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Henry's funeral, and Murphy's Law

To millions of TV viewers the flypast at Henry Allingham's funeral ran on rails – which it did, sort of.
Pat Malone tells the full story

The timing was nothing short of perfect. Just as the church bell tolled for the 113th time, just as the last echo of the bugle faded on the wind and the body of Henry Allingham began its last journey, the little arrow of First World War fighters flew slowly into the overhead; every eye turned skyward, every heart was moved at the sight of it, and the thousand-strong congregation began spontaneously to applaud, because it was an impeccable postscript to the funeral of Britain's last World War One aviator.

Little did they know. In the circumstances of the day, getting one aircraft overhead would have been a significant achievement; mustering five was a miracle. They flew in from hundreds of miles away in winds that were "right on the limit" of the aircraft's abilities, they flew despite sickness that virtually prostrated one of their number, they flew in at the best possible moment despite binning the entire schedule at the last minute and despite a critical radio failure that left their leader deaf and dumb. The flight of the Great War Display Team at the funeral of Henry Allingham was living proof that the two immutable laws governing aviation are gravity and Murphy's, and anything that can go wrong, will.

It had begun four years before, when Squadron Leader Mike Buckland was busy organising the flypast for the 50th anniversary of the end of World War Two. Mike, a C130J instructor at RAF Lyneham, is the man to

whom the MoD's Ceremonial Events and Commemorations Team turn whenever an ad hoc tribute of some sort is required, and at the time he was busy summoning up poppy-dropping bombers, appropriate escorts, the Red Arrows and sundry other materiel for an appearance over Buckingham Palace. There's more to this stuff than you think – it's not just a matter of asking the CAA for permission and warning Heathrow. Where do you get a million poppies, and how do you persuade Westminster Council's sanitation department to sweep them up? (Answer: tell them afterwards.) More importantly, how do you plan for eventualities, how do you cope with the unforeseen, how do you build in flexibility when you're choreographing disparate assets that must arrive over a precise point at a precise time, in a precise sequence?

Heart-stopping moments come with the territory. The flypast for the 25th anniversary of the Falklands War almost ended in tears when someone in the Royal party needed a comfort break, and a request came down for a ten-minute delay. Mike initially refused; the helicopters had already started their run-in, five more sections were lined up behind them, and no provision had been made in the programme for a 'rolex', the military term for a flexible hiatus in proceedings. "The Royals are *never late*," says Mike, "so it wasn't going to be necessary..."

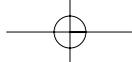
But now it was necessary, and word came down from the top. "So I'm standing in the

street with a mobile phone and orders to stop the show," Mike recalls. "I called Thames Radar, gave them the authentication code-words and asked them to pass on an order for a ten-minute delay, then all I could do was stand there and pray. The Red Arrows were on guard frequency and had to be found, but all the aircrews coped superbly; they just made it up in mid-run, and everything happened bang on schedule, plus ten minutes. We did get several letters of congratulation, including one from people who knew the full story, which was appreciated. It translated into something like one thousand aircraft-minutes of delay at Heathrow, which annoyed them a bit. Apart from that it ran on rails."

But anyway, the name of Henry Allingham came up at the VE-Day briefings. It was just, 'by the way, Henry's 109 now and won't last forever, would we be able to put up an appropriate aircraft at his funeral?' The Navy and the RAF have long been aware that Henry Allingham's death would be a seminal moment; not only would it shine a light on their aviation heritage, but the funeral would be a time to remember the million men on the British side who might have lived to a great age had they not died, many of them in their teens, in the War to End War.

