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# AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 64

## Women's History in the Air Force with Major Marissa Kester – Part 2

**Host:** Major Erin Davis

**Guest:** Major Marissa Kester

Maj Davis sits down with Air Force historian Maj Marissa Kester, author of *There From the Beginning*, to discuss Air Force women's history throughout the last century. Maj Davis and Maj Kester discuss the roles played by women throughout the early history of the country and up through the Vietnam War, and take a look at the laws that slowly defined and formed the careers women in the military have today.

### Part Two

#### Major Erin Davis:

Hello and welcome back to another episode of The Air Force JAG School Podcast. Today, we are sitting down again with Major Marissa Kester to finish up part two of Air Force Women's History.

[Music: Band playing a section of the Air Force song]

So, switching gears a little bit and into the sixties, obviously, we know culturally there's a big shift. Feminism is kind of becoming a buzzword. And you have *The Feminine Mystique* is published and you have all these women coming forward to talk about equality,

to get women more integrated into society—leaving the house. And around that same time, the DACOWITS, were started. So, could you talk a little bit about who they were and what their goals were?

#### DACOWITS

##### Maj Kester:

Yeah. So DACOWITS was formed in 1951, was the year. And again, I haven't looked at my notes in forever. I'm pretty sure it was 51. And it was formed right when the Korean War was kind of starting up and they were trying to kick off that recruiting campaign and just had no idea—there was this assumption going into the Korean War that women would be ready and able and

it would just be so simple to recruit them and people would want to join just like they did in World War Two. But obviously that was not what happened. And so, they created DACOWITS to kind of get a better feel for what women need or want or just how to better recruit and retain them. And it has been a really kind of backbone institution since then.

And they provide recommendations every year and are often decades ahead of their time in their recommendations that eventually [laughing] they get approved. But it might take a while. And then the sixties is kind of second wave of feminism, which was the logical next step from the quote unquote “first phase,” which was earlier in the century when women earned the right to vote, just basically be viewed as like an equal citizen in the United States. But they still weren’t in many, many, many ways, but they were able to vote and so the second wave was almost due to a cultural reaction to that 1950s bubble in which women had these very strict roles and responsibilities placed upon them.

And of course, women are humans, and no one likes to be put in any type of role, responsibility that’s incredibly strict and limiting. And so multi, multi-factored why that kind of really started to kick off in the sixties. And so that of course led right into the military as it does. And so, you start to see the bigger institutions like the National Organization for Women and the President Kennedy establishing a Commission on Women where these outside forces start actually looking at women and their employment and the discrepancies essentially between how women in men are employed and treated and like the pay gap and pregnancy and all those sorts of factors.

And then women in the military slowly started to kind of get on board with that as well. Vietnam, the Vietnam conflict that spanned a number of years, kind of probably slowed it down, but also encouraged it in a way, because beginning the mid 1960s when Southeast Asia conflict kind of started to kick off, when we started to get involved towards, you know, the early 1970s,

when it ended, women were in kind of a very different position by the end than they were at the beginning. And so, it was just a larger cultural tidal wave going on. But women within the military and the Air Force definitely kind of like jumped on board and like, you know, pushed as well to get a few basic things changed because at that point nothing had been changed since the Integration Act and so Public Law 9130. So, it was a solid, you know, 20 years of living as if it was the post World War II world when it when it wasn’t anymore.

## **Public Law 9130**

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**Maj Davis:**

So, let’s talk a little bit. You know, I’m a JAG. I love the law. So, let’s talk a little bit about Public Law 9130 because that’s the Jeanne Holm era, right?

**Maj Kester:**

Yes.

**Maj Davis:**

Things really start to move and change. So, let’s talk a little bit about the Public Law. What did it what did it end up changing?

**Maj Kester:**

This was definitely the Jeanne Holm era. And most women directors of the Air Force previously had kind of been on board with the whole just like lay low, let’s just do our jobs, like don’t draw attention to ourselves. And there was certain certainly validity in that approach. And obviously, it worked. It worked out just fine. But Jeanne Holm was kind of the one that came around and started shaking the cages a little bit.

And so, yeah, Public Law 9130 was the biggest thing remembered from that is that it essentially removed the rank restrictions on women in the military. And up until this point, that really hadn’t been an issue. There hadn’t been enough women that they had ever come close to that 2% cap or really had any need to like remove that restriction. But the problem was that at this point, you know, the late 1960s, all those women who had

served in World War Two or who had joined the Air Force right away or the military right after World War Two, they were all, you know, field grade officers. And so, there were a bunch of relatively, you know, majors and lieutenant colonels that couldn't do anything else, couldn't go anywhere else. They were kind of capped pretty early in their career because there could only be, according to the Women's Liberation Act, one colonel, a female colonel in the service at any one time. And it was a temporary position. So, it wasn't even a permanent [laughing], you know, field. It was the women's director position.

So, this law went in and removed a bunch of those restrictions. And yeah, most people remember it as like the women's promotion law is what they called it, because it allowed women to become general. And so, everyone, of course, not everyone, but a lot of people of course, were fearful that, "*Oh, we just open the floodgates.*" You know, "*There's going to be all these women generals walking around now.*" Of course, that's not really what happened [laughing], but that is how Jeanne Holm was able to get her stars, her first star. She was the first woman in the Air Force to promote to general.

