

DIETER THOMAS

The career of Germany's leading airshow man —
from demo pilot to Berlin organiser

words: **Ben Dunnell**



This photograph: Its 10 engines creating a tremendous noise, Dornier Do31 E-3 experimental jet VTOL transport was demonstrated by Dieter Thomas and Drury Wood at the 1969 Paris Salon. Quite an aircraft in which to first experience airshow flying! Dornier

Far left: Dieter Thomas during his time as a test pilot on the Do31 programme... via Dieter Thomas

Left: ...and today, in his office in the Bavarian town of Fürstentfeldbrück. Ben Dunnell



The spectacular Dornier Do31 jet VTOL transport provided Dieter's first airshow experiences, via Dieter Thomas



'A quite impolite comment was my sole consolation on the opening day of the 1979 Paris Salon as 'Jupiter', the strict 'Chief Airshow Policeman', pitilessly sent me back home after a display flight with the Alpha Jet.

'As a result of several flying accidents and increasing public pressure, the French parliament saw itself forced to pass a law on display flying at Le Bourget. Television cameras and a team comprising several experts were set up to make sure that the new paragraphs were complied with. One of these changes asked for an increase in the minimum altitude for displays to 500ft AGL. As a member of the French president's entourage, the Paris police prefect personally monitored compliance with the new paragraphs during the opening day of the Salon.

'Only one hour before my display, I was informed that I was to take part in the short 'President's Show' in which only French aircraft were allowed to participate, flying the Franco-German Alpha Jet in the colours of the Patrouille de France. However, instead of my rehearsed display, lasting six minutes, I was only given two-and-a-half minutes. To cap it all, we were told that Monsieur le Président would meet and shake hands with all the pilots, apart from me of course — after all, I am not French! My ego slightly bent, my anger grew slowly as the show drew nearer.

'When the tower gave me the signal for my 'demo' exactly on time, I had decided on an extremely tight programme filled with highlights which I had, of course, never practised in that order. Everything went according to plan, up until the last roll which I completed a little early. On my way to the cross runway where I was supposed to land, I therefore decided to add a second, fast roll. Most of the spectators were no longer watching my aircraft, as the first Mirage had already taken to the air noisily. Only the television cameras and the eyes of the police prefect were fixed on my second roll which, I have to admit, did not turn out as planned. I had not completely released the back pressure on the stick at the beginning of the roll so the pure

aileron roll turned into a barrel roll — at the end of which I was at least 100ft (30m) below the newly-established safety altitude.

'As a deterrent to others, the 'outlaw' was immediately suspended from further participation in the 1979 Paris Air Show.'

So says Dieter Thomas of one of the most memorable incidents from his long career as a test pilot. Yet, as he also remarks, 'We all learn by our mistakes. Le Bourget '79 well and truly left its mark on my attitude to display flying'. 11 years later, Dieter was at the helm of the flying display at ILA, the biggest airshow in Germany, an event on which much attention was focussed in the aftermath of the Ramstein tragedy two years previously. From 1990 until his retirement following the 2006 show in Berlin, he developed the ILA programme in his own particular style, bringing in many new features while upholding the strictest safety standards. After all, memories of Ramstein remain potent in Germany, even with the passage of time.

TEST AND DISPLAY PILOT

Having been among the young West Germans who started flying as soon as they could once the resumption of aviation was permitted there in a limited way, after the war, Dieter became a member of the first company of the 'new' Luftwaffe in 1956. After training, he instructed on T-33s and Fiat G91s — his entry into the world of test flying, and thus air displays, came rather by accident.

Dieter flew some T-33 missions to help the then DVL (Deutsches Versuchs- und Forschungsanstalt für Luftfahrt, now the DLR) with research, and then undertook several flights in the type looking for radioactive clouds which passed over Germany seven days after Chinese nuclear weapons tests. This pioneering work went well: 'As I was quite good at finding these clouds, they asked me if I could come to the DVL as a research pilot... then Dornier started the Do31 jet VTOL transport programme, and I was a chase pilot. They found out that I was not so bad, and asked me if I could become a junior test pilot.'

