

Sam Guill 500 Goss Road Port Townsend, WA 98368 (360) 385-2658

General Information

Each tape is numbered and may contain several narratives, or in rare cases, only a portion of one officer's story. The introduction I do relates the names, where we are, and the date of the taping.

It is desired that the first draft be double-spaced and ship names be italicized (or in CAPS). I will edit the draft, correct spelling of names, places, etc. and return to you.

Having made corrections, please print the smooth copy single-spaced, and return it with your itemized bill.

Start each narration on a new page. The heading should include the officer's name, retired rank, class (date graduated USCGA) or other source such as VMI (Virginia Military Institute).

Informal language is used throughout. Here are some terms that may be encountered:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>Pay grade</u>	<u>Equivalent Army rank</u>		
Cadet	-----	Midshipman, Cadet		
Ensign	01	2 nd Lieutenant		
Lt. Junior Grade	02	1 st Lieutenant		(JG or Lt. JG)
Lieutenant	03	Captain		2 stripes
Lt. Commander	04	Major		2 ½ stripes
Commander	05	Lt. Colonel		3 stripes
Captain	06	Colonel		4 stripes
Rear Admiral	07	Brigadier	"Flag"	1 broad stripe
Rear Admiral	08	Major General	RADM	2 stars
Vice Admiral	09	Lt. General	VADM	3 stars
Admiral	10	General	ADM	4 stars (Commandant)

MICHELLE FITZPATRICK
LIEUTENANT COLONEL, USCG
emdy

S: This is the tenth day of October, 1990, and I'm in the Coast Guard Academy Museum with Michelle Fitzpatrick. Michelle, you were a graduate of the first co-ed class, 1980. I'll just turn this over and let you tell your story.

M: I was raised in Pottsville Pennsylvania, which is an inland town, and I had never heard of the Coast Guard. I was a land lubber, never sailed, never been in a row boat.

Early in my senior year, I received the Academy bulletin, and that was really the first time that I knew the Academy existed and what the Coast Guard was all about. I did not know that it was the first year women were being accepted as cadets. I read the bulletin and thought this looked like a neat organization. I was interested in humanitarian things, considered joining the peace corps, and in the environment, and also in getting a good engineering education. The Coast Guard Academy seemed to put all those things together, so I applied, not knowing that it was the first year that women were being accepted. Although I did find it strange that the Academy bulletin talked about only young men.

I was accepted, so I trotted up here and saw the place for the first time the day before reporting in as a cadet. I didn't really know what I was getting into, had no idea what military academies were like. I didn't know much about the Coast Guard, but of course I learned that fairly quickly and kind of toughed it out.

The first summer was probably one of the worst experiences of my life, tougher than I had any idea to expect. I had a problem with fallen arches because we had no supports in our shoes, they didn't know what kind of shoes to get us.

Still, there was something about the Coast Guard as I was learning about it and the clincher for me was the summer program

on the Eagle. We flew down to Miami. It was my first plane ride, ever, and we saw the Eagle under full sail from the plane. Then we spent a week on board and I fell in love with the Coast Guard. There's something about the Eagle. I had never sailed before, it was a totally new experience, but it just grabbed me from the very beginning. I spent every summer on the Eagle just because I enjoyed it so much. Something about a square rigger just got me and I've belonged to the Coast Guard from that summer on.

S: What did your parents think of you entering the Coast Guard?

M: They didn't understand it much better than I did. My sister had enlisted in the Navy, so she had some idea about what I might be getting into, but it was her idea to think about the military as a way of financing school. My dad was in the army in Korea as a cook, but they didn't know anything about the Academy and they hadn't gone to college so they really didn't know what to expect. They thought it was great that I getting to go to such a prestigious place and I had been selected out of 10,000 applicants and entered a class of 327, so they thought it was really wonderful. It was a surprise for all of us, exactly how it worked.

S: How many women were admitted in that class?

