All in the family

St. Louis F-15 assembly mechanic Steve Coulter (right) and wife Pat traveled to Texas in late May to be on hand for son Matt's winging ceremony as a U.S. Navy aviator. Matt had spent 13 months at Naval Air Station Kingsville, Texas, training in the Boeing T-45 Goshawk (shown here), an aircraft his dad had assembled during his first decade at Boeing.

U.S. NAVY PHOTO BY MARYANN SHRAMKO

A St. Louis assembly mechanic recalls working on T-45 Goshawk jet trainers—the same aircraft that his son flew to earn his U.S. Navy wings

By Doug Cantwell

Steve Coulter, an F-15 assembly mechanic in St. Louis, got pretty choked up recently as he watched his son Matt cross the stage aboard the USS *Lexington* in Corpus Christi, Texas, to receive his "wings of gold" as a U.S. Navy aviator. "I expected it to get a little emotional, but I wasn't ready for this," he said.

That's because Steve took pride in the training vehicle as well as in the young man wearing the dress whites.

Coulter spent his first decade at Boeing assembling the T-45 Goshawk, the two-seat jet in which son Matt earned his "wings of gold" and qualified to land aboard an aircraft carrier at sea. Steve had even gone out to Long Beach, Calif., in 1990 as one of the crew that packed the program in semitrailer trucks and moved it to St. Louis, where the 210th Goshawk recently rolled off the line.

Matt had taken a while to find traction in his career pursuits. He first accepted an athletic scholarship at University of Arkansas at Little Rock, where he spent two years working toward an engineering degree, playing soccer and feeling uncertain about both. He then enlisted in the Navy, where things started to click for him.

He'd heard about the Navy's "Seaman to Admiral 21" program and decided to apply. STA-21 gives enlisted personnel who demonstrate outstanding motivation a chance to earn a commission and become an officer. Admiral Mike Boorda championed the program during the 1990s after rising from the enlisted ranks to become Chief of Naval Operations. Boorda believed that "people should have the opportunity to excel, even if they don't get a perfect or traditional start."

As a newly commissioned lieutenant, Matt headed to Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla., where he toughed it out through six weeks of preflight indoctrination. He then moved on to nearby Whiting Field, where he first retracted landing gear in propeller-driven T-34 trainers. Arriving at NAS Kingsville in Texas, he underwent three months of intensive classroom and simulator preparation to fly jets.

Matt found the 13 months of training at Kingsville grueling. "It was like taking an exam every day," he recalled. "If you weren't prepared, you screwed up and had to do it over again."

His most unforgettable training moment? "Definitely my first cat shot on the carrier," he said, referring to the ship's steam-powered catapult launch. "It's like nothing you've ever felt before, accelerating from zero to 120 knots in two seconds."

Matt recalled moving up to the T-45C's all-digital, flat-panel "glass cockpit" with its head-up display (HUD). "There's a huge difference in precision with the digital and a lot less to keep track of in your head," he said. "When you make your [carrier landing] approach, it's much easier to stay on the right glide slope using the HUD."

Matt also appreciates the system's velocity-vectoring function, which appears as a symbol on the HUD indicating the aircraft's true trajectory. "When you're out in poor visibility or strong crosswinds, the velocity vector helps you distinguish your real direction of travel from what your senses may be telling you."

Where to from here? "As one of the new guys out in the fleet, I'll be getting my share of the nuggets," by which he means the night flights and other duties avoided by the pilots with seniority. "But I love to fly," he said, "and I'm happy to pay my dues." ■

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