# Aim Point

An Air Force Pilot's Lessons
for Navigating Life

Colonel Bruce Hurd, U.S. Air Force (Retired)

Chapter 1

# Falling Out of the Sky


*Air Force T-38 Talon with its gear extended prior to landing. (military.com)*

*I almost died on that West Texas night of October 4, 1978. Instead, I found my aim point.*

*As I prepared to fly, I strapped myself into my supersonic jet, the Air Force T-38 Talon, and plugged my G-Suit into the aircraft's pneumatic system. The G-Suit prevented me from losing consciousness during aggressive high-G maneuvers, because it inflated to help stop blood from draining out of my brain into the rest of my body.*

*By this point in my training, I fully understood the Air Force wanted aggressive pilots. I was a good student. Just days before my flight I failed a training mission for being too aggressive. In my haste to rejoin the flight leader during formation maneuvering, I accelerated so quickly I flew faster than the speed of sound.*

*Since regulations prohibited breaking the sound barrier except under controlled conditions, my instructor marked me down for lack of airspeed control. While he told me why he had to fail me on that flight, his tone of voice and body language said "attaboy!"*

*I was a 23-year-old second lieutenant student pilot, doing so well the instructors chose me as the first in my entire class to solo at night in the T-38. Confident in my abilities, I had the procedures down cold. I made sure all my maps, approach plates, and flying equipment were up-to-date and readily available.*

*Once I settled into the cockpit and performed all my preflight checks that night, I started the plane's two powerful jet engines. I heard on the tower radio frequency they changed the runway because of a change in wind direction. No problem, I thought. Even though I had done all my night training on a different runway, I was sure I could make the adjustments I needed.*

*I taxied out and lined up on the active runway. After I received clearance for takeoff, I advanced the throttles to full power. When the engines got to 100% RPM, I released the brakes. The plane lurched forward, and I pushed the throttles into full afterburner. Since the T-38 has such short wings, it relies on speed to create enough lift to fly. When I engaged the afterburners, typically only used for takeoff and emergencies, raw jet fuel pumped directly into the back end of my engines. This created a controlled explosion that provided the extra thrust necessary for me to accelerate to my takeoff speed of 165 miles per hour. As I shot into the night, I felt like I could do anything.*

*After I completed an uneventful navigation leg around the city of Lubbock, Texas, I returned to Reese Air Force Base to do practice landings before calling it a night. As I approached the airfield, I requested authorization to fly an overheard pattern to a touch-and-go landing. The first aircraft to return to base that night, I passed above the takeoff end of the runway going 300 miles per hour (MPH). I pulled the throttles back to idle power and made a hard 180-degree right turn to set myself up on the downwind leg, reducing my speed, configuring my aircraft for landing, and getting enough displacement from the runway so that when I made my final 180-degree turn toward the runway I would roll out on final approach lined up to land the aircraft. Easy. I had done this hundreds of times already, even at night.*

*Except things were not what they seemed. No one knew about the severe wind shear between the wind at traffic pattern altitude (1,500 feet in the*

*air) and the wind reported at ground level. On the ground, the wind went straight down the runway. At altitude, a 50-mile-an-hour crosswind pushed me closer to the airfield while I flew my downwind leg. This meant my displacement from the runway became smaller and smaller as I set myself up for my final turn for landing. It also meant the 50 mile-an-hour crosswind would quickly become a tailwind as I made my turn — I would lose one-third of my airspeed in seconds.*

*Since I hadn't flown a night approach on this runway, I didn't have any downwind ground references. The lighted electrical shack and the road intersection I had been using as visual checkpoints were useless. Still, I had general guidelines for where I should place myself and I used those. Those guidelines, though, didn't account for strong crosswinds.*

*As I reached my 30-second timing point past the end of the runway, I felt confident. I put down my landing gear and banked hard to the right. I turned my head around to pick up my aim point as I descended rapidly. The aim point is the spot on the runway that pilots use to make a safe landing. It's not marked on the runway. Instead, each pilot must determine his or her aim point depending on the type of plane they're flying, the weather, the condition and length of the runway, and a host of other things. Seconds ticked by.*

*Finally, about halfway around the turn, I saw my aim point on the runway. I instantly knew things were terribly wrong. I was way too low. Worse than that, I realized my bank angle was far too steep. I quickly focused on my angle-of-attack indicator on top of the instrument panel. It was glowing bright red. My stalled-out wings were no longer providing the lift I needed to stay airborne. I knew I was in a desperate situation. I immediately threw my throttles into full afterburner and raised my landing gear to reduce drag.*

*Because I had started my turn much too close to the runway, I had unknowingly maneuvered too aggressively, attempting to make things "look right" for the landing. I crosschecked my vertical velocity indicator and I saw it pegged at 4,000 feet per minute going down. My altimeter showed me plummeting through 1,000 feet above the ground. I wasn't flying any*

*more — I was falling out of the sky. It would only be a matter of seconds before I hit the ground at over 100 miles per hour and exploded in a fireball.*

*My heart was in my throat. I carefully leveled the wings to increase lift. I needed to allow the plane to continue its descent to regain speed. If I tried to pull back on the stick too soon, I would lose what little lift I still had, and I would go deeper into the stall and crash. As I sank into the unlit darkness of the field leading to the runway, I saw the runway lights get flatter and flatter. I had to remain disciplined and continue my descent at full power just to give the plane time to accelerate to minimum climb speed. At one point I noticed the lights at the far end of the airfield weren't visible anymore because the small rise midway down the runway blocked them. The airfield was on a slight plateau and I was going below runway altitude. I knew I could hit the ground any second.*

Looking back on this experience, I realize I was more afraid of failure than I was of dying. I didn't want to crash because I didn't want to shame myself or my family by the failure of not making it through pilot training. My father, a highly decorated World War II pilot, would never have blamed me for not becoming a pilot, but this would have caused him and my mother so much grief. To have their son die in Air Force pilot training would have destroyed them inside. And it would have been my fault, because I screwed up.

This book is about the traumatic events in my life. They all have something in common. They're all victories of mine. This is a book about these triumphs. It's about my facing disappointment, fear, and shame, learning from these situations, and moving past them. It's about how I applied these lessons and learned to navigate change in my life a positive way.

I expect any of you reading this book can identify events in your life you have been keeping secret. We don't reveal them because we fear the shame and humiliation we believe we'll suffer if people ever found out what happened. In this book, I'm shining a light on each of my "shameful" events, so they'll no longer have power over me. I'm freeing myself from living with the fear of being found out, of being embarrassed by what happened to me many years ago, often as a child. In this book, I also talk about going

through Air Force pilot training — this is where the dramatic, nearly fatal experience I've described happened. Pilot training was ultimately a very successful year for me. It was also much more stressful than any other time in my life.

This book is far more than me reliving past traumas, though. Throughout my life, I've known I need to move past the pain and fear of these experiences to be the man I want to be and live the life I want to live. These shaming experiences, along with my stressful year in pilot training, also helped me recognize the goodness and support all around me. These trials led to my appreciation of all the amazing people and wonderful events in my life. The worst experiences of my life are also the inspiration for the guiding principles I used as an officer in the Air Force during my 30-year career. I discovered the importance of courage, compassion, integrity, and trust.

Just like all of you, I've succeeded and failed, and I've done amazing things. Along the way, I experienced situations and events in my life that have knocked me for a loop. Throughout it all, though, I haven't seen myself as a victim. It's just the opposite. All the events described in this book have been a co-creation. Whether consciously or not, I somehow brought these painful experiences into my life. The real challenge is to discover the benefits from them. What have I learned from going through each of them? What can I take forward to make the rest of my life better?

This is the reason for this book. I want to show how I turned around and even appreciated these traumatic events, common to many people, for what they inspired in me. I offer what I've learned from facing some very painful experiences. Much of how I applied these lessons relates to my experience as a career officer and pilot in the U.S. Air Force; however, I believe my insights may be helpful to many people from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Chapter 2

# An Uncomfortable Silence

*My mother, Ann Cornell Hurd, and my father, Walter L. Hurd Jr., at home on leave during World War II*

My father was a brigadier general in the United States Air Force. Born in 1919, he grew up during the Depression. He sent himself through school at Morningside College in Iowa and joined the Army Air Corps in 1941. He married my mother the day he graduated from pilot training, just months before the outbreak of World War II for the United States. During the war, he fought the Japanese in Australia and New Guinea before returning to the U.S. in 1943 to create and train the brand new 314th Troop Carrier Squadron, a transport squadron flying C-47 and C-46 aircraft.

After training his unit, he led them to England and France to fight the Germans. He finished World War II as a 26-year-old lieutenant colonel — an astronomic promotion rate for such a young officer. After the war, he and my

mother moved to the Philippines, where Dad and some wartime colleagues helped found Philippine Airlines (PAL). He started as PAL's chief pilot and rose to vice president of operations. In 1954, Mom, Dad, and my three older siblings moved to California a few months before I was born in December. Dad began his corporate career, eventually becoming Corporate Director for Safety and Product Assurance for Lockheed Corporation. He remained in the reserves until his retirement from the Air Force in the late 1960s.

During the war, my mother, Ann, completed her college degree in home economics at Iowa State and worked at an ammunition plant supporting the war effort. While she did some teaching when they lived in the Philippines after the war, once my oldest brother arrived in 1949, my mother focused on raising her family. In the early 1970s, she earned her master's degree in Special Education from San Jose State University. By the time I graduated from high school in 1973, Mom was an established full-time special education teacher at Quimby Oaks Junior High School in San Jose. Her students loved her. My parents remained married until my father passed on from prostate cancer in 1995. My mother was devastated, and she never recovered emotionally after my father's death. She died in her sleep in 2002. Devoted to each other throughout their lives, my parents are shining examples of the love and dedication a married couple can show toward each other.

