



Flight school: The author meets her "enemy" (left) and her copilot (above).

## I hate to fly.

Yet here I am, strapped into the pilot seat of a fighter plane. In moments I'll be piercing the wild blue yonder with the nose of my screaming Marchetti aircraft, engaging in dog-fights with an opponent who will be trying to shoot me down. The bullets will be fake, but the Marchetti, the combat maneuvers, and the ground far, far below will be absolutely real.

I've never flown a plane before.

In fact, just being a passenger in an airplane makes me queasy. And that's why I've decided to fly this mission today.

Like most people, I use air travel out of necessity. When I must fly, I clench my teeth, cross my fingers, and trust to the fates that the plane will rise, fly, land safely. I've been known to dash off a will on my way to the airport, clasp hands with startled total strangers during takeoffs and landings, and start the applause when the plane touches down. I know that airline crashes are rare; it's just that it scares me to put so much faith into something that seems so impossible.

When I read an ad in the newspaper for a combat flight school that offers the experience of flying a plane without having to have a pilot's license, I saw an opportunity for total immersion therapy. I thought if I could put my hands on the controls and have an intensely winning flight experience, perhaps I could overcome my fear of flying for good.

A little skeptical, I phoned Air Combat U.S.A. at (800) 522-7590 with a few questions.

**Q.** Why don't I need a license?

## Fear of Flying

Being a passenger in a plane made her nervous, so she tried her hand at being a pilot. **by Maxine Paetro**

**A.** Though you'll be flying the plane, a highly trained fighter pilot will be beside you in the copilot's seat with dual controls. In this context, it's completely legal for you to fly.

**Q.** Is this safe?

**A.** Air Combat has had 10,000 customers and we haven't lost one yet.

**Q.** Is this any fun?

**A.** It's the thrill of a lifetime.

The idea of quashing my fear and having fun at the same time proved irresistible. I sent off my check that day.

### D Day

It's a bright July afternoon—a clear and perfect day to fly. I take a train to Farmingdale, New York's Republic Airfield with my friend Danny, who'll take pictures and offer moral support. As usual, I'm having preflight jitters, wondering who should inherit my house, my diamond earrings, my cats.

We arrive early and meet the two modern-day barnstormers who will be my everything today: Michael ("Baron") von Vietinghoff-Scheel, a German pilot who flew the mighty RF-4 Phantom attack air fighter for the Luftwaffe, and Mark ("Bof") Ebling, a Pennsylvania native who flew F/A-16 attack aircrafts

during the Gulf War.

Bof agrees to share the cockpit with me. He nicknames me "Mad Max" and offers me two mini coffee cakes so that I'll have food in my belly. I'm told that less than 10 percent of day-tripper pilots get airsick, and the coffee cake ballast should help keep me in the majority.

I ask who typically enrolls in the school and learn that the range is vast: from an 8-year-old child to a great-grandmother who, after her first flight, signed on for the advanced classes. The only requirements are that you have a healthy heart, good eyesight, and, because the parachutes can handle up to 245 pounds, weigh no more than that. Most of Air Combat's customers are men ages 35 to 50, but 10 percent are women—and I'm told that women tend to fly more aggressively than men. *I'm* not feeling even slightly aggressive, however. I admit to Bof and Baron that I'm a nervous flyer and that I'm hoping to change all that today.

My opponent arrives. Siobhan Reilly, a sales manager for Xerox, has signed up for air combat because she's looking for thrills. Newly divorced and the mother of a 6-year-old daughter, she tells me, "I woke up one morning and I was thirty. I realized I hadn't done enough



exciting things with my life." She now plans to inject her normal routine with two adventures a year. Air combat is first—hang gliding is next.

Siobhan and I pick out our flight suits, a choice of weathered olive drab and gray. We change, roll up our sleeves, and are instantly transformed: We look like we've been flying all our lives. Then Baron calls me to the phone: Air Combat home office is on the line. Baron has rattled me out! He has taken my nervous Nellie chatter seriously and has told base that I'm too frightened to fly! They're suggesting strongly that if that's the case, I drop out.

