

Borne the Battle

Episode # 187

Darlene Iskra: Groundbreaker

<https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/72828/borne-battle-187-darlene-iskra-groundbreaker/>

(Text Transcript Follows)

[00:00:00] Music

[00:00:10] OPENING MONOLOGUE:

Tanner Iskra (TI): Oh, let's get it. Monday, March 23rd, 2020. *Borne the Battle*. Brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the podcast that focuses on inspiring veteran stories and puts a highlight on important resources, offices, and benefits for our veterans. I am your host, Marine Corps veteran Tanner Iskra. Hope everyone had a good week outside of podcast land. Hope everyone is practicing that social distancing. However, I still hope that you're exercising and getting away from that old cabin fever. No ratings or reviews this week, which I'm fine with because last week you had a lot of reviews. However, my math for Marines detected that we've reached a milestone. 200 combined ratings and reviews. Do you know what that did for us? About a week and a half ago, at the time of this release, we were the number one show for a couple of days straight in the government category on iTunes. iTunes also put us in the top shows in that category for the better part of last week. Why is that? Well it was because of your listenership, your ratings, and especially your reviews that did that, so thank you. Let's keep it going. Because remember, the more ratings and reviews not only lets me know how we're doing as far as bringing you what you want, the ratings and reviews and subs give us a better chance to climb in the iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, et cetera, algorithms, which in turn allows us to reach more veterans out in podcast land and gives them a chance to listen and hear not only these great stories, but the benefits breakdown episodes and the information provided in the news releases. Speaking of news releases, we don't have any new ones this week. However, as they're released, I'll make sure to get it to you. As far as the latest in coronavirus, if I see anything that gets released on our blog or out in VA social media land, just like last week and the week before that, I'll get on here and do a quick update.

And if you haven't heard last week's update on COVID-19, check it out. There are some changes and some new standard operating procedures

for when you have to visit- for when you visit a VA facility. All right, so excited to bring you this week's episode. Today we have the first woman to ever command a ship in the Navy. And her last name is Iskra. Up until a month ago, we have never spoken. We had no idea that each other even existed. So, the big question was, are we related? We don't know for sure, but both of our families came from Northern Croatia, Austria region, uh, around the same time. She now lives in my home state of Washington and she's been to my hometown and even though she's never met my family, she knew my family existed because she frequents a restaurant that has my family history hanging up on the wall. Just such a weird, amazing connection. Best part? She's a trailblazer. In addition to being the first woman to ever command a ship, she was one of the first three women to become a Naval dive officer. And on Capitol Hill, she helped staff, and pass an amendment that, among other things, forbade the DoD from requiring US service women from wearing the abaya garment while stationed in Saudi Arabia. Like I said, complete trailblazer. So, without further ado, I bring to you Navy veteran, Darlene Iskra. Enjoy.

[00:03:29] Music

[00:03:34] Interview:

(TI): Darlene, I can't believe that I'm in front of you right now. This is amazing. It really is.

Darlene Iskra (DI): It's really fun.

(TI): For anybody that's listening, I want you to know that- that before about a month ago, you and I had never talked, right?

(DI): Correct. I didn't even know you existed [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter] You know, I- I knew. You know, I had read before and you know, intermittently that an Iskra was the very first woman to ever command a ship in the Navy. And of course, the first thing I thought was, we had to be related in some way. And now I thought that that was way before 1990.

(DI): Oh.

(TI): I did, you know, I- I mean, I was just a lance corporal. Maybe I heard it as a lance corporal, maybe I heard it as a corporal. As I was coming up through the ranks. I just heard that story.

(DI): But I didn't make it- but I didn't go into command until 1990.

(TI): Yeah, that's what I know. Yeah, I know. Yeah. I had- but I had no idea it was 1990. I thought it was- I thought something like that would've happened way earlier than that, you know.

(DI): Yeah. You would've thought [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter]And for me, so for me in 1990 it's- it's still pretty recent in my mind.

(DI): I know - 30 years ago [Laughter]

(TI): We, we are, we are. I'm, I'm understanding that- that kids today are now looking at me like I looked at Vietnam veterans.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): But for me, 1990 is pretty recent. So how we- how we met mutual friend through the VFW. We linked up and lo and behold, in our first conversation, we found out both of our families came from Northern Croatia. Isn't that wild?

(DI): Yeah, yeah, well, Iskra, in this country isn't that common but I don't know what it is in Croatia, you know, if it's very common or not. But I mean, I don't know.

(TI): I hear from like, you know, there's Iskras in Russia—

(DI): Yes.

(TI): There's Iskras in Slavic- you know, all Slavic countries, almost like a Jones.

(DI): Hmm, interesting.

(TI): Interesting note about the- the word Iskra. It was a former polish jet at one point. It was- it was Lenin's first newspaper.

(DI): Mhm, I knew that.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): Did you know it means spark?

(TI): Yes, it does.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): A gunnery sergeant with me at the Black Sea Rotational Force out- out in Romania, and he was Bosnian, and his last name was Hadzic. So, he knew my last name and he knew what it meant. So, my nickname immediately became Sparky.

(DI): Mhm. Well, that kind of goes with your job, too. Kinda

(TI): A little bit.

(DI): Communications and stuff.

(TI): A little bit. The spark. You even live in Washington now?

(DI): Yes.

(TI): Like my home state.

(DI): I actually lived in Washington before I joined the Navy. And I was up there because I had, my first husband was a sailor, and so we wound up in Washington and then we got divorced and I stayed there until I joined the Navy myself.

(TI): Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh. Now, now Iskra isn't your married name? It's-

(DI): No, no. It's my- it's- yeah.

(TI): It's blood.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): Gotcha.

(DI): It's my birth name, as they say now.

(TI): Gotcha.

(DI): Don't say maiden anymore. It's birth name [Laughter]. It's a new vernacular.

