

Come fly(past) with us

Two of the RAF's largest bases were heavily involved in this year's Trooping the Colour flypast - **Gary Parsons** flies with the E-3D Sentry from Waddington and **Damien Burke** with the TriStar from Brize Norton.

Practice makes perfect

The sun is trying to peep through gaps in the clouds racing across a breezy airfield. It's not ideal weather conditions in which to practise a flypast, but the 'met' man says it will improve, so the green light is given with an hour's slippage in the programme. Every year the RAF is tasked with

performing a flypast over Buckingham Palace to celebrate the Queen's official birthday, always on the second Saturday in June, and this year is no exception, despite the recent Gulf conflict and associated resourcing difficulties.



After last year's successful flypasts over the Mall and Portsmouth, this year's formation has a familiar feel to it, comprising the leading five elements from before, enabling a reduction in practice and preparation time, well-oiled as the plan is now. Once again the formation will be led by the C-17 from 99 Squadron, each element responding to his timings and positioning for the final run-in on the day. But, before the big day itself, one practice sortie will be flown to ensure everyone is talking on the right frequencies, knows their formation colleagues and gets into the drill of low-level flying, and today (Tuesday 10 June) is the day, despite the rather crummy weather forecast. Waddington's ATC tower is the datum, standing in for Buck House, and the track will take us from the formation assembly point at Southwold direct to Marham, onto Spalding for a turn for the final run-in. Air-Scene UK has the privilege of flying on the E-3D Sentry with 23 Squadron, the third package in the flypast accompanied by two Tornado F3s from RAF Leuchars.

The brief is swift and to the point - the crew have already been briefed on most aspects of the formation the week before at Brize Norton, so today is concerned with radio frequencies, waypoints and MATZ contacts. ZH102 'Dopey' is to be our aircraft, with ZH105 ready as back-up in case of any last-minute snags. Callsign is simply 'Sentry', alias 'NATO 42' if a divert is required - diversion airfields are Brize Norton and Leuchars. The flypast sortie, once complete, is to be embellished with an intercept at 40,000 ft by Southern QRA from RAF Marham, this being their first day on official standby - the captain, Sqd Ldr Ken Gunning, is keen to see if the F3 can fly slow enough at that altitude! The Boss of 23 Squadron, Wg Cdr Harry Hallett, is also flying on the sortie as co-pilot, though Ken of course is 'Skipper' for the trip.

Timings are revised to 1100Z take-off, 1300Z overhead Waddington and touch-down at 1500Z to take into account the hour's weather delay. A safety brief follows together with a flightsuit fitting and its off to the awaiting bus for transport to Alpha dispersal where Dopey sits, now bathed in warm summer sun.





As the flight crew strap in and run-through the pre-flight checks, there are a few minutes to re-acquaint myself with the internals of an E-3D. Built for comfort it is not, with just a few airliner-style seats at the rear near the small galley and single latrine. The lack of windows is a result of extensive anti-radiation protection built into the fuselage to prevent the aircrew being micro-waved by the emissions from the huge rotating radome on top of the aircraft - so photo-friendly it is not. The few small windows in the fuselage doors are thick, have an interior anti-scratch panel and internal plastic mesh, so present something of a challenge! Seat five behind the pilot isn't available until after the flypast, so I'm directed to sit behind the communications station, facing rearwards for take-off, headphones on to listen to the pre-flight chat. Without any reference points to see, it's difficult to know where the aircraft

is on the airfield, but after a few minutes the engines rise in pitch and an invisible hand presses my back as 'Dopey' surges forward along runway 21. Rotate occurs at 143 knots and the transit to the Coltishall MATZ will be done at 5,000 ft, taking a gentle curve over the Wisbech area while making contact with the Neatishead Controller. We have already spotted 'Windsor Lead', the C-17 from Brize, as she heads eastward from the Lichfield corridor.

We can unstrap and move about after a few minutes, taking the opportunity to stand at the rear of the cockpit and watch the Norfolk countryside to slide below us. It normally takes an hour and a half to get to the Mother-in-Law's just north of Norwich but we're there in ten minutes, holding to the east of Coltishall, waiting for the Tornado F3s and the instruction to proceed to Southwold. The cloud is quite thick and below us at 3,000 ft, with another layer approximately 1,000 ft above us - we're the meat in a cloud sandwich. Talking of which, it is time to crack open the packed lunch, while there's a few minutes to spare.



Warlord crackles over the R/T, and soon three Tornado F3s appear at eight o'clock, one slipping effortlessly onto the starboard wing. Pictures are difficult, but what the hell, it's all digital and no film is being wasted. The sun pops in and out as we fly in racetrack pattern, awaiting Windsor Lead's instruction. We learn of an extra thirty minutes delay, and a brief period of confusion ensues as the accompanying fighters think it's an extra ninety minutes from now, but clarity is swiftly given and the jets in the other formation take the opportunity to top up their tanks from the TriStar and VC-10 - our F3s will have to re-fuel elsewhere once the flypast is over.

