

The Collings Foundation Release
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15 Congressional Medal of Honor Recipients and 120 Prisoners of War Unite to Honor Vietnam Veterans

Nearly four decades after the United States ceased combat operations in Vietnam, a group of highly distinguished veterans—15 Congressional Medal of Honor recipients and 120 former Prisoners of War—are striving to honor their fellow Service-members in a unique and deeply meaningful fashion. Their goal is to return a Vietnam-era F-105 fighter-jet to the sky on a mission of recognition and education. According to Medal of Honor recipient and 6-year Prisoner of War Colonel Leo Thorsness (ret), “It is one thing to see “my” aircraft mounted on a pole or gathering dust in a museum, quite another to see it roar down the runway and take to the sky. This means a lot to me and my fellow veterans—it gives us a chance to show our families how we served our country.”

Col Thorsness and his fellow veterans are partnering in this endeavor with the Collings Foundation, a non-profit educational organization whose WWII-era B-17, B-24, B-25, and P-51 have toured the nation for the past twenty years as a flying museum. In the late 1990s the Foundation expanded its mission to honor Vietnam Veterans by acquiring and restoring an F-4 Phantom, TA-4 Skyhawk, and UH-1 Huey for its “Vietnam Memorial Flight.” As our veterans age, the impact of these flying aircraft is ever more important. Bringing history to life, these “living” memorials honor our veterans and our nation’s history in a way that is real and touches people’s lives all across the country.

However, it was clear to veterans like Col Thorsness that the Vietnam Memorial Flight would be incomplete if it did not include an airworthy F-105 Thunderchief. One of the iconic fighters of the Vietnam War, over half of all US bombing missions flown in the conflict were undertaken by “Thuds.” Tasked with conventional strike and surface-to-air-missile (SAM) suppression missions deep within enemy territory, the odds against “Thud” crews were daunting. Approximately half the F-105s built were shot down. 150 F-105 crewmembers were killed during operations in Vietnam, and a further 100 “Thud” crewmembers were held captive as prisoners of war. Put quite simply, flying F-105s during Vietnam demanded a very unique dedication to duty and country—our veterans delivered.

Acquiring an F-105 to restore to airworthy condition is no easy feat—even for a group that includes 15 Congressional Medal of Honor recipients and 120 former Prisoners of War. This initiative requires Congressional authorization, whereby an aircraft is transferred at no cost to the government to the Collings Foundation. Whether the group succeeds or not will be determined over the next few weeks. The House Armed Services Committee is currently considering language submitted by Representative Niki Tsongas (D-MA) to enable the transfer. According to former F-105 pilot, 5.5-year POW, and past Air Force Association Chairman of the Board Gene Smith: “We served our country over the skies of Southeast Asia and after being shot down we continued to uphold the highest standards of military conduct as prisoners of war. Getting an F-105 back into the skies means a great deal to me—we gave a lot for this country, many of my friends gave with their lives. I don’t think we are asking for too much--this sacrifice and dedication to duty merits recognition.”