(TI): So you kind of grew up, you kind of lived in Washington state and you still live in Washington state now, but you- you- I didn't know you lived there before you joined the Navy.

(DI): Yeah, I lived in California all my life. Went to college, you know, and then I got married and then we moved to Washington in 1975 and I lived there until '79 but it was my home state of record the whole time I was in the Navy.

(TI): Tax-free.

(DI): That's right [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter]

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): Now for those that don't know, my grandfather was the first person in my family to be born in America. But he still had a lot of the old country in him. He had two older brothers that were born there in what is now Croatia. And he had another brother that was born in Austria. And, he was the last to really, really know the origins of our family history. He said that at one point that we had family in Ohio or Australia. So, I mean, do you know anybody in either Ohio or Australia? No? Okay.

(DI): No.

(TI): Okay. Grew up in California.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): Gotcha, gotcha.

(DI): And we were the only Iskras I knew.

(TI): I can imagine that. I can imagine- not a very common name, like you said, alright. So, in addition to this weird family coincidence—

(DI): Yes [Laughter]

(TI): You know, you're simply a groundbreaker, honestly. And I'm so honored to be able to just sit down and talk with you. One of the first female diving officers in the Navy. First woman to ever command a vessel in the Navy. Why did they say vessel? It's a ship. It was a ship, right? The Opportune was a ship.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): It was a ship, a commissioned ship.

(TI): Yeah, it was big.

(DI): No [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter] I mean—

(DI): The idea is big. Yeah. But the ship was actually quite small. It's basically an ocean-going tug.

(TI): Okay. But it was still big enough to tug some big ships.

(DI): Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

(TI): I mean, it was a full vessel.

(DI): A powerful little- little ship, yes.

(TI): [Laughter] But before- before all of this, you decided to join the service—

(DI): Yes.

(TI): In the first place. Do you remember that decision?

(DI): Yes, I do. And it was financial. You know, I'd gotten divorced. I was working three jobs up in Anacortes. I was living in Anacortes, Washington. And, uhm, working with the armed services YMCA in Oak Harbor. And I also had a job teaching at the local swimming pool. And I had a third job where I was teaching physical fitness at the local junior college, and I was making like \$750 a month, doing like- working like 80 hours a week. And, um, I thought, well, Oh, I saw it. I saw an advertisement in the Seattle Post Intelligencer at the time.

(TI): The old PI.

(DI): Yeah. About mid-level managers wanted it, and it was like, you have to- just have to have your bachelor's degree, you know, blah, blah, blah. And then, down at the bottom, it was like US Navy recruiting office [Laughter]

(TI): [Laughter] Pretty slick.

(DI): So, I said, okay, I called, and I had to go down to Seattle, and I spoke to a woman there. And, it was kind of exciting and I thought, you know what? I- I was not doing well in Anacortes, and I knew I needed to get out of that situation. So, I thought, you know what, I'm just going to change my life.

(TI): Wow. Like so many others. Talk to me about being one of the first female divers in American Naval history.

(DI): Well, you know, we didn't know that at the time. And, when I was working at the pool in- in Anacortes, one of my coworkers says to me, "Oh, you should look at- you're a good swimmer. You should look into Navy diving." And I'm like, there's divers in the Navy? I had no clue [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And so, when I talked to my recruiter, she's like, "Oh yeah, when you get to OCS, officer candidate school, they'll- they'll do a volunteer and, you know, there's physical requirements you have to pass and other requirements." And I'm like, okay, fine. So, get to OCS and sure enough, about six weeks into the 16-week program, they call for volunteers for divers - diving officers. And so, I'm like, okay, sign me up. And you know, it's basically a- you have to do a run in a certain amount of time and pushups- so many pushups, so many sit ups, you know, that whole thing.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And then once you pass that, then you have other requirements you have to do. So anyway. That's how that happened. It was just kind of one of those-

(TI): But they didn't tell you that you were going to be one of the first?

(DI): Oh no, I didn't- I had no idea that they had- they had just opened the- the program to women like the six months before. No idea that we were the first. So, we wound up going to dive school, which was here at the Washington Navy Yard, and there was a woman in the class ahead of us. And there had been women who tried before but didn't make it.

(TI): Got you.

(DI): And- and I want to clarify also that there were enlisted divers, well, before women diving officers.

(TI): Okay.

(DI): There had been enlisted divers since 1975.

(TI): Got you.

(DI): But this is in 1979 and yeah, so the- the women officers were finally able to go into the program and it al- also, I found out many years later, it all came about because they opened ships to women back then in 1978 and so then they decided, well, I guess we can open this other program to women, as well, because on the tenders- the big repair ships and- and ship tenders, they had dive lockers. And so, they figured, well, women can- can be in charge of the dive lockers and so therefore go on the ship. So that's how that kind of all happened. So, what was really cool was I was diving officer on the USS Hector, which was stationed out of an AR station out of San Francisco. And, there was only like six women on the whole ship of 900 men.

(TI): Oh my gosh.

(DI): Yeah. It was pretty weird [Laughter]

(TI): Yeah. What was billeting like? How- how did they figure that out?

(DI): Billeting? Oh yeah. Well, as officers, you get your own state room.

(TI): Sure. Got you.

(DI): So that was easy.

(TI): But you had enlisted women too, at the same time?

(DI): No.

(TI): Oh just six women- the six women were on—

(DI): Six women officers and the rest were enlisted- enlisted men, and the women- enlisted women came about a year and a half afterwards. So, it was just at the start of this whole integration of women in ships.

(TI): What was the biggest challenge at that time?

(DI): It really- The Hector was an awesome ship to be on board. The officers were very supportive. The CO was very supportive, and I managed to, uhm, get my guys behind me because I was- I was awesome at physical training back then, I was like, buff, you know? And so, and they hadn't even had a physical training requirement in the dive locker. I mean, they were just like, really, it was funny.

