

Women pilots who fly Air Force fighters and bombers have made their mark and earned respect.

USAF photo by SSgt. William Greer



The Quiet Pioneers

BAJA, Combo, Spycy, Shooter, Shock: They're all call signs of mission-qualified fighter and bomber pilots, and the only unusual thing about them is that these monikers of warrior-group bonding belong to women.

April 2003 will mark 10 years since the Air Force changed its policy to permit women to take up combat assignments as fighter and bomber pilots. Since then, dozens of female officers have completed rigorous training to become proficient in flying fighters and bombers.

Critics predicted they'd never integrate smoothly. Two women pilots spurred negative attention early on. Media interest surged when Navy F-14 pilot Lt. Kara S. Hultgreen died in a carrier landing in October 1994. Accusations of improper Navy training procedures followed. Air Force B-52

By Rebecca Grant

pilot 1st Lt. Kelly J. Flinn made headlines in 1997 when she was discharged from the Air Force for disciplinary issues. Commentators labeled the issue of women in the cockpit as social engineering and predicted readiness would suffer.

Meanwhile, from Stateside training bases to deployed locations all over the world, the cadre of female fighter and bomber pilots flourished.

Lifting the Ban

Congress removed the legal ban on women in combat aircraft by passing Public Law 102-190 in December 1991. But Department of Defense policy still prohibited women from taking up combat aircraft assignments. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin lifted the policy ban on April 28, 1993.

The Air Force had already been contemplating how to respond, and nothing brought the matter to a head more clearly than the case of a young lieutenant named Jeannie M. Flynn. Flynn was commissioned through ROTC and received a master's degree in aerospace engineering before heading off to pilot training. Flynn had graduated first in her Undergraduate Pilot Training class in 1992. Air Force rules called for newly minted pilots to select their weapon system based on merit and cockpit availability. The early 1990s were the days of banked pilots and dwindling choices for assignments. Typical pilot training classes competed for one or two fighter seats. Flynn earned the right to choose first, and she selected the plum: an F-15E assignment.

With the policy restriction still in place, the Air Force could not comply and sent Flynn to be a First Assignment Instructor Pilot, teaching students to fly the T-38. Meanwhile, Flynn's case wound its way through the bureaucracy, ultimately to be reviewed by Air Force Secretary Donald B. Rice, who found his hands tied by Pentagon policy.

Flynn's case pointed out the discrepancy between the exclusion policy and the Air Force's standards. Fighter pilots are trained, not born. Flynn made the grade by objective standards but found her options limited by a policy suggesting women would get in over their heads.

Aspin's 1993 decision came just in time for Flynn. As a highly skilled young female pilot, Flynn's next option after the FAIP assignment most likely would have been to KC-10s, the cream of the crop of flying assignments outside the fighter and bomber communities. Tanker and airlift crews welcomed an earlier generation of women such as Col. Pamela A. Melroy, commissioned in 1983, who flew KC-10s in Desert Storm and then moved on to Air Force Test Pilot School and from there to NASA, where she is an astronaut with two shuttle missions under her belt.

The Air Force looked back over the records of two years' worth of Undergraduate Pilot Training classes to find women whose class rankings would have qualified them to select a fighter or bomber at the time they graduated. The hunt also factored in how many fighter and bomber slots were available to each class, sometimes a number as low as one. Based on these criteria, the Air Force identified three pilots who would have been sent to fighters or bombers had the ban not been still in place. These included Flynn and then-Capt. Martha McSally. By the end of 1993, seven women were in training to fly fighters.

Women Pilots in Combat

Flynn went to four weeks of fighter lead-in training in T-38s and on to the schoolhouse for F-15E training, then at Luke AFB, Ariz. In February 1994, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill A. McPeak introduced Flynn to the press as the Air Force's first mission-qualified female fighter pilot.

"She didn't ask for anything from anybody," said McPeak. "Nobody gave her anything, and she went right through that course just like everybody else. Everybody in the squadron had very high respect for her. And in her opinion, the F-15E is the world's greatest airplane."

Flynn and the F-15E were indeed a good match. She went on to log more than 2,000 hours in the F-15E by the end of 2002, including 200 hours of combat time in Operation Allied Force. She was the first female fighter pilot to graduate from the USAF Weapons School at Nellis AFB, Nev., and is currently assigned as an F-15E instructor at the school—

Nearly 10 years ago, USAF changed its policy to permit female fighter and bomber combat pilots. The measure of merit is performance.

once again, the first woman to hold that post.

