

PROOF

BY REBECCA DOUGLAS • PHOTO BY JENSEN LARSON

WHEN BARRY HYDE ('07, DB) lost his sight, and nearly his life, in a catastrophic airplane accident at age 26, everyone thought he was finished with aviation.

Boy, were they wrong.

After a grueling two-year recovery full of physical and emotional obstacles, Hyde began plotting an alternative to his boyhood dream of becoming a commercial pilot.

First, he made history by becoming the first FAA advanced ground and instrument ground instructor who is blind. Next, he became the first blind student to earn a Master's degree in Aviation Science and Aeronautics from Embry-Riddle—which he did with a perfect 4.0 GPA. Currently, he's finishing his Ph.D. in Business Administration from Northcentral University, an online partner of Embry-Riddle; and he recently accepted a position as an adjunct professor for Daniel Webster College.

FOR BOTH advanced degrees, Hyde specialized in aviation safety and operations. His doctoral dissertation is on the proper execution of preflight checklists—a highly personal topic, as he cites improper preflighting as the primary cause of the accident that nearly killed him more than a decade ago. “I want to help prevent other pilots from experiencing what happened to me,” Hyde explains.

FATE-CHANGING FLIGHT

Hyde was riding right seat as a safety pilot in a 1965 Piper Twin Comanche for a pilot who wanted to practice his instrument skills. The two took off from Concord, N.C., where Hyde worked as a flight instructor, bound for Lewisburg, W.Va.

“About 22 minutes after takeoff, the engines started spitting and missing,” Hyde recounts. “A few minutes later, the right engine stopped. About 10 minutes after that, the left engine up and quit. We had a baseball field picked out [for an emergency landing], but the airplane glided like a rock and we didn’t make it.”

It was Hyde who keyed the mic and sent the last radio transmission: “Niner-four Yankee is going in.”

The Comanche crashed into a patch of trees between two houses—approximately 100 feet short of the intended field and 30 miles from Roanoke, Va. Hyde’s seat broke on impact, both wing tips (with the auxiliary fuel tanks inside) were sheared off and the tail section completely separated from the fuselage. When paramedics arrived, both of Hyde’s lungs had collapsed. They intubated him on-site before airlifting him to the nearest hospital, where he was pronounced dead on arrival.

DEFYING THE ODDS

After doctors managed to “bring him back,” life-support machines kept him alive.



a trachea tube, stomach tube and IV, but no memory for another three months. He not only had to learn to walk again; he had to learn to do so blind.

“I believe God spared me for a reason: I want to help other pilots become safer. That’s why I tell them: ‘Don’t trust anyone but your mother, and you best keep your eye on her, too.’”

Because the aircraft had a lap belt but no shoulder harness, Hyde’s head had repeatedly hit the control panel. Most of his injuries were consequently concentrated from the neck up, including two cracks in his cranium, the full detachment of his nose, four breaks in his jaw, the complete separation of the roof of his mouth, a broken vertebra and four missing teeth. His left eye was lodged behind his cheekbone; his right eye completely covered itself with a cataract. In addition, his right leg was broken in four places.

Hyde’s father, a construction worker and national rodeo champion, passed out cold when he saw his son’s battered, swollen face.

For 20 days, Hyde lay comatose. When he returned home after almost three months in the hospital, he had

More than a decade later, he still needs anti-seizure medication three times daily and his sense of taste and smell, along with his sight, have never returned.

WHAT WENT WRONG

As Hyde healed, he began to piece together what caused the accident. The combination of in-flight power loss and the lack of a fire after impact made him conclude that the Comanche’s main tanks had run completely dry. When Hyde took into account the aircraft’s estimated fuel burn, overall tank capacity and fueling records, it became clear to him the aircraft had not been topped off and the mistake was *not* caught during preflight.



Accident investigators found no evidence of fuel in either main fuel tank; an undetermined amount of fuel was found in the auxiliary tanks.

“Our accident *never* should have happened,” he stresses.

