

How PoWs in the Hanoi Hilton Learned of the Moon Landing

By Leo K. Thorsness, Colonel USAF Retired

Editor's Note: Leo K. Thorsness spoke to the attendees of the 2011 International Space Development Conference in Huntsville, Alabama. On May 21, 2011 he told a fascinating story of how the Vietnam prisoners of war held in the Hanoi Hilton found out about America's July 20, 1969 landing on the moon. Col. Thorsness is a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor for acts of bravery in Vietnam. Eleven days after the events for which he was awarded the Medal of Honor, he was shot down and spent from April 30, 1967 through March 4, 1973 at the Hanoi Hilton as a prisoner of war. Leo was introduced by Kepler's President **Robert M. Krone**, PhD and Colonel USAF retired.

Bob and I only go back about 61 years. I'm older than him, I'm not sure I remember how long I've known anyone, but he is one of my great friends. And we served together and flew together a hundred years ago.

Very quickly, I was a Wild Weasel pilot, and I was on my 92nd mission over North Vietnam. I got shot down with an air-to-air missile with a mate, and I spent six years in Hanoi.

And, first, a summary of those six years. Three years were brutal—solitary, small cells, a lot of torture, can't talk to anybody, real bad life. The last three years were mostly boring, big cells, you got to talk out loud, bricks came out of windows, and much different.

The last three years, because of pressures from our families, and a lot of Americans who wore PoW bracelets—and some of you did, some of you may still—the treatment got a lot better. And our wives and families were allowed to send us a six-line letter every two months. And also, they were allowed to send us a two-kilo package every two months. But you found out, most of things they thought we'd like the camp authorities liked, so we didn't get much of that. But, in one of them, maybe not a six pounder or two pounds, there'd be maybe, you know, half a pound with just a couple things.

One day—I'm getting to the story now—one day somebody got a package. If you lived in a cell with a bunch of people, and by now we did, anything you got you shared with everybody else. We were just about like brothers there.

And, within this package was a sugar—like the ones you have on your table now—and this one had a picture it.



And for that picture the Vietnamese failed to realize its significance, It was the picture of—you know what I'm going to say? Neil Armstrong stepping on the moon.

Now, as aviators, we knew, before we were shot down in 1965 or 1966, that America was scheduled to try to do this. But we had no idea it happened, we had no news, no radio or anything, no pencils, no papers. And this little package came through. If they caught you communicating, they beat you bad. Within about fifteen seconds, as soon as that happened, we were on the wall communicating with the rest of the camp that we had been contacted.

And here's what it sounded like, I can tap it out for you, it just takes fifteen seconds. Because, if any of you, or your kids, end up in space, listen, they might use the tap code up there, right? And you'll want to know the tap code when you get up there. And what we sent was just eight letters: A M standing for America "A—M—O—N—M—O—O—N." (He tapped out the code with his knuckle on the podium – Ed.) "American on moon."

