

Jessica Wright & Wanda Bechtold

United States Army

Interviewed by Shannon Lee, March 2013



Secretary Jessica Wright retired from active duty in November 2010 after serving the U.S. Army for 35 years. Her journey with the Army began in 1974. Upon graduating from college, jobs were hard to come by so her father suggested joining the Army. At that time, the Army segregated women, allowing them only to serve in the Women's Army Corp. The only jobs available to women were jobs traditionally held by civilian women-administration, nursing, and healthcare. The rules surrounding these jobs were very strict. That all changed with the desegregation of the Army in late 1976/early 1977. This pivotal move led Wright to what she described as a defining moment in her military career- the decision to attend, and complete, flight school.

The desegregation of the Army led to significant shifts in the advancement of women. Speaking of her own career, Wright stated, "I joined a military where women were segregated. I ended up serving as the first woman maneuver brigade commander in 2010." During her 35 years in service, Secretary Wright saw many changes in the positions available to women and how those positions were viewed. Speaking of the changes, Wright said, "Doing away with the Women's Army Corp. was a significant event. Women piloting open attack military helicopters, women serving as maneuver brigade commanders, and women openly serving in combat roles for the last 10 years were significant events." Noting the progressive evolution of the military over the last 40 years, Wright spoke of women saying, "Our military couldn't do what they do without women. Women pull their own weight and they are professionals. When they [women] are doing the job, you just cannot tell the difference."

Being a woman in the military during such a pivotal time was not without its challenges. Secretary Wright's greatest challenge, however, was one that working moms can easily identify with: learning how to balance work and family. Recalling the days when her son was young, Wright said there were times when she would have to miss a school event due to the demands of her job. The difficulty, she noted, "is not without guilt, not without some pain." She recalled one event when her son was in second grade at St. Joan of Arc School in Hershey. It was Halloween and Wright was unable to attend the day's activities because she was on a mission to fly. The students had a parade outside that day so she told her son, "I'll try to fly over and flash my

landing light.” She continued, “I did it and he told his classmates ‘That’s my mom!’, and the kids didn’t believe his mom was flying a helicopter.”

In spite of the sacrifices and challenges, Wright encourages anybody with the desire and ability to join the military to do so. Calling the military “a phenomenal place” and “a great place to learn and grow”, she speaks of the military as a place where promotion is based on achievements. Men and women are mentored to become the best they can be. Speaking to women considering the military, Wright encourages them to do so. Her advice is “to take every single opportunity that comes their way and not wait for the big opportunities. The military has so much to offer and teaches you to make decisions when you’re young.” Currently, Wright’s 23-year-old son is a platoon leader in charge of over 30 people. He is, as she said, “responsible to ensure they are doing their mission. At a very young age, the military expects leadership. You learn to think on your feet, make good decisions, and be accountable.”

Secretary Wright concluded this interview by noting that one of the most important things we can do is show our support for our troops. Communication is key in showing that support. “You don’t realize the impact of saying ‘Thank you.’ If a family member is deployed, take the kids to hockey practice or shovel the driveway – it makes it so much easier for the person left behind.” Thank you, Secretary Jessica Wright, for your dedication and service to our country.



Supporting our troops is exactly what Wanda Bechtold has been doing since 2003. A veteran of the Army, Bechtold served from 1974 to 1980 and had the privilege of being one of the first women to train at Ft. Jackson as the Army was beginning to integrate women, eliminating the

Women's Army Corp. Citing the experiences of basic training as her clearest memory of her time in the service, Bechtold shared that many women joined the military because they had nowhere else to go. Service to the country allowed them a chance for world travel and education, something very difficult for women at that time. Since then, women have been given greater opportunities to choose occupations; many serving as drill instructors and in other occupations outside the traditional clerical and medical positions. One of the greatest changes, Bechtold noted, is that "women are more respected now."

In 2003, Bechtold, now the mother of two sons serving in the military, founded Central Pennsylvania Supports the Troops. The organization was started after her youngest son, serving in Iraq at the time, noticed that many of his comrades were not receiving gifts for Christmas. That year, she sent gifts to twelve of his fellow soldiers and the program took off from there. In 2011, Central Pennsylvania Supports the Troops sent an astounding 6,000 care packages to soldiers overseas, with half of the packages going to soldiers from Fort Indiantown Gap and the remaining packages going to members of the Marine Corp. serving from Camp Lejeune. Despite the generosity of the donations, Bechtold noted the organization is usually in the red at the end of the year.

The board members of Central Pennsylvania Supports the Troops receive no salaries in order to ensure that every penny donated is spent on the troops overseas. A variety of fundraising efforts and collections are made throughout the year, including the placement of Christmas trees in several Lebanon County banks. Common items requested include: personal care items, socks, beef jerky, peanuts, protein bars, and candy (Twizzlers are a favorite). In the late fall, donations collected during the year are stuffed into individual handmade stockings and are assembled into care packages by a team of 115 to 125 volunteers. Bechtold said postage on the packages typically costs around \$20,000, and there are no discounts on postage.

Bechtold welcomes everybody to support Central Pennsylvania Supports the Troops. When it comes to volunteers, "We will find something for anybody to do, regardless of abilities." People are invited to join the organization on packing day to help pack items and so they can see that the money and items are being used correctly. Anybody wishing to assist the organization is welcome to donate items, donate money for postage, write cards for the troops or assist with fundraising. For more information, and to receive notification of packing days and other events, Central Pennsylvania Supports the Troops can be found at www.centralpennsylvaniasupportsthetroops.com. Thank you, Wanda Bechtold, not only for your service to our country but your ongoing care and support of our troops serving overseas!

This article concludes the Women's History Month series. If you would like to read previous articles, please visit the Lebanon County Commission for Women's web site: www.lebcounty.org/womens_commission. We would like to take this opportunity to thank each woman who shared their stories with us and have lived as shining examples of bravery and courage.