

FEATURE

560th FTS hosts Vietnam-era Freedom Flyers reunion

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Every year since 1973 the Freedom Flyer Reunion and Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Symposium has been held on Randolph Air Force Base in honor of repatriated Vietnam War POW pilots. The annual event also offers a "freedom flight" for those who never received the opportunity to take their final, champagne-showered, flight.

The last group of the POWs returned to the United States during the last week of March 1973 after being released from their imprisonment in North Vietnam.

This year's ceremony marked the 38th year since their return. The event, hosted by the 560th Flying Training Squadron, took place March 25 at the base theater.

"Launching American heroes over southeast Texas is our way of paying them back," said Col. Richard Murphy, 12th Flying Training Wing commander. "Our nation learned a valuable lesson at their expense."

The symposium featured the stories and reflections of eight POWs as they shared their experiences from the grim times in the "Hanoi Hilton," the infamous POW camp, and their inspiring stories of perseverance.

Stories including the establishment of the tap code, a successful form of communication in which the alphabet was arranged in a grid with each letter assigned to a different tapping combination, as well as a prison break were highlighted.

"Belief in God, belief in our country, Uniform Code of Military Justice, leadership and comrades helped us return home," said Col. Carlyle Harris, eight-year POW and featured speaker at the symposium. "We won. We prevailed over the enemy. It was they who ended up with mud on their faces as we came out victorious."

During the Vietnam War, 3,326 military personnel were killed in action or were missing. Only 1,322 people were returned, said Lt. Col. Elmo Baker, six-year POW.

This year, the squadron began recording both the symposium and the stories told by individual "flyers" as a means of preserving history and use in the future.

"It is important to begin recording now so future generations can benefit from their experiences," Colonel Murphy said.

The symposium was followed at noon by a wreath-laying ceremony at the Missing Man Monument in honor of America's military heroes who never made it home from war.

The ceremony, which was open to the base community, included members from the Randolph Honor Guard for a three-volley rifle salute, a Band of the West bugler for "Taps" and a T-38 Talon II fly-over in missing man formation.

"Thank you," Colonel Murphy said. "Your legacy will never be forgotten."



The Randolph Air Force Base Honor Guard provides a three-volley rifle salute March 25 during the annual wreath-laying ceremony held each year in conjunction with the Freedom Flyer reunion and symposium.



Above: Col. Richard Murphy (center), 12th Flying Training Wing commander, and retired Col. William Goldfein (right) lay a wreath in honor of America's military heroes who never made it home from war at the Missing Man Monument March 25 during the 38th annual Freedom Flyers Reunion.

Photo by Don Lindsey

Left: Freedom Flyers salute during the national anthem at the symposium held in conjunction with the annual reunion.

Photo by Joel Martinez