

Women in the Peruvian Air Force (FAP)

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The US and Peruvian air forces held the seminar "Women, Peace and Security"

Source: Aeronoticias - Aeronoticias (fap.mil.pe)

The acceptance of women in the Peruvian Armed Forces was enacted by Law No. 26628, issued by Congress on 20 June 1996. This provided for the incorporation of women into the military career, as officers and non-commissioned officers, with the same rights and obligations as male personnel. This law was passed when, for the first time in the history of Peru, a woman held the presidency of the Peruvian Congress.

A few decades ago, the almost unique role of Peruvian women was relegated to that of daughter, wife, and mother. This began to change with education, laws, and the evolution of time. On 7 September 1955, during the governance of General EP Manuel Odría, Law No. 12391 was enacted, which allowed women, for the first time in Peru, to vote and be elected. To do so, they had to be literate and over 21 years of age. In 1979, universal vote for females was achieved, and became effective in the general elections of 1980.

Little by little, women were filling positions previously occupied only by men. Education, the world's evolution, and national realities were modifying women's

behavior, allowing them to assume new roles, new forms, and possibilities for personal fulfillment. On 20 July 1996, during the government of President Alberto Fujimori, for the first time a law was enacted that allowed women to join the Armed Forces as active soldiers.

The Peruvian Air Force (FAP) Assumes the Legal Mandate

In the FAP, Law No. 26628 became effective the year after it was enacted. In 1997, female psychologists were allowed to enter the institution and today, after 24 years, we have three FAP colonels in that career field. The FAP offers people equal opportunities within the institution.

Currently, the FAP has dedicated professional, technical, and service women, officers, and non-commissioned officers, many of them wives and mothers, who work in our institution with a vocation for service, professional excellence, and personal integrity.

After two years of female personnel entering FAP schools, women became part of the promotions taking place in training schools for cadets and students, then they joined the active service military, to become part of the FAP institution.

In 2020, after 22 years of women joining the FAP, when the world and Peru in particular, were facing the COVID-19 pandemic, for the first time, a female brigadier general was selected to lead a cadet battalion in the FAP's Officer School (EOFAP)—Melanie Capa Quispe, from the Weapons, Command and Combat career field.

A Woman Responsible for the Maintenance of Weapons

Entering the War Materials Service (SEMAG) means reaching the heart of the institution where maintenance and repair of weapons, explosives, repair and maintenance of ejection seats, night vision goggles, parachutes, among others, are conducted.

A small woman, gentle but firm, worked there for years—Major Julissa Rodríguez Pérez, a chemical engineer specializing in Weapons Systems, who also had a master's degree in Environmental Engineering and Sustainable Development. Until recently, she was head of SEMAG's Department of Engineering and Projects, responsible for ensuring the operability of FAP weapons, bombs, rockets, pyrotechnics, weapons systems, and developing projects that facilitate the institution's work in this regard. She was born in the city of Arequipa and is the mother of two young children. For 17 years she has been a duty officer, eight of which she has worked at SEMAG. She is currently on a peace mission as a member of the UN mission in Africa.

At the end of 2019, Major Julissa Rodríguez was part of a photo exhibit, “Women who Broke Inequality”, conducted by the Ministry of Women and in which brave Peruvian females who inspire and give hope to other women are highlighted.

Three FAP Colonels

In 1997, the FAP made a public call requesting women psychologists apply to be part of the institution’s officer staff, in order to comply with the recently passed law to incorporate women in Peru’s armed institutions.

Ninety women applied for ten vacancies. After passing military training, seven remained, and five officers were accepted. Today, three of them are Colonels Rafael Seminario Soto, Hazel Sciutto Cook and Nancy Mejía Cruz.

The psychologists entered with the rank of lieutenants and two years later became service officers. Initially, the presence of women in military institutions was not easy; as the men had to get used to them. Colonel Nancy Mejía recalls: “It was not easy to meet the demands of military discipline, we had to adapt to the system; I am comfortable, and I am an officer proud to wear the uniform,” said this military woman and happy mother of a 13-year-old boy.

FAP Female Staff

Today, hundreds of females in the Peruvian Air Force, through their work in all the specialties of our institution, give prestige to the institution, and as Peruvians, work for the common good and defense of our country. “Here, the norm is respect for the person and the activities are carried out with responsibility, creativity, effective communication and teamwork,” they point out.

