

**The Korean War, which saw the full emergence of jet aircraft in combat, began forty years ago this month.**

# ***JET WAR***

**By Phillip Farris**

**I**N the peaceful years just after World War II, while the United States was deactivating combat units, releasing servicemen and servicewomen from duty, and dismantling arsenals, Air Force leaders were developing aircraft for an air war yet to come—the jet war. The Air Force, under Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, was building a solid nucleus of modern aircraft, even as it shrank in size.

The events of June 25, 1950—forty years ago this month—shattered the brief postwar peace and sparked the militarization of the cold war. Communist North Korean troops stormed across the 38th parallel. Attacking at dawn, the North's spearhead of Soviet-built T-34 tanks and following infantry swept aside the first defenses and flooded south into the Republic of Korea. South Korean forces, taken by surprise, wavered and broke. Communist infantry and marines poured ashore on South Korea's east coast near Kangnung. Kaesong fell at 9:00 a.m., and the seaborne Communist columns pushed their way inland.

The attack set off immediate alarms far south and east of the Ko-

rean battlegrounds, in Japan. There, the bases of the US Fifth Air Force were spread out in a defensive arc from Kyushu in the south to Honshu in the north. Fifth Air Force combat squadrons formed the backbone of US air defenses in the Far East.

The Fifth was largest of the Far East Air Forces (FEAF), recognized as the major air element of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area Theater. FEAF's primary mission was to maintain active air defense of the Far East Command and theater of operations. Fifth Air Force provided the "appropriate mobile air striking force" prescribed in FEAF's mission statement.

The mainstay of the Fifth's defensive capability was the first jet fighter that the United States ever produced in quantity: the Lockheed F-80C Shooting Star. This new aircraft was deployed with the 35th Fighter-Interceptor Wing at Yokota, near Tokyo; with the 68th Fighter-Bomber Wing at Itazuke Air Base on Kyushu; and with the 49th Fighter-Bomber Wing at Misawa on northern Honshu.

*Fighter pilots on both sides of the Korean War found that the principles of a maneuvering dog-fight applied to the higher speeds of jets. 1st Lt. Russell J. Brown downed a MiG-15 with his F-80C (right) over Sinuiju, Korea, in the first jet-vs.-jet combat in history.*



The United States knew it required more than the F-80 jet fighter for the war effort. The F-80 squadrons were backed by two all-weather fighter units operating prop-driven North American F-82 Twin Mustangs. In fact, FEAF's planners also saw a need for Fifth Air Force to use every prop-driven F-51 North American Mustang that could be found. They understood and valued the F-51's longer range and ability to operate from short, rough airfields.

Also deployed at Yokota were RF-80A reconnaissance planes of the 8th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron. Two light tactical bomber squadrons of the 3d Bombardment Wing, equipped with Douglas B-26 Invaders, were deployed at Johnson AB, north of Tokyo. Rounding out Fifth Air Force's lineup of units was the 374th Troop Carrier Wing, which operated out of Tachikawa AB with two squadrons of Douglas C-54 transport aircraft.

and provide a ten percent reserve for combat attrition. Unfortunately, the Air Force in 1950 was what General Vandenberg would later describe as "a shoestring Air Force." Deep reductions in personnel in 1949 and early 1950 brought its strength down to 411,277—less than one fifth the size of the 2,000,000-strong World War II flying force. USAF had to support the first year of operations with World War II equipment stocks.

Even so, there was no shortage of USAF action. By June 26, only hours after the North Korean invasion began, airmen from the Fifth Air Force were flying over the peninsula in every available plane, evacuating Americans via Seoul's Kimpo Airfield and carrying other noncombatants out of the beleaguered country.

The enemy, however, continued to press hard and fast as the droning USAF transports—C-54s, C-47s, and Curtiss C-46s—undertook their

### The First Jet Victories

On the same day, Air Force 1st Lt. Robert H. Dewald, flying an F-80 jet, downed a Soviet-made Ilyushin Il-1 attack plane. Lieutenant Dewald's achievement is recorded as the first-ever American aerial victory attributed to a pilot flying a jet aircraft. Flying a cover mission earlier that day, 1st Lt. William G. Hudson and Maj. James W. Little, both flying in prop-driven F-82 fighters, were attacked by two North Korean fighters, and the US pilots fought back. With guns blazing, they flamed two enemy planes. Lieutenant Hudson is credited with downing a Yak-11 fighter. Major Little is credited with destroying an La-7. The Air Force scored three other aerial victories on its first complete day of offensive fighter operations. Lt. Charles Moran, Capt. Raymond Schillereff, and Lt. Robert E. Wayne, flying in an F-82 and F-80s, respectively, brought down a Soviet-made La-7 and two Soviet-made Il-1s.

