

# 80's Ladies at the Air Force Academy: The Doors Open

The author in formation for the march to Jack's Valley, July 1976

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Fifty years ago, on June 28th, 1976, the first women took the oath of office as cadets at the USAF Academy. While there was extensive media coverage at the time, subsequent journal articles analyzing various aspects of integration, a book-length study of the institutional process of integration by Judith Hicks Stiehm, and more recently two published memoirs, a history of the women of the class of 1980—80's Ladies—has yet to be published. This article is a first step in recording that history, to include an overview of the necessary cultural, social, and legal changes, as well as the committed advocates who pushed to make them happen, a summary of the planning and preparations of Academy leaders, and a description of the first women cadets' experiences during Basic Cadet Training and their fourth class (freshman) year.

While admitting women to the service academies was a significant leap forward in the history of women in the US military, the process of accepting women as full-fledged members of the armed forces began with passage of the Women's Armed Services Integration Act of 1948. It codified permanent roles and positions for women in the regular organizations of all four services for the first time, but also strictly limited the numbers of and promotion opportunities for women, especially officers.[1] These constraints remained until the early 1970s, when two factors combined to finally expand opportunities for women, especially in the Air Force. First, all USAF career fields were opened to women except flying positions and a small number of others considered to be direct combat assignments. Second, the transition to the all-volunteer force beginning in 1973 as the Vietnam War ended led to significant increases in the recruitment of women to meet end-strength goals since there were not enough qualified male volunteers. As part of this expansion, women were allowed regular enrollment in the Reserve Officer Training Corps.[2]

These changes in opportunities for women in the Air Force were also a result of larger social and cultural pressures. Beginning in the 1960s, the women's movement highlighted inequities, raised questions about exclusions and the reasoning behind them, and pushed for expanded opportunities for women in all walks of life. These changing attitudes and women's activism led to a series of legal changes. The Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. And 1972 saw passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, Title IX of the Education Amendments, and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA).[3]

The public debates and hearings regarding the ERA raised questions of drafting women, women serving in combat, and inequities in career opportunities. These issues, plus the question of equitable access to education highlighted by Title IX, became part of a growing debate about admitting women to the service academies. Resolutions

to do so were introduced in Congress and generally accepted by the Senate. But all were blocked in the House by the chair of the Armed Services Committee, F. Edward Hébert, who adamantly opposed the idea. Eventually after much debate, Hébert agreed to at least hold hearings on the topic.[4]

The primary argument offered by opponents such as Hébert was that the mission of the academies was to train combat officers, with the military taking the lead in arguing against the legislation on these grounds.[5] Other reasons to deny women's admission were added to this basic premise. It was said that admitting women would lead to lower standards. Other objections focused on how women would undermine the culture and "Spartan character" of the institutions. Still others asserted such a change would require too much money for modifications to facilities.[6]

Advocates for women's admission pointed out the various laws establishing the academies did not require graduates to serve as "combat officers" and that, in fact, significant percentages of graduates did not serve in combat specialties. They, therefore, asserted the relevant question was that of granting women equal opportunity for education and career advancement. Members of Congress were particularly supportive of this argument. Congressman Donald Fraser pointed out the incongruity of the Defense Department's stated goal to quadruple the number of women in the military by 1977 while "denying them access to the best educational program of their profession." Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder emphasized they were simply asking "that sex would not be considered as a disqualifier before you got to any of the other qualifications." She argued further that women wanted to attend the academies for the same reasons as men: they wanted a "superior academy education that will give them superior job and career advancement opportunities within the military."[7]

Congressional advocates for admitting women ultimately prevailed because the opponents' primary argument—that the academies were intended to produce combat leaders, and only combat leaders—was fundamentally flawed. The relevant sections of Title 10 direct that cadets will be instructed and prepared for military service, not combat leadership.[8] The USAF Academy was on particularly thin ice in this regard since, by policy, a given percentage of individuals accepted for admission were not qualified to become pilots or navigators, the primary combat-related career fields in the Air Force. Further, a significant percentage of graduates served in non-combat jobs, regardless of their career specialties.[9]

Because the "combat leaders" argument was, essentially, unsupportable, proponents of the legislation were able to disconnect the issue of women in combat from the question of admitting women to the academies, a necessary strategy since they recognized they would likely lose a vote to allow women in combat. Subsequently, P.L. 94-106 passed the House 303-96 and the Senate by a voice vote and was signed into law by President Gerald Ford on October 7, 1975. It directed the service secretaries to take all necessary actions to admit women to the USAF Academy, US Military Academy, and US Naval Academy beginning with the classes entering in 1976.[10]

