

Recollections of a Marine Attack Pilot

Larry R. Gibson

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This is a passionate and illuminating account of one man's time in the military.

Marine officer Larry R. Gibson offers a crisply written series of vignettes about his career in *Recollections of a Marine Attack Pilot*.

Gibson begins with a fateful decision: parking in downtown Lexington, Kentucky, one day when he was finishing his bachelor's degree. Had the engineering student parked on the other side of the street, he would not have entered a Marine Corps recruitment office and begun the process of becoming a marine attack pilot. He went on to serve two tours of combat duty during the Vietnam War, act as a jet flight instructor, and become one of a select number of pilots capable of delivering nuclear weapons.

The role of chance in determining other critical aspects of Gibson's life is a thread that continues throughout the book. This is particularly apparent when he describes instances during his flight training and in military service when snap decisions, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time, meant the difference between an ordinary day and a tragic one. His tone is often reflective and is devoid of bravado, though his career achievements are impressive.

A lifelong feeling of being "enchanted with airplanes" is clear—first as shared with his father, and then enhanced when a small airfield was built near his home. Aviation and military history buffs will enjoy reading Gibson's accounts of flying different kinds of military aircraft, as well as details of physical and educational training in the Marine Corps. Also interesting are accounts of daily life living in Vietnam: enduring the sweltering climate, eating C-rations, and using helmets for quickie bathing. However, even those unfamiliar with military life, procedures, and jargon will learn a lot from Gibson's patient explanations and vivid scenes. His insights about how some of his Quantico instructors were reassigned to operational units during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis makes this instance of historical international brinkmanship even more sobering.

Gibson is a proud marine, and his pages describe fellow officers and pilots with admiration, save for one blowhard he encountered during flight training ("They call me 'Slick'"), who is held up as an example of someone who shirked dangerous duty. The author's evident pride in his military career and in the Marine Corps is tempered with some humility. He notes that he was very pleased with himself for coming in first during an obstacle course race during his marine training, but also points out two other foibles during an all-night maneuver that nearly got him thrown out.

Sometimes details are rehashed in subsequent chapters, and this repetition, as well as an overuse of exclamation points, detracts from the otherwise flowing narrative. Gibson's book also loses its laser focus on his military exploits in the last few chapters, veering off the runway with some odd chapters about his dentist, paranormal events involving a baggage claim ticket, and a wistful reminiscence about a college student he might have married.

Recollections of a Marine Attack Pilot is a military memoir that will be like catnip for passionate fans of aviation. This is an illuminating description of what it takes to be a military pilot, as well as of historical geopolitical events.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (January 2, 2017)

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