

## Newsletter January 2030: The con trick

'Bandit 3 o'clock. Scramble!', called the master (model aircraft safe traffic emergency regulator). She looked up from the screen as the club members jumped into action.

'ETA?'

'It's at 100 metres about a kilometre away. Travelling at 30 kph and heading straight for us. ETA two minutes'. The members knew they had time to get everyone airborne before the bandit arrived.

It was a bit of a pain taking your turn as spotter rather than flying. But then there was the fun as well. Waiting till someone had lost sight of his or her model - that was always good. You could sound the klaxon then wait for the pilot to come over and grovel.

'Do a one-eighty', you would shout. 'You are at 80 metres due north and flying level upright.' And then there was the joyous walk to the clubhouse for the punishment round of bacon butties the pilot was obliged to buy. This replaced the 'O- bother' auto-return button that was briefly popular when auto flying started, though no-one said 'bother' of course.

'What's the model?'

'Model T, Orinoco'. Everyone called it a flivver even though no-one knew why.

'Flight time?'

'Fifteen minutes elapsed.' That meant it had about twenty five minutes flight time left. Perfect!

When 'con', short for that revolting word 'conspicuity', first appeared on the scene they had thought it was the beginning of the end of free model flying. Then the cyclists in the club explained how riding in front of autonomous cars allowed them to slow the cars down to a safe speed on narrow roads. The penny dropped.

It was amazing what the con screens could tell you. Every flying thing in the area showed up on the screen with its identity. You could move to avoid even the daftest full-size pilot. But the real fun was drones.

'Five hundred metres and closing'.

Seven models were now in the air and about to start what was called the 'Orinoco formation' or more briefly the 'con trick'. It was much more difficult and fun than the mock dogfights that sometimes ended with one model dropping onto another and both spiralling slowly down.

The con trick involved one model flying above and another below the bandit. Then the remaining models would circle round it. The bandit's onboard guidance would stop it moving onto a proximity path so it would stop dead in the air. A cheer always went up.

It was poetry in motion. The club competitions had improved everyone's flying. A few years ago flying in a perfect circle in formation would have been beyond many pilots. Now it was

like a school of fish. Top and bottom were the tricky stations. Full flap into wind. As the drone slowed throttle back almost to a hover then gently circle maintaining height.

They had started with combat where beams and sensors were used to record hits. Once maps were added to the screens they invented a kind of figure skating where models had to be flown to trace exact shapes horizontally. You started with perfect circles and moved on to combinations of eights, squares and triangles. You could see the shape recorded on the screen. At first it was all done using first person view. They didn't need that any more now.

Two green lights appeared in the sky. A cheer went up and the models turned towards it. Top and bottom took station first to make sure the bandit had to maintain height. Then the other models started to circle. Hearts swelled with pride as the drone stopped almost overhead.

'Count-down please.'

'Estimated flight time remaining twenty-two minutes.' That meant they had to keep it still for another eight minutes to be sure. Good job they were now using solid-state and sulphur batteries. They could easily stay up that long.

The eight minutes passed quickly, then the master shouted 'Release!'

Top broke away first allowing the flivver to rise and fly away to deliver the vile plastic toy that it no doubt carried. Everyone knew that it now couldn't get back to base so would have to land after delivery in one of the safe spots it would know. Then the operator would have to drive out to collect it. Deep joy.

There was an intense pleasure in the skill needed to fly the con trick. It was no use the operator complaining to the club. The flivver should not fly over airfields but of course the operators did as they pleased. Never mind anyone else. So all in all it was a very pleasing interlude in the day's flying. Time for a coffee and a cinnamon waffle.