

# ROBIN OLDS, FIGHTER PILOT

## Memories of Dick Jones '63

Robin Olds became the greatest of fighter pilots in the era of modern warfare. His exploits are legendary. As we were graduating from our USNA in 1963 and beginning to establish our military careers, he was then becoming what we all at the time aspired to be. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Robin Olds graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point with the West Point Class of 1944. He began to establish himself as one whose career would be a bit “different” in that he had been an All American lineman on the West Point football team (but I don’t believe ever beat Navy) and after commissioning in the US Army Air Corps he married a real life active duty movie star, Vera Raines, who he had met on a blind date. But, enough of this. One can simply “google” his name and be linked to his entire biography to get the “rest of the story.” This is to be about my personal experiences with Robin Olds.

A) By early 1967, I had been based at Chu Lai, RVN, since September, 1966. No experiences outside RVN as yet. No R and R to Hawaii as yet which came up several months later. Our F-4 squadron, the VMFA-314, Black Knights, had a centerline fuel tank that had been made into a baggage tank. We had taken the fuel tank, cut a rectangular panel out of the side of the tank, put hinges and zeus fittings on the panel, and turned it into a door on the tank. Voila, a centerline fuel tank that became a baggage tank. As I recall, we could get about 65 cases of drinks into the tank, but we could make it about 115 cases of drinks if we put them into the tank on a can by can basis rather than simply loading the cases. Or something like that! My RIO and I took one of our F-4s from Chu Lai, RVN to Ubon, Thailand on a bit of a cross country flight. Our objective was to pick up a load of soft drinks and beer, mainly for our enlisted club at Chu Lai, to load the drinks into our makeshift baggage tank, and return with our prize to Chu Lai. In the process, we got to spend a night at Ubon in an air conditioned BOQ where we could have a hot shower, some cold drinks and a steak dinner there in

the Ubon O Club. We Marines had no such luxuries back at Chu Lai, RVN. RIO Bob Gordon and I made the trip to Ubon. After landing at Ubon, we arranged for the aforesaid load of drinks, checked into the Ubon BOQ with its air conditioning and enjoyed a long hot shower. At an appointed hour, we assembled in the Ubon Officer's Club for libations and refreshment. Bob and I sat quietly at a table in the club enjoying our drinks, with ice, when a US Air Force flight suit clad guy came in the door. He went to the bar and asked the bartender for the "dish and the spoon." What in the world was this to be about? The bartender gave him a large aluminum dishpan and a long handled wooden spoon. He held the dishpan like a bass drum, began to march back and forth within the club, and banged that dishpan like a bass drum with that wooden spoon as if he was marching in a Fourth of July Parade back home in the States. As he marched, he chanted that "he had today flown his 100<sup>th</sup> mission up North' and, as a result, was on his way home back to the good old US of A. Drinks were on this USAF pilot that afternoon! We received our complimentary drinks as did the other folks in the bar.

Once things in the bar had quieted down a bit, Bob Gordon went to the bartender and asked for the "dish and the spoon." He began a similar parade routine while beating on that dishpan with the wooden spoon as he bellowed "The Marines have landed. Drinks are on the Marines." That meant that I had to pay half the check once it arrived. We enjoyed drinks and "fighter pilot conversation" with our newfound Air Force friends for awhile. While this revalry was going on, a tall gentleman in a US Air Force flight suit came toward us. He was sporting the largest and most perfect handlebar mustache that I had ever seen. As he approached us, a low voice uttered "hello gents, I'm Robin Olds." It was the infamous Col Robin Olds. To the aspiring young fighter pilot, Jones, it was like a meeting with the Trinity. As I said earlier, here was what so many of us aspired to become! We enjoyed 30-40 minutes of conversation about airplanes, MIGs, how to combat them, etc. Remember, this was the guy who only about one month

ago had been responsible for planning and implementing “Operation Bolo,” the highly successful operation within the “Route Package 6” area of Hanoi-Haiphong that had 7 known Mig kills in only one day. At that time, the door to the bar room banged open. A large black man stood in the doorway. He wore green utility trousers, a black sweatshirt with large white letters on the chest, and had a large black ten gallon hat perched on his left arm. As he came toward us, we could read the shirt. “HEAD N----R” It was Col Chappie James who would eventually retire as Gen Chappie James, USAF. At the time, he was Col Chappie James and was Col Olds’ Executive Officer with the 8<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, USAF, Ubon, Thailand. We had a ball that evening and felt really fortunate to spend time with such legendary figures.

