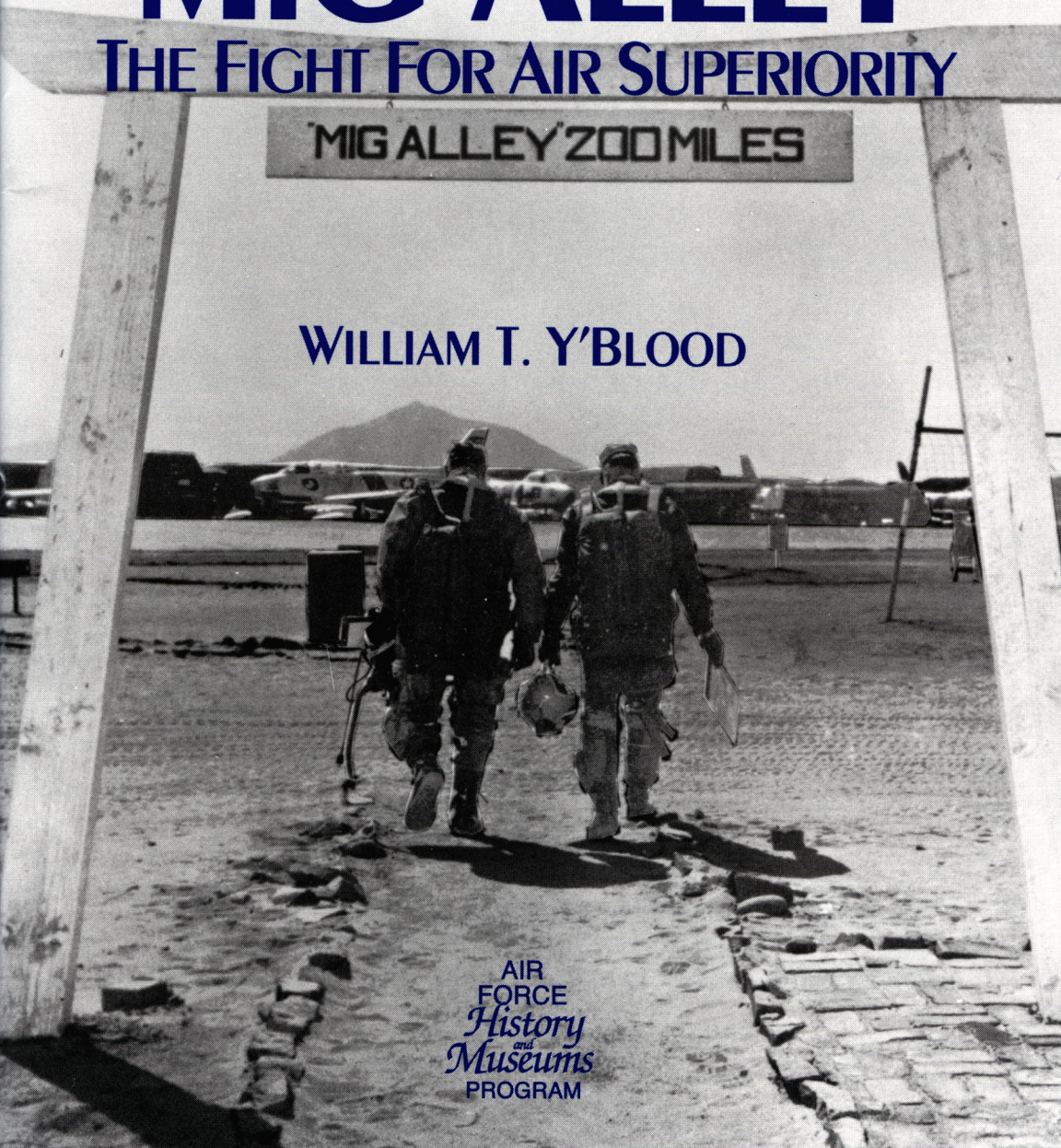
the Korean War
Fiftieth Anniversary
Commemorative Edition

MiG ALLEY

THE FIGHT FOR AIR SUPERIORITY



WILLIAM T. Y'BLOOD

AIR FORCE *History and Museums* PROGRAM

Report Documentation Page

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Two 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing pilots in Korea pass beneath a torii gate constructed by fellow servicemen as they walk toward their F–86 Sabres and head off for a combat mission in MiG Alley.

The U.S. Air Force in Korea

MiG ALLEY

THE FIGHT FOR AIR SUPERIORITY

WILLIAM T. Y'BLOOD

AIR FORCE HISTORY AND MUSEUMS PROGRAM
2000

MiG ALLEY

The Fight For Air Superiority

The fight for air superiority began the day the Korean War started and only ended with the armistice three years later. Once the shock of the North Koreans' invasion wore off, it did not take long for the United States Air Force, assisted by other United Nations air forces, to destroy the North Korean Air Force. The arrival of the MiG–15 in November 1950, often flown by Soviet pilots, changed things considerably however. For the remainder of the war, bitterly contested air battles were fought almost daily. Yet despite a decided numerical superiority in jet fighters, the Communists were never able to gain air superiority, testament to the skill and training of the UN fighter pilots, primarily those U.S. Air Force airmen flying the magnificent F–86 Sabre.

The North Korean forces that invaded South Korea on June 25, 1950, were vastly superior to those of its southern neighbor, particularly in air units. Although its military was primarily ground-oriented, North Korea possessed an efficient air force. The North Korean Air Force (NKAF) consisted of approximately 132 combat aircraft and another 30 transports and trainers, These combat aircraft were "hand-me-downs" from the Soviet Union—Lavochkin La–9s, Ilyushin Il–10s, and Yakovlev Yak–3s and –7Bs. Front-line aircraft during World War II, they were now considered obsolescent by Soviet standards. Nonetheless, flown by aggressive and well-trained pilots against little opposition from the tiny Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF), they were still capable of inflicting considerable damage.

In contrast to its numerically and technologically superior opponent, the ROKAF was little more than an air force in name. Given South Korean president Syngman Rhee's strong anti-Communist feelings and very aggressive attitude toward North Korea, the official American policy had been to build an indigenous security force just large enough to maintain internal order and public safety. The ROKAF had but 16 planes: 13 liaison types and 3 T–6 trainers. Of its 57 pilots, only 39 were considered to be trained. Having little with which to fight, the ROKAF was virtually wiped out during the first days of the war.

A much more substantial foe faced the North Koreans from across the Sea of Japan, however. The U.S. Far East Air Forces (FEAF), commanded by Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, was part of the occupation forces in Japan. It was the United States Air Force's largest overseas command, with 35,122 people assigned. FEAF contained three air forces: the Thirteenth headquartered at Clark Field in the Philippines, the Twentieth at Kadena on Okinawa, and the Fifth at Nagoya, Japan. It was Maj. Gen. Earle E. "Pat" Partridge's Fifth Air Force that would bear the brunt of the fighting in Korea.

In numbers, FEAF appeared ready for any contingency. As of May 31, 1950, it possessed 1,172 aircraft: 504 F–80s, 47 F–51s, 42 F–82s, 73 B–26s, 27 B–29s, 179 transports, 48 reconnaissance aircraft, and 252 miscellaneous types (T–6, SB–17, T–33, etc.). Although the F–80C was by far the most numerous and most modern aircraft in FEAF's inventory, it was rapidly approaching obsolescence. Furthermore, of these 1,172 aircraft, only 657 were actually available for use in Korea, and not all of these were combat-ready. The remaining aircraft were either in storage or had to be used for missions with the Thirteenth and Twentieth Air Forces and in the defense of Japan, FEAF's primary mission.

Then too, as in all of the services, postwar budget cuts militated against FEAF's being a truly effective force for any major contingency. Inadequate engineering support, shortages of personnel in certain categories (i.e., navigators and bombardiers), reduced training time, and little fat in the form of spare aircraft to replace losses hampered its operations considerably.

Despite these shortcomings, FEAF was ready to fight, though its initial missions were defensive. With the enemy driving hard toward Seoul, the American ambassador asked General of the Army Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander, Allied Powers and also the Commander in Chief, Far East Command to



Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, the FEAF commander, and Maj. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, commander of the Fifth Air Force.

evacuate all American citizens from Korea. MacArthur quickly directed that ship and aerial evacuation from Seoul/Inchon and Pusan commence.

Because they had a greater loiter time than the F–80s, the long-legged, twin-engine F–82G night fighters usually covered the Seoul/Inchon evacuations. On June 26, a pair of La–7 fighters bounced two F–82s near Seoul. When the Twin Mustangs turned into the attack, the enemy planes fled. Authorized to fire if the enemy attempted to disrupt the evacuation, the FEAF fliers refrained because the La–7s never got close to either the harbor or the Kimpo airport. The defenders were also unsure of the "rules of engagement," a term not used in the Korean War, but applicable here. Far East Command headquarters was furious that the enemy plane had not been engaged. It directed FEAF to issue clarifying orders directing aggressive action in the event an NKAF plane tried to interfere with the evacuation or acted in an "unfriendly" manner to ROK or American forces. The next day, North Korean fliers discovered to their regret that FEAF planes would not brook any interference with the evacuations.

On the 27th, F–82Gs of the 68th, 339th, and 4th Fighter All-Weather Squadrons and F–80Cs of the 8th Fighter-Bomber Wing (FBW)* took turns cover-

*Throughout most of the Korean War, a wing consisted of a combat group, a maintenance and supply group, an air base group, and a medical group, all with identical numerical designations. A wing trained for and conducted combat operations and also operated a



Engine maintenance is done on an F–82G of the 68th Fighter (All Weather) Squadron.

ing the ship evacuation from Inchon and the air evacuation from Kimpo airport. Four F–82s of the 68th orbited Kimpo and Suwon at 4,000 feet while a trio of 339th Twin Mustangs flew a mid-cover at 8,000 feet and four more 4th Squadron fighters flew above a thin deck of clouds at 12,000 feet. For nearly three hours the planes bored holes in the sky, seeing little except arriving and departing transports and slowly thickening clouds. Then, shortly after noon, as the F–82s were being forced lower by the clouds, one pilot called out, "They're shooting at me!"

The Americans went into their breaks as several enemy planes flashed by, damaging 1st Lt. Charles B. Moran's plane in the process. The North Korean aircraft were not fast enough to escape, however, as several of the big F–82s "latched-on" to the attackers. First Lieutenant William Hudson and his radar operator, Lt. Carl Fraser, followed one of the enemy planes (identified as either a Yak–11 or a Yak–7U) through the clouds, knocking off chunks of fuselage and setting its wing afire. The Americans saw the enemy pilot climb out of his cockpit onto the wing and say something to his observer. Either dead or frozen in fear, the observer did not move. The pilot then pulled the ripcord on his chute, which billowed and yanked him off the wing. The Yak rolled over and dove into the ground, taking the observer with it.

Meanwhile, after shaking off his attacker, Lt. Moran got behind what he identified as either a Yak or an La–7 and sent it straight into the ground. (Aircraft identification was a problem in Korea, just as it had been in World War II. North Korean Yaks had inline engines, while the Lavochkins had radials, quite obvious design differences.) Major James W. Little, the 339th's commander, also bagged an La–7, and two other enemy planes were claimed by the Americans as probables.

All of these victories came almost simultaneously, and not until 1953 did the

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permanent installation. By the end of the war this structure was being phased out as the wing took direct control of its combat units. In this booklet, the terms "wing" and "group" are used interchangeably.

USAF credit Lt. Hudson with scoring the first kill of the war. Not to be outdone by their prop-driven compatriots, FEAF F–80Cs also scored on the 27th. That afternoon, a quartet of Shooting Stars from the 8th FBW's 35th Fighter Bomber Squadron (FBS) were orbiting Kimpo airfield when eight Il–10s darted underneath them and began strafing the field. Before the Americans could interfere, the enemy planes destroyed seven ROKAF aircraft caught on the ground. The North Korean's joy in their victories was short-lived. First Lieutenant Robert E. Wayne bagged two of the attackers as they pulled out of their runs, while Capt. Raymond E. Schillereff and 1st Lt. Robert H. Dewald each shot down an Il–10. The remaining enemy planes quickly scooted for home. The three Americans had scored the first jet aircraft victories of the war.

Action, both on the ground and in the air, remained hot for the next few days. The North Koreans occupied Kimpo airfield and most of Seoul on the 28th, then gathered their forces on the north bank of the Han River before pressing south again. That same day, NKAF planes struck Suwon, where C–54s were bringing in ammunition for the beleaguered ROK troops. Four Yaks strafed the airfield in the early afternoon, disabling an F–82 and a B–26 which were grounded there. Several hours later, six more Yaks caught a C–54 in the landing pattern and severely damaged it. The North Koreans continued, destroying another C–54 on the ground. Clearly, Suwon was becoming a very dangerous place.

The next day NKAF planes returned, but this time they met with trouble. During the morning, F–80Cs shot down an Il–10 and possibly an La–7 as they strafed the airfield. Other enemy planes got through, however, to destroy another C–54. The afternoon proved to be even more exciting and more costly to the North Koreans.

Despite concerns for his safety, Gen. MacArthur flew into Suwon that afternoon, accompanied by Gen. Stratemeyer and other staff officers, to receive firsthand reports on the rapidly deteriorating situation. A strong escort of F–80s and a flight of F–51 Mustangs were provided for MacArthur's personal C–54 *Bataan*. Even this early in the war, FEAF planners realized that despite their obsolescence, the F–51s possessed greater range and could operate from shorter and rougher airfields than the F–80s could. These advantages and the gravity of the Korean situation required that USAF pilots convert from F–80s back to F–51s. A number of F–51s had been pulled from storage and were to have been turned over to the South Koreans. Instead, FEAF retained these aircraft and put back in their cockpits the pilots who had flown them a year or more earlier. These pilots quickly showed that their mounts' useful days were not yet over.

While MacArthur was at Suwon, several enemy planes, variously identified as Yak–9s, Il–10s, or La–7s, attacked the field. They were met by the Mustangs. Recollections differ as to whether Gen. MacArthur saw these attacks from outside a building on the field or from his plane as it taxied in. Whatever the case, Gen. Stratemeyer later stated that MacArthur was very impressed with the work of the Mustang pilots. And well he should have been.

The Americans were obviously very comfortable back in the cockpits of their old aircraft. In the ensuing battle, 2d Lt. Orrin R. Fox, of the 80th FBS, bagged



An F–51 of the 18th Fighter-Bomber Group taxis through a sizeable pond following a heavy rain.

two Il–10s. Fox's squadron mate, 1st Lt. Harry T. Sandlin, was officially credited with an La–7, while 1st Lt. Richard J. Burns, from the 35th FBS, got an Il–10. Another pair of Yak–9s were destroyed by 36th FBS pilots, 1st Lts. Charles W. Wurster and John Thomas, on the 30th. For the next few weeks air-to-air combat with the enemy was rare. The seriousness of the ground situation meant that FEAF's efforts were directed primarily at trying to stop the onrushing enemy.

