



Air Shows are in Guard 'T-bird' Pilot's Blood

Story and Photo by Air Force Master Sgt. Mike R. Smith

National Guard Bureau

AS acrobatic aircraft buzzed overhead at Andrews AFB, Air Force Lt. Col. Derek Routt paid more notice to the parked, baby-blue and white business jets on the ground; aircraft used by the nation's elected and military leaders.

The first Air National Guard officer to serve on the Air Force Thunderbirds was enjoying his time in the nation's capital in May. It was his eighth event since joining the team.

Routt wore the dark-blue flight suit of the Thunderbirds. So there was "no distinguishing between a Guard, Reserve or active-duty Thunderbird," he said.

"This is a true-to-form, Total Force team," he said. "When I tell people that I am a Guardsman it brings a lot of questions, and that allows me to talk about the Air Guard. But it really doesn't matter what service or what capacity; to serve is the number one goal."

As a Nevada Guard member, Routt flew the F-15 Eagle with the "most diverse wing in the Air Force" — the 57th at Nellis Air Force Base. The Thunderbirds are based just down the street.



Air Force Lt. Col. Derek Routt, "Thunderbird No. 7," is a Nevada Air National Guard member in his first season as Operations Officer for the U.S. Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron "Thunderbirds."

"I had some people approach me about applying for the position," Routt said. He made the grade.

It is Routt's first time working as an operations officer, now as the second-in-command of the nation's premiere F-16 Fighting Falcon squadron.

"I run the operations business, which means I put aircraft in the air, put pilots into aircraft and make sure that their training is done. During the show, and all the way through our season, my number one job is safety," he said.

Routt will travel with the team — 11 officers and 120 enlisted Airmen — on a schedule of air shows across the nation and as far as Hawaii up, until November. Then he will prepare for his second, and final, 2010 season.


Routt flies Thunderbird No. 7 to and from shows. The plane is used in support missions. "You can think of the operations officer as more of a producer of the show, who controls the air space, people, communications and gear," he said.

"While the guys are flying, I'm controlling the airfield and ensuring the team is doing it safe and properly."

Routt supervises the safety of pilots who fly within a few feet of each other.

But he was looking around the flight line Thursday morning more a spectator than a participant. He said his status and schedule has not dulled his childhood excitement for air shows and airplanes.

"Wouldn't it be great to take that up," he said, pointing toward a WWII fighter.

"Now that would be awesome." 

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