

Forty Six Years a Fighter Pilot

Address given by Brigadier General Robin Olds, USAF,
2ND ANNUAL WESTERN AEROSPACE HISTORICAL
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Brig. Gen. Robin Olds arriving at the Symposium Awards Banquet and being greeted by (l-r) Birch Matthews, Symposium Chairman; James O'Reilly, American Fighter Pilots Assoc; Col. Douglas Logan, USAF (Ret); Lt. Col. William J. Horvat, USAF (Ret) and Editor of A.A.H.S. JOURNAL; Lt. Cdr. Dan Macintyre, USNR. In background at left, J.J. Smith.

(All photos - Paul Quappe).

Editor's Note: General Olds was the keynote speaker at the Honors and Awards Banquet. His fame and experience as a fighter pilot complements the theme of the Symposium - A HALF CENTURY OF FIGHTER AIRCRAFT DEVELOPMENT. Colonel Beirne Lay, Jr., USAF (Ret.), was the Master of Ceremonies and Denham S. Scott, A.A.H.S., presented awards to honored guests whose contributions marked milestones in fighter aircraft development.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have only two qualifications for asking your indulgence in listening to me this evening. You have gathered to talk about, to listen to, and to think about 50 years of development of fighter aviation. One qualification is that for 46 of those 50 years I've been a fighter pilot - first in spirit, then in actuality.

One of the first sounds I can remember was the slapping clang of the halyards against the steel flagpole at Langley Field at night and the sound of the old P-1's being warmed up by the crew chiefs before dawn. These were my first memories and I suppose with those very early conscious impressions there was implanted in me the desire to be part of that scene.

As a youngster, I had many heroes. I was a very impressionable young man. And I must say to you, in all sincerity, that I am humble tonight because I'm in the company of men that I have held as my heroes all of my life. Jimmy Mattern, for one - when I was nine years old he ranked right after G-8 and his Battle Aces in my esteem.

My father was General Billy Mitchell's aide, and I remember General Mitchell and all he stood for. I remember Robert George leading his squadron over Langley Field on a Saturday morning. He would get the whole gang and put them into a huge Lufberry and then pull up and dive through in trail, one after the other, down through the middle of that circle, then up again in a huge loop. To me, he and his men were like gods.

I remember the good old days when my father's friends would gather. Oh, how the stories flowed. And how that little boy, crouched in the dark at the top of the stairs, listened with two great big ears, absorbing and drinking in every word and every song - all the bad ones and all the good ones. I think my own war stories were enhanced tremendously by the stories I heard in those days.

I remember people coming to our house - people like Bob Williams, Ernst Udet, Roscoe Turner and Paul Mantz. I remember particularly that a dear friend of my father was Elliott White Springs - many of you have probably read his books. He was a great hero of mine. General Tooe Spaatz, who was then a major, lived nearby, and I used to chase one of his daughters in the front door and out the back. He'd never even look up from his newspaper!

I remember the thrill - the ultimate thrill to me - when Captain Eddie Rickenbacker had dinner with us one night. My father asked me, "Why don't you say hello?" I couldn't because I was absolutely tongue-tied. I remember great men in my small circle of acquaintances as a young boy - Gen-

eral Frank M. Andrews, McNarney, General Hugh Knerr. I could go on and on — Ken Walker, Major Eglin, Gilkenson, Dargue, A.Y. Smith, Harold George, C.V. Haynes, General Kepner

I remember a lot of youngsters too. Among them was tonight's toastmaster — a very difficult act to follow — Beirne Lay. Beirne was something of a hero of mine, too. I'll never forget the excitement at Langley the day the news went around that a B-6 (that was the Keystone Bomber) had just landed on top of one of the new barracks, and the pilot was, at that very moment, struggling under a parachute out in Back River. Of course that pilot was Beirne Lay! I don't know why he jumped out of the thing, or how he even got through all the wires and struts, but I do remember my first thought at the time was, "My Gosh, I hope he is not being stung by all those jellyfish."

