

THUNDERBIRD ONE

It's raining in Warner Robins as Richard McSpadden sips coffee at his hotel. Dressed in khakis and a white polo with an embroidered "G" that he received at his alma mater the day before, McSpadden (AB '83) might be mistaken for an ordinary civilian. But the military haircut and the humble but powerful personality he exudes across the table are clues that Lt. Col. McSpadden is anything but ordinary. He is, in fact, the lead pilot of the Thunderbirds, the Air Force's air demonstration squadron, which has been performing breathtaking maneuvers in the skies over America since Ike was president.

"These days, the Thunderbirds fly F-16s, which are capable of Mach 2," says McSpadden, who notes that Mach 2 is a whopping 1,500 miles per hour. During an air show, the Thunderbirds throttle back to 1,200 mph—which is still

mind-blowing since these \$20 million planes are just 24 inches apart when they do much of their precision aerial acrobatics. One wrong tilt of a wingtip could spell disaster. Even when things are going perfectly outside the cockpit, a pilot is under extreme duress inside, owing

When the Air Force's elite air demonstration squadron took to the skies in their golden anniversary year, Lt. Col. Richard McSpadden (AB '83) led the way

by Tracy Coley Curlee (ABJ '90)



SPECIAL



to G-forces that make a 160-pound man feel 1,600 pounds of pressure in a high-G maneuver.

“It takes a lot of concentration at those speeds. You’re flying so fast that your head is pressed hard against the back of your seat . . . it’s difficult to move even a finger,” says McSpadden, who has had a passion for flying since he was a kid in Panama City, Fla. He remembers sitting atop his father’s shoulders at an air show in the mid-sixties, watching the Thunderbirds perform their daring feats overhead. That’s where McSpadden’s career path began, says his father, Dick McSpadden, a retired Wells Fargo employee and a pilot himself.

“Richard has always been an excellent athlete,” says Dick. “At one point, he had dreams of becoming a professional tennis player. He had all the makings: competitive spirit, studious, very intelligent.”

The main thing Dick McSpadden impressed upon all four of his children was to be different: “I didn’t want them to be part of the masses. I told them, ‘Don’t do what the other kids

a Thunder-bird pilot, candidates must have an exemplary service record, highly developed leadership qualities, a recommendation from their commanding officer—and, of course, exceptional flying ability with a minimum of 1,000 hours of military jet experience.

McSpadden had logged more than 3,500 hours of fighter aircraft time and more than 1,500 hours as an instructor pilot. But he wasn’t just trying to make the Thunderbird team; he was going for lead pilot: Thunderbird One. From 100 initial candidates, the selection process was narrowed to 10, then to three, and finally to one. “I was stunned!” says McSpadden, who couldn’t believe it when he was told he was the new commander of the Thunderbirds.

Serving as lead pilot and pacesetter for the 2002-03 flying season is a particular honor for McSpadden because the Thunderbirds are celebrating their 50th anniversary. They were officially activated on May 25, 1953, just six years after the Air Force was established as a separate service branch.

Native American legend has it that at one time a thunderbird was regarded with “great fear and respect, and when it took to the skies, the earth trembled from the thunder of its great wings.”

are doing. But whatever you do, you need to do your best.’ ”

On the being-different scale, McSpadden is clearly in the 99th percentile. After completing a year at Gulf Coast Community College, he transferred to UGA, joined the Air Force ROTC program, and decided to major in economics, a degree he thought would augment his piloting skills.

In 1983, McSpadden was commissioned into the Air Force as a fighter pilot—a job that has taken him as far away as Japan and the Philippines. He also saw Desert Storm duty as a tactical planner. The pivotal year in his career was 2001, when he decided to go for the gold. “I didn’t think I would ever make the cut for the Thunderbird team,” says McSpadden, who was well aware of how rigorous the selection process is.

Competing against the best of the best, nearly 100 elite pilots vied for a two-year position with the Thunderbird team, which includes 12 officers (eight pilots, six of whom fly demonstrations, plus four support officers) and approximately 120 enlisted men and women who serve in various capacities, including mechanics and engineers. To qualify as

The Thunderbirds work much like a sports team preparing for a big game,” says McSpadden. “Except our big game takes place two or three times a week. Each base we visit is different and we have to map out our flight plan and prepare for any obstacle—like around the tall skyscrapers in Chicago—so our show runs smoothly.”

Flying during a performance is a great feeling that’s difficult to describe, says McSpadden:

“There’s simply nothing else to compare it to. Our flying takes discipline, teamwork, and talent. We can distinguish subtle inflections in voices and minor aircraft movements that help us evaluate how our teammates are doing. Every performance is different. It’s too exciting and too much fun for it to ever be just another routine. On every maneuver, I focus on priorities—which are safety, predictability, and precision. All of our maneuvers are designed with the safety of the crowd, our pilots, and our crew as our first priority.”

On the day before the Thunderbirds’ air show in Warner Robins, McSpadden’s alma mater is rolling out the red

carpet—though the North Campus sirens are unintentional. What will prove to be a harmless electrical problem has set off fire alarms in the UGA administration building, which brings fire trucks and police to the area just as McSpadden arrives.

The sidewalk evacuees include President Michael Adams, who shakes McSpadden’s hand and acknowledges those showing him around: Dave Muia (AB ’74, MEd ’79), director of UGA Alumni Relations; BellSouth executive Carl Swearingen (ABJ ’67, MA ’69); former Thunderbird One pilot Ron Mumm, who works with Swearingen at BellSouth; and Mumm’s son Chad, who is a prospective UGA student.

