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AFJAGS Podcast: Episode 78

Talks with a Trailblazer: Retired Colonel Susan McNeill

Host: Major Laura Quaco

Guest: Retired Colonel Susan McNeill

In this episode, Major Laura Quaco sits down with Retired Colonel Susan McNeill, the first female Black/African American judge advocate to make the rank of colonel in any of the military services. Colonel McNeill shares some notable moments in her Air Force career—from being a procurement officer during the Vietnam War, to witnessing the first STS-1 Columbia Space Shuttle landing after providing legal advice on a related contract.

[Intro music – The Air Force Song (Instrumental)]

Introduction

Major Laura Quaco:

Good morning, afternoon, and evening listeners. Welcome back to The Air Force Judge Advocate General's School Podcast. I'm Major Laura Quaco, and I'm your host for this podcast. Now, I am on the line with Colonel (Retired) Susan McNeill. You had a little preview about her in our last episode when I was chatting with Colonel Ja Rai Williams and Lieutenant Colonel Velma Thompson. If you didn't hear that one, it was Episode 77 and we discussed some Black/African American history in the Air Force JAG Corps. I recommend going back

and listening to it, but it's not required to follow along with this episode today. There are various trailblazers we discussed in that last episode, and we're going to have two of those very individuals in this episode and the next.

For this episode, we have Col (Ret) McNeill, and she was the very first female Black/African American judge advocate to make the rank of colonel in any of the military services. In the next episode, you'll hear from Chief Master Sergeant (Retired) David Haskins, who was the first Black/African American to serve in the seniormost paralegal position we have, which is in The Judge Advocate General's Office.

Now, back to today's episode. Col McNeill will be sharing some notable moments and contributions in her Air Force career, and she's going to give us some advice she used along the way. But, a little bit of background about her: Col McNeill commissioned in the Air Force as a lieutenant in May of 1970 as a procurement officer during the Vietnam War. In 1975, she was accepted into the Funded Legal Education Program, or FLEP, and was able to go to law school and receive her degree by 1978. As a JAG officer, she filled many duty positions, but one of the notable mentions is she was a subject matter expert in contracts, not surprising given her procurement officer experience. So, with that short intro, Col (Ret) McNeill I'm going to turn it over to you. Welcome to The AFJAGS Podcast, and thank you so much for joining us here today.

Retired Colonel Susan McNeill:

Oh, well, I'm honored. I'm definitely honored to be here. I never would have dreamed when I went to JASOC that I would be doing a podcast—podcast, of course, didn't exist, but I've never would have dreamed that I would be back at the school in this way talking about my life. It just was—it's been charmed, and I want you to know, first of all, that I am as old as the Air Force.

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

I celebrate my birthday every year just about the time the Air Force does, so I never forget either. And I have just had a remarkable experience starting out, never even dreaming of where I could go, and that's—that, I think is a wonderful lesson for each and every young person who might be hearing this, that you can't really imagine how your life will develop if you work at it, and if you talk to people who know how to get from place A to place B and C and so on and just be patient. And I think those are the mini tips that I have for you right now. But I compare my career in a way to the life of Forrest Gump. Some of you may not know the reference and I'm not totally like

of the life of the fictional Forrest Gump, but I had some wonderful experiences where I touched on some very historic events and times. And, well, let me just tell you a little bit about how I got to OTS.

Accession into the Air Force

Maj Quaco:

Yes, ma'am, and if I could just jump in really quickly for my nonmilitary listeners out there and just explain that OTS stands for Officer Training School. It's where a lot of us Air Force officers go through for initial officer training and commissioning. There's a couple other ways. There's the ROTC, ROTC, or a Reserve Officer's Training Corps, which is actually a pre commissioning program that individuals will do while they're doing their undergraduate or graduate studies. Then there's also the Air Force Academy way of commissioning, which is the Air Force's undergraduate military school. But, back over to you, ma'am, about OTS.