(TI): Oh, wow.

(DI): So, I get them out there to a running and- and, you know, PT and I'm kicking their butts and they're like, whoa. Ensign Iskra is pretty damn cool. You know, just impressed the heck out of them. So yeah.

(TI): Doesn't take much for a lot of guys.

(DI): I know, apparently not.

(TI): Doesn't take much.

(DI): But yeah, after that it was like, it was great. And of course, the other good thing was there had been some drug related problems in the dive locker, this is in the early eighties, right?

(TI): Yeah, late seventies, early eighties coming out of Vietnam.

(DI): So, one of the first things my boss said to me was, "I need you to- we think that there were problems in the dive locker with drugs and so we need you to clean it up." So of course, you know, you come in there with your drug dogs and your inspection, and yeah, we found marijuana. And then we- so then we tested everybody. Urinalysis screening and popped three. And so, I went from a dive locker of nine men to six men, and then after that my boss was like "I want you to go on every single dive." I'm like okay sir, sure, no problem sir. Because, we had been told as officers we wouldn't get to do hardly any diving, so I was out there every day. It was great.

(TI): Oh, wow. And it sounds like you went everywhere, too. All over the Pacific, Diego Garcia, Kenya sounds like a great gig.

(DI): Yep, no, it was it was a wonderful tour.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): Yeah, it was wonderful.

(TI): You requested a transfer.

(DI): Well, no, I was- got remarried and my husband was getting transferred down to San Diego.

(TI): Let me rephrase that. According to the *Time* article that I read you requested a transfer.

(DI): Oh, okay. Well, that was later.

(TI): Got you. Got you.

(DI): Okay. So, I was I had gotten remarried and we were down in San Diego and I was in a job that was pretty dead end.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): It was a staff job and it was teaching, you know, it was fine but it wasn't really -

(TI): Wasn't- wasn't what you were doing—

(DI): Exactly.

(TI): You weren't diving out- out in Kenya

(DI): Correct.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): So, I saw this- there used to be this magazine, it was called *Faceplate* and it's a magazine of diving- Navy diving and salvage. And they still- they still publish it, but they publish it online now. But, uhm—

(TI): Magazine industry has changed.

(DI): Yeah, I know.

(TI): Just like newspapers.

(DI): Yeah. So, I- I happened to see an article about this new class of ARSs, which is the kind of ship that divers go on, other than tenders. That was being built as a gender-neutral platform, and this was the first ship in the Navy that was being built as a gender-neutral platform. I mean, the tenders that the women had been on before were-, they had to be modified to accommodate women.

(TI): Okay.

(DI): So now they're—

(TI): We're talking like heads and building—

(DI): Yeah. Building in heads.

(TI): Got you.

(DI): So, I'm like, oh my gosh, this is a great opportunity for me because, you know, I mean, I've- I could see, I mean, I'd been in the Navy four years and I'm like, thinking, yeah, there's nothing left for me here. And a lot of

women got out at that time who wanted to go on ships because there just wasn't anything available. So, I called my detailer, which is basically your assignment officer, and I said, I really want to go on one of these- on this ship. The Safeguard. He goes, well, the Safeguard's been, you know, billeted but we have the grasp, which is just being- they're starting to do the manning at that point. This is 1984.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): Yeah. And so, I'm like, oh, this is what I want. So that's when I submitted my request for transfer and it turned out the grasp was being built up in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, and it was gonna eventually be stationed out of Norfolk, Virginia. So yeah, I went across the country and that was the kind of the start of my whole new adventure.

(TI): Because you were like- Heads and billeting like that's- that's, I mean, nowadays we don't even think about that, you know, like, but back then, it it's amaz—

(DI): I mean, that was the whole criteria. Like, heaven forbid you share the head with a man. Right? Good lord, yeah.

(TI): So you eventually became OpsO- XO of ships

(DI): Yeah, that was my first on the *Grasp*. I was the Ops officer and then, well pre-commissioning so it was- it was- that was kind of unfortunate because when you're pre-commissioning, the ship doesn't really get underway all that much.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): But I did- we did get her through the whole commissioning process and then underway and all of the training. So, I did manage to, you know, get my feet wet again on being- they call it driving the ship basically you con the ship and take it here and there. Anyway, so then I got selected for executive officer and—

(TI): Was, uhm, was overall command a goal at this point for you?

(DI): You know, it- you know I thought, eventually, if I kept going, that it would be. I mean I never in a million years thought I'd be the first. Never! That was not the goal. The goal was to have a career commensurate with my male counterparts.

(TI): Yeah. Yeah, of course.

(DI): Yeah. And so I did the best I could just like everybody else.

(TI): At that point was it known that no woman had ever commanded a vessel in the Navy?

(DI): Yes. But you know, there were women who were senior to me who were in the surface warfare community which is related.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And so I was thinking eventually one of them would, and in fact, one woman was selected for command before me.

(TI): Didn't happen though.

(DI): She went to command after I did.

(TI): Oh, wow. Wow. When did you know that you were going to get called to command your own ship?

(DI): Well I had- I was on- I was XO and we were on deployment. It was on the USS Hoist and my detailer's like, you need to get engineering officer of the watch qualified. Now this was like the last qualification I needed, but I'm not an engineer. And so, it was really scary to me. But being on a diesel ship it actually turned out to be fairly straightforward. So, I was XO of the ship and I'm finally getting my engineering officer of the watch qualifications. And then after that I got selected for command. But, again, I didn't think I would be the first one.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): You know, because my detailer's like, well you know we can give you a little break. Because I had I had basically gone from sea duty, sea duty, sea duty, three- three ships in a row.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): With a little break in between for schools, but, ya know. So, I'm like, fine. You know. "We'll send you to the war college." Okay, fine. "Oh no, we'll send you—" Okay, fine. I mean I was pretty open to whatever they wanted to do with me.

