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# The Supersonic Ace: General Chuck Yeager

By Victoria Yeager



With his fabled 1/16 Cherokee Indian heritage and 20/7 eyesight, the six-year-old boy stealthily moved among the trees and then hid as he spied a gray squirrel gathering acorns, unaware of its predator. The boy carefully aimed with precision. Tonight their family would have protein for dinner. It was 1929.

Fifteen years later, Flight Officer Chuck Yeager, now a fighter pilot, shot down his first enemy aircraft in World War II on March 4, 1944. Yeager had an innate competitiveness that drove him to excel and to be the best at every endeavor he undertook. He took advantage of the opportunity for high school graduates to learn to fly in the military, and after learning to control his initial airsickness,

he flew incessantly.

In 1943, Yeager was sent to Wright Field in Ohio to test the P-39 with a new type of propeller. Checked out in a P-47, he decided to visit Hamlin, his hometown, following the Ohio River into Huntington and banking south. At approximately 7 a.m., he hit full throttle and dove on Main Street at 500 mph before pulling up, performing slow rolls and buzzing the treetops. The townsfolk weren't amused. An elderly lady was so frightened that she had to be taken to the hospital, and a farmer was left fuming, claiming that his entire crop of corn had been blown down.

Another time, Yeager flew under the bridge on the Kanawha River during the Sternwheel Regatta, scaring festival-goers who were jumping out of the way. If you were to count how many people today say they saw this, you would think all of West Virginia was on the banks of the Kanawha River that day. There is now a bridge nearby that is appropriately named Yeager Bridge.

Yeager, having already fine-tuned his skills, was utilizing them to protect his country. March 4, 1944 marked Yeager's eighth mission in World War II and the first daylight raid over Berlin. Yeager, flying a P-51, shot down his first enemy aircraft. On March 5, 1944, Yeager, again flying a P-51, was shot down southeast of Bordeaux in occupied France by three German aircrafts. As he descended in his parachute, he grabbed a sapling and rode it to a soft landing. On the ground, he quickly gathered up his parachute and hid it before heading into the forest to get as far away from his landing spot as possible. "There ain't a German in the world that can catch a West Virginian in the woods," he later explained of his escape.

Hiding in the woods for days, he was drawn out by the sound of a woodsman chopping wood. The woodsman didn't speak English but conveyed that Yeager should wait there. After the woodsman left, Yeager moved off and hid where he could see the woodsman's return in the event that it was a trap. The woodsman brought back a member of the Maquis, the French resistance during World War II. Yeager stayed with the Maquis in and around Nerac, northwest of Toulouse, in Southwestern France for a couple of months, teaching them how to use explosives to blow up bridges and railroads. As a kid, Yeager had learned about machinery and explosives by helping his dad, a gas driller.

Yeager's bravery was not for his personal survival alone. Escaping the Germans, climbing over the Pyrenees to neutral Spain, he was joined by another downed U.S. airman. The two had stumbled upon a cabin for shelter and were discovered by a German patrol when the second airman left his socks on a limb outside the cabin. The Germans opened fire and the two U.S. airmen jumped out the back window. When

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the second airman was shot in the knee, Yeager carried him to a water flume and shoved him down it before following. When they reached the bottom, he cut off the airman's leg below the knee and then carried the airman for three days, traveling through the Pyrenees Mountains in the frigid deep snow and thick forests that were reminiscent of hollers in West Virginia until they reached neutral Spain. For this, Yeager is the only Army Air Corps pilot to receive a Bronze Star medal with a V for valor.

After a month in Spain, Yeager made it back to England but refused to go home to the U.S., insisting all the way up to the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower, that he wanted to stay and fight. Eisenhower said of this request, "I don't normally meet with airmen, but I have kids shooting themselves in the foot to go home, yet you are ordered to go home and you are refusing. Why?" Yeager, with typical West Virginia patriotism, replied, "I don't want to leave my buddies after only eight missions. It just isn't right. I have a lot of fighting left to do."

His West Virginia roots were an asset many times during his career. Hunting game in West Virginia, Yeager had learned deflection shooting whereby you lead your prey calculated by the speed the prey is traveling. Studies have shown that 90 percent of the kills in World War II were accomplished by 11 percent of the pilots. The one thing these pilots had in common was that they were rural kids who had grown up with a gun in their hand. After D-Day, June 6, 1944, the Maquis rose up, exposing themselves, making the information Yeager had learned while living with them unimportant. Only then did General Eisenhower allow Yeager back into combat.

In November 1944, the headline of the widely read all-military newspaper, Stars and Stripes, read "Five Kills Vindicate Ike's Ruling." Yeager was the first ace, meaning that he was the first to shoot down five enemy aircrafts in a day, and the legend of the man had begun. He went on to complete 65 missions and shot down 12.5 enemy aircraft, making him a fighter ace and then some.

After Yeager returned from the war, he chose Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio because it was closest to his hometown. There he became a maintenance officer using his skills taught to him by his dad. When not flying, Yeager spent time trying to figure out how he could bust his butt and how he could save it. He realized that the X-1, the experimental rocket plane built to attempt to break the sound barrier, didn't have a back-up system for ejecting fuel if the electricity went out. Without the ability to eject fuel, he would blow up upon landing the rocket. He rigged a switch for emergency fuel ejection, and, on his next flight, when the electricity went out, he had no radio or fuel ejection capability so he tried the new switch. Since no one could radio him to tell him if the fuel was ejecting, he tried stalling the plane every 2,000 feet. When the stall speed got lower and lower, he knew his back-up system was working.

