

## INTRODUCTION

I once observed that fighter pilots are little boys who never really get past the stage of buzzing past little girls on their bikes. I still believe this to be true. But then how does one deal with a general of fighter pilots? All the more so, how does one deal with a professional warrior who has the most elegant and subtle intellectual disguise this side of Jeff Daniels in *Dumb and Dumber*?

Well, okay, you need a few things right off. To fly an F-16 fighter plane, you have to have the skills of a concert pianist—in fact, you need to know how to play two pianos at once, since all the buttons you use to fight the airplane (that's why it's called a fighter) and all the buttons that work the radar, guns, and missiles are located on the stick and throttle quadrant so that you can kill people without having to look down. So, there you are, flying an aircraft that looks and evidently acts like a Chevy Corvette (but in three dimensions), head up, eyes out of the cockpit, looking for some Bad Guy to give a Slammer (AIM-120 AMRAAM missile) to. . . . Well, just flying the damned airplane isn't all that easy—which is why, as anyone can tell you, one of the differences between a fighter pilot and an ape is that it doesn't cost \$1,000,000 to train an ape.

There are numerous other such differences between fighter pilots and apes, of course—you can, for example, trust your wife around an ape. . . .

Anyway, where were we? Oh, yeah. There you are, at 20,000 feet with a highly expensive fighter plane strapped to your back, flying it with the sort of skill the average guy with perfect eyesight, the reflexes of a mongoose, and the killer instinct of Jack Dempsey after a few hard drinks can develop in, oh, ten or twenty years of practice. Right hand is on the stick, identifying the various weapons-control buttons by feeling with your fingertips, while your left hand is doing the same on the throttle quadrant. There are other people

out there who want to kill you. Some in their own airplanes, others on the ground with surface-to-air missiles, which are like fighter planes, but dumber, though somewhat faster, and still others with various firearms ranging from the ubiquitous AK-47 7.62mm (.30 caliber) to 100 millimeter (four-inch, and these bullets explode when they hit or get close to you), because, amazingly enough, not everyone likes fighter pilots.

But, getting back to business, this fighter jock is a general officer. He isn't merely supposed to mount his gallant steed and tilt off against a willing foe on the field of honor. He's supposed to lead, and command others like himself, because all of this fighting stuff is supposed to make sense, because you're not merely a well-paid and highly trained ape-substitute. You are, in fact, supposed to make a plan on how to use all those three-dimensional Corvettes that carry bombs and missiles with the purpose of enforcing your country's will on somebody who might not quite see things our way.

A fighter pilot is, when you get down to it, a warrior, a person who puts himself in harm's way, and does it all by himself. Such people are both the same as, and different from, other warriors. The differences are mainly technical. The fighter jock drives something sleek, neat, and expensive, and loves driving it (as the wife of a naval aviator once wrote: "I'm his mistress—he's married to the airplane") because it's what sets him apart. That's what makes him bigger than other men, and this is something the fighter jock never forgets. And so, in the tradition of armored knights of medieval times, there he is, up there for everyone to see, proud and alone, doing his job for his country.

They don't have to look like killers. We so often think all professional soldiers should look like John Wayne. A good and serious man, the Duke, but he got no closer to combat operations than the offensive line of USC's football team back in the 1930s. I mean, nobody will ever mistake Chuck Horner for Duke Wayne. This transplanted Iowa farm boy is so laid back that one sometimes wants to stick a needle in his arm to make sure he's still alive, but then you remember that we don't select fighter pilots or flag officers off park benches, and you look a little closer and try to penetrate the disguise. What's the difference between a fighter pilot and an ape? You don't entrust an ape with the safety of your country.

This overage farm boy has the eyesight of a gyrfalcon, and he can play two pianos at the same time. As a team member of Lockheed-Martin, he still has access to his beloved F-16. Along the way, he's picked up a few long tonnes of knowledge, and more than that, he's got a place inside his brain where he's systematized the science and application of air power in the same way that Isaac Newton once organized physics. It's not just longer-range

artillery. It's a way to attack an enemy systematically—all over, all at the same time. And you can do real harm that way. Not just punching him in the nose. Not just twisting his arm. Going after every square inch at once: Hi, there, you are now at war, hope you enjoy the ride.

Horner also, to quote John Paul Jones, has something a professional officer must have: “the nicest sense of personal honor.” Right and wrong are identifiable in Chuck’s universe, and separate. In a community where a man’s word is his life, Chuck Horner’s word is found in gold lettering on an adamantine wall of granite. He is a man of the American Midwest, and he has all the values and qualities one associates with such an origin: honesty, fair play, respect for others who may look or talk a little differently. He is the shrewdest of observers, and he’s a man who enjoyed being a Wild Weasel, a fighter jock tasked to finding and killing SAM sites—that is, eliminating the people and things whose job it was to eliminate him. Weaseldom was dangerous. Chuck Horner enjoyed the game.

For this reason, and others, Chuck Horner is regarded as a “fighter pilot’s fighter pilot” by a friend of mine who went “downtown” over Baghdad a few times himself back in 1991. The combination of brains, skill, and pure physical talent kept him alive when other men were less fortunate. When the Air Force nearly collapsed in the 1970s, he was one of the men who saved it, and rebuilt it in the 1980s, not just fixing the broken parts, but defining what an air force is supposed to be. What such organizations do came largely from Chuck’s mind. It’s business for Chuck, and a serious one, in which at best the people who die wear the other sort of uniform, something General Horner keeps in mind.

Chuck’s also a superb storyteller, as you are about to see, with a keen eye for detail, and he’s blessed with a puckish sense of humor that shines over a glass of something adult in a comfortable corner of the local O-Club, while you also learn a lot of things, because he’s a dazzlingly effective teacher. The short version is: Chuck Horner is a hero who has paid his dues many, many times. He’s been there, done that, and he has the T-shirt to prove it. In the first war of smart bombs, computers, and high-performance aircraft flown by true professionals, Chuck led the winning side, proving that the difference between a fighter pilot and an ape is that the pilot is quite a bit smarter, and better to have on your side.

—Tom Clancy