They also had a serious problem they never came to grips with: my mother's alcoholism. Even after my mother finally stopped drinking in 1987, she refused to acknowledge the damaging effects on our family of her drinking and the pain it caused. Her denial was a perfect example of how our family dealt with the problem. We ignored her harmful behavior. My father discouraged us from talking about Mom's drinking and considered it disrespectful to even raise the issue within our family. Meanwhile, we were clear we should never talk about my mother's drinking to anyone outside our family.

We had another rule growing up: my parents wouldn't allow us to criticize each other. The intent behind this was noble — they wanted us to be a source of support for one another. Unfortunately, this also meant it was

very difficult for us to provide well-meaning, constructive feedback to each other. This self-imposed prohibition on criticism had unintended negative effects on how my siblings and I dealt with my mother's alcoholism. Each of us in the family had to deal with this terrible problem alone. The situation was unbearable.

At the time I was growing up, American society didn't understand or accept the causes and problems associated with alcohol as it does now. People often viewed alcoholism as a moral failure to hide away from others, for fear of being treated as an outcast. As a child, though, I couldn't understand. Why can't Mom be the loving, wonderful mother I know she is? Why does she become this angry, hurtful, self-pitying person who I can't even stand to be around? I hated it when she was like that. I couldn't talk with her and I certainly couldn't count on her for anything. There was no telling when she would be this way. Was she going to hurt me? Was she going to hurt herself? Who could I count on? I could rely on Dad, but he works a lot and he's not always around. What if I'm home alone with her and she does something stupid or dangerous? These fears and questions haunted me my entire life.

Amazingly, despite my mother's alcoholism, in many other ways I had a stable childhood. My father, Walter L. Hurd Jr., was an executive at Lockheed Missiles and Space Corporation in Sunnyvale, California. The seven of us didn't live extravagantly, but I don't recall ever going without something important.

I grew up in Los Altos, California — a suburb of San Francisco. I was the fourth of five children, with just seven years separating my oldest brother Dave from my younger brother Kevin. Growing up in the Hurd family was sometimes a mob scene, especially with four boys involved. However, it was great to have ready-made teammates and friends, even with a heavy dose of sibling rivalry present. We were big into baseball and were huge San Francisco Giants fans (still are). Our lives revolved around schoolwork and sports.

I got my growth spurt very early and started shaving before I turned thirteen. By the time I turned 15, I was a freshman at Homestead High

School in Cupertino and I had grown to my current height (5'9"). I played football and baseball at Homestead, but only my first couple of years. By my junior year, my "adequate but not extraordinary" athletic skills weren't making the grade and the head coaches cut me from both the junior varsity baseball and football teams within six months of each other. While these were huge blows at the time, they turned out to be the best things that could have happened, as this allowed me the time to devote my energies toward other, much more productive areas.

I graduated from Homestead in 1973. Some of you might know this was one year behind Apple founder Steve Jobs, who graduated from Homestead in the Class of 1972. Our school had 2,500 students and Steve and I never crossed paths, nor did we have any classes together, so I clearly missed out on the opportunity of making friends with him. (I hear he did well.) After high school, I entered the University of California, Berkeley on an Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) scholarship. Going to Cal as an Air Force ROTC cadet in the immediate anti-military environment of the mid-1970s was an interesting experience. More on that later.

For quite a while after college, I wondered what it would have been like to go to a university where being in officer training was a popular thing to do … or even acceptable. In the years since my 1977 graduation, I've come to appreciate the excellent education I received and the exposure I had to a wide diversity of opinions and experiences I had at Cal. I've also learned to treasure my relationships with my ROTC classmates — the eleven of us remaining even make a point of gathering together every other year.

My wonderful wife JoAnn and I married in 1989. We have a delightful daughter, Emily, and also an amazing son Justin, from JoAnn's first marriage. Justin lives in Seattle with his beautiful wife Jeanette and their two wonderful sons Tom and Dane. I'll write more about JoAnn, Justin, and Emily later. I spent an incredible, very rewarding career as an officer/pilot in the U.S. Air Force and retired in 2007 at the rank of colonel. Because I had 16 different assignments over my Air Force career and I jump back and forth throughout this book, specific dates, places, and positions can be hard to keep straight, so I've included the details in Appendix A at the end

of the book. After the Air Force, I worked the next eight years as a senior program manager at a large defense company in San Diego. I still fill-in as a consulting employee when they need my expertise.

Chapter 3

# Connections with my Father

*My father as a flying cadet in Army Air Corps pilot training in 1941. He's third from the left.*

It was 1984. I thought about my father as my crew and I flew our KC-10 tanker in and out of the clouds that surrounded the Owen Stanley Range. I was in awe of the jungle-covered mountains rising to 14,000 feet — I had never seen such rugged, steep terrain in my life. The Owen Stanley Range forms the spine of New Guinea, a large, still-wild island north of Australia.

This primitive, steaming, malaria-ridden land is where my father flew C-47 transports during the earliest, darkest days of World War II in the Pacific. When he arrived at the beginning of 1942, the under-equipped and

ill-prepared Americans and Australians were fighting a desperate defensive war against a much larger Japanese force on the attack.

The Japanese launched a series of well-planned assaults throughout the western Pacific and eastern Asia, starting on December 7, 1941 with a surprise attack that decimated the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. In the months that followed, the Japanese ran up an unbroken string of victories, overrunning Hong Kong, Malaya, the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia), and innumerable Pacific island bases, despite heroic Allied resistance.

By the spring of 1942, the Japanese already controlled most of New Guinea north of the Owen Stanley mountains. If they took the entire island, they could use it as an unsinkable base of operations to invade Australia and knock our ally out of the war. If that happened, an American counteroffensive would be nearly impossible. The Japanese would be on the verge of winning the Pacific war. My father and the other Allied troops in Australia and New Guinea knew they had to stop the Japanese even though no one had done it before.

My father and his squadron, along with thousands of other Army troops, left Pearl Harbor on November 29, 1941 on the U.S. Army Transport (USAT) Republic. The USAT Republic was a troop ship within a naval convoy en route to the Philippines. Halfway to their destination, the convoy received a coded message that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor and our two countries were at war. The vulnerable convoy was dangerously close to Japanese-controlled islands. They were ordered to turn immediately toward British-controlled Fiji in the South Pacific and await further instructions.

On December 12, the Army ordered them to sail to Brisbane, where they established the U.S. Forces in Australia (USFIA), the first American military organization in Australia. After a brief period of training in Australia, my father became part of the 21st Air Transport Squadron flying C-47 transport aircraft (the military version of the Douglas DC-3).

Before leaving the U.S. in November 1941 as part of the convoy headed to the Philippines, my father started training as a fighter pilot. Once he arrived in Australia, the Army Air Force needed transport crews and aircraft

to support the outnumbered soldiers who were already fighting the Japanese in New Guinea. For the next 15 months, beginning in March 1942, my father and his squadron-mates air-dropped supplies to frontline soldiers in New Guinea and delivered paratroopers behind Japanese lines.

They fought the Japanese in what can only be described as primitive conditions. They slept on the gravel and dirt ramp under the wings of their aircraft, draped with mosquito netting to fend off the hordes of jungle insects that came out at night. Their aircraft lacked proper instrumentation, and they used maps based on old National Geographic surveys — wholly inadequate for flying. I remember hearing my father describe how the American military was woefully unprepared when the war started.

Worse than the logistical problems, though, was the constant danger of being jumped by Japanese fighters and the ever-present threat of sudden Japanese air raids on their base. The Japanese knew they had to eliminate American airpower in southern New Guinea for them to win the war and they did everything they possibly could to make it happen.

On that day in 1984, my KC-10 crew and I flew less than 10,000 feet above the tops of the Owen Stanley Range as we navigated our way from Andersen Air Base in Guam to the Royal Australian Air Force Base outside of Darwin, Australia. We had to fly that low to stay within the Visual Flight Rules air route system. Even in 1984, there was no radar coverage where we travelled. We maintained our separation from other aircraft in our area by flying at even or odd thousand-foot altitudes (depending on whether we were flying northbound or southbound) and making radio calls over a common radio frequency at checkpoints along the route. We did this for hundreds of miles, just as aviators had been doing since they established the first common air routes in this part of the world in the early days of the 20th Century.

I couldn't help feeling a strong connection with my father as we flew above the rugged, primitive territory he had fought over during those grave days. I marveled at how he and his colleagues even survived the war, navigating their way through the narrow, jagged mountain passes of New

Guinea, flying as low as they could to stay out of sight of patrolling Japanese fighters. Such incredible courage and determination.

During that 1942-43 campaign in New Guinea, my father earned numerous medals for bravery: he was a three-time recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) and earned four Air Medals, also. Next to the Medal of Honor and the Air Force Cross, the DFC is the highest medal for courage in combat the Air Force awards.

In the middle of 1943, the Army Air Force reassigned my father stateside to train C-46 Commando pilots in preparation for taking command of the 314th Troop Carrier Squadron, a newly created squadron he would form and lead. With this new assignment he was promoted to major, a remarkably fast rise through the ranks. After training his men at Alliance Army Airfield in Nebraska and Pope Army Airfield in North Carolina, he and his squadron deployed in March 1945, to Royal Air Force (RAF) Barkston Heath north of London in England. Shortly after that, they forward deployed to Rove/ Amy in France. From then until the war ended in Europe in May 1945, my father and his men flew resupply and troop transport missions supporting the final Allied push on Germany. The day after the Germans surrendered, my father flew the first Allied aircraft into Norway. His C-46 was loaded with British paratroopers to accept the surrender of the German occupying forces.

