

LEO T. THOMAS, Jr.. (DECEASED)

Notes from Jimmie H. Butler

I was at AFIT at Wright Patt when Leo was killed on 19 December 1971. I hadn't known Leo well at USAFA, but I remembered him by his smile. Since he had gone down in Laos, I was rather surprised to learn that a memorial service was scheduled for Georgetown, KY on 11 January 1972.

I got the Dean's permission for a contingent of AFIT students to go down to Kentucky for the service. Somewhere I have my "recruitment letter," which closed out with something like:

"We can't expect to be at all places at all times, but this is our place, and our time."

I believe we got together 19 of mostly Leo's classmates and other USAFA grads to travel to Georgetown and show his family our respect for Leo. My good friend, Jim Roper, quoted below, had flown up from Craig AFB, AL, as well. I would meet him about 25 years later.

The following are excerpts from notes from Bob Venkus has offered some remembrances from Leo's first combat tour, Raven Colonel Jim Roper, and from USAF icon, Colonel Joe Kittinger.

Notes from The Venk (Bob Venkus '63)

Your notes about Leo are great and I applaud their inclusion in anything associated with the reunion. But may I suggest that an additional tribute from a classmate who shared Leo's first combat tour could also be considered. I apologize for not putting this forward earlier, but I was unaware of the effort to honor "Leotus Thomasina," as he was sometimes called by his fellow Thud Drivers. Leo was a Thud Driver first and foremost; I'm sure he eventually learned to love the F-4 even though he always called them "THUMBs"» Two Holed Ugly Mini Buffs.

Leo and I checked out in the F-105 together in 68-69 at McConnell. Our class was appropriately nicknamed "The CIN Pack" (pronounced like a Clinton admission of "CIN"). Our exploits were legendary throughout southern Kansas and TDY bases like George in California. Leo often took the lead in the shenanigans, including a trip to Hollywood in a flight suit to find and confront any anti-war, pinko commies that might mistakenly want to argue the pros and cons of VietNam with him.

By late 69 we had joined the war as qualified Thud Weasels, and both Leo and I began flying combat from Takhli in the 333rd TFS, "The Lancers." My fond memories of Leo will one day fill many pages of my next book, including all of the following:

1. A frantic (successful!) search to find him in Bangkok's Chao Phya hotel the day we were to report to the 333rd; unfortunately, a humorless squadron commander was there to greet the C-130 and witnessed Leo's "exuberant" arrival.
2. Multiple combat missions with him as lead or as my wingman, including my 100th in the Thud when we supported two Buff strikes in NVN as Weasels and, between strikes, strafed (until Winchester) floating POL in Laos. We thought we'd won the war until the wing CC chewed us out for risking our butts and endangering the 2nd Buff effort!
3. Many a night at the Takhli O'Club where Leo certainly earned the right to have ANY stag bar named after him. On one occasion, he rescued this much-too-aggressive fighter pilot from a very physical encounter with a crowd of over-sensitive EB-66 guys who, for somereason, seemed insulted by my insults.

4. Many a day at the "Lancers" squadron bumper pool lounge where Leo and I would compete with each other and the rest of the unscheduled crews for line-of-sight schedule changes that might get us another combat mission.

I could go on, but suffice it to say that I got to know Leo as well as I know any '63 classmate during the almost two years we flew Thuds together. He was a unique personality and a superb pilot and would have undoubtedly gone on to great things had he not met his fate in December 1971. He was the last member of the "CIN Pack" to die in combat; altogether 5 out of 15 were KIA. I was still flying Thuds on Okinawa when Leo died and I missed the stateside memorial services for Captain Thomas and his pitter. I went on to fly another 40+ Weasel missions over SEA in 72. Like many of you, I flew and fought then not so much for a fractured, confused country which was trying desperately to end the Southeast Asia nightmare, but for Leo, Dick, Joe, Larry, Doug, and all the others who had done their best in a war that none of us fully understood then, or perhaps even now.

I did not meet Leo's widow, Kay, and son, Leo III, until Leo's remains were found and returned for burial at Arlington in the summer of '95. After the outstanding funeral (band; flyby; The Works!) which so many classmates attended, I joined the family at their hotel's bar and answered as many questions as I could about the man they had loved. We laughed and cried and drank to him; I think he would have enjoyed the war stories I told. We sat there for hours, enjoying life with a small measure of the gusto he brought to each and every day of his short, spectacular life. Each of us who knew and loved him will always remember the way he lived that adventure.

