



Seven War Stories

Donald J. Meek

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“There are old pilots and there are bold pilots,” quips retired Retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Donald J. Meek in his autobiography, “but there are few old, bold pilots.” Lieutenant Colonel Meek is one of those few. This is a man who, when he ran out of bombs during an attack on a North Korean rail yard asked the pilot to turn the B-26 around, drew a pistol and fired through the open bomb bay doors at an enemy locomotive.

Meek’s shares a story of one famous gunner, “Stag” Thomas who actually won a bit of attention for thanks to actress Marilyn Monroe. Then on a tour of Korea with the USO, the busty blonde sex kitten is reported to have commented that she “would like to meet the famous gunner who would rather go ‘loco-hunting’ than to have a date with her.”

Nearly twenty years, many planes, and another war later, Meek continues such boldness (or “stupidity” as he candidly puts it in retrospect) leading strafing missions in Laos and playing aerial cat-and-mouse with a Russian bomber in the North Atlantic.

In the Laos chapters he flies little propeller-driven T-28 trainers that have been fitted out for close ground support. He credits living through many harrowing missions to the “laughter” of communist anti-aircraft gunners who were amused and surprised by his ungainly crate. By the time of the Russian bomber episode he is flying an equally “antique” EC-121 “Connie” AWACS reconnaissance plane. This is the aircraft he used in an encounter with a Tupolev Bear bomber, a decision he admits shows that sometimes “daring and stupidity go hand in hand.”

Meek’s memoir is punctuated with several such incidents in his 21-year-long career, along with stories of similarly bold and daring pilots with whom he served. Among the most colorful and most memorable of these are the legendary Fred “Magnet Ass” Platt and the fanatically heroic Laotian dive-bomber Lee Lue (whose motto “we fly till we die” became a self-fulfilling prophecy).

Meek’s love of flying and of the Air Force (he admits he and his wife both cried upon his retirement) are evident from the first page to the last in this all-too-short work.

It is this brevity that is the book’s weakness. Fully half of this little book is given over to little personal remembrances. While being told what song by what performer was playing on the radio at key moments in the colonel’s life has its charm, what is needed are more details about more missions.

After all, this man earned the right to wear the “50-Mission-Crush” cap in Korea, yet we are only allowed a glimpse into two or three of those fifty combat flights. The Laotian tour is better fleshed-out, but the reader is treated to a mere sampler platter, a teasing appetizer, when there is an obvious feast just waiting to be laid out.

Meek’s autobiography is interesting, very personal, and quite entertaining. Unfortunately it also feels unfulfilling and unfinished, with a choppy style that is more dinner table reminiscing than writing. This memoir begs for the hand of a professional writer, a co-author, or ghost-writer who could pull and polish more memories and details from the martial treasure trove that is Meek’s life. A spare 108 pages, it demands to be filled out with more information, more detail, and with more than just seven war stories.

MARK G. MCLAUGHLIN (August 1, 2011)

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