It was in the remarkable Do31, with Drury Wood as pilot in command, that Dieter not only set five new world records but also had his first taste of airshow flying. This was in the Do31 E1 at Le Bourget in 1967, albeit then powered by only the two Bristol Pegasus engines in the underwing nacelles. Two years later, pilots and aircraft were back again in Paris, this time flying the Do31 E3 with its eight RB162 lift engines (four in each wingtip-mounted nacelle) alongside an RAF Harrier GR1 in a VTOL presentation. 'It was a very funny show', says Dieter, 'because you must understand that this 10-engined aeroplane was so terribly noisy that the pilots couldn't talk to each other, even with an intercom. We had to give signals with our thumbs, and I was watching the instruments while Drury was flying, so I didn't really notice the crowd.'

LEARNING THE AIRSHOW ART

The year Dieter spent at EPNER, the French test pilot school, from 1969-70 was a deliberate move on Dornier's part as it was collaborating with Dassault on the Alpha Jet programme, and



Clockwise from top:

Dieter flying Alpha Jet prototype 04, in the colours of the Patrouille de France. Dassault via Dieter Thomas

The static display at ILA 92, the first event to be held in Berlin. As can be seen, Dieter Thomas brought in participation from many air arms, including the remaining Soviet forces in eastern Germany, alongside manufacturers' aircraft. Messe Berlin

ILA 2000 was the first Berlin show at which Dieter Thomas organised 'only' the flying display, handing the ground side over to a colleague. Messe Berlin

A highlight of recent ILA flying displays was this historic transport trio in 2000, comprising Åke Jansson's DC-3, the SAA Historic Flight's DC-4 and Lufthansa's Ju52/3m — all aircraft with Berlin connections. Ben Dunnell

wanted a fully-qualified German pilot for it. When Jean-Marie Saget undertook the initial flight of the Alpha Jet on 26 October 1973, Dieter was flying chase, but he soon got his hands on the Franco-German trainer and carried out the maiden flights of the next three prototypes. 'My first real airshow presentations were on the Alpha Jet', says Dieter, 'in 1975 at Le Bourget and then at Farnborough the following year, where I flew it with external loads. I was a specialist at displaying with loads,

and I did a knife-edge pass to show them, which I flew using the weapons. At more than 350kt, the weapons and the fuselage gave you enough lift when you were on a knife-edge pass.'

Learning to display the Alpha Jet taught Dieter a lot about the art of airshow flying. 'I practiced a lot at high altitude, on top of the clouds, but I must tell you that this is nothing. You have to go 'on the deck', and see the ground coming up like hell. The lower you go, the safer it is, but this is a problem you cannot explain to safety agencies and so on. When you fly at very low altitude, below 300ft, you can judge with your eyes whether you are climbing, whether you are descending, and if you have a good track. When you go above 300ft in jets now, you have to look at your altimeter to keep your minima, but then the altimeter is lacking. Sometimes you can be in a shallow descent and then make a fast roll, and you can come out very low, and you hadn't noticed at the beginning of the roll that you were descending. Bill Bedford was the first person who tried to explain this.'

The display that saw Dieter being banned from Le Bourget in 1979 was an example of

just such a mistake, made because he was in a hurry and trusting the altimeter. He says that Paris is now 'more relaxed' than it was, especially at the first few shows after the Tu-144 accident there in 1973. As for the other trade shows of the day, 'Hannover was not policed. You could do what you wanted, and this was criticised a lot. Farnborough, as I remember, was really strict but friendly. There was a lot of leadership behind it — people who knew what they were talking about. When I wrote the flight operations procedure for Berlin, I looked at the English way of doing it.'

The Dornier 228 programme kept Dieter busy on his return from France, and its advanced wing was to be part of what he describes as 'the real highlight of my career', the one-off Do24ATT amphibian with its astonishing water-borne performance. 'The first wave that hits you after reaching 50kt, including the wind, catapults you into the air like a Harrier going off a ski-jump. It rotates you, and then you hang in ground effect and accelerate, hoping that you don't fall back. But you never fall back, because the wing is fantastic'. Dieter displayed the Do24ATT at Hannover's ILA 84 show, flying to and from Kiel; this was the aircraft's first and last show appearance until it was restored to fly again by Iren Dornier (the only other pilot to captain it) and came to ILA 2004 in Berlin.

