

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Captain John K. Callahan, Jr., on March 29, 2022, for the NOAA 50th Oral History Collection. This is an addendum to our seven-part oral history interview. The interviewer is Molly Graham. It's a remote interview with Captain Callahan in Coupeville, Washington. I'm in Scarborough, Maine. It's been a little while since we spoke. We had an opportunity to look at the transcripts from our interviews last year. Today is sort of an addendum to what we've talked about so far. I know you wanted to talk a little bit about women's issues that you encountered in the NOAA Corps. I didn't know if you had a place you wanted to start or if I should prompt you.

John Callahan: That would be fine. It was after our interview regarding my term as Captain of the *Discover*. When we finished that interview, I was thinking about it a week later, and I remembered a couple of incidents that I thought might be of interest. So going back about 50 years or so when I was stationed in Rockville and acting as an attorney, etcetera, there were a number of issues that came up, and I guess, actually dating back to the time I was the Executive Officer of the *Peirce*, having to do with women in the Corps, and also women on the ships. At that time the whole thing seemed to revolve [around] concerns of birthing, as well as the relationships between men and women, how they how that would affect the crews performance, I guess. Also, most tellingly, how the spouses were going to react to that. So, fast forward now to when I took over command of the *Discoverer*. Those issues had pretty much been resolved. We had women on all of our ships in the Corps, throughout the crew itself. Birthing was not an issue. Relationships really were no longer an issue. It was more of a – if somebody had a relationship, and it interfered with anything that we were doing, that would become of concern, but basically, that had all been handled. So, what happened was, when I got on the *Discoverer*, the first problem that I encountered, or complaint, if you will, was from a group of women regarding the bathroom. When you came on board the *Discoverer* on the quarter deck, if you turn left, there was a bathroom, called the head. Then, if you go through those doors and continue aft, you had the oceanographic lab, where a lot of the scientific operations were conducted and analyzed, so there are a lot of people in there working. The complaint was that the bathroom that was located in that immediate vicinity had the term “men” written on it. The complaint was from the women, “Why do we have to go down to the next deck to find a bathroom when this one is much, much closer to where we're working?” I was actually very surprised that that hadn't been taken care of. The solution to that one was simple. Just take the sign off. No more men's only on that thing, put a lock on the door so people can have some privacy, and we made it a unisex head. It just kind of surprised me that that was still a little bit of a hangover from the past. But it was a simple solution. They were happy with that. The second incident that I remembered involving women's issues, if you will, is one of the young ladies – I had a conversation with her, and she expressed an interest in being on the ships firefighting team and said that she couldn't be on the team. She'd been told that she couldn't join because they didn't have any equipment for her. Now, this young lady, by the way, is about roughly five-foot and was one of the best – I mean, every day, she was out working out on the deck and really physically fit. But apparently, none of the equipment they had would fit her. I called the Chief Boatswain in, who was in charge of that area, and asked him, “Was this the case?” He said, “Yes, she had been denied because they didn't have the equipment.” I said, “Well, what do we need to get the equipment?” He said, “Well, we don't have any money for that.” So that was a solution waiting to happen. They got some money. They ordered the uniforms and boots and whatever else they needed for her size, and she got onto the firefighting team. Don't you know

that when we were doing drills and stuff, turns out that she's one of the only people on the firefighting team that could get into these particular spaces. It worked out well, both for the firefighting team and for this young lady. Those were the two incidents that kind of involved women's issues. I just thought that might be kind of interesting for your information.

MG: Was there resistance, say, from the men or the higher-ups on the ship to make these accommodations?

JC: I can't really address that because this stuff happened before I got there. I have no idea of what happened before. If there was resistance, it didn't surface in front of me because I was asking the questions as to why this can't be done. So if there was any resistance, it just disappeared.

MG: Was there anything else from your career that we forgot to put on the record in our previous sessions?

JC: As I read through all that stuff I might have told you that when I was editing it, I was actually being pulled back (in my mind) into those actual times. It was very, very strange. Some of it was very joyous. Some of it was very depressing. I was like, "Whoa." The answer to your question basically is, I don't know. We've covered an awful lot of stuff. I can't think of anything that pops out that I didn't tell you about.

