

# The Blue Angels' Fat Albert

By Steve Petit, former Fat Albert pilot.

The Blue Angels are a Navy squadron and come under the jurisdiction of the Naval Training Command. The Blue Angels' mission is to show to the public the high degree of training Naval aviators will receive. In addition, the Blues are tasked to assist the recruiting efforts for the Department of Navy.

Traditionally, one Marine Corps pilot flies with the team each year. In addition, Marine Corps officers have also served the team as event coordinators and as public affairs officers.

The Blues travel throughout the country from March through November each year, performing air shows in large cities and at some out of the way military air stations. All this traveling would not be possible if it were not for the all-Marine crew of the squadron's C-130 support aircraft, affectionately named "Fat Albert."

Since 1970, this distinctively painted *Hercules* has been an integral part of the Blue Angels. Flown by three pilots and five enlisted crewmembers, Fat Albert is the home away from home for the squadron and its 45 maintenance and support personnel for each show site.

*Bert* carries all the specialized equipment to complete a successful air show. Without Fat Albert and the crew, there would not be an air show. Unlike fleet KC-130s, the Blues' model is a C-130 and it proudly displays its Marine markings. Fat Albert weighs 155,000 pounds fully loaded, and cruises at speeds of more than 320 knots at altitudes as high as 35,000 feet. During a normal air show season *Bert* logs more than 100,000 miles.

But the *real* crowd pleaser is when Fat Albert is able to demonstrate its JATO (jet assisted takeoff) capability. (Actually, it's *rocket* assisted.) Eight solid-fuel rocket bottles, four on each side, thrust the big bird at a 45-degree nose up attitude to an altitude of about 15,000 feet. This exclusive demonstration is spectacular and shows the aircraft being flown to its limits.

However, the JATO era is coming to an end this November, with the final

air show of the Blues' year at NAS Pensacola. Due to budget restraints, the JATO demo will no longer be part of the Blue Angels air show. Maj Drew Hess, USMC, will fly the final JATO shot. Steve Petit, who flew the first JATO demo back in 1975, will attend as well.

"It was quite a thrill, and folks got a kick out of seeing a large aircraft like *Bert* rocket skyward," said Petit, who after his tour with the Blues went on to become a captain with American Airlines. He recalled the first JATO demo: "In 1975, *Bert* was flown by Capt Ron Fleming and myself. Fat Albert's role then, as now, was to perform all the maintenance and logistical support for the Blues. The plane, with its maintenance package was quite literally the maintenance support base for the squadron at each show site. Cdr Tony Less, the boss for the 1975 team, knew that if for some reason *Bert* went down, he was out of the air show business. So understandably, Boss Less kept a pretty tight rein on Albert and what the aircraft could and couldn't do. Therefore, at most air show sites, Albert would fly in on Thursday, and with the exception of a few maintenance supply runs, would not takeoff until the end of the air show weekend on Sunday.

"*Bert* would sneak in a few low passes or we'd take her into the break



In the Blue Angels' red flight suits of the mid-70s: Fat Albert pilots (L) Capt Steve Petit and Capt Phil Brooks at MCAS El Toro.

for an overhead pattern; but generally, *Bert's* role was to haul the maintenance support package into a show site and the haul it back to base at the end of the weekend. But we were itching to get *Bert* into the air show and let the crowd see just what this highly versatile aircraft could do.

"Just a few weeks before the end of the season air show at home base NAS Pensacola, Ron and I were batting back and forth ideas to get Albert in the show. So I said to Ron, 'Let's do a JATO demonstration!' and he replied, 'Capital idea!' And so we march into the boss's office to propose our plan. We had the advantage, as the boss didn't have to protect Albert since all



A night time JATO demo by Fat Albert in 2006 at MCAS Miramar.

