

THE BOY JET FIGHTER PILOT

Operation Gunboat - Book 1

Chapter 1

There was a loud banging on his bedroom door and as Michael forced himself awake, he heard Angela calling, “Michael, move it, we have to fly; the Rebel jet fighters are going to attack the Island’s gunboat!”

What Island? What gunboat? Michael wondered, as he sluggishly raised himself onto one elbow, rubbing the sleep from his eyes; then feeling for the bedside lamp switch.

As the light flared on, he blinked his eyes against the unaccustomed brightness, and wiped the hair from his face. He looked towards the door where Angela had been calling. There was a green, nomex flight suit hanging up behind the door. It had not been there before he went to bed. It was identical to those in which his grandfather and the others flew. On it were sewn pilot’s ‘wings’ and ‘tiger’ flying patches, but he could that see it would fit his smaller frame. On a hook beside the door hung a white flying helmet with a tiger’s head on each side. It was also the same as the helmets the others wore, but once again, was obviously his. With it was a knee pad which pilots strapped to the left knee while they were flying, and could be used to read briefings or as a note pad.

He wondered what was going on. He did not know, but then very awake, leapt out of bed and rushed into the bathroom to get ready. While he was washing and brushing his teeth, he thought of where he was and how he had arrived there.

Chapter 2

Michael was born in Zimbabwe, Africa where his parents and sisters lived. For as long as he could remember, he had loved aircraft and especially jet fighters. Michael and his grandfather Paul, who owned two supersonic,

warbird jet fighters in Tasmania, Australia, had often emailed each other about flying.

When he was ten years old he had been invited to spend a year with his grandparents, Paul and Cindy, and attend school in Australia. His parents were hoping it would improve his school work because he spent so much time reading about aeroplanes and making models. They thought if he was around the jet fighters and spent time with his grandparents, his 18 year old aunt Angela and his cousin Jordan; he would work harder at school.

Jordan was 17, also from Africa, and like Michael had always loved aircraft. He had come to live in Tasmania a few years earlier. With Paul, Angela and Jordan flew a magnificent, supersonic and classic English built single-seat Hawker Hunter jet fighter and a twice the speed of sound, two-seater French Dassault Mirage jet fighter that Paul had taught them to fly. Angela and Jordan had completed their schooling. They were both studying aeronautical engineering at Launceston University. Once they had completed their daily studies they spent as much time as they could in the hangar. Michael's grandfather also allowed him to spend all his spare time, after he had done his homework, helping with his Jet Fighters. He daydreamed of flying these immaculately maintained aircraft. But that day was a long way off as Paul had said that if he had to use the ejection seat, the explosive force of the cartridges in the seat would probably crush his young back.

He watched closely everything his grandfather, Angela and Jordan as well as the engineers did. He was always asking probing questions, and because he worked so hard, they were happy to answer. It meant that he soon knew a great deal about the Hunter and Mirage. Paul had said that Michael probably had almost as much knowledge of their basic structure, cockpit procedures and manoeuvres, as the pilots themselves.

When his grandfather was in the Air Force, flying jet fighters, his favourite exercises were Air Combat Manoeuvres or 'dogfighting,' as they were called. It had been during an earlier jet fighter age when the air to air missiles were in their infancy and the radars not very good. Therefore, most of the dogfighting training was close in, employing the 'Basic Fighter

Manoeuvres' handed down from the first fighter pilots of the Red Baron era, in the First World War.

Michael was enthralled by his grandfather's stories of dogfighting, and also other aspects of his long and varied flying career. He questioned him incessantly, especially about the techniques of dogfighting. His grandfather had explained the manoeuvres using small models of Hunter and Mirage jet fighters that he had kept with him since he was a young pilot flying these aircraft. Angela and Jordan also loved dogfighting and occasionally practiced with Paul's friend Duncan, who owned a two-seater Hunter (Bunty) and lived in Queensland. They met at Airshows and flying 3 fast jet fighters allowed them to train at multiple combat tactics. The jets had to be flown to their limits, in aerobatic manoeuvres, at high 'G'. They often did not know whether they were up or down as they concentrated in trying to gain an advantage over one another. Because of this it gave them a lot of confidence for flying the very fast and manoeuvrable jet fighters.

Paul also gave talks to aviation interest groups like Air Cadets, Air Scouts and Air League. Michael attended as many as he could, and anyone who saw him at the back could tell how engrossed he was and how proud he was of his grandfather.

Both jet fighters were painted gloss black. The Hunter, 'Hunty' was adorned in the markings of a multi-coloured Dusky Dolphin and the Mirage; they called 'Delta' (because of its triangular shape), a ferocious Tiger. The family had made it their mission to defend these creatures. The Dolphin was worth defending because of its high intelligence and fellowship towards humans, and the Tiger because it was endangered in the wild. They flew at Air Shows and were always a highlight in their spectacular markings, loud jet noise and high speed passes (or Fly Bys).

Michael had gone to bed early, even though it was Friday night and there was no school the next day. The previous afternoon had been spent in the hangar polishing the Hunter after his grandfather had flown it that morning, and he had been pleasantly tired.

Chapter 2

Back in the bedroom he put on the flight suit, grabbed the helmet, knee pad and rushed to the lounge room where he assumed Angela had gone.

He stepped inside and saw his grandfather, Angela and Jordan, deep in conversation. They looked up as he approached them and his grandfather said, "There you are Michael! We must hurry to the hangar. My informant on the Rebel Island telephoned that their jet fighters are preparing for take off." Kimba, the family Staffordshire bull terrier, came bounding across to greet him. Typical of the breed, the little, white bitch, was full of life with her abundant energy, and always delighted to greet anyone. Michael bent down, distractedly, to pat her.

At last Michael realised what they had been talking about. For many years the aggressive Rebel Islands in the northern Pacific Ocean had fished, illegally, in the territorial waters of independent Pacific Islands in the Coral Sea. They were too poor and small to be able to defend their ocean. Michael's grandfather and the other two had flown to the Islands and chased away the Rebel fishing boats, by flying low and supersonic over them. The noise from the high speed jets, and especially the sonic booms was earth shattering. The boats had sped away as fast as their engines would carry them.

These exploits had raised the awareness of the international community. Cash was raised to supply small gunboats for each island, to protect their waters. For many months they had managed to keep the illegal fishing boats away. But Paul had heard that the Rebel Islands had acquired jet fighters to attack the gunboats. The boats were too small, with insufficient anti-aircraft guns to defend themselves against the lethal jet fighters.

Now Paul had confirmation that the Rebel jet fighters were making ready to attack. He turned to each of them in turn, and with an excited sparkle in his eyes said, "Angela, you will fly Delta, and because Jordan has a bad cold, Michael you take Hunty. I will stay in our briefing room, and with Jordan's help, co-ordinate the mission on the radio. When we get to the hangar, you pre-flight your aircraft and then we will Brief before you take off."

Michael was dumbstruck! Did they not know he had only just turned eleven? He could not fly! Something was going on, but he kept quiet and followed the others out to the Land Rover, four wheel drive vehicle. They used it as transport to the hangar at Launceston Airport, from their home on the beach.

Cindy, Michael's grandmother, who was in the kitchen part of the family room, came across with hot chocolate and sandwiches for them. He had expected her to be aghast that he was going with them. She was always anxious about Angela, who was just 18 and Jordan 17, going flying. She was bound to have a fit with him about to fly. But she just wished them good luck, gave Michael a hug, and told him to be careful. Strange!

Chapter 4

Once outside, it was that wonderful time of the morning when it was still dark, but the pink tinge on the eastern horizon heralded the first approach of dawn. The air was still and cool. It was clear above with a mass of sparkling stars in the clearest sky in the world, Tasmania. The waves could be heard gently collapsing on the beach from a small swell in Bass Strait. Michael was reminded of his grandfather talking longingly of flying jet fighters, on training weapons strikes in Africa, in the early dawn such as this. He suddenly felt a surge of excitement. He was going to fly a Hunter. How he had dreamed of flying the most graceful jet fighter that had ever flown. Hunty was so well maintained that it was like a new aeroplane. It looked and sounded so impressive on the ground and especially in the air.

Michael knew every inch of Hunty and Delta. He had listened so intently to all the briefings his grandfather, Angela, and Jordan had given. He knew exactly what he had to do, and felt confident he could handle himself. It was a most unusual morning but he was determined to do exactly what was expected of him.

As they drove to the Airport there was huge excitement in the four wheel drive. Paul was driving, with Angela, also in front, sitting on her knee and

turned towards him, so that she could speak to both Paul and the boys in the back. The chatter was mainly between the other three, as Michael was still coming to terms with what was going occur in the next couple of hours. Looking at them he thought about what a mixed bunch they were. People could see that Angela was Paul's daughter. Like him, she was already tall with light brown hair, where his was now grey. They both had rather sharp, Irish features. She also had a habit of talking too quickly in her enthusiasm. This generally centred on flying fast jet fighters.

Cindy was olive skinned, rather short and beautiful. Jordan was her brother's son, very dark, with masses of curly dark hair and very good looking. He was of medium height and had a quieter, thoughtful nature, but loved flying as much as the others. Michael was Cindy's grandson and looked a lot like Jordan. He was also dark but had an abundance of thick, straight, black hair which he would sweep from his face whenever he was happy, excited, shy, nervous, irritated or angry; and had the huge dark hazel eyes of his grandmother. Since arriving in Tasmania, Angela was always teasing him about all the local girls who wanted to visit.

The main aspect that the very fair Paul and dark Michael did have in common was polishing the jet fighters and Paul's old Mercedes sports car. The family always said that if the two ever had to be found; all that was required was to look for them polishing one of the fighters, or the car. Flying was definitely a part of the family. As well as the four of them involved, there was another cousin, Rory, who was an airline pilot in Africa, and who had also corresponded with Paul all his life.

Chapter 5

The engineers had been warned they were on their way. As Paul drove into the airport grounds they could see the hangar doors were open. Under the bright lights in the hangar the gleaming jet fighters appeared to be waiting in anticipation for action.

They halted outside the hangar and while Angela went to put her helmet on Delta's cockpit steps, Michael strode towards the Hunter. Hunty's engineer Andrew greeted him completely normally as he stretched up to fit

his helmet over the handle of the ladder attached to the side of the jet fighter.

While Paul and Jordan went to prepare the Briefing, Angela and Michael began the External Pre-flight inspection of their aircraft. Having watched the others so often, Michael knew exactly what to do. There was actually very little to check. The aircraft were immaculate; especially as he had spent the previous afternoon polishing Hunty after his grandfather had flown it. It was just a matter of making sure nothing was out of place and all the covers, blanks and locks were removed. The blanks were in the engine intakes, and the locks were in the undercarriage to stop them collapsing, with no hydraulics.