The academies had to follow the law, of course, but admitting women was also a matter of process and attitudes. Air Force Academy leaders had anticipated the decision. The Superintendent, Lieutenant General Albert P. Clark, despite his passionate opposition to admitting women, had ordered preparations to begin in 1972. Committees were established to study a plethora of questions and identify issues requiring decisions. The first plan, USAF Academy Contingency Plan 36-72, "Integration of Females into the Cadet Wing," dated 15 September 1972, was submitted to General Clark that month. The process continued until the first female cadets reported in June 1976.[11]

From the beginning, a key element of the plan was the assignment of women lieutenants as Air Training Officers (ATOs) to serve as "surrogate" upper class women by participating in training the new women cadets and serving as female role models. Naturally, none of these women were academy graduates. To address their lack of experience, the 15 lieutenants selected to be ATOs reported to the Academy in January 1976 to undergo six months of familiarization with the culture, organization, and procedures of the Academy, including an abbreviated training program to test female performance in all the activities that would be required of women cadets. The ATO program provided decision makers with another important insight by highlighting the extent of opposition among male cadets to the mere idea of admitting women. A graphic illustration of which occurred when the men "oinked" and "mooed" at the ATOs as they marched to the dining hall.[12]

Academy leaders did their best to overcome opposition and prepare both cadets and staff to accept women as cadets. But there was no way to change the institutional culture in such a short time, nor could they "order" cadets and staff to change the negative attitudes they might hold. On the other hand, they could issue orders regarding the assimilation of women that had to be

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**Swearing-in ceremony for the Class of 1980 following Evening Meal Formation, June 28, 1980** ***(Photo courtesy of USAFA Clark Special Collections)***

obeyed, at least on the surface. All told, their efforts bought the women time to try to show they belonged, while inevitably driving the opposition underground. In essence, the women cadets became guinea pigs in a grand experiment with a predetermined outcome. The decision to admit women would not be reversed. It was on their shoulders to prove it was not a mistake.

While the Academy was preparing for the arrival of female cadets, young women across the country were learning of this unique opportunity and deciding whether to apply. Reactions from family, friends, teachers, mentors, and advisors ranged from unqualified support, to puzzlement regarding why a woman would want to go to a military school, to warnings about how hard it would be and that they wouldn't be accepted, to outright opposition to women being admitted. One female student's guidance counselor and a math teacher refused to write letters of recommendation because they thought women should not attend the academies.[13] Marianne Owens attended an orientation meeting at which cadets expressed their skepticism regarding the admission of women, claiming that most officers and cadets were opposed to the idea and that women could not meet the physical requirements.[14]

When the class of 1980 reported to be begin Basic Cadet Training (BCT, or "Beast") on June 28, 1976, they stepped into a foreign environment. Basic cadet training, like all military induction processes, was focused on turning civilians into military novices. Extensive media attention during the first days and weeks added a layer of unreality to this process, as the 1,436 men were virtually ignored and the 157 women found cameras pointed in their faces at almost every turn. The women also quickly realized they were being watched, their performance measured, and their every action judged by the upper class cadet cadre, officer leaders, and their male classmates. The media attention eventually subsided, but the institutional attention remained unrelenting. They were living in a fishbowl, and they understood that if one of them screwed up or failed, it would reflect on all of them.

The first day brought a fire hose of information and orders, in the midst of which, if anyone had any doubts, it became clear there were people who were not happy about the inclusion of women. One of the women was directed by basic training cadre members to "go to her dorm," pointing at Sijan Hall where male cadets who were attending various summer training programs were housed, rather than Vandenberg Hall where basic cadets were housed. When she entered she was quickly surrounded by a mob of the men, screaming obscenities and shouting that she should get out of "their" academy. Pressing around her, they knocked her to the floor. She was able to regain her feet and leave the building as they gradually spent their ire and started to drift away, eventually making it back to Vandenberg Hall.[15] While not all opponents were this brazen, they found ways small and large to add personal enmity to the usual miseries of BCT and, subsequently, the fourth class year. More generally, the mere presence of the women was used by some upperclassmen to denigrate the entire class. Both men and women were told their class was "weak" because the women were undermining standards and ruining the institution.

In addition to considerable emphasis on physical conditioning, many hours during the first half of BCT ("First Beast") were devoted to learning the basics of military life: identifying both cadet and regular Air Force insignia, saluting and the proper way to address a superior in rank, marching drill, preparing for both personal and room inspections, and most importantly, instant obedience to orders. Basics also spent many hours memorizing the cadet chain of command and other required knowledge, to be recited on demand from the upper class cadre. There were also uniform fittings, medical screening, academic placement tests, and a host of other administrative details to be accomplished.