My father was stateside, preparing to go to the Pacific Theater for the final major push on Japan, when the B-29 "Enola Gay" dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The Japanese surrendered shortly after the second bomb dropped on Nagasaki. Millions of Americans, in the military and otherwise, breathed an enormous sigh of relief the war was over. They all knew an invasion of the Japanese home islands would cost an enormous number of American and Japanese lives. This would be on top of the hundreds of thousands of Americans who had already died over the previous four years of war.

My connections with my father have been numerous, and sometimes surprising, throughout my Air Force career. The most pronounced connection, of course, was both of us being pilots in the Air Force. Even though it could be hard to get him to talk about his wartime experiences,

Dad told us stories about going to pilot training as a young man who had grown up in small-town Iowa.

He described the shock of being thrust into the intense training and competitiveness in pilot training. He told us of his need to stand up for himself and the importance of doing the right thing. All of this I found to be true throughout my career, but especially in pilot training. It was a shock. It was intense, competitive, and dangerous. I describe that more in a later chapter. Throughout my experience in pilot training, though, I felt a connection with my father, knowing he had gone through something similar 37 years earlier.

As a young lieutenant copilot in 1980, my crew and I flew to England for a 45-day deployment to Europe, supporting air refueling training for Air Force aircrews stationed there. As we crossed the coastline and saw the green fields of the British countryside, I remembered my father and his descriptions of flying in Europe with his squadron during the war. I knew my destination, RAF Fairford, was not far from the same airfields from which he flew as a young commander. I could feel his presence with me in the cockpit, and I was honored to be an Air Force pilot flying in these same skies, just like he did. It was thrilling.

I could feel the strongest connections with my father as I dealt with some of the most difficult challenges I faced during my life. I remember hearing how, as the vice president of operations for Philippine Air Lines after the war, he stuck his neck out to train Filipino copilots how to be airline captains while his supervisor was away for an extended period. Up to that point, upgrades to captain had only been approved for white pilots, not the native Filipinos, even though many of them were highly qualified and had met all the experience requirements. It was not policy. It was just "the way things were done." It was also racial discrimination.

My father thought this unofficial policy was grossly unfair, and he did the right thing when he was left in charge. By the time his boss returned, Dad had trained several of the Filipino pilots as captains and the precedent for their upgrade had been established. Shortly after PAL leadership returned, they removed my father from his leadership position. While not given as a

reason, everyone knew he was removed because he had trained the Filipino pilots as captains.

They reassigned my father to be a line pilot for the next several years, flying regular passenger routes in the Philippines and throughout the Pacific. It wasn't long afterward that my father and mother decided to return to the U.S., where Dad began a highly successful career in product assurance, flight safety, and quality control, rising to the level of corporate director at Lockheed Corporation.

When faced with difficult decisions, I would talk with my father to get his thoughts. Even after he died, his principles and presence were still with me. I feel as connected with him now as I ever have and I'm grateful to have his guidance. I am very proud to be his son. At his funeral in 1995, I delivered a eulogy that sums up my feelings toward my father. I've included that as Appendix C near the end of the book.

Chapter 4

# Odd Bears

*The amazing UC Berkeley Air Force ROTC Class of 1977 at our 20th Reunion in 1997. Pictured left to right back row: Lee Walden, Paul Pilipenko, Clint Gilliam, Bill Flanigan, Ray Nickels, Wayne Koide, and Rich Blomseth. Front row: Bob Gott, me, Adlai Breger, and Tom Dorgan. Not pictured at this reunion: Delores (Johnson) Street, Angelica (Rivera) Carson, Clayton Leitch, and Bruce Markovich*

"How many babies have you killed today?"

The older student and his girlfriend glared at me as we passed on the street just south of the UC Berkeley campus. I was an 18-year-old freshman and living away from home for the first time. It was my second day of classes as a University of California Golden Bear. Walking back to the dormitory in my Air Force uniform, I had just finished my very first Tuesday morning ROTC training session. Even though I knew Berkeley was

unfriendly toward the military, the anger my mere presence triggered in this student still surprised me. Over the next four years, I learned his response was not uncommon.

Air Force ROTC is an officer commissioning program conducted on well over one hundred university campuses throughout the country. ROTC is the largest of the three Air Force commissioning programs, bigger than either the Air Force Academy or Officer Training School. The ROTC program requires cadets to successfully complete 6-10 hours per week of classwork, leadership exercises, and physical fitness. This goes on for four years, along with intensive summer training. At the end of the program, with the recommendation of the colonel in charge of the detachment, the Air Force commissions the student as a second lieutenant. The new officer then goes to advanced training in his or her assigned career field.

The Air Force Academy is far more intense than ROTC and requires a complete, 24/7 commitment from its cadets. ROTC cadets can lead a much less regimented life while they're attending school. Apart from being far more familiar with all aspects of the Air Force right from the beginning, the biggest advantage I saw for my peers who graduated from the academy was they already had an extensive network of friends and colleagues as they began their career, while those of us from ROTC were just starting to make those connections. I also discovered, after only a few years into my Air Force career, it made little difference who graduated from the academy and who didn't. We were all evaluated on how well we did our job at that point.

I came very close to not even going into the Air Force in the first place. I applied to both the Air Force and Navy for ROTC scholarships — the scholarships paid the same amount. In the spring of 1973, the Navy awarded me a scholarship. The Air Force sent me a letter saying I was an alternate. Someone would have to turn back their Air Force scholarship for me to get one. I wasn't even sure if I was near the top of the alternate list or near the bottom, either.

Being a firm believer in "a bird in the hand…", I felt my decision was easy at that point — I'll go with the Navy. And I was perfectly OK with this. I saw the Navy as exciting and adventurous and I could become a pilot

there, too. I also breathed a sigh of relief. As much as I adored, admired, and revered my father, I did not want to put myself in a position to compete with his achievements. By going into the Navy, I felt I could forge my own career, however long that lasted, and avoid any direct comparisons with my father's success.

For the entire spring and summer before I started college, I told my high school friends and work colleagues at the YMCA I was going into the Navy. I even walked across the stage at my high school's honors night, my proud parents in the audience, as the announcer told everyone I was the recipient of a Naval ROTC scholarship to UC Berkeley. I was all set to join the Navy. I was happy.

Then came the letter. At the end of the summer, the Air Force informed me it had upgraded me to a primary scholarship awardee. Someone had declined their scholarship. Perhaps they had a choice and went with a different service. Perhaps they received an academy appointment and chose that route instead. Or perhaps they decided the military wasn't for them. I never found out, and it didn't matter what the reason was. I now had a choice, and school was starting in less than a week.

My father volunteered to take the day off and go with me to the campus, about 50 miles away, where we could visit both ROTC detachments. We felt that would help me make my decision, and I appreciated his support. To his credit, my father never pressured me one way or the other, although I knew it would thrill him if I joined the Air Force.

As it turned out, both the Air Force and Naval ROTC detachments at Berkeley shared the same building: Callaghan Hall. The Air Force was on one side and the Navy was on the other. There were even two separate entrances, kind of like the dog and cat entrances at a veterinarian. While no one ever told us, we learned early on as Air Force cadets to always use the Air Force entrance. The Navy and Air Force weren't hostile toward each other. We just chose to operate in separate universes.

Callaghan Hall reminded me of a very impressive liquor store in a bad part of town. The building itself was stately and historic, but the doors and windows had metal bars on them. Those of us in ROTC were

never completely sure whether the bars were there to prevent people from breaking in or to keep us in a contained area. There were frequent student demonstrations in front of our building, as we were the most visible symbol on campus of the military-industrial complex in the immediate post-Vietnam era. This intense anti-military feeling lingered for a long time, culminating in the destruction of Callaghan Hall by an arsonist in 1985, eight years after I graduated. That was a great loss. Callaghan Hall was an historic site, named after a Navy Medal of Honor winner, with an irreplaceable library dedicated to Admiral Nimitz, a former Navy instructor at Berkeley. Yet, ROTC never left campus and it's still going strong today.

My father and I arrived at Callaghan Hall the week before school started in 1973. He called ahead to let both the Navy and Air Force detachments know we would be visiting them that day. We went into the Navy detachment first because that was literally the first door we saw. A Navy petty officer met us at the front desk. Here's how the conversation went:

"Can I help you?"

"Yes," explained my father. "My son Bruce has both an Air Force and a Navy ROTC scholarship here at Berkeley. He's trying to decide which one to take."

(The petty officer looks at me. He doesn't get out of his chair and it appears like we're bothering him.) "He can come in next week with the other midshipmen and we'll tell him what he needs to know then."

Long pause.

"If you need anything else, there are pamphlets on the wall behind you." (Points to wall)

Long pause.

"OK. Thank you."

We walked down the hall to the Air Force detachment. We're met by a technical sergeant. Here's how that conversation went:

"Can I help you?"

"Yes," explained my father. "My son Bruce has both an Air Force and a Navy ROTC scholarship here at Berkeley. He's trying to decide which one to take."

"Oh, yes. You called, didn't you? Let me get Colonel Wasson." (Colonel Wasson was the detachment commander). The sergeant left to get Colonel Wasson, who walked out of his office, extended his hand to both of us, and we shook hands.

"Welcome to Cal. Very glad to meet you both. We really hope you choose the Air Force, Bruce."

The rest of the lengthy conversation went like that. Colonel Wasson explained the Air Force ROTC program at Cal and what I could expect as a cadet. He called the other ROTC instructors over and introduced them to us. Somewhere near the end of our conversation, one of the instructors asked if my father had ever been in the military — it hadn't come up previously and my father hadn't mentioned anything to that point. He pulled out his military ID that showed he was a retired Air Force brigadier general. That got their attention. They called over Major Post, the area recruiting chief, who happened to be in his office. He took my father and me into one of the classrooms and showed us a recruiting slide-show describing the ROTC program in more detail. After he finished, we said goodbye to the Air Force team, and they emphasized they hoped to see me at Corps Training next week.

