

Interview by Matthew Stevenson, AutoPilot Magazine, Spring 2004

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Captain Kerry L. Tidmore

Demonstration Pilot/Team Chief

T-6/A Texan II East Coast Demo Team

Moody Air Force Base, Georgia

Matt – So, what kind of person does it take to be a stunt pilot?

Kerry -- Stunt Pilot? I have to say honestly that I know and understand that there are flying jobs in this world that call for exactly that, like for instance, Hollywood movies, and various other flying stunts that I've seen performed by a wide variance of aviation professionals across the country. However, considering the highly regulatory and structured nature of my job as a demo pilot in Air Education and Training Command (AETC), the title of "stunt pilot" hardly seems appropriate. While certainly not without some of the same dangers and risks that go along with any kind of low altitude, high performance flying, I'd say my military job title would be demonstration pilot, and if you're looking for the civilian equivalent, then professional air show pilot suits me.

What I do in my demonstration flying the T-6/A Texan II is a routine, or series of maneuvers that showcases the aircraft's superb maneuverability and agility w/out sacrificing the performance envelope of the aircraft or putting myself in a situation that would require extreme skill to make it out of alive. The air show routine for this aircraft was created with the air show spectator in mind, and in particular, possible future Air

Force pilots, but its' a far stretch from the days of barnstorming, and everything I do in the demonstration has been practiced, critiqued, refined, and then is practiced some more before I fly my first air show for a public audience. So, because of these reasons, the level of supervision that's involved in an Air Force pilot flying aerial demonstrations for the public, and for what I believe is our charter and number one priority of our team, which is to put on an Excellent, but SAFE show, I'm most comfortable with demo pilot or air show pilot. I'll leave stunt pilot to the professionals who fly a lot lower than I do, and those who have actually earned that title.

Matt -- When you were young what drew you into piloting/ how involved was your family?

Kerry -- I've met two types of pilots in my lifetime, those who were drawn into aviation later in life, maybe as adults or somewhere in their lives where a career decision sparked an interest and therefore led them in a certain direction. The other type are those who have been pursuing their dream of flying airplanes for as long as they can remember, usually around the age of four, which seems to be about as far back as the average person's memory will allow. For me, I was the latter. As funny as it may sound, I distinctly remember a conscious thought around the age of four when I would see airplanes flying over my house and thinking that I had to do that. My Mom will tell you the story of when I informed her of my intentions one afternoon at the age of four while playing in the front yard. My pronunciation of "airplane" was apparently a little off, but she got the point. From that time, I never let up with the pursuit of my dream.

My childhood revolved around aircraft. We lived in a town west of Atlanta, Georgia, which happened to be located near Dobbins Air Force Base, so I began to notice very early in life how sleek and fast the military jets were. They would buzz over our house returning into Dobbins, and sometimes the afterburners would rattle our windows, it made the hair on the back of my neck standup,...I was hooked. My Dad, also worked for Lockheed Aircraft Company in Marietta, Ga., and was always bringing home model airplanes that he purchased at the company's gift store. Dad was quite instrumental in helping me to build a concrete foundation for what I intended to do for the rest of my life. I would go with him to the family days at Lockheed, and he would always be sure I got to see ALL of the aircraft, touch them, sit in them, whatever he could do. He knew it was my passion, and he worked so hard to fulfill a kid's fantasy, Dad was my hero for that, and still is. Although Dad was never a pilot, he seemed to share my deep interest and desire to be around airplanes and aviation, we connected on that level. Dad taught me the very first things I knew about aircraft and flying, how the wings lifted the airplane, the engines, how to tell different airplanes apart, etc. Dad had spent his first several years actually building the aircraft at Lockheed, and could identify a C-5 Galaxy aircraft coming over the house just by the sound of the engines, I wanted to know aircraft that well too. If it weren't for Dad's influence, and the support and backing of two loving parents, there's no way I would be doing what I'm doing today. Our family always made the Dobbins AFB air show, and the Lockheed family days, where they would have static displays to look at up close, and various aerial demonstrations. At one of these air shows, I saw my first USAF Thunderbirds demonstration, man, if there was any one thing that

reinforced my decision about flying airplanes for the rest of my life it was that. They were so precise, so sharp, that was it, I would be a USAF jet pilot.

