Sixty Hours With the U.S. Air Force

About a month ago, I received an invitation to spend nearly three days with the U.S. Air Force, and in particular the Air Force Space Command, traveling across the nation and visiting air bases in Colorado, Virginia and Florida. I consulted with Outrigger’s Military Liaison, Mildred Courtney, who strongly urged me to take the time to go on the trip. “It will be the experience of a lifetime,” she said. I took her advice and I am certainly glad I did.

The trip began a little over a week ago at Peterson Air Force Base (AFB) in Colorado Springs where I reported bright and early on Thursday morning for a briefing prior to boarding an aircraft. The transport for our small group was a 49-year old KC-135 Stratotanker, similar to an old Boeing 707 airliner – but not intended for passengers. An aerial “gas station” with limited seating, its main mission is to refuel other aircraft in mid-air. In fact, that’s what we did while flying to Langley AFB, Virginia. A couple of F-15 fighter jets pulled up below and behind us, where they were skillfully refueled by an Airman maneuvering a boom from a small rear-facing cockpit located below our tail section.

At Langley AFB, we had a series of briefings on the organization and missions of the Air Force and its Space Command. We also had a chance to learn about and see the F-22 Raptor, America’s newest and most advanced stealth fighter. Bad weather forced a last-minute cancellation of a scheduled flight to demonstrate its phenomenal maneuverability and air combat capabilities, but we did get a chance to see the plane close up and talk to the pilot. (To see it fly, check out www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnU1xyB9Ce0.) The Raptor is scheduled to operate out of Hickam AFB, in Honolulu, in the foreseeable future.

We passed our final day at Cape Canaveral, Florida, and learned firsthand about the Air Force’s involvement in the launching of a wide variety of satellites that circle the earth to provide critical communications, global positioning information, surveillance and missile detection. We spent a great deal of time with the commander of the base, Brig. Gen. Susan Helms, who kept us fascinated with stories of her five space flights and world-record eight-hour, 56-minute space walk. We also visited the neighboring Kennedy Space Center and had an opportunity to see the Space Shuttle Discovery, which was poised to take off on its flight to the International Space Station three days later.

The trip and the briefings brought home to me how different the Air Force is today from the one I almost joined 54 years ago. Its mission and operational reach go far into space, control of which is critical for so many things, ranging from on-the-ground military operations to everyday communications and financial transactions. As you read this article, our troops serving in Iraq and Afghanistan depend on functioning satellites for communication and coordination of support. Overhead, unmanned Predator aircraft, flown remotely by pilots in Nevada, conduct surveillance and bring firepower to bear with the help of satellite links.

Another thing that impressed me is the quality and dedication of the men and women serving our country. Called Airmen (the counterpart of Soldiers, Sailors and Marines), they represent the finest of our nation’s youth. Every one of them I encountered was bright, articulate, knowledgeable, and professional.

The third conclusion I came to was our nation must reinvest heavily in the Air Force in the coming years. Air dominance and control of space is vital for our nation if we are to survive as a bastion of freedom and remain a world leader. While it is great that new aircraft such as the F-22 Raptor are being delivered, the fact that the Air Force is still flying 50-year old, pre-Vietnam War KC-135 Stratotankers while Congress is earmarking billions of dollars on thousands of pork-barrel projects tells me our nation’s spending priorities need to be re-evaluated.

My thanks to all the Airmen who made my 60-hour visit so enjoyable and informative.