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Jet Fighter Riding

by Greg Clarke

The runway, a Second World War landing strip that has seen better repair, stretches toward distant trees and fields. In the cockpit the sounds of a jet engine winding its way to power is a distant noise, barely audible…

The runway, a Second World War landing strip that has seen better repair, stretches toward distant trees and fields. In the cockpit the sounds of a jet engine winding its way to power is a distant noise, barely audible through my flying helmet. Far louder is the sound of heavy breathing through the oxygen mask clamped over my nose and mouth. I am kitted out liked an ace or a top gun but, if a ride in a fighter jet is meant to be about excitement, in the moments before blast-off, nervousness, or fear, is a much more powerful emotion: flights to Paris never start like this.

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Pilot Darren De Roia fires the jet toward the end of the runway and we launch into the air before we even get close to the trees. Then, minutes later, despite a vague awareness of the clear blue sky above us I am not certain which way is the ground. De Roia has not been flying straight since take-off. A bank of cloud is below us but I am staring straight at it through the Perspex canopy of a fighter jet's roof. The aircraft is upside down. The blue is beyond my feet. Strapped in tight there is no real sense of discomfort and, indeed, the parachute under my rear makes quite a cushion. I can still hear myself breathing heavily, via the headphones in the helmet, but disorientation is complete.

De Roia flips the fighter again and the blue sky is where it is supposed to be – above my head. "Want to try the loop," he asks. Thankfully, I do not have time to say, no. De Roia pulls the control column gently, points the jet's nose toward space and we head vertical, climbing at around 14,000 feet per minute.

Our domain is the sky above Ballarat, about an hour's drive west of Melbourne, Australia, in a jet fighter bought from the New Zealand Air Force. This is a Strikemaster MK 88, one of the most successful fighter aircraft made in Britain. This one was built in 1972 and, yet, at

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the current rate of flying De Roia estimates his jet will be serviceable for another 30 years.

This aircraft is a lot smaller than you might think, roughly the size of a Cessna. “Small and agile,” says 40-year-old De Roia. There are, however, a few rather significant differences not the least of which is the Rolls Royce engine. The camouflage livery suggests something a little different too.

The Strikemaster has a top speed of 834km/h. The renowned 12 Apostles, towering rock formations standing sentry-like in the ocean on the south-west coast of Victoria, are around 15 minutes flying-time away. De Roia often performs his perfected aerobatics routine above them and is something of a tour guide at altitude: he describes the manoeuvres as he employs them – aileron rolls, derry turns and barrel rolls – and all the while his tone, somehow, is as casual as it was on the briefing video I had watched before take-off.

The nimble Strikemaster just might be ideal for this sort of flying. I had thought I would be seated somewhere behind the pilot, much like modern-day navigators. But I am, in fact, sitting beside him. Blissfully, there are no backs of heads, over-head lockers or toilet doors, anywhere.

The loop is a little like flying around the inside of a bottle. The Wright brothers have been credited with the first 360 degree turn in an aircraft though our frolicking, you would assume, has taken us a little faster and higher. We peak at around 12000 feet.

As we start our inverted decent I look out through the roof, beyond the breaks in the cloud. The fields below look scorched by the summer, patches of land more brown than green. But I have been warned not to look through the top of the canopy. Keep your eyes fixed on the horizon (wherever that is) or out the front of the aircraft and your chances of being sick are minimal.

We pass through around a mile and a half of sky and exit the loop at around 500km/h. “That’s 4-Gs (gravitational forces),” says De Roia, his voice crackling through the headphones. My body is four times its normal weight. I lift my arms off my knees and the struggle is obvious. My stomach is churning. A far easier motion is to tilt my eyes, and I do, toward the air-sick bag tucked into a pocket of my flying suit.

I only just regain a sense of composure when De Roia, who was trained to fly the Strikemaster by Allan Page a retired group captain in the Royal Australian Air Force, mentions we are going to perform an ‘attack’ and singles out a set of isolated farm sheds. He executes a wing-over (you may have seen a wing-over in the movies - those

shots of the jets peeling away from each other – with the words 'Tally-ho, chaps' accompanying it). For a moment we are 90 degrees to the ground, one wing points straight at it.

We dive towards the 'target' but it seems as if the ground is rushing us. The Strikemaster had two machine guns and could carry 3000 pounds of bombs. The guns' firing button is on the control column between my legs. We release our 'weapons' and head back toward space. Climbing vertical again, the sun is streaming through the canopy. I can't see a thing. My stomach may have gone the way of the 'bombs'.

De Roia's clients are an eclectic lot. Recently one came from Japan, stayed a week in Ballarat, and went flying every morning and afternoon. Another was a 90-year-old man who wanted to experience the loop before he died. He went flying in his own suit, the knot in his tie impeccable. Clinton Casey recently had the fighter experience over the Apostles. "At one stage we were flying above the beach inverted, looking straight down at the waves crashing. It was just breathtaking." Casey smiles often, his sense of exuberance is not lost.

"So, we'll track back to Ballarat now," says De Roia. There are degrees of relief and disappointment at this revelation. As we approach the runway three green lights come on in the cockpit. All the wheels are down. De Roia lines up perfectly with the middle of the asphalt, we touchdown, skip over an uneven section of tarmac, and stop 800-metres later. There is a sense of triumph. Yet it is driven more by the fact the sick bag is empty rather than the fact I am still alive.

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