Col McNeill:

It was the only accession device or way to get into the Air Force when I came in in 1970. In 1969, I believe Air Force ROTC was opened up to women. And of course, the academies weren't accessioning women until a little bit later, so I was only able to get into the Air Force through OTS. As a teenager—and it was sort of an interesting process. Of course, my father was retired major in the Army Reserves. He served in Guadalcanal. He served in Fort McClellan, Alabama. He entered the Army in 1943 as a draftee. He thought he had volunteered initially, and he was not able to come into service because at that time Blacks were discouraged. This is in Washington, D.C. even. Blacks were discouraged to volunteer and enlist, and the services were taking very few African American troops. That changed very shortly, thereafter, and he was drafted, to his surprise. But he did want to join and wanted to be in the Signal Corps because he was a photographer. He was able, while he was at Fort McClellan, to take a picture of the first African American general ever in any service. Well, he became a general, but he was a colonel then, Colonel B.O. Davis, and he

was in the Inspector General's office doing an Inspector General's visit to various southern bases because of the troubles that African American troops were having in the facilities on base and off base and other complaints that were including the jobs that African Americans were assigned to.

So there's a long background there because my father, in many subtle ways, encouraged me to, not really to join the Air Force or any service, but put the spark into my mind about the possible opportunities in the services, and set me in a way of problem solving. He would kind of, you know, this is the Army way to problem solve, to find the problem—and I don't remember all the steps, but he would kind of subtly teach me how he benefited from being in the service.

Maj Quaco:

That's really funny you say that because my father was also in the Air Force and I feel like he raised me to problem solve in a military like fashion. But anyway, was there anything else that you feel like inspired you or made you interested in the Air Force?

Col McNeill:

So, as a teenager, I was fascinated by the space program. I would be in front of the television on every launch. I knew the astronauts, I knew the astronauts' wives. [Laughter].

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

I was just inspired and fascinated by spaceflight and also experimental aircraft flight. I would in—in high school. I would sneak away to the library, which is about ten blocks from my high school, on my way home and read Aviation and Space Weekly. And I just devoured it. I knew Chuck Yeager. I knew Glamorous Glennis' aircraft—I just—that was the—kind of the call name. I knew that it was the Bell X-1. And then later the, of course, the X-15 pilots, Scott Crossfield. I was—I just

devoured this and I graduated high school in '69 and went shortly thereafter to a women's college, which you say, well, I'm not quite sure how that was going to work out for you, but I kind of wanted to be initially in the sciences and possibly an aeronautical engineer, but I don't know how I got—would have gotten from one to the other then.

I graduated with just an American studies degree because I got frustrated that I think women were not then encouraged to really develop their math skills, and I think I got a little frustrated then, so I graduated with an American Studies degree. And then being in Washington, the government service was a great opportunity, so I went took the civil service exam and went on interviews, and then I—I was very frustrated at being asked even for a administrative job, not a secretarial job or a general job, if I could type, so I—I said no, you know this—even though I could. I learned how to type in high school.

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Barriers for Women

Col McNeill:

And so I got upset and walked into a recruiter's office. Well, to make a long story short, I was able to join the Air Force, and what's very interesting is I did listen to the two podcasts that Major Kester presented about a year ago or maybe less on this series. And she was describing the accession process for women, which was very much appearance based. And that rang such a bell with me, because I never could figure out why we had to have so many pictures of ourselves to get into OTS. From various angles, you know, the front profile, the side profile, the full. And I asked the men, I said, did you have to go through all this picture taking? And they, of course, said, no, no, this is just for women.

Maj Quaco:

Wow.

Col McNeill:

The emphasis was on a woman's appearance. So, this continued for quite a while. And there were, of course, regulations. The grooming regulation was much thicker for women as to makeup, and that, you know, presenting a feminine appearance. And unfortunately, you just kind of went along and accommodated this, even to the point later on where it got very frustrating, where later on in the '70s, the miniskirt came in and the uniforms were shorter, uniform skirts were shorter. And of course there were no pants until later on in the '70s, about '74, I think, until, you know, there were commanders and first sergeants and such, taking a ruler up to a woman's skirt, measuring the skirt length, you know, it had to be two inches above the knee, if it looked good. [Laughter]. I think that was in the regulation.

So, you can see that sometimes I felt the barriers for women were, you know, I was going through two sets of hurdles, being African American and female. And then gradually through the '70s, the regulations and the court decisions started to come in our favor so that things that seemed very unfair and inappropriate dropped by the wayside. The pregnancy regulations, of course. In fact, it was interesting, the decision on the woman remaining in the service, I think this was eventually towards—after the initial Susan Struck case, which was Susan Struck challenged to remain in the service and have her baby and then, you know, get back. And that was not allowed. She was summarily discharged. So she appealed it and she won. And that, I believe, was in '72. And then *Frontiero vs. Richardson*, which was a little bit later, maybe '74, which provided equal benefits for women, for their dependents, and there were many, many cases like this.