And so that was a big turning point because again, it was the first major piece of legislation that affected women in the military since the Integration Act. So, switching up the way that the women were structured within the force inevitably led to other shifts. You can't just change one thing and nothing else changes. A bunch of stuff is going to change after that, kind of aftershocks. So that was a big, big turning point, I would say.

## Resistance

### **Maj Davis:**

So, a little bit right in the same window of time there, a lot happened, it feels like in the sixties. Like you mentioned before, also now we have Vietnam. So, there was, I think, a lot of resistance to having women actually serving in Southeast Asia. Outside of maybe some like nurse, nursing corps women who, there never seem to be much debate about the importance of nurses overall.

But I think, correct me if I am wrong, but I think there's even some resistance to sending women into the sort of combat areas to have them do their jobs. What was the turning point there? It looks like a, you know, a couple of people, the battle was sort of won and they were allowed to go over and actually serve overseas. But what were some of the struggles there?

### **Maj Kester:**

Yes, definitely a lot of resistance. But it was almost like that again, that bureaucratic resistance, because commanders in the field were actually requesting certain women or units of women to come over and help because they felt like they could do a great job and they needed their help. And so, it was actually the big Air Force that was saying "*No*", you know, the whole combat law thing, you know, that was very overinterpreted from the Integration Act.

But then a lot of the kind of reasoning they used was while women need separate housing, separate uniforms, separate *everything* at this point because it was still so kind of like gender segregated that we don't want to have to build or maintain housing or any of these things for such a few number of women who were going to serve. And so, a lot of, that's the reason not very many enlisted women were actually able to deploy or serve overseas. Officers were more likely to be allowed to deploy. But they really had to push for that. And there was, it was kind of this just like a handshake agreement that between the male leadership at the time, like we're just not going to have women deploy.

And so, yeah, the women that were able to deploy, the first few especially, had to kind of push back and say, "*No. There's no reason why I can't. Why shouldn't. I want to. I'm volunteering.*" You know [laughing], "*You probably need some volunteers.*" A lot of it was, I think the first test of like women volunteering to deploy, which probably didn't happen very much in Korea. And again, most of the women that served in the Korean conflict served stateside. So, they didn't deploy to the theater. And of course, the ones who did were nurses.

And I really, I'm sure it exists somewhere, but if it doesn't, I would love for someone to write a tome on military nursing because it's just a whole other animal. It's a whole nother thing. And I feel like they're always there. Right? And no one ever really acknowledges that. You just assume they're going to be there and they are.

And kind of the same thing happened in Vietnam, that nursing aside, there were a few officers and I think around six to 800 there actually are no, there's no official number because there was no official record of all the women deployed. So, there's no way to say how many actually deployed or what they did. Or awards or medals they earned from their service because no one kept track of that. So yeah, it was just this shift in the way that like women were volunteering and pushing to deploy. And then eventually the Air Force kind of had to acquiesce and let them, especially because conflict carried out for so long, that when we emerged from Vietnam, there was this precedent that was set that like, you know, women can deploy, they want to deploy.

During the Tet Offensive, there was one of I think the chief master sergeant wrote a letter that basically said the women were amazing, they're amazingly helpful. They handle all the stresses of deployment and, you know, all those fears that women can't handle the stress of combat and all these things, that emotional argument, that nope, they did just fine. They're here helping out. They're doing the mission. They're as good as or better than all their male counterparts. So that was kind of interesting to run across that letter.

But, yeah, I would say it was more the Vietnam conflict wasn't a high volume of participation with women necessarily, but it was a huge shift in that in the internal perspective, like, okay, now we have these women, we can use them. It's been done before. So next time around, like the tracks are already laid a little bit to use them more, you know.

## Big Changes

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**Maj Davis:**

Yeah. And that's so interesting because there's that chicken or the egg question of does change really start at the top or at the bottom? Because, you know, it's so interesting that like big Air Force, big bureaucracy, Congress, like, nope women are too fragile for this. Women can't handle this. They're hysterical.

And then with the actual commanders and the people who are overseas in these situations, like, *"No, they're doing just fine. We would actually—can we have more?"* Like will more people come over? *"We need all these women."*

**Maj Kester:**

Right.

**Maj Davis:**

*"We need help. They're good workers. Like can we have more of them?"*

There's always, I think it's always a question in law, right? Which is are we starting from, you know, do people at the top tell us what we were going to be doing or does that cultural revolution really start more with the general population and then it gained so much traction that it starts to become law? I think that's the same kind of question you can have, you know, in this situation, because then now you're into the seventies and so much stuff happened in the seventies. I mean, even ...

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah.

**Maj Davis:**

In law, in legal precedent, the fifties and sixties and seventies were times of big changes to rights and equality, not just for women but for black people and other minorities. There's a ton going on in these decades. And you know this, the women in the military, you know, it's not really different because, you know, you have in

the seventies, when they really changed the way that they start applying equal protection.

Like before the seventies, if there was a rational reason for treating men and women differently—it was allowed. It was never found to be a violation of equal protection as long as it was quote unquote “justifiable” that there was a rational reason that women and men are different. And it’s interesting, too, because when they start making this shift, it’s really the—I think if we didn’t have some people at the top, though, who were helping in the military to enforce and stuff—so General Holm talks a lot in her book and also in her interview with Library of Congress about her relationship with General Robert Dixon and the personal interest he took in changing a lot of these internal policies that were holding women back.

