

Mutiny On High©

JK Savoy

Mutiny On High is a fictionalized depiction of the author's real-life experience. The identities of actual people have been melded into composition characters, or given an alias in order to protect their privacy. Places and incidents are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons living or dead, events or locales are entirely coincidental.

In the mid-1970s, the loudest jet in the sky had to be the Boeing 727, and the worst passenger in the world has always been another pilot. Those entities met on an early morning flight from LaGuardia Airport, New York bound for Miami. Anya and I were seated as close to the three noisiest rear engines in the sky that a last minute ticket holder could. I ceded our fate to the hands of other skilled aviators and wondered, 'Did the middle finger of Fate place my worst student from my early flight instructor days at the helm? Did a clod with two left feet jump ahead of competent pilots because he worked for this bargain basement airline as a ticket agent?' Unable to see the flight crew's names from back where we sat; the face of a corporate pilot I once flew with, who was even worse than any student imaginable, came to mind. I tightened our seatbelts, closed my eyes and began to count down from a hundred to one. Reverie was deferred as a stewardess in a perky little outfit reached over us to secure a headliner panel to the inner fuselage with a couple of strips of packaging tape. I murmured, "Paste-on smile and all the rest, she and the tape blend well with the packaging theme throughout the cabin."

I needed some distance in order to gain perspective of my re-entry into the material world. Having spent a few years as a rambling free spirit in search of something beyond the bullshit of paths of fulfillment, paved with nothing but more bullshit, one day I let the wind set my compass. Free from

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imposed values, conventional wisdom and blind belief for over two years, with the support of rock bottom at my back; I looked up, took it from there and landed on my feet. Fate rewarded me for my sabbatical days by casting me into the loving arms of Anya. Two years later, with my life building from a solid foundation, my startup flight school was booming though my overloaded nerves begged for reprieve.

As the captain sealed the cockpit door, I recalled my early days as a flight instructor-pilot at a fixed base operation. The word was, the FBO I worked for had been leveraged into the portfolio of an infamous Wall Street marauder. But hey, a paycheck was a paycheck. Whomever sat his butt in whatever I was flying on a given day, I flew to wherever they needed to go. I never gave much thought to the life stories of the mogul's disciples seated behind my cabin's partition: What path choices led them from what they once were to what they became by signing their lives over to his will and whim. My question was, 'Why in hell has my life become nothing but, flying them to where I'd wait an indeterminable amount of time in dismal airport lobbies only to come back home to wash up, rinse off and repeat the 'same old' tomorrow?' That in mind, and in order to objectify my purpose as a glorified chauffeur, it was in the best interest of all for me to close off to their diminishing humanity and complete the task. Hey, the tips were pretty damn good and I got my rocks off defying gravity while making a living at it.

Having achieved my youthful fantasy of flying free with the wind, one day I looked around while asking myself, 'Free from what?' With the dream of what my inner child fantasized of

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being behind me, my feet met the solid ground of unexplored possibilities when I walked away from the bullshit. And here I am. At my side sat the person who was the lifeline who pulled me to safe haven from one absurd adventure to the next, to finally realizing my true self. Her love and embodied groundedness inspired me to become the completed being who lurked in the shadow of capriciousness all along.

Juxtaposing my erstwhile profession as an exalted bellhop for a Howard Hughes wannabe (*and, yes, I had to carry the bloodsucker's bags*) I observed the very professional flight crew that had boarded the Boeing. In spite of the fact that they flew for a third-level airline, I was impressed with their military like order and discipline as they settled into their checklists and switch flipping. I reflected on how, as a child, I would close off to the bugs crawling across my face as I lay in the grass watching birds magically stroking the sky as they lifted through it to who knows where, and somehow transported my spirit along with theirs. Years later, living out my fantasy as a professional pilot, one day I asked myself that most life altering question 'what-if' and concluded, "*Free spirits may be destined to fly, but in groups of more than one; the thrill of it all quickly turns into a flight of rebelliousness, self-indulgence and finally beaming his particles to yet another soul searching flight of fancy.*" So I grounded myself and walked away from a life of being passed over by more qualified pilots or conniving corporate suck-ups to whatever path might find me, and here I am.

