

June



Lima Lima Flight Team saluting the Queen Elizabeth II as it leaves New York Harbor, Sept., 1999

Photo by Gary Donovan

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Tribune photos by Tim Zielenbach

Lima Lima Flight Team pilots, who wear a winged insignia (above, right), fly their former Navy trainers out of the Naper Aero Club field in Naperville.

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A BREAK IN THE VI

Program gives paren
of fragile kids
a brief respite.

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Airborne ballet

Flight team gives vintage T-34s
a new career as sky dancers

By Glenna Holloway
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Sporting bright yellow paint jobs reminiscent of their days as Navy training planes in World War II, six T-34 Mentors in a wedge formation, lights on, trailing white smoke, roar over an expectant crowd. The tight precision wedge has become the signature of the Lima Lima Flight Team based at the Naper Aero Club field at a residential air park in Naperville.

The Lima Lima airmen (pronounced Leema Leema) and their vintage Mentors comprise the largest civilian flight team in the world. They are the non-military equivalent of the Navy's Blue Angels and the Air Force Thunderbirds. Their name derives from the Federal Aviation Administration designator for their home field, which is LL-10. "Lima" is the phonetic code used for the letter "L."

The flight team's origins go back 20 years to a flying club, The Mentor Flyers Inc., and a single T-34. Eventually, the membership reached 15, and more T-34s were acquired by club members, usually in partnerships. The Lima Lima fleet now numbers seven T-34s.

Lou Drendel, a charter member, said, "There was a surge of interest in T-34 flying that coincided with a formation training and qualification program by the National T-34 Association. Just as the military has levels of skill from basic tactical formation flying to demonstration team flying, so the Lima Lima Flight has evolved. Having many other Mentors allows us to practice every weekend the weather permits."

Drendel, 57, is a vice president of Moser Lumber Inc. in Naperville. Although he was a paratrooper with the 32nd Airborne Division, all his piloting experience has been civilian. He is the author and illustrator of more than 60 books on military aviation, 15 of which are currently in print. He is now president of the National T-34 Association as well as illustrator and co-author of its Formation Flight Manual, which has been adopted by all other major warbird organizations of North America including the Experimental Aircraft Association.

"It was always assumed that these planes couldn't do aerobatic formation flying," Drendel said. "But in 1988 we



Pilot Lou Drendel leads a five-ship loop maneuver. He is the author and illustrator of more than 60 books on military aviation.

tried it: first a barrel roll with two planes, which was unsuccessful. We didn't understand the physics. The wingman couldn't keep up. It wasn't dangerous, we just didn't know the technique. The first thing we perfected was a formation loop."

Besides Drendel, nine other men have now qualified to fly in air shows. Half are commercial airline pilots who enjoy the feel and freedom of flying light aircraft on their own time.

One is Bill Cherwin, who has been with United Airlines almost 35 years and is a captain on Boeing 747s. He has logged more than 24,000 hours of flying time in his

career, the most of any member of the team, and also is the only one who is qualified in all six positions, from leader to slot (the posterior point of the formation).

Upcoming

The first event on the team's 1995 schedule is Thunder Over Louisville, April 22. So far, their local season includes the grand reopening of Navy Pier in Chicago, June 16-18; Lake in the Hills, June 17; Macomb, June 25; DeKalb, July 8-9; Springfield, July 15-16; Chicago Air and Water Show, Aug. 3-6; Morris, Sept. 2-3.

