



CHAPTER FIVE [Book excerpt]

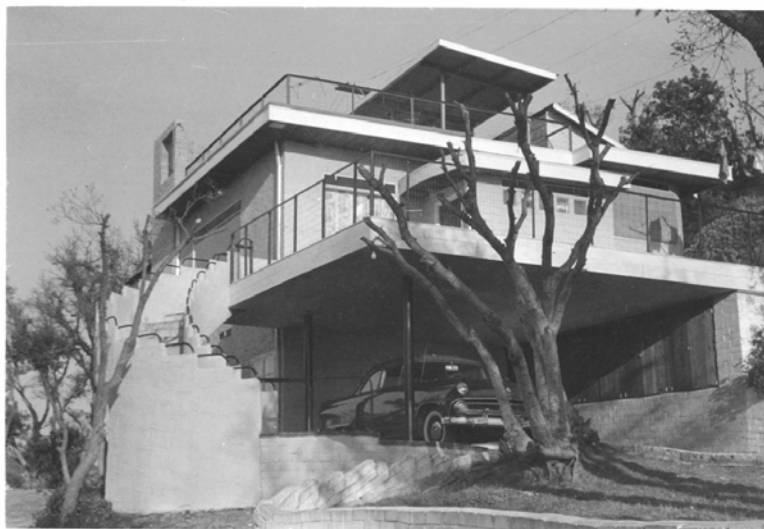
The Transcendent Reality



Naval Aviator is Born. My father's enthusiasm was always infectious, but this particular Sunday he was definitely over the top. Anticipating a visit by two of Dad's most special associates, I knew our clandestine guests worked for Kelly Johnson at Lockheed Aircraft's ultra-secret, experimental aircraft-design and test facility—the "Skunk Works." Based in Burbank, California, the Skunk Works—formed in the early 1940s—got its name from the odorous fumes that drifted over from an adjacent factory.

Our special summer day in 1952 finally arrived. Who were these two men that held so much respect for my father, and he for them? My first look told me why Dad was so enamored. Two muscular men dressed in freshly creased slacks, brown bombardier jackets, and black shoes so shiny you could see your face in them, stepped out of a stretch limousine. They each wore gold-rimmed sunglasses and silk scarves around their bulbous necks. Climbing the steps of our spiral entryway in militaristic tandem, their swaggered confidence implied the world was their oyster. As Dad stepped forward to greet these two aviation giants, their tan, weathered, smiling faces radiated genuine affection. Nearly paralyzed with fascination, I managed a faint "hello" during my brief introduction. My eyes were riveted on the pilot wings, insignias, and aircraft-identification patches sewn into their flight jackets. In rapturous awe, I sat quietly as Mom brought out the lemonade, cold beer, and a bountiful array of finger food. Although a typical, always-hungry, nine-year-old, even the most tantalizing snack suddenly held no interest. I was not about to miss one gesture or utterance from either of our two impressive guests.

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Lockheed's Finest

Our distinguished visitors turned out to be Tony LeVier and Herman "Fish" Salmon. Next to Chuck Yeager, whom my father knew more vaguely, these two characters are arguably the most successful test pilots in aviation history. Few would disagree they were *Lockheed's* most revered. Essential members of Kelly Johnson's flight-test team, as was my father, they each enjoyed long and illustrious careers. [Tony LeVier eventually became the supervising test pilot on the U-2 reconnaissance (spy) plane, with its maiden flight in 1955.]

Noting a young boy's almost rabid fascination, they delighted in sharing one hair-raising flight story after another. Several of these high-altitude, pulse-pounding, flight-test narratives included my father's trouble-shooting participation. Fearfully spellbound, Mom nervously gnawed her fingernails as Lockheed's most-famous took turns intently describing engine and electrical fires, oil and hydraulic failures, airframe stress fractures, and low-altitude bailouts!

Surviving a continual string of real-life emergencies seemed to suggest some form of supernatural ability or protection—like the heroes and heroines described in fantasy comic books. Was it possible for flesh-and-blood humans to be impervious to the perils affecting mere mortals? How could these three supermen successfully extricate themselves from a multitude of complex, often unrehearsed

emergencies? In an unsophisticated but excited appeal, I repeatedly tried to get some understandable answers. Although they offered nothing more than their belief in continued good fortune and the grace of God, my young mind formed a tentative, almost subliminal answer. All three men seemed to have an unconscious ability to anticipate a previously undemonstrated problem *before* it actually occurred. This allowed them to be ready – with split-second timing – in advance of any and all emergencies. Was it really possible to predict future events? If so, where did this intuitive sensing come from?

Regrettably, I did not enjoy the pleasure of meeting either of these majestically courageous men again. One motivational imperative firmly planted itself in my subconscious mind, however. *I would either climb my way to Heaven, or – if need be – face the devil, itself, to get a definitive response to my unanswered questions.* After this fortuitous meeting, my child-self began to wonder whether a transcendent Spirit (Angel) might be influencing my daily life. Many years later – after several of my *own* extraordinary flying experiences in Vietnam – empowering and transformative answers would be revealed.

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