

WILD BILL YONDER

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What's the big deal?" I thought. Until, three seconds into our specially chartered cruise, Col. J.J. Rovira lit the afterburner and took that first left turn.

The sky fell over on its side and I felt not only the blood draining from my brains but my brains draining from my skull. I had sensed the three-stage kick to a fully open throttle, at which point the engine's rear canister flooded with fuel for a literal explosion of additional thrust.

And what a lovely day for flying it was.

I would get my fill of it, too. For after nearly a year of pestering the Pentagon for a spin with the Bucaneros, Puerto Rico's Air National Guard unit, I found myself sealed inside the cockpit of a screaming F-16 Fighting Falcon. Moments before, on the tarmac, the steel arm bracing open the canopy had retracted with smooth hydraulic authority to pull the transparent lid down over pilot and passenger, squadron commander Rovira and myself.

Upon meeting the commander, I felt that instant mutual respect shared by kindred airmen for each other's perils in the wild blue frontiers of the earth's gaseous outer layer, commonly referred to as yonder. Rovira had several combat tours of 'Nam under his belt. And I had logged untold frequent-flyer miles in coach, invariably sandwiched between a wailing chorus of colicky triplets on one side, and a drunk Sumo wrestler hogging up the armrest on the other.

Understand I am not a pilot. Nor by definition a stowaway.

No, I'm that curious rapsallion in between who insinuates himself into worlds off limits to most mortals by slyly flashing a press pass. Though for my ride with the Bucaneros, I also had to promise to wash and wax their planes every weekend till Comet Hyakutake's next swing





through town. Or till the O.J. saga is over. Whichever comes first.

"Hang on," came the commander's voice, disarmingly confident over the headset. We had taxied to Runway 10 at Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport. Commercial pilots share the strip with Bucaneros and enviously grant them right of way for takeoff. Better

said, liftoff.

A muffled thunder rose outside the cockpit, from the beast, a single Pratt and Whitney F100-PW-200 engine, thrusting with the menace of a virgin-starved volcano directly beneath and behind us, I felt dizzy and gasped for air, having reached for the toggle switch to increase my oxygen supply and finding I had accidentally turned it off instead.

Correcting the mistake just before passing out, I regained my wits to take stock of the moment.

God knows how long I'd been salivating for this, a taste of the fighter pilot's thrill. Now my wish was about to be granted, against quite formidable odds. After all, I was a civilian, didn't have a pilot's license and my driver's license was expired, revoked actually, for trying to fly a Honda Civic.

Barely able to conceal my glee, I slid my visor down, reveling in the authenticity of the gesture. Behind the dark tint, which easily tamed the morning's tropical glare, I murmured solemnly "Eat your heart out Tom Cruise, you phony top gun bastard. This is the real thing.

And vrrroosh! No sooner had I given a thumbs up and crossed myself with it, than the plane slung itself toward the sun. Never used the runway. We were absolutely still, motionless, on the ground one second, and then suddenly climbing away from the horizon, the scenery gone in a flurry.



The view was overwhelming, but had me on the verge of cardiac arrest when I looked out and noticed our plane had no wings. I'm accustomed to seeing a jet's comforting wing span reach out and scrape the skyline. But F-16 airfoils

resemble the skimpy feathers on the side of a dart.

Its design forgoes the neutral stability of normal aircraft in exchange for supreme agility. Which, added to the plane's preternatural pickup, makes for loads of fun. I had been warned. But as the plane leapt from the runway I felt perfectly unaffected by the alleged trauma I'd been told to expect.

Quick, yes. But gosh, it really wasn't any worse, any more stressful, than taking one of those propeller puddle jumpers over to Culebra. That is, until Rovira ignited the afterburner, that portion of the engine, to avoid technicalities, which shoots fire.

Here the plane banked sharply, at cross angles to the trajectory I, for one, was still following. The maneuver yanked the chains of gravity taut. Every corpuscle in my body felt drawn and quartered by the opposing forces. Now, I thought, this is more like it.

My G-suit inflated. Automatically, it constricted my legs like a boa, to reverse or at least stem the sudden exodus of blood from my torso, the gray matter from my head.

The paralysis was excruciatingly sudden, immobilizing me in mid-blink. Could not for the life of me budge my head, turn it or so much as nod. I could barely lift my arms, make a fist, articulate my fingers.

