
Amazing Yeager

"Hey, smartass, you come sit on my lap,"

says Chuck Yeager. He is speaking to a woman he just met and being quintessentially Yeager: gutsy, blunt and getting away with behavior as amazing as that of the October day in '47 he screamed his rocket-powered X-1 fighter through the sound barrier and thereafter branded himself an aviation icon. The general is 77 now, his bearing as ramrod proud, his dress as knife-pleat sharp, as the day he was awarded for bravery the Congressional Medal of Honor. Though his youth is as gone as the hair up top, his ice-blue eyes are lit with an eternal badboy gleam which glints whenever he's in the mood to tease, which is often. Hey, his mischievous squint seems to say, "it's great being Chuck Yeager – war hero, test pilot, emblem of American guts, glory, glamour – in short, Mr. Right Stuff personified." It's great because, hell, Chuck Yeager's having fun.

"I don't look at myself as a hero," he is quoted in one Internet interview conducted on the 50th anniversary of the historic day he, with ribs broken in a horseback riding accident, flew faster than the speed of sound. "My lifestyle is that I just happened to be a guy that was at the right place at the right time and was patriotic enough to do my duty.

"Whatever happens after that," he adds of the fame and glory that followed, "you live with. And it's fun. You go in an airport and some guy'll say, 'Are you who I think you are?' *Man*," and here's the fun part for Chuck Yeager, "How in the hell would I know who you think I am?" Sir, I don't know, sir, is what you might choose to reply to such a classic Yeager comment – that is, if you didn't know his sensitive, sentimental side. About 50 years ago, he says, "it was a hell of a lot of guts" to test-fly the high-performance military aircraft like Glamorous Glennis, the legendary X-1 named for his wife of 45 years who succumbed to ovarian cancer in 1992, and whose death, says a Yeager friend, so devastated the general that even today he can't discuss it "without breaking up." And it's a hell of a lot of guts, still, to be retired (since 1975), on an Air Force salary of \$1 a year (his consulting test pilot's pay), and willing to venture out from home in Grass Valley, CA go up in any "nonmilitary stuff" he is in the mood to fly. For airshows. For friends. For fun. Like a buddy's C-414 he admits he doesn't "know so well," a fact which wouldn't faze Chuck Yeager. "Hell, we were smokin' along just fine," he says after one such spin with the 414. "Upside down, right side up – doesn't matter to a test pilot. I just want to see how the damn plane will fly."

But guts go only so far when what you absolutely love to do is hike and fish in the wilds of Wyoming and being Chuck Yeager means instead you always have to "go off somewhere," as he says, "and give a damn talk." When the guts go, what kicks in is all that stuff of which the Right Stuff is made: a brand of discipline, a sense of duty, a drive to "finish what you start" and "do the best you can" that rocketed the son of a West Virginia gas driller through a stellar military career – he has a breastful of decorations to prove it, from the Purple Heart to the Distinguished Flying Cross. It is this that propelled the aviation Hall of Famer through turns as flight instructor, test pilot, commander of the Air Force Aerospace Research (p14)

Oh Chuck Yeager

(cont'd) Pilots School (which trained pilots for the space program), U.S. Defense Representative, and survivor – of two harrowing aircraft accidents, one in which he was badly burned. And it is this that fires the general, still, as he is sought after for every kind of public appearance – and mind you, when you're dealing with a true American hero in an age of so few, "some people," Yeager says, "get a little bit demanding." Of course, Chuck Yeager will probably say it's that legendary "duty" that keeps him in the public eye. What he doesn't say is these are perfect occasions for Chuck Yeager, bearer of that badboy gleam, to come out and play.

"Yeah," he deadpans at one such appearance where the small audience, half pilots, hung on his every never-minced word as he describes his particularly Yeager-esque brand of cockpit exploits. "Any landing you walk away from is a good landing. An airplane you can use the next day is an outstanding landing."

Oh, it might seem a bit wearying to be hero-worshipped the way you are when you are Chuck Yeager. For the six fortunate top bidders at the 1999 Napa Valley Wine Auction, for example, who paid \$38,000 to "Soar, Sip and Sup with a Legend," it might seem so. This auctioned-off event provided by Yeager friend and Astrale e Terra winery chairman C. Paul Johnson finds the six – successful businessmen, all, one a Learjet owner, another with a Citation to his name – winning a full day with the most famous test pilot of all time. The prize? A flight around the Napa Valley in Johnson's Cessna 414, Yeager at the controls; wine-tasting and an intimate dinner at Johnson's winery home, Yeager's place set at the head of the table. The occasion, of course, calls for a photo-op. As the six auction winners gather around Yeager before boarding the C-414, the air of awe is palpable – normally cool and confident CEOs dumbstruck into silence, usually smooth entrepreneurs suddenly shy.

"Do you even ask?!" an incredulous one of the six says when questioned

why he wants to fly with the "guy at the top of the pyramid," as Yeager is called in the film *The Right Stuff*, the "fastest man alive." "Who else would you want to fly with?!"

"Aw, cut the crap," gruffs Yeager as



the group photo is snapped.

He's only joking. Just ask Johnson, a fellow former fighter pilot who befriended the legend some years ago by acknowledging him as his hero. "Oh, he's being a typical fighter pilot, always pushing the envelope," Johnson says, which could be applied to Yeager's conversational baiting. "I tease him, he teases back." He laughs: "I guess not too many guys tease General Yeager!" And not too many women have the nerve to slap him. Too bad. Chuck Yeager probably would like to be seen not as Chuck Yeager, hero and icon, but rather as the Chuck Yeager he knows pretty well: only a patriotic guy, forged from discipline, inspired by duty and – always – havin' a helluva good time.

