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## **60 YEARS PATROUILLE DE FRANCE !**

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The Patrouille de France celebrates this year its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday and being today one of the leading attractions in the air show world they are very mature in their job and very famous because of this. Flying with this stuntteam means a job fully dedicated tot the team and requires much discipline from the team members and lots of training hours resulting in a sharp performance on the shows. Having a celebration means getting gifts. Probably the most beautiful gifts (besides all others) were the beautiful weahter, and the really stunning performance of the Italian Frecce Tricolore team. And ofcourse the Patrouille de France flew themselves for own public !

### **LOOKING BACK OVER THE YEARS**

The history of Patrouille de France begins after the Second World War when several squadrons act as French Air Force Presentation Squadron to represent the French Air Force at national and international aviation events. In these settings the public witnessed shows with De Havilland Vampires, F-84G Thunderjets, Dassault MD-450 Ouragan and Dassault Mystère IV A jet aircraft. The legend says that the enthusiasm of air show commentator Jacques Noetinger led to the creation of the name Patrouille de France. This prestigious name is used for the first time by the patrol of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Wing commanded by major Delachenal. The use of fighter aircraft occurred to be too expensive after all and however this form of presentation was seized in 1963, the Salon-de-Provence air school continued its own patrol, not using fighter aircraft but Fouga CM-170 Magister trainer jets to train young pilots. With the Fouga it was far less expensive and so it was more acceptable for the country facing budgetary difficulties. The headquarters was given an opportunity to keep the Patrouille de France alive with reasonable costs and so this air school patrol continued the air show activities of Patrouille de France for 13 years with the Fouga Magister. The Fouga was replaced in 1980 by the Alpha jet which aircraft is still current. The popularity of the Patrouille de France each year is unquestionable but its fame reaches beyond national boundaries and so the whole of Europe and many other countries in the world had an encounter with the team and their spectacle attraction in the air.

### **TRADING PLACES**

This year the begin of the season on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of May a demonstration was given at La Base Aérienne 701 Salon de Provence which is the home base of the team. This event was a good occasion for an interview with the team. The winter period (from November to April) is exclusively dedicated to training and developing a new program at a rate of two flights per day. Questions were answered by current leader Cdt Raphaël Nal as a spokesman for his team. He mentioned a specific route within the team to learn the characteristic of flying in this aerobatic team evolving to leadership. Every year three new pilots enter the formation and three pilots leave the

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team. A pattern of changes will follow. Within two years a new pilot will enter the position of Nr. 1 (leader), and in the second year of the leader which is the third year, the nr. 5 & 7 are more sophisticated in charge of making the program for the year after together with the leader. Nr. 8 & 6 working with Nr. 4 (second leader) will be Nr. 5 & 7 in the next year. When October is reached, meaning the end of the season the leader position of Nr. 1 is given to Nr. 4. So every year the Patrouille de France changes quite a lot and a lot of novelties are adapted for the team as a whole and also for the individual pilots. The leader and Nr. 5 & 7 are creating the new choreography and the figures are their own choices. Another thing is the exposure to risks and the team directors are in close communication with the team and Headquarters about the safety issue. That is why we want to have the best talent in creating balance between risks and the show spectacle. Some figures are very complicated such as flying upside down, but some fly by is not so difficult from technically point of view but impressive for the public.

## **SELECTION**

Pilots are recruited in the French Air Force combat units. Those who show interest and want to volunteer in the Patrouille the France spent one day with the team when HQ agreed. About 22-30 persons a year are granted with a visit. An interview with the team will follow. The team will choose more or less on the character and motivation also based on specific questions. Why you want to come here? Is it for the show, to meet people, to make communications, to demonstrate the flag, to be a representative of our forces? and so on. We choose on character and the capacity to build the best thing in human link. We are the best team with Alpha jets and while laughing the leader declares; 'we are the best formation in the world'. The idea is that some prestige must be in your attitude to convince others in where you believe in. Officers need at least 1500 flying hours on jet aircraft for selection as a candidate.

## **SALON-DE PROVENCE**

The team is very satisfied on the location of Base Aérienne 701 Salon de Provence. We do have good support and some very good qualities of the environment. There are not so many aircraft around, there is quite a lot of freedom and we can fly when we want. There is most of the time a good weather situation. On the other hand with the Air Force College located at the same airfield the team is on the spot good for motivation of young officers getting inside the air force. The pilots are completely dedicated to the team without having another job. Making over 300 flight hours a year which is considerably more than a fighter pilot and plenty of things to prepare it will consume all of your time. It is not that you serve the Patrouille de France, no it is more you are the Patrouille de France and in this job you ought to give the best of you. A typical mission on an exercise day consists of –starting up at 08.00 hrs with some physical exercise followed by the first briefing -exercise- debriefing- second briefing-exercise-lunch-second debriefing and collective sports.

## **PROFESSIONALISM**

Flying in a stunt team requires a very strict obeying of the rules. Sometimes you want to go a little further, a little closer or a little lower but we have to show professionalism

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and rules are rules and we won't go across. The leader is the voice. When the leader says to the right we go. You don't have to really watch. When we say something, it will be done. Everyone rely on the other ones. This is how we work in the team. One of the difficult moments is the concentration period when we get into the aircraft, before we start the music we say. The pilots, they have to be more than 100% on the mission and never make a mistake. The Alpha jet is a perfect aircraft in the formation, not too quick, not too slow, very manoeuvrable, equipped with a jet engine and really cheap. We can still fly with it another ten years. Replacement is not on at the moment. When in future a replacement will be the issue we are depending of the choice to be made over the replacement of all of the jet training aircraft in the French Air Force. The team works with eight aircraft and one spare on the ground. It is eight or nothing. As soon as two aircraft have to stay on the ground, we have a problem. There is also a nr.9 spare pilot.

## **SIXTY YEARS SHOW**

On our question if the team is strictly a business for men the team commander said not. Once we had female pilot as a leader. She was candidate and selected in 2008, became Nr. 4 in 2009 and leader in 2010. She has been a brilliant leader at that time and demonstrated that even this position is in reach of women. Also we wanted to know if special circumstances occurred during the last years and Cdt Raphaël Nal remembered a demonstration two years ago along the south coast of France with good weather in the morning but with increasing weather problems during the day and with a cancellation of the Patrouille de France at the end of the day. One year later we came back and it was very good weather again with 40.000 people waiting for our show. There were problems with smoke devices and our tactical C-160 transport aircraft. We had to find a solution, people are waiting for us. We flew with an Alpha jet to Orleans to change the smoker and flew back to the show location and managed to fit everything in time for the show. There is no feeling of competition with other teams, we admire each other. Patrouille de France created always their own figures, however the 'cork screw' was taken from the Red Arrows but in a remake. The corkscrew was changed in a triple corkscrew around the leader and thus not a real copy. As mentioned the figures of this year contain new elements including 'le soixante' with a blue six and a red zero. Those who are curious are invited to watch our show on one of the aviation events.

Kees Otten & Wim Das.

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