It’s in the thunder of the engines, the geometric streak of white left in the sky, or the perfect timing it shares with The Star-Spangled Banner. Wherever the enchantment lies, most say there is something about watching a military formation of jets fly atop Kyle Field for home football games. If the planes’ pass gives you chills from the stands, imagine what the Aggie pilots feel.
On the final day of Scott Elrod’s freshman year at Texas A&M, the Class of 1997 cadet saw something that would eventually take hold of his life. While on Kyle Field for his Corps of Cadets Final Review, Elrod watched the sky split around the nose of a swept-wing, twin-engine fighter jet.

He felt the sound rumble in the pit of his stomach and the pressure of altitude form in his veins.

His feet were on the ground, but he could feel the promise that someday they wouldn’t always be.

In the Corps, cadets like to refer to cardinal direction. North, south, east and west—but the compass offers no way to say “up.” Elrod didn’t need the command. The sheer sound of the jet’s engine was enough of an indicator to tilt his head.

A group of four F-14 Tomcats, a type of plane known for their use as fighters for the U.S. Navy, flew in precision formation above the cadets. Elrod’s mouth fell open.

He remembers the quick decision.

“That is what I want to do,” Elrod voiced on the spot.

He learned a lot during his first year in the Corps of Cadets Company C-2—drills, discipline and a love for brightly shined military dress shoes. But at that moment, Elrod said, he discovered a career.

“So, what did I go and do?” he said.

“I’ve been a Tomcat fighter pilot for over 10 years.”

And what is he waiting to do now? Unsurprisingly, the naval pilot and lieutenant commander said of himself, “The first thing I wanted to do is go back to Texas A&M and do a flyby.”

He’s already done one. He flew an F/A-18 over the maroon crowd before last year’s Baylor game.

With one flyover down and the hunger for more still unappeased, there has to be something in the tradition besides just the discipline of flying.

Maybe it’s the whole experience of flyovers that make them life-changing. It could be the smell of the grass, the heat from the sun or the sound of multiple thousands singing The Star-Spangled Banner, all focused on a giant American flag rolling in the breeze.

As the lyrics proclaim the final verse of, “oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave, o’er the land of the free”—a roar of speed starts growing from the south end of Kyle Field.

With the words “the home of the brave,” the plane formation sweeps over the south goalpost and is gone, leaving in its wake a sky-watching fan base so mesmerized that they miss the first beat of Texas, Our Texas.

Even after the planes are gone, there’s a bit of magic still in the air, said Mike Caruso. His role on the field is that of associate athletic director in charge of all home game athletics. Even after seven home football games last year, he doesn’t grow tired of the grand entry and departure of America’s finest.

The flyover has almost become part of Aggie game day tradition, Caruso said. It’s expected and photographed. People talk about it. It’s just another thing that makes Texas A&M a “destination location for football,” he said.

“We’re the envy of the Big 12 in that we actually have the luxury of a waiting list of pilots who want to fly,” he said.

Not all schools have flyovers at every home football game, Caruso said. That the University has a waiting list makes the event all the more elite. The record of procedures that must be completed before the planes can fly without an actual military mission is a mile long, he said, and not all schools can get a handle on it.

“I think the reason we’re so popular is we do one of the best jobs in the country at managing the whole activity,” Caruso said.

He points to Texas A&M’s flyover coordinator, Lt. Jason Crowley, for explanation.

Crowley is a Navy pilot himself, on a 33-month tour at Texas A&M to teach and work with aviation. He knows the procedure well. Before a flyover can happen, the pilot needs military approval, permission from the Federal Aviation Administration and detailed communication with the local airport, plus a few more ins and outs with the military. It all involves paperwork. But once it’s stacked, signed, stamped and sealed, it’s time for game day, Crowley said.

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TOP: Two Apaches lead two Blackhawks over the Louisiana-Monroe game in September 2007.

LEFT AND ABOVE: Sikorsky MH-53 Sea Dragons, flown by the Navy’s Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 15 out of Corpus Christi, during military appreciation activities at the 2007 Kansas game.
It’s Crowley who is holding the two-way radio that communicates with the pilots up in the air. “Every part of the game is scheduled,” Crowley said. “If the national anthem starts at a certain time, we know that 65 seconds later, it will be done.”

That means 60 seconds after the start of the song, pilots are to be over the south end zone of Kyle Field, Crowley said. From his standpoint, after the planes make their pass, it’s mission accomplished. “The pilots love it,” he said. “To fly over Kyle Field on a football game day? That needs no explanation.”

An explanation may not be needed, but Elrod doesn’t mind sharing his account. His flyover was scheduled for a couple of weeks before leaving for a seven-month deployment on an aircraft carrier as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. “I really wanted to do a flyover before I left,” he said.

Elrod had already had one canceled flyover. He was set to fly right before Sept. 11, 2001, but the national emergency drastically increased security concerns. He was ordered to remain on the ground and was unable to make the trip. Not this time, he said. This time he flew right into College Station in an F/A-18. And on Saturday, he was in a four-man formation, preparing to make his round.

