

## *Resiliency Rules: Forged in the Fires of Failure*

The most important rules informing the decisions I have made in my life as a wife (in a mil-to-mil marriage), mom, female military aviator, airline pilot and USAF Squadron leader, that have brought me the greatest, self-perceived successes are (in my order of importance):

1. Picking the right partner/spouse (this is my second attempt; I chose poorly the first time, but that story is a saga along the lines of Pillars of the Earth, by Ken Follett).
2. Being honest about your life and career goals with yourself, your spouse and others through detailed and continuous communication.
3. Staying connected and sharing stories, hardships, successes and promoting healthy progress (WMA, WAI, Ninety Nines); find a mentor/be a mentor.
4. Be a vigilant scrapper; never believe a job is beneath you (true leaders do the minutia and difficult tasks to empower and enable their people to achieve greatness; and completing “company tasks” outside the cockpit only makes you more well-rounded and builds your resume!).
5. Have patience with your career progression and enjoy your life outside of work; prioritize joy and humor.

After 15 years of climbing the USAF ladder in the “man’s world” of aviation, I had been hired to serve as the Chief Pilot for my squadron. I was so excited, especially since I had been serving in numerous support functions for the previous five years (Rule #4). I was ready to get out from behind a desk and back with my flying family. A few months in my new role, I learned that my life partner was offered command of the squadron for which I was the Chief Pilot. In an instant, my world exploded like a balloon, popped by a child, and all the parts and pieces of my career fell to the ground like bits of shredded latex. I knew I would have to step down from my dream job and move to the side as my husband’s career soared. He did not even have to ask me; I would never keep him from his ultimate dream and final milestone in his career. He had earned it and the squadron would be better for it.

Even so, I felt pangs of jealousy and bitterness for the better part of a year; I felt cast aside and unimportant. I had moments of pure hatred for the system and this seemingly inequitable fate. Fortunately, these feelings were short-lived because I had great mentors to provide wise guidance. I quickly gained employment as a Sim Pro and then landed my dream job at American Airlines as a First Officer. Ultimately, this curse of being cast aside was the best thing that could have ever happened to my career, not to mention the blessing of the rich experience my husband had as commander.

I bet there are many of you reading this that have a similar experience, feeling like a second chair to your partner’s career, especially those of you with competing military careers. I recently realized that I am in good company when it comes to flying airplanes for the military and a major airline while navigating the storms of a mil-to-mil marriage and being the best wife and mother I can be. I had the remarkable privilege of sitting on the breakout panel, “Striking a Balance,” at WAI 2020 Conference in March. I learned so much from my fellow panelists and Meghan Camp, my dear friend and the panel facilitator, in addition to the audience participants. I realized that I am not alone; there are so many other ladies just like me! Having no females in my USAF

pilot training class, and only one female in my operational unit, I have felt very alone and different for the majority of my flying career. Yet all at once, I was surrounded by women who fly for the military and the airlines while raising a family with their spouses (some also military spouses).

I could not believe all of the insightful questions asked by the audience. The gist of all the questions was very simple, “How do you juggle everything, succeed in each area of your life, fight the internal and external battles and stay sane?” My quick answer, and one I realized was shared by all the panel members, was that I am not afraid to fail and ask for help. In fact, I embrace failing because it means I am learning and getting better. I love sharing my failures with others and having others share their failures with me so I can learn from them. It is simply liberating when failure is no longer a negative experience.

The second thing all the panelists agreed with is the need for support. This support is not only childcare support, but also support from one’s spouse, employer, coworkers, fellow female aviators/mentors. Each panel member had their own personalized support system; but we all had one. Personally, I have leaned heavily on my husband, parents, mother-in-law, au pairs, live-in nannies, neighbors/friends, and coworkers. I also have incredible female mentors in my life like my mother (retired State Appellate Court Justice), Olga Custodio (retired American Airlines Captain and USAF pilot), and Val Moore (retired USAF pilot) who help guide me through the maze of spinning plates. Moreover, I have paid close attention to the men around me throughout my journey, how they treat their wives, daughters and me, and I lock arms with those that seem invested in the cause of parity.

