

Interview with Tom Hanton

June 15, 2024

Born in 1944 in Santa Monica, California, and educated at California State University Long Beach, Lt. Col. Hanton entered Officer Training School on November 16, 1967. After commissioning in February 1968, Lt. Col. Hanton was trained as a Navigator and Electronic Warfare Officer at Mather AFB. Following a tour as an F-4 Weapon System Officer at Holloman, NM with the 9th Tactical Fighter Squadron, he was assigned to a combat tour in the F-4E with the 4th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Da Nang AB, South Vietnam. He was forced to eject on his 135th combat mission and spent 275 days as a Prisoner of War. When he returned to the United States after the war, he obtained a master's degree from Arizona State and served as an Electronic Warfare Officer in the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at George, AFB, first in the F-105G and then the F-4G Wild Weasels, including roles as a Standardization/Evaluation Flight Examiner and the initial instructor cadre in the F-4G. Lt. Col. Hanton then served as the Assistant Chief of the F-4G Program Management Office and as the DoD Electronic Warfare Staff Officer at Headquarters Allied Air Forces Central Europe (AAFCE) at Ramstein AB, West Germany. After a Pentagon assignment in the Electronic Combat Directorate (AF/XOE) he became the Deputy Commander for Operations with the 65th Air Division, at Lindsey Air Station Germany and participated in combat operations during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm with Joint Task Force Proven Force, serving as the J-3 (Air) and Deputy Director of the Operations Directorate at Incirlik AB, Turkey, from December 1990 – March 1991. He ended his career in the USAF serving as Chief of the Electronic Combat Division at Headquarters Air Force Operational Test and Evaluation Center at Kirtland AFB, NM, retiring on February 1, 1993. He has been Treasurer, Communications Director, and President of NAM-POWs. He is also on the boards of the Society of Wild Weasels and the Red River Valley Fighter Pilots Association. Lt. Col. Hanton was awarded the Bronze Star for exceptionally meritorious service while held as a Prisoner of War.

Tell us about your background.

My dad was a World War Two fighter pilot and I was born in California where he was stationed after his combat tour. He moved all around during his 26-year career. I had no real aspirations of joining the Air Force, quite frankly, until my senior year in college, when my roommate was drafted. I realized, "Tom you're going to graduate in six months. You had better figure out what you want to do with your life." So, I started talking to recruiters, and I talked to all of them, actually, except for the Army. I did know I wanted to fly. I knew I didn't want to go into the Army because their focus is on ground operations, not air operations. The Air Force was the most interested in me joining them, so I signed up.

How did you find yourself in Vietnam?

After I graduated from Long Beach State here in California, I went to Officer Training School and then to Navigator and Electronic Warfare Officer Training. During that timeframe, the AF was putting Navigators in the back seat of F-4s and the F-105G as Weapon Systems Operators or Electronic Warfare Officers. But our aeronautical rating was Navigator. After my F-4 RTU at George Air Force Base, CA I went to Holloman AFB, NM. Actually, I had orders for Ubon, Thailand, and right before the class graduated, they changed six back seaters' assignments from SEA to Holloman. They were pulling pilots out of the backseat of the F-4 (the F-105G Wild Weasel always had EWOs in the back seat) because the AF figured out that it was unsustainable to produce enough pilots to have one in the back seat of the F-4 and that Navigators were capable of performing the mission. Trained navigators could do that kind of job, and we did. Holloman needed back seaters, so they sent six of us there. The war was winding down. At that point, the Nixon Administration was pulling combat forces out of Vietnam. I was at Holloman for almost two years, 1970 and 1971, and then received orders for a January 1972 report date to Da Nang AB, Vietnam.

I arrived there at the end of January, and I started flying combat missions about a week after that, in the first week of February. From February of '72, I was in the 4th Tactical Fighter Squadron, and from February to June 27, when I was shot down, I flew 135 missions, with about 25 of them being over the North. We started going North again in April 1972.

Were those mostly Pack 6 missions?