The 727 banked to the left as my balls flew to the right.

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After the blue flush liquid dispatched my golden dew unto the sky, I returned to my seat. Anya had fallen asleep. As I gazed at the cirriform shapes caressing the heavens, my eyelids flickered shut as my mind gave in to the overwhelming force of a flashback to my former career as the echo of a voice of desperation bellowed: “Robert Basco will prove to be the greatest genius ever in the world of finance! If his rocket keeps soaring, he’ll soon become the greatest mega-money man in America, and we’ll be along for the ride,” said Woody, Basco’s used aircraft sales executive as he taxied the newly acquired Grumman Grand Commander, twin-turboprop to the run up area where we’d finish our preflight procedures.

Although I had a thousand hours or so instructing in various twin engine aircraft, I’d never been inside a Grand Commander until that day, never mind fly one. Virgin that I was to this fine lady of the sky, I relegated myself to being Woody's co-pilot and personal assistant. In deference to the more senior guy with the company, who said he chose me for this flight from many other twin engine time-building flight instructors, my duties would be to work the radios, find and read necessary charts, and be my latest captain's second pair of hands. Major airlines hire guys with mucho multi-engine time, so I was at his service!

Woody had me hold the airplane's manual out for him. Though he claimed to have many hours in that aircraft type, quite a few during actual instrument conditions, he was referring to the book all too often and had no natural flow of movement to where things were located, nor what came next on the checklist. Instantly, I felt uneasy with him as pilot in

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command and crammed all I might need to know to make that plane an extension of me from the pages of its manual to my eager to learn everything brain.

“You know Joey, when you have the opportunity to serve in the shadow of greatness as we do with Robert Basco, with no pun intended, the sky’s the limit. And the guys on his personal flight crew told me, once we move up to being one of them, we can call him Bobby. Hey kiddo, I must say: Let his vision forever be the light of our lives!”

“Really Woody? Truth is, I can't get all knocked out by your painting that Wall Street hustler as the greatest human on Earth. One of my students, an emergency room doctor, defined the greatest human in the world as a person who changes the bedpans and bathes terminal patients at his hospital.”

“That's ridiculous, Joey, how can you compare one with the other?”

“We'd have to ask those patients, wouldn't we?”

His smirk changed to a look of consternation as he fumbled with the controls during the run-up. With sweat stains expanding under his arms, I continued to consume every page of the aircraft's manual I could as I reassured myself, *‘All airplanes are basically alike: It’s a matter of learning their quirks and numbers.’*

“Woody, are you aware that the air traffic controllers will be staging a work slowdown beginning today? It’s been the buzz throughout the general aviation world for over a week now.” Woody's hands reached one way, then spastically changed direction as he scanned the control panel, trying to

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convince me that he knew his way around. I was not convinced.

He circumnavigated my question and answered inappropriately, “I checked the weather between here and Boston. It's calling for high overcast by the time we touch down, and light rain showers when we return. Eight to ten miles of visibility: Visual flight rules all the way, so we won't be needing their help.”

“Woody, not to change the subject, but every other twin I've flown requires that take offs and landings be done with the fuel source selectors on the main tanks.” Pointing to the manual, I added, “No shit Woody, this big-ass bird too!” as I set the fuel selectors to its mains.

“Yeah, I knew that ... kiddo.”

While I read the takeoff speed sequences as we powered down the runway, it was becoming more apparent that Basco's airplane salesman didn't know a Grand Commander from a park pigeon. My stomach met my buttock when he yanked the aircraft from the ground. My feet hovered above the rudder pedals while I focused on the operations manual on my lap, studying it with one eye while keeping the other on my most recent Captain Outrageous.

As we turned to the north, I said, “Woody, you still have ten degrees of flaps hanging out there. In the interest of reducing drag, I would've bled them off after initial climb-out, but I'm just here to build multiengine hours so I can get me that airline job before I age out.”

