



## Airborne

On my eighteenth birthday, I was drafted, became an Aviation Cadet, won my wings, flew a B-17 bomber across the Atlantic and seven combat missions before Victory in Europe Day. Seven missions weren't enough to earn quick return to the U.S.A., so I went into the Army of Occupation where an unofficial army newspaper, *The Foggia Occupator*, needed a pilot to fly reporters around. The editor, Sgt. Milton Hoffman, a journalist in civilian life, offered me a jeep, green "U.S. Army Correspondent" press patches for my shoulders, and a Speed Graphic camera. I flew to Rome, Naples, Pisa, jeeped around southern Italy, wrote a column, then news, features, and finally became managing editor.

Dancing had never entered my life. As a preteen in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, I played stickball on East 27th Street, fished in the bay, swam at Brighton Beach, biked to Coney Island for a twenty-five-cent ride on the Cyclone, and to Floyd Bennett Field to watch airplanes. I took violin lessons, played in the Brooklyn Tech orchestra, and swam backstroke for the swimming team.

One Sunday afternoon while in Basic Flight Training at Minter Air Force Base in Bakersfield, California, I saw a Fred Astaire movie, *Holiday Inn*. Afterward I felt something different from the itchy disquiet of a kid far from home. Waiting for the military bus on the empty main street, I thought, "Astaire can dance, but I can fly" and wanted Sunday to be over so I could be back in the air, cutting arcs in the sky. Years later, when I told this to Martha Graham she said, "What you really wanted was to dance."



I'd just climbed the Leaning Tower. Photo by Eugene Cowen.

Home on leave after graduating in class 44F (June 1944) wearing my new pilot's wings, I visited my uncle, Navy Commander Ira Hodes, who'd won a battlefield commission in World War I, and when World War II began joined the Navy and was refitting destroyers in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He took me below into his realm, a boiler factory from hell. But he was proud of it, and when he introduced me to his Navy friends I realized he was proud of me.

Five years later, after I'd danced all over the U.S.A. and Europe, he asked, "When are you going to stop this dancing and go to work?"

"Dancing is my work," I replied, wondering if I could ever earn a living at it. I was Martha Graham's third military pilot. David Zellmer had flown B-24 bombers in the Pacific, and Douglas Watson had flown F4U Corsair fighters in the Navy. Both had seen combat.

"I cannot know what it is to fly a combat mission," Martha said. "But every life has its mission, and some demand all that we can give."

The day I soloed I fell in love with flying. Three years later, September 16, 1946, war over, I took a dance lesson at the Martha Graham Studio and fell in love with dancing.



*Above:* Stearman PT-13 "Primary" trainer. Goggles on head (instead of around neck) mean I've soloed. U.S. Army photo.



*Left:* In a "basic" trainer, Vultee Valiant BT-13. U.S. Army photo.

*Right:* Cessna AT17  
“advanced trainer.” In  
my new pilot’s wings.  
U.S. Army photo.

*Below:* B-17 Flying For-  
tress and crew. Me, top  
row (2nd from left). U.S.  
Army photo.



I'm asked, "How do you go from flying to dancing?" To me it seems natural; both need space and yield new concepts of it. Both demand skills and practice. And both can become pure action in which self-awareness vanishes, leaving unearthly joy.

A few weeks before my first performance—I'd been dancing less than half a year—I confessed to Martha that I worried about forgetting my moves onstage. She told me to lie on my back and proceed mentally through the entire dance. "Don't move a muscle. The body learns first, and although you may be able to do the dance on your feet, until you can do it in your *mind*, you don't really know it."

"That's how we practiced aerobatics!" And I told her about the cadet's handbook that instructed us to lie on our backs and imagine each kick on the rudder, press on the stick, and view of earth and sky.

A stage performance, like a combat mission, is complete in itself yet part of a far greater enterprise. After each performance, I'd replay it in my mind, after which it faded unless something unusual made it stick in memory, like my first performance when I got my foot entangled in the backdrop. Or when I danced with a broken toe in Bombay. Or the Broadway musical, *First Impressions*, where I forgot my lines and improvised, next day to have writer/director Abe Burrows say, "Those were some interesting lines I *didn't* write."

I'd also replay each flying mission, transferring to permanent memory only a few, like a training mission when I'd "buzzed" (flown) fifty feet above the rooftops of Rock Hill, South Carolina. Or when I flew a four-engine bomber across the Atlantic Ocean. Or my first sight of flak exploding. Or the bombing mission to Inn Rattenberg, a railroad bridge in the Austrian Alps hidden by clouds. No enemy fighters in sight so we were ordered to break formation and seek "targets of opportunity." I spotted another bridge and after "bombs away" tilted the plane and peered down. The valley was hidden by smoke. That night two pictures flickered through my mind: an Alpine village nestled in a green valley and a village aflame, shrouded in the smoke of my bombs.

Now, in my tenth decade, flying, which I did for less than three years, and dancing, which lasted more than sixty, tower over everything but love and family.

I began as Martha's student and (because few other men were available) soon became a dancer in her troupe. In a few more years, I was her

partner. Yet almost from the start, we clashed. She was known for her fierce temper, but the first time she unleashed it at me it triggered my own. From then on, she sometimes seemed to provoke me deliberately, and because I always blew back it gave her a kind of power over me. Martha was driven to dominate people, and although I welcomed her as a teacher and creative polestar I could not allow myself to be dominated.

Nevertheless, from that day to this, when I encounter her detractors I leap to her defense. Many were fascinated by Martha, others stood in awe; she scared not a few, some resisted and some opposed. For those genuinely unmoved, I feel pity, as for someone tone-deaf or without rhythm.

I never did “figure out” Martha. She could be selfish and cruel but was most often giving and warm. Intellectually brilliant, she sometimes acted with no thought at all. Everything she did was without reservation. She was also a public genius and fair game for every kind of treatment, from Agnes de Mille’s patronizing, error-riddled, soap opera biography to the thought-provoking “deconstructions” of Susan Leigh Foster.

Martha’s vision, her dances, and her dancing were her everything. To become an object of her interest was intoxicating, and to dance with her was to be part of a soaring enterprise. It was a challenge I was powerless to resist. Yet it took me a while to realize that I was stuck with her and with dancing for the rest of my life.

In May 1978, Alan Tung calls from Kennedy Airport. He had danced in my young audience troupe, The Ballet Team, and is now director of the school of Maurice Béjart’s Ballet of the 20th Century in Belgium. He wants to see dancing on his first night back in New York City. I get tickets to Martha Graham’s *Clytemnestra* at the Met, Lincoln Center.

*Clytemnestra* had premiered in 1958, my final year with Graham, and although not in it, I’d returned to the troupe in order to dance my old roles. Now, twenty years later, Bertram Ross, the original Agamemnon, is even more arrogant and swaggering. When he takes his first fatal step toward the bath, the sudden entrance of Death literally raises the hairs on my neck. And when Clytemnestra strikes, I want to shout, “Take that, you smug bastard!”

The original Aegisthus, one of Martha’s most sinister villains, had been danced by Paul Taylor. “He’s kind of shifty, so I turned him in,” Paul had said, reducing his eerie characterization to not turning out his legs. Alan and I saw the role danced by Mario Delamo who has a slithery sensuality