I only had about five Pack 6 missions. We were in Da Nang, and it was like, literally, a 10-15 minute flight into Route Pack 1, which was the southern part of North Vietnam, and that's where the enemy was assembling forces for their push south and had numerous supply areas. The North Vietnamese Army came across the border with troops, tanks, and related equipment. And at the time, there were no American combat troops in that area – only US Marine and Army Advisors with the South Vietnam Army. So, we flew a lot of Pack 1 sorties. The guys from Thailand were doing most of the Pack 6 sorties, although we were assigned a few there. My first flight over North Vietnam – Route Pack 6 - was in April 1972 when the B-52s flew up to drop mines in Haiphong Harbor. I think it was around the 16th of April or so. We escorted them because the Buffs flew right up the coast from Thailand. We joined up with them to provide MiG Escort as they passed Da Nang and accompanied them up to Haiphong. We didn't do that many Pack 6 missions out of Da Nang, because we were the closest to the DMZ. Additionally, it was reasonably close to fly down to the southern part of South Vietnam, around Saigon, because there was a major North Vietnam Army concentration and fighting there. They were landlocked, and down near Cambodia, the NVA were coming through that area to try to capture Saigon. We did a lot of Close Air Support there. That's why we didn't fly as many up North.

One-hundred and thirty-five missions was a lot of missions in only five months. You can do the math: it was almost every day. Some days we would go out three times. We could be in some of the combat areas in five minutes, ten minutes.

Did you support any of the Laotian campaign as well?

We did initially. In February and March, I did a fair number of missions along the Ho-Chi Minh Trail and in both Barrel Roll and Steel Tiger areas of Laos. Starting in April we did not fly many missions in those areas. It was mostly in-country support, close air support for the ARVN, and different types of missions into the lower parts of North Vietnam.

I did a ferry mission over to Clark and then back. But that was about the only flight I had that wasn't a combat mission. I wish I'd have kept a mission record. It would have taken ten minutes to note something that was unclassified about the missions. From my flight record – Form 5 - I've got the numbers, the aircraft tail numbers, and some other basic info but nothing substantial.

On the 27th of June of 1972 I was on what I think was my third or fourth escort mission into Route Pack 6. The other Route Pack 6 missions had been on MiG CAP while all the other North Vietnam Missions had been Interdiction Missions. In fact, our squadron was the last US fighter squadron stationed in Vietnam. We were at Da Nang with the F-4E, then we moved to Takhli AB, Thailand the day before I was shot down. I flew one combat mission out of Takhli and was shot down that day on number 135 - 27 June 1972.

Tell us about that experience, if you feel comfortable with it.

Yes, it's fine. I'm comfortable with it. We were always in the air-to-air configuration when we went into RP 5 or 6. In the other North Vietnam missions we had an air to ground configuration (CBU, dumb bombs, LGBs, and mines). We were bombing SAM sites, troop concentrations, supply facilities, other military structures, and bridges. But when we went up into Route Pack 6, we were always air-to-air configured and flew either a combat air patrol CAP (MiG CAP) or Chaff Escort. The guys that had most of the air-to-air MiG kills were the guys from Udorn AB, Thailand. They had smart equipment in their airplanes, which helped them locate and target the MiGs. And, quite frankly, it makes sense to have dedicated units for that mission. When you do the same type of mission every day, you really do sharpen your skills.

On the other hand, it was kind of nice to experience all the different conventional weapons deliveries that we did with the F-4. I enjoyed it. We did every mission at Da Nang that you can think of. We dropped mines. We dropped sensors along the Trail. We did night missions with the gunships, dropping LGBs. We didn't have the equipment to do our own laser designating, but they did. We did all those kind of activities, close air support, you know, primarily, and interdiction, both day and night. Up in the PDJ [Laos] we did a few missions, but not many. It was primarily the guys at Ubon, Korat, and Udorn who were geographically closer to Laos. But what we were tasked to fly was not only based on geography but the tactical situation.

