THE COURAGE TO TAKE COMMAND

LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM A MILITARY TRAILBLAZER

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Introduction

My Story

There aren't many kids who get to say that one of their parents is a spy. It's the stuff of television shows and movies and games kids play with each other. But for my father, it was a career. He was an infantry officer who conducted military intelligence operations for the United States Marines at the Pentagon. I thought his job was the coolest thing ever.

He would disappear on secret missions that he never told the family about. Even my mother didn't know where her husband was going or what he was doing when he got there, and she was supposed to just deal with that kind of uncertainty until he showed up again. For her, I'm sure it was nerve-racking. Although I missed my father when he was gone, I didn't worry—I was too naive to realize the dangers involved, and young enough to have a very romanticized view of what spy work was all about.

I imagined him as one of the dashing heroes on my favorite TV shows and movies: *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, *The Wild Wild West*, *Get Smart*, and of course James Bond. More likely, my dad was doing research and analysis, but in my mind, he was calculating angles so a bullet would ricochet off a bottle and whiz right past a villain's ear, scaring him into spilling the secret code needed to defuse a bomb about to go off in a theater.

There were, of course, pluses and minuses for me with a Marine officer for a dad. The first minus was that he missed my birth because he was off fighting in the Korean War. Luckily, I don't remember that. What I do remember is that I had a sheltered life growing up on military bases. All our needs were covered, and we didn't socialize with nonmilitary kids.

Many military wives wore their husband's rank, and bases were well segregated—officers with officers, enlisted men with enlisted men. Our housing was separated according to this hierarchy, so I could only socialize with other kids whose fathers were around the same rank as my father's, and it translated to a certain snobbery. The wives of colonels looked down on the wives of majors, and so on. My parents weren't like that, though. I remember going to the beauty parlor after my father had been promoted to major, and the ladies in the shop asked me who my mother was.

"Joyce Harvey Morgenthaler," I told them.

"She's the nicest woman here!" one of the beauticians exclaimed. "She never treats us badly because our husbands are enlisted."

The other ladies nodded. I was very proud of my mother that day, and it taught me something about the kind of person I wanted to be—the kind who would make people want to speak enthusiastically about me behind my back.

I was never much of a girly girl growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. Luckily, both my parents were feminists and never expected me to conform to society's "rules" for girls. But as parents, their gender roles were pretty standard: He barked out the orders that she

followed, and if I wanted emotional support, I'd better talk to my mom, because my dad wouldn't put up with any *feelings*. "Suck it up" was the general theme.

"Daughters of Marines don't cry!" he would tell me. Later, it became "Daughters of Marine *colonels* don't cry!"

And Dad was never wrong.

Except that one time.

I was about 14, and we were sitting at the dining room table for dinner, with the television in the background showing the rerun of a boxing match. Later, my dad mentioned the winner of the match—except he named the wrong guy.

"He didn't win," I said.

"Of course he did!"

"But . . . I just watched it on television. The other guy won."

"It's in the newspaper," he said gruffly. "Go to the living room and go get the paper and look it up and you'll see I'm right. GO LOOK."

I turned to the sports page, and I was terrified . . . because *I* was right. I knew how to deal with my father when I was wrong, but how was I supposed to break the news to him that he was about to lose his always-right streak?

"WELL?" he boomed from the dining room in his Marine voice. "WAS I RIGHT?"

"No," I said in the tiniest voice I could manage. "I was."

I looked down at my feet as I brought in the newspaper. He grabbed it. For a moment, his face was serious, and then he burst out laughing. From then on, we were allowed to say that Dad had been wrong only once in his life.

That's why it was confusing to me when he told teenage me, "You're going to go further in life than I ever did."

Dad was wrong only once, so . . . could it be true?

"They're opening up the ROTC to women on a trial basis," my father told me, his eyes lit up with possibility. The move to an all-volunteer force had led to aggressive recruitment strategies. The military needed more bodies, even if they were female.

I thought for a few seconds about what he was telling me. I had never before considered a career in the military.

"Every branch?" I asked him.

