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BRIG. GEN. JEANNIE M. LEAVITT, THE AIR FORCE'S FIRST
FEMALE FIGHTER PILOT, RECRUITS TOMORROW'S STARS



Military Trailblazer

Air Force general soars to new heights while inspiring tomorrow's fighter pilots

BY ADRIENNE MAND LEWIN

In anticipation of her 2019 film “Captain Marvel,” actress Brie Larson hosted a special IMAX theater debut of its trailer in September at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Air and Space Museum, in Washington, D.C. Among those who joined Larson to watch the preview of the newest installment in the blockbuster Marvel Cinematic Universe series was Brig. Gen. Jeannie M. Leavitt, commander of Air Force Recruiting Service, Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas.

Leavitt first met the Oscar-winning actress in March while serving as the 57th Wing commander at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, where Larson trained to inhabit her character, Air Force Col. Carol Danvers, who gains superpowers and becomes Captain Marvel. “I was with Brie quite a bit,” Leavitt recalls. “I was really impressed with

how much effort she put into developing her character. She talked to a number of fighter pilots about their experiences and got to fly in the back of a fighter. The team at Nellis and the Marvel team had a great visit.”

Larson, who is the first woman to lead a Marvel franchise, was equally taken with Leavitt, another groundbreaker as the Air Force’s first female fighter pilot. “I got to learn from the best,” she wrote aside a photo of the duo posted on Instagram after their visit. “Meet Brigadier General Jeannie Leavitt, 57th Wing Commander. I had the pleasure of spending time with her and many other badass, fascinating and deeply hilarious pilots on a recent visit to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Thank you for helping me get closer to [the] core of Carol Danvers aka



#CaptainMarvel. Thank you @marvel for bringing us together. Higher further faster more!”

Though she and her family have enjoyed their Hollywood interactions, it’s not the first time for Leavitt in the spotlight. She was on-hand in April 1993 when U.S. Defense Secretary Les Aspin announced he was ordering all military branches to end restrictions that prevented women from flying combat aircraft or serving on warships. “The services will be able to call on a much larger pool of talent to perform the vital tasks that our military forces must

perform in the post–Cold War world,” Aspin said at the press conference, adding, “Many important military jobs are closed to women, and as long as that is the case, we cannot be sure that we are putting the very best person in the job.”

Leavitt, then Lt. Jeannie Flynn, was introduced to the press corps by Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Merrill McPeak, an early critic of the policy change who embraced it at the announcement. She fielded sometimes condescending questions from reporters about her endurance and stamina compared with male fighter pilots (“I go through the same

training that my male counterparts go through, and I’ve had no problems to this point.”) and whether she was taking the job away from a man who had earned it (she wasn’t).

“It was quite a bit of attention that I would have preferred not to have,” Leavitt recalls, “but to be given the opportunity that I was, I thought it was a good deal.” At the time, McPeak said, there were more than 67,000 women comprising 15 percent of the active duty Air Force, while 295 pilots and 115 navigators were then eligible for the new missions.



Gen Jeannie Leavitt
ol David Stamps

It was disappointing, though expected, when Leavitt graduated first in her pilot-training class in January 1993 that she was unable to be assigned to her first choice of aircraft, the F-15E Strike Eagle. It simply wasn't an option for women. "When I was a cadet in ROTC, I had the opportunity to fly in a number of Air Force aircraft — cargo planes, tankers and fighters," she says. "I got a few F-16 backseat rides and was sold on fighters. I knew what I wanted to fly, but I knew I couldn't based on the policy of the Department of Defense."

Things were changing at the time in Washington, with the prior November's election of a record 47 women, including 24 first-timers, to the U.S. House of Representatives, as well as four new female senators. Pundits famously dubbed it "The Year of the Woman." It was in that political climate that Aspin, part of President Bill Clinton's administration, changed the policy, and Leavitt's superiors remembered her wish. "I got the call a little bit ahead of time from Air Force leadership asking me about my request for the F-15E upon graduation. They asked if I really wanted to [fly it] or if I was trying to make a point because of the law. I told them I wanted to fly that airplane more than anything."

