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Joan Strayer, interviewed by Shavonne Brosnan

Joan Strayer

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MF144 Women in the Military

NA3247 Joan Strayer, interviewed by Shavonne Brosnan, May 8, 2003, Bangor, Maine, about her service in the U.S. Navy and her perspective on women serving in the military. Lieutenant Commander Joan Strayer, U.S. Navy Aviation Maintenance Officer, retired in 2007 after 20 years in service. Recording: mfc_na3247_01A. (microcassette C 2360) Time: 00:24:20. Restrictions: None.

Interviewee: Joan Strayer (JS)

Interviewer: Shavonne Brosnan (SB)

Date: May 8, 2003

Location: Bangor, Maine

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SB: On May 8th to 2003 interviewing Commander J... [tape malfunction]

JS: ...coke plant in the coal mine out in Wyoming, where... [tape malfunction] wife and when all of her children, all of us got older and left the house, she started babysitting and then she became a bus driver for the school. And now she has also retired from that.

I have four brothers. Two are older and two are younger. They're... [tape malfunction] just finished his residency as an Emergency Room... [tape malfunction]. You know, I have, um...three of my brothers are married. I have... [tape malfunction]. I've been married for five years, almost, and I have... [tape malfunction]

SB: How old were you and what exactly...you know, attracted you to the...to the Navy?

JS: It was a free education from them. I—when I was a junior, senior in high school I—I don't know how I got on this kick, but when I was little and growing up, I thought being an airline pilot would be really cool; to be an airline pilot. And my dad knew that, and one day he brought home a catalog from the Air Force Academy and said it's not, you know, if you want to do that, this would be a good way. If you want to be a pilot here, you could start this way. And so, I looked at that. And then when I was a junior and I said, well, heck, I may as well apply and so when you're applying to one service Academy you usually—you tend to apply to the others... [tape malfunction] I also applied to Navy and I was accepted to Navy. And actually, their track coach talked... [tape malfunction]

SB: *unintelligible*

JS: And I think there was pressure on me to—to—to have my education free because my two older brothers both received Superior Student Scholarships for Wyoming. They were like one of 25 students in the state that got their tuition, room and board all paid for at the University of Wyoming. And so, I'm thinking... [tape malfunction] I need to pay my own way. And another thing, it's a guaranteed job after you.

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SB: That's true. So, how did you feel going into it? I mean, were you a little nervous? I mean, you're going... [tape malfunction] Oh man... [tape malfunction]

JS: You know, it was funny because my friends in high school, they're saying, 'Where are you going?' They had no idea and I was like, 'I'm going to go to the Naval Academy' and one of my friends even asked, like, are there any men there? Like you know that it's this...there's 10-percent women. It's a ratio, but you know... [tape malfunction] and I grew up in a family with all boys.

SB: Yeah...

JS: I was...I was in sports. I was used to you know, rough and tumble and, and thinking... [tape malfunction] I didn't think I was treated any different in my family. I mean, I was just. I had my own room but that was pretty much it. You know, I figured I can handle it.

SB: ... [tape malfunction] was it like when you first got there?

JB: Well, the first day it's a blur. They just hand you—I mean it's the same for everybody. I think, if you're a man or a woman, it doesn't matter because you're all a plebe. You're all treated lower than dirt. You're, all you know, you have to call everybody, Sir, salute—and, and you're learning—They take away everything and then they slowly give them back—your privileges back to you one by one. You know, your plebe year you can't... [tape malfunction]

SB: Your hair! [distressed]... [tape malfunction]

JS: I know.

SB: ... [tape malfunction]

JS: You can't do anything and then you know the next year, 'Oh, you get to have a radio in your room!' You're thinking 'Wow!' And you can't drive a car on the base until you're a senior.

SB: Right.

JS: And... [tape malfunction] you know everybody, in my point of view, and I know that people have had different experiences, but with me I didn't think that the women, or me in particular was... [tape malfunction]

SB: How does your family feel about you entering the Navy and leaving... [tape malfunction]?

