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Flight of the Light Eagles

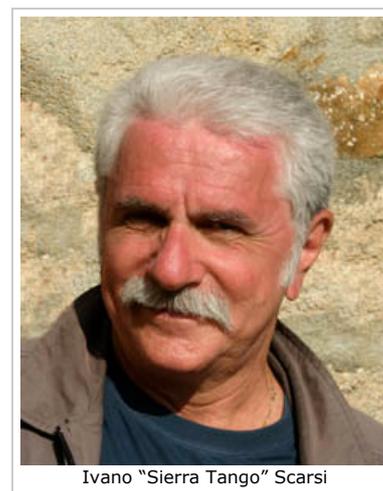
By Ivano Scarsi, EAA 428207

It was a late afternoon at the end of the summer of 1991 when Carlo "Batman" Andreini and Corrado "Colonel" Borrelli approached me during the preflight of my trike at the Dovera Country Club, near Milan, in the north of Italy. They were with no doubt the best trike pilots at the place, with the exception of the instructor of the local flying school, Alberto Frigerio, the man who taught us all. Batman and the Colonel were precise pilots, daring but not reckless, always intent to explore the flying envelope of weight-shift planes, always an example of unswerving takeoffs and smooth landings. I had a lot of respect for their skill.

"We have been watching you," Batman said, "and we have seen that you can fly steady and consistently. We think you are the right guy for what we have in mind." Their dream was to create the first Italian trike formation flight unit, and they had already decided on the name: the Light Eagles. I was thrilled and flattered.

It was clear that we had to trust each other completely; flying a few meters from another pilot's wingtip, particularly with an easily buffeted very light plane with no yaw control, requires absolute concentration and no surprises. We started right away to plan our routines and spent hours practicing formation flight, getting used to flying closer and closer. We became more comfortable each time and eventually were able to almost overlap the wingtips with less than 2 meters of vertical wing separation.

But the flying season was at an end, and we had to mothball our trikes until next spring. (In Milan, winters are for real.) During a dinner at the club on New Year's Eve, a fellow pilot, Andrea "One" Rota, asked to enter the team. It was just what we needed to complete the formation, and he was accepted.



Ivano "Sierra Tango" Scarsi



The Light Eagles Team – (left to right) Andrea "One" Rota, Ivano "Sierra Tango" Scarsi, Carlo "Batman" Andreini, and Corrado "Colonel" Borrelli

By late spring of 1992, we had polished our program to perfection (at least this was what we thought) and performed about once a month mainly for the people coming to watch from the nearby towns. The following was how a typical Light Eagles show was conducted, and it's told as if it's happening now, with the same emotion as then:

We start about one hour before dusk. It's very important to have smooth air and no crosswind. We know every step by heart, but nevertheless we make a point to review every move every time. We walk in an empty hangar following the sequence just like we will do it later in flight. When we are ready, we man our trikes, all parked in line in front of the spectators. Radio communication is essential all the time: at mv mark we start the engines together. the engines warmed beforehand.

and then we taxi in line to the end of the runway – Andrea "One" Rota in front, myself second, then Batman and the Colonel.

We line up for takeoff. One is in the center of the runway with me behind him and the other two slightly behind right and left. At the signal, One begins his takeoff roll, rocking my wing with his wake and climbing steeply. We stay, stepping on brakes while he makes a quick left turn, comes back downwind very low, makes a short base, and turns on final behind us. At the right time, One radios, "Go!" and the three of us floor the gas pedal and start to roll in formation. The runway isn't very large; I must go very straight and quickly compensate for the prop torque because the wingmen are right beside me, the prop wash unpleasantly close to the ground. If One has timed it right, we're in the diamond formation as soon as we lift off together. This has always extracted cheers from the spectators, or so they've told us. (We don't see or hear anything, of course.)

When we fly over the end of the runway, I give a radio signal and start a gentle climbing turn to the left. This is tricky, and we practiced it a lot. Turns can't be too wide or too narrow, since the Colonel on the inside is close to stalling, while Batman on the outside has to pull the bar all the way in his belly to gather speed. (He installed a speedbar.) We do another circuit in formation at about 200 feet, then again over the end of the runway we break for what we call "the Bomb." The Colonel and Batman break sharply left and right, One and me do the same a second later, and we work out our paths to cross all together from four directions with 20 feet of vertical separation on top of the crowd.

We regroup over the threshold of the runway in the "canopy" formation – all in line, staggered one on top of the other. After a last pass by the spectators, we turn for landing. We land three together in an arrow formation, with One passing on top of us and banking back sharply to land behind us. Again, if we time it correctly, he'll catch us while we taxi to the parking. We line up and shut down the engines all together on radio mark.

By this time, it's almost sunset, and the whole show lasts about 30 minutes. We're exhilarated and very happy and really gratified by the enthusiastic applause that the spectators always give us.



The Light Eagles visit Freccie Tricolori along with their flight instructor Alberto Frigerio (third from left).

By the end of the summer of 1994, the Colonel wrote to the Pattuglia Acrobatica Nazionale (better known as Freccie Tricolori), telling them what we were doing, and they were kind enough to invite us to their Rivolto Base so we all could "exchange points of view." It was a fantastic experience. They wanted to view our videotapes and commented on the professional nature of our performance.

Then they showed us everything. We sat in their MB-339 jets, toured their facilities, got briefed by technicians, and received advice on how to look better from the ground. The soloist, Lt. Col. Stefano Rosa, call sign Pony 10, even staged a little aerobatic demonstration for us. (Sadly, Col. Rosa died in an accident practicing with the BreitlingJet Team in 2008.) The only thing they couldn't do was take us up for a ride, but hey, they're a military outfit, and there are rules.

We went on performing our program for another couple of years until it became increasingly difficult for each of us to find the time and energy to continue. After almost three years since the last performance, in June of 1999 we gathered again, and pressed by all our friends at the Dovera Country Club, we decided to do it one last time. After some hours of retraining, we were back in formation, and boy, how much we loved it.

I'm still flying my beloved trike, but now I'm the only one of the Light Eagles still flying. If this experience inspires someone to try trike formation flying, I'll be very happy. A word of caution, though. This kind of flying doesn't require any special skill, apart from precision and discipline, but it does require a lot – and I mean a lot – of preparation. If you want to do it, you have to do it with someone whose flying ability you trust with your life. And then all of you must train and train again until you're really comfortable flying very close together. But I can assure you that the satisfaction is guaranteed. As far as I know, we were the first Italian trike formation flying team.

Ivano Scarsi lives now in Monza, Italy, famous for the Formula 1 Grand Prix racing circuit, and can be reached via email at sierra.tango@mac.com.

