Arlington National Cemetery Website

Kara Spears Hultgreen

Lieutenant, United States Navy

A Naval Aviator, she was the first female fighter pilot killed after the Department of Defense Risk Rule was rescinded. She was killed while making a landing on an aircraft carrier off the coast of California.

She is buried in Section 60 of Arlington National Cemetery.

Then and Now: Forging the way
14 November 2004
Scott Huddleston
Courtesy of the Express-News

It's been a decade since a young woman from San Antonio, the first female Navy fighter pilot cleared for combat, lost her life when her F-14 Tomcat crashed into the Pacific Ocean off the California coast.

Her death was controversial almost immediately.

Some who opposed the use of female combat pilots said the Navy, hoping to downplay the Tailhook sexual abuse scandal, had hastened promotion of female pilots, placing them in danger with inadequate training.

Critics suggested she had approached the USS Abraham Lincoln at an improper "glide slope."

Others defended the 29-year-old pilot, whose left engine stalled on descent to the carrier on that Tuesday afternoon. Some in naval aviation said the crash was unavoidable.

The one thing both sides agreed on was that the October 25, 1994, death of Lieutenant Kara S. Hultgreen was as much a tragic loss for her family as it was for her country.

An Alamo Heights High School graduate who excelled academically, Hultgreen was from a family of prominent lawyers and judges. She could have done any number of things, but chose to serve her country and was cleared to fly a $40 million aircraft that could soar at speeds up to 1,500 mph.

Born October 5, 1965, in Greenwich, Connecticut, and reared in Chicago and Toronto, Hultgreen moved to San Antonio in 1981 after her parents divorced.

She entered Alamo Heights as a junior, and played basketball and tennis. She later graduated from the University of Texas with a major in aerospace engineering.

On July 24, 1994, shortly after Congress lifted a ban on female combat pilots, she became certified to fly the Tomcat, the plane from the 1986 movie "Top Gun," by executing her final qualifying night landing on the USS Constellation.

Hultgreen could bench-press more than 200 pounds. Her call sign, "Hulk," became "Revlon" after she wore makeup one day for a television interview.

"A year and a half ago, people were telling me that I might as well get out because 'you've got no future in the Navy. There are no jet slots open for women,'" she told the San Antonio Express-News after being cleared to fly in combat.

She insisted the female pilots were treated the same as men.

"We were under a microscope just like any other junior pilot," Hultgreen said.

A memorial service for her, with an F-14 flyover, was held at the San Antonio Country Club. She was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Her flight jacket, helmet and uniforms were donated to the Smithsonian Institution.

A judge advocate general and a separate incident report cited a combination of engine failure and pilot error in the crash.

Elaine Donnelly, director of the private Center for Military Readiness in Livonia, Mich., charged that the Navy had prematurely qualified Hultgreen and another female, Lieutenant Carey Lohrenz, for political reasons.

Other female Navy pilots saw the criticism as part of a smear campaign to keep women from competing for pilot slots.

Lohrenz, grounded in 1995, sued the Navy for sexual discrimination, and filed a libel suit against Donnelly, claiming pressure created by critics affected her flying. The Navy paid $150,000 in a settlement.

In 2002 a federal judge dismissed the suit against Donnelly, ruling that Lohrenz was a public figure, and that her lawyers had to prove Donnelly

knowingly spread false information or acted with reckless disregard for the truth.

The judge did not rule on claims women got special treatment, but said the issue was "extremely muddled," the Washington Times reported.

An appellate court upheld the ruling, and the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear a final appeal.

Hultgreen's mother, San Antonio lawyer Sally Spears, wrote a book, "Call Sign Revlon: The Life and Death of Navy Fighter Pilot Kara Hultgreen," published by Naval Institute Press in 1998.

By then, the Navy had 29 female pilots cleared to fly fighter aircraft.

Spears said she has considered negotiating movie rights for her book so everyone could see the story of the strong woman with an infectious smile who also could be softhearted and sensitive.

"I don't think of her as a (military) veteran," Spears said. "She was my baby girl."

From a contemporary press report:

Like many American teens who grew up in the Space Age, Kara Hultgreen was in high school when she decided she wanted to be an astronaut.