Enemy planes continued to be active, though, bombing and strafing U.S. and ROK ground troops but generally steering clear of FEAF aircraft. Exceptions did occur. A 19th Bombardment Group B–29 was shot down by NKAF fighters on July 12, and a B–26 was badly damaged by Yaks three days later. Twice, Yaks jumped F–80s which were strafing ground targets. No damage was sustained by either side in these brief engagements. Despite these appearances, North Korean air power was slowly being whittled away as B–29s, B–26s, F–80s, and F–51s attacked airfields and dispersion areas. In one attack on the main Pyongyang airfield on July 19, seven 8th Fighter-Bomber Group (FBG) F–80s destroyed 14 enemy fighters and a twin-engine bomber on the ground. Another seven planes were damaged.

In the meantime, by mid-July, the South Koreans and the few American ground units in Korea were being pushed back toward the southeast corner of the country. No one knew whether they would be able to stave off the enemy or be pushed into the sea. With FEAF aircraft now including F–51Ds of the Royal Australian Air Force's (RAAF's) No. 77 Squadron giving the attackers a terrible pounding from the front lines to North Korea's capital, Pyongyang, and with the infusion of additional ground troops, the retreat halted and a defensive line was erected. The "Pusan Perimeter" would be the high-water mark of the North Korean offensive.



F–80Cs of the 8th Fighter-Bomber Group.

On July 17, enemy planes were again encountered, and in a brief skirmish, a Yak–9 fell to Capt. Francis B. Clark flying an F–80. Two days later, pilots of the 36th FBS on a close support mission tangled with a quartet of Yak–9s attacking the Taejon airfield. When the Americans spotted them, the Yaks were returning north. Jettisoning the rockets they were carrying for their ground mission, the Shooting Star pilots were quickly on top of the enemy planes. In quick succession, 1st Lts. Robert D. McKee and Charles W. Wurster and 2d Lt. Elwood A. Kees blasted three of the Yaks out of the sky. This victory was Wurster's second, and he became one of only three pilots to score more than one "kill" in all of 1950.

July 20 saw Taejon fall. It also saw the rapidly enfeebled NKAF lose more planes. Captain Robert L. Lee and 2d Lt. David H. Goodnough, both of the 35th FBS, blasted two Yaks from the sky. As it turned out, these two planes would be the last enemy aircraft to fall for more than three months. Although the North Koreans were still capable of harm, as seen by an attack on a British destroyer on August 23, for all intents FEAF had gained air superiority by July 20, and a month later it had also achieved air supremacy.*

Throughout August and the first weeks of September, furious fighting raged around the Pusan Perimeter. At times the enemy threatened to break through, but the defenders, supported admirably by FEAF, Navy, Marine, and RAAF aircraft,

*In general, air superiority denotes the greater combat effectiveness of one air force over another in that this superiority permits air operations without prohibitive interference

stood firm. Then, on September 15, Gen. MacArthur launched an invasion behind the North Korean lines. The landings at Inchon surprised the enemy, but they swiftly recovered and mounted stout resistance. Nevertheless, late on the 25th, Seoul was declared recaptured, although heavy fighting continued in and around the city for several more days.

Meanwhile, on September 16, Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker's Eighth Army began its breakout from the Pusan Perimeter. Bolstered by B–29s, B–26s, F–80s, and F–51s attacking all along the front lines, the Eighth Army moved forward. Determined resistance kept the advance slow at first, but faced with entrapment from the rear and a powerful force smashing them from the front, the North Koreans wavered and then broke. By the end of September, South Korean troops had reached the 38th Parallel and other UN forces were drawing near.

Whether the UN troops should now cross the 38th Parallel was the subject of impassioned debate by political and military leaders around the world. As early as mid-July, MacArthur had contemplated crossing the parallel, believing this might be the only way to bring the war to a successful conclusion. At about the same time, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) and the National Security Council (NSC) also began studying the matter. From their endeavors emerged a paper, NSC 81/1, which established certain guidelines, including a provision that operations close to the Manchurian and Soviet Union borders would be forbidden, as well as operations across these borders.

Even as the JCS and the NSC wrestled with their guidelines, Gen. Stratemeyer was already taking action, issuing orders against border violations on July 3 and August 14. Errors nevertheless occurred, notably on August 27 when a pair of Mustang pilots strafed the Antung airfield (just across the Yalu River from Sinuiju) and on September 22 when a B–29 crew mistakenly bombed the Antung marshaling yard. Incensed by these blunders, the FEAF leader reiterated that under no conditions would the borders be violated. The most serious violation, however, occurred on October 8.

That day a quartet of 49th FBG pilots were scheduled to sweep the Chongjin airfield in northeast Korea. Two of the fliers, including the flight leader, had to abort after experiencing mechanical problems, but the remaining pair pressed on. Instead of hitting the Chongjin field, however, they hit an airfield near Vladivostok. Seeing the field filled with "P–39" aircraft, the two men proceeded to strafe them. Several of these planes were destroyed or damaged before the Americans departed. Soviet political reaction was swift, and the United States apologized for the gaffe. Sadly, this incident resulted in the group commander being relieved, but a court-martial did not convict the errant pilots. Nonetheless, they did no further flying in Korea.

Later, some people believed this incursion helped keep the Soviets out of the war by showing that the United States was prepared to take whatever action was needed to win the war. Although the attack may have heightened Soviet Premier

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by the opposing air force. Air supremacy goes a step farther in that an air force can impose its will upon an opposing air force at any time or at any place within its realm of control.

Joseph Stalin's concerns about the war, it also goaded the Soviets to increase their aerial presence in the region. This presence would soon be felt.

On September 27, President Truman authorized MacArthur to advance north across the parallel. The UN General Assembly also addressed this issue, but it did not approve a crossing until October 7. Syngman Rhee, the implacable anti-Communist, did not wait for a UN sanction. He sent his troops into North Korea on October 1. American patrols crossed on the 7th, with the main force following two days later. The drive was on for the Yalu River.

As the Eighth Army and X Corps drove north, Gen. Stratemeyer took the opportunity to move some of his units to Korea. Benefiting especially from these moves were the F–80 groups whose planes were short-legged. The F–51 units also gained because they could now spend more time over the target rather than en route to it. During the period from the Inchon landings to November 1, FEAF aircraft seldom encountered enemy planes. The few North Korean pilots still flying were usually content to make nighttime nuisance raids or hit-and-run attacks when little or no opposition was present. In one such instance on September 28, a Yak pilot caught an F–51 unaware and shot it down.

Yet, although the NKAF was seldom seen, ominous signs portended a buildup of Communist air and ground assets. More than 75 fighters were seen on October 18 on the Antung airfield. A number of Chinese soldiers were captured in late October. Then, on both the Eighth Army and X Corps fronts, Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) attacked and destroyed several U.S. and ROK units. Almost as quickly as they had appeared, the Chinese vanished. Allied intelligence officials and other senior officers dismissed the aircraft sightings as just bluffs. The ground actions were also downplayed as little more than spoiling attacks by a few Chinese "volunteers." Intelligence officials believed that only about 12,000 CCF soldiers were in North Korea. Actually, approximately 300,000 men were already in the country, with more ready to enter if needed. It was a major intelligence blunder brought on by a preconceived notion that the Chinese would not become involved in the war. In World War II, the Japanese coined a phrase for such thinking; they called it the "Victory Disease."

Perhaps the presence of the Chinese "volunteers" emboldened the North Korean fliers, for they became more active in late October and early November. A new stage of the air war opened on November 1. That morning, three Yaks jumped a T–6 "Mosquito" air controller and a B–26 a few miles south of Sinuiju. Neither plane was damaged, and the B–26 gunner downed one of the attackers. More Yaks showed up to attack four 18th FBG Mustangs that were on a ground attack mission. In the ensuing dogfight, Capts. Robert D. Thresher and Alma R. Flake each bagged one of the enemy planes. Seeing their comrades shot down, the remaining Yaks scuttled back across the Yalu. Flake recalled the enemy pilots as "inexperienced and unskilled."

Around noon, an RF–80 pilot reported 15 Yaks parked on the Sinuiju airfield. (The Americans soon nicknamed Sinuiju, "Sunny Joe.") General Partridge, the Fifth Air Force commander, swiftly ordered a fighter sweep of the field. Twelve F–80s, with strict orders not to violate the border, made the sweep. One Yak was



A heavily laden F–80 of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group makes a JATO takeoff.

destroyed and six others were damaged, but antiaircraft fire (most of this from across the river) brought down one of the Shooting Stars. A second mission later in the day found the field empty except for those planes damaged earlier.

The day's action was not over, and this time a new and very dangerous adversary appeared. Led by a Mosquito controller, a flight of F–51s was striking ground targets near Sinuiju when it was bounced by six swept-wing jets painted a "burned green silver." The Americans escaped with little harm, but they may have inflicted some damage to a couple of the jets. MiG–15s, initially misidentified as MiG–14s (a designation never actually used), had now entered the battle.

Although intelligence officials considered that the Soviets might be service-testing the MiGs themselves, they estimated it was more likely that these aircraft were flown by Chinese or North Korean pilots. They also thought that only a limited number of these fighters were available. Their estimate concerning numbers seemed to be confirmed the next day when, instead of the six aircraft of the day before, only five showed up. This seemed to indicate that the sixth craft had been damaged.

Neither estimate was accurate. The initial missions were flown solely by Soviet pilots, and only some time later were Chinese and North Korean pilots gradually introduced into combat operations. The Soviet fliers were ordered to dress in North Korean uniforms and even to speak Korean when making radio transmissions. Since few Soviets spoke Korean, they carried a tablet containing some commonly used phrases, spelled out phonetically. In the heat of battle such a subterfuge quickly collapsed as the pilots reverted to their native language. It was not long before the UN fliers suspected they were facing the Soviets. Fearful that this imbroglio might become general knowledge, which could escalate the conflict into a world war, both sides exerted great effort to downplay the Soviet's role. Not until after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the gradual opening of its archives did more details of its involvement in the war emerge.

Two examples of how far the Soviets would go to hide their involvement concern downed airmen. One was the death of Lt. Yevgeny Stelmakh in May 1951. Soviet fliers were ordered to stay over Communist-controlled areas and to never fly over the Yellow Sea. Stelmakh was shot down while attacking B–29s. After ejecting, he landed in UN-controlled territory. Rather than being taken prisoner, he shot himself. In the second incident, a MiG–15 pilot apparently violated orders and had to bail out over the Yellow Sea. The Americans began a rescue operation to pick up the pilot. Before they could reach the man, however, other MiGs broke through the fighters covering the rescue attempt and strafed their comrade in the water. His body was never found.

Although FEAF and other UN organizations were surprised by the MiGs, they had no reason to have been caught unaware. In February and March 1950, Western intelligence agencies apparently took little notice of a Soviet MiG–15 air division stationed in the Shanghai area as it participated in combat operations against Nationalist Chinese forces. Also, in the summer of 1950, the Soviets provided the Chinese with a number of aircraft. Although most of the fighters were the earlier MiG–9s, a decidedly inferior aircraft, MiG–15s were also included. The number of MiG–15s possessed by the Chinese eventually increased to 586 by August 1952. As they sold China these aircraft, the Soviets also instituted an intensive training program for their Chinese customers. Even with this influx of new aircraft and an updated training program, the Chinese were unable to provide an effective air defense for their country.

A request to Stalin for help resulted in the arrival in northeast China of an air division commanded by Lt. Gen. Ivan M. Belov in August 1950. Equipped with 122 MiG–15s, this division was responsible for the air defense of the region. It was aircraft of this division that first fought the Americans. As the front lines drew closer to their border, the Soviets dispatched some 13 air divisions to the area, including 6 equipped with MiG–15s, 3 with MiG–9s, and 1 with La–9s. Also included in these new units was a Tu–2 bomber division with approximately 200 aircraft. Ostensibly, these units were to be used only for the air defense of China. Some confusion surrounds the organizational structure of these Soviet divisions. Depending on the source consulted, they came under the command of the 67th Air Corps, the 64th Fighter Air Corps, the 64th Fighter Aviation Corps, or the 64th Air Defense Corps (this last organization also controlled a number of ground air defense forces). United Nations fliers really did not care how the enemy forces were organized or who they were fighting, they just knew that their job had suddenly gotten tougher.

Over the next couple of days, Mustang pilots from the 8th FBG tangled with MiGs coming across the Yalu from Antung. Neither side scored in battles on the 6th, but combats on the 7th and 8th bore more positive results. In one bout on the 7th, four F–51s and four MiG–15s initially met head-on, then broke into a "yo-yo" action.* The MiG pilots' gunnery was not good, but one of the Mustang pilots,

*As the name indicates, this type of action involved diving attacks followed by zoom climbs to get into position for a succeeding dive.

Maj. Kendall Carson, scored a hit in one of the jets' wing roots. Carson's attention was quickly diverted when the other three MiGs swept past him back to Antung. When Carson looked back, burning wreckage on the ground marked the spot where the MiG–15 had crashed. No one had seen the fighter go in, so Carson did not receive official credit for the fighter's destruction.

Other 8th FBG pilots also clashed with MiGs on the 7th. One fight took place at 10,000 feet, a good altitude for the Mustangs but not for the MiGs. In an action that lasted about seven minutes, three of the enemy planes were damaged. A fourth was seen disappearing over the sea, its guns still firing. Yet more MiGs attacked another Mustang flight later in the day, with no results on either side.

Apparently intent on blooding his fliers as quickly as possible, the Soviet air commander sent more planes out on the 8th, this time in response to a major B–29 raid on Sinuiju. The 8th FBG had its Mustangs out on flak suppression missions, and the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group (FIG) also supplied F–80Cs for the same task and as cover for the B–29s. A number of MiGs crossed the Yalu to contest this effort. They ignored the high-flying B–29s and spent their time instead attempting to pick off lower-flying aircraft. Again the Soviet pilots were not using the MiG–15 to its best advantage.

