

Interview Transcript
October 21, 2006
Military Women's Memorial

Malia K. (Bell) Spranger | 1984-1987, 1987-interview | US Air Force Academy (USAFA),
Air Force, AF Reserve

Sabrina S. (Bell) Zerphy | 1986-1990, 1990-1998 | US Naval Academy (USNA), Navy

Felicia M. (Bell) Mohr | 1994-1998, 1998-interview | US Air Force Academy (USAFA),
Air Force

00:00:00 Mario

Alright, we're doing bars.

00:00:03 Jane Maliszewski

I'm Jane, I don't know...

00:00:04 Mario

I'm Mario.

00:00:05 Jane Maliszewski

Hi, Mario.

00:00:08 Mario

Ah.

00:00:08 Jane Maliszewski

Now, are you the one that used to be the IT guy? No.

00:00:12 Mario

Not really. You're talking about Sanjeev though, but, um...

00:00:15 Jane Maliszewski

Oh, okay.

00:00:16 Mario

Yeah.

00:00:17 Jane Maliszewski

Oh, yeah, that's right, you were, I did meet you over at the foundation.

00:00:20 Mario

Did you?

00:00:21 Jane Maliszewski

I think so, yeah. Didn't you come into the room one time? Yeah.

00:00:24 Unknown Speaker

We went like this.

00:00:25 Jane Maliszewski

Yeah, I just volunteer a little bit. I meet a lot of people without name tags.

00:00:31 Mario

Okay, okay, okay, all right. Well, we can start.

00:00:39 Jane Maliszewski

My name is Jane Maliszewski, Colonel, U.S. Army, retired, and I am interviewing the three Bell sisters on the 21st of October 2006 at the Women's Memorial during the Academy Women's Symposium. We have here Malia Spranger, who graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1987, Sabrina Zerphy, who graduated from the Naval Academy in 1990. Did I say that correctly?

00:01:03 Sabrina Zerphy

That's correct.

00:01:03 Jane Maliszewski

Okay. And Felicia Mohr, who graduated from the Air Force Academy in 1998. This interview is being recorded for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation's Oral History Program. What I'm going to ask you to do now is go to each of you, and then tell me a little bit about your Air Force or Navy career. When you entered the academy, when you got commissioned, and what your service has been like. And then we'll go back to some background just so we can kind of get a feel for where you're at. Would you like to start?

00:01:39 Malia Spranger

Okay. I was—I started at the Air Force Academy in 1983 and graduated in 1987. I was a chem major and an intercollegiate athlete, gymnast, at the Air Force Academy. After

that, I went into personnel, was my career field. I chose that to be in a career field that I could be with my husband, who was a pilot. We got married three days after graduation, and both went to Columbus, Mississippi was our first duty station. And there, I did five years of active duty. After five years of active duty, got off of active duty and went into the Air Force Reserve, and have been in the Air Force Reserve ever since. I was pretty much part-time until 9/11, and then after 9/11, I was mobilized at Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base, did two years of mobilization there, and now I work at Special Operations Command.

00:02:31 Jane Maliszewski

And your husband is stationed in that area?

00:02:35 Malia Spranger

Actually, my husband got off of active duty at about the 15-and-a-half-year mark, so about five years ago, and he actually flies for FedEx right now.

00:02:43 Jane Maliszewski

Okay, thank you.

00:02:46 Sabrina Zerphy

I went to the Naval Academy in 1986 and graduated in 1990. I was an oceanography major, I selected surface warfare. My year group was one of the first years that they had just opened up logistic ships to women. My first command was the *USS Mount Baker*, AE-34 out of Charleston, South Carolina. When I reported there, I was one of five women on board. We were—it was—I believe it was three women officers and two senior enlisted. Again, it was at the very beginning of the implementation of women at sea. While I was on the Mount Baker I was auxiliary officer for a year and a half, and then I was a combat information watch officer. The *USS Mount Baker* did deploy, I believe it was with the USS Eisenhower Battle Group, in support of Desert Storm in 1991, so I did a three-year tour on the *USS Mount Baker*. When I left the Mount Baker, I did a follow-on sea tour with *USNS Leroy Grumman*, which was an MSC, a military sealift command oiler, and that is considered a forward-deployed all the time. It was a one-year tour. During that tour, we basically supported Adriatic operations of the fleet in the Mediterranean, in the Adriatic, we did a lot of replenishments.

00:04:21

That was a kind of an eye-opening tour, because it was a military sea lift, it was run by civilians, but there was a military detachment of of about 20 to 30 primarily communications and operations personnel. It was kind of eye-opening because at that time, again, as they were trying to get women, it was one of the opportunities for

enlisted women. It was primarily women, I think. Of the 20 to 30 people, about three-quarters of them were women, so it was actually my first opportunity to actually manage and lead primarily women, which was a little different than when I went to the Mount Baker and those auxiliaries, and it was me and 72 men in my division.

00:05:06 Jane Maliszewski

How was it different?

