
OPERATION GOLDEN TROUT

Gen. Irving "Twig" Branch was my kind of commander. Twig had a sense of perspective about running the flight test center at Edwards; he worked hard and efficiently, but when fish were biting or ducks were flying, there was no holding him back. Friends in Texas would call him in California and say, "Hey, Twig, we got so many doves in the air we can't see the damned sun." Buddies down in Louisiana saved him a place in their duck blind. Pals in Wyoming had his horse saddled and waiting for the next antelope hunt. Twig's office was like a command post for *Field and Stream*. And because he ran the base, getting to these far-away places was no problem. He'd order up a B-57 bomber and use the bomb bay to load his gear going, and carry back the game. Twig was a general and ran the show, so what could a couple of colonels like Anderson and Yeager do, but go along on these trips whenever General Branch told us to? And because we were as fanatic as he was about the outdoors, and

damned good at it to boot, he never went anywhere without us. As Andy said, "Twig is *muy simpatico*."

To say that General Branch made my years as commandant of the space school more enjoyable is a weak understatement. Twig made it heaven, and I made up for a lot of years when test piloting and squadron commanding got in the way of rod and gun. But once the space school was really launched and humming, there was just no excuse for hanging around when Twig gave marching orders. He'd call me at the school: "Hey, Chuck, how's your schedule? I got us booked to give a talk and hunt ducks down on the Gulf next Tuesday."

As commandant I had a dozen airplanes at my disposal. Andy was operations officer of the flight test division, so he had anything he ever needed to get somewhere. And Twig, of course, had it all. In my case I was constantly traveling somewhere on Air Force business, doing a lot of speech-making and personal appearances, and if a trip took me to good hunting-and-fishing territory, I figured I'd earned the right to take advantage of the situation. I remember flying down to a Confederate Air Force convention, where I was asked to appear in a B-57. Capt. Joe Engle flew down with me, and we stopped off in Albuquerque on the way home to pick up a couple of elk that Twig and I had shot the weekend before. We loaded our game in the bomb bay. As we were taking off to go back to Edwards, a fire warning light came on from one of the engines, and as I cut back on the power, I had to laugh. I told Joe, "Hey, if we auger in with all this elk meat, they're gonna think we had the biggest knucklebones they've ever seen." And when it was grapefruit harvest season, I'd fly down to Jackie's ranch in Indio and load up her fruit in a six-hundred-pound drop tank baggage pod. I bent all the regulations and I'm sure I could've been court-martialed a dozen times over.

Andy and I were in the shape of our lives. Hell, we crawled all over the Sierras every chance we got,

working higher and higher into the mountain lakes, some of them so inaccessible there were no trails. It was an ordeal getting up there—we'd call them "four blister treks"—but, man, it was worth it because that's where we fished for golden trout. Not many people knew about these gold-colored trout; they're so delicious that once you eat some, you'd crawl halfway to heaven to have more. Ridley, Russ Schleh, and I discovered goldens by accident while fishing a cold mountain stream during the X-1 days. Jack hooked one and said, "Look at this little bugger. Looks like he's been eating gold nuggets." We caught a batch, fried them up, and just rolled our eyes to heaven. Golden trout are indigenous to the Sierra, but because they're found mostly in the coldest water at the highest elevations, most fishermen couldn't be bothered packing in and out fifty to one hundred miles. But I could.

Looking back, I'd say it was probably a mistake to let Twig Branch in on the secret of the golden trout. Andy and I took him up to one of our fishing holes and cooked him up a batch. The general's face just lit up. Hell, I could see wheels spinning and turning in his head. He had a lot of friends in New Mexico and planned to retire there, and the idea of being a thousand miles from golden trout did not please him. The next thing that happened was Andy, looking damned worried, coming to me and shaking his head. "Jesus, Chuck, I don't know. The guy is a general and he did give me a direct order, but I've got to sign for the airplanes and my neck is really stuck far out." I said, "What in hell are you talking about?" And that was the first I heard about Operation Golden Trout.

If I say General Branch might have gone too far, you can imagine. He decided to transplant the Sierra golden trout into the mountain streams of New Mexico. And he had cooked up his scheme with pals in the New Mexico Fish and Game Department. He authorized Andy to fly up to New Mexico in a four-

engine C-130 cargo airplane used to transport troops and vehicles to pick up his pals in their four-wheel drive that carried special oxygenated containers to hold the golden trout. The trip probably violated half a dozen Air Force, federal, and state regulations; but a general is a general, and we were ordered into action.