As I grew up and into adolescence, I would do just about anything to see an airplane up close. Any time we would pass an airport on the highway going somewhere, I'd beg Mom or Dad to stop and let me look, sometimes they did, and I'd just stare at the ramp full of airplanes and dream of my chance to one fly them, it really consumed me. At the age of fourteen, Mom and Dad allowed me to join an aviation branch of the scouts called the Explorers. I don't remember how it came up, but one day Mom took me down to the Paulding County Library for a group meeting, and could you believe it? They were discussing actually flying an airplane? Wow. The group's leader was a gentleman named Bob Bradley. Later that week we were standing on the ramp at Cornelius-Moore (Cedartown, GA) Airport looking at a green and white C-172. Bobby was giving the members airplane rides. I've never forget the smell of that aircraft, just leaning over looking into the cockpit and at the instrument panel, it was like I was already miles above everyone else standing around me. Listening to the gyros wind down after the master switch had been turned off, it's all very vivid to me. That afternoon it was my turn to go. As Bobby, his son Jeff, and myself walked out to the airplane, Bobby casually tossed the aircraft keys to his son, who was working on his private license, and said, "okay Jeffro, think you can get us up there and back?". Whoa! I was in awe. At this moment I felt that actually flying an aircraft was something that I could do even before going to college or an academy. My very first flight in any aircraft had occurred a few years prior, when my Mom purchased a Delta airlines ticket out of Hartsfield, ATL., and we flew to

Raleigh-Durham, NC. She let me have the window seat, and I never took my face out of the window from takeoff to landing. But this was different, in the C-172 I could actually see the controls, the instrument panel, hear the radios, look out and see the landing gear, I remember pretending that day that I was flying that aircraft, I could see it happening, and later that year I did.

During the next several years with Mom and Dad's support, I was able to get my Private Pilots license (Age 18), and actually owned partnerships in three different single engine Cessna aircraft. I flew my first solo flight at a little airport called Stockmar, named after its owner and airfield manager, the late Dodgie Stockmar helped me in the direction of becoming a pilot. While most kids at my high school were practicing football, baseball, or some other after school function, I was busy honing my flying skills in my C-150 while flying over my high school and thinking how unfortunate all my classmates were down there doing something so relatively usual like football, track or whatever. It was this time in my life when I started to see I was going in quite a different direction than most of my friends. During my junior and senior year and immediately after high school, I spent every free hour I had at Stockmar airport, watching all the pilots, studying their behaviors, the way they spoke, the way they held their coffee cups, anything...I wanted to be one of them. But most of all I watched how they flew, and I began to be able to pick out the better ones. Dodgie was the very best. He seemed to have a way with an aircraft that made it all his while he was at the controls. I watched him do several "impromptu" air shows while I was spending time there and his skill amazed me. One day while in my C-150 w/ me, he showed me how to do a loop, this was my first taste of

aerobatics. My first big step came with getting my private license, and with the help of another great instructor there at Stockmar, and who is also now my long-time friend Dave Enloe I did it.

I flew my 1963 model C-172, named “Sugar Bear” out to Cedartown airport to see Mr. John Mann, the FAA examiner. I remember flying out to the airport thinking, well, if I can fly this thing out here by myself, I should be able to fly it right for the examiner. I left Cedartown later that day with my private ticket, what a feeling! My very next flight was to take my family up in the aircraft, I’ll never forget my Mom’s excitement as her own son flew the aircraft off the runway and into the blue sky,...I believe she had also been waiting for this moment with the enthusiastic proud excitement that only a Mom can have. She reminded me that day countless times of my vow to her 14 years prior, “Mom, I’m gonna fly *airplanes*”.

Matt -- What made you join the military?

Kerry -- Throughout college I kept flying around the Atlanta area. First in our Skyhawk out of Cartersville airport, then McCollum Field in Marietta, GA. Then with the Lockheed flying club also out of McCollum. I flew every chance I could, even sometimes when I could have been studying, I just couldn’t stay away for very long. When I wasn’t in my mechanical engineering books, I was studying aerodynamics, aerobatics, and anything that had to do with flying. I purchased a video on aerobatics, and spins by Barry Shiff. After thoroughly reading the material and watching the how-to video over and over, I went out and taught myself spins and spin recoveries. I didn’t

mention this to anyone, I just did it. While I was a sophomore I saw an F-16 flight demonstration at Dobbins. After the demo I asked the pilot how he got his commission, thinking he would say OTS, which was to be my plan, or the USAF Academy. He told me about ROTC and how I could enroll from Southern Tech into the program at Georgia Tech. That was Saturday. Monday morning I sat, w/ a tie on, in front of Col Eugene Rose, the Professor for Aerospace Studies at ROTC Det. 165 at GA TECH, and told him I wanted to be an Air Force pilot. He was somewhat amazed that I'd just walked in seemingly off the street, without so much as an appointment, or previous phone call to inquire. I didn't need any of that, I knew what I wanted, and it wasn't negotiable. Apparently, he was impressed enough to give me a chance, he enrolled me into their three-year program and told me that there was no guarantee of getting a pilot slot. I told him I just wanted the chance, I knew I would do whatever it took to get the slot. It worked, at graduation in 1994 I was commissioned a second lieutenant, and stationed at Vance Air Force Base Oklahoma for Undergraduate Pilot Training, I was going to fly jets! I knew that I had made it because of my family's support, I owe them everything.

