
AN UNFORGETTABLE WEEKEND IN HOUSTON

By

AL WHITLEY

Al Whitley, who has been the Foreign Training Officer (FTO) at the Armed Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia for more years than he cares to remember, knows that small favors sometimes lead to big friendships that pay even bigger dividends for the foreign training program.

Six years ago he pitched in for a few evenings and weekends to help a young U.S. Air Force major at the Staff College deal with the massive publicity and requests for press and television interviews that came with his selection as a NASA astronaut.

The young major didn't forget and they kept in touch over the years. Last spring, he wrote Al to say he'd been promoted to full colonel and, more importantly, had been assigned as pilot on his first voyage in the Space Shuttle program. He invited Al to bring the foreign officers at the Staff College to NASA's Space Headquarters in Houston and promised to show them some things that very few people, American or foreigners, ever get to see.

A phone call to the Chief of Naval Education and Training (CNET) got approval for the trip, and last June some foreign officers from Australia, Canada, Germany, Great Britain, and Korea had one of the most memorable experiences of their lives.

The astronaut is Colonel Frederick D. (Fred) Gregory. He is scheduled to fly the Shuttle on its January mission with crew commander Bob Overmyer and mission specialist Norm Thagard (who flew the historic mission with Sally Ride).

When the allied officers arrived in Houston, they were met by Colonel Gregory, Overmyer, and Thagard, and taken throughout the shuttle trainer cockpit and crew quarters, briefed in Mission Control, and shown several of the training vehicles and facilities. Some even examined and tried on parts of real "space suits."

They were impressed, but Colonel Gregory wasn't finished with them. That evening he picked them all up at the hotel, took them home with him, and treated the group to a party in their honor -- including a Texas-style barbeque with chili, and Willie Nelson music with dance instruction ("Cotton-Eyed Joe" and the "Texas Two-Step") by the astronaut's daughter and some of her friends. Also at the party were Overmyer and Thagard with their wives, and many of the Gregory family's neighbors. Each allied officer was presented with patches commemorating Space Shuttle voyages, and the evening ended with a swim in the pool.

Gregory still wasn't finished. Early the next morning he came by with his neighbors and several ski-boats and took them all to a nearby lake for a half-day of water skiing and boating. That night he helped arrange for a big Texas steak dinner and a look at the famous mechanical bulls at "Gilley's" nightclub. Two of the allies rode the bull successfully.

The allies unquestionably enjoyed the weekend immensely, but what seemed to impress them the most was the fact that an important American like Fred Gregory would be that kind and generous to a group of foreigners whom he had never met!

And it came about primarily because an FTO (who also happened to be a Public Affairs Officer), performed a small favor several years ago.

Editor's Note: This article, which was written by Mr. Al Whitley, was submitted by CNET for publication in the DISAM Journal. As stated in CNET's 19 July letter of transmittal:

Mr. Whitley has been the Public Affairs Officer (PAO), as well as Foreign Training Officer, at the Armed Forces Staff College for the past 19 years and has established an outstanding Informational Program (IP). He has consistently administered a program that fully satisfies the spirit and intent that was in mind when the IP was initiated by the Secretary of State. In this article, Mr. Whitley actually communicates two important points: first, that a seemingly small, friendly gesture can sometimes repay your kindness many times over; and, second, what a "super" treat some of our international students received. What a story for the international students to share with their family and friends upon returning home. Isn't that the objective we in the international training business are working towards?