

Into the Blue

The U.S. Navy's Blue Angels took me on the ride of my life!

By Aaron Derr

The Blue Angels' F/A-18 Hornets are 56 feet long and 40.4 feet wide, with a top speed around Mach 1.7. (Trust me: They're really, really fast.)



The voice of Lt. Mark Tedrow, crackling through the headset onboard the F/A-18 Hornet, is so calm, so relaxed — so normal — it's almost unsettling.

We're several thousand feet above the ground going several hundred miles per hour. We are experiencing almost five times the normal force of gravity.

Tedrow is in the front seat, flying this incredibly powerful Navy fighter jet. He's in complete and total control.

I'm in the backseat, desperately clinging to consciousness. I feel as if I weigh about 750 pounds.

My field of vision has narrowed to about the size of a penny. We're flying sideways, but I can't tell. I can't look around. I can't move at all. There's too much weight, too much pressure, too many g-forces.

I can feel the blood rushing out of my head, down my body, pooling in my hips, where, under normal conditions, it most definitely is not supposed to be.

And here's Tedrow, sounding like he's walking in the park.

"There you go. ... Sounding good. ... Nice. Nice work! How do you feel?"

BEST OF THE BEST

The Blue Angels are the U.S. Navy's flight demonstration squadron. Their pilots are among the most skilled the Navy has to offer. Since 1946, they've been performing incredible, amazing, unbelievable acrobatic air maneuvers for audiences across the country.

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I have gone on a lot of adventures in my Boys' Life career, but few have ended with, um, my face in a bag.

For video of the Blue Angels in action, as well as footage from my own ride, click on boyslife.org/blueangels.





The Blue Angels serve as the U.S. Navy's flight demonstration squadron, performing in more than 70 shows each year.

The F/A-18 Hornet comes with an M-61 Vulcan cannon in its nose. The Blue Angels replace the cannon with a smoke tank for special effects during their shows.

Occasionally, the Blue Angels will invite journalists and reporters for what they call a Key Influencer Ride. When *Boys' Life* got an invitation last year, The Boss decided to send his most expendable staffer to see what it's like to fly with the best of the best.

When Tedrow's Hornet accelerates for takeoff down the runway at the Naval Air Facility in El Centro, Calif., it almost looks like a normal airplane. Then, immediately, it goes almost vertical (not normal!), and the g-forces thrust me back deep into my seat.

Seconds later, when I can finally look around again, we're near the clouds.

The g in g-force stands for "gravity." When you're twisting, turning and flying through the air going hundreds of miles per hour, the effects of gravity become much, much stronger.

A normal person walking around our planet experiences 1 g, or 1 times his weight in gravity. If you weigh 150 pounds, at 1 g you feel like 150 pounds.

But at 5 g's, that person feels as though he suddenly weighs 750 pounds.

DEFYING GRAVITY

It takes just a few minutes for Tedrow to fly the 75 miles from El Centro to Yuma, Ariz. Once there, we cruise around the desert at nearly the speed of sound.

Then, the fun begins.

The Hornet's maneuvers — the same ones they would use in an actual combat situation — create extra g's. All that gravity has the interesting effect of pushing things down. That includes the blood in your body that you rely on for minor things like seeing and maintaining consciousness.

Normal people can handle a temporary increase in g's as you would experience, for example, while riding a roller coaster. But anything longer than a few seconds requires normal people to physically fight to keep that blood where it belongs — in your brain. That's where the "hick" maneuver comes in.

Riders with the Blue Angels are taught to tighten up every muscle in their legs, abdomen and chest to prevent the blood from rushing away from their upper body. The idea is to yell "hick!"

rather loudly, then hold your breath and clench those muscles for several seconds.

As you feel the blood literally draining out of your brain, you take a quick breath and repeat the process.

BACK TO EARTH

Every time you tense those muscles, you can feel the blood rushing back to where it belongs. Your vision is temporarily restored, and you are completely awake. Then as the g's continue to increase, the blood drains to your lower body, your field of vision narrows and you can feel yourself slipping toward unconsciousness.

That means it's time to yell "hick!" all over again.

None of this applies to Mark Tedrow, for he is not a normal person.

He's a pilot with the Blue Angels, which requires him to be in excellent physical condition. That, combined with years of exposure to multiple g-forces, means all the twisting and turning has little effect on him.

A normal person thinks nothing of getting up in the morning and brushing his teeth.

Tedrow thinks nothing of pulling a 720-degree roll at 500 miles per hour.

Shortly after a maneuver, I begin to experience some nausea.



THE BLUE ANGELS

Since 1946, the Blue Angels have performed for more than 500 million fans. They do demonstrations across the country from March through November. Get their schedule at boyslife.org/links/angelschedule.

The Blue Angels have their own maintenance team responsible for preparation and upkeep of the aircraft.



Lt. Mark Tedrow is the pilot for the Blue Angels Key Influencer program. When he isn't taking a writer on the ride of his life, he's working as the narrator during Blue Angels demonstrations.

