

Lt. Col. Jennifer Wrynn, '92, joins 181 women in the world's largest all female skydiving formation.



AIR TIGHT SUPPORT SQUAD

The 70th Flying Training Squadron takes
on the role of wingman at USAFA

By Lewis Carlyle

Editor's Note:

In March 2010, Checkpoints ran a story on the 557th Flying Training Squadron based here at the Academy (Altimeter of Character, page 37). The article reviewed the powered flight program which gets cadets into the cockpit of an airplane and has them taking their first solo ride after just nine flights. For the story below, Checkpoints returns to the airfield to review a critical element of the Academy's flight instructing empire: the 70th Flying Training Squadron.

Lt. Col. David Rodriguez, '89, strolls across the tarmac at the Air Force Academy's landing strip, heading for the row of



Top, from left, Lt. Col. David Rodriguez, '89, Lt. Col. Lisa Mase and Col. Jim Smetzer, '81. Bottom: USAFA's Twin Otters, of the 98th Flying Training Squadron, are piloted by Lt. Col. Scott Drinkard, '88, and Maj Brock Larson while on the recent spring training deployment at Cape Canaveral, FL.



gleaming white planes parked neatly in front of the hangars. A full time reservist, he runs the show at the 70th Flying Training Squadron. “We’re a Reserve Associate Unit,” Rodriguez says through his beaming smile, “and we support all the mission elements of the 306 Flying Training Group, which oversees all of the cadet airmanship programs here at the Academy. We are tasked to support and augment the instructor corps.”

With 11 pilots teaching powered flight and another 11 assisting with the parachute program, Rodriguez’s team stays busy around the clock. The 70th FTS also has 13 instructors who provide support to the soaring program. He continues, “Our mission statement says that we provide

professional, experienced, and skilled citizen airmen. We farm our instructors out and our mission is to be a good wingman, and that’s what we do. The people on this team are here because they love what they do, and they always have, which is why they still do it. A lot of guys could just quit—but they don’t. They give up a lot from their civilian jobs and from their personal time because they love coming here and working with the cadets to help instill those character traits that we look for in a good officer.”

One such wingman is Lt. Col. Jennifer Wrynn, '92. A pilot and parachuting world record holder, the multi-talented instructor teaches both powered flight

and parachuting. “On the flying side of things,” she recounts proudly, “I take students who have never flown before and teach them how to solo an airplane in just nine rides. We go over common mistakes and how to recover from them.”

Wrynn is also a skydiving instructor with the Wings of Blue. “In that role,” she describes, “my main duty is to offer mentorship in what we call accelerated free fall, or AFF. At USAFA, a cadet’s first five jumps are solo because they’ve had so much ground-training. In basic parachuting, students simply have to demonstrate that they can jump out of the aircraft, free fall for about ten seconds, pull the rip cord and land safely. For the kids who want to join Wings of Blue, things are a bit more complex. Freefall can last up to 60 seconds, during which time we execute maneuvers.”

As if Power Flight and Wings of Blue weren’t enough, Wrynn also teaches courses in the Academy’s management department every other day. “We stay busy,” she continues, “and we have a lot of interaction with cadets. I see my students all over the place and sometimes it takes me a minute to remember which course I know them from. The Academy can be a very overwhelming place. Having gone through the experience myself helps me to better connect with my students. There are a lot of competing activities which domi-

nate a cadet's time, and that can make it difficult for them to focus."

It goes without saying, freefalling with a parachute or piloting an airplane are not places one wants to lose focus. Wrynn says sometimes the instructors have to cut students a bit of a break. "If I sense that one of my students is taking on too much, I can pull her aside and we can re-evaluate our timeline."

The cadets who train at the airfield are in good hands. Among the myriad of accomplishments the instructor corps has on its list of accolades, Wrynn is world record holder. A strong advocate for the fight against breast cancer, she put her freefall skills to the test just this past year. "We set out to break the previous world record for largest female aerial free fall formation, which was set in 2005 with 151 women. In September of 2009, women from 31 nations joined to set the new record with 181 jumpers in formation. It was pretty intense; everything had to be well choreographed because we jumped out of ten different airplanes. The whole operation was intended to raise money for breast cancer. All together, we raised about \$560,000. It was an amazing experience.

There were women around me who were wearing the names of friends or family members who have been afflicted with cancer. It was very touching."

Back at the airfield, Lt. Col. Rodriguez is getting excited about the future of the program. "We'll be moving into a new building shortly," he says, "and this marks the permanent physical presence of our reserve associate construct as part of the total force here at the Academy. It's the same all across the Air Force. Whenever officers deploy, whether they go to Iraq or Afghanistan, chances are they'll be imbedded with Reserve personnel whenever they're doing the mission."

Both students and instructors are quick to point out that none of the airfield operations could happen without the support of the reserve team. Maj. Brock Larson is Assistant Director of Operations. He's worked as a UV-18 Twin Otter instructor and also as a parachute jump instructor. "I'm here to support the commander with whatever directive programs he needs help with. Prior to my arrival here, I spent four and a half years as the B-Flight commander where we supported the 98th Flying Train-



Lt. Col. Jennifer Wrynn, '92, in her pink breast cancer jumpsuit after her world record-setting skydiving formation.

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ing Squadron and the Wings of Blue Parachute team.” As part of the Active Guard Reserve, Larson was there for the care and feeding of traditional reservists who supported the Wings of Blue mission.

Larson says, “The emphasis of the jump program—Airman-ship 490, the basic free fall program—is character develop-ment. When you put a cadet in the door of what some might call a perfectly good airplane and ask him or her to let go, it takes a lot of courage to have faith in their training, their equipment and, most importantly, their instructors. It takes guts and it takes character, and that’s what the philosophy of the program is all about. If they can draw from their training and from everything they’ve learned at the Academy and apply it correctly, our hope is that later on in their careers as officers, when they’re faced with dire circumstances, they’ll know how to handle the situation.”

Rodriguez echoes Larson’s concern for the cadets’ futures. Like many Air Force personnel, he strongly believes in the value of courage, and the split second decision making abilities of a fighter pilot in the cockpit. “I hope we are able to keep the airmanship programs relevant to building those leaders of character,” he muses. “The soaring, jump and powered flight programs force cadets to take their lives into their own hands. If they mess up, they could very well kill themselves. The new UAV programs are great—and certainly essential to the Air Force’s mission—but piloting a remote aircraft does not place you in any physical danger. I hope these new cadets don’t lose sight of that.”

Having been through the Academy experience himself, Rodriguez knows what it’s like to have the demanding schedule of a cadet. It helps him to better understand what these young men and women are going through when they come down to the airfield. “I hope I can speak for most grads who are now serving at the Academy when I say that we’re helping to complete the circle by sharing our common experiences with these kids.”

Like most graduates, Rodriguez lives by the creed of the Core Values. He understands that the most important lesson he and his instructors can impart on cadets today is to always do the right thing. “It all comes back to the Core Values,” he concludes, “especially *integrity first*. In my 20 plus years in the Air Force, that’s probably been the one consistent thread no matter what you do or where you go—and if these young people can embrace that quality then they should be successful in just about everything they do.” 

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