To reach that goal, she concluded she needed to obtain either a pilot's license or a Ph.D., recalled her mother, San Antonio lawyer Sally Spears.

``But Kara loved speed, so she decided the best way (to become an astronaut) was to be a pilot,'' Spears said.

The Alamo Heights High School graduate won an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis. But when she failed to receive a designated spot, she enrolled instead at the University of Texas at Austin.

After receiving a degree in aerospace engineering from UT, Hult-green attended naval aviation officer candidate school in Pensacola, Fla.

She eventually wound up in Key West, Florida, flying A-6 Intruders.

Spears said Hultgreen wanted more. She wanted to become part of the Navy's "elite of the elite,'' carrier-based fighter pilots - a position closed to women

until a combat ban was lifted in 1993.

Almost immediately, she began what was to be an intense year of training in the F-14 fighter at Miramar Naval Air Station in San Diego.

Hultgreen became the Navy's first fully qualified female F-14 Tomcat pilot when she landed successfully on the USS Constellation in summer 1994.

On October 25, 1994, Lt. Kara Hultgreen, 29, was killed when the left engine of her F-14 stalled as she attempted to land on the carrier USS Abraham Lincoln about 50 miles off the coast from San Diego.

Radar intercept officer Lieutenant Matthew Klemish ejected safely from the plane and was rescued from the water minutes later.

But Hultgreen, who ejected seconds after Klemish, fell straight into the ocean and was killed. Her body, still strapped in the ejection seat, was discovered 19 days later.

The pioneer female fighter pilot was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

From various press reports:

Navy recovers plane wreckage from ocean: 23 December 1994

The U.S. Navy Wednesday recovered the wreckage of the F-14 Tomcat flown by Lieutenant Kara Hultgreen, the United States' first woman carrier fighter pilot who was killed at sea October 25, 1994 in a landing accident 50 miles off San Diego.

The accident occurred as Hultgreen, 29, was making a final approach to the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln after a routine flight from Miramar Naval Air Station, her home base. Both she and her radar intercept officer, Lieutenant Matthew Klemish, ejected, but only he survived. Because the plane rolled onto its back as it went out of control, Hultgreen was ejected directly into the sea and was killed instantly.

Her body was recovered November 12 in 3,700 feet of water not far from the sunken jet. She was buried with full honors at Arlington National Cemetery.

This was the Navy's third attempt to retrieve the aircraft, a Navy spokeswoman said. Recovery was made using undersea robotic equipment

that attached cables to the 62-foot-long fighter. The F-14 was taken to North Island Naval Air Station at San Diego, where it will be examined by a team of experts from the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, Va. According to reports from witnesses and a videotape of the landing attempt, the aircraft may have had engine failure when it was at dangerously low speed and altitude some yards astern of the carrier. The jet yawed to the left, went nose up and winged over to the left before plunging into the sea.

A Navy spokeswoman said the accident investigation could take several weeks. The results will be turned over to the Navy high command, which will determine whether they will be made public. After the accident, a still anonymous caller provoked a media controversy by charging that the Navy had lowered standards to allow Hultgreen to qualify for carrier duty in a move to appeal to political correctness. The charges evaporated after Hultgreen's fellow aviators and commanding officer defended her as an excellent pilot, and her mother released official flight records showing that Hultgreen had qualified third-highest in a group of seven with an above-average score 30 points over the minimum requirement.

The Navy has released the findings of its investigation into the F-14A flight mishap of October 25, 1994, which resulted in the death of the pilot, Lieutenant Kara S. Hultgreen. In addition to the death of Lieutenant Hultgreen, the accident caused minor injuries to Lieutenant Matthew P. Klemish, the radar intercept officer, and the loss of the aircraft.

The investigating officer's findings are based on witness statements, official records and logbooks, and the engineering analysis of the aircraft and engines recovered after the accident. Even after this comprehensive investigation, we will never know for certain all of the contributing factors which may have caused this tragic accident.

