

The First Female Hispanic General Officer in the United States Air Force Was a Nurse:

Brigadier General Carmelita Vigil Schimmenti

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This nurse leader profile describes some of the achievements by Brigadier General Carmelita Vigil Schimmenti, the Ninth Nurse Corps Chief of the United States Air Force and first Hispanic Air Force general officer. General Schimmenti describes her leadership within cultural, social, and professional nursing contexts.

The importance of diversity in the health profession in general, and within nursing in particular, has long been widely recognized and supported.¹⁻⁴ Developing Hispanic nurse leaders, especially those who are bilingual and bicultural, is an important endeavor for the nursing profession and for Hispanic communities.³

It was a distinct honor to interview Brigadier General Carmelita Vigil Schimmenti (Retired), who served as the Chief of the United States Air Force (USAF) Nurse Corps from October 1, 1985, to October 1, 1988. She was the first married female officer to serve as USAF nurse corps chief, and the first Hispanic female to be promoted to the rank of general in the USAF. During my interview with her, I found her to be pleasant, engaging, and gracious, as she shared her experiences as a nurse, an Air Force officer and a Hispanic American during a period of significant social and historical change. All nurses aspiring leadership roles can benefit from reading the lessons learned by General Schimmenti during her 30-year military nursing career. A clear theme during the interview with the General was her tenacity, hard work, and resourcefulness. General Schimmenti's story also serves as an example of the dedication and service of women in the US Armed Forces.

FINDING A WAY

For the first 10 years of life, Carmelita and her family lived on a pinto bean farm surrounded by close relatives, and on land homesteaded by her grandfather in the mid 1800s. For the first 4 years of schooling, she attended a 1-room schoolhouse populated by 15 students. However, in 1946, unrelenting droughts eventually compelled her family to leave the farm and seek work in the city of Albuquerque, New Mexico. Leaving the farm was painful and sad for all; they were leaving

behind family and a simple and familiar way of life, as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.

The family relocated and settled in Albuquerque's South Valley where they were able to raise chickens and other small animals to earn a living wage. She quickly learned that although all students were afforded the same educational opportunities in the Albuquerque school system, kids from the South Valley were not generally viewed as college material! However, she was blessed with teachers who challenged the students to defy public perception, and these relationships with teachers inspired Carmelita to search and pray for a way to move beyond her current circumstances in pursuit of higher education.

I started working after school and during summer vacations at age 12, hoping that I could save enough money to allow me to pursue an education beyond high school. I was 1 of 5 children and knew that my parents couldn't afford to support my ambition. Miraculously, a couple of months after graduating from high school, one of the American Legion posts offered me a small scholarship to attend a hospital-based

KEY POINTS

- **Successful nurse leaders find a way to view all experiences as opportunities for learning and growing.**
- **The most rewarding leadership experiences are those that produce a sense of purpose, meaning, and service.**
- **Relationships built on respect, collaboration, and effective communication provide a foundation for effective leadership.**

nursing program in my hometown. It was an answer to my prayers! The scholarship and my savings were enough to allow me to enroll in the 3-year nursing program. Little did I know that it was but the first step leading to a lifetime career in the magnificent and rewarding field of nursing.

MOTIVATION TO SERVE

A year after graduating from the Regina School of Nursing in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1957, Carmelita entered the USAF. Her decision to enter military service was primarily prompted by a promise she had made to her father during World War II. Her father, the product of a culture that considered military service an essential aspect of citizenship, was medically disqualified for military service when the war erupted in 1941. He grieved that since he did not qualify to serve and had no sons to send to war, his family was not “doing its share in the war.”

A memorable day for me was the day Dad and I were outside the general store watching men in our farming community boarding a bus to travel to the military induction center in Albuquerque. As we watched the men waving goodbye to family and friends, I saw a great sadness in Dad’s face and heard him say in a tearful voice, “We are the only family not doing our share!” Although only 6 years old, on the ride home in the old pickup truck I said to him: “Don’t worry Daddy, when I grow up I’m gonna join the Army and do our share.” I never forgot his reaction or my response. However, Dad and I never spoke about that conversation again, until 16 years later when I came home as a registered nurse to ask my parents’ blessing to join the military. Dad burst into tears and said, “You didn’t forget your promise, Hija...Go with our blessing!”

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

World War II and other sociopolitical events prompted an increased social awareness for the next 3 decades, specifically in issues such as civil rights, racial discrimination, segregation, and the rights of women. One that especially gained awareness in almost all communities was racial discrimination. Carmelita credits her father for helping her to deal with the “mentality of the times” when, occasionally, she encountered discriminatory practices!

