



**Jack Broughton sacrificed his Air Force career to protect two of his pilots.**

# The Man From Thud Ridge

By John T. Correll

**W**hen Air Force Col. Jacksel M. Broughton arrived for duty at Takhli Air Base in Thailand in September 1966, Rolling Thunder—the air war against North Vietnam—was entering its hottest phase.

Broughton, 41, looked like a sure bet to go far: a West Point graduate, 114 combat missions in Korea, commander of the USAF Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team, commander of an air defense interceptor squadron, combat ready in every fighter from the P-47 to

the F-106, and promoted to colonel in June 1964 with only 19 years of commissioned service.

At Takhli, he was vice commander of the 355th Tactical Fighter Wing, one of the two Thud wings in Thailand engaged in Route Pack Six, the part of North Vietnam where the air defenses were thickest and most lethal. Broughton often led a combined strike force of F-105s from his own wing and from the 388th TFW at Korat AB, Thailand.

In June 1967, Broughton was nine months into his combat tour and had

flown 102 combat missions. He had already earned the Air Force Cross—second only to the Medal of Honor in the hierarchy of awards—two Silver Stars, and two Distinguished Flying Crosses.

Almost 50 years later, Broughton is well known for his combat memoir, *Thud Ridge*, which has been in print continuously since publication in 1969, with about half a million copies sold. The title refers to a string of small mountains that screened the F-105's approach to Hanoi. Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), who flew missions in Route



*F-105 Thuds hammer enemy positions in this Air Force Art Collection painting by Jim Laurier. In the distance is "Thud Ridge," the small mountain range that screened the aircraft's approach to Hanoi.*

Pack Six as a Navy pilot before he was shot down and captured, calls *Thud Ridge* the "single best day-to-day account of combat flying in Vietnam."

The book ends on a cryptic note, recounting an action of which Lt. Gen. William W. Momyer, commander of 7th Air Force, said, "The only thing that he [Broughton] did not do to accomplish his mission was to kill himself in the effort; and but for his superior airmanship and guts he would have done that. I recommend Colonel Broughton be awarded the Air Force Cross."

However, as Broughton said in *Thud Ridge*, "It didn't work out that way. Two of my majors were accused of strafing a Russian ship near Haiphong as they fought for their lives. I fought for them with all of my might and instead of my getting a second Air Force Cross, all three of us received a general court-martial. That is quite a story in itself and one of these days I may tell that story, too."

It would be another 20 years, though, before the full story was disclosed.

The Vietnam War was managed in detail from Washington, with combat

effectiveness undercut by limited objectives, gradual escalation, and measured responses. In particular, President Lyndon B. Johnson and his Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, were distrustful and fearful of airpower. Johnson agonized over the questionable proposition that aggressive use of airpower might draw China or the Soviet Union into the war. To guard against any such provocation, airmen were saddled with an elaborate list of rules of engagement.

### Make No Mistake

"The ROE consisted of a one-inch-thick stack of legal-length paper, hung vertically in a manila folder," Broughton said. "The clasp at the top allowed for the constant changes that could be recommended by anyone up the chain of command who made more than 40 cents an hour. We were required to sign off that we had read and understood all of them before we were allowed to head north for the first time. Recertification was a periodic requirement."

The rules came in two categories: geographical areas that could not be struck and conditions under which enemy forces could not be attacked.

"Alongside Thud Ridge—a north-south mountain range lying between our bases in Thailand and Hanoi—was the MiG fighter base at Phuc Yen," Broughton said. "We would fly inbound en route to Hanoi, and I would have, say, five flights of fighters—four aircraft to each flight. And as I would approach Phuc Yen I would watch the MiGs come out and taxi to the end of the runway and run their engines up and get ready for takeoff. Now, I could have dumped my nose right then and got four MiGs on the ground on almost every mission up there. But I couldn't touch them. ... So I would go past the airfield and the MiGs would roll for takeoff and be on the tail of my last flight and in position to shoot down whomever they wanted to."

