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MiG KILLERS

USAFA grads prove lethal to enemy pilots

Air-to-air. It is the quintessential mission. Every fighter pilot learns the skills and is prepared for that moment when the call comes in: "MiGs, 10 o'clock, you are cleared to engage and destroy."

But the simple odds are truthfully against any such personal contest. The Air Force has produced untold numbers of fighter pilots. The number who have actually encountered enemy fighters (we euphemistically refer to all of them as MiGs, but there are actually many different types), is actually quite small. And the number of those who have tangled with and actually shot down enemy aircraft is smaller still.

Air Force Academy graduates have certainly been in that arena. Since 1959, graduates have been involved in every one of our nation's conflicts, and have filled many a fighter cockpit. They have claimed their share of the air-to-air kills. According to the official Aerial Victory Credits roster kept at the Air Force Historical

Research Agency at Maxwell AFB, Ala., 31 graduates have kill credits for a total of 50 enemy aircraft.

Our first conflict was the long war in Southeast Asia. It has been labeled the Vietnam War, but that is a misnomer. It was a regional conflict, and the U.S. Air Force was involved in every corner of that war which stretched from Koh Tang Island off the coast of Cambodia, to North Vietnam's border with China, and from the outer-most regions of northern Laos to the tip of the Ca Mau Peninsula in South Vietnam. Air Force fighter crews logged many a sweat soaked sortie over Hanoi, which at one point was one of the most heavily defended areas in the world.

In that conflict, 22 grads bagged 37 MiG 17s and MiG 21s. Most of them got their kills flying some variant of the F-4 Phantom, equipped with AIM-7 Sparrows (radar guided missiles), AIM-9 Sidewinders (heat-seeking missiles), AIM-4D Falcons (also heat seeking missiles), and occasionally a pod mounted 20 mm cannon. Later in the war, the F-4E was deployed into the theater. It had an internally mounted 20 mm cannon.

