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Airmen, cadets get 'tattooed' in England

By David Edwards
Academy Spirit Staff Writer

U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. -- Several Airmen from the Air Force Academy recently spent a couple of days getting "tattooed" — and they traveled all the way to England for it.

If that revelation conjures up images of ink, needles and skin, picture instead military aircraft, awed spectators and skies over the British Isles.

This Tattoo is actually an airshow. Not just any airshow, mind you, but the Royal International Air Tattoo, recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest military airshow in the world.

No less of an authority than Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin has called it the best airshow around. And retired Gen. John Jumper, former Chief of Staff of the Air Force, said, "This is my favorite airshow. I am always proud to come back."

They'll get no argument from Capt. Dan Walker and the group he led to Royal Air Force Fairford. The Academy contingent featured representatives from the 306th Flying Training Group.

"The scale when we got there was enormous," said Cadet 1st Class Pat Gill of Cadet Squadron 37. "Taking off and performing my demo in front of 200,000 people, that's not something I'm going to forget anytime soon."

Servicemembers from dozens of countries participate in the Tattoo, and the U.S. Air Force is well established there. This year also marked the 70th anniversary of the World War II Battle of Britain, and officials commemorated those dark days with a stirring display of period aircraft, including German Messerschmitts.

Academy seniors from two squadrons received rock-star treatment during and after their displays of glider and parachuting prowess. They brought with them a TG-10C aerobatic glider and a C-17 Globemaster III from which the eight parachutists in the 98th Flying Training Squadron jumped during their demonstration.

In addition, Capt. Jack Nelson of the 557th FTS manned a static display of a T-52A, known commercially as the DA-40. The plane was provided by Austrian company Diamond Air. Captain Nelson's exhibit was visited by many thousands of people, all of whom were "very into it," he said.

“This was a great way to get the word out about our programs, and also a great way to reward our most deserving cadets,” Captain Nelson said.

The Tattoo also provided the Academy with a lot of firsts — “too many to count,” Cadet Gill said. Captain Walker said that as far as he knows, this was the first time the Academy had participated in the Tattoo, and it was also the first time the cadets had even heard of the event.

Unfortunately for the cadets, the weather in Fairford on the second of the two scheduled performance days was, well, English. So they took full advantage of a beautiful Saturday.

“We had to make that one count,” said Cadet 1st Class Keenan Ryner of CS 04, spokesman for the Air Force Wings of Blue Parachute Demonstration Team. Their C-17 made two passes of four jumpers each, and the parachutists’ path back to the plane took them right into the crowd, which heaped adulation on them.

Besides the performances, the cadets and their commanders were surrounded by their fellows in the militaries of a diverse array of countries, such as Jordan and host Great Britain. They eagerly mingled with their new friends and found themselves trading questions and answers frequently.

“It was almost a culture shock because we’re used the way we do things here in America,” Cadet Ryner said. “I’d pay money to go see that airshow. We really hope we (the Academy cadets) get invited back.”

All of the group’s members enjoyed the commemoration of the Battle of Britain, too. Cadet Gill said it was a bit surreal to see Nazi swastikas in contemporary Europe. Warplanes flew in tight formation, and the portrayal concluded with the German and British planes flying together in a show of solidarity.

The Academy representatives enjoyed their experience at the Tattoo so thoroughly that they ran out of superlatives to describe it.

“I was extremely impressed with how it was set up, and the hospitality was outstanding,” Captain Walker said. “It was like everybody was there just to see you.”

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