- B) Later that Spring, Col Olds and his flight diverted into Chu Lai, RVN one evening while enroute back to Ubon from a strike in North Vietnam. Coincidentally, they were assigned to our squadron for handling that evening and eventually for spending the night with us there at Chu Lai. I happened to be in charge of the flight line for VMFA-314 and we “hosted” the Air Force birds overnight. Col Olds and I remembered that evening when we had me in Ubon. He could not believe the conditions under which we Marines lived at Chu Lai. No hot showers, no air conditioning and likely no ice for drinks at our self built “Officer’s Club.” During the night while the Air Force slept, I had my troops on our flight line detail paint the Air Force F-4s in a “Marine camouflage” paint scheme. By the time Col Olds showed up the next morning for departure to Ubon, we had made both him and his wingman “honorary Marines.” He laughed and thoroughly enjoyed the prank. Of course, it was water soluble paint and could easily be washed off by his Ubon maintenance crews back at home base. Col Doug Petty, our MAG-13 commanding officer, was much less impressed with our humor than had been Col Olds, but all’s well that ends well.
- C) Once back from RVN, I was assigned as a flight instructor in the F-4 with VMFAT-201 at Cherry Point, NC. We were essentially like a Navy RAG squadron. Our job was to train pilots and RIOs in the F-4, and we got both

newly “winged” students as well as more experienced students who were “transitioning” into the F-4. At the time, MGEN Marion E Carl was the Commanding General of MCAB, Cherry Point, NC. Gen Carl would later receive another star and become Commanding General Second Marine Air Wing. Gen Carl was another military aviator of reknown of that era. He had become an ace in WWII and held a number of aviation honors at that time. As CG of the Base, Gen Carl prided himself on the fact that he could, and would, fly any aircraft stationed on his base. He flew the F-4 with VMFAT-201 frequently. We always put an experienced pilot in the back seat to fly with Gen Carl. One of my turns came when Gen Carl planned to take a weekend cross country flight to the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, Colorado to attend the annual meeting of the “Fighter Aces Association” being held at the Air Force Academy. Off we went! Upon arrival at the Air Force Academy, we were scheduled to attend a luncheon in the Academy dining hall with the Cadets. By now, Col Olds had returned to CONUS from RVN, been promoted to BGEN, and was now the Commandant of Cadets, US Air Force Academy. BGEN Olds was the official Host for the Fighter Ace’s Weekend and would host the welcome aboard luncheon. The head table was set up in the form of a large letter T with the host located at the head of the T. I was a lowly Marine Captain peon and simply permitted to have lunch with them. I was seated as far down toward the base of the T where one might find a chair and a place setting for lunch. Luncheon progressed! During lunch, it seemed to me that BGEN Olds actually looked directly at me on several occasions. I dismissed it as only my imagination. After lunch, the official program began. BGEN Olds stepped to the microphone. He looked directly at me sitting there at the base of the T and bellowed:

“Captain Jones, Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314, Chu Lai, Viet Nam, 19678.” He actually remembered. I was shocked. He briefly related the “painting of the aircraft” story to the entire gathering while I listened in dumbfound disbelief. I toured the Academy that afternoon. In the morning, Gen Carl and I boarded our F-4 and blasted off for home and Cherry Point.

Gen Olds is gone now! An excellent biography, "Robin Olds Fighter Pilot" has been written by his daughter. Incidentally, Gen Carl is also gone from us, having been killed by a shotgun blast in his own home one night. He was shot by an intruder while attempting to defend his wife who the intruder had walked in on while Gen Carl slept in the next room. Such times in which we live. Two great warriors!