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**GUEST: COL. (RET.) NICOLE MALACHOWSKI '96**

**HOST: LT. COL. (TET.) NAVIERE WALKEWICZ '99**

**Naviere Walkewicz 00:00**

My guest today is Col. (Ret.) Nicole Malachowski, USAFA Class of '96. Her career has been nothing short of extraordinary. Col. Malachowski is perhaps best known as the first woman to fly as a pilot with the Thunderbirds, a singular distinction that set her path to reaching even greater heights. However, what you might not know is that her journey took an unexpected turn when she faced a sudden life altering loss of her place in the Air Force. The challenges that followed were extreme and personal, but through them, Col. Malachowski demonstrated resilience and strength that not only transformed her own life, but also empowered her to help others with their own struggles. In today's conversation, we'll dive deep into the personal and professional journey that led her to transition to civilian life, the lessons she learned from the hardships she faced along the way, and how she now advocates for others, sharing the wisdom she's gained from the tough battles she's fought and won. We'll also take a look back at her time at the Academy, her experiences as a pilot, and the leadership principles that have guided Col. Malachowski, she has become a powerful voice for resilience, perseverance and leadership, and I'm excited to hear her insights on all of these topics. Col. Malachowski, may I call you Nicole?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Yes, please.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Welcome to *Long Blue Leadership*, and thank you for being here.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure. It truly is.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

I think one of the things that's so exciting for our listeners is really getting to know you. And you know, I think there's no question about who you are in the media. I mean, all the things you've accomplished, but some things that are most special is when we just sit down and kind of get to know you behind the scenes.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Indeed, let's do it.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Excellent, excellent. So we like to start going back a little bit, but before we do, I'm sitting here and I'm noticing we're wearing the same color top. So

**Nicole Malachowski**

That's right.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

We've already got the memo, but you have a beautiful pendant on. Can you talk about that?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Thank you so much. Yeah, for people who are listening, it's actually a little heart with wings. And this was gifted to me by a lady I met back in probably 2006-2007 when I was a pilot flying with the Thunderbirds. During that time, the organization called the 99s, which is the organization—

**Naviere Walkewicz**

99s!

**Nicole Malachowski**

Yeah, women pilots. They brought me in, and I was able to get a membership. And there was a lady there at the time — her name was Bobby Rowe — and she just took a little bit of a liking to me and was very much a mentor and a role model, someone who was there to encourage me and help me through what was indeed a stressful time. And I remember, after I finished my tour with the Thunderbirds, one day I opened the mail and there was a really thoughtful letter from her talking about what she perceived as my impact on women in aviation, which was very humbling, and it came along with this necklace. And so I've had this necklace since about 2008

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh, I just got chill bumps. I feel like we're probably going to have some great stories of people that've touched your life along the way like this today.

**Nicole Malachowski**

I always tell people, I'm an end result of a lot of hard work by other people.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh, that's awesome. So let's go back to even before the academy. Where did you grow up? Where are you from, and what were you like as a little girl?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Sure, yeah. So I was actually born in central California, in a town called Santa Maria. And I consider myself very lucky, because I was born a woman in America. So there was a lot of opportunities, you know, afforded to me. Also very lucky to be born into a solid, you know, middle class family. You know, I was a kid who always had a roof over my head and food on the table, which makes it a lot easier, right, for you to seize opportunities and to be your best. And think it's important that we acknowledge that not everybody is born into that position. And so I was very, very lucky. I will tell you, I was definitely the loner, definitely an introvert. Always have been. A lot of people would be surprised by that, but I am a solid INFJ on the Myers Briggs. But as a young kid, just very quiet, kept to myself. I was very much a dreamer, very curious about things. So I loved to dive into books. I loved school. I was the kid that would take my lunchbox out into the middle of the football field by myself and just stare up at the sky and the clouds moving by and dream about things. I remember being in the Girl Scouts. During junior high, we moved down towards Southern California, where I learned about Civil Air Patrol, and then from there in high school, we actually made a big move to Las Vegas, Nevada. I continued my time in Civil Air Patrol as a cadet, but also joined the Air Force Junior ROTC at my high school. Very much again, someone who very much a loner, but very, very driven by my dream of flying and very just driven to do something hard. I always like to see what I was capable of doing. So I think joining things like Civil Air Patrol and Junior ROTC kept me focused on those goals.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Wow. So I'm just drawn to this visual of you with your lunchbox in the middle of the football field, looking up at this guy. So were you dreaming about flying at that...

**Nicole Malachowski**

I was, I was, and you know what's so funny as you're talking, I remember it was a metal lunch pail, and it was The Rescuers Down Under.

**Naveire Walkewicz**

Oh my gosh. I remember that show.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Yeah, my little lunch box. You know, I went to an air show when I was 5 years old, and I remember seeing an F-4 Phantom fly by, and it flew by so low and it was so loud, I had to cover my ears. And I remember my chest rumbling, you know, the smell of jet fuel. And I remember thinking, man, like there's a person in there, like I want to be that person. And I had come from a family that, you know, honored and respected military service. So both of my grandfathers were career military, my father had been drafted into the Army during Vietnam. So I knew that military service was honorable and noble and good. And when I discovered that that was a military plane, I remember as a kid putting one plus one is two. I'm like, "Wait, you can fly jets and serve in the military? That's what I'm going to be." That was around 1979 and what's odd is, you know, with that excitement of a 5-year-old, I didn't know it was against the law (and it would be against the law until I was a cadet at the Air Force Academy) for women to be fighter pilots. But to a 5-year-old, you don't think of those things.

**Naviere Walkewicz 05:47**

That's right. There are no boundaries on dreams.

**Nicole Malachowski**

So looking up at the sky, watching planes, and of course, in high school, in particular, moving to Las Vegas, Nevada — because Nellis Air Force Base is there — so I mean, I would watch the red flag launches and watch how those jets fly. And of course, I would see the Thunderbirds flying by as a kid, thinking that was pretty cool. So to be honest, I set my sights on the Air Force Academy in elementary school.

**Naviere Walkewicz 06:09**

Oh my goodness.

06:11

So when I was 5 and decided to be a fighter pilot...

**Naviere Walkewicz 06:13**

You had decided...

**Nicole Malachowski 06:14**

I mean, I was maniacally, maniacally focused. I did not have a backup plan. I am so lucky that things worked out, because I have no idea what else I would have done with my career, but I remember in sixth grade a bit of a turning point. It was a very distinct kind of emotional moment. Our teacher had asked all of us, on a Friday, one of us would stand up and talk about our goal, what we want to be when we grow up, and how we're going to get there. And I remember when my time came, I stood up on a Friday. It was all the confidence of a 12-year-old, and I said, "I'm gonna be a fighter pilot someday." And I remember the kids laughing, and now I'm an introvert and I'm kind of a loner, so then the kind of social laughter was very I... Look I'm 50 something years old now, and I still remember how I felt in that moment. It was really horrifying. And my teacher said, "Well, why don't you sit down and come back when you have something more realistic?"

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Wow.

**Nicole Malachowski**

And I remember going home that day and just tears, the tears of a 12-year-old girl, just flowing. But after I got it out, it was more like fuel to the fire. And I've always been that way, like, tell me I can't do something, and I will make sure I go do it. And so I remember really looking into it and studying. And my parents took me on a vacation to the National Air and Space Museum in D.C., you know, to keep fanning those flames. And this is a funny story, because in sixth grade, after that trip to the National Air and Space Museum, I learned about the Air Force Academy, and I wrote a letter to the Air Force Academy. And I will never forget — they responded.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Really?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Yes, they responded. The admissions office responded with a personalized letter letting me know I'm kind of young to apply now, but here's the application process. They sent me a whole bunch of Air Force Academy swag, and that was it. Sixth grade — I was going to the Air Force Academy.

**Naviere Walkewicz 07:55**

Goodness. That is fascinating. And so I'm seeing this, this young girl in her classroom. And so I'm curious on your resilience, even at a young age, when you went home in tears, how did you pull yourself back of where — is that something just in you already? You kind of sat in a little bit, and then you stood up and you felt more...

**Nicole Malachowski**

You know, I hope this doesn't sound weird, but I've always been kind of OK and content being alone. I don't need outside, I guess, validation. I think I was kind of born that way or raised that way, but at the same time, you do need some kind of support system. And I was lucky, again. I had supportive parents. I was lucky to surround myself, you know, with folks, especially like at that age of 12-13, joining the Civil Air Patrol, right? Yeah, because now I've got other kids who have similar likes and similar dreams. So maybe I'm not the nerd or the outsider anymore. I'm starting to fit in, and I have a feeling of belonging with a group. Also to have the senior members in the Civil Air Patrol as role models to teach me. You know, I think it's always important for people to surround themselves with people who believe in their dreams as much as you do. And I think organizations like the Civil Air Patrol and Junior ROTC did that for me during those tumultuous adolescent years.

**Naviere Walkewicz 09:10**

Yes, so much so. So when you were actually old enough to apply now to the Academy, let's talk about that process. What was it like for you?

**Nicole Malachowski** 09:16

Well, I mean, I think it was more exciting than anything else. I told you I had stayed maniacally focused. I was very particular and organized about prioritizing how my application would look. So of course, I strove to have the good grades, and obviously stayed involved with the activities like Civil Air Patrol or participating in sports like running cross country and track, as well as doing community service-type activities. So I was indeed focused on making sure that application looked good. I remember the thing I was probably the most nervous about were those interviews with your senators and your representatives, and wondering if I was going to be able to interview well. So I was putting my best foot forward. And I remember my senior year — it was approximately October, maybe coming up on November, about this time, right? And I went to the mailbox to get the mail, and I had the application had already been in, right? Because everything was done before the fall, and I saw this giant envelope from the Air Force Academy. And I thought, “No way, because it's only like October or November.” And I started shaking, and I opened it right there at the mailbox. I had to go up the street. I opened it, and I feel bad because I think I littered the envelope all over the street, but I remember opening it up, and the first line was, “Congratulations, you've been accepted to the Class of 1996.” And I instantaneously just started crying and running as fast as I could back to my house to tell my family, I mean, to be that was an early admissions—

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Yes, it was.

**Nicole Malachowski**

To know in October, November of your senior high school that you're going to the Air Force Academy. I mean, my dream since I was 5, that letter I wrote to the Academy at age 12, had all come full circle. And I remember eating dinner with a family that night, everyone's celebrating, everyone's happy. And then I go to bed, and I remember thinking, “Whoa, like, now you have to put your money where your mouth is.” You know, it's not an easy thing to get accepted. It's an even harder thing to make it through.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Yes.

**Nicole Malachowski**

And so I think there was that kind of smack of reality in the face that now you got to go do this, and you got to, you got to put your money where your mouth is.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 11:18

Oh my goodness. And so your family loved it. And just that feeling, I just can imagine seeing you at the mailbox and then running back. So when you when you got that news, then, tell me about what happened after that. Obviously, you knew you were going, and this was October, November, so you still had to finish the school year before you got on the bus at the Academy. What was that the rest of that year like?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Well, I also started taking flying lessons at age 12. I had soloed at age 16. So I was like, "I need to get in some more flying," right? Because I was really interested in flying the gliders here at the Academy and going to pilot training. So I'm like, "I better get as much flying in as I can to put my best foot forward." Academically, I don't think I did much. But the other thing that was of concern and remained, I guess, a challenge of mine as a cadet was the athletics. I've never been naturally gifted athletically. So trying to, as I was awaiting, going to the Academy, working out every day. Working towards the cadet physical fitness test, was something that I really focused on, because I knew it was a weakness of mine, and indeed, it stayed a weakness of mine, but I made it through so—

**Naviere Walkewicz 12:25**

Oh my goodness. So talk us through. Had you been to the Academy prior to the acceptance?

