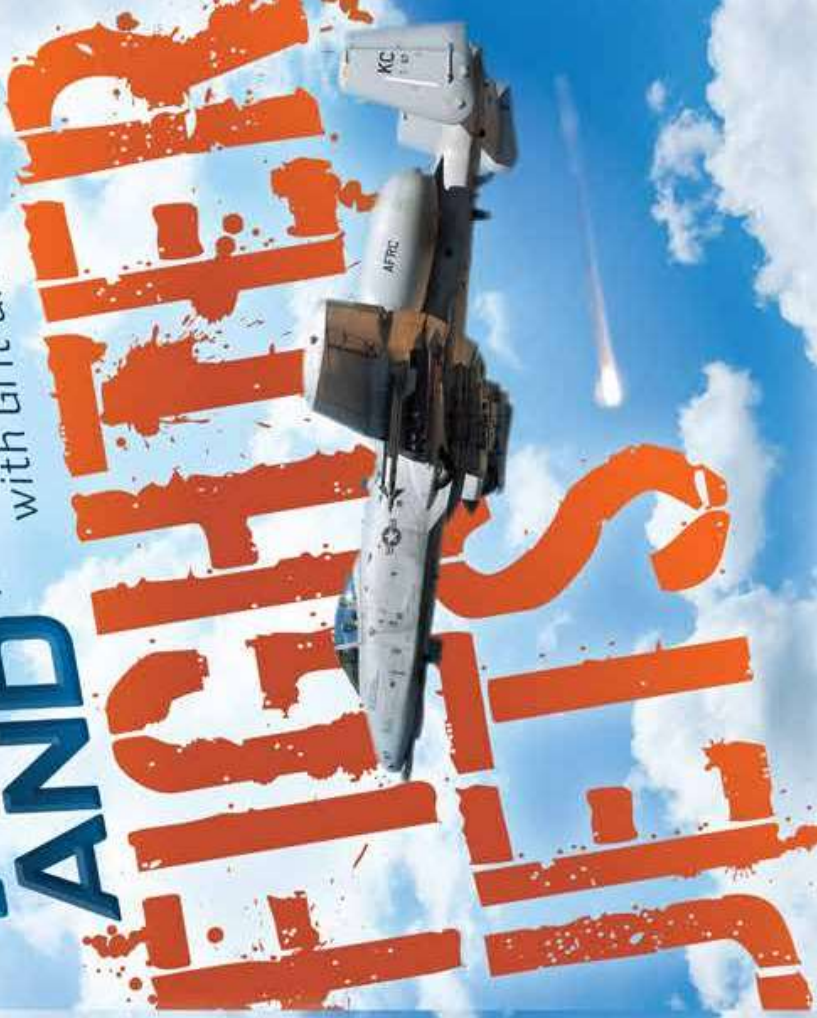


Foreword by **LT. COL. DAVE GROSSMAN**

FAITH, FAMILY AND

How to Live Life to the Full
with Grit and Grace



COL. TODD "RIDDLER" RIDDLE

FAITH, FAMILY AND FIGHTER JETS

COL. TODD RIDDLE



*The Christian faith
DOESN'T HAVE TO BE
disappointingly safe!*

From the cockpit of his A-10 Warthog in a narrow canyon in Afghanistan, to wrestling his children on the living room carpet, and on to the C-suite of a Fortune 500 company, Colonel Todd "Riddler" Riddle seamlessly weaves practical life lessons from his adventures of flying, leading and serving through thrilling, suspenseful and humorous storytelling.

Leaning on his years as a pastor, Riddler brings to life the truth of scripture in *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*. As a combat-decorated fighter pilot, parachutist with the 82d Airborne, and Fighter Squadron Commander, Colonel Riddle shows how faith can thrive and guide in every role amidst an increasingly fractured world.

RE-IGNITE YOUR PURPOSE!

"Even if you've never served in the military or experienced combat, you will relate to Colonel Todd Riddle's stories of courage in the face of adversity and trusting the Lord amid life's trials. Faith, Family and Fighter Jets will encourage you!"

—JIM DALY, president, Focus on the Family



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Faith, Family and Fighter Jets

From his action-packed sequences in the clouds to his down-to-earth conversations and humorous moments with his children, Todd Riddle gives you an authentic look at the real life and faith of a fighter pilot who loves God, loves his family, and loves his military career. His biblical encouragement, practical applications, and gut-level transparency will inspire you to integrate your faith into your family and work life too, so God can be glorified, and you can experience a life well lived.

—**Cindi McMenamin**, national conference speaker, Bible teacher, pastor's wife, and author of seventeen books, including *When Women Walk Alone*, *When God Sees Your Tears*, and *When Couples Walk Together* (coauthored with her husband, Hugh)

Faith, Family and Fighter Jets is the ultimate dad book! It has the adrenaline of a fighter pilot, the tender love of a father, and the practical parenting tips of a great teacher. I was gripped from beginning to end with Colonel Todd's life, and it made me want to be a better dad. The "Riddler" skillfully uses his tactical military training to help us become better parents. Each chapter is gripping, manly, humble, and very accessible. *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* slayed me. I'm a believer in this book.