Notes from Colonel Jim Roper, USAF, Retired

I PCSed to Craig AFB in October, 1971. Leo Thomas had a huge fan club there from a T-38 tour prior to the F-4 assignment. We heard in December that he had been killed. A Raven friend, Rich Meeboer, was the FAC when Leo went in on a snake-and-nape pass on an outpost near Pak Beng, Laos. That afternoon Rich put CBU and slick bombs on the 23-mm that tagged Leo.

At a Raven Reunion, during the late 1970's, Rich Meeboer showed super-8 film of CBU and slick Mk-82s hitting muzzle flashes from 23-mm anti-aircraft artillery. He said that one group of guns included the ones that had killed Leo Thomas, earlier in the day. Rich added that Leo had flown the "last snake and nape mission on the PDJ." Skip bomb passes were restricted by the wing after Leo's loss.

My Ops Officer, Max Hubrich, knew Leo and offered to get a T-37 to make the funeral in Kentucky. The Guard fly-by was impressive because it was on target and very low, (although IMC) in hilly terrain.

Back in Selma, we had just had a fire in the Stag Bar, and it re-opened as a "casual" co-ed bar. I used my office on the O Club Advisory Council and was able to rally Leo's Craig supporters to name the bar the "Leo T. Thomas Memorial Lounge." Considering my time with him at Udorn, I knew it would be an honor to have a bar named for him.

Notes from Colonel Joe Kittinger, ex-Commander 555TFS

Leo was one of the best fighter pilots and gentlemen that I ever knew. He was assigned to my squadron, the 555 TFS. He and I flew together quite frequently on many combat missions in Vietnam. We also would socialize at the O Club and once in a while we would visit downtown Udorn for a beer or so. Leo and I were quite close.

He flew my wing on a particularly hairy mission over North Vietnam and that night he confided to me that for the first time in his combat flying career he thought that he might get shot down on the mission that day. I jumped all over him reminding him that all fighter pilots were bulletproof and invisible and that he had to maintain his confidence. We both remembered other fighter pilots that once they lost their confidence they usually got shot down. He finally said that he would try to forget that mission and press on.

A few days later, after another hairy combat mission over North Vietnam he caught me at the bar and told me that everything was o.k. again and that he was once again bulletproof and invisible. To that statement we had a drink-or was it two?

Leo was one of the most popular young officers at Udorn. He had a tremendous sense of humor and was respected by his peers and senior officers. He was the kind of officer and pilot that every senior officer wanted on his team because he was such a great person and officer.

When I could, I always had him on my wing. We were a great team together, and when we went up north I always would try to have Leo assigned to my flight.

Leo came to me the night before he was lost and asked to fly a mission the next day. He was scheduled for a mission in the Barrel Roll area over Laos. In his back seat was a young navigator on his first combat mission. His brother had been previously shot down in an F-4 combat mission a year or so earlier. However, this guy was a tiger. Usually, the Barrel Roll area was not that intense, with 37 mm weapons seldom encountered.

Later that day I was in the combat control center when we were notified that Leo had taken a direct hit in the cockpit and was shot down. I was devastated. From the reports that we received Leo had taken a direct hit in the cockpit from a 37mm gun. (a golden "B B"). There were no parachutes observed. I had to know without a doubt that Leo was down and could not have survived. I personally called the FAC that was controlling the mission and got his eye-witness statement of the hit. He said he followed the aircraft all of the way to the ground and that there were no parachutes. I questioned him repeatedly as I had to be certain that Leo had not survived the hit. He assured me that neither of the crew survived. Finally I was convinced that Leo had not survived.

That night at the bar I had a martini with a black olive and said my final farewell to a dear friend and fellow warrior. May God rest his Soul.

In my three combat tours in Vietnam I lost many great friends and aviators-but losing Leo was one of the hardest and most difficult one for me to accept because he was so special and such a good friend. But in combat you cannot dwell on such things as you might lose the edge—so you have a martini with a black olive and press on. I never met Leo's wife, but I am sure she is a special person. The USAFA should be proud of such a gallant Warrior, Gentleman and American. He brought great credit to that institution.

Leo was special.