

The Day My Courage Failed

In the wake of demobilization immediately after World War II, fighter squadrons were being formed as part of the Air National Guard and equipped with fighter aircraft surplus to the needs of the U. S. Air Force, usually P-51's. To these squadrons gravitated the experienced fighter pilots who had left the Service, but still wanted to continue flying what were then considered to be high performance aircraft. It was an opportunity for the select few to feel again the exhilaration of going 'fast and high' and otherwise repeat the half-forgotten feats of derring-do. The queue to join was long but with a better-than-average combat record, I was selected, and after being sworn in, began my duties as the squadron operations officer.

By 1950 I had been promoted and given command of the squadron, which was then in the process of converting from the P-51 Mustang to the jet P-80 Shooting Star. We soon discovered that jet aircraft behaved quite differently than their propeller-driven counterparts in several significant aspects, and so, after the initial check-out flight, each of us needed a lot more airtime to really get comfortable in the jet.

One Saturday afternoon a four-ship formation was scheduled for a high altitude navigation training flight to Minneapolis and return. I have forgotten who was leading, but Ray, a recent recruit, was flying #4, the wing position on the element leader on the outside of the formation. Somewhere along the route the flight entered high, dense clouds. Under these conditions it is possible to see 40 or 50 feet - just enough to maintain position on the leader if one stayed in tight formation. However, if a pilot strayed far enough to lose visual contact, the danger of collision or vertigo, with its loss of spatial orientation was immediate. The pilot had to switch to instruments, get control of his aircraft, and hope for the best. This transition had to be made quickly and required that the pilot have absolute faith in his instruments and an absolute disregard for the physical cues that his senses were giving him. Ray never made it.

Seconds after the flight came unraveled, Ray transmitted a call in the blind, his voice rising, "I'm in trouble."

After repeated attempts by his flight leader to contact him, Ray made one last transmission. He was stuttering now, the high pitch of his voice betraying his panic. "I'm in a spin." Then nothing.

The flight leader, with the remainder of his flight, turned back and when he was within radio range of the base, reported what had happened. His message was followed shortly by a telephone call from the sheriff's office of a distant county reporting an aircraft crash. They also confirmed the identification of the aircraft and the fact that the pilot did not get out. There was no doubt about it - Ray had been killed. He had probably been in a spiral rather than a spin and was going so fast that, just before impact, the external fuel tanks had been ripped off.

I went up to the front office and told Sy, the full-time Base Commander, what had happened. We agreed that we had better get out to Ray's house and break the news to his wife before she heard it on the news. As Ray's C.O. it was my job to do it, and as we drove across town, I tried to frame some words which were gentle, yet conveyed the brutal and tragic news which I was bringing. But I didn't have much luck and finally gave up and sat somberly, staring out the window. By the time we found the address I was in a pretty bad emotional state. I was no stranger to nerves - a few years before I had survived countless battles with German fighters - but this was different, calling for infinitely more

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courage. As I reached for the doorbell, I realized that my mouth was dry as cotton, my heart pounding almost uncontrollably. The ring was promptly answered by a young lady who informed us that we were at the wrong house - Ray lived around the corner about 50 steps. As she closed the door and we turned to go, the air must have gone out of me because Sy took one look at me and said, "I don't want to do it either, but if you want me to, I will." I couldn't look him in the eye as I mumbled my thanks. I had failed when the chips were down and I knew it. We went round the corner to the right house with Sy now in the lead. A pleasant, smiling young lady answered the door, a little tot of perhaps four or five peeking around from behind his mother's skirt.

After verifying that we were at Ray's house, Sy said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you that there has been an accident and Ray has been killed."

For what seemed like a long time, it was deathly still and no one moved. Then she began to crumple and we both leaped forward to catch her. The next twenty minutes were a blur as her neighbors began to file in and take charge of the children and attend to the numerous other tasks that needed doing.

We finally left and on the ride back to the field, Sy mentioned something about not finding the right words. I told him that I thought that he had done just fine under the circumstances; there certainly was no easy way. But then I didn't need to tell him that. He knew it as well as I did. And I also knew that he had bailed me out the one time my courage had failed me, and I was grateful to him for it.

I left the squadron soon after that in order to return to active duty and only heard of the goings-on back there at those odd times when I crossed paths with one of my old mates. It was through one such chance encounter a few years later, that I learned what had happened to Sy. He was making an Instrument Landing System (ILS) approach in bad weather and got too low on the glide slope. No one seemed to know if he was distracted in the cockpit or if the ILS was malfunctioning but he never made it to the runway. He punched a hole in the side of a freighter tied up at its dock on the lakefront and Sy and what was left of his aircraft wound up inside the hull of the ship. He deserved better.

I was deeply affected by the news of Sy's death; more than usual. That kind of news was not particularly rare in those days and was ordinarily accepted with a shrug and a comment about bad luck. But I couldn't forget it and days later, I still thought about Sy occasionally and mourned his passing silently. Undoubtedly the closeness I felt for Sy went back to the time we had gone to tell Ray's wife of his death and he had stepped up and done my job for me.

I wondered who had gone to tell his wife and whether he had done as well as Sy.