JS: My mother was very—I mean here I am her only girl and I know that when we drove to the airport—I had a really early flight—and we—it's a two and a half-hour drive from my hometown to Salt Lake City where we have to catch the plane... [tape malfunction] ride the entire way there and, and the, um... [tape malfunction] was like after three weeks of plebe summer where you're running around and just getting the—it's like boot camp. You're getting the—it's ... [tape malfunction] a pay phone and I just called, and I was like [wailing] 'I want to come home' and my mom said, 'go talk to somebody, see what you need to do to come home.'

SB: She's all for it!

JS: She's all for it, so... But then I talked to my squad leader and he talked me into staying. He's like just stay at least until the academic ... [tape malfunction] stayed. And I really didn't do well academically. I

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was in sports and your time is very limited, but I mean, I—I did what I had to do to pass academically. I wasn't a stellar student but I wasn't, you know, I wasn't in pure failure, ... [tape malfunction] but I was just pretty much middle of the road. I did a varsity sport, which is tough. I mean in any school, I'm sure. ... [tape malfunction] for sure, because I was used to being the top in high school.

SB: Right.

JS: And then you know, ... [tape malfunction] I'm with overachievers and, and ... [tape malfunction]

SB: The other women at the Academy, did they...did you guys sort of bond together? Or is it just you with the guys or different like—physically training, because I know...Did you guys have the same standards as the guys, that you have to meet?

JS: Now, for physical fitness tests we have different standards. I mean, it's the same as it is ... [tape malfunction] the Academy, too. We had to do a mile and a half run. We had to do sit-ups and all that ... [tape malfunction] But things like swimming. We had to do, you know, all the same things as the guys We had to jump off of a 30—or three meter—30 meter platform. It was like to simulate abandoning ship and you had to do that at least once a year. One of my roommates was just petrified ... [tape malfunction] There were guys, too ... [tape malfunction]. Since the women were so few and I know, you get roomed by classes. We had six girls in my class and so you basically, were pretty much limited ... [tape malfunction] way you all got along. But, it was a challenge sometimes. I know I was in, you know, track and all the girls on the track team we would pretty much ... [tape malfunction]

SB: OK, that's good because I've heard so many, you know, experiences where the guys would single women ... [tape malfunction]

JS: I mean, I know of some, but nothing really ever happened to me personally, and I don't know if it's because I didn't act different. I didn't expect to be treated different. Or if it was because I just got in with a good... [tape malfunction] men who ... [tape malfunction] the day I was there, there had always been women at the Academy. So, class of '80 was the first class to have women and I was class of '87.

SB: Uh-huh.

JS: So, none of the guys there had ever had, you know, all been there and women had always been there, too, and so ... [tape malfunction] how can you say that? And ... [tape malfunction] there were some guys who were jerks and I ... [tape malfunction] [*unintelligible*] We had our uniform that we wore, it was, it was kind of like our khaki uniform, but it was all black and they called it Working Uniform Blue Alpha. And that acronym became Women with Unusually Big Asses...

SB: Oh, my...

JS: Or Women Used By All... And, um, you know, they would, they would call women at the Academy WUBAs. So...

SB: Awful!

JS: That was their nickname for us. But they have since changed the name of that uniform.

Both: Laughter.

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JS: It's just...but if you weren't a woman I mean, right? I...I was obviously much thinner and skinnier. I was a Varsity athlete. I weigh about 50 more pounds than I did in college but, you know, I wasn't a woman with an unusually big ass. I wasn't a woman who was used by... so, I just didn't let it bother me, but there were some women who, you know, were overweight or there were some ... [tape malfunction] you know that that's who they were targeting. I figured, you know, it's not targeted at me. So, but ... [tape malfunction] the uniform now, but they don't... [tape malfunction]

SB: Another subject that we [*unintelligible*] touch upon is ... [tape malfunction] back in the WAC...You know, their image would be prostitute or lesbian, and I'm sure that was a long time ago and I'm pretty sure that it's calmed down now but was there any instance of [*unintelligible*]?

