Beat: Entertainment

Air Show Atlantic Warbirds Over Debert

Interview With 2023 CF-18 Demo Pilot

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USPA NEWS - Since the early 80's, the CF-18 has been a fan favorite throughout the air show circuit. It has thrilled audiences from coast to coast with heart stopping, jaw dropping, and precisely executed performances.
Decades later, the CF-18 Demo Team is still drawing thousands of enthusiastic fans each season.

On Media Day, at the 2023 Air Show Atlantic Warbirds Over Debert, I had the chance to speak with Captain Jesse Haggart-Smith(callsign Modem) member of the 433 Tactical Fighter Squadron and is the current CF-18 Demo Pilot. The interview took place at the Halifax Stanfield International Airport where the CF-18 Demo jet and team were staging in preparation for the weekend performances.

I commenced the interview by asking, if there is an interesting story behind the callsign, Modem? Captain Haggart-Smith replied," A Fighter Pilot never gives away how they got their callsign." He went on to say that a callsign can be given based on a funny story, a play on the pilot's name or a personality trait.

When I asked about the mission statement or mandate for the CF-18 Demo Team, Captain Haggart-Smith had this to say, " What we are out here to do is show off the amazing capabilities of the beautiful CF-18. We also want the audience to recognize the professionalism and dedication of the people who fly it and work on it. So, as we show-off the professionalism of the Air Force, our hope is to connect with communities and shine a light on posible careers that are available"

Each year the CF-18 DEMO has a theme which usually includes a supporting livery, but this year the jet is painted in "air superiority gray". When I asked about this years theme, he had this to say, " This year we are focusing on our operational readiness. Each of the planes came from the fleet and are going to go back into the fleet as fully combat ready aircraft which can deploy to active duty at any given moment."
Captain Haggart-Smith continued to explain that each year the Public Affairs Team and Commanders sit down and look at what element of the Air Force that they want to showcase. For example Canada 150 Anniversary, The 100th Anniversary of the Air Force, or sometimes it is just showing off the high level of professionalism and dedication of the CF-18 Demonstration Team and the entire Air Force.

In further comments, Captain Haggart-Smith explained that in order to be considered for the position of CF-18 Demo Pilot, the fighter pilot candidate be a must be a Combat Ready CF-18 Flight Lead and must have accrued a minimum of 500 hours of experience flying the CF-18. Those that meet that requirement are encouraged to apply for the position.
He went on to tell me that this years CF-18 Demo Team has 8 core members which consist of Pilot, Safety Pilot on the ground, a Public Affairs Officer, 4 Master Technicians, and a second pilot flying an additional jet. He emphasized that all members are essential for keeping the jet in the air and ensuring that the highest level safety is present during the performances.

This is the second year Captain Jesse Haggart-Smith has held the position as CF-18 Demo Pilot. He indicated that this year has been a reduced season with only 5 performances within Canada compared to last year having done 15 Canadian dates and an additional 3 performances in the United States.
Although the CF-18 will not be landing in Debert, Captain Haggard-Smith said that the audience could expect to see a full aerobatical demonstration which will show the full range of performance on the CF-18 along with all the professionalism and dedication of all the team members.

Throughout our conversation, Captain Jesse Haggart-Smith went on to tell me that he was
born in Maple Ridge, B.C., and he was accepted into the Royal Canadian Air Force in 2011, where he would pursue his childhood dream of becoming a fighter pilot. In 2016, after years of hard work and discipline he received his Royal Canadian Air Force pilot's wings. Since then, he has logged close to 1,000 hours in various military aircraft, including over 600 hours in the CF-18. He was

involved in various NORAD missions before being deployed to Romania to participate in Operation Reassurance, Canada's contribution to NATO’s enhanced air policing mission.

As I concluded the interview, I asked Captain Haggart-Smith what gives him the most satisfaction in showcasing the CF-18 and essentially the entire Royal Canadian Air Force? He said, " I am an incredibly lucky man. Every time I fly this jet, I feel like I stole it. I am doing what I absolutely love to do! Connecting with fans of all ages that are passionate about aviation and come out to experience the excitement of the CF-18 aerobatic demonstration. Also being able to inspire future generations of aviators by showing them that with hard work dreams of flying can become a reality. This is what I find most satisfying and rewarding. It has been a great honour and privilege to serve as the CF-18 Demo Pilot over the last two seasons and I have loved every minute of it."

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