

# THE RIGHT STUFF



*On Safari with Gen. Chuck Yeager*



**Yeager with blue wildebeest**

BY JOE DA SILVA

When the Cape red hartebeest dropped in an instant after a perfect heart shot, I knew I was in special company. My client was none other than the world-renowned American aviation legend, Major General Chuck Yeager, the first person to break the sound barrier. Almost 64 years ago, on Oct. 14, 1947, Yeager flew his Bell X-1 at Mach 1 at an altitude of 45,000 feet. Since then, this remarkable man, who

still has 20-20 vision and excellent coordination, has flown and tested more than 361 different types of aircraft and is still flying today. He has visited every corner of the globe, even the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War, as an honored guest. It is now impossible for any other person to duplicate the multiple achievements of this highly decorated man. He is indeed one of a kind.

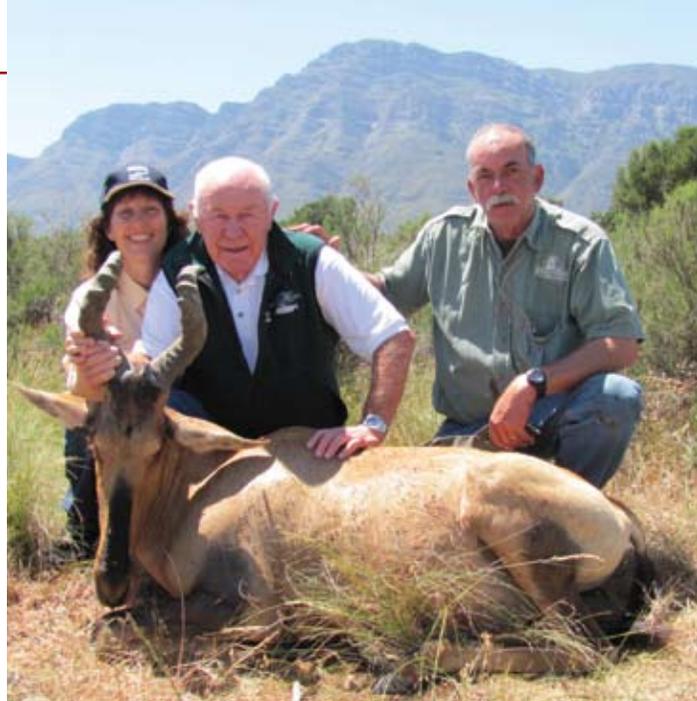
I have my good friends, Adelino Serras Pires and his wife Fiona Capstick, to thank for introducing me to the Yeagers a number of years ago at the Dallas Safari Club Convention. Eighty-seven years old and on his first visit to South Africa, the General and his lovely wife, Victoria, both hunted with me in the Western Cape during October 2010. It was the General's first African hunting safari. A

formidable fighter and test pilot whose combat credentials include World War II and Vietnam, Yeager is a deadly shot, as is his wife.

The Yeager safari took place in the Wellington area and in the Cederberg Mountain region of the Western Cape. Both husband and wife achieved inch-and-a-half groupings off a bench rest at 100 meters with a .270 Winchester rifle, shooting 150-grain Winchester ammunition. This gun is the personal rifle of my associate and professional hunter Girdri Joubert, which turned out to be a very lucky rifle for the Yeager safari.

The General is a gallant man. On the first day of our safari, he let Victoria take a splendid Rowland Ward bontebok ram after a fine stalk that brought her to within 100 meters of the animal. After the ram moved away from a group of females, it presented a clear target and went down immediately to a broadside shot. Although we were unable that day to get a blue wildebeest or springbok because of deteriorating weather and adverse wind conditions, the Yeagers' hunting experiences had long taught them that every day is a hunting day, but that not every day is a shooting day.

