



CLASS OF
1963

COL. (RET.) LEONARD
"LUCKY" EKMAN

As the tow plane slowly circles the Sacramento Mountains east of Alamogordo, New Mexico, the trailing glider pilot suddenly feels a favorable lift. It's time to release from the tow rope. Once free, Col. (Ret.) Leonard "Lucky" Ekman '63 smoothly maneuvers his aircraft around the rocky cliffs below. He uses the heated mountainside to climb even higher.

In minutes, he's joined by a fellow soaring enthusiast in the blue skies that always envelop this sleepy desert community. The glider pilots orchestrate a tricky two-ship formation as they ascend and descend, following the occasional updrafts they catch.

"Formation flying in gliders is something you do near the end of your gliding career rather than at the beginning," Ekman chuckles.

Up here, in the quiet surroundings of the wild blue yonder, Ekman finds comfort and peace as he continues his life journey, which currently includes a cancer battle. Up here, he counts his ever-expanding blessings of family and friends.

After graduating from the United States Air Force Academy and heading to pilot training, Ekman built a career and private life that were never too far away from flying. It's readily apparent he has never lost that passion.

"Aviation is life's big adventure for me," he admits. "I suppose I'm not very imaginative, but I never tire of flying. I love every minute of it."

As Ekman and his fellow pilot come in for a landing, visiting Academy soaring cadets gather to watch the gliders touch down, side by side, almost simultaneously. A short while later, Ekman is talking with the cadets, sharing his love of flight and answering their questions.

"I love talking to cadets," he reports. "They're our hope, so I cheer them on. Thank God they're stepping up for the challenges that are out there."



On this December morning, Ekman is contemplating the news of his selection as a 2021 USAFA Distinguished Graduate. He's quick to suggest he doesn't deserve the designation.

"I was just a fighter pilot," he smiles. "Just a simple airman doing his job, loving life, loving his family and doing what he could to make the country a better place."

MILITARY BRAT

As a youngster, Ekman knew military life well. His father served in the Army and the family moved frequently.

While attending Georgia Military Academy during high school, Ekman realized he wanted to serve his country and received plenty of encouragement to apply to West Point. But he showed a particular interest in the relatively new service academy — USAFA — instead.

"A West Point graduate, my dean of faculty at Georgia Military Academy, told me not to go to the Air Force Academy," he laughs. "He said it would be 50 years before that place amounts to anything."

But Ekman was intrigued by the expanded curriculum the Air Force Academy was offered.

"West Point and Annapolis seemed stuck in their core curriculum," he explains. "The Air Force Academy had an enrichment curriculum and a quick transition into graduate schools."

When he arrived at USAFA, Ekman took full advantage of those educational opportunities during his four years, completing a whopping 200 credit hours.

"Some semesters I was taking 10 courses at a time, and that's a lot for an undergraduate," he admits. "I slept probably three or four hours a night during the week and then crashed on the weekends, which is not a good thing to do for one's health."

He never regretted the huge academic load, though, Ekman says.

"What those 200 credit hours gave me was a whole quiver full of problem-solving arrows, because each of the academic disciplines has a slightly different approach to problem solving," he says. "It gave me a complete bag of tricks."

His days weren't completely filled with classes and studying, however. As a cadet, Ekman competed on the Academy rifle team, participated in intramurals and was involved in political science activities during his limited free time.

Ekman credits his superior roommates for getting him through the rough spots of cadet life. He singles out William Gable, Les Denend, Ted Sahd, Drue DeBerry and Sam Westbrook for their help.

"I loved being at the Academy, which I guess means I'm a little bit crazy," he



ACROSS: Lucky Ekman's end-of-tour photo at Takhli in August 1966, after 153 missions over North Vietnam and 185 total missions.

TOP: U.S. Army Lt. Col. Ken and Frances Ekman are pictured with a young Lucky Ekman in the late 1940s while living in Washington, D.C.

MIDDLE: Lucky Ekman's 8th grade photo in his Georgia Military Academy uniform.

BOTTOM: Lucky Ekman (right) poses for a grip-and-grin photo with his 354th TFS squadron commander in 1966 at Takhli after his first 100 missions over North Vietnam. He kept flying combat for another three months.

says. "I never had any doubts about getting through."

FIGHTER MENTALITY

Upon graduation, Ekman headed to pilot training at Williams Air Force Base in Arizona.

"For me it wasn't party time," he admits. "I knuckled down and got really serious."