M: Thirty-eight, if I remember correctly, out of 327. And we ended up graduating fourteen out of 142. There was a little bit higher attrition, but not that much. As of the ten year mark, twelve of us were still in active duty.

So that was my entrance- it was quite a shock, I was kind of in a daze for most of fourth class year. There were a lot of problems because the system wasn't ready for women. The buildings weren't ready for women. The administration wasn't ready for women. Nobody was ready for us to be there. Everything and everybody had to adjust.

One of the worst parts about it was in Chase Hall, the heads hadn't been converted to women's heads yet, so the first half of the

year, we were all in six of the twelve companies. So there was still a whole half of the corps that was not integrated for the first semester. They finished working on the heads that semester and twelve of us got back from Christmas break to a note saying we were now in a new company.

S: Did you have an opportunity to volunteer?

M: They asked for volunteers, but I think they only got three. So we had to basically start over, forming relationships with our classmates, getting to know all these things and that was an added stress that we did not need. I can understand why it was done and I'm not sure that in the same position I would have made a different decision, but still, it adversely affected us. My grades that semester were much worse. and I'm a straight A student. I couldn't study. But they wanted to integrate the whole corps as quickly as possible and the decision was made to take the top twelve women and put them in the other half. After that it was all integrated.

There were these little things, like study hour uniforms used to be men's v-neck tee shirts. Men's v-neck tee shirts on women look a little different. Things like that, it takes time. I understand that society is still not ready for women to be totally integrated in all aspects, but we made it work. The Academy made it work. I think it works fairly well, there are still some bugs, but as long as society isn't totally non-discriminatory, neither will the Coast Guard be because we get people from all areas of society. When you've got a bunch of eighteen to 22 year olds, you just have to deal with their personalities. That's always going to be a problem because that's the age group you're working with. It certainly wasn't easy being on the receiving end of it.

One of the saving graces for me, I joined the sailing club, having never sailed before. I was on the water every afternoon for two seasons out of the year. We ended up going to the women's national championships my senior year and three of the four of us that went had never sailed before the Academy, so that says a lot for

the sailing program. Most colleges don't even accept people that don't have any sailing experience let alone train them to that level.

I also joined the cadet musical activities. In fact, as an instructor, I still participate in the plays that they put on because I enjoy it so much.

I studied ocean engineering, which took a lot of effort, but I wanted an engineering degree. That was the closest that I could find to something environmental, which was what I was interested in.

Every year, we were doing things for the first time: women in DCA School air, women on the cutters, everything was first because we were the first class through.

I think it was the end of our fourth class year when they made the decision that all of us would go on the cutters when we graduated. At the time the Navy didn't allow it, the Coast Guard didn't have any, and we had to make a decision: do we or don't we. Thankfully the Coast Guard made the right decision and all graduates would go to sea. They started putting us on the ships that summer and started assigning enlisted women to the big cutters to start the integration process.

S: What was your first ship?

M: They still picked by class rank, that hadn't changed, and I graduated twenty-first overall. I was high enough that I had a pretty good selection and I decided on engineering because I was interested in engineering and it seemed like shipboard engineer would be a fun thing to do, even though I hadn't done much hands on stuff. And if you wanted to go into engineering at the time the premier ship was polar ice breakers. They still are premier ships. So I chose engineering on the polar sea.

At the time, there weren't any women on ice breakers, and a lot of men thought that it would stay that way. In fact, I found out years later that the commandant and personnel people at headquarters had asked if they thought it was okay for a women to go on an icebreaker alone, because the policy at the time was that they would have two women on a ship together, but they wouldn't

keep us from choosing a ship where we were the only one if our class rank put us in that position. So it turned out that I was going to be the only woman on an ice breaker and there was some concern about that. They evidently had even considered not letting me do it. They finally decided if they were going to let us pick according to class rank they better do it.