Struggling against the ripping implosion, I instinctually and desperately squeezed the muscles in my upper body and pumped my legs so far as I could against the foot rest, all to help draw the blood back. And, sounding like an overworked espresso machine, I fought vainly to fill my momentarily collapsed lungs.

Of course, I couldn't speak and was positively dying to ask Rovira how the hell he was flying the plane.

This, friends, was my first tussle with G-force.

One G is the force exerted by the Earth's gravity on stationery objects at sea level. At two Gs you feel as if your weight has doubled, at three, like Oprah after a tour of the Häagen Dazs factory, and so on. How many Gs pulled by a plane and anyone inside depends on the speed and angle of a given maneuver. The F-16 and sometimes its pilots can withstand up to nine.

And this was a baby turn. Three and a half tops.

Really high G maneuvers routinely threaten fighter pilots



with loss of consciousness, known as GLOC. It sets in by degrees. First you lose peripheral vision. Then everything turns gray. Then your forward field of vision narrows into a tiny dot, like a television set that's just been turned off. Finally, you totally blackout.

Indeed, the sequence uncannily mimics the progress of love. And has proven just as fatal.

But we rolled out of the turn safely, and my organs seemed to have snapped back, not necessarily into their proper place, mind you.

"How are we doing back there?" Rovira asked, as the plane leveled at about a thousand feet and shot west along the northern coast, past the El Morro promontory.

"Oh, fine," I managed, while staring hopefully at the bumble-bee striped ejection handle. I wasn't about to pull it and make him mad. Still, we were now just eight seconds into an hourplus trip, and knowing that handle was within reach did humor my survival instinct.

The island streaked by lush and green on our left, and the Atlantic blanketing the world to the right never looked so resplendent. It shone like a gleaming palette, alive and slipping from one translucent shade of blue to the next.

Afterburner off, and gravity's grip subsided, I could enjoy myself a bit. Unclench my stomach. And marvel. Here was an entirely different perspective on speed. At low altitude, with the island for static reference, you really do sense that it's possible to go fast enough to catch up with time, if not actually lap it and hurtle into the past.

The tiny plane's speed is as unapologetically lethal as its objective. I admit being totally seduced by its predatory aesthetics. Oh, to run one's hand over its aluminum-alloy skin, quiver in the wake of its roar after takeoff, gape as it descends through the clouds for a precision attack.

I'm no war monger. But I defy any pacifist to look me in the eye and tell me honestly they never once wanted to drop a smart bomb on their landlord. "Go ahead," I thought lapsing into cathartic fantasy, "raise my rent."

Air superiority doesn't come cheap. Figure \$20 million for the plane we were in, an F-16B from the early '80s. Twice that for a new model. And it costs roughly \$2,000 an hour to operate. Not including tolls.

Over Arecibo, Rovira hung another left into the island's interior. I leaned my helmet back against the headrest and braced myself for the Gs. To quote the lucky devil who holds the world record for being hit by lightning, "The second time wasn't that bad."

We hugged the mountainous contours. Rising and dipping above discernible treetops, slicing through narrow valleys, bolting over lakes and rivers, the Falcon proclaimed its sovereignty of the sky. We careened freely,

avoiding populated areas, through corridors of airspace reserved exclusively for Bucaneros.

Then tearing out over the west coast at Aquadilla, Rovira lowered our altitude. And lowered it. "Don't tell me," I said, "it's a submarine, too."

We were skimming the water, through the salt spray at 500 miles-per-hour, when two stunned faces flashed by on my right. Surely we had vanished by the time our apparition fully registered with the fishermen in that rickety wooden yolita.

I pictured them relating the sighting to friends: "That's right, and a chupacabras was flying it."

Seconds later, the Cabo Rojo lighthouse loomed nigh. Lone sentry on that secluded sea-battered bluff, the dilapidated landmark is often designated as a mock missile silo during Bucaneros' air combat exercises, where one team of pirates attacks it while another defends.

But that wasn't on our agenda today.

Reaching the cliffs, Rovira banked right and thundered upwards for our rendezvous with the fuel tanker. We climbed to 18,000 feet over the Mona Channel, where a gaggle of other F-16s, standard single-seaters that had taken off minutes before us, were preparing to quench their thirst.

