

Ride of a lifetime

Civilian gets familiarization flight with F-15

■ By **James Moore**
53d Weapons Evaluation Group

First, the takeoff was amazing. Capt. Lance "Blade" Wilkins, 83d Fighter Weapons Squadron, was calling out the airspeed in knots, and in just a few seconds our F-15 was doing over 300 knots (later we did 695 knots, which is mach 1.08 or 800 miles/hr). As we reached mission altitude over the Gulf of Mexico, I told Blade I felt closer to God up there...he replied "the closer the better." The water looked like glass, and the waves appeared stationary. I've only flown in private/commercial aircraft prior to this, and the view from a fighter's cockpit is so much better.

On the way to the mission area, Blade did some G warmup maneuvers (I think it was a 4.5 G turn in one direction, then 6.5 Gs in the other). The pressurized suit squeezed my legs and lower torso much harder than I expected. Imagine feeling like you weigh almost a ton, and the outfit you're in suddenly squeezes you like a boa (minus the slithering). Later in the mission I looked at my watch between my sleeve and glove and noticed a lot of tiny red freckles, which I think was from the blood being squeezed to my upper body. During high G maneuvers you strain the muscles in your lower body and you're supposed to breathe in a very unnatural fashion (take a 60 percent gasp of air just prior to the maneuver, then pretend to blow out a candle every 3 seconds...all the while air is being forced into your mask). The purpose of this technique, and the G suit, is to prevent G-LOC (G-induced loss of consciousness, since the blood naturally tries to pool in your lower body). Blade

“As we reached mission altitude over the Gulf of Mexico, I told Blade I felt closer to God up there... he replied "the closer the better.”

—James Moore
53d Weapons Evaluation Group



Courtesy photo

James Moore, 53d Weapons Evaluation Group operations research analyst, gives the thumbs up from the cockpit of an F-15 piloted by Capt. Lance "Blade" Wilkins, 83d Fighter Weapons Squadron. Mr. Moore received a familiarization flight April 28 at Tyndall AFB, Fla.

let me know I was breathing too fast during those warmups, so I slowed down quite a bit for the remainder of the mission. The muscles in my lower body are still sore from the straining.

Blade let me fly the jet just a little to get a feel for the controls, the aircraft was amazingly sensitive. As we waited for the unmanned QF-4 full-scale target, loitering provided ample time to soak in the views. We saw boats on the way out, but in the area selected for the shots there were none (makes sense, huh?).

During the three missile shots I got to experience a taste of what tactical maneuvering was as we switched lead planes, joined a different formation, etc. It was fairly benign according to Blade, but fairly intense to me. There were 3 missiles fired by the other aircraft, and I got a good look at one of them leaving the rail. The missiles we

evaluate typically have their warheads removed, so the targets can normally be flown back to base and later reused.

I kept expecting to get queasy, but never did. I wish I had a transcript of the cockpit discussion. It would have gone something like this: (right after a pretty good maneuver) Blade: "That was 6.5 G's." Me: "I felt every one of them." We coasted back to base, but Blade saved enough fuel to make the trip a little more exciting for me after we got in the vicinity of Tyndall. After an unannounced hard turn, Blade said, "That was 7.5 Gs." I sarcastically replied, laughing, "Thanks for the advance warning!" We did one low approach, giving me a great view of the building I normally work in. Blade made a very smooth landing, despite the crosswinds at the time.

I know it's very rare for a civilian to experience this, so I am truly blessed. On the morning of the flight before I left for work I called my family together to say a prayer for safety, and that I wouldn't G-LOC or even puke. Praise God, He honored all three requests.