

"Older men declare war.
But it is youth that must
fight and die."

Herbert Hoover-1944



Robin Olds

By Duncan Craighead

"The problem with the Vietnamese situation was not the fact that we were there, it was how we went about it. That we were there was proper. If we had done what we should have done, the way we should have done it, and the way we

could have done it at the time, we wouldn't be in the mess we're in today — the mess few people seem to realize we're in. We lost worldwide respect for the way we conducted ourselves in Southeast Asia, and for our desertion of the South

Vietnamese, the Cambodians, the Laotians, and everyone else in the South Pacific. When you lose respect as a world power, you get stepped on, you are held in contempt, and you are abused. Respect is a lot more useful than love in world politics."

Robin Olds has been a Steamboat resident since 1973. Previously he spent thirty years in the United States Air Force. He started as a West Point cadet in 1940, and retired as a Brigadier General in 1973. The following pages deal with his military involvement in world affairs from 1943 to 1973. The story starts from the beginning.

"My father was an Army Air Corps officer who learned to fly in 1916 and was commissioned in World War I. He met my mother in Hawaii after the war and I was born in Honolulu on July 14, 1922. My father stayed in the service and, as a result, I grew up in military life. We lived in one place and another: Honolulu, Washington, Virginia, Kansas and places like that. Though I was an army brat, I was pretty lucky because we didn't move much in those days. I went through most of grammar and high school in Hampton, Virginia, while Dad was stationed at Langley Field nearby. Most of my early memories are of airplanes and pilots. As a little boy I used to sit at the top of the stairs when there was a party at our house and listen to the pilots talking. I knew flying was what I wanted to do.

"When Britain and France declared war on Germany in September of 1939, I had just entered a West Point prep school in Washington. I left the school and went down to the Canadian Legation and said I wanted to join the R.C.A.F.

A man looked at me and asked me how old I was. I told him I was 19 but that didn't impress him. He said I would have to get my parents' permission. Well, I went home and asked my dad, who was then a colonel, and he hit the roof — hard! Consequently, I entered West Point in 1940. I went because I knew if I could graduate, I would receive a regular commission. The Army Air Corps would be my career. It never occurred to me that I might become an infantry officer.

"I was the first one from my family to attend the military academy at West Point, but all my ancestors were in the military, starting with a fellow in the early 1700's. West Point is, normally, a four year curriculum. I entered in 1940 when the war was already going in Europe. Pearl Harbor brought America into the conflict on December 7, 1941. I was a sophomore. In my junior year, my class started flying training. That was the summer of 1942. In the fall, it was announced that my class, the class of 1944, would graduate in 1943. Things became pretty hectic. No academics were eliminated, just compressed into the remaining months. On top of that was football and flight training, every other day, at a nearby base. It was a tough schedule! But, we

didn't care. All we wanted was a piece of the action before the war ended. That was the big thing with us in those days.



"Two of us attacked 55 ME-109's."

"After graduation, I went to Arizona to learn to fly P-38s; after that, Texas for aerial gunnery. Then, back to California to join my first operational training squadron. We went overseas to England in 1944, just before D-Day. Our early missions were mostly tactical interdiction in France against German installations and transportation systems. Beating up railroads, strafing airfields, bombing ammo dumps and things like that. We were also escorting heavy bombers on their raids into Germany."

What was General Olds' toughest assignment during that time?

"It would be hard to say. In a year of combat, a lot can happen to you. There was the time when two of us attacked 55 German ME-109s. That was very exciting, to say the least! You have to understand that sometimes, when the timing is right, aggressiveness will win for you against very high odds. As a matter of fact, on that particular mission, numbers were to the Germans' disadvantage. There were too many of them. Try to visualize an aerial battle involving a large number of aircraft. The greatest danger, aside from bullets, is a mid-air collision. It



Squadron commander in Europe, "I was a 22-year old major."

doesn't matter who is involved, friend or enemy, a collision will have the same result. It's really the greatest threat in any air battle. In that particular circumstance, the Germans were hampered by the sheer weight of their own numbers. There were many times when we strafed German airfields and we suffered heavy losses everytime we did that."

One of the biggest moral questions of any war is what does it feel like to kill another man. General Olds had an honest answer.

