SWEATING THE METAL

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FLYING UNDER FIRE. A CHINOOK PILOT'S BLISTERING ACCOUNT OF LIFE, DEATH AND DUST IN AFGHANISTAN

FLT LT ALEX 'FRENCHIE' DUNCAN DFC

with Antony Loveless

HODDER & STOUGHTON

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To my wife Alison, and my boys Guy and Max

Destiny chose me to fly the sky, since conception in the womb,
While nurtured by my mother's breast, I had a duty to assume.
For I have flown past heaven's door, to places you've not seen,
Constantly lived my boyhood dreams, in the places I have been.
I've flown the depths of darkness, by the light from stars alone,
I am utterly spellbound by that world, the world I call my own.

Taken from 'The Fighter Pilot' by Bazza

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Although the events that I describe in this book are as they appeared to me, they also represent the words and memories of countless others. To all of you, both named and anonymous, who gave up your time and your memories, thank you.

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PROLOGUE

MAY 17TH, 2008

I check my watch; we've been sitting 'turning and burning' – rotors spinning, burning fuel – on the pan at Camp Bastion, for fifty minutes now.

Early afternoon – Helmand Province in May – and the outside air temperature display on the instrument panel says it's 50°C. The Chinook's windscreen takes the full glare, turning the cockpit into a greenhouse where the ambient temperature is nudging 65°C. Hot doesn't even come close; there's no frame of reference for this.

A bead of sweat trickles from underneath my helmet and into my eye. I've had enough; I radio control . . .

'Bastion Ops, Black Cat Two Two. Where's the armourer?' I ask.

'Black Cat Two Two, Bastion Ops. Should be with you now.'

I twist and look over my left shoulder and see him walking up the ramp; I motion for him to sit on the jump seat. Bob Ruffles, my No.2 crewman, assists the armourer and plugs his helmet into the comms.

'Okay, this is what we've got,' I tell him. 'We landed at Gereshk to refuel with our formation leader an hour ago, and his cab had a massive fuel leak. It's completely soaked his Defensive Aids Suite, so his flares are now bathed in it. We'll fly you to Gereshk so you can replace them. We'll be back for you after our next sortie – about forty-five minutes.'

I look past him to the full load of passengers in the back. We've been briefed that they're VIPs. They were supposed to be our

wingman's next load, but his cab isn't going anywhere with fuel-soaked flares; it's the armourer's mission to replace those. Ours is to get the VIPs to Musa Qala.

I don't know who they are except they're very well dressed, so they look a bit out of place. Their questioning glares and furrowed brows tell me they're an unhappy group of suits. I guess I'd be pissed off too if I'd waited in the heat for over an hour before boarding.

Time to get moving. Ordinarily, we'd be going nowhere without an Apache watching our backs, but we've been flying all morning and our escort – an Apache with the call sign Ugly Five Zero – is already at Musa Qala waiting for us.

'Bastion Tower, Black Cat Two Two ready for departure.'

'Black Cat Two Two, cleared for take-off and cross as required. Visibility 5km, wind two-five-zero at ten knots.'

'Pre take-offs good, ready to lift,' says Alex, my co-pilot, from the left seat.

'Clear above and behind.' This from Neil 'Coops' Cooper, my No.1 crewman at the ramp. Bob mans the port-side Minigun as we lift.

'Take-off, Black Cat Two Two.'

I pull pitch and lift into the afternoon sky. It's a short hop to Gereshk, just east of Camp Bastion, and we're in the air no more than five minutes before I land us and drop off the armourer. Thirty seconds on the ground, no more. Coops gives the all clear and I lift us once again into the crystal-clear azure sky and turn due north for Musa Qala.

Ten more minutes and we're about six miles from the target. I radio ahead to the Apache: 'Ugly Five Zero, Black Cat Two Two. Inbound. Next location in five.'

'Black Cat Two Two, Ugly Five Zero, visual. Be aware, enemy forces moving weapons along your route. Hold; we're checking it out.'

This could indicate that something major is afoot. The Taliban often ditch their weapons, cache them and melt back into the civilian population. Once they do that, they know that our moral and ethical code prevents us from returning fire. The upside,

though, is that if they want to launch an attack, they need to move the weapons into place. The Apache crew are using their reconnaissance pod to investigate.

