It takes a special kind of lawyer to serve in the Army Judge Advocate General’s Corps (JAGC). It requires a passion for public service, an ability to lead diverse individuals, the faculty to learn a new substantive area of the law every few years, and a willingness to deploy in harm’s way to a war zone. It also takes a special kind of woman to rise to the top of the nearly all-male ranks of the senior military leadership. General Flora D. Darpino is this kind of exceptional lawyer and woman.

On September 3, 2013, she was promoted to the rank of three-star lieutenant general and began serving as The 39th Judge Advocate General of the U.S. Army, the first woman to hold this position since the first Judge Advocate General was appointed in 1775. As The Judge Advocate General (TJAG), she is the senior military lawyer for the Army and the principal legal adviser to the secretary of the Army. In addition, she directs over 10,000 lawyers in the JAGC at over 100 active and reserve Army legal offices across the U.S. and overseas. She has achieved many other “firsts” in the Army, among them the first female assistant executive officer to TJAG and the first Judge Advocate General to join the Army direct from civilian life.

Born in Wilmington, Delaware, General Darpino became interested in law after being active in student government. She graduated from Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania and received her J.D. from Rutgers University in New Jersey. Because her husband owed the U.S. Army four years of service after he graduated from law school, and because she did not want to take a bar exam every time they moved, General Darpino joined the Army as well. Upon arrival at her first duty station in 1987, her boss told her, “I told them I didn’t want a woman, but they sent you anyway.” That first job helped shape her as an officer by helping her realize that she needed to embrace the challenges she faced with determination and hard work. By the time she left that job, that boss rated her as his best young lawyer.

During her career, General Darpino has held the toughest positions in JAGC and served with distinction in two deployments to the combat theater of Iraq. In 2002, she was selected as the senior lawyer for the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) and in that position (a combination of general counsel and district attorney), she deployed to Iraq in the early stages of the war. She and her team grappled with complex legal issues of first impression on a daily basis as well as challenging political and diplomatic issues. Following her promotion to full colonel, she again served in Iraq in 2010-2011 as the senior lawyer for all U.S. forces in that country as the U.S. transitioned from combat operations to an advise and assist mission.

Among her numerous positions, she has served as a federal court litigator, defense counsel, chief counsel for a Corps Staff Judge Advocate Office advising a senior general in Germany, and as commander of the Army’s Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, the only ABA-accredited military law school with an LL.M. program. As JAGC’s chief recruiting officer, she became the “face” of the Army JAGC and was responsible for developing and implementing lawyer recruiting goals and policies. During her term as the chief recruiter for “the nation’s largest law firm,” she influenced an inestimable number of young women—and men—to use their legal skills in the service of their country, and JAGC applications increased each year that she led the recruiting effort.

In addition to being an exceptional lawyer and leader herself, General Darpino always has understood, accepted, and embraced her position as a trailblazer and role model for younger women in the JAGC. For instance, in 1995, following her LL.M. program, she was accepted by the JAGC and was responsible for the Army Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School, the only ABA-accredited military law school with an LL.M. program. As JAGC’s chief recruiting officer, she became the “face” of the Army JAGC and was responsible for developing and implementing lawyer recruiting goals and policies. During her term as the chief recruiter for “the nation’s largest law firm,” she influenced an inestimable number of young women—and men—to use their legal skills in the service of their country, and JAGC applications increased each year that she led the recruiting effort.

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By her example, she has shown young women how rewarding military service can be and how it indeed is possible to balance a challenging career as a military lawyer and her family responsibilities as a wife and mother of two daughters. Her passion to serve and her ability to lead and inspire epitomize the qualities of a recipient of the Margaret Brent Award.