Before go-time, planes in the flyover take off from Easterwood Airport to a holding location over the Texas World Speedway, just south of the stadium. From there, he said, they just follow the schedule. The military planes use technology that lets pilots simply plug in the latitude and longitude of a target location, and the plane will travel there at just the right speed.

Latitude for Kyle Field: 30 degrees, 36 minutes, 34.1 seconds north.
Longitude for Kyle Field: 96 degrees, 20 minutes, 24 seconds west

“I was flying wingman, so I was focused on flying formation off our lead,” Elrod said. “We’re only flying a couple feet from one another. My job is not to hit him and fly good formation, and his job is to get us good position and lead the flight around.”

When performing a flyover, pilots don’t always get to take in a bird’s eye view of the stadium. “I could tell we were over Kyle Field, but had to stay focused,” Elrod said. Just the knowledge of being above Kyle Field was enough to make his memory in the skies.

Anyway, according to the pilots, the best view is from the middle of the field, Caruso said.

After the pilots perform the flyover, they land their planes at a secured Easterwood Airport. “We go get them and bring them back over to the game,” Caruso said. “They are literally like rock stars.”

Pilots normally get back to Kyle Field during the third quarter and are introduced during the second timeout.
by name, home base, section of service and, when the pilot is a former student, Class year. The camera crews in charge of the big screen zoom in on the pilots for broadcast on the 12th Man TV, and the stands go crazy.

“It was good to see everybody and hear people so excited that we did a flyby. That’s the real satisfaction, that they’re happy that we were there,” Elrod said. “A flyover sparked my interest for the Navy. Hopefully it will mean something to somebody like it did for me.”

Capt. Courtney “Blade” Sartain ’97 with the U.S. Air Force performed his first flyover with his brother, Christian ’90.

“That was one of the neatest flights,” Sartain said. “To be in formation over the school, with your brother, it’s incredible.”

At its basic level, flyovers are just about timing, he said.

Caruso knows about timing.

“You see that atomic clock on my whiteboard?” Caruso asked in his Rudder-located office. He pointed to a digital clock the size of a phonebook. “I usually just take that down to the field.”

Timing is everything. Pilots set their watches to the atomic clock. The TV trucks use that reading to set the official time. The scoreboard gets its numbers from the same piece.

Everything goes by the clock.

“Through pregame and kickoff, through when the national anthem is played, everything is scheduled,” he said.

So, although pilots live by a similar code of preciseness and staying on target, “It’s still a little stressful,” Sartain said. “You don’t want to be too late or too early.”

There is often nothing to worry about, Caruso said. “These are real active-duty guys that come to do this,” he said.

Kyle Field flybys have included F-18 Hornets, F-16s, C-130 Hercules, SH-60 helicopters, MH-53s, AH-64 Apaches, and T-45s, Crowley said.

It can be really loud, “but we’ve never shattered any glass,” Caruso said.

The pilots appreciate the crowd’s response.

“It is really overwhelming the reception we get at Kyle Field, to hear the fans of A&M show great support for what we do and what we continue to do,” Sartain said.

After he flew in formation over the Montana State game last year, Sartain said, he and the other pilots received a standing ovation as they walked up to their seats.

“Capt. Courtney “Blade” Sartain ’97”

“It’s very emotional. It’s unbelievable,” he said.

With 80,000, sometimes more, fans in Kyle Field, Sartain said you can only pick out a few people in the crowd on whom you can focus. “It’s all one big noise,” he said, a mixture of whoops, hollers and vociferous applause.

The athletic department offers free tickets to the pilots and their families, so when the crowd stood in appreciation, Sartain could see his family.

“We still talk about it,” he said.

Like most of Texas A&M’s traditions, the introduction of flyovers has evolved, Caruso said, though the crowd’s reaction has stayed the same.

“You have to think about the genesis of flyovers,” he said. When Caruso first moved to the athletic department 20 years ago, flyovers were nonexistent or reserved for special occasions, like military appreciation day or Veterans Day.

A pairing with aviators out of the ROTC department changed all that, he said.

“When we decided that we would make a commitment to the pilots to get them to come back and get them recognized as they should be, then all the sudden it took off,” he said. “It took on a life of its own.”

That was about five years ago. Since then, there have been flyovers for every home game.

“I venture to say that most of the folks that come here for a Texas A&M University football game leave knowing that they came to an event,” he said.

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The Association of Former Students will proudly support the flyovers at Kyle Field in 2008 by arranging and providing assistance with transportation and lodging for military personnel participating in each flyover. Thank you for making this possible through your annual support.

- Aug. 30 vs. Arkansas State, Alabama Air National Guard, 187th Fighter Wing, out of Montgomery, Ala.
- Sept. 27 vs. Army, Army 7/6 Cavalry regiment out of Conroe.
- Oct. 11 vs. Kansas State, 182nd Fighter Squadron, Texas Air National Guard, out of San Antonio.
- Oct. 18 vs. Texas Tech, Marine VMFA(AW)-533, out of Beaufort, S.C.
- Nov. 1 vs. Colorado, to be determined.
- Nov. 8 vs. Oklahoma, Navy VFA-32 out of Oceana, Va.