These men/allies are priceless; I know fist-hand as my father is one of them. I had the advantage of watching my father model this behavior as he encouraged my mother, and numerous other females (including me); through incredibly successful careers. The truth is, I have had so much support along every step of my journey, I just did not recognize it and lean in to the support network until a few years into my career. Before I move on, I think it is very important for me to really highlight the single most important support relationship; the support relationship with a life partner. This support relationship is the number one determining factor to the ultimate life satisfaction/success. Your partner should be your biggest fan and loudest cheerleader, and you should mirror that dedicated behavior for your partner (Rule #1).

My husband and I enjoy a strong and equal partnership, based on honesty, trust and respect, which is why it was possible for me to step out of my chief pilot role so he could achieve his goal to be a squadron commander. It was his time and I trusted that when it was my time, he would do anything and everything he could to encourage and help me. We also spent a lot of time communicating, in difficult detail, what it might look like when he relinquishes command and what types of positions I might be seeking (airlines, USAF leadership positions, etc). So, the right partner is absolutely the key, as the right partnership builds trust through honest conversation and consistent, intentional support (Rule #2).

So, for those of you that want to know if you can “have it all,” you can! I just don’t know of any way you can have it all, all of the time. At least, I know I have never had it all, all at once. I was not able to be pregnant and fly. I am not able to be a homeroom parent for my children’s classes

and simultaneously be a Formal Training Unit Instructor Pilot, Director of Operations and an American Airlines First Officer at the same time; but I have been able to be all of those things in the last five years at some point in time. I think the hardest thing for the personality type of the female aviator/wife/mom, is patience. One thing at a time and one day at a time (Rule #5).

It may not seem like the rules listed above tie into successful mil-to-mil marriages, but I believe they do. If both partners abide by these rules, both parties can find a way to juggle their shared life and still reach personal goals without doing so at the expense of their other half. However, good partnerships can't always combat the military's decision to geographically separate flying couples from one another, but we can continue highlighting the negative impact of these unilateral and rigid decisions by offering creative, viable solutions. Our combined efforts can and will eventually help mil-to-mil marriages be less stressful and ultimately more successful.

Coming up with the creative solutions takes a united effort from couples and families that have been negatively affected by cookie-cutter policies that ultimately have negative impact on the mission. We have seen telecommuting come to the forefront of "normal operations" over the last few months, and these new work rules have been wildly successful. It is not impossible to think that one military member in a mil-to-mil marriage could telecommute his/her desk work for the duration of a PCS cycle, while cohabitating with their family at another PCS location. It is also possible that the member could stay current in their airframe by commuting once a month to go fly with their unit. There are so many first, second and third order beneficial effects to this time of creative solution. The benefits to the family are obvious; the benefits to the military include reduced "re-train" rates and PCS costs, among countless other benefits. Our community has ideas that must be socialized and presented to the various Services; united in effort, we can affect change (Rule #3).

This last year alone we have seen major strides and accomplishments on behalf of females serving in the military and couples serving together. Nursing mothers will now have dedicated places to pump; both parents have equal maternal/paternal leave rights dependent upon their primary or secondary caregiver statuses rather than their gender. Ideas are being explored by groups like the Women's Initial Team at the Pentagon, that are aimed at providing options for servicemembers that desire to continue serving but have family limitations precluding them from participating in a full-time status for certain periods of time (ie, raising young children). Total Force Integration initiatives could also allow for ease of movement between Reserves and Active Duty depending on one's phase of life, in addition to Inactive Ready Reserve (IRR) billets serving as placeholders for those that need to pause their careers. The possibilities are endless if we stay open minded and think outside the "this is the way we have always done things" box.

I like to believe that I am raising two young men to be thoughtful allies who will one day walk alongside the women of their generation, standing up for parity in opportunity. Maybe someday my sons or their spouses will pick up the torch carried by dedicated leaders like Major Afton Brown from Air Force Recruiting Service, Detachment 1. She is a great initiator of progress and change by diligently connecting determined and brilliant minds throughout the Services. Or, Meaghan Camp who spends hours of her personal time organizing a panel for WAI so "flying mamas" know they are not alone in the uphill journey.

This month, as we celebrate huge milestones in progress for women military aviators (and ultimately military aviation as a whole), like the repeal of the Combat Exclusion Law and the recent changing of the lyrics in the Air Force Song to make it gender neutral, let us continue the efforts of those that came before us to clear our skies, by actively keeping the skies clear for those “in close or extended trail.”