



Jets in Formation

SOME 12 months ago Tom Williams, President of the Sport and Vintage Aviation Society, the force behind the Wings Over Wairarapa Airshow, raised the idea of a Jet Formation for the event.

The thought was well founded with there now being four Aero Vodochody L-39 Albatros aircraft in the country. The challenges were to identify suitably qualified pilots, encourage the owners of these aircraft to make them available, to get the aircraft and pilots together and of course to finance the venture.

It was not too difficult to engage pilots, an initial approach to the owners brought cautious agreement and the promoter undertook to budget the venture.

My involvement was to initially co-ordinate and as it transpired to fly as #3 in the 'Team'. The other pilots were identified as Pete Vause with his own aircraft based in New Plymouth, John Lanham and one other possibility with the fourth aircraft.

By mid October it was time to get cracking. With the owner of the L-39 I would fly, we flew to New Plymouth for a day with Pete Vause to see what we could 'achieve'. With Brett Emeny coaching we achieved a successful first flight completing advanced formation manoeuvres including chandelles, loops and even a barrel roll. On a second sortie Brett joined in with his Vampire to assess compatibility of the two different types. Again the results were encouraging.

With this success the potential team was formulated; John Lanham to lead, Pete as #2, and myself as #3. The fourth L-39 had become unavailable so consideration was given to putting the Strikemaster in as #4. The next step was to get these four aircraft together. On the day this was planned the Strikemaster was unserviceable, however the team of John Lanham, Pete Vause and myself assembled at New Plymouth on 11th of December. Again we were joined by Brett Emeny in his Vampire. Over two flights we were able to confirm the potential of the 3 Albatross team, the compatibility of the Vampire and develop a basic display routine. The missing link was the Strikemaster. Would its performance suit the other aircraft?

Back at Ardmore on 7th January, just two weeks out from the Show, Dave Brown and myself finally had the opportunity to fly these two aircraft together. The L-39 and Strikemaster are of similar weight and power so as expected were very compatible in speeds and manoeuvrability. The stage was set.

After some discussion within the potential group it was decided we could put up a formation of six aircraft, being three L-39s, the Strikemaster and two Vampires piloted by Brett Emeny and Paul (Huggy) Hughan. With the aircraft involved scattered from Auckland to New Plymouth, Nelson and Christchurch the challenge would now be to achieve a combined practice. This was tentatively planned for Thursday before the Show, however, the weather and pilot availability prevented this.

So on Friday 18th January we got together at Masterton for a full practice. The display was finalised: Six aircraft would start the show with a loop and flypast, the Strikemaster would break from the formation to provide solo manoeuvres between formation passes which included several formation changes, and the Vampires would detach to provide 3x L-39 and Vampire pair manoeuvres. Seemed simple!! The first flight was preceded by a thorough briefing and 'walk through' by the pilots so all knew the routine and individual responsibilities.

The initial practice was once again encouraging. Following the



Chris Gee

A first for New Zealand: Six privately owned jets in formation at the Wings Over Wairarapa airshow. They were flown by Lead (blue L-39) John Lanham, #2 (green L-39) Peter Vause, #3 (blue camo L-39) Frank Parker, #6 (Strikemaster) Dave Brown, #4 (silver Vampire) Brett Emeny, #5 (grey Vampire) Paul Hughan.

flight and a thorough debrief, including critique from a number of observers, a few minor changes were made to improve the flow of the display and then it was on live for the first display on Friday evening. This was followed by displays on Saturday and Sunday of the Airshow.

Flying a jet in a formation display was a new experience for me. I have many years of Harvard and 'Fighter' plus some basic jet formation experience as back up so it was not totally daunting. The Jet, with no propeller has no torque effects so flying in formation is a little easier. This is countered by a slower engine response so it is easy to get 'dragged' (left behind), or with less drag (no propeller disc) gain excessive overtake on the leader. The higher speeds add to the aircraft stability and larger manoeuvres actually allow more time to analyse and correct minor errors in formation position (though that gets a little scrambled at the top of a loop). Equally, minor diversions develop into major ones quickly, which can affect the whole formation.

This display could not have been achieved without a lot of co-operation and input from a number of people. Firstly, the promotion of the concept and underwriting of the cost by Wings over Wairarapa. Secondly, the generosity of the aircraft owners to make their aircraft available to the group. Finally the individual pilots whose experience, capability and dedication enabled it to happen. Accordingly I wish to make my thanks to the owners concerned.

As a part 'facilitator' and participant in the Jet Team it was indeed an exciting experience. Feedback to date suggests it was well appreciated by our audience, so maybe again one day.

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