

JOHN KNUTSON



John Andrew Knutson was working in the year after High School, trying to decide what he wanted to do. In the 1960's the probability of having to go into the military was very high. At one point, John was interviewing for a job, and the man doing the interview told him, "Everything looks good, but why don't you contact us once you have the military out of the way."

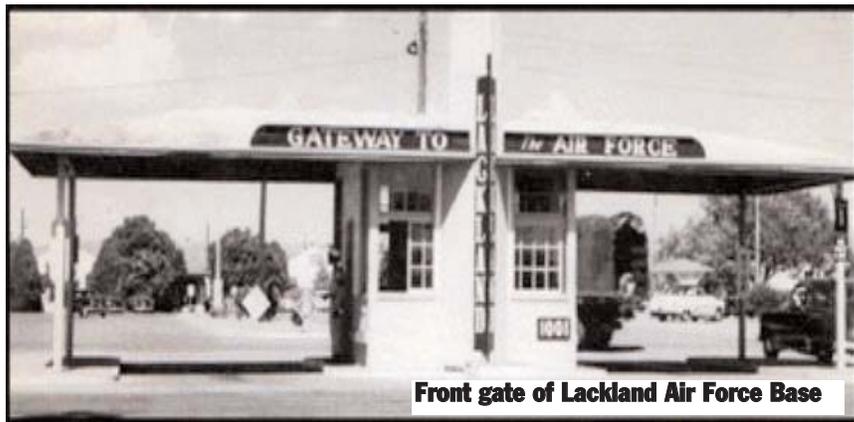
Military service wasn't a matter of if, but a matter of when. John assumed that he would get drafted, so he decided that he would join the military on his own terms, in his own time. He was antsy to do something different, so he went to talk with the local recruiters. He talked with the Army and the Navy, and both told him that he would have to wait for a "slot" to open for him to go.

John then went to visit with the Air Force recruiter. He was told that there was a slot open for him to go down for enlistment on the following Monday. John would have to leave on Sunday night and head to Souix Falls South Dakota. Knutson decided to go, and on Sunday night, boarded a bus in Granite Falls Minnesota for Souix Falls.

On Monday morning, John reported for a physical, which he passed along with a series of other tests. By 2:00 PM John was sworn into the US Air Force, the date was 2 May 1966. He was given an airline ticket for that night. He didn't go home to say goodbye, just straight to the airport.

He flew to San Antonio Texas, to report for Basic Training. Knutson was being sent to Lackland Air Force Base. He boarded a bus, bound for the base. A couple of hundred feet from the main gate, the driver pulled over and told them all to "smoke if you got 'em" and that this would be the last taste of the civilian world they would see for a long time.

It was about 3:00 AM when John and the rest of the men on the bus entered the base. After some “encouragement” to get up and get moving, the men were sent to a temporary barracks for the night. They had barely got in the barracks, and into bed before the Training Instructors (TI’s) burst into the place yelling and screaming at them all.



Front gate of Lackland Air Force Base

They were rushed out, and sent for breakfast. One of the first things John did while at basic was to go through a “shot line”. After that, he went to get his haircut, and uniform issue. Then, he was sent to his real barracks, and assigned a bunk.

Knutson recalls that at basic, he was kept so busy that he didn’t really have time to digest everything that was going on. For most all of the guys, it was their first time away from home. He didn’t have much of a chance to decide on any opinions on much of anything. He just knew that he hated it. Looking back on it years later however, he notes that it was a heck of a good experience.

Basic Training was pretty much of a rush course for Knutson. He only spent four weeks at it. They had one day on the firing range. John recalls firing only about 60 rounds, before the time there was up and they were moving on to the next topic. That was the first, and pretty much only time John fired a weapon in the military.

In June, after graduation from Basic, John was sent to Rantoul Illinois, Chanute Air Force base for Tech School. He was assigned to Aircraft Instrument School, based on an early aptitude style test. Here, Knutson recalls that they marched everywhere.

The studies at Tech School were fun and seemed easy to John. They did component by component training. They looked at an individual instrument, what it told, and how it was all connected to get the reading. “I loved it” he says, it was very interesting to him. “After we got through basic, it started to get fun.”

On 1 September 1966, John graduated from Tech School. The school lasted about 2 1/2 months. Most of the men in the class were assigned to a US base. A couple of them were assigned to an overseas post. John received orders for Glasgow Air Force Base. The TI’s had never heard of it and assumed that John was being sent to Scotland. After talking with another guy at Chanute, he found out that Glasgow was in Montana.



