AIR FORCE THUNDERBIRDS PRIORITIZE DIVERSITY IN COCKPIT AMID PUZZLING DECLINE IN APPLICANTS

News / Events / Festivals



The Air Force's vaunted Thunderbirds jet fighter aerobatics team is not diverse enough inside the cockpit.

Brig. Gen. Christopher M. Short, commander of the 57th Wing at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, said in an email last month that of 15 pilot applicants for three openings, 14 are white.

He asked fighter wing commanders to stir up more candidates who "don't necessarily look like each of you." He bemoaned the fact that, not only is there a lack of diversity, but the number of applicants to make the world-famous team has taken a puzzling drop in the past two years.

"I am asking for your help in finding the right pilots for next year's Thunderbirds team," is how Gen.

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Short begins his email.

“While we have several qualified candidates that many of you submitted, I am lacking the depth in talent we’ve seen in previous years and I am lacking in diversity of gender, ethnicity and [aircraft type] background,” Gen. Short wrote.

His wing commands more than 100 combat aircraft, as well as the Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, popularly known as the Thunderbirds.

“As you look out at your wings, I’d also ask you to look at those pilots that may have the ability to reach our audiences that don’t necessarily look like each of you,” he said.

All eight current Thunderbird pilots are white males. Of the eight, six fly the demonstrations, one flies as the lead and narrator, and one is the operations officer. They fly on the team for two years, and three of the six demonstration fliers are replaced annually.

Gen. Short told the story of former Thunderbird pilot Caroline “Blaze” Jensen, the team’s right wing and No. 3 (now one of the openings), who was not only a skilled performer but also a public relations asset. The longest lines of fans seeking autographs typically formed in front of her.

“Being a female pilot allowed her to make connections none of the other pilots were able to do,” Gen. Short said. “While she brought a different gender demographic — she was also a reservist — she earned her position on the team and, like each of the team members, did an amazing job representing our AF.”

The general, himself an F-15 pilot, acknowledged that there may not be a sufficient pool of black and female pilots in the Air Force.

“I don’t expect a huge push of diverse applicants, primarily because our pool isn’t very diverse,” he wrote. “But I need talent on the team as well, and some of the 15 applicants just don’t have the depth of record of our typical competitive applicant. I am hoping you have one or two you can engage and discuss the impact they could have on our Air Force by becoming a Thunderbird pilot.”

He said he does not know why the number of applicants is shrinking.

“If you have insights on why we are not getting the number of traditional applicants, I’d love to hear,” he said. “The challenge cuts across many [aircraft types] on the team, so I think it is a reflection of a slightly tired force — but there may be other factors I’m missing. I would really appreciate your help.”

He added: “With over 200 days a year of [duty away from base] and a focus on retaining, recruiting and representing our AF, this has to be a volunteer, but I have found, and learned from others, that the reluctant volunteer often makes the best Thunderbird officer. I’d offer that those chosen for the team do very well in school and promotion competition — often they come in with the record that supports that — but we have taken very good care of those with excellent records.”

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