



MEET THE PILOTS

2016 EXHIBITORS:
BREITLING WINGWALKERS

Ever wondered what it feels like to hurtle through the air in synchronised formation and loop-the-loop, or how a pilot gets to the level of skill required to perform in a professional air show? If so, the annual Meet the Pilots event is the place to be.



GARY ELSON
GUERNSEY AERO CLUB CHAIRMAN

Air traffic controller and current Chairman of the Guernsey Aero Club, Gary Elson, has a wealth of experience on the air show circuit. As the Deputy Senior controller at the Royal International Air Tattoo – the biggest military air show in

the world, Gary also provides air traffic control services at the Eastbourne, Dunsfold and Guernsey air shows.

‘I’ve been organising the popular Meet the Pilots event, in conjunction with the Guernsey Air Display, since 2006, when I managed to arrange for a Lynx helicopter of the Royal Navy Black Cats team to be opened to the public. Since then, the event has gone from strength to strength, with over a thousand children and adults visiting the airport to get an up-close look at the display aircraft and talk to their pilots.’

Together with marvelling at the awe-inspiring aerial display (Guernsey Air Display – 14 September), meeting the pilots is a must for anyone wanting to hear their fascinating back-stories and personal accounts of life as a pilot. Pilot John Beattie enthusiastically describes flying as ‘some kind of compulsion once you get into it’. With over 40



2016 EXHIBITORS: WILLIE CRUICKSHANK AND AL COUTTS
– WILDCATS AEROBATICS DISPLAY TEAM

years’ experience in display flying, John has flown a multitude of aircraft since first training with the Royal Navy in 1968, from helicopters to jets, including his beloved Skyraider. He participated in his first display only five years after taking up flying, and moved into fixed-wing display flying in 1986. Part of being a skilled air display pilot means understanding the aircraft’s capabilities and limitations; John playfully advises not to ‘try and hover a BAE 146, or do a loop in a helicopter’

For Willie Cruickshank, whose experience includes 26 years as a fighter pilot in the RAF, his joy of flying stems

from ‘the freedom that it brings’. With a private pilot’s license under his belt at just 17, it was 28 years later that Willie embraced the world of air displays. ‘Before being allowed to perform in air displays, we must first be awarded a Display Authorisation (DA) by an approved examiner. Obtaining a DA is an annual requirement and it can take around 10 hours of flying to prepare for the exam. That may not sound like a lot but a display or practice flight generally only lasts about 15 minutes.’

Mark Petrie, known for expertly handling his Strikemaster jet, had been flying for 25 years, including 12 years in the RAF, before venturing into jet air displays, where the level of skill required is demanding. Similarly, Andy Preece considers himself ‘extremely lucky’ to have been given the opportunity to fly a number of different aircraft over the years. ‘It is wonderful to be able to step into a machine that has the freedom to manoeuvre in three dimensions, while the windows have the most incredible views in the world. For me, display flying takes the whole experience to the ultimate level.’

So how do you get to be an air display pilot? John explains that ‘you normally start by being fairly experienced and put in lots of hours perfecting various manoeuvres at altitude, then slowly bring the height down to display levels. This doesn’t have to take long, but it is important to lead into it gradually. Once trained and with a bit of experience, each season starts with some intensive practice and check rides



2016 EXHIBITORS:
SIMON SHIRLEY – RAVEN DISPLAY TEAM

in front of a DAE or mentor.’ In addition, the pilots attend seminars where they discuss the best way to do things to avoid problems that have occurred in the past; being mentally prepared is paramount.

Taking to the skies obviously involves a degree of risk that many would be dubious about undertaking.

For John, owing to such extensive practice beforehand, you could view every manoeuvre ‘as a risk or none of them as being risky, given that they each have a clearly defined start condition for speed and height, designed to allow the manoeuvre to ▶



2016 EXHIBITORS:

LEFT: RAVEN DISPLAY TEAM

RIGHT: AURIGNY'S MUCH-LOVED JOEY JUNIOR

be completed satisfactorily and with a safety margin to allow for the unexpected.' For Willie, the highest levels of risk he's experienced were during combat missions as an RAF fighter pilot. 'Although display flying might look dangerous, we go to huge lengths to minimise any risks to ourselves and others. Consequently, I don't think of it as a risky occupation. My favourite manoeuvre is the 'mirror pass' when we fly canopy to canopy - Top Gun style.' When asked what the riskiest manoeuvre is that Mark's ever done, he was quick to answer with 'landing!'

In terms of advising the next generation of future air display pilots, John recommends getting 'as much practice as possible. Listen to others, never assume you know more than the next chap. Watch other performers and learn what looks good to a crowd. Often what feels good in the cockpit doesn't look so good from outside.' Willie adds, 'Follow your dream and don't ever give up. I applied to the RAF to be a pilot, which was my dream job, but was only offered

a commission as a navigator. I took the job and loved my time in the 'back seat' but after five years of perseverance, they finally gave in to my request for a shot at pilot training and I've never looked back.'

Mark describes the Meet the Pilots event as the perfect opportunity to 'get up close to the aircraft and speak directly to the crew.' Members of the public can look forward to seeing inside the planes and learning how they work. Andy notes that it is the ideal place to 'see and feel a pilot's passion for flying that is sometimes difficult to express with written words alone.'

'I love the Meet the Pilots event at Guernsey Airport! It's a unique opportunity for people to come and see the aeroplanes up close and talk to their pilots, ahead of watching the display in the bay the following day. It's always a great event with a really friendly atmosphere and we love meeting people of all ages.'

- Willie Cruikshank ■

MEET THE PILOTS

13 September 2017
ASG Hangar
Guernsey Airport

Any plane enthusiasts and budding pilots need to head to the Meet the Pilots event, which will be hosted at the ASG Hangar at Guernsey Airport on 13 September, where even Aurigny's much-loved Joey Junior will be displayed. As 2017 celebrates the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Britain Memorial Flight, during the annual air display that will take place the following day, spectators can again see the Lancaster, Hurricane and Spitfire flying over St Peter Port.

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