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# DOCA

Defense Orientation Conference Association



## DOCA's Gulf Coast Visit Overview

February 2014

Forty four DOCA members migrated south last month in search of warmer climes and the opportunity to meet with our military at Hurlburt Field, Naval Air Station Pensacola and Eglin Air Force Base. In the midst of a rough winter the temperate coast of the Florida panhandle beckoned – unfortunately winter followed us there.

The week began auspiciously with an Executive Committee meeting Sunday, followed by a visit for all those assembled to the Naval Aviation Museum aboard NAS Pensacola. After exploring the incredible exhibits, we moved next door to the National Flight Academy for a reception and tour with officers from the air station. This extraordinary facility offers a unique learning experience for kids in grades 7 to 12 but it appeals to those of any age. From the moment you enter, the sights, sounds and smells make you feel as though you have just walked aboard an actual aircraft carrier. The simulators and classrooms are state of the art, and kids who attend the programs are immersed in shipboard life – living in bunk rooms, eating on the “Mess Deck,” etc. The flight simulators that they use are enclosed cockpits – video games on steroids. Our members explored all of this and, most importantly, had the opportunity to engage in one-on-one discussions with the leaders and trainers from the Navy's premier aviation training base.



On Monday morning, we traveled west about 45 minutes to Hurlburt Field, home of the U.S. Air Force 1<sup>st</sup> Special Operations Wing. Here we met with Colonel Bill West, the 1<sup>st</sup> SOW Commander and members of his team, and had the opportunity to get a close up look at both the CV-22 Osprey and the AC-130U gunship. It was a most impressive display, and was topped off by each member of our group being presented with a 105mm howitzer shell casing as a souvenir of our visit. Driving back through a setting sun on Navarre Beach, Gulf Islands National Seashore and Pensacola Beach, we had a brief respite to reflect on the exceptional young

professionals who train so hard and put their lives on the line regularly to be a part of our Air Force's Special Operations Forces.

The next day we made the short drive to historic Naval Air Station Pensacola once again, but this time to the headquarters building. Rear Admiral Mike White, Commander Naval Education and Training Command, Captain Keith Hoskins, Commanding Officer NAS Pensacola, and Captain John Jones all greeted us, despite an overcast sky and threatening weather. With steaming mugs of real Navy coffee in hand, we were enthralled by their tag-team presentation and frank responses to our questions. This was followed by a quick windshield tour of the base before Mother Nature intervened in our plans. The rain, which started to fall in mid-morning, was forecast to turn to ice. The Florida panhandle is understandably ill-equipped to deal with snow and freezing rain so all of the bases were shutting down and we retreated to our hotel.

The dusting of snow that greeted us the next morning seemed harmless enough but it was just enough to disguise the ice that covered everything. All the bases remained closed --- as well as the airport, bridges, some city streets, parts of Interstate 10 and many businesses. We missed out on our planned visit to Eglin AFB but look forward to a return trip for a refresher course on what we learned and to fill in the parts that we had to miss.