He started out in the T-37 before transitioning to the T-38.

When he completed pilot training, Ekman was shipped to Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada to fly the F-105. He was part of the third class of undergraduate pilot training graduates who went straight into the F-105. He was the Top Gun of his class.

Ekman would meet his future wife, Kaye, while working on his Corvette in a Nellis parking lot. "I was dirty and greasy," he laughs.

When he completed F-105 training, Ekman was anxious to join the fight in Vietnam.

"It was the only war we had, but I thought I was going to miss it," he remembers. As it turned out, there was no rush.

His first squadron at McConnell Air Force Base in Kansas worked hard to "season" their young lieutenants instead of sending them to war immediately. "That made a big difference in our survival," he admits.

After three months gaining F-105 flying experience, Ekman arrived in Vietnam in August 1965.

COMBAT TOUR

His initial deployment with the 562nd Tactical Fighter Squadron lasted about four months. He volunteered to stay longer after completing his first assignment.

During those early months, Ekman amassed nearly 650 hours of combat time. He flew 185 missions during those tours, with 153 flown over North Vietnam.

"I lost two flight commanders, basically to weapons malfunctions," he reports. "You wonder why him and not me? These guys were people with kids and wives, and here I am a bachelor who's footloose and fancy free and not caring about much of anything." He was shot down once, on his 131st mission North.

When he returned to the states, Ekman was still a lieutenant but had so much combat experience that he was sent to Tactical Air Command to become an instructor pilot.

"I learned how to lead, and I got to know a bunch of terrific folks who went

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off to fight the war from our instruction," he says.

By the end of his two-and-a-half-year instructor assignment, Ekman tallied 1,700 hours in the F-105.

"It was a very special time," he says. "I was able to take advantage of it and build time fast and get to know the F-105 very well."

CONTINUING EDUCATION

Ekman was awarded an Olmsted Scholarship for schooling with Swiss diplomats in Geneva, Switzerland. First, he and his wife, Kaye, attended French language school, finishing first and second in their class, respectively.

Son Ken was born in May 1969, three years to the day after Lucky's North Vietnam downing and rescue by the HH-3 Jolly Green Giants. The family of three then traveled to Geneva, where Lucky attended the Institute for International Studies, completing a master's degree equivalent.

While in Switzerland, Ekman began flying gliders for the first time. He'd missed out on soaring as a cadet, because a year prior to his arrival in Colorado Springs, a powerful windstorm damaged the Academy's gliders.

"It basically put the Academy out of the glider business while I was a cadet," he reports.

When his educational stint ended, Ekman was antsy to return to the war.

"We were still losing guys," he says. "And we had guys who had been trapped in the Hanoi Hilton for all this time. I had to go back and try to fix that."

So, in late 1971, Ekman became an F-105 Wild Weasel and returned to Vietnam. For a few months, Ekman didn't see much action. But then North Vietnam invaded the South in April 1972.

"Suddenly, all hell broke loose," he recalls. "We were back in it hot and heavy, going up North and fighting the best that the North Vietnamese and the Russians could come up with. It was an interesting time and a great time to be a Wild Weasel."

At the conclusion of his final tour,

Ekman notched 287 missions over North Vietnam and 1,066 total combat hours.

"That's as much as anybody has," he admits. "It was a worthwhile tour for me, because I had to lead to keep a bunch of good guys alive. And I shot a bunch of missiles."

BACK HOME

With the war winding down, Ekman attempted to extend his time in Vietnam. The Air Force declined, instead sending him to Armed Forces Staff College.

From there he returned to USAFA to teach political science, assist as a cadet glider instructor, help guide the Honor and Ethics Committee, and serve as First Squadron air officer commanding.

After an eventful three years (1972-76) at his alma mater, Ekman returned to the Weasel force at George Air Force Base in California, commanding both an F-105G and the first operational F-4G squadrons, charged with training aircrews and maintaining readiness for deployment to the Fulda Gap in Central Europe.

His next assignment was the State Department's Senior Service School, where he studied Saudi Arabia. That led to a two-year assignment as the Air Force section chief in that country, helping Saudi Arabia overbuy, overprovision and overbuild to prepare for the arrival of American forces in Desert Storm.

"It was a fascinating time for me . . . working with folks in that different culture and flying with them in their F-5s," he says. "And the Saudis had a cost-unconstrained Air Force built on recycled \$15.6 billion petrodollars in Air Force programs alone. That was another building block toward a wonderful life experience."

