



This is your CAPTAIN SPEAKING

*Renowned airman, Captain Laurie Kay, on
new pilots, technology and magic moments*

IT WAS FAN-BLOODY-TASTIC. I WAS IN DUXFORD IN ENGLAND LAST SEPTEMBER, about to take my first flight in a Spitfire. A friend had loaned me his SA Airforce flying overall. It had the old wings on it and even the rank I'd held in the SA Airforce all those years ago.

We climbed into the aircraft that had been converted into a two-seater and as it started up ... man ... you feel the vibrations, you smell the fuel, you see the smoke. Then you open up the power and head into the blue. Up there ... we looped and rolled, we waltzed and danced.' Captain Laurie Kay, celebrated South African pilot and flying legend, pauses. There's a catch in his voice.

'I get a little emotional about this. I grew up reading *Biggles* books, so to be granted the opportunity to fly in the iconic Spitfire was absolutely unbelievable. The powers that be gave us perfect weather and as I was flying I realised that 70 years ago, in the Battle of Britain, men were flying solo in these, fighting for survival.'

This Spitfire flight is pretty high up on his list of career highlights, a list that has several momentous moments jostling for first place. This is the man who captained the 747 that flew over the 1995 Rugby World Cup and led the three 747s that flew in close formation over Thabo Mbeki's inauguration; he's flown many of our local dignitaries and piloted a few planes for big-name Hollywood productions. But for him, 'life's not a dress rehearsal ... and right now I am trying to pack everything into the third act'.

After 30 years flying for SAA, he retired, only to join Nationwide as a captain. So he's well qualified to comment on the youngsters joining the profession.

'It's hard. Right now youngsters go for training, get the qualifications and then discover there are not necessarily jobs for them. They struggle to get the 1 000 flying hours they need before any organisation will look at them.

'But for those who are on time, who are neatly dressed, who knock on doors ... they will get the jobs. Because in this industry you need passion. It's the basic ingredient. You need to have a desire to do it. You also need to have the money to do it; if you're not sponsored by a company or institution, it's not cheap. To anyone who is thinking of entering the aviation business, I say they have to start with the end in sight. If you want to be a commercial pilot, focus on that and do what is needed to get there.

'And once you've got your licence, you need to be responsible. You have to suppress your ego. It is too easy to think you're immortal up there. You have to always obey the rules.'

Laurie (while he might be Captain Kay up in the air, when you speak to him his warmth and enthusiasm are infectious and he has to be a Laurie) says that even though he's in his 'Act Three', he's not daunted by the challenges and technological changes currently facing the industry.

'I really don't see huge challenges or changes. The industry has always had its ups and downs and right now it is still feeling the effects of the tough economic climate.

'And yes, the on-board technology is unbelievable – an aircraft can now do automatic landings in unbelievable weather conditions; satellite navigation is so accurate that two aircraft could literally pass within metres of one another; and the aircraft's on-board computer will communicate any snags with the system on the ground so that when you land (and you might not even be aware there was a snag) a solution has been found or a part sourced to fix the snag. But aircraft technology has always been progressive.'

Laurie's been asked about his 1995 Rugby World Cup flight repeatedly, yet he doesn't flag: 'It was not difficult, but it was aggressive flying and we were given a specific time, 2.32.45 seconds, that we had to be over the target stadium because it was going to be broadcast internationally.' He stops to snort with laughter. 'I did wonder if they thought the Jumbo was like *Airwolf* and could hover outside the stadium.'


Much to the crowd's delight, they had to do two passes over the stadium. 'For me as well as the entire team involved (including the military air traffic control, city council and

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police) it was such a huge privilege to be part of the glue that brought the nation together that day. People remember two things from 24 June 1995: Joel Stransky's drop kick and the 747.'

Today though, Laurie wants us to remember a DVD, called *Flight for a Nation*, that he and several of his peers created in order to preserve South African aviation heritage and raise money for charity. The DVD contains remarkable footage of iconic moments – including the 'Three Ship' 747 Union Building formation that was a world-aviation first – and has even been given high praise by Clint Eastwood. Laurie met him ('just so cool, he really is a great man') and Morgan Freeman when they were in South Africa filming *Invictus* and both were presented with their own copies. The next day, Eastwood told him, 'This is terrific, it is really fantastic.'

And it is, says Laurie, as all the proceeds go to the South African Guide-Dogs Association For The Blind. The sales of the DVD have, to date, sponsored several guide dogs and preserved our aviation history.

'This little DVD really is my ultimate career highlight. I've been so incredibly fortunate in my life and this allows me to give a little something back.' 

**For your copy of *Flight for a Nation*, contact
Florence Bilsland on ☎ 011 705 3512/3.**

Laurie says she has a lovely Scottish accent.

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