

Transcript of Oral History Interview (edited)

Interviewee: Mara Langevin

Interviewer: Karen Lau

Date: August 8, 2022

Summary: Mara Langevin was the first minority, female pilot and Asian American, female pilot in U.S. Coast Guard history. In this interview, she describes her Japanese American and Cherokee heritage, her experiences throughout her Coast Guard career in flight school and aviation as a female pilot, and her current work in humanitarian assistance at USAID.

Karen Lau

[00:00:00]

Could you state your name and your position, please?

Mara Langevin

[00:00:03]

My name is Mara Michelle Langevin and currently, I am a humanitarian assistance advisor to the military with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance.

Karen Lau

[00:00:15]

When and where were you born?

Mara Langevin

[00:00:17]

I was born in Southern California, Hollywood, on August 20th, 1969.

Karen Lau

[00:00:25]

Could you describe your childhood, upbringing, and family?

Mara Langevin

[00:00:29]

I am the youngest of five children, so I have two older brothers and two older sisters. My mother was from Hawaii and my father was from Arizona. They met when my father was in the Navy, stationed out in Honolulu, Hawaii. My oldest brother and my sister and my other sister were born in Hawaii. And then when my parents moved to Southern California, my other brother and I were born, and it was a great year. We weren't very well off. My mother was a teacher. My father had some various different jobs. At one time, he was working for Litton Corporation, working on the spacesuit, and other times he was a substitute teacher ... I had a humble upbringing, but it was great to have my brothers and sisters in the house. We always had a full family in the house all the time. So, it was a good upbringing.

Karen Lau

[00:01:40]

Thank you for sharing about your childhood in your family ... You mentioned that your father was a veteran, and he was stationed in Honolulu. What was it like for you to follow in your father's footsteps? Could you tell me about your father's service as a U.S. Navy Korean War veteran?

Mara Langevin

[00:02:03]

My father was born in Arizona, and he joined the Navy in 1951. So, it was a few years after World War II had ended and the Korean War had started in 1950. He and his friends from high school wanted to join the military. So, one of his really good friends joined the Marine Corps, and he wanted to join the Marine Corps as well so the buddies could stick together. But his father did not want him to join the Marine Corps because he thought that that service was a lot more dangerous, seeing much more hand-to-hand combat. But he did allow my father to join the Navy. And so, my father joined the Navy. He always wanted to be a pilot, and he got into the aviation field. He enlisted. So, he wasn't an officer, but he ended up being an aviation's postman's mate in the Navy, which is basically a plane captain who takes care of the pilot's plane, pulls them out of the hangar, gets them started, gets them ready, does the engine checks, all those types of things. So, he was on an aircraft carrier during the Korean War, and that was his position. When I was growing up, he always loved planes, loved movies about dogfights and aircraft. We used to watch this show called "Baa Black Sheep Together," which was about Marines in World War II and the War in the Pacific. It was very much a dogfight, pilot-on-pilot type of movie. I enjoyed watching it with him. I enjoyed the flying scenes and the aviation. So, part of the reason why I went into aviation was because of my dad.

Karen Lau

[00:04:04]

I was just going to ask you if your father's time as a plane captain had inspired you to join flight school. When you told your father that you were accepted to flight school, what was his reaction?

Mara Langevin

[00:04:18]

He was very happy. I told him on the phone because I was in the Oregon at the time. I think he was very happy. He was a tough, tough guy. Back in the day, they didn't really show a lot of emotions. From what I gathered on the phone, he seemed like he was really happy for me.

Karen Lau

[00:04:45]

You mentioned that your mother was a schoolteacher. I read in an article by Dr. Thiesen that she expected all of you and your siblings to get full scholarships to college. What was growing up with that expectation like?

Mara Langevin

[00:04:57]

Yeah, that was a little bit stressful. We had modest upbringings, not a lot of money growing up in our household. She was a teacher, wanted everyone to go to college, but didn't have the funds to pay for everyone. So, it was expected that if you go to college, you would pay for it out of a scholarship. So, we all had to do well on grades, we all had to do well on our SAT tests. And it was a lot of stress because my sisters did their really well on their grades and their SATs. My brothers were not as good. But my oldest brother actually went off to the Air Force right away after high school. So, he ended up not going to college right away, but did go after his service in the Air Force. My other brother got a scholarship, actually. He went to the Coast Guard Academy. He got a scholarship there and then got medically disqualified for his vision, which was really sad, but then did end up getting a scholarship to USC for ROTC, Navy ROTC. We were all fortunate enough to get a scholarship. My oldest brother went to school afterwards. I think he might have used the GI Bill to get his college degree.

Karen Lau

[00:06:32]

Out of all the military academies, you decided to attend the Coast Guard Academy. Why did you make this decision? Could you tell me about your experience as a cadet and a student-athlete?

Mara Langevin

[00:06:44]

Yes, I did apply to all the academies. I did not get into the Air Force Academy. The Naval Academy said that they would accept me if I did one year of Naval Academy Prep School, which is called NAPS. So, I would have to do five years at the Naval Academy. The Merchant Marine Academy, West Point, and the Coast Guard accepted me. I thought about the missions of each service, really wanting to fly. Since the Air Force didn't accept me, I was like, "Wow, I'm not sure if I want to fly Navy missions for what the Navy did or the Army because their main mission is to shoot down and kill people." I think with my personality, the Coast Guard's [mission of] saving lives is much more suited for me. So, I ended up going to the Coast Guard and I was glad I did because it was a wonderful mission. The aviation part of it, the search and rescue, was really exciting and really rewarding.

