

FINDING GRUENTH

An F-16 crash was neither the beginning nor the end of this story.

MAJ. Lucas F. Gruenther always wanted to be a fighter pilot. When he spoke at his old high school, he said the movie “Top Gun” inspired him, but his mother thinks he was kidding because that’s the sort of joke he would have made. His uncle flew F-15s and his great-grandfather Alfred M. Gruenther was a four-star Army general. Military service was a family tradition.

In many ways, Gruenther was flying at an early age. He flung himself at soccer balls. He flung himself up rock-climbing routes. He flung himself off ski slopes and bungee jumps and into schoolwork and student government. He flung himself into life.

“Whatever you do, don’t suck. Kick butt,” Gruenther told students when he returned to Tuolumne, Calif.’s, Summerville High School. “Get out there and try hard at everything you do.”

After JROTC and the US Air Force Academy, Gruenther ended up at Aviano AB, Italy, in the 555th Fighter Squadron, the “Triple Nickel.” He was flight lead and served as chief of flight safety for the 31st Fighter Wing. Squadron mates said his enthusiasm was infectious. He taught them to climb, backpack, run, and speak Italian. He pushed them to drop candy bars and eat fresh vegetables for lunch. He’d thank the lowest ranking airman, by name, for keeping the squadron’s F-16s in the air.

On Jan. 28, 2013, Gruenther went missing over the Adriatic Sea during a four-ship night training mission in bad weather. The Italian Coast Guard led a massive search in terrible conditions. At the end of the second day, they found a debris field. On the afternoon of the third day, they found his body.

A thousand people came to Gruenther’s memorial service at Aviano. Among them were his many Italian friends and US Army soldiers he’d supported in combat in Afghanistan. Lt. Col. John Peterson, the 555th FS commander, told them Gruenther knew he was set to start as a flight commander on Feb. 1. What he did not know was he was also going to enter the instructor upgrade program.



LUC HER

By Peter Grier

All photos on these two pages are via a video from Maj. Lucas Gruenther's memorial website: www.lucasgruenther.com.

"Even though 'Gaza' [his call sign] did not become an instructor pilot in the Triple Nickel, he sure did teach us a lot," said Peterson. "Even though he didn't become or hold the title of flight commander in the Triple Nickel, I think the way he led his life, ... he was a flight commander of life. That's why we're here today."

Life in the Air Force can be dangerous. Gruenther exemplifies the men and women willing to run the risks of flying and maintaining high performance jet aircraft to defend the United States, Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III told the 2013 Air Force Association Air Warfare symposium in Orlando, Fla. Welsh talked about Gruenther's life and death and well-attended memorial service. He talked about Gruenther's mother waving goodbye as the No. 3 aircraft pulled up and away out of the missing man formation. He talked about Gruenther's wife, Cassy, who gave birth to their daughter, Serene, the day after the Aviano service.

Serene will never meet her father, but she will know all about him, said Welsh. And she will always be the daughter of an American airman. "So the line goes on. So many of you stand in it, and I'm so honored to stand with you," said Welsh.

Like many who join the military, Gruenther was an athlete as a kid. He loved taekwondo, soccer, and basketball. Partly this was because he also loved his maternal grandfather, Bob Mathias. Mathias twice won the Olympic gold medal in decathlon before becoming an actor and later a US congressman from California. "Luc made lots of lists of things he wanted to do before he died, and on one of his early lists he said he did want to be an Olympic decathlon winner," said his mother, Romel Mathias.

"Fighter pilot" appeared on Gruenther's list at an early age as well. He had posters of jets and model airplanes in his room. "He always wanted to be a pilot," his mother recalled.

His biggest challenge was sitting still. He'd get up early and want to go out and do something.





Reuters photo by Giorgio Benvenuti

She said he'd cut her off. He said he hadn't noticed and apologized. He offered to pump her gas. "They ended up shaking hands and talking almost as friends," said his mother.

Gruenther planned for an Air Force career as thoroughly as he planned to be a better goaltender. He later joked it had to work because he couldn't think of a Plan B. He joined JROTC his junior year at Summerville High and then landed a recommendation from his local congressman for a spot at the Air Force Academy. His aunt, Megan Mathias, lives in Colorado Springs and dropped him off at the start of his first year.

She remembered worrying that he was too free-spirited to adapt to cadet life. "I was hesitant to see him go, and he said, 'Auntie M, I'm fine,' and he just walked up those stairs. He was so excited to start that adventure," she remembered.

At the academy he joined the Wings of Blue parachute team and climbed Colorado's mountains during his free time. He graduated with distinction, and he and wife, Cassy—his high school sweetheart—ended up in Wichita Falls, Tex., where he served as a T-37 primary flight instructor for three years. When he graduated from F-16 training in Ohio, he rolled the dice and put Aviano down as his first choice.