00:05:09 Sabrina Zerphy

I think the leadership of a core of people that is primarily women really changes the dynamic of the group than when it's primarily men. Women— and not that they're more difficult, they're just— they're different. There are different things that are important to women. There's more feedback that you need to provide, more kind of emotional support, not, you know, nice type of things, but they're interested in how they— I needed to be interested in how they felt, what they were going through, what their families were, and it was different, like I said, than managing the men. I did a— in fact, I became pregnant on my— on that tour as OIC, but at that time, the ship was needing to be deployed in the Caribbean to support Haitian migration out of Haiti and Cuba, and also the reinstallation of Aristide in Haiti. So it was basically well into my second trimester because they, I had a hard time pinpointing exactly when, you know, how far along I was. So it— While we were kind of in, somewhat in combat operations, and there was a USNS— the hospital ship was Mercy, I believe, was in the area. They said it was okay for me to stay on board, so I stayed on board.

00:06:42

The day that the Mercy left, they said, okay, now it's time for you to— you're well into your second trimester, so you need to, you know, you need to get going. I was fortunate because I was going to take kind of a slow boat back, take one of the frigates that was going back up to Jacksonville, and go back up to Norfolk, but I happened to, the ship happened to be visited by then the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Borda, who said, “well, I'm flying back up today, so why don't you just hop on my helicopter and fly back up to Norfolk?” which I did. So that kind of, that was the— not so much the end of my sea tour, but at that time I rolled to shore, and I went to the Atlantic Intelligence Command and stayed at the Atlantic Intelligence Command for three years, and that's out of Norfolk, Virginia. Then my husband and I, who was also a Naval Academy grad, we had an opportunity to run a business with his father up in Allentown, Pennsylvania, so we both resigned our commissions and that's where we are today.

00:07:38 Jane Maliszewski

And what year did you resign?

00:07:40 Sabrina Zerphy

1998.

00:07:42 Jane Maliszewski

Okay, okay, thank you. And finally...

00:07:46 Felicia Mohr

And finally [laughs].

00:07:48 Jane Maliszewski

Long awaiting your turn.

00:07:48 Sabrina Zerphy

Sorry [laughs].

00:07:50 Felicia Mohr

No, that was great, wish I had that much to say. Well, having been inspired by both my sisters, I too went to an academy. I went to the Air Force Academy, graduated in 1998, and I...

00:08:02 Jane Maliszewski

Now, you had two to pick from, Air Force and Navy.

00:08:05 Felicia Mohr

I know.

00:08:06 Jane Maliszewski

Why go that route?

00:08:08 Felicia Mohr

Well, I like the mountains.

00:08:09 Jane Maliszewski

You could have gone Army. That really rounded you out as a joint service family.

00:08:13 Felicia Mohr

No, no, no. I know, it just never even entered my mind [all laugh], I didn't even put in my application for Army. No, but I did apply to both the Naval and the Air Force Academy, but the Air Force Academy appealed to me because of the mountains and also the

mission, not so much about the water. In fact, I get seasick, so it was probably better, better equipped for the Air Force. Not that I fly, but anyway, so went to the Air Force Academy, graduated in 1998. That's where I met my husband, and we, we actually didn't marry right away. I had my first assignment as an acquisitions officer at Hanscom Air Force Base, up in Massachusetts, and up there I was an executive officer for the first year, in information programs. The next couple of years I was a program manager for Global Air Traffic Systems, and then our next assignment—I was actually very fortunate—was able to be stationed with my then-boyfriend, and then Jeff and I eventually married when we were stationed together up at Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska, which is in Anchorage. And up there, I was a program manager for the forward operating bases. Not many people are aware, but we actually have—we still maintain a presence up there because of our proximity to Russia. So anyways, I managed a couple of these forward operating bases that a couple times a year, the 15s [F-15s] deployed out to the sites and just, just kind of a, more of a posturing more so than anything else. So I had that experience, and it was about as close as I could get to the operational side of the Air Force, where I'm actually working with base operations, base support, runway support, understanding the civil engineering side of how to run a base. So from that assignment, I came to my current assignment as an ROTC instructor at Valdosta State University, which is very fortunate because my husband is based at Moody Air Force Base, so we're co-located. And as an ROTC instructor, I work—actually instruct the seniors in national securities. I'm the commandant of cadets, and I will be there for the next year.

00:10:22 Jane Maliszewski

Oh, excellent. I did ROTC time myself, I was at Louisiana Tech.

00:10:26 Felicia Mohr

Oh, very good. It's a—

00:10:26 Jane Maliszewski

It's a fun experience.

00:10:28 Felicia Mohr

It is, it is. It's a really fun job.

00:10:30 Jane Maliszewski

I'll keep in touch with some of the cadets that graduated while I was there. Um, this is like 15 years ago.

00:10:35 Felicia Mohr

Well, that's great, I hope that happens with me, too.

00:10:39 Jane Maliszewski

Could one of you talk about your parents and your family life? Do you have other brothers and sisters? What did your parents do, and how did you get influenced to go into the service?

00:10:51 Malia Spranger

Well, I think our greatest influence is probably our father, he's a career Navy captain. He was a dentist in the Navy. Pretty much, he was West Coast for the first 10 years of his life, on aircraft carriers, off and on tours through Vietnam. Actually, our earliest Navy experience was my mom decided to follow him on an aircraft carrier through a pac—Westpac tour. So we spent nine months, and she toted A five-year-old and a two-year-old through Hawaii, Japan, Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, and you know, this was back, I mean, this is during the Vietnam War, but there wasn't a lot of anti-American issues and stuff like that. The world was a little bit safer, there wasn't this terrorism kind of thing, and here she went, and a couple other women basically followed the aircraft carrier group around as it made its trip. And so...

