

A PPL flies with the Red Arrows

*How does a PPL get to practice aerobatics with the Red Arrows? AOPA member **David Tang** reports on the flight of a lifetime*



My first-ever loop was at the controls of a Red Arrows Hawk, and it was pretty good, if I say so myself. I might have been a little timid about pulling up to the vertical, I might have held the climb a little long, and I might have come off the bottom about 2,000 feet lower than I went in, but otherwise I think it must have looked very professional.

My mentor, Red 9, Squadron Leader Martin Higgins, was certainly very complimentary, and we went on to do a couple of barrel rolls which were, to my mind, nearly exemplary. But between you and me, I suspect that an observer on the ground might have spotted that the plane was not being flown by a real

Red Arrow. Almost any pilot could fly a Hawk – but not one in ten thousand could fly a Hawk the way the Red Arrows fly them.

But how does a humble PPL manage to wangle his way into the hallowed cockpit of a Red Arrows Hawk, the province of the best pilots in the world? There's a lot to be said for being in the right place at the right time, and for taking your chances. As First Vice President of the London Chinese Association I'm responsible for the Chinese New Year celebrations in Trafalgar Square. We have a VIP guest list, and because the police and the Armed Forces have been actively recruiting in the Chinese community, for the last two years we've invited senior officers from the police

and all three services for a grandstand view of the celebrations.

The RAF was represented by Air Vice Marshal John Ponsonby, who like me flies both helicopter and fixed-wing, and as you'd expect the business of flying came up in conversation. Towards the end of the celebrations the Air Vice Marshal, who is responsible for all RAF recruitment and training and who I think had enjoyed his Chinese New Year, asked me if there was



Left: I was able to fly three loops, each better than the last – I thought
 Inset left: this is the publicity picture they gave me after my flight
 Above: I had expected more drama, but inside it was whisper-quiet
 Right: during take-off I was overwhelmed at simply being there
 Lower right: Red Arrows Hawk – flown by the best pilots in the world



anything he could do to return the compliment.

Well, if you don't ask, you don't get. "I'd love a flight with the Red Arrows," I said quickly – trying to make it sound like a joke. "Hmm," he said. "Send me an email." So as soon as I got into the office I dashed one off, and nothing happened. I began to suspect I'd asked for too much, and put it out of my mind.

But I hadn't been forgotten. A month later the AVM's assistant called me to say it was the wrong time of year for Red Arrows training (the Chinese New Year is in January or February) but they'd be in touch when they had an opening. In late summer they came back to me and gave me a date – November 8th.

I spent months trying not to get too excited about it. I knew there was no guarantee that I'd be able to fly – I might be deemed medically unfit, they might be unable to fit me into their training schedule, or they might simply think the better of it. But as the date got closer and nobody called to cancel, I allowed myself to dream a little bit.

In early November the RAF contacted me with details. I was to fly to RAF Scampton on the appointed day and contact ATC at 8am sharp for an 8:10 landing slot. If I was late I'd be turned away, because the Red Arrows operate to a tight practice schedule and there's no room for slippage. They sent me the approach plates and all the information I'd need. I was due to go up there with a two-man crew from the Cantonese-language pan-European cable TV station, and two journalists from Chinese magazines, so I arranged to meet them at Elstree at 6am.

I was up early because I couldn't sleep anyway, and arrived at a deserted Elstree in plenty of time to pre-flight my Saratoga, load my four passengers and make ready. I planned to leave at 7am, which would give me ample time for any contingency en route. At 6:55am I turned the key – but the prop turned two blades and ground to a halt. I tried again, and this time I got one blade and some tired noises.

"No!" I thought. "Don't do this to me, please!" But there was no way she was going to start. I realised that at the end of my last flight I'd spent a long time running through the Avidyne glass cockpit features with a friend, and I must have run the battery right down.

But what about my slot? What about my flight with the Red Arrows?

Elstree still looked deserted, but I'd seen a couple of chaps in uniforms near the gate. They might be able to help. They were there to fly the Air Ambulance, which meant there had to be somebody in the hangar. After some frantic dashing about I located an engineer who, by a miracle, could lay his hands on a ground power cart. This time my aircraft started first time.

But I was late. As fortune would have it, there was an incredible tailwind – between 45 and 50 knots – but even so, I wasn't sure of making up the lost time. I poured on power, and 30 minutes later, with the groundspeed having touched 185 knots en route, I switched to Waddington for clearance to land at Scampton. The time was 7:55am.

"Welcome," a nice lady told me. "You're in good time for an 8:10 landing slot."

What, me worry? As it happened, one of my passengers started to feel distinctly unwell. As soon as I informed Waddington that I had a green passenger they threw the schedule aside and cleared me to land at Scampton immediately. Not only that, but as I touched down they asked me if I required medical assistance. I thanked them profusely but said it was nothing more than motion sickness – she was starting to feel better already.