Jack Ridley, a country boy from Oklahoma, helped Yeager achieve one of the West Virginian's greatest accomplishments. On October 14, 1947, Yeager risked his neck to be the first to break the sound barrier, going Mach 1.06 to do so. When Yeager busted through the sound barrier, he told Ridley over the radio, "This mach meter must be busted—the needle went off the scale."

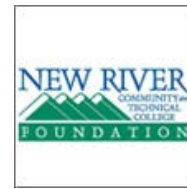
Ridley replied, "Ah hell, must be something wrong with your eyesight." They weren't allowed to discuss the truth over the radio.

After breaking the sound barrier and again proving his skills as a pilot, Yeager took part in another top assignment at Edwards Air Force Base. In 1951, the Air Force was looking to set a new world speed record and called on him for the project. Bell Aircraft Company delivered a new aircraft called the X-1A which was designed to fly twice the speed of sound. On December 12, 1953, Yeager strapped into the X-1A, fired three engines and began his climb, but he quickly realized there was a problem—he was blinded by the sun, couldn't see his controls and consequently his angle of ascent was much too steep. He reached 80,000 feet (the outer limits of the atmosphere) at Mach 2.4, setting a new record, but he was moving too high, too fast, and his plane rebelled. The X-1A began rolling and spinning toward the desert floor. "I was crashing around in that cockpit, slamming violently from side to side, front to back, battered to the point where I was too stunned to think," Yeager recalls. He regained control of the X-1A at 5,000 feet.

"I don't know of another pilot who could have walked away from that one," noted Gen. Albert G. Boyd, Yeager's commanding officer. "The gyrations were so severe that there was an indentation on the canopy where he struck it with his head and he bent the control stick. Chuck believed he was going to die. No pilot could listen to the tape of Yeager's last ride in the X-1A without getting goosebumps. One moment, we're listening to a pilot in dire circumstances. In less than a minute, he's back in control and cracking a joke. It's the most dramatic and impressive thing I've ever heard."

The Yeager legend grew. He was asked to fly around the world to test other aircraft, reel off more speeches and receive awards from several Presidents, including Truman, Eisenhower and Ford. His career then took him from a seven-year stint in the desert to Germany, where he served as squadron commander for a wing of fighter pilots. The one-time young hot shot had become the "old man," but his flying skills were still sharp, as many of the young pilots under his command learned the hard way. "There was a helluva line of eager young pilots anxious to jump our new squadron commander and see what he was made of," recalled one of the men in his wing. "Testing Yeager turned out to be a massacre. He waxed everybody and with such ease that it was shameful."

Retirement would never slow Yeager down. He continued to work for the Air Force as a consultant in exchange for the privilege of flying their newest jets. Yeager was as busy as ever in many ways now that he had been thrust into the hero business. With the release of Tom Wolfe's bestseller *The Right Stuff*, the movie from the same title, Yeager's autobiography and his popular AC Delco commercials, he was one of the most sought-after men in America.



Yeager has had such an impact on aviation that he actually began to change the way people spoke. It is his coolness under pressure combined with his distinctive West Virginia drawl that transformed the dialect of an entire generation of pilots. "That voice," Tom Wolfe writes, "started drifting down from on high. At first the tower at Edwards began to notice that all of a sudden there were an awful lot of test pilots up there with West Virginia draws...Military pilots and then, soon, airline pilots, pilots from Maine and Massachusetts and the Dakotas and Oregon and everywhere else, began to talk in that poker-hollow West Virginia drawl, or as close to it as they could bend their native accents. It was the drawl of the most righteous of all the possessors of the right stuff: Chuck Yeager."

As a kid, Yeager's mother, Susie Mae, sent him down to the poor farm to help the poor folks. He brought them food, cut their hair and shaved their beards. Susie Mae refused to take hand-outs, and between her and Hal Yeager they were able to provide for their family. If they didn't have something or enough money that week, they tightened their belts and did without. That sort of pride was instilled in Yeager. When asked how he felt about breaking the sound barrier, he says, "It was duty. And a sense of accomplishment—I'd done what the ol' man (Gen. Boyd) had set out for me to do."

Yeager continues to help the less fortunate to this day. In December, he participated in Governor Manchin's One Shot Doe Hunt, which gives the doe meat to the Food Bank of West Virginia and which raised \$60,000 last December for Hunters Helping the Hungry, a non-profit organization. He also has inspired and contributes to Marshall University's Yeager Scholars, a full four-year scholarship with a summer at Oxford and the opportunity for a semester abroad, and in 2008 Congress voted on and the President signed a law that awarded an honorary second star to General Yeager, making him Major General Yeager.

As President Bush said, "If there is one word to define Chuck Yeager, it is service. Service to his country."

Although Yeager will always be inexorably linked with breaking the sound barrier, his life has yielded far more. From his humble beginnings in Hamlin through his highly active retirement, he has been rich beyond most men's dreams. He embraces life. "I've had (am having) a full life and enjoyed just about every damned minute of it because that's how I lived," he wrote in 1985. "My beginnings back in West Virginia tell who I am to this day."

Perhaps the most intriguing quality that Chuck Yeager possesses is that he is someone with whom all people, men and women, young and old, can easily relate. Chuck Yeager, the hillbilly from West Virginia who flew like a demon and never backed down from a challenge, epitomizes that hunger in all of us and defines what it means to be truly rich.

Yeager's mother and father always told him, "Never forget where you came from."

And Chuck Yeager never has.

For more on Chuck Yeager, visit [www.chuckyeager.com](http://www.chuckyeager.com).

A special thanks to Jack Houvouras, editor of the Huntington Quarterly, for his contributions to this article.

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