

Colonel Maritza Sáenz Ryan

By: Tony "The Marine" Santiago



Colonel Maritza Sáenz Ryan

Colonel Maritza Sáenz Ryan (born c. 1960), is a United States Army officer and the head of the Department of Law at the United States Military Academy. She is the first woman and first Hispanic (Puerto Rican and Spanish heritage) West Point graduate to serve as an academic department head. She also has the distinction of being the most senior ranking Hispanic Judge Advocate and has been instrumental in raising awareness of the inequity and impracticality of the Combat Exclusion Policy, which restricts women's roles and opportunities in the military regardless of talent or ability.

Early years

Sáenz Ryan (birth name: Maritza Sáenz) was born in New York City to a Puerto Rican father and a Spanish mother. There she received her primary and secondary education. In the late 1970s she was accepted in the United States Military Academy, also known as "West Point". There she met fellow cadet Robert Ryan, whom she later married and had two children. She graduated from West Point in 1982 and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Field Artillery. Sáenz Ryan was a member of only the third class to include women cadets at West Point.

Military career

She was assigned to the 1st Armored Division Artillery in Nuremberg, West Germany. She returned to the United States and as a participant of the under the U.S. Army's Funded Legal Education Program she went to law school in Nashville, Tenn., at Vanderbilt University. After earning her law degree, she was selected for Order of the Coif and admitted to the New York bar. Sáenz Ryan was reassigned to the Judge Advocate General's Corps (JAGC) as a trial counsel at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Sáenz Ryan, who had been promoted to the rank of Captain, was deployed overseas during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Shield and was assigned as the brigade legal counsel for a Field Artillery brigade.

She returned to JAG Corps headquarters in Washington, DC. after and earned her Masters degree in Law from the Judge Advocate General's School in Charleston, Virginia. She was later selected to attend the Command & General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. In 1999, while she was attending the Command and General Staff

College, doctors had found and removed a cancerous tumor from her leg. Sáenz Ryan recovered and was retained on active duty by the Army. She applied for a position as an Academy professor at West Point.

In August, 2001, she was appointed Deputy Head, Department of Law, at the U.S. Military Academy, one of two newly created permanent military faculty positions in the department. Her Commanding officer and mentor, Brigadier General Pat Finnegan, allowed her to receive treatment for her condition and to have a full recovery before she could assume her position full time.

In 2006, after accepting the presidential nomination and being confirmed by Congress, Sáenz Ryan was named head of the Department of Law at the United States Military Academy. She replaced former head Finnegan, who left to become the academy's Dean of the Academic Board. She has the distinction of also being the most senior ranking Hispanic Judge Advocate. She also has the distinction of being the first woman and first Hispanic West Point graduate to serve as an academic department head.

Sáenz Ryan played an instrumental role in raising awareness of the inequity and impracticality of the Combat Exclusion Policy, which restricts women's roles and opportunities in the military regardless of talent or ability. In 2008, the West Point Center for the Rule of Law was established under her leadership.

Honors

In 2000, Sáenz Ryan was named as one of the top 100 Influential Hispanics by Hispanic Magazine. On August 7, 2010, she was among the recipients of the Margaret Brent Award. The award is given annually by the ABA's (American Bar Association) Commission on Women in the Profession to women lawyers who have achieved professional excellence in their field and share a commitment to champion other women.

Military awards decorations

Among Col. Sáenz Ryan 's military awards and decorations are the following:

- *Meritorious Service Medal
- *Joint Services Commendation Medal
- *Commendation Medal|Army Commendation Medal
- *National Defense Service Medal
- *Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal
- *Southwest Asia Service Medal
- *Army Service Ribbon
- *Kuwait Liberation Medal (Saudi Arabian)
- *Kuwait Liberation Medal (Kuwait)
- *Army Overseas Service Ribbon

Badges

- *Air Assault Badge
- *Parachutist badge