There are many other examples, such as Major Julissa Laguna Arana, a helicopter pilot for the 3rd Air Group who, in 2015, who became the first rotary-wing aircraft instructor pilot in Peru. Maj Laguna is married to an Air Force pilot and has two daughters. She is a cordial, firm, and brave woman, who flies the Bolkow and is preparing to fly the MI-17.

Captain Romina Feijoo Arana, another helicopter pilot, participates in peace-keeping support operations in the emergency zone in the Valley of the Apurimac, Ene and Mantaro Rivers (VRAEM), among other missions.

Among the multitude of enlisted professional and technical women in our Air Force, we have SO3 (First Technical Sergeant) Marleni Manya Zela, who is the first female aeronautical mechanic qualified in our Twin Otter DHC-6-400 system. There are many non-commissioned officers who stand out as technical specialists in weapons, helicopter artillery, flight engineers in M-17 helicopters, and Mechanics on Bell-212 helicopters. Last year, for example, TC3 Diana García

Velásquez, during the pandemic, qualified as loadmaster for the Spartan C-27J aircraft, becoming the first Air Force female to become loadmaster in said aircraft.

During 2020, when we were facing COVID-19; there was a unique event in the military field in Peru: Two women held top honors in both the Air Force and Navy Officer Schools. They were 2nd Lieutenant Melania Capa Quispe in the Air Force, and Ensign AP Greta Ruiz in the Navy; both recipients of the Sword of Honor award during their respective promotions.

Women Fly in our Amazon

Sixty percent of our territory is the Amazon jungle and our crews, for more than eight decades, have flown the skies of this complex and intricate region where microclimates and weather conditions require courage and experience to be able to fly.

Currently, three female FAP transport pilots fly in that region. They are Captains Kary Francia Vásquez and Fiorela Sponza Nagybabí, as well as Lieutenant FAP Genesis Díaz Chavarría.

Air Force Captain Kary Francia graduated from EOFAP in 2013 and has been flying the Twin Otters of the 42nd Air Group in Iquitos for more than five years. “I like it and I am happy with my work in the jungle. The sudden climatological changes and the nature of this vast Amazon area force the crews to carry out greater analysis, planning and training,” this young officer tells us. Like her fellow men, she covers the Iquitos, Trompeteros, Caballacocha, Estrecho, Gueppi, Tarapoto, Pucallpa routes and other locations and landing fields. “The FAP performs a very important task in this region, we bring the presence of the government to the poor and remote regions of our territory, integrating and supporting them in their development,” says Captain Francia, who obtained first place in the Tactical Course-2019. She is not only a good pilot, but also a great athlete who practices shooting and was the South American Military Rifle Shooting Champion in 2012.

Captain Fiorela Sponza Nagybabí worked for four years in the 42nd Air Group and became the first Peruvian pilot to land in the turbulent rivers of our Amazon. She does so as co-pilot of the Twin Otters, in the rivers of the Putumayo basin, in the Morona, Marañón, Amazonas. “We reach the most remote villages where you can only enter either by air or river. I am happy because I am helping very vulnerable populations. With representatives of other sectors of the government, we have flown through all the riverside towns bringing health, medicine, and the presence of the Peruvian government,” she says.

“It is not easy to land in the rivers of our jungle,” says Captain Sponza, who is married to another Air Force pilot, a flight instructor. She smiles and says: “I am lucky to have the instructor at home.” They’ve both flown together, but have not

since they married, as security regulations prevent it. She travels to the most remote localities of our territory. “I enjoy the natural charm of our Amazon,” she points out.

The other officer who joined the work in this region a little over a year ago is 2nd Lieutenant Génesis Díaz Chavarría, who is a native of the northern coast of Lima. As a child, she dreamed of flying and after much study and sacrifice, she achieved her goal. Like all the young Air Force pilots, she graduated from the EOFAP and successfully complied with its requirements: thirteen hours of flight in the T-41, then 60 hours in the Zlin and Alarus, and finally 120 hours in the KT-1P, qualifying as a military pilot of the Command and Combat section. She now trains in the jungle, in the 42nd Air Group, in the Twin Otter planes. “It has cost me, I have felt fear, but I have received good training in the Air Force and that makes me have the courage and desire to move forward. The plane has already taken off and I am not going to stop until I reach the top,” says 2nd Lieutenant Díaz.

