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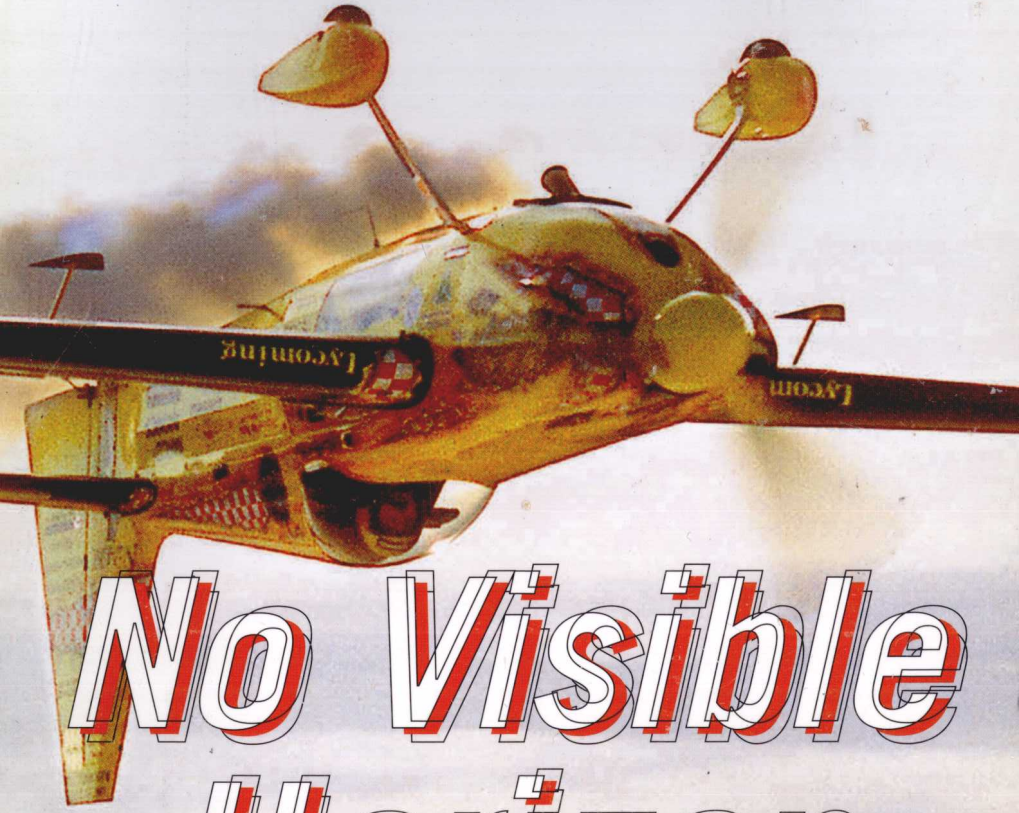
SURVIVING THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS SPORT



No Visible Horizon

JOSHUA COOPER RAMO

NO VISIBLE HORIZON

Surviving the World's Most Dangerous Sport

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In the middle of the
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a strange tradition emerged.

In the middle of the fifteenth century in Japan, a time when the kingdom was both at its most isolated and, to Japanese eyes, most perfect, a strange tradition emerged: composing haiku as you died, at the very moment of death. Perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Japanese culture had become obsessed with the relationship between life and art. There was an increasing belief that the two should never be separated, that a well-lived life was a work of art. Was it surprising that some Japanese poets wanted to try to weave the two together, to make a little tatami of life and art? What better time than at the moment of death? After a lifetime of study, could you be beautiful in three lines? Could you be perfect? Could you reduce it, all of it, your life, down to seventeen syllables?

Mame de iyo
mi wa narawashi no
kusa no tsuyu

Farewell . . . I
pass as all things do
dew on the grass.

So it all awaited you. Special inks were mixed. A brush of the rarest hair was prepared and left lying near your bed. The

softest rice paper was fetched. All this lay waiting for your last moment. The Zen monks who collected the death poems looked for two virtues, two marks of beauty. The first was *aware*, a sense of the sadness of things passing, the way birds at dawn sing like mourners or cherry blossoms fall like tears in the spring. The second virtue was *mi-yabi*, an attempt to refine oneself. Everything about the poems—their sound, how they looked on the page—was meant to evoke this attempt at refinement, at compactness. So Basho, dead in early June 1807:

Tabi ni yande
yume wa kareno o
kakemeguru

On a journey, ill:
my dream goes wandering
over withered fields.

