



Sarah's lesson comes in handy



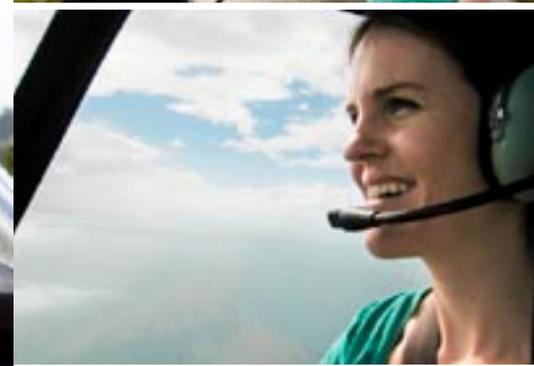
Fight or flight?



Keeping nerves at bay with Roy

Fly factor

Sarah Lang channels her inner thunderbird and takes to the skies



A plea for help?



Up and away in the chopper



Not your usual dash



Look out, Angelina!

I've half-fancied piloting a plane ever since I read about Angelina Jolie flying her rainbow family around in a private jet. The only problem? Well, I couldn't quite afford the jet. Oh, and I'm really scared of heights. They say overcoming a fear is good for you – and I was suffering a bit of freelance writer's cabin fever – so when the chance to fly a helicopter cropped up, with fingers crossed, I decided I was game.

My instructor at North Shore Helicopter Training turns out to be the company captain himself, chief instructor/director Roy Crane, who seems delighted that I'm female. "We need more women flying these great machines as the field's so male dominated!" Roy declares, adding, "Women tend to make better pilots because they're generally more sensitive – and flying's all about sensitivity, not ego." Thus buttered up, and having warily eyed Roy's credentials, I have to admit that I couldn't be in safer hands. Good thing, considering my fear of heights began as a little girl, trapped in the car with my parents and three squabbling siblings en route to visiting grandparents in the Wairarapa. As we crossed the Manawatu Gorge, where

the mountain suddenly slips away into the yawning chasm, I used to imagine the car missing a bend and plunging over the barrier. Since then I've had dreams where I've been falling, until I wake up with a jerk. Er, why I'm doing this again? First on the agenda is five minutes on a helicopter simulator in Roy's office, where I learn how to manoeuvre the three main controls. As he launches into a scientific spiel about how each works, I try to jam the keywords into my brain. Pedals: left and right. Left lever: up and down. Main control: direction and speed. "Just remember two things. One, look up and out: appreciate that view. Two: relax, because otherwise that tension will transmit to the controls," he says. It's time to hit the airstrip. In the

distance is our decidedly cute, cosy R22: a Robinson 22, the world's most popular helicopter. As each seat comes with its own set of controls, I figure this'll be a bit like going for a spin with a driving teacher: if you screw up, they can take over. But thankfully the heat won't be on me for a while. "Ready?" Roy's voice cracks faintly through the sound system. "Yes", I tell him, though I'm still not sure whether I'm going to freak out up there. Once the propellers become a whirring blur we slowly take off. As the adrenalin rush hits, a nervous giggle escapes me. Then I remember to look around. Through the curved glass you get a spectacular, almost 360-degree view: there's Orewa to the left, Whangaparaoa ahead to the right, the city

skyscrapers are a blur in the far-right distance and Rangitoto is barely a smudge. While today's a bit hazy we can still see 50km in each direction. Time to fire up my synapses. After Roy demonstrates again how the controls work, I'll get a go at each, one at a time, while he looks after the other two. Here goes, I think, breathing through my nerves. Gingerly I press a foot onto the tail-controlling "anti-torque" pedals, pointing the aircraft left then right. So far so good. Next up's adjusting our height by lifting the "collective pitch control", aka the left-hand lever. On cue, we rise slightly then dip a little. Then I tentatively change direction by adjusting the aptly-named "teetering bar" (aka the "cyclic stick"). Now I take control of all three. It's tricky: one small movement

makes the helicopter veer one way. Making a concerted effort to relax my automatically tensed muscles, I realise Roy's not manning the controls. I'm actually flying this thing! I can't wipe the silly grin off my face the whole way along the Orewa coast. Flying, I decide, is an escape hatch from the world and its problems. When Roy takes over, I'm free to drink in the big-picture perspective and appreciate what a stunning spot of the earth we inhabit. We're almost back at base when Roy casually mentions that, to land, he'll be reducing the engine revs to "near idle". "A lot of people think that once the engine quits that's it, but just like a plane, you can safely glide to the ground," he says. The engine... quits? My heart jumps into my mouth but Roy

assures me that in an autorotation landing, updraughting air, not the engine, keeps the blades turning – a bit like a windmill. Before a gentle touchdown at the base, Roy gets me to hold the helicopter steady. For a second my brain empties, I yank at the teetering bar and spin into an almost-360-degree turn. Cucumber cool, Roy turns the chopper back around, and this time I manage to hold it steady by adjusting the controls. Then Roy takes the reins and lands at a seemingly speedy 1300ft per minute. "You did good!" he smiles. Perhaps he says that to all the ladies, but a glow of satisfaction at having flown this thing – and having backed myself to do it – washes over me. And while I'm still no Angelina, I've definitely caught her flying bug. **WFE**

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