

# The Pilots Journals

## A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

*At the time of this story I was Flight Lieutenant Lowery of No 75 Squadron, No 81 Wing based at RAAF Williamtown, about 100 miles north of Sydney.*

The Squadron had recently completed its conversion from the Avon Sabre to the brand new Mirage III, but we were still experimenting with this new jet and its remarkable performance envelope. There was also considerable interest in the RAAF's first supersonic fighter from the Australian community at large and we were frequently asked to extend a navigation leg to show the new jet over one city or another.

On this occasion, the Squadron had deployed to Darwin, the tropical capital of Australia's Northern Territory, to gain hot weather experience with the aircraft and to begin intercept training with Darwin's air defence radar unit. However, before getting down to the hard work, we were to spend a week acclimatising to this part of the world and familiarising ourselves with the airfields, instrument approaches, visual navigation features and weather. To this end, the large ferry drop tanks were retained on the aircraft to increase our sortie duration times.

This particular mission was a four-ship low-level simulated strike on the Lake Argyle Dam some 300 miles to the south-west of Darwin. This would take us over some of the most featureless and poorly mapped terrain in Australia; basically flat, dusty scrub country in the dry season, with the odd clump of Eucalyptus trees and thousands of termite mounds to aid navigation. There were no roads shown on the map and any that existed would be stock trails made permanent by the 4 wheel drives and 3 ton trucks used by stockmen who migrated from station to station as cattle mustering dictated. Land usage was measured in acres per head around here; not heads per acre!

Even Lake Argyle and its dam were not on the maps and we had no idea how big the lake was or what the dam looked like. We only knew that plans to turn it into the "Rice Bowl of Asia" failed dismally when the resident Magpie Geese ate the project out of house and home.

As an additional aid to navigation, the route was almost totally devoid of any noticeable contours, there being no hills above 300 odd feet, no permanent river beds until we reached the Ord River that fed the target dam, no railway lines and, thankfully, no power lines. Known hazards were the thousands of Kites that thermalled in the willie-willies generated by the heat and the odd dead gum tree that would be hard to see against the dark red earth and grey scrub background.

So, armed with all that useful information, we lit burners at 15 sec intervals (we didn't do formation take-offs at high all-up weights), lifted off at 176 knots and formed into low-level arrow-head formation at 500 feet. After crossing Darwin Harbour, the Cox Peninsular and the Crocodile infested Bynoe Harbour we settled down at 480 knots and tried, without success, to visually match the terrain to the map.

I think at this stage three of us dumped the map into the map case and decided to leave navigation to the flight leader.

Thirty minutes latter we were over the southern tip of Lake Argyle and accelerating to strike speed of 540 knots. But the visual impact of this lake was immense. We had no idea it was so large - it turned out to be five times larger than Sydney Harbour - and it seemed totally out of place; stuck in the middle of a harsh, red countryside. Finding all of this fresh water in such a barren area is akin to finding hot springs at the South Pole!

By comparison, the dam holding all this back was tiny and I doubt that any of the simulated bombs we released in a 60-degree dive attack from 12,000 feet would have hit it.

Still in disbelief, we flew back down the lake and then turned north-east for the mouth of the Daly River where, we were told, a crash-landed WWII Liberator bomber in a swamp constituted our next turning point.

By now the drop tanks were empty and the jet was a pure pleasure to fly. The leader increased speed to almost 600 knots and we watched with amusement the dust trails that suddenly appeared in our wake. Presumably, several parts of the aircraft, and the drop tanks in particular, were forming oblique shock waves that were hitting the ground just 200 feet below us and stirring up a storm. Each of us in turn climbed up to about 1000 feet to get a better view and we observed that the individual trails left by the aircraft flying about 300 feet apart laterally formed into a single dense red cloud travelling at 600 knots a mile or so back.

Suddenly a thick, straight brown line flashed towards us and in its centre, directly in line with our formation, was a 3 ton truck leaving its own tiny trail of red dust. Just before it flashed underneath, we saw that the truck's tray was packed with about 20 Aborigines, all sitting down and dozing in the hot sun. They were certainly not looking at us and I doubt that any had ever seen a jet aircraft up close and personal, if at all, and they wouldn't hear us at this speed until they were suddenly immersed in the private dust storm travelling in our wake.

We must all have been startled by this occurrence, as all aircraft instantly zoomed to 1000 feet. I know I was wondering what on earth those Abos, probably stockmen on the way to a cattle station, must have thought. There they were dozing in the open tray of a jolting truck when suddenly, out of the blue, they are hit by a dust storm accompanied by a tremendous wind blast and the ear-splitting sound of four jets and their shock waves

We formed into line astern and circled back to see if they were all right. However, our apprehension was soon put to rest. We found the truck stopped in the middle of the dirt track with all of its occupants standing beside it. Now, at low speed, they could hear us coming and see for the first time what had caused such an explosive phenomenon. They were all jumping up and down and waving madly, but the sight I will always remember was the broad white smile on each black face.

We had made their day by generating a unique experience and I dare say they dine-out on this story by the campfires at night to this day.

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