00:11:42 Jane Maliszewski

Was your mother Filipino?

00:11:44 Malia Spranger

My mother is Filipino.

00:11:45 Jane Maliszewski

Okay.

00:11:46 Sabrina Zerphy

One of the— our— her father was in the U.S. Navy and he was a career petty officer at that time. Of course, the Filipinos could only be stewards or cooks at that MS's, but he did an entire career in the Navy, and in fact was at the Naval Academy. He was a steward at the Naval Academy. So it was a big deal to him and to my grandmother and, of course, my mother and her mother's family that I actually went. You know, when he was allowed, you know, he was allowed to only be a steward and serve food and, and had a granddaughter who went to— or, granddaughters who went to military academies later.

00:12:22 Jane Maliszewski

Interesting. Interesting. So his background was, experience was Navy, yet you...

00:12:28 Malia Spranger

Yeah, I chose Air Force.

00:12:30 Jane Maliszewski

What influenced you to choose the Air Force Academy?

00:12:32 Malia Spranger

You know, my dad retired, out of, the rest of his career was on the East Coast side. We moved right before my senior year, and I had applied to all east coast colleges. I was ready to go Ivy League, I had a ROTC scholarship, but after living for a year on the west coast, I too enjoyed the mountains. When I compared the academy's education to even the Ivy League schools that were being taught in classes of 300, and freshmen being lost, I was just really impressed with the academy and the opportunities. You know, soaring, jumping on airplanes, the gymnastics program. Both myself and Felicia and Sabrina were all basically gymnasts, so we were recruited to do gymnastics at our academies as well, so that was a big pull. So yeah, I broke tradition and went to the Air Force. I felt that they, at the time they were better assimilating females into the service, and I still feel that way, kind of. I really felt good about going to the Air Force Academy and was happy to have my sister there, and unfortunately, Sabrina went to Navy, but it worked out. It was good, it was really good.

00:13:35 Jane Maliszewski

And you're 2 years apart?

00:13:37 Malia Spranger

We're three years, three years apart.

00:13:38 Jane Maliszewski

So there was a time when you were at the same football game on opposite sides.

00:13:42 Malia Spranger

We actually did. She, as a freshman, as a plebe, they allowed her to come to the Air Force game back when Air Force was winning. Now we are not [laughs]. But she came as a plebe and I was a firstie, and it was great. My parents came. Felicia, I don't know if you came, I can't remember right now.

00:13:59 Felicia Mohr

I did, I did, I was there.

00:14:00 Malia Spranger

You did! You were there with Nawita. We have one other sister. It goes, myself, Sabrina, and then there's a sister, Nawita, that's right between these two. We're almost all...

00:14:08 Jane Maliszewski

So she's the one that went Army.

00:14:10 Malia Spranger

She... [Sisters laugh]

00:14:12 Felicia Mohr

She dated a Marine.

00:14:13 Malia Spranger

I know!

00:14:13 Felicia Mohr

Does that count?

00:14:17 Sabrina Zerphy

Yeah, she was kind of through with the military, I think.

00:14:20 Jane Maliszewski

There's always one in every pack.

00:14:22 Sabrina Zerphy

She's got to be rebellious.

00:14:23 Malia Spranger

But she was an engineer, she went and got her engineering degree, so. But that's her influence. You know, so we grew up Navy, we grew up moving around, not too often. We probably only moved every four years.

00:14:35 Felicia Mohr

These two did, I didn't.

00:14:36 Malia Spranger

Yeah, you didn't. But very nuclear family. Very used to getting out, meeting new friends, and having that kind of military influence and stuff like that. My dad is very organized, always kept us that way. Actually, I would say my mom actually ran the ship at home. But, you know— and the military academies really offered a unique program, different than any other college, even with the RONC programs that were there. So, that's why I think we went. He was probably our greatest influence, still is to this day. Still always has loved the Navy, is more interested in Navy League stuff now, goes to a lot of, you know, ship commissioning's and stuff like that. It really is his lifeblood. He enjoys it.

00:15:17 Felicia Mohr

Always very patriotic.

00:15:18 Jane Maliszewski

Sabrina, what was your influence, then, to go the Navy route? You were the daddy's little girl, obviously [Sabrina laughs].

00:15:23 Malia Spranger

I know [laughs].

00:15:23 Sabrina Zerphy

Well, I think that, again, Malia mentions gymnastics, and of course as a varsity athlete, you know, you kind of make the decisions. Not so much based upon that, but I think, you know, one of the things is my oldest sister had always taken care of me. All the time, I remember from being very little. that she was always taking care of me, I'd go everywhere with her. I'd go with her friends. She was a rare older sister that involved me with anything. I'd go to movies with her and her friends, and I think, you know, when— and I hadn't really considered the academies before Malia left. Of course, you don't consider that stuff when you're younger, but then, you know, she went to the Air Force Academy, which is really where I started to get interested in the Academies. But when it came time to make the decision, I had gotten accepted and recruited by both the Air Force and the Navy. I think I decided, well, she's always taking care of me, I want to see if I can do this on my own. And that really was what I kind of decided to do, because I didn't— I knew that I'd let myself fall into that she could take care of me, and she would have. You know, I would have been totally protected, because she would have been a first class at that time. I would have been a freshman, but I wanted to kind of do it on my own, and I'm really glad that I did. I really think that the Naval Academy is an overall better experience. But it's— so we have a little inner service here.

