

Travel back to the turbulent sixties thru the testosterone-fueled friendship of two who seek more out of life than most. Experience the demands and horror of air combat during the Vietnam War by two Naval Aviators and their father's own WWII combat survival. This is a military thriller in the genre of Stephan Coonts and Dan Pederson.

TALL AIR

by D. Stuart White

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D. STUART WHITE

TALL AIR

**Solid Friends, Fractured Times...
Growing up in the Sixties**

— **A Novel** —

Tall Air – Here is what they are saying:

“High Speed, Low Drag! What an AMAZING ride!”

- LCDR Jamie “Tilly” Tilden, Washington

“I could never adequately explain the reality of my days in middle and high school to my daughter. Your description hit the nail on the head.”

- Penny McCready, Harbor Springs

“I loved it—laughed, smiled, and even got a little teary. Hot fire, hot guys, some pain, and a lot of sympathies.”

- Curl Candler, Traverse City

“Yes, the '60s were something else, and Stone and Finn sure extracted their fair share—the good and bad—as we all did.”

- Robert Johannes, Colorado

“You had me totally in the cockpit and I don’t know anything about flying. The smell, feel, and emotion are there—loving it on the edge of my seat. More please!”

- Tom Patterson, Lake Orion

“Your passion is so real—your enthusiasm is contagious.”

- Jack Haughton, Bloomfield Hills

Knighthawk *Publications*
Bloomfield Hills, MI

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This book is completely fictional. The characters, incidents, and dialogue and events are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real—even though they are based on actual real-life experiences. Some names have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been recreated. Nothing is intended or should be interpreted as expressing or representing the views of the U.S. Navy or other departments or agency of any governmental body.

Contents

Introduction: The War Never Stops—It Just Drips On You’ll Never Walk Alone” – Mormon Tabernacle Choir/ From Carousel	xiii
One: The Two-Headed Coin Burdens Carried “Father and Son” – Yusuf/Cat Stevens	1
Two: California Boy – The Hardening and Softening “Here Comes the Sun” – Beatles.....	6
Three: Limits and Mastery A Mother’s Pain “I’m Eighteen” – Alice Cooper.....	15
Four: Water Tower Boys Death Zone Explorers “Born to Be Wild” – Steppenwolf.....	21
Five: Insecure Moments Walking a Razor Blade into Adulthood “Going Up the Country” – Canned Heat	26
Six: Flight Dreams Seeking Tall Air “Eve of Destruction” – Barry McGuire.....	31
Seven: Memories Stashed But Not Forgotten WWII Reflections – David Finley “Father and Son” – Yusuf/Cat Stevens	37
Eight: ‘Our Gal’ Puts on Her Clothes WWII Reflections – David Finley “Sing, Sing, Sing” – Benny Goodman.....	43
Nine: Surviving the Hump WWII Reflections – David Finley “Moonlight Serenade” – Glenn Miller.....	53
Ten: Starduster’s Struggle WWII Reflections – David Finley “Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree” – Glenn Miller	58

Eleven: Commitments “Don’t Get Sloppy with Your Lives.” “Suzie Q” – Creedence Clearwater Revival “Midnight Rider” – Allman Brothers	64
Twelve: Wives/Girlfriends Maddy’s Irreverent Tribe “Under My Thumb” – Rolling Stones	79
Thirteen: Hover Boy to Pointy End Driver Arrogant Snarls “Don’t Worry Baby” – Beach Boys	91
Fourteen: “Fast in the Groove” (FIG) “Long Cool Woman” – The Hollies	101
Fifteen: Finding Home Green Eyes “Do You Believe in Magic” – Lovin’ Spoonful	110
Sixteen: Tall Air An Unlikely Gun Fighter “Street Fighting Man” – Rolling Stones	118
Seventeen: Stitched The Fuzz Buster Save “Paint It Black” – Rolling Stones	126
Eighteen: Face Curtain Calls Riding the Rails “Chain of Fools” – Aretha Franklin	141
Nineteen: Sucking River Mud “Run Through the Jungle” – Creedence Clearwater Revival	147
Twenty: The Kamikaze Save “We Gotta Get Out of This Place” – Animals	154
Twenty-One: One Ton’s Pay Back The Coin Flip “Respect” – Aretha Franklin	165
Twenty-Two: True Blues	175
Epilogue	177
“Adagio for Strings” – London Philharmonic Orchestra	177
About The Author	181

Introduction



The War Never Stops—It Just Drips On You’ll Never Walk Alone” – Mormon Tabernacle Choir/From Carousel

He’s so quiet. I’m not used to his silence—I miss the endless stream of banter. But I get it. Who wants to go through this? I wait with him while he gets the poison pushed into his veins. We play cards and talk but mostly he just sleeps. It gives me a lot of time to think, to remember. There is a lot to remember. So much of it makes me laugh—other memories, not so much.

