The year was 1972. Folk, rock and soul music ruled the airwaves; platform shoes and bell-bottoms defined modern fashion,

and technological advances included the pocket calculator and the first video game.

President Nixon was elected to a second term and the Vietnam War continued to cast a dark shadow over the country.

In the sciences, the space shuttle program was born,

Apollo 17 sent the world the unforgettable "Blue Marble" image of Earth,

and the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps,

a science-based service provided by the newly formed National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, commissioned its first female officer.

From then on, through their skill, strength and expertise,

the women of the NOAA Corps have built and shaped a solid foundation for Women In Service.

With only 321 active officers, the NOAA Commissioned Officer Corps
is the smallest of the seven uniformed services of the United States. It's very small because its focus is very specialized. NOAA Corps officers serve at sea, on land, and in the air commanding a fleet of ships and aircraft specially equipped to enable scientists to study, understand and predict changes in the complex and dynamic natural systems of our planet that sustain life as we know it. From the seafood we eat, to the weather we brave, to the ships that navigate our seas carrying people and cargo to and from our ports, to the deep ocean we have only just begun to explore, the work of the NOAA Corps reaches every American - protecting our lives and property, and preserving our natural resources for current and future generations.

One of the most memorable stories that I have over my career...
One time when we were out...

00:02:23.700 --> 00:02:26.780
I'm surprised I went back to sea after my first sea tour...

00:02:26.800 --> 00:02:30.420
This is absolutely everything that I was looking for...

00:02:30.420 --> 00:02:33.420
That was a moment that I will certainly never forget...

00:02:34.300 --> 00:02:39.800
Like a photograph, personal stories are an imprint of our life experience.

00:02:39.820 --> 00:02:43.100
They tell us something about our place in time:

00:02:43.100 --> 00:02:50.060
a memorable moment, a defining experience, or simply those times in life when we intersect

00:02:50.060 --> 00:02:56.290
with people or places in random ways that set us on pathways that we couldn't imagine,

00:02:56.290 --> 00:02:57.940
let alone plan.

00:02:58.280 --> 00:03:00.740
Everyone has stories to tell

00:03:00.740 --> 00:03:04.440
and those stories tell us about ourselves:

00:03:04.440 --> 00:03:09.920
what moves us, what challenges us, what makes us who we are.

00:03:09.920 --> 00:03:14.060
These are stories of a small group of unique women

00:03:14.060 --> 00:03:17.140
who joined a small corps of unique purpose

00:03:17.140 --> 00:03:19.080
to serve their nation

00:03:19.080 --> 00:03:21.480
-- women from different walks of life

00:03:21.480 --> 00:03:24.400
who served at different points in time,
but who all share the same sense of dedication
toward the pursuit of understanding
and stewardship for our common home.
I had one letter was, "No women! Not now, not ever! Blaaargh!!" You know...
And I said, "That's okay.... About time he retired anyway.
The story of women in the NOAA Corps
begins with a man
who unlocked and opened the door of opportunity
and a woman who walked through it.
There was no reason women couldn't be commissioned. None!
No legal reason, no social reason, no practical reason at all.
It was just something that was overdue.
The NOAA Corps was established long before NOAA was.
By the time NOAA became a federal agency in 1970,
the Corps was already in its 53rd year, having operated under predecessor agencies
ever since it was first established in 1917.
Admiral Harley Nygren began his service in 1947.
Over his long career, he rose to the top job.

He was the director of the Corps when NOAA was established

and the decision of whether or not to admit women into the Corps was his.

Ultimately, the responsibility was mine.

But I had encouragement from the administrators.

They didn't pressure us at all.

Once in a while he'd say, "are you ever going to have any women in the Corps?"

And I'd say, "yeah, we're looking at it."

So the environment was there and it was a matter of looking at the mechanics of it.

And the outcome was obvious:

We had no basis for not recruiting women, none.

There were good reasons for doing it -- social reasons, economic reasons -- all kinds of reasons for doing it,

but one for not doing it was "we never did that before."

And that's not acceptable.

Pamela Chelgren was the first female officer
to step up and test this new space.

Together with her male counterparts,
she and the women who followed laid the groundwork for a new era.

