



Airshow Photography

Part 5 of our Aviation Photography series contributed by Chris Gee

WELCOME to part five of our how-to series of aviation photography articles. In this issue, we cover how to make the most out of the greatest of aviation-geek gatherings, the airshow! Since attending my first airshow - I think it was a 'Wings and Wheels' event held at Wigram in Christchurch in the early 80s - I have been addicted to the sound of engines, the smell of aviation fuel, and the feeling of camaraderie from being surrounded by hundreds, sometimes thousands, of fellow aeroplane fanatics. By the time you read this article, many of you will have just returned from the wonderful Omasa Classic Fighters airshow (expect a photo essay from Omasa in the next issue), and I hope you were able to apply some of the photography techniques we covered in previous issues.

Preparation and Planning

It is important to do some research and preparation before you attend an airshow, especially one that is held in another city or country. I recommend reading as many reviews and reports as you can from previous years' events, as well as scouring the online forums for tips on transport and accommodation from the locals. This can also be a great way to make some new friends. While preparing to attend the Royal International Air Tattoo (RIAT) at Fairford in the UK in 2007, I discovered I had a problem with the trains not running from my station on the Sunday, the last day of the show. One of the guys on a local forum realised he would be driving past my hotel that day on his way to the airshow and offered to pick me up. After some emails back and forth, he told me to cancel all my train tickets for the week, and he drove me to and from the airshow everyday! We remain good friends to this day.

It's a good idea to plan to arrive as early as possible, not only to get a head start on the traffic and queues at the gate, but also to give yourself some time to get around the static displays before the majority of the crowd turn up. It's very frustrating having people walking in front of you while you are trying for a wide angle shot of an entire aircraft! There is often a queue of people with cameras trying to get the same shot as you, so be patient. It also pays to hang around for an hour or two after the airshow officially ends, since this lets most of the traffic and people get out before you try to leave. There is usually still a lot



Tupolev Tu-144 'Konkordski'



The Red Arrows 'Bomb Burst'



RAF AH-64 Apache with Rockets



Spanish Air Force EF2000 Typhoon



Royal Air Force GR9 Harrier

to see and photograph at that time, and the evening light can be wonderful for your images.

Book your accommodation early since all the hotels or motels near an airshow will usually sell out months in advance. The longer you leave it, the further away from the airfield your hotel will be, which will also affect your transport. Although special trains or buses will often be put on for an event, getting to the airfield can be half the adventure! One good case of this is the MAKS Air Expo, in Moscow, Russia. Over 200,000 people attended the two public days of the airshow, and the trains were absolutely jam packed for the hour-long ride out to Zhukovskiy airbase. The crush to get onto the trains was intense and one of the American guys I was travelling with got his leg trapped between the platform and the train, his head and back trampled on, and a massive deep gash up the side of his leg. With no handholds, people hanging onto your shoulders and arms, and a very fast moving and rapidly stopping train the ride was like a rollercoaster... I was glad to have all my camera gear safely stored in a backpack that I could put on my front instead of my back. Of course once I got through the security (which took two hours) and out onto the airfield with the marvellous array of unique Russian aircraft before me, it immediately became very well worth it!

You will need to work out how much gear you can realistically cart around on your back all day. It is good to have a specialised camera backpack for your gear, but make sure there's room in it for some supplies. I always take a few snacks and bottles of water as the food stalls tend to be expensive, and there can be major delays before you get served. There's nothing worse than standing in a queue watching all the displays you could be photographing! A typical list of gear you might want to carry could be as follows: Camera body (two if possible...), Zoom Lens, Wide Lens, Flash, Spare batteries, Spare memory cards, Food and Water.

It is common at airshows to see people carrying two cameras at once, one with a zoom and one with a wide-angle lens. This saves time by avoiding the need to change between lenses, with the added

Pictures at left: Chris has been fortunate to attend several major overseas airshows, often during time out from his regular work on tour as a professional Concert Audio Engineer (www.stereomage.co.nz). If you plan, prepare and practice, great pictures will follow.

bonus of reducing the chance of dust getting into your camera while the sensor chamber is exposed. On the other hand, it can get quite difficult carrying two at the same time, and you might find your precious cameras get knocked around a fair bit. Even with only one camera, it is easy for the controls to get bumped without you knowing. I recommend performing a camera check every few minutes to make sure all your knobs and switches are still in the right place, thereby avoiding discovering that your metering mode has been knocked into 'spot' and your exposure meter has been feeding you false information for the last ten minutes... a true story I'm afraid!

