

# Sky High

by Janice Raber



Sometimes a planned vacation doesn't follow the plan, and the unplanned one turns out better than the planned one. On an attempted escape from the cold winter this year, I headed to the Florida Keys, planning on some scuba diving and fun in the sun. Northern winds look harshly upon Long Island deserters and liberally endowed the south with their chilly gusts. For ten days they blew relentlessly, keeping deep-sea fishing fleets and dive charter boats harbor bound. Sure, there was still golf, and fishing close to shore, and some ocean swimming if you could tolerate seaweed engulfing your ankles and decorating your hair. But that wasn't the original plan. There was sightseeing for a few days with visiting friends and family from New York and Tiki bars with good music at night, but as much fun as that was, it wasn't the whole plan either. Diving was the plan, and the gear sat dry, untouched in the corner while the wind continued to blow.

There is an airport in Marathon Key and everyday as I passed by, I noticed the full wind-sock. Though high seas may keep ships in port, the airplanes didn't seem to be grounded by the high winds. One plane in particular drew my interest, a camouflage-painted jet fighter with a sign that invited "FLY A FIGHTER JET." A phone call later I switched to Plan B...flying high was to replace diving deep.

Captain Ed Steigerwald has been a pilot for 31 years. Almost all of his experience is in jets, some years domestic and 20 years as a civilian pilot with the U.S. Department of Defense. We would be flying a military aircraft, an L-39, the most widely used fighter jet in the world and still in production today. You'll notice I said we would be flying, meaning, I was going to be FLYING the plane, not just flying IN the plane. I would actually have control of the aircraft and, no, I am not a pilot.

Captain Ed explained that there are certain FAA regulations, restrictions and certifications when an aircraft is used for civilian use. The FAA has certified this aircraft in the experimental exhibition category. The restriction is that he cannot make the flight carrying a passenger for hire, so for the duration of the flight under this FAA regulation, I would become a temporary, partial owner of the plane. (Please

sign here, pay there, thank you very much.) There are no other fees or dues, expenses or liabilities that I would have.

"As far as the flight goes," Captain Ed continued, "after take off, once we turn out over the ocean, I'm going to let you fly the airplane for a bit." There followed probably the quickest flying lesson anyone has ever had, which was basically that I should do two important things...look outside and be very gentle with the stick. (Just like in scuba, only two important things: ascend slowly and never hold your breath!) Great! I can handle that! I can't wait to get started!

There were, however, a few more things to become familiar with that Captain Ed pointed out and described in some detail using a large photograph of the inside of the cockpit where I would be sitting. I would be in the copilot/gunner's seat. He would be in front in the pilot's seat. The control stick moves the aircraft left, right, up and down. The artificial horizon would show the degree angle of bank; 30 degrees is the standard turn, but we would be doing that, 45 degrees and a lot more,



L-39's controls and gauges.

including rollovers. We then discussed G forces (gravity forces). "One G is sitting here right now, 2 G is twice as heavy, 3 G you can practically not pick up your arm and 4 G you will feel really plastered in the seat," he said. "Going the other direction from 1 G to 0 is weightless. If we push the airplane further and harder we will get to negative G's. This is where you come up out of your seat and your stomach does a couple of flips. We won't push the airplane so far that we run the risk of losing consciousness. It's generally above 4 G's." (OK, that's fine with me.)

We talked about the combat maneuvers we would be doing and the gauges. The altimeter tells how high we are over the ocean above sea level and reads like the hands of a



Expert scuba diver, author Jan Raber, about to explore in another direction.

clock: big hand is hundreds of feet, little hand reads thousands. No movement is level flight. The side numbers are angle of attack up and down. Then he said, "When I give you the airplane, I will give it to you during the climb at about 13 or 14 nose up attitude. This will tell you how steep of a climb. After you've made a couple of turns, give the plane back to me. I'll demonstrate a combat maneuver, turn the airplane really pretty steep and I'll show you a wing-over where we come up like so and back around like this." (He is flying a model plane around with his hand, demonstrating.) "We're just trying to trade places with our enemy, if we had one, so we can turn steeper than he can and he ends up out here; then we can come up in a wing-over position. Not too radical." (OK, OK, I'm thinking. Let's do it!) "After that, I'll show you how to roll it; then you can try it a couple of times, if you want to. And we'll just go from there." (I want to, I want to.)

"Couple of things you'll be interested in," Captain Ed said ignoring my eagerness. "Over here is the air-conditioning," he points out. "Machine guns and missiles of course are disabled." (Of course.) "This red handle is the canopy-locking lever. We don't want to pull on this during flight because that will unlock the canopy and it will explode off the aircraft." (No, we don't want to grab that.)

Can we fly now? Not yet.

