A Fighter Pilot's Christmas

by John Roberts

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Now it’s Christmas again and, in my personal tradition of the past two decades, I always think of the three families I no longer have—my parents, my ex-wife and children, and my fellow Fighter Pilots. It is the time to be alone and be silent and think of those who gave me and changed me the most, whom I never repaid and cannot erase. It is not guilt, for it is not healthy to carry that too long. It is a more positive thing, a warm and self-confident recognition that I owe what I am to others more than to myself. Of many, it is the closest connection between my individuality and all humanity, which a sane man must build and nurture at all costs. Lose that, and all is lost.

The Fighter Pilot concept and experience are not just influence or profession or way of life. It is so intense, because of the nature of the effort and the completeness of the concentration required, it is so embedded in your brain and personality, if you really are one, that it is your definition. Those others who feel the same, and that is a small group surrounded by imposters, affect each other like brothers from the womb.

I have told you before that I decided to be a Fighter Pilot at 15, and it took 20 years before I was flying combat over the four countries of Southeast Asia. Perhaps because it took so long, was so uncertain, and required so much of me, it became much more a part of me than others for whom it was an easier, faster, more casual process. A natural part of that was that I wanted to be the best, nothing less, or I would have felt...
that my life and accomplishment were terribly incomplete. For the Fighter Pilot, excellence is not just a goal; it is self-respect and survival. And, it is promotion up the slippery, competitive pole that I climbed until I was leading a NATO fighter squadron four years later.

And so, one day in 1970 after a year and a half of combat, I took myself alone one afternoon to the big briefing room at Korat, Thailand. Just me and that nice, old dawg, and the memories of those who had been there, with that same dawg, three years before. I once wrote a book about all the fighter pilots who had flown combat in the twentieth century, and I concluded that the bravest and greatest of them were the men who had sat in that room, and the similar one over at Takhli, from 1965 to 1968, and who had flown their great and vulnerable F-105 war machines into the cauldron of North Vietnam around Hanoi known as Package Six. It takes nothing away from the carrier pilots of Midway or the RAF pilots of the Battle of Britain, or any others, to say that the Thud Drivers of Rolling Thunder were the greatest Fighter Pilots who ever lived, and died. We all know why, no need to repeat it here.

I had talked to some before I came, I had read Jack Broughton’s book and the others, I had heard the legends of Risner and Hasler and the rest. I had put myself in the cockpit and tried to imagine what they had done against the missiles and the MiGs and the ground fire and the politicians. I remembered the film clip where the guy had finished his hundred from this place and was standing at his going-home party and holding the squadron photo his comrades had given him. He was crying, and then he smashed the glass and wood into pieces on the table, cutting his hand, and choked out the words: “I don’t need this to remember you guys.”

So, there I was, in the middle of Southeast Asia, the middle the war, the middle of my Fighter Pilot career, the middle of an insane bombing halt, remembering the greatest Fighter Pilots, remembering those who never came back to this base or their friends or their families. And, I realized that I was never going to be like them. I was never going to kill a MiG or go Downtown or be the absolute best. I didn’t have the flying time or the ultimate combat experience, and such things are just so much ego anyway; so it was just as well as the war and sacrifice grew meaningless.

But, the final recognition that I had reached my limit, as had my country, was a painful and discouraging experience that eventually led me out of the Air Force. I had already extended my tour to be there, and all I was doing was getting shot at while killing jungle snakes and moving mud. My country didn’t really need me any more. So, I decided not to extend again and go back to my family and forget it.

Before I left that room thirty years ago, however, I took a few more minutes and I thought about the men who sat there and never came back. I thought about their attitudes and courage and spirit, and I thought about their willingness to go back again and again, 100 times, against the odds, because not to have done so would have been the greatest betrayal of their lives and their comrades and their ungrateful country.

For the rest of my life, they, the lost ones, are the images who guide me and tell me to carry on and keep fighting and remember. I was not one of them, but they are a part of me that will never darken, that will sustain my spirit and my happiness. I live for them as much as for myself, because we are one in the pantheon of warriors who sacrificed their gentleness to carry the world another painful step forward.

John Roberts
Budapest, Hungary