

Bold(her)

An Adventure That Paved the Way

Susan Beharriell:

So, I look at this alphabetical list. Well, first of all, they won't let me be an army officer, or a naval officer, or a pilot, or a navigator, or an engineer. I don't want to give out socks for the rest of my life. Well, for four years, anyway. I'm not a finance officer. I don't want to be a secretary. I don't want to get ulcers being an air traffic controller. I have no idea what an air weapons officer even is. I'm not a dentist. I'm not a nurse. Rapidly running out of things. And down at the bottom of the list is something that says security. So I asked "what's that?" And he said "that's military police and intelligence". So [00:00:45 boing, boing, boing], I knew what intelligence was. I said, I choose that. So, he looked it up, and he said, "No, that's not open to women." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, it isn't."

So, I put security, security, security, and signed it, dated it, and gave it back to him. He said, "No, you can't put three of the same thing." So, I picked something else for the third one. And off it goes into the system. And I go back to my course thinking, my goodness, what on earth have I got myself into? Well, it was very important that people get loaded on these courses for the next summer when we went back to year two of university because if you didn't get in the course, you didn't get the training in the limited time in the summer. And you got behind everybody else upon graduation. So, that's when they sent three senior officers from Ottawa to interview me because they wanted to find out if I was a bra-burning women's libber who just wanted to get in because the system said no. Well, it's expensive to train Canadian forces officers, so I guess they decided I wasn't. Having asked me all kinds of questions, which would be totally against the law now. And when they decided to let me in, he literally waved his finger in my face as I'm on parade and said, "you'd better measure up, or we'll never let another woman in". No pressure, dear.

Lisa Bragg:

It was the 1970's and Susan Beharriell was accepted into a joint university and Canadian Armed Forces training program. In fact, she was one of the first group of women to undergo the same officer training regime as men. But when it came time to pick her direction for her career, she was told flatly no to her first choice. I'm Lisa Bragg, and this is Bold(h)er Stories of, and for women who stand out, brought to you by BMO for Women. Susan's story has adventure at every twist and turn. The line, you can't because you're a woman, was predictable for women of her generation, and major health roadblocks didn't keep her back either. And yet she doesn't think of herself as a trailblazer. As she'll tell you, she just did her job. Susan, there was quite a reaction when you kept showing up doing what you needed to do to get the next job.

Susan Beharriell:

When I went to a particular course, it was because I needed this. It was an imagery analysis, photo interpretation, and I needed it for my next job. And there weren't really many jobs around. So, it wasn't like I could say, no, I'd rather have another one. There wasn't anything else because it was all so new. And they didn't know what to do with me. The chief instructor submitted his resignation when he found out there was a woman on his course. And he said, "no way, no blankety- blankety-blank

woman would be in my course". So, everybody, even the staff, was all mad at me because their workloads had increased because the chief instructor had left, and it was all my fault.

So, then we get in the classroom the first day, and everybody's taking their lead from this senior person. And no one will speak to me. Now, of course, it's all men, and they wouldn't speak to me. And this was their way of saying women shouldn't be in the military. You should certainly not be an officer. And you should, even more, certainly not be an intelligence officer. And we don't like it. And you can just leave, thank you. And once I figured out what they were doing, and it wasn't that I had personally done anything to them, this was just their way of objecting. So, I thought to myself, I am going to learn as much as I possibly can in spite of them all. And it was not easy when you go to a tough, fast career course when you can't talk to anybody. And because I was the only officer, I couldn't go to their residences, and I couldn't go to their mess hall, or their dining rooms, and they couldn't come to mine.

So, there was nobody to talk to after school. I'm really baffled by number six; what did you get on the question or something. They couldn't. There was nobody to talk to. So, I knuckled down, and it was hard day after day after, week after week, after month after month. And at the end of the course, I topped the course this much, but I topped the course. And at the graduation party, the chief instructor came back, and he took me aside, and he told me that he really hadn't expected women to blah, blah, blah. I said, yes? He said, "but you've proven to me that women can do it. And I will have a woman in my classroom any day". And that made all the hassles worthwhile. And it took a big man to make such a 180-degree change and tell me to my face. And even though there were no women for quite some time after that, but once there were, he was really an advocate for women in the branch, and he put his money where his mouth was. So, that was, that was tough. But you just carry on and do what needs doing.

Lisa Bragg:

Gosh, Susan, when you speak, it feels like it should be 60 or 70 years ago, but you are only 67. This was the '70s, '80s, and '90s that you really heard no, because you're a woman, over and over again. Did you ever feel just like quitting or walking away from all of it?

