



FLYING WITH THE BREITLING JET TEAM

# An Aerobatic Ballet at Over 400 Miles Per Hour

SPORTS & OUTDOORS : SPORTS

By JAN TEGLER

on 6.26.15

Photo by BREITLING/KATSUHIKO TOKUNAGA

Accelerating through 120 knots (138 mph), the nose of the **L-39C Albatros** rotates smartly on takeoff. Two seconds later, we're airborne with landing gear and flaps coming up, climbing for a target just a couple hundred yards ahead and less than 50 feet above.

At 200 knots (230 mph), in a shallow climb, the letters B-R-E-I-T-L-I-N-G come into brilliant focus just above the canopy, drawing ever closer. I smile from ear to ear as pilot

Georges-Eric Castaing maneuvers us smoothly into position. Our jet (number 5) occupies the second “slot” position of the seven-jet formation.

Picture an arrowhead with **Breitling** jet number 1 at the tip of the arrow. Jets 4 and 2 flank jet 1, stepped down to the left and right. Jets 7 and 6 occupy the same positions on jets 4 and 2, forming the wedge of the arrowhead. Jets 3 and 5 are wingtip to wingtip, their noses “slotted” into place below the tails of 4 and 2, and under the right and left wings of 7 and 6 at the rear of the formation.

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## More Travel



45 degrees to our right, just a few feet above (nearly close enough to touch) is Paco Wallaert flying number 6. Directly above and just ahead, Bernard Charbonnel is in number 2. On our left wing is Christophe Deketelaere in number 3. Leader Jacques Bothelin in number 1 is further above and ahead but still unbelievably close, flanked by Francios Ponsot in number 4 and Patrick Marchand in number 7.

At this point, there’s nothing else to do but cue the mic and say to Castaing (call sign “Georgio”): “This is fucking fantastic!”

We’re in the air with the **Breitling Jet Team** (BJT) 6,000 feet over the intensely green central Florida highlands, heading southeast to a maneuvering area.

24 hours earlier we had arrived at Lakeland-Linder Regional Airport, a 40-minute drive east of Tampa, to meet up with the team on the day of their first-ever performance in the US at **SUN ’n FUN**. A week-long air show, the SUN ’n FUN International Fly-In and Expo is one of the largest aviation events in the nation and has served as a kickoff for the domestic air show season since 1974.

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## With roots extending back to 2001, the BJT is the largest professional civilian jet aerobatic display team in the world.

This huge gathering of civilian, ex-military and contemporary military aircraft was the stage for the long-awaited public debut of the BJT in the US and the first stop on their 2015 American tour.

With roots extending back to 2001, the BJT is the largest professional civilian jet aerobatic display team in the world.

Think of them as a civilian counterpart to the **US Navy’s Blue Angels** or the **US Air Force’s Thunderbirds**. Breitling has supported the Dijon, France-based unit since 2003, employing the team as the most visible emblem of the brand’s commitment to aviation. The BJT performs throughout Europe annually and has toured Asia and Russia. But the odyssey this team endured to bring about its first appearance in the US is one for the books.

Bringing a French aerobatic team flying seven jets, all registered in France, to the US to

perform before American audiences isn't a simple matter, explains Jim DiMatteo, Breitling's USA Aviation Consultant. DiMatteo, a retired US Navy fighter pilot and ex-commander of Top Gun adversary squadrons, serves as the team's coordinator.

"One of the reasons Breitling wanted an American aviation expert was to lay the groundwork for the team's appearance here with the FAA," DiMatteo notes. "It's a big issue. How do you get the FAA to approve foreign pilots and the foreign airplanes? With the airplanes it's a process of mechanical and systems checks, and the FAA can proceed with that very logically. The groundbreaking part of what we've done — which Breitling is getting a lot of credit for — is developing a reciprocity agreement between the FAA and other countries, specifically Europe and the UK."

With the full support of Breitling, DiMatteo, Bothelin and the team spent more than a year pioneering the reciprocity agreement between the FAA and other countries to allow the BJT and other foreign pilots flying foreign-registered aircraft to perform in American airspace. This long-desired framework is a major step forward for sport aviation and the international airshow industry.

"Now we go for a left bank, and pull three Gs!" Georgio says as the formation rotates as one into our first maneuver, a wonderfully executed barrel roll. Moderate G-forces drive my tail end firmly into the ejection seat as the horizon tilts to the right then spins inverted, continuing through 360 degrees as the L-39s all around us maintain position.

Capable of 405 knots (466 mph) in level flight and stressed for +8/-4 Gs, the Albatros is a product of the Cold War, a jet trainer developed in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s by Czech aerospace firm Aero Vodochody. Generations of Russian and Soviet-Bloc pilots underwent advanced training in the L-39C before graduating to fighters including the MiG-29, SU-27 and other tactical jets.

More than 2,200 L-39s were produced in total. Nearly 40 countries have operated the airplane and it continues to serve in many air forces today. That's a fact worth remembering as six (actually, seven, including the number 8 photo-ship) Albatroses dance around us, deftly maintaining position with small throttle and stick inputs by the very experienced pilots doing the flying.

My driver, Georgio, has nearly 5,000 flight hours in French fast-jet trainers and fighters including the Fouga Magister, Alpha Jet, Mirage F1 and Mirage 2000, over a 23-year career in the *Armée de l'Air* (French Air Force). When retirement loomed, Georgio, like his contemporaries, prepared for a career flying [airliners](#) or corporate jets.

