# Maria – Interview 1 2016

(officer, 32 years, married, yes, -3)

## C

Why did you join the RAF?

## Maria

My father was in the RAF when I was a child and we were on holiday in a caravan and it was raining as usual it was in Wales. And I was 11 and my mother said what do you want to be, and we were just passing the time because it was raining, and she said what do you think you two girls, me and my sister, might do when grow up. And I hadn’t got a clue and she said do you think you might join the RAF like your Daddy and I said that sounds like a good idea and it literally I have blamed her to this day I said you have brainwashed me from the age of 11. And it is literally only because it was suggested and I don’t know why but it hit something inside and from the age of 11 that is all I ever wanted to do. And after I flunked my A ‘Levels I sort of out grew school and got sick of them I didn’t know about being commissioned I just wanted to join up. This was round about 85 it was very tight to get any places in those days and eventually after 2yrs of working at Woolworths and going down the management there at Woolworths and doing quite well actually but absolutely hating it the AIR FORCE rang up having done all my tests a couple of years before and said Oh there is a place does she still want it. I took it.

## C

Wow.

## Maria

I was engaged at the time and told my boyfriend I just needed to get it out of my system and then I joined up in the ranks as a supplier.

## C

Marvellous, so when did you start to think about leaving the AIR FORCE?

## Maria

Oh god, when I first joined up I never imagined I’d have a career of 31 yrs. When I first joined up I told the boyfriend I was just going to do one year get it out of my system then I would leave. Which is ridiculous and in those days I joined up on 9 yrs. unconditional service which meant for airwomen you could do the 9 yrs. and come out or you could leave on marriage or you would have to leave on childbirth or being pregnant. Because the changes hadn’t happened at that stage and I just automatically expected that I would do a few years then leave. I didn’t see it as a long term career, when I met Guy, my first husband I just imagined that when we got married and I got pregnant I would leave and that what I’d signed up to do. It never occurred up to me that was wrong or that there was anything sexist there or anything. And of course by the time I did get pregnant I didn’t have a child until I was 33, I’d got commissioned I was really enjoying life in the AIR FORCE I could see a career I was doing well. And the idea of leaving wasn’t quite so much in my face and of course other WRAF’s, oh other service people had taken the MoD the European Court of Law and had changed the rules on being able to have children, thank the Lord. So it started to disappear the idea of my leaving early and then of course I got divorced when my son was 2 and then I find myself being a particularly well off single parent that if I had left and been a single parent in civvi street life would have been more difficult. So I remember sitting talking to my son and discussing how my life would be in the AIR FORCE there would be awkward hours and I might have to bring him into work with me, actually this was while we were based at London, and things like 7/7 happened and I would have to bring him in and stick him upstairs but we made a conscious decision that I would see it through. The biggest downside was the idea of going OOA and leaving him and that took a lot of soul searching as to whether I was doing the right thing but I felt very torn that I should do the right thing by the AIR FORCE but wait until my son was an age when he could understand and I went when he was 8. OOA and then of course promotion was always on the edge there and after London and another tour I was always on the promotion board and you sort of keep thinking it might happen it might happen and of course it never did happen and I think I was in that sort of sphere for about 5 years where every year I’d get rung up and you’ve missed off by one or you’ve missed off by 2. And I was still hopeful but my age was becoming an issue for the 2 ranks up piece and I seriously thought about leaving round about 5 yrs. ago probably because of the lack of promotion and feeling a bit peed off about it and then nerves got in the way and confidence about what would I do if I came out and you start to compare well I am on, I don’t know what I was on their but getting up to 60 grand a Yr I was really lucky with the people I worked for. They knew I had been around a long time I was always given the respect that I needed from my line chain of command I was always left to my own devices I was on easy street If I am honest nobody gave me shit for anything, hell for anything I always worked hard I always did my best but if I wanted to go off an see my son in a school play I didn’t used ask I would just tell them. Right I’m off Wed I am going to see my son but they knew and trusted me to catch up so it just seemed I’ll continue and you know Caroline, I would have continued til I was 55 I got over the idea of not being promoted. I got over my hang up about it or my shame if you like and watching younger people come up and taking over. I wasn’t jealous or nasty about the people that got promoted I kept thinking they are younger a lot younger but I knew they needed legs to get on 1\* and I only had legs to get to stay at a Wing Commander while I got over that little thing it was a comfortable living I guess really it was only the beginning of this year and it was circumstantial. My husband had left the Army we had a quarter at Trobridge, I’ve still got the quarter at Trobridge, but we had this lovely house that we have spent lots of money doing up. This house is only 1hr 20 mins away from Bristol where I lived at Abbey Wood. The quarter is 1 hr away. And so sometimes I’d think Oh God I don’t want to go back to the quarter when another 20 mins I could go back to my beautiful home. But I was trapped in the boarding school bit, you have got to be in a quarter if you have a child at boarding school. So then I had an accident in Feb, I tore me ACL skiing and I had more help in my own house area, my in-laws and various people. So the MoD gave me permission to stay here rather than be at the quarter and suddenly I am full time at my own house I am working from home on the laptop and then I started driving in a bit but I was still having physio here and I got comfortable in my own house I was hating the quarter, My husband being out and then LIDOS headhunted me for the job. And so when you started to put all the bits together, my son finishing school. Beth not wanting to stay and do A’ Levels at private education the boarding school bit went and I was offered money, more than I am on now plus a company car and my pension and living in my own home. I’ve still got the pain of a journey I am still going to have to go to Bristol most days but it became an offer to attractive to turn down and that is the only reason I took it up.