The following day, June 28, saw another Air Force "first." On the morning of that day, the southward-drifting polar front stood over the airfields on Kyushu, but the Fifth Air Force had to fly. Lt. Bryce Poe II took off alone into the murky overcast from Itazuke in his RF-80A. His task was to reconnoiter and photograph the vanguard of the North Korean force. Weather at Itazuke was foul, but Lieutenant Poe found clear weather in Korea, and he successfully carried out his mission. Lieutenant Poe's flight marked the first reconnaissance sortie of the Korean War and, of greater historical significance, the Air Force's first combat jet reconnaissance sortie.

While the ground war raged up and down the Korean peninsula, FEAF pilots waged unceasing air war against the North Korean enemy—destroying aircraft; attacking supply and troop depots; shattering critical transportation facilities and routes; burning vehicles, locomotives, and railcars; and relentlessly pounding front-line, dug-in positions. American pilots went into this fresh combat bolstered by their battle-tested experience of World War II. For the most part, the Americans who carried the brunt of early fighting were veteran aviators.



By September 1952, three jet aces in Korea, members of the 4th FIW, could claim seventeen victories among them. Col. Harrison R. Thyng (left) had shot down five Communist aircraft, Maj. Fred "Boots" Blesse (center) seven, and Capt. Clifford Jolley (right) five. The three would eventually account for twenty-two MiGs.

### "A Shoestring Air Force"

In the first days of the war, Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer, FEAF Commander, sent a message to USAF Headquarters asking for personnel to bring all units up to war strength. He also requested 164 F-80s, twenty-one F-82s, sixty-four F-51s, twenty-two B-26s, twenty-three Boeing B-29s, twenty-one C-54s, and fifteen Douglas C-47s. Most of these planes were needed to round out squadrons to war strength

life-saving sorties under protective cover of F-80 jets, prop-driven F-51 Mustangs, and F-82 Twin Mustang night fighters.

On June 27, under orders from Washington, Fifth Air Force fighters went to war in earnest, aided by carrier-based Navy and Marine fighter and attack planes, Royal Australian Air Force Meteor jets, South Korean and South African fighter-bombers, and Greek and Thai transport units.



A Communist MiG-15 pilot abandons his aircraft after it is hit by gunfire from an F-86 Sabre. The Sabre's gun camera recorded the MiG pilot's ejection. The USAF pilot in this May 1953 dogfight was 2d Lt. Edwin E. "Buzz" Aldrin, Jr., who achieved fame sixteen years later as the second man to walk on the moon.

Early in the war, it was North Korea's Yakovlev fighters that tangled most frequently with the American Mustangs and Shooting Stars. However, as the Chinese Communists moved into the battle along the Yalu River in the war's first winter, the sweptwing, Soviet-made MiG-15 fighter entered the Korean air war. So, too, did an American aircraft that soon would become known as the "MiG Killer": the North American F-86 Sabre.

To be sure, the Air Force's slower F-80 jets already had gone up against the MiGs before the F-86 appeared on the scene in Korea. The first "jet-to-jet" victory in military history, in fact, saw a Soviet-made MiG-15 going down in flames at the hands of an American F-80 pilot. Lt. Russell J. Brown of FEAF's 16th Fighter Squadron sparred with and then brought down the Soviet jet on November 8, 1950.

It was in encounters with the F-86, however, that the Soviet-made MiGs met their true nemesis.

The critical role of the F-86 is made plain in the final tally of Korean War victories. The Air Force's official victory publication lists page after page of Sabre pilot victories over the MiG-15. Of 839 MiG-15s shot down in air-to-air combat during the Korean War, fully 800 were brought down by Sabre pilots. The enemy managed to drop only fifty-eight of the F-86s.

Ace is a title of honor given to an airman officially credited with downing five or more enemy air-

craft. Of the forty Americans of all services who became aces in the Korean War, thirty-nine made their mark in F-86s. (The only non-Sabre ace, Navy Lt. Guy P. Bordelon, had five night kills in his F4U-5N.) Though they didn't become aces, many other American pilots scored victories. These individuals are credited with a total of 114 air-to-air victories in Korea. Of these, nearly two-thirds—seventy-two—were racked up by pilots flying the F-86.

#### A New Type of Air Combat

Jet aces of the Korean conflict were experienced hands, pilots who were able to put the sleek, swept-

wing F-86 machine through its paces to give the Americans air superiority and a lopsided kill advantage against the fast and well-built MiG. It was a new type of air combat, never attempted before. The unique problems and features of jet war were dramatized in a personal account of a typical engagement by Col. Harrison R. Thyng, who became one of the Korean War's jet aces [see "Valor," p. 111, January 1989 issue].

In the 1958 book *Five Down and Glory*, Thyng recalled: "The F-86 pilots ride over North Korea to the Yalu River, the sun glinting off silver aircraft, contrails streaming behind, as they challenge the numerically superior enemy to come on up and fight. . . .

