

THE BOY JET FIGHTER PILOT

Operation Tigers – Book 2

Chapter 1

The shrill ring of the telephone woke him. Michael gradually roused himself from an exhausted sleep.

Then he remembered he had been doing his homework and must have dozed off. But he found no books on the desk. He suddenly realised it had happened again! He jumped up and looked around at the closed door of his bedroom. It was there hanging on the hook; his flight suit, and on the wall next to it, his helmet and knee pad. He felt the excitement rise in him, and swept the hair from his forehead. He was back in his flying dimension!

The phone call that had woken him must have had something to do with it. Still in his board shorts, Wallaby T-shirt and bare feet from an early morning surf, he opened the door and rushed towards the family room.

The ever alert Kimba, their little white Staffordshire bull terrier, came bounding into the corridor and jumped on him. He fought her off, told her to relax, which she did. Then she led the way to the others, with the confident strut that all Staffies have.

Chapter 2

Stepping into the large, sun filled family room Michael saw Paul, Jordan and Angela in a huddle around the lounge room table. Cindy, his grandmother, was making tea at the central cooking pedestal.

The family room, which combined as lounge, dining and kitchen rooms, was the centre point of their lives at home. It faced north, as did all the rooms in the house. Paul, his grandfather, said that in the lower, southern hemisphere all rooms should face north. In winter when it was cool, and the sun was low in the north, there was always sunshine in all the rooms.

In summer, when it warmed up, the sun was higher and did not shine in as much. In addition, the house had two levels and all faced north overlooking the magical Bass Strait. It could be calm and docile on one day, but stormy and treacherous the next. Dolphins often frolicked alongside the beach and the occasional whale passed by, playfully breaching if they had a calf.

Choosing the location of Tam O'Shanter, alongside Tam O'Shanter Bay in North Eastern Tasmania was no random one for Paul. It was in a rain shadow of the central highlands of Tasmania and statistically received more sunshine than the famed Gold and Sunshine Coasts of Queensland. Having a north facing beach was a bonus, as there were few places in the populated areas of Australia that faced this ideal direction.

Keeping his two immaculately maintained jet fighters at Launceston airport, close by, was also a consideration. With their massive military jet engines they were extremely noisy. The airport was 14 kilometres away from the city and did not affect many people when they flew.

Chapter 3

The first person to see Michael when he walked in was Jordan. "Here comes the traitor!" He exclaimed, looking at the Australian rugby team T-shirt Michael was wearing. Paul leaned across and gave Jordan a playful punch on his arm. He recoiled theatrically and burst out laughing. Paul was a great supporter of the Wallabies because they had done so well in the world arena. Rugby Union was the smallest football code in Australia and the Wallabies often beat teams where rugby was followed like a religion. Michael played rugby union at school in Launceston and like Paul had adopted the Wallabies. Jordan, who was brought up in Africa, as they all were except Angela, still supported the South African Springboks. It produced a lot of friendly rivalry in the rugby season. Angela and Cindy were bemused by the goings-on.

"What was the phone call?" Michael asked innocently and changing the direction of the conversation.

Looking at him Paul said severely, "The Rebel Islands have acquired another jet fighter. It is the L39 Albatross, a more advanced version of the L29 Delfins that you guys encountered in Savu six months ago.

Six months ago, thought Michael! It felt like the day before. In a way it was, because he appeared to be living two lives. Both almost identical, but in the current one he flew the magnificent jet fighters he had dreamed of flying. But this was not a dream. He did not know what it was and did not much care to know, because he could fly the graceful Hawker Hunter (they called Hunty) and perhaps mighty Dassault Mirage 3 (Delta) jet fighters.

"As you know Michael, we have been watching the activities of the poachers on Tiger Island, close to the Rebel Islands," Paul continued. "It is an island in the group called the Friendly Islands that had no human inhabitants. Tigers had become extinct there many years before. The two human Tiger Island families had been persuaded to withdraw to a larger island and the Sumatran Tiger was re-introduced. The programme had been successful and several Tigers were observed on the island in recent years. Then it was discovered that the Rebel islanders used a helicopter, with hunters to poach and kill the Tigers. The carcasses were then loaded into the helicopter and flown back to the Rebel Islands, where they sold the various body parts to unscrupulous traders.

"Once again, the Friendly Islanders have no means to defend Tiger Island against the jet fighter, helicopter and well armed poachers. Our informant on the Rebel Island also feels it is only a matter of time before they use the jet fighter to attack the Gunboat on Savu again. We have been discussing what we can do to neutralise the Albatross as we did the last time, and save the Tigers.

"Angela's idea is that we fly there and disrupt the helicopter while it is poaching on Tiger Island. The Rebel fighter is bound to try and stop us. We will have to display the skills you showed last time and somehow take out the fighter."

They had all sat quietly and listened while Paul filled Michael in on the discussion.

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Jordan suddenly blurted out, "We have to find ammunition for our guns. The Albatross has far better performance than the Delfins and I think we should be able to defend ourselves!"

"I am afraid I agree with Jordan, Dad. It was quite scary to watch the Delfins firing at us in Savu. Wasn't it Michael?" Angela said siding with her cousin, and looking to Michael for support. His first reaction had been to nervously sweep the thick, dark forelock from his brow. Before he could say anything Paul broke in, "I am sorry but it is not negotiable. For a start the Australian government would never allow a civilian organisation to use heavy calibre, automatic weapons in this country. But I also have no interest in arming the jets. We are trying to stop aggression, not promote it. If you guys are not happy to go ahead as we are, I quite understand. It is a dangerous exercise."

The three youngsters looked at one another and, as it was Jordan, who had expressed concern, elected himself spokesman. "No, you are quite right Paul. If we want to go to war we can join the military."

Paul felt relieved. He had encouraged them to be strong willed and free thinking. This was the first time they had shown any opposition to his ideas concerning their flying. That they had backed down so quickly meant it had just been an understandable reaction and apprehension to flying against armed fighters. He had already offered them way out and was not surprised when they did not accept it. It was up to him to decide if he wanted to discontinue the Mission and persuade the government to neutralise the situation. The alternative was to encourage his keen, young pilots and give them confidence to do the job he knew was well within their capabilities. The former option he disregarded immediately. The diplomatic channels took so long that by the time any action was taken, all the Tigers would be dead and the Gunboat at Savu, sunk.

"On our previous mission I took a chance," Paul began. "I knew that we had superior aircraft and that Angela and Michael were extremely well

trained in Dogfighting. Although I also assumed their pilots would be good," he continued looking at Angela and Michael," I knew you could do it, and you succeeded in spectacular fashion!" Both were smiling.

"We have continued to train even harder on 1 versus 1 air combat, and 2 versus 1, with Duncan in Bunty," Paul continued. "You guys are flying very well; to such an extent that as much as I would like to lead the mission, I would be a hindrance at my age." Before he could continue they all nodded at each other in good-naturedly agreement.

"Cheeky buzzards," Paul castigated them jokingly, before he went on. "I also realised from the last Mission how important it was for me to coordinate between you in the aircraft, Savu and my informant on the Rebel Island.

"I have no doubt you will have the capability to successfully handle any the situation that presents itself," he concluded, feeling the confidence of his words as he looked at the three, beaming and eager young faces. The earlier disagreement was forgotten.

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"Now let us begin the planning!" Paul said, moving on. "Firstly, and I know you are waiting for this; Jordan will lead in Delta with Michael in the back seat," he started. Then looking at Michael, continued, "Michael, your training went very well in Delta, but it is always good to watch someone more experienced from the back seat. More importantly, your extra set of eyes will allow Jordan to watch what is happening on the ground, while you keep Angela's tail clear." Michael had understood and nodded in agreement, although he wished he could remember flying the Mirage. He knew from the last Mission that he would cope and his skills would be good enough.

Paul moved onto Angela. "My girl, you will fly your favourite, Hunty." She just smiled and Paul was both pleased and surprised she had accepted so readily, that she would not be leading. Angela was older than Jordan and had led the first Mission. But thankfully she realised, as they all did,

that Jordan flew the Mirage as if it was a part of him. He could now outfly all of them in Dogfighting and she obviously understood that he was the natural choice to lead them. Paul was grateful for her maturity and like any father, unsure of his parenting skills, suddenly thought at least that he and Cindy must have done something right.

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“My Rebel Island informant tells me that the helicopter returned two days ago with a Tiger,” said Paul moving the discussion back to the current Mission. “They normally go across once a week with the pilot and two poachers with rifles. Therefore we have at least three days to prepare.

“My plan is that in two days time you will fly to Savu at dusk. I will organise to have the fighters put in a hangar. That way no-one will know you are there. Then, hopefully, the next day if the helicopter flies, I will scramble you.

“You should arrive over Tiger Island at the same time as the chopper. Once they have put the poachers on the ground, you frighten the life out of them with low-level supersonic booms. Then continue low passes over the helicopter, forcing it to land. When that happens I will have policemen from the Friendly Islands, in boats close by, move in and take them into custody while you provide aerial support.”

Paul concluded with, “Michael, have you finished your homework yet?”

“Not yet Grandfather,” answered Michael, “It won’t take long.” He swept the hair from his forehead as he always did as a reaction whenever he was excited, happy, angry, nervous, agitated or uncertain.

“Good,” said Paul. “It is a bit too late to go to the hangar today. We will go down first thing in the morning and make sure all is ready.”

Cindy, Paul’s wife had not said anything up until then, not knowing much about the jet fighter operation. But when she saw that the informal briefing was over, she spoke up. “Paul, I hope you are right about the

capabilities of Delta, Hunty and kids over the Rebel jet fighters? Are you sure we were not just lucky last time?”

“No Love. We will still assume they have employed even better mercenary pilots, but my informant says they have not flown much since arriving on the Rebel Island,” he tried to reassure her. “Angela, Jordan, Michael and I fly at least three times a week. I would pit them against any other pilots in the same aircraft. Even against the best pilots flying the Albatrosses, they would more than hold their own.”

“As long as you are convinced, I will try not to worry,” she had answered and seemingly satisfied, changed the subject. “Come on all of you, your tea is ready.”

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There was a rush to the centre pedestal. With all the activity the youngsters participated in, they were always ready to eat. Kimba leapt up, hoping for some action, then seemed to realise it was too early for her meal time and settled back in the late afternoon sun, by the front sliding windows. Even though she lay down with her head on her paws, her large, intelligent eyes followed every movement, especially Michael’s. Her satin soft ears, so incongruous with the powerful, muscled, little terrier; were constantly on the move as she followed any sound.

As Michael sat down he moved a wayward forelock from his brow; then while he waited for his grandmother to serve him, he worried about going to bed that night. What if he switched lives while he slept? He would miss all the action!

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After devouring a huge meal Michael excused himself and went to complete his homework. Although it was a Saturday evening Paul always insisted he complete any assigned work before he could be around the jet fighters. It had worked, because since Michael had arrived in Australia his academic results had improved dramatically. That was the reason he was

in Launceston, and also Jordan. Both had been interested in aeroplanes for as long as their parents could remember. Paul, their uncle and grandfather, who was both an airline pilot and owner of the two jet fighters, had further encouraged their enthusiasm. They had corresponded with Paul as soon as they were able. Their obsession with aeroplanes had resulted in their schoolwork suffering. First Jordan, then Michael had been invited to live with Paul and Cindy in Australia. They were treated the same as their daughter, Angela, who had the same intense interest in the jet fighters. The rule was that all schoolwork was completed before they were allowed near the hangar. It had been extremely successful. Both Angela and Jordan had excelled at school and were both studying aeronautical engineering at Launceston University. Michael's marks were in the top ten of his class, which both surprised and delighted his parents in Africa.

What was of interest to Michael when he arrived at his room was whether his homework was the same as had been assigned in both dimensions. He closed the door, delighted again to see the flight suit hanging there. In his schoolbag he found the homework was identical. Strange, but he did not question it, and got down to work.

It was late when the assignments were complete. He went for a shower and then returned to say goodnight to the others. His grandparents were watching television with Kimba contentedly sleeping at their feet. They told Michael that Angela and Jordan had gone to meet friends at the local, community golf club, a five minute walk from their house on the beach.

Rather reluctantly he said good night and went to bed. He really did not want to sleep, fearing that when he awoke he would be back in the other dimension. But he was so exhausted from surfing and then completing his homework that he could not keep his eyes open.

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Michael was lying on his stomach as he woke. He had been in a very deep, dreamless sleep and struggled out the depths of his slumber. Suddenly he remembered, and was instantly alert, rolled over and sat up. It was still early but there was enough light for him to see his flight suit on

the door hook. Yes! He was still in his flying dimension. He would be flying the awesome Mirage.

After he had washed and changed into some casual clothes he went into the family room. Kimba rushed up and leapt up on him as he walked into the room. He was the only one who allowed her to do that, besides Paul, and much against Cindy's wishes. She said they spoilt her, which was true, but Kimba had so much character and life to share. Michael played with her for a short while and then took her downstairs to let her out and relieve herself.

The sun was just rising and the sky was clear. It had been forecast to be a lovely day. It was certainly starting out that way. But Michael, who was unconsciously looking out at a serene Bass Strait, had his mind elsewhere. He would be flying the mighty Mirage and the excitement was building up in him. Even though Jordan would be doing the actual flying, he wanted to make sure he went through all the Procedures in his mind.

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He heard the phone ringing in the house, upstairs. He called Kimba, who was running around the yard with her inquisitive nose to the ground, picking up scents of night time visitors around the fence. She turned around at his command and obediently ran to him and they rushed up the stairs to the family room.

Paul was on the phone in his pyjamas and running his fingers through his tousled, grey hair. He had a look of grave concern on his face as he listened intently to whoever was speaking. Michael instinctively swept the hair that had fallen across his forehead.

“When do you think they will take off?” Paul asked, looking more concerned. There was a pause and he said, determinedly, “We will be ready!”

Putting the phone down, he saw Michael. “Michael, get the others up. That was my informant on the Rebel Island. He says it looks as though the

helicopter will be going sooner than normal. The Albatross is also being prepared for flight. Tell Jordan and Angela we will leave as soon as they are ready. I will phone the engineers,” Paul concluded and headed back to his and Cindy’s bedroom.

It was Michael’s turn to bash on doors to wake up Jordan and Angela. He then climbed into his flight suit, grabbed the helmet and knee pad, and headed back to the family room. Kimba loved all the activity and darted from one room to the next, as if expecting a game.

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In the family room he found Cindy preparing sandwiches and hot chocolate for them to take. Michael moved in alongside her, to help.

“You take care now Michael,” she started saying, “you have all been very lucky so far. I hope your grandfather is not taking too many risks?”

Moving the hair from his face with the back of his hand, and with a humorous glint in his eye, Michael looked at Cindy and said, “Grandfather says the more we practice the luckier we get!”

She burst out laughing. “Touché,” she responded through her amusement. “He is too smart for his own good!”

Angela and Jordan arrived together in their flight suits and stood around the pedestal pouring themselves hot chocolates. Both looked excited. After the previous Mission against the Rebel jet fighters, Angela was anticipating a repeat and Jordan was thankful he would not miss it, as he had been sick on Operation Gunboat.

Paul came in soon after, also in his flight suit, having shaved and looking refreshed,. With a quick kiss on Cindy’s lips they all departed for the 4 wheel drive that they used to take them to the airport. Cindy’s customary parting words were, “Be careful,” sounding after them.

Kimba, with her huge, bright eyes had stared, pleadingly at them from behind the gate. Michael had just closed it and was about to walk to the vehicle where the others were waiting.

“You can’t come this time Kimba,” Michael said to her. “There will be too much going on.” As if she did understand, her head dropped, her ears drooped, and she slunk back to the house. She looked back once, a face of dejection as only Staffies can show, as if she had been betrayed.

Michael half smiled at Kimba’s theatrical departure, but there was too much going on in his mind for him to dwell too much on her. He ran to the utility, remembering the last time they had made the same journey. He had been in turmoil, with no idea what was going on. He had desperately wanted to tell the family of his dilemma on the one hand, but he also wanted to fly the Hunter. It had turned out to be a spectacularly successful Mission. He had not mentioned his strange double lives to anyone, not wanting to break the spell. It seemed to be working and he was now on his way to fly the Mirage.

The occupants of the 4 wheel drive were oblivious to the picturesque, green, rolling hills they were driving through. They had driven this way many times from Tam O’Shanter Bay, through Karoola to Launceston. It was mainly cattle and sheep country, and the open fields were emerald green for most of the year, between large, eucalypt covered hills. There were valleys east of Karoola, around Scottsdale, that looked like Switzerland in the summer. There were deep, broad, glacial valleys with beautifully manicured crops on the floors.

On most of these routine commutes between the hangar and home, not much was said as the family enjoyed a relaxing ride, looking at the lovely countryside. However, this time Paul gave another informal Brief because of the change in the poacher’s plans. But just before he began they drove along School Road, passed the little Anglican Church of St Albans. It was a charming little white church that Paul and his devout family attended each Sunday morning, when, invariably one of them would be asked to do one of the readings. It overlooked a lovely, picturesque valley the other side of which was the farm of their very good friends the Baxter’s, and

who were the leaders of the growing congregation. Regardless of the circumstances everyone was generally quiet at this spot because of its beauty and serenity. Once passed the church and climbing between the red, flowering hedgerows with rolling green emerald fields along side, Paul began; “It would be clear that you will have to take off soon and proceed directly to the Tiger Island,” Paul had said thoughtfully. “With full internal fuel and drop tanks you will have enough fuel to reach Tiger Island, remain overhead for about 30 minutes, before going to refuel at Savu.”

While the three youngsters listened intently, waiting for further instructions, Paul’s mobile phone rang. Angela, who was in the front passenger seat, answered it. While she listened there was a deathly silence in the car, with only the sound coming from the purr of the engine and road noise.

