

## ‘Lebanon Is South of Maine’



Plane spotters sit in a parking lot near Kennedy International Airport. Credit: Charlie Eckert

By Charlie Eckert

Oct. 22, 2014—They were in position. Ben Granucci, William Rizzo and David Abbey sat in folding chairs in an empty parking spot halfway between a McDonald’s and Panera Bread in a strip-mall parking lot. They were two miles south of John F. Kennedy International Airport, beneath the flight path to Runway 31 Right.

Granucci monitored a flight-tracking app on his iPhone. Rizzo peered into the cloudless sky. Abbey did both. They wore headphones and listened to the air-traffic controllers with the scanners on their laps.

“Lebanon is south of Maine,” Ben Granucci said.

They had been tracking a Boeing 737, with the call sign LEB1, for three hours. They believed that the jet was flying the Lebanese delegation to New York City for the United Nations General Assembly – the best week of the year for plane spotting in New York City.

“This is the World Series of spotting,” Rizzo said, holding a Nikon camera with a large telephoto zoom lens. “It’s a week of gorging on aviation and I love it.”

Rizzo, 41, is the son of a World War II B-24 bomber pilot. He grew up next to Kennedy airport and has been plane spotting for 20 years. He now lives in Audubon, N.J., where he works as a manager at a Medicaid claims office.

About a dozen spotters waited in the parking lot for the arrival of LEB1. Earlier in the day, they had tracked, spotted and photographed a rare, Soviet-built Ilyushin 62 from the Republic of Gambia.

“We were ecstatic,” Rizzo said. “I couldn’t believe I was looking at it.”

“You have so much traffic from around the world that you don’t see here. Stuff that you don’t see in this country. Stuff that you don’t see on this continent,” Granucci said. “Airline types that should never be able to make the trip that they just made, but are here because they had a light-enough load, enough fuel and they had a couple people on board that had to be in New York.”

Granucci, 33, has been plane spotting for two years. He works as a stagehand and lives in Wappingers Falls, N.Y. He’d been driving nearly four hours each day to be at Kennedy for what he called “the week of the year.”

Some of the spotters in the parking lot felt a sense of urgency to document the older airplanes before they were decommissioned.

Art Brett, 67, a retiree who lives in Paramus, N.J., first started spotting planes in the 1970s.

“I used to travel on business and I’d flown on 727s hundreds of times and they just disappeared overnight and I was so sorry I really didn’t take more pictures of them,” Brett said. “The MD-11 has gone away, the 747 is even getting scarce, the Concorde is gone.”

Rizzo regretted not starting earlier.

“If I’d started when I was in high school, I could have got all the TWAs, all the Pan Ams, Easterns, you know, all these airlines that are gone forever that I’ll never be able to photograph,” he said.

Although increased security and suspicions about their hobby have made it more difficult to be a plane spotter since 9/11, they continue to spot year-round.

“Spotting, the activity, is also about friendship,” said Renato Salzinger, 40, a pilot from São Paulo, Brazil, who came to New York on vacation just to plane spot during the General Assembly.

“Plane spotters are the greatest group of people, as an entire group, that I have ever known,” Granucci said. “You can show up somewhere and you have instant friends.”



A Condor approaches Kennedy International Airport. Credit: Ben Granucci

Granucci looked at his flight-tracking app and determined that LEB1 was approaching New York City and starting to descend.

The visibility was good and the afternoon sun was in the right position to photograph the 737 if it landed on Runway 31 Right.

“That’s a long-drawn approach,” one of the spotters said.

Granucci’s flight-tracking app now indicated that LEB1’s flight path was taking it away from Kennedy and towards Edison, N.J.

“Lebanon is going to Newark,” he said.

Rizzo started cursing.

LEB1 wasn’t going to land at Kennedy.

About a half-hour later, a Condor 767 approached the airport. The German airliner rarely flies to New York. It would serve as a consolation prize.

David Abbey, 44, listened intently as air-traffic controllers spoke with the Condor's pilots. Abbey had come straight from his job as a letter carrier and was still wearing his uniform shorts.

Kennedy's air-traffic control tower confirmed that the Condor was making its descent. The spotters readied their cameras.

They were in the perfect position.

The Condor was on the flight path for Runway 31 Right. Its landing gear was already down by the time it was close enough for the spotters to start taking pictures. The sound of the jet's engines drowned out the clicking shutters of the spotters' cameras.

For a brief moment, you could see the large orange heart painted on its tail. As soon as the Condor landed, the spotters called it a day.