

12 aviators earn 'Wings of Gold'

In conjunction with NAS Meridian's 50th Anniversary and the centennial of Naval Aviation, Naval Air Station Meridian hosted a winging ceremony at which 12 Navy, Marine Corps and Royal navy aviators received their "Wings of Gold."

The ceremony was March 25, in the chapel on board NAS Meridian.

The guest speaker was Rear Adm. Ted N. Branch, Commander, Naval Air Forces, U.S. Atlantic Fleet. Branch, a native of Long Beach, Miss., had been traveling the state to promote the first Mississippi Navy Week. He had speaking engagements in Biloxi, Long Beach, Gulfport, Jackson and concluded his trip in Meridian.

Branch graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1979 and earned a master's degree in International Relations from the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

A naval aviator, Branch's operational assignments include Light Attack Squadrons 15 and 37, USS Forrestal (CV 59), and Strike Fighter Squadron 37. He served as executive and commanding officer of Strike Fighter Squadron 15, executive officer in USS John C. Stennis (CVN 74), commanding officer in USS Coronado (AGF 11) and USS Nimitz (CVN 68), and commander of Carrier Strike Group One/Carl Vinson Strike Group. He assumed command of Naval Air Force Atlantic in February 2011. Naval Air Force Atlantic is composed of more than 40,000 men and women who maintain and operate five aircraft carriers, 80 aircraft squadrons flying 1,000 aircraft, and a number of supporting shore facilities. They provide combat-ready air forces to commanders operating from the North Pole to the Antarctic, and from the East Coast of the United States to the Indian Ocean.

The naval aviator designation ceremony is not prescribed specifically by U.S. Navy regulations, but has emerged as an honored product of the rich heritage of naval tradition. It marks the culmination of nearly two years of specialized training, which has prepared these officers for the rigorous demands of aerial combat and carrier operations -- earning each the title of "Naval Aviator" and the right to wear the coveted "Wings of Gold."

Those who received their Wings of Gold included:

Lt. j.g. Nicholas William Clouse, USN, who earned one Navy "E" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training and carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 9. Clouse completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Seven;

Lt. j.g. Charles Michael Hallum, USN, who was selected as VT-9's Student of the Month for September 2010 and earned three Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 11. Hallum completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

1st Lt. Benjamin Michael Hopkins, USMC, who carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 10. Hopkins completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Seven;

Lt. j.g. Robert William Kershner, who was named to the Commodore's List during Advanced Jet Flight Training. He

earned three Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training and carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman on Feb. 10. Kershner completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

Lt. Matthew King, Royal navy, completed Jet Training in the UK and spent one year flying the Hawk for the Royal Navy. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 11. King completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

Lt. j.g. Jacob Robert Laginess, USN, who was named to the Commodore's List during Primary Flight Training and earned two Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman on Feb. 9. Laginess completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

Lt. Daniel Geoffrey Latham, Royal navy, who completed jet training in the UK and flew the Hawk for the Royal Navy. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 11. Latham completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

1st Lt. Bridger Leary, USMC, who was named to the Commodore's List and received the Academic Award during Primary Flight Training. He earned one Navy "E" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training and carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 10. Leary completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Seven;

1st Lt. Michael Benedict Manna, USMC, who was named to the Commodore's List during Primary Flight Training and earned two Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 10. Manna completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine;

Lt. j.g. Justin Daniel Porter, USN, who earned one Navy "E" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training and carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 9. Porter completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Seven;

Capt. Evan Livingstone Shockley, USMC, who was VT-7's Student of the Month for January 2011. He earned four Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy During Advanced Jet Flight Training and carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 10. Shockley completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Seven; and

Lt. j.g. Ryan Andrew Vessichelli, USN, who was selected VT-9's Student of the Month for August 2010 and VT-9's Student of the Quarter for the first quarter of 2011. He was named to the Commodore's List during Primary Flight Training and earned two Navy "E's" for bombing accuracy during Advanced Jet Flight Training. He carrier qualified in the T-45C on board the USS Harry S. Truman (CVN-75) on Feb. 10. Vessichelli completed Advanced Jet Flight Training with Training Squadron Nine.