From the Jungles of Panama to the Streets of Junction City: A Veteran's Journey of Service

In the heart of Junction City, Kansas, the local police department echoes the story of this month's Veteran Spotlight—Chief Kirt Nichols. His path from the jungles of Panama to the leadership of the Junction City Police Department is a testament to a lifelong commitment to service.

Kirt Nichols enlisted in the U.S. Army on March 7, 1981, after graduating high school a semester early. Inspired by a strong family tradition of military service, he embarked on a journey that would take him from his first duty station at Fort Riley, Kansas, to Fort Davis, Panama to Fort Campbell, KY—where he earned his Air Assault badge— and finally to Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

As an 11C Mortarman, Kirt would experience the rigorous discipline, and challenging environments that define military experience, and it would be a tour he did at Fort Davis, Panama that would ultimately help shape him to become the man he is today. While on this assignment at Fort Davis (located on the Atlantic side), he would be tasked with protecting the Panama Canal during a time of geopolitical transition. The harsh jungle environment with its dense wildlife, relentless ant trails and towering snakes – served as a crucible that defined his resilience and discipline.

On March 7, 1990, exactly nine years after enlisting, Nichols transitioned from Soldier to Police Officer in his hometown of Junction City, mentored by then-Chief Jerry Smith along with his Field Training Officer Jeff Childs. His seamless shift into law enforcement was powered by the same values that had guided his military career: discipline, respect, and dedication. Today, as Chief of Police, he continues to lead with those principles.

Chief Nichols brings a unique dual perspective to his role, stressing that both soldiers and officers must treat people with dignity—even under pressure. His advice to young service members is simple but powerful: *Own your career, master your craft, and treat others as you'd want your family treated.*

Reflecting on the differences between military service then and now, he notes a generational shift—today's soldiers are more inclined to question authority. Still, he remains hopeful, seeing promise in veterans whose skills in physical fitness and weaponry can serve law enforcement well.

In a town closely tied to Fort Riley and the military community, Chief Nichols champions stronger connections between service members and civilians. He believes these bonds help military families put down roots and navigate the challenges of deployments and extended training periods.

Chief Kirt Nichols' story is more than a personal journey—it's a powerful reminder that for some, service doesn't end with a uniform change. Whether guarding international waters or local neighborhoods, his mission remains the same: to serve with pride and purpose.