

**TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH  
NICOLE MALACHOWSKI  
5 DECEMBER 2012**

QUESTION: Why did you join the Air Force?

NICOLE: Well, I joined the Air Force I guess for a couple of reasons. I came from your kind of standard, patriotic middle class American family. Both of my grandfathers had been career military, Navy and Army, and my father had also served in the Army during Vietnam. So, I was raised on those military stories, those stories of patriotism and I grew up in a household where it was considered noble and honorable and a good thing to do to serve your country. Then you kind of combine that with my love of fast aircraft, fighter aircraft, which I discovered at the young age of five. So, when you put those two things together, aviation with the love of military service, the natural answer for me was to join the Air Force.

QUESTION: What was the impact of the air show when you were a child?

NICOLE: Absolutely. My parents took us to an air show there in central California and I saw an aircraft called the F4 Phantom flying. The F4 aircraft was the workhorse of the Vietnam War, you know, and it was loud and it was fast and you can smell the jet fuel and it was technology and power. What more would a five-year-old kid want to do, I mean, it was everything all wrapped into one and that was the day I decided I wanted to be a fighter pilot. I remember looking at my dad and going dad, I want to be a fighter pilot and I remember him saying, you'll be a great fighter pilot some day.

QUESTION: When you were five women weren't allowed to fly.

NICOLE: Right. Women were not allowed to fly fighter or bomber aircraft. At the time, literally that year when I was five, 1979, it was when women were first allowed into pilot training. So, I've kind of been growing up synonymous with this evolution of women military aviators. It is kind of an interesting connect.

QUESTION: When you joined, were you aware of the obstacles?

NICOLE: I did not become aware of the obstacles until I was about 12 years old. It was an interesting story behind that. When I was in the sixth grade, all of us had to stand up and talk about what we wanted to be when we grew up and how we were going to get there. Each Friday a different student would stand up there and I remember standing up and saying that I wanted to be a fighter pilot. Here I am, 12 years old in front of all my peers, and a lot of people started laughing, girls can't be pilots, girls can't be fighter pilots, and I remember my teacher informing me, very unceremoniously, that it was against the law for women to fly fighter aircraft. And I remember running home to my dad. My dreams that I have had since I was five were being shattered right before my very eyes, and talking to him about that, and that realization. That was hard for a 12-year-old girl, it was hard to realize that everything I thought I could do, that I wanted to do, that I dreamed of doing, wasn't going to be allowed because of some law.

QUESTION: What did your dad say?

NICOLE: My dad told me, well laws can change and you need to stay focused on your goals and maybe you can't fly a fighter aircraft right now but you can still go on and fly aircraft, you could

be an airline pilot, you can fly the tanker or trainer aircraft in the military and it was when I was 12 years old, and in this devastating moment of a 12-year-old young girl that my dad and my grandfather introduced me to the Civil Air Patrol. So I joined the Civil Air Patrol when I was 12 years old and that's where I got my first flying lessons. I stayed focused.

QUESTION: Talking about the WASP, who were these women and what did they do?

NICOLE: The WASP are the Women Airforce Service Pilots. They were America's first women military aviators and they served during WWII. At the time, as WWII had pressed on, there was a shortage overseas of male combat pilots. And as this war raged, we realized there was a need at home to backfill some of these military flying jobs, jobs such as ferrying aircraft out from the manufacturer to the different bases and instructing the male pilots on how to fly aircraft from the basic fundamentals. There was also some tactics development, okay, so how do we strafe, how do we shoot the gun air to ground, and there was a need for test pilots, a need for instructors. General Hap Arnold at the time, along with Jackie Cochran, who was the leading female aviatrix of the era, saw that there was this untapped resource in American women who were absolutely capable of flying these aircraft. So they setup this program called the WASP and we had, I guess, about 25,000 applicants, I think just over, around 1,900 were selected and 1,074 ended up graduating training. And again, what these women did was free up a lot of the male pilots to go out into the European and the Pacific theater where that war raged on and they did so for just over two years.

QUESTION: What kind of aircraft did they fly?

NICOLE: They flew everything from trainer aircraft to big bomber aircrafts like the B29, B26, they even flew fighter aircraft like the P51 Mustang. They flew it all.

QUESTION: My understanding, they were not part of the regular military?

