

1st Marine strike pilot returns to NAS Meridian where she made history

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Naval Air Station Meridian hosted a Women's History Month luncheon on March 24 in the Roy M. Wheat Galley. In celebration of NAS Meridian's 50th anniversary and the 100th anniversary of Naval Aviation, committee members invited one of our own back to where she made history.

Lt. Col. Karen Tribbett Brannen returned to NAS Meridian nearly 13 years after she made history becoming the Marine Corps' first female strike fighter pilot to earn "Wings of Gold." That historical moment occurred on Oct. 17, 1997.

At the luncheon, she recalled the many experiences that shaped her career.

"I got here because of the support of a lot of people. And I would actually say even though my mother is an amazing person, my dad was the driving factor in my life," Brannen said. "It was he that said to me, 'You've got to beat the boys.'"

Hardly anyone believed she would make it as a fighter pilot, not even her high school classmates.

"I said if I could be anything, I want to be a fighter pilot and all the guys in class laughed," Brannen recalled. "Those memories stalked me. So I said to myself 'I can do this.'"

She went on to college at Rochester Computer Technology and still thought she wanted to be a fighter pilot.

"Timing is everything," she said. "The spring of my final year, Congress passed the law that allowed women to fly in the Marine Corps. I applied, passed my flight physical and went to training."

Then married, Karen Fuller Tribbett, attended Officer Candidate School in the summer of 1994 where she finished as an honor graduate for her platoon and received the Physical Training Award for having the highest overall physical fitness scores in the company. She was commissioned second lieutenant on Aug. 26, 1994 and graduated with honors from Basic School.

Second Lt. Tribbett completed primary flight training in VT-3 in May 1996 and became the first female Marine to receive a jet training slot. First Lt. Tribbett completed intermediate jet training at Training Squadron 19 at NAS Meridian flying the T-2C and went on to fly the TA-4J with Training Squadron 7. She earned student of the month honors at both jet training squadrons.

"I didn't really think it was a big deal when I got to Merid-

ian. The Navy had women pilots for years, but the Marine Corps was different," Brannen said. "It was hard for them to accept me, but I did well and was on the top. I got what I wanted, and I wanted jets."

Tribbett was the top graduate in her class and selected to fly the F/A-18 Hornet with a West Coast squadron. From there, "Stump" (that's her call sign) was assigned to Fleet Replacement Squadron VMFAT-101 first at El Toro, Calif., then Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Miramar, Calif.

In 1999, Capt. Tribbett checked into Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 242 at MCAS Miramar. She deployed with VMFA-242 to Iwakuni, Japan from March 2001 to September 2001, and earned her Air Combat Tactics Instructor Certification in December 2001.

She returned to Quantico, Va. in July 2002 to attend Expeditionary Warfare School (EWS). After completing EWS, she was assigned as an active duty officer to Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 321 at Andrews Air Force Base from July 2003 until the squadron was deactivated in September 2004. From there, Maj. Tribbett was assigned to VR-1 where she flew C-37B's (also known as Gulfstream's G550) from October 2004 to June 2007.

"I didn't know what a Gulfstream was at that time," she said. "It was a really fancy VIP plane and I flew around with the Secretary of the Navy, the Commandant of the Marine Corps and congressmen."

Maj. Tribbett left active duty and accepted a job as a Large Cabin Demonstration Pilot with Gulfstream in June 2007. She continues to participate in the Marine Corps Reserves and has completed command and staff positions. She was promoted to lieutenant colonel, and currently serves as the Officer in Charge of the Peacetime Wartime Support Team (PWST) in Savannah, Ga.

In Oct. 24, 2010, she married Maj. Matt Brannen, a judge advocate in the Marine Corps.

Prior to the luncheon, Brannen visited with fifth graders at NAS Meridian's Starbase Atlantis program. The children asked questions about flying and her experiences in the military.

"It's very true that what people say to children and young adults can make a difference in their lives," Brannen said. "I think the real point is that if a few people believe in you and you believe in yourself, you will go a really long way." And timing is everything."