

CLASS OF
1980

MAJ. GEN. (RET.)

SUSAN DESJARDINS



During the Dark Ages of her third-class year, then-Cadet Susan Desjardins '80 received a card from her parents. Any mail from back home during those long winter months brightened her day.

This particular card, however, delivered an inspirational message, motivating the future Air Force general as she began and then navigated a 32-year active-duty military career.

"I have the card to this day," she shares. "And I still look at it from time to time."

Not surprisingly, she has committed the words to memory.

"To achieve all that is possible, we must attempt the impossible," she recites. "To be as much as we can be, we must dream of being more."

Today, sitting in the living room of her Exeter, New Hampshire, home, Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Desjardins still marvels at the power of those words.

"So, when things seemed impossible to me, and there were many of those times, I was going to try my best because I knew I could get further than I thought," she remembers thinking. "Then I was going to dream of being more, always reaching and asking, 'What's next?' That's probably a good life lesson."

Sure enough, Gen. Desjardins persevered and stayed committed to serving her country as a pilot and leader. Her biography includes involvement in a host of significant military operations over three decades.

And now her resume includes one more honor of note — United States Air Force Academy Distinguished Graduate Award

recipient.

"I get this phone call from Gen. Mike Gould ('76)," she laughs. "I knew he's just going to ask me to do something. Then he and Bob Lowe ('71 and then-AOG board chair) told me that I was chosen as a Distinguished Graduate. I was speechless. Of all the people who have graduated from the Air Force Academy, so many who are deserving and highly accomplished, I just didn't think that I fit in that group. But I was and I am very humbled and very honored."



NEW ENGLAND LIFE

Born in Exeter, Gen. Desjardins spent her entire childhood in New England. Her father was previously a Marine and Korean War veteran. Her mother was a former Air Force nurse.

Tragically, she and her siblings struggled

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through the loss of their birth mother when Gen. Desjardins was just 7.

“Here was my dad with four babies, basically, in his mid-30s,” she remembers. “It was a sad time for us; an enormous loss and a big transition for our family.”

With the help of relatives, especially a nearby grandmother, the family was able to manage.

“And then this angel came into our lives, who ended up being my stepmother,” Gen. Desjardins says. “She had been a career woman working in Boston. She came into our lives, made us whole again and became our mom.”

Her stepmother turned out to be the perfect role model for Gen. Desjardins as she contemplated her future. Her new mother filled the home with laughter, fun and deep moral values.

“My parents taught us about responsibility, taught us about commitment, taught us about finishing a job once you start something,” she recalls. “There was a lot of honesty and trust ... things that really became touchstones later in life.”

Labeled a tomboy by friends, Gen. Desjardins was a highly competitive young woman.

“I was always trying to keep up with my older brother, who was only 14 months older than me,” she recalls. “I wanted to do things as well, if not better, than him.”

That competitive streak carried over to the classroom. She was close to a straight-A student.

“I remember when I got my first B,” she says. “I was devastated.”

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

Gen. Desjardins worked paying jobs throughout high school, saving money for future college expenses.

“I think there were 12 different families that I babysat for in the neighborhood,” she says. “All my Fridays and Saturdays, and lots of times Sundays, were sort of eaten up with babysitting.”

She found some time, however, for extracurricular activities. She performed in several drama productions, participated in National Honor Society, and successfully ran for class vice president.

Her father always pushed her to think bigger.



ACROSS: Then-Cadet Susan Desjardins '80 serves as cadre during Basic Cadet Training.

TOP: Gen. Desjardins prepares for a mission during her pilot days.

MIDDLE: Gen. Desjardins and husband Peter Lennon never pass up a chance to hike.

BELOW: Gen. Desjardins at home in Exeter, New Hampshire, with family pets.



"Why not class president?" he asked.

When she indicated her intentions of becoming a nurse, her dad wondered if she'd thought about becoming a doctor.

Early on, Gen. Desjardins discovered the value of morning runs. She would get up early and log several miles before catching the school bus.

"It's been one of those things that saved my sanity over the years," she admits. "And I still do it."

