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Setting her sights on the skies, NAVAIR engineer receives unique recognition



Samantha Pappas, air vehicle test lead for the Navy's Triton Unmanned Air System, is a 2014 recipient of Women in Aerospace's Initiative, Inspiration, Impact award for her contribution to the aerospace community. Pappas is leading efforts for Triton's initial ferry flight to Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md., in September. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, Patuxent River, Md. – One of NAVAIR's senior flight test engineers will receive a Women in Aerospace's (WIA) award in October for her outstanding contributions to the aerospace community.

Samantha Pappas, air vehicle test lead for the [Triton Unmanned Air System \(UAS\)](#) program, is the 2014 recipient of WIA's Initiative, Inspiration, Impact award for "being an impeccable leader, inspiring mentor, and exceptional engineer whose technical expertise and unwavering dedication were paramount to the advancement of Naval Aviation."

Over the last decade, Pappas has held multiple positions at NAVAIR and has grown to be a leader in her career field. She oversees a team of 18 personnel who are responsible for testing the new MQ-4C Triton unmanned air vehicle to ensure it's ready for delivery to the fleet in the next few years.

"Sam has proven to be a dedicated, hardworking individual who is committed to her team,

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to the Triton program and to the Navy,” said [Capt. Jim Hoke](#), Triton UAS program manager. “She is a role-model for other young men and woman who aspire to be leaders at NAVAIR, and we are very fortunate to have her on our team.”

Pappas didn’t always aspire to be an aviation engineer, but she did always have her sights focused on the skies. At a young age, learning about space exploration fostered her passion for space flight. She dreamed of being an astronaut in her early teen years, attended several space camps throughout middle and high school, but ultimately decided to take a practical approach by studying aerospace engineering in college.

“My family thought my choice was a little crazy,” said Pappas. “Most of them did not go to formal college and my grandmother, who I lived with, had a tough time understanding why a girl would be interested in engineering.”

Pappas proved to them it was the right choice for her. She attended Penn State University, focusing on aerospace engineering for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees. While a minority in her degree programs, she never let it detract from her experience. That positive attitude and determination paid off when, shortly before earning her master’s degree in 2004, she received an offer to interview at NAVAIR.

“I didn’t even know where Pax River was or what the work was like”, she said. “I had never been exposed to flight test.”

After her interview and tour of the base, she was hooked because of the innovative work done here. The flight test department offered her a position the same day, and she immediately accepted.

She held positions in the E-2/C-2, EA-18G and P-8 offices, before being accepted to Naval Test Pilot School. After being one of the elite civilians to complete the 10-month curriculum, she returned to the P-8 program as the structures lead.

In 2010, Pappas, a military spouse, moved to the West Coast when her husband, a helicopter test pilot, transferred to Camp Pendleton, California. Eager to progress in her career, Pappas looked for opportunities within NAVAIR and was fortunate to find a position as a government liaison at Triton’s manufacturer’s facility.

“I was extremely lucky to have such an opportunity, and it was a perfect fit,” she said.

When her husband received orders back to Pax, she returned to continue working on the program.

“I love working with flight test teams; the atmosphere is very motivating and supportive,” she said. “I get a lot of satisfaction from playing a small role in the development and deployment of systems that will help our troops in the field.”

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Pappas is proud of her work accomplishments. She said she has always felt supported and encouraged from her family, college professors, supervisors and co-workers. She hasn't let being a woman in a prominently male career field hold her back.

Her drive and dedication is also evident outside of the office. She is an avid runner and has participated in various races throughout the country. She is always up for a challenge, whether it be at work or on the course.

"All I can say is 'be yourself', it's natural to harbor certain doubts and fears, just don't give up if it's your passion," she said. "You don't want to feel regret later in life. Be respectful of others and treat others how you would like to be treated. All of that applies to everyone, not just women."