

Performers in Uniform

THE BLUE ANGELS



By Peter Mohn

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Photographs courtesy of the
Department of the Navy



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THE BLUE ANGELS COME TO TOWN

“There they are!” someone said, pointing to a puff of smoke in the sky. Everyone in the crowd looked. Within minutes, six dark blue aircraft, flying in formation, appeared north of the airport.

“Mankato Unicom, this is Blue Angel Leader.” A deep voice came over the airport’s radio receiver. “We are going to make a low pass down runway three-three.”

The six jets roared over the airport. As they streaked over the runway, they did a “delta roll.” The whole formation rolled upside down and back upright again. Then they climbed, still in formation, into the sky.

The stars of the air show, The Blue Angels of the United States Navy, had arrived.



“Maybe they’ll do a second maneuver before they land,” Number Seven said. The people watched the six jets fade in the distance.

“Mankato Unicom, this is Cherokee Oh-Four Delta,” the voice of a student pilot came over the radio. “I’m turning final for landing on runway three-three.”

“That’s it,” Number Seven said. “The Blue Angels will land now. We can’t let our planes interfere with normal airport traffic.”

The Blue Angels, still in their tight formation, flew over several towns near the airport. Then they turned back.

“Mankato Unicom, this is Blue Angel Leader. We’re on final approach five miles out. Landing runway three-three.”

In order, the six blue jets set down. The jets landed within moments of each other. Their wheels left a puff of bluish smoke as they touched down. Each slowed to a stop at the end of the concrete runway. When all six had stopped, the jets taxied slowly, in formation, to their parking spots.

The Blue Angel ground crews were waiting. Six men stood at attention in the parking area. As each plane reached its spot, its ground crewman gave a hand signal. Each plane turned and stopped. Another signal was given. The whining jet engines gave way to silence.



At another signal, six canopies opened together. When Blue Angel Number One stood up in his cockpit, so did the other five pilots. As a unit they climbed down the slim ladders their crew had attached to their aircraft.

“How was your flight?” one person asked.

“Smooth,” said one of the Blues. “The weather was beautiful.”

“How long did it take you to fly here?” someone asked.

“Just a little over two hours,” Number One said.

“Huh!” snorted one of the Army’s Silver Eagles helicopter team that was also in the air show. “It took us just a little over two days!”

Everyone laughed. Blue Angel Number Seven walked up to Number One and saluted. “How soon do you want to debrief?”

“Oh, in ten minutes or so,” Number One answered.

“Yes, sir,” said Number Seven.

The pilots continued to talk to the people. Ten minutes later the Blue Angel team moved toward the airport terminal.

“Well, what do you have for us?” Number One asked Blue Angel Number Seven.

“Everything is ready, Boss. The show looks good and they’re bringing in the jet fuel after each show. They had too many appearances for us, so I cut some of them,” Number Seven said. He gave each pilot a large envelope. In the envelopes were keys to a motel room, keys to a car, and a schedule of appointments.

Number One looked at the printed schedule. “Anyone have any questions?” he asked. There were no replies. “Okay, let’s get going.”

FLIGHT OF THE BLUE ANGELS

Air shows are fun. Most of them have both civilian and military performers. The other acts may include the Army's Silver Eagles helicopter team, the Army's Golden Knights parachute team, or civilian pilots stunting in propellor-driven planes. Some of the civilian acts are quite short—5 to 15 minutes. At most shows the Blue Angels fly last. They are the best known.

Lieutenant Bauer talked about what happens on the day of the show. “What we call the ‘morning turns’ are made by our early crew, starting about 7 A.M.,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “They do a complete check on the planes. They start the engines. If they find anything wrong, it’s fixed immediately.”



The rest of the ground crew arrives about 11 A.M. The planes are fueled and polished.

“Weather always has the final say on what we do,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “If the sky is full of clouds, we may have to throw out some of our high maneuvers. They are too dangerous to perform in clouds. And we couldn’t be seen from the ground.”

The Blues can fly a “high show,” which includes spectacular high-speed climbs and starbursts. Or they can do a “low show,” with all the various rolling maneuvers. Beautiful, sunny, cloudless weather is needed for the high show that the Blues prefer.

“The pilots discuss other airports for emergency landings,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “We talk about the wind. Wind always affects how the planes perform. Once again, we go over any possible problems around the show site.”

Finally, the briefing ends.

“Okay,” says Number One. “That does it. It’s two-twenty now. Be on the flight line in exactly thirty minutes.”

Blue Angel Number Seven is the announcer for the team. As the six pilots walk down the flight line, Number Seven tells the crowd about the history of the Blue Angels. When each pilot is helmeted and in his plane, a signal is given to start the engines.

“Ladies and gentlemen, during the start-up, it will be too noisy for you to hear me,” Number Seven says. “I will resume the narration as soon as the aircraft taxi out.”

The starting units whine. Compressed, heated air and electricity are fed into the jets. A deafening roar covers the show site. The starting units are disconnected. The ground crew swiftly changes position. One man stands in front of the plane. The other two squat behind on either side. With hand signals, the man in front tells the pilot to operate various control systems on the aircraft.



Inside each aircraft, the pilots operate the controls. Each time a system checks out, the men behind the aircraft give a thumbs up signal. When the checks are completed, the pilot gets a “go” signal from his ground crew chief.