Susan Beharriell:

Well, I, yeah. I wonder about that. I was pretty darn determined that I wasn't going to fold. Not while it was the driver, but every once in a while, I would remember it. I could just see me phoning up and saying, "everybody's being mean to me, and I can't take it" to the folks who were watching me about women can't do this. So, I never even contemplated doing that, but it would not have gone over well. And I do think back wondering how on earth I got through it, but stiff upper lip and get on with it. I'm going to prove this, that we can do it in spite of all of you. And it was hard.

Lisa Bragg:

And in spite of them all, you rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. Now, I know you have many stories, you're a public speaker, and you tell audiences about your journey, but tell us about your Cold Lake posting.

Susan Beharriell:

I was there for two reasons. First of all, that's Northern Alberta, and it was in the era before the oil sands. And it was a four-hour drive north of Edmonton, and there were no stoplights in between. And there was not much in Cold Lake. Now I'm sure it's much bigger. I was sent there to be, first of all, the

Cold Lake base intelligence officer, but also to work as the intelligence officer for a huge international Air Force exercise. One of the things I did was to say, look, if I'm going to understand what these pilots are doing, what I'm tasking them to do, I really need to go up in the backseat of a fighter and see what I'm tasking them to do. Well, the immediate response was no, your female parts will be damaged. So, I looked back at him, and said, "excuse me, mine are internal".

Well, it took a long time, but they finally did send me for the high-altitude indoctrination course. Of course, in those days, there were no female fighter pilots or navigators. So, this was a bit weird. Anyway, they did take me up in my first flight. Well, I have over 80 hours in the backseat of various fighters now. And the four of us on the Maple Flag staff, three pilots and me, would simply take two-seaters and fly down to bases in the states where we had to coordinate what we were doing in this exercise so that we were in step with other air forces. And one of them just happens to be Nellis Air Force Base, which is right outside Las Vegas. And to get there, we would do a bit of a detour and fly below the rim of the Grand Canyon, pretty cool in the backseat.

Anyway, at the end of my posting, a couple of weeks before I was posted out, the base commander called me up, and he said, "Susan, you're going flying". Well, I had wanted to go flying in the CF-18, ever since I arrived four years earlier, but I had a real job, and I couldn't sit around waiting for the backseat of CF-18 to be open, so I could go for a joy ride. So, he said, "Susan, you're going flying". So, this means a G-suit for gravity, which is like a pair of chaps that go from your waist down. And they have a balloon inside them, which is the air is pushed into this balloon on the outside of your legs to press hard against your leg and keep the blood where it is as opposed to rushing from one end of your head to your feet like you feel when you're on a rollercoaster.

So, out we went, and the pilot did his normal training. So, we did a firefight. We had a dogfight. He had his radio and radar jammed. He did a bombing run. He did a fake shooting, passes, and some takeoffs, and landings and stuff. Anyway, when we were finally done, he said, "well, here we go. We got a bit of extra gas. Let me show you something". So, this was the 100mile x 70mile Cold Lake air weapons range which has no houses, no roads and no people obviously and is designed for the pilots to fly sort of wherever they want. So, he took me out, and he took me down to 100 feet off the ground. Now the trees in Northern Alberta are not that high because it's too cold, and it's not like we were going to bang into anything, but he gets going rather fast.

And he broke the sound barrier 100 feet above the ground. The aircraft is just shaking like this. Things seem to be whizzing by. Of course, nothing is. And just so exciting. It's like you're, behind you is a rocket launcher, which it essentially is. So, he pulls back on the throttle and then pulls back on the stick. So, he slowed down a smidge, and then he goes straight up like an arrow and that, and puts it on again and feels like you're headed into space. It was really exciting. So, then he slowed down a bit and straightened out and waggled the wings, which is a signal to me that I have control because this is a dual set of controls front and seat and backseat. So, we're going along, and I've flown a lot, just straight ahead, following whatever headings the guys asked me to steer when we were going on these work trips.

