

Year of the

Raptor

WORDS BRIAN HARTIGAN

Every two years, as 'Avalon' – more properly called the Australian International Airshow, at Avalon – gets closer, I get more excited.

Avalon is the holy grail for aviation enthusiasts in this part of the world. It's the biggest, loudest, most diverse and most exciting air show in Australia – and, indeed, the southern hemisphere.

And I love it.



PIC DANIEL MACINTOSH

PIC ROSIE HARTIGAN

As 'Avalon 2013' got closer and closer, I got more and more excited. Press releases from the organisers began to drip feed information on this year's event as early as April last year.

This year was going to be my seventh attendance at Avalon – and I always go for the full six days without ever getting bored.

Early big news from the organisers' media feeds was that the US Air Force's F-22 Raptor would actually be flying this time. So, how could I not be excited again this year.

Anyway, CONTACT got itself ready for another big show. We printed 1000 extra copies of the latest magazine to give away, we made a 'stick-your-head-in-a-hole-and-get-your-photo-taken' attraction and we printed thousands of posters especially for show giveaways.

Then, with less than a week to go, probably the best of all the press releases came in. From the Royal Australian Air Force, this one started with the tantalising opener, "World-first media opportunity to capture vision of air-to-air refuelling of F/A-18 Hornets from on board a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) KC-30A Multi-Role Tanker Transport (MRTT)". And I near wet myself!

So it came to pass that on the Wednesday of the trade-only show days, CONTACT Air Land & Sea's managing editor Brian Hartigan got the very rare privilege of soaring above it all, aboard Australia's newly certified KC-30A multi-role tanker transport, sitting in 'business class', looking at F/A-18s out the window – and trying very hard to look cool, calm and professional about being on this massive 'jolly'.

We were assured that not only was this the first MRTT flight to carry Australian media, it was the first anywhere in the world to carry media during a live air-to-air refuel sortie.

Cruising at altitude in restricted airspace above East Sale, the MRTT married up with four 'classic' Hornets headed to the airshow, and topped off their tanks for the last leg in to Avalon.

Of course, I'm pretty sure they didn't really need the refuel to make the distance from Williamtown to Avalon – it was all done for us media. But before you yell, 'what a waste of money', it was actually a good training opportunity for all concerned – not just the F/A-18 crews, but the MRTT too. And, of course, it was an awesome PR opportunity for the RAAF too.

As Wing Commander Geoff Fox, the MRTT squadron's (33 Sqn) boss put it, "We have not done refueling in the Air Force for more than five years, so we have got a whole generation of aircrew and maintainers who have to learn how to do this."

A fair point when you think of it. While MRTT may be new to the RAAF, just buying the airplanes and handing them over to a squadron does not a new capability make. There must be a lot to learn.

For example, while I didn't notice any example of this on my flight (I was too busy fighting with the 30 or so other photographers and videographers for a vantage point), an F/A-18, or any plane, actually pushes a bow-wave of air in front of it, much like a boat on water. And when the plane is coming in to marry up with the fuel drogue dangling from the wing station on the much bigger KC-30A – which is itself pushing a lot of air around – the manoeuvre is not quite as simple as just driving up and plugging in. It does, apparently, take a lot of practice and a lot of anticipation around what's about to happen.

So this flight over East Sale was just another in a long list of training flights required for both the Hornet and the MRTT crews. And it was just happy happenstance that I, 30-or-so other media and the 165,000 other people who visited Avalon this year got to see parts of the action surrounding the movements of these aircraft.

Australia's KC-30A MRTT is a new beast. We actually bought five of them to replace the venerable B707 fleet that retired about five years ago.



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