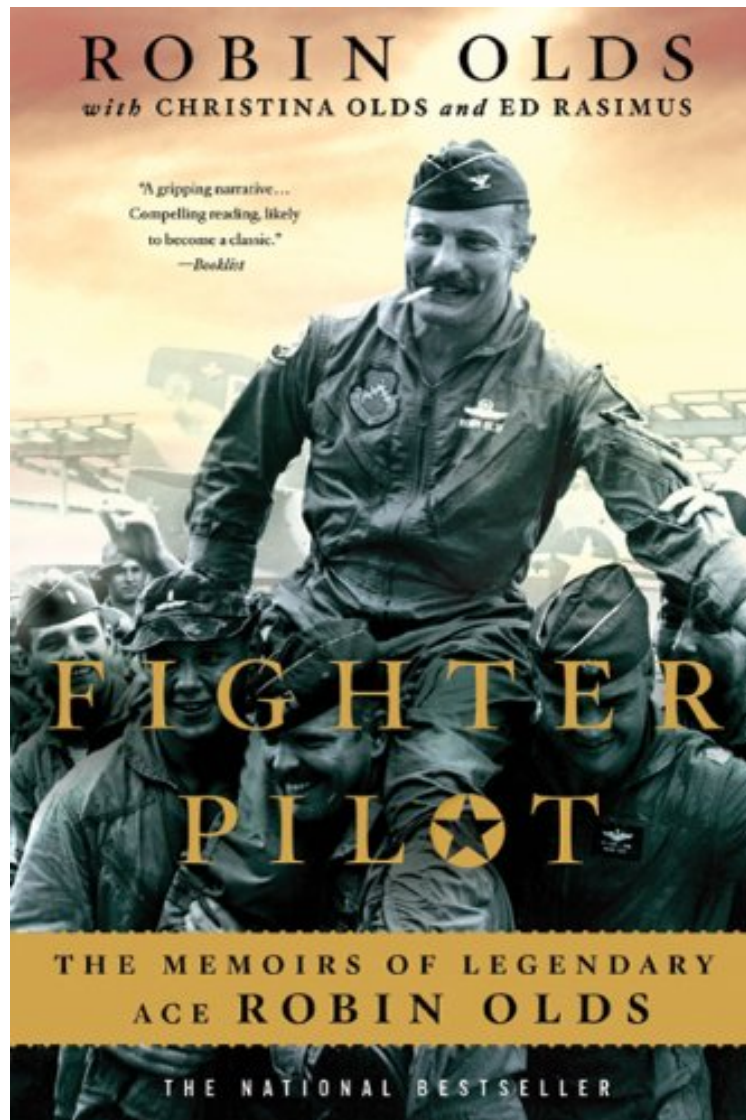


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## Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace Robin Olds

*Christina Olds, Ed Rasimus, Robin Olds*

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**Christina Olds, Ed Rasimus, Robin Olds : Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace Robin Olds** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Fighter Pilot: The Memoirs of Legendary Ace Robin Olds:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. A classic you can't put down if you enjoy action and what heroism is all about.By Sherman A. Thompson.. Probably among the ten best books I've ever read, and at my age (83) I've read a

lot of 'em. There's so much good about this book I hardly know where to start. I was so impressed with both Robin Olds' exploits and the way the book was written I bought two more as loaners for friends, who were equally impressed. This is one of those books that will keep you up late at night and destroy your daily routine because it is hard to put down. I learned much about the air wars of WW2 and Viet-Nam, the West Point "old-boy" network, the dysfunctional way the Pentagon and DOD works, and the way a true hero bends the rules when necessary. ... Can't recommend this book high enough as a combination of entertainment, history, and the story of a true hero. Patton and Olds would have understood one another. Olds himself, using his collection of notes, completed most of the book before passing away before final completion. The book was finished and final edited posthumously by his daughter and another combat experienced fighter pilot who helped keep things technically straight. I can't rate this book high enough. You won't be disappointed. 7 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Thinking Hotrod By HektorA great "thinking hotrod" of the USAF, General Robin Olds had an unconventional style of leadership. He exercised it with as much gusto on the flight lines of the units he commanded as the officers club bars where he infused spirited competitiveness among his pilots. That predictably left a trail of broken fittings and furniture sometimes but he he was quick to take the blame and organise compensation immediately the following morning. But even in the middle of roaring fighter pilots' songs with his youngsters, Robin Olds remained a serious professional and an exceptional air tactician throughout his career, flying fighters of World War 2 and the Vietnam war. He was not a glory seeker. He deliberately stopped shooting down Migs after his four victories in Vietnam (he was already a well known WW2 ace) just because USAF had warned him he would have to return home to a desk job as soon as he had his fifth kill in Vietnam. Robin got around the problem by inviting his No. 2 or No. 3 to take the Migs that would otherwise have been his victims. This tactic kept him flying in Vietnam for a much longer tenure. He flew as an exchange pilot with Britain's RAF and was uniquely honoured with the command of that squadron. As a colonel he flew with NATO combat crews in Europe and during that time, he set up an expanded tactical weapons delivery