

# LEO KEITH THORSNESS

## BIRTH

February 14, 1932<sup>i</sup>  
Walnut Grove, Redwood County,  
Minnesota

## ENLISTED

1951<sup>ii</sup>  
Walnut Grove, Redwood County,  
Minnesota

## MILITARY SERVICE<sup>iii</sup> - Vietnam

United States Air Force 1951-1973  
Rank Colonel  
355<sup>h</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing  
357<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron



## Early Years

Leo Keith Thorsness, was the third and last child born to Emil R. and Bernice Mae *Learned* Thorsness.<sup>iv;v</sup> He grew up on a farm near Walnut Grove, Minnesota. His grandfather John Thorsness was an immigrant from Norway.<sup>vi</sup> Leo's two older siblings were Donna M., born in 1926 and brother John L. in 1929.<sup>vii</sup> Leo earned the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award from the Boy Scouts of America, one of only nine known Eagle Scouts who also received the Medal of Honor.<sup>viii</sup> He married Gaylee Anderson on December 26, 1953 in Brookings, South Dakota and had a daughter Dawn Tae Thorsness who also served in the United States Air Force.<sup>ix</sup>

He received his Bachelors degree from the University of Omaha, and his Master's degree in Systems Management from the University of Southern California.<sup>x</sup>

## Military Career

"In 1954 he received his commission as an officer and earned his wings with a rating as pilot through the SUAF Aviation Cadet program in Class 54-G." As a Strategic Air Command pilot he completed fighter pilot training and flew both F-86 and F-100 jets. After 1966 he completed F-105 "Wild Weasel" training at George AFB, California. His task was locating and destroying North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites during the Vietnam War. It meant making himself a target so the SAM sights would give away their positions. Therefore, it was the most dangerous assignment a pilot could get in Vietnam. "Wild Weasel losses were 2 1/2 times greater than any other flight mission in this war."<sup>xi;xii</sup>

## Medal of Honor Citation

On April 19, 1967, then Major Thorsness performed the action that earned him the Medal of Honor.

"Air Force Medal of Honor

The President of the United States in the name of the Congress takes pride in presenting the Medal of Honor to LIEUTENANT COLONEL LEO K. THORSNESS UNITED STATES AIR FORCE for service as set forth in the following citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty. As pilot of an F-105 aircraft, Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness was on a surface-to-air missile suppression mission over North Vietnam. Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness and his wingman attacked and silenced a surface-to-air missile site with air-to-ground missiles and then destroyed a second surface-to-air missile site with bombs. In the attack on the second missile site, Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness' wingman was shot down by intensive anti-aircraft fire, and the two crewmembers abandoned their aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness circled the descending parachutes to keep the crewmembers in sight and relay their position to the Search and Rescue Center. During this maneuver, a MIG-17 was sighted in the area. Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness immediately initiated an attack and destroyed the MIG. Because his aircraft was low on fuel, he was forced to depart the area in search of a tanker. Upon being advised that two helicopters were orbiting over the

downed crew's position and that there were hostile MIGs in the area posing a serious threat to the helicopters, Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness, despite his low fuel condition, decided to return alone through a hostile environment of surface-to-air missile and anti-aircraft defenses to the downed crew's position. As he approached the area, he spotted four MIG-17 aircraft and immediately initiated an attack on the MIGs, damaging one and driving the others away from the rescue scene. When it became apparent that an aircraft in the area was critically low on fuel and the crew would have to abandon the aircraft unless they could reach a tanker, Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness, although critically short on fuel himself, helped to avert further possible loss of life and a friendly aircraft by recovering at a forward operating base, thus allowing the aircraft in emergency fuel condition to refuel safely. Lieutenant Colonel Thorsness' extraordinary heroism, self-sacrifice and personal bravery involving conspicuous risk of life were in the highest traditions of the military service, and have reflected great credit upon himself and the U.S. Air Force."<sup>xiii</sup>,<sup>xiv</sup>

Leo K. Thorsness was the only Medal of Honor recipient credited with an aerial victory in the Vietnam War.<sup>xv</sup>