(TI): Aye Sir, aye ma'am, whatever you want.

(DI): Yeah, I mean, but I knew I was going to command eventually. And so, but apparently, up at the Bureau of Naval Personnel there was a little bit of a

discussion about who was going to be the first woman to command a ship, because this other woman, like I said, had been selected first.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): But she had been reassigned to another three year tour between her executive officer tour and her commander tour.

(TI): Gotcha.

(DI): So there - they were looking at whether to pull her out of her current job, but my detailer was like, I need- I need Darlene. I don't have the depth and breadth of officers that the surface warfare community has. So, I need this woman to go into command and and it- it will be the first, but you know, I need her. So, it was really not political but it just was a necessity.

(TI): Well that's how it should have been.

(DI): Of course.

(TI): The needs of the Navy.

(DI): But- but it still became kind of political.

(TI): Oh, sure. Sure, of course. Now, the other woman did she ended up becoming a commander too?

(DI): She did.

(TI): What was her name?

(DI): Deborah Gernes. And then, shortly after that another woman named Jeanne Miller became the CO.

(TI): Got you.

(DI): So, we were the first three and the other two happened in '91.

(TI): Got you. So, 1990. I mean how old was the Navy at that point?

(DI): Oh, I don't know 200 and some years old.

(TI): Yeah. I mean it's amazing that it took that long.

(DI): Well, you know, the whole gender stereotypes of women and their roles in society were- were changing. I mean they had been changing since the 70s it just took the military a little bit longer to accept some of that stuff.

(TI): Your generation and the generation before that saw a lot of that.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): You know. So, and of course you know the government's usually about a generation behind in anything.

(DI): [Laughter] Yeah.

(TI): So, what was the mission? So, you took command of the *USS Opportune*.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): What was the mission of that?

(DI): Like I said, an ocean-going tug. And- and it also had salvage capabilities. So, we had an onboard towing machine that could tow disabled ships. We could use it to pull ships that had gone a ground, off, you know, after just- just a little bit more to it than that. But we also had the capability of a heavy ton lift, so we could, you know, send our divers or whatever down to the bottom and pick up anchors or pick up even small vessels, you know, and- and things like that.

(TI): Very heavy things at the bottom of the ocean.

(DI): Yeah. Airplanes. Airplanes were a big- a big deal back in the 80s and 90s in terms of uh you know, especially in the Norfolk Virginia area, 'cause you'd get pilots out of Oceana and they would- they would crash and then you'd have to go pick up the remnants.

(TI): Wow. Yeah, I saw that. I mean, that was kind of the *Opportune's* mission ever since it was commissioned.

(DI): Oh yeah.

(TI): Back in what was it '43?

(DI): '44

(TI): '44. It had a lot- a very storied history [inaudible] down aircraft, aiding distressed ships.

(DI): Yeah. In fact, *Opportune* was one of the vessels in the mid-eighties that helped do the recovery on the *Challenger*.

(TI): Wow. Wow

(DI): Yeah. In the mid-eighties, yeah

(TI): You even got the opportunity to help Florida with Hurricane Andrew, right?

(DI): Yes, indeed.

(TI): How'd that go down?

(DI): Uhm, that was an interesting time. We were actually towing a vessel down through the Panama Canal. And on our way back, the hurricane hit. And so, we were told to kind of stay away cause we had to go, of course, right through Florida cause we were on the East coast.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And, so, then they told us to pull into Miami. And we unloaded some supplies, and then- sorry, we pulled into Key West, Florida and we unloaded supplies. Then we went to Miami and started helping to, actually we did a couple of things. The main mission of the Navy down there was to clean up the schools, so the schools could restart back. you know.

(TI): Start back up.

(DI): Because this was in August and September. So- so we would go to the local schools and rip out the carpeting and throw away the books. And, you know, we had whole teams. I had another set of crew who went down and helped with FEMA to help take insurance information about the people who had lost their homes.

(TI): Oh, wow

(DI): So, yeah. We had two missions then, so it was pretty- it was pretty interesting.

(TI): Andrew stuck out to me because as a kid, I mean, you know you can laugh at this but as a kid that was the first hurricane that I can remember that really affected a lot of people. I remember that's the first hurricane for me that was like you know I saw the imagery of the houses boarded up and everybody preparing and all the aftermath. So, when I saw that you helped out with that that was the first thing that stuck out to me.

(DI): What was interesting, too, because as CO I had an opportunity to go up in a helicopter and observe the destruction from the air. It - it was actually

like a bomb had hit. I mean, there was not a stick of wood in the mainly affected area.

(TI): Wow.

(DI): You know it was just amazing to look at. Yeah.

(TI): Very good. Now were you the *Opportune's* last commander?

(DI): Yes and no. It's kind of a weird story.

(TI): Maybe the last- the last active commander

(DI): Yeah, yeah.

(TI): Because it was decommissioned shortly after, right?

(DI): Yeah. I left. I had some medical problems and so I had some surgery and so then I left and and then my - the XO took over, actually took over the job of decommissioning the ship.

(TI): Gotcha. That's a great lead in. You left the Navy in 2000 after 21 years. Before I ask what the reason was to finally hang up the uniform, I want- I just gotta ask you a couple more questions about your service.

(DI): Okay.

(TI): First I want to know, who was either your greatest mentor or your best friend while you were in?

(DI): Well that's a very interesting question. I don't know that I was really mentored through my career, although I was also- I was married to another military officer who happened to be a Navy SEAL. And we talked a lot about leadership and how to, you know, how to approach different things. I wish I could say that there were some women that helped me out, but unfortunately, I was—

(TI): One of the first.