By 1994 the Air Force had seven female fighter pilots—including Flynn—and two bomber pilots.

In 1995, McSally became the first Air Force female pilot to fly a combat aircraft into enemy territory—the no-fly zone mission over Iraq. McSally was an athletic Air Force Academy graduate who'd had to get a waiver to fly because at five feet three inches she was one inch under the regulation height. She made Air Force history flying the A-10.

While the Air Force worked women into the fighter and bomber squadrons with few hiccups, the numbers of women in combat cockpits did not grow fast. In 1998, there were still only eight bomber pilots and 25 fighter pilots, a tiny fraction of the overall force. But the numbers were on the rise. Fueled by accessions from the Air Force Academy, a new group of women who'd never experienced the combat exclusion ban were making it through Undergraduate Pilot Training with high marks.

Three Air Force female combat pilots agreed—a little reluctantly—to be interviewed for this story. The big news? They love flying. They love the Air Force. They talk just like the guys.

An F-15C Pilot

“Since I went to the academy, I know a lot of female fighter pilots,” said 1997 graduate Capt. Samantha

A. “Combo” Weeks, who is now an F-15C pilot with more than 700 hours at the 94th Fighter Squadron at Langley AFB, Va. Weeks had two things in common with legions of fighter pilots before her. She came from a military family, and her determination to fly sprouted early.

“My father was a master sergeant in the Air Force, so I grew up in it,” Weeks explained in a recent interview. “We were stationed in [RAF] Lakenheath [UK]. When I was about five years old, and we were flying back from England on a KC-135, we refueled F-15s over the Atlantic. I decided I had to do that.”

Her parents were skeptical at first. “I was just patted on the back, ‘Girls don’t do that,’” said Weeks. “And I just kept saying, ‘Nope, I’m gonna, I’m gonna, I’m gonna.’” Soon her parents were “definitely supportive of it. Initially, they’re like, sure she’ll change 20 times; next week she’s going to want to be a hairdresser. But I didn’t.”

The desire stayed and in junior high school, Weeks asked a startled guidance counselor for a book on the Air Force Academy and never looked back. Years later at Tyndall AFB, Fla., when “I went solo to the tanker, my life had come full circle,” she said. “Rather than being the five-year-old little girl who was laying in the boom watching them refuel the F-15s, I was now the fighter pilot in the F-15 getting refueled.”

There were role models to follow.

Weeks recalled then-Capt. Jeannie Flynn coming to the academy to address the cadets. At Undergraduate Pilot Training at Laughlin AFB, Tex., “it was the exact normal pilot training experience for anybody,” said Weeks. Her class of 30 started out with five women. One washed out, and Weeks was the only one selected to split to the fighter-bomber track in T-38s. Once on the track, Weeks found it to be smooth sailing.

“There was no ‘oh gosh, a girl’s coming,’” she said. Then at Tyndall, “I actually had as one of my instructor pilots the very first female F-15C pilot [then-Capt. Maria “Baja” Randolph], so it wasn’t a big deal at all.”

A B-1B Pilot

Capt. Kimberly Dawn Monroe, a B-1 pilot, had a story typical of this new generation. “I was always interested in flying, ever since I was about five years old,” Monroe said. Flying first captivated her on an airline flight to visit her grandparents. “I thought I always wanted to be a stewardess, but once I got into high school, they were offering a ground school course for a private pilot’s license for free, and so that really interested me,” she said. “I took that, and then my grandparents gave me my flying lessons as a graduation present. I got my private pilot’s license right out of high school.”

Monroe’s college counselor steered her toward the Air Force. “When I first started, I didn’t even know what ROTC was,” explained Monroe. “I thought I’d let them pay for college, then once I got out, maybe join the airlines somewhere down the road, but getting involved in ROTC and the Air Force way of life, I actually found out I love it.” Monroe graduated from Angelo State University in Texas in 1996, attended UPT at Laughlin, and went from the T-38 to the B-1 schoolhouse at Dyess Air Force Base, also in Texas. “I’m a west Texas home girl,” Monroe confirmed. Why the B-1? “I started to make a decision that I liked the crew mentality,” she said. “At that point in time, we were able to deploy from home and do long sorties, and then come right back. The B-1 sounded the best option for me.”

