

Wild, Wild Weasel

Leo Thorsness fought "most of North Vietnam" in one of the epic solo battles of the SEA war.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

THE Wild Weasel crews, flying two-seat F-105Gs, took on the most dangerous and demanding mission of the air war in Southeast Asia. Their job was to precede a strike force into the target area, entice enemy surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft radars to come on the air, and knock them out with bombs or with missiles that homed on the radar's emissions. Often they were in a high-threat area for half an hour while the strike force attacked its targets and withdrew. The business of offering themselves as targets for enemy gunners was made even more hazardous by the presence of MiG fighters. Only the top pilots were selected to fly F-105Gs.

Head Weasel of the 357th Tac Fighter Squadron at Takhli Air Base in Thailand was Maj. Leo Thorsness. On April 19, 1967, he and his backseater, Capt. Harold Johnson, fought one of the epic solo battles of the war in a wild fifty-minute duel with SAMs, AAA, and MiGs.

The target that day was an army compound near Hanoi, the most heavily defended area in the history of aerial warfare. Thorsness, leading a flight of four Weasels, heard the rattling in his headset that signaled enemy radars coming on long before they reached the target. Directing two of his F-105s to the north, Thorsness and his wingman stayed south, forcing enemy gunners to divide their attention. Johnson's scope in the back seat showed many SAMs in the area. Thorsness fired a Shrike missile at one of the sites, and moments later its radar went off the air. He then silenced another with a direct bomb hit.

Things quickly began to go sour. First, Thorsness's wingman, Tom

Madison, was hit by flak. Both he and his backseater, Tom Sterling, ejected. Thorsness flew toward their chutes, somehow finding time to fire at another SAM site along the way. Then the two Weasels he had sent north were attacked by MiGs. The afterburner of one F-105 wouldn't light; the element was forced to return to Takhli, leaving Thorsness alone in a hornet's nest of SAMs, AAA, and MiGs.

As Major Thorsness circled the two chutes, Johnson spotted a MiG off their left wing. The big F-105, designed for delivering nuclear weapons at low altitude, was never intended for air-to-air combat. But never mind that. Thorsness attacked the MiG, destroying it with 20-mm cannon fire as another MiG closed on his tail. Low on fuel, he broke off and rendezvoused with a tanker.

In the meantime, two prop-driven A-1E Sandys and a rescue helicopter had arrived to look for Madison and Sterling. Thorsness, with only 500 rounds of ammunition left, turned back from the tanker to fly cover for the rescue force, knowing there were at least five MiGs in the area. Using the last of his ammunition, he hit and probably destroyed one of them. Then, in a wild supersonic dash at fifty feet, he shook off four more MiGs that had come up fast behind him.

Once more, Thorsness started for the rescue scene, where MiGs had downed one Sandy. Out of ammunition, he hoped at least to draw the MiGs away from the remaining Sandy in what might well have been a suicidal maneuver. In the nick of time, an element of the strike force, which had been delayed, arrived and hit the enemy fighters.

It wasn't over yet. Again low on fuel, Thorsness headed for a tanker just as one of the strike force pilots, lost and almost out of fuel, called him for help. Thorsness knew he couldn't make Takhli without refueling. Rapidly calculating that he could stretch it to Udorn, some 200

miles closer, without taking on fuel, he directed the tanker toward the lost pilot. Once across the Mekong, he throttled back to idle and "glided" toward Udorn, touching down as his tanks went dry. That four-hour mission had been, as Captain Johnson said, "a full day's work."

Eleven days later, while Thorsness was on his ninety-third mission, a MiG popped up from behind a mountain and put a missile up the tailpipe of his F-105. He and Harry Johnson ejected at 600 knots, Thorsness suffering severe injuries. Both men spent almost the next six years in North Vietnam's prisons. Because of his "uncooperative attitude," Thorsness was denied medical attention, spent a year in solitary, and suffered severe back injuries under torture. On March 4, 1973, both men walked away from prison, Thorsness on crutches. No one could ever say that Leo Thorsness hadn't paid his dues in full.

On October 15, 1973, President Nixon presented the Medal of Honor to Lt. Col. Leo K. Thorsness for extraordinary heroism on that April day in 1967. Maj. Harold Johnson was later awarded the Air Force Cross. No longer able to fly fighters because of his back injuries, Leo Thorsness retired as a colonel. He is now Director of Civic Affairs for Litton Industries. ■



Lt. Col. Leo K. Thorsness of Sioux Falls, S. D., received the Medal of Honor on October 15, 1973, for valor in Vietnam.