

"Oh, look.
There's the land
down under"



FRIGHT RECORDER

Screaming jet pilot **Paul Robinson** gets the flight of his life

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Xtreme machine

I'm willing my stomach back into its customary place as we start our simulated bombing run. There's an empty field in the distance that's gonna be real sorry it messed with us. We drop into a low-level approach – "under the radar" – screaming over the unimpressed trees at 250 knots (460km/h). DeRoia assures me we aren't allowed under 500ft (150m), but it looks way closer. We "wingover", pulling into a steep climb.

"We're going up at a mighty rate," yells DeRoia. The vertical speed indicator is wrapped around 6000ft per minute, or 110km/h – and it's a lot more thrilling than 110km/h horizontally, on a freeway. I find out later, however, that 6000 is as far as the indicator goes. DeRoia reckons



WE'RE HEADING DOWN, FAR TOO FAST AND FAR TOO SIDWAYS

we're nearer 14,000ft per minute (250km/h). I'm feeling the g but am too preoccupied to vomit.

We come over in a banking turn. DeRoia stands the Strikemaster on its nose, points it at the "target" and we're plummeting earthwards at around 550km/h. Just when I'm thinking it's my time to die, DeRoia stabs a button on the control stick to "release the weapon" and we're out of there, pulling up and away in a sustained "g turn" – our maximum rate of turn, pulling nearly the four-g limit. Any more and we'd stall. By the time I've forced my head round to check the "damage", the field is just a patch on a faraway quilt. "I don't think we caused too much havoc," says DeRoia.

I'm feeling pretty damn cocky. Then DeRoia asks if I want to take the controls and try an aileron roll.

Now the answer to this is actually "no", but would I respect myself in the morning?

Noticing my, er, fear, DeRoia says, "It's simple. Just push the stick forward and the aircraft goes down. Pull it back and the aircraft goes up. Left is left, and right is right."

Easy for you to say, I think. I remind myself what "dual control"

means and silently thank God I don't have to operate the rudder with my foot at the same time. DeRoia will take care of that.

He tells me to pull back the stick "a fraction" to lift the nose, centre the stick, then "slam" it hard right and the aircraft will start to roll. Sure. I'm sweating through my gloves. I caress the stick and attempt a telepathic connection with the plane. This fails. I wimp out, just nudging it gently. The nose starts to drop and we're heading down, far too fast, and far too sideways. I freeze, staring alternately at the stick then the approaching ground. DeRoia laughs as he pulls us gently back level after what seems like hours. I'm really sweating now.

"Don't worry. Most people take it too gently, first time. You need to be coordinated, and most people aren't, because they aren't flying aerobatics every week."

I can accept that. I find out later that we would have been in trouble if we'd been going any faster.

The cloud is coming in from the west as DeRoia turns back in the direction of Ballarat – not that I'd know this if he hadn't told me. Now that we're just plain flying again,

I check out the scenery and decide it really does feel good to be God. Without weaponry, I can only imagine how damn good it must feel to be a vengeful God.

The airport appears to float into view, DeRoia is chatting over the radio, and I'm thinking the ground is getting closer fast, but we don't appear to be slowing.

Three green lights flash on the control panel. I know green means go, but I'm worried, anyway.

"No panic, it's just to make sure the Dunlops are dangling before we drop," says DeRoia. The wheels touch at about 220km/h.

We need 800m to stop without hammering the brakes too hard. The road I drove in on crosses the end of the runway. I decide DeRoia is probably aware of this. The fence and sheep are a dead giveaway. The runway is rockier than I remember from take-off. DeRoia eases the stick forward to stop us leaping back into the sky. As we slow, I realise we're miles away from the fence.

We taxi back towards the welcoming committee – DeRoia's partner, a very cold photographer, and a couple of blow-ins enquiring about a flight. The aero club boys

have long since headed home.

I unfasten my safety harness with surprisingly little effort and clamber out of the cockpit. Falling, as opposed to alighting from the wing, I attempt a nonchalant swagger. However, with enough adrenaline coursing through my system to bring back the dinosaurs, it's a rather shaky swagger.

At the debrief, I'm still pumped as DeRoia recaps the last 40 minutes. I wonder aloud if he still gets an excitement hard-on every time he heads for the sky.

"I still get that thrill. It's a military aircraft – it doesn't get any better than that. I'm working in three dimensions, but because I practise for every emergency, it's all second nature in the cockpit. It's only when something goes wrong that I've got to consciously think what's going on."

Later, as I stand at the urinal pissing a stream that would make Mr Ed jealous, I decide that the prolonged absence of conscious thought is probably a good thing – especially with all that thrust between your legs.

