

New commander at Nellis excited about his team

Air Force Maj. Gen. Marv Esmond, a top fighter jock, returns home to Las Vegas and the thrill of a new job.

By Susan Greene
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Marv Esmond loves to fly.

But when the Air Force major general sat down last week to talk about his new job as commander of Nellis Air Force Base, his 27 years as a top fighter jock barely came up.

However honed his flight skills or sharpened his combat tactics, however great his respect for the scores of state-of-the-art fighting machines that take off and land each day under his command, Esmond speaks most enthusiastically about the men and women he leads.

"There's nothing more gratifying than recognizing the potential of a young airman," said the 50-year-old command pilot. "Honestly, that beats the thrill of flying."

Esmond assumed command of Nellis three weeks ago, but is not a newcomer to the base, known as the home of the fighter pilot. He, his wife, Barbara, and their daughter and son lived there in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when he served as an operations officer and later a squadron commander.

"My kids kind of grew up here. We think of Las Vegas as home," he said during an interview in his office at Nellis' Weapons and Tactics Center.



Craig L. Morarn/Review-Journal

Maj. Gen. Marv Esmond talks about his new role as commander of Nellis Air Force Base, an F-22 blazing through the sky in the painting next to him. Esmond, a jet fighter pilot, was stationed at Nellis during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A friendly man with a kind face and a firm handshake, Esmond is described by those who have met or worked with him since his arrival as earnest and warm, a patient listener who insists on being called Marv, not Marvin.

He has more than 3,000 flying hours in T-37s, T-38s, F-4s, F-5s and in F-16s, which he now flies about twice weekly.

As Nellis' highest-ranking military officer, the two-star general has overall authority over the base and its operations, including the Air Force Weapons School, the Red Flag exercises, the Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team, various test and evaluation squadrons and the 3.1 million-acre training ranges northwest of Las Vegas.

He describes the base's mission as "sharpening the sword," preening the Air Force's strike forces to be as lean and mean as possible.

Esmond neither plans nor expects any significant operational changes at Nellis, but wants to continue improving work and living conditions for its 7,600 military personnel - "the team," as he calls them.

Indeed, the major general sees his role at Nellis as that of a coach, stressing the need to "give young folks, the junior and senior enlisted folks, the power to make decisions and grow with that responsibility."

"Our young people are smarter, better trained and more intellectual than ever. They're the ones who do the mission, who really get the job done," kit' said. "Often times they see much more efficient ways, economical ways to do what we're asked to do. You simply have to take advantage of all their capability and creativity. ... When the communication is there, it's really something to behold."

Esmond talks a lot about "treating people like people" and "hearing their input," ideas emphasized by the military's new regime of Total Quality Management, a quality improvement program that promotes middle and lower-management decision making in the workplace. But coming from him, the points seem less like bureaucratic jargon than the learned wisdom of a man who was drafted into the Army and has experienced the life of a military grunt.

"I remember the living conditions of the late 1960s, the training methods and lack of tools we needed to train adequately," said Esmond, who entered Air Force officer school after his basic Army training. "I know what it's like not to be heard ... and how it feels when someone above you really listens."

Like his predecessors, Maj. Gens. Thomas Griffith and Richard Bethurem, Esmond expects his command of Nellis to last about two years.

As under previous commands, some of the base's operations will remain secret, such as activities at the classified Area 51 air base at Groom Lake. But Esmond said he'll do his best to keep lines of communication open to the public, especially about environmental issues in the base's massive ranges.

"Personally, I'm an open kind of guy. It's best to be fair and aboveboard," he said. "You've got to remember, I too am a taxpayer and a citizen of Nevada."

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