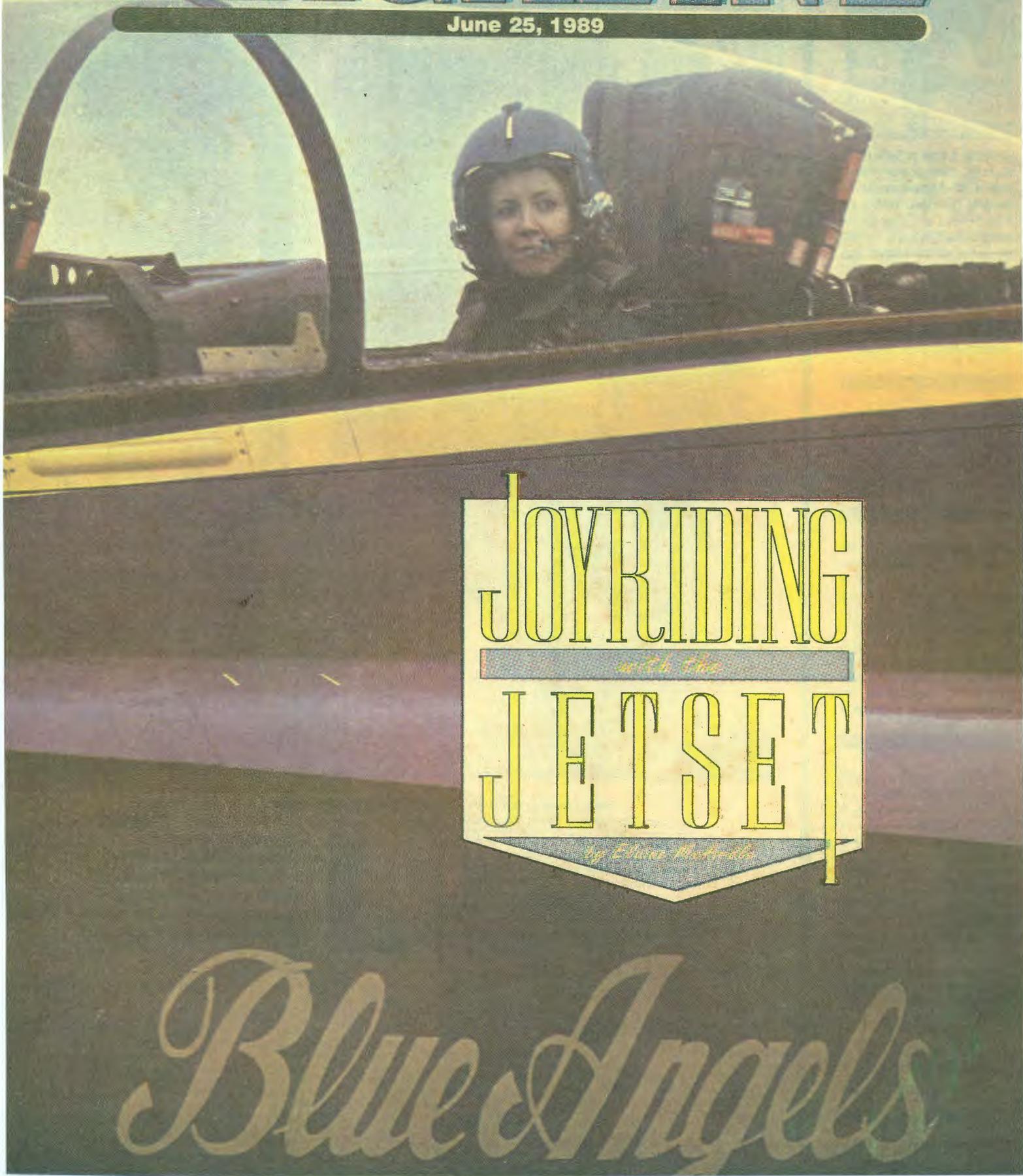


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JOYRIDING
with the
JETSET
by Oliver Markwell

Blue Angels

HITCHHIKING

on the

HORNET

Staff writer
Elaine McArdle
donned a flight suit,
climbed into the Navy's
creme-de-la-creme fighter jet
and sailed off for the
trip of a lifetime. Here is the
distillation of that
heady experience.