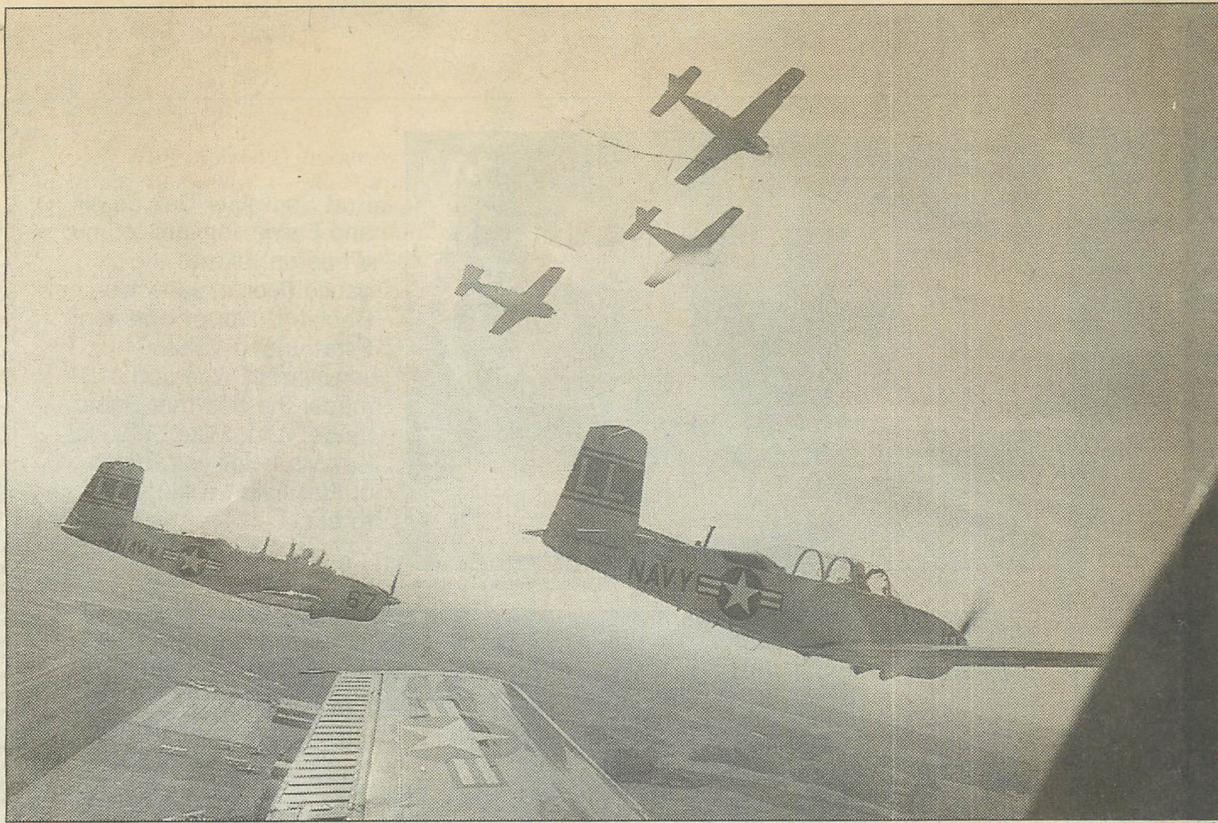
They also have contracted for shows in many other states, including the big air show at Oshkosh, Wis., in July.

For further information and bookings, call Lou Drendel at 708-904-5440.

"It's fun to do things you can't do in a big plane," Cherwin said. "And you're on your own, no crew, no fancy equipment. It's a challenge, not only mental but physical. We do a lot of grunting when we're pulling Gs [units of gravitational force]."

Cherwin, 55, lives with his wife Jean in St. Charles. He designs many of the maneuvers used in the Lima

SEE LIMA LIMA,
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Tribune photos by Tim Zielenbach

Members of the Lima Lima flight team practice maneuvers in the sky between Naperville and Beloit, Wis. The kind of formation flying the T-34 pilots do requires deep concentration.

Lima Lima

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Lima program. The work is akin to choreography. Besides his knowledge of physics and aerodynamics, he employs a keen sense of grace and motion to make the show a visual treat for the audience. Cherwin grinned. "It's been called a ballet in the sky. And at the start, the flight leader says, 'Let's dance.'

"The T-34 is not loud. It has flair and safety. And it's slow: top speed 219 knots [253 mph], which means we can turn in smaller circles and keep the action in front of the crowd longer than jet teams can."

"What we try to do is make the difficult look easy and the easy look difficult. The most difficult maneuver is the vertical rejoin or vertical rendezvous," Cherwin said. "It's our newest addition, and we'll use it in our 1995 shows."

Each year, the team's fame grows along with its proficiency. Besides air shows, they fly at private gatherings including memorial services, even parties.

"Sometimes we do partial shows in places where there's no permit for aerobatics. Last year a man hired us to fly a simple formation with smoke over the east end of Lake Geneva for his wife's birthday," Drendel recalled.

"T-34s cost less than most warbirds. They run from around \$100,000 to \$350,000. Sometimes they're bought at Civil Air Patrol auctions. They're relatively inexpensive to maintain. Ours have 285-horsepower Continental



On the ground after practice, Lima Lima members Ed Hicks (left) and Rick Gretz stand before the team's original T-34 Mentor trainer.