In previous wars, rules of engagement were routinely ignored. In Korea, for example, US pilots were forbidden to cross into Soviet or Chinese territory, even in hot pursuit of enemy aircraft, but most of them did it anyway. Border crossers were punished lightly, if at all.

In Vietnam, the ROE were strictly enforced with little allowance for mistakes.

On June 2, 1967, Jack Broughton ran afoul of the rules of engagement, with disastrous consequences for his Air Force career. The wing commander was away on a trip and Broughton was

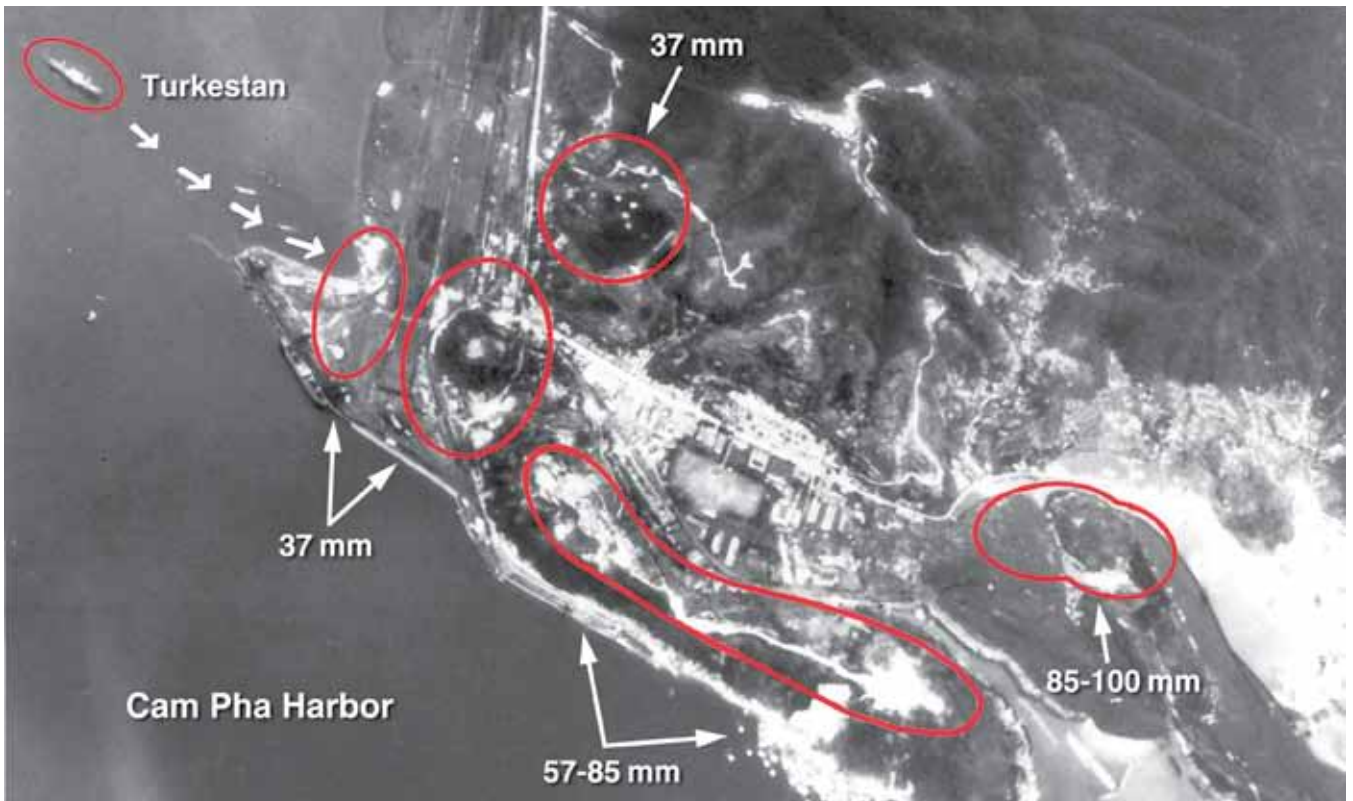


the acting commander. He had flown a mission that day. After landing, he attended to some paperwork and went to the officers club to eat, still in his flight suit. During dinner, he was called outside by two of his pilots, Maj. Frederick G. Tolman and Maj. Alonzo L. Ferguson, who had just landed and were greatly worried.