00:16:54 Jane Maliszewski

You better be careful of whom you're sitting between [all laugh].

00:16:57 Sabrina Zerphy

I'm squished here between them, these Air Force people, but I'm really glad. And we had been on the east coast when my father was stationed at Bethesda Naval Hospital for five years, and so we had visited the Naval Academy, and I had actually visited all three academies before. But I made the decision to go into the Navy, you know, because I was familiar with the Navy, I liked the Navy, and I knew I couldn't fly, I was too small. And so I went into the Navy.

00:17:30 Jane Maliszewski

Felicia, now there was a couple of years between the time you went to the Air Force Academy and the time your sister had gone and graduated.

00:17:36 Malia Spranger

Eleven.

00:17:36 Jane Maliszewski

And I'm sure that you—

00:17:38 Malia Spranger

She's my baby [laughs].

00:17:39 Jane Maliszewski

—you prepared notes on experiences.

00:17:42 Felicia Mohr

I did.

00:17:43 Jane Maliszewski

What was the change, and what did you experience going through rather early versus what you went through more recently, in how women are accepted or opportunities that are open? What type— was there a difference in experience, I guess, is my question for both of you.

00:18:01 Felicia Mohr

You know, when I was going through, I didn't really notice or pick up on the limitations. I don't think they're nearly as apparent as they are with the Naval Academy or the Military

Academy, maybe. Because by the time I was going through, there was female fighter pilots, at least by the time...

00:18:16 Malia Spranger

That's true.

00:18:17 Felicia Mohr

Training was an option for me, because what was it, '95 or '96?

00:18:21 Malia Spranger

They got to be fighter pilots?

00:18:22 Felicia Mohr

Right, so...

00:18:23 Sabrina Zerphy

'93. Combat exclusion was lifted in '93, so it would have been...

00:18:27 Malia Spranger

So we had the first one in '94.

00:18:29 Felicia Mohr

So that was never, I really experienced no limitations. I had a great experience at the academy. So...

00:18:36 Sabrina Zerphy

Malia was back at the academy, though. So, she took care of Felicia.

00:18:44 Felicia Mohr

That's true [sisters laugh].

00:18:44 Malia Spranger

Well actually, my husband was. At that point, I was a reservist. Actually, I was home with the three kids. And so, he was an instructor there by the time she was going.

00:18:52 Jane Maliszewski

So, you didn't you get extra harassment because...

00:18:54 Felicia Mohr

I got extra loving! [All laugh] I did, it was fantastic. She actually lived on base, so it could not have been a better situation.

00:19:01 Malia Spranger

Yes, we took care of her. Lots of care.

00:19:03 Felicia Mohr

Introduced me to my husband.

00:19:04 Jane Maliszewski

Oh, yes.

00:19:05 Felicia Mohr

I know [all laugh].

00:19:07 Jane Maliszewski

Now, are you going to say that it was a lot harder when you were there, and you had to walk to school in the school in the snow, and all that?

00:19:13 Malia Spranger

[Laughing] No.

00:19:13 Jane Maliszewski

Okay.

00:19:15 Malia Spranger

No, no, I believe that, every person has their own experience. It's interesting how I can have classmates that could be sitting right next to me, and their experience and their take on the whole thing can be totally different. I never felt prejudice against, I never, you know, and this whole sexual harassment thing has been coming up recently. I never had any of that. You know, I don't think I ever put myself in any of the situations that may, you know, cause some of that or lead to that, maybe I was a little bit more cautious, but I just think that I didn't have any negative experiences when it came to being a woman at the academy. I really don't. I think everybody comes in there and has a different philosophy. I think maybe one of the things, and we try to figure this out, because we're very optimistic in our group, in our family, and we don't look at the bad side, and we don't have a lot of bad experiences. We're very lucky, I think, in some respects. But one of the things is growing up in an all-girl family, there was none of this, boys do this, girls do that. This is whatever we want to do. And I see that in families, and

not that it's bad or good. Boys are different. I have three boys. They are different. I mean, if I had known what I know about boys, I don't know if I ever would have gone into the Air Force or gone to the Air Force Academy knowing how they grow up. But in an all-girl family, the sky's the limit. I never compared myself. None of us are super attention-needers. If upperclassmen aren't paying attention to it, I'm okay with that. I'm okay with being a fly on the wall. There were certain things that were taught in some of our survival training and resistance training, and it was like, you don't want to stand out, and it is hard as a female sometimes. But you better take that to heart. If there's a way that you can blend in with people, this is what you need to do in some of those instances. So I think I didn't have issues.

00:21:13 Jane Maliszewski

Well, you two had three years apart, you were comparing notes between your academies. How was your experience, maybe, at the Naval Academy different from what your sister went through at the Air Force?