And I do think, you know, there’s that combination of—you have to acknowledge, you just have to kind of come from the top, where you have to have you know the Supreme Court, you have to have Congress actually making big policy and law changes. But you also need to have people who are actually implementing them at lower levels, because we know—you know, especially the military bureaucracy can be a nightmare, and you can get away with probably ignoring something for years before you actually put it into practice. I mean, we see not even just in this past decade when President Trump signed the executive order that transgender members were no longer able to serve. The military kind of dragged their feet on actually implementing that to kind of see how much traction it would get and how you know—to see if it would last. So, we’re pretty good [laughing] at delaying things.

So, I think it really did take people on both ends to speak up and get some of the stuff to change. I do think it’s interesting that one of the first pieces of discrimination that changed was actually in favor of men, which was that women used to be able to separate voluntarily if they were going to get married. And then they change that. And they said, “*Well, that’s not fair to the men*” because they don’t have an out—right?

**Maj Kester:**

Right.

**Maj Davis:**

Like this is an all-volunteer force now. But once you’re in, you’re in. So, I thought that funny—that was sort of the first thing, was how are we discriminating against men? [laughing] So now women can’t just separate voluntarily.

**Maj Kester:**

[laughing] Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I know. Yep. And yeah, yeah, I know. I totally agree with everything you’re saying.

And it is interesting, you know, through the process of writing I kept trying to, like, nail down this like pattern or, you know, this list of players or characters that were necessary for change. And of course, if there was a formula with someone much higher than me would have figured it out by now.

But yeah, it really is kind of like a dance or a flow it’s like a—it’s not a linear thing—social change and cultural change. And it often takes more time than we think it should, because just those certain beliefs or cultural programs you have running in the background of your mind that you’re probably not even conscious of, they just determine so much of how you see the world and what you think is right and what other people think is right. And just, you know, they just determine everything.

And so those type of things take just generations to change, really. And so, yeah, the women that really—and the men, too—I mean, there were absolutely men who were incredibly supportive, were incredibly like relevant and game changers, honestly, for certain policies to get changed. It just takes a few people to really stand there and say, “*No, this is silly*” or “*This is outdated*”, or “*That’s just not relevant anymore. This really needs to be changed.*” And yet because the military is—when it wants to be—it can be incredibly stubborn [laughing] because it kind of is in its own bubble. And so, right, no one’s checking up necessarily on the day-to-day implementation of policies or attempts to shift the culture in one direction. No one’s

doing that, necessarily, you know. So, if it's not being done, someone has to kind of stand up and make a scene. And, you know, a lot of people don't want to do that. But the people that do, are generally the ones that we kind of look back on, like—thanks [laughing]—thanks for that.

**Maj Davis:**

I know, and you really have to give people credit, again like General Holm. A lot of this stuff, you know, it's you never know what you would do personally. But I feel like if I was here and I was meeting that kind of resistance, I don't know that I would keep putting up with it. And I know she talks a lot about that she just got lucky. She had great bosses, she had cool assignments, and she was obviously somebody that people liked working with. And she was she became the first female general in the Air Force. So, you know, someone liked her somewhere.

**Maj Kester:**

Right.

**Maj Davis:**

Now, you just have to give her so much credit because she really stuck to her guns and you know, she was really a big part of all of this change happening—even though she didn't really take a lot of credit for it, when she talks about it. She was, *"I was in the right place at the right time. I was at the right meetings"*—and it's like, oh, man, I don't know that I would put up with a lot of this stuff. You know, I think I would have wanted to be somewhere where I felt included and accepted. So, you have to give people a lot of credit for being around long enough to help make these changes happen.

**Maj Kester:**

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Just having the persistence, honestly. I mean, for year after year. And obviously she was good at playing that game where she was able to rise up within the ranks and she was able to be at those meetings. You know what that phrase like luck requires opportunity, essentially. Like she put herself in the position whether she believes it was luck or not or, you know, somewhat irrelevant. But she was the one

that still was able to like stick with it and persist and yeah, I mean, I agree. I think that would be exhausting, quite honestly. So, you know, for the people that really, that really stick with it. Yeah, it's that fortitude is it can really obviously change everything.

## Dependent Benefits

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, it really can.

And then just a couple other little things that happened in the seventies that I want to point out, mostly because they're law related—so how we feel about that around here [laughing] also because I think they are culturally and historically important. Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of course, very famously argued in front of the Supreme Court before she was a justice herself in 1973 about female service member dependent benefits.

So, prior to this if you were a female service member and you had dependents—you know husband and children, in this time, unless your husband relied on you for more than 50% of his support, you did not get any dependent benefits whatsoever—didn't matter what your rank was, it didn't matter what your job was. You could be a lieutenant colonel and if you have a husband, if he has a job, you're not getting any dependent benefits.

So, she very famously argued that that was unconstitutional under equal protection. And she did win. And that was a pretty big case. I think it was Lieutenant Frontiero. She was actually here at Maxwell. And she was the one who, she was the petitioner in that case. And that was a really, a really big shift, I think, in the way that people thought about female service members. Because to me, it implies the idea that women don't have dependents is just culturally, you know, that women's jobs aren't important, that women are not bringing home the bacon, that women are not the family member who does all this supporting. And I mean, I think even in the seventies, I mean, the concept of like a stay-at-home husband was almost unfathomable. To me, I think the 50% of household support probably was for people who

had husbands who maybe were disabled and couldn't work, because I don't think it was even a thing.

