

TRAIL BLAZER

WISCONSIN HISTORY MAKER, MAJOR GENERAL MARCIA ANDERSON (RET) 'COMMANDS THE JOURNEY AHEAD'



Marcia Anderson was just looking to take a science class to fulfill her undergraduate science requirement for her art degree. She was not interested in the traditional science class with test tubes and microscopes, rather she signed up for a military science course that would fulfill the requirement. That class set her on course to becoming the first African American in the United States Army Reserve to attain the rank of major general, taking her place in our

nation's history.

Anderson's father, Rudy Mahan, served in the U.S. Air Force as truck driver during the Korean War and her brother served in the Marines for 12 years. Her father had a dream of serving as a bomber pilot, but he didn't have access to programs such as Officer Candidate School, which he would need a commission to in order to apply for flight school.

Growing up in Beloit, Anderson says that her grandmother and mother were the greatest influences in her life. Both women were very assertive people, who believed that she could do anything and both made sure she had plenty of opportunities - when they could afford it - to attend arts and sporting events. She especially shared a deep bond with her great grandmother, whom they called "Mother Dear," whose wisdom and insights into life helped Anderson become who she is today.

Things weren't always easy for Anderson, who was held back in kindergarten when her teacher told her mother that she was a bit slow. That setback became a

powerful motivation for her. She was determined to prove that teacher wrong.

Growing up, Anderson never saw herself as a leader, nor did she see herself in charge of anyone but herself. She had done a little camping in the Girl Scouts, but nothing that would prepare her for what she would experience in the military.

That all changed in 1977. While attending Creighton University in Omaha, she accidentally signed up for ROTC for a science credit. The training made her step outside her comfort zone and forced her to take leadership roles as a cadet. She had to quickly learn how to motivate other people, figure out a plan, and execute it, sometimes with limited resources and information. She realized that she liked the physical aspects of the training, learning new things like rappelling, map reading, first aid, firing a weapon, and "camping."

Most importantly, to her, was how much she learned from and admired the other cadets. They knew they were all part of something much greater than themselves. And the

military's structure appealed to her. So she joined the United States Army in May of 1979 when she received her Commission as a 2nd Lieutenant upon graduating from Creighton University.

Again, things weren't always easy. During her initial years of service in the 1980s, there were many people who did not welcome her- or other women for that matter- as a soldier, value her contributions, or believe they could trust her to do the right thing. While she was a captain, her superior, a lieutenant colonel, introduced her to his staff saying that he was "forced" to take her. She recalls others took credit for her work, diminished her accomplishments, and told her that she was taking a position from a male officer who deserved it more.

Comments like that made her even more determined to learn the profession of arms, excel at every task, and demonstrate that she had earned and deserved a leadership role.

Over the next thirty years, Anderson climbed the ranks of the US Army Reserve, defying the odds and the attitudes.

On October 1, 2011, Marcia Anderson made history when the United States Army Reserve promoted her to major general during a ceremony at Fort Knox. She was to be stationed in Washington D.C. as the third-highest ranking officer in the Army Reserve. She was the first African American to achieve this rank.

Humble, she felt very responsible to all those who had preceded her in service, such as the women of the 6888th Postal Battalion, the Tuskegee Airmen, the Buffalo Soldiers, the Montford Point Marines, and countless people who served without

recognition or thanks. She was also grateful to those women in Beloit who set her up for success: her mother, grandmother, and Mother Dear. She promised she would never do anything while serving that would dishonor or minimize all of their sacrifices and each day she led proudly in their honor.

In 2016, after a thirty-six year career, General Anderson retired from the Army Reserve. During her years in service, she earned the Distinguished Service Medal, the Legion of Merit with two oak leaf clusters, the Meritorious Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, the

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Army Commendation Medal, the Army Achievement Medal, the Parachutist Badge, and the Physical Fitness Badge. Later that year, Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer named her to be the sponsor of the USS Beloit, an honor bestowed on her for her ties to Beloit and her service to her country. She is now permanently part of that ship's history.

Like those before her, General Anderson shares what she has learned with her fellow veterans: "Each one of us are unique and we need to remember that we are very special. Out of a population of over three hundred million, less than one percent of the people in this country have served in the military. Each person who has served has been trained and 'KNOWS' how to lead and handle stressful situations. Be proud of your service. You earned that right."

