



Triumphs and Tragedy: The contest to remember

Silverstone. It is the name for the 2009 World Aerobatic Championships (WAC), and it will be forever etched in the minds of attendees who saw it live, and aerobatic enthusiasts who watched it unfold from afar. For me, the name Silverstone will always generate a mix of emotions: admiration for those who fly and organize, compassion for those who suffered so much loss, and a strong sense of what the aerobatic community is all about. The glory of winning and the spectacular skills of the pilots aside, Silverstone was all that we had hoped it would be, and something we never imagined.

WAC 2009

Mike Heuer, President of CIVA



The top three pilots at WAC – Krotov, Ecalle, and Le Vot

Who would ever have foreseen the loss of the first WAC competitor since 1960, IAC president and US Team member, Vicki Cruse? What I had originally planned to write changed in an instant. Let me provide some background, and recount the days of the competition leading up to the accident that changed it all.

The Days of Preparation

The first order of business at the WAC was the CIVA Judging Seminar. Graham reviewed the CIVA Judges Recurrence Course—a set of questions on the latest rules much like IAC's own annual test for judges. Graham and John always strive for the best and most consistent judging, and this seminar was very productive. The FairPlay System (FPS) is the statistical scoring system now used at all FAI Aerobatic Championships, and judges received their analysis between flight programs so they could get feedback on their performance. All team managers received a complete package of judging analysis after the conclusion of WAC.

Each judge signed a letter of agreement, certifying his currency, understanding of his international role, and agreeing to not be prejudiced toward any pilot of any nationality. This has been a personal crusade of mine for several years as I remember the “old days” when judges were considered a part of their country's national team, and often judged to benefit their own pilots. Judges who do not perform well will receive poor RIs (Rank Indexes), how a judge ranks a pilot in comparison to the rest of the panel. This is the main measure of judge performance. We used RIs for judge selections this year and will use them again in the future.

QinetiQ

The first day was also my first look at the QinetiQ system, an electro-optical tracking system for box infringement penalties or “out-calls,” as well as height measuring. QinetiQ (pronounced “kinetic”) is a British company that principally caters to the defense industry. Their system was adapted for competition aerobatics use by software designer Stephen Madle, British Aerobatic Association member, and team member working on site. The computer monitors show the aerobatic box from different perspectives. A yellow ribbon on the screen depicts the aircraft's flight path. The ribbon turns red when the aircraft departs the box. The system was tested considerably prior to the event. It is incredibly accurate. On one occasion Stephen remarked, “He was out by 87 centimeters.”

Altitude penalties were also assessed using the QinetiQ system. The monitors and computers were located in a small tower near the runway and the radar tracking head—part of a small mobile unit—was nearby. The “outs” were tracked and recorded in the tower and relayed to the chief judge's station. They were recorded on penalty work sheets, and then delivered to the scoring office.

For the first time in my 44 years of attending aerobatic competitions, we had a totally accurate and reliable way of not only recording box infringements, but also measuring height accurate to the centimeter.

When someone asked how accurate the QinetiQ system is, someone answered that perhaps the discussion should really be on what part of the aircraft the radar was tracking—the tail wheel or the spinner!

One of the offshoots of this is a pilot can now be called out “high”—a rare occurrence in all of the competitions I have attended throughout the years. One pilot received “high” height penalties four times during his flight. I am sure he was not happy, yet the fact remains, these penalties are called for in CIVA rules. Pilots seeking some sort of energy and height advantage were not be able to do so “free of charge” in this competition.

At the end of the WAC, the scoring system reported there were 15 low calls, 21 high calls, and 149 box outs assessed using the QinetiQ system.

The Opening

On Wednesday, August 19, all teams reported for the general briefing. Opening ceremonies were held that night with the fanfare for which the British are famous. The competition was declared “open” by this author as the senior FAI official present.

Here's how we stood at the opening ceremonies: 60 pilots representing 18 countries. Of these 60, eight were women (two from France, two from Russia, two from the U.S., one from Germany, and one from Switzerland).

