

TAPE: #001
CODE NAME: Marlena
INTERVIEWER: Amber
DATE: March 2, 2022
TIME: 10am EST
PLACE: Zoom
DURATION OF INTERVIEW: 1:36:12
STUDY: Women's Oral History

Amber: My first question for you is please provide your full name for the record.

Marlena:
My name is Marlena Ventresca Parker.

Amber:
Alright. Where were you born?

Marlena:
I was born in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.

Amber
Talk about your growing up years. Parents, siblings, and where you grew up.

Marlena:
I grew up in a very loving home. I am a first generation American. My parents both immigrated from Torre dei Nolfi, Italy to the United States. So, I grew up with lots of cousins and relatives around me. I experienced a lot of love and community feeling with my family. But I was the primary English speaker helping my Italian relatives learn English.

Amber:
And, what was it like growing up where you did?

Marlena:
It was very comfortable. I grew up in a a very comfortable home. I am the oldest of four children. I have a brother and two younger sisters and in in general, Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Where Doyle's town is, is a beautiful community. I was raised also with Catholic faith. I went to an all-girls private Catholic high school called Gwen and Mercy Academy and it was there that my guidance counselor knew that I was interested in becoming an astronaut, and she encouraged me to apply to the Air Force Academy.

Amber:
How old were you when you first imagined joining the armed forces?

Marlena:

I guess I was um... 16?

Amber:

How did you think about people in the military at this time?

Marlena:

It's really interesting. Um, my father was drafted in like the 70s during Vietnam, but I was very young. I don't remember any of his service. My grandfather was part of the Italian Army. And I heard their stories from World War II. I had two great uncles who served in the Italian Air Force. They weren't pilots but again, they had stories, so I knew about service probably more Italian military service than I knew about the United States' military service. But we always had a great love of the United States of America and celebrated the fact that immigrants had a chance in this country to pursue their dreams. And I think I had great family support with a love of country that really fueled me to pursue my dreams. My biggest dreams.

Amber:

Um, how would you describe a service member? So, a marine airman soldier, Coast Guard.

Marlena:

A service member is a dedicated American citizen who puts their service before self and is willing to make a difference every day.

Amber:

And do you feel that you fit the description how so? Or how not?

Marlena:

I definitely feel like I fit this description. I think our founding fathers got it right, in the sense of freedom is fundamental to our way of life in America. It's a model for our world. And so, to support that protect our homeland, and to help deliver that message around the world. I think there could be no greater calling.

Amber:

What made you decide to join the military?

Marlena:

Well, as I was mentioning, I was really involved in just watching on television. The space program and reading about it in magazines, and I really wanted to become an astronaut and my high school guidance counselor thought that... the Air Force was the way to go to get to being an astronaut or maybe part of NASA. And so she encouraged me to send away I submitted a postcard to the Air Force Academy for an application which came in the mail and was a large packet of paperwork to accomplish. This was in 1985.

Amber:

Um... What were most women you knew doing with their lives?

Marlena:

Well, I knew very few professional women. I loved my teachers at my high school. And I think that was the primary role that I saw people filling. Of course, I knew nurses. Um, at that time. I didn't have any female doctors in my life. Um, I also was raised by I mean, impacted academically by sisters, nuns that were affiliated with my Catholic education. So of course, I knew women in the liturgical fields. My mom was a stay at home mom. My mom never went to college. And I think that was probably why my family was so supportive of me. I was I was taking some chances in what I was dreaming about, and they were willing to let me go and pursue those dreams.

Amber:

That's awesome. And then I kind of skipped this question, so I had to go back.

Marlena:

Okay.

Amber:

Why did you decide to join your particular service? So, the Air Force.

Marlena:

Well I think that was really my guidance counselor's direction. Because of my interest in the space program. She thought air force would be best. And so Air Force Academy was a college opportunity to pursue that path and and she guided me in that lane.

Amber:

Awesome. Tell me about the day you volunteered.

Marlena:

Well, the day that I volunteered was my first day at the Air Force Academy. So when high school completed in the beginning of June of 1986, is when I graduated from high school, I had like less than one month till I was to report to the Air Force Academy. The Air Force Academy is in Colorado Springs, Colorado. And so, I went my family you know, drove me to the Philadelphia airport. And then I was on a plane. Flew to Denver airport, and then I had to change planes and fly from Denver to Colorado Springs. And then we were directed at the Colorado Springs airport to get onto a bus and then it was about a 20-minute drive to the Air Force Academy. And they drop you off at this parking lot to the opening of the Air Force Academy and it's at that time, it was called the "Bring Me Men Ramp". And so, it's an opening that leads up to the cadet area literally a ramp that goes under a tunnel up to a higher level of ground where there's walking areas. And the inscription on the top of this tunnel that you see from this park where we got off the bus was "bring me men". And I definitely began to think, how do I fit in here? We were guided to get in line. We had small bags. All of our belongings were taken from us. And then pretty much we began to get instructed by cadets, higher ranking cadets that were beginning to give us military instructions and give us directions on what we would

be doing next. And it was definitely overwhelming.

Amber:

Awe. What did your family and friends think about you joining the military?

Marlena:

I think they were excited for me. I think they were excited because I had a dream and I was gonna find a way to pursue it. I think they were nervous. Colorado was pretty far away. I was a recruited gymnast. And so, I got I was able to take a recruiting trip that spring before I went in my mom accompanied me with that so she got to see where I would be going. But she was the only person in my family that got to see the actual facility on that special trip that I got to go on. Um, and... like I said earlier, she had never gone to college so, I thought, I think she thought this was amazing.

Amber:

What were the physical requirements for joining the military.

