

EXIT INTERVIEW

illustration by
Tim Tomkinson



CHUCK YEAGER

The greatest pilot in military history weighs in on breaking the sound barrier and butterscotch pie.

Q: What adventure most changed your life?

You haven't got time to listen to them all. I spent 65 years in air force cockpits and fought in four wars, but I never looked at it as an adventure. It's duty. You could say that the most important thing I did was break the sound barrier. That's the reason we're on the moon. But it was my *job* to try. That's the way I looked at it. Whatever the outcome, it didn't really make much difference to me.

Do you have a recurring dream?

I don't dream. I don't have nightmares. I'm gifted in that I can lie down and sleep within a minute anywhere I am, any time of day.

What's the best meal you ever had?

Something as basic as cornbread and buttermilk in a bowl. I was raised back in the hills of West Virginia, and I still have my grandmother's recipe for butterscotch pie. A couple of years ago I entered that pie in the county fair where I live now in California and won a blue ribbon. Made the front page of the paper.

What's the biggest bet you ever made?

I won \$1,500 in a poker game with some other pilots in World War II, and the next day, before we left on a mission over France, I put my money, ring, and ID card into a bag and gave it to an intelligence officer because all we carried were dog tags. Well, I got shot down behind enemy lines. I dodged Germans and got in with the French

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underground, then over the Pyrenees to Spain, and three months later rejoined my outfit. But the thing that worried me most all that time was thinking that intelligence officer would steal my money.

Where's the strangest place you ever woke up?

Another guy's wife's bed... That's a joke, son.

What song do you have to hear once a week?

"It Takes a Little Rain," by the Oak Ridge Boys. Best harmony I ever heard. I've seen them probably a dozen times, and when they play in Reno, they call me and I go over and introduce them.

What's the worst physical pain you've ever experienced?

I've broken shoulders and ribs and gotten burned in an airplane. But when it's over with, it's forgotten. Experiences associated with war you don't dwell on.

What was your first car?

A '46 Ford coupe when I got back from World War II. Of course, I'd already flown planes by then. I've flown 341 types of military planes in every country in the world and logged about 18,000 hours. The last time I flew an F-16 was a year ago, on the 60th anniversary of breaking the sound barrier. It might sound funny, but I've never owned an airplane in my life. If you're willing to bleed, Uncle Sam will give you all the planes you want.

What skill should every man have?

I don't know. That's speculation, and I don't speculate.

What's the most cherished possession you ever lost?

I don't get that attached to anything. One of the first things I found out when I went to England in 1943 as a fighter pilot was that about every day one guy didn't come back. You figured out quick not to get too close to people.

Who's the toughest guy you know?

In my profession, it'd be the guy who kills you.

What's the most scared you've ever been?

You're stupid if you get frightened because it interferes with you working your way out of the situation. That's the way I've lived. A while back I was on the *Hour of Power* Sunday morning TV show, and Reverend Schuller asked me: When you're up in an airplane and something goes wrong, do you pray to God? And I said, "No, God can't help me. I have to do it myself." The reverend just rolled his eyes.

Which of your senses could you live without most easily?

I'm damn near living without my hearing now — an occupational hazard. Mustang and jet pilots were exposed to so much noise, and the only protection we had was leather helmets. I've tried hearing aids, but hell, that just amplifies *everything*.

What's the best advice you ever received?

I get a lot of letters from kids: "What would you recommend that I do?" And my simple answer is that nobody ever gave me any advice. I have found that those who do it on their own do it best.

—INTERVIEWED BY STEVEN RUSSELL

The retired brigadier general, 85, is chairman of the General Chuck Yeager Foundation, which raises money for Down syndrome children and disabled veterans.

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