

A day with the Reds

Hiss, whoosh, roar!

Ginge & I were stood at the gate of RAF Scampton. Ginge was explaining that we were there by invitation for a Red Arrows GA Safety Day. I was looking down the noisy end of an automatic rifle. The guy in combat fatigues holding the safe end of it looked friendly enough though. We were given a laminated pass and told to drive onto the base and follow the signs to the car park. Phew.

We were actually there for the opportunity to crawl all over the Red's Hawks and to watch them practising, but the price was to spend the morning and half the afternoon in a meeting room listening to presentations and asking intelligent questions. We did get fed for free at lunchtime though, and the graveyard shift (the first presentation after lunch) was done by David Cockburn, the entertaining chap who does most of the CAA Safety Evenings. More of that later...

Coffee and introductions over, we were given a talk by 'Red 10', Flt Lt Andy Robins, who asked us to avoid flying into them because they valued their lives too. He pointed out (as did several others throughout the day) that the only official source of info about RA(T)s is the AIS – he had us chanting “the A. I.S.” several times through his talk. The CAA chaps actually had available some glossy A5 user guides to the infamous AIS website. The guide is also available online at <http://www.ais.org.uk/aes/en/image/PIBGuide.PDF>

Alternatively you can always ring up the freephone number **0500 35480 2** for a recorded message about what's going on and where to avoid it. Oh and please don't use the Red Arrows web site as a source of information – it's intended for PR, not flight safety briefings

Boring bit over, he said that they do about 90 displays a year, plus about 80 fly-pasts (in response to 1300 requests!). They have a difficult time when somebody infringes a display RA(T) because it's a challenge manoeuvring 10 fast jets around the sky while avoiding an uninvited guest – when a combat pilot describes something as dangerous I believe him. They have had a good variety of people infringing their airspace including once a pilot from their own home base, RAF Scampton, so nobody's perfect. He could only recall one prosecution for an infringement: a Dutch pilot who deliberately flew through a display while taking photographs.

They generally fly between displays as a 10 aircraft formation in two groups of 5 about half a mile apart at about 2000ft (QNH) and 360kt – a nice round 10 seconds per nautical mile to make The Boss' mental arithmetic easy. They don't carry TCAS or microlight-spotting radar, but they do have twenty pairs of eyes looking out, including the technicians who fly in the rear seat during transit, and UHF intercom to warn The Boss of 'tallies'. They plan their transits by air chart, street map, and simple GPS. They do talk to civilian ATSU's as they fly around and will take a RIS if available, but mostly it's VFR see and avoid. If they see, they'll avoid by descending to 'skyline the tally'. They might give a short burst of smoke to say hello. During a fly-past they'll drop to about 500ft to 1000ft – so now you know where to look.

What, I asked, should I do in my microlight if I saw them coming towards me? “Stay predictable” was the answer. OK, but what if thought they might not have seen me?

“Climb”. But I only get 450fpm on a good day ! <chuckles from the crowd>. “Then show your wing – but don’t fall out of the sky doing it”.

There then followed a couple of talks about how to avoid airspace infringements in general. Further reminders of “the A.I.S.” and fly-on-track and the 0500 number, and an entreaty that if you think you are infringing by accident to get on the radio and say so – they might be able to help you find the safest way out of the mess and if they know what you are trying to do. It makes the controller’s job easier too.

After lunch we got a surprise: the man from the CAA was telling us that he thought GPS could help improve VFR flight safety. I found his talk interesting as he showed how use of a GPS can be integrated into the normal VFR flight routines. Basically, and much simplified, after all the usual warnings about the ways that GPS can give you duff information or distract you from your lookout, he suggested a variety of uses:

- use the GPS at turn points to confirm track and wind calculations
- compare GPS ETA at waypoints with the calculated ones
- just use the GPS as a CDI (keeping right of planned track in case someone else’s using the same waypoints but in the opposite direction)
- use the GPS as a pointer to help locate a reference point as you approach it
- set a route around controlled airspace and then skip unwanted waypoints if you get cleared through it (not all GPS units allow this easily, but some do)
- set your planned destination as an intermediate waypoint, with your alternate as the GPS final destination so you don’t need to replan if you need it
- if you’ve had to divert to avoid weather, the GPS can help you find your way back to the planned route.

... and finally, they ask, please check out www.airspacesafety.com, a new Airspace Safety Initiative

Then at long last they took us outside, loaded us into a couple of coaches, and drove us round to the hangars (past “Nigger’s” grave – all say “ah!”). After a safety briefing by Andy we were allowed to wander the hangar and chat with the technical staff. I managed to blag my way to sticking my nose into a Hawk cockpit and having a look around. The forward visibility was better than I expected, but there is still a lot of ironwork for potentially conflicting traffic to hide behind. Meanwhile in the background, Reds 1 to 5 were practising their routine for the 2008 season.

