

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 35
Colleen McGuire

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is retired Brigadier General Colleen McGuire. General McGuire retired from the United States Army in 2012 after an illustrious 32 year career in which the Missoula native and U-M graduate accomplished many firsts. She was the first woman to hold the army's highest law enforcement office. Provost Marshal General and the first woman to head the Army's premier felony investigative arm, the Criminal Investigation Command. She's taking fire and combat and led critical work on sexual assault and mental health in the military.

Colleen McGuire I really felt that after 32 years, I wanted to come back home. You know, it's funny. I left Montana's 23, and I wanted to go out and see the world, and I did, and then I spent 25 years trying to get back to Montana.

Justin Angle Colleen now describes herself as a rancher, explorer, outdoors enthusiast and curiosity aficionado, and she splits time between her home and Kalispell and her ranch in eastern Oregon. General McGuire, thanks for coming on the show today.

Colleen McGuire It's a mouthful. I'm calling from now.

Justin Angle I'm calling you OK. Well, how is actually going to ask do people just refer to you as general or brigadier general? Like how like, there's so many great nations of various ranks? What's what's the appropriate honorific?

Colleen McGuire You know, I've always been calling, but of course, the military doesn't permit that. So thought it was always either ma'am or your rank and general, even though brigadier general, you're addressed as a general. But yes, there's clear levels of general and I'm at that first level.

Justin Angle Well, tell us where you grew up and what did your parents do?

Colleen McGuire I grew up in Missoula, Montana, right here, right near. Then was Washington Grade School Central High School in the University of Montana. I just went to all schools here. My father was in the army reserves and he also worked at Fort Lewis and was a student here. And my mother worked out of home as well. She was also a student for a short period of time here at the university, and she worked for Dr. Carol and Dr. Bob Ammons right here on campus. That's where I got a job here that actually helped me get through college. And but then she also worked for the county welfare as well.

Justin Angle And so you had two brothers serve in the military as well. Was the, you know, service in the military a choice right from the start because you are an ROTC student when you were here, right? Not on your radar, right from the start?

Colleen McGuire No, not at all. As a matter of fact, I had three brothers that actually three of my four brothers all served in the military. It was a way of life. It was something to do. And so we grew up around the military. We all grew up polishing dad's boots and the like. So the military was always an option. And because it was in our family and his brothers also served in the Navy and the Air Force in the army as well. So yes, it's it's in the blood.

Justin Angle Pardon me for being stereotypical, but you know, during your time here, you're active in your sorority or on the cheerleading squad studied TV production. These are the sorts

of things that that predict a different type of career than 32 years and right in the army. Talk about the decision to enter enter into the into the military after graduation.

Colleen McGuire Oh, it has to start back when I was in high school, when I was about to graduate from Sentinel, I knew that I was going to come to the university Montana. I had received in a scholarship through the Montana Broadcasters Association, which got my foot in the door at the University. That helped tremendously. So I was also looking for another avenue, another money stream. So I was like, Well, why not? The Army reserves? So I enlisted in the Army reserves when I was still a senior in high school, and that summer before I started school here at the university, I went to South Carolina for basic training at Fort Jackson and found that I loved it. I really did like the regimen, and I liked living in a different part of the country and I enjoyed a different group of people and so I enjoyed it, came back to here and went to school. And then my junior year of college is when I transferred my reserve obligation to ROTC. And so I didn't join ROTC until my junior year. And then I knew. That when I graduated, I would for sure have a job, right?

Justin Angle Sure. Yeah.

Colleen McGuire This is the late 70s and so were it's a different economy. And so I wanted to have a guaranteed employment. But also, to be honest, I want a little adventure as well. Yeah. And so that's that's what got me into the military and yeah.

Justin Angle And fairly early on, you got into the the police side of the military. Is that right?

Colleen McGuire Right.

Justin Angle Talk about that choice.

Colleen McGuire So who would have thought having a degree in broadcast journalism, right, that all of a sudden I'd want to go into law enforcement looking at all the different fields? The opportunity to get into broadcast journalism type of arena really was in the Navy, and the Air Force had a good program in terms of public affairs and the army. They to have a very good program, public affairs, but you can't enter into it until you've already been in the military for about five six years. So I wanted to do something a little more exciting and back then combat arms fields. Infantry and armor were closed to women, right? But military police was also one of those that was currently open to women and had more of a combat role, not your typical law enforcement. It had that as well. I think the physical aspects of, you know, the law enforcement and combat support really appealed to me. So that's why I went law enforcement.

