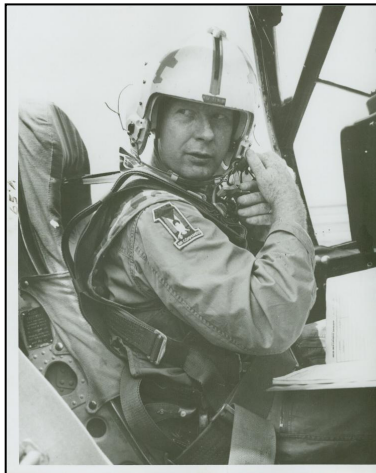


# BEYOND THE CALL OF DUTY

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*... for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and  
beyond the call of duty*

## A pilot's story



An Autobiography  
Approximately 61,000 words

### **COLONEL BERNARD FISHER, USAF Retired**

Recipient of the **Congressional Medal of Honor**,  
the Silver Star and the Distinguished Flying Cross

### **JERRY BORROWMAN**

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## **Dedication**

To the men and women of the United States Armed Forces who willingly place their lives at risk to protect the freedoms of America and our allies twenty-four hours a day all across the world. We hope that this story will help you better understand their professional lives and the sacrifices they make our behalf.

We also dedicate the book to Realla Fisher, Bernie's wife and companion for more than 55 years.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Prelude – The White House**

*Washington D.C., January 19, 1967.*

In some ways, standing in the Red Room of the White House waiting to meet the president made me more nervous than serving on active duty in Vietnam. We arrived in a black limousine that took us directly to the front portico of the executive mansion and I sincerely looked forward to the events of the day. But now, as the ceremony was about to get under way, I found myself in a mental struggle wondering exactly how one addresses the president. The military aides assigned to help me and my family while we toured Washington had carefully laid out all the plans and alternatives for how we should proceed when standing in the glare of the public spotlight, but had somehow missed this key point. Something in my mind told me that I should call him “Mr. President,” but for some reason that sounded funny, as if it was a phrase used only in television sitcoms. As a Major in the United States Air Force I supposed it would be appropriate for me to simply call the Commander-in-Chief, “Sir,” but I just wasn’t sure. Just then I caught the eye of the Chief Protocol officer and he came over to where I stood in line so I could whisper my problem in his ear. He smiled. Apparently I wasn’t the only person to feel so out of place that I could forget such a basic title. He assured me that “Mr. President” was the appropriate response.

With that settled I stepped back to my wife’s side and relaxed as we tried to keep our five boys in some kind of a proper line. Everyone in the room was waiting in

anticipation for the president to walk through the door. Everyone, that is, but our youngest boy, Scotty, who was suffering from jet lag and ready for a nap. He slipped out of line, crawled up on one of the ornate davenports that had been part of former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy's re-decorating of the White House, snuggled in and promptly curled up to fall asleep.

I smiled to myself about Scotty, thinking that perhaps he was the smartest among us to not get caught up in the pageantry of the great honors that would be bestowed on me and the members of my team that day. In a many ways I felt ambivalent about what was happening – we were simply professional airmen who had done our duty in Vietnam.

The rescue for which I was to be honored took place almost a year earlier, but it had taken this long to consider and act on the recommendation for the Congressional Medal of Honor. Two of the men involved in the rescue had previously been awarded the Silver Star, while the other two had received the Distinguish Flying Cross. I was thrilled that they were joining us for my ceremony here in the White House. I could never have imagined on that cloudy day over Ashau Valley in Vietnam how much that day's events would change all of our lives.

There was a stirring in the room, which broke into my thoughts and I turned to see the door fly open as an aide preceded President Lyndon B. Johnson through the doors. The President entered the room with a forceful stride and a commanding presence that seemed to dominate everything else in the room. He was an extremely tall man, compared to my 5 foot 8 inch height. He came up and saluted me, shook my hand and asked me to introduce the members of my family.

“Mr. President, I'm pleased to introduce you to my wife, Realla.”

