

Billings Gazette

Thursday, July 7, 1988 B

Billings, Montana 59103

104th Year, No. 66



Gazette photo by Larry Mayer

Blue Angels crew chief Don Reid explains the F-18 systems to Gazette reporter Dennis Gaub before his demonstration flight on the jet plane Wednesday.

Hornet flight is wild fun

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*Billings Gazette
7/7/88*

You can admire the flying skills of the U.S. Navy's Blue Angels from the ground, as thousands of spectators will do Saturday and Sunday during the Big Sky International Airshow.

But to truly appreciate what and how the Blue Angels fly, you have to sit in the cockpit of an F-18 "Hornet" as it seemingly rockets through Montana's Big Sky.

I did that Wednesday and later searched for the right words to describe my ride with Lt. Doug McClain.

Let's start by saying that I'm one of the few people in the Western World who *hasn't* seen the 1986 hit movie, "Top Gun."

I won't rush out to rent the videotape — not after McClain gave me 45 minutes of high-performance maneuvers that make a movie appear tame in comparison. KTVQ's Gus Koernig and KZLS' Kurt

“
I love to fly inverted, I'd do it all the time if I could.
—Doug McClain
F-18 pilot
”

Anthony also rode with McClain during a pre-air show demonstration for local media representatives.

I mentioned my "Top Gun" void to McClain as we taxied into take-off position at Billings Logan International Airport. "Trashy movie," he said, but "it had some great flying. It made us (Navy pilots) look

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like turds. You can't be a turd and fly these."

McClain, who will narrate the team's performance, said the purpose of the flight was my enjoyment. If I became sick during our high-speed, neck-snapping routines, McClain said he wouldn't have done his job.

He succeeded. I kept my lunch. I had a lot of fun.

And I came away a believer in the F-18's ability to duel with fighters from whatever superpower — or belligerent Third World tyrant — crosses swords with Uncle Sam.

What can the Hornet do?

For starters, McClain turned on the after-burners as we neared the end of the runway. A few seconds earlier, we had been traveling at 120-150 mph. Suddenly, the plane burst to more than 300 mph, its nose pointed almost straight up.

Yet, the acceleration was graceful, so smooth and quiet that only the instrument panel in front of me told what was happening.

Soon afterwards, I appreciated the advice that crew chief Don Reid had given for coping with G-forces. He said to "grunt like The Hulk" and to imagine "you're trying to pass a watermelon." That tactic is designed to counteract the tendency of blood to leave first your retinas, then the frontal lobe of your brain, possibly resulting in a blackout, Reid said.

Our first climb subjected us to forces equal to 5.3 times the force of gravity, according to the panel. That didn't seem bad, I confidently told McClain over the plane's intercom.

We headed north on a trip that took us about 40 miles out of Billings. McClain, an Oklahoma City native, asked me what river valley lay below us. The Mussellshell, I answered, hoping that I was right. "It sure is beautiful," he said.

That was just the start. McClain demonstrated such maneuvers as the half Cuban eight, which he said is designed to put a fighter in position to drop nuclear weapons; loops; aileron rolls; a four-point roll that made me appreciate being firmly strapped in my seat; barrel rolls; vertical climbs; and a minimum-radius turn that made the Hornet almost seem to turn back on itself.

He also gave me an upside-down

look at the landscape. "I love to fly inverted," McClain said. "I'd do it all the time if I could." And I couldn't tell if he was kidding.

The Hornet can accelerate from 300 to 500 knots (about 360-600 mph) faster than any plane in the world, McClain said, and I believe him after seeing the feat take seconds.

He also gave a convincing show of the Hornet's climbing ability, powering it from 8,000 feet to 20,000 feet in 15-20 seconds.

McClain briefly turned the stick over to me and allowed me to steer the Hornet through three or four gentle rolls.

We peaked at about 675 mph and 7.9 Gs during the flight, and only once did I feel uncomfortable. As we returned to the airport, McClain said he was going to demonstrate a carrier break, a sharp-turn maneuver designed to slow a fighter enough to land on a deck about 400 feet long and 75 feet wide.

For a split second, everything went dark. Then I snapped back to reality, completing what McClain had said earlier would be an "out-of-body experience."

The runway lay below us. The flight was over but not memories that may last a lifetime.