Chemo—I try not to let him know I’m worried. I guess we are all afraid we will have to face this. But my pal—no way! Always active, healthy, and full of spit.

Time has sure done a number on him—in my mind I see that square jaw, cleft in his chin, dark penetrating eyes and a smile the ladies could not resist. Now his face is gaunt and creased. His eyes have lost their spark and he is thin, way too thin. He wearily peers over at me and I see something in his face I have never seen before—he is afraid—trying his best to mask his fear. He was the the best of us and now—a shadow of his former self. This is just not fair! Why hasn’t anyone figured this disease out? This makes me so angry! He does not deserve this!

As Mathe (Māthe) dozes off I pondered the cause of his cancer. They think this might be his exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, but no one is sure—or they just aren't saying—and I wonder how many other guys are going through this. At least I can be here for him. We've had each other's backs for as long as I can remember. Where else would I be?

He lost his dad in WWII. What little he remembers of him he has never discussed. His mom's scrapbooks and his feelings are stashed away—he keeps them tightly wrapped. I have had my dark times too, but not like his. He doesn't think that I see his sadness. His fight for health only seems to amplify the pain he's endured.

He has always taken on his burdens and confronted his tragedies directly and has reveled in many of life's pleasures. We have explored and shared much together, and I watched his career in aviation blossom from our first civilian flying missteps to NAVAIR flight competence.

After leaving the Navy he chooses to lead a so-called “normal life” to find a real job in the corporate world. Even so, he eventually found Tall Air again by transitioning into corporate jets as a contract pilot — or until a few months ago.

After a long career, filled with challenge, as a Naval Aviator, I chose another path—retirement. Mathe and I still find time to fly in the reserves and competitively test our selves together.

I have never held the fact that he spent time at U of M against him. We Spartans have always been less misguided in life's social, intellectual, and political orientation than our friends on the other side of the tracks. At least we think so. Go Green! And—if it helps him—Go Blue!

I guess there are a lot of reasons why God put us together. We are similar to the neural connection that binds us, yet very dissimilar at the

same time. For all his self-confidence, I was a bit lacking. He was fearless in everything. I was always hesitant about jumping in and seemed to see the down side in most of our adventures—and of course, he saved my ass way more than once. For all his dark good looks I guess I'm the other side of the coin—blond-haired, blue-eyed, a bit gawky but well-intended. But if you flipped the coin you might just see both of us as one.

We each have had our own time in the barrel—I wouldn't be here at all if it wasn't for him. I would have missed my whole life.

Although our friendship started long before, it was our military experience that was the real cement. For some, the dream gets smashed. For a few, that dream of flight never ends. It was our common bond, for the effort—the wanting it—to test ourselves, to struggle, and to succeed in the pursuit of the end.

I turn my head and look at him lying there in the chemo chair—as I watch the drip, drip, drip into the black and blue vein on the top of his hand. “Hey, buddy, our ‘Gotta Get There’ list is growing. I have some great ideas for our next one.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me, pal.”

One: The Two-Headed Coin



Burdens Carried

“Father and Son” – Yusuf/Cat Stevens

1970 Vietnam

The wind racing by his canopy brought Finn back from his temporary dream state, on his letdown to the boat off the coast of North Vietnam. He couldn't hold onto consciousness and wondered if he was bleeding out. Had Mathe's calls brought him back?

Captain Matthew (Māthe) “Rock” Stone watched his buddy L.T. Jonathan “Finn” Finley's descent, as he rode his wing from a distance, and helplessly watched the rapidly decaying control of Finn's aircraft. “Hold it together, pal. We're almost home,” called Mathe, as he watched the fuel stream drain out of Finn's aircraft—way too close to his jet's exhaust.

Finn tried to keep his head up. Holding onto hope, he took a glance at the gauges to reconfirm his problems. He felt the energy getting sucked out of his machine and himself and pressed his mic button. Holding onto hope, his fingers found the appropriate buttons and knobs inside the cockpit to fight his emergencies—but he knew he was rapidly succumbing.

“Mathe, not sure I can stretch this glide to the boat,” he said, trying to sound confident.

Finn slowly rolled the “scooter” towards the shore, thinking that his chances for survival were better over land. He was well into North Vietnam, and he would find a way out into the safety of the South. Blood in the water on an ejection was the last thing he wanted after hearing stories of aggressive shark populations off the shoreline. Finn’s mind raced.

He continued to stare out of the cockpit into the empty sky ahead and felt as if he was not there. Time seemed to compress as he held the stick a little tighter and alternated between accepting his fate and fighting for his life.

Vice-like fear crept in and out of his thoughts for his chances of survival as his G-suit torso seemed to be tightening by itself. He was slowly releasing the pressure of speed, time, altitude, distance, fuel, and system calculations—common flying concerns just seemed to fall away. The inner battle to give in to his emotions, to scream and leave the work for someone else, to just steer the machine was getting stronger.