The principal findings are that Lieutenant Hultgreen was fully qualified to fly the F-14A and that Lieutenant Klemish was a fully qualified F-14A radar intercept officer. This mishap occurred during the landing phase of routine carrier operations. The emergency resulting in the mishap was precipitated by a left engine malfunction at an extremely vulnerable moment as the aircraft was approaching the carrier to land. The pilot attempted to continue flying the aircraft to safety but was unable to do so.

"All too often we forget how narrow the margin of safety is in naval carrier aviation," said Vice Admiral Robert J. Spane, Commander, Naval Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. "This pilot did her best to keep this aircraft flying under conditions that were all but impossible."

As a result of this accident, the report recommends the Navy implement additional checks on the engine and add this type of emergency to the Navy's F-14 flight simulator training syllabus.

Hultgreen became the first woman to qualify in a combat-ready F-14 Tomcat, the illustrious Top Gun carrier fighter jet. She became a part of the Black Lions of VF-213 who were preparing to deploy to the Persian Gulf. As she was approaching the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln on October 25, 1994, her aircraft began losing altitude. Her radar intercept officer ejected successfully. Hultgreen ejected immediately after, but the jet had already rolled. After an exhaustive search, her body and the plane were not recovered.

She received full military honors upon her death and no special attention was drawn to the fact that she was the first female Tomcat pilot. However, unsigned faxes began to circulate, maligning her record, and suggesting that the Navy in its rush to integrate women into the ranks was placing unqualified people on aircraft. Zimmerman says, "It was an unheard of breach of naval aviation etiquette to question the flight record of a pilot who had gone down. It was just not done. Except with Kara Hultgreen."

Maintaining its policy of disallowing access to flight records of personnel who had died, the Navy stated that Hultgreen was "average to above average" as an F-14 pilot. Hultgreen's mother then came forward and gave records to the media which identified her daughter as graduating third out of the seven pilots in her class.

As a result of the media coverage, the Navy salvaged the plane and recovered her body, still strapped inside the ejector seat. This effort cost $100,000. A four-month investigation found that technical malfunction, not pilot error caused the crash and that almost no pilot could have saved the plane after the left engine stalled as it approached the ship.)

Zimmerman sums it up when she says,

What has been established in the aftermath of Tailhook is a different, more durable formula: the crucial relationship between respect and responsibility. The women of the Navy...would never be respected by their male peers unless and until they were allowed commensurate responsibilities. Giving American women the right to prove themselves as warfighters established them on new footing, as fully participatory, first-class citizens. It serves to dismantle the divided, hegemonic culture of two classes--the protectors and the protected--and leads the way to what theorist Judith Hicks Stiehm calls "a society of defenders." The old gender norms are not trashed, but enlarged.

July 1998

Naval Institute Press Publishes Book from the First Woman Fighter Pilot to Die in the Line of Duty

Call Sign Revlon: The Life and Death of Navy Fighter Pilot Kara Hultgreen by Sally Spears

Lt. Kara Hultgreen was just twenty-nine and the U.S. Navy's first fully qualified female fleet fighter pilot when her F-14 Tomcat slammed into the Pacific Ocean in October 1994. Her death was not only a tragic loss to her family but a serious blow to a Navy struggling to redefine the roll of women in its ranks. The image of this beautiful and vibrant young woman with her fierce warplane -- plastered across the front pages of newspapers around the world after the crash -- provoked strong emotions and gave new life to the controversy. Those who believed women had no place in combat airplanes attacked Kara's abilities and the navy's motives for assigning her to a combat squadron. The release of her carrier qualification records and the navy's report blaming the crash on engine malfunction only enflamed the debate.

Today the opposing sides are as firmly entrenched as ever and it is doubtful the publication of this book will alter their opinions. But that is not its purpose. Written by Kara's mother, San Antonio attorney Sally Spears, Call Sign Revlon goes behind the headlines to tell the story of a remarkable woman who made history. It presents Kara's shortcomings along with her strengths -- the ups and downs of a personal life along with her professional career, drawing freely from Kara's journals and from extensive interviews. It describes how her ambition to fly combat aircraft collided with the customs of the navy, the mores of society, and, until the repeal of the combat exclusion laws in 1991, with the law of the United States.

