



WINGS *of* VALOR

Honoring America's Fighter Aces



AMERICA'S FIGHTER ACES

Wings of Valor is a profoundly moving testament to our living fighter pilot Aces, in words that describe their remarkable moments of courage, daring and bravery in aerial combat. Their stories are intended to encourage and inspire young Americans to adopt the cherished values of patriotism and service. The Aces photographs, captured in contemporary settings, were taken many decades after the faded snapshots of youthful aviators that are used as background in some of the images. These portraits convey a tone and quality that reflect the honor and distinction that these elite airmen have earned.

Produced in collaboration with the American Fighter Aces Association, *Wings of Valor* was created to preserve and promote the distinguished heritage of the American combat fighter Ace for future generations.

Cover Photo: Captain Don S. Gentile, USAAF

Cover Design: Scott Schmehl

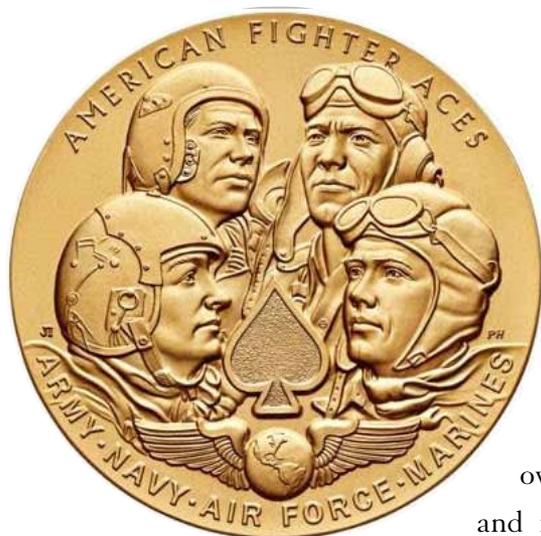


A HERO'S ACTION IS ALWAYS EXTRAORDINARY because it is so contrary to the basic human instincts of self-preservation and survival. For the fighter Ace, it was often kill or be killed. The men whose images and stories are told in *Wings of Valor* reflect the courage and determination it takes to get no less than five “kills” in aerial combat and return from each mission alive. Some were shot down, captured and later returned home. These men distinguished themselves as Navy, Marine, U.S. Army Air Corps and Air Force pilots who had the courage to pursue their enemy with aggression, agility and precision. They have been recognized as elite and special.

To fly in combat may seem exciting and noble, but it was also extremely dangerous and deadly. All fighter pilots, regardless of their personal victory tallies, are deserving of great respect and credit for what they endured.

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact qualities that separate a good fighter pilot from a great fighter pilot. However, they consist of an indomitable inner spirit and a fierce determination to survive and succeed at any cost, with a measure of opportunity and luck added to the mix.

Wings of Valor immortalizes 82 men for their incredible bravery and aerial heroics during World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam wars. It is the embodiment of the very term Ace. Their images and stories, collected on these pages, are as diverse as America itself. Today, these men will tell you that they are proud Americans who are caretakers of freedom. They have been to the edge and have lived to tell their story.



THE CONGRESSIONAL GOLD MEDAL

On May 20, 2015, the American Fighter Aces were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal — Congress’ highest civilian award—in a standing-room-only ceremony held in Emancipation Hall on Capitol Hill. The ceremony was attended by over three dozen surviving Aces and their families and friends, who were flown to Washington, D.C. by more than 20 volunteer pilots and a fleet of small and mid-sized jets, an experience that many of the volunteer pilots called a true privilege and honor.

The Congressional Gold Medal is an award bestowed by the United States Congress to persons who have performed an act that has an impact on American history and culture that is likely to be recognized as a major achievement in the recipient’s field long after the actual achievement.

Bill H.R. 685, introduced by Rep. Sam Johnson of Texas on February 14, 2013, passed in the House on May 19, 2014, passed in the Senate by unanimous vote on May 20, 2014 and was signed by President Barack Obama on May 23, 2014. The bill became Public Law 113-105 with the sole purpose “to award a Congressional Gold Medal to the American Fighter Aces, collectively, in recognition of their heroic military service and defense of our country’s freedom throughout the history of aviation warfare.”

The United States Mint designed and struck the single gold medal to honor the American Fighter Aces. The Gold Medal was given to the Smithsonian Institution, where it is available for display and research. Each Fighter Ace received a bronze replica of the medal.



The following excerpt from *Wings of Valor: Honoring America's Fighter Aces* is a sampling of the many amazing stories of bravery and courage demonstrated by these heroes.

CLARENCE E. ANDERSON
Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

RICHARD S. BECKER
Major, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

CLARENCE A. BORLEY
Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

PERRY J. DAHL
Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

ARTHUR C. FIEDLER
Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

R. STEPHEN RITCHIE
Brigadier General, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

CLARENCE E. ANDERSON

Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Bud Anderson (he was born Clarence Emil and regarded the nickname he was given in infancy as an act of mercy) always remembered the 1929 crash landing of a Boeing Model 80 Trimotor in a field near his family's home when he was seven years old. It was a major event: people from all around came to gawk at the plane. Bud and his best friend rushed to the crash site and spent the day climbing through the cabin and sitting in the cockpit, imagining themselves airborne and in command.