***Matt* -- What personal traits do you possess that make you a better pilot?**

Kerry -- Well, I'd say one trait that seems to be common among most pilots and the one that is most of the time we're labeled with is *competitiveness*. Not necessarily competing against your peers, but just a general competitiveness that makes you always strive to do a better job, know more about your aircraft than the next guy, maneuver your aircraft smoother, and ultimately challenge and push yourself to improve every time you strap

into the aircraft. As well as, always searching to better other areas of your life at the same time (i.e. be a better dad, mom, brother, sister, son, daughter, friend or companion). It's a way you approach your life, leaning forward and always learning something new. One of my favorite air show airbosses, Mr Ralph Royce says at every performer briefing, "perfection is expected, excellence will be tolerated", this is the approach to your job I'm talking about. I'm also a very *mechanically minded and analytical* person. I have a pretty good ability to evaluate a situation, then process all the data and make quick decisions real-time, while at the same time exercising hand-eye coordination to fly a machine that is traveling at a high rate of speed and changing direction in three dimensions. It's my theory that the best pilots are the ones who possess a certain talent in this area. I believe the personal trait that takes me above some of the others, is that I just *simply like to fly* more than the average guy. I live for it. When others have went home and are into other hobbies at home or wherever, I'm thinking about my next sortie and what I'll do differently to make that one certain maneuver better. Don't get me wrong, I do several other things and activities/sports,etc. but flying is always in the back of my mind. I'm most at home when I'm flying, most relaxed, and I feel a freedom, and a heightened keen sense of awareness that is absolutely the best feeling in the world. This is especially true when I'm flying aerobatics. Finally, there's an old saying, "there's bold pilots, and there's old pilots, but there are no old bold pilots". I think this means knowing where the line is, and not crossing it. Knowing the rules and sticking to them ALWAYS. Knowing your aircraft inside and out, so that one day when the chips are down, you'll have already thought of your solution to the problem. And, mostly, a humbled, but

concrete foundation of confidence and an open ear just might be the difference between which one of those pilots you'll likely be one day.

Matt -- Do you prefer instructing young pilots over flying in air shows or vice versa and why?

Kerry -- Having instructed students in two different Air Force aircraft and w/ almost six years experience doing so, there's not many problems that a student can bring me that I haven't seen several hundred times before. So, since you can see so far ahead of the jet, and can predict w/ mind boggling precision their every mistake even before they think of making it, the challenge for the IP I believe comes in not losing your sight picture of really what's expected of these students at their stage of training. Being able to relate to them, and understand the problems they're going thru makes you the kind of IP that they will remember for the rest of their lives as someone who made a difference in their career and lives. There's never really a need to yell at them when they make a mistake, just correct it, show them the proper way, and move on. The calmer you are in the aircraft, the more confident of a student you will build. I save the yelling for the debrief,...just kidding. Truthfully, I also believe firmly in a structured environment during the student's first month or so in the military flying training arena, it better prepares them for the real-time life and death split second decisions they might well be making on their own in a very short period of time after pilot training. I love instructing, but, I also like flying for myself. With the students, it's all about the syllabus, when I'm flying an air show, it's about me and that aircraft, and how well it and I will sync up that day, as well as the rest

of my team and how well they will all work together to make for a great show.

Somedays we all click so well, it's like the whole team is on autopilot, other days we have to work harder at that. But, on the days that seem to have more hiccups, we spend time on those in debrief and find ways to prevent them from happening again. Constant and continual improvement, it's about not getting complacent just because you happened to have a good day. Tomorrow could be your worse.