NICOLE: Interestingly, when the WASP program was stood up, they were not considered active duty military, which is really strange when you look at it. They took the exact same oath as any other military officer at the time, they wore military uniforms, and they flew military aircraft and accomplished and taught the same flight training as their male active duty military counterparts. So, it was very interesting that they weren't considered military at the time and it wouldn't be until 1977 that they would get veteran status.

QUESTION: Because they were not part of the military they weren't afforded the usual benefits or same honors?

NICOLE: This is one of those hard things when you look back on this WASP story. When you relate it to all their success and all they have done for America and for our military, you know, they had to pay their own way to training and they had to pay their own way home when they were unceremoniously disbanded. And 38 women actually gave their lives to their country in service as WASP, and you're right, their fellow classmates would have to raise funds to ship their body home in poor pinewood boxes. They were not afforded any kind of benefits to the families and sadly, they weren't even allowed to have an American flag draped over their coffin, which is absolutely just a tragedy.

QUESTION: What dangers did women face on a daily basis?

NICOLE: Flying aircraft in and of itself obviously has some inherent risks associated. We try to mitigate that whether it's in WWII or in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we try to mitigate that through proper training and instruction. For the WASP themselves, often times, they would be the first people stepping into aircraft that were fresh off the manufacturing line so sometimes there were flaws in those aircraft. Sometimes when aircraft had to be kind of retrofitted or overhauled, they would be test pilots, they would take to the skies testing out the different changes to the aircraft. When new aircraft came on line, they acted as inaugural pilots to test out the characteristics. I would argue that one of the most dangerous things that the WASP did was tow-targets. They would tow these banners behind them and let the male pilots who were training for combat shoot real bullets at the targets they were towing behind their plane. That takes an absolute wonderful amount of skill, and of course courage. One of the other things that the WASP did that's very little known is that they helped develop some of the air-to-ground strafing tactics that were used in the European theater. So, when you would see the fighter aircraft dive in on say a moving train and shoot bullets, those WASP were the ones developing the tactics here stateside. And anytime you point an aircraft at high speed towards the ground, there's going to be risk.

QUESTION: Talk about the women who lost their lives and how their families had to bare the burden of bringing them home.

NICOLE: Absolutely, their classmates would be the first step in getting their bodies home in these poorly crafted pinewood boxes that weren't paid for by the United States government. They'd get shipped home whenever they could get the body there; there was no sort of priority set on that. The families received no benefits, the families weren't allowed to have gold stars on their windows to celebrate this service of the WASP, and again, they weren't allowed to have American flags draped over the coffin, which is really the biggest tragedy of all.

QUESTION: Why is that story so important to you?

NICOLE: The story is important to me because it's important to recognize anybody's service and sacrifice to their country, especially those who've made the ultimate sacrifice. You know, whether we're talking about in the Revolutionary War or the current wars in Afghanistan, there is a certain expectation as Americans that we honor that service and that that didn't happen for these women back in WWII is egregious.

QUESTION: You did something about that.

NICOLE: I tried.

QUESTION: Tell us how they are finally recognized for their service?

NICOLE: Well, they were recognized, kind of, in fits and starts. They've been recognized over the last few decades in different ways. I think it's important to start at the beginning, which is really where they ended, the unceremonious disbandment in 1944. You know, General Hap Arnold came to recognize how right he and Jackie Cochran were, how much they did help in the war effort and he pushed really hard in 1944, with that last graduating class, to get Congress to give them veteran's status, to afford them the benefits that they rightly deserved. That bill went before a Congress and it was defeated and the WASP's records were actually sealed and stamped, secret and classified, and were hidden away from historians for about 33 years. So in 1977, again, we would see a resurrection of the WASP story momentarily, where they received veteran's status. It would be another seven years before their medals ever made it to them and

