



John Belts (left), the Beaufort airport manager and member of the Carteret County Aviation Association, shows off his homebuilt bi-wing aircraft to (from right) Cpl. Tyler Wilson, Kara Wilson, Lance Cpl. Derek Regier and Lance Cpl. Mitchell Newell. Cherry Point air traffic controllers and their families were invited to a fly-in and fish fry Sept. 20 by the CCAA in appreciation for ATC's support of local flights.

## Air traffic controllers fly out at fly-in

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To many air traffic controllers working below the tower in a dark, windowless room lit primarily by glowing radar screens, the aviators that they serve are merely blips on a glass panel.

To aviators, those controllers are nothing more than a reassuring voice coming out of the tiny speakers in their headsets.

The distance between them could be measured in miles, wavelengths or even — faith. In any case, the actual humans on the other side of those brief electronic impulses can seem as far away as the moon.

But once in a while, that gap is closed, like it was Sept. 20, when air traffic controllers from Cherry Point spent the morning meeting, flying and eating with members of the Carteret County Aviation Association in Beaufort, N.C.

"We really appreciate these guys and all they do to support us," said Pete Beswick, a member of the CCAA who was involved in inviting the controllers to the fly-in and fish fry at Michael J. Smith Field.

"They're the guys who keep us from hanging into each other in the clouds," added Beswick. "They are professional, courteous and helpful."

For the controllers, it was more than just an opportunity to match faces to the voices that they talk to on the radio. It was the chance to get up in the air and experience some of the same conditions that they help pilots deal with on a regular basis.

The wind was stiff and cool that morning, steady enough from the northeast to point the airfield's windsocks toward the old Civil War fort on the eastern tip of Bogue Banks. The clouds that blanketed the field provided the perfect opportunity for pilots to practice a few instrument approaches, one of the main reasons pilots and air traffic controllers talk in the first place.

On the ground, many of the nearly 50 controllers and family members eagerly awaited their turns as at least eight local pilots offered free rides. Some just circled the field while others took relatively short hops out to the Cape Lookout lighthouse, nearby Fort Macon and sandy stretches of beach on the Atlantic shoreline. Afterward, the guests examined many of the various aircraft staged on the field for the event — everything from vintage personal aircraft to a homebuilt bi-winger to one of the most modern and ex-

pensive four-seat airplanes built today. The event concluded with free food and good conversation served fresh on the edge of the flight line, where parked airplanes rested, their engines still warm from the morning's activities.

Many of the visiting controllers shared the same reaction from their time separated from terra firma. "It was good to see it from their point of view instead of just looking at blips on a screen," said Pfc. John Staffenhagen, a Cherry Point radar trainee. Unlike his fellow trainee, Pfc. Nicholas Leathers, this was Staffenhagen's first time in a small airplane. But both enjoyed the rare opportunity just the same.

Sgt. Douglas Marshall, an ATC tower supervisor at Cherry Point, was no stranger to the Beaufort airport. He was one of the air traffic controllers who worked from a temporary tower here in July 2006 during the town's Pepsi Sail tall ship visit, providing tower services to heavy traffic at this otherwise nontowered airfield. He has attended other similar events, but still enjoyed "being on the other end to see the aircraft that he is usually talking to."

This wasn't the first time Cherry Point controllers were invited to share food and swap stories with the Beaufort fliers, but, according to Frank Hauman, longtime CCAA member, it was the first time they were offered rides.

"It won't be the last time either," said Beswick as association members packed up picnic ware and waved to parting guests.

For a little while, at least, these local fliers and Cherry Point's air traffic controllers will be more than just blips and voices on the other end of a brief electronic transmission.



Corporals Tyler Wilson and Casey Todd, Cherry Point air traffic controllers, get a bird's eye view of flight operations from the back seat of a Beechcraft Bonanza. As guests of the Carteret County Aviation Association recently, many Cherry Point controllers had the opportunity to become part of the small blips that they often see on their radar screens.

Harold Juhl, a member of the Carteret County Aviation Association, briefs Cherry Point air traffic controllers and family members about air operations at Michael J. Smith Field in Beaufort, N.C. Local pilots spent the morning showing their thanks for Cherry Point's "courteous and professional" interaction during flights in the area.



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