

Interview Transcript
October 21, 2006
Military Women's Memorial

Nicole Ilene Blatt
Los Angeles, California
1985-1990 | 1990-interview
U.S. Air Force Academy, Air Force

00:00:00 Jane Maliszewski

My name is Jane Maliszewski, Colonel, United States Army, retired, and I am interviewing Nicole Blatt on the 21st of October 2006 at the Women's Memorial during the Academy Women's Symposium. Nicole attended the U.S. Air Force Academy from 1986 to 1990 and then served in the Air Force from 1990 to the present. She is still in the Air Force serving at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. This interview is being recorded for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial Foundation's Oral History Program. Could you please give us your full name for the record?

00:00:36 Nicole Blatt

It's Lieutenant Colonel Nicole Ilene Blatt.

00:00:38 Jane Maliszewski

And when and where were you born?

00:00:40 Nicole Blatt

I was born in Los Angeles, California on May 28, 1968. And actually, to make a correction to that, I entered the Air Force Academy in July 5, 1985, but I took Stopout. I was originally class of '89. I took Stopout, which is a program between sophomore and junior year that you can take a year off and you get leave, leave without pay orders, but you're still active. You have to keep an ID and in an active status, and you can do whatever you want during that year and then you come back—

00:01:13 Jane Maliszewski

And so like, [unclear]?

00:01:14 Nicole Blatt

Yes.

00:01:15 Jane Maliszewski

I didn't know they offered that.

00:01:17 Nicole Blatt

They don't anymore. It was too good of a program [both laugh].

00:01:20 Jane Maliszewski

Wow.

00:01:21 Nicole Blatt

It was a great program.

00:01:22 Jane Maliszewski

Yeah. I wonder if they did it at the other academies. That's kind of cool. So what were your parents' names and what did they do, and any military service in your family's background?

00:01:33 Nicole Blatt

My father's Ronald Blatt and my mom is Eleanor Blatt, and they are both doctors. So I grew up in a house where both of them had careers. My mom was a very strong role model. My dad was sick for a lot of years, had brain tumors, and so he was out of work for a lot of years. So my mom held the fort down and she's—

00:02:02 Jane Maliszewski

Were they in practice together as doctors?

00:02:04 Nicole Blatt

My dad was a surgeon. My mom was a pediatrician. So they shared an office for a few years, but no adults want screaming kids in the same waiting room so they eventually split offices when it made more sense. And— but my mom's very inspirational, in that she became a doctor back when very few women were doctors. And in fact, when she got accepted to medical school, her mother actually cried saying, “how are you going to have children? How are you going to raise your kids if you do this?” And then she went off to medical school. So when I applied for the Air Force Academy, she just laughed because my grandma still said the same thing to me: “why would I want to go do that?” And she just laughed to everybody, “because that's what she wants to do.”

00:02:57 Jane Maliszewski

Interesting. Interesting. So your family, brothers and sisters?

00:03:01 Nicole Blatt

I have a brother who's Jeffrey Blatt, who's a brain surgeon in Kansas, and my sister Michelle Blatt, who raises her kid and just has fun.

00:03:16 Jane Maliszewski

So you're the only one that went into the service?

00:03:18 Nicole Blatt

And I'm the only one who went in the service.

00:03:21 Jane Maliszewski

Are you in the medical field?

00:03:22 Nicole Blatt

No. No, no, no.

00:03:23 Jane Maliszewski

So you're really broke.

00:03:24 NB

In fact, my brother's a brain surgeon, so I actually studied astronautical engineering and became a rocket scientist. So we would have that fun.

00:03:34 JM

Thanksgiving dinner must be interesting.

00:03:37 NB

And my dad did his standard three years in the Navy, but not really. Nobody in my family has a military background.

00:03:50 JM

So where did you graduate high school?

00:03:52 NB

I went to Cate School in Santa Barbara. It's a private boarding school. In fact, it was an all-boys school and had turned co-ed with my class. My class was the first that had women for all four years, and, so this is their 25th anniversary of co-education. And in fact, in two weeks, I've been invited to go back and speak to the students there, to tell them about my adventures in the military, being the first female graduate to go to an academy. And so they've invited me back to talk.

00:04:29 JM

Great, great. I did that back with my grammar school and high school as well. That was a great experience to see what has changed and what hasn't. So, as a child, did you have any particular dreams of— what do I want to be when I grow up? And did they include going in the military?

00:04:46 NB

I actually, ever since I was three, I wanted to be an astronaut. When I was two, I wanted to be a bird. They said, "you can't." So by the time I was three, I said, I want to be an astronaut. And— but by the time I was probably six or seven my eyesight was already bad, and I already didn't qualify. But it didn't stop me anyway from still pursuing that direction, because you just don't know what kind of technology is going to change, or what kind of medical miracles are going to happen, or what kind of waivers you can get as you grow up, and to get to a position where all that changes and there's a way to fix eyesight or something like that comes up and to not be prepared because I backed out of it when I was six, would have been a shame [laughs].