**Maj Kester:**

So yeah. Absolutely. Oh no. I was just going to say there was definitely I felt like almost an element of shame to that rule. Like, you know, if your spouse can't support you, then you need to prove it, number one. And then like then we'll give you some benefits, you know [laughing]. Like this kind of ridiculous thing versus a man that if they were married, they were just assumed to, you know, need that spousal or dependent support so yeah.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, there was definitely an impression, I think in some cases still exists today, that women having jobs—like now we're kind of, you know, the eighties and nineties kind of created the two-income household idea—but definitely at the time. I think even today, the thought that the female spouse having a job, like that wasn't as important, that might be more for her own life interest and benefit than it was anything beneficial to the household. And like I think a lot of times too it was still thought as being detrimental. You know like maybe you should be at home taking care of the family. *Like if you're the one at work—fine—I guess we'll give you the benefits, but maybe you shouldn't be. Why would we incentivize you to get a job when you should be home taking care of those kids, lady?*

**Maj Kester:**

Totally, totally. And there was no, I mean, we think childcare is hard to get today, like in the seventies or eighties it was fairly nonexistent. People had to ask, you know, their neighbors and family and there was no such thing as like Air Force childcare or any, like, encouragement of, you know—yeah having kids because, yeah, *"You should probably be at home if you have those kids, right? What are you doing here?"* And *"your husband's not supporting you more than 50%. Like what's going on here",* you know?

**Maj Davis:**

Right.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, it was, it was definitely a big—because it was kind of the, it was the first anyway, and it was a big case, obviously, that opened the door to the next few. Like, okay, well if that's going to change, then we got a list of other things that need to change too. Just logically like it wouldn't make any sense to not change these other things like pregnancy waivers and everything else.

So yeah, that definitely was, that was a big, big deal.

## **Military Education**

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**Maj Davis:**

Yeah. I also thought it was interesting, you told a little anecdote in your book about women attending Air War College. The first female to actually attend Air War College wasn't until, certainly until after Public Law 9130 because it was only open—I think at the time, right?—to colonels, full bird O-6 colonels and then they had to open up to O-5 just so women were able to attend. And even then, you know, there were, there's such a cap on who could even have, you know, an O-5 rank, that it was also impossible for women to get to go.

And then also just being a cadet at USAFA. You talked about how members of Congress brought a lawsuit because they wanted to write letters of recommendation for women to attend USAFA. And they were being forced to be discriminatory when they wrote those letters because they couldn't write them for women, and they would be in violation of like equal protection clause for not be able to write those letters.

I thought that was like a fascinating legal read on that situation. It wasn't even, you know, just say, *"Oh, women and men should be able to both attend."* But the idea of members of Congress saying, *"No, you're forcing me to discriminate now, because I can't recommend women for this. So now I'm violating equal protection."* I thought that was such an interesting argument to make.

And I think this is one of those occasions where you can start to use the law as a weapon sometimes to accomplish things. If you take the right perspective and if you use it the right way, it can really be a tool for change.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I can imagine being an Air Force JAG in the seventies was just like fascinating, for lack [laughing] of a better word. Other probably, I mean, there's so many changes and yes, different and interesting angles that certain policies were changed. And, and I feel like, kind of ahead of the time too, you know, it's like typically we think of like the law changing being one of the last things to change. But in some instances, especially with the women in the military—it was kind of one of the first things to really change. And then everyone had to get on board and like shift their mindset and adapt to it. Which seems a little backwards almost. So yeah, that case with the academy, but yeah, just a lot of changes in the seventies for sure.

And then allowing women to be in pilot training, and it just like kept going. Like once that train kind of left the station, it's just, there was a lot of changes in like a decade or two that happened, you know, it's cool and I can imagine at the time it was kind of like head spinning. [laughing]

## **Pilot Training**

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**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, it really must have been.

Even so, you know, talking about pilot training, you know, that's the heart of the Air Force. That's our—our claim to fame. And I think we even see it now, right? Like to be a pilot is to be at the top of the pile. But they didn't really open up pilot training to women until the 1970s. Obviously still, we're not in any way shape or form allowed to do any sort of combat flying. But it's crazy when you think back to World War Two and the WAF and these women who were flying all of these—they weren't flying combat missions—but they were flying

all of these like logistics and supply missions. And they were doing the bulk of the stateside flying to free up men to go to combat, which the men did *not* appreciate.

So, it's just it's just crazy to think that like there was this prevailing cultural ideal that women weren't capable of handling, even being a pilot, first off, but also that this is a sacred, sanctified thing and it will be *tarnished* if we allow women to play a role in this because "*It will diminish what it means for me to be a pilot if this woman can also do it.*"

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, absolutely. And that really was kind of the sacred cow. Because the Air Force, by and large has been the first service to integrate women with most things, and kind of the most open and or most, kind of like, forward leaning with that kind of stuff, whether because they think women should be involved or they see it coming so they just lean into it and let it happen, you know, early on.

But yes, the pilot training was definitely kind of the one like, exactly like you said it was. And that kind of goes to the bigger definition or like when you think bigger picture, you know, more philosophical or whatever, about this whole topic of like everything a man is, is defined by what he's essentially not, you know, and what he's not, is not a woman.

