This Fishing Life…

In another life, I flew fast jets for the RAAF… it doesn't get much better, believe me. But at the same time, I was still a game fisherman when time allowed, and had been on and off since I was 11 years old in Sydney.

In 1977, while based at Amberley just outside Brisbane and flying F111s for the Air Force, I owned a nice little half cabin trailer boat, and occasionally, made a big day trip out across Moreton Bay and fished in the waters east of Moreton Island - usually for sportfish like kingies and mahimahi, but every so often, we'd throw a streamer lure or two out and troll around where we saw bird activity, looking for "something bigger" without actually knowing what was there. On one long memorable day, we went as wide as we dared in calm weather, found some great flying fish activity, and threw a brace of lures out the back, hoping to get lucky and maybe snag a wahoo.

The lures were attached to a couple of large Mitchell reels that I owned and used either for heavy duty bottom fishing or surfcasting. The Mitchells were the real deal, manufactured as they were in those days in France, one was the big Mitchell 499 spinning reel that was designed without a bail, and had always been a great and very rugged reel. I still have them today and use them on the beach.

On this occasion, I also had a new Penn Senator 6/0 that I'd purchased in the US, and this was its first big outing, so it was set up as a shotgun rig with an old handmade game lure that I'd picked up from somewhere. The lure had faded cloth feathers, but great action because it had a crude articulated head, although I'd never caught anything with it.

On this day, we picked up a 10kg mahimahi on one of the Penns, and were turning back towards Cape Moreton and thinking about going home when the shotgun exploded and the Penn started making noises I'd never heard. What a rush that sound triggers…!

A quick look showed we'd found ourselves a nice black marlin that clearly wasn't too discriminating when it came to the quality of lures it hit. The fish was probably around 50 kilos, and had plenty of attitude, and it was then that I discovered that the drag on the Penn wasn't quite up to the workout that the marlin was giving it, starting to smoke a bit after 15 minutes of gaining then rapidly losing line with nothing much to show for it.

About this time, the fish settled down and gave me time to tip a bucketload of saltwater onto the reel, which seemed to at least stabilise the drag temperature. The fight went on for another hour, and then as most juvenile blacks will do when they get up to the boat and give it a bit of a lookover, the fish decided it didn't like what it saw, launched into the air less than 10 metres from the boat, gave its head one final shake, and the lure flew towards us while the fish launched itself in the opposite direction. Game over…

Getting back to the ramp at Redcliff took all the fuel on board and three hours of motoring, arriving after dark - without GPS in those days of course. Hell of a day though…

Among other duties as an F111 pilot back then, I used to do test flights on aircraft that had been released from maintenance after having had engine changes or other major work. On the first flight after an engine change, we basically had to run the jet from one end of its flight envelope to the other, the fast end of those test flights being a high speed run out at sea east of the Southeast Queensland coast, running along a designated track that was far enough out to sea that when the aircraft was operating faster than the speed of sound, the sonic boom stayed far enough offshore that we didn't break a few million dollars worth of glass in the Brisbane CBD or along the Gold Coast.

The day after my adventure with that juvenile black marlin off Cape Moreton, I was on duty and scheduled for a test flight in an F111, which proceeded pretty much as planned, flying out across the ocean off Fraser Island, then pointing the jet south, opening up the throttles to full afterburner, and hanging on for what was always the ride of your life. If the engines had been set up accurately by the superb engine technicians the RAAF had working on the F111s, then the aircraft

would accelerate like a bat out of hell well past Mach 2, usually up to at least Mach 2.3, often up to about Mach 2.5 while still wanting to go even faster.

However, if things weren't absolutely perfect with the new engine, or with the scheduling of the complex supersonic geometry of the engine intake systems, the engine would occasionally stall and let go in spectacular fashion. An engine stall in a subsonic Boeing jetliner like the 747 with its large engines can be impressive enough, but when it happens at Mach 1.8 in an F111, it was nothing short of spectacular. A huge boom, lots of shaking and vibration, the aircraft would swing violently, often accompanied by sheets of flame a couple of feet away outside the cockpit, and a fair bit of adrenalin inside the cockpit.

On this day however, everything was perfect… the jet was climbing into a black sky passing 55,000 feet altitude as the Mach tape touched 2.5 (that's about 1850 miles per hour, or 3000 kilometres per hour), so we rolled it on its back, slowed down and rapidly dropped down to sea level, where we reversed course and headed back up the supersonic track just a couple of hundred feet off the water, giving the engines an equally tough test at Mach 1.2 down in the thick air.

That worked fine too, so we turned back towards the RAAF base located on the western side of Brisbane, and as we did so, passed pretty much right over the spot where I'd lost that black marlin just 24 hours before off Cape Moreton.

From where we turned over the ocean above our fishing spot the previous day it took just three minutes at the relatively sedate speed (for an F111) of 480 knots to get from where we'd lost the black marlin to over the boat ramp at Redcliffe.

How do these two totally different stories fit together? Sure, it's a stretch, but basically, it's all about the thrill… I still get the same rush seeing a huge blue marlin crash-tackling a lure on the short corner these days as I used to get looking up into that black sky and seeing the curvature of the Earth's horizon with my hair on fire at Mach 2 plus. You can never possibly get sick of either…

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North Coast Big Game Anglers

Photo courtesy RAAF