

THE GRIT FACTOR

THE GRIT FACTOR

COURAGE, RESILIENCE & LEADERSHIP
IN THE MOST MALE-DOMINATED
ORGANIZATION IN THE WORLD

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*Dedicated to the memory of Dougald and Tori MacMillan,
who gave me a home as a young lieutenant at Fort Bragg.*

For Peter, Sam, and Jude, who have my heart.

*For all the new and transitioning and developing
leaders moving into their own new experiences, willing,
despite the resistance, to face into the wind.*

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THE GRIT FACTOR

Introduction

Plotting a Course for Grit

As I walk onto the flight line, the night sky is moonless, the darkness deep and menacing. I am walking with my backseater, the pilot who flies behind me in the tandem glass cockpit of our Apache, the world's most sophisticated attack helicopter. Each of our battalion's twenty-four Apaches crouches in its own fortified space, bounded by walls four feet tall and two feet thick, constructed of large stones held in place by chicken wire. These barriers are meant to contain an explosion if a grenade were lobbed over the perimeter, to limit the damage. Two rows of fencing topped with barbed concertina wire define the perimeter of the flight line. At this time of night, the Apaches are visible only as hulking shapes of latent energy. All are armed with Hellfire antitank missiles and 30 mm high-explosive rounds.

With each step, our eyes adjust to the darkness. We walk around the helicopter for one last check before climbing in to launch. We begin the run-up procedure, and I hear the rotor blades cut into the thick darkness and begin churning the air in a rhythmic *thump thump*.

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I pull pitch, pulling up the lever of the collective that changes the angle of all four rotor blades simultaneously, and I feel a momentary lightness as our aircraft lifts into the air and we transition to forward flight. We move into the night, dark sky above shadowy ground, everything dark except for the green picture I see through the infrared monocular over my right eye. The infrared picture is clear and crisp, showing that the landscape is still holding the heat of Bosnia's Adriatic sun from just hours before. I call in to the tower to report departure, and fly us to the checkpoint just to the north of the airfield, a route we know now by heart.

"You have the controls," I say to my backseater.

"I have the controls," he confirms.

"You have the controls," I say again, all part of carefully scripted communications procedures.

Our communication is aural only. The positioning of our seats does not permit a questioning glance. Now I'm in charge of navigation. I open the large, folded map on my knee, and use my lips to turn on the tiny green light attached to my microphone. Under minimal illumination, I check and tune the radios for the next frequencies we will need, and confirm the waypoints I have programmed against the pencil line I've drawn along our route. I do all of this in less than a minute, actions carried out with little effort, a product of repeated drilling throughout training. As we fly north along our route, I check in with the ground units we're flying over in Multinational Division North, units from various NATO countries. The objective isn't far tonight. We begin to slow as we approach the area where we will perform an armed aerial reconnaissance of a Serbian heavy-weapon storage site.

Then, at that moment, in that night, in the midst of the radio calls coming from ground forces and from the air-traffic-controlling agency, the sound in my helmet changes.

"Radar . . . tracking . . ." the electronic voice says.

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My backseater and I know immediately what the voice indicates. I feel my heart in my throat. We're being tracked by the most lethal anti-aircraft system in the world.

"What do you want me to do LT?" my backseater asks. "Do you want me to break the hard deck?"

We had been briefed on our arrival into this country that the rules of engagement specified a minimum flight altitude, or hard deck, of three hundred feet, much higher than we are comfortable flying tactically because of the susceptibility to surface fire or anti-aircraft weapons. Lower-altitude flying permits us to mask our movements and thus avoid enemy contact. The minimum altitude is meant to support the next operational phase of postwar Bosnia, the resettlement of the Muslim community previously forced out of homes and neighborhoods, by reducing the disruption to the civilian population.

"I'll call it in," I say, quickly tuning the VHF radio to reach the air-controlling agency.

I key the mike.

