

Access to Airports and Air Bases

written by Tulio R. Soto | May 24, 2022



One of the biggest obstacles that the aero-historians, spotters and avgeeks find regarding access to data and photography of aircraft in general, is precisely that of *access*.

By necessity, airports and air bases are off-limits to many but the most essential and thoroughly authorized parties. There are exceptions, of course, since some airports and air arms know that in their vast majority the enthusiasts are harmless. Yes, there are a few nut cases out there who have caused harm to the whole group.

Aviation is under attack by environmentalists, aircraft noise is tightly regulated in many countries; cities have grown around airports that used to be in the middle of nowhere, and now the people living in those areas do not want the airports around anymore. Smart managers and military officers should realize the untapped source of support that they have in all those people interested in learning more about a specific airplane, a military base, a civilian airport, an airliner... Besides being voters, many of us also have relatives and friends in positions as diverse as they are, and with degrees of influence varying from very little to a whole lot.

Some airports, under the excuse of fighting possible terrorist threats, have erected high walls around the

perimeter, denying the view of the runways to anyone outside. The truth of the matter is, that for a committed terrorist, there are no barriers. If someone wants to cause harm, they will do so, and no walls or security system will stop them. It has happened before, many times.

It saddens me, for example, when in Guatemala, you see many of our indigenous brothers and sisters, who have traveled from towns and villages, to visit the *Big Capital*, wander to the airport and attempt to see an airplane from up close. Being as poor as they are, probably flying as a passenger is something they can only dream of. But it is in those dreams where the future of any human endeavor lays. Who is to tell that the little kid seeing an airplane for the first time, will not in the future, become a pilot, an engineer, a military officer? But all those humble people can do is try to peek from across the street, over the wall, and wonder at those big machines taking off and landing. No one has told them that as citizens of the country, they can walk inside the terminal and look at all the activity from a closer distance.

Military air bases are also strict in their security measures, and as I said before, for a good reason. Airports are a dangerous place. People gets killed if they are not careful. But if the access is denied based on a feeble excuse of "secrecy," it is a sad excuse at all. Any possible opponent that is worth its salt, will know more about the air force or naval arm, their equipment and capabilities, their layout, etc. Espionage is not dead, and they have the means to achieve their goals by a myriad of other means.

Some airports have seen the light and have created "spots" around the fences or the walls, where those interested can peek at the airport and even take photos. Some, as is the case with the Raleigh-Durham airport in North Carolina, USA, and many others in Europe, have gone even further: They have created sites by the end of one of the runways, where you can drive up and park your car; then you can go and sit under a roofed structure, which is elevated and has seating and also a loudspeaker transmitting the radio traffic between the tower and the airplanes in the pattern. There is a playground for the kiddies, it has a small version of the runway, painted with all the markings. It probably cost a few thousand dollars to build, but I am sure that in our countries, where money is always an issue, aviation companies, gasoline providers, aircraft distributors and the airport authorities, could join forces with the volunteer effort of those interested, and build up something that the community in general would enjoy at one time or another.

Going back to the military, they are much maligned in many of the Latin American countries, the result of protracted internal conflicts. While I agree that some changes have to be made to make the military more accountable to the civilian power of a given country, I also support their mission, if for no other reason, that they are doing something that most of us are unable or unwilling to do; they sacrifice their time, they put their lives on the line everyday, to protect our borders, our sea borders, our natural resources, against enemies bent on our destruction; they find the smugglers and , they fly many times, antiquated or obsolete equipment, and all we do is bitch at them for one reason or another. With this said, it would help the military in general, in Latin America, to be more open towards researchers, towards enthusiasts. Many bases in the USA and Europe and other countries, hold "open house" days, when visitors are welcome.

One of my fondest memories of the Fuerza Aérea Guatemalteca (Guatemalan Air Force) -FAG- happened many years ago, when the new La Aurora airport terminal was still under construction. A local charity, I believe the League against Cancer, ran a fundraiser: For 5 Quetzales, then equal to 5 Dollars, you could

hop and fly in one of the FAG's aircraft. I flew in the C-47 FAG-555. I stood in line with literally thousands and thousands of Guatemalans who otherwise, would have never had the chance to fly! On the other hand, one of my earliest and saddest memories with the FAG happened around 1963 or 1965, when the USAF Thunderbirds came to Guatemala. My father, at my begging and insistence, took us all children to the fence around La Aurora air base to try to get a glimpse of the team's F-100s. Some bright "brick headed" FAG officer had thought about posting sentries at such fences, and they did not allow you to even look from the outside in!!! It still makes my blood boil to this day! Some time later, when the first Pan-Am Boeing 707 came to Guatemala, something similar happened; this time they had soldiers posted at the observation terrace at the old terminal, and they did not allow you to look in the direction of the La Aurora air base, where the F-51D Mustangs were parked.



USAF Thunderbirds at La Aurora air base, in Guatemala City, during the air arm's anniversary celebrations. (Photo: Guatemala Air Force Photo Archives via LAAHS.)

I guess I have gone long enough now, and it is time to cut this short: Open up, guys! Whether civilian or military, you will find enthusiastic support from all of those interested in aviation. And if what goes on is any indication, even the closest of the "secrets" eventually makes it out, and your refusal to allow photography or visitors, only delays the inevitable.