00:05:33 JM

Wow, you were thinking a lot when you were six. So space was always on your mind.

00:05:42 NB

So— just the, the idea of just floating in space would be just so cool. When I was looking at colleges—because I went to a boarding school, it's 100% go on to college. And so, college prep is very important. You go through all these books to try to figure out what you want to do, and I'm looking through the college handbook, and at the time the Air Force Academy was the only university or only school that had

astronautical engineering as an accredited major. And so I was laughing about that because, I mean, I am not the military type, I mean, at least I wasn't then, and I probably break a lot of the traditional opinions and stereotypes now. But as I started reading about it, it just became more interesting. It seemed like a neat adventure, and I got more interested in it.

00:06:46 JM

So is the Air Force Academy the only academy you looked at? I mean, because of the space aspect.

00:06:50 NB

Yes, it was actually.

00:06:52 JM

And did you apply for other colleges?

00:06:54 NB

I did. I did. I applied for some Ivy Leagues, a lot of the University of California schools.

00:07:01 JM

So when you got your acceptance for the Air Force,—

00:07:05 NB

Oh, it was great. I got it—

JM

—was it an easy decision or did you have to really think about what you wanted to do down the road?

00:07:10 NB

I got that— I got it very early. As soon as my application was complete and I did my fitness test, as soon as they had gotten the results of my fitness test within a couple of weeks, I was accepted. So I knew before Christmas that I had already been accepted to my number one choice school and it just made senior year of high school so much easier.

00:07:33 JM

Now what kind of support did you get from your school community, your friends, your family when you decided to go down this very different route?

00:07:40 NB

Oh, the school was great. I was— being part of this first group of girls at this all-boys school, and the girls that were there were incredibly dynamic and amazing, the people that they had brought in there. And so I was the most unathletic female at the school. I mean, these girls could play volleyball, they could study, they could do everything, except for me. Here I am, I mean, I was good at school, but I was a terrible athlete. And so I'm the only one who's picking, going to a place where you have to be athletic. [Laughs]

00:08:17 JM

Yeah, you have to participate with the team on a team to be there. So what sport did you do at the Air Force Academy, then?

00:08:25 NB

I did intramural swimming and water polo because I could swim. Being from California, I could definitely swim compared to everybody from the Midwest.

00:08:36 JM

If they had a surfing team, you would've done that, okay.

00:08:38 NB

[Laughing] I could do that. In fact, it was funny. I played water polo during basic training, and I never realized how good of a swimmer I was until you get a bunch of boys from Kansas jumping in the pool, and they can't tread water for 30 seconds, and they're holding on to the side. And so I'm a starting player, playing the whole game with— out of the 100 people that are playing water polo, there's only maybe one other girl playing [laughing]. But just because I could swim forever. And then the other thing I did was— I did the Blue Barts, the theater group. And so during that intramural time when we're getting prepared for musicals, I was involved in those, because I was big into dancing as a kid.

00:09:23 JM

Singing as well?

00:09:25 NB

I can't sing [laughs]. I did a lot of dancing. I did competitive dancing when I was— before I went off to boarding school. So I would do a lot of the choreography in the musicals and be the lead dancer in the musicals.

00:09:45 JM

So, what was the transition to Academy life like for you? I mean, you were coming from a boarding school environment into the military [Nicole laughs] where you had no idea what you were getting into.

00:09:57 NB

I had no idea. I was so clueless. The night before I went—we started basic training July 5th, 1985. So July 4th, 1985, I go out with my friends to this tiny little venue to this punk rock concert. It was The Vandals and the Red Hot Chili Peppers playing in this tiny little room. And there's all these guys there in trench coats and combat boots, and I'm looking at them going, I'm getting a pair of those boots tomorrow. And I got my hair cut that day, because we had to cut off all our hair. And I got on a plane in the morning, and waved goodbye to my parents, and showed up there and just had no idea what I was getting into.

00:10:43 Jane Maliszewski

So what was the biggest challenge for you?

00:10:45 NB

Um. The athletics. You— Not only is athletics really important, but that's where you get your peer respect. And so, if you— it doesn't matter how smart you are, how good your uniform looks. If you are not athletic, your classmates will reduce the amount of respect that they have for you.

00:11:15 JM

And that's kind of a unique culture for the academies, I would think.

00:11:19 NB

You know, I'm not sure.

00:11:20 JM

It's very athletic based.

00:11:22 NB

It's, it's probably more evident there. And so I learned this at a younger— It was in my face a lot more at that time, so I'm realizing it now, but it's really the same in society. I think when you see the captain of the football team is the most popular guy in school, and the business— the guys that are on the fast track to CEO are the guys that are in good shape and look good in their suits. It's the same thing, it's a little more subtle in society. So, it was nice to realize that early. That's a— I don't know—

00:12:09 JM

What about the military training aspect of the academy, any problems with that?