So I ended up as an engineer on an ice breaker and the only woman on board, which was a little bit higher stress than being at the Academy, but not that much worse. I had to deal with being a novelty at the Academy and that helped prepare me for being the only woman as an engineer on an ice breaker. It helped me deal with it, but it didn't help the guys deal with it. There was a lot of tension at first. The engineering guys didn't know what to do with me. We got underway within a week of when I reported on board for a north trip, which didn't give me a lot of time to get used to the crew and vice versa. It took a couple months for the crew to realize that I was there like any other student engineer, she's another ensign, going to make the same mistakes. I was willing to work and learn. And after they got a chance to see me doing my job, they started to accept me as a student engineer.

Some of the officers, however, were not as malleable. The captain was John Dershal and he was a wonderful CO and I owe a lot to him. One the warrant officers who came on board within a week of when I got there told me he'd been kicked off a 378 because of his attitude toward women and it was better being on ice breakers because there weren't any women. And there I was. But he got to be one of my closest friends in the ward room once he saw what I was doing. Some of the guys never got past waiting for me to go away.

Visiting ports was an interesting experience because most of the ward room didn't want me to go ashore with them because they didn't want me to see what they were doing in these foreign ports. Luckily some of the pilots who weren't interested in night life would go sight seeing with me.

We made another north trip the winter after I reported on board to Antarctica, then we made a south trip to Chili, Peru, Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii. We stopped in Peru and docked

at a Navy base and they assigned one of their guys to guard the gang plank. One night, I came back from liberty with some guys and this guard thought they were trying to bring me on board for other reasons; he would not believe that I was one of the ships crew. So here's this guy who doesn't speak English with a machine gun, saying sorry, you can't come on board. Finally he asked the guy on the quarter-deck a third class petty officer if it was okay if I came on board ship.

I guess they still don't have enlisted women on ice breakers, and I think that's a mistake. The way the ships are designed, they have four man berthing areas, first class petty officers have two to a room, and they have a couple of heads. The smaller one they could have for women on board.

During my second year there, we had district inspection, and that was one of the first questions they asked me. I told them that there's no reason. I even asked the enlisted guys if it would it be a problem if you had a bunch of women on board and they used the forward head and they said no problem. But they still haven't done that so any officer that goes on board will probably be the only woman officer. I wouldn't trade that experience for anything in the world: traveling to the north and south poles. It would have been nice to have another woman to talk to and I think they make mistake by not having women on ice breakers. During the winter trip, we had gotten stuck and had to winter over and that was an experience in and of itself.

S: In the Antarctic?

M: That was in the Arctic. We were doing tests on the stress that the hold takes breaking ice. Some of the companies were talking about building ice breaker tankers, so they put stress gauges on the hold and said go find the biggest ice you can find. We found one, a forty foot ridge. We ended up backing into this piece of ice, pushing the rudder over and bending the steering gear. That got us stuck for a while. I think that's the only modern time that an ice breakers had

to winter over. All ice breakers are equipped to do that, but that's the only time it's actually happened.

Myself and another officer were flown off to go to school, so the time the ship got back in, I'd be ready to go back to work in an engineering job in the yards, still as part of the ship. When the engineering officers went into port, they inspect all the yard work. I needed to go to damage control school and they wanted me to do that before the ship came into the yards. It was probably just as well, although I wouldn't have asked to get off. From my point of view, I could handle it, but from the guys point of view, not knowing when they'd see land and having only one woman on board created a tension for them.

My second tour was at headquarters, and it was at my request. So far I'd gotten everything I wanted, working in the office of research and development on Arctic oil spill response. Having just been on an ice breaker, I knew what the Arctic was like, which really helped a lot. I was in charge of the project. We were still riding on the wave of the Argo merchant, which spilled oil back in 1976 and they dumped a lot of money into research. We thought we could handle regular oil spills, but still didn't know what would happen if the oil spilled on ice. At the time they were talking about opening up Prudoe Bay in Alaska. There was a lot of potential for major damage if there was ice involved in one of these spills. Unfortunately, at the same time they were trying to not regulate so much and the project, by the time I left, had stopped being funded, which was a mistake the Coast Guard made as they discovered when Exxon Valdez went aground.

