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COMMANDER WILLIAM THOMAS, USN (RET.) *NAVAL AVIATION AND WEAPONS TESTING*

About Our Guest Speaker for April 3, 2004

Bill Thomas' first aviation experience was a scenic ride with his younger brother, over the rolling fields above Canastota, NY in a Piper Tri-Pacer piloted by their uncle. Although both boys were about 10 years old, it was clearly a formative experience, as both chose careers in aviation. Bill joined the Navy following graduation from State University of New York at Albany. He was commissioned in January 1967 and received his wings as a Naval Aviator in June 1968.

Assigned to NAS Lemoore, CA, Bill trained in the A-7 Corsair II. His first operational tour was with Attack Squadron 97 from March 1969 to 1972 flying the A-7A and A-7E. While with the squadron, **he completed two cruises to Vietnam flying 200 combat missions off the USS CONSTELLATION and the USS ENTERPRISE.** He then reported to Operational Test and Evaluation Squadron 5 (VX-5), at NWC China Lake, CA. For the next two years he worked on such projects as Walleye, APAM, laser-guided bombs and laser countermeasures. He flew 3 models of A-7s, 3 models of A-4s and the US-2B. In 1974, Bill returned to NAS Lemoore via the Naval Post Graduate Safety School, then reported aboard Attack Squadron 195, the venerable "Dambusters." Again flying A-7E Corsair II's, he served as Operations and Safety Officer, deploying to the Western Pacific on USS KITTY HAWK.

Bill returned to Lemoore in 1977 as Weapons and Safety Officer in Attack Squadron 122 as an instructor pilot, preparing newly winged pilots for the Fleet in the A-7. Bill was "forced" to accumulate numerous hours in the T-28. In 1980, he reported to Commander, Carrier Group 8 in Norfolk, VA, as the Strike Weapons Officer. (Before reporting to Norfolk, he and Pat were married and found time to honeymoon just up the road from Pine Mountain Lake, in Yosemite.) The good news was that he was able to remain flying the A-7 during this tour, including deployments on the USS INDEPENDENCE to the Indian Ocean amidst the Iran Hostage Crisis, the USS EISENHOWER during North Atlantic NATO operations, the USS KENNEDY in the Caribbean, and, on the USS AMERICA preparing the carrier and Air Wing for deployment. The bad news was that he was on board carriers for a total of 558 days over two years. When their

time in Virginia ended, Pat recalls that he had almost learned the neighbors' names.



Pacific Missile Test Center at Point Mugu, CA was Bill's next stop. According to habit, he flew 40 hours the first month plus the next 10 weekends in the A-7, as well as the A-6E Intruder, chasing Tomahawk missiles across the Western United States! Bill served as Flight Test Officer and led the Attack Weapons Branch, testing TOMAHAWK and HARPOON missiles, as well as a variety of weapons and target drones. He completed the National Test Pilot School Experimental Flight Dynamics Course. In 1984, he assumed the duties of Joint Advanced

Weapons Countermeasures Program Officer and tested numerous weapons, most of which are only recently emerging from the "black" world.

During his tour at Point Mugu, Bill earned his MBA at Pepperdine University. His military awards include an individual Air Medal, 19 Strike/Flight Air Medals, a Navy Commendation Medal (with Combat V), Vietnam Cross of Gallantry and Meritorious Service Medal. Before his Navy retirement in 1988, **Commander Thomas amassed over 4500 flight hours in tactical aircraft and 543 carrier arrested landings.** He retired after 22 years as a Naval Aviator, having never gone more than 3 months out of a Navy jet.

Bill then joined Northrop (now Northrop-Grumman Corporation) and has been involved in the development of cruise missiles, targets and unmanned vehicles. He has nearly 6,000 flight hours, most recently in their class '73 Cardinal with Pat, an Instrument-rated pilot. Bill is the Chairman of the Camarillo Airport Authority and flies EAA Young Eagles as often as possible. He and Pat have been "weekenders" at PML since 1998. Bill has two sons, LCDR Keith Thomas, a Navy C-130 pilot at Point Mugu, CA and Mike Thomas, of Elmira NY.

The Pine Mountain Lake Aviation Association is honored to welcome Commander Bill Thomas on Saturday, April 3, 2004, 5:30 p.m. at the Buchner Hangar. Please find more details on the last page of this newsletter.

✦ Keith Zenobia