

# Yeager wows Namibians

• JANA-MARI SMITH

BRIGADIER General Chuck Yeager on Tuesday told a group of enthralled Namibian admirers that it was relatively quiet when he broke the sound barrier, except for his own “sigh of relief”.

At an informal meeting with the legendary test pilot, who has clocked more than 19 000 flying hours during his illustrious career, Yeager demonstrated that he is still young at heart, battle ready and as passionate about flying and life as ever.

He joked that during his career he has had “five more takeoffs than landings” and proudly said “I am 87 years old and I still fly”.

He told the assembled group of pilots, many of whom freely admitted that he is their hero, that if he still was a test pilot, his favourite plane would be the F-15.

During his career he has flown 361 different makes and models of military aircraft.

Together with his wife, Victoria Yeager, the General spoke in Windhoek following a nine-day Namibian safari, which marked his first trip to southern Africa.

And while a visit to Namibia was ticked off late in life, it is understandable considering Yeager’s incredible life story, which include heroic escapes from the Nazis in World War Two, worldwide fame as a man barely in his twenties and other daring adventures in the sky.

“Hell yes,” Yeager answered on Tuesday, when asked if he ever felt fear in 1947, when he was trying to break through the sound barrier with an experimental plane.

Though he might admit fear, it becomes clear that it was exactly his nerves of steel, his finely tuned knowledge of planes and his bravery that got him selected as the test pilot for the rocket-powered Bell X-1.

According to his bosses at the time, the characteristics that set Yeager apart, and which convinced them to choose a 24-year-old former military pilot instead of more experienced pilots, was that he was the “best instinctive pilot and was cool and calm under pressure”.

During the days preceding his famous feat, Yeager says he “remained confident” that the X-1 was capable of reaching Mach 1 despite numerous problems that cropped up during the flight tests. On the day he made history, he was in serious pain from a number of broken ribs after falling from a horse the previous day.

On October 14 1947, at an altitude of 43 000 feet, Yeager “crossed the invisible threshold of flight faster than sound”, according to a commentator speaking on a Yeager documentary.

He became known as the fastest man alive. Yeager told his audience in Windhoek and that he cruised at a speed of approximately Mach 1.09 “for about 20 seconds, and that was it”.

This achievement did not stop Yeager from achieving more. The rest of his career included a number of daring flight experiments, during several of which he had very narrow escapes.



LEGENDS ... International test pilot legend Chuck Yeager meets local flying legend Gus Uys.

And despite the evident skill, personal characteristics and strength required to build such a remarkable career as his, Yeager modestly said on Tuesday that it all came down to being at “the right place, at the right time”. Yeager might be modest, but his wife Victoria says that he has an instinctive feel for machines and was the type of pilot who practiced hard and often.

He reminisced about his beginnings as a pilot, and was frank about the fact that during his first flight on a plane, he became sick, after which he thought to himself, “you made a big mistake”. According to Yeager, he saw a plane for the first time when he was 15.

And yet, though he felt sick during his first airplane ride, he enrolled in the military pilot programme from which he graduated and was immediately posted in Europe in 1944.

The rest is history.

Yeager and his wife praised the country and Yeager admitted that he was “pleasantly surprised ... Namibia is a wonderful country.”