

spotlight

@WIISCanada
www.wiiscanada.org

Interview with Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett

Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett is the first female Chief of Reserves and Cadets and a role model for young females across the country and abroad. She has had a distinguished career serving the Reserve Force with some notable national appointments including the director of Professional Development and Director of the Ottawa Detachment of the Canadian Defence Academy, Director of Training and Education Policy and Project Director (military) for the Defence Learning Network. Bennett holds a BPhEd (physical education) from McMaster University, a BEd from Queen's University, and an MA in Leadership and Training from Royal Roads University. She is also a graduate of the Canadian Forces Staff School, College, the Canadian Forces Staff College, and the NATO Defence College.

We had the opportunity to sit down and chat with Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett for some "wise" words to share with WIIS Canada members.

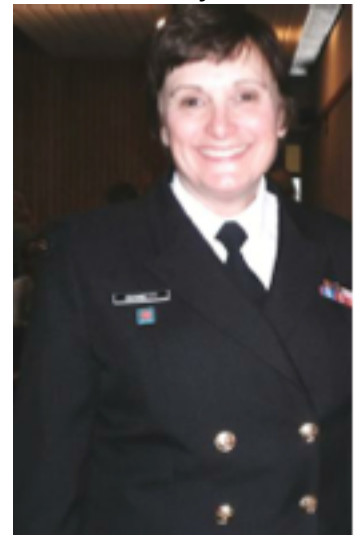
What types of challenges have you faced as a woman in your career, especially in breaking the glass ceiling?

There were lots of questions and challenges as to whether women would be able to do certain jobs, and how they would do it. I think the same can be said about any of the male dominated professions. So the first few women who enter into any profession have a few more challenges and there are many questions about your ability to compete with other people in that and whether you'll be able to meet physical challenges or the stress. I think a lot of what those of us who were the first women did was to dispel some of the myths and break the ice. It's certainly a lot easier for people now.

There was also a sense of loneliness if you were the only one. Women have different work relationships with each other. I had lots of great support and comradeship, but having women to talk to or mentor

that's a challenge as well when you're entering a new profession. I've really worked hard for providing that for women now, so that they have examples.

One of the other challenges for the military was the concept of "seeing is believing." So that women have examples and role models and know what they can achieve. Now people can see that you can work at this rank and do this job with that position, and that encourages people.



What challenges do you see women facing today in the military?

It's changed dramatically, but we still don't have a huge critical mass across all the ranks. It's certainly better for people who are joining now. We no longer have as much pressure to prove yourself, as women have proven that they are very capable across a variety of diverse positions or challenges, whether it was in combat roles or in supervisory and leadership roles. I think the other is that there is more of a sense of normalcy now that... it's not unusual to have women in leadership or supervisory or superior positions, and I think that there aren't as many personal struggles and obstacles as there once were.

In terms of the work environment, and I think that, in creating an environment where women feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging, that they can be successful. The other is for women to know that they can be themselves. They can bring their own style and their own experience and capabilities. You don't have to be a man, and you don't have to have male characteristics. I think that's a challenge for people to be able to find themselves, to see that they could be successful in that.

How can the military transition to what you picture to be an ideal gender situation?

We're working very hard on our employment programs and our employment policies to create an environment in which anyone who chooses that career path can be successful. I think one of the things we are

doing now is looking at human resource issues from the point of view of all personnel, not just gender-specific. I think some of the issues with society for a work-life balance or family decisions are being shared by men and women equally, so I think creating a work environment that fosters a sense of belonging and a sense of well-being, knowing you're looked after is really critical for us.

Also, overcoming all the "firsts." While it is an accomplishment to celebrate when someone is the first woman to achieve that, it would be really nice when it's not a big deal anymore. We're very careful about how we look at opportunities equally for promotions or that are based on qualification and experience, rather than gender. So I think sheer numbers and representation across all the occupations and all of the environments would be really helpful for that. I'm really pleased that we're now the next generation of recruits, and that people coming in no longer think of themselves in terms of their race or their gender or where they are. They see themselves as part of a larger group, as opposed to separating themselves out.

Do you see this ideal as attainable in the near future?

We still have some issues we need to overcome, like any male-dominated field, industry or career path.

There are still some workplace stresses, and because we have a very hierarchical organization and it takes time for women to progress through the ranks, there are some challenges there. So this isn't something I see us immediately able to

Interview with Rear Admiral Jennifer Bennett

do, but I do see over a period of the next decade, us being able to work further on integration and the situation and the culture in the military.

I also think that because the next generation of recruits live in a different Canadian society than some of us currently in the military, they'll bring that with them, and so that will also change.

So yes, I think it's achievable. It's difficult, it's a challenge because military life comes with a different set of challenges than other careers. It also comes with incredible opportunities as well. We need to have more flexible policies and employment practices, like most industries and most career paths now.

You see some of the onus being on the young women themselves in being prepared to dedicate themselves to the military and be prepared for the challenges that they have to become "firsts," or one of the few, and they may have to break those barriers?

