

**LOREE "ROWDY" DRAUDE**

# **SOAR**

**INTO**

**JOY**



**A Combat Pilot's Wisdom on Falling  
in Love with Your Life**

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## Chapter 1

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SOAR?

*“One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.”*

—HELEN KELLER

When you hear the word *soar*, what comes to mind? I envision birds, their wings outspread, seemingly floating in the air as they scan the ground for their next meal. Sometimes, they hover aloft for what feels like an impossible time, never having to flap their wings to generate lift.

I love seeing birds soaring because it reminds me that I, too, can design my life in a way that optimizes the lift underneath my wings and stays in a place of resonance. *Merriam-Webster* defines *soar* as “to ascend to a higher or more exalted level.” My definition is “to fly with joy.”

Let me start with a story of one of my most challenging night flights onboard an aircraft carrier. It’s one of my favorite stories to share in a keynote speech because it illustrates perseverance and the power of finding joy.

We were getting ready to take off on a mission hundreds of miles away from land. The weather was not great. There was no visible horizon, as the moon was hidden behind a thick layer of clouds.

As we were taxiing toward the catapult for takeoff, one of the generators on our jet stopped working. I say “our” because I flew with a crew: a COTAC (a naval flight officer – NFO – who sits to the right of the pilot. NFOs do not control the movement of the aircraft), a TACCO (an NFO who sits in the back of the jet and manages the weapons and sonobuoys) and an aircrewman (an enlisted sailor who works with the TACCO to listen to submarines with the aforementioned sonobuoys). The jet I was flying, the S-3B Viking, had two engines, each powering a separate generator, so we had backup power. We were able to restart it, but it shut off again. We weren’t sure what was happening, but we could fly as long as we had one generator.

We decided to keep going. I kept cycling the generator switch, hoping it would keep working. We got up to the catapult to get ready to take off. Both generators were working fine, and things were looking up. Once we did our final cockpit checks, with the engines at full power, I turned our exterior lights on, indicating to the catapult officer that we were ready to fly. The catapult officer released the pistons that held us in place, and our jet was slung down the flight deck and thrown into the air.

As we left the carrier, we felt a thud, and instantaneously, *all of the lights in the cockpit went out*. We were in complete darkness. Shit!

Only two malfunctions can cause the electricity in the cockpit to fail. One is a dual engine failure; the other is a dual generator failure.

If you lose both engines on a catapult shot, you have two seconds before the jet hits the water below, so you must eject immediately.

But if you lose both generators, you have engines. You still have power so that you can fly. But you may not have electricity or lights.

As soon as all the lights went out, I felt I still had working engines. There wasn't the "wind down," the slowing drone sound of engines that had quit, and the nose of the aircraft didn't start to drop.

I immediately yelled to the COTAC, "I have control!" so he wouldn't pull the ejection handle. I had to yell because no electricity equals no intercom or radio either.

I yelled, "APU!" which let him know he needed to get our auxiliary power unit (APU) working as soon as possible, so we could have lights and be able to see. Because he was an experienced NFO, his hand was already pulling the APU handle as I shouted the next step in the checklist. I focused on keeping us out of the water, and he focused on getting us some electricity.

I always carried a flashlight in my torso harness and turned it on the red night setting before takeoff in case of an emergency like this — a tip I'd learned from an instructor pilot. I turned it toward the instrument panel and saw the analog engine gauges working.

We were going to be fine.

Most importantly, I could see the jet's nose-high attitude. We were rapidly climbing away from the water. The COTAC got the APU started. The APU dropped down from the belly of the jet so the airflow could turn its blades and generate electricity. The lights in the cockpit returned.

As the lights came on, I saw the jet was at a high as possible angle of attack to get us away from the water without stalling. We were able to get one of the generators started, but the other wouldn't come back online. I called back to the squadron to update them on our status, expecting to be called back for a landing. But instead, I was told to carry on our mission, and they'd see us in an hour and a half.

Welcome to the fleet! This isn't the Training Command anymore. You have to fly your mission, even when conditions aren't ideal.

We had the minimum essential equipment. We were good to go, so we continued our mission.

I was quiet for the rest of the flight, reflecting on what had happened and focusing on our mission. Our TACCO, Lt. Larry Anderson, was a prior-enlisted officer, so he was slightly older than the other junior officers and, therefore, more street-smart, which had earned him his callsign, "Jedi." Jedi noticed that the COTAC and SENSO were exchanging stories and using "colorful" language that he thought might make me uncomfortable, so he wrote down a note on his kneeboard to debrief the crew on "professional" communication in the cockpit.