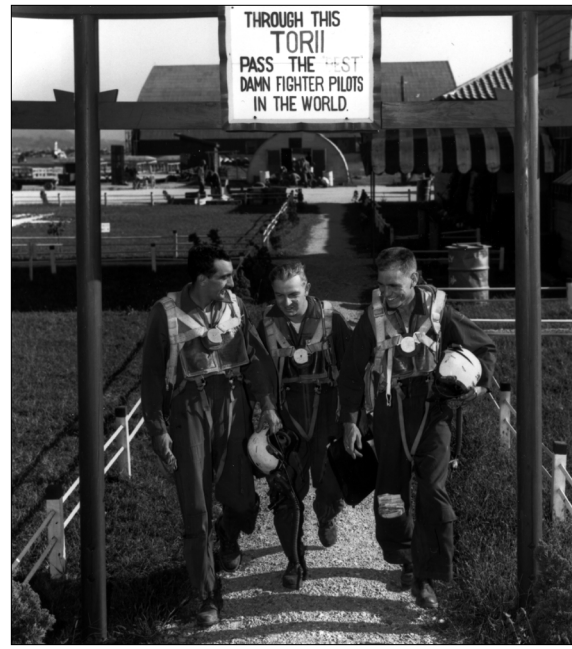
Several MiGs made passes on the F–51s with no success. The Mustang pilots, however, reported damaging three of the jets and claimed as a probable a fourth MiG which was last seen over the Yalu, smoking heavily. Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Evans G. Stephens, the commander of the 16th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron (FIS), was leading three other F–80s on a strafing run on antiaircraft positions. As the Shooting Stars climbed back to 18,000 feet, the Americans noticed eight MiGs across the river at about their altitude. Oddly, the enemy pilots appeared to be showing off, doing loops and barrel rolls.

The MiGs suddenly broke off their aerial show to dive into the F–80 formation. Stephens's wingman, 1st Lt. Russell J. Brown, on detached service from the 26th FIS, got on the tail of a MiG as it swept past him. The MiG banked to the left, and Brown was able to cut the corner and catch the fast-moving fighter. Brown fired four short bursts, followed by four more. A plume of smoke gushed from the right side of the MiG–15's fuselage. Brown then fired a long burst, and the enemy plane exploded. The first all-jet air-to-air combat in history had ended in a victory for Brown and the USAF.

Navy fliers began a three-day series of attacks on the Sinuiju area on the 10th. The MiGs continued to rise in defense of the city and its bridges. On the first day of these raids, Lt. Comdr. William T. Amen, flying an F9F off the carrier *Philippine Sea*, sparred with an enemy jet for a short while before sending the MiG down in flames. It was the USN's first kill in all-jet combat. That afternoon, another MiG–15 was claimed by a pair of *Valley Forge* F9F pilots. One week later, Navy fliers scored a third MiG kill.

Despite the successes of the American pilots against the MiGs during this period, it was obvious that the MiG–15 was markedly superior to the American aircraft then operating in Korea. This was demonstrated on the 9th when a pair of MiGs pounced on an RB–29 over Sinuiju. Although the tail gunner, Cpl. Harry J.

LaVene, managed to shoot down one of the fighters, the other riddled the reconnaissance plane so badly that it crashed on landing at Johnson Air Base (AB). Five crewmen died in the crash. Because of this deadly encounter, FEAF forbade the use of RB–29s near the Yalu. The aging B–29's vulnerability to the new Soviet fighters was underscored on November 10 when six MiGs ganged up on a 307th Bombardment Group plane and blasted it out of the sky.



These fliers no doubt agree with the sentiments on this sign at Kimpo airfield.

Realizing that the military situation had changed with the appearance of the MiG–15s, Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg, the Air Force chief of staff, deployed an F–84E wing and an F–86A wing to the Far East. A Strategic Air Command (SAC) unit, the 27th Fighter Escort Wing (FEW), came from Bergstrom AFB, Texas. This Thunderjet wing had trained for long-range escort of B–29s and B–50s, but it would spend most of its time in Korea operating in the close support role. On the other hand, the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing (FIW), headquartered at Langley AFB, Virginia, but with its squadrons located at New Castle County Airport, Wilmington, Delaware, at Dover AFB, Delaware, and at Andrews AFB, Maryland, utilized its Sabres in the air superiority role from the start.

The movement of the two wings to Korea was accomplished in an extraordinarily short time. After being flown to San Diego and McClellan AFB, California, the planes were loaded on an escort carrier in San Diego and a fast tanker in San Francisco. These ships then proceeded at high speed to Japan. By November 21, advanced echelons of these units had reported to Gen. Partridge. Unfortunately, the urgent need for these wings resulted in their aircraft being improperly prepared for shipment, and many were damaged by salt spray corrosion before arriving in Japan. Extra time had to be spent in readying these planes for action after they arrived.

Initially, Partridge intended the 4th FIW to be based at Pyongyang and the 27th FEW to be at Kimpo. Before these arrangements could be initiated, the CCF



F–86 Sabres of the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Group take off past an F–80C of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group.

launched a major offensive which drove the UN troops southward. Now the 27th Wing, leaving a rear echelon at Itazuke, was sent to Taegu. For the moment, Kimpo was still a viable operation with F–80s of the 51st FIG, and RF–51Ds of the 67th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) already stationed there. Because of the crowded conditions, the 4th FIW was directed to send only a detachment of 32 planes to Kimpo. Primarily consisting of personnel and aircraft of the 336th FIS, this detachment also consisted of officers and men from group headquarters and the other two squadrons. The remainder of the wing was left at Johnson AB.

On December 6, less than a month after being notified it was to move, the 27th FEW flew its first combat mission. Nine days later, on the 15th, the 4th Wing entered combat with an orientation mission over North Korea. Action was not long in coming.

This first mission had not gone into the section of northwest Korea soon to become known as "MiG Alley." December 17 saw the 4th FIW F–86As make their first foray into that area. Lieutenant Colonel Bruce H. Hinton, the 336th's commander, led a flight of four Sabres up to the Yalu in hopes of enticing the MiGs into combat. In that, he succeeded.

The fighters carried two 120-gallon wing tanks, which gave them an effective combat radius of about 210 miles. However, the round trip between Kimpo and the Yalu was approximately 350 miles. Thus, every drop of fuel counted if the Sabres were going to make efficient patrols. Because of fuel concerns, Hinton's planes entered the combat area at a leisurely Mach 0.62. It became apparent that this speed was too slow to effectively counter the MiG–15s. After the first encounters, the 4th FIW pilots realized this fact and began entering MiG Alley at speeds above Mach 0.85.

As Hinton's flight neared Sinuiju at 25,000 feet, the Americans could see well into snow-covered Manchuria. A few miles south of the city, four MiGs rose to

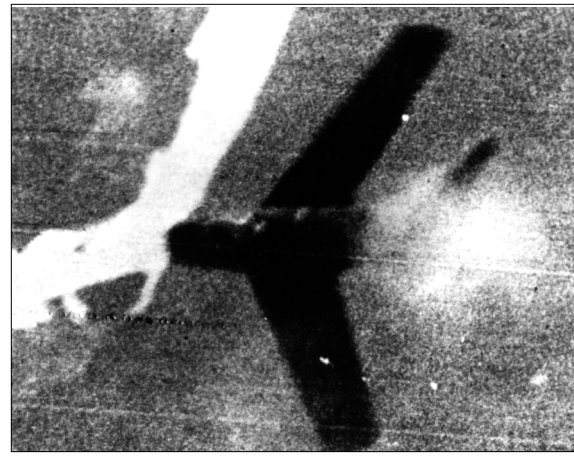
challenge them. The Soviet pilots apparently thought the enemy planes were F–80s, supposedly "easy pickings" for the MiGs. They quickly learned their mistake. The MiGs were in a poor position when the Americans spotted them, still climbing and about 5,000 feet below the F–86s.

Hinton dove on the enemy, followed closely by his wingmen. The Soviets broke and attempted to run from what they still thought were slow F–80s. To their surprise, the Sabres, having dropped their wing tanks, were swiftly on them. Hinton recalled that at about this time he saw his Machmeter needle well over the meter's redline limit of Mach 0.95. He closed behind one MiG and gave it a short burst. Debris fell from the jet, and it appeared to be streaming fuel. Another MiG slid in front of him. From about 800 feet behind, he gave it several long bursts. Flames spurted from the fuselage before the MiG rolled over and then dove into the ground. It was the first of many F–86 victories over the MiG–15.

Hinton's victory had not come easily. He had used up nearly a full load of .50-caliber ammunition. At this time, the Air Force's standard fighter armament remained the .50-caliber machine gun. It was a fine weapon with a high rate of fire, but it was short-ranged, and its rather light punch (as compared to the heavier armament of the enemy jet) made knocking down a MiG–15 difficult. The MiG–15, on the other hand, carried two 23mm cannons and one 37mm cannon. These could be devastating weapons, but they were slow-firing.

Although both planes can be considered relatively equal with respect to ability, performance differences were noted as the number of encounters increased. The lighter MiG–15 could operate at higher altitudes than the Sabres could reach, particularly the early F–86As. The Soviets exploited this height advantage consistently throughout the war. Additionally, the jet had a better rate of climb, could accelerate faster in level flight, and had a tighter turning radius at high altitude. On the negative side, it was easy for a MiG pilot to lose control of his plane at high airspeeds, and poor longitudinal stability at high altitudes often led to uncontrollable spins. Some 35 MiG–15s were later claimed by FEAF to be destroyed solely by uncontrolled spins. The MiG, moreover, had a slow roll rate, and it was even shorter-ranged than the F–86.

Thanks in large measure to its adjustable horizontal stabilizer, the F–86's flight controls were vastly superior to those on the MiGs. The F–86 also had a



Desperately trying to escape, a MiG–15 begins to smoke after being hit by bullets from an attacking F–86.

high dive speed and was much more stable in high-speed turns. Negative factors of the Sabre included a slow climb rate, slow acceleration in level flight, poor ability to convert speed into altitude, and on some early A models, an inadequate gunsight. This last problem was addressed when the later Sabres received an improved radar-ranging gunsight.

For the next few days following Hinton's victory, the 4th FIW pilots, still trying to stretch the time they could remain over the target, continued to enter MiG Alley at relatively low speeds. The Soviet pilots, always possessing the height advantage, quickly realized that they could make passes through the Sabre formations and escape before the F–86s could accelerate. In response, the Americans discarded their fuel-saving tactics and entered the combat zone at speeds above Mach 0.87. Unfortunately, this reduced their time on patrol to just 20 minutes, leaving little time for high-speed aerial combat.

To alleviate this situation, the 4th FIW standardized on a 16-aircraft patrol consisting of four flights of four Sabres each arriving at five-minute intervals and at different altitudes. This new tactic was tested on December 22. Leading the mission was the group commander, Lt. Col. John C. Meyer. That day Meyer would add the first of his two Korean War kills to his World War II total of 24 victories. Fifteen MiG–15s used their altitude advantage to bounce the Americans and begin a battle that lasted almost 20 minutes.

The MiGs scored their first Sabre victory when their powerful 23mm and 37mm cannon shells struck Capt. Lawrence V. Bach's F–86 and sent it down in flames. Still, the day belonged to the Americans. In a close-in, whirling fight that extended from over 30,000 feet down to the treetops, the 4th FIW fliers bagged six MiG–15s. In addition to Meyer, Capt. James O. Roberts, 1st Lt. John Odiorne, and 1st Lt. Arthur L. O'Connor also picked off fighters. Lieutenant Colonel Glenn T. Eagleston, commander of the 334th FIS, got one more kill to add to his 18.5 from World War II. Finally, a Navy exchange pilot flying with the 4th, Lt. Cdr. Paul E. Pugh, also downed a jet. Pugh would claim a second MiG kill on the 30th, although Air Force records do not confirm this.*

Despite Pugh's claim, the December 30 engagement was a relatively sedate affair. The 36 MiGs that challenged the 16 Sabres were very cautious, and the Americans found it hard to get close enough to the enemy to do great damage. Nevertheless, they damaged two enemy fighters, including one by Capt. James Jabara, who would become one of the USAF's leading aces of the war.

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*Claims by fliers of other services or nationalities flying with Fifth Air Force units were initially given credit by FEAF. Because these airmen were not members of the Air Force, such claims were deleted in 1988 from the USAF's official list of aerial victories in wars up to that point, even though the claims were given to the units involved. Far East Air Forces also initially credited aircraft destroyed on the ground. The USAF, however, officially declared that "an enemy aircraft had to be destroyed while airborne. This included shooting an aircraft down, causing the pilot to bail out, intentionally ramming and destroying an enemy aircraft, of maneuvering it into the ground or water." Thus, ground claims were also deleted from the 1988 victory list.



At least 14 Sabres of the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Group can be seen massed on the runway prior to taking off for MiG Alley.

The close of 1950 saw the 4th FIG logging 234 counterair sorties. During these sorties, 76 Sabres had engaged MiGs and claimed 8 fighters destroyed, 2 as probables, and 7 more damaged. Only one F–86 was lost. The 4th's pilots had made a fine start, but they realized that they were operating at a distinct handicap.

With their bases just minutes away from the combat arena, the MiG–15s usually held the altitude advantage and thus could choose the time and position of their attacks. Too, although their .50-caliber machine guns damaged a number of MiGs, the Americans complained that their armament did not have enough stopping power to consistently bring down the MiGs. These high-speed, G-pulling fights allowed little chance for deflection shooting. The only sure way to make a kill was to get behind a MiG and "fly up his tailpipe" to pepper the jet from close range. Again, in the type of combat then prevalent, this often meant getting just one chance to shoot. The Sabre pilots began asking for heavier armament. Such weapons would eventually be delivered, but only as a test and with mixed results.

As 1951 opened, however, the 4th FIG, like many other Air Force units in Korea, had more pressing concerns than armament. The Chinese offensive, which had been launched in late November, was now in full swing, and the UN forces were in a precipitous flight. Pyongyang, where the 8th and 18th FBGs had begun operating in just the last weeks of November, was evacuated on December 3. Seoul's turn came a month later. Hardly settled into its new base at Kimpo, the 4th FIG was ordered to evacuate, and quickly. The last Sabre flew back to Japan on January 2. That evening, as gunfire erupted around the field, the remaining pilots and ground crews flew out in a C–54.

Also evacuating Kimpo were the F–80C-equipped 51st FIW and the 67th TRS with its RF–51Ds. Most of the 51st's planes had flown out earlier, but a couple still remained on the 3d, when they made one last strike before flying to safety. Despite the closeness of the enemy, a C–119 made a final, very dangerous trip into

Kimpo early on the 4th to pick up any remaining personnel. Later that day, Seoul fell.

The Communist offensive finally ground to a halt roughly along the 37th Parallel. In late January, Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, the new Eighth Army commander (who succeeded Gen. Walker after his death in a traffic accident), ordered a reconnaissance in force while the CCF and North Koreans regrouped. This "limited" offensive quickly turned into a full-blown drive. By April 9 Seoul had been retaken for the last time, and the UN forces continued to press forward. A renewed offensive by the Chinese Army failed, and by July the battlefront had settled down to a line winding from below Kaesong on the west to above Kansong on the shore of the Sea of Japan. For the rest of the war all ground action, reminiscent of the positional and bloody trench warfare of World War I, would occur along this line.