At first light, on the morning of 27 June we were MiG escort for three flights of F-4s who were laying a chaff corridor for the F-4 flights that would soon bomb a military compound on the edge of Hanoi. And there was actually no threat activity during that phase of the overall morning mission. We had air-to-air missiles, and, of course, the gun on the F-4E. I was in the fourth aircraft of the formation, Blue 4, as we say.

That mission was very unusual compared to the other 134 missions. In mid-May the 390th squadron was closed down as part of combat forces withdrawal from Vietnam. When I arrived, we had three squadrons, 4th, 421st and 390th, I was in the 4th. In fact, all these squadrons were on the list of those Nixon was pulling out. We were on the books to go to Udorn AB, Thailand at some point. And then, of course, the invasion happened. But it didn't change the schedule. It did change a few things, but they shut the 390th down right in the middle of all that!

What they did with the 390th squadron guys, was that anyone close to the end of their tour were sent home. I don't know what the criteria was, but then the rest of them were evenly split between the 421st and the 4th. We essentially got an additional flight. We then had five flights because of the number of people.

On the 27th of June mission all the guys in the flight, except for me, had transferred in from the 390th. I didn't know any of them. I hardly knew the guys in the other flights of the 4th because we tended to fly with the guys in our own flight. That's the way we did it, and generally, we flew with the same pilot, though not always. So, I was crewed with a pilot and three other aircrews I'd never flown with or knew. It was really unusual.

I'm in Blue Four. We did the chaff-escort mission and because of no air-to-air activity we had all our ordnance when we egressed. While we were on the tanker, we were directed to talk with a controlling agency that wanted to know our weapon status. We were still air-to-air capable. Several F-4s were lost during the follow-on bombing phase of the morning mission and they were conducting a SAR that needed MiG CAP. The bombing target was just south of Hanoi. It was a military supply depot. The guys who were dropping bombs came in and, of course, they were escorted by other F-4 flights. But some of those guys got shot down. I don't recall the numbers, but I think two.

In fact, that day, the 27th of June, we lost five F-4s, every one of them to MiGs, not any to AAA or SAMs. That was one of the best days for the North Vietnamese Air Force, because they accomplished all of the shoot downs. There were only, I believe two other days in the whole war where they shot down that many airplanes over North Vietnam and the only day that five F-4s were shot down by MiGs.

People sometimes refer to having either a SAM Day or a MIG Day. This was obviously a MiG Day. Why were they so successful that day?

At that point, we're talking June, we've been doing almost the same thing every day over North Vietnam. It was the same routes. There's only so many routes you could use. Timing wise, it was similar. And they watched us, they could hear us talk, just like we could hear them through some of the agencies. They just studied our routine and capitalized on it. By then, in fact, I think after the Robert Olds Bolo Tactic, they started doing their air-to air-tactics differently - they didn't want to directly engage us. Their tactic became hit and run – high speed from low altitude directly below the target aircraft. And that's exactly what happened on 27 June 72.

In fact, if you talk to Tony Marshall, he was a back seater like I was at the time. He saw us get shot down. They were the Fast FAC down low that we were providing cover for. They were trying to get the guys that were being rescued up on the radios and find out where they were. Tony and Marty saw the MiGs come flying, zooming down through the valley, and pull up, going supersonic, and shoot two of us down – number three and four. The MiGs did not turn their radars on, so we got absolutely no warning whatsoever. I have met the MiG flight lead who told me they were vectored into position. We were in a tactically unsound formation for a MiG CAP as a four-ship. You should not do four-ship MiG CAPs. You do two and two, but for some unknown reason, that's what our flight lead did. Perhaps because it was not briefed – being both MiG Cap and Escort – and how to establish the CAP.

I've heard that the USAF would not allow its pilots to do a two and two for air superiority missions. All the veterans agreed this was blatantly stupid, but this was ordered from on high. Was that true?