**Nicole Malachowski 12:31**

No. And I remember when my parents came to drop me off for Jacks Valley and basic training. When we came up over that hill, over Monument Hill, and you can see the Chapel and the imposing white buildings on a hill, I was like, "Oh, wow, that's extraordinary." And I was really just excited. People asked, "Were you nervous that day?" I was not. I was happy. I mean I got yelled at. I remember getting off the bus and getting into formation that first time, the formation where we would walk up what was then the Bring Me Men ramp and I was smiling, and I was getting yelled at because I was smiling. And my mom and dad — my mom was over there wiping tears, and I'm waving like a little kid. "This is gonna be fine. This is exciting!" You know? And getting yelled at because I was smiling, because I was just so happy that — this, to me, was like, the first step of the rest of my life. It was that first real step towards this goal of serving my country like people in my family had, and getting to fly jets while I do it. I mean how cool is that?

**Naviere Walkewicz**

So you already had your private pilot's license when you got here?

**Nicole Malachowski**

I did not, actually. I missed it by a few hours. I had soloed, and I had a few hours after solo. It was really just a financial thing. I remember in high school, I would ride my 10-speed over to a plant nursery, and I would water the plants, and then they would pay me cash under the table, and then I would ride my 10-speed bike to North Las Vegas Airport, and I would give it to a guy by the name of Bill Cotter, who was my first instructor, and he would take me flying. And I remember the first time I went over there. I was probably 14. I rode my bike over, and I was like, "Hey, I'm Nicole Malakowski. I'm gonna be a fighter pilot," or Nicole Elliot at the time. You know, "I want flying lessons." And back then, this is, like, 1989, 1990, everyone just stared at me because there's this 14-year-old girl. They're like, "What are you talking about?" And I remember Bill Cotter, an older man, came around the corner. You know, hair disheveled, wrinkled shirt, big old cup of coffee with the coffee stains, like, "I'll fly with you. I'll fly with anyone."

**Naviere Walkewicz**

I love that.

**Nicole Malachowski**

And that was it. Bill Cotter became my man. So he treated me like any other pilot. He had high expectations for me. And he was one of the first people I celebrated that Air Force Academy acceptance with.

**Naviere Walkewicz 14:46**

That's awesome. I mean, how special too — the fact that you had so much like desire that you rode your bike to water plants.

**Nicole Malachowski**

I would do it at 5 a.m.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh, my goodness, I love that. Well, I think you were probably are working on all that athleticism, and you didn't even know. Yeah, so let's talk about while you're at the Academy, then, what was your journey like? Obviously it sounds like academics wasn't a struggle for you.

**Nicole Malachowski 15:10**

Academics turned out pretty well. Let's be honest, I had some classes I distinctly remember. Capt. Demon Dante was my — what was that — chemistry. And there was Capt. Stonebreaker, statistics, that was another tough one. So chemistry, physics and statistics were hard for me. That was kind of a C+, B- kind of thing. The rest of the academics seemed to go pretty darn well. Militarily, that went well. I was, I think — leaning on the experience I had from Civil Air Patrol and Junior ROTC really helped out a lot. It was very comfortable with all of the military aspects of things. Then we come to athletics, right? I want to say I never failed a PT test, but I came about as close as you could get, probably more than half the time. I consistently struggled — that darn stand still, jump, you know, the pull ups, those were things that I struggled with, but I continued to work on them. Again, I never failed, but it was always something that was a specter in the back of my mind that, like, "I'm gonna come here do all this hard work and I'm gonna get kicked out because I can't do the jump or the sit ups." That was something that did, in fact, stress me a bit. But it was a pretty average kind of experience. I didn't have any extreme highs or extreme lows. I did march tours for the same thing: getting caught out of my dorm after hours. And both times it was because I was trying to finish a project with another cadet that was, like, due the next day. So you know—

**Naviere Walkewicz**

If you're gonna walk tours like, look—

**Nicole Malachowski**

I think it paid off.

**Naviere Walkewicz 16:43**

Because, didn't you graduate fourth in your class?



**Nicole Malachowski** 16:46

No, gracious, no. Oh my. I graduated fourth in my pilot training.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

OK.

**Nicole Malachowski**

I think that's a Wikipedia mystery. I need to get that fixed. No, I graduated, like, 120-something in my class.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 16:58

OK, I was gonna say, there's a big distinction. I'm like, those tours paid off.

**Nicole Malachowski** 17:03

I was 100-and-something in the Air Force Academy class. But again it was a very average experience. I don't remember any highs or lows. I do remember I got my enjoyment becoming a cadet soaring instructor pilot.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 17:18

Let's talk about that, because I feel like that is a kind of a key leadership role as well.

**Nicole Malachowski** 17:22

Yes, that was my leadership role. So my senior year, I was the cadet soaring squadron commander.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh, let's talk about.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Yes, yes. So obviously, between freshman, sophomore year, I signed up as soon as I could to take soaring and when I discovered that you could actually apply to be a soaring instructor, again — this is, this is how I do things, right? You see, I make a decision, and then I stay maniacally focused on it. So, I was able to apply, got lucky, and got picked up for the instructor program. And I remember that was a really like growth experience, because it's one thing to be able to fly a glider, it's another thing to be able to try to teach somebody how to do that. And I really — I give a lot of credit to this, you know, soaring instructor upgrade program teaching me the skills of, how do you communicate something technical? How do you communicate something hard? This idea that you need to be able to communicate it not just in one way, but two or three different ways, because each of your students is going to come at it with a different skill set, or a different perspective, or a different personality that responds to different type of teaching. So learning how to tailor your instruction and your care and your leadership to each individual was something I learned here as a sophomore, and you're like — or a C3C — this idea that I would carry that on into my career as a leader, and ultimately into being, you know, a fighter squadron commander, this tailored leadership actually started here. But soaring is what was my respite. Soaring is where I refilled that tank. Teaching — the first time — you know, one of my other cadet students soloed, and you're just standing there watching that take off, going, "Please,

please, please.” And then they do it and like, it's one thing to be successful yourself. It's a whole different level to teach somebody else to be successful. Like, I'm getting like—

**Naviere Walkewicz 19:14**

I'm seeing you. I wish for those of you who are only listening — I wish you could see, like — when you just see someone who's in the sunshine because it's just so bright. Like, that's what you are showing me right now.

**Nicole Malachowski 19:23**

And it was funny, because at that time, I weighed maybe, gosh, under 110 pounds. And so I would often be matched with the football players. And so, as you recall, the heavier person would sit in the front seat, us instructors would sit in the back. And I remember I could never see anything, because these guys were 6-foot-tall, broad shoulders, and I'd have to lean to the left and lean to the right in order to see the tow-plane. And I remember, I went up with one football player, and we got up at altitude, and I said, “OK, this is your first flight. Go ahead and pull that red knob and release us from the tow-plane.” And he does, and you hear the thunk, and you see the tow-plane dive off all gracefully, and all of a sudden he just starts flipping out. He's like, “We don't have an engine. We don't have...”

**Naviere Walkewicz 20:04**

Oh my goodness, yes.

**Nicole Malachowski 20:06**

And he got so excitable about the thing. I was like, “I don't know what about gliders you didn't understand. Gliders glide.” But he actually started passing out. And I remember I had to reach up and grab him by his collar and pull him back, because he was starting to lean forward on the stick. I had to lean back, pull him back and fly a glider until he came back to wow. And he went on to solo, this kid who had a sincere fear of doing this. He didn't even want to get in the glider in the first place. To see him go from that to someone who soloed, man. And I'm still friends with him to this day. I won't name his name, but I'm still friends with him to this day, and he's an extraordinarily accomplished leader in corporate America.

**Naviere Walkewicz 20:45**

Oh, that's so fantastic. That's what it's about. Wow. So, you knew you enjoyed, well, obviously you have enjoyed the flying and soaring, but the leadership aspect, I think, was something that was new to you then? Or had you done that in Civil Air Patrol? Did you also have leadership there?

**Nicole Malachowski 21:00**

Yeah, I had leadership experience in Civil Air Patrol, but I think this was a different level. You know, my senior year, becoming the cadet soaring squadron commander, it was really cool, because not only were you trying to take inputs from your peers and your colleagues on things we can improve or do differently, you know, valuing the other cadet's opinions, but how do I translate that to leadership? How do I go now and talk to the real officers, the active-duty officers in charge, and go, "These are maybe resources we need, or things culturally, you know, that we need to change." And that was hard for me, because I had never done that before. How do you advocate for your peers in a way that's understood, by the active-duty leadership? So that was really something that, again, would become important in my military career, because when you're put in a leadership role, it's about, I think, advocating for the people who you are accountable for and responsible to. And so how can you do that and do it in a way that it's received well by the leadership above you? And we also, man, we won the national championships that year.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

That's amazing.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Got to stand up there at Mitchell Hall with a big trophy, you know? So what a great group of folks. And then we all went to pilot training together, and then we flew Strike Eagles together. And then people like Jack Fischer go on and become astronauts, and you're like, "Dude, I knew that guy when..." I mean, it's just what an extraordinary group of folks. What a fun little club to be a part of.

**Naviere Walkewicz 22:24**

Wow. So let's talk about that club a little bit after you graduated from the Academy. You went on to pilot training. Not everyone gets to do that, so talk to us about that journey with you.

**Nicole Malachowski 22:33**

Well, sure. I mean, just extraordinarily lucky to go to pilot training. I was slated to go early right after graduation, and I was a casual status lieutenant flying gliders, of course, and I went out for a jog and broke my ankle. So this would be my first little detour. And I ended up — they offered me to go to go to Shepherd a lot later, or as soon as my ankle was healed, I could go to Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi, right away. And I said, "I gotta go. I cannot sit around and wait. I want to go to Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi." And everyone's like, "What you're going to turn down the chance of going to fighters to like, have to fight for Columbus?" I like, "I can't be stagnant. I need to go." So showed up at Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi, and again, really grateful for all of the flying experience that I had. I think that just those foundational procedures, you know, foundational knowledge, was vital to being a little more comfortable than other people that didn't have that experience. It was easy to be slightly ahead of the curve early on. But as I like to tell people, I fell flat on my face across the starting line. My second check ride in pilot training, I failed. Now, pilot training at that time was about a year long. There were about 10 check rides, and at that time, failing one check ride statistically, traditionally, would take you out of the running for graduating high enough to be a fighter pilot. This was devastating to me. I mean, how in the world did I work since I was 5 years old for this moment — and I failed a check ride because my flaps were not in the right position for takeoff in the T-37. And for those who

flew the T-37 which is now just in museums, they know that as you taxi out to the runway, with the way the hydraulics cycle, your flaps can indeed adjust and you need to do one more check before takeoff. And I failed that, flat out. And so it was a one downgrade fail. The rest of my sortie went flawlessly. And so this was extraordinarily devastating. And I remember even having fleeting moments that night of like, "Maybe I should just quit." Now this is, of course, the youth in me, right? I'm a 21-year-old kid, and I'm just getting a little bit emotional about it. But if I can't be a fighter pilot and I just knocked myself out of the running, I should quit. And I didn't call my parents because I didn't want to tell them. I was too embarrassed to say, "Hey, my dream that you all have supported is about to come to an end, because I messed up and I made a really junior varsity mistake." And so I called my mentor, Sue Ross. So Sue Ross had been my English teacher my freshman year at the Air Force Academy. She became my sponsor mom, and I thought she had hung the moon when I was a freshman at the Academy, because she was the first woman I'd seen with Wings of Silver. Yes, she was a tanker pilot. And I thought, "Oh, she's hung the moon." So who do I call? Sue Ross. And I get on the phone, and there's a lot of this and that, and all my excuse-making and crying, and she just let me talk, and she's like, "Are you done?" And I'm done. And she goes, "Well, are you going to do that again tomorrow?" And I said, "Sue, how am I supposed to get back in the jet tomorrow? How do I face my peers? I've been telling them I'm gonna fly Strike Eagles this whole time, like this is so embarrassing. What if I fail again? What if I fail again tomorrow?" And I remember she talked me off the ledge, man, and I came away with that conversation, realizing that indeed, I really believe failure is the price of entry for achieving something great. Because if you have the right mindset, you come away with failures, I think, a lot more committed, a lot more dedicated, a lot more focused, and I think a lot more humble, and all of those characteristics and traits are good things. And so if not for Sue Ross, I don't know that I would have gotten in the jet the next day with the right mindset. Now I had used my mulligan and I had fallen flat on my face across the starting line, and I had to stay squeaky clean the rest of the time, which I managed to do.