When Knutson was sent to Glasgow, it was a relatively new base. It had been built in the mid 1950’s. This would be John’s first permanent assignment.

When Knutson arrived at the base to check in, one guard looked at his orders, the other stood looking up at the sky. That guard asked if he liked to look at the sky, to which John replied he never really thought about it. The guard looked at him and said, “Well there ain’t another thing to do out here.”

From day one, John notes that he was either training on the planes, or on how to use the tools to repair them. Education on the systems he was working on was almost non-stop. He notes that he always had a book in hand, studying. He says that he just got into the routine.

Around Easter 1967, John made a trip back to Minnesota to visit. It was a kind of unannounced trip. Knutson hopped a train, and traveled to Willmar Minnesota, arriving in the early morning hours. He waited in a Cafe near the train depot for a time to call his sister and brother-in-law in Kandiyohi, about 5 miles east. While there, another guy offered to give John a ride to their place, and John accepted. When John arrived at their home, in the early morning hours, his brother-in-law answered the door, fresh out of bed and said to him, "What the hell are you doing here!" Even after all these years, they still laugh at the greeting he received that night. He spent his leave traveling to visit family and friends in Minnesota before traveling back to Montana.

While in Montana, John did find something else to occupy his time other than look at the sky. He met a young woman, Vivian Schultz, and the two were married on 8 December 1967.

In March 1968, John received orders to report to Perrin Air Force Base in Dennison Texas. He was a part of Air Training Command, training on F-102's and T-37's. It was a completely new training routine. In the morning he was in class, and the afternoons he spent on the flight line. He stayed at Perrin for about 6 months, until late September 1968.



F-105 "Thunder Chief"

Knutson was then sent to McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita Kansas for more Tech School. He was there to train on F-105 "Thunder Chief's", a fighter bomber airplane. This was to be the stepping off point for overseas service. John figured there was a strong possibility of being sent overseas after Glasgow, and now being trained on planes being used in the war, John expected to receive word for overseas duty.

In December 1968, John left McConnell for California to be sent overseas to support operations in Vietnam. He dropped his wife, Vivian, off with her parents in Wolf Point Montana, before traveling on to Travis Air Force Base in California. Vivian was pregnant with their first child when he left. John's daughter, Jillene, was born in February 1969, while he was overseas.

On 28 December 1968, Knutson left Travis Air Force Base for service in Thailand. His plane took off, and headed to Hawaii. After leaving Hawaii, Knuston recalls celebrating the New Year on the plane between Hawaii and Wake Island. He then traveled on to Japan, and then finally landing in Bangkok Thailand on 2 January 1969.

After landing in Thailand, the door opened to the plane, and John got his first impression of the area. John recalls the overwhelming "stink" in the air of the country. Thailand had a completely different way of life, with open sewer systems, and a lower cleanliness level than the United States. The smell he recalls so vividly was that of a latrine smell.

Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base main gate



In Bangkok, John and the other men boarded buses and were transported about 120 miles north to Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base. Here he was to help repair and maintain planes being used in support of the Vietnam War.



Takhli Royal Thai Air Force Base



At Takhli John was assigned to a unit to work on F-105 airplanes, a total of 75 over three squadrons. The planes would take part in the bombing missions running into Vietnam 24 hours a day. They would fly in, drop their bombs, fly out, reset and repair at Takhli, and go out again.

From time to time, planes and pilots would go out, but not come back. Lost to the war. The first couple of times that this happened, it bothered John, but after a while it just became routine. He just didn't want to, or have time to dwell on the ones that were lost. If he did this, he couldn't do his job effectively. It became a part of the job and the situation that he was in.

The work day was a 12 hour day, John's shift was from 6pm to 6am. Four days on, and then one day off. He would go to work and deal with plane after plane, trying to repair and keep the F-105's operational. Occasionally, a pilot would come around and be in a hurry to want to take off and cause a stir to get the maintenance personnel moving, but John would tell them that he has to sign off on the repairs that he makes, and he wasn't going to sign off until he had completed the check.

He was issued a weapon from the armory, but never carried it. The weapon was kept in the armory, and if they needed it, they would have to go there to get it. This was only in the event the base was being overrun or in a combat situation. The base for the most part, was fairly secure.

John recalls of Takhli, "Thank God they kept you busy because, what would you do?" There was plenty to do in the area if you didn't mind getting into some trouble, but for someone that wanted to serve his time and then get home to his new family, the off hours got to be pretty boring. One time he recalls actually going to go see a movie in Thailand, a western. Also, from time to time, a USO show would come to them for him to check out.