—**Mark Foreman**, lead pastor at North Coast Calvary Chapel, author of *Wholly Jesus* and *Never Say No: Raising Big-Picture Kids*

Colonel Todd "Riddler" Riddle takes the readers on a twisted and hilarious journey into his life as a decorated A-10 fighter pilot and laughably a failing children's sports coach. Riddler expresses his story in a way that captures the hearts of believers and those who want a relationship with Christ, while straying away from the traditional and predictable stories to meet readers where they are on their spiritual journey. *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is a great and entertaining must read.

—**Chad Robichaux**, author of *An Unfair Advantage*, *Fight for Us*, *Behind the Lines*, *The Truth about PTSD*, and *Path to Resiliency*

In his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*, Todd the Riddler has done a great job of bringing together the challenges of life as a fighter pilot with the challenges of everyday living. His candid approach clearly connects with highly confident folks like us fighter pilots—especially the male ones who are quick thinkers and slow learners in relationships. His stories can help us all learn and grow. So kick the tires and light the fires and start turning those pages.

—**Leon “Lee” Ellis**, CSP, Colonel USAF (Ret.),
and president of Leadership Freedom LLC

Even if you’ve never served in the military or experienced combat, you will relate to Colonel Todd Riddle’s stories of courage in the face of adversity and trusting the Lord amid life’s trials. *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* will encourage you!

—**Jim Daly**, president, Focus on the Family

Colonel Todd Riddle has written an amazing look at the airman experience that couches an inspirational and introspective guide to a fulfilled and spirit-driven life. Riddle provides levity and guidance from his experiences inside and outside of a fighter jet. He displays a warm and infectious personality, an unwavering positiveness, and a down-to-earth demeanor that allows him to connect and share experiences with anyone. *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is an accessible guide to finding faith and inspiration in any situation.

—**Scott Smith**, professor of marketing,
University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg, Missouri

Todd Riddle has lived a very interesting and challenging life as his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* shows. It is always refreshing to hear how someone in a hazardous profession implements his Christian faith as he lives his life.

—**Tom Osborne**, College Football Hall of Fame,
National Champion coach, and former US congressman

Not only do I want to become a fighter pilot and grow an obnoxiously elaborate mustache, but more importantly, I want to create “radical fans” in my life. Colonel Todd Riddle in his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* has provided great insight on how I can transition radical fans for me to radical fans for Jesus.

—**Jay Rapley MD**, orthopedic sports medicine surgeon,
Rockhill orthopedic specialist

A lifelong family friend, I met Colonel Todd “Riddler” Riddle when he was sixteen years old and playing smashmouth football under the Friday night Nebraska skyline. His tenacity enabled him to overcome obstacles on the gridiron and propelled him to a life of valiant military service to our nation. Be inspired by Colonel Riddle’s courageous leadership as he invites you to discover the time-tested principles of faith, family, and freedom in his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*.

—**Karen Bowling**, executive director, Nebraska Family Alliance

In his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*, Colonel Todd “Riddler” Riddle combines compelling detail with introspection and even humor as he takes readers from the intensity of flying an A-10 fighter jet in a combat mission, to the antics of a college student fleeing the scene of a prank, to the tender reminiscence of a football coach dad who gained insight from the players he guided. Brilliantly written, this inspiring book provides usable advice for leaders and encouragement for us all.

—**Tammy Real-McKeighan**, news editor and faith columnist, *Fremont Tribune*, Nebraska, and author of *Spiritual Spinach: Faith for the Journey*

SHACK! Riddler is right on target in inspiring and motivating people to examine the most important things in their life and how to impact those around them. Wherever you are in life, *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is the perfect wingman to guide you to greater fulfillment and achieving a grander purpose.

—**Lietunent Colonel Kenyatta “Deacon” Ruffin**,
US Air Force fighter pilot and White House Fellow

Todd Riddle's *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* will inspire you, fuel your faith, change your perspective, and give you insights on how to live out God's destiny for your life. My friend Todd's passion for God, zest for life, unquenchable hope, and steadfast faith will ignite a spark in you to live life to the fullest and change your world.

—**Pastor Solomon Wang**, vice president, Convoy of Hope

With brutal honesty, humor, and great storytelling, Colonel Todd Riddle in his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* invites us into the cockpit of his fighter jet to experience hair-raising encounters that forged the grit and grace needed for success, not only on the battlefield but also in navigating everyday life. His ability to translate lessons learned in combat to the boardroom, classroom, and family room makes this book essential for readers looking to elevate the significance of their relationships and service to others. Grounded in the timeless truths found in Scripture, this book will have you on the edge of your seat in suspense on one page and laughing out loud on the next.