All of which, ladies and gentlemen, is my way of trying to justify my first qualification for standing before you this evening — my long, long association with the early pioneers. I grew up with aviation in my blood. I chose to go the fighter route, and I've been a most fortunate man in having wanted it, desired it, dreamed of it, strived for it and lived it for forty-six years.

My first qualification isn't very much in this crowd. Because tonight I feel sincerely that I stand among the great, the greatest of the great. The men of vision, the pioneers, the men of courage, the men of great intelligence, of perseverance and determination, who fought against odds to give me, as a simple user of their products, the fulfillment of my life's ambition. To all of you — Mr. Breese, Mr. Burgess, and although he is not here Mr. Neumann, and Mr. Schmued (I've flown your products), you're my heroes, my gods.

My second qualification for being here tonight is to try to tell you, in some way, what you have done for those of us who think so very, very highly of you, and who, quite frankly, worship at your shrine. It wasn't for me to contribute. It was only for me to use — to employ the products of every riveter, every designer, every engineer, and every technician who produced those lovely fighter aircraft.

Recently, after a span of twenty-two years between combat missions, it was my great, great privilege to command a fighter wing in combat. That had been my goal, my aspiration, my ideal, my earnest hope, my fondest wish, all of my career. It was the greatest experience of my life. You men gave that to me. I'm grateful.

I'd like to tell you what you also gave to a lot of other people. Perhaps I'm just very lucky to be able to say I commanded a fighter wing in combat later than any of the rest of you — and that's really not much. But I would like to tell you that as great as you men are, as memorable as your feats and accomplishments are, you will be pleased to know a new breed is coming right along behind you.

As an old man honored to command this new breed, let me reassure you that they are tough, fine and the most highly motivated, patriotic, loyal American kids. They are smart, dedicated, determined and ambitious. I want to reassure you that you've got some very worthy successors, young men whom you've inspired, who are coming right along that road behind you. You can be very proud of

them. Right now I'm working with about 3,400 of them. They're the smartest kids I've ever seen in my life. They're absolutely great. And so too are the men, even in these turbulent times, who are flying your equipment, using your engines, your electronics, the products of your brains and your heart. These youngsters are magnificent; so don't fear for the future. I'll try to tell you just a little bit about what they're doing. Many of you know this. Maybe you will indulge me in one or two short war stories. I'll start off by saying to you, Mr. Holtzem, "Curse you, Red Baron." This is a silly thing about the little dog on top of his doghouse who went out daily to fight the Red Barron.

For some perverse reason, Snoopy was our patron saint. His battle cry of "Curse you, Red Baron" was always a cry of anguish because he had just been shot down again. I think this was why we associated with Snoopy. This is a very, very peculiar war going on, and an awful lot of us were being shot down. It was a little different in World War II. I seem to remember that if you were shot down in those days and managed to get out again, they sent you home for some reason or other. But I had a kid who was shot down twice in one morning and flew the next day. I'm telling you about the caliber, the spirit, the quality of these young men. They absolutely filled my heart to the bursting point at times. "Curse you Red Baron." We used to sing endless choruses of that catchy tune — "ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty or more! The bloody Red Baron rolled up the score!" Snoopy knocked the news right off the front, and always when the going was roughest.



Master of Ceremonies Beirne Lay, Col., USAF (Ret) introduces Gen. Olds who gave the keynote address at the 2nd Annual Western Aerospace Historical Symposium.



Brig. Gen Robin Olds at the speaker's podium.

I flew, as Beirne mentioned, a few missions in World War II. They were fascinating, very interesting, and many of them really got your attention. But this war is very different. It varies from place to place. The only part of it that I know is north of the 17th parallel. I must tell you about it so that I may let you understand what these youngsters are doing today with such spirit, such great morale, and such great hearts. I say in all honesty, every single one of the 57 missions I flew in the vicinity of Hanoi was as rough as the roughest missions I flew in World War II. It's a vastly different war. Thank heavens we have the equipment that you provide and the support that you give us.

