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EXECUTIVE PURSUITS

A Novice Pilot Soars, and His Doubts Fall

By HARRY HURT III

I HURTLED toward the restricted military airspace over Avon Park Air Force Range in the rear cockpit of a TF-51 Mustang named Crazy Horse, clutching the control stick. The World War II vintage instruments indicated the plane was going 300 miles an hour at an altitude of 7,500 feet, some 40 miles south of Kissimmee, Fla.

It seemed, however, that I was in a slow-motion dream, sailing on a pale blue ocean frothing with cumulus cloud waves. Next to witnessing my wife give birth to our son, flying the Mustang was by far the coolest, most humbling thing I'd ever done. It made me feel bolder than Batman, cockier than a barnyard rooster. At the same time, it also scared me silly.

I gave silent thanks that Lee Lauderback was in the forward cockpit ready to pounce on the Mustang's dual controls if I screwed up. A 55-year-old instructor and aerobatics ace, Lee was chief executive of Stallion 51, a private flight operations company specializing in antique war birds. He has flown more than 6,000 hours in TF-51 and single-seat P-51 Mustangs, more than any other pilot in the fighter plane's fabled history.

"Mustang Zero One," Lee rasped into his boom mike. "Range check?"

"We're cold at the moment, but we're waiting on a flight," the Avon Park controller advised. "Could be any time."

"Can we use it until you get hot again?" Lee pressed.

"O.K.," the controller replied. "Just tell me where you're gonna be."

I stared out the Mustang's bubble canopy as Lee detailed our flight plan. We were passing over what appeared to be a pair of runways in the middle of nowhere. At the near end, there were low-rise buildings and a squadron of fighter jets. At the far end, there was a row of white patches that looked like gigantic sand boxes.

"That area that looks like an airport is a tactical firing range designed to resemble an Iraq or Afghanistan arrangement," Lee said. "The buildings are supposed to be terrorist houses. The planes are actually plywood replicas of Soviet MiG's. The sandy areas with the rectangular lines are 20-millimeter strafing pits."

"They use live ammo out there?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, they do," Lee confirmed.

I felt my stomach do a double back flip. So far, I had performed only the most basic maneuvers in the Mustang: turning left, turning right, nosing up, nosing down. But under Lee's direction, I was supposed to try a series of aerobatics starting with an aileron roll that would literally make the plane do double back flips. "What this'll do is give you a lot more confidence about banked turns," Lee assured.

I sucked a deep breath, stalling for time. As Lee had demonstrated with a model airplane back on the ground, the ailerons were hinged control panels on the outboard ends of the wings that operated in tandem. When the right aileron went down, the left aileron went up, and vice versa, aiding your ability to turn in either direction. In an aileron roll, you made the airplane flip over upside down and right side up again.

That sounded like a circus trick, the kind of stunt hotdogs performed at air shows. But I knew from research and from long conversations with my father, a former Navy test pilot, that maneuvers like aileron rolls served deadly serious military purposes.

By virtually all accounts, the P-51 Mustang enabled Allied forces to achieve air superiority over Germany in World War II. After the aircraft's combat debut in late 1943, the Army's three main Mustang fighter groups claimed to have shot down 4,950 enemy aircraft, roughly 50 percent of all Allied "kills" in the European theater. Those same three units also claimed to have destroyed 4,131 aircraft on the ground, while losing only 840 of their own planes.

The secret to the Mustang's success was its unique combination of speed, range and maneuverability. Thanks to a 1,700-horsepower Merlin engine designed by [Rolls-Royce](#), it was fast enough to catch and destroy a V-1 rocket. No other propeller-driven plane could beat it in a straight-up vertical climb. Segueing from high-powered ascents into loops and rolls helped American pilots avoid hostile fire and position themselves to attack enemy aircraft.

With less than 90 minutes of ground-school training and only 20 minutes inside the cockpit of the Mustang, I had no illusions about having "the right stuff," much less becoming the next Chuck Yeager. Indeed, a part of me wanted to beg Lee Lauderback to fly us right back to Kissimmee Gateway Airport. But there was another part of me that must have inherited my father's unadulterated love of flying, because I agreed to let Lee talk me through my first aileron roll.

"It's gonna feel a little weird to you," he allowed. "All your instincts are gonna tell you that you have to hold onto your seat, but you don't. You're gonna stay in your seat just like you are."

"Roger that," I replied with nary an ounce of conviction.

"The only important thing is just to keep holding the stick all the way over until I tell you to neutralize," Lee added. "Don't pull back. Don't push forward. Just keep it over there. We're gonna start by bringing up the nose."

I nodded, and tightened my grip on the control stick as the Mustang's propeller rose above the bowled horizon. My limbs and stomach clenched against the mounting G force as if they had just taken a volley of anti-aircraft flak.

"Now turn it all the way to the left!" Lee cried out.

I shoved the stick toward my left knee and held it there as directed. Suddenly, earth and sky switched. I saw green and brown

above, pale blue and puffy white below. Then, just as suddenly, earth and sky resumed their familiar places. I heard Lee tell me to neutralize the control stick.

"Good job, good job," he cheered as the Mustang leveled off again.

Overcome with a wondrous mixture of relief, disbelief and sheer joy, I shouted out a stream of triumphant expletives.

The next thing I knew, I was doing a second aileron roll, this time flipping the plane over to the right. Then I did a barrel roll, elevating the nose and flopping over to trace the circumference of an imaginary barrel. For a split second, I felt the bliss of weightlessness. I celebrated with another burst of unprintable exclamations. Then I exited Avon Park Air Force Range before any live firing commenced.

"I think I'm gonna let you land it," Lee allowed.

That should have sobered me right up. Instead, I kept chortling with joyous intoxication as Lee talked me through our final approach to Kissimmee Gateway.

"Your first job is to line up with that centerline," he advised as the Mustang descended toward Runway 33. "Now nose her up a little. Relax, you're doing fine. Pull back on the stick just a little bit more."

The wings teetered to the right. I nudged the stick to the left, and they leveled. Then I heard the tires squeal against the runway as the Mustang made a perfect landing.

I tried to come to my senses as Lee taxied the plane back to the Stallion 51 hangars, but it was no use. I knew he had lowered the flaps and the landing gear. I suspected he had also worked considerable magic with the rudder pedals from takeoff to touchdown. I didn't care. All I heard was the purr of the TF-51 Mustang named Crazy Horse, and words that were music to the earphones inside my blue Kevlar crash helmet.

"Maybe," Lee said, "I'll make a fighter pilot out of you after all."

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