How Dolph Overton Spearheaded the Fifth Victory Credit for Chick Cleveland

Joe: Sorry it's taken so long - believe it or not, I'm way too busy, and I'm not as quick as I used to be. The Memorial to DD is super. The following narrative is lifted from Chapter 12 of my book, "Once a Fighter Pilot." Feel free to add it as a link. VR, Chick

In 1999 the nostalgia of a West Point class reunion at Hilton Head, North Carolina, turned unexpectedly to the topic of revisiting Cleveland's record of air-to-air victories in the Korean War. Instigating the discussion was Dolphin D. Overton, known familiarly as "Dolph" or "D.D." whom he'd had little contact with since they graduated from West Point and entered pilot training in Texas. As an F-86 pilot flying with the 51st Fighter Interceptor Wing in Korea, Overton became an ace "with the hottest streak in Air Force history," shooting down five MiGs in just four days in January 1953.[i]

Some of the more aggressive F-86 pilots routinely bent the rules of engagement, crossing the Yalu into Chinese airspace to engage the MiGs, but Overton was given a "career-killing" efficiency report after responding truthfully when higher headquarters asked him if he had been in a dogfight north of the river. A Swiss diplomat had witnessed the engagement and filed a complaint through the United Nations. When the war was over, Overton felt he had no choice but to resign his commission and leave the service--taking his intense drive and love of aviation with him. The Air Force lost a born leader, while he went on to become rich and famous in civilian life.

"D.D. made a lot of money but never lost his interest in aviation," Cleveland said. "He had his own fleet of airplanes—every type of Cessna ever built. He owned a lot of other airplanes, and restored a Ford Tri-motor in North Carolina. He took me through the airplane and the hangar that was doing the restoration. He had a huge library of aviation books, mostly fighter oriented, which he donated to the University of Virginia. Earlier, at the Hilton Head reunion, several guys came around and said D.D. wants to talk to you. He and I got together at the barbecue and we sat down and talked MiG stories."
“I’ve heard the stories of your two probables,” he said, and asked Cleveland to tell them again. So Cleveland told him the stories.

They talked later on the phone. Overton had gone over the two probables in his mind, and said, “You dumb ass, why didn’t you claim those as kills? I’ve seen other claims approved with less meat on them than that.”

“Maybe you’re right, D.D.,” Cleveland said. “I didn’t claim them, and that’s the way it is. I’m happy with my four-two-four record.”

“Well, I’m not,” Overton said. “I’m going to go to work, and we’re going to get those two probables confirmed.”

“Yeah, right,” Cleveland said. Here was a friend who hadn’t been associated with the Air Force for years, and he was going to go to this much trouble for a “dumb-ass” classmate. Cleveland promptly forgot about it, but Overton didn’t. He went to work, and over the next seven years the bureaucracy would get a feel of what it must have been like for a MiG pilot to have D.D. Overton on his tail. He had bulldog tenacity when he sank his teeth into a problem, and the mulish curiosity of a trained historian.

First he tried to track down the pilots who had been in Cleveland’s flight in Korea, and learned that all but one who observed his MiG engagements were deceased. John “Red Dog” Hager, who was Cleveland’s wingman when he scored a probable kill on July 11, 1952, was no longer living, but Overton located Don Pascoe, the wingman who witnessed the second probable on September 21, who was still alive and residing in California. He contacted Pascoe and asked if he remembered the engagement on the 21st, and Pascoe said absolutely, he remembered it clearly—“You never forget air-to-air combat. It’s burned into your memory.”

Pascoe said he had always thought that encounter “was one of Cleve’s several kills” and should have been reported as such. Overton got a statement from Pascoe, and he and Boots Blesse (a double ace and major general now retired and living in Florida) submitted that and other documentation to the Victory Confirmation Board of the American Fighter Aces Association in San Antonio. Overton noted in a letter to Blesse that Cleveland did not know he “was looking into the matter until after the fact.” “I had a similar circumstance in my lifetime where a late recognition of some of my awards was made by a total outsider, and it meant so very much to me and my family,” he wrote.[ii]

He also spoke of “Chick’s modesty and reticence … to initiate any review to upgrade his own claim” and said it was understandable how the probable victory of September 21st was one of those that just fell out of the follow-up loop in the excitement of the heavy activity that day.” The gun camera film “was not usable” and “his penchant and his lifelong reputation for complete verification on all his claims or anything he ever did is a factor.”