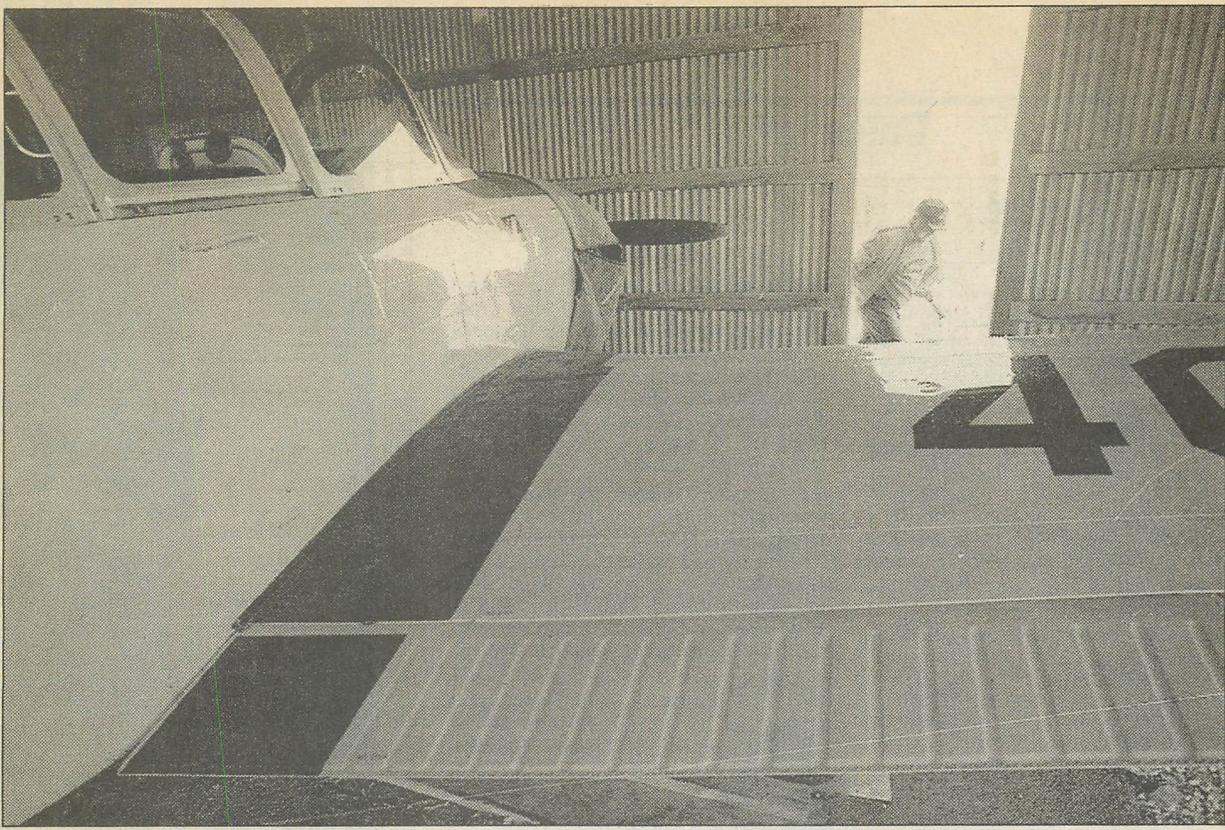
engines, more capable than the originals," said Drendel, who lives at Naper Aero Estates with his wife, Carol.

For a one-day show, the fee for the Lima Lima Flight Team is \$4,000 within 200 miles of home base. A two-day show is \$8,000. The price goes up with distance from their field. Their aerobatic performance lasts 16 to 20 minutes. Sometimes they fly a brief teaser in the morning. After the main event, they show off their airplanes on the ground, sign autographs and answer questions from the crowd.

Stan Robinson, the newest member, is also a captain with United Airlines, which he joined in 1979. Robinson, who lives in Glen Ellyn with his wife, Ann, and three chil-

dren, flew his first formal assignment with the Lima Lima team in January in Oak Park. It was a Missing Man formation often used to honor a veteran pilot at his graveside service. The flight is usually performed with four airplanes (cost: \$300 per plane) cued by someone on the ground with a radio. It is a very stirring ritual, and the individual pilots say they would like to have it at their own funerals.