Dad and I walked back to the car for the trip home. On the one-hour drive, we talked about the visit. Dad asked me if I had made my decision. I realized I had a very important choice to make — one that would affect my life profoundly from that moment on — and I didn't want to weigh first impressions too heavily. After all, my inclination had been to choose the Navy, because it had chosen me first. I also wouldn't be placing myself in direct competition with my war hero father and I had already decided I would accept the Navy's offer before the Air Force came through at the end of the summer.

Yet, the profound difference in attitude and atmosphere between the two detachments left a definite impression. I wanted to be someplace that wanted me. In the end that desire carried the day. I told my father I would take the Air Force offer. I could tell he was pleased. When we returned home and I told Mom, she was upset. It was because many of my parents' friends

were pilots during the war and never came home. She wanted me to be safe on a ship somewhere in the Navy. Even so, she eventually came around and accepted my decision.

I've never regretted my 18-year-old self's choice, although I like to believe I would still have had a successful career in the Navy if I had chosen to go that direction. My encounters with the two ROTC detachments taught me about the importance of treating people well and how a first impression, either negative or positive, can change everything. It helped me make my life-altering decision.

I chose to attend UC Berkeley for many reasons. It had, and still has, an excellent reputation as a world-class educational institution. I wanted to receive a high-quality education from a prestigious university. As a California resident, I applied to a state-sponsored school that would offer lower tuition in case I didn't get a scholarship. Berkeley was also close enough to my family without being so close that I needed to commute. I wanted to live on my own without being too far away from home. Finally, I wanted to apply to a school that offered both Air Force and Navy ROTC programs. That last requirement narrowed the field down quite a bit. For example, the only two University of California campuses that offered both Air Force and Navy ROTC were UC Berkeley and UCLA.

What I didn't include in my decision was the atmosphere at mid-1970s UC Berkeley toward ROTC students. As an ROTC cadet, I found the immediate, post-Vietnam environment on campus ranged from indifference at best, to outright hostility at worst. Outside of my cohort of fellow ROTC cadets and instructors and a handful of close, non-ROTC friends, I don't remember ever receiving supportive comments or gestures regarding my ROTC activities from any students or faculty members during my entire four years on campus. I do remember snide remarks from fellow students like the one I described at the beginning of the chapter. Sometimes these encounters were confrontational, mostly they were not. I felt many of my professors were neutral regarding my ROTC participation; however, there were some who clearly appeared to resent my being in their class.

Dating a student at Berkeley was nearly out of the question. For one thing, those of us who were ROTC cadets completely stood out from all the other students. Apart from occasionally walking around in uniform — a dead giveaway — we were the only people on campus who had haircuts. We were completely out of fashion and easily identifiable. We found our dates elsewhere. I had a steady girlfriend from my hometown for about a year after I started at Cal — we broke up early during my sophomore year.

After that, despite having infinite charm and undeniably good looks (cough, cough), my dates were few and far between and never with another Cal student. This was not from a lack of trying on my part. Many of my fellow cadets had similar experiences. We were worse than nerds. We were social pariah "ROTC (pronounced 'ROT-see') Nazis." It was an isolated existence in the middle of a large campus full of students our age.

As a result, those of us in ROTC bonded. Not only did we see each other for hours per week over four years, we hung out together outside of cadet training. Many of us even roomed with each other off campus. ROTC activities and advancement within the cadet corps became an important focus. Just as important, we supported one another. We cheered each other's successes and offered help when things weren't going so well. By far, my most prominent memories of UC Berkeley were those times spent with my fellow cadets. We have even kept in touch with each other after Cal. While there are a couple of us with whom we've lost contact and, sadly, two who have passed on, the rest of the 15 officers in our commissioning class have been gathering at reunions since 1997. It's always so much fun to catch up with each other every two years to celebrate our lifelong friendships.

Chapter 5

# Obstacle Course

*Taking the oath of office at my officer commissioning ceremony in the Nimitz Library at Callaghan Hall on April 2, 1977. Our Air Force ROTC commandant at the University of California, Colonel Reagan H. Beene Jr., is administering the oath to me.*

It was the spring of my senior year. My vision was blurred, and I couldn't do anything about it. I stood in line at my pre-commissioning physical at Travis Air Force Base and I was close to being called forward to take my eyesight examination. The situation felt hopeless. There was no way out.

So, this was how my dream of becoming a pilot was going to end? After all the selection boards I passed and training hurdles I jumped, I was going

to fail the eye test mere months before reporting to pilot training? I needed time for my far vision to adjust back to 20/20, but it was too late. There wasn't enough time. I was just about at the front of the line and I knew I couldn't pass the test.

Then a master sergeant appeared from out of nowhere. I didn't even notice him until he spoke up.

"We need someone to take the electrocardiogram test. You. Come with me."

He didn't ask for volunteers. There was no time to even respond to what he was saying. He simply pointed at me. I jumped out of line and went with him. I knew this would give me time to adjust my eyesight. It was a miracle. This is a fairly long story, which I write about below, so just keep reading; it saved my Air Force pilot career.

Despite the enormous academic rigor at UC Berkeley, I never doubted I would graduate and get my commission as an officer in the Air Force. I just had to keep applying myself to the tasks at hand. What I wasn't sure about was whether I would even get into pilot training in the first place. By the time the spring of 1976 rolled around at the end of my junior year, the Air Force realized there were too many cadets lined up for pilot slots. Flight training had been slashed by 80% due to severe post-Vietnam War budget cuts. For my class (the Class of 1977) and the classes in front of and behind us, they cut the number of ROTC cadets designated for pilot training by 70% nationwide.

This meant that of the 1,000 cadets promised pilot training in my class, only 300 would be allowed to attend. The Air Force held a "reverse selection board" to determine which cadets would keep their coveted pilot slots. They ranked us from 1 to 1,000 in merit order and then took away pilot assignments from "the bottom 700." To put this into perspective, those 1,000 pilot assignments had been awarded to the 1,000 scholarship cadets who had been chosen from among 30,000 applicants across the country before we entered college in 1973. While there had been some movement in and out of the nationwide cadet corps from 1973 to 1976, the basic quality cut was the same. These 1,000 pilot selectees were the best of a very select group.

The cut was devastating. Six of my classmates, including my roommate, had flying training slots taken away. My other roommate, Rich, and I kept ours. We knew we were very fortunate. The two of us, and the other three cadets at UC Berkeley who kept our pilot assignments, had conflicting emotions. We were sad for our friends who lost their slots, guys we had come to know and become close to over the past three years in the corps. Yet, we were extremely relieved the Air Force didn't release us. It was heart-wrenching. In the end, the cut to 300 pilot candidates meant only the top 1% of those who wanted to become Air Force pilots through ROTC would even go to training. We knew we were damn lucky.

Because we knew this, we were acutely aware each of us had a slot thousands of other guys would have given anything for. This group included some of our best friends. We treated this opportunity with the respect and reverence it deserved. And for God's sake, we had to do our best. We couldn't allow ourselves to fail. Quitting was out of the question, regardless of how difficult things might get. Period. Failure would have been awful, but quitting would have been unforgivable. We had to keep going, no matter how tough it was, despite any of our personal desires.

Our wants and desires were completely in line with what we were about to do in pilot training. I wanted to do well because I had long wanted to be an Air Force pilot. Failing to graduate would have been devastating. I had to earn my wings, no matter what I encountered. I wouldn't let the Air Force intimidate me. They could send me home for not doing well if it came to that, but I would never even think about quitting.

Even after I made the pilot training cut and kept my assignment to flight school, there was still one more big hurdle to overcome before I could report for duty. I had to pass a pre-commissioning flight physical. Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't be a problem. Unfortunately for me, I discovered about halfway through college that my eyesight was getting progressively worse. To be a pilot, I had to have 20/20 vision uncorrected. It was clear the Air Force wouldn't give waivers to anyone who couldn't pass all aspects of the flight physical. I knew there were thousands of people who were ready, willing, and able to take my slot.

Near the end of my sophomore year, I took an eye test on my own initiative at the UC Berkeley optometry school. The results were not good. Because of all the reading I had to do, my vision was now 20/30 bordering on 20/40, much worse than the mandatory 20/20 eyesight requirement for pilot trainees. I was heartbroken. It didn't help that the optometry student who gave me the test told me, "Cheer up, maybe you can be a navigator." Knucklehead.

My father asked around and found an ophthalmologist in Palo Alto who specialized in non-invasive, corrective eye treatments. This was important, because I couldn't get any surgery or medical treatments without advising the Air Force, which would highlight my eyesight deficiency and cause them to remove me immediately from the pilot training list. Anything I did, I needed to accomplish on my own, without violating Air Force protocols.

At the end of my first examination, the doctor told me he could help. My spirits soared. He gave me a prescription for a set of glasses I would have to use anytime I was reading. These glasses would reduce the strain on my eyes and help reset my eyesight to my natural 20/20 vision. The catch was I would need to use them religiously for the treatment to be effective.

I found on those few occasions when I needed to read without my glasses, my far vision would blur almost immediately, and it would take 15-20 minutes to get it fully back to 20/20. So, for my junior and senior years, I would wear these half-glasses every time I read or studied, including in my ROTC courses. This caused my ROTC classmates and professors to wonder "what was up with the pilot candidate who was wearing glasses," but no one ever raised a red flag because I could still pass the eye test without them.

Fast forward to the spring of 1977. I am with a couple dozen Air Force ROTC cadets gathered at Travis AFB outside of Fairfield, CA for our pre-commissioning physicals. I'm confident I can pass all the tests, including the eye test, which is the first station. Then, they hand us a series of forms to fill out. The print is tiny. I don't have my glasses because wearing those would instantly raise the issue of whether I have 20/20 vision.

