

A Dream Come True

Four red jets streak low across the airfield. Five others, including mine, rush to meet them. The closing speed is over 600 miles an hour. A collision seems inevitable. I hold my breath. But, with a mighty roar, the four flash through the gaps between us, our wingtips almost touching.

After years watching and admiring the Red Arrows, I'm finally flying with them. It's the fulfilment of a boyhood dream, no less exciting for the fact that I'm no longer a youngster, but a 48-year old, and an RAF pilot myself.

I'm sitting in Red 3, just to the left of the Leader, his sleek red Hawk jet framed against the deep blue of a late summer sky. Another red Hawk sits just to my left. They're such iconic images that I'm finding it difficult to believe I'm really up here with them, rather than looking at their pictures in a magazine. But I am, and we're halfway through a 20-minute In-Season Display Practice.

It's everything I imagined it would be, a high-adrenalin, Boys' Own comic, adventure. And, as with so many things in life, the opportunity has arisen largely through luck.

In 2001, I'd commanded an RAF detachment at an Italian Air Force base in southern Italy. From there, our Harriers flew over the Balkans in support of NATO peacekeeping troops. During my four and a half months as 'Detco', I met many gifted Harrier pilots, including a young flight lieutenant, Spike Jepson.

I came to know Spike better than most because we took part in a 10km charity run up Mount Vesuvius. It was one of the hardest things either of us had ever done, and the result led to frequent exchanges of good-natured banter. Despite being 15 years older, I'd beaten him to the top.

Three years later, Squadron Leader Spike Jepson was leading the Red Arrows, and I was a late stand-in as host to a party of prize-winning schoolchildren who were visiting the Team at RAF Scampton, near Lincoln. On our meeting, Spike resumed the banter, and offered me a flight.

So, here I am, upside down with nothing on the altimeter but the maker's name. Not quite true, because now, ten seconds after our near collision at ground level, we're at six and a half thousand feet, the formations of four and five interlacing again at the top of a vertical loop.

What a way to earn a living.

Some people think that Red Arrows pilots are prima donnas, mere poseurs in their red flying suits. But I've operated alongside them several times in my career, even teaching some of them to fly, including their first female pilot. I've seen at first hand how much effort goes into perfecting their display, and the risks involved.

They've lost many pilots over the years, one the week before I arrived at Scampton for the first time in the mid 80s, killed during a practice over the airfield. And when I served there again several years later, two, including the then team leader, were hobbling around on crutches after a mid-air collision. The leader's Hawk had ended up in the upstairs bathroom of a house in the local village!

Not the most consoling of thoughts as the jets crowd in and the grass of the airfield flashes past 100 feet below me.

We're flying in Diamond Nine now, and I look round at the other eight aircraft. They appear close together when seen from the ground, but, let me tell you, from up here, they

really are close. And what you don't usually see as a spectator is the constant bobbing about as their pilots strive to maintain the ideal formation position.

The Red Arrows are always striving for the ideal. Soon after they land, they'll sit down and review a video of their performance. Their self-analysis will be hyper-critical, a brutal thing to witness, but it's part of what makes them the best display team in the world.

My pilot has already subjected himself to some ripe self-criticism. He does so again as he fails to close into formation as quickly as he thinks he should following a barrel roll.

I find it reassuring that he's working so hard. It makes him seem more human, more like a mere line pilot like me. Not that I could do it. The speed with which he spots minute errors in position and reacts to correct them would be beyond me.

Spike looks across at me from the lead Hawk, slightly ahead and to our right. His eyes crease into a smile, before he growls another command into the radio.

'Looping, Go.'

Spike's aircraft pitches up, and we all follow. To point us heavenwards, they've snapped to 6g. This means that everything weighs six times normal. So, not only is my head, encased in its bulbous flying helmet, being forced downwards, but so are my internal organs, and my blood.

The blood is the critical bit. As it drains from my brain, my vision starts to dim as if a grey lace camera lens is shutting. Eventually, everything could turn black and I could suffer a g-induced loss of consciousness. Not a good idea in the middle of a formation aerobatic display.

To prevent such a potentially lethal eventuality, you learn to strain your abdominal muscles to stop the blood descending, aided, in high performance aircraft like the Hawk, by g trousers. I gasp as my own g trousers inflate to grip my legs and abdomen tightly. It's quite disconcerting if you're not used to it, which I'm not, but I don't black out, so they must be helping.

The g diminishes as we float, upside down, over the top of a loop. I look at the other eight aircraft, and at the earth laid out 7,000 feet beneath me, and smile. Not like a 48-year old group captain, but like a little boy.