Justin Angle Talk about your experience with military law enforcement. You rose through the ranks. You describe, you know, this choice is one that was one of the few sort of close to combat type of experiences open to women, and you rose through the ranks into roles that women had not occupied before. Talk about some of those experiences

Colleen McGuire when you said about your career. Regardless, you know, military, wherever in the civilian arena, business arena, whatever. I didn't set out to to break any glass ceilings. You know, I am going to try to go do this and I want to challenge myself and do this. I just did the job the army sent me to. I was 23 years old. Now I'm a platoon leader in charge of 40 men, no women, 40 men. There were all about my age or older and I'm their boss. From there then I did go to a law enforcement assignment in Darmstadt and I bounced all over from, like you said, I. I did my physical security, I did law enforcement, and then I also did combat support and that another field that kind of surprised me about the time I was promoted to lieutenant colonel and was now looking for a battalion command position, which of course, you know, you don't have a choice and they, you know, direct. This is where you're going to go. You can make a request. It doesn't mean you're going to get it. Yeah. And in my case, I made requests for other organizations than the one that I got in. That was with the United States disciplinary barracks

as the battalion commander for our military prison. And I had never worked in and in prisons or anything. And again, I felt like back to that first assignment that I had. It was leadership all over again at the graduate level, now working with soldiers who had to look over and care for our inmates.

Justin Angle Gosh. And so talk about that work environment. You're leading a team, but you're also overseeing folks that have lost their way and made bad choices and done, you know, a wide range of bad things. Talk about that experience.

Colleen McGuire It's it's daunting. Certainly, I was again another first, the first woman to command the battalion. And then about several years later, I came back to Leavenworth and commanded the prison proper. My focus was always take care of the soldiers. Mm-Hmm. That's a tough job. It really is. It's a thankless job. I really do admire even in our state and federal facilities. Those guards, those jailers, those people that ensure that the rules are followed inside the prison. So my focus was always on the soldiers because I figured if the soldiers were doing their job properly, then the inmates were being well cared for. Very interesting. In the military prison environment, compared to your federal state county, you know, local is that every single one of your inmates or are our high school graduates OK because they had to all have passed the muster in order to join the military? And so they're all very bright, all very smart, ambitious. And that, too, is very dangerous in terms of the games inmates play.

Justin Angle A lot of said about the military, probably mostly by people that don't know what they're talking about, but there's a lot of hot takes about how it functions as a bureaucracy and as a meritocracy. You advance through this system in kind of a pioneering way into roles that women did not occupied before, in a way that most members of the military, regardless of gender, race or whatever, haven't, you know, advance to talk about that system of meritocracy and bureaucracy.

Colleen McGuire You know, it's been 10 years since I left the military, and I can still honestly say, you know, sometimes when you think back on things, you know, you now have a different perspective. But I can honestly say the process works. I find it is as fair as fair can get. Were there opportunities that weren't offered to me, let's say, because I was a woman? Oh yeah. Yes, there was. You know, and that's another whole discussion. But did I think that I always had a fair shake? Yes. You bet. I thought that the doors were open to me. I never felt as though they were closed unless policy or law closed those for me. And those were always changing. I mean, look at now. I mean, the number of Four-Star generals we have that are women. Look at the different fields that women are in now. They're all you know now. You can be in special forces for heaven's sake. Infantry, if you can prove your merit, then you should be able to do that, right? Well, they've ponied up. It's it's I think the military does give you the opportunities if you're willing to work hard and, yes, make sacrifices.

Justin Angle And so one of the things that is remarkable is that operational effectiveness carries over from political regime to political regime in many ways. I mean, and in thirty two years, I mean, you served for Democrats or Republicans. I talk about that experience and how, you know, in some ways the military stays out of politics, but in other ways, it's it's an arm of politics to talk about that relationship.

Colleen McGuire It's very clear to a soldier the president is the commander in chief. And so for me, growing up, it really the only time that it made a difference in terms of what political party the president was in, it was always our commander in chief was usually through fiscal policies. And it was when I was at the Pentagon is where you really have that power of influence. And that's when, you know, we were talking about the meritocracy. Let's talk a little bit about the bureaucracy. Sure. So at least a third of my career 10 years was in in the Pentagon and in the Washington, D.C., area. Not only is it a fascinating building, but we've kind of personified that place, you know, so it's now got its own identity. The Pentagon, you really, as an individual, can really make a difference and influence. And one of the ways I did that was through working

with the Army's Suicide Prevention Task Force and how just the work that my team did under the leadership of General Pete Chiarelli, who was the vice chief of staff at the time.

We were really able to at least identify some of the issues that soldiers were going through that was contributing to the spate of suicides and self-harm that we were seeing that at the time because the the way that we monitor and track self-harm and and suicides and the like is that it is particularly in the military. But the army in particular, C.I.D is the sole investigator.

Justin Angle CID? Define that.

