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By David Bedard

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## **Alaska Air Guardsman advocates for military, STEM careers for women in pageant win**

**JOINT BASE ELMENDORF-RICHARDSON, Alaska** —For many Americans, getting behind the wheel for a first solo drive is a rite of passage that comes with a sense of exuberance at opening the doorway to automotive freedom.

That first zip down a bustling freeway without mom or dad scrutinizing every lane change can also come with jangled nerves at the idea of the training wheels finally coming off for good.

For Alaska Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Elizabeth McJannet-Bratton, noncommissioned officer in charge of Inbound Cargo, 176th Logistics Readiness Squadron, that rite of passage didn't come first behind the wheel of a Buick sedan or a Honda SUV, but behind the yoke of a Cessna 172.

After performing a few touch and goes at Augusta State Airport, Maine, with her pilot instructor looking over her shoulder, he told her to pull over after taxiing. Without warning or pretense, he told her it was time to drop the training wheels and fly solo.

Dumbstruck, McJannet-Bratton said she collected herself and talked her way through the checklist of procedures. After a few minutes of defying gravity without another human being within earshot, the then 16-year-old safely touched down, successfully realizing a childhood dream of taking flight on her own terms.

Another ambition the Air Guardsman recently realized was winning a statewide pageant, earning laurels as Miss Alaska Collegiate 2021 during an Oct. 24 competition in Palmer.

McJannet-Bratton's platform of "Combat Boots to High Heels" underscored her lifelong conviction that women can pursue careers in defense and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, without sacrificing a sense of femininity.

"The platform is about inspiring young women with the knowledge you can be in the military or a STEM career field, and also be confident in yourself while being as girly as you want to be," she said. "Those aren't mutually exclusive things."

The manifold path to capturing the Miss Alaska Collegiate sash began in Sydney, Australia, where McJannet-Bratton was born to an Australian mother, Michelle, and an American father, David. Her parents met in Anchorage, a city the Airman calls home, during a walkabout sojourn for both that had them crossing paths in the Last Frontier.

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The family moved to the United States when McJannet-Bratton was 2, settling in Erie, Colorado, where she grew up. David, a commercial pilot and aerospace engineer, worked on designing the Atlas V space rocket, inspiring his daughter to seek for herself a life of wings and rocket boosters.

"I basically grew up on Star Trek," she said.

A Girl Scout who lettered in choir and track and field, McJannet-Bratton's aeronautic pursuits led the 16-year-old to the Civil Air Patrol and an encampment that would further cement her interest in aircraft and the military.

During a subsequent summer camp at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, McJannet-Bratton said she developed a yen for the state on the edge of the Arctic.

"I came to Alaska expecting igloos and tundra, and was like, 'Wow, it's gorgeous up here,'" she recalled.

When she managed to snag a \$79 one-way ticket to Anchorage, the Coloradan decided to take a leap of faith. If it didn't work out, she could write it off as an extended vacation. But if she could find success, she thought she could make a new home.

She landed a job as a nanny and, after a month in the state, joined the Alaska Air National Guard's 176th Wing as an air transportation specialist with 176th LRS. A year-and-a-half later, she landed a full-time technician job with the unit and later reclassified to traffic management.

During her transition from a tenderfoot cheechako to a veteran sourdough Alaskan, McJannet-Bratton earned a Bachelor of Science in Aviation Technology from the University of Alaska Anchorage, and is pursuing a Master of Science in Global Supply Chain Management.

She never forgot her roots in the Civil Air Patrol.

### **Fail until you succeed**

The daughter of an actual, no-kidding, certified rocket scientist, perhaps it was fate that rocketry is a big part of the Civil Air Patrol cadet curriculum.

McJannet-Bratton said cadets start with simple foam rockets before graduating to more advanced model rockets. Finally, students have to successfully deliver an egg, or an "astronaut," into high altitude and deliver the passenger back safely to terra firma.

On her first attempt as a cadet, the junior rocket scientist's boosted vehicle suffered a failed parachute, burning in at a rate that unfortunately delivered an egg suitable only for an omelet.

