

Full Day

Over the Red River delta, Leo Thorsness “took on most of North Vietnam all by himself.”

By John T. Correll



Photo via Leo Thorsness

THE strike force that headed into the Red River delta of North Vietnam on the afternoon of April 19, 1967, consisted of three kinds of airplanes.

Leading the way was a flight of F-105 Wild Weasels from Takhli Air Base in Thailand. They would be first into the target area to clear a path through the surface-to-air missiles. They would also be the last ones out, after the rest of the strike force had departed.

Following the Weasels came a flight of F-4 Phantoms to provide defense against MiG interceptors. With the Phantoms came four flights of F-105Ds, heavily loaded with bombs.

The target for the day was the Xuan Mai army barracks and storage supply area. It was 37 miles southwest of Hanoi and about 500 miles from Takhli.

The Weasels' mission was dangerous. They "trolled" for SAMs, using themselves as bait. If the SAM operators fired a missile or turned on their tracking radar, the Weasels could home in on the signal. They could destroy the radar with a Shrike missile that locked on the radar beam, or they could guide a strike onto the SAM site. However, the SAMs had the option of the first shot.

The call sign for the Weasels that day was Kingfish. The leader was Maj. Leo K. Thorsness in Kingfish 01, a two-seat F-105F configured for finding and fighting SAMs. Kingfish 02 and Kingfish 03 were full-up Weasel aircraft, too, but Kingfish 04 was an F-105D.

Thorsness, 35, was the "chief Weasel" at Takhli. Unlike the custom in other wings, the Weasels at Takhli were assigned to individual squadrons. Thorsness, however, was recognized as the Weasel leader by both the crews and the wing.

He had joined the Air Force in 1951 at Walnut Grove, Minn., and earned his wings and commission in the aviation cadets. He had flown a number of fighters, including the F-100, before coming to Takhli and Wild Weasel duty in October 1966.

Thorsness and his regular electronic warfare officer, Capt. Harold E. "Harry" Johnson, had almost 90 missions over North Vietnam, just 10 short of the number that counted for a full combat tour and a ticket home. So far, they had eluded 53 SAMs that had been fired at them.

They were bucking the odds. One hundred missions was a difficult mark to reach. The saying among F-105 pilots was, "By your 66th mission, you'll have been shot down twice and picked up once." In 1967 alone, a total of 26 Wild Weasel aircraft would be shot down.

The strike force refueled from KC-135 tankers over southern Laos and set course for the Red River delta, which was strongly defended by SAMs and anti-aircraft artillery.

Thorsness carried two Shrike missiles, CBU-24 cluster bombs, and 6,000 rounds of ammunition. "I carried two Shrikes whenever possible," he said. "Toward the end of our era there, I was given the option of carrying one Shrike and one ECM pod. I had confidence in the evasion tactics we developed and not a lot of confidence in the ECM pod, so always went with two Shrikes for more killing power."

Weasels

The SA-2 surface-to-air missile was one of the weapons supplied to the North Vietnamese by their Soviet allies. This was the SAM that had brought down Francis Gary Powers, flying a CIA U-2, over the Soviet Union in 1960.

As employed against fighters in Vietnam, it had a range of 17 miles. "Our Shrike was good for about seven miles," Thorsness said. "We were consistently outgunned by 10 miles until Harry and I came up with the Shrike toss: Climb to 35,000 feet, plug in burner, pull nose up to 45 degrees—nearly stalled out. We could hit SAMs about 35 miles away with this maneuver, a celebration day the first time we pulled it off."

The SA-2 was lethal at high altitudes, but fighters could outmaneuver it or shake it off by diving to low altitude. ("Take it down!" was a frequent call on Weasel missions.) Unfortunately, "taking it down" put the diving airplane within range of the anti-aircraft artillery, which accounted for even more US fighter losses in Vietnam than the SAMs did.