Speaking of that equipment, here are some interesting observations on the performance of sophisticated gear and the application of old tactics. You gave us an airplane that can exceed Mach 2. Yet, with rare exception, very few times did we exceed Mach 1 in our strike operations. Instead, the power inherent in that capability was translated into an amazing pay load at considerable range. The speed potential carried us in swiftly and, once free of our bombs, gave us an unbeatable maneuvering potential. We also fell back on basic and simple tactics — mass, flight and element integrity, radio discipline, mutual support, swift action and visual coverage. I smile when I say this, for there was a time, not ten years ago, when the suggestion of a need for training in squadron-sized formations, for maintenance of qualification in delivering conventional ordnance and for keeping current in aerial combat tactics was enough to get one laughed out of the conference room. One was a dreamer, a starry-eyed romanticist, a ghost from the past. The name of

the game was nuclear deterrence. Everyone, even fighter pilots, worked at it.

What wonders the harsh necessities of reality can produce! Visualize, if you will, a mission to the Delta in 1967. F-105s and F4s rise from their three bases to meet the sleek KC-135 tankers already waiting over the Gulf of Tonkin. In flights of four, the fighters rendezvous each with a particular tanker. They are expertly guided by the unsung radar-men of the tactical control system. All the while refueling is in progress, the tanker crews are working a delicate problem of split second timing and navigation. Then, magnificently, just moments short of the exact second, the entire force is in precise order, at exact position and altitude — all the fighters have to do is drop off and down — and the strike force is formed in predetermined order — in WING formation. That's the way we went in because it proved to be the best way — in spite of those who didn't understand back in 1958.

There were also those who said that fighters would never dogfight again and that guns were obsolete. That too was in the late '50s and early '60s. During the longest dogfight of my career (May, 1967), I had time to think somewhat wryly of that pronouncement and wish fervently that it had been right. I was not only doing the unthinkable, but I surely needed a gun to help me do it. I had occasion to remember that pronouncement many times in 1967.

The pilots were faced with some very interesting problems. For every mission you flew up north you had to plan that you were going to be shot at heavily. This could take many different forms — basically three: bullets, missiles and MIGs. So all of your tactics had to be designed to cope with the total threat at every point of your ingress and egress. Because of the fact that the northern missions always required a refueling, you were somewhat limited in the amount of force you could use, even though you may have had it back on the home ramp. You couldn't put in the force that you may have liked, because you were tanker-limited to some extent. So we developed tactics that were surprisingly similar to those of World War II, and they were successful.

I read a piece in the "Stars and Stripes" attributed to someone in the Department of Defense — this was about the middle of the summer of 1967. In effect, the spokesman declared to the world that SAM's didn't bother him because they had shot an awful lot of them and they hadn't hit too many airplanes. All of us were tempted to let him know that, although the MIGs and SAMs didn't scare him, they scared the hell out of us. In the final analysis, in addition to the electronics, countermeasures and all the other goodies, it's still a pilot's eyeballs and skill that permit him to operate in that environment of flak, MIGs and SAMs. Even though you may be jamming with some measure of success against the enemy's capabilities to detect you, to launch his missile and to guide it to you — nevertheless, when he launches 38 of them at you in the period of about two minutes, you are compelled to dodge because the odds are against you, and Russian Roulette is an idiot's game.

I, for one, haven't the courage to sit there and watch a missile coming at me, growing larger every instant of time, and say to myself, "That's all right, that electronic gadget

down under my wing is going to take care of it." No, Sir! I'm a prudent man. I make a move. We all had to. This is something that you must cope with every instant of time over North Vietnam. It is a test range.