Once a month he was allowed to use the “Mars Radio” system to call home. This was a series of radio to radio communication that was used to patch through to the United States and the phone systems to call family at home. Any charges incurred by the phone system was charged to the receiving phone number. On occasion, if John was lucky, his call was routed through the site owned by Barry Goldwater, who would pick up the charges for connecting the calls of service personnel overseas.

Eventually, Knutson got word that he would hopefully be home in time for Christmas, this brightened his spirits. Then, shortly before Thanksgiving, 1969, John was awakened after work one morning and told to go see the orderly.



Barry Goldwater

Knuston was told to pack up his things, and clear the base, his flight was at 6am the next morning. Although excited about the prospect of going home, John was almost certain that he wouldn't be able to “clear the base” in less than a day. Normally it takes about two days for a guy to check in to all departments to be cleared to go home. Seeing John was frustrated, his supervisor asked him what was going on. John explained his situation and was taken to his Commander. The Commander looked at his orders and told him, “clear these departments and come back to me.” The Commander would take care of the rest of the areas that John needed to clear.

One of the areas that John did have to clear was the armory. He had to go there, show his ID, and sign off to take his name off the list of people authorized a weapon. After all the areas were taken care of, John left Takhli for Bangkok to check in for a seat assignment.

He took off and flew to Okinawa, then non stop to Travis Air Force base in California. Knuston arrived at Travis on Thanksgiving Day 1969. He had orders in hand to go to Altus Air Force base for training with the first active group of C-5's.

It seemed like it would be a pretty good job, but when John showed his orders, he was kind of laughed at. The guy asked what was he going to do with this? John was a bit puzzled so the guy explained, the training was 6 months, and Knutson only had 5 months left in the Air Force. So John asked what his options were. He was told that he could extend, so he could go to the school, but his other option was to be discharged. Having a new family at home, Knutson chose discharge. All of the offices were closed for Thanksgiving, so he would have to do the paperwork the following day.

He was discharged on 28 November 1969 as an Airman 3rd Class, the day after Thanksgiving. He called home to his wife Vivian, and made arrangements to be picked up at the Great Falls airport the following day. On Saturday, he saw his wife, and for the first time, his nine month old daughter.

After his service, John began working in the civilian world, trying to find something that would “fit”. John and his wife welcomed a second daughter, Linnae in late 1970. They were making their home in Montana.

While employed with Cat, John followed some prodding by a friend of his to go look at the opportunities with the Air National Guard in Great Falls. The opportunity allowed Knutson to enlist in the Air National Guard, and to work full time for the military working on airplanes as a civilian. In order to take the job opening, he had to be a member of the guard unit and drill with them, as regular enlistee's do. He took the job that they offered and went home to tell his wife he had a new job, the third one in one and a half years.



F-106 "Delta Dart" Aircraft

F-106 Delta Dart

On 15 April 1972 John joined the Montana Air National Guard. His first two weeks in the guard, he notes that he "just showed up" for the most part. There wasn't anything specific for him to do. Then John was sent to Malstrom Air Force base for training on F-106, "Delta Dart" planes.

He was hired onto the Civil Service on 15 May 1972. He worked on F-106's for the next 17 years.



F-16 Fighting Falcon

As technology progressed, the Air National Guard began transitioning to F-16 "Fighting Falcon's".



Montana Air National Guard Patch, after the unit transitioned to the F-16 aircraft. - Donated by John Knutson

He served in Montana, Panama, Tyndall Air Force Base, Fresno California, and Souix City Iowa during his career.

In the summer of 1990, John also served at the Air National Guard base in Duluth Minnesota for a number of months.

On 29 September 1995, John retired from the Civil Service with the Montana Air National Guard. He continued to serve in the Air Guard until he retired on 31 December 1999 as a Master Sergeant E-7.

Knutson and his wife still reside in Montana. Their oldest daughter, Jillene, followed her father into the Air Force becoming a commissioned officer and KC 135 pilot.



Knutson's E-7 Master Sergeant Rank - the style on left was eventually replaced with the current style shown on the right. Donated by Knutson



Medals earned by Knutson from top left: Air Force Commendation, Air Force Good Conduct, National Defense Service, (row 2 from left) Vietnam Service, Armed Forces Reserve, & Republic of Vietnam Service.



Master Sergeant John A. Knutson - Montana Air National Guard