

FLAT TOP

One Week Later

They have to be in Florida almost two weeks before the race, because of Celeste's duties as co-promoter of the event, and various pre-race publicity commitments the Bikesters have. Terry's going to fly to Florida. Nitro, Celeste and TK will drive out with the truck and trailer. This way, Terry gets a couple of extra weeks at home.

Nitro and TK have taken SuperBike totally apart and carefully checked everything, replacing any part with even a slight amount of wear. The bike is now back together and ready to race. They also went all through RocketBike making any changes or modifications that Terry, and the computer readouts from the test at China Lake told them were necessary.

Communicating by computer, Ben, Jim and TK have totally redesigned the flight surfaces of the bike, getting rid of the short Delta wings that fold into the body when not in use. Instead they've come up with a complete lifting body design, using ducted air to increase lift and lower the stall speeds -- very much like the advanced designs TK saw at Edwards. They have also finished the modifications to the trailer, and are ready to give the 'Flight Deck' a test.

The twins have been driving Nerissa crazy. They want to see Terry fly on RocketBike. She reluctantly gives in and agrees to testing it here on the farm, even though Terry's exploits are very unsettling to her.

Flying off the Flat top

It's another cool and clear morning as they get everything set to give the trailer launch a try. RocketBike is sitting on top of the trailer in its ready position. Terry is in his silver flight suit, with his parachute on this time. He and Nitro are up on top of the trailer by the bike, talking, as Terry puts on his helmet. They are going over things one last time. As Nitro says: "You can't be too careful."

Terry and Nitro shake hands and Nitro goes back down to the ground and over to the computer with TK. Over to the side, Celeste is standing with Nerissa and the twins. Celeste knows that the racing, and before that the daredevil stunts, that are so much a part of Terry's life, are hard for Nerissa to deal with. She also knows that Nerissa would never ask Terry to give up something that he loves so much.

Terry is on RocketBike and everything reads "Go" on the computer screen in front of TK. Nerissa looks up at Terry sitting on the bike, and Terry gives her a "thumbs up, no sweat" sign. TK begins the count down.

Just before he's ready to say, "Blast off," Nerissa looks up, and high in the clear sky, flying in big circles directly above them is the 'Silver Eagle'. Nerissa is at peace. She knows everything will be all right. She puts her arms around the twins so they can watch Terry fly together. Jill and Katie look up and say, "Look, the eagle is back." Celeste looks up, and sees nothing, but she somehow knows everything is OK.

Blast Off

Terry hits the ignition button and launches with a roar! In the blink of an eye, he's above the

bluff and heading out over the water, leaving a trail of white flame and a steam-like vapor trail.

The twins are jumping up and down with excitement. Even Nerissa is thrilled by the spectacular launch, now that she knows Terry will be safe from any harm. Terry rolls out into a gentle arc over the water, and curves back over the farm. He sees the twins waving and waves back, then he pulls back on the controls and goes almost straight up. “Wild!”

TK is watching the computer as it absorbs the unbelievable amounts of input being radioed to it from RocketBike. “Terry’s really putting the Bike through it’s paces; there’ll be so much data it’ll take weeks to analyze,” thinks TK, “Cool.”

Nitro is already on the radio trying to talk Terry into coming down, but he knows Terry will land when he’s ready to. It’s true Terry is having a lot of fun, and is in no big hurry to come back down, but the other thing is when he comes back down he’s got to land. That’s ‘iffy’, even by Terry’s standards. He radios to Nitro. “If you thought the top of the Bikester trailer looked small when you’re down there standing on it, you ought to see it from up here - - It’s TINEY!”

“This is going to be scary,” thinks Terry, even though he’s attracted to things kinda scary. This might be carrying it a little far.

Floating on Air

The plan for landing is to first make a low, slow pass a few feet over the trailer to see what it’s like. Nitro says, “If you don’t like it, you can always land on the driveway,” which they had picked for their alternate landing strip.

“No way,” thinks Terry, “I came up here to land on the top of the trailer and that’s what I’m going to do.”

He loops in and makes a very low pass over the trailer, slowing down so he’s holding it just over stall speed.

“It’s amazing,” thinks Terry, “how sensitive this bike is to fly, I can feel its every twitch, I can feel it floating right on the edge of stalling ... I love it!”

Down on the ground TK at the computer relays information to Nitro. “The aerodynamic modifications we made are making a big difference. He’s down to under thirty-five miles an hour and the bike’s flying very smoothly. We’ve dropped the stall speed by almost ten miles per hour without losing any stability.”

As Terry pulls up to come around again and land, he thinks, “It felt really solid at that low of a speed, I felt like I could almost step off the bike onto the trailer as I went over it. I think maybe this will work.”

Nitro radios “We’re putting up the catch line now.” TK starts the sequence on the computer that raises the line. They are using a very strong bungee cord, so it will have a little give to slow the bike down to a stop as it lands.

Terry hits the button on the handlebars, which drops the ‘tailhook’ that will catch the line. He’s coming in, low and slow. Everyone on the ground holds their breath as Terry drifts in towards the edge of the trailer. At just barely above stall speed it seems like it’s taking forever. Nerissa is once again aware of the eagle, which is very low, flying in tight circles above them.

Touchdown

RocketBike comes across the edge of the trailer and the tailhook catches the line just as the bike’s wheels touch the deck. It’s still going almost thirty-five miles and hour and Terry braces himself for the sudden de-acceleration as the bike pulls against the bungee cord to stop before it goes off the other end of the trailer.

The bungee cord works just as TK's figures said it would work, absorbing the energy that is hurling Terry and RocketBike towards the other end of the trailer roof. In fact, TK has worked it out so closely that the bike, pulling against the cord, springs so far forward that its front wheel is actually hanging over the far edge of the trailer before it springs back on to the solid trailer top.

In the brief second that he's hanging out over the far edge of the trailer, Terry looks down at the ground and thinks: "Whoa, I don't know how many times we can do this and get away with it!"

At the computer screen TK thinks, "Hmm, calculated the elasticity in that bungee perfectly, another engineering triumph." At least that's what he thinks until Terry tells him exactly what he thinks of that calculation!

Chapter 10

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