And finally, I think DoD got the idea that this wasn't going to work, that they had and they looked at many, many different points of discrimination, but didn't go all the way to opening up all AFSCs and it's taken a very long time to open up AFSCs for combat jobs. The Air Force pilot situation was one of the probably easier ones to solve than some of the Army and Marine

specialties, because the close combat was not seen as feminine and appropriate. So, as I say, I've been in the Air Force and seen the changes for women, for African Americans. I wasn't in the Air Force in 1969 when Melvin Laird promulgated, or sent out, the Statement of Human Goals, which requested respect for everyone and set out some—really hopes that people could be treated fairly and with respect. It was just a kind of a mission goal statement rather than a specific set of regulations.

And then, unfortunately, Travis Air Force Base set the Air Force and the DoD on a different course. Of course, there had been disturbances and problems with race relations overseas in Vietnam, fragging of officers, and other difficult situations. But the real push, I think, for change came in 1972 Travis disturbances in their dormitories. And how—how does that relate to me? Okay, I was a procurement officer at the Strategic Air Command headquarters base office, Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. And of course, that base did they called it procurement contract, and now the term is acquisition, for the base and many of its missions, including the headquarters underground which controlled the operations of missile systems and bombers and tankers through the Looking Glass Program, which was kind of an airborne command post for nuclear forces and also other strategic forces, I guess. But it was kind of the shield for our defense capability. Therefore, there were many, many officers and civilians, especially civilians well entrenched into the contracting process there who did most of the heavy lifting.

Procurement Officer

In a sense, I think perhaps I was—I'm sure I was the first woman procurement officer—military procurement officer they had. I'm sure I was the first African American procurement officer. So I was kind of in a protected space, but I ended up purchasing—I remember I think one of my OPRs said, you know, I did an excellent job in saving the Air Force money when I switched from the IBM's, you know, switched the contract from the IBM Selectric, which is, some of you don't even have a clue as to what that was, but it was a typewriter, an IBM with

a little ball that made typing faster. When I saved a lot of money, \$100 per typewriter, when I went from that to an IBM clone, the Olivetti, and then—

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

—you can get a picture of what I was supervising, buying typewriters and some services. And so I said, this is—this is—I’m going nowhere here. I don’t—I put in for overseas, couldn’t get overseas.

Social Actions Office

Col McNeill:

So, one day someone from a new office, which was actually created as a result of some of these riots and disturbances that I mentioned earlier, called Social Actions, which was race relations, equal opportunity and drug abuse. The individual came over to me and said, “how would you like to try something new, try a career broadening experience and get into this new field?” Well—

Maj Quaco:

And what did you think about that?

Col McNeill:

I said, “are you kidding me? That’s, that sounds like trouble.” But this is—this is—just my common sense says this is—this is trouble. And then he came back and he convinced me that this is something that I would be suited for—uniquely suited for—I know what he meant there, and that I would enjoy as a career broadening, and then I could get back into my procurement career field. And I thought about it again and I said, you know, take a chance, see what happens. And so I went off to training and the Air Force, the DoD, then I have to refer to my notes here—and the directive number was 1322.11, which established the Race Relations Education Program, as well as the other regulations—equal opportunity treatment and set the whole ball.

So, I was at another kind of crossroad where the Defense Department and—as well as the Air Force—the Air Force was a leader in establishing the Defense Race Relations Institute, which trained young officers and airmen in educating others. It developed a 18 hour course that we would take back to our bases and actually act as a facilitator to talk about things, such, as the history of various groups in the wider community. It wasn’t just Defense Department related, but in the wider community, as well as the history of what had happened to bring us to this point. Some of the problems and disturbances, the causes of a lack of need for understanding and for just common—you would walk into the BX and there wouldn’t be products for African Americans and other groups to use to make grooming easier, hair care especially. And there was a lack of understanding of the various processes. You know, there wasn’t an African American beautician at the beauty shop, for example, or a barber who would be able to do the best job with an African American guy’s hair. And there were a lot of misunderstanding about beards and—and the condition called *pseudofolliculitis barbae*—curly hair would grow into the beard, and that was a problem with the grooming standards. And those are the kind of things that we helped people understand.

