



WING and a prayer

Waldo Waldman on his amazing metamorphosis from angst-ridden child to combat pilot to motivational speaker.

By Carla Lucchetta
Photos courtesy of
Waldo Waldman

Imagine growing up claustrophobic and afraid of heights—then seeking out a career that forces you into enclosed spaces, high above the clouds, sometimes in the pitch black, sometimes in a combat zone. That's what Rob "Waldo" Waldman did when he became an F-16 fighter pilot. And 65 combat missions in Iraq and Serbia later, Waldman is the perfect person to deliver at least 70 keynote and motivational speeches a year on what it takes to be a winner.

The author of *Never Fly Solo*—the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and Amazon.com best-selling companion book to his talks—has pledged to give a percentage of his sales proceeds to veteran charities such as Wounded Warriors, The American Legion, Snowball Express, and

the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. He donates time and speaking engagements to the Israeli Air Force Center and Foundation, an organization that provides a community for air force families with bereavement programs, social services, and legacy education for children of air force personnel. And not only is Waldman committed to mentoring children, young pilots, and inspiring business teams, he is also loyal to his roots, as well as to his past and fellow military comrades and their families.

So, how did he do it? How did he overcome his fears and create the life he has today?

Born on Long Island to a former Navy man-turned-airplane mechanic and a stay-at-home mother, Waldman is one of four children, with an identical twin brother, Dave,

whom he calls his "ultimate wingman." He pinpoints the defining moment that sealed his fate to one of the first times his father, then head of maintenance for El Al Airlines at Kennedy Airport, took him there to watch planes take off. Waldman didn't want to fix them, though; he wanted to fly them. How he'd be able to do this when he couldn't even

studied psychology and Spanish and when the time came to make a choice between teaching and further training to become a fighter pilot, not surprisingly, he stepped outside his comfort zone and chose the greater challenge.

In *Never Fly Solo*, Waldman outlines the basic principles he learned in 11 years of flying with the U.S. Air Force, beginning with "Push It

Up"—the axiom connotes making a commitment and living up to it, no matter what. "Chair Flying" suggests that being prepared and rehearsing contingencies in business leads to confidence; "Check Six" is the idea that no matter how committed and prepared you are, there will always be blind spots, and that's when you need to find and cultivate mutually trusting relationships with wingmen, people who will always tell you the truth and have your back (he says the three most important words in life are "I need help").

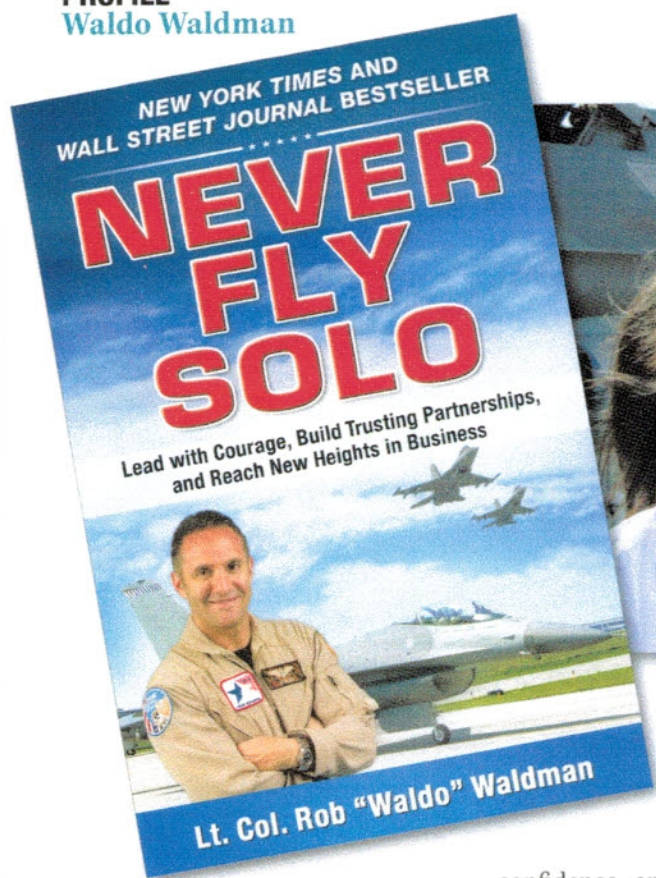


Waldman before mission in Kosovo.

