

WOMEN FLYING HIGH: CONQUERING MALE BASTIONS IN AEROSPACE ECHELONS



Federal budget cuts and the looming fiscal cliff are restructuring the country's aerospace industry, with workers being laid-off, productions dipping and charges of compromising on the defense of the country being made. However, this is not the only change that the industry is witnessing – another revolutionary transformation is underway in the top-most echelons of the nation's defense contractors. Women engineers, scientists and managers are rising to prominence and ascending top posts that hitherto were the sole realms of men. Lockheed Martin Corporation, the world's largest defense firm chose Marilyn A. Hewson, earlier this month, as its chief executive - the first female in the corporation history to don the mantle. Her selection was necessitated by the abrupt removal of her predecessor, Christopher E. Kubasik, who had to leave after he was found to have been in an improper close relationship with a lesser employee. The move is path breaking. Never in the history of aerospace has such a high-ranking and dominant firm had a woman at its helm. Coming as it was, close on the heels of Phebe Novakovic taking over as chief executive at General Dynamics, America's fifth-largest defense firm, in Fairfax, Va. it validates that women are rising to eminence in an industry that has long been dominated by men. Even though women have been holding top positions in other industries since the last many years, aerospace was one bastion that they had failed to penetrate. The ascension of women like Marilyn Hewson and Phebe Novakovic shows, that pioneering steps have been taken and that in all likelihood more of their ilk will follow in their footsteps. Next year, six women will be part of aerospace giant Northrop Grumman Corp.'s 14-member senior management team. Boeing Co. has reshuffled its executive ranks and promoted seven people to senior roles – 5 of them are females. By the New Year, there will be 21 women who will be at the helm of America's top Fortune 500 companies. Loren Thomson, a defense policy analyst said that the entry of more women will not change the fundamental outlook of the industry that takes sales numbers as its yardstick for measuring success. Irrespective of whether the leadership is in the hands of women or men, these metrics are not going to change, he said. Experts opine that males have dominated this industry for such a long period because aerospace leaders have mostly evolved from science and engineering ranks, academics that mostly men opt for. Women have greeted the promotion of these two ladies with considerable glee and enthusiasm. Lillian Ryals, vice president of the Mitre Corp., a nonprofit government contractor said, it is apparent that women's role have changed considerably since the last thirty years she has been in the industry. Not only are there more women in the industry than ever before, but also their reach and influence has increased in all spheres. Hewson more than merits her promotion having built a solid reputation in many business areas. The firm's huge electronics system, under her, became its most lucrative unit. On her appointment, she underplayed the fact that she was the first woman to be its chief executive, "Regardless of gender, each of us brings our unique perspective and collection of experiences to our roles and contributes to the success of the organization," she said. She expressed hope that her accomplishment and the success of other women will inspire and motivate other women and make it less daunting for them to aspire for such goals and that they will pursue their dreams of making a career in male-dominated fields. Deborah Soon, senior vice president of strategy at Catalyst, a nonprofit organization that monitors advancements that women make in the business world, said that it would be wrong to assume that men and women are now on equal platforms – that will come when a woman leading an aerospace company does not make news, she said.