A few months later, her dream career began in an F-15E formal training course with the 555th Fighter Squadron at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. Leavitt was aware of the pressure she was under as the first woman in her unit's ranks. "There were a lot of vocal opponents before the decision was made," she says. "People definitely watched me closely when I first showed up at the new unit. Once they found that I was a competent pilot, I faced less resistance. I definitely felt like I needed to prove myself."

For the past 25 years, Leavitt's career has taken her all over the country and the world, in places as varied as North Carolina; Idaho; Washington, D.C.; Saudi Arabia; Kuwait; Turkey; Iraq; and Afghanistan. She has flown more than 3,000 hours, including more than 300 combat hours in Operations Southern Watch, Northern Watch and Enduring Freedom. She felt more than prepared for each situation. "In the Air Force, our training does a great job of preparing us for combat operations," she says.

"Your adrenaline definitely goes up when you're flying over hostile territory, but you fall back on all the training that you've had. When there are American forces on the ground who need your support, you know that's your most important mission."

A Distinguished Record

Growing up in St. Louis as the third of four girls in her family, Leavitt always understood she could be whatever she wanted to be. "We had very supportive parents who really believed in us," Leavitt recalls. "It really helped my sisters and I accomplish more than we ever thought possible."

While STEM had yet to become an acronym, math and science were Leavitt's favorite subjects in school, and she was inspired by uncles who were engineers. At the University of Texas, Austin, she did not start out wanting to join the military, but she was fascinated with aerospace engineering. She participated in a co-op program at NASA to gain work experience as an undergrad and met an Air Force second lieutenant who was awaiting pilot training. Her interest piqued, Leavitt joined the ROTC but continued to work two more semesters at NASA's Johnson Space Center, in Houston, in a variety of jobs supporting the shuttle program. "I enjoyed designing airplanes," she says, "but I thought flying airplanes would be even better."

There were a few other women in her ROTC detachment, but Leavitt was the only one designated to go to pilot training. She was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Air Force at graduation, when she earned a bachelor's in aerospace engineering in December 1990. While awaiting her time in the queue to begin pilot training, Leavitt decided to get her master's in aeronautics and astronautics at Stanford University in Stanford, California, graduating in 1991.

Leavitt learned quickly how to succeed in a field dominated by men. "When I studied aerospace at Texas and Stanford, there were very few women in my engineering classes. Even fewer women were professors. In my case, I didn't really meet resistance because grades are the ultimate equalizer. I worked very hard at the University of Texas; that's why I had the opportunity to go to Stanford

on a scholarship."

After Stanford, Leavitt began her undergraduate pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base, Texas, which she completed in January 1993, right before the policy changed that allowed her to become a fighter pilot.

Leavitt goes by the aviator call sign "Tally," which she says is derived from a brevity term in aviation that means enemy combatants are in sight. She is coy about how she earned the name from the fighter pilots in her squadron. "I've had it since I was a lieutenant in my first operations squadron," she says. "There's always a story, and I rarely share mine. In most cases, you keep a call sign if you do something notable."

Notable is a good word to describe her military career overall. Leavitt has furthered her education through numerous programs and earned additional master's degrees in business administration, military operational art and science, and national security strategy. She has received major awards and decorations including the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, the Bronze Star Medal, the Defense Meritorious Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, the Meritorious Service Medal with three oak leaf clusters, the Air Medal with four oak leaf clusters and several others.

Leavitt has served in a variety of flying, staff and command assignments and has commanded at the flight, squadron and wing level of the Air Force. She continued to break barriers at Nellis, where she was the 57th Wing's first female commander. There, she oversaw the Air Force's most diverse flying wing, comprised of 37 squadrons at 13 installations with more than 130 different aircraft. "One of the very rewarding things about being in the 57th wing and being at Nellis Air Force Base was having a significant impact on the combat readiness of our forces. Our training is second to none in the world, and being part of providing the training of warriors was very rewarding."