step into a closet for more than a few seconds, or manage the childhood pleasure of taking a roller coaster ride, was anybody's guess. "Passion trumps fear," he says in retrospect. True to the perfectionism that would define his life and later his career, he excelled in high school academics as well as in athletics and music. So when the time came for college, Waldman worked hard to get accepted to the U.S. Air Force Academy, which in itself was no easy feat. The Academy has high standards, but luckily Waldman's parents laid down a sound foundation for their children. "They taught us to work hard and challenged us to think 'outside our cockpit,'" he says, using the air force lingo that peppers his books and motivational talks. "They showed us how to be unique and independent and not to sell out to mediocrity." In addition to air force training, Waldman

The book continues to outline Waldman's real-life triumphs and pitfalls, and that's the main reason his advice makes so much sense. He doesn't shy away from telling his audience—whether he's speaking to a roomful of business leaders or veterans, or giving one-on-one mentoring—the plain truth about what he's been through and why he knows that integrity, focus, transparency in communication, personal connection, a balanced life, service to others and above all, courage, is what you need to excel in your mission, whatever it may be.

Perhaps the most poignant story in his book is in a chapter titled "Abort, Abort: The Courage to Quit," when he describes, after numerous dangerous missions over war zones, the difficult decision to step out of his plane on a noncombat flight from Spain to the U.S. due to a lack of



L-R: Wife Dana and Waldman.

confidence and overwhelming fear. "I walk back to Base Operations nauseated, embarrassed, and ready to get railed at by my wingmen...I explain to [them] that I barely slept last night, had a pounding headache and felt exhausted," he recalls. "I couldn't risk falling asleep while heading home and being a safety hazard to myself or the formation: 'I'm sorry, guys, I just couldn't do it.' Sure, all this is true. But I don't tell them that the real reason I couldn't sleep was because of my anxiety and my secret fear of having a claustrophobic panic attack over the Atlantic Ocean." Waldman goes on to explain why his wingmen didn't see him as a loser, as he expected, but respected him for knowing when his condition would put the mission at risk. This is a perfect example of how Waldman's honesty wins people over in his motivational work, and explains why he's a much sought-after speaker who has reached the exclusive ranks of Certified Speaking Professional (only 7 percent of all speakers attain this level). He is also past president of the National Speakers Association in Georgia, where he makes his home, and was distinguished in 2008 as a Top 40 Under 40 businessman.

After 11 years in the air force, including flying and instructing, Waldman was hungry for a new challenge and more creativity in his life. So, taking advice from his twin brother, a successful salesman, he entered the business world. He'd received his M.B.A. at night school, stayed on

part time in the air force reserve, and took a job as a business manager at the Israeli technology company SimiGon, which makes PC-based virtual reality pilot simulators and training systems. From there he went to work with his brother in a financial consulting firm, and then he began selling on commission part time for a seminar company. After a few months he decided to try his hand at creating his own seminars. "Making the transition was challenging. After being in the military, where you become trained to get things done, I also had to learn to ease up a bit. I also knew I had a story to tell."

It wasn't long before Waldman understood that his personal experiences in the air force and the training itself helped him prepare for the next phase in his life, and could therefore help other military veterans transition to civilian life. As well as donating all his advance profits from *Never Fly Solo* to veteran organizations, he also writes for venues like military.com about how to leverage military training and technical skills in the marketplace. He gives practical advice on everything from preparing résumés to interview skills and how to network, or "wingwork." "Soldiers and veterans of our country have donated their wings temporarily, and many have given them entirely. There are no more passionate people than those that have served their country. They know about challenge, accountability, courage, and trust. They're examples to all."

The image that emerges when watching Waldman's website video clips is of an energetic, motivated man inspiring his audience to their feet for a rousing chorus of "Push It Up." You can see how he overcame his fears and trepidations to become the kind of leader and wingman

his air force cohorts could trust and respect. But speaking to him one on one, a different kind of person shines through, no less passionate and honest, just a little more, well...reserved and reflective. Recently married, Waldman admits that his workaholic tendencies and perhaps a new kind of fear have caused him to take on too much. "I don't want to make excuses for it," he says candidly. "I do believe in relationships and love and it's something I want in my life. It's a matter of focusing my energy there and not running from it." But this isn't a man still searching for an identity; he knows who he is. "Who I am, is a committed, courageous, very passionate person," Waldman confirms. "Whatever I do, I have to be in that environment. Every speech I give is like a fighter pilot mission. If I could overcome my fear to fly an F-16 and live my dream, then I believe others can do the same." **LM**

For more information, visit
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L-R: Twin brothers Waldo and Dave Waldman.