Gruenther (l) and fellow pilot Capt. Sean Hoeltje at a forward operating base in Afghanistan in 2011. An avid outdoorsman, Gruenther tried to start a recycling program in the combat zone. It was not a raging success.

Italian Coast Guard Rear Adm. Francesco Saverio Ferrara points at a map showing the search coordinates for Gruenther's F-16. The Italian Coast Guard led the search for Gruenther, whose body was not recovered for three days due to terrible weather conditions.

And when he did something, he did it all the way. A big, rangy kid, he was a natural goalie. But he got books on goaltending and studied them and then went to a goaltending camp held in the summer in Colorado Springs, Colo., on the Air Force Academy grounds.

He pursued rock climbing with the same passion. By eighth grade, he and friends were going out after school and climbing local crags two or three days a week. He was a committed evangelist for the sport as well. "He was always enthusiastic about getting other people into it," said childhood friend and climbing buddy David Twining.

Sometimes Gruenther's desire to pass along his enthusiasm went pretty far. As an adult he told his mother he wanted to try base jumping. She thought jumping off a cliff with a parachute sounded way too dangerous and tried to talk him out of it. She went so far as to offer to pay for him to travel to Spain if he'd change his mind.

He called her the next day and said he knew she was really upset, but he'd

researched base jumping completely, purchased all the requisite safety gear, and was going with someone who knew what they were doing. "I'm an adult, and I want to do this, and, Mom, I want you to come with me," he said. So she did.

Off to Aviano

Gruenther's family and friends remember him as a listener, someone who was always interested in the other person's point of view. Once he was driving along when suddenly another driver glared and flipped him off and then turned into a gas station. Gruenther followed her in, parked, and went up to her. He apologized and asked if he had offended her.

Photo via Cassy Gruenther



Cassy said she still remembers the day he found out that was where they were headed. "He was jumping around, going, 'We got Italy! We got Italy!'" she said.

Aviano sits near the foothills of the Alps, in northeastern Italy. Gruenther taught his squadron mates the names of the mountains they flew by and their most famous climbing routes. He had a passion for other cultures and languages and worked hard on his Italian.

Cassy said one of his proudest moments was when he went into a local bakery and ordered bread from a woman whose back was to him. When she turned around she was expecting to see a native. She did a double take on seeing that her customer was an American.

Gruenther had a number of good Italian friends, many of them fellow climbers or ultramarathon runners. He and Cassy traveled deeper into the country and around Europe whenever they could. "He loved all of it," she said of their time in Italy.

His fellow pilots remember him as a guy who met new arrivals at the airplane and would throw himself into cleaning the dirty dog crates that had carried their pets.

When the Triple Nickel deployed to Afghanistan in 2011 he tried to start a recycling program in a combat zone. Results were mediocre.

His results in combat were better. In Afghanistan Gruenther's squadron operated out of Bagram Airfield for six months. While deployed he flew 369 combat hours over the course of 17 missions. Gruenther fired 200 rounds of 20 mm ammunition and dropped 10 Joint Direct Attack Munitions in support of coalition troops in combat situations. He eliminated two enemy fighting positions, one cave, and eight enemy fighters.

In one mission Gruenther came to the aid of a US convoy ambushed and stopped by Taliban insurgents. The team was isolated on a dangerous curve in a rural road and taking fire from three directions. Gruenther blew over the firefight with afterburners on to get everybody's attention. That paused the firing but it soon resumed again. So he dropped a 500-pound bomb on a nearby ridge, and the Taliban decided it might be better to melt away.

Days later, he did something his colleagues would call "Gazaesque": He visited the tiny forward operating base of the Army soldiers he'd helped. He

was not sure they had ever met a fighter pilot. "They practically tackled me just to shake my hand and thank me for saving their lives. It was really cool," Gruenther told Summerville High students when he returned to speak in 2012. He said it was the best day of his war.

As a flight safety officer at Aviano, Gruenther spearheaded the implementation of a new safety action program. Ultimately this led to Aviano winning US Air Forces in Europe's 2012 Flight Safety Achievement for Combat Aircraft award. He himself was named the 31st Fighter Wing's staff agencies' 2012 Company Grade Officer of the Year.

I Like People

Late in 2012, Peterson, the 555th commander, was talking with Gruenther in his office and asked him what some of his short-term goals were. Gruenther responded that he really wanted to be a flight commander. "In that uber-confident, almost childlike innocent way, with that big smile, he was like, 'I like people and I like helping people and that's what flight commanders do,'" said Peterson at the memorial service.