His research showed that September 21st 1952 was a busy day. Sabre pilots claimed five MiGs shot down (including two by Robbie Risner), plus one probable, Cleveland’s claim. The next week was a busy one—with “10 more MiGs down with Chick getting 2 of those.” Overton recalled from his own combat experience that going back and reviewing a probable claim during a week when the MiGs were flying would have been unusual.[iii]

In May 2000 the Victory Confirmation Board of the American Fighter Aces Association, made up of five WWII aces from all the services, reviewed the documentation and validated Cleveland’s fifth kill in the skies over Korea. So the American Fighter Aces Association recognized him as a fighter ace and he was inducted as a member of the Association. Brigadier General Frank L. Gailer, Jr., (USAF ret.), who was Third Air Force vice commander when Cleveland was at RAF Upper Heyford, was president of the Association, and Cleveland wrote
Gailer that he was “deeply honored” to be recognized by the Victory Confirmation Board. “I guess I have secretly wished for many years to be one of the big boys, and now that it’s happened, to say I am delighted is akin to calling the Lincoln Memorial ‘interesting’,” he wrote.

The quest for official confirmation had only begun. The Fighter Aces Association banded together the aces from each branch of the armed forces, but had no official relationship with any of the military services. Each service had its own procedures for confirming victory credits or correcting military records. The Association had validated the fifth victory and he was an ace in their eyes, but that was not an official Air Force finding. The next step was to correct the official record.

The Air Force Historical Research Agency at Maxwell AFB is the official repository for historical records, including USAF aerial victory credits. Overton first contacted the Agency in 2002 to see if the documentation he had gathered was sufficient to award Cleveland his fifth victory. The Agency did not have the expertise or authority to act as a victory credit board or corrections board, however, only to confirm whether or not credits were actually awarded by orders or other official documentation. The documentation he presented was not deemed sufficient for the Agency to change the official record.

Overton was not dissuaded. In 2004, he learned that under glasnost the Russian government had opened its military records from the Korean War and disk copies, including every MiG-15 combat sortie flown, were available in the National Archives II at Silver Spring, Maryland. He called and asked Cleveland to go with him, and they drove up to Silver Spring. The records were under tight security, and it was like getting to the Holy Grail to see the collection. “They didn’t just check our I.D., but took our fingerprints, our faces, and cleared us to the next level where we were checked again and finally gained access to where the Russian collection was stored. The archivist in charge knew we were coming and greeted us warmly.”

The archivist had a disk containing the MiG-15 records ready for them, but the data was in Russian and would have to be translated. He had used the services of the Russian Language Department at the University of Maryland campus, which was nearby, and suggested they go there for help in translating the records. Rather than have them go through the labyrinthine procedures required to remove records from the facility, the archivist met them in the parking lot with the disk. What a nice departure from the bureaucratic maze. They drove directly to the University of Maryland and got directions to the Russian Language Department.

They sought out the head of the department, but she was out to lunch. Upon returning she said, oh yes, she could help them. She brought the information from the disk up on her computer, and they found the MiG combat records for September 21, 1952—the date of his second probable victory. "There it was in all its glory, in Russian. We asked the lady if she could isolate that part of the disk and translate it for us. She said, oh yes, I’ll be able to do that. So we left in a state of high excitement."

Months passed, and no word from the translator. “D.D. contacted her and learned nothing had been done because she wasn’t familiar with the military terminology used in the records. He went back to Maryland, retrieved the disk, and located two other translators—one in Washington and one on the West Coast at the Presidio—both vetted by the Department of Defense. He made copies of the disk and sent one to each of them. Their translations were “essentially” the same, with gaps between American and Russian accounts of victories and losses.

The Russians claimed they lost two MiG-15s that day and shot down two F-86s. Fifth Air Force pilots claimed five MiG kills and a probable with no losses. One F-86 suffered battle damage but made it home safely. The two losses the Russians admitted to were north of the river, one of which matched closely in description, coordinates, and time to Cleveland’s engagement that day. There was an hour’s difference in time, but that was explained by the difference in time zones—“the Chinese were on one time zone; we were on another.”
The Historical Research Agency was still disinclined to change the record on the basis of the evidence presented—pointing out that its role was not to act as a victory confirmation board, but “to confirm whether or not credits were actually awarded by official documentation.” [vii] Nearly five years had gone by and a frustrated, but unrelenting D.D. Overton was back where he started.

