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# A SOLDIER'S TALE

In an exclusive interview, Maj. Lisa Jaster talks about her fight to become the third woman to graduate from U.S. Army Ranger School.

BY HILARY ACHAUER





U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Paul Sale The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.

Ranger School tests soldiers mentally and physically, and less than half the candidates graduate.

In April, 381 men and 19 women entered Army Ranger School, “the most physically and mentally demanding leadership school the Army has to offer,” according to [Goarmy.com](#).

It was the first time women were allowed to attend the school.

[Armytimes.com](#) stated only eight women made it through the Ranger Assessment Phase. All eight failed the Darby Phase (also called the “Benning Phase”), which is the first of three stages in Ranger School proper. They were “recycled” along with 101 men, which is standard practice if students struggle in some areas of the course but show potential, according to Armytimes.com. After all the women failed a second time, only three females—and two males—were allowed to “recycle,” though the males declined to do so.

The three women stayed in the school all spring and summer, through the mountains and swamps, through the sleep deprivation and grueling hikes. Then, in August 2015, after three attempts at the first stage and a single attempt at each of the others, two women made history: 26-year-old Capt. Kristen Griest and 25-year-old Lt. Shaye Haver became the first females to graduate Ranger School.

That left one woman still in training.

She was Maj. Lisa Jaster, a graduate of West Point, an Army reservist, an engineer at Shell, a 37-year-old mother of two young children and a CrossFit athlete. Jaster recycled the Mountain Phase once, and she was also sent back to the swamp along with 20 other men to repeat the third and final phase.

In October 2015, Jaster graduated after spending six months away from her family—six months without seeing her 3-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son.

“I knew that someday ... this will be important to my children, for them to know that I stood up for something,” Jaster said a week after graduating.

Jaster earned her Ranger tab and is now reunited with her family, but she’s faced criticism from those who oppose women in the formerly male-only institution. An Oklahoma congressman, Rep. Steve Russell (R), has questioned whether the women were given special treatment and asked for records from classes that included the women.

Here, in an exclusive interview with the CrossFit Journal, Jaster talks about that criticism, how CrossFit helped her prepare for Ranger School and what kept her motivated to finish.



## Part of the Solution

The seed for Jaster’s six-month ordeal in Ranger School was planted when she was part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Jaster was an active-duty soldier from 2000 to 2007, and she also served in Iraq.

Jaster commanded male and female engineers but said she was not allowed to treat them equally.

“I had both male and female soldiers, but I had to send forward only male soldiers because of the rule and standards and the roles of women in combat going to certain environments,” Jaster said.

As she progressed in the military, she saw her male counterparts entering programs such as Ranger School, which made them eligible for positions and promotions that weren’t available to her.

“These are the men I’m competing against for promotions moving forward,” Jaster explained.

Jaster said she thinks Ranger School should be open to everyone who is a leader, and it bothered her that it was an option only for her fellow male engineer officers. Then, when Ranger School opened to women this year as part of a gender-integrated assessment of the course, she felt she had no choice but to enter.

“If I had an issue with something in the military, then I feel strongly that I should do something about it. So when the opportunity came up I couldn’t sit there and say, ‘Well I don’t like this,’ and then not raise my hand to be part of the solution,” she said.

The logistics of attending Ranger School were more complicated for Jaster than for most of the other soldiers.

“So when the opportunity came up I  
couldn’t sit there and . . . not raise my  
hand to be part of the solution.”

—Lisa Jaster

First, Jaster had to take a leave from her job as an engineer at Shell. She shaved her long red hair. Then, her husband, a Marine, had to take over solo parenting duties for as long as it took her to finish. Jaster thought she’d be gone for nine weeks. She underestimated the difficulty of the course, but she never quit. In all, she was gone for 26 weeks.

The hardest part of the experience, she said, was being away from her family. But it was her family who inspired her to keep trying—even when it seemed hopeless.

“I kept a picture of my kids in my pocket, and I think my son was wearing a Batman T-shirt and my daughter was wearing a Wonder Woman T-shirt. I wrote on the picture before I laminated it, saying, ‘I need to be their super hero,’” Jaster said.