—**Mark Balschweid**, professor and department head of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication, University of Nebraska-Lincoln; senior fellow of the American Association for Agricultural Education

In this book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*, Colonel Todd Riddle paints stunning visual pictures of life for the reader as he shares his story as a fighter pilot and how God has used it in his journey to be more like Jesus. We are entertained by his honest and at times self-deprecating stories while in the air and at home. The similes he brings from his time in combat bring valued and practical insights for all. And his intriguing and humorous stories from his life as a fighter pilot translate to real-life leadership principles for any follower of Jesus. He is a humble warrior bearing his soul to us and in turn challenging us to see our own stories as part of something grander.

—**Rick Lorimer**, lead pastor, Christ Place

If you want a mix of real-world action, whimsy, provocative questions, engaging stories, and serious reflection, then *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is for you. If you want candor touched with humility, this book is for you. Todd Riddle's fighter-pilot experience, painted in detail, is a lens through which we can see ourselves and our lives in a fresh way. I reflect on writing most often with one question: "What did I learn in that reading?" The answer here is, "Things I can engage and practice this very day!" Thanks, Colonel Riddle, for telling us your story and defending our freedoms.

—**Dick Foth**, coauthor of *Known: Finding Deep Friendships in a Shallow World*

You had better get to the ER if your pulse doesn't increase after reading Colonel Todd Riddle's story of supporting US ground troops in the Afghanistan mountains while flying through a hail storm! In *Faith, Family and Figher Jets*, Todd's wonderful gift of telling his authentic story with humor and a ton of heart and then connecting that story to God's mercy and grace is nothing short of remarkable. His love for Jesus, his dear family, and his country will continue to inspire me to "put on love" when I wake up each morning.

—**David W. Anderson**, PhD, founder of Impacting People, and cohost of the *Red Truck Marriage* podcast

With his genuine integrity, love for his family, dedication to his country, and commitment to his Christian faith, Todd Riddle and his family impressed me from our first meeting. His wisdom shaped my own leadership skills in those areas. And his insight compels me to pursue deeper relationships and to fight for all that is good and right and true in this world.

—**Chad Puckett**, executive director, Show-Me Christian Youth Homes

Wow! *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is a great and easy read that is entwined with the grace and mercy of an almighty God who sees the vulnerability of a man's life journey with him. To hear about Colonel Riddle's tight spaces in battle and practice and some of the choices he made while as a fighter pilot for our great nation is as real as it gets. Add to that the glimpses he gives us into his life as a boy and young man and to becoming a father and we have in these pages a great example of what we need today. Great job, Colonel Riddle!

—**A. J. Nunez**, pastor, Covenant Worship Center, Fresno, California,
and executive director, Mighty Men Movement

In his book *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets*, Colonel Riddle doesn't hold back. He shows you what he has seen. You are there with him as he learns. He's not afraid to share his mistakes. You feel the weight of the jet and get a clear view of wisdom well earned.

—**Mark Oh**, MD, emergency medicine, southern California

**FAITH,
FAMILY
AND** *How to Live Life to the Full
with Grit and Grace*
**FIGHTER
JETS**

COL. TODD "RIDDLER" RIDDLE



NASHVILLE

NEW YORK • LONDON • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

Faith, Family and Fighter Jets

How to Live Life to the Full with Grit and Grace

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*To Sarah, whose zeal for the Lord and free laughter make all
of this flying and praying and working have purpose.
You make our life together a delight and are the picture of grit and grace.*

*From Sarah, who dedicates this book to fellow souls
who have lived with a fighter pilot!*

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FOREWORD

I believe that *Faith, Family and Fighter Jets* is the single most important book to come out of America's longest war—the war on terrorism. Here's why.

Evil is the absence of love, just as darkness is the absence of light. And God defeats evil with love. Love for our families, love for our nation, and (most importantly) love for our God are among the weapons that a loving God uses to fight evil in this world. And this is a book about a man who fiercely loves his family, his nation, and his God.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in America on September 11, 2001, Americans such as Todd Riddle have been hunting down the forces of evil across the globe.

Evil. What else do you call it when terrorists fly planes full of helpless men, women, and children into buildings in order to murder those passengers and thousands of others like them in those buildings?

Evil. What else can you call it when our enemy beheads helpless bound victims and then proudly disseminates the video recording of these horrific acts around the world?

Evil. What else do you call it when terrorists burn an enemy pilot alive in a cage? This is what terrorists did to a Jordanian Royal Air Force pilot who was shot down and captured.

Add to such atrocities the many beheadings of other captured enemy combatants and civilians that some of our enemies have conducted, video recorded, and posted on the internet and even used to recruit others to their side. What else would call these acts other than evil?

Colonel Todd Riddle and the American pilots who have flown with him would have been treated just as badly if they had ever been shot down and captured by the enemy in this war. So when Colonel Riddle's son turns in a school project entitled "My Daddy Kills Bad Guys" (see chapter 20), we need to recognize the simple wisdom and truth spoken by a child.

