

# 2005

## THE CHICK FIGHTER PILOTS ASSOCIATION (CFPA)

*'We are a small group, but the point of the CFPA is not to set ourselves apart. We are, first and foremost, Fighter Pilots. That's our priority'.*

**The Chick Fighter Pilots' Association website.**

In the early days of pioneering aviation a number of plucky women defied convention and forged a name for themselves as accomplished aviators. Feminine hands grappled with planes hewn from canvas, wood and much prayer to establish records still celebrated today. Unwieldy airframes aside, the minority of women flyers were pitted against the many male institutions reinforcing the ceilings with concrete and inhibiting their further progression.

Such women thrived on the fringes of aviation, tolerated but never fully accepted, more than anything feeling very isolated in their endeavours. Camaraderie of shared spirit would make that same impenetrable ceiling a little more transparent and perhaps instil some encouraging cracks.

After the adrenaline had ebbed away at the end of the first Women's Transcontinental Air Derby or 'Powder Puff Derby' in September 1929 Amelia Earhart, Bobbi Trout and host of other women pilots gathered under the bleachers of a public grandstand in Cleveland, Ohio. They came up with the concept of an organisation dedicated to the needs of licensed women pilots in the US. This was the birth of the Ninety Nines, which today enjoys many thousands of members from across globe.

Safety in numbers perhaps? More likely the numerical advantage of so many passionate aviatrixes and their unified voice resonating with enough passion to effect change. Decades later the same thing happened for the egg beaters shying away from the kitchen. Jean Ross Howard in 1955 made a bold statement by establishing the Whirly Girls. This fun group brought together women helicopter pilots from across the world. The Whirly Girls started with just 6 charter members at their first meeting or 'hovering' and today can boast a membership of 1,500 women representatives from 45 countries.

Fast forward to a day in 2005 when a group of women F-16 instructor fighter pilots serving in the United States Air Force were gathered at Luke Air Force Base. In the midst of saying goodbye to one of their own leaving active service, the six intrepid pilots had a light bulb moment during the farewell luncheon. As none had served operationally with another female

F-16 pilot they came up with the idea of meeting once a month just to stay in touch. The Chick Fighter Pilots Association (CFPA) thus hatched into existence and word eventually spread attracting other scattered F-16 pilots to join. Today the CFPA not only encompasses women flying F-16's but other types such as the F-15 Eagle, F-117A Nighthawk and the A-10A Thunderbolt.

From informal monthly meetings, the CFPA has grown into a support network for serving member fighter pilots in the US Air Force. Strengthening ties, exchanging ideas and an esprit de corps in the context of flying fast jets binds the professional and social aspects of the CFPA. It's the hangout of choice for those wishing to share their experiences, catch up with friends and welcome new members. But who exactly are the Fighter Chicks?

'SHOCK', 'STAC', 'HAK' and 'Torch' represent some of the many thousands of personal call-sign names which US military aviators use to identify themselves. But all share the common bond of being part of the CFPA family, with some being the founding matriarchs of the sisterhood.

'SHOCK' a United States Air Force Academy graduate and F-16 driver is currently posted to the Academy as instructor. Like many of her compatriots she has seen through assignments in far flung locations such as Korea and Japan. Recently she served as an F-16 instructor pilot at her CFPA chapter home of Luke AFB. 'SHOCK' also took part in Operation Iraqi Freedom being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for her actions during that historic conflict.

From the sleek lines of the F-16 to the geometrically angular and sinister form of the F-117 Stealth Fighter. 'Kirby', a Holloman AFB Fighter Chick and pilot on the enigmatic F-117 took the time to whisper: "Between 2004 and the end of the F-117A Stealth Fighter's operational history in 2008, Kirby, Shaq and Cans became the first, and only, women to every fly the Nighthawk. As part of the 8th Fighter Squadron 'Black Sheep', they flew as wingmen, flight leaders, and instructor pilots. They were the 'Ladies of the Nighthawk'."

Fighter Chick Major 'HARB' and her husband are the first couple to graduate together from the USAF Test Pilot School. The husband and wife



team are assigned to the 416th Flight Test Squadron, Edwards AFB, California as F-16 test pilots. Major 'HARB' the second ever female test pilot, divides her time between pushing the F-16 to the end of its flight envelope and raising a three year old daughter.

The Fighter Chicks have also hit the headlines. 'FiFi' better known as Major Nicole Malachowski was the first ever woman to fly with the Thunderbird demonstration team in 2006. Major Shawna Rochelle Kimbrell has the accolade of being the first ever F-16 pilot of African-American heritage flying with the 555th 'Triple Nickel' Fighter Squadron.

Fighter Chicks also have an international flavour with 'Handles' flying an F-18C Hornet for the Canadian Air Force. Their appeal extends into other branch services of the US armed forces such as the pilots of the Marine Corps and navy. Civilian Fighter Chicks swell the numbers modestly through the Air National Guard and Reserves.

Embracing the Internet has made the world smaller for the Fighter Chicks, their web presence permitting the sisterhood to do more than just keep in touch. A gallery of hosted images places call signs to faces, vividly painting the operational picture of women pilots assigned to Stateside and overseas bases. The message board section invites members of the public to join the moderated forums. It acts as a platform for those interested in aviation and drawn towards making contact with actual fighter pilots without compromising operational security. Furthermore aspiring young fighter chicks and those already in training can seek valuable advice from seasoned 'veterans'. The Fighter Chicks use the medium for general announcements and news, such as the all important periodic get together meetings in the traditional venue of Las Vegas.

Flight suits cut differently and hair a little longer than previous regulation length represents a testament to the tenaciousness of the few responsible for opening up one of the last bastions of male preserve, the fighter cockpit. Jackie Cochran may have flown an experimental fighter to clinch the Bendix race trophy in 1938, but it wasn't enough. In 1942 Jackie, in the company of Nancy Harkness Love, diligently established the Women's Air Service Pilots (WASP) to mitigate the anticipated pilot shortage during the war years. The capable WASP flew all types from pursuit fighters such as the P-51 Mustang to heavy bombers like the venerable B-17 Flying Fortress. However with cessation of hostilities in Europe the WASP were swiftly disbanded in December 1944. The new jet era of the post war years reinforced the lockdown of the fighter canopy to women.

A change of legislation in 1993 finally enabled qualified women pilots to compete on an equal footing with their male counterparts for coveted fighter placements. The first to successfully secure an assignment was Captain Jeannie Flynn call sign 'Tally'. She entered the history books in 1994 by becoming the first to fly the F-15E Strike Eagle. Today the US Air Force alone has 3,700 fighter pilots of which 70 are women.

The exclusive male domain is no more but shoring up the numbers of women serving as combat pilots will take some time. Integration and acceptance has been facilitated with the help of female pilots focusing on the mission parameters irrespective of earlier scrutiny. The novelty factor is yesterday's news and successive generations will compete more on merit and aptitude with gender issues relegated to history. A modern utopian prediction steadily edging closer to reality thanks to the altruistic and practical activities of contemporary pioneers. The CFPA demystifies the world of the fighter pilot to the average lay person and serves to inspire emerging generations, both male and female alike. In this respect the Fighter Chicks make the job of the air force recruiter a whole lot easier.

One thing will never change, the 'fighter 'trixes' of the CFPA will certainly remain as 'chick' members by association. But there's no denying that all have matured into eagles soaring high and ranked amongst the best of fighter pilots. Like the Ninety Nines and the Whirly Girls their future is assured to withstand the test of time.

Future 'Fighter Chicks' are always welcome, for further information please visit their nest at [www.fighterchicks.com](http://www.fighterchicks.com)