Others in their chain of command—their squadron commander and the deputy for operations—were new. Broughton was known as a stand-up boss. The bond was special because on a previous mission, Tolman had “wiped out a large gun emplacement that was in the process of shooting me out of the sky,” Broughton said.

On June 2, they had flown as Weep Three and Four, with Tolman as flight leader and Ferguson as wingman. Tolman told Broughton he may have hit a ship at Cam Pha harbor while suppressing fire from anti-aircraft guns. Cam Pha was North Vietnam’s auxiliary port and like Haiphong, 40 miles to the south, off limits under the ROE. Guns—some of them in the protected area, some just outside the restricted lines—routinely

**Left:** Jack Broughton removes his gloves after a mission over Hanoi in 1967. **Below:** A reconnaissance photo of Cam Pha harbor. Anti-aircraft fire—from the sites circled in red—prompted return fire from two pilots under Broughton’s command. Their encounter there changed Broughton’s Air Force career.



shot at F-105s both inbound to targets and outbound. They fired at Tolman and Ferguson on their way to their target that day and Tolman, noting the exact location, planned to “hit them a lick” later.

On their return, they swept down on Cam Pha in a high-speed strafing run, Tolman in the lead. Fire from the ground was heavy and accurate. As Tolman hosed the gun emplacements with his cannon, he suddenly saw a ship in the center of the activity in the harbor. The F-105s climbed for altitude and headed south. The entire encounter with the ship took place in about five seconds.

The ship would be central in the gun camera images but the field of focus was too narrow for the film to show the ground fire coming up from all sides. For reasons of weather, Tolman and Ferguson diverted to refuel at Ubon, where they were taken to a mandatory intelligence debriefing. Shaken, Tolman denied firing his cannon. That was a false official statement on the record and there was no way to call it back. Ferguson was also implicated by not objecting.

Broughton saw instantly that the gun camera film was the only evidence the ship had been fired upon. “I could either follow the established procedures and they would be court-martialed for firing on an unauthorized target and making false official statements, or I could do something about it,” he said.

He made a quick decision. “Over the years, I have had hundreds of suggestions as to how I could have reacted differently, but none of the advice givers [were] there,” he said.

He called the sergeant running the film crew and told him to bring the film to him. There, outside the club, he had the sergeant open the containers, pull out the film, and expose it in the headlights of the truck.

“I could have let that film go through its normal channels and thrown Ted and Lonnie to the wolves,” he said. “I would have been clean, but I would have surrendered any possibility of further action on my part.”

Or, “I could have pleaded their case up through the maze of supervision. ‘Perhaps we struck a ship—it was all a mistake.’ I knew that would not work. I had been through several investigations where our people had been dealt with severely for minor infractions of Washington’s restrictions.”

At 2 a.m., Gen. John D. Ryan, commander in chief of Pacific Air Forces, called with an instruction to “check and see if there is any possibility that



Photo via Jack Broughton

**Broughton (r) briefs President John Kennedy on air defense issues in 1963, while the head of Air Defense Command, Gen. Robert Lee, listens. Broughton was then commander of the 5th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron.**

Kingfish Four could have bombed a ship in the Haiphong area this afternoon and call me back immediately.” Broughton reported, “There is no possibility that Kingfish Four could have bombed a ship.”

He did not volunteer any further information.

### Ryan Presses the Search

The next day, the Soviets complained their merchant vessel, *Turkestan*, had been bombed in the roadstead at Cam Pha and said they had recovered an unexploded 20 mm shell from the damage on the ship. “The 105 does not eject fired shell casings,” Broughton said. “It spits everything that passes through the firing cycle into a big can in the nose of the aircraft and stores the brass there until the can is unloaded on the ground.” The shell in evidence was probably taken from the wreckage of an F-105 somewhere in North Vietnam.