## C

What did that feel like making that decision?

## Maria

Horrific. I remember you leaving and even talking about it now gets me going, I find it really difficult

## C

Do you want some tissues?

## Maria

It’s really hard Caroline, (crying) I don’t know when it’s been you entire life, 31 years I didn’t realise how much I cared until I came to the decision. The decision to put my notice in and while Lidos were head hunting me I though I’ll put the application in. They told me about the job they didn’t just hand it to me I had to fill in the application on line and it was for the key account manager job that I’d done while I was in the AIR FORCE a couple of years ago and I loved it because it was one of those jobs where you are out and about talking to people all the time you are not stuck behind a computer you are talking to people you are trouble shooting and you never knew what was going to happen that day and there was no boredom factor with that job. So it was the ideal job and I knew I could do it I was job when I did it and I obviously understood about LIDOS and taking over from Logistics Services I had all the knowledge so I knew I was a good candidate for the job and the fact that they were chasing me gave me that confidence but it was still a hard decision and I remember my boss, Carl my Wing Commander at the moment and we get on really well we have been friends rather than my boss, we would go for a coffee. And I decided to be up front and say look I am thinking about putting my notice in also Phil who had been my Wing Commander when I was at CAM who I absolutely adored he had come out in Jan, well he is just out now but I met him when he was over for interviews. He had been serving in Saudi, he came over and got offered a job for LIDOS and he took me out for lunch and I was back briefing him on everything to do with the company and I was saying you know you have to leave at some point John, cause he was at this stage you have to make the break at some point this is a fantastic opportunity you are not going to get promoted again, cause he had not done staff college. He was a fantastic Wing Commander but wasn’t going to get picked up and I persuaded him and then I few months later I was ringing him up and Carl and saying I don’t know what to do and Carl said Maria this is your chance the AIR FORCE haven’t promoted you, you are bloody good at this job and and so I was being persuaded from both sides and my husband was saying maybe the time is now. But I was going for those coffees with Carl, and I’m not a cry baby, that’s not true I am a very emotional woman but I don’t cry at work I’m not the sort to lose it at work, I’ve never had a paddy fit or something stupid like that but I am sitting down in the coffee bar in Abbey Wood and as I am talking my throat is closing up and my eyes are filling up and Carl is having to hold my hand over the coffee and so the actual hardest bit was deciding whether to actually even apply knowing there was a strong chance I was going to get it and then I got told at the interview that I was their ideal candidate I had easy street I didn’t have to wait or worry about other people being interviewed they said they would only interview other people if I turned them down. So then it was what I wanted, it was all on my side so that was the fun bit. And then I had to PvR I had to press the button, it seems like only a few weeks ago now, it was only a few weeks ago it has happened so fast. And there was no blue suiters in the office that day at all, in fact there was no uniformed people in the office that day at all. So I had to do it so I pressed the button and then I felt sick I felt really ill, went to the loo had a few tears and then I went looking for the Air Commodore, I don’t know if you know him?