He offered a handshake and when Realla responded, her right hand completely disappeared in the grasp of his huge hand. I then introduced each of the four older boys, who stood respectfully in their suits. He chatted amiably with them for a few moments, helping everyone to relax. I didn't know exactly what to say about Scotty, but it turned out I didn't need to. The president spied him lying on the couch, not quite asleep, so he walked over and sat down next to him and talked quietly with him for a few moments until the little boy smiled.

Then the president stood up, came over to me and asked, "Are you ready?"

I responded, "Yes, sir, I guess we are."

"Then let's go," he said enthusiastically, thumping me in the chest as he said it. He hit really hard. Being totally unprepared for that, it about knocked the wind out of me and I sort of staggered from the blow. But he didn't have time to notice since he was already propelling me forward by the arm as members of the White House staff opened the doors to the corridor in front of us. We walked a few paces and made a sharp turn to the right to enter the much larger East Room of the White House. Passing through the door I could see a line of dignitaries and guests, including my mother and other family members, flanked by a large contingent of reporters whose flash cameras were already doing their best to blind us. I drew in my breath as we started into the crowd, wondering to myself, "Just how did a boy who grew up on a twenty-acre farm in Clearfield, Utah end up here?"

## ***PART 1 – Establishing a Military Career***

### **1 – Seaman 1<sup>st</sup> Class**

I don't know exactly when my fascination with airplanes began. When I got old enough to have a paper route, I was assigned to ride my bicycle on a five mile route up the dirt road that led to Hill Air Force Base near my home in Clearfield, Utah to deliver papers to families living on the base. I often stopped and watched the aircraft taking off and landing, trying to imagine how it felt to leave the ground and soar through the air.

I couldn't believe my good fortune when I actually had the chance to experience flight when I was thirteen years old. We had a Deacon's Quorum advisor at church, named Haven Barlow, whom we kids loved. He was young, single and could relate to a bunch of twelve and thirteen year old boys. One day a friend and I were teasing him about his girlfriend when he startled us with a question, "Would you guys like to go flying in an airplane at the Ogden Airport?"

"Are you serious?"

"I'm serious, if you'll let up on the teasing."

"Wow – that sounds like the greatest thing in the world!"

Airplanes were still pretty unique in 1940 and I didn't know anyone beside Haven who had ever been in one. The airplane he was authorized to fly was a single engine J-3C Piper Cub. I was surprised to find that they stored the planes tipped forward on their nose, with tails up in the air. This allowed them to stack the planes almost on top of each

other to get more airplanes inside the protection of the hangar and we had to move two or three out onto the tarmac to extract our plane. Haven climbed into the cockpit and checked a lot of instruments, fired up the engine and revved it until he was satisfied it was in proper condition to fly. The force of the propeller backwash was startling and prompted me to move back to a safer spot as Haven and Donald Jacobs taxied out onto the runway and brought the aircraft into position for take-off. With a roar Haven brought the engine to full throttle and they were off the ground and up into the air. The sound of the engine faded quickly as they circled out and over the field, disappearing to the south, leaving me waiting anxiously for my turn.

It wasn't long before I heard the drone of the engine and they coasted into a nice, easy landing. Donald climbed out of the passenger door with a big grin on his face and in no time I found myself crawling up the strut and into the cramped little cabin. The airplane was different than anything I'd experienced before. The metal in the wing and the door almost seemed fragile and even though it was a simple airplane, there were dozens of gauges and controls in the cockpit to raise my curiosity. As soon as Donald was clear, Haven pushed the throttle wide-open and the engine roared to life. The aircraft started trembling as it picked up ground speed and I was amazed at how fast we accelerated. I loved the sensation of being forced back against the leather seat and found myself holding my breath. The noise and vibration increased and then suddenly, the sound changed, the vibrations quit and the ground was falling away below me. That had to be the greatest feeling of my life. It took a few moments to get used to the side-to-side motion as we danced on the air currents, but before I could really think much about it Haven banked hard and headed south towards Clearfield. As we gained altitude the cars

on the roads beneath us started to look like toys and I was amazed to see what the roofs of familiar buildings looked like from this new vantage point. When we reached cruising altitude it seemed like we were almost moving in slow motion because one's point of reference is so different up there. Haven circled our farm and then headed back towards Ogden. I wished the ride could last forever, but gasoline was expensive and even a Piper Cub went through it pretty fast.

