JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

The Military Offers Women Pay Equity and Opportunity, but Few Still Make Top Ranks

Though the armed services tout themselves as a meritocracy, for women the promise remains elusive

Maj.Gen. Maria Barrett, left, and Brig. Gen. Paula Lodi are the first sisters in the Army to both attain the rank of general. PHOTO: EMAN MOHAMMED FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Nancy A. Youssef

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Military tradition holds that when an Army general is promoted, he bequeaths his old rank from the shoulder of his uniform to someone he thinks should be promoted next—a practice that has historically allowed men to pave the way for other men.

At the promotion ceremony for Army Maj. Gen. Maria Barrett last year, however, she handed her old, one-star shoulder boards to her sister, who donned them this summer when she became Brig. Gen. Paula Lodi, making the two women the first sisters in the Army's 244-year history to reach the rank of general.

Their careers and those of female generals and admirals before them, as well as countless other ambitious women in the military who have not reached the highest ranks, help illustrate many of the challenges but also the promise for women leaders in the military. The challenges include not just the basic difficulties that all officer candidates must and should face, but difficulties arising

from gender discrimination and often organized opposition by male peers. This at times can include sexual harassment.

The armed services tout themselves as a meritocracy, where people from all walks of life can enlist and then move up through perseverance, commitment and hard work. For women, however, this promise has proved elusive. While some of the barriers for women moving into the highest officer ranks have been slowly lifting, women still aren't promoted at the same rate as their male counterparts.

That's why the promotion of these two sisters is a point of pride for the Army. Fathers and sons, brothers and even couples have reached the rank of general, but never sisters.

To reach the milestone, Gens. Barrett and Lodi were often the first women to lead in the select jobs open to them, in the few fields that offered a pathway for promotion. Gen. Barrett has specialized in cyberwarfare and communications. Gen. Lodi has spent the bulk of her career in Army medicine.

Gens. Barrett and Lodi and their fellow women military leaders rose through the ranks even as some of their fellow service members did not believe females should be in the service, and as sexual harassment and better career options elsewhere caused some of their colleagues to leave the armed forces.

Women who have reached the top levels of the military have said they could not have done it without the support of male commanders and the quiet mentorship of women who preceded them.

A spokeswoman for the Pentagon says it has sought to address the challenges women in the military face, in part, by training commanders and including women in discussions about ways to make the military more welcoming and safe for women.

“Although the Department is not immune to many of the challenges we face in society at large, we hold ourselves to a higher standard,” Pentagon spokeswoman Lisa Lawrence, a civilian, says. “The new programs and policies we have implemented are positive steps forward, but more work remains and we are absolutely dedicated to ensuring opportunity for all qualified personnel regardless of gender,” she says.

Women who choose a career as a military officer often say it is because of the leadership opportunities.

Gen. Barrett says that early in her career, making general wasn’t her end goal. Rather, she says, “being poised to accept more responsibility is how I would describe my experience.”

Moreover, while pay gaps have long dogged women in the corporate world, the military adheres to a rigid pay system that is based on rank and allows few exceptions. Female officers interviewed by the Rand Corp. for a 2018 study commissioned by the U.S. Air Force also cited as

reasons for staying in the military such benefits as the availability of medical care, access to military housing and the retirement program.

Certain military traditions, however, still present greater hurdles for women in the service than they do for men.

While female executives in the business world can reach the top echelons of their companies in a number of ways, the U.S. military prefers officers who went to college at service academies, led certain forces, served on certain deployments and worked with specific generals to keep rising in the ranks. Women, meanwhile, are underrepresented in each of these categories, year after year, in varying degrees depending on the specialty and service.

As of February 2018, there were 63 female admirals and generals in the U.S. military out of roughly 650 total, according to a report by the Service Women's Action Network, an advocacy group for women in the military. In late 2000, according to the report, there were just over 30 female admirals and generals.