'AIRSHOW POLICEMAN'

When the Daimler-Benz group took over Dornier, Dieter realised it was time to move on as he didn't feel the new management was sufficiently receptive to ideas. That his new job was in the world of airshows was perhaps rather surprising, given that they had been banned in Germany since the deaths of 72 people in the Ramstein tragedy of 1988 involving the Freccia Tricolori. In 1990, it was decided to relax the ban and hold ILA 90 as planned at Hannover, with Dieter as the flight director. With memories of the disaster so fresh, it was a high-pressure task.

'Of course, Ramstein was a USAF airshow on a USAF airfield', Dieter says. 'There was no German authorisation, there was no flight operating procedure and there were no limitations. Afterwards, Germany was the only country to forbid all airshows, but then came ILA at Hannover in 1990 and they decided to make new rules. They looked for a 'policeman', a test pilot who had demonstrated aircraft before, and they asked me if I would be the flight director. Initially, at Hannover, I was only there to look at the rules, the distances and the minimum altitudes.'

The unrelated crash of a Luftwaffe Transall in the run-up to the 1990 show led to the withdrawal of all the planned Bundeswehr flying participation, so it was fortunate that the Russians came to ILA with military aircraft — a MiG-29, MiG-29UB and Ka-29 — for the first time to add interest to proceedings. According to Dieter, 'The main pressure for us came from the Russians. They didn't understand anything about limitations, because a test pilot in Russia could do what he wanted. So, they came and suddenly found that there were restrictions, and I had to explain why. They didn't know what Ramstein was.'

ILA 2006 HIGHLIGHTS

Top to bottom:

Two Eurofighters from JG73 break formation during the Luftwaffe 50th anniversary set-piece at ILA 2006, which Dieter Thomas choreographed with the pilots involved and the commentator. Ben Dunnell

The Dornier Do24ATT was one of Dieter Thomas' test projects with the German manufacturer. In 2004, it returned to the air thanks to Iren Dornier and his team. 'Iren Dornier isn't a trained test pilot, but he told me that he repeated every test flight I made,' Dieter told *AI*. 'If he didn't find what I observed, he repeated the test flight to check my findings.' At ILA 2006, the Do24ATT flew with a pair of Marineflieger Atlantics. Ben Dunnell

ILA 2006 saw the first appearance of the Messerschmitt Stiftung's new-build Me262A/B-1c, a tremendous moment for Dieter Thomas as well as everybody who witnessed it. Ben Dunnell

Walter Maisch's powerful Yak-11 alongside a pair of Yak-3s, owned by Paul Ressle and The Fighter Factory, on the ILA 2006 flightline. Through booking such aircraft for the ILA, and his certification work on behalf of the LBA (Germany's CAA), Dieter Thomas has assisted the development of the warbird movement in Germany. Messe Berlin

BERLIN FLYING DIRECTOR

When ILA moved to Berlin's Schönefeld Airport in 1992, the event was taken on by Messe Berlin, the city's trade fair organising company who at that time had no experience in the field. They asked their predecessors at Hannover for advice, who suggested that Dieter be brought on board. 'Suddenly, I was not only flight director; I was responsible for the ground management, for ground safety, air safety, and I advised Messe Berlin on everything about organising a show at an airport. I had 10-15 people managing this initial Berlin airshow. It then went up to nearly 20 people, but then in 2000 I gave the ground management to my partner, and I kept only the flying part.'

Over the years of ILA in Berlin, Dieter has introduced several memorably unusual features to the display. 'I always think you must create an airshow. It's a choreography. I always wanted to show the whole spectrum of aviation, from balloons and airships to modern airliners and supersonic jets, and all in equal parts. You must always vary it, so after a fast jet, I tried to put a slow aircraft; after an ultralight, a heavy aircraft, and so on.'