And so that split between like being a pilot and being a combat pilot and being a pilot in this like elite Air Force, which is what we do, this is, "*I'm the best of the best. I'm a pilot in the Air Force. And therefore, if women are going to be allowed in, like that just dilutes all of my, you know, achievements or my kind of place in society or in the force.*"

And so, I don't even know if it was necessary, I'm sure in some cases it was, very like opposed to women in general just believing, you know, the argument we hear even, you know, today that women can't handle certain stressors or they're too emotional or all that thing. But a lot of it was like, "*Don't come into my*" you



know, “Just leave my bubble, my world alone and go do whatever else you want to do.” But like, “Don’t touch my”, you know, “my thing”.

But then they did. [laughing]

## 1980s

### **Maj Davis:**

So, let’s talk a little bit about the 1980s because you talked about how there was actually kind of a moment in time where maybe this all was *going to go away*. And it was actually sort of like bureaucratic inertia that kept the women in the Air Force. Can you talk a little bit about that?

### **Maj Kester:**

Yeah, that was the kind of recruiting hold that took place, I think through referencing.

When Reagan was elected in 1980, it was kind of this unofficial, it was kind of the Army that really jumped in and the Air Force rode on the coattails and they were like, “Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa. Like we need a minute. Like a lot has happened. A lot has changed. We need a minute to reassess situation.” And like—“Do we really need”, you know, back to that question, “women in the military to this extent?” Because, you know, now, it just there was a lot of change. So they took a year or two to deal with that. And then basically the administration then kind of came back—you know, they didn’t really, I don’t think, even knew it was happening necessarily, but like—“Okay, that was good. Like, we’re moving on now. It’s time to move on.”

In the eighties, we saw a lot more focus or awareness of that combat restriction because how—every service did this in their own way—but for the Air Force, they took that combat rule from the Integration Act—that was one of the few things still in place. And they *added* a bunch to it. And so, they decided that any, women were not allowed to participate in anything combat-related, at all, or hypothetically, or in the future—like, you know, just a very vague but like all-encompassing definition.

And so, you know, the “woman pause” is what Jeanne Holm called it when she, when she talked about it in her book with that two-year kind of recruiting pause. Maybe they felt like that was coming next. And they needed to reassess or whatever it was. But yeah, the interesting, kind of again, the military kind of doing their thing in a bubble like—pushing back a little bit—like, “Oh, we need that. We need to think about this. We need to adjust.” [laughing]

### **Maj Davis:**

Yeah. I think in your book, somebody said it was a “traumatic exercise”, for men while they were integrating women and making the military more coed—a traumatic exercise.

### **Maj Kester:**

Traumatic. Yep. [laughing]

Looking back—like when I walked away from, like kind of being done with this project, it was like, wow, there’s still—you can look it at all day, all the ways that there’s so much, how much more we have to go in all the different ways and all the different things we can still change.

But like, it really is kind of amazing how far we’ve come in a relatively short period of time. But, you know, yeah, the whole like it has been *traumatic for us*. I do think it’s funny because it’s just a different a glimpse into a different perspective of the whole thing of like, “Oh my gosh, so much change all at once.” And, you know, “When I joined, you know, the military was manly and full of men”, and this thing and that—and then “Now, it’s not. And I don’t know, I don’t know what to think about it.”

Essentially, the reaction at the time during that “woman pause” that we were just talking about, was like women, like the military is being feminized. Women are taking over the military. And it’s like, the numbers had gone up, but they were still so small compared to men, that like that idea is purely a perception of like, “I wasn’t even aware of all these issues five years ago. And now, not only am I aware, but they’ve all changed.” And it just feels like

it's all encompassing. But it really wasn't. It was kind of just some like natural logistical catch up to the fact that you needed a women's bathroom, you know? [laughing]

## Women In Combat

### Maj Davis:

Right. So, changing gears a little bit, one of the things I wanted to talk about was, and I think this is, still culturally this is a fairly recent memory. This definitely happened during my lifetime. But the idea of the "mommy war" of the nineties and the perception that sending women into combat was a threat to the American family, right?

So, this whole time, everything we've talked about up until now, the biggest caveat, the one leftover thing from the '48 Integration Act was that very vaguely women shouldn't be in combat. And the services definitely use the word combat any time they decided that something was not for women, regardless of what the rationale behind it was. If you stuck "combat" somewhere in the job description now women are excluded.

So, looking at the nineties, Kennedy-Roth Amendment. So, in the nineties, the House Armed Services Committee voted to allow women to fly in combat missions, but there was a ton of resistance to this from Congress. And a big part of the argument—it almost feels archaic because this is the nineties—and they're like, "No, no, no." Like, "*Women have to be at home. Women have to have children. It would disrupt the whole household if women were allowed to go to combat. We're sending mothers to die.*" And it's Roth and Kennedy—were the two congressmen who were really pushing this bill to allow not only for women to serve in combat, but also to maybe start easing up on the gender-based assignment policies in general.

And those are obviously now—I don't I actually don't know if we have fully gotten away from—now that women can be in special operations, I don't know that we've actually eliminated gender-based assignments.

I'm sure there might be some still lingering, but this is the first-time people really started talking about—that there are no neutral arguments to say that women are unable to do these kinds of combat jobs, specifically flying, and that we need to look at excellence and who's the best pilot, not what's their gender. And they were talking about how is a restriction based in law that's no longer relevant in the world of the nineties.

