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FOUR DOLLARS

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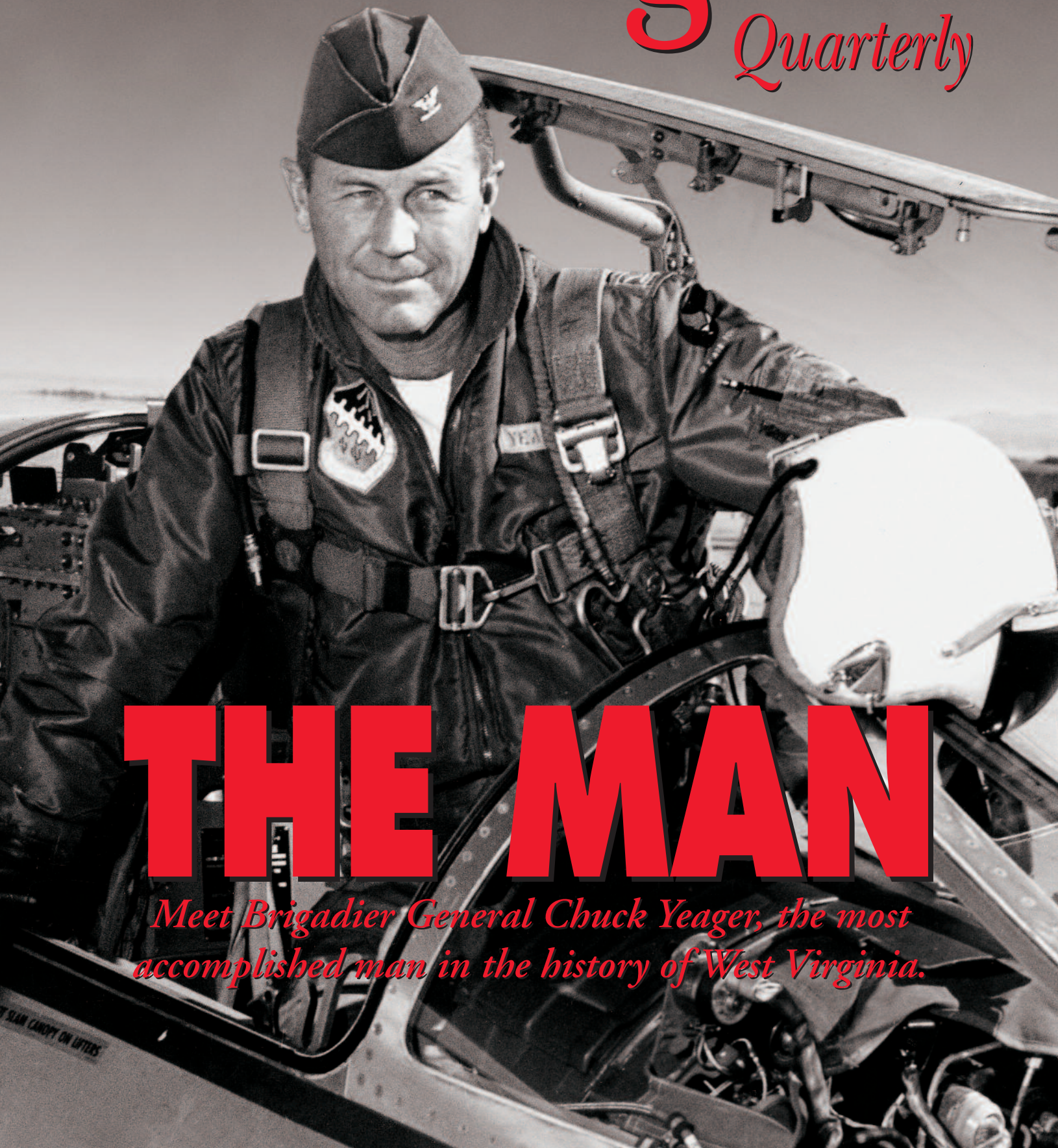

THE MAN

Meet Brigadier General Chuck Yeager, the most accomplished man in the history of West Virginia.

he did more than smash that brick wall in the sky. chuck yeager lived life to the fullest and along the way became the greatest pilot in history.

