

# Piotrowski

By John Lowery

**A**t dusk, two heavily armed AT-28s scrambled from the 3,300-foot runway at the Bien Hoa, South Vietnam, military encampment. It was January 1962. The Air Force “air commando” pilots launched to support US Army Special Forces embedded with an Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) company under attack.

On reaching the target area, the airmen found the Viet Cong had started grass fires, creating dense gray smoke. In the fading light this significantly reduced visibility, making the mission especially difficult. The ARVN soldiers were located in a triangular-shaped fort designed to protect an adjoining village. To point out the enemy’s location, one of the soldiers marked the attackers’ location with a white phosphorous rocket. Then, in a series of passes, the two AT-28s delivered four cans of

napalm and raked the target area with machine gunfire.

The pilots later learned they had saved both the fort and village.

It was the first taste of combat for Capt. John L. Piotrowski and his fellow air commandos, with much more to come. He and the other airmen learned quickly that counterinsurgency warfare was a different kind of war, as it was conducted largely in secret and involved major political as well as military considerations.

Their operations were covert, so the pilots could not receive credit for combat missions nor coveted combat flight time. Instead, each flight was logged as “combat support” or a training sortie.

For Piotrowski the successful mission from Bien Hoa was the beginning of a long, clandestine presence in Southeast Asia.

The son of Polish immigrants, Piotrowski graduated as class valedictorian from Henry Ford Trade School in Dearborn, Mich. This unique high school not only taught teenage students marketable toolmaker skills, its academic curriculum prepared them for admission to a university.

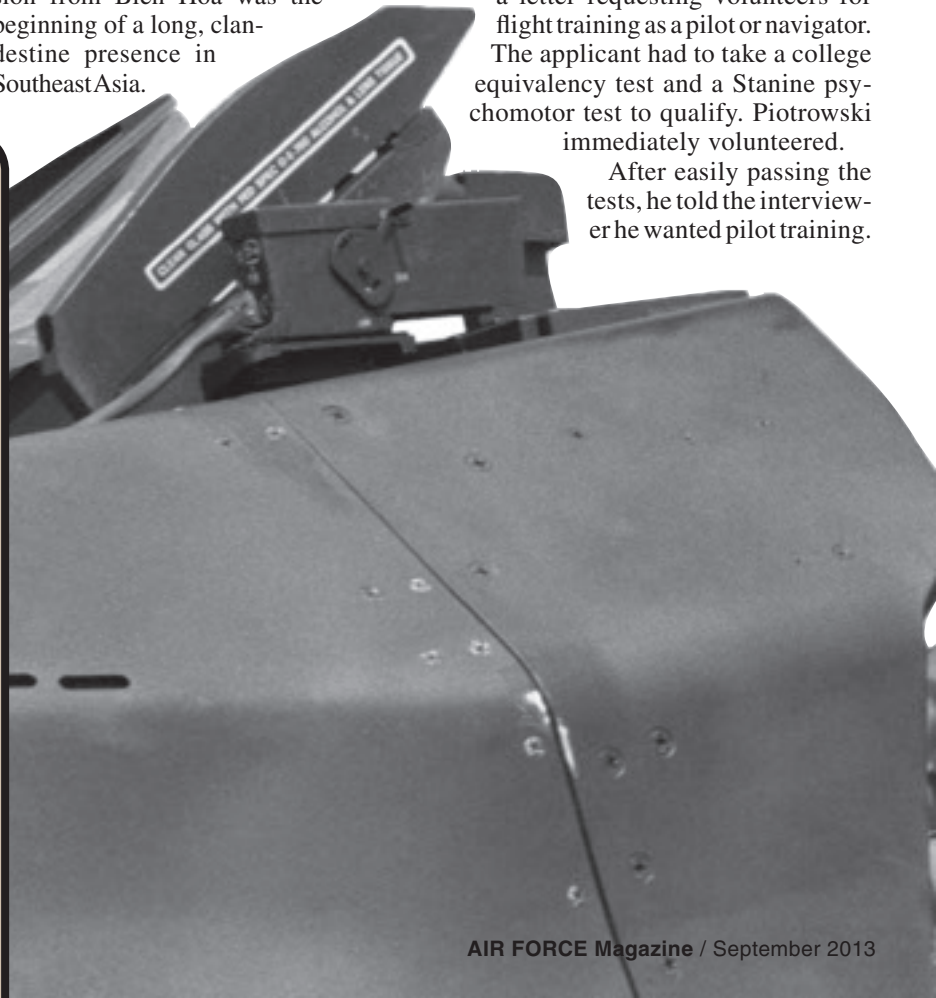
With the Korean War raging, on his 18th birthday, Feb. 17, 1952, Piotrowski registered for the draft. On Sept. 2, 1952, he enlisted in the United States Air Force, scoring 100 percent on mental and aptitude tests.

After boot camp, he was assigned to Keesler AFB, Miss., to a basic electronics course, followed by radar repair school. Then, while checking the weekend duty roster he noticed a letter requesting volunteers for flight training as a pilot or navigator. The applicant had to take a college equivalency test and a Stanine psychomotor test to qualify. Piotrowski immediately volunteered.