Growing up on a large fruit tree farm in the small foothills town of Newcastle, a few miles north of Sacramento at the gateway to the High Sierra, Anderson was 5 years old when Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic. As a result, he immediately fell in love with flight and his father deepened the romance soon after by driving him in the family's Model T to a little dirt airfield in nearby Sacramento for a ride in a Stearman biplane. Then came the Trimotor, falling out of the sky like a gift. After this, as Anderson later wrote in his memoir *To Fly and Fight*, the walls of his bedroom were papered with photos torn out of the pages of *Popular Aviation*, squadrons of model planes hung by strings from his ceiling and he had at least a vague sense of his future destiny.

After graduating from high school in 1939, Anderson took stock of what was required to get into the Army Air Corps—be single, 20 years old, and have two years of college. He enrolled in Sacramento Junior College Technical Institute for Aeronautics (later joking that the entrance exam was being able to remember the name) and also

entered the Civilian Pilot Training Program, which meant he could learn to fly for free while pursuing his studies. He had just graduated from the JC, had several hundred hours' flight time in a Piper Cub, and was working as an aircraft mechanic at the Sacramento Air Depot when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Less than a month later, Anderson turned 20 and immediately enlisted and was sent to Lindbergh Field in San Diego for flight training.

Not long after receiving his wings in September 1942, he was assigned to a new fighter group that had just been formed, the 357th. In the spring of 1943, the pilots of the 357th were sent to the gunnery range in Tonopah, Nevada, to learn combat tactics. One of the men he met there was Chuck Yeager, who would become Bud Anderson's long time good friend. Among the things that the two men had in common was 20/10 vision: they could spot planes when they were still only specks in the air, invisible to men with only average good vision.



Photo credit: Nick Del Calzo

The 357th sailed for England in November 1943, aboard the Queen Elizabeth and was assigned the new P-51 Mustang when it settled into the RAF base at Leiston, sixty miles north of London. (Anderson had “Old Crow” in the whiskey maker’s lettering painted on his fuselage.)

The 357th would become one of the most lethal of all the U.S. fighter groups, scoring 658 victories against 128 losses while going up against the Germans’ best pilots and planes. “We weren’t like other people,” Anderson later said, “at least not in our own minds. We were bolder, braver, smarter, more spirited.” Yet he also saw that only the fittest survived. Of the 28 original pilots in Anderson’s squadron, 16 would either die in combat or be shot down and captured. (Yeager was shot down over France but managed to make his way to Spain and returned to the unit.)

As the engine of his Mustang idled heavily as he waited to take off on his first mission, Anderson was “more afraid of screwing up than of dying.” But he didn’t even see an enemy aircraft in his first few missions over France because the Germans had concentrated their air defense closer to home. Then he had all the action he wanted as his squadron began flying escort for the bombers beginning to pound aircraft factories and other targets in the German homeland.

The German fighters would come at the B-17s and B-24s head-on, trying to scatter the formation. They’d fire long bursts, roll down, then circle around to get ahead of the bomber stream and attack again. The Mustangs stopped many of the attacks, but the bomber losses were fearsome, with up to four percent casualty rate being regarded as acceptable by the Allied High Command. Anderson was amazed by the bravery of the Allied crews, stoically continuing to go up when their chances of survival dwindled day after day.

On March 8, 1944, Anderson got his first kill when he fired a Hail Mary burst at a Messerschmitt 109 after

engaging it in a series of tight turns to get inside position and the German pilot flew directly into his pattern. Over the next two months, he got three more. On May 12, Anderson became an Ace without firing a shot when he closed on a ME 109 and the German pilot, panicking at his approach, preemptively bailed out of the plane.

In late May, Old Crow and the other Mustangs got a paint job—black and white stripes on their wings so that Navy gunners wouldn’t target them during the Normandy invasion. By the end of June, after supporting the landing, the 357th was back to escort missions that at times involved as many as 1,300 U.S. bombers and 1,100 fighters. On June 29, Anderson’s biggest day of combat, he shot down three FW 190s.

By the beginning of 1945, Anderson had 16 kills and was a triple Ace. Amazingly, his plane had never even suffered a hit in all the dogfights he’d had during his 116 missions. On January 14, he and Yeager flew their last missions of the war, the two of them backing up the main force of Mustangs heading toward Germany.

After the war Bud Anderson worked as a test pilot and reluctantly spent time at the Pentagon. He did two tours in Vietnam in command of the 18th and 355th Tactical Fighter Wings, flying 25 combat missions in F-105s. While he was there, his son Jim, just out of flight school, was flying a light plane over the jungle, dropping leaflets and making propaganda broadcasts. Bud made a surprise visit to Jim’s base and accompanied him as co-pilot on one of these missions.

Bud Anderson retired from the Air Force as a Colonel in 1972. In 1988, he and Chuck Yeager climbed into refurbished Mustangs like those they’d flown over forty years earlier and went up together one last time at an air show at Maxwell Air Force Base, disproving the old adage that “there are old pilots and there are bold pilots but there are no old, bold pilots.”

