

Art's Tour at Cherry Point

Feb. 12, 2007

In January of this year, 2007, I wrote to the Commanding Officer of the Marine Attack Squadron, VMA-231, (the Ace of Spades Squadron) based at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, North Carolina, asking if he would be interested in historical memorabilia of that particular squadron. After three weeks I was about to give up when I received a very nice letter from a 1st Lieutenant Brian Gerschutz. In the letter I was invited to visit the squadron. Anne said that inasmuch as the squadron was to deploy to Iraq around the first of March, we could go over for a few days. A few emails and phone calls firmed up a schedule for a tour.



On Monday, February 12 we arrived at the squadron area at 10 am. After a cell phone call, we were met by Lieutenant Gerschutz. To get into the working area it was necessary to pass through a multi tiered turnstile and could pass only upon the insertion of a key card into a receptacle. Only one person per each insertion was allowed. Brian came through the gate and, using his card, got us through the fence, one at a time. When inside we took time to shake hands and make our greetings. As is rather common, matters were a little formal until Anne

cracked the ice and from there on everyone was totally relaxed.

Security is very, very tight. When entering the main gate of the air station there are many security blocks that would stop anything short of an Abrams tank and there is a sentry with orders to start shooting at anyone attempting to violate the security measures. Shoot to kill is the order. It is impossible to enter the squadron area without having the proper key card to insert in a slot to permit the passage of only one person. Brian got us into the area and took us to their coffer snack bar where we had a cup of coffee and talked for a short bit. I was just starting to show him the collection of pictures I had brought when people started showing up in the room, as though someone had rung a bell.

They were all pilots and in flight suits. The squadron's CO, Lt. Col. Brian P. Annichiarico, came in with a group of pilots. There was also a major and a captain whose names escape me. There were so many I met, it was difficult to remember all of them. The pictures, apparently elicited considerable interest, perhaps because none of them had ever flown a piston powered, propeller plane nor seen planes of the type on the pictures. They were astounded at some of the things I mentioned about operations during the war. At one point, they could hardly believe it when I told them how pilots managed their oxygen at high altitudes. There were quite a few questions and I answered them as best I could. I was quite flattered at the attention, something totally unexpected. During the snack bar session Anne was busily taking pictures and chatting with some of the men.



After the period in the snack bar, we went to their hanger. Someone sent word ahead to "power up" one of the planes and when we entered the hangar there was a Harrier, AVHB -2, one of the so called jump jets, with a power cable attached and several internal systems operating (just for our visit). Lt. Gerschutz showed me around the plane explaining the features in my language which pleased me. There was a maintenance stand with steps and I was given a safety helmet to wear when I ascended the stand to look into the cockpit.



Lt. Gerschutz gave me a 'Cook's Tour' of the cockpit and I must admit it was mind boggling although as he explained, much of it made logic. But it was still mind boggling, trying, even remotely, to compare it to the planes in that squadron during World War II. The cockpit is a mass of levers, buttons, controls, computer readouts and displays. I think the most advanced development to increase pilot efficiency is the HUD, (Heads Up Display) which is a slanted glass screen directly in line with the pilot's vision on which

can be shown so many things that make it unnecessary for the pilot to look down to see, such as air speed, altitude, different engine functions, angle of attack, vicarious temperatures etc. These readings are viewed at a touch of different buttons. Something I had never heard of before was a 4x4 screen to the right of the HUD on which the pilot can display mission, armament load and a host of other aircraft related matter. One might ask, "Well, if he has to be keeping his eyes on the horizon so much of the time how can he determine which buttons to push to show different readings on the screen"? The answer is that all pilots, before they are permitted to fly the plane, must undergo a rigid "blindfold cockpit checkout". This checkout requires that the pilot know, without looking, where everything is located. I was quite satisfied to see the old standard Martin Baker ejection seat still in use although many improvement modifications have been made since I instructed classes on the seat. It has saved many lives.

It might be said here that the plane I was being shown was the Commanding Officer's plane and was undergoing modifications by civilian field teams from Boeing, the contractor who makes about 80% of the plane. During the time I was getting the scoop on the plane the civilians had to stand back and when I was through they came back and went to work again. I think Anne heard one of them say that I must have been some kind of general or something. She talked to him and told him a little about me. The young man was impressed.

There were two external fuel tanks which, I believe are more or less permanently attached to their pylons. I asked what the capacity was and was told about 2200 pounds! It seems that jet pilots think in terms of pounds rather than gallons of fuel. However, for those tanks I would guess about 330 gallons each and I have no idea what the internal fuel capacity might be. There was what I at first thought was a rocket on a launch rail but it turns out that it was FLEERS. I don't know what the acronym in total means but the first two letters mean Forward Looking---. I was told that package could "see" many things and transmit that information to other planes or to ground stations for intelligence purposes. When my 'august presence' terminated a very elaborate engine powered vehicle moved in and VERY carefully raised a cradle under that unit and after detaching it, lowered the FLEERS away from the plane. It was satisfying to see the care the crew took to insure no damage to the unit. I was shown all the jets that control the flight of the plane. If I counted properly there are eight of them.

I could go on and on but at the very least I was extremely impressed by the plane shown me. The lift thrusters and controls were considerably different than I had mentally pictured. I was shown how lateral and longitude stability was managed during hovering through various jets. Interestingly the movement of the rudder also moved jets below it to provide rotation while hovering. The Harrier was quite a bit larger than I had envisioned. I would estimate it was all of twelve feet from floor to the top of the area behind the



cockpit canopy. The wings were anhedral, the opposite of dihedral and not very large so far as surface area is concerned. My overall impression was that it was a very heavy plane and very solid. When I asked what seemed to be the general confidence level of the pilots, Brian replied that it was very good.

We returned to the main building and then to another room where some of their historical matter was kept. There were two pilots seated at computers, apparently boning up on the plane. Brian's wife, 18 month old daughter and his mother came in and we chatted for a while. Brian found a pile of loose photos. Anne sat and started going through them and LO, there was one of ME. I have not idea how it came to be in there. I tendered my thanks to Brian and others around and we began bidding our goodbyes. From there we went to the area where the O'Club had been before it was bulldozed down. Many memories went down with that building

This was a day I will remember even though my gray matter tends to let things like that drift.

They were a great group of young men, Marines all.
Semper Fi.

