

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR



Captain Tom Laitinen, Jr. Operation Iraqi Freedom

Tom Laitinen, son of Tom and Sandy Laitinen, was a native of Negaunee, Michigan, and graduated from Negaunee High School in 1993. In the following four years at Michigan State University, he majored in engineering but at the same time gained his certification as a private pilot.

In 1997 after graduation from college, he followed in the footsteps of his older

brother, Michael Wasson, a career military man and a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force.

After several training steps and attaining the rank of Captain, Tom Jr. joined the 414th Combat Squadron as a pilot of an F-15 Strike Eagle assigned to Iraq. On March 27, 2003 on the fifth day of the war on Iraq, Laitinen's squadron bombed Saddam Hussein's presidential palace and other targets in Baghdad while flying through a barrage of anti-aircraft fire. The mission was performed at night because the Air Force's night vision capabilities were much more advanced than the Iraqi's. Even so, bursts of anti-aircraft fire as well as surface-to-surface missiles made flying over the heart of the capital extremely dangerous at that time. As a result, on April 19, 2003, Laitinen was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. While the attack was

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cited by his superiors as being instrumental in the early success of the war, Laitinen said the most important aspect to him was that he assisted the troops on the ground.

Currently, Captain Laitinen is back in the United States assigned as a staff officer at Nellis Air Force Base in Las Vegas, Nevada.

TJ Mudge, Aug. 2005