



# Thunderbird for a Day

My Hometown Hero flight with the USAF demonstration squad

**THE E-MAIL SAID TO** show up at General Mitchell International Airport, Milwaukee, on July 23, at 2:30 p.m. for a 5:30 flight and not much else. No further communication as to where, how you get there, who you look for, etc. The words on the screen went on to tell me to drink lots of water—it helps combat nausea (much more on that later)—and to show up wearing underwear, socks, and a T-shirt. That seemed a little sporty for cross-country travel, so I took it upon myself to add a pair of shorts and sneakers to the ensemble. I figure it can't hurt to be overdressed.

After catching sight of the red, white, and blue F-16s at the guard ramp, I find the base commanders office. My pilot today is Lt. Col. Derek Routt, or “Taz,” as he prefers to be called. Taz is 38 years old, could pass for 25, and has the waistline of my 16-year-old. He’s wearing one of those tight-fitting blue Thunderbird jumpsuits that make

him look like a cartoon version of a steely-eyed fighter pilot, all straight lines and hard edges. The jumpsuit seems to have a built-in swagger. Since our body mass indexes couldn’t be further apart, I’m praying they brought something with a little more fabric for me because the underwear, socks, and T-shirt alone aren’t going to be a pretty picture for the cameras.

## THE BRIEF

We borrow the base commander’s office, and Taz and I sit down for a flight briefing. Taz turns out to be a really nice guy. He begins by

covering our route of flight and the maneuvers we will be accomplishing, and then continues by talking about the g-forces we will be encounter. The maximum we will experience is 9g's. Taz goes on to explain that since this flight is all for my benefit, if I get sick, no problem, we'll just head back. Hmm... 9g's...I'm thinking airsickness may happen faster than either of us anticipates.

I ask Taz if there are any other people getting rides today. He tells me that I'm here as part of the Thunderbird's Hometown Hero program. Not too many of those apparently; on this trip the only other flight is for a police officer who was shot in the line of duty—I guess I got here the easy way! After my briefing with Taz, I need to brief with the flight surgeon. All this briefing is why you arrive three hours early. She does some rudimentary blood pressure cuff and stethoscope work and seems satisfied that I'm going to survive the experience. We talk extensively about nausea and, once again,

how this whole flight is for my experience, so if I don't like something, we don't have to do it. We talk about tensing your whole body and breathing in short gasps to overcome the g-forces. The g-suit I will be wearing will give me about 4g's of protection; the rest will come from me.

We practice this sitting in chairs—tensing and breathing, that is. Very quickly she identifies me as the ace of the base at this particular maneuver as she remarks about what a natural I am, but I've got a leg up. I quickly realized that it's remarkably similar to what I remember my wife doing in child-birth class 20 years ago. But this time, I'm not just standing in the corner holding the ice chips; I'm the one on stage.

I suit up in a green jumpsuit (thankfully one appears with ample proportions), g-suit, harness, and helmet. I watch as the staff hauls mightily on the strings of the g-suit that looks for all the world like a 19th century woman's corset.

I'm not liking the fancy helmet already. The helmet, oxygen mask, and visor are very confining, as in, claustrophobically confining. And, breathing isn't easy with the mask on, something I don't like very much. This is what Darth Vader must feel like.

One last instructional session involves practice in quickly shedding the oxygen mask and drawing the clearly deficient barf bag up to my face. In fact, the Air Force believes that this maneuver, like the child-birth breathing, is worthy of extensive practice. The oxygen mask isn't easy to disconnect from the helmet, and clearly the crew chief would view the successful completion of this barfing maneuver as critical to the whole operation. So we practice. And practice some more.

THE FLIGHT

After catching a ride in a van for the 50 yards or so we have to traverse to where the airplane is parked—apparently walking violates

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some sort of Air Force security rule—I grab all my equipment and climb up the ladder into my seat. The cockpit is tight. I can move my arms and my head, but not much else. Of course, if I were built more like Taz, things might go a little easier.

The crew chief buckles all the various straps and clasps that attach me to the F-16, after which he makes a big show of fishing out my primary barf bag from a pocket of my jumpsuit and tucking it under a Velcro strap on my chest where it will be handy to access. Clearly this is the most important piece of equipment I will need in his mind, not the g-suit, not the ejection seat, not the survival pack. Our eyes meet—he pats the barf bag meaningfully to make sure I grasp the gravity of the situation. Message understood!

I am now trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey ready to go in the oven. I have received training in operating the ejection seat, quickly disconnecting the 15 things I would have to

disconnect to exit the airplane without blowing the ejection seat, disconnecting my parachute if we do eject, and disconnecting my survival kit and raft if we go into trees after we eject—none of which I remember! Clearly, if the airplane catches on fire, I'll be going up in flames with it. I resign myself to death if Taz doesn't come to my rescue.

