For my friend and colleague Mildred Courtney, yesterday, May 29, 2015, marked the completion of 60 years as a member of the Outrigger ‘ohana! In this hectic, fast-paced world, a 60th career anniversary is almost as rare as snow in Waikīkī, so it’s appropriate to take a moment to honor this extraordinary lady and look back at how both she and our company have changed and grown over the past six decades.

Mildred is an amazing woman in many ways. In 1955 I was away at college while my parents, Roy and Estelle Kelley, were completing the Reef Hotel,1 (ORF) the first high-rise hotel to have been built in Waikīkī for many decades. With its 10-story tower rising over the palm trees, the project received a lot of attention in the press.

That same year, Mildred, a bright young woman who had been born in Honolulu but raised on the “Big Island” of Hawai‘i, was hired as a telephone switchboard operator. Her “office” was in a small room in the basement of the Reef, in front of an old-fashioned “plugboard” – a PBX telephone switchboard. 2 It had a rotary dial and a copper-tipped electrical cord for every incoming line and a plug for every room and administrative phone on the property. Mildred quickly rose to become chief operator.

Four years later, in 1959, we almost lost Mildred when Waikīkī was deluged with more than nine inches (23 cm) of rain that fell in one astonishing 24-hour period. Water backed up along Kālia Road in front of the hotel and poured into the basement, most of which was a garage, rising over head-high. The elevators and power soon went out, and parked cars were bobbing around like boats. Most of the PBX operators quickly fled the building.

Not Mildred. She refused to “abandon ship” and kept answering calls, even as the floodwaters rose. When the PBX finally shorted out, she sought refuge in the narrow

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1. Reef Hotel
2. PBX telephone switchboard

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Mildred Courtney was evacuated from the telephone switchboard room at the Reef Hotel after waters from massive Waikīkī rains flooded the hotel’s basement

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Mildred Courtney celebrates 60 years of service!
space between the top of the switchboard cabinet and the ceiling. My brother-in-law, Chuck Rolles, paddled in on a surfboard to rescue her.

After the PBX was later moved upstairs behind the front desk, Mildred handled most of the calls that came in for Outrigger co-founder Roy Kelley. If the call seemed important, she would track him down no matter where he was. This was often a challenge because Roy did not keep a calendar or a schedule. He sat at his cluttered desk in the Reef Hotel lobby talking to guests and associates until something diverted his attention, whether it was walking over to another hotel, working on plans in a drafting room in the basement, or climbing up to check the placement of steel at a construction site. But Mildred always managed to locate him. Then, to get his attention, she quickly and deftly tapped the toggle switch on the PBX twice to produce a distinctive ring-ring tone, which alerted Roy that the call on hold was important and needed to be answered.

Over time, in addition to managing the telephone department and handling guest calls, Mildred became Roy's personal assistant. She also became our company's first guest relations manager. On “Boat Days” she’d sail out of Honolulu Harbor on a tugboat sponsored by the Hawai'i Visitors Bureau to greet the legendary ocean liners Lurline, Monterey and Matsonia that brought visitors to Hawai'i in the pre-jet-airplane era. The tug met the big ships just off Waikīkī Beach. After climbing aboard amid the tricky offshore swells, she greeted, interviewed and photographed arriving guests even before the vessel steamed into port, then rushed back to the office to get stories and photos of them in our company's weekly newspaper, Waikiki Visitor, before the press deadline. Guests loved it and would ask for extra copies to send home!

Mildred then graduated to hotel manager and then to vice president of our company’s three Waikiki Surf properties and the Malia, all located near the intersection of Kūhiō Avenue and Lewers Street. Having worked with Roy Kelley for so many years, she absorbed and emulated his philosophy – fill every room every night and carefully watch every expense every day.

After 35 years, when it came time to pull back from the daily demands of managing hotels and at an age when most people would contemplate retirement, Mildred felt the need for a new challenge. In 1990 she became Outrigger’s director of government-military liaison and began working full-time with all branches of our military, handling a wide range of responsibilities. Success in this position led to further promotions, and today she holds the title of corporate director military liaison emeritus.

Mildred's success in this area is legendary. The years between 1991 (the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait) and 2011, when the U.S. military was heavily involved in the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Afghanistan, were particularly challenging, to say the least. Mildred was busy seven days a week finding hotel accommodations for members of our armed services as they passed through Hawai'i on their way to or from the Middle East.

Roy Kelley celebrates his 62nd birthday at the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel with Mildred Courtney, Mike Hickey (cutting cake), Sharon Olsen (ORF gift shop), Ashby Johnson (background center) and Tom Burke (background right with glasses) and others

Veterans of the trenches: Tom Burke, Tony Del Piano, Chuck Comeau and Mildred Courtney
Mildred Courtney ...

Having been a hotel manager, Mildred knew how to search within our system when she needed to find one last room even on a night when all properties appeared to be sold out. Woe to the hotel manager who didn't know what was going on at his or her property, or who wasn't ready to go that extra mile to get a checked-out, vacant room ready for a weary servicemember, even very late in the evening.

But Mildred went far beyond securing hotel rooms for military personnel passing through Hawai‘i. Because she has always understood the feelings and needs of the military and their families, from buck private to four-star general, she has done still more for the men and women of our armed services and their families who are stationed in Hawai‘i.

Thus, she has made it possible for many military families to furnish their homes or apartments in Hawai‘i by donating hotel furniture replaced during renovation programs.

She has organized turkey donations at Thanksgiving and Christmas, she has donated books for sailors to read while at sea, she has donated phone cards to enable servicemembers to call home during the holidays, and she even delivered a truckload of “snow” one Christmas for military-base kids to play in.

These are just a few of the things she has done on her own without seeking a bit of publicity or reward. Nevertheless, the word spread anyhow, and Mildred has consequently been given many, many awards for her service and accomplishments, including:

- The Outrigger President’s Award (five times!), the Po'okela (Excellence) Award and the Lifetime Achievement Award
- The Order of the Diamond presented by the Air Force Hawaii Sergeants Association
- The Patriot Award from the National Guard Association of the United States, honoring the “citizen soldier”
- The Meritorious Public Service Award from the Department of the Navy
- The Spirit of Ho‘okanaka Award from the Hawaii Air National Guard
- The prestigious Ihe (Spear) Award from the Hawai‘i Army Museum Society (HAMS)
- The American Patriot Award from the Navy League of the United States – Honolulu Council

However, perhaps the most wonderful reflection of Mildred’s accomplishments came to me in a brief private conversation I had over a decade ago with retired Marine Corps General Charles C. Krulak. From 1995 to 1999, Gen. Krulak had been the 31st Commandant, the top post in the entire Marine Corps. When he learned I worked for Outrigger Enterprises Group, Gen. Krulak said he had been stationed in Hawaii for many years and knew our company well.

Then he smiled and spoke the following words with emotion and conviction, “Mildred Courtney! Now, there's a lady. I cannot say enough about her and all that she and your company have done for the military in Hawai‘i.”

I agree! It is an extraordinary pleasure to recognize Mildred Courtney on the 60th anniversary of her association with Outrigger. Please join me in thanking her for her decades-long commitment and unparalleled contributions to Hawai‘i’s military families and to the growth and reputation of our company. Congratulations, Mildred, on 60 years of distinguished service! 😊

References:
1 Now the Outrigger Reef Waikiki Beach Resort
2 Private Branch Exchange – the now obsolete telephone equipment featured in the 1980 comedy “9 to 5,” starring Jane Fonda and Lilly Tomlin.