And I anticipate at some point you do editing when you use these, or no?Â Theyâ€™re justâ€”theyâ€™re raw interviews in there?

Interviewer

Theyâ€™re raw interviews.

Donna McAleer

Okay. Â Okay.

Interviewer

Theyâ€™re raw interviews, so youâ€™re going to tell me your name, and youâ€™re going to tell me the spelling of your name for the transcriberâ€”Â

Donna McAleer

Okay.Â

Interviewer

So they understand.

Donna McAleer

Okay. Â My name is Donna McAleer.

Interviewer

Look at me.

Donna McAleer

My name is Donna McAleer, and thatâ€™s M-C-A-L-E-E-Râ€”or should I say Mike, Charlie, Alpha, Lima, Echo, Echo, Romeo?Â

Interviewer

And Donna is the traditional spelling: D zeroâ€”D-Oâ€”sorryâ€”double N-A.

Donna McAleer

Correct, yes.Â

Interviewer

Okay. Â All right, so letâ€™s begin with where you come from.

Donna McAleer

Iâ€™m originally from the East Coast, but during my high school years was living in Nashville, Tennessee. Â My family moved from Redding, Connecticut to Nashville, Tennessee, and sent me to an all-girls Catholic private school for high school, and having

come from a public school system, and playing Little League and many sports, I was a little bit dismayed to be going to a small school where they wore uniforms.Â And in the course of the four years in this school in Nashville, became very activeâ€” fell in love with the tightness of this school.Â And my senior year at the school I was taking a math class at the boysâ€™ prep school across the street, and my father took me to a Thunderbirds showâ€”a U.S. Air Force Thunderbirdsâ€”and I immediately became enamored with how to become a Thunderbird pilot. Â And started asking a lot of questions and learned about the Service Academies, and started pursuingâ€”actually, this wasâ€”Iâ€™m sorryâ€”this was the end of my sophomore year in high schoolâ€”started looking into the Academies, and all of a sudden I heard from West Point from some, I guess, testing scores.

Donna McAleer

And there was a young man who had beenâ€”my junior year, he had graduated the boysâ€™ school across the street and came to West Point in the class of â€™85, and he came back to Nashville on what was called CPRCâ€”I donâ€™t even know the acronym, what it meansâ€”Cadet Public Relations Councilâ€”and came to our school and asked our principal, Sister Mary Angela, if there might be any young women interested in going to the Academy. Â And she said, â€œI got a few for you,â€ and that was kind of my start of looking at West Point.Â

Interviewer

So had you everâ€”you lived in Reddingâ€”had you ever come over to visit West Point?

Donna McAleer

No, I hadnâ€™tâ€”I never had.

Interviewer

So youâ€™d never been at West Point till you arrived here to look at it as a potentialâ€”

Donna McAleer

Well, as aâ€”yes, as a potential. Â I came to the summer academic leadership workshopâ€”I forgot what it was called then. Â But itâ€™s essentially a wonderful recruiting tool to introduce prospective students to Academy life and the profession. Â And I had applied to all the Service Academies and was accepted, except at Air Force I got disqualified from flying.Â And there was no way I wanted to be in the back seat, and made the decision really based on the Army was about leading people, not implementing technology. Â And then came up for an overnight visit, and the restâ€”ended up coming here.Â

Interviewer

And did you come from an Army family at all?

Donna McAleer

I did not come from an Army family. Â I had one uncle on my fatherâ€™s side who served in the Battle of the Bulge and was killed. Â And my maternal grandfather had served in the Hungarian Air Force, but there was no other military in my family.

Interviewer

Was your family surprised that you were so interested in the Service Academies?

Donna McAleer

I think my family was very excited and supportive. Â My mother was probably the most worried in that she had gone to Marymount College in Tarrytown, New York. Â And she had actually been up to West Point several times and dated many different cadets over the course of her college career.Â And I think she was a little bit more concerned that a daughter was going into the military, but they were both really, really supportive.

Interviewer

So you entered in the class of what?

Donna McAleer

I entered in the class of 1987, so it was the eighth class with women, and we entered in the summer of â€™83.

The Vanguard of a New Generation
Interviewer

Now, were you at all concernedâ€"and Iâ€™m curious to hear what you wouldâ€™ve heard from other women about what it was like to be a woman at the United States Military Academy?

Donna McAleer

There was actually only two women I talked to, really. One was a classmate of Jim Tullyâ€™sâ€" he had introduced us, and we spoke a little bit on the phone. And the other one was Julie Del Giorno, class of â€™86, who was a basketball player, and she is who I stayed with on the overnight visit. But I donâ€™t think I was mature enough at the time to ask questions about what it was like based on a gender.Â It looked like a huge challenge for everybody, and at that time I didnâ€™t realize how women had only been there a couple years.

