

One-on-One

First Black Female Combat Pilot in U.S. Department of Defense History

By Lango Deen
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Captain Vernice G. Armour, 32, is the first Black female pilot in the Marine Corps, and the first Black female combat pilot in United States Department of Defense history.

USBE: You have to be one of America's Famous Firsts.

Capt. V. Armour: I don't think I knew I was going to do any of it when I was starting out. Except for being a police officer. I wanted to be a cop, and ride a horse down town since I was about 3 years old. If you ever been to Chicago, they have mounted patrol, that really had an effect on me growing up. At age 6, I got my first horse, and I've had horses ever since.

USBE: Did you ever think of riding horses as a career?

Armour: I started on the equestrian team at my university. But being the college student without any money - you had to take lessons, I ended up getting off the team.

USBE: You graduated as a police officer in December 1996. Two years later, you gained admission to Officer Candidate School on an aviation contract. Why?

Armour: Being a police officer was my primary goal, and that is what I focused on. I actually took a year off from college to go to police academy for 6 months, and another 6 months to finish probation. After a year of working full time, I went back to school and finished up my degree. I was enjoying being a police officer immensely, but, at a certain point, I decided I could always be a cop, but I wouldn't always have the opportunity to be a leader of Marines and a Naval Aviator.

USBE: How did you get into the Marine Corps?

Armour: There are different ways you can be accessed into the Corps. Through ROTC, the Naval Academy, Platoon Leaders Course summer sessions, or the 10-week Officer Candidate Course. Once that is complete, you are commissioned as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps. Then there is six months of training on how to be an infantryman, or rifleman, because that is the Corps' motto: 'Every Marine a rifleman.'

You learn to shoot a rifle, the pistol; go through squad tactics, infantry training –defense, offense, and how to call in air strikes. You get full education on what it is to be a Marine. After that, you are ready to go off into your specialty school. I wanted to be a pilot, so I had to go to flight school.

USBE: The physical exam couldn't have been much of challenge for you because you had a degree in physical education with an emphasis in exercise science, plus you rode horses.

Armour: That kind of physical checks your measurements: elbow to your wrist, elbow to your shoulder, knee to hip, to make sure you can actually fit in the cockpit of the aircraft. They test your eyesight, and your heart. They run your blood. I actually found out I was anemic, and I had to get a waiver for that. But once I made it through those hurdles, I was given a guaranteed flight contract. That meant when I came in the Marine Corps, I was guaranteed a pilot slot to go to flight school.

USBE: What was flight training like?

Armour: Pensacola is awesome -the sand, the beach, and the sun. It's a beautiful base, and you're really immersed in the history of aviation in the Marine Corps, and in the Navy. That's when you first get to bond with all the men and women you will be going to flight school with. I went to Corpus Christi for a little bit of the primary training, and then ended up in Pensacola, at Whiting Field, where I graduated and earned my "Wings of Gold"

USBE: Pensacola is a legendary base.

Armour: It's the home of the Blue Angels, so you see the jets flying. It's also, if you will, the birthplace of each Naval aviator. For the most part, 98-99 percent of aviators start out at Pensacola. So it's pretty much the birthplace of your aviation career.

USBE: You topped a class of 12 when you earned your wings in July 2001.

Armour: I actually wanted to fly jets, when I first started out, but I wasn't the top ranked person out of primary training who wanted jets. So, I made sure to study as hard as I could because there was only one Cobra [day/night marginal weather Marine Corps attack helicopter that provides enroute escort for assault helicopters and their embarked forces] slot, I wanted to make sure I had it.



USBE: What happened after you got wings?

Armour: I went to a training squadron, and I was there from July 2001 to March 2002. On March 1st, I checked into my squadron. There, you learn the tactics of how to 'fight' the aircraft. In the training squadron, you learn how to fly it. You need to know how to fight it when you go to war, go to battle; you learn to target, and how to come back home safely.