Marlena:

At that time, I knew I wanted to be a pilot. So, when I had to go for my medical screening, I had to be taller than five two, which I am. I'm five six. And I had to have 20/20 vision. So those were the two requirements that I was mostly concerned about because I did want to become a pilot. At that time, I didn't have any other complicating medical situations. I had broken my elbow as a kid um, so, and that was like something I had to document but that wasn't, um, anything that would limit my ability to serve.

Amber:

Um, how did the standards compare to the men's standards so?

Marlena:

Those physical standards were the same. Now when we got to the Air Force Academy, we had physical fitness standards that were different from the men to the women, but at that at that particular time once we first got there, there were people that knew they were not medically qualified to be a pilot, but they were medically qualified to serve in a different way. So not every single person that went to the Air Force Academy graduates and becomes a pilot.

Amber:

Where did you undergo basic training or boot camp?

Marlena:

Basic training and boot camp where at the Air Force Academy. We spent two weeks on the cadet area going through training. It was physical fitness, and it- that was quite challenging because we were at the higher elevation of 7000 feet very different than where I lived in Pennsylvania. So that was part of it. We began to learn like general military knowledge. There was a book called Contrails and it was a small like handheld red book with all kinds of knowledge; important dates in Air Force history, quotes that

we had to remember, different fighter pilots that had special kills, whether it be in different conflicts that they shut down another aircraft, so there was this book of knowledge that we were learning and learning military customs and courtesies. There were some academic learning at that time, and then the physical fitness. So, that was like a two-week introduction into how to wear the uniform properly, what were the personal appearance standards, how do you properly make a bed and have inspections also of that. And then after that, we went to two weeks in an area that we could march to. So, it was like a two-mile march and it was called Jack's Valley and that was an outdoor training event. We spent time as in our fatigue uniform. So that first part of it we were always wearing our blue uniform. And then when we went to Jack's Valley, we were always wearing our fatigues. And the thing that I think I liked best about that experience was we were outside, we were living in tents. But when we were in the cadet area, you know we were assigned to squadrons. And because the Air Force Academy had 40 squadrons at that time, there were only about four women per squadron in every grade level. So, as us going in as basic cadets, there was only four women that I was primarily around. When we went to Jack's Valley. We had a women's tent, and so I was around more women at that time than I had ever been. And then in general that became a more physically driven experience with confidence courses and assault courses, and we were carrying weapons and learning other functions of military service at that time.

Amber:

Um. You might have already answered this but what stands out to you from your basic training experience?

Marlena:

Okay. Being one of only four women out of a squadron of 30 you can imagine we got a lot of extra attention. Some of it was negative some of it was positive. There were definitely...um, inappropriate comments, there were inappropriate times, and I did not know enough or feel confident in establishing my boundaries, that there were definitely times crossed. So basic training was hard. It was... sometimes I didn't know if I was going to make it through that week. But when I look back on that experience, and I talk about the networking that then began when I got to be in that tent with other women, we began to find greater support. You know, I mean, those first two weeks, you're just floundering trying to survive and now you have this opportunity to begin to network with other people that maybe looked like you more or didn't look like you more. But in general, I found good support from my male classmates, squadron mates, and then when we went to Jack's Valley, because I had, um, probably greater physical performance than I was performing militarily because that was all new to me and physical was primarily for me, I did well in that environment and so that brought different kinds of recognition, you know? So, I think those were probably the lows and the highs become blurred because you, you don't know you don't know you're gonna overcome it. You know what I mean? So that feeling of overcoming that challenge is is rewarding and amazing. So, I don't know if that's a good answer or a complicated answer, but I think that's accurate.

Amber:

Awesome! How did you begin to develop your identity as a military person during this initial phase?

Marlena:

Yeah, I, I think, I don't think I had an individual identity. I just wanted to fit into a collective identity. And so, I wanted to be what they asked me to be. Wear my uniform properly. Make sure my hair and my hat were in standards. Learn the knowledge. Like they were molding me into...Um... a cadet and a future Air Force Leader. So, I feel like followership was vital at that initial phase.

Amber:

Who stands out to you in terms of influencing you developing your military identity?

Marlena:

Hm. Wow. I think ... um...there are a couple people. First two weeks there was a cad a female upper-class Cadet that was incredibly mean and condescending to me. I definitely knew I wanted to prove her wrong. So, she definitely even though it was a negative, it had an influence on me. There was another upper-class female Cadet that I've found to be more supportive and encouraging. And so, I would say she had a positive effect on me. And then once academics started, there were lots of professors wearing their military uniform that began to model for me as well.

Amber:

Cool. What aspects of military life did you have the most trouble adjusting to?

Marlena:

Are you, is this a... like a really broad question where we still kind of talking about that time in um when I first joined? I guess Amber I think I should I just give you a quick bit of information. The air after you were at the Air Force Academy for four years you graduated. I graduated as a second lieutenant, and I went to one year of pilot training. After pilot training. I had nine years of active duty service. And that was the requirement because of the pilot training I received. After 1999. I transitioned to the Air Force Reserves. And so, as an Air Force reservist, I then served um a lot more time. I just retired in 2020. You know what I mean? So, there's there are different phases of service in my story. And... each of these phases had different experiences that definitely made me the officer I was when I graduated and impacted how I developed as an officer. But I don't know if I could pick one event you know, because of there's such an expanse of time.

Amber:

Maybe one that sticks out to you the most?

Marlena:

I think that the probably the biggest transition for me was when I left active duty and decided to go to the reserves. The biggest reason was because I knew... I also, I forgot to tell you, I also married a military member. And so the idea for, and he was the same

rank as me doing the same job as me. And so, the idea that both of us would continue to pursue higher learning higher rank was a challenge if we wanted to start a family and we, I did I did I wanted to be a mom. I wanted to start a family and so that probably was my biggest decision when I was leaving active duty deciding if I was going to go to the reserves because I wanted to be a mom. And I didn't see enough female role models that were doing that. And so, I wasn't sure how I was going to do that. Amber?

