

Pilot flying high with the help of prosthetic

Back in the sky after loss of left arm

A GOONELLABAH man who lost his arm in an Australian Defence Force Academy bus crash late last year has returned to the sky with the help of a rare prosthetic.

Nathan Parker's injuries occurred when a bus containing about 55 academy personnel rolled on November 20, 2015, near Windellama, New South Wales, injuring 25.

Mr Parker spent about three weeks recovering in hospital and a Defence Force medical facility and had his prosthetic fitted on January 25.

While Mr Parker's dream of becoming a fighter pilot remains in question for the time being, with continued support from the Australian Defence Force, family and friends he hopes to fly professionally in future, in some capacity.

Meeting with instructors at Northern Rivers Aero Club in Lismore last Friday for his first flight since the accident, Mr Parker said he was feeling nervous, but excited about the airborne opportunity.

"The instructors tell me after a hiatus it comes back pretty quickly. But the aim today isn't to ace it, it's to get up there, have a play with the new hand and ticking this off the bucket list," he said.

"It's been a long journey to get here.

"There's been a lot of good moments, as well as bad. The support from family, friends and work has been phenomenal so that's made everything 100 times easier.

"And the Defence Force has been excellent. It's like one big family - I've been getting support from



OPTIMISTIC: Aspiring pilot Nathan Parker was fitted with a prosthetic after losing his arm in a bus crash. Now, he's flying again. PHOTO: LUKE MORTIMER

everywhere."

Mr Parker has been flying at the Aero Club since he was 14 and said it had been a big part of his drive to become a professional pilot.

"Just getting back into a plane, even if I don't reach the ultimate end goal, is definitely going to be a big milestone for me," he said.

"It's an awesome feeling up there. It's a different view of the world, you have that freedom...it's hard to describe the feeling.

"I didn't know exactly what I'd be able to do when I was in the hospital bed, but getting back in a plane was a big motivator for my recovery.

"If I achieve that, I count it as a big personal success."

Mr Parker's robotic prosthetic arm, one of only a

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handful in Australia, responds to forearm movements, but Mr Parker was still training himself to best control the advanced device.

"Initially it was a bit weird. You sort of have to rethink how to use your hand to do things," he said.

"But it's been awesome fun along the way. Everything becomes a challenge, but like a game too, as in what you can and

can't do.

"There's been lots of training picking up lots of little blocks and that sort of thing.

"There's constant improvement, but there's times when the hand does something different to what I want to do.

"It's a constant learning experience, but step by step I'm getting closer."

Regarding his goal to fly professionally in coming

years, Mr Parker was optimistic.

"Until someone says I can't do it, I'm going to keep chasing the dream," he said.

"But I'm just one person in this story. There's heaps of others who are going part of similar challenges after the crash.

"We've all banded together since. I guess it really shows how strong the Defence Force family is.

"I've had mates sending me cards and messages and all sorts of stuff during my recovery. The support has been world class."

Mr Parker was adamant his recovery would not have been as successful without the "support of family and friends, Defence and the instructors at the Aero Club".