And I thought that was really interesting because again, this is something that feels like it would have come up in the seventies, you know, that this cultural shift would have changed. And it just goes to show that, you know, culturally there are a lot of thoughts and feelings and opinions about what a woman's role in society is. And those systemic cultural values still linger. You know, even into what I mean, I guess being a child of the eighties and nineties, what I would consider modern time [laughing] that these things happen.

I thought it was also really interesting that John McCain testified and supported women in the military. And of course, you know, he has a very interesting specific background being in the Army, having been a P O W. So, it's really—it's interesting not only that this is the time where someone stepped up and said, "*Hey, actually, why are we still doing this?*" But that there was still so much resistance to it. You know, even in the nineties. There was a lot in the, you know, we have Operation URGENT FURY, ELDORADO CANYON and just, you know, all these instances where now suddenly we want to put women out there and they actually flying these combat missions and they're doing a good job.

So, you know, it just it just goes to show that, like we were saying before, a lot of this stuff just takes time. And there's also, there's the idea too that women face very specifically terrible threats if you're taken as a P O W, right? Correct me if I'm wrong. Martha McSally was a major whose plane went down, and I think she was tortured and raped, when she was taken as a P O W?

**Maj Kester:**

That was an army—Martha McSally was the Air Force. She was, I believe, a major when she was the first woman to fly in combat. But there was an Army major.

**Maj Davis:**

Oh, I'm sorry.

**Maj Kester:**

I believe Rhonda Cornum. But yeah, that same story, that exact thing, where she was basically, like her plane went down and she was tortured and raped and all these horrible things. And that happened obviously during the Gulf War, right when the Kennedy-Roth Amendment and like this topic was really kind of hot. And so, it was an argument as to why—"See"—you know—"See, this is why women shouldn't be doing this." You know.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah. And I mean, you have to respect I know that she testified about it. You have to respect what she went through and that she doesn't want other people to go through that. So, it's just hard...

**Maj Kester:**

Right.

**Maj Davis:**

It's just hard because nobody, nobody deserves to go through something like that. And we certainly don't want put people at risk of something like that. But at the same time, you know, maybe women need at least the right to be allowed to assume that risk for themselves and to make that decision for themselves.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, I think that was the biggest shift with the early nineties, was just exactly what you just said. It was like, kind of, this coming, like this point where we kind of like being in the military is inherently risky. And at this point, we have been an all-volunteer force for nearly two decades, like when the Gulf War kicked off. So,

if a woman volunteers, at what point do you just let her—she chose to be a volunteer in the military. No one's forcing her to do this. And so, you know, she kind of gets to choose what, you know, is theoretically right. You would think she would get to choose her level of risk with that risk acceptance or risk tolerance.

**Maj Davis:**

Right. And I think a big part of that is just culturally, I think and maybe I mean, I think it's still around a little bit today in certain contexts at least, that men know better what women need and that, you know, "*We'll help you make this decision because you're not really able to make that decision for yourself.*" You know just the idea the whole patriarchy, right? The idea that, "*Well, no, we need you at home. We'll tell you what's appropriate for you to be doing. Why don't you just have a seat and we'll let you know, what your next job is going to be.*"

**Maj Kester:**

[laughing] Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

And because women hadn't been allowed, you know, to a major extent in combat before, that was like, "*Well, you haven't done this before, so how would you know?*"

And it's like, "*You wouldn't let me do it. So how would I know?*" [laughing] You know.

So, it was kind of this, like, self-feeding loop and really, like, I forget what it was. Ah, I wish I could remember maybe a year or two ago. Right when I was kind of finishing up this book and like on the news, I overheard, you know, someone come on and say, "*Mothers are going to be sent and they're going to die. And we're sending women and moms.*" And it was like the exact same thing. And I was just like my poor husband who has heard this a million times, like—"Do you hear that right now?" They're using the same argument over and over and over and at some point, like, when are we going to let this one go? Like, let's pick a new argument, everyone you know? [laughing]

**Maj Davis:**

Right. Well, and also the idea too, you know, you and I are both, our spouses are also military and no one's pitching a fit that my husband is going overseas. And, you know, my husband could die. Daddies die in war, right? And it's kind of, I mean, it's unfair to men to have that double standard in the same way, where why is my relationship with my children deemed more valuable?

Obviously, culturally, because it's *my job* to take care of them in a way that I guess it's not my husband's job. But the idea that that relationship is less important is also sort of mystifying because to devalue your own relationship with like your family and your children is also really culturally interesting.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, absolutely. And that was, that was kind of a pushback, too, with the Gulf War, with the whole mommy war thing, with like you know, at this point, we had been an all-volunteer force for nearly two decades. And so, the demographics of the force had changed somewhat significantly. People, officers were older, more likely to be married with kids.

So, versus, you know, in the sixties or the fifties when there was still a draft. And it was still much more kind of a younger, a younger force at this point. A lot of members did have kids. And yeah, exactly. Why is it any worse for a dad to go die in combat than a mom? I mean, it's traumatic all around. No one wants that to happen. So, to kind of say one life is more valuable than the other is not really making a solid argument, I don't think.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, I agree. And I do think, though, that is definitely a prevailing sentiment, even right now. For the record, this is being recorded in March of 2022. The Ukraine conflict is going on right now, and the news talks about men between the ages of 18 and 60 required to stay behind and fight. Women and children allowed to evacuate.