"Man has been at war and killing his fellow man since the dawn of time. The moral question has been argued for an equal length of time; by philosophers, theologians, reformists, conquerors, poets, writers, students, you name it. However, I don't think the moral issue is what you have asked. If I understand the question, you have asked me what it feels like to kill another man. My answer is simple. It feels great, compared to the alternative! Remember, for those truly involved in a war, civilians and soldiers alike, emotions run deep. You hurt, and you hate. You see others killed around you and you kill so as not to be killed. You kill to stop the killing and you kill because the issue at stake is beyond the point of any other solution. You kill because you are where you are, doing what you're doing, and other places and times simply do not exist. After a short time in your time

frame, you have been there forever, and you are mentally and physically reduced to a one-day-at-a-time solution to the problem of continued existence. Under those tensions, the fact of killing becomes totally impersonal, so long as it remains objective, and not the other way around."

The air war in Europe intensified as the Allied Forces got closer to Germany. One of Hitler's most important weapons was the jet airplane, which no other country had at that time. We asked General Olds if he ever met one of these jets in the air.

"A pilot in my squadron shot down the very first German jet encountered. It was just a fluke. The German pilot very stupidly let himself get trapped. Some of the jets were caught while trying to land. That wasn't very healthy for us. You could get them, yes, but you were subject massive ground fire. We had a lot of battles with their jets. Their rocket planes, too.

"Hitler was no air power genius — thank God he wasn't or we might all be speaking German today. He didn't know how to use those jets properly. He used them to support his ground troops. The dumbest thing he could have done! Finally, when he employed them against the bombers, it was too late for Germany.

"In many respects, much of the German equipment was more advanced than ours. Not

all, but certainly the ME-109, which was designed back in 1933 or 1934, was the most advanced fighter in the world at that time. It held the world speed record for years. Their tanks were better than ours, too. There was little comparison. I believe their basic artillery piece, the 88 mm, was superior to anything that we had.

"In contrast, we had masses of aircraft and weapons, but we also had something more important — national will — the sense that we were in the right and the courage to carry out our convictions.

"I recall that our last mission in Europe was on May 8. I think the surrender was on May 10. The war kind of trickled off toward the end — it was a matter of the Allied authorities trying to find someone to negotiate with. On our very last mission we did shoot down another German jet. This occurred way down over Austria, near Innsbruck. That's such pretty country. I felt we had no business being there. The question wasn't asked, but I am compelled to broach the subject. You must remember that an awful lot went on in occupied Europe that was really horrible. The world knew about it and the world's worst fears were exceeded when the Americans went into Germany and discovered the concentration camps. The shock was sickening. Six million people dead staggered the mind. But the pictures of the human scarecrows barely able to walk and the piles of bodies brought a deeply emotional and personal reaction. I'm not sure we should blame all the German people — most claim not to have known. But, to me, that's like our claiming no knowledge of the antics in Washington.

"There was anger all over Europe. If you had seen Europe in those days, you would understand why. Cities lay in ruins. Like London, which was attacked for years by planes, buzz bombs, and V-2 rockets. To this day, the British distrust the Germans. For me, I think the Germans would make a lot better allies than enemies. I hope it will be that way in the future. The same for the Japanese.

"I was a squadron commander by March of 1945. I was 22 years old, a major, and a combat veteran. When the war ended, I made my way from England to California and joined the first American unit equipped with jets. The aircraft were Lockheed P-80s and, to us, they were beautiful, if not reliable. Flying them was a true adventure. Everything that goes up must come down and we often wondered if we were going to come down in one piece.

"As the years passed, I enjoyed my life as a fighter pilot. Each day was full of challenge — fellow officers became fast friends. Assignments varied, keeping interest high. I spent one year as a member of the Royal Air Force squadron in England. Then Korea broke. To my chagrin, I

didn't get into that one but spent my time as a base commander training others, then as a staff officer.



"I enjoyed my life as a fighter pilot."

"In 1955 I went to Germany to command the 86th Fighter Group. Next year found me down in Libya at an American base outside of Tripoli. I was there for two years, running a weapons training center. Then, horror of horrors, the Pentagon. Of all my thirty years, the next four were the worst. Even the memory of that place is upsetting. After a year in the National War College, I took command of the 81st Tactical Fighter Wing in England. Following that, a short stint in headquarters, then off to Thailand to command the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing. We flew F-4s and were one of the four Air Force units carrying out the bombing raids against North



Vietnam. 1966-1967 were intense years. Missions near Hanoi were as tough and dangerous as anything I faced in Germany during World War II. The North Vietnamese had surface-to-air missiles, MIG fighters and anti-aircraft guns, the like of which Germany never had."

When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, it left many bitter people in the United States and Vietnam. The war had been a horror for the South Vietnamese, who lost their country and their hope, and for the Americans, who lost thousands of men and respect all over the world. The social effects that the war had on young Americans were also dramatic. General Olds remembers one event clearly.