SA-2s were first detected in North Vietnam in April 1965 and shot down their first US aircraft, an F-4C, in July 1965. The SAMs were particularly thick around Hanoi, but the Weasels expected to encounter them anywhere they went. All of the Weasel missions were into high threat areas. If there

Air Force Maj. Leo Thorsness (left), pictured just after a mission, and his regular backseater, Capt. Harold Johnson (right), flew 93 Wild Weasel missions over North Vietnam. For his actions on April 19, 1967, Thorsness was awarded the Medal of Honor. Johnson received the Air Force Cross.





Wild Weasels at Takhli RTAB, Thailand, were assigned to individual combat squadrons. Thorsness and Johnson, pictured at left in this 1967 photo, flew with the 357th Tactical Fighter Squadron and expected to battle SAMs on every mission.

weren't any SAMs, there was no reason to send the Weasels.

The first Weasels had been F-100Fs, but they weren't fast enough to keep up with the F-105Ds in the strike force. They were replaced by F-105F two-seat combat training models, enhanced with sophisticated electronic equipment. The F-105Fs flew their first operational missions in Vietnam in June 1966. They had a radar homing and warning system and a launch warning receiver. They were armed with Shrike missiles, bombs, and a 20 mm Gatling gun. Some of the Weasels were upgraded to an F-105G configuration beginning in late 1967.

An SA-2 site in Vietnam had five or six SAMs situated around a 40-foot ring in a six-pointed star pattern. The missiles were guided by a Fan Song radar in a van in the center of the ring.

Whenever a Weasel aircraft was painted by the beam from a Fan Song radar, the crew got a distinctive crackle in their headphones. They called it the "rattlesnake."

"The 'rattlesnake' crackle was in both cockpits, as were the small scopes," Thorsness said. "Harry had additional visual and electronic inputs in his cockpit. The scope in my cockpit was mounted in the upper left corner of the instrument panel and about three inches across. A weak signal would originate in the center of the scope and grow.

"There were three ever larger rings on the scope. We commonly referred to the SAM radar signals as one-ringer, two-ringer, or three-ringer. Once the

SAM signal approached three rings, it was dead serious, no pun intended. When the signals became very strong, more than a three ringer, they went all the way to the edge of the scope and sort of spilled over sideways. When you had multiple signals that strong, we said the scope was 'growing hair.'"

SAMs

As Thorsness and the Weasels crossed the mountains that separated North Vietnam from Laos, the radars from the SAM and AAA sites began tracking them. Johnson was first to hear the rattlesnake crackle.

Employing a tactic that he had used with success before, Thorsness split his flight into two elements. He sent Kingfish 03 and Kingfish 04 around to the north while he went south with Kingfish 02—Maj. Thomas M. Madison and Maj. Thomas J. Sterling, EWO—on his wing.

Thorsness believed that "with good wingmen flying No. 2 and No. 4 and our experience learning how to evade SAMs, we could provide twice the coverage by splitting our flight of four into two elements of two aircraft. When we split, each element would take one side of the strike target."

As the Weasels approached, the blip on their radar screens got bigger. The SAM site was southeast of Xuan Mai. Thorsness turned toward it and launched a Shrike from seven miles away. The site itself was not visible because of distance and haze, but the signal disappeared from the scopes almost instantly, indicating that the missile had taken out the radar.

Almost immediately, they picked up another SAM warning. The signal was very strong. The scope was "growing hair," Thorsness said.

He turned north, and through the broken clouds saw the SAM site and radar, the missiles in firing position, with a ring of anti-aircraft defenses around the perimeter. Thorsness attacked through a barrage of fire from the 37 mm and 57 mm guns and scored a direct hit with his CBU-24 cluster bombs.

Two SAMs were out of business, but the rattlesnake crackle came yet again.



This F-105F is the one flown by Thorsness on his memorable mission. It was specially configured to defeat enemy missiles with radar and missile-launch warning systems and radar-seeking Shrike missiles.



Thorsness was a flight lead and seasoned F-105 Wild Weasel pilot. Shown here in 1962 at Spangdahlem AB, Germany, Thorsness nearly reached the 100 mission milestone that would have been his ticket home from Vietnam.