“Looking good,” says Number One into a microphone mounted on his helmet. The other pilots report they’re ready. The radio conversation is brief and quiet. “Rolling,” says Number One. His jet starts to move out. It turns sharply. As it passes Number Two, that aircraft starts moving. The remaining four aircraft follow in formation.

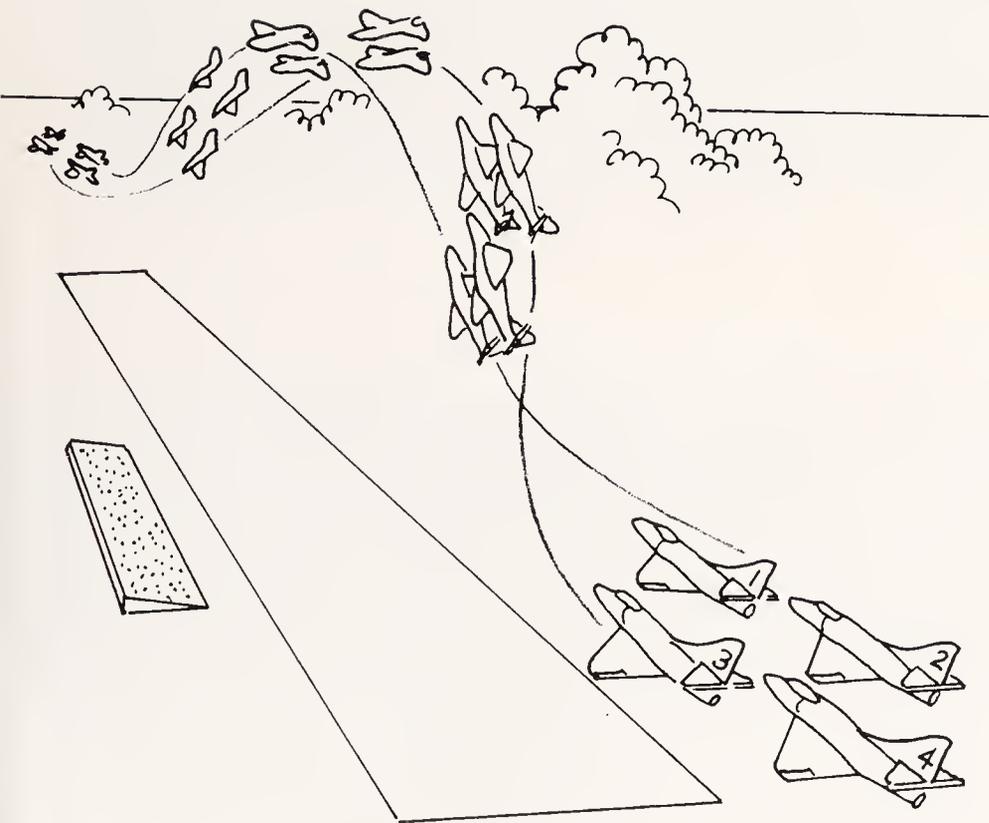


“You are seeing,” says Number Seven to the audience, “the Blue Angels’ taxi formation. They also fly that close together. The team will take off, in groups of two.”

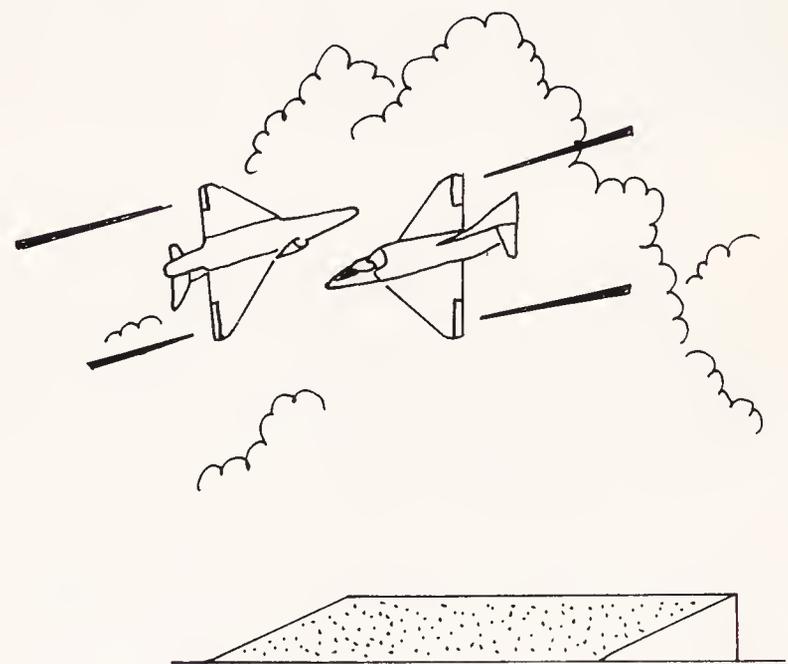
The first two jets roar down the runway. Before they are air borne, however, the next two begin their takeoff roll. The first two lift off and the second two quickly join them. The planes form the familiar Blue Angel diamond and streak skyward. They climb almost vertically.

“Now, I direct your attention to the runway,” says Number Seven. “The lead solo pilot will do a snap roll on takeoff. This is what we call the ‘dirty roll,’ because he does it before his landing gear and flaps are up.”

