

Coming Home

The last flight of the Vietnam War

by Jessie Meyers '10

John Norvell '66, P'99, P'02 is a retired lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Air Force, a scholar of history, the former Director of Alumni Relations at Hobart, and a teacher. This last title has affected the way he views history and defines himself. "I'm always a history professor at heart," says Norvell, who has taught at DeSales High School and the U.S. Air Force Academy.

Norvell wasn't the first member of his family to serve. His father was a master sergeant in World War II and the Korean War and his great-grandfather fought in the Civil War. He even has ancestors who took part in the American Revolution. For Norvell, who fought in the Vietnam War, there was never a moment during which he doubted his decision to fly.

"When you're an aviator, it's your job. You know what you have to do," he explains. "If you end up in combat, that's just your job."

Norvell was commissioned into service in 1966, just as the Vietnam War was gaining momentum. He witnessed numerous demonstrations against the war while working on a command post in Washington, D.C., heard Martin Luther King, Jr. give his last public speech in 1968, and watched Bobby Kennedy's children mourn at their father's grave the day after he was buried.

He also flew 42 combat missions, one of which was the last fighter mission of the Vietnam War.

"There was a lottery to see who would fly the mission among the high ranking officers of the base," Norvell explains. "We were lowly fliers, but we had to sit alert that day and, after the 'official last flight' took off, we scrambled. We took off at 10:30 and the war ended at noon on August 15, 1973. So we were the last flight of the Vietnam War."

Norvell even has a recording from this flight. Right at noon, a mysterious message was broadcast over the command radio net: "Little Orphan Annie has crossed the Blue Ridge Bridge. I repeat: Little Orphan Annie has crossed the Blue Ridge Bridge..."

"We thought, 'What does that mean?' thinking something important was about to be announced," says Norvell. "And then we heard



LT COLONEL JOHN E. NORVELL '66, P'99, P'02 (THEN CAPTAIN), IN FRONT OF AN F-4 FIGHTER AIRCRAFT AT UDORN ROYAL THAI AIR FORCE BASE IN 1973, BEFORE HEADING ON A COMBAT MISSION OVER SOUTH EAST ASI.

it – the sound of a toilet flushing. Yep, it was a joke, and that's how eight years of air war ended. This was someone's idea of the end of the war, an ironic commentary – all those missions and all those lives flushed down the toilet."

For his service in Vietnam, Norvell received four air medals.

But readjusting to post-war life back home was challenging. "Service people weren't well-received after the Vietnam War," Norvell recalls. "There were no parades, no welcome-backs. I ended up going to Alaska, where I flew intercept missions against Soviet bombers. Anchorage was a place out of time. I didn't feel the same sort of resentment like I did on the mainland. Sometimes Homecoming simply means being able to be back home. It means being there, doing your job, and moving on to do another job; that's all there is to it."

Vietnam did, however, foster deep friendships. "You and your comrades become a band of brothers, a fraternity," says Norvell. "You don't get any time off from each other and so you get to know these people better than anyone else."

"I don't usually talk about my time in combat," Norvell explains, "but this is an

example of how HWS alumni have found themselves linked to major events, trends and issues in American history." Another example Norvell notes is his first-year roommate – Dr. Robert Peter Gale '66, who coordinated medical relief efforts for victims of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Accident.

For many years after the war, Norvell taught modern American military history. Interestingly, his focus is the First World War, not the Vietnam War. "I focus on WWI because it drove so much of the history of the United States."

The biggest difference between World War I and the Vietnam War? "Weapons," Norvell says. "Nuclear warfare has shaped everything from social to political to military history for the last 50 years and drove so much of the latter part of the 20th century."

After studying and teaching American history, Norvell has learned that, "...the study of liberal arts allows you to become a better thinker, a better organizer of information, and a better writer. You're more logical and critical in the way you look at things. I try to teach my students not to take things at face value. People have to think about what they're seeing." ■