00:21:22 Sabrina Zerphy

I would agree with Malia in that I personally did not have any gender-based issues at the Naval Academy. I'm kind of a believer in, there are people that are going to have issues—no matter where that they go and what they do, and there are people that are not. I think that, you know, obviously there's some very specific physical things that are different between the academies and, you know, how they approach their training and what they do. But as far as any gender-related problems, I mean, even when I got out into the fleet, into the Navy, where at that time we were less than 5% of the population—again, five women on a ship, with a ship of 300 men—I never, even in those cases, I can't think of really a single instance where I felt either gender discrimination or gender harassment. I was definitely different. And it was, for a lot of people, a lot of men, it was the very first time that they had contact with either a woman officer or a woman in my position. But I had, I'd never had—and I don't know that it was because I was not really approachable with sexual harassment type things. I think that self-confidence kind of portrays itself and it never, and it never occurred.

00:22:53 Jane Maliszewski

That's good to hear. It's good to hear. As far as your military service time, I'd like to know, what do you think was your most challenging situation that you've been in? And also, what do you think was the greatest success from your military service?

00:23:14 Felicia Mohr

Do you want to start [all laugh]? I'd say with my particular career track, I've probably had the most leadership experience as an ROTC instructor. Because certainly you're getting

folks in there that maybe are not necessarily committed to the Air Force, they're just kind of testing the waters. Then you've got the folks that think they are, but they've got to work on their people skills. And I have to be very honest with my feedback, and that's— That's new for me because the people I've worked with in the past have been very experienced in their jobs, been doing it for the last 15, 20 years. I'm not teaching them anything new. Now these cadets, I'm trying to prepare them, try to get them so that they are good employees as well as supervisors for their troops. So, I'd have to say that's been the best leadership experience for me so far.

00:23:59 Jane Maliszewski

So that's your challenge and your success.

00:24:01 Felicia Mohr

That's my challenge and my success. It's been the most rewarding job, and I think if I were to go back into acquisitions for the next 15 years, it would still remain my most rewarding job, because it's working with people. I mean, you can't get any closer to the heart of the Air Force than working with its future leaders.

00:24:19 Jane Maliszewski

And this would be, probably a three-year assignment for you?

00:24:21 Felicia Mohr

Three-year, yes. I'm blessed.

00:24:26 Malia Spranger

Oh, me? Probably one of the most challenging things that I did was— I was at Central Command when 9/11 happened. I was actually doing my 2 weeks of annual tour at the time, and, you know, we sat there on TV and watched that. And next thing you know, Central Command being the leader of the fight in that AOR was— we were recalling all our reservists. And so, for the next three months, we're recalling them, and some people aren't happy to leave their jobs, and it was very difficult. I spent hours on the phone talking to people and trying to convince them that, hey, yes, this is that military duty that you thought you did once a weekend or a couple times out of the year, and now we need you to come in, and I don't want to send a sheriff to your door to get you. So, there was a couple long discussions on trying to get people to understand that this is a commitment, and now you've got to come in. And the reserve has been a challenge. In the active-duty military, I see people that are very used to lockstep. They know what their next career thing is, what they should do, the school that they should go to, and da da da. When you mix reserve in there, you're getting people that have civilian commitments. They have other commitments in their life, and they're just as

professional there, and their additional job is not Pizza Hut. It is, you know, a full-fledged military career with the same currencies for flying, the same military and professional expectancies, and standards that they have to keep up. And now, all of a sudden you tell them, no, you need to leave your family and your civilian job, and you need to report. And that was pretty difficult. It was difficult on all those people to try to do that, and it's been difficult for the last, what, five, six years now as we continue to call up reservists and guardsmen to leave their families. But that's what we're here for. That's what the guard and the reserve is here for. So, you know, that was probably a challenge, and hopefully it'll continue to be a success because we're going to need the Guard and Reserve if we're going to keep battling this global war on terror.

00:26:26 Jane Maliszewski

Okay, Sabrina?

00:26:28 Sabrina Zerphy

I guess my first year of my first division officer tour was a real challenge. It was a real eye-opening experience in that I think I learned— I'm introverted, kind of, by nature and I'm not— I'd say I'm not an alpha personality, and I think I learned how to be much more of an alpha personality in my first division officer tour. I learned all the fundamentals while at the academy, but of course you're not really leading or managing anyone while you're there. You know, now when I get to my first sea tour and I've got these people that I'm responsible as the captain for everything that they do, from bouncing a check to treating their spouse right, to obviously their work performance on the ship. And that accountability— not that it was hard to accept, but it took a lot of adjustment. It took a lot of— I learned a tremendous amount, and I say— I tell people that you learn all the fundamentals at the academy, and then you really put it into practice, when you hit the fleet, because now when I look back on the absolutely amazing leadership opportunities that I had to develop leadership—which you don't get anywhere else—where you can start at that base level and make a whole lot of mistakes. And most of my mistakes were usually around thinking, oh, if I ignore it, I think it'll go away. That if I just pretend like I won't hear that, and I learned the ramifications of it, it doesn't work very well, it just kind of, it gets worse.

