



In 1943 a hurricane formed in the Gulf. The government would not allow warnings of the storm hoping that it would sink U-boats in the gulf. Colonel Duckworth flew into the eye of the storm thus creating today's Hurricane Hunters.

Secret Storm
By Larry A. Bergeron

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Secret Storm



Historical fiction based on actual events
during the top secret hurricane of 1943
which spawned the origination of today's
Hurricane Hunters

Larry A. Bergeron

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This is a work of historical fiction, based on actual persons and events. Some characters are entirely fictional. The author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

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Chapter 1

Shuffle Up and Deal

July 25th, 1943 2100

World War II aircraft of every imaginable size and shape sat along the runway at a little-known Army-Air Corps training base in Bryan, Texas. Some planes bore the star and stripes and others the red, white and blue target, the well-known British insignia. Each was anchored to the ground and awaiting sunrise. The night sky was calm, clear and warm, and the stars were the only lights shining on the black central Texas asphalt leading back towards the old metal hangar at the end of the field.

Its rolling doors sat open, and a lone, shiny, silver AT-6 American trainer sat inside in the middle of the darkness. The polished wooden propeller sparkled in the light of the moon, and a green military jeep bearing a license plate with a colonel's insignia sat next to the aircraft.

One other luminescence shone through a ground level doorway near the left rear of the hangar, and voices could be heard coming from the light. Just inside was a round, green, felt-covered card table surrounded by military

personnel of various rank and nationality. In the center were six stacks of poker-chips representing \$72.50 in cash, one week's salary to those watching the weekly no-limit Texas hold'em card game.

The oldest of the group, Lt. Colonel Joseph Duckworth,



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bit into his Cuban cigar, scratched his head and gingerly peeked at his two cards for the umpteenth time. He scanned the faces of the men around him. Each man was here, on orders from his respective headquarters in Europe, to learn to fly through heavy cloud cover in order to give the Allies an edge in the air war overseas. Right now, though, their minds

were on cards instead of planes, and their faces were stoic, giving away nothing.

I think they're ready for some cattle prodding, thought Duck.

Captain Ronald T. Collins of the Royal Air Force raised the Colonel's initial bet of \$55 after seeing the flop: jack of diamonds, ace of spades, and ace of hearts.

Following Duck's opening bid, the four other airmen at the table had quickly folded. The pot now bloomed to over a hundred dollars.

Duckworth's reputation as a flyer and a gambler preceded him. The Colonel had re-entered the service three years before for a second tour in the Army-Air Corps after the beginning of the war in Europe, first as a major,

then Lt. colonel. In 1940, he was recalled to active duty and was immediately surprised and appalled at how new pilots were being trained before going off to war. After all, his knowledge gained from flying 12,000 hours for Eastern Airlines had given him the authority to start this school for pilots from the U.S. and abroad.

Duckworth smiled at the two ladies now staring back at him from beneath the cards. Duck sneered over his military issue Ray-Ban sunglasses that he wore only on days that ended in “y”, and growled at the roly-poly Collins, “All in, mate.”

“Duck, you don’t have shit,” snapped the captain. “It’s just that typical, know-it-all, deep as Queen Anne’s ass, American bullshit.” Collie, as the Yanks called him, was well-known for his flaming red hair, hellish grin and bad attitude.

Duck smiled inwardly. Shitheads like Collie didn’t bother him one bit...he’d seen his type before, and he’d learned how to handle them. His quiet, confident demeanor seemed to bother them most, and that’s exactly what he wanted.

Duck sat back in a more casual posture, sipping his Jack and Coke. “Well, Collie, there’s only one way to find out, now ain’t there?”

“Colonel, I bet your hand is just about as worthless as that two-bit piece of junk you call an airplane that you fly around here every morning, waking up the whole damn base.” Collins spoke with his arms going out in opposite directions. “So, I call your piece-of-shit hand, you Yankee son of a bitch. All in.” The little fat man flipped over his

cards: jack of clubs, ten of diamonds. With the flop, that made two pair, aces and jacks.

