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Success or Failure? Women's Integration into the United States Military Academy at West Point.

The United States Military Academy at West Point is America's oldest standing military Academy. Since its foundation in 1802, West Point has been providing officers for the United States Army. Though American soldiers would first occupy this base on January 27th, 1778, it would take almost 25 years for West Point to be established as the north's most prestigious military college. 217 graduates during the Civil War would serve for the Union army, while 146 men would be generals for the Confederate army during this time. West Point has an extremely long list of notable alumni, including Robert E. Lee, graduate of the class of 1829, William Tecumseh Sherman, graduate of 1840, and Ulysses S. Grant, graduate of the class of 1843. It is obvious that there are no women in that list of notable graduates before 1976. Military Academies in the United States did not allow women into their colleges until President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106 allowing women to be admitted into previously male-only military colleges. This thesis aims to explore the experiences of women entering the United States Military Academy at West Point for the first time in 1976, and seeing the social changes that have occurred since.

Public Law 94-106 states that “a), the Secretaries of the military departments shall, under the direction of the Secretary of Defense, continue to exercise the authority granted them in chapters 403, 603 and 903 of title 10, United States Code, but such authority must be exercised within a program providing for the orderly and expeditious admission of women to the academies, consistent with the needs of the services, with the implementation of such program upon enactment of this Act.”<sup>1</sup> Gerald Ford signing this law on October 7th, 1975 would allow women to join the military academies in the United States the following academic year, starting in the summer of 1976. According to West Point's Superintendent Lieutenant General Sidney B. Berry, this integration is “the most significant change in the 173-year history of the United States

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<sup>1</sup> Public law 94-106, (October 7, 1975)

Military Academy.”<sup>2</sup> The signing of this law is just the beginning for the journey of women at the military academies within the United States.

When I began my research into this topic, I truly believed that this story would be focused on the terrible things that these pioneer women went through. These women officers are ground-breaking as they are the first to assume the nontraditional roles of West Point cadet and officer.<sup>3</sup> From harassment to hazing, the women of the first graduating integrated classes were nothing but easy. But still with this, the women who survived the 4 years at the military academy at West Point are positive about their experience and understand that they were the first women to go through these things in order for other women to have a more pleasant experience. Sharon Disher, a female graduate in the first integrated class of 1980, expresses her commitment to the academy. “It pains me every time I see a newspaper headline defaming the Naval Academy. It is not my intent to inflict more pain. I write this book to document history. The events depicted in this book took place nearly thirty years ago. If the issues seem too fresh or the events appear too similar to modern-day occurrences, then it is time to stop repeating them.”<sup>4</sup> Writing a book to express her experiences, Disher feels as though she must tell the truth about her experiences, but that people should not do so in a way that defames the academy, but rather shows a growth in gender acceptance and that the academies will continue to grow as there is more inclusivity placed into the military.

Not only did my research lead to me finding mainly positive experiences, I also learned that although women have been at the United States Military Academy at West Point for over 40

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<sup>2</sup> Feron, James. “Integrated West Point Prepares for First Women Cadets.” *The New York Times*. (September 22, 1975)

<sup>3</sup> Yoder, Janice D.; Adams, Jerome “A Report on Women West Point Graduates Assuming Nontraditional Roles.” *Midwestern Psychological Association* (May 1984)

<sup>4</sup> Disher, Sharon H. “First Class : Women Join the Ranks at the Naval Academy.” *New York: Naval Institute Press*. (2013)

years, they are still an understudied group.<sup>5</sup> Leslie Lewis's study also addresses the lack of literature on women and leadership development at the United States Military Academy.<sup>6</sup> A large question that altered my research in Leslie Ann Lewis's study of women at West Point is as follows: How do women develop their leader identities as members of a minoritized group in a male-dominated culture when experiencing different levels of misogyny, sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual assault?<sup>7</sup> Not only does this question strike me regarding women's abilities to lead, but also the idea of women being a minority. "Of all the minority groups seeking equal rights, however, women are expected to create the most dramatic changes at the academy next year," says James Feron.<sup>8</sup> While women have attended West Point and the other United States military service academies since 1976, there is little published scholarly research on the lived experiences of these women and even less on their leadership development. No one has asked West Point women how they define leadership or how their West Point experiences have informed their leadership development.<sup>9</sup> According to Marene Allison, "the black males always felt like they didn't belong, and it was only after the females showed up did they feel like they weren't the lowest class at West Point."<sup>10</sup> This proves women as a minority group at West Point.

West Point's success stems from a rigorous program that combines academics, athletics, and military training in an extremely regimented schedule for the future military leaders.

