

Marines in blue

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Cpl. Jacob Osborne



During "morning turns," the ground crew inspects every inch of the F/A-18 to guarantee safety standards are met. The Blue Angel pilots fly the jets at speeds up to 700 miles per hour during aerial demonstrations performed throughout the world. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Kuande Hall)

"The feeling of flying at high speeds is incredible," said Marine Capt. Brandon Cordill, number three pilot for the United States Navy Demonstration Squadron in Pensacola, Fla. "Take the scariest roller coaster you have ever been on and multiply it by 100, and that's close to the adrenaline rush I get to experience on a daily basis flying with the Blue Angels."

NAVAL AIR STATION PENSACOLA, Fla. - The team of elite Naval aviators performs stunts before more than 11 million people annually and the aircraft are an iconic image of Navy aerial precision.

What many may not know is that the Marine Corps plays a vital role in the success of the Blue Angels, not only in the air but on the ground.



Sgt. Kyle Storm, crew chief for the number seven jet, salutes Navy Lt. Mark Tedrow prior to take off. A team of enlisted Marines and sailors perform all maintenance, administrative and support functions for the Blue Angels Demonstration Squadron. Their knowledge and skills ensure the aircraft are in the best condition prior to each aerial demonstration. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Kuande Hall)

"This is my first year with the team, and it has really been an honor to serve with the Blue Angels," said Cordill, one of two Marine F/A-18 pilots on the team. "I never saw myself flying one of these blue jets."

By piloting F/A-18s in aerial acrobats at speeds just short of Mach 1 (that's nearly 700 MPH to non-aviator types), the squadron serves two significant functions. The first, and most recognizable is showcasing the capabilities of Navy-Marine Corps pilots, crew and aircraft for the American public. Secondly, the team has the opportunity to represent the courtesy and professionalism instilled into every sailor and Marine.

As the second oldest formal flying aerobatic team in the world, the Blue Angels represent the proficiency of the blue-green team.

"The most important reason to have Marines on the Blue Angels team is that Marines and sailors work together in the fleet to accomplish a mission, and it's the same for the Blue Angels team," said Maj. Brent Stevens, number four pilot in the squadron.

Safety is always a concern while piloting a 30,000-pound aircraft, but years of experience, intense training and the familiarity developed between team members mitigates the risk.

"We fly as close as 18 inches from each other while in the diamond formation, really demonstrating the discipline instilled by the military," said Stevens.

Without the trust in their teammate's abilities the show would not be possible.



F/A-18s with the Blue Angels Demonstration Squadron torch the skies above Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla. The Blue Angels perform 70 air shows at 34 locations across the United States each year. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Kuande Hall)

"I feel safer flying with the Blue Angels than driving on the highway, because I trust the team with my life, and they trust me with theirs," said Cordill.

The first Marine Blue Angel pilot, Capt. Chuck Hiatt, took to the skies in 1954 when the team was flying swept-wing Grumman F9F-8 Cougars. The Blue Angels flew several other craft before 1954 as well as several more before settling on the McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Hornet in 1986. Throughout the years and the various aircraft, Marines have been a continuous presence on the team.

A total of 16 officers voluntarily serve with the Blue Angels.

The officers who take to the skies are seven Blue Angel pilots, an aviator narrator who flies with the team and three C-130 pilots. The other officers in the squadron include a Naval flight officer, maintenance officer, administrative officer, public affairs officer and flight surgeon.

Each year, the team typically selects three tactical jet pilots, two support officers and one Marine Corps C-130 pilot to relieve departing members.

The Chief of Naval Air Training selects the Blue Angels' commanding officer. The "Boss," who pilots the number one jet, must have at least 3,000 tactical jet flight hours and have commanded a tactical jet squadron to even be considered for his role.

Navy and Marine Corps jet pilots with an aircraft carrier qualification that meet the minimum flight hours are eligible to fly jets two through seven.

"It takes a minimum of 1,250 tactical jet flight hours to become a Blue Angel pilot," said Cordill. "It takes a fleet aviator roughly eight years to achieve that."



Maj. Brent Stevens, number four pilot for the Blue Angels Demonstration Squadron, signs autographs for spectators at the Aviation Museum aboard Naval Air Station Pensacola, Fla. "To be able to go to small towns and represent all the deployed Marines and sailors is a very special feeling, and I am honored to do it," Stevens said. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Kuande Hall)

Pilots who meet the basic requirements submit an application directly to the team. Those whose applications qualify visit the squadron at scheduled show sites early in the show season to observe the team firsthand. Finalists are chosen mid-season and interviewed at the Blue Angels' squadron in Pensacola, Florida. The team then selects new demonstration pilots and support officers by unanimous vote.

Next, prospective aviators must complete a minimum of 120 practice flights at Naval Air Facility El Centro, Calif., where the team conducts annual winter training. During this time they fly as many as five flights per day, six days a week before final selection ultimately determines whether they make the team

Once on the team, pilots serve three-year tours. Their position assignments are made according to team needs, pilot experience and career considerations for members.

Aside from the two Marine F/A-18 pilots, there are several Marines on the ground crew.

Enlisted members must apply to join the team and go through a similar selection process as officer crew. The team accepts applications from all aviation and support ratings. All applicants are interviewed and spend five days with the team either in Pensacola or at a show site. Each enlisted team member is then selected from a pool of applicants that are qualified to fill upcoming job vacancies.

Enlisted members range from E-4 through E-9 and perform all maintenance, administrative and support functions during their three- to four-year tour with the Blue Angels.

"The Marines on the ground inspire me with the amount of dedication and work they put into making sure the team accomplishes the mission safely," said Stevens.

Every morning, before the pilots climb into their jets, a team of crew chiefs and mechanics inspect every moving part of the aircraft and refuel each jet. Ensuring safety and a thorough serving during this ritual is one of the most important tasks performed by the ground crew.

“When the pilots climb into their aircraft, they trust that we have made sure it is safe and ready to fly,” said Sgt. Kyle Storm, crew chief for the number seven jet. “The crew chief is responsible for the overall appearance and safety of the aircraft as well as the pilot’s gear.”

For more than 200 years, the Navy-Marine team has upheld America’s values worldwide. With thousands of Marines and sailors currently deployed, the Blue Angels take pride in honoring their service and sacrifice through their performances.

“To be able to go to small towns and represent all the deployed Marines and sailors is a very special feeling, and I am honored to do it,” Stevens said.

Throughout the 70 air shows at 34 locations across the United States each year, the team’s pilots still employ many of the same practices and techniques used in their aerial displays back in 1946. Since that time, the Blue Angels have flown for more than 260 million spectators.

For the estimated 11 million spectators who get the chance to view the squadron during air shows each year, maybe just a few will dream of and eventually become one of the few who fly as a Marine Blue Angel, getting the adrenaline rush of the fastest roller coaster imaginable, multiplied by 100.



Ground crewman inspects the F/A-18 during "morning turns" to guarantee safety standards are met. The Blue Angel pilots fly the jets at speeds up to 700 miles per hour during aerial demonstrations performed throughout the world, so safety is of the utmost importance. (U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Kuande Hall).