

# GENERAL PAUL HESTER

## FROM 4-STARS TO C-STAR

by Ben Schooley

Sometimes you never know who is sitting at the table next to you having lunch at the Cabana Grille. Or you're unaware of the notoriety of a member of the twosome ahead of you on the golf course. And sometimes you are amazed to find that that man, recently retired, was one of the most powerful men in the Armed Forces.

General Paul Hester is an unassuming man. He has a slightly quiet nature to him as he relaxes on his veranda, enjoying a cocktail with Lynda, his wife of 27 years. Recently retired from the Air Force, General Hester entered the military in 1970, at the height of the Vietnam War, and simply never left. As unassuming as he may be, his piercing gaze is indicative of more than 200 combat hours as a fighter pilot throughout Southeast Asia, and a total of almost 3000 flight hours. Rising through the ranks of the military, General Paul Hester was promoted to a 4-Star General in 2004, making him one of only 7 such officers in the United States Air Force. Recently retired and now a resident of Cordillera Ranch, General Hester sat down with us to detail his many adventures.

"My family always had folks that served, as the previous generation was in WWII. There was never any doubt that I would spend a portion of my life in the military. My dad obviously had an interest in WWII because he flew in that war, but he never pushed Air Force. I came to that conclusion myself." Upon entering college at Ole Miss, Hester quickly enrolled in the ROTC program. He completed his two compulsory years, and re-enrolled for an additional two years. "The last two years of ROTC are for advanced students, pending a commitment as they will pay your tuition. At the end of the 4 years, you are a 2nd Lt."

"After graduation, I went on to pilot training. This was 1970, and I had just received my Accounting Degree. There was a delay of me reporting to pilot training, so I had a year as a tax accountant for Arthur

Anderson in Atlanta. I had a job waiting for me at the end of my service, but I obviously never went back." After a quick year of pilot training, Hester was sent on his first tour to Vietnam at Korat AFB in Taiwan flying an A7D plane, which is a single seat attack bomber. Quickly, he learned the realities of combat. "I'm not sure anybody knows what to expect when you get into combat, and it changes based on the level of combat. Was it fearful, exciting, and thrilling for a 23 year old boy? Sure. Was there some naivety? Definitely. It met my expectations, though. As Winston Churchill said, 'There's nothing more exhilarating than being shot at and missed'". Additionally, Hester was able to gain some all-important knowledge. "All of the young people that go into the military and face something stressful, they grow up faster.

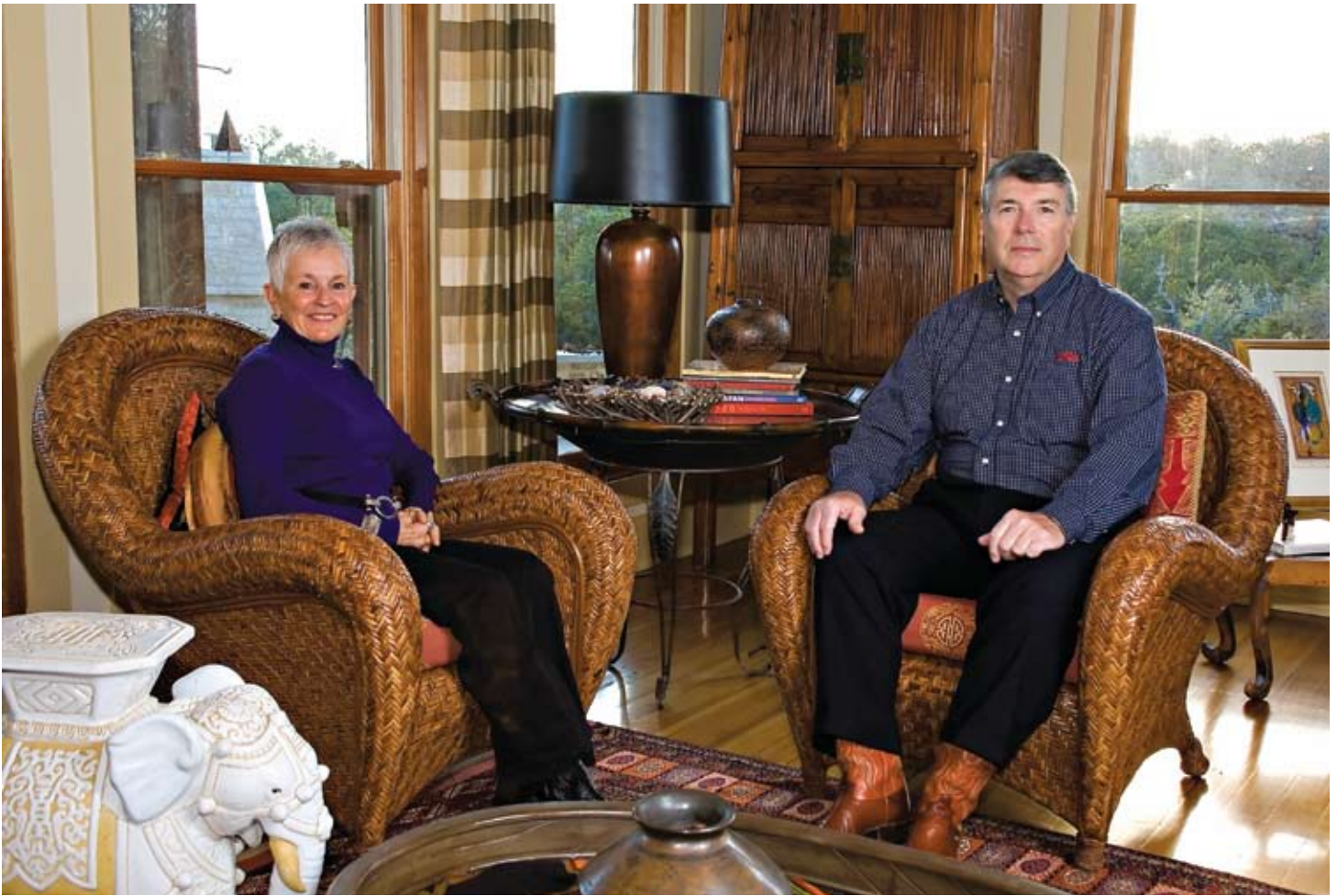


They understand very quickly what's important in life and what's not. It doesn't mean it will always stick with you, but at that time, you know what's important to you."

