



# LEADERSHIP SUCCESS STRATEGIES of U.S. Army Women General Officers

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**O**N 23 JULY 2008, Army Lieutenant General (LTG) Ann E. Dunwoody was confirmed by the U.S. Senate for promotion to the rank of general (four stars). This promotion is historically groundbreaking because Dunwoody is the first woman in the U.S. military to attain the rank of general. Her achievement is a milestone that has taken 12 years to reach since LTG Carol Mutter, U.S. Marine Corps, was nominated and approved as the first woman to attain three-star rank in 1996. LTG Claudia Kennedy followed Mutter a year later as the Army's first woman three-star. Progress to the four-star tier has been slow in coming, given the relative numbers of women officers, but the July 2008 Army promotion list to Brigadier General (which had five women selected for promotion) inspires hope that competent women in the Army can and are advancing to the highest levels in the male-dominated hierarchy.

Research on the views and opinions of senior women leaders in the U.S. military is rare. Army nurse Anna May Hayes was the first Army woman promoted to brigadier general in June 1970. Including BG Hayes, only 42 women have been selected and promoted to general officer (GO) rank in the active duty Army.<sup>1</sup> Even in progressive societies, male dominance remains a fact of life, a legacy from a pre-reflective, pre-technological past. Except for history's handful of warrior queens, senior military leadership positions have always belonged to men. Biographies and histories document pervasive male dominance in military roles. Female progress in military leadership has yet to be documented beyond mere statistics.

This article's research data clearly point to factors and competencies the male-dominated Army had already enshrined as roles, norms, and values. In that sense, my results differ not at all from what one would expect from an all-male GO study. Does this convergence of expectations for Army officers represent an objective, legitimate validation of the roles, norms, and values—or is it an unavoidable solidarity, perpetuating male-dominance within a social construction?

Post-modern analysis has not yet varnished the perceptions and experiences that the women in this study have articulated, and this study cannot address the question of whether the military culture is hopelessly chauvinistic, or not. Their answers to questions simply reflect what leadership factors and competencies they think enhanced their ability to be selected for senior leadership positions. One can only observe that it would be surprising and ironic if these factors and competencies did not reflect already well-defined Army expectations.

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PHOTO: Counterclockwise: BG Anna Mae Hays, Chief of the Army Nurse Corps (left), and BG Elizabeth P. Hoisington, Director, WAC (right), with Mrs. Dwight D. Eisenhower on their promotion day, 11 June 1970; Marine Corps LTG Carol A. Mutter promoted in 1996; Army LTG Claudia J. Kennedy promoted in 1997; LTG Ann E. Dunwoody, 2008. (DOD)

My analysis reveals seven universal themes:

- Professional competency and doing a good job.
- The value of interpersonal skills, including good communication skills and taking care of people.
- Being known by your good reputation.
- Taking and excelling in demanding positions such as being a commander.
- Luck and timing.
- Not aspiring to make general officer too early.
- Mentoring, sponsoring, and coaching.

The above suggest that the same expectations and behaviors contribute to career progression and selection as a general officer, regardless of one's gender.

## **Background of Women in the Army**

Although women have been in the U.S. Army unofficially since the Revolutionary War and members of the Women's Army Corps (WAC) since its inception, Congress did not pass the Women's Armed Services Integration Act until 1948. The act made women (other than nurses) eligible to serve in the active duty military in times of peace as permanent regular and reserve members of the Army, Navy, Marines, and the then recently formed Air Force.<sup>2</sup> It also set limits on the number of women who could serve in the Armed Forces. Enlisted women could total no more than 2 percent of the total force in each branch of the service, while women officers (excluding nurses) could not exceed 10 percent of the enlisted women strength. The act also limited career opportunities. It did not allow women to have command authority over men.<sup>3</sup>

Another major change occurred in the mid-1970s after the Vietnam War when the military became an all-volunteer force. Because enlistment in the new all-volunteer Army was low, the Department of

Defense concluded that widening roles for females would ameliorate troop shortages and fill vacant positions.<sup>4</sup> President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106 in 1975, opening the formerly all-male U.S. service academies to female applicants, and thereby creating conditions in which women officers would lead men.<sup>5</sup> Public Law 94-106 also deliberately expanded leadership positions beyond those previously allowed under the Women's Army Corps.

