

Joy Flight

It was our last weekend in Perth, WA, at the end of three-week trip Downunder, escaping the dreary Scottish festive weather of 1996/97 to swelter under a blazing Aussie sun. We were on a visit to our friends Dorothy and John Flynn who had emigrated in 1974. This was our coolest day so far and after a lazy lunch under their pergola, we were enjoying a light breeze which brought the drone of small planes to our ears.

'Do you have an airport near here?' I asked.

'Yes,' said John F, 'that's Jandakot you can hear. It's a training airport. On weekdays they train commercial pilots to fly all sorts of planes right up to 747s. On weekends it's used by the local aero club. They do joy flights.'

'In small planes? I've always promised myself a trip in a small plane. Can you sit beside the pilot, see everything happening?'

'Yes, they're trainers. My pal Dave went on a flight. You see the whole of Perth, right down the Swan River, all the way to Fremantle.'

'Expensive, I suppose?' said my wife.

'No, I don't think so. Will I phone, find out?' asked John F.

He returned to advise if we went over, they would try to fit us in.

'How about it, Margaret? Let's do it. Come on, you'll love it.'

We checked-in at the neat white building called "Home of the Royal Aero Club of WA" and paid our fee of 35 Aussie dollars each (then about £22), which seemed 'reasonable', even to Margaret. Looking at our details on the disclaimer forms, the chap explained that the club did these flights to try to encourage new members, not really as a tourist attraction.

'I'm sorry, mate, but you'll have to wait a bit, see if I can find one of our instructors willing to fit you in.'

With our forms duly signed, we stood outside watching an assortment of aircraft taking off, circling to land, some just touching down then rising steeply again to join the queue for another go around.

After a short wait, a tiny thirty-some blond bombshell bounced towards us on thick trainers. Her uniform comprised a tan shirt and a short dark green skirt revealing stubby muscular legs. She was a perfect miniature Amazon, a chubby pixie. Her epaulets had four rings, designating her as a captain. Tucked under each arm she hugged two thick squares of well-used yellow foam. Straps suspending thick wooden blocks dangled from her clenched fists.

'Hi, I'm Holly. You're my victims for the joy flight?' she chirped with an evil grin. 'Sorry I can't shake hands. Follow me.'

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Margaret and I traipsed behind her to a four-seater trainer. John and Dorothy had elected to watch us from the observation deck. John had his long-lens camera and would try to capture key moments.

Holly climbed up into the left-hand seat of a squat little plane and organised her cushions and blocks, explaining that at 4 ft. 10 inches she needed them had to reach the controls.

'Right, Margaret,' said Holly, 'up you come, mate. Sit behind me to balance our weight against John. Put on the earphones. That's it. Now, John, front or back, mate?

'Front please, I've always. . . .'

'Yeah, yeah, all the guys want to be in front, but it'll be tight, mate. That's it, strap into the co-pilot's seat.'

As I squeezed into the cockpit I discovered how small the plane was. As she went through her first checks, the duplicate U-shaped joystick on my side brushed against my tummy, even with the seat right back. The control console seemed like a museum piece, with multiple old-fashioned Bakelite flick switches, a dozen or so aluminium dials, some with red, white or green lights. The front windscreen, inches from my nose, seemed too small for its purpose and, because the plane was angled upwards at the front, the runway immediately in front of me was obscured. All I could see was a larger aircraft about two hundred metres ahead of us, quite near the end of the runway. I looked sideways and checked. Holly's eye-line was half-a-head lower than mine which meant she could see less than me - almost nothing. The first tentacles of doubt tightened around my chest. Our pixie pilot was bolstered up on two squares of foam with the other two behind her back pushing her to the very edge of her seat. The wooden blocks were strapped to the pedals on her side. She was almost standing, balanced precariously on her bottom. I checked again: four rings - definitely a captain.

Holly's chirpy voice turned serious. 'Right, John, do I need to say it? TOUCH NOTHING. OK mate?'

The talons of panic gripped my bladder and squeezed. Lunchtime beer was accrued. I should have visited the loo before this flight. Would I last?

'Sure,' I said, placing my hands by my side, hoping the camera dangling from my neck would not snag on anything. I tried to look backwards to Margaret, but the seat harness was too tight. This was not a plane intended for a wider-bodied aviator. My feet were wedged into a corner to the right of the duplicate pedals and already beginning to freeze due to lack of blood flow.