The F-4 was equipped with unique radar, identification and missile technol-

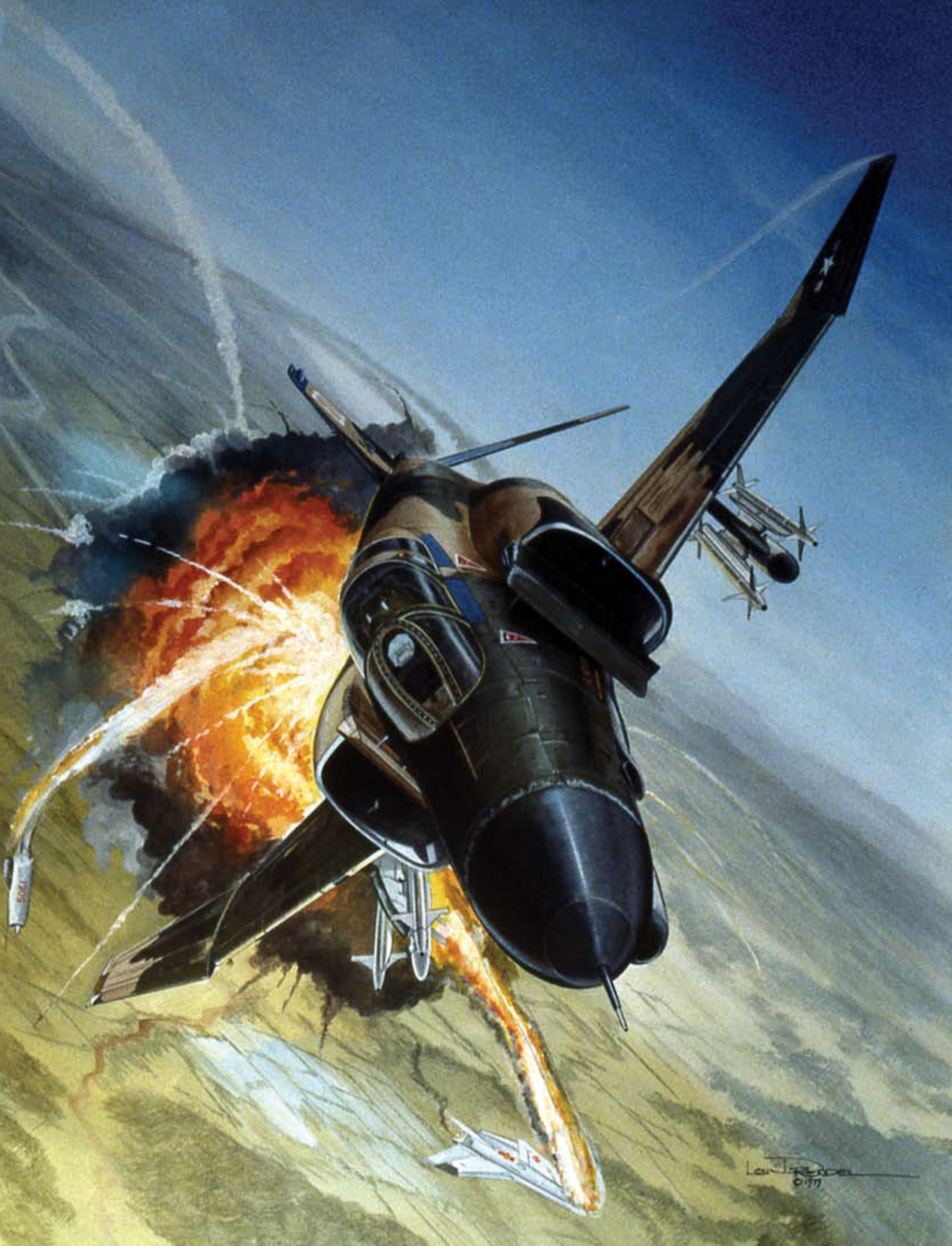
ogy which required a crew of two. When kills were claimed, the Air Force gave each crew member a kill credit. When the F-4s were initially deployed to the theater, they carried a crew of two pilots. About 1967 though, the Air Force began replacing the back seat pilot with a weapons systems operator, who was a rated navigator.

Capt. Robert Blake, '59, was the first to score in the conflict. Flying as the front seat pilot of an F-4C with the 555th Tactical Fighter Squadron, he destroyed a MiG 21 with an AIM-7 Sparrow missile on April 23, 1966. There were two more kills that year one by 1Lt. Gerald Hardgrave, '63, from the back seat of his F-4, and the other by 1Lt. Karl Richter, '64, piloting his F-105.

On January 2, 1967, F-4s from bases in Thailand and South Vietnam swept into the Hanoi area as part of Operation Bolo. They used deception tactics to appear as flights of F-105s, hoping that the North Vietnamese would launch a strong force of MiGs to intercept them. The enemy did so and was confronted by the massive force of F-4s intent on sweeping them from the skies. When the battle was done, seven MiG 21s had been downed. One was claimed by 1Lt. Ralph Wetterhahn,

"Splash One for Paula 01"

Capt. Steve Ritchie's third MiG kill, and the first of two on July 8, 1972.





“Splash Three, Splash Four”

Capt. Steve Ritchie, shoots down two MiG-21s enroute to becoming an Ace in the Vietnam War.

’63, a front seat pilot with the 555th TFS. He hit it with an AIM-7.

1Lt. Charles Clifton, ’64, flying as a back seater with Col. Robin Olds in an F-4C, got a MiG 21 with an AIM-9 in that fight. Olds was the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing commander at the time. Later that summer, he would report to USAFA as the commandant.

The Class of ’65 seemed to have a special relationship with the Falcon missile. But overall, the weapon did not perform satisfactorily, and was removed from the theater. The F-4s then carried Sparrows and Sidewinders only.

