

# NAS Meridian's Starbase-Atlantis celebrates 100,000th student graduation

**By Penny Randall**

Staff Writer

After 16 years of inspiring fifth-graders in the areas of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), the Navy's Starbase-Atlantis program graduated its 100,000th student.

Starbase-Atlantis Meridian on board Naval Air Station Meridian is one of 15 programs located on Navy installations worldwide. It marked the celebration during a graduation ceremony on Feb. 18 for fifth grade students from Poplar Springs Elementary.

Eleven-year-old Mary Beth Hilliard was the class' top graduate.

"This week has been really fun," said Hilliard who earned the call sign "Atomic." "We have done so much that it's hard to decide what my favorite part was, but probably the rocket we made out of straws. We also learned about latitude and longitude – that's something I haven't even learned in school yet."

The first Navy Starbase academy was launched in September 1994 at NAS Pensacola, and began offering fifth-grade students the opportunity to participate in a variety of learning experiences designed to increase knowledge and interest in STEM subjects. The program has since expanded throughout the Navy.

NAS Meridian Starbase-Atlantis opened in 2002 and its sister-site on the Choctaw Indian Reservation in Philadelphia opened in 2003. Since then the Meridian site has graduated more than 5,500 students and the Choctaw site has graduated nearly 2,400 students.

Starbase-Atlantis course topics include Newton's Laws of Motion, fluid mechanics and aerodynamics, model rocketry and much more. Students 'fly' aircraft on a computer flight simulator, as well as build and launch a model rocket as the final project for the course.

Poplar Springs Elementary math teacher Diana Covington was with her students all week.

"It's a great program" Covington said. "They introduce so much math and science and make it fun for the kids. It's a very visual program and the kids get so much hands-on experience. Schools should be begging for their students to come here."

Fifth-grader Jacob Moore, 10, said his favorite part of the

week was flying the jets in the simulator.

"It was so cool," said Moore who earned the call sign "Gravity." "You have to be very coordinated and use your hands and feet at the same time."

During their week-long training on board NAS Meridian, fifth graders are treated to tours of the Simulator building, Air Operations, the hangar and Fire & Rescue Station #1. These tours allow the students to see the STEM subjects they are learning in the classroom applied directly in the real world.

Mackenzie Jones is no stranger to the military world. Her dad, Joel, is in the Mississippi Air National Guard at Key Field.

"Everything we've done this week has been really fun," Jones said. "The teachers have taught us so much and we saw so many different demonstrations that involved math and science. They let us experience everything and actually do it ourselves."

NAS Meridian's Starbase partners with schools in the city of Meridian and Lauderdale County, rotating class attendance throughout the school year. Students from schools that are not in rotation for a particular year can get the STARBASE experience by applying to attend one of several weeklong sessions during the summer break.

Fifth grade students spend 25 hours over five days at Starbase Atlantis. The instructors teach 60 percent of the public schools' objectives in science and 80 percent of public schools' math objectives.

"We are proud to have Starbase Atlantis on board NAS Meridian," said Capt. Charles Gibson who was the guest speaker at the graduation ceremony. "Very few Navy bases are special enough to have such a great program."

Operated by each of the armed services, there are more than 60 Starbase programs throughout the U.S. and Puerto Rico, funded by the Department of Defense through Congressional appropriation since 1989.

For more information on the Navy's Starbase-Atlantis programs, visit <https://www.netc.navy.mil/community/starbase/sa.html> or [www.starbasedod.com](http://www.starbasedod.com).