That's a good question. I don't know. We rarely did CAP. We used to just escort when we were up there. And I mean, I had already been in the F-4 for two years with probably 700 hours or so in the F-4. At Holloman, I don't ever remember doing a four-ship CAP mission. We didn't have the kind of training that they have now. We tended to have intercept missions and other Air Combat Training (ACT), but we rarely did CAP.

I remember doing one exercise out of Holloman to Nellis. We went out and back. We hit a tanker and went on the ranges at Nellis. There was no Red Flag in 1970. We were dropping bombs out there, not real bombs, but practice blue bombs. We were not escorted by anybody. But that is the only exercise I remember participating in during my two years there.

When Red Flag started years later, I flew a number of them, both deployed and out of George in both the F-105G and F-4G. Wild Weasel tactics involve a different kind of "Combat Air Patrol" than an air-to-air Combat Air Patrol. But it's a similar concept: we never flew Weasels in a four-ship formation, maybe to the combat area but not after arrival there. The readers know this quite well - you split the flight up and put two in one location and the other two in another. Flying as a four-ship air-to-air ends up that one is flying formation most of the time, especially as Blue Four with little time for lookout. In our case we ran out of fuel. We were always behind, because you needed more power to maintain formation. We were constantly going into burner just to try to get back into formation, and doing numerous turns, trying to remain in the SAR area.

I've read that in the earlier part of the war, when F-4s out of Da Nang were going to Pack 6 on a much more common basis, that the Four position routinely was the limiting factor due to its fuel for the very reason you mentioned. The Air Force had mandated the four-ship, and it was just a mess. They couldn't keep enough fuel on the bird to last for more than a few minutes over Pack 6.

Part of it is that. The other part is you are the lookout. You'll be looking over them, looking at their six. Are they seeing your six? It's just cumbersome. It's not as efficient. And you've got more things to consider. You're a big, fat target.

When we got shot down, that was our third departure for the tanker after we had MiGs called out. Every time that we got on station, they called out MiGs. We turned toward them, and then they would turn away, and we would chase after them. Of course, by this time, we were low on fuel. We had jettisoned all of our tanks. We jettisoned our center line on the escort mission. That was standard. You did that as you were entering North Vietnam. When it went dry, you dumped it. And then when we chased after the first set of MiGs, we dumped the wing tanks. So now we've got clean airplanes, which, while it has some advantages, fuel is not one of them. And so, we'd have to depart our CAP area sooner than desired. We couldn't stay up on the Combat Air Patrol that long with only internal fuel and the second and third times we cycled in, we were clean.

We were at Joker fuel – which was damn near out of fuel. It was touch and go whether we would have been able to make it to the tanker. Our flight lead was not even acknowledging our earlier bingo calls. It was really frustrating. My front seater had an F-105 tour and had been in the F-106. He was not a rookie. He just didn't have a lot of F-4 time. He was a very good pilot doing the best fuel management job possible, but we were just given a tough situation. At that point we were out of formation being unable to use burner to pull back into formation. We got shot down because we were husbanding our fuel. We were cut off from below the flight as we were departing North Vietnam. Finally, the flight lead acknowledged our bingo call but we were now below that fuel state. If we had not gotten to the tanker or had a problem with not being able to take on fuel, we would have had to leave that airplane somewhere in Laos. On the third time in there is when we got shot down, both Three and Four. Both of us were shot down because we were both out of formation and the lead element couldn't monitor our six. Of course, we could see their six, but we were Four and we were lagging more than Three was. We were both low and below the lead element.

We were hit by a heat-seeking Atoll Missile from a MiG-21. The MiGs came from behind, in trail, which had become their preferred tactic. As I mentioned, I have met and talked to the pilot who shot me down. I've met him three times, once in the States and twice in Vietnam. He doesn't speak English, but he understands English. We had, like, a combat debrief at the first meeting.... I have the napkin! It was crazy. There are a couple guys, actually, who have had that opportunity.