Without question Lieutenant Hultgreen fit the traditional mold of fighter pilots: brash, smart, aggressive, cocky to the point of arrogance. Like the rest, she made mistakes but also performed well -- the only thing that distinguished her from her fellow pilots was her gender. But as this book clearly shows, it was Kara's determination and perseverance that helped her become one of the first women to qualify as an F-14 carrier pilot -- an inspiration to young people everywhere. By turns personally revealing and professionally insightful, Call Sign Revlon will be published in October and available for $27.95 at bookstores or direct from the Naval Institute. To order call toll free 800-233-8764 or visit the web site at www.usni.org.

For more information, contact:
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(Four years ago, pioneering Navy F-14 fighter pilot Kara Hultgreendied in a crash in the Pacific Ocean. A new book by her mother celebrates the young San Antonian's exuberant life and shining legacy. But for some female aviators, the book rekindles anger over male pilots' hostility toward women fliers and attacks on Hultgreen after her death. Feature writer Marina Pisano followed Hultgreen's career from 1991.)

The voice on the telephone conveyed so much - barely contained elation, pride of achievement, and running through it all the kind of wry humor that never failed to break up her friends and ease stress in the white-knuckle profession that defined the very word.

"And, all of a sudden, you're (on the aircraft carrier) starting up the jet next to an S-3 and two inches away, there's an F-18 and inches from him, there's an A-6. And you take off ... It's really exciting ... because I remember a little over a year ago, people were telling me, you're never going to be there. It's kind of awesome."

It was the fall of 1994. The combat aircraft exclusion rule that historically barred military women from fighter planes had been scuttled, and Navy Lt. Kara S. Hultgreen, fresh from training at Miramar Naval Air Station in California, was there all right - snug in the pilot's seat of an F-14 Tomcat on the flight deck of a carrier, waiting to be catapulted, literally, into the sky along with the nation's best and boldest.

It helped that she looked and acted every inch the part - tall, good- looking, super-confident, brash, fearless.

In her new book, "Call Sign Revlon: The Life and Death of Navy Fighter Pilot Kara Hultgreen" (Naval Institute Press, $27.95), San Antonio attorney Sally Spears, recounts her daughter's short life with a mixture of intimate family stories about Kara and her two older sisters, Dagny and Kirsten, passages from letters and Kara's journal and sometimes surprising objectivity about her faults and events in her life.

Spears' book celebrates the positive legacy of the young aviator's life, a shining model who soared into the rarefied, all-male airspace of combat jets including some unfriendly airspace, as it turned out.

But for some of Hultgreen's friends, the book is reopening deep wounds and stirring up painful, bitter memories and anger. Today, few of the young female aviators who broke into combat positions with Hultgreen are flying carrier- based jets.

In July 1994, she became the first woman to carrier-qualify in the two-engine, supersonic, weapon- loaded F-14, joining a pioneering sisterhood within the already elite cadre of Navy pilots. The Tomcat was featured in the film "Top Gun."

On the phone from Miramar that fall day, the graduate of Alamo Heights High School and the University of Texas at Austin talked excitedly about her fighter squadron, VF-213 Blacklions, assigned to the USS Abraham Lincoln.

"The guys are already calling it the Babe-raham Lincoln," she said, laughing off the sexist fighter-jock humor.

But soon after that phone interview, 12 days after a story about her aviation milestone ran in the San Antonio Express-News, 29-year-old Hultgreen's F-14 plunged into the Pacific Ocean in a failed day landing approach at the Lincoln. Her RIO - radar intercept officer Lt. Matthew P. Klemish - ejected safely.

Engine, pilot blamed

The report by the judge advocate general and the subsequent Mishap Investigation Report cited a combination of engine stall and pilot error as causes for the accident.

Suddenly, the voice, the promise, the remarkable life were stilled forever.

**Spears, who in 1997 was appointed to DACOWITS - the civilian Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services - by then- Secretary of the Navy John Dalton, writes of the profound grief at her loss and the attacks on her daughter's competence
after the fatal crash.**

There were allegations from male aviators of special treatment and lowered flight-training standards for female fighter pilots. Conservative critic Elaine Donnelly, director of the private Center for Military Readiness, charged that the Navy, in the wake of the embarrassing Tailhook scandal, was pushing women through combat- jet training for political reasons.