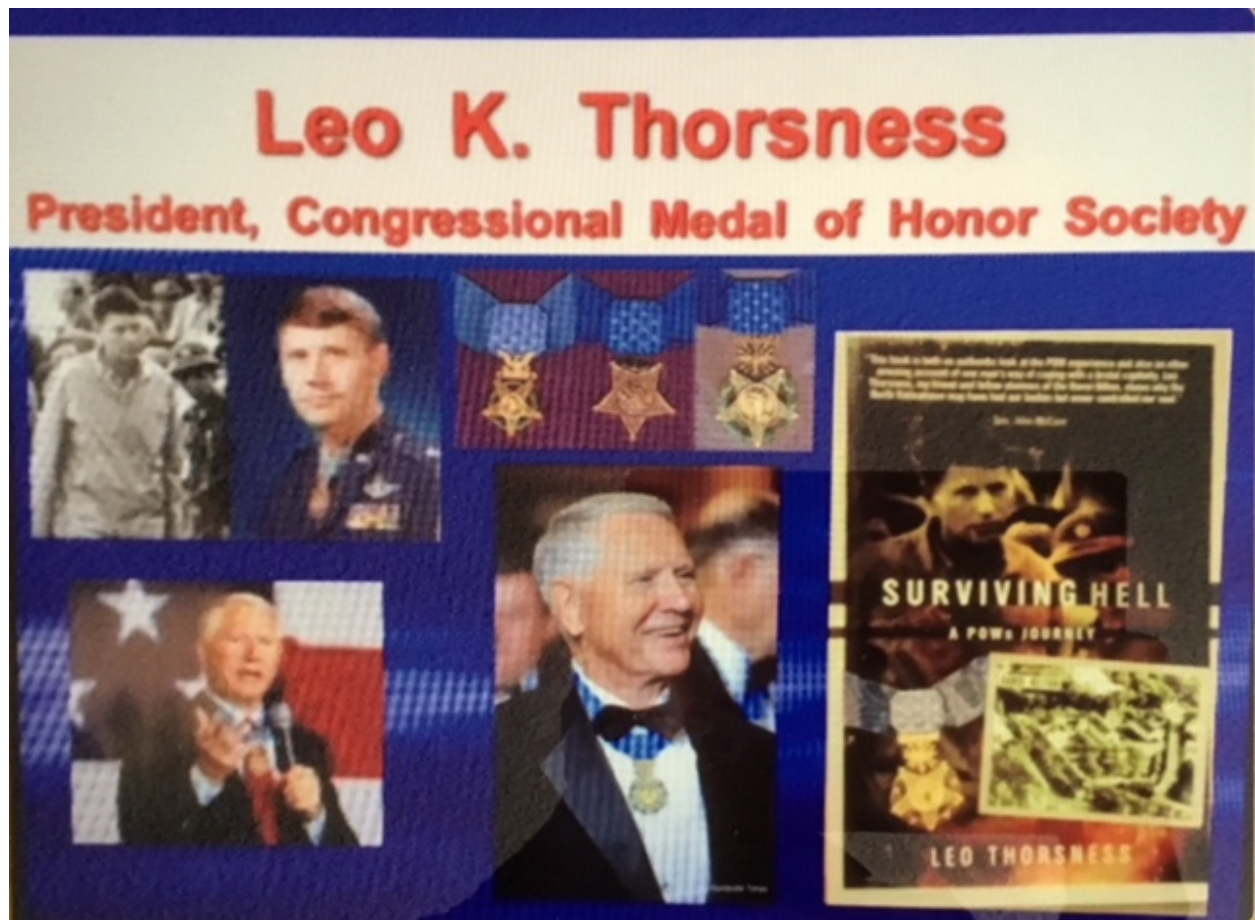
And those fifteen or twenty seconds, in our mind, just justified the brutality and what we were fighting for as Americans. We were so proud. And it was the happiest twenty seconds of our lives, in that prison setting—other than when we got released to come home. We were so proud to be Americans.

In fact, the next morning when I went out, a Vietnamese guard was out, he said, "The moon is up." And I said, "You can't look at that, that's our moon."



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Editor's Note: We scoured the internet trying to find a picture of that historic sugar packet, but we were unsuccessful. However, we believe it probably looked very much like this matchbook cover from the same historical moment. Leo, his wife Gaylee and I, and my wife, Bencey, lived across the street from each other near Turner Air Force Base, Georgia beginning in early 1954. Our daughters, Kat Krone and Dawn Thorsness, were born within a week of each other at the Turner AFB Hospital. That began a close relationship that lasted until Leo's passing in May 2017. We flew together in Air Force F-84F, F-100, and F-105 jets, worked together in academia, and met socially whenever possible – except for the six and one-half years Leo suffered in the Hanoi prison. He became the President of the Medal of Honor Society.



His book, *Surviving Hell: A POW's Journey* was a beautifully written description of how the Hanoi POWs survived day after day for the longest incarceration of America's military in its history.

LEO K. THORSNESS

Organization: US Air Force
Company: 357th Tactical Fighter Squadron Division:
Born: February 14, 1932, Walnut Grove, MN
Died: May 02, 2017, St. Augustine, FL
Rank at Retirement: Colonel
Past President of the Medal of Honor Society
Date of Issue: October 15, 1973 Accredited
Place: Over North Vietnam
Date: April 19, 1967
Rank: Major



Medal of Honor 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, Lt. Col. Thorsness was on a surface-to-air missile suppression mission over North Vietnam. Lt. Col. 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, Lt. Col. Thorsness's wingman was shot down by intensive antiaircraft fire, and the two crewmembers abandoned their aircraft.

Lt. Col. 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. Lt. Col. 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, Lt. Col. Thorsness, despite his low fuel condition, decided to return alone through a hostile environment of surface-to-air missile and antiaircraft 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, Lt. Col. 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.

Lt. Col. Thorsness's extraordinary heroism, self-sacrifice, and personal bravery involving conspicuous risk of life were in the highest traditions of the military service, and they have reflected great credit upon himself and the US Air Force.

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Editor's Notes: My daughter Kat, and I attended Leo's interment with full military honors at Arlington Cemetery. Kepler Space Institute has created the Leo K. Thorsness Academic Chair for Space Leadership. Leo credited his family, friends, faith and flying for his many successes in life and for his dedicated service to America. **Bob Krone.**