RICHARD S. BECKER

Major, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Richard Becker, who was called “MiG Wrecker Becker” by the other pilots in his squadron, also carried the label of “Second Ace of the Korean War” with him most of his life. It was only after the opening of the official records of the former Soviet Union, whose best pilots Becker had gone up against in dogfights over “MiG Alley” in 1951, that he discovered that one of his “probables” could have been a confirmed kill and he may, therefore, actually have been the first Ace of the war. But by then, as Becker often said, such distinctions had long since ceased to matter. He only wished that he had been able to fly more combat missions in Korea and take down more enemy planes.

Becker first entered the Army Air Force during World War II as an enlisted man in 1944 after graduating from high school in his home town of Fleetwood, Pennsylvania. He served in Italy in the last months of World War II as a member of a ground crew and decided that some day he would be a pilot himself. After being discharged at the end of the war, he entered the newly established U.S. Air Force in 1948 as a cadet and was commissioned as a second lieutenant a year later.

He went through training at the advanced gunnery school at Nellis Air Force Base and was assigned to the 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, the so called “Fighting Pigeons.” He started off flying the F-80 Shooting Star, the Air Force’s first jet fighter, but by the time the 334th was sent to Korea in December 1950, it had been assigned the new F-86 Sabre Jet, the sharpest weapon in the U.S. air arsenal. Becker had the name “Miss Behaving” painted on the side of his plane.

In the first days of the war, North Korean pilots, flying World War II-era Soviet YAK-9 fighters, had quickly established superiority against South Korea’s tiny air force. Then the U.S. arrived at the head of

the UN force with its first generation of jets—the F-80 and F-84—and had the upper hand until the Koreans introduced the new MiG-15 fighters the USSR had given them. Fast and heavily armed, the MiG-15 controlled the skies for several weeks until the U.S. answered with the F-86, setting up the contest between two second generation jet fighters that would define the air war in Korea.

The USSR denied that experienced Soviet pilots were flying the Chinese MiGs and did everything to disguise their identity—ordering them to wear Chinese uniforms; to play the role of “tourists” when not on duty; to speak only Chinese or Korean; and not to stray from the Chinese border so that if they were shot down they would not be captured. But U.S. pilots sometimes caught glimpses of them in the cockpit and heard them blurt out sentences in Russian over the radio during the chaos of dogfights; they knew who the enemy was.

The U.S. was at a disadvantage in the early part of the air war. As Becker later said, “We never had more than 16 aircraft in the air at the beginning... It was not unusual for a flight of four Sabres to take on 30 to 40 MiGs.” Moreover, U.S. pilots had to fly 250 miles to get to “MiG Alley,” the narrow section of North Korea just over the Chinese border where most combat took place, while the MiGs were within 40 miles of their bases in China just over the Yalu River. They could climb to altitude over friendly territory and then dive on the Americans when they appeared. They could also see how many of the F-86s they were facing and quickly send up more of their own planes in what Becker and the other U.S. pilots called “MiG trains”—24 MiGs followed by another 24 and then a third 24. Moreover, the MiGs could break off the fight whenever they wanted and head back over the Yalu knowing that the Sabres had been ordered not to pursue them over the border. The F-86s, on the other hand, often had to fight their way back home, often attacked by a newly arrived

contingent of the enemy, their fuel so low that often they were forced to glide the last few miles to their base and make deadstick landings. “It was a fight to the death,” Becker later recalled. “It was also a short fight. Sometimes during an entire day, combat lasted only 4 or 5 minutes, but it was so violent that we were exhausted when we landed.”

On December 30, 1950, Becker was part of a flight of F-86s flying a sweep over “MiG Alley.” When they spotted “a huge gaggle” of 20 or more MiGs, the flight leader ordered the Americans to drop their auxiliary fuel tanks and attack. Becker’s left tank didn’t disengage. According to protocols, he should have returned to base, but he wanted to get into the fight and wrenched his plane to get a MiG in his sights. As he fired a long burst, the MiG began to smoke and went into a spin. He followed it down but had to break off before seeing it hit the ground because he was attacked by other MiGs. Back at the base, he claimed a kill, but was only given a “probable.” In fact, Soviet archives opened in the 1990s confirmed that the MiG did indeed crash and that the Soviet pilot—named Savinow—was killed. (If credited with this kill, Becker, rather than his fellow pilot James Jabara, would have been the first American Ace of the Korean air war.)

On April 22, Becker was flying wing to his flight leader when they jumped a group of MiGs from above. He hit one of them with a short burst and it entered a death spin. On July 8, he shot down another MiG while covering a B-29 raid against the North Korean capital of Pyongyang: “I started at 47,000 feet and fought with him for at least ten minutes. We ended up on the deck, flying between mountains. I finally got him and he crashed into a mountain within a mile of the Yalu.”

His big day came on August 19, when he was one of four Sabres that ran into eight MiGs. “We climbed behind them and they didn’t see us. We got within 1,200 feet before they turned.” Becker got within 500 feet of the flight leader and opened fire; the MiG rolled over and the pilot bailed out. Then he went after the enemy wing man: “I hit him hard and he blew up in my face.” Pieces of the disintegrating MiG smashed Becker’s windscreen and canopy and he had to struggle with his plane’s falling hydraulic pressure on the way back home.

On September 9, Becker got his fifth MiG (sixth, if the first “probable” had been included.) Within an hour of landing back at the base, he received a telegram from the Secretary of the Air Force ordering him to return to the U.S. He complained bitterly that he only had 82 missions, not the 100 that usually comprised a tour. But his commanding officers had decided that because of his Ace status, he would be a propaganda asset to the enemy if shot down, and captured, and his appeals were denied.

