

MAC 'SERGE' TUCKER

FIGHTER PILOT

MIS-ADVENTURES BEYOND THE SOUND BARRIER
WITH AN AUSTRALIAN TOP GUN

**'AWESOME.
Serge is a funny man.'**
PAUL CARTER



13

The Cannonball Run

SPOOK WAS OUR exchange pilot from the United States Marine Corps (USMC). Every two years Australia would send an F-18 pilot to the USMC and they would reciprocate. For a marine the 75SQN and the home of the Magpies was a good gig. For single Marines, however, the middle of the Northern Territory could take some getting used to.

Spook and I formed a close bond early on and shared a common interest in practical jokes and generally elevating squadron morale—the difference between Spook and I, though, was that he had diplomatic immunity and I didn't.

I think Spook's issue was that he was highly intelligent and a little bored just hanging out in Tindal—so he would do things to keep himself entertained. On one occasion Spook used an ink pad to paint the inside of Duck's oxygen mask, so that Duck came back from a flight with a giant red stain around his nose and chin. Duck walked into the squadron unable to see what the rest of the unit was in hysterics about, but soon worked it out.

Spook also had the executive officer (XO) firmly in his sights. JP had previously completed the USMC exchange which we believed had fucked him up and caused him to become anally retentive—a trait I admired but it really got under Spook's skin. Spook started

FIGHTER PILOT

out with little things like tampering with JP's email when he wasn't in his office. I remember well when an email hit the inbox of every individual in the entire squadron—1500 of JP's subordinates:

From: SQNLDR JP Conlan, XO75SQN

Subject: I'm coming out of the closet

Fellow Magpies,

I can no longer hide my true feelings and wish to inform you all that I am gay. I look forward to your continued support.

JP

This got the reaction Spook anticipated but, like an attention-seeking child, he didn't let up; in fact, the practical jokes escalated. He got a handful of small prawns, removed the ends of the curtain rod in JP's office and filled the rod with prawns. Needless to say, a week later the XO couldn't work in his office nor could he find the source of the smell. Assuming some sort of land-walking desert prawn infestation, he called the pest removalist who soon found the cause.

Next was 'upside-down day' for the XO. Spook spent an entire weekend rearranging JP's office so that everything was upside-down. Pictures were rehung, filing cabinets, desks and computers turned over—the lot. It was having to spend his next weekend re-filing all his paperwork that had fallen out when the filing cabinet was turned upside-down that really ticked JP off.

With the XO in a foul mood, Spook could no longer own up to his escapades for fear of being deported back to the States. He thought it best to lay low for a couple of days, so we signed out the CO's new red V6 Commodore and headed to Darwin for the weekend.

Until recently the Northern Territory of Australia was the last great bastion for red-blooded rev heads. With long (1000-kilometre) straight roads and no speed limit, the Territory was a fantastic place for straight line speed and was briefly home to Australia's Cannonball Run. Sheiks, sportstars and billionaires from all around the world would converge on Darwin for one week a year, bringing with them some of the world's most expensive sportscars: Dodge Vipers, Porsche GTs, Ferraris and Lambos would all be paraded on the Stokes Wharf early Sunday morning before the race.

Spook and I thought we would watch the start of the race before we headed back to Tindal. We met some of the drivers and had a lengthy drool over the cars before the pits were closed and the vehicles prepared to depart. The competitors departed at two-minute intervals and after about half an hour Spook had seen enough, so we went back to our car and started heading south ourselves. What we didn't realise was that the Cannonball route was not closed to other vehicles and competitors were bound by the normal city speed limits until they got out of town where speed was unlimited. As such, we unintentionally ended up with a Dodge Viper in front of us and a Ferrari behind. Spook was driving and took one look at me with his big shit-eating grin and I knew what he was thinking.

As soon as we were out of the city, Spook floored it. He wound the CO's car out to 220 kilometres per hour, which was as high as the speedo read.

'I'm sure we can win this first leg of the Cannonball to Katherine, Serge—what do you say?' he asked in his Detroit accent.

Gripping the sides of my seat with white knuckles, and the middle of my seat with my seriously puckered arse, I agreed—we would either win it or die. It was that simple.

Spook was overtaking cars like they were standing still. I'm not sure if it was because the drivers weren't professional, or possibly because they weren't maniac fighter pilots like Spook, but we were

FIGHTER PILOT

taking a lot of places and no-one had yet passed us. Then we saw a police car that was acting as a safety car for the race. I looked at Spook and he grinned back.

We screamed past the police car in excess of 220 kilometres per hour and I took a photo of the stunned officer. Spook checked the mirrors for flashing lights. Nothing.

'Dude, he thinks we're one of them,' he said. And that was it—we were in the race we weren't officially competing in.

Darwin to Katherine is about 350 kilometres. A Commodore can normally achieve about 500–600 kilometres per tank. Less than an hour into the race, we were nearly out of gas—although we had travelled 200 kilometres in that hour. We briefed for the pit stop and Spook screamed into the petrol station, locking up the wheels as we arrived. I was out first, running to the pump. Spook had already popped the fuel lid. I had the nozzle in and was pumping as Spook went in and threw some cash on the counter. He grabbed a couple of drinks, told the attendant to keep the change, got back into the car, started the engine and revved the shit out of it as I was hanging up the hose. As I stepped into the car he floored it—almost leaving me on my arse. We had done our pit stop in under three minutes and only lost one position in the race.

