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Description

NBC's Katie Couric visits the Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina to take a look at the F-16 fighter jet and the pilots that fly them. Considered to be one of the best fighter jets in the military, the F-16 is one of the primary weapons being used against Iraq in the Gulf War. Couric finishes her report with pulling five Gs in the famed fighter.

Keywords

DEBORAH NORVILLE, co-host:
As tanks and troops continue to pour into Saudi Arabia, they're being guarded by an array of American air power, the cornerstone of Operation Desert Shield. The key to Operation Desert Shield is the F-16 fighter, and we sent Today correspondent Katie Couric down to the 363rd Tactical Fighter Wing in Sumter, South Carolina, home of the F-16. She says she got quite a ride.
KATHERINE COURIC, reporting:
The F-16 Fighting Falcon, a gleaming, nimble fighter jet that's part of the U.S. arsenal in the Middle East. Two squadrons, 48 aircraft, left Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, South Carolina, to make the 17-hour flight to the Arabian desert, and are now in place along with F-15s, Stealth fighter jets, A-10 anti-tank aircraft, and hundreds of combat-ready planes stationed on aircraft carriers in the region. Add up all these letters and numbers and you get U.S. air power that military planners say has no equal, air superiority that's crucial to the Mideast equation.
Colonel BOB GATLIFF (United States Air Force): If you don't have control of the sky then you run the risk of getting your ground troops chewed up by enemy air, and so it's important for us to go ahead and take that threat away.
COURIC: Once that threat is taken away, the F-16 can fly deep into enemy territory to attack key targets, and shift gears for air-to-air combat by putting its heat-seeking Sidewinder missiles and 20-millimeter cannons into action.

Captain JEFF CONNORS (F-16 Pilot): The F-16 in a dogfight capability is as good or better than any airplane in the world.

Captain BOB BRODERICK (F-16 Pilot): There's not a plane out there that can out fly it; it's the best one to fly around, and its maneuverability and turn rates and thrust-to-weight ratios really make it a excellent plane to fly. And it's--it's the one I like to fly, and the only one I like to be in out there.

COURIC: To illustrate what the F-16 can do, the Air Force offered to take us for a ride. That meant a flight suit, and more importantly a G-suit, which helps keep a normal blood flow through the body so you don't lose consciousness as the force of gravity or number of G's increase. Also required, a helmet and oxygen mask for high altitudes.

Unidentified Man #1: You are ready.

COURIC: Part of our pre-flight training included experiencing the F-16 in a state-of-the-art simulator where we got the opportunity to do a 360-degree rollover.

Unidentified Man #2: Good job. Roll to the left a little bit more.

COURIC: And shoot down a Russian MiG, the kind the Iraqis fly.

Did I get it?

Unidentified Man #2: Yeah. See the smoke coming out of it?

COURIC: Oh, yeah. Bye, MiG.

Unidentified Man #2: That's a good one.

COURIC: Reviewing emergency procedures is a must, like learning how to use the ejection seat, which didn't exactly feel like the real thing.

Unidentified Man #3: Wasn't exciting enough for you?

COURIC: It--it--is that it?

Unidentified Man #4: Is that all there is?

CONNORS: OK.

COURIC: OK.

CONNORS: The red switches we talked about earlier, this one here...

COURIC: Yeah.

CONNORS: ...this one here and this one here.

COURIC: Twenty-eight-year-old Jeff Connors, an Air Force captain, was our pilot. Flying the F-16 requires quick reflexes, a cool head, and nerves of steel. A little cockiness doesn't hurt. After reviewing safety procedures one final time, we were prepared for takeoff.

Unidentified Man #5: We put gas in it.

COURIC: Armed with another piece of equipment, the all-important airsickness bag used by many first-time flyers including me, twice. The takeoff was mild until we shot up like a rocket, popping through the cloud cover.

CONNORS: We'll just go ahead and pull up. There's a little bit of G there.
COURIC: Whoa! That was intense. That was great.
Then came the time to pull G's, 5.2 to be exact, which feels like the weight of a hundred people punching
you in your stomach.
CONNORS: OK. Go ahead and strain a little bit now.
COURIC: OK.
CONNORS: And flex on to a left-hand G-turn. OK. There's-- there's two G's, and we're building up to
three G's. Do you feel the difference?
COURIC: Yes.
CONNORS: OK. OK. Now we're getting harder. There's four G's, and we'll build up to five G's. There's
five G's. Strange sensation, isn't it?
COURIC: Yeah.
CONNORS: OK. Now we'll just release. Isn't that...
COURIC: Whoa!
CONNORS: ...a strange sensation?
COURIC: Very strange. I didn't like that so much.
CONNORS: Yes, I don't like that so much either.
COURIC: At 18,000 feet we flew at supersonic speed.
CONNORS: We're going .98, OK? There goes supersonic right now. We're going 670 knotts ground
speed. OK, you want to do an aileron roll?
COURIC: Whatever you think.
CONNORS: OK. This is an aileron roll. It's real easy. Pretty easy, huh?
COURIC: Whoa!
CONNORS: Anything else?
COURIC: That was fun.
We finished off our flight with a bombing exercise at a nearby range. An hour and seven minutes later we
were back on the ground.
CONNORS: Congratulations.
COURIC: Thank you. Good job. I lived to tell about it.
As impressive as the F-16s and the pilots who fly them are, neither could perform their missions without
the support personnel who keep the planes in fighting shape. They continue to do that every day at Shaw,
but many here wish they were there.
BRODERICK: Feel a little bit jealous about the guys that went over, and it's--I know they're--they're
doing the real tough job right now, but it's--it's not necessarily easy sitting back here either waiting for our
opportunity to get over there and help them out.