



VICTORIA'S SECRETS

{ballarat - a city for all seasons}

TOP GUNS!



Clockwise from left: Pilot Darren De Roia prepares for the flight; it's all smiles for Greg Clarke before the flight; the Strikemaster takes off; Darren and Greg in the cockpit.

The runway, a Second World War landing strip, stretches toward trees and paddocks. In the cockpit the sounds of a jet engine winding its way to power is a distant noise, barely audible through the flying helmet. Far louder are the sounds of heavy

breathing through an oxygen mask. A ride in a fighter jet is meant to be about excitement but, in the moments before take-off, fear is a much more powerful emotion. I am dressed as though some top gun. Flights to Sydney never start like this.

Pilot Darren De Roia, fires the jet toward the end of the runway but we dart into the air before we even get close to it. Then, minutes after take-off, despite a vague awareness of the clear blue sky above us I am not certain which way the ground is. 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 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 14,000ft per minute.

Our domain is the sky above Ballarat, Victoria, 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 aircraft is a lot smaller than you might think, roughly the size of a Cessna. “Small and agile,” says 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 834 kilometres per hour. The renowned Twelve Apostles on the south-west coast of Victoria are around 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 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 12,000 feet.

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 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 500 km/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 RAAF, 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). For a moment we are 90 degrees to the ground, one wing pointed 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 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, President of the Richmond Football Club (AFL), 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.”

“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 and we touchdown. As we taxi towards the hangar I can see my parked car - finally I know where we are.

Contact Australian Jet Adventures, Tel: 5339 276 or www.austjetadv.com

STORY BY GREG CLARKE

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF AUSTRALIAN JET ADVENTURES