'Slime' time

For many Navy female aviators at the time, the smear campaign against Hultgreen and Carey Lohrenz, the other F-14 pilot aboard the Lincoln, was a cautionary tale for women who dare to soar too high in a man's world.

It was "the sliming of Kara," says Retired Capt. Rosemary Mariner, who pioneered naval aviation for women in 1973 and was a mentor for Hultgreen and many others.

While acknowledging supportive men in their squadrons, they openly question the way the Navy handled the integration of women into combat-aircraft jobs. They see a failure of command leadership to confront open hostility from male aviators and instructors.

The Navy declined to comment for this story, referring instead to a Navy Inspector General's report released in July 1997. It said the Navy mishandled the effort to get women into fighters and noted media scrutiny put undue stress on women while causing resentment among the men.

Commanders were trying to show the women weren't receiving special treatment, but they did things that fueled resentment. "Like they would have the women in for coffee and cookies with the captain. It made us feel like idiots. I mean, nobody has coffee and cookies with the captain," says Tammie Jo Shults, an F-18 pilot who is now a civilian airline pilot living near San Antonio.

At first, women fighter pilots were subjected to a monthly pregnancy test, but the testing stopped after outraged women complained. Men weren't getting monthly sperm-count tests.

"Navy leadership is an oxymoron," says Pam Lyons Carel, an F- 18 pilot who was on the Lincoln and, on a television monitor below the flight deck, watched in horror as her friend crashed. She is now a T-45 instructor at Kingsville Naval Air Station.

Four years after Hultgreen's death, "Kara's name still evokes emotion," says Lt. Cmdr. Linda Heid, a naval flight officer on the EA-6B Prowler who also watched the crash.

Hultgreen's friend Brenda Sheufele, an F-18 aviator, is a shore-based test pilot and may return to the fleet when her present tour is over.

But others in the small circle are either in shore-based assignments or they've left the service for a combination of professional and personal reasons.

'A threat' to male peers

After Hultgreen's death, Lohrenz, as the remaining female F-14 pilot on the Lincoln, got much of the heat and pressure from male aviators. The stress affected her performance, say Heid and others, and she was grounded in 1995. The Navy returned her to non-carrier flying status in 1997.

Lohrenz filed a lawsuit against the Navy alleging sexual discrimination and also sued Donnelly and the San Diego Union-Tribune for libel.

Last month, the Navy and Lohrenz reached a settlement in which the Navy agreed to pay the flier $150,000 but denied any wrongdoing. Lohrenz will leave active duty on Feb. 28.

The suit against the Union-Tribune was dismissed about a year ago.

Lt. Missy Cummings, a U.S. Naval Academy graduate who went into F/A-18 (fighter attack) training, is suing the author and publisher of "Bogeys and Bandits: The Making of a Fighter Pilot" for defamation and disclosure of private facts. She says she is leaving the Navy in March.

"Before the combat exclusion law was lifted, the guys seemed to accept us," Carel says. "But after it was lifted, we became a threat."

For some men, the anger and resentment toward female aviators may have been payback time for all the damage done to their careers by Tailhook.

For women like Shults, what happened was "a little slice of hell we've each gone through at one time or another."

As Carel recalls, "The guys (on the Lincoln) never said anything to us the day Kara crashed - no expressions of sorrow. They knew we were good friends, but only one came up and said he was sorry."

Flood of hostility

The crash was a turning point, Heid says.

"Before Kara died, it was exciting, wonderful. She always made us laugh. After Kara died, it kind of opened the floodgates to a hostile environment. Everything went downhill from there." Again, the Navy declined to comment beyond the inspector general's report.

Heid is taking over as active-duty commanding officer of a Naval Reserve unit in North Carolina. "I've had a very successful career, but I'm choosing not to go back to flying. I'm tired of living life under a microscope," she says.

It wasn't supposed to be that way.

In 1994, Hultgreen symbolized a heady sense of arrival for female aviators. With it came optimism that, once the guys saw they could do the job, they would be fair and welcome them warmly into combat aircraft squadrons. Their numbers would steadily row.

