

Changing the Narrative

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Changing the Narrative: Women in the Military

I grew up in a single-parent household. My mom is the strongest woman I have ever known. She taught me my work ethic and values, and she instilled in me the notion to do the right thing. I owe my strong connection to service to my mom. She worked for the police department and as a corrections officer. I joined the military to give the best service to my country, my people, and hopefully the world.

As the 2021 Woman of Color Pioneer Award recipient, I continue to feel drawn to the role of a protector, but in the name of diversity. Diversity matters, and representation counts. That includes gender, sexual orientation, religion, and so much more. From all these various backgrounds come different ideas. Each brings something unique to the table and discussions. We need to expand, innovate, and produce dynamic strategies for greater success. We need to make sure we use ALL our strengths, harness that collective power, and utilize creative options to go into the battle zone, whatever that may be.

Our military should represent the people it serves. If we want to protect and serve everyone in our country, we need diversity in all ranks. The leadership positions need to reflect this diversity, and promotion for these positions needs to be fair across the board. We need people from all cultural demographics to be represented at all levels and considered for promotions and recognition. We need to respect one another and integrate everyone into as many career paths and operations as possible. Simply put, we need a healthy climate, one in which no one is being harassed or discriminated against, where opportunities are equitably available. And all need to feel welcome and equal at recruiting stations because that is where it all starts.

I have had to overcome issues of exclusion myself as a woman in the military. As an aviator, I flew onboard Special Operations C-130 aircraft variants for years. I have experience with four different models. Three of those models did not have functioning latrines; they

only had urinals. Though I learned how to think outside the box (and teach other women how to do the same), I would have had fewer obstacles to overcome to operate at altitude if this barrier had been previously addressed and solved for female aircrew members. I also dealt with logistical layers of exclusion. Certain crew members believed that because they had me or other women on their team, there would be an unnecessary need to secure female lodging, which adds extra costs, time, and coordination to mission planning. Then there is the perceived notion of women being weaker and

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unable to do all tasks and operations that men can do. This is not new. Historically, body armor and uniforms were made mostly for men. Weapon shapes were made for men, too, and catered to their arms’ length, for example.

These are a few instances that show the dire need to advocate for gender inclusion in the military. Women advance

strategies for cooperation, dissuasion, and persuasion, which all lead to less violent outcomes. Statistics show that conflict is less likely to happen when women are in the ranks. Additionally, the Women Peace and Security Act shows that women and diverse populations are underrepresented in peace talks and mediation, leading to poor outcomes and suffering for those in conflict regions, such as the Middle East, South Sudan, the Philippines, and more. We need more women involved to make sure everyone’s rights are represented in peace-keeping strategies.

Looking at the data, women are improving in high school graduation rates and physical fitness, while men are worsening in those areas. More statistics show that by the year 2045, less than 5 percent of the male population will be eligible for military service. That is very few!

We need to champion work-life balance to prevent burnout for military personnel. We also need more opportunities to boost the understanding of family so that both parents enjoy leave, without social stigma. Additionally, if our talent has a better quality of life, we will retain them longer. Inclusion also allows everyone to feel comfortable reporting harassment and discrimination. The “liberty and justice” that I honor allows each person the freedom to speak up and contribute for the betterment of themselves and their country. ■



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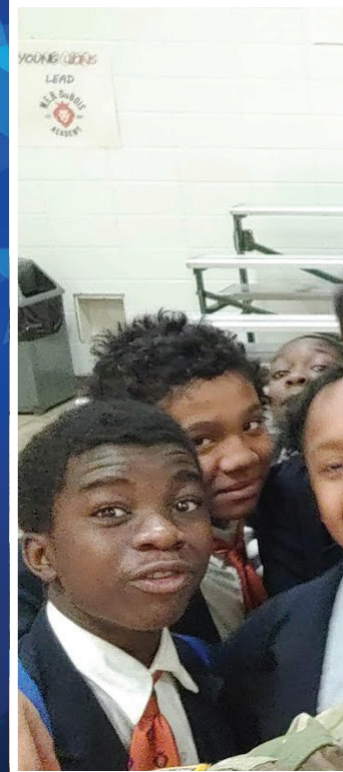
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BEYA STARS AND STRIPES WINNER ASSUMES HISTORIC US ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS COMMAND ROLE

By Nancy Allen, USACE South Pacific Division

When Col. Antoinette “Toni” Gant assumed command of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers South Pacific Division July 9, 2021, she became the first African American female to serve at that level in the history of USACE. In 2021, Gant was the Black Engineer of the Year Conference Awards Army Stars and Stripes Award recipient in recognition of her efforts in mentorship, diversity, and value-based service to the Army and the Nation. Gant’s interest in science and

engineering began early in her hometown of Port Gibson, Mississippi, a predominantly African American community on the Mississippi River, where her father taught history and mother taught chemistry, biology and physics. Her parents nurtured her interests by encouraging her to attend summer programs in science.

“They did a good job in trying to get me to understand that the surroundings that I lived in were not what the world was like,” Gant said. “One of

my mother’s students was a Corps of Engineers employee who came to talk about civil engineering, the impacts you could have in that field and how you could help your community, which interested me.”

Gant graduated from Prairie View A&M University in Texas as a Distinguished Military Graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering and a commission in the Engineer Regiment. She also holds a Master of Science in Engineer Management from Missouri



University of Science and Technology, Rolla, Missouri, and a Master of Science in national resource strategy from the Dwight D. Eisenhower School, National Defense University, Washington, D.C.

In her 27 years of active duty service, Gant has lived in 12 states and two countries, serving in an array of positions. She has deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and in 2016, Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) serving as the engineer for the Resolute Support and OFS headquarters, a four-star coalition headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Some of her greatest accomplishments have come from mentoring others. "Seeing young Soldiers and Civilians excel to the potential where you always thought they could be, pushing them beyond what they thought possible, is inspiring," Gant said. "Everyone needs a board of directors – people who will tell you not what you want to hear but rather what you need to hear."

A strong advocate for STEM, Gant has worked to develop partnerships with agencies and organizations to promote science, technology, engineering, and math initiatives. She has received

several national and community awards, to include the 2020 Women of Color Career Achievement in Government Award, the YWCA Women on the Move Award, Women of Influence in Government by Albuquerque Business First, BEYA Special Recognition Award, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., South Central Region Visionary Leader and Global Leader Awards.

"We have more STEM jobs now than people to do them. We need to get students excited about STEM and what they can do in those fields," Gant said. "That's what BEYA does. It's important for middle schoolers and high schoolers, especially in the African American community, to see that there are people in positions who look just like them making a difference. Whether it be in corporate America or military service, it is possible."

Under Gant's command, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers South Pacific Division provides vital engineering solutions in collaboration with partners to secure the nation, energize the economy and reduce risk from disaster. South Pacific Division operates in California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico and in parts of Colorado,

Oregon, Idaho, Wyoming and Texas that includes 1,100 miles of coastline, 3.9 million acres of estuarine wetlands, 2,290 miles of federal levees and 46 dams and reservoirs. Most recently, South Pacific Division responded to the COVID-19 pandemic working with partner agencies to establish eight alternate care facilities across eight states.

Gant oversees water resources, military construction, environmental stewardship and restoration and emergency management with a workforce of 2,500 civilians and military personnel in five districts across the 10 states.

"It is an incredible honor and a tremendous privilege for me to serve as the Division Commander," Gant said during her change of command ceremony. "My vision is quite simple. We will continue to invest in our people as we deliver our program by revolutionizing our processes while discovering the endless possibilities that we, the South Pacific Division, have to offer."