It wasn't obvious to me what had happened to the airplane. I knew we were out of control, but didn't know what the flyability was until I grabbed the stick. The airplane was just going all over the sky. The hydraulics were gone. When the missile blew up the left engine all the hydraulic lines were cut because the hydraulic lines run between the engines, and that's exactly what happened. The stick felt like a wet noodle. I said, "Well, this is going to be it! We're going to be bailing out of this thing." I'm focusing now on the altimeter, and I knew what altitude I was going to pull the handle.

We didn't talk about bailing out after the Atoll hit. I don't know why we didn't, but we didn't. Some guys in that situation do not have enough time. We were at a little over 20,000 feet, so we had some time. It was just about getting as far away from there as possible and as close to Laos as we could go. You wanted to get away from North Vietnam.

I wasn't anxious to bail out right away, but I was anxious to bail out when we got to 10,000 AGL, which was about 12,000 feet on the altimeter. I was waiting for it to wind down, and by the time I was about to

pull the lower handle, he pulled his ejection handle. I just know we both went and then I'm floating down in this valley, and I wanted to get over to this karst, this big outcropping, type of mountain that was on one side of a village surrounded by rice paddies. For parachute steering I pulled the two marked riser loops - it's called a four-line cut. And now I'm steering towards that karst and three peasants are at the other end of this rice paddy. All of a sudden, I heard something go zinging by me, and they were shooting at me so I couldn't steer towards the karst. I had to try to get to the other side of the village, into an area that looked like it had some concealment. Once I got into it, it was a lot of bamboo, but they had pretty much stripped that out between the rice paddies to build their houses and other things. From the air, it looked like it was dense, but it was not dense at all. I was able to E&E for about an hour. I could never get anybody up on the survival radio.

Well, they created another SAR for us. I could hear SAR chatter going on for my pilot just prior to being captured. In fact, there's a book that was written about that rescue. They rescued my front seater, and they rescued the front seater of the other airplane, number Three. Eventually, they rescued both of those guys and both of us back seaters were captured. The book is called Saving Captain Aikman. It was one of the three notable rescues of the Vietnam War, because of the nature of that SAR. I could go through all that, but I won't, because that's another interview of that SAR. But the PJ that had to go down and pick up my front seater was awarded the Air Force Cross for saving him. And they shot up one of the Jolly Greens that had to depart and leave Aikman on the ground with the PJ.

Anyway, they scarfed me up in about an hour. It was midday, and I could hear this firefight going around the corner, if you will. And then they took everything but my skivvies. I was barefoot and in skivvies. They had all my gear, and they marched me through the village. There was several burnt hooches that had been on fire. I thought, "This is gonna be a good day", but fortunately, they didn't take it out on me, except when they initially captured me. They were a little fearful of what I might do, but that's the only time I really was beaten up, was when they were trying to secure me. I wasn't doing anything like going for my .38 or anything aggressive.

It took two days to arrive in Hanoi. The first night, I was in the village, and then the second day, they marched me to a road, and I was handed over to the regular army personnel. I was put in a Soviet Jeep, blindfolded, and taken to another village for the night. And then the next day, the third day, we got into Hanoi and I was taken to the Hanoi Hilton. I was in and out of the Hilton, and over to another prison on the edge of Hanoi called the Zoo, and then back to the Hilton and back to the Zoo. They moved us around a fair amount over the nine months I was a prisoner. Tony, who you talked to earlier, was a cellmate. I can't remember when he was shot down. I think it was four or five days after I was, and in the early August timeframe, they moved me out of solitary and put me in with two others. They took us to the Zoo after a few days. It was Chuck Jackson and Tony Marshall and myself.

Eventually our group grew. The number of people in the room depended on where you were, but most of the time we were in a room with four of us, and the group size tended to vary over time, but it stabilized with about fifteen of us in several rooms. I got to be good friends with Tony. We were in the same pilot training class at Williams AFB after we were released.

Tony told me that they had actually discontinued torture when Ho Chi Minh died, but that the Americans were not being briefed on that. Were you expecting to be tortured? And were you then told it's not going to happen to you, like he had been?

