

Townsville was the latest regional centre to experience the high-octane sights and sounds of a now-annual Royal Australian Air Force air show – and what a show it was!

Actually, the RAAF can't take all the credit. The actual flying display was organised as the city's celebration of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of major rejuvenation works on The Strand – the city's waterfront promenade – and the site of the spectacular air display.

Headlining the air show was the US Air Force's Thunderbirds aerobatics demonstration team with its six F-16 Fighting Falcons.

With dust storms across much of Australia's eastern seaboard in the week leading up to the air show, there was some doubt whether the show would go on or not – and if it did, there was lingering doubt, even on Saturday morning, whether the display could be as spectacular as it might otherwise be, given the lingering dust haze.

After driving all the way from Canberra just for this, CONTACT was at least a little relieved to see the Thunderbirds in the air on Friday, rehearsing for Saturday's show, just as we rolled in to town.

Speaking to high-ranking RAAF members on Saturday morning, however, it seemed CONTACT wasn't alone in thinking that Friday's rehearsal pointed to the potential of a rather lackluster demo to come.

But, bloody hell, were we ever wrong? The Thunderbirds' show was simply awesome!

Having been to many, many airshows over the years, I can easily say this was the best, most diverse air display I've ever seen.

WORDS AND PICS BRIAN HARTIGAN



The F-16 is one of my favourite airplanes anyway, so, to have six of them in formation was just brilliant. Not that they spent a lot of time in six-ship formation, though.

Splitting early, four Falcons stayed together for much of the show while the other two came from hither and thither in the most confusing and unpredictable ways possible.

From left and right, head-on high-speed passes or one inverted just above the other, and even from behind, they came from everywhere.

Standing on the beach, at water's edge, my head was spinning, literally, as I tried to guess where the next ear-piercing roar was going to come from.

With my camera pointed in one direction, following the latest sequence, then swinging around in anticipation of the next set of pics from a different perspective, I missed what was probably the best photo of all – though the image is burnt into my brain.

While engrossed in the antics of the two wild-card Thunderbirds, the four-ship formation suddenly and unexpectedly thundered directly overhead, from behind, in the closest formation of planes I've ever seen.

Flirting with minimum safe height above the crowd and as-near-as-damn-it almost touching each other, they flew as one.

And, for one fleeting moment, the light was perfect for a perfect photo – and I missed it.

Damn!

And this was a one-show-only weekend, so I couldn't ready myself for the encore opportunity.

Damn and blast!

But, of course, it wasn't all about the Thunderbirds.

There was the usual array of airplanes, old and new, tooling up and down in front of a very appreciative crowd – more than 70,000 of them, according to local estimates – in a very picturesque setting.

The Army's Townsville-based chopper fleet was another favourite of mine. As a former aircraft fitter (helicopter mechanic) I have a soft spot for the whirly birds anyway, so getting a good look at a Blackhawk, Chinook and the new MRH-90 relatively close was pretty cool.

Actually, it was literally pretty cool – and that close – that I got soaked by sea spray from the Chinook's downwash in the hover.

Notable for its absence, however, was the Townsville-based Caribou, only months away from its retirement. Seems there was a 'mayday' incident on the Friday that caused the whole fleet to be grounded as a precaution.

Another imminent retiree was there, however, and, in a first for me, two F-111's performed a simultaneous, formation dump-and-burn to open the evening's fireworks finale – a world-class show in itself.

Well done Townsville – you've set the bar very high for Newcastle next year.

