



PRECISION PILOTS DO IT PRECISELY

ANTHONY PRESTON ON HOW A GOOD
FROLIC CAN DO WONDERS FOR YOUR
FLYING SKILL, AS LONG AS YOU TAKE IT
SERIOUSLY

On arriving into Truro I was greeted by more unfortunate news. Nick had been caught out by wind shear, with his front strut taking most of the shock after a particularly heavy landing. It was too badly bent to be considered airworthy.

With the creative use of his smart phone, an aluminium stockist was found, along with a B&Q for a hacksaw and an electric drill, and within an hour a new front strut was manufactured.

Due to our attention being focused on the obvious, we missed the torn engine mount until after the repair. This was going to be a little more difficult to put right, and sadly for Nick, he had to load his plane into the Van of Shame and drive with Leah to Belle Vue.

The three remaining pilots – me, Gareth and Big Al – set off to rendezvous with the rest of the gang at Belle Vue. The flight was spectacular, joining the north coast after Wadebridge and then over Tintagel and up to Bude with the sun slowly sinking towards the horizon behind us.

On arrival I could see the Bugs parked by the side of the runway. Jon and Carl reported that Pat was also in and had set off for a little local flying before the sun set, leaving just Al and Gareth to arrive. After quite a wait and with the sun on the horizon, two dots appeared, growing larger with every passing minute.

Quite a wonderful sight to see, the gaggle coming home for the night. □

• Next month: Nick flees the Van of Shame – only to be replaced by Ben.



THERE was a time when frolicking in the sky was encouraged, not frowned upon by safety-conscious killjoys and those with leaden feet.

The Tiger Club was founded at Redhill in 1958. I joined in 1962. What a club atmosphere! Not only had we three Super Tiger Moths, named Bishop, Deacon and Archbishop, but also three SV4C Stampes, G-ATKC, G-ASHS, and my favourite, G-AWEF, and a gaggle of cheeky D31 Turbulents.

In their competition form all the biplanes were single-seat, open cockpit, and fitted with Gypsy Major engines capable of maintaining power when inverted.

Regular weekend competitions reinforced the high spirits of youthful aviators; no ATC for us! We believed, with justification, in the Mark One eyeball. We were not afearred of competition in those days. Combatants competed. It was what the sons of fighter pilots did. It was later we regretted its loss – on playing field, in boxing ring and squash court.

Picture a typical summer's afternoon on the green-sward that makes up the inviting expanse that is Redhill Aerodrome. There will be a great deal of bustle, on the ground and in the air.

Pride of place in the day's events will go to the aerobatic competitions, keenly observed by the team of judges (Iona Radice and Neil Williams among them) and experts huddled behind, looking up and loudly voicing their Aresti* expertise.

But side events have their place too, the favourites among them being flour-bombing, balloon-bursting, ▷



De Havilland Super Tiger

* The Aresti Catalogue is the FAI document designed by Spanish aviator Colonel José Luis Aresti Aguirre (1919–2003) spelling out the aerobatic manoeuvres permitted in aerobatic competition.



Belgian Stampe et Verongen SV4C

▷ ribbon-cutting and spot landings. Here, Rollason-built *Draine Turbulents*, the microlights of their day, fleck the Surrey sky, like unruly doves painted in flashy colours.

Most popular is flour-bombing from the single-seat, open-cockpit *Turbulent*, which can be rolled as effectively in one direction as the other.

Ribbon-cutting and balloon-bursting sees extreme manoeuvres close to the ground. Competitors might be more cautious had they known of my brother-in-law's encounter with the self-same ground in the self-same aeroplane.

One day, overhead the aerodrome's northern boundary in a blue *Turbulent*, he manages to enter a spin. He manages to enter, but fails to exit. Or, if exit he does, he does so too late. With a "Pat-a-Poum" he smites the ground. Engine here, one wing there, tail here, and seat, in which Tony was still sitting, there. Other bits spread about, like flowers in a flowerbed.

In a hospital bed, battered, Tony encounters intensive care but thinks little of it. Soon has himself removed. Back at work in four weeks, his body resembles a half-hearted chameleon: deep mauve down all one side. Men were men then.

The *Turbulent*, thanks to its balloon-bursting, ribbon-slicing blades, whirling immediately ahead of the pilot, is ideally suited, but has no advantage in spot landing competitions, unless you count its extreme proximity to the ground.

Tigers, *Turbulents*, Stampes and Cubs have no flaps. Spot landings present them with more of a challenge than they do a Cessna 150 or Cherokee 140.

Pilots like Brendan O'Brien could land on a sixpence back then. Now he needs a moving truck.

The spot landing is a reliable gauge of a pilot's handling skills. For that reason it has a place in the demanding challenges set by the BPPA, the British Precision Pilots Association.

Traditionally the day's competition will comprise a navigational exercise of fiendish difficulty, where points are scored on fractions of seconds, and a series of spot landings, where touchdowns are regularly no more than inches apart.

From the touchline, as it were, cries of "Spot on, old chap!" and "Precisely, old fellow!" may be heard in public school accents, or French, accompanying the exhibition of elegant judgement and sang froid under pressure.

In days gone by, timings at turning points on cross-country competitions were verified by teams of stop-watch-holding underlings sprinkled along the route. Today the process of fair judgement is simplified and, given the diminished numbers of enthusiasts, made possible, thanks to GPS.

The BPPA operates under the wing of the RAeC. The chairman of this august body is honoured by a badge of office presented and sponsored by its designer, Apollonius Nooten-Boom II. The magnificence of the badge is an indication of the respect in which the RAeC is still held.

There is, unsurprisingly, an old-world dignity that attaches itself to the BPPA: a seriousness at odds with the exuberance of the competitor in his determination to fly with accuracy and precision second to none.

The typical precision pilot, if such thing exists, takes his hobby seriously. That's unquestionable when you notice the level of concentration as he pores over the chart, measuring off fractions of nautical miles with thin strips of folded, finely graduated paper.

Speak to one of these unassuming aviators, competing at some romantic airfield off the beaten track, and you're likely to find they have flown in from France or have just returned victorious from a precision flying competition in South Africa, South America or Hungary.

There's nothing special about their aeroplanes. The speciality is within them. They fly Cessnas, Jodels, Pipers and even the odd microlight. What is also special is the atmosphere, not unlike that found at Redhill in the '60s.

It's good to know there are pilots committed to improving their flying skills to such levels of perfection. Good to know there are targets to aim for through organizations like the BPPA.

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There's nothing wrong with the pursuit of excellence. It can be at the same time both entertaining and improving. If there's pride concealed in victory you won't find it in conceit. You'll find the kind of quiet confidence that singles out the pilot you'd always wish to be flown by or formate with.

Seek out the BPPA website, precisionflying.co.uk, and you'll find the following:

"Welcome to the website of the BPPA, which on behalf of the Royal Aero Club of Great Britain is responsible for the promotion and day-to-day running of rally and precision flying competitions within the UK.

"The BPPA is also responsible for the selection of pilots and crew to represent Great Britain at international competitions organised under the auspices of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI).

"The BPPA exists to promote high standards of airmanship, especially in VFR navigation and landing skills ..."

It's worth reading on, for there are words of advice for every keen pilot, whether PPL or NPPL, light aircraft or microlight. You may catch the bug. Unlike some varieties it will do you no harm: it will do you much good. It will do you, your aeroplane and your flying precisely that. □