"Breaking up into small flights, we stagger our altitude. We have checked our guns and sights by firing a few warm-up rounds as we crossed the bomb line. Oxygen masks are checked and pulled as tight as possible over our faces. We know we may exceed eight Gs in the coming fight, and that is painful with a loose mask.

"We are cruising at a very high Mach. Every eye is strained to catch the first movement of an enemy attempt to cross the Yalu from the Manchurian sanctuary into the graveyard of several hundred MiGs known as MiG Alley.

"Now we see flashes in the distance as the sun reflects off the



The North American F-86 Sabre, the nemesis of Soviet-built MiGs during the Korean War, was known as the "MiG Killer." Of 839 MiG-15s destroyed in air-to-air combat, 800 were F-86 victories. Only fifty-eight Sabres were shot down.



**Maj. James W. Jabara, an F-86 pilot, became USAF's second triple jet ace on July 15, 1953, when he shot down his fifteenth MiG. In May 1951, he destroyed two MiGs in a battle that pitted thirty-six Sabres against some fifty MiGs.**

beautiful MiG aircraft. The radio crackles: 'Many, many coming across at Suiho above 45,000 feet.'

"We know the enemy sections are now being vectored and the advantage is theirs. Traveling at terrifically high speed and altitude, attackers can readily achieve surprise. The area bound by the horizon at this altitude is so vast that it is practically impossible to keep it fully covered with the human eye.

"Our flights are well spread out, ships line abreast, and each pilot keeps his head swiveling 360 degrees. Suddenly, MiGs appear directly in front of us at our level. At rates of closure of possibly 1,200 miles an hour, we pass through each other's formations.

"Unless the MiG wants to fight, and also turned as he climbed, he will be lost from sight in the distance before the turn is completed. But if he shows an inclination to scrap, you immediately trade head-on passes again. You sucker the MiG into position where the outstanding advantage of your aircraft will give you the chance to outmaneuver him.

"For you, combat has become an individual dogfight. Flight integrity has been lost, but your wingman is still with you, widely separated but close enough for you to know you are covered.

"Suddenly, you go into a steep turn. Your Mach drops off. The MiG turns with you and you let him grad-

ually creep up and outturn you. At the critical moment, you reverse your turn. The hydraulic controls work beautifully. The MiG cannot turn as readily as you and is slung out to the side. When you pop your speed brakes, the MiG flashes by you. Quickly closing the brakes, you slide onto his tail and hammer him with your fifties. Pieces fly off the MiG, but he won't burn or explode at that high altitude. He twists and turns and attempts to dive away, but you will not be denied. Your fifties have hit him in the engine and slowed him up enough so that he cannot get away from you. His canopy suddenly blows and the pilot catapults out, barely missing your airplane. Now your wingman is whooping it up over the radio, and you flash for home very low on fuel."

### **Making Aviation History**

By May 20, 1951, Capt. James Jabara, an F-86 pilot, had destroyed four enemy MiGs and needed but one more to become the first "jet-to-jet ace" in history. Late that afternoon, two Sabre flights closed into "MiG Alley" and found that the adversary was willing to come up and fight. Hearing the news by radio, two other Sabre flights, one of

which included Captain Jabara, sped to the area, arrived in fifteen minutes, and took part in the combat. In the battle, thirty-six USAF Sabre pilots battled some fifty MiGs. Jabara plunged into the fight and downed not one but two MiGs, establishing his place in aviation history.

In the pages of this magazine's June 1951 issue, Captain Jabara described the mission: "I tacked on to three MiGs at 35,000 feet, picked out the last one, and bored straight in. My first two bursts ripped up his fuselage and left wing. At about 10,000 feet, the pilot bailed out. It was a good thing he did, because the MiG disintegrated. Then I climbed back to 20,000 feet to get back into the battle. I bounced six more MiGs. I closed in and got off two bursts into one of them, scoring heavily both times. He began to smoke. Then, when my second burst caught him square in the middle, he burst into flames and fell into an uncontrollable spin. All I could see was a whirl of fire. I had to break off then because there was another MiG on my tail."

At war's end, Captain Jabara could claim fifteen MiG kills.

In terms of Korean War victories, Captain Jabara was surpassed only by Capt. Joseph H. McConnell, Jr. In the first five months of 1953, the F-86 pilot from 39th Fighter Squadron bagged sixteen MiG-15s. On one particularly auspicious day—May 18—Captain McConnell dropped three MiGs, thus becoming the first "triple jet ace" in USAF history.

The Korean War was a watershed in military aviation. As the pilots knew only too well, times were changing. The machines were unlike any ever seen, and the era of free-lance air warriors was rapidly passing. Captain McConnell, discussing his status as an ace, made a portentous statement: "It's the teamwork out here that counts. The lone wolf stuff is out. Your life always depends on your wingman and his life on you. I may get credit for a MiG, but it's the team that does it, not myself alone." ■

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