## C

Yeh,

## Maria

he is a really lovely chap, he works over in, I’ve known him for years and he had

recently PvR’d and he works over in one of the other pavilions and I just went looking for anybody in a blue suit to say I’ve PvR’d and I felt better having PvR’d and then I sort of got into the swing of it and then to be fair I was so blinking busy the job I am going into has been service with SO1s in it, and they are all leaving because it is being civilianised but they are replacing 6 of us with 2. Me as the team leader plus one. And in the last fortnight that plus one started and he turned out to be a WO from the Army, lovely bloke really nice but well he was like a Duracell bunny right, very enthused, very thrilled to have come out of the Army and got what he considered to be a Wing Commanders job, over the moon with himself but a little bit goby and a little bit, thought he knew it all when he didn’t. And on my first day of meeting him, cause I said I’d help train him up, my bosses were very good he was dismissing everything and I suddenly found myself in this position of having to protect what had been my job now knowing that I had to have a mind-set because it was going to be civilianised, there was only going to be 2 of us my mindset was I wouldn’t be able to do it to the same depth and the same degree and things were going to have to change and the last 2 weeks were hell to be honest with you I had no run down I was still doing my own job I was trying to get for clearing, I was training this new chap up, he was frustrating me and I thought I’ve made a big mistake. I questioned absolutely whether I had made the right decision. Not just because of him, he is a nice man, but I know he is going to be on his own for 6 weeks before I get into the job, the others will have left, he is not going to manage it and I am going to have to go in and there will be a hell of a lot to sort out and pick up. I began to think II am on easy street in the AIR FORCE nobody gives me any hell, like I said to you before, I’m on good money but then I balance that with the fact that I am going to get posted it could be High Wycombe I don’t want to do that again I want to be at home. So it’s been traumatic is what I am saying.

(Laughter)

Traumatic and now I just feel like I am on leave. I’ve just come back from leave but I am on my resettlement bit I’ve got to go in and do a course tomorrow and I have got in fact I have got the laptop out to switch onto and I feel a bit oh God I’ve got to switch on the computer and right now I wish I was never starting on the second of Sep, well I am starting on the 5th of Sept which I am looking forward to but I am not looking forward to the work I quite like being off doing my garden it will be interesting to leave how I adapt it’s just a bit like being on PODL I guess. At the moment I am enjoying the freedom, I’ve got my leaving do tomorrow I am going back in tomorrow night for that but other than that I am sort of it’s a bit weird I am sort of in this cloud of not knowing I am neither here nor there. Carl sent me my assessment when I was in America and it was fabulous and I cried then. And he put all this stuff in about the AIR FORCE has missed a chance here with this one she should have been promoted it didn’t happen and that is why we are losing her. And that is the truth if I’d got promoted I would never thought of leaving and I would have put up with the hell of having to move around I’ve managed all these years and I have managed it I think being good mummy. I’ve been a good mother, I’ve been a good step mother I’ve been a good wife to my second husband. At least better than I was to the first, I’ve tried harder. (Laughter) It’s sort of circumstantial that is the only reason left.

## C

So you said you are sort of in this cloud, how is that making you feel?

## Maria

Well the very fact that I can talk to you and get emotional again shows that I am not in a comfortable place. Having accepted it and when you asked me if I would do this I thought oh my God this will end up showing all this all my feelings but I didn’t mind that because I guess that is why you are doing it because you want to understand how people feel. And I have met people who are so excited to leave and they see it as anew opportunity and don’t think I don’t they are a good company the chap who I am going to directly work for is an American and I like him we have hit it off, I’ve worked with him, obviously had a lot of dealings with him over a year and he knows what I am like he knows that I am straight talking he knows I like a joke he has a good sense of humour. He knows what I like and I know that he respects me the main boss is a female and I know that she took a shine to me so I don’t feel uncomfortable and if anything it is an easy step they are a civilian company but they are contracted with the MoD and I am going into a job that I very much understand and I am going to be briefing the people that I used to brief when I was in the AIR FORCE. So all the real difference will be my attire and my nail varnish colour (laughter) and the fact that I hope that people will listen as much to me in this uniform (civ clothes) as much as they did in the blue uniform . But that will be up to me how I approach things I’ve got no fears I am not scared but I think part of that is because I am going into the known and there is so much familiarity around me I’ve got the best of both worlds in a way it is a good stepping stone I think it would be very different, and it was a bit like you when you went into FTRS, you sort of understand the similarity of it. Whereas if I had gone and found a job with amazon or something and you are completely in an environment that you don’t, ok I understand logistics, but in an environment that you don’t understand I think that would be a scarier thing. I don’t think I have taken the easy option I think I took the option that was offered to me that was too attractive to turn down and if it had not presented itself I probably would have just poddled along as I was.

## C

How would you describe your job as an AIR FORCE officer, if you think of it from that point of view, not your role but your job as an AIR FORCE officer?