Amber:
Yes?

Marlena:
My dog is ringing a bell that she likes to go out. Can we take just a second? So, I can let her out. Okay.

Amber:
My cats knocked over a plant. Okay all right back to it. Um...What-

Marlena:
Did I answered that question?

Amber:
What?

Marlena:
Do you feel like I answered that question?

Amber:
I feel like you did. Yeah.

Marlena:
Okay. All right.

Amber:
Yes. Um, what aspect of military of the military did you enjoy the most?

Marlena:
I love being a pilot. I love being part of the crew. I flew the KC 10 which had four crew members and that opportunity to lead a multi ship of Kc 10s Dragging fighters across the Pacific and briefing, like a group of 40 people as the lead tanker was an unbelievable experience responsibility, planning execution, just to see that succeed was immeasurable. As I became a more senior leader, I had an opportunity to be a Squadron Commander, and a vice Wing Commander and I would say those opportunities to impact people directly change their lives, encourage them was the most rewarding part of my time in the military.

Amber:

How has your time in the military different from other points in your life? How was.

Marlena:

Well, since I retired in 2020, and I'm also a commercial airline pilot, so I still get to be a pilot and do something I love every day. It's I would say the camaraderie is different. There are not opportunities to come together with people that you have grown close to because most people will, you know, disperse, go back to their hometown or be with family. And I don't I just don't see those military members as much as I would like to, you know? And like I was when I was working with them. So, the camaraderie is different.

Amber:

Describe your day-to-day uniform and any problems you had getting it to fit.

Marlena:

Hm. I think in general, the uniform fit. It is uncomfortable as a woman to have to zip down a flight suit to take off, like the arms and shoulders to go to the bathroom. Especially in like an airplane like you're in a tiny space and that's not easy to do. Right? The men, there was the zipper had was multi directional so men could zip it up from the bottom and not have to take the whole uniform off their body to go to the bathroom. So, I would say that was significantly different.

Amber:

How did civilians react to women in uniform?

Marlena:

I think civilians were surprised I think civilians were also very gracious. I have heard thank you for your service 1000s and 1000s of times, so I think people genuinely are grateful. It is a shock to me, that women at the Air Force Academy were 10%. When I got into the flying community, we were at 14% of women were pilots. And now that I met a commercial airline 7% of the pilots are women. So, it still is not representative as a career as other areas of industry.

Amber:

And describe your first military assignment.

Marlena:

My first military assignment was to the KC 10 At March Air Force Base. I was a co pilot at that time, and we deployed to the east where we would fly out of Al Dhafra airbase up over the Gulf and Iraq and Iran and conduct air refueling for fighter aircraft that could be engaging with ground operations.

Amber:

Um, did you...

Marlena:

I was...

Amber:
Sorry.

Marlena:
Okay. No, I was just gonna say the KC 10 was a really unique aircraft. It was a heavy aircraft, so very large. It had the ability to carry people and cargo and then could conduct air refueling, as well as take on gas. So, we could be forced extense extended to stay up in the air longer.

Amber:
Um, did your assignment match up with your expectations about what you would be doing in the military? How so were how not?

Marlena:
That's a funny question because remember, I told you I wanted to be an astronaut. Okay, so I'm not an astronaut. And when I got to that first assignment in the KC 10, in March, Air Force Base, our unit was in the same building as reservist. And all of these reservists were flying the same missions that we flew, but just on a part time basis and on their other time, they were commercial airline pilots, and I began to see their quality of life. I began to see the compensation plans with their civilian companies. And that is where I changed my goal and knew that I wanted to become a commercial airline pilot. So those people at that time had a big influence in changing the direction of my career.

Amber:
Describe your subsequent military assignments.

Marlena:
So the unit from March Air Force Base, moved up to Travis Air Force Base. So, I stayed in California for my entire time on active duty. March Air Force Bases outside of Riverside, California, and we went up to Travis Air Force base with which is in Vacaville, California. And so, it was neat. I was still flying the KC 10. And I became an aircraft commander, which means I moved from the copilot right seat to the left seat as a aircraft commander.

Amber:
What impact did your superiors have on your experiences in the military?

Marlena:
I think that my um superiors impacted me well, for the most part. I had very supportive commanders, who encouraged me to upgrade to aircraft commander. I had um...one aircraft commander that I think ... was somewhat flirtatious with me and I did not want that attention. And that person, I think, prevented me from getting a job that I was pursuing. Um. In general, I had an experience where I was the first female commander of the 73rd Airlift Squadron. And the group commander brought me in because the

previous commander had a problem with the organization and kind of created apart so I went in to fix a problem. And I'm really proud because I was an outsider brought in and I had good success in that organization.

Amber:

How did your military peers influence your experience in the military?

Marlena:

I would say in general, my KC 10. Crew members were phenomenal, great support. The opportunity that I had when I was flying to C 40. That's a different type of mission. The C 40 is a blue and white paint scheme like Air Force One and their primary customer are congressional delegations. So, it was a very different kind of mission with huge visibility. For example, the President of the United States knew what was going on on our mission. So, that there was a very, it was very challenging when you had customers who had that kind of access to the leaders of our country. The ability to post on social media very quickly, and the crews could not get back to me in time, so I could elevate it through my leadership channels to help make sure they were aware of things that were going on while these congressional delegations were traveling all around the world. So those crew members I tried to protect and really bolster their confidence, help them establish boundaries with their customers because they were tested in a very different way.

Amber:

Explain to me the physical demands of your job in the military.