An EC-130 Pilot

Capt. Kristin Goodwin, now a B-2 pilot at Whiteman AFB, Mo., had a

USAF photo by SSGT. William Greer



An F-15E crew from RAF Lakenheath, UK, prepares to take off on a mission during Operation Enduring Freedom. Some women pilots also patrol the no-fly zones over Iraq.

slightly different experience starting out in the EC-130 community. Goodwin graduated from USAFA in 1993 and went to pilot training in 1994. She said she remembered hearing about the Air Force opening cockpits to women, but “being young and excited to go to pilot training, I wasn’t following that as closely.”

Goodwin’s dream was special operations. “I heard things were opening,” she said, “but then I still found out that we weren’t allowed to fly MC-130s, which is what I wanted to fly. I wanted to do special ops.”

Goodwin made up for it with an assignment to the EC-130s at Davis–Monthan AFB, Ariz. The tour later included Airborne Battlefield Command and Control Center aircraft missions over Bosnia and flying the EC-130 for special operations “in places I can’t talk about,” she said. As a young copilot, brand new to the squadron, her place on a dedicated EC-130 crew raised questions when “the issue came up that I was a woman.” Women weren’t part of the special operations arena. As Goodwin recalled, “My squadron commander at the time was hesitant to approve that, and this captain at the time fought for me, because I was only a lieutenant and he said he wanted me and stuck by his guns, and the commander finally gave in and let me be on the crew.”

The bottom line was about performance, not gender. “They were looking for a pilot,” commented Goodwin. “That’s how it’s been for me ever since, that I’ve been treated as a pilot, not necessarily as just some woman.”

On to Combat

Experience made the women combat pilots. Weeks first logged combat time in Operation Northern Watch. She had been in the squadron about six months and had about 150 hours in the F-15C when she deployed to Turkey. “Definitely, the first day that I taxied out in a jet, with live missiles, the young lieutenant, it was a big deal,” said Weeks. “But I understand what my job is, and I’m proud to do my job.”

No-fly-zone patrol duty had its memorable moments. “There was some triple A that was shot at us,” recalled Weeks. She saw “a big black airburst off my left wing. It was lower in altitude, so I wasn’t like



USAF photo by SSgt. Greg L. Davis

Lt. Col. Martha McSally in 1995 became the first woman to pilot a combat aircraft into hostile military airspace. She flew an A-10 attack aircraft, such as the one above, into the no-fly zone over Iraq.

right there. It was kind of cool because I saw it, and I got to call it.”

Later on that same deployment, Weeks and her flight lead “actually had somebody who was crossing the northern no-fly zone,” she said. “We got to commit out on that Iraqi plane, and that was awesome because you’re going to do the job you trained for every single day. A big part of our life is always being in the right place at the right time.” They did not get authority to shoot, but the chance to commit was exciting: “For an F-15C pilot that doesn’t come about too often,” Weeks said.

“It’s good that it kind of becomes a little routine and monotonous,” Weeks summed up the no-fly zone experience. Over the past year, she also flew combat missions in US skies as part of Operation Noble Eagle.

Monroe logged 18 combat missions in Operation Enduring Freedom from January to May 2002. Deployed with the B-1 to a base in the Middle East, she lived in a tent with five other female officers. Long training missions in the B-1 and a deployment with Aerospace Expeditionary Force 4 a year earlier accustomed her to the expeditionary way of life.

Flying over Afghanistan itself was a surprise. “I thought it would look like the planet Mars or something,” said Monroe. “The terrain is varying—it’s got desert, and then mountains, and then some parts are really

lush and green, with lakes and rivers—so some parts are actually very beautiful.”

Monroe and the three others in her crew swung into the new rhythm of providing massed, precision Joint Direct Attack Munition strikes on call. “They gave us as much gas as we could take to hold up in the skies for as long as we can,” she said. “We were just up there waiting for the call.” She added, “Once they had a target, they would just pass it off to us and then we would do the job accordingly.”

The weapon of choice was JDAM. “You feel better shacking your targets anyway with that sort of a weapon,” Monroe said.

She recalled that her first combat mission was, “of course, a little scary” but added that she was eager for it. “We were well-trained and well-prepared, so I was kind of anxious and ready to go and actually apply what I’ve learned to do the mission and do it well.” Long missions were familiar fare in the B-1, and she described the endless aerial refuelings as “definitely good training.”

Like Weeks and Monroe, Goodwin found worldwide deployments routine in Air Force life. Her squadron flew EC-130H Compass Call aircraft used for communications jamming and information warfare. “We would get called constantly,” Goodwin said. “You always had to be ready to go.”