Welcome to the F/A-18. The Hornet. The U.S. Navy's primo, state-of-the-art, fighter jet. Sleek royal blue trimmed in yellow, a mere 56 feet long, the Hornet can rip through the air at 1,300 miles per hour. It can take off and land in 150 feet — half the length of a football field, and, not coincidentally, the length of an

aircraft carrier.

It's \$36 million of heaving, bucking aircraft, and you're inside.

You're strapped in for all your life. Straps on your ankles, on your thighs. Straps across your chest, and straps over your shoulders.

A heavy helmet, with a small microphone perched before your mouth.

The throttle sits between your knees. You're not about to touch it.

Also between your knees is a black and yellow loop — pull that, and your seat is ejected from the plane.

You're sure not about to touch that.

A clear canopy extends over the top of the plane and halfway down either side. You can see everything, the entire panorama, except directly in front of you, where sits the pilot.

The pilot. Not an ordinary pilot, but a Navy fighter pilot. A "fighter jock." A graduate of the Top Gun aviator school. Even better: This pilot's a member of the Blue Angels — the Navy's elite corps of precision demonstration aviators.

As the plane taxis out, with the pilot seeking clearance for takeoff from ground control, you feel the

enormous power of this aircraft — straining and heaving to get aloft, anxious for the air.

"OK, we're going now," the pilot says, and you can feel the twin jet engines rumbling under you.

"Now we'll hit the afterburners," he says — and the plane gives a hard kick.

Whoosh!

You're hurtling along the runway — faster than you've ever gone, and now he warns you — time to take off.

Straight up, nose first. A 90-degree takeoff.

You brace yourself, you grab the handholds and lean forward, tensing every muscle.

You've been warned about the gravity forces caused by a steep ascent: The "G's" will suck the blood from your head and squeeze it to your toes. They can make you lightheaded, even cause you to lose consciousness for a few minutes.

You refuse to black out. You're only going to do this once.

Wham!

Your head slams forward and you feel all the force of the universe on your back — in this case, at least 700 pounds of gravity. You're not blacking out. You just can't move.

And, suddenly — relief.

You burst through the gray ceiling above the ground, and then — alone. Miles and miles of sky and no one, nothing else.

Can there ever be a sensation like this?

Up in the solitude of this expanse, up where the sun seems only 20 feet away, up where the periwinkle blue and stark white are all you see.

(See SKY HIGH, Page 12)

SKY HIGH

Alone — alone in the yawning canyons of clouds, hurtling past at 500 miles an hour.

The pilot is talking, but you only want to watch the sky.

If ever there was a moment of pure experience — no reflection, no distraction — but pure absorption in the moment, it is this.

You know you'll never do this again — and so, you feel every moment.

You are filled with a sense of wonder, a sense of joy in being a mile and a half above the earth in glorious solitude, in endless, glorious air. Nothing but clouds and sky.

"I don't know why you ever go back down," you say, enviously.

He laughs. "See that reading to the left? That's the fuel gauge. We have to go back every once in a while and put another quarter in."

If only you could leave your physical self behind — just watch and delight in the wild expanse of blue.

The equipment is heavy, though — reminding you that you're not floating up here as in a dream. The helmet and the straps press your chest, and the buckles pull your thighs and ankles into place in case of emergency and the need to eject from the plane.

And the feeling of this speed — your body is telling you that it's not really sure what's going on, has never experienced this before.

You don't feel sick. You feel — unsure, wary of the next sensation.

But you're not afraid. Not with this jet, whose highly skilled maintenance crew fuss over its every detail. Not with this pilot, one of the best in the world.

His voice interrupts you — "Want to do a barrel roll?" he asks.

And then this sleek craft is leaning to the left and gently turning over, over, as the blue and white is all around you, spinning.

It is like nothing you've ever experienced. It's pure exhilaration, as a swirl of sky envelopes you.

He aims for two tall white clouds, separated by a slender azure canyon.

"Let's roll through that," he says, and you do — you hit the clouds, and tumble amidst the white and blue and white and blue.

