

DeBellevue:

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photo reconnaissance aircraft and as a “Wild Weasel” aircraft that hunted SAMs.

After graduating from Navigator training, DeBellevue went to F-4 upgrade training, where he learned about flying the “Rhino”. Following F-4 training he spent 18 months in the 335 Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in North Carolina, where he honed his flying skills. When Captain DeBellevue was assigned to Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, he was very experienced in the F-4.

He reported to the “Triple Nickel Squadron”, the 555th TFS, on 30 November 1971, at a time when operations over North Vietnam were halted during negotiations attempting to end the war.

In late 1971 and early 1972, Americans were flying missions mostly in Laos and South Vietnam. In March-April 1972, the mission of the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing at Udorn changed to include missions into North Vietnam. The Laredo High Speed Forward Air Control (Fast FAC) mission, which had been cancelled due to high losses, was restarted. DeBellevue was in the first group of three pilots and three WSOs in the restarted program.

The Laredo Fast FAC missions were only flown in North Vietnam in an attempt to stop the flow of munitions and supplies to the Viet Cong in South Vietnam. It became obvious to DeBellevue that only those who were very sure of themselves volunteered to join the Fast FAC program, since the missions spent long hours above North Vietnam.

“If you were shot down, the possibility of being rescued was slim,” DeBellevue said. “In combat it is the decisions you make in the blink of an eye that determines whether you live or die.” An average Fast FAC mission was four to six hours long and the planes would cycle to the tanker for refueling once or twice.

DeBellevue was flying MIGCAP missions when he was not flying Fast FAC missions. On 10 May, DeBellevue was number three, with Captain Steve Ritchie, in a formation of four F-4s, Callsign Oyster Flight. One and three were flying aircraft equipped with Combat Tree. Oyster Flight was northwest of Hanoi when they picked up MIG indications and, since they were the first flight into North Vietnam, they started shooting.

The result was the flight shot three of the four MiG-21s down. This was DeBellevue’s first kill. He was 26 years old. DeBellevue’s roommate was the backseater who was shot down in Oyster 01.

DeBellevue did not see any parachutes prior to the F-4 hitting the side of a hill. “We did not know it, but he ejected just prior to impact,” DeBellevue said. “In three weeks, my roommate managed to evade capture and walk far enough south so that the rescue helicopters could get to him.”

By this time, DeBellevue, who had over 15 Laredo Fast FAC missions, was selected to be the lead WSO for the Triple Nickel’s MIGCAP formations and started transitioning out of the Fast FAC program. The average MIGCAP mission was about three hours long if it went into North Vietnam from the west over land and about five hours long if it went in from the east over the Gulf of Tonkin.

When asked how much time he spent monitoring his instruments during a MIGCAP mission he replied, “85 percent of the time.” When he was then asked how much time he spent looking outside the aircraft, he again replied, “85 percent of the time.” “You had to do everything all the time” DeBellevue said.

When the air war resumed in 1972 after the bombing halt, the enemy MiG total was up to 206, an all-time high. The principal matchup was between the two-seat McDonnell Douglas F-4 Phantom II and North Vietnam’s best fighter, the single pilot Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-21. These air duels were during efforts to protect B-52 bomber strike forces during their time in the target area. The MiG-21 was a close match in capability with the F-4. The latest MiG-21s had a gun but relied mainly on their Atoll heat-seeking missiles and were extremely fast.

The enemy pilots usually employed “Hit and Run” tactics. Air Force results against the MiGs improved markedly in the last six months of America’s involvement in Vietnam. In 1972, a fusion center to pull together intelligence information from all reconnaissance sources was set up at Nakhon Phanom air base in Thailand with the call sign “Teaball.”

The main Air Force air-to-air missiles were the radar-guided AIM-7 Sparrow and the heat-seeking AIM-9 Sidewinder. The Sparrow had an effective range of more than 10 miles, compared to about two miles for the Sidewinder.