“I did everything I could to follow up and actually follow through with my beliefs,” she said.

Jaster wants her children to learn you can’t just wish for change.

“You have to do something about it,” she said.

There was one more thing that helped Jaster survive the ordeal: CrossFit. She said the mental aspect of enduring CrossFit workouts helped her immensely during Ranger School.

Ranger School was designed to develop both combat and leadership skills in tactical environments that mimic actual combat. Soldiers walk for hours in their gear, function on very little sleep and food, and experience mental and physical stress. They learn about airborne operations, air-assault operations, and how to survive and conduct small-unit operations in mountain, jungle and swamp terrain.

“It’s that no-quit mindset,” Jaster said about CrossFit. “Workouts are made to take you to that limit of wanting to quit, wanting to lose your lunch, and still drive through it. That mentality is exactly what you need to be successful at Ranger School.”

To prepare specifically for Ranger School, Jaster added extra elements to her CrossFit workouts. In the months leading up to the school, Jaster did high-rep squats followed by hour-long road marches with a weighted backpack, or she’d follow up a 5-mile run with a CrossFit workout.

“It’s the same mental game,” Jaster said about CrossFit and Ranger School. “Somebody who enjoys CrossFit is also going to be more successful in any physical training event, I believe.”



When challenged during training,  
Jaster tried to be a “super hero”  
for her young children.





U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Whitney Houston

Another trailblazer: U.S. Army 1st Lt. Elyse Ping Medvigy was the first female company fire-support officer to serve in an infantry brigade combat team supporting Operation Enduring Freedom.

## Special Treatment

When [Ruth Bader Ginsberg](#) entered Harvard Law School in 1956 as one of nine women in a class of 500, the dean told her she was taking the place of a man. Ginsberg went on to make the Harvard Law Review while caring for her young daughter and her cancer-stricken husband. She is now associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Almost 60 years after Bader was mistreated at Harvard, Jaster, Haver and Griest experienced a similar reaction to the idea of women entering and graduating from Ranger School.

Upon hearing about the first female graduates of Ranger School, Congressman Russell, himself a Ranger, asked for performance records from the school to prove the women didn't receive special treatment. The military has refused to release records but insisted the women received no special treatment.

Maj. Jimmy Hathaway, the executive officer for the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, took to [social media](#), disputing all allegations that the women were not held to the same standards as men.

"If you honestly think an RI (Ranger Instructor) was going to take it easy on this class you are mistaken," Hathaway wrote as part of a nine-point statement.

Angered by the congressman's allegations, a group of female West Point graduates turned the tables and asked for [Russell's Ranger records](#).

When Jaster is questioned about special treatment and differing standards, she directs people to her male classmates.

"Nobody is ever going to believe me, and of course no matter what I'm going to say it was just as hard if not harder on me than everyone else. The only people that can really speak to that would be my male classmates," Jaster said.

Lt. Seth Clickner went through each phase of Ranger School twice. He was in Haver and Jaster's squad and Griest's company for two go-throughs. In a [media roundtable](#) held after they completed Ranger School, Clickner answered the question about special treatment.

"I saw no special treatment of females," Clickner said in the video, "and if there was I guess I must have missed out on that. I mean I spent six months here and I saw nothing of the sort."



Courtesy of CrossFit Memorial

"Somebody who enjoys CrossFit is also going to be more successful in any physical training event." —Lisa Jaster

Jaster said she never felt resentment or anger from her fellow soldiers.

"I saw no special treatment of females."

—Lt. Seth Clickner

"Whether or not you can carry your own load and do what everyone else can is what's important. There's tall Rangers, small Rangers. Some Rangers are stronger than the others, some are smarter than the others, and that's what matters. The gender didn't matter at all with my peers," she told the CrossFit Journal.

In addition to being only one of three women in the program—and the only woman after Haver and Griest graduated—Jaster was also quite a bit older than most of her fellow Ranger School soldiers. The only older soldier was a 40-year-old chaplain.

Other than sometimes preventing her from understanding jokes and cultural references, age was never an issue, Jaster said.