Thorsness launched his second Shrike and called for the Weasels to “take it down.” They did not know whether the Shrike found its target or not.

“We are now totally immersed in combat,” Thorsness recalled many years later. “By this time, every cell in one’s body is focused. Just the radio

chatter by itself was enough to consume you. There are multiple radio calls from strike pilots: calling out MiGs, flak, ‘where’s Ford Two?’, etc., MiG alerts broadcast on Guard channel, listening to Harry, Harry listening to me, listening for my wingmen, listening for the tail end of the strike flights so we know when we can ‘get out of Dodge.’ While staying on top of all that going on, we are looking for more SAM sites, keeping our six [the six o’clock stern position] clear of MiGs, jinking to avoid flak, monitoring the aircraft, setting bomb/Shrike/gun switches for the next run, and nursing our fuel so as to cover the last strike flight.”

MiGs

The battle had now shifted away from the Red River delta. Kingfish 02 was hit by anti-aircraft fire, and Madison and Sterling bailed out over the foothills near the Black River.

Meanwhile, Kingfish 03 and Kingfish 04 were having their own troubles off to the north. They were fighting MiGs, and Kingfish 04’s afterburner

The target of the day was North Vietnam’s Xuan Mai army barracks, 37 miles southwest of Hanoi. The target zone was heavily defended by enemy SAMs and was a thousand-mile round-trip from Takhli.

-  **MiG crash site**
-  **F-105 crash site**
-  **SAM site**



Map by Zaur Eylanbekov



Thorsness (left) and Johnson destroyed at least two SAM sites and a MiG-17 on April 19, 1967. Another SAM site and MiG were listed as probable kills. Thorsness, out of ammo, had to outrun pursuing MiGs.

wouldn't light. Kingfish 03 had to outmaneuver two MiGs as he escorted Kingfish 04 out. Thorsness and Johnson in Kingfish 01 were the only fighter crew left in the area.

They saw Madison's and Sterling's chutes and began flying around them.

"As we circled the descending crew, we were on a southeasterly heading when I spotted a MiG-17 heading east, low at our nine o'clock position," Johnson said. "I called him to the attention of Major Thorsness."

Thorsness dropped down behind the MiG, in tail chase position at 632 mph and 3,000 feet altitude, and opened up with the 20 mm gun. The left wing of the MiG splintered. Thorsness saw it enter a tight left spin and go down in a rice field.

Johnson spotted more MiG-17s behind them, about 2,000 feet back. Thorsness pulled sharply left, selected afterburner, and outran the MiGs. He was low on fuel and went looking for a tanker.

After refueling, Thorsness returned to the area where Madison and Sterling had gone down to fly cover for them. Rescue helicopters and propeller-driven A-1 "Sandy" rescue support aircraft were also orbiting. Darkness was less than two hours away.

Back in the bailout area, they saw four MiG-17s. Thorsness pressed the attack, pitting the lone F-105F against several enemy aircraft.

The only armament he had left was 500 rounds of 20 mm cannon ammunition. "One of the MiGs flew right into

my gunsight at about 2,000 feet and pieces started falling off the [enemy] aircraft," Thorsness told Bob Ruhl of *Airman Magazine* in 1974. "They hadn't seen us, but they did now."

Two more of the MiGs turned to attack. Thorsness, out of ammunition, dropped to 50 feet and increased speed. He soon outdistanced the MiGs and they discontinued the chase after a few miles.

Kingfish 01 had accounted for two SAM sites and a MiG-17 for certain, and another SAM site and another MiG credited as probable. The second MiG could not be confirmed. There had been

lots of action before that engagement, and Thorsness' gun camera had run out of film.

The Weasel F-105 having eluded them, the MiGs turned on the Sandys. Thorsness turned back to see if he could get the MiGs to chase him instead. As it happened, that wasn't necessary because another flight of F-105s arrived to take on the MiGs. The new arrivals got four of them.

The rescue force was unable to pick up Madison and Sterling, who were captured.

