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Local fighter ace shares story of joining elite ranks

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His journey to receiving the distinction of a legendary flying ace took a faithful friend, files of research and more than 50 years. Now retired Lt. Gen. Charles "Chick" Cleveland, 87, is president of the American Fighter Aces Association and will head to D.C. on May 20 as the nation's remaining aces are presented a single Congressional Gold Medal for their service.

Combat pilots earned the title, "ace," by destroying five or more hostile aircraft in air-to-air combat. The AFA Association was founded in 1960 to recognize their accomplishments.

Only 1,450 legendary pilots during WWI, WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War proved their merit and received the special distinction of becoming an ace, and Montgomery is home to one of them. Cleveland retired to the area from Maxwell Air Force Base.

Cleveland is currently gathering the remaining living aces from across the nation to take part in the Medal Presentation Ceremony, along with family members of aces who have died.

"I tell you it's been one of the greatest honors of my life to be the president of this group; all they've achieved and contributed to the war efforts has been phenomenal and to be in the same group as guys like Eddie Rickenbacker and many others ... it's been a humbling experience for me," Cleveland said.

Cleveland's military service began just after the U.S. Air Force became its own service and after being known as the U.S. Army Air Corps.

"When I graduated, just a few years before the Air Force had become its own separate service ... it was kind of the new flashy dog on the block and I had been interested in airplanes ever since I was a boy, so I decided to head in that direction," Cleveland said.

He graduated from West Point military academy in 1949, was accepted into the Air Force and enrolled in pilot training for the F-84, a straight-wing aircraft designed for air to ground combat. His first mission was during the Korean War.

"The Korean War started in June 1950 and I was at that time still in pilot training," Cleveland said. "I volunteered to go over and fly in the Korean War as an F-84 pilot, but it turned out they didn't have enough missions to rotate on time, so they didn't need me. Instead I got to fly F-86s. These were saber jets and of course that was the sleek new, supersonic jet at the time. Everybody was 'Ga-ga' over it and I got to fly it."

Flying out of South Korea to the Yellow River, which divided North Korea and China, Cleveland flew as a wingman for his first 80 missions. His mission was to help establish air superiority over the Chinese and the Russians and "keep enemy airplanes off our backs and off the backs of the infantry," Cleveland said.

After Cleveland was promoted to flight leader, he moved from wingman to the front flying position and became the hunter shooting down Russian MIG-15 aircraft.

"When I started leading, I was the front guy, so I got into several scraps with the MIG-15 and was fortunate enough to shoot a number of them down," Cleveland said.

Cleveland left Korea in 1952 with four confirmed victories, two probable destroyed aircraft and four damaged. That was his record for 47 years. He was content to let his record stand, but his friend, Dolphin D. Overton, who also was an ace pilot during the Korean War, was not. He was sure he could prove at least one of Cleveland's probables was a victory.

"I didn't know what he was going to do, but by-gosh he did it!" Cleveland said. "He spent six years writing letters and researching. He got all the MIG-15 flying records from the Russian archives, compared them to our intelligence reports on the same days and was able to make a good connection for one of my probables. My claim coincided with the Russian's admission of a downed airplane."

However, Overton needed Cleveland's help to convince the Air Force Board of the Correction of Military Record. Together they went to D.C. for an interview and a testimonial hearing in front of the board, along with Cleveland's operations officer from the 334th Squadron in Korea.

They left from the hearing confident and six weeks later Cleveland received confirmation that his

fifth victory had been approved. He was now an official ace.

"I lived so long with the 4-2-4 moniker, nothing had changed," Cleveland said. "What happened had happened, but the recognition of it does put you in an elite level in Air Force fighter pilots. I was obviously very pleased and thrilled."

He is now working hard to keep the stories of the aces alive for future generations through publishing the book, "Wings of Valor," published by the Naval Institute Press. Cleveland has created a Kickstarter account online to raise money for production and distribution costs. Donations can also be made at <http://wingsofvalor.us/>.