It was good to see some “new blood” in the sport. One of the new pilots making her debut at WAC was French team member Aude Lemordant, flying a CAP 232. Aude is 27 years old. She's a pilot for Air France on the Airbus, and flew her first aerobatic competition in 2005. There were many young pilots at this competition—or perhaps they are just looking younger! In any event, there were many French pilots younger than 30, and young new competitors from other countries as well.

At the opening, it appeared this would be the first time in several WAC events that the FAI Challenge Trophy

On one occasion Stephen remarked, “He was out by 87 centimeters.”



Hubie Tolson and Goody Thomas service their Sukhoi after a competition flight



David Kaftan and Alena Kaftanova measure the wind

would be presented to a winning women's team, as there have been too few female entrants in recent years to declare a women's team championship. The woman who wins the Women's World Champion title takes home the Royal Aero Club Trophy.

It was very gratifying to meet pilots from around the world, including Ireland, Slovenia, Brazil, and Portugal, as some of these nations have never been represented at a WAC before. The total turnout was better than anticipated, especially in view of world economic troubles.

Communicating and Using Technology

Communication is often overlooked or forgotten at championships. Obviously, it takes time and effort to do it properly. The Silverstone event established a "gold standard" for communication, with new ideas and various methods and equipment used. All team managers, contest officials, and organizers were issued disposable UK mobile phones that came pre-coded with the all of the key contest phone numbers. Motorola radios were also in use. To communicate even more effectively, the organizers used text messaging to notify everyone of important news. They were able to send messages en masse using software in the IT office, headed up by Peter Rounce.

The announcements sent via text message were also posted on the Twitter website, so even those that weren't issued mobile phones had access to important information.

From the jury, we also used e-mail more than ever before. We sent team managers "Jury Policy Letters" that discussed jury decisions and our interpretations of the rules. These documents were created to head off protests, as well as answer and clarify questions brought to us by pilots and team managers.

In addition, the WAC organization had three websites: one for public use; one for pilots, team members, and officials; and a blog site where the contest director posted documents and updates.

The use of the Internet and e-mails was made possible by the excellent WiFi coverage at the entire contest site. Pilots could view their results and their individual score sheets on www.civa-results.com. The scores were posted on the website from the scoring office as frequently as possible throughout the event.

After the loss of Thursday due to bad weather, the first pilot in Programme Q (the CIVA Known program), finally launched in his Sukhoi 31. That pilot was Martin Sonka of the Czech Republic. It was 12:44 on Friday, August 21 and the contest was underway.

Saturday, August 22

We awoke to a beautiful morning with blue skies, some high clouds, and winds well within limits. The warm-up pilot, Francois Rallet of France in the Extra 330SC, took to the air at 09:00 and his was the only warm-up flight flown

before the resumption of Programme Q to save time. The first competition pilot was Mikael Brageot of France flying the CAP 232.

The organizers' goal, with flight director Cassidy pushing very hard, was to get Programme Q finished.

Two important people on that day, and all days, were Alena Kaftanova and David Kaftan, our wind observers from the Czech Republic. They are familiar faces at European competitions. They're the ones usually running the weather balloon operation and they are extremely proficient. Balloons are launched at 30-minute intervals, unless weather is rapidly changing, which requires more frequent launches—though the time required to take the wind readings precludes much tightening of the time. Wind is always of great concern to pilots. Team managers and the organizers sent the wind information out via text message to all of the managers after the readings were taken. With aircraft and the briefing tent somewhat spread out, this turned out to be very helpful. In addition, the latest information was also posted right at the runway starter's position near the takeoff point.

Traffic control was done with flags. Red for stop, white for ground movement, and green for clearance to take off. Two Americans, Bob Harris and Patty Anderson, were in Silverstone and working the take-off start point near the runway and launched the aircraft under Alan Cassidy's overall direction. Patty and Bob had met the British at



Steve Green, WAC 2009's Contest Director – he had the key to every office on the airfield



From the cockpit of a French Extra 330SC



The Russian team



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AWAC in Pendleton, Oregon in 2008 – and enjoyed the international aerobatic family so much they made the commitment to come and help at Silverstone. Robbie Sturm accompanied them, and also helped on the flight line, in the contest office, and scoring office.

