Meet Brigadier General Chuck Yeager, the most accomplished man in the history of West Virginia.
he did more than smash that brick wall in the sky. chuck yeager lived life to the fullest and along the way became the greatest pilot in history.

A pair of tatter-torn, mud-stained boots charged through the dense back woods of Hamlin, West Virginia. The morning fog hadn’t even considered rising at this early point in the day but that didn’t deter a young schoolboy, just seven-years-old, from weaving his way through trees and shrubs, hills and streams, his rifle in hand en route to a small patch of hickory trees where he knew squirrels would be feeding. He knew because of the wisdom passed on to him by his father and he knew because of his own fascination with the outdoors — his playground — where he was a student of all that nature affords. The youngster slowed and his short, thin frame emerged from the fog dressed in dungarees, ragged flannel shirt and ball cap. His tan brow frayed, he raised his rifle as his steel blue eyes honed in on a small target some 75 yards away. A crackling shot rang out and suddenly a small, headless gray animal fell from the trees.

Little Charles Yeager smiled, knowing that none of his friends could have pulled that shot off, knowing that he had outwitted nature and, most importantly, knowing that tonight dinner would offer more than just cornbread and buttermilk. By now the school bell was ringing as Yeager headed home. He knew he was in for an ass-chewing from the principal, but he didn’t care. This was where he truly longed to be — exploring the mysteries of nature, at one with his knowledge and skill, proving to himself that he was good at something, possibly even the best. He was proud of his feat, confident in his ability and alive with the awareness that he was, in the truest sense, rich...

an article by john h. bouvouras
Chuck Yeager didn't grow up rich, at least monetarily, in the small town of Hamlin, West Virginia. Hamlin was a tough, hard-working community deep in the hollows of the Appalachian that, as the old saying goes, you had to “pump in sunshine.” But it was here that Yeager spent his youth, quite contentedly, in poverty. His father worked as a driller in the gas fields of West Virginia while his mother took care of the home and five children. Despite spending six days a week on the road working, Yeager’s father always found time on Sundays to teach his children to fish, hunt, and survive, often with style, in the harsh environments in which they worked. In town, he ran a small grocery store and saw the old man’s Chevrolet truck. It was this upbringing in the charming yet rural setting of Hamlin that laid the groundwork for the future success of the single greatest pilot that ever lived.

Following a lackluster trek through high school, Yeager enlisted as an airplane mechanic with the United States Air Force in the midst of World War II. He hoped his new path would take him to far away places that might hold the same magic as the desert...and the joy of flying makes you so damned happy that just barely scraping the rocks and sagebrush, your hand on the miles an hour,” he writes in his autobiography, “your belly

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During a military flight back east, he decided to visit Hamlin. He followed the Ohio River into Huntington then banked south for his hometown. At approximately 5 miles north of the town, and dove on Main Street at 500 mph before pulling up, doing some slow rolls and buzzing the treetops. But the townfolk weren’t amused. An elderly lady was so frightened that she had to be taken to the hospital, and another farmer was left fuming because his entire crop of corn had been blown down. Yeager’s training then took him to California. While there, he and a buddy stopped into a local gymnasium to arrange a U.S.O. dance. Inside a small office he found a “very pretty brunette” seated behind the desk. Glenn D. Eisenhower. “General,” he said, “I don’t want to leave my buddies after only eight missions. It just isn’t right. I have a lot of fighting left to do.”

There was instant chemistry between the two even though Glenn found his Virginia accent appalling. “I barely understood every third word he spoke,” she wrote in Yeager. “But...I sensed that he was a very strong and determined person, a poor boy who had started with nothing and would show the world what he was really made of. That was the kind of man that I hoped one day to marry.”

After a whirlwind romance, Yeager received his orders to report overseas. Early on, while corresponded with Glenn frequently, and began enclosing his paychecks. “Here,” he would write, “bank this for us.”