MG: I was curious about your life in retirement. You talked a little bit about your work with the school. Remind me what it's called.

JC: The Mastery of Scottish Arts.

MG: That's right. How else are you spending your time in retirement?

JC: Well, interesting. When I retired, I had a sense of failure because I hadn't achieved what I wanted to achieve. In a way, I didn't want to have that feeling of failure again. So I didn't involve myself in any kind of a second career. Instead, I ended up doing work with nonprofit organizations, organizations that I thought were really worthy. For example, I incorporated and worked for a while as the President of the American Musical Theatre Ensemble in Seattle. I also incorporated a scholarship fund for engineers and scientists in the Puget Sound area called the Puget Sound Engineering and Science Scholarship Fund, which by the way, today, they're giving out at least sixty, seventy thousand dollars of scholarships on a yearly basis to kids that want to study engineering and science. I became Vice President and eventually Chairman of that organization. I was spending a lot of time doing that kind of stuff. Then right around the time, somewhere around 1998 or '99, something like that, I ended up taking this course, and during the course, a couple of things came out. One of them was that I didn't want to have a failure so essentially I denied myself another career. Secondly, they had a project that you had to do as part of the course. I ended up organizing what I thought was going to be a small drum session, [but] turned out to be the Mastery of Scottish Arts. The guy that was coaching me said, "You're bigger than what you say you want to do here." He really got me annoyed. I told him, "Alright, I'm going to make this thing (school) the world's best in a year." And it was, which is like,

“Whoa. How’d that happen, right?” It was about that time that somebody else came along and said, “Hey, look, we're looking for an instructor in contract law and acquisition. Would you be interested?” I said, “Sure, I'll try it.” I started teaching these courses and traveling around the country to various agencies to do that. So, all of a sudden, my plate was very full again. It was a great career in terms of a second career because I got to work with countless agencies within the federal government, including NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration], by the way, Department of Defense, Forest Service, Veterans Affairs, NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] to name a few.– I had people in a White House attending my courses. It was great. Apparently, I was pretty good at it because I used to get the highest ratings for an instructor. A lot of agencies would request me by name. If I wasn't going to be teaching, they would delay the course or wouldn't run it. That was a very rewarding experience. I actually got the feeling that I was making a difference in the lives of the people that I was teaching because I went way beyond just whatever was in the book that I was teaching out of. We talked about life stuff and integrity, for example. I had a couple of people that – I don't want to say they were – hold on a second. When you write something, and you're copying somebody else's words.

MG: Plagiarism.

JC: Plagiarism. I uncovered that in one of the courses I led .When I found it and called the people that were involved into a separate room and asked them – I showed them what I had and asked them to explain it. One guy started off with some excuse, and the other guy standing next to him said, “Shut up. We did it.” [laughter] I asked them why. They told me. We had this big, long discussion about integrity and doing what you said you were going to do, how it was supposed to be done, and when it was supposed to be done. That kind of discussion actually made an impact on them. I know that for a fact. Again, it was very, very rewarding. I got to travel all around the country, [to] different locations. They were usually one- or two-week courses. I got to visit places that I never would have even dreamt of going. [laughter] Kingman, Arizona. You ever hear of Kingman, Arizona? One of the students there told me – it's a very small place. It's on Route 66. What was that joke he (one of the students) told? The toothbrush was invented in Kingman. If it been invented anywhere else it would have been called the "teeth-brush" instead of toothbrush. [laughter] At any rate, I did that. I started to back off of that (teaching) when I was [in my] early seventies. I was cutting back to doing courses with just the Forest Service and the Veterans Administration. Those were my two primary clients. Every once in a while, I'd get a call saying that they needed somebody to do some other agency course. But basically, I was trying to reduce my work and spend more time traveling and at home. Then I had a stroke. So that kind of made up my mind that, I guess, the teaching part was over because I could no longer stand in front of a group and talk for eight hours, which is exactly what I did. For the last three years, essentially, between the stroke and open-heart surgery, I haven't been doing too much. I've been trying to go through all those boxes I have in my garage with NOAA memorabilia and stuff. I've still got about fifteen boxes to go through. But once I started to see the light at the end of that tunnel, I agreed to allow somebody to nominate me to be on the Board of the Ledgewood Beach Community Club, which is our community. Then I started another organization with a couple of guys, former military people, having to do with smoking cigars and drinking excellent scotch. We're expanding that membership, and it's a lot of fun to get together with these people. Our wives are involved as well. So, a good time.