Karen Lau

[00:07:55]

That's wonderful. What was the hardest part of the military lifestyle for you to adapt to? I've heard so many horror stories about Swab Summer. Could you tell me about that?

Mara Langevin

[00:08:04]

For me, there were a couple of things that are really difficult. One was being in an environment that was mostly male dominated. So, in our class, we were like 10 percent female and all the female cadets were kind of stuck in the same room together. So, I think

there was like four of us in one room. First of all, it's summer and the rest of the male cadets, fourth class cadets, they were just two in a room. [A challenge other than] being in this male-dominated culture ... for four years [was] time management, managing your time because you have to balance your schoolwork with your military education, like your military indoctrination. If you wanted to do sports, which I decided to do, you had very little time to juggle. I'm sure regular colleges are very similar with sports and academics, but then throw in another aspect of your military indoctrination and education, waking up at reveille, going to bed at Taps, certain times of the day, meals at set times, and managing all that together. The time management piece was really a hard thing to do initially.

Karen Lau

[00:09:38]

If you could go back to the start of your military career, what advice would you give yourself?

Mara Langevin

[00:09:43]

Yeah, I had to think about this question quite a bit. I think in retrospect, especially knowing that I was going to be the first Asian American female and first minority female pilot, I think I would have been prouder of who I was and maybe sharing more of my background, heritage, and culture with people. My way to survive in that environment was trying to fit in and assimilate to the environment. [I didn't try] to stand out [or] bring attention to [myself] so I'd be part of the ranks of the troops. That was the way I survived. I felt that was the best way to get through the hardships of the academy life. In retrospect, I think maybe I should have been more proud and more open and educated people on what's it like to be an Asian American or what my heritage is. I think if I could go back in time, I would tell myself that.

Karen Lau

[00:11:00]

I've heard similar responses from the female veterans that I've interviewed about how they wish that they, at the beginning of their career, wouldn't have just put their head down and did what they were told, that they would have expressed themselves more and hadn't been afraid to be themselves.

Mara Langevin

[00:11:15]

Yes, very similar feelings.

Karen Lau

[00:11:18]

What was your last position in the Coast Guard before you retired?

Mara Langevin

[00:11:22]

I was an instructor pilot and a standardization and structure pilot, which is over at the Aviation Training Center in Mobile, Alabama. As a standardization instructor pilot, we take all the pilots from the fleet from various different air stations and we educate them, train them, and then exercise them on the Coast Guard aviation standards, making sure that every pilot can fly at every air station and understand what the rules are, how to do the procedures and what the aircraft limitations are. Everything is standard within the Coast Guard and all the emergency procedures are conducted in the same way, so that if you're flying with somebody from a different air station, you can still communicate and know how to fly the aircraft. It should be seamless ... Everybody flies and uses the same rules.

Karen Lau

[00:12:34]

Could you describe some of your experiences during your first tour on the Cutter Resolute?

Mara Langevin

[00:12:39]

On the Cutter Resolute, that was my first tour. I was an ensign when I got to Astoria, Oregon, which is where the Resolute was. I was the only female aboard the 210-foot cutter. I believe there were maybe 100 folks on the ship, and I was the only female. That was a little challenging because [I didn't] have anybody to relate to or to talk to. It was similar to the Academy here in this male-dominated place, and I just had to fit in. We did a lot of fisheries patrol. In that area, Washington, Oregon, Northern California coast, and sometimes Alaska, we did a lot of patrols, law enforcement, making sure that people were following the fisheries laws, [ensuring that] they're not overfishing or fishing endangered species. We did some search and rescue on the cutter, and we did a couple of patrols down south where we did more law enforcement type [missions], looking for drugs. I was a deck watch officer, so my duties were to drive the ship during special detail. I was a maritime law enforcement officer. I would go out on these boardings, on these fishing boats, talk to the captain, make sure they had all the safety equipment, go down in the fish holes, and check the fish to make sure they were fishing the right species, which was, a lot of times, very awful because it was stinky, and I was seasick. Some of the times, [I was] dealing with older men who saw [me as] a little girl on the ship, because at that time I was 21 and I'm short in stature, not an overbearing personality. Sometimes, fishermen thought they could push me around because of being a woman, being younger, [and] smaller in stature.

Karen Lau

[00:14:58]

It's interesting that you brought up even in your service assignment, that you were being surrounded by men and it was male-dominated at the time. When I spoke with an U.S. Army major, she said that when she tried to find a mentor, the person that was above her said that his wife wouldn't be comfortable with him mentoring her. Did you have any of those conversations?

Mara Langevin

[00:15:22]

No, I didn't. I think that idea of mentoring was pretty new when I first got in. I didn't really look to find a mentor. It was more, just do your best and if there's somebody who's a good leader that you want to emulate, just talk to them, try and emulate them. There wasn't the term mentorship. I think there might have been, but it wasn't something that at least is now very much taught at the Academy. [Now, people can] find a mentor, find someone to help them, and find someone you can talk to and relate with. It wasn't that popular when I was in. There were a few women pilots who came aboard. Sometimes we had AVDETs, which are aviation detachments. For the ship that I was on, we had one 8865 helicopter that would stay on the back for the entire patrol ... For that patrol, they would work with us ... If they had a female pilot, she would stay with me. So, I met a couple of really neat female pilots while I was on the cutter, and ... when I became a pilot, there were some really impressive female pilots in the Coast Guard who I thought of as my mentors at the time.

