

# Back Where He Belongs

By Drew Crowover

**T**he first Immelman Maneuver went easily enough. Half a loop, then half a barrel-roll, and in an instant Judge Rawlins flew in the opposite direction, 200 feet higher in altitude. Three seconds later, he completed a second Immelman just as smoothly, though as he leveled out after the half barrel-roll, he could feel the energy in his plane and in himself begin to wane.

As he pulled back on the control of the Pitts S-1S, his weakened, 81-year-old left hand loosened, causing the plane to tilt. He regained the control and, against his better judgment, began the third Immelman.

*“Does he have enough power, ladies and gentlemen?! Can he complete the triple Immelman?!”*

The announcer’s enthusiasm boomed over the tens of thousands of aviation lovers who stood either on the grassy infield or on a tiny section of wooden bleachers that they’d waited for hours in the pre-dawn morning to nab. The bleacher bums often photographed air shows for a living, so for better vantage points and paychecks, they sometimes got to the airfields before Judge Rawlins’ summer clerks got to bed.

The Judge heard a tinny version of the announcer’s questions crackle through his headset as he ascended into the cloudless, cerulean sky. He thought of everyone below, all rooting him on, holding their breaths, wondering if the Judge would endure the forces — not just because of his age, but because of the decades that had passed since his last turn in the cockpit. Judge Rawlins clenched his teeth, tightened what remained of the once-formidable muscles in the core of his body, and pushed the antique biplane higher than it should have been able to go.

As he inverted the plane, he felt gravity tug his hair, his clothes, and his dogtags from Korea toward the earth. He took in one of his favorite sights, one that he hadn’t seen in nearly 50 years, and one that he had given up on ever seeing again: the world flipped upside-down. Verdant green fields, crisscrossed with matte, pitch-black landing strips and dotted with silver, gleaming aerodromes, replaced the heavens. In place of the earth blazed a deep, brilliant blue.

The S-1S vibrated and the aluminum engine began to stall. He expected this. Reluctantly, he said goodbye to the inverted world and turned the control sharply to the right for the half barrel-roll. He completed it and fought to straighten out the plane. His hands and forearms shook as his grip on the control continued to weaken. The power in his plane and in him was nearly exhausted.

Judge Rawlins completed the third Immelman at 50 knots, just before the engine sputtered and died. The dogtags slid down the Judge’s chest and lay against his sternum. As he steadied the plane, it lurched forward, jamming his head back into the seat. His vision narrowed and blurred. His ears rang as

though tuning forks had been shoved in them. It took a conscious effort to breathe in, and then another to exhale. The plane slowed to a crawl, 2,680 feet above the crowd.

*“He did it, ladies and gentlemen! A triple Immelman! Put your hands together, loud enough for him to hear!”*

The spectators probably thought that their cheers were strictly for show because of the plane’s distance, but due to the muted engine, their claps, yells, and whistles reached the pilot. As he regained his focus, both visually and mentally, the exultant cacophony passed through him and brought him more joy than he had felt in years.

He deviated from the script and let his plane fall freely to the ground. The pistons waited for him to engage the throttle. He released his hands from the control and shook his arms about the cabin to get some blood flowing and to return some feeling to his numb fingers.

The plane’s nose hurtled toward the earth like a lawn dart. The Judge’s sole view through the windshield was of the green field

below. To excite the crowd, he flipped the yellow switch. Two streams of white smoke billowed from the tail. He tilted the plane slightly, causing it to spiral and slow. The white trails followed, creating giant corkscrews in the sky. He was glad that Anne had died a week ago. Had she been in the crowd watching him plummet like a wounded dove, his propeller still as a statue, that alone probably would have killed her on the spot.

Ever since the crash in 1978 that put Judge Rawlins in a coma for a week, Anne had hated the idea of his returning to the cockpit. “I know you love flying,” she’d say every 10 years or so when the argument would come up, “but I love having you as a husband. Your kids love having you as a father. The people love having you as a judge. Please, no more flying.”

“Fine,” he’d say. She was right; he did love flying. But he loved her more. If she didn’t want him to fly, then he wouldn’t, although he would periodically give her the opportunity to change her mind.

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Last week, at the end of four months of hospice care, when the cancer completed its quest to ravage half of Anne’s organs, Judge Rawlins held her frail, bony hands in his own frail, bony hands and prayed. With each pulse that he felt, he wondered if it would be her last. For two hours, the beats of her heart became fainter, softer, and less frequent, until they stopped without ceremony. He clasped her hands together and laid them on the quilt that she’d sewn back when their kids were still kids.