The Pentagon denied a US attack on the ship. “The incident was quieting down and becoming yesterday’s crisis,” said Phil G. Goulding, chief spokesman for the Department of Defense. “The press, swept up in other news events and particularly the Middle East War, did not pursue it.”

The issue remained alive “because General Ryan wouldn’t let the *Turkestan* go away,” Broughton said. “He spent the next two weeks crisscrossing the Pacific

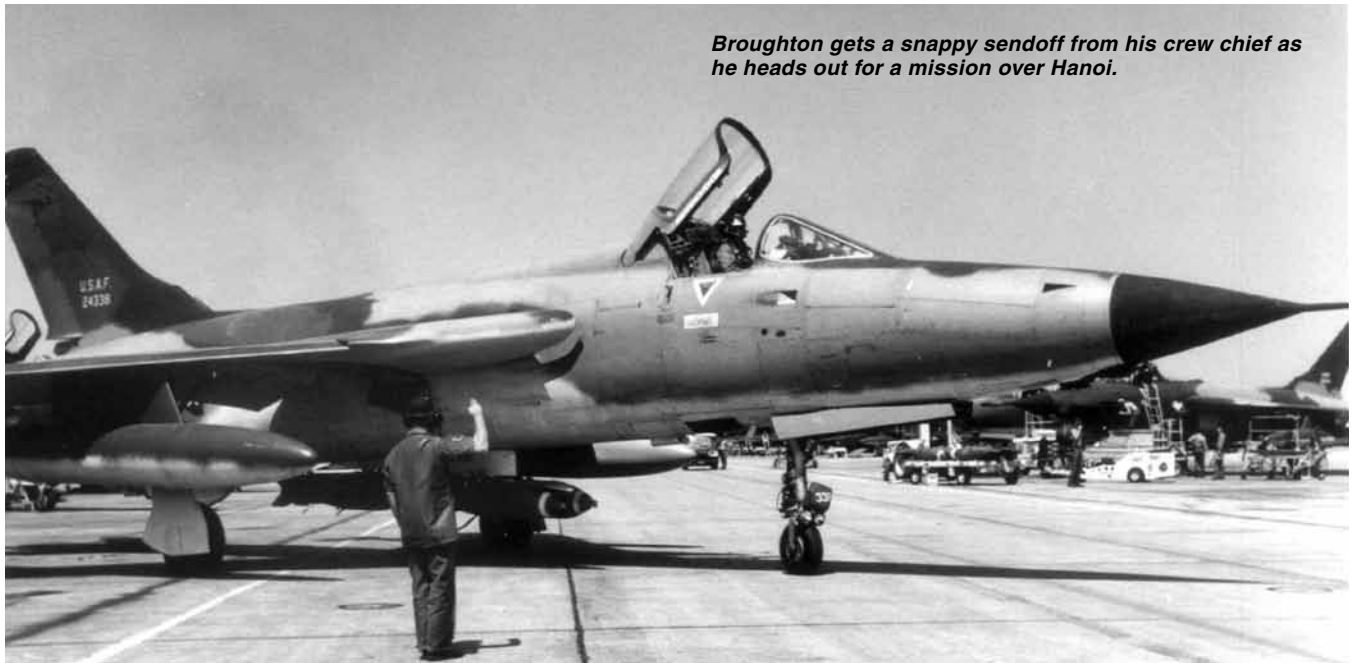
with a C-135 full of PACAF detectives, personally searching for an answer.”

Ryan confronted Broughton at Takhli June 17, this time asking his question more broadly. Broughton told him that the two-ship element he was looking for was Weep Three and Four and that he, Broughton, had destroyed the film.

Broughton was relieved of duty immediately and by Ryan’s specific order put into a holding pattern as special assistant to the combat support group commander. Ryan denied the request of the wing commander that Broughton be made special assistant to him instead. Ryan insisted that it be the combat support group commander, several years junior to Broughton and formerly his subordinate.

The Pentagon conceded US warplanes may have struck the Soviet freighter with cannon fire aimed at anti-aircraft guns protecting the port. A few days later, on June 29, two Navy fighters attacked the Soviet ship *Mikhail Frunze* in Haiphong harbor. The Defense Department announced that damage to the vessel was “inadvertent,” and that was the end of that. The Navy showed no interest in prosecuting its pilots for violating the ROE.