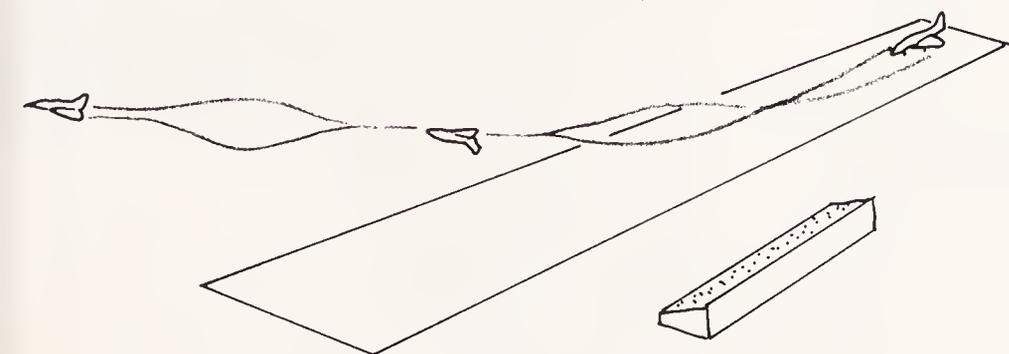
Number Five hurtles down the runway, lifts, and quickly rolls. As the plane comes right side up again, the landing gear and flaps are lifted. The plane streaks into the sky.



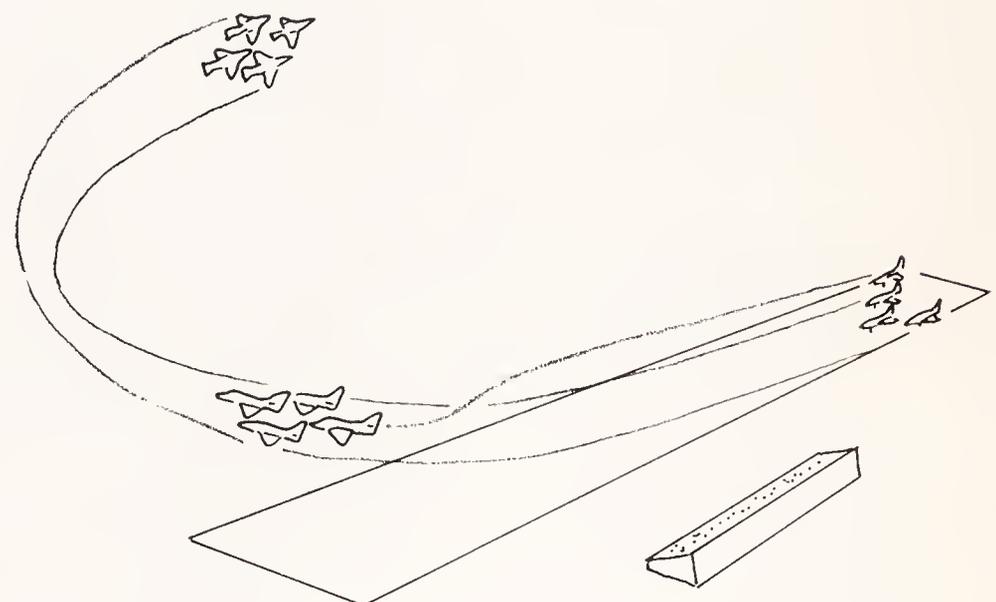
DIAMOND ROLL



SOLO OPPOSING KNIFE EDGE



DIRTY ROLL ON TAKEOFF



DIAMOND TAKEOFF

“And now, the last aircraft will do a series of snap rolls as it climbs out,” the narrator says. The Number Six plane rolls down the runway, takes off and heads up. Its speed still increasing, the plane spins time and again as it climbs.

Well away from the airport, but heading in, Blue Angel Number One is organizing his diamond formation for the first pass.

“Coming in on diamond roll,” he says. The other three pilots keep their places close to his plane. The four aircraft reach the beginning of the show line. “Rolling,” says Number One. The other pilots follow. “Okay,” says Number One as the roll is completed. “Climbing out.”





The diamond demonstration is graceful. The four aircraft act as one in their rolls and loops. But the two solo pilots give a hint of how violent it could be. They cross at show center at closing speeds near 1,000 miles per hour.

“To some people, it looks like the solo pilots are playing ‘chicken’ in high-speed jets,” a solo pilot comments. “That’s not true. We know what we are doing. And, of course, we can see each other coming. People ask me if I’m frightened doing this kind of thing. I really am not. I know my plane and I know my teammate. We do a good job.”

As the solos meet at show center, they may roll to a “knife-edge”—where the wings point up and down—as they pass within a few feet.



Throughout the show, Blue Angel Number One is tuned to the solo pilots' radio as well as his own diamond's frequency. He and the lead solo pilot do most of the talking and not much of that. When they do talk, they speak quietly, without much excitement.

Most of the time Number One is giving the diamond clues as to how he's flying his plane.

"Up a little," he might say. At the same time, he is moving his control stick back a little to give himself a little more altitude. Wherever he goes, the other three follow.

The other three always have their eyes on some part of their leader's plane. They simply fly to keep that part of Number One in the same place no matter what the maneuver.

All four share the same sensations—the brief periods of weightlessness, the heavy pull of gravity as they climb out, and hanging in their tight harnesses as they fly upside down. On the ground, Blue Angel Number Seven describes what the Blue Angels are doing. He tries to tell the crowd what it's like up there.

