

Per Knight, Class of '41 – Top Gun

William K. Knight was born Sept. 10, 1924, grandson of homesteaders who built a cabin on the Bigfork River banks in 1901 when Per's father James was a boy. James and wife Esther had 5 children. Baby William, called Per, joined two brothers, Jere and James Todd, and two sisters, Jean and Janice.

On Per's 3rd birthday, he was rewarded for his swimming prowess with permission to swim alone across the Bigfork River. On his 5th birthday he was given his first gun. He completed grades 1-8 at Zaiser School and graduated from Bigfork High in 1942. That summer he cut and peeled pulpwood at their logging camp. Then, with many men fighting in WWII, Per joined other young men in North Dakota to help with the harvest.

Upon turning 18, Per searched for recruiters who handled Aviation Cadet enlistees and found one at the Federal Building in Minneapolis. The recruiter led him to the room for the two-year college equivalency test. Next step was a physical exam at Ft. Snelling. On Nov. 18, '42 he was sworn into the Aviation Cadet program.

Called to active duty on Jan. 31, 1943, Per's training to become a fighter pilot occurred in roughly 3 months segments at several locations - initial training, college courses, flying instruction, qualification tests for single engine flight training and mechanics.

Per reached fully qualified status at The Cadet Center (now Lackland AFB). His pay went from \$25 to \$75 a month, his uniform changed, including a propeller on his cap. PVT William Knight was officially an Aviation Cadet in the U.S. Air Corps. Training continued at Sikeston, MO with primary flight training, 115 hp planes; Winfield, KS, training on 450hp fixed wing planes; Aloe Air Base, advanced training. On March 12, 1944, William Knight received his wings and his commission as 2nd Lt. For the next 2 years Per was an instructor for newer aviation cadets.

Peggy meets Per: "Per and a pilot friend flew from Victoria TX to Norman OK, then drove to Oklahoma City where the other pilot's girlfriend was my friend. Jo: Do you want to meet Per? Me: No not particularly. Jo: Please? He's very handsome. Me: I don't care if he's the President. Jo prevailed and we met at mother's house, then went to the drug store's soda fountain. I interrogated Per who later said he was hooked almost immediately. The first year, due to Per's training, we had only 4 dates but many letters. Friendship and affection grew. 16 months after he got his wings, Per and I were married in the Luke Air Force Base chapel, July 25, 1945."

The night WWII ended Per, now 1st Lt, had cleared Luke Base, AZ to go to a fighter group in the Pacific. Suddenly, radio stations called for military personnel heading to other locations to report to the nearest base or, if near their previous base, return. Thus Per remained at Luke instructing advanced cadets.

In 1946 Per was transferred to Chanute AFB mechanics training center and, that same year, was sent to Carlisle Barracks, PA to Military Government School to learn how to get Japanese industry off the U.S. welfare list. For the next 3 years, Per was stationed in Japan. His team's job was to upgrade houses to U.S. standards, followed by upgrading a hotel on the side of Mount Fuji. He was then sent to the Headquarters 8th Army in Yokohama. There they restored industries between Yokohama and Tokyo where such things as Yamaha motorcycles were manufactured.



In 1947 the Air Corps separated from the Army to become the U.S. Air Force. The 49th Fighter Group was then in Chitose Air Base on Hokaido Island. Per was now flying P-51s and set a new air to air gunnery record for the 49th Group. (See picture above, Knick's P-51, Peggy's Passion) Per states, "When I advised the target scanner that he hadn't counted my black paint marks that had knicked the target's edge, the 7th Squad Commander said I'd now be known as Nick

Knick. I added the K to make it Knick. I am still Knick to most friends beyond the MN and Canadian borders."

Next Per and the 49th group were sent to Misawa Air Base in Japan. He says, "I suddenly learned, due to my Military Government training and flying experience, I was now a flight commander in the 49th and was the Japanese labor officer for Misawa which included building the runways for jet aircraft."

When the USAF got their first two jet aircraft at Misawa, Per was among the first pilots to fly the jet and to establish conversion of propeller pilots to become comb at ready Jet Jocks. Doing this, he became jet combat ready himself.

Peggy: "Per was in Japan for 3 years, I lived with family and worked in my brother's business office. When he returned, Per recognized me immediately but I didn't recognize him. The 20 year old who left was now a 23 year old officer, wore glasses, was all grown up. Daughter Carol was born in Mesa AZ in '50 and son James in Bryan, TX in '52. During the rest of Per's service we lived on base."

In 1949, back in the U.S., Per returned to Randolph AFB, TX, in control of the students but not responsible for their training. Soon someone realized that due to his being jet combat ready Per should be on a base that had jet fighters. He was sent to Williams AFB near Mesa, AZ, a base that had jet fighters. "50% of the most experienced jet fighter pilots in the USAF were based there," Per states. "Now I was in hog heaven." Per advanced to being Flight Commander with 25 instructors and 100 students under his command.

