

Chuck Yeager, R.I.P.

Those under the age of 60 won't understand this, but if you took a U.S. commercial flight between 1950 and 1970, when the Captain came on the intercom to address passengers, his voice sounded vaguely familiar and much like that of every other Captain of a commercial flight you'd previously taken.

Each had a calm, down-home, sing-song, “*twang*” as they welcomed passengers and recited the details of each flight. We are indebted to the genius of author Tom Wolfe for recognizing why: **They were all trying to imitate their idol, Chuck Yeager!**

Charles Elwood Yeager was every bit as much a god to the aviation industry as Charles Lindbergh, Billy Mitchell, Jimmy Doolittle or Neil Armstrong. He was to aviation in the 1950s and 1960s what Babe Ruth was to baseball in the 1920s and 1930s.

He was a decorated World War II combat “*Ace*,” who once recorded five confirmed “*kills*” in one mission and also downed a NAZI *Messerschmidt* jet fighter with his propeller-driven *P-51 Mustang*. But the reason he is enshrined in the “*Pantheon*” of Aviation was because he was the first man to exceed the speed of sound in level flight. And, as any self-respecting combat fighter-pilot would, he set that record despite broken bones and a hang-over!

For those testing experimental aircraft at what is now **Edwards Air Force Base** in California, there was a popular tavern off-base named **Pancho's** to which these former fighter-pilots often gravitated at night. Their alcohol-fueled races back to base were the stuff of legends, and it's a miracle any of them survived to tell about it.

Tom Wolfe relates the story better than anyone in his book “***The Right Stuff***.” Two nights before he “*broke the sound barrier*” on October 14, 1947, Yeager was at ***Pancho’s*** and drunker than 100 Indians. He either stole or borrowed a horse to race his fellow test pilots back to ***Edwards*** and grab some shut-eye before they resumed risking their lives piloting experimental aircraft at speeds approaching that of a bullet.

To defeat the sports cars driven at suicidal speeds by rival pilots, Yeager opted to take a short-cut by jumping his horse over some rancher’s fence. Yeager cleared the fence all right, but the horse would have none of it.

The day of his record-setting flight he was suffering from several broken ribs, but didn’t dare tell anyone for fear he’d be replaced by another pilot. In fact, his ribs were so painful he couldn’t reach back to close the canopy of his ***Bell X-1*** cockpit, so he improvised by cutting a length of broom-handle to secretly enable him to accomplish this vital task.

“The right stuff” is an elusive quality to define, so if you have to ask what it means, you probably don’t have it. The best explanation I can muster is this: Fear paralyzes most people, but there are a rare few who simply won’t permit it to interfere with the mission at hand.

Chuck Yeager didn’t just have “the right stuff,” he DEFINED it. That’s why an entire generation of pilots honored him by imitating that Myra, West Virginia drawl.

*(Those curious about that accent might watch the film ***Dr. Strangelove*** and pay attention to the voice of B-52 pilot Major Kong, played by actor Slim Pickens, as he describes the contents of B-52 Survival Kits.)*

Earl Holt III