

Fifty years ago in Korea, the shooting war stopped but the Cold War had been fundamentally changed.

# The Remembered

By Peter Grier

**S**HORTLY after noon on July 27, 1953, Capt. Ralph S. Parr Jr. spotted an unfamiliar aircraft. The Air Force pilot was flying an escort mission near Chunggang-jin, on the Yalu River, only hours before the newly signed armistice was to bring an end to the Korean War.



# War

*F-86 Sabres, such as these A models, had a dramatic impact on the course of the Korean War. Still, most sorties were devoted to attacks on ground forces, airlift, and the like.*

However, 5th Air Force instructed airmen to keep up the pressure until the appointed time, so Parr turned his F-86 Sabre and made several passes by the stranger. Parr identified it as a North Korean Ilyushin Il-12. With one long burst of gunfire, he sent it spiraling earthward in flames.

That was the war's last air-to-air encounter. Fifty years ago this month, at precisely 10:01 p.m. on July 27, the fighting between US-led United Nations forces and North Korean Communist aggressors came to an end.

When it did, the Korean peninsula was divided in two nations, with



heavily armed forces facing each other across the 38th parallel. So the situation has remained, to this day.

Korea may have been America's "forgotten war," overshadowed by World War II, but in retrospect it was clearly a pivotal event for the US military in general and US Air Force in particular.

At the war's beginning in June 1950, the United States was woefully unprepared to counter North Korea's armed aggression. Force size and the military budget had shrunk to a tiny fraction of their World War II levels. Yet, by the end of the fighting 37 months later, the United States had laid the foundation for the large standing force throughout the Cold War.

### The Jet Age

The Air Force expanded. When it began fighting in Korea, USAF was still heavily dependent on propeller-driven fighters and bombers. By the time of the armistice, it boasted an almost all-jet combat force. New aircraft, such as the supersonic F-100 fighter and B-57 tactical bomber, were on the verge of entering the inventory in quantity.

The Air Force's combat experience in Korea was marked by improvisation—at one point, for example, C-47s seeded the roads of Pyongyang with roofing nails in an effort to halt North Korean trucks. However, Air Force operators also learned lessons about close air support, interdiction,

and airlift, lessons that proved to be of great value in years to come.

In the words of the Air Force's official history of the Korean conflict: "The fledgling United States Air Force emerged as a power better able to maintain peace through preparedness."

The Korean War began on June 25, 1950, when North Korean forces stormed southward across the 38th parallel in a carefully planned attack. In the south, Republic of Korea defenders were rocked back on their heels and then routed. President Syngman Rhee fled south with his

government, and President Harry S. Truman ordered the evacuation of US nationals, under protective cover from US airpower.

Fifth Air Force—largest of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's Far East Air Forces (FEAF)—rose to the task. F-82 Twin Mustangs flew overhead while evacuees were loaded onto ships at the port of Inchon during the first hours of fighting. By the night of June 26, the situation had become so dire that embassy officials asked for an airlift to take remaining dependents out. A flight of F-82 fighters, ordered to defend Seoul's Kimpo



Photo via Robert F. Dorr

*Pilots flying F-82 Twin Mustangs, such as this one, scored aerial victories in the war's early days. When Soviet-built MiGs entered the conflict, though, the F-82s were overmatched.*



*Capt. Ralph Parr describes the last shootdown of the war to Col. Thomas DeJarnette, a 4th Wing group commander. Parr's achievement was the last air-to-air victory of the conflict.*

Airfield during this operation, scored the first air-to-air kills of the war.

The big Twin Mustangs were orbiting the field when five North Korean fighters, either Yaks or Lavochkins, swung by. First Lt. William G. Hudson, in pursuit, blew off chunks of one and set its wing afire. He saw its pilot climb out and say something to his observer, who did not respond. Then the pilot pulled his ripcord and parachuted free, while the aircraft rolled over and crashed, the observer still inside.

At least one additional North Korean airplane—possibly three—was shot down in this encounter, but it is Hudson's victory that the Air Force today officially lists as its first of the Korean War.

