

Hero Yeager has students up in air

By Alice Collins
staff writer

RETIRED AIR Force Gen. Chuck Yeager told Detroit Country Day School students about air-to-air combat over German-occupied France

during World War II and what it was like to fly the Bell X-1 through the sound barrier.

Eighth grader David Kuhn of Farmington Hills was so impressed with Yeager that he said afterward, "I want to fly because of him. He's totally honest. I can see him doing

all that. He's so alive. Most people his age aren't that alive."

Yeager, whose feats are depicted in the popular book and movie "The Right Stuff" and his own bestseller "Yeager," stirred excitement from the students May 6 and also from a sold-out St. Joseph Mercy Hospital benefit crowd the night before.

The \$175-per-ticket benefit was the annual hospital Men of Mercy Celebrity Night held at the Northfield Hilton in Troy. Yeager was the larger-than-life hero — a "star" to stand beside, talk with, be photographed with.

The DCD students had heard about Yeager from their parents and grandparents and many said they've seen him doing TV commercials.

"MY DAD got his book for me and said I should read it," said Noah Tepperman, an eighth grader at DCD from Windsor. "I haven't yet, but now, after seeing him, it would be worth it. He kind of destroys the fantasy people have of flying. He tells you what it's really like."

"Most speakers are boring," Noah continued, "but not him. It was like he was one of us, talking to us."

Yeager told the students, "Any one of you could fly any airplane flying today. They don't make airplanes that the average person couldn't fly." But everytime a pilot moves from one aircraft to another, "you have to learn the systems."

He described what testing the X-1 research rocket was like. It was in that rocket in 1947 that Yeager landed in the history books by cracking through the sound barrier for the first time. Before that, many thought it couldn't be done and that it was suicidal to try.

'When I flew the X-1, many of your fathers and mothers weren't even born.'

— Chuck Yeager,
retired general

That first ride faster than the speed of sound launched the era of supersonic flight and space exploration.

"WHEN I flew the X-1 many of your fathers and mothers weren't even born," he said. "It was almost 41 years ago." Whenever a plane would get into the range of the speed of sound, "you'd get a lot of shaking, buffeting, like driving over potholes."

The X-1 was made to fly in the region of the speed of sound "to try to find out about it," Yeager said. He was selected as its pilot because in addition to his flying ability "I understood machinery."

Yeager was never an astronaut, but eventually he commanded the U.S. Air Force pilot school similar to the Navy pilot school described in the movie "Top Gun."

"I trained 38 astronauts in that school," he said. He never became an astronaut, he said, because "when the program was started in 1959 you had to have a college degree. I wasn't eligible and I wasn't interested."

But he admitted he would love to fly the space shuttle.

The government's not going to waste money training somebody my

age. It would be fun to fly it, but I wouldn't want to ride in the back with the mission specialists."

ANYONE INTERESTED in becoming a pilot should learn a lot about computers, Yeager said. Computers do much of the flying today. "The pilot today is 10 times more effective than he was 10 years ago because of the technology."

Yeager still does some test work as a consultant for the Air Force. "We're right at the base of a big jump in technology right now," he said.

During a question and answer period, a student asked what his favorite airplane is.

"I loved the P-51 (fighter). I fought a war in it and I still fly it today. But the best plane to fly today is the newest, because it has the best and newest technology."

Another asked him what he liked doing best. "Air-to-air combat is the most exciting . . . either you live or die. You're put to the ultimate test."

"Flying the X-1 was the most important thing I ever did."

Asked about the dangers he encountered throughout the years, "When they (Air Force) tell you to do it, you do it. I was trained to do that job. It was my duty to do it."

Yeager was also asked about female pilots. He began his response by saying, "The way I'm going to answer this might make your teachers angry." Then he went on to say, "the shape of your reproductive organ doesn't have anything to do with how good a pilot you are." It drew laughs from the sixth-12th graders, their teachers, administrators and some friends who filled the DCD learning center.

He said of the book and movie "The Right Stuff," "It was good entertainment but you've got to remember, it's not a documentary."

ASKED WHAT he thought of the movie "Top Gun," which is based at the U.S. Navy pilot school, he said: "Beautiful flying, but a soap opera story."

In response to the question, "Why did you decide to go to Vietnam?" he said: "Because I was told to. When my country asks me to fight, that's what I do. That's what being in the military is all about."

Student Lori Stec of Troy said after the speech, "I had him being famous for breaking the sound barrier. He had an interesting life story to tell and it was a special honor for him to come out to our school."

Pakin Liptawat, a student from Bloomfield Hills, said, "He was really interesting."



CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer

Chuck Yeager spoke to Detroit Country Day students on the school's Beverly Hills campus May 6.

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