The MiGs were little seen during the CCF advance in December to January. Stalin had prohibited his pilots from providing air cover for the Chinese, and they apparently spent much of their time in training. Additionally, great effort was expended with scant success during this period in attempting to rehabilitate a number of North Korean airfields for use by the MiGs. However, the Chinese took this opportunity to move at least ten MiG–15s of their 4th Air Division to Antung to gain combat experience. Accompanied by Soviet fliers, the Chinese flew their first missions on December 28.

The Communist fliers, apparently figuring that with the removal of the Sabres and Thunderjets to Japan, their only opponents would be the F–80s and F–51s, became bolder and began appearing farther south. On January 21, four 49th FBG Shooting Stars escorting an RF–80 south of Sinuiju were attacked by 12 MiGs. The F–80s were unable to protect the reconnaissance plane and lost one of their number also. That same day, however, this newfound aggressiveness cost the enemy. Two F–84E flights were bombing a bridge over the Chongchon River when they were jumped by 16 Chinese-flown MiGs. In this first fight between the Chinese and the Americans, the Americans lost one plane, but Lt. Col. William E. Bertram, the 523d FBS commander, got behind a MiG and with some well-placed shots knocked the enemy fighter out of the air. With his victory, Bertram became the first Thunderjet pilot to score a MiG kill.

The Chinese had now been blooded in aerial combat over Korea, but it was accidents, not combat, that proved most costly to them during their initial two-month tour at Antung. They experienced a serious accident for every 42.2 sorties, and it quickly became evident to both the Chinese and the Soviets that the Chinese needed much more training. The 4th Air Division was withdrawn from combat operations, and for the next six months the Soviets were responsible for all air operations in MiG Alley.

Detachments of the 4th FIW and the 27th FEW had been ordered back to Korea on January 14, this time to Taegu. Still far removed from the Yalu, instead of operating in the air superiority role, the Sabres were given air-to-ground bombing missions. Close air support was not the F–86A's forte, but the 4th flew more than 150 sorties before returning to its proper mission. Although the straight-wing F–84Es were underpowered and no match for the MiG–15s, the 27th's Thunder-

jets marked their return to Korea in spectacular fashion.

It had become apparent to the FEAF and Fifth Air Force commanders that the Communists were expending great effort to repair their airfields at Pyongyang and around Sinuiju. The latter field was already well-covered with antiaircraft batteries on both sides of the Yalu; now Pyongyang experienced a phenomenal growth in the number of antiaircraft guns. If these defensive efforts succeeded, the complexion of the air war would change dramatically.

To thwart the enemy, Gen. Stratemeyer ordered a B–29 strike on Pyongyang for January 23. Forty F–80s of the 49th FBG would fly flak suppression missions prior to the B–29 attack. Another strike was also planned for the 23d. Colonel Ashley B. Packard, the 27th FEW's commander, proposed sending eight flights of F–84s to strafe Sinuiju. Two flights would constitute the attack package while the remainder would act as top cover. Both missions on the 23d were executed flawlessly.

The flak suppression F–80s at Pyongyang did their job so well that the B–29s drew little fire as they placed 90 percent of their bombs on the airfield. At Sinuiju, it was MiGs, not flak, that met the attackers. The eight strafers had already made their runs across the airfield before the enemy reacted. Dust clouds on the Antung field revealed the MiGs taking off. Because of their late takeoff, the MiGs were unable to gain an altitude advantage, and most of the fighting was done below 20,000 feet. For almost 30 minutes, a fierce air battle raged over Sinuiju. First Lieutenant Jacob Kratt, Jr., scored a double kill in less than two minutes, and Capts. Allen McGuire and William W. Slaughter each claimed a MiG. (McGuire's



While one F–84 is towed to its parking spot, another Thunderjet roars off the runway.

victory does not appear in the USAF's 1988 list of official credits.) In all, the 27th pilots claimed four MiGs destroyed, three probables, and four damaged against no losses. Three days after this battle, Kratt downed a Yak–3 for his final victory of the war.

At this time there was still some concern at some command levels about the success of Gen. Ridgway's new offensive. Until such success could be assured, Gen. Partridge ordered many of his units, including the 49th FBW, the 27th FEW, and the 4th FIW, again back to Japan. Soon it became evident that the enemy was falling back, and the Sabres of the 334th FIS were again ordered forward to Korea.

With many of the Yalu bridges still relatively undamaged, FEAF directed more B–29 strikes against these structures. Because of the threat of the MiGs, but more importantly because of the urgent need of their services against other targets during the Chinese offensive, the B–29s had not ventured into MiG Alley for some time. Unescorted RB–29s operating in the area were often met by MiGs and were not always able to escape. As the ground fighting quieted, FEAF decided that it was time to return to northwest Korea, regardless of the enemy jets.

On March 1, 98th Bombardment Group (BG) B–29s bombed a bridge near Chongju. Although scheduled to be escorted by F–80s, strong headwinds prevented a rendezvous, and the 18 Superfortresses proceeded alone. Shortly after coming off the target, the bombers were attacked by nine MiGs. In a fierce battle, B–29 gunners shot down one of the fighters, but ten of the bombers were damaged, three severely. If this kind of damage continued, the B–29s would not be able to operate over northwest Korea.

When Gen. Partridge recalled elements of the 4th FIG back to Korea, the 334th FIS moved to Suwon. At this time, Suwon was just a mudhole with a single runway and no taxiway. Planes had to taxi back up the runway to reach their parking areas, naturally delaying other landings. Facilities at the base were primitive, but the field would have to do for the time because it was the closest one to MiG Alley. Also, the 336th FIS moved to Taegu and staged its Sabres through Suwon.

On March 12, four 36th FBS Shooting Stars on an armed reconnaissance mission near Namsi were jumped by 12 MiGs. The F–80 pilots scored some hits on the enemy planes but did not bring down any. During the battle, however, two of the MiGs collided and exploded. These enemy pilots may have been new to combat, for their shooting was extremely poor. Five days later, near Sunchon, another trio of 36th FBS planes encountered more MiGs. In a freewheeling, low-level fight in and out of clouds, a MiG collided with 1st Lt. Howard J. Landry's F–80. Landry was posthumously credited with downing the enemy fighter.

The Soviet pilots may have demonstrated poor gunnery because they were in the process of changing units. Unlike the Americans, who normally rotated individuals, the Soviets rotated entire units, this time bringing in the No. 324 Fighter Air Division and the No. 303 Fighter Air Division. Even though these new pilots were more carefully chosen than their predecessors, this policy had the baneful effect of having everyone learn everything all over again. Although their aerial activity declined somewhat, MiG losses climbed as the newcomers met veteran

American pilots.

In late March, the Sabres and MiGs fought a couple of inconclusive battles as the Communists seemed unwilling to mix it up. Actions on April 3 and 4, however, showed the enemy airmen to be more determined. This new aggressiveness did not prevent them from losing three aircraft on the 3d and another on the 4th against no Sabre losses. One of the victors on April 3 was Capt. Jabara, who claimed the first of his long string of MiG kills. A week later, Jabara would bag his second MiG.

Reacting to pressure from Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, the SAC commander, who wanted to see his Thunderjets operating in their regular role as escort fighters rather than in ground attack, Gen. Stratemeyer assigned the 27th FEW F–84Es to accompany the B–29s on their next couple of forays into MiG Alley. Taking off from cloud-covered Itazuke on April 7, 48 F–84s met the bombers on time and spread out alongside the B–29s as they bombed bridges at Sinuiju and Uiju. Overhead, Sabres provided high cover. Near the target, 30 MiGs slanted down through the F–86s for an attack on the bombers. Only one made it through the wall of F–84s, but this one was able to down a Superfortress.

A follow-up attack on the Sinuiju bridge on the 12th proved more deadly to the bombers. Instead of flying in a compact formation, the bombers today were badly strung out, forcing the 54 escorting F–84s to thin their ranks. About 50 MiGs swarmed over the B–29s as they approached the target, sending down two in flames and damaging another so severely that it barely made Suwon. Four others were also damaged. Attesting to the ferocity of this battle, Superfortress gunners claimed ten MiGs, of which seven were later credited. Two were kills made by Sgt. Billy G. Beach.

The faster enemy jets slashed through the straggling formations before the F–84s could react, although the Thunderjet pilots did claim three fighters as probably destroyed. Unlike the previous mission, when they were unable to do much to counter the attack, the Sabres were very active. At times, the Sabre pilots pursued their quarry through the bomber formations, being shot at by gunners and F–84s alike. Colonel Meyer and Lt. Col. Hinton each scored their last victories of the war, while Capt. Jabara added one more MiG to his scorecard. Also downing an enemy jet was Capt. Howard M. Lane.

The loss of the three B–29s, coupled with the damages sustained by other bombers, was a blow to FEAF and FEAF Bomber Command. With fewer than 100 B–29s assigned, such losses could not be tolerated. Reluctantly, Stratemeyer called a temporary halt to B–29 attacks in the Sinuiju area. Just as reluctantly, the FEAF commander radioed LeMay that Partridge was reporting that the Thunderjets were outclassed by the MiGs and that the Korea-based F–86s were better suited for counterair and escort missions. Only when fields and facilities in Korea were ready for them would the 27th's F–84s be utilized again in the escort role.

In these latest fights, the U.S. fliers noted a growing proficiency on the part of their foes. Unit cohesion in formations of up to 16 aircraft appeared to be much better, and the enemy pilots exhibited greater aggressiveness. This cohesiveness was displayed in battles on April 16 and 18 when neither side was able to gain an

advantage. The Communists' newfound competence worried FEAF, especially since reconnaissance missions showed that they were busily rehabilitating airfields in North Korea and that some of these fields might soon be ready to receive MiGs.

Beginning April 17, FEAF launched a major effort to neutralize the enemy's work by sending its B–29s against the airfields. Again, the Sabres of the 4th FIW were aloft to protect the bombers. Responding to the new threat presented by the MiGs, the 4th's pilots devised new tactics. They were helped in this by the fact that facilities at Suwon had been improved and that both squadrons, the 334th and the 336th, could now be based there. With both squadrons at Suwon, more F–86s could be dispatched to the Yalu, of particular importance since the MiGs often attacked in large numbers. Instead of four aircraft, the number of Sabres in a flight was increased to six. In this size formation the F–86s could counter the usual MiG tactic of splitting a four-ship flight into two pairs, one climbing and one diving. Four of the Sabres would go after the climbers while the remaining two F–86s would chase the divers. The 4th also began scheduling their patrols to operate more closely. These new tactics received their baptism on April 22.

That afternoon, 12 Sabres, sporting the black and white fuselage and wing stripes that identified the 4th FIW, were just finishing an uneventful patrol when they were jumped by 36 MiGs. The MiGs themselves were attacked by 12 more F–86s which had just arrived to relieve the first patrol. Four of the enemy planes were downed in the ensuing melee, and four more were damaged. Among those scoring were Lt. Col. Eagleston, who got his second, and final, victory of the war, and Capt. Jabara. This was Jabara's fourth kill, making him the leader in aerial victories. Although Jabara was scheduled to rotate back to Japan with the 334th FIS, because he was close to achieving "ace" status, he was allowed to stay and fly with the 335th FIS which replaced his squadron at Suwon. Victories, however, would be hard to achieve for the next month, with only one attained until May 20.

Although the North Koreans doggedly continued to work on the airfields, methodical B–29 raids and night intruder attacks by B–26s prevented them from fully repairing their fields. Watched constantly, the airfields were never used effectively. The field at Sinuiju proved more of a problem; surrounded by numerous antiaircraft guns, it was also protected by MiGs based just across the river at Antung. When the Communists began intensive construction and repair work to the field in early May, Gen. Partridge decided it was time to revisit "Sunny Joe."

On the afternoon of May 9, while F–80s, F–51s, and Marine F4Us pounded the airfield, Air Force F–86s and F–84s and Navy F9Fs covered the attackers. Approximately 50 MiG–15s rose from Antung, but only a handful made halfhearted passes on the attackers, and minimal damage was inflicted on either side. At one point, a Sabre flight was paced but not attacked by eight MiGs flying only a few hundred yards away, just across the river. Grieviously damaged, Sinuiju was out of action for the time being.

Activity in MiG Alley slackened for the next couple of weeks until, on May 20, some 50 enemy jets engaged several flights of Sabres. A call for help brought more Sabres to the scene. In the thick of the action was Capt. Jabara. Despite the



Maj. James Jabara

handicap of being unable to drop one of his wing tanks, which greatly affected his plane's handling, Jabara remained in the fight. His perseverance was rewarded with two more kills, bringing his score to six and making him the first jet ace in history.* Another MiG fell to F–86 guns, one was claimed a probable, and five were damaged.

After this poor showing, the enemy fighters vanished for more than a week. They showed up again on the 31st, when they tried to down a couple of B–29s south of Sinuiju. Their attempt was singularly unsuccessful. A gunner got one of the attackers, and Sabres shot down two more. The Soviet pilots were a bit more successful the following day. One B–29 went down in flames, but other gunners destroyed two MiGs, and an F–86 got a third. That same day a Navy exchange pilot flying with the 336th FIS also downed a MiG–15.

The MiGs were conspicuously absent for more than two weeks, but they made their presence felt on the 17th. Approximately 25 fighters took on an F–86 formation near the Yalu. The Americans believed this group of planes were flown by "honchos," a Japanese term for "boss," because they appeared to be very aggressive and well-trained. One MiG fell to Sabre guns and six more were damaged against no U.S. losses. The following morning, 40 more honchos came up to do battle with 32 F–86s. In the ensuing battle, no less than five enemy fighters were downed, including two by 1st Lt. Ralph D. Gibson. One Sabre, however, was lost in this fight, the second F–86 loss of the war. The action continued on the 18th, when the Sabres damaged four MiGs but lost another F–86.

The MiG pilots did not spend all their time battling the Sabres. Communist forces had been trying for several days to dislodge South Korean troops from Sinmi-do, a tiny island about 75 miles southeast of Sinuiju. On June 20, they decided to provide their men with Il–10 air support. The enemy planes were met by Mustangs which downed two of the Ilyushins (which were never officially credited) and damaged three more. More aircraft from both sides rushed to the scene. Mustang pilot 1st Lt. James B. Harrison bagged one of six Yak–9s which put in an ap-

*Although the USAF has never given the term "ace" official sanction, the destruction of five or more aircraft in aerial combat has always bestowed upon an individual a special distinction.

pearance. Harrison's victory was the last official kill for an F–51 pilot during the war. Concerning his kill, Harrison stated, "Them Yaks are flown by a bunch of Yuks and there ain't no sweat." Another adversary, however, produced a lot of sweat. MiG–15s soon arrived on the scene. While most of the jets engaged F–86s at altitude, one broke through to shoot the wing off an F–51. Trapped by G-forces, the Mustang pilot could not release himself from his plane as it corkscrewed into the ground.