I recall as a child and a teenager living in Albuquerque and seeing “help wanted” signs and newspaper ads that specified “Negroes, Indians, and Spanish speaking need not apply.” In the same city, I knew there were motels and restaurants that specified “Whites only”! Within my family, my mother, my sisters, and I were light skinned, and could, and often did, “pass for white.” My Dad, however, was dark skinned

and bore Hispanic/Indian features. In spite of the fact that we spoke Spanish in the home, the rule in our family was “English only in public places.” In time, we grew to understand the wisdom of the rule! Those were the times! In retrospect, I realize that my beloved Dad encountered more discrimination than we ever realized, but he was a man who understood his worth and never spoke about such encounters! However, a most memorable event occurred on a trip to El Paso, Texas. My father was a laborer with the AT&SF railroad and was proud to have been granted free travel passes on one of the cheaper passenger trains. One day, he announced that the family would spend a few days in El Paso and Juarez Mexico, using his free travel passes! The evening of our arrival in El Paso, we stopped at a nearby restaurant for dinner, and Dad proudly escorted Mom and his daughters to a nearby table. As I said earlier, Dad “looked Hispanic,” while the rest of us “could pass for white.” We sat at a table and soon an employee of the restaurant approached our table and said to Dad, “Sir, you’re going to have to sit in the back room; you can’t sit out here.” Dad answered, “but this is my family!” The employee replied, “Well, they can eat out here, but you have to go back there,” pointing to a room removed from the main dining room. Dad calmly stood up, put on his railroad cap, and said, “Come on, girls, we’re leaving.” As we walked out, my sisters and I were crying, “Why, Daddy, why?” and he said: “That is an ignorant man with ignorant rules; you will meet such people throughout life; don’t let them affect how you feel about yourself and how you feel about others!” That is a lesson I never forgot and one that served me well throughout my life! Thereafter, when I encountered discrimination, I already knew to pity the offender...my Dad had already taught me to pity rather than scorn that brand of ignorance!

Carmelita reported that within the military system during her years of service, commanders worked hard to discourage or eradicate discriminatory practices. She described a situation in which individuals in her chain of command intervened when she was denied housing in a local community.

I arrived at a base in Texas, and drove to an apartment complex in the area recommended by fellow officers. After completing the registration form, the clerk paused and asked, “What kind of a name is Carmelita Vigil?” I answered, “Spanish.” The clerk paused and left to consult with someone in the back office. When he returned, he smiled and said, “I’m so sorry, but we are completely full.”

The following day, when meeting with her unit commander, he asked about her living accommodations. She related that she was living with a friend because she was unable to find a vacant apartment in the building where other military officers lived.

Carmelita also described the clerk's inquiry about her name, and her sense that the Spanish name had rendered her ineligible for occupancy. Unbeknownst to Carmelita, her commander subsequently notified the wing commander about the incident. The wing commander then called the apartment manager and threatened to "pull out every airman living in that apartment complex if I find that you are discriminating against our military members!" Within 24 hours, Carmelita was assured that an apartment would be available by the end of the week. Commanders were alert and responsive to "prevailing discriminatory practices" in many parts of the country, and they used their influence to effect fair treatment of all military personnel whether on base or in the local community.

In 1968, when Carmelita married a United States Marine Corps officer, she learned first-hand about discriminatory practices within the military involving women. For example, the regulations afforded male married officers the option of on-base housing when available; and these regulations did not provide such an option for female officers. Additionally, the rules allowed club membership to female spouses, but not to male spouses. Encountering such inconsistencies, she used the chain of command in hopes of effecting changes, not only locally, but in the military system at large. She said, "I was a junior officer at the time, and I enjoyed talking to senior leaders who did not realize that such rules even existed, and who were generally eager to assist!"

Carmelita describes the 1970s as a time of change in the military services by allowing women to qualify for jobs previously open only to men. In 1976, the USAF changed the rules and allowed the first women to enter pilot training. The nurses on active duty were some of the first considered. Carmelita explains:

We were already proven officers, so when they opened pilot training to women, they asked several of us if we were interested in applying. I don't believe that many nurses chose to make the transition; however, I did know one nurse who accepted and graduated from flight training with honors. In those days, regulations precluded the assignment of women to combat roles, in spite of their skills and proficiency! That rule made her ineligible for being assigned to a flying unit. However, because of her flying proficiency, she was assigned as an instructor in the F16 combat fighter training program, which prepared pilots for flying F16s in combat. The message was "as a woman you are not sufficiently skilled for flying combat missions, but you are sufficiently skilled to teach male pilots who will fly the plane in combat!" Undoubtedly, her stellar performance, and that of many like hers, was responsible for a change in the rules in recent years! One of the leadership issues this scenario illustrates is the notion that change often occurs in "stages," a reality that most of us as leaders

need to learn! Organizational change is seldom swift. The larger the organization, the slower the process.

Carmelita served in the United States Air Force during the Vietnam war years, a time of great social unrest in this country. She described some of her experiences as a medevac nurse, and as a clinical nurse in medical centers during and post war.