A roller coaster is not even close.

A roller coaster includes screams of other passengers and the inescapable feeling of being bound to the seat, to the car, and to the planet earth.

Up here, you roll and you hear nothing — and see no one. It's you and the clouds and the rush of exceptional speed — 300, 400, 500 miles an hour.

Now — another roll — but not a gentle turn through the clouds.

The plane flips — a complete 360-degree roll in two seconds flat.

That . . . is a sensation! It makes your stomach flutter; it tickles your insides.

That is just plain FUN.

Flip! — and you're back upright.

"Now, we'll go upside down for a while," he says in his so-assuring, so-unconcerned and even-toned voice.

The plane rolls onto its back, and you are hanging — hanging from your shoulder straps and leg straps — like hanging from the monkey bars when a child except your eyes don't see ground and grass but sky and sky everywhere.

You turn down the volume of the sounds from the air control tower, and even lower the volume of the pilot's soothing voice.

You just want to watch.

You don't want to speak, not even to tell him how this is the greatest experience of your life.

You just want to feel it.

Now, he asks, do you want to take hold of the controls or fly?

You think of your sister. She'd be much better at this. She got her driver's permit when she was 14. She wanted to be a pilot, but got sidetracked.

You, however, don't get the same joy out of testing the limits of mechanical and electrical and electronic stuff.

On the other hand . . .

You look down at the throttle, and grasp it.

"Nose it up," he says. You barely pull the throttle back and the nose of this spectacular multi-million-dollar plane lifts at your command.



Staff photo by Jack Iddon

Ms. McArdle had just landed when this photo was taken, but she admits it took her hours to get back to earth. She's walking under the wing of the F/A-18 with Blue Angels pilot Matt Seamon.

"Now take it to the left," and you push the throttle over. The plane tilts.

"Keep going, keep going," he says, and you have the plane turning over and over.

You stop it on a dime, upright, just by gently releasing the throttle.

Rolls in a fighter jet, dives and sharp turns at 600 miles an hour. Tailspins, loops, vertical takeoffs. *De rigueur* for him.

"Just another day at the office," he says with a broad smile that you catch in a reflection from a mirror next to his face.

It's time to become weightless, he says.

The pilot does something — what? You can't really tell, and anyway, you're too mesmerized by the stratospheric view outside the cockpit to watch him.

He performs some maneuver, and then — a feeling of complete pleasure.

"This!" you say, as your body loses sensation, "*This is great!*"

The pilot laughs. "That's a big favorite," he says, and he tosses his glove to see if it will float.

It does, briefly.

"No wonder people want to be astronauts!" you say, overwhelmed by the feeling of . . . no feeling.

Ripping along. Getting close to mach 1 — 600 mph — that mystical moment when the plane breaks the speed of sound.

And then he puts on the airbrake — a giant paddle that drastically reduces the jet's speed in mere seconds.

Suddenly, it seems as if you have stopped. Just stopped. Hanging in the air.

That maneuver, he explains, is a great advantage in mid-air combat. If you're being chased by a hostile craft, you skid to a stop, your enemy roars past you, and then you're behind him. You win.

"Do you want to pull some more G's?" he asks

You say yes, but only because this is your one chance to try it.

You're not sure you're going to like this anymore than the six G's you pulled in that vertical takeoff

— the ones that slammed you into your knees, unable to move.

The pilot eases the plane forward, and you feel enormous force pinning your body back against the seat. You clutch two handholds next to the canopy, and tense up.

You're not blacking out. That's success.

But it doesn't feel good.

"Wanna do that again?" he asks.

You hesitate.

"It's all right, you can tell me," he says, in a confidential tone.

"I don't really like those G's," you say. "I like those rolls better."

With that, he noses the plane up, and you roll again.

You go up a mile and more, you soar down and peek through the cloud cover to the ocean, which holds a tiny dot of a boat.

You climb back again, and roar above Martha's Vineyard — a fact which the pilot knows because of an electronic map on his panel. You can't see anything but glorious azure space.

You race through the clouds, and then, too soon, it's time to head for home.