And I was thinking there are female service members in the Ukrainian Army. So, if you are the spouse, the active-duty spouse, and you're a female, and you have two small children and your husband tries to evacuate with them, are they going to allow him to leave? Like is it, is there not a tradeoff to say, well, one of our family members has stayed behind to fight, so the other family member is going to take the rest of the family and go?

Is that sufficient, or are we going to have to make a decision? And I don't know that anybody really asking that question, but it's something that occurred to me I thought was interesting was the idea that, you know, it's still the women and children first mentality. And I think there's I think a lot of people think there's probably something chivalrous about that, but maybe, yeah, thanks. But at the same time, it's definitely—it puts another cultural value on women as being child caretakers and not able to stay back and do the fighting. I don't I certainly don't think they're turning down any women who want to stick around and help by any means. But it's still kind of an archaic idea. And so, instead of just saying one parent has to take kids and another parent has to stay behind. It was *men* who have to stay behind...

**Maj Kester:**

Right.

## Modern Day

**Maj Davis:**

So, it's definitely not something that culturally we've gotten past yet, but you know—we've made so much change in just the past 50, 60, 70 years that, you know, over time, I'm sure that will change.

And then so yeah, finally kind of getting into modern day a little bit, obviously in 2011, President Obama started passing a lot of diversity and inclusion policies, that we are still definitely talking about today. Definitely something we're talking about in military justice. But I think this is really where we start to see a lot of the more modern-day changes that now you and I are living with, right?

I joined in 2015, so really only four years after that the creation—don't know if a lot of people know this—but the creation of MyVector—a big part of that was actually to encourage women to have other female mentors—which I didn't realize.

**Maj Kester:**

Oh.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah.

So, I forget where I read that, I could cite my sources, but yeah, part of it was that I know that Jeanne Holm kind of talked about this it—and you mentioned in your book that for a long time to *survive* in the military for women like to keep your job and kind of keep your, keep your spot, you had to keep your head down and you couldn't be—you couldn't stand out too much from the boys—you had to be one of the boys. You had to be—you couldn't rock the boat too much. You had to kind of go with the flow. And a big part of that was that women did not mentor each other. It was not seen as a good thing to have female mentors. It was a little bit every man for himself in a lot of those cases.

So, yeah, the MyVector was created—the idea was to put more people in touch with each other, to encourage, especially women, to have more mentors. But I think also for the sake of diversity in general, was you know, if you're a minority or if you're someone who maybe your leadership has yet to be somebody that you felt like you could relate to, that there were—this was a way for you to get in touch with other people in the military who, you know, you might connect with on a different level.

So, I thought that was really interesting. One thing we didn't talk about was the change, I think in the eighties or seventies about O P Rs and the things that you're allowed to write in O P Rs. A lot of, [laughing] a lot of the things that people could write were things like, "*Oh, she's the picture of femininity in our office.*" And, you know, "*For a woman, she did a great job.*" Ah, you know ...

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, those are my favorite. [laughing] Especially, she's a woman.

**Maj Davis:**

So obviously they got rid of that. But also now, you know, you can't have gendered language, you know, for things that come up for promotion and stuff. So, I know I was reading totally unrelated to this, I was reading a study and it was about A I at places like Amazon where they're using A I to hire people and to kind of sort through applicants.

And they found that the program had a bias where if a resume had some like president of like women's officer forum or president of like women's chess club, that if it had the word woman or women in it, the A I marked it as like unwanted. Like this is not a good candidate. I know that that's sort of part of the idea behind a lot of the way they're doing O P Rs and P R Fs and all that stuff is to try to avoid any sort of gender language whatsoever so that there's no indication on the face of the application what the gender of the person is. Which is super interesting.

And also, I think too—correct me if I'm wrong, but I think also now with a lot of the changes they're making to like maternity leave policy, that it's not supposed to be reflected on any of your paperwork that like you missed your 12 weeks to take care of your child, which is super important. That's obviously too, we got a really nice, you know, maternity leave package, which is amazing. And now they're increasing like parental leave in general also for fathers which is really nice. So, they're making, making a lot of forward strides.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, the maternity leave, I remember changed right before I had my first son. So, it was in 2016. And then when I was a reservist going to do my annual tour and my building didn't have a nursing room, so yeah, I had to go pump in the bathrooms and an ice chest closet, and it was fine. I mean, but yeah, that was 2017/2018.

So, an example of how the rule changes, but not necessarily things change right away. Like the rule has to change, and then people still have to go and like tell people the rule has changed and push the issue. And like almost every nursing room that I've heard ever seen has been an initiative of some woman, probably a mom or one who is nursing or is about to do the nursing, that is like, "Wait a minute. We don't have this? We're supposed to have this. So, I'm going to take it upon myself to set this up." Like, a lot of stories I've seen are just women who do it themselves, essentially. Even though it's a rule and it should be provided for, it's still takes like grass root movement on the beginning half and then on to follow up with the law as well or the policy changes as well.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, it's so interesting. And I'm sure there are dozens of other tiny or not tiny things that are happening that you and I see or experience on a day-to-day that we don't even see for ourselves or realize, or that we notice and it just hasn't been articulated in a way that will lead to change yet. But I have hope. I think we're getting there.

