

## STORIES

SEPTEMBER 12, 2011 | WAR AND PEACE

### WOMAN OF THE WEEK: GEN. BECKY HALSTEAD

**“Character has no gender,” Halstead often reminds people.**

*by Anna Louie Sussman*

It was 1976, the year that West Point first opened its doors to women, and at five foot one and a half, Becky Halstead wasn't an obvious candidate for the storied military academy. A varsity athlete with nine letters under her belt, she dreamed of becoming a high-school sports coach. But as her mother read aloud from a newspaper article announcing West Point's change in policy, Halstead realized she had many of the qualifications the university was looking for: she was well-rounded and a leader in her small-town community of Willseyville, N.Y., and she excelled in school.

Not only was Halstead accepted to West Point's second coeducational class, she would go on to be the first female West Point graduate to be promoted to brigadier general in 2004, among other accolades.

She would also go on to lead the U.S. military during one of its most high-profile national-security missions. Halstead, 52, served in Germany, South America, and eventually, Iraq and Afghanistan, becoming the senior commanding general for logistics in Iraq. She was the first woman in U.S. history to hold a strategic-level command logistics position in combat, a job that included overseeing supply, maintenance, transportation, and distribution to more than 250,000 personnel who were serving in the Iraq theater of operations.

But for Halstead, all of the “firsts” that she racked up as she broke barrier after barrier mattered less than the troops she led. “At the end of the day, it's the soldiers who are getting the actual mission done, and I try never to forget that,” she said.

Halstead attributes her success to her strong commitment to leading by example, regardless of rank or gender. “In 31 years of wearing a uniform, I've strived not to be looked at as a woman first, or an officer first,” she reflected. “I've always wanted to be considered a leader of character. Then all those other things don't matter.” She often reminds people that “character has no gender.”

In 2008, she retired from the military after 27 years of service. During that time, she earned master's degrees in Advanced Military Studies (with a thesis on “Visionary Leadership”) and Resource Strategy, and too many medals to count. She considers her greatest accomplishment leaving behind a legacy of younger leaders, women and men, of whom she can be proud, and with whom she stays in close touch. One soldier recently emailed her from Afghanistan to say he often wished he could call her for advice on how to handle tough situations. Instead, he said, he stops to ask himself, “What would M6 (her military call name) do?” Another of her command sergeant majors with whom she served in Iraq named his daughter Rebecca, a gesture that she said “brought me to my humble knees.”

Today, as the founder and principal of the consultancy Steadfast Leadership, she shares her insights on leadership with everyone from sixth-grade students to Wall Street CEOs. She stresses that leadership, especially in the military, is not about climbing to the top. “You've heard the expression, ‘rank has its privileges,’” she said, noting that the expression makes her uneasy. “People want to be promoted to have privileges, but really, rank has its responsibilities. To lead America's sons and daughters—that is a huge responsibility that should never be taken lightly.”

Ultimately, she says, “I always default to the fact that each of us is unique. Our leadership styles will probably change a little bit every day.” And, she adds, “That's a good thing.”

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