



THE THUNDERBIRDS

AIR FORCE DEMONSTRATION SQUADRON CELEBRATES 65 YEARS

By Master Sgt. (Ret.) Al Eakle

In 1953, the Air Force wanted to demonstrate the capabilities of one of its frontline fighters, not just only to the country's own citizens, but to the world. An order came down from senior Air Force leaders to form a demonstration team and be ready to fly their first demonstration three weeks later. Thus were the beginnings of the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron "Thunderbirds" who continue this mission 65 years later.

"I was walking on the tarmac (at Luke AFB, Ariz.) one day when I was stopped by then-Maj. Dick 'Smokey' Catledge, the first commander/leader of the Thunderbirds," said former Staff Sgt. Bob Graham, a member of the first team. "He asked if I wanted to do something fun." Graham's smile must have been a dead giveaway, for there he began a two-year assignment as a roving crew chief and supply person as team members did double duty in those days. "We really had nothing but a priority to get the job done," Graham added.

Within a year of standing up the team, the State Department sent them on their first overseas tour to 11 Central and South American countries. Since then, the team has visited 62 countries around the world, including last year's demonstration at the Royal International Air Tattoo at RAF Fairford, United Kingdom, and a flyover during Bastille Day in Paris, France.

The Thunderbirds flew several different aircraft their first 16 years, including the F-84G Thunderjet, the F-84F Thunderstreak and the F-100C Super Sabre.

Nearly forgotten, the Thunderbirds flew the F-105B Thunderchief at only six shows between April 26 and May 9, 1964. Tragically, Capt. Gene Devlin was killed during arrival maneuvers at Hamilton AFB, California. His plane had broken in two just behind the cockpit and he had no time to



The first Thunderbirds team started with seven officers and 22 enlisted members. Today the team is made up of 12 officers and 118 enlisted in 28 different Air Force Specialty Codes.



Crew Chief Sgt. Brad Zomer watches during the run-up as a Thunderbirds F-16 Fighting Falcon gets ready to launch. Maintainers proved they were able to convert to a combat unit on short notice in 1988 when they had an F-16 fully ready for combat in less than 24 hours. They installed a Gatling gun with live ordnance under the wings.

eject. The accident investigation uncovered a structural flaw, which led to the grounding of all F-105Bs.

The urgency to get them back on the road and with all pilots also qualified to fly the F-100D, the team transitioned back to the Super Sabre following the incident. Thunderbird pilots flew the F-100C for nearly 13 years.

The Thunderbirds saw a record year in 1965. The team flew three overseas tours: a 7-day tour in four Caribbean countries; a 27-day tour in 10 European countries; and 16-day tour of seven Central American countries and Mexico. Their show season concluded in December, having flown a record 121 airshows.

The Thunderbirds broke the century mark again in 1967, flying 107 demonstrations. An exciting moment came that year when solo pilot Maj. Tony McPeak (later General and Air Force Chief of Staff) had the wings come off his aircraft (due to metal fatigue) during the bomb-burst maneuver. His was the first major accident to happen during a Thunderbirds airshow.

REFIT CHALLENGES

The conversion to F-4E Phantom IIs, T-38 Talons and F-16 Fighting Falcons offered maintainers a challenge.

In the case of the F-4s, the paint scheme changed due to the variations in chemicals. The white paint base was developed and remains a part of today's Thunderbird aircraft design.

The oil embargo of the 1970s nearly spelled the end for all military aerial demonstration teams. The Air Force, however, reasoned the T-38 could perform the mission for one-fifth the fuel usage of the F-4, so the Air Force ordered the transition to the T-38.

The Thunderbird team began an unprecedented effort that required manufacturer-level modifications be done at the squadron level, something unheard of at the time. In typical Thunderbird fashion, they finished the task in only 116 days and did it 50 percent under budget.

Now-retired Gen. Lloyd "Fig" Newton made history by becoming the first African-American Thunderbird pilot in 1974. He held several positions on the team, including Narrator, Slot Pilot and Right Wing Pilot.