00:12:15 NB

Um, I think a lot of the upperclassmen who were with me in basic training would be very surprised that I'm still in [laughs]. You just— The military, it's probably good for me. I could use that outside discipline. You know, it's— So, the military part of it, the marching, the reciting quotes and yelling, you just kind of get used to it. It's no big deal. In fact, it makes you really able to handle more because you're like, I can handle this. I mean, you start off scared to death during basic training, and by the time freshman year's over and they start ramping it up for recognition week, they're yelling at you, and it just— you're— doesn't even affect you. It's funny. You're like, yeah, big deal. Bring it on [laughs]. And I think that's helpful in life.

00:13:21 JM

Anything in particular that stands out about your schedule or special activities you participated in while at the academy? Any special training you went to?

00:13:30 NB

Um, yeah. In fact, I think that one of the best training opportunities—that we all had requirements at the time—was SERE school, Survival Evasion Resistance Escape. We called it SERE-y. Now it's— the other services call it SERE. And I've heard it's been taken away from the school now, which is a shame because—

00:13:55 JM

It was run by the Air Force Academy?

00:13:58 NB

It was, it was sort of run by the Air Force Academy, but they brought in the experts from Fairchild, from the Survival School to actually run the program. And the upper class cadets augmented with the training. And so you're going through it, but also if you go back and teach it, you'll be either a partisan, or interrogator, or aggressor.

00:14:22 JM

Playing a different role.

00:14:23 NB

Right. And so you learn even more again. But going through that, you just learn so much about what you can handle and what you can do, and you come out with so much more self-confidence, that it's such a great learning experience. It sucks. But when you get through it, you're like, wow, I did this. And I think it's especially good for women because you are, you're on an even— or, amount of performance that you have to get through, or even excel at it. It levels the playing field when you're a POW.

00:15:05 JM

Because there's as much mental—

00:15:06 NB

Right. And they're beating you in there.

00:15:08 JM

—about it as there is physical.

00:15:09 NB

Right. They're beating you, and they're interrogating you, and they're sticking you in small boxes. And you're doing well, and some of the guys are not. And so, it's— And so when you're up against the guys, and you're doing— you're outperforming them in something that is physical and mental together, and something that sucks for everybody, it helps define who you are as an individual and what strengths you bring. That— and it doesn't matter what gender you are, what race you are, anything. It's how you perform as an individual.

00:15:48 JM

Now, there's been a lot in the news about the academy, and particularly the Air Force Academy, and sexual harassment and that type of stuff. Anything that you experienced there?

00:15:57 NB

You know, it's— I mean, you get your minor— I mean, you get the attitude, the, you know, “no girls will ever live in this hallway,” or whatever. But, you know, that's so...

00:16:14 JM

Blustery, yeah.

00:16:16 NB

Nothing. And so hearing about all this, the sexual assault that was going on, and remembering from what it was like when I was there, it's almost like it's hard to believe, or they've just put it on a higher standard than the other schools. Because, you know, they talk about date rape, but you get a normal college, and I think that's happening to all the girls there. I mean, not all, but I mean, I would guess that a higher percentage of this harassment is going on in regular college than it is at a military school. I don't know for sure, but I've got to think that it's happening more, and I think the women at the academy are better prepared for that kind of harassment, to fight back.

00:17:01 JM

Yeah, well, you're getting that kind of training.

00:17:03 NB

Yeah, than the women at normal colleges.

00:17:08 JM

So once— Now, you had the year's break in the middle between your second and third year?

00:17:12 NB

Yes.

00:17:13 JM

Okay, so what did you do? You went to language training, is that—

00:17:18 NB

I actually, I took— I was an astronautical engineering major, so, you know, it's a lot of engineering work, not a lot of time for electives. And so I took that year, and I went— First, I went for— backpacking in Europe, go to Ural Pass. I did that for a month, and then I stopped, I ended in Paris and I went to a semester school in Paris, where I studied French, and art history, and theater, and international business.

00:17:45 JM

And this was not set up by the academy?

00:17:47 NB

No.

00:17:48 JM

Okay.

00:17:49 NB

So I got to do all of those liberal arts classes that I wouldn't have been able to do at the academy, and then came back, and I went back to UC Santa Barbara where I audited a French class to keep my French going, but I got a job down on the wharf. So, I actually worked at the— down at the water, replacing planks and painting and just— you know, just seeing what life was like at a college campus at Santa Barbara, also.

00:18:24 JM

So was there any thought in your mind about not going back then?