Or Cibuko, in the winter of 1788:

Yuku mizu to
tomo ni suzushiku
ishi kawa ya

The running stream
is cool . . . the pebbles
underfoot.

And, perfectly, Ozui, dead in January 1783:

Yo no hazuna
Heirkiru ware mo
Katachi nashi

Still tied to this world
I cool off and lose
my form.

It is the kind of day to write poems about. The summer sky bleeds from soft robin's-egg blue at the horizon to deepest azure directly above. In between are a million more shades, as if God, restless and unsatisfied, has unloaded the full spectrum into the heavens. A few clouds hover harmlessly in the breezeless sky, pulling weak shadows over the earth. It is a day to fall in love, to lie on the grass and listen to Louis Armstrong.

I am flying at the height of those clouds, 1,000 feet, and fast out of a dive: 200 miles an hour. To amuse myself I roll upside down and pass just above the clouds, dragging my tail in the vapor that steams upward from each, watching the reflection of my yellow plane. I pump the stick slightly to bump the nose up. The Extra 200, a German-built plane, is made for these aerial acrobatics the way a Porsche is made for the autobahn. I jam the stick to the left side of the cockpit, drawing the left wing ailerons up into the airstream, where they bite into the airflow and quickly pull the wing up and around, right side up, then inverted again. The Extra can come full around in less than a second, faster than you can say "roll." My shoulder and crotch belts dig into my skin as I float upside down. The steel ratchets that hold them tight grind at my hips. I stop the plane hard, exactly wings level and inverted. Sweat runs up from my chin and into my eyes.

I am going to pull through from here toward the ocean below me. Hold your hand out, palm up. Flip it over. Now arc it away from you and down. A split-S maneuver, de rigueur in competition aerobatics, the sport of precision flying. I fuss with the power a bit. I press the nose up for a second to make sure I am level. I glance out over the wing, squinting. Is it aligned with the horizon? As I set up I notice everything: the shudder and whir of the propeller, the twitch of my rudder in the slipstream, the stink of gasoline draining from the tank. What I don't notice is that I am cluelessly, stealthily losing altitude. I check and recheck my alignment, inverted for a good twenty seconds, ignoring my altimeter as it shows me leaching height. I am descending, unawares. I am about to start a maneuver that takes 800 feet from an altitude of 700 feet.

"Pssshhh." I pop the air out of my lungs and suck in a new breath as I start the pull. Almost immediately, my eyes begin to gray out as the blood rushes from my head. The g-meter creeps past seven. In the cockpit now I weigh seven times my weight, more than 1,000 pounds. I lose sight of the horizon and then my vision squeezes into a tunnel, as if I were peering through a paper-towel holder. I tuck my chin to my chest and close the back of my throat. I suck in on my abdominal muscles, trying to trap blood in my head and heart. I grunt, a hum of pain and stability. I am like a locked-in coma patient. My mind is alive in this useless hunk of a body. It is wonderful.

And then, in an instant no longer than it takes my brain to assemble a single neuron, I am terrified. I have seen from the angle of the sun and the sea below that I am too low. I can't tell

how much I am off, but I know that even a foot is too much. Friends have died this way. "Aaargh." The breath shoots out of me in a horrified burst. In an instant my mind is cranking through the options. I don't have enough room to pull the maneuver through without putting more stress on the plane than it can handle, snapping the wings off. But I am too far along to roll the plane back upright. My options flip in front of me, shuffling cards, all bad. And then the thought comes to me, the one everyone always asks about. "If something happens up there, what will you think? Will you think the risks you took were worth the way your life ended? Will you be sad? Will you think of your family?" Here, on the last day of my life, in the last moment, I am writing a death poem with my plane. Now, with the water coming up at me at more than 200 miles per hour, what *am* I feeling? What am I thinking? I don't feel remorse or fear of death or even of pain. I don't think about my family or the life I am about to slam into pieces. What I am feeling in that one moment of truth is anger. Deep, profound anger.

"Shit," I think. "I've just killed myself."

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The best pilots in the world, perhaps sixty men and a dozen women, compete in what is called Unlimited Aerobatics. Of these sixty, a dozen or so occupy a little world of their own, the space of super-competitive pilots who devote the bulk of their lives to flying aerobatics. They put in hundreds of hours a year, stagger through blistering physical pain. There are few financial rewards. Though there have been attempts to make the sport into an aerial NASCAR, they have all failed. Unlimited pilots fly for joy and victory. Which makes it hard to say if it is noble or stupid that so many of them die.