"The average age was 23, so they grew up with different cartoons than I did. So there's movies they would quote, and I had never heard of the movie, and there's definitely a lot of movies or songs I would quote, or songs I would get stuck in my head, and they had never heard of," she said.

"Making gender jokes was a little bit difficult, but they had no problem making age jokes," Jaster said. She said the other soldiers, aware this was the first gender integration in the school, teased her about her age but never her gender.

## Fail Better

The women were criticized for the length of time it took them to complete Ranger School, and repeated recycling was especially hard on Jaster because each go-through meant more time away from her family.

Jaster would call home in tears at times when she had to repeat yet another phase of Ranger School.

"Hey, honey, I didn't do it. I failed," she said she'd tell her husband, Marine Lt. Col. Allan Jaster.



Her husband would assure her she hadn't failed.

“Hundreds of guys fail the same way,” he’d tell her. “They get recycled every year and no one would ever call them a failure.”

Hathaway addressed this point in his open letter.

“Upon a second failure (the women) were offered a Day 1 recycle. This means they started day 1 and had to complete RAP (Ranger Assessment Phase) week a second time. There is no advantage to this, would any of you volunteered (sic) to go through RAP week twice and take a Day 1 recycle? Most people would not as evident by the several men who were also offered a Day 1, but declined,” Hathaway wrote.

An average of 37 percent of candidates recycle one or more phases at Ranger School, and an average of 45 percent of soldiers who enter graduate, according to [Armytimes.com](#). Most of the failures—about 60 percent of them—occur during the four-day assessment phase.

## The Next Step

Now at home in Houston, Texas, Jaster said her husband did such a good job while she was gone she didn't feel like she was coming back to a barely managed disaster.

“The house is clean, kept together. Everything is working. The kids are healthy, happy, thriving and getting good grades in school,” Jaster said.

And perhaps Jaster’s intrepid spirit runs in the family.

“When I got home, (my kids) didn't come running and screaming to me because they needed me. They came because they miss and love me,” she said.

She’s back to work at Shell, but she’s not ready to announce what she’ll do next.

Cut off from newspapers, radio and the Internet for six months, part of Jester’s reintegration into regular life is catching up on what has happened in economics since April. Crude oil prices have declined significantly over the last six months, and she needs to understand stock prices for her work at Shell.

Unlike male graduates, female Ranger School graduates can't apply to join the 75th Ranger Regiment, the special-operations unit that carries out raids and other difficult missions. This may not be the case for long. If the 75th Ranger Regiment, the Navy SEALs, the Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command or any other military branch wants to remain closed to women, it must obtain an exception from the Pentagon [before Jan. 1, 2016](#).

However, the Pentagon may make a final decision about exactly what combat roles women may be allowed to fill later in the year.

“I have lots and lots of goals of what I want to do next in the military, as well as my professional career ... but I think before I start publicizing those goals I need to reintegrate and become normal again. And let my hair grow back in a little bit,” Jaster said with a laugh.

Jaster is also getting used to doing CrossFit again. After a week of being back at CrossFit Memorial in Houston and going to her jiu-jitsu classes, she’s noticed a loss of strength and mobility from her time away.

“Six months of not stretching was not a good idea,” she said.

It’s been a time of change in the military since the Pentagon lifted the ban on women serving in ground-combat roles in 2013, and not all women are driven to take on roles they were previously denied. But some, like Jaster, are seizing the opportunity and standing up for their beliefs.

Although she’s not sure what she wants to do next, Jaster, along with Griest and Haver, has already accomplished something important. And she’s using her Ranger School experience in daily life.

“Yesterday (my son) got popped in the mouth really hard (in jiu-jitsu), and I told him you have to go back on the mat,” she said. “You can't just walk away.” ■

## About the Author

Hilary Achauer is a freelance writer and editor specializing in health and wellness content. In addition to writing articles, online content, blogs and newsletters, Hilary writes for the CrossFit Journal. To contact her, visit [hilaryachauer.com](#).



Long barred from combat roles, females might soon find all military positions open to them.