We don't have long to wait.

'Black Cat Two Two, Ugly Five Zero. Enemy forces moving weapons to the south-west – suggest you try alternative routing. Guys, the ICOM chatter has got ten times worse. They're up to something.'

If Taliban radio traffic has increased markedly, something is brewing. I feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

I click the PTT button on the end of the cyclic to confirm I've received the message.

I decide to fly a feint into FOB Edinburgh. It's a couple of miles away from Musa Qala but it's on higher ground so if the Taliban are laying in wait for us, they'll see us landing there and assume its our intended destination. I brief the crew. 'I'll just do a low-level orbit over Edinburgh and use terrain masking so they won't see us at Musa Qala.'

Our biggest threat comes from rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs), but if we're fast and low we're that much harder to hit. Normally we fly an approach 50ft on the light and 45 on the noise; that means that if I go below 50ft, a warning light will come on and at 45ft a noise will sound. As the non-handling pilot, Alex has the noise and I have the light.

I brief Alex. 'Okay, I want you to put us four miles north of Edinburgh. There's a deep valley (or "wadi") there, and I want to be flying low through it at max speed on the approach. Bug the RadAlt down to 10ft; I'm gonna put the light on at 20 and we're going to go in as fast and as low as we dare.'

It's called a CAD, or Concealed Approach and Departure; when less experienced guys train in the UK they do it with speed and height commensurate with safety. The received wisdom is that speed is life, altitude is life insurance; no one has ever collided with the sky. But whoever said that was clearly unfamiliar with Helmand Province. As captain, I'm responsible for the safety of the aircraft and everyone on it. And for me, here and now, that means going low and fast.

'Bob, get on the starboard Minigun. Standard Rules of Engagement; you have my authority to engage without reference to me if we come under fire. Clear?'

'Clear as, Frenchie.'

I want him on the right because, looking at the topography of the area, that's where we'd most likely take fire from. He can scan his arcs, I've got the front and right, and Alex and Coops have the left. We're as well prepared as we can be, even if it does feel like we're flying into the lion's den.

Alex gets us into the perfect position and I drop down low into the wadi as I fly us towards FOB Edinburgh at 160 knots. Trees are rushing past the cockpit windows on either side but I'm totally focused on the job at hand so they barely register. We're so low, I'm climbing to avoid tall blades of grass as we scream along the wadi and I'm working the collective up and down like a whore's knickers, throwing the aircraft around. Anyone trying to get a bead on us is going to have a fucking hard time.

It's about twenty seconds later when I see the Toyota Hilux with a man standing in the back. It's alongside the wadi in our 1 o'clock position and about half a mile ahead. It's redolent of one of the Technicals – the flat-bed pick-up trucks with a machine-gun or recoilless rifle in the back that caused so much mayhem in *Black Hawk Down*. They're popular with the Taliban, too. Suddenly, alarm bells are ringing in my head. They're so loud, I'm sure the others can hear.

'Threat right,' I shout as both Alex and I look at the guy in the truck.

My response is automatic. I act even before the thought has formed and throw the cyclic hard left to jink the cab away from danger. Except the threat isn't to the right; the truck is nothing to do with the Taliban.

The threat lies unseen on our left, on the far bank of the wadi. A team has been brought in specifically to take us out and they have a view of the whole vista below them, including us.

I've flown us right into the jaws of a trap that's been laid specially for one particular VIP that we're carrying.

PROLOGUE

BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG, BANG!

The Defensive Aids Suite comes alive and fires off flares to draw the threat away from us; too late though. Everything happens in a nanosecond but perception distortion has me tight in its grip, so it seems like an age.

I feel the airframe shudder violently as we simultaneously lurch upwards and to the right. I know what's happened even as Coops shouts over the comms: 'We've been hit, we've been hit!'

There's no time for Bob to react on the gun. The aircraft has just done the polar opposite of what I've asked of it. And for any pilot, that's the worst thing imaginable – loss of control.

'RPG!' shouts Coops. 'We've lost a huge piece of the blade!'

The Master Caution goes off and I'm thrust into a world of *son et lumière*. Warning lights are flashing, and the RadAlt alarm is sounding through my helmet speakers – we've got system failures. We've got sixteen VIPs in the back. And we're still in the kill zone.

We're going down.