With a better-prepared body tube, McJannet-Bratton's rocket glided back to earth, but insufficient packaging doomed astronaut Humpty Dumpty.

Finally, on her third try, the cadet managed to deliver an intact egg. Trial and error coupled with a studied analysis finally made for a successful outcome.

McJannet-Bratton attended her first pageant as a spectator in 2016, catching a bug that would lead to a lot of failure before hard work and study would lead to success.

“My impression of pageants was some women who don’t know a lot in pretty dresses walking across the stage,” she said. “After I did some research, I learned how the competitors have different platforms based on a belief of how to help the community. Most are highly educated.”

Competing in her first pageant in 2017, McJannet-Bratton failed to garner the top sash, but she got a first-hand glimpse of what is required to be competitive. Five days later, she was on a plane bound for Puerto Rico, recently devastated by Hurricane Maria, where she would work at an air traffic hub bringing in relief supplies.

Among those supplies was mail, which had been backed up for a month. The Airman said she was emotionally overwhelmed by a tidal wave of boxes with words of encouragement like “You got this” and “Stay Strong” scrawled on the outside.

“We worked all night getting all the cargo off, and it was all the stuff people were sending their families,” she recalled. “It was already a very humbling and impactful mission overall, but it was good to see that side of people helping each other. I am grateful to see that side of humanity.”

Living out her platform of Combat Boots to High Heels in reverse, McJannet-Bratton continued to refine the skills necessary to successfully compete. Through three more pageants, she learned to ace the backstage interview but would fall short in other areas of the competition. She was honing in on piecing all of it together for her eventual win.

Through it all was her continued service to the Civil Air Patrol as adult cadre, serving as the Alaska Wing director of Cadet Programs. She is responsible for working with cadet staff to plan and execute large-scale activities like the annual encampment that originally inspired her to serve.

### **Houston, we have touchdown**

In 2016, U.S. Army Reserve Capt. Deshauna Barber was crowned Miss USA. In interviews following her achievement, she talked about her upbringing by two career Soldiers as well as reconciling her “girly girl side” with her interests in the military, business management and information technology. As an inspired McJannet-Bratton knew all along, there need not be a conflict between the interests.

As far as the pageant interviews went, she said they reminded her of military boards. The poise and confidence she leaned on in one dimension was equally as helpful in the other.

The Airman said the platform that she would stick with throughout her pageant career, the platform that would ultimately propel her to be crowned Miss Alaska Collegiate arose out of a conversation she had with her sister’s friends growing up.

One friend expressed interest in being a biologist. Another replied that science was no profession for aspiring young women.

“I don’t want to do that, that’s for nerds, not pretty girls,” McJannet-Bratton recalled one of the friends saying during the conversation.

“No!” the Airman exclaimed. “You can do both of them. Do whatever you want and don’t let some outside perception change what you want to do.”

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1. **Attached pdf** includes story and a small selection of low-resolution photos for viewing on screen.
2. **DVIDS link** includes selected full-resolution photos. (Accessible from military computers.)  
<https://www.dvidshub.net/news/383332/alaska-air-guardsman-advocates-military-stem-careers-women-pageant-win>



Alaska Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Elizabeth McJannet-Bratton is the noncommissioned officer in charge for Inbound Cargo, 176th Logistics Readiness Squadron. She was crowned Miss Alaska Collegiate 2021 during an Oct. 24, 2020, competition in Palmer. (U.S. Air National Guard photo by David Bedard/Released)



Alaska Air National Guard Staff Sgt. Elizabeth McJannet-Bratton, noncommissioned officer in charge for Inbound Cargo, 176th Logistics Readiness Squadron, is crowned Miss Alaska Collegiate 2021 during an Oct. 24, 2020, competition in Palmer. McJannet-Bratton's platform was "Combat Boots to High Heels," promoting women's interest in careers with the military and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. (Photo courtesy of Staff Sgt. Elizabeth McJannet-Bratton)