"This is Blue Max Fifty-Six. We're at position Alpha at three hundred feet, and we're getting a tracking signal from hostile radar," I report.

In the few seconds of waiting for the reply, the sound in my headset changes.

"Radar . . . acquisition . . ." comes the computerized voice.

Just then the voice at the controlling agency crackles back on the frequency.

"If you're nervous, return to base," the voice on the other end says. "But don't break the hard deck."

Nervous? Heck yes, we were nervous. I had a decision to make in that few seconds, a decision that had to take into account layers of information: Our threat briefs indicated a lowered threat level, No aircraft had been targeted in recent months. Provocation was more likely than engagement. Engagement would result in an international incident. In that instant, I had to make a choice

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not to allow myself to be paralyzed by fear, and instead to use the judgment developed by years of training to make a quick yet measured response.

What I did in the face of that challenge, the decision I made, I'll save for chapter 6. But I learned something that night, something I knew from other experiences outside the aircraft. When a leader encounters fear, and she will, she has to fly straight through it. As inevitable as fear may be, there's no room for it in that cockpit. The only way to avoid being sidetracked or taken down by fear is to do the opposite of what would seem natural. Instead of turning around, a leader turns toward fear and addresses it head-on.

The decision to turn toward fear instead of away from it takes grit, something I'd learned in childhood. Grit is a quality—and, as you'll discover, a skill—that more than any other has been critical to my successes. Now that I have been out of the military for more years than I was in and have taken on new challenges, I've learned that most of the places that require grit aren't in the air. There are many situations that require you to adapt quickly, effectively, and often with little support—for your own sake, but also for the sake of those you are leading, whether by official position or by example. There are many situations that may seem, at first, impossible. How you address those situations, and your success in making the most of them, has a lot to do with this ingredient I grew up calling grit. Grit has many dimensions—character, courage, and conviction among them. Each of these is already within you, and each can be further developed. It takes grit to survive a hostile environment—in the air or in the boardroom—and it is also true that hostile environments develop grit.

Why I Wrote This Book

There is much I wish I'd known in those early years when I was developing the judgment that would serve me that night in Bos-

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nia. As one of the first women to fly the Apache helicopter in the US Army, I found myself—in the mid-1990s, just out of college and flight school—in a field with no women to look to in senior positions, surrounded by people who did not, for the most part, want me there, and some who would make being there quite difficult. The internet wasn't yet common, so finding the stories of others who had persevered and triumphed wasn't easy. Few stories of other women in uniform had been told, and I was too overwhelmed to have the presence of mind to look for them. Had I looked, very few would have been available outside of quickly forgotten local-news headlines. Stories of women in uniform, their trials and triumphs, simply had not been the stories that were shared.

The requirements of the mission and the aircraft were demanding, and I thrilled to the challenge, but my greatest difficulties had nothing to do with flying, and it is there I would have given anything for thoughtful mentorship. Still today, stories and advice—or often, mentorship of any kind—are in short supply, especially for women in fields still mostly populated by men. This is true even though studies show that women's ambitions match those of their male counterparts. I wrote this book for all women who lead or aspire to lead. Maybe you are one of these women, or you know one. I also hope that men running organizations will find important takeaways in these pages about successfully integrating women into senior roles. I hope that by hearing stories of women overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles, in the most daring of professions, women who have succeeded and failed and always had twice as much to overcome—that in it all, you will be able to learn lessons about developing your own sense of grit, whether you are starting out, transitioning to new places in your careers, or facing challenges with little support.

I've been working on this book for three years, starting about a decade after I took off the uniform. In those first ten years after I hung up my flight suit, I earned an MBA at the Tuck School

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of Business at Dartmouth and worked in the field at Guidant in cardiac rhythm management, and then led teams at Microsoft. I left the corporate world to write my first book, *North of Hope*, a few years after a family tragedy (a story I will share more of later in the book), and then earned my MFA before beginning to write, and then speak, about the lessons and stories I was internalizing from years in both the corporate and military worlds.