PART ONE

BEGINNINGS

1

ACCROCHES-TOI À TON RÊVE

I always wanted to fly. I was six when my uncle gave me a book called *Les Ailes d'or L'Aéronavale US* (Golden Wings of the US Navy). Full of high-quality photos of F-14s, it awakened within me an interest in flying which then demanded attention like a recalcitrant child. Once I'd opened my mind to the concept of flight, I dreamed of being a fast jet pilot and began an enduring love affair with aviation that remains with me still.

My father is British. He's an accountant, and my mum (who's French) is an English teacher. They met when my dad was reading French at Oxford and, as part of his degree, went to France for a year to work as the assistant to an English teacher – that teacher was my mum. I was born in Belgium in 1976, where my father was working at the time, but moved to Paris when I was one.

Paris dominates my memories of growing up, so the city had quite an impact on my sense of identity. We lived in a spacious apartment near the Seine in a suburb to the south-west of the city. We spoke English and French at home, so I passed the exam for a bilingual secondary school and eventually graduated with my Baccalaureate. England, though, was also a huge influence on me; my paternal grandparents lived in Sevenoaks and I adored it there. I travelled there regularly from a young age and when I was older I'd spend summers there to improve my English so I had a pretty good grounding in British culture.

We travelled a fair bit when I was younger and I looked forward to the flights almost more than I did the actual destinations. I was always asking my dad to draw aircraft or make paper airplanes for

me; I wasn't so much concerned with how a plane was kept in the sky, it was the graciousness of it – there was a certain magic about the fact that it flew.

I don't think the French Air Force ever figured in my thoughts, even from when I first dreamed of flying; it was always the RAF. When I learned about World War II, I always imagined I was in the cockpit of a Spitfire. So when it came to choosing a university, it had to be one in England. I read Aerospace Engineering at Manchester and after graduating in July 1999 (alongside my degree, I also acquired the nickname 'Frenchie') I was accepted into the Royal Air Force as a direct-entry pilot.

The RAF's motto is '*Per Ardua Ad Astra*', which, roughly translated, means 'Through Adversity to the Stars'. A very loose translation might be, 'It's a rocky road that leads to the stars,' and having travelled that arduous, winding and infinitely long road to gaining my wings, it's a maxim that really means something to me.

I was well aware of what the process involved when I did my initial assessment with the RAF, but somehow, by the time I presented myself at RAF Cranwell (the RAF's equivalent of Sandhurst) on August 6th 2000 to begin my six months of officer training, it's like I'd forgotten. I knew on an abstract level that you don't just join the RAF and start flying on day two, but there was still a part of me that expected to be given the keys and told to go ahead and fly!

The process of turning civilians into functioning, capable military officers is an exact science, tried, tested and honed over generations, but basically it boils down to breaking and then remaking you. The process irons out all the flaws, the bad habits, the laziness, lack of fitness and absence of discipline that are hallmarks of civilian life, and replaces them with military bearing, an ability to march, work as part of a team and lead by example. It was February 2001 when I passed out as Flying Office Alex Duncan but, because there were no slots immediately available at

the Elementary Flying Training School (EFTS), I didn't start my basic flying training until May.

The four-month course is broadly similar to the course that civilian pilots do to obtain a Private Pilot's Licence, except it's much more comprehensive and the pace of learning is accelerated. You can be flying in formation, hanging off the wing of another aircraft, with around fifteen hours flying under your belt, a time when many PPLs have only just soloed. The training is exceptionally good and despite not being a naturally gifted pilot, I aced all of my final exams and left EFTS with sixty-five hours, experience in my logbook.

Despite now being able to fly a light aircraft in cloud, at night, alone, and perform aerobatics and low-level flying, you're still of no use to the RAF. EFTS is all about identifying your strengths so you can be streamed to one of three arenas that the brass thinks you're most suited to, depending on where they have the greatest need at that particular time – fast jets, multi-engine or rotary. Fast jets was my first choice, followed by multis and finally, rotary, which is what I got. I'd sailed through all my exams and handling tests, and I was informed I'd achieved the grade, but there was a problem affecting the Tucano T1, the aircraft on which the RAF teaches basic fast jet flying. It created a huge backlog of pilots, so they looked at my performance and decided I had the aptitude to be a good helicopter pilot.