I had to hear the evacuation procedure. "This procedure," Capt. Ed explained very calmly, "is only if we had a big-time problem." "Now," he continued, "in 31 years I have over 10,000 flight hours, almost all of it's

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jet time in similar kinds of airplanes. In all this flying time I have never once really thought about leaving the airplane in flight. We have always managed to come home together, so that's the plan. However, IF we had a major problem and we had to get out to save ourselves, the procedure is pretty simple. First off I'd be yelling at you...Janice, BAIL OUT! BAIL OUT! BAIL OUT! Pull the red handle, jettison the canopy. You have to do yours; I can't do it for you. I'd do mine. Pull it back; it slides very easy. The canopy explodes off the aircraft. Step two, you need to unbuckle your seat belt and remove your seat straps, all of them." (I noticed it is right-hand release similar to a diver's weight belt.) "Step three: get out," he said next. "The easiest way out is negative G so we float out, or we turn upside down; that's choice two, we fall or climb out. Before that happens stand on your toes, bring your legs up as close as you can to your seat so you don't get caught up on the instrument panel."

"Now you are out of the airplane. This is us, (he points in the air), and the airplane is over there somewhere." (I picture myself floating around the sky gracefully.) "Put your thumbs in front of your eyes; that will focus your attention; reach over here by your heart, grab the parachute rip cord, pull it straight out. Enjoy your sky dive." (At no extra charge, I think.) "If you are falling from thousands of

feet up and you've never jumped out of an airplane before, it's quite an experience," he added with a smile. (Now I picture myself screaming for all I'm worth while tumbling ungracefully earthward.) Then, there's more. "Chances are we end up in the water; not much around here other than water." There followed a brief lesson on inflating the life jacket, kind of like a flight attendant gives you...in the unlikely event of a water landing, etc. (Snorkeling optional, I think.)

"Any questions?"

Can we fly now?

At last it is finally time to put on the army green-colored flight suit with all the zipper pockets. I placed my water bottle in the one by my right calf. Next came the orange life preserver, shaped very much like a horseshoe, and over that a black parachute. There is a parachute attached to the seat, but because I am smaller than the average fighter pilot, I had to wear this one. We climbed into our respective cockpits and buckled in. I fastened the headphones through



*Janice smiling in the cockpit.*

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which Captain Ed and I would communicate with each other and with the tower. The canopy was lowered and I latched it. The air-conditioning started and the cabin was pressurized.

We taxied down the runway, and within five minutes we were airborne, an advantage of using a small airport. Up and away into the wild blue yonder, or at least the 50 square miles of it that we had permission to use for our aerial acrobatics. I felt the G force as we did a steep climb and banked. Captain Ed did a few maneuvers and then it was my turn. I was amazed at the sensitivity of this enormous, powerful jet plane and the immediate response to my slightest touch on the control stick. At 300 MPH things happen fast! I banked left, right, circled and climbed. Unbelievably exciting! We dove and experienced zero G. Then I did a rollover! What a thrill it was - pushing the stick left, further and further wondering if I could really do it. Could I really get this plane to turn over and what would happen if I did, and all of a sudden there we were upside down and still rolling. I didn't dare stop then. Not yet! I kept the stick hard left and we

finished the roll and I straightened out, watching the artificial horizon now for a moment to be sure which way was up.

I looked out the window at the Florida Keys below. At our highest we were about 7,500 feet. The day was clear and sunny with great visibility! We cruised around a bit and buzzed the golf course at Key Colony in Marathon. With all the canals and boat slips, it really does resemble a key shape. Duck Key looks very much like the head of a duck.

We tried an evasive maneuver that was in the movie "Top Gun" where they went in for a shot and then banked and climbed high and fast and banked again and rolled over. We did a touch and fly at the airport and then went up to almost 4 G and I was too excited to really notice whether I could move my arms or not.

Then Captain Ed said to pull my harness straps tight, and we did one more trick before returning to land. We turned the plane over and flew upside down for a while. How strange to look up to see the earth below you and the curve of the horizon going up like a bowl instead of the downward arc I had become accustomed to and expected. There were the patches of green

foliage and beige sand over my head, and I could see the 7-mile bridge upside down, stretched like a ribbon between Marathon and Bahia Honda State Park. I could see the blue canvas awnings of Key Colony and then, just when I was getting used to this view of the earth, we turned upright and were banking towards the airport.

We came in for a perfect landing, but my heart was still flying, and I think I spent the rest of my vacation sky-high in my head. Sometimes when plans don't work out, a better plan comes along!

For information on flying  
Tropical Jet Fighters e-mail:  
tropicalfighters@yahoo.com  
Marathon Airport in the Florida Keys  
U.S. 1 at mile marker 52.2  
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