Richard Becker continued flying fighters until 1955 when he lost an eye in an accident. He retired from the Air Force as a Major in 1970.



Photo credit: Alex McKnight

CLARENCE A. BORLEY

Commander, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

On his fourth day adrift in the Pacific, Clarence Borley, who at the age of 20 had just become the Navy's youngest Ace, was overcome by the hopelessness of his situation. Utterly alone in a flimsy raft, hallucinating from lack of food and water, he pulled out his service revolver to end it all. "I thought that before I shot myself, I'd better make sure it was working all right," he later said of a potentially tragic moment that suddenly turned comic. "So I popped off a shot in the air. The shock of the noise brought me back to sanity." Borley quickly decided that continuing to try to survive was preferable to death.

A gangly young man who grew up in Yakima, Washington, Borley, then 17 years old, had worked with his father on the family farm all day on December 7, 1941, and didn't find out about the attack on Pearl Harbor until late in the evening when a neighbor told him what had happened. What Borley told writer Tom Cleaver years afterward summed up the feelings of his entire generation on that day of infamy: "I knew my life had changed forever, though I wasn't sure how."

He had been interested in flying since seeing "Dive Bomber," an Errol Flynn film released a few months before the attack. He thought that he'd never be able to satisfy the requirement of two years of college to enter flight training, but in the spring of 1942, he learned that Navy aviation was now accepting high school graduates who could pass a test showing college level knowledge. Borley hopped a bus to Seattle right after his 18th birthday in July, took the test and passed it, and waited impatiently for orders. When they finally arrived the week of Thanksgiving, he thought to himself, "This is the best Christmas present ever."

He reported first to Corpus Christi and then to Pensacola where he qualified for fighters and acquired the nickname "Spike." He was assigned to air group VF-15, which called itself "Satan's Playmates." His squadron trained six hours a day for six weeks practicing carrier take offs and landings. In early April 1944, VF-15 was ordered to the USS Essex.

His first aerial combat came on June 19 as a part of a flight of four Hellcats launched to protect the task force. They soon saw 30 enemy dive bombers and 20 fighters and dropped down to attack. "The scene was chaotic beyond description with every air craft firing at someone else," Borley later told writer James Oleson of the event that became known as "The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot" because of the large number of enemy planes destroyed. "Afterwards, I returned to the fleet [and] met my squadron mates[who] had all shot down one or two of the enemy. I had to confess to my utter shame that I had not fired a single shot...In the excitement and confusion of my first aerial combat, I had forgotten to charge my guns!"



Photo credit: Nick Del Calzo

On October 10, his plane was part of a flight of 14 Hellcats that took off for Okinawa at dawn. Later that day, after destroying several Japanese aircraft on the ground, Borley spotted five Zeros. He got on the tail of the leader of the group, pulled his trigger and fanned his rudders to spread the shot pattern from one wing tip of the enemy plane to the other. The Zero caught fire and rolled over, hitting the cane fields below.

“It gives you a feeling of great exhilaration when you overcome somebody in combat,” Borley recalled of his first kill five decades later. “You’re fighting for your life.”

That is what he himself would be doing two days later as the Essex approached the island of Formosa. Borley felt a vague sense of apprehension as he took off with three other Hellcats just before dawn. Two of the planes soon experienced engine problems and were forced to return to the carrier. Borley and his flight leader continued on. As the island of Formosa loomed up in the sunrise, they saw several Japanese fighters. Almost without encountering resistance, Borley shot down four enemy planes in quick succession.

As the remaining fighters fled, Borley and his flight leader turned back to the ship. Spotting more Japanese planes taking off from an airfield below, they went in for a strafing run. Anti-aircraft fire bloomed in the air all around them. Borley felt his plane shudder and saw fire coming out of the engine. He didn’t want to go down over enemy territory and decided to try to glide to the ocean about five miles away. He had just cleared the shoreline when his plane stalled, smacked down into the water and broke apart. His Mae West brought him to the surface. Seeing that the current was taking him back to land, he started swimming toward open water.

The U.S. air strikes were still taking place. Borley popped open a container of dye so that the planes would see him. As a Japanese patrol boat headed in his direction, a Hellcat dropped down to destroy it.

The pilot spotted Borley and came around again, lowered his landing gear to slow his air speed, and dropped a raft that saved Borley’s life.

Over the next three days he drank from the small supply of water in one of the raft’s compartments and used the line and hooks in a futile effort to catch fish. He experienced a night of terror as a typhoon churned the ocean and tossed his raft into the air. At one point he was dumped into the ocean, but managed to climb back into the raft.

By October 15, he was a speck adrift in the Taiwan Straits, suffering from hunger, thirst, exhaustion and desperation. Because he knew details of the coming U.S. invasion of the Philippines and was afraid that he would give them up if captured and tortured, he thought about taking his own life.

Later that day, after deciding to carry on instead of killing himself, Borley saw a submarine rise up out of the water beside him. He thought it was Japanese and pulled out his pistol, but then a voice yelled through a bullhorn: “Put down that gun!” It was the USS Sawfish. The sub was actually looking for another pilot and happened by accident onto Borley, who was 75 miles from where he first went down.