As he returned to the cockpit area he saw Angela stride, purposefully towards him. With a slight flush on her pretty face, she looked excited. Her long, shining, brown hair was tied in a high pony tail and bouncing from side to side as she walked. She stood a head taller than Michael. He thought she looked very impressive in her green, nomex (fire resistant) flight suit, on which were badges that pilot's wore with pride, especially the pilot's wings. She had the intense, eager, sparkling eyes of her father, but they were large and dark hazel, like her mother's. Under Paul's tutelage she was already an accomplished pilot. She would revel in leading this Mission. Just watching her gave Michael the confidence he needed for what was required of him on this most unusual day.

He walked alongside her carrying his knee pad as they made their way to the Briefing Room. Angela put her arm around his shoulders, as a comrade in arms would, and said, "Michael, this is going to be such an adventure, but we must keep our tails clear!"

"Of course," responded Michael, knowing how important it was for fighter pilots, in formation, to watch out for the enemy behind them – 'watching each others 'sixes' or 'tails' is what fighter pilots called it.

Chapter 6

In the Briefing Room Angela walked up to the row lockers against one wall. She opened the one with her name on it and took out a G suit and knee pad. Michael hung back a bit, not quite sure what to do.

“Grab your G suit Michael, we will fit them after the Brief,” said Angela looking back at him. He opened his own locker and, as well as his work overalls, there was a nomex covered G suit that would obviously fit him. At that stage he was ready to accept anything. He took the G suit and sat between Angela and Jordan, while Paul stood writing on the white board. Michael felt sorry for Jordan, as he would certainly have been flying if had he not been sick. However, Jordan smiled encouragement to Michael, and understood his excitement, as he had already been on several adventures with the others.

When he finished writing, Paul turned around slowly and looked at each of them in turn. “I will give a general briefing on what we know about the Rebel fighters and pilots. Then Angela will give a specific Formation Brief to Michael.

“The Rebels have two L29 Delfin jets. As you know, they are an advanced trainer of reasonably, high performance. However, they are not nearly as powerful or fast as Hunty, and especially Delta; but are more manoeuvrable at low speed. They will also be armed with machine guns, unlike us, without ammunition. We know nothing about the pilots, but must assume they are good.

“Your job will be to keep them occupied so that they cannot attack the gunboat at Savu, the biggest Pacific Island, or shoot at you. That will mean a lot of precise manoeuvring, and your multi-aircraft combat commentary and control will have to be on the ball.

“You can land at Savu Airport to refuel, but the Rebels will have to return to their Base for that. They will only have about 15 minutes in the area before they have to break off. If they wait any longer they will either run out of fuel, and ditch in the sea on their way back, or land on Savu and be captured.

“Angela you are leading because you are better than all of us at dogfighting and it will be a good chance for Michael to practice all he has learnt.”

But I have never flown, Michael wanted to say! He kept his mouth shut, and nodded his head – he had studied so hard for this – he could do it!

“Jordan and I will be on the radio with information from Savu and our spy on the Rebel Islands”

With that Paul handed over to Angela for her Brief to Michael. She jumped out of her seat and quickly sketched notes on the board next to Paul’s, then turned and spoke gravely to Michael, referring occasionally to what she had written.

“Michael, we will call ourselves Tiger Formation, and Dad will be Sheekan on the radio. Start on my thumbs up, and check in automatically on the radio, once you have completed your Checks. It will be a formation take off,” she continued, “and once airborne, and in the climb, I will call you to go Patrol Battle Formation.”

Close Formation for take off! Michael panicked inside, felt his face go pale and hoped Angela had not noticed. His first take off in a Hunter, and it was about to be the most difficult.

“We will use Bingo fuel (minimum fuel) to land at Savu as the 300 kilogram lights, which will give us 30 minutes to land. (‘Bingo’ was minimum fuel the first pilot called who had the lowest fuel, to get back to land).

“Standard ACM (Air Combat Manoeuvres) calls will apply. Are there any questions?” Angela asked.

Michael gulped. That was his last chance to ask if they were all crazy! But the opportunity of flying a Hunter was too strong, and he merely moved his head from side to side. Then he lowered it as he wrote the details down on his knee pad, so they could not see his confusion. He was further helped

by Angela fitting her G suit, and he leapt up, turning away from them to do the same.

“Good,” beamed Angela, as she straightened up from zipping up her G suit which fitted over her legs and abdomen. She then grabbed the Mae West (Flotation vest including the emergency beacon) off the wall alongside her and fitted it over the top of her torso. Her face had transformed from the grim professional to an excited young girl. “Let’s get airborne!”

Chapter 7

The sun was just rising above Mount Barrow to the east of Launceston airport as they stepped outside, and bright yellow rays were pushing through the few puffy clouds in the sky. It was one of the lovely clear, crisp days that were typical of the area they lived in, and a great morning to fly.

The engineers had towed the jets out of the hangar and looked even more impressive with the morning sun beaming down on them. Paul walked out to Hunty with Michael, and was his usual talkative self, especially when it came to fast jet flying. Michael listened while still fitting his Mae West. Paul spoke of normal flying tips that Michael was always pleased to receive. It gave Michael confidence as he passed his knee pad to his grandfather. He climbed the ladder into Hunty’s cockpit. He stepped onto the ejection seat, facing rearwards to check all was in order on the seat. Then before going any further, he looked over the graceful lines of the Hunter’s upper surface, adorned with the sleek markings of the dolphin. It was going to be great, he thought!

He turned around and sat down on the seat and raised it so that he was at the correct height. Paul passed him his ejection seat straps and Michael strapped himself to it. Then Paul passed him the helmet and finally his knee pad, which Michael strapped to the top of his left thigh. His grandfather spoke about a small fuel balance problem he had noticed on the flight the previous day. He told Michael, if it needed attention, he should tell the engineers after he landed.

Michael nodded in agreement and asked Paul to remove the ejections seat pins, after which they were shown to him and stowed in the side of the seat. The seat was 'live', and Michael wondered fleetingly why he's grandfather was not concerned about his young back now?

With the huge smile and a wish of good hunting, Paul descended, removed the steps, and walked away. Michael knew he was on his own. He looked across at Angela next to him in Delta. The aggressive Mirage two-seater looked grand in the morning sun, with the ferocious tiger markings glaring at him. The huge canopy was fully raised, as Angela, with her helmeted head down, did her cockpit checks. He ducked his head down to do likewise. After carrying out a normal scan, left to right, around the cockpit, he was soon ready for the start. Raising his head he saw Angela looking at him with her dark visor lowered, in anticipation. Michael put his thumb up as he had seen the others do at this stage. With that Angela twirled her left forefinger above her head and gave Delta's engineer Thomas a thumbs up. Michael did the same towards Andrew, by Hunty's side.

Michael checked the fuel cocks on, put on all the electrics and leaned forward to press the start button. He had started both Hunty and Delta before with his grandfather watching, so, as sat back, he recognised the deep rumble of the huge jet engine turning behind him, and then the whine as it reached idle thrust.

Once the temperatures stabilised he went through more Checks for take off. He selected flap, checked the fuel gauges, that the instruments were working correctly, his harness was tight and then putting on his oxygen mask tested he was breathing freely. Andrew watched the flaps going up and down, and indicated, with hand signals, they were in the correct position. Out the corner of his eye he could see Thomas doing the same for Angela, but her controls were different from the Hunter and it took longer. The Mirage did not have a tailplane or flaps. The controls were more complicated and she had to be sure of them.

Michael was ready, and looking over again at Angela, he saw her putting on her mask and the canopy closing above her. He was pleased he had not been too slow, and held her up. He gave her thumbs up when she looked

up and immediately heard a rasping voice in his helmet, “Tiger Formation check!”

“Tiger 2,” he answered breathlessly as he breathed oxygen from the mask attached tightly to his face.

Angela then spoke to air traffic control, “Launceston tower, Tiger Formation request taxi.”

“Tiger Formation, Launceston Tower, clear to taxi for Runway 14 Right,” was the response.

“14 Right, Tiger Lead,” confirmed Angela in her very businesslike voice.

Michael saw her wave to Thomas, who then began to marshal, or guide, her out, by swinging his arms above his head. Michael could hear the roar of Delta’s engine over the sound of Hunty’s, even though he had a helmet on.

Delta sped out passed Thomas, who saluted Angela. She acknowledged it and then turned down the taxiway towards the runway. Michael waved at Andrew who began to move his arms above his head, clearing Michael to taxi. He pushed the throttle slightly forward, and Hunty’s engine whine increased, and they began to move. Michael gave the brakes a quick touch, to check them and Hunty’s nose bobbed down. Then he accelerated past Andrew and proudly returned his engineer’s salute. He closed the throttle and turned to position himself about 50 m behind Delta.

Chapter 8

Michael did not have time to think or worry any more, as there was much to do. He could see his grandfather’s face as he went through the Checks he had to do again, before take off. They had talked about all the aspects of flying both Hunty and Delta, and applied what they had discussed a thousand times.

He looked up to make sure he was the right distance behind Delta. He kept Hunty straight with a brake handle on the control column ('joystick', as it was sometimes called) and the rudder pedals.

As they went passed the passenger terminal, he saw people looking at them. The passengers were descending the stairs, preparing to board a jet airliner. The sleek jet fighters always caused such a stir wherever they went. Michael felt momentarily smug that he was at last in one, and not watching, longingly at them. He still had the canopy rolled back, and felt the fresh breeze on his face as they moved briskly along.

"Tiger Formation ready for take off," Angela had called, knowing Michael would be ready.

"Tiger formation cleared for take off," was the immediate response from the Tower.

Chapter 9

Angela taxied the sleek and aggressive Mirage jet fighter rapidly onto the runway and moved to the left side, to allow Michael to move into a position on her right and just back – called Echelon Starboard. He selected the Hunter's canopy closed and lowered his head so that it could move forward and lock. There was a hiss as the air conditioning seal inflated and then air rushing in with the cockpit pressurising.

He could imagine his grandfather, Paul saying, "Move up until you can just see the inside of the Mirage's jet pipe, and look along the trailing edge of the wing. That will put you far enough out, and back." He stopped the Hunter in the right spot with the slight jerk and selected the park brake on. Angela, looking back at him, nodded and gave thumbs up – good position, she confirmed!