## Maria

Well it was obviously diverse I used to love the fact that you could move on every couple of years apart from the actually physicality of moving and the pain of that. It never really unless, I only ever dislike done job as an officer. There was always something new and interesting to look forward to and I found that the diversity of being able to do something different every couple of years and meeting lots of people but being almost likeminded people fun. So apart from the frustrations you have with any job or the frustrations you might have. The diversity I loved the leadership part of it. Clearly my best tours were my command tours, doesn’t everybody? I liked being in charge I liked helping people when I said on Facebook that I was leaving and I got some of those nice comments I thought really some of those people I had been a real influence on them but you hope you are doing some good for people but so I enjoyed the leadership side of it the diversity, the changes the people and the fun side of it. I really enjoyed the OOA and that made me sad on the aircraft about an reporter in Afghanistan and that got me going as well, I thought I will never go anywhere like Afghanistan or Iraq, you know really bizarre things but just that interest that is there and I guess that is what I wanted when I joined dup was a different lifestyle than going to work at Woolworths and being a manger and just doing 9- 5. So it is hard to pinpoint what I loved the most, but in a nutshell, the diversity, the travel, the people. And definitely I preferred being an office than being an airwoman. But I loved both sides to be fair I’m glad I started in the ranks I’m glad I had that experience but I definitely liked being in charge the best.

## C

Why did you like being in charge?

## Maria

Just to see things improved I remember one of the reasons I took a commission was because I was board. There was an officer in SCAF, I worked in SCAF, at the time and he used to come out of his office, he was an ignorant git to be honest, I won’t tell you his name I remember it but I won’t tell you it. He was an ignorant git and he used to come out and instruct all us SACs to do something and there was an explanation as to why we were doing something, nobody minds if we were doing something but if you understand why you have to do something. And I found myself more and more thinking why am I doing it and wanting to be in that office that had just had a chat with the squadron leader and understanding the background to things. It was that and the fact that I was board and had finally got my maths GCSE that I was able to do the commission bit. When you get to an area where you are in charge, like your command particularly I think I just liked trying to make changes for the good but also bring my experience from the rank where you don’t make changes for change sake and I think I like to see things succeed. Obviously that has been one small part there have been lots of office jobs but I’ve enjoyed developing and improving things.

## C

Have you got an example can you think of one?

## Maria

Of improved?

## C

Yeh

## Maria

Gosh, well I think I improved London, you were there!

## C

I know.

## Maria

You sometimes took over from bosses who were complete drongos or rude or nasty people and that helped you cream in that was easy …

## C

Are you thinking of London in particular?

## Maria

Yes, well actually it’s happened to me twice it happened when I was OC MT at Lincolnshire as well. When you take over from a plonker who has treated people like dirt and then you don’t need to try that hard you can still get everything done that you want doing but you can do it in a much nicer way. I have rarely had to be bossy, I am bossy but I’ve never had to order anybody to do anything. I think there is a way to get people to do something for you and do it with a smile on your face and get them on side I think London was a place that was really down at the time they knew they were the bottom of the pile of the movers it was and particularly the junior officers, considered where all the failures went. That was not true that was a perception and of course I went in as a none mover it was difficult at first on the movements branch side Ian Tripp tried to get me sacked. There was all sorts of things going on but by the time I had finished there and with your help and with your successors help we ended up with a squadron that was well respected. We were backfilling all the other areas people began to see that it was an area that, I hated calling it a respite tour but it was and they had time to calm and settle down go and get some fitness in and go and get some training in do some good stuff and they were ready to go back out. And I felt that was highly important and I think that then as I got another movers job in the LSC after that was proof that I had achieved what I wanted to achieve. But equally I then went did chief of staff at Halton and it was obviously all connected with Deep Cut and Deep Cut had a dreadful reputation because of what had happened all those years ago and I can’t tell you how many returns we had a month I can’t even begin to remember everything we had returns on but it took up all my life for returns it was beyond a joke and I whittled it down from something like I don’t know 75 returns to 25.

## C

What are returns?

## Maria

Returns like you know, I am trying to think of one now. Obviously you would have how many people were going through training how many how many female. How many people had been done for drugs or how many had been for being out late any charges the course work itself they were looking at every angle of the training that they could because they were looking for bullying and harassment, diversity. I became the equal opportunities office and went and did all the training for that because you had to be very careful about about gays and lesbians and anything like that, it was a really fantastic job and it was like a second command job plus the Wing Commander at the time was doing his Masters and used to leave things to me. He was always, always says to me thanks to you I got my masters cause he used to lock himself away in the office and he got promoted so you know but it was a good job bit I did feel that we made some improvements in that area.

## C

That is brilliant hat is really good. So if you think of your most challenging tours what kinds of things would keep you awake at night?