range at Wheelus AFB in Libya that provided realistic enhanced training to USAF pilots.. On return to Conus, he did an outstanding job at the USAF Academy as its Commandant and then as the Inspector General for Safety for the entire air force. General Olds' greatest strength was his ability to confront both his juniors and seniors with the true state of affairs that affected the USAF's professional environment. No matter how unpleasant it might sound to their ears, he never minced his words or his biting criticism where it was deserved. By this personality trait he certainly lost some of the support of his seniors (and one or two more stars) but gained a huge amount of love and respect of all those he commanded. I have a photo of the F-15 missing man flyby he got when he was buried with full honours at the Arlington Cemetery in 2007. The general must have grunted with pleasure. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. The interesting life of a pilot legend By Flying Photographer The book is the autobiography of fighter ace and legendary pilot, General Robin Olds, as told by himself and edited together after his death by his daughter Christina and friend and author Ed Rasimus. For a synopsis of the book and its content, please refer to the most helpful customer review. Personally, I believe that by not completing his memoirs in time before his death, what could have been a truly outstanding addition to any aviation-related library instead turned out to be a very interesting book that clearly shows that is the result of stitching together written pieces but mostly lacks a true coherent structure. The book shines and excels when Robin has the pen in his hand and he is writing as he would be talking, and we get a glimpse into this huge personality. His legend status (at least amongst fellow pilots and fighters) is well deserved, as will be readily apparent after finishing the book. This is definitely a recommended read for any aviation enthusiast, and as such I rate it 4 stars.

Robin Olds was many things to many people. To his West Point football coach he was an All American destined for the National College Football Hall of Fame. To his P-38 and P-51 wartime squadrons in WWII he was the aggressive fighter pilot who made double ace and became their commander in nine short months. For the pioneers of the jet age, he was the wingman on the first jet demo team, a racer in the Thompson Trophy race, and the only U.S. exchange officer to command an RAF squadron. In the tabloid press he was the dashing flying hero who married the glamorous movie star. For the current crop of fighter pilots he is best known as the leader of the F-4 Wolfpack battling over North Vietnam. For cadets at the Air Force Academy he was a role model and mentor. He was all of those things and more. Here's Robin's story in his own words and gleaned from the family and friends of his lifetime. Here's the talent and learning, the passion and leadership, the love and disappointments of his life. Few men have written on the tablets of aviation history with such a broad and indelible brush. Olds was a classic hero with vices as well as virtues, a life writ large that impacted many.