Donna McAleer

And, you know, the women I think in the â€™80sâ€"certainly in the class of â€™80â€"they were on the vanguard of a new generation of leaders. Â But the women in the early â€™80s years I mean really set the tone, when you look at there was only 62 to 75 that were graduating each yearâ€" class of â€™80 had about a 50% attrition rate of the women. Â So no, I never asked those questions. Â I was neverâ€"I never was really concerned with that, and I thinkâ€"

Interviewer

I guess itâ€™s a sign of the health of the project in the sense of the Academy with respect to gender that it didnâ€™t necessarily occur to you right away that that would be the overriding characteristic.

Donna McAleer

Right, but I think experience and time and maturity allow you to look back on that experience and look at the importance of that, and look at how do weâ€"how do we harness those differences in gender in terms of the way we communicate, the way we lead,

the way we interact?A I mean I know so much more now than I ever knew then, and kind of this whole importance of thereâ€™s so much empirical literature about the importance of strong role models, and that women benefit more from strong role models, particularly same-gender examples.Â And certainly as a cadet here in the early â€™80s, there were not many women on staff. Â I think there were six totalâ€” thatâ€™s what I remember. Â I remember two in the Department of Physical Education, two in BS&L [Department of Behavioral Sciences & Leadership]â€”two professors in BS&L, one in history, and two TACs [Tactical Officers], so thatâ€™s seven.

Donna McAleer

We did not see women at high levels of command with families that had a variety of experience, and so I think for a lot of us in those early years, you know, all our role models really were men.Â And those women that were here, they were certainly role models, but I donâ€™t think we realized kind of how they were also on the vanguard.

Interviewer

Now, in your class, there are how many women?Â

Donna McAleer

My class graduated with 114 women. Â We started out with about 175, so.

Interviewer

And you have written a book about women at West Point, right?Â

Donna McAleer

Correct.

Interviewer

And so you know a lot about this subject. Â Iâ€™m curious as to whether there were quotas for women in this time.

Donna McAleer

Well, there were alwaysâ€”the Admissions Office always had what they called â€œcomposition goals.â€ Â How did they want a class of incoming cadets to look? Â And they wanted that to reflect what the Army looked like and, you know, somewhat from society. Â So I thinkâ€”could you call them â€œquotasâ€â€”yeah, potentially.Â Where we were against all those goals I donâ€™t knowâ€”certainly one of the elements that I think the Academy worked really hard on is the retention rate. Â And really, in the admissions process, correlating a candidateâ€™s resume, academic background, to success as an officer was pretty key.Â And as youâ€”if you were to look at the history of the thirty years now that women have been graduating, in those first five years you had anywhere from a 50â€”50% retention rate all the way up to about 68. Â That rate has gone up significantly in the last 25 years, where you have retention rates of women, 75% or above, and theyâ€™re notâ€”the delta between the men and the women is not that much different any more.Â So I think the selection and the admissions process is very well correlated with that.

Interviewer

Now, what was your experience like as a woman here at the Academy, both as you recall it

and as you look back upon it now? A Howâ€™d it feel? A Did it feel special? A Did it feel compromising in any way?

Donna McAleer

It feltâ€”while here, it felt challenging in every way, shape, and form, all the timeâ€”academically, physically, emotionally, spiritually. Â My Plebe year was probably the year that, for me, gender played a pretty specific role. Â I was in Company B-1, and B-1 had a pretty ugly moniker to it. Â It was whatâ€”the official name of the company was B-1 The Barbarians.Â But, kind of affectionately, it was called â€œBoys 1,â€ and the mission of Boys 1 was to run all the women out of the Corps, and they were doing a pretty good job. Â There was only one woman in the Firstie class. Â There were three in the Cow class, two in the Yearling class, and five in my Plebe class, of which two of us went on to the next year.

Interviewer

And you would directâ€”you relate these numbers directly to the attitude of the men in B-1.

Donna McAleer

Yeah. Â Iâ€”my recollection of the attitude in B-1, it was very misogynistic. Â There were a lot of comments and names we were called constantly. Â We were accused of being here because we wanted to find a husband. Â We were never given the benefit of the doubtâ€”you know, hey, maybe we wanted the best engineering education. Â We wanted an opportunity to develop as leaders.Â We wanted to become professional officers that this was a training and proving ground in the premier leadership school in the country. Â And a lot of those comments were based on something we couldnâ€™t changeâ€”I mean we canâ€™t change our gender, so. Â But also I want to say that those years in B-1 were equally hard for the men in the company, and frankly, the upper-class women in the company. Â It was just not a great company to be in. Â There was a lot ofâ€”I would equate it to the treatment of cadets in the movie The Lords of Discipline. Â There was a lot of running that company by fear. Â We all always worried about gettingâ€”racking up too many demerits, or at the time, what were called these â€œfourth class reports.â€

Donna McAleer

And you would get them from minor infractions, from be it a uniform out of place, shoes not shined, a missed duty, and when you racked up so many of these, you would then have a board, a disciplinary board. The fear of going into those disciplinary boards was probably a driving factor to not earn those infractions. Â Our Firsties would kind of have the room, the lights dimmed down, the blankets on the table, crossed sabers, candlesâ€”it was kind of this whole atmosphere of intimidation. Â And certainly getting called pejorative comments isâ€”doesnâ€™tâ€”is something that you think doesnâ€™t ever bother you, and you just kind ofâ€”youâ€”youâ€”you let it go off your back.