I was so gutted at first that I even considered leaving the RAF, but ultimately I accepted the decision because I realised it was about what the Air Force needed, not what I wanted. Whatever I flew, be it fast jets or helicopters, I'd love the job because I would still be flying. Maybe a different kind of flying to what I'd dreamed of, but still flying nonetheless.

Because I thought I'd be streamed fast jet, I'd already arranged a holding post with the fast jet test squadron at Boscombe Down. I couldn't change it, so there was nothing else to do but change my perspective. If I couldn't be a fast jet pilot in the RAF, at least I'd be able to live the life for a few months and get it out of my system.

So that's what I did. After a period of leave, I arrived at Boscombe

Down in November 2001 for four months. I had the time of my life and can look back on having flown the Jaguar, the Hawk and the Alpha Jet. Although the time I spent in them wasn't loggable because I hadn't earned my wings then, it didn't matter. Firstly, I made loads of memories. Secondly, when you're talking to mates outside of the RAF, one of the first things they ask you is, 'Have you flown a fast jet?' At least now I can say, 'Yes.'

RAF Shawbury in Shropshire is home to the Defence Helicopter Flying School and the Central Flying School (Helicopter) Squadron; it's where you come if you want to fly helicopters for the Army, Navy or RAF. So in March 2002 I arrived ready to learn everything I needed to know about rotary-winged aircraft – or helicopters, as they're more widely known.

At this stage, I really didn't know a great deal about them, but when I looked at the RAF's fleet of helicopters I set my sights on the Chinook from the off. There was something different about it. That said, I still felt apprehensive. To me, helicopters were the devil's machines. I know how fixed-wing aircraft stay aloft but I regarded helicopters as little more than six million separate pieces flying in an unstable formation. So far as I was concerned then, it was aerodynamically impossible for a helicopter to fly, so the only conclusion that I could draw was that they're so fucking ugly that the earth repels them. I wasn't sure I could deal with that.

The course began with a month of ground school where we learned the principles of flight and looked at vector diagrams that apparently proved that helicopters can, in fact, fly. I'm sure that anybody with a first in Engineering or Pure Maths could quickly prove otherwise, but the school did a pretty good job of convincing us, so I parked my scepticism and concentrated on the finer points of helicopter meteorology. As ground school progressed, we learned the various checks in a procedural trainer, which is a cardboard mock-up of the cockpit. The needles on the dials move and the sim makes all the relevant noises, but it's just to get

you used to where everything is. Eventually, we actually started walk-arounds so we were up close and personal with this mythical flying beast.

It was a single-engine Eurocopter Squirrel HT1 – the ideal platform in which to learn the rudiments of helicopter flying, according to the RAF. The engine is tiny – about 2ft long by 11 inches high – but it's worth about a million pounds, so there's clearly more to it than simple pistons. It must be all the pixie dust that they put in there to keep the thing aloft.

Everything about the Squirrel is small and light – you can lift the tail with a finger because it's plastic, thin and very, very light. The blades are no more than five inches wide, yet they spin at 225rpm and somehow keep you airborne. One thing you don't want is to see the engineers working on the tail rotor before you fly, because if you do, you'll see the transmission tube that runs the length of the boom to keep the tail rotor spinning, which is no more than finger-thickness and spins at 1,000rpm. It really is best not to think about it too hard.

My first actual flight in it is a familiarisation one with an instructor, and it's the only free ride on the course. There were three of us riding along for that. The instructor walked out to the line, helmet on, dark visor down. Standing there before me and my two fellow students he assumed almost mythical status, for he can fly this thing.

So, picture this . . . we get in – I'm in the back and I just can't compute how we're going to get airborne with four adults inside. The instructor runs through his checks and starts the aircraft, his hand whizzing around the cockpit. He reaches to his left and pulls on a lever that looks just like the handbrake in my car and suddenly we're in the air. We go straight up, taxi in between some other helicopters, fly gently over the grass on the airfield, turn through 180° to make sure there is nothing behind, and off we go. Down goes the nose and we are flying. I'm dumbstruck because it feels just how I'd imagine a flying carpet would feel.

