



# Stearman Flight

The inaugural F.A.S.T. certified Stearman Formation Clinic flies over St. Louis

BY DON PARSONS

“Number 3, knock it off!” came the calm but stern command from flight leader Tonya Hodson. The four former primary trainers rolled out in unison from their turn to calm, straight-and-level flight. Number 2 in the flight couldn’t have seen it, and Number 4 probably wondered what he was missing. What none of them but Tonya knew was that her instructor, David Burroughs, had briefed her to make the call to her flight as part of the training. Number 3 was doing nothing wrong, but hearing the call reinforced that part of the training.

The training was being conducted by Stearman Flight, an organization dedicated to en-

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**Lead:** Numbers 2 and 3 keep their attention riveted on their wingman as they practice during one of the flying sessions. Strict adherence to a standardized set of procedures minimizes the risk associated with flying formation.



Formation practice starts on the ground, after a thorough preflight briefing session.

hancing safety and proficiency in Stearman formation flying. It is the only F.A.S.T. (Formation and Safety Team) certified organization specializing in flying the

Stearman PT series of biplanes. There are 16 different organizations that make up the group involved in F.A.S.T.; the organization is tasked by the FAA to over-

see formation training. Seventeen pilots signed up to improve their skills and gain knowledge in formation flying with eight either earning or upgrading their



The flight forms up on Ralph Lutes during the flying portion of the clinic.



Ralph Lutes, Mike Neubig, and Carey Hardin discuss the day's flying during their debrief.

F.A.S.T. card.

The clinic, held at St Louis's Creve Coeur Airport (aka, Dauster Field), which has Stearman-friendly grass runways, ran from May 28 to 31. They have another clinic scheduled there October 1 through 4, along with a clinic at Hollister Municipal Airport in Hollister, California. David Burroughs, one of the Stearman flight instructors and one of the group's two F.A.S.T. representatives, says, "More training was done in Stearmans during World War II than anything else. Historically, the

airplane is important. There are thousands still flying. There is an extremely strong core group of people. We wanted to be a large and active signatory [to F.A.S.T.]"

Stearman Flight conducts four-day clinics. The first day, a Thursday evening, is a ground school and briefing for the next day, when flying begins. Friday starts with a morning review of the briefing, answering of questions, and familiarization of the flight area. By afternoon, the instructors are getting serious with the training. "You have to be a good Stearman pilot to

begin with," says Burroughs. "You almost have to be able to control the airplane almost unconsciously to maintain formation."


Friday starts out reasonably early and runs until dark. Saturday starts at sunrise as the instructors try to get people qualified. Each flight takes about two hours, counting the briefing and debriefing time. "There are five phases of formation flying," says Burroughs. "Number one is the briefing. Number two is getting airborne and getting into formation. Number three is spent flying next to each other. Number four is rearranging the formation. And number five is the debriefing. All are done in a standardized way. That's what these clinics are about."

Lunch is grabbed on the run. During the May class, one of the local residents went and grabbed pizza for everyone. Sub sandwiches were brought the next day.

"Where else can you get guys with this kind of experience?" says Norm Beachum. "I've only been flying (Stearmans) for two years; they can teach you a lot. After three flights, I can say it's a real learning experience. It's an excellent experience here, but it's a little bit overwhelming but enjoyable for a newbie."

Tonya Hodson, from Marion, Kansas, was attending her fourth clinic. She had been a Stearman owner and pilot for almost 10 years. "It's so challenging," she says. "I always wanted to fly formation. The hardest part as a lead is you're responsible for the entire flight. Whether it's two or eight aircraft, you're assuming a lot of responsibility."

Rod Hightower, a Stearman owner-pilot based at Creve Coeur Airport in St. Louis agrees. "It's crazy hard. Probably the hardest, most challenging thing I've done in an airplane."

For more information, visit Stearman Flight on the Web at <http://StearmanFlight.net>. 



The class photo of the May 2009 Stearman Flight F.A.S.T. clinic, the first of what is hoped to be many Stearman formation clinics to come.