“Hold the line please,” said Angela to whoever she was speaking. She looked gravely at Paul and with her hand over the handset, “It is someone on Rebel Island. He wants to speak to you Dad.”

Paul slowed down and pulled off the road. Leaving the engine running he put the hand brake on and took the phone from Angela.

“Go ahead, Paul speaking,” he said roughly, then listened for at least a minute, occasionally nodding his head. At the end of the conversation all he said was, “Thanks for the warning. Please let me know when they take off.”

He handed the phone to Angela and resumed the drive with more haste in his manner.

“The poachers have arrived at the helicopter and have met with the pilots of the helicopter and Albatross. Their aircraft are black and blue respectively,” he said to his captive audience, once he had settled back into the highest speed he could maintain on the winding road. While concentrating intently on the driving he continued, “Angela phone the hangar and tell Thomas and Andrew we are 30 minutes out and you guys

will go straight to the aircraft and take off as soon as possible.” He took a breath and without moving his eyes off the road continued. “Angela, as soon as you have called, I will suggest a plan of action. Then Jordan, you will Brief Angela and Michael. It is not ideal to do this in the car, but we have to be airborne as soon as possible!”

Still holding the phone Angela used the speed dial to call the hangar. She held it to her ear, and while she waited, Michael glanced across at Jordan alongside him. He looked thoughtful but not at all anxious. He was like that. Where Paul and Angela tended to be over-reactive and make quick, instinctive decisions, which sometimes could have been better thought through, Jordan was very deliberate and calculating. He would assess all aspects of the problem before voicing a resolution. Of course, that was on the ground. When he was flying the jet fighters he could make decisions as quickly as anyone, but once again, Paul said he was much more controlled in his commentary and control than either he or Angela.

Still looking at Jordan thoughtfully organising his Brief, Michael understood what Paul had said about himself and Angela. In their defence of the Gunboat at Savu, when he had been flying with Angela, she had certainly become excited in her commentary, but it did not detract in anyway from how well she had controlled the fight. She had been so impressive by the way she maintained a mental and visual picture throughout. He envied Jordan’s methodical and calculating approach, but he felt he was more like Paul and Angela. He just hoped he would be able to fly as well as them.

The hangar answered at last, and Angela spoke rapidly into the phone, “Andrew, how far along are you and Thomas in the preparation of the jets? Things are escalating. Dad wants us to take off as soon as we arrive.” She waited while he answered. After a short while she said, “Thanks, we will see you in about 15 minutes.”

“They have towed the aircraft out of the hangar and busy pre-fighting them,” Angela told her father in her characteristic rapid-fire, excited tone, as she put the phone down.

“Right!” stated Paul to start his brief. “As soon as we arrive, I will pre-flight Hunty for Angela, and Michael you do the same on Delta. Angela and Jordan go straight to the hangar, put in a flight plan and collect your G suits, maps and anything else you think you might need. By the time you get back to the aircraft you should be able to just strap in, start up and take off.

“I think the best idea will be to proceed directly to Tiger Island. I imagine the helicopter and Albatross will be airborne by the time you are in the air. That means you will probably arrive at the Island about the same time as them.

“You will have about 30 minutes of fuel left before you have to depart for Savu. Does that sound about right Jordan?” Paul questioned, looking quickly over his shoulder to the serious looking teenager in the back.

“Yes, I would say that is about correct,” answered Jordan, after a short while, as if he had calculated fuel burns, high and low level, quickly in his head – which he probably had!

Angela was nodding her head in agreement when Paul continued, “That is all I have to say. Jordan, you brief Angela and Michael on how you think the operation should run.” Paul concluded. Michael assumed that was to show Jordan how confident he was about his ability to produce a workable plan.

Michael had been quite surprised Paul had not said more about how they should tackle the poachers, helicopter and armed jet fighter again. But then Michael thought about it and realised he should not have been. Paul had trained his young pilots and they had already proved how good they were as jet fighter pilots.

Jordan began with, “It will be a formation take off with the standard radio check-ins. Also, the standard, commentary and control calls in the air-to-air combat.” He mentioned it as if they would be doing a scenic tour of the Island, Michael thought.

Jordan, acknowledging the chat they had had the previous afternoon said, “I think Paul, we will start as you suggested,” continuing his Brief. “As we approach overhead we will be in Patrol Battle Formation, and then Counter until we know where the chopper and jet are. Once we have established their position, Angela you descend and harass the chopper until it lands, and brief Paul on what the situation is on the ground so that he can relay to the police offshore.

“Michael and I will remain aloft and deal with the Albatross,” and had said it so matter-of-factly that there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that is exactly what he would do.

“Angela, you will run short of fuel first, so we will use the Bingo fuel at 1000 pounds a side on Hunty. (Although the Mirage burnt a lot more fuel than the Hunter, especially if it used afterburner, it also carried more fuel in the configuration that they flew. Both aircraft were fitted with high-speed drop tanks, but the ones the Mirage carried had more and allowed about 15 minutes more time in the air than the Hunter). That will be enough time to reach Savu, with 15 minutes to spare.”

Jordan then smiled and his eyes lit up as he continued, “We will do the break and landing at Savu that you did last time and you can see it from behind, Angela. The people on Savu still talk about it with awe. You are such a show off!” They all burst out laughing and Angela leaned back over from the front seat and gave him a good thump on his shoulder, as he turned away from her, chuckling.

The genial banter continued for a while as they all relaxed. Michael suspected that had been Jordan’s intention.

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As they passed through the city of Launceston on their way to the airport, which was 14 kilometres to the South, the other three continued to discuss small technical problems that the aircraft had. Michael could only recall the small fuel imbalance on Hunty, on his previous mission. That was not mentioned and had obviously been rectified. The other problems were

minor; there was a very small hydraulic leak from the Mirage's left wheel brake, and the Hunter was missing a screw on the instrument panel. They were waiting for spares and neither would affect the flight.

The security guard at the entrance to the 'Air Side' of the Airport recognised their vehicle and with a wave and smile opened the gate so that they hardly had to slowdown.

Paul drove passed a few hangers containing light aircraft as they travelled to the southern part of the airfield where he had erected a hangar for his jet fighters. The sun was now high in a clear, blue sky. Looking across the airfield, over the green paddocks in a beautiful valley, Mount Arthur could be seen in the distance, on the left; Mount Barrow, and with its bastion-like, flat top was in the centre and closer. It seemed to be protecting the area. Ben Lomond, the highest mountain in Tasmania was to the right of the view and further back; also had a flat top. It was a pleasant sight to see each time they drove this route to the hangar, but nothing compared seeing to the two, awesome, black, supersonic jet fighters parked alongside one another, on the concrete outside the open doors of their hangar.

Hunty was a classic jet fighter, the Hawker Hunter, and arguably the most graceful jet fighter that has ever flown. Paul had spent his whole life, from the age of 15, dreaming of flying one, then working on them as an engineer in the air force, before flying them ever since. Hunty was an ex-Singapore Air Force Hunter he had acquired. Flying Hunty had been such a success at Airshows that Paul was able to retire from airline flying and also buy the Mighty Dassault Mirage 3. Like the Hunty, Delta was fast, but the sleek Mirage could fly twice as fast as the Hunter at high-level, and was capable of flying at over twice the speed of sound. Delta was an ex-Swiss Air Force Mirage. It had been built and maintained like a Swiss watch and was in immaculate condition when Paul had bought it.

Paul had both aircraft painted black because he liked the colour on a jet fighter. The Hunter was also adorned with the markings on a Dusky Dolphin as he had always admired the friendly and highly intelligent Dolphin, and felt they needed protection from some ruthless fishermen. On Delta was painted a ferocious Tiger which had always been Angela's

favourite animal and were endangered in the wild, and they were on their to partly correct that .

Paul had deliberately removed any semblance of the military lives of his jet fighters because he wanted the public to recognise the pure excitement generated by them, and especially to the pilots who flew them. He always maintained that most jet fighter pilots joined the air force for the pure joy of flying these ultimate, flying machines and not to fight wars. That was certainly correct for him. That he had been required to do battle in the Hunter in the air force had been unfortunate, but necessary. That was over and he wanted these machines to be seen exclusively as aircraft of extreme enjoyment for their pilots and those who came to see them.

They were maintained like new aircraft by two engineers, Andrew and Thomas. Andrew was an ex- air force Hunter engineer and Thomas had worked on Mirages, also in the air force. However, they were always able to help each other on both aircraft.

As they drove up to the hangar, the jets sparkled in the sunlight from the constant polishing they received. Andrew and Thomas had removed the engine blanks and undercarriage locks from their respective aircraft, which meant they had completed their Pre-flight Checks.

They both waved from the aircraft as Paul parked the four wheel drive next to the hangar. They walked towards the vehicle dressed in their blue work overalls, which had a fair amount of oil and dirt on them from many hours of working on their beloved jet fighters. They were both in their fifties, like Paul. They were both so grateful that they had been allowed relive their air force squadron days, working on these wonderful aircraft.

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Paul knew that at first the engineers had been a bit concerned with teenagers flying these high speed and early supersonic jet fighters, which could be a real handful for pilots, especially the Mirage. The modern fly-by-wire jet fighters have very sophisticated weapons, autopilots, navigation systems and could carry a lot more ordinance. However the

computers had made general handling a lot safer. They have made a stall virtually impossible, whereas in the Hunter and Mirage a normal or high-speed stall (also called a “departure”) would occasionally require an ejection. That was because of the huge loss of height to recover; around 2 to 3000 meters.

Andrew and Thomas were soon amazed at the amount of work and enthusiasm Angela, then Jordan and finally Michael, put into the aircraft. They were willing to do anything, from helping with passing tools, carrying equipment, polishing the aircraft, to sweeping the hangar floors. They were very confident youngsters but always respectful of Paul and the engineers, probably because they had been associated with the jet fighters for so long. There was always laughter and fun when they were around. They asked incessant questions and because they were such willing workers, all were answered.

By the time Paul had decided to teach Angela to fly, the day she turned 16, she had an enormous amount of aviation knowledge. This was particularly on high-speed performance and the technical systems of the Hunter and Mirage.

Thomas and Andrew watched her excel at flying under her father’s instruction with a borrowed Cessna 172. She soon had her private pilot’s licence and passed the examinations with flying colours. Paul then had Angela flying with a friend in a private Jet Provost in Devonport, further west, on the north coast of Tasmania. The Jet Provost had been an advanced two-seat jet trainer in many air forces in the 1960s and 70’s. After ten flights he confirmed that Angela was a natural pilot and was astounded by her general knowledge of aviation.

At that stage Paul began instructing her in the Mirage. He took it very easy, initially, because of her age and lack of experience, but soon realised he could continue as if she was an air force trainee. She flew the Mirage with confidence, was soon solo and onto more advanced aerobatics and air combat. Following that she achieved her main ambition, to fly her beloved single-seater Hunter, Hunty, who had been in the family since she was a baby.

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They all leapt out of the vehicle. Michael took Jordan's helmet and knee pad, and hurried to the Mirage. Paul remained in an intense huddle with the engineers, obviously including them in the details of the Mission.

Arriving beside Delta Michael put the helmet on the concrete hardstanding and rapidly climbed the front ladder to the main cockpit where Jordan would sit. With a quick look at the pressures and electrical switches, to ensure all was in order, he descended the steps to begin the walk around External Pre-flight inspection for Jordan. Paul was now slowly jogging to the Hunter with Angela's helmet under his arm. The engineers walked more slowly back to the jet fighters, their main job done - the jets were ready!

It did not take long for Michael and Paul to complete the external inspection of both aircraft. They were maintained to the standard of brand new jet fighters. There was no limit on time or money when it came to keeping him in such pristine condition. However, Paul was surprised to have found that in their new, civil role the jets were very simple to maintain. Without complex weapon systems and navigation equipment, they were basic aeroplanes and easier to keep flying than a Tiger Moth. Fuel was the main expense because their huge and thirsty military turbojets devoured so much of it.

After completing the walk round, Michael, as usual, found Delta spotless. Nothing was loose, leaking, missing or out of place. As he arrived back at the cockpit Angela and Jordan were running from the hangar towards them carrying their G suits and now wearing their survival jerkins over their upper bodies.

Chapter

Paul walked across to join the others while they fitted their G suits over the flight suits. Jordan had handed Michael his smaller G suit. As he stood just outside the group, working on the hooks and zips to fit and tighten the complex G suit around his stomach and legs, he remembered the assistance

it had provided him in Savu. Pulling in tight turns when the G was strongest, he had to tense his body to prevent himself from 'greying' out. The air was forced into the suit, also helping to stop the blood from being driven towards his feet.

Paul, Jordan and Angela had been running over the details they had discussed on the drive to the airport. They all wrote the details on their knee pads. Jordan had done most of the talking, as leader, and included Michael in the Briefing as he would be a useful lookout and would also be checking the navigation.

“Michael, I might require you to fly quite a bit. Without an autopilot in these jet fighters, it will allow me to concentrate on other things,” said Jordan intensely as he looked down to do battle with a tricky zip on his G suit.

Michael merely nodded, knowing the more handling he got the better. He felt so proud to be one of them. They all wore similar, camouflage, green nomex (fire resistant) flight suits on which were sewn patches of their Tiger Flight motif that Paul had devised for his organisation. They also had a 'Supersonic' patch for going through the speed of sound in the Hunter and a 'Mach 2' patch for going twice the speed of sound in the Mirage. But the badge they were most proud of was the 'Wings' Paul had presented to each of them when they had finished their training on the Hunter and Mirage. It was similar to the wings of many other air forces, but could be distinguished as representing Australia's fierce, well-known and largest eagle, the Wedgetail. A pair of Wedgetails lived in the Parks and Wildlife forest alongside their home at Tam O'Shanter Bay.

They all finished zipping up at about the same time and stomped around, pulling at their garments, especially the tight G suits until they were comfortable. Looking at them, they had the intense eyes of all jet fighter pilots that Michael had read about. They were also trim, including Paul, who worked hard to keep fit in order to fly these demanding jet fighters. Their slim hips were accentuated by the tight G suits over their lower bodies and the bulky flight suits and survival jerkin above. Michael was excited to be included in their company. He swept the forelock that had

fallen across his face. Angela saw it and with her huge, bright and distinctive smile, strolled across with her left, flat hand held high. Michael immediately remembered their trademark gesture at Savu and stretched up to give her a stinging high-5.

Jordan and Paul had seen this bit of bravado and joined in. Soon there were high-5s all round, including the engineers. Then they were all laughing. It was perfect way to start their mission. They were excited, ready and now relaxed.

Angela and Andrew walked towards Hunty, and Jordan began climbing Delta's front ladder, which was alongside him, followed by Paul who would strap him in. Michael handed Thomas his helmet and began the long climb into Delta's rear cockpit. Most tandem-seat, jet fighter trainers were made so that the back seat was higher than the front in order that the instructor can see over the student in the front, especially on take off and landing. The rear seat on the Mirage was also next to the engine intake and the ladder that fitted to the left side of the rear cockpit had to go outside the intake.

When Michael reached the top of the steps he had to duck under the raised, one piece canopy and stepped onto the ejection seat, facing rearwards. He bent over, to thoroughly check the ejection seat, to ensure all the complex pieces were fitted correctly. He then stood up and before turning around to face forward, looked back over the huge delta (or triangular) wing of the mighty Mirage. In its gloss, black paintwork with the ferocious tiger's head on the fin and stripes on the sides, it was awesome. It gave him a real buzz, whenever he was in this position, as he looked back over Hunty and Delta.

He turned around and sat down to begin his strap in. Thomas always liked to chat, and while Michael began fitting the ejection seat straps he asked questions about the Mission. Michael was very familiar with the ejection seat procedure, having helped service them, and was able to answer Thomas's questions while he buckled the straps. Paul had ensured the Hunter's ejection seat had been upgraded to that of the Swiss Mirage seats. They were not the most modern, but were rocket assisted (one in Hunty

and two in Delta). The rocket ejection seat also meant that the pilot could eject at any time, in flight or on the ground. The early Hunter and Mirage ejection seats required that the aircraft be at least 90 knots and level for ejection. The early ejection seats also used explosive cartridges which often damaged the pilot's back.

Once Michael had made himself comfortable in the seat, he raised it (because of his age, he was much shorter than one of the others who had been in the seat before) and adjusted the rudder pedals so he had full movement. Then he buckled the lap of the ejection seat first. In the early ejection seats there were brown parachute straps that buckled first, then blue seats straps that held the pilot in the seat. After an ejection, when the pilot was forced clear of the aircraft, the blue ejection seats straps automatically detached. The seat then fell away deploying the parachute. The pilot was attached to the parachute by the brown straps. The strap in procedure of the old seats was therefore quite complicated, bulky and time consuming with the two sets of straps and buckles. In the modern rocket seats there were still the same brown and blue straps but they were cleverly interconnected and only required one buckle.

Michael pulled his lap straps very tight. His grandfather said that only air force pilots suffered back problems from ejections. Navy pilots strapped so tight for the explosive aircraft carrier launches; that if they had to eject there were no back problems. He said the bottom straps should be so tight that there would marks on the upper thighs after a flight. There was also a lower, groin strap that fitted to the bottom of the buckle and with that Michael pulled himself further down into the seat, so he would not lift out when they were upside down, with negative G.

Next came the shoulder straps and they fitted into the top of the main buckle. They did not have to be pulled as tight as those on the lower seat, but still firm. Leg restraint straps ran through rings just behind Michael's knees and into the seat. These would stop his legs flapping around the cockpit during an ejection.

