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Once Is Plenty

When a combat plane goes down in Southeast Asia, the conflict stops as far as the U.S. Air Force and area ground troops are concerned. A massive "search and rescue" effort is launched to save the pilot.

James L. DeVoss, retired 1st Lt. of the

U.S. Air Force speaks with authority on the subject. He was the object of just such an effort last June. He told Wayland Rotarians at their luncheon meeting Wednesday of his personal experience and showed a film of his rescue. He is a native of the area.



He's the only one known to have done it and survived. Retired Air Force 1st Lt. James L. DeVoss smiles as he relates his story of being ejected from a jet flying 600 miles an hour during a combat mission over Southeast Asia. Only visible remaining toll of his ordeal are his leg braces, which, he told Wayland Rotarians, he "eventually will throw away".

DeVoss was, and probably still is, the only jet pilot to eject from a stricken ship flying 600 miles an hour, and live to tell his story. His reason for talking about it is "to show the great value the American Government places on a human life," he told his Wayland audience.

The young hero's jet was hit by enemy fire while returning from a completed mission June 16 of last year. His ship went out of control at 5000 feet. Five pounds of TNT under his seat ejected him before a rocket on his chute took over after clearing the jet. The excessive speed put so much strain on Lt. DeVoss' body that his legs pulled out of his knee sockets, ripping all ligaments and tendons. Surgeons at the base hospital told him that had his legs stretched another one-eighth of an inch both would have been torn off by the force of the wind. His left arm was broken in six places. He was fortunate that he came down in an area with low-growing bushes that helped to break the fall. On regaining consciousness, he managed to use his rescue radio by pulling open the antenna with his teeth, allowing his three wingmen above to record his exact position on the ground.

They in turn radioed home base and continued to circle the area until more planes arrived. First came four slow-flying planes to search out and repulse any ground fire to make it safe for two 'copters with rescue crews to come in and lower men and a litter. Three other aircraft in the area came in to assist.

The young pilot pointed out that in all, twelve aircraft teamed up to make his rescue possible. "I'm personally very grateful that the United States puts such a high price on a life" he quipped.

The Air Force filmed the rescue, and Lt. DeVoss was given a duplicate when he gave the Air Force rights to show it. The photos are the best taken so far of a rescue mission in the Vietnam war. Included are shots of the rescue team being lowered to the ground from a hovering copter, first-aid being administered after he was lifted aboard, and final touchdown back at base.

The retired Lt. is a University of Michigan pre-med graduate. He enlisted in the Air Force in January of 1967, took pilot's training at Randolph Field, Texas, and completed jet flying at McConnell, Kansas before going to Takhli, Royal Thailand Air Force base. He flew combat missions from January of 1969 until he was shot down six months later. He completed 70 1/2 missions. He was the only one in the squadron with that 1/2 tacked on. That 1/2 ended in hospitalization for 5 months.

Does the young pilot want to go back? He does! He wants to finish his full year of duty in Southeast Asia but the Air Force says "no". The reason? If he were forced to eject again under just ordinary conditions he would lose both legs because of permanent instability in his knees.

Jet Pilot DeVoss wanted to be a career Air Force officer. He has these words of advice to young men wondering about such a career: "If you like to fly, the Air Force is a fine career."

Lt. DeVoss' recovery from his injuries is proving to be something of a medical miracle, according to his doctors. There was grave doubt that he would ever have use of his legs. He walks without crutches but does have braces which he maintains will eventually be thrown away.