After the crew chief completes his familiarization, Taz climbs up to give me a cockpit orientation. Ejection seat arming lever...100 percent oxygen control...g-suit test button...more stuff I don't understand. I ask him if there is a quiz afterward.

Taz makes a point of telling me that if we have to eject, he's not going until I go first.



Comforting!

We both smile for a photo op, and then Taz hops down to don his own gear. I notice that Taz seems to have a form-fitting blue g-suit to match his flight suit, no corset for him. I wish I had one of those; my outfit makes me look like the Michelin



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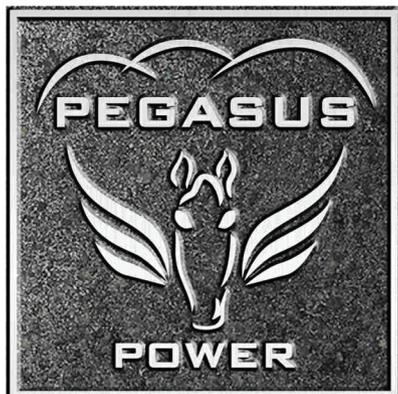
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**JEFF SKILES**

Man. Taz climbs the ladder with much more grace than I was able to muster, the canopy comes down, and we're committed.

We start up and taxi out to the end of the runway, where Taz advances the throttle. As you might guess, the acceleration is like a kick in the pants. We're airborne in what seems like about 1,000 feet, and Taz keeps it over the runway while raising the gear and accelerating. By the end of the pavement we're doing 400 knots, and Taz does a 6g pull to vertical, leaving my stomach behind on the runway.

At this weight, and with no armament, the F-16 can go straight up vertically. In what seems like 15 seconds we're passing through 10,000 feet. Taz pulls the F-16 over onto its back and tells me to look out the top of the canopy. Wow! Way, way, way below I see the runway we just left only moments before.

Taz pitches the plane over to level flight, and we fly out to the Military Operations Area (MOA) at just below the speed of sound! We cover a lot of distance fast. Taz shows me a couple of barrel rolls. We go inverted. We try knife-edge flight.

Taz shows me how they identify enemies by targeting several airliners in the area. As an airline pilot myself, I'm finding this less than comforting. We, of course, have no weapons.

Taz and I fly around awhile waiting for the MOA to become active so we can do some vertical maneuvers and the 9g thing that Taz has been talking about since I met him. But as we do this, I'm beginning to think this is a bad idea. I've never had a stomach for aerobatics, and with my head wrapped in this helmet and oxygen mask, I'm feeling really claustrophobic.

**THE PRICE OF FAME**

The airplane itself is very uncomfortable for a pilot if you aren't used to it. The engine is constantly cycling somehow. One moment it's vibrating like you're in a stall buffet, the next it's smooth. This is particularly pronounced in the rear seat where I am pretty close to riding on the

engine. There are constant large pressurization bumps, and the AC system is cycling from what seems to be high to low blow. Taz tells me that this is normal, but I find it all disturbing. Very shortly, I am grateful for all the barf bag practice.

After a few more maneuvers we head on back to base. On short final I'm filled with relief that we'll soon be landing because I left my stomach somewhere back there in the MOA. Solid Ground! Terra Firma! But no—not so fast—I realize that this is to be one of those 360-degree overhead approaches where we fly over the runway centerline and then Taz pulls it into a high-g knife-edge turn to downwind and then carves the F-16 back around for landing. Doesn't do my stomach any good, but I don't need my backup barf bag—I couldn't reach it anyway.

We taxi back to the guard ramp and shut down. As the whine of the engine slowly dissipates, the crew chief hurries up the ladder, casts his eyes quickly around the cockpit, looks relieved, and then helps me undo all the clasps and hoses attaching me to the airplane. Following his lead I shakily descend the ladder to earth. I resist kissing the ground since what appears to be the entire Thunderbird organization has assembled on the ramp standing at attention. They clearly would rather be back at the hotel, but they try to look interested as Taz says some nice words and presents me with both a really handsome framed photo of the Thunderbirds and a certificate of survival for the flight. I'm hoping there isn't any dried puke on my face as I manage a surprisingly credible thank-you speech considering how I'm feeling at the moment.

As the sun dips low on the horizon, Taz and I head back to the hangar, my Air Force Thunderbird experience at an end. Walking next to Taz, I briefly try to imitate that fighter pilot swagger that comes so easily to him. But, I'm denied even this token nod to bravado; I can feel the barf bag sloshing in the pocket of my jumpsuit with every step I take. **EAA**

**Jeff Skiles**, EAA 336120, is EAA vice president of chapters and youth education and flies a 1935 Waco biplane.