Then one day, I received an email through an online officer-mentorship program. I'd been part of this program for only six months when I was asked to be available for the first women transitioning into submarines, but none of them contacted me. Then an inquiry came from a brand-new second lieutenant in the Army. She was just getting ready to start flight school, she said. Would I consider being her mentor?

I agreed immediately, and then had second thoughts. I'd been out for over ten years, and the challenges in my experience as one of the first women to fly Apaches in the Army were surely somewhat unique. I wanted to be able to offer her advice from a broader range of experience. I also knew that there must be other women who were seeking and could benefit from this kind of knowledge. How could I scale it to be available to others as well? These questions led to the idea that became the basis of this book. What if I were to interview other military women who were in the vanguards of their fields, women of varied branches and levels of experience, who could speak about grit—that factor I'd always thought of as critical to my success throughout the years—by telling their stories and offering concrete advice?

I started reaching out to other military women who, like me, had learned how to succeed in the most male-dominated organization in the world. The women interviewed for this book didn't join the military understanding the challenges ahead of them. The women who responded positively to my invitation to share their stories nearly all reported that they hadn't given much

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thought to what it meant to be the first woman in her role. As Captain Katie Higgins, the first woman to fly with the vaunted aerial demonstration team the Blue Angels, told me, “I didn’t fathom the impact my joining the team would have. I was just there to do my job.” General Ann Dunwoody, the first woman to achieve the rank of four-star general, had expected to spend her required two years in the Army and then get out and be a school PE instructor. But every one of these women, from World War II WASPs to early women combat pilots, submariners, rescue swimmers, and general officers all came to have an intimate understanding of grit, and the leadership required to go along with it. They learned how to weather change and uncertainty, make the most of difficult circumstances, and find the place inside of themselves that helps them persevere when things get tough.

Several of the younger leaders I interviewed spoke of the importance of a sisterhood, how they have been supported by it and how important it has been to their effectiveness and their longevity in the armed forces. Those of us in earlier generations did not have that advantage. Selfishly, *The Grit Factor* has been a way for me to connect to a sisterhood so completely lacking in my own experience. If you are currently the lone woman in your company, or even your field, I hope this book might be a sisterly companion for you as well. And if you are a man who manages one of these women, or if you love one of these woman, I hope this book will help you understand both what she may be experiencing and how you can best support her.

The women I interviewed for this book generously offer stories and takeaways that apply in any circumstance of life or work. These women are examples, they are mentors, and by the end of this book, you might just feel as if they are friends. Unless otherwise noted, all remarks and recollections that I quote from these women in the ensuing chapters come from phone conversations I had with each over several years’ time.

Why Grit, and Why Now?

Should we be focusing on grit? The psychologist Angela Duckworth's work on grit in her Character Lab at the University of Pennsylvania identified grit as a key component—if not *the* key component—of success, more than any other factor. This helped focus all of us on core character attributes and skills, going deep to find the sources of our strength. After the popularity of her book *Grit* soared in the wake of her TED talk, there was a backlash. Why were we focused on grit when the focus should be on changing the system that demands this kind of exceptional tenacity of its minority members? In the wake of the #MeToo movement, this is an apt concern. It will take sustained effort and leadership from everyone, but particularly from women, to change workplace culture. And sustained effort and leadership require—you guessed it—grit. In the midst of seemingly untenable challenges, grit will get us through the hardest times.

We must indeed work toward changing that reality, and yet the truth is that the world needs the best all of us have to offer right now, and that leaders today are facing challenges both in and out of uniform. I wrote *The Grit Factor* to help with both inspiration and tactical exercises to identify and develop the grit necessary to navigate these hardships.

While I expanded my cognitive understanding of grit thanks to Duckworth's provocative work, I found I needed more stories of real people who have faced circumstances similar to the challenges I was facing. I wanted to share stories, particularly of women who are in the minority among their peers and the people they are charged with leading.