00:18:27 NB

Oh, I always knew I was going back. I was the youngest person at the academy. I mean, I was the youngest in my class. I had turned 17 a month before I showed up for basic training, and had I not gone stop out, I would have been 20 all my senior year, and I would have graduated when I was still 20. I would have been commissioned at 20 and turned 21 the next day [laughs].

00:18:52 JM

No champagne to celebrate.

00:18:54 NB

Yeah, [Jane laughs] I didn't want to go through [laughs]. It's not like you can have a fake ID there!

00:18:57 JM

Yeah.

00:19:00 NB

Yeah, you know, senior year is supposed to be fun, I didn't want to go through it being only 20 [laughing]. And plus, you know, college is the best time of your life. Why rush it in four years?

00:19:09 JM

Well, you bond so much with the class that you're in. I mean, was that a hard decision to say, well, you know, see you guys, I know you're going to be a year ahead of me, and I'm going to make it with a new set?

00:19:20 NB

It is. It is, and that's why most people didn't want to do it, because they want to graduate with the class that they went through basic with.

00:19:26 JM

I mean, I think there'd be a lot of peer pressure to do that, to stay with the class.

00:19:30 NB

Right. And also at the time, at least 70% was going to pilot training, and people just wanted to get to fly as quickly as possible. Now, there was no chance that I was going to pilot training.

00:19:39 JM

So what did you end up doing? What did you get commissioned?

00:19:42 NB

I ended up, I'm an astronautical engineer.

00:19:45 JM

Okay.

00:19:46 NB

And I first went to be a program manager doing— redesigning command and control systems for ballistic missiles, Minuteman missiles. And then from there—

00:19:59 JM

And where was that?

00:20:00 NB

At Norton Air Force Base.

00:20:01 JM

OK, so that was your first assignment as a second lieutenant?

00:20:03 NB

Yes.

00:20:04 JM

Okay.

00:20:05 NB

And a comment about that. When I got there, the first thing I noticed was I could not believe how even they treated the males and female officers as far as jobs and capabilities. I mean, they really gave jobs based on the capabilities. There was no discrimination whatsoever, and it was such a— it was an overwhelmingly surprising environment. That you didn't have to fight for that engineer, that good engineer job. They—

00:20:39 JM

Is that because your experience while at the academy was slightly different, or you just expected once you get out to the real Air Force that this fun time, and equal time I had at the Academy was not going to be there?

00:20:51 NB

The Academy was not equal. The Academy was not equal. I mean, the women, we had to fight for, we had to fight for equality. We did. And in the real world, women still have to fight for equality. So— but being in the Air Force, and especially in what was Air Force Systems Command—now Air Force Materiel Command—was so... it was such a nice environment for non-discrimination. Went way beyond what the civilian world does, what the academies did. I mean, it was— it wasn't affirmative action or anything, it was just based on your capability. And it was really nice.

00:21:35 JM

Uh-huh. And did you find that with all your assignments?

00:21:39 NB

Pretty much.

00:21:43 JM

Pretty much. Okay. And you're still in aeronautical engineering, so, why don't you go through the, your other career jobs, bases?

00:21:47 NB

I went to— after that, Norton Air Force Base was closing down, I went to LA Air Force Base and built satellites. I ran— as a brand new captain I ran a spacecraft production contract that was worth \$300 million. And I was—

00:22:06 JM

That's a lot of responsibility.

00:22:07 NB

[Laughing] It is, it is. I had a couple of lieutenants working for me, and a team of contractor engineers. And we're obviously contracting out to build these satellites. And in fact, one of my satellites that we built back then is being launched in two weeks, and I've been invited out to go watch the launch.

00:22:27 JM

One that you built back then?

00:22:29 NB

Yes.

00:22:29 JM

And you're finally getting it off the ground?

00:22:30 NB

It's been in storage because the satellites before have lasted longer than their design life.

00:22:35 JM

Oh, that's right! Yes. Yeah.

00:22:36 NB

So, it's been, you know, in ground storage for—

00:22:39 JM

Yeah, that's the good news government story, right? They built something that actually lasted longer than it was built.

00:22:43 NB

Right. And then from there, I went to— I got accepted to test pilot school. And so, I went to Edwards Air Force Base.

00:22:56 JM

Test pilot. Okay. So, what happened with the laser surgery, [Nicole laughs] or what happened when you said your eyesight was so bad?

00:23:02 NB

My eyesight is so bad I don't even qualify to be in the Air Force. I need a waiver. [Laughs] By the time I graduated— My eyes weren't that bad when I went in, but by the time—

00:23:14 JM

Late night studying and—

00:23:15 NB

Yeah. A lot of computer programming. By the time I graduated, my eyes— I'm blind. I can't see the E [laughing] at the top of the chart. But I wanted to go to test pilot school, and you can go as a flight test engineer.

00:23:28 JM

Okay.