After about three weeks, the First BCT training cadre was replaced by an entire new set of first and second class cadets, and the class of basics marched about five and a half miles to Jack's Valley, there to assemble tents and cots, stow their belongings in regulation foot-



**Packing out for Second BCT in Jack's Valley** ***(Photo courtesy of USAFA Clark Special Collections)***

lockers, and proceed with Second BCT. The physical training continued at even greater intensity, punctuated by running the confidence course, the obstacle course, and the assault course, the latter two ultimately in timed competition between squadrons. Some of the men viewed the women as a detriment because their times were typically slower than that of their male classmates. But by this time, the bonds between the men and women had begun to gel, and the majority cheered each other on and helped each other succeed.

When the intense training of the summer finally ended the women of 1980 had survived with remarkably small attrition—2.5 percent—with the men's only slightly higher.[16] The formal "promotion" of the class from basic cadet status took place with the cadet wing assembled for the Acceptance Parade on August 14, 1976.[17] They were now officially fourthclass cadets—still the lowest of the low, but no longer "basics."

While the entire class would have to adapt to yet another cadet chain of command, new upperclassmen, and the academic, military, and athletic demands of the school year, the women faced another round of proving themselves, this time to the large majority of the three upper classes of men who had yet to have contact with them. That process was significantly hindered by two key decisions made prior to their arrival.

The first was to house the women separately in their own "women's area" on the sixth floor of the Vandenburg Hall dormitory. This segregated living arrangement was established at the beginning of BCT, but its effects were muted by the nature of the training activities. Academy leaders felt the women would benefit from living together in a situation of mutual support rather than being scattered in small numbers in their squadron dormitory areas, and there was considerable validity to this consideration.

At the same time, the arrangement had significant negative consequences. The first was the isolation of the women from their male classmates and the upperclassmen in their squadrons. There were only limited times when the men and women could interact, getting to know each other, helping each other complete required fourth class tasks and supporting each other through the stresses of freshman year, thus building camaraderie with their classmates. The second was that the segregation led to rumors about the living arrangements, some more plausible than others. It was said that female cadets were allowed to roam the corridors at rest, rather than marching at attention next to the wall with eyes locked forward as was required of fourth class cadets. Other rumors, such as the installation of bathtubs in women's latrines and a kitchen in the women's area, were apparently believed by at least some people notwithstanding their total implausibility. Despite being untrue, they added to a sense that the women received special treatment.



**Basic cadet in the classic USAFA "Front Leaning Rest Position"** ***(Photo courtesy of USAFA Clark Special Collections)***

The second key decision was to assign women to only half the cadet wing. Squadrons 1 through 20, who resided in Vandenburg Hall, had women cadets, while squadrons 21 through 40, who except for three squadrons lived across the terrazzo in Sijan Hall, had none. The decision was made for the same reason: to ensure women were assigned in numbers adequate for mutual support. Again, despite the best intentions, the lack of women in squadrons 21 through 40 significantly slowed the women's integration because none of the men, even their own classmates, had routine contact with them. Further, a vocal portion of the men in third and fourth groups were proud of their lack of female cadets. They could behave as if nothing had changed.

The problems created by these decisions were clear to Academy leaders, and they quickly decided to assign women to all the squadrons. Just before finals at the end of first semester, half the women were notified they would be reassigned to a squadron in third or fourth group when they returned from holiday leave to start the second semester. Regardless of how necessary, the change was profoundly disheartening to the women selected to change squadrons in the middle of their fourth class year. After working so hard to build relationships with their male classmates and to show the upperclassmen in their squadrons they belonged, they would have to start over again in facing another group of skeptical men. However, as Kathleen Kornahrens observes, "It really was so crucial for our assimilation and a huge plus that the administration pivoted and moved us half way through, difficult as it was."[18]

Beyond these events, day-to-day life had settled into a busy routine. Fourth class academics were filled with required core classes and a standard course load of 19.5 semester hours. Fourth class cadets also continued to be subject to rigid military training requirements: walking at attention any time they were out of their rooms, restricting their movements between buildings to the marble strips on the periphery, eating while sitting at attention, and the continued memorization and recitation of their required "knowledge."