### **Naviere Walkewicz**

And that's because you had that failure at the entry point of achieving something great.

### **Nicole Malachowski**

And I realized too, after I got out of the jet the next day, I didn't die. I flew again. Life is fine. You can get up and you can keep going, and you can get back in the cockpit the next day. And you know, worked out for me. And I did finish fourth in my class, and I had an extraordinary class. It was a time of great cultural change in the Air Force, because we were the first group of women to come through pilot training with the option of flying fighter aircraft. And so my peers, my teammates, my classmates, they were all for it. But there was indeed some instructors who came from the old school who were not too on board with that, and some of them could make your day a little bit difficult. And I thought, then, "Is this happening to me? Is there discrimination happening or whatever? And no, it can't be. Just do your best." But now, as a 50-something year old woman looking back having been an instructor to hundreds of people over my career, yeah, there was definitely some people who were trying to make it more difficult than it needed to be. But I managed to have more good people on my side than there were the negatives and the naysayers. And so that was helpful.

**Naviere Walkewicz 27:38**

So, I want to ask a question about that, because some of our listeners, you know, they're in these leadership positions, or they're under leaders that maybe don't always have their back. What were some of the lessons or things you might share with them in those situations?

**Nicole Malachowski 27:53**

Sure. Well, I'm delighted to say that my direct leadership, if you will, the instructor pilot assigned to me, or the squadron commander or the flight commander, were actually seemed to be very supportive. It was really the kind of distractors and noise on the side other instructor pilots, maybe some folks flying stand out to me. I always tried to say, "You've got to stay focused on the good and the positive, so don't surround yourself with those people, and don't let them enter your head," right? Because the jet just wants to be flown. The beauty of being a pilot is, it's very objective, right? There is very little that's subjective about what we do. And so if you've come into work every day and say to yourself, "I want to be a master of my craft—" That was my mantra my whole career. I want to be a master of my craft. "What is it I can do today to do better, to make this aircraft perform better, to get the aircraft to do what I need it to do according to these standards?" Because the beauty, again, of being a pilot is that everything is very measurable, and it hits a point where maybe naysayers and distractors can no longer stand in your way if you can actually do the job. And so I was very lucky to have, in the T-37, during that failure, my assigned instructor was a gal by the name of Capt. Kim Jameson. And I remember when I came back with that unsatisfactory grade, which, by the way, was well deserved. If I was that instructor, I would have given myself the same grade. She was like, "What happened?" And she sat me down and grabbed me a soda, and we went for a little walk, and, you know, she was there just like Sue Ross to build me back up and to put me in the cockpit the next day. So when we have these failures, you have to have already put in effort into creating your network. You have to put in effort into nurturing those relationships so that when the time comes, those people are there to lift you up, you know? And yeah, and we talk a lot about networking, and how do you build that network? And I say you always got to have — you want people who are going to be those cheerleaders to celebrate your wins. You want those people who are gonna be there in the dark times, those failures, to lift you up. But the third thing that you definitely need, and I think the most important, and I think what Sue Ross does for me to this day, 30 something years later, is the person who will give you an attitude check when you need it. And if you have those three things and a couple of people in your life, you have what you need to move forward.

**Naviere Walkewicz 30:04**

Thank you for sharing that. That's amazing. So talk about your time while you're in uniform. You had some key leadership positions. You were squadron commander. Can you share some of your stories with that and maybe even some high points and some lessons learned where you as a leader felt that maybe it was a low point or a failure, but you grew from it?

**Nicole Malachowski 30:23**

Sure, sure. Yes. I mean, I had so many, you know, different fun assignments. Obviously when you're in your first fighter squadron, I got out at RAF Lakenheath out there in England. I mean, what a rage, right? To be a lieutenant flying Strike Eagles at 500 feet, 500 mph up Loch Ness, and then on the weekends, taking a cheap flight over to Europe to hang out with your friends. Like, look, that was living the dream. You know, becoming, in my second squadron, which was at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, becoming a flight lead and upgrading to instructor pilot. Very nervous to go into the instructor pilot upgrade. I went in very young. In fact, when I got to that squadron, the weapons officer said, "Hey, I want to put you in the instructor upgrade." And I was like, "No way." Like, "I am not ready for that. I am not good enough for that." And I was new to the squadron. There were people technically older and more experienced than me. They were in the queue, and he wanted me to jump the queue, a guy by the name of Michael Jagers, call sign Mick. I'm still friends with him to this day, and I remember I avoided him. I avoided him like the plague because I did not want to upgrade to instructor. And I think I was nervous too about social exclusion, at that time. This was now 2000 so, you know, women were still just up and coming. There weren't a lot of women instructors and fighters, and I didn't want to jump that queue. These people, like, "You're new to the squadron. Why are you going into the instructor upgrade in front of me?" And I'd always tried to — and I'll overcome this — but at that time, you know, "Try to blend in with the guys, and try to not stand out, and try to go under the radar." And this was putting me like right front show and center, and I would ignore Mick. Like he would walk down the hallway, and I literally would jump into a briefing room and shut the door. And finally he pulled me over. He's like, "Look, you're going into the instructor upgrade." I said, "Mick, I'm not ready." I remember, he said, "No, you're gonna do that because you're who I want in the upgrade." I said, "Why?" He goes, "Because I don't..." Oh, no. What I said to him, this is exact words. I said, "Mick, I'm not the best pilot in the squadron," to which he replied, "You're definitely not the best pilot in the squadron." And I said, "I'm not ready for this." He said, "But you have everything that a good instructor needs, right? You're very good at communicating. You're very good at explaining things in multiple ways. You're kind and approachable." And he goes, "That's exactly what I need. You're what the squadron needs." And I said, "Mick, well, I'm not ready." He goes, "Well, you're gonna do it." And I said, "Well..." and I had been researching this Naviere. I discovered I was 50 hours short of the minimum hours required by regulation to go into the upgrade. So of course, I finally go, "Well, Mick, sorry, bro, it's against the regulations. I need 50 more hours." And he had my grade book there, and he opened it up. He goes, "I already have the waiver signed by the wing commander." And I remember saying, "Mick, I just I'm not sure I can do this." And he looked at me, and he said, "It's not your job to get through it alone. It's my job. It's my job to ensure you have what it takes and what you need. It's my job to teach you to be a good instructor. So your success is going to be my success. I will not let you fail." What a glorious man, what a wonderful instructor. And the lesson learned here to people is this: Believe those who believe in you. Believe those who believe in you.

**Naviere Walkewicz 33:35**

Sorry, I just got a feel that was — It's true, though it really is. And those people — I think sometimes your trajectory can change, or accelerate, because someone gave you a little bit of courage that you just needed that little piece. And so talk about that. What was it like to do that? And so you jumped the queue. How did that affect you?

**Nicole Malachowski 33:55**

I was nervous again about the social ramifications, which never actually came. So I think that was maybe more pressure on myself. You know, Mick was the weapons officer, so everyone respected and revered him. And we would genuflect to him walking down the hallway, rightfully so — him and a guy by the name of Mikey Whitehead, or Michael Whitehead — both of them took me under their wing, both weapons officers. And I think because they did that, other people, you know, kind of backed down. And I did, in fact, fail rides during that upgrade. But I remember Mikey Whitehead coming to my house on a Saturday with a whiteboard with markers, trying to teach me how to do a better drawing of my BFM maneuvers, and teaching me how to debrief. He'd show up with a six pack of beer, and we would draw all day. To see what it took for people to pour into you, to be successful and to learn, as I gained experience and credibility, how to replicate that and how to be that person for other people, right? Because it's about turning around. It really is about lifting up other people. Your success isn't your own. It's how can you help other people achieve the best of themselves? Yeah, and that's what you know Mikey and Mick did for me, and of course, the rest you know being history, because then I had the credentials I needed to apply to be a Thunderbird. And then from the Thunderbirds, I could become a commander, yada yada. But being an instructor pilot, again, in the F-15, how extraordinary. To teach a brand new pilot or WSO, not only to fly the aircraft, to how to employ it as a weapon system. I mean, come on. And then to turn around and go to war with them. There's no bigger honor. There's nothing, I think, more humbling than that. And I remember Sept. 11 kicked off, and I remember being at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base Sept. 11, and I had just gotten an assignment to move. And I said, "Please, please, please, let me stay." Because I was sure the squadron was going to deploy, and I just didn't want to leave a squadron at war. And instead, they said, "Nope, you got to go." So I was going to a non-flying assignment.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh, wow.

**Nicole Malachowski**

And I was like, "Oh, this is going to be horrible." So all my friends are fighting the war post-Sept. 11, and I am assigned to Korea — Camp Red Cloud, Second Infantry Division — non-flying as an ALO, an air liaison officer, an Attack-P, and I remember showing up there and being a little bit kind of down. I remember sending texts to my friends and getting emails and hearing about all the war stories. And then I got surrounded by the most extraordinary enlisted airmen I have probably ever met. Then the enlisted on the Thunderbirds that took me under their wing. Because when you're an ALO, you're an officer of one out there, and all of a sudden you've got staff sergeants, tech sergeants, master sergeants, which for fighter pilots, is unusual. Other career fields in the Air Force are exposed to the enlisted. At that time, fighter pilots and flying, we weren't exposed to enlisted. So all of a sudden, I've got these extraordinary guys, a guy by the name of Rob Skowronski, 9-Line, who I'm still friends with you know to this day, you know, teaching me how to make field expedient antennas, teaching me how to drive a Humvee and work this totally complicated, archaic radio palette, and I'm down there learning how to call in airstrikes from the ground.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Wow.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Now remember, prior to that, I'm the one in the sky, and now I'm seeing it from this other perspective. Now I'm jumping out of the back of armored personnel carriers, and the Army's teaching me how to throw grenades, and I'm getting to learn about ground maneuver and what it's like to be a young, 18-, 19-year-old on the ground. What an extraordinary growth experience. And everybody said, "Don't apply to be an ALO. Don't go do the non-flying tour. Your career is going to be derailed. You'll never come back to Strike. Blah, blah, blah." And instead, I had one of the biggest growth and leadership experiences of my life. And after that, I go back to the Strike Eagle, back to Lakenheath and get deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom. Guess who flies close air support a heck of a lot better? Because now she has seen it from the ground. So that loop of close air support is now connected. You become a better master of your craft, all because of these enlisted guys who gave me the attitude-check the young fighter pilot needed, who gave me the skills and the resources I needed to be OK at that, you know? And just teaching me about enlisted and teaching me what they need from leaders. Man, I would never give up that one year in as an ALO with those guys for anything in the world. And you fast forward, you're leading a four-ship of F-15s as a mission commander over Iraq, and you get sent over the city of Samara to check in for the 9-Line, right? And you check in on the radio, and all of a sudden you hear a little voice that says, "Is that Captain Fifi?" And it was one of my guys that I had served with. And now there's bullets flying in the background, and now there's a sense of urgency in his voice. I can tell you things get very personal very quickly, but the fact that we had worked together before allowed us to work together again, and things worked out that day.

