



# Red Checkers Return

Contributed by Chris Gee

*Airshow enthusiasts in New Zealand will have been delighted to see the return of the Red Checkers to the display circuit this year, beginning with Wings Over Wairarapa in January. Regular Contributor to KiwiFlyer, Chris Gee, spoke with Squadron Leader Jim Rankin to compile this article.*

**SINCE** 1967 the Royal New Zealand Air Force aerobatic display team, The Red Checkers,

has been wowing crowds at aviation events across the country, earning a reputation for world-class aerobatic displays. They serve to showcase the professionalism of the RNZAF aircrew, with their routines representing a pinnacle of precision flying. As a school boy growing up near Wigram airbase in Christchurch, I spent many a morning watching them rehearse overhead, had posters of the aircrew on my bedroom wall, and have continued to watch and admire the team since. Unfortunately, 2010 became a tragic year for the Red Checkers. A fatal accident in January claimed Squadron Leader Nicholas Haydn Cree, 32, as he was rehearsing the 'Fish-Tail Pass', which was to be part of his solo routine. Later in March, a collision between the undercarriage of one aircraft and the canopy of another while changing formation, resulted in The Red Checkers team being stood down for the rest of the year.

In 2011 however, the Red Checkers are back on our aviation event circuit and were set to make their comeback at the Wings over Wairarapa Airshow in Masterton. Abysmal weather put paid to a full display on the Saturday and resulted in cancellation of the Airshow on Sunday, but the team still got the chance to show they were in form and back in action on the practice day.

Philosophical about the lack of a full display, the team's leader SQNLDR Jim Rankin comments, "The old adage says 'the best way to break a drought is to hold an aviation event', and that was certainly the case at Masterton. The team was keen to display... We can control a lot of things but the weather is not one of them."

## Display Season Training

Every year the team must start training for the display season from scratch. Jim Rankin clarifies, "Every year a new Checkers team starts up, with training normally starting in September or October.

Where possible, it is preferred to introduce 2-3 new team members in any new season, and keep 2-3 from the previous year to assist continuity. This year, for a number of reasons, I am the only team member with previous Checkers experience. So, every year we start afresh, this year even more so due to most team members being new to it!"



Gavin Conroy



Gavin Conroy

Absent from our sky during the latter part of 2010, airshow enthusiasts can look forward to seeing regular appearances of the Red Checkers again during the 2011 display season.

While the routine has no new formation manoeuvres this year, they are arranged differently from previous displays. That said, the solo aircraft does fly some individual manoeuvres that are new for this season. Jim Rankin describes the process for adding new manoeuvres to the formation routine: "The sequence for this year was fairly well determined even before we started training, and the training was then tailored to meet the needs of that routine. If for any reason we decided to add something new, it would be a very stepped process. I would probably fly it by myself to see that it fitted in with the whole routine (in terms of positioning and energy, and flowing from one manoeuvre to another). We would then work it up over a period of time, starting with only 2 aircraft then adding more as experience was gained. Once happy with the whole manoeuvre we would incorporate it in the sequence, and start to step down the altitude to the final display height."

This year two manoeuvres have been removed from the display, the 'Fish Tail', and the 'Team Carousel'.

The adverse weather at Masterton raised the question of how the team cope changing the routine to fit the conditions: "The simple answer is that at the moment we don't", confesses Jim Rankin. "Either we can display, which needs a cloud base of around 2,000 ft and reasonable visibility, or we don't. Some teams have separate "flat" shows for low cloud days. For the Checkers, our ceiling requirements are already relatively low, so we don't have a flat routine"

## Checkers History

The name 'Red Checkers' comes from red and white chequered squadron markings of the Central Flying School. Originally, the team flew the venerable North American Harvard. These were used

up until 1973, when the team was disbanded due to the fuel crisis. At that time the RNZAF training aircraft were painted in a red and white paint scheme.

In 1980, the team was reformed, with new Airtrainer CT-4B aircraft. In 1994, they relocated from Wigram to Ohakea and the colour scheme was changed to today's yellow and black. In 1999 the RNZAF switched to the newer CT-4E Airtrainer's, which are still in use today.

## Aircraft and Team

Each team member is allocated their own aircraft to display with, "We normally fly the same aircraft every time", Jim Rankin explains, "though occasionally this is not possible due to servicing requirements. If that was the case, we would always fly at least one practice with the new aircraft, just to get used to it - they all fly just a little bit differently and it's enough to be noticeable in formation aerobatics..."

The CT-4E has some attributes that make it great for the type of flying the Red Checkers do and some attributes that are not so great. "Any pilot will always want more power," says Jim Rankin. "The CT-4E has a little more than the old B models we used to use, so it does make formation aerobatics a bit easier now, but we don't have a huge excess of power - basically if you get out of position, you won't have the power to get back! Otherwise, the Airtrainer has good visibility, is very robust and reliable, and is responsive enough to be able to do the manoeuvres we want."

