



Out of the Office

by Ginny Phillips

Not Your Average Hobby

As a member of the Lima Lima Flight Team, the only six-aircraft civilian formation aerobatic flight team in the world, NAHU member John Rippinger joins other T-34 pilots in precision formation flying all over the United States and beyond.

“Basically, I like a three-dimensional world, not two-dimensional,” said Rippinger, of Resource Brokerage in Schaumburg, Illinois. “I began flying in 1964 while still in high school... 40 years ago! I went through several flying phases: seaplanes, hang gliders, ultralights, powered parachutes and hot air balloons. I was even the co-pilot of the helium balloon ‘Chicago,’ which took first place at the 1981 U.S. National Gas Balloon Championships.

“I’d always wanted to own a Warbird—an ex-military airplane—and finally bought into a partnership in a T-34, which is a 1950s vintage Navy trainer. I didn’t know the Lima Lima Flight Team existed at that time. I had never even heard of them. Then one day I was taxiing down to the end of a runway and saw six other yellow airplanes just like mine, so I went over to say hello. At that point I had no inclination to have anything to do with the team, but in 1991 they ended up losing a pilot who decided to get out of the air show business. So they only had five pilots and needed another one. They knew I had the plane, and they pretty much said, ‘You’re the closest thing to an air show pilot we can find.’ You know the movie *Rudy*?



That was me—I was the walk-on.

“So I got a ‘crash’ course in formation aerobatic flying, and eventually I got hooked on it. You first have to ‘un-learn’ the three cardinal rules of flying:

1. Stay as far away from any other aircraft as possible. (We fly 10 to 15 feet from one another.)
2. Always scan your instrument panel—the dials and gauges tell you a story. (My head is always at a 45-degree angle looking at the leader; I never look inside the plane.)

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3. Always question every order given by controllers or fellow pilots. (The team is a dictatorship run by one person, the leader. It is not a democracy.)

“When you fly formation with five other airplanes, it gets somewhat cozy. It’s a very dynamic situation and, unlike the Blue Angels, our act is harder to fly because we have propellers, not jets. Jets have no external moving parts; we have this seven-foot propeller on the front that can chew up a lot of aluminum really quick. We have neither speed brakes nor afterburners, so there’s no way to slow down or speed up other than throttle control. The aircraft demands the ultimate of precision flying because it was never meant to be flown in these kinds of formations.

“The trick of this whole air show business is to make the act look dangerous for the crowd, but to have some margin of safety for us. All the military and civilian teams have had fatalities in past, and we don’t take what we do lightly. There is a balance between having a great air show act and our personal safety level.

“It’s not a hobby—it’s another full-time occupation. Every weekend that’s flyable we practice. We do 25 to 30 events a year, from the Dominican Republic to Anchorage, Alaska, from Acapulco to New Jersey. We’re always tweaking the act, seeing what will work. My other job within the team is to go out and get sponsors—we have 24 different product sponsorships—which leans heavily on my insurance sales background. Without a dedicated staff, there would be no way I could take off the two months per year for flying that I currently do.



“Now I have a second T-34, with the thinking that if one impractical plane is good, two has to be better. It’s not good for your golf game. I have the highest posted handicap in my club, but I’m a scratch flier.” ■

You can learn more about the Lima Lima Flight Team by going to www.limalima.com. John Rippinger, CLU, ChFC, CFP, RHU, REBC, LUTCF, RFC, can be reached at jrippinger@rfginc.com.