It was pretty odd as we started to drift down for a landing. A small airplane like that tends to swagger in the wind as it loses altitude and sometimes it looked like we'd land at an angle to the runway, rather than straight on. As we got closer and closer to the ground, the perception of speed increased until when we hit the runway it felt like we were going way too fast to get stopped in time. I must have held my breath, because I let it out slowly as I felt the jerk of the wheels touching the ground. Haven pumped the brakes until we slowed down and came to a stop.

It was over and it would be years before I got to fly again. Probably the thing I liked best is how serene it felt being detached from the earth. I'd never experienced such an exhilarating sense of freedom. I loved everything about that flight and went home and built a model airplane to remind me of it.

My interest in machines wasn't limited to airplanes. Even though I wasn't old enough to drive, I asked my dad if I could fix up a 1927 Chevy that my parents had abandoned to the barnyard several years earlier. Sitting there with no roof and a family of chickens nesting in the front seat, I don't think he thought I could ever get it going, so he wasn't too worried giving me permission to try. After cleaning it up and working on the engine for a couple of months I borrowed a battery from a neighbor and got the

engine running. With a lot of work I finally got the old car off the cinderblocks and onto its own wheels. Even with my best efforts, though, it was still in pretty terrible shape. The tires were so brittle that I had to wrap the inner-tubes with canvas to try to prevent blow-outs.

I hadn't gotten around to fixing the brakes yet, but decided to take some friends out for a test drive. As I came around a corner in the late dusk I saw some movement up ahead, which turned out to be a herd of cattle. I was driving way too fast for the road and with no brakes I hit a couple of cows. I expected the owner to turn me into the police, but instead he was apologetic because he didn't have any lights on to indicate the herd was on the road. So, there we were, each trying to apologize to the other until it dawned us that we were both in the wrong. We each went our own way, with me driving much more carefully than before. I felt bad about hurting the animals, but was glad that none of my friends had been injured.

Through the years I continued to work on automobiles to get peak performance from the engine because I loved the sensation of acceleration and speed.

December 7, 1941 arrived and the world changed for all of us with the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I was about to turn 15 years old when the attack occurred, so there was no immediate opportunity for me to go into military service. A lot of the older boys I knew at church dropped out of school or college so they could enlist. It was both exciting and ominous to think that they were going off to battle.

The most immediate effect of the war in Clearfield was that the economy picked up. As the country started preparing to send soldiers into battle, government orders for goods and services went right through the roof. I benefited from the new activity by

getting a job as a forklift operator after school down at the Freeport Center loading naval ammunition onto railroad cars. The pay was good and my family appreciated the financial help.

As I approached my senior year the war became more and more of a reality in my life. When I turned seventeen, I decided to enlist so I could have some say over which branch of the military I'd serve in. My friend Donald Jacobs was two years older than me and at eighteen he'd enlisted in the Merchant Marines to serve on supply ships in the Pacific. Since he was one of the guys I looked up to, I decided to follow his example. Unfortunately, they told me the Merchant Marines had filled their quota, so that wasn't available. I looked at the recruiting material they had on hand and decided to try the V-5 program that the Navy had for training pilots. I signed up for the test, but failed. I wanted to take it again, but they wouldn't let me. I felt frustrated, but decided that I'd still like to join the Navy. Since I loved working on cars so much I applied to become an aircraft mechanic. This time the Navy accepted me. I continued in high school until January, 1945, when I reached my eighteenth birthday. Because so many of my classmates were signing up to defend our country, the school made special arrangements so we could qualify for early graduation.

