Midwest City honoring Vietnam War hero

By Darl DeVault
Contributing Writer

Left: John Madden and Charles "Chuck" DeBellevue on Sept. 9, 1972. Right: Charles "Chuck" DeBellevue with the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron and a McDonnell Douglas F-4D-Phantom II-2. PROVIDED PHOTOS

Edmond resident U.S. Air Force Colonel (ret.) Charles B. "Chuck" DeBellevue, now 76, became America's first and only six MiG victory credit ace in 1972 in the skies of North Vietnam as a Weapons Systems Officer (WSO).

This Veterans Day, he will be honored as a grand marshal in the Midwest City Veterans Day Parade on Nov. 11.

This patriot is America's top ace of the Vietnam War and the last ace to serve on active duty.

"It is an honor to speak to my fellow veterans as I salute the men and women who have served, especially those who served in the Vietnam War, and those who currently serve and now sacrifice daily to keep our proud country free," DeBellevue said recently. "When I took off from Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base in my F-4D Phantom II, I knew that I had the best support in the world. The crew chiefs, munitions, and maintenance personnel, along with the support from base personnel, helped me survive the missions I flew. Anytime I can repay that support, I am there."

DeBellevue was raised in Crowley, in Southwest Louisiana. It was a small town in the middle of rice growing country. He was commissioned through the Reserve Officer Training Corps at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, now the University of Louisiana-Lafayette (The Ragin Cajuns) in 1968.

Since commissioning and graduation were at the same time, DeBellevue skipped graduation. The colonel who spoke at his commissioning ceremony said, "May you serve in interesting times!" How true those words turned out!

Tinker Air Force Base area residents have some understanding of the importance of DeBellevue's role in becoming an ace. Near the 552nd Air Control Wing area on Tinker AFB is an EC-121 aircraft, similar to the one DeBellevue worked with on his missions into North Vietnam, The EC-121, Callsign "Disco", is an earlier version of the "E-3 AWACS" aircraft used today.

In today's Air Force most of the fighter aircraft are single seat. The crews on the Boeing E-3 Sentry, commonly known as AWACS, provide overwatch for today's fighters in the way of surveillance, command and control, and communications. They feed data to today's fighters both by voice and electronically. Most of the AWACS aircraft are based at Tinker.

The USS Chicago, Callsign "Red Crown," a U.S. Navy heavy cruiser, also provided radar support to the Air Force crews flying MiG Combat Air Patrol (MIGCAP) missions into North Vietnam. They aided in tracking and targeting the enemy during missions supporting bombing operations in North Vietnam.

By 1972, air to air combat over Vietnam had changed, with newly sophisticated air-to-air missiles allowing for remote targeting and high technology sensors that could send data on enemy aircraft electronically into a fighter plane.

The pilots and WSOs 0f the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing (TRW) had an advantage over U.S. aircrews at other locations. Ten of the wing's F-4D Phantoms had the brand new top-secret APX-80 electronics set installed, known by its code-name "Combat Tree". This highly classified system could read the "friend or foe" IFF signals of the transponders built into the MiGs.

This was the same system that North Vietnamese GCI (Ground Control Intercept) radar used to discriminate its aircraft from those of the Americans. Displayed on a scope in the WSO's cockpit, Combat Tree gave the Phantoms the ability to find, identify, and fire at MiGs when they were still beyond visual range (BVR).

The North Vietnamese air defense system had more than 200 radar facilities that supplied warning and guidance for the MiGs. This classified system helped even out the tough odds for the American aircrews, who, in 1972, had to fly into North Vietnam daily.

In the early days of the war, during Operation Rolling Thunder when the F-105s were going into North Vietnam, it took 100 combat missions into North Vietnam to complete a tour. In 1972, it took a year to complete a full combat tour.

Initially, the Air Force put two pilots in the F-4, which is why there is a control stick in the back cockpit. The U.S. Navy and U.S. Marine Corp never put pilots in the rear cockpit of their F-4s, except in their training squadrons so they had no need for a control stick in the rear cockpit. DeBellevue was well versed in all the different systems in the F-4 that he flew and could not only handle his duties but could also fly the jet and refuel if needed.

His aircraft carried two electronic warfare jamming pods on missions into North Vietnam. This gave the fighter an electronic counter measures system that helped defeat the Surface to Air Missiles (SAMs) that were fired at them. "When a SAM was fired at your aircraft, you only one chance to react," DeBellevue said recently. "If you did not see the SAM or panicked, your aircraft was destroyed."

While there were other two seat fighters in the Air Force, the F-4 was the first two-seat combat aircraft that employed the talents of a WSO in a multirole environment. The fighter had a solid air to ground capability and, when modified with Combat Tree, gave the airmen air to air mission superiority in a BVR dogfight. The F-4 was also used as a

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