(DI): Tip of the spear. So, I- my husband was- was a very good mentor and a very good friend. I have some long term friends that I still communicate with that I'd met in- in the Navy and a couple of them have become admirals [Laughter]

(TI): Wow

(DI): Yeah. So, it's kind of like Ooh I knew her when—

(TI): [Laughter] So in a way you were their mentor- in a sense.

(DI): You know some of them think of me as that and I just kind of look at them and think Holy mackerel, that is just so hard to understand. You know.

(TI): Humbling.

(DI): Yes, very much so because like you said I opted to get out and, um, they managed to keep going.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And I think a lot of it did have to do with mentors. I think even though they were not that much junior than I, in some of their fields they had- there were more women. Like my field, diving and salvage, there's none. There still are very few.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): You know but in the supply Corps there were- there had been women who already had been admirals, and in the Nurse Corps, you know, obviously there had been women forever. And so, it- it was- they had more opportunity. And of course, men help mentor as well. I'm not just saying you had to have a woman mentor.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): But I also think and this came up during my research when I finally got into grad school because I was curious as to how they stayed the course when I felt like I couldn't stay the course. And a lot of it had to do with their- their ability - their resilience. Their ability to let things flow, to not worry about when someone said something inappropriate to you, and- and you took care of it, of course, right then. But, you know, it just- and I just allowed and I don't know exactly why my personality was such—

(TI): Cause you're an Iskra.

(DI): [Laughter] I took things so personally, yes.

(TI): You ask my wife, she'll tell, "Yeah that is so my husband."

(DI): Oh my God. So- so yeah So it just started getting me down, you know. I started getting more and more like I can't handle this anymore and it was a lot of gendered talk.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): You know, women don't belong in the Navy. Women shouldn't be on ships. Women shouldn't do this. Women shouldn't do that. And I'm like I've heard this all my stupid career and I'm tired of it.

(TI): Heavy lied the crown?

(DI): Pardon?

(TI): Heavy- heavy lie the crown.

(DI): Mmhmm, yeah.

(TI): What was your favorite job or post in the Navy?

(DI): Post Navy?

(TI): No po-

(DI): While I was in Navy?

(TI): Yea, or your favorite post. Either your favorite job or your favorite post.

(DI): Oh, okay, yeah. You know, well of course my first job on the *USS Hector* that's what made me want to stay in.

(TI): I could see even when you talk about it and today your eyes light up.

(DI): It- it was a really good tour, you know. Then things started going downhill. So, and of course, you know, I'm- I'm working it. I'm on ships and I liked being at sea, and of course, when I took command it was like wow this is awesome.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): But that wasn't my favorite tour even though it was a very important job and I felt very proud to be in command of the ship. But actually, my most favorite job, and I went there kicking and screaming because my husband got stationed there was in Guam. And I went to the CommNav- Commander Naval Forces Marianas and he was dual hatted as the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet rep to you know the Western Pacific.

(TI): Some long title

(DI): Yeah, I know, and it's all acronyms but I do I had better set it up. Anyway, so I turned out to be his civil military affairs officer.

(TI): Okay.

(DI): So, it wasn't really diving related at all. But so I got to go to all the different island nations out there. So, we went to you know the Federated States of Micronesia, the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas, of course Guam. The Republic of Palau. And I got to interact with, you know, the state department personnel and FEMA and even the Peace Corps.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): Because a Peace Corps was kind of like, "Oh military" and I'm like "Oh, no we're here to help." Yeah right.

(TI): A little bit of outreach- a little bit of outreach trying to try to bridge that gap.

(DI): So, and we had a couple of disasters that we worked out there. Big mudslide in Pola- in Pohnpei and there was an aircraft crash in Guam. Really horrific. But the diving that was a thing and even though I wasn't in a diving billet, it'd be near in this- in the South Pacific. The diving is awesome. Every weekend I'd be out there.

(TI): So, it turned into a hobby too.

(DI): Oh yeah absolutely. But the- but the job was just so much fun, too.

(TI): Civil affairs Marines- when I was at- when we were at the Black Sea Rotational Force and we worked pretty closely to civil affairs. We worked pretty much across the hallway from the civil affairs Marines and it just looked like they were always having a great time. So, I can understand where that would be -

(DI): Well one of the things that I did in- and the first admiral that I worked for really wasn't so keen on it, but the second admiral that came in- they had an admiral's barge, I guess that's what they call it. It was actually a little boat you know a really nice 35-foot- 50-foot boat.

(TI): Noted.

(DI): And- and so you know but we'd have a lot of uh foreign vessels come in the admiral would occasionally have a little reception for them. Well you know I thought you know here they are there- there's foreign country and- and you know, we really should we really should do more for that. So, I convinced the admiral of that when- when a ship came in that we

need to do a little harbor cruise and do a little reception with all this- little CO's from Guam and plus the officers of the ship. But that was that worked out really good. So fun.

(TI): Makes- makes- make an event that not many people forget.

(DI): Right. Exactly.

(TI): Absolutely, absolutely. So, you kinda- kinda already led in about why you decided to- reason to finally hang up the uniform. You did a congressional fellowship.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): You helped staff and pass an amendment in 2003. And the 2003 Def- Defense Authorization Bill which forbade the DOD from requiring US Service Women to wear the- is it- abbeyott- ab- how do you pro-

(DI): Abaya.

(TI): Abaya. While station in Saudi Arabia. Basically the burqua without- without the head covering, right?

(DI): I- yeah.

(TI): There was a time that the DOD considered this?

(DI): Oh well-

(TI): In 2003?

(DI): It's actually started after the Persian Gulf War in 1991. And, for some reason, the Air Force- when they when they had their- their- their base in Saudi Arabia decided that the women were going to wear the abaya when they were out in town. Not only did they have to wear the abaya, but they had to walk behind the men. Even if you're an officer, you had to sit in the backseat. You couldn't drive. So, even if you're an enlisted woman and that was your job was to drive the truck you couldn't do it. I mean you just- you really they they were telling women that they basically had to act like Muslim women.

