

SJAFB's new recruit

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Jeremiah Seaberry is not like boys his age.

He has wings.

The 9-year-old sat in an F-15E with his name emblazoned on the side - along with his call name -- "Swoosh."

It was a good thing his co-pilot Capt. Adam Lubber was there, too. Swoosh could barely peek over the dash.

He knew the seriousness of his mission -- Operation "Slam Dunk" -- a special assignment ordered by the president of the United States.

"I might not make it," he told his aunt, Melissa Seaberry, as he prepared for takeoff, waving to his family.

Jeremiah was hand-selected for the mission.

His grandmother, Portia Seaberry, his aunt and two cousins, came with him Friday on his visit to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base.

But before he could earn those wings, he had to complete the training.

Capt. Lubber helped Swoosh prepare for the grueling life of a pilot. He instructed him in rolls, map-reading and mission tactics.

The pair's classified operation took place over Badguyland.

But it not the only battle Jeremiah faces -- and not his only victory, either.

Swoosh has sickle cell disease.

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Getting the chance to do normal "kid stuff" is not easy for Jeremiah, his family says.

"He knows he's different," Mrs. Seaberry said. His growth is stunted by the disease and he stays weak. He can't play without risk of hospitalization. Sickle Cell disease is very painful. It's a debilitating disease."

But getting out to have a chance to be a fighter pilot for a day at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base was a thrill for the young man whose body might have challenges, but whose spirit is strong.

"We feel very special they would consider kids with disabilities," Portia said. "It gave him a day as a kid."

The staff of Goldsboro Pediatrics nominated Jeremiah for the program.

And there is a reason for his call sign, the newly winged pilot says.

"It's because I run around so fast, it's 'swoosh,'" he said.

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Mrs. Seaberry said Jeremiah was excited when he learned he could bring some guests. He made a list and narrowed the names down to his cousins, Jerrell Newkirk and Rico Seaberry, who joined the crew.

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Capt. Adam Lubber points out parts of the F-15E to Jeremiah "Swoosh" Seaberry, 9, as the two sit on top of the jet. Jeremiah, who has sickle cell disease, was nominated for the Fighter Pilot for a Day program at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base by the Goldsboro Pediatrics staff.

The three boys trained for Swoosh's new career in the flight simulator and virtual reality parachute trainer.

"This is all he's going to talk about from now on," Mrs. Seaberry said.

In addition to his time in the cockpit, Jeremiah also received his very own flight suit, visor cover and name tag. Snack O Stuff on Spence Avenue donated the gear.

As his co-pilot zipped him into his flight suit, speed jeans and fitted his harness, Luber shared some of the finer points of the uniform.

"Pop your collar," he said. "It will prevent rubbing, and you won't get sunburned."

He leaned down next to Swoosh and whispered, "And the ladies love it."

After the uniform check, the pilots were cleared to step.

They met went to the front desk to get their final briefing before boarding.

The sun was up and the skies were clear.

It was a perfect day for flying.

"We've really got to go on this mission," Swoosh said to Luber.

"Well, we can't tell the president no, can we?" he said.

They made their way to the "Spirit of Goldsboro." The boys took turns sitting in the cockpit and walking on the wing. Luber gave them a tour of the flight line and pointed out the planes.

"We can't go until you get your wings," Luber said. "You've got to wait for the wing commander."

4th Fighter Wing Commander Col. Mark Slocum arrived and knelt down to look at his newest pilot, eye-to-eye.

He pinned the silver wings onto the flight suit.

"Now you've got your own wings, buddy," he said.

They were cleared for take off.

Luber took a backseat to Swoosh. "Start her up!" he yelled.

There was a pause, and then a laugh.

"You don't know how?" Luber laughed. "I guess we should switch positions."

The plane never left the hangar, but that did not make Swoosh any less of a pilot.

Flight was not necessary for the day to be a "Slam Dunk."

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