Mike's first call was to the Great War Display Team, a ten-strong group who fly WWI replica aircraft at air shows. Did they have something suitable? Better than that, they said – for Henry Allingham they really thought they should put up a whole formation of aircraft of his era; they had three SE5s, a Sopwith Pup

**Top: three SE5s low over the Channel, making perhaps 40 knots of groundspeed
Inset: Henry Allingham, late in life, with SE5**



Courtesy: RAF



and a Sopwith Triplane. And they didn't ask for any money, which was good, because there wasn't any. In the event, Alan Spence of Newsdesk Communications, a company that produces publications for the MoD, provided a couple of thousand pounds in sponsorship to cover the cost of hotel bills, travelling and so forth; the RAF sent an avgas bowser from Boscombe Down, and Shoreham's manager John Haffenden waived all fees – well done, all these parties.

Mike scouted out the location, brought the CAA on side because they'd be flying single-engined aircraft over a built-up area (okay as long as you stay within gliding distance of the shoreline and above 700 feet amsl) and then he promptly forgot about it for four years. He was reminded again in June this year, during a briefing for the flypast to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift in September. 'By the way, Henry's not very well

Top: Vic Lockwood (left) and Dave Linney with Dave's 90hp, seven-eighths scale SE5 replica
Above: Pre-flight planning - Vic Lockwood, Mike Buckland, Neil Davidson and David Linney at Shoreham

Top right: Ernie Hoblyn, landing after a go-around, is walked across the wind in his Triplane

Above right: 77-year-old Des Biggs preflights the SE5 replica he built himself

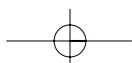
– how are the plans for his funeral flypast progressing?"

"It's all in hand," said Mike.

His reminders to the CAA and the Great War Display Team brought forth, on the day before Henry's funeral, David Linney and Vic Lockwood, who flew their replica SE5s into Shoreham. David is a former Harrier pilot whose seven-eighths scale SE5 was built by

Mike Beech in 1978, and its Continental engine produces just 90hp, compared with up to 220hp in the original. "There's a lot of drag," said David. "Sixty knots straight and level is pretty good going." Vic Lockwood was slightly better off, with 100hp, but he had another problem – he'd caught some sort of bug and was feeling absolutely rotten. He went to bed in the hotel at 1830hrs that evening to try to shake it off, but it didn't work.

David and Mike Buckland went over the plan. Mike had been to the funeral rehearsal that day and had timed it at 61 minutes. It would start at noon; allow five minutes to get out, two minutes for the Last Post, a minute's silence, reveille, then the flypast. The datum was St Nicholas's Church at grid ref TQ307045. The GPS lat/long of the church tower was N050 49.522 W001 08.701. The holding area for the formation was grid ref TQ360026, and a roundabout on the A259





Left: the splendidly-mustachioed Dan Griffith arrives in the Sopwith Pup

serious turbulence. He was followed soon afterwards by the Sopwith Triplane built by Ernie Hoblyn, who'd flown up from Honiton in Devon. The wind played havoc with his first approach, so he threw it away and landed safely at the second attempt. David and Vic ran out to walk him across the wind.

"Bloody rough," said Ernie. "If I'd known it was this bad I'd never have left."

Last man in was Dan Griffith, a former Harrier and CAA test pilot who flies aircraft as diverse as the Spitfire and the Canberra and who is the Great War team's Sopwith Pup man. The windsock was sticking out almost at right angles, and it was clear that had this not been an extra-special occasion there would have been no flying today.

The formation briefing covered every possible contingency including flying in the hold – the Sopwiths are rather faster than the SE5s and the 'Tripehound' in particular starts to feel sloppy at low speeds, so they need an outside track. David Linney thought that radio failure could be a show-stopper; if it happened, everything would go ahead according to the original timings. Vic Lockwood, a former Lightning and Tornado pilot and an ETPS tutor, pronounced himself fit to fly even though he could speak only in a hoarse whisper and looked marginally better than Henry Allingham.

