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May 10, 2014

O. Keith Thomas  
AEW Crewmate, USN

Keith,

These past 15 years have been such a blessing for each of us in FC-35. Our crew was a tight "Band of Brothers", as were most of our squadron mates! Now, not only are we thrilled to be back together, after 50 + years, but able to finally share some of the good memories and not just the crash in 1961. But I do think the reunions helped to put some closure to our losses. I know it did for me. There were so many questions I had about that night, and nobody to talk to. I had a spell of "heavy" nights for a long time. My wife Marlene recalls many fretful early morning hours of my keeping her awake for a few years. Very frustrating! It wasn't until the crew started finding each other and talking that those old feelings and concerns could finally be put to rest.

Some of my funniest memories are of you and Clark playing against all comers in those perpetual Pinochle games in the old VW-12 barracks. You may not remember, but I only sat in on 1 or 2 games. You guys blew me off the chair with double-deck Pinochle! It sure wasn't what I learned at home. I didn't mind loosing, but I was a Cheap Skate, and "penny a point / dollar a set", was too rich for me! (Chuckle) Those were fun days. My frugalness also kept me out of the Waikiki Night life ashore, as your marriage did for you. But the old crew had many a trek to the EM Club at Midway on the few days we didn't fly. I also remember some great crew picnics on the beach at Midway too. You were good at planning fun things to occupy us between missions.

Returning from my January 1960 home leave, I re-joined the newly merged F-35 and C-20 crews as 1<sup>st</sup> Radioman. I think my old friend, Chief Mike Hopper, put a good word in for me, and Commander Wood made it happen. You were already the CIC Crew Leader and helped me fit right in with the guys in the "dark room." With Lt. Mills and you constantly conducting CIC crew training at Barber's Point, and likewise for us in our training, F-35 and C-20 combined as FC-35, was the best all-around, navy reconnaissance flight crew in the Pacific (in MY mind), and eager to prove it! (Chuckle) It was exciting times for us in our youth. (And probably why we felt the pain after we crashed)! That last year together before the crash was amazing. FC-35 won many top AEW Mission evaluations, Best Navigation, Most Advanced Pilots, fastest CIC Response Times, fastest Emergency Response Time, etc., - and the best "in-flight meals", with Charlie R.! Remember? ☺

Sadly, after our January 1961 incident, you and I went separate directions. I knew of Chief Hopper's anxiety about flying again, and heard about Commander John Wood's severe break down, but was unaware of your problems, until these last few years. I did hear from one of our old shipmates a couple of years after I got out that you had been hospitalized for some emotional issues while you were still in the Navy. I remember being pretty surprised at the time. I was hoping it was not a result of the crash.

The depression issues you have dealt with were NOT like the Keith Thomas I remember before 1-22-1961! I never flew with a better CIC Crew leader while I was in the Navy. We, the flight guys, all really respected you and you always looked out for your crew.

If I can ever be of help, my contact info is above. Marlene and I will be attending the Midway Island Reunion, June 5<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> in Kentucky, then on to our summer home.

Fair winds shipmate, and God Bless,

Lee F. Kalsch,  
AT-2, First Radioman, FC- 35 AEWBARRONPAC, USN

*Work is for those who don't play golf*