

receiving her degree.

“For a West Pointer, they call it ‘four years and then you cut and run.’ I had four years of free education,” Erica said. “In fact, I actually got paid to go to college. I received a stipend, my books were covered, housing was covered ... with those four years of education, I was committed to do four years of (military) service.

“In 2000, there was no war in sight. And the pre-med thing had dropped off of my future plans. And the day after you graduate, you’re commissioned as a second lieutenant in a great big commissioning ceremony,” she said. “It’s your first day in the Army, really, and you have to choose which branch you want to be in. I could have chosen medical corps, but it would have been administrative work.”

Erica said she didn’t want a desk job, and going off the beaten path seemed appealing. So, she decided to become involved with engineering.

Her first assignment immediately after graduating from Creighton was at Fort Lewis, WA.

“Ever since then, that’s been my career,” Erica said. “At my very first duty station, I had to undergo training and take an engineer course. I got to blow stuff up, and I learned about how to build an airfield and all of the other things that engineers have to do. I had to do about a year’s worth of training.

Her first deployment, scheduled to last one year, from 2001 to 2002, was in South Korea.

Erica was preparing to travel to Australia when the terrorists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, 2001.

“Cell phones weren’t like we have now,” she said. “The planes hit and we were out in the field. So we didn’t even get the news until the day after. We didn’t quite know the extent of it until two weeks after 9/11.”

The United States began its war on terror in November 2001. “That was kind of the onset, and it mainly involved Special Operations. That first year in Afghanistan was really a Special Operations fight, and was retaliatory for 9/11,” she said. “In 2001 and 2002, we were working on getting established over there.”

Erica discovered during her stint in Korea that she loved overseas duty. When her service there ended, she decided to do a three-year U.S. Army tour in Germany. “I had only been there maybe half-a-year, and the war (in Iraq) started March 19, 2003. We knew that since we were stationed in Germany, we likely would be the first responders. We knew a few months before (it happened). We were getting ready, we were getting our equipment and there was a lot of training that we were unofficially doing.

Erica’s unit eventually received its marching orders to go to war. She was the head of a platoon of 45 men.



Major Erica Iverson is pictured with U.S. Rep. Grace Napolitano of California. Erica was Rep. Napolitano’s special guest at President Barack Obama’s State of the Union address in January. (Photo courtesy of Erica Iverson)

“We prepared our families; we wrote our wills, and we didn’t know how long we were going to be gone. We planned as if we weren’t coming back – that was our mentality,” she said. “Nothing was established, but we were told to bring along two months worth of hygiene products, and do other things to prepare. We got over to Kuwait in February 2003.”

### Long way from home

The desert of the Middle East, she discovered, is a long ways from Vermillion.

“I was still pretty new; I was getting my feet wet in the military, learning the leadership,” Erica said. “It was a struggle to be in charge. I had 45 guys, and I was one of the youngest ones, so they had this young, little butter-bar (military slang for the gold bars worn by second lieutenants), this brand-new military person and I was supposed to lead them. There was a lot of pressure, but it was the unknown, too, that you had to deal with.”

She and her platoon members were given the opportunity to call their families the day before being deployed. “You couldn’t say anything specific; they didn’t know where we were, and all you could all them was that you’re safe,” she said. “It’s emotional, because you don’t know if it is going to be the last time. You write a letter and you stick it in your pocket, and I told my roommate if something happens to hand over the letter.

“You have to make peace with it all, but it’s what we do,”

IVERSON continued on page 22

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