B2Osh, -my gosh

B2Oshers getting ready

"How would you fancy flying into Oshkosh in a Bonanza formation?" asked Bas Scheffers of OzRunways. Knowing my penchant for the beautiful Beech, the answer was obvious: it would be the aeronautical equivalent of winning a luxury holiday; it would be the most stylish and exciting way to begin the greatest show on earth! Before I drowned him in enthusiasm, Bas gave me the address of Larry Gaines, coordinator of B2Osh – a group of around 120 Bonanzas and Barons who make the trip from Rockford, Illinois every year.

Within days I'd heard back from Larry – who is a big fan of Australians – inviting me to join the aerial caravan that formally invented the formation fly in to AirVenture. Larry was instantly likeable, boasting the most fabulous combination of enthusiasm, determination, leadership and seriousness about flight safety. He filled me in with the group's history, operations and schedules, as well as forwarding the NOTAMs for Oshkosh (about the size of the Yellow Pages) and a party list (most of which were compulsory and would not be a problem for any self-respecting Aussie).

'B2Osh' made its first flight as a group in 1990 and have flown in every year since. I was to participate in the 24th B2Osh event, which promised to be a biggie. The only flight whereby the group have been unable to land was in 2010, and was known as Sploshkosh because it was so wet. This year, Larry would be leading the first element with Wayne Collins and Larry's predecessor, Elliott Schiffman.

Before the event there is months of training, culminating in a clinic at Porterville, California. The clinic is co-hosted by B2OSH's Stephen Blythe and the Mooney Caravan's Director of Training Dave Marten, active duty USAF, and an instructor at Edwards Air Force Base's Test Pilot School.

"I doubt the world has a better training scenario for a civilian pilot to learn formation flying," said Gaines. And with that, I felt confident that I would be taking part in one of the year's most exciting and well-organised events.

B-Day

At last, the day arrived. Alighting the bus at Rockford, Illinois with another Aussie and a Scotsman in tow, we arrived in time for the meet-and-greet hangar party, where I immediately spotted Larry. He was just as I expected: dashing, humorous and in control. I gifted him an Akubra hat and he, in exchange, gave us the compulsory B2Osh t-shirts (green this year).

Glenn Wimbish

The next morning's weather was overcast, but not problematic. The mass compulsory briefing took place in the morning. Altitudes and procedures were discussed and finalised, along with probable runways at Wittman, go-around procedures and radio etiquette (all calls to be kept to an absolute minimum, with each element leader responsible for their element's calls).

Looking around the room of around 250 green-shirted pilots and co-pilots, I could feel the buzz: the camaraderie, excitement and obvious life-long friendships, which had been formed over the years. There were children, babies, elderly men and women and teenagers. I noted I was the only co-pilot in green t-shirt and heels. Everyone was smiling, taking photographs, and introducing themselves to the newcomers. The remaining passengers were paired with their pilots. I scored Glenn Wimbish, a southern gentleman from Burlington North Carolina, with a serious expression and a voice that could read me a bedtime story every night for the rest of my life. "Ahhh, y'all be safe with Glenn," remarked the gentleman next to me. "As long as you don't try and drink beer in his cockpit. He's very serious, and an excellent, excellent pilot."

After introducing myself, Glenn and the element leaders had a final brief, and I walked out to the aircraft. And there she was; my dream bird – an immaculately maintained 1973 V35B – just begging me to take her home. Upon Glenn's return, I asked about her history, "She's the only airplane ah've ever owned. One wife and one bird is enough for me," Glenn drawled. "I'll sell her to you, if you like," he teased, before we climbed in and waved goodbye to the other 108 aircraft waiting to taxi. As absolute luck would have it, we were in the fourth element (although I was in my complete element!) and so would take off right near the beginning of the formation. Glenn, as element leader, would be taking the lead and the radio calls, and I promised him I wouldn't prattle on, or drink beer in his cockpit. "You can do what you liiiiike, ah don't mand at awl," he smiled, and I could see the others had been pulling my leg about his taciturnity.

With Larry taking the lead at the first element, we were cleared to start up and taxi, element by element, three by three. It was a sight of great awesomeness to see 108 Bonanzas and Barons (the Barons at the back) of all ages and models, taxiing en masse to the runway. To our left was a super splendid 1962 Beech P35, owned by Mr Kevin Smith, and on the right a mint 2001 A36 and her proud owner Mr Clarence Lambe. We were in fine company as we rolled out of Rockford and into the sky for our cruising altitude of 2000ft.

Oshkosh, my gosh!

It was a flawless flight of a little over an hour, with Larry keeping check of the formation from the front, and the Baron at the back holding up the tail end. Glenn concentrated furiously and flew seamlessly, this being his twenty-third (and final, he claims, although someone told me he says that every year!) B2Osh trip. For me, as lookout, it was over so quickly; it seemed only minutes before Larry was making contact with Osh tower (the world's busiest control tower for one week a year) informing them of our imminent arrival. The reception from the tower was unexpectedly enthusiastic, after Larry announced the arrival of a formation of 109 aircraft, inbound: "Welcome to Oshkosh. You guys rock!" declared the controller, who then went ahead and made an announcement to everyone on frequency that we were arriving.

"She's the only airplane ah've ever owned. One wife and one bird is enough for me,"

Eschelon

Glenn's Beautiful V-tail

The rule is that each element leader calls 'gear down' and visually checks their element's gear. I cannot put into words the sound of 36 pilots, one after another, minute by minute, calling their gear is down and they're ready. And then, the famous Osh tower monologue began: "Bonanza formation, element one, cleared runway 33 left and 36 right, land on the purple dot and keep it rolling."

As we were fourth to land, we were treated to the marvellous sight of the previous aircraft landing on the purple dot, while we were cleared for the yellow dot, which of course Glenn made with great elegance. As we rolled off the runway and were marshalled onto the taxiway, I caught sight of the crowd gathered to welcome us. Waving and gesticulating, I had to remind myself that the flight is not over until the wheels are chocked, and that we may be at the greatest show on earth, but we still had some distance to our final field.

When Glenn killed the engine and shut down, a marshal came running up and said, "Welcome to Oshkosh, can I help you with anything?" to which I was, for once, speechless, as rows and rows of Beech aircraft lined up, tied down and started setting up camp. "Whaale, we're here. Welcome to Oshkosh," declared Glenn. "Y'all wanna come do it again next year?" he asked with the sardonic smile of a man who knows he will be doing this every year for the rest of his life. "You betcha!" I retorted, in my new American vernacular as I skipped off to find the media tent before returning for the after-flight pizza party and speeches.

And with that, I acknowledged that Glenn Wimbish would not be the only pilot to return, year after year, in a beautiful Bonanza. Who knows, maybe after eight years or so, I might be brave enough to fly one in myself. ■

Kreisha would like to thank Larry Gaines, Glenn Wimbish and everybody in the B2Osh formation; and, of course, Bas Scheffers, for making this happen.