

## Flying with the US Air Force Thunderbirds

### Take a Ride on the Wild Side

by Gary Palamara

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Most of the early afternoon is spent discussing the flight and going over procedures. Next, there's a pre-flight physical, before getting fitted for your "G suit." For Karen Adams, a reporter for KYW radio in Philadelphia, and Bill Baldini from WCAU-TV, the anticipation of this Air Show weekend is now mixed with a combination of nervousness and joy. The kind of feeling you get when you're seated in a roller coaster, as it heads straight for the top. Karen and Bill are about to get a close-up look at what it's like to fly like a bird... a Thunderbird, to be exact.



The United States Air Force Thunderbirds are one of the world's premiere military aerial demonstration teams. Along with the Navy Blue Angels and the Canadian Snowbirds, the Thunderbirds crisscross North America each year showcasing some of the best precision flying in the world. For the Media, all three teams and many civilian performers offer backseat rides to show off their talent and skill, and their coming to a town near you.

*Army Air Corps Symbol - © USAF*



#### After the War

The Army Air Corps became a separate branch of the military following the end of World War II. Within a short time after the creation of the Air Force in 1947, top brass recognized the need for self-promotion. Personnel retention, recruitment and the ever present need for public support in the halls of government, were as important in the early years of the Air Force, as they are today. So like the Navy's Blue Angel squadron six years before, in May of 1953, the United States Air Force established a precision aerobatic team.

Officially, they were known as the 300<sup>th</sup> Air Demonstration Squadron, but soon after their inception, the new team was given the name the Thunderbirds, after the mythical Native-American War Bird. In 2003, the Thunderbirds are celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

## The Mission

Job One for the Navy's Blue Angels, the Canadian Snowbirds and for the USAF Thunderbirds is to promote military aviation while spreading good will and patriotism across America and around the world. During the past half-century, the Thunderbirds have performed in all 50 states and 65 countries overseas. The air show season runs from March to November so, there is plenty of good flying yet to come in 2003.

Flyovers at public events and air shows have always been the way military teams demonstrate their skills to the public. But now, in this time of heightened awareness of aviation, military skill and precision takes on an even greater sense of importance. On average, according to the International Council of Air Shows, ICAS, between 15 and 18 million people across North America attend air shows each year. But 2003 is not an average year.



Besides the Thunderbirds anniversary, on December 17, 2003, the world will celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wright Brothers invention of the airplane. Coming so late in the year, public interest in aviation will likely remain high throughout this year and into 2004.



When the Thunderbird team arrives in your hometown for an air show, getting the Air Force message out to the public, takes on many forms. The entire team spreads out to attend town meetings, school events, make hospital visits and participate in local TV and Radio interviews. To give local reporters a realistic view of what it's like to be a Thunderbird pilot, the team also provides credentialed members of the media with back seat rides in a real Thunderbird jet. If you are interested in riding a roller coaster on Steroids, the Thunderbirds have an F-16 waiting for you.

In air show circles, it's known as a Media Flight, and at most air show locations, the Thunderbirds only have time for one or two. Radio Reporters are more than welcome to participate, and the procedure is relatively simple. All the information is available on the Thunderbird website or via telephone. But with limited availability, time is of the essence

however and applications should be submitted well in advance of the air show dates. The team will notify you several weeks prior to the air show, if you have been chosen to fly.

### Pulling Gs

Hard nosed reporters get goose bumps at the chance, which is of course the point of the flights. The clock just seemed to stand still as the day of the flight came closer for Bill Baldini. “Once I knew I was going up, I had a tough time waiting for the day to come... All I wanted to do was fly.” “I spent 4 years in the Air Force” Baldini continued, “and they never let me fly anything... Now I’m a reporter, and they put me in the back seat of an F-16... Wow!”

For Karen Adams from KYW Radio, flying with the Thunderbirds was a career highlight. “It’s the reality of a childhood fantasy...” “My father served in the Army, so I knew about the Thunderbirds.” “I even dreamed about becoming a fighter pilot, just so I could feel the power of an F-16. As it turned out, that wasn’t necessary.”

Karen was the first one to fly when the Thunderbirds came to the near-by Willow Grove air show in 2002. “I was in the air for about an hour. After takeoff, we jetted over to the New Jersey coastline.” “We even flew into a restricted military zone, where I got to feel what a Lockheed Martin F-16 can do.” “I’ll never forget the feeling of the G-force as my pilot Major Glen Lawson engaged in sharp turns and loops. The pressure was enormous.”



The next day it was Bill Baldini’s turn to soar into the heavens. “When we started down the runway, the pilot said to me, don’t look straight ahead, because you can’t really see how fast we’re going. Look to the right or the left.” The jet starts to roll, then the afterburner kicks in and within a few seconds, you are going vertical. “The pilot started counting off the G’s...” Baldini continued, “6.5, 7, 8... When we hit 9 G’s, I was frozen. I couldn’t move my arms or legs. Then, I thought to myself, this guy up front is still talking to me in a calm voice and flying this thing... unbelievable!”

A Media flight lasts from 30 minutes to an hour. Your Thunderbird pilot will go as slow or as fast as you like, and they concentrate on making sure that you have a good flight. Back on the ground, I asked Bill how he felt, “I know why these pilots love this stuff... you feel like the King of the world up there, all you see is sky.”



**“I walked away from the experience with a whole new respect for fighter pilots” said Karen Adams, “They must endure and overcome the physiological effects of G-force while engaging in high altitude dog fights.” I asked Karen, if she would do it again and without hesitation she answered... “In a minute.” Bill Baldini had a similar response. Did you have any regrets, I asked.... “Yea, I was annoyed because I didn’t want it to end... I want to go again.”**

**The air show season is upon us, and chances are, there will be an air show near your hometown. You can find a complete listing of Thunderbird, Blue Angels, Snow Bird and ICAS show dates and information about taking media flights, on the worldwide web and at the addresses listed on the Links page. Why not reach for the sky!**

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### **About the Author**

**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, writer and photographer. Gary is also an Amateur Radio operator. His amateur radio call sign is, AF1US.**

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