

'I Never Intended to be the First'

The Navy's first female African American tactical fighter pilot earned her rating last year and hopes to pave the way for others

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Navy Lt. j.g. Madeline Swegle made history in July at the Naval Air Station in Kingsville, Texas, when she became the Navy's first known African American female tactical fighter pilot.

"I'm excited to have this opportunity to work harder and fly high performance jet aircraft in the fleet," Swegle said in a Navy statement. "It would've been nice to see someone who looked like me in this role. I never intended to be the first. I hope it's encouraging to other people."

Swegle completed the Navy's Tactical Air (Strike) training program in the T-45C Goshawk. Her training puts her on the path to fly fighter planes such as the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet, EA-18G Growler or F-35C Joint Strike Fighter.

The Virginia native said that while she was growing up, her parents would take her to see the Blue Angels perform — visits that would inspire her.

"My parents raised me, and they told me that I can be whatever I wanted to be," Swegle said. "We would go see the Blue Angels when they were in town. They were just so cool. I loved them. I love fast planes."

Swegle said her three years of training were "daunting," but also thrilling.

"It was crazy to be in such a higher performance aircraft," Swegle said. "I was really excited on the takeoff, like feeling the exhilaration and getting thrown back in the seat a little bit."

In a video released prior to Swegle's graduation ceremony, Matthew Maher, commanding officer of training, commended the Naval Academy graduate.

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“To show up here at this level, you need to be a top performer, and then you have to continue to perform while you’re here” he said. “These are the best pilots in the world that are trained here, the very best. She, just like all of her fellow Wingees, are at that standard of excellence, and they’re going to go out and make all of us very proud.”

Trailblazing for Women

As an African American female, Swegle is paving the way for others to follow. Her success is surely welcome as the Navy reports that women make up a small percentage of aviators.

The Pensacola News Journal reported that as of 2018, the Navy had 765 female pilots, which is less than 7 percent of all pilots.

Military.com found in 2018 that Black pilots are lacking in the service. The Navy cited that just 1.9 percent of all pilots assigned to the EA-18 Growler, E-2 Hawkeye, C-2 Greyhound and F/A-18 Hornet were Black.

Swegle said that she hopes other women and minority women will be encouraged to follow, knowing they have the tools to succeed just as she did. Swegle added that it provides a great sense of accomplishment.

“I am really honored that I get to wear the wings and get to fly planes and call myself a pilot,” she said.

This article is part of the VFW's initiative to celebrate African-American service members and veterans in honor of Black History Month. It is featured in the February 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.