A display in the small tower kept pilots advised of the flight order numbers. The tower displayed the pilot number up. In the photo accompanying this article, the orange color means a “free break” is allowed in the sequence due to the cloud level.

Clouds moved in quickly, at about 400 meters, and flying was discontinued. The first competition pilot did not complete his flight and a jury flight was launched with Osmo Jalovaara and Alan Cassidy in his Pitts S-2A, to verify the low cloud. After a couple of hours, ceiling began rapidly rising, and flying resumed just after 11:00.

Because the weather had been marginal, we were concerned whether the French pilot would find the ceiling sufficient. Eight-hundred meters (2,625 feet) are needed to fly with a break. Procedures can get quite cumbersome here if a pilot decides to abort the flight program. This requires the launch of the weather bird with jury member on board to verify the ceiling is below the minimum. If it is not, the pilot is not entitled to repeat the flight.

At WAC 2009 though, there was one big difference. Since height was being tracked by the QinetiQ system, it was easy to verify if the pilot was accurate when he called in cloud levels on the radio. For example, When Brageot flew prior to the Q sequence, he reached an altitude of 914 meters and the highest point during the sequence was 780 meters. So pilot reports were easily verified, a remarkable system. The contest continued.

Everything came to a halt just before noon on Saturday.



French Team pilots Renaud Ecalle, Pierre Varloteaux, and Francois Le Vot



French team aircraft at home base

Vicki Cruse lost her life during her flight of Programme Q at Silverstone. She was flying a borrowed Edge 540. The accident occurred at about 11:57 during the fifth figure of the Known. The Silverstone emergency response teams were at the accident site in a matter of minutes. The figure is a fairly simple one for an Unlimited pilot and was easy for a pilot of Vicki’s skill and experience. The figure calls for a 1-¼ snap roll on a vertical downline with pull to upright. The aircraft never stopped rotating until it hit the ground. To date, we have no news on the cause and cannot speculate. But to all of us on site, it was unbelievable.

Flying was canceled and a meeting of the team managers was scheduled for Sunday at 10.00 to discuss whether or not the Championships should continue, and if so, which flight programs would be flown.

This was a tragedy on so many levels...

Vicki Cruse was president of the IAC and a member of the US Team for the fourth time. An extremely proficient and skilled pilot, she had previously won the title of US National Aerobatic Champion. She was also a passionate advocate for the sport and brought many new people into aerobatics. I know that many of you have enjoyed her articles in *Sport Aerobatics* as much as I have.

It has been a difficult time for the sport. Chandy Clanton, a former US Team pilot, died in a practice accident just a few weeks before Silverstone. Svetlana Fedorenko, a member of the Russian Team who had last flown at an FAI Championships in 2006, also lost her life just prior to WAC in a training accident. And it was not long after the 2005 WAC in Spain that Marta Meyer was killed in a practice accident. The sport has been hit with several tragedies in a very short time. For those of us at Silverstone, it was difficult to bear—to lose another friend, a colleague, a teammate, a fellow officer, and a superb pilot.

What to Do Next

The team managers held a meeting, followed by a meeting of the international jury and the officers of CIVA. The team managers unanimously agreed to continue the World Aerobatic Championships as a tribute to Vicki Cruse. She would most certainly have wanted us to continue; there is no doubt in my mind.

The championships carried on. The organizers, particularly Steve Green and Alan Cassidy, had been liaising with Silverstone officials and providing their input to the international jury on the conduct of the competition from that point on. Decisions were made by the jury and were explained in another Jury Policy Letter that evening.

Everyone was under stress, and sometimes that stress does not manifest itself until well after a tragic event or incident occurs. To fly a Free Programme next, which pilots have carefully prepared for and practiced, would be much less stressful, and therefore safer, than going directly into an Unknown. In our view, this was our most important priority—to conduct a championship that was stable, predictable, and what competitors expect. Rules changes or adjustments only destabilize an event, and create a less safe environment.

Along these same lines, there were no changes in other rules. All meteorological limits were observed. Our operating procedures stayed the same. We did not relax or waive



Castor Fantoba of Spain



Cockpit of Renaud Ecalle's Extra 330SC

In our view, this was our most important priority—to conduct a championship that was stable, predictable, and what competitors expect.