## Maria

God, the LSC one was probably the most challenging because I went from doing the London job into the LSC into another Moves area, which had always been traditionally run by a mover I was working for Group Captain, the Welsh chap, a real character, anyway it will come back to me. Anyway it transpired that he was one of the ones that had written a formal letter of complaint when I had got the SAMOs job and Ian Tripp ended up respecting me funny little man that he is. I ended up getting that job and the Group Captain, I can’t believe that I have gone blank on his name, and he ended up really liking me. He did me a big service when I first got into the job he came up to me in front of all my movs staff, my Flight Leiutenants and said I’ll go and admit now that I was one of the ones that wrote and complained about you being a SAMO but you are here because you proved your worth and the fact that you did that job so anybody that thinks you are not a mover are completely out of order and he said in front of my new staff but he also put me under a huge amount of pressure because he was after trying to get me promoted. And I was sometimes working until mid-night. It was an operations and exercise job I wasn’t on the actual operations end I was on the ex area but it was a fantastic job for going out and seeing what my staff were doing all over the world I could go out and see where they were preparing for the exercises getting the logs set up but I was also doing the chief of staff for him I was inundated with work. It was the time I had met my husband, obviously I was engaged to my husband and we had moved to reading so I had quite a long journey into work so it was challenging from the point of view of the amount of work, not that it was beyond my capabilities. I don’t think I have ever felt challenged beyond my capabilities. And I guess the only other one was the Andover job in the joint helicopter command and it’s not because it was a challenging job it’s because I hated it. And there is a challenge to getting out of bed in the morning to go and do a job that you have no interest in what so ever. And that was a shock to my system because it’s not often, it’s happened only once, I just loathed it. It was I would do the CASP type work the joint agreements between the Air Command and the JHC (interrupted by participants phone) it was a middle persons job all I really had to do was collate everyone’s replies and send them to the 2\* board and I felt like a secretary to the 2\* board and arranged all their meetings and I was just the dogs body in the middle but with no reason to use my own intellect to add any value other than presenting it in a good fashion and actually I got a great assessment out of that one but it was boring and I was working with all the civilians there and I have no issue with working with civil servants but this particular bunch had come down form Wilton where the Army HQ had been, never wanted to move to Andover and even three years on had not got over it and they bitched and moaned continually. And they were the sort of people if you went for a cup of coffee with them, I noticed this the very first week. Whoever wasn’t with them they would be bitching about and then the next day that would person would be in and the next person would be away and they be bitching about that person and so I never went for coffees with them I am not interested in bitching so it was a quite a boring lonely existence and that was a huge challenge. But only for that reason.

## C

Ok, so does anything keep you awake now, now that you have moved on somewhat?

## Maria

Yeh, I guess so. I am not a great sleeper anyway I am a worrier anyway I never stop thinking I never relax I don’t know how to relax. If I am not working work wise I am doing something around the house and I am involved with all sorts of stuff not always work related. My mother is still very ill my sister is her carer and is very ill herself I worry about, I don’t worry about my son normally because he is a great young man but I worry will he get into university will he be happy all the normal mother stuff. I don’t worry about my marriage but I do worry about will I enjoy the job and I have the money is going to be attractive and it’s going to be hard and if I don’t like it I worry about whether I will have the guts to either look elsewhere and I will live a slightly reduced lifestyle and not have as many holidays, I don’t have a posh car, but whatever it is I spend my money on I worry a little bit about whether or not I will put up with it just for the money or whether I will have the gut to say enough is enough. I don’t know. I don’t want to do something that I am not going to enjoy and I guess a little bit of me worries about, because I have had such an easy time working for people who have known of me, even if they haven’t known me personally they have known of me and I have a reasonable, it sounds a bit big headed but apparently I have had this reputation. So I’ve gone into this job and I’ve had we have heard lots of good things about you we trust you we are going to let you get on with it. I’ve literally had that said to me the last number of tours and now I am going into something where yeh they know me because they have worked with me for the last year but I haven’t got depth of history with them. What if I get a nasty boss? That bothers me because at the moment if you do get a nasty boss and it has happened on a few occasions years ago you tend to know that they are going to move on or you are going to move on 18 months at the most obviously. And you can cope with crap for 18 months and what bothers me is if I don’t get a boss I liked or somebody was constantly haranguing at me and time is money out in civvi street and they are going to want their money from me that bothers me a little bit about well there is no getting away from it. You either put up hope they leave or you are going to have to leave. So probably that is the only thing.

## C

Ok that is interesting. What would you say then promotion was nearly there all the time. What would you say was your greatest challenge to not getting that promotion, to your career progression?

