

# The Blues at 60

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By Gary Palamara



The radio comes alive as Commander Steven Foley keys his mic...  
“Release Brake ready – Now” - “Smoke On ready – Now”

The afterburners are lit and within seconds the four blue and gold aircraft start to move. Foley, his two wingmen, LCDR John Saccamando and Major Mathew Shortal and slot pilot LCDR Max McCoy maneuver their sleek blue jets down the runway, as the



crowd rise to their feet. Once airborne, it's wheels up as the number four aircraft quickly falls into the slot position behind the others.  
“Four's in Boss”

Then, from the mile long sound system, the voice of the team narrator, Lieutenant John Allison fills the air. “Ladies and Gentleman, The world famous Blue Angels Diamond formation has once again taken to the skies”.

As the four jets exit show left, almost without warning, Lead Solo pilot, LCDR Craig Olson and Opposing Solo LCDR Ted Steelman head down the runway. Olson, in Blue Angel 5, is first to leave ground. He immediately banks his plane to the left and is gone. Steelman, flying the number 6 jet, does a quick barrel roll within 200 feet of the runway before aiming his plane for the sky.

## Aerial Acrobatics at its Finest

For the spectators who watch from the sidelines, it will be an afternoon of thrills and amazement and a chance to witness a demonstration of precision aerobatics at it's finest. For the men and women of the United States Navy Blue Angels, it's just another

day at the “office”. Making the difficult, look routine is job one. And it’s been happening every weekend, just like this, for the past 60 years.

On April 24, 1946 and less than a year after the end of World War II, America’s first aerial demonstration team was formed when then Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral, Chester W. Nimitz, ordered the establishment of an official Navy team. From the start, the mission was then, as it remains today, to showcase naval aviation to the world. In 2006 the Blues are celebrating their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary as America’s premiere flight demonstration team.



Air show excitement happens each weekend all across North America from March through November. So, why not come out and join the fun. For a complete listing of airshow dates and websites of the major performers, see the side bar.

### Good Radio Listening

While most air shows are held on Saturdays and Sundays, good radio listening begins as the performers start arriving around mid-week. Practice shows and rehearsals can take place at almost any time after that, so there’s usually lots of good chatter on the local air bands. If you ask any of the Navy personal about transmit frequencies etc, they will politely answer in general terms. The official answer however, will be more likely, “no comment”. All of the top performers and the air show industry in general, have a strict policy of not confirming air show frequencies to the public. So with that in mind, I didn’t bother to ask anyone about specific frequencies of operation.

Although the frequencies used by the air show industry are always changing, and are often site specific, the most common frequencies used by the major teams do not change very much from show to show. Most are already known and published in various forms, including on the Internet. This basic info, should give anyone who is new to aircraft listening a good starting point. Besides, a lot of the excitement comes from discovering those elusive new frequencies anyway.

If you live close enough to the air show site, your listening pleasure will start the week prior to the official open house weekend. All of the major airshow performers like the Navy Blue Angels, Air Force Thunderbirds and the Canadian Snowbirds send out advance teams to make sure everything is ready prior to the main team’s arrival. You can look for the advance aircraft to arrive as early as Tuesday or Wednesday of the air show week. They will most likely come up on the regular tower approach frequencies as they near the field and they will normally be identified with the team’s name, Blue Angel 8, Thunderbird 7 etc. Quite often, prior to landing, the advance team will ask for permission to fly around and become familiar with the area. After landing, they will work quickly to make sure everything is ready for the rest of the team’s arrival on Thursday or Friday.

Along with the advance team, listen too for lots of pre show chatter from the various ground-based setup groups. Their job is to prepare the show site, position the concession stands and park all of the planes that will be flying in for the static displays. Setup before the air show and cleanup afterwards, is a big job. Some air show crowd lines can stretch for almost a mile and listening to the crews as they get everything ready and then clean up after the show is another listening opportunity.

### Handpicked Support Personnel

All of the top performers also travel with support personnel. Depending upon the size of the show and the number of days the team will spend on the road, as many as 50 people might travel in advance of the main show performers. These folks are hand picked, and are tops in their respective fields. The Navy's support people volunteer for their assignments and receive no additional pay for their efforts. Once selected, these "maintainers" are assigned to the Blue Angels squadron for a three-year tour and travel to each show site throughout the season. Enlisted personnel rotate in and out of the squadron on an as needed basis, with teammates, joining and leaving the squadron throughout the year. The support team represents more than 25 different Naval career fields. With a squadron of nearly 125 people, it takes a tremendous amount of coordination and planning to make sure everything goes smoothly. Staying on top of everyone's personal and professional needs is key to having a successful air show. Luckily, for the Blue Angels, this task has been well honed over the years.



### Fat Albert

On July 22, 1970, the United States Marine Corps officially took over the role of Blue Angels logistical support. Before that time, no specific organization was charged with supporting the Blue Angels mission and flying the team from air show to air show. Since the Marines took over, the Angels support aircraft has always been a four-engine turbo prop Hercules C-130, made by the Lockheed Company. Over the years, the C-130 has affectionately been given the

name of "Fat Albert", after the Bill Cosby character of the same name.