Athletics bring an extremely positive atmosphere onto the campus of West Point. Academics are crucial in order to breed future leaders of our country, and significantly enough, West Point was

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, Leslie Ann, "West Point Women's Views on Leadership: Perceptions From First Women Graduates Through Current Cadets," *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*. (Dec 29, 2020). ii

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 21

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 8

<sup>8</sup> Feron, "Integrated West Point,"

<sup>9</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 303

<sup>10</sup> O'Connor, Brandon. "Forty years have passed since the first women graduated from West Point in the Class of 1980." *Army.mil*, (May 27, 2020)

the only engineering college until 1824. This led most of the United State's railways, roads, and bridges to be created by graduates of West Point. The graduates of the United States Military Academy at West Point are the nation's top military leaders, with no regard to gender.

West Point was designed for men, by men, and for its first 176 years of existence, it was kept that way. In the summer of 1976, women were allowed to enter the military academy as cadets for the first time in history. 62 of the 119 women of the first admitted class would stay for the full four years and graduate. Not only did these 62 women complete their four years- being held to the same standards as the men, they also did it while enduring sexism, misogyny, and hate from faculty, other male cadets, and the outside world. Even with these odds against them, at all three military academies, including the Air Force academy, women and men performed equally in academic studies in the first years.<sup>11</sup> Even with their environment telling them to stop, these 62 women in the class of 1980 persisted.

The initial introduction of women to all of these academies were instrumental in the movement to equal rights in the military. Before this, women may have been seen as instrumental to the war effort, solely as being good partners for their husbands. Women were solely people to watch over the home while their husbands were able to serve in the military freely. A military family meant the men were in the military, not the women. A typical woman born into a military family would be a well-mannered daughter who would turn into some military mans' housewife early on in her life. This way of life changed when women were integrated into these military academies and during wartime. Before WWI, women served primarily as civilian nurses, cooks, laundresses, clerical workers, or military hospital administrators.<sup>12</sup> Women like Pat Locke took a different route. Locke was enlisted in the United

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<sup>11</sup> No Author, "How Women are Faring At West Point and Annapolis." *The New York Times*. (September 11, 1977)

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 56

States army and employed as a communications specialist in a signal battalion at 17 years old to escape her hometown of Detroit and when stationed at Fort Polk, Louisiana, she was given the opportunity to attend West Point in the first class, in which she did and Locke thrived.<sup>13</sup> Locke was able to fit in having military experience and an understanding of discipline. In order to fit in, the women tended to adopt traditional masculine qualities in order to win acceptance.<sup>14</sup>

Since these military academies were still very prestigious, the women being admitted were women from high-status military families. The women of the Class of 1980 were twice as likely to come from military families as the men (36% of women vs. 18% of the men).<sup>15</sup> These women who were part of the first year of admittees faced every piece of discrimination one could think of. Facing discrimination from many areas including their uniforms and their medical needs, this first class of women were pioneers for the following women to this day to attend the academies freely. After 4 years of having women at the academy, as previously stated, 62 women graduated from West Point. In Annapolis in the same year of 1980, 55 women graduated from the Naval Academy. These women, once destined to be housewives, were becoming Second Lieutenants in the United States Army or Ensigns in the United States Navy.

The same experiences were happening down at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. The Naval Academy was founded in 1845, being another military academy where future United States military leaders were trained. The Naval Academy, located in Annapolis, Maryland, is perfectly located on the Chesapeake river with access to the Atlantic Ocean. With public law 94-106 being put into military schools, the Naval Academy would also integrate their college to allow women at the Academy. The Naval Academy had the same experience as West

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<sup>13</sup> O'Connor, "Forty years,"

<sup>14</sup> Associated Press, "Impact of Female Cadets Assessed by West Point." *The New York Times*. (October 10, 1979)

<sup>15</sup> Durning, Kathleen P. "Women at the Naval Academy: AN ATTITUDE SURVEY." *Navy Personnel Research and Development Center*. (Summer 1978) 574

Point, having their first graduating class in 1980, 4 years after the law was signed in 1976. To compare the two academies, the United States Military Academy is a larger institution than the Naval Academy.

In order to help with my understanding of West Point, it is interesting and important to look into the experiences of women at the Naval Academy. On July 6th, 1976, for the first time in the history of the U.S. Naval Academy, 81 female plebes were sworn in as midshipmen alongside 1,217 male classmates.<sup>16</sup> Historian Michael Gelfand has done crucial scholarly research on the problems of these women and what is being explored in this thesis, but his focus being the Naval Academy. Though different academies with different futures for their graduates, the social acceptances of women would be very similar.

