THE BIRTH OF 'THE BLUES'

It Started 70 Years Ago

In 1946, a small group of US Navy aerial combat veterans were organized into what was officially called the Navy's Flight Demonstration Team.

That same year, one of their own coined the nick-name 'Blue Angels'. Over time, this world-famous precision flying group has become known to many as simply 'The Blues'.

When, where, how and why it started...and by whom...is an interesting bit of naval history. Following is a summation of this world famous aerial demonstration team's first decade.

Bill Lee
December 2016

~ THE CHALLENGE ~

Shortly after the end of World War II, Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz became the US Navy's Chief of Naval Operations. It was, at long last, peacetime in America. But an unlikely adversary soon tested the good admiral's mettle.

As the war clouds disappeared, the hugely successful use of air power during World War II led to serious talk about separating the Army Air Force from the Department of the Army and creating a whole new armed service, which happened in 1947. Some proponents of this idea argued that Naval Aviation should also be integrated into the proposed new military organization.

One politically powerful advocate for creating the US Air Force claimed that an air force could do anything that a navy could do, and could eliminate the need for an American navy altogether. As Texas native, Admiral Nimitz may well have said privately...if not something stronger... Them's fightin' words!
As Admiral Nimitz and others campaigned for keeping the Navy...including Naval Air...intact and independent, one tactic he initiated was to create a flight demonstration team. He felt that keeping the American public interested in naval aviation could be beneficial to that cause.

Accordingly, on April 24, 1946, Admiral Nimitz issued a directive ordering the formation of such a group and delegated that task to Rear Admiral Ralph Davison, commanding officer of the Naval Air Advanced Training Command, based at Naval Air Station Jacksonville (NAS Jax) in Florida. That installation's primary focus in 1946 was on fighter pilot training.

Davison, an accomplished naval aviator himself, had led the Fast Carrier Task Group 58.2 into battle in the Spring of 1945. He and his staff were embarked in the carrier FRANKLIN (CV-13) when she was nearly sunk by a Japanese kamikaze aircraft. His war experiences led to a desire for the newly formed flight exhibition team to demonstrate typical fighter maneuvers for the public, including mock combat with a faux opponent.

To assemble and train such a team, Davison selected Lt. Commander Roy (Butch) Voris USN, a World War II fighter ace. Voris is depicted on the left when he was in flight training as a student in 1941. In turn, Voris initially selected three other combat veterans who were serving as flight instructors with him at NAS JAX in 1946 to form the team.

The team trained for a month and a half, using Grumman F6F Hellcats, the premier US Navy carrier-based fighter of World War II. They perfected a fifteen-minute aerial demonstration show, flying far closer in formation than normal.

These maneuvers were practiced over the Florida Everglades. When later asked why, Voris dryly said: "If anything happened, just the alligators would know".

In May of 1946, they premiered for Navy officials, who enthusiastically approved their performance. The team's first public exhibition took place at an air show on June 15, 1946.
On that debut day, Voris led a trio of Hellcats that had been modified to reduce weight and make these already nimble aircraft even more maneuverable. Each aircraft was painted in the now-familiar blue with gold trim color scheme associated with 'The Blues'.

A fourth aircraft, a SNJ trainer, depicted on the right and roughly resembling a Japanese Zero, was a part of their show. This aircraft and the other three closed the show by conducting aerial maneuvers intended to simulate combat.

Near the end of the show, the faux 'Zero' flew off and disappeared, trailing smoke as a dummy parachutist was tossed out of the 'doomed' aircraft. In staged triumph, the three 'victorious' Hellcats flew by an appreciative, albeit quite small, by modern standards, crowd and then landed in front of them.

The aerial demonstration team's initial success led to the base's newspaper sponsoring a contest to give the group a catchy name. The appellation 'Blue Lancers' won the contest and the person that submitted that moniker received a ten dollar prize. But the team never actually used that name.

Instead, near the end of June, a member of the team saw an ad for The Blue Angel night club in New York and decided that 'Blue Angels' was a perfect sobriquet for the flying group. The rest of the team readily agreed and they submitted the name for Navy approval in July, which was quickly granted. The first performance the group conducted under the name Blue Angels took place at the World's Fair in Omaha, Nebraska on July 19, 1946.