00:23:29 NB

And you just need a class-three medical, which still I don't qualify for, but I went to try to get this. And I went to the flight surgeon, and they said, "no, you can't because you don't qualify." I said, well, I want a waiver. And they said, "no, we're not going to see you." And I said, well, I need to see the flight doc so that I can apply for the waiver. And they said, "well, you don't qualify to see the flight doc." And I went round and round, and I fought this, and I was starting to let it—you know, like the door was closing on me. And I went to squadron officer school at that time. And I didn't know what I was going to do, I had, you know— what should I do with my life? Should I get out? Should I stay in? I went off to SOS, and one of the speakers—I'm probably one of the very few people that SOS actually, actually changed my life—because one of the speakers got up and was talking about a guy that— he was a pilot, and he got this type of cancer that you have about a 10% chance of survival, and they had medically retired him, and they'd done aggressive chemo, and he was part of that 10% that survived. And it went into remission, and it went into remission long enough, and so he went back. He goes, "hey, I don't have it anymore. Let me back in. I want to fly again." And they did. They let this guy fly again. And I started thinking, you know, if they let a guy with terminal cancer fly a plane, they should let me sit in the back seat with bad eyesight! [Both laugh] So I went back, I went to the patient advocate's office, I fought it more. I finally got an appointment to see him, I went through the waiver process. Nine months later, they actually grant me the waiver, and I apply to school, and I get in.

00:25:12 JM

So you can sit in the back of the aircraft [both laugh].

00:25:16 NB

So yeah. So I ended up going to test pilot school, which is an incredible experience. I've flown over 38 types of aircraft. I have.

00:25:26 JM

Now, when you say flown, you've flown in as a test engineer?

00:25:30 NB

I've actually been at the controls. Now, I've had a pilot with me who's been responsible for the plane, but at some point during the flight they've actually let me fly the plane. The rules were that we were not allowed to do takeoffs or landings. We can pretty much fly anything else.

00:25:48 JM

So your job as a test pilot, then, is to evaluate how the aircraft is flying and if all the systems work?

00:25:55 NB

Right. That and integrating new weapons onto the plane. So if we're— you know, and like, for example, if you add certain weapons, does it make the wings flutter under Gs? Or when the bomb releases, does it fly up and hit the tail? Those are bad things. Does the avionics work and tell you the right time, the right direction so that you don't accidentally run out of gas because it's told you the wrong thing or something?

00:26:25 JM

Interesting. So how long did you do that for?

00:26:27 NB

Test pilot school was a year, and then I stayed at Edwards for the follow-on assignment in the F-16 combined test squadron there. And so I did F-16 testing there, the developmental test side for blocks 30 and 40 F-16s. And then from there, I went to Tucson, Arizona where I did operational tests for block 30 F-16s, and a little bit of A-10 and HH-60 flight tests also. And so I've got, I think I've got about 550 flight hours, over 300 hours in an F-16. I mean, it's low for a pilot, but it's good for an engineer.

00:27:15 JM

And so what happened after that? You've done that for a few years, and then what's the next step?

00:27:20 NB

The most exciting part of my career was while I was at Tucson, we were developing a new prototype system that was a tactical data link system that would put friendly—you know, would mark where friendlies were in your cockpit. It put it...

00:27:40 JM

A blue force tracking?

00:27:41 NB

Blue force tracking. It put it— And it not only told you where they were in your cockpit, but it also would display it on all your weapon sensor videos. You know, if your weapons pointed there, you knew if there were friendlies in the area. And there's a lot of those different blue force tracker systems. And we also come up with this gateway that would connect different systems together so we could share with the Army—you know, get the Army's information in, and get the Navy's information.

00:28:08 JM

Yeah, we like it when you don't fly over us and drop bombs.

00:28:11 NB

Yeah.

00:28:12 JM

Unless we really ask you to.

00:28:13 NB

And so we'd done that, and we had integrated GPS, and we had integrated a brand new targeting pod called Lightning targeting pod, and also put JDAMs on the plane. And so, we really beefed up this capability that the Air National Guard now had.

00:28:34 JM

And what unit were you with, that you were doing this?

00:28:36 NB

I was with the Air National Guard Air Force Reserve Test Center.

00:28:40 JM

And where is that?

00:28:41 NB

It's in Tucson, Arizona. And so, when the war was about to kick off, the western war was going to be done with special forces teams and conventional fighters flying over and looking for scuds. Because, you know, we had to make sure that no scuds were launched into Israel. We didn't want Israel into the war. Or Jordan, for that matter, because they got hit last time from all the wrong direction. So it was a very time-sensitive targeting mission, and we developed the CONOPS for how to do this, and part of the way it was going to work so quickly was to be able to know— get those targets immediately into the planes and, you know, digitally, and also know where the friendly teams were. They're very— you know, special forces teams. There's no forward line of troops or anything.

00:29:41 JM

Right, right.

