

# TURBULENT TIMES

Jonathan Wilkins shares his experiences of a first season flying into things, under things and dropping things when flying a D31 Turbulent as part of The Turbulent Display Team

Photos by Richard Foord



Taking off and flying three aircraft tied together with bunting is just one airshow routine the Turb team are known for



**>** As a child I was probably no different to many of you with my dreams of one day being able to fly. As a young boy attending airshows with my dad, I was in my element, and living in the South-East back in the 80s and early 90s I was relatively spoilt for choice with airshows.

Regular venues included Biggin Hill, Manston and Folkestone seafront, sadly all now gone having – like so many others – succumbed to legislation and the economic decline. One annual display which particularly appealed to me and which I attended religiously was West Malling’s Great Warbirds, with its vast mix of vintage aircraft and the airfield’s virtually untouched wartime surroundings. Unfortunately West Malling’s demise was sealed in the early ‘90s, the classic WWII RAF airfield making way for a technology park and housing estate.

Even as a young lad, I had very little interest in fast, noisy jets and preferred the throaty tones of a radial or snappy crackle of a Merlin, and happily I followed those young dreams and learnt to fly, gaining my PPL at the age of 19.

As the years passed, I began to fly more interesting types, converting to tailwheel to expand my options so that in January 2008 I purchased my first aeroplane, Druine D31 Turbulent G-BUKH. For me, the Turbulent was an affordable, fun little Permit aircraft perfectly suited

**The author waves to the crowd – the Turb Team have always had a very personal relationship with the spectators**

for summertime aviating. My intentions were perhaps not so obvious at the time, but having spent a couple of years flying Kilo Hotel I was eager to move on to more adventurous flying. I was introduced to formation flying by Glyn Richards who, as a Turbulent owner himself, has over 350 hours on type, along with vast experience in formation and display flying. Glyn was the perfect mentor.

During the latter part of 2010, having acquired sufficient formation experience, I was invited by team manager Alan Garside to train with the Turbulent Display Team with a view to gaining my Display Authorisation the following spring and maybe, just maybe, taking part in my first display towards the end of the 2011 season – something I relished with anticipation.

Having successfully gained my DA in March that year, I knew little of the turn of events that would so beneficially work to my advantage. My initial introduction into the world of air displays, and looking to become part of them, came in May when I flew out to France with the team who were displaying at the famous NATO Tiger Meet at Cambrai. Although not displaying myself, I was able to gain a valuable introduction to the procedures involved in attending and taking part in this type of event, as well as supplying a spare aircraft if needed. It goes without saying that my first Channel crossing in a Turb, flying in five-ship formation, was fantastic, if a little slow.

Having completed the Continental part of my training, June saw the opportunity to tag along to RAF Cosford’s annual air display, again as reserve aircraft... but just prior to departing one of the team dropped out. The inevitable question arose, “Would you like to fly your first display?” Naturally and excitedly I said, “Yes!” The three-hour transit from Headcorn included a fuel stop at Lasham, weaving our way in

through dozens of thermalling gliders, and we arrived at Cosford through heavy showers of rain.

The following morning and my first display loomed. The thought of completing the much practised routine in front of thousands of spectators, rather than a field of sheep at Headcorn, was somewhat daunting but at the same time that zing of excitement had the adrenalin pumping. I was finally ready to demonstrate what I had learnt. Unfortunately the TAFS on the day showed a slow-moving warm front containing plenty of precipitation, and rain it did... all day! With many acts pulling out due to the conditions, we made the decision that it was safe enough for us to perform and we duly opened the show.

Having completed my first display, in rather challenging conditions to say the least, we arrived back on the ground, cold and thoroughly soaked through, but nevertheless I felt a huge sense of achievement and pride. I’m not sure exactly how many brave souls dared to peer out from underneath their rain-soaked umbrellas to watch our spirited endeavours though!

