

Airtime

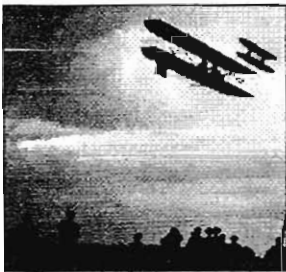


“Once you have tasted flight, you will walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward; for there you have been and there you will always long to be.”

- Leonardo da Vinci

“To fly is everything.”

- Otto Lilienthal



“The course of the flight up and down was exceedingly erratic, partly due to the irregularity of the air, and partly to lack of experience in handling this machine.”

- Orville Wright

“...the first time they put a harness on me, with a tow rope, before I got more than four feet off the ground, the rope broke and I plopped back down—and that was all the flying I wanted.”

- Gertrude Rogallo

“Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed.”

Neal Armstrong

“There’s no time like air time, and no place like cloud base.”

- Edward John Steele Jr.

About the Author

Wing-nut, Wrong Way, Stain, Seamless, Butch, Archie, Knucklehead, Boy Wonder, Daddy, YOU!, are some of the nicknames that might capture most of the explanation. A sworn to internal youth, old enough to know better but too young to care, not yet fully matured forty-something, finally a father, from Santa Barbara, California.

Born on the east coast to parents (Edward John Sr. and Elizabeth Ann); that were struggling to make ends meet. With the utilities being disconnected due to the bills not being paid, when Edward John Jr. ("E.J.") was only six months old, the family made a risky move to California for an employment opportunity. However, Edward Sr. had tremendous insight and the Steele family would be rewarded. A couple of job hops here and there, followed by creating a "start-up" company with four other Engineers (in Santa Barbara, CA; the jewel of the west coast), landed a long-term career and solid upbringing of four children; Suanne, Marianne, Julianne and E.J.

Santa Barbara! What a place to grow up. Although it is a bit too crowded now and has become quite the college party scene, it still holds all it's original beauty, and with the ocean and mountains just minutes apart, the sports activity is plentiful. Young E.J. learned to enjoy it all; surfing, mountain biking, road cycling, roller-blading, golfing, cliff-diving, hang gliding, sailing, scuba diving, even water-skiing on the ocean. However, hang gliding would become the focus.

But, E.J. wouldn't learn to *really* appreciate his home town though until after moving to Chico, California for college; since a surfer going to college in Santa Barbara (a town with both the University and City College surrounded by ocean) was *not* going to work out well. In the quaint, little town of Chico E.J. would learn that Santa Barbara was not the only town that offered such an abundance of outdoor activity; with acre after acre of preserved park land loaded with single-track trails that border each side of the beautiful Big Chico creek (that had numerous cliff-diving spots along it's water's edge), several of glass-smooth lakes that invited water-skiing, and not to forget the high level of night-life that the college town hosted.

The lessons of life would really begin when, while during a mountain bike trip at Mammoth Mountain, California and fishing (fishing???... of all things!) at a freezing five O'clock in the morning, E.J. and his best bud simultaneously felt a strange sense to cut the trip short, and upon their return home would learn that E.J.'s father had past. A devastating event for the whole Steele family, Ed Sr.'s death is still felt as though it were yesterday, but all the lessons he tried to convey now come clear in just about every situation experienced.

So now as he tries to march through life successfully and happily, hopefully bringing joy to his wife (Susan) and child (Sierra Skye), E.J. seeks balance in many of life's refreshing outdoor activities, but his passion is hang gliding; flying free, soaring high.

Preface

I meet FAR too many people that immediately decide the most impressive aspect of hang gliding is that it is inherently dangerous. I mean; so what?... so is life. If by chance you manage not getting “capped” by some punk-ass fourteen year old kid in high school, you might make it to seventeen and get shipped off to fight some stupid war (that serves some pompous politicians’ egos) and get blown to pieces; or worse, be put back together just enough to live your life out as a vegetable. You might be bumped from a plane flight and shuffled to the next, just to be flown straight in to a tall building on the East coast. You could marry the wrong guy, and have you and your unborn child slaughtered by some riverside. Or, you could simply eat healthy, do and say all the right things, pray every Sunday, love your family, work your ass off all your life, and then as you celebrate reaching retirement, you can *still* have some stupid, *fucking* ailment suddenly take you down with absolutely no respect for you or the hole in the lives you leave behind.

I digress; sorry. It’s just that all my life I’ve been so afraid of death, and it pisses me off to see so many good people dodge all the major misfortunes offered in life just to be caught by the simple but ugly ones. What, am I next?! And, I’m not so much afraid of dying, but rather of not living. I absolutely *hate* it when I hear people say; “It’s things like that that make you appreciate your life.” Bullshit! We should *always* live *every* day like it’s our last. I’m not waiting for some sign from reality to tell me ‘This is it. You can start living now.’ before I decide to enjoy life. Why do you need a tragedy to make you respectful of the privilege God (or who ever it is that rules over us; I use the name “God” as a general definition, as a place holder) has given you? If you wake up, rejoice; it’s another opportunity to indulge yourself.

I’m going full throttle the whole way. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not saying go crazy. I still want to eat healthy (but, eating well sure *tastes* like more fun), be polite to and help out others, laugh and love with my family. I’m not a stunt man. I don’t fly to scare the shit out of myself; instead, because it feels good. I dreamed it, it was beautiful, and then I trained very hard to make it happen. I’m saying take a risk. Talk to a stranger; try to make them laugh. Ask your crush on a date. Open the door for your girl. Do something for a stranger for nothing. Splurge with your money once in a while (what the hell else are you earning it for?). Embarrass yourself now and then. Skinny-dip for Christ’s sake! Hug your kids, hug your friends, hug *everybody*. Tell the people you love that you do. And, if by chance, you finish this story and are so inspired, hang glide. Don’t just say you’d love to do that some day; do it! (The average age of a hang glider pilot is 42 years; sorry, it’s never too late). At least go watch, because it’s beautiful, quiet, surreal flight.

Finally, I dedicate this out pouring of my love for the sport of hang gliding to my poor mother. Because I know she worried whenever I left her sight. I thank her because throughout all these years she watched, relatively silently, as I came up the learning curve of so many sports; scratched and bruised, and sometimes broken-hearted. And, as I describe a day’s flight, I can see behind the translucent look of fear in her eyes, is the lucid image that she sees, she *knows*, the intangible joy that flying gives me.