He felt firmly, but comfortably, strapped to the seat. He looked up and Andrew was ready with his helmet, or 'bonedome', as some fighter pilots

called them. Their helmets were white with Paul's "Tiger Flight" black patch on each side and the same ferocious Tiger's head painted on either side of the fin. Sweeping his brow, to settle his unruly hair, he held his hands up to receive the helmet and saw Jordan in the front taking his from Paul. It was pleasing to know he was keeping up. He had to be careful that his ears did not get caught as he pulled the helmet onto his head. He then connected the oxygen tube to the aircraft adaptor and the emergency oxygen tube under the straps to the ejection seat; in case he had to eject at very high altitude. Finally, he plugged in his G suit to the aircraft and pressed the test button to feel the G suit inflate momentarily.

"Okay for pins Thomas," Michael said looking up and pulled the pin from the bottom ejection seat handle. Thomas removed the top pin, showed it to Michael and took Michael's pin and stowed it on the cockpit wall next to Michael, who gave him a smile and nod.

"Good luck and don't let them shoot any more Tigers, Michael," shouted Thomas so that he could be heard through Michael's helmet. "Cheers mate!"

"No worries," responded Michael in kind to his Aussie friend.

Thomas laughed and descended the steps, which he then lifted away from the Mirage. Paul had also placed the front steps on the ground between the jet fighters with the rest of the ground equipment.

Chapter

"How do you read Michael?" asked Jordan in a surprisingly the clear tone on the intercom from the front seat.

"Loud and clear," answered Michael.

"When you have finished checking your cockpit give me a call," said Jordan again.

“Roger,” was all Michael said as he began his scan from left to right around the small space he occupied. He kept his hands and feet away from the controls because Jordan was the commander and would be doing the real Pre-flight from the front seat. Michael was just checking his instruments, oxygen and radio systems were working correctly in the back cockpit. While he did this he could see the throttle and fuel cocks being moved by Jordan. Michael had most of the same controls as him, so that if he moved anything Michael would see or feel it in the back. In fact, because the instructor normally sat in the rear cockpit, Michael could actually override what Jordan was doing, as an instructor would do if the student made an error. Of course, he would not do that in this case because he was supporting Jordan.

“How are you doing Michael?” Jordan suddenly asked as Michael completed testing his oxygen. “I am ready,” answered Michael.

The whole preparation, from strap in to ready for start, had only taken about five minutes although a lot had been done. Jet fighter pilots had to be very quick, but thorough, and to do that they followed a rigid procedure every time.

“Good!” said Jordan. “The canopy is coming down.” This was to warn Michael to keep his arms free of where the canopy would shut.

Michael glanced up to watch the canopy coming down and then across to the right, at Hunty and could see Angela with her helmet visor down, looking towards them. Jordan must have given her a thumbs up, because she turned and twirled a forefinger above her head at Andrew, who responded the same way as did Thomas to Jordan.

Immediately Michael heard the sweet whine of the Mirage electrical starter motor. Thomas had moved up next to Delta and pushed the spring-loaded door on the side of the engine intake to hear the engine beginning to turn. There was a noise like a door slamming shut as he let it to go and moved away from the side of the aircraft alongside Jordan, having checked that the engine was starting correctly. Both he and Paul, with their defenders over the ears, crouched down to watch the start. Andrew was doing the

same next to the Hunter and as the hydraulic pump on the engine began turning, Michael could see the relaxed speed brake under Hunty slam up, and the flaps retract.

Looking back inside, Michael could see the small RPM gauge on the front instrument panel winding up. The Jet Pipe Temperature gauge needle was showing the engine light off and the combined roar, whine and rumble could be heard coming from behind. There was also a slight tremor he felt through the fuselage behind him as the huge, military turbojet grumbled to idle RPM.

Automatically, once he saw they had a successful start and the engine instruments had stabilised, he checked them all again. While he was looking down, Jordan warned, “Michael, keep your hands and feet off the controls.”

“Roger” he responded. The controls moved forward and back, then left and right for full and free movement. Michael looked up to see Thomas indicate to Jordan the control positions. Without flaps or tailplane, the Mirage had a complex ‘elevon’ control system to turn and climb (or descent). With the controls moving Thomas could confirm to Jordan that they were doing what he had selected. He also flicked the speed brakes switch on the throttle and Michael could see them moving up from the middle on both wings. Out of sight, the same was happening below the wings.

Angela, in Hunty, took a bit longer because she had to check the controls and the movement of the flaps with Andrew. While Michael waited, he looked around. He was quite high above the ground, in the rear seat. The massive engine intakes bulged out on each side of him, and the little ‘mice’ nozzles sat neatly in the middle of each intake. The nozzles only came into use once the Mirage was supersonic. At speeds above Mach 1.2 they began to automatically move out of the engine intakes to keep the engine shock wave ahead of the intake edges, providing smooth air through to the engine.

Still looking towards Hunty, Michael saw Angela glance around and give them thumbs up.

“Tiger Formation check,” asked Jordan immediately on the radio.

“Tiger 2,” answered Angela.

“Roger; Launceston tower, Tiger Formation request taxi,” was Jordan’s call to the control tower.

“Tiger Formation, Launceston Tower, you are cleared to taxi for Runway 14R.”

Immediately, Michael saw the throttle by his left arm move and Thomas indicating to Jordan that the chocks were clear and began to marshal him to taxi by swinging his arms together above his head and back down, repeatedly. Delta’s engine began to roar and whine a bit louder. The aircraft moved and immediately bobbed down as Jordan checked the brakes, then accelerated forward. As they swept passed Thomas he gave a smiling salute. Michael waved (as he knew Jordan was also doing in the front). All he could see of the front was the back of the ejection seat and occasionally a bit of Jordan’s helmet as he moved his head around. Then they were turning in front of the shining black Hunter with Angela indicating to Andrew she wanted to taxi by the wave of a hand.

Although she was a very competent jet fighter pilot, Angela was a beautiful young girl and very feminine. She always dressed in the most up-to-date fashion under her mother’s “cool” influence and within Paul’s budget, as he often had to remind her! But behind the impersonal helmet, lowered visor and oxygen mask, she was just another jet fighter pilot. Michael could see her head darting from side to side, checking all was clear either side of Hunty. Once they were passed her in Delta, Andrew began to marshal Angela to follow them. Hunty moved, bobbed momentarily, then moved again and disappeared out of sight behind them. Angela would be following 50 meters behind.

The taxi to Runway 14 was a long one from their Tiger Flight parking area at the southern end of the airport. They would pass the passenger terminal as they had done on their first Mission, Operation Gunboat. Michael remembered how good he had felt having the passengers, who were walking out to jet airliner, look across them at them in awe. He had so wanted to be flying a jet fighter and suddenly he was in one. This time there were two airliners embarking passengers, with visitors farewelling them, standing on the balcony. The size of the terminal was a lot larger than one would imagine for a small city and a lot of people were standing and watching. The Tiger Flight jet fighters had become an attraction for the people of Launceston, and Michael could see a lot waving at them, both in the terminal and those walking to the airliners. The sleek, noisy and awesome jet fighters got everyone's attention and their aura excited most.

Unlike the first Mission, when Michael had been concentrating on his procedures and only glimpsed at the captivated public, he now had time to give them a hearty wave, to which almost the whole crowd responded by throwing their arms into the air. Angela, in Hunty must have seen this and also waved, because he could see them looking back and waving at her. In fact, the passengers who had been walking to board the airliners had stopped to watch them. Michael smiled as he understood their appreciation of these jets that he loved so much.

He was brought out of his thoughts by Jordan transmitting over the aircraft intercom, "Michael is your harness tight and have your ejection seat pins been removed?" he asked suddenly from the front cockpit of the Mirage. With a quick check of the pins next to him, he answered, "Affirm!"

"Thanks," said Jordan and immediately called Launceston Tower on the radio "Launceston Tower, Tiger Formation ready." That meant he had done his Before Take Off Checks, which was why he had asked Michael to check his straps and pins.

"Tiger Formation, cleared for take off and left turn on track. After take off, call Melbourne Centre passing 8000 feet," answered the Tower

Controller who was a good friend of theirs, and finished off with, “Good luck!”

“We are cleared for take off, left turn, Tiger Formation. To Melbourne Centre at 8000 feet,” repeated Jordan as he was required to do as part of Air Traffic Control rules, in order that both parties understood the instructions, and finished with, “Thanks.”

Jordan rushed the Mirage onto the left side of the runway and came to a stop with a jerk about 100 meters from the threshold. That was so Angela could position in the Hunter on his right side, slightly back, in echelon starboard.

Michael looked back to see the magnificent, black Hunter, sitting high and proudly on its undercarriage and adorned with the graceful markings of a Dusky Dolphin, moving in next to them. Angela, behind her helmet and visor, was looking back and forth to ensure she was in the correct position, and slowed the Hunter down. With a slight bob of Hunty’s nose Angela stopped the Hunter and immediately looked inside to complete her Checks, while the canopy moved forward to lock for take off. At the same time he could hear the pitch of Delta’s engine increase and then the roar of the thrust Jordan had applied. He would have given Angela ‘thumbs up’ to increase power for take off.

Still looking across at Hunty, Michael could see the fire truck that the Airport Management used to collect their brake parachutes. Don, the “Firey”, as they called him, had come to watch, as he often did. Michael would also join him whenever Hunty, Delta or both were flying. There was something awesome about the anticipation of, and the take off itself. They both loved it, as did Paul, Angela and Jordan, who would join them if they weren’t actually flying.

He then saw the control column rotate around the cockpit in front of him and the pedals move; Jordan was ensuring he had full and free movement just before take off and was looking to see the actual controls moving, which Michael could also do as he turned his head back to watch Angela.

Delta's nose dropped as the engine reached almost full dry thrust (no afterburner) and Hunty's nose also dipped against the brakes. The roar of the jets had reached a crescendo, which they could hear even with their helmets on and canopies closed. The Mirage was vibrating and fighting the brakes. Both aircraft wanted to go. Then Angela's left thumb came into view in the forward canopy panel again and dropped immediately, Michael knew, to her throttle.

At that instant Delta leapt away. Michael was forced back into his seat, and a second later there was another surge of acceleration, forcing him further back, and that was Jordan selecting minimum afterburner. It was still not nearly the Mirage's full thrust, but allowed Hunty to stay in formation, with a reserve of power. He looked back. The Hunter had moved up a bit closer, then back into position. Angela's helmeted head was fixed on them as she held formation. Although the visor on her helmet was down over her eyes and her oxygen mask was in place, her head appeared locked in position, unmoving. Michael could imagine her making small, rapid adjustments on the throttle and rudder pedals, as he had done in the same position on the previous mission. He saw her head look forward for an instant and back to them. She was checking that she was in the middle of her side of the runway.

It seemed such a short time before he could feel that Mirage's nose rise. Still watching the Hunter, its nose wheel lifted off the runway – Angela's helmet never moved. They were screeching down the runway and must have been passing 150 knots (270 km/hr) – he could see the Launceston terminal, a blur behind the Hunter.

With a very slight wobble the Mirage was airborne and Michael was reminded of how smooth it was once they were flying. Still looking at the Hunter, it lifted off, and momentarily bobbed a bit higher than them, then settled and stuck in position. Angela's head had never moved. The undercarriage was going up, the nose wheel swinging forward into its wheel well and the door snapped shut after it. He could feel the final Mirage doors close and it was even smoother.

The ground behind the Hunter was rapidly becoming more distant with more of the beautiful green fields, hedgerows and farm buildings coming into sight.

Hunty dropped down momentarily and Michael knew Angela had selected Hunty's flaps up. The Mirage had none. She eased forward for a second as the drag reduced but corrected quickly and was locked back into position. On the ground it would have looked a perfect formation take off – and so it was.

Jordan rolled the Mirage left. Angela anticipated it and in an instant all that Michael could see behind the Hunter was blue sky. He was looking up at her and Hunty and if he had not known better would have thought the Hunter was about fall on them. Michael was in awe at how good her formation was. Without thinking he said aloud, "She's the best!" The voice-activated microphone picked it up, and Jordan answered, "Yes, she is," as he rolled out onto track to the Northeast.

The Hunter rolled down smoothly still in perfect formation and Michael could see the luxurious landscape of North Eastern Tasmania again as they climbed towards the coast.

"Tiger 2, Patrol Battle Formation – go!" ordered Jordan. With that Angela snapped the Hunter away from them. For an instant all Michael could see was the black under belly of the Hunter, and then it's graceful, swept back plan form as it pulled away from them. In a very short time Hunty was 3 kilometres away and Angela rolled out abeam them in Patrol Battle Formation, the normal formation for a long-range navigation.

They continued their fast climb towards the Northeast, in another glorious day, with only a few fair weather cumulous clouds below them. Michael could see the gleaming, white beach of Boobyalla, which started at Tomahawk, and further along the coast to their left was the scenic area where they lived at Tam O'Shanter.

Once they had passed over the Islands in Bass Strait, between Tasmania and the Australian mainland, the formation reached its cruising level at

39,000 feet. Michael checked his GPS reading against the map he carried and it all looked correct.

Chapter

With the Australian coast just a glimmer of land to their left, the Melbourne ATC told them they had left his radar coverage. That meant they would be controlled by Brisbane ATC and they had to give position reports on the journey to Tiger Island.

“It is time to give Paul a call Michael, to find out what is going on, on the Rebel Island,” said Jordan over the intercom. “Will you speak to him on the Tiger Formation frequency?”

“Sure,” replied Michael and switched to their Tiger Flight frequency. Michael, Jordan, and Angela could listen on both ATC and Tiger Flight frequencies but could only speak on one or the other at a time. They had to be careful that they switched to the correct one before speaking.

“Sheekan, Tiger 1, how do you read?” asked Michael on the Tiger frequency. (Sheekan was Paul’s call sign and was named after the infamous tiger in Rudyard Kipling’s ‘Jungle Book’).

“Loud and clear,” answered a noticeably anxious Paul. “Thank goodness you called. Where are you? The helicopter took off half an hour ago, closely followed by the Albatross. They should be at Tiger Island within the next 30 minutes. The good news is that the Albatross will have been airborne for about an hour and be forced to return for fuel shortly after they arrive.” This was all said very quickly by Paul. When he was excited he had always spoken too quickly, but fortunately his family were used to it and understood him.

“Copied Sheekan,” replied Michael, trying not to match his grandfather’s rapid-fire exchange. “We are in the cruise north east of Australia. Our estimated time of arrival (ETA) over Tiger Island is also 30 minutes.” Michael was able to give a very accurate time from his GPS unit. “We

will have about 20 minutes of fuel low level before flying to Savu to refuel,” he continued.

“Excellent,” exclaimed a relieved Paul. “You could be lucky enough to arrive at Tiger Island just before they drop the poachers. I will call you with any changes; otherwise contact me when you begin your descent.”

“Did you copy that Jordan?” asked Michael on the intercom.

“Thanks Michael. Just keep an eye on the fuel burn and navigation,” answered Jordan as they sped, high over the vast expanse of the Pacific Ocean, to another adventure in their formidable jet fighters.

Everything was working fine and Michael looked about him and felt an overwhelming feeling of enjoyment to be in his exalted position that would be most boys’ fantasies. He thought of what Jordan often said, and laughed. He was always joking and saying that he often found bruises on his legs. Then he said he remembered that he had pinched himself to make sure he was not dreaming, because he could not believe he was flying these jets. Looking to his right, Michael saw the very elegant, black Hunter. It was real alright!

“Michael, do you want to have a feel of the controls?” asked Jordan suddenly. After the relative quiet and Michael deep in his thought, the voice activated microphone shattered Michael’s “dwaal” as Angela would have called it. It was the South African word for daydream.

“Yes please,” he answered and wriggled himself into a more upright position in the ejection seat. He put his feet on the rudder pedals, and hands just above the throttle and control column, ready to take control.

“You have control,” said Jordan. That was Michael’s cue to take over.

“I have control,” responded Michael gripping the throttle and control column lightly. There was a slight twitch of the Mirage as Michael took over; then settled down. There was no autopilot on most second or third

generation jet fighters, like the Hunter and Mirage, and they had to be flown all the time.

“Tiger 2, this is Tiger 1, Michael’s flying. You lead for a while so that he can get a feel of Delta.” Jordan said to Angela on the Tiger Formation frequency.

“Tiger 1, I have the lead. Brisbane ATC has advised there is no traffic in the area, so go for your life Michael,” said a less than professional Angela.

With that Michael pulled back on the control column and began a huge, gradual, barrel roll to the right, over the top of the Hunter. As ATC had told them there were no other aircraft in the area, Michael had a lot of freedom to manoeuvre.

“Cooooo! You are certainly getting the feel Michael!” gasped Jordan, as he grunted against the G they were pulling.

Michael knew it was this kind of bravado that his grandfather had enjoyed in flying jet fighters. He always said that jet fighters had so much power, speed and manoeuvrability over any other form of aircraft and these should be used at every opportunity; but safely! Delta’s power controls were just as light as Hunty’s but the control column sat slightly lower, and his right, flying arm rested more comfortably on his right thigh and stabilised it.

Over the top of the roll they were upside down and Michael looked down at the swept plan form of the black Hunter 1000 feet below them, and the deep, royal blue ocean thousands of feet further down.

He continued the gentle Barrel Roll onto Angela’s right side, keeping her in sight all the time, until she was approaching the horizon. He judged the roll out so that they were level, on the beam, in Patrol Battle Formation, on the opposite side from before.

Michael immediately slammed the Delta into a “Twinkle” roll, around its own axis, rolling upright two seconds later, and still in position.

“I think you have had a good enough feel for now, Michael. You nearly knocked me out with the Twinkle Roll,” Jordan said laughing over the intercom. The Mirage rolled so quickly that Paul said they would have to warn the passengers in the air force, in the two-seater, of the high roll rate, because the helmet could take a good thump on the canopy if they were not prepared.