"I think it (the presence of female combat pilots) will be real commonplace in a couple of years," Hultgreen predicted. "I don't think it's going to be an issue at all."

She was wrong about that.

In comments for a San Antonio Express-News story about Hultgreen in June 1993, a Navy spokeswoman projected that there would be 40 to 45 female pilots, radio intercept officers and other flight officers in tactical squadrons by 1995, compared with none in 1993. Today, only 29 of the Navy's 110 female pilots are in fighters.

But optimism, "a happy spirit," along with a passion for flying were what Kara was all about, Shults says.

That plus daring, tenacity and incredible drive.

'She never gave up'

Spears recalls those traits showed up early and set her apart from her sisters.

"She lacked the cut-off valve that is inborn in some people, and that was the part about Kara that I admired most about her," Spears says. "She never gave up, but she had to learn how to control her drive. Anything that appealed to her, she just went after it - riding a motorcycle, jumping out of an airplane, driving race cars. She'd explore these things with the idea that anything was possible."

At the same time, Spears remembers her daughter was loving and sensitive with family and friends from her earliest years.

Born October 5, 1965, in Greenwich, Connecticut, to Spears and Tor Hultgreen, she was a toddler when her family moved to the Chicago area. In 1973, Tor's job in the wood industry took the family to Toronto and a beautiful home surrounded by cedar trees. Spears worked for the company's law department, so the three girls were cared for by a string of live-in help.

Kirsten and Dagny diligently tried to elude their annoying kid sister, but with

single-mindedness she persisted. Spears describes in the book two portents of glass-ceiling encounters in the future aviator's life. Once she refused to leave Dagny's bathroom, hanging on the glass shower door until it broke. Another time she ran through a glass door when her sisters refused to let her in he room.

Picking up pieces of glass, her amazed father could only say, "That's incredible, not a scratch on her."

Next to glass doors, the combat- fighter exclusion law would not be daunting.

The couple separated in 1976, and in 1981, Spears and Kara moved back to the attorney's hometown, San Antonio. Kirsten stayed with her father in Canada to finish high school, then joined her mother. Dagny was already at UT/Austin and Kara entered Alamo Heights High School as a junior.

It was culture shock for her youngest, Spears says - an athletic, assertive, adventuresome Canadian girl transplanted to the land of "big hair, red lips and cheerleading."

But she blossomed here, excelling academically and lettering in basketball and tennis. Aerospace engineering

When Hultgreen didn't make a numerical cut-off for female appointees to the U.S. Naval Academy - a pathway to naval aviation and the astronaut program, she hoped - she majored in aerospace engineering at UT/Austin instead. After graduating in 1987,
she entered Aviation Officer Candidate School.

Hultgreen's career took off. But by February 1991, when she flew a cross-country hop to San Antonio with RIO Amy Boyer, she had slammed into a formidable barrier. She was flying an EA-6A - an electronic-modified A-6, no slouch of an airplane. But she kept submitting transition papers to move into her dream plane - the F-18 - with no luck.

"It just never occurred to me that being female was a birth defect," she said with a grin and undisguised sarcasm during an interview at Kelly AFB.

If she didn't transition soon into "something pointy with an afterburner," as she put it, she'd be too senior to fly carrier jets. Unless the combat exclusion law was lifted, she might have to leave the Navy.

Hultgreen and other female aviators lobbied members of Congress to repeal the law. That happened in 1991, but the Navy didn't implement it until 1993.

She didn't get F-18s.

But "I'm so excited. I'm going to fly F-14s," Hultgreen said in 1993, ecstatic at getting next-best.

Skill in tricky landing.

If there were any questions about her abilities as a pilot, they were quashed in October 1992, when the right gear on her EA-6A froze during a landing approach at Pensacola (Fla.) Naval Air Station. Emergency vehicles lined up on the field, but with RIO Ron Lotz aboard, Hultgreen skillfully executed a perfect landing to the applause of people on the ground.

And if there were any doubts about her ability to handle sexist colleagues, those were leveled at the infamous Tailhook convention in 1991. When a boozed-up aviator tried to grope her, Hultgreen slammed him up against a wall and watched him slowly slump to the floor.