There were times at which I very much felt pressure being the first.

Because I was the first, if I did poorly that would make it harder for women coming in behind me.

After the class came through with six women in it,

I no longer was worried about that.

Pamela Chelgren's commission pioneered a societal shift in the Corps that picked up steam in the ensuing years.

By 1975, eighteen more female officers had joined the ranks of the NOAA Corps, including Evelyn Fields, whose career in the Corps spanned 31 years.

She attained the rank of Rear Admiral and the distinction of being the first female commanding officer of the NOAA Corps.

Before we got there, I understand that the commands spent a lot of time prepping their crew.
'We're going to get these ladies
and you got to clean up your language,
and you got to do this, and you got to that,
and you got to do the other.'

It was kind of a test or platform that
the C.O.s didn't want to fail at,
those that were fortunate enough to get us,
(and I do mean fortunate enough to get us),
the women coming out of the class;
they didn't want to fail either.

It was a real step forward for the NOAA Corps because
the other services, yes, they had women,
but they didn't have women doing
the exact same job that the men were doing.

You were sworn in as an ensign,
you went to basic training class and when
you came out of basic training class you went to a ship.

My first ship, I was the only woman on my first ship and
when we got underway from Seattle
for a four-month cruise to the South Pacific,
there was 81 guys and me.

I know the captain was very worried.
He would have weekly lunches with me just to check in and see how things were going. My sense was, after that first sea tour, I would say about five percent of the guys were verbally, vocally supportive of me being there, 10 percent were the opposite, negative, and 85 percent really didn't care. So you know, 'you get the job done, that's fine.' And that 10 percent, that really did change after the first couple of years. It took them really seeing that I was there to get the job done and I wasn't there to make trouble for people. I was really there committed to the same things they were committed to and wanting to be a shipmate. And that really counts for something. In the journey of life,
sometimes we follow a road out of curiosity.

Other times we set out with clear intention, motivated by specific people or aspirations.

Whether their initial plans were experimental or inspired, these women all answered a call of scientific service to their country.

My dad was in the Coast Guard.

He was in the Coast Guard and the Navy.

My dad is a retired Navy Reservist and the proudest I ever saw him was on those weekends when he put his uniform on to go to his monthly weekend duty or his two weeks a year.

And so I was groomed from the time that I was young to want to serve my country to work on behalf of my country.

That's, I think initially, too, what sort of drove that desire to serve my country and to wear the uniform.
I didn't know what my service
would look like growing up,

but I'm not surprised that I'm
wearing a uniform today.

I watched a documentary about the response
to the Exxon Valdez oil spill when I was in high school,

and that sort of set my compass to know that

I wanted to do something with the ocean.

I stumbled across the NOAA Corps website.

I actually didn't know that NOAA even had
a corps of officers

that drove the ships and flew the planes.

So that was sort of just bumbling along
following the websites,

and found the old school
NOAA Corps recruiting video.

And it was like, "do you want to dive and
do you want to fly and do science,

and serve your country at the same time?

I was like, "Yes."

I looked it up online and I was really impressed.

I noticed that they had a lot to do with
oil spill response
and it was different. It was about providing scientific support to the Coast Guard
during major oil spills and that really piqued my interest.
My entire career I've worked for the Office of Coast Survey,
and the Office of Coast Survey collects the data that makes the nautical charts for shipping.
So in my mind, at least, that's a very clear, relevant thing.
You know, ships need to know where they're going and how to get there.
I mean, they're moving 80 percent of the goods that are coming in and out of the United States.
So, for me, that's a very clear mission.
I don't think about it a lot, but when I do kinda get down in the dumps about 'why are we doing this,'
I just think about maps.
We make maps.
Who can't get behind a map? It's information.
It tells you where things are.
You know where your resources are, you know where the fish habitat is, you know what minerals there are, you know where to lay a cable, you know where to put a navigation channel. There's a whole bunch of stuff going on underneath there and there's a whole bunch of people on the surface doing a lot of different things.

