



**Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost
Commander, U.S. Transportation Command
Keynote Address at the Women in Aviation Conference
Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center, Nashville, Tn.
March 18, 2022
Connect, Engage, Inspire**

AS PREPARED

Thank you, Allison, for that awesome introduction. And for the opportunity to speak with you all today and what an amazing location – it feels like we soared away to an island resort hidden in the middle of Nashville - I don't think we could have asked for a better venue, or hospitality!

It's such an honor to be here with my fellow aviation enthusiasts and friends - and there's no better way to celebrate Women's History Month. Thank you, Sheila, for opening up the conference for the day and sharing your inspiring story. I've had some fun interactions with Women in Aviation over the years. I've previously participated in Girls in Aviation Day, and numerous STEM education events prior to attending the EAA's WomenVenture in Oshkosh. – I feel so comfortable being here with you all – how could I not though? The women and men of Women in Aviation International embody the passion and drive of the aviation community; something, I too, am very passionate about.

It is easy to catch the aviation bug. My interest began at an early age... some years after immigrating to the United States from the Netherlands in the 1960s, my parents owned a flying operation. And anyone who has been a part of a family business knows that it is just that – a family's business - meaning it's everyone's responsibility to chip in and do their part to make it successful.

When I wasn't sweeping floors, or cleaning spark plugs, the business provided me a lot of cool opportunities...Like flying banners down the beaches of Florida, flying around the Bahamas, or teaching people how to fly. I even ended up getting my pilot's license before I got my driver's license. - I knew from a young age that I wanted to spend the rest of my life flying among the clouds...though with all the thunderstorms in Florida, I certainly appreciate clear days best.

My passion for aviation, and the science and physics behind it, is initially what led me to a career in the Air Force. I set my sights on the Air Force Academy and graduated with a degree in aeronautical engineering. My dream was to fly fighter jets... I wanted to fly Mach one with my hair on fire. Fast forward to now, I've logged more than 4,200 hours of military flight time in more than 30 different military aircraft. And for the slower moments of my life, my husband and I fly our Cessna 175 around.

I have now been wearing the uniform for more than three decades, and I'm grateful for every opportunity I've had...I've grown from every challenge I've been given...and I've enjoyed every position I've held – especially the ones where I was able to connect with people who had such passion for what they did - like I do for flying.



Now, if flying is so easy to fall in love with – and I think many of us here can attest to that statement – then why are there so few women pilots? Women make up about a quarter of the STEM workforce, but the percentage of women pilots lags far behind this statistic - at less than 10 percent. It's an especially relevant issue in the military, where women are just over five percent of the pilot community. The stats are even worse for African American women in the military – which is less than one percent.... It's clear that military, and civil, aviation has long been a boy's club...and I'm heartened that we are now making a change.

Our military employs some of the most advanced aircraft in the world to defend our nation, deter our adversaries, reassure our partners and allies, and help diplomacy proceed from a position of strength. Utilizing extraordinary skill and precision, military pilots carry out these tasks and push each aircraft's limits with complete control. Though I bet when you hear the term "military pilot" you think of Top Gun, or fighter jets – but that's not the only case. The military operates nearly 50 different types of aircraft. From transporting patients during a life-saving aeromedical evacuation aboard a C-17 Globemaster, or UH-60 Black Hawk, to flying the President of the United States across the Atlantic aboard the iconic Boeing VC-25, known as Air Force One – the military offers a wide range of aircraft to fly! And the opportunities are endless.

Most professional civilian pilots fly from point A to point B and stick to their normal route. But in the military, you could be in Iceland air refueling Norwegian F-35 Lightnings from your KC-135 Stratotanker one day, to refueling French Mirage 2000s in Spain the next. Every day is different. Sounds pretty cool, doesn't it?

Being a pilot, both in the military, or as a civilian, takes dedication and confidence. It may not be for everyone, but those who choose it realize there are very few things they can't accomplish – And we all know there's no better office than a cockpit. So, what can we do to share this opportunity with other women?

It starts with mentorship.

