

60 Shades of Red (background)

What you are about to see, IF my humble technology has worked, was never originally intended for public consumption, it being merely my compilation of my Red Arrows photography over the past 60 years. None of these images were taken with any consideration to the rule of thirds or to entering them into a competition, just to have them critiqued by judges with scant knowledge of the challenges involved to take them.

During my lifetime seismic accidents have brought about significant changes to airshow regulations. By their very nature, air shows have always been potentially hazardous. Douglas Bader being a prime example having lost his legs practicing (some would say showing off) for an air display in 1931.

During the 1952 Farnborough Airshow, the prototype DH110 broke up during its display killing both crew members. One of its engines hurtled into the crowded spectator enclosures killing 29 and injuring 60. The show continued when another prototype took off and startled the already startled crowd even further by producing a sonic boom over their heads.

Not one claim for compensation was made either from the aircrew's widows or the bereaved families. Contrast this with the flurry of litigation in the wake of the awful 2015 Shoreham Airshow tragedy where 11 were killed and 16 injured.

The most devastating airshow accident of the 20th century was in 1988 at Ramstein in Germany. Following a low level collision, 3 of the Italian Frecce Tricolori jets disintegrated into a fireball onto the estimated crowd of 300,000. 67 spectators and the 3 pilots died whilst 346 spectators sustained serious injuries, whilst hundreds more had minor injuries.

Over the 60 years of their history the Red Arrows themselves have been no stranger to death. In 1971 whilst practicing the "Roulette" manoeuvre over their then home base of RAF Kemble, four pilots were killed when the two jets collided head on. Ironically this manoeuvre had been safely executed hundreds of times over the previous 5 years. The resultant clamping down on flight regulations has meant that air shows have gradually been deprived of the "wow factor." Since Shoreham, there has been a significant reduction in the number of UK air shows. Those that remain have been utterly sanitised to the point that most of these images, would be beyond the reach of today's casual spectator. Perhaps appropriately in the male dominated world that was the RAF in the early 1960's, the Red Arrows were conceived in the gent's toilet of the Officers Mess at RAF Hornchurch.

During an impromptu "chat amongst the porcelain," an Air Marshal instructed a young Flt Lt. to form a display team utilising the new Folland Gnat which had come into service in 1962.

Painted bright yellow" the team of 5 aeroplanes became known as the "Yellow jacks, "but this, only after they had upset officialdom by referring to themselves over the airwaves as "Daffodil Patrol"

The Yellowjacks only operated during 1964 but successfully morphed into the Official Team of the Central Flying School. The Red Arrows First public performance was at the Biggin Hill Air Fair in May 1965.

Initially they flew only 7 scarlet Gnats, but soon became 9, enabling them to create their trade mark formation "Diamond Nine". One manoeuvre which found particular favour with the Reds was the "Twinkle Roll" This was conceived by "Red 3" the then Flt Lt. Bill Loverseed. He was a whizz with the Gnat's electrical systems, and discovered that if fuse 13 was removed it boosted the Gnat's rate of roll to over 400 degrees per second. The sight of nine aircraft executing a snap roll whilst in formation had never been done by any team before. Officialdom however was not happy at the unauthorised removal of Fuse 13 and an order was relayed "replace the fuses immediately". This of course they dutifully did but not before blowing all of them, which enabled them to carry on "twinkling"

The diminutive Gnat was much loved by its pilots and the term “putting it on” as opposed to getting into it was coined. At the top of the loop the pilots were experiencing loads of about 4-5 “G”, today’s GP drivers are now subjected to similar loads in some fast corners.

The normal tenure as a team member is 3 years. However to maintain continuity at the end of each season 3 members are replaced. This means none of those on the team in 2026 will still be there in 2035. The exception to this will be Red 1 (the leader) He will be a member who having completed one tour as a formation member, will go and fly a desk somewhere for a year or so, to return as team leader for a further 3 years.

Each year there are normally 30-40 hopefuls aspiring to meet the demands required to wear the coveted Red Suit. Most are already qualified flying instructors, yet they are subjected to a searching expose of their personality and flying skills.

To the spectator on the ground, the Reds look as if they are flying very close together. This is in fact the case, but there is a built in vertical separation ensuring they are kept away from the deadly jet wash of the aeroplane mere feet ahead or above.

The actual wingtip separation is in the region of 12 to 14 feet. This shrinks to an incredible EIGHT feet during the “Apollo” formation. I have no doubt that over the 60 years freak conditions have created near disaster situations, considerably boosting the pulse rates of those concerned.

The main factor enabling them to fly so closely is that the 8 in the formation focus on a reference point on the adjacent aircraft. Be it a wingtip or exhaust pipe or cockpit. This means they concentrate intently on keeping their own aircraft the same distance from that pre-determined reference point, without paying too much regard to where they are actually going! Effectively the boss” is required to fly the whole formation as one aeroplane. The downside of this is that, should he get it wrong, the whole lot will dutifully follow him into the ground!

Those of you around in the early 70’s may remember when the Red Arrows in their Gnats, would appear at Broadstairs Water Gala. They would arrive by flying at roof top height down the length of the High Street, scattering startled shoppers as they went, then zoom up into a loop over the bay, before bomb bursting straight at the crowd lining the cliff tops. All this of course is a total no no today as they are not to fly anywhere near the crowd line, and the minimum height restriction has removed all the excitement. From 1966 “The Reds” were frequent visitors to RAF Manston where they made full use of the unrestricted airspace to practice their art. The shots at RAF Manston were taken between 1965/72 during my tenure as a spotty clerk in what was then the MT section but is now the RAF Manston History Museum Back in the day H&S was not an issue so I was able to get up close and friendly. My favourite spot was to clamber up onto the top of a 2500 petrol tanker. In those days they flew so low that more than once I began to think I may have to “jump for it” as they bomb burst seemingly straight at me. Even today the white smoke is created by injecting raw diesel fuel into the hot jet exhaust. This would just gently drift down upon its enthusiastic audience. Many is the time, I would arrive home smelling of diesel to be greeted by my mother’s cries of “those bloody Red Arrows had been down again?”

The Gnats did sterling service until replaced in 1979 by the bigger but less nimble Hawk. These airframes reach their sell by date in 2029 and the whole future of the “Reds” is currently uncertain, with no obvious British made replacement to keep the British flag flying. The only images that were taken with privileged access were for the arrival of the British Airways A380 for aircrew training at Manston in July 2013.

A journalist friend arranged a press pass enabling me for once to impersonate a real photographer. All of the early images were taken on my first “proper” camera, a 2nd hand Pentax S1A for which I paid a princely £45. I also paupered myself to buy a fixed length, manual focus 300mm lens. A twin lens reflex Yashica Mat, provided glorious 6x6 negatives. This presentation is an amalgam of scanned transparencies taken on Agfa CT18, with its modest 50 ASA, a combination of colour and black and white negatives. I hope you will be able to see the difference in quality since going digital in 2003 Video footage dates from 1989 to 2024.