All the members of the Red Checkers team undertake the extra work required on a 'volunteer' basis, and still perform all their normal operational duties within the RNZAF. Jim Rankin explains, "All the team are Instructors flying the Airtrainer within the Flying Training Wing. ... Given that this is an additional duty it does take a lot of extra time, so this can limit the number of pilots who are able to volunteer. It should be noted that any Instructor at the Flying Training Wing could be a team member. All RNZAF Qualified Flight Instructors have been taught the basic formation

and aerobatic skills required. The Checkers just takes those skills and hones them, adds in a few new aspects such as formation aerobatics and puts it in to a package. It is a lot of hard work, but very rewarding."

Flying in No.1 Position is SQNLDR Jim Rankin, who has been in the RNZAF since 1978, and flying for the Red Checkers for five years, four of them as team leader. He has about 7900 hours

military flying experience with transport, training, helicopter and jet aircraft, and another couple of thousand hours of civil, microlight and gliding experience. His current operational position is the Flying Training Wing Training Officer, responsible for the content and co-ordination of the various training courses conducted at Ohakea.

Piloting the aircraft in No.2 Position is FLTLT Matt Alcock (echelon right, also flies the low aircraft in the 'Mirror' manoeuvre). He is currently the Flight Commander at

Pilot Training School and an ex-Royal Air Force helicopter pilot with 20 years flying experience (4130 hours total).

No.3 Position belongs to SQNLDR Baz Nicholson (echelon left, also leads the 'heart' manoeuvre). He is a former RNZAF Navigator with a transport background, and has been flying for 10 years, with a 2600 hour total.

The No.4 Position is taken by FLTLT Graham Burnnand, (echelon right, two out, also flies in the box line astern position, and in the heart). Graham is currently an Instructor at Pilot Training School and has been flying for 9 years, with a helicopter background and 1990 hours in his logbook.

Coming in at the No.5 Position is SQNLDR Tony Budd (echelon left, two out, also flies all the solo aerobatic displays). He is currently the Officer Commanding Pilot Training Squadron and has been flying for 12 years, also with a helicopter background and 2800 hours total. The No.6 Position pilot is responsible for the spare aircraft, and is flown by FLTLT Charlie Wood.



The Red Checkers Team, from left to right: FLTLT Graham Burnnand, FLTLT Matt Alcock, SQNLDR Jim Rankin, SQNLDR Baz Nicholson, SQNLDR Anthony Budd.



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To put this into perspective, the current Red Checkers line up has some 80 years of flying experience between them and over 19000 hours in the air.

**The Support Team**

Behind every group of star performers is a team of dedicated support staff, without whom there would not be a performance. Jim Rankin explains the personnel and equipment the Red Checkers rely on to keep them in the air: "All Airtrainer maintenance is provided on contract by Aeromotive Ltd. For most displays we take two Aeromotive engineers with us to provide support, one of which will be a Licensed Aircraft Maintenance Engineer. They vary this duty around the Aeromotive team, so most of them will get away to at least one display in a season. We also take a dedicated commentator (this year Warrant Officer Pete Barker). There is also an Admin Officer (this year Pilot Officer Louise Nelson) who takes care of all our accommodation, transport, etc. Last, but by no means least, we take away a photographer from the RNZAF Central Photographic Establishment (normally Sergeant Tim Jordan), who videos all Red Checkers practices and displays for subsequent debriefs. We take 6 aircraft, the personnel noted above, and sometimes additional ground crew where required. For instance we often will conduct a media flight, taking various media as passengers to show them what we do. In that case an RNZAF technician will accompany us to help fit the passengers with all the safety gear we routinely carry in the Airtrainer. Depending on how far the display is from home base, we sometimes use a Kingair aircraft to transport the ground crew and the extra gear, such as passenger safety equipment."

It is unfortunate that the RNZAF is not in a position to deploy the Red Checkers to offshore airshows, as they are well capable of holding their own against the best international display teams. The RNZAF might not have jet fighters for us to stare in awe at, but Kiwi airshow enthusiasts can consider themselves quite fortunate that we do have an aerobatic display team of such a high calibre as the Red Checkers.

My thanks to SQNLDR Jim Rankin for his time with this interview, and my best wishes to him and his team for many more great years in the air to come. CG.

*Using a civilian Nanchang as camera ship, Gavin Conroy flew with the Red Checkers in February during a practice session for their 2011 display routine. Follow Gavin's work at [www.cap-photography.blogspot.com](http://www.cap-photography.blogspot.com) or [www.capphotography.ifp3.com](http://www.capphotography.ifp3.com)*



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