

# Making HERstory: Dr. Susan Northrup, U.S. Federal Air Surgeon



**Dr. Susan Northrup** with the family's Canadian Car and Foundry Harvard Mark IV, a version of the North American T-6 warbird trainer. (COURTESY: John Hyle)

With the FAA's theme for Women's History Month being "Soaring to Your Potential: Empowering Women to Executive Leadership at the FAA," there is no better example of such empowerment than Dr. Susan Northrup, our new U.S. Federal Air Surgeon, AAM-1. Dr. Northrup, an acknowledged aerospace medicine expert, is motivated to increase productive dialogue with employees and stakeholders to help increase the effectiveness of the Office of Aerospace Medicine's (AAM) vital work.

"It's important to listen to our employees and stakeholders, and empower them," she says. It all goes back to the concept of a safety culture and a just culture. We're all smart. We're a great team. We need to listen to one another to make things better."

**[LISTEN: The Air Up There Podcast: Dr. Susan Northrup Makes Aviation History](#)**



Dr. Northrup, who comes to her new role having served as Acting Deputy Federal Air Surgeon and Senior Regional Flight Surgeon, based in Atlanta, played a major role in AAM's response to the COVID-19 global health emergency. Under her leadership the Regional Flight Surgeon Team took its place on the front lines of the FAA's response to COVID-19, by providing timely, scientifically valid, and risk-based advice to help keep the National Air Space System operational and our employees safe.

AAM has actively participated in the [International Civil Aviation Organization](#) (ICAO) Council Aviation Recovery Task Force (CART) and the [Collaborative Arrangement for the Prevention and Management of Public Health Events in Civil Aviation](#) (CAPSCA). For instance, AAM assisted in the development of the:

- 1) Take-Off Guidance Document (TOGD);
- 2) The High Level Cover Document (HLCD);

- 3) Manual on Testing and Cross-Border Risk Management Measures;
- 4) Guidance on public health mitigation measures;
- 5) Public health corridor implementation materials; and
- 6) Guidelines modules for airports, aircraft, crew, and cargo.

“We’re just getting started,” said Dr. Northrup hinting at a transformational year ahead for AAM.



*Dr. Susan Northrup during her time as U.S.A.F. colonel. (COURTESY: U.S. Air Force photo/Staff Sgt. Paul Flipse)*

As U.S. Federal Air Surgeon, Northrup wears many hats. The same is true in her life outside of the office. The retired U.S. Air Force Colonel and private pilot also served as an assistant scoutmaster and public health officer for Boy Scout Jamborees. Two more titles Dr. Northrup wears proudly are wife and mother in a family filled with aviators.

Her husband recently retired as a commercial airline captain and continues to fly their Harvard MkIV (better known as a T-6 Texan) and is restoring a Stearman. Her eldest of two sons graduated in December from Georgia Southern University and accepted a job with [Gulfstream Aerospace Corporation](#) in Savannah, Ga where he’s Service Center Engineer. Both of Dr. Northrup’s sons have their private pilot’s license and represent four generations of aviation professionals on both sides of the family tree.

Northrup's grandfather was an engineer that worked on Boeing B-29 Superfortress engines, and her father worked in USAF intelligence. Her husband's grandfather was a lead mechanic for Eastern Airlines and her father-in-law was a private pilot.

The proud Ohio State University Buckeye had her eyes on a medical career when she graduated in 1985 with a bachelor of arts in chemistry with honors in liberal arts. Northrup stayed in Columbus, Ohio and earned her medical degree in 1989. This led her to the "Lone Star State" where she earned a master's degree in public health from the University of Texas in 1994. She is an acknowledged expert in her field, having served as the vice-chair for aerospace medicine on the American Board of Preventive Medicine. During her time with the U.S. Air Force, she served as the U.S. Head of Delegation to NATO's aeromedical working group. She is also a past president of the American Society of Aerospace Medicine Specialists and the Civil Aviation Medical Association.

As Northrup continues to settle into her new role, she is committed to helping airmen safely stay in the sky, while protecting the NAS.



*FAA Federal Air Surgeon Dr. Susan A. Northrup, M.D.*

"My goals for AAM start with improving the relevance of our work to the greater agency," she said. I want to improve communication and I want it to be omnidirectional," said Dr. Northrup. She drafted a communications plan for AAM to help amplify the office's efforts, while also inviting airmen advocacy groups to voice their concerns with the [Airman Medical Certification process](#).

"When you ask an aviator, 'what one word describes you?' A significant percentage of them will tell you pilot, airman or aviator. When we remove their ability to do that, we affect who they are," Northrup says.. "Is it any surprise that when we delay,

remove and deny their medical certification that they get upset?" She has multiple recurring meetings set up with Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, Experimental Aircraft Association and other airmen advocacy organizations to build a strong bridge of mutual understanding. "Helping pilots get to yes, while preserving the safety of the national airspace can be a challenging balancing act between risk-based science and someone's rights. We're here to help." she added.