**Naviere Walkewicz 38:53**

The perspectives you gain in that growth period. I mean, that's pretty powerful. Can you share something that maybe you learned from the perspective of how to lead better from other perspectives?

**Nicole Malachowski 39:05**

Yeah, I mean, I think it goes back to what I was leaning on before, which is this tailored leadership. I learned from the enlisted, there's just the diversity of their personalities and skill-sets. Let's be honest, when you go into a fighter squadron, things are a little bit one-note, right? I mean, we all are cut from a similar cloth. We all kind of have similar personality traits. You don't want your fighter pilots any other way, but working with that enlisted understanding what drives and putting the effort into understanding what drives and motivates individuals, right? Not every single one of those enlisted JTAC, you know, wanted to grow up to be the chief master sergeant in the Air Force. Right? Some of them were there to just get in, get out and get their GI-bill. All equally important, all equally necessary to the team. So learning at that age how to put your arms around everybody that you're responsible for, not just the ones that maybe are easiest to lead or maybe the ones you're the most comfortable interacting with as a leader, is "How do I figure it out?" You know, there were some guys that, if I were to call them on up to the front of the room, in front of the whole squadron, to compliment them on something they did, maybe a check-ride they had — and this goes for my fighter squadron command as well — they would love it, right? Because it, it was how they were extrinsically motivated, and that's OK. There's nothing wrong with that. If that's what they need, and that's what you need to do to get the best of their



strengths and best of their commitment go for it. And there were others that, if I were to bring them in front of their peers to compliment them, they would shut down and never talk to me for the rest of the you know, their assignment. And so that's where I would take the time to write a handwritten note, maybe put it on the seat of their Humvee, or put it in their helmet, you know, in the fighter squadron. And then when they'd see me walking down the hallway, we'd give the knowing nod that they were acknowledged for their awesome, whatever it was, and we would move on. And so those enlisted taught me about just the diversity of personalities, the diversity of motivations, and how to really tap into that for the betterment of the larger mission in the team.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 41:04

Yes. And so what I'm hearing, in a really, kind of summarizing way, is leadership is personal.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Very. It's all about people, and it's about authenticity and connections.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

So speaking about personal and authenticity, I'd be remiss if we didn't talk about your journey to the Thunderbirds.

**Nicole Malachowski**

I knew this was going to come up.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

It's here, and so, you know, it's a different time. There was no woman Thunderbird pilot before you? What was that like? Maybe the journey. Let's talk about that...

**Nicole Malachowski** 41:33

I'll just be, you know, blatantly honest about it. Because, you know, I'm in my 50s now. I got nothing to hide. I gotta tell you, I grew up in Las Vegas, Nevada, so the Thunderbirds were part of the backdrop. I knew that the Thunderbirds, as a kid, were special and were considered elite. And kind of going back to my personality, I love being told that, "You can't do things." And the truth is — people laugh at this — but the truth is, when I applied to be a Thunderbird, I did it because the way my career was going, I wasn't ready to — I wasn't on timeline to go to IDE yet or to go to ACSC. But I had a weird year kind of gap, and I didn't they didn't really know what to do with me. I didn't know what to do with them. And my husband was going to be PCSing to Nellis. This is, like, a true story. I know people want me to say, "Well, I had this big, long dream..." It was always in the background as something that was an option. Because of a lot of people who put a lot of effort into me, I was indeed qualified to get in there and to give it a try. But it wasn't something that was like an ultimate goal, right? It really was, "Huh, well, it's time to PCS. I'm not ready to go to IDE. I don't want them to put me in some weird admin job at the Pentagon. The Thunderbirds application comes out every year at this time and says the exact same thing. So maybe when the application comes out, I'll apply." And that's what I did. Isn't that weird? And also another thing people don't believe, but it's true: I did not know they had not had a woman Thunderbird pilot when I applied, did not even occur to me. Remember, I had never known an Air Force without women fighter pilots in it. And we had all achieved the age where we had acquired the hours

needed. At that time, it was 1,000 hours, and I'll get to something about that in a second. It was 1,000 hours minimum in order to apply. They've since lowered those hours, rightfully so, and it just lined up with the timing. And I'm like, "Well, that would be kind of fun and different to do," because remember, I was told, "Don't go be an ALO. It will ruin your career." And all it did was open doors and opportunities for growth, and opportunities for different assignments. So now, what are people saying? "Don't be a Thunderbird. You're gonna throw your career off, Nicole. You'll never come back to the F-15E. You're never gonna come back and command and Strike Eagle. Don't do it." And I'm like, "Oh I've read this book before." And I always tell people, "When you get those butterflies in your stomach that says this could be something cool, something different, that is your cue to go do it. Don't worry about what anybody else is saying." And so, I was able to put that application in. And in fact, I put that application in, and when I went and told everyone I was going to apply, generally speaking, people were really tickled and happy and supportive. But as the days went by, people started to think about it. I heard, you know, "It's too hard to be a Thunderbird, you probably won't get picked." I mean, statistically, no one gets picked to do that. "They've never had a woman before. Are you sure you want to do that and this and that?" And I remember the day I turned my application in — this was back when you still had hard copies, and you still had to mail them. Okay, 2005 — I took it over to the group commander's chief of staff, slid it across the desk. I was super nervous, because the voice in my head was like, "Nicole, other people become Thunderbird pilots, not you." That was the — "other people become Thunderbird pilots, not you. What are you doing? Why are you risking this?" But I kept thinking, "What's the worst that's going to happen? I don't get picked, like most people don't get picked. And I go back to flying Strike Eagles with my community, which I love, like life is good, right? Either way, it's a win-win." So as I slid that application across the desk, I said, "I'm applying to be a Thunderbird. Here's my application." I remember the staff looked up to me and said, "You know Nicole. It's hard to be a Thunderbird. You know Nicole. You probably won't get picked." And the exact words were, "You know Nicole, they've never had a woman before, and the colonel can only stratify one person. So we're not sure we want to waste it." That is actually what happened. And in that moment, I think there's leadership lessons here, because this person was not trying to be mean. What was coming out was, I think, the unconscious bias all of us have to check ourselves on every day at all ages. I think what was coming out were the cultural paradigms of the Air Force at that time. And I think what was coming out were other people's expectations about what I should or shouldn't be doing. You know, "Who are you to think you can go off the little standard path IDE, and then staff tour. And then, you know, "Who are you to think you can do that?"

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh my.

### **Nicole Malachowski**

And I walked out, and I felt embarrassed and ashamed. And I remember thinking, “Nicole, other people become Thunderbird pilots, not you.” And I went across the street to the officer’s club and grabbed a beer like any good fighter pilot would. And I remember thinking, “Thank God I didn’t put myself out there. Thank God, Nicole,” — now I’m a 30-year-old captain, so I’m still a young person — you know. “Thank God you didn’t risk failure. Who are you to think you could be a Thunderbird, silly girl?” Right? And in that moment, the weirdest thing happened, and I tell this story on stage sometimes. The door opened to the officers club, and in walks the wing commander, Brig. Gen. Mark Matthews. He walks in, and he, for whatever reason, comes over and starts talking to me. Now, this is weird, right? I’m a captain. He’s a brigadier general. I don’t know why he was talking to me. Like, walking amongst the people that day, or, you know, just making small talk. And so I’m trying to hold my own talking to him, a little bit nervous.

### **Naviere Walkewicz**

And you’re probably still feeling a little bit down.

### **Nicole Malachowski**

Totally down. And in that moment, over walks my squadron commander, a wonderful man by the name of Dan Debree. His call sign was Trash. Get it? Trash, Debree. Trash walks over, super excited, very supportive of my application. And he’s like, “Hey, General, did you know Nicole’s applying to be a Thunderbird?” Man, I mean, you could have slowed down time. I was like, “Ixnay on the underbird-thay thing,” like, “This is terrible.” Neither of these guys knew that I had removed my application. And Dan’s standing there all proud. He’s my squadron commander, supporting me, a great man, again. And Mark Matthews looks down at me, Gen. Matthews, and he goes, “That’s great. How’s your application going?” And I’m like, I looked at him, and here’s what happened. I said, “You know, so it’s hard to be Thunderbird. I probably won’t get picked they haven’t had a woman, so I don’t want to waste anybody’s time.” I said it. I said all of it. And this is kind of an embarrassing story to tell, but I’m just, this is the truth, right? This is the vulnerable truth of how this happened. And he looked down at me, and I will never forget this. And I hope folks listening who have big dreams and gnarly goals remember this. He looked down at me and he said, “Nicole…” Actually, he said, “Fifi.” My call sign. “Fifi, nobody wants to lead a scripted life.” And he walked away and left me in extraordinarily uncomfortable silence. And those words, “nobody wants to lead a scripted life,” have become my life’s mantra every time I get the knot in my stomach that says, “That dream is too big or that idea is too innovative, don’t rock the boat.” I remember what he said, because those words, like they lifted the weight of the world off my shoulders, told me it was OK to dream big. It was OK to buck the status quo. It was OK to be different. He was telling me it’s OK to risk failure in pursuit of personal, professional growth. And it’s not so much, I think, he’s telling you and me to write ourselves into the script. What he was saying was, “Don’t ever write yourself out of the script.” And as leaders and teammates, don’t you ever write anybody else or their wild ideas out of the script, either. And so nobody wants lead a scripted life. And I hope what you’re hearing in these stories — and maybe what I’m realizing just chatting with you — is these little turning points, these pivot moments where these really important people, the Mark Matthews, the Mikey Whiteheads, the Mick Jagers, the Sue Rosses, the Kim Jamesons, they all come at that right moment. You got to be open to that and how important your actions and your words are to making or breaking somebody else’s dress.

**Naviere Walkewicz 49:23**

Yes, yeah. So you took that application back?