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, I think that the secondary bias stuff is really fascinating just from a bigger picture and just like a bigger historical picture. Because like I mentioned a few times, it's just the stories that we, that we like every generation essentially kind of buys into and grows up with and like what we watch our mothers do and what we believe is appropriate, like that determines so much of what we even notice in the world as fair or unfair or something that needs to be changed. Like if we believe a certain thing, like we're not even going to notice that it's a problem because we don't think it's a problem, you know. And we're not even necessarily even aware that we don't think it's a problem.

So, I'm not saying necessarily any type of like training is going to help with that. I think it's more just like the awareness that that's happening. And I think that's where the time comes in and like every generation changes how they operate and therefore how they raise their

kids, you know, boys and girls. And so that change over time is, I think, somewhat inevitable because as long as people are reacting to the previous generation and the rules that they're living in now, which they almost always are—change is somewhat inevitable—it's just like the rate or the depth to which things change is interesting.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah, I completely agree. And I have to say too, are things perfect? No, of course not. And there's always room for growth and change. But at the same time, you know, I think the Air Force and the D O D as a whole, I think especially in the past couple of decades, we've become more progressive. We're the first, a lot of times to make some of these changes, to ask these questions, to care about the answers and what we can do to fix things.

And I think in a lot of ways, we are making better strides than a lot of the civilian sector. Just knowing other friends of mine who work out in the civilian world, even at other government agencies, that things here are actually, you're sitting a little bit prettier you know, being an Air Force member than maybe you would be if you were you know, if I was a civilian attorney in a lot of ways. So, you know, it's ...

**Maj Kester:**

Yeah, I totally agree. Yeah.

**Maj Davis:**

Yeah. So, I think, you know, we can be grateful that the people who've come before us—women and men—who've made the changes that they have did that for us. And it's a pretty good place to be sitting these days. And, you know, we, I think we all just need to be mindful as we become people who are in leadership, people who have more power, people who have more ability to affect change—that we listen when other people, whether it's other women or, you know, people who are minorities or are some other group of people who feel that something is being discriminatory or that there's a bias, that we listen, and we don't let our own view of the world influence how we make decisions about

other people's experiences in the way that policies affect other people.

Because I think that's a big part of this, is that no one thought that this was a problem and no one wanted to listen to the fact that it was a problem, for a really long time, you know, all these different things. And it took, you know, lawsuits. It took intervention, you know, from higher level policy and law to really get a lot of this stuff changed. And, you know, maybe we can be better than that. Maybe we can listen, you know, at the ground level and we can start helping influence that change.

**Maj Kester:**

And I think that's where we are really big picture. I think we're at this, we're living this really exciting time where you know, the second wave of, kind of, pushing to prove that we are, you know—the first wave was like, *"Hey, we're citizens."* The second wave of feminism was kind of more like, *"Hey, we're equal to men. We can do everything just as well as them or better, watch me."* And now we're at this point where we can stand on all that work that has been done before us. And like kind of the more subtle and softer, like challenge through being curious and being open and through networking and sharing and those grassroots efforts and like, being persistent—the stories around, like, what it means to be—like what is the military? What's it for? What is being a woman, like women in the military? There's so many definitions that we kind of take for granted or assume and they're so narrow. And I think when we start challenging certain definitions, and particularly as the nature of warfare is changing with technology and A I we're at that point anyway where it's going to happen.

So, bringing along like how is the mission changing and like our purpose as a military and service changing? And then what personnel shifts, like mindset shift do we need to make to accommodate, and to really like

do well with that mission? Not, you know, leaving old ideas in the past is like this is the military and this is what we do. And you know, and for better or worse, and I understand people have a lot of resistance to that, but at some point, like it's going to shift—whether or not we're paying attention. And so, kind of leaning into it and being curious and open up, like what really is the best way to accomplish this mission? You know, all other factors, gender and the whole thing aside, what do we need?

And I think we're there. I mean, I really do. I have a lot of hope. I think a lot of people are open and curious and ready for change. And so, I'm excited to see what happens next.

## Closing

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**Maj Davis:**

Thank you again so much to Major Kester for sitting down and talking with us. You can find her book, *There from the Beginning*, on the Air University website.

**Announcer:**

Thank you for listening to another episode of The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School Podcast. You can find this and all our available episodes, transcriptions and show notes at [www.jagreporter.af.mil/podcast](http://www.jagreporter.af.mil/podcast). You can also find us on Apple, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you like to listen. Please give us a like, a rating, a follow or a subscription.

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[Music: Band playing ending of the Air Force song]

## Glossary

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- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **AI:** artificial intelligence
- **DACOWITS:** Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services
- **DoD:** Department of Defense
- **JAG:** judge advocate general
- **OPR:** Officer Performance Report
- **POW:** Prisoner of War
- **PRF:** Promotion Recommendation Form
- **USAFA:** United States Air Force Academy
- **WAAC:** Women's Auxiliary Army Corps

## Websites

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- [Major General Jeanne M. Holm Biography](#)
- [Major General Jeanne M. Holm Interview](#)
- [National Organization for Women](#)
- [Rhonda Cornum](#) (female POW)
- [Sharron Frontiero](#) (plaintiff in the first case Ruth Bader Ginsburg argued before the Supreme Court)

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Layout by Thomasa Huffstutler