"Every branch except the Marines."

"Then I'm not interested."

I was the daughter of a Marine, and I'd been brought up to believe that the Marines were the best.

But sometime between that conversation in summer and the day I arrived as a freshman at Penn State in September 1972, I had a change of heart. I walked up to the Willard Building, which housed the ROTC programs. My choice was simple: I didn't like flying and I was prone to seasickness, so I chose the Army.

"I want to be a spy," I told the officer. I wanted to do the top secret stuff my father was doing at the Pentagon.

"You should apply for a scholarship," he said. "This year is the first year we're offering four-year scholarships to women."

I had to go before the board that would decide on the scholarship recipients. Several young women went for their interviews before I did, and they chatted about their experiences afterward.

"What did they ask you?"

"Well, they wanted to know if I'd ever seen *M*A*S*H* and what I thought of it, and they asked me what I think the military does."

Softball questions. No worries—I had this thing nailed. I wasn't even nervous until I sat down in front of a seemingly completely different board from the one all the other women had appeared before.

"Do you think you're superior to these other girls because your father's an officer?" one of the men asked me.

I was confused. Was it just my perception, or were they . . . hostile? "The advantage is that I've moved a lot and I'm able to adapt and assess situations, but the disadvantage is that I have no lifelong friends, and that's kind of lonely," I replied.

I never got the *M*A*S*H* question. They fired away at me for several minutes until I walked away wondering what had just happened. But I must have had the right answers, because I became one of the first group of six women to receive a four-year scholarship to Penn State.

My grandfather Wendell P.C. Morgenthaler Sr. was too old to serve in World War II. He was thrilled when my father was accepted in the U.S. Naval Academy and later commissioned as a Marine Corps officer. My grandfather became a recruiter for the Academy and a regular at the officers club in Harrisburg. When he learned that I had followed in Dad's footsteps, he called me to tell me how proud he was. He requested a press release and photo from the ROTC brigade that he could send to his local newspaper—his granddaughter, one of the first scholarship recipients! He invited me to visit and met me at the bus terminal with flowers. He couldn't wait to take me to the officer's club and show me off to all the guys. But what a shock it was for both of us to see the following day's newspaper.

When you want people to salute in the Army, you say, "Present arms!" Under the women's picture ran the caption "Present legs!"

I hated seeing my grandfather humiliated—and I was none too pleased about it either. Our Army scholarships were a significant leap toward equality for women, and the newspaper staff had seen fit to trivialize it by making silly sexual commentary.

I hoped that the men I would serve with would not make that same judgment, but my dad was not so sure. As thrilled as my parents were for me, he warned me: "They don't want you there."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of the men don't want to see women in the military. You're going to have to work harder than everyone else to get any respect."

Doubts crept in. Was I making the right decision? It wouldn't take long to be tested: Soon after I signed up, I learned that those of us on scholarship were expected to join an extracurricular activity: either the Rangers or the drill team. I happily signed up for the Rangers—I couldn't wait to play war in the woods, learn survival skills, and lead other cadets. Army Rangers are some of the toughest people in the military.

But the colonel who led the Army ROTC brigade informed me that this was not an option for women. I was to join the drill team, period. I had already learned in class that I was not particularly good at marching; I lost the cadence too easily. So I pressed the issue, stressing that I had grown up playing war and that I wanted to be prepared for battle.

"Women are not in combat," he told me. It was a rule. No women in battle, therefore no training for battle.

I didn't know then how false his information was. Now I know about the nurses under attack at Anzio in World War II, the WACs wounded in Vietnam, and the women serving along the North Korean border. I'm sure they'll be glad to know that they weren't in combat after all.

"If I can't be in the Rangers, then I'm not doing an extracurricular activity," I told the colonel.

He lost it.

"You spoiled Marine brat! You think you're special? Your father's a stupid jarhead, and he doesn't get you any special treatment here. *I'm* in charge here, and you will follow my orders!"

My words were low and deliberate. "I'm not going to be some cutie marching around for your pleasure. You can take back the scholarship."

