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CELEBRATING A Leader In The Corps

By Brigadier General Gail E. Crawford

Continuing with our celebration of Women's History Month, we had the opportunity to interview Brigadier General Gail E. Crawford, Director, Military Justice and Discipline Directorate. She provides her experiences and thoughts on leadership and inclusivity.

Women's History Month



President Jimmy Carter signs a proclamation designating March 2-8, 1980, as the first national Women's History Week. [National Archives](https://www.archives.gov)

March is Women's History Month, which started as a national celebration in 1980 when President Jimmy Carter issued a presidential proclamation declaring the week starting 2 March 1980 as Women's History Week.[1] Next, Congress passed Public Law 97-28 authorizing and requesting President Ronald Reagan to proclaim the week beginning 7 March 1982 as "Women's History Week." [2] Women's History Week continued to be observed in March each year until 1987 when Congress passed Public Law 100-9 designating the month of March as "Women's History Month." Each year since 1995 a presidential proclamation designates March as Women's History Month.

In this special edition, we had the opportunity to interview [Brigadier General Gail E. Crawford](#), Director, Military Justice and Discipline Directorate. She provides her experiences and thoughts on leadership and inclusivity. This interview was edited and condensed for clarity.

On Enlisting

All of my siblings served in the military, so I had strong family ties to the military. At eighteen, I had a basketball scholarship to Albany State in Georgia. I played basketball and ran track. As a collegiate athlete, I found I couldn't keep up with classes because I was exhausted from practices and being on the road. It was more than I felt I could handle at that time. After my freshman year, I went back home to Florida and told my father I didn't want to go back to school. My father was so disappointed as I was the first person in my family's lineage to go to college and I was dropping out. I promised him I would go back to school and finish, and I did—but not right away. As the fall semester began, schools opened, and I was not there. One day I was at the mall and encountered a friend who played baseball at my high school and also at Albany State. He told me he had enlisted in the Air Force and that the Air Force was paying for his college classes. That same day, I went to the recruiter's office at that mall and enlisted in the Air Force—then I told my parents. I do not advise doing it in that order.

The Air Force instilled the discipline in me to pursue excellence.

I wanted to be in pararescue, but back then, girls couldn't be in pararescue, even though the recruiter told me I could. As I graduated basic training, I was told that based on my [ASVAB](#) score, I could be an admin troop or a Morse systems operator. I chose admin, and after a few amazing years as a Staff Support Administrative Specialist, and with encouragement from mentors, I decided to switch career fields and become a paralegal.

Back then, you had to serve in another career field before you could become a paralegal. As a Senior Airman, I was encouraged to apply by the Admin career field Chief Master Sergeant who looked for strong admin troops to become paralegals. After an interview with the Kirtland Law Office Manager and the [AMC](#) Command Paralegal my retraining package was approved, and I went back to Technical School to become a paralegal.

On Being a Paralegal then an Attorney

The Air Force instilled the discipline in me to pursue excellence. I also had amazing [JAGC](#) mentors who inspired and helped me along the way. As a paralegal, I worked over 50 hours a week, while taking college classes at lunch, at night and on weekends. I was encouraged and supported by my entire law office to pursue my education, but not before I finished my Career Development Course. Back then, you had to get your five-level upgrade training before you were allowed to take college courses, so I had to do that first. Many of the captains also encouraged me to go to law school. They shared their experiences and their belief in me that I had what it took to be an officer and a judge advocate.

I left active duty as an [NCO](#) to attend school full time, keep my promise to my father and finish my degree. My boss at the time encouraged me to go into the Reserves so that I could continue to serve as a paralegal, which is what I did. I served at Moody Air Force Base, Georgia as an [IMA](#) and also did numerous special tours at legal offices across the United States while in law school. One of the happiest days of my life still today was when I learned I'd been selected as a judge advocate. When I came back on active duty, many of the Airmen I served with as a paralegal were still serving in the JAG Corps. Those [JAGs](#) from the base legal offices where I worked were now majors, lieutenant colonels and colonels and the paralegals were senior master sergeants and chief master sergeants. Looking back at how many of them were still serving and how successful they were, I knew how lucky I was to have landed on teams with such amazing Airmen leaders. I owe them all a great debt of gratitude.

I tell this story because at eighteen, I didn't have the best grades. I was a young, talented but undisciplined inner-city youth. People see me now and think I had a specific life path, but that isn't the case. I am here through perseverance, amazing mentors, and a lot of luck.

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On Barriers and Overcoming Them

My first supervisor in the Air Force thought I couldn't read and therefore excluded me from opportunities and events. As it turns out, I was actually a voracious reader. I read everything. As I kid, I read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica that my dad purchased for our family and would go to the library and checkout a stack of books that stood taller than me ... and read them all. It was my love of reading that opened up an entire new world for me to see a path to rise above my circumstances. But my supervisor didn't know that. He judged me based on something other than my merit. This was in the mid-1980s. I am so grateful for the executive secretary, the senior NCO who replaced that supervisor, and countless, nameless others who saw more in me and put me on a trajectory for success. They helped me understand that the Air Force was actually a place where I could grow, learn, and serve my country regardless of my demographic, and that my first supervisor was not representative of what our Air Force stood for. The amazing team of Airmen around me were the reason I stayed. They showed me an Air Force that I not only wanted to be a part of, but also could one day serve as a leader.