I have no choice but to press ahead. My heart sinks. I fill out the forms for the next 15 minutes and turn them in. I look in front of me and things are blurry. I'm now required to report to the first station and take my eye test. I go to the back of the line. There are five of us waiting, and I'm desperately trying to focus on things in the distance to make whatever improvements I can. It's no use. The line is moving quickly and there's not nearly enough time. I can't pass the test. I will fail the physical and lose my pilot slot. I feel terrible down to the pit of my stomach.

What happened next can only be described as divine intervention. There were two guys ahead of me in line when the master sergeant I described earlier directed me to take an electrocardiogram test. He appeared from out of nowhere and just pointed at me, like an angel of deliverance.

I immediately got out of line and followed him to the EKG station. They hooked me up, and I went through the battery of tests evaluating my heart functions. The entire time, I'm focusing on the ceiling, working on my far vision. My eyesight is improving. After 10-15 minutes, I'm released to take my eye test. I make a point of going to the back of the line even though the guys in front of me offered to let me go ahead of them since I had been pulled out of line earlier.

"No thanks, I'm happy to wait my turn."

I continue to focus on things in the distance. By the time I get to the front of the line, my eyesight has recovered completely. I pass the test with no problem. It was a miracle.

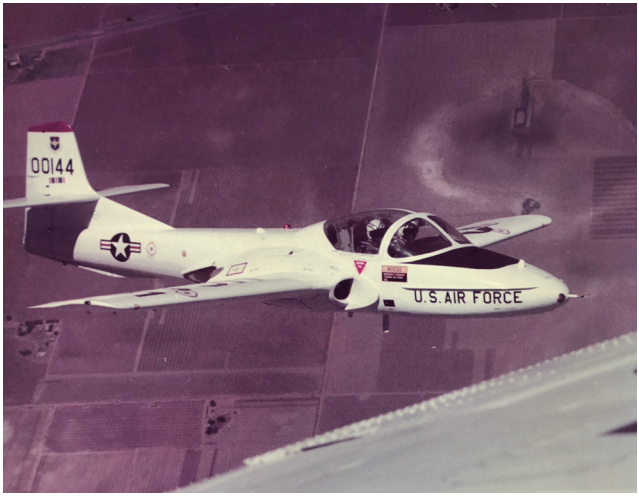
Because I never again had the extraordinary reading load I had in college, I passed all my Air Force eye exams from that point forward with no problem. Not that it would have mattered much either way. Once I was a trained Air Force pilot, if I had issues with my eyesight, I would be given glasses to correct my vision while flying. They just didn't want to send anyone to flying training who wasn't in top physical shape to begin with.

After having received my degree from UC Berkeley and completed all my commissioning requirements, including passing my physical exam, I had finished the obstacle course. I was now a commissioned second lieutenant with orders to attend Undergraduate Pilot Training as a member

of Class 79-02. Pilot training started in January 1978 at Reese Air Force Base near Lubbock, in West Texas. As difficult as it was to get to this point, the hardest part was about to begin.

Chapter 6

# Wings




*Flying formation in the Air Force T-37 primary trainer over the West Texas prairie in the summer of 1978. I'm the pilot on the right.*

"Room Ten-Hut!"

I was a 23-year-old second lieutenant student pilot at Air Force pilot training. All 19 of the students in my section jumped out of our chairs and stood at attention, eyes facing forward. The instructor pilots in our flight filed in and gathered at the back of the room while one of them walked to the front and stood at the podium. He addressed us. We remained at attention.

"You are in Muleshoe Area. You are near the end of your training mission. You look at your fuel gauge and you've reached bingo fuel. Time to return to base. Suddenly, your #1 engine fire light comes on. You look over your left shoulder and you see your plane is trailing smoke. What do you do … Lieutenant Hurd?"

The other 18 students sit down. It's my turn in the barrel. They have chosen me today. I carefully responded to the scenario, reciting the precisely memorized procedures we used for specific emergency procedures. The instructor continued with follow-up questions to ensure I properly reacted to whichever way the scenario developed. Finally, after several minutes standing at attention and answering questions, the instructor told me I could sit down. I had passed.

There is no winning in this situation. If I answer the scenario correctly, complete with follow-up questions and alternative situations, I get to remain on the flying schedule. I'm expected to answer correctly. If I don't get everything right, I'm unceremoniously removed from the flying schedule, and I get a failing mark for the entire day. Worse than that, if I fail, I'm on my way to developing a reputation for being lazy, unprepared, and not able to perform under pressure. "Can this guy even cut it?" the instructors would wonder. It was a no-win situation —the best I could do was not lose any ground. This ritual went on every day of our flight training for the entire year. And this was only one of the many ways the instructors used to intimidate students.

Air Force pilot training was hard. It was in-your-face, it was relentless, and it lasted a full year. The Air Force designed it to put constant pressure on student pilots. Many of the instructors were hardcore, no-bullshit, Vietnam veterans in this all-male environment. Any actions or words that showed the slightest trace of uncertainty or weakness were magnified 10 times and shown to the entire world. There was a saying among many of the instructors that the best motivators for a student were "fear, sarcasm, and ridicule." It became clear that those students unprepared for the day's training flights, failed stand-up, or just weren't hacking it would get a lot more unwanted attention.

I wanted to avoid that situation at all costs. I did all I could to appear self-confident without arrogance and I wanted to look like I knew what I was doing. I made sure I studied hard, often with a group of my classmates, and that I knew all the required procedures well ahead of time. This would keep me from making any bonehead mistakes labeling me as lazy or stupid

— not that any of us in my class were either of those. More than that, though, I used my power of visualizing to put myself in a successful and positive frame of mind. And it worked.

I would go on to graduate from Air Force pilot training, one of the most intense courses the Air Force offers. It required my absolute attention for the entire 12 months. I didn't bring a television when I moved to Reese AFB in January 1978. Reese was just west of Lubbock, Texas and far away from where I grew up. I had just turned 23, and I didn't want any distractions while I immersed myself in learning how to fly. I felt sorry for the married guys because they had wives and children who needed attention. I could focus completely on my flying. Or so I thought. It didn't fully work out that way.

Like many other single guys, I dated while I was in training. I had a long-distance girlfriend, Jane, who lived in Southern California near my parents. She visited me twice, and I even went to see her on a couple of long weekends. We would write and call each other about once a week, too — long-distance phone calls were a major expense back then and we would schedule our next call before we said goodbye each time. Apart from my relationship with Jane and occasional get-togethers with my classmates, that was about it. I focused everything else on adjusting to the Air Force and learning to fly the way the Air Force wanted me to.

I had to devote myself right from the beginning. I knew this would be the first school I ever attempted where I could easily fail, no matter how much effort I put into it. Homestead High School was challenging, but there was never any doubt I would do well. I wasn't a threat to be valedictorian, yet I graduated with a grade point average and SAT scores that allowed me to get into the University of California at Berkeley on an Air Force ROTC scholarship. In no time after arriving in the fall of 1973, I discovered Cal was very different from high school.

I had to work my butt off to just get a C+ or B- in my calculus and physics classes. I loaded up on those during my freshman year as a physical science major. However, after one full year of competing with a whole raft of pre-med students, I decided I needed to change majors, or I would

explode. I knew it would only get worse from where I was. I applied to the UC Berkeley Business School, which was an upper division school at that time. Fortunately, the school accepted me, and I graduated with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration in March 1977.

At pilot training, many nights before I went to bed, I used a visualizing technique bordering on obsessive compulsive behavior. I would lie on my back on the floor of my room in the Bachelor Officers Quarters. I would then throw a small, hard rubber ball in the air and catch it, throw it and catch it, throw it and catch it, etc., etc. I would do this for 10, 15, 20, 25, even 30 minutes. While I was doing this mindless, routine physical activity, I would visualize my flights the next day. I saw myself accomplishing each procedure and performing each maneuver perfectly. I saw how my flight instruments looked when I was flying. I imagined how it felt. I went through all the routine and emergency procedures I needed to know by heart. I had to know I knew it all perfectly because the physical aspects of flying the plane did not come easily at first.

As any teacher understands, people learn at different rates and in different ways. That's why good instructors have a bag of tricks they can pull out for each student. If one technique doesn't work, perhaps another one will. In pilot training, though, there's a standard curriculum taught by the instructor pilots. A student gets X number of rides to practice aerobatic maneuvers, Y number of rides to practice landings, Z number of rides to fly instrument approaches, etc., etc.

The curriculum doesn't consider the quality of instructor, weather conditions on a given day, condition of the aircraft, or any of the many, many variables that can come into play. The belief was that students should be able to get all the maneuvers down within a certain number of training flights. If they can't, they wouldn't make a good pilot and should be washed out of the program. This was theoretically a good method if we all learned the same way. The fact is some students, like me, learned the priority of inflight tasks slower and more methodically than others.

As time went on, I appreciated that what separates the best pilots from the others is an ability to absorb a wide variety of inputs and understand

which tasks are most important — which of them need to be dealt with immediately, and which can wait until later. As I advanced in my Air Force flying career, becoming an aircraft commander in the KC-135 and an instructor pilot in the KC-10 tankers, I became an expert in assimilating inputs and determining a coherent course of action in a demanding military flying environment. This was a developed skill set. Some pilot training students who became accomplished military pilots take a little longer than others to bring all of this into focus. I was one of those.

Compounding the stress and difficulty of trying to succeed in this environment, I had a terrible instructor pilot to begin with. The squadron assigned me to an Air Force major on his last assignment before being forced to retire. He hated his job. He had been passed over for promotion to lieutenant colonel and was very bitter about it. He didn't take his responsibility to instruct me with any degree of seriousness. I was his first student, and I turned out to be his last. After the squadron became aware of his performance with me, they never let him touch another student.