Colleen McGuire The Criminal Investigation Command. OK? And it was messy ideas, actually criminal investigation division but it's actually the command. And they investigate all unattended deaths. So it had a standard of investigation and reporting was within days. Now you look at the whole United States and the army came under a lot of scrutiny because, you know, why are we sending all of our, you know, our treasure to you and they're killing themselves or they're dying or self-harm and the like? What are you doing to them? And we kept on trying to say, we're just a microcosm of the United States. It's out there as well. Oh, no, you know, you have so many more suicides going on in the army. Well, now fast forward several years, 10, 15 years. We now all recognize that there is just a problem with with suicide and. In self-harm. And one of the discoveries we made was the co-morbidities that come with multiple diagnoses, but also multiple pharmaceutical solutions.

Justin Angle Sure.

Colleen McGuire OK. Hence, the opioid drug interaction.

Justin Angle You bet. Self treatment and you

Colleen McGuire and the opioids, you know that whole. We we crack the code on that one as well. And so a lot of our medical processing now and in paperwork and records has changed because of that study. It was in the work that we did. A lot of things have come of it to include what were some of the variables that were affecting our soldiers? Well, one poor diet were on no sleep. Mm hmm. And then, of course, the readily available opioids. Yeah. So all of those combined with a protracted war.

Justin Angle We'll be back to our conversation with Colleen Maguire after this short break.

Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with retired United States Army Brigadier General and native Montanan, Colleen McGuire.

Yeah, I mean, longer periods of war than we'd ever experienced in multiple deployments.

Colleen McGuire In multiple deployments. You bet. And so just that period of time that I was in the Pentagon from about my my last tour there that started in 2008, I had just come off of an 18 month deployment to Iraq and then was assigned to the Pentagon and then was assigned to look at this, this concern that the leadership had about our soldiers. So from 2008 until 2012, when I left the military, a lot of a lot of work was done and a lot of changes were made.

Justin Angle And so maybe talk about how some of those changes have maybe come to fruition. I mean, we hear a lot of reporting about, you know, how well we do by our vets.

Colleen McGuire You bet.

Justin Angle What were your thoughts on that? Are you willing to talk about that a little bit?

Colleen McGuire Well, hearken back to the Vietnam War a little bit and our well deserved veterans that never got the recognition when they came home. And the horrors that they had

to deal with there in Vietnam and then coming home and dealing with a whole different set of horrors that we didn't really fully appreciate, understand or admit mental health issues. Yeah. And what came of and defined now is PTSD or PTS. And I think now we have all accepted that and we have the means to deal with that. Now we're looking at other remedies and recognition when we see somebody that isn't just quite themselves, right. We're not opposed to giving them some time off, maybe send them to a wellness clinic or facility learning how to do meditation. There's now an appreciation of yoga. I mean, we're back back in the 70s, while yoga was really big and in the 60s, you know, started all of that. It was just that was like counterculture.

Justin Angle It had all of this other baggage attached to it. Like soft, and foo-foo.

Colleen McGuire Oh yeah. Oh yeah, you bet. And now soldiers engage in that, you know, to some degree. I mean, there's now a greater appreciation of different means of dealing with pain; physical, mental and how they interact and or manifest with each other, you know?

Justin Angle Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, it's about execution and decision making, right and whatever can contribute to better execution, better decision making. You got to take it.

Colleen McGuire And let's look at our diet. You know, let's let's let's cut out all those packaged things. Here's another one for you, too. I was a single parent the entire time I was in the military. That was unheard of. So, in fact, often challenged that, you know, I could never say, well, I've got to, you know, pick up my child from daycare. You never said that. You made arrangements to make sure that your child was taken care of. But if you needed to work 24 hours and like I did one time and it was, it was my poor daughter who was only two at the time was passed from friend, a friend, a friend while I had to work unexpectedly when we invaded Grenada. So operation just cause and I was working at the Pentagon as a young captain and they said, well, we need you to take the Army Operation Center. You've got to pull shift down there, like in, you know, 20 minutes and you're going to be there for the next 12 hours. Wow.

Well, I had a near-infant child. I had to take care of, so I'm making telephone calls to thank God. The army family is the family that it is. And so the Auld took care of my daughter while I had to do that. So.

Justin Angle So you mentioned you retire from the military in 2012, and is that the point at which you went to go work for Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel?

Colleen McGuire Good friend of mine General Dave Patton, who was assigned working for the secretary of Defense at the time, recommended that I be part of the military response to sexual assault in the military. And so I was open with a panel of women. I was the only law enforcement perspective. Most of that was legal. That was over the course of several years that we went through a series of discussions and testimonies from women to to look at, you know, the military response. It was a great opportunity to still be able to influence and be a part of at least discovering what was going on in terms of the response to sexual assault. I would argue from a from the law enforcement perspective, it's pretty. It's pretty rock solid. I mean, everything can be improved upon. But I felt confident, particularly within the criminal investigators of the army, that they were well-trained and. Hard to deal with sexual assault.