JS: Well, since I graduated and I was out in the fleet and I was kind of a senior Lieutenant and we had some other, some other women who... [tape malfunction] on the water and they were also in the Naval Academy graduates and we were talking at lunch one day and seems like all the women who were in the even numbered classes like, you know, classes—class of ninety... [tape malfunction] or whatever it's like, they were all... I mean, this is just a very big generalization like, yeah, the even number classes, they were all 'sluts' and the odd number classes, they were all 'lesbians.'

SB: Oh, no...

JS: And I was like, well, I was in an odd number class [laughter] and the strangest thing, two years after I graduated, I was at a change of command ceremony. I went back after to a command that that I had already left to go ... [tape malfunction] talking with one of the NSOs who was in my squadron. She was, she was much senior to... [tape malfunction] you know, she—she pretty much lived through everything. Her name was Lisa Thompson, and I was talking with her at this change of command, she says, 'You know, I said I wasn't going to bother me, but this weekend it was like a lesbian lovefest at our house. We had over all these naval officers who were lesbians with their girlfriends and um, she's like it was just too weird. I just had to leave... [tape malfunction]

SB: [*High-pitched scream*]

JS: ...three years [*unintelligible*] and she's a lesbian. In fact, I have talked to her and she, she actually—this was back in the early 90s. Somebody turned her in for being lesbian. She was kicked out of the Navy for lesbianism. Is that a word? ... [tape malfunction] homosexuality and you know, now she lives in California. She has a life partner now and, and I've talked to her and she's happy. She's happy with her life... [tape malfunction]. I lived with this woman, and I didn't know she was lesbian. So, I'm thinking, well, you know, I'm in an odd number class and we're supposed to be...you know the trend is lesbians in odd number classes... [tape malfunction] [*unintelligible*] and she's happy.

SB: At least she's happy.

JS: Yeah.

SB: The guys ever like [*unintelligible*]

JS: My roommate always had, I mean, she was attractive. She was thin. She was very personable... [tape malfunction] And, and this is who I am but... [tape malfunction]

SB: Shocking.

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SB: Okay, so after you graduated, what was your first duty station or assignment?

JS: ... [tape malfunction] When I graduated, it was back in the, the mid 80s, late 80s and they still had the combat exclusion law and...

SB: Right.

JS: I...my first duty station was with a training squadron in Pensacola. Um, BT... [tape malfunction] trained NFOs, the backseat guys to be in A6s. Um, no... [tape malfunction] it was all jet training. We trained backseat guys and I was in the maintenance department there fixing airplanes ... [tape malfunction] squadron with civilian contract maintenance and I worked at the AIND ... [tape malfunction]

[unintelligible noise and laughter]

JS: Ages ago, so that was my first duty station, and I was just a little ensign with all kinds of senior officers, I mean we had senior Lieutenant follow the instructors...they were much senior to me and we had a few women and one of them was Lisa Thompson that I told you about... [tape malfunction] You know, since I was a junior to everybody it was... [tape malfunction] the else who was on the staff was Lieutenant Myra ... [tape malfunction]. I mean I got along with every... [tape malfunction] with Lisa... [tape malfunction]

SB: ... [tape malfunction] have anybody working underneath you?

JS: Oh, yeah.

SB: Did they, like a lot of people say that guys have problems, you know... [tape malfunction]

JS: No. The strange thing is that I was younger than most of them back in there. And so I was, you know, 23, 22... [tape malfunction] and they, I had Chiefs working for me, calling me ma'am and they were 35, so it's a little strange when you have that, but I think the Chiefs understand regardless of whether it's a man or a woman officer, the Chief, they're pretty much the ones who trained... [tape malfunction]

SB: Dad always told me... [laughter]

JS: It doesn't matter if it's a man or a woman, they mean they...I mean I have one Chief, Chief Cheetah, who pretty much would tell me how he'd like, you know, 'Ma'am, it would be nice if you did this.' He wouldn't say, 'Hey, you need to do this!' He would say, 'It might be a good idea if you tried that.' And I'm sure that if I was, you know, John Strayer, that Joe, he would tell me the same thing.

