



F-35 Lightning II Program

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Meet Air Force Reserve's First Female F-35 Pilot

By 419th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

HILL AIR FORCE BASE, Utah -- Before she climbed into the world's most advanced fighter jet to become the Air Force Reserve's first female F-35 pilot, Col. Gina "Torch" Sabric had already flown 10 airframes and racked up 22 years of flying experience.

"My family can tell you I've wanted to be a fighter pilot forever," said Sabric, the first female commander of the 419th Fighter Wing at Hill Air Force Base, Utah. "I've always been fascinated with air and space."

Service is in her DNA. Growing up in Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, her mother was a nurse and her father a police officer, and she had several uncles who served in the Air Force. But it was a trip to a local airshow that turned her aviation dream into a tangible goal.



Col. Gina "Torch" Sabric, commander of the 419th Fighter Wing at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, and the Air Force Reserve's first female F-35 pilot.

"My dad was a private pilot, so he took me to an airshow when I was a little girl, and I remember looking up at those airplanes and being amazed," Sabric said. "Ever since then, I knew I was going to be a pilot."

Twice in her teens she went to U.S. Space Camp in Huntsville, Alabama. A few years later, she had followed in her dad's footsteps, earning a private pilot's license while studying aerospace engineering at Penn State. By 1995, Sabric was ready to join the Air Force and had no doubts she'd be wearing a flight suit.

"If you really want something, you work your hardest to get it."

Sabric proved herself as the top graduate from navigator training, launching her career first as an F-15E Strike Eagle weapons system officer and later as a distinguished graduate from pilot training into the F-16 Fighting Falcon. Add to that the MQ-9 Reaper, a remotely piloted aircraft, and the T-38 Talon, which she flew as "red air," or simulated enemy against F-22 Raptors. Most recently, she flew special operations missions in the C-146A Wolfhound out of Duke Field, Florida.

"I don't have the typical flying career," Sabric said of the multiple airframes she's flown. "I've had the opportunity to bounce around with different aircraft and mission sets. I think it's made me a better pilot because I've had the opportunity to experience so much outside the fighter world."

Her career is different in other ways, too. Sabric said she's grown accustomed to answering questions about being a woman in the fighter world – one that, until 1993 when Jeannie Leavitt became the Air Force's first female fighter pilot, was dominated by men.

"In the nineties, women were just getting into fighters," Sabric said. "Back then, you were either the only girl in pilot training, or just one of two. But once you prove yourself in the cockpit, gender doesn't matter anymore. A fighter pilot is a fighter pilot and everyone has to do the same job."

Sabric said a lot has changed in the past 20 years. She doesn't feel like "the token girl" in the squadron. She has more than 2,500 flying hours, including time in combat, and has deployed numerous times in support of Operations Allied Force, Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom, and Noble Eagle.

"It's great to know that today there are little girls, like me, who look up and see fighter jets and say, 'I can do that.'"

Sabric said she loves talking to school groups and touting some of the ways both men and women can serve in the Air Force Reserve.

"When you take off the helmet and the long hair comes out, that's a good thing for girls to see," Sabric said. "I remember when I was a lieutenant, we brought a group of Girl Scouts to the F-15E simulator. That was really eye-opening to me because it was a moment when I realized how far we've come. We were able to show these girls what opportunities were open to them that weren't just a few years earlier."

Still, there's only a small number of women fighter pilots in the Air Force, and only three others – all active duty – in the F-35 community.

Sabric said the birth of her son, Tyler, in 2011 was the deciding factor in leaving active duty for the Air Force Reserve, as it offered more flexibility in how and where she served.

"The Reserve provides an opportunity to serve either part time or full time when it works for you and your family," she said. "It's unique because everyone is here by choice. About two-thirds of our

Airmen serve part time, and they do a phenomenal job of balancing work – both military and civilian – and family, because they want to serve in some capacity.”

Earlier this year, the Reserve brought Sabric, a single mom, to Hill AFB in Northern Utah, where less than three years earlier the 419th FW and its active duty counterpart, the 388th FW, received the Air Force’s first operational F-35A Lightning II. Since then, the two wings have flown the F-35 in a “Total Force” partnership, launching more than 9,000 sorties and logging nearly 15,000 hours in the jet.

“When I was told I got this job, a huge smile came across my face and I thought, ‘Wow, I just got the golden ticket,’” Sabric said. “It’s an amazing opportunity to be a fighter pilot and fly the latest fifth-generation aircraft at an operational wing. It doesn’t get any better.”

Sabric became fully qualified in the F-35 in August, having finished two months of training at Eglin AFB, Florida, and additional flying hours at Hill.

“I’m still new in the airplane,” Sabric said. “Every sortie you learn something new, so as I continue to fly I’ll continue to learn. What the F-35 brings to the fight now, it’s light-years beyond fourth-gen aircraft.”

Aside from the stealth technology that keeps the F-35 virtually invisible to radar, Sabric said the most impressive aspect of the jet is its “sensor fusion” – the vast wealth of information it collects and sends that can be shared with other aircraft, giving pilots a bigger picture of the battlespace.

“Learning the F-35 is a challenge, and it’s a lot of new information to process and interpret,” Sabric said. But her diverse flying experience prepared her to make yet another switch. “Luckily, it’s still stick and rudder, and flying is flying.”

Sabric looks forward to helping the F-35 reach full operational capability at Hill. By 2019, the base will be home to 78 jets and four fighter squadrons capable of worldwide deployment. It’s a responsibility and privilege she couldn’t have imagined as a girl growing up in Tobyhanna.

“Sitting in this seat for the 419th, surrounded by these beautiful mountains, flying the premier fighter of the Air Force – I could not be happier to be where I am right now.”