“Impressive Michael,” called Angela over the Tiger Formation frequency. “We can see you have been trained by my Dad– another show off!”

“Hey, enough of that,” chimed in Paul, listening out in Launceston. “It is all in the training for improving the dogfight. That is my excuse and I am sticking to it!”

“Yeah, yeah!” said Angela, laughing.

Chapter

“Three minutes before our descent,” Jordan interjected over the radio, more seriously and breaking the banter. “I have the lead Tiger 2.” At the same time he said, “I have control Michael,” over the intercom. They both acknowledged and Michael took his hands and feet off the controls.

Looking ahead Michael searched for the Friendly Islands and could see some, but not identify any. Out to the right, over the horizon, was Savu, their safe haven, where they could refuel.

Jordan called Brisbane ATC, “Tiger Formation descending, will call climbing out from Savu on return.

“Roger, Tiger Formation,” acknowledged Brisbane Air Traffic Control which is what they had understood from the Tiger Formation flight plan. There was very little air traffic around these poor islands and nothing planned for that day.

Jordan moved the throttle back and slowly lowered the Mirage's nose. Looking to his left Michael saw Hunty's attitude change as well.

"Tiger 2, I think it will be wise if you stop your descent at 10,000 feet and circle overhead Tiger Island," said Jordan over the radio. "We will continue down until we are low level over the Island. I assume the Rebel Albatross jet fighter will be circling over the helicopter. If they are already over the Island I will attempt to distract the Albatross, while you descend and harass the helicopter. Do you understand so far?" asked Jordan after an unusually long Briefing. He had obviously been trying to work out the best plan of action.

"Tiger 2 copied!" was all the Angela said. The two had flown a lot together and understood one another's ideas.

"I want the Rebel fighter to think there is only one jet he has to contend with," Jordan continued, just to clarify the Briefing. "Does that sound logical Sheekan?" He asked of Paul.

"It sounds like a good plan, but remember, once again, he will assume you are unarmed and will be fearless," warned Paul.

"Tiger 1 copied!" said Jordan, ending the conversation.

"Michael," Jordan said over the intercom, "I will be relying on you to find the Albatross and helicopter first. I hope we will see them before they arrive at the Island. We should pick up at the black helicopter first."

"Understood," Michael acknowledged over the intercom.

"Tiger 1, I have Tiger Island visual ahead," Angela suddenly called, with an excited rise in the pitch of her voice.

"I have it also Angela," Jordan responded, breaking their radio protocol by using her name. No big problem, but surprising for the super cool Jordan. But he also sounded keyed up. Looking to the left side of the front ejection seat, Michael could see it too and looking further left he could see the main island of the Friendly Group.

It was another crystal, clear day in the Pacific and the green Tiger Island had tropical forests right down to the narrow, white beach that surrounded it. Then he saw a huge white gash right along the western side of the island. “There was no mention of a runway on Tiger Island, was there?” Michael asked Jordan on the intercom.

“No there was not, but no-one knows much about it,” Jordan answered. Then to Paul on Tiger frequency, “Sheekan, Tiger 1, do you know about a runway here?”

“Negative Tiger 1, I will enquire from my Rebel island informant.” Paul said. “I can only assume it was an ex – USAF runway from World War II.”

“Roger!” was all that Jordan said. The runway was not important in what they wanted to achieve.

As they approached 10,000 feet Angela called, “Tiger 1, this is Tiger 2, I am levelling off and will begin a large orbit over the Island.”

“Roger Tiger 2,” Jordan answered.

Michael looked across and they rapidly left Angela above them. Jordan banked slightly right, as they continued their descent.

“Michael, I am heading to the right side of the Island, closest to Rebel Island. It is from that direction they will be coming,” Jordan explained over the intercom. “I will concentrate on looking over the Island, in case they had already arrived. You watch for them crossing the coast, from the Rebel Island.”

That was another long conversation for Jordan, and as they approached 5000 feet Michael saw the throttle moving forward and felt the surge of power as they levelled off and accelerated.

Chapter

The Mirage was now off the coast and Michael could see Tiger Island had some high hills and was heavily forested. He assumed the helicopter dropped the poachers on the old runway or narrow beach alongside.

Once they had done half the orbit, Jordan called over the radio for all to hear, "Nothing seen over the island."

"Roger, Tiger 1. This is Sheekan. The police on the boat offshore have called to say they can see you, but have not seen the helicopter or the Rebel Albatross.

The Mirage was now on the other side of the Island looking in the direction the Rebels should be coming. Michael looked at the old, white, sealed runway, which was now closer to them. To him it was in remarkably good condition. It had obviously been constructed of concrete, which always wore well. It was also a lot longer than he had expected; about the same length as Launceston. Michael absorbed that in a glance and then looked back over Island towards the expected Rebel's approach path.

Immediately, he spotted a dot on the ocean, about 10 kilometres from the Island. At first he thought it was a boat, because it appeared to be on the water. But it was moving too fast. Before saying anything, he looked for the Rebel jet fighter. At first he saw nothing and looking down again at the dot it had become larger. He searched for the Albatross again, starting low and moving up. Then he saw it. The Albatross was also still not much more than a dot and was only 1000 feet or so above the helicopter, flying in a tight circle.

He had not seen it immediately, because it was well below the horizon and its multi-blue paintwork camouflaged it against the blue Coral Sea.

"Bogies visual, left, nine o'clock, low at 8 kilometres!" Michael shouted over the radio.

"Looking!" responded Jordan. "Keep them in sight Michael."

“I have them too, Tiger 1,” Angela joined in.

“Visual, visual,” shouted Jordan becoming unusually excited as he picked them up. “Angela, keep us all in sight. I don’t think they have seen us. I am climbing up a bit higher.”

“Wilco, Tiger 1,” answered Angela, with a question her voice, but then realised Jordan did not want the Rebels to pick the Mirage up at that stage.

Michael saw the throttle move forward to full dry power and Delta’s nose went up and the Island rapidly fell away. They were still turning left so that Michael could see the helicopter moving steadily towards the island. The Albatross circled over it like a protecting vulture.

“Good pick up on the Rebel aircraft, Michael. You have the eagle eyes in the family,” said Jordan over the intercom; then moving on, “just keep them visual while I think of the next move.”

Michael was thankful for Jordan’s praise on seeing the Rebels so early. Now they had the advantage of surprise.

There was a long silence over the radio while the helicopter approached ever closer to the Island.

“This is the plan.” Jordan suddenly said over the Tiger frequency. “We will let them cross the coast and Angela that is when you must harass the helicopter. But before that we must entice the Albatross away, as Michael did in Savu, or else it might take a shot at you. Stay above us and 250 meters back.

“We want the helicopter over the Island so that you can frighten the pilot into landing. We do not want him to turn around over the sea and go back to Rebel Island. We want the Friendly Island’s police to capture the poachers.”

It was another long Briefing from Jordan, but he was having to plan as the situation developed. Delta was now at 8000 feet, just below Hunty whom Michael assumed was behind them because he could not see the Hunter. Looking down, he could see the helicopter was just flying over the eastern beach onto the Island. The Albatross was still orbiting about 1000 feet above it. He was about to mention it, when Jordan called to everyone on the Tiger frequency, "They are crossing the coast."

"Tiger 2, I am beginning my dive on the Albatross. I want him to see us now, but not you. I will slide through his six o'clock and I hope he reverses on me. As soon as he does that, you tackle the helicopter. If the Albatross does not reverse on us, we will try something else. Is everyone clear on the plan?" he asked, but not expecting a reply. Only Paul answered, "Good luck and take care!"

"Thanks Sheekan, I am turning in," he replied. Then to Michael on the intercom, "Michael, I will do this slower than normal in the hope he follows us, but not so slow that he can start shooting at us. Tell me if you ever start seeing his belly." Michael knew that would mean that the Albatross was about to start firing.

"Wilco," Michael replied.

With that the Mirage's nose went into a descending turn towards the Albatross. Looking out Michael could see the helicopter halfway across the Island with the Rebel Albatross turning behind it. A quick glance at the speed and Michael saw it going passed 350 knots. The Albatross would not be going much faster than that. As he thought of that, Jordan brought the throttle back to hold the speed.

Chapter

When they were about 3 kilometres away from the Rebel fighter it had moved to the other side of the Island. If he was any sort of fighter pilot and was keeping a good lookout, he would see them in the Mirage. They were now approaching his six o'clock with quite a high overtake.

At 1 kilometre out, the Mirage was just coming into what would be normal gun range. “Why doesn’t he see us?” Jordan said gruffly, in frustration. “What sort of fighter pilot is he?” he said again over the intercom to no-one in particular. They had to draw the jet away from the helicopter. The Rebels had obviously not expected company.

Just then the Albatross banked hard and began pulling towards them in a Break manoeuvre. He had seen them and was worried about being shot.

“Here we go!” said Jordan, with relief, over the Tiger frequency.

Almost immediately they began to slide behind the Albatross. Jordan eased on the throttle and climbed slightly higher. In a real fight he would have taken the bank off and climbed in a high yo-yo. But he wanted to entice Rebel jet fighter.

“Watch for the reversal Michael,” gasped Jordan now pulling hard G for the first time in the flight and looking back and down on the rebel jet fighter. The ademahr, angle of attack indicator, began to sound as the pull and G increased. The Albatross began moving behind them.

“He is reversing Jordan,” Michael groaned with the G as he saw the Rebel jet fighter’s wings rolling right.

“Yes!” exclaimed Jordan with relief. “Tiger 2, you are clear to dive in. Make it good!”

“Well done Jordan; I am in the dive,” responded Angela, her voice was tension charged.

“He is rolling into our six, Jordan,” called Michael with his right arm gripping the top of canopy rail, so that he could turn around as much as possible and look back at the Albatross.

“I am easing off the bank, increasing power and climbing,” Jordan informed Michael. “Tell me if he closes for a gun shot.”

Michael could feel the nose going up, the engine surging, and then a further kick as the afterburner lit off.

“He is still following, but keep the bank and the pull on,” Michael called over the intercom, becoming concerned as the Albatross closed towards gun range, but he still did not have a lead angle, which would have meant he was about to shoot.

Very quickly, Michael realised he was looking right down on the jet fighter, and appeared as though they were hanging high above the green jungle below.

“You have really suckered him in, Jordan,” Michael almost shouted over the intercom. “He has to be decelerating fast at this stage!”

“I hope so, because we are also running out of performance,” Jordan answered with a bit of concern, over the intercom.

“I am beginning to see his belly—he is firing! He has stalled! He is spinning!” Michael shouted in quick succession, his voice rising as the situation developed.

“Excellent, not a moment too soon,” said Jordan as he kept the power on, continuing the roll and also pulling the nose down behind the spinning Albatross, with the ademahr screaming with the high angle of attack and G.

“I have done the first pass Tiger 1,” gasped Angela who was obviously pulling up hard and banking from her flyby. She must be pulling a lot of G thought Michael, because he could hardly understand her. “I was just about supersonic and thought I would hit them. The helicopter was out of control for a while. They are starting to turn for home and close to the runway. I am turning in again,” continued Angela.

“Good luck Angela. The Albatross has just recovered from the spin. You had better make this pass work!” Jordan concluded with finality.

Looking down from above Michael saw the Albatross had rolled out nose down and accelerating. They were just 1 kilometre behind the Rebel fighter and he was not taking any evasive action against them.

“He knows we are not armed,” Michael said aloud over the intercom.

“You are right Michael,” replied Jordan as they closed on the descending Albatross. “The helicopter pilot has obviously informed them of Angela’s passes. He is going after her.”

As he finished speaking Michael saw the streamlined black silhouette of the Hunter streaking over the jungle. Looking ahead of it he saw the helicopter just passing over the abandoned runway. It looked as if they would collide. Then she was passed, and the helicopter, out of control from Hunty’s slipstream, was almost on its back. He had to crash, thought Michael. But he was then distracted as he saw Albatross turn to follow Hunty.

“He is after you Angela! Have you got him visual?” asked Jordan anxiously.

“Negative, negative!” groaned Angela, obviously in a high G turn. “Tally-ho, I have him in sight, but he will have a tough time catching me. I am flying at 550 knots.”

“Stay low and sucker him in, without crashing!” Jordan spoke with less emotion, gathering his thoughts. “He is fixated and frustrated. He knows we are sitting ducks, without guns, and is desperate to shoot us down.”

It is typical fighter pilot fixation, thought Michael. His grandfather had told stories of several fighter pilots, over the years, flying into the ground, trying to strike ground targets and pulling out too late. In the air, pilots had run out of ammunition or their guns had failed, and they had flown themselves into the enemy aircraft, just to get a kill!

Jordan had realised what was happening. First, the Rebel Albatross pilot had allowed himself to be suckered into a stall against them. He had recovered, but had now abandoned caution and was going after Angela.

“Roger Jordan, I am slowing down and the trees are flashing by,” responded Angela. “He is right on the deck behind me!”

“Be careful, Tiger 2,” cautioned Jordan. Then he spoke to Michael over the intercom, “It looks as though the helicopter has recovered again. It is our turn to inflict some fear on them.”

They were still in the dive. It had all taken just moments. Jordan selected full dry power, then afterburner and Michael watched the airspeed whirl up, then that eerie silence as the aircraft goes supersonic. All the sound is left behind. His grandfather had often described it. The controls were a lot more sensitive and the Mirage twitched around a bit.

Jordan began to pull out from the descent a little early, Michael thought. But thankfully Jordan had anticipated their inertia and speed, and levelled off just above the emerald, green, tropical rainforest. Michael had a glimpse around Jordan’s ejection seat in front of him, and saw the Bell 206 Jet Ranger helicopter; which he could now distinguish, flying towards them. We are going to hit it thought Michael and closed his eyes.

“He has crashed!” Angela shouted over the radio. Michael felt the G come on, tensed up and opened his eyes. We must have missed the helicopter. It could not have been us that crashed.

“Gee, that was close,” said a less than composed Jordan over the intercom, as he pulled the Mirage high over the island, in a climbing turn.

“Are you okay Angela?” asked Jordan sounding a little more confident.

“Yes,” shouted a very excited Angela. “The Albatross was closing on me and I ducked behind a hill. He was so intent firing, which he had begun to do, when he just clipped the top of the hill with a wing tip. The aircraft cart wheeled and he ejected before it crashed into the jungle” Angela was

now very animated and breathless. She was talking so fast, as she always did when she was excited. "I am circling low level over the crash site."

"Good show Angela," Jordan said with relief. "Fly over to us."

Michael felt relieved, as he knew what it had been like to see guns firing at him on Operation Gunboat. But now he was also looking down for the helicopter. Then he picked it up. By some miracle it had not crashed and looked as though it was about to land on the runway.

"Jordan, they have had enough and are landing. They would not know the jet has crashed. They want to stay alive," said Michael over the intercom.

"Thanks Michael, I can see them now. We are going to have to encourage them to abandon the chopper, and hopefully leave their weapons," Jordan replied thoughtfully over the intercom and Michael could imagine his methodical mind working out scenarios.

He began rolling the Mirage down again and was aiming along the runway, right at the chopper. Then he spoke again over intercom, "Michael, tell Sheekan to call the Friendly Island police in towards the shore."

"Roger," responded Michael, and continued on the radio, "Sheekan, Tiger 1," he called, his voice rising as they rushed towards the runway.

"Go-ahead to Tiger 1," answered Paul in Launceston.

"Standby Sheekan," responded Michael his voice rising further. He could not concentrate on speaking over the radio as they crossed the end of the runway very low and very fast, aiming at the helicopter which was just touching down on the edge of the runway, at the other end. A quick glance down and Michael saw they were screeching along, just above the runway at 600 knots. Stretching his head around Jordan's ejection seat, Michael could just make out the doors on both sides of the chopper opening and people clambering out. Then they were just metres above it, bodies diving everywhere, and pulling up once more.

“I see you pulling up Tiger 1. I am in your high ten o’clock position,” called a more calm Angela; the professional once more. “Four people ran from the chopper and there were no rifles in their hands as they scrambled for the closest trees.”

“Visual, Tiger 2,” called Jordan still climbing and turning the Mirage towards the Hunter. “Michael, send Sheekan the message I asked for before that final pass,” he continued over the intercom.

“Sheekan, Tiger 1, the helicopter has landed as we had hoped. The four occupants have run into the trees closest to the beach without visible weapons,” transmitted Michael looking down at the orbiting black Hunter and the helicopter, with its blades still rotating on the runway. They had not cut the motor in their haste to avoid the menacing Mirage.

“Tiger 1, I copied all that. Well done all of you,” responded Paul sounding very relieved. He must have been desperate to offer advice, but admirably, had kept quiet. “The police are on the way, and should be on shore very soon.”

Chapter

“Sheekan, Tiger 1,” Jordan suddenly broke in. “Paul we have to get that helicopter. That will stop any further poaching!” It was a conclusive statement and he continued as if there would be no further discussion. “This runway is at least as long as Launceston. It is concrete and in remarkably good condition. Looking at the way the wind is blowing the smoke away from the burning Albatross crash, it is strong. I am sure I can stop Delta without using the parachute and not burn out the wheel brakes. We still have enough fuel to do that and return to Savu.”

There was a silence while everyone thought about it. As they circled 2000 feet over the runway looking down at the Jet Ranger, its blades turning slowly and the sun glinting off the tips, Jordan, said over the intercom, “Michael you will have to jump in front cockpit and fly Delta out. Are you up for it?”

“Too right, I am!” Michael answered immediately. He was desperate to fly the Mirage and the fact Jordan had told Paul they should do it, meant he knew Michael was capable.

