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Thunderbirds: Female Combat Pilots US Air Force

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Thunderbirds

The United States Air Force Air Demonstration Squadron, the USAF Thunderbirds Squadron has performed aerobatic manoeuvres worldwide since its inception in 1953. This year, for the first time in the unit's history, the Thunderbirds will fly to Ireland to perform at the Salthill Air Show on Sunday the 24th of June. The Thunderbird's performance at Salthill will be its first ever in Ireland and the unit's first deployment to Europe since the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The Thunderbirds Squadron consists of six F-16 C fighter jets flown by experienced combat pilots chosen from among the US Air Force's top operational combat squadrons. Speaking to the Irish Times from their home base at Nellins Air Force Base in the Nevada desert outside Las Vegas, Captain Elizabeth Kreft, stated that the core mission of the Thunderbirds was to 'perform precision aerial manoeuvres that demonstrate the combat capabilities of the aircraft of the United States Air Force'.

Captain Kreft went on to say that the pilots and support crews of the Thunderbirds were particularly excited about the upcoming Irish visit given that many had strong Irish family connections. Most of the unit's members have also passed through Shannon Airport in recent years on their way to operational assignments in the Middle East and Afghanistan. She also stated that the squadron was also proud to visit Ireland and to 'spread the good will of the United States Air Force amongst our allies, and particularly among our sister countries who have shown their preparedness over the last number of years to make a stand for freedom throughout the world'.

For the squadron's lead solo pilot, Major Ed Casey (33) from Sparta, New Jersey, the Thunderbird's visit to Ireland is a homecoming of sorts. His mother, Ailis Casey from Schull in Co. Cork emigrated to the US in 1974. His father, Maurice and grandmother Margaret Casey are still living in Ireland. Major Casey echoed Captain Kreft's views on the Irish trip and informed the Irish Times that the unit plans to put the Irish Tri-Colour on the flag panels of its aircraft during and after the Irish visit. Two of the Squadron's top combat pilots are women, including Major Nicole Malachowski whose grandparents come from Mallow in Co. Cork.

According to Major Casey, 'all of our pilots have combat experience over Iraq and many have been operational in Afghanistan'. He went on to describe the logistics involved in getting the Squadron's F-16s from Las Vegas to Shannon Airport. 'We will fly direct from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania to Shannon, crossing the North Atlantic with an escort of two KC 10 Extender refueling jets'. These large aircraft will refuel each of the team's eight F-16s with approximately 4000 litres of aviation fuel at least three times during the transatlantic flight. According to Major Casey, the Squadron's support team of approximately 80 personnel will travel to Ireland in 'greater comfort' aboard two US Airforce C-17 transport aircraft.

Major Casey described three previous trips through Shannon Airport whilst serving as a combat pilot in various operational units of the US Air Force on his way to deployments

in Iraq and elsewhere. As has become customary among US military personnel who have served in Iraq or Afghanistan and who have 'been lucky enough to transit via Shannon', Major Casey emphasised the 'incredible hospitality and the warm welcome of the Irish' in Co. Clare. He also described the almost Talisman-like quality of the pint of Guinness, the last drink of choice sought out by most young US soldiers on their final stop-over in non-hostile territory prior to combat overseas.

According to Major Casey 'The transatlantic flight from Pittsburgh to Shannon, including refueling periods, is approximately 6 and a half hours'. 'We could exploit the aircraft's capabilities and get there a lot faster, but we've got to shadow the big, heavy refueling jets'. One of more unfortunate outcomes of such a lengthy transit is not lost on the Squadron's pilots. Unfortunately for the Thunderbirds combat pilots, unlike commercial passenger jets, the spartan cockpit of the F-16 has no toilet – or indeed much room for manoeuvre. In terms of the delicate subject of relieving themselves en route to Ireland, Major Casey, combat veteran and 'Top-Gun' in the US Airforce, stated diplomatically, 'there are ways to do it – but it aint easy'.

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