

PAULA NIXON

Peacetime

What in the hell did you ask for?

That question boomed out over a loudspeaker the day my dad, Paul, got his orders at Fort Belvoir in February 1957. Ninety-nine curious guys turned to look at him.

Paul was headed to Elmendorf Airforce Base.

Most personal news was communicated by letters in the fifties. If it was really important, there was always a Western Union telegram. Telephone calls were expensive and rare. But this news warranted a call to his wife, Joyce, back in Kansas. The two had been married for less than a year. Paul had asked for Fort Riley, sixty-five miles from Joyce's hometown. He had to break the news to her that they were headed for the territory of Alaska, 3000 miles from Kansas.

Paul started college in 1951 after graduating from Cimarron High School on the windswept plains of southwestern Kansas. His parents had moved to Dodge City and then Cimarron during World War II, looking for new opportunities. They had left behind the family farm and their extended family in Oklahoma.

Paul's dad drove him 250 miles to Manhattan, home of Kansas State College, the state's land grant school. Paul had loaded his Cushman scooter into the family's 1949 Ford trunk so he'd have wheels when he got there. He enrolled in math and science classes with the idea of majoring in engineering. As required, he also signed up for Advanced

Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). The Air Force classes he hoped for were full, so he opted for the Army instead.

He was young, not yet eighteen. Within the first week, he had found a job as a houseboy that would provide him with room and board at Van Zile Hall, a dormitory for girls. He lived in the basement and worked in the kitchen. He would return to the job every fall until he graduated.

While Paul was a sophomore taking calculus, surveying during the day, and washing piles of dishes in the evenings, Joyce was finishing her senior year at Topeka High School. She lived in a close-knit family with one grandmother next door and another less than twenty miles away. She played oboe in the high school orchestra, sewed most of her own clothes, and rode the bus downtown to work at Pelletier's, a local department store. She arrived at K-state with a bevy of high school friends and pledged to the Alpha Xi Delta sorority. Her major was foods and nutrition.

Joyce also needed a job and found one at Van Zile, serving in the cafeteria. It's not clear when she and Paul met, but it would be some time before they went on their first date. By all accounts, that first date was to a movie, but the two could never agree on which movie it was. Not in question was their second date at Cohen's Chicken House in Junction City, twenty miles from Manhattan and home to Fort Riley.

In the summer of 1953, before Paul and Joyce met, Paul got a three-month contract to work for the Alaska Road Commission. His engineering coursework and prior surveying experience with the Kansas Highway Department qualified him for the unusual summer job. He and three buddies drove a car to Washington State, where they parked it with a family member for the summer and then flew from Seattle to Fairbanks.

From Fairbanks, it was a trip of 250 miles east. Towns were almost nonexistent out on that stretch of the Alcan Highway approaching the Canadian border. Their work on the highway was mostly surveying and calculating road cuts. There Paul learned firsthand the challenges and best practices of working on permafrost.

The closest fresh water was fifty miles away and had to be trucked to the road camp where the crew lived. The pay was decent, and most of Paul's expenses were covered by a daily allowance of \$6. It was valuable work experience, and Paul could throw a fishing line in the Tanana River in his spare time.

Paul returned for a second summer in 1954. He and a buddy lived in a cabin to try and save some of their per diem by doing their own cooking and laundry. Bear steaks and salmon were on the menu, but fresh vegetables were nowhere to be found.

In 1955 Paul was a senior, and Joyce was a junior, both still planning to graduate on schedule in their original fields of study.

Joyce returned, as usual, to Topeka for the summer to work at Pelletier's. Paul had a six-week ROTC active training camp to attend at Fort Carson in Colorado, so he would not be returning to Alaska. During that spring, he published an article in the March issue of *Kansas State Engineer* about working on the Alcan. He described the challenges of road building in the far north, along with details about living in rustic conditions. He highly recommended the job to his fellow students.

Paul and Joyce stayed in touch and agreed to meet at his parents' home over the Fourth of July weekend. Joyce and a friend rode a bus from Topeka while Paul and a buddy drove in from Colorado.

In December, before the holiday break, they "passed chocolates" to announce their engagement at the Alpha Xi Delta house.

On a sunny afternoon in late May of 1956, Paul graduated with a degree in civil engineering. Earlier that day, he had received his commission in the Army as a 2nd Lieutenant. His parents and Joyce were there to celebrate with him. Within days he reported to work with Phillips Petroleum in Borger, Texas, a job he would hold until the Army called him up.

Joyce returned to Topeka to finish planning their mid-summer wedding. It was a formal event on a Saturday evening in July at the Westminster Presbyterian Church not far from the neighborhood where she had grown up. Joyce was one week away from turning twenty-one. Paul was twenty-three. At a luncheon on the afternoon of the wedding, the Lester and Nixon families met each other for the first time.