those medals were sent to them in brown paper envelopes. Most of them got them in their early 80s; a lot of them had passed away by that time. It was just completely unfortunate. But when we talk about them receiving the veteran's status in 1977, this actually happened at the same time of another kind of evolutionary step for American military women, which was the discussions going on at the national level about women going to pilot training. In 1977, they get veteran status and in 1979, immediately thereafter, women in the Air Force are going to be allowed to go to pilot training. So then you're not going to hear anything about the WASP for quite some time. Then in the early 1990s, the discussion on Capitol Hill, as far as women flying fighter and bomber aircraft, women flying in combat roles, is going to be reinvigorated. As they're doing this testimony on Capitol Hill, the sides that were for opening these jobs to women in combat aviation would often cite the WASP story as an example and a precedent for what women were capable of doing. And so, that's kind of how we got to the early 90s, that's when I was a kid at the [Air Force] Academy, when the law changed, and, I realized, wow, you know, my dream that I've had since I was five, that I thought was shattered at age 12, right, has actually turned out and can become a reality. So, when you fast-forward to about 2006, I had the privilege of flying as the right wing #3 pilot position on the United States Air Force Thunderbirds. It was at that time I was able to meet Nancy and Deanie Parrish from Wings Across America. The WASP story had always been part of something that I was raised with, it was something that I was keenly aware of and it was something that was inspiring me this whole time to stay on track to my goal. And I remember meeting them, being inspired, going to these air shows where these WASP would be on the autograph line and they would always have those beautiful blue scarves and they'd be flapping in the wind and they'd be waiting to talk to me or waiting for my autograph, which I thought was completely backward because they're my heroes, they're American heroes, and I had a wonderful opportunity on numerous occasions to have lunch with the different air shows with these WASP, to have different discussions, to hear their stories of patriotism, of skill, of dedication. So we fast-forward from the thunderbird period, and actually, I'll go back for a second. When I was a thunderbird, having been the first woman to fly in the Air Force Thunderbirds, I would often get numerous questions from people in the crowd or in the audience saying, hey, not only did I not know there were women Thunderbird pilots but I didn't know that there were women fighter pilots and I didn't even know that there were women pilots in the military. I mean, some people, even as late as 2006 didn't know that. So, I realized that pretty quickly that it wasn't my story that was important but it was the more strategic story, the story of my sisters that I have been in combat with, in the story of my sisters who flew in WWII, those WASP. I realized I had a perfect platform which to share the WASP story, an important American story and certainly one that touches at the heart of Air Force history. So, I liked to answer people's questions maybe a little bit rhetorically, you know, maybe a little bit sarcastically sometimes, like wow, I didn't know that women could fly fighter aircraft, and I'd say, yes, did you know women have been flying fighter aircraft since WWII? And they'd say, no. And this conversation would ensue and one by one, I tried to educate people in hopes that that story would move forward. I hope it did.

QUESTION: Why were the records sealed?

NICOLE: I think only the people who were there at the time probably know why those records were sealed. But let's be honest, in that day and age and during that era, it was very uncommon, and in fact, frowned upon for women to be doing such non-traditional roles. Not just serving in the military, which was pretty non-traditional, but also, oh my goodness, flying aircraft. This

was hard for a lot of people in that day and age to swallow. So I think that once the war was over and they didn't feel that the necessity was there, it was easier for them to sweep this story under the rug. It would have been harder to have recognized them for what they deserved.

QUESTION: Do you think that's the reason they were denied veteran's status?

NICOLE: I do think that that's what it is. I do not think at that time, and this is just my opinion, that the American people were ready for that or to accept that it had even happened. It was so revolutionary, it was so, at that time, unthinkable that women would be flying P51s. So, and, and for a lot of the WASP themselves, remember these were women of that generation, they weren't trying to get recognized, they weren't trying to make history. What they were, were American patriots, they saw a skill set that they had that could not only help their country, but that they could help the entire free world. This is about a story of service. This is about a story of patriotism. They are the most humble group of women you will ever meet.

QUESTION: Tell me about the day you were there and this great injustice was finally set right.

NICOLE: You talking about the day that the bill was signed?

QUESTION: Yes.

NICOLE: So much work by so many people had gone into drafting this bill, had gone into getting the appropriate support across Congress, so many countless hours, faces I'll never know. But that moment, when we were standing in the Oval Office and President Obama signed that bill with several of our WASP in attendance, with women representing the current generation who benefitted from the vanguard ways of the WASP, it was really just overwhelming, I think surreal, I think probably the most proud moment of my Air Force career. The realization that I'm part of something that started 60 years ago, at least flying wise, back to the time of the Revolution, you know, when you think about service to our country as women. Just to see that come full circle, and see the WASP wearing the fabric of the story, and to see that I played a small part in the fabric of the story, and someday a little gal whose in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade right now wondering what she's going to do with her life is going to be part of that fabric too. It's neat to be part of something that exists, you know, perpetually.