On May 28th, 1980, the first female Midshipmen graduated from the Naval Academy. Of the 947 graduates that day, 55 were women.<sup>17</sup> According to Michael Gelfand, author of *Sea Change at Annapolis: The United States Naval Academy, 1949-2000*, women's acceptance into the Brigade of Midshipmen was a significant step in getting females into combat and, therefore, helped them to fulfill their roles and responsibilities as American citizens.<sup>18</sup> This is interesting in understanding the personal and scholarly opinions of Gelfand in regards to women being allowed in combat. Legally, navy women must be treated differently from navy men. Title 10 of the U.S. Code, Section 6015, states that women "may not be assigned to duty in aircraft that are engaged in combat missions nor may they be assigned to duty on vessels of the Navy other than hospital ships and transports."<sup>19</sup> This restriction had an immediate impact on women midshipmen in the

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<sup>16</sup> Disher, Sharon, "Women CAN Fight." *U.S. Naval Institute*, (September 2006)

<sup>17</sup> Gelfand, Michael. "Sea Change at Annapolis: The United States Naval Academy, 1949-2000." *Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press*. (2006) chapter 5

<sup>18</sup> Gelfand, "Sea Change," chapter 5

<sup>19</sup> Durning, "Women at the," 570

summer of 1976, in that they could not embark on orientation cruises and flights without being "required to take leave, wear civilian clothes, and be the guest of a male Navy member."<sup>20</sup>

As for the first women and their experiences, they were very similar to West Point. Women were looked down upon, and there was even a regimental commander who would order men to treat the women "as if they were his daughters."<sup>21</sup> Though this commander may have intended for the male midshipmen to respect their female classmates, it can be interpreted by each individual male, and could very well put these women on a lower level than the men.

In regards to sexual assault, for the first graduating class at the Naval Academy, administrators only noted five sexual misconduct cases, all of which involved alcohol.<sup>22</sup> An unbelievably low statistic, this proves the drive to cover up or not notice any form of sexism against these newly admitted women to overlook any problems that would make the Academy look bad. This may also stem from women not wanting to speak out. Anonymous interviews with eight women who graduated between 1988 and 1993 reveal experiences similar to those of previous female graduates. As for sexual harassment, all of the women remembered repeated comments from male midshipmen about their weight, attractiveness, supposed sexual promiscuity, intelligence, and their being out of place in a man's environment.<sup>23</sup> Graduate of the class of 1982, Brig. General Cindy Jebb, now the Dean of the Academic Board at West Point says that "I think it's safe to say we were probably all sexually harassed."<sup>24</sup> As hard as it is to speak on these topics and potentially traumatizing experiences, it is crucial to allow historians to understand the journeys of these first female midshipmen through the Naval Academy.

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<sup>20</sup> Durning, "Women at the," 570

<sup>21</sup> Gelfand, "Sea Change," chapter 6

<sup>22</sup> Gelfand, "Sea Change," chapter 6

<sup>23</sup> Gelfand, "Sea Change," chapter 7

<sup>24</sup> O'Connor, Brandon. "The Army is Changing: Current Female Cadets Will Enter the Army with More Career Options Than Ever." *Army.mil* (June 10, 2020)



One must compare the experiences of women at both the United States Military Academy and the United States Naval Academy in the beginning years of integration at these academies from 1976-1984 in order to understand the experience of women today, whether that be successful or full of failure. This period of time which includes the experiences of the first female cadets is crucial for understanding how women were treated and if they stayed at their respective academies. At West Point the dropout rate for females in the class of 1980 was 31 percent and 22 percent at the Naval Academy. In each case, that was about 10 percent higher than the dropout rate for men.<sup>25</sup> This percentage, for the first class of women when West Point was not prepared, is a smaller percentage than I expected.

My research is driven by the question of if women to this day are still overlooked in the military as there are still questions of allowing women into combat and other male-dominated roles in the military. The women in the class of 1980 are the original basis of my research when bringing light to the challenges and opportunities these women faced.

These women faced struggles in their day to day lives. These women were ready to be introduced into the military academies, but the academies and their faculty and other cadets were not. The women were placed into dorms that were not adjusted to housing women. The dorms had more urinals than toilets, which is not beneficial to the women. Men cadets sabotaged women's rooms, damaged their uniforms, and hazed women cadets not just because they had done something wrong, but simply because they were women.<sup>26</sup> The female-specific uniforms alone caused controversy. A wardrobe malfunction on the first day caused several broken zippers.<sup>27</sup> These small mishaps proved the unpreparedness of the academy.

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<sup>25</sup> "How Women are,"

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 72

<sup>27</sup> Schloesser, Kelly. "Hard-Earned Respect: The first women of West Point." *Army.mil*, (November 2010)

Women also had very little representation at these academies upon their first arrivals. Very little to no staff members were female and the men who led these academies were uneducated on the needs of women, let alone women in the military. These women endured struggles with their uniforms. Uniforms malfunctioned or didn't fit right as the academy adjusted to a new population, and West Point was led by a superintendent, Lt. Gen. Sidney B. Berry, who originally resisted the arrival of females.<sup>28</sup> They would not fit their body types, or even be too feminine looking to sexualize the women. In regards to sexualizing the women, these cadets faced sexual harassment. Though it is rarely spoken about, the women who entered these academies were sometimes sexually harassed and even sometimes sexually assaulted. On the lowest level, women would face sexual discrimination from not only their classmates, but educators and faculty. This enforced title IX to come into effect at these schools. Title IX, created in 1972, protects everyone in the United States from sexual discrimination in any school or program which receives funding from the United States federal government.<sup>29</sup>

In order to expand on the difficulties women faced when being allowed to attend the United States Military Academy and the United States Naval Academy, the rhetoric of newspapers and public articles from this time period, which had both negative and positive rhetoric, are crucial to understanding public opinion. The importance of the words that people who have the power to affect the opinions of the local communities sometimes goes unnoticed. If one person has the ability to monopolize a community of people and force their beliefs on a controversial decision, their beliefs will be the most widespread. When women were being introduced to the communities in Annapolis and West Point, the way undecided people inside and outside of the academy viewed them was up to the people who were covering it in the news.