Karen Lau

[00:17:00]

In 1993, you were selected for flight school. What were your initial thoughts upon learning that you were selected and what was the flight school training like?

Mara Langevin

[00:17:09]

Oh, I was ecstatic. When I found out I got flight school, that was like my dream come true. I always wanted to be a pilot. I didn't have to be on a ship anymore and get seasick all the time. I think [I had thoughts of] "Oh my gosh, am I good enough for this?" [There was] a little bit of self-doubt initially. [Then, I thought], "I got what I wanted and now I got to really work hard, excel, and get my wings." There was a pressure for me to not only get through, but [also] to excel.

Karen Lau

[00:17:53]

What does the achievement of becoming the first minority, female aviator in the Coast Guard mean to you?

Mara Langevin

[00:18:01]

Now, when I found out, it was kind of a shock. I didn't realize that I was the only female, minority pilot ... I did a diversity talk at the Coast Guard Academy for a diversity weekend. That was great. I guess it's a little bit of pressure, too ... I'm glad that I ended my career in a positive light for other coaches and especially the aviators. I can imagine if I was still in, it would be a little bit more pressure to be the excellent pilot ... but I'm ecstatic that I can help others, too. I've talked to a few people at the Academy, and they were so excited to have someone to relate to who is the first or in that position. When I gave that presentation to the Academy, they could relate to my stories. I'm happy that they had someone to relate to

because back in the day, I didn't have many people that I could relate to. I'm trying to mentor a pilot, she's an Asian American pilot as well, and I keep in touch with her. That's really great that she reached out to me, and I can talk her through my experiences as a flight student, try to help her get through the process, and be someone there that she can talk to, relate to. But she's killing it. She doesn't even need help from me. She's doing great, but that part of it is really fun and exciting to do so.

Karen Lau

[00:20:05]

It's incredible that you're able to give back and be the person for somebody else that you didn't have back then.

Mara Langevin

[00:20:12]

Yeah, that's really special. That's really a neat feeling.

Karen Lau

[00:20:17]

At a similar time when you were in flight school, there was an African American, female student who unfortunately wasn't able to finish. Why do you think it took so long for there to be minority women pilots? What kind of challenges do you think they faced that made them leave?

Mara Langevin

[00:20:36]

In the Coast Guard, since it is a seagoing service, and the focus is on ship driving and search and rescue. However, a lot of it is shipboard search and rescue. Aviation isn't for everyone. It's a difficult mission. It's a difficult job. It really takes a desire to be a pilot. Maybe part of it is the culture of the flight instructors. Early on, I know that in some services where it was more of a male-dominated area [like] aviation was, women were not accepted. In the Marine Corps, I had a friend who was the first female pilot in the Marine Corps, and ... it was very hard for her. There were pilots who did not want her to be there, didn't think she could do it, and didn't think she was strong enough, but she proved them wrong. I think there might [have] been a culture between back in the day of men thinking that women couldn't do this because aviation was so difficult. I don't know why they thought a woman couldn't do it because I mean, physiology says that women can be better fighter pilots because of the way our bodies form. We've got the same brain men have. There are very intelligent women who can do the same thing. It's that that old way of thinking, maybe it's fear. Maybe they think if women start entering this field or minorities start entering this field, it's going to take away their jobs. I have no idea what took so long.

Karen Lau

[00:22:49]

I think that's kind of a similar mindset that people had when the combat arms exclusion ban was lifted, and women were able to go into direct combat. Now we know that there are some positions that women are specifically better at than men because they're allowed to go into villages in Afghanistan, where in those cultures, men aren't allowed to approach or speak to women at all.

Mara Langevin

[00:23:12]

Right, right, the female engagement teams in the Army.

Karen Lau

[00:23:24]

Since you made history, there have only been two Asian American, female Coast Guard officers who have earned their wings, Susan Walters in 2008 and Adriana Gaenzle in 2012. How does this make you feel?

Mara Langevin

[00:23:39]

I was kind of shocked when I heard that. I thought there might be more. I thought at least from what I've seen in the Coast Guard in general, there's a lot more Asian American Pacific Islanders in the Coast Guard. Even when I went to the Academy, we were one of the [larger] minority groups within the Coast Guard. I thought there would be more, but I'm not sure why. It just could be because the Coast Guard is so much more of a seagoing service. And people when they join the Coast Guard, they look to being a ship driver or a ship captain. There are so many other things that the Coast Guard does, too, that could maybe draw the AAPI people towards that type of job.

Karen Lau

[00:24:43]

After you earned your wings, could you describe some of your search and rescue missions in the HH-65A Dolphin helicopter?

Mara Langevin

[00:24:51]

The primary mission for aviation is search and rescue. When you're stationed at the air station, you're on call for 24 hours with the heavy-duty pilots, and you're just ready to take the call when some ship goes down or someone's in distress. That's probably most of what we do. We also do law enforcement missions sometimes. Like I mentioned before, those are on the back of the ships as an aviation detachment. We would go out with the ships and do fisheries patrols or drug ops. There are specific aviation units that are solely drug law enforcement operations. I really enjoyed the Aids to Navigation missions that I did in the Coast Guard where we helped service lighthouses and marker beacons. I had a really good

relationship with the head navigation person down in Honolulu. I'd lower them down on this small rock where there was a nav aide. We had a really good relationship, and he would serve as the nav aid, and I'd bring him back up and I would take him out to the lighthouse. Those were always fun missions for me. We also had some missions where we worked with the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] (NOAA), and we would monitor marine mammals. In Hawaii during their migration season when they're giving birth to their babies, the humpback whales are all over Maui, off of Maui, and sometimes boats get too close. We would monitor the boats, [prevent them from] harassing the whales.