The MIG's were worrisome. However, we liked them because they kept our morale up. All fighter pilots have a love for aerial battle. It's a great feeling to launch a missile at a MIG, even if the missile misses. At least you feel useful. After the mission you can tell terrible war stories about what a scrap you had. I'll just say that the MIGs were surprisingly good and oftentimes very aggressive. I submit to you that our aircraft are better. The power that gives the capability to fly Mach 2 translates into a useful load-carrying capacity of two 370-gallon tanks, six 750-pound bombs, two 500-pound bombs, four Sparrow missiles, two Sidewinders and an ECM pod. Now you don't go Mach 2 with all that under your F4! So the MIG17s were a real challenge. They were flown by excellent pilots by the way — really excellent pilots. Somebody asked me, "Who's flying those MIGs?" I said, "Gee, I never flew up alongside one of them and asked him. I don't know!" But they were tough.

To show you how tough they are, I've seen a MIG 17 split-s from about 2,000 feet going at a great rate of knots. I watched it with amazement, I just couldn't believe it. One of the few times I went supersonic in that whole year occurred when I was firing a Sparrow at a MIG which I thought I had dead-to-rights. I launched my missile within all parameters and even had time to check my own speed. I was going 1.2 Mach. As the missile accelerated the MIG started turning. You've got to understand this — this MIG made a head-on firing pass at me. Now that's the truth, I couldn't believe my eyes. I told my backseater, "Look at him! You know what he's going to do? He's going to shoot at us!" And he did! The MIG 21 has a great "press." It's a glamorous looking little bird and, if used properly, can be dangerous. But I don't think they ever got the "hang" of the thing. In spite of all the energy/maneuverability curves and everything I've read in all the books and technical publications, an F4 can 'hack' a MIG 21 below 15,000 feet any day. It's not easy! You've got a tremendous fight on your hands. It would help, of course, if you had a gun on board. It's kind of discouraging sometimes to run out of missiles. You want to drop your tail hook and try to knock the MIGs' canopy off. Basically, it (the MIG21) was a rather disappointing airplane. It seldom lived up to its "press." Thank goodness! We had a great respect for the MIG 17s, though.

Flak! I'm not even going to talk about flak. Many of you old-timers have seen flak over Berlin; you've seen the Ruhr. You've watched the B-17s hanging up there, churning along at about 180 per — you know, full-bore — and it would take forever to pass a given point. So the gunners on the ground had plenty of time to barrage. Oh, boy! How they'd barrage! Our great, courageous bomber pilots just bored right on in, as if they were an irresistible power. I couldn't believe my eyes when I first saw that flak in World War II. But over North Vietnam — by the time we got across the Red River — we were knocking off about 550 knots indicated. When we got to the target and identified it, everybody rolled in at once. Very often we had as many as 12 F-4s and 105s

going down the chute, all at the same time. Our roll-in speed was at about 560 knots from about 16,000 feet. You didn't have to worry about somebody running over you, because you were already going just as fast as you could and he couldn't possibly catch you.

Even in that short span of time the entire strike force would spend over the target, I've seen the sky turn just as black as many of you have seen it over Europe — the North Vietnamese have that many guns. And their guns are more accurate than the old guns of World War II.

"... There are lessons to be learned."

Some interesting things have come out of this war that will write a page in aerial history. There are lessons to be learned, but it's going to take a long time to translate this in terms of equipment and men.

First Lesson: The young kids of today. They are better trained than you and I were; they're smarter; they've got just as much guts; they're just as patriotic and just as loyal. That's the first lesson.

Second Lesson: We have to remember that when we are against a very determined enemy, a very capable enemy, a well-supplied and well-equipped and courageous enemy, it takes a combination of excellent equipment, fine men and good tactics to do the job. You have to fall back on basics and the simpler the better.