QUESTION: Back to the Revolution, most people have no idea that women have served the Nation that far back, how familiar are you?

NICOLE: I bet you I'm not as familiar as you sir, but I do know that women...

QUESTION: Do you want to talk about that or stick with more contemporary?

NICOLE: More contemporary is probably better but I wouldn't mind. When I think about the history of our country, you know, it was founded upon an idea, an idea that wasn't proven. I wish I could talk to the first person who stepped onto the first battlefield and took the first bullet at the start of the Revolutionary War. Why did you do it? What was going on in your mind? What was the conviction? What were you feeling that you would sacrifice so much for something we didn't know was going to happen? Then you fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and you go; why is it that you take this oath to the Constitution? What is it that makes you wear this uniform? And I would argue it's that same thing, this idea of the American dream, this idea of freedom and of liberty, and it may pass over 200 years but there is a common thread between all of us. I mean, wouldn't you want to talk, I want to talk, to the first person who fell on the first

battle of the Revolutionary War and go; where did you get that courage, where is that courage of conviction coming from? And when you look at Americans today, I would ask them that same question. We all serve and it's a fundamental story of patriotism. It's a fundamental story of pride, and in the American dream, and the American ideal. I really wish I could go back to the Revolutionary War. And I'm sure the first person who fell was a guy, but the women who served in the Revolutionary War, they did it for the same reason, they did it because they believed in something that was unto that point, unproven. That's amazing stuff, that's courage.

QUESTION: Causes such passion in you.

NICOLE: In my opinion the WASP are special. Not because they were women per se, they're not just remarkable because they were America's first women military aviators, what we have to remember is that the WASP were remarkable in their own right. They raised their hand and they served their country in a time of dire need. All of us are familiar with the sacrifices of the greatest generation and they were part of that. But they were remarkable in that they raised their hand at a time that was not traditional to do so to serve, and it's remarkable in its own right. At the same time, I am smart enough to understand my history as a woman in today's military and I'm smart enough to understand it's important that we honor that history. The WASP were not just revolutionary for the integration of women into military and into the military aviation, but I would argue that the WASP were evolutionary in the progress that women have seen in this military. The WASP had taken to the skies over Iraq in my heart, the WASP were part of the whole story while we were on the Thunderbirds. When I look at my career and time I spent at the White House, it was a privilege to use that moment of time with that access to seal the story, finally codify the story in American history and to be a part of that is the most unbelievable feeling. The Tuskegee Airmen, we talk about their so special, unique for overcoming the social prejudices that exist at the time. Yes, it was evolutionary and revolutionary in the integration of African Americans at that time and that certainly carries over to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. At the same time, what they did was remarkable in its own right. So, you always want to balance that, you don't want to say that the WASP were great because they were women, that is important to the story but the story is bigger than that. The story is about Americans who serve their country at a time of need and it's an important story that has to be told.

QUESTION: And often not received the recognition they deserve.

NICOLE: Absolutely not. I mean, we saw the same thing with our Tuskegee Airmen, the exact same thing. Look at their record, look at their combat record, it was remarkable in its own right and deserved to be in the history books because of that alone. You add on the fact that it was revolutionary for the African American aviators at the time to integrate, to lead us forward as far as integration within the Armed Services and that makes it just even more amazing.

QUESTION: You served as a combat pilot in Iraqi Freedom, tell me what a job like that entails.

NICOLE: Well, when you fly into combat or serve in a combat theater, it's really about doing what you've been trained to do. So I think there is some job satisfaction, of course, in that I've spent years and years training. You know, you've been working towards this goal since you were five years old, to serve your country, to do it in combat, to defend freedom, to defend the American ideals, and so, when you finally have that moment to go into combat, I'll tell you, you feel a couple of different ways. There is a sense of pride and satisfaction and finally being called upon what you've spent years, if not decades, training to do. There's a sense of pride in going to