Meanwhile, another, decidedly different, enemy aircraft also caused headaches for the Fifth Air Force. The Polikarpov Po–2 was an ancient biplane that had first been flown back in 1928. Close to 33,000 of this aircraft and its variants were eventually built. On a good day it could perhaps make 100 miles per hour, but this slowness and its great maneuverability were its defenses. Its wooden frame and fabric covering provided little surface from which radar beams could reflect. It was the perfect nocturnal raider. Its regular runs over the Seoul area earned it the nickname "Bedcheck Charlie." Although more of a nuisance than anything else, on June 17 one Po–2 dropped a bomb squarely on the 335th FIS's ramp at Suwon. This single bomb destroyed a Sabre, damaged eight others, and wounded one Sabre pilot and a civilian technical representative. Ironically, the oldest and slowest plane in the Communists' inventory did more damage to the F–86 force than their newest and fastest aircraft had.

Po–2s and other small aircraft continued to operate until the end of the war, usually causing little damage but proving again and again very difficult to bring down. To combat these nuisances, Fifth Air Force introduced the F–94B. Equipped with these night fighters, the 319th FIS moved to Suwon on March 23, 1952. Although capable of penetrating well into North Korea, because of its highly classified radar and fire-control systems, the F–94 was initially prohibited from operating deep in enemy territroy. After hearing numerous complaints about this restriction, in November 1952 Gen. Vandenberg personally authorized the removal of restrictions.

While the F–94s were being held back in a local air defense role, Marine F3D Skyknights were dispatched nightly in support of B–29 operations and on interception missions. The Marines also operated a squadron of twin-engine F7Fs, which also supported the B–29s and performed night air defense missions. When the restrictions on the F–94s were finally lifted, these aircraft also went out on deep interception missions and operated "barrier patrols" ahead of the B–29s.

The Marines were first to score a night kill when a Skyknight crew downed a Yak–15 jet near Sinuiju on November 3, 1952. On January 30, 1953, the 319th FIS bagged its first night victory when Capt. Ben L. Fithian and Lt. Sam R. Lyons shot down a conventionally powered La–9. Their attack was achieved completely by radar; the two Americans never saw their quarry until it burst into flames. The F–94s scored several more victories before the end of the war, but these came at a price. Early on May 3, 1953, Lts. Stanton G. Wilcox and Irwin L. Goldberg brought down a Po–2, but while maneuvering at low speed and low altitude during the attack, their F–94 apparently stalled and crashed, killing both fliers. Then on June 12 near Cho-do, the 319th's commander, Lt. Col. Robert V. McHale, and his



An F–94 of the 319th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron under tow at Suwon.

radar observer, Capt. Samuel Hoster, evidently crashed into their target and were killed.

Although the F–94s did have some success in downing the enemy night attackers, they were generally too fast to be truly effective against the Bedcheck Charlies. World War II vintage propeller-driven aircraft, such as the F4U Corsair, proved more dangerous against these enemy planes. In fact, the Navy's only ace of the war, Lt. Guy Bordelon, was a Corsair night fighter pilot who downed four Bedcheck Charlies on June 30 and July 1, 1953, and a fifth on the night of July 16, 1953.

By the summer of 1951 it appeared that a stalemate was occurring on the ground, and both sides agreed to meet for truce talks. Due to Communist intransigence, however, the talks proved fruitless, and two more years passed before an agreement was signed.

The Chinese and Soviets meanwhile accumulated some 445 MiG–15s across the Yalu. In contrast, FEAF had but 89 F–86s available. Of these 89 Sabres, only 44 were for use by the 4th FIW's two squadrons based in Korea. And of those 44 fighters in Korea, maintenance problems often meant that half of them were grounded. Despite this enormous disparity, the Sabres, supported by F–84s and F–80s, more than held their own in combat.

Lieutenant General Otto P. Weyland, the new FEAF commander, repeatedly requested more air units, particularly F–86 and F–84 wings, but Air Force headquarters remained cool to his requests. One reason for the Air Force leadership's reluctance was that post–World War II cutbacks had sliced the service's resources drastically, and now it had few units to spare. A second reason was that, although a violent war was raging in Korea, the United States believed Europe was the Communists' true target. Europe, and the defense of the United States, had priority on resources. The Air Force did begin to exchange the older F–86As for improved F–86Es on a one-to-one basis, but this process took time.

It was well that the E-model, featuring a "flying tail" (a horizontal stabilizer

moving as one unit) and hydraulically powered flight controls which substantially increased maneuverability, began to arrive, because the 4th FIW was now faced with an improved MiG, the MiG–15bis. This version had a more powerful engine, which gave it a higher maximum speed and a greater operational altitude. The plane also featured a number of other improvements to enhance its effectiveness. Flown by veteran Soviet pilots, the MiG–15bis was a very dangerous foe.

Although Sabres remained a rare commodity in Korea, new F–84 units were arriving in the war zone, and the 49th FBW began converting from F–80s to Thunderjets. Two Air National Guard (ANG) wings, the 136th FBW from Texas and the 116th FBW from Georgia, arrived in May and July 1951, respectively.* Actually, the arrival of these two Thunderjet wings did not significantly increase FEAF's combat capabilities because Gen. LeMay, the SAC leader, had finally secured the release of the 27th FEW back to his command. Before the 27th departed for home, however, it provided transition training to the 49th and 136th wings. These F–84 additions, warned Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Air Force chief of staff, would be the last FEAF would see for some time. He also cautioned that aircraft shortages throughout the USAF precluded him from providing FEAF with the desired 50 percent theater reserve of fighters. If lucky, FEAF might get a 10 percent reserve.

While the 116th was initially assigned air defense duties in Japan, a mission singularly inappropriate for the F–84, the 136th FBW's movement to Korea was just an even exchange with the 27th FEW. Almost immediately upon its arrival, the 136th began combat operations, flying its first mission on May 24, 1951. On June 26, while escorting Superfortresses attacking the Yongyu airfield, 1st Lt. Arthur E. Olinger and Capt. Harry Underwood shared credit for destroying a MiG–15 that had evaded the F–86 screen. This victory was the ANG's first jet kill.

The relatively static ground war meant that FEAF could begin to bring some order to its Korean basing. Fields were rapidly improved, and many of FEAF's tactical units were able to move closer to the battleground. In August, the 4th FIW replaced the 8th FBW at Kimpo, the 8th in turn taking over the 4th's facilities at Suwon. A few months later, the 8th was joined by the 51st FIW, which began reequipping with Sabres late in the year.

Throughout 1951, the small band of Sabres continued to hold the line against their numerically superior opponents. Invariably, when F–86 formations met MiGs in combat, they were outnumbered, sometimes three or four to one. Also, the Communists, more comfortable with their new aircraft, had become more aggressive against UN aircraft operating in MiG Alley. This danger to the B–29s resulted in a ban on bomber operations in the Alley unless they had fighter escort. Even without B–29s to attack, the MiG pilots had a wealth of other targets to choose from, and reconnaissance aircraft and fighter-bombers often received their unwelcome attention. Fierce air battles were the norm throughout the summer and

*The 136th's squadrons came from Texas and Arkansas; the 116th's from Georgia, Florida, and California.



The aircraft in the background seem to defeat the purpose of camouflaging those in the foreground. The nearest F–86 is Col. Francis S. Gabreski's personal aircraft.

fall of 1951. For example, on September 2 between Sinuiju and Pyongyang, 22 Sabres fought a half-hour battle with 40 MiGs. Four enemy planes were downed in this action. One of the victors in this battle was a veteran of World War II and one of the best known fliers of that conflict. Colonel Francis S. "Gabby" Gabreski, now the 4th FIW's deputy commander, was America's top living ace, having shot down 28 German planes in World War II. He would also become a jet ace in Korea. Seven days after Gabreski's victory, 28 F–86s were met by no fewer than 70 MiGs. In the ensuing combat, Capts. Richard S. Becker and Ralph D. Gibson each downed an enemy plane, making them the second and third aces of the war. On the 25th, five more MiGs fell to the Sabres.

Late September saw the Chinese Air Force reenter the battle. Their first major action took place on the 25th when 32 Chinese MiGs joined their Soviet compatriots against U.S. planes attacking bridges over the Chongchon River. Over the next month the Chinese pilots engaged their enemy ten times. According to the Chinese, these battles produced 20 victories plus another 10 damaged aircraft against a loss of 14 of their own planes. (In contrast, during the same period FEAF recorded the destruction of 40 MiGs and the loss of 7 F–86s, 2 F–84s, 5 B–29s, and 1 RF–80.) Because of the inexperience of their pilots, it was Chinese policy to rotate their air divisions and regiments after they had been in five to seven engagements. From late 1951 until the end of the war, they kept at least three divisions of approximately 45 MiGs each at bases across the Yalu.

The almost daily fights of Sabres and MiGs were intense, draining experiences for the fighter pilots, and their victories came with a price. September saw three F–86s and one each F–51, F–80, and F–84 fall to the enemy fighters. Then, too often, aircraft on interdiction missions had to jettison their bombs and flee the predations of the MiGs. An extremely concerned Gen. Weyland warned Gen. Vandenberg on September 15 that the increasing Communist air strength could result in FEAF losing control of the air. Weyland asked for another F–86 wing or, if that

could not be supplied, conversion of one of his F–80 wings to Sabres.

Although sympathetic to Weyland's concerns, Vandenberg told him that no F–86s could be spared without impairing Air Defense Command's effectiveness. The specter of a Communist assault in Europe or on North America continued to sway the United States' defense outlook. Vandenberg also stated that unless the source of the enemy's air supplies (i.e., Manchuria) could be attacked, air superiority could not be assured no matter how many aircraft were sent. There the matter stood for the moment, but it was not long before more signs appeared that the Communists were close to gaining an edge in Korea.

Sensing that their opponents were weakening, the Communists concentrated their efforts to rejuvenate their North Korean airfields. This was what Weyland and his new Fifth Air Force commander, Maj. Gen. Frank F. Everest, feared. If these fields became operational for MiG use, the enemy could extend MiG Alley all the way south to Pyongyang. Particularly worrisome were three fields that lay within a 20-mile radius of one another between the Alley and Pyongyang. These fields—Namsi, Taechon, and Saamcham—had to be rendered useless. An intensive effort was mounted against all North Korean airfields. The Chinese later recorded some 119 attacks against the North Korean fields, with nearly 13,800 bombs falling on them.

In the meantime, however, if the aerial action in September had been hard, that in October was brutal. In seemingly constant action, the Sabre pilots continued to score against the enemy jets. Two MiGs went down on the 1st; six on the following day, including Gabreski's third kill; one on the 8th; another on the 12th; and then *nine* on the 16th. Even the old F–80s got into the act, 8th FBW pilots claiming two probables on October 3 when they were attacked while on an interdiction mission. But disaster loomed for FEAF aircraft.

Although forced out of MiG Alley, FEAF Bomber Command's B–29s had



A pair of 4th Fighter-Interceptor Group F–86As roar off the Suwon runway bound for MiG Alley.

continued daylight attacks on other North Korean targets. The command also began experimenting with night attacks using Shoran (*sho*rt *ra*nge *n*avigation) equipment. For the most part during this time, the MiGs had left the bombers alone. This changed when the B–29s began attacking the Namsi-Taechon-Saamcham fields. The night attacks were progressing too slowly, and daylight attacks were resumed on the airfields. The first raids elicited little response from the enemy, but it was only a matter of time before the Communists would put up a defense. It came on October 23.

That morning FEAF sent nine Superfortresses (one later aborted the mission) against the Namsi field. Providing close escort for the bombers were 55 F–84s of the 49th and 136th FBWs. Another 34 F–86s were positioned higher to catch any enemy planes before they got too close to the B–29s. All of this escort had little effect. Approximately 100 MiGs engaged the Sabres near Namsi, effectively preventing them from going to the aid of the bombers. The Americans knocked down two enemy planes, but as they and the MiGs tangled, another 50 MiGs went after the B–29s. Whether these 50 planes were actually part of the group battling the Sabres or were additional aircraft is unknown.

Despite their heroic efforts to protect the B–29s, it was evident that the straight-wing Thunderjets were incapable of keeping up with the faster and more maneuverable MiG–15s. Many of the enemy jets broke through the escorts to pummel the bombers. Three of the bombers went down under the onslaught, and four of the five remaining planes were so badly damaged that they had to make emergency landings in Korea and Japan. An F–84 was also shot down. A Thunderjet pilot claimed one MiG, and the bomber gunners claimed another three.

The Superfortress crews' pain continued for several more days. An 8-plane raid on Sunchon the following day was met by up to 70 MiGs, and another B–29 was destroyed. Bomber gunners claimed one MiG, and Col. Harrison R. Thyng, who took command of the 4th FIW on November 1, bagged another. Confronted with mounting bomber losses, Gen. Weyland ordered a two-day standdown, then resumed the daylight attacks. On the 27th, almost 100 MiGs met a B–29 force escorted by F–84s and RAAF Meteors near Sinanju. Six enemy fighters went down, all to the B–29 gunners, but one of the bombers was severely damaged and three others experienced minor damage. Fortunately, a mission the following day was not bothered by the MiGs.

It had been a terrible week for the B–29s. Until that last week in October, only six bombers had been lost in combat. Now, in just one week and in spite of the valiant efforts of the fighters, five bombers had been destroyed and eight were seriously damaged. Faced with the possibility of the complete destruction of its strategic bomber force, FEAF withdrew the B–29s from daylight operations and began using them only in the relative safety of darkness.

Even as the B–29s were being slaughtered over Namsi, Gen. Vandenberg was reconsidering his earlier decision not to strengthen the F–86 force in Korea. Against the advice of many on his staff who continued to focus on Europe, the chief of staff ordered the Air Defense Command to provide 75 Sabres along with pilots and crew chiefs. These planes were the newer model F–86Es. Most of these

aircraft went to the 51st FIW, but some went to the 4th, which assigned them primarily to flight leaders.