We had a lot of sophisticated gear in the F4C and the F105. With rare exception, you didn't have time to use all the sophisticated gear when you were over the barrel. Simplicity and speed of execution were paramount. For instance, we flew 24 hours around the clock and many of our missions were up in the Delta at night. How did you get in? Very simple — headquarters agreed that you should go in only when the moon was at a certain angle and a certain degree of fullness, and you didn't have too many clouds hanging about. Under these conditions, you'd sneak in through the mountains, keeping the front seat completely blacked out. (No lights in the cockpit whatsoever.) The kid in the back seat handled the throttles and watched the compass, and the guy up front flew the bird and served as your terrain avoidance gear.

You poked your nose over the Delta and got down to about 50 feet at 500 knots at night. The land/water contrast of the moon shining on the rice paddies and the canals gave you your horizon. Pretty soon you didn't need that, because the flak started coming up and you had all the horizon you could use. The navigation had to be precise — you pulled up to 200 feet to drop your bombs when you arrived at the target.

Equipment sophistication in that environment? You could go in through the same mountains in an advanced airplane using the gear which provides terrain avoidance, but very probably not as low as you could fly if you were doing it yourself. You'd go in over the Delta at an altitude surely not less than something like 250 feet. In the F4, we pulled up to 200 feet to bomb and got right back down again. You say, "What are you idiots doing at 50 feet at night?" Because we all wanted to survive. Because you

could not go at 500 or 1,000 feet. Because night time no longer works to your advantage. Night doesn't hide you. It makes it difficult for you; and it doesn't faze the enemy defenses.

When a SAM is launched at you at night you can see it, all right, but you don't know how far away it is. In some instances, you can't really tell its relative motion to your position and direction of travel, which is most important in keeping a missile from pelting you. Then when the sustainer motor burns out at night, the missile doesn't have running lights, so you don't know where it is. It is a very eerie sensation to know that these things are stalking you and you can't see them — except when they burst in a hideous blast of orange flame. I have been chased by SAMs down below 100 feet in daylight, so don't tell me they can't track you below certain altitudes. I'm sorry! They can! And do! So the only way to get in at night is to get down below 50 feet. That's not a very sophisticated way to do it, but it's the only effective way, and even that is not very safe.

I tried to remind my troops, and those for whom we worked, that the CBI (China, Burma, India theater) was the place where they invented the Ground Observer Corps. It was the place where they had little people up on the hills who said, "Here come the Japs." Well, it's working in reverse now. I think some of the same spotters are still there. You can have all the radar you like, but those same little guys are still up there on mountain tops, eating their rice and bananas, and you can't sneak past them. There is no way. I know! I tried!

I was directed to drop bombs on the blast furnaces at

Thai Nguyen in daylight, in bad weather. It was a very fascinating trip. We sneaked in when the visibility was about $\frac{1}{4}$ to 1 mile at most, let down in a part of the map where it says, "relief data inaccurate." That was very encouraging. We were some 1,200 feet below the reported tops of the mountains that were all around us before I saw the ground. We immediately had to pull up over a crest, then back down the other side. Anyway, we made it down through the clouds, broke out at 800 feet over the Red River. It was on time-and-distance — 3,500 foot hills half a mile behind us. Three of us proceeded into the target at about 20 feet. They didn't start shooting at us until we were about 15 miles out. That's where the first perimeter of guns were. They weren't worried. They knew we were coming, they knew where we were going — they had it all figured out.

The first two bullet holes through my airplane (we were flying at 20 feet at about 550 knots) were from the top to the bottom. They were shooting from rock hummocks which were all around. It was very difficult, under these particular circumstances, to surprise anybody.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I don't mean to talk about what I did. I'm merely trying to illustrate to you what your youngsters are doing; and I say, once again, these are my only qualifications for standing here. One: I've been a fighter pilot in my heart for 46 years; and Two: I'm privileged to report to people whom I hold in deepest respect that your accomplishments are known by the troops for whom you make their operations and daily lives possible. I'd like to speak for them and thank you, gentlemen. You're the greats of this country of ours today.



Gen. Olds and Max Holtzem, former pilot of Jasta 16, German Air Force in WWI, discuss Eugene Clay's painting displayed in Banquet Room at Symposium.