At 12:21 they walked out to their aircraft and did their walk-rounds, then carefully donned gloves, balaclavas, helmets and lifejackets. Seven minutes later David Linney swung his prop; the engine started first time. Vic Lockwood had the luxury of an electric starter; display pilot Will Greenwood swung the third SE5, and Ernie Hoblyn swung the Pup before climbing into his self-starting Tripehound. They did not know it, but inside

Below: SE5, Pup and Triplane under starters orders at Shoreham

south of Rottingdean was the Initial Point (IP) for the flypast. A forward holding area was nominated at Brighton Marina at TQ338032, 2nm from the datum. When the Last Post sounded, the formation would leave the forward IP on receipt of a call from Mike's accomplice Cpl Neil Davidson, who would be stationed on top of the tallest office building in the area and equipped with binoculars, a stopwatch, a handheld radio, a spare radio in case the first one failed, and as a final backup a mobile phone and the number of Shoreham Tower. The planned speed for the flypast was 60 kts with a minimum height over the datum

of 700' on the regional QNH. Given the forecast wind, a strong westerly, groundspeed was likely to be lower; therefore the team, prosaically calligned 'Warbirds Formation', would get a three-minute warning from Neil to head for the church. Flypast frequency would be 122.95. Everything was set out on charts. It had all been meticulously planned; what could possibly go wrong?

On the morning of the funeral the third SE5 came in, piloted by 77-year-old Des Biggs, who built the aircraft himself. Des had come down from Sywell and had not been a pleasant flight, with high winds creating



the church Mike Buckland was sweating bullets because for some reason they were rattling through the business and were on course to finish 16 minutes early. Thank heavens they'd built in so much holding time, he thought.

At 12:39 a BBC Twin Squirrel took off and hovered beyond Shoreham's runway as David Linney's SE5 started its take-off run – in that wind, all of 20 yards, it seemed. Within 30 seconds they were all off, rising and falling like a mobile over a child's cot on climb-out, turning downwind along the coast, picking up speed, signing off Shoreham and going to 122.95.

At this point David Linney's radio failed. It failed just in time for him not to hear Neil Davidson's urgent call to the effect that things had galloped ahead, and it was already time to leave the forward IP for the church. "Three minutes, repeat three minutes," said Neil.

David flew blithely on. Vic Lockwood in the second SE5 quickly realised David had heard nothing. In deference to the weather the formation was widely spread, and Vic poured on as much speed as 100hp could generate to close in on his leader. Frantically he waved three gloved fingers out of the cockpit and pointed forcefully back towards the church; David got the picture and turned the formation around. But they were way downwind between the two IPs, and making 40 knots over the ground in the teeth of a headwind; they beat their way back with the wind roiling among the buildings and throwing them about like feathers. David caught a glimpse of the

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Above right: Ernie Hoblyn's Sopwith Tripehound, a handful even on a calm day
Right: Brighton Pier was just 17 years old when the SE5s first flew over

throng down below, the admirals, the air marshals, royalty, the media and the common people all looking up, as the aircraft crossed the church at no time that had ever been written down or even discussed. They flew straight on to Shoreham in formation, broke over the runway and circled to land. David and Vic climbed out of their aircraft and shrugged their shoulders. "It all went pear-shaped," said David. "Heaven knows where we came in the proceedings."

They picketed their planes and went in for lunch in a grimly despondent mood; nobody was flying anywhere until the wind had died down. Five minutes later, Mike Buckland called from the church to ask whether everyone was down safe.

"Fantastic, guys," he said. "You were two minutes late on the datum but the timing couldn't have been better. The bells were just finishing and they were about to lay Henry in his grave, and it was a very emotional moment. The crowd didn't hear you until you were overhead, and they gave you a great round of applause. Well done!"

"Oh," said David, "it was all down to good planning."

TV broadcasts and next day's newspapers were full of images of the flypast, although nobody managed to get a shot of the entire formation. The papers recorded that there had been a flypast by First World War replica aircraft, and it all sounded routine, as if you just ordered a display from a shop. But a small number of people know exactly how it was, and I'm sure that Henry Allingham, looking down on it – or up at it, as the case may be – appreciated it more than anyone. ■

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