Marlena:

The physical demands would begin with preparation. I think you could always set yourself off for a great day by being ready for what was coming. So, we did simulator training where we practice emergency procedures. We checked our fitness for flight every day we were going to fly, and that was am I feeling good, did I rest well, do I have any family? So, we did some analysis of ourselves in preparation to go fly and I think those were the greatest ways to prepare and be fit for the job.

Amber:

Nice. What were your living conditions like?

Marlena:

Um, for the most part, my living conditions were very, very well. I had one roommate when I lived at the Air Force Academy. I lived by myself in pilot training, but I was close to other people in an apartment. When I moved to Riverside, I began a relationship, so I was living off base. I moved up to northern California, again, living off base in a home that I bought. Um. I had an assignment in at the Pentagon. I lived off base there. My greatest challenge was when I was the squadron commander at Scott Air Force Base in the 73rd Airlift Squadron. Because I was a reservist, and I was commuting from Virginia to the job in St. Louis. So, that was tricky because I was not always present physically there. And but I had a 24/7 responsibility. I would travel there for a week or two weeks

at a time. And live on base but was comfortable. And then in my final assignment at McGuire Air Force Base, I lived here in Pennsylvania and was able to drive to that assignment. So, in general, my living accommodations have been comfortable and...um... pretty much my choice. When we were flying the KC 10 sometimes, we would stay at Marine Corps installations, and I will say those facilities were not as nice as Air Force facilities. Sometimes we, we also deployed to an island called Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. And this was an island that had you know, sand fleas and things like that. So, there were times when the overnights stay or a couple weeks stay was not as comfortable because there were, you know, bugs or things like that. But those were manageable.

Amber:

Describe your experience with physical training as part of your military service.

Marlena:

Okay, so it started at the Air Force Academy. We had physical fitness standards. There were push-ups and sit ups you had to do a long jump, and you had to do pull ups and then you also had to run. When I got into my regular service in the military. A fitness test became a requirement on a yearly basis. And that is where it changed from push-ups sit ups, a waist measurement, and a run. That had highs and lows. There were times when the testing was terminated because people were injured or there were severe consequences like some people died during the test. So, they had hiatus. Yeah. They had hiatuses at different times to figure out what was going on with people and continuing to revise the same standards.

Amber:

What impacted your...

Marlena:

Turned out it turned out in those cases, the people that did die had other conditions that they didn't know about. So, there were contributing factors. Yeah, I know. It wasn't just the test but that test that day in that body affected somebody. Yeah.

Amber:

Dang. Intense.

Marlena:

Amber, could we hold one more second, my dog is scratching to come back in. Okay. Okay, sorry about that.

Amber:

No worries. Okay. What impact did your service life have on your health?

Marlena:

Okay. It had a huge impact on my health. I had some mental health challenges from the Air Force Academy where I was verbally assaulted, sexually assaulted, and that was

something that, you know, I overcame and began to learn how to deal with that. I injured my knee and my shoulder at the Air Force Academy doing gymnastics, which was something I recovered from, but I still have problems with those two injuries today. I think that I'm flying, sitting I have back and hip issues as well. I have lost hearing my eyesight is changed. I have, um, I have a service-related disability.

Amber:

Did you develop any physical problems as a result of your military service? You can already answer that but.

Marlena:

I kind of did. I mean, some of those events happened while serving so yes.

Amber:

What have your experiences with the VA medical system and like?

Marlena:

My experience with the VA have been good. I have, like I said, put in a claim and received a service-connected disability. In general, I'm very fortunate that I have other forms of medical care. So, they are not my primary health care provider. The VA is not my primary health care provider.

Amber:

Um. Do you feel the VA medical system is welcoming to female veterans?

Marlena:

Yes.

Amber:

And then explain.

Marlena:

Well, I actually just went to an appointment at a VA facility. It was not VA. Was, it was a company called LHI and they did this review of my knee because it's been bothering me again. And um it was interesting. There was all kinds of pamphlets, phone numbers, support groups, for female veterans that I had not seen that level of marketing to female veterans before and that was really great. I took down a whole bunch of numbers and information. And that was different than I had seen before.

Amber:

That's awesome. What are your most vivid memories of your time in the military?

Marlena:

My most vivid memories are like I told you earlier I loved commanding the KC 10 crew as an instructor pilot and leading that multi ship formation across a large body of water. Whether it was going to the Pacific or going you know, to the Middle East is it's just a

phenomenal experience to lead that kind of a crew. I was stationed in Ramstein, Germany during Operation Allied Force. That was the Kosovo war in 1999. And I was the aircraft commander on a crew of four and the KC 10. That was doing air refueling up over the Serbian Peninsula and we would go as far south as Macedonia. And when we were conducting air refueling on that day, we had a battle damaged a 10 that was requesting air refueling. And the A 10 in general, is a power deprived aircraft. So, we would do a maneuver called a toboggan, which means you would go from a higher altitude to a lower altitude while you're air refueling because this aircraft that's lagging in performance might have a better chance of catching up to the boom when you're in this downward change of altitude. And so, we air refueled this battle damaged a 10 all the way across the Adriatic Ocean at 10,000 feet which was an emergency altitude to get that aircraft safely back to their home station. And that was also an unbelievable experience that tested the rules of the KC 10 tested the cohesiveness of my crew as well as pushed the envelope of performance...I had a great experience when I was assigned at the Pentagon. I was working in the National Military Command Center and at that time the Air Force had a service member that was that had died in Afghanistan. And I happened to be on duty making the first phone call to the new Air Force Chief of Staff on his first day. And I vividly remember that phone call and giving him information on what had transpired. When I went to the 73rd Airlift Squadron and I heard about the problems and inappropriate relationships that were happening in that organization, I felt phenomenal to inspire a group of flight attendants. They were equally male and female but letting them know that they we had professional standards, and everybody was expected to behave that way. And we would hold people accountable if they didn't. So, it really empowered that group of professionals. And then my last assignment was as an Augmentee to the commander of the 6/21 contingency response wing. And this was also phenomenal. I was a reservist back filling in for a Wing Commander, I would go to different meetings and be with other high levels officials at that base. And I was honored that they respected me with the same level of respect that they would have given my boss, you know, so that was pretty amazing opportunities. It was Joint Base McGuire Dix Lakehurst. It's a huge base with so many different leaders at different levels of the military and different divisions of the military and that was really great experience.