war along with your brothers and sisters who you know are your wingmen and are going to have your back. There's a sense of huge seriousness, a sense of huge responsibility. There is a somberness to that because what we're talking about, at the end of the day is life and death. When you hit that pickle button or when you make a decision to drop a weapon, that's life and death. This is serious stuff. There's nothing celebratory about it. These are greatly trained American men and women who are going out there to do a very serious job and they take that as a huge responsibility. In my line flying the F-15E Strike Eagle, a lot of that had to do with what's called CAS, close air support. We would go in and we would help out during what we call TICs, T-I-C stands for troops and contact. So you get on the radio and there's some Americans or some coalition forces that are pinned down, taking enemy fire, they're shooting back, and you need to take responsibility and do this right because lives are depending on you. And so, you know, it is taxing mentally, it's taxing emotionally. At the end of the day, when a young Soldier or Marine is yelling for help on a radio it becomes very personally very quickly. And the satisfaction that you get as a fighter pilot or a fighter WSO in the F-15E, knowing that you helped that American Soldier or Marine, there is great job satisfaction than that.

QUESTION: What is the most difficult part of flying an aircraft?

NICOLE: You know, all aircraft, whether you're talking about a glider or an F-15E, adhere to the same scientific principles. So, I could argue that flying an aircraft, whether it's a Cessna or an F-16, conceptually isn't that different. I'm going to climb, I'm going to descend, I've got a throttle or I'm going to use the wind, I'm going trade altitude for air speed, whatever that is, the difference is in employing the aircraft. The F-15E is a weapon of war; it is about employing it as a weapon of war that makes it difficult. The amount of systems and capabilities that are encompassed in the F-15E are, in my opinion, just unmatched, phenomenal, both air-to-air and air-to-ground capabilities and that aircraft continues to evolve itself as well. So, when you think about employing it as a weapon of war, that's where it gets intense, that's where you have to understand all those systems, knowing what situation, what system I'm going to use, coordinating within the aircraft, because we have a pilot in the front seat and a weapon systems officer in the back seat. The delineation of duties, at the end of the day, once you cross the line into combat, it's no longer scripted like training. It may not be straight out of our tactics manuals, it's about how do I understand my system, how do I understand my teammate, how do we fall back on the foundational principles that are going to allow us to be successful employing in this moment in this situation. And I argue that the American people invest a lot of money into the training and the skills of their military men and women and they deserve people who are capable of employing to that level. I also argue that the American people have a vested interest in ensuring that we utilize good judgment. So, developing that judgment is what's going to carry you through a successful combat deployment.

QUESTION: Every job has good days and bad days, what's a bad day in your line of work?

NICOLE: It's hard to say if there's a bad day in my line of work, you know, in peacetime. You look around to those who work with you or for you and say, wow, I didn't fly so well today, but you know what, that's not really a bad day, I still got to fly an F-15E and that's how we get better. We talk about, in my squadron, steel sharp and steel, it's holding each other accountable to those standards of performance, holding each other accountable to those standards of judgment so that when the time comes to go into combat, it's only decisiveness, it's decision making in the right way. In peacetime, there are very few bad days. I can tell you that,

unfortunately, in combat there are bad days that you get called in to help in that troops in contact situation and you're too late. There are days that you cannot employ that F-15E in a way that will help the situation, and it's very personal, and very real on the radios and when you fly home from something like that, yeah, that's a bad day.

QUESTION: When you're having a bad day, there's discipline and training but you're not a machine.

NICOLE: Right, the men and women of the military, we're human beings, we feel. A lot of us have lost friends in service, to our country. It's interesting in my line of work as far as flying the F-15E; it's different than the guy on the ground. My heart and my responsibility and my satisfaction comes from helping that Marine and that Soldier because when you think about it, from my advantage point at 15,000 or 20,000 feet, I don't see it, smell it, hear it, feel it the way that those young Marines and young Soldiers are and that weighs heavy on your heart. And when you hear that fight going on on our radio, that weighs heavy on your heart, maybe not at that moment because your training kicks in, right, and you are decisive and you use your judgment and you employ that F-15E as a weapon to help our Soldiers and Marines, to help our coalition, to help our allies, to help innocent civilians on the ground. But when you have an intense mission like that where you know that lives were at stake, or lives were lost, when you fly home, it's very quiet, it's very quiet, it makes you realize how precious human life is, makes you realize the level that you're sacrificing, that you're putting yourself in harm's way, it becomes very real. You think about your spouse, you think about your parents, you definitely think about your kids. If we didn't think about that, I'd be worried. That's when I would be worried. The fact that we're human, that fact that we care, that fact that we feel, in a lot of ways I think that's what makes the American Armed Forces so special. This is not something that's taken lightly at all, this is a huge responsibility and something that we take very seriously.

