

The Pinnacle of Professionalism

Col. Ralph Parr's unique combination of achievements spans three wars and 8,000 hours of fighter time.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

THE Distinguished Service Cross and its successor, the Air Force Cross, rank second to the Medal of Honor as decorations for valor in combat. Only one man, Col. Ralph S. Parr, has been awarded both medals.

Ralph Parr's combat career began as a P-38 pilot in the Pacific in the closing weeks of World War II. In 1950, while flying F-86s in the States, he was picked to be one of the first pilots sent to Korea to fly F-80s with the 49th Fighter Bomber Wing. On that tour, Lieutenant Parr flew 165 combat missions against close-support and interdiction targets.

After more than a year in the States developing new air-to-air tactics for jet fighters, then-Captain Parr wangled a second tour in Korea, flying F-86s with the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing. In forty-seven missions during a remarkable seven weeks at the end of the war, he earned the Silver Star and the Distinguished Service Cross and downed ten enemy aircraft, including the last Communist plane shot down over Korea, an Il-12 transport apparently far off course.

Parr's DSC was awarded for a mission on June 30, 1953. He and his wingman, Lt. Al Cox, were attacked by ten MiG-15s. Captain Parr shot down two MiGs and was maneuvering for his third kill when a call for help came from his wing commander, Col. James Johnson, whose F-86 had flamed out after swallowing debris from a MiG he had downed and who was under attack by several other MiGs. Though low on fuel, Captain Parr found his boss, drove off the at-



Ralph Parr, who racked up a grand total of 641 missions in three wars.

tackers, giving Colonel Johnson time to restart his engine, and escorted him back to base.

In the interim between our "limited wars" in Asia, Ralph Parr's career continued to center on fighters. He was one of the first instructors in F-4s and, in the fall of 1967, was named Operations Officer of the 12th TFW in Vietnam. Before that tour ended, he had logged 226 combat missions, the most memorable on March 16, 1968, when he was awarded the Air Force Cross for extraordinary valor during the siege of Khe Sanh.

On that day, Colonel Parr and his backseater, Capt. Tom McManus, "a very gutsy guy," were flying one of two F-4s fragged to escort C-130s that were resupplying the Marines at Khe Sanh. As they approached the rendezvous point, a FAC, Fingerprint 54, diverted the flight to attack two mortar positions within seventy meters of friendly forces. Only napalm, which Colonel Parr carried, could be used, and there was but one possible run-in heading, dictated by terrain, poor visibility, and troop locations.

The second F-4 held at a higher altitude while Colonel Parr destroyed both mortar positions in two runs, releasing at absolute minimum altitude. On the second run, six well-camouflaged heavy automatic weapons—five of them quad mounts—that were sited to destroy

departing cargo aircraft opened fire, severely damaging Parr's F-4. The fire from the twenty-two 14.5-mm guns was described by the FAC as "unbelievably intense."

Nevertheless, Colonel Parr decided to continue the strike until his ordnance was expended. With two napalm runs and four 20-mm cannon passes—all on the same restricted run-in—he destroyed five of the automatic weapons and silenced the sixth.

Visibility had now become extremely poor, and there still was heavy small-arms fire from enemy troops a few meters from the landing strip. Judging that it was not safe for three aircraft to operate in those conditions, Colonel Parr asked the slow-moving FAC "to back off a bit" so he could call troop targets for the second F-4. After that, the route was clear for C-130s departing the Khe Sanh strip.

Fingerprint 54 later reported that he had never seen such aggressiveness and courage in the face of such intense fire. The Marines whom Colonel Parr had defended called his bravery and skill "the pinnacle of aerial professionalism."

Two years later, Ralph Parr returned to Vietnam for a second tour, this time as commander of the 12th TFW, flying 201 more combat sorties for a grand total of 641 missions in three wars. That may well be an Air Force record to add to Colonel Parr's array of some sixty US and foreign decorations.

In 1976, Ralph Parr was retired for physical disability after suffering a serious back injury while inspecting hurricane damage to a roof at Eglin AFB, Fla. "You'd think," he says, "I could have picked a more graceful way to depart the military."

It's not the leaving, but the doing that counts. Colonel Parr may have hung up his blue suit, but his achievements in five combat tours remain a shining symbol in the annals of Air Force valor. ■