Tornado alley #1



We drop down to 3,000 ft and head for the Southwold formation area, looking out for other formations on the way - the VC-10 is spotted, together with its Jaguars from Coltishall. The cloud is just below us, broken but looking menacing in places. We drop in behind the TriStar and its three Tornado GR4s, with a separation of two miles - a distance that disappears in a matter of seconds at 270 knots. It's bumpier down here at 3,000 ft, but attention is focussed on altitude and separation from this point on.

Soon the order to proceed on-track to Marham crackles over the intercom, and we start the descent down to 1,500 ft - this means through the cloud, and the ride really starts to get rough as the Sentry drops through the cumulus. It's difficult to stay focussed on the F3 as it slips in and out of sight, inch-perfect off the starboard wing, vapour bursting along its length. An impressive display of airmanship, as the buffeting increases, then lessens as we drop beneath the cloud. It's still bumpy, and Ken is sawing away at the control column - this is no boating lake ride! We're in the wake turbulence created by the C-17 and [TriStar](#), even at a distance of two





miles, so Ken decides discretion is the better part of valour and takes 'Dopey' up to 1,700 ft where the ride is a lot smoother. We'll stay here for the rest of the trip, but it would take a special sort of 'anorak' watching from the ground to know we're not at exactly the same height as the preceding aircraft.

Watton airfield disappears below us and almost instantly Marham's runway can be seen in the distance - just how difficult must it have been for the American bombers in the Second World War with the myriad of airfields that dotted East Anglia. Even at this low level, half a dozen fields can be made out at any one time, if one had the time to look! The navigation system ticks off the miles until the next waypoint, and it's a straight run on to Spalding before turning right and direct to Waddington. The flat Lincolnshire countryside looks even flatter up here, perfect training ground for those Lancasters of 617 Squadron some sixty years ago.

'Windsor Lead' makes his turn - even at four miles he is quite visible, a great fat grey whale in the sky. In seconds we are over Heckington, and pass right over my house at 280 knots - just hope the missus is ready! Three minutes later Waddington's tower slips underneath us and we break formation, circling over Lincoln, climbing into stiller air. Almost instantly we are on our own, the F3s disappearing in search of fuel before their trek north back to Leuchars.



Sadly we learn that the embellish is cancelled, the QRA F3s from Marham not wanting to play today after all. After some practice approaches to runway 21 we land, and the mood is one of a job well done - on target and time, in the best RAF tradition. I'd like to think I have helped in some way...but I'm sure they'll do just fine on the day without me! Her Majesty's salute is in safe hands.

The author would like to thank OC 23 Squadron Wg Cdr Harry Hallett, the flightcrew of 'NATO 42' and Jacqui Wheeler, CCO RAF Waddington for their help and assistance.

Perfect from practice



Saturday, day of the flypast, dawns grey and dismal. Looks like I am to repeat Gary's experience of Thursday, complete with grey skies. However by the time I reach RAF Brize Norton patches of blue are appearing... Boarding an RAF TriStar for the flypast turns out to be a mundane experience little different to boarding an Easyjet 737 - first, we wait in the departure lounge at Brize Norton. No baggage to check in to the hold, so it's straight through security with the obligatory hand baggage x-ray machine and metal detector. And then more waiting while passengers for the VC-10 in the flypast go out to their aircraft first.

Groaning under the weight of cameras the handsome and suave group of press (why yes, that includes me) get to the TriStar first and bag a few seats. The sun has finally made an appearance and

I've checked the route and timings and pick my seat appropriately in order to provide the best chances for a good photo of the Tornados expected to formate on the TriStar. The bad news is that the windows all appear to be cleaned using a combination of sandpaper and knives - many are totally useless for taking photos through. Some of the better ones have awful 'anti scratch' panels covering them, some of which move up out of the way - but some don't. Even the clearest ones aren't any use if you zoom out to any distance. It's going to be a challenging time for photos but what the heck, it's an experience regardless. *(Ha! He had it easy by comparison! - Ed)*

Soon we're all loaded onboard and we push back from the terminal. Engines spool into life and the big jet taxis down to the runway, turning onto it and accelerating immediately with a fantastic deep throated whining roar - no 737, this! We're airborne in no time at all and climbing steeply out over the Brize - Bampton road (only two

spotters down there today) while the landing gear returns to its hiding place along with the flaps. The wingtip flexes up and down in an impressive manner and the underwing engine pods shake from side to side with the power being piled on for the climb. It is 1100L.

We level out at around 9,500 feet, perfect for sight-seeing but only get a brief bit of that before cloud closes in around us to the disgust of the photographers onboard. Thankfully Him upstairs hears the prayers and the clouds melt away as we near Northampton, only twelve minutes after take-off. Racing past I trace my route back home... a gruelling slog on the roads is gone in just a few minutes! Even my own house slides past below, to my delight. Looking further into the distance the familiar runways of Thurlleigh are visible in the haze, and the remains of RAF Kimbolton coyly pass underneath us too. RAF Alconbury is next, still covered with cars, and I soon lose count of the number of airfields we are seeing - ranging in state from barely visible traces in crops through to fairly intact but disused fields, to fully intact and operational RAF stations such as RAF Marham, where we turn to head out to sea. It has been just twenty-three minutes since take-off.



