

Starting over is something Navy kids learn to do. Kelly Wilkinson, artist and equestrian, was born into a big Catholic career Navy family. She traveled the world as a child and developed passions for art and for horses, but she always wanted to be a pilot.

Now, it is easy to see Kelly painting in her studio, and it's not difficult to envision her galloping a horse cross country; but to picture this blond, pony-tailed all-American-girl at the controls of a USN C37Sea King helicopter lifting off the pitching deck of a ship in the Arabian Gulf takes a completely different perspective!

While attending the University of Virginia on an ROTC scholarship, Kelly kept up with her painting and rode with the Farmington Hunt; but immediately following graduation in 1988, newly commissioned Ensign Kelly Wilkinson departed Charlottesville to attend flight school in Pensacola, Florida where she earned her wings.

During flight school Kelly rode with the Live Oak Hounds in Thomasville, Georgia, and even when she was deployed to the Middle East did some riding, competing in the Bahrain National Horse Show.

After eight years of active duty, an accomplished aviator, Lt. Cmdr. Kelly Wilkinson was hired to fly for Piedmont Airlines. She was, to her delight, based in Charlottesville and she made the most of the opportunity reconnect with old hunt club friends and to ride.

When US Airways hired her to fly 737s out of Reagan International Airport, Kelly kept up her ties with the Farmington horse folk, and in Washington she added painting to her repertoire once more. She studied at the Torpedo Factory, an Olde Towne Alexandria studio/gallery.



Good Friends, oil on linen. Collection of Gary and Sandy Kendall.

Kelly Wilkinson

Artist and Aviator

by
Elizabeth Spaulding

Photos courtesy of Kelly Wilkinson



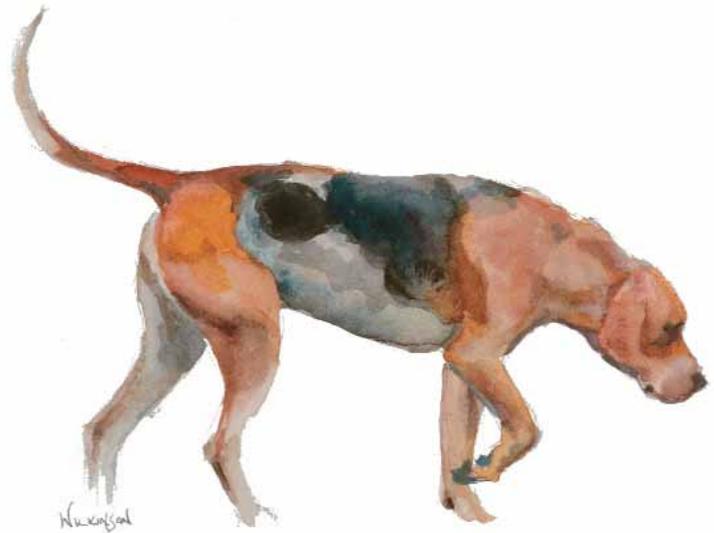
Kelly instructing in the T-34C. Pensacola, Florida.



November Hill, oil on linen
Private collection

Farmington Hunt's Critic, watercolor

Passion & Pastime, oil on linen



Thanksgiving Bounty, oil on linen



Kelly looked forward to the day when she would be a senior pilot and thus might have more time for art and riding. Her Original Plan was right on track. Then came September 11, 2001.

On a clear morning, just days after the terrorist attacks in New York and D.C., Lt. Cmdr. Kelly Wilkinson USNR looked down over Washington from the cockpit of a 737. She could see smoke still rising from the Pentagon. Two squadrons of F16 fighter jets were aloft and on patrol. She and a few fellow pilots had volunteered to ferry empty passenger jets out of Washington D.C. for the grounded airline companies.

In February of 2002, furloughed from US Airways, Kelly re-upped for one last tour of duty with the Navy. She served in Operation Noble Eagle, where her technical skills were needed. She taught aerobatics, instrumentation and navigation to a new generation of jet jockeys.

Kelly foresaw that the commercial aviation industry would take a long time to recover and knew that her Original Career Plan was a thing of the past. Henry Wingate, a flight school classmate and himself a Charlottesville native and artist, encouraged Kelly to seriously reconsider her painting – this time as a profession. He recommended an atelier in New Hampshire, The Ingbretson Studio of Drawing and Painting. An atelier, which strives to provide aspiring painters with the essential skills to “render accurately the visible world,” is the most demanding system for the study of classical art, and the same exacting standards, required of art students in 19th century Paris are required today.

It makes sense that a highly trained former pilot would choose such an elite, technically demanding route into the professional art world. Kelly immersed herself in this rigorous survival school for the next three years, then went on to Italy to study portraiture for six additional months with Charles Cecil.

When Kelly came home she



The Ballerina, oil on linen. Private collection.

Livi and Grace at the Lake, oil on linen. Private collection.





Donna Eicher (l), Kelly(c), and Put Spaulding(r) on Thanksgiving Day, 2005.

returned to Charlottesville. Memories of the University, of the tradition-steeped landscapes and of riding with old friends made settling there a happy prospect. She set up a studio downtown.

Kelly recalls the aviation term, *sterile cockpit*, that denotes the place where a pilot's total focus is required. Her studio is her sterile cockpit. Huckleberry, her distinguished, elderly lab snoozing in the corner, is her co-pilot, and her desk overflows with art books instead of flight manuals. A single north-facing window lets in just the right amount of light, and like a cockpit, it looks out at the sky.

Kelly retains her rank as lieutenant commander in the United States Naval Reserve. She does miss flying every day, but she feels fortunate to be where she is. "I felt it was an honor both to attend UVA and to serve in the US Navy. And I get that same feeling whenever I'm asked to paint a portrait."

Kelly works from life, often in the field. She prepares drawings, analyzing line, form and gesture. Preliminary oil sketches record light and color. She revisits her subjects often in the field or by having

them sit for her. In the studio she plans composition, scale and format. Putting it all together, she coordinates instinct and vision

into a painting much as she used to sense speed and read altitude for a pinpoint landing.

Kelly Wilkinson has exhibited in the Portrait Painters of America show in Atlanta, the prestigious Salmagundi Club in New York, and several of her sporting paintings were chosen for the Master of Fox Hounds Centennial Sporting Art Show in 2006 that opened in New York and later toured the US.

This past spring she flew to Paris to live and to work on a portrait for a client. Her commission schedule is booked well into 2008. See Kelly's portfolio at www.AlbemarleArt.com.

Elizabeth Spaulding grew up in Virginia. She owns and operates Antiques, Etc., an English country-styled antiques and gift store in Charlottesville. She does equine sculpture, rides with Farmington Hunt Club and writes when she can.

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