



Taking off on a dream flight

Donning leather helmet and goggles and taking the controls of a Tiger Moth was a fantasy come true for **JOHN-PAUL MOLONEY**

I'm 700m up when the word comes through my headset that it's time for me to take control of the old warbird.

I grasp for the first time the turned wooden stick that until that point has been moving about between my legs, controlled from behind by the pilot.

Now, I'm in charge of a Tiger Moth.

Long before security in the air became paramount, I'd once pressed a couple of buttons to change the altitude of a cruising 747. But this is real flying.

I'm amazed how easy and responsive the controls are given the age of the machine I'm flying. It's raining and grey, but I can see the horizon and I dip the nose towards it slightly.

My pilot encourages me to try banking left and right and this is quite effortless.

To me, it's utterly magic.

The couple of minutes I'm in control are fleeting and I'm sad when the word comes back to me that it's time to give up the stick to the expert.

Right then, I feel like I could go on all day.

As a kid my imagination sometimes used to stray into a sky buzzing with biplanes.

Even in my clumsy hands, some wooden clothes pegs, a pot of glue and some Paddle Pop sticks could create for me an airfield of model fighters.

Of course, there had to be a three-winged scarlet one for the Red Baron and some green ones for the British Sopwith Camel.

As an '80s kid, I probably should have been more into the fighter jets of *Top Gun*, but the slow speed and intimacy of early air combat was much better suited to a kid with a plane in each hand. For a few years a friend's computer game called *Sopwith* had me wasting hours doing loop-the-loops and dropping bombs.

While I'd spent plenty of time in my early years pretending to be in control of one of these beautiful old planes, I must admit I've never actually believed I'd ever be in one – let alone actually controlling it. I supposed it's the same way I've never really expected to be climbing the rigging of a tall ship.

In hindsight, I have to ask myself why, because it could scarcely be easier to fulfil this childhood fantasy.

Two hours from Canberra, at the Camden

airport, I found myself wearing a leather cap and goggles and sitting in the front seat of a de Havilland Tiger Moth owned and operated by Airborne Aviation. I was feeling quite aviator-cool sitting in the cockpit. It was only later in the day when my wife showed me my photo I was relieved of this misapprehension. I looked like a massive dork.

A descendent of the iconic fighters of World War I, the Tiger Moth was built in the thousands in the 1930s but was swiftly superseded by the monoplanes that dominated World War II and the skies ever since.

Still, the Tiger Moth served an extremely important purpose during that war as an air force trainer. As my pilot at Camden – Vietnam War veteran pilot Doug Graham – explained, back in the 1940s the bright yellow of the Tiger Moth signalled to more experienced pilots that a rookie was in the air.

Thousands of pilots who fought in the skies of World War II learned their craft in the relatively slow and simple Tiger Moth before graduating into more modern fighters



and bombers. As we taxied towards the runway, I reflected on this. I was taking my first flight in the same cockpit and pressing my elbows against the same steel as men who'd gone on to fight and die in the air.

The morning of my flight the skies were grey and threatening. Unfortunately, as Doug explained, that meant we could only climb to about 650m, ruling out any aerobatics.

An early surprise to me was that we took off from a grass runway, the wooden propeller now a barely visible blur in front of the pleasingly roaring engine. As we climbed and banked towards Camden, Doug explained over the intercom how communication between pilot and ground crew and even pilot and trainee instructor was a luxury not afforded to the Air Force rookies back in the day.

Pilot and trainee would have to rely on their instruments to keep them on course, their eyes to keep clear of other aircraft and a rubber speaking tube – still present but not used in the Camden plane – to speak to each other.

The payoff for missing out on aerobatics was returning home to the Camden airstrip at a low altitude of just 175m, following the Nepean River.

Doug radioed through to the tower to request a "touch and go". He didn't need to explain what that was.

We approached the runway, slowing to 60 knots or so, a speed where every little gust of wind pushed our nose off course a little, requiring some small adjustment.

As the grass approached our wheels, the engine was almost shut down, making it an almost silent final approach.

Despite being in a 70-year-old plane essentially made of wood and fabric, I didn't feel at all nervous as we made our gentle glide to earth.

The "touch" on the grass was more gentle than I'd imagined, and we rolled along silent for a few seconds before the engine roared again for the "go" as we accelerated and took off for another circuit of the airfield.

A few minutes later, we touched down for the final time, taxied to the hanger and the

fantasy experience was over.

As we returned to the hanger, I asked Doug over the radio if he thought a plane like this could still be flying in another 70 years.

Unlikely, he thought, given the dwindling supplies of parts and the dying expertise in skills such as applying fabric to the wings.

Since we can't take it for granted that these magnificent old flying machines will be available to us for too much longer, I was grateful I'd got up in one. The kid playing with the Paddle Pop stick planes 20 years ago would have been thrilled.

John-Paul Moloney flew courtesy of Airborne Aviation at Camden Airport. Telephone (02) 4655 7200. Thirty-minute flights are priced at \$242 (scenic) and \$267 (aerobatics), 45 minute flights are \$363 (scenic) and \$400 (aerobatics).

John-Paul Moloney discovers the magic of flying a Tiger Moth with Airborne Aviation. Not only was it a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take the controls of a 70-year-old plane, but it served as a great way to see Camden.