After establishing a base familiarity with the current research, I began interviewing military women who had lived the challenges of leadership while also contending with hostilities within the system. I gathered their instructive and inspiring stories

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and listened to the lessons they learned. I wanted to be able to understand (and share) the particulars of grit, by talking to the grittiest women around. The military demands unparalleled focus, discipline, and sacrifice from those who choose to take the oath and wear the uniform. All of us whose stories went into this book experienced not only the rigorous challenges and responsibilities of military life but also the need to navigate the most insular and male-dominated organization in the country and our world. While wrestling with challenges in and out of combat zones along with their fellow soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines, the women featured in this book were forced to make their way through a world rarely welcoming and in many cases openly threatening. Ours was a double challenge, a layered crucible, and the stories and lessons that emerged come doubly forged. If anyone has something valuable to say about grit, it's a woman who has risen through the ranks of the most male-dominated organizations in the world.

Though all the women I interviewed for this book have a military background, the stories and insights they share will help anyone facing challenges with little support, whether that's navigating your way through the seismic change technology brings to so many fields, weathering an acquisition or reorganization, or getting through a difficult period with a project or work environment. This hypothesis is proved repeatedly with every audience I speak to around the country today, in industries ranging from finance to health care, logistics to produce, education to plastics.

You may be thinking that grit is a “you've either got it or you don't” trait, or the end result of surviving a lifetime of struggles—that the leaders featured in this book are simply extraordinary and unusual. The good news is that grit is a skill. It can be developed. After years in uniform and years in the corporate world as well, I know for certain that grit is not reserved for military pilots and big-mountain climbers. Grit and resilience are innate to every single one of us. Like any skill, though, it may need to

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be nurtured and it must be maintained. Any of us can get out of practice. Fortunately both training and maintenance are possible.

To help you do that, I've organized the stories and the insights from my own experiences and research, and organized them into three categories: Commit, Learn, and Launch. Underneath these categories are eight aspects of grit. Each of these aspects gets its own chapter, which I've filled with relevant stories, research, and specific strategies and exercises meant to support and guide you in your own journey of grit.

How Grit Relates to Leadership

This is a book about leadership. It is a book about grit. Those who are first in their fields, or one of few in their fields, are leaders by virtue of circumstance, and the challenges ahead of them require grit. Their successes show others what is possible. Those who lead and are committed to making a difference either by choice or circumstance need grit, full stop.

I do have one warning for you: if you are looking for a one-size-fits-all leadership model, this book will disappoint. The leaders here are successful because they found a way to lead that is true to themselves, and they all are as unique as their own fingerprints. This is one of the biggest lessons, that becoming an authentic leader is a personal journey that will look different for everyone (something we will cover in depth in chapter 7). At the same time, these leaders do share some commonalities. Before taking on the most difficult work, these leaders did the work to own their own stories and to understand their environments. The other aspects of grit that they share we will cover in each successive chapter. These elements form the basis of *The Grit Factor*.

This is, at last, the book I would like to have had when I was starting out with no women to use as examples in my field, surrounded by men who in many cases, despite my performance,

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were reluctant at best to accept me as a colleague, much less as a leader.

I am deeply honored to share the stories of these remarkable women, and the lessons they learned, with you today, and am confident you will come away with specific advice that will help you excel at whatever career stage you find yourself in, as well as an invigorated and informed sense of purpose and passion.

Like anything that is difficult and worthwhile, developing grit requires dedicated and consistent effort. It is my hope that the stories here animate the advice and lessons in a way that will make you excited to develop your courage and your resilience. Each chapter includes practical exercises, too, so that you can spend time with the lessons and apply them to your own circumstances. This combination of lesson, story, and tactical work is designed to help you develop grit in yourself. It's unlikely you are hearing enemy systems in your helmet in the middle of an Adriatic night, but you do and will have challenges that feel just as precarious. After reading and working through *The Grit Factor*, you will have what you need in yourself not only to make it through but to come out stronger.