So, that's, kinda, the little speech I give to myself about maps. I like them. The mission that we fly is an important mission to the nation. We're out there collecting vital data that they use for hurricane forecasts and intensity models. That information gets relayed to the National Hurricane Center for them to make better forecasts, and it's all about saving life and property. We want to make sure people are protected.
In my opinion, that's why I'm out there doing my job. That's what I love about my job. I am out there making a difference. We are there to collect that data that could help somebody who is along the coast know that the storm is actually coming their way. It's important. And I feel proud after those missions, and it makes me want to go fly another one.

I was involved in Deepwater Horizon. I was previously on the NOAA Ship Gordon Gunter as my first sea tour, and we ended up being the first federal vessel actually onsite to do oil spill response. That was an incredible opportunity to really be there at a time of national disaster and to be able to play a part in that. Whether it's cleaning up oil spills or even just protecting endangered species like we do out here or to help gather data for climate change,
all of these things are going to have major impacts on future generations.

And to me, I couldn't get any fulfillment out of anything else the way that I do with this career.

I tell people that I have the coolest job in the world and that has been my story since day one, and it's the story that I'm sticking with.

We all face moments in life that do not go as planned. Navigating the unexpected is a test of skill and courage under pressure.

These challenges are milestones that speak to our strength or teach us a lesson, and from which we can either stay or adjust our course.

You never really think about, 'Oh, I don't know, I can't do this.' You just deal with it, get it done and move on.

Our second flight from Turks and Caicos back to Florida, about halfway back, we're over
the Bahamas at this point,

00:13:10.480 --> 00:13:12.920 we get an engine fire indication.

00:13:12.920 --> 00:13:16.780 That, of all the things that could probably happen to the plane,

00:13:16.780 --> 00:13:19.680 that's probably the one that you never really want to hear as a pilot.

00:13:19.680 --> 00:13:21.880 So the first thing that you hear is the fire bell goes off.

00:13:21.880 --> 00:13:25.690 So it's a really loud bell in the cockpit that sounds.

00:13:25.690 --> 00:13:27.180 And so you have this bell.

00:13:27.180 --> 00:13:28.850 You jumped to action, in that sense.

00:13:28.850 --> 00:13:33.080 You really don't have much time that you're like, 'oh, let's sit and think about it or talk about it'

00:13:33.080 --> 00:13:34.880 You're like, 'run the checklist.'

00:13:34.880 --> 00:13:38.240 So, after we shut down the engine, we're calling,

00:13:38.240 --> 00:13:41.060 declaring an emergency, and so they had us divert.

00:13:41.060 --> 00:13:44.380 At this point we're at 8000 and also heading into some iffy weather.

00:13:44.380 --> 00:13:49.380 And they're like "Hey, Rock Sound is your closest airport; go," basically.

00:13:49.380 --> 00:13:52.100 We're looking at: what's our runway length at this place we're going into?

00:13:52.100 --> 00:13:53.790 We've never been here, we have no idea,
we're just headed in, single-engine, into this airport

00:13:56.380 --> 00:13:58.581
as storms and stuff are coming in around us.

00:13:58.581 --> 00:14:00.180
So we landed.

00:14:00.180 --> 00:14:01.310
Everything went well;

00:14:01.310 --> 00:14:05.820
it was my first legit single-engine landing.
You know, we practice it here.

00:14:05.820 --> 00:14:10.160
Surprisingly enough, simulation is pretty
much spot on for the real thing.

00:14:10.160 --> 00:14:15.380
So that was a huge confidence booster for
me to be able to fly this thing, single-engine,

00:14:15.380 --> 00:14:20.700
land single-engine in the middle of nowhere,
and go, 'all right, that wasn't too bad.'

00:14:20.700 --> 00:14:22.440
It wasn't as bad as you thought it would be.

00:14:22.440 --> 00:14:24.560
Whenever you have a challenge, to me

00:14:24.570 --> 00:14:28.630
(and I used to say this to the folks that worked for me),

00:14:28.630 --> 00:14:34.280
I don't look at it as a challenge.
I always looked at it as an opportunity.

00:14:34.280 --> 00:14:37.480
And I think that puts it in a whole new realm

00:14:37.480 --> 00:14:41.100
when you say an opportunity as opposed to a challenge.

00:14:41.100 --> 00:14:44.610
But what that does is it builds a level of confidence.

