

Alumna Breaks New Ground in U.S. Army

By Tom Nugent

Ask Marcia Anderson, BA'79, where she found the courage that was required to become the U.S. Army's first female African-American two-star general, and the former Creighton political science major will tell you an amusing story about her experience as an Army captain who was once assigned to lead a dozen tough-as-nails drill sergeants.

"I was a company commander back during the early 1990s," recalls Anderson, whose promotion to the rank of Army Reserve major general made national headlines last fall, "and I'd been given the task of helping to improve the performance of a group of really tough infantry drill sergeants.

"As you might imagine, I felt a little bit intimidated at first. But then I realized that all of us shared the same goal — finding ways to improve the U.S. Army — and I started feeling better about my assignment."

Anderson says she prepared for the training sessions by "learning everything I could about ways to help those drill sergeants get better at their jobs."

She also followed her career-long philosophy of "trusting the people under your command" and "giving them the freedom — and the resources — to perform their assignments well."

Although the 12 hard-nosed D.I.s (drill instructors) were "a bit standoffish" at first, they soon began to appreciate the confidence their female commander was showing in them ... and their training unit went on to excel at its mission of preparing civilian recruits for life in the Army.

On a couple of occasions, however, the then-Capt. Anderson was required to enforce some "old-school Army discipline" — while letting her charges know that she wouldn't accept anything less than their best.

"I do remember one particular afternoon when I felt the need to give them a good

chewing out," says the 53-year-old major general with a cheerful laugh. "On that occasion, a raised voice and a couple of slamming doors were enough to get their attention — and also to show them I meant business when I asked them to improve their job performance."

For the recently promoted two-star — who's now serving as the deputy chief, Office of the Chief, Army Reserve — finding the nerve to perform well under pressure has been a lifelong challenge.



Marcia Anderson, BA'79, became the U.S. Army's first female African-American two-star general.

A native of economically battered East St. Louis, Ill., Anderson says she got off to a rocky start in school. "Believe it or not, I failed kindergarten!" she explains with another ringing laugh. "For whatever reason, the teacher decided I wasn't ready for first grade, and they held me back a year.

"Well, by the time I did get to first grade, all my friends were already in second, and they used to make fun of me. I got angry about that ... and so I vowed that they weren't going to write my story. And as the years passed, I gradually decided that I was going to find the strength and the determination I needed for success within."

By the time Anderson arrived at Creighton in 1974, she was already a disciplined, hard-working student, and she was determined to succeed academically.

She also "benefited enormously," she says, from the fact that her uncle was a

Jesuit professor at Creighton — Fr. Joseph Brown — who shared her love of theater. A longtime mentor and an inspiring teacher, he helped her focus her academic life, and even directed her in a student theater production (*The House of Bernarda Alba*) that drew rave reviews on campus.

Anderson says she got another "major boost" at Creighton purely by accident. Intent on meeting a science requirement, she signed up for ROTC — never imagining that her academic decision would lead to a glittering, 31-year career as an officer in the U.S. Army Reserves.

But that's what happened. After earning a law degree at Rutgers in the early 1980s, she went on to become both a Reserve Officer and an executive administrator in the U.S. federal court system. Today, Anderson manages a staff of 25 people at the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Madison, Wis., for a court that covers 44 counties. But she says her part-time job as deputy chief of the Army Reserves is in some ways even more demanding than her full-time civilian post. Her overriding goal in 2012: To help make the Reserves "much more flexible and much better organized, so we can help more good people to stay with us throughout longer and more productive careers."

Like two other bold-hearted Creighton women who broke new ground in the U.S. military (recently retired Maj. Gen. Carla Hawley-Bowland, MD'78, the first female Medical Corps general officer in the history of the U.S. Army, and pioneering World War II Women Airforce Service Pilot Mary Ruth Rance, ARTS'38), Anderson has helped to "open the door" for hundreds of young women in today's military.

"Really, I feel like I'm quite fortunate," the newly promoted two-star says today, while describing her recent headline-making promotion at the Army's sprawling base in Ft. Knox, Ky. "My father served in the Army Air Corps (which later became the Air Force) during the Korean War, but some of the opportunities I was given weren't available to him because of his race.

"He is so proud of my promotion to two-star; I think the buttons are still popping from his shirt!"