



# Madison County Military Hall Of Heroes

Madison County Courthouse 100 Northside Square, Huntsville, AL 35801

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## 2008 Madison County Military Heritage Commission Hall of Heroes Inductees

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Leo K. THORSNESS

MEDAL OF HONOR, Silver Star (2 awards)

Distinguished Flying Cross (6 awards)

Air Medal w/Valor (10 Awards)

Lt. Col. Thorsness' wingman was shot down by intensive anti-aircraft fire, and the 2 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 2 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 anti-aircraft defenses to the downed crew's position. As he approached the area, he spotted 4 MIG-17 aircraft and immediately initiated an attack on the MIGs, damaging 1 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. Leo was also awarded the Silver Star (2 awards), the Distinguished Flying Cross (6 awards) and the Air Medal with Valor (ten awards) during his service in Vietnam

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Leo K. Thorsness was born in Walnut Grove, Minnesota on Feb 14, 1932. He and Gaylee Anderson met in the freshman registration line at South Dakota State College in 1950, married in 1953 and have one daughter, Dawn. In January 1951, Leo enlisted in the USAF; graduated from Class 54-G Aviation Cadets, and served as a fighter pilot flying F-84s, F-100s and F-105s. Colonel Thorsness flew 92 ½ Wild Weasel missions over North Vietnam in the 357th Tactical Fighter Squadron and was shot down in April 1967, becoming a prisoner of war. He was released from North Vietnam in 1973. In 1986 he and Gaylee moved to Seattle where he served as a Washington State Senator from 1988 to 1992. Leo is now a resident of Madison, Alabama. On April 19, 1967, then Lt. Colonel Thorsness received the Medal of Honor 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 tile attack on the second missile site,



Sidney E. LYONS, Jr.  
SILVER STAR MEDAL, Distinguished Flying Cross  
Air Medal with Valor (2 awards)

Florence, Alabama native Sidney E. Lyons, Jr. is a retired U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel. He began his military career after receiving his commission through the ROTC program at the University of Tennessee. He has served as a scout master with the Boy Scouts of America and is himself, an Eagle Scout. Sid has lived in Huntsville since 1997 and his current interest is as an artist and sculptor. His art focus is on Native American's and military scenes. He is married and has two children.

On June 19, 1967, he received the Silver Star for Gallantry in action while serving with Troop D, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, 9th Infantry Division in the Republic of Vietnam. After learning that two of his unit's helicopters had been shot down and ground forces were critically low on ammunition he loaded a helicopter with a re-supply of ammunition and braved a murderous barrage of enemy fire to land and unload the supplies. He then hovered his aircraft along the front line and extracted seriously wounded men until his aircraft could not possibly hold any more men. This action saved the lives of many of the engaged ground forces and the two downed aircrews. Sid was also awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and two awards of the Air Medal with Valor during his service in Vietnam.



Peter J. (Pete) RITCH  
BRONZE STAR MEDAL W/Valor  
Navy Commendation Medal W/Valor

Pete Ritch was born in Brooklyn, New York. He has lived in Huntsville for almost fourteen years and has two children and five grand children. The day following his college graduation Pete received a draft notice and on that same day he joined the United States Marine Corps. After he completed OCS and specialty training, Pete arrived in Vietnam in October of 1968.

On February 22, 1969, this Marine Corps officer distinguished himself against a platoon size force of North Vietnamese Regulars who were attacking his armored column with automatic weapons fire. Disregarding his own safety, he exposed himself to intense enemy fire while skillfully manning his .50 caliber machine gun to suppress enemy fire threatening infantry personnel riding on the back of his vehicle. After clearing the hazardous area he again exposed himself to hostile fire and deployed his tanks and used supporting fire from his units 90mm weapons to allow the infantry to deploy. At the risk of his own life, he ensured the safety of others. For his actions Pete was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor. Pete was also awarded the Navy Commendation Medal with Valor during his service in Vietnam.



Vernon V. (Vic) COLLINS, Jr.  
BRONZE STAR MEDAL W/VALOR

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Vic Collins is a retired U.S. Army Master Sergeant and a native of Macon, Georgia. He entered military service in 1959 and served twenty six years on active duty. Vic has four children and three grand children and has lived in Huntsville since 1983.

On February 25, 1971, Sergeant Collins was serving at Khe Sanh in the Republic of Vietnam with Battery B, 1st BN, 44th Artillery. On that date, he distinguished himself by exceptionally valorous action against enemy forces attacking his unit with artillery fire. After he directed counter battery fire the enemy fire ceased. As he began a crater analysis of the final round, another barrage of enemy fire hit his position, wounding him. Disregarding his wound he ran to the nearest M42, known to soldiers as a “Duster”, and returned fire upon the enemy until heavy enemy fire forced the crew to evacuate. He then ran through the bursting enemy fire to another “Duster” and while continuously exposing himself to hostile fire he again returned fire until the enemy fire was completely suppressed. For his actions, Sergeant Collins was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with Valor and the Purple Heart for wounds received.