Yeager arrived in England with the 161st fighter squadron and began flying his P-51 Mustang, which he named Glamorous Glen, over the dangerous skies of France and Germany. But, after only eight missions and the day after scoring his first kill, the 21-year-old was shot down over German-occupied France. He was flying at the tail-end of a group of P-51 Mustangs that were escorting B-24s on a bombing run. As the “tail-end charlie,” he was in a very vulnerable position. German fighters typically attacked from above and behind and in a scenario like this, Yeager would need all the knowledge and skills he acquired in the rugged hills of West Virginia to survive. After hiding out for several days in a farmer’s barn, he slowly climbed his way back on. Yeager attacked each day with renewed passion and verve. When an intelligence officer warned of heavy flack and possible vicious fighter opposition on a given day, Yeager would think to himself, “I hope he’s right.”

By now Yeager was flying Glamorous Glen II (and later a new P-51D which he named Glamorous Glen III) in search of German fighters and more kills. On October 12, 1944, he found both. While escorting a box of B-24s over Holland, he noticed a group of 50 miles ahead — his exceptional 20/20 vision would serve him well on this particular day. Yeager charged to the lead and closed in on a group of German Me-109s. “I came in behind their tail-end charlie and was about to begin hammering him, when he suddenly broke left and ran into his wingman,” he wrote in Yeager. “I blew up a 109 from six hundred yards — my third victory — when I turned around and saw another angling in behind me. Man, I pulled back on my throttle so damn hard I nearly stalled, rolled up and over, and came in behind and under him, kicking right rudder and simultaneously firing. I was underneath the guy, less than fifty feet, and I opened up on that as if it were a can of Spam. That made four. A moment later, I waxed a funny's in a deep dive.”

Yeager had just scored five victories to become the country’s first ace in a day. The front page of Stars and Stripes declared FIVE KILLS VINDICATE IKE’S DECISION. The Yeager legend had begun.

“He flew like a demon and was always taking calculated risks that are the essence of his personality,” said his close friend and squadron leader Bud Anderson. “We all liked to buzz, but Chuck buzzed a few feet lower than the rest of us. And when Yeager attacked, he was ferocious. Yeager was the best. Period. No one even matched his skill or courage or, I might add, his capacity to raise hell and have fun.”

Throughout his career, Yeager attributed much of his success to luck. During one of his missions in World War II, he stumbled upon three German jet fighters. “I could barely believe my good fortune,” he wrote. But instead of fearing their 150 mph speed advantage over his Mustang, he dove after them and became one of the first pilots to down a German jet.

Another example of his unique attitude toward combat took place in the skies over Germany and Poland. His squadron was mistaken for a group of unescorted bombers and the Germans scrambled every plane on the ground for an attack. “God Almighty!” squadron leader Bud Anderson exclaimed. “There must be a hundred and fifty of them.” Yeager’s reaction? “We couldn’t believe our luck. We plopped right into the rear of this enormous gaggle of German fighters. There were sixteen of us and over two hundred of them, but then more Mustangs from group caught up and joined in. Christ.”

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CHUCK YEAGER

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there were airplanes going every which way. A dogfight run by Yeager and I have no idea how long I was spinning and looping in the sky. I wound up 2,000 feet above the ground where the earth seemed to be a wild sky, I knew that dogfighting was what I was born to do."

As hard as Y eager and his buddies flew, they parted with even greater zeal. They drank until either a fight broke out or someone passed out. The topic of choice for the evening was, what else, flying: "You fought wide open, full-throttle. With experience, you knew before a kill you when you were going to score. You set him up, and there was no way out; both of you were confident hunters and your trigger finger never shook. When he blew up, it was a pleasing, beautiful site. There was no joy in killing someone, but real satisfaction when you outwitted a guy and destroyed his machine. The excitement of those dogfights never diminished. For me, combat remains the ultimate flying experience, " he engaged.

His tour of duty in World War II came to an end in 1945 and Yeager returned to the United States. It was there that he learned he was to marry Glennis but beyond that he was, however, concerned about being a stranger in his own land. "I pictured West Virginia as a foreign country where I couldn't understand the spoken language," Glennis recalls.

Chuck laughed. "Oh, hell, hon, we all speak the king's English, same as you do." The two arrived in Hamlin to a warm welcome. Yeager's promise of marriage went unheeded. Chuck's coolness under pressure.

In the quiet desert, Y eager was working over the Mojave thundered. "There were...other pilots," writes Tom Wolfe in his best seller The Right Stuff, "with enough Pilot Ego to believe that they were actually better than this drawlin' hot dog. But no one would contest the fact that as of that time, the 1940s, Chuck Yeager was at the top of the pyramid, number one among all the 'True Brothers'."