But that was my project and I enjoyed that a lot. It gave me the chance to use what I knew about engineering and apply it and also it was the one thing that I wanted from the Coast Guard, which was to work with environmental safety, response, cleaning up the environment.

From there I was thinking about teaching. I would have preferred teaching engineering, because that was my major, but the engineering department couldn't guarantee me a teaching job right out of grad school, and I happen to think it's important to teach well

when the information is still fresh in your mind. They were looking for physics teachers and I agreed to go to school to teach physics.

So I went to a naval graduate school in Monterey to learn to teach what the Coast Guard calls engineering physics, which is mostly physics with a little bit of application. I had a masters of science degree in physics when I graduated and I got an award for having the highest grade point average in the graduating class. That says something about not just me as a student, but the Coast Guard Academy training versus the Navy training. I was a lot better prepared, I think, for the higher level work than my navy counterparts were. I felt more comfortable with it.

S: You'd had more responsibility thrust on you than your Navy contemporaries.

M: I had to learn to do things, be in charge, the whole bit much. more than they had. From there, I came to teach here at the Academy, teaching physics and working with the sailing team in my spare time. And I'm still involved with cadet musical activities. So I feel like I'm giving back to the programs that gave to me. I really enjoy seeing the cadets grow and change. When they get here, they look like little kids and it's fun to watch them mature into officers. To be part of that process.

S: It's a very critical time in anyone's life, between eighteen and 22. Those who are 21 when they enter, there's a vast difference.

N: I'm real pleased to be part of that. And I was just selected for promotion to lieutenant commander, so I've now got tenure in the Coast Guard and I'm pleased about that too.

S: That's a great step forward and assures you of several more years of active duty.

M: My career path is technical, and that's not always considered to be easily promotable. I'm glad that now we're making the statement

that everything you do in the Coast Guard is important. It's how you do it that counts, not what your job description is. It's okay to go engineering. The main thing is to do your best and give the Coast Guard their money's worth.

S: You're the second ocean engineering that I've talked to.

M: You must have talked to Joanne, because she's the only other one.

S: Yes, and she is combining a career with being a wife and a mother. That takes quite some juggling of her time, but she seems perfectly at ease with it. And that is something that I'd like to have on the record, how Coast Guard women are handling this.

M: Well, I'm still single and part of the reason is I haven't met someone yet that I would want to marry. Part of it is my independence, my intelligence. I've learned to develop parts of my personality that are not traditional feminine aspects and that may be part of it. But that's okay. I'm comfortable with who I am and where I am. If I did get married, I know it would be tough. My Coast Guard career with trying to figure out what my husband's career is doing and we might have kids- it's not an easy choice and I'm kind of glad that I haven't had to make it yet. I haven't found someone to make me think about compromise. A lot of times someone's career has to take a back seat, and that's a tough choice. The Coast Guard is such a small service that there's not a lot of commands where you can both find jobs and keep going from job to job.

S: Also you might consider marrying outside of the service and then you'd have a house husband.

M: And also you don't decide who you're going to fall in love with- you have to take what you get. Some people are luckier than others when it comes to careers. At the rate things are going, by the time I get married I'll be ready to retire anyway so it won't matter. It's tough, but women haven't had to make those kinds of decisions and

now they do and it's not just military careers. Most families can't afford to survive on one salary, no matter what the salary is. So having to choose how to divide your time between your career and your family and raise the kids, whether to do day care, that's getting more common in society in general. It's a little tougher in the service because of being on duty and being on call or having to go overseas.

S: How many of your contemporaries are married?

M: Of those I graduated with, I think there are only one or two of us who aren't married, so most of them are.

S: How many of those have children?

M: At least half. We just had our ten years reunion, and two of them came up with new babies.