When I went to survival school in 1970, when I was at Holloman, it hadn't made it into the curriculum. But they should have known, certainly, by the time I went over in '72 and went through jungle survival. But that was primarily jungle focused, and we didn't do any practice of what it was like to be interrogated. Tony was correct. I was expecting to be tortured. I got some very valuable information in survival school on how to handle an interrogation situation. I applied all their techniques, but I did not know that they wouldn't torture us. I didn't know that they weren't going to beat me or do whatever. I guess it's good to be prepared for the worst.

There was a question I asked him that I'd like to ask you too, because by this time, as we've already discussed a bit, most of the troops have been pulled out. Was there a sense that this war was almost over? That, "Hey, if I go down, I'm not going to be here for eight years. I can gut it out for a few months?" And did that provide any psychological help going up every day?

Oh, absolutely. But I didn't know how long it was going to be, because you never know. But yes, it did help. One of those things that helped me the most was knowing the guys who had been there since the beginning – a long time. Navy A-4 pilot Everett Alvarez had been there eight years or thereabouts, when I was shot down, and I would rely on, "Okay, I can make it one more day."

I know a lot of the long-held POWs. I got to be quite good friends with a lot of them. I spent eighteen years in the DC area as a defense contractor after retiring, and I got to know them. There were, at the time, probably twenty-five former POWs in that region, and all of them were guys that had been over there for a long time. Leo Thorsness was one. I mean, I was blessed to meet and know all those guys, and they didn't treat me any differently. I kept telling them, "You were in graduate school. I was in high school." But they appreciate what we went through, because they frequently said that we were part of ending the war. They appreciate what we went through.

I'll give you some numbers. Somewhere around 75% of the aviators that were captured in North Vietnam were shot down between the first bombing in '64 and when the bombing halt started in '68. And then the rest of us, 25%, were shot down in '72. Just one year.

Of those guys, that 75% had been there that long. Four to eight years. That's a significant number. Talk about not knowing what was going on. There were so many factors that made it easier for guys like Tony and myself. We've had this conversation a lot. Both when we were locked up, and since then - how did we do it and what are we doing now? I don't want to say we joke about it, because it wasn't that kind of a situation, but humor was a huge thing.

Nixon had promised withdrawal from Vietnam and the Air Force flying squadrons were leaving South Vietnam, and yet they were bringing squadrons over from the States. To this day I do not understand. I have met some of these former North Vietnamese, now Vietnamese, pilots. They ask, "Why did your country send you there when they knew they were leaving? Why did you go?" Of course, they were in

their 20s as well, just doing their jobs, as were we. They weren't aware of the US POW experience. I'm sure I could be dead wrong on it, but I doubt it. I mean, I wasn't aware of what the US Army was doing with prisoners they captured. Was the ARVN or US Army mistreating their prisoners? I don't know. That was the furthest thing from my mind. I was out there flying airplanes and participating in combat missions, and that was my priority and all I really cared about.

But a bigger question in my mind remains - why in the world did the North Vietnamese not wait another year and just take over after the US had left? I don't know. It's crazy.

So, when you got out and you came back, you made the choice to stay in the Air Force. Was that a decision you agonized over? Did you think, maybe, "I'm done with all this"?

No, I didn't. I enjoyed what I was doing. Being in the F-4 was great. I thought it was super. We had rated assignment personnel who had been working on our assignments after it was determined that we were still medically qualified to fly. One of the guys from the flight I had been in at Holloman was down there at MPC - Military Personnel Center. He was a pilot, and he was supposed to work pilot assignments. But, since he knew me, he came to Travis Air Force Base, which was where the hospital was that I was assigned for medical treatment and sat down and asked me what I wanted to do. And I told him I wanted to go the F-111. He said, "Tom, you don't want to go to the F-111. You'll be stuck in that for the rest of your career. Don't you want to go to pilot training?" I said, I'm too old. I'll be over 30. By the time I would have been able to start and finish, I would have been over 30. He asked me a second time, "Don't you want to go to pilot training?" And I said... "I'd like to go to Williams Air Force Base for pilot training."