Michael immediately began to move the throttle towards fully forward. The Mirage was already roaring next him, and then as the thrust increased the Hunter's nose dipped down against the brakes, and began to shake as if desperate for take off. The Hunter's powerful Avon engine growled and

whined at almost full thrust. All the instruments were normal. Michael rotated the Hunter's controls for full and free movement and then gave Angela another thumbs up. She nodded; looked forward, put her head back and almost immediately thrust it forward – the signal to release brakes together. As the Mirage leapt forward Michael released the brakes. Grandfather had said, “Apply full throttle straight away to ensure you don't get behind – look forward very quickly a couple of times and keep straight with rudder pedals.” There was a surge of acceleration and a massive roar as Michael slammed the throttle forward to its stop. He was pushed back into the ejection seat by the power, but coping well. He went a little too far forward at first and then settled down, with small throttle and pedal movements. The ground was streaking past behind the Mirage, but he was just concentrating on sticking to the awesome and striking jet fighter three metres away. He appeared locked to it. He had no idea how fast they were going or when they would take off.

His grandfather had said, “Just do what the leader does.” The Mirage's nose wheel lifted slowly off the runway. Michael eased the Hunter's nose back and checked it, so it did not go too high. Then the Delta lifted off. Michael pulled back a bit more and they were airborne. It was so smooth; but then he began to bob around. He was over controlling. His grandfather always said, “Lock your right arm on your right leg, to stop the over controlling and make only small smooth movements to stay in formation. Do the same with the throttle in your left hand; small, precise movements.”

Then Mirage's wheels stopped turning and the undercarriage began retracting. Without moving his head away from Delta Michael applied brakes. Then, with his left hand still on the throttle, just moved his forefinger straight forward, and pushed in the undercarriage button he knew was there. He could feel the wheels going up and flying became even smoother. Once the flaps were up, he felt very comfortable. He was still bobbing about a bit and knew he could have done better but they would not notice on the ground. He was coping – “Thank you grandfather!” He said aloud to himself.

In fact, he was coping too well. He must have done this before. There was no time to reflect on that because Angela began to turn left. They were over the beautiful Ben Lomond Mountain area and looking past the Mirage, the countryside of rolling green hills looked amazing. Angela rolled out and for a second Michael bobbed up, and then settled back into formation.

“Tiger 2, Patrol Battle Formation go!” ordered Angela suddenly. Michael banked hard away from her and when he thought he had gone far enough, rolled out. He was supposed to be about 3 kilometres away. His grandfather had shown him what it would look like with Hunter and Mirage plastic models.

“Spot on Tiger 2,” called Angela confirming his position. He had to just keep the Mirage on the beam and on the horizon. There was also time to enjoy the view. They were leaving the Tasmanian North Eastern coastline over the beautifully white and broad Boobyalla Beach at Tomahawk, which stretched for kilometres.

Michael’s airspeed indicator showed they were climbing at 450 knots (900 km/hour) which was the Mirage’s climb speed. Michael checked his map to make sure he knew where they were. It was the most glorious, clear day. With Tasmania behind them, the mainland Australian coast was far off to the left as they flew north east. All looked well. There was no actual need to map read because they had modern GPS navigation equipment. But he had always heard his grandfather encourage the others to do so, to keep in practice, in case there was a GPS failure.

They levelled off and cruised at an altitude of 36,000feet (12 km) at Mach .95 which was very close to supersonic speed (Mach 1). Angela was in a hurry to get there. Australia was soon a long way behind and, if Angela had not been alongside, Michael thought he would have felt very alone over the huge expanse of the southern Pacific ocean.

Chapter 10

Angela had occasionally been speaking to the Australian Air Traffic Control with position reports on the planned route. She had also answered updates from Paul on their second, Tiger Flight, radio frequency. Suddenly Paul called again. It sounded urgent. “Tiger Formation, this is Sheekan. The two Rebel jet fighters are taking off. They will be overhead Savu in about 20 minutes!”

“Roger, Sheekan,” Angela responded in an unusually calm voice. “We will remain at high-level for a further 10 minutes before we descend over the gunboat, to save fuel.”

“Good idea, I will keep you informed, Sheekan out.”

It was a good idea, thought Michael. Because the air was very thin 12 km up they would burn half the fuel that they would at low-level.

They were soon over Savu and Michael could see it was a small island, but it was still larger than all the others in sight. The long runway almost ran its full length, on the northern side.

“Tiger 2, we will make a large orbit overhead. Close to Attack Battle Formation,” called Angela, and the sleek Mirage began a turn away from him. Angela wanted Michael to follow her about 250 m behind. This would allow Angela to manoeuvre freely in a giant circle in the sky without worrying about Michael, but also meant they would not be able to clear each others ‘tails’.

He turned and pulled, to position himself and immediately felt his first effects of G. His grandfather had demonstrated the effects of G or Gravity to him. He had filled a bucket full of water and tied a short string to it. He had then swung it fast, in a big circle, up and down in front of him. He showed that, over the top, when the bucket was upside down, the water did not fall out. He said it was thrown out and held there by centrifugal force. What pilots called G was the same. Going fast around the corner in the car with Paul made Michael fall against the door, and he said that was G. He had also felt it on his favourite Movie World Ride on the Gold Coast, “Lethal Weapon”. He had to strap in tight and the ride took him through several very fast loops and rolls, and he could feel himself being pushed

into the seat by G. In an aircraft pulling 2 G it meant that a person's body was twice its normal weight. Pulling 7 G made the body seven times its normal weight!

As Michael pulled a bit harder he felt the G-suit, which was strapped over the lower part of his flight suit, tighten with air. The biggest problem when fighter pilots pulled a lot of G was that it slowed the blood going to the brain, like the water going to the bottom of the swinging bucket. This affected the pilot's eyesight first. Everything began to go grey, and they could not see where they were going. The G-suit forced compressed air around the pilot's stomach and legs, to stop the blood going any further down. The pilot also had to tense the stomach muscles to help. Michael's grandfather had said when they were dogfighting there was a lot of grunting and groaning as the pilot struggled against the G forces. That was also why fighter pilots had to keep themselves fit, because tensing up all the time was very tiring.

Michael was soon in position behind and a little out from Angela, so that he did not bob around her slipstream. As they flew a very wide, shallow turn, it gave Michael time to make sure all was well with Hunty. The early fighters did not have the many warning lights or chimes of the new aircraft, to inform the pilot if something was going wrong. He had to check for himself. Michael saw that the fuel from one side was a little unbalanced from the other, as Paul had told him. But it was not enough to worry about.

Then he had time to look out to the beautiful scene below him. The small, green islands dotted around were framed with the most glorious, white sand; that could also still be seen through the crystal clear, shallow, blue sea. It was so idyllic, but also strange, because the scene could soon change. There might be two Rebel fighters trying to sink the gunboat, with only Hunty and Delta trying to stop them. His thoughts were interrupted by the Savu ATC calling them, "Tiger Formation, this is Savu tower, do you read?"

"Affirm. Go-ahead Savu," answered Angela in a surprisingly calm voice again.

“Tiger Formation, Savu tower,” the Tower controller repeated, sounding excited and concerned. “We have been advised by Sheekan to deploy the gunboat away from the shore in case the Rebel jet fighters get past you. If they fire on the gunboat, it would be better out at sea, than by the dock, where there might be civilian casualties.”

That is a good idea, thought Michael and looking down from so high; could see a craft planing at high speed away from the small harbour.

“A good idea,” agreed Angela “and we have it in sight. We are descending now. The Rebels should be overhead within five minutes and we will be holding CAP (Combat Air Patrol – a defensive position over at a designated area) at 2000 feet, over the gunboat.” With that she called, “Tiger 2, remain in Attack Battle Formation, reducing power.”

She banked over and away from Michael, and began a wide spiral dive for the ocean below. Michael remained in the same position behind and could feel the speed increasing and his ears clearing on their rapid descent. The ground and sea came up very quickly and soon the gunboat could be seen clearly; even figures moving about on the deck.

At 2000 feet Angela gradually levelled off, applied power and as she began to move away from Michael he throttled up to stay 250 metres behind her. He felt the extra surge from Hunty’s engine as the dense air close to sea gave him more power. Ahead of Angela he could see the gunboat and she was going to fly right over it.

“Tiger 2, go Patrol Battle Formation. The Rebels jet fighters should be here very soon. We will fly past, above the gunboat, every couple of minutes. We will Counter at each end.” (Angela briefed that they would carry out the more aggressive ‘Counter’ instead of the ‘Turn About’ they would usually employ on a CAP. They were expecting the Rebel jet fighters at any time, and they had to keep the tail exposure time to a minimum). Michael rolled sharply right, eased on power, and levelled out when he thought he was far enough away from Delta. He was soon in position 3 kilometres away and on the beam. Seeing this Angela called,

“Your tail is clear!” in her professional manner. The Rebel fighters would have to pass them to shoot the gunboat.

“Tiger 2 copied. Tail clear,” called Michael. The ‘Tail Clear’ call was part of the scan pattern to ensure that the rebel fighters could not sneak up and attack them from behind. Angela and Michael both looked forward then scanned rapidly rearwards, up and down, past each other, and as far back as possible, to make sure they were not ‘jumped’ without warning, by the rebel jet fighters. The attack was most likely to come from behind because guns could only really be successful from there. If Rebel pilots were good they would fly out of the sun. He could hear his grandfather once saying, “If the sun is on the other side of your leader, step up so that the attacker (bogey) has to drop out of the sun to shoot the leader. If the leader is looking into the sun, step down so that the same applies.”

“Counter left, track 6, go!” called Angela, and Delta banked sharply to the left, away from Hunty. Michael banked hard to match Angela, with full thrust, as she would have done, at about 60 degrees of bank, and then pulled hard. He felt the G come on, and tensed his stomach muscles as the air rushed into his G-suit, but not quickly enough and he started to ‘grey out’. Not a good time. Grunting, he tensed harder until he could see Delta clearly again. But now he was starting to lose her under his nose, as he turned inside her circle.

“Losing you Tiger 1,” he called, and felt as though he was speaking with someone strangling him, while he continued tensing.

“Visual! Keep the turn going. Tail clear!” answered Angela, not quite as casually as before, as she struggled against the G, looking back at him.

He snapped out on Track 6 (the opposite direction from the way they had been flying i.e. Track 12. In ACM a lot of calls are related to clock positions as it is a simple and well used scale). Looking across; there was Delta, exactly where she should have been. Michael quickly checked to the rear. The sky was empty behind her; thank goodness! “Tail clear,” he called.

