

Navy F-14 Tomcats are sure to impress

By Tara Marion

Through a series of choreographed maneuvers at the High of America Air Show at the Kalamazoo Battle Creek International Airport, the Navy's F-14 Tomcat Demonstration Team will illustrate the power and agility of the F-14 Tomcat and the standard maneuvers taught to every recruit in the Navy.

The Tomcat is a Mach 2+ airplane, which means it was designed to exceed twice the speed of sound—in excess of 1,500 mph. Although equipped with this tremendous capacity, pilots are not allowed to break the sound barrier at the air show; they will be flying the Tomcats 675 to 700 mph.

During the early stages of training, pilots practice their maneuvers at an altitude of 5,000 feet. They'll perform the same maneuvers at 200-500 feet at the air show for better visibility.

"That doesn't mean there's anything unsafe or inherently dangerous about doing them lower," said Commander Dirk Hebert, chief of staff at Fighter Wing Atlantic in Oceana, Va.

Because they're more comfortable flying lower to the ground, instructor pilots with at least 1,500 flight hours fly the planes in the demonstration. Even those experienced pilots don't fly alone, however; they fly with a radar intercept officer, which is Hebert's role in the air show.

A maintenance crew of one or two people comes with the pilots for the F-14 performances. "When you fly a show away from your home base without maintenance support, something is bound to stress, crack or break," Hebert explained. Although the things that go wrong at air shows are routine maintenance problems, the air show does put the planes under some stress—the Tomcats will reach the end of their service lives by the year 2008.

The age of the Tomcats is an appeal to many air show spectators. "It's been around for many, many years, and yet it still looks so modern," Hebert said. "It has a very sleek design to it still. (But) you can't maintain them anymore."

Costing \$38 million each, Tomcats were designed to attack and destroy enemy aircraft at night and in all weather conditions with a wide array of missiles, such as the long-range AIM-54 Phoenix missile, the medium-range AIM-7 Sparrow, the heat-seeking AIM-9 Sidewinder and an internally mounted 20 mm Vulcan cannon.

Tomcats can track up to 24 targets simultaneously with their advanced weapons-control system and attack six of them with the AIM-54 Phoenix missile.

It's also a supersonic, twin-engine, variable swing-wing strike fighter plane, which qualifies the Tomcat as perhaps the most versatile fighter aircraft in the world. "The F-14 has kind of a menacing look to it, and it looks like a war machine," Hebert said. "It's very big, and it makes a lot of noise at an air show."

According to Hebert, the majority of air show spectators go to see the military hardware. Conversely, the Navy participates in air shows to show the results of taxpayer's support.

The air show is also a recruiting tool for the Navy because it allows them to portray the Navy and the Tomcat in a positive light. "If we put our best foot forward, we're going to get good people to come and talk to us," Hebert explained.

Students ranging from high school juniors to college sophomores and juniors are the Navy's targets. "We want those young kids to be impressed with the Navy and want to join," Hebert said. "We want everybody in America to want to join the service."

Tomcats were designed for the military service in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the time, they represented the cutting edge of technology and replaced the F-4 Phantom II Fighter. Similarly, the F-18 Superhornet will eventually replace the F-14 Tomcat and will represent the latest advances in technology, wing design, engineering and maneuverability.

“We love to show people that they’re getting their money’s worth,” Hebert said. “We take great pride in what we do.”