Donna McAleer

And you know, you come into your room and, you know, talk about it with your classmates, andâ€”or your roommates, and youâ€™d put on a strong face. Â And I do have a belief in the Nietzscean philosophy: that which doesnâ€™t kill you makes you stronger.Â And all these years later, thereâ€™s very few things, be it in a corporate environment, having been a national level athlete on the bobsled team, be it a nonprofit, there are few things that bother me like that.Â I see those cadetsâ€”they were really immature. Â They were really immature, and we had a tactical officer who was I think as intimidated by the first class

cadets as we were. A Now, looking backâ€”

Misogyny in Company B-1
Interviewer

What kind of names did they call you?

Donna McAleer

They would call us â€œbitchâ€ and â€œcuntâ€ and â€œmamacitaâ€ and â€œwhoreâ€ and you knowâ€”youâ€”kind of I think you can probably figure out whatâ€”

Interviewer

And they werenâ€™t disciplined for using theseâ€”Â

Donna McAleer

No, they werenâ€™t, because they were never really caught, andâ€”

Interviewer

If they had been, would they have been disciplined?

Donna McAleer

You know, I donâ€™t know. I think they would haveâ€”maybe not within our company, but certainly later on.Â And you know, to be accused regularly of, you know, â€œyouâ€™re only here to find a husband,â€ or you knowâ€”I mean those kinds of things, and they never had anything to do with performance.Â All they were, were based on gender, and I still think someâ€”and again, this is not allâ€”the men in that company, I donâ€™t think they also had examples of strong women in their lives. Now, I will say that attitude wasâ€”to me, was totally gone by my sophomore year. My next three years in Company A-3 was a vastly different experience.

Interviewer

But come back to B-1 for a moment.

Donna McAleer

Okay.

Donna McAleer

What percentage of the cadets, the Plebes in B-1â€”Iâ€™m sorry, the Firsties in B-1 would you say were this abusive?

Donna McAleer

Aboutâ€”probably about 35 to 40% of them.Â But they were the 35 to 40% that were in key cadet leadership positions. Again, the company wasnâ€™t easy for anyone, and I think there was even some pressure on the 60â€”the 65 or the 60% who didnâ€™t engage in that to partake in it, so. You know, itâ€™sâ€”

Interviewer

Did it ever wear you down? Did you ever feel like you were fed up and ready to leave?

Donna McAleer

No, not because of that. It just made me want toâ€”it really made me want to do better and prove them wrong. If for nothing else, just to prove them wrong to say, you know, â€œI could do this.â€ Yeah, did I want to leave?Â Sureâ€”I mean I had a very tough time academically, and I was ready toâ€”I donâ€™t want to say â€œready toâ€ resign, but I had reapplied to civilian colleges and gotten an ROTC scholarship.Â And I think it was really kind of my motherâ€™s response when I called her.

Donna McAleer

You know, we used to be able to call like maybe once or twice a month or something, and she queried me about why I had an acceptance letter and an ROTC scholarship from Boston College at the houseâ€”and they mistakenly sent it there than to here. And you know, I was kind of complaining, and she said, â€œYou know you got two choices. You can quit right now, and Iâ€™ll be down in five hours and pick you up, or,â€ she said, â€œfrankly, you can shut up and put up and drive on.â€ And I kind of said, â€œOoâ€”thanks, Mom. Iâ€™ll talk to you in a couple weeks.â€ And it was really the motivation I needed to keep going.

Donna McAleer

And unfortunately, I learned the academic grade of a delta is a gift that keeps on giving.Â You are much better off failing a class here and going to summer school, and doing much better and getting grade replacement. So you know, a lot of lessons in hindsight, but the last three years was this incredible challenge. West Point is a place I am really proud to be from, and Iâ€”you know, in writing the book, in my research when I interact with people, the cachet that the name carries and the experience opens doors. Thereâ€™sâ€”there is no doubt about that. And some of those tough times emotionally I think made me a lot stronger later.

Interviewer

But nowâ€”let me make sure I understand thisâ€”so the three succeeding years, you didnâ€™t feel any of the same stuff.

Donna McAleer

Not at all. I mean it was a completely different school for me.

Interviewer

Why do you think thatâ€™s the caseâ€”â€™cause of the change of company?

Donna McAleer

I think a lot of it had to do with the change of company. I think you now hadâ€”there were three classes that had all come in with women.Â They had more women. They were used to seeing women perform and compete equally. It wasâ€”it was justâ€” there was this change, and I donâ€™t think Iâ€™ve reflected on it enough to know what it was. And itâ€™s interesting, because the group of us from B-1 are still kind of close friends today, and weâ€”when we talk about things, thereâ€™s always one or two incidents that come up, and you find out how kind of poorly everybody was treated. It wasâ€”there wasâ€”I think one of the big differences between now, then and now, is thereâ€™s much more

emphasis on respect for the individual. I would imagine thatâ€”

Women Have Equal Responsibility in Defending the Nation
Interviewer

Things are better now, you think.

