

Donor portrait of Germaine J. F. Seewer: Citizen in uniform



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Germaine J. F. Seewer is the first woman to hold the rank of Major General in the Swiss Armed Forces. Her new role as Commander of the Armed Forces College has forged even closer ties to her alma mater.

Germaine J. F. Seewer is not particularly keen on press events – least of all when the focus is on her. Yet she says she was glad to accept the invitation to speak to *ETH Globe*: "I still have very strong ties to ETH Zurich. My time there shaped who I am today." She is also conscious of the example she has set by becoming the first woman to rise to the rank of Major General in the Swiss Armed Forces. Women now have access to all the branches of the armed forces, as shown by pioneering figures such as Switzerland's first female fighter jet pilot Fanny Chollet, who appeared at a media briefing on the proposed purchase of new fighter jets. Overall, however, women continue to be something of an exception. "It's not enough to just promote women as equal partners," says Seewer. "You also need a welcoming environment that actively encourages more young women to sign up." In part, this relies on women like Seewer acting as role models to prove that women can reach the highest ranks of the armed forces.

Seewer herself views the situation pragmatically. She praises the choice to appoint Viola Amherd as Switzerland's first-ever female defence minister: "The public really like her," she says. "But she has to perform the same duties as a man. I personally don't see any difference."

Always at the forefront

Originally from the Swiss canton of Valais, Seewer has a matter-of-fact approach that probably stems from the fact that she has spent her entire career in male-dominated environments. When she began her degree in chemistry at ETH Zurich, there were fewer than ten women in her class. She still has fond memories of those first few months, recalling the old chemistry building and the steeply banked lecture hall, though it took a while to find her bearings in the Main Building.

Seewer comes across as quiet and reserved, yet her ascent in the ranks clearly demonstrates her healthy reserves of tenacity and determination. She deliberately keeps a low profile and reveals little about herself in conversation. But, just occasionally, she alludes to the fact that there have always been people in her life who influenced her career at key moments. One of these was a teacher at her secondary school in Brig, who managed to get a young Seewer interested in chemistry. The subsequent transition from peaceful Valais to ETH went without a hitch. "I was well aware that ETH gives people rather less leeway than other universities," she remarks with a smile. "I had done my homework and I knew what to expect!"

Just across the road

Her academic career initially led her from chemistry to animal science. "I liked being able to literally just cross the road to apply what I had learned," she says. At that time, the chemists and animal scientists were still housed relatively close to the ETH Main Building, just on the other side of a small residential street. In her doctoral thesis, Seewer investigated how pork meat quality is affected by gender, breed and different feeds.

At first, it appeared that Seewer was set to make a career as a researcher. She completed her postdoctoral studies at AU Foulum, a food and agricultural research centre in Denmark, and then worked as a scientist at the Swiss Federal Research Station for Animal Production in Posieux. "I chose to do my postdoc in Denmark because, unlike the Americans, the Danes' ideas about meat quality are similar to ours," she says.

Fascination with people

Today she is a high-ranking staff officer working in a very different field, yet she can still apply much of what she learned during that period.

Skills that immediately spring to mind include analytical thinking and the importance of rigorously checking one's sources – plus a distinct flair for numbers and the ability to see beyond the statistics. ETH also taught her valuable lessons about thinking in a connected way.

Seewer's career has advanced in leaps and bounds since she joined the military intelligence service as a specialist instructor in 1998. Her assignments have included serving as a staff officer with the Swisscoy troops in Kosovo, working as a UN military observer in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and her deployment from 2008 to 2010 as Commander of the Swiss Air Force's leadership training college once she joined the ranks as a career officer. One of her biggest promotions came in 2013, when she was appointed as Brigadier General by the Swiss Federal Council and took on the role of the Armed Forces' Head of Human Resources in parallel. Five years later she became the first woman to command a brigade.

"I find the diverse mix of people fascinating," she once said when asked what she enjoyed about her job. She enjoys how the armed forces brings people together from different parts of the country and different social classes to tackle a job together. "The French-speaking part of Switzerland has a word that reflects exactly what I feel: *citoyen-soldat*." Seewer readily accepts that the armed forces must adapt continuously to changing social conditions. "Today's 20-year-olds have a different mindset to the one we had when we were 20," she acknowledges. "But we had different attitudes to those that came before us, too!"

A spring to remember

Earlier this year, Seewer was appointed as Commander of the Armed Forces College AFC. "It's nice how my career has led me back into education," she says. This will mean she has more contact with ETH in the future, because the ETH Military Academy (MILAC) plays an important role in training career officers. "I was scheduled to pay an official visit to ETH Zurich President Joël Mesot and Rector Sarah Springman," she says. "But we had to postpone that due to the current circumstances."

The coronavirus crisis has certainly put the armed forces in an unusual situation. “We’ve seen the focus shifting to troops that wouldn’t normally expect to get so much attention, such as the medical corps,” Seewer says. She acknowledges that the armed forces have done a good job and points to positive feedback from the health service, government and the population at large. Although she herself wasn’t directly involved in the armed forces’ response to the coronavirus, a major effort was still required in her area of responsibility. “We had to introduce new training formats overnight because our normal face-to-face classes were no longer possible,” she says.

Don’t forget your roots

Seewer emphasises that her ties to ETH have never been broken: “I’ve always stayed in touch with the university as a member of the Alumni Association. And since the MILAC graduation ceremonies and annual meetings are always held in the ETH Main Building, I’ve had the opportunity to pop back to my alma mater every now and then.” As an alumna, she also supports the Excellence Scholarship & Opportunity Programme through the ETH Foundation, which provides excellence scholarships to outstanding Master’s students. “I’m proud of where I studied and happy to be able to give something back,” Seewer says. She’s delighted that ETH is such a highly ranked university and acknowledges the importance of maintaining an international focus to remain successful in the future. “But I very much hope that ETH will never forget its roots as a Swiss federal university,” she remarks. “It’s part of the fabric of our nation and something we should always nurture.”

This portrait was published in the Globe Magazine of ETH Zurich in September 2020.

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https://ethz-foundation.ch/en/spotlight/news_2020_portrait_seewer/