In 1976, the team flew with the Bicentennial logo on their tails—the only aircraft in the Air Force inventory to claim that heraldry—because the Thunderbirds were the only military unit recognized as an official Bicentennial organization.

TRANSITIONING TO FALCONS

Sadly, tragedy struck the team Jan. 18, 1982, when Thunderbirds in diamond formation crashed, taking the lives of four pilots. Several months later, Gen. Bill Creech, commander of Tactical Air Command and a Thunderbird alumnus, announced the team would receive and convert to the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

The team went through a difficult rebuilding process, but through the dedicated efforts of officers and enlisted alike, the Thunderbirds were back on the road the following year.

"Replacement pilots were selected and trained, a new airshow sequence based on the F-16's performance was designed, and new operational procedures were developed," said retired Brig. Gen. Jim Latham, Right Wing pilot in 1978–79 who became Commander/Leader in June 1982. "A new paint scheme for the aircraft and installation of a smoke generating system had to be designed and developed. Aircraft maintainers had to be cross-trained from the T-38 to the F-16, and experienced F-16 specialists with skills unique to the aircraft were hired and trained on the unique aspects of being a Thunderbird."

Critical to successful transition and rebuilding the team were its enlisted members, for without them the pilots would not be able to safely fly the demonstrations. "It was not



Thunderbirds crew chiefs scramble to chalk the Thunderbirds T-38 Talons.



Crew Chief Tech. Sgt. Tim Matthews helps Lt. Col. Roger Parrish, Thunderbirds Commander/Leader, strap into his F-4E Phantom II at Howard Air Force Base, Panama.

just the maintainers,” said Latham, “but the logistics, supply, administration and public affairs specialists who often made the impossible happen.” After ten months of training and preparation, the Thunderbirds were back “On the Road Again” for the 1983 airshow season.

Their first public demonstration in the F-16 was April 2, 1983, at Nellis AFB, Nevada. They have been flying the aircraft for more than 35 years, for a total 2,450 demos flown in the Fighting Falcon.

RECOGNITION AND REDEDICATION

The Thunderbirds, as “Ambassadors in Blue” for all Americans, were singled out for being the epitome of the nation’s Air Force community and representing the best of what can be accomplished through teamwork. They received the General of the Army Omar Bradley Spirit of America Award following their triumphant 1984 international tour, the first overseas appearance by the Thunderbirds in 13 years.

In 1986, the Thunderbirds participated in the rededication flyby of the Statue of Liberty and in September, another milestone was attained when the team went over the 200 million mark for total attendance.

The largest crowd ever to see a performance—2.25 million people—was at Coney Island, New York, July 4, 1987. The 1987 Far East tour marked their debut in Beijing, China—the first American military demonstration to ever perform in a Communist country.

The Thunderbirds are more than just a demonstration squadron. Maintainers proved they were able to convert to a combat unit on short notice in 1988 when they had an F-16 fully ready for combat in less than 24 hours. They installed a Gatling gun with live ordnance under the wings and then Logistic Officer Maj. B. J. Java flew the plane to a gunnery range and dropped bombs on target—all bull’s-eyes. The exercise validated the team’s wartime capability.



During their overseas deployment in July 2017, the Thunderbirds performed a flyover in Paris as part of France’s Bastille Day celebration. President Donald Trump was in the audience that day. The inclusion of the Thunderbirds in these festivities marked the 100th year since the United State’s entry into the First World War. The team also flew demonstrations at the Royal International Air Tattoo at RAF Fairford, United Kingdom. This was the team’s first overseas deployment to Europe since 2011. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Master Sgt. Christopher Boitz)

EXCHANGE PROGRAM

A new program for enlisted started in 1989 when Thunderbirds Commander/Leader Lt. Col. Steve Trent and U.S. Navy Blue Angels Commander/Leader Cmdr. Pat Money-maker created an exchange program, which exists to this day. The teams exchange senior enlisted who are fully integrated mission contributors. Master Sgt. Willie Cooper was the first Thunderbird to serve with the “Blues” under this program.

