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Taking Pictures at the Airshow

Rick and Dody Sheremeta photograph the US Air Force's Thunderbird fleet with the Tamron SP 24-70mm VC and SP 70-300mm VC lenses.

Article by Jenn Gidman

Images by Rick and Dody Sheremeta

The US Air Force's Thunderbird fleet of F-16s landed in Kalispell, Montana, during the last weekend of August, and Rick and Dody Sheremeta were there to capture the high-flying loops, breaks, and impressively choreographed formations. The show, held at Glacier Park International Airport, gave the Sheremetas the chance to showcase the power and grace of the military aircraft with the help of their own powerful photographic tools: the Tamron SP 24-70mm VC (../../../lenses/prod/2470_vcusd_a007.php) and SP 70-300mm VC USD (../../../lenses/prod/70300_vcusd_a005.php) lenses.

Most of the images Rick and Dody captured at the event were with the Tamron SP 70-300mm VC USD lens. "The 70-300 is really easy to handle-anything bigger or heavier and you'd really need to put it on a tripod," Rick says. "The difficulty, however, with using a tripod at an airshow is that you can hold it steady while the planes are several miles away and track them as they're coming toward you, but when they close within an angle of about 45 degrees perpendicular to their paths and you're panning through the next 90 degrees, it's very difficult to get the picture when you've got the camera on a tripod. You're much better off handholding your camera, especially with something as light as the 70-300."

The Friday before the show started featured various preshow events-including a preflight party and "rev your engine" display of a Chevy pickup that's been clocked going 400 mph, thanks to the jet engine under its hood-but Rick and Dody wanted to focus on the Thunderbirds. "We were right up against the airport fence, as close to the runway as you could possibly get," Rick says. " It was a beautiful, clear day, with blue Montana skies. We wanted to get ground shots of the planes, the pilots, and the aircraft taking off and landing."

Capturing the planes on the ground before they ascended into the sky was a perfect time to tap into the Tamron SP 24-70mm VC. "We weren't on the tarmac right next to the planes-we were several hundred feet away," Rick says. "I was able to get a row of planes all nice and neat on the tarmac, with some of the mountain background and sky in the scene, from where we were positioned with the 24-70. I took this picture in Aperture Priority at 1/250th of a second at F/16, ISO 200."

Rick and Dody also wanted to showcase the experts behind the controls of the F-16s, all highly skilled pilots with years of Air Force training. "It's amazing how they have the show choreographed to the nth degree-it's like a dance routine," Rick says. "During Friday's photo shoot, Dody took this picture of a pilot in his plane, with a crewmember standing at attention in front of it. She took it in Aperture Priority at 1/1000th of a second at F/16, with no cropping."

Watching the Thunderbirds take off and land was another part of Friday's roster. "They would come in very slow and touch down very gently-the pilots can almost make these things just stand up in the air," Rick explains. "Dody wanted to get some of the mountains and the Whitefish Mountain ski area in the background for an image she took of one plane landing. She took the picture at F/5.6 at 1/4000th of a second. Even though the lens was seeing the plane as the main subject in the foreground, the relative

distance between the plane and the mountains in the background was compressed enough to make both very sharp. This image is slightly cropped from the bottom up to get rid of a distracting sign that was in front of the plane."

After capturing their close-ups and wide-angle shots, Rick and Dody headed back to the airfield on Sunday to shoot from a different vantage point. "We went out into a farmer's field beyond the end of the runway," Rick says. "Our perspective was from much further away, but what the 300mm end of the 70-300 allowed us to do is that, when the planes went by, we could see where they were going before they turned back for their next maneuver. We were able to get ready for them to come back into the frame and catch them at just the right moment by shooting in continuous burst mode while we were tracking them."

To take pictures of planes zipping along at hundreds of miles per hour, Rick and Dody set their focusing to AI Servo and shot in continuous-burst mode in Shutter Priority. "An absolute minimum shutter speed at this type of event is around 1/1,000 of a second or faster," he says. "I took some pictures at 1/640th of a second and they were marginal, and the ones at 1/500th, regardless of what I did, came out blurry. The aperture wasn't really a concern because the planes were close, for the most part, and all you had in the background was sky or a dark mountain; if they were far enough away, shooting at F/5.6 or F/6.3 ensured a fairly sharp background."

Using "Evaluative" metering mode, Rick and Dody took some test exposures before they started shooting each day and verified the test shots on their histograms. "Essentially, the sky is going to govern the exposure," Rick says. "On Friday we set the exposure value to 0 EV, which worked perfectly fine and gave us that nice, rich sky color you see in the images. On Sunday, however, it was overcast, with a lot of gray sky; to compensate, I set the exposure to +1. If the planes were a little too dark because they were passing overhead, that was a quick tonal-adjustment fix in Lightroom."

One of the most popular airshow maneuvers is the multi-plane formation. "You'll see four planes flying together, as well as a couple of solo planes crossing and doing maneuvers, and then they'll all meet up to form a six-plane diamond formation," Rick says. "For this image I took of a four-plane formation, I followed them around the valley as they made their turn and started reapproaching the airport. As soon as I could, I locked in my focus and panned with the planes, and at the appropriate time started shooting frames in Shutter Priority at about eight frames per second, at 1/2000th of a second."

Proper foot positioning is critical in capturing a formation image. "I've found the best way to take this kind of picture is to put one foot in front of the other or side by side, perpendicular to where you anticipate the planes' path is going to be," Rick says. "Then swivel at the waist as they're coming toward you, even as they get right in front of you, and just keep turning-I developed this technique during many

years of photographing birds in flight in Florida. If you don't do that and have both feet facing in the direction from where the planes coming, you can only turn so far at the waist and then have to move your feet, stepping back or forward in order to keep panning. This will definitely affect your ability to track the planes and will throw your focus off."

Although the Thunderbird pilots don't activate them during every single maneuver, smoke trails add drama and aesthetic appeal to airshow imagery. "The pilots control the smoke, which isn't actually the engine exhaust, by turning it on and off with a nozzle," Rick explains. For these type of pictures, I just follow the planes as best I can and shoot a series of bursts, then selectively crop them to get the best images."

To see more of Rick and Dody Sheremeta's work, go to www.alpenglowproductions.com (http://www.alpenglowproductions.com) .