**Nicole Malachowski 49:30**

Sure did. Sure did. I did not get the No. 1 stratification from the colonel, but I did from the general. And so that worked out for me. And then went through the process. Really fascinating, how it happened, actually. So you send in the application — I think their timeline is a lot different these days, but this was back in '05, and we ended up deploying over Christmas to Al Udeid, and we were flying Operation Iraqi Freedom. And I remember one day, Squadron Commander Dan Debree comes walking in. He's like, "You're not gonna believe this, but you made the semi-finals." And the semi-finals are next week back in the United States, joining the team at an air show while they're on the road. And I'm like, "Oh man, I can't go." And I thought this was devastating, but I thought, "Oh well, at least I know I made it to the semi-finals," which was like, 12 people. And he's like, "I don't really know how we're going to do this or what we're going to do." And I'm like, "No sir, it's OK. I know I need to be here to fly." He's like, "Oh no, no. We're gonna try to figure this out." It just so happens that the group commander, the deployed group commander, an F-16 pilot, a guy by the name of John Venable, used to be Thunderbird 1. Oh my See, see how these little pivot, yes, I always tell people, like, "I'm not good. I'm really not. I am the result of TLC, not tender loving care, but timing, luck and circumstance." My successes are because of other people and a lot of timing, luck and circumstance. So John Venable brings me in, and he was not, I'll be honest, it was not a pleasant conversation. He interrogated me. He asked me all these questions. And essentially, what he was doing was he was prepping me for the interview. I didn't know it at the time. It was not an enjoyable conversation. He looked at my boots and told me they were dirty. I'm like walking around with sands of Al Udeid. I had just landed from a combat mission. I was still sweaty and dirty. Hadn't even had breakfast because it was a night mission. And I didn't realize at the time, he was prepping me for what was gonna come. He knew what was coming, and everything he asked me was what I got asked. And I had a week to think about it, and a week to polish my answers, and a week to really ponder if it's what I wanted to do. Did I want that pressure? Did I want the microscope? Was I ready for this? So at the end of the day, John Venable turned out to be quite a gift, and he looked at me. He goes, "OK, you can go, but you better make it to the finals and make it worth my decision to send you from combat." So literally, I fly out. My husband, who's back in England, packs my service dress, packs everything, has it shipped. I end up at the air show and do the whole semi-finals thing. And after I'd spent a few days with them, I fly back, and within days, I'm back flying combat missions out of Al Udeid, and we're coming to the end of that tour at Al Udeid. It's been a few weeks, and I'm sitting SOF in the tower, and I remember there was a lot of fog coming in, and we were having to divert all these tankers. God love them. It was a very stressful time. And all of a sudden this email popped up on my email and it said, "Congratulations, you've made the finals." It's like you've got to be kidding me. Ridiculous. Yeah.

**Naviere Walkewicz 52:48**

Oh my. And may I ask in that week that you had to think about it, because in the beginning it was a, "This could work out really well. This could be good." And the feeling you had in the pit of your stomach about, "Maybe this is something I really want to do." What was it about it when you started thinking about it?

**Nicole Malachowski 53:04**

When I really started thinking about, I think I was putting myself back in the kid in high school with her brown bag lunch out on the football field watching the Thunderbirds fly over. To see those six jets smoke behind them, red, white and blue, screaming over your high school. You know, "You wanted to be a fighter pilot since you were a kid." I'm staring up at them, thinking, "There's people up there. I want to be one of those people." This idea that there would be a little kid watching me as a Thunderbird pilot, and maybe someday go, "Maybe I could fulfill whatever my dream is. Maybe I could join the Air Force too." A little girl going, "Maybe I could be a fighter pilot someday." And I think the gravity and the weight of the mission of the Thunderbirds started to really impact me, because it had indeed impacted me as a kid. And the idea that I could be a part of that — and I think the other thing was, and maybe this sounds cheesy or trite, but it's not. You know, sitting at Al Udeid drinking my one beer at 3 in the morning after I land from my night combat mission, sitting with all these great Americans from all over the country, from every different background, and thinking, "I could go tell their story." And that's what Thunderbirds get to do. You get to represent the world's greatest Air Force and tell the stories of these airmen who are out there getting the job done, those TAC-PS, those crew chiefs, the folks that are working at the tower, the folks in the food hall, our medical professionals, the cyber, the whole thing, right? And all of a sudden it got really exciting to me, like I could go out there with this team, with this mission, and we could represent our friends with the honor and the dignity and the respect that they deserve. And I think those two things kind of collided together and I started getting really excited about this Thunderbird thing. And then I fly out to Nellis for the finals. Same thing: service dress gets shipped. I fly from Al Udeid. It's a mess, and do my best at the finals, and all those questions that John Venable hammered me with — every single one of them — was asked He was a gift, as painful as it was, he was a gift. I ended up back at Lakenheath — painfully excruciating waiting for the finals and when we got back from Iraq, they give you the three weeks of downtime. My husband was a gracious man and took me on a cruise of the Baltic Sea. We're sitting in our cabin in Oslo, Norway, and the phone in the cabin rings.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

The phone in your cabin.

**Nicole Malachowski**

The phone in my cabin rings. It's about 10 o'clock at night, but full sun outside because it's summertime in Norway. And immediately we looked at each other, and both of our heart, we've talked about this, both our hearts sank, because why does a phone call come to military people on vacation. It's never good, and I was a flight commander at the time. So was he. We immediately thought something disastrous had happened, an aircraft accident, a death of — a car accident. And we let it ring another time, and he's like, "You need to pick it up." And I picked it up, and I said, "Hello." And they go, "Is this Capt. Malachowski?" I said, "Yes." And they go, "Stand by for the commander of Air Combat Command."

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Oh my gosh.

**Nicole Malachowski**

And I looked at my husband, and I was like, "What is going on?" Well, I knew this was the consolation call. I think there was five or six of us who had made it to finals. Three people were gonna get positions, the others were not. And it is tradition that the commander of Air Combat Command calls all six, which is very gracious and professionally courteous. And so I thought this was my consolation call. So I'm waiting, and it feels like an eternity, and all of a sudden I hear, "Is Fifi there?" And I said, "Yes." He goes, "Ron Keyes..." which was Gen. Ron Keyes, commander of Air Combat Command. I'm a young captain. I'm like, you've got to be kidding me. And I go, "Sir, how are you?" He goes, "We have a pretty amazing Air Force that we can find you in the middle of the Oslo, Norway, fjord, don't we?" I said, "Yes, sir, we do." He goes, "Well, I know you're on vacation, so I want to keep it simple. I want to offer you a job." And I said, "Yes, sir." He goes, "How would you like to be Thunderbird No. 3?" And I stayed as professional as I could in my voice, but I was looking at my husband gesticulating, jumping up and down like, "You're not gonna believe this." I said, "Sir, I would absolutely love that." He goes, "OK, great. You're the next Thunderbird No. 3. Look forward to watching you fly and get back to your vacation." And he hung up the phone.

**Naviere Walkewicz 57:22**

Wow, you made my eyes sweat a couple of times this this session already. So your husband. How did..?

**Nicole Malachowski 57:32**

Oh, well, we hugged immediately. We ordered some champagne, charcuterie. You know, what was really weird is the next day, they did contact us for a quick review of the press release, because they needed to put it out. Now, this is what I was not prepared for, OK: the media. I don't care how much you think you could prepare to be the first woman Thunderbird pilot, but you cannot. I was blissfully naive to the amount of attention, both positive and negative, that this was going to cause the world. But anyways, what was funny was, when they went out onto CNN and they made the announcement the next day, it was all over the news. It ended up that the captain of the ship, the vice-captain, sorry, the co-captain, the No. 2 in charge of the ship we were on, was actually the photographer for the Canadian Snowbirds, and somehow managed to find my name and came up to the room. Anyways, that was just super weird, small world, but we got to sit at the captain's table.

**Naviere Walkewicz 58:32**

I'm sure you did. They were like, "This is happening."

**Nicole Malachowski 58:37**

You know, the Thunderbirds, at that time, 125 people from 25 different career fields who came together to make that mission happen. You know, then it's an elite mission, and all it takes is one of us not doing it to the highest level of excellence, and that entire thing falls apart. I've never been in a squadron with that many high-performing, highly motivated people in my life. I am still dear friends with my crew chief, still friends with people on the team. It is such a crucible experience. It's a one-off, you know? And so they carried the extra weight everywhere they went. "What's it like to have the first woman Thunderbird pilot?" And I almost felt bad about it, because it was so much extra attention and pressure, not just on me, but on the entire team. But the grace that they handled it with and the way they supported and

encouraged me — you know, I had bad air shows. I had bad days. I had things I struggled with during training. There was a maneuver called the Trail-To-Diamond roll that I could not figure out. To top it off, everyone else on the team had it figured out, like we had to do extra rides because I could not figure it out. You know, here I am at the height of my career, height of experience, supposedly, you know, an elite fighter pilot, right? And I can't figure it out. And I could see the headlines in the back of my head: "First woman Thunderbird pilot fails out of training." And I was just like, "You can't, you can't do it, man. You got to get through." And because of those guys and their willingness to work with me and teach me, and their willingness to do the same maneuver hundreds of times just for me, that's how I got through.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:02:33

That's amazing. That's another nugget in there. I think that people listening or watching this even is — and you've said it before, it's not TLC — tender loving care — but I think it's the people that are part of that time, luck and circumstance.

**Nicole Malachowski**

I am the end result of a lot of other people's hard work. I can assure you of that.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:02:54

I love that. Can you share a little about — you said something that some of the training you got Public Affairs has carried you through your career. Now, are there any things you could share with the listeners that might be useful?

**Nicole Malachowski** 1:03:09

Sure. I think the easy and the softball questions are always going to be easy and softball. The things that they taught me well were to handle the more difficult questions, or maybe even the aggressive or even the controversial, which of course, I received multitudes of those things. But it's first in acknowledging the question, no matter how difficult or aggressive that it is, right? Looking the person in the eye and not shying away from the question, but also being prepared for those hard things, right? Having contingency plan that these difficult comments or questions are going to come. So always having two or three main takeaways, the thing that you can always bridge back to. I mean, learning how to bridge to what you want to talk about, learning how to bridge to the main points and the takeaways, while ensuring that the person feels like their question is being answered right, while also getting your main points done in a way that is positive, in a way that can bring down tension and bring down anger, or even in some cases, hate. So learning how to do that bridge. Acknowledge — "Yes, I understand that for some people, women flying in combat is a difficult thing. You know, I grew up in a family of military folks, and I learned that women can love their country too, and some of us choose to show it by wearing our nation's uniform..." And then going on to the next question.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Yeah, wonderful. Perfect example. I think that's very helpful.

**Nicole Malachowski** 1:04:29

Thank you to Air Force Public Affairs. Not a skill I had prior to meeting them.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:04:33**

So after that, so the Thunderbirds, and I understand it, I think there's three open positions every time there's a new...

**Nicole Malachowski 1:04:41**

Right, so in those six, you know, in the Delta formation, yes, there are three. They switched three out to two-year assignments.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:04:50**

OK, so after the two years, let's talk about what happened for your career. What was the next trajectory?