Fighters escorting the bomb-carrying aircraft never knew where the threat would come from. They normally stayed close to the planes they were protecting so they would not be caught out of position during an attack. However, the MIGCAP missions that DeBellevue flew were not escorting the flights loaded with bombs. Instead they were the blocking force preventing the MIGs from getting close to the F-4s loaded with bombs. The MIGCAP missions had the ability to go after the MiGs wherever they were flying. “You always had to know exactly where you were flying,” DeBellevue said. “This was especially true when the targets were in the Buffer Zone just south of China.”

An ace is defined as an aviator who has shot down at least five enemy aircraft in air-to-air combat. “You had to be on you’re A-Game from the time you walked out to the jet until you landed back at Udorn,” DeBellevue said. The Air Force and the Navy awarded equal credit to both crewmembers in the F-4 since they operated as a team, working in tandem in two different cockpits.

Between May and September of 1972 DeBellevue shot down six enemy MiGs while flying with two different pilots in four separate engagements.

On Sept. 9, 1972, Olds Flight was told to go orbit Phuc Yen airfield, located just north of Hanoi. “This was not a very safe or sane thing to do,” DeBellevue said.

Flying with Captain John Madden, they intercepted a MiG-21 on final for landing at Phuc Yen. While they prevented him from landing, they were not in a position to destroy the MiG. Olds 03 ended up in shooting down the MiG with the F-4E’s 20mm gatling gun.

Ten minutes later, as they crossed the Red River 15 miles west of Hanoi, North Vietnam, DeBellevue picked up a radar target eight miles in front of them. A few seconds later they intercepted two MiG-19s. They had to make short work of these two MiGs because they were low on fuel. It was a hard turning close-in dog fight. They hit the first MiG with an AIM-9J, and it crashed. “The second MiG-19 was aggressive and a real threat,” DeBellevue said. “We only had a few seconds to spare when we fired the number three AIM-9J. It came off our F-4 and pulled lead on the MiG-19. The missile ended up in the MiG’s engine, causing him to crash.”

That was DeBellevue’s fifth and sixth kills making him America’s top ace in the

war. He was no longer allowed to fly combat. He returned to the United States for a seven-week tour of military bases.

DeBellevue returned to Udorn and in the next three weeks he flew his last seven missions, none in North Vietnam. He also spent time around the base thanking everyone for supporting the war effort.

To make ace he flew 617 hours of combat and a total of 220 combat missions, 96 of which were over North Vietnam. At the end of the Vietnam War, his Triple Nickel Squadron had the highest number of MiG kills in the war.

After his combat tour, DeBellevue went to pilot training and then to the front seat of the F-4. “You had to know the rules of flying” DeBellevue said of his new status. “You didn’t always have to follow them. If you had to break a rule to save the jet, break the rule. Have your story ready when you land.”

DeBellevue says he used this quote while he was flying, when he had non-flying jobs and when he worked in civilian jobs after his retirement.

He went on to accumulate more than 3,000 flight hours, including 550 combat hours. His military decorations include the Air Force Cross (making ace), three Silver Stars, three Legions of Merit, six Distinguished Flying Crosses and 18 Air Medals.

He went on to be the base commander at Misawa Air Base, Japan and the air base wing commander at Edwards AFB, California. One of his duties at Edwards was to recover many NASA Space Shuttles returning from orbit. His final assignment was at the University of Missouri-Columbia as the commander of the AF ROTC detachment. DeBellevue retired in February 1998 with 30 years of service and was the last American ace on active duty.

Following retirement DeBellevue and his wife Sally and family moved to Edmond when he accepted a job as a program manager with Frontier Electronic Systems in Stillwater. After turning the program that he was responsible for into a success, he moved on to other jobs, including one with Oklahoma State University. He now works for Performance Aircraft Services Inc., based in Grapevine, Texas.

DeBellevue was inducted into the Louisiana Military Hall of Fame in 2011 and the Oklahoma Military Hall of Fame in 2012. He, along with the other American aces, was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in 2014.