00:14:44.610 --> 00:14:48.980
So each time you take one of those opportunities

00:14:48.980 --> 00:14:53.380
and succeed at it, it builds the confidence
that much more.

00:14:53.380 --> 00:14:57.580
It definitely was one of those things that nobody wants to have an emergency in the plane,

00:14:57.580 --> 00:15:04.230
but it was also a monster confidence booster for me, and also a surety in both our training,

00:15:04.230 --> 00:15:06.300
our aircraft, and your skills.

00:15:06.300 --> 00:15:08.670
And I think it builds that confidence level

00:15:08.670 --> 00:15:10.760
to the point that you just kind of go,

00:15:10.760 --> 00:15:13.380
'okay, I'm ready for the next one; bring it on,'

00:15:13.380 --> 00:15:15.980
you know, and you just move on.

00:15:19.920 --> 00:15:23.840
The gifts of wisdom, encouragement and support,

00:15:23.850 --> 00:15:27.397
born of shared experiences, become special bonds

00:15:27.400 --> 00:15:30.600
that shape our sense of self,

00:15:30.600 --> 00:15:32.500
connect us as a family,

00:15:32.500 --> 00:15:34.820
and carry us forward.

00:15:36.360 --> 00:15:39.540
One of the things they told me early in life was that

00:15:39.540 --> 00:15:42.573
in order for two people

00:15:42.580 --> 00:15:45.680
to really communicate with each other,

00:15:45.680 --> 00:15:48.240
they have to have some shared experience.

00:15:48.240 --> 00:15:51.140
You take a group, take a squad of marines

00:15:51.140 --> 00:15:52.350
and shove them through a firefight,

00:15:52.350 --> 00:15:54.860
those folks are welded forever as a family because

00:15:54.860 --> 00:16:00.160
they have shared that experience
and now they're communicating,

00:16:00.160 --> 00:16:01.980
and that's true anywhere.

00:16:01.980 --> 00:16:05.580
On my second ship, I was the only female in the crew.

00:16:05.580 --> 00:16:10.600
And so when Liz went out to one of her ships

00:16:10.610 --> 00:16:12.560
she was the only female in the crew.

00:16:12.560 --> 00:16:14.310
And just keeping tabs, you know, and just

00:16:14.310 --> 00:16:17.240
checking in, seeing if everything is good,

00:16:17.240 --> 00:16:20.900
we bounce off a lot of different ideas with each other.

00:16:20.900 --> 00:16:24.730
So it's been a friendship, mentor, mentee,

00:16:24.730 --> 00:16:26.720
and it goes back and forth.

00:16:26.720 --> 00:16:29.455
She's certainly spoken to me about

00:16:29.460 --> 00:16:31.860
blind spots that I had, and

00:16:31.860 --> 00:16:34.875
also strengths and how to capitalize
on those strengths

00:16:34.880 --> 00:16:37.300
to make me become a better leader.

00:16:37.300 --> 00:16:39.660
And I know in the past, as she was just saying,
I've been a sounding board for her for sure in the past. And so it's kind of nice that it has gone both ways, both up and down between us over the years. They're our support group. We know that we're all kind of going through the same sort of thing. Whenever I need to vent, you know, I'll just call one of my NOAA Corps friends. And we'll just scream about things for a little bit and then it goes back to normal. They are people that I have maintained close relationships with that I feel comfortable asking for advice, asking for help, just keeping in touch, letting them know kind of what I'm up to, sharing stories, different things like that. Look above you and look below at folks who have gone before, folks who are coming up behind you. You're part of a really, fairly fabulous club or family. It's a pretty small alumni association of a group that's done some very, very, very special things.
You share a bond of service,

you've made contributions to the country like no one else has made.

You're like a family.

Although the idea of women in service is no longer the novelty it once was,

this is only because of bold decisions that created new opportunities and because of the courageous women who seized them and forged pathways for others.

Today, women serve prominently at all levels of the uniformed services and have boundless opportunities.

So, why is it still important to tell stories of women of the NOAA Corps?

I have no idea why it's important to talk about the stories of women in the NOAA Corps.

You know, to be honest, I wish that we weren't. I wish that we were just talking about stories of the NOAA Corps.

Like, who cares what you are as long as you
can do the work or have the skills, or have the training.

