

The American Fighter Aces Association
Oral Interviews
The Museum of Flight
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Phillip C. DeLong

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Abstract:

Fighter ace Phillip C. DeLong discusses his nearly three decades of military service with the United States Marine Corps. He describes his wartime experiences as a fighter pilot, including his time with Marine Fighting Squadron 212 (VMF-212) during World War II and with Marine Fighter Squadron 312 (VMF-312) during the Korean War. He also touches on other assignments from his military career, such as his time with the Marine Corps Aviation Guided Missile unit and with several Marine training squadrons. Topics discussed include his service history with VMF-212 and VMF-312; his aerial victories against two Yakovlev fighters in Korea; and his various command and administrative positions.

Biography:

Phillip C. DeLong was born on July 9, 1919 in Jackson, Michigan. He entered the Naval Aviation Cadet program and received his commission with the United States Marine Corps in 1942. The following year, he was assigned to Marine Fighting Squadron 212 (VMF-212) in the South Pacific, flying missions in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. DeLong remained in the military after World War II and went on to serve with Marine Fighter Squadron 312 (VMF-312) aboard the USS *Bataan* (CVL-29) during the Korean War. Apart from his combat tours, he also held a number of command and administrative positions during his career, including serving as commanding officer of several Marine training squadrons and of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Japan. DeLong retired as a colonel in 1969, then worked as a personnel director for the Irwin Yacht and Marine Corporation. He passed away in 2006.

Biographical information courtesy of: Boyce, Ward J., ed., American fighter aces album. Mesa, Ariz: American Fighter Aces Association, 1996.

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Transcript:

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Phillip C. DeLong

[START OF INTERVIEW]

0:00:00

[Personal background]

PHILLIP C. DELONG: Eric Hammel, in reply to your letter of July 10th, you asked for a very detailed, first-person account, which I will attempt to give you on this recording. This is Phil DeLong, Colonel, retired, USMC. Your detailed account as to background. Date of birth is July 9, 1919 in Jackson, Michigan. My education prior to entering the service was two years at the University of Michigan Engineering School.

[Joining the United States Marine Corps and flight training]

Why did I opt for flying? I guess I always have been interested in airplanes. I earned my wings at Corpus Christi, Texas—Dallas, Texas. Went through as a cadet and then joined the Marine Corps. I was transferred to—

[recording stops and starts again 00:01:45]

I was transferred to Miami for further training in the F2A, the old Brewster Buffalo. The airplanes that I flew for flight training were NP-1s, N2Ss, and I believe I had a little bit of time in the SNJ. From Miami, the Naval Air Station at Miami, I went to Chicago to the Naval Air Station there, where we checked out on the carrier, the USS *Wolverine*. It was in the middle of the winter. We'd just had a snowstorm. They had bulldozed the runways, leaving bunkers on either side about 20 or 30 feet high.

00:03:07

We took off, went out to where the carrier was supposedly leaving the dock, and it was just at that point leaving the dock. Lake Michigan was frozen over for about two miles out, so it had an icebreaker in front of it. And it finally got into clear water, and we did check out on the carrier. We got all of our carrier landings in. From the Naval Air Station in Chicago I went to El Toro, joined VMF-212, checked out in F4F-4s and F4U-1s. I had a total of about 400 flight hours for VMF-212.

[VMF-212 in the South Pacific]

For about a month, then to Guadalcanal, then to Vella Lavella, all in the Pacific. From there, the active war for VMF-212 began. We covered the initial landings on Treasure Island [likely meant

Treasury Islands] and Bougainville. [audio distortion]—patrols, covering Task Force, striking Rabaul, plus fighter sweeps over Rabaul. During this time, I, on January the 9th of 1944, shot down two Japanese Zekes over Rabaul, with one probable.