00:28:11 Jane Maliszewski

You learn you have to—

00:28:12 Sabrina Zerphy

You learn you have to be proactive, you learn you have to go. And it was a real personality step for me to learn how to do that, and that continued to refine through the eight years that I was active duty. And now that I'm a civilian, and I own and operate a

family business with my husband's family, I mean, I can see the value of having learned those lessons back when it didn't matter that much. Back when I didn't have control, do I fire someone or hire someone, or are they going to sue me or not going to sue me? You know, you made all those mistakes, you know, early on. So I think that— I mean, I look at my Naval Academy and my active duty time as such great leadership training that I don't know how else I would have gotten it without physically doing that through the Navy.

00:29:02 Jane Maliszewski

You had already mentioned that your dad was a big influence on your life. Do you have somebody else that was a big influence individually, somebody that you had worked with or somebody that mentored you, or just a role model that you kind of kept in your mind as you were getting through your academy and service life?

00:29:20 Sabrina Zerphy

Well, my sister. I mean, again, she's the oldest sister. She takes care, It wasn't always perfect, we had our moments, but some of that faded in my memory. But I think that I've always— I have been, like I said, my personality is a little more introverted, but I've been surrounded by very— not so much aggressive women, but just very proactive, very positive, very strong women. From my mother to my sister, to my grandparent, to my grandmother. My little Filipino grandmother, you know, we didn't talk about her, she wasn't in the Navy, but she was in the Philippines during World War II, you know, had my mother and her brother and her father on her back, escaping the Japanese for four years in the, you know, in the jungle, raised 13 kids. My mother's the oldest at 13. I mean, just tremendously strong women in influencing my life. Even my youngest sisters, you know, all of them. I'm surrounded by just, amazingly incredible women that I want to be part of, that I say to myself sometimes, what would they do, you know?

00:30:37 Felicia Mohr

I do, I ask myself that a lot in situations that I think are tricky. And I think in my head, what would my sisters do? Because I respect what—

00:20:46 Jane Maliszewski

It's great to have a family like that.

00:30:46 Felicia Mohr

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

00:30:48 Malia Spranger

Our mother is incredible. She grew up— and my grandmother was— but it was, again, in the 50s and 60s, very stereotypical. But she always kind of broke the mold on things. She was nursing children when everybody was bottle feeding them. She was drinking water and being healthy, and being very proactive with our education, and keeping us very involved in a lot of different things, when mothers then could— sat back and, let their kids do whatever.

00:31:16 Sabrina Murphy

I never pigeonholed us to, like Malia said, to, this is what girls do, and this is what boys do. And I don't think we ever had that, ever. In our— and some of it was reshaping our father sometimes [Malia laughs], because I think he had more ideas about what girls should do and what they shouldn't do. And of course, we, being young, you don't remember those kind of discussions that probably took place between my parents. But according to my mother now, retelling the history, that it was a little hard-fisted, some of her, “you will do this with your daughters, and you will teach them how to ski, and horseback ride, and shoot guns, just like they were, just like they're your children.” You don't say, well, they're just girls, and I'm not going to show them.

00:31:58 Jane Maliszewski

So, if you were going to give a piece of advice to young women that are considering a career in the military, either going to the academy or through ROTC, what would you tell them? What do they need to keep in mind when they're considering a career in the service?

00:32:14 Sabrina Zerphy

I'd say—

00:32:15 Jane Maliszewski

What do you tell them?

00:32:15 Felicia Mohr

What do I tell them? I tell them to seek out the opportunities, because the Air Force has so many of them. And while I kind of complain about my job not being overly exciting, it's provided me some really awesome experiences. For example, I got to do the, be one of the Air Force triathletes during the Combined Forces...

00:32:45 Malia Spranger

Eco Challenge.

00:32:46 Felicia Mohr

Well, no, I just did the triathlon, but my husband did the Armed Forces Eco Challenge. And then they also have language programs, and I love to travel, and they paid me to go to Senegal for a month just to learn French. I mean, just incredible.

00:33:01 Jane Maliszewski

While in the academy?

00:33:02 Felicia Mohr

No, while I've been in the active duty.

00:33:03 Jane Maliszewski

Oh, really? Okay.

00:33:04 Felicia Mohr

Yeah, so it's— I tell them that— find the reward in your job, and if it's not in your job, look for ways. If you want to deploy, there's deployment positions out there. Just, always be looking ahead, and looking— don't expect these great things to fall in your lap. You need to be proactive and do the research, and good things will come to you.

00:33:26 Jane Maliszewski

Okay. Sabrina?

00:33:30 Sabrina Zerphy

I guess I'd just say that if you are pursuing a career in the service, remember your duty is to your country and to your service and it's—There are— if you make a commitment, you need to see it through. And it's a hard life, you know. I don't know, particularly the Navy life, it's very gut-wrenching to make that decision. It was very hard for me to decide, do I get out? I have a daughter. I had a hard time leaving my dogs on deployment, I can't imagine, you know, leaving a child for six months, six to eight months. And, do you want to do that, or do you, should you get out? And it's a personal choice that every person in the military has to make, because I think it transcends gender, your importance with your family. But it really is the needs of the service, and you have to accept that going into that. If you accept that going into that, that makes some of those decisions a little bit easier. Rather than fight against, well, they shouldn't require me to do this at this time and try and change everything, it's, you know, it is what it is. You know, it's a life dedicated to your country.

00:34:43 Jane Maliszewski

Malia?