"Kara could give as good as she got," says retired Cmdr. Tom Sobieck, commanding officer of VF-124, her training squadron at Miramar. "I saw her bench press 230 pounds. She could kick the hell out of guys."

That fit her call sign, "Hulk." She had many, but that one stuck the longest, friends say. Spears' book title refers to the "Revlon" call sign pinned on her after she showed up at the squadron one day in full Big-Hair Texas Woman makeup for a TV interview. She rarely wore makeup because, "Hey, I'm a fighter pilot."

In fact, Hultgreen was a lot like the guys in this closed fraternity.

Male fighter pilots were smart, aggressive, cocky and intensely focused. So was she.

Anyone who could look down from the black night sky at a postage stamp-size landing deck moving across the dark sea and land a $40 million, 27-ton jet with a 65-foot wingspan on a 100-foot-wide space had every right to swagger.

The chance to "strap on the mighty Tomcat" was simply thrilling, she said in mock-macho tones.

Both legend and truth

She loved to tease reporters, who, in the months before her death, increasingly sought her out. "Do you want the legend or the truth?" she'd ask.

In many ways, the two had merged in Hultgreen.

As for her skills in the cockpit, Sobieck describes Hultgreen as a superb pilot who purely loved flying.

"She'd go out and fly the s--- out of that airplane (F-14). And when she made some mistakes, she'd go around and ask experienced guys, 'What did I do wrong?' She was intense about learning to fly that airplane."

Publicly, Hultgreen always downplayed any suggestion of male animosity in the squadron. But Spears says her daughter talked to her about instructors who were so fiercely opposed to female fighter pilots they wouldn't teach them.

Women 'degrading'

Shults recounts her experience with a surly F-18 instructor who flatly said he wouldn't score her check ride because it was degrading to him and the ground crew to have a women sitting up there in the cockpit.

"I told him Congress has stated that I am going to be here. If you don't like that, vote. But when you're wearing a uniform, your orders are to give me a check ride." She complained and got a check ride with another instructor.

As Heid describes the wall of resistance, "The guys just saw us as these militant feminist bitches who were taking away men's jobs."

**Hultgreen was candid about initially failing to qualify in night landings at the USS Constellation in the spring of 1994. Three out of her five classmates were disqualified the first time around. She got more land-based instruction at Miramar and tried again,
successfully. It was an option open to men as well, but claims of special treatment were raised.**

The Navy Inspector General report concluded that Hultgreen and other female aviators did not get preferential treatment or lowered qualification standards in training. Moreover, it said the women didn't get the needed mentoring that "nuggets" - new aviators on the carrier - traditionally receive.

Conflict can't stop?

Report or no, Linda Bird Francke, author of "Ground Zero," an examination of gender wars in the military, says, "The resistance to women won't go away because it can't."

Citing anthropologist Margaret Mead, Francke argues that men's sureness of their masculinity is tied up in their right or ability to do something that women can't or aren't allowed to do. If women can fly F-18s and F-14s into combat, where does that leave men?

"Women have been integrated into combat aircraft, but they haven't been assimilated," she says.

Spears agrees, "No amount of facts can change the cultural bias against women doing this."

For her, telling Kara's story has been a painful journey, a way to work through the grief but also to ensure her daughter's legacy.

"For the same reason, I donated all her stuff - her wings, her flight jacket, her helmet, her uniforms - to the Smithsonian. I wanted her to have a place. I didn't want her to be lost."

In that phone interview right before her death, Hultgreen was more focused and dedicated than ever. "(Now) my job is to get in the books and study, and then be very safe and predictable on the boat so nobody is (saying), 'Oh my God. It's Hultgreen coming again. We think she's going to crash' ... I want to blend in."

Francke visited the young aviator's grave at Arlington National Cemetery - one of the most frequently visited servicewomen's graves there. "It's so wonderful and very touching because she has one simple gravestone, no different from the people she lies alongside of in that long march of gravestones."

If in life Kara Hultgreen was unique, streaking across the sky like a blazing rocket, in death she got her wish: "To blend in."

