

THE RIGHT STUFF IN THE WRONG PLACE

by Edward C. Ingraham

Most of us know by now about Chuck Yeager: World War II ace, first man to break the sound barrier, star of TV commercials, subject of a critically acclaimed book by Tom Wolfe and a Hollywood movie, and, most recently, author of a best-selling autobiography. Yeager's autobiography understandably focuses on his days as a war hero and America's greatest test pilot. He devotes just seven of the book's 340 pages to another period in his career, after age had grounded him and before *The Right Stuff* immortalized him. That was when I knew him, and for one rather giddy period of two weeks, I even served as his ostensible boss. The place was Pakistan, and what I saw of Yeager left me no doubt that he was a brave and courageous pilot. I much admired the man. Unfortunately, men like Yeager are well suited to play certain roles, but not others. In my guise as political counselor at the U.S. embassy there, I learned that the role of diplomat suited him as little as the role of test pilot would have suited me. I can well understand why his autobiography skips so lightly over this time of his life.


In 1970, the Air Force faced the problem so often encountered with aging super-pilots who manage to stay alive—namely, how to extract the 47-year-old Yeager from the cockpits in which he had spent his adult life and put him behind a desk. It wasn't made easier by Yeager's obvious lack of enthusiasm or talent for paperwork, of-

fice routines, and the principles of modern management. Shopping around for a quiet corner to place a brigadier general who also didn't fit comfortably into the mainstream of the military bureaucracy, someone finally suggested that he be sent off to head our Military Assistance Advisory Group in Pakistan.

One might naturally think that a diplomatic assignment was about the worst place for a hell-bent-for-leather pilot. This assignment, however, wasn't as foolhardy as it looked. First, the job didn't involve diplomatic chores. We already had a whole diplomatic establishment—from ambassador to military attaches—in Pakistan. All the chief of the advisory group had to do was teach Pakistanis how to use American military equipment without killing themselves in the process. The job wasn't all that difficult because the Pakistani armed forces already were reasonably sophisticated. It was made still easier by the fact that, at the moment, they weren't getting any new American military equipment, having temporarily fallen out of our favor after attacking India in 1965.

In 1971, with his wife, Glennis, in tow, Yeager arrived in Pakistan's shiny new capital of Islamabad to head the group. Yeager's new command was a modest one: about four officers and a dozen enlisted men charged with the equally modest task of seeing that the residual trickle of American military aid was properly distributed to the Pakistanis. Not large enough for a separate existence, the group was part of the regular Amer-

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ican diplomatic establishment, along with the political officers (over whom I presided), and the people who issued visas, got Americans out of jail, and handed out photographs of a smiling President Nixon.

The U.S. ambassador to Pakistan was a political appointee named Joseph Farland, a captain of industry from West Virginia, who had become president of a large coal company through perspicacity, hard work, and marrying the owner's daughter. Farland had held several small ambassadorships in Latin America during the Eisenhower administration. By virtue of this diplomatic experience, enhanced perhaps (or so Farland told me) by a generous contribution to Nixon's campaign, he had obtained the appointment to Pakistan. The depth of Farland's political understanding can be deduced from his rejoinder to an uncomplimentary remark I once made about the late dictator of the Dominican Republic, Rafael Trujillo, one of Latin America's more notorious thugs, in whose capital Farland had once served as American ambassador. "Ed," he declared, "you don't understand. Trujillo was a fine man, an upstanding man. He was just misled by evil companions."


Farland was inordinately vain, "in love," as one of my political officers put it, "with his own right profile." His only piece of artwork that hadn't been supplied by the Government Printing Office was an immense oil portrait of himself—an allegorical study of Farland in a gray suit, clutching a ship's wheel, profile extended, the American flag behind him, looking rather like a corporate Columbus approaching the New World. He knew little about the Indian subcontinent and didn't really like the place or its people. He did, however, have two virtues. Conscious of his limitations, he left the running of the embassy largely in the hands of his deputy, a talented career officer with decades of experience on the Indian subcontinent. And Farland wasn't around much, spending

most of his time on vacations and incessant "business trips" back to the United States.