Amber:

It's really cool. Did the service ever prevent you from doing anything because you were a woman?

Marlena:

Well, when I first graduated from pilot training, women were not authorized to fly combat aircraft. So, in 1991, that rule didn't change till 1993. So, at that time, I was limited on what aircraft I picked following pilot training.

Amber:

In what ways do you believe these limitations were based on the perception of women's lack of physical capabilities?

Marlena:

At that time, it was 100% based on that. I think it was also based on mental capabilities. Could women handle the challenge? Did they have the right psyche for combat? So, I love the fact that they're women, right now in squadron commander positions and leadership positions in new brand new aircraft, leading the way on that. Overcoming all those prior stereotypes.

Amber:

What opportunities did you have to interact with other women in the military?

Marlena:

It is funny. Um. There have been opportunities that I have pursued on my own. I just went to my 30th reunion for the Air Force Academy. It was the 30th really 31st reunion because it was canceled last year because of COVID. But when I went there, I created an opportunity to meet with the women that came to that reunion. And literally, there were some women that I had never met before. And it got me to thinking about my time at the Air Force Academy. That experience that I told you about where we lived in a tent. That was the most women I had ever really been around the the Air Force Academy never created opportunities for groups of women to come together to discuss issues or network or find ways to encourage each other. And it was interesting that we were talking about this 31 years later, and wondering if changes had been made. And we didn't necessarily know but I was I was sad that there were women that I did not know when I graduated from the Air Force Academy. In general, every assignment that I had after that, I would say I knew, every women, every woman, because there was so few of us. It was easy to know everybody when there's only 10 of you. So, it's interesting that we want to promote increased numbers, but at the same time, we have to find more ways to connect them connect women and bring them together. So, they have opportunities to build trustworthy relationships that they can find comfort, find confidence through, find credibility in, and I think that would be ways that we could do better.

Amber:

Inspiring. What does being a woman in the military mean to you?

Marlena:

Being in a woman in the military really goes back to that same definition of what I thought service would be. I don't think that a citizen has to be labeled male or female, we rise to the occasion for our country because we love it. Um. Do women do things differently than men? Absolutely. I think I bring a level of humility, graceful confidence and the willingness to connect with others that is different than my male counterparts.

Amber:

How if at all did women's experience in the military change during your time of service?

Marlena:

Wow. Phenomenally! Right. Like there's probably there's definitely more women than

when I started. Okay. I talked about that combat rule that changed in 1993. Um. I think the whole um, social media influence is phenomenal because you have the ability to see something now that I didn't have when I was younger, you know what I mean? Like I told you I sent away for a postcard to get a paper packet had I had the ability to you know, you can follow the life and the day of a cadet online at their website, you know. They have there's Instagram so there's so many ways to do that and I think that is probably my, my greatest purpose now. I am an admission liaison officer for the Air Force Academy, so I help high school students pursue their dream of going to the Air Force Academy. I am a pilot with United Airlines, and I started an Instagram called Come fly with MVP. And I want to be a role model. I want to use the hashtag see it to be it and the hashtag Who are you reaching back for? These are goals of mine that I want to help influence in whatever way I can. Whether it be through social media or through my interaction with passengers as they come aboard my aircraft. I want to show them what I do and that you can do it too. Because I never, I never saw that. It didn't limit me, but we have all of these tools now to make this known. In general, the airline industry is struggling to continue to build pilots and get them to backfill this huge generation that's about to retire. So, we must as a country, encourage more we women to get there, and want to be there.

Amber:
Gonna switch gears for a sec. All these papers.

Marlena:
Are those my papers?

Amber:
No they're questions.

Marlena:
Oh.

Amber:
There's a lot of different categories. Um. So there's a section for questions for those who served overseas. You mentioned that you flew the KC 10 over like Iraq and stuff. So, you served overseas?

Marlena:
Absolutely.

Amber:
Okay. So as some of these questions. I didn't want to assume that I was like, um... So, some questions on that. Did you want to serve overseas?

Marlena:
Yes, I think I knew that that was a possibility. I had always been interested in travel.

And the KC 10 was a worldwide aircraft. So, I knew that was part of that mission.

Amber:

And then did you request an overseas assignment?

Marlena:

Well, in general, the ways I never requested an overseas assignment because the KC 10. The aircraft that I was flying, did not have an overseas home station. The KC 10s were CONUS aircraft that flew overseas, but there was not a unit directly in an overseas location. So that was one reason, but the second reason was the worldwide operations took us everywhere. We've we've been to every continent; we've seen amazing places all over our world because of that worldwide operation. So in general, it may not have been something that I could request because of an assignment but I'm really grateful for all of the travel that I did.

Amber:

How much time were you given to prepare for to leave?

Marlena:

Well, if you weren't deploying, which the KC 10 would do, we would go to the United Arab Emirates for a four months period of time. You would probably get a month's worth of notice they they propped out the rotation, crew members pretty well in advance so so you knew. I would say you needed a good week to 10 days to get all of the requirements accomplished prior to your departure. That could be uniform requirements. It could be medical requirements, and then mission planning requirements.

Amber:

What instructions were you given?