**Nicole Malachowski 1:04:54**

Yeah, so coming off the Thunderbirds, it was like, "How do you top that," right? I mean, that was a pretty amazing experience. And it was time for me to go to IDE or ACSC, and I'm not one for wanting to do the normal thing. So I was looking at all the different kind of fellowships and such that were available. And when I was a Thunderbird pilot, I went to an air show, and I was the navigation officer, and there's a point to this. And I got into work early because I was trying to put together the Form-70 and organizing the tankers for us to fly home after the air show. And I walked in, there was an older gentleman in there, very tall, very distinguished looking older guy, very, I don't know, very presence, energy. And he says, "Hey, what are you doing in here?" And I introduced myself, because he saw I was in my Thunderbird uniform and super humble. He's like, "Do you want coffee?" I said, "Well, if you have coffee, that'd be great." There was no coffee made. There's now this man in his late 60s, maybe 70s, down on his hands and knees crawling through cabinets trying to make me coffee. Come to find out — here's another one of those moments. His name is Gen. John Borling.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

I know Gen. John Borling.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Call sign "Viking." Yes, former fighter pilot, and as you know, he was a prisoner of war in the Hanoi Hilton for several years. So I was standing in front of greatness and had no clue. Here's this old guy fawning over me, trying to find me coffee, and I had no clue the lion that was standing in front of me. Well, fast forward. Finish up the Thunderbirds, I get a phone call. We love these phone calls. I said, "Hey, it's Nicole." He goes, "It's Viking Borling." I'm like, "How the heck did this guy that I met once get my phone?" He goes, "Hey, when I was an Air Force officer, a young fighter pilot, I did ACSC as a White House fellow, and I think you should be a White House fellow." I said, "Well, what's the White House fellowship?" So he explains it to me, and I'm like, "There is no way I will get picked as one of 12 to 15 people across the United States, across all career fields, including civilians, to be a White House fellow. Colin Powell was a White House fellow. I am not a White House fellow. This is ridiculous." So I entertained his conversation. He says, "I want you to think about it. I'm gonna call you back tomorrow, same time." Boom. Phone rings. Viking Borling, "You're applying to be a White House fellow." "No sir. I'm not." Third day, phone calls. "You're applying to be a White House fellow." Anyways, I applied to be a White House fellow. I went through that whole process, semi-finals, regional panel interviews, and



then the finals, and again, got very lucky and was selected to be a White House fellow. So I served my IDE credits in Washington, D.C., wearing civilian clothes. I got assigned outside of the White House to the U.S. General Services Administration. And I thought, "Why am I the only White House fellow that doesn't have this big, prestigious, like White House cabinet-level position?" They said, "You're going to the GSA." When they said GSA, I thought they meant Girl Scouts of America, honest to God, that's what I thought. I was like, Girl Scouts of America. Then I looked it up, and I was like, "GSA!" And then I started reading about what they do. The federal government does not function without the GSA. I mean, the GSA is the OSS of the federal government. Like, it was exciting. And I was like, this is where the nuts and bolts happen. Well, the GSA also runs what's called the Office of the President Elect. Between election and inauguration, the incoming president and their team needs to have a place to get ready, like our current incoming administration is doing. It's a physical office building where they make decisions about cabinet secretaries or they get their intelligence briefings and all of that. Guess who got put on the presidential transition support team to be up close and personal for the peaceful transition of power between George Bush and Barack Obama? And that's where I found myself — a major in the United States Air Force who had no business — we would literally go the Oval Office in the morning, get orders from President Bush, and then go across to the nondisclosed location to meet with the Obama team. And I'm standing there, and here's walking by — I knew who cabinet secretaries were before they were announced. You know, here's Hillary Clinton, there's Rahm Emanuel. You're just like, "This is crazy." I had no business. No business.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:08:49

All because someone asked you if you wanted coffee.

**Nicole Malachowski**

All because a really cool retired fighter pilot and POW wanted coffee. But the extraordinary part about the White House fellowship was most of the fellows were civilian, and I had been nothing but military since I was 17 years old and showed up at the Air Force Academy. So to be able to look at leadership and teamwork and professionalism from a completely different lens, to see how people from the education field or from healthcare would solve a problem was fascinating. And I still have this network to this day, of White House fellows. You know, we in the military can look to solve problems a very specific way, and a lot of us are a little bit very specific in how we do it. And so to learn how to look at problems and solve things in different ways was extraordinary. To meet people at the height of their profession from other industries and career fields. I mean, all of a sudden you're like, wow, there's, like, other things out there, outside of the Air Force. There's people doing great work and moving society and change makers. It's not just us in the military. Like a lot of times, we think the military has a monopoly on leadership and teamwork, and we don't. We really don't. We have good things, but we don't have a monopoly on it, friends. And I see that now in what I do, you know, with corporate America, but I also had a lot of free time as a White House fellow, which was weird, right? Yeah, not to be scheduled. So I got this gnarly idea. I thought maybe we should try to get the Congressional Gold Medal for the Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II, because if not for the Women Air Force Service Pilots of World War II, I would not have had the career that I had. And remember in 1991-92 when they were having the hearings on Capitol Hill on whether or not to lift the ban on women becoming fighter pilots — now I'm a freshman at the Academy and this is my dream hanging on the line. It was the story of the WASP that they used. It was WASP who testified on Capitol Hill. And so I

thought the WASP record had been sealed up, and even parts of it classified secret and put away into the archives, never to be shown and shared in our educational system, in our schools, with the American public. And I thought, "How awful is that?" You know, we need to correct the record. So I had met during my time as a Thunderbird a fireball by the name of Deanie Parrish, and her daughter Nancy Parrish, who had Dini had been a WASP in World War II. Her daughter had been archiving the WASP story for many years. I approached them, I said, "You know, I think we should do this Congressional Gold Medal thing." And they said, "All right, you go do that." And I remember walking through the halls of Capitol Hill saying, "Well, gosh-darnit, this is a good idea, right? Everyone's got to get behind this. This is a good idea. They're gonna say yes." That's not how Capitol Hill works. So really dejected, I came back to the White House fellows, and I said, "I don't understand. I wrote up this document, and I go, and people should love the WASP, right?" And that's when a fellow by the name is Sarita James, one of my best friends, she says, "Let me see what you're showing them." She comes from corporate America, from technology, at that time. An entrepreneur. She's like, "Let me help you. Can I get the document? Can I help you rewrite it? Sit next to me." Everything changed.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Wow, what was the difference?

**Nicole Malachowski**

She taught me that in politics, it has to answer the question, "What's in it for them?" How do you make this a feather in the cap of the person you're talking to, and how do you get it down and synopsise And how do you do the work for them so it is done. She says, "Well, you need to draft the bill." "I don't know how to draft a bill, Sarita. What are you talking about? Draft the bill." You want zero work for them. You want them to go, "Oh, what a great idea. I can honor the WASP in the state of Nevada. Look at me." Right? Because it doesn't matter who gets the credit, as long as you get it done. So if this was a means to an end, then that's what we're going to do. And so we started tailoring it to each and every senator and congressman. And we got Congress to call pretty quickly, but Senate was really slowing down. Oh, and when I went to draft the bill, I used the Tuskegee Airmen template as a sample, as a template. So the Tuskegee Airmen template was what allowed me — and I went over the archives. I talked to archivists. I started drafting this. I started looking at how laws are written, and I was doing this from the third floor of my condo in Alexandria, Virginia. And anyways, we finally drafted, get the whole package put together. Sarita helps me tailor it. Nancy and Deanie helped give me the facts I need to tailor to that specific WASP still alive in Florida, in your city, and here's why you care. And we got to where the Senate wasn't falling and so I thought, well, it's time to use the White House fellow thing. And so I got a meeting with Harry Reid, who was the Senate majority leader at the time, and they said, "Yeah, come on over. He'll take a meeting with you because you're a White House fellow." Well, then they realized Harry Reid gave me my nomination to the Air Force Academy when he was Congressman Reid.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:13:51**

Oh my goodness.

**Nicole Malachowski**

You see how things come full circle? Don't burn bridges friends. So I walk in and he goes, "Nice to meet you. I'm glad to see a success story of one of my Air Force Academy nominees." And he was really fascinated by the Thunderbird thing, of course, and we talked about combat and all that. And he's like, "Show me your bill." And I showed it to him. I gave him the spiel, you know, for all the WASPs in Nevada, because that's where he was from. And he looked up at his assistant who was standing there taking notes, and he's like, "How come we haven't signed on to this bill?" And the assistant said, "Well, sir, we can certainly do that." He goes, "Now." And he pointed to the door, and within three hours, it was done. Senate Bill 614, to award the Congressional Gold Medal to the Women Air Force Service Pilots — and this wasn't to give them an award, because the WASPs, they don't care about awards. They don't care about recognition. They did the right thing by their country, because they were patriots. The whole point of that Congressional Gold Medal was to correct the record. It was all about correcting the record. And so the single greatest accomplishment, I think, of my White House fellowship, was that bill. Then being there when the president signed it, and then being able to speak there during the ceremony next to Tom Brokaw.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:15:09**

I bet you have so many incredible moments like that.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:15:12**

Well, these were some of them, for sure But the ability to just honor the WASPs, the people who made it possible for people like me and my other girlfriends who've been able to fly fighters is pretty extraordinary.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

And so what did Deanie think of that?

**Nicole Malachowski**

Oh, Deanie was tickled. She was just kind of like, "I didn't think you'd be able to do it." She goes, "But I should have known better." And she was able to be on stage. She was the one that represented all WASPs to receive the first Congressional Gold Medal. And she deserved it. And they all deserved it, and now people talk about the story of the WASPs a lot more than they used to, and that was the point all along — to honor their legacy and to honor the history and the trail they blazed for the rest of us.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:15:55**

So your career trajectory is just really incredible, because you've kind of talked about how you've been put in these places based off of circumstance, but then when you get there, it's all about, "How do you make the most of it?"

**Nicole Malachowski 1:16:07**

Seize the opportunity. Seize what's available. A lot of times, you know, as human beings, we go, "Well, I don't have this," or, "I can't do this right now or not resource this way." Man, find a way. Yeah, ask yourself the right question: "What is it I can do right now with what I have?"

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:16:21**

Well, that makes me feel like that's a really good lead into kind of what circumstantially happened to you, unexpectedly. So you're medically retired from the Air Force. Do you want to talk about how that happened?

**Nicole Malachowski 1:16:32**

Sure, sure. You know, the greatest honor of my career was serving as the commander of the 333rd Fighter Squadron. That was circa 2011-2012 and I'm a lieutenant colonel, height of my career. The greatest honor is to be a squadron commander, right? I mean, it's the last time you have to where you can really impact other people, and not just them and their personal and professional goals, but their families as well. And so I enjoyed that. And I remember also during that time being physically fit, mentally fit, spiritually fit. And I remember feeling ill in the summer of 2012, like I had the flu. And I had aches and pains, low-grade fever, and I ended up getting a rash on my hip, and I went to the military doctors, and I was like, the flight surgeon, I'm like, "Hey, I got this rash. I don't really feel good." I had taken myself off the flying schedule. They said, "Oh, it's probably just a virus," you know. "Rest." They looked at the rash, gave me some topical ointment, said it's probably a spider bite, and sent me on my way. But within three months, I started having severe neurological problems, so things like word finding, slurring my words, inability to read, write, inability to type, dropping things with my right hand, dragging my right leg, getting lost driving home. I remember going into a grocery store and having a complete panic attack because I didn't know what a grocery store was or why I was in there. So very Alzheimer's-dementia-like symptoms. So in fact, what was happening was my brain was becoming inflamed with an infection. Unfortunately, at that time, the belief was that there was not Lyme disease in North Carolina. The belief was also that because I did not see a tick, I couldn't possibly have Lyme. We now know, hindsight being 2020, that's exactly what had happened to me. So over the next four years, my symptoms would wax and wane. They would come and go. They would change in severity. Obviously, I could no longer fly. I was grounded, but they said, "Hey, you can stay in the Air Force. You just can't fly." And I said, "That's great, because honestly, I just want to lead airmen and be a part of a team." So I did everything — I've flown in combat. I've been a Thunderbird. I commanded a fighter squadron. I don't need to fly anymore. So I fought to stay in, and four years later, I found myself serving as Michelle Obama's assistant there in the East Wing of the White House. And I woke up one day in July of 20 — now is it 15? Yeah. And I was locked in. I couldn't move or speak. And this temporary paralysis would last 30 seconds, and then I'd be out of it for three minutes, then it would come on for five minutes, then it may be out of it for 30 seconds. It's very scary, because it was like being on the end of a remote control, like someone was turning the volume or the channels off and on, and I had no control over it. And so there's a lot of details to this story, but my symptom list was like 63 symptoms long, covering every system in my body. The military medicine couldn't figure it out. So to their credit, and with the help of the chief of staff at the time, Gen. Goldfein, and with the help of the Air Force surgeon general at the time, I was able to go outside the system, and I was seen at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. I told them about the rash. I said everything — I was very healthy, until I got this rash. I was very healthy, looking at my records. And so they cast the net wide, and that's where tick-borne illness came into it. And at that time, I was in a wheelchair. I couldn't talk. My husband was wheeling me around. And I remember when the doctor said, "Come on in. We have the diagnosis. We know what's wrong with her." My husband was like, "Great, give her the shot in the butt or the super pill, and she'll be back in the jet. Let's go." And I remember not being able to speak for myself. I'm just hearing this,

