

WING AND A PRAYER



When airline pilots fly for laughs this is the kind of thing they like to do – seat of the pants extreme acrobatics. Besides being fun, it sharpens flying skills and hones reactions in case of real-life emergencies. We sent **Piers Townley**, *Flipside's* own trainee pilot, on a mission to see if he was made of the right stuff

FLYING AT 200mph (325km/h) might not sound particularly thrilling. After all, a jet airliner travels at three times that speed and that's about as exciting as a bus ride. But when you're flying on your side and so low that you think your ear is going to brush the ground, it's one hell of a buzz.

Aerobatics instructor Darren Audet flips his biplane, affectionately named after *Gone with the Wind* heroine Scarlett O'Hara ('because she's feisty and twitchy') and we skim the runway and soar gut-churningly fast into the clouds. A huge weight squeezes my insides as the g-forces grow, but I've got a grin so wide you could put a coat hanger in my mouth.

EMERGENCY MOVES

For learner pilots and professional flyers, the aerobatics course in the Pitts Special is a must, just for the experience. It's not something everyone can sign up for. You have to be at least in pilot training if not fully qualified, but business is booming.

A former military and now an easyJet commercial pilot, Darren and his partner Marie-Louise run

Advanced Flying Ltd, a company that teaches aerial emergency manoeuvres. He likes to call them aerial acrobatics, but to you and me and anyone lucky enough to see Scarlett twisting and turning in the sky, they're stunts. Loops, rolls, stall turns – manoeuvres that seem to defy the laws of gravity and turn your stomach inside-out – all are part of Darren's everyday skills.

Since French pioneer pilot Adolphe Pégoud first flew upside down back in 1913, stunt flying or aerobatics has been a paramount skill for all military pilots and on the wishlist for many commercial ones.

'There are plenty of airline pilots who want to try the course,' says Darren. 'They want to get back to basics, to practice their flying skills. It prepares them for any aerial eventuality. But there's something incredible about flying this way. It's real seat-of-your-pants stuff, absolutely exhilarating. You have to think in three dimensions, think of the entire area, the ground and airspace

and how you're going to move the aircraft through it.'

Darren takes me through the pre-flight check list, a detailed tour of the aircraft, checking the engine, flaps, aileron, rudder – all the important bits. When you're pulling 6g at 900 m (3000 ft) over the English countryside, you really don't want anything falling off.

BACK TO BASICS

The cockpit is so basic it's almost barren. There are the expected dials for altitude, airspeed and oil pressure but apart from the flimsy looking stick and rudder pedals, that's about it. It's also quite a squeeze, especially when you're wearing a parachute and flying helmet. It's a tandem two-seater and I'm in the front, but all I can see is the aircraft's nose and the propeller.

Scarlett is an American Pitts Special, one of the world's most favoured aerobatic planes, with a fuel and oil system modified to allow total control and manoeuvrability while inverted. It's also built ▶

We don't want to alarm you, but Darren Audet, the pilot throwing this Pitts Special about, is also a pilot for easyJet. Test pilot and French Flying ace pilot Adolphe Pégoud, left, was thought to be the first pilot to fly both a loop and upside down in 1913

