

Gwynn Robinson

A Distinguished Member of Our Greatest Generation



“Winning his Wings” 2nd Lt. Robinson 1942.

The “Greatest Generation” has no finer representative than the Chairman of our Board of Directors, Gwynn Herndon Robinson, Major-General USAF Ret. It is with great pride that we add “Veteran of the Month” to the list of honors he has gathered during a long life of service and achievement.

Gwynn’s story is, in every way, an example of the American Dream. Born in New York City in 1920 to a family of limited means, he began his long list of accomplishments with a series of scholastic scholarships to the best known private schools in the East. He graduated from Choate in 1938, turned down a scholarship to Princeton, enrolled instead at M.I.T. where he joined the R.O.T.C., enjoying his first contact with the military.

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From College and Curtain Calls to the Cavalry!

His time at M.I.T. was interrupted by what Gwynn calls, “my foray into dramatics.” Like everything else he attempted, this “foray” was on an epic scale: Orson Welles’ 1939 production of Shakespeare’s “Five Kings” starring Welles and Burgess Meredith, was a condensation of all five of the bard’s “king” plays. Accompanying an aspiring actor friend, Gwynn ended up reading for and getting a surprisingly large part. But the play ran well over five hours and after its first performances, Welles cut the piece to normal size, and with it, most of Gwynn’s part. Never a quitter, Gwynn honored his commitment, stayed on, but lost his scholastic momentum at M.I.T. When intense work and summer school couldn’t make up the gap, he dropped out and got a job at a major ad agency in New York where he, unsurprisingly, began rising through the ranks. A dating relationship introduced him to the world of horsemanship. He quickly became an accomplished rider and in 1940, while many of his friends joined Army Reserve units, Gwynn chose Squadron A, 101st Cavalry, New York National Guard. Formed after the Civil War, Squadron A was Gotham’s own horse troop, legendary for its colorful appearances in city parades. In his jodhpurs, boots, spurs and campaign hat, Gwynn was every inch the cavalryman.



General Robinson and 101st Cavalry on the march.

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Preparing for War Long Before Pearl Harbor,



**Trooper Robinson in full
Calvary uniform.**

He completed the Officer Candidate course at the head of his class, but was not yet old enough (21) to receive a commission. There was no time to be disappointed: in January, 1941, the troopers were called to active (Robinson as a private) duty and by a blazing July, they were bivouacked in North Carolina as part of the vast war games the Army conducted in its desperate effort to prepare for war. After 5 months of maneuvers, they were ordered to return to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, and began an exhausting trip north in late November. They were nearing their goal at last on the afternoon of Sunday, December 7th 1941, and without radios, the weary troopers had no idea why hundreds of people were rushing out of their homes to cheer them, blowing kisses, blessing them, and waving American flags.

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Shoe a horse or Fly a Plane? He made the right decision.

Two sets of orders were waiting at Ft. Devens. One accepted Gwynn's application for USAAF Pre-Flight School at Maxwell Field, Alabama; the other, with an immediate promotion to Sergeant, ordered him to the cavalry Horseshoers School at Ft. Riley Kansas. His First Sergeant urged him to take the latter. "Your Army career will be assured, and you'll have a trade to pursue when you retire," he said. The man who might have been the world's greatest smithy did not take long to make his decision. He reported for flight training on December 10th, 1941.

"I loved flying – it was better than I imagined," he remembers. He soloed before six hours (it took Manfred Von Richtofen twenty-three); went on to Basic Training, then Advanced Training (Twin Engine) where he won his wings and his 2nd Lieutenant's Commission ("One of the happiest days of my life!") Then on to B-26 training at Mc Dill Field in Florida. Within two weeks, he was named a Flight Instructor. This was remarkable enough, but all the more so when it is remembered that the Martin B-26 was considered the "hottest" of American bombers, unforgiving in all but skilled hands. The Army Air Corps called the B-26 "the Marauder," but squadron pilots dubbed it, "The widow maker." By November, 1942 Gwynn was assigned to the 344th Bomb Group for final operational training. In the same month, the Allies began the invasion and liberation of North Africa.



An Advance Model of B-26 in flight.

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An escape from the Luftwaffe and rescue at sea by the Brits

In early 1943, Robinson was named flight commander of one of the groups to ferry B-26s across the Atlantic to Africa. It was a harrowing, island hopping journey, and the group reached Morocco in May. After a month of routine patrols, Gwynn's first combat mission was on July 12th to soften up German defenses before the invasion of Sicily. Many missions followed. Then on August 23rd, approaching a Luftwaffe airfield between Rome and Naples, his B-26 lost an engine to anti-aircraft fire. He continued his bomb run, hit the target and turned for home (Tunisia) but could not keep up with the group on one engine. Flying dangerously low over the Mediterranean, his wounded bird was attacked by a dozen ME 109's. Five of them were shot down by Robinson's gunners, and the rest broke off. Realizing he could not make the safety of Sicily, and with 3 of his crew wounded, Gwynn made a harrowing water landing 400 yards off



A Martin B-26 Bomber under which Gen. Robinson wrote, "This is the baby I'm flying." (1942-43)

the Italian-held island of Lipari, badly injuring his left arm and hand. He and the crew were interned by friendly Italians, but Lipari was soon to be evacuated and they were to be turned over to the Germans in Italy. In the dark of night, Gwynn led his crew in a daring escape on a turbulent sea in a small boat. The "Yanks" were rescued by a British PT Boat and ultimately flown to a Palermo (Sicily) hospital.

