





*"Pilot For A Day"*  
*Alex Langlee*

**DANGER**  
THIS AIRPLANE CONTAINS  
EJECTION SEATS,  
CANOPY REMOVERS  
AND EXPLOSIVE  
CHARGES. SEE  
T.O.-2 FOR  
INSTRUCTIONS.



# Pilots for a Day

A FEW months after he received his wings at Randolph AFB, Texas, Alex Langlee's luck ran out. He was not the victim of a training accident or a casualty in some contingency operation. For Alex, a malignant hepatoma—in other words, liver cancer—was the enemy. He was six years old.

Alex was one of many youngsters who have "joined" the Air Force under Randolph's "Pilot for a Day" program, which brings chronically ill children to the base one at a time for a brief taste of Air Force life.

What began as a grassroots project by one pilot at Randolph has spread to several other bases. The format varies by installation, but the objective remains the same: Give youngsters an unforgettable experience and, if only for a moment, help them get their minds off of the diseases that dominate their lives.

The procedure is simple. Each child is invited to spend a full day at the base, is welcomed like a visiting general, outfitted in gear like a pilot's, allowed to sit in the cockpit of an airplane, and given a "flight" in a simulator.

Alex Langlee may have realized deep down that it was all make-believe, but he had been as proud of his short Air Force career as any pilot who ever trained at Randolph. On one of the last days that he was able to attend school, he had insisted on wearing the tiny flight suit he had been given at Randolph. He was particularly proud of the patch

proclaiming him a member of the 560th Flying Training Squadron.

## How It Began

The idea of bringing such children to the base for their special day originated with then-Capt. Rory Blackburn, a giant of a man known as "Ox" in the 560th, where he was a pilot at the time.

In 1994, Blackburn's wife had been hospitalized and, visiting her, the captain had seen youngsters whose lives had been taken over by their chronic, often fatal, illnesses. Thinking that some might benefit from a little special attention, he developed the idea of bringing them and their families to the base and making them honorary members of the squadron known as the "Chargin' Cheetahs."

It was not an altogether unprecedented concept. Open houses and VIP visits long have been routine at US Air Force installations throughout the world, and individual USAF members traditionally have been involved in community projects from the Boy Scouts to athletic programs for underprivileged children. Blackburn simply put these elements together and came up with a plan to single out a few chronically ill children and, for a few hours, make them the center of attention.

He sent letters to a number of agencies that dealt with young cancer patients. Several agencies showed interest and soon the program was up and running.

Social workers helped select children who were both seriously ill and had evinced an interest in aviation. The squadron did the rest.

“These children usually end up spending more time in the hospital than they do with their families and friends,” Blackburn later remarked. “We were trying to ease the pain of losing a childhood, ... to give back a little something after they’ve had so many things taken away from them.”

The captain played host to the first several children. When he moved on to another assignment and, eventually, to a civilian airline, other pilots carried on the tradition at Randolph. Capt. Phillip Johnson, also a pilot with the 560th, now coordinates the visits, handles the logistics, and hosts many of the visiting youngsters.

From the start, Pilot for a Day has been a volunteer project, sanctioned but not financially underwritten by the Air Force. At Randolph, most funding comes from the Officers’ Wives Club and the chapel fund. Squadron personnel donate their time to man static displays, demonstrate equipment, and otherwise entertain the young guests.

Typically, a child’s day begins with “suiting up.” The child is issued a scaled-down flight suit, flight cap, and scarf, along with a set of “wings” and squadron patches. The young “pilot” then tours the squadron, meets its commander or another representative, and visits the

life-support facility to try on a parachute and oxygen mask.

### In “Combat”

A tour of the flight line usually follows. The child sees aircraft (a variety of training airplanes and a C-21) on static display. Each airplane has the child’s name painted on the side, below the cockpit. A pilot from the 560th stands by each aircraft to answer questions and help the youngster climb into the airplane. The child is encouraged to sit in the cockpit, feel the controls, and do what youngsters do best—pretend they are pursuing the Red Baron or his Star Wars counterpart.