The air-to-air action then quieted down in early 1968 as the United States initiated a bombing halt against North Vietnam. During the next four years, the theater airpower was focused on supporting allied ground forces and interdicting enemy trucks and supplies along the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

On March 30, 1972, though, that all changed. North Vietnam launched a massive attack on South Vietnam. Once again, the U.S. Air Force was unleashed against North Vietnam, and the air battles resumed. The F-4, Phantom was still the mainstay weapon. But the F-4Cs had been returned to the United States

and the F-4E with its internal cannon, had been introduced. Additionally, the back seat pilot had now been replaced with a WSO.

On that same day, Capt. Fredrick Olmsted Jr., ’64, a WSO with the 13th TFS shot down a MiG 21 with a Sparrow missile. He got a second MiG 21 kill on April 16.

On Feb. 21 Major Robert Lodge, ’64, an F-4 pilot and weapons officer with the 555th TFS, actually shot down a MiG 21 with a Sparrow missile before the offensive began. So he was ready for the increased operations tempo, and added to his total with additional kills of MiG 21s on May 8 and 10. Tragically though, he was shot down on the 10th by a MiG 19, and killed. His was an especially tragic loss because he was considered the top fighter pilot in the Air Force.

In that same engagement, Capt. Steve Ritchie, ’64, also an F-4 pilot with the 555th claimed a kill of a MiG 21 with a Sparrow. He would go on to score another MiG 21 kill on May 31, two more on July 8, and a fifth on Aug. 28, to become the Air Force’s first ace in the conflict (See the actual F-4 Ritchie flew on page XX).

He was followed closely by Capt. Jeffrey Feinstein, ’68, a WSO with the 13th

TFS. Feinstein got his first kill against a MiG 21 on April 16. He then scored additional kills of MiG 21s on May 31, July 18, July 29, and Oct. 13, thereby becoming our second ace. All of his kills were with AIM-7s and -9s.

The day after Capt. Robert Lodge, ’64, was killed, a squadron mate and WSO, 1Lt. Jim Bell, ’70, destroyed another MiG 21 with a Sparrow.

On May 31, Capt. Bruce Leonard, ’65, a pilot with the 13th TFS and flying an F-4E, destroyed a MiG 21 with a Side-winder missile.

Later that summer, 1Lt. William Hargrove, ’70, a WSO with the 555th TFS, got a kill against a MiG 21 with the 20 mm cannon on Sept. 9. A week later, he scored another MiG 21 kill with an AIM-9.

On Sept. 12, Captain Mike Mahaffey ’67, a pilot assigned to the 469th TFS, brought down a MiG 21 with a Side-winder. Twenty three days later on Oct. 5, Capt. Dick Coe, ’68, shot down a MiG 21 with an AIM-9. Eight days after that, Jeff Feinstein got his fifth kill. That was the last aerial victory by a USAFA grad in the war.

Returning home from the war, many of these men would pass on their skills to a new generation of air warriors who would

fight the next wars. But they would hone their skills on a new generation of aircraft and aerial tactics created from the lessons learned in that long and hard fought war.

Desert Storm in 1991 was the next arena in which significant aerial combat took place. The venerable F-4 had been almost completely replaced by the F-15 as the premier air-to-air aircraft. The only Phantoms which deployed were F-4Gs which flew as “Wild Weasel” aircraft, specifically designed to find and destroy surface-to-air missile sites. During that six week campaign, five graduates shot down six Iraqi aircraft.

On the second day of the campaign, Jan. 19, Capt. Dave Prather, ’86, from the 36th TFW shot down an F-1 Mirage with a Sparrow. Eight days later, Capt. Ben Powell, ’84, also from the 36th TFW, claimed another F-1 with a Sparrow and also a MiG 23 with a second Sparrow.

