

# On a wing and a scare

By GREG CLARKE

**W**E have not been flying straight since take-off and despite a vague awareness of the clear blue sky above us I am not certain which way the ground is.

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 hear myself breathing heavily, through the oxygen mask, via the headphones in my helmet, but disorientation is complete.

Pilot Darren 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 about 14,000 feet per minute.

Our domain is the sky above Ballarat, Victoria, in a Strikemaster MK 88 jet fighter bought from the New Zealand Air Force.

The Strikemaster has a top speed of 834km/h. The renowned Twelve Apostles on the south-west coast of Victoria are 15 minutes away and De Roia often performs his perfected aerobatics routine above them. 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



**FLYING HIGH:** The Strikemaster goes through its paces

might be ideal for this sort of flying. I had thought I would be seated somewhere behind the pilot, much like passengers who fly with the Roulettes. But I am sitting beside him, in the navigator's seat.

The loop is a little like flying around the inside of a bottle. As we start our inverted decent I look out through the roof, beyond the breaks in the cloud. The paddocks below look scorched by the summer, squared sections 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 and your chances of being sick are minimal.

We 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 mentions we are going to perform an "attack". He executes a wing-over (when jets peel away from each other). For a moment we are 90 degrees to the ground, one wing points straight at it.

We dive towards the "target". The ground rushes at us. The 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. I suspect my stomach may have gone the way of the "bombs".

• Continued Page 16

# Flying high on a wing and a scare

• From Page 14

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. At a starting price of \$1395 for a 20-minute flight, cost obviously wasn't a consideration. Another was a 90-year-old South Australian 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 is president of the Richmond Football Club (AFL) and recently had the fighter experience over the Apostles.

"I had the chance to go to the coast or the Grampians. It was such a beautiful day I thought it would be good to head to the coast. 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. And true to form, I have no idea which direction the airport is.

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 touch down, skip over an uneven section of tarmac, and stop 800m later. As we taxi towards the hangar I can see my parked car — finally I know where we are.

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