The Black Power movement was very prominent then, and there were signs and symbols and dapping and all kinds of things like that, that went around with black pride and that maybe the majority did not understand, so it was a conversation, it was an effort to say respect for all people is important, and these were what the Air Force standards were. And we talked about things like the—even the Confederate flag and what the understanding was of the Confederate flag. We talked about various kinds of music, you know, soul versus country, just to kind of build a bridge with people. We went through exercises to put people in different places in their lives. You know, switch places and say, walk a mile in my shoes kind of thing. And so therefore, you know, it was a great education for me, especially to meet with so many other people, to talk with so many other people, and the classes had everyone from airman first

class to full colonel. So, you can imagine there was an interesting exchange. It did rankle some senior officers who were not used to being so directly, I wouldn't say confronted, but directly in a group of young airmen who maybe didn't come from where they came from and vice versa. So it was an interesting and I kind of think of it as a little bit experimental. From that point, the different phases—there were actually three phases in the entire, I believe, series that did not change until I got over to Thailand, but it was the Defense Race Relations Institute kind of got feedback, worked on the education program, and it did change and kind of emphasize more Air Force standards.

Maj Quaco:

So we have the barrier action working groups now that sound similar. It sounds like you were in kind of the first iteration.

Col McNeill:

Yes, I was indeed.

Maj Quaco:

Wow, that's very interesting to hear that you were you were kind of in that first iteration of what we're still trying to strive to do today. What was it like being in that work?

Col McNeill:

Well, as I said, it was—it was frustrating because not all people accepted some of the things that the Air Force was trying to do and some of the things that people were come up with that—you know, people were talking about. It was, you know, the different worlds were kind of colliding, and especially with regard to senior people who had lived in a sort of culture in the Air Force that did not necessarily take into account each and every possible background of the various people. So, it was it was frustrating for a lot of people.

Maj Quaco:

Right.

Serving at U-Tapao, Thailand

Col McNeill:

And as I said, things changed and as it became more and more understood, it's kind of smoothed out. And then—then we took it overseas. I went to Thailand, U-Tapao, and I want to transition into that because that kind of opened up another Forrest Gump moment for me—

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

—which was an interesting experience in and of itself, but was a couple of events that were really life changing and nation changing. And the first one was when Nixon resigned. We had no idea. It came as a shock to us all. The only outlet we really had was the *Stars and Stripes*, you know, because we didn't have cell phones. I kind of got a little bit of an advanced word, because I knew the folks at the AFRTS, or the radio station and the TV station, because we did fortunately have an Armed Forces television station and they had a teletype that I think I got word through somebody calling me up and saying, this has happened. But, basically most people learned through the *Stars and Stripes*, and that was really shocking.

The second kind of Forrest Gump moment was the fall of Saigon. The war had ended, I believe, in '72ish, '73ish. And about '73 all of the troops and the POWs were returning and there was an effort to start to close bases, although there was still insurgency in Vietnam and in Cambodia. A lot of people do not know that Cambodia was also a theater of war, more or less a secret theater of war, because the Khmer Rouge were trying to take over the government and, as were the Viet Cong in Vietnam. There was early bombing in '71, but there were operations that were going on here and there, with regard to Cambodia, as well. We were co-located with an Army base and there were definitely Army people. I don't think I'm telling too many tales out of school, definitely army people, they're sort of co-located with us that were watching those operations and gaining intelligence about what

was going on. So, I was there through a very tenuous period when we had conceded that the war was over, but yet we were drawing down and Saigon still was trying to operate with a, with an embassy and trying to, I guess, stave off the ultimate, which was coming, which was the takeover of the capital. The day it was, I believe, around April 14th or around that time that Vietnam fell, that those couple of days or weeks were tumultuous.

People from the United States who had dependents remaining in Vietnam, especially children, were coming through U-Tapao trying to gain information about what was going on in Saigon and trying to get their dependents out. This was kind of a little operation conducted by the Vice Commander of the base, kind of took a special—this is a special program. And he—he would have briefings for us and them about what was going on and nothing classified, but just kind of the status of sort of the unclassified version of the status of what was going on. And then in April, the word came that the embassy was being abandoned. What happened next was truly astounding. The beach—U-Tapao was in the Gulf of Siam, surrounded by beaches—beautiful, white, lovely, luxurious beaches that were—an area down the road were several resorts, and the beaches started filling up with refugees that had come—the skies were filled with aircraft, F-4s, helicopters, other aircrafts, mostly small aircraft that had fled Vietnam with Vietnamese people, pilots, their families stuffed into an F-4, maybe six, seven, eight people in a plane that was only designed to hold a very few, landing at the base. And refugee camps were set up there as well.