Duck leaned towards the table, turned his ladies over and drawled. "Pair of lovely red tight assed British queens." He received a cold stare from his opponent.

"Figures, you lucky, freaking Yank." Collins stood and walked away from the table in disgust, unable to watch the turn. It came anyway...jack of spades.

A cheer went up from the British onlookers and Collins flew back to the game, reveling in the moment. "Looks like you're about to get yer' wings clipped, Colonel. Right now, those ladies just look like two whores in a midnight Texas brawl. Ha." Most of the onlookers joined in, on the laugh.

Duck's expression never changed. He sipped some more Jack. "Cap, you ever see a goony bird try to take off?"

Collins looked puzzled by the question.

Expecting no response, Duckworth answered his own query. "As hard as those ugly little suckers try, they just keep bumpin' their asses until they're out 'a room, or out 'a breath. Funny, I figure that's kinda' how you're gonna' feel at the end of this here hand. You'll be gasping for air...and your ass is gonna' be real sore."

The room broke into laughter, except for Collins who now wore a deep red mask of anger, matching his hair.

The dealer burned another card and slowly placed the last card on the table. Another queen and another win for Duck. The Colonel winked at the dealer and thanked him, as he raked in the multi-colored clay chips. Collins stormed out of the room, cursing and slamming the door behind him.

It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last that Colonel Duckworth would walk home a winner. Originally from Georgia, Duckworth graduated as a U.S. Army Flying Cadet in 1928 and served as a pilot for Eastern Airlines during the 1930's. Duck's reputation preceded him when he walked into any room. And tonight, his troops gathered around and patted him on the back, wishing him heart felt congratulations. "Way to go, Colonel, he had it coming."

Duck's navigator, Lt. Ralph O'Hair, hadn't spoken a word until it was all over, but now he wore a shit eating grin a mile long. It didn't matter whether it was cards, flying the aging AT-6, or life itself. Duck was an ace at just about everything he touched.

Out of nowhere, Duck slapped O'Hair on the back and tipped his hat forward, "How about that? Those Brits didn't even stick around for a conciliatory drink." *Cowards*, he thought internally. "How 'bout you, care to toast the victory?"

"Sure, why not, Colonel," responded O'Hair.

Duck pored them another Jack and Coke.

They lifted their glasses in a toast.

"Here's to victory," Duck said. "Both here and in the war."

Glasses clinked.

"I'm all for that, Colonel, and it just might come down to what we do right here in Texas, Sir."

"You are right about that my friend; you are definitely right about that."

Chapter 2

Mornin' Dawlin'

July 26th, 1943 0700

The flowers sparkled with morning dew as the sun peeked through the pine trees at the end of the Bryan, Texas, Airfield runway. Only one set of footprints could be seen in the grass this early. Lt. Colonel Joseph Duckworth's. This was his daily routine, and everybody knew it. He was obsessed with the love of his life, and he couldn't wait to see her every morning. He had been this way ever since joining the service back in '35.

Duck pushed open the hangar doors to reveal his favorite "little lady," the AT-6 Texan. She was always ready to fly, and Duck loved being at the controls of this deceptively well-built little plane. "Mornin', Dawlin'," Duck said, as he hopped up onto the wing and slid back the canopy.



AT 6 Texan: courtesy military archives

The Texan was the perfect high-performance trainer and was the finest combination of challenges ever built into a military aircraft. She wasn't easy to fly by any means. In fact, she had a reputation of putting every new pilot that climbed into her cockpit through her paces. A pilot's proficiency would either benefit from the mental and physical exertion experienced during and after the flight, or he would pay the ultimate price. Flying this little "wildcat" meant the pilot would get to be a better flyer, or he would die trying.

The Brits had taken a particular disliking to the Texan. Back in the war over Europe, they had three fighters that could easily outmaneuver and out race the AT-6. The Spitfire MK-2 had a top speed over 300 miles per hour while the Texan could barely get over 200. They occasionally put a for-sale sign on Duck's favorite 'little dawlin' as a reminder to their air superiority.

Duck climbed into the cockpit, primed the engine, and went through his standard pre-flight check list to settle in. After a few more checks of dials and switches, he took a deep breath and pressed the little black rubber button.