(TI): Amazing.

(DI): And there was this one woman who's now a senator, Martha McSally. She was an Air Force I don't know if she was a major at the time, but she

was, you know, active pilot. A Thunderbird pilot. And of course, she bristled at this whole thing.

(TI): Sure.

(DI): And not only because she was an officer but being very religious she felt that they were forcing her to to abide by these Muslim rules and not her own Christian values. And she tried everything-

(TI): Or just American cultural norms.

(DI): Exactly.

(TI): Yeah

(DI): But she- she was looking at it from a religious perspective.

(TI): Got you.

(DI): So, anyway, so that was in in the early nineties. And, of course, I did my fellowship in 2003 so this was still going on, this whole abaya thing back in Saudi Arabia. So, I met Martha at an event- a woman- a woman's event in- in- in DC she was talking to a group called this Sea Service Leadership Association. And I was, like I said, I was at- I was at the office of Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington State. And she was talking about this and that how she was working with a congressman from New Hampshire, I think it was. And then her own a congressman- senator. But she needed- and they were both Republicans and she needed a Democratic person, you know, to do the bipartisan thing. And so after she talked I- I went up to her I said you know I think this is an important issue, and I- working with Maria Cantwell and maybe we can work something out. So, she went and talked to Senator Cantwell and we did work it out.

(TI): That's great. That's great.

(DI): Yeah. It was really cool. What was really fun though was when Senator Cantwell stood up in front of congress and actually called me by name. So, I'm in the congressional record, which I thought was really cool.

(TI): That's great That's- I mean that's amazing. I didn't think I couldn't -believe - I can't believe that that would be a thing in 2003. The 2000 - the reason 2003 for me is big 'cause that was the year I joined.

(DI): I know in 2003. So, then what happened was of course this rule went into effect and then they left Saudi Arabia. So it was kind of like a moot point

(TI): But still—

(DI): But still.

(TI): You're able to- you were able to -

(DI): Absolutely.

(TI): Yeah. Able to make that point.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): And if we ever go back that that rule will still be there.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): I mean like you said its congressional record.

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): You know when I think of- of women icons in the military, you know, I- I personally thought of Molly Pitcher, Betsy Ross. In a broader sense I think of Clara Barton, Louisa May Alcott. Great women from either, you know, revolutionary times or around the time that women fought for the right to vote like in the early 1900s, suffragette times. You know, I think it's important that we can't forget to look around and realize that women are unfortunately, and fortunately, because we had the honor to meet them. Are still making history. You know, women like Air Force and NASA Colonel Eileen Collins.

(DI): Yep.

(TI): You know in the Marine Corps we always learned about General Mutter, General Dunwoody recently with the Army.

(DI): Right.

(TI): Now you've written two books on this subject. *Women in the United States Armed Forces* and *Breaking Through the Brass Ceiling, Strategies for Success for Elite Military Women*. Who, for you, who is one woman in the military that you want to ensure that nobody forgets?

(DI): Well, obviously Ann Dunwoody, you know being the first woman four star general in the United States military. But another woman who I think is phenomenal is Admiral Michelle Howard who was the first four star Admiral in the Navy. And in the sea services, 'cause there still hasn't been a four star woman in the coast guard, or in the Marine Corps.

(TI): Nope.

(DI): So, she's awesome, she's really awesome. And, of course she's retired now, but she also became one of the highest- in the highest positions of any woman in the military in terms of she was like the vice- now I can't remember if she was the vice CNO or vice Bureau of Naval Personnel.

(TI): Okay.

(DI): But- but then she- she was also in charge of the expeditionary force that saved Captain Phillips from the pirates in- in whenever that was 2008 or nine.

(TI): Yeah. Yeah.

(DI): You know she was in charge of that mission.

(TI): Did not know that.

(DI): Yeah, she's awesome and she used to be local.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): I have her email I think if you want it.

(TI): Absolutely! I would love to interview her. Absolutely

(DI): Yeah.

(TI): So, you know if you're listening to this that will be coming. Hopefully. So, I mean is there like a, like a group, sorority or fraternity, if you will, of like groundbreaking women. Like do you guys all know of each other or -

(DI): Yeah pretty much. You know it all comes together at the Women and Military Service for America Memorial which is the entrance to Arlington Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia. Their mission is to educate the public about the- the wonderful deeds of military women through history.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): American women, you know, so they have a archival area and they do oral histories and written histories, and then they have- and the Memorial is also a museum.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): That you can visit.

(TI): The reason I know about it is because as a Marine, for a while, I was the commandant's videographer and we would host the sunset parades every Tuesday and we would do the little soiree if you will at the Women's History Memorial. And that's how I got to know, But that- but if I didn't know- if I wasn't in that billet, I would have never have known about.

(DI): Right. Well there are so many women that I speak to now I'm- I've been appointed as the Washing- one of the Washington State ambassadors for the Women's Memorial in order to get the word even further out outside of Washington, DC. And when I talk to women at different events that I attend in Washington, they have no- they don't have a clue.

(TI): In Washington State.

(DI): Yeah, Washington State. Yeah, they don't know anything, really anything about it So it's- it- and I was just looking at a lot of these, cause I'm here in DC right now. Brochures, you know, tourist brochures and- and I'm thinking where is the Women's Memorial on this map? Not there. Even in the Foder's guide to Washington, DC, it's not in there.

(TI): If you're not- if you're not- you know there's no visual to this podcast but behind her there's this table where there's just all these pamphlets.

(DI): It's not there and I'm thinking I need to do something about that.

(TI): Yeah, absolutely.

(DI): I want to start a letter writing campaign I think to AAA Maps and to you know Rick Stevens Washington DC. I want to do all that stuff.