Well, the interesting thing was that Cambodian refugees, as the Khmer Rouge approached, fled Cambodia, and they were also on the beach at U-Tapao, the Gulf of Siam. And there was really—I'm a captain, you know, a lowly—not lowly, but in terms of rank and position, a race relations instructor, and I'm sort of an eyewitness to all of the international machinations that are going on between the Vietnamese refugees, the Cambodian refugees, the Thai government who did not want, you know, I guess traditional maybe rivals did not want all

of this going on and they—they were kind of captives of the circumstance, and they were trying to get people moved on to Guam, which was the next stage in the refugee process for the Vietnamese. I'm not sure about the Cambodians, but, you know, moved on to United States. Not only were the people at issue, these, you know, refugees and most of them, many of them had positions at the embassy, maybe in intelligence and as—as aircraft pilots.

There were also concerns about who would get the aircraft and my underground sources told me that this wa—these were discussions going on between the Thai government and the American government. And these were all, of course, American assets or at least, you know, given to the—to the South Vietnamese. And the question was, who would get these assets. A little bit later, there were aircraft carriers that showed up off the Gulf of Siam on the beach and one amazing Memorial Day after this fall, we were having a beach party for the holiday, and we witnessed helicopters going into the drink, being disposed of, or perhaps they were being off lifted and maybe some of them fell into the drain. But, this was an unreal situation with the refugees, with the aircraft carrier, with the helicopters, you know, some of them going into the sea. International problems here and there.

The base commander found out also that there were some agents from Vietnam that wanted to kind of not leave Thailand, but kind of infiltrate these groups and do some, you know, bad things. He-he facilitated, that's all I'll say, he facilitated their being put on a plane to Guam so that they could be dealt with, presumably could be dealt with later. He himself, in an interview, admitted this, so I'm not telling tales out of school. It's now, I believe, at the University of Texas in an interview that he gave, an oral history gave. It was a wild time, kind of, as I say, another Forrest Gump moment for me, and I—I at the time I was attempting to I think I don't know if I'd been notified that I'd been accepted to FLEP or not, but I was in the process of waiting to hear, you know, whether I would be accepted.

Maj Quaco:

So you certainly had a lot of—I can't describe in any other way except Forrest Gump moments.

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Funded Legal Education Program

Maj Quaco:

So, and so now you're talking about the funded legal education program.

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Maj Quaco:

What inspired you to apply to that program?

Col McNeill:

Well, that's—that's an interesting question. I think because of all the experiences I'd had, I felt like contracting, I knew that there were such things as, of course, being in contracting and acquisition. I knew there were attorneys that dealt with acquisition law. I knew that I felt like my whole being in the—in the race relations, social actions, career field kind of prepared me for being really interested in people and inequality. And I thought, my goodness, you know, this is really an appropriate career field to try, and it was just opening up. There might have been two rounds of selections. Maybe I was in the second round, I'm not sure. But it was a new program and I thought, oh, this is this is ideal. Well, I want to say about that what I did before I decided that that's what I wanted to do in my next assignment after leaving Thailand, and what I did, I prepared myself for that. And that's kind of another lesson that I want to talk about.

I prepared myself while I was at my previous base at Offutt. I took extra courses in law, constitutional law, as well as business law, to demonstrate that this was a strong interest that I had to be accepted into the Funded

Legal Education Program. I took the LSAT before I left, and I guess I got a good enough score to be competitive and so I prepared myself for this prior to my leaving and set up all of the kind of recommendation processes that I would need to do and that—the long—taking the long range view was one of the things I think is so important to learn, even though, you know, you may see something that you want to do two or three or four years off, start preparing immediately, because I could never have done it had I been—done this from—from Thailand, where, as I said, you had to have the radio service to get a phone call. And I was very happy to find out that I was accepted. I had some very good counsel from Col Jim Howie, who was the SJA there at U-Tapao. He helped me, guided me in the right direction there, and gave me some tips as to what I would expect. It also happened that an African American, Col Doug Ward, came over to be SJA. So, he also—he is probably one of my first mentors as an African American, very helpful to me and telling me what to expect when I returned to the states.

Maj Quaco:

And for our civilian listeners, a SJA is just a staff judge advocate, that's kind of like you're lead attorney in a base legal office.

Col McNeill:

Yes, head honcho of the legal office.