Statistically, women have not made major proportional gains in the ranks that precede general or admiral since being made eligible to rise through the ranks starting in the 1970s. Roughly 10.6% of Army colonels are women, compared with 14.1% in the Air Force and just 2.3% in the Marine Corps. In the Navy, 11.6% of captains—the comparable rank—are women. The figures have hovered around those same rates for the past decade.

Women have played active roles in U.S. wars since the American Revolution, but not officially until 1901, and even then, it was for a few select roles or just during wartime. Women could not be a part of the peacetime military until 1948 when Congress passed the Women's Armed Services Integration Act. And, even then, women could only hold a certain percentage of jobs at a particular rank and could not rise above the rank of captain. That act was revised in 1967 to allow more women to serve and become higher-ranking officers. But only in the 1980s could women join aviation units, albeit in noncombat roles. They were allowed to join combat units starting in 2015.

The first women to achieve some of the highest ranks in the armed forces are legendary within each service. In 2008, Gen. Ann Dunwoody became the first Army four-star general. In 2006, Michelle Howard was the first female graduate of the Naval Academy to reach the rank of admiral; by 2014 she was the first female four-star admiral. In 2012, Gen. Janet Wolfenbarger was the first Air Force four-star general. The Marine Corps has yet to name a female four-star general.

Lt. Gen. Claudia Kennedy, the first woman to become a three-star general in the Army, was also the highest-ranking woman at that time to publicly charge another general with sexual harassment. In 2000, an Army inspector general report found she was a victim of unwanted sexual advances; she and the accused general both left the military soon after.

Ret. Navy Vice Adm. Carol Pottenger was among the first women to serve at sea and eventually became the first female admiral to command a group of combat ships deployed abroad. She says that when she joined the Navy in 1977, some male colleagues did not believe women belonged on ships.

“We never wanted to be recognized as a first. We just wanted to do our jobs,” she says.

By 2015, Adm. Pottenger was on the Pentagon advisory committee that advocated opening all combat jobs to women. That decision, she says, was about what was best for military readiness.

“Having men and women serving side by side is a fusion of experience, temperament, background and skill set that created a better way of doing things,” Adm. Pottenger says.

In 2015, the Pentagon panel’s recommendation became policy when then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced that the military would open all positions to women by Jan. 1, 2016, including ground combat forces.

Still, a pipeline problem remains. Women were not allowed into the service academies until the 1970s. These elite institutions—the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md.; the U.S. Military Academy in West Point, N.Y.; and the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.—are not the only way to get an officer’s commission but have long been the most prestigious entree to the service corps’ top ranks—accounting for about 18% of all officer commissions in fiscal 2017, according to a report by the Congressional Research Service. As of 2018, female representation at Annapolis was 28%—the highest percentage of the three academies, the report says.

The Pentagon has been slow to make adaptations to women, in big ways and small. For example, body armor fitted to women was not available until years into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes leading to more injuries.

Studies by outside groups with support from the military have shown that for many years female officers at all levels have been less likely to progress through career milestones at the same rates as male officers. For example, in the Air Force, after their first 13 years of service, males in flying-related positions such as pilots, navigators and combat-systems officers were retained at a rate of 63%, on average, compared with only 39% for female officers, according to Air Force data from 2001 to 2015 provided to Rand.

The pipeline isn’t the only problem. The path to promotion for women and men in the military often calls for monthslong deployments to war zones, which pose unconventional challenges when it comes to finding work-life balance, especially for officers with families. Gens. Barrett and Lodi have 10 combat deployments between them, to the Middle East, Afghanistan and in support of hurricane relief efforts.

Gen. Lodi remembers her three deployments to Iraq, in part, by some of the milestones she missed during her two daughters' lives, like new teeth coming in and first days of school.

While such deployments have opened opportunities for female officers to move up, they remain a challenge for the military. Pentagon studies have found that the demands of family life are a key problem in retention of female and male officers, though more so for the former. Difficulties cited include deployments, frequent moves and demanding work schedules. The Pentagon has made efforts to address such problems with support groups and counseling.