“Don't sweat it kiddo, I got this thing!”

“Okay Woody, what do the manual and your latest co-pilot

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know anyway?”

Suddenly, Woody dumped the flaps. The airplane's nose responded to his abrupt move while my skipper overreacted to the consequent pitch change by overcontrolling. I settled the argument between man and machine by holding the yoke on my side absolutely steady. As one more aspiring full time ‘Bobby’ pilot, I realized how the significance of our mission eclipsed professional skill sets and plain old common sense. With deference to the greater wisdom of the Wall Street wizard’s suck-up, I consoled myself with: Bobby's daughter had to be ferried home to New Jersey from Boston after a routine dental visit, and the other spoiled rich bitches at her private school would rip her apart if they heard that she flew commercial. I set my criticisms aside and watched Woody running out of clear air ahead as the weather worsened.

Hoping to circumnavigate a mushrooming cumulous, Woody banked right, then looked right. I muttered, “Holy shit!” watching the sweat stains from his armpits meeting at his necktie. Seeing too many fuzzy things draping from an increasingly thickening cloud deck above, I set the radio to Newark Departure Control to get some kind of idea what was going on with the rapidly changing weather. There was only silence from where there would be constant tower to aircraft, to tower chatter. The story would be the same on all frequencies.

When the Grumman’s manual and I finally grew to be in sync, it became crystal clear: Woody knew diddly-squat of its material. Instantly, my instructor persona surfaced. As he hastily submitted to a greater wisdom, my commands became

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agreeable to him, followed by, "Yeah, kiddo! Of course I knew that!" A voice from the radio blasted, "*Eastern five eleven out of two thousand for six; heading two seven zero, over.*"

"*Roger, five eleven,*" replied Departure Control.

It was the first transmission we heard since takeoff. At least I knew the radios were okay. We were on top of a newly formed cloud deck that was increasing in density and upward slope: Soon, we would be in it. Finally, I said to the clearly out of control commander of our ship: "I'm gonna try to contact 'Departure Control' for an instrument clearance to Boston."

His hands were frozen to the yoke as he stared at a solid gray windshield. We were climbing past six thousand feet at nearly two hundred miles per hour, blasting through the clouds as I shouted, "Eyes on the gauges you idiot, and keep those wings level!" then, yelled into the mic, "Newark departure Control, One Romeo Bravo, requesting instrument clearance to Boston Logan! Do you copy?" A hissing noise was all we'd hear in response to my transmission. Where was the lifeline of a voice of salvation? I knew they were silenced by their need to protest that dick in the Nixon administration's refusal to hear their plea for more controllers and better working conditions as their slowdown ignored ours. "*One Romeo Bravo, we read you loud and clear. They ain't talking to non-airline folks today.*" I recognized the voice as the Eastern pilot. As usual, it wasn't general aviation's day, though big business' ass was always available to kiss.

Suddenly, the gauges before me begged to differ with what the seat of my pants felt. As an instrument flight instructor, I told myself what I trained my students to do; "*Trust the*

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gauges, 'cause your ass is full of shit!' The attitude indicator read descending left turn. We were dropping nearly a thousand feet a minute. A panicked Woody had unpredictably and stupidly lowered full flaps and the landing gear motors announced their actuation. The airspeed indicator was heading toward the warning arc of acceptable flap operation. My asshole tensed up in direct proportion to the tightening spiral. My wits must have been about me since I tried to determine which wing would blow off first if he pulled up abruptly, and if there would be any sense for me to attempt to control the big bird afterward, or think good thoughts of all of those I may have wronged.

