

# Teen 'whirlwind' leads invasion of 10 US, UK airports



By **Thom Patterson, CNN**

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Aviation enthusiasts had a rare chance to visit a ramp at London's Heathrow on Friday for Aviation Day.

## Story highlights

A 17-year-old workaholic has organized a unique international event for aviation enthusiasts on National Aviation Day

More than 100 "avgeeks" get exclusive access to restricted areas at 10 airports in the US and London

**(CNN)** — A remarkable kid snagged the keys to the kingdom on Friday, just in time for National Aviation Day in the United States.

Seventeen-year-old Ryan Ewing and more than 100 other aviation enthusiasts are getting exclusive access to secured areas at 10 major airports in the U.S. and London, plus restricted areas of American Airlines facilities.

"I always had the idea of doing some kind of big-scale aviation meetup like this, but I needed somebody big backing me up," said Ryan, founder of the aviation site [airlinegeeks.com](http://airlinegeeks.com).

He pitched his plan months ago to American Airlines officials at Reagan National Airport, who loved it so much they expanded it system-wide.

Ryan then offered free tickets to each location through an online lottery -- which were snapped up in about three hours.

Now a horde of self-described "avgeeks" of all ages are invading air traffic control towers, American Airlines' operation center, cockpit flight simulators and one of the world's largest airline maintenance facilities -- places that airplane buffs would kill to visit.

On Twitter, [@KyleSA01](https://twitter.com/KyleSA01) geeks out about his rare chance to hang in the tower at London's airport or -- as he calls it -- the "ATC TAAARRRR."





**Kyle / Springbok97**

@kyleSA01

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Current situation! Up @HeathrowAirport ATC TAAARRRR with @AmericanAir & @AirlineGeeks for #AAviationDay #avgeek

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Someday, many of the younger avgeeks at this event may end up working in the airline industry - which, by the way, flew about 3.5 billion passengers last year, worldwide.

How planes get their names

## Showing 'how the sausage is being made'

August 19 has been National Aviation Day since 1939, when President Franklin Roosevelt singled out the date (Orville Wright's birthday) to "stimulate interest in aviation."

This year, the day comes after American Airlines finalized a huge merger with US Airways. This month, the airline surprised the industry by giving ground workers raises ranging from 15% to 55%.

The pay hikes were the first for some American Airlines workers in more than two years and were separate from contract talks.

Related story: [The last fight of US Airways](#)

"I can't help but think that leaders are serious at the new American Airlines about being more open, more transparent, doing the right thing and taking greater risks," said American Airlines spokesman Kent Powell.



Letting outsiders into restricted areas for a day is an extension of that cultural shift, said Powell, who was among the first to hear Ryan's pitch for Aviation Day. Powell sent the idea floating up the chain of command until it was green-lighted at the airline's highest executive levels.

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"We're showing a little bit of how the sausage is being made," he said. "Sometimes that isn't always pretty. But we all love sausage so it's important for us to understand the complexity of what goes into that. And that's what this is all about."

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## To-die-for avgeek treats

Avgeeks gained access to the air traffic control towers at Philadelphia International Airport and at London's Heathrow, Ryan said -- the world's second busiest for international traffic.

[Related story: Five ways to celebrate Aviation Day](#)

In addition to Heathrow, Philly and Reagan National, the event allows access to usually restricted areas at other airports, including New York LaGuardia; Chicago O'Hare; LAX in Los Angeles; Dallas-Fort Worth in Texas; Charlotte, North Carolina and Miami International in Florida.

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, enthusiasts are seeing what happens behind the scenes at what's described as the world's largest airline-owned maintenance/engineering facility.

In Texas, they may get flight time in simulators pilots use to hone their skills.

They're touring American's Southern Reservations office, a sprawling workplace with about 2,000 employees.



They're also visiting the brain of the entire airline: American's new integrated Operations Center where route schedulers, flight dispatchers, weather forecasters and other team leaders all coordinate to keep the carrier running smoothly.



Along the way, they're getting opportunities to ask workers across the system about their jobs, including managers and executives.



## The face plastered against the airplane window

Ryan can't remember a time when he didn't love airplanes and the miracle of flight.

"I've always wanted to go to the airport. I was always that kid -- and I'm still that kid -- that's plastered against the window on the airplane."

Friends -- including adults and teens -- use words to describe Ryan such as "whirlwind" or "super-focused" and "workaholic."

In 2013, at age 13, he launched [AirlineGeeks.com](http://AirlineGeeks.com) out of his parents' home outside Washington, offering news and features about the airline industry.

Although the site makes virtually zero money, it now gets about 12,000 page views a month. Its Twitter followers number 15,000 plus. The site has an unpaid international editorial team of 19, about half of which are adults, Ryan said.

As an online aviation journalist, he gets invited to industry press events. But some -- like Delta Air Lines' Media Day and Fleet Showcase in April -- he can't attend.

"I had school," he explained.

A few avgeek details about Ryan:



- favorite airplane: Boeing's 787 Dreamliner
- at the top of his interview wish list: a few minutes with "Miracle on the Hudson" pilot, retired airline Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger



**Photos:** Celebrating the wonder of flight

**National Aviation Day** – National Aviation Day is August 19. A federal act invites people to observe the day "with appropriate exercises to further stimulate interest in aviation in the United States." Gliding is one example. At many gliderports, pilots will introduce passengers to the wonderful world of gliding. Click through the gallery for more ideas on how to celebrate aviation.



Ryan also wants to organize more avgeek events with other airlines. He spends almost all his free time working for the website and volunteering at Reagan National airport, where he works with the social service agency [Travelers Aid](#).



## A strong work ethic and a guilty pleasure

Ryan doesn't think he's a workaholic. He sees his busy lifestyle as "doing my day's duties."

Ryan still has another two years of high school ahead before college, where he expects to study aviation management and eventually work as a manager somewhere in the industry.



Ryan Ewing, 17, organized an aviation event Friday stretching from London to Los Angeles.

If his aviation goals don't pan out, Ryan said he might look into a career in law enforcement.

That explains his guilty pleasure: The reality TV show, "Cops."

"I've always wanted to make an aviation 'Cops' — 'Airport Cops,' because I think that could actually be halfway successful."

Some of his friends are concerned that Ryan is a little too serious about his hobby. They worry that he's rushing a bit too fast to grow up and may be missing

his only chance to enjoy a full teen experience.



Don't worry about all that, he said.

"Yes, I do goof off sometimes," he admitted. "Tomorrow I'm working ... and I guarantee you I'll get distracted. I'll probably end up watching 18 episodes of 'Cops.'"