## Maria

Well, I guess it was knowing how I would cope with people that had originally worked for me that were then going to get promoted above me. I’ve never worked for anybody that has worked for me that is a lucky break in a way. Having said that I have hopefully treated everybody that has worked for me with respect on the way up hopefully if then they go on and they do better that me and a number of them have and I am proud for them I’d hope that if I came to work for them that they would have remembered that I was a good boss to them and that they would treat me with respect and I would obviously help them on their way

## C

yes

## Maria

I guess the biggest challenge was not to be jealous. I am going to be honest about it and the biggest one of the other biggest challenge was never to judge somebody on well why did they get it and I didn’t? What was better about them, I’m better than them. I’ve never felt that I am not an overly confident person by nature I never judged myself to be better than anybody anyway so it was I guess a little bit of it was. I went to work in the LS for Luke, he had known me years ago I can’t remember when, he remembered me more than I remembered me. But when he did his arrivals interview with me this was only a year ago. He said Maria you had such a great reputation what happened? Why didn’t you get promoted where did you go wrong? And I said No, I don’t think I actually went wrong, I said and yes I had a good reputation and hopefully I still have a good reputation Is aid sometimes things don’t work out. You know I am 51, I am older than the average and I haven’t go the legs to get to 1\* and they are looking at other people and so I just had to keep that in the back of my mind all the time. I didn’t get my commission until I was in my 30’s and try to remember that I am older than the average. There are people like Sarah who I have got regard for who actually worked for me as a Sergeant when I was a very junior office and we worked together as SACs years and she did get to Wing Commander and I think well she didn’t have children, she didn’t have a marriage she could put everything into the job and so in balance I just tried to balance everything out into my head and well like I am a mummy, I’ve had a nice home a good family and I’ve got a good job. So the challenge was not to be jealous, to cope and it never happened to me, but to cope if I had to work with somebody who had worked for me and hope that I got on with them well. And then the little bit about being embarrassed when people say things like that to you as if I had done something not wrong but gone off the boil and I think the other challenge was not to become a grumpy old Squadron Ldr because there was plenty of them around wasn’t there? They become bitter and twisted, they are in their 50s and they have been bypassed and looking at a lot of them rightly so (laughter) and I had to try and think well maybe I am one of them so let’s try not to be one of them let’s try and keep positive and happy and making the best of it and don’t become a bitter and twisted person and about 5 years ago I had the worry that I would become that person I was so upset after, John was an amazing desk officer and we were friends and that was the closest I came I was one off. It was when I was in the JHC I’d came 14th, I think I came 14th when they promoted 13 I think that was it. And I was so close I had already written myself off then that happened and I’d done an OOA then I did an acting Wing Commander well a Leiutenant Colonel job for 6 months and I thought if there is any chance it is next year, having come that close, having done an acting job, having done an OOA if there’s any chance and I think being 13/14th on the board I went to 22nd. And I though the deflation that year was the year I stopped caring, and I didn’t stop caring about the job but I stopped caring about my assessments. And since then I have had a number of bosses who have said Maria we are going to write you up and we are going to make it really strong and we are going to try and get you promoted and I would literally snort at them, yeh alright then go on crack on help yourself because it is not going to make a blind bit of difference. Do you know it was liberating, so liberating. So 5 years ago may be becoming sad and bitter to becoming liberated being able to say whatever you want, obviously I am a reasonably polite person. But having the guts to say what you want knowing I don’t give a toss if you write me badly. Because I know I am right what difference is it going to make to me it was quite a liberating time for me there. So the challenge became quite fun. (Laughter)

I know now my last couple of bosses, I am actually quite good friend with them we have become quite good friends. And they said we have never had anybody so bloody cheeky work for us and

## C

Can you give an example of that?

## Maria

Well I don’t know I mean, John always remembers this. I did know him before I got into the job, that is as a key account manager working at Bicester for LS and I didn’t know him and of the week of him explaining, I took over from Rob but he had already moved on so John had to bring me up to speed on everything, John is a lovely bloke but sort of grey haired and I don’t know how but somehow or other our ages came into that week and I found out that he was a year younger than me. And I was truly shocked because I look a lot younger than him, I said seriously you are younger than me? But you are so grey! And this was when I first met him and he has never forgiven me and he tells people, you know first week of knowing her and she slagged me off for being grey and telling me I looked old. I think I have never been a creep I’ve never liked creeps, you know I don’t bumly crawly lick licks. But it’s nice to be relaxed enough not to have to think too much about what you are saying as I left CAM I was working for Mike laziest Wing Commander in the AIR FORCE lovely man, lovely sense of humour but that man did not work for a living, he was doing his Bisley shooting and he secondary duty stuff and if you want to talk about cheek I just used to tell him and I said to him you know well you are useless, all you care about is your secondary duties but I am happy because I can do what I want to do. You crack on and do that and let me run everything else. You wouldn’t normally do that if you were after promotion. And he knew it and at the end he said you know what I couldn’t have had the fun I’ve had without you there, because I did all the work and he has let the job go down in the last year and he knows he has and I said to him before I start in Oct you had bloody well better update all our contacts list and everything you have let drop since I left. So I guess it is that level of cheekiness but you can get away with it having said that I think you get away with more when you are a female anyway, you know rightly or wrongly and I’ve never played on sexuality but when you are working for men and you can have a little grin after you say something naughty or rude, they sort of have that moment of oh they were rude to me then but then you grin at them and you get away with it. (Laughter)

