

# Aguilar brings unique perspective to USAWC

*Thomas Zimmerman, Army War College Public Affairs Office*

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*Karen Aguilar, a visiting Professor of International Relations at the Army War College, thanks those in the audience after being awarded the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Meritorious Civilian Service Award by Gen. James Mattis, Commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command. Aguilar was honored for her work while serving as the dual-hatted political advisor for Mattis at JFCOM and Gen. Abrial at Allied*

*Command Transformation Headquarters. Photo by Megan Clugh.*

Oct. 25, 2010 –Karen Aguilar, now a visiting Professor of International Relations at the Army War College, was working at the U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu, Somalia when it came under siege from local militants taking advantage of civil unrest in 1991. As they closed in on the embassy, one of the militants shot his gun into the air and made his intentions clear. Little did he know that a team of Marines and Navy Seals had arrived to evacuate the embassy.

"They told our perimeter guard to open up or we'll blow you away and then they looked up and saw the Marines on the roof with these really big guns and they said in Somali, 'Igaralli ahow,' which means, 'Excuse me, I didn't mean it, my mistake,'" she said. "In the NEO that followed we lost everything we owned, but the euphoria of not being dead goes a long way to assuaging the loss of one's dishes and stereo."

That event in her life forged an emotional bond between her and the Marines that continues and was highlighted during a recent award ceremony in the Center for Strategic Leadership.

Gen. James Mattis, Commander of U.S. Joint Forces Command, presented Aguilar, a Minister Counselor (a two-star-general equivalent) with the State Department, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Meritorious Civilian Service Award, during his recent visit here.

Aguilar was honored for her work while serving as the dual-hatted political advisor for Mattis at JFCOM and Gen. Abrial at Allied Command Transformation Headquarters. She wore many hats in this role, including acting as a liaison between the two organizations and helping to shape the COIN doctrine, Comprehensive Approach and the New Strategic Concept that will provide the strategic direction for the NATO Alliance over the next decade.

“This was really the culmination of a lot of life experience,” she said of the award. “I’m very grateful that he took the time to recognize a non-military member. It was very touching.”

“I joined the Foreign Service and became a diplomat because the idea of service was deeply attractive to me but I did not consider the military to be a realistic option for women in those days and the idea of being a civil servant seemed a bit unadventurous,” she said. “The Foreign Service promised to be public service that was challenging, competitive and just a bit risky.” She was commissioned as a Foreign Service officer in 1980.

Her first adventure came at her first fulltime posting in Lagos Nigeria, where she experienced her first military coup and was unable to cross the borders for six months. She was also trapped in the cross fire in Burkina Faso when the military HQ across the street from her Center was overrun by a military coup against another military dictator and had to negotiate the safe passage of her staff and patrons from the American Center.

Aside from African assignments she was Liaison Officer at NATO HQ; Law Enforcement Counselor in Moscow; Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism for the Department of State; Senior Interagency Strategy Team Leader at the new National Counterterrorism Center; and Director for Pakistan before taking up duties in Baghdad in 2008. Her position in Iraq frequently required inspections of projects outside the green zone, including Anbar Province where her convoy was attacked by IED in May 2009 and two of her deputies killed along with a Naval reserve officer.

“She really brings a unique perspective to the discussions,” said USAWC student Lt. Col. Dusty O’Neill. “Being in the military you look at civilian-military relations from a certain perspective and she brings her perspective from her time as a Foreign Service Officer.”

“She brings to the seminar the diplomatic and State Department perspective that the military is not often exposed to,” said student Rick Folks, in Seminar 20. “She’s worked with the military enough that she understands and appreciates our perspective and can shape military viewpoints in an interagency

environment.

“It helps at the strategic level to broaden our perspective and think about how the instruments of power interact at that level.”

Aguilar also credits Mattis for creating the opportunity for success for her while she served as the director of the Iraq Transition Office in Baghdad.

“Much of the work he and the Marines did in the Anbar province really set the conditions for success in capacity building and reconstruction,” she said.

“If he called tomorrow and asked me to serve with him anywhere I would say yes.”

To receive the award from Mattis was very emotional and special for her said the San Fernando, Ca, native.

“General Mattis is unparalleled in taking care of people,” she said. “He realizes that both civilian led assistance and international support is very important in our current war efforts and the thought and energy he takes in supporting those of us joining him in the effort , whether US. Military, civilian or foreign coalition members, is incredible. He recognizes the importance of civilian-military and interagency relations.

U.S. Army War College Archives - News Article - 25 October 2010