

**Mary Erin Blair nee O'Connor
Narrator**

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Herkimer County Community College
Herkimer, New York**

Mary Erin O'Connor Blair – MB
Interviewers – IV

MB: My name is Mary Erin O'Connor Blair and we're taping here at Herkimer County Community College in Herkimer, New York.

IV: Would you give us your background and how you got started in the service?

MB: I joined the navy in 1972, I had just graduated from Delhi High Ag and Tech and I was living in Syracuse and I was looking for a challenge so I decided that I wanted a big challenge something that other people weren't doing so I decided to join the navy. I was not unfamiliar with the navy as my parents are both World War II Veterans. My mom served in Washington during World War II and my dad in the army during World War II. I was drawn to the navy more so than the army. I got to be honest with you, because I liked their uniforms better and had watched and seen pictures of my mother and I was moved to follow in her footsteps.

IV: What kind of things did your parents tell you about their work?

MB: My mother frequently talked about women being in during World War II and what it was like and the things they had to take jobs over for men so they could go out to sea. It was a whole new breaking ground for women during World War II. They had just established women in the service and they weren't quite sure what to do with them so it was the start of women in the service and it was a new ground she was breaking. She speaks fondly of her time in the service and the friends she made and what it was like for women to be on the same level as men to serve their country. Usually they were back home serving but my mother wanted to put on the uniform and serve right up next to the men.

IV: How did your experiences parallel hers in terms of women being involved in the military?

MB: I would think by the time I went in in 1972 and my mom had got out in '45 that they had come a long way but really they hadn't, nowhere like they are today. I went to boot camp in Bainbridge, Maryland where I spent ten weeks all with women. We didn't see a man except for a medic in the whole ten weeks I was there. I spent a short period of time at the Naval Air search Station in Norfolk, Virginia and they had women there but when I got to the Submarine Base [New London] in Groton, Connecticut, and this was 1972, there were a handful of women on the base and we didn't even have a barracks. When I went to check in at night I said "Where is the barracks?" and they said we have no female barracks, "waves" at that time they called us, and we ended up living in an apartment in the officer's quarters which was pretty good because we

didn't have to live in the barracks we had our own apartment. If you were to tell a woman in the service today that they have no barracks because they didn't have enough women they would probably look at you and go, "How can that be?" We were few in number despite all those years of women in the service.

IV: If you had to take a part of your experience in the service what was the most impressive to you and I don't mean necessarily good or bad I just mean the impression. What was it about the service and being in the service that left you with a greatest story?

MB: I would say the comradery of the people and how they felt for each other and what they were willing to do for each other. I was at the submarine base and I met people that were studying to go into submarine service and they knew that something happened to that submarine they were going to have to go behind that hatch and close that door knowing that that person you were going to have to leave them in there and they would die and these people knew what they had to do and were willing to do this and also that they would do anything for his shipmate. They would give their life they would give their life jacket; they had a special bond that I had never seen or experienced before except from my dealings with my parents. They would give their life for their shipmate. It was very moving to me to see how they cared and took care of each other and they move as a unit and work as a unit, like a family unit but just not related.

IV: Just in your own reflection, why?

MB: Well you start out in the navy or in any military service where they take you and make you a part of the military the first thing you want to do is not wear civilian clothes. You want to get your civilian clothes off and you want to wear a uniform and be part of that group. For ten weeks you live you sleep you work as a group and because you work so close together you form a special bond. I'm still in contact with three girls that I was in boot camp with that I haven't seen since 1972. I have remained in contact with them for over thirty years, we just formed a bond. Each duty station I went to its just things that click, you work hard you play hard you become like a family. You love each other like a family and you're willing to make sacrifices like you would in a family. I've seen people that would take watches for other people so they could be with their family. It's phenomenal and it's been going on for years.

IV: Tell us some more about you being on the submarine and your duty.

MB: Well I wasn't on a submarine I was at the submarine base in Groton. Another thing is you don't really know what people will do. I didn't know anything about submarines when I got there but I started working with these gentlemen, these sailors, and I saw what they were doing and what they were willing to do and they would go out and they couldn't get mail they couldn't get messages and this was before email and they be gone for three months and they didn't see or hear from their families. If they're on a sub and their parent died they didn't tell them. They didn't know until they came back that someone in their family had died. They would not surface, it was the Cold War, you didn't surface. I was in awe to learn that these people would do that stuff. The thing about those people is they were unsung heroes because you never heard about them. I mean usually today you hear of these aircraft carriers overseas and all these big ships and units going, but here is this group of people silently doing their job not asking for recognition and to me that's left a lasting impression. Military people aren't there for the glory of it; they're

there to do a job. I was truly truly impressed with what they were willing to do. It was phenomenal.

IV: Tell us some more about what you did. What was life like for you in the service?

MB: When I first joined the navy there was very few jobs women could do. You could be a medic, a clerk, store keeper, administrative type duties. There weren't maybe five jobs when I enlisted that they showed me I could do. Since I had an aversion to blood I decided the medics weren't for me. So I was a personnel man and I took care of people's records, well at least I started out that way and worked my way up to counseling after twenty six years. I use to transfer people and when I first started doing it I didn't think of it much, you have to remember Vietnam was going on at this time, and I sent a lot of people to Vietnam. I would type their orders up, get their medical records, take care of everything they needed. I got to say because what was going on here in the states, I really didn't realize where I was sending them, and I was sending them into harm's way. Until someone in my home town, a kid I had gone to school with was killed did it put a personal face on it. So after that whenever I sent somebody overseas to Vietnam I looked at that person in a whole different way. It surely stopped and made me think it wasn't a person on a piece of paper. I did a variety of jobs and they were all working with sailors. Then I got into counseling with them and it was a very very rewarding experience for me.

