

From F-4 Phantom to A-10 Warthog - the Memoirs of a Cold War Fighter Pilot

SPOILER ALERT - THIS BOOK IS NOT ABOUT PLANES

OK, well it is, of course it is - the title gives it away and it is written by Colonel Steve Ladd, United States Air Force (Retired) - but it is about so much more

Go to any bookshop, or library and you will see shelves of lovely books all sorted into categories - travel, romantic fiction, self-help, crime. It's what the booksellers and librarians do - to allow us readers to easily find what we want. We appreciate things being grouped together, it allows us to be able to say we like this, or this, but not that.

Memoirs though are tricky to categorise. Unless they are the memoirs of some third rate 25 year old "celebrity" with no life experience but with enhanced breasts or an ability to kick a ball around a field - in which case you can easily display them on the shelf marked "Utter Garbage". Generally though a good memoir would contain some chronological story (so file under "History?"), some witty anecdotes (file under "Humour?") and maybe some serious name-dropping (file under "Popular Culture?"). Or of course you simply plonk it into "Biographies and Autobiographies" - in which case it will be overlooked by everyone who doesn't like reading about someone else's life.

Steve Ladd and his book should, on the face of it, be easy to categorise, to pigeonhole - by simply following the appropriate stereotypes. He is an American, and he was a fighter pilot who saw active duty in the Vietnam War and the Cold War. So he must be loud and brash, and his story must be all about rampant chest beating and unleashing napalm with abandon.

He isn't - and it isn't.

Steve Ladd's book of memoirs could legitimately be placed on any number of shelves - "Action", "Military", "History", "Humour", "Management", "Personal Development", "Travel". Impossible to categorise, hard to summarise - and difficult to put down.

But whichever category it is listed under when you order a copy, when you pick it up you will

discover what I found to be one of the most enjoyable, engaging, warm and witty books I've ever had the pleasure to read. A book about a normal guy pursuing a career that, I suspect, could not on the face of it be more alien to pretty much anyone reading this.

Steve's story follows his career in, and then out of, then back into the cockpit as a fighter pilot in the United States Air Force (or USAF - one of the easier to remember acronyms featured in the book - of which there are so many the books warrants a glossary). From being accepted as a trainee pilot in 1967, let loose into the Georgia skies in a tiny little civil aircraft with one propeller on the front (lovingly known as the "Bug Smasher") to an emotional final low-level flypast in the Nevada desert in 1994, in his beloved, and fearsomely equipped A10 Warthog.

Right. Let's get the aircraft bit out of the way shall we? The backdrop to Steve's story, his working life, were two awesome military aircraft. The first - the McDonnell Douglas F4 Phantom, a two seat long-range supersonic fighter-bomber that formed the backbone of the US air threat during the Vietnam War and the Cold War, and was operational from the early 1960's to the early 1980's.



Phantoms - unloaded and heading for home, 1969.

(© Colonel Joe 'Gork' Gorecki USAF (Retired))

The second, the Fairchild A-10 Thunderbolt, better known as the Warthog due to its "unconventional looks" as well as its rapidly achieved reputation as a fearsome weapon of war. Aircraft lovers will find plenty of aviation enjoyment as Steve reminisces about his active duty in the Phantom in Thailand

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during the Vietnam War and in Europe during the Cold War, his role as an elite instructor to the next generation of elite pupils at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, and his love affair with the Warthog that started like an ill-advised blind date but blossomed into a highly effective and loving marriage of man and machine.



A10 Thunderbolt, aka the Warthog

But Steve's story is so much more - the planes were the tools of his trade, the US Air Force the family in which a high-spirited, ambitious would-be fighter pilot - "I was endowed with a man-sized ego and a surplus of self-confidence" - would live and grow during a 28 year career. It is a story less about the military missions flown, the aerial encounters, the dogfights with the enemy, and far more about the man, the extended family that supported him and that he nurtured, and the camaraderie that develops within a team of special people.

Any high performing team - and lordy, a squadron of aircraft armed to the teeth needs to be in the hands of a high performing team - must be built around a number of core attributes over and above the technical ability to do the job (and it is clear from Steve's experience that anyone without that technical ability is very soon found out during the exhaustive training that the USAF provides throughout the lifetime of their most valuable assets). Perhaps the most important of these is trust - not so much in the pilot's own ability, which I suspect is a given, but in his colleagues, and in the book this seemed to manifest itself in many ways. Big ways - when in command knowing that your orders are executed by your wing man without question, and conversely trusting your leader to make the right call, based upon competence, experience

and the ability to lead by example. As Steve notes, "The mutual trust required to manage a complex fluid scenario involving a number of aircraft to a successful conclusion cannot be overstated." And trust showed itself in little ways - the occasional "overlooking" of the established procedure of pre-flight checks with the ground crew (the crew chief or CC) and reliance instead on the word of the CC that "You're good to go, Sir."