Deep in North Vietnam airspace, in a heavily damaged fighter, lieutenant Johnathan “Finn” Finley thought to himself: *Don’t take the easy way out—work to survive your wounds. You have support, the ship is waiting for you, and Taco and Mathe are on your wing— you will make it.* Then there was the other voice—but then...

The Engine Fire Warning Light suddenly blinked intermittently and then glared full-on from Finn’s A-4 Skyhawk instrument panel—and told it all.

“My God! Fire! God no! Not today, not now—please!” Finn yelled.

He thought he heard the crackle of hot metal from the rear of the airplane and felt the heat rising. A small wisp of smoke rose from the cockpit floor, and the jet jumped. He was suddenly watching the dirt and everything else, on the cockpit floor rise to eye level and suddenly drop. It only took a second.

Mathe followed Finn's jet down, on his wing, looking over at him in shock and horror, and the frustration of not being able to help his pal. It was eating him alive. Suddenly, Finn's father's words—spoken to both boys long ago—popped into this head:

"Boys, don't let yourselves ever become a two-headed coin—you will never win! You probably have never seen one, but they were common in my era, and they can be much trouble if a lot is riding on the flip. You guys are very much alike—more than you are dissimilar in many ways. A two-headed coin can be a powerful tool in the wrong hands, so be careful with your abilities and the direction you take in life. Sometimes the wrong-decision paths are easily taken."

Finn was frozen, caught between covering every inch of ground to the safety of the sea and the carrier Raleigh (CVA-23) in his rapidly decaying machine—and the reality he didn't want to admit: his firecracker of an airplane could explode at any moment. Coming to his trained senses, he slammed the PCL (power control lever—the throttle) off, pushed the fuel shutoff lever to emergency off, and pulled the emergency generator handle to extend.

Holding on for dear life, he yelled to his jet, "I need fuel now but fire, no, no, no."

Finn fought for control, held the stick tighter, squeezed her harder—trying to get the attention she was not giving him—to control her, to fight her if he had to. Even so, she yawed into a rapidly

decaying roll and spin. The fog bank below was about to swallow both of them, as he continued to strain and yell for control of the machine.

Finn's survival vice—holding onto life but fighting the opportunity to leave—was reaching critical mass. Eject before it is too late, he told himself. Mathe and Taco's voices were screaming at him to punch out—but held on for a little more distance—ever closer to his aircraft carrier, or was it shore? Confused and in and out of consciousness—he wasn't sure anymore.

Losing consciousness for a moment the jet suddenly departed flight again and began to tumble with fire enveloping the cockpit. Finn's jet was now flying backward—a true ass ender.

“Please, God, get the nose to come around, out of the flame so I can leave,” Finn cried.

The hot rod slowly begins to turn it's nose toward the fog bank—down.

He's beyond worrying about the pilot who makes no mistakes—the close-to-perfect pilot, in his mind—the most consistent OK three-wire grabber in the squadron.

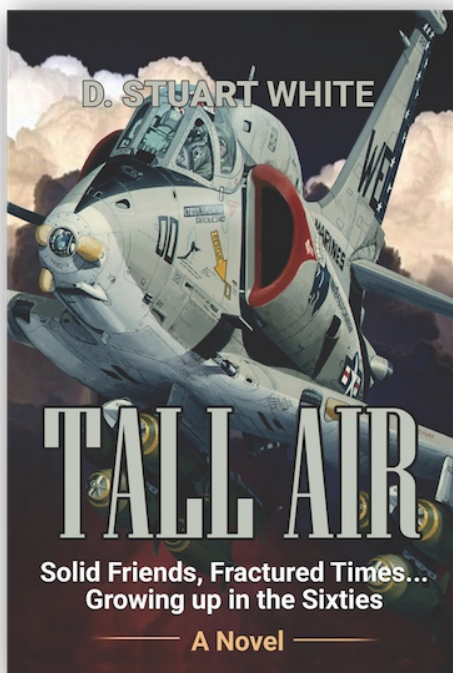
“I need to live,” he cried, and suddenly, “God, I have no control!”

“I can't save the plane and not sure about me,” he mumbled.

Calm took over Finn—nothing mattered much to him now. Not the pain in his groin and cheek, the heat and fire; not the green color security of his jet's cockpit, the locker room/cockpit smell of oil, jet fuel, sweat, nor the dry, rubbery on-demand O2 he breathed. His concern for the wind whistling through the holes in his airplane—underneath and right beside him—didn't seem so important now.

There was Captain Matthew (Māthe) Stone, fellow “Talon” and buddy, frantically, giving him hand signals while flying next to him and Taco, in trail, yelling for him to eject.

Mathe joined in, “Finn get out! Get out of the airplane now!”



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