

The British-made Strikemaster jet that once belonged to the New Zealand Air Force



Jet Set

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The runway was built for the purposes of World War Two. From the cockpit it stretches before us and, as I contemplate the proximity of the trees at the end of the tarmac, the sounds of an engine winding its way to power is a subtle noise, barely audible through my flying helmet

Pilot Darren De Roia fires the jet and only minutes after we launch, despite considerable familiarity with the copse obstacle, I am not certain which way the ground is. De Roia has not been flying straight since take-off. There is a vague awareness of the blue sky above us. A bank of cloud is below us, but I am star-

ing straight at it through the canopy of a fighter jet's roof.

The aircraft is upside down. The blue is beyond my feet. Strapped in tight there is little discomfort, and, indeed, the parachute under my rear makes quite a cushion, 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 affably. Thankfully I do not have time to say no. De Roia points the jet toward space and we head vertical, climbing at around 14 thousand feet per minute.

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The fighter is a lot smaller than you might think, roughly the size of a Cessna. "Small and agile," says 41-year-old De Roia. There are, however, a few rather significant differences, not the least of which are a top speed of more than 800 km/h and the camouflage livery.

The Wright brothers have been credited with the first 360 degree turn in an aircraft. Our version of it — the loop — it is safe to assume, takes us a little faster and higher. We peak at around 12 thousand feet.

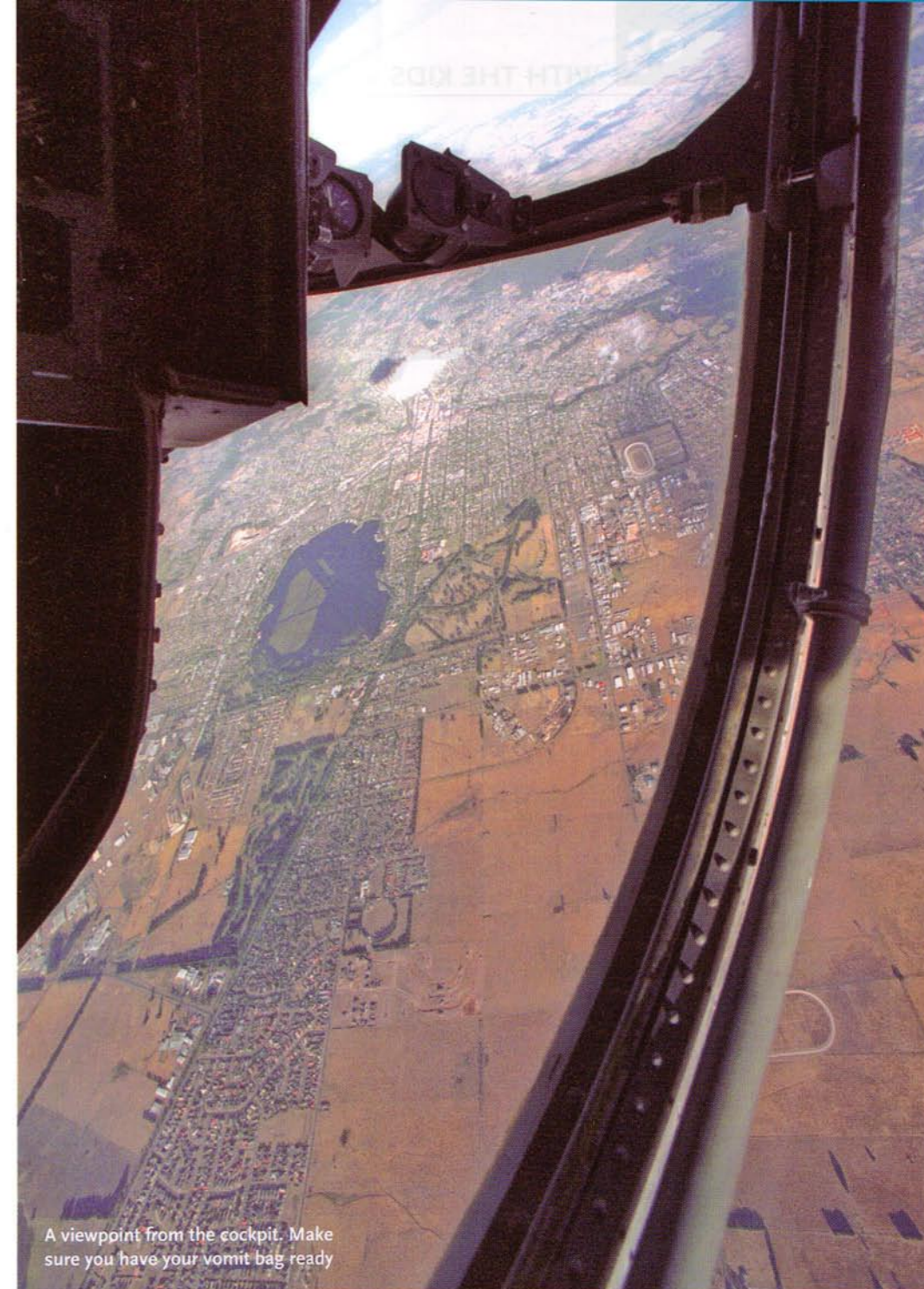
As we start our inverted descent, I look out through the roof, beyond the breaks in the cloud to patches of

land. But you are not supposed to look through the top of the canopy. Keep eyes fixed on the horizon (wherever that is) and the chances of examining the particulars of your breakfast 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. A far easier motion is to tilt my eyes toward the airsick bag in a pocket of my flying suit.

As we level out I embrace a vague notion of composure when De Roia mentions we are going to perform an *attack*. We dive towards some isolated sheds, but it seems as if the ground is rushing to us. The Strikemaster once carried machine guns and bombs. The guns' firing button is on the control column between my legs. We release our 'weapons' and head back toward space. The sun is streaming through the canopy. I can't see a thing. My stomach may have gone the way of the 'bombs'.

"We'll track back to Ballarat now," says De Roia. We touchdown, then skip over an uneven section of tarmac. And stop. The morning's most simple manoeuvre encourages a burst of euphoria, because the sick bag is empty. And the cockpit's occupants are still in one piece — at least that's what the laconic De Roia offers anyway. **PC**



A viewpoint from the cockpit. Make sure you have your vomit bag ready

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