

The Right Place
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Chuck Yeager says he was just in the right place at the right time when he broke the sound barrier 50 years ago. To him, history is what happens when you're doing what you said you'd do.

Fifty years ago, Chuck Yeager opened the doors to space travel by proving that a man could fly faster than the speed of sound. Over Rogers Dry Lake in California, he piloted an experimental straight-wing plane called the X-1 at 662 miles per hour, and kept it in control despite the battering effects of shock waves.

But on that day, Oct. 14, 1947, Yeager didn't realize the significance of what he was doing. For a young man who had grown up in the backwoods of West Virginia, making history or even setting speed records never was the goal. "I flew the X-1 because it was my duty," says Yeager, in a voice that's both playful and forceful in its sincerity.

Born in Myra, W.Va., on Feb. 13, 1923, Charles Elwood Yeager was raised on respect. Hal and Susie Yeager's chief lesson, as their son remembers it, mirrored that of the Boy Scouts. "They taught me to honor my flag and my country, and that duty came above all else." Duty, he explains, "is just a commitment you have and you make.... Your word was your bond and if you start something, you finish it."

As for making history, he says, "I was just in the right place at the right time."

Yeager joined the Army Air Force after graduating from high school in 1941. A flight officer during the war in Europe, he flew 64 missions and shot down 13 German aircraft. He was shot down himself over Germany, and with the help of the French Underground, made his way across the Pyrenees Mountains to Spain. Then as now, death wasn't something he feared.

"If you get killed, you don't know — so what difference does it make," says Yeager. He's laughing, playful again, then quickly turns serious. "We lost a lot of guys over there during the war. You hope you're going to live, but when you find out you don't have control over the outcome — you just concentrate on what you're doing and you don't think about it."

He approached his work after the war as a test pilot — a job he volunteered for — the same way.

"I've been flying for 55 years and one month," says Yeager. But he says the F-15 he piloted on Oct. 14, 1997, at Edwards Air Force Base will be his last. He'll still fly smaller "Mustangs" in air shows, he says, but no more of these barrier-crashing models.

"It interferes with my fishing and hunting," he laughs.

If anything, this is the real Chuck Yeager. At 74, he's still backpacking and camping in the High Sierras of California — something he's also been doing for 50 years. Still cooking golden trout in a skillet over a campfire, the way he learned in the Boy Scouts years ago.

"Besides, it's best to go out on top while I'm in good shape," he says, "to keep someone from grounding me."

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