(TI): Absolutely. What- what's going on with it lately? Is there anything new going on with it?

(DI): Well yeah actually the reason I was here was because the founder General Wilma Vaught's 90th birthday is this month and they were going to do a big reception for her but of course now that-

(TI): With everything-

(DI): With this coronavirus, everything's been canceled.

(TI): These- these other groundbreaking women- you talked about not having maybe a mentor either male or female in the Navy. Do you see these other women as mentors now as later on in life?

(DI): Well yeah! I mean we get together, and we talk. And-and interestingly you mentioned one of the books, *Women Breaking Through the Brass Ceiling*, women's military- really I forget the name. It was a very tongue- a lot- a lot of words there. But I interviewed the senior most women in the military. So, I interviewed the general and- and flag officers. And at that time there were about 300. So, this this all happened in 2006. So I'd- I've contacted as many of- they were all still- well there was only one or two that were deceased by then, but most of them were all still alive and plus then I got information on the internet about other- other women. Anyway, so, I put together this study about how they made it to the top in a man's world, basically.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And- and a couple of the women actually interviewed me. So I think the fact that I had been one of the, pioneers you know, and there was some name recognition there, so, I really got access to quite a number of these senior women and they were just so wonderful to speak to. And in fact, one of them that I interviewed has subsequently moved to Kingston, Washington and now we're really good friends.

(TI): Oh wow.

(DI): Yeah. So, yeah it opened doors. It really opened doors for me. And I, for that I'll be eternally grateful. I mean I wouldn't be- I wouldn't have met you if it hadn't been for this.

(TI): Oh my gosh. It's just amazing. I still think of, you know, Darlene Iskra and I just read that and I'm just like, we have to be related, no way. Sounds like you keep yourself busy.

(DI): Yes.

(TI): What are your where are you working on lately?

(DI): Okay, so I'm fully retired and so I don't get paid but that's okay. I, like I said, I'm the- one of the ambassadors for the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. I also am with the Women Divers Hall of Fame. I used to be their scholar- one of their scholarship chairs, but I've since you know started to say "no."

(TI): Retired from that too.

(DI): I did. I'm with the local chapter of the Military Officer Association of Kitsap County. And, I'm very active in that organization. Currently their

secretary, but I had been the president, and then I- I've been in there for since like 2011. And I was in the Rotary but I also finally said goodbye to that.

(TI): Elder state - it's the as the product of being an elder statesman. You can say no to things now. You can say, "You know what -"

(DI): Well my admiral friend she told me you know I am just starting to say no cause now I'm in the last third of my life and I want to make it what I want to do and I thought about that and I thought, good idea!

(TI): Darlene, what's one thing that you learned in service that carried with- that carried with you and everything that you did afterwards?

(DI): Well you have to do the job to the best of your ability and- and take opportunities as they are presented to you. You know you you called and I'm like, yes I'm doing it because this is an opportunity for me to talk about the Women's Memorial which is very important to me but also provide- I know I'm a role model even though you know it does seem kind of strange to me cause I just always felt like I was just doing the best I could and just moving forward. I wasn't pushing an agenda or anything other than that. But now, my agenda of course is equality for women, for women.

(TI): And we talk about the history of women in the military, it's still being made. I mean even today I mean -

(DI): Yes.

(TI): I mean even since I've gotten out and it's amazing to see this, you know, like women that are now enlisted women, that pass through the Marine Corps School of Infantry. Recently one just completed ranger school.

(DI): Right. But you know you realize those are all like physical things, physical, very physical. And so, like with- with me like when I went in through diving school, I mean so it was physically very challenging for me.

(TI): So, you can definitely identify with that.

(DI): Oh, absolutely. But you know there are also other firsts that haven't occurred yet in the- in the more senior levels. Like in the I think we finally got our first unified commander. And I think it was an Air Force general I think she's in charge of STRATCOM or one of those Air Force, you know that's the first. We still haven't had like any of the Joint Chiefs females. Still haven't had the CO of an aircraft carrier as a female. You know, and I

know that there are some obviously other command posts out there that women haven't had yet cause they haven't been in the combatant role for that many years.

(TI): Yeah, haven't been to get into that pipeline.

(DI): So, there's still so many.

(TI): Wow. Is there a there a veteran nonprofit or individual who you've worked with or you had experience with with whom you'd like to mention?

(DI): Well yeah, the two that I just did SWAN and the Women in Military Service for America both are nonprofit. They're working on, you know, military sexual trauma and trying to ensure that the people who have been affected by that are getting their day in court and that the people responsible are getting their day in court.

(TI): Good. Ms. Iskra, and I love saying that, is there something that I haven't asked or something that we didn't cover that you think it's important to share to the listeners?

(DI): I- yes. Okay. So, I- I retired out of the military at 21 years and I was 48 years old, so still pretty young.

(TI): Yeah.

(DI): And I have to say that I felt deflated because I felt like I had been doing such an important job and I really didn't know where to go from there. I had been accepted to a graduate school program at the University of Maryland, which is what I did for, um, I got my PhD in 2007. So, no matter how old you are, there's still opportunities out there. So, I got my PhD at age 55, all of my classmates were 25, you know. So I mean, and they, which was really cool. They looked at me like a classmate, not like, I'm this old woman. Right? But then I was still able to go forward and like you say, I got the- helped get the abaya amendment passed. And I wrote two books, and now I've gotten lazy. I haven't, other than, you know, being involved in these local organizations. I'm getting kind of lazy, but I'm thinking now we've got to get that, I've got to get this Women's Memorial in all these tourist pamphlets. That's my next big thing. So, there's always something, know there's always something to look forward to and you have to, you do what you're passionate about. And anybody could tell you, I'm passionate about women and their equality.

