



‘Pilot for a Day,’ *Memories for a Lifetime*

Program offers kids with serious illnesses a chance to see military life up close.

Story and Photos by Sgt. 1st Class Jon Soucy

National Guard Bureau



Air Force Lt. Col. Chris Hardgrave, an F-16 pilot with the 121st Fighter Squadron, talks with Kayla Kiley, visiting the squadron as part of the Pilot for a Day program for seriously ill children held at Andrews Air Force Base.

THE flight suit she wore at Andrews AFB was a little too big for her, so the pant legs had to be rolled up to keep from touching the ground.

But as she strode into the headquarters of the 121st Fighter Squadron of the District of Columbia Air National Guard, those assembled to meet her sounded off with a loud call to “Attention!”

For Kayla Kiley, it may have been the first time the room

was called to attention for her, but it wouldn’t be the last time during her visit here on Thursday.

Kiley, a 10-year-old from Waldorf, Maryland battling cancer, was a guest on the base as part of the Pilot for a Day program, headed up by the D.C. Air Guard’s 201st Airlift Squadron.

“Pilot for a Day is a program designed to bring cheer and happiness to children who are suffering from chronic illnesses that need a lift up,” said Maj. Susanne Schulz, a pilot with the

201st who heads up the program at Andrews. "It's what we can do within our realm of ability to make a child happy for a day."

The program allows participants to meet and spend time with many of the different units stationed on the base. Kiley got hands-on time in an F-16 Fighting Falcon flight simulator and on-board many of the aircraft flown by Guard and Reserve units at the base.

"We pop them into a flight suit; we let them experience airplanes; we let them go into the control tower and they get to taxi in an airplane," said Schulz. "Anything that we do (as pilots), or think they might enjoy, we share with them."

The program was originally started at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, in 1994, said Schulz, and other bases followed, including Andrews in 2004.

"We modeled it off of one we saw at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base (Arizona)," said Schulz. "We knew we could do a good job with it, because Andrews Air Force Base is so robust with military activity and we wanted to do something that could give back to the community."

The program at Andrews has hosted 10 children so far, said Schulz, adding that they try and host two children each year.

There are also added elements to the program that bring participants back.

"One important thing to note is, we don't just bring the child on for Pilot for a Day for one day," said Schulz. "They're a member of our military family forever

and we bring them back annually for a reunion in conjunction with the Andrews Air Force Base Joint Service Open House."

The reunion at the open house usually attracts about six children, said Schulz.

"We bring the kids out and they get to meet each other," said Schulz. "And the families who are going through (similar) situations get to meet each other."

Quite a bit goes into planning a Pilot for a Day visit.

"The D.C. Guard is the overarching entity that brings it together," said Schulz. "You've got to coordinate with about 12 different entities."

One of them is Children's Hospital, which helps pair up interested families with the program's organizers.

"Children's Hospital speaks with the family to see if they'd be interested in doing it with the military," said Schulz. "They make sure the child has the proper physical abilities to participate at the

level at which they would have the most fun. It's pretty special and it's a good fit. Children's Hospital works really (well) with us."


Organizers do a lot of the preparations in their off-duty hours.

"We have to take time off from our regular jobs, and it's usually on our own time to put the day together," said Schulz.

"The program is my favorite thing I've done with the military," she said. "It is so rewarding to see the children smile and laugh and forget whatever illness they have."

And many family members feel the same way.

"It's really amazing seeing all this come together," said Kathy Kiley, Kayla's mother. "She's really happy and that's all that matters."

Kayla said her favorite part of the day was the time spent flying the F-16 simulator. "I liked it when I got to do the loop-de-loop," she said. 



Kayla Kiley looks out at the flight line at Andrews Air Force Base, while riding in a bus to visit the 121st Fighter Squadron.

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