

Tohono O'odham visit strengthens good relationship

by Teresa Walker
56th Fighter Wing Range Management

3/26/2010 - **LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Ariz.** -- Tohono O'odham Nation Chairman Ned Norris, members of his staff and invited guests visited Luke Air Force Base Monday to sign a memorandum of understanding between them to facilitate a government-to-government relationship.

Brig. Gen. Kurt Neubauer, 56th Fighter Wing commander, invited the chairman and his guests who were also briefed on the 56th FW mission.

"I truly appreciate the effort made by Chairman Norris and his delegation in making the lengthy trip to Luke," said General Neubauer. "It's important that we do everything in our power to foster a positive relationship with the nation as we do have a presence over their lands on a daily basis. The MOU Chairman Norris and I signed is both tangible and symbolic, in that it conveys a spirit of cooperation between Luke and the nation."

The Air Force has trained in the airspace overlying the Tohono O'odham Nation in southeast Arizona since the early 1940s. The airspace above the nation is part of the Barry M. Goldwater Range complex and is crucial for pilot combat readiness. Not only do pilots use the airspace to travel to and from the BMGR, but it also provides a training area that is separate from the path of established general aviation and commercial airways.

The MOU is an agreement between the nation and Luke to consult each other in good faith regarding the range. The 56th Range Management Office has a dedicated liaison who focuses on fostering the government-to-government relationship with the Tohono O'odham Nation people.

Kevin O'Berry consults directly with the members of the nation to address activities or events on the BMGR that may impact the nation's interests.

"I've found that when an incident is reported to us, almost always something out of the ordinary has occurred," said Mr. O'Berry. "We continue to educate both the pilots and the Tohono O'odham Nation leaders and communities on ways to minimize impact from our activities."

Chairman Norris and guests began their visit with a wing mission brief before they signed the MOU and had lunch at Club Five Six. The guests were taken on a base tour that included a stop at the fire station for a discussion on aircraft accident response and egress training. They also toured the 61st Fighter Squadron for an extensive discussion on mission planning processes, how flight briefings are conducted, mission execution and how training lessons learned are derived through post-flight debriefings.

Capt. Daniel Sorenson, 61st FS chief of weapons and instructor pilot, guided the group through the squadron and to the simulator. He said the experience helped him understand the concerns of the nation, and he provided them a better understanding of the challenges pilots face.

"It was a pleasure to showcase the 'Top Dogs' and the 56th Fighter Wing with the leaders of the Tohono O'odham Nation," said Captain Sorenson. "They seemed to enjoy watching a tape of a flight and getting simulator experience. I think they gained a new perspective on what training takes place in the Sells airspace, low-level routes and in the cockpit."



Tohono O'odham Nation Chairmain Ned Norris asks Richard Roller, right, 56th Training Squadron Network Training Center project officer, a few questions before beginning his simulator experience Monday at the Luke Air Force Base simulators. (Photo by Airman 1st Class Ronifel Yasay)

A final stop at the simulator enabled the visitors to experience what an F-16 pilot sees when flying at 500 feet above ground level and travelling speeds of more than 500 mph. This demonstration helped explain that when aircraft conducting low altitude training occasionally over-fly vehicles on roads below, the pilots are not intentionally targeting the vehicles.

At 500 feet vehicles and smaller structures are not seen until the last moment when it may be too late to avoid overflight, according to Captain Sorenson. This is especially true just after sunrise and just before sunset.

It also helped the nation leaders understand the complexity of the mission and its importance to national security.