Thorsness headed for Laos and the tanker. Before he got there, another F-105, one of those that had taken on the MiGs, called for help. He was separated from his flight and had only 600 pounds of fuel left.

Although he was seriously low on fuel himself, Thorsness asked the tanker to fly toward the F-105 with the emergency and turned south, hoping to make it into Udorn, inside Thailand on the other side of the Mekong.

"With 70 miles to go, I pulled the power back to idle and we just glided in," he said. "We were indicating 'empty' when the runway came up just in front of us, and we landed a little long. As we climbed out of the cockpit, Harry said something quaint like, 'That's a full day's work.'"

Col. Jack Broughton, vice commander of the 355th TFW at Takhli, called it the day that Leo Thorsness "took on most of North Vietnam all by himself."

The mission was successful. The



After he and Thorsness glided 70 miles to Takhli and landed with no fuel remaining, Johnson called it "a full day's work." Pictured at Nellis AFB, Nev., are (l-r) Johnson, Thorsness, and fellow Weasels Capt. Larry Waller and Capt. Jim Padgett.



Eleven days after the "Full Day" mission, Thorsness and Johnson volunteered for two missions in one day. Trying to "get home by Mother's Day," they were shot down on their 93rd sortie and held as POWs for six years.

strike flight, protected by the Weasels, got through. Twenty-two buildings were destroyed at Xuan Mai, and there were 13 secondary fires. Smoke was visible from 40 miles away. Several aircraft were lost to the anti-aircraft guns, but none were shot down or damaged by the SAMs, which had been the Weasels' responsibility.

For their actions that day, Leo Thorsness would be awarded the Medal of Honor and Harry Johnson would receive the Air Force Cross—but that came much later, after a long stay in the Hanoi Hilton.

Shot Down

Eleven days later, on April 30, Thorsness and Johnson flew an early morning mission and were standing by as a spare crew at Takhli. When one of the Weasels on a later mission aborted with radio trouble, they were written in to substitute.

"[Weasel] No. 3 aborted," Thorsness said. "They could not find another replacement so Harry and I volunteered to fill in. We were trying hard to get home by Mother's Day."

It would be their second sortie of the day and their 93rd mission over North Vietnam. Normally, Thorsness

flew lead in the Weasel flight, but in this instance, he and Johnson moved into the position in the formation where the aircraft that aborted was to have flown.

As leader of the second element in the Weasel flight, Thorsness' call sign was Carbine 03. His wingman was

Lt. Bob Abbott in a single-seat Thud. Behind the Weasels came four flights of bomb-carrying F-105s, led by Col. Jack Broughton, flying as Waco 01, and two flights of F-4s for MiG cover.

After refueling, Carbine flight swung north to troll for SAMs. The mission followed approximately the same route as the April 19 mission had.

The Weasels did not pick up any indication of SAMs, but they were getting an air-to-air radar signal. They figured they were being painted by the radars from the F-4s a few miles farther back.

"Two MiGs popped up from behind a large mountain we used as a turning point," Thorsness said. "We had just turned east and accelerated to 600 knots for a preplanned Shrike launch. At 600 knots, those MiGs could not have kept up with us. My belief is that the MiG and a wingman were orbiting in the valley on the west side of the mountain. We were headed northeast. I think he turned out of his orbit, looked up, and there sat those big fat Thuds loaded to the gills with weapons. All they had to do was pull up their nose and hose off their air-to-air missiles—and we were toast."

The MiGs blew Carbine 03 and 04 out of the sky. They were about 30 miles west northwest of the April 19 battle.

Six Years as POW

Thorsness was injured as he bailed out. The ejection blasted him into the windstream at almost 700 mph.



Thorsness received the Medal of Honor for his actions in the April 19, 1967, Xuan Mai mission. He was unable to receive the honor from President Nixon until Oct. 15, 1973, months after his return.



Thorsness (third from right) is shown here at the F-105's retirement ceremony at Hill AFB, Utah, in 1984. Thorsness retired from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel on Oct. 25, 1973.