Inspiring the Next Generation

In June, Leavitt left Nellis after two years to become commander of the Air Force Recruiting Service (AFRS) Joint Base San

“The Air Force recruiting mission is incredibly important. Our recruiters are building tomorrow’s Air Force. We have **THE BEST AIR FORCE IN THE WORLD**, and our recruiters are responsible for building into the future line,” she says, adding, “Our mission is truly to **ENGAGE AND INSPIRE AMERICA’S YOUTH** and to recruit the best to be part of our Air Force. I am absolutely honored and so excited to be a part of this mission.”

— BRIG. GEN. JEANNIE M. LEAVITT



Brig. Gen. Jeannie Leavitt, 57th Wing commander, walks with the Thunderbird team members during Aviation Nation 2016 at Nellis Air Force Base.

Antonio-Randolph, Texas. The AFRS comprises more than 2,470 airmen and civilians in more than 1,200 recruiting offices across the United States and abroad. She is responsible for all enlisted accessions and a variety of officer-accession programs. AFRS also manages all strategic marketing for the U.S. Air Force.

“The Air Force recruiting mission is incredibly important,” Leavitt says. “Our recruiters are building tomorrow’s Air Force. We have the best Air Force in the world, and our recruiters are responsible for building into the future line,” she says, adding, “Our mission is truly to engage and inspire America’s youth and to recruit the best to be part of our Air Force. I am absolutely honored and so excited to be a part of this mission.”

As part of that mission, she hopes to see more female fighter pilots join the ranks. “There are considerably more women that fly fighters today — that’s not hard to do since there were none when I started. We would like to have a more diverse pilot force, and we are making efforts to engage with different parts of the demographics throughout the country to make sure that people understand the opportunities available to them.”

Among them, she cites education and

travel as just a few of the benefits of serving. “The Air Force has provided so many opportunities for me,” Leavitt says. “I often get asked about breaking barriers and the fact that I was able to fly fighters, and quite honestly these were all opportunities because I joined the Air Force. The Air Force provides the opportunity to do something with a purpose, to help defend our country. They taught me to fly and sent me back to school. I’ve had so much training and been able to see the world. To be part of a winning team is pretty incredible, to be part of something bigger than yourself. I do amazing things with amazing people every day, and I’m very thankful for the opportunities I’ve had since I joined the Air Force.”

Leavitt also tries to inspire children to follow a STEM path by speaking at events and meeting students. “I am always excited to support anything that sparks an interest in others in STEM. Those were always my passion. Those were the subjects I loved in school. Anything I can do to pass on that passion for others is something very rewarding for me.”

Outside of the Air Force, Leavitt enjoys being with her husband, retired Air Force Col. Craig Leavitt, an F-16 pilot, and their children, Shannon and Michael, who are in

middle school. “When I am not working, I am a full-time mom. I love spending time with my husband and kids. We do outdoor activities and travel and explore each area where we get stationed.”

With pilots for parents, Shannon and Michael are well versed in aviation, though it remains to be seen if they’ll follow a similar career path. “Our kids have been around aviation from the time they were born. They both really enjoy flying and had the opportunity to fly at a very young age. They’ve had a vastly different childhood than I did. I never flew in any aircraft until I was 18, but they both flew before they turned 1 year old. They want all kinds of careers. We always tell them they can do whatever they want; they just need to work hard and chase their dream.”

Though she often is touted as a pioneer in the military, Leavitt downplays the significance and credits her own diligence with her success. “I have worked very hard to do my best in every educational opportunity, every training program and every position I’ve held,” she explains, “and primarily due to timing, I’m considered a trailblazer. ... While I don’t seek the title, I don’t necessarily mind it because it implies that those who will follow the path behind may meet less resistance.” ■