Disrupting his symphony of aircraft abuse, I shouted, "Right the fuck now, level this aircraft, apply full power and nose it up eight degrees!" As he followed my instructions to the letter, I milked the flaps up then flicked a switch, thus reversing the landing gear's course. The thought tore through my mind about a pilot friend who had an engine blow just after takeoff. Having mis-identified the live engine as the dead one, he shut it down. Left with neither engine, he rolled to a knife edge and flew between two buildings killing only himself: A sad tale of a heroic World War II combat ace, having a fucked up day. What sat to my left was an asshole who bluffed his way to his Peter Principle moment, and his long delayed level of incompetence, when he would kill everyone below including us. Crashing was not an acceptable option: I had a date that night.

Having stabilized the Grumman my flight instructor persona dominated the ongoing moment. With my ass seated

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in its familiar place as the base for he who can always talk anyone at the helm through just about anything, I popped a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint into Woody's mouth and stated, "Chew on this and climb to four thousand feet, heading two seven-zero!" As we turned and scrambled away from countless, unsuspecting victims of Woody's assholedness, I realized: The only thing more crushing than the clouds enveloping us, or the thought of bumping into a fellow traveler of the sky, was the stench of cat-pissy sweat filling my nostrils as it eked through Woody's shirt.

I wondered, 'Should I launch a gut busting punch to his ribcage, immobilize him and slide his seat back then order him to sit on his hands? Hell no! Four hands are better than two overworked pilot-paws trying to salvage a lousy situation and get us to a safe harbor. And, oh yeah, it ain't the time to try to figure out that fancy auto-pilot toy that Bobby bought for us. So, like all of the rookies who had sat to the left of me, I'll turn this jackass into a pilot!'

As we ascended to three thousand feet, I tuned the navigation radio to the Sparta radio beacon and flew to it while broadcasting, "Aircraft inbound Sparta, heading two four zero, squawking 'IDENT,' out of three thousand for four, and I do hope you guys hear me!" There were multiple clicks from our speaker. I knew I was loud and clear when a voice announced the local altimeter setting, hoping to keep us out of the treetops. My mutiny upon the results stemming from a clusterfuck of corporate bullshit headed west!

Woody's eyes glared dead ahead. His fists were clenched on the yoke. His knees wobbled violently as did rolls of blubber

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hanging over his belt. Tears streamed past his quivering mouth that was lost for words. The salesman was not going to buy the farm, not with my sorry ass aboard!

“Woody, you are the most stupid jackass to ever fly out of the puking mouth of creation! What was in your fool head throwing us into a graveyard spiral over a village filled with innocent folks and kids in Connecticut? Could the townsfolk walking down a street below imagine that a moron up above would carelessly drop a big-ass airplane on them?”

Obeying my order to maintain level flight he did. Suddenly, his quavering voice blurted the worst justification for stupidity that I'd ever heard, “Joey, I just assumed that there had to be an airport somewhere down there!”

“Somewhere? Really? Right behind an iceberg dead ahead? Go on, Woody!”

“Really Joey ... Uh, I just wanted to pop out of the clouds and sneak a peek.”

“Woody, at what altitude were the bases of those clouds?” His blank stare and silence were met with mine. As my legs ceased trembling, the clouds below broke sporadically revealing buildings and highway patterns of the familiar terrain near my ‘pilots in training’ practice area in northern New Jersey.

As we passed the Sparta navigation beacon, we broke out from the overcast as I said, “Woody, make a descending left turn toward Highway forty-five. Follow it south and *scud-run* just below the clouds. That’ll lead us to our airport. When it comes in sight, make our way toward runway ten. I’ll handle the power, flaps and landing gear while you hold ‘er steady

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and aim for that big ol' number ten, do ya got all of that?"

"Yeah, okay, Joey; back to where we took off from."

"Kind of, we actually took off from runway twenty-three but it crosses ten ... Uh, Woody, can you handle all of this?"

"Joey, I have done this before! Yeah, yeah okay, I got this... yeah!"

"Glad to see it's all coming back to you. I'll call out the numbers, while you fly this airplane exactly like I say: To be precise, just like the Grumman bible right here on my lap says!"

"Roger that, boss. .. er, uh... Captain Joey!"

"Call me what you will, just fly it by the numbers exactly as I call them out, grasshopper. Maybe, someday, they'll call you the master of your domain."