Shortly after my birthday I received official notification that I was to report to Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City for induction and processing, followed a short time later by a transfer to Boot Camp in Memphis, Tennessee. Since I'd never been east of Utah, I actually found that pretty exciting and I looked forward to seeing the countryside on the train journey east. By this point in World War II, however, the Union Pacific Railroad was moving so many troops that they'd run out of passenger cars. To meet the demand

they simply converted old cattle cars into troop carriers by hosing out the cars and bolting in some wooden seats for us to sit on. There were no windows to look out of, just two days of staring at the inside of a wooden box car. Some of the taller men occasionally stood on tiptoes to look out through a set of slats in each corner, but they were beyond my reach. For me the trip wasn't as bad as it might have been since a number of my friends from church had been assigned to the same car and we were able to talk to each other and play games.

On our arrival in Memphis we transferred by bus to the Navy Air Technical Training Center for boot camp, the purpose of which was to orient us to military life and toughen us up physically. At the end of boot camp I received orders to transfer to Norman, Oklahoma for Aircraft Mechanics School where my love of automobiles served me well. Our group progressed through the twenty-one weeks of the school at a pretty fair clip. By the end we were disassembling and reassembling an F-4U Corsair assigned specifically for our training. The school also maintained some aircraft on the actual flight line, which they let us work on occasionally.

I learned an important lesson while working on the bomb bay doors of the aircraft. My assignment was to find and correct a problem in the hydraulic system. To complete the task I had to get the bomb bay doors closed, but no matter what I tried, I couldn't find the trip-release to do it. I prodded and poked at various levers with a broom handle until one of the instructors noticed what I was doing. He issued a curt order for me to stand at attention and then said he wanted to show me something. I moved out of the bomb-well and watched as he used the broom handle to activate the correct release. The doors slammed shut with terrific force, sending a shudder through the entire frame of

the aircraft. The doors are under 3,000 pounds of hydraulic pressure and if I'd actually hit the correct release from where I was previously standing I would have been crushed by the force of those massive doors. I was far more careful after that.

While in Oklahoma one of my fellow student's brothers flew down in a P-47 Thunderbolt fighter before leaving for combat in Europe. He gave us an air show that was one for the books, buzzing the flight line with a dazzling array of maneuvers while we stood watching with mouths agape. It was the most thrilling ten minutes of my entire naval career and reinforced my desire to be a pilot some day.

After mechanics training, we spent two weeks learning about radar and then we transferred to Mayport, Florida to gunnery school to learn how to shoot. It was about this time that that the United States dropped the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, which brought an end to World War II. That was a real cause for celebration among the guys in our unit, particularly since it meant we wouldn't have to face the dangers of combat. I was glad along with everyone else, but I also felt like maybe I was missing out on something too.

After that it was a little odd to still be in training, without much chance of ever seeing combat. Some of the men decided to stay and make a career out of the Navy and they got promoted and moved to a permanent assignment as aircraft mechanics. Most of us decided that there wasn't going to be a lot of opportunity in a peacetime Navy so decided to wait out the balance of our enlistment. We were given more menial assignments that were suited to our rank of Seaman First Class. I was assigned to pilot a "Liberty Launch," which is a 55-foot boat that goes from a mainland dock to an aircraft

carrier moored out in the harbor. In essence, I was a shuttle driver, transporting sailors back and forth from ship to shore as needed. Not much of a job really.

Since the Navy had far more enlisted personnel than it needed in peacetime, I took advantage of an early release program that ended my enlistment in March, 1946. After receiving the “Ruptured Duckling” separation patch in San Francisco I traveled to the small farming community of Kuna in southwest Idaho where my parents had moved while I was in the Navy. I’d been pretty lonesome for home while in training, so I was glad to be with my family again even though it was kind of strange to not go home to Clearfield where all my friends were. It was even stranger to find myself a civilian again, left to wonder what I ought to do with my life. Still, with the post-war economy running along at full-tilt the future looked pretty bright.