

With personable style, new general takes over the National Guard

By **Ian Duncan**
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Somewhere over Afghanistan, an A-10 plunged toward the earth, a two-star general at the controls.

Fortunately for the general and the aircraft, it was a simulation. As the uprushing ground filled the viewing screen before Maj. Gen. Linda L. Singh, a pilot reached into the cockpit to hit pause.

"I think I just crashed," said Singh, still in the seat at Warfield Air National Guard Base in Middle River. "Sorry."

Adjusting to life after the A-10 is retired is just one of the challenges that will confront Singh when she assumes control of the Maryland National Guard during a change-of-command ceremony scheduled for Saturday in Baltimore.

The 6,000-member state guard, like the rest of the U.S. military, is emerging from more than a dozen years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, where many members made multiple deployments. While military leaders labor to pare down the postwar force, the rise of the self-declared Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the conflict in Ukraine, and Russian provocations around Europe are drawing attention back to old battlefields.

Meanwhile, the guard has struggled with the Army and the Air Force in recent years over funding, personnel numbers and equipment. There's also the constant demand of the guard's domestic mission, responding to natural disasters and other emergencies in Maryland and beyond.

The 50-year-old Singh, who lives in Prince George's County, is the 29th adjutant general of Maryland but the first African-American and the first woman to hold the post. She brings command experience from Kosovo and Afghanistan — where she earned a Bronze Star — executive experience from a multinational federal contractor, and a low-key personal style to the job.

"She's so genuinely authentic," said Marty Rodgers, a longtime colleague at the consulting firm Accenture. "She's so comfortable in who she is."

As a teenager in rural Frederick County in the 1970s, Singh had a clear idea of what she wanted out of her life.

At Linganore High School, the self-described tomboy discovered a love of electrical engineering. She figured on joining the Reserve Officers' Training Corps at the University of Maryland, earning a degree and maybe getting a job as a lineman with a power company.

But home life got in the way. When Singh was in 10th grade, she says, she told her parents that she had been sexually abused by a relative. That triggered a dispute that ended with her running away from home.

Her high school basketball coach, Robert Dawson, provided some help. He said he did not realize how serious her personal troubles were.

"She didn't display it out on the basketball court," he said. "She was always at practice. She wasn't any problem at all."

Eventually, Singh dropped out of high school and started working full time at a mall pretzel stand. Sometimes she slept in a back office and scavenged meals.

Then, one day, she saw a National Guard recruiting stand in the mall. She decided to enlist.

"For the longest time it was the military that was carrying me forward," she said.

Singh decided to train as a radar repairer. It was a way she could use her electronics skills, and she was intrigued by the danger.

Enemies "look to blow up the radars," Singh said. "That's like the first thing they look to blow up." She was told her life expectancy in a war would be "about 10 seconds."

But while she was training, Singh married her first husband and became pregnant with her first child. She shifted from the risky repair career track over to personnel.

The marriage didn't work out, but her former mother-in-law had convinced Singh to finish her high school education, and she began to find her place in the military. Some of Singh's superiors urged her to consider becoming an officer.

One sergeant put the issue bluntly: "He told me that I was too bossy to stay enlisted."

Singh earned her commission in 1991. Her officer class included eight women of about 20 candidates, Singh said — an above-average percentage. But she was conscious that there were few female senior commanders in the military.

Singh was determined to prove that she could work just as hard as any male soldier.

"That was a big deal for me," she said. "I needed to be able to pull my own weight."

As an African-American woman, Singh said, she was used occasionally to tout the military's diversity. But she said it's good if she can serve as a model for others.

Singh was also building her civilian career, gaining experience with government contractors in the Washington area and landing eventually at Accenture.

Rodgers, her colleague, said Singh brought a principled style of leadership to her work, and her experience as a military leader gave her insight into clients' needs.

Rodgers said overcoming adversity in her youth gave Singh a self-assurance that shined through and made it easy for her to relate to the most junior new hire or the most senior executive.

Singh moved up the ranks in the National Guard fairly briskly. She said she never had her eyes on being a general — she got a bit star-struck when she encountered one, even — but thought that being a colonel, the next-highest rank, would be "cool."

"I was really a hard charger," Singh said. "I never stayed in the same job. ... I strategically looked at trying to build my portfolio of skills. That was important to me."

Having achieved her aim of earning a colonel's eagle, Singh was sent to Afghanistan in late 2011. Although she spent her career in logistics and support roles, Singh's commanders assigned her to work in operations, coordinating between Western forces and the Afghan military and police.

"I was dreading it going in," she said.

Maj. Gen. James A. Adkins, Singh's predecessor as adjutant general, said the move was intended to expose Singh to new experiences and help position her for the military's highest ranks.

"I can remember sitting in the meeting with her and emphasizing that she really should go on this deployment," Adkins said. "No matter where we get in our career, we still need mentors."

The deployment also exposed Singh to real danger, despite her senior rank. Her job involved regular travel around Kabul with limited security. In February 2012, Maryland National Guard Maj. Robert Marchanti II, a former teacher from Baltimore County, was shot to death inside a supposedly secure ministry building in the Afghan capital.

"There's no clear lines of battle," Singh said. "Anything can happen at any given time and you never know when it's your day."

The closest Singh came to outright violence, she said, was during a conference at which she had been invited to speak. Security teams assigned to different Afghan generals got into a dispute over who was in charge and drew their guns.

"You heard weapons go 'chk chk,'" Singh said. Eventually things calmed enough for her to deliver a few remarks before making a swift exit.

"That was a tense one," Singh said. "What we call the pucker factor — I was pretty tense that whole time."

Soon after she returned from Afghanistan, Singh was promoted to brigadier general and named commander of the Maryland Army National Guard.

In December, then-Gov.-elect Larry Hogan announced that she would be Maryland's next adjutant general. That puts her in command of both the Army and the Air National Guard.

"What better way to end a career than the way I started it: In the Maryland Guard," Singh said chuckling to herself. "That's pretty cool."

Her public information officer pointed out that she was not just in the guard, but leading it. Singh burst out laughing.

"I forget that simple thing," she said. "Sorry."

That self-effacing style was on display last week at the air base, home to the 175th Wing of the Maryland Air National Guard. There was a bustle of excitement before Singh entered a briefing room. Someone called out, "Gentleman! Stand by."

She acknowledged that she had much to learn about the Air Force but said she is committed to finding an aircraft to fly once the A-10 is retired, and said she would be open about her progress.

"A wing has to fly," she told the airmen.

But Singh did not come off as a haughty, intimidating officer. She wandered through the offices and chatted with the guardsmen she encountered. At one point she stopped at the desk of a pregnant woman, and got into an extended discussion of the limited mobility that comes with carrying a baby in one's belly.

iduncan@baltsun.com

twitter.com/iduncan

Maj. Gen. Linda L. Singh

29th adjutant general of Maryland

Commander of the Maryland National Guard

Hometown: Raised in Frederick County

Residence: Glenn Dale

Family: Married, two children

Education: B.S., business administration, Columbia Union College

MBA, military management, Touro International University

Master of Strategic Studies, U.S. Army War College

Experience: Deployments to Kosovo, Afghanistan; Bronze Star

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