I am insulted. I am incensed.

"Baron's off the wall," I tell the marketing director. "I'm up for this."

I put it to Bof. "Baron says I'm chicken. Are you afraid to fly with me?"

"Nope," says Bof. "You'll do fine. We'll keep you safe."

"Good," I say. "Baron is the enemy. He must die."

## Ground School

Before we can wrap our white knuckles around the control sticks, Siobhan and I need to know what we're doing. Bof stands before a blackboard with diagrams and holds two pointers with miniature fighter planes glued to the ends.

I wonder how much stuff he can jam into our heads.

We learn how to maneuver our planes, chase down our targets, and position the planes at the correct angle in which to "shoot" at the enemy. We learn about the effects of gravity, how at four times the force of gravity (+4Gs), the blood in our heads will be squeezed so far down that we may start to black out.

Because the bullets are fake and the pointer sticks are toys, everything looks tiny and innocent and very easy.

I'm not fooled.

I remember a former driving-school instructor of mine lashing out in frustration. "I know you're smart," she barked at me. "Why can't you park a car?"

I recall a time I tried to dock a powerboat. As I glided inexorably toward a rich man's cabin cruiser, my teacher sprinted across the deck on the toes of his size-14 deck shoes and threw himself between the two hulls.

I think of video games where time after

## The Wild Blue Yonder

On the tarmac, Danny takes photos of the four of us in front of the planes. The Marchettis are very small, shiny, and (dare I say this?) cute. Like bumper cars with wings. We break into groups of two, strap on our parachutes. We

# Because

THE BULLETS ARE FAKE, BECAUSE THE POINTER STICKS ARE TOYS, AND BECAUSE BOF IS A NATURAL TEACHER, EVERYTHING LOOKS TINY AND INNOCENT AND VERY EASY. BUT I'M NOT FOOLED AT ALL.



time my little car crashes and burns.

I have a poor sense of spatial relationships and iffy reflexes. Will today's flight be my downfall?

Bof taps on the blackboard with his airplane-on-a-stick: "The Rules to Live By:"

1. Be aggressive. "Turn toward the enemy."
2. Keep the enemy in sight. "Lose sight, lose the fight."
3. Airspeed is life. "The person with the most airspeed wins."

And lastly, the fighter pilot credo:

4. Look good at all costs. "It's better to look good and die than to look bad and live."

I can't help but laugh at the machismo.

As the moment of truth nears, I cast sidelong glances at Siobhan, a woman who leads a squadron of office-equipment salespeople every day. She's not going to roll over and let me trounce her. I feel my womanhood is at stake. Not only do I want to survive this mission, I want to win.

climb into the cockpit: I take the pilot's seat, Bof gets into the copilot's seat beside me.

Bof gives me a quick course in aircraft communication—which button to push to talk to him, which button is his link to Baron. I glance at the instrument panel, which, of course, tells me nothing.

Bof rolls us out on to the runway. I give my friend Danny a weak thumbs-up, which is followed by a flash of insight. I should have left my house to him! All earthly thoughts leave me seconds later, as Bof begins the takeoff. We are airborne with Siobhan and Baron following ten to 20 feet behind.

"Let's just fly nice and easy," I say. But that's not to be. We do a few practice sweeps, then Bof turns the controls over to me. "You're flying," he says. "Go get 'em." The enemy streaks out ahead of us, then doubles back, high above us.

"Fight's on, fight's on," Bof yells into his radio link with Baron. At Bof's direction, I pull back on the stick, and the plane rises, loops over completely. G-forces press like crazy. We're upside down, tracking Siobhan and Baron, who try to evade me by flying into the sun.

The horizon slides, spins.

I spot the mosquito I'm trying to kill. It rolls. I follow. I get it in my crosshairs. I lock on.