Marlena:

You normally had like a pre deployment checklist. And so, it was pretty well organized. And somebody had done it before you so, if you had any questions about where you had to go to get a shot or pick up Specialty Equipment it was answerable.

Amber:

And what clothing/equipment were you issued or instructed to bring with you?

Marlena:

Well, again, it was all determined by the location that you were going to. We had publications that guided us in that lane. So for example, when we went to the Middle East, we had to take desert uniforms, we had to take chemical warfare gear. We had to take summer clothes if we were going to be have downtime or off base. There were times when we went up to Greenland that we had to take cold weather gear. So, there were different types of bags that we had already built for ourselves that we knew we had to carry with us when we traveled.

Amber:

Were you able to talk to anyone who had completed a similar assignment?

Marlena:

Yes, absolutely.

Amber:

And then describe your preparations to go overseas. Like arranging family stuff. immunizations?

Marlena:

Yeah. Yeah, sure. I would definitely, like I said, need about a week of time to get medically qualified, which could have been specialty shots that you had to go to a certain area. There was a time that they were also providing us sleeping aids because we would be on 24-hour operations. So, to get your body on that right cycle for maybe sleep in the day to work at night. There were medical aids for that. In general, my my um last deploy deployment, I had two daughters. And so, I had to allow time to drive my daughters to my mother in law's and father in law's house because they were going to be caring for my kids while I was deployed.

Amber:

Um it says, Tell me what the trip was like.

Marlena:

I learned well, the way that I deployed seven times in the KC 10. And so they were all similar, but it evolved over my time and service. For first time I deployed to the Middle East we were staying in a hotel. The second time I deployed to the Middle East, we were staying in an apartment building. The third time I had deployed to the Middle East. We were staying in trailers on the base. And then the fourth and the subsequent times. They were hardened structures. They had built up the base so much that we could now stay on base. So, it was interesting, you know, we were in a hotel where you could you walk around outside. We were in this apartment building again, where you could go and walk through the souks and be part of the local town drive yourself to the base. To a time after the Khobar Towers incident and we had in Saudi Arabia, and then they moved us all to on base so there were temporary trailers for us to live in and then they eventually built hardened structures.

Amber:

Did you travel as part of a unit or as a replacement?

Marlena:

Always part of a crew. Yep, unit.

Amber:

I figured that but I was like I better ask.

Marlena:
Yeah.

Amber:
How did you travel by ship or by air?

Marlena:
Air. Yep. We always we always would fly in the plane that because the plane [inaudible] as people [inaudible] because of maintenance scheduling and stuff, so we would fly. One time I flew a 21-hour mission from Travis Air Force Base and Air Force Base in Northern California, all the way to Al Dhafra airbase in the Middle East. And that 21-hour mission had an augmented crew so that mean we got rest breaks when we were flying over there. We had a whole configuration of almost 50 passengers with us, because we were swapping out all of these crews when we got there.

Amber:
What were your first impressions on arrival?

Marlena:
Yeah, I think you are overwhelmed like almost the heat takes your breath away. It is so different. So dry so.... It was just so different. And when it would get windy there you think oh wow, this is going to cool us off. But no. The sand would like hit your face and just feel like little cuts. It was just so so different.

Amber:
Were you transferred within the host country? Did you remain with the same unit the whole time?

Marlena:
Stayed with the same unit.

Amber:
And, how did you adjust to the living and working conditions overseas?

Marlena:
I think I think I adjusted well I I'm a very positive person and I want to always make the best of a situation. I'm also very faith filled. And so, I know that I have spiritual resources that keep me strong and keep me focused. It's hard to be away from your family and your loved ones. But there were different times again, based on technology, right? My first couple times. I might have been able to place a phone call home once in a four-month time. The next time we went we might have had more like we might have had a whole room with phones and phone calls were unlimited. Eventually, we began to get computers and we could Skype and see face to face. So yeah, I think technology also helped that but the very first deployments were really challenging. Emotionally like that

because you began to relate so well with your crew you become a team you go to fly every mission together. You eat your meals together because you're on the same schedule and you will stay that way, so you become very close.

Amber:

Tell me about your daily life overseas of food housing. Any problems with supplies?

Marlena:

Yeah, again, it changed over my different deployments. When you're in a hotel, you go down to a hotel restaurant, right when you're in an apartment, I can go out to a restaurant in town. When we moved on to the base and in a trailers, there were post nation provided services so it might have been more ethnically local food selections. But by the time they created the hardened facility there was a hardened chow hall and we had US Air Force military services representatives preparing the food. So, it was American food eventually came in and then eventually there was like a Dunkin Donuts and a subway and like they got hardened to a very different level. You know?

Amber:

Were there enough people to do the job or was the unit understaffed?

Marlena:

I think are we had enough people to do the job

Amber:

then how long was your tour of duty?

Marlena:

Well, I would normally go for a four-month period. And like I said I deployed seven times.

Amber:

Yes. So many! Did you learn the language of the countries?

Marlena:

But Amber it doesn't like so many but over a period.

Amber:

Yeah.

Marlena:

That's a long time, right?

Amber:

Yeah, just sounds so much. Did you learn...

Marlena:

I should also tell you that I'm I'm 53 years old.

Amber:
You look young.

Marlena:
You're very sweet to say that but that that's a life story, right?

Amber:
It's crazy. Did you learn the language of the countries where you served?

Marlena:
I learned phrases, but it was I don't think I could have learned those languages.

Amber:
What did you do on your days off?

Marlena:
I would love to go sightseeing. We took a road trip to Dubai. When I was in in the Middle East on a deployment to Ramstein. I we went to Paris we drove to Poland. We got to see Verdon. Yeah. When you go to when you go to New Zealand you go and bungee jump off a bridge. When you're in Japan, you go down to Roppongi like there there's just so many opportunities to be part of the local culture or see the world.