The women endured the same routine harassment of the fourth class training system as their male classmates. But there was an added layer of much more personal antagonism from those upperclassmen who wanted to make clear their opposition to and disdain for

having women in the wing, and who were determined to drive as many as possible to quit. Disparaging comments and name calling were almost routine. Kornahrens recounts that women were often stopped on the terrazzo by upperclassmen shouting "You, bitch, drive out here." ("Drive out here" meant you were to stop, make an appropriate facing movement, and step off the marble strip to be berated by the upper class cadet for some offense.) There were even uglier incidents. One of the few Black women was sitting at attention in the dining hall when a male cadet approached her from behind and whispered that no one wanted n—-s or women at the Academy.[19]

Admittedly, not every woman endured the same degree of enmity. From that perspective, each one had a singular experience of being one of the first. Yet, because they were judged as a group in so many ways, the experience was also profoundly collective. The abuse of one was felt, on some level, by all. From that perspective, the universal reaction of the women was twofold. First, "they" would never see them cry. Second, "you can say or do whatever you want, *we* aren't leaving." Their determination to succeed was reinforced by the support of many of the men—classmates, upperclassmen, faculty, and staff. Much of it was under the radar: a quiet word of encouragement here or there, or simply treating the women as cadets instead of "female" cadets. The Academy's integration was mandated by Congress and the signature of the president. But true integration came with these small steps. With classmates who willingly worked with female teammates to complete squadron details. With the BCT element leader who left a Coke and a candy bar on the bookshelf of the female winner of his element drill competition. With participation in coed extracurricular activities such as the Drum & Bugle Corps or athletics. By way of these and many other small steps the class of 1980 became a *class*—that just happened to have the first women cadets as members.



**Female cadet on the Confidence Course "Slide for Life"** ***(Photo courtesy of USAFA Clark Special Collections)***

After exams at the end of spring semester, the class of '80 had one last obstacle to overcome. Hell Week—a final, concentrated dose of "training" that culminated in a Recognition Ceremony where the third class trainers awarded their fourth class cadets the prop and wings insignia signifying upper class status. For both the men and women, it was a great relief to have made it through a demanding year, and they shared the pride in what they had accomplished.

For the women, the doors had been opened, and they had stepped through to claim a place in the institution and the cadet wing. Yet, despite significant progress, the process of integration was far from complete. Life in the fish bowl would continue. They now understood everything they did would be a "first," and the pressure to prove they belonged would continue. They also understood there were many classmates (male and female), upperclassmen, and staff members who would help them along the way. Finally, they understood that no matter how hard they tried to fit in and be inconspicuous, they could never escape their unique status as one of the first, a status they eventually would learn to embrace. ■

NOTES

**1**. See Jeanne Holm, *Women in the Military: An Unfinished Revolution* (Novato CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 119-20 for a summary of the law's provisions and STATUTE-62-Pg356a.pdf for the complete text.
**2**. Holm, 267-70.
**3**. Judith Hicks Stiehm, *Bring Me Men and Women: Mandated Change at the U.S. Air Force Academy* (Berkeley CA: University of CA Press, 1981), 44.
**4**. Holm, 305-6; Stiehm, 11.
**5**. Holm, 307.
**6**. For examples, see testimony of Martin R. Hoffman, DOD General Counsel, 5 June 1974; Lt Gen A.P. Clark, USAFA Superintendent, 18 June 1974; Jacqueline Cochran, WW II leader of Women Airforce Service Pilots, 18 July 1974, "Hearings before Subcommittee No. 2 of HASC, 93rd Congress, Second Session on H.R. 9832," *Report HASC-94-9* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1975), 76, 135-37, 254-55.
**7**. See "Hearings before Subcommittee No. 2 of HASC," Schroeder, 29 May 1974, 21, 22, 22-23; Fraser, 18 July 1974, 243-44; also Holm, 308.
**8**. U.S. Code: Title 10–Armed Forces, Chapters 753, 853, 953.
**9**. "Hearings before Subcommittee No. 2 of HASC," Schroeder, 29 May 1974, 22, 29.
**10**. The US Coast Guard Academy was not covered by the law, but also admitted women in 1976. The US Merchant Marine Academy had opened to women in 1974.
**11**. See Stiehm, 89-117, for analysis of the planning.
**12**. Irene Graf and Terry T. Walter, interview by Robert Bartonowicz and Joe Dixon, 1 September 1977, transcript p. 15, oral history file #85, Academy Oral History Collection, Clark Special Collections, McDermott Library, United States Air Force Academy.
**13**. Anonymous, personal communication with the author, 31 August 2022.
**14**. Steven A. Simon, "50 Years of Service," *Checkpoints* USAFA Graduate Magazine, March 2026, 46.
**15**. Anonymous, phone interview by author, 9 March 2026.
**16**. Stiehm, 129.
**17**. The Academy student body of about 4,400 people is referred to as the cadet wing; the wing is divided into four groups; each group is further divided into 10 squadrons of about 110 cadets each.
**18**. Kathleen Utley Kornahrens, email message to author, 10 March 2026.
**19**. Kathleen Utley Kornahrens, *"Bring Me Men …" Brought Women: Marching with the First Female Cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Co., 2023), pp. 94-5.