Suddenly you are enveloped in gray — heavy gray rainclouds.

And then — bang!

As quickly as you were amongst the clouds, you are below them.

You are just above houses and cars, and for the first time in 45 minutes, you see something more than sky and cloud. And then the pilot points out the runway, directly in front.

"This won't be like a commercial airliner landing," he says. "This will be a lot rougher."

As the ground rises up to meet you, he says, "It will look like we're about to crash, but we're not."

You know.

Zap.

The jet hits the ground hard. You are down.

And you're sorry. ■



Blue Angels pilot Lt. Matt Seamon instructs Elaine McArdie before take-off.

Lieutenant Matt Seamon is Blue Angel Number Seven, team narrator and the pilot who takes special passengers such as reporters for rides in the F/A-18.

Lean and taut, his suntanned face etched with laugh lines, Lt. Seamon is a member of that elite corps of steely nerved fighter jocks celebrated in literature and cinema — most notably, Tom Wolfe's "The Right Stuff" and the 1986 movie, "Top Gun."

Because naval aviators must land their jets and take off from the short length of an aircraft carrier, which requires exceptional skill, they are arguably the most able pilots in the world.

"Anyone can land an airplane on a runway," says Lt. Randy Schumacher, a Navy pilot and chief of Navy recruiting in

Boston. "It's different to land on a postage stamp."

Each year the Navy recruits about 400 young men and women as potential aviators. Only a few end up as jet pilots, and even fewer as Blue Angels. In addition to at least two years of college, aviation applicants must be less than 27 years old and have perfect vision and excellent health.

It costs millions of dollars for the Navy to train someone as a jet aviator. But many young pilots are lured from the military by the big money to be made flying for commercial airlines — and the Navy constantly faces a shortage of qualified aviators.

Enter the Blue Angels.

(See ANGELS, Page 13)

ANGELS

Formed in 1946 by Adm. Chester W. Nimitz to maintain public interest in naval aviation, the Blue Angels' primary function is to recruit exceptional young men and women into the flight program.

Over the past 40-plus years, the Blue Angels have dazzled more than 217 million spectators with their wingtip-to-wingtip demonstrations of precision aerobatics. This year, they will perform at 72 airshows in 39 locations; their June 10 and 11 performances at Otis Air Base in Bourne drew a total of 300,000 people.

In 1984, the Navy began to phase out its use of the F-4 Phantom and introduced its newest jet — the McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 Hornet, the first Navy aircraft to perform dual functions as a fighter and as an attack aircraft able to carry up to 17,000 pounds of bombs and missiles.

The Hornets, which are stationed aboard the nation's 14 aircraft carriers, have a maximum speed of 1,360 mph — almost twice the speed of sound — and can soar 50,000 feet above ground. The Navy owns about 1,100 of them at about \$36 million each; in 1986, the Hornet became the official aircraft for the Blue Angels.

Because of the public relations function of the Blue Angels, team members are selected just as much for their personalities as their capacity for mastering the nuances of the Hornet.

"We like to think a high percentage of Navy pilots can do the flying," Lt. Seamon says. "We look for guys with the requisite flying ability, but also the ability to deal with the public."

That quality is one which Lt. Seamon has — in abundance.

In contrast to the overinflated egos borne by fighter jocks in movies and television, Lt. Seamon is friendly and low-key. He bounces up to greet a visitor, giving a firm handshake and a warm smile.

His trim physique is not the result of a superhuman aerobics regimen or miles of early-morning jogging, he says. "Naw. I just do some abdominals and some weightlifting."

He exudes an air of professionalism. He seems intrepid, fearless. You can imagine a firecracker exploding behind him suddenly and eliciting not a flinch from his cleancut face.

On joining the Navy eight years ago, Lt. Seamon, 30, set his sights on becoming a Blue Angel. So far in his career, it is the pinnacle.