It was quite an experience seeing the General take his first African animal – the Cape red



**Yeager and red hartebeest, with Victoria Yeager and PH Joe da Silva of Cape Town Hunting Safaris.**

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*Every day is a hunting day, but not every day is a shooting day.*

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hartebeest – but it was an even more interesting experience seeing him take his blue wildebeest. We came across a large herd and began our stalk. The General is not a trophy hunter. He started hunting at a young age with his farming parents in West Virginia,

where the emphasis was on acquiring meat for personal consumption. Today, Yeager still goes on annual hunts for meat, but also for the simple experience of being in the wilderness.

We managed to get to within 200 meters of the herd and had selected the bull. This was going to be a challenging shot. Yeager took aim and I heard the shot hit the animal. The next thing, the wildebeest disappeared into quite dense vegetation at the bottom of a hill. We moved as quickly as we could, just as the herd started coming up wind of us. I positioned the General with the shooting sticks, expecting the animal to cross from the left.

The herd, as if out of the blue heaven above, suddenly flew past us with the General's wildebeest bringing up the rear. In a flash, he shouldered his rifle and brought it down. It was a perfect lung shot and I asked the General how he had managed to do that so quickly. He gave a quick lesson in reaction under pressure. Images of the General letting rip in aerial combat danced around in my head as he spoke. After all, this is the same man who brought down five enemy aircraft in World War II in a single day. Taking down a wildebeest amid a blur of stampeding creatures was par for the course.

Our exhilarating wildebeest adventure was followed a few hours later by a perfect shot on a lone ram springbok. We could not get closer than about 220 yards, but he was not about to back out of this challenge. He mounted his



**Victoria Yeager and Western Cape bontebok shot with a Winchester .270, joined by da Silva and husband Chuck.**

rifle on the shooting stick, the shot went off and the ram dropped dead. I was quite frankly astounded at the General's control, judgment and reflexes. "I've done this before ... with planes!" was his response at my astonishment.

Victoria took a Cape red hartebeest and springbok as well before we moved on to the Kagga Kamma Private Game Reserve in the Cederberg Mountains with its wonderful rock formations. Our pilot had to make a few passes over the landing strip to clear it of zebra before we could land. Hein de Waal and Peter Loubser of the Reserve arranged for the General to hunt an eland. He came within 120 meters of a fine old bull and dropped it with a well-placed bullet in the neck.

No sooner had we celebrated this hunt amid wonderful scenery than the heavens ripped open and the rain came down in absolute torrents. A break in the downpour saw us get airborne for Stellenbosch – all of us enjoying that feeling common to all hunters after a successful day afield, far from the stresses of urban life that numb

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**Fiona Capstick with Adelino Serres Pires  
in their Pretoria home**



Above and below, Hawk and Gripen fighter pilots of the South African Air Force, Air Force Base Makhado, Louis Trichardt, officially welcomed Yeager.



our senses and alienate us from one another. Hunting heals the soul.

Before leaving the Western Cape, I had the honor of accompanying the Yeagers by air to Clanwilliam, where my friend Nick McFall arranged a visit to Johan Ferreira's Rooibos tea plantation and factory because Victoria loves South Africa's unique tea. It was inspiring to see Victoria, a licensed pilot, take the helm of the Beechcraft Bonanza as our pilot, Jesse Roos, gave her the controls. She flew us up to Clanwilliam.

Paul Roos and the Stellenbosch Flying Club – the largest private flying club in the country – gave the Yeagers a great welcome. The General gave an illustrated talk, after which the club grilled a splendid *braaivleis* (barbecue) before the Yeagers were taken to a fine wine estate for the night.