Well, I did go to pilot training, and I did turn 30 while I was there. UPT started in January 1974. In November, right before Thanksgiving, I was medically grounded about six weeks before our January graduation, with only around 15 rides and the Formation Check remaining.

So they medically grounded you. Why?

That's a long story. It was due to the results of a screening test performed on a number of us that was to determine if we had suffered any head or brain injuries (tumors, etc.). My test results were borderline, so they grounded me. I said, "Fine, if you're going to ground me on that, that's just a screening test. You tell me it's going to ground me from flying and drastically change my career." I said, "I want any test, in fact ALL the tests available, to make sure those possible things aren't there, like a brain tumor or a lesion or whatever. I'm not coming back in six months. If you're going to ground me, you're going to tell me that now if you need to operate on me, or whatever." I stayed at Wofford Hall USAF Hospital at Lackland for another month and had additional tests. And of course, none of those more invasive and rigorous tests showed anything beyond normal, and by the time it wound its way through the system they were not going to let me back in pilot training.

By the time the medical issue was sorted out and I was back on flying status in November 1977 it had been three years, they wouldn't let me go back and finish pilot training. The Surgeon General decided that since I was already rated as a navigator, that's what I was going to be.

Looking back, I have no earthly idea why it happened. I went all the way to the Air Force IG with it, and he said, "You got screwed." Those were the exact words he used. I happened to know him – he was the ranking POW in Hanoi. He was in my one of my father's squadrons as a Captain. Now he was a two star as the AF IG, and he said, "Tom, you got screwed. I went to the Air Force Surgeon General, and he wouldn't budge." Lastly, the general said, "I'm not happy, but I can't do anything about it." By that time, I had to get on with something else. It was approaching five years since I had been in the cockpit of a fighter (June 27, 1972-January, 27 1977).

In the meantime, while I was on medical hold during that time frame, I acquired a master's degree, an MBA. I convinced the Air Force into sending me via an Air Force Institute of Technology (AFIT) Program to Arizona State University, which is in the Phoenix area, so I wouldn't be far away from Williams. And that if I would return to pilot training, dropping out of the program, I wouldn't get "dinged."

I ended up going to the Weasels at George. I was firm in stating to Rated Assignments: "If you can put me back in the cockpit as an EWO" – I had the schoolhouse training but I had never been an EWO – "I'll go be a Weasel at George in the F-105 or I'm getting out! You can have my wings, and then you'd have two assignments to fill." And they complied. I went to George in January 1977. So, by the time I arrived at George and finished Thud Weasel School and was back in the cockpit of a fighter as a combat Weasel, it was almost five years from the day I bailed out of the airplane near Hanoi. I had lost five years of my career doing other things – the heart of an operational flying career.

What was that like, returning to flying status as a Weasel, after being out for so long?

I knew all the threat systems had changed. I was wondering what that would be like. Actually, it was almost like riding a bicycle. Even though it was in a different airplane, everything aviation-related came back real fast.

How was the Thud?

The Thud was great! I knew it was going away and I was blessed to have the opportunity to be in an F-105 Wild Weasel Squadron. They couldn't tell me dates or anything, because it was classified. They were replacing it with the F-4G. And as it turns out, like a lot of Air Force programs, that one slipped. I spent two years in the F-105G at George. They had two combat ready squadrons, and one that was a combination F-4C/F-105G Wild Weasel training squadron. I went through that training squadron and then I went down to one of the operational squadrons for a year and a half. And then the F-4G program came in. For some reason - I don't know why to this day, and the Colonel (Goose Gowell) who could answer that question has passed away - I was chosen as the only 105 guy to go down and be in the initial F-4G instructor cadre. There were ten of us EWOs. I hadn't been in combat in the Weasel, and I'd only been in it for a year and a half. I didn't have that much time as a Weasel guy.

Were any of the others also experienced in both the F-4 and F-105 back seats?

