

EXCERPT FOUR

“Rich, we believe that the enemy is at the base of that hill at four o’clock. We’re going to fly away from it and stay on the treetops for about five miles; I don’t want ’em to know I’m here yet. I’m going to give you the controls in a minute, but in the meantime, I want you to put your hands and feet on the controls and just follow what I do. Believe me, I’m not going to tell you to do anything that may cause my imminent demise, OK?”

“Roger, Dwight.”

Dwight made some gentle climbing and diving S-turns to the left and right, maintaining their general heading away from the hill.

“OK, when I give you the airplane, I’ll say, ‘You’ve got it,’ and when I’m taking it away from you, you’ll feel me move the stick against your hand and I’ll say, ‘I’ve got it.’ OK?”

“OK.”

Dwight said, “OK, you’ve got it.” and he released the controls. The nose lifted a little, but Dwight decided to let Rich figure it out for himself as they climbed a good fifty feet off the treetops.

“Don’t take us too high, Rich. I don’t want ’em to see us.”

Rich didn’t say anything but lowered the nose, a bit too sharply. Dwight, hand poised to grab the stick, again decided to try to let Rich figure it out for himself. Sure enough, he leveled off twenty feet above the trees.

“Good man, Rich; you’re a natural. Now I want you to hold the stick with the pads of your fingers and thumb. I can tell you’ve got a death grip on it. Good; that’s it. Now do some of those gentle S-turns like I showed you. You’re not going to need hardly any rudder. The sharper the turn, the more rudder you’ll need.”

Rich performed the turns beautifully. No sweat.

“You know something, pal? I said you were a natural back there mainly to give you confidence, but, I swear to God, I think you’ve got the gift; no shit!”

“Go to hell, man!”

“You know something, Rich? I would normally say something in retort, but I know you pretty well. You know you’ve got it too, don’t you?”

“You know? I’ll have to admit, I feels good!”

They both laughed out loud.

Dwight said, “Do a three-sixty.”

“Do what?”

“Start a gentle left turn and take it all the way around until we’re going in this direction again and then straighten her out.”

“Aren’t we kinda low for that kind of crap?”

“Yes, but you need a little humility after that little display of natural flying skills. I’ll probably have to take it away from you, but go ahead and give it a try.”

Rich gave it some left stick and instinctively fed in some rudder when he felt the slip, maintaining his altitude with just a smidgen of back stick.

Damn! He does have the gift!

Rich brought it all the way around to their original heading and straightened out perfectly. He had gained about fifty feet, but it had been a damn good turn.

“Do you have any idea what you just did, pardner?”

“Yeah, I turned the airplane around. No big deal.”

“You are what we call an instinctive pilot. You did it by feel! You initiated the turn, and that’s where I would have had to take the airplane away from a normal person. You pulled back on the stick to keep from losing altitude and fed in rudder to stop the airplane from skidding. Then you neutralized the controls so that the airplane maintained its attitude and then rolled the airplane out of the turn using right rudder and a little up stick!

“You’ve got it, my man! You’ve got the *gift!*”

Rich said, “Bullshit, man,” but Dwight could see the smile from the back of Rich’s head.

“All right, hotshot; you see that big, round white gauge in the top center of the panel?”

“Yep.”

“That’s a directional gyro, a compass. I want you to turn right and roll out on a heading of two-four-zero. That’s almost west but not quite.”

“I know how to use a compass, man!”

“Oh, excuse me, Mister Chuck Yeager! I forgot.”

Rich executed a quick, sharp, coordinated turn and rolled out a little too late, but that was expected; experienced pilots did that all the time when piloting an unfamiliar airplane. Dwight gave him a new heading, and he rolled out perfectly, this time coordinating his rollout to end up on heading.

“Show-off!”

Almost under his breath, Rich chortled, “Heh, heh, heh.”

“All right, one last exercise to get you really grooved in. See that tree sticking up fifty feet higher than the others a half mile ahead?”

“Yeah, I see it.”

“OK. Off to the left of it about two hundred yards is another one

sticking up but not as high; see it?"

"I see it."

