

PROFILE

KERRY KUYKENDALL SMITH '90

Taking to the Skies

By Sarah Zobel



For Kerry Kuykendall Smith '90, a day at work means taking a Boeing 737 for a spin. Smith, a production test pilot at the company's Renton, Washington, factory, flies the jets before their exteriors have even been painted. Later, when a plane is delivered to an airline, she will fly with the company pilots and crew to make sure they're completely satisfied. But initially, Smith's task is to really push each airplane, ensuring that everything works, and seeing what happens in worst-case scenarios: She tests the flight controls and backup systems, radios, navigation equipment and the radars, checking for any flaw before shutting down the engines one at a time and relighting them. With so much engineering and math involved, the job nurtures Smith's analytical side.

"That's what being a test pilot is — it's not really being gutsy. I mean, you can't be scared, but in the end, it's about fully understanding how the aircraft is supposed to function, and then executing the best plan to safely and efficiently test that functionality," says Smith.

Though the job may sound daunting to those on the ground, Smith says she's just happy to be flying brand-new planes.

"In the Navy, I flew F-14s — those are old planes and you'd have something break all the time. That's why they like to have military pilots as test pilots: They have a lot

of experience with things not going right, and they know how to go through emergency procedures and make judgment calls on what to do," Smith says.

It's a career she was drawn to as early as eighth grade, when her science teacher, a finalist for NASA's Teacher in Space Project, showed *The Right Stuff* in class. As an upper at Exeter, Smith wrote to then-President George H.W. Bush to ask why women weren't allowed to fly fighter planes. She received a response stating that the administration felt it was the nation's desire that women stay out of combat.

"I thought it was ironic that they got so many requests, they had to create a form letter," Smith says. Undeterred, she enrolled in the U.S. Naval Academy, confident she would eventually have her turn at the controls. She was right: In the autumn of Smith's senior year, the National Defense Authorization Act for 1994 allowed women in combat.

"Half my career is timing," says Smith. Indeed, after three years flying the F-14, with deployments to the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, she was accepted into the U.S. Naval Test Pilot School. Admission is competitive, but Smith says administrators were specifically looking for F-14 pilots the year she applied. Only once was her timing off: Though she also earned a master's degree in Astronautical Engineering at the Naval Postgraduate School and long hoped to serve as a pilot astronaut on the space shuttle, whenever that opportunity arose, she was either deployed overseas or the victim of budget cuts.

NASA is now looking for younger pilots for Mars missions, and although Smith would still jump at the chance to travel to space, she acknowledges there is plenty to keep her busy. Along with testing 737s, she is helping Boeing with development projects, looking ahead to the near-term future of aviation. She's also the mother of two young sons who don't bat an eye at her day job.

Smith is aware that some of her female compatriots have had gender-related issues, but feels fortunate that she has not, beyond the self-awareness that comes of being the only woman in squadron meetings. She's grateful to have been part of an elite group, the 1,800 or so U.S. Naval aviators who are active at any given time, and that her work challenges and exhilarates her — mentally, physically and emotionally — in an office that is unmatched by any on Earth. ■