



by Ryan Calef

# Humble in Victory: The Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Army

When speaking with Lt. Gen. Flora D. Darpino, one cannot mistake her humble nature, whether speaking to her or simply passing her during a run around the University of Virginia, home of the U.S. Army Judge Advocate General (JAG) Legal Center and School. Such humility is remarkable considering the weight of history behind her appointment and the challenges her office presently faces.

The U.S. Army JAG Corps was founded on July 29, 1775, at the behest of George Washington to establish order and the rule of law within the Continental Army, making it one of the oldest law firms in the nation. But history is not the only challenge Lt. Gen. Darpino faces. She is also the first woman to hold this position—a place in history of which she is well aware and to which she is well suited.

When Lt. Gen. Darpino entered the Army, women held only 7 percent of its judge advocate positions, with only two in senior positions. Today, nearly 28 percent of the Army is female, and female senior officers are found at all levels, in many branches.

At her first assignment, her boss told her, “I told them not to send me a woman, but they sent you anyway.” She knew at that moment she would need to prove herself, knowing that if she did her job, and did it really well, the Army would never judge her on being a woman, but on how well she did the job.

Lt. Gen. Darpino said, “Once you open the opportunity to woman, and level the playing field, they will rise to the same level.” She speaks from battle-tested experience. Her age group includes the first females to flood the ranks and knew they needed to do their very best. She shared the burdens of change with her class, and they rose to the challenge. Looking back, Lt. Gen. Darpino reflected that “the Army demonstrated faith in women, and women met and exceeded the standard.”

Her determination to overcome the challenges of history is the result of the lessons from her parents, who always taught her to be better than the person next to her. When Lt. Gen. Darpino first entered the military, she never expected to be the judge

advocate general. However, she fell in love with soldiers and being a part of something greater than one’s self. She also fully embraced her new client and rolled up her sleeves. As she said for herself and all new attorneys, “Embrac[ing] the soldier part is important, to understand the client, to understand yourself.” She goes on to further state that “if you understand your clients, if you understand their needs and concerns, you can provide the right legal opinion.”

However, the Army was never her career goal. Meeting a Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) cadet while she was attending Gettysburg College put her on her pathway to destiny and the Army. There she met then cadet, now Col. (Retired) Christopher O’Brien. Although they attended different law schools, they remained together, and when then Lt. O’Brien took a commission in the JAG Corps, Darpino followed suit. She and her husband re-evaluated their decision several times over the years, and re-examined phases, such as with children, but love the honorable profession of being soldiers.

The Army gives promotions based on potential, and then it pushes you into the job to meet and exceed that potential. It has found great potential in Lt. Gen. Darpino. From beginning of their careers, both Lt. Gen. Darpino and her husband had an unwritten rule to never say “I’d like to thank my spouse.” Lt. Gen. Darpino remarked, “We are each other’s biggest cheerleader, can’t be in competition, and must celebrate each other’s victory.”

When she was promoted to colonel, Lt. Gen. Darpino, believing it was likely her last promotion, broke their long-standing rule and thanked him, handing him a bouquet of plastic toys. She considers her husband to be a great lawyer and military officer. Lt. Gen. Darpino commented, “When married to a guy like that, it’s like lighting striking. It could have hit 10 inches over, and he might have been the judge advocate general.” She considers her success to have had a great deal of luck, as so many people are capable and able, and for reasons you don’t know, you get tapped.

As Lt. Gen. Darpino pursued her military career, following the

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advice of her parents, she continued to be promoted and began to command others. She considers herself an eternal optimist, who views each challenge to be an opportunity to learn new skills and mold others. She considers the JAG Corps and the professional attorneys in general as teams of teams who must work together to solve complex problems. She states that you must train your subordinates like everyone else. As a leader, your ultimate goal is to make yourself irrelevant. A true success of a leader is when you can leave the office and it functions without you. Even though you can do it better, and you can do it faster than your subordinates, or you can tell them the answer and they could do it faster, you don't do it and let them learn to solve the problems and gain the ability to solve the problems when you are not there. As a fine testament to that belief and her success are the hundreds of attorneys she has commanded and the hundreds she currently commands.

While she has many assignments in many diverse locations, it is interactions with her family that define her experiences and her assignments. She recalls her first real leadership assignment at Fort Campbell, Ky., with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. She remembers how young her two girls were at the time, how they bought their first pets and had a tire swing in the backyard. Work-life balance is an essential element of a successful career and to her personal success. This assignment represented her first opportunity to train new attorneys and impress upon them the values needed for a successful career. She contrasts this with her assignment to Iraq to serve as a senior supervising attorney. She recalls the trouble of being away from her family but found that in face of that challenge, she grew so much, as issues in combat mean life and death, and her advice proved critical to commanders, as the advice of attorneys should be to their clients during tense situations.

Fortunately for the Army, Lt. Gen. Darpino would be promoted again and again. Her promotion to general was especially memorable. She recalls being in Iraq and getting called to report to the commanding general. When she entered his office, she expected to find him sitting behind his oversized desk, but instead found him waiting to greet her with the news that the Army had asked her to serve as a general officer. She was humbled by the trust and confidence the Army had in her and was determined to exceed these standards. Her surprise at being selected as a general officer contradicts the feelings she had when she was told the chief of staff of the Army, the highest ranking army officer, was on the phone for her. Lt. Gen. Darpino explains she knew the reason for the call.

Within the JAG Corps, with so few general officers, she finds her peers to be her friends. Either way, she would do her duty, whether to serve as the first female judge advocate general of the Army, serve as a deputy, or retire, she would complete her duty. It was on that call that she found out the Army would ask her to serve as the 39<sup>th</sup> judge advocate general of the U.S. Army. Her service would be at a time for great challenges and a need for leadership, and she was sworn in on October 6, 2013.

Lt. Gen. Darpino sees a challenge ahead of her: addressing deficiencies in the Army regarding sexual assault. She sees the JAG as having a strong role in preventing sexual assault of woman in the armed forces. Accountability is the first and foremost job, as well as to advise commanders and gather evidence



for successful prosecutions. Accountability also includes caring for the victim, providing a voice and support for their struggle. More importantly Lt. Gen. Darpino states that while accountability is important, it reaches just one individual at a time, while with education and prevention, you can affect hundreds at a time.

"You need to get on the front end and educate," Darpino states. "We need to provide the tools to the Army so soldiers can receive training, and JAGs are uniquely equipped because we see the results of holding people accountable. JAG must take the lead." As the JAG moves forth, Lt. Gen. Darpino is best suited to guide to the corps to continued success as one of America's oldest law firms. ©