If I had to choose between flying air shows for the rest of my life, or being a primary jet instructor for the rest of my life, well, I'd be flying air shows. However, the real thrill is being able to fly an aircraft in a high performance and challenging manner, and get to at some point share that w/ someone who is new at it. I'm doing that now with our additional demo pilot for next year's team, Capt Ed Martin. Ed has been a safety observer for a year and was recently selected to be the second demo pilot, along side myself for next year. Now that I'm getting to share the experiences I've had as the demo pilot over this past year, and pass them along to Ed with my lessons learned and how he can be his best, it's given my job an even higher degree of satisfaction. My experience as a demo pilot has also spilled over into my instruction. Although what I do in the demo and what I teach per the syllabus to students are two totally separate ways of flying this aircraft, I do find at times an appropriate time and place to interject a technique or two that will help them with a certain aerobatic maneuver or part of formation extended trail that I pulled from the demo pilot files. Although I'm careful not to show them things that I wouldn't want them practicing on their own, or things that would not fit in with the primary flight manual, which is basically how they are supposed to fly the airplane. I

learned a long time ago, that anything you show a student, they will immitate or repeat, usually on their very next solo sortie, so I use discretion with demonstrating advanced ways of maneuvering the aircraft.

Matt -- Please tell me about your scariest flight or any “close calls” you’ve had and please be detailed. I will probably use this.

Kerry -- On Sep 04, 2003, while on a Functional Check Flight (FCF) or maintenance test flight training sortie to upgrade a new FCF instructor pilot, I experienced a severe engine malfunction, which resulted in me shutting down the engine, and performing an engine out “dead stick” landing into Spence Field in Moultrie, GA. The event occurred about 20 minutes into a planned hour and a half flight. Myself in the front seat and the guy I was upgrading in the back seat. We had just completed our required systems checks at FL 310, and had performed two max mach and max airspeed dives into the practice area west of Moody AFB. After performing a G-awareness turn to check proper operation of our anti-G system in the aircraft and our G-suits, as well as determine our G-tolerance for the day, I performed the first of two planned spins. After the first spin and on the subsequent dive recovery, the CHIP light illuminated, which detects metal in the oil system and is probably the most serious light we can have on in the cockpit besides a fire light. I made an immediate turn towards my intended landing field while the backseater started into required checklists. About 1 minute later, to my surprise and utter disappointment, it became very evident with the aircraft shuddering that the engine was catastrophically coming apart, and with oil pressure dropping rapidly, that I would be shutting down the

ONLY engine that I had. I made a few radio calls on UHF and VHF to ATC, and the Supervisor of Flying (SOF) at Moody, and advised them of our problem. I think it also took them a bit by surprise with my “engine out” radio call. This is obviously not something you want to hear from single engine aircraft. With the canopy completely iced over in the rear cockpit and fogged over in the front, from just being at FL 310 in a cold soaked environment and no chance to defog, we were somewhat in our own very adequate IFR trainer, not where I wanted to be, but would have been great training for my students. I wiped at the front canopy enough to see out of it and navigated to the field, while the backseater read off checklists, I was extremely glad to have him along, it was a very busy time. As we approached the field, we were forced to pick our way down thru a 4500 foot thin broken layer, that covered most of Spence field. I got below the weather with a lot of energy and continued to Spence, arriving at high key in a very quiet (no engine noise) airplane at approx. 2500 AGL. With all the checklists complete, I flew the Emergency Landing Pattern (ELP) and slipped the aircraft for all it was worth on base key and throughout final, touching down approx. 2000 feet down and on speed. Because of the absence of normal drag provided by a turning 4-blade propeller once on the runway, poor pavement condition, and my desire to max brake this aircraft to a stop, my rollout resulted in two blown tires, which I was actually relieved about when I felt them go. I remember thinking, well he--, there’s at least something I don’t have to worry about anymore. I really didn’t give too much thought to the tires, after having successfully planted the multi-million \$ aircraft on the ground. I was quite happy my back seater and I would not be looking for each other on the ground, after we had been forced to eject. It worked out, and I’m thankful for many things about that day.

Matt -- What does your wife think about your career?

Kerry -- She's the greatest thing that's ever come along in my life, period. I really don't think anyone else but her could, #1 put up with me, and #2 keep up w/ my pace. She does a good job with both. I involve her in my career making decisions, it's both our lives, and we treat it that way. She loves more than anything to see me flying and happy, so she allows me time to do that. Actually the first question she'll ask me if I'm cranky on a particular day is "have you not flown today"? She understands the pilot in me.

Matt – What are some of your favorite spots to fly over Georgia or favorite airports?

