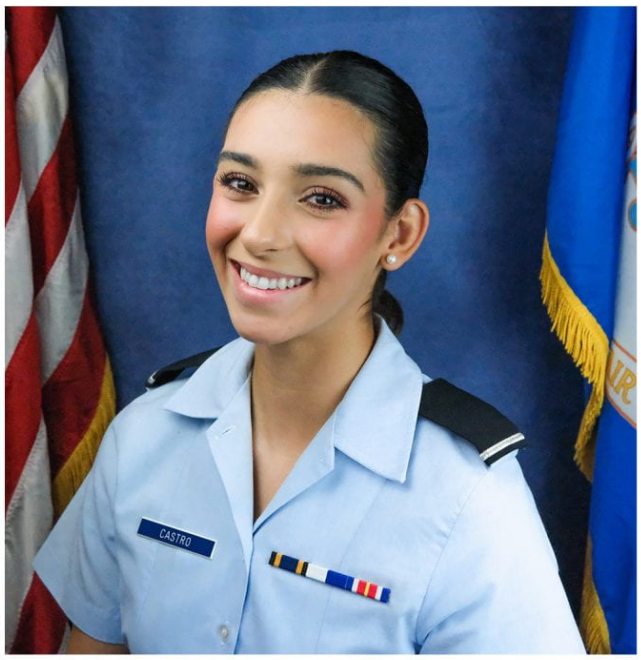
# Ready for takeoff

Anteaters in Air Force ROTC are among elite few selected for pilot training after graduation.

Friday, December 06, 2024

Erica Leal
UC Irvine News






UC Irvine seniors Dennis Melka, who’s studying Earth system science, and Larissa Castro, a political science major, will enter flight school next June after four years in the Air Force Reserve Officers’ Training Corps.

Picture Credit:
United States Air Force

The sky’s the limit for UC Irvine seniors Larissa Castro and Dennis Melka. Both have been chosen for highly coveted flight training in the U.S. Air Force.

“Every time I climb into an aircraft, even if it’s something I’ve never flown before, it just feels right,” Melka says. “It’s you, the aircraft and the air. There’s something about it that just makes total sense.”

Castro, a political science major, and Melka, who’s studying Earth system science, will graduate from UC Irvine in June while also becoming officers through the Air Force Reserve Officers’ Training Corps.

Growing up in the Czech Republic, Melka dreamed of flight and space, driven by the desire to become a pilot and astronaut. In 2019, believing there was a lack of opportunity in that country for his specific career goals, Melka researched ways to achieve his ambitions in the U.S. and landed on AFROTC.

Castro’s piloting aspirations emerged later in life. Originally from San Diego, she grew up in Temecula with plans to become a doctor or nurse. However, after her uncle – a captain in the Air Force – suggested she join the ROTC program during her freshman year at Mt. San Jacinto College, she decided to give it a try. During a visit to Virginia’s Joint Base Langley-Eustis in 2022, Castro says, she had the opportunity to see F-22 Raptors and other aircraft. Captivated by the display of air power and the base culture, she realized she wanted to be a pilot.

“I love it now,” Castro says. “Flying is breathtaking and stressful at the same time. Things are constantly changing in an aircraft. Every single day that you fly, it’s different. That’s what I like best about it.”

She and Melka met during a boot camp-like program at Alabama’s Maxwell Air Force Base. By chance, they were placed in the same flight group, and their connection as Anteaters developed into a friendship.

While UC Irvine does not have its own AFROTC unit, students may travel to a nearby host campus for training. These “cross-town cadets” go to their unit’s host campus one to three times a week and must be enrolled as full-time students at their home university to remain in AFROTC. Castro trains at Cal State San Bernardino with Detachment 002, and Melka is a cross-town cadet with UCLA’s Detachment 055.

AFROTC is one of the avenues through which the U.S. commissions new Air Force officers. Cadets spend their first year or two as trainees, gaining military and leadership skills, before becoming leaders in their unit for their final two years. During the third year, they are asked to submit their postcollege job selections.

Those like Castro and Melka, who aim to become pilots, are evaluated during their third year by a flight board. Their performance is assessed alongside that of fellow cadets across the nation, and only the top candidates are chosen for flight training, attaining a pilot slot.

Image



Dennis Melka, with the American flag, and colleagues pose in October outside a T-6 Texan II jet trainer at the Royal New Zealand Air Force Base Ohakea. Royal New Zealand Air Force

When Melka and Castro learned of their selection, they recall, both felt validated.

“Picking up the call from my commander, I was so stressed. Finally, she said, ‘Congratulations. You are among the newest pilot trainees in the United States Air Force,’” Melka says. “I was just jumping up and down, and everyone was clapping. It was unbelievable. What a vindication.”

“My heart was pounding,” Castro says. “It’s such a big moment, determining how my life will look for the next few years. As soon as I heard, I had tears of joy. Knowing what I’ve endured along this journey, it was a feeling of accomplishment.”

Image



The two are expected to undergo flight training from late 2025 through 2026. After completing their initial instruction on light aircraft, they will fly the T-6 Texan II trainer.

Castro will be competing for a slot on a jet training aircraft, with the goal of becoming a fighter pilot, while Melka will be based at Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, having been selected for Euro-NATO Joint Jet Pilot Training. Upon completion of the T-6 course, he will fly the T-38 Talon jet trainer and is guaranteed a spot in one of the Air Force's fighters or bombers.

Currently studying abroad in New Zealand while also participating in joint training with the New Zealand Air Training Corps, Melka experienced what he calls the highlight of his career so far: In October, he became the first member of the U.S. armed forces to fly on New Zealand's newest military aircraft and visited the Royal New Zealand Air Force Base Ohakea on a three-day tour.

While their tenure as undergraduates is ending, both Melka and Castro note the positive impact of the opportunities and community they have found at UC Irvine.

“My time with the Earth system science department has been spectacular,” Melka says. “It’s a great group of people – my academic peers and professors. The amount I’ve learned from the advice I’ve received along the way and how they’ve led me through periods of my education have been remarkable.”

Castro adds: “Often, the classes I’m taking at UCI relate to what I’m learning in my aerospace classes in ROTC. It’s made me a lot more knowledgeable on the civilian and military perspectives.

“Although after graduation we both enter the Air Force as officers, we will be Anteaters – and friends – for life.”

UC Irvine News
Feature Stories
Earth System Science
View PDF