"You are dismissed," he said through clenched teeth.

I headed to the bathroom and had a good cry. Then I calmed down, washed my face, and headed to the military class already in session. Afterward, the colonel asked the instructor how I appeared in class. The captain was puzzled and said I seemed fine. Word flew throughout the brigade that I had stood up to the colonel. I didn't sign up for the drill team, and I didn't lose my scholarship. It was my first military victory.

My career would be punctuated by moments just like that. Along with the other pioneering women who joined alongside me, I had to redefine women's roles and prove that we were good for more than just tending wounds and filing papers. When things were unfair, we had to stand up for ourselves loudly, or no one else would.

At Penn State, some of the male cadets nicknamed one woman cadet "Tits" and another "Hot Lips." When a cadet tried to nickname me "Legs," I told him he could call me anything he wanted after I knocked his teeth in. This happened about two years before any U.S. court recognized sexual harassment as a crime: before

that, bosses were free to fire employees who wouldn't sleep with them, and managers could make lewd remarks to their workers all day long without fear of reprisal. This was particularly evident in the military, where we women were expected to sing along with the obscene call-and-response cadences for marching or running ("I don't know but I've been told . . ."). Some of the officers used just the funny, PG versions, but many made unabashed references to women's genitals, and we were expected to get with it or quit.

I learned to pick my battles.

I never said anything about the cadences or the inappropriate sexual talk around us, but I did speak up when someone crossed the line with me personally, including once when a major cornered me and once when an officer pulled the women aside and told us that if we passed out in the field, then he would cut off our shirts and bras. Uh, *no*. There was no medical reason for that.

It's not that I was supremely confident—I had moments of doubt just like anyone else might, but I was determined never to become a victim of that doubt. For any meaningful change to happen, we women would have to be strong leaders, or else we would always be treated as lesser soldiers.

In my first year, the higher-ups pulled women out of weapons training to listen to classroom lectures, including one about weather balloons. I remember it specifically because all of us women nodded off at one point in the class and the poor professor said, "You must not have had much sleep last night." He was right, but we were also really tired of taking time-filler classes when what we should have been doing was training for battle. None of us wanted to be unprepared. A war does not choose its victims by gender.

So we yelled about it, loud and long. The following year, women weren't pulled out of combat training classes anymore. Progress.

Getting taken seriously wasn't our only problem, though. On my first assignment in Korea in 1977, I encountered another major problem: prostitution. Married men were openly cheating on their wives (calling it "geographical bachelorhood"); single young men were handing over their whole paychecks at the brothels. They'd bring strippers and prostitutes into the clubs and had no concern about how that would make the rest of us women feel.

What it did was sour me on the idea of marriage: It seemed that all the men were cheating, so why bother with marriage? It also seemed that they'd lost the very notion of women as people. I had nearly every man in the officers' club competing for my affection. I'd never had that much attention in my life! But it wasn't because they all cared about me or even had any idea who I was. To them, I was just a warm body, and because I was an American, I was "free." Prostitutes cost money.

When I was a junior officer, the same men who fell all over themselves to sweet-talk me at night would try to avoid saluting me during the day.

In the military, you are always supposed to stop what you're doing and salute any officer who outranks you. Instead, the guys would pretend not to see me, or just say, "Afternoon, Ma'am," an intentional slight.

All of it left me depressed, and I handled it badly. I gained weight so men would leave me alone and stop thinking of me as a sexual object, and I began waiting in the building until everyone else had left so I wouldn't have to encounter the enlisted men on my way out and feel their disrespect.

But one day, I got tired of being depressed. I thought about the gift my father had sent me when I arrived in Korea: a notebook that said, "Make Policy, Not Coffee!" I thought about the many

great leaders I admired and how none of them would shy away from conflict.

If you let those guys get away with it once, they win, I told myself. It was crazy that I was hiding out in a building because some men didn't want to show respect. So the next time it happened, I made sure to counter it quickly.

"Oh!" I said. "You've forgotten how to salute. Well, that's OK because I can show you. Come here, soldier."