The 4th sent a cadre of veterans to the 51st to help in its conversion to the Sabre. Among this group were Col. Gabreski, who took command of the 51st FIW, and Lt. Col. George L. Jones, who became the 51st FIG's leader. With the addition of the F–86Es, FEAF now possessed 165 Sabres, not all available for combat. Though nearly double the number of F–86s FEAF had previously, this tally still fell far short of the more than 550 MiG–15s facing the UN fliers.

While the 51st began working up its Sabres, all three of the 4th's squadrons gathered together at Kimpo, where they continued their patrols of MiG Alley. One of the more spectacular successes for the Americans in November, however, did not come in air-to-air combat, but rather on a strafing mission. On November 18, a quartet of 4th FIW Sabres spotted 12 MiGs parked on the Uiju airfield northeast of Sinuiju. Leaving two of their flight overhead as cover, Capt. Kenneth D. Chandler and 1st Lt. Dayton W. Ragland proceeded to "beat up" the airfield. Flying just a few feet above the ground, the pair raked the parked planes with .50-caliber fire. Because of the danger from antiaircraft fire and the nearness of the airfields just across the Yalu, the Americans made just one pass. It was enough. Chandler and Ragland left behind four destroyed jets and several others damaged.

As impressive a success as this mission was, it was surpassed on November 30. Throughout the month, North and South Korean troops had been fighting for control of several islands in the Yellow Sea south of Sinuiju. On several occasions the Communists had been supported by twin-engine Tu–2 bombers. On the afternoon of the 30th, a group of 31 Sabres patrolling the southern portion of MiG Alley sighted a large enemy formation heading toward the islands. The Americans counted 12 Tu–2s with 16 La–9 propeller-driven fighters as close escort and 16 MiG–15s. The ensuing battle was no contest. Eight of the lumbering Tu–2s were swiftly dispatched, as were three La–9s. All except one of the MiGs escaped the carnage; this fighter fell to Maj. George A. Davis who also destroyed three Tu–2s to bring his total score to six.

December 1 saw the 51st FIW's first combat missions, following a very abbreviated transition training period. The wing's two squadrons were based at Suwon, where they spent the remainder of the war. First Lieutenant Paul E. Roach became the wing's first victor with Sabres, bagging a MiG on just the wing's second day of operations. For the present, however, the 4th FIW remained the primary MiG killers, with nine of the enemy fighters falling to its guns during the first week of the month.

December's big battle came on the 13th when nearly 150 MiGs challenged the 4th FIW's morning and afternoon sweeps over Sinanju. Thirteen of the Communist jets were destroyed in these fights, including four by Maj. Davis. These victories made him the leading U.S. ace of the war to date. The Communists' ardor for battle apparently cooled after these actions, for the MiGs showed little inclination to fight, and only five of the jets were destroyed, one by an F–84, during the rest of December.

Throughout the war, the United States tried to obtain a MiG–15 for testing. A

number of unsuccessful attempts were made to recover crashed MiGs, and up to $100,000 was offered to the first defector who would bring a MiG–15 with him. "Project Moolah" did not seem to have much effect. The first defector and his MiG–15 came over in September 1953, well after the cease-fire, and he claimed he knew nothing about the monetary offer.

Equally desirous of getting a Sabre and learning its secrets, the Communists had more success. After several failed attempts to force down an F–86, a Sabre was shot down in the fall of 1951. Instead of ejecting, the pilot crash-landed his aircraft. The plane suffered little damage at impact, and friendly units rescued the pilot. Later attempts to destroy the fighter from the air were unsuccessful. Salvaged by the Communists, the Sabre was first taken to Antung, then to Moscow, where Soviet aircraft designers pored over it. Of particular interest to the Soviets were the American plane's flight control, air conditioning, and electrical systems and its gunsight. Construction methods and materials also received much attention. Some students of the Soviet aviation industry later claimed that the Sukhoi design bureau's study of the F–86 enabled that organization to reach a higher technical competence than other Soviet aviation bureaus.

In spite of the addition of the 51st FIW, American fliers continued to lose ground as the Communists increased their MiG force too. Additionally, maintenance problems and a lack of spare parts contributed to high out-of-commission rates for the Sabres. In January 1952, this rate was a staggering 45 percent. Fortunately, this was the high (or low, depending on the view) point of the war for such rates. Because two units were now flying Sabres on almost daily combat missions, the need for external drop-tanks soared, and by January 1952 the stockpile of these tanks was almost exhausted. Until more tanks were received, the Sabre pilots often had to fly their missions carrying only one tank; this meant less time



A 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group Sabre drops its wing tanks preparatory to going into action in MiG Alley.

could be spent patrolling.

With greater numbers of MiGs available, the Communists began using new tactics during the winter of 1951–1952. Giving up on trying to use the North Korean airfields to any extent, the enemy concentrated on dispatching huge formations of fighters from their Manchurian bases for sweeps south toward Pyongyang. Called "trains" by the Americans, these formations—one crossing the Yalu at Antung and another over the Suiho reservoir—often contained as many as 100 MiGs each. Usually flying above 35,000 feet, the trains would converge at Pyongyang for the return flight. While outbound, each train often detached several flights to engage the Sabre patrols. A number of fighters would be dropped off also on the return to pick off lower-flying fighter-bombers or stragglers. The Soviets perhaps hoped that with these tactics they could overwhelm their opponents with sheer numbers. In spite of this alarming show of force, the MiG–15 pilots often showed little inclination to fight.

It appeared to the Americans that the Communists were again introducing new fliers to combat. Indeed, between November 1951 and May 1952 the Chinese rotated 17 MiG–15 regiments and one La–11 regiment through the Manchurian fields, with almost 450 pilots gaining combat experience. In the battles that did occur, the Americans usually came home the victor. Leading the way was the 51st FIW, with 27 kills in January. The 4th FIW could only claim 5 victories in the same period. This disparity perhaps resulted because the 4th still flew F–86As for the most part. Its sister wing had the more capable Es which had improved flight controls and a better fire control system than did most of the As.

With maintenance and spares problems still plaguing the Sabre wings, fewer missions were flown in February. Only seven MiGs were bagged by the 4th during the month, and just ten by the 51st. These victories were marred by the loss of FEAF's top ace. On February 10, Maj. George Davis, flying an F–86E, was leading 18 F–86As covering Thunderjets attacking rail targets near Kunu-ri. In the distance, Davis saw MiG contrails. Perhaps a bit too eager to close with the enemy, he (and his wingman) left the rest of the Sabres to protect the fighter-bombers and go after the MiGs. Seizing the rare opportunity of an altitude advantage, Davis surprised his quarry and quickly shot down two MiGs. But as he racked his plane around to get behind another fighter, he lost airspeed. A fourth MiG pumped several cannon shells into



Maj. George A. Davis, Jr.

the Sabre. Davis's F–86 tumbled from the sky and smashed into a mountain. At the time FEAF's leading ace with 11 MiGs and 3 Tu–2s to his credit, Davis was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Some 17 MiGs fell to the Sabres in February against the loss of two F–86s, one of which was Davis's. This victory count climbed during the next two months: 37 MiGs in March and 44 more in April, with only six Sabres lost in those two months. The number of Sabre aces climbed to 12 during this time. Among these aces were Col. Gabreski, who bagged his fifth MiG on April 1, and Capt. Iven C. Kincheloe, Jr., who reached that coveted mark on the 6th. (Kincheloe later received the 1956 Mackay Trophy for setting a manned altitude record of 125,907 feet in the Bell X–2.)

Several sources in recent years have claimed that late in the war the U.S. airmen probably scored many more victories than the official records show. These victories were usually made across the Yalu in Manchuria. Despite the prohibitions on crossing the river, in the heat of battle accidental incursions did occur. The sources state, however, that many missions were deliberately flown across the Yalu to catch MiGs at their most vulnerable time, in the traffic patterns or on the ground at the Communist airfields. More than one gun camera film supposedly showed MiGs with their landing gear down approaching an airfield. Numerous parked fighters could also be seen on these films. Among pilots claimed to have strayed across the river were Gabreski, Lt. Col. George Jones (a 6.5 ace), Maj. William T. Whisner, Jr. (5.5 MiGs), and Col. Walker M. "Bud" Mahurin, the famed World War II ace who shot down 3.5 MiG–15s.

The Fifth Air Force fliers did not need to cross the Yalu to see that the Communists were assembling an awesome array of MiG–15s on their Manchurian fields. On April 13, Fifth Air Force reconnaissance planes spotted between 400 and 500 MiG–15s parked on just *one* airfield. This sobering sight presaged more hard, desperate fighting in the months ahead. Numbers of fighters was not the only problem facing the UN fliers. The enemy began using ground radar to control interceptions of the UN aircraft. This meant that the Communists could be more precise in their interceptions, avoiding the F–86s and instead attacking the more vulnerable fighter-bombers.

Fifth Air Force set up its own radar and direction center on the island of Chodo, in the Yellow Sea. From here the radar coverage extended all the way to the Yalu. Rescue facilities were also established on the island. Although not fully operational in May, the direction center enabled the Sabres to shoot down 6 of the 27 MiGs destroyed that month. Another five enemy planes also fell to the F–86s. These victories came at a cost, however: MiGs shot down an F–51, three F–84s, and five F–86s in May. Enemy flak also claimed an important victory that month.

To increase the Sabre's capabilities, the 4th FIG experimented in May with carrying a pair of 1,000-pound bombs and operating in a ground attack mode. These attacks were not particularly successful, and it took the arrival of the F–86F to show that the Sabre could be used effectively as a ground attack aircraft. While flying an F–86E during such a mission on May 13, Bud Mahurin was shot down and taken prisoner.

Several other experiments of note were undertaken by FEAF fighter units during the war. From mid-January to May 1953 FEAF conducted a test designated "Project Gun Val," which involved new armament for the F–86. The Sabre pilots had been complaining for some time about the .50-caliber machine gun's lack of stopping power. On too many occasions they got behind a MiG but were unable to bring it down. On the other hand, the MiG's 20mm and 37mm cannons often caused serious, if not fatal, damage to their adversaries. Eight modified F–86Fs were assigned to the 4th FIW, but instead of six machine guns, these planes carried four 20mm cannons. To conceal the fact that they had more powerful weapons, the Gun Val Sabres always flew missions with regular F–86s.

The Gun Val aircraft flew 284 combat sorties, during which MiGs were sighted on 139 occasions and fired on 41 times. Half of the firings (21) resulted in 6 kills, 3 probables, and 12 fighters damaged. Although the percentage of MiGs destroyed or damaged per mission was greater than the Fifth Air Force overall average, it was believed that this resulted more from the skill of the test pilots and favorable combat conditions than from an increase in firepower. One serious problem encountered during the test was compressor stalls when the guns were fired above 35,000 feet. These stalls may have contributed to the loss of one test aircraft. FEAF concluded that the 20mm installation was not suitable for combat because of its limited firing time, only four seconds, and because of the compressor stall problem. Nevertheless, FEAF concluded that the gun's reliability, high cyclic rate, and muzzle velocity indicated that the weapon had promise for arming future fighters.

A less successful, somewhat bizarre test involved rockets. Six F–86Fs were fitted with a jet-assisted takeoff (JATO) pod mounted on the lower aft section of the fuselage. The pod contained three rocket motors similar to the JATO bottles used for additional thrust to get heavy aircraft off the ground. These motors could provide about 1,000 pounds of thrust for 38 seconds when fired in train, or 3,000 pounds of thrust for 14 seconds when fired simultaneously. Fortunately, this test was short-lived.

The rocket-boosted Sabres flew 140 sorties, of which all but 4 were in combat. The JATO units were fired on 16 sorties, and 6 enemy aircraft were claimed destroyed. Only in two of these kills was it believed that the JATO was a significant factor. One pilot was lost during these engagements, although it was not known if the rockets played any role in his demise. What was most troubling to the pilots was the discovery that installing the JATO pod shifted the aircraft's center of gravity toward its rear limits. This, of course, produced instability. The F–86 could easily begin porpoising (oscillating up and down) and quickly exceed the pilot's ability to control the aircraft. Additionally, in a high "G" turn, the craft's instability caused control-stick reversal which could also lead to loss of control. The pilots participating in this test also discovered that the performance of the JATO aircraft was inferior to that of the Sabres with the "6-3" wing. Finally, in an environment where ground turnaround time was an important factor, it took nearly 3 hours to turn around a JATO-equipped F–86, compared to a normal time of 30 minutes. FEAF quickly decided that the extra weight and instability caused by the



F–86Fs of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Group.

installation was not worth the effort being expended, and the remaining test aircraft were reconverted to standard F–86Fs.

Although these tests provided valuable information to the Fifth Air Force and FEAF, what materialized from this information lay far in the future. What was really needed at the time were more Sabres. These finally began to appear in the summer of 1952 in the guise of the F–86F. The first F-models were just F–86Es with a new engine rated at 6,090 pounds of thrust. While this increased the Sabre's rate of climb and service ceiling, it was the addition of a new wing on later F–86Fs that really made it a MiG killer. The leading-edge slats of the earlier models were deleted in this new wing, a new leading edge was extended six inches at the wing root and three inches at the wing tip, and wing fences were added. This change also enabled a leading-edge tank to be fitted, adding another 130 gallons of fuel to the Sabre's internal fuel capacity. This new wing, the 6-3 hard wing, enabled the Sabre to maneuver with the MiG–15 at higher altitudes. Although the MiG still held an altitude advantage over the F–86F, this advantage was so reduced as to be effectively useless. The 6-3 wing was also available as a kit, and a number of late-model F–86Es were retrofitted with it, aiding their maneuverability immensely.

The F–86Fs sent to Korea were used in two modes, one strictly an air superiority fighter, the other a fighter-bomber. With this influx of new Sabres, FEAF was at last able to convert more units. At Suwon, the 51st FIW was brought to full strength with the addition of a third squadron. In early 1953, the 18th FBW finally traded in its tired Mustangs for the fighter-bomber F–86Fs. The 8th FBW began converting from F–80s to F–86Fs in late February 1953. While these latter two wings would fly some air superiority missions, the 4th and 51st FIWs still flew

most of the missions into MiG Alley.

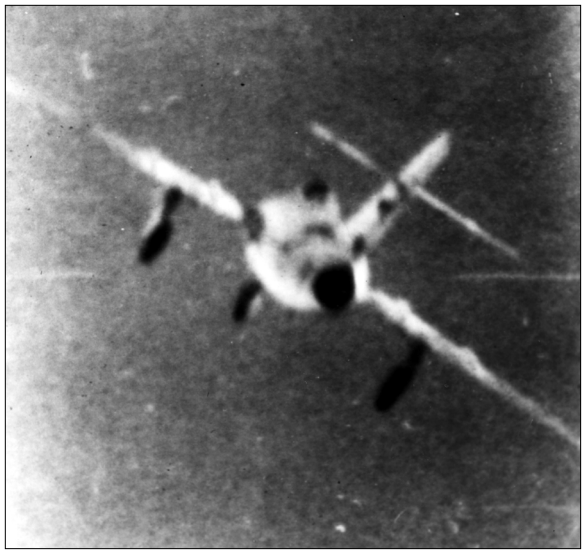
By the summer of 1952, intelligence officials estimated that Communist air strength in the Far East exceeded 7,000 aircraft , of which about 5,000 were Soviet, 2,000 Chinese, and aproximately 270 North Korean, and this number remained relatively stable for the remainder of the war. Thus, despite the additional Sabres, the Communists retained a significant numerical superiority over their foe.

