



Merryl Tengesdal

Naval Aviator and Air Force Combat Pilot Colonel



VISIT MERRYL'S WEBSITE

About:

- **Gender:** Female
- **Languages:** English
- **Travels from:** United States

Engagement Types:

- Guest Appearance
- Speaking

Topics:

- DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion)
- Growth Strategy
- Health & Wellbeing
- Leadership & Management
- Mental Health in the Workplace
- Mindfulness & Resilience
- Motivation and Inspiration

Biography Highlights

- First and Only African American Woman USAF U-2 Pilot
- Competitor, CBS' 'Tough as Nails'
- Author of 'Shatter the Sky: What going to the stratosphere taught me about self-worth, sacrifice, and discipline'
- Advocate for Women & Children of Color in STEM

Biography

Colonel Merryl Tengesdal (ret.) is the first and only African American woman to fly the United States Air Force's U-2 "Dragon Lady" high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft. As a former Naval Aviator and Air Force Combat Pilot, Merryl has flown over 3,400 flight hours including 330 combat hours in six different rotary and fixed wing aircraft. She has been deployed worldwide supporting combat operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and military operations in South America, the Caribbean, and the Horn of Africa.

Tengesdal has extensive command and senior leadership experience including Deputy Operations Group Commander and Inspector General for the 9th Reconnaissance Wing, Director of Operations and Commander for the 9th Physiological Support Squadron. As the first female selected to be Commander of Warner Robins Air Logistics Center, Detachment 2 at Palmdale, CA, she led the oversight of a multi-billion-dollar depot-level

Websites:

- [Personal Website](#)

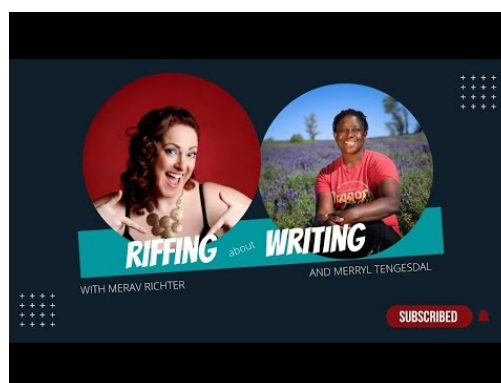
maintenance, repair, and developmental testing program for the U-2. She retired in 2017 from the Pentagon in her last assignment as the Director of Inspections for the Air Force Inspector General, where she oversaw USAF's conventional, nuclear and special access inspections program for 860,000 Airmen.

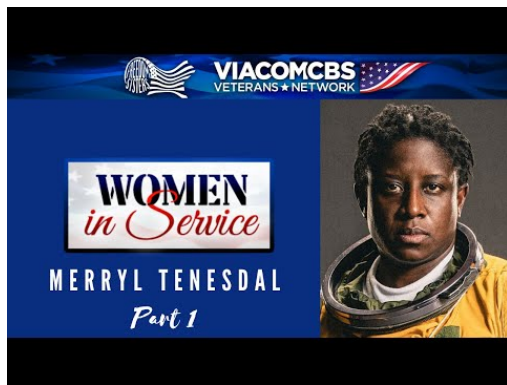
Since her retirement, Tengesdal has become a highly sought-after motivational speaker for industry, non-profit organizations and educational institutions on a wide range of topics including diversity and leadership, applying military leadership lessons to business enterprises and women in leadership. Tengesdal has a keen interest in promoting efforts to increase women and children of color in STEM.

Tengesdal is a Reality Television Star and cast member on season 2 of CBS's uplifting, reality competition show *Tough As Nails* and promotes increased minority involvement in the Trades. She has also appeared as a commentator on PBS's *UNLADYLIKE2020: The Bessie Coleman Story* (2020) and as a technical consultant to Steven Spielberg on *Bridge of Spies* (2015).

Tengesdal holds a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of Newhaven, a Masters in Aeronautical Science from Embry-Riddle University, and is a graduate of the non-resident programs at the Air Command and Staff College and Air War College. She was inducted into the 2019 Gathering of Eagles Foundation as an aviation pioneer.

Videos





Meryll's Topics

Thriving Under Pressure: Lessons in Leadership, Grit, and Decision-Making

From executing high-stakes reconnaissance missions at 70,000 feet in a hostile environment to leading in military spaces, Colonel Meryll Tengesdal (Ret.) knows what it takes to perform under pressure. Drawing from her experience as a combat pilot, military leader, and aviation pioneer, she provides compelling insights on how to stay focused, make critical decisions, and lead with confidence—no matter the circumstances. With a mix of personal stories and battle-tested strategies, Colonel Tengesdal empowers audiences to embrace challenges, develop resilience, and lead with excellence in high-pressure environments.

Available: In person, Virtually

Excellence Through Adversity

Colonel Meryll Tengesdal is no stranger to adversity. Despite the deck being stacked against her Meryll rose through the ranks of the U.S. military eventually becoming the first and only African American woman to fly the United States Air Force's U-2 "Dragon Lady" high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft. Now retired, she reflects on her experiences in the military and inspires students, business leaders, and organization to defeat the odds and excel in their endeavors.