"In 1969 or 1970, I was asked to give a speech to the ROTC youngsters at a mid-western university. I was then a Commandant of Cadets at the Air Force Academy. The university had been torn by a month-long riot and feelings were at a fever pitch. My presence as a military man did not help matters. Except for a handful of ROTC cadets, the student body was seething with hostility. Many attended my presentation. Their rage beat against me with an almost physical force. I understood their frustrations only too well and tried not to take the abuse being hurled my way as something personal. It wasn't easy. When the clamor subsided, I looked across the rows of faces and started my talk by telling them they were a bunch of amateurs who didn't know how to hate, because they didn't know how to hate or what it was they were supposed to hate. I suggested that they listen to a pro. The war going on was indeed wrong, I told them. Not wrong because we were there; wrong because the people in Washington, Kennedy and Johnson, and particularly, Robert S. McNamara, had never grasped the basic objective. The cost in human lives was a price being paid for no stated reason. The men in Washington were playing at war with no understanding of war or its prosecution, with little understanding of the emotional reaction of the American people to a seemingly pointless course of national action.

"I told the audience I had been honored in October of 1967 by a visit with President Johnson on my return from Vietnam. It was a pleasant forty minutes but I left the Oval Office firmly convinced that the President really didn't know what was going on in Southeast Asia. Certainly he knew statistically, monetarily and politically. But, he didn't know what was going on in the hearts of the South Vietnamese people or of the Thais, or of his own American troops.

"Later events bore me out. In 1972, we left the South Vietnamese, the Thais, the Cambodians, and all of the people of that area to their certain fate. We left the region with our tail between our legs; nothing solved, nothing gained. An eight-year waste and an everlasting disgrace, a

blundering, inept prosecution of a situation which, from the very start, demanded a positive course with positive, believable, attainable goals. A government owes that to its people, and a government failing in that obligation must be held accountable by the people."

I asked General Olds if he thought Senator Goldwater, if he had been elected President, would have had a better solution to the Vietnam problem.

"I think, as President, Senator Goldwater would have had the courage to do things with positive purpose. What hurts me so deeply now is that we sacrificed all of those young men for nothing. As a professional military man, I knew we were in a position to end that war in 1967. To end it decisively and to end it where you tell the enemy, 'All right, this is how it's going to be.' Now, that's a simplistic approach, but we had the power. We just lacked the direction. If we had done that there would have been thousands of young men alive today — that includes thousands and thousands of Vietnamese, both North and South. Better than that, there would have been millions of South Vietnamese living their own lives instead of being under the dominance of a harsh communist regime. That's to say nothing of what is happening in Cambodia.



"The right man, at the right job,
at the right time."

The newspapers don't tell us much about that, do they? Thailand is under attack, not massive attack, but a constant probing at her borders. Now, the North Vietnamese are even fighting with the Chinese.

"After my interview with Lyndon Johnson a reporter at a press conference asked me, 'Why don't we just get out?' Well, the thought had never occurred to me. I said, 'Well, in the first place, we would lose what little we have left of



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Laos. Then we would lose all of Cambodia, South Vietnam and, ultimately, Thailand and Indonesia in another 15 or 20 years.'

"He said, 'Oh, you believe in the Domino Theory?'

"I said, 'I've never heard of it, but that's what is going to happen. (And that's what is happening right now.)

" 'How should we end the war?' asked the reporter.

" 'Simple,' I said, 'win it.' "

What would have happened if we hadn't pulled out?

"We fiddle-faddled around for so long, and got ourselves into such a mess with press statements and Presidential proclamations that I don't know

if we had any other choice. Our prisoners were held as pawns and we had to act. In the years since we have continued to demonstrate a lack of national will. The free world is crumbling around us. The Russians wait, maneuver and grow constantly stronger. We agree at the conference table to reduce our military strength with no quid-pro-quo. We are allowing ourselves to be blackmailed through the medium of oil and we literally buy a peace between warring neighbors in the Middle East when we can't pay the interest on our national debt. Who knows where it will end? I hope we are not pushed to the very brink of continued existence. Years ago, we should have learned we cannot isolate ourselves from world affairs; we cannot act with indecision and lack of clear direction and we cannot be weak. No one wants war. But the surest way to bring it about is to fail to maintain our proper place in world affairs."

After Vietnam, General Olds' next assignment was commander of Cadets at the Air Force Academy, for 3½ years. His last assignment in the Air Force was at an air base in California, where he worked for two years. Then, after 30 years of military life, he said good-bye to the Air Core. In 1973, he moved to Steamboat Springs.

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