Amber
That's so cool. Did you get R&R?

Marlena:
Absolutely.

Amber
Were you able to get your mail?

Marlena:
Yeah, I think so.

Amber:
Did you have running water and laundry and shower facilities?

Marlena:
Yes. But they all they weren't always fantastic. Like when we first moved those trailers. It was awful. It was awful.

Amber:
How long was your shift?

Marlena:

Well, usually when you were flying, you would be alerted four hours prior to the takeoff time. You would report three hours prior. So, it was like you had an hour to get yourself ready and you would show to work and then you would mission plan for one hour and then you would go to the aircraft. Um. And so, I would argue that we probably had 14-hour days because of that prep time and how the day started. Um. Yeah, 14-hour days.

Amber:

That's long. How many days did you get off?

Marlena:

Because of the FAA requires crew rest. We would go from a day on to crew rest after that. So, you could never be scheduled before that minimum recovery time.

Amber:

That's nice. Were there any special regulations because of where you were serving?

Marlena:

Well there were always host nation rules. So, whether it was the United Arab Emirates whether it was Germany, whether you were in Japan or Korea, or China. No, we never were in China. Vietnam or, uh yeah, Vietnam. Those were the host nation rules they would apply. That might mean like documents you had to bring to show if it was a passport if it was a specialty visa. If it was like report of your inoculation records. Sometimes you had to read about their agricultural requirements so you couldn't bring apples in or fruit from home into Japan and things like that. You had to be aware of.

Amber:

How were... Sorry. Were you ever deployed into disaster relief humanitarian mission?

Marlena:

Um, I was not deployed to that mission. But when I was in the contingency response wing, that was my last assignments. I was a colonel at that time. That unit 100% responded to it. So, when the Wing Commander deployed with the unit, I would be home station backfill. And so, as home station backfill, I would have to make sure that the crews that were getting ready to go out were prepared for the conditions they would be. They responded to hurricanes in Haiti, they responded to the hurricanes in Puerto Rico, the hurricane that hit Florida. Um. We responded when the um...um...the...um... the shoot, why am I not thinking of the name of the facility? It was a reactor that spilled into the Pacific Ocean from Japan. That happened um...yeah, there was lots of responding. Me personally, I never went to that location, but I supported from home station.

Amber:

Nice. How did the citizens of the host country feel about American service personnel?

Marlena:

Yeah, I would argue that they were grateful, incredibly grateful for American service personnel. I heard stories about when they were in Puerto Rico that the hurricane impact did transit within the country so much that our crews had to take relief supplies, sling them on to helicopters that would fly to these mountainous destinations where people were desperate for food and water because trucks couldn't get up the hill to them. It was really, really amazing, innovative, innovative services, innovative ways of delivering humanitarian supplies, that were not what they had done in the past. So, they had to get creative to do that.

Amber:

You're just like blowing my mind with all this stuff, honestly. I'm like, dang, and I'm just sitting here. So, you mentioned you had children?

Marlena:

Yes.

Amber:

Okay. So, I have a couple questions on that. Because you had you had them while you were in the military because you said you just retired. So did you, um did you were... Do you know other women who had children while on active duty?

Marlena:

I knew of them I did not know them. Well, we did not network and like share best practices or things like that. And social media wasn't around to even have that you know, and I was away from my mom. So, there were some close friends. These were spouses, mostly of the male military members that I worked with, and they were a great help to me.

Amber:

How did colleagues and superiors react to the pregnancy?

Marlena:

Um, yeah, I think I think they're accepting of it. But for a military member, that's a pilot, you are grounded for your first trimester. You can fly for your second trimester, and then you're grounded for your third trimester. So, there is a...um, effect on the mission for sure, because you can't do it during some phases of your pregnancy. But you might be able to do different duties at home station that you weren't doing before. So, there could be some tradeoffs. I would argue that probably that had a negative impact on somebody, right? Somebody had to go do the flying for me, maybe they didn't want to, and they might have had to

Amber:

What, what was it like to raise a child while on active duty?

Marlena:

Well, I raised my children as a reservist so slightly different, but at the same time, I think

that my success as a military member is 100% related to my family. If your children don't have the same values and support you in what you're doing, that could have a negative effect on your job. Right? How you do your service. So, I would argue that my children served with me because of the impact that my military service had on them.

Amber:

Um. Did you feel that your military duties were incompatible with child rearing?

Marlena:

That absolutely was why I left active duty and went to the reserves. I didn't know how I was going to do that. On active duty. It's really amazing. Now they have like leaves of absences and all kinds of initiatives to help women but at that time, it wasn't there. At my time.

Amber:

Did the fact that you've had children affect your career options?

Marlena:

Yes. Here's an example. I mentioned to you that I am married to a military member. We were the same rank. We did the same job. But I'm the one who had to take time away from my job to have the baby. My husband went on to be a higher rank than me. And I think that is because of my role as a mom. I have no regrets about that. But that's a fact of how that played out.

Amber:

Very interesting. How, how are family is affected when mothers are in the service? Plusses and minuses.

Marlena:

Yeah, it's interesting. I think that you're right. Moms deploying might be different than dads deploying. But I think that technology can have a really positive effect by keeping us close keeping us connected. I think dads can rise to the occasion, or family members can rise to the occasion and be the support that children need during deployments. But I think that being honest with your children, about what you're doing, and the effect that it might have on our country or a country that you're going to, could provide great growth to them and encourage them to be the best citizen they can be. Because they have that understanding.

Amber:

The final stretch. Um.... Okay, so describe your transition to civilian life.