Donna McAleer

Things areâ€”I think things are better now. From the interviews that Iâ€™ve conducted in working towards my book, things are not perfect, by no means. I donâ€™t know if that is an achievable state. But I think thereâ€™s a lot more recognition towards issues.Â Thereâ€™s a lot more focus onâ€”

Interviewer

Well, what are the other issues, though, besides okayâ€”one you identified is that women can be called sort of nasty names and treated with disrespect. What are other issues associated with being a woman at West Point?

Donna McAleer

I think other issues are around performance. Thereâ€”and part of it is I think issues we place upon ourselves of exceeding the standard by a greater delta. It wasnâ€™t enough to meet the standardâ€”you had to exceed it. And in a small group of people, the performance of one individual, like it or not, reflected on all individuals of that demographic group. So, if there was a woman who was performing poorly physically, or maybe not meeting a standard, it was kind of generalized over the whole population.Â And again, I think thatâ€™sâ€”thatâ€™s progressed.

Donna McAleer

Theirâ€”theirâ€”both West Point and the Army, I think, unfortunately have a perceptionâ€”not a perceptionâ€”we donâ€™t have identical standards for men and women. And whyâ€”because of physiological differencesâ€”I mean thereâ€™s empirical reasons why we donâ€™t have the same standards. Yet having different standards then puts people at two differentâ€”two different levels, and makes one question, â€œwell, you know, women canâ€™t perform at this level.â€ I mean the APFT is a classic example.

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s the APFT?

Donna McAleer

The APFT is the Army Physical Fitness Test. And weâ€™re seeing this in the Army. You know, thereâ€™s a lot of talk right nowâ€”well, not so much talk, but there has been talk aboutâ€”regarding the Combat Exclusion Rule. So the Combat Exclusion Rule is a DoD policy that prevents the assignment of women into units whose mission is to engage in direct combat, or to be attached to units whose mission is to engage in direct ground combat.

Donna McAleer

Okay, this is significant for a number of reasons. First of all, women are being attached to these units and utilized in a variety of areas, but the challenge is theyâ€™re not getting

credit of being within those combat units. And if we look at our history in terms of where the senior leadership in the Army is coming from, and particularly at the most strategic levelâ€”at the, you know, Chief of Staffsâ€”those are all billets that come from the Combat Arms Branch. And women right now, they can aspire to it, but itâ€™s not a reality, and that need to open up those branches is imperative. Now, people say, â€œWell, maybe the paradigm needs to shift in terms of how we manage our personnel.â€

Donna McAleer

Well, something has to be done to better balance the opportunities.Â Not all women want to go into the Infantry, but thereâ€™s not an empirical standard where men and women are evaluated atâ€”thatâ€™s the same standard, from a physical standpoint, from an emotional standpoint, from a leadership standpoint. Here as a cadet in the â€™80s, Infantry as the queen of battle was the branch that was most touted. The pinnacle of a career at that timeâ€”again, where weâ€™re not a nation at warâ€”was to be an Infantry Ranger Airborne Battalion Commander.

Donna McAleer

Well, two ofâ€”three of those fourâ€”thoseâ€”those four attributes are unattainable for a woman, so youâ€™ve already moved her to a different group.Â Soâ€”and again, thatâ€™s evolved significantly if you look at how are wars being fought. We have this asynchronous battle, and the role ofâ€”the whole structure of the Army is changing to support this. But still, women do not have these opportunities to be in these combat arms branches. And again, not every woman wants to be, but to be able to have a standard to say, â€œOkay, if I want to be and I meet or exceed the standard, I can be.â€

Donna McAleer

And maybe thereâ€™s some men that might not meet that same standard, and maybe they donâ€™t want to be there either, but Iâ€™m a firm believer in the importance ofâ€”as citizens, women have equal responsibility in defending the nation as men do.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s come back to your own personal experienceâ€”

Donna McAleer

Okay.

Serving in the U.S. Army as the Cold War Ended
Interviewer

A little bit. So on Branch Night, you chooseâ€”

Donna McAleer

I chose Military Police, and looking back on that decision, if there was one decision I could make over again, it would probably be that one.Â I didnâ€™t take the initiative to really learn and understand the mission of all the branches. I knew what was open to me, I knew what wasnâ€™t open to me. I wanted to be in aviationâ€”I got disqualified because of hay fever. I chose Military Police on some very shortsighted reasons, and those reasons were if was a very small branch, and I thought I could be a little bit higher to get an assignment.

