

Heather Penney

United States Air Force Pilot, Senior Resident Fellow for the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies at the Air Force Association

Most widely recognized for her service on September 11, Heather “Lucky” Penney is a renowned speaker on topics ranging from personal courage; decision-making under stress; leadership; organizational transformation; inclusivity; high performance teams; national defense issues; and aviation. She grew up around aviation and warbirds, but women couldn’t be fighter pilots when she went to college; congressional statute excluded women from combat. Pursuing her love of aviation, she stood up the first collegiate team to race in the Air Race Classic at Purdue University, where she earned her B.A. and M.A. She was in graduate school when she learned that Congress had opened combat aviation to women.

Heather was part of the first wave of women who went directly into fighters from pilot training. She applied to the Air National Guard and earned her wings through the exclusive and prestigious Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training, a NATO undergraduate pilot training program where she flew the T-37 and T-38. The first and only woman in the 121st Fighter Squadron, Heather deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom for initial combat operations as a night-time SCUD Hunter in the western deserts of Iraq, also supporting Special Operations Forces. She flew the F-16 for ten years before having to make the difficult decision to leave the fighter aviation as a single mother. She continued to serve, flying the Gulfstream G-100 Astra jet for another six years in the VIP Special Airlift Mission.

For over ten years, Heather was a Director of various Air Force programs for Lockheed Martin, specializing in capture management, government relations, and strategic business development. Her portfolio included the F-22, the F-16, F-35 training, and the Air Force’s Advanced Pilot Training competition to replace the T-38. She now is a Senior Resident Fellow for the Mitchell Institute for Aerospace Studies at the Air Force Association, where she researches conducts extensive research on cutting edge defense policy and technologies with a focus on the leveraging the critical advantage that only aerospace power affords.

She has been a regular lecturer at the Air Force’s Squadron Officer School; is on the Board of Directors for the Experimental Aviation Association; is Chair of the EAA Women Soar Society, dedicated to supporting and expanding the presence of women across aviation; and was the Beideman Visiting Scholar at the Oskin Leadership Institute for Widener University from 2018-2019. Heather’s passion for aviation has never faded – she has flown her Taylorcraft BC-12 coast-to-coast, owned several vintage aircraft, and raced jets at 500 mph and 50ft above the desert floor at the Reno Air Races. She has over 3,500 hours with Commercial, CFII/MEI, and ATP ratings; and she has co-piloted the Collings Foundation B-17, brining history alive to communities across the nation. She enjoys flying her WWII Army Air Forces PT-13 Stearman biplane and 1950 Cessna 170A. She is now married with two daughters and rescue dog, Gilmore (named after Roscoe’s lion). When she isn’t in the air, you can usually find her with her family, camping and hiking in a National Park.