

OU alumna a real-life ‘Captain Marvel’ as U.S. Air Force pilot and base commander

University of Oklahoma alumna Col. Samantha Weeks knew at age 6 she wanted to be a fighter pilot. The calling was clear from the day she witnessed the in-flight refueling of an F-111 Aardvark as her family flew home from overseas on a KC-135 Stratotanker.

The daughter of a U.S. Air Force master sergeant watched in awe, then told her father she wanted to do that. He thought she aspired to be the crewmember controlling the boom and pumping thousands of gallons of jet fuel into the bomber.

No, Weeks told him, she wanted to be the F-111 pilot.

“He patted me on the back and said, ‘Girls don’t do that.’”

The response was no better from her seventh-grade school counselor, who failed to take her seriously.

Yet, as it turned out, Congress lifted the ban on women flying in combat in 1993, the same year Weeks entered the U.S. Air Force Academy.

She received her commission from the Air Force Academy in 1997. After graduating from Specialized Undergraduate Pilot Training, Weeks flew the F-15C Eagle fighter jet in support of Operations Northern and Southern Watch – enforcing the no-fly zones over Iraq. Her more than 2,200 flying hours include 105 combat/combat support hours. She was also a member of the prestigious Thunderbirds aerial demonstration squad.

“I’ve been a determined person since age 6 on who I am and what I want to achieve. I give a lot of credit to luck and training,” says Weeks, 43.

“In my 22 years of service, I’ve met women who tell me I’m doing what they always wanted to do, but couldn’t based off their timing. Some of those women are Women Air Service Pilots or WASPs from World War II.” Weeks says, “These women, they are the trailblazers who led the way to allow me to fly higher, further, and farther.”

Of the 2,341 fighter pilots today with the rank of colonel or below, only 85 are female – 61 active duty, 24 Air National Guard and 24 Reserve, according to the Air Force.

“Being a female fighter pilot still makes you part of a small

population, but the groundwork has been laid and we are trying to showcase the service to our nation in the Air Force every day.”

Learning to lead

Since August 2018, Weeks has been commander of the 14th Flying Training Wing at Columbus Air Force Base, Miss. She manages an operations and maintenance budget of \$115 million with capital assets exceeding \$2.3 billion. The wing has 244 aircraft that fly 77,000 hours per year while training more than 400 pilots and combat system operators annually.

“It’s kind of like being the mayor of a small city,” Weeks says.

She is responsible for everything on base – food, housing, making sure the buildings have electricity – on top of the flying training mission.

“Communication is one of the toughest challenges,” Weeks says. “To make sure your immediate team understands and passes all the way down your intent, vision and decisions is arduous but absolutely essential.”

She says the education she received from OU is put to good use every day. Weeks earned a Master of Human Relations degree while serving at Osan Air Base, South Korea, through OU Online, then known as OU Extended Campus.

The university pioneered the intensive seminar teaching format in the 1960s specifically for the military-adult learner. Since fall 2009, nearly 3,000 men and women in U.S. armed services worldwide have completed degrees or certificates through OU Online.

“In 2003, very few schools offered 100 percent online distance learning,” she says. “I chose the University of Oklahoma with its human relations degree when I saw it wasn’t just social work but focused on leadership.”

At the time, she was a captain anticipating a promotion to major.

“Leadership was going to be an imperative in my world. I absolutely got what I needed,” Weeks says. “My degree in human relations helps me day in and day out. It set me on a better path.”



U.S. Air Force Col. Samantha Weeks

She keeps two OU textbooks on a shelf in her office for easy reference. One is *Nonverbal Behavior in Interpersonal Relations*, by Virginia Peck Richmond and James C. McCroskey. The other is *Cultural Diversity in the Workplace: Issues and Strategies*, by George Henderson, OU's Sylvan N. Goldman Professor of Human Relations, Education and Sociology and a David Ross Boyd Professor, who continues to champion civil rights in higher education.

Twenty-five years after its publication, Henderson's book about effectively recruiting, training, managing and promoting a culturally diverse work force is as vital as ever, says Weeks, adding that the Air Force Recruiting Service strives to enlist people across the spectrum of gender, race and socioeconomic status, and their different perspectives improve the organization.

Leading by example

While female fighter pilots and commanders remain a small minority in the Air Force, Weeks feels fortunate to have been part of the evolution.

The trailblazers who didn't get those opportunities aren't resentful, but rather are "glad to see it grow across the ages," Weeks says. Her goal is to share her story honestly with the young women who follow to help them achieve.

One woman who is sure to recruit more female pilots is the fictional Capt. Carol Danvers – better known as "Captain Marvel." Weeks says the 2019 blockbuster, which accurately portrays a female pilot who excels in pilot training and flies the F-15C, will do as much to inspire young women to be military pilots as the 1986 movie "Top Gun" did to recruit men.

In fact, Air Force Recruiting Service filmed a commercial featuring Air Force women pilots to coincide with the release of *Captain Marvel*.

One additional, important duty Weeks has in addition to base commander is being mom to Ryan, 4, and Ethan, 3. She admits it is a balancing act.

"There are days I'm not always the best mom. There are days I'm not always the best military leader," she says. "What I try to do every day is be better than I was the day before."

"Try" is the advice she gives everyone.

"Many people will hold back from trying something new for fear of failure. They won't fail, but they won't succeed and reach their full potential," Weeks says.

While flying with the Thunderbirds in 2007 and 2008, she often heard the comment, "I didn't know women could do that." At her first air show, Weeks also heard a familiar voice say, "That's my girl."

Since that day, her father has attended multiple air shows and has made every one of her command-change ceremonies, stateside or overseas.

Weeks says, "He is definitely a proud papa."

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