Chapter 11

They were racing up to the gunboat again, and Michael remembered to step down as Angela was looking towards the sun, while she cleared his tail. He felt he was coping well. As they screeched over the gunboat at 350 knots (750 kilometres an hour) Michael glanced down quickly and thought he could see the crew waving up at him. Then they were over and he looked right, to give Angela a 'Tail clear call'. Instead of the clear horizon far behind Delta, there was a menacing blue Delfin jet fighter rapidly closing in behind her. He blinked his eyes to ensure he was not seeing things.

"Break right Angela, bogey your six, closing and menacing," he shouted over the radio using Angela's name and not her Tiger call sign. No problem; he saw Delta snap right, her nose going down and a flame light in her exhaust as the afterburner lit.

"Tiger 2 sliding high. Two bogeys closing on you. Rebel 2 is in Attack Battle Formation behind Rebel 1." Before he could take a breath Michael shouted, "Reverse left, nose high, they're sliding through your six and climbing in your high 10 o'clock. I am further back in your high 8 o'clock." Michael was climbing high above Delta, ready to come down and support her, or she could come up to him, if they switched his way, and sandwich them. He had seen the Delfins, with a very high overtake, sliding behind Delta and no threat to her, then climbing between the two of them.

"I have the bogey's visual and going after them. The leader fired at me and missed! Number 2 is way back," gasped Angela as she fought the G.

"I am visual all aircraft, sliding down into your six," called Michael in support. He was still high above the fight, and as he rolled and dropped Hunty's nose he saw the Number 2 Rebel roll onto its back and pull down.

"Rebel 2 is breaking out and diving for the gunboat!" screamed Michael again. He had not expected that.

Angela responded, “I am staying with Rebel 1 Michael, deal with Rebel 2,” in a matter of fact voice as Michael could see her closing behind the Rebel leader.

Deal with him – how, thought Michael? He applied power, continued his dive and aimed ahead of the speeding Rebel 2. His grandfather had often said fighter pilots could never resist a certain kill. Michael decided to place himself between the gunboat and the bogey. Rebel 2 still had a few kilometres to reach the gunboat, but the Hunter was a lot faster than a Delfin. Michael was rapidly overtaking, then flew right in front of its path and began a gentle, climbing right turn ahead of it and away from the gunboat. He throttled back and deployed the speed brake to slow down and tempt the Delfin. He was turning just enough so that, looking back over his shoulder, he could see the Rebel fighter behind. Its nose was turning towards him. He had succeeded!

“Well done Michael!” called Angela. “You are going to have to beat him now, or he will get firing shots at you. I am tied up keeping behind Rebel leader. Michael was so impressed that Angela could be fighting her battle and still be watching him, as he enticed the Delfin away from the gunboat. He had no idea where she was, and now certainly had a huge problem on his hands.

Looking hard over his shoulder, the Delfin was pointed at him and gaining fast. He did not want to be too slow, so he stowed the speed brake, and opened the throttle.

“When you see bogey’s belly behind, you know he has a lead angle and can shoot,” he could hear grandfather’s instructions at briefings. “But if his nose is just pointing at you and is more than 30 degrees off from your rear sector, with a high overtake, he will slide through your six and you can reverse,” was another statement often mentioned in their conversations.

The Delfin was now certainly overtaking him and more than 30 degrees off, but was still far back. Michael now had good performance. Then suddenly the Rebel was close and pulling hard in his six. As he started to see Rebel 2’s belly Michael could see gun flashes from its nose. That

spurred him into action. He applied full thrust and pulled hard on the control column towards the Rebel in Defensive Break manoeuvre. He grunted loudly as he fought against the most G he had pulled so far; and his G-suit was charging with air to help him. He could feel Hunty beginning to ‘judder’. “Just into the ‘burble’, not the ‘judder’ or it will high speed stall!” He had often heard his grandfather say that about aerobatics and dogfighting in the Hunter. He eased off the pull to the ‘burble’ and at the same time saw the Delfin slide through his ‘six’ and lost him.

He immediately stopped the pull, snapped opposite roll with ailerons and a touch of rudder, prayed and pulled again in the opposite direction to the left. He looked back in the turn, dreading that the bogey may have barrel rolled on his reversal, and was still behind him. But no, as Paul had said, “A fighter pilot can be so intent on the kill that he can be caught out by a reversal.”

“Thank you grandfather,” Michael said aloud as the Delfin, with a high overshoot, was sliding passed him. Too late, it began to climb and slow down in a high yo-yo, but Michael was already behind it, and rolled right to slide in behind him. With Hunty’s extra thrust, he could climb and keep up.

“Well done Michael,” called an elated Angela, “make sure you stay behind him until he runs out of fuel.”

“Well done grandson,” came Paul’s quite emotional and excited voice. Michael felt a rush of confidence. Paul had never called him ‘grandson’. He had always being treated exactly as if he was his real grandson, but Michael’s father was Jordan’s son, not Paul’s. It was a nice touch, and showed Paul’s pride in him.

But those were fleeting thoughts, because the Delfin did not know Hunty was not armed, and began to evade aggressively. His pilot pulled hard towards Michael. With his nose high and power on Michael barrel rolled Hunty out of the turn, to the left, to fit closer in the Rebel’s ‘six’. Called a Barrel Roll Attack.

Michael was worried, because the Delfin could fly a lot slower than the Hunter. So he lowered flap to keep the speed coming back. He could feel the ‘burble’ and he knew they were turning well. He kept Hunty’s nose high so that the Delfin had to keep climbing. Michael was still behind, but could not make angles for a camera shot. The Delfin would soon have to descend. He did not have Hunty’s power. Just as Michael thought of that, the Delfin rolled on to its back and dived for the ocean below.

Instinctively, Michael rolled to follow him, selecting full throttle and flap up, as he did so. Hunty was just too powerful and he soon caught up to the Delfin who was descending as fast as it could. It was sitting in Michael’s front windscreen, but he could not track it in the gun sight. Then, it had to level off, and pulled back just above the water. Michael had a perfect camera, firing shot. He had already set the Delfin wingspan of 33 feet on the front of his gun sight. He flew the centre ‘pipper’ (dot) onto the bogey and then rotated the throttle twist grip to move the graticules (little diamonds) around the pipper, until they touched the wingtips of the Rebel fighter in the gun sight. That meant he was in the perfect position. The cross in the gun sight showed where his guns (or in this case, the camera) were pointing. But the pipper was the aiming point because it was working out a ‘tracking solution’ to score a ‘kill’.

“Rebel 2 is bugging out and going home!” Michael could not resist the well-known line by Tom Cruise’s Weapons System Officer ‘Goose’ from his favourite movie, ‘Top Gun’.

“Rebel 1, has just done the same thing; their fuel must be low!” said now a very excited Angela. “We have done it Michael; well done again!”

“Fantastic, both of you,” joined in Paul, who sounded extremely relieved. “You may land at Savu airport, re-fuel and we will wait to see what develops on the Rebel Island,” he continued. “We are all very proud of you.”

“Thanks Dad,” responded a very uncharacteristically, girlish Angela, thankful of her father’s praise. Then changing back to her professional

voice called, “Tiger 2, I am in your high 2 o’clock position, roll right, and come up and join me in Attack Battle Formation, right side.

Michael reluctantly broke off his attack on the departing Delfin, rolled right and saw Delta. Angela is good; a real leader. During the fight he had been concentrating on his own battle. He had not seen or even looked for Delta. But Angela had won her fight and also watched Michael throughout. I want to be like that, he thought.

Chapter 12

With his confidence and feel for the Hunter riding high he quickly manoeuvred 250 m behind Angela, on the right-hand side.

“We will position for a Battle Break right across the runway to land on Runway 27 at Savu,” said Angela

“Roger, Tiger 1,” responded Michael, with a smile. A ‘Break’ is the easiest and quickest way to put a formation of aircraft on the ground. To have them trail for landing made the aircraft susceptible to attack from enemy fighters, while they were slow, behind one another to land. In a Break, the formation (Close or Battle) could approach overhead the runway, normally parallel to it, at high speed and Break (hard turn) on to downwind. Then slow down, lower the undercarriage and flap, space about 400 m, turn Final and land. All aircraft are down in a couple of minutes.

The Battle Break across the runway was fighter pilots bravado. Angela was showing off after their success. Michael was looking forward to it

“Switch to Savu Tower, Tiger Formation,” Angela snapped.

“Tiger 2,” Michael checked in.

“Roger. Savu Tower, Tiger Formation, rejoining to land, request a Break over the Tower?” Angela asked in her professional voice.

“Tigers, we saw it all. Fantastic! You are cleared for Break and landing – as low and as fast as you want,” a very excited, momentarily unprofessional, but relieved Air Traffic Controller called over the air.

With that, Delta’s nose went down and began to pull away. Michael applied thrust, felt Hunty surge forward again and held formation, as they accelerated towards Savu. Michael glanced forward, and could see the palm fringed island ahead with the runway across their path, just beyond the beach line. They were going fast and already very low. I hope we don’t go supersonic, thought Michael. It would break all the windows on the island. Angela was far too professional for that. But they were soon flying at about 600kts (1200 kilometres an hour).

Out the corner of his eye he could see the runway coming up, and the beach. He began bobbing about in the hot air at low level. Delta was just above him, to the left, because Angela would break in front, and over him. They flashed over the coast and, almost immediately, Angela snapped Delta hard right. Michael was looking up and ahead at the beautiful, black delta plan view of the mighty Mirage, adorned with tiger stripes. She shot to the right, climbing. Once she was passed he banked hard right, pulled, closed the throttle, and deployed the speed brake. He greyed out immediately in a 6 G turn. He grunted again and again to tense his body to clear his vision. It cleared, and looking back he could see Delta, still banking and turning on to Downwind. It was a long turn, through 270 degrees. As she rolled out Michael saw Delta’s undercarriage extending. He followed suit and selected Hunty’s wheels down, and some flap. Then the reality set in. He had to land the Hunter – he had never landed any aeroplane, let alone a high performance jet fighter! He would do exactly what Paul had talked about. There was no time left to panic.

“Put the aircraft in front on the horizon, and sit just outside its path on Downwind.” was what his grandfather had said. “Spacing is ideally 400 m back.”

Michael came abeam the middle of the runway and it felt comfortable. He was flying smoothly now, after the dogfighting, and was handling the Hunter confidently. Alongside the tower he did the Downwind Checks he

knew by heart; the undercarriage was down, the brakes exercised and his harness was tight. He selected 6500 RPM. “Fly past the end of the runway until the swept leading edge of the wing touches the landing end of the runway. Don’t turn early as I did on my first solo, and got too high – scary,” he remembered Paul once saying. Glancing forward he saw Delta begin a gentle descending turn.

