

# Room at the Top

by Lori Rapp



General Carol Mutter (BA-67)

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## The nation is finally learning what folks at UNC have known for a long time—Major General Carol Mutter is a Trail Blazer.

The UNC alumna received the Trail Blazer award as one of the University’s Honored Alumni in 1992, and was honored again in 1994 when she returned to her alma mater as commencement speaker. But it wasn’t until President Bill Clinton nominated Mutter as the first female three-star general earlier this year that she gained widespread national attention.

While the military and university press had previously recognized Mutter’s success in climbing to the top of a male-dominated profession, she was now being interviewed on “The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer” and featured in *The Washington Post*.

“If confirmed by the Senate (hearings are set for late summer), Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Carol Mutter, 50, would be the first woman to ascend to the rank of lieutenant general,” wrote John Mintz of *The Washington Post*. “She would be placed in charge of Marine Corps manpower policy and planning, one of that service’s most senior positions.”

“Mutter would be the only woman among 107 male three-star officers. In all, the four services have 19 female officers with the rank of brigadier general and above, among about 867 men.”

At the time of Clinton’s nomination, Mutter was commander of the Marine Corps Systems Command at Quantico, Virginia. “There’s an irony in the fact that the Marine Corps may be the first service to have a female three-star general,” wrote Mintz.

“Many female Marines feel they don’t have the same career opportunities as men because they are denied direct combat jobs. Marine combat assignments are considered the best way to rise through the ranks.

“Only 64 percent of Marine jobs are open to women, while 68 percent of Army positions are available; it’s 94 percent in the Navy and 99 percent in the Air Force.” *The Washington Post* writer quoted a military source who said that Mutter was not the beneficiary of affirmative action. She was simply “the most qualified person for the job.”

And during interviews with “The NewsHour With Jim Lehrer” and *Spectrum*, Mutter revealed many of the qualities that have helped her succeed. She’s a hard-working team player who prefers to acknowledge women’s success in the military rather than dwell on the challenges they face.

“The doors have opened to women one by one,” she told *Spectrum*. “I haven’t always been the first one through those doors.”

Asked for advice on how to succeed in a field dominated by men, Mutter suggested three tactics:

- Don’t let gender be an issue.
- Act like you belong.
- Work hard and do a good job.

Could any supervisor—male or female—argue with such a work ethic? Mutter’s haven’t. From data processing to women’s officer training, she’s excelled at her assignments. And her titles, such as assistant chief of staff and deputy commanding general, have grown more impressive with each promotion and achievement.

Her medals and decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal, National Defense Service Medal with bronze star, and the Sea Service Deployment Ribbon with four bronze stars.

In addition to the bachelor’s degree in mathematics that she earned from UNC, Mutter holds degrees from two institutions in Newport, Rhode Island, a master’s in general management from Salve Regina College and a master’s in business management from the Naval War College.

## So did UNC play a role in her success?

“The math and science background was very helpful to me in the computer and technical side of things in the Marine Corps,” Mutter said.

She also cited an educational psychology class that sharpened her human-relations skills. “A large part of being an officer is leadership, which is dealing with people,” she said.

“I still feel attuned with teachers and teaching,” she said, explaining that she drew on her UNC education background when teaching women officers.

“To me teaching is an integral part of leadership and something I always enjoy focusing on.”

Mutter grew up on a farm near Eaton, Colorado. Her mother, Haddie Schneider, who now lives in Greeley, says that Gen. Mutter was recruited to a “summer job” consisting of nine weeks of basic training after her junior year in college. She was commissioned as a second lieutenant the day before graduation in 1969.

Ask her to cite people key to her success and the general will name her supportive husband, Colonel James Mutter, who is retired from the Marine Corps, and her military supervisors.

But you won’t get words of self-praise from this unassuming high-achiever, according to Georgette Vigil, executive director of the UNC Alumni Association.

“She has her roots in northern Colorado and success has not changed her,” said Vigil, who met Mutter when the major general spoke at UNC’s commencement.

“She’s straight-forward, honest and approachable,” Vigil said.

“I like her.”