# A History of the JATO Demonstration

our maintenance support was sitting in our own hanger. ‘Boss, we want to be in the air show,’ I announced. ‘What can you guys do?’ he replied, giving us a quizzical look. ‘Do? Hell, we can put JATO bottles on her, light her up like a Roman candle and climb out like a homesick angel!’ was my retort. ‘Well lads, that sounds like an outstanding idea. You’re in the air show.’

‘Quite satisfied with ourselves, we about-faced and went down the passageway to our office. I leaned over to Ron and said: ‘So, Ron, how do you do one of these JATO shots?’ He looked at me and said, ‘Hell, I’ve never done one! I thought you’d done one!’

Not to be deterred by our lack of experience, I began contacting various bases in search of JATO bottles. None were found at Cherry Point, El Toro or any nearby Air Force base. Finally, I called Pax River and got hold of an old Navy chief. ‘You got any JATO bottles?’ I asked. ‘I got a whole warehouse full of them,’ he said. ‘Come on up and take all you want.’

‘So with the air show only days away, Ron and I flew up to Pax River and came back with a pallet of JATO bottles. Well, no time like the present--we read over our NATOPS manual on the use of JATO and we were ready for the show on Saturday.

‘On November 22, 1975, I climbed into the left seat and Ron Fleming took the right. The flight engineer

was GySgt Mortinson, and we took along SSgt Mike Rhoades who would hack the clock for the JATO burn (he was a little nervous about this whole endeavor). We carried minimum fuel and took off all nonessential gear to make ‘Bert as light as possible. It was a cool November day and we had about 15 knots right down the runway--perfect weather for a JATO demonstration. I locked the brakes and ran the engines up to full power. Scanning the instruments quickly, I released the brakes and we began our takeoff roll. The plan was to ignite the bottles right at rotation speed to get maximum performance and climb gradient. At rotation speed, I pulled back on the yoke and at the

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same time called ‘Fire’ to the flight engineer to ignite the bottles. *What a kick in the pants!*

‘Our loadmaster, SSgt Rhoades, started the clock to time the burn so we could nose over just before the bottles burned out. I think we had a burn time of about 12 seconds that was based on temperature. So I asked SSgt Rhoades to give me a ‘mark’ at 10 seconds, to get the nose over as we were really hanging on the props. Now, I was a little slow on my rotation so we had plenty of airspeed as I heard ‘Mark!’ Knowing I had beaucoup airspeed,

I kept the nose up a bit longer even though SSgt Rhoades gave me a couple of more ‘Mark!’ ‘Mark!’ each one an octave higher and louder.

‘But the crowd loved it, and it was a sight to see the big blue and white aircraft climb out at about a 45-degree deck angle. Leveling off a second



A wave of the American flag to the crowd at MCAS Miramar.

or two after the bottles burned out, we stayed at altitude and came back around for a combat assault approach, like those we practiced in the fleet. Coming over the numbers, we went to full flaps and brought the engines to idle, which made the props act as big

old barn doors. Flare was started at about 30 feet, and we stopped Albert well under 1000 feet and right at show center.

‘So that was it. First time Fat Albert was part

of the air show, first time JATO demonstration and first short field landing. All very successful. I am proud to be part of the legacy of Fat Albert--the Blue Angels support aircraft.’

Maj Drew Hess added: ‘All of us here at Fat Albert Airlines are saddened with the end of JATO. However, next year marks the 40th anniversary of the All Marine Corps C-130 crew serving proudly on the Blue Angels and will also mark the beginning of the next chapter in our history book. The team is researching several alternatives to replace JATO, and we look forward to showcasing them to the American public in the future.’

This blending of Marines and Navy certainly demonstrates all the best that the two services offer. All the Marines who serve with the Blues feel honored to be able to represent the U. S. Naval Service to the public. The show season can be long and the time away from family can be tough, but serving with the Blues is truly a unique experience.

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*Ed Note: Author Steve Petit served from 1969-1977, serving with the Blues from 1975-77. He has recently retired from American Airlines.*



A JATO takeoff roll, showing rockets.