“D.D. called me and said he had run up against a stone wall,” Cleveland recalled. “He’d been at it since 1999—that’s what you call friendship. He asked me if there was anything I could do to help. I said that there was the Air Force Board for the Correction of Military Records, which was open to me but was difficult for him to access. They were my records, and only I could do it. I told him I didn’t want to do that, and he said Chick you have to. I finally said okay, and he sent me two boxes of stuff he had collected.”[viii]

Cleveland painstakingly put the evidence in order, and in March 2007 he submitted the package to the Board for Correction of Air Force Records. He asked that he be permitted to make a personal appearance before the Board, accompanied by D.D. Overton and Major General USAF (Ret) Frederick C. “Boots” Blesse, both members of the American Fighter Aces Association. “Mr. Overton did most of the research into the circumstances of my claim and General Blesse can speak to the operational considerations involved.”[ix]

The request was granted, and in November 2007 a formal hearing was convened in executive session at Andrews AFB, Maryland. “Boots drove up from Florida. He has a daughter in Washington. D.D. also has a daughter in Washington and her husband got us digs at a posh country club there. My son Chris, who works in Washington, had dinner with us and listened to war stories. He was fascinated. He’d heard all about Boots and D.D., but had never met them. The next morning, D.D.’s wife drove us all out to Andrews.”

They arrived at the hearing and were met by a “very pleasant and professional” BCMR staff member who showed them to the anteroom. They were called in individually, with Cleveland appearing first. "I went in first and sat down. There were five voting members of the panel. The chief of Air Force History, Dick Anderegg, was there in an advisory capacity. He’s a retired F-4 pilot, very professional, and he asked good fighter pilot questions, like how long did your wingman wait to call a break, and did you ever look back and see the pursuing MiGs. I said no, I was padlocked on those two MiGs I was chasing.”

“They asked a lot of good questions. I testified for about an hour and a half. I said I would not be there if not for D.D. Overton. He had done all the research, and I accepted what the Historical Research Agency said, that they could not confirm the victory, until D.D. sent me all the material. When I saw the analysis he did of the Russian records from that day compared to ours, I said hey this is a fight worth fighting. That’s when I requested the hearing.”

After a short break Overton came in and testified. He brought a map he actually carried in the cockpit with him during the war. They all knew he was an ace, and was there in a supporting role. He was asked what had convinced him “this was a kill and not a probable.” “D.D. said the evidence he had gathered convinced him. They loved him. He was there about 20 minutes, and then Boots came in.”

Cleveland had told the board that Boots was not there to address the specific mission, but to talk about the operational factors involved. "Boots said up front he couldn’t shed any light on the actual mission, because he wasn’t there that day. The aura of Boots being a double ace awes everybody he meets. He has a sharp sense of humor, and he soon had everyone laughing.”

When the definition of a kill was brought up, a board member asked Boots, “You’re not necessarily talking about killing the pilot are you, or just shooting down the aircraft?”
“Oh God no, if the pilot ejected you wouldn’t want to kill him. Say you shot him down on Tuesday, he might be up again Thursday and you could get him again.”[x] The suing laughter seemed to Cleveland to be a good sign.

The hearing ended on a good note. “The board was thorough and professional. They had gone over the documentation carefully, and asked the right questions. Boots and I went into the anteroom where D.D. and his wife were waiting. There were observers at the hearing, and some of them came over to have their pictures taken with us. I had a good feeling, but you never know.”

Christmas came and went, and there was no answer. Then, in January, he got a call saying the correction to his records had been approved. The Secretary of the Air Force’s representative had signed the paper officially making him an ace, and it was on its way.[xi]

He was certified as the 40th jet ace of the Korean War. It occurred to many that unless there was another major war, he might be the last named fighter ace. Soon afterward, in March 2008, the Alabama House of Representatives adopted a resolution commending him on the recognition. Near the end of the year, in a special ceremony, Lieutenant General Allen Peck, Air University commander, presented him with the Silver Star for valor, the Armed Forces third highest medal.[xii]


[ii] Ltr, Dolph Overton to Boots Blesse, Sep 1, 1999.

[iii] Ibid.


[v] Ltr, AFHRA to Mr. Dolph Overton, Apr 12, 2002; Ltr, AFHRA to Overton, Oct 19, 2004.


[x] Cleveland interview, Jan 14, 2009.

[xi] Ibid.