As a Christian, I know that Jesus died for terrorists every bit as much as he died for you and me. God loves them, so we who follow him try to respond to them with love. Instead of beheading captured terrorists or burning them alive, we strive to treat them with dignity and respect. Rather than intentionally seeking the mass murder of innocents, we have fought a war with the lowest levels of collateral damage ever seen in modern times, often placing our own troops in danger rather than accepting possible harm to innocent civilians. That is how we fight evil with love. We "do not repay evil with evil" (1 Peter 3:9 NIV). While a soldier must shoot and possibly kill an enemy, as soon as the enemy is captured or has surrendered, the soldier will call the medic to save the life of the person who tried to kill them. In each case, they are practicing what Paul says love does: "[Love] always protects" (1 Corinthians 13:7 NIV).

With the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, that part of the war may have come to a conclusion but the global war on terrorism continues, and US armed forces must still go in harm's way around the world. Colonel Todd Riddle is one of these warriors. He is among the many men and women who fight by night and day, in distant lands, across the globe, defeating evil with love. As is so very well said by Riddle:

One reason fighter pilots win is that, when called to fight, we rise to the occasion and boldly run toward the sound of the guns. Not in a twisted view of bloodthirst, but as a very human response to the nature

of God imprinted on our lives. There is no greater love than to place ourselves in harm's way, potentially to die, for another.

Throughout this war, our citizens have thanked our warriors, but the truth is that our military men and women volunteered for this; they were not drafted. And they take great satisfaction in what they do. Here's Riddle again:

I have been fortunate to experience many highlights, and I expect your stories, which I hope this book have triggered, reflect the handwriting of a loving God through each retelling. Epic events are great to reflect upon, and they help urge us along when the path gets lonely or difficult. I have been fortunate to fly into sunrises and sunsets over the Atlantic and the Pacific, to have dogfought F-18s from Finland, to have landed at places that aren't officially places, to have parachuted with green berets, to have flown faster than the speed of sound, to have killed bad guys and helped rescue some good guys. I've seen my three children born, coached Little League, swam with sharks, stayed in a fourteenth-century castle with my wife, and raced an Audi A-6 on the Autobahn in Germany. I have briefed senators, met an ambassador, tactfully disagreed with four-star generals, been hugged by an Afghan warlord, floored the accelerator on a Ferrari, and chased giraffes from a jeep in Kenya. . . . [But] All of these things are meaningless garbage if they cost me my faith and relationship with those I love. . . .

I fly jets to go to war and protect American lives and kill bad guys because it's what I feel called and motivated to do. You don't have to thank me for that.

The military families are the real heroes of these decades of war, and they most deserve our thanks. Colonel Riddle shows us how they, too, are motivated by love:

I have witnessed my kind and diminutive wife boldly wade right into the middle of the lives of single moms and paroled dads whose history of drugs, jail, and bad choices dared to compromise the future and safety of their precious kids. She pours out her life, her treasure, her time and heart with no promise of a return on the investment. Brushing right past her own fears, heartaches, and uncertainties, she remains unwilling to defer to someone “better” who has yet to show up.

Thus, a loving God has raised up a new Greatest Generation forged in decades of war.

I began to humbly understand that there is not a place that our Creator will not go, a darkness, history, or desperation that his presence and orchestration cannot conquer. Perhaps the inky black fingers of despair grip at each of us at times, “the night holds onto us” as a song lyric calls out. Still, the assurance exists that, when inviting an eternal God into our lives, the darkness no longer has any power over the light. With reliance on him and in cooperation with him, we can become beacons of light that will draw others through dark times.

Faith, Family and Fighter Jets is the best book today that continues the narrative of faith, service, and sacrifice exemplified by so many warriors and their families. This is a living, faith-filled resource from and for a new Greatest Generation empowered by God’s love as they fight an epic battle against forces of evil. This book informs, inspires, and calls us to good, godly greatness. It is a pathfinding, trailblazing book, showing us how to balance God, family, and service. And not just military service. You’ll find in this book practical counsel for service in business, in our families and churches, and even to ourselves as we seek to love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Love is all-encompassing, covering every aspect of life, and Todd Riddle knows this.

He also is not hung up on himself. He tells hilarious stories, often at his own expense, and he uses even these to show us how we can learn to humbly

love others *and* act with courage, sacrifice, and perseverance no matter the vocation we have been called to embrace.

I encourage you not to just read this book but to also study it and strive to apply it to your own life. May it be a mighty blessing upon you, your family, your church, and your nation.

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman (US Army, ret.)

Author of *On Killing*, *On Combat*, *On Spiritual Combat*, *Assassination Generation*, and *Sheepdogs: Meet Our Nation's Warriors* children's book

1

WHAT THE HAIL?

“Faithful trumps successful.”