Eventually transferring to Luke AFB in Glendale, Arizona, Hester transitioned into the F-4, and began teaching others how to fly that particular aircraft. "I thought about de-enlisting at this point. My initial

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commitment was for 5 years. I was coming to the end of that, and I thought about going to law school. About that time in my life, the Air Force was introducing the F-15. I had an opportunity to get in that program early, and law school became a distant memory.”

After training others, Hester’s career took him to Germany. “Once in Germany, I helped stand up the first wing of F-15 in Europe at Bitburg AFB. The wing at Bitburg flew F4s, so they needed to transition to the F-15. So I came in as an instructor to help them transition. That was real exciting. That was the height of the Cold War and we set Zulu Alerts at Bitburg. We had wall to wall missiles, hot and ready. You get a combination of active scrambles and training scrambles...so you’re going live with active missiles. After afterburner, you make a turn and begin looking for Soviet airplanes.” While perhaps a scary prospect of going to war with the USSR, Hester and his force remained confident. “There was never any doubt in our minds who was going to win that contest. We knew we were the best pilots in the world.”

Hester was quickly promoted in 1979 to a Staff Officer for Tactical Command Headquarters in Leavenworth, VA. “I had reached a point where I knew that I would serve 20 years and retire. I was still having fun, and it made economic sense to carry that 20 years.” At the same time, Hester had also met his match in the form of his wife, Lynda. Lynda remembers, “I was going to school at Old Dominion, and we met thru mutual friends. My first husband was shot down and killed in Southeast Asia, so I was an ‘MIA wife’ for 7 years. In the late 70s, the US government did a review and tried to resolve the cases of the missing.

They declared him “presumptively dead” and we were married. I had been on the east coast at the Air Force Base, and I took my children to Langley to be with Paul. We were married in the Langley Chapel in 1982.”

Quickly promoted again, Hester and his new family went to Washington, DC to run the office for the House of Representatives for the Air Force. Then in 1990, Hester went to the National War College for a year. Following that, and in the same year, the Air Force

moved him to Okinawa, Japan. “We went there and basically never came back until we retired. The Air Force had decided that would be where we would live

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life. I was now the Vice commander of the 18th Tactical Fighter Wing.” As for Japan, the Hesters were in love. “We spent 3 different tours in Japan, and loved every minute

of it. We loved the people, loved the island, and I loved flying out there. They are such great people and would just give you the shirt off their back.”

Despite their love for Japan, the military had other plans for General Hester. He returned to attend Harvard for a year. Then a quick move to Washington where he spent a year on the Joint Staff. Then to Vienna to work with the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and then back to Japan. Another move to Florida where Hester was the Wing Commander of Testing and Evaluation. He then returned to DC for a year, after receiving his 2nd Star. In 1999, Hester received his 3rd Star and was sent back to Japan as the Commander of US Forces in Japan. Finally, in 2004, Hester received his 4th Star, and was sent to Hawaii as the Commander of the Pacific Forces, a regiment with over 55,000 active. 4 years later, he retired.

A lifetime military family, the Hesters were poised to make a decision that had been delayed 35 years: where should we settle down? “It was a simple process – we had a home in DC, and figured we would always move back there. However, we made a family decision to not retire in that environment. The pursuit for our home fell on Linda’s shoulder, who is from Texas. I told her I would only go one place in Texas – San Antonio. I like South Texas. It became her job to find a house, and on one of our visits I sent her to scout some locations. She did, she came to Cordillera Ranch, and this was the first house on the first day she looked at. So I can thank Kevin Best for taking her around. She walked in the front door and said ‘this is it.’ That was on a Tuesday, and we bought it on Friday.” Lynda explains her decision, “The quirkiness of this home is my favorite. It fit the blend of our life – some of the Japanese aspects of the home were what we wanted. I wanted the casual rustic with the Japanese flair, and I just loved it. I walked in and could see the trees and the pools outside, and I was hooked. Robert Thornton was a joy as well, as we learned what he stood for as an individual, in terms of his quality and his commitment to

his product. People ask each other all the time ‘who built your home’, and when they hear Thornton, their eyes just light up.”

A man known for making some difficult decisions, the Hesters couldn’t be happier with the decision of living in Cordillera Ranch. “We are overwhelmingly pleased with the Ranch. We’ve migrated through what I like to call “Tribes” of our life. I have Ole Miss, my fraternity, then the Air Force for 37 years, and the Ranch and the residents have become my new tribe. You certainly feel home when you come thru the front gate. Last summer we had some retired General officers from the Japanese military to Cordillera, and they came and learned all about Lackland, Randolph, and we brought them to Cordillera for dinner. We introduced them to the Hill Country. They walked out the front door and saw the night sky and how dark it is here and they just fell in love with it, much as we have.”

A life that has been brimming with adventure, travel, and exotic locations, one naturally wonders if the General Paul Hester still flies, still travels, and still seeks the intrigue that the past 37 years have given him. “You know, just getting in a plane to fly from point A to point B is not very exciting to a fighter pilot. Instead, I’d much rather just ride my Harley. And hey, my blood pressure is lower.”