YEAGER

A pair of tatter-torn, mud-stained boots charged through the dense back woods of Hamlin, West Virginia. The morning fog hadn't even considered rising at this early point in the day but that didn't deter a young schoolboy, just seven-years-old, from weaving his way through trees and shrubs, hills and streams, his rifle in hand en route to a small patch of hickory trees where he knew squirrels would be feeding. He knew because of the wisdom passed on to him by his father and he knew because of his own fascination with the outdoors — his playground — where he was a student of all that nature affords. The youngster slowed and his short, thin frame emerged from the fog dressed in dungarees, ragged flannel shirt and ball cap. His tan brow frayed, he raised his rifle as his steel blue eyes honed in on a small target some 75 yards away. A crackling shot rang out and suddenly a small, headless gray animal fell from the trees.

Little Charles Yeager smiled, knowing that none of his friends could have pulled that shot off, knowing that he had outwitted nature and, most importantly, knowing that tonight dinner would offer more than just cornbread and buttermilk. By now the school bell was ringing as Yeager headed home. He knew he was in for an ass-chewing from the principal, but he didn't care. This was where he truly longed to be — exploring the mysteries of nature, at one with his knowledge and skill, proving to himself that he was good at something, possibly even the best. He was proud of his feat, confident in his ability and alive with the awareness that he was, in the truest sense, rich...

an article by john h. houvouras

In Huntington recently for a visit with the Yeager Scholars.

A stamp honors his historic ride.

Still flying fighter jets at age 74.

Where it all began, flight training for WWII.

Chuck Yeager didn't grow up rich, at least monetarily, in the small town of Hamlin, West Virginia. Hamlin was a proud, hard-working community so deep in the hollers of the Appalachias that, as the old saying goes, you had to "pump in sunshine." But it was here that Yeager spent his youth, quite contentedly, in poverty. His father worked as a driller in the gas fields of West Virginia while his mother took care of the home and five children. Despite spending six days a week on the road working, Yeager's father always found time on Sundays to teach his children to fish, hunt and survive, often with style, in the harshest of environments. Early on, young Charles, as he was called by the townsfolk, took an interest in his Dad's work, absorbing every piece of knowledge he could about the machines he operated. He also shared his father's love of cars and studied every detail of the old man's Chevy truck. It was this upbringing in the charming yet rural setting of Hamlin that laid the groundwork for the future success of the single greatest pilot that ever lived.

Following a lackluster trek through high school, Yeager enlisted as an airplane mechanic with the United States Air Force in the midst of World War II. He hoped his new path would take him to far away places that might hold the same magic as the West Virginia woods behind his home. He helped service planes before a newly-formed "Flying Sergeants" program gave him the opportunity to attend flight training. Believe it or not, his first few flights were unauspicious, finding the typically resilient Yeager puking his brains out. But he quickly overcame his airsickness ("Mind over matter," Yeager might say.) and began to set himself apart as the best flyer in the class. He possessed an innate competitiveness that drove him to excel, to be the best at every endeavor he undertook. It wasn't long before he was buzzing trees, flying just atop the deck and performing slow roles in the open skies over Nevada. He had found a new place to explore and its boundaries were nearly endless.

"You're whipping through a desert canyon at three hundred miles an hour," he writes in his autobiography, *Yeager*, "your belly just barely scraping the rocks and sagebrush, your hand on the throttle of a P-39 fighter. It's a crystal-clear morning on the desert...and the joy of flying makes you so damned happy that you want to shout for joy. You feel so lucky, so blessed to be a fighter pilot."

Yeager's passion was obvious and he flew incessantly throughout flight training, getting his hands on every airplane on base at all times of the day and night. When he wasn't flying, he was studying every aspect of every plane, down to the last nut and bolt. And when he wasn't near an airplane, he was either waxing poetic about them at the local watering hole or dreaming about them in his bunk.