—Brad Riddle

The jet slowly rumbled along the runway, gaining speed and groaning a bit under the weight of bombs, bullets, and rockets. I pulled back slightly on the stick, setting the nose to a few degrees above the horizon while letting the jet accelerate a bit more before getting airborne. I’ve always preferred a bit more “smash” (airspeed) when the jet feels a little sluggish and I’m flying within the mountain bowl and thinner air at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. There were beautiful, towering white clouds rolling over the base and toward the Hindu Kush mountain ranges northeast of our position toward the Kunar province. It was 2008, and I was grateful and energized to be flying the Hawg again, ready to punish the deserving enemies of our nation and proud to be a member of the 303rd Fighter Squadron—the “World’s Greatest Fighter Squadron. Seriously.” At least that was our toast in the bar.

Weather conditions made it impossible for us to get to our assigned airspace, so we flew using an instrument approach back to Bagram to get below the clouds. Flying south of Bagram and now below the weather, we received an

urgent radio call directing us to immediately proceed to an area east of Gardez, near the Pakistan border. The chattering radios told us to rush to support a crippled US convoy that had struck an improvised explosive device (IED). As we raced toward the friendly troops, intercepted enemy radio calls were relayed to us and indicated a second impending attack of more than a hundred terrorists. After moving the refueling tanker closer to our convoy and topping off with fuel, I headed toward the convoy as my flight lead then swapped roles and headed for the tanker (called yo-yo operations). I strained to understand the ground controller (known as a JTAC, Joint Terminal Air Controller) on the radio as the mountain valleys and frequent pops of lightning affected our communication. He was separated from the convoy by another mountain valley a few miles to his east as he tried to relay to me what was happening. I skirted alongside some dark clouds, just above the mountains, trying to make sense of where the good guys and bad guys were. The truth was, the guys on the ground weren't sure where the enemy was, and in the low ground along a river gorge, they were frightened knowing that they had just survived an explosion, had vehicles they could no longer drive, and were expecting a follow-on attack.

Sliding along the periphery of the storm, which looked to be building in intensity, I found the friendly location on my map display. The US soldiers were in a narrow river gorge that was about four hundred meters across and surrounded by vertical rock faces 13,000 feet high. I had entered and exited the weather looking for a clear avenue of approach. Unfortunate luck had the friendly convoy perfectly centered beneath the building storm. I was hoping to find some clear air and quickly locate the friendlies and terrify the enemy into inaction before killing them. An air-to-ground strafe with the indescribable GAU-8 Avenger 30mm Gatling gun on which I sat was the most incredibly accurate, rapid, and effective of weapons. The terrorists of Afghanistan knew the lethality of the A-10 well. Radio intercepts overheard them calling the Hawg the "Monster" and imploring one another to remain in hiding until our presence was thought to be gone.

Realizing I was going to have to fly directly into the storm to get to the convoy, which could get a little ugly, I made a quick radio call to confirm our

troops weren't simply hoping for an airshow or a "morale pass." The strained voice of the JTAC and what I could overhear of the convoy coming through the radio made me a little embarrassed to ask. He requested an immediate show of force. A show of force lacks the Hollywood-like opportunities to provide "kinetic effects" (code words for blowing stuff up) but is often used as a rapid deterrent to enemy forces and a critical reassurance to our vulnerable soldiers on the ground of the mighty A-10's presence and protection. It can also buy some time and protection during a hostile situation to sort out locations and target sets and to arrange a quick game plan. As a rule, fighter pilots would rather shoot the enemy than scare them, but inherent to our training is to do the best we can with whatever pitch is thrown.

So I tried to hit the pitch as hard as I could. I turned the jet east and flew into the storm, heading for the friendlies and the river gorge. The jet began to bounce quite a bit with turbulence and heavy rain. Very quickly the entire cockpit got dark as I was enveloped by angry clouds. I had checked the altitude on my map that would keep me safe above the mountaintops: 13,300 feet was the number. The turbulence grew more intense, and the jet was pitching up and down 1,500 feet. I noticed I was continuing to climb higher into the weather with each of my corrections, reducing the likelihood that I might be able to see the ground and provide help. I've heard other pilots call this the "I want to live" instinct. Usually a good instinct, it wasn't helping me as I continued to pull the jet higher in an overcorrection to get back to altitude. My profane self-corrections were later heard on my mission tape and laughed about at a fighter pilot roll call. I had forgotten to turn off my hot microphone after refueling so each breath and mumbled word were recorded.

