

# Blind Flying Lesson

## Report #16

By Laurence Gonzales

Sometimes the demonstration transcends the known, revealing true mastery.



Laurence Gonzales is the author of *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why* (W.W. Norton). See [www.DeepSurvival.com](http://www.DeepSurvival.com). He quit International Aerobatics Club competition after his friend Randy Gagne died, though he still flies (occasionally upside-down). This story was excerpted with permission from his book *The Hero's Apprentice* (Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1994).

I WENT TO CALIFORNIA to study aerobatics with Randy Gagne, the Canadian national champion, and a member of the U.S. Aerobatics Team. We met at Van Nuys Airport to fly his Pitts Special.

After flying with Randy for a week, I came to know him as a modest master. He never did anything to show off, but only to make a point that might help to open my perceptions.

Once he had qualified me to recover from inadvertent spins and to land the airplane safely, we concentrated on sharpening my technique for an upcoming contest. Competition aerobatics is considered the best way to perfect flying technique. It is judged according to the precision with which pilots fly a dozen figures in sequence — spins, loops, rolls, hammerheads, Cuban 8s, Immelmans, and so on.

I flew the sequence a few times, and Randy said he thought I could place in the top five if I didn't lose my concentration during the stress of competition. He gave me a few tips to help improve my scores. The maneuvers involved a lot of climbing and diving. I was pulling a lot of g's, flipping over on my back, tumbling down, up and backward. By the time we'd been through it several times, I was tired and my flying had started to become a little ragged.

Randy took the controls, and said, "Let me show you something. I'm going to fly the sequence the way it's supposed to be flown." *Great* thought. I wanted to see it done precisely so that I could imitate what I saw. Then he added, "Only I'm going to fly it with my eyes closed and my head down. Just tell me when we're vertical."

Instinctively I reached out for something to hold onto, but there was nothing in that bubble-canopy Pitts. Hanging up there 5,000 feet above the ground north of Santa Susana Pass, green mountains rising on either side, I suddenly felt a terror grip my heart. Randy was going to fly the entire sequence with his eyes closed? This seemed to me to be the height of madness. And yet I felt that, in keeping with this spirit of coolness that we had developed, I could hardly refuse to go along with him. A bond of trust is forged between instructor and student — but perhaps trust is the wrong word. It's more like the hold a charismatic cult leader has on a new convert: It's so strong that the student would follow the instructor anywhere.

My mind raced, searching for some logic in this situation, which seemed to defy everything I had struggled to learn up until that point. I watched Randy bow his head down low, as if in prayer. I thought: This is insane.

Back in the sixties, a friend of mine used to say, "A blown mind is an open mind." Now as Randy began the sequence, my mind was completely open. And utterly blown.

The aircraft rolled inverted, and I forced myself to let go and relax. The mountains slid down one side of the canopy and sneaked up the other as smoothly as if stagehands moved a scrim.

I looked at the back of Randy's head. He wasn't peeking. Anyway, I had come to know him well enough to feel certain that he'd never cheat at such a thing. I could trust him: He would die first.

Split S. Loop. Immelman. How did he do that? I was watching lovely competition maneuvers being done by a blind man. I began to relax for real now. Giving myself over to the madness of it, I laughed out loud. Nothing in my 15 years of flying could have prepared me for this.

A level 360-degree turn doesn't seem like much of a feat, but he started out pointing west and ended up pointing exactly west, and that's akin to driving the family car around the block blindfolded. Spin-and-a-quarter: Right on heading. I called the vertical line for him on the way down.

He pulled the nose to the horizon, and I found that we were headed straight for one of those green mountains at eyeball level. Rather than telling him to watch out for the mountain, I found myself laughing. Was this true chaos, or had we reached some new pinnacle of transcendent order? In those few maneuvers, I had somehow developed a complete faith in Randy's ability to fly aerobatics blindfolded.

I could see cows and power lines, but sure enough, before we hit the mountain, he pulled up to a hammerhead. Once again I called the vertical line for him on the way up. He turned on a wingtip and found the precise vertical line down.

Working up to the finish, he drew a figure called a fish hook, in which he angled upward, rolled inverted, and then dove straight toward the ground. There is no sensation quite like being a passenger in an airplane that is pointed straight at the ground, going 160 knots, piloted by a man who insists on keeping his eyes shut.

Perhaps more remarkable was that he pulled out exactly at 3,000 feet, where we were supposed to be. Almost as an afterthought, as we headed for that mountain again, he completed the last figure, a two-point roll — Bam: inverted. Bam: upright. Dead solid perfect. Had it been a contest, he would have easily placed near the top.

"Your airplane," he said, handing me back the controls. I could barely fly I was so shaken.

"So you see," he went on smoothly, as if nothing at all unusual had happened, finally raising his head and looking around, "you do need to watch the horizon and look at your reference points, but it's really a matter of feel more than anything." **E&CA**

*Randy Gagne and another pilot were killed Oct. 25, 1997, when the Extra 300 they were flying crashed near Castaic, Calif.*