Study after study has proven how women mentoring women makes all the difference. The University of Massachusetts studied 150 freshmen women with engineering majors to gauge the impact of women role models in the field. These students were all assigned either a male mentor, a female mentor, or no mentor at all. At the end of the school year, the findings were very interesting. 18 percent of students with male mentors and 11 percent of students without mentors had switched majors or dropped out of school entirely.

But can you guess the number of female students with female mentors who dropped out of school or switched majors? Zero. A pretty convincing statistic, but is it really all that surprising that relatable support means better outcomes?

What these statistics offer is a blueprint for how to ease the gender gap in aviation. - We need more female mentors! Connecting is now easier than ever with the advancements of technology and social media, and the right connections foster resiliency and growth in the face of adversity; I've experienced this personally:



Multiple times I was directly confronted by those who thought less of women in male-dominated roles. Whether it was my time as a civilian flight instructor in the early 80's, pressure from an officer in my chain of command at the Academy, or a particular fighter aircraft flight instructor, my response and recovery from those events remained steadfast. I doubled down, strived to be better than my male peers, and pay it forward for those after me. But it didn't come easy.

What gave me the strength to handle these situations was my mentor support. First, my parents provided me a strong foundation of self-worth and my flight instructors and peers instilled confidence in me along the way. Both attributes helped me to have the courage to stand up for myself and stick with it. As I faced these types of obstacles, and still today, I always think about the three most important people that are on this journey with me. The people before me, the people beside me, and the people behind me.

Even as a senior leader, I look up to those before me – those who paved the way - both personal and public role models who led by example, faced adversity, and didn't give up. I'm inspired by the actions of people like, Sally Ride, who blazed a cosmic trail for us and shattered the glass dome of the galaxy when she took flight on the Challenger that summer day in 1983. I will never forget, at 17 years old, skipping school to watch the launch from Cape Canaveral while flying a Cessna 172 in a holding pattern over the Melbourne VOR.

That made such an impression on me, seeing the first American woman head into space, and it was such a proud moment for America and the science and technology realm...I bet I kept my "Ride Sally Ride" graphic tee for 30 years – it got me through some pretty tough times. You know Sally never stopped inspiring? When she retired, she wrote children's science books about exploring space – and she always signed them with "Reach for the Stars".

Speaking of reaching for the stars, I also looked up to Col Eileen Collins - who may be here with us this morning. She directly affected my journey towards Test Pilot School—she was an instructor at the Air Force Academy when I was there, and in fact I chose to fly the same aircraft she did, the C-141 Starlifter, to increase my chances of getting in to TPS.

The 97 women of the Air Force Academy's graduating class of 1980 encouraged me to keep going through my training as a cadet. When they walked up the ramp at the Academy on inprocessing day in 1976, they did so beneath a large sign with two-foot aluminum letters boldly stating, "BRING ME MEN". Those were words from a Sam Walter Foss poem to describe American leaders – words that no longer encompassed the description of ALL the leaders at the Air Force Academy. They made history as the first graduating class with women and showed me, and many others, how anything is possible, and that it can be done.

Their journeys motivated me; I saw women of courage, who had strength and perseverance to challenge the status quo - women in aviation history who fought extreme odds to achieve what was once thought impossible for women. And standing in the stadium at my Air Force Academy graduation in 1988, about to throw my wheel cap in the air, I never would have thought I would become a four-star, let alone one of two female four-stars serving today; but I did - not only because of those in front of me who first smoothed the road ahead of my path – but also because of those



beside me who supported me through it all—my peer mentors who were sharing the same experiences.

I am so grateful for peers of mine like Col Pam Melroy, who proceeded me at Test Pilot School, flew with me in the C-17 test program, and went off to NASA as an astronaut and is now the NASA Deputy Administrator. And Col Monica Smith, who flew chase sorties with me at Edwards AFB. She was the only female African American pilot there. She is a cultural historian now and kicked off a Military Women Aviator Oral history project that will continue to inspire young women. And I will also mention Gen Tally Leavitt who I admire as our first female fighter pilot, phenomenal leader and amazing mom! Relationships with them, and others going through what I was going through, was two-fold. On one hand, we were able to share information, skills, and techniques, but on the other, we helped each other overcome challenges.