The Thunderbirds flew their 3,000th air show at Naval Air Station Norfolk, Virginia, on April 22, 1990. Two weeks before the scheduled European trip later that year, Iraq invaded Kuwait, triggering Operation Desert Shield. The loss of airlift capability resulted in the short-notice cancellation of a planned European and North African tour, as well as several stateside air shows. Due to the war, the team lost its C-141 support, and for the first time since 1975, it had to rely on two C-130s for transport. The team would not see the return of C-141 support until well into the 1991 season.

In 1991, the Thunderbirds returned to Europe. The team added flags from Hungary, Poland and Switzerland to the flag panel. They were the first team to fly over former Warsaw

Pact countries. This would be the final season the team would fly the F-16A and B models.

The Thunderbirds were the host demonstration team for the Golden Air Tattoo 50th Anniversary of the Air Force air show in 1997. The United States Postal Service honored the Air Force's 50th anniversary as a separate branch of the military in 1997 with a limited edition stamp featuring the Thunderbirds. The stamp pictured the Thunderbirds' Delta formation.

The team made television history in 2003 while celebrating their 50th Anniversary. The Commander/Leader Lt. Col. Richard McSpadden started the Coca-Cola 600 by broadcasting live from the cockpit, "Gentlemen, start your engines."

As a captain, retired Col. Nicole "Fifi" Malachowski made history when she became the first female pilot selected to fly as part of the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron. She spent the 2006 and 2007 air show seasons as the Right Wing Pilot in the diamond formation.

Started with seven officers and 22 enlisted, today's Thunderbird Team is made up of 12 officers and 118 enlisted in 28 different Air Force specialty codes. "We are a Total Force team," said Chief Master Sgt. Jason Hughes, chief enlisted manager. "We are always looking for people to serve on the



Tech. Sgt. Christopher Chappell, a tactical aircraft maintainer on the Number Seven jet flown by the Thunderbirds Operations Officer, signs an autograph at an airshow.

team from active duty, Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve volunteers."

If hired, volunteers will typically serve between three and four years as a Thunderbird. Every new enlisted team member begins their Thunderbirds assignment learning about

NEW CHALLENGE COIN RECOGNIZES TWO THUNDERBIRDS ANNIVERSARIES

The Thunderbirds Alumni Association (TBAA) is recognizing two Thunderbirds anniversaries in 2018 with a new challenge coin.

The new challenge coin recognizes the USAF Air Demonstration Squadron's 65th anniversary and the 35th anniversary of the team's first official demonstration in the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

The first official demonstration was flown at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, April 2, 1983.

This special coin is struck brass two inches in diameter, 3mm thick and has roughly 8 to 10 colors with shiny silver metal plating.

The cost is \$20 each plus \$3 for postage.

Coins are available through the TBAA website tbaa.org under the Merchandise sub-tab.





Following tradition, the Thunderbirds fly over as cadets toss their hats in the air during their graduation from the U.S. Air Force Academy.

life as a Thunderbird, the team's long and detailed history, its heritage, mission and squadron-specific policies. Their in-processing culminates in an oral exam where they are tested by their fellow Airmen on anything and everything related to the Thunderbirds. Once they complete the final test, the squadron commander rewards them with the Thunderbirds patch and coin.

And once they successfully complete their tour, these individuals have the opportunity to become active in the Thunderbirds Alumni Association, along with the 2,177 men and women who have worn the Thunderbird patch over the last 65 years.

"I served on the team from 1986–88 and worked in Operations," said retired Master Sgt. Tina McCormick. "Being on the team allowed me to get on the flight line and try and learn something other than my job. I learned how to launch and actually launched #8 (Narrator) from a show site. I also spent a winter at Indian Springs (now Creech AFB) learning the music and actually did the music at the Eglin air show."

This year's team is scheduled to fly 64 demonstrations at 34 locations in the U.S. and Canada.



While meeting the USAF Thunderbirds jet demonstration team and crew, Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin traded fighter pilot stories with then-Maj. Nicole Malachowski, who in 2006 became the first female demonstration pilot on any U.S. military high performance jet team.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The author served as the Thunderbirds Airshow Coordinator from 1989-91. He currently serves as the Administrative/Communications Assistant for the Thunderbirds Alumni Association.