Donna McAleer

At that point, not being a nation at war, where you were going, you were really going to be there three or four years, so being in a location was more important to me at the time. I really thought I had an opportunity to go to Korea, which isâ€”I wanted to just kind of see that part of the world. And I really didnâ€™t understand the mission of the branch.Â So thatâ€”but that was the decision I made, and lo and behold, thatâ€™s the branch I got. While on active duty, I ended up branch-transferring into Engineers, but never actually served in an Engineer unit, so why didnâ€™t I choose Engineers from here? Because I thought Iâ€™d be too low, and I would end up in, at the time, what was considered a training assignment, and thatâ€™s not what I wanted to be.

Interviewer

So you were commissioned and assigned where?

Donna McAleer

I was commissioned, and my first unit was in Germany as a Military Police Brigade that was attached to Seventh Corps, and was headquartered with Third Infantry Division. So I was in central Germany in a city named Wurzburg.

Interviewer

And weâ€™re talking about where nowâ€”19â€”in terms of chronology hereâ€”1988?

Donna McAleer

So weâ€™re talking 1988â€”1988, so arrived in Germany in January of â€™88.Â Became a platoon leader and then an executive officer of an MP Company. And when I got commissioned, I was very much looking forward to this new profession, and was very open to a career in the Army, and a little bit bright-eyed and excited. West Point had been a place where there had been such high standards for everything, and the high standards as well as the atmosphere of your colleagues I think really pushed me to try to do my best.

Interviewer

I found the expectations in the Army much lower than they were here, and particularly in my MP Company. I hadâ€”within the first two years, I had two company commanders and two first sergeants relieved of duty.Â Whichâ€”

Interviewer

For what reason?

Donna McAleer

The first one was conduct unbecoming an officer because our company commander was having an affair with one of the soldiers. And then the second one was for drinking and alcohol issues while on a deployment, on a training deployment, so kind of two basic-levelâ€”it wasâ€”I wasnâ€™t prepared for it. I didnâ€™t realizeâ€”it wasnâ€™t what I expected. And so it kind of set a tone that I was not too willing to give the MPs too much longer, and fortunately, I was selectedâ€”the Divisionâ€”there was an opening on our Division staff in the Public Affairs office.

Donna McAleer

And so I went to work in Public Affairs, and served with a wonderful group of soldiers and an officer in charge who really valued the use of all skills, and being very complementary.Â And again, Iâ€™m hesitant to talk about this, given the natureâ€”being an organizationâ€”being an Army thatâ€™s been at war for nine years. This wasâ€”this was a very different time in the Army. I mean a lot of our time was we were fighting the tail end of the Cold War. We were doing a lot of conversion of equipment, upgrading of equipment, and a lot ofâ€”most of our exercises were still on the scenario of the Russians crossing the border into Germany.

Donna McAleer

We also spent a lot of time in missions like area beautificationâ€”I mean these were kind of not the things you kind of think of when you think of an Army career. The awesome thing about Public Affairs was the ability to get into an area where youâ€™re promoting things of what your soldiers are doing, what the Divisionâ€™s doing.Â Your interactions with the German, the local German populaceâ€”and to me, that was something I loved, and it was something I was good at, so. That is not typicallyâ€”typical for a lieutenant to go into that. I also started writing a lot of the speeches for our commanding general.

Donna McAleer

So, you know, I gotâ€”as a lieutenant, now all of a sudden I was exposed to a senior level staff, which was really interesting. I didnâ€™t want to go back to an MP unit, and I put in a branch transfer. I put in a branch transfer to go Engineers. My spouse, who was a classmate, was Engineers, and again, the thought was this would keep us together through an Advanced Course, and possibly a next assignment. While at the Advanced Courseâ€”in the third year of our commission, so in â€™91, the Congressional mandates were passed to reduce the active duty forces by 25%.Â And the cutsâ€”the reductions were going to come from the most senior grades and the most junior grades.

Interviewer

Now, where are we nowâ€”are weâ€”

Donna McAleer

Weâ€™re about â€™91.

Interviewer

So this is after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Donna McAleer

This is after the fallâ€”

Interviewer

This is the draw-downâ€”the beginning of it.

Donna McAleer

This is the draw-down. Â This is the beginningâ€”this is the beginning of the draw-down. Â And what happens is I start looking at going to graduate schools, and summer of â€™90 is the invasion of Iraq into Kuwait. Â Most people are activatedâ€”our Division is not. Â We are responsible for the movement of all personnel off of the continent of Europe and the

move over to Southwest Asia. A And that was a period where you felt like you were missing out a little. You had gone to an institution and you had trained and prepared to lead soldiers, and lead soldiers in combat, and Iâ€™m thankful I never had to do it, but there is a level at thatâ€”I think at that point in maturity, this romantic notion of wars. Â How would I have reacted? Â How would I have led? Â How would my soldiers have performed? Â I ended up just from the timing standpointâ€”you know, the war was pretty quick. Â It ends, we end up PCSing and going to Fort Leonard Wood.Â

Interviewer

PCS means?

