WALKING ON A PLANE'S WINGS TAKES MORE THAN JUST A PRAYER

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The world's only aerobatic formation wing-walking team, the Breitling Wingwalkers, is in the UAE and competing in this year's Al Ain Air Championship.

The British team consists of two 1930s Boeing Stearman bi-planes in bright orange colours, two experienced pilots and two incredibly fit ladies who ride on top of the plane while doing daring stunts.

The pilots, Martyn Carrington and David Barrell, and wingwalkers Sarah Tanner and Stephanie Pansier, arrived in the UAE five days ahead of the championship to allow them enough time to start their preparations and rehearsals for the event which is expecting around 45,000 people over its duration from Thursday to today.

To prepare for the show, they have been rehearsing in the air twice a day for 15 minute durations since their arrival, which may not seem like a lot, but as they showed us, those 15 minutes are enough and more when you're up there in the skies sitting on top of a plane wing.

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As Gulf News discovered, just one 15-minute ride is enough to make every inch of your body ache and your throat dry out completely.

The force of air acting against the body makes even the smallest movement a Herculean task and requires tremendous energy to overcome the resistance. Your throat and lips dry out quickly making your teeth stick to your lips. The specially-designed goggles to protect your eyes from the wind pressure can't completely prevent air from getting inside and your eyes begin to water. Not to mention the extreme flapping of the skin on your face, that is not pleasant or flattering in the least.

So how do the wing-walking girls execute elegant gymnastic-like routines while the plane is twisting and turning at speeds of up to 150 miles per hour (240 kilometres per hour) and make it all look so effortless?

"There is a lot of power behind it and when we are not flying, we do weight training to build the muscles in our arms," said Sarah, the team's lead wingwalker from the UK.

"It is quite extreme up there and we have to smile for the cameras because they really zoom in and your cheeks are flapping, and without realising it, we must suck in our cheeks and our lips," she says. "You don't realise it when it you are up there, but when you come down, you realise your cheeks are aching."

Stephanie from France joined the team at the end of October 2015 and the Al Ain Air Championship is her debut performance. "I am doing my best," she said. "It is exciting being here in the championship."

Wing walking

When Stephanie took up wing walking, she had to put in hours of weight training on a daily basis to build her arm muscles.

"That's even before she started flying, before any kind of training, just so she could build her strength," explains Sarah. "It is never easy when you first start but building muscles before the training [is important] because you need that strength to climb around, and for waving,"

Sarah explains what some of the intense training includes. "Learning to climb around in the hanger, learning to swivel, and how to operate the harnesses. We spend a few days in the hanger doing these," she said.

This is alongside familiarisation with the plane and safety training, and flying. "There is plenty of flying to start with, slow flying and then gradually the pilot starts to introduce aerobatics and the speed gets faster. Then they introduce another plane," she added.

Sarah and Stephanie practice closely so they can know every move by heart. There is also the matter of the plane being very delicate — one wrong step onto the wing and the foot can go through and break it. The same applies to the cockpit, which the girls climb into from the wing during one of their stunts. There are only two spots in the cockpit that they can step on, otherwise they can damage or break a vital plane part.

Yet they manage to do all this in sync and on cue.

The secret to being in sync, Stephanie explains, is that "[Sarah] is always on my left side, so I am able to see her. And we are in communication with hand signals so I know what will be the next

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move. But we practice on ground too, to know the routine."

Stephanie, a self-confessed aviation addict, says one of the reasons she loves being a wingwalker is because "it's like having a room with a view, a breathtaking view."

So what are the requirements to become a wingwalker?

"Background in dance or gymnastics is good. Being physically strong is also good," says Sarah.

Sarah and Stephanie are visibly excited about being in Al Ain for the championship, and this year's format has transformed the event from an air show into a championship, thus introducing an element of competitiveness.

During their 15-minute performance, the girls will be performing a number of stunts, but their favourite, Sarah said, is a manoeuvre towards the end.

"We unstrap from the static harness, have another harness around our waist, then we lean forward holding our arms out and holding on to the rig, get out of the static harness and climb down to sit in the cockpit."

The team can be seen performing twice a day during the Al Ain Air Championship.

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