During the time he was unavoidably in residence in Pakistan, Farland developed a weekly routine that separated him as much as possible from the lively, dirty nation beyond his doors. Every Friday—Thursday on occasion—he would be chauffeured to his summer residence in the cool heights of Murree, a mountain resort an hour from Islamabad. There, in a large, walled palace perched on a ridge at the edge of the Himalayas, he would relax until Monday with a small coterie of court jesters, companions, and ladies-in-waiting. They would play bridge and parlor games, crack off-color jokes, serve bloody marys, and even dress in funny clothes and women's hats, secure from the world outside the walls.

It was into this sad little court that America's greatest test pilot was inducted when he and Glennis arrived in Islamabad in 1971. Yeager relates in his autobiography that Farland, a fellow West Virginian, had personally selected him for the military advisor's slot. This puzzles me because, arriving a few months later, I found that Farland had only the vaguest idea of Yeager's history, didn't realize he had broken the sound barrier, and wasn't all that sure what the sound barrier was. In any event, Farland quickly enlisted Yeager to play two key roles: weekend courtier at Murree and aerial chauffeur.

One of the perks of Yeager's position was a twin-engined Beechcraft, a small airplane supplied by the Pentagon to help keep track of the occasional pieces of American military equipment that sporadically showed up in the country. Farland, however, had other designs on the plane. An ardent fisherman, he found the Beechcraft was the ideal vehicle for transporting him to Pakistan's more remote lakes and rivers. Yeager's mission was not only to fly Farland to the fishing grounds, but to take on such logistical details as prepositioning the fishing poles, bour-



bon, and other essentials at the site. He performed these chores without complaint.

Yeager had the military man's awe of high civilian authority, and he treated the ambassador with the sort of deference that Farland relished but didn't get from the rest of us. But try as he might to be a good sport, Yeager didn't seem all that happy with his lot. Farland's habit of referring to him publicly as "my pilot" didn't help. I recall one weekend when Yeager brought up to Murree a movie projector and a Pentagon film showing how he had broken the sound barrier. I found it fascinating. The other courtiers made funny remarks, while, as I remember, Farland and his wife dozed.

Major Hoople meets Caliban

While Farland and his court cavorted at Murree, the country outside the palace walls began to crumble. Pakistan in 1971 encompassed both the present-day country and the more populous East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. The country's two wings were separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory and a massive cultural barrier. From its inception, Pakistan had been ruled by the politicians and soldiers of the West Wing, whose view of their Eastern compatriots was best expressed to me by a Pakistani general: "Our East Wing, you see, is a low-lying country inhabited by... heh, heh... low, lying people."

In early 1971, the Western rulers inexplicably permitted a free, nationwide election—the first in the country's history. The downtrodden masses of East Pakistan united behind a single candidate, swept the polls, and ended up in complete control of the nation's parliament. The dumb-founded Westerners promptly annulled the election, tossed the victorious Eastern leaders in jail, and shipped a good part of Pakistan's army to the East to ensure tranquility. The result was a campaign of brutal oppression, followed quickly by a civil war, the flight of ten million refugees into neighboring India, and, in due course, Indian intervention in support of the resistance.

Back in Islamabad, we at the embassy were increasingly preoccupied with the deepening crisis. Meetings became more frequent and more tense. The ambassador fulminated against our consulate in Dhaka, East Pakistan's capital, for reporting to the State Department the enormity of the slaughter. We argued over what we should recommend to Washington, and we were troubled by the complex questions that the conflict raised.


That is, most of us were troubled. No such doubts seemed to cross the mind of Chuck

Yeager. I remember one occasion on which Farland asked Yeager for his assessment of how long the Pakistani forces in the East could withstand an all-out attack by India. "We could hold them off for maybe a month," he replied, "but beyond that we wouldn't have a chance without help from outside." It took the rest of us a moment to fathom what he was saying, not realizing at first that the "we" was West Pakistan, not the United States. After the meeting, I mumbled something to Yeager about perhaps being a little more even-handed in his comments. He gave me a withering glance. "Goddamn it, we're assigned to Pakistan," he said. "What's wrong with being loyal?!" Disloyally, I slunk away.

The dictator of Pakistan at the time, the one who had ordered the crackdown in the East, was a dim-witted general named Yahya Khan. Way over his head in events he couldn't begin to understand, Yahya took increasingly to brooding and drinking. Somehow he also took a fancy to Farland, who had met with him on several occasions to deliver suggestions and ukases from Washington. He would invite the reluctant ambassador over to his office to drink and brood with him. It would have been fun to hear their conversations: Major Hoople chatting with Caliban. The link proved less useful than we hoped, however, as it became clear that Yahya was more interested in having a drinking partner than an advisor.

