



Review: *Touching the Face of God, A Fighter Pilot's Story*, by Travis Vanderpool

BOOK REVIEW

ROBERT CARTER 

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ABSTRACT

Touching the Face of God, A Fighter Pilot's Story, by Travis Vanderpool, tells the story of a decorated combat Vietnam pilot who, after his tour, returned stateside to briefly serve as a flight instructor, who then resigned his commission to attend law school. He illustrates the influences of his family and faith and shares how he grew up in Texas and the cultural influences that impacted his life, which led to his military service. The book is enriched by photos from his life and includes additional explanations for the images. Travis reflected on his lived experiences so that in reading the book, it is as if you were sitting with him and having a conversation about life, why he became a pilot, why he stopped flying and pursued a law degree, and meeting his wife and their life together. This book provides a window into Baby Boomer cultural influences and gives a personal glimpse into the life of someone who desired to serve in the military through the years leading up to and during the Vietnam War; moreover, the healing journey and reflections on modern conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan that came later in his life. There are some moments when his reflections may be dissonant with the readers without military or combat experience.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Robert Carter

Montefiore Nyack Hospital and
Lutheran Ministries at West
Point, US

rcarter@montefiorenyack.org

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Review by Robert Carter *Touching the Face of God, A Fighter Pilot's Story*

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Travis Vanderpool's memoir offers a compelling, accessible look at a life shaped by mid-century America, military service, and a deep-rooted Christian faith. Told with clarity, humility, and occasional humor, his story weaves personal milestones with the major cultural and geopolitical forces of the time. The book is divided into three parts—his upbringing and education, military service during the Vietnam War, and his post-service career as a lawyer—but the heart of the story lies in his years as a fighter pilot. While the memoir excels in recounting Vanderpool's military service, the sections on his early life and post-military career are lighter in detail and, at times, feel less developed. Nonetheless, Vanderpool's ability to explain his decision-making processes, often through metaphor and reflection, results in a memoir that feels both personal and historically grounded.

Vanderpool begins his story by tracing his roots in Dallas, Texas, which offers a vivid picture of growing up in the 1940s and 50s. These early chapters highlight the people, places, and values that influenced his character. His stories of family life, neighborhood games, and school experiences are not just nostalgic; they lay the foundation for understanding how he developed his sense of discipline and duty. The cultural references scattered throughout—from popular movies to Cold War tensions—offer valuable context. For instance, his mother's use of a wringer washer inspired a moment of linguistic history as he explained the origin of the phrase “run through the wringer” (p. 12).

His early academic path began at Abilene Christian College, where he quickly realized he lacked both the physicality and interest to follow in his brother-in-law's athletic footsteps. This led to his transfer to Texas Christian University (TCU), where his academic focus and future came into sharper view. It was at TCU that he joined Air Force ROTC and the Delta Tau Delta fraternity, an experience he reflects on with gratitude, even noting how hazing contributed to his personal development—a viewpoint that may not align with modern sensibilities (p. 51).

The core of Vanderpool's narrative and the most compelling portion of the memoir focused on his training and service as a fighter pilot during the Vietnam War. His account begins with pilot training at Laughlin Air Force Base with Class 66-G in 1965, where he flew the T-37 “Tweety Bird” and the T-38 “White Rocket.” He shared his impressions of flying at high altitudes and described the experience as nearly spiritual, stating, “It was as if I could reach out and touch the face of God” (p. 110). Upon

completing his training, he transitioned to flying the F-100 Super Sabre and was assigned to the 90th Tactical Fighter Squadron, which was a part of the 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing at Bien Hoa Air Base in Vietnam. Over the course of a year, he flew 267 combat missions. His vivid accounts of these missions are powerful not because of their technical detail but because of their emotional resonance. He reflected on the rules of engagement, including the decision not to pursue enemy forces across borders, which he critiqued for allowing safe havens for the North Vietnamese Army (p. 197). He shared the emotional weight of loss, noting that two of the 10 pilots he trained with were killed within the first three months of deployment (p. 153). Because of his actions, Vanderpool was awarded four Distinguished Flying Crosses, and he has included both the citations and the stories behind them in the book to give readers a deeper sense of the courage and risk involved in his service.

After returning from Vietnam, Vanderpool transitioned to a less demanding role as a T-38 instructor at Reese AFB in Lubbock, Texas. The transition marked the beginning of a gradual shift in his priorities as he began to focus more on family and long-term stability. In 1971, he resigned his commission and enrolled in Southern Methodist University Law School, later becoming a trial lawyer for a utility company until his retirement in 2007. While the final section of the book touches on important life transitions—marriage, fatherhood, law school, and faith, it felt abbreviated compared to the rich storytelling found in earlier chapters. He described how his return to civilian life was marked by indifference from friends who seemed unaware a war was even being fought (p. 241), a sentiment echoed by many veterans from the Vietnam era. He also spoke candidly about the challenges of reintegration and how his faith continued to shape his perspective in this new phase of life. However, readers may find themselves wishing for a deeper dive into his legal career or how his wartime experiences shaped his views in the courtroom and beyond.

In conclusion, *Touching the Face of God: A Fighter Pilot's Story* by Travis Vanderpool is a thoughtful and engaging memoir that offers a personal look into the life of a man shaped by war, faith, and changing times. The book's greatest strength lies in its vivid portrayal of Vanderpool's time as a fighter pilot during the Vietnam War, providing a rare, first-hand account of combat aviation that remains accessible to readers without technical backgrounds. While the sections covering his early life and post-military career are somewhat less detailed, they still contribute meaningful context to his journey and values. Vanderpool's candid reflections on the social, spiritual, and historical forces that influenced his decisions make this a worthwhile read for veterans, military enthusiasts, and anyone interested in how personal conviction can guide a life of service. Readers

looking to understand the mindset and motivations of those who served during the Vietnam War, particularly in the Air Force, will find this memoir both informative and relatable. For further exploration into the aircraft, missions, and legacy of F-100 pilots, the Super Sabre Society website at <https://supersabresociety.com> is a valuable resource. More information specifically about Travis Vanderpool and his service can be found at <https://supersabresociety.com/biography/travis-vanderpool/>.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Robert Carter  orcid.org/0009-0008-7557-1568

Montefiore Nyack Hospital and Lutheran Ministries at West Point, US

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