If my memory is correct, three initial cadre Bears. T. Bear Larson had been a Thud weasel in combat and the F-4C Weasel in Europe. Marsh Goldberg had been one of the initial F-100 Weasels, then a Thud Weasel (I could be wrong about this), then an F-4C and then he was one of the initial cadre F-4G guys. Skip Meyer had been in the Thud and F-4C. The other six EWOs had only been in the F-4C Weasel, which really was not as capable compared to the F-105, primarily in that it couldn't carry the AGM-78. It was still effective, but it had less stand-off capability. I mean, there's plusses and minuses to both of those airplanes. I didn't fly the F-4C, so I really don't know, but those three guys had had experience in them.

The F-4G was so much more capable, it was like night and day. It was unbelievable. It's like an instrument check. When you can't see anything, and you're flying instruments, and then all of a sudden you see everything around you, because you've come out of the clouds. Well, in the F-105 it was kind of like that, doing an instrument check. You had ways of figuring out where the threats were.

I remember the first time I flew in the F-4G. We took off from George. As we climbed to 15,000 feet on the way up to Nellis. That was a 30-minute ride. As I recall, I could start seeing the Nellis Range threats and where they were on that range, half an hour before we got there!

In the F-105G or the F-4C Weasel, you had to be fairly close, and you'd have to "weasel around" and try to acquire the threat location using angles, signal strength, etc. You knew roughly where the threat was located but you didn't exactly how far away it was. And of course, when you go to the range a lot, you know where they are. But the point is, in the F-4G, it was like somebody coming out of an instrument check, and all of a sudden, you see everything in range and bearing. It was marvelous.

Anyway, it was one of those blessings. You know, I didn't get to sit in what I consider the best seat, the front, the seat that I wanted to be in. But I still had some great experiences. If I had finished pilot training, and then gone to an F-4 assignment, because that's what I had, all those people I met in the Weasel business and all these other things that I had a chance to do, I wouldn't have done any of those things. If I'd gone into the front seat of an F-4, who knows what I'd have done. I'm disappointed, but I'm not distressed about it. I had a great career. The people that I met in my Air Force career, that's really the highlight of all of it. You know, the airplanes were great, and I liked all my assignments. I just found it a blessed life, if you will. It was a great life.

So the people were your favorite thing about the Air Force?

The people, definitely, and the same thing when I retired and worked another 18 years up in the DC Area, I met a lot of people up there that are still friends from some of the projects and contracts I worked, and the military people we supported. It has to boil down to the people. I don't have any complaints, let's put it that way.

What have you been up to in more recent times? You've retired from your post-Air Force career too. What do you want to do with the rest of your life?

I retired from the contractor world in 2010, so that's 14 years ago this October. I have been very busy. I've been on and off the Weasel board. I was on it as the Vice President for a while, until my late wife had cancer and I had to drop off. When she passed away, I came back on it. I was first the Treasurer and then the President of the Vietnam War POW association called "Nam-POWs", and I'm still on that board as the Communications Director. I produce the newsletters and control the website, and a lot of reunion planning. I also run two River Rat programs, the investment committee and the River Rat of the Year program. So, I'm on the Management Board of three organizations that have my utmost respect for what they stand for and do.

I consider giving back to be important, particularly to my NAM-POW group. Being the President of that organization has a great deal of meaning. Most of those guys had been over there for a long time and suffered dearly and the fact that they wanted me to fill that position, I figuratively pinch myself every once in a while - what an honor, for crying out loud! Now we have our current President, who is one of the B-52 pilots that was shot down. So, we're moving away from the older guys. Ev Alvarez, the first pilot shot down over North Vietnam, was the president last year, our 50th year of freedom. Those are the kind of things that I'm involved in, and I'll probably continue to be involved in, though I want to download some of it, to let other people have the experience.

My significant other has just retired from her teaching job as a college professor, and we've done a fair amount of traveling. That's one of the biggest things, is to do more traveling. We're blessed to be healthy. We have the desire to travel, and we're just going to do a lot of it until we can't stand it anymore.