Justin Angle So let's talk a little bit about your time since you've retired, moved back to Montana, you've been here. What about six years living up in Kalispell and splitting time with a ranch out in eastern Oregon? What's what's retirement been like for you?

Colleen McGuire So her retirement, it's been busier than, I think than when I was active duty military. The decision to retire was was hard for me, but you know, it came. I wanted to leave on a high and it was a high. At the time, I was working for the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. We had a sit down chat about really, why are you retiring? You know.

Justin Angle You have more to do.

Colleen McGuire You got more to do. And I really felt that after 32 years, I wanted to come back home. You know, it's funny. I left Montana, I was 23, and I wanted to go out and see the world, and I did. And then I spent 25 years trying to get back to Montana. OK, saw the world. I know what's good. I want to come back home and you have grandchildren. I have grandchildren. I have. So my daughter made the choice for me where I was going to live. I was looking to come back to Missoula. But when my daughter and her family live in Kalispell and definitely wanted to head up north and. And I love the community. It is again, it's the playground, you know, and and I'm still very active in bicycling and hiking and skiing and downhill and cross-country and all of the the fun outdoor Montana's stuff we do.

Justin Angle Your LinkedIn profile this: you described yourself as a curiosity aficionado. First of all, that's like a fantastic turn of phrase, but what does it mean to you to be a curiosity aficionado?

Colleen McGuire Oh, everything from early morning reading the news and especially, you know, I read the news like most everybody now anymore on the internet, right? And then I start spiraling into these rabbit rabbit holes because that's really interesting. Yeah, I am curious about everything, anything, and I get that definitely from my father. I mean, if it's not amateur astronomy, I'm also a ham radio operator. I like to sew knit all those type of things. I'm renovating a house. I have my hands in all sorts of things right now and of course, ranching. Why not?

Justin Angle Right. Tell us about that.

Colleen McGuire So I was in Iraq, and my deputy at the time asked me what I was going to do when I grew up. And I really did not have a good retirement plan, so to speak. I just knew that I had been fiscally diligent throughout my career, and I knew that I didn't have to work if I didn't want to. And so I wanted to just I said I was going to travel and spend time with my family.

And he said, Yeah, well, that's going to last about three months, then what are you going to do? And so I started a ranch with him.

Justin Angle OK.

Colleen McGuire And so I started a ranch in eastern Oregon where my partner and his wife and family, they've already had started a ranch. And so I started out there with them. And I've got me. I've my little ranch. It's a little over 200 acres, about 100 cow calf pair, and we run an Angus Cow calf operation. Yeah.

Justin Angle Commercial herd. That must be something. It is. Get out there and just pay an entirely new experience.

Colleen McGuire Iowa's a Missoula City girl, really. You know, I mean, yes, I love the outdoors and I do all of that. But I was not a rancher. I have learned again, I have learned so much, you know, I just constant learning inspires me. And then just learning how to run an operation like that is has been really fun. It's made me poor. Not really, but it's it's it takes a lot of time, a lot of energy, and I enjoy it. And I think it's a great way for me to pass on to my grandchildren. Also, the culture of what the West is all about super well.

Justin Angle We started this conversation with, you know, questions for me about titles, and we have to have another conversation about that. You recently awarded an honorary doctorate at Fall Commencement here at the University of Montana. So should we call you General Dr? Like, what do you prefer?

Colleen McGuire Colleen Okay. Like we said in the beginning, we'll stick with that. What an honor. I was really quite surprised. And I don't really, to this day, know how that came about. I mean, University of Montana's been such a huge part of my life. I'm amazed by the what the university is doing. I'm so encouraged by it. It has changed so much. And my father laments

being a Vietnam-era veteran that he wished he had had the same experience that I had and am having, and that the students today are having on campus compared to what he had. It is it is so much more hopeful here on campus since his time, I just I'm just surprised by it. I really am. And it is a huge honor and it says a lot about the university in how they recognize accomplishments of not only their alumni, but the fact that it's a recognition of what I did while in the military is, geez, it's a it's a 180 turn from the reputation that the university, whether deserved or not, had the late 60s. Mm-Hmm.

Justin Angle Yeah. Yeah, well, I feel like I've personally benefited from your service in so many ways, Colleen. It's been an honor to meet you, spend some time with you and thanks so much for sharing your story and insights with our listeners.

Colleen McGuire It was an honor. Thank you very much.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by first security bank Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. AJ Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.