COLLEGE DECISION

As high school graduation neared, Gen. Desjardins focused her attention on attending one of several prestigious schools — Dartmouth, Mount Holyoke and Smith among them. But reality soon set in, knowing her parents had limited resources.

"Even though I had worked all the way through high school and saved as much money as I could, I knew it would be difficult to swing the tuition," she says.

Her father happened to read a story indicating that for the first time service academies were accepting female applicants. Gen. Desjardins decided to give it a try.

She received an appointment to USAFA from her congressional representative and accepted the offer.

"Then I found out it was free," she says. "This was amazing, because then I didn't have to worry about working anymore."

Five days after high school graduation, she was on an airplane to Colorado.

"It was my second airplane ride ever," she says. "And I had never been west of New York. That's how it all started."

ACADEMY DAYS

Then-Cadet Desjardins realized that she and the other '80s Ladies were making history when they arrived on base in 1976. But other than the press hanging around from time to time, she didn't give her history-making involvement much thought.

"We were just so focused on what we were trying to do and surviving every day," she says. "That really didn't impact or make a huge impression on me."

At all costs, she did avoid talking to reporters during her first year, not wanting to draw attention to herself.

"I knew I was going to say something that was going to make some upperclass-

man upset with me," she laughs.

While Basic Cadet Training was a challenge for her, Gen. Desjardins admits to enjoying the Jacks Valley experience.

"I was more in my element there," she says. "I loved being outside, and I liked the camping part. I was in pretty good physical shape, even though the altitude was something to deal with at first. It was tough, but it's just a good memory."

Other vivid memories from her cadet years include the first Parents Weekend when her mom and dad made the trip out from New Hampshire. Also, Recognition and SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) training were huge accomplishments she'll never forget.

"At the end of SERE, seeing the American flag when the upperclass cadre pulled the hood off my head ... what a sense of patriotism I felt," she says.

Gen. Desjardins eventually became USAFA's first female cadet squadron commander for 32nd Squadron, the Roadrunners. She took the job very seriously.

"I knew that people would be watching me, and I did not want to let my classmates or my squadron down," she recalls. "As a woman, I had to be better, because I felt I would be a little bit more under the microscope. I had to be really good, because our successes would be magnified, but so would my failures."

Among the many lessons she learned as a cadet were the importance of teamwork, a willingness to accept criticism, and a recognition that each person has something to contribute to the mission.

CAREER GOALS

Her only goal upon arriving at USAFA was to become an Air Force officer. She later zeroed in on becoming a pilot.

"Our AOCs (Air Officers Commanding) would talk about their careers as aviators," she says. "I came to the conclusion that if you're qualified, you're at the Air Force Academy, you should be a pilot."

Turns out her eyesight worsened while at the Academy, and she was on the verge of losing her pilot qualification.

"I was devastated," she admits. "But quickly, my AOC put me in for a waiver, and the superintendent approved it. I had to go to pilot training then, and I was really

glad I did."

After graduation, then-2nd Lt. Desjardins headed to Laughlin Air Force Base in Texas for training.

"The class was largely Academy grads," she says. "I had more fun in the T-38 than I did in the T-37."

She was assigned to the KC-135 and went to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina, for her first operational assignment. She later transitioned to the KC-10. She would eventually fly the C-5 and C-17 as well. Ultimately, she accrued more than 3,800 flying hours, primarily in tanker and transport aircraft.

She piloted the lead tanker during the 1986 Libyan Raid.

"I understood, at that point, how important it was that we do our job so that the fighters and bombers could do their job," she says.

Additionally, she was involved with military operations in Grenada and Panama, as well as the response to the Achille Lauro cruise ship hostage crisis.

Later, she flew during Operations Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

"We refueled the B-52s that did the first strikes in Desert Storm," she reports.

In addition to flying during Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, Gen. Desjardins served as a deployed expeditionary operations group commander and squadron commander.