Karen Lau

[00:27:02]

It's great that you worked with NOAA. They do so much to protect marine wildlife and the environment. In the story of your first rescue, you describe the moment where you had rescued a pilot who then asked you where the pilots were and didn't really believe you when you said you were the pilot. How did this moment make you feel and were there any moments similar to this in your later rescue missions?

Mara Langevin

[00:27:24]

Yeah, I was a little annoyed. I mean, here I just picked him up and saved his life, and he was he didn't believe that I was a pilot. At first, I was a little annoyed and shocked that he didn't believe me. But then, I was thinking about how he just got rescued, maybe he's tired, maybe he's a little shaken up. I kind of thought it was funny after that and kind of blew it off, but it was typical. He wasn't the only one. There are a lot of other people who when I introduced myself, I'd come up in the flight suit and I had my wings ... so that only can mean [I'm] a pilot. I don't know what they thought I could be if I wasn't not the pilot. I suspect they thought I was like the flight nurse or maybe a mechanic. It happened quite a bit. People didn't believe that I was a pilot. There's a stereotype of pilots, at least when I got in, [that pilots were] tall and male ... So, if you don't fit that stereotype, then you obviously can't be [a pilot]. I think today is a little different, maybe I'm hoping.

Karen Lau

[00:28:51]

Not every pilot looks like Tom Cruise.

Mara Langevin

[00:28:52]

Exactly. There you go.

Karen Lau

[00:28:55]

You talked about your time as an instructor pilot in Mobile, Alabama. Could you tell me about your experiences at the Coast Guard's Aviation Training Center and what was it like to teach students the ropes?

Mara Langevin

[00:29:08]

It was an important mission. It was sometimes very nerve-wracking because you take a pilot who just got their wings, and they don't know anything about the aircraft. Part of what we did there in Mobile at the Aviation Training Center with the pilots that just got their wings is train them in the aircraft that they're going to be flying in the fleet. They know once they get their wings that they're going to be helicopter pilots and they're going to be 1860 pilots or 65 pilots. So, I took the 65 pilots who had not stepped foot in [the] HH-65 before, and I taught them how to fly the aircraft. I was their first look at the aircraft, the procedures, the emergency procedures, and how to fly the bird. It was important that I got everything right, everything textbook, because once you go in the fleet, you have to assimilate into that air station wherever it is. Everybody should know how to fly that aircraft in the fleet. So, it was an important job. It was scary at times, but it was really rewarding, too, because you're training your fleet pilot to do the right thing.

Karen Lau

[00:30:25]

That's amazing. In your different service assignments, what were the biggest challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?

Mara Langevin

[00:30:40]

In my first service assignment, I think one of the biggest challenges on the ship was seasickness, just being able to get under way and maintain my composure as a deck watch officer, as a combat information system officer, when I'm feeling like crap. Where I was stationed in northern Oregon ... we got underway in the Columbia River, and we hit the bar probably 20 to 30 minutes out of our port and it just starts. The Columbia River bar is very dangerous and it's very choppy. It can be very choppy. And so, you get sick right away. So, I guess maintaining composure when you're just feeling awful and you're waking up in the middle of the night to stand watch and being professional all the time ... I felt as being the only woman on the ship, I had to be very professional and not give anybody any idea that ... I was helpless or the woman who couldn't do something. I always had to be professional even when I was doing bad. I always had to be the leader.

Karen Lau

[00:32:13]

What do you recall about your relationships and camaraderie with your fellow service members throughout your career?

Mara Langevin

[00:32:20]

They helped. On the ship, I had some junior officers who were kind of like older brothers to me who I could talk to and who understood me. At flight school, I had friends who were going through the same thing I was going through, and we commiserated together. Even at

the air station, I had two really good friends who I can always lean on and always talk to. For the most part, nobody really cared that I was an Asian American female or a minority female.

Karen Lau

[00:33:35]

Throughout your career, where have you been stationed and what were some of your most memorable experiences interacting with the people and their cultures at these places?

Mara Langevin

[00:38:13]

When I was in the Coast Guard, my first duty station was Astoria, Oregon in the Pacific Northwest. It was a very small community and a lot of people within the community had Scandinavian or Finnish heritage. At the time that I was there, if you weren't blond haired or blue eyed, then you might get people who would tell you to go back where you came from when you enter into a store. But for the most part, there were many lovely people there and they had Scandinavian festivals in the summertime which were really neat. I learned a lot about that culture that I didn't know about. Then, I was stationed in Florida for flight school. Being in the South was an also another experience that being a minority, you sometimes get people who say comments under their breath about you and you don't know exactly what they're saying, but you can kind of tell what they're saying. I got to go to Mardi Gras in New Orleans for the first time, which was very interesting. I met my husband in flight school so that was one of the perks of being there in Florida. And then I went to Hawaii, and that was a great experience because my mom's from Hawaii and I had relatives there. The people in Hawaii are very diverse. There's a lot of different Asian cultures there, so I actually fit in completely in Hawaii and people even thought I was from Hawaii and local. I love the food, I love the culture, and that was easy. Then I went back to Mobile, Alabama, which was similar to Florida, the southern culture and Southern hospitality, but sometimes not for everyone. And the food was great ... I ended up leaving the Coast Guard right out of Mobile, Alabama, moving back to Honolulu, Hawaii. And I've been there ever since. In my current job, I've been to several different places, deployed to Kuwait.