SB: So, tell me a little bit more about how your career has progressed.

JS: I started as an Ensign in a training squadron and I was not a maintenance officer at the time. I was what they called a General Unrestricted Line Ops... [tape malfunction] that—before combat exclusion that was, it seems like it was the narrative that they created for women officers [unintelligible crosstalk by SB]

SB: How do you feel about that? How do you feel that you couldn't go to combat? Because I know the Gulf War came around '91. Did you get in [unintelligible]?

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JS: It really limited the kind of duty assignments you could... [tape malfunction] back then. Women coming out of the Academy, we could select staff jobs or we could select unrestricted or restricted line jobs. And now they can't. I mean, you have to be not physically qualified to be an unrestricted line officer now, to pick that. But I mean we could [*unintelligible*] Officer or we could be an Intel Officer but now the only way you can pick that right out of the Academy is if you're not physically qualified to go to sea... [tape malfunction]... [tape malfunction]

The job, unless you were high up in the class, which I was middle of the road, those jobs, they only offered like one or two and they would be taken by other women. So, the unrestricted line... [tape malfunction] unrestricted line was pretty much, here are a bunch of jobs that women can go to, and you know, you can do. I went down to Pensacola to be close to my then fiancé.

SB: You mean the Naval Academy?

JS: Yeah, well. This was the first husband. I'm on the 2nd husband.

[*Laughter*]

SB: Okay. Alright. So, one of the questions is, how does being a woman shape your military experience? I mean, obviously, we've talked about how you've been treated pretty fairly, you know, which I think is awesome because I've heard so many other horror stories. But I mean, your family has supported you... [tape malfunction] you know, it's been good.

JS: Yeah, I think so, too... [tape malfunction] I really don't have any complaints. And like I said, I don't know if it's just my attitude personally and people have been trying to, to insult me and I just don't pay any attention to them or what? But in shaping my career, I never expected to go on a carrier and go to the Persian Gulf for six months. I had just... [tape malfunction] It was kind of surreal because when I got commissioned, that was not an option and I didn't think it ever would be an option in my 20 years, but the Commission in '87 combat exclusion listed after the Gulf War '92, um, and it just the timing was such that I was in a P3 squadron at the time. I did a six-month appointment to Iceland which, you know, you're away from home and it's tough, but it's not as tough as being on a ship, which I've done both now. So, I can tell... [tape malfunction] Iceland you had—I had my own [*unintelligible*] room. I can make my own dinner. I could, you know, we could go out to the club after work, after work and have a beer, if we wanted, and so deployment really wasn't that arduous, but then that was around Christmas time. The next Christmas I was on the USS Nimiz... [tape malfunction] again. We keep meeting, but you know, and I had, I just it was strange. And Christmas that year in Hong Kong, and I had no, you know, it was something that I never expected to do, but it's something that I did. Because I had to. When the [*unintelligible*] it was good timing in that my squadron, my P3 squadron was decommissioning and so I had to find a new job anyway. And so I went into all the books that I knew. I went into proceedings and the things and, you know, carriers were starting to get women, squadrons were starting to get women. I figured out which carriers were going to have women, which squadrons were on which carriers and went through and saw whose rotation dates matched up with mine and then I call my detailer and said here, where I'd like to go.

SB: How was life on a carrier?

JS: As an officer, I mean, I—enlisted women I'm sure have a totally different experience. As an officer, we had, I had a room with just three other women. We had a head that was specifically for women

there. My first deployment there seemed like there were hardly any women [*unintelligible*] we were a rarity. Our head was always, you know, sparkling clean. They cleaned our showers every day and I don't know if it was because we were women and they treated it different or because our compartment cleaners were women and they knew they need to have it clean, yeah. It was thin, I know that nowadays, talking with some guys who, 'Oh, yeah. I remember seeing you on the, on the in the hangar bay or on the flight deck, I mean. It was like we were kind of scoped out. They, they, they knew us. I served in my next shore duty station, this Chief came... [tape malfunction] and he's like, oh, yeah, I've seen... [tape malfunction] I've seen you running down on the treadmill. It was like, well, what are you doing watching me like that?