During a military flight back east, he decided to visit Hamlin. He followed the Ohio River into Huntington then banked south for his hometown. At approximately 7 a.m., he hit full throttle and dove on Main Street at 500 mph before pulling up, doing some slow rolls and buzzing the treetops. But the townsfolk weren't amused. An elderly lady was so frightened that she had to be taken to the hospital, and another farmer was left fuming because his entire crop of corn had been blown down.

His training then took him to California. While there, he and a buddy stopped into a local gymnasium to arrange a U.S.O. dance. Inside a small office he found a "very pretty brunette" seated behind the desk. Glennis Dickhouse, an 18-year-old high school graduate from Oroville, Ca. who some said resembled actress Vivien Leigh, looked annoyed when the brash, young fighter pilot asked her to arrange a dance that evening for 30 men.

"You expect me to whip up a dance and find 30 girls on three hours notice?" Glennis exclaimed. Yeager fired back, "No, you'll only need to come up with 29 because I want to take you."

There was instant chemistry between the two even though Glennis found his West Virginia accent appalling.

"I barely understood every third word he spoke," she wrote in *Yeager*. "But...I sensed that he was a very strong and determined person, a poor boy who had started with nothing and would show the world what he was really made of. That was the kind of man that I hoped one day to marry."

After a whirlwind romance, Yeager received his orders to report overseas. He corresponded with Glennis frequently and began enclosing his paychecks. "Here," he would write, "bank this for us."

Yeager arrived in England with the 363rd fighter squadron and began flying his P-51 Mustang, which he named Glamorous Glen, over the dangerous skies of France and Germany. But, after only eight missions and the day after scoring his first kill, the 21-year-old was shot down over German-occupied France. He was flying at the tail-end of a group of P-51 Mustangs that were escorting B-24s on a bombing run. As the "tail-end charlie," he was in a very vulnerable position. German fighters typically attacked from above and behind and it was the tail-end charlie that got hammered first. As his plane plummeted to the ground, Yeager punched out.

Wounded with a gash on his forehead and a hole in his leg caused by shrapnel fragments, Yeager was alone and on the run. He called upon all the knowledge and skills that he acquired in the rugged hills of West Virginia to survive. After hiding out for several days in a farmer's barn, he slowly climbed his way over the snow-covered French Pyrenees, avoiding death from the elements on one occasion and gunfire from a German patrol on another, before finally making his way into Spain where freedom awaited him.

What also awaited Yeager was a trip back home. A "no more combat" rule for evadees was being enforced to protect the French underground. If Yeager were shot down again, he might be tortured into divulging escape routes.

But Yeager would have nothing to do with rules. "I was raised to finish what I started, not slink off after flying only eight missions," he wrote in *Yeager*. "Screw the regulations. I was brassy and pushed my way up the chain of command at group headquarters arguing my case."

In the first of a long line of bold feats, Yeager was granted a meeting with Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. "General," he said, "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."

Eisenhower ultimately granted his request and the war was back on. Yeager attacked each day with renewed passion and verve. When an intelligence officer warned of heavy flack and possible vicious fighter opposition on a given day, Yeager would think to himself, "I hope he's right."

By now Yeager was flying Glamorous Glen II (and later a new P-51D which he named Glamorous Glen III) in search of German fighters and more kills. On October 12, 1944, he found both. While escorting a box of B-24s over Holland, he noticed specks 50 miles ahead — his exceptional 20/10 vision would serve him well on this particular day. Yeager charged to the lead and closed in on a group of German Me-109s.

"I came in behind their tail-end charlie and was about to begin hammering him, when he suddenly broke left and ran into his wingman," he wrote in *Yeager*. "I blew up a 109 from six hundred yards — my third victory — when I turned around and saw another angling in behind me. Man, I pulled back on my throttle so damned hard I nearly stalled, rolled up and over, came in behind and under him, kicking right rudder and simultaneously firing. I was underneath the guy, less than fifty feet, and I opened up that 109 as if it were a can of Spam. That made four. A moment later, I waxed a guy's fanny in a steep dive."

Yeager had just scored five victories to become the country's first ace in a day. The front page headline in *Stars and Stripes* declared: FIVE KILLS VINDICATE IKES DECISION. The Yeager legend had begun.