Since 1970, seven different aircraft have been used to transport the Blue Angels men and equipment. The current Fat Albert aircraft has been in service since 2002 and is painted to match the Angels blue and gold color scheme. And lest you think that the old C-130 is simply a beast of burden, at most air shows, Fat Albert even gets a chance to take center stage. With a spit and polished paint job and a maximum take off weight approaching 160,000 pounds, the C-130 is a tremendous show performer in it's own right. No more so, than when Fat Albert wows the crowd with a Jet Assisted Take Off (JATO).

Flying in “Fat-Albert”, or simply “Bert”, the support team, bring along everything that is required for a complete Blue Angels air show. They carry spares of all mission critical parts and even have some room left over for a few creature comforts. From a spare, jet engine and communications equipment, to public relations flyers, handouts and bottled water, everything is put aboard Bert for the trip. Soon after the support teams arrival, the Jet aircraft are overhead and the months of coordination and planning are over. The air show weekend has officially begun and everyone prays for good weather.



The Blue Angels wow the crowds at more than 75 public air shows across America and around the world every year. Most show sites are two or even three-day weekend events with the exceptions being the major national holidays like Memorial Day, Labor Day and the Fourth of July. Shows can average 50-60 thousand spectators per day and when you add in practice shows, official flyovers and other special events each year, the Blue Angels show off the Navy’s Blue and Gold colors to an estimated 10-15 million people annually. Over a 60 year career, hundreds of millions have been witness to Naval aviation at it’s finest.

### Time Flies!

The long history of Blue Angel air shows actually began on June 15, 1946. Less than two months after the team was officially established, the first squadron leader, WWII combat veteran, Lieutenant Commander Roy “Butch” Voris, led his naval aviators into the skies over Craig Field in Jacksonville, Florida. It was the first Blue Angels air show. Back then, the aircraft of choice was the battle tested Grumman F-6F Hellcat, a single engine propeller driven fighter. During WWII, the Hellcat had the highest Kill - Loss ratio of any American fighter plane, so it was the obvious choice for the newly formed team. The Blues would go on to fly only one other propeller driven aircraft before switching over to their first Jet powered fighter. In 1951, the Grumman F9F Panther became the Blue Angels first Jet powered aircraft.



Over the years, the team, have used a total of eight different airframes to fly their routines. All of these aircraft have come from only two airplane manufacturers, the Grumman Corporation of Bethpage, New York and the McDonnald-Douglas Company, which is now a part of the Boeing Company. In the late 1960s the team began flying the venerable McDonnald-Douglas F-4. But due in large part to the oil crisis of the 1970s the team transitioned away from the Viet Nam era,

Phantom and began flying the smaller and more fuel-efficient McDonnald-Douglas A-4 Sky hawk. Although small in size, the Sky hawk was a very capable aircraft and the Blues flew the A-4 for more than 6 years.

### Time for a Change - The Hornet

With the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, upon them, in 1986, it was time for a change. On November 8, 1986, at the close of the air show season, the Blue Angels introduced their sixth and still current jet fighter, the McDonnald-Douglas F/A-18 Hornet. Training with the new jet began almost immediately. The first full year of air show operation with the F/A-18 was 1987.

First flown by the U.S. Navy in 1980, nearly 1200 Hornets have been built over the years. While the actual number of Navy fighters is officially a secret, many of the 1200 airframes have been sold to friendly air forces around the globe. With constant upgrades and improvements throughout its long career as a Navy fighter, the F/A-18 has maintained its record as the world's number one Attack-Fighter aircraft. The numbers speak for themselves.

The Hornet is a heavy aircraft, weighing in at over 45,000 pounds. That's more than three times the weight of the Blues first aircraft, the F-6F. Yet, despite it's bulk, the 38 by 56 foot airframe is extremely maneuverable and can easily better 1,360 mph, with a flight ceiling of 50,000 feet. This high level of performance comes largely from the F/A-18's massive power plant. The multi-role war machine is powered by two General Electric, F-400 engines that are capable of delivering 16,000 pounds of thrust per side. Fully equipped for battle, the Hornet can carry one 20 mm six-barrel cannon with 570 rounds, plus up to 17,000 pounds ordnance under the wings. Bombs, rockets, missiles and fuel drop tanks can be attached to any one of nine external points along the fuselage.

The F/A-18 Hornet was also the first fighter aircraft to have carbon fiber wings and the first tactical jet fighter to use digital fly-by-wire flight controls. With all this power, capability and sophistication, its no wonder then, that since it's introduction nearly 27 years ago, the F/A-18 Hornet has been the pride of the Navy's fleet. What better aircraft to showcase Naval aviation to the world.