“Don’t use the brake parachute Michael, the runway is very long and we don’t want to use the spare,” reminded Angela, still thinking clearly of the Mission.

Michael waited, dutifully, until Hunty’s wing reached the runway threshold, which seemed a long way back. “Your speed should be about 200 knots (400 kilometres an hour). Begin a gentle descent and turn towards the runway,” were Paul’s words. It was going well. The Hunter was the perfect gun platform and therefore a steady as a rock. “Halfway in the turn, select full flap. The speed should be about 180 knots. Lower the nose so the speed does not drop below 170 knots.” Michael had not had to touch the power.

The runway was coming up and he could appreciate the speed, by the ground rushing passed him. He lined up with the runway at 500 feet, and pulled the nose up slightly, as he was going low. That worked out well because he needed to lose some speed. “Cross the threshold with a shallow angle, at about 145 knots,” said Grandfather, in his head. With just 200 m to the threshold he had a fleeting memory of how he’d love to stand by the runway and watch Hunty and Delta at this stage in their approach. Paul had taken him to the runway threshold at Launceston Airport just after he had arrived, and watched the others, Angela and Jordan, landing the Hunter and Mirage. It was just awesome; these huge predatory fighters, with their noses high, and engines whining at high thrust. The pilot could be seen peering ahead, and making small aileron adjustments. There would be a roar and rush as they passed, a screech as the wheels touched, and then the parachute flared open. He would go down, whenever the Hunter and Mirage were flying, to watch the approach and landing – so spectacular!

He was aiming for the threshold and it felt right. Angela had landed and moved left in case his brakes failed and he had to pass her. In the final seconds he had to check back slightly to make his aiming point, the threshold markings. Then back a little more, to flare, so he would not smash onto the runway. He closed the throttle and with a firm thump, they were down. “Tiger 2 down,” he called, so Angela knew he had landed safely.

“At 90 knots you fly the nose wheel onto the runway. Don’t let it drop at low speed or you may damage the aircraft,” Paul had said. With the nose wheel on the ground he turned left onto Angela’s side of the runway. He let himself catch up until he was 100 metres behind. It was a very long runway and they did not have to use much braking.

Chapter 13

At the end of the runway Angela taxied off left towards the small Airport Terminal at Savu. Michael followed, and as they moved off the runway he put his head down and selected the canopy open. As it ran back, he felt the warm air of the Pacific island flow into the cockpit. What a relief!

He went through his After Landing Checklist as he followed 50 m behind Delta. He selected the flaps up and switched off unnecessary electrical systems. Then he took off his oxygen mask and took a huge gulp of fresh air. With the speed of the taxi, the air in coming into the cockpit cooled his face, and he began to relax. Only then did he truly realise how hard he had worked. As he rubbed his face, now free of the mask, he looked down and saw his flight suit drenched with perspiration.

It had been an amazingly, exciting day for him. He was so longing to tell his Grandfather all about it, and thank him for all the talks they had shared about flying these extraordinary jet fighters. He was also just so pleased he had coped and not let anyone down.

As they approached the Terminal, Michael could see a crowd of people in front of the buildings. They were clapping, although he could not hear them over the noise of the Hunter’s Avon engine.

There were a couple of men in blue uniforms by the Terminal and one began marshalling Angela. She followed him, and a second man pointed to Michael and began marshalling. Michael brought Hunty to stop next to Delta, and looked across to see her canopy rising and Angela giving him a huge smile. He put the park brake on and shut the engine.

“Michael, remember to put your ejection seat pins in!” came Angela’s voice over the radio, and saw her holding her oxygen mask up to her mouth.

“Roger, thanks,” responded Michael by smiling across at her. In all his excitement, he may have forgotten to make his seat safe.

With Hunty’s engine running down Michael unstrapped, took off his helmet, and sat for a moment rubbing his face and looking down at the sweat on his flying suit. He then stood up on the ejection seat, turned around and put the seat pins in place. The seat was now safe. He looked up and as the engine clattered to stop he could see the people by the building waving, and he waved back. Glancing across, he saw Angela standing on her seat and doing the same. They both realised that the Islanders were very happy. They had found allies to defend their rights.

There were no steps and Michael had to climb over the canopy, onto the fuselage and then leap off the back of Hunty’s wing, onto the ground. He jogged across to Angela and as he approached, he was pleased to see that she was just as hot and wet as him, and had red marks on her face from the oxygen mask. But what was most noticeable was the bright sparkle in her eyes and the broad grin. She just loved what she did, and had been so successful. As he approached she put her left hand above her head, and he stretched up to give her stinging “Hi-5” and there was the roar from the crowd. They looked across at the islanders, burst out laughing and waved again.

A uniformed Islander ran up to them, slightly breathless and said, “Sheekan has just called to say the Rebels fighters are refuelling and re-arming. It looks as though they are coming back. He says they must know

you are not armed and will probably come to shoot you down first, before taking on the gunboat.”

Angela’s face transformed back to the serious professional, and turned to Michael, “Michael you know how to refuel the aircraft. I will go to the Tower and call the fuel truck to meet you at the aircraft. I will stay at the Tower, speak to Dad, and wait to hear when they take off. We will probably be airborne as soon as you have refuelled.” After a moment’s thought, she continued. “The Brief remains almost as before: we do a formation take off. But this time go straight into Patrol Battle Formation. We will Counter over the gunboat as before, but lower, at 1000 feet, and expect them to attack us first.

Michael merely nodded and with that Angela turned and ran to the Tower. The uniformed Islander, whom he assumed was a local policeman, followed her. Michael had a momentary thought of Paul’s choice of callsign, ‘Sheekan’. He and Angela loved anything to do tigers and dolphins, but Sheekan, the evil tiger from Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Jungle Book’ was an odd, although well known choice. He smiled momentarily and it was forgotten.

Chapter 14

Gone was the elation of the initial success and it was back to business. Michael ran to the Mirage first. It would be a while before the fuel tanker truck arrived. It gave him time to check out the aircraft. It was just to make sure neither of them had battle damage or unserviceabilities.

After a quick walk round he just found small spots of grease on the rear of both jet fighters. This was common as it was blown off by the air passing the undercarriage at high speed, on take off and landing. They were still perfect. The shots the Rebel jet fighters had taken were what were called ‘opportunity’ shots. They had not tracked long enough for the gunsight to work out a ‘tracking solution’. They had just fired, hoping that Hunty and Delta would fly through their spray of bullets. Fortunately, they had failed

Michael kept anxiously looking across to see if the fuel truck was on its way. He began to worry and was about to call Angela in the Tower, when it appeared from around a hangar, with black diesel smoke belching from its exhaust. It was travelling as fast as it could.

While waiting for the fuel truck to arrive at the aircraft Michael was able to tidy the straps on both his and Angela's ejections seats. He put their helmets on top of the canopy coaming, where they had easy access as there would be no-one to help them strap in this time.

He leapt off the back of Hunty's wing as the fuel truck stopped in front of the fighters. It was fortunate that this fuel truck normally refuelled Airliners, because it had two long hoses. The fuel connectors of the Hunter and Mirage were the same as those on the airliners, so Michael would be able to refuel them together. He had often done this for the engineers at Launceston Airport. With the help of the beaming, young Islander driver, both aircraft were soon attached and the fuel flowing.

With the refuelling taking place he could not help himself. Michael found a rag in the Hunter's small baggage hold and began polishing the jet fighters. There was not much to clean. While he was underneath the aircraft, removing the grease, it was his first opportunity he to reflect on what occurred up till then. It had been so exciting and had fulfilled his ultimate daydreams. Here he was with his own flight suit on. Over that the Mae West on his chest, the confining G suit around his waist and legs, and leg restraint straps for the ejection seat, around his knees. Why did all this mean so much to him? Then he remembered what his grandfather Paul, who was in his late fifties and still loved these jets as much as ever, often said in his public speaking;

'It is more than just noise and speed; it is the whole experience. It is the green 'nomex' (fire resistant) flight suit, and the badges of experience sewn on it. It is being strapped to, or standing next the thunderous roar, whine and vibration of the powerful jet engine in the fighter. It is the smell of jet fuel burnt and raw. It is the procedures, the expectation in the voices of the air traffic controllers and the explosive take off, with light and powerful controls. It is the aerobatics with sustained G forces, and

amazing views from high and low altitude. It is the ground flashing by, especially low level, at high, spectacular speeds. It is being strapped to a single seat jet fighter, sitting so high and free in the clear vision canopy, all on your own. It is wearing the helmet (or bonedome) with the oxygen mask attached firmly, breathing the cool gas with the visor lowered to eliminate the bright glare above the brilliant white clouds. It is the flat, high speed approach and landing with the welcoming tug of an open parachute decelerating the aircraft. Then it is the look of excitement on the faces of the people watching, as we climb down the steps, not only from young, expectant faces; but also the elderly. You see the look of fun in everyone's eyes! Finally, of course, it is the noise and speed! The whole thing makes one feel so alive. I cannot get enough of it; even now!' Michael realised that it was exactly the same for him.

He looked at the jet fighters themselves. They were both about the same size; 15 meters long, weighing 10 tons, and larger than one would imagine for a jet fighter. The Hunter was loved for its graceful lines. The Mirage was sleek and aggressive and looked as though it was designed to fly very fast. Delta was from the Swiss Air Force and had been modified with a little wing (or canard) mounted on each engine intake. The canards did not move but gave the Mirage a lot better turning performance in dogfighting and aerobatics. It was not very noticeable from the side but gave it a very distinctive and impressive view in a turn. As imposing as these fighters were, the animal motifs made them even more striking.

Jet fighter flying was obviously Paul's favourite; he had also really enjoyed his airline and helicopter flying. Most of his helicopter operations had been in the Air Force, but occasionally he now flew a Bell Jet Ranger in Tasmania, as a volunteer for the Air Ambulance. He also used the helicopter to fly people from Launceston Airport to the renowned Barnbogle Links Golf Course at Bridport, close to their home. His friend was in charge of the Golf Course which owned the helicopter, but allowed it to be used for ambulance flying. Paul was teaching Angela and Jordan to fly it, and Michael had been for several flights. It was great fun but did not compare with flying the jet fighters.

Chapter 15

As Michael was removing the last of the grease he heard Angela calling, “Michael, stop polishing! The Rebel pilots are strapping in,” she shouted angrily, running towards the jets from the Tower. “Stop the refuelling and unplug Hunty, we only have about 15 minutes.”

Without even acknowledging her, he nervously swept the hair from his face, and then rushed under Hunty’s right wing, and moved under the fuselage to the refuelling jack that was located in the left undercarriage inboard of left wing. All the lights were out. Thankfully, the tanks were full. He un-plugged the hose, and rushed out with it. The driver, now looking a bit panicked by Angela’s terse message, wound in the hose. Angela followed with her hose.