00:05:00

On January the 14th, shot down two more Zekes. January the 23rd, got one and two-third Zekes, two with Elwood [likely Hugh M. Elwood] and Harrison [possibly Allan S. Harrison]. And—go back to January 23rd. Shot down one and two-third Zekes. That was with Major Elwood, at the time, and Lieutenant Harrison. That amounted to two-thirds of an aircraft each and—for the three of us, that is—and then I additionally got one Zero that day. Again on the 23rd, with Major Elwood, I—we got one airplane, so that amounted to a half each. So for the day of January 23rd, I got two and one-sixth. On the 29th, shot down one Zeke. On the 31st, shot down one-half. That amounted to a total of eight and one-sixth kills.

On February the 15th, I shot down three Vals. I was covering the initial landing on Green Island. We intercepted the Val dive-bombers who were attacking the landing force and the Navy fleet. We moved VMF-212 to and operated out of Green Island. [audio distortion]—about two months, ran strafing, escort patrol, barge search, sub patrol, covered Task Force in the area. The tour was over in May 1944 and returned to the Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point and joined VMF-913.

[Post-World War II assignments and VMF-312 during the Korean War]

World War II was over, and on September '45 went to Japan, joined VMF-224 to do search-and-rescue and surveillance over Japan. Returned to Marine Corps Air Station Quantico April of 1946, went to Marine Corps schools. Total flight hours at that time of interest were 1,230.

00:08:15

From there, I went to the Bureau of Aeronautics in Washington—and it's now Bureau of Weapons—on May of '46. Stayed there until July of '48. Went again to Quantico and then to El Toro in July of 1950. Then went to Korea, VMF-312, September 1950. Flew from carriers. Armed reconnaissance, Tactical Air Control Airborne, over the Chosin Reservoir and basically all of Korea. We carrier-qualified aboard the USS *Sicily*, S-I-C-I-L-Y, on 20 January 1951. VMF-312 went aboard the carrier USS *Bataan*, March '51. [audio distortion]—312 went aboard the carrier the USS *Bataan* in March on 1951 and flew more recons, close air supports. And on April 1951 is when the story about the Chinese Air Force begins.

When war broke out in Korea in June of 1950, squadron VMF-312 was based at El Toro, Southern California, still flying Corsairs, now the F4U-4. By mid-September, 312 was in Japan in Itami. And before the end of the month was up, [unintelligible 00:10:25] from Kimpo, Korea,

had moved to Wonsan in October, Yonpo in December, and then back to Itami in Japan on the 14th of that month and continued to fly missions over Korea. The Checkerboard moved to Bofu on Honshu and back to Korea, Pusan, on February the 10th. Returning to Japan on March 5th, the squadron boarded the *Bataan*, the CVL-29, at Sasebo for carrier duty with the Seventh Fleet, Task Force 95. Its mission was to escort friendly ships and blockade enemy craft on the west coast of Korea. Also, to fly armed reconnaissance and close air support missions for the U.S. Army and Marine ground forces in the area.

[Aerial victories against Yakovlev aircraft (April 1951)]

On April 21, 1951, I led a four-plane flight off of the carrier *Bataan* at 0540 in the morning. The task was an armed reconnaissance of the west coast of Korea. Around 6:45, a distress call was heard from another Checkerboard pilot, Lieutenant Godby [likely William H. Godby], reporting him bailing out because of engine trouble. I made radio contact with *Bataan's* combat air control, and it relayed his request for a helicopter to be dispatched to pick up the downed pilot.

00:12:08

Godby's flight orbited his position, and my second division—second section was detached to rendezvous with the helicopter and escort it to the rescue site on Korean mainland. My wingman, First Lieutenant Harold Daigh, that's D-A-I-G-H, continued on to the target area, climbing to an altitude over [unintelligible 00:12:37]. When we reached about 2,000 feet, they spotted four aircraft approaching from the northwest at 5,000. He called them out to me as P-51s, but they were in fact Communist piston engine YAK-3s or -9 fighters. Believing them to be friendly, I didn't pay any attention to them as they made a right turn towards me from ten o'clock in a loose right echelon formation. I quickly became aware that they were not friendly when a bullet from one of the YAKs hit the Corsair just aft of the cockpit, slightly damaging my radio.