As Judge Rawlins sat next to her body, lifeless now for the first time since he’d introduced himself to the young, fair-skinned





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blonde at Carl Stewart's ranch 56 years ago, he felt like he should be crying. He called the nurse into the bedroom. "She's gone," he said with much effort and little volume as he looked at the family portrait that hung on the wall. The nurse put her hand on his shoulder and remained silent. Though she had worked at their house daily for months, caring solely for his ailing wife, now he was the one who received her comfort. The Judge thought about the nurse and how compassionately she had treated Anne. He wondered how she could devote her life to caring for the dying, to making the disintegration of life as comfortable as it could possibly be. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

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Two days after Anne died, their daughter, Robin, took Judge Rawlins to the federal courthouse in which he had presided since President Ford appointed him. The Judge didn't have any pressing business in his chambers, but both he and Robin agreed that some time in his fortress of solitude would do him well.

The Judge squirmed in the new Swedish ergonomic desk chair that had recently been sent to replace his well-worn, gloriously non-ergonomic desk chair. "Thank you," he said, smiling to Robin as she set a cup of dark, steaming tea on his desk.

She smiled back. "You're welcome! And with just a little sugar."

The Judge's eyes widened. "Good girl! Daddy raised you right."

"You certainly did. And mom did a darn good job, too."

Robin watched as her dad nodded his head in agreement, broke eye contact as he lost himself in thought, and looked down at his thick, pine desk, fingering the stack of mail that had piled up.

"Should I even ask about the voicemails and emails?" Robin said.

"Oh, I can't even imagine," the Judge said, laughing. "I'll get to those after I get to these, which means I'll probably be 90 by the time I'm all caught up."

Robin loved seeing her dad sustain an effort to laugh and smile. She left him to his desk while she read in the corner in the brown leather chair, bathed in the sun. Judge Rawlins looked up periodically as his mature, loving daughter, the grandmother of his great-grandchildren, giggled at whatever she was reading. Some things don't change: the leather chair in the corner, Robin in a ponytail curled up reading, her laugh. The only change is that instead of reading a book, Robin now reads her novels on a computer the size of a sheet of paper.

After two hours of quiet togetherness, Judge Rawlins and Robin took their cups down the hall to the break room. They chatted about who they'd heard from since Anne's death, surprising themselves with names that hadn't been mentioned in decades. They returned to the chambers, Robin to get her purse, the Judge to get his overstuffed briefcase. As they left, the Judge opened one of the doors to the vertical curio cabinet in which dozens of mementos from the Judge's life resided. "Robin?" he said. "I need to tell you something."

Robin spun around in the doorway. "Yes?"

Judge Rawlins reached into the curio and pulled out his goggles and dogtags from the Korean War. "Next week is the air show at the base. I made some phone calls, and I'm going to fly in it."

"You're *what*?" Robin scowled and grew red. "You haven't flown since the '70s! What are you thinking? And you're eighty-freakin'-one years old!" She shook her head and crossed her arms. "No way. I'm sorry, but I can't let you."

"Honey, I'm not asking for your permission," Judge Rawlins said. "I'm telling you what I'm going to do. I know how old I am, and I know how long it's been since I've flown a plane." He tucked the goggles and dog tags into his coat pocket. "What am I thinking? I'm thinking, 'I promised your mom that I wouldn't fly as long as she was alive.' Now that she's gone, and precisely because I am eighty-freakin'-one years old, I'm going to fly."

"Come on, Daddy," Robin pleaded, as though she were seven. "I don't want to plan two funerals in one week."

"That's not fair, baby," the Judge said. He put his hand on her head and ran his fingers over her graying hair. "First, I'm getting a physical that morning by an Air Force doctor. If they say I can't fly, I won't. Second, I'll be in the golf cart of planes." Robin laughed and held back a tear. "You know how Arnold Palmer leads off the Masters with a simple shot, and former ballplayers throw out an easy first pitch? That's what I'll be doing. I'll be in a basic plane, flying around a little, nothing fancy. Promise."

Robin worried about her father. That a doctor would check him out beforehand comforted her, but doctors can't guarantee that he will react quickly enough in an emergency or that he will land safely. The Judge couldn't survive another crash like the one in '78. However, Robin knew the futility of arguing with him.

"Promise?" she asked.

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As the plane hurtled to the ground, corkscrewing, releasing two white spaghetti-like strands of smoke from behind, Judge Rawlins strained to guide the rudder to the left to halt the spin. His biceps quivered as he forced the plane to submit to his will. When it steadied into a simple dive, the Judge held the anti-spin controls and reached for the throttle. He waited a few seconds to give the crowd something to worry about, then punched the throttle forward and yanked back on the elevator.

Closer to the ground than he honestly would have liked to have been, the Judge leveled off and zoomed over the crowd. To his left and right and all around, tens of thousands of spectators cheered him on. Judge Rawlins looked up at the sky — the endless sky in which he was once again a part. He eased the control toward his chest, took a deep breath, and flew straight at the sun.



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