

After three near-death experiences,
this daredevil pilot is still

Plane Crazy

BY KENNETH MILLER

On a muggy April morning, Sean D. Tucker was making a practice run over Red River Parish, Louisiana, in his crimson biplane. At 54, he had long been regarded as the Michael Jordan of aerobatic flying—an athlete so gifted, he'd transformed his sport into an art. But as he began to climb, he heard a bam from somewhere near the tail. Part of the elevator control system had snapped, making normal steering impossible.

The plane bucked wildly, hurtling 15 feet above the ground at 225 mph. To keep it from hitting the tarmac, Tucker performed a frantic dance—feet pumping the rudder pedals, left hand shuttling between the throttle and a lever for pitch adjustment. He wrestled the craft to an altitude of 5,000 feet, where he tried some maneuvers to gauge whether he could land safely. He couldn't.

He radioed his ground crew, asking them to pass a message to his wife and kids: "If anything happens, tell Colleen, Eric and Tara I love them." He said a prayer. Then he prepared to abandon the machine he'd spent 11 years and a million dollars honing to perfection.

That day in 2006 wasn't the first time Tucker had been forced to part with a plane mid-solo. It was, in fact, the third. Such persistence in the face of near disaster helps explain why he'll be inducted into the National Aviation Hall of Fame in July, alongside

view of aviation, however, was tempered by the crash photos in his file drawer. Recalls Tucker, "My pop was truly a nervous flier."

Tucker was 14 the first time he joined him in the cockpit, on a business trip to Fresno. "It's six a.m.," he says. "Dark, dark, dark. He's white-knuckled, sweat pouring off him. Then we skim the top of the clouds, and the sun is coming up over the hills, and everything is lined in silver. It was so magical, an epiphany. I knew I wanted to be in the sky."

Tucker enrolled in a skydiving course at 17. One day he invited a



such paragons as the Wright brothers.

Just one look at Tucker tells you the man was born to soar. He's compact and broad-shouldered, with craggy features he might have inherited from a bird of prey. His flying style seems natural too. The aircraft leaps like a dolphin, spins like a ballerina, tumbles like a leaf. "My goal," he says, "is for the wings to become my arms."

In reality, of course, Tucker's aerial exploits are the product of meticulous preparation. But his will to push the envelope comes from a boyhood revelation: The greatest beauty often lies on the other side of fear.

Growing up outside Los Angeles, Tucker loved to hang out at small airports with his father, William, an aircraft-industry lawyer who learned to fly as part of his job. His father's

friend along, with tragic results: The boy's parachute malfunctioned, and he plunged to his death. Tucker immediately gave up skydiving, but not his dream. He went on to flight school.

There he discovered he was as skittish a flier as his father. "I'd freeze at the controls if I got close to stalling," he says. While attending the University of California, Santa Cruz, he decided to overcome his fears by doing what scared him most. He signed up for lessons with Amelia Reid, a legendary aerobatics teacher based nearby.

On Tucker's first flight with Reid, she rolled the plane. The wings shook, the windows rattled, and something astonishing happened: He didn't die. "From then on," Tucker says, "I went nuts." He began practicing obsessively and dropped out of college to pursue his habit. Supporting himself by crop

dusting, he bought a cheap stunt plane and hit the air show circuit, barnstorming across California and Mexico.

"I had a lot of passion," he says, "but I didn't have the commensurate skills. Older guys would say, 'Sean, you're dangerous. You're pushing it too much.' And I'd say, 'What do they know?'"

He found out in 1979, while practicing for an attempt at a record-breaking 30 inverted flat spins. With the plane upside down and gyrating, he tried to shift its center of gravity by leaning out of the open cockpit. Unfortunately, he couldn't reach the pedals

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to stop the maneuver. He bailed out at 300 feet, just before the craft—still spinning—slammed into the ground.

Chastened, Tucker concentrated on building his own helicopter crop-dusting business. But he never lost his passion for extreme flying, and in 1984, he bought another stunt plane. When its fuselage cracked during a roll, he had to hit the silk again.

Tucker purchased a replacement and set about learning the finer points of aerobatics. He soon surpassed his mentors. After winning his first national championship in 1988, he went back on the road, performing signature maneuvers like the double hammerhead and the Son of Edwin, which involves a vertical climb followed by a wild tumble known as a *lomcevak* (Czech for "headache").

Today the software company Ora-

cle sponsors Tucker to the tune of \$2.1 million a year. He employs five mechanics and rehearses his moves three times a day. Yet disaster is never more than a glitch away—which is how he found himself about to leap from a plane again that morning in Louisiana.

Tucker was directed to a cotton field where he could ditch the plane without endangering others. But that didn't eliminate the danger to himself. Climbing out of the cockpit, he tripped over a shoulder harness and was pinned against the tail-brace wires.



He hung there for a few minutes, stunned and disoriented, listening to the cables scream. Then he jumped. "See you later, girl," he murmured, looking away as he floated down. He heard the crash, but he couldn't bear to watch.

Tucker flew at an air show in Florida two days later, but for months he was racked by doubts. "It took me a long time to figure out whether I was still supposed to walk this path," he says.

The following October, though, during a show in San Diego, he had what he considered to be the first perfect flight of his career—a run so graceful that the plane seemed to pilot itself.

He decided soon afterward that retirement was not an option. "I'm still learning," Tucker says. "And I'm still getting better."



Watch amazing video of Tucker in flight at rd.com/daredevil.