



WING WALKER

Getting strapped on to the top wing of the Aerosuperbatics Stearman biplane is a strange sensation.

Apart from the fact that I'm about to stand on the outside of an aeroplane while it's in flight, a pretty extreme way to spend a few minutes of your life, there's a huge propeller what seems like inches from my face.

As it guns into life the entire plane (and me) vibrates with the incredible torque and energy and we're off, bumping and shaking along the grass field doubling up as a runway. Then suddenly, there's a lightness to everything and I'm wingwalking, feeling like I'm on some extreme rollercoaster.

Aerobatics and wingwalking grew in the 1920s when unemployed World War I pilots sought some way to earn an income from the skills they'd learned in the lethal skies over the trenches. They would buzz over small towns to gain the curiosity of onlookers then negotiate with farmers for makeshift landing strips to perform ever increasing displays of low-level stunts.

These days, the world's only wingwalking formation team is Aerosuperbatics, based near Cirencester. It's amazing to see and even more amazing to do. Recently, **eight-year old Tiger Brewer** (the grandson of Aerosuperbatics owner Vic Norman) became the youngest ever wingwalker.

www.aerosuperbatics.com

15,000 STUNTS&COUNTING

The *Aresti dictionary* is the **Fédération Aéronautique Internationale (FAI)** approved bible of the competition flying community. It's basically the handbook of stunts.

Originally it had 3000 entries but with new techniques and new pilots it now has 15,000 aerobatic combinations. The catalogue and its aerial notation was first set out by the Spanish pilot, **Colonel José Luis de Aresti Aguirre** in the 1960s.



Even though the Pitts Special could be collecting its pension this year – it first flew in 1944 – it is still a favourite with aerobatic aces

◀ like a bulldog – able to withstand the huge g-forces and stresses of extreme aerobatics.

Fired up, the engine throbs right through your body as we wait on the runway for control tower clearance. It comes and we lurch forwards, the engine roaring on full throttle as Darren pitches Scarlet into the sky after an incredibly short run. Just for a 'warm up' he buzzes low and fast along the runway. Really low – we're talking mere metres – and then tips us skywards.

My brain does its own run through of somersaults. 'You're in control,' Darren says matter-of-factly, and I am... Blimey, I am! The control stick is ridiculously small in my sweating hands and the slightest nudge sideways has the aircraft tipping instantly. It's just so sensitive. With

the wind buffeting and the clouds zipping past, it's hard enough just to keep us level let alone perform the slow roll that Darren suggests. 'The trick is to keep your gaze on a point in the distance,' he says. 'Don't worry about airspeed and the like, I'll do that for you.'

STICK AND RUDDER

As the plane banks to the left its weight and physics make it want to 'sideslip' towards the ground so you have to counter that with a combination of stick and rudder control. As the plane backs further over, as the ground replaces the sky and vice versa, these forces increase. To say it's a little tricky is an understatement.

'You have control,' I murmur, and Darren acknowledges.

'I didn't want to tell you at the

THE HARDEST MANOEUVRE OUTSIDE LOOP

'There are two ways you can do this,' says Darren. 'You can start level, roll inverted, and push up and come all the way round back to inverted again.'

'The other, and this is the most daunting, is to start level at the top and push down like you're going over a hill. The tendency is to bug out halfway down and you think "no, no, it's

too hard!" Then you're in this horrible nose-down position going faster and faster and you come out at the bottom of the loop with your heart in your mouth.

'You'll be pulling minus g-forces, all the blood rushes up into your head and it feels like your eyeballs are going to burst out of your head.'

start, but most pilots feel a little queasy on their first Pitts flight,' he says. He can certainly count me among that number.

'Right, ready for the loop then. You're not allowed in a Pitts unless you do a loop,' he chuckles. And before I can say a word, we're pitching skywards at a trouser-soiling rate, all my body weight straining against the seat harness as the clouds swing past and over and there's a sickening moment of weightlessness at the top of the loop. Then the engine whines higher and it's up and over we go, the earth swinging round into view and then back behind us as we level out. I'm speechless. And breathless.

But being airborne doesn't get much better than this. ■

www.advancedflying.co.uk