Two sailors came down to help him into the sub. He was unable to talk and his face was so badly sunburned that the commander of the Sawfish was not certain he was an American until Borley pulled out his dogtags.

The second day after his rescue, the Sawfish was attacked by a Japanese convoy and depth charged for over an hour. Borley considered the irony: he had survived being shot down, hammered by a typhoon, and considering suicide only to be crushed to death deep in the ocean. But the Sawfish survived and finally put ashore on November 9.

After his rescue, the war was over for Clarence Borley. He made the Navy a career, finally retiring as a Commander in 1968.

PERRY J. DAHL

Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Perry Dahl shot down nine Japanese planes in the Pacific during World War II. He survived a crash landing and a midair collision. But one of his sharpest memories of the war is not about combat at all, but about a bizarre fishing trip with Charles Lindbergh.

The Lone Eagle had been sent to New Guinea by the U.S. government to help Dahl and the other P-38 pilots of the 475th Fighter Group stationed there learn techniques of better fuel conservation. He was not a gregarious man and so Dahl was a little surprised when “Lindy” asked him one afternoon if he wanted to go fishing. Dahl said yes and then Lindbergh led him to the beach where he had commandeered one of the large rafts carried by B-25 bombers. They walked the raft out into the water and then jumped aboard, paddling out beyond a coral reef. Dahl was about to ask how they’d fish without poles when Lindbergh suddenly reached into his pack and pulled out a grenade, pulled the pin and tossed it overboard. After the concussion sent up a spume of water, Lindbergh said, “Let’s go fishing.” He dived into the water, Dahl right behind him, and they spent the next few minutes gathering the stunned fish floating toward the surface. That night the squadron had a fish fry.

Perry Dahl was 17 when he enlisted in the Washington State National Guard in 1939, hoping to use the pay for attending weekend meetings to buy gas for his ’32 Chevy. The unit was called to active duty early in 1941 and he had to complete his last year of high school at night. After marching back from infantry maneuvers in a driving rain at Fort Lewis one afternoon, he saw pilots standing under the wings of their planes laughing and smoking and, most important, dry. He applied for the Air Corps soon after and was accepted on September 6, 1942.

His unit at Williams Air Force Base was the first to train in P-38s and Dahl, like most of the other pilots

who flew this plane, came to love the Lightning and was always ready to fiercely defend it against its detractors. His father came to visit one afternoon and as four of the planes roared by overhead, he looked up in awe, and said, “23 Skidoo.” That is what Dahl later named the P-38 he flew in the Pacific.

Just 5’5” and 125 pounds (he had to sit on pillows to reach the controls), Dahl was assigned to the 475th Fighter Group in October 1943, as a replacement pilot along with another flyer whose hair was prematurely grey. When the commanding officer first saw them, he shook his head in despair and said, “My God, they’re sending me old men and kids!”

Dahl was almost shot down on his fifth mission. “I was tail end Charlie on a flight of 18 planes,” he remembers. “When the order came to drop tanks, I forgot to switch to internal tanks and as a consequence lost power. By the time my engines restarted, I’d been left behind.” His flight leader radioed him to head back home. But on the way he saw a Zero. As he went after it, a second enemy fighter suddenly appeared and opened fire. Dahl quickly pulled up the right side of his plane and the shells, which would have shredded the cockpit of a single engine fighter, were absorbed by the tail boom of the P-38. Dahl limped back to base on one engine.

Dahl got his first kill on November 9, 1943, and his second—both Zeroes—over Wewak, capital of Papua New Guinea, three days before Christmas. In his next engagement, he was flying back to base after a reconnaissance mission to pinpoint the location of Japanese shipping when he saw a Zero dart into the clouds above him. He followed and when he came out, he saw the enemy plane just 50 meters ahead of him and opened fire. The Zero exploded and when Dahl flew through the debris, his landing gear was destroyed. He managed to get back to his base where he walked away from a crash landing.

He became an Ace when he brought down a Zero and a Ki-43 “Oscar” on April 3, 1944.

By late summer, when his squadron moved to the Philippines, Dahl had six kills. On November 10, just after he shot down the leader of a flight of Ki-67 “Tonys” over the island of Ponson, another P-38 collided with “23 Skidoo.” The other plane crashed. Dahl saw that his tail section was badly damaged. Any thought that he might be able to limp back to base disappeared when his right engine fell off. The P-38 blew up just as Dahl managed to bail out, the explosion leaving flash burns on much of his body.

Over open water, he delayed pulling the ripcord as long as possible because the Japanese pilots often strafed American pilots in their parachutes. As he was about to hit the water, he opened the chute and prepared to slip out of the rigging. He popped his Mae West, came to the surface, and opened his one-man raft. As a Zero swooped down to open fire, Dahl flipped the raft over and hid under it. Soon after a Japanese destroyer headed toward him and was about to bring him aboard when U.S. B-25s appeared and the destroyer began evasive maneuvers.



Photo credit: Alex McKnight

After several hours, Dahl managed to get his raft to shore. He landed, cached the raft, and began walking up a trail heading into the jungle. Hearing footsteps, he took out his .45 pistol. He saw someone in the heavy foliage a few feet away and pulled the trigger. As the gun misfired, Dahl saw that the other man was a Philippine guerrilla who slashed at the bush between them with a machete. Dahl shouted “Americano!” The guerrilla said angrily in perfect English, “Why the hell did you try to kill me?”