"He flew like a demon and was always taking calculated risks that are the essence of his personality," said his close friend and squadron leader Bud Anderson. "We all like to buzz, but Chuck buzzed a few feet lower than the rest of us. And when Yeager attacked, he was ferocious. Yeager was the best. Period. No one matched his skill or courage or, I might add, his capacity to raise hell and have fun."

Throughout his career, Yeager attributed much of his success to luck. During one of his missions in World War II, he stumbled upon three German jet fighters. "I could barely believe my good luck," he wrote. But instead of fearing their 150 mph speed advantage over his Mustang, he dove after them and became one of the first pilots to down a German jet.

Another example of his unique attitude toward combat took place in the skies over East Germany and Poland. His squadron was mistaken for a group of unescorted bombers and the Germans scrambled every plane on the ground for an attack.

"God Almighty!" squadron leader Bud Anderson exclaimed. "There must be a hundred and fifty of them."

Yeager's reaction? "We couldn't believe our luck. We plowed right into the rear of this enormous gaggle of German fighters. There were sixteen of us and over two hundred of them, but then more Mustangs from group caught up and joined in. Christ,

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CHUCK YEAGER

(Continued from page 21)

there were airplanes going every which way. A dogfight runs by its own clock and I have no idea how long I was spinning and looping in the sky. I wound up 2,000 feet from the deck with four kills...the ground was littered with burning wreckage. It was an awesome sight. That day was a fighter pilot's dream. In the midst of a wild sky, I knew that dogfighting was what I was born to do."

As hard as Yeager and his buddies flew, they partied with even greater zeal. They drank until either a fight broke out or someone passed out. The topic of choice for the evening was, what else, flying: "You fought wide open, full-throttle. With experience, you knew before a kill when you were going to score. You set him up, and there was no way out: both of you knew he was finished. You were a confident hunter and your trigger finger never shook. When he blew up, it was a pleasing, beautiful site. There was no joy in killing someone, but real satisfaction when you outflew a guy and destroyed his machine. The excitement of those dogfights never diminished. For me, combat remains the ultimate flying experience," he explains in *Yeager*.

His tour of duty in World War II came to an end in 1945 and Yeager returned to the states unsure of his future. He knew he wanted to marry Glennis but beyond that...

In typical Yeager fashion, he showed up at her door just after landing in California and announced, "Pack your bags. I'm taking you home to meet my folks."

"What for?" Glennis asked.

"What do you think?" he responded.

Yeager couldn't promise Glennis much except perhaps a cabin in a holler. But that was enough. She was, however, concerned about being a stranger in a strange land.

"I pictured West Virginia as a foreign country where I couldn't understand the spoken language," Glennis said.

Chuck laughed. "Oh, hell, hon, we all speak the king's English, same as you do."

The two arrived in Hamlin to a warm reception by the family and town. Glennis then drove to Huntington with Chuck, his mother and sister, where they bought rings and a wedding dress. They were married at home in the family parlor and honeymooned that evening in Huntington.

The marriage began with Glennis living with the Yeager's in Hamlin while Chuck was assigned to Wright Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio, so he could fly home on weekends. His decision to stay as close as possible to his new wife turned out to be a true stroke of luck. From 1945 to 1946, Wright Patterson was *the* place to be for a tenacious fighter pilot. The hangers on base were overflowing with planes and Yeager had every intention of flying every one of them. What's more, prop planes were being fazed out and a new era of jet fighters was emerging. Yeager, who was accepted as a test pilot despite his lack of education, was licking his chops. He flew eight hours a day and never missed an opportunity to take on another hot shot test pilot in a dogfight.

"I went through the entire stable of test pilots and waxed every fanny...when they saw I was merciless, they just quit," Yeager wrote.

When he wasn't flying at Wright, he was performing around the country in air shows, further honing his skills. But fate would soon move him to the next great flying locale — the drab California desert, home of Muroc.