### It's Showtime at 450 MPH!

On show day, the Blue Angels team arrives several hours before the scheduled take off time and begin by checking over everything. Away from the flight line, the pilots gather for a pre-flight meeting approximately two hours prior to take off. They will go over every aspect of the show performance and discuss everything in detail. Back on the flight line, the maintainers check and then re-check every aspect of the show. From engines to communications, nothing is overlooked.

At the heart of any successful military operation is good communications. The Angels travel with a complete Com-Trailer



loaded with everything needed for a successful Blue Angels performance. During the show, the main diamond formation will monitor at least two frequencies. Chatter is normally kept to a minimum but the atmosphere is upbeat and professional. During most of the maneuvers, the Bosses' voice is just about all you'll hear. Commander Foley calls out each command in a calm assured manor, like a surgeon in an operating room. Only this operating room is flying along at 450 miles per hour. The two solo pilots operate in much the same manor as the diamond team. They share a "private" frequency for their own coordination, but they also monitor the main diamond frequency as well. As they fly along performing each show routine, everyone knows exactly where they are in the performance. The ground controllers listen to everything.

Monitoring as many as six different frequencies at the same time, the ground controller's job is to be the eyes and ears for the rest of the team. They monitor aircraft position, wind speed and critical weather data on a second by second basis. In the event of any emergency or sudden change in field conditions, the ground controller will notify the team leader who will assess the situation and then take whatever action is needed.



### The Right Stuff

Becoming a Blue Angel is a career high for any Navy or Marine Corps Officer. The requirements are tough and most team members were turned down at least once prior to making the team. A total of 16 officers serve with the Blue Angels. The Chief of Naval Air Training chooses the Commanding Officer of the Blue Angels team. The Blue Angels leader must have at least 3,000 tactical jet flight-hours and have commanded a tactical jet squadron prior to being selected. The Commanding Officer flies the Number 1 jet. Each year a selection board within the Blue Angels group, chooses three tactical (fighter or fighter/attack) jet pilots, two support officers and one Marine Corps C-130 pilot to relieve departing members. Marine Corps pilots who wish to apply for the position of Fat Albert Commander, must have at least 1,200 flight hours with the C-130 Hercules. Most Blue Angel officers serve for three years with the Blue Angels while Pilots and Maintenance Officers serve for only a two-year period.

In addition to all of the technical requirements for becoming a member of the Blue Angels, every team member selection is based on a myriad of intangible qualities, like professional ability, military bearing and communication skills. Any Blue Angels member will tell you that they represent the best that the Navy has to offer. With 60 years of Blue Angel history behind them, they stand on the shoulders of the many who have come before. May they have many more good years in the future?

### Footnote On Air Shows After 9/11

On September 15 & 16, 2001 the Navy Blue Angels and the Army's elite parachute team; the Golden Knights were scheduled to perform for an open house

weekend at McGuire Air Force Base in southern New Jersey. Those air shows were naturally cancelled because of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>. For a short while after the attacks, it looked as though military air shows might be gone forever. But within weeks of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, public Open Houses were rescheduled with heightened security. While most of the aerial performers finished out the 2001 season after missing only a few show dates, for McGuire Air Force Base however, it was a different story. Because McGuire's mission is so vital to the support of our men and women overseas, it was officially off the air show list after that dark day in September '01. In 2005, McGuire's status changed and it once again held an open house weekend in June. Naturally, the folks at McGuire wanted to welcome back the teams who were originally scheduled to perform in 2001. On June 4 & 5 2005, it was my pleasure to be at the base when the Navy Blue Angels and the Army Golden Knights once again returned to the skies over Burlington County, New Jersey.

### Knights Falling

Next, we'll take a close up look at the Army's Golden Knights parachute team. And we'll try to answer the age old question, "Why would anyone in his or her right mind, willingly jump out of a perfectly good airplane?" See you then.

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*Editor's Note: Gary Palamara is a freelance writer with a love of aviation. From 1968-'72, he worked with the Armed Forces Radio & Television Service while serving with the United States Air Force. For the past 30 years, he has been a freelance broadcast engineer. Gary is also an Amateur Radio operator. His amateur call sign is, AF1US. Reach him via his website, [www.garypalamara.com](http://www.garypalamara.com)*

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Photo Captions for the above...

Photo One \*\* Copyright US Navy - "A Blue Angel View of the world"

Photo Two - "The world famous Blue Angels Diamond formation"

Photo Three - "Solo 5 heads for the sky at the start of another Blue Angels air show"

Photo Four - "Blue Angels support provided by the United States Marines"

Photo Five \*\* Copyright US Navy - "Fat Albert's crowd pleasing Jet Assisted Take Off"

Photo Six - "Commander Foley steers Blue Angel #1 down the McGuire Air Force Base taxiway"

Photo Seven - "The Blue Angels Communications Trailer in Action"

Photo Eight - "All six Blue Angels, performing an Inverted Bomb Burst maneuver"

Photo Nine - "Up Close and personal with Blue Angel Three"

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