The fighting in MiG Alley heated up again in the summer of 1952. Initially, not that many MiGs were sighted, but they were flown by very experienced pilots. The enemy also became more adept in their use of ground-controlled radar to intercept UN aircraft. Even with these experienced fliers, the Communists lost 20 MiG–15s in June. Only 3 F–86s were downed in these battles. The following month the Sabres shot down 16 MiGs while losing 4 of their own. Most of the enemy planes fell during a major encounter on July 4 when about 50 MiGs attempted to attack fighter-bombers striking targets near the Yalu. Although some of the MiGs penetrated the Sabre screen to make unsuccessful runs on the fighter-bombers, it was at the cost of 13 of their number to the Sabres. Two F–86s were also lost. Among the victors in this Independence Day battle were Col. Royal N. Baker and Capt. Clifford D. Jolley. One of the top aces of the war, Baker finished with 13 MiG–15 victories; Jolley wound up with 7. Another scorer on the 4th was Capt. James A. Horowitz. Under the pen name James Salter, he later wrote one of the better novels of the Korean War, *The Hunters*.

Only 404 enemy sorties had been seen in July, but this number soared to more than 1,150 in August as the Communists again attempted to gain air superiority. Two major battles were fought during the month, one on the 6th when 35 Sabres engaged 52 MiGs. Six of the enemy planes were shot down. The other large encounter occurred on the 30th, when 5 MiG–15s were destroyed. August was a very successful month for the FEAF fliers; at a cost of only 2 fighters, 33 MiGs were destroyed, including one by an RCAF pilot flying with the 39th FIS.

The Communists became increasingly aggressive in September: some 1,857 aircraft were sighted. On September 1, several MiGs evaded F–86 patrols and flew as far south as Haeju, just above the 38th Parallel, where they damaged a Mustang. Three days later, MiGs and Sabres fought 17 separate engagements in a day-long battle north of the Chongchon River. Using the Yalu for protection, some 73 MiGs shuttled back and forth across the river to attack 39 F–86s. The cover of the Yalu did not prevent the Americans from downing 13 MiGs. Unfortunately, 4 Sabres were also lost in these actions. September saw several more violent air battles, and more Sabre pilots became aces, most notably Maj. Frederic C. “Boots” Blesse, who bagged his fifth aircraft during the September 4 fight. By the end of the month Blesse had 8 MiGs and 1 La–9 to his credit. He knocked down another MiG–15 on October 3 to bring his final score to ten.

Another pilot who became an ace in September was Capt. Robinson Risner who got the fifth of his eventual eight victories on September 21. Risner, later to become one of the more famous POWs during the Vietnam War, was involved in one of the more remarkable incidents of the Korean War. During a mission on October 10, 1952, with Risner leading a flight of four Sabres as cover for F–84s at-



Landing gear dangling, a MiG–15 is caught on film on April 1, 1952, by Lt. Robert L. Sands's F–86 gun camera. Seconds later, the enemy fighter burst into flames, its pilot ejected, and the aircraft spun in near Sinuiju.

tacking a target at the mouth of the Yalu, he radioed a predetermined code (authorized by his commander) to the members of his flight as it approached the target for his men to turn off their IFF (identification, friend or foe) equipment in the event they were forced across the river. While covering the F–84s, the flight was, indeed, forced to the north side of the river. Shortly, Risner saw MiGs clawing for altitude.

About the same time that Risner saw the MiGs, they saw the Sabres and turned back toward Antung. Not about to let the enemy get away, Risner gave chase. Getting behind the "Tail-end Charlie," Risner opened fire. Other than shattering its canopy, his fire did not seem to have much effect on the MiG. He poured more bursts into the enemy jet but could not bring it down. The Communist pilot was very good, using every trick to evade or get behind his tormentor. At one point, the MiG pilot flew upside down just feet above the trees. Just seconds before, the two planes had been flying side by side, each pilot eyeing the other warily.

The MiG pilot finally made a break for the Ta-tung-kou airfield. As flak speckled the sky around them, Risner chased the MiG between two hangars and was at last able to blast the plane with his last ammunition. The MiG exploded in a huge fireball, the flying debris setting afire several parked aircraft. Risner and his wingman, Joe Logan, who had stayed with him throughout the chase, beat a hasty retreat. Flak again darkened the sky as they sped south. The flak holed Logan's plane and fuel and hydraulic fluid streamed from it. Risner decided unorthodox means were needed to save his wingman. Ordering Logan to keep his throttle firewalled, Risner positioned his plane behind the other F–86. When Logan's fuel ran out, Risner used his plane's "bow wave" to push the other Sabre toward Cho-do, where there were rescue facilities. It was an extremely risky venture: debris from the damaged aircraft could be ingested into Risner's plane with drastic results; a bit too strong a shove and he could send Logan out of control. Remarkably, the technique worked.

Directly over Cho-do, after radioing the island to prepare to pick him up, Logan bailed out. Risner returned to Kimpo satisfied with the day's work, but still concerned for the safety of his wingman. For all the effort expended, the mission ended tragically. Although he ejected safely, Logan drifted out to sea and became entangled in his parachute shroud lines when he hit the water. He drowned as the rescue helicopter neared him.

As autumn turned to winter, it was evident that the Communists were again rotating their units. Encounters between MiGs and Sabres dropped precipitously from 706 in September to 434 in October and to only 406 in November, but they climbed to 519 in December when the Chinese again became active. These confrontations generally occurred only when the MiGs held a clear numerical advantage and when the Yalu was close by for an escape route. Fifth Air Force noted that there were repeated instances of a single firing run by only one ship of a two-MiG element, thus indicating "some variety of pedagogy . . . was in progress." Few of the enemy pilots appeared to be expert, and the F–86 pilots were able to rack up 27 kills in October, 26 in the following month, and 31 in December. Four Sabres were lost in October, 3 in November, and 2 in December. (The Chinese claimed to have destroyed 37 planes in December.) One notable victor in October was Capt. Manuel J. "Pete" Fernandez, Jr., who got his first MiG on October 4. Before he was finished, Fernandez would become the third-highest scoring ace of the war with 14.5 kills.

Even though encounters were few, the Sabres remained outnumbered. The Americans began to experiment with different tactics to offset this disadvantage. The F–86Fs now flew above 40,000 feet, while the Es patrolled about 10,000 feet lower. Although the "finger-four" or "fluid-four" formation remained standard for the Sabres, the 51st FIW also began employing a 6-aircraft flight, and the 4th FIW used sections of 8 aircraft. In early 1953 the Sabre wings also began flying a "train" formation to counter the enemy's superior numbers. In this tactic, the Sabres retained the fluid-four flight, but flew a loose trail formation of six flights following at approximately one-mile intervals.



Capt. Manuel J. "Pete" Fernandez,Jr., showing his scorecard as of May 8, 1953. The words on the sign were an American version of Korean grammar, and basically meant "We have MiGs."

During 1951 and 1952, the Americans had noted a tendency for the MiG–15 to spin. Of 32 such

reported incidents (all but one in 1952), 29 of the fighters crashed. Twenty of this number had not even been fired upon. Almost 8 percent of the confirmed kills during the year were attributed to spins unrelated to battle damage. In just two days in late November, three MiGs were seen to spin in and crash. One went into a spin at 38,000 feet after its initial break; a second spun in while attempting evasive maneuvers; a third, not under attack, was seen to suddenly snap-roll while turning. Unable to account for this problem, American technical intelligence officers theorized that the placement of the MiG's horizontal tail coupled with limited elevator control were major contributors to the plane's longitudinal instability.

More instances of MiGs spinning out of control were observed during the first four months of 1953. Some 24 MiGs were seen to enter spins. Half of these were assessed as accidental, and 11 fighters crashed. These losses represented more than 12 percent of the MiGs destroyed in that period. Several examples of the MiG–15's propensity to spin occurred on just one day. During morning and afternoon engagements on May 19, 1953, 41 F–86s met 48 MiGs. In the first encounter, a pair of Sabres (Cobra 3 and 4) were flying at 45,000 feet when four enemy fighters made a run on them. One MiG pulled in too tight on Cobra 3 and began to spin. The pilot ejected at 41,000 feet. Shortly afterward, another MiG overshot Cobra 4 and vanished. Looking over his shoulder for further attackers, Cobra 4 saw another MiG in a spin at 45,000 feet. This plane was followed down to 10,000 feet, but it is unknown if it crashed.

Five minutes later, another pair of Sabres (Python 1 and 2) were jumped by eight MiGs. Python 1 got on the tail of a MiG shooting at his wingman and scored hits on the enemy's left wing and tail section. The MiG began to turn right, then, suddenly, snapped to the left and began to spin from 34,000 feet. Its corkscrew continued all the way to the ground.

The morning action was not over. About 30 minutes after the second event, a quartet of MiGs bounced Boxer flight at 42,000 feet. The MiGs, however, overshot their quarry and quickly became the hunted. Boxer 1 placed several bursts of fire into the left side of the fuselage of one of the MiGs. The fighter began spinning, and its pilot ejected at 35,000 feet.

That afternoon, two MiGs attacked Python 5 and 6 at 43,000 feet. A scissoring duel quickly ensued, and Python 6 scored telling hits. The MiG started burning, then whipped into a tight spin. Its pilot ejected at a very low altitude.

Their training apparently over, the MiG pilots became more aggressive in January 1953. Large training formations were still seen at high altitudes, but many of the enemy pilots that did engage in combat showed excellent skill and pugnaciousness. Nonetheless, the Sabre pilots maintained their superiority over their opponents. During the month, the Sabres downed 37 MiGs and 1 Tu–2 medium bomber which strayed too far into dangerous territory. Only one F–86 was lost in January.

Several accomplishments stand out. Captain Dolphin D. Overton III had previously flown a combat tour in F–84s. Now he was finishing a tour in F–86s with the 16th FIS. On the last missions of his tour and in four consecutive days, January 21–24, Overton shot down five MiGs, setting a record for becoming a jet ace

in the fastest time. It has been claimed by some individuals that Overton shot down two more MiGs on the 23d. Unfortunately, both were north of the Yalu and never credited. Overton's squadron commander, Lt. Col. Edwin L. Heller, was shot down and taken prisoner on the same mission. No rescue attempt was made because Heller was more than 100 miles inside Manchuria. Heller survived terrible torture by the Chinese and was eventually repatriated.

Somehow, Lt. Gen. Glenn O. Barcus, the Fifth Air Force commander, learned of the incident and hit the ceiling. Although his attempt to strip Overton of his ace status was overruled, Barcus soon had the young captain on his way back to the United States. The Fifth Air Force leader also ripped into the 51st FIW's commander, who then sent Barcus's message down the line, making some personnel changes in the process. The Heller incident, and similar ones, also caused the JCS to warn Gen. Mark Clark, head of the United Nations Command, that there must not be any more border violations.

The same day that Overton scored his last victory, January 24, 1st Lt. Harold E. Fischer became an ace with the fifth of his total of ten kills. Then, on January 14, 1st Lt. Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., began his rise to the top of the Korean War scoreboard by downing a MiG–15. McConnell flew combat as a B–24 navigator in World War II, but it was obvious that he was just as proficient with a gunsight as he was with charting courses.

Now a major, James Jabara returned to Korea for a second tour on January 14. It would be several months before he would add to his score. In the meantime, others competing for the title of leading ace were notching their victories. Pete Fernandez became the 26th jet ace of the war when he bagged his fifth and sixth MiGs on February 18. Actually, that placing on the ace list should have gone to Joe McConnell, who had gotten his fifth aircraft two days earlier. A delay in confirming his victory, however, resulted in McConnell being accorded the 27th spot on the ace list.

February saw 26 MiGs fall to the Sabres, which lost just 2 of their own. On the 25th, the 18th FBW began flying counterair missions in addition to its ground attack role. The MiGs again grew more aggressive in March. Several times the enemy jets flew south to just a few miles of the front lines. The enemy pilots also decided to come down from their perches above 40,000 feet to as low as 17,000 feet. At the lower altitudes, though, they proved to be easier prey for the Sabres. Some 34 MiGs were shot down in March, again with the loss of only two F–86s. Among the victors in March were Fernandez, who destroyed two MiGs on the 21st to make him a double ace, and Maj. James P. Hagerstrom, from the 18th FBW. Hagerstrom, who had flown with the 4th FIW, got the fifth of his eventual 8.5 total kills on March 27. With these victories, Hagerstrom became the 18th's only jet ace.

Only 1,616 MiG sorties were sighted by Sabres in April, resulting in just 372 engagements. The sharpshooting F–86 pilots shot down 27 MiGs and lost 4 of their own. One of these losses was the 51st FIW's Harold E. Fischer. When Capt. Fischer was shot down on April 7, he had scored ten MiG victories. Unluckily, he went down well inside Manchuria and was captured by Chinese troops. Fischer



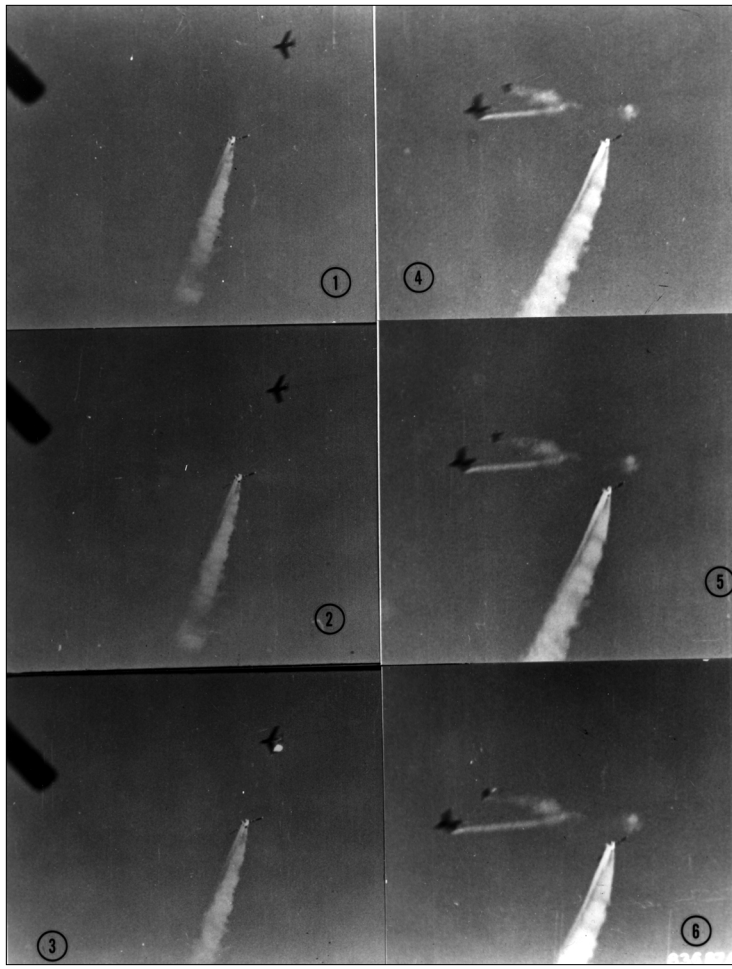
Then 1st Lt. Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., shown after he had downed his first MiG–15 on January 14, 1953.

was not released by his captors until 1955, two years after the end of the war. The month also saw the near loss of Capt. McConnell. Shot down by a MiG on April 12, he was able to nurse his plane back out over the Yellow Sea, where he bailed out. A rescue helicopter plucked him from the cold waters within minutes. Four days later he got his ninth MiG, and on the 24th he became a double ace.