When our mission that night was completed, it was time to land. Landing a jet on an aircraft carrier is difficult; landing a jet on an aircraft carrier at night is *really* difficult. Landing a jet on an aircraft carrier at night, with overcast skies blocking the horizon and still being shaken by almost dying during the takeoff, is ... well, it's one of the most difficult things I've had to do.



*Carrier landing, night and day. Photo credit: Carl Vause*

I was still new to the carrier aviation world and only had about 30 landings on an aircraft carrier by that point, 10 of which were night landings, and six of those 10 were on a moonlit night during training. I had a crew to get onboard safely, and everyone on the flight deck counted on me to do my job.

I came in for the first landing and had too much power on the jet, which is likely to happen when descending toward a small, dimly lit area knowing that you will hit it. You don't want to be underpowered! But my excess of power meant I sailed too far down the centerline; the tailhook on my jet slammed past all four arresting gear wires in the landing area, and we went flying again into the dark inky night sky. Missing all the arresting gears is called a "bolter."

As I slammed the throttles forward and rotated the nose up to climb away from the carrier and the water, I let my frustration get the best of me, and I uttered a string of profanities that would have made the saltiest of sailors blush. I used the F-word in every possible grammatical format—noun, verb, adverb, adjective, and conjunction. Upon hearing my reaction, Jedi quietly took a pen and scratched out his previous note about profanity.

I flew the landing pattern again to approach the carrier for another try. I had a better start but got underpowered, added too much power to compensate, and went around again. Aaagh!

Everyone on the ship, including my fellow aviators, was watching my struggle on the closed-circuit television screens all over the carrier.

Imagine what it's like to have 5,000 people watching you fail at your job.

My COTAC started talking to me in a smooth jazz voice. I couldn't let myself freak out. I didn't have that luxury.

We came back around a third time. I still struggled with getting the power right, but this time it was my ham-fisting of the control stick that resulted in me landing too flat and, therefore, the tailhook skipping over the number 4 arresting wire. Bolter number 3.

Thankfully, we had plenty of gas for these attempts, but by the third bolter, the pressure to land was at an all-time high, and I needed to get me and my crew onboard. Somehow, I managed to pull it together and landed on the fourth try. It never felt so good to be thrown forward against my torso harness as the tailhook caught the arresting gear. My legs shook as I taxied us out of the landing area and into our parking spot.

As I unstrapped from the ejection seat, I steeled myself for the judgment and criticism I was likely to receive for not being able to land the jet the first time. As one of the first women to fly in combat jets on this ship, I knew everything I did was scrutinized, and I felt like I had let down all the women who were on the carrier with me, trying to demonstrate that gender didn't matter in most roles in the military.

As I exited the jet, the aircrewman in the back, who had become less chatty the longer we flew in the landing pattern, patted me on the shoulder and exclaimed, "Don't worry, ma'am. I flew with someone who bolted five times." Then he added, with an encouraging smile, "And hey, thanks for the extra flight time!"

At the time, I was grateful for the encouragement. As I thought about his words later, it affected me much more deeply. Here was this kid...okay, he was probably 22, and I was about 27... and instead of running off the flight deck to get back to a warm, safe place or being angry at me for not getting onboard on the first try...he had stayed behind to make sure I was keeping my chin up. He was finding the joy in a situation where I could only find fear and self-doubt.

Maybe he had just seen too many Monty Python movies and couldn't get "*Always Look on the Bright Side of Life*" out of his head, but for me, his words were the beginning of a multi-year, personal journey to find joy in whatever I do.



\* \* \*

It still blows my mind every time an airplane lifts off the ground. How can it be? How many times as children did we run along and jump into the air, hoping that we'd somehow defy gravity and stay airborne, but instead feel the disappointment of gravity pulling us back down to the ground? And yet, when we're in an airplane, at some point during the takeoff, the nose of the aircraft pulls up, and we magically lift into the air. I'm grateful to Bernoulli for figuring out fluid dynamics and to the Wright brothers for putting the principles to work to invent flight.

I've always loved things that aren't what they seemed to be. Airplanes certainly fit into that category. Who would ever look at a humongous C-5 Galaxy aircraft and imagine that weight lifting into the sky? Or that a round piece of vinyl could hold a symphony, or that a small block of metal, glass, and plastic could enable us to talk to one another across the world? I love human ingenuity. What other incredible things are yet to be discovered and created?

The word *flying* describes the feeling of weightlessness, transcending the downward pull of gravity and moving effortlessly through the sky. People on drug trips "fly" when they're "high." "I flew through that book" describes the ease and speed of reading.

Metaphorically, flying portrays freedom of movement and control of our destiny. But what's the science behind flight? It's time to geek out a little and talk about the four forces of flight, as the technical descriptions can help you understand how to take flight and soar in your own life.

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