His incompetence as an instructor was plain when I took my first checkride in the primary Air Force trainer, the T-37 twin jet aircraft. I failed the checkride so badly that I got more things wrong than I got right. This surprised the other instructors in my flight since I appeared to know what I was doing. It turned out the major taught me some critical procedures incorrectly, while he didn't teach me other important procedures at all. Because of the Air Force training curriculum limitations, I only had three instructional flights over the next two days before my required recheck. My new instructor, Captain Howie Price, did his best to straighten me out, but there was only so much he could teach me or correct in those three flights.

The first checkride in pilot training is the Mid-Phase Check (MPC). This is the one point, by far, where the most students fail out of the program. The MPC is where the squadron takes a critical look to determine whether they think a student has what it takes to make it. The MPC recheck, if it's required, is the place where the make-or-break evaluation happens. I knew if I failed the recheck, it was pretty much all over but the shouting, even though I would have one more checkride, the Final Progress Check (FPC).

If it came to that, we all knew the FPC was a rubber stamp and I'd be out the door.

When I failed my MPC, I found out people started shying away from me. They didn't exactly pity me, but it was obvious my friends and fellow students were glad they weren't me. It was almost as if they felt I was contagious and getting too close or hanging around me too much would cause them to "catch" whatever I had. Apart from Captain Price, the other instructors in the flight started to not pay attention to me anymore, since I'd likely be gone sometime soon. It was a terrible feeling. I cringe when I remember that period, kind of like reliving a slow-motion car wreck and not being able to do anything about it.

This is where my positive thinking ritual had a huge effect. Every day, I would walk into the flight room with an upbeat attitude and an air of determination. My classmates and the instructor pilots in the flight didn't know what to make of me. Typically, students in my situation had a "hang-dog" look and seemed defeated before they went to their last, failing checkride. In my case, this should have been particularly true since I had failed the MPC so miserably the first time.

To this day, I don't know if Captain Price or Major Leinen (our section commander) steered the squadron's check section into having Major Fry give me the recheck. I never saw any indication they did anything, but given they knew what occurred with my first instructor, they might have nudged the system to make this happen. Major Fry, the leader of the check section, had been around long enough to recognize what was important in this situation. He was there to determine my overall aptitude and attitude and not get sidetracked by whether I had all the procedures down perfectly.

I remember going to my MPC recheck with a determined attitude. I felt I was skilled enough to pass, and I knew all the procedures down cold, yet the disastrous experience I had with my first-ever checkride was just a few days old and hard to shake. I would do my best and let the chips fall where they may. Thankfully, while my MPC recheck was challenging, it was also uneventful. I performed everything within standards with a few minor critiques. Most important of all, I passed. I felt thrilled. I knew I had barely

escaped a disaster. My classmates were happy for me, too, and I became one of the gang again. I wasn't "the guy who would be leaving soon" any longer.

I think I surprised more than one instructor with my success, simply because that was not typically what happened in these cases. I understand why their attitudes changed. I also attribute my success to the positive attitude I cultivated and nurtured. Without my complete focus on a positive outcome, I wouldn't have had a chance. It was shortly after my T-37 MPC recheck that things fell into place for me. It all came together as I learned what was a "now" priority in the cockpit, and what was important but could wait.

The Air Force conducted the advanced (T-38) phase of pilot training in a very different atmosphere than the T-37 phase. While pilot training remained oppressive and demanding, once we advanced into the T-38 phase the instructors treated us as if we had earned at least a little acknowledgement and respect. This was a huge relief. During T-38s, the Air Force's focus was on producing a qualified graduate and not as much trying to wash out those who didn't have the aptitude for flying.

The T-38 was a very different aircraft from the T-37. The T-37 was a conventional, subsonic trainer with underpowered engines; the T-38 was a short-winged, supersonic, high-performance, fighter-like aircraft. By mastering the T-38, we were proving to our instructors and the Air Force we were ready to take the next step and become full-fledged Air Force pilots. The T-38 also incorporated more advanced training than the T-37. For example, we had to pass a T-38 formation checkride involving two aircraft (a two-ship formation) and complete additional training in four aircraft (four-ship) formation flying. In T-37s, the Air Force only introduced us to two-ship formation flying.

The Northrup T-38 "Talon" began in the Air Force in 1962 and is still being used by the USAF today. Two pilots sit in tandem in the T-38, with the student in the front of the cockpit and the instructor pilot in the back. The T-38 was a major step up from the basic trainer, the Cessna T-37 "Tweet." It was much faster, and the instrumentation was significantly upgraded. It also allowed the student to perform like a single-seat pilot, with the instructor

tucked away in the back of the cockpit, out of arm's reach. I really enjoyed flying the T-38, as it was fast, sexy, and performed like an airborne sports car. It was also far more unforgiving, as I learned later, with its short wings making it much easier to stall during the approach and landing phase.

Unlike my halting progress with a subpar instructor in T-37s, I had the great fortune of having an excellent T-38 instructor (Captain Chuck Hanner) right from the beginning. Captain Hanner was an F-106 fighter pilot who had received a follow-on assignment to be a T-38 instructor at Reese AFB — this was considered "a broadening assignment" outside of his primary area of expertise (F-106 pilot in his case). All career Air Force officers must do this. I did it many times, especially as I became more senior.

I was Captain Hanner's first-ever student when I started the T-38 phase. I was also his only student, to begin with. Because of that, I had his undivided attention as he got his local checkout and learned the ropes of being an instructor at Reese. This was a huge advantage, since I received focused, consistent training right from the beginning. Captain Hanner and I flew two or three T-38 sorties every day — a fast pace requiring me to be prepared at all times. It also helped reinforce skills I learned from one flight to the next.

Most important was Captain Hanner's attitude. Even though it was clear he would rather have been flying his beloved F-106 Delta Dart fighter, he was an excellent instructor and had a great perspective on things. I progressed rapidly through the program, soloed at day and at night in the T-38 earlier than anyone, and was the first in my class to take and pass the T-38 contact (flying skills) checkride. I also was the first, along with my classmate Steve Carey, to pass the T-38 formation checkride. Each of those were huge milestones in the T-38 phase.

In the end, everything turned out great. I graduated with my class in December 1978, ranking in the top one-third of my classmates. Both the T-37 and T-38 squadrons thought enough of me that they wanted me to come back and join their ranks as a flight instructor. While I was grateful for the compliment, by the time I finished my year-long adventure in pilot training, I didn't really want to return to that oppressive training environment. I wanted to find adventure elsewhere.

Chapter 7

# Walls Closing In

*Prisoner of War compound at survival training. (sfahq.com)*

"Let me out!! Get me out of here!!"

The guy in the box next to me was screaming.

"Flight Surgeon!!"

One of my most intense memories in Air Force Combat Survival Training was having to squat in a tiny, pitch-black box with a bag over my head for what seemed an eternity. The box had adjustable sides that fit snugly around each of us, so we were touching all the walls as we curled up in a crouched position. I couldn't even move, much less turn around or stretch any part of my body.

It was then I discovered I suffered from claustrophobia. It didn't help that the guy next to me was having a fearful, claustrophobic experience. He had used the safe phrase ("flight surgeon"), which required the instructors to stop what they were doing and remove him from whatever situation he

was in. It also meant he failed the course, likely jeopardizing his Air Force flying career if he was a crewmember. Successful completion of survival training was mandatory for all of us.

I could hear the instructors scrambling to get him out of the box next to me as he continued to yell. It was all I could do to maintain my presence of mind and not lose my own composure. This was the first time I ever felt on the verge of being overcome by this fear. I've only had three claustrophobic reactions in my entire life, none of which ever became debilitating. This one was the first and easily the worst. I felt my breathing become faster and get increasingly shallow. My heartbeat increased, and my mind raced as I fought off the panic. I had to go within and force myself to think about something different — I couldn't even acknowledge my situation to myself. I visualized myself elsewhere and shut myself down to what was happening.

To set the stage, after I graduated from pilot training in December 1978, I went right to KC-135 copilot qualification training at Castle Air Force Base near Merced, California in January 1979. I spent the next four months at Castle learning to fly the "Stratotanker." This was one of the most enjoyable periods in my early Air Force career. I remember the first time I saw a KC-135 flying at Castle. It was my first day there, and I was driving back to base after grabbing a bite to eat in Merced. I saw a KC-135 on final approach, paralleling me as I drove on a perimeter road. It looked big and sleek and beautiful. I realized, *I'm going to fly this plane, a plane that could take me across the oceans to adventures anywhere in the world.* It was love at first sight.

After graduating as a fully qualified KC-135 copilot in May, I went to land survival training at Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane, Washington and then water survival training at Homestead Air Force Base at the southern tip of Florida — opposite corners of the country. Water survival was kind of fun … decidedly low key. It was more of a vacation than anything else. It was useful since we learned important aspects of how to survive if we either ditched our aircraft or had to bail out over the ocean. That said, the entire course was only three days in the south Florida sun where we did things like practice parachute landings in the water. Our final exam was floating around

in a life raft in our flight suits within sight of the tourists on the beaches of Biscayne Bay. Not too tough.

The two-week survival course at Fairchild, however, based on the multi-service Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape (SERE) course, was no fun. After some brief classroom instruction, we divided into groups of 10-12 personnel and went on an instructor-led survival hike through the forests of eastern Washington. The one-week trek in the mosquito-infested woods was bearable, especially since I had been a YMCA camp counselor for four summers in high school and college and had done a lot of backpacking as part of that experience. I was one of only a few officers in my class and I was the designated section leader, which meant I got to try things out first. We didn't starve, and nobody broke any bones or got sick, so the training was a success from that perspective.