On Feb. 2, Capt. Gregory Masters, ’82, of the 36th TFW, killed an IL 76 transport with a Sparrow. Five days later, Col. Rick Parsons, ’66, from the 33rd TFW, destroyed an SU 7 with another Sparrow. On Feb. 6, Capt. Thomas Dietz, ’82, from the 36th TFW, shot down a MiG 21 with a Sidewinder. That same day, perhaps the strangest kill of the conflict was claimed by Capt. Robert Swain, ’79. An A-10 pilot assigned to the 706th TFS, an Air Force Reserve unit mobilized for the war, he found and destroyed an Iraqi

helicopter with several hundred rounds of 30 mm cannon fire as it tried to elude him over Kuwait on Feb. 6.

On Feb. 28, all allied forces ceased fire. But fighter aircraft continued to patrol the skies of Iraq, enforcing flight restrictions against the Iraqi forces. On March 22, an Iraqi SU 22 was observed taking off. Tom Dietz was on orbit and spotted the aircraft. He then engaged and destroyed it with an AIM 9 for his second kill.

A few years later, we became involved in a series of campaigns in the Balkan region of Europe. The first operation which saw aerial combat was Operation DENY FLIGHT. On Feb. 28, 1994 Capt. Robert Wright, ’84, assigned to the 526th Fighter Squadron, Ramstein AB, Germany, led a flight of two F-16s against six Serbian J-21 Jastreb light attack aircraft which had violated the no-fly zone and were attacking a target in Bosnia. The Serbian aircraft were warned several times to cease and desist. When they ignored the calls, Wright used a new missile, the AIM-120 AMRAAM, and killed one aircraft. He then attacked and destroyed two more with Sidewinders. The remaining aircraft fled but were engaged by another flight of F-16s, which destroyed a fourth Jastreb. While evading, a fifth J-21 crashed. The sixth man was able to return to base. Reportedly, he told his compatriots “Don’t mess with those Americans.”

Five years later, the U.S. Air Force participated in Operation ALLIED FORCE

against the nation of Serbia. In that short but very violent brouhaha, grads claimed more kills. On March 24, 1999, Capt. Michael Shower, ’90, an F-15 pilot from the 493rd Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, engaged and destroyed a MiG 29 with an AMRAAM. About six weeks later on May 4, Lt. Col. Michael Geczy, ’82, assigned to the 78th EFS and also flying the F-15, did the same thing to another MiG 29.

To date, that is the complete record. Most assuredly though, the warriors from these more recent conflicts are also passing on their hard learned skills to the men and now women filling our cockpits today. They will be needed, for as the Greek philosopher Plato said, “It is only the dead who have seen the end of war.”

Editor’s Note: Limited-edition print “Splash Three, Splash Four,” depicting the action in which Capt. Steve Ritchie shot down two MiG-21s enroute to becoming an Ace in the Vietnam War is available for purchase. Overall print size is 29”x 21-1/2,” image size is 25”x 16.” Copies are available from the artist at \$100. Additional original aviation art is available from the artist at www.aviation-art.net. Lou Drendel is also available for private commissions.

MiGs killed in 1967–68

	Date	Name	Class	Unit	Aircraft	Position	Target	Weapon
1967	1/6	1Lt. Norm Wells	’63	555th	F-4	BSP	MiG 21	AIM-7
	4/26	1Lt. James Sears	’64	389th	F-4	BSP	MiG 21	AIM-7
	5/20	1Lt. Stephen Croker	’64	433rd	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-7
	*5/20	1Lt. Stephen Croker	’64	433rd	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-9
	6/5	1Lt. Norm Wells	’63	555th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-9
	11/6	1Lt. George McKinney	’65	435th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	20 mm
	12/17	1Lt. John Ryan	’65	13th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-4D
	12/19	1Lt. George McKinney	’65	435th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	20 mm
	*1Lt. Stephen Croker was flying in the back seat with Colonel Olds when they met and destroyed the two MiGs.							
1968	1/3	1Lt. Mike Muldoon	’65	435th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-4D
	1/18	1Lt. Wayne Smith	’65	435th	F-4	BSP	MiG 17	AIM-4D
	2/5	1Lt. Bruce Huneke	’65	13th	F-4	BSP	MiG 21	AIM-4D

