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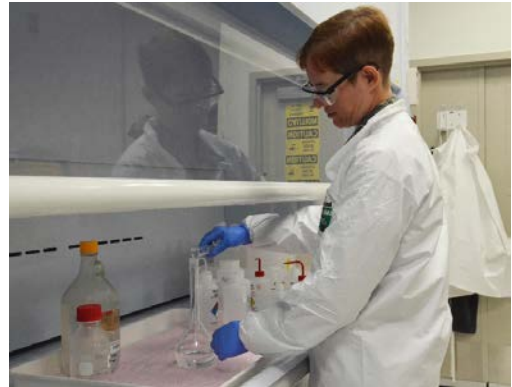
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A1C with Ph.D. lands job at nuclear treaty monitoring center

By Susan A. Romano, AFTAC Public Affairs

PATRICK AIR FORCE BASE, Fla. – It's not often you see those three-letter titles – A1C and Ph.D. – used to refer to the same person. As a matter of fact, only one-hundredth of one percent of the Air Force's enlisted force from E-1 through E-9 possess a doctor of philosophy degree – that's just 33 Airmen out of 259,190 currently on active duty.

Yet one woman with a doctorate in chemistry found herself signing on the proverbial dotted line, completing basic training, and is now assigned to the Department of Defense's sole nuclear treaty monitoring center here.



Airman 1st Class Cynthia A. Schroll enlisted in the Air Force in December 2017, though her unique career journey began much earlier, soon after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"I was in my senior year of high school in 2001, and after 9/11 happened, I told my parents I wanted to enlist," Schroll said. "During the discussion, my mother said something that struck me, even using the word 'please' and *asking* me to do something for the first time in my life instead of *telling* me to. She said, 'Please don't enlist. I've been saving your whole life for you to go to college.' I knew how much it meant to her, and I respect my parents deeply, so I went to college."

Schroll attended Morehead State University in Kentucky and earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry in 2006. She bypassed the traditional path after her undergraduate studies and went straight into the doctoral program at the University of Cincinnati.

"It's not uncommon for people looking into science degrees to forego a master's program and go straight into a doctoral studies," Schroll explained. "Most universities that offer a Ph.D. will let you obtain a master's degree if you find yourself struggling with the Ph.D. work load."

She joked, "Someone once told me that the difference between a Ph.D. and a master's degree is the Ph.D. project has to work in the end, while a master's student can write up all the ways the project didn't work!"

Upon completion of her doctorate in analytical chemistry with an emphasis in spectroelectrochemical detection of f-block elements (say that five times fast!), she went straight into the work force doing environmental sample preparation, product management and worked as a contract research assistant at Pacific Northwest National Laboratory. She also taught general chemistry at the University of Cincinnati for two years. It was an enjoyable career per se, Schroll said, but military service was still on her mind.

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2-2-2 PHD

“I had everything going for me – a great education, good job, supportive family, everything – yet I was still thinking about enlisting,” she said. “But I had some significant hurdles to overcome. I was overweight and knew that was going to be a factor as to whether I’d qualify or not. I had pets. I had a house. And then in 2014 I lost my mother to multiple myeloma, a form of blood cancer. It was devastating to my family and me. I took it quite hard and was lost without her influence.”

From that tragedy, however, came the realization that she still wanted to serve her country and thought it would be a lasting tribute to her beloved mother.



“I knew deep-down from the beginning she didn’t want me to join the service, but through all the grief I was experiencing, I had to find a path that would bring me greater reward,” she explained.

So after several months of careful thought, consideration and a solid work-out program, Schroll paid a visit to her local recruiter to change her title from ‘Doctor’ to ‘Airman.’

“Before I left for basic, I had several lengthy conversations with my sister who served in the Army for almost 10 years and I spoke to several other female friends who had also gone through the experience,” she said. “They all told me about the mind games I should expect from the military training instructors (MTIs) and some of the difficulties that arise when you put 40 women together in small quarters for several weeks at a time. Needless to say, I found basic training quite entertaining!”

