

Marine Values Family and Community

John Shoemaker

In a continuing effort to recognize those Veterans who live in Highland Beach or serve our community, we share a short story of each and post it on our town website: www.highlandbeach.us and specifically [Veteran Heroes of Highland Beach | Highland Beach, FL](#)

Please visit this tab to read stories and profiles of our citizens who have served or are serving our country and our town. Prepare to be amazed by the incredible stories of our Veterans. We have at least one Brigadier General, one who was captured by the Germans and escaped three times during the Battle of the Bulge, a WWII B-17 navigator, and other veterans who served in Desert Shield, Desert Storm, Afghanistan, and Vietnam, along with others across Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force – including a fighter pilot who trained other fighter pilots. Others served in different roles from scout dog handler to nurse, helicopter pilot to artillery Forward Observer. Some stories are quite dramatic, others very demanding and less dramatic. But all, without exception, served with the utmost honor and dedication, for which we are deeply grateful.

I am pleased to introduce you to one of our newest firefighters, James Steyn, 35 years old. Born in South Africa, his family emigrated to the US in 1997 and he went to Raleigh High School in North Carolina. He entered the delayed entry program in high school for his ambition to be a US Marine. He enlisted in 2010 and was off to Parris Island, South Carolina, for boot camp. James wanted to be an infantryman and was assigned to the Marine's Naval Air Station in Jacksonville, Florida.



After graduation, he was sent to Alpha Company, 1st Bn, 3rd Marine Division, at the Marine Corps Base, Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. He was focused on land operations with some fleet assignments in the Pacific. But after a year, he was deployed to the most dangerous place on the planet – Helmand Province, Afghanistan.



As a PFC (private first class) and a combat infantryman, he would perform combat patrols from what they referred to as a COP or Command Out Post, named COP Sharp, and also from a more remote position called Patrol Base Empire. This was very hazardous activity as they would search for the Taliban and insurgents day after day with armed patrols. As you can imagine, living conditions in this defensive compound were very primitive. He slept in a “mud hut” on a foam mat for months in a sweltering, dry, desert-like climate in summer and quite cold in winter.

Contact with the enemy was rare but intense when it happened.





You can read more about the Marines in Helmand Province at: [Marines complete operations in Afghanistan, depart Helmand province > I Marine Expeditionary Force > Article](#) The Marines completed their withdrawal in 2014.

I asked James how he felt about his experience in Afghanistan and he quickly replied that he had no regrets and would do it again – in a “heartbeat.” While growing up, he was looking for travel and adventure to be a different kind of man. He stated very clearly that the leadership of the Marines was outstanding, and they received great support. Fundamentally, working with the other Marines as a "team" was an incredible experience that he values every day. The bond of trust created in his Marine unit is unshakable. He spoke of his brotherhood with team members who are like family to him today and stays in touch with all of them.



Corporal Steyn finished his enlistment of four years in 2014 after returning from Afghanistan. He talks fondly of his team members but does not want to talk much about his combat experiences. One lesson, among many, is that “no matter how bad it may be for you, someone else has it worse.” It is hard for people to understand without the experience of combat in a harsh environment with the crudest type of day-to-day living. He has learned to appreciate all that he has and to value it in a way most people cannot.

After the Marines, he went to Wake Technical Community College and joined Columbia Helicopters as a Crew Chief. It was a private helicopter company serving the US Military with logistical shipments. He spent nearly three years in Afghanistan as a civilian providing logistical support for the military using the NV246-CH or heavy-lift Chinook helicopter. Most missions involved transits between Kabul, Jalalabad, and Bagram bases.



Then, after two years, he decided to become an EMT and attended school during the COVID-19 crisis. Broadening his experience, he went to the Police Academy at Indian River State College.

Not to stop his growth, he continued his training at the Indian River State College again, only to pass the firefighter requirements. Finally, he returned to school again to earn his role as a Paramedic.

So, we have all the checkboxes: EMT, Medic, Police Academy training, Firefighter, and Paramedic schools.

Given available jobs, he became a PSO or Public Safety Officer at Indian River Shores, and as soon as he graduated, he interviewed for an EMT/Firefighter in Highland Beach.

I asked, “Why Highland Beach? He replied, “As a new department with great leadership, I wanted to support a concierge level of medical service to the community.” He went on to say that he “just wants to help people.”

He believes that Highland Beach will not be like Delray and will deliver a higher level of service. He has total faith and trust in his crew. As he learned in Afghanistan, having an outstanding team with solid leadership means everything.

He loves how the community welcomes him and all the EMTs/Firefighters. “You know, the residents beep their horns or wave to us when they pass us at the Station or on A1A,” he said. “That’s a great feeling.” He sincerely feels the community appreciates the Fire Department and all the crews.



James is married to Kelly, and they have a 4-year-old son, Killiam, and two dogs, Cody and Cora. Kelly works from home in Port St. Lucy in a logistical support role for Gardner Life Health products.

James Steyn has come a long way from South Africa and Afghanistan to our three miles of paradise. He certainly has paid his dues and is proud of our new Fire Department. Like the others in our new Fire Department, he is a serious-minded professional who loves his job.

Please continue to beep your horns when you pass the Station and wave when you see them. We are one community, small enough to live life together, know each other, and depend on each other.

We are a community of togetherness.