The Air Force, however, decided to throw the book at Broughton and the two majors. The court-martial authority in their case was the 355th TFW, but the charges and specifications were



*Broughton gets a snappy sendoff from his crew chief as he heads out for a mission over Hanoi.*

drawn up by a legal advisor from 13th Air Force and given to the wing commander to sign. There were two counts of conspiracy under Article 81 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and two lesser counts for destroying government property and the catchall general punitive article.

The specific accusations were destruction of seven rolls of government film and “willfully, with intent to deceive” concealing a “material fact” by exposing the undeveloped film. The potential penalty was dismissal from service with loss of pay and allowances, including retirement benefits, and 12 years or more in prison.

The pretrial investigation, required by UCMJ Article 32 before a general court-martial, recommended summary nonjudicial punishment with reprimands and fines imposed.

This was overruled by higher headquarters, citing “breach of moral code” and directing a court-martial.

The venue for the court-martial was Clark Air Base in the Philippines, headquarters of 13th Air Force. By the strange organizational setup in Southeast Asia, the wings in Thailand were under the operational control of 7th Air Force in Saigon but reported to 13th Air Force for everything else.

Seventh Air Force, the combat headquarters, had no part in the trial. However, among those ready to support Broughton without regard to possible consequences was Maj. Gen. Gordon M. Graham, vice commander of 7th Air Force, who said Broughton’s past accomplishments, courage, and leader-

ship should “transcend any isolated errors in judgment made under the stress of combat.”

Few people other than those directly involved knew the time and place of the trial. Some material introduced in evidence was classified top secret. “That meant portions of the trial would have to be closed sessions, and it meant that air policemen had to guard the doors of the auditorium,” Broughton said.

The defendants immediately upset the apple cart with preemptory challenges that removed the designated president of the court-martial and two others and left Col. Charles E. Yeager, one of the best known fighter pilots in the world, as president of the court.

“When it came down to finding a colonel who was senior to Jack to head his court-martial board, every bird colonel in Southeast Asia ducked for cover,” Yeager said. “It was a damned mess and no bird colonel, hoping to be promoted to general some day, wanted to be involved. Everybody from the Joint Chiefs down wanted to nail Broughton and his pilots and make them examples. Nobody wanted to displease the Chief of Staff, but nobody wanted to nail Jack, either, because most of us sympathized.”

Col. Robin Olds, commander of the F-4 wing at Ubon, challenged himself off the court on the grounds of prior knowledge. He later said that Ryan, who “was conducting the investigation himself,” had discussed the case with him.

With the gun camera film gone, there was no evidence against Tolman and Ferguson and they were promptly acquitted of all charges. The court threw out the

conspiracy charges against Broughton but convicted him of the lesser charges, with “intent to deceive” removed from the specifications. He was fined \$100 a month for six months and admonished, probably not what PACAF had in mind. Nevertheless, “it was a kiss of death because the only way for a senior officer to survive a scandal of that magnitude was to have all charges against him dismissed,” Yeager said. “He would never again have a command.”

Also serving on the court was Col. Harry C. Aderholt, commander of the 56th Air Commando Wing at Nakhon Phanom AB, Thailand, noted for his combat orientation and standing up for his aircrews. Returning to the base after the trial, he told his pilots, “I’ve just come from the most disgusting episode of my life. I have seen a great injustice done. If you go out and hit the wrong target and mess up badly and come back here, don’t you tell anybody.”

On Oct. 15, the *Miami Herald* told a curious story in a Copley News Service dispatch filed from Hong Kong. It quoted an unnamed witness whose “report is accepted as genuine in diplomatic circles here.” The witness said he had visited *Turkestan* and seen the holes in the upper and lower bridge. The entry of the bullets had been horizontal rather than at an angle and the holes varied in size from 15 mm to 40 mm.

The indication was that it was the North Vietnamese gunners, trying to hit the low-flying airplanes, who raked the ship.