"Joey, whatever comes of this, I'll always hear your voice in my right ear."

"More than likely, I'll be to the left of you while you pour me a coffee!"

The ceiling was less than a thousand feet as we flew just above every hill and power line I knew on a first name basis along Highway forty-five. I gazed at the human wreckage in the captain's chair and asked, "No shit, have you ever flown this or any other airplane in actual instrument conditions?" The cabin was filled with Woody's silence, B.O. and the smell of panic poop. "If I weren't the only other pilot hanging out at the airport today, would you have taken off alone?"

"Joey, I can't answer that because I saw you, I asked you and here we are."

"Woody, why the hell did you put us up here? I mean, this

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whole day was a total blunder-fest with you as the maestro and me ...? Yeah, here I am!”

“There was Bobby’s last minute emergency pick up in Boston. Everyone else was out of town, so it was down to me and the Grumman. Kiddo, I’m supposed to be able to fly what I sell! No excuses! If I can’t, the Basco people will chew me up and spit me out. This for shit sales job is my only way to move vertically in the Basco organization; then I can work my way up the full time pilot ladder. My commissions are in Basco stock options. I need to join Bobby’s regular flight crew in order to get salaried. As for you, you were just hanging out waiting for something to fly like all of the other instructors, so I grabbed you.”

I wondered, ‘Work his way up the Basco ladder and step on that rung named after me on the way?’ Then I said to him, “Dude, I can’t say that I hope our little flying lesson helps give you that edge over the competition... Hey, have you ever considered selling boats? If shit happens, you can throw your hands in the air and float your useless ass away from it all!” Gathering my composure, I ordered, “Answer my question! Why did you put us up here?”

“Joey, the truth is, I never flew this airplane as pilot in command nor have I ever flown anything under actual instrument conditions. Why did I put us up here? I’m pushing thirty something and I’m running out of options!”

“Woody, we hardly know one another. I mean, passing glances and having people in common does not mean connection.”

“Kiddo, I assumed that you must have flown a Commander,

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what with you hopping in and out of every type of plane imaginable. Everyone talked you up.”

“Assumed? There’s that word again that has no goddamn place in aviation! But I’ll safely assume you know the three word breakdown of that one.”

The outline of the airport appeared ahead of us. Following my instructions to the letter, Woody did his part in setting up the approach. Inches above the runway, I wrestled the controls from him before he’d balloon the landing since he failed to reduce enough power, then I greased the Grumman to a perfect touchdown. Woody taxied it to its tie-down spot while my two feet occasionally butted in to keep our wingtips away from those of others. With his sweat filled hand on the power levers to shut it down, I said, “I gotta tell it like it is: If I ever see your pathetic ass behind the yoke of anything bigger than a Piper Cub, or in any condition other than unlimited ceiling and visibility, I’ll tell anyone who’ll listen what you did today followed by an ass kicking of biblical proportions!”

“Joey, you have the word of, well... I guess there’s no other words to say but ... your forever grateful student! You taught me one hell of a lot today. Thanks Captain, you saved my sorry ass, and all of those folks up there in Connecticut!”

After shutting the engines down, we did the post-flight checklist, while his left hand gripped the captain’s doorhandle. Eyes swollen with held back tears, he said, “I’ll never forget what you did for me today. I’m forever in your debt.”

As we cracked open our respective doors, then quickly shut them, a blast of rotor wash from a Jet Ranger chopper shook

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the Grumman as it set down near us. As Ike, Basco's chief pilot, shut it down a smiling Bobby Basco emerged from his latest new toy then walked quickly toward us.

Like a magician's rabbit, jumping from a hat, Woody ran to him shouting: "Sorry Boss, I had to head back ... Yeah, I saw that the weather turned to shit on us, and I couldn't get an instrument clearance because ..."

"Calm down there Woodster, you did the totally right thing!"

"Boss, what about your daughter? I mean she had to get back from ..."