The guerrillas took him to an improvised medical clinic in the jungle where he was treated for his burns. Over the next month, he went from one guerrilla camp to another, one step ahead of Japanese patrols. Often subsisting on grub worms, Dahl weighed less than 90 pounds when a pair of U.S. scouts finally located him and called in a PBX seaplane to take him out.

After convalescence in a Sidney hospital, Dahl was back in combat in early spring 1945. In March he brought down a Japanese bomber and fighter, bringing his total enemy kills to nine.

After the war, he came home and got degrees at the University of Washington and Colorado State University and was working at the *Seattle Post Intelligencer* when he was recalled to active duty in 1951. Deciding to make the Air Force his career, he eventually served as Deputy Chief of Staff for the North American Air Defense Command and commanded the 56th Special Operations Wing. After flying two combat tours in Vietnam, Perry Dahl retired as a Colonel in 1978.

ARTHUR FIEDLER

Colonel, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Arthur Fiedler's summary moment as a fighter pilot in World War II came during a dogfight over Ploesti, Romania, on June 28, 1944, when he destroyed a German Messerschmitt 109 with his .45 pistol—without firing a shot.

His squadron of P-51s was flying at 25,000 feet when a flock of Messerschmitt 109s appeared. The flight leader immediately ordered an attack: "Drop tanks and balls to the wall!" Fiedler's left auxiliary fuel tank wouldn't disengage. He made every maneuver he could think of to get rid of it, but he didn't lose the tank until he thought to test fire his guns. By that time, he was all alone. Heading toward where he thought the rest of his flight would be, he went through heavy cloud cover and then, when he broke into the clear, saw two 109s. One of them spotted Fiedler and he maneuvered the P-51 into an acrobatic dive, pulled out at 13,000 feet and opened fire, sending the 109 down in flames.

"I'd been given a 'probable' four days earlier," he later recalled, "and I thought, 'By God, I'm not getting another one.' So I followed him down to get pictures." The 109 crashed and Fiedler was pulling up when the other Focke-Wulf appeared. He put several shots into the German plane's fuselage but then his guns jammed as a result of the heavy G forces. "We were about 40 feet from each other, so close it was like flying in formation. He's looking at me and I'm looking at him. I'm not able to fire and not sure what to do. I figure whether I climb or dive he's probably coming after me with his 20mm cannon. I finally decided I'm going to take out my .45 pistol and start shooting at him. As I pulled out the gun, he was looking at me. He suddenly jettisoned his canopy and just bailed out. I knew they probably wouldn't believe it back at the base, so I turned on the cameras to have proof. For a while the other guys called me Svengali because I had 'hypnotized' this German pilot."

Fiedler had wanted to fly since he was 7 years old and became friends with a boy on his block in Oak Park, Illinois, whose father was a military pilot stationed out of town. When the father came home for weekend visits he circled over the neighborhood several times before landing at a nearby field. Fiedler and all the other kids would come out to watch, dancing and yelling as the plane maneuvered above them. "My God, he's like a bird!" Fiedler remembers marveling.

He was 18 when he joined the Army Air Corps in April 1942, a lean and lanky young man with a sharp sense of irony. Because of a shortage of instructors and planes, he wasn't called to flight school until October. After getting his wings and training in P-47 Thunderbolts, he was sent to an Air Corps facility in Dover, Delaware, in March 1943 as an instructor. His commanding officer told him that he would be there for the duration of the war and probably



Photo credit: Nick Del Calzo

never see air combat so Fiedler and his fiancé immediately got married. Three weeks later the Dover base was closed. Fiedler was assigned to the 325th Flight Group and sent to Lessina, Italy. His wife, now pregnant, went home to her family.

His first mission was on June 13, 1944, flying in a P-51 named “Helen,” after his wife. He had never flown in a formation of more than eight planes. But on this mission, escorting bombers to Munich, there were over 50 Mustangs that were likely, according to the preflight briefing the pilots received, to run into as many as 400 German fighters. Fiedler always remembered the sound of his own heart thumping with excitement as his plane got closer to Germany.

He had excellent 20/10 vision and on the flight path along the coast near Trieste he saw black specks in the distance and excitedly called out, “Bogeys, two o’clock high!” After a short pause the gruff voice of his flight leader came over the radio, “Naw, that’s just flak.” As Fiedler later recalled, “I’d never seen flak before. I was so embarrassed that I could have crawled down the tube to my oxygen mask.”

Soon after, another pilot pointed out the vapor trails of a pair of ME 109s. The flight leader ignored them. “Are we at war, or not?” Fiedler wondered. Almost immediately the question was answered as a 109 came roaring down the left side of the formation chased by a pair of P-51s from another squadron. As he watched fire from their machine guns rip chunks out of the approaching German plane, Fiedler understood that the game he was in was played for keeps.

Flying for a time as wingman to the famed Ace “Herky” Green, Fiedler got his first two kills on June 28, 1944, the day he took down the ME 109 with his .45. About two weeks later, on July 9, 1944, he got another 109 over Ploesti, and then on July 26 shot down a FW-190 and a Messerschmitt over Vienna, when his squadron took on 64 German fighters attacking a group of B-17s. He had become an Ace in a concentrated month of combat at the age of 20.