“Is Hunty full?” She asked Michael directly. “Delta is not quite there, but has more than enough.”

“Yes,” answered Michael, not wanting to say more because Angela seemed really tense, and pushed away the hair that had fallen on his forehead again.

“Good,” she said, and must have seen the anxious look on his face. “Sorry I shouted at you, but it is not a good time to be polishing,” she smiled without humour, as she handed the driver the hose.

“The aircraft were refuelling, I had done the turnarounds, and it kept me occupied,” he defended himself.

“No worries,” Angela smiled, warmly this time, “I am a bit concerned. The Rebel jet fighters are going to go after us first, and will want to shoot us down, before going for the gunboat.”

Michael smiled back. “She’ll be right!” He said, mimicking another Australian colloquialism, and offered her a ‘High-5’ this time. As she smacked his upright hand, there was a roar from the crowd again. They had been quiet during the turnaround, and forgotten, but were now pleased to see these two, young and courageous aviators proving their confidence

and bravado. Looking at the crowd Angela and Michael were smiling and more relaxed. They were ready.

Without further discussion they ran to the rear of the main planes of their respective fighters, climbed up and moved along the top of the fuselage to the cockpits. After checking the ejection seat Michael pulled the pins and stowed them. Then carefully sat down, ensuring he did not pull anything on the seat that could fire it. While he was strapping himself in, something made him glance across at Angela, who was looking at him. She smiled and gave him thumbs up, pointing down. She realised he had tidied her cockpit to make her strap in easier. He grinned back and with another swipe of his thick dark hair, fitted his helmet and then prepared for the start.

When he was ready, he looked across with his thumb up, to Angela who was waiting and twirled her forefinger above her head. Their starts went smoothly again and as soon as he was ready, gave another thumbs up. Angela checked them in and received taxi and take off clearance from Savu Tower. There were no other aircraft around. The airport had been closed to civil traffic because of the attack by the Rebels.

Angela rushed Delta out onto the taxiway towards the runway. Michael followed, and, although they were obviously in a hurry, he double-checked his procedures to ensure he had missed nothing. His grandfather told him mistakes were made in a rush. Emergencies demanded haste, but the correct procedures still had to be followed. A quick glance at the crowd saw them waving and he put his hand high, out of the open cockpit, to acknowledge them.

The Tower had been good in not interrupting them, but suddenly broke in over the radio, “Sheekan advises the Rebel fighters are airborne and will be overhead in about 20 minutes!”

“Roger,” was all that Angela said.

Michael followed the rushing Delta onto the runway. He caught up, with his canopy closing and ensured, as soon as she came to a halt, he would be in formation ready for take off.

Delta bobbed to a stop on the left side of the runway once more, and Michael moved up quickly into Echelon Starboard. Angela looked up to check he was in position and he gave a thumbs up. She twirled her finger above her head again, and he throttled up. Hunty's engine roared, its nose dipped against the brakes and eager to be away. After a quick check around the cockpit and a rotation of the controls, Michael looked up and nodded. Angela put her head back against the headrest and thrust it forward. They surged away. On the first take off he had noticed the positive 'thump' in his back as the enormous jet power thrust him against the back of the ejection seat. This time he was more aware of it and of the ferocious Tiger staring down on him from Delta's fin. It was a fleeting thought. With all they had been through, Michael's confidence was riding high and he stuck to Delta like glue.

They were airborne halfway down the runway. Soon after they had lifted off, and were selecting gear and flap up, Angela began an early, climbing, left turn towards the gunboat. If it had been the first take off Michael would not have coped and had to break formation. But he could not be dislodged. Angela must have realised how well he was now flying, and concentrated on the oncoming defence of the gunboat. He just stuck there and even saw the waves crashing on the beautiful, white beach and the aquamarine, blue sea just below Delta.

Chapter 16

They rolled out still climbing and accelerating. "Tiger 2, Patrol Battle Formation, go!" called Angela, back in her professional voice. Michael cranked on right aileron and pulled out into line abreast formation, abeam Delta, 3 km out.

"Tiger 1. Tail clear," he said.

“Good work; tail clear Tiger 2,” Angela acknowledging that Michael was right on top of his game “Levelling off, the gunboat is directly ahead, 10 kilometres. Check in Tiger frequency,” she continued succinctly.

“Tiger 2,” Michael responded, glancing down and changing the frequency. Looking up he saw the gunboat much closer and drifting across the sea in front of them.

“Tiger 2 in. Tail clear Tiger 1,” he checked in automatically.

“Tail clear Tiger 2,” Angela confirmed and then to Paul, “Sheekan, Tiger Formation on frequency.”

“Tiger 1, this is Sheekan, the Rebel jet fighters have been airborne 15 minutes. They will soon be overhead. Take care and good luck!” said Paul, and Michael could hear the concern in his otherwise, professional voice.

“Roger,” was all Angela answered.

They were soon over the gunboat and 30 seconds later Angela called, “Tiger 2 Counter left, track 6 go!” Michael snapped the Hunter to the left towards Delta, simultaneously applying full thrust, and pulled. The now, expected G, came on and he was ready for it; tensed up and never even greyed out.

“Losing you Tiger 1,” called Michael, as Delta disappeared under his nose.

“Visual Tiger 2, tail clear; rolling out track 6,” grunted Angela, tensing against the G in the turn. Michael could imagine her looking back for him, over her shoulder, as she rolled out in the opposite direction they had been flying.

Michael rolled out track 6, looked right and saw Delta directly abeam, exactly where he expected to see her. “Tiger 1, tail clear,” he answered, and began his scan from directly in front, all the way passed Delta, up and down, and as far back as he could before calling tail clear again. Angela had obviously done the same because she responded in kind.

As part of the scan, fighter pilots occasionally focussed on a point on the ground, then looked up again. Failing to do this, and just staring into the sky, meant that the eyes focussed about 3 m ahead, until a bogey was quite close.

Michael eased the power up to keep Hunty in formation abeam Delta. Angela had set thrust to hold 500 knots. It was very fast but gave them huge options in a vertical fight. They hurtled over the cruising gunboat at 1000 feet. They were lower than the previous engagement and Michael thought he could see some of the sailors gazing up at him.

Once passed the boat he looked forward to begin the scan again. The sky ahead appeared clear and as he began to rotate his head towards the Mirage, he thought he saw a dot. He shot his eyes to the front again. Sure enough, there it was, becoming larger.

“Bogey 12 0’clock, 6 kilometres, menacing,” gasped Michael, squeezing the radio transmit button on the throttle hard, as if enabling him to speak quicker.

“Visual, there are 2 bogeys, one ahead of each of us. Ease out Tiger 2,” replied Angela once again in a surprisingly cool voice. What a professional, he had time to think, as he eased on the bank to move slightly away from Delta. By moving apart Angela wanted to see if the Rebels would choose one of them to attack, or split and fight them individually.

“They are going to split,” called Angela having forced them to make a decision. “Buster power, prepare to Cross High, track 12,” she continued. This was the best option. The Delfins were going to have to fly between them. Angela wanted to turn back towards them as they would probably also do. Once they had completed their 180 degree turn, they would be higher than the less powerful Delfins, and could perhaps go on the offensive from above. (Buster power was full throttle for the Hunter and dry thrust for the Mirage. Afterburner was massive, extra thrust for Delta, and which the Hunter could not match, without an Afterburner).

The dots could now be seen as aircraft. Michael snatched a look at his airspeed indicator – 550 knots (1100 km/hr). They could climb as high as they wanted, and Angela was thinking the same.

“Tiger 2, as we pull up we are going vertical. Don’t look for the bogeys. I will have them visual. Watch me. Avoid a collision. Fly behind me – copied?” She questioned sternly.

“Tiger 2 copied,” confirmed Michael, wondering at her insistence.

Seconds later the Delfins could be identified. One was aiming at Huntly and the other at Delta.

“Standby to cross....they’re are firing!” Shouted Angela, momentarily losing her cool, “Michael, cross high, go! Track 12.” The last part was strained as she had begun to pull.

Just before her call, Michael saw gun flashes and traces passing below him. Then he was pulling and turning, watching Delta’s nose climbing sharply and turning towards him. The tiger on the Mirage’s fin had never looked more menacing. The last he saw of the Delfin firing at him was just before it streaked under him with guns blazing.

Then there was a sharp bang. It could only be one thing. “I have been hit Tiger 1,” Michael groaned as he fought the G to keep the sustained pull going.

“Are you okay?” Angela sounded concerned, despite the strain in her voice.

“Everything appears normal,” he replied as nothing had changed in controls or thrust – the most important functions for him right then.

“Good, keep me visual,” said Angela. “The Bogies are crossing behind us, but will never climb as high as us, with their limited power,” she said, sounding confident. “We will try to keep them climbing towards us, and leave the gunboat.”

Their noses were almost vertical and now moving towards each other. Michael then realised why she had insisted he only look at Delta. Then he remembered his grandfather had said, with both elements in a Cross High, there was a chance they could collide at cross over, if both were looking at the bogeys.

They were crossing at a high rate and would have missed each other, but it seemed so close. Michael eased off the pull so that as he looked at Delta passing through the top of his canopy, she was about 100 metres away.

“Tiger 2 has crossed,” he confirmed

“Roger, Tiger 2 continue towards track 12, we will be about -- -- -- -- they have collided!” Angela shouted, elated. “The bogeys have collided, wing to wing, at the crossover. I am rolling left, nose down, follow me in Attack Battle Formation,” the pitch of her voice becoming higher.

With that Delta rolled nose down, and Michael followed, turning in behind her. A quick glance and he could see the Delfins floating down, locked together, like a falling leaf.

“There goes one ejection. Oh, and another! Two parachutes; the pilots are safe,” observed Angela as she spiralled the formation down. Michael arrived 250 m behind Delta, just outside her path. He glanced out to see the Delfins cascade into the sea. The pilots, incongruously, were floating, gently down nearby. The gunboat was steaming towards them at high speed, with a huge, white wake behind it. They would rescue and then hold them prisoners. There would be rejoicing in Savu today.

“Sheekan, Tiger 1. The Rebels jet fighters collided, the pilots ejected and they are being picked up by the gunboat!” Angela checked in with Paul in a now, very excited voice.