00:29:42 NB

And I was the only person in the military that actually really knew how this system worked, because I was the engineer on it as a prototype system. A couple contractors knew, but they couldn't get out there. And so, I went out there and I fielded the system, it's gateways, we built a special Hum-V with a fifth wheel trailer on it that put this equipment, we trained a special team of Navy and Air Force guys, the Marines paid for it, and hooked them up with the special forces teams to lead them on day one of the war, into the middle of Western Iraq. You know, crossing the line and setting up this, so all of our networks would be linked together so that we could see where the friendly tracks were.

00:30:34 JM

And you did this all from Tucson, or did you—?

00:30:35 NB

No. I deployed. I deployed to— I spent time in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and even Iraq.

00:30:48 JM

Was this as a part of a [something]-wide trip?

00:30:52 NB

It was a deployment for the war. I went by myself, I was my own commander, I had nobody under me. Technically, I worked for the CFAC, the Combined Forces Air Component commander, but I'm sure he had no idea who I was or that I existed.

00:31:11 JM

And you just traveled around to where you needed to be and made your arrangements for visiting certain cores and locations?

00:31:18 NB

Right. And getting the equipment fielded, getting the people trained to run it, getting them convinced and selling them on the idea of how important it is to keep this equipment running, and who needs to know it, and training that team that went into Iraq, training another that was on the border someplace else that I can't say. And training the fighter pilots, also, on how it was going to work, training the special forces guys. Teaching all these people, and running around, and fixing it when the network was falling apart because it was— I mean, the network, I think of it kind of like pieces of silk, you try to tie it together here, and it breaks over here. At the time they were just so fragile, the networks, so just watching it and being in—

00:32:03 JM

So what time frame was this, like months, years, how long were you there?

00:32:07 NB

This was February 2003 to the beginning of the war, so a month before the war, and then the month of the major combat ops.

00:32:16 JM

So until April, I guess?

00:32:18 NB

Right, until— and it was working, we were doing well in the west, and our plans were starting to move further and further east, and we were about to— we were getting towards Baghdad, and the node in the east wasn't working. And we couldn't get it working, and I tried to talk the guys through it over the phone, I tried to get them crypto-ed, it just wasn't working. We could not get good enough communication lines to troubleshoot the problem. So I finally just, I'm going on. We've got to get this working. And I hopped a plane with some special forces guys that took me into Kuwait, and some Marines came out and picked me up, and drove me in there, and I ended up being with 1st Meth, and got there just in time. I got there the afternoon

where, that evening, it was around April 1st, April 2nd. That night, they were leaving at midnight to go take Baghdad, and I go there in the afternoon and started tearing all their equipment apart, got it all fixed. They were— it took— it was a couple hours into Iraq, is how far in I was. I forgot what it was called.

00:33:33 JM

So they got you in there, you had your little tool kit of engineering parts, diagrams.

00:33:38 NB

I mean, they picked me up in a rental car [laughing].

00:33:40 JM

Undercover!

00:33:42 NB

We drove into Iraq in a rental car with big V-tape.

00:33:46 JM

And you're thinking, SERE training actually might come in handy!

00:33:50 NB

Driving past the pipelines where smoke's coming out of it, busted things all over, blown up buildings, and [laughs], how did a little girl from Huntington Beach get here! I got there, and they— so I got there around 4 in the afternoon, tore all their equipment apart, figured out what the problem was, and got it solved, got it working by 10 o'clock at night, and they were leaving at midnight. And we were driving in with one of the—it was actually an Army guy that was doing a special project with the Marines—he had given me a Cuban cigar. I had never smoked a cigar in my life. He goes, "this is a victory cigar. Smoke it with victory." So when we got all the equipment fixed, and all packed up and ready to go—again, by 10 P.M., we had two hours—we just sat out, we had these lawn chairs opened up, and sat under the stars in Iraq, it was a beautiful night. I lit that cigarette, I passed it around to the Marines that were going forward that night to go take Baghdad, and—

00:35:01 JM

And you sat around yourself!

00:35:04 NB

Of course! Yeah! We sat around, smoking a cigar. It was great. And they didn't really know how they were going to get me out of there. You know, we take you in here, you may be stuck with us for the next couple months fighting a war in Baghdad.

00:35:19 JM

It'll be a new title: embedded engineer.

