

The following is an excerpt from
Driven: A 93-year-old former attorney's reflections
on stop-at-nothing ambition, Parkinson's, and finding lasting love late in life
by John Martel
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I was now a twenty-year-old U.S. Air Force Aviation Cadet, desperate to win the Silver Wings of an Air Force pilot. I knew that fifty percent of cadets washed out—having failed to prove to their instructors that they were capable of soloing—so when my instructor, P. L. Wiggins, a former hero in the Battle of Britain, hopped out of the rear cockpit of our T-6 trainer and said, “You’re ready, Son,” my first reaction was incredible relief that I was finally about to get my chance. As soon as he was clear of the wing, I throttled the plane forward toward the runway before he could change his mind.

You’re ready, Son, but suddenly I wasn’t so sure, and as I taxied into position for takeoff, my sense of relief gave way to a surreal sense of dread. I felt disassociated from my body, as if

watching myself from a safe distance. Was this *me* doing this? *Alone*? I wasn't afraid of dying, but of a worse fate: the possibility of failure. I was about to have good reason to fear both outcomes, and my life would never be the same.

Your future self is watching you right now through your memories.
— Aubrey de Grey

The eerily silent auxiliary landing strip where I would attempt my first solo was two miles from the village of Tifton, Georgia, and twenty-seven miles from Moultrie, where the main training base was located. I glanced again through my cockpit window over to where instructor Wiggins stood, but remained careful not to meet his eyes lest he motion me back and deprive me of my chance to win the glory that would come with the silver wings.

Nobody else was around except for the driver of a permanent standby emergency vehicle. Bruised afternoon thunderclouds loomed above us, and the air at ground level was so thick and humid it threatened to clog my nostrils despite a wind that gusted hard.

Wind.

It is said that horses hate wind, and I'm with them. The wind that day at Tifton was blustery, and I'd been painfully aware on our first two landings of my instructor's subtle but reassuring corrections made from his duplicate set of controls in the T-6's rear cockpit. It had seemed especially gusty coming down toward the runway on our last approach, but I wasn't about to question his decision to let me have my shot at becoming an Air Force pilot.

We would learn later why nobody else was shooting landings at the Tifton auxiliary field that day: the landing strip had been closed earlier due to occasional high crosswinds, with gusts of over 40 m.p.h. Unfortunately, no one had notified my instructor.

My first solo takeoff was unremarkable, though I was surprised at how the aircraft was pushed to the right even before I was airborne. This told me that the wind had shifted into a ninety-degree crosswind. Memo to self: take care coming down on final approach.

Upon reaching altitude, I flew the basic rectangular pattern as instructed, left onto the crosswind leg, then left again onto the longer downwind leg, and then another left turn onto the base leg. I was painfully aware of the absence of P. L.'s assistance. I also realized I'd stopped breathing.

On the positive side, I'd begun to feel more connected to myself, finally aware of the simple reality that I was truly alone; that if I didn't control the plane, nobody else would. I made the last, steep left turn from base leg onto final approach, careful to keep my airspeed up to avoid stalling out while achieving alignment with the runway. This always-touchy maneuver would be the death of my friend, Bob Jones, who would stall and crash while turning onto final approach one year later in Korea.

Blood pounded in my temples as I tried to line up with the runway, but as soon as I completed the turn onto final approach, I was immediately blown off-course to the right, completely out of alignment. *Holy shit!* I pushed hard on the left rudder and tried to angle the plane back into line, but heat spread throughout my body as I realized I was failing. The crosswind and sudden gusts felt like a giant hand manipulating my aircraft as if it were a toy. My own hands were wet on the control stick, and sweat dampened my face and dripped out of my helmet.

I fought off a wave of panic and gave my head a shake, trying to clear my thoughts. Everything was at stake—including my life—as the runway fast approached. The relentless crosswind kept sliding me off line no matter what I did. What the hell was happening? I had no

radio contact with my instructor and wondered what he was thinking, what he would do in this situation.

I was now less than 200 feet from touchdown, still drifting to the right of the landing strip. Crabbing the aircraft into the wind with left rudder was also causing a longitudinal misalignment with the runway of about thirty degrees. I was coming in slanted. In desperation, I switched to the side-slip—or wing-low method—in which I employed the left aileron to drop the wing into the wind, then applied the opposite rudder to hold the aircraft on a straight alignment with the landing strip.

A new problem: I had lowered my left wing to compensate for the high wind which led to my concern that it was so low it might strike the ground before the wheels. Sweat stung my eyes, partially blinding me.

Now, less than a hundred feet from the runway rushing up to meet me, my training and instincts told me the best I could hope for, given the conditions, was a ground loop—a high-speed horizontal spin on the runway—that could risk collapsing the landing gear or even taking out a wing—which would also take me out of the cadet program. This was an unacceptable result. I'd have to take the bird around for another try. I jammed the throttle forward and waited for the powerful Pratt & Whitney 600-horse power engine to respond, but the aircraft only shuddered as it struggled to overcome its inertia. I realized I had waited too long to apply power. The T-6 had already reached the optimum stall speed for landing, but landing was the last thing I wanted.

When it became clear I'd avoid hitting the tarmac, I managed to catch my breath, but my troubles had just begun. I was slowly regaining altitude—too slowly, perhaps 200-300 feet—but I could not reclaim a safe airspeed. The bird continued to shudder, warning me it was about to

stall out and crash. To make matters worse, I was hit with vertigo, suddenly unsure of either the aircraft's altitude or attitude, whether I was level, sideways, or upside down. Since I could not see the ground, only sky, I deduced that I was probably in a dangerous nose-up position. The engine groaned, its protest drowning out the sound of my pounding heart. I was on the very verge of stalling, and wasn't there a stand of tall eucalyptus trees close to the airstrip? If I hit one of those, nothing could save me.

Despite my disorientation, I sensed I was about to either hit the trees and crash in flames or stall out and fly the plane straight into the ground. Either way, death felt certain. Survival was now my sole objective, and acting solely on instinct, I jerked the throttle back and thrust the stick forward. The engine died, the nose dropped, and suddenly, everything went silent as a graveyard. Below, I got a glimpse of land, rapidly reaching up to claim me. Fear gave way to grim resignation. This would end badly—the end of my short-lived career as an Air Force pilot; probably the end of my life.

Spoiler alert: I didn't die.