00:34:45 Malia Spranger

I would say, you know, know who you are and be that person. Have integrity. Stand by what you say and what you do. And, you know, if you follow that, you can take care of the people that take care of the mission. You know, really as an officer, unless you're a pilot, you really are taking care of people, taking care of the mission.

00:35:04 Jane Maliszewski

Unless you're a pilot [sisters laugh].

00:35:05 Malia Spranger

Well, if you're a pilot, then you're taking care of just yourself for a while. So, that didn't come out right [all laugh]. But basically, know what you want and know who you are, and stand by that, and be able to, you know, take your medicine if you make a wrong decision, you know, learn from it. We're all human beings, and just keep trying. Take each day, as we usually tell most of the cadets when they're starting. I have actually a son, my oldest son is a freshman at the academy. You take each day as it comes. You're going to make failures and you're going to have issues, and just get up and start over again. And that's really what I think one of the biggest lessons the academy teaches you.

00:35:47 Sabrina Zerphy

Perseverance and seeing it through.

00:35:49 Malia Spranger

It may not be the greatest day, and you may have messed up, and then you just, you learn from it, you get up and you go forward, and you keep moving.

00:35:57 Jane Maliszewski

If you— thinking back on your time in the academy, your service career, if there's something that you could do differently, is there anything you would do differently?

00:36:08 Felicia Mohr

I probably would have picked a different career field. Something that's more operational. Since I'm going to be in the Air Force anyways, I might as well do something that's more military.

00:36:16 Jane Maliszewski

So how did you get into the acquisition? Was that your choice?

00:36:19 Felicia Mohr

Yeah, I did. I got into the acquisitions because I thought— I didn't know exactly where my interests were, but I thought maybe corporate America was somewhere in my future, and that would set me up very well for that.

00:36:29 Jane Maliszewski

It will.

00:36:31 Felicia Mohr

It will, it will, but now I decided I don't want to go that direction [laughs]. But it took me a few years in that field to realize that, so that's still a valuable lesson.

00:36:41 Jane Maliszewski

Okay.

00:36:43 Sabrina Zerphy

Yeah, I don't know if I'd change anything. I just went to a change of command for one of my, actually one of my husband's department heads. He became CO [commanding officer] of a cruiser, and he and I were reflecting how, it's very bittersweet. I would have loved to have done a department head tour, I would have loved to have stayed in. It was an exciting life. But again, it's kind of about what I would do, you know, versus what my family— and it was a difficult decision to make, you know, and I think that any young woman will face that because, of course, there's the stereotypes that once you have a family, that's it, you're done. And that's not necessarily true, but you have to really work hard. So, and I wasn't really at that time to say, okay, well, you know what, if I take a shore tour—and like I said, my husband was active duty at the time, he was a submariner—if he, you know, he goes back to sea and then we can switch, and maybe I'll see you and maybe I won't. And, you know, it just, it's hard to do. It's hard to have a life balance. Particularly— I don't know if it's specific to the Navy.

00:37:53 Jane Maliszewski

No, it's not.

00:37:54 Sabrina Zerphy

I don't know if it's changed, but, you know, I think it is any active duty where, you know, you...

00:37:59 Felicia Mohr

You spend a lot of time away from home.

00:38:02 Sabrina Zerphy

Right, yeah, you spend a lot of time away from home.

00:38:04 Jane Maliszewski

When you're gone, too, it's a family thing. It's not just you as the service member, it's your family, and if you can't provide that kind of stability or some expectations, it's an issue. Anything that you would have changed?

00:38:16 Malia Spranger

I wouldn't have changed anything. I had children right away, basically nine months from graduation. I had my first son, and 14 months later I had the second. Got off of active duty, really, because I had three kids and I am a type A personality. I am proactive in everything I do, and I don't like anybody else to take care of my kids, like I didn't like anybody else to take care of my sisters. [All laugh] So I have a lot of control issues. But I really, I wouldn't change anything. I'm still in the reserve now. I would like to command at some time, and I hope to try to branch out into a different area in the reserve, so maybe I'll be able to do that. I plan on staying in the reserve until, you know, I can't do it anymore. But I really enjoy it. I enjoy the people, I enjoy the service. It's a great place to be.

00:39:08 Jane Maliszewski

Okay. Is there anything that you would like to discuss that we haven't brought up? We kind of did a broad brush of military careers and experiences. Is there something in particular that any of, each of you would like to talk about before we wrap this up?

00:39:22 Felicia Mohr

We should mention Kurt, at the Academy.

00:39:26 Malia Spranger

Oh, my oldest, I do have an oldest son that's at the Air Force Academy, he's a freshman. It's been interesting, he has wanted to go to the academy pretty much his whole life. Actually, it really started when he saw his aunt there, he actually wrote that in his little application to go to the academy. Because when your parents go there, I mean, that's just like totally long time ago. But he was in elementary school when Felicia was going through there, and very influenced by her and all the cadets that came over. So, and— you know, we hope to keep the tradition going. But it's funny because he thought having parents, and having an aunt there, and knowing everything, he'd have the thing licked. But it is a different experience for everybody. So it's...

00:40:11 Jane Maliszewski

So he's in his first year?

00:40:12 Malia Spranger

He is in his first year.

00:40:13 Jane Maliszewski

So what about the other two?

00:40:15 Malia Spranger

Actually, the other one right behind him is going to apply.