### **Prisoner of War Years**

On April 30, 1967, seven missions short of completing their tours of 100 missions, Major Thorsness, and his "backseat guy" Captain Harold Johnson were shot down by a Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-2 over North Vietnam. After Flying his mission in the morning, Major Thorsness as the Wild Weasel leader assigned himself as a spare aircraft for the afternoon mission because of a shortage of crews. While still inbound over North Vietnam, communications were disrupted. Just as Thorsness got an instrument indication that the flight was being painted by air born radar, he saw an F-105 going down in flames that eventually was identified as his own wingman, shot down by an Atoll missile. Within a minute, his own aircraft was also hit with a heat-seeking missile fired by the MiGs.<sup>xvi</sup>

Thorsness and Johnson ejected. Separated from each other by a ridge, they were the object of a three-hour rescue effort involving the entire strike force covering. The effort was futile and all the men were captured. Though CSAR helicopter forces were again launched the next day, none of the downed men were located.<sup>xvii</sup>

Thorsness, then age 35, was taken to the infamous prison camp known as "Hanoi Hilton" where he endured three years of torture. In all, he would spend six years as a Prisoner of War. During his six years of captivity, his "uncooperativeness towards his captors" earned him a year in solitary confinement and severe back injuries due to torture. The Medal of Honor was awarded by the United States Congress during his captivity, but not announced until his release in 1973 to prevent the North Vietnamese from using it against him. He learned he'd been nominated for the Medal of Honor from a coded message tapped on the wall of his prison cell. He was medically disqualified from further flying in the Air Force due to injuries incurred during his ejection and aggravated by the torture, which he was subjected to in captivity. He retired on October 25, 1973.<sup>xviii</sup>, <sup>xix</sup>



During the last three years of his captivity, Thorsness' wife Gaylee was allowed to send six-line letters a few times a year. Each of her letters was returned with the word "deceased" written on the front. His daughter, Dawn, was age 11 when he was shot down and 18 when he came home.<sup>xx</sup>

### **Post Military Years**

Thorsness served as Director of Civil Affairs for Litton Industries from 1979 to 1985. On November 1988, Leo was elected to the Washington State Senate. He immediately became the Senator from District 11 to serve the unexpired term of Avery Garnett, who died in April 1988. In the state senate, he sponsored a bill dubbed the "Truth Bill" on March 3, 1990. The legislature unanimously passed the measure, SJM8020, urging the Federal government to release information about 30,000 U.S. soldiers listed as either prisoners of war or missing in action in conflicts dating back to World War II.<sup>xxi</sup> Currently retired, he serves on the Board of directors of the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation.<sup>xxii</sup> In December 2008, Thorsness' autobiography, "*Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey*" was published.<sup>xxiii</sup> In 2009, he was awarded the Audie Murphy Award.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Based upon his experience as a U.S. Military officer, fighter pilot and Prisoner of War, he has been a frequent motivational speaker for many businesses and groups. During his talks he relates the lessons he learned during those six long years when he was denied his freedom.<sup>xxv</sup> In 2007, he spoke at the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the U.S. Air Force.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Leo K. Thorsness himself gives an eight minute, 44 second report on what happened in his time during the Vietnam War, Medal of Honor, Vietnam War Story.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCquks\\_CSEQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCquks_CSEQ)

Leo K. Thorsness talks about his time as a POW during the Vietnam War.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwuPSCB6T6E>

Leo K. Thorsness dedicates the new F-105F Thunderchief, serial #63-8261.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2hWz6m91JK>



President Richard Nixon, Major Leo K. Thorsness, Leo's mother, Bernice and Leo's wife, Gaylee.



**Awards and  
Decorations for Colonel Leo K. Thorsness<sup>xxvii</sup>**



US Air Force Command Pilot Badge



Medal of Honor



Silver Star with bronze oak leaf cluster



Distinguished Flying Cross with silver oak leaf cluster



Purple Heart with bronze oak leaf cluster



Air Medal with three silver oak leaf clusters



Prisoner of War Medal



Combat Readiness Medal



Army Good Conduct Medal



National Defense Service Medal with bronze service star



Vietnam Service Medal



Air Force Longevity Service Award with four bronze oak leaf clusters



Armed Forces Reserve Medal



Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon



Vietnam Campaign Medal

Compiled by Susan Carleton Jirele  
Anthony Wayne Chapter Regent  
Mankato DAR



## US Air Force Medal of Honor

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## NOTES

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