What is Something You Wish You Had Known Early in Your Career?

When I was a young captain, I met [Major General Mary Saunders](#) (USAF, Ret.)^[3]. Someone in our group asked her what struggles she faced, and if she ever had a problem with people because she was black and female? She said, "I've never had a problem. I've met people and *they* had a

problem. I supervised people and *they* had a problem, but I've never had a problem." The crowd chuckled but I was transformed in that moment. Her answer taught me not to carry that burden, not to worry about how people would react to my demographic, but to focus on excellence and service. I didn't realize I was carrying that burden until she said that. It literally changed my life and wish I had that advice when I was eighteen.

On Women in the Military

So many opportunities have opened up to women at an unprecedented level. Last week I saw four female 4-stars appear on stage together at the Military Women's Memorial at Arlington Cemetery and later unveil a portrait of [Major General Marcelite J. Harris](#) (USAF, Ret.), the Air Force's first African-American female general officer.^[4] Those senior leaders reminded us that while we live in unprecedented times, we still have work to do. The theme was "Beyond Firsts: Powering the Future Force." As I reflect on our history as a nation, I believe that the issues that divide us along gender lines run deep. Consider how long it took women to have equal protection rights and voting rights in this country. None of us are free until all of us are free.

"I've met people and *they* had a problem. I supervised people and *they* had a problem, but I've never had a problem." ~Maj Gen Saunders

In the history of this great nation many have fought hard and won our freedom to live free^[5] and our freedom to serve this country.^[6] The challenge to this generation of Airmen and Guardians is to win the freedom to lead. We must continue to create an environment where all Airmen and Guardians can bring their whole selves to freely serve our nation and be a part of something greater than themselves, but also rise to the highest ranks of our service. We must continue to challenge our biases and treat people objectively with dignity and respect. We also must continue the great work the Air Force has done with groups like the [WIT](#) and [BEST](#) and other barrier working groups that continuously study,

expose, and eliminate institutional barriers to service and leadership. I'm proud of the work our Air Force has done, I'm optimistic about the future, but we cannot stop doing this important work.

We also need to recognize we are all in this together. I would not be here were it not for mentors who didn't look like me. But representation matters. It's important for our youth to see someone who looks like me in senior leadership positions—it helps the next generation see possibility. Many things seem impossible until someone does it. A sub-4-minute mile seemed impossible until Roger Bannister did it.^[7] Then, so many others did it in quick succession. I believe the same will be true for our Airmen and Guardians.

The sky is no longer the limit.

Interviewer/Editor: Major Allison K.W. Johnson (Editor-in-Chief)

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Glossary

- **AMC:** Air Mobility Command
- **ASVAB:** Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery
- **BEST:** Black/African American Employment Strategy Team
- **IMA:** Individual Mobilization Augmentee
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **JAGC:** Judge Advocate General's Corps
- **LL.M.:** Master of Laws
- **NCO:** noncommissioned officer
- **WIT:** Women's Initiative Team

About the Speaker



Brigadier General Gail E. Crawford, USAF

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EXPAND YOUR KNOWLEDGE

External Links to Additional Resources

- **National Museum:** nationalmuseum.af.mil/Collections/Research/Womens-History/
- **National Women's History Museum:** womenshistory.org
- **Women's History Resources at the Library of Congress:** guides.loc.gov/american-women
- **Women's Military Memorial:** womensmemorial.org
- **Women Leaders Discuss Benefits of Military Service:** dvidshub.net/video/875561/beyond-firsts-powering-future-force

Endnotes

- [1] Joe Hernandez, “Women’s History Month grew out of a weeklong commemoration by Jimmy Carter in 1980,” NPR (Mar. 2, 2023, 6:00 AM), <https://www.npr.org/2023/03/02/1160430549/womens-history-month-grew-out-of-a-weeklong-commemoration-by-jimmy-carter-in-1980>.
- [2] *Women’s History Month*, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, <https://womenshistorymonth.gov> (last accessed Mar. 2, 2023).
- [3] Dep’t of the Air Force, “Major General Mary L. Saunders Official Biography” (2005), <https://www.af.mil/About-Us/Biographies/Display/Article/104617/major-general-mary-l-saunders/>.
- [4] Norah O’Donnell et al., Women, Peace, & Security Series Discussion & Fireside Chat, Beyond Firsts: Powering the Future Force (Mar. 6, 2023).
- [5] U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1.
- [6] Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, Pub. L. 80-625 (1948) (enabling women to serve as permanent, regular members of the armed forces); Pub. L. 94-106 (1975) (allowing for women to be admitted to all-male military colleges); Exec. Order No. 9981 (1948) (desegregating the military). This year (2023) is the 75th anniversary of EO 9981.
- [7] “Roger Bannister,” WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Bannister (last accessed Mar. 3, 2023).