

Aviation enthusiasts amaze me

By Penny Randall

Editor

I have a great job which I truly enjoy, but sometimes my job is just plain fun.

Last week, I had the pleasure and I do mean pleasure of escorting three groups of aviation enthusiasts around the flight line.

The first day, 31 residents of The Netherlands, France, England and Japan were waiting on me at the front gate when I arrived to pick them up in government vehicles. Luckily I had the help of a very dedicated student pilot from Training Squadron 7 who assisted me for several hours while the group walked around the flight line and took photos of aircraft, recorded tail numbers in their pocket notebooks and just asked questions about the aircraft.

But let me explain a little further... when I say took photos of the aircraft, I mean they took a photo of each and every T-45C "Goshawk" they laid their eyes on. Not just one photo, but several photos. They truly love aviation and everything about it. It's not just a hobby – it's a passion for them.

As many of you know I take photographs for *The Skyline* and before coming to NAS Meridian I worked at *The Meridian Star* newspaper for several years as a reporter. I have a love for photography, so when I see a camera that I know is a very good camera I always ask questions about the equipment and how it handles. Photographers talk about their cameras like pilots talk about their planes.

I immediately noticed one of the Nikon cameras that a French guy was using and asked a few questions. He said with a smile on his face, that his lens alone was \$7,000 – I could only wish for a camera and lens like his.

When I posed a question to the group, "Why do you take a photo of each and every one of the T-45s – aren't they are all

the same?" a member of the group from The Netherlands spoke up and explained, "No my dear, each jet is different. It has a different tail number and a different story."

I wish I would have gotten his name because what he went on to say was truly groundbreaking and so true.

"Let's say your hobby is fishing, like many Americans do. You don't just catch one fish and say well that's a day. No, you want to catch lots of fish. It's the same with us, we don't just take one photo... we take lots of photos of the jets. It's our hobby."

The leader of the group from England was Clive Bartram who has made trips to NAS Meridian before.

He was and I say this with the honest truth, the most interesting person I've met in a long time. He was courteous and engaged me in conversation about the Royal wedding that had just taken place the weekend before the group arrived.

I told him I would have loved to be in England for the wedding and he said, "Oh, no, too many people for me." Instead he took a trip to the U.S. We had a big laugh about that. He even brought me a tin of cookies from England that had Prince William and his new bride, Kate, on the front. I was thrilled!

Clive and his group were on a 10-day trip to the U.S. that started in Beaufort, S.C., then to Pensacola, Fla., Mobile, Ala., Keesler Air Force Base, NAS Meridian, Columbus Air Force Base and was ending in New Orleans.

"We are here to appreciate naval aviation," Clive told me. "In the 1960s aviation was a big mystery. Everything was kept so hush, hush when it came to military aircraft. So that really drew my attention. You could find out information about civilian aircraft, but military aircraft was a mystery."

Clive made his first trip to the United States in 1977. "We went to the bone yard in Arizona and it was just spectacular," he said as his eyes lit up.

I attempted to speak with one of the Japanese members, Katsuhiko Hirasawa, but it was a little more difficult to communicate. He understood everything I was saying, but it was difficult to understand some of his words. I have to say the Japanese aviation enthusiasts were very courteous and thanked me several times for allowing them to visit the base.

The Netherlands and French groups were lead by Jurgen van Toor who was no stranger to the United States. In fact, Jurgen is no stranger to NAS Meridian making trips here in November 1995 and May 2004.

"I was fortunate to visit Meridian two times before, but my friends have never been to the base. A simple walk along the flight line would really make our day," he said.

And it was the group from The Netherlands who asked if they could come back the next day because they had a break in their schedules. I said it shouldn't be a problem at all, and they were thrilled.

The group included Paul Betten and his 19-year old son, Dennis, who I have to say were my favorites to chat with. The Bettens are from the city of Sneek in The Netherlands and it was their first trip to Mississippi.

When you think of the Netherlands, many Americans think of blonde hair, blue eye, fair skin and very attractive people – this father-son team were no exception. They were very handsome and loved to talk about aviation.

When it was time to go, Paul said his trip to NAS Meridian was "super and superb."

I could not agree more!