Women in the corporate world sometimes face similar difficulties advancing into the top jobs, as large companies often reward people who are willing to move often to run big departments or important subsidiaries. But female military women have an additional problem with mobility.

A Department of Defense study from 2017 showed that of married service members, 44.3% of women were in dual-military marriages, whereas just 7.3% of males had spouses in a service. The DOD study found that difficulties in accommodating couples, particularly when separate assignments demanded running two households, were a problem that caused women to leave the service.

Plus, there is the pull of career possibilities outside of the military for women officers, many of whom have been sought by corporations for their leadership and technical expertise, especially in areas such as cybersecurity and IT.

Female officers often told Rand that they believed opportunities with civilian employers might be superior to those in the Air Force in terms of pay, hours and flexibility. The highest-ranking general makes roughly $187,000 a year and receives benefits like housing and staffing to support hosting military-related events. The median total compensation for female CEOs in the Russell 3000 market index was $4.1 million in 2017, versus $3.9 million for men, according to a 2018 study by Equilar, Inc.—an example in which the pay gap has actually flipped, though the ranks of women CEOs remains very small.

For those who do remain in the service, sexual harassment proves to be a formidable problem. According to Pentagon statistics released earlier this year, the number of sexual assaults reported in 2018 rose nearly 38%, to 20,500 reported incidents of unwanted sexual contact, compared with 14,900 in 2016.

Kate Germano, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel who has advocated for greater equity for men and women in the military, says expanding women's role in leadership begins with changing the sometimes misogynistic language used within the ranks, rather than dismissing it as just what troops say. Language can change how men see women in the force and how women see themselves, she says. Too often in her experience, she says, women were described as sexual

conquests off the battlefield; in uniform, they too often were seen as a tolerated, not a welcome, part of the force.

Language can lead to sexual harassment, Ms. Germano says.

"The military has not adapted to the idea that having a family is good thing and a responsibility to be shared by men and women," says Ms. Germano, adding that those two factors make it difficult to retain women. Those women who do reach the rank of general or admiral "end up carrying the burden for the entire force and are seen as the fix-its," she says.

The Pentagon has acknowledged problems in the past, some of which have required action by its leadership and judicial system. At least seven Marines were court-martialed after a secret Facebook page in which troops posted sexually harassing and nude photos of female service members was exposed in 2017.

"The Defense Department has taken a number of actions to actively address harassment including the issuance of its first-ever military harassment policy in 2018 and enhancing a commander's ability to set appropriate command climate by taking steps to make sexual harassment a stand-alone military crime," Ms. Lawrence, the Pentagon spokeswoman, said in a statement.

Perhaps just as pernicious is a fear among some female service members that those in leadership are always looking for a reason to not give them a chance.

Gens. Barrett and Lodi say that problems like sexual harassment in the military arise from myriad causes, and that diversity in the leadership is one way to address those challenges.

"The military is still a human endeavor," Gen. Barrett says.

The sisters, meanwhile, concede it is startling that it took until 2019 for the Army to promote two sisters to the same rank.

They grew up just outside of Boston. Their father, Cpl. Ruston Lodi, was an Army veteran who earned a Silver Star for gallantry in action while serving with the Fifth Army in Italy during World War II. The father supported his daughters' decision to also serve.

Gen. Barrett, 53 years old, joined the Army to pay for her Tufts University education, which she hoped would lead her to the State Department. Gen. Lodi, 51 years old, went to Rutgers University and thought she would serve in the Army for a time and eventually become a dietitian.

Both generals have earned Bronze Stars.

Gen. Lodi's two daughters now have joined the military, and the general says each of their careers has already been defined less by their gender and more by what they bring to the Army.

Ms. Youssef is a Wall Street Journal reporter in Washington. She can be reached at nancy.youssef@wsj.com.

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