It’s true it’s true

## C

Yes, it is true.

Ok, Ok that is really good. If you had a magic wand, and you could change anything about the air force or your career what would you change?

## Maria

Well, I guess what I would have done is have more confidence in myself earlier and taken a commission earlier and given myself a better chance of getting promoted. So therefore if I had the magic wand I deny I wanted to be promoted, I wanted to see a reward for the work I had done. It wasn’t about being I powerful position it wasn’t about being in charge it was about being considered in the top bracket for the work and effort I made cause I’ve never been high powered I’ve never had a game plan I’ve never wanted to get to a certain rank and after I left London and went to the LSC I was shocked with the junior officers that worked for me there I had had some great junior officers working for me in the past and they were a little bit up themselves in the LSC. People that worked in the LSC thought they were all pretty special and going places it was the operational job to go to to get promoted and I had my junior officers there sitting me down and telling me what they expected for their assessment and what, they knew their game plan and I was in awe, I was also in shock and I was bloody hacked off with them at the same time. But I couldn’t help respect the fact that they were 10yrs younger than me and they knew exactly where they wanted to get to. They knew what job they wanted to hop to get to and I had never been that way and do you know when I look back I think I maybe should have been, I maybe should have planned things out a bit better if I had wanted the career I should have been a little bit cleverer myself and you can’t complain about these people who get it because they have been cleverer than me. But at the same time I found it very calculating almost their expectation, I don’t like people to have an expectation they should just work bloody hard and if they do ok the fine. So I think if I had a magic wand I wouldn’t suddenly magic myself into that positon I’d just wish that maybe I had, I’d play the game the same but I just think I would have started younger, I would have taken the specialist course when it was first offered to me. I turned it down when I first got commissioned because I was married I wanted a child, not a good career move but I was naïve Caroline I didn’t know what not doing the course would mean later on.

## C

Yeh

## Maria

And then with the wars that then happened and the movers went and shot right up and the pure bred suppliers they got left behind. I think in hindsight I would have been cleverer at planning my career.

## C

Ok Last question and it is a nice one, what is your best memory? That you are going to take away with you.

## Maria

What from my time in the AIR FORCE?

## C

A long time to cover I know!

## Maria

31 years, gosh. My God. Well funnily enough with it just being you, but some of my best memories are from London. Because it was the in command tour and I think what some of the best memories there were the beer calls. And the fact that I was a single mother and the year before taking on that job, I can’t remember the name of the desk officer, he was only in a year and he got promoted, dreadful. But I can remember I got promoted after only 4 yrs. in rank so I was the first off my supply course to get Squadron Ldr people were looking at me as if I was going to fly I was obviously older than the average having been commissioned later on and at that stage I never really thought about the next rank on but I just assumed that it would all flow that way. And then I said to the desk officer after I had done a tour as a squadron ldr that I would like an in command tour and his answer to me was, yeh probably not because you are a single parent and it’s going to be too tough for you, my father had just died, and obviously my marriage was over and I was in quite a vulnerable position and if I had had that answer 5 yrs. later I would have really shot down that boys throat. How w he dare he turn round and tell me that as a single parent I couldn’t possibly manage a command tour, instead I went ok and I took it. And that was then fundamental in what happened afterwards because I then got myself out of synch compared to my peer group the following year I had sort of toughened up a bit and there was a head of branch I’ve forgotten his name, he has left now, lovely man. And I said to him is it branch policy that a single parent can’t do a in command tour and he said absolutely not that would be completely inappropriate and wrong and depending on which tour it is he said your child can be an added bonus to it and I remember saying, that child can even become the mascot (laugher) you can always bring him around and when I got to London I remember one of the beer calls that we had and I thought well my son had been at school all day and I didn’t know anybody to do childcare at that stage and you know you were kind to baby sit on accession but the beer call was all of us there and I had to drag my son along and what I really loved was that it then became a family squadron and all the young lads and lasses if they had family they would bring their children along to the beer call and I can remember looking around one day and it was summer and we were all having a laugh and singing and it was a really fun fun day and all the kids were there and all it was our happy hour not a special vent and my son made friends with the other children and I remember being quite proud and if that Air Commodore could see me now my son is like my little mascot in the Squadron you know Tom I am really good friends with and I remember him saying Maria if you are busy I will go and get your son from school and 7/7 he went and picked him up from school and he sat and did his maths homework with him while I was out there on the pan trying to pretending to be a mover with my 2 IC having to tell me everything. (laughter) and it was that would have been one of my happier moments and my OOA tour fun, hard work, working til mid-night meeting Iraqis, meeting Afghans hopefully, I don’t think making a huge difference but at least getting on with them, really great fun and I’ve got contacts in Iraq now people keep in touch. I have got one on Facebook, I am a bit cautious about who I am but I think I have kept in touch with a few people that way. And just seeing the different ways they live their lives and I was called Major Maria cause they didn’t understand what a Squadron Ldr was.

