

Parachutist

JANUARY 2018 | ISSUE 699



ZACH LEWIS

Stars IN THE Eastern Sky

BY JIM
MCCORMICK



It all started more than a year ago when renowned competitor, coach and organizer Solly Williams was contacted by some people with whom he had worked in China. They spoke of an air show outside of a large but not well-known city in central China. Details were sparse. Time passed.

By mid-summer of 2017, Williams' exchanges with his contacts in China intensified. He posed questions. Some answers followed; some did not. Language, culture and distance all presented challenges. Soon, time was short. If he was going to find 50 world-class skydivers ready to take two weeks out of their busy schedules to travel halfway around the world, he needed to start the process.

For leadership, Williams aimed high. At his side as the team came together was decorated British competitor Pete Allum. Also in leadership were highly-regarded British organizer Milko Hodgkinson and accomplished Italian competitor Marco Arrigo.

roll-up door, one had a door narrower than a DC-3's, and one had no door at all. Everybody was in a learning mode, including the pilots. While they had flown jumpers, they had never done it in formation and were not excited about doing so. Hoping to persuade them, the team prepared for 15-ways with five jumpers in each plane to give the pilots an opportunity to practice.

Fully geared up and surrounding the silent jump planes, the team waited. The pilots talked. Organizers tried to persuade. Translators translated. The pilots could not be convinced. The team returned to its staging area.

Eventually, two pilots agreed to fly in formation. As would become the norm during the event, plans changed. With the jumpers distributed in various ways, the first jumps occurred. The moment was magical. Under canopy, the team had a view of the massive Yangtze River only a short distance from the airport. Everyone made their first jump in China. Progress.



The dates approached. Flights were booked. Schedules were cleared. Travel began. The last weekend in October, a team of 50 jumpers from eight countries, as well as videographers and ground crew, arrived in Wuhan, China, for the World Fly-In Expo, uncertain of what to expect.

The event started gradually. No jumps took place the first day scheduled for practice jumps because the landing area was still being cleared.

The team headed to the site of the air show to make practice jumps on the second day. The aircraft were Harbin Y-12 Twin Pandas. One had a familiar full-width

The next day, all three pilots agreed to fly in formation. As a tribute to their hosts, the team planned a 45-way Chinese star, but for some reason, jump altitude during the entire event was limited to 11,000 feet. The air show started in two days, and with jumps limited to only one or two per day, the team—including the pilots—needed to gel quickly.

Despite the trail planes flying far from the lead plane, the star formation almost completed on the first attempt. It was a tribute to the quality of the team that the second attempt was a stunning success. From a spread-out aircraft formation and



STEPHEN TONGSON



RALPH WILHELM



ZACH LEWIS

with only 30 seconds of working time, the team built the largest freefall formation ever over China, a national record ... and the air show had not even begun.

On day one of the air show, the team's first jump was cancelled due to low clouds. The extensive opening ceremonies began in front of a stage full of more than 150 stern-faced dignitaries expecting to be impressed. They were not disappointed. They were soon treated to performances by a polished jet team and formations of powered hang gliders, gyrocopters and powered paragliders. Dozens of hot-air balloons ascended in unison. There were aerobatic performers and dozens of accuracy jumpers, some in costume and others launching fireworks from massive brackets below their knees.

The high point of the day for the skydiving team was its one shot at the 45-way Chinese star. Trailing smoke one minute before exit and throughout the jump, the team performed perfectly and honored its host country in a most dramatic way. As their parachutes opened in rapid succession, the audience of 150,000, accustomed to slow-moving accuracy canopies, was stunned to see so many fast-moving

sport canopies darting about the sky. Their response was absolute adulation. Audience members shrieked with excitement to have photos taken with members of the team, and it took the jumpers as much as half an hour to make it back to the staging area.

The team's next challenge was inspired by the Chinese flag and consisted of a 25-way Chinese star with four 5-way stars grouped to one side. With limited working time and large distances to cover, the team members once again showed why they deserved to be international ambassadors of skydiving: completion on the first attempt.

The celebration of flying continued through the four days of the air show. The team's Chinese hosts went to great length to be gracious, and the pilots rose to the challenge and significantly improved their formation-flying skills.

The third day of the air show saw a dramatic example of the team's western culture blending with the eastern culture of their hosts. A mass wedding—a form of celebration popular in Asia—took place when 100 couples celebrated their unions in 100 hot-air balloons. Keen to take advantage of such a unique opportunity and with much encouragement from the team, Hodgkinson asked his long-time fiancé, Siân Stokes, to participate. The Chinese event organizers were thrilled to have a couple from the west join in! With their symbolic union, the couple was a perfect representation of how the Chinese embraced a team from around the world to create stars in the eastern sky.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jim McCormick, D-12379, is a Colorado skydiver, author and organizational consultant. He has earned numerous state, national and world large-formation records. McCormick is also the director of development for the International Skydiving Museum & Hall of Fame.