

Salute to Our Veterans

Alan's Big Moment Was All for Naught

Though A Veteran of 177 Combat Missions, the Only Flight Alan Steinbrecher Cared If Anyone Else Saw Went Unnoticed

By Mitch Lehman
EDITOR OF THE TRIBUNE

Like most veterans, San Marino resident Alan Steinbrecher is extremely humble about his service in the United States Armed Forces. There was one day, however, that he wished at least two people on the planet were paying a little more attention. More on that later...

Steinbrecher took part in the NROTC program at the University of North Carolina and was therefore commissioned as an ensign the day he graduated, which was June 3, 1968.

Upon receiving his commission, Steinbrecher was ordered to report to the Chief of Naval Air Station
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Capt. Alan Steinbrecher and the F-4 Phantom, Naval Air Facility Fallon, Nevada, 1982.

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val Aviation Training, Pensacola, Florida, to begin flight training to become a Navy pilot. His flight training consisted of a pre-flight academy at Pensacola, then primary training in T-34 aircraft at Naval Air Station Saufley Field, which is located outside of Pensacola.

Upon completing primary, he was assigned to Basic Jet Training at Naval Air Station Meridian, Mississippi, where on Oct. 4 of that same year he began flying the T-2 jet. Upon completion of Basic Jet in the spring of 1969, it was back to Pensacola for air-to-air gunnery and carrier qualifications. Then, on to NAS Beeville, Texas, for Advanced Jet training, during the summer of 1969. Steinbrecher received his pilot's wings on Sept. 22, 1969.

"I was then ordered to NAS Miramar, here in California, for transition into the F-8 Crusader fighter aircraft, which would be the airplane I would fly in the Fleet," he remembers. "My training in that was in Fighter Squadron 124, and spanned from November, 1969 to October, 1970. I was then ordered to join Fighter Squadron 194, the 'Legendary Red Lightnings,' when it returned from its Vietnam cruise. I joined VF-194 in December, 1970, and flew with that squadron until June, 1973."

While a pilot in VF-194 the squadron made two "Westpac," or Western Pacific cruises to Vietnam, the first from May through December, 1971, the second from April, 1972 through April, 1973.



Alan Steinbrecher, Memorial Day, Lacy Park, 2010.

"During that time I served as the squadron's Aircraft Division Officer and one of its Landing Signal Officers, responsible for the safe and expeditious recovery of aircraft aboard our aircraft carrier, the USS Oriskany," said Steinbrecher. "My primary assignment, however, was as a fighter pilot, flying over both North and South Vietnam, in support of United States' operations in that theater. In all, I flew 177 combat missions."

After his two combat cruises, Steinbrecher transferred to the squadron which transitioned pilots into the F-8, known as the Crusader.

"I served as a Combat Flight Instructor and Landing Signal Officer in that squadron from May, 1973 to August, 1974, when I withdrew my regular commission, accepted a commission in the United States Naval Air Reserve, and began law school," Steinbrecher said. "I continued to fly throughout law school, however, with reconnaissance F-8s based at Andrews AFB, Washington, D.C. After graduating from law school in 1977 and upon accepting a job with

a law firm in Los Angeles, I was able to transition to the F-4 Phantom fighter and fly with the two F-4 reserve fighter squadrons based at NAS Miramar. My secondary job was as Air Wing Landing Signal Officer."

Steinbrecher continued that duty until 1983, when he transferred to the staff of Commander, Naval Air Forces Pacific at NAS North Island, San Diego. That is where he remained until his resignation as a Captain, United States Naval Air Reserve, in 1989.

There were also harrowing times for Steinbrecher. His plane was shot at with anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles over North Vietnam and later while strafing a North Vietnamese position in the DMZ, after the North Vietnamese had invaded.

He was forced to make an emergency landing at Miramar after his aircraft caught fire and was later totaled.

During one carrier landing, the tailhook separated from Steinbrecher's aircraft.

"I had to use my afterburner to recover just above the water," he said.

"That was very exciting."

During a typhoon, he was once forced to make a night carrier landing.

"With half my aircraft systems out," Steinbrecher said calmly.

But those pale when compared to a missed landing in Virginia. During his keynote speech at San Marino's Memorial Day ceremony in 2010, Steinbrecher told the story of one of his most humbling events of his otherwise distinguished career. We asked him to reprise it here.

"I was in the Naval Air Reserves flying the F-4 Phantom out of Miramar," he recalled with a grin. "I had started seeing a woman, who would later be my wife, Millie, in San Diego, where she lived and was teaching school. Millie was visiting her parents in Seaport, Va., not far from Langley Air Force Base. I had the opportunity to take a trip back to visit her. Millie's father was a retired Naval Aviator and I had not met him. I was flying back there to meet them and spend the weekend."

Approaching Langley, Steinbrecher decided to try to impress his best gal and make an indelible first impression on her father, all in one fell swoop.

"We were descending on a typically hot, muggy East Coast day," Steinbrecher recalled. "Visibility was not great due to the haze. We had the airfield in sight and plenty of time. I decided to push up the throttle and drop in as fast as I could, thinking they would be awaiting my arrival in the operations building where they could see the planes arrive. At a fighter base, the airplanes arrive in the direction they

are going to land parallel to the runway and execute a "break," whereby they roll the airplane 90 degrees, pull the stick and generate Gs, to 180 degrees, parallel to the runway. The G force and the throttle slow the airplane. From the end of the runway, you start another 180 degree descending turn. It is a point of pride to execute this entry break and landing maneuver from as high a speed as the pilot thinks he can get away with."

Wanting to impress Millie and her father, Steinbrecher came screaming into the break at what he estimated at 450-500 knots. "Way over the allotted speed," he said, laughing. Steinbrecher put the aircraft through the maximum G force as he rolled into the break.

"Due to the humidity, the wings were immediately enveloped in vapor," he said. "Because I was going so fast when I entered the break, the airplane didn't slow down enough to lower the landing gear and flaps at the usual point, so I rolled into 'the groove' – the straight-away to landing – still putting them down. I therefore touched down very fast, but didn't want to deploy the drogue chute so I had to really jump on the airplane's brakes. It was a circus getting it slowed down and I took every inch of the runway. My back-seater almost passed out from fright and our brakes were glowing."

Steinbrecher and his co-pilot taxied back to the operations shed where he "assumed my girlfriend would be waiting for me."

Upon arrival at the operations building, Alan and Millie were reunited.

"There stood the apple of my eye with her father, not seeming to be impressed with my dazzling airmanship," Steinbrecher joked. "Finally, I couldn't take it any more, and I asked them if they liked my break."

"Oh, we didn't see it," Millie said. "Was it nice? We thought you would be later. We were in the officer's club enjoying happy hour."

The best laid plans of mice and, in this case, airmen. But quoting another work of literature, "all's well that ends well."

Steinbrecher grew up in Dearborn, Mich. And graduated from Cranbrook School in Bloomfield Hills in 1964. Accepted at the University of Michigan, he elected to "try something out of state" and ended up at North Carolina. It doesn't deter him from being a vehement fan of the Maize & Blue.

Alan and Millie have been married for 32 years and called San Marino "home" since 1985. Their three children – Greg, Katy and Lucy – each attended San Marino schools before graduating from Pasadena Polytechnic. All three went on to earn degrees from the University of Virginia.

Steinbrecher served as president of the San Marino Schools Foundation from 1999-2000 and was president of the Los Angeles County Bar Association from 2010-11 after serving on the officer "ladder" of that organization. He also served as president of San Marino National Little League in 1998.

In 2010, Steinbrecher was named The Tribune's 'Citizen of the Year.'