

South Dakota Medal of Honor Recipients

Leo K. Thorsness

Rank and organization:

Lieutenant Colonel (then Major) U.S. Air Force, 357th Tactical
Fighter Squadron

Place and date:

Over North Vietnam
April 19, 1967

Entered service at:

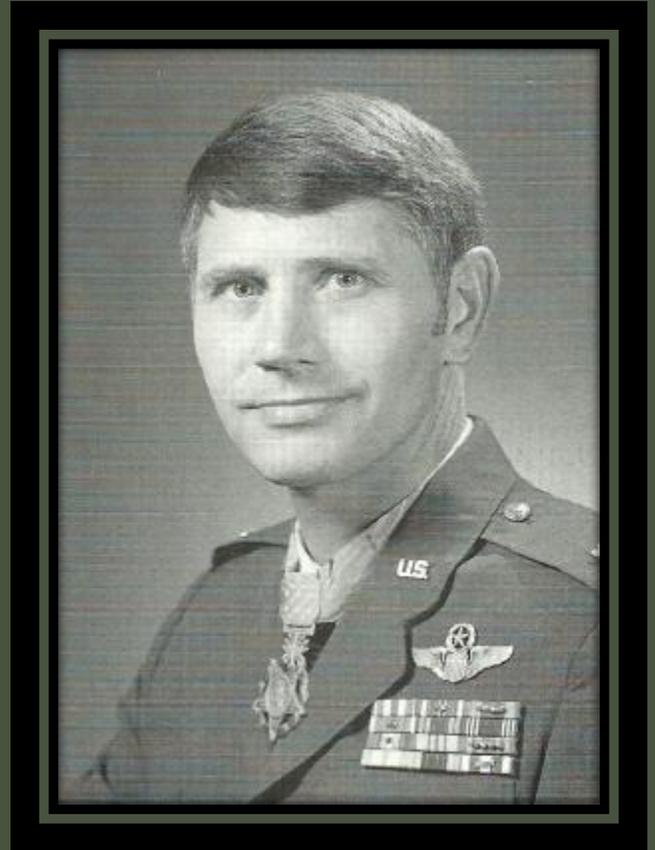
Walnut Grove, Minnesota

Born:

Walnut Grove, Minnesota

Memorial Dedication:

September 22, 2000 in Brookings, South Dakota



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 antiaircraft 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.

To listen to Colonel Leo K. Thorsness' story, click link below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WJ18XdHL24>

