

## Colonel Leo Thorsness, U.S. Air Force

**Major Leo Thorsness** received his Medal of Honor citation for Vietnam War in 1967: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. As pilot of an F-105 aircraft, Lt. Col. Thorsness was on a surface-to-air missile suppression mission over North Vietnam. Lt. Col. Thorsness and his wingman attacked and silenced a surface-to-air missile site with air-to-ground missiles, and then destroyed a second surface-to-air missile site with bombs. In the attack on the second missile site, Lt. Col. Thorsness' wingman was shot down by intensive anti-aircraft fire, and the two crewmembers abandoned their aircraft. Lt. Col. Thorsness circled the descending parachutes to keep the crewmembers in sight and relay their position to the Search and Rescue Center. During this maneuver, a MIG-17 was sighted in the area. Lt. Col. Thorsness immediately initiated an attack and destroyed the MIG. Because his aircraft was low on fuel, he was forced to depart the area in search of a tanker. Upon being advised that two helicopters were orbiting over the downed crew's position and that there were hostile MIGs in the area posing a serious threat to the helicopters, Lt. Col. Thorsness, despite his low fuel condition, decided to return alone through a hostile environment of surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft defenses to the downed crew's position. As he approached the area, he spotted four MIG-17 aircraft and immediately initiated an attack on the MIGs, damaging one and driving the others away from the rescue scene. When it became apparent that an aircraft in the area was critically low on fuel and the crew would have to abandon the aircraft unless they could reach a tanker, Lt. Col. Thorsness, although critically short on fuel himself, helped to avert further possible loss of life and a friendly aircraft by recovering at a forward operating base, thus allowing the aircraft in emergency fuel condition to refuel safely. Lt. Col. Thorsness' extraordinary heroism, self-sacrifice, and personal bravery involving conspicuous risk of life were in the highest traditions of the military service, and have reflected great credit upon himself and the U.S. Air Force."

**Biography:** Leo Keith Thorsness was born on 14 February 1932 in Walnut Grove, MN, where he earned the Eagle Scout award from the Boy Scouts of America. He is one of only nine known Eagle Scouts who also received the Medal of Honor. In 2010, Thorsness received the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award. He attended South Dakota State College in 1950, where he met his future wife, Gaylee Anderson, also a freshman. They married in 1953 and had a daughter, Dawn.

Thorsness enlisted in the Air Force in 1951 at the age of 19 because his brother was then serving in Korea. In 1954 he received his commission as an officer and his pilot wings through the USAF Aviation Cadet program in Class 54-G. He later earned a bachelor's degree from the University of Omaha in 1964, and a Masters in Defense Systems Management from the University of Southern California. His initial assignment was as a pilot in Strategic Air Command, but he completed training as a fighter pilot and flew both F-84 and F-100 jets before transitioning to the F-105 Thunderchief.

In the autumn of 1966, after completing F-105 "Wild Weasel" training at George AFB, CA, he was assigned to the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing based at Takhli Royal Thai AFB in Thailand, flying F-105F's, tasked with locating and destroying North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites.

**Medal of Honor Mission:** On April 19, 1967, Major Thorsness and his Electronic Warfare Officer, Captain Harold E. Johnson, led Kingfish flight (three F-105F Weasel aircraft and an F-105D single-seater) on a SAM suppression mission. The target was the Xuan Mai army training compound, near Hanoi. Thorsness directed the second element of F-105s, to troll north while he and his wingman maneuvered south, forcing defending gunners to divide their attention. Thorsness located two SAM sites and fired a Shrike missile to attack one, whose radar went off the air. He destroyed the second with cluster bombs. One of the F-105s was hit by anti-aircraft fire and both crewmen had to eject. Unknown to Thorsness, the other two F-105s had been attacked by MIG-17s. The afterburner of one of the F-105s wouldn't light, the element had disengaged, and returned to base, leaving him to fight solo.

As their F-105 circled the parachutes of the F-105 crew, relaying the position to Crown, the airborne search and rescue HC-130 command aircraft, Johnson spotted a MIG-17 off their right wing. The F-105, though not designed for air-to-air combat, responded well as Thorsness attacked the MIG and destroyed it with 20-mm cannon fire, just as a second MIG closed on his tail. Low on fuel, Thorsness outran his pursuers and left the battle area to rendezvous with a KC-135 tanker over Laos.

As this occurred, the initial element of the rescue force—a pair of A-1E "Sandies"—arrived to locate the position of the downed crewmen before calling in the waiting HH-53 Jolly Green helicopters orbiting at a holding point over Laos. Thorsness, with only 500 rounds of ammunition left, turned back from the tanker to fly RESCAP (rescue combat air patrol) for the Sandies and update them on the situation and terrain. As Thorsness approached the area, briefing the Sandies, he spotted MIG-17s in a wagon wheel orbit around him and attacked, probably destroying another that flew across his path.

Pairs of MIGs attacked each propeller-driven Sandy as it came out of its turn in search orbit, shooting down the leader with cannon fire when he failed to heed warnings to break into the attack, and forced the wingman into a series of repeated evasive turns. Sandy 02 reported the situation and Thorsness advised him to keep turning and announced his return.

Although all of his ammunition had been depleted, Thorsness reversed and flew back to the scene, hoping in some way to draw the MIGs away from the surviving A-1. However, as he re-engaged, Panda flight from the 355th TFW arrived back in the area. It had dropped its ordnance on the target and was en route to its post-strike aerial refueling when Kingfish 02 went down. Panda had jettisoned its wing tanks, making the rescue radar controller reluctant to use it to CAP the rescue effort, but it filled its internal tanks and returned to North Vietnam at high altitude to conserve fuel.

