

Sheila E. Widnall: Making Air Force and U.S History

When Sheila E. Widnall was sworn in as the eighteenth Secretary of the Air Force on August 6, 1993, she not only made Air Force history as the first woman to hold that post, she also made U.S. military history as the first—and, as yet, only—female Secretary of any military service.

Widnall was born in Tacoma, Washington in July of 1938 and grew up near McChord Air Force Base. Possibly in part because of that influence, she developed such an interest in aircraft and aerodynamics that she pursued a long education in the field, earning a B.Sc., M.S., and Sc.D. in Aeronautics and Astronautics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Widnall accepted the prestigious post of associate provost of MIT in 1992. She served in that capacity until 1993, when she became the Air Force's first female Secretary.



When serving as Secretary, Widnall oversaw the modernization of the Air Force at a time when the military services were undergoing deep budget reductions. Under her command, the agency released a long range vision statement, “Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force.” Widnall also worked to streamline the acquisition process, emphasized the importance of a quality of life program, and co-chaired the Department of Defense Task Force on Sexual Harassment and Discrimination.

Widnall stepped down as Secretary of the Air Force on October 31, 1997 to return to her faculty position at MIT.

By Sara Mitcho

Contractor

Air Force Office of Small & Disadvantaged Business Utilization

From multiple sources