

National Guard: Brig. Gen. Mathews reflects on ceiling-shattering career

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A magnificent 36-year military career filled with many firsts will, at last, draw to a close when Brig. Gen Joane Mathews retires from her position as Wisconsin's deputy adjutant general for Army.

"As much as I absolutely love my job, the Soldiers and families I work for and with, we have so many outstanding leaders who are ready for that next step," Mathews said in explaining her decision. "I've never been one to hold anyone up."

Mathews' military career began in 1986 when she completed the Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the University of North Dakota at Grand Forks. She spent 11 years on active duty as a helicopter pilot, and deployed to Southwest Asia where she flew numerous missions in northern Iraq's no-fly zone as part of Operation Provide Comfort. When her time on active duty concluded, she joined the Wisconsin Army National Guard.

"It was a bit of a culture shock," she admitted. "But what impressed me the most were the Soldiers. It amazed me how dedicated our Guard members were, then and now — having to comply with the same active duty regulations and policies, with a lot less time to meet those requirements."

Mathews spent time during her first drill weekends talking with, and learning about, her fellow Soldiers.

"I remember being so impressed with what they do on the civilian side," Mathews said. "It reinforced to me, again, not to judge people by their rank — because a private, a specialist or second lieutenant with just a few years in the military may have years of leadership experience or be a subject matter expert in their career

field. Everyone has something to offer and to give.”

During her time in the Wisconsin Army National Guard, Mathews earned numerous awards and honors, and achieved several milestones. She was the state’s first non-medical female colonel, the first female commander of the 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation Regiment, and later would become the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s first female brigade commander when she assumed command of the 64th Troop Command brigade.

She was the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s first female chief of staff for Army, and then became the first female assistant adjutant general for readiness and training when she was promoted to brigadier general. In so doing, the Fish Clan member of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians became the first female Native American general officer in the entire Army National Guard.

In June of 2018, after two years as assistant adjutant general, Mathews became the deputy adjutant general for Army. As deputy adjutant general for Army, Mathews was responsible to the adjutant general for the Wisconsin Army National Guard’s performance and readiness for federal and state missions.

“The deputy adjutant general Army position carries a lot of responsibility,” Mathews said. “I care so much for our Soldiers, and I hurt when they hurt. People have and always will be my number one priority.”

Mathews understood that many Soldiers are reluctant to speak to a general officer, so she tried to be as approachable as possible.

“I didn’t let the position go to my head,” she said. “I do my best to try and keep people at ease when speaking with them. I also speak from the heart when I am in front of Soldiers, or even one-on-one. I really believe people know when one is being honest and sincere, showing care and concern. They can also see right through you when you’re not.”

Her disposition of caring for others will undoubtedly serve her well in her next role, as director of the Wisconsin National Guard Challenge Academy. She is expected to begin that position in late April, pending selection of her replacement as deputy adjutant general for Army.

Mathews said she would advise Wisconsin’s next deputy adjutant general for Army

to stay out of the office and away from the desk as much as possible.

“Walk around the building, talk to Soldiers, Airmen and our civilian employees” and retiree volunteers, she said. “Get out and travel — visit our Soldiers in their environment. And most importantly, when you speak with folks, listen to what they have to say. Be an active listener and a voice of change for them — a change for the better.”

Mathews carried on a legacy of military service in her family, and expressed hope when she was promoted to brigadier general that she would be a positive role model for other female service members. She credited her success to her family, both biological and military.

“I have been so very blessed to have worked with so many dedicated Soldiers, Airmen and civilians throughout my career,” Mathews said. “I am grateful for my military career, and am happy I will still be a part of the Department of Military Affairs family in my next adventure in life.”