Francois Le Vot of Team France



Renaud Ecalle obliges a young fan

any rules and, therefore, continued to use what we have in the FAI Sporting Code as our guide. This lessened the chance of “unintended consequences” and a stable, safe atmosphere.

I stated the following in my letter to the team managers:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I know there are probably as many ideas out there on what could be done as there are people. But it is time to get on with the Championships and let the organizers continue to do the wonderful job they have so far in running this competition.”

I have been honored to work with everyone here and I ask you give them your continuing support and understanding. Their job is difficult and exhausting but they are totally dedicated to your safety, to the completion of this Championships, and the best competition possible.”

The Contest Continues

Flying resumed on Monday, August 24, close to schedule. Richard Pickin, one of the warm-up pilots from the UK, flew his CAP for the judges, drawing the low lines for them. Finally about 13:17, flying at the 25th World Aerobatic Championships started up once again with the flight of Alex Leboulanger in his CAP 232. We started flying with a weather break that lasted all day. As luck would have it, another weather hold occurred late in the afternoon. There had been a cold front over the UK, which refused to move through. One of the British remarked to me, “If you are disappointed with the weather, just wait... it will change.”

US Team pilot David Martin was the first American to fly after Vicki’s accident. Another American pilot, Michael Racy, was in the air when the weather turned bad again and the contest was put on hold. Michael had reported the ceiling at just over 500 meters. It had turned a bit cold and windy.

It was on this day that Tom Casells of the UK had a technical abort and it was almost an identical problem to the French pilot. The wing root fairing (toward the leading edge) came loose. The Technical Commission Chairman, Mark Davies, had it fixed very quickly but I could see the disappointment in his face as he sat in the cockpit.

After further delays, Programme Q wrapped up on Tuesday, August 25. Renaud Ecalle (France) was the winner in the Extra 330SC. Francois Le Vot (France) was in second place, with Alexander Krotov (Russia) in third.

A word about Renaud and the French Team: These are tough, dedicated, and well-trained pilots who are admired by everyone in the international aerobatic community. Their trainer is Claude “Coco” Bessiere, a former World Aerobatic Champion, and no doubt one of the top three coaches in the world. The French Team is like no other in the respect that it is a mix of military and civilian pilots. The Extra 330SC that Renaud flies is owned by the French Air Force. He is an active duty French Air Force officer and pilot. No other aerobatic team enjoys this level of government support. Undoubtedly, the very best French Air Force pilots are chosen for this assignment—one any military pilot would covet—and then with the best aircraft and training, they consistently win. No surprise here. That said, they deserve every medal they win. They are very good aviators.

It was also good to see Alexander Krotov back on the scene and doing so well. He was badly injured in an accident at an airshow in Japan in 2003. He was not expected to survive. There he was in Silverstone, racking up a bronze medal in the Q. Welcome back, Alexander!

WAC is full of these kinds of stories, which is perhaps why many of us are so drawn to it.

With the shortened schedule and the decision to not permit flying on most of the following two days of WAC, Program Q took on more importance at WAC. It appeared at that point it would most certainly count toward the final results. Again, here is where CIVA rules depart from IAC rules. Program Q, the Known, is

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French Team Extra 330SC



International Jury members Bob Chomono (France), Mike Heuer (USA), and Osmo Jalovaara (Finland)

called “Q” because it is regarded as a qualification flight. Pilots warm up, the judging panel is thoroughly refreshed and ready to go, and the contest organization’s kinks are worked out. This has worked well in the past. However, with weather problems almost always plaguing contest sites (with the peculiar and strict CIVA rules that are in place regarding weather limits), it was decided a few years ago to include Q in the final results if only Programme 1 could be completed. A count of the days and hours left made this a near certainty.

Nevertheless, Alan Cassidy and his crew pulled out all the stops in the remaining time to complete as much as possible. But in the end, there were not enough hours in the day. On Friday, August 28, the decision was made to call it complete. All pilots had flown the Known and Free programmes.