No time for a honeymoon, Joyce and Paul drove to Borger, where Paul was back at work on Monday morning. By November, the couple had moved to Alexandria, Virginia, where Paul reported for Basic Military Officer Training at Fort Belvoir.

Paul left his job at Phillips, knowing he would have a position with the company when his active duty ended. Joyce was still pursuing her degree via correspondence courses. It was a slog, and she dreaded returning alone to K-State for the spring semester.

During her time in Virginia, while Paul was in school, she got to know another officer's wife in the apartment complex where they lived. She and Dawn became friends, not knowing if they would see each other again after Joyce returned to Kansas.

What in the hell did you ask for?

Three of the one hundred that day, including Paul, got the same assignment. The Army Corps of Engineers in Anchorage, Alaska. Each, maybe for a slightly different combination of reasons, high marks in officer training, and/or experience in cold weather construction. Of the three, Paul was the only one who had actual experience in Alaska.

The assignment was considered overseas duty, but since it was peacetime, Joyce would be able to go with Paul. She must have been cheered by the news that her friend Dawn would also be moving to Alaska.

Joyce's parents may have feared they wouldn't see their daughter again. After all, the title of Paul's article about his experiences was "Alaska: Wild West of the 20th Century." Paul returned briefly to Kansas before driving, once again, to Washington, this time to Seattle, where their 1956 Ford would be ferried to Alaska. Joyce still had a few weeks of classes and then finals before she could join him.

In a letter to Joyce's parents from Anchorage, Paul expressed his regret for not being present when *she walked across that stage*. He told them about his trip north and the broken taillight the car had suffered on the journey. Much more serious to him was the fact that both of his fishing poles were stolen out of the car. He ended the letter by saying: Please *send my wife as soon as you can — I really need her here*.

Joyce's trip was not without mishaps and miscommunications, but she did arrive in Anchorage within weeks of Paul's letter. A short time later, when their belongings arrived, Paul found a new rod and reel from Joyce's father, a fellow fisherman.

Life in Anchorage was nothing like life in the road camp and provided most of the same comforts of life as in the Lower 48. Although some things, like fresh fruit and vegetables, were hard to find and expensive. The young couple lived in officer's quarters on Fort Richardson and formed long-term friendships with the other officers and their spouses.

Paul's projects included the design of airport runways and nose wing hangars. The work gave him the experience he would need for his professional license. It was one of the few times in his life that Paul would work at an 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM job.

Finally, the couple could enjoy their young married life. They loved the long days of summer, and it marked the beginning of their many years together, fishing and picnicking, spending as much time as possible outdoors next to mountain streams.

By the end of the summer, they were expecting their first child. Joyce bought a used Singer sewing machine and started making maternity and baby clothes.

In the dark of winter, Joyce picked out a female puppy at the local pound on the Fort. Punk was named for the striking pumpkin-colored eyebrows and markings on her legs and chest that stood out against her black fur.

In April, Joyce and Paul sent a telegram to her parents: PAULA KAY ARRIVED AT 0429 HRS ON 18 APRIL 7 LBS 8 OZ 21 INCHES.

Joyce and Paul and all of the grandparents were thrilled. Punk was not. She took to ripping diapers off the clothesline.

Paul was promoted to 1st Lieutenant shortly before his active-duty service concluded. In November 1958, he built a wooden-framed crib that he could set securely in the backseat of the Ford for the trip back to Kansas. The four flew to Seattle (Punk in baggage) and picked up the car for the long road trip back to Kansas, Paula and Punk in the back seat.

Paul and Joyce, college sweethearts, married at a young age and returned to Kansas as a family. Their first stop was Cimarron to introduce their newest family members to the Nixons. Then on to Topeka to meet the Lesters.

Paul served his remaining four years in the Army reserves while working for Phillips, later starting his own consulting business in western Kansas, where he and Joyce raised their three kids, the two youngest Kansas born.

A few weeks ago, I visited Paul in Colorado. For months we have been going through photo albums, scrapbooks filled with newspaper clippings, and the occasional handwritten letter. Joyce died in 2020, and we have missed her as we have tried to piece the family stories together. On this day, Paul opened a battered Army-issued footlocker. Inside we found his pinks and greens, his dress uniform with its two castle pins on the lapels signifying his service in the Corps of Engineers. And a file folder filled with Army correspondence, including Punk's first rabies certificate. She lived sixteen years, a much-loved member of the family.

Also in the folder was a letter to Joyce from Major Baumgardner with her travel orders. I picture Joyce standing at the mailbox on a breezy Kansas day with the letter in her hand, contemplating how her life is about to take a turn she hadn't anticipated, apprehensive but also excited about what's to come.

Author: Paula Nixon

Paula Nixon lives in New Mexico. Her dad is Army veteran Paul Nixon. Writing this gave Paula a greater appreciation for the sacrifices her folks made — no gap years or summers in Europe! Instead, they relished the adventure and opportunities the Army gave them.