

'Gray Eagle'

LtGen Petersen Earns New Title

Story by SSgt T. L. Dunn
PAO, MCDEC, Quantico, Va.

A Marine is once again the "Gray Eagle," the Navy Department's senior aviator by date of aviation designation.

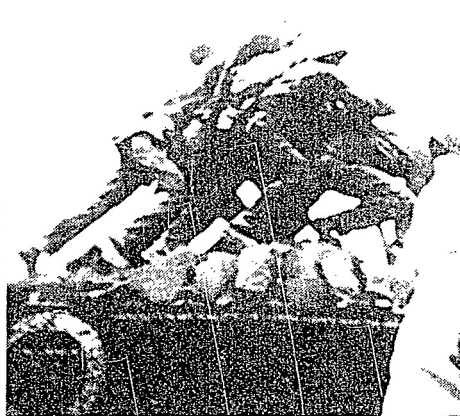
LtGen Frank E. Petersen, commanding general of the Marine Corps Development and Education Command (MCDEC), assumed the title when Navy Vice Admiral James E. Service retired August 21.

The general also became the senior aviator in the Department of Defense. His October 1952 designation supersedes all other armed forces aviators.

The Gray Eagle Trophy award, sponsored by the Vought Corporation, was started in 1960. The trophy is passed on to honor the senior Naval aviator still on active flight status.

The miniature aircraft carrier with an eagle landing on the deck has an inscription: "In recognition of a clear eye, a stout heart, a steady hand, and a daring defiance of gravity and the law of averages." A smaller replica is also presented to each incumbent to keep as a personal memento.

Photo by MGySgt Mike Hakim



LtGen Petersen is the sixth Marine to hold this title. The most recent was LtGen Andrew O'Donnell (October 1979-June 1981).

"I am honored to be among such illustrious predecessors," said the general.

But the general is familiar with holding unique titles. He has been the "Silver Hawk," the Marine Corps' senior aviator since October 1985 and the Corps' first black aviator,

LtGen Frank E. Petersen, Commanding General, Marine Corps Development and Education Command, Quantico, Va., is the Navy Department's "Gray Eagle." He is also the aviator in the armed services with the longest time as a designated aviator.

first black squadron commander, first black general and first black base commander.

LtGen Petersen completed the Naval Aviation Cadet Program and was commissioned a Marine second lieutenant in October 1952.

The Topeka, Kan., native has flown 350 combat missions in two wars and has logged more than 4,000 hours in various fighter and attack aircraft.

"During Korea, you had to see who you were fighting," he said. "You were literally face to face with the enemy. Today, the air fight takes place over the horizon. You can achieve a kill miles away.

"Younger pilots who have grown up in the computer age seem to do better in the cockpit than those seasoned with thousands of hours in a 'bird,' primarily because eye-to-hand ability is more adaptable to the modern cockpit," he added.

He speaks of the progress in Naval aviation with excitement, an emotion he has felt about flying since his days in the F6F-3 Hellcat and the F8F Bearcat as a cadet in



The Marine Corps' first black aviator, Frank E. Petersen was commissioned a second lieutenant in October 1952. During the Korean War, he flew the Corsair. In Vietnam, he flew the Phantom jet.

Pensacola, Fla. The general's face lights up every time the subjects of flying and aircraft enter a conversation.

"I would rather spend my career in a cockpit than behind a desk," he said. "The thrill of flying an airplane is something that drives one to fight to stay in the cockpit."

He hasn't been in the cockpit as much as he would like since assuming command at MCDEC in June 1986, but he has recently flown the F/A-18 Hornet, the F-16 Falcon and the TAV-8B Harrier II.

Although he began his career in Korea flying the F4U Corsair, the general has been flying the Phantom since 1968, when he was squadron commander for Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 314.

Under his command, '314 became the first squadron to receive the Marine Corps Aviation Association's Robert M. Hanson Award as the outstanding fighter squadron of the year.

The general has also been group commander for Marine Aircraft Group 32 at Marine Corps Air Station, Cherry Point, N.C., and commanding general of the First Marine Aircraft Wing on Okinawa, Japan.

His numerous decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Purple Heart and the Air Medal.

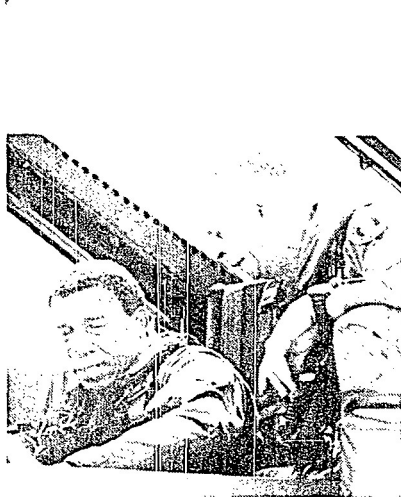
He was awarded the Purple Heart for injuries sustained in Vietnam. While serving as the squadron commander for VMFA-314, he was on a mission assisting a recon outfit that had been pinned down above the Demilitarized Zone, when one of his Phantom's engines was hit by enemy ground fire and burst into flames.

"I pulled the throttle back and shut down the engine, added power on the other one and tried to get as close to the DMZ as I could," he recalled.

But on the way back the number-two engine caught fire.

"This may sound kind of foolish, but here are two guys sitting in an airplane with both engines on fire and the hydraulic system leaking," he said. "If we had punched out over enemy territory, we could have spent the remainder of the war in the 'Hanoi Hilton.'"

Just after reaching the DMZ, the fires burned through the control system and he gave the order to eject. He was looking back at his radar in-



U.S. Navy Photos

LtGen Frank E. Petersen was checked out in the F/A-18B Hornet by Col J. G. Hart, Marine Aviation Detachment commander at Patuxent River, Md. The general has been a Marine officer for more than 35 years.

tercept officer to ensure his seat worked.

"When I ejected, I went out in an awkward position," he said. "The initial impact of the ejection seat gives a shock of about 20 Gs. It was like a corkscrew effect."

He suffered a herniated disk in his back and a hairline fracture of the hip socket and flew 240 more missions before being treated. Today he walks with a slight limp but it doesn't keep the 55-year-old from working out at the gym whenever his schedule permits.

Young Marines enjoy having the opportunity to work out next to their commanding general. Although he admits that he is probably setting

the example, the general says that is not the reason he is there.

"It's my own personal desire to be there," he said. "Staying physically fit is the best thing you can do." The general can still pass the Marine Corps physical fitness test but is no longer required to because of his age.

Even though being the Gray Eagle is the culmination of a 35-year career in aviation, LtGen Petersen still says, "As I sit here with three stars, I would give up a month's pay to be able to rove around with the young aviators and fly their stuff and live in their world."