Tickets and Access

Sometimes as a photographer it can be difficult dealing with the crowds at an airshow. Many people feel the need to raise their hands in the air as aircraft fly past, or put their children on their shoulders, which while understandable, can be frustrating if you're not right up the front of the audience. Tripods can be tricky to use in a crowd since people may trip up on the legs and knock you around, so unless you know you will have the room, stick to a monopod.

Luckily most New Zealand airshows are not overcrowded and everybody is on the same page, behaving themselves, and enjoying the air displays. The same cannot necessarily be said for the crowds in other countries though! At the MAKS Air Expo in Moscow there are vodka stands between the aircraft and the military hardware, drawing a very young (and intoxicated) crowd. The 'barrier' between the audience and the runway consisted of a line of soldiers linking arms, and sometimes an officer with a megaphone on the back of a jeep would drive along behind them and order them to move the crowd back, so all of a sudden the whole crowd would be squished back five meters. It was more like being in the front row of a concert than an aviation event!

To avoid the crowds and ensure you will get the shots you want, you may want to investigate whether the airshow sells Gold or Silver tickets, which give you a premium grandstand view, as well as privileged access to food, refreshments, parking and merchandising. Although more expensive, I do recommend getting a couple of days up the top of the grandstand, since the elevation

offers photographers an excellent view of the top of the aircraft for landing and take off, and avoids that most annoying of airshow items, the speaker stand! While it is obviously essential for the public to be able to hear commentary and public announcements, there is nothing worse than having a long line of small speakers on tall stands all along the crowd. Many a good photo has been ruined when a blurry speaker passes in front of the aircraft...

Another possible option is to extend your visit to the airshow beyond the advertised public days. There will normally be a few 'practice' days before the airshow, followed by a 'fly-out' day afterwards. Many of the larger events have 'trade-only' days before the public days, and sometimes you can just supply a business card and pay a small fee to get in. Often the trade days are the main reason for the airshow (with the public days an after-thought) and they are every photographer's dream! Many of the air displays are rehearsed then, and without crowds of people bumping your elbows and getting their heads in your way, you can move up and down the crowd at will to get shots from various angles, safe in the knowledge

that you can easily get back up the front of the audience. All the aircraft are usually set up on the static display, and are similarly much easier to photograph on trade days without thousands of people getting in the way. Often there won't be barriers set up around the aircraft, and you can get access to the aircraft for close up and cockpit shots (always ask permission of course). I also find the aircrew much more relaxed and conversational on the trade days, which can lead to some great photographic opportunities. At the ILA airshow in Berlin, I had a fantastic conversation with a German Army helicopter pilot who recognised the greenstone around my neck and asked if I was from New Zealand. He told me he flew both the UH-1 Huey and NH-90 TTH and took me airside to get a close up look at the NH-90, which was particularly interesting given that the RNZAF is about to convert from one to the other!

The arrival and fly-out days can be an excellent opportunity to get a new angle on the aircraft taxiing and taking off, and some events will arrange a special public viewing area for this. The fly-out



1. Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack on an airshow day with hoards of people; **Compare to 2.** Ilyushin IL-78 Midas on a trade day offering a clear shot; **3 & 4.** Keep a sharp eye out for anything out of the ordinary or unique. I will never forget that Russian Air Force pilot cycling up to her aircraft, hanging her bike and handbag on an air-to-air missile and climbing into her Mig-27...

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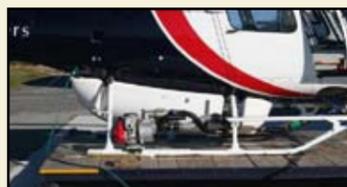
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day of the RIAT airshow is the only day of the year that there is an airport in Europe busier than Heathrow. It takes three days to fly all the aircraft in, and one day to fly them all out again! Even if there is no access available to the airfield on these rehearsal days, it can be worth parking up near the end of the runway, to enjoy the view. Since many of the aircraft will perform their tightest turns and manoeuvres near the airfield perimeter, you can get a unique perspective you might otherwise not get during the airshow itself.

If you are covering the event for a magazine or a website (maybe even your own website) you might be able to apply for a media pass. Most events will have viewing areas set aside for the media, and a place with internet access and power to upload images and recharge batteries. If you need media access to an event, it's important to apply early on, but be aware that there will often be a set number of media passes available, so don't be too disappointed if you are turned down. You will need the editor of your publication to sponsor you as their agent, and you will need to behave in a professional manner. The media viewing area can be crowded too, and you will be restricted to one spot so it's still important to move around and get different angles on the event. The best thing about media access is the opportunity to meet other photographers and watch them work. It can be a great learning experience, and some pros are very helpful and open with their advice.