[00:46:41] Music

[00:46:48] PSA:

Narrator: There are nearly two million women veterans who served and deserve the best care anywhere. At each VA medical center nationwide a women veteran's program manager is available to advise, advocate, and coordinate care for women veterans. Women veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should call the VA Women Veterans Call Center at 855-VAWOMEN or contact the nearest VA medical center and ask for the women veteran's program manager.

[00:47:18] Music

[00:47:22] Closing Monologue:

(TI): What a treat and what an honor to sit down with Darlene. Super excited to keep in contact and trace the family lines. For more information on the Women in Military Service for American Memorial, you can visit simply womensmemorial.org [Link: www.womensmemorial.org] In addition, for more information on the Service Women's Action Network, you can visit servicewomen, all one word, dot org [Link: www.servicewomen.org] This week's *Borne the Battle* Veteran of the Week is Marine Corps veteran Opha Mae Johnson, and it comes by way of the World War One Centennial Commission. You can find them at, and this is all one word, worldwaronecentennial.org [Link: www.worldwaronecentennial.org] The legends of women dressing as males to fight for the United States has been spoken of since the revolution. Women were not allowed to legally enlist in the armed services, with the Marine Corps being no exception. By the summer of 1918, however, the Corps was in need of more service members, many of whom occupied vital administrative and clerical positions throughout the war department at the time. The idea was circulated and eventually approved to allow women into the Marines to fill these non-combat positions, relieving these men to head out to the front. From Kokomo, Indiana, Opha Mae Johnson was first in line when the recruiting station in Washington DC opened its doors to women and would become a legend as the first woman Marine. Opha Mae Jacob was born in May of 1878 to William and Elleby Jacob in Kokomo, Indiana. Not much is known about her early life in Indiana, but by 1895 she would move with her parents to the nation's capital, Washington DC. On June 4th, 1895 she is listed as a graduate of Woods Commercial College in DC. She would continue to live in Washington DC with her husband and parents and found clerical work with the Interstate Commerce Commission. This is where she would find herself through the beginning

of the First World War. Initially, American women served their country in a moral and economic support role through the Salvation Army, Red Cross, and numerous other local and national organizations.

The closest that women would be able to get to the front would be as nurses in hospital units treating wounded soldiers at evacuation hospitals behind the lines, or as humanitarian workers aiding the soldiers in the trenches. Following the German offensive in the spring of 1918 and their subsequent defeat in the second battle of the Marne, the allied powers now found themselves on the offensive. However, it had been at no small cost, with the casualty sustained by repelling the offensive, as well as the need for trained battle-ready soldiers for the final push of the war. The military realized that it needed ways to increase the number of trained combat troops in Europe and that they needed to do so quickly. While the United States military wouldn't consider using women as combat troops for decades to come, there was another way that women could bolster the nations fighting strength in France that began to be discussed. On August 8th, 1918 the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, it's a great name, gave his approval, allowing women to enroll in the Marine Corps Reserve to serve in clerical positions, which would free up Marines currently occupying those positions to be deployed to the front. On August 13th, 1918, Opha Johnson, at age 40, would be at the head of the queue of many women waiting in line to enlist. Rigorous interviews and examinations made for a challenging path towards enlistment in the Marine Corps. One of the many thousands that enlisted, only 305 were enlisted during the four months of recruiting. As evidenced by her successful enlistment, Johnson was able to clear these challenges. On September 11th, 1918 she was promoted to sergeant. By January of 1919 she remained the only female reservist working in the quartermaster department who held the rank. Following the end of the war, the female reservists were gradually discharged from the Marine Corps Reserve. Many, including Sergeant Johnson, elected to stay working in the war department, which it was called- which the DOD was called back then, in the role of civil servants. Johnson would continue her clerical work in the civil service for decades to follow. Opha would continually stay in touch with her comrades and remained involved in the Marines after she was discharged. Her name would be found amongst the charter members of the Belleau Wood Post One of the American Legion formed by these pioneers in the Marine Corps. Following service in the Marines, Opha Mae Johnson lived the rest of her life in Washington, DC with her husband, which she would have continued association with the Marine Corps. Sadly, on August 11th, 1955 Opha Mae Johnson passed away at the age of 76. She would be buried next to her husband at Rock Creek Cemetery in DC. We honor her service.

That's it for this episode of *Borne the Battle*. If you yourself would like to nominate a *Borne the Battle* veteran the week, you can. Just email us at podcast@va.gov. Include a short writeup and let us know what you'd like to see him or her as the *Borne the Battle* veteran of the week. And as always, I'm reminded by people smarter than me to remind you that the Department of Veterans Affairs does not endorse or officially sanction any entities that may be discussed in this podcast, nor any media, products or services they may provide.

I say that because, if you're a veteran artist, if you create poetry or music, we will feature your auditory art as our outro. If you email us at- again, at podcast@va.gov with all the pertinent details. What you're hearing now is the song "Conquer" by B Ferrari and Zhou off the Ninja Punch music album, Sounds Like Freedom, Volume One. For more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/>]. If you like this podcast, please subscribe to it. And for more stories on veterans and veteran benefits, check out our website, blogs.va.gov [Link: www.blogs.va.gov] and follow the on social media, Twitter [Link to VA's twitter page: https://twitter.com/DeptVetAffairs?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwca], Instagram [Link to VA's Instagram page: <https://www.instagram.com/deptvetaffairs/?hl=en>], Facebook [Link to VA's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/VeteransAffairs>], YouTube [Link to VA's YouTube page: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBvOzPLm_bzjtpX-Htstp2vw], RallyPoint [Link: <https://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage/56052/question-rallypoint-great-place-start/>]. Deptvetaffairs. US Department of Veterans Affairs. No matter the social media, you can always find us with that blue checkmark. Thank you again for listening and we'll see you next week. Take care.

[00:53:30] Music

(Text Transcript Ends)