Women volunteered for the military services in record numbers after these changes, and, as the number of military women increased, the military and the government saw the large numbers of female volunteers as essential rather than optional to the readiness of the service branches.<sup>6</sup> Especially in the Army, these increased numbers of women brought about a major change in Americans opinions about gender, the full of effects of which we have yet to see.

In the 30 years since then, the percentage of women soldiers serving in the U.S. Army has increased significantly. In 1972, 1.8 percent of Army soldiers were women. In 1991, with 93,100 women serving, the ratio had risen to 11 percent.<sup>7</sup> By 2005, the number was 14.3 percent. A corresponding increase occurred in the number of women selected, trained, and placed into officer or primary leadership roles. Department of Defense personnel tables show 15.3 percent of active duty Army officers were women in 2005. Army officer rank by gender for that year is shown in Table 1.

## **Demographic Data of the General Officer Participants**

When I conducted this study in 2006, there were 38 living women Army GOs. Of the 38, 14 were serving on active duty. There were also 24 living women GOs who had retired from the Army. I interviewed 12 of the 14 serving GOs and 11 of the 24 retired women GOs, for a total of 23 participants.

**Age and time in service.** The youngest general interviewed was 47 years old. She had served on active duty for 25.5 years, and she had been commissioned an Army officer in 1981. The oldest general interviewed was 77 years old. She had retired from the Army in 1986, at age 57. The oldest GO interviewed entered the Army in 1954, and she had served 32 years in the Army: 2 years as an enlisted member of the Women's Army Corps and 30 years

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Rank/Grade	Total	Male	Female	% Female	% Male
<i>General</i>	10	10	0	0	100
<i>Lieutenant General</i>	45	45	0	0	100
<i>Major General</i>	100	94	6	6	94
<i>Brigadier General</i>	152	147	5	3.3	96.7
<i>Colonel</i>	3,775	3,328	447	11.8	88.2
<i>Lieutenant Colonel</i>	9,134	7,975	1,159	12.7	87.3
<i>Major</i>	14,835	12,822	2,013	13.6	86.4
<i>Captain</i>	24,967	20,449	4,518	18.1	81.9
<i>1st Lieutenant</i>	7,490	5,879	1,611	21.5	78.5
<i>2nd Lieutenant</i>	8,666	6,926	1,740	20.1	79.9

NOTE: Table 1. Adapted from U.S. Department of Defense, 2005. This information is U.S. government public domain material and is not copyrighted.

**Table 1. Army active duty officer personnel by rank/grade and gender. (30 September 2005)**

as a commissioned officer in the Regular Army. She retired in 1986. The average amount of leadership experience among all 23 participants serving as an Army officer was 30.5 years. The number of years serving as a general ranged from 1 to 11 years, with an average of 3.8 years spent as a GO.

**Commissioning sources.** The 23 participants entered the Army and were commissioned through five sources. Most of the GOs (15 or 62.5 percent) entered the Army as a direct appointment rather than going through a more typical precommissioning process like the Reserve Officer Training Course (ROTC) program or Officer Candidate School (OCS). Twelve of the 15 participants (or 80 percent) who entered the Army through a direct appointment were members of the WAC. Of the remaining 8 GOs, 3 (13 percent) were commissioned through ROTC, 2 (8.7 percent) were commissioned through OCS, and 2 (8.7 percent) were commissioned through the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point. One GO was commissioned through the Air Force Health Professions Scholarship Program prior to transferring into the Army.

**Education.** The education levels of the participant GOs included: 2 with only baccalaureate degrees, 11 with 1 masters degree, 6 with 2 masters degrees, 1 with 3 masters degrees, and 3 who had earned doctorates or an equivalent degree.

**Marital Status.** The 23 participants included 13 who were currently married and 10 who were cur-

rently single (including 2 women who had divorced and 2 who were widows).

**Branch.** The participants' Army training included an array of branches and specialties. They included 4 Adjutant General GOs, 3 Signal Corps GOs, 2 Transportation GOs, 3 Army Nurse GOs, 1 Medical Corps GO, 1 Medical Service Corps GO, 1 Aviation GO, 1 Military Police GO, 1 Military Intelligence GO, 1 Quartermaster GO, 1 Chemical GO, 1 USMA professor GO, 1 Finance GO, 1 Ordnance GO, and 1 Judge Advocate General GO.