After easily passing the tests, he told the interviewer he wanted pilot training.

**First generation American John Piotrowski began as an enlisted radio repairman and became Air Force vice chief of staff. He lived the American dream.**

*Right: Lt. Gen. John Piotrowski in the cockpit of an F-16 during his time as commander of 9th Air Force.*



But he was told of a two-year delay for a pilot training class; a navigator class was available in just a couple of weeks. Piotrowski responded, "Sir, you just got yourself a navigator."

Previous electronics and radar training provided an ideal background for this navigation cadet. On Aug. 11, 1954, as one of five distinguished graduates, 20-year-old Piotrowski received the silver wings of an Air Force navigator and was commissioned a second lieutenant.

He was assigned to Japan and the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing and began flying RB-26s on eight-hour weather reconnaissance sorties, forecasting the Korean peninsula's weather patterns. This, along with night college courses, kept him occupied through the two-year assignment.

### Jungle Jim

Promoted to first lieutenant and contemplating his return to the US, he requested and was accepted for pilot training. As a member of Pilot Training Class 58-M, he excelled—graduating as top student pilot and awarded the Commander's Trophy. He chose combat crew training in the F-86F Sabre at Williams AFB, Ariz., an assignment that led to a very beneficial career redirection.

On graduating from F-86F crew training, his entire class received orders to Strategic Air Command to become copilots on B-47 bombers. As a newly minted fighter pilot, Piotrowski appealed the assignment to the wing commander. Because of his electronics and radar background, he was offered an opening at Williams as an electronics maintenance officer.

He quickly agreed and the job proved a good fit, as he excelled at improving the fighters' fire-control and radar systems. Concurrently he averaged 90 hours a month flying both jet fighters and the base's C-47 and C-45 transports. Soon he was promoted to captain.

A couple years later he received an unusual interview for a special assignment. A general asked him three questions: "Are you willing to fly obsolete airplanes?" Since Piotrowski was already doing just that,

he responded he was. Was he willing to fly combat missions? As he was a military pilot, again the obvious answer was yes. The final question was more unusual: "If sent into combat and captured are you willing to be disowned by the government?" This required more thought: Eventually, Piotrowski answered, "Yes, sir!"

He shortly thereafter received secret orders to Project Jungle Jim, which later became the 1st Air Commando Wing. The clandestine organization began gestating in the spring of 1961, with President Kennedy's authorization on Oct. 11, 1961, "for the initial purpose of training Vietnamese forces," per the President's national security memorandum.

Piotrowski was to report May 7, 1961, to Eglin Air Force Auxiliary Field No. 9—Hurlburt Field, Fla. The new unit would be equipped with the Navy T-28B trainers and A-26 light attack bombers (later redesignated B-26). Despite experience flying both aircraft, he was assigned as an armament and munitions officer. Still, he felt certain there would be flying involved.





He expressed concern that his munitions experience was limited to training ammunition. His boss, a World War II veteran, just happened to have copies of two important Army Air Corps field manuals, “Bombs for Aircraft” and “Ammunition for Aircraft.” He gave both to Piotrowski.

On the long overland trip to Hurlburt Field, Piotrowski memorized the contents of both manuals. Arriving at his new assignment, he proved to be unique—a jet-age pilot and munitions officer with in-depth knowledge of World War II weapons. The combination made him an indispensable asset for the budding air commando operation. He quickly became the go-to man in his unit for getting tasks accomplished, a tag that would follow him the rest of his career.

In early September 1961, Piotrowski proposed marriage to Sheila Fredrickson, and they decided on early December nuptials. Their plans were dashed later that month by a sudden clandestine assignment to Southeast Asia—so secret he couldn’t tell his betrothed where he was going or whether he would be able to write or call. Subsequently, with their pastor’s indulgence, they managed a late December wedding via telephone from Taiwan and Fort Walton Beach, Fla. The honeymoon would come later.

Piotrowski’s assignment was to take six B-26s from storage at the CIA’s Air





*Above left: USAF airmen train South Vietnamese pilots at Bien Hoa AB, South Vietnam, in 1961. Piotrowski was based there as an air commando. Left: Piotrowski got his fourth star in 1985. Assignments as vice chief of staff, NORAD commander, and head of US Space Command would follow. Above: Airmen load bombs on a B-26 in South Korea in December 1952. Piotrowski came up with the idea of adding wing-mounted pylons on the aircraft to increase the munitions load.*

Asia facility at Tainan, Taiwan, and get them combat ready and in place for the budding air commando detachment at the then-primitive South Vietnamese base at Bien Hoa. The aircraft had been loaned to the French in their fight with the Viet Minh. Following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, they had been in storage for more than seven years—since the spring of 1954.

### Working on Weapons

Piotrowski's idea of wing-mounted weapons pylons for the B-26 came to be during this refurbishing and overhaul process. As configured, the B-26 could carry only bombs of various sizes in the internal bomb bay. The thin-skinned napalm tanks couldn't be safely dropped from a bomb bay, nor could rocket pods be mounted on the wing. With the wing pylon stations the aircraft could carry rockets, bombs, and napalm.

