

## COLONEL ROBERT J. GRAHAM ONE OF THE FEW

WHEN?  
1934 to present

WHERE? Vietnam



EVENT  
Vietnam War

VOCABULARY  
POW Viet Cong  
MIA

Silver star recipient Colonel Robert J. Graham wrote about his experience as a fighter pilot in the Vietnam War in his book titled *One of the Few*. The writing spans the years from 1962 to 1973 during his time in Vietnam. He explains the reason for writing the book in an interview with Fox 56 news: "...this is sort of a semi-apology to my family to tell them why it was so important that I was gone defending the country so much." Graham served four tours of combat duty during his time in the United States Air Force (USAF).

Born in Scranton, Pa., his father moved the family to Bloomfield, New Jersey, after receiving a promotion. That is where Graham called home during his formative years. According to his PBS interview, Graham was 18 when he dropped out of college and joined the USAF in 1953 (Zavada Times Leader). He spent the next 26 years as a fighter pilot. During his fourth tour he took command of the 4<sup>th</sup> Tactical Air Squadron in Thailand flying the F-4 (Kirkus). It was while he and his pilot were at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, however, that Graham was convinced to become a F100 fighter pilot. After serving as navigator and radio operator, he received his pilot wings in 1960 (Kirkus).

In May of 1966, Graham was stationed at the Bien Hoa Air Base in the Dong Nai province near the Dong Nai River. It is about 16 miles north of what is now Ho Chi Minh city. The base kept two fighter jets on the landing strip at the ready 24/7. A call came in that nearly 500 men were being attacked by about 1,500 Viet Cong near a base on the border of Cambodia. If the men weren't helped a massacre would result. He and his fellow pilot ran to the aircraft and flew to see what they could do to help. It took the two jets each with two 500-pound bombs and 800 rounds of 20 mm cannon shot about 15 minutes to reach the area. They were directed to the exact location by the radio operator below. The lead plane made his first run and dropped his bombs. As Graham prepared to follow his jet was hit with 50 caliber rounds from Viet Cong defenders. He pulled up above the clouds to see if he could still



fly the airplane and discovered that the fuel pumps that supplied fuel to the jet engine had been hit and the only way he could get fuel to the engine was by gravity. That meant no steep

climbs or turns or speed. He had to fly at minimum speed. Fortunately, the first plane was able to chase the attackers away after expending all of his ammo.

Graham waited for the lead plane to escort him back to Bien Hoa when another call came. A forward position of about 500 men needed help to defend themselves from over 4,000 attackers at Tay Ninh. Though the lead plane was able to fly he was out of ammunition. Graham had a full complement of ammunition but was not able to fly his plane except by gravity feed. That made him very vulnerable to being shot down. Though his plane was unable to fully respond, he decided to do what he could to help the men below realizing that he may well lose his life. As he came through the clouds, Graham reports that the number of defenders looked like “someone kicked over an anthill” (PBS). On his first pass he dropped his two 500-pound bombs in the heaviest concentration of troops. He slowly turned his plane around and attacked again and again—made 15 passes-- and shot at the enemy troops until he was out of ammunition. The enemy had begun a fast retreat. Still, he made more passes to encourage the enemy to continue to turn away from the base. The U.S. troops had been saved. When Graham returned to his base, his plane had over 350 bullet holes in it, but none had hit Graham.

When his last tour was completed, he was assigned to the Pentagon as a strategic planner and then to the Air War College. In addition to the 18 medals and ribbons awarded to him, he has recently been nominated for the Medal of Honor. Since his retirement in 1982, he and his wife moved to Mountain Top, PA. and he began a second career in financial investment planning. His company Riggs Asset Management Company was formed in 1990 (Kirkus). *One of the Few* explores his view of the war from the air from over 4,000 hours of flight time.

#### ONLINE RESOURCES

[Genealogy Trails](#)

[Kirkus](#) Colonel Robert J. Graham

[PBS VIDEO COLONEL GRAHAM](#)

[Fox 56 news](#)

[Zavada Times Leader Col. Graham](#)