**Sampling and confidentiality.** Purposive sampling is a deliberate method researchers use to select study participants with particular characteristics from an accessible population determined to be appropriate for the needs of the study.<sup>8</sup> I selected active duty women Army officers who currently hold or who have held high leadership responsibilities within the Army, and who have been selected and promoted to the rank of brigadier general or higher. To protect the identity of the participants and allow the participants confidentiality, I assigned pseudonyms for each participant.

## Findings

I asked each of the 23 participants several questions. Three interview questions directly provided insight and a better understanding of the factors and competencies that might contribute to the career ascension of a female U.S. Army officer into the role of GO.

**Interview question #1.** *From your experience, what specific personal competencies and skills contributed most to your career development and advancement?* GO14's response was typical; "I think the skills I had [that] sustained me [were] teamwork, effective communications, [and] inspiring others to reach their potential; all of those things, just really working and developing those that work around you. It's really been those personal things that have guided me. It's really all about the Soldier. You know, taking care of Soldiers. Leading them well, managing them." The majority of the participants (13 or 56.5 percent) stated working with other people, interpersonal skills, or communication skills were the most important skills that contributed to their career development and advancement.

GO2 replied, "I think first of all is basic confidence in my abilities to lead people, to command, to make tough decisions, and to take risk." GO6 stated, "I believe I'm really good with people. I'm empathetic. You know there is a whole body of literature about the way women lead. We lead differently. I think that's part of it. People have always said how

good I am with people, and that they've enjoyed working with me and for me. So, I think that was key. Also being physically fit was important. That's one of those things, at a young age in the Army, I recognized that my ability to run and to work out [was important]. Men noticed me because I could run well. Leadership recognized that and whether or not that's fair or not, that was reality. I am also an excellent speaker."

GO10 stated, "I am very mission-focused and results oriented. I understand the role that my organization has in the overall mission accomplishment. I've always understood that. I've always been able to communicate that to people. I'm very dedicated to getting the mission done."

GO20 stated, "I'm nice. I like people. If you don't like people you can't be a leader, because you're not sensitive to what's going on with them. I think more than anything else, it would be a love of people."

Table 2 lists a composite summary in order of rank of specific participant skills and competencies based on the participant experiences that contributed to their career advancement and development.

Skills and Competencies	Number of Responses	Participant Percentage
<i>Communication skills (speaking/listening)</i>	14	60.9
<i>Interpersonal skills/People-person</i>	19	43.5
<i>Leadership/Command</i>	9	39.1
<i>Good value system/Courage/Confidence/Loyalty</i>	8	34.8
<i>Hard work/Take tough jobs</i>	6	26.1
<i>Teamwork</i>	5	21.7
<i>Physical fitness</i>	5	21.7
<i>Domain knowledge/Education</i>	4	17.4
<i>Good sense of humor</i>	4	17.4
<i>Develops/Helps people</i>	3	13.0
<i>Flexible/Adaptive</i>	3	13.0
<i>Caring/Trusting</i>	3	13.0
<i>Mission focused/Results oriented</i>	2	8.7
<i>Values history</i>	2	8.7
<i>Emulates good practices</i>	1	4.3
<i>Lifelong learner</i>	1	4.3
<i>Organized/Disciplined</i>	1	4.3
<i>Innovative</i>	1	4.3

**Table 2. Participant skills and competencies that contributed to Army career advancement.**



**Interview question #2.** *How did you prepare yourself for high levels of command and leadership?* Several participants expressed that their actual Army experiences and performing well in various duty positions was a very important factor in preparing for higher levels of command and leadership in the Army (48 percent).

GO2 said, “When you are being looked at as a colonel or brigadier general, then what you bring to the table are the lessons learned from your cumulative experiences and hopefully everything that I had learned, or the real lessons, the nuggets you take from commanding at three separate levels before I made brigadier general.”

Almost half (11) of the GOs mentioned the importance of directly observing both good and bad leaders and learning vicariously through their accomplishments or failures.

