

Wife, mother, major: Third woman passes Army's test to be elite Ranger

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Maj. Lisa Jaster holds her daughter Victoria, 3, and her son Zachary, 7, following Ranger School graduation ceremonies on October 16, 2015, at Victory Pond in Columbus, Georgia. Photo: Robin Trimarchi/Columbus Ledger-Enquirer/TNS

COLUMBUS, Ga. — Major Lisa Jaster refused to give up.

That determination paid off Friday morning when she was awarded the Ranger tab, and the coveted badge was pinned to the sleeve of Jaster's uniform. It signified she had completed the Army's most difficult combat leadership course.

Jaster wasn't the first woman to graduate from the Army's Ranger School. Captain Kristen Griest and First Lieutenant Shaye Haver were the first female soldiers to earn that honor two months ago.

Yet Jaster's accomplishment is no less significant. She is a 37-year-old mother of a 3-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son. When her son had his birthday in August, she missed it. She was completing 180 days in a course that takes 62 days if a soldier goes straight through without repeating a stage.

New Ranger Is Also Engineer, Reservist

Jaster, a graduate from the United States Military Academy at West Point in New York, also has a day job. She is an oil engineer in Houston and serves in an Army Corps of Engineer Reserve. She is married to Marine Lieutenant Colonel Allan Jaster.

She also becomes part of the first father-daughter Ranger duo. Her father, William Peplinski, also a West Point graduate, completed Ranger School in 1969.

"There is no quitting," Jaster said in a news conference before she and 88 other soldiers graduated. "I can't have quit in me. So, there was never an option to stop."

Still, that doesn't mean she didn't think about it.

Jaster, Griest and Haver were part of a group of 19 women to start the course April 19. The soldiers were forced to train with little food or sleep. They had to learn how to operate in the woods, mountains and swamplands in preparation for battle. Jaster, Griest and Haver were the last three women by early July. The other 16 women had been dropped from the course by the Army.

Determination Carried Her Through To End

On a day in late July, Jaster's iron will was tested. Griest and Haver moved on to the final phase of training in the Florida swamps. The three women had been on track to graduate together. Jaster was crushed when she had to stay behind and repeat the phase.

"I remember Kris coming over happy, expecting me to say I was also moving on," she said. "She gave me the biggest hug and I looked at her literally with tears in my eyes saying, 'I'm done. I can't do this.'"

Then Jaster looked at a photo she carried throughout the course, of her children Zac and Victoria dressed as superheroes.

She remembered she had come to Ranger School to be a hero for her children and changed her mind.

This Is First Time Course Was Opened To Women

The Army opened Ranger School to women for the first time this year as military leaders weighed the decision of opening more combat jobs to women. Being part of this historic test program motivated Jaster to step out from her comfort zone.

"I wanted to do something," she said. "I wanted to better myself as a leader and I wanted to help the Army" decide whether or not to allow women in Ranger School. If Jaster gave her best effort, she hoped to play a part in helping answer the question.

That question was answered shortly after Haver and Griest graduated on Aug. 21, when it was announced that Ranger School would be open to all qualified soldiers, men and women. The next course that starts in November is expected to have female soldiers, military commanders have said.

Griest, a military police officer stationed at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and Haver, an attack helicopter pilot stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, were at Fort Benning, Georgia, on Friday to watch the graduation, and celebrate with Jaster after.

Ranger School Was Tougher Than She Anticipated

Jaster was humbled during the six months she was in the school.

“I thought I was smarter — I thought I knew more,” she said. “I told my boss, ‘This is easy; physically I can handle it. I will be back in nine weeks, don’t worry.’ It has been 26 weeks.”

Jaster was surprised she was not treated differently because of her gender. Being male or female was not a factor throughout the course, she pointed out.

“The thing that surprised me the most was the professionalism of my peers,” she said. “I thought there would be more resistance. But once you get in the field and once you start training shoulder to shoulder, gender stops mattering very quickly. And it was, ‘Can you accomplish the mission.’”

Jaster proved yes, she could.