

## Leaving gravity behind, high above El Centro



## Let's take a thrill ride on Fat Albert

Story and photos by Jan Wagner • AutoMatters+

A recent Friday the 13th turned out to be my lucky day. Earlier I had applied for one of the coveted media spots for a ride on Fat Albert this day, but I'd not heard back. I assumed that meant no, so instead I went on a shoot at San Diego's Balboa Park.

At about 9:30 am, my cell phone rang. It was the Public Affairs Officer from NAF El Centro. I learned that an email snafu had prevented me from receiving my flight approval notification. He asked me if I could make it to NAF El Centro in time for the mandatory briefings?

You betcha. I arrived at the main gate of the base—the winter home of the Blue Angels—with just under half an hour to spare.

I signed an air transportation agreement and listened intently to an initial briefing that included: "This is not a commercial airline. Do not wear your seatbelts loosely. They need to be tight, because you're going to go floating if you don't. If you actually do go floating, you're probably going to crack your head, so hopefully that's good incentive for you guys to keep your seatbelts super tight. That way you can enjoy the ride."

We learned that we were "actually going to be part of history today. Captain Katie Higgins is going to be the first female to be performing the demo, as far as practice, and tomorrow will be her first air show."

Then our left seat pilot, Captain Katie Higgins, introduced her crew and gave them a quick crew brief that included her step-by-step, turn-by-turn, climbing, diving and banking plan for our flight.

Next, in her passenger brief, Captain Higgins told us: "You're going to feel some positive G's up to two. It's about two times your body weight, so you'll feel heavy in your seat, like you're getting sucked down. Then you'll also feel the zero-G, which is kind of like you're in space. You're going to feel weightless. You're going to come out of your seat if your seatbelt isn't cinched down tight enough, so make sure you get that thing cinched down. In addition to your body floating away, anything that you have in your hands, anything that

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(Left page) Fat Albert in banked turn. • (Right, top to bottom) Fat Albert. • Crew and passenger brief by Captain Katie Higgins. • Seated in a high-G maneuver.



(Top to bottom) Straight and level flight. • Floating in zero-G. • Crew of Fat Albert (with author at center).

you have around your neck, in your pockets that aren't secured down are also going to float away. This is not conducive to our aircraft because when we put the positive G's back on, everything's going to come crashing down. So, if you don't mind, please keep everything securely on your body: cameras, phones, anything like that, because if it does crash and explode all over the back of this beautiful aircraft, unfortunately you'll be staying here helping to pick up the pieces. That also goes for the contents of your stomach. If someone is going to be sick, if you can please put it in an airsick bag because, again, if it goes everywhere, you're going to have to stay and help us clean it up—if you don't mind. So seatbelts, don't barf unless it's in a bag and keep holding all your stuff."

I asked Captain Higgins if I could hold my (heavy) camera to take photos. She said "It would be kind of cool because you'll see the guys who are in the back who aren't strapped down—our safety observers—they'll be floating around, and so it would be a really cool kind of picture. I would say definitely have it out."

As for whether or not she is nervous about her history-making flight as the first female demo pilot, she replied: "No, I'm not. We've gotten plenty of practice. My parents are in the crowd so I'm really happy to be able to do it in front of them. Its a great opportunity to be here." We applauded her. "The whole flight takes about 8-½ minutes, depending upon how fast I fly it."

From there, we found our seats, belted ourselves in and were each given an airsickness bag.

Our flight was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. In the high-G portions, it felt like a super magnet was trying to pull my camera to the deck. Surprisingly, the plane got quite hot and humid on our short flight. Feeling weightless was wonderful. Fortunately I did not need my motion sickness bag, which will now be a treasured souvenir. The memories will last a lifetime. ■

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Award-winning **JAN WAGNER** has been writing professionally since 1979 and an avid photographer for as long as he could hold a camera. He was a television writer/producer in his native Alberta, before transferring to his current home in San Diego.