A gripping narrative...Compelling reading, likely to become a classic. Booklist Robin Olds is probably the greatest aerial warrior America ever produced. His autobiography tells it like it was...and provides written proof why the people who served with him made him a legend. This book will be an instant classic. Stephen Coonts, New York Times bestselling author of The Assassin One man's account of war and, in its way, a tribute to a vanished breed of men. The Wall Street Journal Excellent...at times, his poetic descriptions reveal a humanity rarely exhibited in public by this swashbuckling, handlebar-mustachioed giant of air power. Aviation Weekly About the Author Robin Olds

(1922-2007) was a U.S. Air Force fighter pilot. A triple ace, he achieved a combined total of 16 victories in the Second World War and the Vietnam War. Born into an army family in Honolulu and raised in Virginia, he was educated at West Point, where he was an All American football player. He fought in Europe during World War II, and was regarded as the best wing commander in the Vietnam War. He was promoted to brigadier general after Vietnam, and also served as Commandant of Cadets at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Christina Olds is the daughter of Robin Olds. She holds a B.A. in English and creative writing from Vassar. Ed Rasimus is a retired USAF fighter pilot whose books on the Vietnam air war include *When Thunder Rolled* and *Palace Cobra*. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

From Chapter 7: *Victories at Last!* By August we had all changed. Combat does that. It digs deep into your soul, searching to find the grit. For most, it isn't something you think about. It just happens. The world shrinks around you. Home, Mom, and apple pie become remote memories, and the mental image of your girlfriend back in the States is sexier than the rear view of Betty Grable. We learned to live one day at a time and to concentrate on survival. But to varying degrees we all developed a deep sense of frustration at our lack of real action. I needed something positive to make the empty beds of lost friends meaningful. There had to be more than just strafing trains, dropping bombs, losing people, fighting to come back home, then feeling like we hadn't really accomplished anything. It was part of the war effort, but the milk runs didn't fulfill the vision we held of a fighter pilot. Ground attack was part of the mission, but our focus always returned to aerial battles. The group had made progress since our arrival in early May, but the price had been high. We'd lost three of our four flight commanders, both of my roommates had been shot down over Holland, and many pilots were KIA or POW. Nearly half of the original 434th Squadron was gone. The other two squadrons in the group had suffered similar attrition. Our original group CO, Kyle Riddle, was lost to flak on May 10. No one was immune. We who survived had gotten smarter about combat. Our salvation appeared with the arrival of Colonel Hubert Hub Zemke, who replaced Colonel Riddle as CO two days later. Hub was about to give us all some much-needed savvy in the art of aerial warfare, and we were ready. Zemke had loads of experience. He'd been an Air Corps pilot prior to the war and even flown a tour with the Soviet air force. As CO of the 56th Group at RAF Boxed, he had developed tactics in which his pilots rendezvoused at an easily found landmark in their bomber escort zone, then broke up into individual flights and fanned out in 180-degree arcs to respond to attacks on the bomber stream. The spread let his units cover a lot of airspace. In May, both of Zemke's wingmen were shot down by Luftwaffe ace Gnter Rall, who in turn was shot down by 56th Group ace Joe Powers in the same dogfight. After that, Zemke upgraded his fan-out tactic to the three full squadrons of the group instead of just flights. He jumped at the chance to command the 479th because he wanted to fly the new Mustangs. His 56th Group had P-47s, which were increasingly focusing on ground attack. He knew we were converting to P-51s when we heard only rumors. Hub was our kind of guy, aggressive, smart, relentless, and determined to hit the Luftwaffe where it hurt. He was already a triple ace and had created legends in the 56th, like Gabreski, Mahurin, and Johnson. We in the 479th knew about their exploits and were in awe of their skill and good fortune. I'll admit we were a raggedy-assed bunch when he arrived. We had lots of desire but not much air-to-air experience. We never blamed Colonel Riddle for that. God knows he flew and led as many missions as anyone, but results count. For us Hub's fame as leader of his Wolfpack was nothing short of awesome. The new boss took over and rattled us right away. He taught, led, laid down the law, and put us on the right track. Things were going to be different. Although he put up a stern front, we quickly learned he cared about each of us. To tell the truth, we felt as though he had a hard time keeping a straight face at our bumbling eagerness. He had a great sense of humor, but we learned when it wasn't at the forefront. On his first day at Wattisham, Hub put up a sign on the door of his office: **KNOCK BEFORE YOU ENTER. I'M A BASTARD, TOO. LET'S SEE YOU SALUTE.