Robinson, 46, flew helicopters in Vietnam, where he was awarded a Bronze Star. He spoke of his pride in being part of the Lima Lima team and how hard it is "to get used to flying so close. I'm very impressed with the ability of these guys. I still consider myself in training with them."



Closing the hangar after practicing with his fellow Lima Lima team members is Frank Fastner of Naperville, a retired electrical engineer and former Air Force weatherman.

"In formation flying, there are similarities to helicopter flying—in the way you fly relative to another fixed object," Robinson said, referring to the constant maintenance of distance and position, focusing on a specific area of the plane ahead. "Fixed-wing aircraft rarely use rudders except for takeoff and landing, but helicopters do, and so does the T-34 in holding that fixed reference."

"I also enjoy the social aspects of the membership—breakfast at Janesville [Wis.] or down at Morris, maybe—after a morning of hard practice, which it's wise to do on an empty stomach. And there's always the challenge to be good among a bunch of guys in love with the same idea."

Rick Gretz, 48, another Vietnam veteran and founder of a national chain of franchised sign shops, began flying T-34s in 1984. His military service was with the Army's 9th Infantry Division. He became a pilot after he became a civilian, but he has vivid memories of riding in Army helicopters, and he dreamed of flying as a child.

"You have to have deep concentration to do aerobatics. There's no room for error. You can't look around at the scenery or let your mind wander. Nobody wants to get hurt, but even more, you don't want to hurt anybody else," said Gretz, who lives at Naper Aero Estates with his wife, Mary, and their daughter.

Ed Hicks soloed on his 16th birthday. On leaving the U.S. Air Force in 1969, he was hired by Delta Airlines, where he is a captain on Boeing 757s and 767s. He has logged more than 22,000 hours in trainers, jet fighters and air-

liners. But his time in T-34s with the team "satisfies a deep-rooted love of precision flying and fills that little void that wants to turn upside down and pull Gs."

Hicks, 53, lives in St. Charles with his wife, Leslie. He joined the Lima Limas in 1987. He describes the T-34 as "the poor man's warbird. It's also very forgiving to fly. We're fortunate to have so many. We're also fortunate to have a godfather in Charlie Nogle down in Tuscola [Ill.]. He's tops as a troubleshooter and very knowledgeable about Mentor history and mechanics."

The team's repertoire consists of the opening wedge formation approaching the crowd from behind. At center stage, two solo planes break from the wedge, leaving a basic diamond pattern. Solos perform while the remaining planes prepare for the next maneuver. For more than 15 minutes, the audience is held slack-jawed with several kinds of loops, barrel rolls, breaks and what looks like a collision course thriller called a switchblade. (The pilots rely on visual signals more than their radios. Their flight manual puts it succinctly: "Sage advice from leaders to their wingmen: The only thing I want to hear from you is acknowledgment, or 'Lead, you're on fire!'")

The new vertical rejoin is performed by two pairs of planes, one pair approaching show center from the left, pulling into a loop, one pair approaching from the right, allowing space to pass head-on. The second pair climbs and rolls 180 degrees, aiming for the same altitude as the looping pair, ending in a rendezvous in

diamond formation. This precedes the climactic bomb burst made famous by the Blue Angels. At the top of the burst, when all four ships are inverted and level, each rolls right and then pulls into a left descending circle before exiting down the showline. After reforming a six-ship double arrowhead, if runway width permits, they land in three-ship formations.

The other five Lima Lima pilots are J.O. Martin of St. Charles, retired United Airlines captain and former Air Force fighter pilot; Gene Martin of Naperville and Venice, Fla., retired cement company owner with 40 years of flying experience; Jerry O'Brien of Elgin, former Air Force pilot in Desert Storm, now a first officer with American Airlines; John Rippinger of Schaumburg, president of Rippinger Financial Group Inc., also a balloonist; and Frank Fastner of Naperville, retired electrical engineer, former Air Force weatherman who flew specially equipped planes into thunderstorms for analytical studies.

Camaraderie, discipline, skill, dedication and pleasure are all elements of the Lima Lima Flight Team's success. There have been many high points in their unique history. Drendel recalled a special one:

"Rick and I were at a bar in Louisville during the American Heritage Airshow, Labor Day 1993. Chuck Yeager walked up and said, 'You and your guys did your usual fine job today.'

"Those of us who fly military airplanes and have the attitude of fighter pilots consider him the fighter pilot icon of the world."