Following the court-martial, Broughton was assigned to the Weapon System



**Broughton readies for a mission in Maxine McCaffrey's famous painting. The artist was deeply impressed by Broughton and the respect he garnered from his fellow pilots.**

Evaluation Group in Washington, D.C. It was an undemanding job and he had time on his hands. He used it to work on the book that would become *Thud Ridge* and on his appeal.

The court-martial was set aside in July 1968 by the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records, which said the felony conviction was disproportionate, especially when Broughton's shortcomings were measured against his outstanding service in combat. The offense was more in keeping with nonjudicial punishment under UCMJ Article 15, as the Article 32 investigation had recommended. The board dismissed the court-martial findings in favor of an Article 15, with forfeiture of \$300 for two months and admonishment.

An officer assigned to observe the proceedings told Broughton that one of the reviewers had said (although it was not made part of the record) the court-martial was the "grossest miscarriage of military justice he had ever seen."

Upon getting the news of the board's finding, Broughton applied for retirement forthwith and left the Air Force on Aug. 31. "I found it interesting that in the entire history of the United States flying forces, only one other officer had ever had a general court-martial set aside and voided. His name was Billy Mitchell," Broughton said.

*Thud Ridge* was published in 1969, with an introduction by Hanson W.

Baldwin, a longtime military editor of the *New York Times*. There have been six US editions so far, and it has been translated into several foreign languages. Broughton's second book, *Going Downtown: The War Against Hanoi and Washington*, came out in 1988, with a foreword by Tom Wolfe. It was Broughton at his fiery best and, for the first time, told the story of the *Turkestan* incident and the court-martial.

### Reversal and Rehabilitation

"Few people in the Air Force knew much about the *Turkestan* issue, other than a sort of wispy knowledge that Broughton had been court-martialed," said Richard P. Hallion, former historian of the Air Force. "By intention or chance, there had been no press coverage of the trial. Even though people were reading *Thud Ridge*, much of the Air Force regarded Broughton as having a cloud over his head, or worse. There were pockets of support for Broughton, but it was not until later—well after publication of the court-martial story in *Going Downtown*—that he was 'rehabilitated,' so to speak, in popular Air Force opinion."

Among those who believed in Broughton all along was Maxine Mc-

Caffrey, best known of the artists who documented the Vietnam War. During the time Broughton was fighting to get his court-martial negated, her painting of him hung in the Pentagon E Ring, outside the office of Gen. Bruce K. Holloway, the vice chief of staff and an old fighter ace.

In her notes to accompany the painting, McCaffrey said, "At the several squadrons at all three bases I heard much about Col. Jack Broughton from the pilots themselves. It seems they had a rare kind of respect for this man who wouldn't send his men where he didn't fly himself. ... Broughton fought for them to live. They admired him, respected him, feared him, and loved him."

In 1997, the Chief of Staff, Gen. Ronald R. Fogleman, established a professional reading program for Air Force members. There were 34 books, of which 13—*Thud Ridge* among them—were designated as the "basic list." The Air Force ordered 10,000 copies and gave one to every junior officer upon promotion to captain. In 2009, Broughton was one of the noted airmen honored at the Air Command and Staff College's Gathering of Eagles.

"There have been hundreds and hundreds of letters and calls of support over the years, and I still get them," Broughton said. He continues to speak and write. His most recent book, in 2007, was *Rupert Red Two*, covering his career before Vietnam and his post-retirement activities. *Rupert Red Two* was his call sign as a P-47 wingman in Germany on his first operational assignment in 1946.

"Jack Broughton was the finest combat leader at Takhli during my time there," said Leo K. Thorsness, leader of the wing's Wild Weasel SAM hunters, a POW for six years, and recipient of the Medal of Honor. "He was a leader who led with brains and guts. All pilots have some good traits; Jack had them all. But one of his greatest strengths—supporting his pilots—was his downfall."

"Combining Jack Broughton's leadership talent in getting the most out of his men, never asking his pilots to fly a mission he would not fly, and leading the toughest missions into Route Pack Six made Jack Broughton a combat legend," said Thorsness. "I am proud to have served with him." ■

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