



"I still find it hard to get my head round the fact that my little boy was actually flying that bloody big jet"



- 1 Age 16 with the Cessna when he flew solo
- 2 Father and son on the flight deck
- 3 The day he got his type rating
- 4 The flight



THAT'S MY BOY!

PROUD FATHER RICHARD BARR TAKES A FLIGHT WITH HIS PILOT SON

LAST MONTH

'Nick's just through there,' said the flight attendant pointing to the flight deck. 'Go and say "hello!"'

TWO YEARS AGO

'We were trying to get into a town called Napier. The cloud stopped us going direct, so we diverted to a much smaller airfield to follow a road in through a valley. We kept on getting forced lower and lower until the cloud was covering the tops of the valley edges too, and then turned a corner and found that the path was entirely blocked so it meant doing some pretty steep turns, seeing some forest get quite close to the nose and trying not to hit Tim in the other plane, then had to perform another three diversions to get to a different aerodrome in order to get the required 300nm [nautical miles] done, and get a signature! More than 25 years ago, one of the earliest words he learned to

pronounce was 'Spitfire'. Since his very early days he was mad about planes, so much so that when a small grey cat arrived in the family, she was named Spitfire too.

Later he built and flew a radio controlled plane with one of those tiny engines that sound like very loud and annoying mosquitos. That hobby ended abruptly one afternoon when the plane got out of radio range, crashed in a sugar beet field and was written off.

I am not sure where my son Nick got it from but flying was circulating through his arteries from a very early age. It was certainly not from my side of my family (my parents had a persistent fear of flying, and for years I would rewrite my will every time I travelled abroad).

For Nick it was different. I remember him as a small boy in one of those quaint Trislander passenger planes (three engines and only one pilot) that shuttle between Guernsey and Jersey. He sat with the pilot and

carefully studied the controls. Later he confessed that he was getting ready to bring the plane down safely if the pilot had a heart attack.

When he was a teenager he had flying lessons and he flew solo when he was sixteen. Then for a while flying gave way to other things and he remained grounded (at least so far as being a pilot was concerned) for many years.

In his mid twenties, when other careers did not appeal to him (he spent some time working in a solicitors' office and very sensibly rejected that career path) he decided to try to qualify as a commercial pilot. Modern aircraft can almost fly themselves, but that makes becoming a pilot no easier. You have to have far greater technical knowledge than in the days when there were just a stick, a couple of pedals and a few rudimentary instruments.

There are few places that train pilots and the competition is stiff, involving gruelling assessments and

sophisticated airplane. An Airbus was used for the final certification of the would-be pilots and they flew around the country practising take offs and landings - their own private jet, except that it could seat more than 150.

And now, a fully trained first officer, he routinely flies one leg of every journey from Belfast (where he is currently based - the arrangement is that the Captain flies one way and the First Officer flies the other way) to destinations as far away as Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and Italy. He has already notched up more than 500 hours of flying time.

On a cold bright September morning Nick met me at Belfast airport. I was to stay with him in his shared flat (he had to sleep on the floor - new pilots are not paid a fortune). I had never been to Northern Ireland before and we had a whistle stop tour of the sights - the Titanic exhibition (awesome), the Carrick-a-Rede Rope Bridge

(underwhelming), the Giant's Causeway (fascinating but far too many tourists) and the sights and sounds of Belfast.

There are still signs of the trauma the city has been through (still many menacing slogans on walls and the tops of high buildings; but also plenty of indications of recovery and rebirth - and we had excellent steaks at the Barking Dog restaurant).

When it was time for home Nick dropped me off at the airport before disappearing behind the scenes. An hour later I walked into the plane. The crew, having been tipped off, had saved me a seat at the front of the passenger cabin.

Before we took off I was given a quick tour of the flight deck - a bewildering array of dials and controls. 'Do you know what they all do?' I asked Nick. 'Of course - and I know what this does too,' he said pointing to something that looked like a

playstation joystick. That is how modern planes are flown these days. Perhaps his time on a computer was well spent after all.

Then the doors were closed and we made our way to the end of the runway. With a surge of power the big jet lifted off and soared into the sky. An hour later everything went quiet, but no one was panicking. The plane seemed to hang in the air before we gently came down for a smooth big jet.

landing in Stansted.

The remarkable thing about the flight was that it was unremarkable. Everything about it was normal. Nick later explained that much of modern flying is about fuel management, so the engines are powered down when you start to descend - hence the quiet. I still find it hard to get my head round the fact that my little boy was actually flying that bloody big jet.