With trust comes the ability to motivate and get the right reaction out of team members, and Steve Ladd focuses on this as one of the soft skills he had to utilise more as he worked his way up the USAF tree of command (and further away from his real passion, "strapping himself into a jet aircraft and climbing to the heavens"). There are some excellent anecdotes demonstrating the thoughtful, and slightly leftfield ways he managed to get the respect of, and best from, the pilots under his command. Indeed it would be easy, and legitimate, to look at this book as a motivational management guide (albeit set against the backdrop of military action).

Given the high pressure environment that the pilots and their support teams worked in there is an inevitable letting off of steam when the time is right, and Steve's book is laced with comedic incidents of hair being let down, comrades being wound up and tensions being released - by way of donkeys in the Officer's Club, sangria-driven shows of false bravado, and the occasional false declaration of the start of WWII. I'd guess having a sick note off work because of a bullfighting accident is one badge of honour he shares with very few others.

It has suddenly dawned on me as I write this that you might be wondering why I have randomly chosen to review "F4 Phantom to A10 Warthog". I have omitted an important detail, that is that Steve and his wife Elaine, after years of nomadic existence moving from the USA to England to Spain to Turkey to Germany and back to the USA, have spent the last 21 years living in Westbury Park. As he himself said to me, "I'm almost one of you". Almost, Steve, almost... The advantage of reviewing books by local authors? You get the chance to meet them, and coffee with Steve Ladd is an entertaining, fascinating and thoroughly enjoyable way of spending a couple of hours.

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Chatting to Steve I tried to get an understanding of just how demanding it is flying at low levels in a machine travelling at a ridiculous speed over terrain that you are judging visually as much as by way of any navigational aids. Despite his self-deprecating answer - "it's OK, it's part of the job, you're trained to do it" it is just one aspect of his job I struggle to get my head round. Just as knowing that if you had to respond in a nuclear launch (which his squadron were tasked and ready to do) you knew that in reality your mission would be one-way. "All part of the job" it may have been, but not a part of a job description that many people could sign up for. And of course the job is dangerous, and Steve tells with emotion and compassion the consequences of when it does go wrong, in a sad and touching story of an air accident that happened in the Welsh mountains during the latter stages of his flying career.

We spoke also about how you can possibly replace the adrenaline rush and buzz that piloting a fighter plane gives you - and concluded, I think, that you can't. It sounded as if Steve had been lucky (a view on life he expounds upon in the book) to extend his flying career as long as he did before succumbing to an assignment behind the BGD - Big Grey Desk, regaining a cockpit job and a later post-military career at civilian airports. He also commented wistfully on a subject that features in the book - the impact of technology on the role of the fighter pilot, and that conclusion that as more and more of the pilot's role is assisted and indeed replaced by technology the more removed today's pilots are becoming from the situation whereby the pilot and his plane are wedded to each other, actions and reactions are based on instinct and physical observation, and the plane is flown by hand/eye coordination of joystick and rudder. Think parking sensors and lane control on your car, and an engine tuned remotely by a computer nerd, and you can see that Steve's yearning for the old ways of flying are maybe no different to you and I hankering for a classic car.

One final message that comes out loud and clear from this book is the longstanding love and affection Steve has for his wife Elaine, a Wirral girl who has for 47 years provided him unstinting, behind-the-scenes, support and strength - much like the many other pilots wives they encountered

and lived alongside on their worldwide tour of US airbases. Often it's the ones below deck who don't get the recognition they deserve, and it is lovely that this book allows Steve to address that.



The REAL Special Relationship, Wallasey, Wirral, England, 6 January 1973.

So, in conclusion I've decided it would be wrong to even try to categorise Steve Ladd's memoirs. Rather I'd just like to summarise them. They are an insight into the life of someone who did a job I could never imagine doing, written by "one of the good guys" - a man of wit, compassion, courage, loyalty, sense of duty and patriotism that it would be lovely, but brave, to aspire to. Please do try and get hold of a copy of this book for yourself or anyone you know - reading it is a joyful education in so many ways.



"From F-4 Phantom to A-10 Warthog - Memoirs of a Cold War Fighter Pilot"
by Colonel Steve Ladd, USAF (Retired)
is available from Pen & Sword Books (www.pen-and-sword.co.uk), Max Minervas on North View, online and from all good bookshops.