"OK, I want you to fly to the right of the big tree about fifty yards, then turn left and go halfway around it, and then head for the other tree. You're going to try to do figure eights around those two trees. There's a lot of wind, so you'll screw it up the first time, but you'll see what it takes to maintain your distances as you have to make corrections for the wind. You'll be banking hard when the wind's trying to blow you away from the tree and shallowly as it's trying to blow you toward it; you with me?"

"Yeah, I understand, but I don't remember which way the wind's blowing."

"Tough shit, hotshot. That's one of the things all this natural flyboy ability you so obviously have is going to help you with."

Rich had correctly lined up to the right of the tallest tree and was now passing it on his left. Dwight pushed the prop control lever to fine pitch and poised his left hand over the throttle and his right by the stick.

Rich entered the turn sharply and with confidence. The airplane turned into the wind with the wings at a forty-five-degree angle; so far, so good. Then, as he came around, the wind began blowing him toward the tree, and he correctly compensated by decreasing the angle of his turn.

The airspeed quickly dropped from 120 to 65, and the big tree was rapidly approaching the left side of the airplane!

"I've got it!" Dwight said as he grabbed the stick, threw it hard right, and nailed the throttle. The airplane responded immediately, and they were heading back in the direction from which they'd entered the maneuver.

Rich said, "Holy shit! Man, did I screw *that* up!"

"You were getting too cocky, man; you just got your head handed to you. Do you know what you did wrong?"

"I think so. I didn't add power in the turn, and I didn't feel for the wind and correct the angle of the turn. I can do it now. Let me try it again."

"OK, you've got the airplane."

Rich immediately banked hard left, kicking left rudder and fire-walling the throttle, as if he were in a barroom brawl and had pushed an adversary up against the wall, his throat in one hand and his testicles in the other.

That's it, my friend. Kick its ass!

Rich eased back on the throttle as he came out of the turn and reentered the arena, the big tree coming up on his left, a hundred yards away.

As the tree began reaching eight o'clock, he began the turn with a bit less angle this time, like a boxer in the first round, sizing up his opponent as

he opened the throttle more, feeling his way into it. *Easy now*, he thought. He flattened the turn out and started right stick as the wind tried to blow him toward the tree. He made a sharper right turn now as the wind tried to blow him away from the other tree; it was beginning to approach at two o'clock. *More throttle, less angle*—he applied less throttle as the tree started to pass at four o'clock.

He applied shallow right stick now as the wind tried to blow him into this tree. More throttle, stick, and rudder now, keeping the tree at three o'clock. More stick and rudder as he came around it, into the middle of the "eight"—*more!* He knew that the big tree was now directly to his left, but he couldn't see it because the bottom of the airplane was in the way as he was at a forty-five-degree angle to the ground, throttle nailed, pulling three g's. Now, stick back left, hard left rudder as the rear kicked out; he pulled the throttle back, entering downwind. The big tree appeared at nine o'clock—*perfect!*

"Do it again!"

"Roger!"

Rich entered the first turn with the throttle already wide open, daring the wind to challenge him. He had become one with the airplane—the brains of the bird. A tear ran down Dwight's face, and he had to blink hard to clear his vision. He had never been more proud in his life as the two men shared something few men have: the delight of flight.

The poem entered Dwight's head again: *Hovering there, I've chased the shouting wind along and flung my eager craft through footless hauls of air. Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace where never lark or even eagle flew. And while with silent, lifting mind, I've trod the high, untrampled sanctity of space, put out my hand and touched the face of God.*

"Amazing, Rich—seriously, absolutely, amazing."

"I can fly an airplane, man!"

"You damn sure can, my friend—not much doubt about it. Like I said before, you got the gift. Give me a heading of two-seven-zero."

"Roger."

Rich nailed the throttle, threw the stick hard right, and kicked hard right rudder, whipping the little airplane around to the heading in two to three seconds.

"You like manhandling her, don't you, buddy?"

"She's a part of me, man."

"I know it. What you're doing is the second biggest thrill known to man."

“Right now, I think it’s the *biggest!*”

“You don’t know what the biggest is yet, my man.”

“Weren’t you talking about getting laid?”

“Nope.”

“What is it, then?”

“Landing.”