

Terminal Velocity

Adrenaline-charged aerobatics herald the arrival of Breitling's new Chrono-matic

Maria Doultton



Aeroplane racing at suicidal altitudes and breakneck speeds...hurling groups of journalists into precipitous nose-dives from 30,000 feet, 15 times over, without the luxury of seatbelts, nor indeed seats. Of the watch industry's vast canon of brands, this could be the doing of only one: Breitling. A brand as synonymous with aviation as it is notorious for such outlandish launches. And in Reno, Nevada this September, it was the Swiss company's newly revived Chrono-matic enjoying the limelight. QP's Adventure Correspondent Maria Doultton explains all.

"Gentlemen, we have a race!" announced the loudspeakers across the Stead airfield on the outskirts of Reno, Nevada, as the Unlimited Class prop planes glimmered in the desert sky. The starter plane peeled away from the 500-foot altitude limit, away from the eight contenders in their respective Hawker Sea Furies, Mustangs and P51s – names ranging from *BearCat* and *Ole Yeller* to race favourite, *Dago Red*.

The race was on. Plumes of white smoke, scrawled against the parched mountains marked their progress around the

far side of the course, marked out crudely by 30-foot high pylons with red and white oil drums perched on top.

Pitched sideways to shave seconds off their race times as they rounded the ludicrously low pylons, their wings grazed the desert sagebrush. The excitement was alarmingly closer than expected. "Those are good seats you got there; planes will just about scrape by your noses," our driver for the day had rightly predicted. Mercifully, his other prediction – "one usually falls out of the sky" – did not come true.

Close-up of the new Chrono-matic's dial. The fine grid pattern around the counters lend a squared-off appearance – a deliberate allusion to the styling of the 1960s and '70s.

Described as 'the world's fastest motor sport' by the organisers of the Reno Air Race, this meeting of magnificent men and their flying machines has been taking place since the 1960s. This year, it is the 41st annual get-together of like-minded aviation junkies and their assorted vintage, aerobatic and jet planes; here to play, show off and risk life and death to break another speed or aerial madness record. Breitling could not have found a crazier bunch of plane nuts. "This would never be allowed in Europe! In Nevada it seems you can do anything..." gasps Stefano Albinati, Aviation Director at Breitling, as yet another daredevil manoeuvre is executed in front of our noses.

Pure Breitling

Above the roar of the planes and the piped country and western music, the two commentators raise their voices in excitement: "Great looking turn; he's hitting 300 there and really flying on tiptoes." With the rollicking commentary and the bizarre antics playing out in front me, I began to get the idea: Reno is to air racing what Le Mans is to car racing. It is fast and madcap. Even if the tone of the gathering – pick-up trucks sporting garden furniture, 'God Bless America' flags, hunting trophies and six-pack coolers – is not what I would expect of Breitling, the spirit of daredevil precision is pure Breitling, which has been the main sponsor of the event for the past four years.

But then again, Breitling has always been different. Name another watch company with a senior employee entitled 'Aviation Director'. It should not have been surprising therefore to find myself on the tarmac of a parched desert plateau at the unveiling of the Chrono-matic Calibre 41LC. The invitation to Reno had sounded innocent enough, but this was an aviation fix fit for the hardcore addict, far from the gentle territory of mechanical watches we all know so well, with lots of neck craning, roaring engines, a visit to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum and, to top it all, a zero-gravity flight. Bottom line: Breitling and aviation go together like hot butter on breakfast toast; like ping and pong; like Bonnie and Clyde. I promise never to forget that.

Born in '69

As my head finally stops spinning from all the airborne madness and catches up with my jet-lagged body, I find myself at home again and remember that, yes, the trip was all about the renaissance of the Chrono-matic – the first automatic chronograph. How could I forget Jean-Paul Girardin, Vice President of Breitling, competing to be heard against the screech of jets racing past the cloth walls of the hospitality chalet?

