

This is the story of Sean D. Tucker, widely considered the world's greatest aerobatic pilot. If you've ever seen pilots perform at a stunt show, you know that the sometimes graceful, sometimes terrifying maneuvers provide a captivating and awesome sight. Sixty-year-old Tucker's remarkable career includes three brushes with death—and the incredible fact that the world's greatest stunt pilot actually suffered from a fear of flying!

Yakov M. Hirschson

The World's Top Stunt Pilot



It was a typical, warm spring morning in 2006 that found Sean Tucker practicing his tricks in his small red airplane above Louisiana's Red River. Like any virtuoso, Tucker knew that to keep himself in top form he could not let a day go by without practice.

But on this morning something went awry. In the midst of his tight maneuvers – swinging first to one side then the other, nose-diving and flying upside down – a strange bang somewhere near the plane's tail broke the calm.

After a hair-raising instant in which Sean tried to identify the problem, he realized that the elevator controls that raise and lower the flaps on the wings to control up-and-down motion were defective. Tucker was flying a plane that was out of control!

In no time the plane began to careen wildly – and this at an altitude of just 15 feet above the ground and at a speed of 225 miles per hour! The brave pilot was literally a hairsbreadth away from death. His heart pounding wildly, Tucker threw both his hands and feet into the fight to regain control of the dysfunctional aircraft. His feet pumped at the pedals while his hands flew over the controls in an effort to find a way of saving himself.

After a couple of minutes, he managed to raise the craft to an altitude of 15,000 feet. At least he now had some breathing space. Then, he searched for a way of landing the plane safely in an empty field. But after a few moments he realized that he could not land.

Tucker's crew of assistants, who were watching from the ground as matters spun out of control, were shocked to hear his shaky voice over the radio: "If anything happens, tell my wife and kids that I was thinking about them in my last moments."

After a quick prayer, Tucker said goodbye to the airplane he had spent millions to develop and that had been his dearest friend for the past 11 years. Then he closed his eyes and jumped!

The plane was totaled immediately on impact, but by some miracle its pilot emerged from the

experience with no more than a couple of minor wounds.

Not long after that, Tucker was back at work, showing off to tens of thousands of enthusiastic spectators as though nothing had happened. The very fact that Tucker was back at work shortly after the accident is incredible in its own right, but this wasn't his first brush with death. That morning in 2006 was actually the third time Tucker was forced to abandon an airplane in midflight.

It was this level of resourcefulness, the ability to operate under such intense stress, which led to Tucker's achieving the highest level of recognition granted pilots in the United States, right alongside the Wright brothers who pioneered heavier-than-air flight.

From Phobia to Euphoria

"Frightening" is hardly the word to describe Sean Tucker's day-to-day existence. Yet, interestingly enough, Tucker was



Sean Tucker's airplane flies upside down among other airplanes at a show.



The world's #1 stunt pilot takes off.

frightened by the very idea of flying when he was younger, let alone performing wild, death-defying stunts in the air.

Today, you cannot see the least sign of any phobia in him. Tucker looks to fright as a challenge; he enjoys taking risks and experiencing the thrill of surviving.

Sean Tucker was born in a small town outside Los Angeles. His father, William Tucker, served as a lawyer for the aviation industry. William was forced to learn to fly as part of his job, and from his earliest years Sean found himself in airports on a regular basis.

In truth, though, William had a strong dislike for flying, and he often suffered from nightmares of plane crashes. The drawer in his office contained horrendous pictures of various plane crashes which he kept as constant reminders of the dangers of piloting an aircraft. Of course, these "reminders" turned him into a nervous pilot who was overly worried about every possible mistake or malfunction.

Sean was just 14 when his father took him for the first time on the plane he was flying for business to Fresno, California. Tucker recalls that flight to this day.

"It was 6 AM and everything was dark. My nervous dad was pale from the strain



Smiling on landing safely after a performance.