The children’s medical conditions preclude their making actual flights, but, after lunching with members of the squadron, they experience the next best thing. In the simulator facility, they “fly” missions in a T-1, T-37, or T-38, often losing themselves in the virtual reality of the high-tech trainers. For a few minutes, they play with what, to an active youngster, must seem like the ultimate video game.

The whole day is designed to make the child feel like part of the unit, said Johnson. “We have their names on the marquee at the gate when they enter. We do a fire station tour where they can get into the trucks and squirt the water. We take them to the [aircraft control] tower so they can watch airplanes come and go and turn on lights.

They visit the Taj Mahal [Randolph’s ornate headquarters building] and ride the old elevator.”

Johnson added, “I have had letters from the moms telling how much the kids appreciated their day.” One told him that her son had passed on and was buried in his flight suit.

“These are great kids and it’s terrible to think what will happen to many of them,” he said, “but we love to have them come. We have a Pilot for a Day wall in our squadron with pictures of them and the host pilots. We don’t forget them.”

After leaving Randolph in 1997, Blackburn was assigned to the 77th Fighter Squadron, known as “The Gamblers,” at Shaw AFB, S.C. He promptly organized a “Fighter Pilot for a Day” program there.

The Shaw program closely follows the Randolph model but it has acquired some local embellishments. One is the presentation of a squadron coin to each of the pilots for a day. In the tradition of the World War II “short snorter,” squadron members are supposed to produce their coins when challenged. If one isn’t carrying it, the member is obliged to buy a drink for the challenger.

The first guest pilot at Shaw was 9-year-old Heston Zeller. He had been under treatment for two years for neuroblastoma, a cancer that attacks nerves and bones. Heston received his coin from Maj. David Minto, squadron operations officer, who explained its significance. Later that day, the boy dug it out when he met Col. Chuck Rogers, then—vice commander of the parent 20th Fighter Wing. When the colonel could not come up with his matching coin, he bought the boy a soda.

Shaw also has the advantage of having simulators that duplicate the actions of a real fighter. Heston not only “flew” the ground-bound F-16 but reportedly scored a few hits on enemy aircraft in the process.

### The Idea Spreads

Other bases heard about the program at Randolph and asked for particulars with an eye toward setting up their own. At least half a dozen installations in the US and overseas now host pilots for a day.

At Charleston AFB, S.C., however, the program developed in a different

USAF photo by TSgt. Brian Jones



*In the cockpit as a pilot for a day at Charleston AFB, S.C., nine-year-old Eric Thompson had a chance for a little while to think about something other than his illness, sickle-cell anemia.*

way. Capt. Brian Doyle, a pilot with the 17th Airlift Squadron, remembers.

"In September 1997," the captain said, "SSgt. Brian Williams and I were talking, and we agreed we wanted to do more charity work. We were living pretty well and it was time to give something back. The more we talked, the more we felt that we could do something right at the base and the idea for pilot for a day resulted.

"Sergeant Williams had heard something about a program at Randolph, but he didn't know how it worked so we pretty much built our own program from scratch. We contacted the Children's Hospital at the Medical University of South Carolina. They put us in touch with one of their child-life specialists, a person involved with helping kids adjust to long stays in the hospital. He set up the arrangements at that end."

Since then, the process has become a familiar routine. About every two months, Doyle contacts the Medical University and says the base is ready to host another child. The hospital makes the selection and has the family complete a questionnaire, giving information on the child's illness, physical and dietary restrictions, and interests, including favorite foods.

With help from TSgt. Brian Jones, a community relations advisor in the base's Public Affairs Office, Doyle works out the logistics for the day. About two weeks in advance, Doyle phones the child and the family to explain the plans. "I like to get to know them and answer any questions they have," said the captain. "Sometimes it's a little daunting for a 6- or 7-year-old to show up at a big base and meet 100 people he has never seen before. I think it helps to read them in on the plans."

The plans also include any siblings the selected child may have. "We encourage them to bring their brothers and sisters along," said Doyle. "The philosophy is that siblings may not always get as much attention as the sick child so we make this their day, too. The [sick] child is the center of it, of course, but we don't want the other kids to feel left out."

For all the youngsters, there are ample souvenirs of the day. As it ends, they are loaded up with stickers, T-shirts, posters, and other mementos donated by base and tenant organizations.

