

Army female command team's diverse careers converge in shared value: care for people

By Sgt. Joshua Taeckens March 26, 2024



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JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-FORT SAM HOUSTON, Texas – The 410th Contracting Support Brigade's first female command team, each with distinctive paths to military service, share a common thread vital to their leadership success: genuine concern for people.

"If you care about people, then you have a future in the Army," Col. Daphne Austin, the 410th brigade commander, said with conviction.

Austin and her senior enlisted advisor, Command Sgt. Maj. Darlene Riley, infused their care for people with their diverse life and military experiences when they assumed command of the 410th Contracting Support Brigade in 2021.

The Army has seen many milestones among female leadership in the last century: from Lt. Col. Mary Hallaren, the first battalion commander of the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps in 1943, to Capt. Linda Bray, the first woman to command a company in combat in 1989, to Gen. Laura Richardson, the first female Army general appointed as a geographic combatant commander in 2021, to Command Sgt. Maj. JoAnn Numann, the first senior enlisted leader of U.S. Army Special Operations Command in 2023.

An all-female command team, once rare, is now becoming more prevalent, signaling progress toward gender inclusion in the Army.

To advance this inclusivity, both Austin and Riley stressed the importance of women in leadership roles supporting the next generation of female leaders.

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1 / 2 Show Caption + Col. Daphne Austin, right, 410th Contracting Support Brigade commander, takes Megan Dake, middle, the deputy assistant secretary of the Army for Procurement, Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, on a tour of the 410th facilities, September 27, 2023, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Dake received a briefing about the 410th mission and discussed the Army Contracting Enterprise. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua Taeckens) (Photo Credit: Sgt. Joshua Taeckens) VIEW ORIGINAL

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2 / 2 Show Caption + Col. Daphne Austin, left, 410th Contracting Support Brigade commander, sits on a panel during the U.S. Army South Women, Peace and Security Symposium, February 22, 2023, in San Antonio, Texas. This symposium included presentations, panel discussions, and question and answer sessions supporting the Women, Peace, and Security initiative. The United Nations Women, Peace, and Security initiative is designed to educate, advocate for, and expand the roles women play in national security and defense strategy throughout the globe. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Alan Brutus) (Photo Credit: Army South Courtesy Asset) VIEW ORIGINAL

Austin, originally from Phenix City, Ala., joined the Army Reserve in 1998 as a Reserve Officers' Training Corps cadet before commissioning into the regular Army. She followed in her aunt's footsteps, who retired as a sergeant first class after 20 years of service.

However, Riley, a native of Seguin, Texas, initially pursued a blue-collar path, working multiple jobs after dropping out of high school. She always kept Army service in the back of her mind given her multi-generational Family history of military service.

Riley's decision came to fruition after a pivotal encounter in 2004 while waitressing in Copperas Cove, Texas, where young Soldiers, fresh from deployment, revealed their harrowing experiences with improvised explosive devices.

"I told myself, 'I'm going to stop playing around.' I was 28 years old, and I had been talking about joining while all these kids, not one of them was over 21, were putting their lives on the line and serving their country," Riley said with frustration. "I went to the recruiting station the next day."

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1 / 2 Show Caption + Command Sgt. Maj. Darlene Riley, left, 410th Contracting Support Brigade senior enlisted leader, motivates a Soldier during the Army Combat Fitness Test, October 5, 2023 at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Riley said that her main command value is taking care of the Civilians and subordinate Soldiers in her command. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Joshua Taeckens) (Photo Credit: Sgt. Joshua Taeckens) [VIEW ORIGINAL](#)

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2 / 2 Show Caption + Col. Daphne Austin 410th Contracting Support Brigade commander, sews during a visit to a local organization that helps people with vision loss, December 15, 2022, in San Antonio, Texas. During the visit, 410th Soldiers and Civilians had an opportunity to meet with the employees and partake in their day-to-day activities on the uniform manufacturing floor. (Courtesy photo) (Photo Credit: Army South Courtesy Asset) [VIEW ORIGINAL](#)

Both women said their decision to serve created great change within them.

"The Army was a mystery to me, and it's a very male dominant environment," said Austin. "And as a black female with self-esteem issues, I did not think I would do well in the military."

Austin said that others noticed her transformation before she had.

After completing her leadership time as a junior officer in Hawaii, she attended captain's career course at Fort Eisenhower, Ga. While there, her peers, who she attended the basic officer leader course with, noticed something had changed within her.

"One gentleman told me, 'You are a different person from three years ago. You used to be so quiet, and now you are so confident. I can see the growth in you,'" she said with pride. "I ended up getting company command right out of captain's career course, because the Army helped me build my confidence."

In contrast, Riley said that her experience returning from a second deployment in the male-dominated military occupation of track vehicle mechanics was anything but positive. Because of her gender, she was denied a transfer to a motor pool she wanted to join that supported an infantry unit.