[*crosstalk*]

SB: That's kind of creepy.

JS: One of my roommates, she would—the treadmills were placed so that there were two of them that were on the back wall. We'd always want to wait for them. She's like, I want to get one of those so that people aren't watching your butt while you're—. It's like guys aren't watching our butts. Then, I talked to Derek, one of our officers, he's like, 'Oh, yeah, we are.' Like, great. I'm just, I think I'm just oblivious to it. And I got my workout to do, and I don't care. Let them look.

SB: Was it scary being with all those guys?

JS: Nah.

SB: No... [tape malfunction]

JS: Our room locked and I mean, there I didn't have any fear and I don't think anybody had any fear that somebody would come in and try to... [tape malfunction] Our squadron had 30 something officers in it and we had three women officers, me, and two pilots and... [tape malfunction] were men and it's like they were all our brothers. It's not like they were our boyfriends or anything. They were our brothers. They were taking care of us and if anybody messed with any of us, which never happened in my experience, and I mean we had 30 brothers there to take care of us... [tape malfunction] the same way as the enlisted... [tape malfunction] at least I hope it did. And as officers we tried to take care of them, too. ... [tape malfunction] deployment there were a lot more women on the ship—

SB: Oh, I bet.

JS: ...so it seemed to go a lot smoother.

SB: ...married again, and you have... [tape malfunction]. How does it feel to be a woman and having ... [tape malfunction] absolutely absurd what I feel. Do you feel, like, any different because you know you're not there all the time?... [tape malfunction]

JS: You know, and I don't know how they did that because there have been times where Carl's sick; I have to take him out of daycare. I have to take the day off to take care of him and, you know, being on shore duty, we have the luxury of doing that. It's not like I'm going on deployment. I'm not going [*unintelligible*] an officer too. It's like a fever or something and I would have to finish up my work and quick go over and get him and then take a day of leave to them and—and take care of him all the time. I mean, that's a much tougher job than what I have now, I think. And I admire the mothers that—

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SB: I know I couldn't do it.

JS: ...and I think it's because I had him so late in life. I was in the Navy for 14 years which set my ways and I really—personally I guess I could if I wanted to, but I think I'd go...I'd go crazy.

SB: I go crazy with being in one place because us moving around...

JS: We're moving next week and—

SB: Where are you guys going?

JS: Down to Norfolk.

SB: Oh-okay.

JS: And it's like, well, you know, we've been here three years it's about time...

SB: Would you please tell my dad? Please. He's just gonna stay in Maine forever.

JS: It's nice up here though [*unintelligible*]

SB: So, well, pretty much almost done. Any other comments about how you feel women in like, what... [tape malfunction] they're treated equally?

JS: You're always gonna have stuff pop up because you're always—in any society, you're gonna have the idiots [*unintelligible*] woman. And so, those cases are always going to pop up and it just seems more like—it gets more attention in the military because we're such a minority, women are. But I know that the numbers are moving up. I'm not sure exactly how many. What the percentage is. One of the better [*unintelligible*] but...and then every once in a while you say, 'Well, the only reason this woman got to flight school is because she's a woman.' You know, her grades are horrible; she's a bad stick; she can't do this or this. [*unintelligible*] get hornets or couldn't get better... Talk like that that. I'm sure it's jealousy is anything they can say bad [*unintelligible*] is that she's a woman and that's the only reason she made it. There are some cases where, I mean and I know personally a petty officer who was in my squadron we were getting ready to go on deployment and she... [tape malfunction]. 'Well, okay, you can't go on deployment that we have to transfer you out. And I mean, it's kind of a lifelong commitment here, with a child to get out of a six month appointment? I'm sorry, but you know—

SB: I know...

