

Dept. of Military Affairs: 128th air refueling wing commander reflects on her service on international women's day

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MILWAUKEE — Behind the desk in the 128th Air Refueling Wing commander's office sits a woman for the first time in the unit's history. Her dark brown hair cut to a bob brushes the top of her flight suit collar. She is a seasoned pilot and strong leader, busy at work during drill weekend. Never too busy for her Airmen, she pauses her work and takes a moment to talk about her time, so far, as the leader of Milwaukee's Brew City Tankers.

Col. Adria Zuccaro assumed command of the 128th Air Refueling Wing in September 2020. This has been an unprecedented year with a multitude of challenges, and in the midst of that, Zuccaro has begun the task of tackling her greatest military challenge yet.

When Zuccaro took her place as the 13th commander of the 128th Air Refueling Wing, she made history by being the first female to ever hold that position. Through her inclusive leadership and willingness to start the year off strong, she has made it very clear, this milestone will not be her only legacy as this wing's leader.

"My vision for this wing is pretty simple -that we remain in business; that we are here 50 years from now; and that we are part of our nation's defense," said Zuccaro. "We have quality. We have dedication. We have all the resources we need to make that happen."

Zuccaro, who now lives in Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, has family ties to the state. She

has worked her way up to the top serving in many leadership positions. She served as executive officer to the commander of First Air Force at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. She discussed how influential positions like this were in developing her career and as an Airman.

“I worked at the 601st Air and Space Operations Center at Tyndall Air Force Base and had a large part in the day-to-day operations of our national defense through Operation Noble Eagle,” said Zuccaro. “I’m pretty proud of the work I got to do there and the team I worked with.”

Zuccaro is also a pilot of various aircraft platforms including the KC-135 Stratotanker, which is the assigned airframe at the 128th Air Refueling Wing. She has flown over 3,000 flight hours and has been deployed in support of Operations Northern Watch; Iraqi Freedom; Enduring Freedom; Inherent Resolve; and Freedom’s Sentinel. Zuccaro talked about specific challenges she faced as an aviator and even had some advice for future Airmen looking to become pilots.

“In the military, if you’re going to go into aviation operations, you have to realize you’re actually getting two jobs,” Zuccaro said. “You really have to be able to prioritize. A pilot’s primary and most risky job is flying airplanes successfully, but they are also tasked with a secondary job within the squadron. Both are important and necessary.”

In March we celebrate Women’s History Month by highlighting women who have made contributions to improve the lives for generations that will come after them. Zuccaro has contributed to that by continuing to strive and achieve throughout her career. Now she has broken down the barrier for future women of her unit.

“I have had the opportunity, now, to work with the women that are in the next generation,” she said. “I find it really interesting the difference in attitudes. I’m kind of the last piece of the generation that just worked as hard as you could to remain on the team. The next generation, they don’t see it that way. They are part of the team and they know it. They are taking down barriers that we hadn’t gotten to or couldn’t get to. It’s so inspiring to see what they are doing and how they go about it.”

Zuccaro also talked about the new changes to the Air Force hair regulations, as well as the changing height restrictions for applying for aviation.

“Recently, there have been a lot of opportunities for positive changes and for women to break down barriers,” Zuccaro said. “For example, women can’t wear their PPE correctly if they have a bun on the back of their head in some instances.”

She explained how barriers to success can have far reaching consequences and how making necessary changes can improve opportunities for all Airmen.

“The height restriction just to apply [for aviation] has been removed,” she said. “That’s not just a female issue, it’s been a male issue as well. When you remove those barriers, you don’t just remove them for women.”

Not only did Zuccaro convey the personal significance of Women’s History Month, but explained how it contributes to her leadership mission of diversity and inclusion as a wing commander. Zuccaro highlighted that diversity is a key strength for any unit.

“I’m very grateful for those women that have come before me and I think the next generation is just going to knock it out of the park,” said Zuccaro.