Peterson replied that he had no doubt Gruenther would be great at the job, and events were set in motion for him to become a flight commander. Early in January 2013, Peterson told Gruenther that he'd take over as a flight commander in a few weeks. "He was super pumped, super happy," said Peterson. "What I didn't tell him was I was also

Below: Cassy Gruenther embraces her husband, Luc, on the flight line at Aviano after a deployment in 2011. Bottom, l-r: Gruenther's younger brother, Chance Hildreth, mother, Romel Mathias, wife, Cassy, Cassy's mother, Kerry Williams, and Cassy's sister, Janelle Williams, smile during a video at the memorial service for Gruenther at Aviano AB, Italy.



USAF photo



USAF photo by A1C Matthew Lotz

going to put him in the instructor upgrade program. I was going to make him an IP. I was saving that one."

On Jan. 28, 2013, at about 7 p.m., local time, Gruenther and three other F-16 pilots departed Aviano on a nighttime opposed surface attack tactics (called OPSAT) training mission. Planned mission tasks included a run against ground

targets and threat actions against simulated surface-to-air missiles.

The pilots were wearing night vision goggles. Weather was not good. According to Gruenther's family, he and other pilots expressed some concerns about the conditions. Eventually they found a spot where they felt visibility was good enough to make their runs.



At about 7:48 p.m., Gruenther began his threat reaction against a simulated SAM threat. This was to include a “last ditch” maneuver, where a pilot attempts to avoid the incoming missile by visually acquiring it, then maneuvering the aircraft aggressively nose up or nose down, with altitude changes. At 7:49 p.m., Gruenther indicated he was executing his “last ditch” effort. He rolled his F-16 to the right and pulled the nose down, according to the US Air Force Aircraft Accident Investigation Board Report. For the next 10 seconds he maintained the nose-low attitude while continuing to roll to the right.

Gruenther accelerated through 400 knots (460 mph) as his altitude decreased to 17,700 feet. At 7:49 p.m. and 10 seconds his wingman indicated that his reaction against the simulated missile had been successful. Three seconds later, Gruenther replied, “Knock it off, I’m spatial D.”

Gruenther recognized that he had become spatially disoriented. He tried to maneuver to level flight, but seven seconds later he was at 10,000 feet with a descent rate of 57,500 feet per minute. At approximately 7:49 p.m. and 25 seconds he ejected, according to the accident board report. The F-16 was traveling at 655 mph and Gruenther would have been buffeted by extreme winds. The seat twisted when it came out of the aircraft and his helmet came off. He suffered fatal injuries during the ejection.

Accident board president Brig. Gen. Derek P. Rydholm concluded that the

mishap was caused by spatial disorientation, due to a combination of weather conditions, the pilot’s use of night vision goggles, the aircraft’s attitude and high rate of speed, and the pilot’s breakdown in visual scan.

Gruenther’s family said they believe he did everything he could in the circumstances. He was a highly rated pilot who faced a split-second life-and-death decision while warning lights and alarms went off as his aircraft plummeted toward the sea.

A Final Lesson

His mother said Gruenther, being the safety officer, would want others to learn from what happened to him. She said the pilots had discussed the lack of a visible horizon at length but eventually flew anyway. If they had listened to themselves a little more, perhaps they would have turned around and gone home. “Sometimes these guys get so caught up in it, they like to fly, they want to fly. But it might not be worth it to do so,” she said.

Gruenther was posthumously promoted to major. One thing his family members agree on is that he would have stayed in and continued to make the Air Force his career. Cassy said that when he was a T-37 instructor pilot he had a great touch with students, never talking down to them, always encouraging. “I

One of Aviano’s F-16s, painted to reflect Gruenther’s posthumous rank of major, was put on display during the memorial service in a large hangar on the base. Some 1,000 people attended.

think he would have been an amazing leader,” she said.

Besides climbing, photography was one of his hobbies. He left behind hundreds of shots of mountains, rivers, races, and rocks, and of Cassy and his friends.

“If you want to be ambitious like Gaza was ambitious, then just look at some of his photos and go out there and do what he was doing,” said the 555th’s Maj. Travis Winslow at Gruenther’s Aviano service.

Since his death, the family has created the Maj. Lucas Gruenther Memorial Fund. Friends have participated in all sorts of charitable outdoor activities, from mud runs to marathons, in an effort to raise money.

“Our goal is to pay for educational scholarships, maybe for kids who want to go to soccer camp, maybe for kids that want to rock climb,” said Cassy. “It’s that ‘I’m not going to give up, I’m going to get what I want’ attitude. We really want to be able to help people like that.” ■

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