On September 12, Fiedler got his seventh kill and had his closest call. He was climbing up after a strafing run at enemy positions in eastern Hungary when he saw a large plane above him. He rose to intercept it, but was cautious because U.S. intelligence had recently informed pilots that the Russian Army was closing on Budapest and had planes in the air. Drawing closer to the plane than he normally would have, Fiedler saw that it had an odd camouflage—wavy blue lines—and no insignia. He was within thirty feet of the tail and identified it as a German He-11 bomber just as the plane’s top turret machine gun opened up, shredding his left wing and missing his engine by six inches.

Fiedler was able to pour enough fire into the He-11 to destroy its cockpit and knock off its left engine, sending the large plane down. But his own hydraulics were shot out on his left side. His air speed and rate of climb falling, he managed to get above the overcast and head for home. The P-51’s brakes were gone when he landed. He saw vehicles at the end of the runway and realized he would hit them if he didn’t do something. Although going fifty miles an hour, he did a skidding ground loop that brought the plane to a stop.

A colonel rushed out in a jeep and yelled up at Fiedler as he opened his canopy, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Fiedler replied, “Well, sir, I got shot up by a German bomber.”

“Did you get him?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy,” the Colonel said and drove off with a smile.

Arthur Fiedler came home in April, 1945, entered the University of Illinois and graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering in 1950. He was called back to service soon after and decided to make the Air Force his career. He worked in the Air Force’s Dyna Soar space launch vehicle program and flew over one thousand sorties in Vietnam. He retired in 1975 as a Colonel.

R. STEPHEN RITCHIE

Brigadier General, U.S. Air Force (Ret.)

Steve Ritchie never forgot the first time he was targeted by Russian surface-to-air missiles. It was April 16, 1972, on his first mission to Hanoi. Accelerating to 1600 miles an hour, three SAM missiles, lethal at 150 feet, came between Ritchie and his wingman at approximately 100 feet, but failed to detonate. Ritchie later told the story many times and always ended: “Thank goodness for that Soviet quality control!”

Ritchie’s hard-charging competitiveness was evident as a boy growing up in North Carolina. He played all sports and was a star quarterback in high school. He was not recruited for Air Force Academy football, but made the roster as a walk-on and became a starting half back for the Falcons in 1962-63, displaying on the gridiron the “intelligent aggression” one writer would later see as the hallmark of his combat career.

Ritchie graduated first in his Pilot Class and was one of a handful to fly the F-104 as a Second Lieutenant. He volunteered for Vietnam in 1968 and flew the first F-4 Fast Forward Air Controller (FAC) mission. The Fast

FAC Program was started by famed pilot George “Bud” Day in 1967 flying F-100s and proved to be one of the most successful missions in the Southeast Asian conflict. Circling at dangerously low altitudes, FAC aircraft marked targets, called in strikes and determined their effectiveness.

During one of his missions, Ritchie located some enemy supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. When none of the aircraft he called in for strikes was able to destroy the cache of materiel, he decided to attack it himself (breaking the very rules he had written). Diving out of the sun in the hope that enemy gunners

would be blinded, he was about to open fire on a strafing run when his F-4 bolted wildly as the right engine was destroyed. After he made it back to Da Nang on one engine it was discovered that a 37 mm had passed directly into the intake, penetrated the rugged J-79 and exited, miraculously without exploding. Ritchie never forgot his thousand-to-one survival miracle.

In 1969, Ritchie was assigned to the Air Force “Top Gun” School at Nellis AF Base where he introduced the Fast FAC mission to the school’s curriculum and taught the initial cadre of instructors. A generation later, Lieutenant



Photo credit: Nick Del Calzo

Colonel Mark Welsh (current Air Force Chief of Staff), Lieutenant Colonel Terry Adams and others implemented the Fast FAC mission in the F-16 in the first Gulf War with a program called “Killer Scout.”

In 1972, Ritchie volunteered again for Vietnam. On May 10, he was number 3 in a flight of F-4s, led by his AF Academy classmate and friend, Major Bob Lodge, who was on his third combat tour. Having planned this special mission for weeks, Lodge proceeded inbound to Hanoi at tree-top level below enemy radar and contacted four MiG-21s. Lodge and his wingman fired their missiles head-on at approximately seven miles, getting two kills. Meanwhile, Ritchie made visual contact with the third MiG and wrenched his F-4D Phantom to gain an inside advantage. Like a quarterback leading his receiver, he fired two Sparrows. The second missile detonated under the MiG and its pilot bailed out.

But this moment of triumph turned to tragedy as Lodge became “target fixated” behind the fourth MiG and failed to heed warnings that two MiG-19s were on his tail. They took down the big Phantom with 30 mm fire. Roger Locker in the plane’s rear seat bailed out. But Lodge had told Ritchie and others that he would never eject, because of his special access to classified information, and went in with the plane.

On May 31, Ritchie was reminded of the unpredictability of the Sparrow missile. “We were in a left turn east of Hanoi when I fired four missiles at a MiG-21,” he recalls. The first three malfunctioned, but luckily the last one hit the MiG hard enough to blow the canopy and entire front end off the aircraft.”