In December of 1971, with Indian-supplied guerrillas applying more and more pressure on his beleaguered forces, Yahya decided on a last, hopeless gesture of defiance. He ordered what was left of his armed forces to attack India directly from the West. His air force roared across the border on the afternoon of December 3 to bomb Indian air bases, while his army crashed into India's defenses on the Western frontier.

Yahya's attack caught the embassy more than normally unprepared. As it happened, Farland's deputy, the career officer who had actually been running the embassy, was halfway around the world on a long-delayed vacation. Although he rushed back, it was several days before he could reach war-torn Islamabad. Meanwhile, Farland was quite uncomfortable, since he was now in actual, rather than nominal, control of the embassy. Faced with a host of urgent decisions, he sat frozen behind his desk, unable to decide on much of anything (which, in retrospect, turned out to be the best thing to do). Yeager, meanwhile, spent the first hours of the war stalking the embassy corridors like Henry V before Agincourt, snarling imprecations at the Indians and assur-



After Yeager's Beechcraft was destroyed during an Indian air raid, he raged to his cowering colleagues that the Indian pilot had been specifically instructed by Indira Gandhi to blast his plane. 'It was,' he later wrote, 'the Indian way of giving Uncle Sam the finger.'

ing anyone who would listen that the Pakistani army would be in New Delhi within a week.

It was the morning after the initial Pakistani strike that Yeager began to take the war with India personally. On the eve of their attack, the Pakistanis had been prudent enough to evacuate their planes from airfields close to the Indian border and move them back into the hinterlands. But no one thought to warn General Yeager. Thus, when an Indian fighter pilot swept low over Islamabad's airport in India's first retaliatory strike, he could see only two small planes on the ground. Dodging antiaircraft fire, he blasted both to smithereens with 20-millimeter cannon fire. One was Yeager's Beechcraft. The other was a plane used by United Nations forces to supply the patrols that monitored the ceasefire line in Kashmir.

I never found out how the United Nations reacted to the destruction of its plane, but Yeager's response was anything but dispassionate. He raged to his cowering colleagues at a staff meeting. His voice resounding through the embassy, he proclaimed that the Indian pilot not only knew exactly what he was doing but had been specifically instructed by Indira Gandhi to blast Yeager's plane. ("It was," he relates in his book, "the Indian way of giving Uncle Sam the finger.") At this meeting, I ventured the timid suggestion that, to an Indian pilot skimming the ground at 500 miles per hour under antiaircraft fire, precise identification of targets on an enemy airfield might take lower priority than simply hitting whatever was there and then getting the hell out. Restraining himself with difficulty, Yeager informed me that anyone dumb enough not to know a deliberate attack on the American flag when he saw one had no business wearing his country's uniform. Since I was a civilian wear-

ing a gray sweater at the time, I didn't fully grasp his nuances, but the essential meaning was clear.

Our response to this Indian atrocity, as I recall, was a top priority cable to Washington that described the incident as a deliberate affront to the American nation and recommended immediate countermeasures. I don't think we ever got an answer.

The destruction of the Beechcraft was the last straw for Yeager. He vanished from his office, and, to the best of my knowledge, wasn't seen again in Islamabad until the war was over. It wasn't a long period; the Indians took only two weeks to trounce the Pakistanis. East Pakistan, known as Bangladesh, became an independent country, and Yahya resigned in disgrace. He was so drunk during his televised farewell speech that the camera focused not on him but on a small table radio across the room.

And where had Yeager been during these dramatic two weeks? The slim entries in his autobiography aren't much help. Yeager says that he "didn't get involved in the actual combat because that would have been too touchy." He then goes on to explain casually that he did "fly around" on such chores as picking up Indian pilots who had been shot down, interrogating them, and hauling them off to prison camps. There are clues, however, that suggest a more active role. A Pakistani businessman, son of a senior general, told me excitedly that Yeager had moved into the big air force base at Peshawar and was personally directing the grateful Pakistanis in deploying their fighter squadrons against the Indians. Another swore that he had seen Yeager emerge from a just-landed jet fighter at the Peshawar base. Yeager was uncharacteristically close-mouthed in succeeding weeks, but a sly grin would appear on his leathery face when we re-