A few miles from the friendlies, hail started hitting the jet. It became deafeningly and surprisingly loud as hailstones the size of tennis balls peppered Tail #093. After all, I was in a closed cockpit, wearing a helmet with ear cups and foam ear protection. Still, the roar of hail hitting the jet at 300 miles an hour was startling. I kept banking the jet up to try to see some sliver of ground that I could dive toward. A hailstone then hit the canopy with incredible force and cracked the outer layer of bulletproof glass. As I was directly over the top of

the friendlies, I turned north to follow the mapped path of the river gorge to try to find an opening. A thin green ribbon of agricultural fields along either side of the snow melt river suddenly appeared. As I rolled the jet on its back to dive beneath the weather, a second hailstone struck the front glass, again cracking the canopy. It felt like getting hit by a steel shot put thrown at 300 miles per hour. I rolled the jet on its back and dove toward the river gorge. Clear now of the hail and heaviest rain, the jet passed 375 knots and raced toward 400 knots. For an A-10 airfoil that isn't exactly svelte, these airspeeds generate an uptick in parasitic drag causing the jet to become nosier. I remember pulling the throttles back a little bit—a negative habit transfer from our high-altitude dive-bombing techniques. This was a mistake as I would need every knot in a few moments. I screamed past the convoy, dispensing flares, banking the jet up in their direction, hoping to present the visual and audible threat to the gathering enemy.

Straining to find the friendlies, I was quickly past them and needed to immediately begin an aggressive climb back into the weather as I had reached the end of the canyon. At 45 degrees nose high and nearly entering the weather again, a final hailstone struck the canopy while the thunderous noise of other hailstones striking the wings, slats, tail, and engine nacelles began again. Entering the dark clouds, I followed my displayed position on the moving map as I tried to calculate if I could make a safe altitude before running out of room. I wasn't sure I trusted my own mental math (known as “gonk” to flyers), trying to calculate altitude gain versus airspeed loss before I ran out of room. My quick gonk seemed to be cutting things too close, or maybe I was just a wimp. I zoomed in on the map scale to find which direction the river turned at the south end of the gorge. I was trying to follow a lower minimum safe altitude a bit longer as my jet continued a labored climb.

Moments later, I flew out of the southwestern side of the storm into blue sky. I checked out the condition of my jet, looking as though it had suffered a terrible back-alley beating while the engines still flawlessly hummed along. I wanted to puke in my mask. In my haste, I had forgotten to close the precious targeting pod (another mistake), and the leading edges of the jet were pocketed

with dents and missing paint. The ground troops and JTAC, now emboldened and moments later assured that the attack had been dissuaded, thanked me over the radio and were able to safely leave (“egress”) the area without attack.

I radioed ahead my emergency status while internally second guessing my decisions. I assured all listeners that the jet was flyable, the engines were sound, and that Tail #093 would not fly again for awhile. The aircraft flew flawlessly, the landing was uneventful, and I was fortunate to navigate around the armada of fire trucks with red lights flashing in case I needed help. I taxied my battered but unbowed Hawg back to the ramp to park. A large audience of pilots, maintainers,¹ and the wing commander watched me park and shut down. I could read the lips of our maintenance chief master sergeant as I turned the last corner and he saw what I brought home. More profanity. Waiting for me at the bottom of my ladder and looking like a father ready to confront a teenager for missing curfew was the wing commander. He had quickly earned a reputation for grounding pilots. Climbing down the ladder, I nervously announced to him and the small greeting party of fellow leaders that “I’ve got full coverage insurance with GEICO, and I’ll pay the deductible.” The snorted laugh of a squadron leader broke the tension, at least my tension. The wing commander didn’t laugh. Perhaps my comedic timing was poor.

Arriving to work the next day after a long night of tape review, writing a narrative statement, and having a physical exam and blood drawn following my “mishap,” my squadron commander told me he was “trying to get you back flying as quick as possible.” I took this to mean that I was grounded pending an investigation.

Hail damage is not considered a combat related loss so I spent the next few days completing additional narratives, signing documents of disclosure, and testifying to two separate safety boards, one in Afghanistan and another back in Louisiana via video-teleconference. Had the jet been full of bullet holes, there would have been fewer questions. But flying into an embedded thunderstorm did not fit any combat damage definitions regardless of the circumstances. Now under a requisite safety investigation, several layers of scrutiny regarding my flying preparation, competence, judgment, training, sleep cycle,

and diet were now under review. With the sleepless self-examination that followed, I began to wonder if or when I would be allowed to fly again, if there would be some embarrassing disciplinary action that would keep me out of the cockpit or forever label my career.

Although unnerving to be so closely examined, my team of leaders were clearly and selflessly in my corner immediately. The A-10 maintenance community was incredibly supportive of what I had done and demonstrably proud of how well their aircraft performed under the extreme conditions. My group commander, an incredible A-10 warrior-leader, strongly defended my actions when the wing commander told him that the A-10 guys needed to “back-down a little bit.” The response that came back was “We don’t back down. Ever.” What a great quote; the kind you would expect from a Hawg guy, a former NCAA Division-1 hockey player, and eventual brigadier general. An investigating pilot from the F-15E community also sought me out to compliment my efforts after reviewing my mission tape.

My reaction in 2008, as well as my reaction today, is mixed. I did the right thing and performed at a high level, though not with perfection, when it mattered the most. I made mistakes in my efforts, but, more significantly to how I process success or failure, I didn’t have the satisfaction on this occasion of employing weapons, seeing the explosions, and knowing with certainty that my actions made a difference. The safety board presiding officer’s comments and the after-action report noted my actions as commendable while simultaneously the wing commander’s brief grounding of me carried its own ambiguity and stigma.