For someone schooled in flying fixed-wing aircraft, it meant a whole new frame of reference and an entirely new way of

thinking; if anything goes wrong, for example, you don't have to find a runway, you can just slow down, find a field, and hover. And you could just hover there for hours, beating gravity. Once I'd accepted the concept, I realised that it opened up entirely new horizons in flying. I must confess that all my previous misgivings melted away as we flew, and I actually began to think, 'Hey, this is pretty cool.' I couldn't believe I'd actually considered leaving the RAF. This tiny glimpse of rotary-winged flight showed me there was nothing to regret; it was going to be good – real good!

My instructor was John Garnons Williams (John GW to us), and he was awesome. He was an old boy, a retired Wing Commander – very well educated, a very, very good pilot and an absolute gentleman to boot. It was a privilege to know him and I was deeply saddened to hear that he died in a training accident in January 2007.

I felt reasonably confident about my first lesson. I mean, how difficult could it be? I'd just finished a month of ground school so I was more than familiar with the functionality of the flight controls. And I knew all the theory: basically, the controls in a helicopter affect the rotors – rotating blades on top of the fuselage, and a tail rotor at the end of the boom. The four blades on the roof are essentially rotating wings – rotary wings – and form a disc. It's the disc that flies; the rest of the helicopter simply follows along.

Unlike commercial and private fixed-wing aircraft, where the co-pilot or student traditionally occupies the right-hand seat, it's role-dependent in a helicopter. The right seat is generally for handling sorties, the left for navigation sorties. So to the left of my seat was the 'handbrake'; that's the collective and it controls altitude. Raise it and it affects all four rotor blades at the same time – 'collectively'. It increases their pitch angle, causing the disc – and the helicopter – to rise. Lower it and the effects are reversed; the pitch angle is reduced and the helicopter descends. On some helicopters, there's a twist-grip throttle on the end of the collective and it's much the same as the throttle on a motorbike – twist to go faster. Things are simplified on the Squirrel, so there's no conventional 'twist' throttle per se. Instead, the throttle has three more or less permanent positions: flight, ground idle and off.

So the collective controls altitude and the throttle controls rotor speed, which is known as 'NR'. Rising vertically from the floor between the pilot's legs is the cyclic control stick; moving it in any direction causes the disc to increase pitch on one half of its cycle while feathering on the other half. The cyclic change of pitch means that the disc tilts and moves in the same direction as the stick. Simple enough so far, right?

There's one more major control and that's the pedals, which work on the tail rotor. The reason that most helicopters have a tail rotor at the end of the boom is to counteract the huge forces generated by the main rotors as they move clockwise. Without the tail rotor, those forces would rotate the fuselage in the opposite direction, an effect known as torque. The tail rotor pushes the tail sideways against the torque so the amount of push – and the direction of the nose – is controlled via the foot pedals. The left one pushes the tail against the torque, so the nose moves to the left. Pushing the right one has the opposite effect.

Like I said, I knew how to fly and I knew the principles of flying a helicopter, so how difficult could it be?

John GW took us up to hover height at 5ft. 'Okay Frenchie, see that tree at our 12 o'clock?'

'The small one on the nose? I see it.'

'Okay, I want you to keep us pointed at that tree. I'll handle the rest of the controls. Got it?'

I thought about the thousands of vibrating, spinning and turning components that comprised the aircraft, each one seemingly with its own mind, powering this wild beast, this unbroken horse somehow tamed and made benign by John's input. In his hands, the helicopter sat solidly at 5ft, rigidly pointed towards the tree about fifty yards off the nose, moving neither forwards nor backwards, neither left nor right. Minus the visual cues, we could have been motionless on the tarmac.

'You have control,' he said.

I pushed gently against the pedals. And for a second or so, all seemed well. Nothing changed. Then the tree was at my 10 o'clock. I pushed against the right pedal . . . and I watched as the

tree moved past the nose to my 3 o'clock, like a roll of film scrolling across my field of vision.

'You see the tree I'm talking about?' John asked. I clicked the push-to-talk button on the cyclic and confirmed I did. 'Well, if you could try to keep us pointed towards it, that would be good,' he said, like a kindly uncle.

I focused. And gradually, the tail's movements became less extreme. The arcs narrowed. And the tree stayed, for the most part, between our 11 o'clock and our 1 o'clock. For some of the time, I actually managed to keep it at our 12 o'clock. It was all about anticipating the response of the pedals and pressing them accordingly.