It should be noted that Wednesday, August 26 and part of Thursday, August 27 were canceled. After the accident, Silverstone did not want any flying to take place when events on the circuit were taking place near or under the box. They rearranged schedules as much as possible, moved events to the north circuit, and called hundreds of people to make it work but it still was not possible to fly on those days. This cost us the necessary time to fly an Unknown. Only four Unknown flights were completed by Friday evening.

Backing up a bit, though everyone knew it would be very tight with time, we did go through the lengthy and arduous procedure for selecting the 1st Unknown just in case. Time was a problem as the clock was ticking and if we were not to lose any valuable flying time, a sequence would have to be finalized in time to give pilots 18 hours before they flew Programme 2, the 1st Unknown. Teams submitted seven sequence proposals. This was far fewer than what we usually receive at a WAC, and even more surprising in view of the many countries represented.

As it turned out, we went through four versions of the 1st Unknowns before we selected one that elicited the fewest complaints. This is a difficult process for the inter-

national jury as we can only accept complaints from team managers that are based on “safety” reasons. We have to sort out which are valid safety concerns and which complaints are being made for competitive reasons. Since every pilot on the airfield has a different idea on what a good Unknown is, the input can be endless. Time and time again, “safety” is cited as a reason for rejecting an Unknown when a team manager is really upset about the fact you did not choose his sequence. But if there is the slightest doubt, we reject the sequence and move on to the next. This is what happened in Silverstone.

Unfortunately, we had to call it quits after only four flights in the 1st Unknown. Very dark clouds rolled in, rain threatened, and we had to shut down flying. In the jury’s office, Steve Green, Alan Cassidy, Bob Chomono, Osmo Jalovaara, and I met for the final meeting of the day. We decided, after looking at the available time left, that it was impossible to finish the first group of pilots in the 1st Unknown. Without this group completed, the program itself would be incomplete. Therefore, the contest was declared finished, with Programme 4 (the “4 Minute”) remaining for the last day, August 29, and the results validated. We had all pilots fly Program Q and 1 and this was enough for the World Aerobatic Championships to be a valid competition.

We now had a new World Aerobatic Champion: Renaud Ecalle of France. Renaud has had an outstanding record this year. He won the World Air Games in powered aerobatics in June, with gold medals in both the Q and the Free. It was a well-deserved victory for this talented Frenchman. He was presented with the famous Aresti Cup that afternoon.

Elena Klimovich of Russia won the Women’s World Aerobatic Champion title for the first time. She came in ninth in the overall standings. A veteran of aerobatic competition and a dedicated member of her team, she turned in an outstanding performance. Elena works tirelessly on behalf of her team, represents Russia at CIVA, and has generated dozens of rules proposals over the years.

Team results were: (1) France, (2) Russia, and (3) United States. These teams were “combined” and consisted of both men and women pilots. This occurs when too few women are present to declare a team championship for that gender. Sadly, with the loss of Vicki Cruse, there were not enough women’s teams to declare a championship—another one of those things that no one ever foresaw happening. The FAI Challenge Trophy remains in storage for another WAC and with all of our hopes there will be more women entering the sport and competing in team slots in the years ahead.

The Last Day and Night

The “classical” competition was now over. But Program 4, the “Final Freestyle” or the “4 Minute” (a name coined for this flight when it was to be precisely four minutes in length) remained. August 29 was Silverstone’s public day. Program 4 has always appealed to spectators and this last day was also being broadcast live on the internet at www.airsports.tv. Since Program 4 is a special and separate trophy event, rules were changed for 2009 to permit “drop-ins.” Three pilots entered this event that had not flown in the classical flight programs: Eric Vazeille, Jurgis Kairys,



WAC Flight Director Alan Cassidy with Women’s World Aerobatic Champion Elena Klimovich of Russia

and Ramon Alonso. Vazeille and Alonso were both former world champions and Kairys is a specialist in this flight. After it was all said and done, however, World Champion Renaud Ecalle again continued his sweep of the gold and won this flight as well. But it was good to see these “Old Knights” in the air.