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950. Per was promoted to Captain in 1951 and sent to Bryan AFB, TX, closed after WWII, reopened to train the same type students as at Williams. No one there had flown F-84s. He wanted training experience in the F-84 so I could talk to the flight students about the F-84 which they could fly for tactical missions when they got their wings and would probably be flying in combat. Most of my instructors had tactical in a P-80, not an F-84. At Luke AFB they ran me through some typical flights; thus I could tell my students about typical combat flight profiles.

The day the armistice was signed, July 27, 1953 Per was released from his major command lock-down and was on the road to Korea. He had to go through bombing and strafing training in T33s at Williams AFB and then to Luke AFB for more gunnery in an earlier model F-84 to be ready to fly the F-84G in Korea. Per became Squadron Operations Officer flying out of K-2 Tagueau AFB. When the F-84Gs were removed, the pilots flew F-86Fs, the MIG killers of the Korean conflict. "The Squadron was then sent south to Taiwan to protect our friendly Chinese," states Per. "We set up and did our mission in spades."

Per was due to return to the U.S. in 1954. When the replacement squadron was in place, Per led the 69th Fighter Squadron back to K-55 Korea, then went to Japan to catch a Flying Tiger back to the U.S.

Next stationed in Clovis, NM Per became operations officer of a Squadron flying F-86H. This new airplane was superior to the F-86F but never made it to combat. Then, gradually F-100s appeared on the ramp and the F-86H disappeared. The F-100s required liquid oxygen for 16 hours flight time versus 7 for the F-86H. Per was promoted to Major while at Clovis.

Per describes a tragedy that struck one evening at Clovis. "The base engineer had blocked the entrance to the vehicle parking lot. I hit this cable with my motor scooter and got a concussion. Concussion is a year's automatic grounding before possible restoration to flying status. The General sent me for testing by the NASA space pilot physicians. The USAF Surgeon General said NO MORE FLYING!!!" Per then went to work for the General.

In 1960 Per was ordered to Lakenheath Air Base in England. NATO was removing all Thor missiles and various NATO European bases were being shuffled around. 50% of the personnel that had been in the 48th Wing had been moved to other bases in Europe or returned to the U.S. All the F-100s were brought to Lakenheath. Per, the junior field grade officer in the maintenance complex, was made Chief of Maintenance.

The news of promotion to Lt Colonel was released in 1963 while Per, Peggy and the kids were returning from England to Amarillo AFB, TX. There he was responsible for all curricula control for the 18,000 man Amarillo tech training school, 104 tech school locations over the rest of the USAF world, and personnel subsystems for experimental and new aircraft, such as the B70 and F122. When the base began closing in 1964, he was sent as Deputy Wing Commander to Webb AFB, TX which trained Air Force pilots.

(Continued on next page.)

I thought you might like to read this.



Per was promoted to Colonel in 1968. That year he was sent to Korat Air Base in Thailand as Deputy Commander of Logistics during the Vietnam War. At first the pilots flew F-105s but converted to F-4Es, the most highly developed fighter in the USAF at that time. In 1969 Per returned to the U.S., to Randolph AFB once again. NASA had a tenant program there for some of its space pilot qualifications. The USAF Personnel Center and other major USAF organizations were also there. The job as host was to provide for the tenants' needs and keep them happy. Per's major task

was to remodel the entire Base to accommodate changing needs. "My team did well at Randolph," Per states. "The Pentagon gave us a big silver trophy as the best USAF Resources Managed Program."

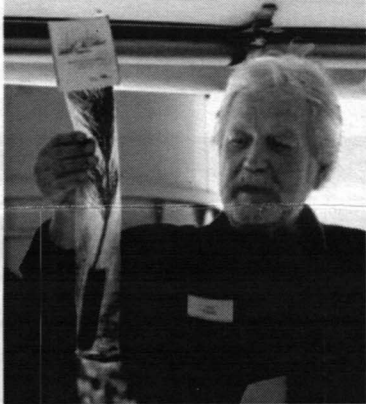
2 years later Per became Deputy Commander at Lackland AFB where his job was to bring the base up to USAF Inspector General Standards. Per's last boss, an old friend from the 49th Fighter Group, had spent 7 years in the Hanoi Hilton prison and was now a two star General.

Per retired on June 30, 1975. He and Peggy headed north, arriving in Effie on July 5. Per found that Effie and Bigfork had grown some — phenomenal! They decided to dedicate their lives to society, to accept no paying positions. Per states, "We became involved in about everything that was alive and active: Lutheran Church, Lions Club, International Lions Club, many conventions (San Diego, Minneapolis, Duluth, Thunder Bay), politics, hunting, millions of dollars' worth of walleyes." Per and brother-in-law Tom Evensen bought an airplane in Duluth, built a hangar at the Bigfork airport and enjoyed many trips, accompanied often by Peggy and Janice. Per gave rides, including medical transport when needed. Indeed, the only income Per took from society was from a grateful woman who insisted he take \$20 for flying her father to St. Paul to University Hospital.

