

Think Big, Fly High

Captain Patricia Yapp Syau Yin, TUDM

What can accountants learn from a jet fighter pilot, and a female one at that? First her story, and then her sheer grit and gumption to overcome several odds to pursue and realise her dream in an unlikely career choice. Captain Patricia Yapp Syau Yin's challenging journey in this pursuit offers hope, inspiration and maybe lessons in perseverance and determination not only for women but also men.



Her personal maxim also underpinning her goal: “Think Big, Fly High” was the topic of her presentation as a special guest speaker at the recent MIA’s Regional Conference held in Kota Kinabalu in August 2008.

“In order to achieve greater heights, think big. Don’t be afraid to try. And my advice to women: Don’t give up.” She also paid tribute to men: “Thank you for allowing women to explore the opportunities in your world. And please continue to do so. And let’s play our part.”

Her appearance was a major coup for the local organisers in efforts to highlight and appropriately showcase Sabah in keeping with the theme of the MIA conference, which had a particular focus on Sabah this year. Currently, as Malaysia’s only active flying female fighter pilot in the Royal Malaysian Air Force she has crossed the threshold into an almost exclusively men’s world.

This small town lass from Sandakan, on Sabah’s east coast, firstly overcame strong parental objections and then the traditional gender barriers to enter an all-male preserve to become the trailblazer she is today.

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Indeed, this plucky lady hopes her achievements would also inspire other women to follow in her footsteps. "Many women are afraid to think of becoming a pilot, for fear of having to endure the gruelling physical training."

Her professional approach to her job, and indeed, acceptance by her male colleagues as well with hardly any gender bias are also eye-openers and inspirational. She also does not receive any special treatment from her male peers and colleagues especially when she is in uniform.

"No ladies first or that sort of thing." In fact her colleagues regard her as one of the boys. "If they gave me any preferential treatment I will feel bad if they do," she emphasised.

Even her call-sign "Foxy" in the squadron had nothing to do with any female attributes. It had more prosaic though serious origins. A problem encountered during an air exercise which compelled a descent due to some malfunctioning with her oxygen supply in a combat exercise and misresulted in her call-sign, and she has been known by that ever since.

She considers the theme of the conference, "None Will Be Left Behind" as appropriate and a good topic that describes the military "as we don't leave our men behind."

Captain Patricia, 32, swapped a safe and promising career in law, abandoning her law studies mid-way, for more exciting prospects in flying for the Air Force.

As a schoolgirl her interest and fascination about careers in uniform were well-known among her family members.

Equally known also was her conservative father's attitude and vocal objections to jobs that dealt with "bullets" for his children, let alone a military career for his only daughter.

Furthermore, "in Sandakan we are hardly exposed to military stuff, not a single jet flying around," she said, speaking of her sheltered upbringing in a small town. Inadvert-

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ently, her elder brother, Ignatius, became the catalyst in her choice of unlikely career. "He remains my role model." His acceptance as a MAS cadet pilot, and training in Scotland in 1992 stirred her imagination and interest in flying. She was in Form Four at the time.

When she expressed this interest to her father he responded, "You can't be a pilot" and the subject was closed, though temporarily

for her. After completing her SPM she was quickly despatched to Kuala Lumpur to do law. In her second semester of law studies an aunt from Sandakan, played the devil's advocate, and quietly sent her a newspaper advertisement for pilot training in the RMAF.

Keeping her intentions quiet she went to the Ministry of Defence, going by bus, (reflecting that she seldom took the bus to get around in KL), managed to locate

along with 52 successful applicants enrolled at the Air Force College in Alor Setar. Training involved an induction to turn cadets from civilians into the military culture. This was followed by a three-year course in military skills with courses on weaponry to basic survival. In the year 2000 she graduated with a diploma in Aeronautical Engineering from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in which she excelled and was selected to the Dean's List.

Next came the flying phase which required handling and piloting the aircraft with advanced survival training. She graduated with a basic wing in 2002, and after completing 180 hours of flying on light aircraft she chose to be a jet fighter pilot over the other more popular helicopter and transport aircrafts for women pilots. She progressed to bigger planes such as the jet Aeromacchi MB339A and was involved in operations for four years followed by two years in the MIG -29 Squadron as a wingman.

Now in her 11th year of service with

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the office for the application forms and submitted them.

When she was called for the interview in Ipoh she had no choice but to ask her father for approval. However, in her mother she found a staunch ally. With reasoning and far-sightedness her mother managed to convince her father of the prospects and potential and succeeded in convincing him. That was in 1997 and Captain Patricia has never looked back since.

She went through three stages of interview and underwent various tests, and

RMAF she wants to go on to fly bigger aircraft and is eyeing to fly the Sukhoi SU-30MKM, the Russian twin engine jet. Aside from flying bigger aircraft she wants to be the first Malaysian female fighter pilot for the aerobatic display in LIMA 2009.

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