**The Life of a Pilot is about Guts, not Sex
It does not Matter if you are a Man or a Woman,
what Matters is to Love the Heavens, to Love to Fly**

Females as Interception Radar Operators

In 2002, there were four women in the Air Force who, for the first time, operated interception radars. They had the responsibility of taking care of territorial airspace and supporting aircraft that flew over the “Quiñones sky,” which is how the Peruvian sky is called in tribute to our hero of national military aviation, Captain José Quiñones.

They are NCOs Elsa La Chira, Romy Ávalos, Inés Cumpa and Angélica Rafael, who, after leaving NCO School, went on to train at the National Air Defense and Information Center (CIDAN). There they obtained knowledge on air traffic control, phraseology, chart reading and notifications, among other topics related to the specialty of Equipment Operation and Communication System and Air Traffic and Radar Control. Currently, two of them are still active, now augmented with air traffic operators.

A Gold Champion

There is also a successful presence of Air Force women in sports. It is worth highlighting Captain Yackeline Guerrero Quintana, who as a cadet during the third year of EOFAP, became world champion in the “Military Cadet” category at the “I World Championship of Military Schools Athletics” held in Turkey in the 2010. She won competing against cadets from thirty-eight countries. This small, calm

and smiling woman from Cajamarca, who despite her calm image, is a tenacious, strong, and determined Air Force officer, obtained the gold medal in the five-thousand-meter race. The physical level of her peers, as has happened on other occasions, seemed superlative, but she did not give up, she ran like the wind and won. One hundred meters of distance between her and her closest competitor, a Ukrainian, was what made the difference in her success. She continued to compete, successfully, in various other championships. There are other Air Force athletes who stand out competing in athletics, shooting, and rugby.

“Chepita” — an Exemplary Memory

Among civilian personnel, we recall a woman who made a difference in the War Material Service (SEMAG). It was Josefina Recuay Centeno, a chemical engineer who began working at SEMAG in 1979, until the day of her death 30 years later. She oversaw the implementation of all the chemical tests on the explosives that the FAP had in its inventory. Together, with chemical engineer Nancy Cedano Guardianos, she created the SEMAG Chemical Laboratory, where engineer Cedano continued to work with the support of another young chemical engineer, Lizbeth Sánchez.

“Chepita,” as her coworkers affectionately called her, developed standard parameters for propulsion systems that served as a guide in SEMAG’s daily work. She researched and led the installation of the parkerization plant for the protection of low alloy steel and iron material that work in continuous friction, such as pistols, shotguns, rifles, and others.

She designed and developed syllabi for the different FAP instruction and training centers. Additionally, she worked to control the chemical stability and increased the reliability of explosives and high explosives used by the Armed Forces.

She was a weapons specialist trainer on explosive chemistry and other related subjects and was an open reference book for anyone who asked. Josefina Recuay toured all the FAP units inspecting bombs, rockets, missiles, cartridges, and other weapons to determine their chemical status to prevent the risk of explosion and/or fire during its handling, transport, and storage. “She always had an accurate diagnosis,” her classmates and students recalled, who expressed the following about her: “A valuable life dedicated to her daily work, she did not seek transcendence, but only sought the best that could be done”.

The First Pilot in Peru

Carmela Combe Thomson was the first woman pilot in Peru. She was born in Lima in 1900. The youngest of five siblings, she lived her adolescence avidly reading magazines and information that arrived from Europe about the nascent world

of aviation and the feat of the aviator Jorge Chávez, a Peruvian born in France, who, in 1910, was the first to cross the Alps.



Carmela Combe: Peru's first female pilot at just 21 years old

Source: "Carmela Combe, the woman who was born to fly - Periodismo 360° UTP " (periodismo360utp.pe)

A unique woman for her time, she was a car and motorcycle driver at the age of fourteen. In 1920, after completing an aviation course promoted by the Curtiss aeronautical company, she enrolled in the Bellavista Civil Aviation School, on the outskirts of Lima, the Peruvian capital.

On 6 May 1921, she flew alone in a Curtiss Oriole plane that she owned and began to work transporting the payroll of workers in Cañete, Ica, south of Lima. On 9 July 1921 she suffered a plane crash, a mechanical failure that forced her to make an emergency landing. She suffered blows from the accident that affected her spinal cord afterwards and caused her chronic pain, but she continued to fly and was able to undergo surgery some time afterwards.