Next came three years commanding the Weapons Systems Evaluation Program, flying both the F-4 and the F-16, and supervising the shooting of 1,800 air-to-air missiles. His team's efforts helped ensure the effective use of missiles during Operation Desert Storm.



CLOCKWISE: Lucky and Kaye Ekman married on April 10, 1968, in Wichita, Kansas. Ekman is pictured following his F-16 fini-flight and hose down at Torrejón Air Base, Spain, on July 6, 1989. Family photo at Dayton hotel for River Rats Reunion, October 2021, with (L-R) son-in-law Scott Taylor, USAFA '94, grandsons Charlie, Jack and Sammy, Ekman, and daughter Katie, USAFA '96.



His next role was as vice commander of the 16th Air Force in Spain. He also served as acting commander after the untimely death of the commander. That final operational assignment allowed Ekman to attain a total of 4,100 flying hours in fighters. His fini-flight in the F-16 came in July 1989.

"I still miss getting to fly that wonderful jet," he admits.

Ekman's last Air Force assignment was as senior fellow with the Atlantic Council, helping chronicle the decline of Soviet military power in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He retired from the military in October 1990.

TRANSITION TIME

In retirement, Ekman joined classmate Harry Snow in pursuing efforts to upgrade legacy C-130 aircraft into short-takeoff-and-landing vehicles.

Ekman also served as president of DEVEK Performance, creating a 200+ mph supercar based on the Porsche 928. In 2012, he worked as a consultant with Boeing to unfreeze the delivery of 787s.

Since fully retiring, Ekman spends significant time teaching the next generation the joys of soaring.

"I just renewed my glider instructor ticket for another two years," he smiles. "I intend to keep teaching people to fly in a glider, teaching acrobatics and unusual attitudes, as long as I'm able."

He's also set his sights on achieving one more aviation goal: 1,000 hours flying gliders. He currently stands at 840 hours.

"I've got 1,000 hours in combat and 1,000 hours as an instructor, and I'm trying to get to 1,000 hours in gliders," he says. "A friend of mine calls that the flying trifecta."

GIVING BACK

Due to exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, Ekman developed prostate cancer later in life. He is now deemed 100% disabled by the Department of Veterans Affairs.

"That means extra money that we don't really need. We are quite comfortable," he says.

The Ekman family decided the combat-related special compensation and VA disability payments would benefit the Air Force Academy. Ekman is a founding director of the Air Force Academy Foundation and knows the importance of private philanthropy for the cadet experience.

"The money keeps flowing, and I can keep giving it to the Academy," he says. "It's a win-

win. That I make a contribution is very important to me."

Among his current giving priorities is the HH-3 Jolly Green Giant Memorial that is planned adjacent to the B-52 display near the North Gate. He's also supporting, along with his classmates, the new Leadership Challenge Tower that's being installed to the northwest of the Cadet Area. In addition, he helps support the cadet rifle team.

Ekman remains passionate about the USAFA Honor Code and does what he can to ensure it remains a pillar of cadet training.

"Honor is fundamental to being an officer in the armed forces of the United States," he says. "I'm trying to bring together the thoughtful reflections of thoughtful people. It's a labor of love and never ending."

BLESSED LIFE

As he processes his selection as a Distinguished Graduate, Ekman thanks his family for their unwavering support through the years.

"It's family that's most important now," he says. "Some of these other things are less important."

He is proud of the impact his wife and each of his children have had on the world thus far.

His wife of 54 years, Kaye (Ph.D., American University), enjoyed a long career in education as a counselor and a university instructor.

His oldest son, Maj. Gen. Kenneth Ekman '91, is director of Strategy, Engagement and Programs with U.S. Africa Command. Christopher "Kit" Ekman, Harvard and Harvard Law graduate, is chief deputy clerk in the U.S. District Court in Southern Alabama. Kevin Ekman, adopted in Bangkok, Thailand, during Ekman's third combat tour, has had a successful food service career spanning almost three decades. Lt. Col. (Ret.) Katrina "Katie" (Ekman) Taylor '96 flew F-15 Eagles for many years before joining the Reserves as an Academy liaison officer. She is raising a family with Strike Eagle IP husband Scott Taylor '94 and serves as director of Indiana Educator Fellowships for The Oaks Academy in Indianapolis.

"The charge I've given our kids is, whatever you do in life, make the world better for those who follow," Ekman avows. "It's been a heck of a ride, and I would do it all again. I've had a very blessed life." 