MG: What do you think made you hold on to all of your NOAA stuff that you have boxes and boxes to go through now?

JC: Well, my lawyer training was essentially that you have to have documentation. So I saved everything. Even when I was on active duty, it was frequently very helpful to be able to go back and read a memo that I had written five, six years ago and recall to mind all of the circumstances that were involved in whatever that issue was. I never knew whether or not, after I'd gotten out of the Corps – whether or not any of this stuff would be of value. Would I be called up by somebody [who] said, “What happened here? What happened there?” It just got put in boxes and stored? [laughter] I don't know what happened, other than the fact that I'd come across – a good example. I came across a transcript of an investigation that I had done regarding one of the commissioned officers, and it was probably an inch and a half thick or so. It was all the questions that got asked and what the answers were. I didn't know that this would ever come up again. But if it did, I would be able to go back and point to this particular transcript rather as proof of “this is what actually happened.” Because sometimes, people think that over a long period of time, stuff is forgotten, and therefore they can make up stories about what happened. That's not necessarily the case. I think I went a little bit overboard with that, as I realize now, going through all these boxes.

MG: I also wanted to ask if you keep in touch regularly with other corpsmen and people that you worked with at NOAA.

JC: Yes, I do, actually. There are a number of commissioned officers that I met throughout my career that I admired. I thought they were the right stuff. I worked with them. I worked for them. I had them working for me. Those particular people I have maintained contact with. For example, my former Executive Officer on the *Oceanographer*, the Executive Officer I had on the *Ferrel* also, and some of the junior officers that served with me on various ships I'm still in contact with. Once in a while, I will talk to some of the senior people that I worked with, people like John Bossler, [Francis D.] “Bill” Moran, but rather infrequent. In fact, I just clued something in my mind that I need to call John and talk to him because it's been a while. Every once in a while, I will come across somebody's name and give them a call [to] find out what's going on. I just had a call from one of the crew members on the *Oceanographer* four or five weeks ago, and they want me to put together some kind of an event in Seattle for all of the former *Oceanographer* people. I've been in touch with the former Chief Steward, [who] I had lunch with recently, and one of the engineers that we had some fun with. The people that I really liked, and I find those people are the ones that continue to do things after the Corps and make contributions to society. Those are the ones that I gravitate towards, and those are the ones that I maintain contact with.

MG: Well, please tell John Bossler I said “hello” if you talk to him soon.

JC: Oh, I will.

MG: The other thing I wanted to ask about is how you're coping with COVID. How are you managing two years into the pandemic? What have the last two years been like for you and your wife?

JC: That's really interesting. We made a decision seven years ago or so to get out of Fremont in Seattle and move to Whidbey Island. If I could figure out how to get this computer turned around I'd show you where we live, I've got a beautiful view – in fact, I'll send you a picture of the sunset that I just took here, which happens, every day, right? If we had been living in Fremont during COVID, it would have been a disaster because we wouldn't be able to get out as much. You'd be paranoid about catching stuff because of the number of people around. But here on Whidbey Island, the vaccination rate, by the way, is up around, I think, close to seventy percent or something. You got a lot of older people that are very careful. We have beautiful surroundings with lots of space around us. We can walk through the neighborhood and do stuff like that. It wasn't as confining as it might have been had we been living in a city or an apartment or something like that. From that standpoint, the fact that we were home and doing stuff at home was not a big deal. [laughter] That's great. “We got some time at home. Now we can catch up on stuff.” My wife got really involved in this incredible garden that she's been tending to for the last three or four years. That kind of stuff kept us busy. We had been doing quite a bit of traveling, and that came to a screeching halt. If there was a downside to our lifestyle, it was being more or less confined to Whidbey Island and not being able to do trips to Alaska, or wherever else we wanted to go. Once in a while, we did make some small trips. I remember going up to Juneau, Alaska. We flew up there to meet with a couple of Coast Guard officers, one of which is the daughter of a friend of mine who had died of a heart attack. I became involved with their family, trying to get stuff squared away. Well, they've grown up now. She is a Captain in the Coast Guard, [laughter] and her husband is a Captain in the Coast Guard. They're both stationed in Juneau. We went up to visit them in the middle of winter because it was not going to have tourists and stuff like that. But aside from those little trips, we pretty much stayed home. It's only been in the last, I would say, four or five months that we're starting to get – what is it? Some kind of fever that people talk about when you're confined to a house or whatever. We've just started to feel that. Of course, we went to Rochester, and now we're booking a cruise, so we'll see what happens. But right now, everything [is] fine.