Being a Minority

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter]. Yes, ma'am. And I want to ask you, because I know we're going to get to the fact that you were the first female Black/African American to make the rank of colonel in any of the armed services' JAG Corps. But I want to ask you, you know, up until this point in your career, we know you went to an all women's college, but—

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Maj Quaco:

—did you find yourself in your life as a constant minority or were you oftentimes surrounded by Black/African American females to serve as mentors?

Col McNeill:

Well, I grew up in Washington, D.C., and there was no lack of women who were mentors. I was kind of too young at that point to really appreciate and understand all the women who had come before me as, you know, teachers and social leaders and politicians and other things. I would—I guess I did not really see the, you know, the seriousness of it, of their advice until I got into more deeply into my career. But I, you know, I faced these situation in terms of being a minority. In my college class, I was definitely—there were nine of us African American women among about 600. I guess I learned coping skills along the way as to being a minority. And actually, you know, I put in a plug for women's colleges, actually, I felt women's institutions I went to was a very strong—encouraged, strong leadership in women. And a lot of—I don't want to say a lot of women, but several women went—did go into the armed services from there—officers—as officers, and did well. And so it was it was a place to develop leadership, and because you had all the roles available to you. So, I guess that was good preparation.

But to answer your question, I kind of was thrown into the water with some skills at code switching and coping. Code switching, being able to talk to different groups based upon cultural backgrounds, history and just, you know, trying to meet everybody where they were in terms of verbal communication. And, so it was a surprise to me. It was—it was a shock. I think I was more shocked by being in the middle of the United States, you know, surrounded by cornfields. [Laughter].

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

But I, you know, I did as I said, I just like I was determined to not let my dad down, determined to—to kind of adapt and survive. And, you know, it seems it worked itself out. Unfortunately, you know, my father, as I didn't find out until later, was the only African American in his Company, a small Company at his officer training school at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and I turned out to be the only African American woman in my small flight that well, actually, I was the only African American period in that class—

Maj Quaco:

Wow.

Col McNeill:

—in OTS, that was able to graduate. Only African American woman, there were men. So, I mean, it's sort of kind of came with the territory.

Maj Quaco:

And when you went to law school, ma'am, were there many other—

Col McNeill:

There were course four Black students.

Maj Quaco:

Male and female?

Col McNeill:

Male and female, two—two women, two men. Three of us finished—the two women and one man finished. But again, that continues the pattern to, not only that, kind of amusingly, it turned out to be four of us, two men and two women, at JAG School.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. So then you finished law school, you joined the JAG Corps,—

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Maj Quaco:

—you got into Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course. Now let's talk about when you became a JAG. You know, I know you probably have a ton of memories from your career in the JAG Corps, but are there any memories that kind of stick out in your mind as being notable or that you're particularly fond of?

STS-1 Columbia Space Shuttle

Col McNeill:

Oh, definitely. At the top of the list or near the very top was my opportunity to see the first STS-1 Columbia Space Shuttle land. They had been preparing for it since I got there in 1978.

Maj Quaco:

And where was that located, ma'am?

Col McNeill:

That was Edwards Air Force Base, the Air Force Flight Test Center, which was co-located with—I believe it was the Dryden, the NASA facility that conducted the space operations, the shuttle operations—or the landing operations of the shuttle. And of course, it was the most—one of the most exciting moments of anyone's life to hear, to see, to see and hear the space shuttle land. It happened to—I believe this was in May. And it followed rainy season, and there was still a lot of rain on Rogers Dry Lake, which is where the shuttle landed. And I was able to review contracts to facilitate the drying of the lake, which were, I believe, pumping contracts. There were also helicopters whirring around the lake, trying to dry it, which was a fantastically interesting sight. But the whole just being a part of that whole operation, and of course, I kind of talked my way in to, since I helped facilitate that, I talked my way into the information offices giving me a pass to get in to see up close, the VIP section, to see up close the landing of the STS-1, the Columbia, and of course, it all brought back these wonderful memories of it kind of brought me full circle of when I was a teenager reading about the Bell X-1 and the X-15 and all of these magical moments in

spaceflight. So, I'm so grateful. It was just about as I was to PCS and I was so hoping it wouldn't be postponed and that I could be a part of it.

Maj Quaco:

That is so incredible that as a child you were fascinated—

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Maj Quaco:

—by space, and—

Col McNeill:

Yes.

Maj Quaco:

—did you ever think that as a lawyer you would get a front row seat? [Laughter].