Success, or my romanticized visions of success, would have involved multiple strafing gun runs on our enemies followed by a reunion with the endangered troops complete with cigars, shared laughter at another near-death experience, and a renewed sense of commitment and belonging to our own band of brothers. But the real-world script on this day didn’t resolve so clearly, and I grappled to understand how success seemed cruelly indifferent to being faithful. Success, whether seen through our lens or the romantic camera lens of Hollywood, has clear, predictable, and highly preferred outcomes. Faithful

service requires a higher calling to duty that can immediately do the right and courageous thing to the best of one's ability, with no wasted energy or loss of focus lamenting the circumstances, opportunity, and even need for resolution.

Whether flying, coaching, or spousing, I am called to be faithful to the truth and love of Christ and his lordship in my life. However faithful the steps, knowing and doing what is right and noble may not always be synonymous with our cultural definitions of success. Faithful works are guided by principle and a love for others, not driven by calculated outcomes or economic returns on investment. Faith-driven decisions are not to be understood as a license to be foolish, rather they are an acknowledgment that God's sovereign economy follows different rules and places different values on life than does a standard business balance sheet. In the eyes of those who only see numbers, status, or advancement as success, faith and duty may seem foolish at worst or charitable at best.

The great British political leader William Wilberforce was credited with abolishing slavery in England and all its territories after thirty-seven years of exhausting parliamentary failures and infrequent, partial successes. He embodied a life ransomed to a faithful pursuit of the right thing even in the face of professional, financial, and physical ruin. Success can be elusive, arbitrary, or even disputed. While abolition was always the goal, Wilberforce followed a life calling, a high and noble purpose, that refused to be slowed by the obstacles and discouragements of what his peers would qualify as serial failures.² But serial failures, when read as chapters of the larger story, demonstrate that God remains sovereign even amid ambiguity.

Aware of my very human limitations to understanding, while also making room for a sovereign Creator to be at work in our world and lives, cues me to know that ambiguity will always exist on this side of heaven. And we are encouraged to make room for and lean in, with trust in the Lord, to fill in the gaps of our understanding, efforts, and plans, all the while depending on his active role in our lives. "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight" (Proverbs 3:5–6 NIV).

My hope and passion are twofold:

- That our character matures to that of a Wilberforce, that even our impromptu choices flow from a deep commitment to eternal biblical truths—truths that I have been taught and seen lived out while working around the world with fighter pilots. These are universal truths that should compel each of us, regardless of our vocation, to love others and act with courage, sacrifice, and perseverance.
- That we would resolve and be driven to remain faithful to the right things over that which is popular or convenient or may meet a fleeting template of “success.” Our challenge is to embrace the call to obedience and service like Wilberforce did, to walk potentially difficult paths. Wilberforce committed himself to the right thing, even in the face of decades of mockery and few successes, to die only three days after slavery was finally abolished. While Wilberforce is an exceptional example, we can each at least aspire to seasons of faithfulness to the right things when others may misperceive our efforts as failing.

Dick Foth is a pastor I appreciate. He recalled in a message his days as a young church intern for his father-in-law. Dick commented on the seemingly unlimited willingness of a parishioner to volunteer substantial hours to help. Dick’s father-in-law warned: “Be careful, Dick. He’ll do anything you ask as long as you throw him a parade.” If the success were to dry up, if the parades and notoriety were to stop, or if things were to become difficult, there wasn’t a confidence that the volunteer had steeled in his heart to genuine service or a truth he held dear over the common and vain need for recognition.

Inevitably, the lines of our pursuits between faithful works in small matters and direct pursuits of success might blur. At times I wonder, am I cognizant of doing the right thing, even in small matters, as a preeminent matter of character building, or only if I might be thrown a parade? Our hope should be that faithful works will bear fruit in our character to eventually fill the most lasting measures of success in this age and the age to come.

We all seem to struggle with and encounter those individuals who must always match another's exploits, or one-up them in the telling. This is affectionately known as "mad dogging" in my fighter squadron, named after a known offender. As my pastor has said, it's better with such people to "let 'em go and run out with the line." That is, resist the urge to perpetually try to compare or compete to feel more significant and successful. A faithful pursuit can be encouraged by appropriate recognition, but our efforts to support the right thing ought to present without a parade.

I was returned to flying duty a few days after the hailstorm. Returning home a few months later, an article appeared with pictures of my battered A-10 to commend aircraft maintenance and myself. I received a safety award, the irony of which did not escape the squadron. "How can you get an award for recovering from an emergency you caused?" I was asked. The question came loudly from the back of a laughing public forum. A valid point I noted and without my dispute. I kept the award anyway. Future grandchildren won't need to be bothered by that part of the story. Our wing commander also pointed me out during a crowded squadron roll call and loudly announced that "Someone should have given Riddler a medal instead of grounding him!" Friend and fellow fighter pilot Dozer quipped, "Can't *you* give medals, colonel?"