The team made ten appearances before they learned that the lighter, more maneuverable Grumman F8F Bearcat could be made available for their use. The Bearcat, developed too late to participate in World War II, utilized the same powerful engine as the Hellcat, but only weighed about two-thirds as much.
Impressed by the Bearcat, it became the team's aircraft on August 25, 1946. Using this propeller-driven fighter, they performed in late August in Denver, Colorado. The photo on the right depicts the original members of the Blue Angels alongside a Bearcat, probably at NAS Jax.

From the start...and even today...each Blue Angels' aircraft displayed U.S. NAVY on both sides of fuselage and on the underside of wings as part of Admiral Nimitz’s intent to publicize naval air. Each aircraft also had a single digit on its tail, making it easy for onlookers to follow a performance narrator's comments.

~ TRAGEDY STRIKES ~

Shortly after they commenced performing in Bearcats, the Blue Angels suffered their first casualty. On September 29, 1946, while performing individual aerobatic maneuvers during a public demonstration, a team member accelerated too hard to avoid hitting the ground, exceeding the aircraft's capability and causing damage to its wings.

The Bearcat became unstable at a very low altitude and crashed in front of an assembled crowd. The pilot did not survive, but no one else was injured. The Blues, shaken of course, moved on, and performed on schedule the next week.

By the end of 1946, the Blue Angels' team consisted of four Bearcats in blue with gold trim, The SNJ trainer was painted bright yellow and nicknamed 'Beetle Bomb'.

As team leader, Voris often was interviewed and widely quoted. One of his most memorable comments came when he addressed a question about how close the aircraft deliberately flew to one another:

"You fly as close together as a couple of feet...every once in a while you do a little bump and so forth. People ask me, 'How close do they fly?' and I'll say if we hit each other, it's too close and if we don't, we're too far apart."
The tempo, if anything, increased the next year. More appearances at air shows were added to their schedule. In May of 1947, Voris was rotated out as flight leader and reassigned.

On June 7, 1947, the Blue Angels' trademark diamond formation was used in Birmingham, Alabama. The image on the right shows them performing a synchronized slow barrel roll at a low altitude.

A fifth Bearcat, which provided solo performances, was added to the team's flying inventory in 1947, replacing the SNJ. The leader of the Blue Angels changed again that year; typical of the frequent rotations in military organizations.

On July 2, 1948, 'The Blues' performed at Coney Island, New York before a crowd estimated at two million people. At the end of that year, the Blue Angels moved their home base from NAS Jax to NAS Corpus Christi, Texas.

In 1949, the team leader, helped by an illustrator, designed the first Blue Angels emblem, which is depicted on the first page of this summation. Over the years, the quadruple aircraft silhouette of the emblem has changed several times, as the 'The Blues' have transitioned from one type of aircraft to another.

In mid-June of 1949, the Blue Angels demonstration team commenced qualifying in the straight-winged Grumman F9F Panther jet fighter. For the next two months they continued to perform on weekends in Bearcats at air shows. Their last public performance using prop-driven aircraft took place on August 14, 1949.

The first Blue Angels jet performance took place in Beaumont, Texas just six days later. Because the Panther jets needed a longer runway than was available in Corpus Christi for safe operations, the demonstration team moved again; this time to Whiting Field in Pensacola, Florida.
~ KOREA ~

On June 25, 1950, North Korean forces invaded South Korea. A month later, half-way through their 1950 air show season, the Blue Angels were ordered to terminate their performances. Their aircraft were armed and repainted in standard navy fighter colors on the West Coast. The Blues reported for duty onboard the recently recommissioned aircraft carrier PRINCETON (CV-37) on November 1, 1950 for combat training.

The team formed the core of fighter squadron VF-191, nicknamed Satan's Kittens. The Blues' leader also became that squadron's commanding officer, but unfortunately he was later killed in combat; the only member of the Blue Angels to die in the Korean War.

~ 1951-1955 ~

Released from combat duty on October 25, 1951, the surviving members of the Blue Angels returned to the United States and reformed the performance team. Because their leader had been lost, Voris rejoined The Blues, becoming their commanding officer for the second time. He served in this capacity throughout the 1952 air show season.

That year, The Blues transitioned to the F9F-5 Panther, a speedier version of the aircraft they flew in combat. In 1955 they switched again, this time to the swept-wing Grumman F-9 Cougar.

During the next sixty years, several generations of Blue Angels aviators have flown at countless air shows using ten different models of aircraft. Their flight demonstration program has grown considerably since that first air show in 1946. The Blues, apparently, are here to stay. So is the US Navy.