“Sheekan, Michael is keen and we must do it now, before they recover and try to get back to their chopper,” Jordan continued over the radio, encouraging Paul to make a decision. “My only concern is that we cannot use the brake parachute. It will be a tight landing.”

“Go for it Tiger 1,” Paul answered, leaving it up to his competent young charges, and then felt he had to give Michael some advice. “Michael, select full afterburner for as long as the brakes hold, before releasing the brakes on take off. That will give you the best acceleration.”

“Thanks Grandfather,” answered Michael, knowing that was against the normal take off practice for the Mirage, and not good for the brakes but would give him the best chance of getting airborne on the short runway with high trees at the end.

“Good luck you guys,” chipped in Angela, “I will keep an eye from above.” Michael looked back and could see the profile of the Hunter, the most graceful jet fighter that had ever flown, sitting comfortably in Attack Battle Formation 250 meters behind them.

“Thanks Angela, I am turning downwind now,” Jordan responded.

“Anything you want to know about the Jet Ranger, Tiger 1?” Paul asked quickly.

“No thanks Sheekan,” Jordan answered. “The blades are already turning, with engine running. I just have to bring the blades up to flight rotation. There must be enough fuel to fly to Savu, because it is about the same distance to the Rebel Island.”

“Good, you are more than capable!” Paul said giving him encouragement. “Even though you have only done a couple of hours, you have flown well.”

“Thanks Paul,” was all Jordan had to say. Everyone went quiet to let him concentrate on landing the difficult delta wing jet fighter on an old runway, in the middle of the jungle. The runway was certainly long enough but with the very high trees right to either end, meant the Mirage could not do it’s, normal, long, flat approach to land.

The decision not to use the brake parachute (because they did not have a ladder needed to replace it with the spare they carried) meant that the landing speed had to be spot on. The small canard on the engine intakes, which the Swiss had fitted to Delta; helped to reduce the landing speed but would still require extremely good flying to ensure success. Michael knew Jordan was up to it.

As they turned left to Final for a landing to the North into wind, Jordan called over the intercom, “Final three greens; your harness tight Michael?”

“Confirmed, three greens,” said Michael checking the three green lights on the undercarriage indicator, in the rear cockpit. “My harness is tight and locked Jordan. Go for it!” he answered.

“Hang on; it’s not going to be a pretty landing!” said Jordan, indicating that to slow down quickly on the runway he would have to do a firm landing, as close to the threshold of the runway as possible, and right on the correct landing speed of 150 knots.

Michael watched passed the front ejection seat as they lined up with the runway. He could see the helicopter, just on the edge, at the other end. Thankfully the wind that they were flying into was very strong. He could see that from the way the tall trees below were being blown back. There was a lot of throttle movement and the engine surged and slowed as Jordan attempted to hold the minimum landing speed, and the aircraft was buffeted by the wind as it flew closer to the trees.

They skimmed across the edge of the trees and Jordan dropped the Mirage to land, nose high, with a good thump just beyond the beginning of the runway. It did not bounce and he kept the nose up to use what was called, aerodynamic braking, to slow the aircraft. It was like holding up a door into the wind. It would slow down quickly. He could not leave it up too long because if the nose fell down too fast when the wings lost lift, it could damage the nose wheel hitting the runway too hard.

About halfway down the runway Jordan lowered the nose wheel onto the concrete. Only then did Michael realise how rough the old surface, with grass in the cracks, was. Poor Delta was bouncing uncomfortably all the way, and still going way too fast.

With the nose wheel on the ground Michael could see over the nose and the jungle at the other end seemed to be rushing up at them. But just when he thought they would crash into the trees, he felt Jordan braking and the Mirage slowed down rapidly. He had delayed braking for as long as possible, letting the firm landing and nose up slow them down. In the end they pulled up just 50 meters from the trees and began turning back to the helicopter they had just passed.

“I have used a lot of braking Michael but, with careful use of the brakes, when you taxi down to the end for take off, you should be okay,” Jordan continued briefing Michael. “I will stop abeam the chopper. After I raise the canopy and jump out, you climb around my ejection seat and into the front cockpit. Put the rear seat ejection seat pins in, but I will leave the front ones out, so be careful not to pull anything or fall over.” Jordan took a breath and went on, “By the time you have strapped in, I should be in the Jet Ranger and ready for take off. Wait for me to lift off before you taxi to the other end of the runway for take off. If there is anything wrong with the chopper I will come back and climb on the wing and jump in the rear cockpit. You take us back to Savu.” Letting that sink in, Jordan said finally, “I am very worried about the poachers and pilot coming back, because they must realise what we are now attempting. Remember all that your grandfather has told and taught you. You will be fine! Have fun!”

Chapter

Jordan's intercom went dead as he stopped the Mirage gently next to the all black Jet Ranger, facing the opposite way into wind. Then he selected the canopy open and it rose above them. Looking across at the chopper Michael had time to think that in its all black finish it would fit right in at Tiger Flight. Although right then it did not look very stable as it was buffeted by the wind, with its low rotor rpm.

Then he was unstrapping. He put in the bottom ejection seat handle pin, and as he stood up Jordan was jumping down the left side of Delta with his helmet still on. Quickly inserting the top ejection seat pin, Michael then started to clamber up and around the front ejection seat, and was immediately tugged by the strong wind, as he moved out of the protection of the huge canopy.

Good, thought Michael, I need that wind. It will shorten my take off run. Then he nearly slipped, but grabbed the canopy instead of anything around the ejection seat, which would fire it. He steadied himself and climbed down into the front ejection seat, and immediately set about making himself comfortable. While he put the seat up and strapped himself in, he looked alongside to see Jordan climbing into the right, pilot's seat of the helicopter. Almost immediately he could hear the pitch of the chopper's engine changing. Jordan was bringing the engine RPM up to 100 percent and the blades to flight rotation. He could imagine Jordan twisting the collective, watching the RPM gauge of the engine and blades, move together. He had seen his grandfather doing it while he explained it to Angela and Jordan, as he was training them. Michael had watched from the back seat whenever he could.

That meant Jordan was almost ready for lift off, and it spurred Michael to strap in more quickly. But first he plugged in the radio chord from his helmet, which he had kept on, so that he could listen to any developments. He broke into a conversation between Jordan and Angela, "-- -- -- goodness the radio jacks are standard and we can communicate," said Jordan to her.

"Excellent, how is the chopper?" Angela asked.

“It’s certainly needs a lot of attention. Very dirty and neglected in the cabin, but mechanically it seems fine and much more comfortable with full rotor rpm in this blustery wind,” Jordan answered. “Where are the police, and is there any sign of the Rebels?” he asked Angela.

“Tiger 2 in,” Michael chipped in with a break in their conversation and assuming Angela was now Tiger 1. “I have just about finished strapping in,” Michael continued, looking across and waving at Jordan, who had glanced his way when he spoke.

“Good, I’m just about to lift off.” Jordan said.

“-- -- -- -- coming out of the jungle holding pistols in their hands,” shouted Angela. She must have been trying to break into their conversation.

The Jet Ranger leapt into the air, rather unsteadily, in Jordan’s haste to get airborne and in the blustery wind. He then moved forward slowly against wind, moving behind the Mirage. That exposed four men running out of the jungle towards Michael, just 100 metres away, firing handguns at the departing helicopter.

“They are firing at you Jordan!” Michael shouted; then looked down the left side and selected the canopy closed, simultaneously moving the throttle forward. The roar behind him increased immediately and he released the park brake. The light Mirage shot forward. It had all taken just seconds, and he had a quick glance back at the poachers. They had moved their attention to him, and were close enough so that he could see their angry faces and pistols pointing his way. Just before the canopy closed he heard a ping and assumed some part of the aircraft had taken a hit.

No time to worry about that. He locked the canopy and concentrated on directing the accelerating 10 ton jet fighter down the centre of the old runway. While he was doing that he heard Jordan say that he had taken off without a problem and was circling just off the beach, waiting for Michael to take off.

Angela then informed everyone on the Tiger Frequency of what was occurring. “Michael is moving and the Rebels appear to be firing at him as they run down the runway after Delta.”

They will have a tough time catching me, Michael thought, but said, “Tiger 2 here; I think they hit Delta, but all appears normal.”

“A handgun cannot do too much damage, Michael,” Jordan assured him.

“Tell me when you are about to release the brakes, Michael and I will give them a low pass to keep their heads down,” Angela spoke in her rapid-fire, excited voice.

“Thanks!” answered Michael glancing at the beautiful, black Dolphin Hunter just passing in front of him at about 1000 feet. He was approaching the leeward end of the runway and slowed down gingerly, not to use the already hot brakes, too much. As he turned the Mirage around at the end, he realised he did not have much time to think about his take off. He remembered all the speeds and knew what to do. His grandfather said he had been trained, but could not remember it. But knew from the Operation Gunboat experience that he could do it. He went to sweep the hair from his face and with his helmet on, felt an idiot. “Old habit,” he nervously giggled to himself.

As he taxied the awesome and aggressive jet fighter to line up for take off, he could see the angry Rebels running towards him, just 400 meters away. Even with the need to get moving Michael had the same rush of adrenalin that he had felt lining up Hunty on the Gunboat Mission. It something his grandfather often talked about. But he had to get back to business.

He braked with a jerk. He did not want to waste any runway, and had turned as close to the end as he could. Immediately he selected the throttle fully forward for dry thrust and the whine and roar increased dramatically. He quickly rotated the controls for full and free movement and checked the engines gauges – he was ready!

“Tiger 1, I am ready!” he called to Angela over the radio and looked at the Rebels, about 100 meters closer.

“I am rolling in Michael. I will be overhead in 15 seconds. Keep your head down. I will be really low.” Angela responded metaphorically and must have been circling just behind him, because he could not see the Hunter.

The Snecma engine was roaring and aircraft vibrating with anticipation when he selected mini—afterburner, by rotating the throttle up, and the nose bobbed down markedly against the brakes. Michael could hear a thunderous roar from behind, even with his helmet on and canopy closed. He started moving the throttle towards full afterburner and brakes began to slip – they were already hot and just could not hold against the torturous thrust. The sky turned dark for just an instant. It was Hunty just above them, descending onto the runway, followed by a noise like a thunderclap, right overhead. The Hunter was zooming passed, just above the Mirage.

Michael released the brakes and the Mirage nose jerked up and the aircraft shot away. Hunty was down to about 3 meters off the runway and Michael thought Angela would touch. But she levelled off and the rebels were diving away for their lives from the Hunter’s flight path. It would have been even more terrifying than the beat ups when they were in the helicopter.

Michael could not believe the Mirage’s acceleration. It was light, the headwind was strong and he had held it against the brakes to almost full afterburner. Looking ahead, the Hunter lifted above the runway. Angela had been so low that she knew that if she had pulled back too sharply she would have contacted the runway with Hunty’s rear fuselage. Once climbing, and away from the ground, she pulled hard to the vertical; and the Hunter’s elegant, dark plan form was presented directly in front of Michael, and rapidly climbed out of view. She must have been supersonic again, or close to it.

She had produced the desired effect because, as he raced passed the rebels a few seconds later, they were sprawled out on the edge of the runway. A

quick glance down and he saw the speed was through 140 knots. “Pull the nose up and check it,” Michael heard his grandfather once saying. The feel of the Mirage control column was very comfortable as he rested his right arm on his right thigh. He pulled the joystick back and the nose rose. He checked it and the jungle ahead looked alarmingly close. Another glimpse inside; 160 knots and he pulled back some more. They were airborne. He quickly selected the undercarriage up and was not sure they would climb over the trees. He just had to pull back further and hope. It must have been the canards, because the fuselage seemed to rotate, without climbing, and then, at the last instant, the Mirage lifted, as if by an external force.

Michael thought he saw individual leaves of the towering treetops, he was that close. But then he eased the nose forward to level off just above the trees, to accelerate and build up a comfortable climb speed.

“Well done Michael,” Angela called first, the relief so apparent in her voice. “I think you may have touched the tree tops?”

“I am not sure Angela, but Delta is flying fine,” answered Michael.

“You just scraped some trees, Michael. I saw a flurry of leaves. You did well to retract your gear so quickly,” Jordan joined in. “You did really well, mate!” he continued with a real Aussie expression of kinship. “I think you should remain below 300 knots and put gear back down to cool those brakes. They took a real beating and you still have two landings to make,” Jordan concluded.

Chapter

The Mirage airspeed was just approaching 300 knots as Michael flew over the end of the forest and beach. He brought the cranked throttle back to its stop, rotated down to come out of afterburner and into full dry thrust to ease the Mirage’s acceleration. To hold the speed back, Michael reduced the thrust further and pulled into a climbing, left turn, while looking out to see where the other two were.

Hunty was about 1000 feet over the runway with the helicopter also orbiting the runway at about 500 feet. Then he took a breath – his first, he thought, since he had released the brakes.

“Thanks guys,” he said, taking another, huge oxygen filled breath. “That was close and if I did hit the trees, Delta seems fine and I am selecting the undercarriage down.”

“Thank goodness for that; all of you,” Paul broke in, having heard all his young charges speaking over the radio. “You have taken a few years off my life, and giving me a few more grey hairs.”

“You only have grey hairs, Grandfather,” said Michael, the relief making him flippant. They all laughed together over the radio. It was just what they needed to settle down. It had been a very tense time.

“Cheeky buzzards, wait until you get home young man!” said Paul, still laughing. Then, getting back to business, continued; “Jordan, you will now be Chopper 1, Angela, Tiger 1 and Michael, Tiger 2. Have the police arrived yet? How is the chopper, Jordan?”

“Sheekan, this is Chopper 1,” Jordan acknowledging his new callsign, “the Jet Ranger is good and I have about 45 minutes fuel remaining, which will get me to Savu. As Michael was taking off, the police moved onto the airfield, and before Angela’s terrified victims could recover, they captured them. The police are actually waving at me right now. I have the poachers’ rifles in the back.”

“Good, Chopper 1,” Paul continued. “I had informed Savu you are all on the way.”

Angela interrupted in the break; “I feel sort of sorry for the pilot of the Albatross,” she said with heavy sarcasm in her voice. “He is all on his own and a couple of kilometres away there must be some very irate Tigers happy to eat him.

“The police say they will wait at the airfield. The Rebel Albatross pilot is bound to make for it.” Paul had thought of everything. “Tiger 2, I think you should head for Savu. We are not sure if you have any damage from the hand gun fire or striking the treetops. I doubt that there will be, but just to be sure, you should leave now. Savu are expecting you. When you get there, refuel as quickly as you can. Then, be on standby in case Tiger 1 has leave to refuel. You may have to replace her overhead Chopper 1 on his way to Savu. That was a lot of information. Are there any questions?” asked Paul.

“Negative, Sheekan. I will fly around the island once more with the landing gear down, to cool the brakes,” Michael replied adjusting the power to keep the speed up against the drag of the lowered landing gear, all the while feeling the buffeting of the dragging undercarriage, in the airflow. “Then I will head for Savu!”

“Good idea, Tiger 2,” his grandfather answered conclusively and moved onto Angela and Jordan. “Tiger 1, you can circle over Chopper 1 while he flies low level to Savu, and call Savu if he has a problem, until you run low on fuel. If Jordan suffers an engine failure in the helicopter and has to ditch, the Savu gunboat is steaming towards you as we speak, and will pick him up.”

“Roger Sheekan,” responded Angela in Hunty. “I should have about another 20 minutes of fuel before I will have to leave for Savu.”

“Thanks Angela,” interrupted Jordan in the Jet Ranger. “Thankfully these people were at least carrying a life raft and I can use the rifles to shoot the sharks!”

“Always the optimist, hey Jordan?” Angela joked.

During this exchange Michael had flown the Mirage once around Tiger Island, gradually climbing. It looked so serene below until he looked at the rough sea, and horizontal blowing and diminishing smoke from the Albatross crash. Thankfully, the forest had not caught alight. The wind

was howling, for which he was grateful. Without it he would never have flown out, over the trees.

With one last look at the Jet Ranger setting course south east for Savu, over the turbulent sea far below, Michael also aimed in that direction. He could also see the chopper under the protection of the dolphin-like Hunter, which was so typical of that mammal. Michael selected the landing gear up, having given the brakes enough time to cool. The clean Mirage quickly accelerated and the ride was smooth at last.

“Tiger 2, wheels up, no lights,” called Michael over the radio confirming no damage to the undercarriage. “I am climbing to 10,000 feet and estimated time of arrival Savu, 10 minutes.”

“Roger, Tiger 2, they are expecting you,” Paul repeated from Launceston.

“You look good, Tiger 2,” Angela called from below. “Have a bit of fun on the way to Savu, you deserve it.”

Chapter

“Thanks!” was all Michael needed to say as his climb speed of 450 knots approached, at full dry thrust. He pulled the nose up further, to hold the speed and appreciated the power of the Mirage as the nose pointed to the heavens. He checked the GPS and it had given a track southeast and time to Savu, as well as the position to descend, which would not be too long after he had levelled off in cruise.

He was climbing so swiftly that instead of levelling off normally, by easing the control column forward; he decided he would wait until close to 10,000 feet and just roll inverted. That is what he did with 200 feet to go. He rolled upside down and pulled down onto the horizon, to level off. Then rolled upright again to maintain height, and reduced the throttle to hold the speed. Fantastic, he thought. That is why he wanted to be jet fighter pilot, he reminded himself again; the power, manoeuvrability, freedom and exhilaration. He looked ahead and could see Savu. It was still couple of minutes before descent. Time for some aerobatics, he

thought. He would keep on positive G because he remembered his loose straps in the back seat. Any negative G and they could damage switches or instruments.