Mara Langevin

[00:43:04]

Under my current position as a humanitarian assistance advisor to the military, I was sent to Kuwait on a deployment to support the Iraqi internally displaced persons response. Kuwait is a very interesting country. It's a majority Muslim country and the women wear complete black burqas. They don't cover their faces but pretty much everything else is covered and the men wear white robes ... The women eat in one place together and the men eat in another place together. You don't see them out together too much. It was a very different culture from the American culture. But I was on that specific response, and I had three months there. It was a learning experience for me in the Middle East, [learning] how people in the Middle East view different cultures, the sexes within their cultures, and different diverse groups within their culture.

Karen Lau

[00:44:32]

Throughout your Coast Guard career, do you have an estimate of how many missions you went on and how many students you've had?

Mara Langevin

[00:44:41]

The missions? I have no idea. It's probably quite a few. I know that I kept a logbook and I have over 1,500 flight hours. A mission is two flight hours. You got to do the math on that. But I did have the number of lives saved in my flight book and I saved 21 lives. It's a very proud number. I can remember that one.

Mara Langevin

[00:45:16]

I'd say new students, probably about ten. And then we would also get fleet pilots who had experience, who just needed to refresh themselves on certs or emergency procedures. And those we did more frequently. So, we would bring them in the simulator and then we'd give them all these emergencies that you can't simulate while you're actually flying because they're too dangerous. And so that was probably about 20 or 30 or so, I was only there for a year and then I got pregnant and had my son, so I had to take some time off.

Karen Lau

[00:45:58]

How have your service experiences affected your life and what have you learned about yourself during your service?

Mara Langevin

[00:46:06]

I think my service experiences have shown me that I can do things that maybe I thought I couldn't do. Sometimes, my confidence in myself is low and I'm not sure where that came from because I've been able to do quite a bit and accomplish quite a lot. But I think the service experience has helped me realize that if I really work hard and put my mind to something, that I can do it ... That's taught me that if you really are motivated to put your mind to it and work hard, it might not always come easily like it comes to some other people but try not to compare yourself to other people. Try to look at what you're given, the talents that you have, work with what you got, and just do the best you can.

Karen Lau

[00:47:05]

Could you describe the day you retired from the Coast Guard? What were your emotions like and how was the readjustment to civilian life?

Mara Langevin

[00:47:13]

I didn't technically retire. I was discharged. You only retire after 20 years of service, and I got out at 10. When I did make the decision to leave the Coast Guard, it wasn't easy. I just had my son, and I was wondering if I wanted to continue flying, continue with the pace of life that you have as a duty pilot or an instructor pilot, and then try and raise my kids at the same time. I think I made the right decision for me. I decided to get out, raise my children, and do something else afterwards. I really miss it. I am not going to lie. I do miss being a pilot and flying search and rescue, but I wouldn't trade my kids or the experiences that I had as they grew up in that, the early years, for anything.

Karen Lau

[00:48:15]

Could you describe your experiences working for the Center in Excellence and Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance and the USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance? How is this experience different from being active duty?

Mara Langevin

[00:48:30]

For the Center for Excellence, it was the first time for me working as a civilian and not in the military. It was still a military organization, though, so there was the hierarchy and reporting to another oath or higher authority and understanding and working with military units. It was very much similar to what I was used to as being in the military. The USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance is completely opposite of the military. It is all civilians. Most of the civilians that work there have either been in the Peace Corps or worked for a non-governmental organization or humanitarian organization. So, it's like the complete opposite of the military. It was actually pretty refreshing, although some things are frustrating because the military is very efficient. There's always a standard operating procedure. People give orders. The hierarchy is very clear. In USAID, it's not quite as clear. It can be very bureaucratic. It's more of a consensus. Let's have a meeting and come to an agreement together. [It's not the format where] the leader makes the decision, and everybody follows it. It's very different ... I think it's needed because in USAID, we work a lot with non-governmental organizations and U.N. organizations, and they're very much like that as well. So, it we can relate a little bit better at USAID because of the way we function with the people that we are, we work with, and we fund.

Karen Lau

[00:50:28]

Today, we see that militaries around the world are getting more and more engaged in humanitarian aid, especially with the war in Ukraine. We can see that giving weapons as aid is just as important as delivering necessary supplies and medical assistance to the people in these countries. So, my next question for you is why is the mission of humanitarian assistance so important and why is it important to you?

Mara Langevin

[00:50:52]

I think humanitarian aid is critical, and I think it's important not just to give that lifesaving assistance like food, water, and shelter immediately after somebody has experienced a disaster or a conflict. But it's also important to give them the tools that they need to be more resilient to a disaster and more self-sufficient to respond to their own needs. The foreign assistance you're giving, making regions strong, is not something that USAID does at all. We focus on humanitarian assistance, like the lifesaving assistance. But we also work in steady state where there if there is no disaster or if there is not a crisis at the time. We work with governments, and we work with non-government organizations to boost their capacity so that should there be a future disaster or a conflict, they're able to provide that needed assistance to the vulnerable populations and the people in need. It's critical. It frustrates ... the Department of Defense because it's a longer-term commitment and you don't see the results quickly. And I think a lot of the military is focused on results [and needs] to see something happen right now. But the approach that USAID takes is they will provide immediate assistance if it's lifesaving and if it's needed. But we're also working on like a longer-term goal and we don't want to do something in the near term that might affect our outcomes in the future.