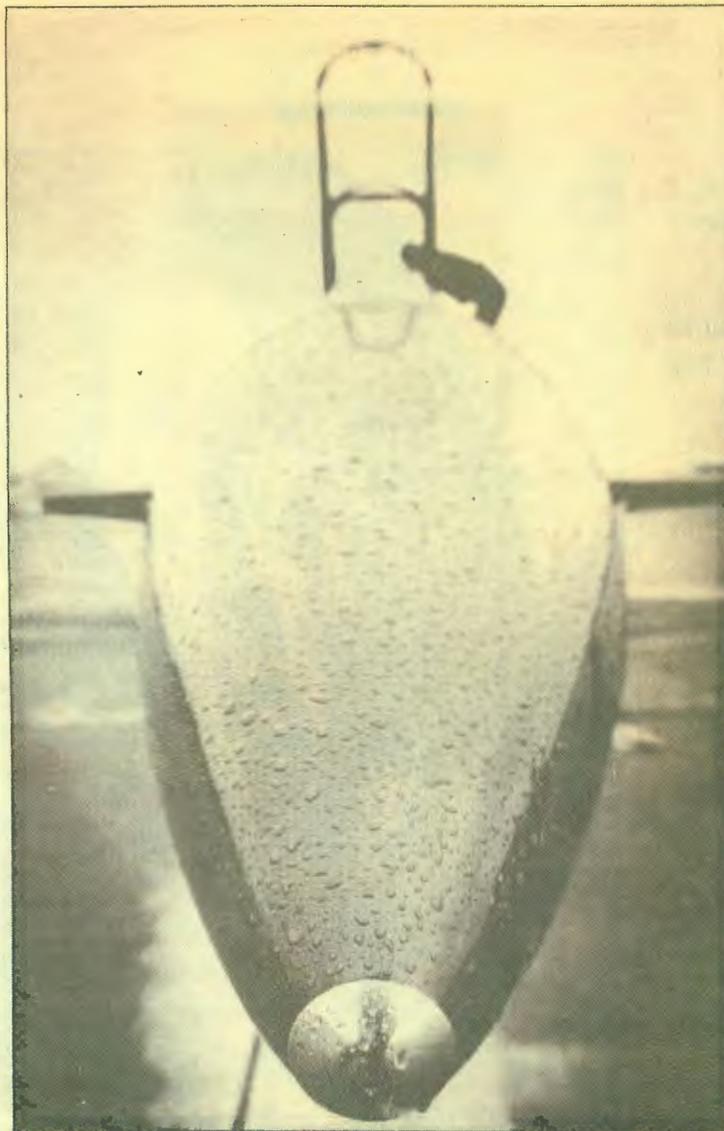
"It's a really fun job," he says, "because you get to do some of the best flying around."

Separated by a mere 3 feet, four of the Blue Angels perform barrel rolls and other maneuvers while in the traditional diamond formation, each jet forming a corner of the diamond.

Two solo jets, called opposing solos, perform complementary maneuvers, such as flying directly toward each other at highspeed, then tipping their wings to avoid a crash.

The Blue Angels aren't performing stunts or tricks. Every maneuver demonstrated in their airshows is a feat that combat pilots master in aviation training.

"You learn that acrobatic stuff in jet school," explains Lt. Schumacher, because flying in tight formation with other jets is not just a pretty sight for admiring audiences. If a pilot finds his



Staff photo by Jack Iddon

From tip to tail, the F/A-18 is the best-of-breed jet. In this view, the pilot leans into the cockpit for last-minute instructions to Ms. McArdle.

navigation equipment crippled, he can tail another jet home at close range for safe landing.

Naval recruits get their first taste of highspeed maneuvers when they're treated to a special flight to see if they have . . . the right stuff.

"We have a ball taking applicants up and doing the 'squirrel cage,' a lot of acrobatics in a short period of time and in a mile-by-mile box. We do loops and spins and barrel rolls. We really mess an applicant up to see if he likes it — if he has any indication that he really likes it," says Lt. Schumacher.

Assuming the applicant survives with innards intact, and in fact qualifies for the jet aviator program, he or she faces about two and a half years of intensive training, starting with propeller airplanes and then on to training jets.

Next comes advanced jets and learning guns, bombing and air combat tactics — the breathtaking maneuvers featured in "Top Gun."