Tornado alley #2



The countryside becomes monotonously flat and featureless so it's with some relief the coastline finally hoves into view and we soon leave that behind along with a solitary fishing boat that looks like a tiny toy nailed to a sheet of frosted glass. Rough seas just look picturesque from up here! Not much than half an hour after departing Brize it's time to enter the hold while the formation elements assemble themselves together, so we fly a huge racetrack pattern that takes us back inland over marshes and villages and the remains of a couple of old airfields before going back out to sea. The C-17 leading the group can soon be seen from the cockpit, but a photo through the thick glass is a waste of time. Back to my seat and craning my neck to the rear I catch sight of some of the rear elements of the formation - the E-3 with a gaggle of Tornado F3s jockeying for position. No sign of the VC-10 and Jaguars, nor will there be - too far behind, and no tailgunner position on TriStars to enable a look behind us.

Just before 1200L two black dots can be seen off to our right, boring in straight at us. Before they get too close their course changes slightly and two Tornado GR4s drop into trail behind us before closing up on the starboard side. Something similar is happening on the port side, just the one Tornado there and a Hawk flitting about

acting as 'whip'. We soon lose the second Tornado on the starboard side which disappears over to the port side (where sadly finding a good window turned out be a hopeless task - so the shots from that side are nowhere near as good). With two Tornados now firmly in formation off our wingtips, and the spare hanging around hoping for one of them to break down, we continue in the holding pattern while final adjustments are made to the formation, more photos are taken, and we wait for the right time to begin the run into London.



Holding turns out to be far more fun with a Tornado on the wingtip - endless photo opportunities present themselves, so I once again thank my lucky stars for having gone digital, and just fire away. Lunch is served in a standard RAF issue goody box (which contains enough food to keep anybody happy, and would probably therefore set you back about £50 on the aforementioned Easyjet 737) and this proves to be a tricky moment. Eat food? Take pictures? Try both? If only those pasties weren't so darn flaky...!



Our pilot soon tells us though that it's the last orbit and when we next straighten out we have begun the run in to the capital, bang on time at 1242L. Our task of saluting Her Majesty lies but eighteen minutes away. More dead airfields slide by, then the M25 scoots by under the wing at 1258L and we are over the massive urban sprawl of London. Landmarks are a bit thin on the ground looking out of my side, but I recognise Kings Cross, St. Pancras and the Telecom Tower before Regents Park and before I even have time to wonder if we have reached Buckingham Palace yet, we suddenly bank to the right and as the Tornado off the wingtip is suddenly flying above the most outrageously photogenic background - I just hold down the shutter button on my camera and hope the shots are going to be half decent despite the state of the window. The Flypast has finished, and we are on our way out of the capital, heading back to Brize Norton. And we didn't even have to pay a congestion charge!



Our little friends from Marham stay with us until well out of London, and then drop back to join each other before accelerating away effortlessly and disappearing back to their base. We still have a load of excess fuel on board so the next half hour is spent orbiting Brize Norton burning it off - yet more sightseeing, such hardships we go through here at Air-Scene UK for you, the reader! Having seen the station from just about every airborne angle we can, we finally begin our circuit to land and the seatbelt signs come back on. Base leg takes us near to RAF Fairford, and only from the air can you appreciate the sheer size of the station. Looking closely, there are a pair of airframes between the two main hangars. These are some of the first arrivals for RIAT 2003 - a Phantom and Harrier for the static display.



Landing is an anticlimax, with the final few seconds a blur of green countryside giving way to the wooden fence at the end of the runway (two more spotters at this end!) and a good solid arrival on the tarmac. All too soon we have taxied off at the far end, weaving our way among the C-17s and VC-10s to return to where we set off from, parked near a rather swish looking 747 and a Swiss business jet. And after that, it's back in the car to race over to Kemble to watch some practice displays for the Classic Jets show the next day - but that's another story! Brize Norton has once again played a key part in saluting Her Majesty, a role that seems to be effortlessly and faultlessly performed.

With many thanks to the crew of 216 Squadron TriStar ZD952 (Flt Lt Moran, Flt Lt Pengelly, MEng McConville, Sgt Johnson, Cpl Armstrong, SAC Connolly, SAC Murphy and SAC Streek), RAF Brize Norton CRO Sqn Ldr David Rowe and assistant Kate Zasada and last but not least fellow snapper Barry Clack. Oh yes, and how could I forget? Happy Birthday Ma'am!



Nimrod MR2 XV236, KMW, Queen's birthday flypast 2003. Copyright Robin Powney 2003



VC-10 C1K XR807, 10 Squadron, Queen's birthday flypast 2003. Copyright Robin Powney 2003



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