Michael looked all around the sky, out of habit. He had been told there were no other aircraft around. He moved the throttle to full dry thrust, then afterburner and felt the welcome kick of acceleration. The speed quickly reached 500 knots and Michael pulled the nose high with G until the ademahr tone sounded amber/red and began rolling slowly. He was flying a huge barrel roll. When he was inverted he looked through the top of the canopy at the deep blue of the ocean below, with the windswept waves and white horses. He kept the pull on and rolled out back on the horizon still with full afterburner, and went straight into a 5 G loop, with amber/red indicating on the ademahr. He had kept the G suit pressurised throughout and was also tensing himself against the G. With the canards and the full afterburner, Delta's loops were almost as tight as the Hunter which had more lift from its thick wings, flaps, but less power.

Over the top of the loop he checked his wings level, by looking over his head to the horizon behind him. He was slightly off, corrected and increased the pull with speed slowing down over the top and the G not as strong, so that the loop was a perfect circle in the sky.

“This is sooooo – coool!” he declared over the Tiger Frequency. “Here I am inverted at 15,000 feet, with full afterburner, over the top of a loop with 180 knots on the ASI and amber/red tone in my ears. It does not get any better! How are you doing down there Jordan, over the sea, 100 knots and buffeted by the wind?”

“You cheeky little buzzard,” Jordan laughed.

“Now I suppose you are going to beat up Savu,” Angela joined in.

“Only if they ask me reeeally nicely,” groaned Michael coming down the back of the loop, with the G coming on strongly again.

They all laughed, including Paul, who had not joined in the banter, but who Michael could imagine smiling at their love of flying.

He continued down the back side of the loop, and began pulling hard again to level off at the same height he had entered. As he came towards the level again, with the speed increasing, he selected the afterburner off and reduced to dry thrust to hold 450 knot cruise speed.

That was terrific he thought, and just what he needed after the previous 20 minutes of excitement. That is why Angela had suggested he had some fun. Paul, his grandfather, also flew aerobatics in the jet fighters whenever he could, especially after not flying for a while. He said it made his eyes sparkling blue again!

Chapter

It was time to get serious again and he still had to land the slippery Mirage at Savu. He could see Savu in the distance and checked out with those on the Tiger Frequency, “Tiger 2, switching to Savu frequency.” Then he spoke to Savu, “Savu Tower, Tiger 2, Mirage jet fighter descending from 10,000 feet and overhead in five minutes.”

“Welcome back Tiger 2. This is Savu Tower and Sheekan has kept us informed by telephone. We have been expecting you and the villagers are rushing to the airport, to see you back again,” replied the very exuberant Tower Controller. “We understand your mission has been successful. Can we expect to see the mighty Mirage at close quarters again?”

“Thank you, and I would appreciate a pass from the North as we did last time,” said Michael, trying to sound calm and professional, but with a huge smile on his face. He involuntarily took his hand off the throttle to move his forelock, and stopped himself, feeling an idiot again. “I will do a low pass from the North and a 270 degree break to the right and land on Runway 29, assuming the wind is from the North-West?”

“The wind is 300 degrees at 20 knots. The airspace has nil aircraft. You are clear for your low pass. Call final and have fun!” Was the Tower’s, now standard, radio call.

Michael had Delta well into the descent at 500 knots. He would not need much more power to be at around 630 knots. 660 knots was supersonic, and he certainly did not want to break the sound barrier. At low level it would shatter all the windows on the island, and terrify the locals.

When he was down to 5000 feet the runway was clearly visible and then saw the gunboat steaming underneath him, in the opposite direction, battling heavy seas, as it went to provide a rescue service for Jordan, if required.

As he dropped below 2000 feet the Mirage started being buffeted by the heat and wind. But Delta was going so fast that they were just sharp bumps. Michael eased up to dry thrust. The response was immediate and the speed rushed up to 600 knots. That should do for now, he thought, and kept the nose going down. He was aiming for just to the side of the Tower.

Then he was skimming the waves and approaching the beach. Everything seemed to blur at that speed. He eased on the thrust some more and a quick glance down indicated he was flying at 625 knots. Just right! He streaked over the beach, flashed passed the palms and was over the airfield. Within a couple of seconds he was abeam the Tower, and imagined the controller looking down on him.

Michael slammed the throttle closed, snapped the control column to the right and pulled to 7 G, greying out; grunted hard as he tensed. His vision cleared; he selected the speed brakes out and looked for downwind.

With the big, slab, triangular wing, the Mirage slowed down quickly, so that Michael was at a comfortable speed passing alongside the tower. He selected his speed brakes in and flipped the small undercarriage lever down. Without a tailplane, as the speed reduced, he held a much higher nose attitude than the Hunter, to stay level. But without flaps on the

Mirage, the speed was much faster on downwind. He did not have much time to look around, but as downwind was over the sea, he firstly looked out at the runway to ensure he was the right distance out; then a glance down and he could see waves crashing on the long, white beach. Even from the 1500 feet circuit height he could see couple of holidaymakers looking up at him, and he momentarily hoped he had not terrified them with his high speed, low level fly by.

That was forgotten as he passed the end of the runway, and waited until the leading edge of Delta's wing touched the threshold and began his descending turn to the runway. The speed was a comfortable 220 knots, but the ademahr's green light tone began as he pulled towards the runway. It quickly went to amber/red and he eased the thrust on to about 75 percent and watched the speed gradually decreasing through 200 knots. He wanted 180 knots rolling out in line with the runway at 500 feet. As the speed dropped through 190 knots, he pulled a bit harder and the ademahr went amber/red again!"

He started to slide through the runway centreline, pulled back a bit harder and only red showed momentarily – the ademahr sounded petrified as it screamed its warning. Michael was already correcting with thrust and reduced bank, but was amazed at how quickly the feel changed at low speed. The controls became quite sloppy. He was pleased his Mirage had the canards, which helped him correct. His grandfather said the original Mirage, without the canards, could be a real handful in that situation.

At 500 feet he had gone slightly through the centreline, but moved across slowly and as the speed trickled up to 160 knots, Michael eased the throttle back to hold.

Once again, he was amazed how much higher the nose was compared to the Hunter in the same position on final, and going faster.

"Tiger 2, final, three greens," he suddenly called, having forgotten to call as he turned towards the runway, with the anxious ademahr screeching at him.

“You are cleared to land, Tiger 2. Run to the end, and taxi to the marshaller in front of the Tower. A fuel tanker is waiting to refuel your Mirage,” called the Savu Tower Controller.

“Cleared to land, Tiger 2,” Michael responded in confirmation.

The ground was now rushing up, but the speed was good as he peered over Delta’s high nose attitude. Approaching the threshold, he flared, closed the throttle, and just before the Mirage sank onto the runway he checked back a bit more and made a good, but firm landing a little beyond the threshold.

The nose wanted to drop, but he checked it back to help the Mirage slow down, as Jordan had done on Tiger Island. He went to grab the parachute handle, and stopped himself. It was a normal reaction, but Savu was so long that it was not as required and saved using the spare parachute that they carried.

Michael lowered the nose onto the ground when it felt comfortable and then the Mirage slowed down, at its own pace, to the end. Because of the very strong headwind, only a little braking was needed to safely turn off the runway towards the Tower.

He suddenly felt a huge relief as he taxied clear of the runway and switched off the electrical components no longer needed, as part of the After Landing Checks. Then he dropped his oxygen mask. He had to keep the canopy closed so that the air-conditioning could work, as it was hot outside in the midday sun. But looking down Michael was still soaked with perspiration, despite the powerful air conditioner. It was all from the tension, hard work and excitement of the flight.

Chapter

Then he looked for the marshaller and saw an islander in a blue uniform signalling to park in front him. Michael taxied the sleek Tiger Mirage slowly towards him, braking lightly to keep the speed down. The idling,

powerful, jet engine still had enough thrust to accelerate it. Every time he braked, the nose dipped, which was a characteristic of the Mirage 3.

Then, he suddenly noticed the crowd of islanders waving and jumping up and down, behind the high fence a few paces behind the marshaller. He had not realised how colourfully they dressed last time, and it made a terrific spectacle.

Michael concentrated on stopping on the marshaller's indication. He applied the park brake and cut the engine. It was running down as he moved the canopy switch, which then began to rise above him. The wind was blowing quite strongly and the warm air washed over him. It should have been uncomfortable, as he was sweating already; but he was just so relieved, then really happy he had made it; and that they had been so successful again.

After unstrapping and removing his helmet and switching everything off, he stood up, turned around and inserted the ejection seat pins. As the engine finished clattering to a stop he heard clapping and cheering. Looking around, he saw the islanders going crazy. They were much closer than on Operation Gunboat. Then, they had been happy to see the jet fighters fly, but a bit afraid of the speed and noise of these awesome aircraft. This time they had loved it, and were overjoyed to see one of the same, brave young aviators. Michael climbed carefully around the canopy and still in his moist flight and G suits, stood on the top of the fuselage, and with a huge smile on his face, pumped both fists in the air! The crowd went crazy; cheering, hooting and leaping around. Michael burst out laughing. They were a very jovial bunch, of all ages, but besides realising how Tiger Flight was protecting them, they were also just enjoying the aura of the impressive jet fighters.

Still laughing, much from relief as anything else, Michael swept the hair from his brow. Then he heard the fuel tanker and saw it moving towards him.

Chapter

It was time to keep moving. If Angela had to return for fuel he would have to be ready to take off and watch over Jordan in the Jet Ranger. He also had to check the Mirage for damage.

He clambered down onto the wing and then off it, to the ground. The fuel tanker parked behind Delta and Michael saw it was the same driver from last time. With a huge smile he shook Michael's hand vigorously; then rushed to drag out the hose which Michael plugged into the refuelling port in Delta's left undercarriage bay.

While the fuel was flowing, Michael stayed beneath the Mirage to check for the tree damage. The Hunter and Mirage paintwork were so clean and shining and that it was simple to check for anything out of the ordinary. Michael saw it immediately. They were flecks of green running all the way down the bottom of the fuselage, but there was no obvious damage to the airframe. He asked the fuel tanker driver for a rag and found he could clean all the green marks off the paintwork. However, he did realise that he had hit a lot of the tree tops and it was a good thing he had raised landing gear so quickly after takeoff. He also checked the brakes, while he was beneath Delta and they were comfortably warm, and obviously serviceable.

Then he climbed back onto the wing, on the right side, to see where the pistol bullets had hit. At first he thought they had all missed, because he could not find even a scratch on the paintwork. But then he saw a thin line where the fuselage bulges around the engine intake, in the yellow of a "Tiger stripe". The bullets had hit the fuselage on the side, but ricocheted off the edge and would need just a bit of touch up paint. Delta was good to go again.

He jumped back onto the ground and saw a policeman walking out from the Tower. He gave Michael a warm greeting and said he had a message from Angela and Paul. Firstly, Angela had said, that because of the strong tailwind low-level, Jordan would meet the gunboat within five minutes. She would then only have fuel for five further minutes overhead him. Jordan had assured her that he would be okay with the gunboat close by. She could return and Michael need not get airborne.

Secondly, Paul's message was that as soon as they had refuelled there would still be enough light for them to return home to Tasmania. Even though both Hunty and Delta had instruments to fly in cloud and night, the aviation authorities required that the pilots had to do a lot of extra, expensive training. Paul had decided that he only ever wanted to do aerobatics, dogfighting and air shows; so he had elected not to do the training. That meant that they could only fly during the day and in clear skies.

There had also been a decision made on what would happen to the helicopter Jordan had captured. The leaders of the Friendly Islands and the Savu Island Group had decided to confiscate it, and not allow the Rebels to use it again for poaching. They were giving it to Paul. They only asked if they acquired their own helicopters in the future; that Paul instruct their pilots to fly them in the one they were giving to him, in Tasmania.

Jordan would obviously be flying Delta home and Michael was a bit disappointed he would not be flying the Mirage again on his own. He never knew when he would have another chance. Still, at least he had been given one flight.

Chapter

Michael knew Angela was returning in Hunty, and would give them a flyby. He thanked the policeman and went to check on the refuelling of the Mirage which was only half finished. Then he climbed back onto Delta's fuselage. He wanted to have the best view of Angela's break, and watch her coming in from the sea.

He saw the policeman walk to the crowd of people behind the security fence, who had become so attracted to the antics of these noisy and speedy jet fighters. Michael was not sure why he was chatting to them, but forgot about him as he seated himself down on top of Delta, just behind the cockpit.

It was at least five minutes since the policeman had first arrived and Angela would have left Jordan and be returning to Savu from the same direction as he had; from the North West, over the sea.

He scanned the horizon, continually, hoping to pick Hunty up early. A dot or a small trail of black exhaust would be the first indication, because Angela would have full throttle. Nothing! He knew that at the speed she was flying, close to the speed of sound, he would never hear her coming.

Another minute passed, but while searching the horizon even more earnestly, Michael never even saw a seagull.

Suddenly, in a split-second, he was in a shadow, with a huge black object above. Too late he realised who it was. Half a second later Hunty was passed and directly in front of him, racing away, very low, and at high-speed. As he raised his hands to his ears to help block out the sound, they never reached in time. There was such a crash overhead, that he felt he was in the middle of a thunderstorm.

So surprised had Michael been by the speed of the Hunter coming from behind him, the noise and wake turbulence, that he lost his balance and fell backward off the Mirage, onto the right wing. He broke his fall with his arm and did not hurt himself. As he sat up, all the eddies from Hunty passing could be heard moving around him. Some actually rippled his flight suit. His grandfather said he had seen an airman have his cap knocked from his head in the air force, from a low level break.

Michael quickly gathered himself to watch what Angela was doing. For one thing, he knew she was laughing – having completely surprised him! He would have to get her back, somehow! But now he'd just wanted to see how she would slow down to land, because she would be landing in the same direction as he had, but approached from the opposite way.

What she did was fantastic and proved what a great pilot she was. By the time he had stood up she was climbing vertically, and once again the black platform showed off the Hunter's elegant lines. When she was about 3000 feet up she began a huge barrel roll to the left and when the Hunter was

upside down Michael could see her speed brake out, above the inverted fuselage. She was slowing down. Then he could see her pulling hard and instead of completing the 360 degree barrel roll she rolled out at 270 degrees onto downwind opposite him, with the landing gear coming down. She had made a tricky manoeuvre look so graceful and neat. She had transferred the racing, ferocious, noisy and aggressive jet fighter to a docile, slow and idling Hunter, right before his eyes.

All he could hear of Hunty was a light grumbling sound as Angela increased the thrust for the final approach, and only then did he become aware of the hoots of laughter behind him. Looking around, the islanders were all falling about laughing, as was the policeman, leaning against the fence. Angela would have known Michael was expecting a flyby from the sea. She must have warned the policeman of her intentions, so that he could tell the islanders and not frighten them.

They had seen Michael fall off the fuselage. He felt embarrassed, but then wiped the forelock from his face and burst out laughing as well, which made them laugh even more.

Turning back and still standing on the wing, he watched Hunty coming into land. The wind was blowing even stronger, in a strengthening sea breeze. Angela touched on the threshold with puffs of blue smoke and slowed comfortably without a parachute.

As she turned off the end of the runway Michael jumped down off the wing to further, good-natured cheers from the crowd. He waved and ducked under the fuselage to check that Delta's refuelling was complete. The hose had been removed by the islander who drove the fuel tanker and Michael checked that the switches were off and the retaining cap was fitted.

He then moved to stand next to the engineer in the blue uniform, who would marshal Hunty next to Delta.

Chapter

Angela brought Hunty swiftly down the taxiway, passed the Tower towards them. She liked to taxi her beloved Hunty fast.

The Hunter looked so awesome from this angle, thought Michael. From the front, was the only time the Hunter looked really aggressive and warlike, his grandfather said; and Michael agreed. It sat fairly squat, with four gun barrels exposed, engine intakes in view, and with the speed brake bulging below the rear fuselage, there was something predatory about it.

Angela had the canopy back. Her visor on the helmet was still down over her eyes, but she had dropped the oxygen mask with tube, and even at that distance he could see she was still smiling.

Hunty's nose bobbed a couple of times as Angela applied brakes and started the turn towards them, being directed by the marshaller moving his arms. Angela brought Hunty to a gentle stop, parked the brakes and shut the engine. She then looked down at Michael beside her and laughed. He shook his fists, good-naturedly, up at her. Over the chattering rundown of Hunty's engine he could hear the islanders laughing and hooting all over again.

The engine continued to run down as the fuel tanker moved up, and the hose was pulled out. Michael connected it to the Hunter once the engine had stopped, and the refuelling began. He stepped out from under the wing as Angela was just climbing over the canopy to the fuselage, and then down onto the wing. Looking up at her standing on the wing as she removed her helmet, Michael could see her flight suit was also wet with perspiration. It had been an exciting and stressful time. But as usual, she had done extremely well and was still full of fun, as they all were.

“Did I get you?” she asked laughing, with the naughtiest twinkle in her huge, dark, brown eyes. With her helmet off, she was shaking out her long, thick, brown hair.

“I'll say! I fell off Delta onto the wing, much to the delight of your captive audience,” said Michael looking across at the crowd. She followed his eyes and waved. They all waved and roared their approval.

Angela jumped down, and walking up to Michael gave him the customary hi-5, which drew more applause from the colourful, islanders.

“Great job Michael,” Angela said more seriously. “Jordan is only about 20 minutes out. As Dad has probably had someone tell you; when Jordan lands we will try and get airborne for home, as soon as possible. So, you do a Turnaround Check on Delta and I will do the same on Hunty while the refuelling is going on.” Michael just nodded and turned for Delta.

Chapter

Angela ducked under the Hunter’s left wing. She took the refuelling hose from the patient fuel tanker driver, who retained a broad grin from excitement and the unusual activity, of which he was in the midst.

