



The Contrail Chronicles: An American Family's Journey Through War and Peace

Dick Nelson

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"Contrails" are those silvery white tracks left in the sky by the engine exhaust condensation of high-altitude aircraft. They show where the airborne traveler is going, as well as where he has been. They define the journey, conducted at high speed, where the air is thin and danger is always lurking. This was the harsh testing-ground for a father and his son, from a family of Swedish immigrants---unlikely participants in the armed conflicts that would consume the world in their respective lifetimes.

The saga of the Nelson family contains joy and sorrow, triumph and tragedy, and ample quantities of humorous stories. It is a case study in how wars cut deeply into a family's heart and soul, and often destroy the bonds that normally exist.

The book traces Wendel Nelson's idealistic quest to become a World War II fighter pilot and defend democracy from fascism. As an American volunteer in the RAF, his exploits range from the Battle of Britain to the North African campaign against Rommel, and then fighter sweeps into Europe in the final years of the war.

His son, Dick, documents his experiences at the U.S. Naval Academy, Naval flight training, and the Vietnam air war. The impact of war on the families involved is described in poignant detail. The lifestyle of the modern combat pilot is described in both hilarious and sad episodes, where fiery death was always around the corner.

This book also describes in detail the family's involvement with World War II, and its effect on Dick and his mother. The stories show the full impact of a war's lost sons and fathers on the families they leave behind. There are rarely happy endings in such stories---mostly, there are only lucky escapes at best. The reader should remember that war is about destruction, not creation; fear, as well as courage; and hatred, as well as love. It is a process of violent human extremes, and not for the squeamish.

In hindsight, most wars seem easy to diagnose as caused by missteps, lapses in judgment, and hidden agendas. But for the immediate participants and decision-makers, the initiation of war always seems---at the time---to be warranted and necessary. Even when war is unavoidable for national survival, it is almost always permeated by a number of incompetent decisions, lack of leadership courage, and cynical motives.

The wars that impacted the Nelsons---World War II and Vietnam---demonstrated war's cruel fallacies in many ways. Wars are normally not won in quick, bloodless victories. The winner is usually the one that makes the least mistakes along the way, and is still standing at the end. That is why the doctrine evolved by some of the greatest military strategists---from William Tecumseh Sherman to Colin Powell---advocated the immediate application of overwhelming force on the enemy to force resolution. Sherman wrote, "I want peace, and believe it can only be reached through union and war, and I will ever conduct war with a view to perfect and early success."

From the swirling dog-fights of the Battle of Britain to the bloody skies over North Vietnam, the Nelsons put their lives on the line to serve the country they loved. Wendel lost his life in the last months of his war, when his P-51 Mustang was caught in a blinding snow storm. Twenty years later, Dick followed in his footsteps

and became a Navy carrier pilot, flying the supersonic F-8E Crusader into combat from an aircraft carrier. He was lucky and survived that conflict, while many did not.

Another aspect of war is its painful impact on the families that are swept up in its whirlwind of violence. The story begins with a young Swedish carpenter's classic search for a better life in America. Enjoy the journey!

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