MG: Did you ever think we'd still be here two years later when you started first hearing about the news out of Wuhan in late 2019?

JC: In the very beginning, I was very concerned because I thought my health might be compromised. I did have a fear, particularly when it first started, that this could be a life-ending experience if you happen to catch this stuff. I try and keep myself in good health, [and] so does my wife. There was always in the back of your mind, “Well, if I get it, it won't be that bad for me, but [it] could be.” Right? Then, as time wore on, and they came out with the vaccinations, and we got vaccinated, the fear of death receded into the background a bit. I do remember very much the anxiety [about] being able to get the vaccine. It was not readily available. People would be getting up – my wife got up early one morning, and they had just posted something on a website where they said you can make appointments for a vaccine, and she grabbed one. But they were gone like that. So, there was some anxiety about that. Again, it seems to have tailed off a bit. Even including when we got the booster shot, it was not a big deal. It's available. Let's do it. A lot of the stuff that happened in the beginning – not so much a concern right now. We are still concerned, my wife and I both, that when we travel, or if we're in any kind of a crowded area, we want to take whatever precautions we can to make sure that we don't get anything,

regardless of how people say it could be very [mild] or whatever. We would just as soon not experience that whole thing.

MG: I feel the same way.

JC: I think I may have told you that I've been tested for sleep apnea. The sleep apnea tests are scheduled at two or three months out. I needed a third test. They were scheduling me for two months from now. This has been going on for months and months and months. I want to get this thing resolved. They put me on a waiting list. I got a call on a Monday afternoon at two o'clock in the afternoon. "Can you come down to Seattle tonight and do your sleep apnea test?" I said, "Yeah, but isn't there supposed to be a COVID test that I have to take before? How's that going to work?" They said, "As long as you do it the next morning, we can make an exception." [laughter] So I went down. I did the test. I went to the hospital [in the] next town over to get the COVID test. They had an appointment for me and everything. They said, "Have you had the procedure already?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "Well, we're not going to do the COVID test?" I said, "Are you kidding?" "No, that's our policy. We don't do it if the procedure's already been done. I said, "So what am I supposed to do?" "Well, if you have any symptoms in the next five days, let us know." I went home and stayed home for five days. No symptoms. Everything worked out fine. But it kind of gives you an idea of [how] in the very beginning, stuff was adhered to very strictly; not so much now.

MG: Well, I think I've gotten to the end of my questions. We'll have to make sure we stay in touch and continue to have conversations that aren't part of the historical record.

JC: Absolutely. Thank you so much for being so patient. I want to acknowledge you, by the way, for the preparation that you did for these interviews. I have been interviewed a couple of different times in my life. I've never run across anybody that has spent as much time as you have in getting facts together and background information. I didn't realize that until I started reading and editing some of those transcripts. It became very apparent that – "Wait a minute, how did she know that? I never said that. She must have done a lot of work [to prepare]." Thank you very much for doing that. Thank you for being very patient with me. It's been an absolute pleasure to work with you. I certainly hope that this project benefits somehow from our interaction.

MG: I'm confident it will. Captain Callahan, this has really been such a treat for me. I look forward to us staying in touch. Again, if you need to record another addendum, we can always do that in the future if more things come up for you.

JC: Alright, thank you.

MG: Alright. Enjoy all your travels and stay safe.

JC: We're going to try.

MG: Be well. Talk to you soon.

JC: Okay. Bye-bye.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/15/2022

Reviewed by John K. Callahan Jr. 8/18/2022

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