In presentations to high school students attending Embry-Riddle’s summer programs and experienced pilots alike, Hyde highlights the interrelated and interdependent nature of job duties and how they impact safety. He cites everyone from the flight school owner and airport operator to the line crew and front desk clerk as factors in his accident.

He also considers the pilot’s attempt to diagnose their problem midair a pivotal mistake. “He said that we couldn’t be out of gas, that it had to be a mechanical problem,” Hyde explains. “The controllers gave us three closer airports to land at, but he wanted to press on to Roanoke because they had rental cars and a maintenance facility.”

Primarily, though, Hyde stresses the importance of thorough preflighting before every flight—without exception, no matter what the circumstances.

In retrospect, he wishes he wouldn’t have deferred to the pilot in command, who was more than twice his age and had more twin-engine time. “The plane was already running, so I got in,” he recalls.

“I believed a fellow pilot when he said we were topped off, and it almost cost me my life. Now I’m proof, in the flesh, of what can happen if someone doesn’t do their job properly.”

ALWAYS AN AVIATOR

When Hyde climbed into the Twin Comanche on that fateful day, he had 1,600 flight hours in his logbook and an interview scheduled with US Airways Express the following week. Abandoning his dream of becoming an airline pilot after the accident was difficult, to say the least. At times, mustering the strength to face another day seemed like an insurmountable challenge, and he even entertained thoughts of suicide.

Studying at Embry-Riddle, however, proved to be therapeutic. It comforts him to know that his safety presentations, tutoring in the flight labs and research about the importance of proper preflighting may help prevent unnecessary accidents.

“Just being on campus, hearing the airplanes landing and taking off, talking with pilots—it all helped him heal,” explains Hyde’s fiancée, Nancy Riedel. “Sometimes he falls asleep listening to the radio chatter from Embry-Riddle’s ramp and dispatch tower.

“Aviation is such a big part of who he is. I don’t think that will ever change. He really enjoys hearing a nice beefy twin engine and his face still lights up whenever he flies. It gives him a natural high.”

While Hyde is quick to point out how much Riedel does for him—driving, cooking, proofreading his papers—she is equally quick to point out how much he does for her: “From an intellectual, spiritual and emotional standpoint, I have gained so much more from Barry than I could ever give back to him.”

When the couple drove to Cape Canaveral for the liftoff of *Endeavour*, Riedel was reminded just how deep Hyde’s connection to aviation still is. Sometimes the longing she sees on his face is tough to reconcile.

“I believe God spared me for a reason,” he explains. “I want to help other pilots become safer. That’s why I tell them: ‘Don’t trust anyone but your mother, and you best keep your eye on her, too.’”

“I still feel flying is the safest form of transportation. Accidents are caused by negligence, error or a combination of both. I want to help prevent those costly mistakes.”

Hyde’s academic advisor, Marvin Smith, holds Hyde’s master’s research on preflight safety in high regard. “He was able to set aside his emotion on the subject and take an unbiased look at the data,” Smith notes. “He was a humble seeker of the truth under very difficult circumstances—proving what a true professional he really is.”

RUBBING ELBOWS WITH AVIATION’S ELITE

Ever since he began his master’s degree as the first blind student at Embry-Riddle, Barry Hyde has been a sought-after speaker on the aviation circuit. Thousands of attendees sprang to their feet after he spoke at the Air Traffic Control Association conference in Washington, D.C., last summer, including plenty of military officers with tears in their eyes.

“The standing ovation must have lasted five minutes,” recalls Marvin Smith, who heads Embry-Riddle’s Master’s in Aeronautics program. “I’ve never seen anything like it. Everyone was so impressed at how Barry persevered and rebuilt his life. It was very emotionally charged.”

Throughout his travels, Hyde has shared the dais with Chuck Yeager, Patty Wagstaff, FAA Acting Administrator Bob Sturgell and other aviation luminaries.

“Before my accident, I despised getting up in front of a crowd. Now, I can’t see them looking at me, so I don’t get nervous,” he laughs. Accepting 17 scholarships apparently gave him enough practice.

“Barry’s the only student I know who needs a press agent,” Smith quips.

