

Oyster SAR
7th AF/CC Gen. Vogt quote
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'Legends of Aerospace' visit 'The Rock'

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3/9/2010 - **SOUTHWEST ASIA** -- The first and last men to walk on the moon, the commander of Apollo 13, the last Air Force pilot "Ace" and the SR-71 chief test pilot - these are "Legends of Aerospace" and the most recent honored guests of the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing.

Hundreds of servicemembers flocked to the base theater here March 8, to hear the stories of Neil Armstrong, U.S. Navy Retired Capt. Gene Cernan, U.S. Navy Retired Capt. Jim Lovell, U.S. Air Force Retired Brig. Gen. Steve Ritchie and Bob Gilliland as the legends made a special appearance at "The Rock", an undisclosed location in Southwest Asia, as part of a tour visiting military installations throughout Europe and Southwest Asia.

People of all ages filled in seats and lined the theater walls to listen to a 40-minute panel discussion detailing the aviators' experiences within the military and the NASA program, followed by a question and answer session.

"This visit was a dream come true," said Senior Master Sgt. Bradley Behling of the 386th Force Support Squadron. "I grew up in the era where space and technology were developing, and these men were at the center of it. Tours like this show everyone over here fighting that we aren't forgotten."

"Many of these men are in their late 70s or early 80s, yet they're flying all over the world raising morale, shaking the hands of those supporting the war-fighting effort," he said. "When Neil Armstrong comes across the globe to say thank you to you personally for the things you are doing, I don't see how anyone can feel anything but inspired to continue our mission until it's done."

During the panel discussion, moderated by "Good Morning America" pioneer David Hartman, the legends took turns sharing their experiences of triumph, lessons learned, obstacles overcome and some of the great people they met and who helped them along the way.

General Ritchie, the first Air Force ace of the Vietnam conflict, downing five MiG 21s, shared one tale in particular about what he considered to be the greatest combat mission he ever flew.

"People think the missions where we downed enemy airplanes, particularly the 8th of July when we were fortunate enough to down two MiG 21s in a minute and 29 seconds were the greatest missions, but the greatest missions, the most meaningful missions, were the rescue missions," he said.

The general spoke about the rescue mission of fellow pilot, Roger Locher, who ejected over enemy lines when his aircraft was downed.

"We didn't hear from him for 22 days," he said. "We had given up. We thought he'd been killed or captured, but he never came out on the captured list like the North Vietnamese liked to publish every few days."

Then one day while General Ritchie was on a mission, the downed officer made contact with his fellow aviators.

"We were flying in that same area [where he went down] and there was a break in the radio chatter, and as a lot of you know with 20 or 30 airplanes all on the same frequency trying to talk at the same time, particularly when they're shooting at you, it gets a little busy," General Ritchie told the crowd. "So there was a break in the radio chatter and a call came over the air, 'Any allied aircraft, this is Oyster 01B.'"

The general remembered thinking that there was no "oyster" call sign that day and then it donned on him and his fellow pilots that it was Roger Locher.

"After we answered, this is exactly what he said, he said 'Guys I've been down here a long time, any chance of picking me up?'," recalled the general. "I don't believe I'd be that cool after 22 days, do you? We said you bet."

That afternoon the general said his unit underwent the deepest rescue mission ever attempted about 60 miles northwest of Hanoi, but the ground fire the planes undertook was so great that the mission had to be called off.

"We went home that night, and as you can imagine we were very down, frustrated, this was our friend, someone we knew very well," he said. "He was on his third combat tour, over 400 combat missions, not only did we admire and respect him greatly, but he was one of the neatest young men many of us had ever met and now we'd found him and couldn't get him out and of course now [the enemy] knew where he was and very soon he would be captured."

Fortunately, hope was not lost on the downed pilot.

"The next morning in one of the great examples, in my opinion, of courageous combat leadership, Gen. John Vogt, the four-star commander of the 7th Air Force in Saigon ... cancelled the entire strike mission of Hanoi and dedicated all the resources, over 150 airplanes, to the rescue of Roger Locher," he said. "I'll shorten it by saying that we went in, we got him out, brought him back, General Vogt flew up in a T-39 from Saigon and was the first of hundreds of

us to meet him as he stepped off that chopper after 23 days, and we had a party at the club that night that you would have enjoyed!"