On July 8, Ritchie launched on what he later called “the most exciting air-to-air mission I ever flew... when I drew on all my life experiences. All the training, education, teamwork, discipline and practice came together in an instant in time.”

This intense experience began when another F-4 had been hit by MiGs and its pilot, separated from his flight, radioed his position as he limped back to base. Knowing there was a “cripple” flying alone, the North Vietnamese dispatched two MiG-21s to take

it out. As Ritchie sprinted to cover the wounded F-4 he was vectored to within two miles of the MiGs by DISCO (call sign of the RC-121 early warning aircraft with special radar and intelligence capabilities). Spotting the lead MiG at 10 o’clock, he turned left in full afterburner to pass it head on, then executed a 6G slicing turn and a barrel roll to the rear quarter of the second MiG. He downed it with two Sparrows, and then, flying through the debris and ignoring the battle damage it caused, he maneuvered hard to achieve a 4 o’clock position on the lead MiG. Knowing that he was beyond maximum angle off, inside minimum range, and pulling too many Gs, he nonetheless locked on the radar from the front cockpit and fired. As the missile seemed to veer off course to the left, Ritchie was shouting: “Come right! Hard right!” As if the Sparrow had received his frantic instructions, it suddenly made a near 90 degree turn, “splashing” the MiG dead center in the fuselage.

On August 28, Ritchie’s flight was headed home from a mission over Haiphong when DISCO warned of two “Blue Bandits” returning to Hanoi. Ritchie realized that he was on course to intercept. Soon his weapons officer saw the “Bandits” ahead at 25,000 feet and secured a radar lock. Ritchie initiated a climbing turn and fired two missiles with no luck. Now trailing the MiGs, he launched two more Sparrows. The first missed, but the second—his fourth and last—scored a direct hit.

There was a huge celebration at the Udorn Air Base Club that night for the first Air Force Ace in Vietnam. No one knew it that evening, but because of the changing nature of future air warfare, Ritchie would probably be the last U.S. fighter pilot Ace.

Stephen Ritchie later transferred to the Air Force Reserves, continuing to fly jets at air shows as a part of the Air Force recruiting program. On January 29, 1999, after flying a T-38 demonstration, he was retired in his “G-suit” on the Randolph Air Force Base Flight Line by one of his former students at the Fighter Weapons School, Air Force Chief of Staff, Mike Ryan.

MISSION STATEMENT | PROJECT OVERVIEW

Wings of Valor is a visual media project designed to reignite the patriotic spirit of America by honoring the exceptional men who fought for our country in aerial combat—the American Fighter Ace.

This project is being produced in collaboration with the American Fighter Aces Association. It will be historical, educational, and inspirational in nature. Most of the fighter Aces currently living and able to be photographed are featured. These heroes desire to foster patriotism and to inspire our youth to become worthy citizens of our country. This is their gift to America.

COMMEMORATIVE BOOK

The core component of the project is *Wings of Valor*, a large commemorative book featuring black-and-white photographs of 82 Aces. The format of the book is similar to the *New York Times* best-seller, *Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the Call of Duty*, produced in collaboration with the Congressional Medal of Honor Society and Foundation. Nick Del Calzo and Peter Collier, the team behind the *Medal of Honor* book, also created *Wings of Valor*, which will be published later this year by the U.S. Naval Institute Press.

SPONSORSHIP AND RESIDUAL OPPORTUNITIES

The photographic images and stories can be utilized in numerous ways, including residual opportunities such as corporate and affinity sponsorship and commemorative events through collaborative alliances with historical groups and military/aviation museums across the country.

- ☆ Traveling photographic exhibition that tours venues around the country
- ☆ Gallery portraits for permanent exhibit in corporate, defense or museum venues
- ☆ Digital book on DVD
- ☆ Medallions of the Fighter Aces
- ☆ Limited edition 11x14 prints, signed by the Aces for major donors

For more information on the project, please visit our website at
WWW.WINGSOFVALOR.US

NICK DEL CALZO

Creative Director and
Lead Photographer

Nick is an award-winning
photojournalist who
conceives and produces

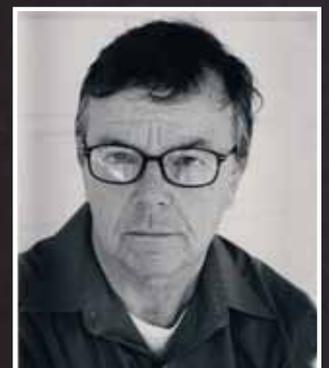


photographic projects that
advance human values. In 2003, he created and
photographed our nation's heroes for the book,
*Medal of Honor: Portraits of Valor Beyond the
Call of Duty*, which has sold over 300,000 copies.
In 1997, Nick photographed and produced
The Triumphant Spirit, another highly acclaimed
book that features portraits of then living survivors
of the Holocaust.

PETER COLLIER

Author

Previously, Peter was
the storywriter for *Medal
of Honor: Portraits of Valor
Beyond the Call of Duty*.



In addition, Peter is the
author (with David Horowitz) of *The Rockefellers:
An American Dynasty*, which was nominated
for the National Book Award, as well as *The
Kennedys: An American Drama*, *The Roosevelts:
An American Saga*, and other books.



WINGS *of* VALOR

Honoring America's Fighter Aces