Donna McAleer

PCS means toâ€”I donâ€™t even know what the heckâ€”Permanent Change of Station, I thinkâ€”itâ€™s you go to your next assignment. Â So we go to our next course in our officer education, and it was there I made the decision that I was ready to pursue a career in the private sector, soâ€”Â

Interviewer

So you had fulfilled your service commitment at this point, and beyond, or?

Donna McAleer

Okay, so our service commitment, when we graduated, at the time the active duty service commitment was five years, plus three additional in the Reserves. Â But going back to these Congressional mandates, which were now reenacted, theyâ€”the Army was offering certain year groups the opportunity to leave the service without having to fulfill that commitment in terms of the years. Â So I ended up serving like almost four and left active duty, which has been a point of contention, I think, in a lot of the West Point community, in kind of the years that followed that.

Donna McAleer

There were significant numbers of graduates gettingâ€”leaving the service, resigning their commission, in 1991, â€™92, â€™93â€”kind of the year groups â€™86, â€™87, â€™88 time frame there. Â And there was a feeling, I think, harbored here that West Pointâ€™s mission was to produce leaders of character.Â But leaders for service in our Army and our nation in a lifetime of service, and there was this unspoken kind of air that we had all these grads who left the service. Â Well, I think a lot of those grads, they left the service and theyâ€™ve contributed as leaders in so many different fields, and I think thatâ€™s an incredible reflection on West Point. Â And the vast majority of those would certainly credit this alma mater for their ability to move ahead.

Interviewer

Who are you thinking of when you say that?Â

Donna McAleer

Who am I thinking of when I say thatâ€”in particularâ€”

Interviewer

People from your class, people that you interviewed, where you say their achievements are

directly related toâ€”with regard to West Point.

Donna McAleer

Well, Iâ€™m thinking of, you know, some of theâ€”some of the people in business, in the not-for-profit sector, in the clergy. Â Some of myâ€”some classmates who have decided theyâ€™re going to focus on their family. Â Thereâ€™s a whole host of them. Â I mean I donâ€™tâ€”I kind of donâ€™t know what their years of service were, but the other piece was the Army was never designed for 100% retention, and people did take opportunities to goâ€”go elsewhere and do other things.

Bridges to the Future
Interviewer

But help me understand that, because a lot of people will say that West Point is just special for what itâ€”what it gives you that you take forward in elements of character and leadership. Â But, you know, there are veryâ€”those are very nebulous terms. Â What do they really mean? Â What did you get from here that you take forwardâ€”that you see others taking forward?

Donna McAleer

An incredible amount of confidence. An ability to, if you think of it in the academic term of the scientific method of looking at a problem, gathering data, analyzing it, and making a decision.Â And maybe not based on complete information. I think thereâ€™s an incredible, you know, physicallyâ€”what do we leave with? We leave with aâ€”

Interviewer

Letâ€™s back up for a second to that one, because I think thatâ€™s a very interesting one. West Pointers can solve problems, in other words.

Donna McAleer

Mm-hmm.Â

Interviewer

Now, what is it about the education here that equips graduates of West Point to solve problems? Â What is it about the education here thatâ€™s different from other institutions, that provides them with that skill?

Donna McAleer

Not havingâ€”well, I havenâ€™t been to another undergraduate institution.Â

Interviewer

I understand, yeah.

Donna McAleer

I think itâ€™s the intensity of the workload, and the quantity of the workloadâ€”that thereâ€™s no extra time in a day, between your academics, your sports requirements, your drill requirements, to really waste a lot of time.Â Andâ€”or is there the time to spend as much time as you would like on something. Â So I think it really gives us this kind of Petri

dish in which to come up with problemsâ€”solveâ€”solutions to problems very quickly. A Is it the best solutionâ€”maybe sometimes yes, maybe sometimes no. Â So I think a lot of it has to do with the intensity.

Donna McAleer

I think the other piece of it has to do with the expectation. Â West Point is a place where bridges to the future are built from a place where the past is always present. Â I mean walk down these halls. Â Walk outside on the Plain. Â Our past here is always in front of us, and we are always reminded of those who have, you know, led in battle orâ€”and made these great decisions.Â And I think itâ€™s thoseâ€”that stimulus is a contribution to that, too. Â And you donâ€™t want to let your classmates down, or your friends, and I think thatâ€™s something that is probably very important if you get into a combat situation, so I think those areâ€”Â

Interviewer

Now you never were in a combat situation.

Donna McAleer

I was neverâ€”no.Â

Interviewer

And you feel you missed out on something by not doing it.

Donna McAleer

Yes. Â I feel like I missed out, but Iâ€™m thankful I wasnâ€™t. Â Again, you come here and you want to become a leader. Â You want to become the best officer you can be. Â You are trained. Â I look at all our military trainingâ€”this is the profession of arms. Â Yeah, you feel like you missed out a little, and thereâ€™s no regret, but you canâ€™t replace that.

