



Marine 2nd Lt. Steven Maro, a student aviator learning to fly the military way, on a wing of a T-34c, Thursday. (Lia Martin Photo)



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Pilots return to Roswell

Sunday, February 21, 2010

The young pilots filling the Great Southwest Aviation building brought back memories of an earlier time as a father remembers his son when he was a student military aviator here.

"Craig graduated as a naval pilot. You walk in here and see all these young men and women, so clean-cut and focused on their life. It's nice to see," Larry Jessen, owner of Great Southwest, said as he gazed out the window across the airfield.

It was in the late 1980s when Craig Jessen received his training, and it has been more than a few years since Roswell has hosted the young military student aviators from Naval Air Station based out of Corpus Christi, Texas.

The 120 aviators and Navy support personnel are staying for three months. The 60 young Marine and Navy pilots are here for their military flight training, and the naval aircraft workers travel with the 16 turbo T-34c Beech craft planes. Their job is to keep the small orange and white planes safe to fly.

Cmdr. Joe Staub, executive officer of Squadron VT-28, keeps a close watch on his charges. It is his overall responsibility to groom them and then send them on their way to more advanced training.

Staub said they get the young aviators as soon as they graduate from college. To test them, they send them to a civilian flight school for 25 hours of air time and ground school, before the Navy spends a lot of time and money. It costs \$1.7 million to train each pilot.

He explained that two squadrons are here this time. He has 30 student aviators in Squadron VT-28 and 30 in Squadron VT-27. Between the two squadrons, there are 10 instructors.

The learning syllabus is difficult and overwhelming on the front end, according to many of the student aviators. It begins with visual flight training and contact flying followed by formation flying. Half of the syllabus is learning to fly by instruments only. A cotton framed hood covers the pilot's face and makes seeing outside the aircraft impossible.

Marine 2nd Lt. Steven Maro said that it is crucial to learn to fly well by instruments. He has already completed basic training and has years of civilian flying under his belt.

Aerobatic training is the first step toward learning combat maneuvers in a jet. The loops and barrel rolls and the experience of what it is like to pull gees when you go upward into a loop is not for the fainthearted.

Then there is the experience of the simulated emergencies, he said.

"They have to give you emergencies; like they cut the power to simulate engine failure," Maro said, as he continues to explain what the term "pulling-gees" means. "When you are standing on earth you are at 1-gee. When you are in a loop going up, you can pull 4.5 gees in this plane."

Maro said that he also skydives and is a scuba diver. He describes them as similar experiences.

"Skydiving is like going from the most violent thing to the most peaceful," Maro said."

Staub admits that the desire to become a pilot often means that that person is a Type-A personality. It could also be a necessary element the Navy looks for in its pilots. Going through the tough syllabus including aerobatic training requires a certain confidence.

"It takes a self-assured confident personality to get in the aircraft and do that," Staub said.

After the young aviators complete the required syllabus, they express their interest in serving in one of three

areas.

These young aviators can decide to fly jets off aircraft carriers where they serve as pilots. These are the pilots who have the strike or attack duties.

They can be assigned to the maritime patrol surveillance or to logistics duty.

Maritime patrol surveillance is responsible for finding submarines, and logistics duty supports the Navy by bringing in men, supplies or anything else required.

"A lot of the guys want to fly jets," Staub said. "It is glamorous."

Capt. Dave Price, wing commander of Training Air Wing 4 in Corpus Christi, visited the military student aviators on Thursday. Price said that it is inspirational to him to see these young students. He thinks that pilots are better now than they were in the days when he was a student.

"They are great officers, great pilots," Price said. "They are post-Sept 11 pilots. They wanted to do something bigger than themselves."

Price said more than half of them will be helicopter pilots because of the Navy mission needs.

"A helicopter: It's a four-wheel Jeep," Price said.

Mayor Sam LaGrone thinks that it is wonderful to host the young aviators, and it is also a great thing for the economy. It will bring thousands of dollars into the community, and help Roswell businesses, hotels and restaurants.

"On the economic side, it is huge," LaGrone said.

Staub thinks that coming back to Roswell has been a good experience. He said the aviators were in Las Cruces the past five years, and came here because Las Cruces was working on its runway this year. Staub thinks it has been an easy transition because their Federal Aviation Administration records were still here, the runways are large, and they seem to be falling right back into the old procedures.

"We have received a warm welcome from Roswell. We wanted to say how gracious the community has been," Staub said.

Jessen said he hopes they come back next year.

"It has had a very positive impact for the people of Roswell," Jessen said. "Everybody gets a bite of the apple."

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