His legs flew out and his knees bent inward, causing severe damage to that joint. His flight suit zippers were blown open, his helmet was ripped away, and his pockets tore off.

Ground gunners were shooting at the parachutes on the way down. Thorsness recalls thinking as he descended that "it's hard to hide in a parachute."

Broughton led an extended and intense rescue effort, but it was not successful.

Thorsness came down in a mountainous area. He crashed into the trees and hung there by his shroud lines before working himself free. About 20 villagers, armed with rifles and machetes, found him. They "cut off my clothes, even my boots. I don't think they knew how to use zippers. I resisted walking but they insisted and they won."

They allowed him to wrap his injured legs in bamboo splints and banana leaves, tied on with vines. After 10 hours, he passed out and was carried the rest of the way to confinement in a fishnet litter.

Johnson was captured soon after Thorsness. They saw each other periodically in Hanoi but did not have an opportunity to speak again until they were repatriated in 1973.

Thorsness was held in the Hanoi Hilton and various other POW camps. He was known as a hard-core resister who did not cooperate with his captors. For that, he was denied medical attention, and he spent a year in solitary confinement. He also sustained back injuries from torture.

"I was in Hanoi six years," he told the PBS production "American Valor" in 2003. "Three years were brutal, torture was normal. Three years were boring, torture was abnormal. Three years you lived in solitary or two or three per cell, couldn't talk out loud, did a lot of beating, and so on. Last three years, I lived in big cells, you could talk out loud, you got to pour a bucket of water over you most days for a bath, and life was a little better."

He was nominated for the Medal of Honor in 1967. The recommendation was signed by the Secretary of the Air Force, but the Department of Defense decided that approval should wait until after repatriation of the POWs, so the nomination was returned to the Air Force to hold until then.

Thorsness learned via POW tap code messages that he had been nominated for the Medal of Honor. Ironically, the officer who wrote the recommendation (he joined the wing after Thorsness' capture) was himself shot down and held captive in the same prison.

Over the years, Thorsness was allowed to send a total of 13 messages to his wife, Gaylee. All were on seven-line letter forms. Supposedly, he was allowed to receive a monthly six-line letter from her. Most were returned to her unopened, some of them stamped

"Deceased" on the outside of the envelope.

"What good that possibly did for their cause is hard to understand," Thorsness said.

The Medal of Honor was approved swiftly after his return from Hanoi, and it was presented to him by President Nixon on Oct. 15, 1973.

Since 1973

Ten days after receiving the Medal of Honor, Thorsness retired from the Air Force as a lieutenant colonel. He and Gaylee settled in her hometown, Sioux Falls, S.D., and Thorsness entered politics.

"With a lot of thinking time in Hanoi and living the ineptness of our war leaders, I gradually became convinced that I had the experience and common sense to help make foreign policy, rather than enforce failed foreign policy as a military man, as a US Congressman or Senator," he said. "And it happened that George McGovern was up for election in 1974, just as I was released in 1973. Bingo, give it a shot."

His run against Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) in 1974 was unsuccessful, as was his challenge to Rep. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) in 1978.

From 1979 to 1985, Thorsness was director of civic affairs for Litton Industries in Beverly Hills, Calif. In 1986, he moved to Indianola, Wash. He was a Washington state senator from 1988 to 1992.

He and Gaylee lived in Alexandria, Va., for two years, and in 2000, they moved to Saddlebrooke, Ariz., where they now live.

"In a prison camp, you had to bow 90 degrees," Thorsness told the "American Valor" program. "If you didn't bow right, they'd beat you. One day I was not gonna bow, and I was hoping that my courage was strong. The guard opened the door and I looked him in the eye and I didn't bow, and the thought that went through my mind was I had won the flip of the coin. I said, you know, he could have had American parents and I could have had Vietnamese parents. How'd I luck out? And it really made an impact on me. And from that day on, I felt kind of sorry for those guys over there." ■

John T. Correll was editor in chief of Air Force Magazine for 18 years and is now a contributing editor. His most recent article, "20 Seconds over Long Binh," appeared in the April issue.