## C

Well, yeh.

## Maria

So and doing that as a female and as a parent and having raised my son at the same time to become the lovely young man he is, really I think I have done the package and I married a lovely man to boot who I met on an OOA. SO lots of happy memories more than everything negative.

## C

Can I ask one question, when you did go OOA, and leaving your son what was that like?

## Maria

Horrific, I was still at London. I volunteered because as I said to you earlier I wanted to do my bit and my son was older sitting down with him and having this conversation and saying mummy really ought to do her bit if I am going to stay in I ought to volunteer to go out of area. I’ll volunteer, I’ve always volunteered so I have done it the right time I knew which one was coming up and I would do it when it wasn’t my son’s birthday or it wasn’t Christmas or something like that and but it would obviously would have meant going to boarding school or going to live with his father, neither option which I was happy for me. And it was only for those 4 moths that temporary measure and I was picking him up from school one day and we had had this conversation and I said to him look he said he would like me to go and I said do you want to go and live with your dad for 4 months or do you want to go to boarding school and I said it doesn’t matter we can test you off early at boarding school and then if you don’t like it I will bring you out and you can stay with your dad and I gave him all these options. And I said I will give you a few days to think about it, anyway after about, well he was only about 7 or 8, 7 when I first had this conversation with him when I few days later I was driving in the car with him and he said mummy I have made a decision about what I would like to do if you go away and I remember my stomach tightening, what is this decision going to be? And he decided to go to boarding school and I said right ok, do you mind me asking why you have come to that decision. And this little boy of 7 turned round to me and said well I have given it a lot of thought mammy and I have decided I don’t want to disrupt my education. Bless him (laughter( he had already been to two or three nurseries, he had changed schools twice he was a bright little lad and he knew and I said understood, so then (interrupted by phone call participants end) then he went to boarding school, duck to water no problem. Do you know what the hardest thing was, was I got myself sorted and then my OOA was cancelled I was due to go to Basra Palace because they moved from Basra Place and I remember ringing up the desk officer and saying I don’t mind where you send me, send me anywhere my son and I are both mentally prepared for me to go send me anywhere and that is how I got the visitors officer job in Afghanistan and that is how I met my husband, so things were meant to be. So that happened quickly, what the hardest bit was I rang my son from Afghanistan having arrive and it was within the first few days. And what I sort of forgot he was used to leaving me for a weekend, he was used to visiting his Dad, while for me it was all vast and I was in this place and he sounded perfectly happy and I came off the phone thinking oh he doesn’t even miss me and then to my shame a week later I rang him, I think nearly a fortnight had gone by and he was really missing me and he was crying and I was like YES YES HE IS MISISNG me my boy is crying, I was really happy. (laughter)

It was hard but I was blessed that my mother and my sister helped out a lot, the second time I went OOA my son was a lot older and he stayed at home with my husband they are like best friends, he say his dad as per normal bathe wanted to live with My husband. But yeh initially leaving my boy behind that was absolutely the hardest thing but it was the right decision and it had a happy ending.

## C

yeh, because you never would have met your husband.

## Maria

I would never have never had met my husband and my God, my son and my husband they gang up on me all the time there is definitely, it’s not a Peters versus Young thing in this family it is definitely a girls and boys thing. The two boys are like this, then I have got my girls. (Laughter)

## C

Brilliant that is it unless there is anything you want to say.

## Maria

No, I hope that is of help, what you will do with it all then?