“For our final maneuver of the day, the Blue Angels will perform their delta vertical break,” the narrator says. “In this maneuver, the six aircraft will break. Each will go a different direction, leaving a smoke star in the sky. At a certain point, each aircraft will loop and return to the center point for the six-plane cross,” says Number Seven.

The formation comes closer. The ground crew plugs a radio into the public address system. The crowd strains to hear Number One's voice.

“Ready,” says the pilot. “Coming up.” There's a pause. “Break.” The six planes split apart and head their separate directions. “Starting,” says the radio. “Over the top. Coming in.”



From six different directions, the aircraft streak in to the center point. They do not collide because each is at a slightly different altitude than the others. But they don't miss by much, either.

"Lineup," says Number One into his microphone. The six planes form a line in the sky. One by one, they come in to land. They land the same way they took off. They taxi in, park, and shut down the engines. At a signal from Number One, six canopies are opened. Together all six pilots leave their cockpits, and walk toward the crowd.

The crowd has been quite quiet. But when the jets are shut down and the pilots step out, the applause begins.

"Let's hear it for them, folks," says the master of ceremonies. "These are the Blue Angels of the United States Navy."

DON'T CALL THEM DAREDEVILS

“We come to fly, not to crash.” A Blue Angel explained why the team has such an excellent safety record. “We learn as much about safety as we do about flying,” he added. “It started when we began pre-flight school.”

All Blue Angel pilots have served in the fleet. This means they have flown off aircraft carriers. Navy records show very few accidents in spite of hundreds of thousands of carrier takeoffs and landings. Most Blue Angels have at least 200 takeoffs and landings on carriers. Some team leaders have more than 1,000!

Some people think of stunt pilots as daredevils.

“We think of ourselves as professionals,” Jim Bauer said. “We don’t take any chances with our show. We know exactly what we’re doing all the time. If any maneuver seems unsafe, we don’t even try it.”

Long before the Blues fly in an air show, they get an aerial photo of the show site. They look at every detail. They look for power lines, tall smokestacks, and radio towers, anything that might interfere with their show.

No air show performer is allowed to come closer than 500 feet from the crowd. So the show line is at least 1,500 feet from the crowd line. To keep this line, the sponsor must put up fences to hold the crowd back.

A naval aviator must be able to fly every day, if needed. Being able to fly means being in good shape. If any pilot isn't in good physical and mental shape, he is grounded.

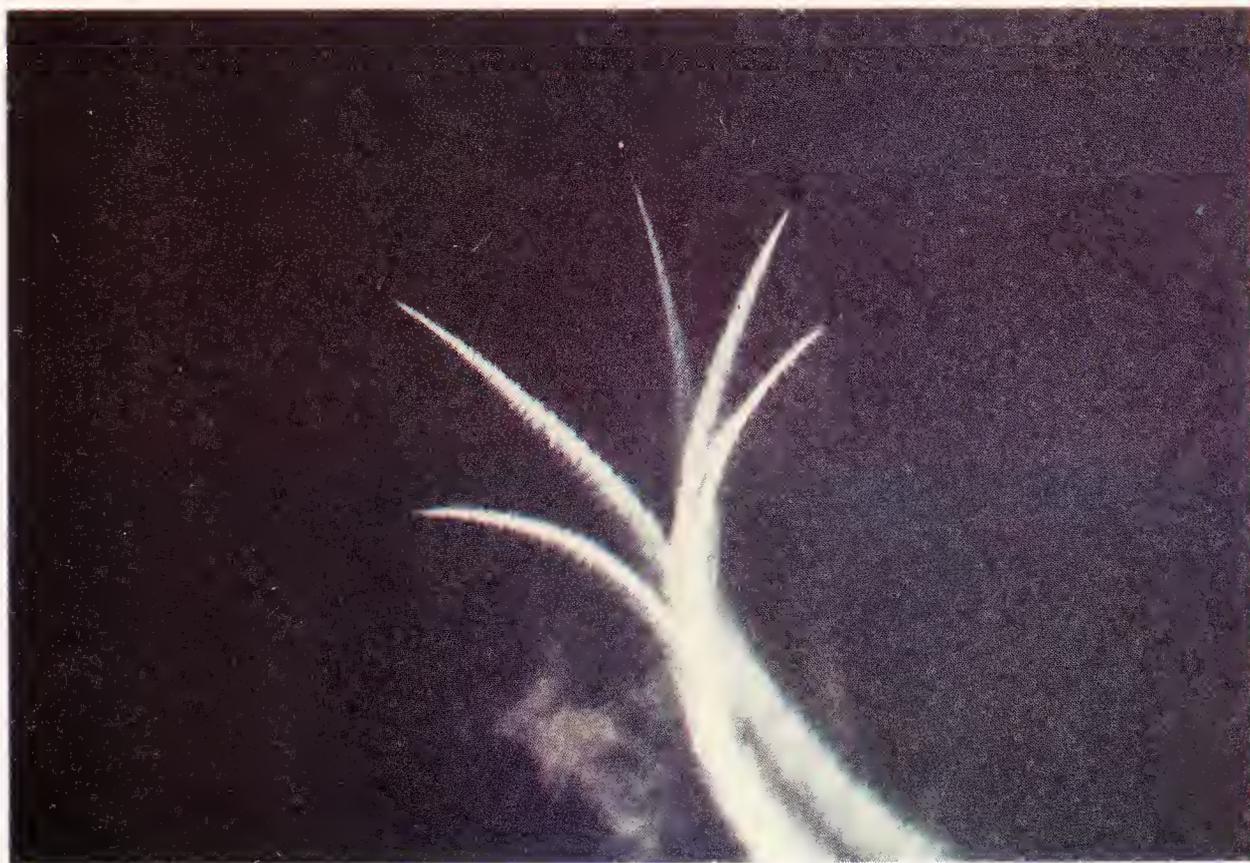
“Imagine going from zero to 140 miles per hour in about two seconds and 200 feet,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “That’s a real kick in the pants. On landing, we go from about 140 miles per hour to zero in the same time and distance.