GO8 stated, “I think a lot of it was done by paying attention to what was going on. Picking and choosing the best of everybody around me. Learning; learning from other people’s mistakes.” GO5 commented, “I had the opportunity to watch general officers at high levels do their jobs and hear their philosophy on what works and what doesn’t work. Of course that goes two ways: you learn what you want to do, and you learn what you don’t want to do.” GO17 reported, “Observation; looking at other officers and other individuals that I thought were very good. Learning as much from those that I thought had bad attributes as those that did good [*sic*].”

A large percentage of the participants, 43 percent, stated education and military schooling were instrumental in their preparation for increased levels of responsibility and leadership. For example, GO23 replied, “I think the Army prepared me. They [the Army organization] prepared me through profes-

sional assignments and schooling and mentors and coaches who I met throughout my career.” Over a third of the 23 GOs (35 percent) believed that the mentoring they received from males or females throughout their career helped develop their leadership abilities and the qualities expected of leaders. GO4 mentioned, “I think the key is finding someone who can help encourage you and help you look at opportunities that you did not see for yourself. I had great mentors who encouraged me to take on a lot of hard jobs. Jobs that I did not think I was qualified for or that I would not succeed at. They said, ‘Look, you have nothing to lose by trying. Go and do it. You can do it. We believe you can do it. Now just trust in us and go try.’”

**Interview question #3.** *From your lived experiences or perceptions, what factors do you think are important in getting promoted to general officer?* This interview question was intended to provide factors the participants thought were important in getting promoted to GO. The responses to this question allowed me to compare and contrast factors the participants considered important. Core themes of the research question emerged from this interview question.

Over half of the participants (15 or 65 percent) stated that working hard, taking the hard jobs like command, and being professionally and technically competent were factors they believed are important in the process of getting promoted to GO. GO6 stated, “I think those that get promoted have had all of the right kinds of jobs, especially the command-track jobs. You’ve got to command, at all of the levels, to get promoted to general. Part of it also is networking. You’re not going to get assigned to PERSCOM [Personnel Command] or HR [Human Resources] Command unless you know people and they’ve heard about you. So it’s commanding at all of the levels and then networking.”

Almost half of those interviewed (11 or 48 percent) stated one’s reputation, visibility with other officers in different branches or specialties, or being known by others in other Army career fields is important in getting promoted to general. To illustrate this idea, GO2 said, “There are people who will be sitting on your board who know you for good and or know you for bad. Those people will more or less direct the destiny of whether you will be promoted or not.” Similarly GO16 stated, “If you

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are fortunate enough to be selected for promotion, the number one reason is your reputation.”

Almost one third (7 or 30.4 percent) of the participants believed luck and timing is an important factor in getting promoted to general officer. GO4 stated, “I ran the brigadier general boards as a recorder on the selection boards. I ran a couple of them. There is that factor of timing that’s incredible. We all know people who should have been generals that weren’t. A lot of that has nothing to do with anything except timing.”

***“If you are fortunate enough to be selected for promotion, the number one reason is your reputation.”***

Mentorship and sponsorship were also cited as factors in being promoted to GO, but some of the participants did not have a mentor or sponsor when they were selected for promotion to brigadier general. GO11 said, “We’ve lots of great colonels. Unfortunately the Army can’t pick all of them for general officer. I think probably the ones that do get picked, they have someone who along the way had sponsored [them] in their words or in their actions; then [recommended them] to other people so that they [became] known entities among the senior folks. And of course, their record; I think it’s understood, it [your record of performance] has to stand on its own. You have to have an outstanding record.”

It was interesting to note that 5 of the participants (22 percent) stated an important factor in getting promoted to GO was not worrying about it or not making the promotion a priority in an officer’s career. GO10 commented, “I guess, I never signed up to be a general officer. I never said that’s what I want to be. In fact, my goal was to make major. As a lieutenant, I thought majors could do anything.”

## Conclusions

The data presented in this article provide career strategies or ideas for Army senior leader advancement, female or male, and parallel experiences of senior managers in the business world. While

the seven major themes and patterns noted above emerged from female participant responses to questions, clearly the answers are pertinent to leadership and management in general. Although other themes emerged in this study, the seven noted were overarching themes and were consistently mentioned during the interviews.