Michael began checking the cockpit and organising the straps for Jordan and himself, and put his helmet into the rear cockpit. Then he had to climb back onto the fuselage and saw Angela begin the external Pre-flight of Hunty. Looking towards the security fence, he saw the crowd of islanders had not left, and were obviously waiting for the departure of the jet fighters. They must have remembered their last, exciting departure for Australia. They were a bit quieter but it still looked like a party. There were colourful groups sitting around on the lawn, behind the security fence, laughing and eating.

Michael diverted his attention to the job in hand and walked around the front of the pointy pitot probe on Delta’s nose. He carried a rag, to clean any dirt or grease that may have collected during the hour they had been flying. He agreed with his grandfather, Paul; that if the aircraft or cars were continually kept polished; as well as making them look great, it was always much easier to see if there was anything amiss with them. He moved slowly around the Mirage, clockwise, checking everything. Besides removing a bit of grease around the undercarriage and some remaining green grass stains beneath the rear fuselage, the Mirage was as good as new.

As he arrived back at the nose where he had begun, he turned around to see Angela walking towards him. Her long brown hair was now tied in a high pony tail and blowing around her face in the strengthening, afternoon sea breeze.

The wind would be blowing Jordan towards them. Just before Angela reached Michael she stopped and turned towards the sea. Michael could just hear it too. Whup-whup-whup! The classic sound of a high inertia, slow moving, twin bladed Bell helicopter.

“He has made it safely – thank God!” Angela expressed for both of them; sounding very relieved. Like any jet fighter pilot group, they were close knit team. More so for them, because they were family.

Then they saw it. They were facing the North West and shielding their eyes against the blazing, midday sun, overhead. They saw the dot just above the palms that ringed the beach, 500 meters away. The dot quickly grew larger in the sea haze caused by the surf and the fierce wind. The blade noise was soon very loud as the wind accelerated the sound towards them.

Very soon the black Bell Jet Ranger was crossing the palms and heading directly for them. The islander in the blue uniform, who had marshalled Michael and Angela, took up his position beside Delta and indicated to Jordan where he should land.

As Jordan was approaching in the tailwind, before he reached them, he had to make a turn away from them, and then turn back to land into wind. From side on Angela and Michael could see how old and neglected the chopper was. But it certainly seemed to be flying well enough. Once Jordan was into wind he flared and slowed down quickly to come into a rather unsteady hover, because of the gusting sea breeze and his lack of helicopter experience.

Michael and Angela were now standing on Delta’s left side and Jordan was about 50 metres away and could be seen working hard on the cyclic and collective to keep the helicopter steady. He had the visor of his helmet

down but the mask was off and his face glistened with perspiration. It must have been really hot in the all glass cabin.

Jordan lowered the Jet Ranger a bit erratically, but made a quite acceptable hover landing, on the concrete. He immediately reduced power to ground idle and the noise receded quickly, as in relief from a stressful job. The sound of the surf and wind became apparent again, as well as the crowd of spectators. Michael turned to watch them clapping and laughing. The policeman must have briefed them on what had happened on the Tiger Island.

Angela followed Michael's gaze and they both smiled and waved at the crowd who were only 50 meters away. But the islanders were looking at the helicopter. Michael turned and looked back to Jordan who was waving at them through the glass canopy. They had a new hero!

As soon as Jordan had stopped the blades and shut the engine he climbed out and stood a little unsteadily on the concrete beside the open door, and removed his helmet. Michael and Angela approached him and saw the broad grin on his dark and sweaty face. He wiped his mop of curly hair into place, which led Michael to do the same. It was the end of a stressful, but highly exciting couple of hours for them. The huge smile on Jordan's face was as much from relief as anything, Michael thought.

All of the sudden there were high-5s all round as before. The crowd burst into further applause, and the trio waved again.

Chapter

The policeman had joined them, and along with the marshaller they all looked over the forlorn helicopter.

“That was a bit of the hairy flight,” Jordan began. “It was so bumpy in the heat and wind, and the sea was really rough below. But it was nice knowing you were above, Angela. Then I saw the gunboat and knew I was close.”

“Having said that,” he continued, “the Jet Ranger is technically very sound. With a bit of a clean up and new paint job from us, it will be as good as new.”

“Doesn’t do very good landings!” Michael piped up. Jordan leapt on him laughing and threw an arm around his neck as if to throttle him. “Cheeky little buzzard!” he laughed. Angela joined in the laughter, and so did the crowd again.

Releasing Michael, but still smiling Jordan said, “You did very well Michael, we are all really proud of you.” Then becoming a bit more serious he said, “Seeing as you have your helmet in the front cockpit, you can fly Delta home, and lead the formation. Then I can see how you land!” He said smiling again, and gave Michael a playful punch on his arm.

Without thinking Michael wiped the wayward hair from his brow. “Thanks Jordan. Are you sure grandad will be okay with that?”

“Of course he will,” confirmed Angela, and also gave him a thump on his other arm. “What you did today on the old airfield, in Delta, was amazing. You deserve it.” Jordan nodded in agreement and said, “I have already told Paul and he was more than happy.”

Changing the subject Jordan said, “I will have a quick chat with the policeman about where he will put the Jet Ranger until it is brought to Tasmania,” and broke off smiling. “Won’t it be great to have our own chopper?” There were smiles of agreement from Angela and Michael.

Then continuing Jordan said, “You guys finish up refuelling and getting ready. I have got to go to the bathroom and flight plan, and will be with you in five minutes. You can Brief us then, Michael.”

Chapter

With that Jordan left. Angela walked over to Hunty to sign the fuel forms for the beaming, fuel tanker driver.

Michael took Jordan's helmet and climbed back onto the Mirage and into the front cockpit. He adjusted the straps for himself and then the ones in the rear cockpit for Jordan. He put his helmet back in the front and Jordan's in the rear. Then climbing back down the way he had come, he picked up his knee pad, which he had left on the ground next to Delta. He set about writing a concise Brief on it. He had anticipated another Brief for their return, but never dreaming he would be giving it, and felt a bit nervous. But then remembered that the other two would help him, if required, especially Jordan, who would be in the back seat behind him, in Delta.

Jordan came walking back from the tower and joined Angela and Michael next to the Mirage.

"Give it to us, Tiger 1," said Angela with a huge smile, and mischief in her eyes.

Adopting a more serious, leaders tone, or so he thought, Michael carried out the informal Brief. "We will make it a standard Formation Take Off and automatic radio check-ins," he began; then could not help himself. His smile returning, he said, "Once we are off the coast Angela, I will call you into Attack Battle Formation, and if the Tower agrees, we will circle to beat up the airfield again."

Angela looked at Jordan, "And he calls me a show off?"

"I will pull to the vertical, in full afterburner, do 2 twinkle rolls and then turn South West for Tasmania, and home," Michael briefed, pretending to ignore Angela, but still smiling as he continued. "Angela, it should give you enough spacing to do a couple of rolls yourself, and then follow me. When we get to Launceston, we will most likely trail for a Base turn to Final; or unless the Tower requests a flyby, in which case we will have to oblige," he said with heavy sarcasm. "We will achieve that with a standard Battle Break from the Northeast as we did last time from Savu. Are there any questions?"

“Negative Michael,” Angela said, and then more seriously, “let’s have fun, but take care!”

“Absolutely,” Michael said, appreciating the gentle warning from Angela, because low passes or beat-ups carried high risks, but were really safe if all flown to the Brief. “Start on my thumbs up,” he concluded.

There were high-5s all round again; mainly for the audience, followed by the customary applause.

Chapter

While Angela turned and walked to the Hunter, Michael and Jordan climbed onto Delta and into their respective cockpits. Michael’s seat was ready and he strapped in quickly.

“Thanks for tidying the straps for me Michael,” shouted Jordan from the back seat, which he had to do to make himself heard over the sound of the surf and the wind, and before he had put his helmet on.

“No worries!” Michael shouted back.

“Becoming more and more an Aussie by the day Michael?” Jordan shouted with a laugh.

Once they were strapped in, with helmets fitted, Michael went around the cockpit doing his Pre-Start Checks. When complete, he looked across at Hunty. Angela still had her helmeted head down, going through her Checks. Good, he had managed to keep up, then immediately wondered if he had missed anything. He quickly went from left to right again, mainly checking that the fuel cocks were in the correct positions and fuel switches on.

“How are you doing in the back Jordan, and can you hear me okay?” Michael said putting on his mask and checking the intercom, while looking towards Angela again.

“Good, thanks Michael,” was Jordan’s quick response on the intercom. There was no time to chat before a formation start.

Lowering his visor, to keep out the bright sunshine reflecting off the white concrete, Michael saw Angela look to her left, at him and give a thumbs up. He returned in kind.

“Canopy closing Jordan, and starting,” he told Jordan, then selected the canopy lowering switch. He pressed the start button just behind the throttle. The sweet sound of the little electrical motor could be heard, followed by the little jet it started, which in turn started the mighty Atar engine that ran almost the full length of the fuselage, behind them. Michael watched the engine start to turn on the RPM gauge on the right, front instrument panel and then looked for engine “light off” on the EGT gauge, next to it. Once the engine temperature began rising, which meant the engine had started, Michael put his hand on the High Pressure Cock, which was a trigger catch on the throttle, to shut down the engine if the temperature rose too quickly or went too high.

But as usual with these well maintained jet fighters the start was smooth and the engine settled down at idle with only a slight vibration, low whine and grumble of the engine, to be heard coming from behind.

Michael quickly went through his After Start/Pre-taxi Checks. Trim for take off, the control check, instruments, fuel, oxygen, harness and ejection seat safety pins, which he had removed getting into the seat. Then, after checking the canopy was locked closed, he selected the air conditioning on – the cool air flooded in and felt so good after the heat outside.

Chapter

“You ready Jordan?” he asked his cousin in the back. “Yep,” was Jordan’s reply. “Thank goodness Delta has great cooling!” Obviously enjoying the relief after so long in the hot, helicopter cockpit.

Angela was looking at Michael as he completed his Checks. Her visor was down, but her oxygen mask still hung below her face. She was smiling but

Michael could see the glistening perspiration on her face. The Hunter's air conditioning system could only be switched on, on take off. Her canopy was still rolled back and open. She would be keen to taxi, to have a breeze on her face from the moving Hunter, even if it was warm.

"Tiger 2, check," called Michael.

"Tiger 2," responded Angela just putting her mask to her face so that she could answer and then dropped it again.

"Savu tower, Tiger Formation requests taxi for Launceston as per our flight plan," Michael requested from the tower. Jordan had put in a flight plan when he was in the Tower.

"Tiger Formation, clear to taxi and take off. We have no traffic in the area. Please set course over the Tower, we would like to see your magnificent jet fighters low and fast again," said the Tower Controller and they could hear there was still excitement in his voice. Savu was mainly used as an emergency airfield for international airlines, as a diversion when the weather was bad or for severe technical problems. Therefore the airspace was clear most of the time.

"Cleared to taxi and take off, Tiger 1," Michael confirmed. "We will set course overhead the Tower," he said trying to sound more confident than he actually felt. The enormity of leading a formation of these high performance jet fighters, at his young age, suddenly dawned on him. Thankfully his grandfather believed strongly in building the confidence of his young pilots. Michael knew that they would not have put him in the position he was, if they did not believe he could do it. With returning confidence he applied throttle and watched the RPM needles, so that he had just enough thrust to begin moving. As the Mirage moved, he touched the brakes and then continued taxiing forward. There was no marshaller and as he turned left towards the runway, closed the throttle so that he would not blow rubbish over Angela and Hunty, and gave a final wave to the exuberant crowd.

It was a long taxi to the threshold, and Michael quickly, but carefully did the Pre-Take off Checks again, finishing off by saying over the intercom, “Jordan, is your harness tight and are your ejection pins out?” At the same time checking own harness and pins.

“Affirm! Have fun Michael. You did well today, mate!” answered Jordan reaffirming his confidence and pride in Michael. Michael sat a little straighter in his seat. “Thanks Jordan.”

As Michael turned the corner towards the runway, the Mirage’s nose dipping in its usual fashion, as brakes were used to turn and slow down. He taxied slowly up the runway, about 50 meters, on the left side, so that Angela could position herself on the right side and back in Echelon Starboard (right). He brought Delta to a stop with a bit of a jerk and the nose booped down. He applied the park brake and rotated the controls for full and free movement, while looking back through the rear view mirror on the canopy coaming above his head, to ensure the controls were moving the way they should. Then he looked across to see Hunty stop in a good position, just to his right and back. The black, sparkling Hunter looked so impressive from that angle. He gave a slight nod to Angela, looked back inside and selected three quarters full dry thrust. The roar increased immediately and Delta’s nose dipped against the brakes. A vibration could be felt through the airframe. A quick look down at the instruments – all was an order! He put his feet back on the toe brakes and released the park brake.

Michael looked out to Angela. Her thumb was in the forward panel, Hunty’s nose was well down, holding against the brakes as well. Michael nodded again, looked forward, put his head back against the ejection seat headrest and immediately took his feet off the brakes, simultaneously throwing his head forward, and applied almost full dry thrust. Delta leapt up and shot forward. Michael did not use the afterburner because of the long runway, but the power gave Angela enough residual thrust to maintain formation.

He kept Delta as straight as possible on the left side of the runway. A quick glance to his right and Hunty was in position. The speed was

rushing through 100 knots. Then at 120 knots he eased the control column back. At 140 knots Delta's nose lifted. He checked it and waited for lift off speed of 160 knots, then he pulled back some more and they were airborne. Delta wobbled a bit in the turbulent air, from the wind and heat and that would be bad for Angela; so Michael concentrated on keeping it steady. Out the corner of his eye he saw she was right there. He waited until they were well clear of the ground, put the brakes on momentarily, and selected the landing gear up. Angela remained locked in position, despite the bumps, and saw her undercarriage going up.

When they were 300 feet up he started a gentle turn to the right and looking in that direction Michael saw Hunty drop down below him, still in close formation and the magnificent black, dolphin Hunter looked terrific against the white beach, blue Coral Sea and crashing surf.

"I wish we had a camera," said Michael over the intercom.

"I have taken one with my mobile phone," answered Jordan, obviously enjoying the same spectacle.

Michael gently rolled out heading seawards and then called, "Tiger 2, Attack Battle Formation, right side."

"Wilco, Tiger 1," said Angela. Looking back Michael saw the Hunter roll smartly away from them and fall back into position.

Michael still had full dry thrust and began a gentle, climbing turn, back towards the airfield. They were already accelerating through 350 knots. He pulled harder, the G coming on, until he could see the airfield in the turn. They were now at 1000 feet and 10 kilometres out over the sea.

He rolled out in the same direction that he had approached on the previous fly-by from Tiger Island. He lowered the Mirage's nose and out of the rear view mirror saw the Hunter in position, 250 meters back on his right side and slightly lower. He would not go as low as the first pass. He had to think of Angela, below him.

Even though he had done it once already that day he still felt just as much excitement, as the speed streaked up towards 600 knots. The sea came rushing up and they closed rapidly with the Island.

The beach flashed by, they crossed the palms, the boundary fence and on passing over the runway he began the pull up. It was fast and he went straight to 6 ½ G. The G suit clamped on his body and he groaned as he struggled not to grey out. Jordan was grunting so loudly that Michael could hear it over the intercom. It was always more difficult for the pilot not flying because he could not anticipate the G.

Looking out each side for the vertical, against horizon, Michael cracked the throttle upward, engaged afterburner light-off. Then he pushed the throttle forward to full afterburner, to get away from Hunty. There was a surge of acceleration. He checked at the vertical and snapped the column left, picking a cloud he was looking at on his left side. Once, twice, he passed the cloud. On the third time, as his wingtip reached the cloud, he stopped the roll, looked right and let the nose drop and rolled out towards the southwest and home. He reduced afterburner and cracked it down to dry thrust.

“Tiger 2, positioning right side for Patrol Battle Formation,” said a formal Angela. Then she continued, “Great stuff! That looked fantastic from behind.”

“You are both the worst show offs!” said Jordan over the radio and laughing.

“We agree,” the Savu Tower Controllers joined in. “It looked amazing. We look forward to seeing you again.” Then, trying to resume his Air Traffic Control voice he said, “Tiger Formation, contact Brisbane Centre.”

“Thank you and hooroo,” replied Michael over the radio; then to Angela, “Tiger 2, change to Brisbane Centre.”

“Tiger 2,” responded Angela on Brisbane frequency.

“Brisbane Centre, Tiger Formation, climbing to Flight Level 380, direct for Launceston,” Michael said informing the ATC of their intentions and looking across to the right for Angela. The Hunter was moving up to abeam them at 3 kilometres, on the horizon, with its nose still in the climbing attitude.

“Tiger Formation, this is Brisbane Centre, you are cleared to Flight Level 380 direct for Launceston. Call maintaining FL380,” confirmed Brisbane ATC.

They continued their climb, quickly leaving the Islands behind and flying into the deep blue sky of the high troposphere, where everything seemed to slow down. They were so high that the 1000 km/hr speed they were moving at, it was hardly noticeable against the sea.

As Michael levelled off, and reduced power, the engine could only be heard as a low growl somewhere behind. It was so serene. Jordan and Michael were quiet, recalling the exciting events of the past couple of hours. Michael could hardly believe what they had been through, as they flew home, high over a dark, aquamarine Pacific Ocean, capped with white horses, visible even from their lofty height.

“Brisbane Centre, Tiger Formation maintaining FL380,” Michael called.

“Roger, Tiger Formation, call the Boundary,” responded the Brisbane ATC.

