

By Clay Latimer for
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Ritchie's Keys

The only U.S. Air Force pilot ace of the Vietnam War. Received the Air Force Cross, a medal for that service ranked second to the Medal of Honor.

"I've quoted Gen. Patton so many times: 'We fight with machinery, but we win with people.'"

It began as a routine combat flight — the sort of mission that Steve Ritchie had done over 300 times.

Just after dawn on July 8, 1972, the 30-year-old Air Force captain climbed into the cockpit of his F-4 Phantom jet and prepared for a familiar run over North Vietnam.

But as he streaked over the border toward the outskirts of Hanoi, Ritchie encountered a fighter pilot's nightmare: two Russian-designed MiG 21s closing in on his quartet of Phantoms.

And Ritchie couldn't see them.

"We only had a few seconds," he told IBD.

That was enough.

During a classic low-altitude dogfight 30 miles outside of the North's capital, Ritchie downed both MiGs with three radar missiles in 1 1/2 minutes.

"Every part of my training, education and discipline came together at that moment," he said.

Six weeks later, on Aug. 28, he shot down his fifth MiG 21 to become the only Air Force pilot ace — a title that signifies five enemy aircraft kills — of the Vietnam War.

Frequent Flier

Ritchie flew 339 missions during two tours in Southeast Asia, took part in rescue operations deep in North Vietnam, and received 25 air medals, 10 Distinguished Flying Crosses and four Silver Stars.

He also was awarded the Air Force Cross, the nation's second-highest decoration. In 1974 he retired from active duty as one of the most decorated pilots in U.S. history and stayed on in the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve.

"The Holy Grail of a fighter pilot is aerial combat," said Fred Olmsted, who shot down two MiG 21s in Vietnam. "To shoot down five airplanes in wicked, high-stress combat at closing speeds of over 1,000 mph, well, Steve became a Hall of Fame legend when he became an ace.

"Steve was not only a fearless combat pilot and a brilliant leader of combat pilots, but he also was always one step ahead of the North Vietnamese. He would analyze every aspect of a coming air battle. There were no surprises for him."

That became clear on a July morning 39 years ago, when Ritchie and his weapon system operator, Charles DeBellevue, were alerted by American radar that two MiG 21s were two miles to the north.

Ritchie immediately made a hard turn that way, spotted the lead MiG midway through the move, rolled left and maxed out both afterburners. "We passed about 1,000 feet from each other. I could see the pilot in the cockpit," he said.

Instead of chasing the plane and risking a trap, Ritchie waited for the second, trailing MiG. He then swung into a nose-down slicing turn and barrel-rolled to find a narrow angle of attack.

In The Blue Vs. The Reds

"The MiG was high in the blue sky, turning hard," he said. "I squeezed the trigger. The first missile hit the center of the fuselage from a near-impossible angle. The second passed through the fireball and debris. I flew over the explosion and a piece of metal from the MiG sliced into my left wing. All of that took 49 seconds."

Meanwhile, the lead MiG was on the trail of one of his flightmates.

With afterburners still plugged in, Ritchie used the raw power of his plane to dive, climb, turn and close the 1 1/2-mile gap as the MiG maneuvered.

"I was about 3,000 feet away when I fired the next missile," he said. "When it came off, it began to snake away from the target. Then suddenly it made what seemed like a 90-degree right turn and hit dead center in the fuselage at maximum velocity. It was a huge fireball. There wasn't a piece left larger than a few square feet.

"It was the most intense, the most exciting mission that I ever flew. It was near perfect. During that

minute and 29 seconds I drew on all my life experiences."

Ritchie and his flightmates returned safely to their home base in Thailand.

Carolina Rise

Ritchie, 69, grew up in Reidsville, N.C., the only child of a tobacco company employee who fought in World War II under Gen. George Patton. Bedrock American values were an important part of daily life.

"The most important lesson I ever learned, other than integrity, was when I told my dad that I wanted a car when I was 16. He said, 'Fine, all you have to do is buy it.' And I did," Ritchie said.

Arriving at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs in 1960, Ritchie was a walk-on in football, working his way up the depth chart like a classic overachiever.

After graduating, Ritchie excelled in flight school in Laredo, Texas. He finished atop his class and impressed instructors with his talent and obsessive preparation.

Then came Vietnam. In 1968 he was assigned to Da Nang Air Base, where he quickly distinguished himself on missions.

"You have to believe in yourself — or you don't live," said Olmsted, one of Ritchie's Air Force Academy classmates. "You can look at any dogfight, and there are moments when somebody is going to get killed. It all hinges on one or two decisions or aircraft movements."

Returning from Southeast Asia in 1969, Ritchie became one of the youngest instructors at Fighter Weapons School, the Air Force's version of "Top Gun."

Three years later, he yearned to return to the war zone. So he volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam and was assigned to neighboring Udorn Royal Thai Air Base.

"A lot of fighter pilots went in there, and bless their hearts, did their 12 months, performed their duty for our country and came home," Olmsted said. "Steve stayed in that war. As long as the country called on him, he was ready to fight. There is no one who loves America any more than Steve."

In April 1972, with the communists invading the South, President Nixon countered with airstrikes north of the 20th parallel.

Enter Ritchie. Three weeks into the Air Force's assault, he downed his first MiG. But before he could savor the moment, two enemy fighters destroyed a plane carrying Maj. Bob Lodge, Ritchie's close friend and an academy classmate.

Ritchie and other pilots returned to the area northwest of Hanoi throughout the week, hoping Lodge and back-seater Roger Locher survived and evaded capture.

Twenty-three days later, the Americans launched one of the most dangerous rescues of the war, pulling Locher from the jungle. Lodge had died in the crash.

Soon, Ritchie downed his second MiG, setting up his double kill on July 8.

Still On The Go

Ritchie, who retired as a brigadier general from the Air Force Reserve in 1999, travels extensively today as a motivational speaker. He lives near the academy, where his F-4 Phantom is on display in a corner of the school's terrazzo.

"He was one of the figures from history you studied, who inspired you," said Col. Vinnie Farrell, an Air Force Academy student in the early 1980s and a Gulf War pilot. "Steve Ritchie was the epitome of a fighter pilot."

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