00:40:18 Jane Maliszewski

Navy?

00:40:17 Malia Spranger

[Laughs] I know! She's trying to get Craig to go Navy, I know. Her husband's, like, bribing him with cars and boats, and come on over to the Navy. So we'll see.

00:40:27 Jane Maliszewski

We really do need to look at the Army. [Sisters laugh] Really, become a purple. We're going purple uniform.

00:40:32 Malia Spranger

We are, we're coming in all services. So anyways, yeah, that's a good point. I think one of the other points I was going to bring up, one of the things that separates women from men is the physical side. And I would have to say that fortunately for us, being gymnasts, we were very strong physically, and very self-confident physically. I mean, you drop and do push-ups, we could do more than the guys. Tell me to do pull-ups, yeah, I could do them too. And so we all entered basic training, and the physical part was really relatively easy for us.

00:41:08 Jane Maliszewski

So do you think that gave you more credibility?

00:41:12 Malia Spranger

It did.

00:41:13 Jane Maliszewski

More legitimacy, I guess, overcoming that particular barrier?

00:41:17 Malia Spranger

Yeah, it wasn't a barrier for us, I guess. And I hear that a lot with the females. I hear that a lot, that during basic training, everybody's hanging back because they've got a runner.

00:41:27 Jane Maliszewski

With the ones that are going through now.

00:41:29 Felicia Mohr

Yeah, and that is a big...

00:41:31 Malia Spranger

It's a big differential.

00:41:32 Jane Maliszewski

Were they talking about that up in the...?

00:41:33 Malia Spranger

Yeah, and we've talked— and I've talked about that with other kids. I work to recruit the kids in from the high schools and stuff like that. And you, even working with your ROTC students, know that the females struggle on that physical side. And maybe that was another reason why I didn't feel the “us and they” thing, because I never was the last person in line. I was helping some of the guys along.

00:41:58 Sabrina Zerphy

Because while I will say that I didn't have any personal problems, I know my roommates did, my friends did. They were kind of on the out looking in.

00:42:10 Jane Maliszewski

And do you think it was because of the physical capability, trying to keep up with those...?

00:42:13 Sabrina Zerphy

I think a lot of it, it's a physical capability. I think it's a difficult time in a woman's life, those years anyway, between 18 and 21, particularly when you're put into a very androgynous situation where you're not a woman anymore, you're not a man, what are you now? I think for a lot of them, they weren't psychologically prepared. I had mentioned to my sisters that I actually think it's that minorities—and when I say minorities, you could be an ethnic minority or just say, like, you're short, or you're really smart, or you're just some kind of discriminatory situation that you might have faced in

high school—I think you're more mentally prepared if you have that than if you're at the top of your class, you're top of your game, you're the best of everything. And now you go to the academy. And for the very first time—

00:43:08 Jane Maliszewski

You're competing with the best of everything.

00:43:09 Sabrina Zerphy

Well, for the very first time as a woman, you're a minority. And I had classmates tell me that they, “damn it, I'm not a minority.” But they were. And I think it was a very difficult adjustment for some women to be a minority, to be that 10% at the time that we were in, and a very physical, obvious, somebody else. I think it was a really difficult mental adjustment for some women that they still are not quite over yet.

00:43:41 Malia Spranger

Yeah, it's interesting. I had a roommate, my roommate freshman year, valedictorian from her school, but then just got in trouble and was on academic probation. And now she's doing great in the Air Force, but it was, it was a very hard year.

00:43:53 Felicia Mohr

Adjustment period.

00:43:54 Malia Spranger

Yeah, and she was a very smart girl, but it was just that adjusting.

00:43:58 Jane Maliszewski

Well, there's academic, there's physical, there's also the whole thing of understanding the military system and the discipline, and— break you down, build you back up again. It is, I mean, it's a hard year for freshmen in college, much less having to wear the uniform.

00:44:16 Sabrina Zerphy

One thing I would like to say is that, through all my travels and deploying in different places of the world, is that I thank God every day that I was born in the United States.

00:44:28 Felicia Mohr

Oh my God, absolutely.

00:44:29 Sabrina Zerphy

The opportunities for women here, they just do not exist in barely any other country. And I am so thankful to this country for our opportunity to be able to pull the grandkids of a, of somebody from somewhere else, that migrated here with not a— with three kids and not a penny, in their purse. And, to have the opportunities that we have had. Absolutely. It's a privilege. It's an honor and a privilege, and I'll never be able to repay it.

00:45:03 Jane Maliszewski

Well, ladies, that was a great interview. And thank you so much. I know, I'm sure each of you has a story that could go on for another hour, and maybe at some point we'll be able to do this again individually, and capture your particular issues, but I thought as a whole, you know, your interaction and just being able to have a family like that, and have your built-in support system, you know, I really, I think that that's what helped you all the best. I mean, other women that went, your roommates probably didn't have that kind of backing, and I can really see that gave you some psychological support.

00:45:39 Felicia Mohr

Absolutely.

00:45:40 Jane Maliszewski

Well, thank you so much.

00:45:40 Felicia Mohr

Thank you.

00:45:41 Malia Spranger

I appreciate your time and effort, my goodness, this is a...

00:45:44 Jane Maliszewski

It's all right. Sorry about that...