** The young pilots got a huge charge out of that. Hell, we were in the habit of saluting everything anyhow, and wouldn't go near a colonel's sanctum unless under extreme duress. To be called before the boss meant trouble. Failing to knock would only have compounded whatever felony had brought us there in the first place, so we knew the sign wasn't about us. We watched and smirked as our immediate bosses and members of the group staff were seen outside that door, self-consciously tucking in shirttails, running hands over hair, buffing up the shoe shine on the back of each trouser leg, adjusting the tie, then knocking timidly, and nervously waiting for permission to enter. We knew and they learned. When Hub arrived, a few of the pilots in the group had shot down an enemy aircraft or two, but I had yet to even see one. I was frustrated. Fighter pilots dream of victory in aerial combat; it's the be-all and end-all of the fighter profession. It was the price of admission, and I wanted to belong. Mission after mission since May, I had flown with my head on a swivel searching for enemy planes. Nothing. Nothing in that vast sky except bombers and flak, explosions and smoke trails spiraling down, anguished calls on the emergency frequency, parachutes and pieces, and the otherwise empty wild blue. No prey, no snarling little Messerschmitt 109s or Focke-Wulf 190s, just nightly mission reports telling us someone else had found them. Usually it was someone from Zemke's 56th Group. Gabreski had twenty-eight kills and I hadn't seen one enemy aircraft in flight. The morning of August 14 finally offered something different: a predawn takeoff, a bridge over the river at Chalon-sur-Saone as the target. The German armies were in retreat, fighting for every mile, resisting fiercely as the Allies pushed through France toward Belgium and Holland. General Patton's 3rd Army was sweeping the southern flank. The bridges behind the Wehrmacht were important targets. Knocking them out would hinder movement and support Patton's intention of destroying everything

in front of him. Only 8th Air Force headquarters knew why the 479th FG was picked to hit this particular bridge. We certainly couldn't figure it out. Maybe they had greater faith with Zemke as our CO. I would ponder it for years yet never figure out the reasoning. We were in England, a couple of hours away from the target, and 9th Air Force was in France now, close to the ground action. They were veterans in providing the air support that had made Patton's dash possible. Perhaps all of the 9th squadrons were engaged in that truly close support in front of the troops, which none of us in the 8th were yet qualified to do. In any event, bombing bridges was something we'd been doing all summer, and I guess it didn't matter whose bombs did the job. During the briefing there was a lot of stirring and nervous coughing. It wasn't the target or the opposition expected, nor even the anticipated flak, that made us nervous. The weather was good, in fact excellent for Europe. Group Lead Highway exuded confidence, the S-2 intel officer made the mission seem really important, our own airfield conditions were normal, and flight assignments stacked up well, so why the giggling feeling? Christ almighty it was still black outside. It was obviously going to be black for takeoff, black for rendezvous, and black all the way into France. What kind of deal was this? We weren't bloody night fighters! We never had been, and you don't go fooling around when a man can't see. Somebody was going to realize the whole thing was starting about two hours too early and we'd all get another cup of coffee while ops replotted the timing. But, no, briefing ended with hearty encouragement from the podium and one small admonition not to forget our navigation lights. No one wanted to ask the burning question, so it wasn't asked. There were a few sidelong glances, some shuffling about, furtive peeks at our hack watches, audible sighs, a few grumbles, but that was all. I guess we thought if we could do what we did every day, a little predawn action thrown in wouldn't hurt too much. After the group briefing, I got D Flight together and tried to do some anticipating. I leaned forward at the table. Look, guys, we all know it's tricky getting forty-eight P-38s in proper order out to the runway in broad daylight, let alone before dawn. I'll tell you what Newcross Blue is going to do. 435th and 436th are going first, 434th is last off, and our Blue will be the last flight in the parade, so I'm going to hold in the parking revetment until everyone passes on the perimeter track heading for runway 27. Then I'll flash my landing lights and fall in behind the gaggle. You stay wherever you're parked till you see my lights, and then follow me in order Two, Three, Four. Got it? Just stay clear of the rest of the mess. When we get airborne I won't do the standard join-up like the rest of the group. Instead of a left orbit, I'm going to climb straight ahead on a heading of 270. I'll throttle back and hold 150 at 800 feet. Two, you move over to my left wing as soon as it's comfortable; Three, keep Four on your right wing and join on my right. If you don't see me, click your mike button three times and back off to 150. I'll start a slow left turn and click back three times. You start your turn and hold 500 feet. When we get around to the briefed departure heading I'll advance throttles to the normal climb power setting. You do the same. Watch for my lights. If you see me, click three times. I'll rock my wings. Then you'll know it's me. That should do it. We'll catch the rest of the gang over the Channel somewhere. Yeah. Sure. Nice idea, Robin. Everything went fine until half of Lakeside Squadron was airborne. Then