Even today, I am inspired by civilians wearing similar shoes to mine – women like Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks – the first woman to serve in that leadership position at the Department of Defense. She has shared that when she started her career as a young female there were obstacles, and one of her priorities now is to make the military a place where ALL people want to come. She stresses that people give their best while working for the Department – and we need to take care of them. Her actions are motivating, and because of like-minded peers across the aviation industry and government – we are making changes for those behind us to ensure the next generation of women land a seat at the table.

When I hit a rough spot, I glance behind me to see those who also desire to be accomplished in this career field. They inspire ME to keep going. But it is also critical that we KEEP them at the table. I am proud that the DoD is making significant strides to remove obstacles that could keep a woman from remaining in the service and reaching her full potential.

For example, services have been authorized to increase paid-parental leave from six weeks to twelve weeks for primary caregivers and to extend leave for the other military parent for those dual-military couples to better support the entire military family. Additionally, with the dual-military families in mind, the Air Force now gives either spouse the option to request to separate from active duty for up to 12 months following the birth or adoption of a child. Previously, this only applied to the mother in such marriages.

We continue to redesign uniforms and equipment, from body armor to flight suits, to better fit a woman's body - even throughout pregnancy. We're increasing support to nursing mothers by making lactation facilities and breast milk storage more accessible. We introduced a career intermission program that allows members to temporarily transition from active duty to inactive Reserve status for one to three years, allowing for more time with family. And...we've even made changes to policies that dictate how women can wear their hair in uniform. HASHTAG Free the Bun!

I'm also especially proud to be a part of the Air Force, which celebrates its 75th anniversary this year. We celebrate the many influencers over the years who drastically altered our way of thinking and forever changed our culture for the better. Such as the WASPS, who paved the way for women



in military aviation, putting their lives on the line every day to test, ferry, and deliver aircraft, freeing up as many male pilots as possible for combat.

Or tales of “firsts” like, Women In Aviation honoree alum, Air Force Colonel Merryl Tengesdal [*Ting-us-dull*], who was the first African American woman to fly the Air Force’s U-2 Dragon Lady Spy Plane. As a Bronx, New York native, Tengesdal was no stranger to challenges. She has described that during her childhood there were many opportunities for her to stray down the wrong path; and drugs and alcohol were prevalent in her hometown. But because of her mother and teachers who gave her a hand-up, not a hand-out, she excelled in high school, particularly in math and science, and stayed on course to shatter glass.

I am also heartened that the civilian aviation industry and the FAA are striving to create a more diverse and inclusive workforce. And organizations like this – WAI, you are making the path even wider through connections and scholarships. I want us to reach a place where there are no more “firsts” or “onlys” left... where women are simply a foundational part of every team at every level - before, beside and behind each of us. Whether you know it or not, you are all 3 of these people to someone.

While networking today, remember that representation is critical, and mentors make the difference. It is important to think about the legacy you are creating and consider your contributions to change. Although we have made advancements in recruiting and retaining women in our career field, it is not about a single engagement or moment. We need to make solid ongoing connections with women interested in aviation – which is why we must keep engaging and inspiring.

As you visit the booths, take a moment to engage with some of our military members, who can share their amazing experiences with you. Following the next powerhouse speaker, Niloofar Rahmani, I will be at the Air Force booth to unveil a portrait painted by one of our very own military combat artists, 2Lt Kat Justen. The portrait is of Retired Air Force Colonel Kathleen “Rambo” Cosand. Rambo paved the way not just for women aviators in the military, but for all in aviation.

There is an array of full-time and part-time military aviation opportunities – such as pilots, mechanics, air traffic controllers, flight nurses and so much more -- all of which can transfer to civilian aviation when you’re ready. I chose this route not just to fly fast jets, but to do something greater than myself—to serve and protect this great nation that welcomed my family so many years ago.

No matter what you do today, and every day, believe in yourself and have the courage to stay with it – and inspire others to do the same! Everyone needs a mentor to listen and guide them through their highs and lows – be one and have one. The inspiration to fly airplanes and shift our culture starts here, at conferences like this. It’s so important that our daughters go from saying “I want to” - to “I can, and I will”.