The winner of the Final Freestyle normally receives the Manfred Stroessenreuther Trophy, but the trophy has not been seen since the closing ceremonies at the World Championships in Granada, Spain in 2007. It is presumed stolen. There are plans to replace it.

To open the last day’s activities, the US Team paid tribute to their team member who lost her life with a traditional “missing man” formation. As the formation flew by, a moment of silence was observed and taps were played. It was a very moving and emotional moment for all of us. The fly-by took place at 11:00, which is the traditional time in Britain for such observances to be made. The large crowd of spectators was totally silent and my respect for the British grew a hundredfold after this wonderful tribute to Vicki.

The Future

On Sunday, August 30, we all began our treks home to family and familiar surroundings. On the drive to Heathrow and the long flight home to the U.S. from London, many thoughts swirled through my mind...

I was constantly reminded that the people are much the same—the deep love of aviation and aerobatic flying is there, just as it was decades ago. That dedication is without national borders and it is the bond we share with our colleagues and friends from nations all over the world. It keeps us all going, and airplanes flying in the box are the best tribute we can pay to those people who are no longer on the flight line with us. 🇺🇸

Photos by Mike Heuer and LG Arvidsson

WAC 2009

25th FAI World Aerobatic Championships 2009 **FORM B**

Pilot ID # _____ Flight # _____

Unlimited 1st Unknown

Wind/vent ←

Fig 1	8.33.2 9.6.3 9.1.3.7 9.4.3.3	16 17 11 8	52
Fig 2	7.3.2 9.1.3.2	7 4	11
Fig 3	8.16.4 9.1.4.2 9.9.7.2	14 4 15	33
Fig 4	8.3.3 9.11.1.5 9.4.5.3 9.9.1.2	15 4 8 15	42
Fig 5	8.42.3 9.1.3.4 9.8.3.4 9.10.2.2	14 8 15 15	52
Fig 6	2.4.3	28	28
Fig 7	8.1.1 9.1.5.1	13 2	15
Fig 8	6.2.1 9.1.1.4 9.4.5.2	15 12 5	32
Fig 9	8.40.1 9.1.1.2 9.4.1.3 9.1.3.8 9.1.3.5 9.1.3.3	14 8 12 12 9 6	61
Fig 10	8.17.1 9.4.2.4 9.10.4.4	13 13 13	39
Fig 11	7.1.2 9.1.3.2 9.4.3.2 9.8.3.2 9.9.8.2	8 4 5 7 13	37
Fig 12	8.44.1 9.1.5.1	12 2	14
Fig 13	8.39.2 9.2.1.4 9.8.1.1 9.4.3.4 9.1.3.6 9.2.3.4	16 13 7 11 10 9	66

Total K = 482

1960



Comments from the Chairman of the British Aerobatic Association and the Chief Judge:

My participation as a very lowly volunteer at WAC 1970, the first WAC in England, was sheer happenstance. In 1986, the second British WAC, my employment as a corner judge was planned. When WAC came to the UK for the third time, this year, my involvement as chairman of the British Aerobatic Association was utterly unavoidable! Hosting the WAC is a once-in-a-generation event here, not only because it takes that long to get around to hoping yet again for good weather, but also because of the enormous effort required from so many volunteer organizers. This 25th WAC was, even more than usual, a roller-coaster ride for all concerned, with a lot of ups and downs. In some ways this enhances the satisfaction of seeing it through to a successful conclusion, yet it also leaves many "what-if" questions hanging in mid-air. I'd just like to say, once again, thanks to all who contributed so much. You know who you are.

Alan Cassidy, Chairman
British Aerobatic Association



My job was easy, made so by 33 judges assistant judges and writers, including an extra pair of hands to monitor the QinetiQ electronic line judging system, which worked perfectly. Not one protest about box-outs highs or lows!

Although we had difficult terrain to get to our main southern position, and had to let everybody through gates that had to be kept locked, we always managed to start on time. We did not use the "Q" as a judges' training flight, because we had a number of flights arranged as part of a CIVA judging seminar before the "Q" started. For the first time at an international event, the judges could have their eyes tuned in before the start of the "Q."

Graham Hill, chief judge,
25th World Aerobatic Championships,
Silverstone, United Kingdom