The whine of the starter winding up, and the low growl of the engine raised the hair on the back of his neck. Thick black smoke blew out of the exhaust pipes and past the wing, and the powerful engine roared to life.

The cockpit was small compared to most, and with the canopy back, Duck's elbows extended out past the side rails into mid-air. The control stick came right up out of the floor with a chrome ring at the top. On the dash, beneath his left arm, were all the primary accessory controls, like the elevator, aileron and rudder trims, as

well as the landing gear and flap actuators. All the electronics and radio goodies were on a console by his right arm. No need to call the control tower, no one would be up there this early.

Duck was clear to taxi. He pushed the stick forward, and she edged out into the morning fog. He could hardly wait for those 600 horses to get her up to full power. Duck guided her with his floor pedals, first left, then right. Soon, he was roaring down the asphalt with wind blowing through his hair, approaching take-off.

“Yee-ha,” yelled the colonel. He always left the canopy open on take-off; it was exhilarating.

“All right dawlin’, let’s go flyin’.” Duck pulled back on the stick as he cleared the telephone wires at the end of the runway and zoomed over the trees. The base quickly disappeared behind him. This was Duck’s happy place.

Chapter 3

God Save the Queen

July 26th, 1943 0900

Duck sat in his office with the base commander of Bryan Army Airfield, General Manford Smith, affectionately known to his troops as Smitty.

Smitty felt a cold pit in his stomach as he studied the



General Manford Smith

transmission in his hand.

“The air war over Europe is going badly, and London is getting her fair share of bombing raids and rockets. That sucks, Colonel. We have to do something about that.”

Smitty knew that the chaps training here at Bryan were anxious to return to the battle at home, but they had been ordered to the flatlands of Texas

where they would learn how to fly through cloud cover from Duck and his AT-6 Texan team.

“The first shock I received,” Smitty said, “was the almost total lack of instrument flying the Air Corps Cadets had been given during flight training. They had no instrument instruction whatsoever. And immediately after flight school, they were directed to fly across the Atlantic, at night. No wonder our losses in actual combat are less than those sustained from ignorance of instrument flying alone. That’s totally unacceptable, Duck,” said the general, pounding his fist on the desk.

“Yes, Sir, I know. The instruction of cadets is unsatisfactory,” Duckworth added. “I think I should cut their prized silver wings in half and tell them that the other half would be given back when they completed the six months of instrument training.”

“The gap in in knowledge had already been identified by combat pilots in Europe as a major danger,” said Smitty. “It was noted in my previous reports that the need for improvement was best summarized by an 8th Air Force B-17 pilot who wrote to a friend taking flying training. This is what he wrote. “For God’s sake man, get all the instrument flying you can. It’s the difference between life and death over here,” Smitty dropped the papers and looked to Duck for help.

“I’m on it, Sir. Every day, each of the sixteen pilots will go up in pairs. Two planes at a time, in tandem. I will sit in one jump seat and Lieutenant O’Hair in the other plane. The cockpit in the trainers will be blacked out over the front seats, so the pilots won’t be able to see anything but the instrument panel and the controls of the 6. O’Hair and

I will handle the take-off, then turn the planes over to the pilots, at a safe altitude. That's when the training will really begin.

"Sounds like a good plan, Colonel," said Smitty. "God Speed. The quicker we get these yahoos trained the faster we can end this stupid war. Dismissed, Colonel."

* * *

"Gentlemen," Duck said as he held court with his students every morning before flight. "The flying part of the course is divided into thirds—one third with your instructor, another to instructing and acting as safety pilot for a fellow student, and the final third will be you under the hood, flying the radio range and making practice approaches."

"We'll be flying in patterns, so pay attention, insisted Duck. "We'll start with "A" pattern, then this "B" pattern," he showed as he pointed to the diagram. "We'll do an ascending and descending vertical "S" pattern, all of which will require timed turns, climbs, and descents to predetermined headings and altitudes."