The mock Prisoner of War (POW) resistance and evasion training at Fairchild, however, was as miserable as it sounds. As a "senior officer," they singled me out for special treatment — more interrogation, longer time in the box, public humiliation, etc. The entire experience lasted a little over 24 hours, starting at dusk one evening when enemy soldiers (the instructors) captured us at gunpoint. We had no opportunity to sleep that night, as we stood at attention with bags over our heads, each of us in our tiny four-wall cell. They monitored and harassed us constantly throughout the night.

I still have distinct memories of the POW training experience. Even to this day, I can recite the words of Rudyard Kipling's poem "Boots" — the instructors played this on a continuous loop for hours, broken only by "news reports" accusing us of being war criminals. The poem narrator would get progressively more distraught as the recording went on as if he were going mad. It was disturbing to listen to this over and over and over. Throughout the night, the instructors would suddenly break the monotony. I remember being pulled out of my cell for a lengthy interrogation in the commandant's office, trying to not divulge any information other than name, rank, and serial number.

Survival training was a miserable experience, period, especially the mock POW camp resistance training. There's no way to describe it as

anything else and I wouldn't try to convince anyone otherwise. Like all events in my life, though, I learned from this. I'm grateful I had this training. I knew if I ever found myself in a survival or, God forbid, a POW situation, I would appreciate having been exposed to this ahead of time. Hopefully then I wouldn't be completely overwhelmed by the desperate situation.

Despite the realism of the training, all of us knew we weren't truly threatened, and everything would be over in a short time. We also knew the instructors couldn't physically harm us, despite their threats and intimidating actions. Yet, the POW training drove home how shocking and frightening this experience could be. That was the intent. We needed to be familiar with what might happen if we ever found ourselves in a terrible situation like that. I can't even pretend to know what the brave men and women of our armed forces who have endured being a POW have felt. I can only marvel at their extraordinary courage.

I also learned, once again, that I'm stronger than I might have previously given myself credit for. That night when I felt the walls of the tiny, dark box closing in on me and my claustrophobic fears well up inside, I discovered I can be strong and overcome imagined fears by going within and focusing on something else. This knowledge has been useful throughout my Air Force career and in my personal life.

Chapter 8

# Night Air Refueling

*U.S. Air Force KC-10 receiving fuel in mid-air. (military.com)*

I felt the sweat soaking through my flightsuit even though the cabin temperature was perfect. I had been on edge for 20 minutes. Focused completely on keeping the KC-135 tanker centered precisely 12 feet above and in front of my KC-10, we were taking on thousands of gallons of fuel through the KC-135's metal boom. These were the worst mid-air refueling conditions I ever encountered and there was no end in sight.

We darted in and out of the clouds going 450 miles per hour on a bright, moonlit night, maneuvering through the turbulence caused by thunderstorms only 10 miles away. The tanker had to bank sharply to stay away from the storms. Going from clouds thick enough to lose sight of the KC-135 into full moonlight created the illusion we were closing in on and about to hit the

plane in front of us. Banking in a turn felt like we were becoming unstable with the increased G-forces, especially as we took on fuel.

The turbulence from the thunderstorms also gave the false impression I should pull back or close with the tanker to maintain position each time the storms buffeted us. I disregarded most of my physical senses to stay in position, keeping my complete focus on what I was seeing in front of me. I had to be steady and deliberate, regardless of what I experienced. I didn't know how much longer I could keep this up.

It was 1985, and I was a captain requalifying in the KC-10 for the 32d Air Refueling Squadron at Barksdale Air Force Base near Shreveport, Louisiana. Seven years earlier, perhaps the most important lesson I learned from pilot training, and especially on that near-fatal night in the T-38 advanced trainer, was the importance of courage and believing in myself. I have admired many courageous men and women, military and civilian, of all ages and nationalities. We all know people who are inspiring examples of courage. We encounter them every day.

Without courage, we sleepwalk through life, reacting to situations presented to us and responding to whichever way the wind is blowing. It takes courage to chart our own direction. That doesn't mean inflexibility. The most successful people I know work hard to understand and cooperate with others, which might mean compromising or changing perspectives. The challenge is knowing when to take a stand and when it's not necessary. I don't have any simple answers for that. Everyone needs to determine that answer for himself or herself. When confronted with questions like these, I've gone within to determine how I feel about a situation. While my responses haven't always been perfect, I believe I come up with a good answer by listening to my heart.

My KC-10 requalification happened right after I completed a non-flying tour as an Air Staff Training (ASTRA) officer at the Pentagon, spending a year learning how Air Force headquarters functions (which was fascinating). My requalification in the KC-10 involved an actual upgrade from copilot to aircraft commander at the same time. This required me to master some new skills as part of my training.

There are five phases of aircraft operations that can get a pilot in real trouble in the KC-10: takeoff and departure, approach and landing, tanker air refueling, taxiing the aircraft on a narrow ramp/taxiway, and receiver air refueling (receiving fuel in mid-air). Having been a KC-10 copilot and a KC-135 aircraft commander before I started my requalification at Barksdale, I had a good handle on takeoff, departure, approach, landing, and tanker air refueling — none of those presented a big challenge. It was a case of regaining a feel for the aircraft and re-familiarizing myself with the procedures. The first time I taxied in the KC-10 jumbo jet was difficult because of how high above the ground I sat in the cockpit and how far I was in front of the nosewheel and the main tires — it was a spatial perception challenge. Even so, I realized the worst that could happen in the unlikely event things went wrong taxiing was planting a wheel in the dirt and getting stuck. That situation would be severely embarrassing, but not fatal.

Receiver air refueling was different though. Unlike the KC-135, in the KC-10 we could take on fuel as well as offload it. This required me as a KC-10 aircraft commander to maneuver within 12 feet of a tanker, going hundreds of miles per hour, and maintain a stable platform while connected to the tanker via a telescopic refueling boom. Since the KC-10 is a very large aircraft and develops a great deal of inertia when maneuvering or accelerating, it required me to master some very precise flying skills to perform receiver air refueling safely. As an aircraft commander in training, this was an important part of my training.

For me to become a fully qualified receiver pilot meant I needed to be able to stay connected with a tanker in almost all situations: day or night, cloudy or sunny, dry or rainy, smooth or bumpy, etc. I needed to train in different conditions to ensure that when the time came, I'd be able to complete any mission the Air Force asked me to perform. Of course, there were limited visibility and severe weather conditions where we wouldn't even attempt a refueling because it was too dangerous. In the "rather die than look bad" (RDTLB) KC-10 community, though, we considered calling off a refueling a last resort.

Near the end of my training, I needed to qualify in night refueling. My first night training mission called for flying across northern Texas to New Mexico and rendezvousing with a KC-135 in an airwork area for refueling training (an airwork area is airspace set aside specifically for military flight training). That night promised to be particularly challenging, because the KC-135s were on restriction. They were not allowed to use their autopilot for refueling that night, since there had been equipment problems recently. This problem was mostly apparent when they refueled jumbo aircraft like the KC-10. To us, this meant the tanker platform would be less stable than usual, especially since our refueling would take place in a confined area where we needed to conduct quite a few turns. This made staying connected with the KC-135's refueling boom even more problematic. On top of all this, the weather briefing called for thunderstorms and associated turbulence near the refueling area. It looked to be a difficult night, even before we took off.

By the time we made radio contact with our KC-135, an hour after takeoff, the weather had deteriorated. Thunderstorms were now just outside the refueling area and were causing turbulence and intermittent thick clouds in the area. In fact, they considered the northeast quadrant of the area unusable, so would need to maneuver even more to stay within the area's boundaries.

We entered the area and saw the lights of the KC-135 in the distance as we conducted our rendezvous. Our tanker rolled out one mile in front and one thousand feet above us, just as planned. It was also turbulent, as we expected. When we climbed to within one-half mile of the KC-135, we entered a thick cloud bank, losing sight of the tanker.

Regulations required us to stop closure with the tanker if we can't see it within one-half mile of contact. As I was pulling the throttles back to maintain position, Major Bill Poggi, my instructor, directed me to continue. I cited the restriction on closing within one-half mile without having positive visual contact with the tanker. He told me he understood, and I should continue, slowly closing with the KC-135.

Major Poggi was near-legendary in the Air Force KC-10 community. He was the chief of all aircrew training at Barksdale and he had more KC-10 flying experience than anyone on base. He was revered as being just an

exceptionally good pilot and a very capable instructor. So I continued my closure. Slowly.

We broke out of the clouds within a quarter-mile of the tanker. I continued closing and then stabilized the plane in the pre-contact position before inching forward for the final few feet prior to making a physical connection with the KC-135 refueling boom. At this point, we were in significant turbulence, with both planes being buffeted by the thunderstorms near the area. As we went in and out of the thick clouds, we alternated between having the full moon light up our tanker, merely feet in front of us, and losing sight of it completely.

It was crazy. I continued my closure towards the KC-135, constantly making the slightest of movements with the throttles and the aircraft controls. I remember thinking, *Why the hell is he letting me continue this?* and *Surely, he must know how dangerous this is!* Yet, as reluctant and scared as I was, I sure as hell wasn't going to back down in front of this revered pilot. RDTLB.

We remained on "Mr. Toad's Wild Ride" for well over 20 minutes, even though the weather never cleared, and the turbulence remained. Major Poggi even made me disconnect and close-to-contact several more times during our little adventure. By the time we finished, I soaked my t-shirt with sweat from the stress of the evening. I've never had to focus so intensely for such an extended period as I did that night. I felt the slightest mistake on my part would have endangered me and my crew. After the refueling was complete, we returned to Barksdale, did several practice approaches and landings, and called it a night.

