



PILOT TO PILOT NETWORK

Ten Feet Tall and Bulletproof

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We pilots often see some of our more famous fellow aviators in a very glamorous way. We put them on pedestals and give them super powers. We are enthralled by their exciting exploits. Because we flyers all belong to the same brotherhood we assume that some of their daring will be aligned us.

We've all read the stories. Guys like Boyington and Bong, Yeager and Hoover have set the bar very high for the rest of us. We fly in the same sky that they did. We may even perform some of the same maneuvers they did. We all had to learn the same basics that they did. We must be one of them, right? I'm here to tell you that there are plenty of "regular" folks who have with seen the end looming ahead of them and have beat the odds as well.

They just don't talk about it much.

I have for some time been curious about the way that lives are changed forever by events completely beyond our control. It's that "right place / right time" thing. Or sometimes, "wrong place . . ." Ordinary pilots who have faced seemingly unbeatable odds walk among us. There is no better place to look and see the result of life altering events than aviation. And the examples are many.

We all know about Chuck Yeager and how he broke the sound barrier for the first time. While that event was carefully planned and staged and he was likely aware of what was supposed to happen, it is unlikely that he had an epiphany one day as a child and decided, " ... and when I grow up I am going to strap into a bullet shaped rocket, fall off the wing of a B-52, light the fire and break the sound barrier!" In Chuck's case, fate conspired to put him in the right place at the right time and he went on to become a legend.

How about that kid Richard from Poplar, Wisconsin? Richard had wanted to become a pilot from a very young age. The road to his dream lead him to the military; it was the only way he could afford to get the training he needed to become the pilot he longed to be. He was just a

farm kid who sometimes hunted deer with his family. Everyone who later flew with him as a fighter pilot remarked that he really wasn't a very good shot. Still, in his P-38, Richard Bong went on to become the leading ace in WWII with 40 kills. He just happened to be pursuing his love for aviation when a war broke out and changed his life's path.

Less famous but no less amazing are the events that befell a pilot by the name of Alfred Haynes. Most pilots remember the event but not the pilot. A career airline pilot, Al had about 30,000 hours total flight time with 7000 in the DC-10 when one day the fan disk of the center mounted GE CF 6-6 on his aircraft suffered an explosive disintegration and took with its failure all the hydraulic lines providing aileron, elevator and rudder control. With only differential thrust for flight controls remaining, the giant aircraft ultimately crash landed on runway 22 at Sioux City, Iowa on July 19, 1989. To have made the runway at all was to defy the odds. Due to the herculean piloting efforts of the United Airlines flight crew that day, 185 of the 296 passengers and the flight crew survived a landing that would otherwise have been a fatal event for all on board. Talk about a life changing event!

What about the rest of us "regular" folks? For the most part, these aviation "heroes" are just ordinary people who are drawn into extraordinary situations where they perform feats they never would ever have imagined. In all cases, fate conspired to change the course of somebody's life. Many unknown or underappreciated examples of this "mid-course" correction exist.

A few years ago I was invited to join a loose gaggle of pilots (I'll avoid the phrase "old pilots") for the sharing of comradeships and drinks, and the telling of lies. It is a place I believed I would fit in quite well as I certainly have my share of old pilot stories to tell. Still, after a brief period of enjoying my monthly dinner meetings with "the guys," I began to feel a bit like the room was a formal ball and I was a pair of brown shoes. There were folks here who had done amazing things in their aviation lives. Dozens of lives in that room had been changed forever by the things they had done that they never thought they would do.

Yes, of course I could relate that well-worn tale about the time I blew a jug clean off my PA-60 in the skies over the Everglades and was forced to limp to a landing at Albert Whitted field, smoke billowing and oil streaming over the wing; but there were guys here who flew Air Force tankers refueling jet jockeys in the stratosphere all over the world!

One of the members served in World War II as the pilot of a B-17. He flew his stricken ship over an Italian island so the crew could bail out over land only to find himself the last man out after the island had passed beneath him. He couldn't swim! Another "brother of the air" flew the "Hump" in C-47's to provide tons of munitions and supplies to the Chinese who were at that time fighting with the Japanese. I hardly measured up. The room was absolutely full of those with unknown talents. . . and me. One of the talented pilots in that room soon became a close friend of mine and I have to admit that although I knew he flew in Vietnam, I didn't know "The rest of the story."