At a stopover for a joint exercise in Shaikh Isa, Bahrain, she was the



Lt. Kristin Bass, the 188th Fighter Wing's first female combat pilot, is strapped into her F-16C by crew chief TSgt. Kevin Jones. Women comprise less than four percent of all USAF pilots.

only female officer deployed there at the time. "That wasn't a problem at all," Goodwin said. "It was just interesting. It was more educational, me talking to the local guys and letting them know that, hey, I'm just a pilot just like anybody else."

Later she was loaned to the 42nd Air Control Squadron to fly the ABCCC on a deployment to Bosnia. "It was something that was ever-changing and you just had to kind of be on top it, just ready for anything," she said of those missions. One vivid memory was shutting down an engine in flight, with weather closing in. Goodwin noted that inside the area of responsibility she was faced with a lot of challenging decisions and added, "I had an amazing crew."

Out of the four years she was stationed at Davis-Monthan, Goodwin quipped, "I feel like I was deployed for two years." The combat-oriented EC-130 and ABCCC missions left her with a taste for more. Following two years at the Pentagon, Goodwin was accepted to train as a B-2 pilot.

"Looking at the B-2, it was a mission that was very different than anything I've done so far," Goodwin explained. "It brought in weapons, weaponeering, dropping bombs, and just a different platform, a different community." She was also enticed by the chance to fly T-38s. "Flying two planes, I found that very inviting," she said. (B-2 pilots fly T-38s to maintain proficiency.)

Goodwin and a fellow female pilot were the first two women selected to fly the B-2 when they arrived at Whiteman in June 2001. Goodwin remembered she wanted to put her best foot forward. She is now mission-qualified in the B-2 with the designator "Spirit 279," marking her entry into the elite ranks of B-2 pilots. "I really am excited still even after a year and really honored to be here," Goodwin said. "Every time I get to fly I can't believe it."

Some adjustments have been necessary. In the fall of 2001, McSally, now a lieutenant colonel, attracted widespread support for her successful fight to overturn the policy requiring US military women to wear the head-to-toe Muslim abaya when on Saudi streets. Republican Sen. Bob Smith of New Hampshire said of McSally's case: "What makes this particularly bizarre is that we are waging a war in Afghanistan to remove those abayas, and the very soldiers who are conducting that war have to cover up."

Today, women combat pilots are a fact of life. The Air Force deputy chief of staff for personnel no longer assigns an action officer to track

"female pilot" issues, as was done in the early 1990s. Statistically, however, they remain scarce. The Air Force counted 15 female bomber pilots and 47 female fighter pilots in the year 2002, out of a total of 462 active duty female pilots in all aircraft and 12,177 active duty male pilots. Thus, female pilots make up only 3.7 percent of all USAF pilots, while women officers account for 17.8 percent of the officer force. The trends do not point to a dramatic upswing anytime soon.

Women serving today have no major complaints. Weeks said that "99.99 times out of 100" she receives the same level of support from commanders and peers that her male counterparts within the squadron receive. She is treated as an equal, although she joked that "people on the radios still say sir" and added, "That's quite alright. I don't get excited." Goodwin noted she is proud to be part of the 325th Bomb Squadron, which is named "The Cavemen."

What does the future hold for these pilots? Flying—and more flying. "I would love to stay in 20 years and then be a career officer," said Weeks. "That's always been my goal." B-1 pilot Monroe said, "Right now, I'm starting instructor school and I'll upgrade to instructor hopefully by the end of the year."

At Whiteman, Goodwin echoed the same goals. She said, "I'm really in the moment and I just want to make sure that I do my job right, and I hope to be an instructor in this platform and become more of an expert in it."

The occasional commentator may still rail against women who fly in combat, but the reality is the Air Force's female combat pilots are seasoned professionals, serving their country well. By relying on high training standards and shunning the limelight, the Air Force has created a warrior environment regardless of gender. Asked if she'd ever experienced bias as a woman pilot, Monroe answered succinctly: "Not inside the Air Force." ■

Rebecca Grant is a contributing editor of Air Force Magazine. She is president of IRIS Independent Research in Washington, D.C., and has worked for RAND, the Secretary of the Air Force, and the Chief of Staff of the Air Force. Grant is a fellow of the Eaker Institute for Aerospace Concepts, the public policy and research arm of the Air Force Association's Aerospace Education Foundation. Her most recent article, "An Air War Like No Other," appeared in the November 2002 issue.