Gravesite photo courtesy of Ron Williams

Photo By M. R. Patterson, 27 June 2003

KS Hultgreen Gravesite PHOTO

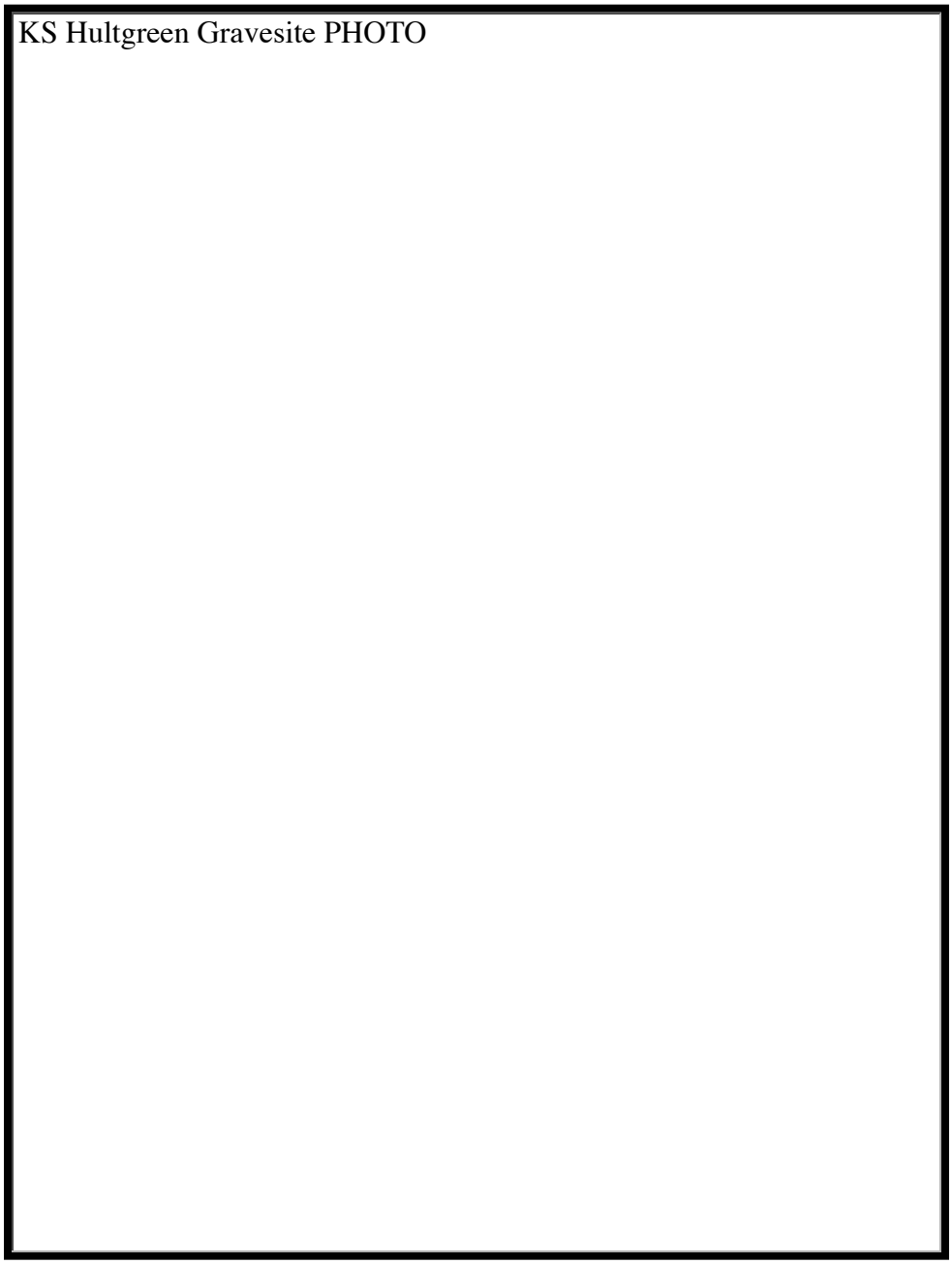

Photo Courtesy of Russell C. Jacobs, March 2006

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