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Thanks to good relations between the Blue Angel team and the organisers of the International Air show in Leeuwarden the Angels managed in their busy schedule to make a visit to the Netherlands. This show from the Blue Angels is the only one in Europe this year while visiting this continent is very uncommon for the team. This event will be the fifth appearance in Europe in their existence and the second time in the Netherlands. The Blue Angels attracted until now an estimated public of 414 million people and celebrates this year the 60 year anniversary of the team

Spectacle

The show of the Blue Angels consists of three sub-parts with a show on the ground when the pilots enter the aircraft, a demonstration of their six F/A-18 Hornets and a JATO (Jet Assisted Take Off) of the transport aircraft of the team a C-130T Hercules nicknamed 'Fat Albert'. Very disciplinary movements can be observed when ground crews salute the pilots who march and after introduction to the public climbs in their cockpits very simultaneously giving a high dose of show in a very American style. The pilots are adored by the public and have in the U.S.A. the status of pop stars. The public is saluting and clapping the hands. In a very strictly timed manoeuvre the Hornets are released from their wheel blocks after the jet engines have started. There is a choice between a high show, a low show and a flat show depending the weather circumstances and visibility. On Thursday when the Angels did their training typical Dutch rainy weather forced them to a flat show in low altitude but while on Friday cloudy the Saturday for the big show the weather was the ultimate situation you could ever wish and the Angels performed like they always did. After taking their place to the runway four Hornets (Angel 1-4) climbed straight in the air together forming the diamond and were followed by the two solo planes (Angel 5-6).

Fat Albert

In the meanwhile Fat Albert moved to the other end of the runway and started a take off using the rocket tubes on the side fuselage. Such a Jet Assisted Take Off is something you may see only once in a lifetime and is such an impressive sight that it caused euphoric feelings amongst the watching crowd. The Hercules is leaving the runway within 500 meters and climbs with an angle of 45 degrees to 1000 ft. A little display was given by the crew which are soldiers of the US Marine Corps (USMC) representing the marine part of the navy. Those pilots must be aircraft commander qualified with at least 1200 flight hours. The funniest thing is that an accompanying transport aircraft doing a show itself is quite unique in the world of stunt teams and by no means the navy is proud on the contribution of Fat Albert. There are rumours that the JATO show could end in near future because the team is running out of the special solid fuel for the rocket bottles.

Diamond and inverted rolls.

The Hornets were giving a high performance and the bright blue colours with a shade of

yellow makes it an attraction to the eye. The Diamond which is a central part in many figures is very tight performed giving the idea of one aircraft containing four equal parts. The solo's have their own way to get attention when they give a deal of 'mirror flying' crossing each other on the side from opposite direction. Other figures are inverted roles and a sneak pass of one of the solo's surprises the public with a speed close to Mach 1. The show is continuing with high speed reversal manoeuvres and double finals, loops and rolls demonstrating the agility of the fly-by-wire F-18A Hornet. While slow flying is just as important for navy pilots like fast flying to demonstrate their capabilities in simulating a carrier approach a hook from the rear gives the smooth plane an odd appearance to the public. The manoeuvre is called the 'queen configuration' with a speed of 128 mph in this slow pass while the music to the public from many speakers sounds 'slow ride, take it easy'. Several loops with the diamond figure centrally and vertical breaks with smoke from the rear amuses the public with great approval. Difficult manoeuvres are normal ingredients of the show like delta loop breaks and separated roles with a pinpointed meeting point for all Angels very close next to each other is breathtaking. Finally a grand finale in delta configuration with all the planes together results in a break and pilots come in one by one. The ending ceremony is quite the same like the beginning with a tightly and disciplinary rolling of the planes to their places and ground crew give again the simultaneously show and after the pilots have been again introduced to the public they get a bright applause.

The interview

Dutch Aviation Support was able to do an interview on the Thursday training day and Angel Nr. 3 was assigned to us, his name Lt. Thomas Winkler from Washington D.C., the left wing. All the Angels have much experience on fast jets and off course on the F/A-18 Hornet. On the latter most of them are flight instructors. An Angel serves two years in the team and he considers it as a great honour, in exceptional cases it could lead to 3 years. After one year an Angel moves to another place in the team which could be flight leader/commander, right wing, left wing, slot pilot, lead solo or opposing solo. Call signs are 1) Axel, 2) Opie, 3) Duck, 4) Pwoc, 5) Bunza, 6) J.B.

There is also a trainer duo seat joining the team with Nr. 7 used to let VIP's or guest pilots join a ride. In the Thursday training a Dutch Klu. F-16 pilot named Sebastian Swaan was the lucky one. A new applicant for the team must be accepted unanimously and starts first training in the desert at El Centro air base.

On our question what is the most important skill to be an Angel Lt. Winkler answered in his opinion it must be public meeting, to be representative and the ability to get along with people. This is of major importance to act in the team successfully all the time.

No G-suit

Lt. Winkler told us that in the cockpit a stopwatch in the HUD and a delayed control in the stick makes the difference with the regular fighter version. When the stick is too sensitive the change to make a mid-air collision by a sudden uncontrolled movement is too high and this is the reason for the special preparation to take the play out of the stick. There is 35 foot pound pressure on the stick to move it gently. Another aspect to mention is the lack of using the G-suit. This should give the pilots no good control to the stick which is steered by hand with the elbow on the knee! Circumstances like this must require an extremely good physical condition from the pilot. G-power will be absorbed with tension in the muscles at exactly the

wright moment, a question of good timing and exactly knowing what is coming next and when. There are no female pilots yet, yes there were two applicants but they didn't make it and it is just a matter of time or they will according to Lt. Winkler.

The planes

The F/A-18A Hornet is flying with the Angels for nineteen years until now and it is a much wanted plane, a matter of fact the best they ever had. There were other beloved planes in the past like the Douglas A-4 Skyhawk and there were also ugly ones like the F-4 Phantom. Planes should represent the inventory of the navy for the most important task of the team is to attract young people to join the navy. The Phantom was like 'wrestling the monster' being a heavy plane with bad manoeuvrability characteristics and low visibility from the cockpit. To stop with this aircraft was initiated by the high costs of the large quantities of fuel the Phantom consumed and the decision was welcomed by the Angels itself. Within 5 years the team expects a change to the Super Hornet however this aircraft is again a heavier one and will give an extra challenge. Planes which acted with the Angels were the Grumman F6F Hellcat, the Grumman F8F Bearcat, the Grumman F9F-2 and F9F-5 Panther, the Grumman F9F-8 Cougar, the Grumman F11F-1 Tiger, the McDonnell Douglas F-4J Phantom 2, the McDonnell Douglas A-4F Skyhawk 2 and the Boeing F/A 18 Hornet.

Will they come back?

It is hard to say, but it is not likely. The flight from Quebec took 12 refuelling actions of all seven aircraft by two KC-10 Extenders and this costs lots of money. Normally the team is home based at NAS Pensacola in Florida and from there a schedule in the states keeps them busy all the time. To get abroad on tour is really exceptional and we know we must be grateful to get the opportunity to see this flying legends in action. Many happy landings guys!

Wim Das & Kees Otten

Dutch Aviation Support