My unscheduled first display was soon to be followed by the team’s second trip of the year to France, when we took part in the Lille Air Show. This display was to be a challenge in itself, not just the breezy, bumpy conditions but a shortened display line to avoid the town meant a slight change to the routine to keep within our slot time. Fortunately we all managed to find our way and complete the display without a hitch.

By July I was almost an old-stager and I took part in my third display of the season, a small local event at Paddock Wood, ▶

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The Tiger Club's G-ARMZ, a regular team aircraft

this time just a stone's throw from our base at Headcorn. And in August, completing my first year with the team, I was lucky enough to be rostered for our last display, the two-day Wings and Wheels event at Dunsfold. Unfortunately, I would be without my own aircraft due to its Permit expiring the previous week, so I flew the bright yellow G-ARMZ over both days in perfect weather conditions. My first season as a display pilot was capped with a formation run and break on our return to Headcorn.

### Our display

Our display is a slightly complex routine consisting of four segments wedged into a 16-minute slot. We fly four Druine D31 Turbulents and rely on three hardy ground crew members to manage the ground-related part of the display.

To begin the display, we alternate between box formation (this is actually flown in a diamond) and line astern before running in towards the crowd line again in box for the break. During this manoeuvre we break in both directions, splitting into pairs for our Limbo Crossover.

Each pair of aircraft runs in on the display line parallel to the crowd from both directions. One pair flies down through the limbo, which is being held up on a pair of 20ft poles by two brave members of our trusty ground crew. We are uniquely authorised

to display down to a height of just three feet, which gives us just enough room to clear the bunting. The other pair of aircraft, flying in the opposite direction, passes the far edge of the limbo at the same height.

This gives spectators the perspective that the aircraft may collide and if the timing is right it always creates quite a gasp.

After performing this twice, all four aircraft rejoin to run one final pass through the limbo in line astern before pulling up and separating out for the flour-bombing sequence. Each armed with two one-pound flour bombs – only plain (plane) flour will do – we get two chances to hit the target right in front of the crowd line. Any bombs landing close to the target are rewarded with a loud bang, triggered by the ground crew, something the spectators don't expect from a small bag of flour. After reverting to racetracking in the same direction, we run in individually for the balloon-bursting sequence. Our ground crew release yellow helium balloons as we run in and using lots of hand/eye co-ordination we try to burst the balloons using our propellers. This may seem straightforward but actually

it isn't as easy as it seems and on a thermic or blustery day, it can be a real challenge as the balloons bobble and weave about in the air, making great entertainment for the spectators.

On the final run-in, to complete our routine we fly down the display line waving at the crowd and it's great looking down at so many people waving back in appreciation. It gives me a huge amount of satisfaction knowing that through what I have learned and in the skills that I have gained in my flying, I can entertain and enthral so many people and thoroughly enjoy myself doing what I love, even when sometimes flying in the most challenging of conditions. What we do is different, it's airborne madness and barnstorming at its best. It defies everything aviation – flying into things, flying under things and dropping things but still, it's pure entertainment and people love it.

Although not the oldest formation display team in the world, The Turbulent Display Team is the oldest formation display team in the world still flying with the same aircraft type. The US Navy Blue Angels started life in 1946 with Grumman F6F Hellcats and several aircraft types later, they display today with F18 Hornets. The Turb Team has been displaying D31 Turbulents since its formation in 1959 when it took part in its first public flying display at Fairoaks. Druine Turbulents were built both as homebuilts and under licence in the UK by Rollason Aircraft & Engines at Croydon from 1958; with Rollason's close ties with The Tiger Club, many aircraft ended up being flown by club members, with the Turb Team often displaying up to nine Turbulents at airshows across the UK, France, Belgium and even Ireland.

With several bookings for this year, including shows in France, I am thoroughly looking forward to my second season with the Turb Team and am delighted to be playing my part in 52 years of airshow history. ■

**Under the limbo is part of the act that airshow crowds have enjoyed for over 50 years**



**Three of the regular Turb Team practise their formation flying**