the doctor says she'll never fly again. And my husband said, "Well, how long until she's better?" And she goes, "Well, treatment's gonna take at least two years." And it was in that moment, it wasn't that I wasn't gonna fly again, that hurt, but when they said two years, I knew that the military was gonna medically retire me. I knew it was over, and I couldn't speak or say anything. And I was just devastated, devastated because my career was going so well. I had so many plans. You know, I wanted to be a group commander. I thought someday I could be a wing commander. Whether it was flying or not, it didn't matter. I remember my goal was to be the commandant of the Air Force Academy. That was my dream. And not that I'm saying I would have a chance, and not that I'm saying I would ever have a chance of being promoted the flag officer, but by God, it was my goal, and all that just came crashing down in that moment. So for nine months I couldn't walk, talk, read or write. I spent another year and a half in rehab, and during that time, obviously went through my medical evaluation board. I have some very constructive critiques of the system at the time to include the process and procedures of being in a patient squadron. I took notes on that so that I could fix that eventually, which I did. But I was medically retired. I fought to stay in and then I realized my body wasn't going to let me and once I accepted that it was over, I was able to move forward. So radical acceptance was a hard thing to come by. But the day of my retirement, Dec. 29, 2017, came. I was home alone because I was bedridden and house bound for two years. It was very hurtful. It remains hurtful how my Air Force career ended. I love the Air Force — based all the stories that I told. But this moment is very painful for me. It still is. And I thought, "Well, what are you gonna do about it? You can't change that you were bit by tick. You can't change you were misdiagnosed and undiagnosed too long. You can't change that. You have a brain injury. What are you going to do, girl? The fighter pilot in you is not going to quit." And that's when I decided, "Well, I'm going to, you know, I got to do something." And the phone rang. It was during this time a gal by the name of Buff Burkel. Retired colonel had been in a helicopter accident, broke her neck in Afghanistan. Anyway, she called and her and I had met a few times, because she's really into the Women in Aviation thing, rightfully so. She's an icon herself. And she said, "Hey, how you doing?" I said, "I'm not good." She goes, "Talk to me," and I remember for two hours just vomiting everything out to this person I didn't really know very well. Well, she was calling from the Air Force Wounded Warrior Program. And the Air Force Wounded Warrior program had been something I knew about as a commander is out there, but in my mind, it wasn't for officers, it wasn't for full-bird colonels. It wasn't for people with tick bites. It was for young, enlisted, you know, who lost a leg to an IED. It wasn't for me, and I was wrong. The Air Force Wounded Warrior Program is for everyone, enlisted, officer, any age, any wound, any illness, any injury. And Buff Burkel, and the Wounded Warrior Program swooped in to save me.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:24:22**

How did she know to call you?

**Nicole Malachowski 1:24:23**

She had heard from other people what had happened and that things weren't going well, you know, just kind of through the Women in Aviation grapevine. But in that moment, the Air Force Women Warrior program called, and then I got to, I got to vomit that story again. And then they called, and I got to vomit the story again. And that's what I needed to do. I had to get it out, and somebody had to listen. And I ended up becoming a trained ambassador and a trained mentor, which I still am to this day. I'm able to help other airmen who are being discharged, and most importantly, I think I'm able to go talk to other commanders in the Air Force. And I still do this — old retired colonel, man — seven years retired, I will

still get out. And I ended up talking to Chief of Staff of the Air Force Gen. Goldfein, just because, why not? What are you gonna do, fire me? Like, I'm already medically out. And I told him my story, and I said, "You guys got to fix this." And the very week after, one week after I was medically retired, I was in a business suit in the Pentagon, fixing the regulations.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

No, this is good.

**Nicole Malachowski**

So anyways, we went through and we changed all those regulations. So my very first act as a retired colonel was to be back in the Pentagon changing regulations for wounded, ill and injured. But I just want to give a shout out to the Air Force Wounded Warrior Program. Psychologically and mental health wise, I don't know that I would have recovered, and that I would have recovered to the place that I am today without them. And so I want for the active duty, listening for people in the Reserve, in the Guard, it is for you, it is for everyone, and it is literally a lifesaving program.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:27:12**

Thank you for sharing that. And I think that the testimony is the fact that you did, you got back up, and then you actually made change for the things that that had failed you.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:28:05**

Maybe talk about what you've been doing then since, after you made that great change.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:28:22**

You're there at your lowest, low point. You're like, "I lost my entire identity," right? Like, "Who am I if I'm not wearing my nation's uniform? What is my contribution to society if I'm not a fighter pilot? How am I going to provide for my family?" Right? "Who am I outside of this uniform?" And that's something I really challenge people in the military to think about early and think about often, because your time in the military will come to an end. Sometimes on your timeline and sometimes not, but it will happen. And if you don't know who it is you are, you know, who are you? What is it that you value and why? Why do you prioritize the things a certain way? That transition is going to be a lot harder than it needs to be, right? So as I sat there in those depths — you know, I'm someone who read and writes now at maybe the sixth-grade level, I can't control my temperature, heart rate or blood pressure. I have a severe balance deficit now that makes me get air sick in airplanes and motion sick in cars. The good Lord keeps me humble. I was sitting there thinking, "I can't do all these things. Who's gonna hire me? What am I gonna do? How can I be dependable to anybody else?" I only get about three to four hours a day where I'm functional. This is the one thing I'm doing today this podcast. That's it. Because of my autonomic system, I have to sit or lay down approximately 18 hours a day. That's just my reality. "So how do I do this? Who am I?" And it was an existential crisis, my friend. And then after a few days of letting myself feel bad, rightfully so, I kind of was like, "You know, you're a fighter pilot, man." And I realized my legacy was never to be like, not a legacy, but what I should be known for. If you're old and on your rocker, Nicole was going to be a fighter pilot, right? Maybe commandant of the Air Force Academy, you know? Sorry, Gavin. Gavin Marks, current commandant, totally my classmate and the best choice for commandant. But it was my dream, right? And it was all crumbling. And I thought, you

know, it wasn't about that. It was never about that. In fact, it hit me that 20-something years of being a fighter pilot honed the characteristic skills trait I needed to survive my illness and to reinvent myself into something bigger. And so people will say, "Nicole, you're resilient." And I love the term resilience, and it's good we talk about resilience, right? It's become more in the lexicon of the military the last five to 10 years. But resilience is not what I am, in my opinion. Like resilience is cool. It's when you fail a check ride at pilot training and you get in the jet the next day, right? It's when you know you make a mistake and say something out of turn, and you pull the person in and you correct it and you apologize. That's resilience, right? It's hard to do, but you bounce back to your old self and you try again. But sometimes in life, we're going to go through crucible experiences that will fundamentally change who you are. The old Nicole Malachowski doesn't exist anymore, before my illness. That experience changed me in a way that I cannot bounce back to my old self, because she doesn't exist anymore. I'm not resilient. I am resurgent. And I have resurged to a place where I am a different person I am because of this illness, much more compassionate to other people than I ever have been. I have learned to say no. I prioritize the things and the people who matter. And believe me, when you are in those depths and you are bedridden and house bound for two years, you figure out who your friends are real quick. And I have clarity on purpose. And it occurred to me, my impact to society was never be a fighter pilot. It was to help people with this illness, late-stage tick-borne illness. Twenty percent of people who get tick-borne illness never recover. Twenty percent stay chronically ill. I'm one of those people. That's over 100,000 Americans a year becoming chronically ill, and I realized that the very characteristics and traits I honed as a fighter pilots are the ones that I need to change this Lyme disease issue nationally and globally for the better. So I'm actually right where I'm supposed to be, and I could make the argument that I impact more people more positively on a grander scale than if I had ever stayed in the Air Force. So, it all worked out. So, what do I do now? I do leadership consulting and professional speaking, but predominantly — that helps pay the bills, and I enjoy it — but predominantly, I do patient advocacy work at the national level. So I'm on several government boards. I'm on several nonprofit panels. We've tripled MNH funding through the cake and like Tic act and things like that. I'm currently on a National Academies of Science committee. Can't talk about that because our report will come out in the spring. I hope everyone will read it. But Lyme disease, I went from being a fighter pilot to being an expert on ticks and Lyme disease. Who knew? Life is weird that way, right? The path to success is always going to be nonlinear.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:33:18**

Yes. Do you work with cadets at all in this? I mean, there's so much research that our cadets do, I'm curious.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:33:25**

So, it's so fascinating that you brought that up. Yes, indeed. So I'm delighted to say that I'm friends and classmates with the current dean, Gen. Letendre. And last year, some of your science cadets there have something called an iGEM program, and they decided to look into Lyme disease, and in particular, how to diagnose Lyme disease at the earliest stages of disease. They went to a national — international, I'm sorry — global conference, and actually won. And so they had me over. I was able to share some of my education and awareness, you know, on Lyme disease, and some of the academic research that I've gotten really smart on, but also the patient experience. What's it like to go through this? What's it like to live with it? Because it's a highly stigmatized disease, for some reason, even

though the science is there, for some reason, it's one of those, "Hey, it has to be all in their head." And I always laugh. I say, "It is all in my head. It was a brain infection. Gosh-darn it." But there's a lot of myths and misnomers that Lyme disease is easy to diagnose and easy to cure, and that couldn't be further from the truth. And the fact that the cadets would look into this and advance the science, which they did, on behalf of millions of people suffering on the world, is extraordinary. And to know that it was my alma mater and my old classmate, the dean, who made that connection, that's the beauty of the Long Blue Line.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:34:42

Yes. Oh my gosh, that's incredible. So you also mentioned you have children. You have twins. So, talk about family life in this new kind of — in the way that you're working now, right? You're not in uniform anymore. You're still pushing things forward, you're consulting. What's it like being a mom?

**Nicole Malachowski** 1:35:03

Man, it's harder to raise 14-year-old twins than it is to get shot at in combat. I will tell you that. So you know, the person that's been missing in this whole time we've been talking is the most important person in my life, which is my husband, Paul. So we will be married — we just, yeah, just had our anniversary, 23 years. I met him in my first fighter squadron in the late '90s. He's an F-15 WSO. So we met flying together, and — now I'll date ourselves. During that first combat that we both flew in, which was over Kosovo and Serbia, Allied Force. That's how old I am.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

I'm right there with you.

**Nicole Malachowski**

So, this man has been the constant in my life through everything. Through the fears of going through the instructor upgrade, through applying to the Thunderbirds to being a squadron commander. And then when I fell ill, he had retired at 20. He's older than me. He had been a stay-at-home dad and I fell ill, you know. And overnight, this man became my caregiver, overnight, this man became essentially a single dad to at that time, 5-year-old twins. I couldn't interact with my twins from the age of 5 to 7, my children watched this whole thing. I mean, he's the guy that went out and had to get a job so that we didn't have to move out of our house because I had lost my job. And so my biggest cheerleader, my biggest supporter, the greatest human being on Earth is my husband, Paul. And when you talk about living and following through on your marriage vows, that's what I'm talking about, that man. I love him dearly, and we're still thick as thieves. And my illness obviously impacts our family, right? People say, "I feel sorry sometimes for your kids," and sometimes I do, but they have learned a level of compassion that other kids wouldn't. They have learned what a good marriage looks like. They have learned what it means to be resilient and resurgent and how to advocate for yourself. So in a lot of ways, these kids have been raised into something different maybe than other kids. Because of the negative circumstance, something positive has come out of it. But my eldest does dictate, you know, our family life, but we're like anybody else, right? My husband, he's a contractor for the Air Force. Loves what he does. I don't know what he does because he works on a skiff, but I know he likes the people and he likes the job. Our twins are 14, and they are really good people. They're very nice people. My daughter is totally excels, you know, little bit of —loves school, does all these after-school activities, really into



science. She wants to be everything from a diplomat to an architect to a neonatologist, and she could probably do all of them at the same time. She's hilarious. And then there's my son, a lot more like his dad, very mellow, a little bit introverted like me. And he is, like, still a Lego master. He's extraordinarily good at satellite imagery. I'm telling you, man, he's got a future in intelligence, and he's in Civil Air Patrol, and so to watch him put on that uniform and to watch him march, or to watch him take an orientation flight with the likes of other people I had served with is amazing. So he has dreams of someday serving in the military, and so we certainly encourage and support that. But who knows? They're 14.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:38:24

Oh gosh, I love that.