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<sup>28</sup> O'Connor, "Forty years,"

<sup>29</sup> Title IX, Education Amendments of 1972 (1972)

These undecided people have the power to speak on such a unique experience such as being a cadet at West Point, and it can be detrimental to the viewpoints of community members.

Rhetoric and the words one chooses to use when speaking about women joining these military academies have a crucial impact on the way the women will get treated during their time at the academy. Journalists hold such power not only in regards to my research, but we see this even today with the power of information being said in the news. When a community relies on information from one source or from just looking at the news, not doing personal research themselves, this causes a monopoly in regards to controlling that community's opinions. The integration of women into the academies had been characterized as one of the most controversial issues surrounding women in the military in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Topics as controversial as allowing women into military colleges are also very hard to do personal research on, especially during the times of the events, so people are bound to believe the opinions in the sources handed to them.

A perfect example of this occurs in a New York Times article published on April 17th, 1977, still during the first academic year of women being at the Academy. This article begins by saying that "officials have concluded, for example, that women from the Deep South are poor prospects."<sup>31</sup> This type of language towards a group of women that could be potential success stories at the academy, are automatically disregarded by the community as unnamed officials are poorly representing women due to where they come from.

Not only does this article written by James Feron have negative connotations, it also blatantly tries to convince its readers that women do not belong at the Academy. "They have also learned that few, if any, of the female recruits had a realistic idea of the grueling physical and

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<sup>30</sup> Jones, Paul L. "Naval Academy: Gender and Racial Disparities. Report to the Chairman, Committee on Armed Services, U.S. Senate." *United States General Accounting Office*. (April 1993) 13

<sup>31</sup> Feron, James. "West Point Will Revise Its Policies On Finding and Training of Women." *The New York Times*. (April 17, 1977)

mental stress they would encounter. Copies of newspaper articles describing this are now being sent to applicants.”<sup>32</sup> This speaks on the idea that potential future female cadets are being scared out of coming to the academy, telling unsuccessful stories of women. The extremely negative language is shocking. “Running, a major element of the first summer of training, will be conducted in categories according to skill, to de-emphasize the women's poor performances.”<sup>33</sup> The disrespect to the pioneer women of the class of 1980 in this article is exponential. This article becomes even more convincing to the readers of its time when Feron interviews a woman, not specified if she was a cadet or not, and she explains how “It's not stuff girls are used to.”<sup>34</sup> The comments about women being too emotional are so crucial in the fight to keep women out of West Point. “The biggest difference is that the women take negative evaluation more personally,”<sup>35</sup> says Major Howard T. Prince. The article also acknowledges the disrespect towards the current female cadets as when a woman conducted a formation, “the corps of cadets burst into laughter.”<sup>36</sup> This is when the article becomes blatantly anti-women at West Point. Someone who wants women to succeed would never publish an embarrassing account that a female cadet experienced without denouncing this behavior, especially when the female cadet's name was published. One of the most astonishing statements made in this degrading article is when Feron says that “The inability of women to fulfill physical standards set by the men can be traced to their different upbringing.”<sup>37</sup> Feron tries to convince his readers that women will never belong, and that it's due to their homelife, in which they are raised by a woman. Not only are they incapable, but they are set back because of “weak grips as with underdeveloped arms and

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<sup>32</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>33</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>34</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>35</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>36</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>37</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

shoulders. Dr. Peterson said.”<sup>38</sup> Something that strikes me is also the way Feron tries to depict women as clueless. Feron says that a female cadet told him that she never ran until she got to the Academy, and that she was suffering shin splints because of it. This rhetoric is so detrimental to women gaining respect, equality, or equity.

Another example of this detrimental rhetoric is an article published by the New York Times on June 4th, 1995. The title is “Woman Ranks First in West Point Class.” Though this title may sound uplifting and pro-women, the article is a total of 7 sentences long for such a high achievement for women. For the first time in the United States Military Academy's 193-year history, a woman was named valedictorian of the graduating class.<sup>39</sup> Not only is this such an amazing accomplishment, but this woman, Second Lieutenant Rebecca E. Marier, would lead the 988 members of her class for the first time as a woman. Rhetoric makes such a large impact on the community, and the fact that this article is only 7 sentences long is disrespectful and shows that the writer, who is not named, put minimal effort into such a high achievement.