So, I'm going along. And then I said, "may I do a roll?" Well, of course, the CF-18 is a hugely more modern aircraft. Like several generations beyond the ones I was used to. So, it's a computer and fly by wire and very highly, technically different. So, I go my normal role process with the stick, where we go bew, bew, bew because it's so much lighter on the controls. So, I straighten us out and say, sorry about that. He said, "no, it's a whole lot more gentle". Well, nobody told me, guys. So, then I asked him if I can do a loop. And he says gently. So, we did a lovely big loop, and it was really fun. So, we punched through some clouds, and then he takes control, and he tips us over on its side. And he

says, "do you know what lake that is?" Well, there's a whole bunch of lakes all over this range. And I had known every square inch of it on a map because I worked with targeting all that. So, I said, "is it Lake [inaudible]?" And he said, yes. So, he straightened us out. He said, "you have the com take us home". So, without a map and dead reckoning on that map that I had memorized inside and upside down, I took us right to the landing zone, lined us right up. And he landed. That was pretty cool.

Lisa Bragg:

You've had many adventures along the way. Tell us about some others.

Susan Beharriell:

Well, yes, I have been very fortunate to have many opportunities. As a girl guide still in public school, I represented Canada at the World Center in Mexico and had my first taste of international travel. And I was certainly bitten by the bug. And this has led me to explore parts of all seven continents. A solo trek along the west coast trail of Vancouver Island, canoeing the Nahanni River in BC and Alaska, and following David Thompson's historic route through the Rockies over the Athabasca Pass. At the top of the Great Divide is a tiny lake called the Committee's Punch bowl of the Hudson Bay Company. I stood at one end and watched the stream head west to the Pacific, then walked not very far to the other end and watched it head to the Atlantic. And that was really pretty cool.

Now that was on the trip when I had a close encounter with a rather large grizzly bear. We had just crossed over the Athabasca Pass, and we stopped for the night, and we had some time before dinner. So, I went away from the camp to just fill in my journal. So, I was sitting on a rock in the middle of a snowfield writing my notes. And all of a sudden, I was aware that I was being watched. So, I slowly looked up a little bit, and sure enough, there was a rather large grizzly bear, probably 150 feet away, looking at me. Now, thank goodness the wind was going from him to me. And so, I instantly froze. Well, the bears don't have great eyesight. So, I thought if I just stayed still, maybe I would just be considered the rock. Well, he did come closer, straight for me and got about 50 or 60 feet away and stood up and was really trying to figure me out.

Well, what's going through my head at this point is how magnificent this animal is and what a privilege it is to be there in its presence. And the other part of my head was saying, what am I going to do if he comes much closer? So, I'm trying to look down at the rock, and where I could, well there were a couple of rocks, where I could wedge myself and put my arms over my neck and hope, again, not moving. I'm sure he could have heard my heart thumping. But it was this wonderful feeling of the magnificence of the animal in front of me. So, he got down on all fours and started coming straight for me. And then, all of a sudden, he just swerved.

And went up the mountain behind me at an angle, and I watched. Well, eventually, I turned my head and watched him go, and you could see him off like half a mile, a mile away, heading up a slope of a gentle mountain. So, I finished my journal and went back to camp, and the guys were all saying, oh, Susan, you missed the most amazing thing. We saw this bear heading up the mountain. I said, "no, I didn't miss it". And, told them the story and they didn't believe me. Several didn't believe me. So, I took them back, and because it was a snowfield, they could see exactly where his tracks were and where I was sitting and where my tracks were. And it was pretty cool.

In the pitch-black in a two-seater, F-5 fighter to be thrown around and buffeted by the flash thunderstorm over Nevada, the aircraft was hit by lightning.

We lost our radio and navigation systems. And then we were guided down by our wingman to safely land in the teeming rain to tell the tale. That was an adventure. Learning to drum, dance, leg, wrestle, and throat sing with Inuk in an Inuktitut. Flying in a helicopter with no doors, feeling the heat, and smelling the lava river flowing not far below us as it took out trees and cars, as it went over an active volcano in Hawaii. Climbing an ice waterfall in Canmore, Alberta. Crampons on my boots and ice axe in hand. Learning to repel of a high sheer rock cliff during basic training,

Lisa Bragg:

You also suffered a brain injury, which a contributing factor you've told me is, was stress.

Susan Beharriell:

And it had nothing to do with my arteries or anything. But I have a dead piece of brain about an inch inside my left forehead. So, the doctors told me that if I were to work very hard right away, I might be able to learn to speak again sort of, but I would never, but if I was going to get anything back, I had to do it right away. And the US doctor told me, "oh, well, you should just resign your commission, and you'll never be able to ride your horse again. You'll never be able to ride, to live alone again, no more traveling, no more speaking in public, and your career's over". I determined that no, that's not what I want to do with my life. So, I got down to work.

Lisa Bragg:

So, you were in Colorado, and the people you were stationed with rallied around you to support you while you did this intensive therapy.