Donna McAleer

And everybody whoâ€™s gotâ€”who has been there said, â€œNo, you didnâ€™t miss out on anything.â€Â But there isâ€”there isâ€”there is, I think, a big delta between aâ€”somebody whoâ€™s been in combatâ€”and itâ€™s also a function of the time. Â I mean I think of look at all soldiers throughout history whoâ€™ve served for some period of time. Â I mean, when I was here in the â€™80s, you know, the officers and the soldiers who had served in Vietnam wereâ€”there werenâ€™t too many of them. Â In the earlyâ€”in the late â€™70s, early â€™80â€”through the â€™80s, you know, essentially, there werenâ€™t that many officers here that had combat experience, particularly junior officers. Â I mean Grenada happened, Panama happenedâ€”the Panama invasion was the fall [sic], was it, one year later [from December-January 1989]

Donna McAleer

So again, you know, I think it would be very different now, where weâ€™veâ€”you know, a nation going on, come October 1st, we will have been at war longer than weâ€™ve been at war at any time in our history.Â We will have been in Afghanistan longer than the Soviets were in Afghanistan, so you have a generation in the Army that if you donâ€™t have that combat experience, youâ€™re kind of an anomaly, so.

Telling the Story of Women at West Point
Interviewer

Tell me about your book now. So you came up with this idea when?

Donna McAleer

So myâ€”Porcelain on Steel: Women of West Pointâ€™s Long Gray Line was born out of my experience as a high school volleyball coach living in Park City, Utah. I have always had an affinity for sports and for coaching, and there was an opportunity to get involved at the high school. And I went into this position wanting to have the most disciplined, most fit team in ourâ€”what do you call itâ€”in ourâ€”in ourâ€”Iâ€™m trying to think of what you call it in high school athleticsâ€”in ourâ€”our class of schools based on size.

Interviewer

But you haveâ€”you have children yourself?

Donna McAleer

I now have a six-year-old. I had a newborn daughter at the time.

Interviewer

Uh-huh. Â But nobody in the team was part of yourâ€”

Donna McAleer

No, no, noâ€”nobody on the team was part of my family, and I really didnâ€™t know what kind of skill set I had in front of me. Â And when my girls showed up to practice the first day wearing spaghetti-strap bras, and tank tops, and short-shorts, and these shoes called â€œskate shoesâ€â€”theyâ€™re like what we would remember as Chucky T Converse, but with very wide lacesâ€”but they donâ€™t wear them tied. Â They wear them open. Â And this was a sport, and it was kind of this three-round shotgun burst. Â I started issuing directives, and the first was the three Bs rule, and that wasnâ€™t the â€œbe bold, be brief, be gone,â€ it was there would be no butts, breasts, or bellies anywhere. Â And Iâ€™m not conservative by nature, but, okay, this was not what I expected in a fitness obsessed ski town.

Donna McAleer

I also had the girlsâ€”we did a lot of conditioning that summer, and I will tell you a lot of the conditioning drills came from my training at West Point, as well as my years bobsledding. Â The first time I dropped my girls for push-upsâ€”and mind you, there was nothing I asked them to do that I didnâ€™t do myself.Â And part of my motivation, too, was I also wanted to get back in shape after having had a child a few months earlier. Â And one girl looked at me, and she said, â€œWhat kind of push-ups?â€ Â And I kind of looked at her, and I dropped everybody and got in a front-leaning rest, and she goes, â€œOhâ€”man push-ups?â€ Â And that was very telling to me, that in high school that there was a gender difference on push-ups. Â Interestingâ€”just a little asideâ€”that first practice, few girls could even do five push-ups.

Donna McAleer

By the end of the season, they were asking me to drop them for push-ups whenever they saw a girlsâ€™ basketball team, because the girlsâ€™ basketball team would do them on

their knees. A And they wanted to demonstrate, you know, certainly how competent they were, and they were cracking out, you know, 60 plus, and so you kind ofâ€”those are little wins that make you quite proud. Â So I kind of left this practice exhausted, concerned, and really inspired, and I thought, â€œWell, God, if some of my youngâ€”my young athletes knew some of the women I knew, maybe they would think about pursuing some other things.â€

Donna McAleer

And as I started pursuing this kind of concept, I came to understand as Americans, weâ€™re bombarded with images of women selling everything, from beer to cars to stereos. Â Itâ€™s not that anythingâ€™s wrong with itâ€”itâ€™s just how itâ€™s done.Â Itâ€™s all about selling sex and selling your body, and itâ€™sâ€”it became sexual allure is this Rosetta stone of power and esteem and confidence. Â And then throw in the likes of the Britney Spears and the Paris Hiltons and the Lindsay Lohans, who are in the news all the time for this really bad behaviorâ€”Iâ€™m like, â€œNo wonder my girls act and dress like this.â€

Donna McAleer

And that kind of got me thinking, who were some of these women I went to school with? Â Who were some of the women I served with in the Army? Â Where are they now? Â This could be an interesting direction and collection. Â And then I thought, â€œWellâ€”Â

Interviewer

Because you thought of them as so distinctly different from the generation you were teaching.