And it was top-secret stuff. Andy flew back with the cargo plane in the dead of night, parked in a deserted part of Edwards, and when the cargo doors opened out rolled a New Mexico State Fisheries vehicle. We took off by chopper into the snows of the Sierra high country. We carried special containers to load up baby goldens that hopefully could be nursed to maturity in New Mexico and fed into their streams by spring. We camped for the night in subfreezing temperatures. Here we were, two colonels and two New Mexico game wardens, fishing illegally in a California stream, hoping that a California game warden didn't wander our way and clap us in jail. Andy and I filled three big containers with baby trout and hid them under a footbridge, until the two game wardens discovered what we had done. "Goddamn it," they said, "you guys are out of your minds. That's the first place a California game warden would look."

We choppered back, transferred the babies into oxygenated tanks, loaded them aboard the four-wheel drive which drove up the ramp back into the cargo airplane, and whisked off to New Mexico. General Branch's plan worked perfectly. The fish did fine in a winter nursery and were released into the lakes in the spring. And that's why golden trout can be fished in New Mexico. The sad part is that Twig never lived to enjoy fishing for them there in retirement. He was killed the following year, when his airplane hit a tree in bad weather, coming into Seattle.

But before that tragedy there was almost another, involving me. This occurred a few months after Operation Golden Trout. I had taken General Branch up to Rocky Basin Lakes, about eleven thou-

sand feet up in the Sierra. Andy and I had fished there a lot, but it was a tough haul in by foot and the general arranged with some Army friends to have a Huey chopper drop us off. We stayed a couple of days, and it was *cold* up there, way below freezing. We had skim ice on the lake even at midday. The Army came back for us, and we loaded up the chopper with an icebox full of fish and all our gear. There were three guys on board, pilot, copilot, and crew chief, when General Branch and I crawled into that Huey. I guess we were overloaded for such a high altitude because I no sooner strapped myself into a jump seat in the middle, when we took off, went up about eighty feet, began shaking to pieces, and came down upside down in the middle of that icy lake. I remember seeing water, foam, and stars. The next thing I recall is swimming toward shore, half-frozen to death. The lake was a mass of foam and debris. I saw the ice chest pop to the surface. Next, the crew chief; then the copilot; then the pilot. It seemed like I was treading water for three or four minutes, before General Branch bobbed up to the surface, gasping for air, his eyes bulging. He had been trapped inside that chopper and had to break the plexiglass and go out underneath. He was saved by an air pocket.

We swam to shore and huddled together, shivering. Twig looked at me kind of funny and said, "Do you feel all right?"

I said, "Yeah, not bad. Except my head is burning."

He said, "I don't wonder. I can see your brains, for chrissake."

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"Your whole head is laid open and I can see your brains."

"That can't be," I said, but the blood was pouring down my face.

I had been scalped blasting through the plexiglass of that Huey, the skin from my skull cap laid back in five places. It would later take 138 sutures to

close up that mess. He was looking at the gray bone of my skull and thought it was my brains. He got me to lie down and the crew chief found a first aid kit floating in the wreckage and bound up my head as best he could. But lying down made my head bleed profusely. When I stood up, the bleeding would ease, but I was freezing in my wet clothes. Twig said, "We're about nine miles from Tunnel Meadows airstrip. I'm going on down and call for a rescue chopper. You guys wait here."

Man, it was cold. The three other guys could at least sit down and bunch up, but I had to keep standing or my head would bleed bad. Finally, I said, "Let's get the hell out of here. I can make it down to Tunnel." I had just been up to this lake two weeks before on a backpack trip with Andy and was in real good shape. So we began to trek out. After about four miles, the other guys began to lag, so I went on without them. The trail was all down, which made it tough on the legs but easy on the wind. I did the nine miles in about two-and-a-half hours and arrived at the airstrip just as General Branch had stepped into the phone booth outside the small operations building. He was starting to dial when I tapped him on the shoulder and said, "General Branch." He wheeled around and dropped the phone. He thought I had died up there and that he was confronting my ghost. Finally he blurted, "What in hell are you doing here?" I said, "I just got tired of standing around up there so I walked out."

Edwards flew a Husky H-43 up and I got to the base hospital around five that afternoon. Talk about somebody with a sore head. They shaved the hair off those cuts and I looked like the world's largest baseball. I walked in the door around seven like a damned sultan in a turban. Glennis took one look and didn't even bother to ask what happened. She ran to the telephone because we were about to have a dinner party for six couples, and she wanted to catch them

before they left to come over. "At least you could've called me," she said as I stumbled into bed.

That was my humorous accident. The next one wasn't half as funny.