

# Md. National Guard leadership takes historic turn

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The Baltimore Sun

FEBRUARY 28, 2015, 7:39 PM

**M**aj. Gen. Linda L. Singh took command of the Maryland National Guard on Saturday, the first woman and the first African-American to hold the position, saying, "This is absolutely the best job I could hope for in the military and the best state in which to do it."

With some 250 uniformed troops in formation before her and hundreds of guests seated on both sides of the podium at the Fifth Regiment Armory in Baltimore, Singh, a 50-year-old combat veteran of Kosovo and Afghanistan, said, "When I think of the journey we have ahead, it's going to be tough, it's going to be challenging."

Minutes earlier the state's 29th adjutant general accepted the ceremonial blue flag representing the colors of command from Gov. Larry Hogan, who appointed her to succeed Maj. Gen. James A. Adkins, who has held the post since June 2008. The ceremony also marked Adkins' retirement from the military — 40 years to the month since he enlisted in the Army.

"And what a journey it's been," said Adkins, adding that the Maryland National Guard, a force of nearly 7,000, including volunteers and civilians, would be in good hands under Singh's command.

"Linda will continue to move this organization forward in these most challenging times," said Adkins, who was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and the Maryland Distinguished Service Cross during the 50-minute ceremony.

The adjutant general serves as a member of the governor's Cabinet and is in charge of daily operations of the Maryland Military Department, an agency with a \$314 million budget that includes the Army and Air National Guard, the Maryland Emergency Management Agency and the Maryland Defense Force.

A veteran of more than 30 years in enlisted and officer ranks, Singh told the gathering that after meeting with Hogan about the position, she knew she wanted to accept it.

"Sometimes, you know, you get that feeling ... I knew it was the right thing," said Singh, who lives in Prince George's County with her husband, Raj Singh, and two daughters, Tara and Shaniece. She has been awarded the Bronze Star and holds an MBA in military management from Touro International College and a master of strategic studies from the U.S. Army War College.

After the ceremony, Singh stood for more than an hour shaking hands, accepting congratulations and posing for photographs at a reception. She said she'd spent the week at meetings in Washington and Virginia with adjutants general from around the country and was inspired by their support.

"I was amazed at all the passion and support and wanting you to be successful," said Singh, who, along with her military duties, also worked as a director of operations for Accenture, a management consulting firm in Rockville. "That just makes me feel that I'm not alone."

She said her short list of things to do includes meeting soon with members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to talk about the National Guard.

"It's important they understand us," she said.

During the reception, Col. Janeen Birckhead, a brigade commander of the 70th Regiment at Aberdeen Proving Ground, pointed to the list of Maryland adjutants general on the ceremony program, noting that Milton A. Reckord, who held the position for 41 years between 1920 and 1965, had to be forced to integrate the guard during the 1950s, a few years after an order from President Harry S. Truman ended racial segregation of the military.

"To go from there to here, that's huge," said Birckhead, who said she has followed Singh in command positions a couple of times.

The significance of an African-American woman taking command of the guard was not lost on retired Lt. Gen. James F. Fretterd, who served as adjutant general from 1987 to 2003, and presided over a push to bring more diversity to the officer corps. He recalled a meeting with officers that took place at the Fifth Regiment Armory soon after he took command.

"I looked around the room — there was no woman above the rank of captain," said Fretterd, 84, who lives in Denton. "I said we've got to change this with minorities and women. ... I had four women who became general officers under my watch."

There's more to do, he said. "If it wasn't for the women and minorities, we wouldn't have an Army, we wouldn't have an Air Force."

Asked to describe the meaning of the day, he called it a "dream come true."

Former Maryland Del. Clarence "Tiger" Davis of East Baltimore said he worked with Fretterd during his time in the legislature on getting more women and minorities into the Maryland National Guard.

"What you're seeing is the culmination" of those efforts, said Davis, 72. "It started back in the mid '80s and here we are. ... Who could have imagined where we'd be today?"

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