Lt. Schumacher admits that the physical sensation of special combat maneuvers is "an acquired taste." Many naval aviation applicants, unused to G's and the thin air of high altitude, get sick the first few times they fly in a jet.

"Part of it is mental," says Lt. Schumacher. Until an aviator is at the controls of a jet, he is more likely to feel ill.

"My first six times, I got sicker than a dog, until I got hold of the aircraft."

After seven years of flying the Hornet, Lt. Seamon, who has racked up more than 240 aircraft carrier landings, seems impervious to the discomfort of G's and barrel rolls.

His passengers for today's flights, fearful of becoming nauseated during the highspeed ride, either avoided breakfast or ate very lightly. During a short break between jet flights, Lt. Seamon cheerfully munched on a greasy sandwich and potato chips.

For him, the highlight of the demanding job — which has him away from his own family 300 days of the year — is meeting children, many of whom he visits in hospitals during his tours.

"You can be having the worst day in the world, and when you meet one of the 'Make A Wish' kids, and see them laughing and smiling, you feel great," he says.

Naval aviators don't talk about "pressing the envelope," or having "the right stuff," as suggested by Tom Wolfe's best-selling book of the same name. And the competitive atmosphere at the Top Gun school in San Diego was greatly exaggerated in the movie that starred Tom Cruise, says Lt. Seamon.

Fighter jock egos aren't nearly as big as movies would have the public

believe. "We get a reputation for that. I'm not quite sure where it comes from. A lot of it is hype. I don't think you'll find guys bragging, they're a lot lower-key than that," he says.

Many people view these pilots as special mortals, a select group whose physical superiority and mental cool places them in one of the most challenging professions that exists.

Normal tour of duty as a Blue Angel is two years. Lt. Seamon will be with the team for three years — this first year narrating the airshow from the ground and next year as a member of the six-jet flying team.

Lt. Seamon leaves his home base in Pensacola, Fla., every Wednesday and flies his Hornet to the site of that weekend's airshow. On Wednesday afternoons, he takes media representatives for rides in the aircraft. Thursdays, the six other Blue Angels fly up from Florida and scope the airbase in preparation for the show. Fridays are devoted to hospital and school visits by the team members.

His long absences are difficult for his wife and two young sons. "It's tough. You just have to have things taken care of before you leave," he says.

When his tour is over in 1991, he'll return to duty with F/A-18s aboard an aircraft carrier.

One feature of the Navy that helps ease the pain of family separations is camaraderie among military personnel, he says. Teamwork and pride in a common goal is one of the best parts of the job.

In addition to relying on his fellow Blue Angels for his life — literally — during highspeed maneuvers, Lt. Seamon depends on the nonpareil expertise of the flight crew who maintain his jet.

This crew is among 100 specially selected enlisted Navy and U.S. Marine Corps personnel who keep the Blue Angels aircraft in top shape.

In addition to superior technical skills, these squadron members must present "impeccable moral character, appearance, speaking ability and military bearing," according to Navy documents.

Not once in the history of the Blue Angels has an airshow been cancelled due to maintenance difficulties.

"They're the cream of the crop, even more so than the pilots," says Lt. Seamon. "They know every inch of the airplane, and work very closely with each pilot and each airplane," he says.

Crew Chief for Lt. Seamon's Hornet is Sgt. Don Reid, whose crisp bearing and impossibly shiny black boots give him away as a U.S. Marine.

He accompanies Lt. Seamon to each airbase on the Wednesday preceding an airshow, riding in the back of the F/A-18.

After five years of maintaining Hornets, Sgt. Reid, 23, has had enough of the backseat role — he wants to fly.

Next year he will enter a special jet pilot program for topnotch enlisted personnel.

At the end of a day of media flights and other preparations for the weekend show, Sgt. Reid and Lt. Seamon walk from the flight line to their rented cars — Lt. Seamon's, a sedan.

Aren't fighter jocks supposed to drive sports cars? he is asked.

He laughs, and jerks his thumb toward Sgt. Reid, who climbs into a snazzier auto.

"I leave that to Don," he says. "With my kids, I own a four-door station wagon." ■



After 45 spectacular minutes in the heavens, the Hornet brings pilot and passenger back to earth.