00:35:21 NB

Yeah, I mean, they, you know, "not really sure how..." I'm like, don't worry, I'll figure it out. I'll make good use of myself, don't worry. And I went, and I made sure that I had a bunch of disposable contacts, and I was ready to go. As long as I have disposable contact lenses, I can go anywhere for any length of time. And then the

next morning, at sunrise, the last element of the headquarters was heading north and they dropped me off at a— I rode with them in these total road warrior vehicle, I mean, they were just massive vehicles, I don't know what they were but they were scary looking [laughs]. And they dropped me off at an airfield that the Marines had just created, taken over, they're just getting their helicopters in there, it was less than a week old. And dropped me off at the air boss's office, and I walked in and I'm like, hey can I get a ride? And they're like, "where do you want to go?" I'm like, anywhere but Iraq. They laughed like, "that's how we feel! Alright, have a seat." Within about 20 minutes they're like, "we've got a helicopter going to Kuwait right now," you know, and I go running out there, the blades are already turning, and I'm yelling at the guy, hey, I'm on— put me on the manifest, I'm on that helicopter! And I'm running around wearing chem gear, which is kind of almost like fireman pants, and a t-shirt, and a FLAC vest, and I just have my hair pulled back, and they think that I'm an embedded reporter, you know, they have no idea that I'm a major, at the time, in the Air Force. I go running on that night and I show them my ID, and they're like, "alright, just hold on ma'am, we'll get you on!" and they drop the back door, and I go running on to the helicopter, and we go flying out in this formation of helicopters, we're— And get out, and get to Kuwait, and it worked.

00:37:18 JM

Wow. So they were able to use the comms system?

00:37:21 NB

Yes. Yes.

00:37:22 JM

And the thing you created?

00:37:23 NB

Yes. So for this system that I fielded, which, it basically covered most areas of Iraq, that we had not one single fratricide incident. So I'm really proud of that. In fact, there were times when they are actually documenting cases where the A-10s were actually rolling in on a target and were called off, aborted because of my system being out there.

00:37:48 JM

And it was able to interface them with the Army's tracking and—

00:37:52 NB

The A-10— We weren't allowed to put it in the A-10, but we had— that node was able to call and tell those guys— saw where they were, and said.

00:38:04 JM

That also became a big realization for the Army guys that used to like to do the grease paints. Wow, this digital stuff can really— It was a big eye-opening experience. And that's thanks to you.

00:38:16 NB

It's nice to know that work saved lives.

00:38:20 JM

So, after that, it's kind of anticlimactic. What happened after your little foray in the war?

00:38:25 NB

No, it got even better! As kind of a, I think as kind of a thank you that I had gone and done this when they didn't expect me there, they didn't— you know, my boss didn't even— you know, were very worried about me going there, a single girl running around. But, you know, I could actually get anywhere I need, I was able to talk these people into doing just amazing stuff, the Marines were great, the Army special forces guys I worked with were great. I mean, if I needed support to get something done, they were there, they understood my mission and they were there to help. It really worked well. So when I came back, they—

00:39:09 JM

Back to Tucson?

00:39:10 NB

Back to Tucson. They had— Just about a week before I came back, I found out that they had changed my orders and I was headed to Monterrey, to Naval postgraduate school [laughs]. So I got to—

00:39:22 JM

Another hardship tour!

00:39:23 NB

I got to go to Naval postgraduate school for 18 months. Got a degree in national security affairs, where I mixed defense analysis, information operations, what I had learned out there, you know, a little bit of engineering along with the national security affairs. Kind of strategic decision making, mix all those together for my thesis.

00:39:45 JM

So was it a master's in...?

00:39:47 NB

It was actually defense decision-making from the National Security Affairs department. But my thesis was on trust and influence in network-centric warfare. So it all tied together, and then because of that thesis—

00:40:04 JM

Are you working on the OSD staff now? ASDNII?

00:40:05 NB

No, actually now I'm at Joint Forces Command doing joint concept development, and I wrote the command and control joint integration concept, of which I pulled pieces of my thesis out and got, you know, little pieces of my— of that into the concept that's now been approved by the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

00:40:24 JM

Excellent.

00:40:25 NB

So I've got the influence in that way, too.

00:40:28 JM

Okay. So, um, so where are you stationed right now?

00:40:31 NB

In Suffolk, at Joint Forces Command.

00:40:34 JM

Okay. Okay, great. And how long have you been there?

00:40:36 NB

A year and a half.

00:40:37 JM

Okay, excellent. And what are your career aspirations, and what do you think is next for you?

00:40:44 NB

You know, um, I've got 16 and a half years in, I want to have a—

00:40:50 JM

The carrot of 20 years is out there, the carrot of making colonel.

00:40:54 NB

I'm 38, I want to have a kid [laughs]. It's— I've put that off for a while because I've been running— you know, you don't want to do that when you're flying, I mean, I only have so many years. I got to fly seven years, so you only have so many flying years, and you have a kid and you're out of the cockpit for quite a while. In fact, as soon as you find out you're pregnant you can't fly a high-G aircraft, so it would've been a year out of the cockpit. So I've had to wait for that, and you know, life can go on. So I've actually applied for squadron command now, I'll find out in a couple weeks if I'm on any of the squadron command lists. So that will...

00:41:46 JM

Determine what your other options are.

00:41:47 NB

Right, right, that will determine those options.

