

A Day with the Red Arrows

“Excellence” is not just the Squadron Motto - as Dave Briers discovers on a visit to RAF Scampton.



Being a child of the 50's, I was brought up on a diet of war related books and films, so, going to spend the day at RAF Scampton served to remind me of the Dam Busters and gripping tales of the RAF. I am even old enough to remember seeing the Hawker Hunters of the Black Arrows, the Jet Provosts of the Red Pelicans and the first Red Arrows' aircraft, the Folland Gnat.

Upon my arrival at Scampton, I soon realised that, unlike Peter Pan, I was getting on in years. They say that when policemen start looking young, we are getting old. The same must be true of pilots and, the young men at Scampton must be following closely on the heels of the “kids” who defended the country in the Battle of Britain.

The morning started in true RAF style with a warm welcome and followed with a multimedia presentation about the Red Arrows. The detail was of just the right intensity to provide answers to many of those questions you always wanted to ask about the team. It also clearly illustrated the need for personal ability, leadership, communication, and, perhaps, most importantly, an inherent desire to support a highly effective team culture - obviously a major factor in the Red Arrows achieving the highest standards of airmanship, anywhere in the world.



Reliance on the performance, can-do attitude and the strength of character of others brings rewards and no other group demonstrates this better than they. Focussed to the nth degree, these men don't hide any personal shortcomings in flying performances – they identify them and point them out to their peers – so great is the respect between team members.

Following a relaxed coffee and chat, we sat in on the pilots' briefing. Most of the abbreviations and technical terms were as foreign to me as Mandarin but, with individual pilots using their Reds' formation numbers to acknowledge information and to add comments, the team culture was again very apparent. Red 1 nominated one member to give an emergency scenario to the team. The "victim" of an aircraft malfunction detailed his actions whilst paying due regard for any consequences his emergency action might have on the formation aircraft.



Briefing over and now came the flying. I was fortunate in having a personal escort. I photographed the Hawks being readied before watching them taxi towards the runway. With my escort's foresight in procuring a vehicle, we made for an ideal spot by the ATC Tower to watch and photograph the practice session. At the same location, a Squadron Photographer videoed the session for use at the de-briefing – all sessions are videoed.





Once the training flight was over we returned, for another photo opportunity, to the apron. Taken by surprise, I was seated in front of the Hawk and the Reds' pilots and was photographed. I didn't object – after all, it is only proper they would want to be photographed in my company – I can understand that!



Then - the de-briefing. The team members watched the video and proceeded to be self-critical as they spotted an error on their part or when they were not correct in attitude, altitude or airspeed. I would imagine most of us would find it difficult to be so highly critical of ourselves – not these professionals – it's all part of the process of being on the road to improvement and reaching for the ultimate goal - "perfection"!

We had a very pleasant and relaxed lunch with another opportunity to chat with team members. All of them were fine ambassadors for the RAF and, there was I, allowing commissioned RAF Officers to make my coffee! This close knit group are only too happy to let outsiders into their world and do so informally, without deference to their rank, and they are totally at home with visitors to Scampton.



Finally, but no less importantly, we were given the hangar tour. All the engineering and servicing teams on the Squadron are unique in that they are RAF personnel and are not a sub-contracted civilian team. The pilots are the first to tell you that the ground teams are the “real” men at Scampton. Their role in maintaining and servicing the Hawks, supporting the team at displays and keeping the aircraft “on line” is a vital one. When these personnel are posted to the Squadron, they are expected to stay for at least 5 years. This policy has ensured that the engineering teams know each individual airframe and can handle just about any engineering “situation” that may arise.





A few more photos, a quick call at the Red Arrows shop and the day is over. It was an experience many wish for but few have granted, there being a long waiting list for visits. We had the benefit of bright sunshine, so despite near freezing temperatures and a biting wind, the photographs have turned out ok. That reminds me – the photograph I had taken earlier? Well, I was presented with a printed copy as I left. That will be framed and preserved as souvenir of a great day.

Following the team example of the Red Arrows, I will not name and thank the individuals I met. Instead, I thank everyone connected with the Reds, in whatever capacity, for their warmth and fine company and I wish the Squadron lasting success in all that they do. Thanks, the Red Arrows and RAF Scampton – your “excellence” was obvious from the start to the end of the day.

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