Rhetoric and ideas pushed into newspapers are effective and typically the widely accepted viewpoint. The opposition included most of the male administration, faculty, and staff and male cadets at West Point. Most of West Point's all-male alumni also vehemently opposed admitting women.<sup>40</sup> The local community, who are not involved in the actual day to day military experience, did not fully accept this change, while head officials like the Naval Academy's Superintendent William P. Mack believed that women would add much more to the academy, as they could do what a man can do, and even more. Another example of this positive rhetoric is a quote from Colonel Ripley while receiving the second highest award a Marine can receive for

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<sup>38</sup> Feron, “West Point Will,”

<sup>39</sup> Associated Press. “Woman Ranks First In West Point Class” *The New York Times*. (June 4, 1995)

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, “WEST POINT WOMEN,” 65

valor in combat. "No way this country could accomplish its role and mission without women. Those who deny that today hold a fossilized view of the academies. They've earned the doggone right to be there."<sup>41</sup> This type of response to a question of whether or not women belong in the military sparks hope for women across the country. A small percentage of administrators were pro-integration of women, but powerful leaders in these academies like William P. Mack are crucial to women gaining respect, representation, and influence.

Not only can the rhetoric discourage women from making this incredible commitment to their country, but also people in their communities. Lindsey Danilack, a class of 2014 graduate, was discouraged from attending the academy. "In high school, one of my teachers actually told me that I would never get into West Point, that it was too hard,"<sup>42</sup> says Lindsey, a perfect fit for the academy as she would go on to be a brigade commander for the entire student body.

The motto of the United States Military Academy at West Point is "Duty, Honor, Country," which focuses on the integrity of service, not any gender regulations. A model cadet is based on character and behavior, to be leaders. Women have strengthened that model cadet. A model cadet then easily transitions to crucial parts of our society: model doctors, model engineers, model scientists, model service members, and model members of society. In 1989, Kristen French became the first woman brigade commander, also known as first captain.<sup>43</sup> This is the highest ranking cadet position, which a woman filled just 13 years after the initial transition, proving women had a place at the Academy. Simone Askew became the first African-American woman first captain.

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<sup>41</sup> Disher, "Women CAN,"

<sup>42</sup> Taylor, Rumsey; Williams, Josh; Williams, Margaret C. "The Women of West Point." *The New York Times*. (September 5, 2014)

<sup>43</sup> Lopez, Tony. "French Retires After 29 Years of Distinguished Service to Our Nation," *Army.mil*, (July 10, 2015)

Brigadier General Kristen French retired in 2015 after 29 years of service to the United States Army. French graduated from West Point in 1986, 10 years after the first female class was allowed at the academy. Kristen has been recognized as the best logistician in the US Army. French has been deployed overseas in support of Operation Joint Endeavor in Croatia, Operation Desert Fox in Kuwait, Operation Iraqi Freedom in Iraq and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup> Kristen French is a superior example of a female asset to our country's military.

Simone Askew is the first black woman to lead the Long Grey Line at West Point. Askew assumed duties as first captain of the 4,400 member Corps of Cadets.<sup>45</sup> First Captain is the top and highest position that a cadet can hold at the Academy. Not only does Simone have the largest responsibility within the cadets, she also is the liaison between the cadets and the administration. Simone is an inspiration for women and people of color. Pat Locke, an African-American female graduate of the class of 1980 "can't believe this happened in (her) lifetime."<sup>46</sup> A 2018 graduate, Simone Askew is just a single example of how successful women have been at West Point.

Family ties to West Point are very common for women to follow the courageous decisions of their mothers. This is the case for the Efaw family. Amy and Andre Efaw are both graduates of The United States Military Academy at West Point in 1989. The Efaw family consists of 3 daughters who have thus graduated from the Academy. Alix, Anastasia, and Arianna. Alix graduated in 2014, Anastasia graduated in 2016, and Arianna graduated in 2017. Each of these women had a much different experience than their mother did, being part of just the 8th graduating class including women. Though Alix puts an emphasis on the idea that "You don't want to be the weak link in the chain. Because they already expect you to be the weak link in the chain," her alumni mother Amy believes that "it's different now. The standards are

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<sup>44</sup> Lopez, "French Retires,"

<sup>45</sup> Cahillane, Kevin. "The West Point Sisters." *The New York Times*. (September 11, 2014)

<sup>46</sup> Cahillane, "The West Point,"

different because they have to be.” This change in the experience of women at West Point shows the foundation the first groups of women laid for females to feel welcome now.