Col McNeill:

It's funny. When one door closes, another maybe opens for you, and I don't know that I would have even as, you know, if I'd gone on somehow to become an engineer, if I'd even ended up in this kind of situation. So, you cannot predict, you cannot foresee. Just take put one foot in front of the other and—and take that leap and just, you know, imagine, you know, just dream as to what you—be prepared. Prepare yourself. And that's—that's you know, I think one of the main lessons, prepare yourself to take that next step and hope that you get there. And if one way doesn't do it the other way may.

Maj Quaco:

Yes, ma'am. And wow, what a great experience being a judge advocate just working contracts in a base legal office and then you get that amazing opportunity. I want to ask you now, because I know you've held many jobs in the JAG Corps, but I want to shift to any of your memories from serving in a leadership capacity. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Serving as a Staff Judge Advocate

Col McNeill:

Oh, I would say, even though I did not want to do it initially, because I wanted to stay in my little comfort zone in contracts. I had two assignments in contract law, and career management said, “oh, I think you need to be an SJA. [Laughter]. I initially said, “Mmm, do I really want to do this?” Well, of course. Yes, of course you have to do it. And I think even though I was expecting, because the base that I was assigned to was Lindsey Air Station in Wiesbaden, Germany, which was the site of the USAFE, that is the United States Air Force in Europe, contracting center. And my predecessor, practically one of the main things he did was contracts in a 250 million dollar contract operation. I asked him before I got there, I said, “did you have—do you do military justice much there?” And he said, “no,” [laughter] “hardly ever have a case,” you know. And when I got there, of course, it was like the floodgates had opened. The first month, there was a murder of an airman who was—it was done off base by a civilian, so it was in the German authorities system. But, you know, this was quite a shock because the Germans published his face in the newspaper to try to identify if anybody knew him and they caught the guy.

But it was, you know, I came expecting to do one thing and be comfortable. And—and then the floodgates had opened and all kinds of things happened. A lot of hijacking took place at that point in history. The base received the hostages because the hospital was there. And so we had we had a media circus part of the time. And so there were a lot of civilian victims of hijacking that were repatriated, basically, and checked out there at that hospital. So it was just an amazing experience in terms of all kinds of international issues and military justice, family abuse issues. And the drugs scene seems to have exploded on my watch there. As a matter of fact, Lindsey Graham even came over to prosecute a couple of our drug cases when he was on active duty. And, so things did not go as I expected them to, but it was such a wonderful, challenging opportunity.

Then, of course, I went on to return to the United States to be part of the Defense Procurement Fraud Unit, which prosecuted fraud cases, and was a special U.S. attorney for a while in two cases. And I went into the grand jury, and I don’t think I would have ever gotten the opportunity in the Air Force to do that. Then I went on into the Civil Law—well I guess I was still in the Contract Law Directorate, and for some reason, while I was at the Procurement Fraud Unit, but because it all to do with contracting. And then I developed a specialty, and that’s another lesson to develop, even though—remember in law school bankruptcy was like an elective and nobody wanted boring, nobody wanted to take bankruptcy? Well, I said, okay, I’ll do this.

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Secretariat and Bankruptcy

Col McNeill:

And that’s one of the things that I would say. Jump at it, make it your own. And it got me into two more jobs at the—I filled in for somebody in the secretary, in the Secretariat, in the contract division, contract law division, you know, because I had a bankruptcy expertise. So I would say, you know, just take it, run with it, take something nobody wants to do, make it your specialty. It may blow up the PanAm. The Pan American Airways bankruptcy blew up on my watch. I wasn’t the first, but it happened there, and there’s so many other things I could talk about.

And I think another important moment or period in my career was kind of the culmination of my work in contract law, which was to be the supervisory staff attorney for the DoD Task Force that supported the Section 800 Panel, which is a long title, but it basically was a congressionally mandated panel commission to study reform of the acquisition laws for the DoD. And because there was—Congress felt a need, and I think contractors were prodding Congress to update calcified laws. And I supervised five attorneys, and wrote, basically we had the framework for the draft of the report, which was an

eight volume report, and suggested many important changes. The GAO said that 55% of the changes that were recommended by the commission—now, the commission was made up of procurement law notables, both in industry and in government and defense government. So, we were just the kind of the support staff, but we did a lot of, you know, like a congressional staff almost, we did a lot of the work to format and frame the draft—eight volumes, from some of the testimony that they gave in our hearings at the Defense Management College at Fort Belvoir. And basically, I think the major import that we had was it resulted in two reform statutes which simplified and changed the laws on commercial purchases, increased thresholds for review and those kind of things. And I think the commercial—pointing in the direction which continued with a later commission—pointed in the direction of using off-the-shelf items for a lot of what the Defense Department buys, no gold-plated toilet seats, none of that stuff—

Maj Quaco:

[Laughter].