In late April and early May the Soviets began withdrawing their pilots from Manchuria, turning over MiG operations to the Chinese and North Koreans. The Sabre pilots agreed that the quality of the opposition had suffered, and they seized the opportunity to inflict the greatest damage on the Communist airmen. Between May 8 and 31, MiGs were seen 1,507 times and engaged 537 times. The result—no less than 56 enemy fighters destroyed and only one F–86 lost. After observing a number of MiG–15s spinning out of control and their pilots ejecting, "A new, inexpensive, highly efficient 'MiG Killer' technique has been found!" FEAF crowed. "If the MiG pilot sees you, he bails out; if he doesn't see you, you shoot him down. What can be more effective?"

Pete Fernandez kept adding to his scorecard, downing a MiG on May 8, getting another and also sharing credit for one more two days later, and bagging one last enemy fighter on the 16th for his final tally of 14.5 victories. Fernandez's victory count was soon eclipsed by Joe McConnell. In May, McConnell shot down 6 MiGs. Three of his victories fell in one day, May 18. This made him a triple ace and brought his final score to 16. It was later reported that Gen. Barcus, the Fifth Air Force commander, not wishing to see his leading ace shot down, ordered McConnell back to the United States almost as soon as he arrived back at Suwon. McConnell hardly had time to pack his B–4 bag before he was put on a plane out of Korea.

In the meantime, Maj. Jabara was trying to catch McConnell. When he left Korea following his first tour, Jabara had six planes to his credit. He now went on a scoring binge during the waning months of the war. On May 26, he caught two MiGs, forcing one into a spin and shooting down the other. He destroyed two more on June 10, one on the 18th, and another pair on June 30. Jabara finished his second tour with one victory on July 15. Although falling one plane short of Mc-



This remarkable sequence of photos records the deaths of two aircraft. After having damaged a MiG–15, the lead F–86 overshot his target. His wingman's gun camera shows the MiG pilot firing at the Sabre crossing in front of him, causing a midwing explosion (Frame 3). The power of the enemy's 23mm and 37mm guns blows off the Sabre's wing (Frames 4–6), which then crashes. The wingman is also firing while this takes place and finshes off the enemy fighter.

Connell's final tally, he still became the second, and final, triple ace, as well as the number two U.S. ace of the war.

May had been a very good month for the Sabres, but June was spectacular. Perhaps because of the weather, which now forced the enemy airmen to fly lower if they were going to attack the vulnerable fighter-bombers, or perhaps because of the inexperience of the Chinese and North Koreans, who failed to use their aircraft

to best advantage, for most of the month the Sabres held the high ground. In 70 of the 92 encounters with MiGs in June, the Sabres could initiate their attack from higher altitude, and most battles took place below 40,000 feet. This was Sabre territory, and it showed. Of the 1,268 MiG–15 sorties seen, 501 were engaged, 77 destroyed, 11 probably destroyed, and 41 damaged. The greatest slaughter occurred on June 30 when 16 MiGs were shot down. This was the largest number of victories recorded in a single day, exceeding the 13 kills scored on December 13, 1951, and again on July 4 and September 4, 1952.

Bad weather now took over and virtually shut down air operations on both sides for almost two weeks. Although the F–86s were back in the air by July 10, the weather remained marginal. Only 232 MiG sorties were seen in the first half of July; just 84 of those were engaged. The Sabres blasted 12 of the MiGs from the sky. Among them, Maj. John F. Bolt, a Marine Corps exchange pilot flying with the 51st FIW's 39th squadron, knocked down his fifth and sixth MiGs on the 11th. With these kills, he became the 37th ace of the war and the only Marine ace. The day after Bolt's victories, and in somewhat better weather, Sabre pilots bagged six more MiG–15s.

When the weather finally cleared enough to mount more sorties, the Sabres again went north to the Yalu to seek out the enemy. In this they were successful, for in a 7-day period between July 16 and 22 they saw 581 MiG–15 sorties, engaged 118, and destroyed 20. On the 20th, Maj. Stephen L. Bettinger became the 39th, and last, Sabre ace. His victory had to await confirmation for several months, however, because he was shot down himself just minutes later and captured. Though his wingman witnessed the kill, further confirmation was required before it could be officially recorded. Following his release on October 2, 1953, from a prisoner of war camp, Bettinger was finally able to verify his victory.

The last MiG–15 to be shot down in the war fell on July 22. Second Lieutenant Sam P. Young seized his chance when a quartet of MiGs passed below his flight. The final MiG that Young destroyed was also the first he had bagged in 34 combat missions. With this battle, combat between Sabre and MiG ended.

By this time, the armistice talks which had been continuing sporadically since October 1951 had entered their final stage. The two sides finally agreed to a ceasefire, signing the armistice agreement at 1000 hours on July 27. Twelve hours after the signing, at 2201 hours, the armistice would become effective. Wanting to put on a final show of force, but also not wishing to be caught by surprise in case the enemy decided to continue the fight, Gen. Barcus put every available F–86 into the air on the 27th. Only a dozen MiGs were seen during the day, and they quickly scooted back across the Yalu. But one enemy plane was brought down that day. Flying well east of MiG Alley, near Chunggangjin on the Yalu, Capt. Ralph S. Parr, Jr., saw a transport plane flying eastward. Not sure initially what kind of aircraft or what nationality it was, Parr made a couple of passes on it. Noting that it was marked with red stars and identifying it as an Ilyushin Il–12, Parr finally made a gunnery run on the transport. One long burst sent the Il–12 down in flames. Parr's victory made him a double ace. It was also the last kill of the Korean War.



51st FIW Sabres on the prowl over North Korea.

In the early stages of the Korean War, FEAF aircraft virtually destroyed the NKAF, gaining not only air superiority but air supremacy as well. The appearance of the MiG–15 changed the situation considerably. Flown primarily by veteran Soviet pilots, although Chinese and North Korean airmen were involved, the MiG–15 came close to wresting control of the air from the UN forces. Yet it did not succeed.

Despite enormous numerical superiority in fighter aircraft, the Communists were unable to gain air superiority. A number of reasons account for this, among them poor tactics and policies, including the wholesale rotation of units without leaving behind veterans to teach the newcomers; poor flying skills, particularly among the Chinese and North Koreans; and perhaps a fear of widening the war if they became too aggressive in attacking UN forces. Probably the most telling reason for the Communists' inability to win the air war was the accomplishments of the F–86 Sabre and its pilots.

The F–86 and the MiG–15 were very close in performance, though throughout the war the Communist jet had an edge in altitude and armament. The Sabre, however, was a much more agile and faster aircraft. Then too, the Americans used superior tactics with greater flexibility and enjoyed a higher standard of training. This superiority showed in the air battles fought in MiG Alley. Interestingly, the majority of the Sabre aces (68 percent) were over 28 years old, supposedly "old men" for jet fighter combat. Conversely, 67 percent of those fliers who had no kills were less than 25 years old. Nearly 38 percent of the 810 F-86 kills (305.5) were made by the 39 Sabre aces.

These victories were achieved at great effort and at a cost. FEAF lost 1,466 aircraft, including 139 planes in air-to-air combat. Seventy-eight of the latter losses were Sabres. The command also suffered 1,144 dead and 306 wounded officers and airmen during aerial operations. Given that FEAF was never a large organization, it nevertheless accomplished a great deal. Of the 1,040,708 sorties flown by the UN air forces in the war, almost two-thirds (720,980) were flown by FEAF aircraft. Miscellaneous sorties, which included such varied missions as reconnais-



4th FIW Sabres look for MiGs over North Korea.

sance and training, constituted the greatest number of sorties, with 222,078. Interdiction followed with 192,581 sorties, and cargo with 181,659 sorties. Falling well below these numbers were close air support missions, with 57,665 sorties, and counterair/air superiority missions, with 66,997. Thus the air superiority missions constituted only 9 percent of the total FEAF sorties of the war. This small percentage belies the importance of the air superiority mission, for without air superiority, the success of the ground campaign becomes problematic.

For their part, the Chinese acknowledged losing 224 MiG–15s, 3 La–11s, and 4 Tu–2s, but they also claimed to have shot down 211 F–86s, 72 F–84s and F–80s, and 47 other aircraft. In addition, Chinese antiaircraft units claimed 413 enemy planes. The Chinese also professed that they and the Soviets destroyed or damaged an incredible 10,629 UN aircraft during the war. North Korean claims were wildly inaccurate, asserting that they shot down some 5,729 UN aircraft and damaged another 6,484!

The ratio of victories in air-to-air battles has undergone several revisions over the years. After the war, the USAF believed it had inflicted a 14:1 margin over the Communists in the air-to-air battles. This ratio was dropped to 10:1 following further studies of the claims. Later studies suggest that a 7:1 ratio is a truer indication of these battles. Even these lower figures show a significantly better performance against a numerically superior opponent.

The Korean air war was a team effort, men and aircraft from several countries and different services pulling together to fight a common foe. Close air support, interdiction, strategic bombing, and air superiority were parts of the whole of that air war, but without the protection afforded by, primarily, the Sabres, all the work of these various parts would have gone for naught, for then the Communists would have been able to employ their numerical superiority against the UN forces on the ground and in the air. Such a possibility would have changed the outcome of the war dramatically. Thanks to the Sabre and its pilots, the UN ground forces were free to undertake their own combat objectives. That was perhaps the most significant air accomplishment of all.

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Col. Ralph D. Gibson, USAF (Ret), 335 FIS
Col. Bruce H. Hinton, USAF (Ret), 336 FIS

McConnell, Capt. Joseph C., Jr.	39 FIS	16
Jabara, Maj. James	334 FIS	15
Fernandez, Capt. Manuel J., Jr.	334 FIS	14.5
Davis, Maj. George A., Jr.	334 FIS	14
Baker, Col. Royal N.	335/336 FIS	13
Blesse, Maj. Frederick C.	334 FIS	10
Fischer, Capt. Harold E.	39 FIS	10
Johnson, Col. James K.	335 FIS	10
Garrison, Lt. Col. Vermont	335 FIS	10
Moore, Capt. Lonnie R.	335 FIS	10
Parr, Capt. Ralph S., Jr.	335 FIS	10
Low, 1st Lt. James F.	335 FIS	9
Foster, Capt. Cecil G.	16 FIS	9
Hagerstrom, Maj. James P.	334 FIS/67 FBS	8.5
Risner, Maj. Robinson	336 FIS	8
Ruddell, Lt. Col. George I.	39 FIS	8
Jolley, Capt. Clifford D.	335 FIS	7
Lilley, Capt. Leonard W.	334 FIS	7
Buttelmann, 1st Lt. Henry	25 FIS	7
Marshall, Maj. W. W.	335 FIS	6.5
Gabreski, Col. Francis S.	4/51 FIW	6.5
Adams, Maj. Donald E.	16 FIS	6.5
Jones, Lt. Col. George L.	335 FIS/51 FIW	6.5
Love, Capt. Robert J.	335 FIS	6
Bolt, Lt. Col. John F. (USMC)	39 FIS (attached)	6
Kasler, 1st Lt. James H.	335 FIS	6
Whisner, Maj. William T., Jr.	334/25 FIS	5.5
Becker, Capt. Richard S.	334 FIS	5
Gibson, Capt. Ralph D.	335 FIS	5
Creighton, Maj. Richard D.	336 FIS	5
Moore, Capt. Robert H.	336/16 FIS	5
Kincheloe, Capt. Iven C., Jr.	25 FIS	5
Westcott, Maj. William H.	25 FIS/51 FIW	5
Latshaw, Capt. Robert T., Jr.	335 FIS	5
Thyng, Col. Harrison R.	335 FIS/4 FIW	5
Overton, Capt. Dolphin D.	16 FIS	5
Baldwin, Col. Robert P.	16/25/39 FIS	5
Curtin, Capt. Clyde A.	335 FIS	5
Bettinger, Maj. Stephen L.	336 FIS	5
Bordelon, Lt. Guy (USN)	VC–3	5

Note: All of these men who shot down at least five enemy planes to attain ace status flew F–86 Sabres, with the exception of Lt. Guy Bordelon who flew a Navy F4U–5NL Corsair night fighter.

Airmen other than USAF pilots also flew the Sabre with the 4th and 51st wings. Several of these exchange pilots scored victories over the MiGs. United

States Marine Corps pilots destroyed 19.5 aircraft. One of these pilots was future astronaut Maj. John Glenn, who shot down three MiGs. Another future astronaut, Navy Lt. Walter M. Schirra, got a MiG while flying F–84s. Four Royal Canadian Air Force pilots were credited with eight MiGs, and five Royal Air Force fliers destroyed another eight MiGs. Royal Australian Air Force fliers were also credited with four MiG–15s while flying Meteors.

On the opposite side, Col. Yevgeni Pepelyayev received credit for 23 victories and Capt. Nikolai Sutyagin for 21 kills. Who the highest scoring Chinese and North Korean fliers were has not yet been revealed.

Source: Dr. Daniel L. Haulman and Col. William C. Stancik, USAFR. *Air Force Aerial Victory Credits: World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam*. Montgomery, Alabama: USAF Historical Research Center, 1988.

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