By the spring of 1947, Chuck Yeager's name appeared on a short list of test pilots under consideration for the highly secretive X-1 project. The X-1 was a Bell aircraft shaped like a bullet with razor-thin wings and four powerful rocket chambers. Because of its eerie design and bold color, it was dubbed the "Orange Beast." Despite lacking a college degree, Yeager was selected as the pilot to steer the experimental aircraft past Mach 1 and the elusive sound barrier.

"We had several other outstanding pilots to choose from," noted project head Gen. Albert G. Boyd, "but none of them could quite match his skill in a cockpit or his coolness under pressure."

In the quiet desert, Yeager was working with an impressive team of scientists and engineers from the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA), the predecessor to NASA. The single most important member of the X-1 team was Yeager's flight engineer, Jack Ridley. Ridley was an excellent pilot in his own right, a standout graduate student of Caltech and the only man to ever whip Yeager in a dogfight.

"Without Jack Ridley," Yeager wrote, "the X-1 probably would never have succeeded."

Yeager's first few rides in the X-1 saw him push the plane from .8 to .9 Mach, but when he neared the sound barrier, the aircraft began buffeting and his controls froze. Scientists from around the world had warned that the sound barrier was a brick wall in the sky which could not be penetrated. They predicted that a pilot's controls would lock up as his craft shook violently and ultimately disintegrated. With Yeager's last flight, it appeared they were right.

But Ridley was undeterred. He sat at a desk and scratched down obscure equations. His calculations yielded a possible solution: a flying tail. It was a long shot, but Yeager and Ridley were confident the modification would work.

The evening before Yeager tested the adjustment made to the X-1, he went horsebackriding in the desert with his wife Glennis. They decided to race back to the stables and Chuck was in the lead. Despite his exceptional vision, he never saw the closed gate in the darkness and was thrown from his horse, cracking two ribs.

Nonetheless, he reported to the hangar the next day, his ribs taped, sure that he could fly the X-1 but unsure if he could lock the heavy cockpit door. He confessed his problem to Ridley who then grabbed a broomstick, sawed off about a 10-inch piece, and handed it to Yeager to use as a lever to lock the door with his good side. The date was October 14, 1947.

Yeager climbed into the X-1 and was dropped from the belly of a B-29 bomber. He fired all four rocket chambers and was slammed to the back of his seat. The aircraft climbed to 42,000 feet and his speed indicated .94 Mach. He had passed through the heavy buffeting and was still flying smooth, like a bat out of hell. Then the speed indicator began to fluctuate at .965 Mach and suddenly jumped right off the scale. A thunderous boom was heard on the desert floor below and many of the brethren assumed Yeager had finally "bought the farm." Instead, they had heard the first sonic boom in history as Yeager smashed through the brick wall.

"Hey, Ridley, that Machmeter is acting screwy," Yeager said cooly. "It just went off the scale on me."

"Son, you is imagining things," Ridley replied.

"Must be. I'm still wearing my ears and nothing else fell off, neither," Yeager joked.

On the ground Glennis was waiting. As was usually the case, Yeager hitched a ride back to base on a fire truck and collapsed in the car with Glennis. "I'm beat," he said. "Let's go home." But as soon as she turned the ignition, two of his buddies ran up to the car and began patting him on the back, hooping and hollering. "That's how I found out that Chuck had broken the sound barrier," Glennis recalled.

That historic flight transcended not only the race for space, but Chuck Yeager's life as well. It took a year before the Air Force released the news to the public, but when they did, the "hillbilly from West Virginia" became a household name. He was on the cover of *TIME* magazine, befriended by the most powerful men and women in America and asked to speak to groups across the country.

Yeager's fabled ride on the orange beast ushered in a new era of aviation. Muroc was renamed Edwards Air Force Base and was transformed from a small blip on a map to the ultimate destination for the hottest test pilots in the game.

"There were...other pilots," writes Tom Wolfe in his best seller *The Right Stuff*, "with enough Pilot Ego to believe that *they* were actually better than this drawlin' hot dog. But no one would contest the fact that as of that time, the 1950s, Chuck Yeager was at the top of the pyramid, number one among all the True Brothers."

Yeager found himself swept up in the Golden Age of Flying and loved every minute. "In less than five years, a whole new Air Force was dumped in our laps for flight testing, including most of the prototypes of today's supersonic aircraft," Yeager wrote. "From first light to last light, seven days a week, the desert sky over the Mojave thundered."

