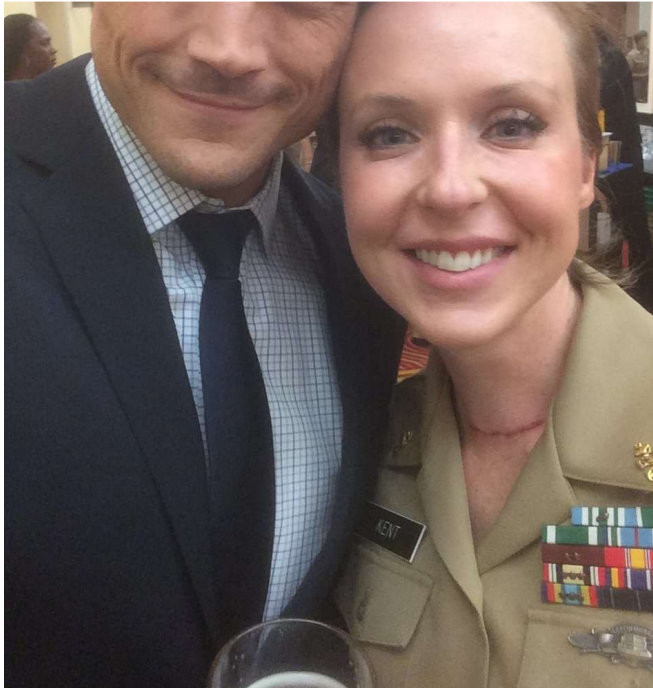
the time. But before long, their first son, Colt, was on the way.

"She did a dead sprint to finish her bachelor's while pregnant with our first son," Joe said. By the time they had their second son, she had earned her master's degree in psychology.

However, work and parenting didn't distract from her other passions. Shannon ran multiple marathons with sub-4-hour times and even completed a Tough Mudder race while seven months pregnant. In addition to being highly intelligent, she was also artistic — her home is filled with massive, ornate mosaics that she worked on at all hours of the night. Outside, she grew and maintained a beautiful garden.

Joe often called home to check in on Shannon and the kids while deployed. During one of Joe's deployments in 2016, Shannon sent him a message that was unlike anything he had received before: a picture of her in the hospital, just after going under the knife to remove cancer from her thyroid. Joe asked if he should get home, but Shannon insisted it wasn't a big deal and that she could take care of it.

The cancer was removed in one surgery, and she was back to work within a day or two without missing a beat.



Shannon Kent with her husband, Joe, shortly after undergoing surgery to remove cancer from her thyroid. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

By the time she was working on her master's degree, she had decided her future included becoming a Doctor of Psychology. This would allow her to be a mother while still contributing to the fight in a few very specific ways that only someone who had an intelligence background in addition to their Ph.D. could apply for, or go into helping fellow veterans who were struggling with PTSD.

After the thyroid cancer was removed, indeed, she was fit for combat. Her unit's next rotation to Iraq and Syria was approaching, and since she was no longer being accepted into the clinical psychology program, she would be going with them. Although it's true that had her commission been approved, she wouldn't have gone on her final deployment, it should be noted that she wasn't "forced" to deploy in lieu of commissioning. The elite unit she was a member of was an all-volunteer force. If she didn't want to go, all she had to do was say the word.

But that's not Shannon. She was, after all, a warrior first and foremost, trained and ready to hunt down the most evil people on the planet. And, damn it, she was good at it.



Shannon Kent with her son while at home in Maryland. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

Shannon's job was to hunt them down. That's what she did up to and including the day she made the ultimate sacrifice.

Shannon Kent while deployed in support of Operation Inherent Resolve. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

The main drag in Manbij was bustling with people on a chilly Wednesday afternoon last January. Shannon Kent, an athletic, red-haired US Navy cryptologist and mother of two, was moving down the street alongside her teammates Scotty, Jon, and Ghadir.

They weren't in uniform (they rarely were in this line of work), but her black North Face hiking pants and dark-purple jacket would serve as suitable attire for the day's mission: scouting out a location to do a source meet, among other things.

Kent's kind eyes and friendly demeanor aren't exactly what the average person thinks of when asked to describe a seasoned special operator hunting down ISIS though. And maybe that's an advantage when assigned to the most secret, oft-rumored unit in the shadowy Joint Special Operations Command. She was used to working alone or in small teams, almost always clandestinely, but sometimes covertly and under cover. And she was damn good at her job.

Kent's team wasn't on a routine patrol that day, as the Department of Defense later claimed. And they weren't out for a leisurely lunch at a popular kebab restaurant frequented by Americans, as many news outlets reported. Kent was responsible for finding ISIS cells and their leaders, fixing their location in time and space, and then providing that intelligence to her peers at Delta Force and SEAL Team 6 or to pilots who would perform kinetic strikes with GPS-guided missiles.

"This wasn't the 'going out to lunch' crowd," said her husband, Joe Kent

Without warning, a blast tore through the nearby restaurant they were passing. Shannon Kent was only a few feet away. Video footage would later show a man with a suicide vest walk into the restaurant moments earlier.

Local Kurds evacuated Kent to a nearby hospital, where an American helicopter retrieved her. Senior Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent was killed in action on Jan. 16, 2019, alongside Special Forces Chief Warrant Officer 2 Jonathan R. Farmer, former Navy SEAL Scott A. Wirtz, and Ghadir Taher, an American working as a civilian interpreter. Eleven Syrian nationals also died in the attack.

ISIS claimed responsibility.

In total, Kent answered her nation's call and deployed in harm's way a total of eight times.

A month after her death, US-backed Kurdish forces arrested five members of ISIS who were believed to be involved in the January attack that resulted in Kent's and three other Americans' deaths.

A portion of the crowd that filled the Naval Academy's chapel in Annapolis, Maryland, for Shannon Kent's memorial included a thousand sailors, hundreds of other service members, dozens of New York state police officers, and many family and friends filled the pews at the Naval Academy's chapel in Annapolis, Maryland, in memory of Senior



Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent. Having her memorial service at the academy's chapel was a big deal.

She is the first enlisted sailor in US Navy history to be allowed the honor. In fact, the last person to have their memorial there was the late Sen. John McCain.

Only a chief may wear the Navy's khaki uniform. For Kent, it was a "sea of khaki" — just what she would have wanted.

Photo by Marty Skovlund Jr./Coffee or Die Magazine.



Shannon Kent and her son. Photo courtesy of Joe Kent.

Despite the passionate recounting of Kent's life by her friends and teammates, it was palpable that words alone could not do justice to the essence of her soul. But maybe telling her stories will shed just enough light on one of the greatest women to ever wear her nation's uniform.

“If it were me, they'd be saying ‘Until Valhalla, brother’ and talking about how I went out doing what I loved, how I died fighting. But with

Shannon, there's this tendency to see her as a woman and mother first, a warrior second,” Joe said, explaining how he must balance mourning the death of his wife with remembering a fallen warrior. “Shannon was a warrior first, and she'd want to be remembered as such.”

Excerpts included from Author: [Marty Skovlund Jr.](#)

Marty Skovlund Jr. was the executive editor of *Coffee or Die*. As a journalist, Marty has covered the Standing Rock protest in North Dakota, embedded with American special operation forces in Afghanistan, and broken stories about the first females to make it through infantry