During basic, trainees are selected to fill certain jobs and responsibilities given to each flight: dorm chief, element leader, chow runner, and entry controller, just to name a few. Schroll volunteered to be the flight’s academic monitor. When the MTI asked what made her qualified for the job, she nonchalantly mentioned she had taught classes before. The MTI did some digging and learned that Schroll had a Ph.D.

“It all came out from there,” she said. “I tried to downplay it as much as I could, and I offered to help any of my flight mates with their study techniques, because we were all in this together. We had one trainee who had such bad test anxiety and we were all worried she was going to run out of the classroom before she finished the end-of-course exam. When our MTI started reading off our test scores, we collectively held our breath when hers was read and we cheered like mad when it was a passing score. A few of us even cried. By far my proudest moment as the academic monitor was the fact we all passed our exams the first time through.”

She graduated basic training in February 2018 and was sent to Goodfellow AFB, Texas, to undergo special instruments training. While there, she became friends with a large contingent of Air Force firefighters.

“Our tech school was housed with the Airmen who undergo firefighting training, and it was so much fun,” Schroll recalled. “I was selected to be a red rope, the person who oversees dorm activities, and they kept me so grounded. I had so much respect for them that on my last day I woke up at 3:30 a.m. to go to their daily formation so I could shake every single hand and say thanks. I love and respect them all so much.”

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3-3-3 PHD

During her tenure at Goodfellow, she received a special visitor who requested to meet with her. She was quite surprised to learn it was a command chief master sergeant who made the trip to speak directly with her.

“I was pretty floored when I found out Chief Master Sgt. (Michael) Joseph came to the schoolhouse to discuss career options with me,” she said. “He introduced himself as the command chief for the Air Force Technical Applications Center, and said his commander was very interested in having me on his team at Patrick AFB. I can’t put my finger on it, but during my conversation with Chief Joseph, I realized this was my chance to live out my desire to serve, especially in the capacity of a scientist. I thought to myself, ‘These folks who have so much experience would know how best to use my skills,’ so I put my trust in them.”



Joseph was highly impressed when he met with Schroll.

“I heard about A1C Schroll as she was coming through the (academic training) pipeline since AFTAC has a majority of the 9S100 Airmen in the Air Force,” said Joseph. “Every Airman has a story, and I wanted to hear hers. Her background was impressive -- she had written two books and has a patent to her name, but it was her desire to serve that impressed me the most. With her chemistry background and our operational need for highly-skilled chemists, it seemed like a natural fit for her to come to AFTAC.”

Recruiting personnel who possess highly-technical scientific degrees and experience has been a challenge for the nuclear treaty monitoring center, but AFTAC’s senior enlisted advisor believes they’re seeking out ways to overcome that challenge.

“Sometimes the Air Force does not get the ‘talent management’ piece right and we need to do all we can to get our people to the right place at the right time. Airman Schroll has already made a positive impact in her squadron and is working to be the best Airman she can be. As leaders, I believe that is all we can really ask of our workforce.”

Schroll is assigned to AFTAC’s radiochemistry laboratory working as a radiochemistry technician. She is responsible for preparing reagent kits in the lab’s tech room as well as co-managing the precious metals program.

“I love the responsibility that comes from knowing our chemists are counting on me to prep their reagents properly and in a timely manner,” said Schroll. “If anything goes wrong with the chemistry, the first place that is looked at is the reagent, so I want them to have confidence when they see my initials on the label that they were prepared correctly.”

When asked if she was looking at becoming a commissioned officer someday, Schroll said it’s not out of the question, but it’s not her immediate focus.

“Right now, I’m still brand new to the Air Force, so I am learning as much about it as possible. I’m an airman first class, and with that comes the responsibility of being the best A1C I can be. My focus is on doing the job I am fortunate to have, and doing it as best I can. When I look to the future, I only see broad opportunities. But I’ve never been one to look too far ahead because all too often we make this grand dream or goal, only to forget to focus on the little steps to get there. I’m focusing on the little steps right now.”