

Col Karen Ritchie, CD

Born in England, Karen Ritchie emigrated to Canada with her family in 1973. She was active as a member and then leader of the Brownies and Girl Guides organization. She graduated from Milton District High School in 1980. At this exact time, The Canadian Armed Forces had begun a period of transformation focused on wider options for women, gender integration in many branches and consequently, increased recruitment of women. Karen saw this as a unique and challenging opportunity and was accepted into the Regular Officer Training Program at Royal Military College. This made Karen one of the thirty-two women admitted to RMC in the fall of 1980 known affectionately as the “New Thirty-Two” Each and every one of these ladies were trail blazers. They helped transform the military colleges to co-educational institutions and demonstrated that given the opportunity, a military career was achievable, suitable and desirable for many women. These women showed courage and determination as they tackled the challenges of an historically male domain. They inspired young ladies across Canada to follow in their footsteps to successful military careers.

Karen graduated from RMC in 1985 with a Bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant.

Entering a male dominated sector of the CAF, Colonel Ritchie pursued a non-traditional career path as an officer in the Electrical and Mechanical Engineering (EME) Branch. She embraced the challenges of transformational leadership and skillfully implemented change management that paved the way for necessary evolution and gender acceptance within Army technical trades. She quickly became a role model for other military women pursuing their own careers, and a mentor for the soldiers under her command at all levels.

Colonel Ritchie’s career path followed a pattern typical of a junior EME officer, with solid leadership postings to field maintenance units and headquarters staffs. Her natural leadership talents were evident and she progressed rapidly through key positions. She attained a master’s degree in 1996 in integrated logistics support and was appointed as an Officer in the Order of Military Merit in 1999. Following graduation from the Canadian Forces College Command and Staff Course in 2000, she was promoted to Lieutenant-Colonel and designated as the Canadian Forces Gender Integration and Employment Equity Officer. Her first command appointment came as Commanding Officer of Area Support Unit Toronto.

In 2004, she was the trailblazer of another milestone, when she became the first of the “New Thirty-two” to be promoted to the rank of Colonel. In 2006, Colonel Ritchie was appointed the first Director of the Omnibus Mounted Soldier Survivability Project in support of operations in Afghanistan. The following year, she became the first woman to assume command of 5 Area Support Group (5 ASG), a 4,300-person bilingual formation, headquartered in Montreal, with over sixty sites and three garrisons, responsible for the logistic, administrative, construction engineering, policing and communications support to the Army in the Province of Quebec.

While dedicated to her assigned positions, Colonel Ritchie also held a significant appointment as the Canadian delegate to the Committee on Women in the NATO Forces, serving as its Deputy Chairperson.

Colonel Ritchie remained loyal to the Brownies and Girl Guides by fostering a life-long attachment to the Guiding movement, for which she was granted the Queen's Guide Award. Karen was deeply involved at all levels from unit to national headquarters, regardless of her posting location. She commenced as a local leader and volunteered more time and effort, culminating in her appointment as a Director of the Board. She was instrumental in the planning committee for major events such as Guiding Mosaic 2006 and the Membership Recruitment Task Force. She applied her passion for the organization into helping young women develop their leadership skills and self-confidence towards reaching their own potential. So beloved was she in the Guiding movement that the Girl Guides of Canada annually award the Colonel Karen Ritchie Memorial National Scholarship to deserving Guides entering their first year of an engineering program.

In her honour, Colonel Ritchie's own peers organized the "First Thirty-two Fund" in order to send deserving Girl Guides to a major event called Mosaic 2010. To this day, the Girl Guides of Canada annually award the Colonel Karen Ritchie Memorial National Scholarship to deserving Guides entering their first year of an engineering program.

She also served as Director of the Board for the Friends of the Canadian War Museum.

She approached every day of her career with compassion, enthusiasm and courage to overcome obstacles. She excelled at being an EME officer and epitomized the CAF fulfillment of gender integration and expanded roles and equality for women, while helping to blaze the trail for future women to follow and exceed.

Colonel Ritchie's life ended prematurely in a tragic vehicle accident in 2008 at the age of 45. Colonel Ritchie has been perpetually honoured by her inclusion on the RMC Wall of Honour, by the RCME School Headquarters building being named after her and by the Memorial Scholarship from the Girl Guides of Canada.