Donna McAleer

Well, not only distinctly different, but these were ordinary women who had done some really extraordinary things, and you know, to know that somebody was qualified on three different aircraftâ€”I mean, you know, did you ever think you could be a helicopter pilot, or a general in the Army?Â So that was really what kind of got me going in this whole area, but I also thought, you know, â€œSomebodyâ€™s already done this concept, right? Â So whatâ€™s going to be unique about it?â€

Donna McAleer

And as I started, you know, other parts of the research, there are more than 10,000 titles written about West Point and its graduatesâ€”individuals, collections, you know, year groups, historical significance. Â Of those 10,000 titles, there were five about women. Â One was the dissertation of Dr. Lance Janda from Cameron University called Stronger Than Custom: The Integration of Women in West Point, was his Ph.D.Â There was three memoirs by graduates inâ€”Â

Interviewer

Excuse meâ€”that was Stronger Than Cussing?

Donna McAleer

Stronger Than Custom.

Interviewer

Custom.Â

Donna McAleer

Stronger Than Custom. Â Then there were three memoirs, one written by Carol Barkalow, class of â€™80, called In the Menâ€™s House.Â One written by Donna Peterson, class of â€™82, called Dress Gray.Â Â Then there was a young adult novel by Amy Efaw, whoâ€™s class of â€™89, who wrote a fictional work about a young woman going to Beast and her experiences in Beast.Â Ironically, Amyâ€™sâ€”Â

Interviewer

You mean Beast Barracks, which you go throughâ€”

Donna McAleer

Beast Barracks, which is the first summer of trainingâ€”

Interviewer

Before your Plebe year.Â

Donna McAleer

Before your training. Â Interestingly enough, Amyâ€™s daughter is now a member of the Plebe class this year.Â

Donna McAleer

Oh, this year.

Donna McAleer

And then the other book by a woman that came out during this time was Tough as Nails by Gail Dwyer from class of â€™81.Â But nobody had written a collection. Â There were no books on what had transpired in the 30â€”well, at the time when I started it, the 20â€”almost 25 years women had entered the Academy. Â And it seemed like this would be a pretty important work in terms of that body of literature, and looking at issues at a macro level of maybe gender integration.Â And sexualâ€”excuse meâ€”gender integration, and sexism, and discrimination, and how are various groups treated when they are coming into a situation. Â And that was kind of the genesis of it.

Interviewer

Now, so you then went out and interviewed an awful lot of women who went to West Point.

Donna McAleer

I did.

Interviewer

And you heard stories, and of course, like you could paint a little chronology of some of the more telling moments of the story of women at West Point. Â Now, the hazing scandal ofâ€”when was that? Â Iâ€™m thinking of the period when the football team was accused of hazing women.

Donna McAleer

Interestingly enough, that did not come up in any of my interviews.Â What I had done was I had gone out to the West Point Womenâ€™s Network via e-mail, and threw out this idea, and asked if anybody was interested and would support it. Â I alsoâ€”there were also women whose stories I knew, and what I was after was capturing howâ€”although these women had the same educational experience, and served in the Armyâ€”how they utilized that education foundation and that experience to go on to all kinds of things.Â Be it an artist or an athlete, a cancer survivor, in the clergy, a wife, a mother, a combat leaderâ€”so interestingly enough, that whole issue with that particular scandalâ€”Â

Interviewer

So you donâ€™t talk so much about what happened here at West Point.

Donna McAleer

I didnâ€™t talkâ€”yeah, not aboutâ€”Â

Interviewer

You talked about them more about what West Point did for their individualâ€”

Donna McAleer

Their individualâ€”rightâ€”and certainly for the women of 1980 who were involved in the interview process.Â I mean there were a lot of institutional issues we did cover. Â I mean from uniforms that women were issued, and how decisions around uniforms just brought even more focus onto the women. Â The class of â€™80â€™s full dress uniform was originally issued without the tails in it, because it was thought that the tails on women would make them stick out more because of their hip size.

Donna McAleer

Well, the fact that when they first marched in their first parade without the tails, they stood out like sore thumbs. Â That was quickly rescinded and changed. Â I mean there were a lot of issues that the institution was dealing with. Â I mean there was a pretty short period of time they had to deal with to get ready for women to arrive. Â I mean President, then-President Ford signed the Executive Order in October of â€™75. Women would be reporting in July of â€™76. Â And so West Point as an institution went out to the Army and out to a number of people in academia, asking for help in identifying prospective women who might be interested in coming here. Â So, you know, although most of those women were recruited to apply, based on sports, based on a whole host of issues, so.

Interviewer

Why donâ€™t we stop here with the intention that weâ€™ll pick up for the next section and go through some of the people that are in your book?

Donna McAleer

Okay.

Interviewer

You can give us little short bios of them.

Donna McAleer

Okay. Â Is thisâ€”is this kind of what youâ€™re after?Â

Interviewer
Yes. Â Yes. Â Itâ€™s good. [End of Audio]