In 1986, Peggy tired of the -60 degree winters. They moved to Florida and enjoyed their lives near the water. Per became a deacon in the Episcopal Church and conducted services at the Pastor's request. In 2006, they returned to Texas where they had lived for years. They reside contentedly in San Marcos and will celebrate their 71st anniversary on July 25.

Jack Rajala, Restoring Minnesota's white pine

Greg Vandegrift, KARE, Sept. 29, 2015



ITASCA COUNTY, MN — On a bright, blustery midsummer afternoon in a remote corner of Minnesota's woods north of Grand Rapids, a solitary figure with a precious bag of white pine seeds plants the future, hoping to restore the past.

"They're little gems," says Jack Rajala, who loves the white pine tree — the forest's tallest tree with its distinctive, uneven branches.

With his white beard and well-worn hands, Rajala looks the part of a lumberjack; but

this day, he's more like a gardener.

"It is a garden, you know that," says Rajala.

It's not your garden-variety garden. He spreads 500 white pine seeds this day in an area prepared for planting.

Rajala's walk through the woods is not a one-time effort; it is part of his three-decade quest to restore the boom-topped giant, which at one time was a major north woods species.

Rajala recalls what his brother once told him in this very section of the forest: "Jack, these lands just grow white pine; they demand white pine."

White pine lumber - Another kind of demand for white pine nearly erased the giant from the forest. From 1850 to 1925, Rajala says the lumberjacks harvested white pine in a big way, leaving just a fraction behind.

Standing next to a giant white pine, Rajala says, "Fortunately, when the harvesting was done here 125 years ago or so, they were going so fast that they left a remnant, like this dandy," which he pats with appreciation.

In fact, less than a one-hour drive to the northwest of where Rajala planted seeds sits the Lost Forty — an 1880's surveying error, which preserved a small patch of 300 and 400-year-old white and red pines.

They're not old, they're big — as two recent visitors found out, who tried but failed to join both hands around one white pine's trunk.

"It's the king of the woods, especially here in the Lost Forty — the whites are huge," says Jerry Smith of Bemidji.

"We want to keep the Lost Forty around as long as we can, but it's not going to be there forever. What we just planted here today is gonna be here for a long time," Rajala says.

White pine in his blood

This passion for white pine restoration is truly personal for Rajala.

"I grew up in the shadow of the smokestack and the sawmill and the white pine tree," Rajala says.

In fact, you'll find his name on Rajala Companies, which has mills in Deer River and Bigfork. At the Bigfork mill alone, which opened in 1902 and has been in the family since the 1940s, a half-billion board feet has rolled through, principally white pine, according to Rajala. However, these days the wood species vary, including hardwoods, aspen and pines. Any white pines that wind up here are storm damaged or over-mature.

But Rajala considers himself far more than a lumberman. Standing next to a large log pile in the mill's yard, he says, "I claim to be a pretty avid conservationist."

White pine maintenance

The seeds that Rajala spread in the woods that July day and for decades require more than sunshine and hope. The first million white pines that Rajala planted didn't survive. Deer ate the top bud which is crucial to tree growth. Others had also tried and failed, according to Rajala.

However, Rajala persisted, developing a so-called bud capping method, which involves more walks in the woods. Moving from one tiny white pine to another, he staples little scraps of paper around the top bud.

"It's so simple, and it's so effective; it works," Rajala says.

To say it works is an understatement. Rajala has successfully planted 3.5 million white pines in three decades.

Beyond planting and bud capping, Rajala also walks the woods with some shears to prune branches that carry the deadly fungus blister rust which is easy to spot with its telltale red needles.

The pruning amounts to Rajala's fingerprint in the forest.

"People say, 'Jack Rajala was here.' And I ask, 'How do you know?' And he said, 'Cause I can see the trees have been pruned."

Rajala's notion that he is tending to a garden — a very big garden — begins to make more sense when you consider his efforts continue 7 days a week. Even he gets overwhelmed, but he also finds his quest rewarding.

Looking at a freshly pruned tree, Rajala says, "You know, they talk back to me. I turn around and see that tree smiling; it's like we have a conversation together.

Rajala's legacy

That conversation will echo for centuries. What's the proof?

In the shadow of a tall white pine, Rajala reflects, "Just 300 years ago, that was just a seed. You know, that's not very long."

Ultimately, Rajala seeks a healthy forest, which includes the lost giants.

"We really had a debt to pay; and by spending the last 25, 30 years now of my life putting white pine back in the landscape, it's small payment," Rajala says.

Future Minnesotans will be in debt to Rajala when walking in the shadow of his white pine passion.

"The best time to plant a tree was yesterday, but the second best is today," Rajala says.

