

Soldier Has Led Way for Other Women

The Oregon Guard command sergeant major was a finalist for a statewide post

by Capi Lynn (reprinted with permission of the Statesman Journal in Salem, Ore.)

One afternoon, nearly three decades ago, Denise Kraxberger came home early from work and found a military recruiter waiting for her with papers to sign.

She was 18 and had just graduated from high school. Although she had a full-time job as a filing clerk at an insurance agency, her mother thought she was partying too much and needed more discipline in her life.

College or the Army National Guard, her mother said.

Kraxberger chose the National Guard and has never looked back.

Twenty-nine years later, she is one of the highest-ranking females in the Oregon Army National Guard.

Upon returning from a yearlong deployment with the 641st Medical Evacuation Battalion, the Keizer woman was being considered for the position of state command sergeant major, a position never held by a woman in Oregon.

"She's in the final four, which is quite a statement," said Col. Mike Caldwell, deputy director of the Oregon Guard.

Kraxberger learned last week that she didn't get the job.

"I was disappointed, but I was proud to have even made the cut," she said.

Kraxberger, 47, has a lot to be proud of as she reflects on her military career.

As one of only 15 command sergeants major in the state, she has helped create opportunities for other women to rise through the ranks of a male-dominated organization.

"Denise has demonstrated gender is not an issue in this organization any longer," Caldwell said. "At one time, I can assure you, it was."

Kraxberger remembers there being just six women in the Oregon Army National Guard when she joined in

1975. Today, there are 634, or about 10 percent of the force.

Nationally, there are nearly 40,000 women in the Army National Guard, or about 12 percent of the force.

"The biggest struggles were a few years back, when there just weren't positions for females," said Kraxberger, who started out working in administration and personnel. "There weren't a lot of women, and the jobs were held up by the men. You had to wait until they retired.

"Today, there are more opportunities."

In August 2000, she became the first female command sergeant major in the state, filling the role of lead support to the battalion commander. She expects that others will follow in her footsteps.

"We have a lot of great females out there, and they're heading this way," she said.

Support from Family

Kraxberger has made her family proud. She and her husband, Don, have been married 26 years and have two grown children.

They met in the Guard when both were working at the recruiting office. He left the organization after fulfilling his six-year commitment and has been her biggest supporter since.

"Every time I was going to get out, he talked me into staying," she said.

Being a woman in the Army National Guard hasn't always been easy. Kraxberger was hesitant to talk about some of the challenges she has faced along the way, but her daughter was more forthright.

"I think she had to work extra hard compared to the males," said her daughter, Devon, 23. "They overlooked her a lot for positions.

"She definitely worked her butt off to get to where she's at."

Kraxberger admitted that there probably were instances of discrimination during her early days in the Guard.

"But I kind of got over it and went on," she said. "I think my Guard time has been great. I think it's been pretty fair."

At times, she has felt added pressure, such as when she became the first female command sergeant major.



Lt. Col. David Greenwood pins a medal on Command Sgt. Maj. Denise Kraxberger of the 641st Medical Evacuation Battalion at a ceremony April 16.

"It was a big deal in the Guard," Kraxberger said. "I knew all eyes were on me to see how I was going to do, how I was going to handle it.

"I think there was a little resistance until once I proved myself and showed I'm here for the soldiers and I can do the job they wanted me to do."

An Accomplished Woman

Not all soldiers welcomed her with open arms.

"I know reality, and reality is that it probably took some of my counterparts a while to realize they had to come to grips with working for a woman," said 1st Sgt. Rodolfo Hernandez, who has served under Kraxberger with the 641st.

"For her to climb all the way to command sergeant major is an accomplishment. It may sound kind of sexist, but those are the facts."

As command sergeant major, Kraxberger's job is to make sure her soldiers get the training they want and need and the recognition they deserve. She also is responsible for logistic and administration needs while acting as liaison to the battalion commander.

"She genuinely cares for her troops," Hernandez said. "It doesn't matter who they are or what their background is.

"She goes above and beyond what is expected of her. She has people underneath her who could do some of the things she does, but she takes it personal. As a soldier, I'd go anywhere with her."

Caldwell isn't surprised to hear such high praise bestowed upon Kraxberger.

"She garners great respect from those who serve with her and serve for her," he said.

That respect has been earned beyond state lines.

During a demobilization ceremony last week, she received a miniature statue of "Iron Mike" in honor of her work during the battalion's deployment at Fort Bragg, N.C. "Iron Mike" is the famous symbol of the Army paratroopers, a group to which the 641st provided support the past year.

"Paratroopers are expected to move further and faster and fight harder than any other soldiers," said Command Sgt. Maj. William Franklin, who came to Salem from Fort Bragg to present the award. "Sgt. Major Kraxberger possesses all that, she just doesn't jump out of an airplane."

Denise Kraxberger

Age: 47

Position: Command sergeant major for the 641st Medical Evacuation Battalion

Service: 29 years in the Oregon Army National Guard

Residence: Keizer

Family: Husband, Don; daughter, Devon; son, D.J.; granddaughter, Hayley, 2°

See Kraxberger on page 19.