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Profile: Lt. Colonel George Anthony "Tony" Nacrelli

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Tony Nacrelli enjoys a quiet life these days.

"As a kid I was afraid of heights," said Tony Nacrelli with a wry chuckle. However, that fear was fleeting when the opportunity presented itself to this St. James High School Class of 1958 alumnus.

"My senior year one of the assistant (football) coaches came and spoke to several of us about the opportunity to go to the Air Force Academy," he related. Nacrelli was hooked. The energetic lad threw himself into the process of transforming himself from an earth-bound "Bulldog" (St. James'

iconic nickname) of the gridiron to a high flying Falcon at the Air Force Academy. It was an endeavor he tackled with mind, body and soul.

"I went to Bullis Prep at Silver Springs, Maryland to get my grades up," Nacrelli explained. "I would have an appointment with the Academy if my grades were higher."

His classroom work paid off. Nacrelli went to Colorado Springs, Colorado, home of the Air Force Academy, and graduated as a second lieutenant in 1963.

"From there I was assigned to Lubbock Texas and flew T-37's. I spent six months flying side by side with an instructor and logged over 1,200 hours," said Nacrelli.

He excelled in his training and was soon promoted to flying T-38's.

"They're super-sonic airplanes. They are the same basic kind of aircraft as a T-37 except they are armored," he noted.

After putting in thirteen months on that rotation Nacrelli was on the move again. Castle Air Force Base in Merced, CA was his next assignment.

"Now I was flying KC 135's. They are 're-fueler' planes to bring fuel to bomber aircraft as well as fighter jets," Nacrelli said.

All this was leading up to Nacrelli's biggest challenge.

During the 1950's until the late '80's America was locked in a nerve wracking Cold War against communism. Part of that conflict was ascertaining just what the enemy was up to. Brave men like Nacrelli were called upon to take on dangerous but crucial scouting missions.

"After my work on the KC 135's I moved over to RC-135's. These are reconnaissance planes. They are modified 707's," he pointed out.

Nacrelli did not draw easy assignments. He was sent to the hot cauldron of the Cold War front — Russia, or as it was then known the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.).

Flying out of Okinawa, Japan Nacrelli was called upon to fly up and down the Soviet border.

"We were just 50 miles off their coast, but we kept out of their air space," he said.

It was far from an easy endeavor.

"Russian planes flew right alongside of us on their side of the air zone," said Nacrelli.

One false move, one mistake, one misinterpretation, and things could have gone horribly wrong.

The stakes were high. Besides Nacrelli and other brave pilots during these crucial missions putting their lives in danger, there was also great risk to the nation. In 1960 CIA pilot Francis Gary Powers was performing that aerial reconnaissance when his aircraft was hit by an S-75 Dvina surface-to-air missile and crashed in Sverdlovsk in the Soviet Union. The incident caused a severe deterioration in the already tense relations between the United States and the U.S.S.R. Powers was convicted of espionage by the Russians and would not be released until two long years later in a prisoner exchange.

"You did not want to get forced down," said Nacrelli.

Fortunately, Nacrelli flew over 20,000 hours safely and delivered countless photos to help the United States Strategic Air Command in its job protecting America. During those years Nacrelli was promoted to senior pilot and also received five medals in recognition for his service.

The military not only provided adventure for Nacrelli but romance as well. While at the Air Force Academy he met his future wife.

"During my junior year Barbara was in her sophomore year at a Catholic school called Loretto Heights," said Nacrelli. After he graduated from the academy the two were married in June 1964.

"We've been able to celebrate 50 wonderful years together," he said.

It was good that this duo had the warmth of true love. Some of their stops in service to America were, shall we say, chilling.

"We were at Fairbanks, Alaska where the weather would go to 70 degrees below zero," Nacrelli noted.

Their marriage has produced three sons who are all successful in their respective careers.

Besides being an accomplished pilot, Nacrelli also went on to have a very successful business career as a salesman for IBM.

"Even then I still served in the Air National Guard," Nacrelli said.

From the beginning of his career at the academy until his final year in the reserves, Nacrelli put together a quarter century of service (1963 to 1988) for his nation.

He still recalls his days at the now closed (since 1993) Saint James High School.

"There were a lot of good people there. The teachers did a great job. They had challenges like having fifty students to a class. But we learned a lot," said Nacrelli.

Five of the six Nacrelli boys went to the Chester school. They all played football.

"We had some pretty good teams. We never won the Catholic League but we were competitive," he said. "We'd play Bonner every Thanksgiving. One year we beat North Catholic on its home field. That was the year that North won the championship, too." he noted.

Nacrelli was a durable player and versatile as well. He played both offense (center) and defense (linebacker) for the two head coaches (Joe Logue and 'Beans' Brennan) during his years at St. James. That experience helped him during his collegiate career.

"I played all four years while I was at the Air Force Academy," he said.

At this time when America honors its veterans it is important to remember that it is dedicated people like Tony Nacrelli who have sacrificed willingly and bravely so that we all enjoy our freedom.