

Thud Ridge: A Legacy and a Legend

"Jack Broughton expected a lot from every pilot in the gaggle, but no more than he gave."—Leo Thorsness

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THEY don't come any more professional than Jack Broughton. After graduating from West Point in 1945, he spent twenty-three years in fighters. Following 114 combat missions in Korea, he earned world-class recognition in the stick-and-rudder league when he was selected to lead the Thunderbirds demonstration team. Then it was F-106s in air defense, a year at the National War College, and on to Southeast Asia as Deputy Commander of the 355th Tac Fighter Wing, equipped with F-105s, popularly known as Thuds.

Col. Jack Broughton believed in our defense of South Vietnam. He also believed that micromanagement of the war by inexperienced civilian theorists in Washington and by a headquarters thousands of miles away violated centuries of military experience. Remote direction of the war, down to minute tactical details, was costing irreplaceable planes and, more important, the lives or freedom of men he led. He cared deeply about those men—so deeply that he led far more than his share of the toughest missions to targets along Thud Ridge to the northwest of Hanoi, where the guns, the SAMs, and the MiGs were concentrated in the deadliest of air defenses.

As his mission tally climbed toward 100, Jack Broughton became one of the few men to be hit by a SAM and survive and one of the few to win the Air Force Cross. All of this—the heroic exploits of many 355th pilots, the massive rescue effort he led when Medal of Honor winner Leo Thorsness was shot down (see "Valor," April '85 issue),

and his own most memorable two days of combat—is described in hair-raising detail in *Thud Ridge*, Colonel Broughton's classic account of F-105 operations in the North, recently reprinted in paperback by Bantam Books.

Those two days began one afternoon in mid-1967 when Broughton led his wing against rail yards near Hanoi. He took the flak-suppression flight, determined to get the 85-mm and 100-mm guns that protected the yards. After a successful strike, he led an armed recce, discovering a valley that intelligence believed abandoned but that now was full of fat logistic targets. Leading the attack, Colonel Broughton was hit by 37-mm fire that knocked out his stability augmentation system. Normally that meant curtains for a Thud, but with superb airmanship he regained control of the 49,000-pound beast and made it back to Takhli.

While the maintenance people replaced the tail section of his aircraft, he requested permission to take the wing back to that same valley the next morning. Organizing the mission took most of the night. With two hours' sleep, Broughton led his pilots in a predawn takeoff and through a wall of violent thunderstorms in what was described by others as "the wildest aerial refueling episode in the history of fighter aviation." Colonel Broughton had to make eight hookups in that black turbulence before he got all the planes in his wing refueled. Re-

grouping the force under almost impossible conditions, he led the flak-suppression flight, silencing the guns that had almost ended his career the previous afternoon, while his pilots clobbered their targets.

As the strike force withdrew, Broughton went after an undamaged building with his guns. He was hit by flak but continued the attack, his aircraft on fire and two main hydraulic systems out. The remaining utility system fluctuated from zero to 3,000 pounds' pressure. If it went, his Thud would become "an unguided missile." Very gently, he pulled out of his dive at treetop level, nursed the wounded bird up to 23,000 feet, where he got the fire out, and made it to an emergency strip, where he had to penetrate a 700-foot ceiling, hydraulic pressure falling periodically to zero all the way.

Those two missions earned Jack Broughton a recommendation for his second Air Force Cross. But that was not to be. Two of his pilots who were fired on by a Russian ship in Haiphong harbor committed the unpardonable sin of returning fire. For his unorthodox defense of the pilots, Colonel Broughton was court-martialed and, for lack of hard evidence, was given no more than a slap on the wrist. Nevertheless, he knew that the door to command and to promotion had been slammed shut. He retired from the Air Force. Thus did we lose one of our great combat leaders who left for all airmen a legacy and a legend of valor.

In a recent letter, Col. Leo Thorsness wrote: "Jack Broughton was the finest combat leader at Takhli during my time there . . . a leader who led with brains and guts. All fighter pilots have some good traits: Jack had them all. But one of his greatest strengths—supporting his pilots—was his downfall."

If the day ever comes when this country goes head-to-head with the Communist first team, let's hope there will be a few Jack Broughtons around to lead the way. ■



Col. Jack Broughton straps on his "Thud," with help from his crew chief, ready to head North again.