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Sun sets on T-34C at NASWF



VT-2 Commanding Officer Cmdr. John Hensel and student naval aviator 1st Lt. Sarah Horn celebrate after completing the final training flight of the T-34C at NAS Whiting Field on Thursday, April 19. U.S. Navy photo by Lt.j.g. Tim Mosso.

By Lt. j.g. Tim Mosso, NAS Whiting Field Public Affairs

Naval Air Station Whiting Field rendered a farewell salute to the T-34C Turbo Mentor on Thursday, April 19. The final student training flight in the venerable craft was witnessed and celebrated by over 100 guests from throughout the extended naval aviation community.

Training Squadron TWO Commanding Officer Cmdr. John Hensel and student naval aviator 1st Lt. Sarah Horn teamed to conclude thirty-five years of T-34C operations by the air station's Training Air Wing FIVE.

Following a triumphant flyover and a water-arch greeting from the base fire department, the air crew of T-34C number 266 disembarked amid a hero's welcome.

The day represented a significant milestone for the aircraft and its air crew alike. Both Hensel and Horn flew their valedictory flight as members of VT-2.

The following day, Hensel passed command of the VT-2 "Doerbirds" to Cmdr. Jennifer Whereatt. Horn, who completed her primary-phase training during the sortie,

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Hensel passes VT-2 to Whereatt

By Jay Cope, NAS Whiting Field Public Affairs

In front of the assembled family, friends, co-workers and fellow service members, Cmdr. John Hensel turned over command to Cmdr. Jennifer Whereatt following the completion of his one-year tour as commanding officer of Training Squadron TWO. The event was held in the Naval Air Station Whiting Field Atrium Friday, April 20 at 10 a.m.

The change of command ceremony dates back to the era of wooden ships, and is a time-honored Navy tradition that enables the crew to see the formal exchange of duties between officers. Retired Navy Capt. Michael Szostak, the guest speaker for the event, alluded to the importance of the ceremony during his remarks.

"Its purpose is founded in the seamless passing of the leadership and responsibility for a unit from one outstanding officer to another. This ceremony also though,



Cmdr. John Hensel and Cmdr. Jennifer Whereatt exchange the Training Squadron TWO command pennant signifying the transfer of command from Hensel to Whereatt April 20. U.S. Navy photos by Jay Cope.

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T-34C Sundown

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was moved by the experience and the community's embrace of the occasion.

"I'm honored; clearly, the aircraft means so much to so many people here. It was incredible," Horn reflected.

The T-34C served as the Navy's principal primary-phase training platform in a career that spanned five decades. During that time, students and their instructors compiled over 2.8 million flight hours. For many, the T-34C represented their first experience with aviation.

Generations of naval aviators gathered on the flight line to mark the departure of the machine that launched their careers. Local men, women, their sons, and their daughters played succeeding roles in the maintenance and operational support of the aircraft during its long association with the region.

Addressing the assembled T-34C community, TRAWING-5 Commodore Col. James Grace acknowledged the cumulative contributions of all personnel who played a hand in the Turbo Mentor's mission – both aloft and on the ground.

"There are a few maintainers in the crowd who were here in November of 1977 when the first T-34C arrived at Whiting... the maintenance of this aircraft has been second to none!

"If only these aircraft could talk and tell us about the thousands of pilots who took their first flight in the T-34C: the anxiety, fear, fright, and excitement. The legacy of the T-34C will live on as long as there are pilots who flew them and maintainers who kept them flying," Grace said.

TRAWING-5 hosted a number of T-34C "plank owners" or first-generation pilots on the day of the final flight. Several of these veteran flight instructors reflected on the Turbo Mentor's sundown celebration by recalling the model's heyday.

Retired Marine Maj. Bob Kashur, now a United Airlines pilot and local resident, described the spectacle of flight operations at the peak of the airframe's operational career in West Florida.

"I still remember that over Pensacola and the surrounding area there were upwards of 250 T-34s, and the skies were black with these aircraft. On any given day at

Whiting Field, it was the sheer number of these planes that struck you.

"When you would taxi out to the [NAS Whiting Field North Field] hub, you'd have twenty to thirty T-34s in a row at the hold-short line. We were graduating maybe 350-400 students per year per squadron back then; today we're doing about 700 between the three squadrons," Kashur recalled.

Continuity was a recurring theme of Hensel's address



The NAS Whiting Field Fire Department salutes the return of the air station's final T-34C student training flight Thursday, April 19. VT-2 Commanding Officer Cmdr. John Hensel and student 1st Lt. Sarah Horn conducted the historic flight. U.S. Navy photo by Lt. j.g. Tim Mosso.

to the assembly. Standing before the crowd, he marveled at how the scenes of the day bore an uncanny resemblance to photographs of the first T-34C's fall 1977 arrival at the air station.

Against a backdrop of the North Field flight line, replete with new T-6B

Texan IIs and weathered Turbo Mentors, Hensel described the parallels evident around him.

"In the photographs of that day, there was the new T-34, and in the background you can see the old T-28s awaiting obsolescence; you can see the people gathered to watch; you can even see the cake they had," Hensel related.

Over 22,600 student military aviators completed primary-phase flight training in the T-34C. The total includes pilots from several branches of the U.S. armed forces, many allied nations, and combat veterans of conflicts from the Cold War through Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Although the pilots, the missions, and the times changed, the standard of success for training operations has remained ironclad. In his concluding remarks, Hensel emphasized the constant that has endured from the dawn of T-34C era through the arrival of the new T-6.

"Then and now, success means a quality sortie safely flown."

Be sure to check out NAS Whiting Field's Facebook fan page for additional information, photos and more -- <https://www.facebook.com/#!/naswhitingfield>