The Weather

The great nemesis of all airshows is the weather. It pays to be prepared, no matter how the day starts out or what the forecast says. I have sat through torrential rain, vicious dust storms, cyclone winds (bad enough to overturn light planes), and heinous heat waves, sometimes all in one day at the airshow! Yes, Melbourne, that's you...

Here are a few things that I find will get you through whatever nature throws your way: A fold up windbreaker or parka, a pocket sized waterproof poncho, a few plastic bags (to protect your camera if it starts raining), sunscreen, moisturiser and lip balm, and a small towel (to dry your camera - The Hitchhiker's Guide was right!)

The biggest danger to your camera is dust, so if you see a dust storm approaching the airfield, or the commentators warn that one is on the way, then quickly put your camera away in its bag with all zips done up well. The worst-case scenario is a combination of dust and rain: one of my lenses became virtually inoperable during the Avalon Airshow in Melbourne after a dust storm blew in, followed an hour later by rain and strong wind. To make matters worse, the hot sun that arrived after the rain brought squadrons of midges that swarmed around your head and get into your eyes. I swear that I found some of them inside my camera when I got back to the hotel... While I did get some excellent photos in these conditions, in hindsight I would have preferred to have a working lens at the end of the day! While many professional cameras have sealed bodies that are 'weather resistant' it still pays to do your best to protect them from moisture and dust.

Photography at Airshows

There are two basic factors that can influence your photography at an airshow more than any others: the distance between the crowd and the air displays, and the location of the sun as it moves across the sky during the day. Of course, both of these factors are out of your control, but you should factor them in to your planning. Many events overseas have extremely long distances between the public and where the aircraft actually perform. The position of the sun relative to the crowd line can influence where you choose to move during the airshow. It's very difficult avoiding silhouetted aircraft if

you end up shooting into the sun, so if possible always try to keep the sun at your back. If you are very lucky you might be able to get access to the opposite side of the airfield from the crowd. This might solve not only your problem with the position of the sun, but also give you a very dramatic background behind the aircraft... the crowd! Most airshows will publish a layout of the show beforehand online, and you can study this to find out where the sun will probably be at what time during the day or how far you will be from the action. This can affect the choice of lenses you bring to the event, but I presume most of you are like myself, and don't have a plethora of lenses to choose from. If you end up shooting into the sun remember to over-expose your images a small amount, otherwise the fuselage of the aircraft between you and the sun will be extremely dark.

If you don't have your gold pass, where is the best place to be to cover the air displays? If you can only attend one public day, it may be worth staking out a spot at the front and centre of the crowd early, and sticking to it! Of course, you may find that if you leave your spot at the front of crowd centre it is impossible to return... Hopefully you'll be able to get a posse of photographers together to guard your spot and let you back in! Having said that though, it can be rather boring getting all your photos from the same spot, so some people like to move around constantly. You can get some excellent shots of the aircraft taxiing, landing and turning overhead from the ends of the crowd, and from behind the operational area where the aircraft prepare before their display. It is also not uncommon to see photographers carting around small stepladders. Personally, I find these a real pain to carry around, but they are

useful to get above the crowds' heads and to gain some elevation in the static display.

It's important to remember that an airshow is not just about aircraft, but also about people: pilots, aircraft marshals, guards, maintainers or spectators. It pays to keep an eye out for anybody doing something unusual and interesting since the small personal

details can make for a great photograph. If you are lucky enough to be able to attend an airshow for multiple rehearsal and public days you can really get a feel for the how the displays will pan out, and learn the best spots to cover each aspect from.

Remember though that the airshow organisers' best-laid plans will always need changing on the day!

Finally, it's easy to get lost in your photos, camera settings and technique while you are photographing an airshow, so I recommend that you put down your camera occasionally and just enjoy the show. One of the highlights of the RIAT airshow in England was the afternoon of the very last day of the airshow, when my best friend from my school days came up, made me put the camera away, handed me a glass of cider, and we watched the Red Arrows perform without once

looking through a viewfinder. Admittedly, I had been at the airshow for a week by then and had thousands of images already... but still, it's important to remember to enjoy yourself!

In the next episode, we will be talking about that 'holy-grail' of aviation photography, the Air-to-Air shoot, hearing from a few legendary photographers with plentiful Air-to-Air experience, whose work I am sure you will recognise. Until then, keep shooting, and have fun!



1. MAKS Air Expo airshow obstacles include hands in the air, speaker stands and punters climbing over everything; 2. NH-90 with UH-1 Iroquois in the background - Trade days offer better access; 3. Red Arrows - Moving to the end of the taxiway can provide unique angles; 4. Keep plastic bags and a towel handy in case of bad weather; 5. Be ready to capture the fun moments.

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