The main out-of-pocket expenses for the program are lunch for the visitors



USAF photo by TSgt. Brian Jones

**Leukemia patient Chris Banks, 12, also became a pilot for a day at Charleston. The base is one of several that have helped chronically ill children with an interest in aviation enjoy a day of being an Air Force VIP.**

and the pilot's wings for the youngster. At Charleston, these are underwritten by the 17th AS Enlisted Fund. Transportation and other forms of support are provided by base public affairs, as they would be for any base tour or open house.

So far, 12 children, ages 7 to 15, have been through the program. Their illnesses have included liver failure, heart disease, leukemia, sickle-cell anemia, and cystic fibrosis. Doyle acts as host on most visits, but he has been encouraging other pilots to take on the role so the program will go on when he is not there.

### North to Alaska

In 1998, the Pilot for a Day program moved north. Inspired by the Randolph example, the 354th Fighter Wing at Eielson AFB, Alaska, wanted to do something similar. Capt. Joe Porrazze and SSgt. Julie Grippo developed the local program, but, rather than limit it to a single squadron, they decided that the Eielson "day" should involve the whole wing.

The result was a basewide effort with various squadrons taking turns to act as hosts for a given day. Last summer, for example, the 355th Fighter Squadron, welcomed 6-year-old cerebral palsy victim Joshua Coffey. Capt. Rich Beavers acted as his "wing man" for the day, introducing him to the unit's A-10s.

Joshua's day at Eielson included sitting in real airplanes and flying

simulators, visiting the control tower and fire department, and meeting the base's four-legged K-9 patrol.

As at Randolph, each of the children is outfitted in a model flight suit. Those at Eielson receive not only pilot's wings but also first lieutenant bars. Nor does the pilot's day end when the child leaves the base. Every year, the wing invites its former guests back to the annual open house and "promotes" them to the next higher grade. In 1998, the Thunderbirds officiated at the promotion ceremony.

Recent Eielson pilots for a day have included Amber Stephenson, an 11-year-old with a heart defect, and 12-year-old Elizabeth Vukmir, with a growth-stunting genetic disease.

In one case, Eielson could not play host to a child on its schedule. Zac Hansen, son of a base noncommissioned officer, was taken to McChord AFB, Wash., shortly before he was to have his day, so Eielson asked folks at McChord to substitute. Maj. Tim Zadalis of McChord's 62nd Operations Support Squadron picked up the ball. He presented Zac with a pilot's scarf and other gifts and arranged for him to "command" a refueling flight.

Air National Guard Capt. Gil Delgado read about the Randolph program in an Air Force press release and began shaping a similar Pilot for a Day program at the 184th Bomb Wing, an ANG unit at McConnell AFB, Kan. Delgado is a weapons systems operator on the wing's B-1 bombers.

"I read about the program at Randolph on the Internet," said Delgado. "I called Capt. Rory Blackburn on the phone and picked his brain about the contacts he made to get the program up and running. We followed his lead but personalized ours a little."

Each month, the 184th invites a seriously ill youngster to enjoy VIP status and bring along the child's family and a few friends. In December 1999, Teasha Decaire, a 14-year-old leukemia patient, was the honoree.

### Ranking Officer

With friends from Grace Baptist Church, Teasha was welcomed by Col. Ed McIlhenny, wing commander, who promptly made the girl an honorary brigadier general and, for the moment, ranking officer in the unit. She was dressed in her flight suit and issued a flight cap with a single star on it.

Capt. Scott Waddell, helps Delgado with the program and serves as host for some visits. "We work with several local hospitals," Waddell said. "Each is assigned a specific time during the year. As their month comes up, the hospital selects the child and we work with the youngster and the parents on the plans."

The 184th BW experience includes a tour of the 127th Bomb Squadron, an introduction to the fire station's canine mascot, and a visit to life support, where the child is fitted for the day with a helmet and harness and briefed on egress procedures.

"After the static displays," said Waddell, "we take them to the runway where, usually, two jets will take off, circle, and do an honorary flyby. The kid gets to talk to the pilots on the radio."