I guess an example would be a NASCAR driver. I can get out there and drive a car, but do I know the techniques and strategies to win the Indy 500? No, that's why the drivers train, to know the best way around the track, the best way to go around the side, when to put on the brakes, when to push on the gas pedal. It's technique; it's a strategy just like different levels of checkers, softball, or baseball.

USBE: Then you were deployed to Iraq in March 2003.

Armour: There are many people who serve in the military for twenty years and never go to war, although you train on a daily basis on what you do when you go to war. I just happened to be in the service at a period of time when we did go. My squadron deployed to Iraq and I used the training I had here in the states. Many people ask me 'what do you do every day?' Well, when you are not in Iraq, you go flying and learn how to execute different tactics and strategies in the aircraft; and when you are not flying you are doing your ground job which could be admin officer, supply officer, computer officer, or any of the jobs dealing with the aircraft.

USBE: You completed 2 tours of duty, what was it like?

Armour: It's a very hostile environment. It gets very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. When I describe the heat to people, I tell them to imagine their head in an oven, with the heat turned all the way, a blow dryer in their face, and sand thrown in it. That's what it was like when sandstorms roll in. The flying was absolutely awesome. I actually had an opportunity to use what I had learned in training in the real world, in defense of my country.



USBE: Were you ever afraid?

Armour: I think one of the scariest times was when we were hit and our weapons systems went down. We didn't know what was wrong. But when we got back on the ground we saw that our weapons systems had actually been struck.

USBE: Were you treated differently because you were woman?

Armour: Once you get into the helicopter as a pilot, you are all the same, protecting each other. But, outside of the aircraft, you never know what the reasons are that you might be having a tough time. It could be a personality conflict. Somebody else might be having a bad day, and they are taking it out on you. I never let myself dwell on why something seems hard or challenging, or why I perceive someone doesn't like me. All I thought about was what I could to overcome whatever the obstacle was.

USBE: Your middle name is 'Junk,' where does that come from?

Armour: You know the slang 'Junk in the trunk?' That's my call sign. You have no input on what it is, except if you don't like it, it's sure to stick. I thought it was cool. We actually have a formal setting where new lieutenants get their call sign. It's a traditional thing.

USBE: Since you came back, you have worked in the manpower & equal opportunity division.

Armour: I'm involved with diversity initiatives that look at what the Marine Corps is doing to improve diversity in the Corps in reference to women and minorities.

USBE: Recently, I read the book *Into the Tiger's Jaw America's First Black Marine Aviator*. Lt. Gen. Frank Petersen writes about some challenging moments as a special assistant for Minority Affairs.

Armour: I have a signed copy, which I am still reading, so don't tell me what's in the book. Diversity is an evolutionary process in the Marine Corps. I think the exposure needs to be out there, especially in the minority communities. So, if your family doesn't own a plane, or you don't have an uncle who does, how do you get the exposure to what it takes to be a pilot? I think that's where the services and professional organizations can take on the task. Several of them are doing it like the associations that are involved with the International Black Aerospace Council (IBAC). Get the role models out there in their flight suits; they need to see us to know people just like them are doing this.

USBE: You have just come back from the IBAC convention in Arizona, how was it?

Armour: It was awesome, awesome. I had the opportunity to meet original Tuskegee Airmen. They blazed the trail for ME!

USBE: I was listening to Tavis Smiley this past Sunday. One of his guests, NASA mission specialist Stephanie Wilson, talked about the IBAC event in Arizona.

Armour: I picked her up from the airport, and I got to hang out with her quite a bit. I also took her to the airport when she left. She is very personable, very down to earth. She came to the Bessie Coleman "Fly sister, Fly" Empowerment breakfast where twelve African American women were honored for being innovators and trailblazers in the field of aviation and aerospace. Stephanie shared a couple of words. It was definitely an honor and privilege to have her come out.

USBE: It's been a real privilege talking to you, too, Capt. Armour. We look forward to seeing you at the National Women of Color Technology Awards conference.

Armour: Thank you.

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