I was met by some officers in two cars, and while my passengers were taken off for a media briefing I was whisked to the medical department and put through an examination similar to a Class Two medical. Unfortunately the doctor wasn't registered with the JAA or I could have saved my next medical fee. I was pronounced fit, and dashed off to the changing rooms where I was measured for G-pants, flying suit and helmet. A friendly corporal helped feed me into them, then directed me to

a mock-up in a hangar where I met Squadron Leader Martin Higgins and was taken through the ejection procedures and shown how to operate a lifejacket and the survival kit.

Then there was time for a piece of toast. I wasn't too nervous because even at that stage, I was prepared for disappointment – anything could still happen to call off the flight. But I'd taken the sensible precaution of stuffing an extra sick-bag into my knee pocket. It wasn't until I'd been strapped into the Hawk, the canopy had been closed and the engine began to whine that I finally allowed myself to believe it was going to happen.

Martin invited me to follow him through on the controls. "You've got 1,000 hours – I'll let



you fly the aircraft later," he said, and we accelerated down the 9,000-foot Scampton runway. The weather was Novemberish but there were a lot of holes in the overcast – enough to go through all the vertical manoeuvres we wanted. I was surprised at how quiet the aircraft was, on the take-off roll and in the air. I'd expected a certain amount of drama, but it was almost whisper-quiet.

It was all rather overwhelming in the first few seconds – just being there – but at 4,000 feet Martin invited me to try my hand at a steep turn. As instructed, I banked through 90 degrees and the G-pants inflated, squeezing my legs in a way that gave me a feeling of extra security. The stick displacement was relatively small, the response was instant and no change was needed to the power setting. I tried a couple more, and Martin pronounced them satisfactory.

"I'm going to show you a loop, then I'll give you control and you can do one," he said. I followed him through on the stick as we climbed effortlessly and pulled through over the top, then resumed straight and level. "Your turn," he said.

At 350 knots I pulled back on the stick, and fed in a small amount of power with the quadrant lever at my left hand. The G-pants started to inflate. Apparently I wasn't firm enough on the stick because I felt Martin pulling slightly harder – we pulled 3G going through the manoeuvre. I held the vertical slightly too long, although there was still no need to alter the power setting, then I pulled through the top and down the other side before pulling out, wings level.

We did two more loops, each better than the previous one (to my untrained eye), then Martin showed me a barrel roll before letting me loose on a couple. Then it was back to Scampton for a low pass, a break into the circuit and a touch-and-go. Approach speed was 180kt, coming back to 125kt at the numbers, and Martin demonstrated a standard curved approach, levelling out over the fence for a greaser. Then he poured on the power, raised the gear and flaps and talked me through a touch-and-go. The circuit was a sustained 2G turn, and he dealt with the gear and the flaps while I held the turn and

followed his instructions on power settings. The landing was adequate, and again Martin added power and climbed steeply back to 4,000 feet before reducing power to idle.

"Engine failure in a Hawk certainly isn't always a matter for ejection," he said in the near silence. "You have a decent glide ratio and plenty of time to work out which of your options to take."

Descent rate in the glide was about 2,000 fpm, with the aircraft in a steep nose-down attitude. Martin banked us gently back to the runway at 180 knots, then flared steadily for a 125kt touchdown on the numbers – one of those perfect landings where you're not sure the tyres have touched the ground. Then he added power again and we were up into another 2G turn, this time for a 100-foot fly-past of the tower for the benefit of Cantonese TV. Finally we broke for a standard landing, and it was over. We'd been up for half an hour, I was told, although it seemed like five minutes. I'd had the stick for probably half the time.

I didn't want to get out. I was helped grinning from the aircraft, relieved of my flying gear and given a cup of coffee, and I suspect I must have babbled a bit while the TV guys interviewed Martin and some of the other Reds. Suffice to say that the Air Vice Marshal and all the Red Arrows have a standing invitation to the Chinese New Year in London as VIP guests.

I had expected it to be more difficult. Basic control of the aircraft is not a major challenge, but flying within the tolerances that are allowed to the Red Arrows is a job for the crème de la crème of service pilots. Every RAF pilot aspires to join the Red Arrows, and those who attain that exalted status are unquestionably the best pilots in the world. For a PPL it was the flight of a lifetime. I took off from Scampton in my Saratoga feeling like a little bit of the Red Arrows' magic dust had rubbed off on me, but mindful of my green passenger I refrained from putting my new-found skills into practice. Thanks to Air Vice Marshal John Ponsoby and Squadron Leader Martin Higgins, I have a flying memory that I will carry with me to the end of my life. ■



*Above: Arrows practice schedules are tight, so our Scampton landing slot was inviolate
Below: Red 9, Squadron Leader Martin Higgins, and me – still coming down after the flight of a lifetime*