00:18:37.600 --> 00:18:41.260
I want my job because I'm qualified!
Not because I'm a girl!

00:18:41.270 --> 00:18:45.390
To be, like, a woman pilot I don't think it's one of, like, a news-breaking thing, you know,

00:18:45.390 --> 00:18:47.280
they've been around for quite a while.

00:18:47.280 --> 00:18:51.460
I've been in the NOAA Corps for 16 years.

00:18:51.460 --> 00:18:55.540
I have never, in my entire career, had any, I guess,

00:18:56.020 --> 00:18:58.200
reactions because I am a female.

00:18:58.200 --> 00:19:01.260
In my opinion, everything we do is about qualification.

00:19:01.260 --> 00:19:04.880
We get our jobs because we are qualified; it's not gender specific.

00:19:04.880 --> 00:19:09.470
Gender is a thing that, really, in my mind, I don't see it as an obstacle.

00:19:09.470 --> 00:19:13.590
I don't see it as something that's in the way of anybody doing their job.

00:19:13.590 --> 00:19:19.340
What I see is highly trained people in this organization going out and doing the things

00:19:19.340 --> 00:19:22.630
that they are passionate about and dedicated to.

00:19:22.630 --> 00:19:26.700
I can sympathize with the viewpoint that, you know, 'why are we talking about

00:19:26.700 --> 00:19:29.280
women in the NOAA Corps, it's about the Corps.'

00:19:30.460 --> 00:19:33.840
I was one of the few women in the Navy Reserve

00:19:33.840 --> 00:19:39.600
oceanography cadre when I was there, one of the few women at the outset in the NASA astronaut program.

00:19:39.600 --> 00:19:44.970
and I didn't see either of those as, you know, female quests or gender quests.

00:19:44.970 --> 00:19:52.060
That was a line of work, a role, a profession. I was qualified to pursue and interested to pursue,

00:19:52.060 --> 00:19:56.160
and wanted to earn my standing on the basis of being a qualified professional.

00:19:56.160 --> 00:20:01.110
I also cared a lot about, being Navy, being NASA.

00:20:01.110 --> 00:20:04.330
I didn't want to be some subpart. 'These are the real NASA people

00:20:04.330 --> 00:20:06.460
and we then have some girls.'

00:20:06.460 --> 00:20:10.120
And so, I get the not wanting to keep saying, 'here's the real NOAA Corps and then there are some girls'.

00:20:10.120 --> 00:20:13.160
or even to say, 'here's the real NOAA Corps

00:20:13.160 --> 00:20:15.020
and isn't it cute or isn't it amazing that girls are here,

00:20:15.020 --> 00:20:18.460
or that women are here?'

00:20:18.470 --> 00:20:19.600
It's neither cute nor amazing.

00:20:20:23.150
We all, I think, hope that we can get to a point

00:20:25.980 --> 00:20:28.940
where it goes without saying,
it's a given, and it's natural and it's accepted.

But the fact of the matter is, as a society and as an organization,

we're working our way through some of these shifts;

shifts in what roles are widely open or open at all to people of color, to people of different genders.

And it is, therefore, still notable by some and noteworthy to others that women are entering new fields; and the question of, 'well how are they doing in those fields'

matters to some.

I can see both sides of that.

I think there is a value to taking some time to talk specifically about the stories of women in the Corps for two reasons.

There will be women looking around, maybe still testing or questioning or wondering if that's a path for them and I think the example and a bit of a shared insight about 'what is this work,' 'what is this place,' 'what is this group that you're joining,' may help some of them steady up their course.
and hopefully draw them to NOAA and to the Corps and become part of the work that we're doing.

And, on the other side, there may well still be some men or others who think, 'I don't know what these women are doing here.' And I would hope that they, too, would take a look at this film and maybe get a fresh glimpse of the caliber, the competency, the professionalism, the integrity of the women who are serving alongside them as officers in the NOAA Corps; and come to see more clearly that, although they change clothes in a different locker room, they are on par: professional standing, professional footing, competency, commitment, dedication and passion.

They are true peers and true equals and maybe shift that mind set a little bit, too.