Marlena:

I was lucky that I had kind of a halfway transition to civilian life when I went from active duty to the reserves. But now that I have completely retired, it's hard to completely disconnect as I mentioned, I'm still helping recruit for the Air Force Academy. So, I'm staying involved in that way. A lot of the people that I mentor, whether it be to the Air

Force Academy, or some of those people that I meet in civilian life that want to be pilots, I might encourage them to find military avenues to be um get involved in and find the training with, so I think I stay close to it. But I do think that it's important to find organizations to stay connected with once you separate. Like I have joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars post in my town and I'm also a member of my townships Veterans Committee. And so, I think there's other ways to get involved and stay connected with veterans in your community and help them and provide resources to them if you can. If they need it.

Amber:

Are there challenges unique to female veterans that come from transitioning to civilian life?

Marlena:

Um, I, I can't pinpoint that exactly. I think there, like you said, have been times that maybe the VA was not as responsive so that could have a negative impact on a transitioning female service member. I think that... um... there probably are female veterans that are in need or feeling alone and I wish I could help them more. Like I want I want to find the people. I want to help people and figure out the best way to do that.

Amber:

And why did you leave the service?

Marlena:

I retired. I did. I accomplished my time.

Amber:

In your opinion, what issues do women veterans face in the US?

Marlena:

Um, I hope that women veterans feel confident when they transition to civilian life to pursue jobs that are commensurate with their experience that may not equal a degree, right. You might have a world of experience and not necessarily degrees that an employer might be seeking. So, I hope that we have employers that are looking at a whole person not just education details on a resume. And also feel like they have a network for support for encouragement for any any level of I don't know care? That they may need.

Amber:

What challenges have you experienced due to being a female veteran?

Marlena:

Well, you know, I mentioned that I had, you know, been a victim of sexual assault in my early career. I have definitely, I think had the effects of sexism or unwanted verbal advances affect a job. I have been hit on as an aircraft commander in Utapao Thailand one time by a civilian contractor that I was a major at that time. So somewhat in my mid

30s. And I had way more confidence than I had at other times in my career in my service that I could tell this man that I was going to report him and that was completely unacceptable. So, it's interesting that we can learn about things, but we might not have the confidence to implement them. But as you get older and wiser you can look back and think I could have done things differently. You know, I could have set boundaries and been able to express them and let someone know that and had the courage to report someone. I think that's hard, hard to do.

Amber:

How could members of the general public improve the experiences of female veterans?

Marlena:

Well, again, I think just that willingness to talk to people. Taking the time to get to know veterans in your community, the female veterans in your community, or if you're an employer, your workforce like get to know what that is about them and how they served. It's important to take the time. You know, veterans' suicide is paramount. That we find ways to connect with people and help stop it.

Amber:

How could members to the government improve the experiences of female veterans?

Marlena:

Um, I think there are like I mentioned earlier, good steps happening now there are opportunities to take a leave of absence, to have a family if you wanted to do something like that or care for a sick family member. Those, those are good exceptions that can allow a person to step back from service but have the opportunity to resume service. So I think there are some really great initiatives happening right now.

Amber:

How could members of the military improve the experiences of female veterans?

Marlena:

I think that the one area that we have to be careful of is allowing the vision of transgender not erase women. And I think we see that a little bit and that is of concern to me.

Amber:

What have you done since leaving the service? You kinda already...

Marlena:

Yeah, I am a full-time commercial airline pilot with United Airlines. I volunteer for the Air Force Academy, and I am a member of my VFW and my township Veterans Committee.

Amber:

How have your military experiences affected your subsequent to career?

Marlena:

My military experience 100% set me up for my follow up career. I would not have gotten the job if I had not had the level of experience that I left the military with.

Amber:

What did it mean to you to serve your country?

Marlena:

It was an honor for me to serve my country. It is an honor for me to wear a uniform, wear the American flag on my uniform and represent every organization that I have been affiliated with. I loved my time of service, and I had the most amazing experiences because of it. And I'm very grateful for that.

Amber:

What did you learn about yourself through the military?

Marlena:

I think that... I mentioned earlier I was a part a positive person and I was a faithful person when I started, and those traits are still with me today, but just stronger. And I think that is a recipe for success. It's a recipe, a recipe to remain hope filled when you feel life is bringing you down or not going your way and I would love to share that more with people

Amber:

What would, what do you want more people to know about service women and women veterans?

Marlena:

I think that people should know that it was not easy. It's not easy to be minority. It's not easy to deal with oppressors for a better word. It's not easy to deal with that. And there should be unlimited resources for people to report inappropriate behaviors or inappropriate and I think there's they're doing better at that than when I was in my young career. But I think the public should know that every person has a story, and they should take the time to get to know them.

Amber:

Two more. What advice would you give a young woman today thinking of joining the service?

Marlena:

I would let that person know that they are in store for greatness. It will get better each day. And there is a robust community of women to support her.

Amber:

And then finally, do you have any additional comments or stories you wish to include in this interview?

Marlena:

Um, well, Amber, it, has this kind of been confusing to you in the sense of like, if I would have provided you a resume in advance would that had helped like the timeline, the locations like could that have would that have helped you would you want anything like that?

Amber:

I would say would have helped but I I kind of figured things while you were talking. So it wasn't confusing.

Marlena:

Yeah, I guess is there anything from my storytelling that you need more info on or has been confusing?

Amber:

I don't think so.

Marlena:

Because I'm grateful that I was able to talk about my Academy experience my pilot training experience, my KC 10. I talked about the C 40. I talked about my assignment at the Pentagon. I talked about my assignment at McGuire I talked about my spouse my family talked about my A 10 mission or the Adriatic. Yeah, I don't think I've missed anything. I don't.

Amber:

Alright. If you feel good, then we're good. Alright, then I will stop the recording.

Marlena:

Okay. Thank you for your time.