

Two Days in May

F-4 Squadron Commander Bob Titus had waited a long time for those days. When they came, seventeen years of experience paid off.

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ROBERT F. Titus graduated from the Test Pilot School at Edwards AFB in 1954, a young combat veteran with 101 fighter missions in Korea. During the next decade, he did experimental and test flying in most US and several European fighters and made the first jet fighter polar crossing from Germany to Alaska in an F-100F.

In 1965, Titus was selected as project officer for the F-5A "Skoshi Tiger" combat evaluation in South Vietnam. He flew more than 300 missions from Bien Hoa with the unit, then, the next year, did in-theater flight tests to speed up certification of new weapons. When he was named CO of the 389th Tac Fighter Squadron at Danang, Bob Titus brought with him a wealth of fighter experience and a burning desire to tangle with North Vietnam's MiG-21s. That desire wasn't to be completely fulfilled until the air war took a different turn that brought him two momentous days in May 1967.

Until late 1966, the F-4s had a primary strike mission in support of Rolling Thunder, the air campaign against military targets in North Vietnam. The MiGs seldom appeared until September 1966, when the North's fighter force had grown to about 100 planes based near Hanoi. As the MiGs became increasingly aggressive, some F-4s were diverted from their strike mission for air combat against the MiGs. On May 20, 1967, Bob Titus became one of the few USAF pilots up to that time to shoot down a



Robert F. Titus received the Air Force Cross for downing two MiGs in one day.

MiG-21. That was prelude to one of the best days north of the DMZ that any USAF fighter jock could ask for.

On May 22, Titus led eight F-4s, escorting an F-105 strike force to a target near Hanoi. This is how he remembers the action that day:

"I was high and to the right of the Thuds and received word that MiGs were airborne at Hanoi. We got a radar lock-on and jettisoned external tanks. The radar steering dot moved to the right side of the scope, but I couldn't pick them up visually. I had turned away from the strike force about ninety degrees and was concerned about leaving them without cover. The MiGs didn't appear to be an immediate threat, so we turned back and resumed our high position so I could see the entire box of Thuds.

"Shortly after that I saw two MiGs coming in fast at six o'clock. They fired missiles and continued straight past the formation as I pulled up and turned left to meet them, reversed to the right as they overshot, switched to Sidewinders, picked up a strong signal from the Number 2 MiG, and released a missile that drove right up his pipe. He exploded in a huge fireball.

"I immediately concentrated on the other MiG. He broke left in a tight diving turn, and I followed. By now there was too much ground return for the missile to pick up the

MiG, so I switched to the externally mounted M61 gun that 'Boots' Blesse [Col. Frederick C. Blesse, then Director of Operations for the 366th Tactical Fighter Wing at Danang] had thoughtfully ordered installed the previous week.

[Earlier, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara's nonflying "Whiz Kids" had decreed that in the air-to-air missile era, guns were excess baggage.]

"I put the pipper in a lead position, and he reversed. I turned, attempted again to get a lead, and again he reversed. We kept this up in a series of rapid, twisting, hard-turning, rolling maneuvers from 25,000 feet or so down to about 2,000 feet. We were in the vicinity of Hoa Lac airfield and were picking up quite a bit of flak and apparently a number of SAMs. My backseater, Capt. Milan Zimer, later told me he counted five.

"Finally the MiG rolled wings level and started a high-G pullout at about 1,500 feet. I got the pipper on him and fired a long burst. He slowed rapidly. I overshot, pulled up, reversed, put the pipper on him again, but my gun had jammed. I called for my wingman to take him, but the MiG by now was in a shallow dive, rocking his wings, and continued down until he hit the ground. It was an exciting, brief episode that culminated seventeen years of fighter flying and training. We joined up and headed home, low on fuel as usual, but satisfied with a good day's work."

Bob Titus, now a retired brigadier general living in Colorado Springs, was awarded the Air Force Cross for that mission—one of the rare occasions when a US pilot shot down two MiGs in a single day. He has only one regret about his combat experience in Vietnam. "There was too little air-to-air work for a thirsty fighter pilot."

Some of Uncle Ho's MiG pilots who are alive today might not agree with that. ■