Spook left a trail of dirt and stones as he fishtailed the CO's car back out on to the Stuart Highway. He soon locked onto the car in front of us—it was the police car again. Surely we couldn't do this again and get away . . . *Vroooooom*—we passed that cop car like it was standing still.

Then Spook started to reel in more of the competitors. Porsches, Lambos, muscle cars—you name it, we passed it. We lost count of how many we overtook—but nothing passed us between Darwin and Katherine.

Coming into Katherine it was like driving down the Bathurst straight—hundreds of people lined both sides of the highway. Spook

kept his foot on the gas and the CO's Commodore screamed its head off at red-line. As we hit the 100-kilometre per hour zone Spook stayed on the gas. People were leaning out with video cameras as Spook manoeuvred so that we were travelling down the centre of the road. We could see the people cheering but could hear nothing other than the V6 whining its head off. We hit the 80-kilometre per hour zone before Spook started to back off below 220. Up ahead we saw lights flashing and shit ourselves. Cops, we thought; if they had a radar gun Spook would have been over three times the speed limit—he'd lose his licence for sure. And then we saw what the lights were all about.

It was a marshal point where cars were being herded to the competitors' paddock and the media was waiting with beers and grid girls. We were wishing aloud that we could get into the VIP area to continue our racing careers when the marshal's hand went up and he directed us straight to the competitors' paddock. We played it as cool as we could, but with all the adrenaline still flowing in our veins we couldn't hold back our chuckles.

We were actually being marshalled to the podium where the first five place-getters were to be awarded a prize. We had left Darwin 30 minutes into the race and had placed fifth on the Darwin-to-Katherine leg. We were so stoked until the judge asked us for our number. Shit. Spook tried his best to use his diplomatic immunity, but we were quietly ushered out of the competitors' paddock.

Oh well. Spook and I might not have the piece of paper, but we were satisfied we were the true fifth place-getters in that leg of the Cannonball Run.

Monday morning was just another day and the XO seemed to have settled down a bit over the weekend. At the end of the morning brief the CO made a few comments and finished off with a request: 'That's all I have, thanks. If I can just see Ayrton Senna and his navigator in my office after brief, please.'

The CO called us into his office where we remained standing in front of his desk. 'Unit' was a wildcard. He could be a great guy one day and an absolute gun-toting cowboy the next. We just hoped he was in a good mood.

'OK, boys. I have a report from the military police here stating that my car was in the Cannonball Run over the weekend. Is that true?'

Spook and I looked at each other and I searched my mind nervously for what the ramifications of our little unscheduled international motor race might be. Spook just looked like a smug diplomat about to claim immunity.

'Serge,' the CO continued, 'you seem to be the most lost for words—spit it out.'

'Well, Sir,' I replied cautiously, 'Spook and I drove back from Darwin at the same time as the Cannonball Run and unfortunately got caught up in the race traffic. We definitely did not enter your car in the race, Sir.'

'Right, good answer. Because the military police have a video of a red Commodore that looks a lot like my car which was filmed racing yesterday.'

This is not good, I thought—we were fucked.

The CO went on: 'I asked to see the tape and could not read the numberplate due to the speed of the car so I told them to go fuck themselves unless they've got some proof. OK?'

'Yes, Sir,' we both said.

'Now, can either of you dickheads tell me the maximum speed for a service vehicle?'

'The signed speed?' I hesitantly answered.

'No. It's 120 kilometres per hour regardless of the maximum stated speed. So, in future, don't be racing my fucking car in the Cannonball Run . . . and I hope you filled it up.'

'Yes, Sir. Three times actually,' Spook stated proudly.

'Right, get out of here, you two, and don't talk about this to anyone.'

'Yes, Sir,' we replied and promptly marched out of his office.

The boss had stood by us. Without knowing the who, the what or the why, he went into bat for his boys. He endeared himself immensely to both Spook and I that day, and in the future I always did my best to look out for him. True loyalty is earned, not bestowed by rank.

'Serge has the RIGHT STUFF, the wrong stuff and some stuff that will peel the enamel off your teeth and make your HAIR STAND UP.'

PAUL CARTER, author of DON'T TELL MUM I WORK ON THE RIGS ...

MAC TUCKER, or 'Serge' to use his callsign name, is one of an elite group of men trained to fly F-18 jets. Now, for the first time, Serge takes you behind the scenes of the fighter pilot world to reveal what it's really like.

Find out how it feels to be shot at by SAS snipers, to be lost in a \$50 million jet over Northern Australia with nothing but car lights to guide you home, to rupture your sinuses while flying, to inadvertently bomb a yacht and to face death on an almost daily basis. Relive the adventures of a real-life Top Gun and find out what it takes to become part of this elite force.

From the Pentagon to the South China Sea, the deserts of Australia to the wars of the Middle East, this book is as action-packed as it is entertaining.

Sit back and strap yourself in for an exhilarating ride to the sound barrier and beyond with Mac Tucker, an Australian fighter pilot and real life Top Gun.

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