Before leaving the Western Cape, I accompanied the Yeagers on a grand tour of the peninsula, from the heights of Table Mountain to magical moments with the



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**The Yeagers with Cape Town and the famous Table Mountain and its "tablecloth" in the background**



**Gen. Chuck Yeager and his springbok**



**Victoria Yeager and springbok**

penguins at Boulders Beach, to whale-watching off Cape Point, before proceeding over the Ou Kaapse Weg into Cape Town itself and some serious waterfront relaxation at a sushi bar. The mixture of hunting amid stupendous scenery and the multifaceted sophistication and natural beauty of the greater Cape Town experience made a profound impression on our distinguished visitors. My wife Nicole, who is a full-time taxidermist, seasoned huntress and shooter, was especially thrilled to have the Yeagers as our guests on the farm. Dinner that night was particularly energizing for us as talk shifted from bullet placement to aerial dogfights. Nicole is honored to have been selected to do all the taxidermy for the Yeager safari animals.

One of the most memorable experiences for the Yeagers during their South African safari holiday was their visit to Pretoria and the Air Force Base Makhado outside Louis Trichardt. I called on Fiona Capstick, a former military officer, to help me make arrangements for the Yeagers to meet our current chief of the South African Air Force, Lt. Gen. Carlo Gagiano, and a former chief of the SAAF, Lt. Gen. Denis Earp, a Korean War Veteran and POW, and his wife Beth.

After gathering at Fiona and Adelino's home in Waterkloof, where Yeager was interviewed by the press, we all enjoyed a wonderful dinner at the Kream Restaurant in nearby Brooklyn. The Yeagers were our guests of honor and our hosts were Gagiano and his wife, Leonie. Yeager, Gagiano and Earp swapped stories



**The pilots at the Hoedspruit base were keen on shaking hands with Yeager.**



**Dinner with the chief of the South African Air Force: from left to right, back to front: Joe da Silva, John Welsh – National Prosecuting Authority, Victoria Yeager, Beth Earp, Fiona Capstick, Leonie Gagiano, Adelino Serres Pires, Lt. Gen. Denis Earp, – former chief of South African Air Force, Gen Chuck Yeager, Lt. Gen. Carlo Gagiano – chief of the South African Air Force.**

and listened enthralled as Yeager relived aviation history. Fiona also presented Victoria with a copy of her award-winning book on the history of the huntress, *The Diana Files: The Huntress-Traveller Through History*.

The SAAF were magnificent in their arrangements to fly the Yeagers and me up to Air Force Base Makhado from Waterkloof Air Base the next morning. Brig. Gen. John Bayne, Director Combat Systems, accompanied us as we took off in perfect weather. We were met halfway by a Hawk and Gripen, flying alongside us, saluting the General as they accompanied us in triumph to the base. There, I felt freshly proud to be a South African as I witnessed their welcome. The General's illustrated talk was received with absolute acclamation. Our young fighter pilots as well as all the other SAAF members and distinguished guests reveled in the presence of an aviation legend. The highlight of the visit came when Gen. Yeager presented the wings to the first female fighter pilot in SAAF history, and also to the first black pilot to qualify on the Hawk fighter aircraft. What a day of celebration. When Gen. Yeager rose to express

his thanks, he mentioned my role in organizing the visit. I was touched at his humility and generosity.

We flew out that afternoon for the SAAF base at Hoedspruit where the General was besieged by pilots keen to shake the hand of a man who wrote aviation history. Then followed tours to famous scenic spots such as the Blyde River Canyon and very successful game viewing. Dr. Wynand Uys,



**Gen. Chuck Yeager with Victoria and Joe**

foremost biologist, took Yeager in his Jabiru aircraft on a game-spotting excursion, while Victoria flew on their wing in a Kitfox, spotting rhinoceros, giraffe and the like. We spent a grand time in a luxury tented bush camp with paraffin lamps and gourmet food, overlooking a waterhole frequented by elephant, lion and buffalo. It was absolute magic, made more so by the unequalled night sounds of the African bush.

The SAAF flew us back to Waterkloof Air Base from Hoedspruit where the Yeagers departed for Namibia and I returned to Cape Town. Many professional hunters become used to hosting significant clients, but I am emboldened to say that Gen. and Mrs. Yeager gave our professional hunting community cause to be freshly proud of our wildlife heritage, of our air force and of the astonishing beauty of our home – South Africa. *GT*

