

Woman flies high as new Snowbirds leader

Squadron's 1st-ever female pilot makes history as 1st-ever female boss

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The Canadian Press



Lt.-Col.

Maryse Carmichael takes command of the Snowbirds on Thursday. She is the first woman to ever run the popular aerobatic team in its 40-year history. (Troy Fleece/Canadian Press)

The first female boss of the renowned Snowbirds aerobatic team walks toward her CT-114 Tutor jet and laughingly glances at the rudder to make sure it hasn't been painted pink.

There have been rumours it might happen, jokes Lt.-Col. Maryse Carmichael.

But the rudder isn't pink. The only thing that distinguishes this jet from a dozen or so others lined up on the tarmac are the black letters on the tail, "CO," for commanding officer.

Carmichael will break a sky-high glass ceiling Thursday by officially taking command of the Snowbirds, becoming the first woman to lead the squadron in its 40-year history.

"It took a little bit of time for women to become pilots [because] it's one of the non-traditional roles," Carmichael said in an interview at the base in Moose Jaw, Sask.

"Then to gain the experience required to be in command of a squadron takes ... many years."

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Carmichael is modest when talking about the groundbreaking role. She notes that while it's a first for the Snowbirds, women have already led other squadrons in the Canadian Forces.

"I don't want to downplay it, it is a fact," she said of being the first. "But really, for me this posting is about the squadron.

"I was on the team a few years ago and I was the first woman to fly with the Snowbirds and that was really different. But now this posting is really about commanding this squadron and commanding the men and women that really represent the Canadian Forces across Canada."

Flying for more than 2 decades

The native of Quebec City, who is in her late 30s, has spent a long time with the military.

She started out as an air cadet at the age of 13 and joined the military full time six years later. She's been a flying instructor, has flown with 434 Combat Support Squadron in Greenwood, N.S., and transported VIPs in Ottawa.

She was posted to 3 Wing Bagotville in Quebec in 2003 as the deputy wing operations officer and moved to 8 Wing Trenton in eastern Ontario in 2007 to fly the CC-130 Hercules.

In 2000, between her time in Ottawa and Bagotville, Carmichael was selected to fly Snowbird 3. She later flew Snowbird 2 and was the team's executive officer.

'When you're flying and you have a helmet on your head, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or woman.'

—*Lt.-Col. Maryse Carmichael*

Things are different now.

"All those years ago, it used to be my focus was about flying the airplane and meeting all the Canadians and Americans that we meet on the road," she explained.

"This time around it is ... really about the entire squadron, about leading the men and women of 431 Squadron to accomplish our mission every day. So it has a broader focus this time."

To date, Carmichael remains the only woman to ever pilot a Snowbirds plane.

But Carmichael, who is married to a fighter pilot and has two young daughters, believes that will change one day. She said there's a lot of pride in being a member of the squadron and gender is irrelevant.

"When you're flying and you have a helmet on your head, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or woman. As long as you can stay in formation, the public from the ground doesn't see it so that's the way I see it, too.

"I just do what I love to do and I love flying and I'm fortunate enough that it has worked out. But if I can influence not only young girls but boys to follow their passion, then that's great."

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[LauraHalliday](#) wrote: Posted 2010/05/03 at 7:20 PM ET "Can she parallel park it though?"

Ask any student pilot: the aeronautical equivalent of parallel parking is flying circuits.

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[outdoors](#) wrote: Posted 2010/05/03 at 6:48 PM ET what-ever--give me all the thumbs down u like

i don't even find this trype as news anymore-when a woman in Canada gets a promotion or a position of power-it seems mute to me

If there was not so many gender preference opportunities for women, how can anyone respect anything women have done or accomplished when the door was left wide open with preferential treatment?

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[CallmeDave](#) wrote: Posted 2010/05/03

at 6:30 PM ET Congratulations! I am sure the honor is well deserved.

I personally do not care whether a man or a woman is leading the Snowbirds, as long as the individual is capable.

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[Parousia](#) wrote: Posted 2010/05/03

at 4:00 PM ET She doesn't have to downplay her gender. That seems to be a Canada thing. There's lots of females flying combat aircraft in the USA, I noticed. They don't look like men, either.

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[chipiy1](#) wrote: Posted 2010/05/03

at 3:42 PM ET YEH!

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