They flew the rest of the cruise in silence, each continuing to reflect on a very unusual and amazing day

Chapter

The Australian mainland was soon visible off to their right, followed soon after by the islands of eastern Bass Strait. Next, ‘The Apple Isle’, Tasmania and their home in North Eastern Tasmania could be seen, with its crystal, white Boobyalla beach at Tomahawk, Waterhouse beach at

Barnbogle and the lush, green mountains beyond. It was always a welcome sight.

It was also the time to go down. Michael was given descent clearance by Melbourne ATC, who they had changed to at the Flight Information Boundary, on their journey south west. They were told to contact their friend in Launceston Tower.

“Launy Tower, Tiger Formation, maintaining FL380, and ready for descent. We are visual,” called Michael, looking ahead in a sky completely clear of clouds, to the beautiful panorama ahead of them. He could see Mount Barrow and where Launceston Airport would be, just beyond it.

Tiger Formation, Launy Tower, we hear you have been busy again,” answered the Tower. “I would like to give you a Break from the North, as you did last time, but our airspace is busy. We have a Jetstar Airbus joining left hand Downwind for Runway 32L in 10 minutes. If you keep your speed up, you can join from Initial Point for a low level right hand Break for RW 32L, before him.”

“Tower, Tiger Formation, we can do that,” answered Michael, accepting the chance for another exciting break and landing, without consulting with the others.

“Roger Tiger Formation, call 5 minutes from Initial, so that I can see if the Break is possible before the Airbus arrives,” confirmed the Launceston Controller.

Then, over the intercom Michael asked Jordan, “Are you happy with that Jordan?” He did not want to do anything the others might not agree with.

“No problem Michael, but it would be best to do it as a standard Close Formation Break from Initial. We don’t want a loose Battle Formation with a busy circuit,” offered Jordan. “But a high speed close formation Break requires very smooth flying by the Leader, or it looks messy from the ground. Are you up to it?”

“I think so,” answered Michael uncertainly, not having flown such a Break before. “Please help me if you think I need it.”

“Sure,” said Jordan, really pleased that Michael had the confidence to go for it, but also not so sure of himself that he would not take advice. “Now, perhaps you should Brief Angela quickly,” he concluded.

“Tiger 2, this Tiger 1, close into Echelon Port (left) for a right hand Break from Initial for RW32R,” Michael briefed Angela over the radio, and looking to his left could see her already positioning herself, as the Hunter began creeping up to close formation again.

“Wilco, Tiger 1, moving in now,” was all that Angela had to say.

“Launy Tower, Tiger Formation descending; will call 5 minutes out from Initial” he informed the Tower.

“Roger,” the Controller acknowledged.

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Michael moved the throttle back to set up the descent, but not fully closed so that Angela would still have a reserve of power to hold close formation. In his rear view mirror Michael could see her almost in Echelon Port already, and concentrated on flying smoothly. He also began looking ahead to see where he should aim to fly over the Initial Point for RW32L. It was a point 8 kilometres back from the runway, and then they would fly over the runway, in line with it, and break right, abeam the Tower. The standard Break was to the left, but there was an airliner approaching from that direction and that is why they would do it to the opposite side.

Looking ahead Michael decided they would fly left around Mount Barrow and that would place them nicely for a run in from Initial. He rolled left and immediately saw Hunty bob up next to them as they rolled towards it. Angela had arrived in position and he must have rolled in too quickly. As

he rolled out he concentrated on doing it more smoothly, and the Hunter stayed right with him.

“That was much better, Michael,” Jordan said over the intercom. He had not mentioned anything when Michael rolled, but was pleased to see Michael correcting his mistake.

“Thanks, Jordan, I am getting the hang of it,” he answered, “although I am surprised grandfather has not offered advice.”

“He trained us, and is confident with our operation,” Jordan said, defending Paul, “but he will be anxious, so make him proud.”

There was no answer for that, so Michael returned his attention to the job in hand. He was descending behind Mount Barrow, and looked to see the speed passing 400 knots. He wanted about 500 knots for the Break. With the increasing speed the controls were becoming more sensitive, and he forced himself to keep the control movements smoother.

“Launy Tower, Tiger Formation, 5 minutes from Initial, Runway 32L,” Michael informed the Tower.

“Roger, Tiger Formation, you are cleared for your right hand Break, and cleared to break from 500ft. Call turning Final Runway 32L” said the Tower Controller. “The Airbus is still 10 minutes out.”

“Cleared for the right Break for RW 32L; will call Final, Tiger Formation,” confirmed Michael, accepting a further complication, by the 500ft Break. He was expecting a level break from 1500ft, the normal circuit height. Descending to 500 ft from Initial meant flying into rougher air closer to the ground, requiring even smoother flying. But it was the Tower allowing them to show off after their success.

As if reading his mind, Jordan said over the intercom, “Don’t worry Michael, you are doing fine. Just keep going the way you are now.”

“Thanks Jordan!”

Michael had chosen a spot 8 kilometres back from Runway 32L. It was a bridge over a small river, and he wanted to fly over that. It was working out well. He lined up on the bridge and Runway and rolled out smoothly. Angela was right with him, although he was aware of the Hunter bobbing around a bit with the high speed. But it would look perfect from the ground.

He crossed the bridge at 2000 feet, which was 1500ft above the ground in that area. He had not touched the throttle. It was working out well. The speed was passing through 490 knots, and would continue to increase. He would not worry about that now, but concentrate on flying really smoothly.

The airfield was approaching very rapidly. He levelled off at 1000 feet on the altimeter (500 feet above the ground). Hunty bobbed a bit but then stuck like glue. It should look fantastic, he had time to think. Then he was abeam the Tower, slammed the control column right, checked the bank at 45 degrees, snapped the throttle closed, deployed the speed brakes and pulled back straight to 6 G.

He was ready for the G and remained wide awake; looking for Downwind and aiming to level off at the circuit height of 2000 feet. Jordan was not coping quite as well. A lot of grunting was coming over the intercom. Once again, with the high G, in the delta winged jet fighter, the Mirage slowed down quickly, and very soon they were on Downwind, with the Tower passing on their right side, 3 kilometres away. Michael selected the speed brakes in and was struck again by the contrast from just 30 seconds before when Delta was tearing along at close to 600 knots, with the ground flashing by, with loud wind and engine noise. Then on Downwind it was almost silent, with everything having slowed down, and just a grumble from the engine behind them.

As he passed the end of the threshold he began his descending turn for the Runway.

“Tiger 1, Final, 3 greens,” called Michael to the Tower.

“You are cleared to land, Tiger 1. It has worked well. The Airbus is just turning onto left Downwind now,” answered the Tower Controller. “That looked fantastic; almost as good as the Break from the North.”

“Cleared to land, Tiger 1, and thanks,” confirmed Michael.

As they descended in the turn towards the runway, Michael thought how short it looked after Savu, and reminded himself that he would need the brake parachute on landing.

Michael rolled out at 500 feet, and a speed of 160 knots. He had lined up well, but dropped a bit too low at about 200 feet. He eased on the thrust to hold the speed and checked back on the control column until the picture looked right. The nose was really high, as he peered over it, with the ground flashing by. He had moved to the left side, leaving the right side for Hunty to land on.

The white and black piano-like markers of the threshold flashed by, just metres below them. Michael checked back again, just above the ground, and then landed firmly. He checked the nose, to hold its position, and immediately slammed the brake parachute handle back. A second later he felt the welcome tug of its opening. The Mirage was slowing nicely. He lowered the nose onto the runway when the speed felt right.

“Tiger 2, down,” called Angela a short time later and Michael knew she had landed safely, and was slowing down normally, with the parachute deployed.

The parachute and the fresh North Westerly wind made a very comfortable deceleration for the Mirage and Michael only had to brake a little towards the end of the runway.

Don, the “Firey” was waiting just off the left, standing next to his utility fire truck. The dour character had an uncustomary, huge grin on his laconic face, and gave Michael a thumbs up when he saw it was him sitting in the front cockpit. He also loved these jet fighters and really liked

Michael. To see Michael flying Delta and leading would have made his day.

Michael dropped his mask, grinned and waved back. Right at the end of the runway, he turned further left, then sharply right to put the parachute off the runway, on the left and released it. Then, still moving at a reasonable speed, he turned Delta left again, and off the runway.

Looking left he could see the awesome black Hunter still moving quite quickly towards them, with Hunty's sparkling white brake parachute bobbing around, gamely behind, doing all it could to slow the 10 ton war machine. Don was running to pick up his discarded parachute.

Michael returned his concentration to taxiing the Mirage back to the Tiger Flight hangar, and to complete his After Landing Checks.

“That was great, once again, Michael!” Jordan said over the intercom. “The circuit was really good.”

“Thanks Jordan,” said Michael accepting Jordan's praise, not lightly given. “That circuit was a lot smoother than the one in Savu. Although in Savu, there had been a very blustery wind; in hot, and bumpy conditions.”

Looking back at Hunty turning off the runway Michael heard the Tower give the Airbus, which was now on Final, clearance to land. It had worked out perfectly, thank goodness!

They taxied down the hill towards the Passenger Terminal, and could see, as usual, people on the viewing balcony. All activity had ceased. Others had been waiting to board the arriving airliner, or to pick up or drop passengers, but now they were all transfixed on the noisy, magnificent jet fighters that were about pass. Michael could not help himself and waved. The people, who had not been quite sure what to do, started waving back at him and to Angela.

“Good to see the people of Launceston are getting used to us,” said Jordan over the intercom, “there have been no complaints about the jets, and now seem to really enjoy seeing us.”

“I reckon they are the luckiest people in Australia,” answered Michael, “but then I am biased.” Jordan just laughed in response.

Chapter

Then they were passed the terminal and approaching the Tiger Flight hangar, at good speed. Michael saw Thomas indicating to him where he wanted Delta; and Andrew standing next to him, was waiting to marshal Hunty. Paul and Cindy were between them. Michael could imagine how pleased Paul would be to see his spectacular and special jet fighters back safe and sound; and also the pride in his young pilots. Cindy would just be happy to see them all home safe. She sought of understood their passion for these aircraft and flying them, but she also knew how dangerous it could be. However, the whole experience meant that her household was always alive with happy, confident and emotion charged youngsters, and that was priceless. They were extremely high achievers, and she was sure there was nothing they could not do with their lives. Although, she suspected they would not want to change a thing they were doing right at that moment.

Michael taxied Delta on Thomas’s instructions, and stopped when he put up his flat hands. He selected the park brake on, shut the engine, and started the stopwatch before raising the canopy. The air conditioner had cooled them down during the flight back, but their flying kit was still damp with perspiration. The cool Northerly breeze that swept passed them, as the canopy opened, was so refreshing.

As was becoming the norm, Michael just sat still for 15 seconds, and enjoyed the moment. Then he saw Thomas carrying the steps to attach it to the front cockpit, and Paul was battling with the larger ladder that fitted to the rear cockpit.

Michael unstrapped as he heard the Mirage engine clattering to a stop. He fitted the lower ejection seat pin. Thomas patted the fuselage to let Michael know the engine had stopped. He looked at the stopwatch; one minute 30 seconds, perfect! It was within a second of the normal time. They often check the jet engine rundown time, especially the engineers. If the engine stopped down in a shorter time than normal there could be a problem developing. On the previous mission he had been so overwhelmed by everything, that he had forgotten to do it with the Hunter. He was obviously now becoming more familiar with his unusual, 'dual' life.

Chapter

Then, as with the previous mission, the events moved very quickly. Thomas had climbed the steps and was fitting Michael's top ejection seat pins. He gave Michael a pat on the shoulder, and Michael looked up at the huge grin on the face of his friend. "Good on you mate!" Thomas shouted to Michael so that he could hear it through his helmet. "Thanks Thomas," Michael said, genuinely pleased with the positive compliment.

He then followed Thomas down the steps, and at the bottom removed his helmet and managed to sweep the hair from his forehead before being enveloped in a huge hug from his grandmother, Cindy. "Thank God you are all right," she said while still hugging him.

"No worries, Nanna!" he laughed, using the Australian word grandmother. He was her first grandchild. She had said she never wanted grandchildren, which would make her feel old, but had adored Michael from the moment that she had first set eyes on him, in Africa.

She finally released Michael as Jordan moved over to receive a hug from her, as well. Angela came striding across from Hunty, with Andrew. The creases from the tight oxygen masks remained on all the pilots' faces after they had flown, and would gradually diminish, within half an hour. Angela's was more pronounced on her fair skin. But all that anyone really saw on her face was a large smile, and the huge, dark, sparkling and expressive eyes. She was still in the "zone", and it would take a while for

her to come down from flying Hunty, and especially in combat. She had lived with a passion for jet fighters from birth. She was most animated when she had just been flying them, and especially so, after the mission they had just flown.

One arm was around her helmet and with the other hand she pulled out the band holding her ponytail, and her tousled, shining, brown hair cascaded around her shoulders. She was marching purposefully towards the group at the Mirage. Her tight G suit above her flying boots, exaggerated the boyish, slim hips. The flight suit on her upper torso was streaked with perspiration, and covered with fighter patches; and loose, unlike the G suit. In that moment Michael stared at her and felt no-one personified a jet fighter pilot more.

Then she was hugging her mother Cindy, followed by the customary high-5s all round. Firstly, between the three pilots; then with Paul, Cindy, Andrew and Thomas.

As they quietened down Paul said, with unaccustomed emotion, “I have never been more proud of you. There were times on Tiger Island when I was really worried; whilst looking directly at Michael.

They were the silent for a moment, then Michael spoke up, “No worries Grandfather, it was a piece of cake!” and swept his brow again.

They all burst out laughing and it relieved the tension, because it had been a touch and go situation on Tiger Island.

Chapter

As was always the case after a flight, the aircraft were returned to the hangar. Andrew and Thomas checked them over thoroughly, while the young pilots polished off any dirt, grease or bugs they had encountered flying fast and low level. It was late in the afternoon before they were ready to leave for their home on the beach at Tam O’Shanter. By then they were all exhausted from the various activities they had performed.

Michael was so dreading sleeping though, because he would probably return to his other life, where he did not fly the awesome jet fighters. He still wanted evidence of it, and deliberately left the knee pad on which he had written the formation details, on the desk in the Briefing room, as he had done, by mistake, after Operation Gunboat.

Once the hangar doors were closed, they farewelled the engineers, who lived near the airport, and climbed, wearily, but happy into Paul's four-wheel-drive.

They were quiet for the first part of the journey through the lovely, green valleys around Karoola, on Pipers River Road, north of Launceston. Angela was dozing, her head flopping about next to Michael in the back; with Jordan on the other side.

Suddenly, Paul spoke up. Angela started and woke up, looking groggily around.

"Much against my better judgement, I have decided we will not get involved with the Rebels again, unless we arm Hunty and Delta," Paul said determinedly, and almost reluctantly. "We cannot fly armed civilian registered aircraft in Australia, but I have spoken to Elders on Savu, by computer link up, and then with the Australian Chief of Defence.

"The Elders are happy to acquire 30 mm ammunition for the cannons on the Mirage and Hunter, which are identical. We could fly them to Savu unarmed, and load the cannons there. Then we do our air-to-air gunnery practice over the sea," Paul continued.

"What about missiles?" asked Jordan, who had brought up the subject of arming the jet fighters earlier. His face had lit up at the prospect of the Hunter and Mirage being armed.

"They would be too sophisticated and the expensive to upgrade the jets, both for me and the Islands," confirmed Paul, who had obviously considered it. "The Australian government has been unofficially pleased with our Missions, but cannot condone interfering in the affairs of another

country. However, they say we can do whatever we like with the jet fighters at Savu.”

They all knew how reluctant Paul was to use his jet fighters as war machines. As if reading their collective thoughts he said, “I was confident you could deal with the Rebels, as I know how well you fly. But they appear to have a lot of money and are always improving the quality of the equipment they get.” he continued seriously. “We have been lucky so far, especially as Michael was actually hit on Gunboat operation. If they get a real jet fighter we might not be as fortunate. Is anyone not happy?” he concluded, taking a quick glance around the cab.

Judging by the enthusiastic smiles on the faces of his pilots, they were delighted. They would be real jet fighter pilots, doing a worthy job.

“I am not happy,” said a very indignant Cindy, sitting next to Paul. Then, with an uncertain smile, she said, “but I might be removed from this family if I object.” That had them all laughing again, including Paul, who had looked so severe, as he had made a very difficult decision. “Just make sure they get the best training Paul!” she concluded looking fiercely at Paul. Even though she already knew how well they were trained.

”Never mind Nanna,” Michael interjected with a huge smile on his face, “when we get the helicopter, I will teach you to fly.” he joked, breaking the tension further, as everyone laughed, at seeing the shocked look on Cindy’s face.

After a light snack they went to their respective rooms. Michael tried to stay awake, dreading the return to his other life of not flying the jet fighters. He also hoped he would not miss the next exciting, and armed Mission.

Chapter

A wet feel on his face woke Michael. It was still early, the sun not yet up. He must have left his door unlatched. Kimba had pushed her way in and given him a lick on his nose. His eyes shot open and he looked at the hook

on the wall where he had left his creased flight suit and helmet. They were not there. His shoulders sank. He was back to his other life.

It wasn't so bad this time. It definitely was not a dream, because later, when they had all driven to the Airport again, his knee pad was where he had left it in the Briefing Room, with the Tiger Mission Formation instructions on it. He just wished he could tell someone, but would not take that chance. It could break the spell and he might not be able to fly the magnificent, classic, jet fighters he loved of so much.

He went into the hangar and stood between them as they sat proudly on their high undercarriages, the hangar lights shining down on their gleaming and spectacular paintwork. He looked up at the Hunter and Mirage in turn.

“Delta and Hunty, the next time we fly against the Rebels, you will be armed and we can defend ourselves,” he said aloud, “as if he expected them to understand him.

Michael hoped it would be soon!