“In some of the things we do in the air, like climbs and loops, we may pull several G’s (several times the force of gravity). Sometimes, we go into ballistic flight, which means we are temporarily weightless, just like the astronauts in space,” he added.

Pulling “several G’s” can rip the wings off an aircraft that isn’t in top shape. It can cause a pilot who isn’t in top shape to lose consciousness for a moment.

One other person at every air show is interested in safety. He represents the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). He holds his own briefing for all the show’s performers. He watches them all closely. If any performer, civilian or military, does something wrong, the FAA man says so. This seldom happens.

The Blue Angels have had very few accidents in their 30 years. “That just isn’t part of our plan,” they say.



MORE THAN JUST PILOTS

Most people think of the Blue Angels team as a group of six pilots. Actually, the whole team numbers more than 100.

The six Blue Angel pilots are kept in the air by specialists. There are men on the ground who take care of the aircraft, publicity, fuel, and everything else needed for the Blues' part of an air show. About half these specialists travel each weekend with the team. The other half stays in Pensacola, the Blue Angels' home base. They will make the trip next weekend.

Enlisted men with the team come from every specialty in Naval aviation. They carry all the tools and equipment they need to keep the Blue Angels flying. The Blues always have people capable of doing everything from fixing engines and electronic gear to painting the aircraft.

“When I joined the Navy, I never thought of the Blue Angels,” one of the crewmen said. “I was interested in aircraft, and when the Navy tested me, it happened that I could go to a special school. I learned about electronics,

then went out to the fleet. A year ago, I saw the notice for the Blue Angels. I volunteered and here I am.”

All aircraft are inspected at regular times. After a certain number of hours of flight, they are taken apart and looked over. They must be in good shape.

“If cars got the same care our planes do, they would last a lot longer,” said a Blue Angel ground crewman. “All Navy aircraft are really babied. If we don’t take good care of them, we really hear about it from the pilots.”

All Navy squadrons take pride in the way they keep their planes and their pilots going. In no squadron is this more obvious than in the Blue Angels.

New crewmen are interviewed every fall. By late November, the names of the new men are announced. Most, but not all, of the Blue Angels ground crew serve for two years. Some, if they are very good at what they do, stay longer.

Other officers assigned to the Blue Angels are Blue Angel Number Seven, a Naval Flight Officer, a doctor, a maintenance officer, an administrative officer, a supply officer, and the two Marine Corps pilots who fly “Fat Albert,” the giant C130 that carries the Blues’ crew and supplies.

Number Seven is the narrator for the team. When the Blue Angels fly, he tells the crowd what they're doing. After two years of making arrangements and narrating the show, Number Seven can join the flying team for one year. He is the only pilot who can serve with the Blue Angels for more than two years.

The Naval Flight Officer also serves as public affairs officer. He is not a pilot, even though he wears the wings of a flying man. The flight officer takes care of scheduling and coordinating the Blue Angels program at each show.

Every year, Number Seven and the Naval Flight Officer go on tour while the Blues are in training. Taking the Number Seven aircraft, a two-seater A4 Skyhawk, they visit every show site on the upcoming schedule.

A Flight Surgeon is part of the team. He oversees the physical and mental health of the officers and crew.

The Maintenance Officer, Administrative Officer, and Supply Officer are also full-time members of the Blue Angels. They take care of all the maintenance and supplies needed to keep the aircraft and men in tip-top condition.

THE AVERAGE BLUE ANGEL

Fewer than 170 persons have ever been Blue Angel pilots. Only a few have flown with the team more than once. These pilots have flown one term as a wingman or solo pilot, then come back as the Number One Blue Angel.

Today the average Blue Angel is about 29 years old. He has been in the Navy five years or more. Many Blue Angels are bachelors.

The U.S. Marine Corps is part of the Navy. So one Marine pilot usually flies with the Blue Angels.

Both men and women can serve in the Blue Angels' ground crew. Women now can fly Navy aircraft, and some do. But they cannot become Blue Angel pilots.

“Our aircraft are tactical jet aircraft,” Lieutenant Bauer explained. “Current Navy regulations do not allow women to go into combat. Since ours are combat aircraft, women cannot fly them.”

At one time, there were several ways of becoming a Naval Aviator. Today, there's only one.

“An Aviator Officer Candidate must have a college degree first,” a Navy recruiter said. “He, or she, can get that from any college in the country. After selection as a candidate, the people go to pre-flight school in Pensacola. It takes 18 months or more to become a Naval Aviator.”

The candidates can choose the type of aircraft they want to fly. They train for several months in that plane. When the candidate flies this aircraft well, he becomes a naval aviator. The aviator's winged badge is won.