Relying on others, including leaders, to label our efforts as "successful" can be inconsistent or unsatisfying and may too fully empower others to dictate our own sense of worth and direction. We must embrace some element of grace to know that, in a fleeting moment of decision making and without a Hollywood scripted ending, ambiguity may be the dominant label for our actions, and our lone consolation is the knowledge that we did the best we could. We can't choose the era in which we are born nor author every circumstance under which we live, study, work, and perform.

I couldn't choreograph a perfect tactical situation and outcome for the hailstorm day. I, like each of you, cannot control the pitch that is thrown. All I can do is determine, regardless of circumstance and perhaps plagued with uncertainty, that I am going to hit the pitch I get thrown as hard as I possibly can and do something, such as fly into a hailstorm, approach a stranger in need,

invite a struggling friend to lunch, mentor a neglected youth, or buy a single mom a washer and dryer. These are ways to hit the pitches thrown to us and to choose being faithful over self regard and success. Swinging at a pitch only when perfectly scripted outcomes are possible is no way to fly a fighter jet and not a way to live our lives. We must hope to live with such character and calling that we might endure thirty-seven Wilberforce years of faithful character building before arriving at the desired and fullness of success. We may even change our world as result.

THUNDERBOLT TAKEAWAYS

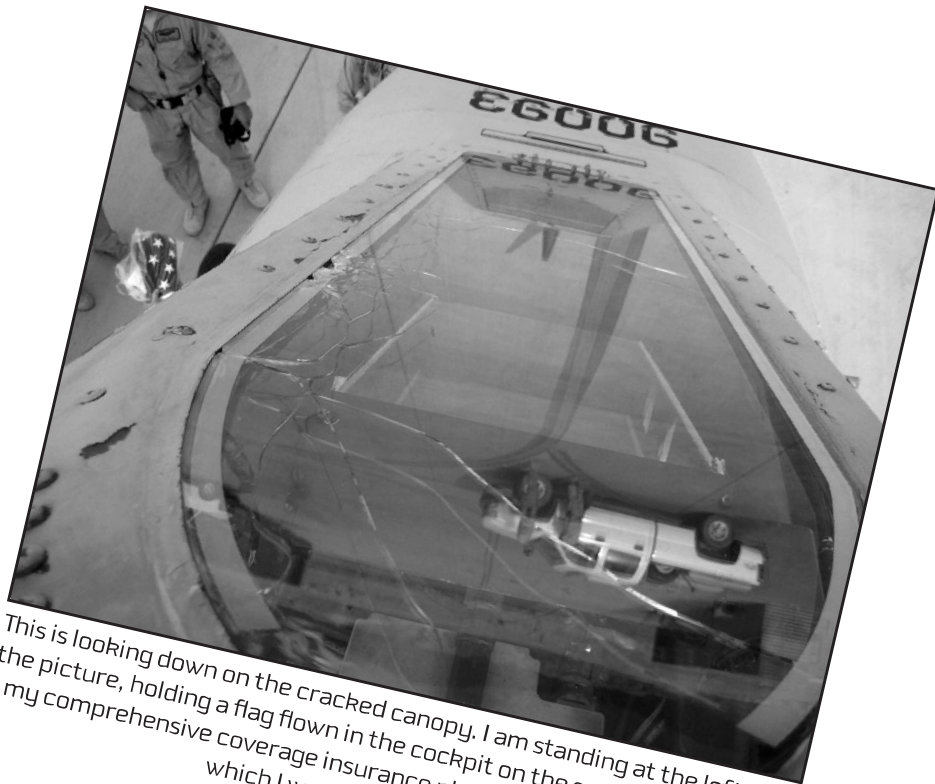
Here are some key mission de-brief points for each of us to consider:

- ✍ Success can be elusive, fickle, and subjective.
- ✍ Duty is demanding.
- ✍ Divine sovereignty triumphs over ambiguity.
- ✍ Grounding our life in biblical truths anchors us during difficult seasons of confusion and shifting norms of moral or vocational expectations.
- ✍ The well-being of others may often trump our own comfort, certainty, and affirmation.
- ✍ Criticism and scrutiny will always travel with changemakers.

Life is messy, and our questions do not always find resolution. But as we understand that God calls us to be faithful and that we are not called to a modern image of success, we can swing the bat without hesitation and lean on our heavenly Judge to relay understanding and our life score. Little else really matters. The apostle Paul was right when he exclaimed: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard these as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:7–9).



The A-10 is an amazing jet with an amazing community of professional maintainers. This photo shows what my aircraft looked like after the hail-storm; this is the leading edge of the left wing. The engines never even hiccuped! I flew the same jet, #093, with my name on it for years afterward.



This is looking down on the cracked canopy. I am standing at the left in the picture, holding a flag flown in the cockpit on the sortie, explaining my comprehensive coverage insurance plan to my leadership. After which I was briefly grounded.