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Korean War pilot receives Silver Star 56 years later

By Carl Bergquist
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More than 56 years after a fateful day in Korea when then Lt. Charles Cleveland landed his F-86 Sabre at a South Korean air base with a “plausible” MiG-15 kill, the now retired Lt. Gen. Cleveland received a Silver Star for his heroics.

Because he didn’t actually see the MiG crash in March 1952, the lieutenant listed it as a “probable kill.” That brought his total victories for the war to four and two probables, not enough for the coveted Ace designation.

In 2000, through the research efforts of a friend, Dolph Overton, the kill was confirmed, and a process began to make General Cleveland, a former Air University commander, the fifth Ace of the Korean War.

The fall of the Soviet Union assisted the confirmation by making Russian flight records available, and those records indicate the MiG-15 the general had in his sights that day was, in fact, shot down.

“To be honest with you, I never really thought about it. I had four kills and two probables, and I was satisfied. That was a pretty good record for Korea,” General Cleveland said after the ceremony Monday at the Maxwell Officers Club. “Dolph worked for more than eight years to prove I had that kill, and his findings satisfied the Fighter Ace Association. But, at first it didn’t satisfy the Air Force. They wanted to see Air Force records that didn’t exist. Finally, the Russian records and testimony from my wingman, Don Pasco, were accepted as proof.”

He said ironically the Air Force claimed five kills and two probable kills that March day in 1952, but the Russian records only confirmed two kills.



Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Charles Cleveland speaks at the Maxwell Officers Club after receiving a Silver Star for his actions 56 years ago.

-- Air Force photo by Melanie Rodgers

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However, one of the two kills was the aircraft the general had engaged in combat and last saw trailing smoke and heading toward the ground.

Lt. Gen. Allen Peck, the current commander of Air University, congratulated General Cleveland in opening remarks and said the purpose of the ceremony was to “correct historical records.”

The Russian records that were so instrumental in securing the medal were found translated and in the possession of the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

“So, how does receiving his Ace status relate to today’s ceremony?” General Peck asked. “The Silver Star is awarded for gallantry in action, and all Aces receive the Silver Star for their actions in combat.”

General Cleveland said once the Air Force examined the Russian records, they were very supportive of his claim.

“This Air Force has awarded a lot of Silver Stars, but not many 56 years after the fact,” he said. “I’m grateful to have good friends who made this happen. I’ve tried to downplay this in my mind, but I’m thrilled.”

Gen. Stephen Lorenz, Air Education and Training Command commander and a former Air University commander, attended the ceremony and said he was pleased that General Cleveland’s record has been updated to accurately reflect his military service.

“It is my honor to celebrate your honor as a fighter Ace and for receiving the Silver Star,” General Lorenz said. “It’s a belated honor that emphasizes the courage and skill you displayed.”

General Cleveland’s daughter, Sue McCarron, called the ceremony fantastic.

“All of the great things he did in the Air Force are coming back for him today,” she said at the ceremony. “It’s a fulfillment to be honored in this way after so long, and I think it’s really fitting.”

During the ceremony, a poignant tribute to General Cleveland came in the form of a letter from a former Korean diplomat to the United States. The writer said, in part, that the general is not only a U.S. hero but also a Korean hero.

“The heroic acts of General Cleveland will be remembered into posterity,” the diplomat said in his letter of appreciation to the general.

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