Once the six bombers were delivered to Bien Hoa, he was in and out of combat over the next three years while also involved with new weapons development.

Piotrowski was asked to testify before the US Army's Howze Board, which was evaluating Air Force close air support of engaged ground forces. He later testified before the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on preparedness, regarding the reliability and utility of counterinsurgency aircraft.

Thanks to the Air Force's Operation Bootstrap program, he enjoyed a six-month sabbatical in 1965 to finish his college degree at the University of Nebraska's Omaha campus. He graduated with honors and a perfect 4.0 grade point average. He went back to the 1st Air Commando Wing, this time as an instructor pilot rather than armament and munitions officer.

Later that year, Piotrowski was sent to the Fighter Weapons School

at Nellis AFB, Nev., for more education, studying the F-100 fire-control system, radar, and its M39 20 mm cannon. He was soon permanently assigned as part of a weapons school team conducting one-week training programs in conventional weapons, tactics, and employment for Air Force general officers on their way to Vietnam. The assignment also put him in the F-4C Phantom II.

Once qualified in the Phantom, Piotrowski had a full plate of duties—with responsibility for the senior officers' course, classroom instruction on weapon systems for FWS students, and flying as instructor pilot in the aircraft. It was during this assignment that he fathered night interdiction and close air support by jet fighters, using flares suspended by parachute. The technique was perfected by the air commandos in their AT-28s and B-26s.

In June 1966, Piotrowski helped devise techniques for employing the Navy-developed AGM-62 Walleye, an electro-optical guided glide bomb.

Piotrowski and the major assisting him completed their development work and were sent to the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon RTAB, Thailand, to introduce the Walleye into combat.



**A KC-10 refuels an E-3 aircraft. The AWACS' future was being debated in Congress until Piotrowski recognized the potential of the concept to direct and control friendly aircraft and pushed hard to keep the airplane in the fleet.**

Using newer avionics in the F-4D, the weapon proved very effective.

Piotrowski had a series of staff and educational assignments and, as a colonel, was named commander of the 40th Tactical Group at Aviano AB, Italy. After two years of his leadership, the group was rated “Best in the Air Force” by the Air Force Inspector General.

Piotrowski assumed command of the newly redesignated 552nd Airborne Warning and Control Wing at Tinker AFB, Okla., in 1976. The wing was equipped with the E-3A Sentry, a specially modified Boeing 707 airliner, conceptualized for the continental US air defense early warning system. Yet, because of cost overruns, Congress was debating the efficacy of the aircraft.

Piotrowski—now a brigadier general—recognized the E-3A concept as having greater mission potential and wanted it deployed to control the air assets in tactical warfare situations. He made his point by taking key officials on worldwide deployments, while demonstrating the aircraft’s usefulness in both tactical and air defense missions. Subsequently the airborne command and control concept became a part of USAF doctrine and has been repeatedly proved in combat.

Lieutenant General Piotrowski assumed command of 9th Air Force at Shaw AFB, S.C., in 1982. While visiting his new units in Europe and the Middle East, he stopped at Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast of Sudan

to check on the Air Force detachment maintaining pre-positioned US military equipment and war reserve assets stored in warehouses leased from the Sudanese government. During the visit he was once again called on for a unique mission.

**Winning a War, Singlehandedly**

He was approached, about mid-day the first day of his visit, by the Sudanese Army’s regional defense commander who informed Piotrowski he was to depart immediately for Khartoum to meet with the Sudanese First Vice President Omar Muhammad al Tayib. The US Embassy sanctioned the request, and Piotrowski departed in his T-39 Sabreliner.

After landing, and dressed in a business suit, he entered the open door of one of several waiting black limos. Now seated beside the US Chief of Mission, he was informed Ethiopia had attacked Sudan that morning and was overwhelming Sudanese forces near the border. The embassy staff, in concert with the Sudanese leadership, wanted Piotrowski to meet publicly with Sudan’s first vice president, for TV cameras.

This involved a salute, handshake, an embrace, and then an entrance into the palace. Following 30 minutes of conversation indoors, the departure routine outside would be a repeat of the arrival scenario for the TV cameras.

On the country’s only TV channel, that night the English subtitles announced, “American general with responsibility for the defense of Sudan visits the area to look over the situation and take necessary action.”

The “one-day war” was over later that night, as Ethiopian forces withdrew behind their own border.

Piotrowski was promoted to general in August 1985 and became Air Force vice chief of staff. In February 1987 he assumed command of the North American Aerospace Defense Command and US Space Command. He held these critical posts for three years as the Cold War unexpectedly ended, before retiring in 1990.

Piotrowski’s life story represents a classic example of the American experience. The son of Polish immigrants progressed from airman basic to the peak of rank and authority in the US military with intelligence, drive, and courage. ■

*John Lowery is a veteran Air Force fighter pilot and freelance writer. He is author of five books on aircraft performance and aviation safety. His most recent article for Air Force Magazine, “Lt. No,” appeared in the July 2012 issue.*