The enemy pilots evidently had not spotted Lieutenant Daigh, who pulled in behind the last two YAKs, initially following the number three man. This left number four at Daigh's seven o'clock, so he then dived to the left and below the aircraft. Daigh made then a climbing 360 turn and opened fire on the two enemy aircraft with unobserved results. Tailing in on another YAK at four o'clock, he opened fire once more, hitting it in the tail, fuselage, and wing. The starboard wing broke off, and the aircraft crashed and burned. Meanwhile, I had executed a very quick split-S to pick up speed and made a climbing turn to the left.

00:14:06

Two of the YAKs attacked again from the stern, but I was able to turn the tables. While still in my turn, one of the enemy aircraft crossed in front of me from right to left at the same instant he saw Daigh's victim crash. Giving his full attention then—my full attention then to the YAK in

front of me, I hit it with a solid burst of 50-caliber, sending it spinning to the ground. It crashed and burned about a half mile from Daigh's victim. I turned to my left, eastward, and immediately spotted two of the YAKs in front heading the same direction. Daigh was pursuing one of them, but the second was behind Daigh, turning right onto his tail. I radioed a warning telling his wingman to pull up. Daigh made a quick turn to the left and opened fire, and the YAK, as it overran him, it began smoking from its cockpit and wing roots. Tailing the lead plane, I started it smoking with my first burst of 50-caliber. Then it turned to the south and then split-S'd and turned to the west.

I continued to score, and the YAK was smoking from its wings and fuselage. Pieces of the plane were simultaneously falling away. Papers then flew from the cockpit as the pilot jettisoned his hood and bailed out. As the YAK crashed into the ocean, its pilot descended much more slowly into the water, apparently unhurt. Daigh and I joined up, climbing to about 6,000 feet, and orbited the enemy pilot's position. I requested that the helicopter sent to rescue Lieutenant Godby also pick up the enemy airman. This—after orbiting for about 10 minutes, Daigh and I headed south. Daigh's plane had developed a rough engine, and I had smoke in my cockpit. So we returned to the ship, and we landed safely aboard it about 8:20.

The fight lasted about 10 minutes from approximately 7:15 to around 7:25 at an altitude of only 2,000 to 3,000 feet. Three YAKs were immediately confirmed destroyed, two by myself and one by Daigh. These were the first Marine Corps kills, and the first by Corsairs, in the Korean War. Daigh had badly damaged the fourth YAK, but it had not seen to crash, according to a dispatch of 26 April. A YAK fighter was located by UN forces in shallow water off the coast two days earlier, and it was assumed this was Daigh's victim and his victory was officially upgraded.

00:17:02

Interesting: the two Corsairs were carrying full external load, six rockets each, plus a combination of 500-pound general purpose bombs and napalm. Throughout most of the battle, Lieutenant Daigh tried but failed to release his bombs before attacking, and they remained in place until the action was over. I didn't get around to jettisoning my bombs until after destroying the first YAK. An interesting part of this is when we were attacked by the YAKs, we were climbing out away from the downed pilot. I had pulled out my maps and had them spread all across my lap. Thus, when I was attacked, I had a cockpit full of maps. I felt the 7.7-millimeters hitting my airplane, did a split-S to get out of the fire and to gain speed. The maps, being loose in the cockpit, didn't help my visibility. So I had to get rid of the map before I could recover from the split-S. This was one of the more tense moments of the flight, considering I started the split-S at about 1,000 feet with a fully-loaded F4U. I did collect the maps and did recover from the dive.