“Winning your wings is a special moment,” a Blue Angel said. “When you start in the program, it seems like it may never happen. When you get them, you're proud.”

Young aviators are usually sent to the fleet. It usually takes almost five years to accumulate enough flight time to qualify for the Blue Angels. During this time, the pilots learn to fly different aircraft.

All the Blue Angels pilots must have at least 1,500 hours of flying time. They must be career-oriented, or planning to stay in the Navy for some time.

“More people than we have room for want to be Blue Angels,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “We look closely at all applications for the team, and so does the Navy.”



“We find out everything about the pilot’s ability. How he gets along with people is important. If he is going to be a Blue Angel, he must look like one and act like one.”

Like the ground crew, three new Blue Angel pilots are named in November.

About the same time, word comes from the Chief of Naval Aviation at the Naval Air Station in Corpus Christi, Texas. He makes the most important decision of them all. He chooses the boss, Blue Angel Number One.



“The boss is our squadron leader,” Lieutenant Bauer explained. “If he can’t fly, the team can’t fly. He is responsible for the whole team and what it does.”

Soon after the new year begins, the whole team moves from Pensacola, Florida, the home base of the Blue Angels, to El Centro, California. Here, the new pilots learn to fly the tight formations and intricate maneuvers. The new ground crews learn to keep the planes in tip-top shape.

TRAINING AT EL CENTRO

El Centro, California is close to the Mexican border. It's warm during the winter and the weather is almost always good. The Blue Angels should fly every day when they are training. California weather gives them that chance.

The Blues spend 65 to 70 days at the Naval Air Station in El Centro. Even though the holdover pilots are very skilled in the Blues' routine, the three new pilots need the practice.

Navy pilots are used to flying in formation. "But they're not used to flying the way we do." said a Blue Angel. "There is only three feet between the wingtip of one plane and the canopy of the next."



The four diamond pilots learn their loops and rolls in close formation. The two solo pilots develop the timing they must have. Twice a day, every day of the week, the six pilots take off and practice.

“At first, they may only fly straight and level in the tight formation,” Lieutenant Jim Bauer said. “When they’re trying maneuvers, they move out a ways. Early training flights are usually higher in the air, too.”

Just like the diamond pilots, the solo pilots stay farther apart. Soon, the whole team gets to know its aircraft better. The pilots develop a sense of concentration. They become more confident of themselves and their aircraft.

New members of the ground crew learn their jobs at El Centro. They work even harder there. During the show season, the Blue Angels never fly twice a day. But they do in training.

“When I came to the team, I’d never seen an A4 up close,” recalled one ground crewman. “Believe me, when they fly them twice a day in training, crews learn fast.”

Sometimes, a pilot comes to the Blue Angels without being qualified to fly the A4 Skyhawk. He must be “checked out.” During the checkout the new pilot flies in a two-seat Skyhawk with another experienced pilot.

Even those pilots who have flown Skyhawks before find that the Blues' planes are different.

“We aren't at war,” a pilot said with a smile on his face. “So our planes are stripped. They have no weapons, and even some of the electronic gear has been taken off.”

The Blues practice every part of their performance. After each flight, they debrief by watching a videotape.

“Debriefings are very thorough. You might hear someone say, ‘ I was a little low there, ’ and other comments. The pilots trade tips on how to handle their planes or how to hold their positions,” Lieutenant Bauer said.

During training, three separate debriefings are held. One debriefing is for the four diamond pilots. The second is for the two solo pilots. The third covers the maneuvers made by all six planes. Debriefing lasts about an hour.

“We get very used to watching our videotapes,” one pilot said. “It gets so bad that we can tell if we're off by inches, even if we're seeing ourselves on an 11-inch tube.”

As April gets closer, the performances get better. Each day, the aircraft move in closer until the diamond is completely tight. The solo pilots make their routine more breathtaking.



“We may never fly a perfect show,” says Jim Bauer.
“But we are always trying.”

For many who live around El Centro, the Blue Angels are only a roar in the sky for two months. They might catch a glimpse of the Skyhawks as they climb rapidly into the sky. But when the Blues finish their training, they have their first air show of the year. And the people of El Centro are invited.

A WEEK WITH THE BLUE ANGELS

The schedule of the Blue Angel team during show season is tough. After the team flies its Sunday show, it usually returns to Pensacola. Monday is the Blues day off. Many times, only the ground crew reports for work on Monday.

“Since we’re away so much, we have a lot of things to do around home,” the pilot said. “Monday is the one day of the week we have to get them done.”

Tuesday, everything gets back to normal. The Blues practice. Everything is checked out again. “Fat Albert” is resupplied, if needed.

On Wednesday, Blue Angel Number Seven leaves Pensacola for the weekend show site.

“We have to have a number of things ready to make our show a success,” explained Lieutenant Al Cisneros, Blue Angel Number Seven during the 1974-1975 seasons. “A

show line has to be laid out for the pilots to see. We have to check the schedule of events. We have to have fuel, smoke oil, and support equipment.”

One or more Navy recruiters usually want to talk to Number Seven. They use the Blue Angels’ shows to encourage young people to join the Navy.

The day after Number Seven arrives, “Fat Albert” sets down. Often “Fat Albert,” a C130, is the biggest aircraft ever to land at an airport.