Yeager found himself swept up in the Golden Age of Flying and loved every minute. "In less than five years, a whole new breed of pilots had been cooked up in the testing that followed -- those who could fly the X-1 but unsure if he could through the heavy buffeting and was still able to break the back of his seat. The aircraft flew at 42,000 feet and his speed exceeded 94 Mach. He had passed through the heavy buffeting and was still flying smooth, like a bat out of hell. Then a pit speed indicator began to fluctuate at .965 Mach and suddenly dropped right off the scale. A thunderous boom was heard on the desert floor below and many of the crew, incurable sonic boom addict, as Yeager smashed through the brick wall.

"Hey, Ridley, that Machmeter is acting screwed," Yeager wrote. "It just went off the scale on me."

"Son, you is imagining things," Ridley replied.

"Must be. I'm still wearing my ears and nothing else fell off, neither," Yeager joked.

On the ground Glennis was waiting. As was usually the case, Yeager hitched a ride back to base on a fire truck and collapsed in the car with Glennis. "I'm beat," he said. "Let's go home." But as soon as she turned the ignition, two of his buddies ran up to the car and began putting him on the back, hooping and hollering. "That's the way we do things," Glennis recalled.

"That historic flight transcended not only the race for speed, but Chuck Yeager's life as well. It took a year before the Air Force released the news to the public, but when they did, the "World's Fastest Man from West Virginia" became a household name. He was on the cover of TIME magazine, befriended by the most powerful men and women in America and asked to speak to groups across the country.

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Yeager received all of the top assignments at Edwards. In 1953, the Air Force was looking to set a new world speed record and called on him for the project. Bell delivered a new aircraft, the X-1A, designed to fly twice the speed of sound. Chuck Yeager, as he fondly called himself, strapped into the X-1A, fired three engines, and began his climb. But there was a problem -- he couldn't fly the X-1A.

Yeager in a dogfight.

Yeager wrote. "From first light to last light, seven days a week, the desert sky was orange in the moonlight. The X-1A cleared 1,000 feet and began rolling and spinning toward the desert floor.

Yeager was already at 592 feet and was well down the back, hooping and hollering. "That's the way we do things," Glennis recalled.

Yeager's flight engineer, Jack Ridley. The date was October 14, 1947.

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It became sick. The layers of blood had shielded it from the fire inside his helmet. However, his face and neck were badly burned and the rubber seal around his helmet lit up and the pure oxygen environment around his head ignited. The inside of his helmet burned his hand. His left eye was burned and covered with layers of baked blood. When he hit the ground, a civilian ran out to hear his story and the town hero gave a speech. Children were let out from school and crowded close to the podium, eager to hear Yeager's words.

His retirement allowed Yeager more time to return to his roots and his love of the outdoors. Whether it was with Glennis and the kids or a pack of his old buddies, he embarked on numerous hunting and fishing trips throughout the world. And nothing was more satisfying than the thrill of traipsing through the woods of West Virginia, the joy of trudging through the mud, or the excitement of catching fish with a handmade pole.

Yeager's love for flying continued to grow, especially among the "fraternity." He waxed everybody, and with such ease that he nearly died breaking the world speed record in the X-1A, a plane which featured a drawing of the X-1, but not of Yeager. A person who could be dead before they can appear on the cover of a stamp and Chuck Yeager's name.

Although Yeager will always be indelibly linked with breaking the sound barrier, his life has yielded far more. From his humble beginnings in Hamlin through his highly-active retirement, he has been rich beyond most men's dreams. Along every step of the way, he appreciated what life afforded him. Whether it was the joy of flying, the thrill of winning, or the satisfaction of serving his country, he lived it all to the fullest. 

Yeager's legacy continued to grow, especially among the "fraternity." He inspired everyone with his stories of daring, determination, and foregoing self-interest for the greater good.

Yeager's life is a testament to the power of imagination, determination, and a love for flying. He was a true pilot who left a lasting legacy on the world of aviation. His contributions to the field of flight continue to inspire future generations to pursue their dreams and push the boundaries of what is possible.

On October 14, 1987, Huntington and Marshall University honored Yeager with the Yeager Medal, an honor that recognizes lifetime contributions to flight. He also received a key to the city of Huntington, West Virginia.

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