Women interested in pursuing a career in the military may be turning more towards West Point. Though today the Air Force Academy is around 30% female and the Naval Academy is around 29%, West Point is actively working on creating more places for women to fit at their academy.<sup>47</sup> As of 2016, the American military will be opening combat positions to qualifying women. Arianna Efaw, class of 2017, is one of these women who saw a future in infantry. “Whenever I tell people I want to go infantry, they laugh in my face,”<sup>48</sup> says Efaw. Efaw’s desire to be an infantry officer is inspiring and proves that women belong in that setting if they are the right fit for the job. That same year in 2016, the incoming class of women recorded for 22% of the class, a jump from the previous year’s class make up only 16% women.<sup>49</sup>

Women around the country dominate the college pool. Today, women make up about 60% of colleges while men only 40%. Women are much less 60% of West Point, about 24-25%. This could possibly be due to the fact that it is a military school, or that women were just allowed to be in the institution 44 years ago. Though still women only make up less than 25% of the corps of cadets, the transition has been far from unsuccessful. This transition also translates into the actual army. As of 2019, women make up 16.8% of officers in the Active Duty Army, 13.6% of enlisted soldiers in the Active Duty Army, and 15.5% of members of the Active Duty US Armed Forces.<sup>50</sup>

Women have been more than just successful at West Point over the last 40 years. Women at West Point today truly thrive. In order to get to this conclusion, I conducted interviews with 2

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<sup>47</sup> Cahillane, “The West Point,”

<sup>48</sup> Taylor, “The Women of,”

<sup>49</sup> Taylor, “The Women of,”

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, “WEST POINT WOMEN,” 9



active female cadets at West Point. In order to understand the current conditions of women at West Point, the best way to do this was to understand the daily lives of female cadets. It is imperative to capture women's stories and experiences before they are lost to history as women often go unheard in the documenting of history as no one asks them their stories.<sup>51</sup> The questions I prepared for the interview were guidelines to further topics that the cadets and I would explore during the interviews. The interviews both lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted on phone calls.

The story I found is that the integration of women to West Point has been successful. In the academy's 175-year history, women were only first accepted into the class of 1980, Sydney Barber is the 16th woman selected for brigade commander since that time, but the 1st black woman to be in this position.<sup>52</sup> Success stories seen on the internet drove me to knowing the success stories of cadets I am able to personally communicate. This has been strengthened by the testimony of two current West Point cadets. The first interviewee, Lauren Lithgow, is in her third year at the Academy, making her known as a "Cow" on campus. Lauren recently signed and committed to serve as an Officer in the US Army, as all juniors will do at the Academy to stay. Lauren is from West Long Branch, New Jersey, and has no family affiliation to the Academy. At 21 years old, Lauren spent a year at USMAPS, the preparatory school at West Point, to allow an extra year to prepare her socially, physically, academically, and athletically, as Lauren is a current member of the Division 1 Women's Basketball team. Lauren's participation on the basketball team is what originally led her to the Academy. The other cadet who was willing to share her story with me was Elizabeth Pepper. Elizabeth is a Firstie, meaning this year is her last academic year at West Point, and she will be graduating as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Spring. When asking

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<sup>51</sup> Lewis, "WEST POINT WOMEN," 338

<sup>52</sup> Cronk, Terri Cook, "First Black Female Brigade Commander at Naval Academy Leads With Passion." *U.S. Department of Defense*. (March 12, 2021)

Elizabeth where she is from, she does not have a set town as she and her family frequently moved as her father graduated from West Point and now has an active job in the Army. Elizabeth is an engineering major.

When speaking to both of these cadets, the first questions of the interviews had to do with Title IX. Title IX is the federal law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in any school or any other education program that receives funding from the federal government. I led the discussion with Title IX because I wanted to understand their own personal viewpoints and knowledge level of sex-based law and how it has affected their own personal journeys to get and stay at West Point. Lauren's response to what Title IX meant to her was it meant equality, as an athlete, Title IX has influenced her but she notices there is still room for improvement at West Point in regards to equality with athletics. Lauren spoke on quality of equipment but also acknowledges how "it is also donation based and donors tend to lean towards mens sports."<sup>53</sup> As for Elizabeth, she says that her experience has been positive and she has not even had to truly look at the specific implications of Title IX. Though I wish these cadets had more experience with Title IX and more of a personal relationship with it, I must conclude that it is a positive that these women do not have to learn about the laws on gender equality as they feel secure as a woman at the academy.

These cadets both have very different backgrounds and these specific backgrounds gave them different preparation for the Academy. Lauren, coming from a typical non-military household, had more of a change in her way of life than Elizabeth, who grew up in a military home, had to. Though it was a change for Lauren, she says "the dress code at West Point is fairly normal and as expected."<sup>54</sup> Lauren speaks on the uniform and how she prefers the Army Combat Uniform over the As for Class uniform as "it is more versatile for females." These ACUs are the

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<sup>53</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview by Jillian R. Olsen, November 16, 2022, interview 1, Wagner College.