Kerry -- I feel a lot of history flying all over Georgia. I grew up flying around all the metro Atlanta airports, and have kept airplanes at, and flown in various clubs at most all of them. As I said earlier, my first was Stockmar, in Villa Rica. This is where I really spent most of my early days flying Cessna, talking about flying, and climbing in just about anything that would fly with anybody who would take me. It was a great time, and I had a blast flying off that dirt strip. I've flown back into it several times over the years, or over it, at various times just to take a look. Sometimes depending on the aircraft I was flying and who owned it, those over flights were, well, quite low. Dodgie always did appreciate a good buzz job. I received my private license with John Mann at Cedartown airport, and I've also kept somewhat in touch with him several times throughout college

and after, flying a T-34B into his field just to catch up. McCollum has gotten a little grown up over the years, but I still remember landing a Cessna Cardinal on the taxiway there one day when the runway was closed on short notice to due a broken aircraft. That was somewhat sporty seeing that I wasn't the only one with that idea that day. Dobbins AFB was also a thrill throughout college as a member of the Atlanta Navy Flying Club. Those guys out there treated myself and my best friend Chris Niemi great, he is also an Air Force pilot now, flying the F/A-22 Raptor out of Edwards AFB, CA. He and I taught ourselves to fly overhead patterns in preparation for pilot training, while we were club members at Dobbins in the T-34B Mentors, what a great flying aircraft. Charlie Brown, PDK, Falcon, I've been into all of those at some point or another, and I enjoyed them all, great people out there to meet at every stop. I still take friends and family over to the 57th Fighter Group Restaurant at PDK, where I used to take Saturday night dates in a Piper Arrow out of Dobbins, that place brings back a lot of good memories spent around Atlanta. Other things like taking buddies flying over the Braves games at the old Fulton County Stadium, at night too, or watching the laser light show over Stone Mountain from a C-172, or just flying over Lake Allatoona and rocking the wings at fishermen waving at us, it was all some of the best experiences I've had flying. There's many more, but it would fill up your magazine.

Matt -- What are some of your fears about your profession now, and your personal profession in the future (i.e. job security)?

Kerry -- The only fear I have currently about my profession is not getting to do enough of it. Really, I think the world's events have about every pilot military and civilian a little on edge. Military pilots are traveling quite a bit and spending time in some pretty hazardous parts of the world, but it's our job to defend this great nation of ours, and we will do that. Civilian pilots are looking at the current airline situation and hoping that it takes a turn for better soon. I hope and think it will, but it may take a while, and it's anybody's guess as to how long. I think my chances of getting to fly something for most of my working years are quite good. Can't guarantee that it will be civilian, military, or a bit of both, but either one will come with reward and sacrifice, I'll just have to see how it works out.

Matt -- How often do you practice routines for a typical air show?

Kerry -- On an off-air show week, I'll practice once or twice a week. At air shows, I'll practice once on a Friday before the shows on Saturday and Sunday. Sometimes at Moody AFB, the NOTAMed aerobatic airspace comes at a premium, since noone else is allowed to fly during the practice period. So, I don't always get all the practice periods I request, but the leadership here is 100% behind the demo team, and if I went to them, they would make it happen. We do our best not to ruffle too many feathers with the scheduling and airspace guys, it pays to keep them happy in the long run.

Matt -- **Do you think g-forces damage your health in the end?**

Kerry -- No, I don't think so. On the contrary, I think it's quite the workout! I don't know of any real concrete data or study that would support a theory either way though. That doesn't mean that some medical group hasn't performed one, I'm just unaware of it. High-g flying however, if you don't take care of yourself and stay in shape can be tough on you. So, eat right when you can, stay in shape or keep your weight in check, exercise, and stretch often. About the only problem I've ever had from flying high-g sorties in high performance aircraft is an occasional stiff neck, which usually happened because I was slightly dehydrated. Which actually is one of the worse things that you can have while trying to perform in a high-g situation. You've really got to stay on top of it especially in the warmer summer months, during air show season. So, I drink lots of water, and stay off the flightline until a certain prescribed time, depending on the air show, just before the demo. When you're dehydrated the first thing that goes away is your g tolerance, the second is your ability to make simple decisions in real-time manner. W/out one or both of these and flying air shows, you're likely to be the next statistic, not good.

Matt -- What do you think you look like to other people/ what do you hope to look like—in the air as a pilot?

Kerry -- As far as what I think I look like to other people, I just hope they see me as a guy who is focused on what he loves to do, is determined but yet still finds time to help others along. Is competitive in nature but doesn't ride on ego or being the loudest person in the room, yet allows his actions and performance to make a more silent but definitive mark in his peer group, one that makes others want to better their own way of doing business in the community. Confident, not cocky, assertive, but not pushy. A good leader that watches out for his people, but trusts them and doesn't micro-manage. A guy that can make tough calls if necessary, but doesn't need the last word to seem important or somehow worthy or wise. Above all, I'd just like to be the guy that others want to go fly with, that's how I've made some of my closest friends for many years, and I continue to do the same in the future.

“Airshow flying is tough, it's tougher if you do something stupid!”

Ralph Royce, Professional Airboss