

Born to Live on the Edge: Experiences from Living on a Farm to Flying Combat Sorties during the Vietnam War to Retirement

Frederick I. Pumroy

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Born to Live on the Edge is a military memoir by a man who ran headlong into danger throughout his life and career.

Adrenaline junkie Frederick I. Pumroy's memoir *Born to Live on the Edge* is filled with adventures flying planes.

Growing up on a farm in Indiana in the 1950s, Pumroy often got in trouble because of his propensity for fighting. He also sustained injuries from speeding on his bike and playing intense sports. After earning cross-country and track scholarships, he attended ROTC boot camp. His decision to join the Air Force was rooted in the joy—and fear—he experienced when flying a toy plane as a child. He conducted countless perilous takeoffs, near-crashes, and risky landings for two decades before becoming a city commissioner after his Air Force retirement.

Flying is said to be “made up of hours of boredom and minutes of shear [sic] terror.” The tension of dangerous flights is relayed via back-to-back play-by-plays whose heart-pounding action alternates with brief updates about Pumroy's career placements and family life. He deliberated whether to take a one-year assignment in Vietnam just after his third child was born, for instance, and accepted it despite the poor timing because he considered being a fighter pilot his true calling. However, there's minimal context included for his risky feats.

The book's anecdotes are bound together by the recurring theme of Pumroy running headlong into danger with a sense of excitement. Prior to its military content, the book boasts about Pumroy's track-and-field prowess and his luck with dating multiple women at once in college. His continued forays into competing in sporting events while injured result in tedium, though.

Spelling and grammatical errors pervade the book, which is further burdened by underdefined military jargon. And while there are informative instances of background information and vibrant imagery, these are rare in a book that becomes repetitive as it continues. Interest is generated by stories about transporting an elephant—a gift from the Cambodian president to the US secretary of defense—from Cambodia to the Los Angeles zoo, of flying at a low altitude while receiving gunfire in Vietnam, and of taking aerial photographs of encampments during recon missions in Cambodia. But too many scenes beyond these end before their danger comes to a head, resulting in minimal payoff for the book as a whole. Further, there is some inconsistency in the book's tone: It revels in accounts of soldiers drinking and gambling—both on and off the clock—while also applauding “Christian values” in a vague manner.

Born to Live on the Edge is a high-octane memoir focused on the highlights of an Air Force veteran's career.

AIMEE JODOIN (January 22, 2025)

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