



IT'S THE TIME OF THE SEASON

WE GO FOR A BLUE ANGELS HERITAGE FLIGHT AS THE AIRSHOW SEASONS BEGINS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY IAN COTTER

For airshows across America, the two biggest “pulls” are the USAF Thunderbirds and the USN Blue Angels. On 9 March we had the chance to witness a very interesting Blue Angels Heritage Flight that served as sort of a kick-off for 2017’s airshow season. With the end of the Second World War, America was hungry for displays of victory and patriotism. During 1946, Adm. Chester Nimitz, Chief of Naval Operations, had a vision to create a Navy flight exhibition team that would not only raise the public’s interest in Naval Aviation but also serve as a morale boost for US Navy personnel. This unit was known as the Navy Flight Exhibition Team and they performed their first flight demonstration on 15 June 1946 at their home base of NAS Jacksonville, Florida, flying the Grumman F6F-5 Hellcat. Right Wing Pilot Lt. Maurice Wickendoll was leaving through an issue of the *New Yorker Magazine* when he came across a column called “Goings On About Town.” In that column he saw the name Blue Angels. He showed this to team leader L/Commander Roy “Butch” Voris who said, “That

sounds great! The Blue Angels, Navy, Blue, and Flying!” Thus was born the Blue Angels.

As noted, the Hellcat was the first team aircraft even though jets were entering the service. The prop-driven fighters offered, in many instances, better performance than the jets plus the Hellcat was the “hero” of the recently ended war. The Blue Angels quickly became known for their tight, precision flight displays and to add a little color, they added an unusual aircraft — an SNJ-5 Texan. The advanced trainer was fitted with a smoke system, painted bright yellow with Japanese markings, named *Beetle Bomb*, and was often “shot down” in the shows by the Hellcats and this was immensely popular with the Americans that had just brought the devastating war to a victorious conclusion.

However, the Hellcat was going to be short-lived with the

Steve Barber flew the Hellcat, accompanied by Ken Gottschall in the Bearcat, and Blue Angels commander Cmdr. Frank Weisser in the Hornet.



Blue Angels and the type was traded in for the powerhouse Grumman F8F-1 Bearcat on 25 August 1946. This small fighter with the big R-2800 engine allowed for some really amazing performances. The SNJ-5 was replaced with an F8F-1 painted in similar markings. The Bearcat was the team’s standard mount until 1949 when the Blue Angels transitioned to the Grumman F9F-2 Panther, the Navy’s front-line jet fighter, and the day of the propeller-driven warriors was over.

On 9 March there was an opportunity to re-create those grand prop-driven days in formation with the Blue Angels’ latest aircraft — the mighty F/A-18 Hornet so enjoy this mix of old and new in the skies over the Salton Sea. AC

The three fighters hold a tight formation that displays the lineage of the Blue Angels.



The Hellcat and Bearcat were provided by the Southern California Wing of the Commemorative Air Force based at Camarillo, California.