



SIERRA HOTEL: Flying Air Force Fighters in the Decade after Vietnam

Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force

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Those old enough to remember the decade after Vietnam will recall those years as exciting but difficult ones to be a fighter pilot. Struggling to come to terms with poor performance by U.S. forces in Vietnam, we seemed to have the wrong jets, unreliable weapons, and inadequate training. On top of this we faced the specter of the next war coming in Europe against the Warsaw Pact, which outnumbered us two to one. We called the Soviet and Soviet-trained pilots Ivan, and sometimes Ivan seemed ten feet tall. We should have had an edge with our force of combat veterans. However, within five years after Vietnam, the number of experienced combat fighter pilots dropped precipitously as many disgruntled aviators left the Air Force for the greener pastures of commercial aviation. For the ones who stayed it was no consolation to know that combat experience always evaporates after every war. All they could see was men who knew how to fight laying down their arms and retiring from the field. The ones who stayed struggled mightily, and this is their story. I did not focus this book on the generals and legislators who worked hard to improve the fighter force. Rather, this book is about the young officers, the line pilots, and weapons systems operators (WSOs), whose innovations, devotion to duty, intelligence, flying skills, and sheer determination made indelible marks on combat capability. Of course, generals made a difference, and nothing could have happened without the leadership and support of some, like the former commanders of Tactical Air Command (TAC), Generals Robert J. Dixon, William W. Momyer, and Wilbur Creech. Some of the stories I relate include them, but the thrust is toward the “blighters in the trenches.” Most worked long, usually thankless hours in an environment where the cynics among them stated that the reward for excellence was no punishment. History is at once educational and fickle. After reading this, a young officer, pilot or not, will have a better understanding of how the fighter force developed. Nonetheless, much of the information herein comes from interviews, and memories dim over the decades. An old joke: What is the difference between a fairy tale and a fighter pilot’s war story? Answer: None, except the fairy tale starts out, “Once upon a time...” whereas the story starts out, “There I was...” That said, the information from the interviewees is the best available. All of them were in the hunt during those years, flying the jets, teaching the younger pilots, and striving for excellence. No one knows more about the era.

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