S: In your opinion does the service offer adequate recognition of the problems of motherhood?

M: I can only go by hearsay. A lot depends on the command itself. Governor's Island has a day care facility as part of the system already. Some men aren't ready to acknowledge that you can be professional and pregnant at the same time. And some women in the fitness reports have remarks that they deal more with their pregnancies than with their jobs and I've heard of that happening.

It's a difficult problem and I think the pregnancy stage is the worst, because it shows. There's something different going on here. We're going to lose you as a worker for a certain amount of days and after that, you may be inconsistent if your kids get sick- do you forget it and do your job?

I'm not sure that it's ever going to be perfect because each person deals with it in their own way. As a whole, we're not entirely comfortable with working mothers in society, and especially in the military. When the thing in Saudi Arabia started, what picture did you see? The front page is the mother being torn from her child and

having to go overseas. That's the one thing that we're still not comfortable with. I think the Coast Guard is always trying to work with it and the more women get at higher levels who are mothers and know what has to be done the better it will be. But the more women in general that get higher, the less prejudicial and discriminatory things are because you've got a woman up there saying to a guy down there- you can't do that.

And it isn't just the women, more men are involved with their children as fathers. I've seen more of that- my kid's sick I need to go home and take my wife to the doctor. Men are becoming real parents as opposed to just providers are also having to deal with the same type of problems and we have to learn more about how to deal with that.

S: Well, we've gotten into a philosophical phase of the discussion.

M: For the record, I think the Coast Guard has done a great job integrating women into all of its aspects. It's not perfect, but compared most of the other services, and society as a whole, I think the Coast Guard has done a wonderful job. And we have a lot of people to thank for their efforts to make it happen.

I'm not trying to be anybody special; I just want to do my job. I can't ignore the fact that I'm part of history, but the more people that allow me to be just a Coast Guard officer and do my job, that makes it better for me as a person and a professional. A lot of people have worked to make that happen. I don't think of myself as a woman Coast Guard officer, I think of myself as a Coast Guard officer and that's the way it should be.

S: Do you find any offense in the title I have chosen for this record- Women In The Coast Guard Uniform?

M: No, because the reason for this is the historical perspective.

That was probably one of the hardest things, dealing with the press as cadets was to have hoards of people wanting to know about everything we were doing. Getting all this attention. It wasn't just as

a cadet, even on the ship going to Australia, before we even dock there was a guy trying to interview me while I was on watch in the engine room. And when the Australian TV came on board, they wanted to talk to the captain and me, and I was just a JG. I didn't have any training of how to deal with that. Those of us who were in the pioneer positions had to learn how to deal with publicity because it was a fact of life for us.

S: Is that something you're able to teach to the young women going through now?

M: I don't think we've ever addressed it that way, and maybe by the time they're out there, they won't be the first women to do these things. Maybe they don't need as much training.

All Coast Guard officers need some level, there's no doubt, and I don't think that we do that well enough. There's always the chance that you're going to be the Coast Guard officer on the scene when something happens and someones going to stick a mike in your face. We don't have training for that and as a result, you have Coast Guard people on TV saying some horrible things because they don't know how to deal with publicity.

We had a fair share of that, maybe more, and that was tough for us and those around us, the guys that were there doing the same things we were doing. We seemed more important. We had to say this is the way it is and have to accept it. There's no reason to get mad about it.

I won't go around telling people I just interviewed for a Coast Guard history, but I think it's appropriate that you're doing this. Knowing what it was like during this transition period and to get a wide perspective. People fifty years from now can look back and understand what the integration process was like.

S: And see what funny uniforms they wore.

M: Yes, cadets generally don't like these ties, but most people who see us for the first time think it's really neat. Most people in uniform tend to complain about it.

S: You gotta have something to complain about, to keep you on an even keel.

M: That's right.

S: I want to thank you for being so forthcoming and giving a good description of another short but very effective career.

M: You're welcome.