“Yes, we heard! Well done both of you. That was fantastic!” Paul sounded extremely relieved. “Are Michael and Hunty okay?” Michael felt that everything was fine, but began looking around at all he could see of

the Hunter. He was still flying loose and holding Attack Battle Formation behind Delta when he saw a bit of broken metal in the middle of the outer, right wing. “I see the hit, grandfather. It is in the end of the wing where there are no significant components or fuel tanks. It should be fine,” answered Michael

“Good Michael,” answered Paul, once again sounding relieved, and then moving on to Angela. “Tiger 1, wait until they have picked up pilots. Then, if you have enough fuel, come straight home.”

“Thanks Dad,” reverting to the proud daughter. “We are circling overhead, and the gunboat is in the process of plucking them out of the sea,” replied an exuberant Angela.

Michael trailed Delta and he saw the last pilot being pulled aboard the gunboat.

“Tiger 2, fuel check?” a more professional Angela suddenly called.

Michael had already checked his fuel and replied immediately, “Tiger 2 has full main tanks and I am still feeding from the drop tanks. I will have enough for the return.”

“Tiger 1 also has sufficient fuel. We will request to pass over the gunboat and Savu Tower; then climb to high altitude for the return,” Angela detailed.

“Request granted, Tiger Formation. The sky is yours. You may fly as low and as fast as you want. We people of Savu are very grateful to you and your jet fighters!” responded a very elated and grateful Tower Controller before Angela could even ask him.

“Savu Tower from Tiger 1, you are welcome. We are turning in now. Tiger 2, remain in Attack Battle Formation and hang on!” The last two words were very flippant for Angela, the professional. Michael could tell she was really enjoying herself and relieved after their success, and deservedly so. She had done an amazing job.

Chapter 17

With that Michael watched the fearsome Tiger Mirage roll towards the sea and surge ahead. He slammed Hunty's throttle forward and rolled over to follow.

Angela levelled off 10 m above the sea, aiming straight at the gunboat. Michael was 250 metres behind and stepped up slightly. Just as well because Angela was so low that she was causing a wake on the sea. A quick glance at his airspeed indicator registered 600 knots (1300 kilometres an hour) – wow! Delta had to climb slightly to streak over the gunboat. Michael followed moments later, just over the bow of the boat. For an instant he looked down to see upturned, smiling faces covering their ears with their hands. The noise would have been explosive.

Then they were down on the sea and teetering on Mach 1 (supersonic), rushing towards the approaching beach, runway and Tower. They were flying in same direction as their first fly by. This time the speed was the same, but it was oh, so much lower. Awesome; thought Michael at their wild ride. This is what fighter pilots live for – airborne success and bravado!

They screeched towards the Tower and as they crossed the runway Angela pulled back hard, towards the vertical. Michael saw the afterburner light up and knew she would pull away from him. He had to pull 6 G to stay with her, and was back to grunting and groaning to stop from greying out.

Angela checked Delta's attitude near vertical, dropped out of afterburner and called, "Tiger 2, I will snap roll once left. You do one right. Keep me visual as we turn towards Tasmania." She was now 500 m ahead and as Michael saw her begin the high speed aileron turn left, he completed one to the right.

It would have looked great from the ground. As if in response to Michael's thoughts, the Tower called, "Fantastic, Tiger Formation. Thank you once again and contact Brisbane Centre for your airways clearance."

“Glad to be of service Savu. Tiger 2, HF 8879 go,” was Angela’s voice back to the true professional.

Chapter 18

They were soon at cruise altitude in Patrol Battle Formation, under Australian ATC. Their flight path had them flying south west towards Tasmania. The afternoon was cloudless and the scene so serene that Michael could hardly believe he had been in action, until he looked down and saw that flying overalls and G suit were wet with perspiration again.

The South East coastline of Australia soon appeared and looked so secure and stable. Michael realised how lucky they were living in Australia. The political frailties of the Pacific, where they had just been, and Africa, where his parents lived, made them so unpredictable.

Then he looked for, and saw the shimmer of an unusually, calm Bass Strait. He could also see the islands indicating the entrance to the Strait, followed by Tasmania, and home.

Almost immediately Angela announced, “Melbourne Centre, Tiger Formation leaving flight level 380 (38,000 feet), descending.”

“Tiger Formation, contact Launceston tower at 80 nautical miles,” responded Melbourne Centre, who had taken over from Brisbane Centre as they flew further south.

On the operational frequency, Angela called, “Sheekan, Tiger Formation will be with you in ten minutes. We will land from Right Base for Runway 32 Left.”

“Tiger 1, this is Sheekan. Welcome home. See you on the ground.” Paul answered.

At 80 nautical miles Angela called, “Launceston tower, Tiger Formation descending, visual. We are positioning for Right Base. Runway 32 Left.”

Then to Michael, “Tiger 2 to Attack Battle Formation.” She could see the runway in the distance.

“Tiger Formation, this is Launceston tower, we request a ‘fly by’. We know your father tries to keep the noise down for the local residents. However we know what you have achieved and you deserve it!” responded a very excited controller, and then continued, “The locals will understand once they hear what you have done.”

“Glad to oblige Launceston tower,” Angela replied, with the giggle in her voice. “Tiger 2, remain in Attack Battle Formation, right and low. We will carry out a Battle Break the same as in Savu. Get the speed over the threshold 135 knots, and use the brake parachute. This runway is half the length of Savu!”

Here we go again, thought Michael, and slipped into position, looking slightly up at Delta. Their noses were going down again and he moved the throttle forward to keep up with the Mirage. He could not enjoy the view this time, as he held formation, but watched the Tasmanian coastline slip beneath them near Bridport, and Barnbougle Golf Course which was easily recognised by the 14 kilometre white, broad, Waterhouse Beach alongside. As they descended they crossed the forested high ground north of Launceston. Beyond and below Delta Michael recognised the beacon on their drive home each time, Mount Arthur, followed by Mount Barrow. They were getting close. A quick glance forward and he saw Launceston airport, with the runway at right angles to their flight path.

Michael felt they were not quite as low as Savu, but flying just as fast. As they crossed the runway, Angela snapped the bank on, hard right. In the next instant Michael was under her flight path and he banked hard after her. This impressive break was now familiar and he followed Angela as he had done in Savu. He went through his Downwind Checks while ensuring he was on the same level, and behind Delta. Grandfather was watching! He also noticed something that he had not, in the same Downwind position in Savu. After all the high speed flying, it was now right back at 200-250 knots. He was reminded of Paul saying of how quiet

it was on Downwind. Then selecting the undercarriage, with the flap down, the throttle back and low on hydraulic power (no accumulator) it took up to 8 seconds for 3 ‘greens’ to illuminate, indicating gear safely down. It seemed like an eternity.

Angela called Launceston Tower “Tiger Formation, Downwind to land.”

“Call Final, Tiger Formation. The Break was spectacular, and don’t worry about the noise, we warned everyone in the Terminal. We informed them about what you have just done in Savu,” replied an excited Tower Controller.

“Thanks,” was all Angela said and Michael saw the Mirage begin turning Final and descending, with its nose high. This was very characteristic of the delta Mirage, which had no flaps. It was a difficult aircraft to fly at low speed, with a high nose attitude. But Angela handled Delta beautifully.

“Tiger 1, Final, 3 greens,” she called in the turn, informing the Tower, in military fashion, that the undercarriage was down and locked.

“Tiger 1, cleared to land Runway 32 Left. The fire track will pick up your parachute at the end of the runway, left side,” the Controller confirmed.

“Roger, cleared to land Runway 32 Left, Tiger 1,” Angela confirmed calmly.

For a moment Michael had the vision of watching the Mirage on short final, nose high, huge delta wing exposed from below, landing light on the nose wheel and the deep roar of the Snecma Atar engine. It was so cool and he loved to watch it. As his wing reached the runway threshold he turned and began descending. Halfway in the turn he called, “Tower, Tiger 2, Final, 3 greens.” He selected full flap and watched the runway as the speed slowly reduced. It looked really short, and the speed had to be right, which is why Angela had reminded him. He could see Angela was down, with two puffs of blue smoke where Delta’s tyres had touched and her parachute, gamely slowing her down.

“Tiger 2 you are cleared to land Runway 32 Left,” confirmed the Tower. Michael could see Delta was slowing down and moving left.

“Cleared to land Runway 32 Left, Tiger 2,” Michael answered abstractedly. His concentration now firmly on the speed, which was coming back to 135 knots. “Ease the throttle up a bit, to hold the speed,” he said to himself. “Nose down a bit. I must land on the threshold markers. Power back a bit. That’s it,” he continued. Looking ahead Delta was on the left side of the runway. He crossed the threshold, closed the throttle and landed firmly. A quick glance across to the parachute switch, selected it, the lights came on – good! Looking ahead, he kept the nose up. It seemed such a long wait, then the tug of the deployed parachute slowing him now.

“Tiger 2 down,” he called to Tower and Angela, informing them he had landed safely and did not need to go around.

“Roger,” called Angela. “Well done!” That was not required but Michael appreciated it. He lowered the Hunter’s nose at about 90 knots. As he felt he was still rushing towards Delta, he applied a bit of braking to help the parachute. He then slowed down quickly and moved to the left of the runway, behind the Mirage. As he did so he saw it turning slightly right. As Angela released the parachute it billowed, then collapsed and fell back onto the grass beside the runway. A man in a fireman’s uniform ran over to collect it. Angela turned left again, off the end of the runway and down the taxiway towards the hangar.

Michael approached the same spot to drop his parachute. The fireman was hauling in Delta’s as Michael turned slightly left, throttled up to lift the parachute, turned right so it would fall off the runway, and released it. With the extra thrust Hunty shot forward. He closed throttle and turned to follow Delta, with a quick wave to the fireman who was rushing back to pick up his parachute.

Chapter 19

As he left the runway Michael ducked his head as he selected the canopy open. While it was rolling back he carried out his After Landing Checks. From left to right; flaps up, the electrics off, and he confirmed the fuel imbalance to tell Andrew, Hunty's engineer. With those complete he looked up and unclipped his oxygen mask and relaxed.

The sun shone down from the crystal clear sky. The cool Tasmanian air refreshed his face as he rubbed the marks where the tight oxygen mask had been attached. Oh, it was good to be alive, he thought. He sat in the front of this awesome, powerful and finely responsive jet fighter. He could feel the power from the massive engine rumbling behind him, even at idle. After 40 years of flying jets, his grandfather had said he never tired of the exhilaration of taxiing a Hunter back to the hangar after a satisfying sortie. Michael now knew exactly what he meant.

He was in position 50 m behind the Mirage, and as they passed the Passenger Terminal, the balcony was crowded with people waving at them. He couldn't see Angela waving back, because she was unable to raise Delta's canopy on taxi. But he was sure she was, and did likewise.