Panda's four F-105s burst through the defensive circle at high speed, then engaged the MIGs in a turning dogfight, permitting Kingfish 01 to depart the area after a 50-minute engagement against SAMs, anti-aircraft guns, and MIGs. Panda 01 (Capt William E. Eskew) shot down a MIG, during which the surviving Sandy escaped, and he and his wingman Panda 02 (Capt Paul A. Seymour) each damaged one of the others. Two other MIGs were shot down by members of a third F-105 strike flight, Nitro 01 and Nitro 03 in another of the 17 MIG engagements on this mission.

Again low on fuel and facing nightfall, Thorsness was headed towards a tanker when Panda

03 (Capt Howard L. Bodenhamer), an F-105 of the flight that had rescued Sandy 02, transmitted by radio that he was critically low on fuel. Thorsness quickly calculated that Kingfish 01 had sufficient fuel to fly to Udorn, near the Mekong River and 200 miles closer, so he vectored the tanker toward Panda 03. When within 60 miles of Udorn, he throttled back to idle and "glided" toward the base, touching down "long" (mid-runway) as his fuel totalizer indicated empty tanks.

**Prisoner of War:** On April 30, 1967, on their 93rd mission (seven shy of completing their tours), Thorsness and Johnson were shot down by a Mikoyan-Gurevich MIG-21 over North Vietnam.

While still inbound over northwest North Vietnam, communications were disrupted when an ejection seat emergency beeper went off aboard one of the F-105s. Despite being observed by early warning radar locations, two MIG-21s approached Carbine flight from behind and unseen. Just as Thorsness got an instrument indication that the flight was being painted by airborne radar, he saw an F-105 going down in flames that eventually was identified as his own wingman, Carbine 04 shot down by an Atoll missile. Within a minute, his own aircraft was also hit with a heat-seeking missile fired by the MIGs.

Thorsness and Johnson ejected. Separated from each other by a ridge, they were the object of a three-hour rescue effort involving the entire strike force as a covering force. Two F-105D aircraft were directed by Crown to provide RESCAP (as Tomahawk flight) until the combat search and rescue (CSAR) forces could arrive on station. Both aircraft were hit by Atoll missiles from MIG 21s, with F-105D 61-0130, piloted by Capt Joe Abbott being shot down, and wingman Maj Al Lenski limping back to Thailand. In addition, one of the A-1 "Sandy" aircraft was hit while one of the rescue Jolly Greens developed hydraulic problems and had to abort,<sup>[14]</sup> thus ending the CSAR mission. Poor communications, heavy MIG engagements and standard operating procedures which did not allow only one CSAR helicopter to remain on station,<sup>[15]</sup> made the effort futile and all the men were captured. CSAR forces were again launched the next day but none of the downed airmen were located. The mission is described in great detail, including verbatim transcripts of radio transmissions, in both *Thud Ridge* and *Thud*, written by Col Jack Broughton, member of Waco flight and another of the RESCAP crews involved in the incident.

His uncooperativeness towards his captors earned him a year in solitary confinement and severe back injuries due to torture. The Medal of Honor was awarded by the U.S. Congress during his captivity, but not announced until his release in 1973 to prevent the Vietnamese from using it against him. Thorsness was released on March 4, 1973, but injuries incurred during the ejection and aggravated by the torture disqualified him medically from flying and he retired on 25 October 1973.

**Political Career:** In 1974, Thorsness unsuccessfully ran for U.S. Senate against incumbent Senator George McGovern. In 1978, Thorsness unsuccessfully ran for the U.S. House of Representatives against Tom Daschle. Thorsness served as Director of Civic Affairs for Litton Industries from 1979 to 1985.

Thorsness later settled in Seattle, WA and was elected to the state senate on 8 November 1988. He immediately became the senator from District 11 to serve the unexpired term of Avery Garrett, who died in April 1988. In the state senate, Thorsness sponsored a bill

dubbed the "Truth Bill" in 1990. The legislature unanimously passed the measure urging the Federal government to release information about 30,000 U.S. soldiers listed as either POW or MIA in conflicts dating back to World War II. It urged the U.S. Congress to pass a similar measure that would declassify information pertaining to these American servicemen. After a single term, Thorsness retired to Indianola, Washington.

He is currently retired and serves on the Board of Directors of the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation. He is currently battling cancer. He moved from Catalina, Arizona, to Madison, Alabama, with his wife in early 2008 to be close to family.

**Military Awards and Other Honors:** Medal of Honor, Silver Star with bronze oak leaf cluster, Distinguished Flying Cross, Purple Heart, Air Medal with three silver oak leaf clusters, Prisoner of War Medal, Combat Readiness Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Air Force Longevity Service Award, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon, Vietnam Campaign Medal. In 2004, the University of Richmond announced the establishment of an endowed chair in leadership and ethics named in honor of Thorsness. The *Colonel Leo K. and Gaylee Thorsness Endowed Chair in Ethical Leadership* was funded by a \$1,000,000 gift organized by W. Thomas Matthews, President and CEO of the Global Private Client Group at Smith Barney. Thorsness is currently serving as Distinguished Leader in Residence at the Jepson School. The Thorsness chair is held by John Donelson Forsyth, a social psychologist with expertise in group dynamics.

**Masonic History:** Brother Leo Thorsness is a member of Unity Lodge #130, Sioux Falls, SD and a National Sojourner.