

# Vietnam-era pilot hero enjoys Luke visit

Medal of Honor recipient spent 6 years as POW

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Fighter planes have advanced dramatically in the past 40 years, but air combat still calls for human ingenuity, a Vietnam-era hero recently told Luke Air Force Base pilots.

Retired Col. Leo Thorsness, 74, who was awarded the Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War and spent six years as a POW, was invited to spend a day with the 310th Fighter Squadron at the base.

He flew the back seat in an F-16 on a two-plane mission, dropped a laser-guided bomb, shot rockets and fired the plane's gun. Thorsness said it was a great experience.

"It's fun for an old fighter pilot to go back and pull some G's and smell the JP (jet propellant) again and get strapped in and roll inverted," he said. "It was a way of life and it was the best job in the world, if you like those kinds of things."

Thorsness also told the Luke F-16 pilots how he and his backseater in a F-105 fighter jet, Capt. Harry Johnson, solved two problems in defeating surface-to-air missiles, or SAMs, over North Vietnam. SAMs and anti-aircraft guns were responsible for downing the vast majority of U.S. planes lost in Vietnam.

When he went to Vietnam in 1966, no one knew really how to defend against the SAM threat. Thorsness and Johnson were the sixth of the "Wild Weasel" crews charged with defeating the SAMs. The first five planes, flying at low to medium altitudes, had been shot down.

Thorsness and Johnson flew relatively high. Then, when a SAM was fired, Thorsness and his wingmen plunged toward the ground, waiting for the missile to arc and come after them.

When it did, they abruptly pivoted away, turning so tightly the SAM couldn't follow. They then attacked the SAM launch site.

Thorsness and Johnson also came up with a way to more than quadruple the seven-mile range of their SHRIKE missiles so they could stay outside the 17-mile range of the SAMs.

By pushing the F-105 to its top speed, nosing up and releasing the SHRIKE just before the plane stalled, Thorsness "lobbed" the missile toward the SAM site.

Then, when the SHRIKE fell below 17,000 feet, its homing equipment locked onto the radar signal of the SAM site, and the missile zipped in and blew it up.

A few days after they developed the technique, Thorsness and two other pilots destroyed five SAM sites with six SHRIKES.

"It was an era where you had to use your brains," Thorsness said. "Sometimes you won, and sometimes you lost."

Thorsness was awarded the Medal of Honor for action over North Vietnam on April 19, 1967. He and his wingman destroyed one SAM site with missiles and another with bombs, but antiaircraft fire brought down the wingman's plane, and he and his backseater bailed out. Thorsness called for rescue crews, then destroyed an enemy MiG-17 fighter in the area.

Low on fuel, and with only 500 rounds of ammunition left, Thorsness went looking for an aerial tanker. But he returned when alerted that hostile MiGs were threatening rescue aircraft.

Seeing four MiGs, he used the last of his ammo to attack them, damaging one and driving off the others. Now critically low on fuel, he let another low-on-fuel American plane fuel up at a tanker rather than doing so himself and made a risky run to a forward base, landing as his tanks went dry.

Eleven days later, Thorsness and Johnson were shot down by a MiG. Both men spent six years in enemy prisons, and Thorsness' back was broken three or four times in torture sessions.

Thorsness, retired and living north of Tucson, said that even though the fighter pilots at Luke command wonderful technology, they still have to use their minds.

"There are new situations, new challenges," Thorsness said. "Every time there's a new offense, you've got to come up with a defense."