

Salthill Airshow Exclusive

feature

...to the skies!

The Salthill Air Show 2007 takes place on 24 June, with crowds of over 100,000 people converging to witness some of the most impressive displays in the world.

This year, 'Thunderbirds', the US Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, will perform precision aerial maneuvers to exhibit the capabilities of modern high-performance aircraft to people throughout the world. Thunderbird Major Nicole Malachowski flies the number three jet as the right wing pilot in the diamond formation. The 32-year-old from Las Vegas, Nevada is in her second season with the squadron and chats to GALWAYnow about life as a Thunderbird.

Have you always wanted to be a pilot? I grew up down the road from the Air Force Space. I was five years old and inspired to join the Air Force to become a fighter pilot and officer. I came from a patriotic family where military service from my grandfathers and my dad is an acceptable and noble thing. I went to an air show when I was five and I fell in love with an aircraft called the F4 Phantom, the power, grace and technology. So when you put those two things together from a very young age – the love of country and the love of the fighter aircraft, I think becoming an Air Force officer and fighter pilot was a natural progression. I'm glad it worked out because I didn't have a back-up plan.

How did you get to the position you are in at the moment? To become a Thunderbird pilot, you need to have a minimum of 1000 hours in a fighter aircraft. I had flown an aircraft called the F-15E Strike Eagle since 1998 and had been in three different fighter squadrons so was able to get that minimum 1000 hours. I then applied to the team.

What kind of training is involved? The training season is four months – it goes from mid November to mid March, from Monday to Friday and fight twice a day. We start at a very basic level with two aircrafts, very high above the ground and very far apart from each other. As our proficiency and confidence develops, we bring those aircrafts closer together and closer to the ground. Then we start adding aircrafts until you get a beautiful delta formation with six aircrafts that you'll see at the end of our show.

You are working in what would be considered a male-dominated career and how have you found this? What's awesome about being on the team is that everyone feels the same pride and humility at being able to wear the Thunderbird patch and to be part of the team, so in that respect, none of us are different. It's just sincerely the privilege of a lifetime for any of us to be Thunderbirds.

Would you recommend your career?

Absolutely. I'm definitely living a dream – there's nothing more fulfilling or rewarding that I've ever done in my life – it's a privilege and an honor to be a Thunderbird. There's 130 people on our team and for all of us it's a responsibility we take very seriously. It's our job to represent the 513,000 men and women who are wearing United States Air Force blue and protecting our freedom around the world.

Is it a high-pressured job? It's definitely a busy job – we're always on the road, about 230 days of the year, but the effort that we put in is definitely worth the sense of fulfillment and the sense of this privilege that we get out of it. I describe it as a two-year lifestyle change for the pilots.

Your work brings you abroad quite a lot.

Where are your favorite places?

I'm very excited to be going to Ireland and Europe this year. We stayed in America the whole time the last show season. It's hard to say if I had a favourite or not because we travel to every corner of the States, the heartland and everywhere in between. It's wonderful because Americans are proud of their military and of their country and to feel that patriotism from the North West to the South East is just amazing. Last year I loved being in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which was a civilian show. I loved being at Kirtland Air force space in New Mexico – that was probably the most patriotic and lively crowd we had last year.

Are you looking forward to visiting Ireland?

I'm definitely looking forward to that. I've been to Ireland on vacation a couple of times. I went with my parents two years ago – my dad was researching his genealogy and we have distant relatives from Mallow so we checked it out and went all around the ring of Kerry. The one thing that is striking is the kindness and hospitality of the Irish – it's unmatched really. The laid back lifestyle, the hospitality and the warm welcome I know we're going to get and you just can't match the Irish scenery – it's just a beautiful country.



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