**Nicole Malachowski**

But I'm just a soccer mom, man, driving kids around to their activities, taking their friends places, and loving life.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:38:32

I love that. Well, you talk about you have like, three to four good hours a day where you're — and so I imagine you probably find ways to maximize that with your family, right? I mean, that has to be—

**Nicole Malachowski**

The single most important thing is to set boundaries and schedule your day. And I did not learn how to do that, to set boundaries until I got sick. And it was out of necessity and survival. And I wish it was a gift I had given myself sooner in my career, prior to marriage, prior to kids, when I was a squadron commander, all of those things. Setting boundaries and setting a schedule and prioritizing is so vital, and I used to think if we set boundaries, people aren't gonna like it, right? They're gonna be offended by it. They're gonna say that I'm not all in or a team player, that I'm not dependable. And in fact, I have never found that to be true. People respect it, and in turn, they model that behavior. It's almost like you're gifting it to other people. If I can do it and say no or say this is what I have to do today, and that's all I can do. You can do it too. You can have the clarity and the purpose, you know? So I schedule my days very far in advance. I mean, we've been scheduling this podcast for months. Delighted to be here. But you know, you gott follow those priorities and needs. And obviously, when it comes to those dark times, the only people that were in that room, when I was laying in that dark room, unable to walk, talk, read and write, were my husband and my two kids. Everything else is extra.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:39:58

I want to talk about this resurgence, because I feel like that is really important for some of our listeners. When they're thinking about — you said you got to know who you are and what's important to you. And how did you get to that clarity?

**Nicole Malachowski 1:40:13**

Well, I got to that clarity because right, life forced me. We know that I was forced into this position, which is why I hope people will listen, right? Do not wait for chaos and crisis to come in order to have clarity on who you are. And I think you really need to be able to answer the question, "What is it I value? And why?" Yes, we have the Air Force values, right? Integrity first, service before self. Those are all good. I'm talking about your personal values, the ones that you're gonna wake up with every day and go, "These are my values." Because those are the things that will help you set the boundaries. Those are the things that will help you prioritize what is good and right. And I don't know what those look like for you. They're going to vary based on your background, your experience, your needs, your family, your community, and so I'll tell you what mine are. Mine are courage and compassion and curiosity, and I developed those as I went through this deep thinking and deep reinvention, when I lost my career. Because I felt I didn't know who I was. And so I started doing some research, and I started reading, you know, actual academic literature on this, and this was the topic that came up. You have to know who you are. You have to maintain integrity to yourself. And that's the thing, this word "integrity." You know, when we talk about in the military, we often talk about doing the right thing, right? Not lying. But if you Google the word "integrity," you go, like, four or five definitions down, it says "maintaining fidelity to the whole." Maintaining loyalty to yourself and who you are. Where are those boundaries and compassion, courage and curiosity are what drive me today, and those are the things I think about every morning. And I would challenge the people listening: What are your values? Who are you when we take off this uniform? Take those wings off. Take the rank off, take the assignment off, take your No. 1 STRAT, take your cool fellowship away. What is it? And the key is to maintain integrity to yourself.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:42:17**

That was powerful. That was incredibly powerful. And I think that anyone listening, if you're sitting in the room with me right now, you're taking that to heart, because you realize, gosh, what a compass to have, what a compass to have.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:42:30**

And you know, as I sat there trying to reinvent myself, because I didn't really finish answering the question you asked earlier, and this was one of my brain-injury things. I have short- and long-term memory loss, and I just realized I didn't finish answering one of your questions, and that's OK. This is part of my reality. How do you reinvent yourself, right? And I came across a Japanese philosophy, and I'm probably going to pronounce it wrong, and I mean no disrespect to a deep Japanese tradition called *ikigai*, I. K. I. G. A. I. and it's about this philosophy of, how do you find your life's purpose. And as I read more about it, during these dark times, bedridden at home, this is how I discovered what I do now, which is leadership, consulting and speaking. An *ikigai* is basically answering the questions, finding out something you're good at, something you love to do, something the world needs, and something you can be paid for. And where those four things overlap, that's where you can reinvent yourself. So what does an old, washed up fighter pilot do, right? And I could answer all but one of those questions. I knew I liked people. I liked leadership, and I knew I liked speaking and communicating. It's always been fun for me. I knew that you could get paid for speaking and consulting, and I knew the world needed it, because I had companies and CEOs contacting me like, "Hey, now that you're not in the Air Force, could you come meet with my team and maybe help us out with this problem or this issue?" The one I couldn't answer is, what are you good at? I'm just a fighter pilot. I'm good at flying planes, or I was,

What am I good at? And I was stuck on that fourth question of *ikigai*, and it occurred to me one day, don't ask yourself what you're good at. Ask the people who love you what you're good at, because they will see things in you that you don't see in yourself. And it was in those moments the people that carried me through literally two years of rehab, learning to walk, talk, read, write, again, even some of my therapists, they were like, "Gosh, you know, you're kind of good at speaking. You know, when you tell a story, I'm really drawn in." "You know, the way you connect with people, your authenticity, your willingness now," because I wasn't like this early in my life, "your willingness to be vulnerable and talk about the hardships and the pain that it's what you're good at." And when I put those four together, wow, you mean I can tell my story on a stage in front of corporate America. Translate these lessons. Learn to their profession and make a difference? Because it's not the flying that I miss, it's being a part of a team. And by doing this for each day that I'm with a team in corporate America, just for a brief moment, I'm a teammate, and just for a brief moment, I fill that hole that still exists in my heart. And so yeah, *Ikigai* helped me reinvent myself.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Thank you for coming back to that and sharing that.

**Nicole Malachowski**

Thanks for letting me and I apologize. My Lyme brain took me off topic.

**Naviere Walkewicz**

Well, I think where we've been has been so incredible, it didn't feel like it was missing at all. So I'm really glad, actually, that you remembered where I didn't to come back to that. Thanks. We'll ask for Nicole's thoughts on reinvention, resilience and leadership next. But before we do that, I'd like to take a moment and thank all of you for listening to *Long Blue Leadership*. The podcast publishes on Tuesdays in both video and audio, and is available on all your favorite podcast platforms. Watch or listen to all episodes of *Long Blue Leadership* and subscribe at [longblueleadership.org](http://longblueleadership.org)

**Naviere Walkewicz**

OK, so we have had an incredible journey together. I mean, I think about — it is not lost on me; you said you have three to four good hours, and I'm so honored that you're spending it with me and our listeners today.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:46:15**

Thank you for having me and thanks to those listening still.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:46:19**

Yes, no this is truly incredible. And really where we'd like to go is just to make sure we capture any final thoughts you have, whether it be leadership, resilience, resurgence, anything that you'd like to kind of share with our listeners, so that when they take away, there's something that they can kind of hold on to.

**Nicole Malachowski** 1:46:33

You know, one of the questions I get asked a lot when I'm out in corporate America is, if you could go back and tell your younger self one thing, what would it be? And I would tell my younger self and the listeners we have right now, this: that only you get to define success for yourself. Don't ever let any other company, organization, team, individual, define what success should look like for you. And I think that our definition of success is individuals can and should change over time. You know, especially in the military, right? We start to think that there's one path we have to follow. Everyone wants to grow up to be chief of staff of the Air Force, or everyone needs to do this and then check the squared ID and then do this next. How many times I was told in my life, "Don't do it. Don't go do that. It's going to take you off the path." What path? Whose path? Stay on your path, right? Success means following that little butterfly in your stomach that says this is different and unusual. This is a unique opportunity. It could result in failure, but it could result in awesomeness, and following that gut instinct. So only you should define success for yourself. Don't fall for anybody else's version of it.

**Naviere Walkewicz** 1:47:46

I like that, especially when you said, "Whose path, your path?" I really like that. OK, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and ask a question, and you can tell me to pound sand, but you've had a lot of interviews, you've had a lot of people ask you questions. If you were to ask yourself a question, like, what's the one that we haven't asked you that you're like, "This is just something that I would really like to share."

**Nicole Malachowski** 1:48:07

Oh wow, that is extraordinarily tough, because you guys have asked everything. I'm glad we covered the stuff about *ikigai*, and I think the stuff about reinvention and resilience. And I think I would go back to maybe what I said before, which is asking yourself and asking me "Who are you? What is it you value and why?" And holding me accountable to that, you know, courage and compassion and curiosity every single day. But you know — What haven't you asked me? My gracious! Well, we haven't talked a little bit about Lyme disease. Here's what I'd like to say. OK, Lyme disease, by and large, is preventable. And I want our followers out here to know that tick bites can cause a lot more than Lyme disease, and that tick bites can lead to not only death, but devastating disabilities that are life altering and life changing, but it's largely preventable. So if people were to go to my social media sites and click on my link tree, at the very bottom of that I have all sorts of prevention tips. Ticks are in all 50 states. Tick-borne illnesses are a global scourge, but prevention is key. So I always tell people Permethrin and Picaridin are your friends. Always carry fine, fine tip tweezers with you for safe tick removal. And go learn about how to safely remove a tick, and that would make me so happy, because most of these tick bites are preventable. What cohort of the American public is exposed to more global vectors than our military and the military families stationed around the world with them. And so I firmly believe the Departments of Defense and Veteran Affairs should be leaders in this space. They are currently not. So if anybody is listening, I hope they take the hint. I would love to partner with the Department of Defense to make it a reality, to raise education and awareness for our service members, veterans and military families.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:50:02**

Thank you for sharing that. And I can say just from being in this short amount of time with you, your Your 3-Cs are coming out in spades, your compassion, your curiosity and your courage. So thank you. One final thought on leadership, if you might leave your listeners with something about leadership.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:50:21**

You know, leadership is a journey. We're always put into positions that we're supposed to grow into. Don't think you have to be perfect to be a leader. It's OK to admit when you make mistakes. It's OK to ask for help, and it's OK to have failures, as long as you overcome them. And I like to remind folks at all levels of leadership, you know that the runway behind you is always unusable. All you ever have is the runway that's in front of you.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:50:46**

Well said, well said. Thank you so much for being on *Long Blue Leadership*.

**Nicole Malachowski 1:50:50**

Thank you for having me. And here's a shout-out to the current cadets that are working hard up on The Hill, wishing them best and hoping they take it one day at a time, absolutely.

**Naviere Walkewicz 1:50:58**

And for our listeners, I think that's — it's certainly one thing to say, you get to meet these incredible leaders, but my ask of you is to share this with your networks, because it's great if you felt something and you've had an impact in your life, but imagine the magnitude you can have by sharing some of the stories of our leaders like Nicole today with your networks and the change we can make together. So, until next time, thanks for being on *Long Blue Leadership*.