

They're here: Air Force's precision flying team arrives with a roar

By [Kirsten Ballard](#)

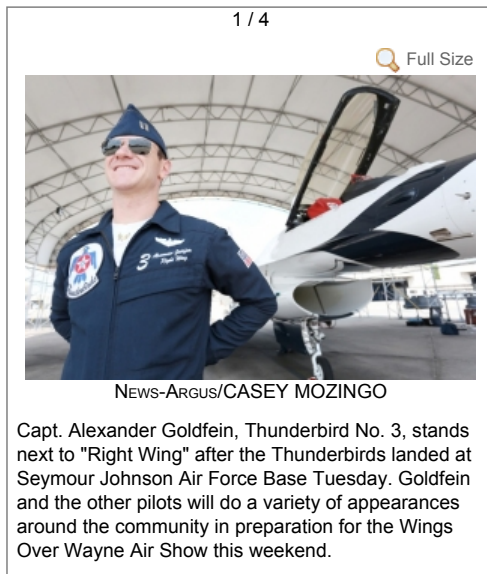
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Mac Faircloth pulled his car over in the Wilber's Barbecue parking lot. "I thought it was them," he said, craning his neck skyward.

The insignia on the bottom of the jet was unmistakable.

The Thunderbirds had arrived.

More than 100,000 people are expected to converge on Seymour Johnson Air Force Base this weekend for the Wings Over Wayne Air Show -- a two-day event the Thunderbirds are set to headline.



So the Air Force's elite demonstration team used Tuesday to scout the site.

Capt. Alex Goldfein, or "Thunderbird No. 3," was among the members of the team who looked out of an F-16 cockpit to survey the land.

But the most memorable sight he took in Tuesday was the F-15E Strike Eagles parked on the Seymour Johnson flight line.

It took him back to his childhood -- to growing up in a military family.

"I'm from everywhere with an F-15," Goldfein said. "I'm a huge believer in the Air Force and its mission."

He grew up wanting to fly the F-15 -- idolizing the members of his family who were fighter pilots.

"I was very fortunate to fly one," he said, adding that he spent several years in F-15C cockpits.

But he never imagined that one day, he would command an F-16C Fighting Falcon in the Thunderbirds' iconic diamond formation.

Wings Over Wayne will mark Goldfein's eighth show in the 2015 air show season -- a grueling run that began in mid-February and will not end until October.

By the time the Thunderbirds hang it up for the year, Goldfein will have participated in 70 air shows.

But he is not the only one.

The Thunderbirds' performance features six pilots. The two solo pilots, numbered five and six, do rolls, dips and tricks while the four diamond pilots fly in formation.

In all, crowds typically see 40 maneuvers during a show.

"We train hard for it," Goldfein said.

And the captain admits that despite the intense training that unfolds long before he and his comrades take to skies over air shows, he still gets a little nervous before each flight.

"I don't want to disappoint the crowds," he said. "I love seeing the people out there."

So he sits down and breathes with his teammates.

And they have a systematic ritual -- going through the same checks and preparation steps each time.

Goldfein says it is very calming to have the routine in place.

But flying is only part of what the Thunderbirds bring to an air show.

The team also gets out into the local community.

Goldfein said he and his teammates will visit local high schools and meet with Make-A-Wish recipients today.

And if Wayne County and Seymour Johnson want a preview of what is to come this weekend, they need only look skyward, as Faircloth did, this afternoon, as the team is set to practice its routine.

But the real fun, for Goldfein, will happen above the 100,000-plus expected on Seymour Johnson Saturday and Sunday.

"I think it's great when they open the gates and bring everyone in," he said. "Military fields are always great."

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