QUESTION: It's hard enough to do what you do, but now you have children how does that impact?

NICOLE: Well, having children, I think, impacts anybody regardless of what career field you're in. Certainly I would argue that the military lifestyle is actually conducive to raising families. While we do move a lot, while there are deployments, the foundation, friendships and bonds are forced here. I could come on base on any given day and say I need someone to watch my kids for an hour and a perfect stranger Airmen would be like, I've got it, and I can trust them to do it and I can trust them to help me out. So the sense of community certainly eases the burden of those deployments. When I think about going into combat, or into harm's way, you know, from a mother's perspective, you bet I think about my kids, but I also know some day it's going to be pretty darn cool for them to tell a story about their mom who flew fighter aircraft, it's going to be pretty, I hope, inspiring to them that they can pursue their own dreams. It's going to be encouraging to them to teach that people are willing to sacrifice in defense of this Nation, that they won the lottery being born into. I'm proud of the country, I'm proud of my service, and I want my kids to be proud of that too. It's an honor to raise them as part of this Air Force family.

QUESTION: When we think about the Air Force, those planes won't be in the air without the people who maintain them on the ground, what are women doing?

NICOLE: Within the Air Force nearly 100% of the career fields are open to women and I'd argue you'd be hard pressed to find a career field where there wasn't a woman. Whether we're

talking about an aircraft maintainer or crew chief on our most advanced aircraft like an F-22, whether you're talking about women air medical evacuation flight nurses, think about what they see and what they do on a daily basis. I find that's just amazing. When you think about those people who work even within our legal system, the JAG Corps that help us uphold the Uniform Code of Military Justice, when you think about the different roles as far as morale and welfare type jobs, taking care of our Airmen and their families and the different processes we have in place for that. You're going to be hard pressed to find a career field that women aren't a part of in the Air Force. And you bring up a really interesting point. The mission of the Air Force is to fly, fight and win. The vast, vast majority of Airmen do not have anything to do directly related with aircraft on a daily basis, yet without them, not a single aircraft takes to the skies. We're sitting here right now in this interview, listening to those engines and those aircraft take off, there's some woman in the control tower clearing them, there's probably a woman whose driving the sweeper on the runway making sure that there aren't rocks or debris so we can takeoff those aircraft safely. There's going to be a woman driving the fuel truck, refueling us so that we can fly again later on today. Does that make sense? We're everywhere and we're inextricably linked, we serve alongside and with our male counterparts, and I think it's absolutely seamless.

QUESTION: The people who maintain the aircraft typically are not officers, they're enlisted people, so how important is the enlisted Airman to the jobs you do?

NICOLE: Well, as an F-15E Strike Eagle pilot I will tell you, the job of the enlisted Airmen, in particular those young 19, 20-year-olds who work on the aircraft is excruciatingly important. Let's put it at the bottom line. Every time I strap into an F-15E, it's with 100% confidence and trust that that aircraft is ready to go, that the engines are going to work, that the flight controls are going to work, that the bombs are going to come off the aircraft the way their supposed to, right, that I can refuel from a boom operator and a KC-135 when I'm running out of gas over northern Iraq trying to help somebody on the ground. Those are the enlisted Airmen, those are the ones who are supporting, getting the mission done. I have 100% faith and confidence every time I strap in the plane, I put my life in their hands and I do so willingly every day. I'm extraordinarily proud to work with them and every time I go fly, you can ask any of my crew chiefs on line, the last thing I do as I strap in is I lean over and I shake their hand and I say thanks for letting me borrow your jet. It's their jet, they let me borrow it and I'm very grateful.

QUESTION: You were the first female pilot selected to fly in one of America's premier air demonstration squadrons, who were they and what was your role in the Thunderbirds?

NICOLE: The Thunderbirds are exactly that, United States Air Force's aerial demonstration team. Their job pretty much is to go out there and represent all the men and women of the United States Air Force, to show and share their story with the American people. We want to recruit the next generations of Americans to come in and continue to make this the greatest Air Force in the world and the Thunderbirds, lastly, want to retain the best of our Airmen to go out, to thank our Airmen, to meet our Airmen, to see what they need. So, in a big way the Thunderbirds are a very public face of the United States Air Force. For me, I served as Thunderbird #3 flying in the right wing position, in the diamond formation. Yeah, it was awesome. Went by too fast. It's hard work to by the way.

