

Biography, Colonel Laurel “Buff” Burkel, US Air Force, retired (as of Nov 2023)



Colonel Laurel “Buff” Burkel retired from the US Air Force in December 2018 after over 27 years of service. She is a distinguished graduate of the University of Michigan’s Air Force Reserve Officer Training Program and holds a bachelor’s degree in Biology from the University of Michigan and master’s degrees in Human Resource Management (MS) from Chapman University, National Security Affairs (MS with Distinction) from US Naval Postgraduate School, and Strategic Studies (MA) from the US Air Force Air War College. Colonel Burkel is a senior navigator with more than 2,100 flight hours (including 285 combat and combat support hours) in training, F-4, C-141, and C-130 aircraft. Over the course of her military career, she commanded an operational C-130 squadron, both at home and deployed, and served in a variety of leadership positions at the group, wing, major command, Headquarters Air Force, joint, and international levels, including tours in the Republic of Korea, Canada, and Afghanistan. On her last deployment in 2015, Colonel Burkel served as the advisor to the Afghan Air Force’s Director of Training in Kabul, Afghanistan. Her deployed tour was cut short due to the injuries she sustained from the October 2015 NATO helicopter crash in Kabul that took the lives of two of her subordinates.

Colonel Burkel now serves as an inspirational/motivational speaker, sharing the story of her survival and recovery from the crash to highlight the power and positivity of our support to and for each other and its fundamental connection to our personal resilience.

Colonel Burkel is a contributing author to the 2023 #1 International Best Seller, “Tenacity – Deconstructing G.R.I.T Collection. She is an Air Force Wounded Warrior (AFW2) and serves as an AFW2 Program Ambassador and Mentor. She is a member of the St Louis Blues Warriors hockey team, a USA Hockey-affiliated disabled veterans hockey program, and serves on the team’s Board of Directors as the Secretary. Colonel Burkel is also an assistant coach with the Southern Illinois Lady Hawks girl’s hockey team. She is a member of the Girls Scouts of Eastern Missouri Board of Directors and is also a member of numerous professional and service organizations.