Jim is a sort of normal looking guy of undisclosed age and slight build. He was fetched up in the Grand Rapids, MI area and had a typical Midwestern childhood filled with bike riding and fishing trips. His father was a hardworking, struggling provider like



most dads of the era and his mother was a full time home maker holding reign over Jim and his three sisters. I will tell you that he was almost 23 years old when, after graduating from the University of Michigan, he made good on an earlier decision and enlisted in the Air Force in 1967 (do your own math).

Bachelor's degree in hand, he applied for and was granted a stint in OTS at Lackland AFB, Texas; the place where all good grads learn to become officers. At the time it was the only way to do what he had wanted to do since getting his first flight at the impressionable age of 12. Although that flight was a brief and Uneventful brush with aviation, (Jim relates that he was allowed to hold the controls for all of 30 seconds!) the bug had bitten him and fate was already conspiring to make substantial changes to his life.

It wasn't a particularly smooth road to flying that he had chosen. The Air Force works in mysterious ways and after initial training Jim discovered that he had been assigned to train further as an air traffic controller. Fearful of losing his dream to fly, he mounted an offensive against the system and outlined his qualifications and desire to fly in a lengthy, detailed letter to the higher-ups. Upon reflection of the events that followed, perhaps the ATC position would have been a better choice.

Following along the path set before him by the all-knowing Air Force, he was finally granted what he sought and was directed to report Vance Air Force Base; Enid, OK for initial pilot training. Ground training and obligatory flights in training aircraft (T-37/T-38) followed and Jim's wings were at last awarded. Now to put it to work. Getting taller by the minute!

Vietnam was where all the action was at this time, and the fact that he would be going there to fly something was ever-present. Not even a series of familiarization briefings complete with films and stats about how many of what planes were being lost in our "police action" could deter him. After weighing all the variables the John Wayne in Jim bubbled to the top and he made another decision. He wanted to fly F105's. The "Thud" was famously the only U.S. aircraft to be removed from combat due to high loss rates. He was not quite ten feet tall yet, but he was getting there.

Just two years and five months after joining the Air Force, on 16 June, 1969, Jim was flight lead on a typical four ship bombing mission (his 71st such mission) when worst fears were realized and his "Thud" was struck and disabled. With his hydraulics shot away, the nose down and soon uncontrollable aircraft quickly accelerated to over 700 miles per hour; well beyond safe ejection speed. Faced with an impending "hard landing" probably resembling that of a yard dart, no decision was really needed. Time was the enemy now. In just another heartbeat with his canopy already a memory, Jim squeezed the triggers that ignited his ROCAT ejection system and punched out into a 700 mile per hour slipstream. Bullet proof at last! A predictable daisy chain of disastrous events followed. The shock of hitting that Thud-induced wall of air broke all of the bones in his left arm, dislocated both his shoulders and his hips, and separated both knees. Thankfully, something went right and his chute deployed properly. Jim, happy to have gotten out alive at all and unaware of the number or severity of his injuries at this point, drifted slowly down into the uninviting lushness and was swallowed up by the steaming Vietnam jungle. Helpless, immobile, broken and alone; lying on a bed of



stabbing bamboo shoots and right in the middle of the “bad guy's” back yard, Jim swam in and out of consciousness. His life now depended on his training, his emergency radio, and his connection with the “brotherhood” circling overhead.

The entire story of Jim’s miraculous rescue from the jungles of Vietnam and the people and equipment employed to complete his extraction and recuperation highlights how many people we have working in the armed services who truly are “Ten Feet Tall and Bulletproof” nearly every day.

Jim is another of the “brotherhood of the air” who pursued a dream, fought doggedly to make it come true, and endured the consequences and ultimately triumphed after events in his life had all gone terribly wrong. He is another of those silent citizens that we may never hear much about and who spend little time crowing over their exploits; but whose life path was unceremoniously and irreversibly changed.

The whole unbelievable story of Jim’s wounded Thud, his terrifying bail-out and his miraculous recovery from the impenetrable Vietnam jungle can be viewed at:

<http://thanksformyeverything.org>

What follows in the film is Jim’s actual recovery produced by the United States Air Force. To hear Jim’ first person motivational account this life event, his recuperation and ultimate recovery; watch him in the video linked from the site above.

Thanks to my buddy Jim DeVoss for sharing his incredible journey. Capt. “T”

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Jim and wife Roberta