IV: Tell me what you want people to know from having counseled with sailors.

MB: The counseling I did on that level was to help them with their military careers. Did you want to stay in? Did you want to get out? Was this the job for you? Maybe a young sailor joins at seventeen and doesn't know what they want to do and they get into something and they decide they want to stay but they don't want to be in the engine room the rest of their life. So you have an experienced person that will say, "Okay you want to stay, what we are going to do to help you get into the job you want and make a career out of it?" They had special counseling for problems that sailors had but my counseling was pretty much helping them get advanced, get courses done, make a good life out of their military career with the navy. It was rewarding to see someone that you started working with and maybe was floundering and didn't know where they wanted to go and maybe you sent them in the right direction and you saw they stayed and you saw that they advanced and found a home in the navy. It was really really rewarding.

IV: You mentioned being in the reserves and you retired. After that length of service what would you want people who have no idea what the experience is like to know?

MB: I'd like them to know that maybe why military people feel differently. They feel special towards each other. If you see veterans groups, they're all over VFW and American Legion, the reason they're special and have these groups is because they have formed this special comradery. They feel comfortable with each other, they talk the same lingo, they've had the same experiences, and they're proud of their military service. A lot of times people don't want to hear it and what you did in the service but veterans like to get together and talk and they feel comfortable talking about it. I'd like people to know it's a great experience and its great people willing to give their lives for their country and people should take the time and listen to what they have to say. They should listen to these facts and I know sometimes it's hard because older vets like to talk but if you stop and listen to almost any veteran you're going to find something interesting or worthwhile about what they had to say about their time.

IV: Give me your favorite story about the time that you were serving.

MB: One of my exciting times was just about the time the war was over in Vietnam and they were going to bring back the POWs and I can't remember where they were going to bring them back but they selected several of us from the submarine base to go down to where they were bringing them back to one of the naval hospitals and I remember thinking how proud I was that they would consider me to go down there and do whatever I could do to those people. I remember that I called my parents and said "Oh oh oh, I'm going down." It never came to pass I think they put them somewhere else but the idea of helping a person that had been a POW just swelled me, I was just so excited. The rest of my time was just helping people and I guess I would say for twenty six years that was my pleasure and my privilege to work with these people and help them. They are just so special.

IV: What was the most difficult thing about your time in the service?

MB: One of the most difficult things that I experienced while I was in the service at that time was, and this was the seventies not later in my career but in the beginning, how at that point there was still prejudice against women being in the service. Sometimes we had a connotation that was not nice about what type of women went into the service. That we may have been less than other women and why did we join and what were our motives. Guys use to say to me, "You're looking for a husband" [Laughs] I said "No I'm not looking for a husband." Granted there were plenty of men around but I was looking to serve my country, I was looking for travel; I was looking to break the stereotype of my mother. I surely think now that if I had the chance like they are today. As a reserve I went to Adak, Alaska and they pulled up with a douse hat to take our luggage and when the girl opened the truck door I saw that she was maybe a five foot three girl, young CB, driving that truck. At that time I had progressed pretty much, I was a chief petty officer but I was so thrilled to see that she was driving a truck and doing jobs that I might have wanted to when I went in in '72 but were not open to me and we were pretty much still stereotyped and that was difficult for me. Also too it was the sixties and early seventies and I guess it was free love and all that stuff and it wasn't really cool to be in the service at that time so that was kind of difficult. They didn't really like military people during then and thought probably even less of women. So I'm really thrilled to see they have broken that stereotype and you see women as commanding officers of ships and they're just doing almost everything in the navy. If I was a little younger I wish I was in right now and try something different. It would be a better place for my daughter. She would have more opportunities than I had and I would be glad to see that. I would be really glad.

IV: What would you say to other people to give them a positive look at service work? Say something to young people about the service.

MB: I would say if a person was considering joining the service it's not saying a lifetime commitment for everyone. I was in and out but I would say they would find they could get a good education. They would learn some discipline which in the beginning sometimes is hard to swallow but in the end it will last with you the rest of your life and prove to make your life probably a little bit better. You would derive such a comradery and self-satisfaction out of serving your country and doing a job that it would remain with you the rest of your life. Till the day you die and when you die you truly feel it as the veterans I take care of. They want that flag draped over them when they go and I do too.

IV: Mary I see that you brought something special, would you show us what you have?

MB: Yes Ma'am, I brought this today. This is called a shadow box that my husband was kind enough when I retired from the reserves to make this box for me. Basically this is my whole military career in a box. Starting off with my original dog tags from boot camp, and a patch I wore to show I was a recruit, also some of the ribbons and medals that I earned while I was in the service. This is my rating badge and it basically it tells sailors what I did in the navy and what my rank was. Then on the bottom here my husband put a little plaque on there that tells how many years I did. So basically you could say this is my military career box. I have this at my office where I'm a state's veteran's counselor where I take care of veterans. When they come in my office a lot of times the vets will say, "Whose medals are those?", and I proudly say, "Those are my medals". I am a woman but I earned all these medals and ribbons and to people that may not have been in the service they may look like trinkets but to anyone who's been in the service these are just examples of what we've done and where we've been and we wear these with pride. We really do, and we take it really seriously. So he preserved these for me forever so I'm really proud to have them. I guess I wouldn't say it's a bragging thing but it's a pride thing so I can also say yes these are medals and these are earned by a woman. Pretty nice huh?

IV: [Zoom in on the shadow box and make comments] [Zooms out]

MB: One day in our offices they had some of the correctional people next door and they were banging on the walls and they banged on the wall and it fell [gasp] I almost had a fit [gasp].

IV: [Zooms back onto shadow box while making comments] That's a great kind of way I mean it's that easy it can come back to her and she can explain. I think it's great.

End of Interview