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A Distinguished Flying Cross to wear with his Purple Heart and Air Medal

Promoted Captain, Gwynn was awarded the medal to wear above his Purple Heart and Air Medal. But now he had to deal with the full extent of the nerve damage to his left arm. The Doctors were certain he'd never regain full use of his arm and hand again. Accordingly, they ordered him back to the states for hospitalization and discharge from the service. Obviously the U.S. Casablanca general hospital Medics didn't know who they were dealing with.

"I made up my mind I was going to get back on flying status," Gwynn remembers. For months back in the States he had physical therapy twice a day, seven days a week, and by March, 1944, when released from the hospital, he was cleared to return to active duty. It was only a matter of time (a short time) before he re-qualified for flying status. He finished his wartime service in the Pentagon training foreign nationals, and attending the Army's Command and General Staff College. Promoted to Major, he went on reserve status in 1946.



Major General Robinson

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From the Pentagon to Paris to Korea and bullet holes in his wings.

Gwynn's pre-war job experience had made it clear to him that business and especially sales, were skill areas for him. That, and his already extensive world travels were beginning to shape his post-war career. Then, Korea intervened. Gwynn was called back to active duty in the blue uniform of the newly Independent United States Air Force, and assigned to the European theatre. By April, 1952 he was moved to Paris as Deputy Director of the USAF Wing in Paris. He credits "my three years of prep school French" for this important promotion (none of his friends take this seriously). The job required traveling to all NATO Nations, and coordinating equipment and preparedness so that European air power would not be neglected during the strains of the Korean conflict. Yet in his Paris office, his mind wandered to the ack-ack puffs in the skies over Korea and the many old friends who were going through hell. Luckily he received orders for an official tour in Korea, "just to take a look-see." There he was reunited with his buddies who were flying the Douglas B-26. He was not on combat status but who could refuse a comrades' invitation to go along for an observational mission or three? This activity is not part of his official record -- nor are the bullet holes accumulated by the planes he piloted during his "observational missions."

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1967: A General at NATO becomes a C. E. O. at Home.

By the end of his exceptional USAF-NATO service, he had traveled all over Europe, North Africa, and the middle East, made connections with the leaders of the day and helped streamline American Airpower in the cold war era. His return to civilian life and his business success was on the same scale. In 1958, he became marketing director for Northrop's International division and by 1967, had become the number two man in the corporation's division with offices in Paris and Beverly Hills, California. He had a wonderful marriage and children. He had been everything he wanted to be except a C.E.O. of a major company. It was a challenge Gwynn could not ignore. In 1967, he accepted Alfred Bloomingdale's offer to become CEO and President of the new Diner's Club International.

It should be remembered that Diner's club was the first credit card company. Before American Express, before the Bankcards. It was a revolutionary concept, and a perfect challenge for Gwynn's abilities. He helped the concept become part of the world's way of life, and was particularly successful in establishing offices across the globe, including (amazingly) the Communist Nations. He established Diners Club offices in every iron curtain country but Albania. "Nobody visited that country," he recalls, "not even the Russians."



Celebrating the end of the Cold War.

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1970: Duty Calls on a New Major General to Airlift Supplies to Vietnam.

But by 1970, two significant events changed Gwynn's life course once again. One was his promotion to Major General, USAF. The other was Vietnam.

In early 1970, General Robinson became Mobilization Assistant for the 22nd Military Airlift Command at Travis AFB in California. For the next three years, he periodically flew with Reserve Crews to Clark Field in the Philippines, airlifting men and supplies to South Vietnam in giant C-141 transport planes. "General Officers were instructed not to go into a combat area without special orders, but having bonded with the crews, I was able to fly with them on trips to Vietnam," he recalls. "Obviously, they had to leave my name off the manifest, but not to worry, no major damage was incurred to any of the planes I was on -- except for the bullet holes. With sharpshooters firing at us on the airfields, we learned to keep the engines running, and everyone, including two star Generals, helped unload as quickly as possible." Did he actually pilot any of these missions? Gwynn picks up the model of the C-141 "Hercules" on his memento filled desk and grinds a little grin.

The citation on his award of The Legion of Merit says it all:

"During this period, General Robinson's initiative, enthusiasm and foresight, coupled with his outstanding managerial capabilities, solved complex problems and positively influenced Air Force Reserve Policy..."

In Civilian Life: Finding Opportunity for others.

In the decade after Vietnam, he explored yet another new business: Executive Recruiting. Again, he rose to the top of this field, while still serving in the USAF Reserve and on the board of the Falcon Foundation, whose mission was to provide prep school scholarships to students wanting admission to the Air Force Academy. He loved this work. Had not prep school scholarships been the key to his incredible career path?

After ten years of finding important people to fill jobs, he reversed direction in 1979 to work in "outplacement," finding opportunity jobs for young people with important futures. Gwynn spent the next decade doing this satisfying work, "A very happy period of my life," he remembers.

In 1980, he received the Distinguished Service Medal.



Gen. Robinson meets with President Ronald Reagan at the White House

In 1991 he joined the Board of Directors of the Veterans Park Conservancy.

Helping to lead the fight to protect the land deeded so long ago for the exclusive use of America's Veterans.



Gen. Robinson and Cyd Charisse at a dinner

In September 2000, a large group of his comrades, business associates and loved ones gathered to celebrate Gwynn's 80th birthday. The site was the DC-3 Restaurant, overlooking the runways of the Santa Monica Airport. It was the perfect place to toast and roast this remarkable man. And, as the still fit cavalryman remembers it: "It gave me the perfect time and place to hang up my spurs."

Fat chance, Trooper

We're on to you, horse soldier. We know you will never stop being of service to the world, to your country, to your family and your friends. You will never stop trying to make things better. You will never hang up your spurs.
