



**Chuck Yeager:  
The Book and the search why Yeager never became an Astronaut**

„With so many ways to bust my butt flying a research aircraft, I knew better than to think that any test flight was routine”.

*He never earned a college degree, although he did finish one year at the Air War College. This made him ineligible for the Mercury program. In the movie The Right Stuff, this is used to create a fictional jealousy by Yeager against the Mercury Seven (25 Feb 2021, Google search).*

Reading his autobiography from August 1986 I wondered whether I could find out more details about his grudge against astronauts and why Chuck Yeager never became an astronaut himself.

A rural boy from the “hollows”, Yeager was born February 13, 1923, in Myra, West Virginia, and never went to college. In his early military training years his closest friend was “Mack” Chuck McKee from Texas with similar rural background and they both stayed away from the “college boys”. His forte was excellent eyesight, skillful hands, understanding the workings of motors and compressors and later an unprecedented love of flying.

The first part of the book tells his formative war experiences and his dedication bordering on stubbornness. “Yeager, can’t you do anything right? Once you are shot down you are supposed to stay down”, his commander told him after he was shot down over France during his 8th mission.

According to a war department rule downed fighter pilots should not fly over enemy territory again to avoid, if captured after another shot-down to betray their escape route and their helpers. As the first evader (a fighter pilot returning to his squadron after being shot down over enemy territory) of his squadron he was granted to return as active fighter pilot after having pleaded his case to General Eisenhower.

In 1946, after the end of the war he married his fiancé Glennis Dickhouse and Yeager selected Wright AFB because it was closest to his hometown in West Virginia. He started out as functional test pilot of repaired aircraft for the active fighter test pilots during the era of converting propeller driven planes to jet propulsion. “It was like going from an elephant to a racehorse”. He excelled as functional test pilot among all the college-degree fighter test pilots after he was allowed to attend the test pilot school on base. After graduating from the test pilot school his Commander General Albert Boyd appointed him to be the principal pilot to fly the X-1 and try to break the sound barrier at the Aeronautical Systems Flight Test Division at Muroc, later renamed to Edwards AFB, due to his outstanding flying and engineering abilities and his “skill in cockpit and stability under pressure”. Yeager stayed at Edwards for 16 years.

Yeager’s motto: “Love the hell what you are doing” ...and he loved flying, not being interested in money or titles.

Chuck Yeager and Bob Hoover became the first Air Force research pilots, together with Jack Ridley as Bell X-1 flight engineer feeling their way towards the “brick-wall” sound barrier. Chuck and Bob were subjected to centrifuge and pressure chamber tests like later the first astronauts, and the NACA (National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics, predecessor organization of NASA) people, expecting senior test pilots were surprised to be faced with two young fighter pilots without a college degree.

The historical flight took place on October 14, 1947 when Yeager broke through the sound barrier in level flight while piloting the X-1 “Glamorous Glennis” at Mach 1.05 at an altitude of 45,000 ft (13,700m). He was assisted by his flight school mates Jack Ridley serving as flight engineer and Bob Hoover flying chase for Chuck Yeager's Bell X-1 supersonic flight.

Yeager’s own account of flying in the “unknown” beginning with 0.85 Mach up to 1.05 Mach during the Bell X-1 test flights is as breathtaking as reported by many others later, like in Tom Wolf’s The Right Stuff – with the difference that Yeager’s account is the unembellished true story with a lot of first hand personal emotions and feelings.

In Yeager’s own words pushing through the sound barrier was very smooth: “Grandma could be sitting up there and sipping lemonade – I heard no sonic boom no nor felt any bump”.



His reported dislike of the Mercury Seven astronauts may also have been triggered by the fact that after his record flight strict secrecy was enacted and no public triumph was allowed, not even a salary bonus was awarded. His friend and club owner Pancho Barnes calculated during one of the “wet” outings at her restaurant at Muroc, that with his military salary of \$250 per month he got \$2 per X-1 flight from the government. Pancho was very fond of Chuck for breaking the sound barrier and thought he would deserve more recognition by the Air Force, “you are getting a royal screwing” she commented, but at least he earned a free steak from her.

Despite his success his private life was far from being glamorous, he still was at Muroc on temporary duty assignment i.e., no housing allowance, so he had to live with his family in a primitive two bedroom “shack” on the Wagon Wheel Ranch, 30 miles off base with the closest neighbor 15 miles away, and there still was the lingering jealousy and spite among the other more senior test pilots because Yeager – with no college education – had been assigned to the X-1 and F-102 test flights and other prestigious test flight projects.

He met Buzz Aldrin at Edwards and flew with Neil Armstrong as a test pilot. He found Aldrin a little arrogant. Armstrong – than, as a Navy test pilot tried to touch and go on a on a dry salt lake which still was a little wet from rain against advise from Chuck Yeager and promptly got stuck. This did not impress Yeager at all and thus strengthened the traditional Air Force test pilot’s prejudice against the Navy test pilots.

Yeager left Edwards in 1954 to come back in 1961 after the “Aviano” disciplinary incident when he lost his post as F-100 squadron commander.

He had to return to George AFB in California and was assigned to attend the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama. After completion of a year’s studies and final thesis on STOL aircraft, Yeager became the first commandant of the USAF Aerospace Research Pilot School, at Edwards which trained astronauts for the USAF and NACA/NASA.

The chapter “Commandant for Space” (page 332 ff.) gives a lot of hints why Chuck Yeager never became an astronaut himself.

First of all there was his missing college degree, which was a NASA requirement for astronaut selection. Furthermore he disliked that NASA and not the Air Force was in charge of the astronaut selection process and he didn’t like to be “flown from the ground”...like NASA did with the chimpanzees at the beginning of the manned spaceflight program. His dislike was compounded by all the benefits the astronauts got offered by NASA – so, he never turned in an application nor was he offered an opportunity.

His age in the mid thirty’s and not being an active test pilot anymore together with his family background – he had four growing up children needing a father - might have influenced his decisions also.

Chuck Yeager definitely possessed what Tom Wolf called the “right stuff”, although Yeager defines it in his autobiography as ...an extensive wealth of experience, to be at the right time at the right place and luck, mixed with a feeling for how machines work, an excellent physical condition, courage, dedication and “you have to love what you are doing”.

He was convinced that only Air Force test pilots would be qualified to go to space, but not under NASA control. So, it could be speculated that if the Air Force Dyna-Soar program to fly their own astronauts into orbit would not have been cancelled – Chuck Yeager would have been one of them, but in his autobiography he never mentions that he wanted to become an astronaut.

The autobiography is worth to be read and re-read at any age, because it is not only a fascinating biography, but also a historical document about aviation and its transition from propeller driven airplanes to supersonic bullet shaped vehicles, eventually opening up the way into space, as the German rocket pioneer Herman Oberth predicted already in 1923 (The Rocket into Planetary Space): “At today’s state of science and technology, it is possible to build machines able to ascend beyond the limits of Earth’s atmosphere”.

And the book is also a monument for the daring men and women who risked their lives, driven by a desire to be the first to “push the envelope” faster and further into the “blue yonder” and beyond.