"Do I look like an idiot, or what? Ike told me about the controllers and their job action and ..." Seeing me drawing closer, Basco smiled and nudged Woody toward the chopper as he added, "... Anyway, I told her to jump on the Eastern Shuttle. She can seize the opportunity and tell her spoiled-ass classmates that she's going to write a paper about the drudgery of riding in the back of a cattle car for an hour and getting down with the common folk. By the way, Woodster, Ike hovered the Jet Ranger over that hangar where we observed your approach and landing. Your new chief pilot said, you fucking greased it!"

"I can't say that I didn't have help, but I will say that they're right: It's like Grand Commanders fly and land themselves. Smooth as a baby's butt!"

As they walked toward Basco's limo, enraged, I took a step closer to Woody and the flying carpetbagger, prepared to rip into both of them. Suddenly, Ike grabbed me by the arm and pulled me back to the Grumman while saying, "Boy, y'all can

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unscrew a lightbulb, but never a pregnant lady: Nor can you change the mind of God, or Bobby Basco once it's made on up. Y'all hearing me, boy? The way Bobby be seein' it, Woody climbed into the left seat when he left here for Boston, and climbed out of it just now: Easy as that. It's like us pilots always say, KISS, keep it simple stupid! So, we'll be keepin' it as simple as our boss sees it to be, boy. That there left seat is where he sees pilots in command like you an' me sittin' and doin' the deed, so the same goes for Woody. Son, y'all gave me the handoff, now I'll be takin' Woody an' me to the goal line, or to our graves. Ya get what I'm sayin', boy?"

"Yeah, Ike. I hear you ..."

"What y'all are gonna do is this: Take this here fifty dollar bill, find yerself a sweet young thing an' buy yerselves some dinner, drinks an' a night on the town, on me. Hell, nobody changes Bobby Basco's mind once it's all made up, not even yers truly. Be seein' ya 'round the campus, an' I got my eye on y'all!"

They say there's no looking back, but if you're entire life has been lived as if rushing headlong in reverse, what other direction is there? As I took my coffee to my usual spot in the pilot's lounge, I watched a blundering mass of wreckage to be galumphing to Basco's limo with his new buddies and whispered, "But for the fickle finger of Fate, can Woody be the Joey of the future? Perhaps we don't get to set our own course in life as winds of change move us along ... Hell no, that's bullshit! Now's the time to bail out of this crap, pull the ripcord and go with the wind. Far fuckin' out! Wherever it takes me, I'll take it from there ..."

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“Joey, wake up. They turned on the fasten seat belts sign a while back. We're on final approach to Miami. Are you alright?”

I turned to Anya. She was restoring me from my reverie by shaking my body. I assured her that all was cool by saying while giving her a big hug, “Yeah Babe, I'm all good. I was just trying to keep my mind off the flight.”

“What?”

Watching palm trees and orange tiled roofs zip by below us, I heard the last grinding sound of flap motors and the thunk of landing gear locking in place. Noting that the final approach's wind sock was indicating a strong crosswind from the right, I marveled at how the captain smoothly corrected for it followed by a gentle chirp from the right wheel followed by the same from the left. As soon as the nosewheel noiselessly settled down, there was the roar of the three engines behind us as he hit reverse thrust. A symphony of perfection continued to play as we smoothly decelerated and headed for the exit jetway.

I turned and said to Anya, “That dude up front totally greased it, wow!”

Backpacks in place and duffle bags in hand, we stood at the rear of the 727 waiting for the line to budge so we could head for its only exit door. “You know, Joey, it's like after the gun goes off at the beginning of a road race, all the runners ahead of you seem to be motionless.”

“Yeah Anya, I know: Then, you see the heads of the people way up front begin to wobble sideways, and when it finally

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spreads back to those right in front of you, your feet begin to shuffle until your hitting your stride.”

With carry-ons flying from overhead bins, and anxious passengers charging ahead, we found our pace and meandered forward. Finally, we were about to turn to exit the plane when the captain opened the cockpit door, looked me square in the face and said, “Joey?”

“Woody?”



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