Yeager received all of the top assignments at Edwards. In 1953, the Air Force was looking to set a new world speed record and called on him for the project. Bell delivered a new aircraft, the X-1A, 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 there was a problem — he was blinded by the sun, couldn't see his controls and consequently his angle of ascent was too steep. He reached 80,000 feet (the outer limits of the atmosphere) at 2.4 Mach, 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 recalled. "Terrifying."

He radioed Ridley. "I don't know whether or not I can get back. I gotta save myself. I don't know if I've torn up this thing or not, but Christ..." he sobbed.

But he somehow managed to regain control of the X-1A at 5,000 feet. "You

won't have to run a structural demonstration on this damned thing," he joked. He had cheated death once again.

"I don't know of another pilot who could have walked away from that one," noted Gen. Albert G. Boyd. "The gyrations were so severe that there was an indentation on the canopy where he struck it with his head. He bent the control stick. Chuck knew he was going to die. No pilot could listen to the tape of Yeager's last ride in the X-IA 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."

That evening, despite being hurt and shaken, Yeager and Glennis attended a formal banquet in Los Angeles where he was scheduled to speak.

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 (where his wife and four children lived in a one bedroom house without a neighbor in sight) to Germany, where he served as squadron commander for a wing of fighter pilots. The one-time young hot shot was now 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."

By 1963, Yeager was back at Edwards and eyeing another record — this time the altitude mark of 113,890 feet held by the Russians. On the afternoon of December 12 (ten years to the day that he nearly died breaking the world speed record in the X-1A), with Glennis and his mother looking on, he took off in a Lockheed NF-104 and began climbing toward the heavens. He exceeded Mach 2 and reached an altitude of 104,000 feet when the nose of his aircraft pitched, then fell flat and began spinning violently. Suddenly, the airplane lost its hydraulic pressure and Yeager knew he was in trouble. The NF-104 made 14 flat spins before finally punching a hole in the desert floor. Yeager managed to eject after 13. While falling from the sky, he was slammed in the face by the tube end of his seat which was still burning. The rubber seal around his helmet lit up and the pure oxygen environment around his head ignited. The inside of his helmet was a combination of fire and smoke as he struggled to breathe. He somehow managed to rip off his helmet, but in the process badly burned his hand. His left eye was burned and covered with layers of baked blood. When he hit the ground, a civilian ran toward him, looked at his face, and turned away in disgust. Yeager's face was charred. He asked the young man for a knife and said, "I've gotta do something about my hand. I can't stand it anymore." He then cut off his glove, but part of two fingers peeled away with it. The young man became sick.

He spent the next month in a hospital. His left eye was saved because the layers of blood had shielded it from the fire inside his helmet. However, his face and neck were badly burned and the only way to prevent permanent scarring was to scrape away the scabs every four days — an extremely painful procedure but one that left him almost completely healed.

In 1966, Yeager was assigned as the commander of the 405th Fighter Wing in the Phillipines. He oversaw five squadrons involved in the Vietnam War and took part in 127 combat missions. He had served his country in virtually every capacity, from a lowly junior maintenance officer to combat ace to research test pilot. He, Glennis and their children had endured the worst possible housing conditions, low pay and, often times, isolation from friends and family. But Yeager had persevered and worked his way through the ranks without ever complaining. In fact, he simply loved his work. Finally, in 1968, after 25 years in the Air Force, Charles E. Yeager was promoted to the rank of General.

In 1975, Yeager finally decided to call it quits. Those in attendance at the retirement ceremonies included fighter pilots and millionaires, test pilots and generals, as well as a few drunks. "It was a typical Yeager crowd," Bud Anderson noted.

But retirement would never slow Yeager down. He continued to work for the Air Force and private companies as a high-priced consultant, earning as much as $1 per year for the privilege of flying their newest jets. Chuck and Glennis bought a home in Grass Valley, Ca., just at the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas, where they ran Yeager Inc., a business to handle all of the requests for speaking engagements, appearances, you name it. 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 best seller *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.