Later that day, the Blue Angels land and the pilots get their final instructions at the show site.

From the time they arrive at the show site, the Blue Angels are on display. But their routine from city to city is almost the same.

“Once we hit the show site, we try to get around as much as we can,” Lieutenant Bauer said. “The people who sponsor the show have put money into it. We want to help them get the biggest possible crowd.”

The Blues usually have more invitations than time. They will attend dinners, receptions, picnics, and banquets. They will visit hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and orphanages. One or more of them makes an appearance on television. Others are interviewed on radio.

“At first, I thought this might get boring after a while,” Jim Bauer said. “But it seems like someone always has a new question or a different greeting. This makes it fun.”

On Friday, the Blues may have morning appointments, but around noon, they withdraw. They will practice that afternoon.

Meanwhile, the airport manager must get ready to close the airport. During the practice, big yellow “Xs” are placed at the end of each runway. These tell pilots of aircraft flying over that the airport is closed.

“We fly for practice, of course,” Jim Bauer said. “But I think, I even hope, sometimes, that during the practice some people who can’t see the weekend show get to see us fly.”

Saturday and Sunday are show days, the public demonstration of the team’s precision flying techniques.



HOMECOMING SHOW

The people of Pensacola, Florida are surrounded by Naval aviation. The Navy has airfields on all sides of town. Sherman Field, which is near the Gulf of Mexico, is the Blue Angels' home. Every year they fly their last show of the season there.

The "Homecoming" air show is the big event in Pensacola. "Where are you going?" is an often-heard question at Homecoming time. Many of the men will take all or part of their 30-day leave soon after the show. Those who are leaving the team will probably report to a different place when their leaves are over. Some will go to other Navy Air Stations and others will report to the fleet.

“I feel like I’ve been around for quite a while,” says a crewman. “I liked it. But I’ve been assigned to a squadron of C130s in Newport, Rhode Island now. It will be very different, but I’m looking forward to it.”

The Blues have offices in one of the large hangars at Sherman Field. The maintenance people occupy the ground floor of the building and the pilots’ office is on the second floor.

There usually are some new faces in the pilots’ area. These are the new pilots who have been selected for the Blues. Most of them wear the standard Navy or Marine flight suit. They haven’t been fitted for the blue and gold suits of the Blue Angels yet. Now they sit in on the briefings and watch the show. But in about four months, they will be the performers.

“I have had two dreams,” says the new Blue Angel pilot, not yet wearing the distinctive gold flight suit. “One was to fly the F14. The other was to fly with the Blue Angels. The F14 can wait.”

The Homecoming show is different from many others. The Navy provides a band concert before the show. Many Navy aircraft are on display. People can even go inside some of them. The big museum of Naval Aviation nearby is open.



The Homecoming air show features other military performers. It also has some civilian acts. The 1975 show opened with the Navy Parachute Team jumping from a helicopter at 10,000 feet. The first jumper opened an American Flag attached to his parachute harness to open the show. This team is made up of volunteers who belong to the Navy's SEAL (Sea and Land) force. They are frogmen who also have been trained as parachutists.

The “Homecoming” show is the only one in which “Fat Albert” performs. This huge aircraft demonstrates a jet-assisted takeoff. Jet-assisted takeoffs are used when the large cargo planes have to use short runways. Eight, separate, small jet engines called JATO bottles are fastened to the plane. After the plane has begun its takeoff roll, the pilot fires the JATO bottles.

As the bottles are fired, they begin roaring. A thin, bluish-white flame appears at the nozzle. And the pilot turns the nose of the plane up at a very steep angle. It climbs quickly into the sky before the JATO bottles burn out.

“Fat Albert” then circles around the field and comes in for a “short field” landing. This also is used when runways aren’t long enough. The moment the aircraft touches down, the pilot reverses the propellers. Instead of pulling the aircraft forward, the props push it backward. It stops in less than 1,000 feet!

Then, incredibly, “Fat Albert” starts backing up. When the plane gets to a taxiway, the pilot turns away from the runway and “Fat Albert’s” act is done. This performance is given only in Pensacola.

As the late fall sun gets lower, it finally is time for the Blue Angels. People have continued to arrive all



afternoon. They are scattered all over Sherman Field. There is hardly a place to stand or sit along the show line fence. The Blues perform the last show of the season. When they land, it's all over for this Blue Angel team.

As the show ends, pilots and crew exchange handshakes. Each crewman is given a photograph of the team in flight. Every pilot has autographed it. The aircraft are quickly towed back to the Blues' hangar.

After the last show, pilots and crew alike will "stand down." This is a Navy word that means "relax."

But soon after the new year begins, the next team will be ready for training. And when spring comes to the United States, the Blue Angels will be ready to thrill another two, three, or four million people.

HISTORY OF THE BLUE ANGELS

The Blue Angels observed their 30th birthday in 1976. They are the oldest of all Armed Forces flight demonstration teams, but they are not the first.

Navy records show that in 1928 Navy pilots gave demonstrations at air shows and air races. The first Navy team may have been the Seahawks.

In those days, Navy pilots who wanted to do stunts were considered nuts. Some Navy pilots who tried stunt flying were grounded. Others got into trouble. But the Navy had a problem. If they didn't fly at any air race or air show, the United States Army Air Corps would.