some idiot got a wheel off the side of the taxiway and bogged down. With no way to taxi around him, the rest of us were ordered to do a 180 on the perimeter track then taxi all the way around the dark airfield for runway 09. Great! That put the remainder of the shooting match in inverse order for takeoff. The only good thing about it was that Newcross Blue Flight was now first in line for departure. That was great, except we were in reverse order on a narrow taxiway. I told Blue Four to pull into the first empty parking stub, Blue Three into the next, and Two wherever he could, then when I taxied past them, to come out in proper order behind me. This worked and we reached runway 09 in proper sequence. I lined up with Two on my right, made the usual pretakeoff checks, blinked my lights, and gave it the throttle. Two hung tight on my wing and we accelerated rapidly to liftoff speed. I hauled back on the yoke smoothly, accelerated, and waited for the bird to fly off the runway, thinking smugly how Two must be appreciating my technique. Suddenly, my God! Right in front of me was a dim shape half on and half off the runway—the bare outline of a P-38, its wing right in my path. No room to swerve, no way to stop! I yelled and yanked back on the yoke. The airplane leaped straight up and off the runway. I snatched the gear handle up, then waited to settle back toward the runway, milking back pressure to keep the airplane from stalling and hoping to accelerate. There was only a slight bump, and then I was flying. I looked right for Two. He was nowhere to be seen. No time to call him. I got on the horn and screamed at the gang that runway 09 was partially blocked. Everyone rolling: STOP, STOP! Do single-ship takeoffs, right side of the runway, and look out for a stuck bird. For God's sake get a light on that thing before someone gets killed! There was pure bedlam on the radio. Everyone talked at once. Someone tried to organize things but only added to the confusion. I inwardly cringed at the thought of our new group COs' reaction to all this. Great way to impress Zemke. He'd have us all for lunch and bury the bones! I set course for France at the briefed time. What the hell, at least I knew where I was, and maybe would soon catch up with whoever had managed to cling to Highway Lead after takeoff. I called Newcross Blue Two and was relieved to hear his bewildered voice announcing he hadn't a clue where I was. At least he had survived. Blue Three and Four were somewhere in that mess back on the ground, so I mentally wrote them off for the rest of the day. Blue would be a two-ship. South across the dark Thames and southern England I looked for the flashing lights of the lead squadron as well as for Blue Two. Nothing doing. I could tell parts of Bison Squadron were somewhere airborne by an occasional radio transmission, but that was all. I just kept on the briefed course for our target area and headed out over the blackness of the Channel, my head on a swivel. Dim white lines marching across the blackness below had to be

waves breaking on the beaches below the cliffs at Fcamp on the Normandy coast. The minute hand on my watch confirmed my position. I was on course and on time as I crossed the coastline into France. The predawn black lightened as I flew steadily on toward Chartres, holding the briefed headings and speeds. The dim reflection of the Loire River flowing through Chartres was my first positive checkpoint, and I turned left 10 degrees to set course for Nevers on the banks of the Loire in Burgundy, about 85 miles and twenty minutes ahead. Suddenly, a stream of tracers passed off my left wing. I jerked mechanically, and surprisingly enjoyed my first sight of flak in the dark. Someone else was on the predawn shift. I fantasized that the gunner, whoever and wherever he was, must have been in the last stages of his night watch. His effort seemed listless at best. Maybe he knew hed catch hell from his section sergeant if his unit had heard me pass and he didnt react. No matter, I had expected to be fired at long before this. It was good to get the waiting over. Soon, objects on the ground took shape and I could pick up the more prominent landmarks. There was the Loire, with the canal paralleling it, then Nevers, right where it should be. I turned to the east, about 105 degrees, and in three minutes there was our initial point, three little lakes shining in contrast to dark earth near a place called Le Creusot. The sun wasnt yet over the horizon but there was enough light to see that the pale sky was empty. Where was everyone? Chatter soon broke out, a rather prolonged discussion about the location of the target in relation to Bison Flights position. I knew damned well they werent where they were supposed to be, because I was there. It was clear from their chatter that they didnt really know where they were in relation to anything except that they were over a river and the river was in France. Bison Lead decided they would turn south to find the target. South? That seemed dead wrong. I had just corrected to the northeast a little to be on course. If Bison was north of the rendezvous point, he would be at or near the target. If he didnt see the target he had to be south of it. That assumed he and his people were reasonably close to course as they came in. The screwups just seemed to keep piling up. Rechecking my armament switches, I pushed up full power and headed for Chalon-sur-Sane all by myself. Sure enough, there was the ribbon of the Sane River