Paul flew from Ballarat to Ballarat courtesy of Australian Jet Adventures, (03) 5250 3181, www.austjetadv.com

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HEY don't normally get so many single guys hanging around the sleepy Ballarat airfield on a Saturday arvo – the sheep they use instead of lawnmowers usually have the numbers. These guys aren't here for flying lessons. They're here because a certain irresponsible ex-RAAF pilot, Darren DeRoia, suggested there might be a few **RALPH**-type babes checking out the throbbing jet action. Instead, there's me.

I'm here to have a hoon in DeRoia's BAC 167 Strikemaster, formerly the property of the closing-down-all-stock-must-go Kiwi air force. And at some stage I'm going to have a drive.

This plane is serious machinery. It's got a Rolls-Royce Viper engine that pumps out over 10,000 horsepower (7460kW), it can carry 3000lb (1360kg) of rockets and bombs, and it's so manoeuvrable it can almost disappear up its own arse – at over 800km/h. Strikemasters sniffed action in the Middle East,

The Strikemaster is equipped with ejection seats that could rocket us out of the cockpit without all this fuss, but they aren't armed, as the risk of unfriendly fire trashing the aircraft is apparently minimal today. The parachute now attached to my arse is about as reassuring as a deckchair cushion, but less comfortable. Its ring has already introduced itself to mine, and they're not real happy together.

My other major concern is vomiting into my oxygen mask. DeRoia says it's unlikely, but unfortunately he has no sick bag, as the bloke who went before me filled it up. "We were still on the ground when he chucked."

Briefing over, DeRoia punches the ignition switches and a hurricane screams in my ears. He pulls the canopy closed. Now there's a rattle in my ears. I remember to breathe.

We line up on the runway centre line. There's a bit of crackle chat over the radio, but I'm still concentrating on my breathing. Next thing, I'm rammed

"That was an aileron roll. Do you want to try a barrel roll now?" Ailerons are the control flaps on the wing. I have no idea where they keep the barrels.

"It's just flying around an imaginary barrel," DeRoia explains. "The size of the roll depends on how high you pitch. You'll feel the g force [gravitational pull]. We'll progressively increase your g so you get to enjoy it. Just don't close your eyes, or you'll get disoriented and feel sick."

We're diving now, DeRoia pushing the nose forward, then we're upside down but still turning. My jaw is pushing down onto my chest as the g force increases, and I couldn't close my eyes even if I wanted to. My lower eyelids have attached themselves to my chin. Eventually we come round, climbing now until we're at the top of the barrel, and I'm looking down on the world again. I tell DeRoia it's like a forward roll at the gym – and no thanks, I don't want another go.



Paul knew it was a sign



flown by Kuwaiti and Saudi military. I do wish it had been built a bit later than 1972, though.

Right this second, rather more pressing than my need for speed is my need to pee. This is a futile train of thought. I'm encased in flight suit (a bit tight, if I'm honest), oxygen mask and helmet, while vainly trying to work out the safety harness, which has more tentacles than Siamese octopus twins. Apparently it's a bloody quick release, though, DeRoia tells me as he runs through emergency procedures.

"It's only going to be a problem if something happens to me," he says.

There's a shitload of levers and switches in the cockpit, some of them under the seat. For an emergency exit while airborne, we'd have to crack the canopy. Then: "It's simple. We just invert the aircraft, hit the harness release and drop out. Just pull the ring when you exit the metal. Not before, unless you want big trouble."

back in the seat as DeRoia applies the herbs. By the time I wrench my head sideways the hangars are already toy-town size and fading. We're doing 220 knots (445km/h) and climbing like there's a hungry ferret on our arse.

Back on the ground I had thought it would be "cool" to fly a pretend attack mission. You know – scream in low under the radar, climb to heaven, locate the target, scream down, *kapow!*, then get out of Dodge.

Like I said, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

I can no longer see Ballarat when DeRoia pulls out of the climb. With no warning, my world turns upside down, then right side up, then upside down. We're flying straight ahead but spinning like a Black and Decker drill. My eyes are falling out of my head trying to keep up with the wildly rotating scenery. DeRoia yells, "Just fix your eyes on the horizon!" This works. I feel like I'm anchored again.

We do a "stiff turn" instead. Suddenly the plane is flying on its side and we're holding a level turn. "If we don't, it'll fall out of the sky," DeRoia reassures me.

We come back level, then pull into that mother of all manoeuvres – the loop. Starting at 4500ft (1370m) we dive into it at 270 knots (500km/h), pulling nearly four g at the bottom of the loop. DeRoia pulls the aircraft up in a tight turn and we slow down a bit, pulling less g force as we reach the top – upside down. Before my head can catch up, we're vertical again, accelerating towards the earth, pulling g all the while, the altimeter spinning faster than my eyes. And every revolution is 1000ft (305m).

When we level out, my face slowly recovers from its basset hound impersonation. It feels like forever, but has in fact been 40 seconds.

"Want to try that sortie now?" DeRoia yells.

THE PILOT HAS NO SICK BAG, AS THE BLOKE WHO WENT BEFORE ME FILLED IT UP