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On the trail of the Bloodhound



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Andy Green. Photo: M. Moorthy

Wing Commander Andy Green is all set to break his own land speed record, driving a machine over 160 times more powerful than a Formula 1 car

He may well be the last action hero. In a time when records fall no sooner than they are set, Royal Air Force fighter pilot Wg Cdr Andy Green, OBE, is still the current holder of the world land speed record (763mph/ 1228kmph), 17 years after he first set it and the first to break the sound barrier on land.

At Cottingley, in an event organised by the British Deputy High Commission, Chennai, Wg Cdr Green, wearing a dark suit and his RAF tie, took the audience through his twin missions — his passion for speed and the need to inspire young minds to probe the wonders of science through his project.

“Rewriting the land speed record is one of the few adventures still left,” he says. In 2016, Wg Cdr Green will be ready to unleash the Bloodhound SSC, named after Britain’s Cold War-era supersonic missiles. Part of the project headed by fellow countryman Richard Noble, who held the record before him, and studied and developed by universities across the U.K., the pencil-shaped Bloodhound was created after five years of research in an aircraft hangar in Bristol. The car is a result of a battle with physics — it combines the best of aerospace technology, the power of a Eurofighter Typhoon jet engine and a rocket booster. “The Jaguar rides at the heart of it. And some of the body is made from Tata Steel. So it has plenty of Indian DNA,” he adds, to whoops of delight.

The project also involves plenty of rocket science, literally. The Bloodhound aims to cover 450m in one second, which makes it way faster than a bullet. Its design is so compelling it stuns the audience. A powdered titanium steering wheel, a single-piece carbon fibre cockpit, a Rolex chronograph, levers and switches, conditions akin to driving on ice, calculations for acceleration and deceleration that can befuddle most minds, the speed of 2G and 3G and their impact on the human mind and body. “The aim is 1,600 kmph,” says Wg Cdr Green.

Posing for pictures alongside a replica of the Bloodhound, the graduate of Mathematics from Worcester College, Oxford, says, “I have been a fighter pilot for over 25 years now, flying both F4 Phantoms and Tornado F3 aircraft. In one sense, I think I qualify to do faster what I do in air, on ground.”

Wg Cdr Green, who works weekdays at the RAF headquarters, and spends weekends flying aerobatic aircraft. “It keeps me fit, sharpens my senses and builds up tolerance for heat, sound and acceleration, all of which I have to deal with in plenty on the Bloodhound. If I were to choose a relaxing pastime, it would be sailing.”

The race is set for a lakebed in the Hakskeen Pan in the Northern Cape of South Africa. The 19-km-long and 3.2-km-wide track was cleared by a team of 300 people who manually moved the stones. With over 12 video cameras on the car, the Bloodhound saga already has thousands of school children in Britain hooked on to it, with people in nearly 200 other countries following its progress. By the time Wg Cdr Green gets in feet first and straps on his seatbelt two years from now, it will be the world’s leading collective science project, “watched by the largest global audience”.

Inspiring a new generation of youngsters to pursue science is his final quest. Until then, this 52-year-old Englishman has his steely resolve set on a patch of red road on the tip of Africa.