Col McNeill:

—just use what's on the shelf. The best as possible. And, and I think that was the import of what we did there. It was one of the—I think the first commissions in a very long time or the first looks at revising the procurement regulations in DoD and, you know, grand scale attempts, and I was very proud that that would be a good way to end a career in acquisition law. And the one thing that I do want to say about that, it was interesting how I got the job. I did not have an LL.M., because I wasn't really interested in moving my career along, because I realized that law school would not be helpful because I'd already had—I was already prior service. I had, you know, five years as something else. I had three years of school and I did not have a long JAG record. So I felt like, you know, you got to get your career moving here. And so what I did was I got an MBA, part time. I did complete it while I was at Edwards and I was able to step into the vacancy created by the moving on of a civilian contract law attorney.

And I said, here's my MBA, you know, this is another way to qualify for this position. I had it and please let me do it. And my wonderful SJA, Col Norm Paul, said "sure." And I'm indebted to him, you know, for the rest of my life. Wonderful guy. He's no longer with us, but I certainly remember his influence on me as a mentor.

Words of Wisdom

Maj Quaco:

Yes, ma'am. And what a great lesson, you know, that you don't always have to go the, quote unquote, conventional path. You really paved your own path to get to the position you wanted. And it sounds like through some great leadership helping you along the way. But, I want to thank you, ma'am, for sharing all of those experiences. I'm sure there are many more, but we really appreciate you giving some of that history to us to share with our JAG Corps and to the world. But before we end today's episode, I do want to turn it back over to you one more time to see if you had any last words that you want to share with our attorneys and paralegals or really anyone out there who may be new to an organization.

Col McNeill:

I think you've heard mostly through my telling of my life story how I think that each individual should kind of find out where they are, find out the possibilities, and maybe even go beyond where they think the present possibilities are. Prepare for a future that you want to see happen, or even if you think it could be a viable next step for you. As I said, I have used education to try to overcome spots where I thought I might not be competitive, because I didn't say this, but a lot of my classmates at JAG School and FLEP recipients were Academy graduates, so that's not a barrier for a woman anymore. But it was at the time. There were no—I don't believe there were any women or very few women who had gone through the academy or able to take advantage of those opportunities. So you have to see what you feel may be a way of expanding the description of your preparation and your goals, and just to be fearless, take that next step and try and go for it. Listen to other people, because they can give you information that you would never expect to fall party

to, which has happened in a couple of cases. And I took those opportunities and ran with them. Give your time to people, listen well and be prepared. And I think that sums it up.

Maj Quaco:

Wow. Well, thank you so much, Col (Ret) McNeill, for sharing not only some of your history with us, but also your words of wisdom. We appreciate you coming on The AFJAGS Podcast.

Col McNeill:

Thank you, Maj Quaco.

Closing

Maj Quaco:

All right, listeners, that's all I have for you today. As per usual, feel free to review, rate, and subscribe this podcast. And for now, this podcast is in recess.

[Gavel bangs twice].

Are you interested in joining the Air Force JAG Corps? You can learn more information at airforce.com/jag. That's J-A-G. You may also call us at 1-800-JAG-USAF. That's 1-800-524-8723 or you may e-mail us at af.jag.recruiting@us.af.mil, that's M-I-L.

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Glossary

- **AFJAGS:** Air Force Judge Advocate General's School
- **AFRTS:** Armed Forces Radio and Television Service
- **AFSC:** Air Force Specialty Code
- **BX:** Base Exchange
- **DoD:** Department of Defense
- **IBM:** International Business Machines Corporation
- **JAG:** Judge Advocate General
- **JASOC:** Judge Advocate Staff Officer Course
- **LL.M.:** Master of Laws
- **LSAT:** Law School Admission Test
- **MBA:** Master of Business Association
- **NASA:** National Aeronautics and Space Administration
- **OPR:** Officer Performance Report
- **OTS:** Officer Training School
- **PCS:** permanent change of station
- **POW:** Prisoner of War
- **SJA:** Staff Judge Advocate
- **STS:** Space Transportation System
- **USAFE:** United States Air Forces in Europe
- **VIP:** very important person

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