I fire.

It's a hit! Smoke streams; Bof gives me a high five. Another pass. Now I can't see



Siobhan's plane at all. I'm looking everywhere, rolling, looping all over the sky. "Good," Bof says, "You're doing better than you know."

Baron's voice comes over the mike: "Tracking, tracking, tracking," but in his German accent it sounds like, "Tricky, tricky, tricky." I think maybe he's giving us a compliment and don't realize what's happening.

Pow, we're hit.

I pull up on the stick, and the nose obeys. There's no longer any sense of up and down. No sky, no water, just a neck-stretching search-and-hope-to-find at 125 m.p.h., 6,000 feet up. But now I'm not thinking about fear of flying. The mission has become: Keep the coffee cake down. Keep the coffee cake down at all costs.

I lose the coffee cake.

I look at my watch. Fifteen minutes down, another 45 to go. It's a hundred degrees under our plastic bubble. My deodorant fails me. My plan to use air combat to

overcome my fears seems incredibly stupid. I hadn't realized how *physically* stressful this experience would be. My body screams, "Bail out, bail out!"

We climb, but they're good and they don't waver. Let them kill us, I pray, so we can finally land.

We're hit!

Bof tells me to lift the nose, look over my shoulder. I do what he tells me. Nothing could have prepared me for this. I realize that video games are to dogfights what singing in the shower is to performing at the Met. "There she is," says Bof. "Up there." I get the enemy in my sights. I squeeze the trigger.

I miss.

We chase the enemy down. "Good girl. Fire," says Bof, and I do. High five.

Where are we? Is it over yet? "Nose up, not too hard," says Bof. Yes, I'm about to stall out my aircraft a mile over the Atlantic. I lower the nose, hand the controls over to Bof, say hello to my little barf bag again.

And we take a bullet up the butt.

Siobhan and Baron fly far and fast. "They're scared," I hear Baron say. That does it. He'll be sorry he ever tangled with me. I press, roll ass-over-helmet. "That's it, watch their plane, over there," Bof tells me.

The one gauge I know how to read registers 4½ Gs. The blood in my brain is down around my earlobes. My vision starts to go gray. I complete the roll and even out.

The enemy is in my sights, then out, then in, then out. Then in. "Fire," says Bof. I do. A hit.

Way to go. Yeah.

"Want to do some maneuvers now?" asks Bof. I nod, but I don't mean it.

We level off, then on Bof's count, I shove the stick hard left. We roll sharply 90 degrees. My stomach rebels again. Bof talks to Baron. Incredibly, mercifully, Siobhan, too, has had enough. We head into the airport. When we touch ground, I struggle out of the seat belts and parachute. I kiss the ground.

I'm dizzy. I'm sick. But I made three kills and lived to see the dawn.

Danny greets me on the tarmac. "Do you know what you've just done?" Admiration is in his eyes.

In the flight room, we watch the videos of our flight while Bof narrates. Our maneuvers look nothing like what we've been taught; I dub them "the coffee cake maneuvers." Now that it's over, I'm having a great time. I've even forgiven Baron for selling me short. Reluctantly, we aviators change out of our groovy flight clothes and depart for home.

Back on the city streets, I sense that a transformation has occurred. I swagger a bit as I step out in front of a fire-red Porsche. I give eye contact to a group of tough-looking teenagers coming toward me on the sidewalk. Mad Max is a cocky woman who won't be making out pre-flight wills anymore.

Hey, what do you know? I love to fly. □

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Maxine Paetro is a contributing editor at New Woman.

## Bof tells

ME TO LIFT THE NOSE, LOOK OVER MY SHOULDER.

NOTHING COULD HAVE PREPARED ME FOR THIS. I

REALIZE THAT VIDEO GAMES ARE TO DOGFIGHTS WHAT

SINGING IN THE SHOWER IS TO PERFORMING AT THE MET.