The guest pilot, parents, and friends then are treated to a special meal before moving on to the B-1 simulator. For Teasha Decaire the meal was donated by a local pizzeria. The day ends with presentation of an honorary unit member certificate to the child and lithographs from the squadron and the Thunderbirds.

In July 1998, Tinker AFB, Okla., also heard of the Randolph program and used it as a model for its own effort. Tinker's first guest was Jimmy Reyes, 13, a leukemia patient at Children's Hospital of Oklahoma and son of a man stationed at the base. With Maj. Pat Penland and Capt. Kurt Birmingham

of the 10th Flight Test Squadron as his escort officers, Jimmy received his flight suit, toured the fire station and tower, got a weather briefing, and flew the E-3 simulator. Since then, Tinker has scheduled quarterly pilot for a day visits.

In 1997, Air Force Television News followed Jason Moon, an 11-year-old with a congenital heart defect, through his tour as pilot for a day at Whiteman AFB, Mo. The base, home of the 509th Bomb Wing, hosted four youngsters that year but then had to suspend its program due to its high operations tempo.

"The last two years have been pretty busy for us," said TSgt. Dee Ann Poole, with 509th public affairs. The wing, which flies B-2 stealth bombers, has been involved in a number of operations, including action in the Balkans. "We just didn't have the people to keep up the Pilot for a Day program," said Poole.

However, the base plans to revive the tradition soon. "We expect to host another child during the first quarter of 2000," Poole said. As in the past, visits will include tours of the B-2, base operations, the weather shop, the tower, and the fire department. The young pilots will find their names on one of the airplanes as they do at other bases. At Whiteman, however, the names will be on removable plates that the children can take home with them.

Whiteman's program is spearheaded by the 509th Operations Support Squadron, but it is a wing effort supported by volunteers from all units.

### Sneak Previews at Whiteman

While Whiteman had to suspend its Pilot for a Day program, it managed to host some special visitors another way, by offering a sneak preview of its annual air shows to seniors and disabled persons. The day before the shows opened to the general public, the special guests are given a VIP tour of the base's B-2 stealth bomber and other displays.

Other bases that don't have ongoing programs also have hosted children who are referred to them by the Make-a-Wish Foundation of America, a national, non-

profit organization supporting seriously ill children. Make-a-Wish has 81 local chapters across the country.

One unit involved was the 116th Bomb Wing of the Georgia ANG. When that unit deployed to Nellis AFB, Nev., last summer, it entertained 35 such children all in one day. The visit, organized by SSgt. Tracy Tharpe, included a tour of the wing's B-1 aircraft, souvenir T-shirts for all the children, and a pizza and snow cone party.

Make-a-Wish Foundation also works with the Thunderbirds to host children at bases where the T-birds fly demonstrations. The team invites local Make-a-Wish chapters to send children with life-threatening diseases and their families to their flight shows in select cities. The special guests meet the pilots, tour the airplanes, take photos, and collect autographs from team members.

Said Christina L. Carmony, public relations manager for the foundation, "We're pleased to partner with the Thunderbirds and grateful for the warmth and generosity extended by the pilots to the families and children."

Charleston AFB teamed with Make-a-Wish Foundation in one instance to find its pilot for a day. Paul Smiley from Northern Ireland spent a week in the US under that group's sponsorship and, during the week, received VIP treatment at the South Carolina base.

At Eglin AFB, Fla., F-15 pilot Maj. Brett Loyd also drew on the Randolph example to found a program for the 40th Flight Test Squadron. In late 1997, the unit welcomed its first guest pilot, a 4-year-old with a rare form of muscle cancer.

Pictures of the event show Michael "Flash" Dosedel manning the cockpit of a fighter, his head bald from cancer treatments and his surgical mask lowered briefly for the photo op. If only for a day, he was a full-fledged member of the 40th.

When a local reporter asked if Michael would be allowed to keep his child-size flight suit, Loyd asked, "Would you like to try and take it away from him?" ■

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*Bruce D. Callander, a regular contributor to Air Force Magazine, served tours of active duty during World War II and the Korean War. In 1952, he joined Air Force Times, serving as editor from 1972 to 1986. His most recent story for Air Force Magazine, "New Rules on Dual Compensation," appeared in the January 2000 issue.*