Doing a good job with professional competence emerged as the most common theme perceived as important. Professional job competence aligns with the research of Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, and King who stated the skills, abilities, and behaviors an organization valued included: “working hard, demonstrating technical proficiency, having good people skills, accomplishing goals and contributing to the bottom line, exhibiting strategic thinking and being open to change, taking risks, making good decisions, applying creativity and innovation, and dealing effectively with conflict.”<sup>9</sup> The majority of the participants (65.2 percent) mentioned competence and doing a good job paramount for promotion to Army GO.

Answers to interview questions also accentuated the importance of having good interpersonal skills to lead others effectively. The majority of the study participants (60.9 percent) reported communication skills such as their speaking and listening skills contributed most to their career development and advancement. GO9 mentioned, “I would definitely say, being able to articulate oneself, either in writing or orally, because that is a very important skill set; to be able to concisely counsel someone, to motivate them, to encourage them, whether that is on a one-on-one basis, or in a crowd.” GO17 commented, “God gave me an ability to speak. I think you can’t underestimate the power of being able to talk to people; being able to use the way you speak as influencers [*sic*] with people.”

Being known by your good reputation was also an important theme shared by the GOs. The participants spoke of having your good reputation known by others as: “reputation,” “visibility,” “exposure,” and “being known.” Almost half (47.8 percent) of the participants believed a person’s reputation and being known to the board members sitting on the brigadier general promotion board is an important factor for selection to general officer. This data aligns with the research of Mainiero, Williamson, and Robinson who reported executive women

discussed the importance of obtaining support and acknowledgement from higher leaders in an organization.<sup>10</sup>

Taking, and doing well in, the tough jobs is a theme replicated in the business world. Catalyst conducted a worldwide research study of executive men and women and their career advancement. Both genders reported that having been provided leadership opportunity (83 percent) and receiving challenging assignments (80 percent) were very helpful factors in their personal success in the organization.<sup>11</sup> It appears that job experience and taking the challenging jobs (and doing well) can advance both men and women in their careers.

Luck and timing was cited by 30.4 percent of the female GO participants as important in getting promoted to general. Cummings defined luck as, “successful or unsuccessful outcomes that appear to result from the convergence of confidence, control, preparation, and opportunity.”<sup>12</sup> GO19 stated, “Then [after professional competence and taking the tough jobs at Division and Corps], probably the most important factor in making general officer, is standing in the right place when lightning strikes.”

The comment, “do not aspire to make GO” frequently came up as the GOs shared their experiences. GO11 stated, “I’d tell them not to aspire. I think this is the approach I took, and I give that as advice, and that is, do your best. I don’t think you can be a lieutenant coming in [the Army], planning to be a general officer. I think at some point you get to be much more self-serving than the servant or the shepherd serving our Soldiers and our men and women in uniform.” The researcher thought it was interesting that 39 percent of the participants stated they were surprised when they made GO, or that they had not made making general officer a goal in their Army career. GO2 described herself as an “accidental general” because when she entered the Army in 1959, the highest rank a woman officer in the WAC could attain and serve in was lieutenant colonel.

Mentoring relationships have always existed in the workplace, although the term mentoring has not always been used to describe the relationship. Mentoring, also called “sponsorship” and “coaching,” was a factor mentioned by 26.1 percent of the participants when asked what factors they thought were important for promotion to Army general officer. Through mentoring relationships, some of

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the participants believed they were given tough assignments or assignments they had not considered that played a major role in their career selection and ascension to GO. Many of the participants in this study mentioned the helpfulness of mentoring or coaching (primarily by senior male Army officers). GO3 commented, “I listened to my mentors; all of which were men, because there really weren’t any women out there.”

In summary, the study’s methodology involved questions aimed at understanding what 23 women GOs perceived as critical factors and competencies for their selection and promotion. The results of this study indicate that female general officers have the same attitudes and draw the same conclusions from their experiences as their male counterparts: Any officer who aspires to higher levels of Army leadership should do the best possible job in the assignments they are given; prepare themselves mentally, physically, and emotionally; accomplish the mission; take care of their soldiers; mentor and be mentored; stay true to their Army values; and not aspire to make general officer until they are colonels in the Army. **MR**

#### NOTES

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