Retirement also allowed Yeager more time to return to his roots and his love of the outdoors. Whether it was with Glennis and the kids or a pack of his old buddies, he embarked on numerous hunting and fishing trips throughout the world. And nothing came between his two week trek in early July through the High Sierras where he angled for the precious golden trout. Not even if the President of the United States called. No, this trip was sacred.

And while he continued to fly the fastest jets in the world, fish and hunt and speak to distinguished groups around the world, his legend continued to grow, especially among the "fraternity."

Yeager had such an impact on aviation that he actually began to change the way people spoke. It was 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 drawls...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."

Airline pilots throughout the country began mimicking his style. Whenever a passenger boarded a commercial plane, they would hear that homey, cool, everything is a-OK, hillbilly voice lulling from the cockpit. "It might get a bit choppy up there today folks, but it's nothin' to worry yourselves about. Those air pockets are just little ol' bumps in the road." And perhaps that says it all. Only Chuck Yeager could have made a West Virginia accent enviable.

In the early 1980s, Yeager walked into the living room of his Grass Valley home and saw a pile of medals, trophies, letters and pictures that spanned the length of his career. "Hey, honey, what's goin' on here?" he asked Glennis. "Are we moving, or what?"

"No, you're giving it away — to Marshall University," she replied. Glennis had been working with Marshall University to establish a Yeager Scholars Program designed to lure the finest students from around the country to Huntington. "Only The Best" was the program's motto. The university was also interested in a collection of memorabilia for permanent safekeeping.

On October 14, 1987, Huntington and Marshall University honored Yeager on the 40th anniversary of his breaking the sound barrier. That day, he was also honored in his hometown of Hamlin with the unveiling of a lifesize statue that stood in front of the local high school. Yeager thrilled all those in attendance by performing a flyby in an F-4. He swept down over the streets in a thunderous charge, pulled up, and displayed his signature slow roll. In Hamlin, the entire city turned out to hear their hometown hero give a speech. Children were let out from school and crowded close to the podium, eager to hear Yeager's words.

"There was one particular boy right in front who was looking up with absolute adoration," Bud Anderson wrote in *Press On!,* the popular follow-up to Yeager's autobiography. "He appeared to be about nine-years-old and I noticed that a couple of times he even started the applause in response to Chuck's remarks. Later, Chuck told me that this one boy grabbed his leg and asked Chuck to hold him. Chuck picked the kid up and as he was giving him a big hug, the boy pressed his head on Chuck's shoulder, clinging like a limpet. Chuck is not one to ever show much emotion or enthusiasm for these kinds of affairs. But he was truly moved by this outpouring of admiration from the people of his hometown."

In 1990, he lost Glennis after two bouts with cancer. They had been married for 45 years.

In October, Yeager was back in Huntington visiting the latest class of Yeager Scholars, giving a couple of students a ride in a P-51 Mustang and talking about the 50th Anniversary of breaking the sound barrier. He was in the midst of a yearlong tour for the highly-celebrated event which culminated with him flying supersonic at Edwards on October 14, 1997, 50 years to the day that he flew the X-1 into history. After getting out of the plane, he announced his retirement from professional flying. The United States Postal Service issued a stamp in honor of the historic feat which featured a drawing of the X-1, but not of Yeager. A person must be dead before they can appear on the cover of a stamp and Chuck Yeager was far from that.

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. Along every step of the way, he appreciated what life afforded him. Whether it was the joy of traipsing through the woods of West Virginia, the thrill of combat in World War II, the challenge of research flying, hunting and fishing in the High Sierras or his relationships with his wife, children and friends, he embraced life.

"I've had 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. My accomplishments as a pilot tell more about luck, happenstance, and a person's destiny. But the guy who broke the sound barrier was the kid who swam the Mud River with a swiped watermelon, or shot the head off a squirrel before school."

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. Although his legend looms larger than life, he has never forgotten his roots or relented in his pursuit of being the best. And everyone, at some point in their life, has longed to be the best at something. Everyone, at one time or another, has dreamt of living life to the fullest. 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 rich.

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