

FLEET AIR ARM AEROBATIC TEAMS

Introduction

The Fleet Air Arm (FAA) has maintained an aerobatic display team since 1948, firstly with piston engined aircraft, then moving on to jet aircraft; the current team now use helicopters. The Black Cats are the current elite display team comprising of two Lynx Helicopters from 702 Naval Air Squadron. The teams comprise of instructors with plenty of experience in flying the particular type of aircraft used in the displays. All teams are a regular squadron of the FAA with a designated number and the training is carried out at the Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) at Yeovilton in Somerset. The teams perform at air shows all over the British Isles and for special events they some times make an appearance abroad.

806 Squadron

This squadron was re-formed in 1948 as the official Royal Navy Aerobatic Team with three, twin piston-engined Sea Hornet F.20s and a solitary jet fighter the Sea Vampire. As was the custom all pilots were handpicked by the Commanding Officer Lt-Cdr D. B. Law. After a final checkout by De Havillands at Hatfield they were collected on 17th May 1948 for embarkation on the aircraft carrier HMCS Magnificent at Belfast for a tour of North America. The ship sailed on 25th for Dartmouth, Nova Scotia on the 25th. The Sea Vampire, flown by Lt-Cdr Law was the first aircraft to fly into the new Idlewild Airport in New York, giving displays on 22nd and 23rd. Law gave two displays in the Vampire and Hornet on the 21st over Dartmouth. 806 participated with some distinction in the opening ceremony of Idlewild (now J. F. Kennedy). The Hornet could carry out spectacular single-engine manoeuvres, which were performed on weekdays at the end of July/early August. Displays were performed at Dorval, Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and Niagara Falls by 1st September. After reaching the UK, 806 squadron went ashore and sadly disbanded on 25th September; eventually they reformed with the new Sea Hawk jet fighter at RNAS Brawdy during March 1953.

738 Squadron - Red Seahawks

In June 1957, 738 squadron was chosen to take part in a combined Naval display at the Farnborough Air show in September, despite having a full operational programme. It was decided to have a team of five aircraft, which were the Hawker Seahawk single-seat fighter. Permission was granted to paint the aircraft bright red with 'Royal Navy' in big white letters under the wing. They were the first aerobatic team to produce smoke at will, by modifying the fuel injection system, from an American technique and this worked perfectly. The team leader was Alan Leahy CBE, DSC and used RNAS Ford, in West Sussex, as their base for workup. By all accounts the Royal Navy's performance at Farnborough was well received, particularly in the aviation magazines and even in the New York Times. During the season the squadron took part in 17 air displays, finishing up at RNAS Abbotsinch.

Fred's Five

This team was formed in 1962, there were in fact ten aircrew, five pilots and five observers from the Naval Fighter School at RNAS Yeovilton. Fred was Lt-Cdr Peter Reynolds, a very experienced flyer, an Empire Test Pilot with thousands of hours in the air. Their aircraft was the De Havilland Sea Vixen, a high level interceptor day and night fighter. Despite its size and complexity, its handling qualities were very good, although not designed for aerobatics. To make the displays more spectacular each aircraft was modified to make coloured smoke, this is done by injecting dyed oil from a small tank under the port wing into the exhaust. The team flew a variety of formations and they proved very popular in the 1960's.

Simons Sircus-892 Squadron

This was the first squadron to be equipped with the D.H. Sea Vixen, being continuously in commission throughout the 1960's operating from aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean, Middle and Far East. The commanding officer was Lt-Cdr Simon Idiens, who was a founder member of Fred's Five and gave his name to this display team. He served in five frontline squadrons, completing over 500 day and 100 night carrier landings. They were formed as an aerobatics team in 1968 after being disembarked from HMS Hermes, reducing to six aircraft. The team prepared for the display season at RNAS Yeovilton between operational sorties, which could see them, embark on a carrier anywhere in the world. When you see a 20-ton frontline fighter being looped as if it were a light jet display plane, you must appreciate the high degree of precision the crews achieved. The team amply demonstrated the capabilities of the Sea Vixen and Naval fighter flying abilities.

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The Sharks-705 Squadron

The main task of 705 was to train helicopter pilots up to 'Wings' standard after completing flying experience on fixed wing aircraft such as the Chipmunk and the Bulldog. The team were formed in 1988, being volunteers and devoted a great deal of their spare time in improving their display. The six members of the Sharks flew the highly manoeuvrable Westland-Aerospatiale Gazelle HT2 helicopter with its high speed and agility. The 8-minute sequence consisted of breathtaking opposition manoeuvres, bringing the rotor blades to within fifteen feet of each other, at closing speeds of over 200 miles per hour. At the time they were one of the few helicopter display teams in the world, and were very active at most UK summer airshows.

The Black Cats

The current aerobatic team fly the Augusta-Westland Lynx HAS8 helicopter, they are based at RNAS Yeovilton. The Royal Navy Helicopter Display Team were formed in 2001 and are the RN's elite display team. Comprised of two Lynx Helicopters from 702 Naval Air Squadron, The Black Cats offer unique pairs formation display that utilises the dynamic nature of the helicopter. The team has stunned audiences, displaying in front of crowds up to 750,000 at airshows throughout the UK. Crews are selected from the instructors of 702 Naval Air Squadron to fly the display. The crews remain permanent for the season, so keeping continuity throughout the team. The carefully choreographed display fully utilises the precision and aerobatic capabilities of the Lynx. The display featured high-speed crosses, close formation work and opposing manoeuvres