Karen Lau

[00:52:34]

What was your experience supporting internally displaced people in Iraq in 2009?

Mara Langevin

[00:52:42]

It was an eye opener. It was culturally very different than what I'm used to. It was very frustrating to understand the politics of what was going on in that specific situation. There were people internally displaced from the conflict that had happened there between ISIS and the Iraqis in 2014, 2015. There were people who were living in [Internally Displaced People] (IDP) camps, who needed assistance ... I learned that the government ... is responsible for taking care of these people, but a lot of governments don't take care of their own people. And they were forcing ... internally displaced people in the camps to return to places that were not safe for them to go because they didn't want to manage camps. It was an election year and people were saying, "We have too many camps. We want to get rid of these camps." The government was trying to shut down these camps and there was no place for these people to go. Their homes were destroyed, and they were forced to live in the community that they came from. The people there would see them as ISIS sympathizers and want to hurt them. So, it was really a frustrating situation that we couldn't do anything substantive for these people. We try to work with the government, we try to work with the U.N., but ultimately, the government of Iraq is in charge of the people, the citizens in their country, and they have the ultimate say. It was very frustrating, but I still felt like we were trying to do good, and we were helping them with the little assistance that we were providing.

Karen Lau

[00:54:36]

Currently, you coordinate the DOD support to disasters in the Asia Pacific region as an adviser to the Geographic Combatant Command. How has this experience been?

Mara Langevin

[00:54:48]

Yeah, that's it's been an interesting experience also ... The DOD is very results-driven, and they focus on what can we do now to make change. It has to be immediate change especially with what's going on in the world geopolitically, [especially with] the focus to Asia, the shift to Asia in the U.S. government, the security situation, the defense situation [in] Asia. We're seeing DOD wanting to use humanitarian assistance more as a tool to gain acceptance rather than to actually help people they want to give humanitarian assistance to. Helping other countries and doing good [will] maybe help the other countries see who the ideal country is ... There's the big competition with China. China is also getting into humanitarian assistance in the Asia Pacific region. Do you want to be the first [country] to give humanitarian assistance rather than China so that we can look like the better country, the partner of choice? It's been challenging because U.S. works to provide assistance based on need, not based on politics. Yes, we are a government agency and sometimes we have to do things the U.S. government tells us to do, but the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance specifically tries to work within the humanitarian principles, ensuring that aid is given to those who most need it. It's been challenging sometimes working with the government and DOD.

Karen Lau

[00:56:54]

As an Asian American working on the DOD support to the Asia-Pacific region, do you have a special approach to these response missions, or do you feel a more personal connection to the people in these regions because of your heritage and your ethnicity?

Mara Langevin

[00:57:12]

I think maybe I do even though I'm half Japanese American and Japan rarely needs assistance from the United States. I don't normally see a lot of work in in Japan, but I think I know the Asian culture. There's a lot of similarities between the different Asian cultures and ... I feel some type of affiliation with the people that I'm working with. A lot of times, I'll go to countries, and I'll be mistaken for that culture. I've been to the Philippines, and they think I'm Filipino because I'm half Asian, or I'll go to Korea, and they think I'm part Korean. I think maybe I get accepted a little bit more when I go to those countries because I look Asian.

Karen Lau

[00:58:26]

What is your vision for your future in humanitarian aid? Is there a specific goal that you'd like to accomplish by the end of your career?

Mara Langevin

[00:58:33]

I would love to continue working with the U.S. for a few more years and then maybe work for an NGO and actually go at the field-level. In my current job, I'm working strictly with the military ... [as] the liaison with USAID ... when the military provides military assistance. My goal is to be a work at the field level, helping the actual people in need and working to help them be more resilient. I think that would be my goal in the future.

Karen Lau

[00:59:17]

That's a wonderful goal. For the last part of the interview, I have some questions about your identity as a Japanese American and a Cherokee American. When I think about the history of Japanese American veterans, the first word that comes to mind is "patriotic," especially when I think about the 442nd Infantry Regiment and their service in World War II, and all of the veterans that served even when the Army was segregated. When you think about the history of Japanese Americans in the military, what comes to mind?

Mara Langevin

[00:59:48]

I think the "go for broke" 442nd Infantry Regiment is the most famous one. We had our Senator from Hawaii, Senator Inouye, who was part of the 442nd. They come to mind first and it's just so motivating. When you realize that they were fighting for our country, who was [incarcerating] their own family members, it's really hard to imagine or fathom that. But the fact that they still did it and they fought so heroically is really inspiring and motivating. It's always something you can turn to when you are feeling a little segregated in your own country. You look to them and you're like, "Wow, they got through what they were [going through and they were] able to do it." Most of them got the Medal of Honor. They were just heroes ... You hear about the Navajo Code Talkers¹ in World War II as well. They were a big part of that war and winning that campaign. So, the whole Native American history, too, is like fighting for a country. [The colonizers] basically wanted to take them out and completely obliterate them from the country so that they can give the land to their different Western settlers. I think about that often and it's hard, but I still think the ideals of the United States, the larger ideals of democracy and the right for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, are important ... Those are things worth fighting for, but we have to remember the past. We can't forget about it or pretend it didn't happen. You know, it's scary, the [incarceration] of the Japanese. I was thinking about what happens if we go to war with China? With that the climate today, I can see that same thing happening to Japanese or Chinese Americans ... because the whole thing that happened with COVID and it's very scary ... We have to be a voice for [history] and make sure that never happens again.