In 1932 she traveled to France, met, and married Julio Bardi, had a daughter who later became a chemical engineer, and became a happy grandmother. On 27 September 1960, the FAP awarded her with the "Peruvian Cross for Aeronautical Merit" for being the first female pilot in Peru, a pioneer of national civil aviation. The Ministry of Aeronautics, on 27 January 1982, awarded her the "Jorge Chávez Dartnell" Medal of Merit for her contribution to the development of civil aviation.

Inés Thomann was the first Peruvian woman who, in 1939, obtained an official pilot permit, and later obtained an international pilot permit. She grew up among

planes and landing strips. Her father, Emilio Thomann Wylemann, was one of the pioneers of civil aviation in Peru. He had a flying school with four planes. Inés flew daily taking passengers from Lima to Punta Hermosa and Ancón, two beach resorts near our capital.

She flew until shortly after she married Julio Stubbs, with whom she had a daughter who studied anthropology. She then dedicated her life to teaching English and translation.

During the 1940s, there were several women in Lima who learned to fly: Elena Ferreyros, Rosa Prado (daughter of President Prado), Lucha Vargas Prada, Olga Von Bischoffshausen, Mary de Querol, Frida Sammerkamp, Inés Álvarez Calderón, and Cristina Melgar. Women have been present since the beginning of our Peruvian national aviation-to include commercial aviation.

Peruvian Women and Space

Peruvian women continue advancing in the world of aeronautics and space. The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has several Peruvian women as part of its staff of scientists. Among them are:



Melissa Soriano was part of the successful Project Curiosity mission

Source: <https://rpp.pe/ciencia/espacio/video-conoce-a-la-peruana-que-integra-mision-de-la-nasa-a-jupiter-noticia-976634>

Melisa Soriano Horny, electronic engineer and economist who graduated from the California Institute of Technology (CALTECH). She has a master's degree in Earth Systems and Geoinformation Science from George Mason Uni-

versity. She is the daughter of mountaineer Arturo Soriano and Amelia Horny. Her parents, born in Huaraz, department of the Peruvian highlands, registered her at the Peruvian consulate at birth in Virginia, United States, on July 5, 1981.

Soriano was part of a team of more than two hundred people who, on the night of August 6, 2012, worked on that complicated sequence of the fantastic landing of “Curiosity” on Martian soil.



Rosa Avalos Warren: NASA mechanical and operations engineer, human spaceflight Mission Manger

Source: <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/i-am-artemis-rosa-avalos-warren>

Rosa Avalos Warren, aerospace engineer with a master’s degree in mechanical engineering from Virginia Tech University. She works at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. She has worked on twenty NASA missions. Rosa was born in Chilca, a beach south of Lima, where UFO sightings were seen before. The daughter of a humble family, she emigrated to the United States when she was 12 years old.

Aracely Quispe Neyra, has a master’s degree in Space, Electrical and Astronautical Engineering from Capitol Technology University, a master’s degree in geospatial intelligence, and a doctorate in science. She is certified to control satellites, create software applications, and designs electrical space mission systems.

Born in Lambayeque on the north coast of Peru, she currently works on the James Webb program, which will replace the Hubble telescope; and she has also worked on other NASA projects. Her mother, an educator from Lambayeque, was the one who encouraged her to break stereotypes and with perseverance, opti-

mism, and determination, she managed to achieve her dreams; using karate for discipline and character development.



Aracely Quispe Neyra, scientist who inspires thousands of women around the world

Source: aracelyquispeneyra.com

In summary in Peru, women have achieved equality and fairness within our society, but still face obstacles that society and education must address and overcome. □

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Perla Baca Gálvez

Professional journalist, graduate of the Catholic University of Peru. She has more than forty years of experience. She has worked as political editor for the newspaper “El Comercio”. Ms. Galvez has been press secretary to five presidents, two primer ministers, a minister of Education, the mayor of Lima, the Commander of the Peruvian Air Force, and the Joint Commander of the Armed Forces. She is an honorary member of Peruvian Institute of Aerospace Studies (IEHAP) and has attended training courses and seminars at the University of Lima. She has also attended seminars at the American Studies Center and School of Costa Rica, the Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Institute of Art and Design (IPAD), and courses and seminars offered by the Information Directorate and de Operations Command of the Peruvian Air Force, among others. She was press director during a presidential inauguration, presidential meetings, national meetings with mayors, and introducing the Peruvian delegate at the United Nations. At the present time she works at the Information and Aerospace Interests Directorate of Peru (DINIA) and edits the journal “Aviación” of the Peruvian Air Force.