

Texting The Air

Written by Mark Shaffer
Tuesday, 26 April 2011 11:24



The Geico Skytypers have a giant message for you

Okay, so the Blue Angels perform incredible, death-defying aerobatic maneuvers at sub-sonic speeds. But can they make giant billboards in the sky? In a word, no. In spite of all their advanced technology, state-of-the-art aircraft and elite pilots, they still can't fire off messages in the sky that can be seen for 400 square miles. Nope. For this you need the Geico Skytypers, the only flying unit on the planet to perform at events like the Beaufort Air Show and "type" in the sky. The Skytypers also fly a unique aircraft: authentic World War II era North American SNJ-2 trainers. Of the 11 remaining planes still in existence, the team uses six of these.

I recently spoke by phone to Pilot Steve "Sting" Kapur, who also serves as the squad's Marketing Officer. He says the Skytypers are fired up to be part of this year's event.

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Steve Kapur: Any time we get to fly with our friends The Blue Angels it's a great thing.

Mark Shaffer: You guys will do a dozen or so shows this year. What sort of preparation goes into each show?

SK: It's hard to say. Of course, there's the basic work that goes into developing the routine which we actually did last year – all of the rehearsing and the training that we do to be capable of flying. But our maintenance team and crew put in a lot of long hours servicing the equipment and keeping it up to standards. We have a 43-foot hauler that travels with us these days that they use as a shop and we use for hospitality and a ready room. It's become a bigger and bigger operation. When we started out six airplanes would fly some place and do a show and we carried all of our stuff with us. Now it's more professional on a lot of levels, more like NASCAR.

MS: I know a lot of people – myself included – who will turn out just to see these vintage planes. They're pretty special and extremely rare.

SK: The SNJ-2's were built around 1940 or '41 and they were used to train men who flew fighters in the Second World War. We're honored to have them and still be flying them. These planes are not Oshkosh show winners. They are working aircraft, so they fly quite a bit and may be a little less pretty but they all fly terrific. We enjoy them.

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MS: The great thing about this is that not only are you literally flying a piece of history, you're helping to celebrate a milestone in the history of Naval Aviation.

SK: We're excited to help celebrate the history of Naval Aviation. Of course, some of the guys in our group are Naval Aviators. We're also doing about 8 or 9 shows with "The Blues" this year so people can sort of see both ends of the spectrum.

MS: Exactly. The leap in technology's right there – right overhead.

SK: It truly is. There's a photo of us flying with the Blue Angels last year and they brought two jets up and tucked them into our formation. Those guys were working like mad to keep those jets in the air and we were flying as fast as we could. We started out at about 6500 feet and nosed it over. Were doing about 165 miles an hour *downhill*. Normally we do about 150. If you go to the website and look at the video it looks like the stabilizers on the jets are having an epileptic fit because the computer is working so hard to keep that jet from departing. It was an interesting experience.

MS: I've seen skywriting but I'm new to "skytyping." What should I expect to see out there?

SK: You're going to see a couple of things. The first is skytyping, which is a form of aerial messaging. We use a computer in the lead aircraft to command the smoke systems in each of the aircraft in the formation and we fly a line abreast formation. In essence we become a giant dot matrix printer. The computer commands each smoke system at the appropriate time to put out a puff and those "dots" all connect to spell words. These messages are as tall as the Empire State Building and they can be 6 to 8 miles long and can be seen from 15 miles in any direction. It's amazing particularly if you get a nice blue sky. We've stopped little league games. We've emptied schools. I hope we haven't caused any wrecks...

MS: That would be ironically inappropriate considering your sponsor.

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(Laughter)

So what's the usual kind of message you "type" and have you ever been tempted to write something you probably shouldn't have?

SK: Oh no. We would *never* think of doing something we *shouldn't*. *Never*.

MS: Oh, I'm sure.

SK: Not a bunch of crazy pilots! No. We wouldn't do that.

(Laughter)

Actually, we do advertising for Geico, which is our main sponsor, and we do some other stuff for companies like Heineken, for instance. We also do messages for people. We've done 14 marriage proposals and so far we're 14 for 14.

MS: Very impressive.

SK: Don't ask us if you don't mean it is all I'm saying. They are going to say "yes."

(Laughter)

We've done some crazy ones too. We did one for a guy who was getting a divorce, something

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to the effect of “She took it all.”

MS: Ah, the marriage went up in smoke...

SK: That was the idea, I guess. Each year on John Lennon’s birthday we do a message for Yoko Ono over Central Park that says, “Remember love.” We’ve also been in a few movies like “She’s Out of Your League.”

MS: Aside from the skytyping, you also put these planes through their paces with a precision performance.

SK: Right. We fly a diamond and opposing solos in an 18 minute routine. We start off as a delta and break into a diamond and opposing solos. The solos do some gee-whiz, head-to-head crosses and the diamond demonstrates tight formation work and we come back together at the end. We have a lot of fun with it. There’s not a lot of vertical. We don’t have the kind of thrust the Blues do, but everybody really seems to enjoy it.

MS: Any chance we’ll see a giant mile high gecko in the sky over Beaufort?

SK: A gecko? Probably not, but I’m here to tell you that you will see the word “Geico.”

(Laughter)

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The Geico Skytypers will perform at the Beaufort Air Show Saturday, April 30th and Sunday May 1st. Get more info at www.beaufortairshow.com and see the Skytypers in action at www.geicoskytypers.com.