<sup>54</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

camo pattern uniform while the As for Class uniform is the “most dress like uniform.”<sup>55</sup> These female cadets today have comfortable clothing to learn, train, and live in due to the women before them. The many first classes of women were able to give feedback on the uniforms, as early graduates of the academy had uniforms that were masculine, too big, and showed the college’s unpreparedness for women. According to Sue Fulton, “The women were a new species at the academy. They were surrounded by men who had never served with women or who were used to attending an academy without them, and were not ready to accept their presence or treat them as equals.”<sup>56</sup> Neither the academy nor the male cadets were prepared for the integration.

Change has been happening recently. More doors opened in the coming years as women at West Point in the class of 2016 were allowed to branch infantry and armor for the first time.<sup>57</sup> This change allows for career opportunities and options for men and women to be equal.

In January of 2021, West Point announced that they would allow different hairstyles for women other than the standard low-bun, in response to a popular opinion coming from female cadets within the academy, according to Pepper. Defense Secretary Mark Esper ordered a review of military hairstyle and grooming policies in the prior July.<sup>58</sup> In the name of diversity, women who have hair types that were not easily placed into a bun can now have more freedom with protecting their hair. According to Sergeant Major Michael Grinston, “This is about an Army standard and how we move forward with the Army, and being a more diverse, inclusive team.”<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth was fond of this change, as she can now wear her hair more comfortably in a braid and so that her Advanced Combat Helmet, or ACH, can fit more comfortably. Elizabeth spoke of her

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<sup>55</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>56</sup> O’Connor, “Forty years,”

<sup>57</sup> O’Connor, “The Army is,”

<sup>58</sup> Associated Press, “In a Nod to Diversity, Army loosens rules on hairstyles, grooming.” *Los Angeles Times*. (January 26, 2021)

<sup>59</sup> Associated Press, “In a Nod,”

experience wearing the ACH with the bun, so uncomfortable that she would have to deal with a headache for the rest of the day. “When you have that tight bun all day in every single uniform, not only does it hurt your hairline, but it also reduces headaches, and especially in a training environment where you have an ACH, it is almost impossible to wear that with a bun and be able to tilt your head up to shoot a rifle.”<sup>60</sup> The larger buns, needed to accommodate thick or longer hair, can make a combat helmet fit badly and potentially impair good vision.<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth also says that this small appearance change allows her “to perform better in the combat uniform.” Elizabeth brings up how she has “talked to a lot of female cadets and also professors that feel the same way.”<sup>62</sup> This recent advancement in comfortability for women is a win for equity for women.

Another new update for these current female cadets is nail polish. Something that had seemed to be very feminine has become a natural occurrence for both men and women. The allowance of a neutral colored nail polish has been approved. Elizabeth says that “they are still very specific about the regulations,”<sup>63</sup> as they ensure safety with nail length and shape. This allows all cadets to maintain something that is seen as self-care and a beauty standard. Lauren believes this change was made to allow “female cadets to show some femininity and small ways to dress like a female even though the uniform is the same to males.”<sup>64</sup> Women are allowed one hole piercing on each ear, while men are still prohibited to wear earrings. Another aspect men are held to at a different standard at West Point than at other military academies is that West Point “is the only military that does not allow men to have beards”<sup>65</sup> according to Elizabeth. Elizabeth

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<sup>60</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview by Jillian R. Olsen, November 17, 2022, interview 2, Wagner College.

<sup>61</sup> Associated Press, “In a Nod,”

<sup>62</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview

<sup>64</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview

believes “that something coming in the future is an adjustment to the male standards, as West Point is adjusting the female standards to allow for a more comfortable and stylistic nature, so there may be a change in the male standards as well.”<sup>66</sup>

It was interesting to learn that both men and women have the same standard for tattoos. Lauren explained how if a cadet wants to get a tattoo it “must be approved before-hand to make sure it is appropriate.”<sup>67</sup> Elizabeth explains a new rule that cadets “are allowed to have tattoos in between fingers, as long as they can not be seen when the cadet is saluting.”<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth also mentioned that cadets are allowed to have a neck tattoo, but it must be a small size, as well as cadets being permitted to have tattoos behind their ears. This ruling is very important when looking at equality of appearance as women and men are held to the same standards in an aspect that is not gendered.

Another focus of the interviews were how other cadets viewed these women. Lauren described her experience as a cadre when she had to lead a group. She felt as though in the beginning, that she would have to “work harder and prove”<sup>69</sup> herself “against the other male leadership for” her squad to respect her. She tells the story of how she was successful in this situation and that after she was able to lead her group, she was “respected and liked more for that.”<sup>70</sup> Just like Arianna Efaw says, “You want to be better than the guys to prove that you belong here.”<sup>71</sup> According to Lewis, women officers have served as professors and tactical officers at West Point and have provided female role models not only for the women but also the men.<sup>72</sup> These experiences with younger male cadets give them experiences that will allow them

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<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview

<sup>67</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Pepper, Interview

<sup>69</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>70</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>71</sup> Taylor, “The Women of,”

