

Pilots fly high at graduation

by Andrew Aggerholm, For the Innisfail Province

Every year around this time a flight of CF-18s pass over 4 Wing Cold Lake in a one-of-a-kind graduation celebration for Canada's newest fighter pilots.

What differs this year is that five pilots were followed by camera crews right through arguably the hardest nine months of training of their lives.

Canada's newest fighter pilots are Capt. Yannick 'Blow' Jobin, Capt. Riel 'Guns' Erickson, Capt. Tristan 'T-Bag' Mckee, Lt. Shamus 'Carney' Allen and Lt. Dave 'Tickler' McLeod. A film crew working on behalf of the Discovery Channel has been documenting the five pilots through the nine-month fighter pilot course (FPC) at 410 operational training squadron, where students learn how to fly Canada's most potent air asset, the CF-18 Hornet.

What was it like with a crew following the pilots around?

"It was different. It was something we learned about three or four months before the course started, so we had time to get used to it," said Mckee. "But it did definitely take time to get used to. (It was) probably a month or so before we were treating them like they weren't even there. It did come along pretty quickly, then it was just like they were part of the background."

Mckee said he couldn't comment on whether or not there was more pressure on him with the cameras following because he hadn't done the course before, so he had nothing to compare it to.

Erickson, who is only the sixth female fighter pilot to graduate from 410 squadron and the second active female CF-18 pilot, echoed the sentiment.

"Having camera crews follow you around for the toughest nine months of your entire life is not exactly something to look forward to. Especially knowing it's going to go national and this is sort of one of those moments where you just want to be able to focus," Erickson said.

Indeed, both pilots described this part of their career in military flying as the most difficult thing they've done.

"Here at 410, the course we just completed is by far the most difficult course in the pilot training system that we've gone through," Mckee said.

"Specifically, the hardest part is halfway through the course - the culmination of air-to-air fighting, so one jet fighting another - dog fighting. The advanced levels of that, so when it's two aircraft versus one enemy and the multiple aircraft dog fighting, that's probably the hardest part in the course."

Erickson described the course as, "one of the most demanding, exhausting, emotional nine months of my life by far."

Mckee developed his interest in flying early in life. His father had a private pilot's licence, and would fly him in a small Cessna four-seater.

From there, he started visiting various air shows, where he developed his interest in military flying. He joined the military in 1999 and went through Royal Military College, where he graduated with a degree in computer engineering. Once he finished college, he trained to become a pilot in Moose Jaw, where he took part in the multi-national NATO Flight Training in Canada program.

"It's a really good experience because the reality of the modern air force is we're always operating with other countries in some aspect or another. So we get a very good introduction to the way their militaries work, the way their people work, who their people are. We've got friends there and go through pilot training with them," Mckee said. "They (other countries, such as Italy, U.K. and Denmark) have instructors there that teach us, so they can help teach us things that go on back in their home countries. So it's really good exposure to working with militaries from other countries, which is what we will be doing for the rest of our military career."

Mckee finished the NFTC program in Cold Lake, flying in 419 squadron on the CT-155 Hawk. After finishing that he moved to the FPC in 410 squadron in May 2005.

Erickson spent most of her young life on a ranch just south of Calgary.

She said she only started thinking about becoming a pilot when she was applying for university. But there was also a family connection to the F-18.

"My uncle retired off the CF-18 in 1992, so I had a little bit of exposure to military flying that way," Erickson said.

Piloting, especially in the military, can still be viewed as a bit of a boys' club, but Erickson said her gender was never really an issue.

"It's not really that much of a big deal. The most important thing is just that you can do your job and that's all that anybody really cares about.

It's more of a challenge to actually do the job than it has been to fit in here. It's great. These guys are my family," Erickson said. "It is a type of bond you never get with anybody else because your lives depend on these people on an everyday basis. The level of trust you have to have with each other. Things like gender (and) colour (don't matter) ... you could be a frog. As long as you do your job, nobody cares."

Mckee said he still remembers his first solo flight in the Hornet.

"It was a lot of fun. Very memorable because it was something we'd all been looking forward to since we wanted to become pilots in the military and it was a lot of fun," he said.

He said his first solo flight came about seven flights into the FPC. He said by the time a person is in 410, he's already a winged pilot (meaning he has his pilot's wings).

Mckee had difficulty putting into words, what the best part of being a CF-18 pilot is.

"It's a lot of fun. I can't even really describe (it). Flying is great, but flying in the Hornet is amazing. The power and the freedom you have. The stuff you do in training and the flights is just amazing," he said.

Erickson joked that her favourite part is pulling the Gs (the force of gravity that is exerted on pilots when they

make sharp turns or altitude changes).

"Every time I get in that thing (the Hornet) ... it's just a high," Erickson continued. "I've started days where I get here early in the morning, and I'm not a morning person, and you get up, the office is always sunny. That is just awesome. (When you) come down off a great flight ... you feel like you're the queen of the world."

Both pilots were talking just moments after they finished their symbolic flights. What emotions were they going through?

"Pretty good. (I'm) feeling pretty confident about where our skill level is at. We're ready to go off and be a basic wingman in a squadron, so that's good," Mckee said. "A bit of relief, because we've been working hard for the last nine months now, so it's always good to get that done and over with and then move on to an operational atmosphere, operational unit and actually do what we've been training to do for the past six years, so that's a good feeling."

"This is really kind of surreal. It was kind of nice because my family started trickling in late last night (Thursday) and coming out of the plane and seeing everybody there, that is possibly the highlight of my life right now," Erickson said. "It's just great to see everybody there. This is the one thing I've really had to work hard for and really fight (for). So it's a half relief, half...just so excited about this."

Now the pilots' paths will diverge. Mckee is posted to 425 'Alouette' squadron at 3 Wing Bagotville, Quebec, where he said he will learn how to operate as a junior wingman and train to become a lead. He said the learning has just begun and never really finishes.

Erickson is posted to 409 'Nighthawk' squadron at 4 Wing. She said she's excited because, "now we get to actually be fighter pilots instead of just training to be a fighter pilot."

She's also looking forward to her first Maple Flag, the annual exercise trained to give junior wingman, such as Erickson and Mckee, their first taste of combat flying experience.

"I think it's going to be interesting. I'm hoping when I get to Maple Flag I just stay in sight with the lead. It'll be fun though," Erickson said.