McSpadden is dressed in a royal blue flight suit with a Thunderbirds patch embroidered on one side of his chest and a big No. 1 on the other. He takes questions, then presents Adams with a large framed photo of the Thunderbirds in their famous delta formation. Each of the six pilots has signed it. To show his appreciation, Adams presents his guest with the white golf shirt he will wear in Warner Robins.

Next on the itinerary is a quick stop at Sanford Stadium to visit the gravesite of school mascots Uga I-V and then an appointment with football coach Mark Richt, who also receives a signed Thunderbirds portrait from McSpadden. The two men have a lot in common. They share leadership ideals, read the same books on team building and strategy, and prepare for “the big game” in similar ways.

“Would you like to see our pre-game video?” says Richt.

“Sure,” says McSpadden.

“Great. Let’s go down to the locker room. Do you have time for this? It’s about 20 minutes long.”

McSpadden smiles and turns to his tour guide.

“Sure,” says Dave Muia. “We’ve got time.”

What follows is an exclusive tour of the locker room and the lower levels of Butts-Mehre, which is a veritable museum of Georgia football history. McSpadden enjoys seeing the special pre-game motivational video and emerges from the viewing room with a football autographed by the entire team.

A few blocks away, the entourage moves through green space that once was D.W. Brooks Drive en route to Hard-



Nearly 100 elite pilots competed for the two-year position of lead pilot/commander of the Thunderbirds. McSpadden’s qualifications included 3,500 hours of fighter aircraft time and 1,500 hours as an instructor pilot—plus a tour of duty as a tactical planner in Desert Storm.



man Hall. Surroundings have changed, but memories of the Air Force ROTC building where McSpadden spent many hours come rushing back. Waiting for him is an excited group of cadets, officers, and administrative staff who have been anticipating the legend’s visit. McSpadden extends his hand to all in the room, and he presents yet another autographed photo of the Thunderbirds to Col. LeeRoy Martin.

“It’s amazing that someone who graduated from UGA is flying as Thunderbird One,” says Sandra Bannan (BSEd ’04),

a recreation and leisure studies major who hopes to make her career in the Air Force as a morale recreation welfare officer. "It motivates you to think that there's the possibility we can do something like that in our careers!"

Visiting time is over, and McSpadden is due back in Warner Robins, where Thunderbirds Two through Six have been performing a show for special needs kids.

The Thunderbird pilots stand in formation on Saturday morning while McSpadden tells a crowd of 60,000 what they're about to witness. He turns and salutes his pilots, then leads them to their jets in a precision march where the ground crew prepares each aircraft in calibrated synchronization.

A deafening roar shakes the ground as Thunderbird One starts his engine, gives a thumbs-up sign to the crowd, and then taxis down the runway. Over the P.A. system, audible over the engines' now-distant roar, is McSpadden's voice:

"Thunderbirds, let's run 'em up!"

As they climb in the sky, the planes move into a diamond formation with McSpadden at the point. Thunderbird Five gets things started with a 360-degree roll followed by Thunderbird Six, who guns his plane toward the clouds at nearly a 90-degree angle. For the next half-hour the team performs death-defying aerial stunts coupled with ear-shattering fly-by's and inverted passes only 150 feet from the ground.

Dick McSpadden and his other son Cliff (BSFCS '98) watch the show from the VIP section, having flown to the show from Hartwell in private planes surplus by the Navy. Cliff, who also went through the ROTC program at UGA, is a pilot for a Delta Airlines subsidiary. And Cliff's son, Tyler, is currently up for a pilot's position in UGA's Air Force program.

The grand finale is the high-bomb burst—the exhaust trailing from five aircraft to form what looks like a giant flower blossom and stem. The show concludes with Thunderbird Five rolling on his back to fly inverted underneath Thunderbird Six—which brings 60,000 people to their feet for a rousing standing ovation.



McSpadden and football coach Mark Richt exchanged gifts during his fall visit to campus—and discovered that they have a lot in common in how they prepare for the "big game."

The unthinkable has happened. A week after the Warner Robins show, a Thunderbird crashed during an air show in Idaho. The pilot had just finished a vertical climb and rollout into a reverse maneuver called a split-S when something went wrong. Instead of pulling back, the plane continued to lose altitude. A split second before impact the pilot ejected and parachuted to safety—just missing the fireball of what had been his aircraft. The pilot waved to the crowd, but then

collapsed. McSpadden and the team followed the injured pilot to the hospital, where he was treated and released.

"I'm thankful no one was hurt in the air or on the ground," says McSpadden. "I'm also thankful for the hours of practice we put into handling difficult situations and the intense effort we put into designing our maneuvers to keep them safe . . . it paid off. In the 50-year history of our team, no spectator has ever been injured during our performances. [The pilot] kept the aircraft on a designed flight path, which kept it well away from the crowd—and he made a timely decision to eject."

The accident grounds the Thunderbirds show for nearly a month while a safety investigation board looks into the incident. Following standard procedure, the downed pilot is grounded until the investigation concludes. Flying resumes with a five-pilot show before 120,000 spectators in Arkansas. And it is no less of a show; if anything it is faster paced.

November marked the end of McSpadden's two-year tour of duty with the Thunderbirds. Back at Nellis AFB in Nevada for the final performance of the season, the Aviation Nation 2003 Air Show was scheduled to honor the Thunderbirds for 50 years of service—which coincides with a celebration of the 100th year of aviation, dating back to the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk in 1903.

Asked how those two years as commander and lead pilot for the Thunderbirds will end, McSpadden says he will shut down the engine of his F-16 one last time and then meet his wife on the runway. She'll be hoisting a bottle of champagne in honor and celebration of Thunderbird One's extraordinary service as the Air Force's ambassador in blue.

Tracy Coley Curlee (ABJ '90) is an editor for UGA Publications.