ILA has always operated under one rather peculiar restriction. The ban on jet aerobatics, whether solo or in formation, imposed after Ramstein has never been lifted. 'If jet pilots did aerobatics, I had to punish them. So, what were they doing? They were doing tactical manoeuvres, and tactical manoeuvres are not forbidden,' Dieter explained with a smile. This issue, and all the others relating to Ramstein, came up again in 2000 when ILA secured an appearance by the Patrouille de France. 'It was forbidden for more than four jet aircraft to fly together in Germany, except for a parade. The Patrouille were invited, but suddenly the authorities said, 'They cannot fly their programme'. I said, 'OK, you go and tell them', but nobody wanted to, right up to the Chancellor [then, Gerhard Schröder]. We decided to have them do a 'parade'.

So it was that the Patrouille de France became the first national jet team to fly in Germany for 12 years, albeit in a gentle 'parade'-style display of flybys. Next time around, ILA 2002 welcomed the Patrouille Suisse, and now the focus was on minimising noise complaints. 'People asked, 'Can't you get them to go higher?' I said, 'Yes, they must go vertical'. But they still don't do aerobatics — no complete loops'. When both the Swiss and French teams appeared in 2004, the arrangements were perfected. By now, Dieter had been to Switzerland

and spent a week with the Patrouille Suisse putting together their ILA routine. Since then, they have incorporated elements of this into their standard show, although the 'tunnel' manoeuvre has to be altered in Germany.

The flight safety rules have not prevented ILA from staging some of the airshow scene's most memorable formations and scenarios of recent times. Dieter was always conscious of the need to create themes and put them across to the public in this way — for example, in 1998 the Berlin Airlift Historical Foundation's C-54E Skymaster flew with a Lufthansa Airbus A340-200 to show the spectrum of four-engined transports, and two years later the SAA Historic Flight's DC-4 ZS-AUB joined Åke Jansson's DC-3 and the Lufthansa Ju52/3m for a unique propliner trio.

ILA 2006 — OUT ON A HIGH

Dieter retired as ILA display director after the 2006 show. He celebrated his 70th birthday at the end of February 2007, and in any case doesn't believe it would be possible to improve upon what he managed in 2006. The Bundeswehr marked the 50th anniversary of its air arms with large-scale operational set-pieces, filling the gap left by the Inspector of the Luftwaffe's decision in 2004 to discontinue the service's solo jet demos. The man who commented on them, ZDF television correspondent Alexander von Sobeck, worked with Dieter and the pilots to create the scenarios involving 38 aircraft and helicopters from the Luftwaffe and Heeresflieger.

The MiG-29M OVT performed manoeuvres that had never before been demonstrated by a jet in the West, and did so brilliantly. After a full briefing on the aircraft from chief test pilot Pavel Vlasov, Dieter put together a safety regime involving so-called high angle of attack corridors over the airfield, in which areas the OVT performed the 'critical moments' in its display. Dieter has known Pavel Vlasov ever since ILA 90 in Hannover, when he came as a junior MiG test pilot and did his first public display outside Russia.

The EADS Heritage Flight's new Messerschmitt Me262 made its début, but it was a close-run thing as the aircraft had only just flown at Manching. 'One day before the ILA, it was not possible, but then Thomas Enders [then co-chief executive of EADS] came to me and said, 'Tomorrow, I will have my press conference, and the 262 will be here'. And it was, because one man made a decision'. And there was a classic example of a unique



formation, Iren Dornier in the Do24ATT leading a pair of Marineflieger Atlantics to highlight the establishment of the Dornier Museum in Friedrichshafen, with which Dieter is involved.

Now, with the reins handed over to Wolfram Cornelius, Dieter has organised his last ILA display. 'You can't do a little bit of ILA,' he says. 'This I've learned, so I've decided not to be there any more'. He has been advising some smaller events, but will concentrate on the work his company does for the LBA, Germany's equivalent of the CAA, seeing various types of aircraft (including several warbirds) through to German certification. So, Dieter Thomas' long contribution to the European airshow scene, and the use of his vast experience of aviation, will continue.