As the highly flammable fuel tanker, a converted Boeing 707, circled in a wide orbit, the dwarfed fighters maintained tight formation on either side of the tanker's wing lips. We joined the formation on the outer side.

The planes flew a hair's breadth apart, at 350 miles-per-hour. By turns, the fighters loped in directly beneath the tanker's tail for their fill up. Watching them all bobbing and weaving individually at such close proximity sent up a cry of rebellion from my breakfast.

I went woozy when we swooped into position for our turn. Then as the ungainly nozzle boom reached past my side of the cockpit to pierce the plane's exposed inlet, I couldn't help recalling how one poetic flyboy

described the refueling procedure. "Easy," he had explained. "You just scoot right under and spread your legs."

We uncoupled, having taken on several thousand pounds of fuel in three minutes, about as much as the average service station sells in a day. I feared I must have ingested some fumes



myself because of what I heard next.

"You have control," Rovira said, as our plane drifted away from the pack.

Skeptical, I touched a finger to the rear control stick. The plane responded. We sailed right, left, up, down, at the slightest pressure from my hand. Flying an F-16 does wonders for your self-esteem. I was jealous of myself.

Famed for its sensitivity, the Falcon's control stick is mounted on the right armrest instead of between the pilot's legs as in most planes. The stick, in fact, barely moves and had such little play it seemed to respond telepathically, anticipating which way I wanted to go.

"My afternoon's free, I said, trembling innards quelled by my excitement at the stick. "Let's go liberate Cuba

Rovira's tight schedule, however, allowed no detours. It was time for a supersonic run. Back in control, the commander took us way off Puerto Rico's south coast and let her rip.

My eyes were trained on the Mach dial, as we catapulted through clouds. Again, came the three-stage kick to full power.

"C'mon. C'mon," Rovira said, cajoling the plane for more speed.

The needle on the dial made its way round, wagging precariously as it passed point six, point seven, point eight, seeking Mach one. "C'mon," Rovira said.

I tried rocking in my seat to get a little more juice out of the plane.

The needle edged passed point nine. Then froze. Mach one, the elusive speed of 750 miles-per-hour known as the sound barrier, teased mercilessly.

"Damn," Rovira said, easing off the throttle. "We're too heavy."

Then he flipped the tables on gravity by enlisting its aid. We soared to a higher altitude, hovered a moment and Rovira tipped our nose down. We were going to attack the sound barrier heading toward the earth.

We dove boldly. The needle retraced the attempt, winding quickly. Passing point six... seven... eight... Again it edged to point nine and stuck. The plane began to rattle slightly as we plummeted. Then pop, the needle swung past Mach one, and we whistled through the wall. As the shaking suddenly gave way to heavenly smooth flight, there was a vague sense we had entered another dimension.

Otherwise, there was scant evidence anything had happened at all. Alas, we were traveling faster than the sonic boom we had detonated. The clearest testament to our feat was left behind for someone else to enjoy, perhaps capping off the day for two unwitting fisherman.

Nevertheless, I gloated. This was a triumph. I was officially supersonic, as commemorated by the "Right Stuff" tattoo I splurged on after landing. I had joined that pantheon of sky masters who had pushed the envelope,

who had punctured the once impenetrable barrier of speed and spirit in a military chariot, or could afford a ticket on the Concord.

Rovira wasn't through with me yet, though. He had fanned open the airbrakes to slow and level out of our plunge. And still, I saw Puerto Rico explode from a pinpoint below to the full-sized land mass whose southern ridges we were now barreling toward.

The Guard's bombing range in Salinas lay on the other side. Bucaneros drop inert bombs there with benign charges to mark hits.

"This part, um, can make you a bit queasy," Rovira said on the approach. Let me clarify his understatement: I'm now more qualified on the topic of vertigo than Hitchcock ever was.

Rolling in through a thick compressed layer of clouds, Rovira shredded the last distinguishing membrane between pilot and plane. He was the plane. And he came tumbling upon the range with vicious abandon, snickering at the laws of physics. While I rode piggyback.

As I suffered the kaleidoscopic maneuvering, it occurred to me that an alternative to bombing your enemy would be to invite him for a ride.

The images flashing across my retina were coming too fast for my mind to decipher. So abruptly did Rovira corner, climb and plunge, yaw, pitch and roll throughout his attack orbit, that my visual perception surrendered and scrambled.

