



Several of the Snowbirds bank over Harrisburg and the Susquehanna River.

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## Canada's Snowbirds a precision flock

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MIDDLETOWN — A trip with Gino Tessier isn't for the fainthearted. That's because Tessier is a Snowbird and he pilots a machine that rolls, dives and soars just feet from eight other powerful jets.

Tessier, with the quick smile and bright eyes of a man who loves his work, wears the bars of a captain in Canada's crack aerobatic squadron that is in Harrisburg for the International Air Show this weekend.

For him and the other pilots in the squadron, climbing aboard a sleek, red-and-white CT-114 Tutor jet is fairly routine.

However, the cockpit can be a bit unsettling for a reporter who has only a few commercial flights under his belt.

The apprehension starts to rise as the ground crew straps you into a parachute and then hoists a helmet and oxygen mask on your head. It isn't lessened when even more straps attach you snugly to a seat resting on an explosive charge that will blow you out of the cockpit if something goes wrong with the jet.

Precision-flight teams generally wait until they're airborne to start their moves. But the Snowbirds' trademark is taking off as a group in formation — nine planes lifting up from the ground and never more than a few feet from each other.

The Canadian-built jets fly at speeds of up to about 475 mph, which Tessier explains is actually a relatively slow speed designed for better handling. That's critical when the nine jets are jammed so close to one another.

The Tutor is an extremely agile craft and it can climb and dive rapidly, increasing the force of gravity so that there is pressure equal to four to six times your bodyweight pressing you into your seat.

During their 30-minute show, the Snowbirds perform 23 different maneuvers with less than 10 seconds between moves. The pilots say their performance is more of an aerial ballet than an aggressive show.

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