Duck pointed to the drawings on the chalkboard. "Automatic direction-finder equipment has been installed and external fuel tanks added to give the '6' improved navigational capability and extended range."

He turned back to face the class. "Ground school will consist of navigation refresher classes, instrument flying problems, and learning instrument procedures by personally flying the Texan. It won't easy, men, but you will get the hang of it, just listen to your instructors and don't panic."

Later that day, Duck took up the first flights.

“Read your altimeters, gentlemen, and keep that stick steady. Duck barked his instructions over the microphone to both pilots. “If you feel yourself drifting left or right, check the level directly in front of you. Keep the plane in the same horizontal position and put the black line through the little round sphere. If you dip below the line, gently pull back on the stick. Don’t panic.”

“Colonel, she’s a shakin’ a bit, mate.” Lieutenant Peter Barksdale of the RAF didn’t think much of the AT-6. “My Lord, I think this piece of junk is gonna’ fall apart.”

“Hold the chatter down, Bark’, ‘less you have a legit question about the mission. This bird’ll get you to hell and back, if you can handle ‘er. There’s probably more shakin’ goin’ on in you than in that little sweetheart you’re flyin’. Now...let’s try a turn, shall we? Gently edge her to the left when I say, Go...Ready...Go.”

Each plane angled in the same direction. “Okay, gentlemen, gently bring her back until the little plane in your sphere levels out.

There, not bad...now, change heading to 2, 6, 0.” Duck was now heading them into cloud cover that was directly ahead.

“T-1, maintain altitude at 7,000. Pete, bring her down to 6. We will maintain this course through this weather.”

Duck studied the clouds. *Not just clouds*, he thought. “Just keep her level and maintain your heading.”

“Colonel, I’m getting the shakes, mate. Barksdale’s voice cracked. “Flying like this is plum crazy.”

“Easy does it, Pete, you’re doin’ fine. You do your part, and that lil’ darlin’ here will do the rest.”

The planes were now in the center of the approaching storm and the turbulence was bouncing them around pretty good.

“Colonel, I sure would feel a lot better flying my Spitfire right about now.” Barksdale voiced concern.

“Lieutenant, you might feel more comfortable, but you wouldn’t be any safer than you are right now.”

Duck had been flying the Texan for eight years since it was first introduced in 1935. She was a much better built aircraft than British trainers of the time. It featured retractable landing gear, a larger engine, variable-pitch propeller and hydraulics. Those who mastered the AT-6 would then go on to specialized training in their own fighters and bombers that sat back at home, waiting for them to join the war.

Duckworth had developed what he called the “full panel,” or “altitude,” system, whereby the two gyro instruments were used in conjunction with the three basic instruments, plus the magnetic compass, the rate of climb indicator, and the clock. He devised the “A” pattern, “B” pattern, and ascending and descending vertical “S” pattern, all of which required timed turns, climbs, and descents to predetermined headings and altitudes. Students were required to make takeoffs under the hood, a feat that amazed everyone when first demonstrated. He composed a course syllabus and trained an experimental group of pilots who began teaching the new method to the school’s instructors.

Every pilot who studied the full-panel system immediately became its enthusiastic booster and word

soon filtered through the AAF that ‘The Duck’ really had something.”

After another four hours of “flying blind”, as Duck called it, the final pair started their return to base. The weather was getting increasingly bad, and their fearless leader was beginning to wonder if this little storm might be a lot more than just the typical afternoon Texas thunderstorm, so he radioed back to base asking for the weather officer, Lieutenant Burdick.

“This is Duckworth, Lieutenant. Any new info on this storm rolling in from the gulf?”

“No, Sir. Just the usual, high seas, wind, rain,” Burdick explained. “If it’s something else, they must be keeping it to themselves.”

“That wouldn’t surprise me one bit,” said Duck. “Reports out of HQ have been few and far between. It’s like their concern is completely focused on the war and what’s going on here at home is coming in at a distant second.



In 1943 a hurricane formed in the Gulf. The government would not allow warnings of the storm hoping that it would sink U-boats in the gulf. Colonel Duckworth flew into the eye of the storm thus creating today's Hurricane Hunters.

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