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The chatter between the control tower and Holly referred to us as, "Trainer-niner-two". Holly confirmed we had completed our checks and we were ordered to close up beside the plane ahead. This plane, Holly explained, was a short-haul cargo plane which trained semi-amateur bush pilots who flew supplies to remote sheep stations. Its call sign was 'Berliner' because it had been used in the Cold War air drops flying into Berlin. To speed operations and 'for the fun of it' we were about to take off side by side. As we taxied forward to take up our position alongside the Berliner, it disappeared from my view. After a few 'blind' minutes while I waited for a collision, it re-appeared to our left. The tower continued to advise us to 'hold' while the Berliner completed its pre-flight checks.

At last the great moment arrived. As we trundled forward Holly explained we must restrict our speed to match that of the other plane in order to avoid creating a side-wash of disturbed air which could adversely affect the Berliner. Margaret, chatting behind, told me she planned to snap the whole sequence. My brain was racing ahead to disaster and my hands were gripping the side of my flimsy metal and canvas seat. The bar across the front of the seat was biting into the back of my thighs, numbing them. Slowly, slowly we picked up speed and rotated until our tail rose and we were nearly horizontal with only the front two wheels still rumbling on the concrete runway. The warning lights at the end of the runway came into focus. I glanced past Holly through her side window. The Berliner was still firmly stuck to the ground. My brain screamed "GET OUT NOW, WHILE YOU STILL CAN".

'Holly, is there something wrong with that plane?' I squeaked.

'No, mate, he's got her loaded with sandbags. It's a training exercise. Don't worry. Look, her tail is coming up now, she's almost airborne.'

The end-of-runway lights turned from flashing white to amber then red. Finally, the cargo plane rotated upwards and began to curve away to our left. Holly gunned our single engine, hauled her joystick back and twisted right. My linked joystick pressed against my tummy and I breathed in sharply. We climbed steeply from the safety of Mother Earth. After a few minutes of staring at a clear blue sky, my joystick eased forwards to reveal the pancake-flat panorama of the sprawling City of Perth.

I compelled myself to release my death grip on my seat. Slowly my blood pressure declined to nearer normal but I was still rigid with anxiety. Holly pointed out the various landmarks, explaining where we could and could not fly. My duplicate joystick moved in sympathy as Holly made photo-shot-runs on various Perth icons. While changing to a new roll of film, Margaret asked if I was feeling alright. I fibbed and tried to relax, risked a

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grab at my camera and managed a few one-handed shots in the direction of the places of interest through my tiny side windshield.

'Right folks, time's up. Let's head home for a beer, OK?'

As we approached the landing strip the Berliner made its approach. The cross breeze had picked up and I watched in amazement as the lumbering aircraft crabbed sideways above the right-hand-side of the runway. It seemed to hover before lurching sideways, dropping like a stone, bouncing heavily on the concrete strip. Veering wildly to the centre of the runway, it straightened then decelerated in what looked like an emergency stop before moving slowly to clear the runway to head for the parking area beside the other flying school planes.

'How did you rate that landing?' I asked, expecting to hear criticism.

'Pretty good, considering. Remember, John, they're training him to take-off and land on very short and narrow dirt airstrips. Definitely a pass, don't you think?'

The tower cleared us for landing and we started our descent but on a line several hundred metres to the right of the runway. Our tiny plane was being buffeted by the now blustery wind. My joystick jerked and wriggled in front of me as Holly adjusted with each gust. We were flying at an angle of around thirty degrees to the line of the runway. And we were far too high and must overshoot. To me Holly had lost it and I was fighting an irrational desire to act, to reach out for the joystick, to take control. Suddenly both joysticks moved forward and we were diving steeply, still crabbing, clearly doomed to crash onto the grass or into the cluster of white buildings which raced up to meet us.

I caught sight of John F with his camera raised, ready to record our demise.

My joystick pulled back sharply and twisted. As we screwed leftwards, the nose came up and the tail dropped. There was no runaway now, only sky. The undercarriage hit hard and the tyres screeched; we bounced once, then rolled gently forward and taxied off to park beside the Berliner.

When I tried to extract my feet from the corner where they had remained jammed throughout, they refused to respond. It was as if they were anaesthetised. Then came pins and needles followed by throbbing pain, causing me to stagger like an inebriate as we moved back to reception building to thank Holly, shake hands and make our escape.

Margaret thought it was one of the best experiences of its kind she had ever had. I said little, merely glad to have survived. Three weeks after our return to Scotland John F wrote to say the aero club had sent him a Joy Flight voucher addressed to me. They

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had charged us for a full hour but we had received only a thirty-minute joy flight. We happily donated it to John and Dorothy. After all, that's what friends are for.