"I said, 'So you're not going to let me go do what I love,' and that I am basically going to stagnate as a staff sergeant because these opportunities will not be afforded to me based on my gender," Riley said in frustration. "Then, I'm done, and I'm getting out."

But, she admitted that the unfortunate gender-based policy ended up being a blessing in disguise, as it led her to switch her military occupational specialty to contracting.

"That denial set the course for so many other amazing achievements," said Riley. "Because of that obstacle, I learned to overcome a lot of challenges I have faced."

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1 / 2 Show Caption + Staff Sgt. Darlene Riley, right, then a contracting noncommissioned officer and now senior enlisted leader of 410th Contracting Support Brigade, shakes hands with Brig. Gen. Camille Nichols, commanding general, Joint Contracting Command, in 2010 during a deployment to Afghanistan. Riley said that upon returning from that deployment she was denied a transfer to a motor pool she wanted to join that supported an infantry unit due to her being a female, but it was a blessing in disguise because she changed her military occupational specialty to contracting. (Courtesy photo) (Photo Credit: Army South Courtesy Asset) VIEW ORIGINAL

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2 / 2 Show Caption + Command Sgt. Maj. Darlene Riley, front, 410th Contracting Support Brigade senior enlisted leader, speaks about one of her Soldiers, Sgt. 1st Class Shanaye Davis, at her Sergeant Audie Murphy Club induction ceremony, May 17, 2023, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Audie Murphy is the most decorated Soldier in American history and club membership is only awarded to noncommissioned officers who exemplify the highest standards of Army leadership. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. Joshua Taeckens) (Photo Credit: Sgt. Joshua Taeckens) VIEW ORIGINAL

Over both Austin's and Riley's military careers, filled with barriers and triumphs, they said they have seen the Army adapt to accommodate women and have encountered many inspiring female leaders.

They said the common theme amongst female leaders they've encountered is their level of care for the Army's number one asset: people.

The 410th command team attributed their current leadership style and approach to the quality of care those leaders demonstrated throughout their careers.

“We know that the basis of our relationship as a leadership team is taking care of our people and making them excited to be a part of this organization,” said Riley. “Of course, there are frequent times that we disagree with each other, but we would never let a disagreement damage the foundation of our relationship which is taking care of our Soldiers and Civilians in the 410th.”

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1 / 2 Show Caption + Col. Daphne Austin, 410th Contracting Support Brigade commander, and Command Sgt. Maj. Darlene Riley, 410th senior enlisted leader, take a group photo with past and present members of 410th after several of them graduated the Contracting Master Gunner Course in May 2023, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. The Contracting Master Gunner Course validates an individual's technical expertise in the field of contracting for the purpose of talent management. (Courtesy photo) (Photo Credit: Army South Courtesy Asset) [VIEW ORIGINAL](#)

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2 / 2 Show Caption + Col. Daphne Austin, left, 410th Contracting Support Brigade commander, speaks at her Soldier’s baby shower, March 1, 2024, at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Austin said that supporting Soldiers in all aspects of their lives is vital for overall readiness and unit success. (Courtesy photo) (Photo Credit: Army South Courtesy Asset) [VIEW ORIGINAL](#)

Austin added that the natural adoration and diverse experiences between her and Riley filters down to their formation, building unit cohesion and enhancing their efforts as a command team.

“From the very beginning, I noticed that [Riley] is a great-hearted person who happens to be one of the most technically competent noncommissioned officers I have ever served with,” Austin said with a smile. “She’s the first person that I want to bounce ideas off of, not because she is my command sergeant major, but because her logical and analytical thinking gives me the background information that helps me formulate important decisions.”

Riley chimed in with a chuckle.

“And she [Austin] brings some emotion to my decision making, because I can be robotic,” said Riley. “Also, she sees things in me that I don’t see myself which has absolutely encouraged me to step out of my comfort zone. She has changed my life.”

Both women aspire to impart the camaraderie and unity that they have experienced as sisters-in-arms to the next generation of female leaders.

“I think that, collectively, women are as strong as their ability to reach out and help the next women who come behind them,” said Riley. “I have noticed with females in the Army that there is a tendency to cooperate, not to compete, and I think that is a trend that the Army can hone in on.”

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As both women thought back to when they joined the Army, they said they would never imagine that they would be where they are now; Austin sees their collective and individual successes as a step forward and demonstrative of the progress the Army has made.

“The Army is moving in a very positive direction towards making sure that women are being prioritized with a lot of initiatives involving women empowerment and mentorship,” Austin noted optimistically. “I think as long as women are communicating and willing to share with one another, we are able to impact the next generations, because somebody is going to come behind us and be the seconds, and thirds and so on.”