<sup>72</sup> Lewis, “WEST POINT WOMEN,” 7

to realize the equality of male and female leadership. As for Elizabeth, she has very similar situations. Elizabeth describes her time with other male cadets as a gradual progression to full respect. Elizabeth believes that the male cadets, ones who may not be convinced of the equality of men and women at West Point, over time gain respect for the women that are completing the same physical, emotional, and academic tasks as they are. Elizabeth blames any kind of disrespect towards women at the Academy on immaturity of the male cadets and that it is a personal problem that they will face themselves, rather than a problem of the Academy or a problem of the culture at West Point. As Lindsey Danilack says perfectly: “We’re all trying to accomplish very similar goals, regardless of gender.”<sup>73</sup>

As for the uncomfortable topic of sexual assault, these two cadets truly were able to open up and speak proudly on the fact that neither of them have experienced any type of assault, misconduct, or unwanted advances by male cadets. Not that I was wanting or expecting either of these cadets to have a story to speak about, but I was surprised when they truly responded in the opposite direction. Both cadets have stories of success within their fellow cadets. Lauren acknowledged the idea of “pretty privilege” and that there is a “stigma that pretty girls in the Army are more well liked or get what they want”<sup>74</sup> due to their appearance. Elizabeth also acknowledged this phenomena and how it allows women at the Academy who have physical features that are appealing to society. Lauren states that “this is obviously a problem, that unfortunately leads to issues like sexual harrassment or assault.”<sup>75</sup> But, on a positive note, these cadets both believe they are surrounded by a positive environment that keeps them safe from forms of sexual assault, discrimination, or harrassment. Elizabeth spoke of a situation she had during her first year where she felt uncomfortable around a male cadet, but her friends and even

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<sup>73</sup> Taylor, “The Women of,”

<sup>74</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

<sup>75</sup> Lauren Lithgow, Interview

those cadets she may not have been close with, gave her a safe environment where she felt protected. It is a nationwide problem of having “bad eggs in the batch” but it is so important to recognize that these female cadets feel safe and that the community would stand behind a woman who felt threatened.

These interviews truly turned my research around. The experiences of women at West Point have not always been positive, but today, it is clear to say that women are comfortable, accepted, and thriving. These interviews were eye opening at the fact that these women represent both a typical female athlete and a daughter of a West Point graduate, giving a wide representation of female students at the academy, and they both have had the same positive experience. These two cadets are prime examples of success stories for women at the Academy. Lauren has been such an inspiration to not only our community, to young athletes, but also to me. Lauren is a strong, independent, and successful woman who is thriving at the nation’s top military academy. As a fellow female athlete, she drives me to be my very best self and to keep me proud, yet humble to be a woman who will do what other women in the past could not. Their amazing stories of success transitioned my research from negative to positive. I truly believe that these two women encapsulate the success stories of women in today’s times. My findings are that women are respected and well-accepted by the United States Military Academy at West Point. “I would definitely not be here today if the women of 1980 wouldn’t have opened the door for all of us. You can really see the impact when you have women from armies from all over the world coming to West Point and then going back and opening doors for women in their militaries,” Said Arelena Shala, class of 2020. As Pat Locke says, “When I entered the Academy in 1976, the men did not want us there. Now 40 years later, everybody recognizes the talent and skills women

bring to the game.”<sup>76</sup> Women in the class of 1980 crawled, so that current women like Lauren and Elizabeth as well as future female cadets could run.

The pressure to be a model cadet is strong enough, but the women who endure and graduate from The United States Military Academy at West Point face much more than just that pressure. Alexandra Efaw represents this insecurity well. She says; “not only do I have to prove myself as a fresh lieutenant out of West Point, but I have to prove myself as a woman too.”<sup>77</sup> Breaking through a glass ceiling is not a well enough said way to depict the experiences of the first women at West Point. Not only did the first graduating female classes break the glass ceiling, but ““there's some shards of glass that may have been embedded in my shoulder now and then,”<sup>78</sup> says Marene Allison, a graduate in the class of 1980. West Point women are strong, resilient, determined, accomplished, vulnerable, and at times self-doubting. They are confident, proud, funny, patriotic, compassionate, and inspiring.<sup>79</sup>

This research has led me to a success story of women’s integration at West Point. From the experiences of women in the first integrated classes to the ongoing experiences of current cadets, women are prosperous and triumphant. Using sources from the live events from 1976, research from historians, and interviews with Lauren and Elizabeth, I formed a complete understanding of a full history of the integration of women at West Point. Though there is always room to grow, West Point accepting women into the military academy is such an amazing achievement and a successful one at that.

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<sup>76</sup> Esch, Mary. “Simone Askew is the First Black Woman to Lead West Point Cadets.”

<sup>77</sup> Taylor, “The Women of,”

<sup>78</sup> O’Connor, “Forty years,”

<sup>79</sup> Lewis, “West Point Women’s Views,” 321



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