I made him salute over and over and over again. This went on for an extraordinary length of time—and soon word spread among the enlisted men that you probably should just salute Lieutenant Morgenthaler or she'd waste your whole afternoon.

At every turn, I was well aware of the consequences of my performance. Whatever I did or failed to do had the potential to change the future for all the women who would come after me. If I showed emotion, my commanders would not say that Jill Morgenthaler showed emotion; they would say that *women* are too emotional.

I knew that my father had been right—I would have to work twice as hard for half the recognition. So instead of complaining about it, that's what I set out to do: I shot my hand in the air to volunteer for everything, took my work as seriously as I'd taken my studies, pushed past my comfort zone, and applied for promotions.

My life in the military was full of many "firsts": I was the first female company commander in the Army Security Agency Group Korea serving along the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the first female battalion commander in the 88th Regional Support Command, and the first female brigade commander in the 84th

Division, commanding hundreds of soldiers across six states. In Illinois, I was the first woman to lead homeland security.

Between 1976 and my retirement in 2006, I served in command centers in Korea, Germany, Bosnia, and Iraq, earning the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star. It was meaningful to me to know that my work was saving lives and bringing people freedom.

You might think that after all my years of service, sexism would be much less of a problem, but consider this: After the birth of my second child, I took off one weekend from the Reserve unit—*two days* when I was entitled to months of maternity leave. I came back to find that my position had been filled and I'd been demoted—under the patronizing guise of making my life "less stressful." Do they do that to men who become fathers? I didn't accept the demotion and instead transferred to a different department, where I continued working my way up according to plan.

Never did I accept the limitations that others tried to impose on me, whether in the military or in my civilian work. Along the way, I met a wonderful man who supports everything I do (though he does have to remind me every now and then to check my "commanding officer" persona at the door), had two great kids who are now successful young adults, attained the rank of full colonel in 2000, ran for Congress (I won the primary, though not the seat), and became a professional public speaker.

I've learned many lessons in the military about how to earn respect, rally a team, overcome opposition, and more, and I will share these with you. They have served me well in business life as well, because good leadership is good leadership. The same interpersonal skills, work ethic, and mindset apply, which is why I've been able to train others to be more effective managers and business owners.

I've seen a lot in this lifetime: rich and poor, just and unjust, oppressed and free, war and peace, the privileged and the marginalized. I've learned from each person I've met, and all of it has led me to the kind of life I'm proud to be living.

And I got to be a spy after all.

About the Author

Colonel Jill Morgenthaler (ret.) is a woman of many firsts. She was one of the first women to train as an equal with men in the inaugural Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) program and one of the first to receive a four-year Army scholarship. She was one of the first female military intelligence commanders in the DMZ in South Korea and Germany (West Berlin), the first female battalion commander in the 88th Regional Support Command, and the first female brigade commander in the 84th Division.

After five years on active duty, she served for 25 years in the Army Reserves. Her operations included military intelligence in South Korea and West Berlin, disaster recovery during the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, peacekeeping in Bosnia, evacuation of Kosovar refugees, and public affairs for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In addition to two Humanitarian Service Medals, Colonel Morgenthaler received the Bronze Star for her leadership in Iraq in 2004 and the Legion of Merit for 30 years of extraordinary leadership performance upon her retirement in 2006.

As the first female Homeland Security advisor for the State of Illinois, Colonel Morgenthaler directed homeland security operations and provided guidance to the Illinois Emergency Management Agency, the Illinois Terrorism Task Force, the Illinois National Guard, and other agencies for the prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery from natural disasters and incidents of terrorism.

Today, Colonel Morgenthaler is a professional speaker, exhilarating audiences with tales of her famous stare down with Saddam Hussein and other examples from her 30 years of service. She presents, consults, and trains on leadership, crisis communications, and homeland security. She is an adjunct professor at Pennsylvania State University.

Colonel Morgenthaler has a bachelor of arts from Pennsylvania State University, a master of arts from the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and a master of strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College.

She is the proud mother of a son and a daughter, and she lives in the Chicago area with her husband.

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