catching the first glow of dawn. It had to be the Sane. And there was the gray darkness of the town with the bridge clearly visible against the rivers silver sheen. I lined up so Id cross the target at about a 45-degree angle and came out of the west. My pass was shallow, more like a skip- bomb pass than a dive- bomb attack. The sight picture was good. Speed just right. There was time to remind myself: Dont hit long, Robin, dont hit the town. I wanted to hit the center span of the bridge, so when the gun sight piper came up to the release point, I pressed the pickle button under my right thumb. There was a thump as the pair of 1,000-pound bombs left the pylons. I broke hard left and stayed down low to make myself as difficult a target as possible. An orange flash in my canopys rearview mirror told me the bombs had detonated. No flak. Must have caught the gunners sleeping late this morning. Once I was clear of the target there was time to burn, and apparently I had the whole of this part of France to myself. Truthfully, finding the rest of the group didnt enter my mind. I stayed right down on the deck, as low as I dared, heading northwest. I throttled back, then tweaked the mixture and prop into auto-lean to save a bit of fuel. When the sun peeked over the horizon, I was paralleling a paved country road bordered by poplar trees and farmhouses set back behind hedges and stone walls. A ridge loomed ahead, running almost due northsouth. The valley from my position, and all the way up the ridge, was totally covered with vineyards. Years later I would recognize it for what it was, the Beaune region: good Burgundy country. But not now. I was looking for something to shoot at, anything military: a convoy, a train, troops, anything. After several minutes of this, two dark shapes suddenly flew across the road left to right about a mile ahead of me. They were just a little higher than I was. I turned right to cut them off, got right down on the grass, pushed the mixtures into auto-rich, rammed the props to high, and shoved the throttles to the wall. My P-38 leaped ahead as though kicked by a mule. The cutoff angle was good and I could see I would be coming in behind the bogeys in short order. I still didnt have a positive ID, but every instinct told me they had to be German. Instinct is no good when youre coming up behind a target with a 20 mm and four .50 caliber guns armed and ready to shoot. It is particularly no good when your adrenaline is pumping. Patience, patience. I wanted those shadowy shapes to be Focke-Wulf 190s! My instincts told me they were Jerries, not a couple of Jugs out of 9th Air Force. Please, bogeys, please turn just a little. Give me an aspect where I can get a positive ID on you. Im closing fast. There isnt much time left. I pressed rudder and slid the pip-per onto the trailing aircrafts left wing. Another second and suddenly I could see the Iron Cross on the side of the lead planes fuselage. No time left now. I squeezed the trigger. The wingmans bird lit up with strikes, spewed heavy smoke, rolled inverted, and hit the ground with a huge explosion. I had to get the other 190 before he gained an advantage on me. He made a violent left break the moment his wingman was hit. I followed, staying inside his turn, knowing my left wingtip was no more than 20 feet off the ground. The g-forces came on hard but I was scarcely aware of them. I flew the piper slowly through his fuselage, pulling ahead, trying to get about a 100-mil lead. I pressed the trigger in a short burst and watched as strikes moved down his fuselage. Perfect! Another burst, more strikes, and he suddenly pulled straight up. The canopy separated and the pilot came out as though he had a spring in his seat. His chute opened immediately and he swung under it. I had pulled up with him and rolled inverted in time to see his aircraft hit in the middle of a farmers field. I rolled into a hard left bank and watched through the top of my canopy as the Jerry landed close to his burning aircraft. He started running as I came around my circle to point my nose at him. I dove at him and he flopped onto his belly. He thought I was going to strafe him. No such thing! I buzzed him there in the mud and pulled up to do two victory rolls. I hoped he saw them. Then I felt like an ass doing

such a silly, damned-fool, kid thing like that. Obviously I'd read too much of Hogans G-8 and His Battle Aces and watched too much of Wings and The Dawn Patrol. The flight home was uneventful, except for a mixed feeling of elation, disbelief, and nagging worry. I hoped my camera had worked. Confirmation couldn't stand on my word alone. That was a grim thought. The camera in the P-38 was mounted in the nose right under the 20 mm gun. It jiggered and bounced like crazy when the guns fired. Instead of getting a record of what was being shot at, it often quit, leaving kill claims unconfirmed. I also knew the circumstances would take some explaining. I didn't want to be too closely questioned on how hard I might have tried to find the others or what I was doing roaming around Burgundy alone. I even wondered if I should mention the bridge at Chalon-sur-Saône. I thought I had hit it but hadn't hung around to make sure. I never did join up with the rest of my flight. It was a lonely trip back with a lot of time to think. Sure enough, my debriefing was met with obvious skepticism. I didn't press the point, just felt sick to my stomach. Then, Colonel Zemke walked into our squadron ready room. Uh-oh, I thought. Here it