



Adrienne Downing prepares to board "Fat Albert" during Saturday's air show at Quonset for what she described as the "ride of a lifetime." Photo by Caitlin Downing

Air Show

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free to check out the plane and ask any questions we might have.

I knew that later I would come up with 1,000 questions I should have asked, but the nerves were getting the better of me, so I decided to climb into the cockpit instead.

Because Chapman looked a little intimidating to me, I sought out the most baby-faced member of the crew, Staff Sergeant Chris Bushnell, to get a realistic view of what I was in for. He assured me that he would get me a "great seat" and that I would be fine.

As the plane's pilots, Major Brendan Burks and Captain Edward Jorge, gave the pre-flight briefing, first in pilot-speak, then in English, I looked around and noticed I was the only "civilian" on the flight. More than half of the military guys had wings on their uniforms and I wondered if they were secretly taking bets on whether I would be able to hang with them or not.

After the brief, it was time to board the plane and get our seat assignments. Bushnell told me I had been assigned the jump seat at the rear of the plane next to him. My seat was on a door that had a window with a great view, but there was no seat next to me. I was not quite sure about his seating arrangements.

As the plane started to taxi down the runway and he was still standing beside me, I yelled over the din and asked where he was going to sit. He reached behind my head, grabbed a metal handle and smiled.

We cruised along about six feet off the runway for what seemed an eternity as the crowd sped by. I had just caught sight of show center when I suddenly got better acquainted with the person next to me as the plane climbed through the air at a 45-degree angle. For comparison's sake, a civilian airliner takes off at a six to 11-degree climb.

Zero-G weightlessness

At the top of our climb, the

plane nosed up and I floated above my seat as we experienced Zero-G weightlessness. The reason for Bushnell's smile was now evident as I looked over and he was holding onto the bar and floating parallel to the ground.

I had no sooner stopped laughing from the excitement of the climb and the weightlessness when we were rolled onto our sides and I was staring straight down at the ground as Fat Albert "waved" at the crowd.

A minimum radius pass had us feeling pretty heavy as we pulled a few Gs. I saw flashes of water, crowd and ground as we swooped and climbed and flew at 360 mph a mere 60 feet off of the runway.

Our final Zero-G maneuver was not quite as graceful as the first. My head collided with Bushnell's elbow, but I had little time to laugh about it as we started diving at a 45-degree angle toward the runway. He yelled, "Make sure you look out the back at the skid marks after we land." We didn't hit the runway quite as hard as I expected after a dive like that, but the anti-skid brakes did let off some smoke as the pilot brought the 100,000-pound plane to a stop in less than 1,500 feet.

After taxiing for the crowd, the pilots parked the plane and I was sad that it was over so soon.

I felt pretty proud of myself as I bounced out of my seat while the Navy petty officer seated across from me looked a little gray. No airsickness for me.

We took pictures with the crew and I thanked them for one of the best experiences I have ever had.

As we were leaving, I asked how they teach a pilot to fly a 50-ton cargo plane like a high performance jet. They told me that all of the maneuvers the crowd sees in an air show are performed by the pilots in the fleet to prepare for hostile environments, or for taking off and landing on short, unprepared runways.

It is clear that the Marines on Fat Albert are well trained and ready for anything. I feel safe with these guys on the watch.

My only question now is: When can I go again?

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