Looking back on life helps us to see the richness and meaning of our experiences, those events that shape us and become part of who we are.
We may travel winding and varied paths and face obstacles along the way, and, from this, gain new insights and abilities. We may be lifted up by others and connected like family. Challenges that seem indomitable at first, perceived through the wisdom that comes from experience may be met with surety and grace. What we discover through our life's work: our guiding principles, our values, or even just one word to live by, is a gift we give ourselves. If I had one word to describe the gift, or the most valuable thing that NOAA Corps has given me... If I to describe the last eight years in one word... Gosh, this is a tricky question! Ask the question again. I would say, "depth."
It's grown me,
challenged me,
pushed me,
stretched me;
but at the same time, been some of the most enjoyable experiences that I've had as well.

So I'd say overall it's given me depth of character, of experience, travel...
can't beg for anything else in that regard.
I think it's given me adventure.
I've been to several continents,
I've had the opportunity to fly in helicopters during oil spills,
dive with hammerhead sharks on remote atolls...
I would say, "passion."
"Interesting."
There are good days and there are bad days around here.
It's not always awesome, it's not always bad, but it's always been interesting.
But if you believe in what you do, and you love what you do, you can get through those
bad days and you can make those
good days even better.

And so you can do anything.

You know I don't really care if I have a good life,
or a fun life, or I make a lot of money.

I just really hope it's interesting.

And I think, so far, it's been that way.

The most valuable gift that NOAA has given me,

my first thought was my independence;
that I can stand on my own,

I've moved around seven times,

that I can show up to a new place,
continue in my career, reach for my goals.

That's what I like to think of my independence.

But then, I've got the counterpart which is the teamwork.

In my opinion, I love working with a group of people.

I would rather come to work and work
with a group of people than work on my own.

Which word do I use?

Independence has allowed me
to get where I am in my career,

but I love my career because the teamwork
that I'm actually able to be part of.

If I were to describe that in one word, it would be "resiliency."

"Command presence."

"Confidence."

Conducting operations is very dynamic and, to go out to sea,

you're constantly operating and managing risk.

The ability to, on a day-in-day-out basis,

take a look at what the environment is providing and being able to get the mission done safely

is something that takes a great deal of intestinal fortitude.

But being able to go back at it again, yeah,

I would say, "resiliency."

When I say, "command presence," I guess that maybe it only makes sense to

somebody in the service or on board ships but

that's a bearing that you have,

it's a tone that you have, it's calm but directed,

even if everything is hectic around you.
"Confidence" because, as I look back on my entire career,
you always have that question mark as to whether you can do something or not.
You might not show it,
you might not come across as being,
oohh... scared to death,
but that confidence level builds.
It builds a little bit more with each opportunity that you get
and you walk away feeling like,
'okay I can conquer the world and it's gonna be okay.'
These young ladies have done some, just, incredible things because they were given an opportunity.
I'm just so inspired and so impressed with the quality and capabilities
of the people that work for the NOAA Corps.
It's gratifying to see that the talent gets better and better and better and I think that's what you really ultimately hope for.
All of us can be very proud of where all of NOAA stands at this point,
not just the officers but the civilian side, too.

It's very positive.

I can never think about the NOAA Corps without reminding myself that President Thomas Jefferson started the ball rolling in 1807 with the survey of the coast.

As we look back at the history of the NOAA Corps now, we should remember to look all the way that far back and think about what that first impetus was.

And I find it fabulous and gratifying to look at the today of the NOAA Corps and say that's still what it's about.

It's the capacities to measure and monitor and understand our planet that are vital to the health and vitality of our country, of our society, and of our economy.

I have every confidence, if Thomas Jefferson were here today and maybe Alexander Hamilton along with him, who started the Coast Guard; they'd be amazed and tremendously proud of what the NOAA Corps has become and they would be
particularly impressed with the people who serve in the NOAA Corps.

00:27:55.960 --> 00:28:00.560
Being founding fathers they might be slightly astonished that women were serving in the NOAA Corps and serving in every imaginable position of responsibility.

00:28:00.560 --> 00:28:03.680
They would be hugely gratified to see how the glimmer in their eyes back then has lived through the years and continues today to serve the country and serve the planet.

00:28:10.360 --> 00:28:14.060
so brilliantly well.