The original Chrono-matic was born in 1969, just a few years before me (to think that anything created in my lifetime already



The Breitling Navitimer Chrono-matic with the automatic Breitling Calibre 41LC (Left Crown) (£2,645).

has retro appeal is a frightening thought indeed). The Navitimer Chrono-matic is a true icon and the winner of the race (pipping Zenith and Movado to the post by a month) to create the first automatic chronograph movement: the Calibre 11. The Navitimer was Breitling's flagship model by 1969 and therefore the first to enjoy the Calibre 11's breakthrough 'modular' technology – what effectively boils down to a separate chronograph movement 'riding' off an existing, self-winding base movement.

Celebration of the Chrono-matic's 35th anniversary is marked by a 're-interpreted' renaissance of the original timepiece, hot on the heels of last year's relatively faithful, limited-edition reissue. Toned down to suit the new century's taste in larger and cleaner lines, the new Chrono-matic Calibre 41LC still maintains the trademark left-hand (the 'LC' of '41LC')

side crown, the fine square-shaped grid pattern around the subdials, and an aviation slide rule operated by rotating the outer bezel. The original Breitling 'B' logo reappears on the dial, along with the revival of the original publicity for the watch – fortunately remaining unsubjected to 're-interpretation'. I was too young to remember what the grown-ups were up to in 1969, but it is a relief we have since moved on from orange zip-up jumpsuits, motorcycle helmets that resemble boiled eggs and earnest executives toting dinner-plate sized computer disks.

Vomit comet

Taking its aerial adventures one step further, Breitling had a surprise prepared for us in Reno – a chance to venture towards the very vanguard of 'air travel'. Dr. Peter Diamandis – a David Copperfield lookalike in a natty black flying suit and

custom-made signet ring featuring a rocket circling a diamond – assembled us in front of a PowerPoint presentation to prepare us for one of the world's first commercial zero-gravity flights. As we donned far less attractive petrol-pump attendant blue flying suits, we were assured that we were space pioneers, among the first 150 people to step aboard *G-Force One*, and would be honoured like heroes upon our return from "the most awesome experience of our lives." The slightly ludicrous nature of this undertaking continued to play on my mind however, despite the company of former NASA astronaut Jon A McBride, and the 10 years invested in developing this aerial rollercoaster ride.

I am not sure what concerned me more: the fact that we were supplied with 'sic sacs' or that we were invited to toss a teddy while in zero gravity. The stripped-



Breitling Japan Masakuni Miyasaka WPP



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(Above left) The 41st National Championship Air Races and Air Show at Reno Stead Field, Nevada. Six classes of aircraft compete: Biplane, Formula One (all powered by a Continental O-200 engine), Sport, T-6, Jet and Unlimited (piston-driven). (Above right) Plane enthusiasts admire the Hawker Sea Fury, September Fury, which clocked-up the 3rd fastest lap time in the Unlimited Class (465.4 mph).



Delightfully retro images from Breitling's early advertising campaigns, espousing an altogether 'alternative' appearance to your average 21st-century Breitling owner.



(Left) The 'vomit comet': Zero-G's *G-Force One*.



(Bottom) Your author (right) enjoying weightlessness on the first of her 15 'parabolas' in *G-Force One*.

out Boeing 727-200, bedecked with Breitling logos, resembled the inside of a 70-foot milk carton. After climbing to 30,000 feet, we promptly nose-dived, attaining a few seconds of weightlessness during the plummet towards the desert below. Fun for a few fleeting moments, but also decidedly stomach-churning – especially since we were locked in for another 14 nauseating 'parabolas'. I merely assumed Breitling was keen to leave no one in any doubt of its position at the forefront of aviation. Point well made!

Once safely landed, my only doubt – or rather concern – is what will Breitling think of next: the moon; orbital travel; Mars landings? Whichever way, the inevitably outlandish publicity stunt will leave no doubt in my mind of Breitling and aviation's mutual suitability as bedfellows. ○