'Much better,' said John. When he thought I'd got control of the pedals, he gave me the collective.

'Okay, you've got the collective. Look at 12 o'clock, keep the height.' And for a while, I did. Then we started to rise and fall like we were a yo-yo controlled by some giant unseen hand.

'Anticipate, anticipate,' I told myself. I reduced my input on the collective – small, tiny movements. We settled.

'Well done, Frenchie. Very good,' he told me, giving my ego a nice boost. I could do this. And then he said, 'Right, I'll give you the cyclic, and I'd like you to keep us in the same position on the ground.'

I did that pretty well and I was thinking to myself, 'This isn't too bad.'

'Okay. That was pretty good. Do you think you're up to trying all of the controls at once?' he asked. Buoyed by my success so far, I told him I'd give it a go. 'Okay, you have control,' John said.

'I have control,' I confirmed.

And I did. At least I did for a few seconds – although, as I realised later, that was mainly because he'd trimmed the aircraft for me and it flattered to deceive. Then the wind increased and I overcorrected for it. Keeping us level and static was like herding cats. If I pushed the cyclic forward, the nose went down and the aircraft descended and started to accelerate. I brought the nose up to slow down and pulled on the collective to climb and I doubled my

height. When I finally managed to check the acceleration, I slowed us down so much that we were going backwards. Move the cyclic left and the aircraft slides left; right cyclic and the aircraft slides right, just like a fixed-wing aircraft, but you have to put a bit of pedal on to adjust the balance. It's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time, while also playing keepy-uppy with a football.

'I have control of the aircraft,' said John, trying not to sound too nervous, although I'm sure inside he was a paragon of fear. But then, that's the instructors' lot. John, bless him, never seemed fazed by anything we did, and his voice – its timbre, tone, manner – never deviated. He was never flustered.

A few days later, I'd finally mastered the hover and we were out doing some ground cushion work – hovering but manoeuvring, not staying in the same position.

'Right, when I give you control, Frenchie, I want you to look at this white line that's at 3 o'clock. Whilst pointing the aircraft at the trees straight ahead of us, gently manoeuvre the aircraft left along the line.'

And because everything had been coming together for me, and I could hold the hover and generally control things, I thought *piece of piss*. Obviously, the minute I took over the controls the manoeuvre was like a dog's breakfast. I tried, but I just couldn't get it right.

'I have control,' says John. 'I was expecting a bit better than that. We'll try again tomorrow.'

As he flew us back to the pan at Shawbury, I felt an enormous sense of disappointment because I thought I'd cracked it. John made you want to do well. He never criticised or put you down and every comment was constructive. Even when you felt he was disappointed in you, he never said it explicitly. Always it was the soft voice, the kindly manner. It was as if your dad was teaching you something but you didn't get it, and you'd disappointed him. He was like everyone's dad.

Another week, though, and I'd put everything behind me. Although I was nowhere near John's standard, he was delighted with my progress. I was holding it all together, and my basic handling was good. And I was enjoying myself. With fixed wing there are rules; but helicopters don't obey any rules whatsoever which, I suppose, makes them quite quirky. There's an element of me that liked that.

There wasn't a real eureka moment for me when all the various elements of flying and controlling a helicopter came together. The way we learned means it happens slowly, so you don't necessarily notice it. I think the first time I knew that I'd cracked it was after about fourteen hours of instruction. It was a Friday, May 17th, and it had been a routine sortie. When we landed, John said, 'Okay Frenchie, I'm going to step out and I want you to take-off from here, go around, then come back and pick me up.' Fourteen hours and I was left in total command of an aircraft costing one and a half million pounds. I loved it!

After the solo, things moved pretty quickly and I started to learn much more advanced handling. Things like utilising a phenomenon called 'cushion creep', which allows you to take off when the aircraft is too heavy and you don't have enough power to lift straight up. I learned how to do quick stops when the aircraft is carrying too much speed to land – you adopt a nose-up attitude and perform a series of rapid, tight turns to scrub it off. Very quickly it seemed, I'd amassed more than thirty-seven hours on the aircraft and the end of the course was just around the corner. I passed the basic handling test with flying colours, which meant I had all the necessary skills to fly the aircraft, could handle emergencies and knew advanced handling techniques, but I was still a long way from getting my wings. I wasn't a pilot yet.