LEADERSHIP GROWTH

After a stint as a KC-10 instructor pilot and evaluator pilot at Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana, Gen. Desjardins was sent to Strategic Air Command Headquarters. Then it was off to Naval Command and Staff College, prior to desk jobs at the Pentagon.

"I couldn't hold a job at the Pentagon," she jokes. "No one likes being at the Pentagon because everyone would rather be doing operations, whether it was flying, driving a tank, commanding a ship. But I was told to maximize my time there, and I did."

After meeting and marrying her husband, Peter, she attended Air War College before becoming commander of the 912th Air Refueling Squadron in North Dakota. A tour on the Joint Staff at the Pentagon was followed by an assignment as com-



ABOVE: Gen. Desjardins poses next to a C-17.

TOP RIGHT: Gen. Desjardins was the first female commandant of cadets at USAFA.

RIGHT: Gen. Desjardins bundled up during a chilly stop in Antarctica.



mander of the 60th Operations Group at Travis Air Force Base, California.

"It's a huge base hosting C-5s and KC-10s," she says. "This was the gateway to the Pacific."

An assignment to Air Mobility Command and U.S. Transportation Command as the commander's executive officer led to her becoming commander of the 437th Airlift Wing at Joint Base Charleston, South Carolina. She was the first woman to command the 437th.

One day, during a wing picnic, Gen. Desjardins took a call from her boss, Gen. John Handy, who announced she was headed back to her alma mater as commandant of cadets.

"I was not thrilled," she admits. "Mainly because we were in the middle of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and from Charleston ... everything was going east. I had 54 C-17s, and there were 75 aircrew and many other airmen on the road or deployed at any one point in time. We were working and running hard, supporting the mission. And here I was told that I was going to go to the Academy ... to train. It was tough to accept that."

DEVELOPING CADETS

Gen. Desjardins became the first female commandant of cadets in USAFA's history, and the assignment turned out well.

"It was an extraordinary experience," she says. "A highlight for sure."

Even though the Academy was embroiled in several challenging situations at that time — including sexual assault, religious proselytizing and honor scandals — Gen. Desjardins says her tenure from 2005 to 2008 helped institute necessary course corrections.

"My marching orders were to put the military back in the military academy," she says. "I was really glad that opportunity came."

Working with then-Superintendent Lt. Gen. (Ret.) John Regni '73, Gen. Desjardins says the Academy senior leaders were able to restore valuable training and institutional traditions that had faded over time.

"We needed to challenge the young men and women who were coming to the Academy," she says. "We didn't need to make it easy. I wanted each and every one of them to be so ready that when they graduated and went to their units, they were ready on day one to get into the fight. That was inspirational to them."

In her final Air Force assignment, Gen. Desjardins was director of plans and policy, Strategic Command, responsible for developing the nation's strategic war plan and for global strike contingency planning.

RETIREMENT TIME

When she hung up her uniform in 2012, Gen. Desjardins and her husband took some time off to travel.

But since then, she has been busy working with organizations of importance to her.

Gen. Desjardins currently serves as a governing trustee of the Falcon Foundation, which supports military prep school scholarships for young men and women desiring to attend USAFA.

She serves on the board for the American Independence Museum in Exeter and is a board trustee for Exeter Health Resources, which includes Exeter Hospital, Core Physicians, and Rockingham County VNA and Hospice. In addition, she's a board trustee for Riverwoods, a leading continuing care and retirement community, and serves on the board of Service Credit Union, an international financial institution catering to the military and veterans.

She's a national board director for the Daedalians, an organization of current and former military aviators that advocates for air and space power, and the New Hampshire/Maine Daedalians Flight. She's also been involved with the New Hampshire Association of Graduates chapter.

A PLACE IN LINE

Gen. Desjardins thanks her family, friends, former commanders, mentors, coworkers and fellow graduates who played a role in her many successes through the years.

She especially appreciates the strong bond the Class of 1980 developed through its cadet years, which has carried over in the decades since.

"That Long Blue Line is real," she says. "There's this special connection, a common understanding and experience with anyone who's a part of that Long Blue Line. I'm just proud and honored to be in that line." 