¹ The [Navajo Code Talkers](#) were a group of 29 Navajo men who served in the U.S. Marine Corps in World War II by creating an undecipherable [code](#) based on the Navajo language. During the Battle of Iwo Jima, the Navajo Code Talker Marines transmitted over 800 coded messages successfully, contributing to many successes in the Pacific Theater.

Karen Lau

[01:02:41]

That's why I think Asian American studies are so critical at this point, when we just had an administration that explicitly spewed violence and hateful sentiment against an American community, a community that has constantly served the U.S. And when I think about Asian-American veterans, I immediately think of Senator Tammy Duckworth and her speech just after January 6th. She said that she was serving the U.S. no matter who the Commander in Chief was, no matter if she voted for them or not. So, I think that sense of patriotism is so unique to Asian Americans. Could you share some of your experiences with your own culture, learning about and celebrating Japanese and Cherokee culture and history?

Mara Langevin

[01:03:33]

When I was younger, I lived in Southern California, and we were fortunate because it is diverse there and there were a lot of different festivals. I remember my mother taking us to one dance festival, which is a huge Buddhist Japanese festival that would have Japanese dances with the lanterns, music, and taiko drumming. It was just really a neat thing. I remember they would have all different types of Japanese food and games that the kids in Japan would play. We would dress up in kimonos ... I remember her getting me a fan because it was a dance that you had to use a fan with ... We took karate. She did not teach us Japanese language ... Now, in retrospect, we were upset because that would be really neat. My dad took me to powwows. So, it's interesting how very similar the festivals [are]. They have a circle dance in the [Japanese festivals]. The Cherokee are the Native American community where you also have a dance. There's drumming and music and you're dancing around the circle. It's a community building thing ... The kids would get together and do the sand paintings ... In our house, we had one room that was very much my mother's Japanese room, which had Japanese [items] in it and dolls. In my father's room, he had Native American paintings and carvings of bears and totems. It was really neat because you're going one room and you're in one culture and you go to another room, another culture. So, I always thought I was lucky to have that. I associate myself at times with the Japanese culture, and then I sometimes associate myself with the Native American culture.

Karen Lau

[01:05:53]

Have you been able to pass down these cultures and traditions to your children?

Mara Langevin

[01:05:58]

I have tried while my kids live in Hawaii. There's a lot of Japanese cultural events that we go to. We've been to parades; we've been to festivals. There are tons of excellent Japanese food in Hawaii. I've taught my son how to make ramen and how to make sushi. Unfortunately, there's not a lot of Native American [culture] in Hawaii. They do have a powwow every year, and I did take my kids when they were a lot younger, but I haven't taken them lately. But my son actually was able to take Native American religions in college, and he really enjoyed that

... [There are] Native American cultures in the Southwest like California, Arizona, and Nevada, [but] we don't see that as often as we see the Asian and Japanese culture in Hawaii.

Karen Lau

[01:07:07]

Since your children live in Hawaii, do you have any thoughts about the U.S.'s colonization and annexation of Hawaii [as someone who has] served the U.S. military, which has historically been very colonial and imperialist, especially towards Asian and Pacific Islander nations?

Mara Langevin

[01:07:25]

The way we annexed Hawaii was very similar to the Native American situation. I'm not Native Hawaiian, but I do have friends who are, and I have a cousin who is. There's a lot of people in Hawaii who are still angry about that, and they have protests. There are people who are so against the protests and think, "That's so long ago. It's past history. Why are they still worried about that now?" It's still part of their culture. Who knows what would have happened if they were able to keep their land? You never know. One of the most recent protests was the Mauna Kea² Observatory. They wanted to build another observatory on one of the mountains, which is sacred to the Hawaiian people. There were protests up there. There were people who were saying, "That's silly. There's already an observatory up there. Why are they making a big deal about building a new one?" But that's their culture. This is their land. We took that from them. I think we need to be more sympathetic to their needs and what they're feeling ... I don't know the right answer to be more sympathetic to them or what to give ... but I know that we can't ignore it. We can't say it's silly. It's not silly to the Hawaiian people. They've got very valid concerns and very valid history against what happened to their people.

Karen Lau

[01:09:28]

I think those are the same arguments against building the Dakota Access Pipeline, intruding on sacred land and interfering with the spirit of this community. How has your identity as both a Cherokee American and a Japanese American affected your ideals of patriotism and service?

Mara Langevin

[01:09:52]

I think when I was younger, [my identity] had little effect to it. I was very much patriotic and wanted to serve my country. As I get older, I find out more about the truth of what happened,

² [Mauna Kea](#), a dormant volcano located on Hawaii's Big Island and the world's tallest mountain, has been the site of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) protests against constructing telescopes since October 2014. In Hawaiian [traditions](#), the mountain is an ancestor to the Native Hawaiian people, and they have a duty to protect its existence.

this suffering that people are seeing on the reservations ... It's a very hard life there. There are people who, especially during COVID, couldn't get access to health care ... [More] should be done. You can't forget about these people and let them handle it themselves. The people who are from those communities who serve in the military are very, very brave, kind of like the 442nd.