00:41:49 JM

As squadron commander, you have a whole squadron of children.

00:41:51 NB

Yeah. If not, I could— I'll probably see about getting out at 20, starting a direction. A different type of direction. I'm looking forward to skiing, being a ski bum. Got a house in Park City, I was thinking I could move to Park City. Write children's books. Um, do my next current. But I don't see it, being a DOD contractor, because I've seen them

having to put up with people like me their whole career [laughs]. I'm like, oh man, I don't want to do that!

00:42:32 JM

Well, it sounds like you're having a lot of fun, and just probably not ever what you expected when you dreamed about becoming a bird when you were two.

00:42:40 NB

[Laughs] No. So I couldn't be an astronaut because it turns out that they never have waived eyesight, and laser surgery just isn't quite there yet. Maybe if I was fifteen years younger, maybe my kids will have that opportunity. But at least I got to get, you know, as far as— I got to do a lot of fun things along the way, and when I was 12 I heard somebody say, "if you shoot for the stars and miss, you'll at least land on a cloud," and that was kind of my motto going through. So going to test pilot school, and walking out to the plane all the time, carrying my helmet, and wearing my G-suit, climbing in an F-16, it was, it's just been amazing.

00:43:27 JM

Is there any particular person who's been an influence on your life, that maybe was a mentor to you about what you should pursue in the Air Force, or what's the next direction you should go?

00:43:38 NB

Um, no. Not in the Air Force. My mom's probably, you know, my biggest advocate. She's very logical, she, you know...

00:43:51 JM

So you inherited that and could kind of process what you felt you needed to do?

00:43:56 NB

Yeah, I think so. But there's, you just— I mean, where I am now, you just don't see that many women above my rank that you can look towards for role models. They're just not out there. I'm over time, huh [laughs]?

00:44:13 JM

No, no, no. You're fine, you're fine. She's giving me a time count, so I know how much longer I can ask questions. So, if you had to give some advice to young women looking at a career in the military or going to the academy, what would you tell them?

00:44:30 NB

Get in shape [laughs].

00:44:32 JM

Okay!

00:44:34 NB

Um, just, I think it was a great thing to do. I think I got a lot more self-confidence, I had incredible adventures, I've gotten to do amazing things, and don't let those

opportunities pass by. Prepare yourself so if, if those opportunities open up for you, you're ready, and you're there.

00:45:03 JM

I'm amazed by your year off, between that second and third year, all the things that you did. I mean, wow, most people would just want to go home and just veg out, and you know, forget all that tension and stress there, and you just packed so much into that, I'm so impressed.

00:45:25 NB

It was a scary year, I mean, have to go to a foreign country when you don't really know the language yet. But that's why I picked France, because it was the one place that I couldn't get away with speaking English. Again, forced discipline, outside forces forcing me to learn new things versus...

00:45:43 JM

So if you could do it all over again, is there anything that you'd change?

00:45:50 NB

Yeah, I would've gotten my jump wings when I was at the academy. That's my one regret in life, that's it, I have no regrets.

00:45:54 JM

That you never went to airborne school?

00:45:56 NB

That I didn't get my— well, we have our own jump, free fall program at the Air Force Academy that freshman year I didn't have the pull-up stat to be able to do free fall. I've jumped from planes, I've done it on my own now, you know, as a lieutenant. But other than that, I really have no regrets in my life, so I think that's a pretty minor one.

00:46:20 JM

Excellent, excellent. Is there any experience that you've had that we haven't covered today that you'd like to talk about?

00:46:26 NB

Um, I don't think so.

00:46:28 JM

Okay.

00:46:29 NB

How'd I do?

00:46:31 JM

Great! Great! I appreciate you coming in, I think you have a wonderful story to tell. I mean, your excitement and enthusiasm about getting excited about network-centric warfare, it's just wow! [both laugh]

00:46:45 NB

I was excited about saving lives, you know, and here's something that I can do, being an engineer and understanding that here's a way that I can do that.

00:46:54 JM

I was an Army signal officer, and I know about the silk thread of the network, and the whole— you know, I get into the concept of network-centric warfare, but the back end of making all that work, all the little wires and stuff.

00:47:08 NB

It's unappreciated [laughs]. Yeah, I see those guys that do such amazing things and they're getting passed over for promotion. You're missing it.

00:47:19 JM

Well, there's some of the military culture. And the Air Force I'm sure has got the fixation on pilots, the Army's got a fixation on big guns, and if it doesn't shoot bullets then it doesn't get funded. So all the smart things that are going on, sometimes it's hard to get money and recognition for them. Until, of course, we can't communicate and it's, you know [both laugh]. Or you have— you run out of fuel and, "where's that logistics? Oh yeah, well we didn't fund that." Okay, yeah. Anyways, than you very much.

00:47:48 NB

Thank you!