

Thunderbirds Sixtieth Anniversary

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Official patch commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the USAF Thunderbirds.

The 3600th US Air Force Air Demonstration Unit was activated at Luke AFB, Arizona, on 1 June 1953. Seven officers and twenty-two enlisted were selected for the first jet fighter demonstration team of the newest US military service branch. All team members were from Luke, home to the USAF advanced flight training school.

Maj. Dick Catledge, who flew twenty-eight combat missions in the P-38 Lightning during World War II and was the training commander at Luke, was in charge of the original team. He flew the lead position in the four-aircraft demonstration. Four other pilots on the team included Capt. Bill Patillo, who flew right wing; his identical twin, Capt. Buck Patillo, who flew left wing; Capt. Bob Kanaga, who flew slot; and Capt. Bob McCormick, the team's backup pilot.

The demonstration squadron performed its first aerial display on 16 June 1953 at Williams AFB, in Mesa, Arizona. The team's first performance at a civilian airshow took place that July at the Cheyenne Frontier Days celebration in Wyoming. Shortly thereafter, the team adopted the name Thunderbirds, influenced in part by the strong Native American culture and folklore from the US Southwest, which considered the thunderbird to be a supernatural bird of exceptional power and strength.

The original demonstration consisted of a series of four-ship formation aerobatics lasting about fifteen minutes. A solo performance was not originally incorporated into the demonstration. However, as the first season progressed, McCormick began flying solo maneuvers with the spare aircraft to warm up the audiences.

The team flew the straight wing F-84G Thunderjet for its first two years and then transitioned to the swept wing F-84F Thunderstreak for a year. The Thunderbirds began flying the F-100C Super Sabre in 1956, the same year they moved to their current home at Nellis AFB, Nevada.

The F-100C served the Thunderbirds team for the next thirteen years. In 1964, the team flew the F-105B Thunderchief for six demonstrations. The F-105 proved unsuitable as a show aircraft, so the team switched back to the F-100, this time to the F-100D. The Thunderbirds flew this version of the Super Sabre through the 1968 season when they switched to the F-4E Phantom II, which was also flown by the US Navy's Blue Angels demonstration team.

Economic considerations—mainly fuel costs—put the team in the T-38A Talon in 1974, which they flew for seven years. This was the only trainer flown by the Thunderbirds. The team transitioned to the Block 15 F-16A in 1983. The Thunderbirds began flying the Block 32 F-16C in 1992 and transitioned to the Pratt & Whitney F100-PW-229-powered Block 52 F-16C for the 2009 show season.

The team's original mission was to give confidence to the Air Force pilots of the day, showing that they, too, could handle the speed and power of jet aircraft.

Over the last sixty years, the mission has grown to include recruiting young men and women; retaining quality Airmen serving today; and representing active duty, Guard, and Reserve members serving at home and abroad.

Today's Thunderbirds reinforce public confidence in the Air Force and demonstrate the professional competence of Air Force members. They strengthen morale and esprit de corps among Air Force members and support Air Force community relations outreach programs. Finally, they present a positive image of the United States and its professional armed forces to foreign nations while projecting international goodwill.

The squadron and its aerial demonstration have evolved as well. The Thunderbirds, today an Air Combat Command squadron under the 57th Fighter Wing at Nellis, consists of six demonstration pilots and two pilots who serve as the maintenance officer and the show narrator plus four support officers, three civilians, and more than 130 enlisted personnel. Officers typically serve two-year assignments with the squadron, while enlisted personnel may serve three to four years. Replacements must be trained for about half of the team each year to assimilate new team members.

The aerial demonstration involves a combination of formation flying with the diamond formation and solo routines, which join the diamond to form the larger delta formation. The pilots perform approximately thirty maneuvers in a demonstration. The entire show, including a pre-show on the ground and in the air, runs just over an hour. The four-ship diamond

formation highlights the training and precision of Air Force pilots, while the solo aircraft highlights the high performance of the F-16.

The squadron performs up to eighty-eight air demonstrations each year—without ever having to cancel a demonstration because of maintenance difficulty. More than 280 million people in all fifty states and fifty-seven foreign countries have seen the team's jets in more than 3,500 aerial demonstrations.

The 2013 show schedule was curtailed in April because of across-the-board federal spending cuts. Pentagon officials announced a plan in October 2013 that will enable the military services to resume conducting community and public outreach activities in 2014, but at a reduced capacity.