So Navy teams gave demonstrations. Most of the time, the teams were put together at one Naval Air Station or another. They flew under such names as the Seahawks, Three Flying Fish, High Hatters, and Topgallantsails.

Other military teams had names like the Three Mugs of Beer, Three Musketeers, and Warhawks. They would organize for a short time. When the air races and air shows ended for the year, the pilots would separate.

The first Blue Angels were formed in 1946. They stayed together all year. They performed all over the United States. Other Navy teams had three aircraft, but the Blues had four. Their first plane was the propeller-driven F6F “Hellcat,” a veteran of World War II.

The first time the Blues ever performed, the war was fresh in the minds of Americans. So they shot down a dummy “enemy” aircraft. They also did precision aerobatics.

The Blue Angels always fly the planes the Navy has on duty around the world. In 1948, they changed from the F6F to the F8F “Bearcat,” the fastest propeller-driven plane the Navy had. Then in 1949, they became jet-propelled in the Grumman F9F “Panther.”



Grumman F9F-2 Panther 1949-50



Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat 1947-48



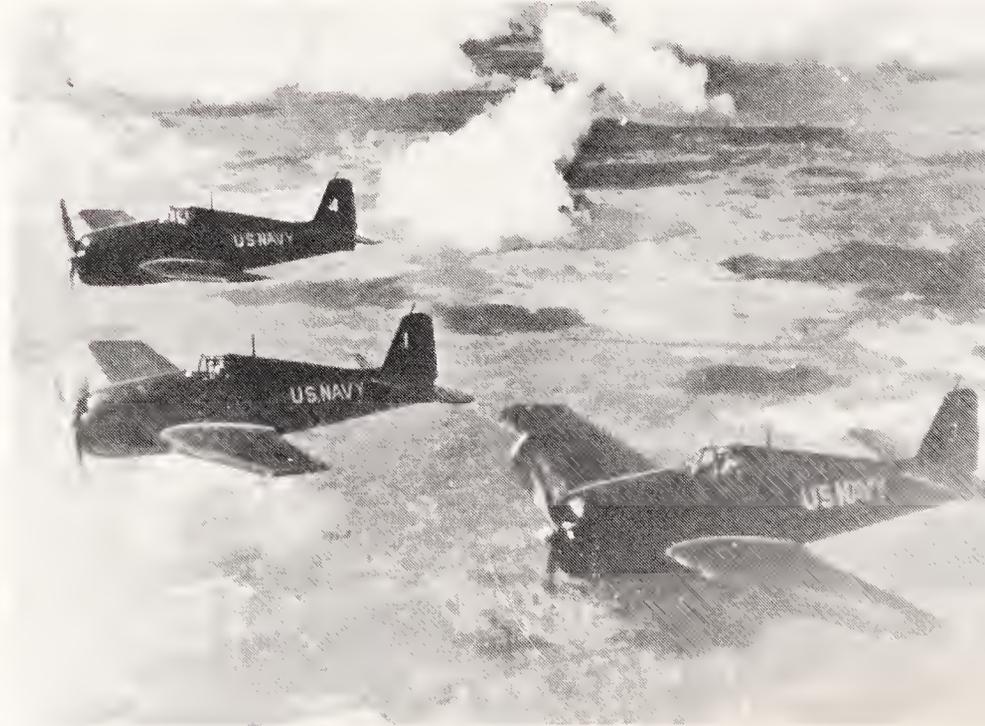
Grumman F9F-5/8 Cougar 1952-56



McDonnell Douglas F-4J Phantom II 1969-73



Grumman F11F-1 Tiger 1957-68



Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat 1946

When they changed planes, the shows they gave changed. Each new aircraft allowed the Blues to do different and more exciting things.

In 1950, the Blues went to war. During the Korean conflict they were sent to the *U.S.S. Princeton*, an aircraft carrier. Lieutenant Commander Johnny Magda was the Blue Angel leader. He was lost in combat when his plane was shot down over Korea.

The team was not gone long, however. Still flying the Panthers, they returned to the air shows. The new Blue Angel team gave its first show in May, 1952 at Memphis, Tennessee.

They switched to the supersonic Grumman F11A “Tiger” in 1958, and flew them for almost ten years. In 1969, they changed to the two-engine McDonnell-Douglas Phantom, the fastest aircraft they have ever flown.

“Just like everyone else, we got hit by the energy crisis,” says Lieutenant Jim Bauer, the team’s public affairs officer. “The Phantom is fun to watch and fun to fly, but it burns too much fuel. The A4 Skyhawk is much more economical, so it became our plane in 1974.”

The Skyhawk was not new to the Navy. It had been in fleet service for 15 years or more.



Each of the six showplanes is a single seater. Blue Angel Number Seven flies a two-seater, and his crew chief travels with him to the show sites. Number Seven also gives rides to three representatives of the news media at each show site.

The Blue Angels are international performers. They did their first shows outside the United States in 1959, in Canada and Bermuda. Since, they have flown in other Caribbean countries, Europe, Iceland, and the Far East.

More than 120 million people have seen them fly.



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Peter B. Mohn published his first children's book in 1975. He still hasn't gotten over it. The **Blue Angels** is his 13th book. A native of Minneapolis, he now lives in Mankato, Minnesota, but would rather be sailing. He spent three years in the Navy himself, but never saw the Blue Angels perform until 1970. Since, he has seen almost 20 such shows. His interests lie in outdoor sports and, of course, flight.



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