While following the second YAK, which ended up heading west, I had chopped him up with the six 50-calibers, and he was smoking, no longer using evasive tactics. I knew I had six high-velocity aviation rockets, and I thought they would be effective—they *could* be an effective anti-

air missile. I selected the rocket launcher, hit the switch, and nothing fired. I gave another burst of 50-caliber, and more parts fell off the YAK. Reselected the rockets and nothing. Tried salvo; nothing happened. I gave it another burst of 50-caliber, papers came out of the YAK's cockpit, the pilot jettisoned his hood, and then bailed out. Upon returning to the carrier, they were reluctant to let me aboard with 60 rockets—or six 5-inch rockets on my Corsair. So while in the Charlie pattern, the ordnance officer advised me on my radio that the night before, they had rewired the rocket circuit on that F4U and installed a new switch to activate the rockets. With this info, I jettisoned the rockets and landed aboard the *Bataan*. But think of the possibility of shooting down an aircraft with an air-to-ground rocket.

00:19:50

312 served on the *Bataan* until June of '51. I was tops in the squadron for missions. I had 127 missions. And for the action on April 21st, I was later awarded the Silver Star and also received two DFCs for the service in Korea. My two-war totals of Air Medals reached 17. The—and five—I'm sorry. And seven DFCs.

[Other assignments and command positions]

I returned in September in '51 to the United States, back to El Toro. Joined the Marine Corps Aviation Ground Intercept Squadron 4 as a commanding officer, which was basically a ground intercept. September of '52, I went to the Air Force station at Biggs Air Force Base, El Paso, Texas, and went through the guided missile school. Got out of there in May of '53, and in June went to Point Mugu, the missile test center for the Navy in—just north of Los Angeles in California.

I joined the Marine Corps Aviation Guided Missile unit. The type of aircraft we flew there was quite extensive. We flew the XF3D-1s; an F6F-5K, which was a drone; an A4D-4N; an F3D-2M, which was peculiar to missile firing; an F9F-6, which was used as a shoot-down plane; and a FJ-4 as a shoot-down plane.

00:22:34

Also flew the F7U-3M, the Cutlass, during that period of time. I got 27 launches of Sparrow 1 missiles. Left there in '56, went to VMA-121 in [Japan?], Korea. Flew AD-6s. Came back to Cherry Point, July of '57, took over as commanding officer of VMAT, which is an attack training squadron at El Toro. We flew F9F-8-Bakers [F9F-8Bs] and 8Ts. It was primarily a special weapons preparatory. [audio distortion] In July of '58, took over as the commanding officer of VMT, which was a composite of all the Marine training outfits on the East Coast. We flew at that, an F9F-8T, and part of the mission was transitioning pilots from straight-wing and from prop to jet. In June 1960, I went overseas to Naples, Italy and joined NATO as a Special

Assistant to the Chief of Staff. Over there was an interesting run. Flew AD-5s. I towed for the Sixth Fleet from the Naval Air Station in Naples. Of interest, while I was towing there one day, they got hit by lightning and they—while airborne in the AD-5s. And we all survived.

June of '65, came back, went to Headquarters, Marine Corps. From there, I went to Okinawa as the commanding officer of the Marine Corps Air Station at Futenma. Spent a year there. In July of '66, went to the Naval War College in Rhode Island. Spent a year there. And from there, went to Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha as the Senior Marine at the Joint Strategic Target Planning Staff. I retired as a colonel, moved to Florida, worked as personnel director for Irwin Yacht and Marine Corporation in St. Petersburg for seven years, and retired again and enjoyed life.

00:25:50

[Family life and conclusion]

Married to the former Katherine Cahill in 1944, and we just celebrated our 51st wedding anniversary this year. Have two children, son Michael, who is a Marine General, and a daughter Susan, who is wife of Bill Newton, now a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. The—my total score for aircraft shot down during both wars was 11 and 1/6 in World War II and two in Korea, for a total of 13 and 1/6. I have not verified this. You may look further into it, but I think I'm probably the only ace who shot down enemy aircraft while I was flying the same type of aircraft in two different wars.

During my career, I was the commanding officer of the Marine Corps Aviation Ground Intercept Squadron 4, of the training squadron VMAT, VMT, and VMA-121, and the Marine Corps Air Station in Futenma. My total decorations for the three wars were the Legion of Merit, Silver Star, seven DFCs, and 17 Air Medals.

0:10:18

[END OF INTERVIEW]