JS: —and she admitted to other women that 'Yeah, I got pregnant, so I didn't have to go on deployment.' And she worked for me again, well, not for me, she actually worked for your dad's squadron in VF-33, she got reassigned after she had her child. It was time to deploy again and she got pregnant again, and came over to work for me.

SB: Oh, my goodness.

JS: So, and it's the very small minority, the women in those numbers that you know the one out of 100 that give everybody a bad—all the women [*unintelligible*]

SB: I feel the same way. I feel that, you know, it goes both ways, like women can claim sexual harassment on their peers just because they're not getting what they want.

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JS: And we have so many young girls out here and—and one thing I just [*unintelligible*] to tell them that birth control is free in the Navy.

SB: [*Laughing*]

JS: Just go over to the doctor. They'll give you a prescription and they give you pills and if you take them... [*Tape recorder is turned off*].

JS: At the Shore Duty command we get the girls who become pregnant and can't, um, you know, they come here to have their child and then they get back on sea duty. And you know when the child, probably 90% of them aren't ... [*tape malfunction*]

So, I just I had to put in the plan of the week, 'Hey, birth control is free. Condoms are free. Birth control pills are free. Just go over the medical and get them.'

SB: We have that all over in college. Wrap it up!

JS: These kids are as young as you are, so...

SB: Well, that's the thing! I'm turning 20 in July, and you know. How most a lot of people in the Navy now are younger than me. ... [*tape malfunction*].

JS: ...and [*unintelligible*] the people that come in and you know I had a comment. One of my petty officers said to me, he's like—this is when I was on shore duty and NCO, and we would get all the pregnant women from the—not all—but we would get pregnant females from the waters [?] that couldn't deploy and the [*unintelligible*], he's like, 'What on earth?' ... [*tape malfunction*]. ...more responsible and more educated. Whatever ... [*tape malfunction*]. And it's like [*unintelligible*] going to happen all the time.

SB: Right.

JS: [*unintelligible*] right now, the Navy still has their exclusive club with the submarines. I don't think they're going to open up submarines to women.

SB: Opinion on that is they have a submarine for all women see how that works, that works.

JS: It works. But, you got ... [*tape malfunction*] in the army and I...I personally would never want to be on the front line, you know

SB: Do you think other women should be able to?

JS: I think they said if they want to. Personally, I wouldn't want to do it. And if women are, physically can do it, and I mean, I'm sure there's 100,000 women out there who are physically qualified. Who are able to do that, and they should be able to if they want to. And I'm sure that there are thousands of men out there who are out there, who are weaker and a lot of women who—

SB: Women out there...

JS: I'm sure they would. Because it's been all men for all the time. It's just when—when the Academy back in 1980, in the 70s, that they first started going there was that was the last class with all men and that that was their class motto: All Men. It's in whatever it was.

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SB: Is there anything that I should have asked you that I haven't yet? Like anything, you feeling?

JS: I felt you got what you needed. I hope.

SB: Oh, yeah.

JS: Okay, and I don't know if I'm a really good person to talk to 'cause—

SB: Ohh, I definitely think.

JS: —because I mean, I—I've kind of lived in a rose-colored world of—I mean being an officer is totally different experience, I know. You were talking about... [tape malfunction] but I, and again I don't know if it was just my attitude and my outlook, that made for... [tape malfunction]

SB: I, personally, think your attitude and outlook is, I mean you can go in there with it... [tape malfunction] and people are gonna... [*alarm begins ringing in the background*]

JS: Uh, fire alarm.

SB: Oh, great!

JS: But hey, but I mean I never expect to be treated differently and so I don't think I ever was treated differently. [*tape recorder is turned off and on*] The way everything—I think we need to evacuate the building.

SB: Great. Thank you so much good luck, thank you.

SB: If you need anything else, just let me know.

[End of recording]