Even the very best pilots, guys with tens of thousands of hours in planes, sometimes come up ten or twenty feet low on a loop. The Internet is filled with crash videos showing some "natural stick" air-show performer jamming happily into a maneuver in perfect form, with the best of intentions, and a hundred feet low. Sometimes on the video you can hear the announcer intoning away on a tinny, reverberating public address system as the disaster unspools: "And now he is coming in for his low-level pass. Out of the north and fast, here it comes, watch him. . . ." Silence. A suicide play-by-play. But there is an education in every one of these lethal mistakes. The flying life has always demanded a passage across the

razor's edge. At any moment you could slip to the other side: a gas leak, weather, fire in the cockpit. You would beat at the flames with your hands, burning them. To no avail. Sometimes what made the risks horrible was that you could watch them play out in front of you; like a little opera, you could hear all the arias of your mistakes singing at you as the earth swam up. A chorus of your guilt followed you down. Occasionally you were able to get out and describe to others what this music had been like. But none of you ever stopped flying. That was the truly unthinkable thing.

But, my goodness, those final symphonies could be violent. Real Wagner stuff, the kind of music where it sounds like the orchestra is surely breaking something. Neil Williams, for instance, the champion British pilot. Never without the Navy blazer with the British Royal Flying Club seal stitched neatly over his heart. You could rip paper on the linear part in his Bryl-creamed hair. Neil was five-foot-six, lantern-jawed. A poster boy for furious flight. One day in the early 1970s he was test-flying a state-of-the-art Zlin 526 Aerobat, just knocking out a few figures to make sure everything was bolted on right. It was a sleek-looking plane, the Zlin, Czech built. The plane had jolted the flying world at the 1964 World Aerobatic Championships because it was the first plane to use the gyroscopic forces of the propeller in aerobatic maneuvers, turning itself into a form of out-of-control helicopter. The Czech plane was a challenge to the sangfroid of the British, who were used to building their own planes, thank you very much. But what could you do? The Zlin was a better plane than anything they made. So Williams set out to master it. Someone had

done some small maintenance work to the British team Zlin. Williams took it for a quick test flight. The whole Eton-Oxford routine. *Back in a moment, chaps.* He did a couple of easy maneuvers and the plane felt fine. He's just pulling into a tight loop when he hears a bang and sees his left wing folding up toward the cockpit in the same way you might close your upraised palm into a fist.

What Neil didn't know was that his little Czech masterpiece had a kind of cancer, a problem that caused the wing spars to split like a toothpick under high g loads. The spar is the long stick of metal that holds the wing to the airplane and, on the Zlin, if you punched it enough times, the spar began to shatter. It was a slow-motion affair. Williams's Zlin had been flying for years. The cancer was buried deep inside the wing, an impossible location to check. He had no idea what he was in for.

At this point Williams starts to think really fast. Actually thinking would be too slow. So he fires off on instinct alone, acting on pure faith. First he rolls the plane inverted and snaps the wing out like a one-way hinge. Imagine snapping out a carpet or a sheet. The wing cracks back into position just as he is finally upside down and leveled off. Williams takes a deep breath. Weird, to be sure, but probably salvageable. He starts to roll upright and . . . the wing starts to fold again. He tries a third time. The wing creaks upward, folding quickly now. So he rolls inverted again and begins thinking. No parachute. He didn't bother to put one on. Routine flight, and all that. The engine hiccups. He's running out of gas. He tries rolling over yet again. No go. So as the fuel-starved engine

begins to sputter, Williams starts an approach to landing at the airfield. Upside down. At any moment the left wing could just come flying off the plane, so he flies gently. He flies a short little traffic pattern. Upside down. Turns onto his final approach leg upside down, and, so low that he actually draws one wingtip through the grass, he fast rolls the plane back upright at the last possible moment and lands as the wing folds up. And walks away. He had pulled off a miracle at the very last second. You could imagine pilots flocking to that little line in the grass, the leaves still wingbrushed, like Hajjis to Mecca or pilgrims to some sighting of the Virgin Mary. That little line in the grass was *it*, they would say to each other, the visible border between miracle and martyrdom. The physical proof of man's faith.

Six years later Williams flew a WWII bomber head on into a mountain in Spain in bad weather, killing everyone on board, including his wife.

It is a commonplace of religious thought that there are two routes to enlightenment. One route is martyrdom; the other involves miracles. At first glance it is maybe surprising that the truth can be found with equal precision along a path of complete horror or by a route of pure wonder. But what martyrdom and miracles have in common is that each tastes of absolutely pure faith. As such, either offers a glimpse of the true world, the one that underlies our lives even if we cannot always see it. Sometimes this world, this true world, is so