I think so. It's in the same way that you like to have a comfort level with anything that's new. So, if you've never flown before, and somebody explains – or you have the chance to practice or try it out first – it's not as stressful. So I think explaining to people, especially in the case of women, having them being able to speak to other women who are members, might dispel some of the myths, or the things that people – their impressions – but at the same time I think it takes a special type of personality, or self-confidence, independence, to also thrive, and to be successful in this occupation.

How do you see your role as the Champion of Women? How do you "champion women?"

Again, it has taken us some time to have women represented across senior ranks or across senior positions in the public service. It's an interesting position, in that I'm an advisor, I'm an advocate, I'm an ambassador, but I'm also an example. I think by having a champion that is representative of that group, or who is a member of that group, it also changes it a bit, in that women would feel more comfortable in bringing issues or questions to me. And I think there's an element of trust as well, if the person who is advocating on your behalf is like you or understands where you've come from.

The other is that in the word "champion," in its very nature implies that I'm going to push for certain issues or I'm going to challenge our organization or our system. I'm going to be a leader in employment equity and in integration or in issues for women, and there is a leadership capacity in that. It's something I take great pride in. It's also incredibly intimidating to be representative of the women across the organization, but that's everything from encouraging, from facilitating, mentoring, as well as advising. And though my personal experience, and my perspective, I can look at where we're moving forward and look at policies.

Could you please elaborate on the idea of critical mass?

So that's the difficult question: what is the right balance in any organization? What is the right number? And you look now at purely at statistics and the percentage of the Canadian population who are women,

should every organization then reflect that same balance? And in our case in the military, where it is a hierarchical organization, people need to spend time and develop to progress through ranks and positions. One of the challenges in any organization or career field that is trying to increase critical mass is to advantage one group over another.

So, that whole question of critical mass, and numbers and balance, it remains a challenge for us because not every Canadian wants to join the military and make a career out of it—we refer to it as propensity to join. Nor is everyone going to be successful. The same can be said about a number of professions.

So again, it's finding the right balance and the right number. I would suggest that we are to be representative of Canadian society, we are Canadians, we are defending Canadian rights and freedoms, because we represent our nation, the faces across our organization should be representative as well. And it's really hard to put numbers on that. What is the right balance? Diversity is a good thing within the organization. I think women bring unique and interesting perspectives and skills and experience to the military, and it provides a nice balance across the organization.

You also spoke about a “warrior ethos” earlier. How has that perspective changed over time?

One of the other challenges is this whole notion of warriors, that in the military you need to be a warrior. The warrior ethos. It starts right at the premise of when you talk about veterans. For most

Canadians, we think about WWI and WWII veterans, and they think about men. But women have played a role in all of the conflicts has taken part in the last hundred years. Initially, they were serving with the military, not in the military.

There were feelings that women wouldn't be up to that warrior aspect; the war fighting, the combat, the very nature of having to potentially kill others. And yet, in today's thinking, often those things that were associated with women – being caring, being empathetic, and emotionally intelligent and intuitive – those are all characteristics of great leaders. They are people-oriented skills. But traditionally, when you think of warriors, you think of male characteristics. Also toughness, that ability to be non-emotional. And yet, we've proven ourselves now, Canada was one of the nations to integrate women into combat and actually employ us in warzones ahead of our allies.

We've come a long way, and if we go back to my point of women being able to be women, or to be able to be themselves and find their way, women had to discover for themselves that they didn't have to be a man to be a member of the profession of arms.

Also, because we are a diverse force, when we deploy to other nations, citizens of that nation see us, and see themselves in that. . The one thing that sets the military apart is, that not only is it a male-dominated occupation, but it is in the nature of our work. Our raison d'être at the end of the day is to defend our nation and to have that capability. So that's where that warrior ethos comes from.

What advice do you have for young women?

I think if opportunity doesn't knock and provide a door for you, find your own experience, find your own way. Look for opportunities. Don't dismiss opportunities because you either think it will be too hard or you don't see where it will go, because I think you can learn from every opportunity and experience. I think pushing your limits helps you achieve greater potential, going beyond what you think, choosing the easy route.

I think the other thing I would advise young women on any career path is to be true to yourself. Find your own style, find your way because in very high stress careers or situations, you'll always default to what your personal best or your comfort zone is. In order to be successful, you have to find a way to do that—it's very hard to imitate what you should be. Find the leadership style that works for you. Find what you're comfortable with, and stick with it. If you can find examples and mentors or sponsors or coaches, whether male or female, that's also great, because that helps with times when you have self-doubt. I think that's really helpful as well. 🌍

Women in International Security (WIIS) Canada Incorporated is a federally registered not-for-profit, non-partisan organization. WIIS Canada is a network dedicated to actively advancing women's leadership at all stages of their careers in international peace and security. It aims to provide a voice and platform of engagement and opportunity for women, and encourages the active civil engagement of women and men who understand the importance of inclusive and diverse participation in peace and security. For more information on WIIS Canada and the benefits of network benefits, visit www.wiiscanada.org or email contact@wiiscanada.org