The next day, we gathered in the mission planning room to prepare for the following day's training mission — my second night refueling. And I discovered we were going back to the same area with another KC-135. We received a preliminary weather briefing and, once again, the forecast was for thunderstorms near the refueling area. Holy crap. No way in hell did I want to go through that again. Yet, I continued planning the mission. Far, far worse than finding myself unable to refuel the night of the flight was backing down from a mission ahead of time simply because of a weather forecast.

That following day, before driving to the squadron, I remember pulling out my Last Will and Testament from my files and putting it on the desk in my living room in my apartment. I didn't expect to not come back, but I was still somewhat unnerved by what had happened the previous night. I didn't feel 100 percent sure, under the same (or worse) conditions, things would turn out well.

As it happened, the weather was much better, and the training flight was far less stressful. I came to find out later I developed something of a reputation because of that earlier flight. The other crewmembers on my flight were impressed with my poise, presence of mind, and flying skill under those difficult circumstances. This helped get me off to a great start in my new squadron.

So, other than showing how crazy I am, what did I learn from this situation? First, I discovered how much ability I have. While it's always good to be cautious while flying, it could have been just as much of a problem if I had underestimated my abilities. By pushing myself up to and beyond what I believed were my limits, I proved to myself I could handle much more than I thought I could.

Confidence in my flying skills was useful as I continued my Air Force career. Sometimes I just had to get the mission done, even under some very difficult conditions. These challenges included nighttime deliveries of supplies to Marines on an unlit airfield in Somalia, mid-ocean air refueling over the Atlantic at night in bad weather, and landing at minimum visibility during a snowstorm in Germany, just to name a few.

Later, when I upgraded to KC-10 instructor pilot, I learned several techniques on how to remain safe while teaching a student how to takeoff, land, and air refuel. I discovered that Major Poggi, by gently "guarding" the throttles and control yoke, was more in control than I understood that night. I also saw how he let me push my limits, so I could discover how capable I was. And for that, I have an even deeper appreciation of what an outstanding instructor pilot he was. Thank you, Major Poggi, and all the other flying instructors and leadership mentors I've had in my life, for helping me believe in my own abilities.

Chapter 9

# Hate Mail


*Me addressing the assembled 19th Air Refueling Group in the theater.*

Courage can be much more than physical bravery. In the fall of 1999, I was a newly promoted colonel and Air Mobility Command had recently given me the privilege of commanding the 19th Air Refueling Group at Robins AFB, in Georgia. The 19th is one of the Air Force's most historic units and can trace its distinguished record back to the 19th Bombardment Group, one of the 15 original combat air groups formed by the Army before World War II.

The group's spirit was legendary. We were known as the Black Knights. The group was very proud of our identification and our motto was "Checkmate to Aggression," dating to the early days of the Cold War. The local community also regarded the Black Knights well — it awarded us

the annual Warner Robins Community Service Award in 2000 while I was commander. I felt deeply honored to command this amazing KC-135 group, with its 500+ dedicated airmen organized into four squadrons.

My new job had quite a few challenges, though, even from the beginning. One of these was having to take over from perhaps the one person in the Air Force I didn't get along with. My predecessor and I had a history going back many years when he and I were in the same KC-10 squadron at Seymour Johnson AFB in North Carolina. My experience with him showed him to be an arrogant bully with a lack of integrity. Before my arrival at Robins, he spread the word throughout the 19th they would be very disappointed in me. He told them they should be sorry to see him leave because they would surely dislike me.

Apart from the obvious lack of professional courtesy this showed, it was also a blatant attempt to set me up for failure by making him look good by comparison. While it irritated me that I had to deal with these undertones as I was taking command of a new group, none of it surprised me. I ignored this nonsense, both publicly and privately, until several months after taking command. That's when I received an anonymous letter in my official mailbox.

*This is odd,* I thought. The letter only had my name written across the front. No address or return address. I opened it and started reading. I was shocked. The two-page, typewritten letter was full of insults, curses, and accusations, all directed at me in the most personal, degrading terms. The letter asserted I was a terrible commander, I was working people too hard, and I had better shape up or I was going to completely lose the respect of the entire group. The letter alleged the author was the leader of a large group of airmen in my unit who felt I was failing miserably as a commander and I "needed to change before it was too late." After that closing threat, the unsigned letter ended. I knew I needed to address these accusations — I couldn't let it go.

Part of the reason it shocked me was I didn't think I had been in charge long enough for anyone to form this strong of a negative opinion about me. More importantly, I found it hard to believe someone would be so bold as to

send the group commander a threatening letter like this, wherein the writer supposedly spoke for a large group of people who felt the same way.

Apart from being a blow to my ego, it was a direct attempt to undermine my confidence as a commander, and I resented it. I had a staff meeting with my deputy and four squadron commanders scheduled for the next day. At the meeting, I distributed copies of the letter and asked them if they knew anything about it or if they knew of any people in their units who felt this way. I could tell they were embarrassed to even be dealing with this situation. They all professed to not know anything about this, which I'm sure was true. They also advised me to toss the "crank" letter and forget about it. I thanked them for their recommendations and adjourned the meeting.

I slept on it that night. The letter still bothered me when I woke up the next morning. It upset me someone or a group of people under my command felt so disconnected that it compelled them to compose and send me such an offensive, threatening letter. It also caused me to think about what I had done or hadn't done to help create this situation. I wondered what I could do to resolve this and prevent something like this from happening again. I decided on a course of action.

The next day, I met with my commanders and told them what I intended to do. At our monthly commander's call in two days, I planned on standing up in front of the entire group and discussing the situation. I wanted to make a slide presentation of the letter and address the issues line-by-line. I would then talk to the group about changes I would make to increase my visibility and availability. I wanted the airmen of my group to have more access to me to discuss any issues that concerned them.

My commanders were aghast. They argued against what I intended to do. They said by highlighting this letter, I was giving the author more credit and visibility than he or she deserved. They were afraid it would backfire on me. We were all still getting to know each other, and I sensed they were worried I might not be able to pull it off. They were unanimous in their opinions. The only one of my leadership team who dissented wasn't present at the meeting. My Senior Enlisted Advisor, Chief Master Sergeant Garry

Frost, told me later he thought it was a fantastic idea for me to address the issue head-on. While I had decided to do just that by the time I talked with Chief Frost, I very much appreciated his vote of confidence in me.

I didn't dismiss my commanders' fears lightly, though. Each of them was an accomplished professional, and I respected their judgment. During my career, I witnessed commanders and other leaders who embarrassed themselves and undercut their authority and reputation by reacting strangely to difficult circumstances. While none of this ever led to disobedience or anything that extreme, it was a terrible situation for them to be in. I remember feeling sorry for them. Good Lord, that would be the worst of all outcomes — I shuddered thinking about that possibility.

Was I letting my ego get the better of my judgment? Were my commanders right — were they perceiving something I was not seeing? I still had almost two years left in command. The absolute last thing I wanted to do was shoot myself in the foot because of wounded pride. I didn't want to be "that guy." Despite my concerns and questions, I went ahead with my plan. I felt I needed to trust my judgment. I needed to show some spine to the men and women under my command by facing this issue head on.

When the time came at the Commander's Call for my presentation, I stood up on stage in front of the theater full of hundreds of airmen. I told them I had received an anonymous letter I wanted to discuss with them. I then asked for my first slide. I specifically instructed my executive officers to include everything in the letter — don't edit and don't censor. The initial slide was full of curses, accusations, and foul language directed personally at me. The already quiet theater went dead silent. Nobody wanted to make a sound or even move. They waited for my reaction. Once I was sure they had read the slide, I looked directly at them and spoke up clearly in a strong voice.

"I know what you're all thinking. You're wondering why my mother would be writing me at work" (slight emphasis on the last two words).

After a split-second pause to absorb what I had just said, the theater burst into laughter. This broke the ice. They saw I didn't want to chew them

out, nor did I intend to plead with them to treat me nicely. I was there to talk to them like adults.

I then described why each of the accusations the writer made, slide by slide, line by line, was incorrect or resulted from a misunderstanding. I explained that I took responsibility for this letter as I hadn't been as connected with them as much as I should have been. I then told them how, in addition to blocking time specifically for them to see me throughout the week, I was immediately instituting a walk-around program where I would be informally coming to one of the four squadrons for an unscheduled visit at least one day per week — this way I would see each squadron on a monthly basis. I also invited the individual(s) who wrote this letter to please come see me, so we could discuss their concerns.

The feedback I received from my Commander's Call briefing was enormously positive. I believe it completely changed the group dynamic. From that point on, the group was fully behind me. They gave me the benefit of the doubt when I asked them to face our many challenges and operational demands over the next two years. This incident also inspired me to have greater personal contact with the men and women in my group, which was a positive result for all of us. To close the loop, the author(s) of the anonymous letter never showed themselves to me or any of my commanders. I wasn't surprised. I expect they went radio silent from that point on, since I never heard another word about this subject.

After my talk, one of my bright young captains took the time to seek me out and tell me how inspirational my talk was. He even compared my reaction to this letter with what Abraham Lincoln might have done — the captain was reading "Lincoln on Leadership." I wasn't sure how to react, so I smiled and said, "Complimenting the boss, eh? I can tell you'll go far." Inside, though, I was flattered.

While the examples I've described in this first section of my book show the importance of courage and belief in myself, this message applies to every one of us. I'm grateful I lived to first learn this lesson in pilot training and was able to apply it throughout my Air Force career. I use this fundamental truth up to this day. After I completed the one-year pilot

training course, my father, mother, and younger brother Kevin made the trip to Reese AFB to watch me graduate in a formal ceremony in December 1978. My father, standing tall in his brigadier general's uniform, came up on stage and presented me with my silver Air Force pilot wings. It remains one of the proudest moments of my life.