Susan Beharriell:

The doctors were pretty amazed that I was able to not have a stuttering monotone of grunts. And so, I learned to speak a second time. And then I had cancer, so I had to learn a third time. Maybe I'll get it right one of these days. Anyway, I was eventually released from the military because the brain injury did settle down to what it was capable of. And it simply was not capable of running a huge staff, which at the rank I was then at, I would be anticipated to do. So, I did keep working for six more years, which was amazing. And quite within the realm of my capabilities, and I was actually offered a promotion to full Colonel, but that was because the promotion side doesn't know anything about your medical side. And so, I had to turn down the assignment to a super-duper intense French course that would go from 7:30 to 6:00 at night, with five hours of homework every night that would qualify people to become a full Colonel. And I was a Lieutenant Colonel at that time. And I knew that my brain just couldn't, couldn't do it. So, I had to write them a memo and say why not. And it was tough because one does work towards progression. But if you'll pardon the pun, it really was a no brainer.

Lisa Bragg:

As a woman in the military, you probably have a lot to say about the military being in the news for sexual harassment nowadays.

Susan Beharriell:

The reports in the news these days are both discouraging on the one hand but rather encouraging on the other. Apparently, an alarming number of very senior male officers still don't get it, as the prime minister says. The sexual misconduct is no longer hidden, and survivors are speaking out. The

military is working hard at determining how it can change its culture. But we must all remind ourselves that the Canadian Forces is, after all, made up of members of Canadian society. I've just recently been named to the Military Sexual Trauma Resource Committee as part of the Canadian Force's efforts to change its culture.

Lisa Bragg:

Thanks for doing that. That's a very important role and demonstrates your continued dedication to the military even in retirement.

Now to change direction a bit, you have a motto that really does suit you.

Susan Beharriell:

Well, ever since I was a little girl, I have had a motto, and that is nothing ventured, nothing gained. And I think that means, well it means to me, if you don't try something you'll never know if you could do it. But perhaps another motto, that of the Royal Canadian Air Force sums up my life so far, Per Ardua Ad Astra, through adversity to the stars.

Lisa Bragg:

Lovely and truly fitting. Susan, on Bold(h)er we always ask these three questions. What's the boldest thing you've ever done?

Susan Beharriell:

It was probably quietly facing that grizzly. Because if I had bolted, moved at all, made any noise, it could have had a very different outcome. But instead, maintaining my cool, the wind direction, and pure luck, it was a wondrous experience.

Lisa Bragg:

When do you wish you were bolder?

Susan Beharriell:

I don't think of myself as bold. So, it's hard to come up with when I could have been bolder. I mean, it probably doesn't help your podcast much, but I don't see myself as being a bold person. I don't go around going, I'm a bold person; I just do whatever's out there.

Lisa Bragg:

What would you say to your 12-year-old self?

Susan Beharriell:

At age 12, I was in grade six. If I remember correctly, I was doing well in school. I sang in the choir and was busy as a girl guide. But I was certainly an oddball at recess and incessantly teased and bullied. So, I would tell my 12-year-old self that the constant bullying will stop. Things will get better. And then I'd say, go for it, girl.

Lisa Bragg:

You just gave me goosebumps. That's beautiful. Thank you. Any last thoughts?

Susan Beharriell:

Well, in terms of my military career, we stand on the shoulders of giants. When you think of the nurses in 1885, as single young women, a dozen of them getting on the steam train, on the tracks that had only just been built and heading out with the army out west to the end of the line, and then getting in red river carts and then going to the Northwest Rebellion and tending for the wounded soldiers there, they were remarkable pioneers and were awarded the campaign medal and became really the first women to serve with, not in, but with the Canadian military. And then there were the nurses of the war in South Africa and then World War I. The first women in Canada to vote were the nursing officers serving in France. And then, of course, World War II, where women served so men could fight, and they did so many things that society and the men thought completely impossible for women. And then was my era of the kind of second wave of women's lib. And we were different in that we were challenging the men for the same jobs. And we had a really hard time with that. But look where we are today, I started off as the only woman, the first woman allowed into the intelligence branch, and we're now 25% of the serving intelligence officers in the Canadian military are women. So, keep going, ladies, keep going.

Lisa Bragg:

Thanks, Susan. My guest today was retired Lieutenant-Colonel Susan Beharriell. I'm Lisa Bragg, and you've been listening to Bold(h)er stories of, and for women who stand out, brought to you by BMO for Women. Please share the show with your community and subscribe to the podcast. Thanks to the team at Media Face. Thank you for listening.