Approaching their hanger he could see Thomas and Andrew standing by the spots they wanted them to park. Angela and Michael both followed their respective marshaller's guidance. They could also see all the family waiting.

In position, Michael applied the park brake. He glanced across to Angela, who had selected her canopy open, after she had cut Delta's engine and it was rising slowly above her head. She had a huge grin on her face again, as she looked at him. He smiled back, looked down and selected HP (high pressure fuel cock) to shut down Hunty's engine.

Everything was a bit of a blur from then on. He saw Andrew fit the steps to Hunty's side and climb up to put in the ejection seat pin to make it safe. He watched Michael insert his seat pan ejection seat pin, then he patted him on his helmet and helped him unstrap.

After climbing down the steps Michael found he was suddenly surrounded by people, and immediately after removing his helmet, swept the unruly mass of damp hair from his brow. Then Paul was shaking his hand and Jordan gave him a hug and was crying, happily. Angela strode through the crowd to give him another ‘High 5’, which was becoming their trademark greeting. She bent down and hugged him. That felt good. It was a great tribute from her who set such high standards. But he was getting tired of all the hugging. Only Jordan gave a less than exuberant greeting. He wore a large grin as he hovered on the outside the bunch, and shook Michael’s hand when he got the chance. Michael understood his inner conflict. Because of his illness he had missed a huge adventure and must have been really disappointed, as any fighter pilot would be; but was also pleased at their success. Michael swept the ruffled hair his from his face again and gave him a knowing nod and smile when their eyes met. Jordan returned the nod, appreciating his understanding.

Chapter 20

Once the initial celebrations receded, the pilots and engineers checked the fighters for damage and unserviceabilities, starting with Hunty’s bullet hole. As Michael had suspected, it was in the outer wing, where there were no significant components, and had passed straight through. The Elfin’s guns were a low calibre and the hole was small. It would merely require a small patch on top and bottom

Then they all helped to tow the Hunter and Mirage back into the hangar. Michael was happy to climb back up into Hunty’s cockpit while Andrew pulled the Hunter with a small tractor. Someone always had to ‘ride’ the brakes in case the towing arm broke during the tow. The person ‘riding’ the brakes could stop the aircraft from running into something. Michael felt at home again in the still warm, padded ejection seat; a reminder of the recent, exciting action packed flight.

Hunter came to stop in the hangar. Paul had inserted the chocks on either side of the nose wheel, to stop it from moving, then stepped back and looked up at Michael in the cockpit, “I know how much you love it in

Hunty's seat Michael," he joked, "but you have to come down and debrief."

Reluctantly, with another sweep of his hand to clear the hair from his face, he stood up, turned around and descended the steps. They walked together to the Briefing Room, his grandfather's arm around Michael's shoulders.

A debriefing always followed any formation mission, so that value could be gathered from anything that had been learnt, and any mistakes corrected.

There was not much to discuss on their flight, because they had all been listening on the radio and it had been spectacularly successful. They were particularly keen to watch the gun camera shots of Angela and Michael's 'kills' on the first engagement. There were a lot of laughs and comments as the gunsight centre 'pipper' stuck to both Delfins during the fight. Paul ended the debriefing with, "Well done all of you, I very proud of way you handled yourselves," including Jordan in his scan around the room. Although he had not flown Jordan had been a great help to Paul in relaying messages between Tiger Flight, Savu and the informant on the Rebel Island. "I received a telephone call from Savu while you were returning. They are obviously very happy with the results and thanked us. The rebel pilots will be tried in court with 'acts against humanity'. I think their territorial waters will be safe from now on." He concluded, "Let us go home and have a celebration dinner and a good sleep. Tomorrow we will go over the aircraft again with a fine toothcomb."

It was late afternoon and the drive back to the beach was quiet after the euphoria of the day. They were tired and each in their own thoughts. Michael was still wondering what it was all about, and just so thankful he had not let the side down.

Darkness had fallen when they drove into the yard. Kimba ran out to the fence to give them her normal, robust greeting, as all Staffordshire Bullterriers do; jumping up and down, and just so happy to see them. After a fairly hasty meal they all said good night and went to their respective rooms, exhausted.

Michael proudly hung his flight suit up behind the door, where he had first seen it. He hung his helmet over the hook where it had been that morning; then remembered he had forgotten the knee pad in the hangar crew room. On it was written all the day's formation briefing. He would collect it in the morning. He then had a soothing shower and was asleep as soon as he head hit the pillow.

Chapter 21

Michael woke with a start from a very deep sleep. The warm, spring sunshine was streaming in through the window onto his bed. He shot bolt upright and looked at the closed bedroom door – there was no flight suit! His head turned to wall alongside – no helmet! He groaned. “Oh no, it could not have been just a dream? It was too real.”

With that he angrily threw off the bedcovers and as he rotated his legs off the bed he felt stiffness pains in his stomach muscles. Gripping his midriff he wandered what could have caused it. The pain was soon forgotten in his disappointment. It had been so real, he thought again.

He slowly raised himself and went to the bathroom for his morning shower. He then changed into his work overalls, but without his normal enthusiasm. Opening the door and walking into the hallway he smelt the lovely aroma of breakfast cooking. He could hear the lively banter coming from voices in the sun filled kitchen/family room. The others must have been up for awhile. As he walked into the room his grandmother noticed him first, “Come in sleepyhead. You must have been really tired to wake up this late? Sit down and I will give you a big breakfast.” To Cindy, someone eating a huge breakfast was a sign of good health. Kimba saw Jordan and rushed over to jump up on him, with tongue lolling and the sparkling, intelligent eyes of a dog who just loved life. Michael was her favourite because he always had time to play with her. That generally meant a good, old fashioned brawl, which Staffords loved.

While he fended off Kimba, then playfully fought her, the others all turned their attention to him. They teased him about wasting the day. They had

already been for a surf on the glorious beach at Lulworth, with its perfect wind swell, just 3 minutes away. Michael desperately wanted to tell them about his vivid and exciting dream. It had been so real, but they might disillusion him in their present, jovial mood.

After breakfast they washed the dishes, then all trooped out to the Land Rover. The day had been planned as a servicing day for the Hunter and Mirage.

Chapter 22

Michael was unusually quiet on the drive to the hangar. Angela and Jordan tried to draw him out. But when they failed, left him alone and discussed what they were going to do on the aircraft. Paul, who was driving, interrupted with his plan of action. Michael was soon forgotten in the back as he relived every moment of the dream.

They parked next to the hangar that had been opened by the engineers, who lived close to the airport. Thomas and Andrew greeted them heartily as they trooped in. Michael stepped gingerly out of the 4x4, his stomach hurting a bit when he moved. He then slowly trailed the group to the hangar and stopped in the entrance to look at his beloved jet fighters. They were so impressive on either side of the hangar, in their spectacular, shiny paintwork. Somehow his feeling for them had changed. He was so sure he now looked upon them with the same awe as his grandfather, Angela, and Jordan. He stepped over to the Hunter and patted Hunty on its side. Something had changed.

“Come along Michael, stop dawdling, we have work to do. You are in a real ‘dwaal’ today,” said Angela, using the South African word for daydream that she had learned from Jordan.

Sweeping a lock of his thick, dark hair from his forehead, Michael reluctantly left the fighters and walked to the Briefing Room. As he walked through the door, he stopped dead! On the planning table was his knee pad. He rushed across and picked it up. On it were his written

formation notes of their Mission to Savu. What was going on? Was it a dream or not?

He wanted to run over to the others, who were writing instructions on the white board, but what would he say? He did not want to break the spell. Then he thought of something else. “Excuse me grandfather, I will be back in a minute,” he called to Paul as he moved to the door, clutching the knee pad to his chest.

Inside the hanger he ran to Hunty’s right wing. He threw the knee pad onto the wing and ducked under the leading edge. There it was; a metal patch. Coming back out, he climbed onto the drop tank and then onto the wing. On his hands and knees he crawled towards the wingtip. There it was again; another, new, metal patch directly above the one he had observed on the bottom surface. Something had gone straight through the wing. As he sat down, turning to touch the patch, he felt the pain in his stomach muscles. Then his grandfather’s words spoke to him again. “After we have been on holiday, I always go straight away for a flight in Delta or Hunty, and enjoy some hard aerobatics or a dogfight. Because I have not flown for a while, I have stiff stomach muscles the following day.” Michael felt his tender midriff muscles again.

Andrew had come around the front of Hunty, and seeing Michael looking a bit flushed asked him, “What are you up to Michael? Are you alright? You look a bit red.”

“I am fine thanks Andrew. What do you know about this patch?” He asked carefully, not to arouse suspicion.

“I can’t say I have ever really noticed it,” remarked Andrew leaning over the leading edge of the wing and feeling the patch. “They do a lot of modifications on aircraft during their lives, but this one looks quite new. Wait here, I will see if the other wing has one, which would indicate it is a modification.”

Michael sat, not moving, as Andrew sauntered away around the front of the Hunter’s nose, to the left wing. “No, there is not the same one on this

side,” he shouted as he wandered back, and said, “That is strange because it does look recent, and neither Thomas nor I have needed to patch Hunty or Delta since your grandfather bought them.” It did not seem to bother him. He lost interest and ducked out of sight beneath the wing to continue his work.

Michael was dumbstruck. What was going on? He had heard stories of parallel universes, multiple dimensions and alternate lives, but like the rest of the family he was very practical and could not understand it. However, something very unusual had occurred. Should he tell the others? Oh, how he wanted to, but knowing them, they would just say it was a dream. It was not! Sitting there on the wing, rubbing the patch as if it would reveal more, he realised he had coped too well flying Hunty for it to have been his first flight. The whole family had also seemed so accustomed to him flying the Hunter. He must have flown Hunty before. The difference was that this time he could recall everything.

In the end, he decided he would keep it to himself. If he told anyone, once again, he thought it might break the spell. Oh, how he hoped it would happen again. Moving towards the edge of the wing, to jump off, he looked across at the Mirage, with the magnificent Tiger markings. Perhaps he had also flown Delta, and would do so again? Going to bed would never be a chore again – who knows what adventures he might have?

“Michael, stop dreaming, we have work to do. This is not like you!” called Angela from the Briefing Room door. Then she looked at him more closely. “It is good to see you looking your usual, happy, self, again. Not as if there was a cloud hanging over you!” With that she turned and went back inside.

Michael had been smiling. He swept the hair from his brow as he strode, briskly between the mighty Jet Fighters to the Briefing Room. He firmly grasped the knee pad and once again felt the bitter sweet pain in his stomach muscles as he walked. What future, exciting adventures would he have with them?