

AVIATION WALL OF HONOR

Major James Ronald Lehtonen Pilot USAF, Viet Nam



James Ronald Lehtonen, a Negaunee native, was born on September 20, 1933 to T. Leonard and Servia (Wigg) Lehtonen. While attending Negaunee High School he was awarded membership in the National Honor Society despite working as a pin setter at the Viga Bowling Lanes, delivering the Mining Journal on his paper route, and running and pole vaulting on the track team.

Following graduation from high school he enrolled at Michigan Tech University where in four years earned his Bachelor's degree in mining engineering. He continued to excel in sports, participating in track but also swimming where as 1955 captain, Tech had an undefeated season. Always interested in flying, he was a member of Michigan Tech's Air Force ROTC program. He was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant upon graduation in 1955.

Jim entered the United States Air Force in June 1956 and was assigned to Lackland AFB, San Antonio, Texas for indoctrination before beginning flight training at Hondo AFB, Texas. He continued his Fighter Interceptor Pilot training at Byron and Perrin AFB's in Texas.

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During his career he accumulated over 5,000 flying hours and was involved in missions in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. He earned the Distinguished Flying Cross and twenty-four Air Medals while serving his country. On his first tour of duty in Vietnam he flew 350 combat missions under extremely hazardous conditions serving as a Forward Air Controller while flying a Cessna T01D/L-19 "Bird Dog."

On his second tour, he flew F-100 Super Sabre jets on 269 combat sorties for a total of 350 combat hours.

Additional awards included the Southwest Asia Campaign M/R, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, the Air Force Longevity Service Award with four Oak Leaf Clusters, the Air Force Expeditionary Medal and the Air Force Commendation Medal.

After serving for over twenty years Major Lehtonen retired from the USAF in 1976 and was employed as a charter pilot for a private fixed base operator in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He was killed on April 7, 1980 when he encountered severe weather conditions on a routine flight and crashed into a mountain top in North Carolina. His remains are interred in the family plot in Negaunee.

Jim is survived by his wife Jean Marie, three daughters Karin, Tracy and Susan and his sister Barbara Lehtonen of Negaunee and Clinton Twp, Michigan.

TJ Mudge, Aug. 2006