Karen Lau

[01:10:52]

In my past interview with a Korean American Coast Guard veteran, he described a "bamboo ceiling" that existed in the Armed Forces, where it was more difficult for minorities to get promotions. Do you believe this still exists today?

Mara Langevin

[01:11:06]

I don't know because I've been out for so long. It's been more than 30 years ... I wouldn't be surprised. There are not very many Asian Americans at the top levels of many corporations or many other civilian government jobs ... When I was in the Coast Guard, there weren't very many Asian American people at the higher ranks ... I hope things have changed for the better. [When] I went to the Academy for the diversity events, the number of amazing Asian American and Pacific Islander people that I met [was astounding] ... I was very hopeful that in a couple of years, they'll probably be really outstanding. Hopefully, they get out to the higher ranks.

Karen Lau

[01:12:31]

It's great that you were able to meet some of the Asian American leaders in person.

Mara Langevin

[01:12:35]

Yeah, some of the [young leaders] were there. They're ensigns now because they've graduated and since have gone to their ships.

Karen Lau

[01:12:47]

During the pandemic, there's been an increase in hate crimes against the Asian-American community, especially towards women and elders. Has this affected you in any way?

Mara Langevin

[01:12:57]

Yeah, it has. My sister is four years older than I am, she's an Asian American, female, elderly person. So, I worry about her and she's living in an area that's predominantly white. I worry that someone's going to go and do the stupid things that we've been seeing on the news. I don't understand it, though ... Why are we attacking vulnerable populations? ... It's cowardice ... Part of it goes back to the previous administration, the kind of hate that they

spread with the COVID. It's a mentality that unfortunately we're seeing more of recently and hopefully they'll stop.

Karen Lau

[01:14:11]

Hopefully, with more Asian Americans entering leadership positions in the military and in government, this will eliminate some of that racism, xenophobic sentiment that's out there. What legacy do you hope to impart to future Asian Americans and women who will enlist in the Coast Guard and enter flight school?

Mara Langevin

[01:14:51]

I hope people know that you don't have to be like a superstar to achieve. When I think about myself, I'm really humbled that so many people have reached out to me and asked me to do presentations because I never saw myself as being a superstar. I felt like I was the one of the average people in the world. I guess looking back on it, even you might not think that you're doing a lot or affecting a lot, maybe you are. Be proud of who you are and what you're doing ... Do it to the best of your ability. Help other people ... If you find yourself in a position to help other people, I think it's important to try to help. You need to try as much as you can to help those people, even if they're not like you, even if you don't have an affinity for them or you're not exactly like them, they need help.

Mara Langevin

[01:16:13]

In the Coast Guard and the military, if you're in a leadership position, be a good leader ... Worry about your troops and the people who are serving. They're key. You should think of yourself as second and them first because they're the ones you're responsible for. As a leader, you want to make sure that your troops are well taken care of. It's interesting because in the Marine Corps, the enlisted always eat first and the officers always eat last to make sure that that they get the best. I think that should be for all the military ... I think when you're a leader, you need to make sure that the people who you're leading [are cared for].

Karen Lau

[01:17:13]

That's great advice. Do you have a message for students who will be listening to this, who want to be the first to accomplish something?

Mara Langevin

[01:17:24]

Go for it. I didn't know I was the first one going through, so I had a probably less pressure on me at the time. If you want to achieve and be the first person, don't let anybody stop you. There are always going to be people [don't want you to] either out of jealousy or fear ... Don't ... even give them the time of day. Don't even worry about anything they say ... Don't listen to them. Focus on the people who matter. Focus on the people you're leading. Focus on the

people who are your cheerleaders. Focus on your mentors. Don't give any energy to those people who want to bring you down.

Karen Lau

[01:18:34]

That was really inspiring. My last question is, why should Asian American history and the stories of Asian American veterans be taught in schools today?

Mara Langevin

[01:18:47]

[AAPI history] is very important because so much of that stuff is not taught and so much of the history can easily repeat itself. We can't let that happen as a nation, as a democracy, as a free, loving society. I recently just found out about the Chinese Exclusion Act, and I am surprised that was never taught when I was younger, not even in college ... The things that we learned from are so important, just as important as the good things we do as a country. We have to learn from that, the negative things we do ... We need to learn so we don't make the same mistakes again. If we want to progress as a society [and] as a nation, we have to learn from our mistakes and from the good things that we do to progress. It seems so logical to me that that's the way we need to progress as a society. But it just seems like we're going backwards sometimes and it's very frustrating.

Karen Lau

[01:20:02]

I completely agree. I was privileged enough to learn about the Chinese Exclusion Act in high school, but at the same time, that shouldn't be the only part of Asian American history that students are exposed to. We should only be learning about the parts where Asians are colonized or excluded. We should be learning about their accomplishments and their heroism.

Mara Langevin

[01:20:22]

Absolutely, I totally agree. I don't even remember the 442nd Infantry Regiment Team when I was in high school being taught so very rarely do you hear of any Asian American hero being taught in school. I think Hawaii might be an exception just because there's a lot of Asian Americans in Hawaii. [My daughter] had a cool course that was Asian American history ... The opportunity to have it on the curriculum for kids to choose from is an important thing. There are so many Asian Americans who contributed to this country being what it is, the positive part of this country ... Other Asian Americans need to learn to be inspired, too.

Karen Lau

[01:21:38]

Thank you so much for doing this interview.