Jet pilot sets her sights on new horizons

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CARENCRO — Lt. Michelle Guidry might not make it to her 10-year reunion when the class of '83 gets together at Carencro High this month.

She's got a job in California flying S-3 anti-submarine jet aircraft for the U.S. Navy.

Not bad for a former runner-up to Louisiana's Junior Miss, who dreamed of a Navy flying career back then, but didn't have the money for college and couldn't get appointed to Annapolis.

"Four times we submitted all the paperwork and answered all their objections, and every time my application came back denied for a different reason," Guidry says, recalling the ordeal.

So she entered Auburn University in Alabama because of their Navy ROTC program and eventually qualified for a full scholarship.

"Engineering was an up-and-coming field at the time and since I like aircraft design, I got my degree in aerospace engineering," she says, explaining, "it gets into orbital mechanics in a space environment."

Wanting to fly came naturally to Guidry whose father, Marcel Guidry, flew helicopters for the Army until his military retirement in 1978. Now he flies locally for Petroleum Helicopters, Inc.

Guidry says, "Growing up we had a Bell ranger helicopter in the backyard and a Cessna at the airport."

Deciding she wanted to fly jets, though, proved easier than getting the Navy to teach her how.

"After college I entered the Navy four years and six months active duty," Guidry says. "I knew I didn't want to be on a ship, and immediately applied for pilot training."

Just as fast, the Navy shot back a medical rejection.

"Once when I was a little girl I sat on an ant pile and had an allergic reaction to the stings," she revealed. "That isolated incident was enough to disqualify me from flight school."

For the next year the only thing she flew was a desk in Washington, D.C. as a test engineer on the Navy's first satellite program.

An OK job for some, perhaps, but too slow for Guidry who admits (jokingly) her taste runs more to "fast cars, fast boats and fast men."

Fate stepped in when, by chance on a D.C. bus, she sat next to the officer in charge of medical restrictions for the Navy.

After hearing her story, he figures he must have done some paperwork magic, because soon after the restriction was lifted she was cleared for flight training.

That was two years ago. This March, she completed all three phases of the Navy's training program. The honor of pinning her wings to her uniform went to her father.

"My boyfriend also gave me an old set of his wings I wear for work, and I got one from the Navy," she says, "but the ones my Dad gave me are 14 karat gold."

Beaming, she recalls, "It was like my wedding day. My biggest moment yet."

Bigger than landing a million-dollar T-2 Buckeye jet aircraft on the USS Forrestal in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico?

"By the time I did that," says Guidry, "I had done it over and over again in practice, plus 60 or 70 times the week before going to the carrier. At the moment I did it I thought, 'Oh God!', but really it felt just like one more practice."

Fear, she claims, doesn't come into it because if you get afraid, you don't think.

According to Guidry, "It's more like a pump of adrenaline or a rise in blood pressure, then the learned behavior kicks in."

Michelle Guidry is one of the few female pilots in the U.S. Navy.

Photo by Kim Andrus

Michelle Guidry uses a jet model to make a point.

She admits, though, that a recent aborted night landing on a rain slick Mississippi runway had her saying Hail Marys while following procedure. That night another jet practicing "touch and go" landings ahead of her came to a full stop on the runway instead of taking off again, she says.

By the time the tower briefed her on the situation, it was almost too late to avoid a collision. Guidry remembers "pulling the stick back hard into my gut and praying for speed and altitude." Later, when the runway cleared, she landed safely.

To date, Guidry has logged over 1,000 hours flying jets.

"To achieve such success and reach this point in her career, she has had to face enormous odds. Women comprise only 11 percent of the Navy's total personnel. Fewer still even dream of making it to flying status in a branch of the service whose corps of 'top gun' pilots is regarded as the flying elite."

Making it, Guidry will tell you, has not been without sacrifice. Among the things she's had to face are adapting to military life and the alienation of being a minority within it.

"You try to be the best at your job and that takes a while to establish (with male peers)," she explains, "but even then it's not complete, cause you're still different."

"Not only that, there are few other females to relate to in general, and you can't relate to civilians at all," she points out.

On a personal note, she says she's turned down two marriage proposals from men she would have married, but they either couldn't wait or didn't understand her flying ambitions.

She also notes that Navy pay at $3,000 plus a month is good, but less than she'd make as a civilian aerospace engineer. What helps is being goal oriented, says Guidry, adding, "When I hit a brick wall, I cry, then I ask myself, How do I get around it?"

"I stay 'up' with the support of my family and because I love what I'm doing," she confides.

Guidry's parents are divorced. Her mother, Marilyn Brewer Guidry, originally from Carencro, lives in Sacramento, Calif. Says Guidry, "I was lucky because my parents raised me to believe I can do and be what I want to be."

Now that she's got her pilot's wings, she owes the Navy more than ever. The 27-year-old says she plans to stay in the military and hopes to be nominated by them as a mission specialist to NASA.

Her goal is simple. She wants to pilot the space shuttle. She figures the only things that stand in her way are time, experience and maybe, test pilot school.