A churning vortex of creamy firmament, spinning glimpses of blue sky, sifting patches of drought-scorched earth and a whirling carousel of black, serrated canyon peaks blended into an optical froth. And that was after I closed my eyes.

The attendant G forces, threatening to separate me into my component ingredients, like a blood sample in a centrifuge, got me to thinking about asking for a raise.

The trick is to focus on your mission.

Rovira's mission was to bomb his target. My mission was to throw up inside the little plastic bag. Two tests of precision.

All I really wanted to do was burp. The tumult had caused a small bubble in my stomach, which the G forces refused to let me expel leisurely. So the bubble, intent on escape, persuaded my stomach to heave its contents.

It was only with Herculean effort that I succeeded in raising my hand to pull off my face mask. Then as my cheeks involuntarily puffed, I turned off my microphone to spare Rovira any sound effects. And there was still the bag to fetch, tucked in the leg pocket of my flight-suit, standard equipment for journalists.

Somehow, even as the world pinwheeled, and I say this with unmitigated pride, I accomplished my mission.

"When do we drop bombs?" I asked, turning the microphone back on after securing the bag with a twist tie.

"Just did," Rovira said.

"And the next one?"

"All done. That was the last one."

"Oh. Well. Good aim," I said.

We bid farewell to the range with a final pass over the strafing pit.

Storming in low across the field, the Gatling gun erupted with a 20 mm round. Bullseye Before the echo could bounce off the canyon wall, Rovira had pulled six and half Gs – straight up – simulating escape from retaliatory fire. We hooked into a ninety-degree vertical climb.

Back out over the Caribbean, Rovira asked if I wanted an acrobatics demonstration next. He judged my whimpering sobs as a negative and decided to save the rough stuff for another day.

Instead, he let me fly the plane again, as the trip drew to a close. Meandering with the coast from Salinas to Ceiba, I revived and happily realized that the next time I saw an F-16 buzz the sky, I would be able to point and say, "been there." I had been saying it for years but now it would be true. I now had first-hand knowledge of drag and lift and thrust in one of the most sophisticated planes ever.

I flew as I pleased, the wings my own now, angling for a better view of the Virgin Islands frolicking up ahead like a herd of migrating humpbacks. The stick felt good in my hand. It imparted to me an elated sense of victory over the human quest for flight, pursued undaunted by any failure since Icarus first miscalculated the melting point of wax.

My rapture ruptured when our eight-ton plane lost all power. We felt from the sky, surrendering altitude as swiftly as poor Icarus himself, our only engine failing, quitting, choking, hopelessly off, a flameout, simulated but sobering.

For his last drill, Rovira had taken control over Ceiba and cut the engine. He then glided the listing heap of metal skillfully to within inches of the airstrip at the Roosevelt Roads Naval Base. And just as I was looking forward to the stop-over, and maybe grabbing a cab from there, a rude jolt slammed me back into my seat. Rovira was thundering back up and into our last hop home.

Shortly, we were sailing over the clustered geometry of San Juan. Runway 10, from which we had originally vaulted into the sky, was visible on the other side of the lagoon.

"We can come in straight and simple," Rovira said, "or make it a little more exciting. Your call."

"Um," I said, overriding my better judgment, "Yea, go crazy."

He bolted dead on. We completely overshot the runway. Then breaching up out of his arrow-head flight path, Rovira looped left in a hairpin arc and descended gallantly as if on the banister of a spiral

staircase. One hour and twenty minutes after take off, we landed. I had flown my first sortie.

When the canopy finally opened, I could barely climb out. Yet, wobbly though I was, I was grateful. Stepping off the last rung of the ladder, I thanked Rovira profusely. He accepted graciously, handed me a pail of soapy water and told me not to forget the wheel rims.

At dinner with a few of the Bucaneros afterwards, one of the pilots asked for my impressions. I paused a moment to reflect before answering him, lest I say anything trite, prosaic or short of the mark.

"Well," I said, measuring my words, "I'll cherish my flight in an F-16 forever as the hands down most exhilarating, unequivocally most exalted, categorically, sincerely and without exaggeration, sheer absolute highlight of my blessed life."

"Yea," he said, "it's a real kick in the ass."

"That's what I meant," I said.