He never expected to continue doing the kind of demanding aerobatic flying he loves. "I didn't imagine it!" he tells me. But Georgio had an ace in the hole. Between 2008 and 2010, he

## WATCH THE SHOW



July 26: Milwaukee, WI  
August 2: Seattle, WA  
August 9: Abbotsford, BC  
August 16: Chicago, IL  
September 7: Toronto, ON  
September 13: Fort Worth, TX  
September 20: Reno, NV  
September 27: Ventura, CA  
October 4: San Diego, CA  
October 18: Houston, TX



flew with the French Air Force's famed jet display team, the Patrouille de France, the French counterpart to our USN Blue Angels or USAF Thunderbirds.

"I knew them [the BJT] of course, because we met many times during air shows when I was with the Patrouille de France, but I didn't know there could be a possibility."

With the BJT since 2014, Castaing and the unit's other relative newcomer Paco Walleart (also a Patrouille de France veteran) exemplify the deep military flying background of the team's pilots.

"And now we go down to get some speed!" Georgio intones over the mic. Bothelin is leading the "eight-pack" downhill toward 400 knots (460 mph) in preparation for a big, beautiful formation loop. Bottoming out, the stick comes back in my lap and the throttle advances as the group pulls for vertical. On come the G-forces (my brain/G-sensor tells me it's close to a four-G pull-up) and there's a bit of buffet on the way up.

I'm grinning stupidly again as we go over the top, gazing at Breitling-emblazoned metal in every direction. It's glorious and I have one second to consider the interesting contrast the BJT represents. I've been fortunate over my career to do some very fun, very dynamic flying in military and civilian aircraft. But this time, I'm not experiencing it with a military display team.

The BJT is a civilian jet aerobatic team. It operates under a corporate agency, not a military structure. That a Swiss watch brand is responsible for this magnificence is a mind-blowing juxtaposition. But it's in keeping with Breitling's dedication to aviation. From its support of legendary aviation events like the Reno National Championship Air Races and pilots like current Red Bull Air Race champion [Nigel Lamb](#) to its history as a maker of onboard chronographs for aircraft and iconic [pilot's watches](#) (Navitimer, Chronomat, Aerospace, Emergency), no watchmaking brand has closer ties to the skies than Breitling.

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**My driver has nearly 5,000 flight hours in French fast-jet trainers and fighters including the Fouga Magister, Alpha Jet, Mirage F1 and Mirage 2000 over a 23-year career in the French Air Force.**

Back to "Speedy", now 10 degrees above to our left, leading us into another maneuver. Bothelin also encapsulates the BJT dichotomy. With more than 11,000 flying hours and thousands of aerobatic performances to his credit over a four-decade career in aviation, Speedy has always been a civilian pilot, never having served in the military.

He's the perfect leader for a civilian jet team with military precision.

"Gaston, pop!" Georgio calls. With that verbal command Gaston (Marchand) pulls number 7's nose up, banks hard to the right and flashes past our canopy at speed, "breaking" for

landing. We're already back at the field and, frankly, the flight is over way too soon for me. I want more. But I'm rewarded with the unforgettable memory of roaring down runway 9/27 in formation, past the crowd line and into the "break", a sharp righthand turn

that will set up each jet downwind in preparation for landing.

It's one of military aviation's most picturesque traditions, and as number 5, in the second slot position, it's Georgio's duty to make the call for each pilot to break.

Then, it's a gorgeous cascade of jets rolling over us one after another as Georgio calls, "Ponpon, pop! Speedy, pop! Charbo, pop!"

We follow the others around to the right to the base leg, turn final and land in trail. 17 stops remain on the Breitling Jet Team's historic American Tour. If you're near one of them, get yourself to the flight line. It's a rare experience that you won't want to miss.

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I pull over to marvel at swales of flowering ocotillo and cholla ablaze in the twilight. At this moment, it feels patently nuts, downright criminal, to live east of California.



TESTING THE BAD BOY 1

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## New Balance Unveils New Line of Soccer Cleats

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BAHAMAS BEYOND COCKTAILS AND REGGAE

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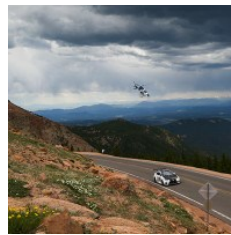
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The famed mountain course of Pikes Peak highway, in Colorado, pits dramatic weather, a dangerous landscape and motoring unpredictability against the racers' will to win.



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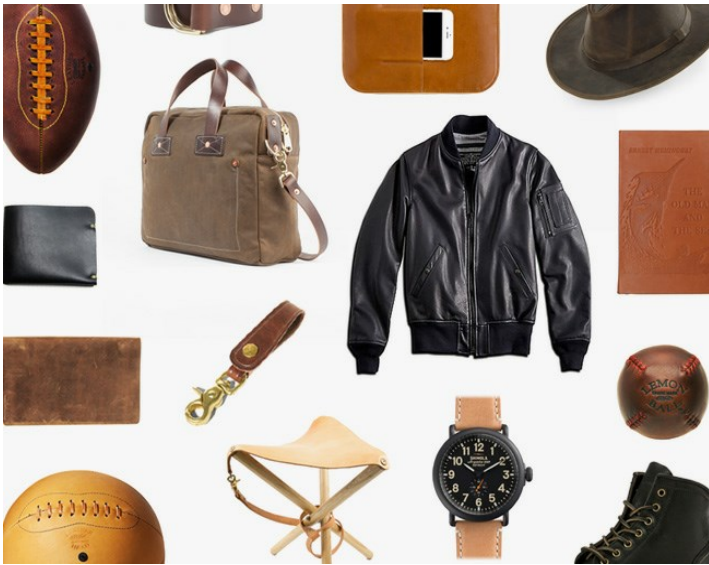


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12,000 MILES TO NOWHERE

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## 12 Raglan Tees for Comfortable Summer Wear

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