

My first solo

Yves Rossy

Yves Rossy has experienced the cutting-edge of flight – from the speed of fighter jets to bird-like independence with a semi-rigid, jet-powered wing strapped on his back – his own invention. Yves is interviewed here by Yayeri van Baarsen

How did you get into aviation? In 1972, when I was 13 years old, I went to see an airshow. Like most kids I was fascinated by planes and birds. My family wasn't into aviation, so I took my bike on the train and went to Gruyères by myself. There, the Patrouille Suisse (the aerobatic team of the Swiss Air Force) was performing; I was completely amazed by the power, noise and speed of the machines. From that moment on I wanted to become an Air Force pilot.

How did your flight training go?

Training to become a military pilot is very different from learning to fly as a civilian. I had to do all kind of tests and exams to get through the selection. My instructor, Laurent Delbrouck, was quite a tough guy, but he prepared his students very well. He was serious, strict and direct. His lessons were disciplined, military style. I liked that as I liked having a well-defined frame to follow.

Learning to fly was difficult. So many things needed to be done and I really had to learn to prioritise. I wanted to do everything exactly at the same time, but that wasn't possible. I had to understand that during your checklist, you could also continue to observe your surroundings by glancing around. It took a lot of training to master the art of multi-tasking, but I got there; after eight hours I first soloed.

Were you ready for it?

Yes, as this was my goal. We all knew that we'd solo somewhere between eight and 10 hours. If you'd take over 10 hours to solo, you'd be thrown out of the selection, those were the rules of the game. Still, I wasn't expecting it to happen that soon.

My first reaction was one of euphoria. 'Wow!' I thought. Also there was a bit of tension; now it was my duty and responsibility to bring this machine back to the ground in one piece. As soon as I took off, I was happy to be alone in the air. The conditions were nice and stable and I did my circuits. As I came close to landing, the tension crept in again, I became more aware and thought, 'I should land well and not crash it!'



As if his current mode of flight isn't cool enough, Yves dreams of an Iron Man-style flight suit
(Photos: X-Dubai)

All went well and I was overjoyed. There was no party though, as the flight was part of our selection training and the instructors were still observing our behaviour. In the military they want serious guys; no matter how excited you are and want to celebrate with some beers, there's no way you're going to destroy everything by having a crazy fiesta.

You've flown fighter jets and commercial aircraft. What made you want to move out of the cockpit?

When I was 30 years old, I discovered skydiving. During freefall I had a second flash, just like happened when watching the airshow aged 13. From then I knew I wanted to fly free. Physically you're falling, but you've got the feeling that you're flying as you're too high to have reference to the ground. This feeling of freedom and movement is fantastic.

It's unreal, you only have a small backpack so you feel like a bird. It's like when you dream of flying: in your dreams you're not surrounded by a machine, holding a stick and working the paddles, you're naked or in your pyjamas.

Skydiving only gives you a minute of freefall, so I had to change the vector (from falling to flying) and make it last longer. From this basic



Yves Rossy

Inventor of the individual jet pack

WHEN: summer 1977

WHERE: Geneva International Airport, Switzerland

AIRCRAFT: FFA AS 202 Bravo

HOURS AT SOLO: 8

HOURS NOW: about 12,000

idea, I went on with sky surfing, wing-suit flying, developing a harness and coming up with different structures. It was mostly learning by doing.

What are your plans?

I have loads: developing new engines, changing wing profiles and performing at airshows. I'll also teach others to fly with a jet-powered wing. I'm hoping that in 10 or 20 years from now there'll be many more people flying like this as it's so much freedom and fun. The most important thing though is safety: unlike birds we don't have feathers, so we should be really careful.

I hope that in the future mankind will need even less to fly. The ideas are already there, in the movies. In *Avatar* they fly on dragons and in *Iron Man* he's got a battery on his chest. Energy is key. Give me that battery and I'll build you the suit. Hopefully we'll soon find new energy sources that don't destroy the planet so much. Because for flying you need either power or feathers. Maybe genetics is the future, and bird cells will be transplanted onto human embryos, creating something like in *The Fly*.

What does flying mean to you?

The two main dreams in my life revolved around flying. One is piloting these powerful machines, sometimes at twice the speed of sound. It's another world, full of speed and power. Your body can't support those forces, so you have to be in a machine. The other, with the jet pack, is almost the opposite. It's simpler, there's more freedom and you experience the purity of flight like a bird. They're two extremes that I can't compare; both are fantastic in a different way. I'm a very lucky guy to have experienced both.

Flying really is part of our DNA. With skydiving, after three or four jumps people already automatically take the right position in the air, like kids' hands do when they're playing with an aircraft. Everyone does this, no exception. Some divers say that humans come from fish, but I can tell you, it's so natural for us to be in the sky, we come from birds. ■