comes. All of us knew that Hub wasn't a man to be trifled with. His reputation as the leader of the famous Wolfpack had us totally in awe of him, to say nothing of the fact that he had more combat time than any of us had total flying time. He came up to me as I snapped to attention, looked me in the eye, and said, You don't know how lucky you are, Captain. I just got a call from the 355th Group. They were passing overhead and saw your engagement, the whole thing. Your two claims are confirmed. I don't remember if I whooped out loud in the colonel's face, but I sure was whooping inside! I had kills. Two of them and confirmed. I was one lucky guy. It turned out no one asked a lot of questions about the bridge. I guess there was a bit of embarrassment over that. It seems the rest of the gang flailed away at a bridge, the wrong one, and the less said the better. What really got to me was learning how a pilot in one of the other squadrons had run off the side of runway 27 in the dark. His bird sank in the mud, so he just shut down the engines, climbed out, and made tracks. Obviously, two birds had become stuck, only no one knew about this second one till I almost hit it. When it was light out, the maintenance troops went to dig it out. They discovered a tire mark across the top of the wing that stuck out over the runway. The tire mark was mine. That had been the thump I'd felt. It took a while to calm down when I digested that one. Two P-38s loaded with gas and two 1,000-pound bombs each would have made a spectacular show. Someone told me they had a picture of that tire mark, but I've never seen it. Years later, in 1949, I drove through France down toward Cap d'Antibes with my wife to show her the sights. I went out of our way to go to Chalon-sur-Saône. That bridge had been on my mind ever since that August morning five years before. It was still there, but one-third of it had been repaired by stringing one of the U.S. Army's Bailey bridges across a missing span. I took a picture, and then wondered who really cared. It certainly didn't matter anymore. At lunch in a charming café by the river I asked the old waiter what had happened to the bridge. When he understood my bad French he became excited and told me a P-38 had come by itself out of the east, blown up the bridge, then disappeared. The Germans (Bosche, he called them) had been very unhappy about it. They had stomped and screamed, then gone the longer way around on their journey back to the Fatherland. That made me feel good, but I didn't tell the old Frenchman I knew the pilot. I didn't think he would believe me. Besides, the Nuits St.-Georges wine was perfect with our lunch, and I didn't want to ruin the occasion by having my lovely wife disbelieve me, too. Decades after those first two kills, someone asked me if I had been frightened during that initial aerial combat. I had certainly thought about that subject a lot. No, I was never truly frightened, either in combat or in other flying situations. Sure, there were times when whatever was going on was damned scary, but I didn't equate that with fright. I guess being momentarily scared, startled, or whatever is a natural reaction to danger. The old adrenaline pumps, your mouth turns dry, you pant, and if you don't watch it your voice goes up about an octave. That's a dead giveaway when you call out on the radio. You've just told the world you're in the excited mode, and usually your condition is contagious. Everyone within range is apt to tense up. Sometimes that's bad, sometimes it's good. Fortunately, experience overcomes these reactions, and the measure of the true veteran fighter pilot is his ability to stay calm, no matter what. Tom Wolfe would later identify that as the Right Stuff, but I'm not sure he really understood where it comes from. To me real fear is something in a man that grows and festers. It may start with a bad scare, but if you don't shake it off, it grows. It does not go away. It builds, day by day, hour by hour. It creeps into the soul, eats at his determination, and erodes his confidence and self-respect. I've seen it in many forms. One fellow may just simply go to pieces. He can't sleep, wears a haunted look, avoids his friends. Others come down with all sorts of maladies, some imagined and psychosomatic, but some truly serious. Some cope by trying to overcompensate. They try to play the he-man, tough-guy role; they do things to prove their guts and balls. Those individuals often prove dangerous not only to themselves, but to everyone around them. You never know what they're going to do in a given situation. I didn't learn these things all at once. Initially, as I began to observe others and think about them in relation to my thoughts about fear, I tended to dismiss . . . no, that's not an honest word I tended to look down on the men who didn't seem to match my youthful, simplistic impression of fighter pilots. I held an image of warriors as keen, fearless, steely-eyed gladiators of the wild blue. In my immaturity, I considered the few who did not measure up to be weaklings with annoying personality problems who were upsetting the unity of the squadron. But in combat, time is compressed, life passes swiftly, lessons are driven home, and regardless of your age or immaturity, your perspective on life evolves. Your understanding of what men do and what you are capable of changes. What you find easy, some may endure a mighty struggle before accepting. Apprehension conquered and mastered is quite different from fear that