QUESTION: What did your parents think?

NICOLE: My parents were absolutely overwhelmed, obviously. We were from Las Vegas, Nevada, so we were familiar with Nellis Air Force Base, which was home of the Thunderbirds. My dad, of course, would beam with pride, he was the one who would wear the Thunderbird t-shirts and walk around and let everybody know that his daughter was up there flying. My mom, on the other hand, I'm not sure she ever saw a complete air show, because she always closed her eyes and cringe at different moments, probably like any mother would. She would go inside sometimes and not watch, I'm like, mom. My dad's out there, that's my daughter, that's my daughter. It's kind of funny.

QUESTION: Currently, you're the commander of a fighter squadron, what leadership skills are required?

NICOLE: As a commander of the 333<sup>rd</sup> Fighter Squadron, my job is to take care of what we call the Lancer Mission and the mission itself is to train the newest F-15E air crew to be ready to go out to their first operational squadron. So, in essence, we get in a whole bunch of lieutenants straight from pilot training, or from NAS school and we teach them from the very basics how to fly the F-15E. So from a leadership perspective, as I see it, my number one priority is taking care of the Lancer Mission and I like to do that by taking care of my people, taking care of instructors who are assigned to me. Most of them are young captains, alright, so making sure that I empower and enable an environment where they can be successful. They are amazing instructors. This is the most combat experienced cadre of instructors the F-15E has ever seen. So, as far as their experience and skill-sets, they've got that down. It's really about how do I empower and enable an environment where they can break that experience down to a way that is teachable to a brand new young lieutenant. I try to let the captains make decisions, I never let them make a bad one that's going to affect safety or the mission, but at times I need to let them try. How do you empower and enable creative thinking since you have an innovative environment? Right now, it's tough times across our country. We're having economic issues. Most certainly those affect things within the Department of Defense. So, how do we think of new and creative, efficient ways to still get the job done? My captains care about what they do, they love what they do, they're good at what they do. So, what can we do as a team to empower and enable that kind of environment? We will always hold each other up to standards. We will always be accountable for our actions. If you can lead, form, that kind of environment, if you can be a young peer leader as a captain, the mission gets done.

QUESTION: Why is it important that you spend so much time mentoring?

NICOLE: From a starting point, at the end of the day, I realize that the history of the WASP inspired me along the way. I've had an unbelievable career for which I'm so grateful to the Air Force for the opportunities, and along the way, I've always had something to look forward to, someone to look up to and I feel like it's just a way of paying it forward. The WASP did that for me when I was 12-years-old and continue to do so to this day. And I'll be honest, it really solidified when I was on the Thunderbirds. I had spent probably my career trying not to stand out for being a woman, the aircraft doesn't care, right, it just wants to be flown, it doesn't matter if you're a man or a woman or where you come from, it just wants to be flown, gender doesn't have anything to do with it. I never tried to fit in with the guys, I've always been myself, I'm acutely aware that I'm a woman. I had kind of spent a lot of the first part of my career just not trying to highlight or stand out for the fact that I was a woman because that didn't matter and it shouldn't matter. Then I became Air Force Thunderbird and I think I recognized something and

matured a little into something that I hadn't understood before, which is that it means something to see someone who looks like you succeeding and when I would stand in that autograph line, and there would be dozens upon dozens of young girls deep, I realized this is no longer about and probably never was about Nicole Malachowski, it's what I represent to them and their hopes and their dreams and the responsibility of living up to that expectation, to those lines of young girls, was a huge responsibility and what an honor and what a privilege. Everyone's got a unique story to tell and if somebody's interested in mine or if I can be that person who encourages them, if I can be that person who says, yes, it's okay to dream big, don't be afraid of that. Then absolutely I'll do it. I love it, I love seeing light bulbs coming on in young kids, I love it when kids realize that, you know what, I am capable of that. It makes me feel pretty proud.

QUESTION: What can we do as a Nation to better recognize and honor that service?

NICOLE: I think it begins with exactly what we've done with the WASP. It's really about making sure that we document and we codify this history, that we tell the story, that we tell the truth, that we gather the facts and the data and that we don't hide it. It's here, it's here to stay and it's something I think all Americans can be proud of.