Available: In person, Virtually

Breaking Barriers: Diversity, Grit, and the Power of Being First

As a trailblazer in military aviation, Colonel Merryl Tengesdal (Ret.) understands firsthand the challenges of being the “first” or “only” in a field. In this engaging and empowering keynote, she shares her journey of persistence, adaptability, and leadership, while emphasizing the importance of diversity, mentorship, and creating inclusive environments. Through compelling personal anecdotes and practical takeaways, Colonel Tengesdal inspires individuals and organizations to foster resilience, uplift underrepresented voices, and create pathways for future leaders in any industry.

Available: In person, Virtually

High-Stakes Leadership: Mental and Physical Strength

Groundbreaking aviator, author, and retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Merryl Tengesdal brings firsthand insights into leading under extreme pressure. In her presentations, Colonel Tengesdal shares lessons learned from high-risk missions and critical decision-making scenarios to equip audiences with the tools needed to excel in leadership roles.

As a leader in the Air Force, Colonel Tengesdal had to ensure peak personal health in order to meet and overcome the physiological challenges that come with flight. Today, Colonel Tengesdal inspires your audience with actionable advice for rising to meet any challenge, no matter the stakes.

Available: In person, Virtually

Veteran Pride: The Power of Purpose

Groundbreaking aviator, author, and retired U.S. Air Force Colonel Merryl Tengesdal draws from her extraordinary career as the first and only African American woman to pilot the U-2 spy plane to share the complexities and strength of veteran identities. Colonel Tengesdal’s insightful and motivational talk highlights the resilience, leadership, and adaptability that military service instills, inspiring both veterans and those who support them to appreciate and leverage their invaluable contributions to society.

In this talk, Colonel Tengesdal emphasizes how a strong sense of purpose can drive individuals to achieve extraordinary feats, both personally and professionally. Colonel Tengesdal’s compelling stories and actionable insights motivate audiences to find and pursue their purpose, empowering them to make a meaningful impact in their lives and communities.

Available: In person, Virtually

Testimonials

“

Col. Merryl Tengesdal ROCKS!!! Thanks for your exceptional service and paving the way for all of us and future generations! You are my HERO!’ ... ‘I love this – let your performance and your professionalism shine through – amazing advice. Thank you!’ ... ‘I am on the edge of my seat. The wisdom and confidence is off the charts.’ ... ‘I could listen to you speak all day Col. Merryl!

Women Impacting Storebrand Excellence (WISE)

“

Merryl’s keynote was a profound testament to her authenticity and resilience. Her candid reflections on her journey from the Bronx to the stratosphere, and the lessons she learned along the way, had a profound impact on our audience. She shared openly and gracefully, inspiring attendees to always put forward their authentic selves and to pursue their dreams with unwavering determination. Highly recommend her to speak on topics of allyship, mentorship, resilience, leadership, and authenticity.

Respected Law Firm

“

Merryl’s presentation was exceptional, it was about leadership, teamwork, being comfortable with the uncomfortable, and taking our game to the next level. She is an amazing and inspiring woman.”

Brown and Brown, Inc.

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There is much one could say. It all boils down to the end product. Merryl was magnificent. She was deeply engaging, and heartfelt. She captured the audiences at both buildings. She was genuine and fun. We are so deeply happy with how things went yesterday.

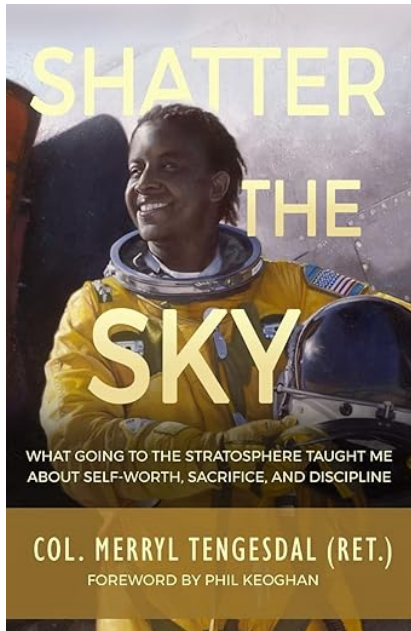
Saint Paul Public Schools

“

Love Col. Tengesdal’s point – it’s so important to learn how to iterate and pivot, using your past/challenges to inform and guide your next steps’ ... ‘Col. Merryl Tengesdal, thank you, thank you for your vibrant spirit and inspiring us through your dreams and your work to create your gorgeous, successful life and all of your service. Thank you for sharing with us!!’ ... ‘THANK YOU! Fantastic!!’ ... ‘Very inspiring!’ ... ‘This has been a great event. Really engaging stories and lessons learned Merryl. Thank you!!!’ ... ‘Thank you Colonel T for a fabulous session.

Crowd Comments from Adobe

Books



Shatter The Sky

Adventure and Exploration Travel

In a life filled with meaning and accomplishment, Meryll Tengesdal, has become one of the most interesting and compelling maverick women in aviation.

[BUY THE BOOK](#)

Speaker Bureaus And Talent Agencies

Meryll Tengesdal is available to book via these agencies

✓ Recommended



Speaking Agency