

Jeanne Holm Dies at 88; A Pioneer in the Air Force

By [Douglas Martin](#) March 1, 2010

Jeanne M. Holm, the first woman to rise to the rank of general in the Air Force and the first woman to become a two-star general in any United States armed service, died on Feb. 15 in Annapolis, Md. She was 88.

The cause was cardiovascular disease, her friend Norma Loeser, a retired Air Force colonel, said.

As a colonel and later after her promotion, General Holm pushed to increase women's opportunities in the Air Force by more than doubling their number, vastly expanding the kinds of positions they could fill and ending policies that discriminated against women.

Her own rise could be seen as part of the change she helped engineer. Until she became a general, Air Force regulations restricted women to a rank of no higher than full colonel. And there could be only one of those: the head of the Women in the Air Force, popularly known as WAFs, in the manner that members of the [Women's Army Corps](#) were known as WACs.

General Holm attributed her success in furthering women's possibilities in the Air Force, including her own, to the beginnings of the women's revolution. In an oral history interview, she pointed out that she had become head of the WAFs, and a full colonel, a little more than a year after Betty Friedan published "[The Feminine Mystique](#)" (1963), often considered the manifesto of the women's movement.

By 1967, restrictions on how high women could rise in military rank were abolished.

Under General Holm's leadership, only four of the Air Force's specialties remained closed to women: pilot, navigator, missile operations and security police. She successfully pushed for opening R.O.T.C. to college women, the first service to do so. She made the Air Force the first service in which a woman commanded a mixed unit of men and women.

General Holm also greatly expanded the number of bases where women could serve, modernized uniforms and helped pave the way for women to be admitted to the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs.

"I set about trying to open up as many fields as I could to women, using any gimmick I could," she said in the oral history, which was recorded by the Library of Congress in 2003.

She even helped lawyers suing the Air Force for sex discrimination by giving them voluminous material from her files. One case resulted in a landmark decision by the United States Supreme Court in 1973 in [Frontiero vs. Richardson](#). It ordered that military women with civilian husbands receive the same full family benefits that military men with civilian wives did.

“It was about equity,” General Holm said of her overall efforts, “and it was about overturning traditional roles and what women could do in society.”

Jeanne Marjorie Holm was born in Portland, Ore., on June 23, 1921. Her father died when she was very young, leaving her mother with three small children. They moved frequently, and her mother remarried when Jeanne was 15.



Jeanne M. Holm attained the rank of Air Force general in 1971. Credit...Associated Press

General Holm learned how to be a silversmith from a woman who was master of the trade. She worked with silver while volunteering for a women’s ambulance corps formed in anticipation of war. She joined the Army in 1942, a month after the creation of the Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps.

“I was between semesters, had nothing to do anyway and was flat broke,” she said in an interview with The New York Times in 1971.

General Holm was one of first enlisted women to be accepted in officer candidate school. After graduating as the equivalent of a second lieutenant, she became a training officer before returning home and attending Lewis and Clark College in Portland for two years.

Joining the Reserves, General Holm indicated in her application that she wanted to serve in the Air Force, which was just being created as a separate service. She was called up in October 1948 and worked in operations during the Berlin airlift and in the early part of the Korean War.

In 1952 she was the first woman to attend the Air Command and Staff School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. As she rose in the ranks, she took time to return to Lewis and Clark in 1956 to finish her studies and graduate.

In 1965 she was named a full colonel and director of the WAFs. In 1970, she put in her papers to retire. But Gen. Robert J. Dixon, the new personnel chief for the Air Force, urged her to stay, saying he was eager to help her increase opportunities for women.

In 1971, she was promoted to general. Two years later, she was given another star. The separate status of the WAFs was abolished in 1976, and women were accepted into the military on much the same basis as men.

General Holm received many decorations. The Air Force's principal officer development program was named after her.

She is survived by a brother, Dale M. Holm.

General Holm became special assistant for women's programs in President Gerald R. Ford's administration. She proposed and helped lead an effort to remove sex bias from all federal laws anticipating that the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution would pass. It did not. She held lesser posts in the administrations of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan.

General Holm continued to speak out on women's military issues after her retirement. In an interview with The Washington Post in 1980, she castigated what she called a "boys will be boys" attitude toward sexual harassment.

"In the military a racist is not allowed to act like one," she said, "but it's still sort of winked at to be sexist."