Many of those young men going to war didn't even know where Vietnam was; some lied about their age to go fight in the jungles of a country where it was often impossible to distinguish friend from foe, and in an environment that was often as lethal as the guns of war! En route to Vietnam, they often waited on hot tarmacs for hours to board noisy aircraft, and once on board, they traveled on cold bucket seats and flew for hours in often turbulent weather! For days after leaving continental United States and before arriving in Vietnam, they ate canned rations or cold lunches; often, they were unable to bathe or even change clothing! Yet through it all, most never complained! Many behaved with the excitement and humor of young and eager boys going to summer camp! We, the nurses watching their spirit, tagged them "GIs MADE IN THE USA!" During their tour of duty in Vietnam, all those eager boys morphed into men; some returned home, many did not. Some returned home with bodies, minds, and souls intact; many did not! And, most tragically, all returned to a country that neither understood and seemingly did not care or appreciate what they had experienced and the sacrifice they had made! One young patient said to me, "Nothing that happened to me in Vietnam hurt as much as what happened when I came back to the States and found out how ungrateful the American people were about our sacrifice."

Carmelita acknowledges that her experiences during and following the war strongly influenced her professional and personal life.

Vietnam had a profound effect on my priorities as a nurse. In fact, when I think about it, I realize how much it shaped my career and my priorities. After my experience in medical evacuation, I was assigned to medical centers where we cared for many of the long-term casualties of the Vietnam war, and I was blessed to hear many of their stories of survival! From them, I learned to cherish my role as nurse and the connection we have with patients by being with them around the clock. In my role as the evening or night supervisor, I often suspended my routine to stop and hold the hand of a sleepless Vietnam victim, who almost always shared his story about life and death in the jungle. They reawakened in me always the need to review with my staff the privilege and importance of providing "care" to those entrusted to us! Today, when I see a veteran who identifies himself as a Vietnam veteran, I

ask to hear their story, remembering that “caring” is always good medicine.

DEVELOPING AS A NURSE LEADER

Carmelita’s experiences as a female, Hispanic American, nurse, and wife, all shaped her leadership style. After working in middle management positions for several years, she was promoted to more senior positions. At that stage, she aspired to create a nurturing and supportive work environment that exploited the talents and knowledge of those in her charge. She acknowledges the many mentors who by example prepared her for the job! She states, “I am deeply grateful to the many above me who provided me opportunities to acquire a variety of skills and knowledge, and who ensured that my evaluation reports reflected my potential for promotion and increased responsibility.” She observed:

I probably said it best at my retirement when I acknowledged that my success during my 30 years of service was the result of “having worked for so many above me who opened doors of opportunity, and for having worked with coworkers in all ranks, who pushed me through those doors.” From my great and many mentors, I learned that when a boss takes care of those entrusted to their care, those in their care will end up taking care of the boss; it proved so in my career!

CONTRIBUTING FACTORS ON THE LEADERSHIP ROAD

Carmelita’s narrative reveals the many elements that influence leadership styles and leadership outcomes. Her cultural heritage and family experiences taught her essential values and behavior for surviving and succeeding. As a child, she learned the privilege of citizenship and the importance of service to country. Early in life, she learned that in any society there are those who lack respect for those who are different, and that each person must work to define their own worth. In her climb on the professional ladder, she learned the importance of acknowledging and rewarding the skills and talents of all others on the ladder regardless of title or position; and she learned the importance of respecting and working collaboratively with other disciplines, even when competing for the same resources. Other factors in her story that formed a foundation for her successful career include her ability to view all experiences as opportunities for learning and growing, her exposure to a variety of leadership styles, and her ability to enlist support from those above her as well as contemporaries and subordinates. Woven throughout her story is her conviction that climbing any career ladder involves those above who unlock doors, and those contemporaries and subordinates who will work hard to make the aspiring leader “look good” on the

way up. In her story, we find the belief that career advancement is highly dependent upon early and continued collaboration between those who lead and those who are led. She stresses the need to listen and respect the perspective of others as a way to strengthen relationships and partnerships. Her story highlights the importance of attaining competence and credibility by not bypassing vital steps on the ladder, by developing good writing and verbal skills, by acknowledging the contributions of colleagues and subordinates, by delegating to others while still remaining involved, and by creating and conveying a sense of team work and trust!

As AF chief nurse and a general officer, I did not change my leadership style. I believe that the principles of effective leadership apply at each rung of the ladder; the issues and challenges are different, but the fundamentals remain unchanged.

Brigadier General Carmelita Vigil Schimmenti is remembered as 1 of the Air Force’s most successful nurse leaders. Her accomplishments are many, but what most stands out from the interview is her character, warmth, and compassion. She chose to focus on leading by example, developing the people around her, enjoying the journey of life, and never forgetting to keep the patient as the focus of the mission. The strong connections that she developed with patients, staff, and even strangers who served in Vietnam remind us of the powerful influence of a relationship-focused leader such as Brigadier General Carmelita Schimmenti.

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1541-4612/2019/\$ See front matter
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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mnl.2019.01.003>