The airlift of civilians concluded without further interference, but back

in Washington, and at the United Nations in New York, officials and diplomats were viewing the situation with growing alarm. With the Soviet delegate absent in protest against the UN's refusal to admit the People's Republic of China, the UN Security Council passed a resolution calling on UN members to resist North Korea's invasion.

On June 27, President Truman—without consulting Congress—ordered US forces to support the UN in its “police action.” In Tokyo, MacArthur, commander of US Far East Command, began plotting strategy. One of his first moves was to order FEAF to strike at North Korean ground troops with all aircraft at its disposal.

### A Cut Too Deep

Unfortunately, not many aircraft were available to the commander of FEAF, Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer. His squadrons were short of everything from F-80 fighters to C-47 transports. In the aftermath of World War II, US flying forces had shrunk by four-fifths, to about 411,277 personnel. Not all of USAF's 48 groups were at full strength or combat ready. In 1948, such downsizing had seemed prudent economy. In the face of North Korea's strike, the cuts appeared to have gone too far, too fast.

Still, FEAF struck back hard with what it had. The US deployed some 921 combat aircraft in the theater by July, flying from bases in Korea and



Photo by Charles Willis via Warren Thompson

**Early jets, such as this pair of F-84s, were straight-wing aircraft. The F-84s and F-80s went from a fighter role to that of close air support. By war's end, most USAF aircraft were jet-powered.**

Japan. More than half were F-80 fighters, the service's first widely deployed jet fighter. The inventory also included 190 F-51 Mustangs of World War II vintage, valued for their long range and ability to operate from rough strips. Thirty-seven F-82s were available for night and all-weather duty. All of the Air Force bombers were prop-driven models—79 B-26s and 87 B-29s.

Job one was to gain air superiority. USAF achieved this fairly easily; the Soviet-supplied aircraft of North Korean units were old and inferior and North Korean pilots were

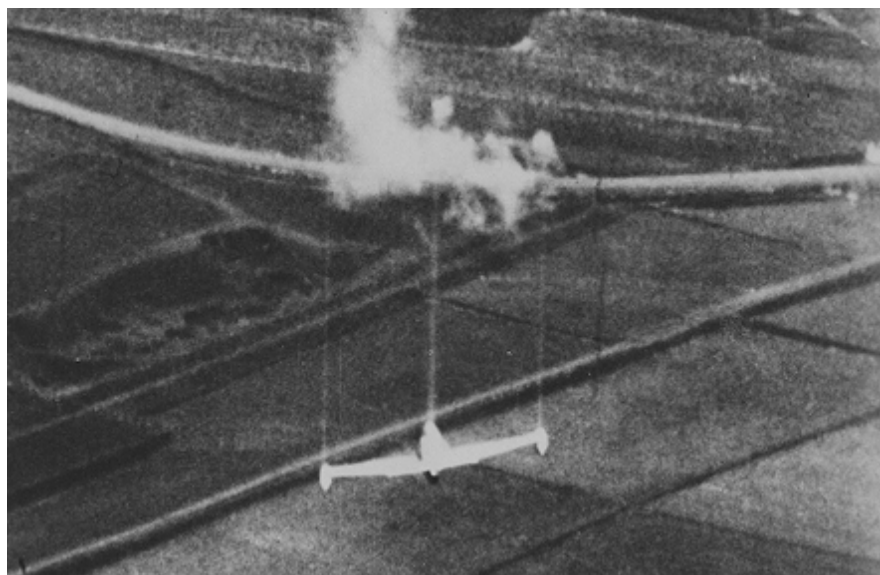
poorly trained. The US estimated that, by August, North Korea still had only a handful of its original 110 combat airplanes.

Job two, attacking North Korean ground troops, was far tougher. North Korea's armies outnumbered US and UN forces, and, aided by the shock effect of their sudden invasion, they made rapid advances to the south. In late summer, UN forces had been driven into a small area covering the approaches to Pusan in the far southeast of the peninsula. In the critical days of July and August, virtually all UN ground forces were dug in on front lines, with only a handful in reserve. It seemed possible South Korea could be lost.

However, the Communists' southward thrust had used up tremendous amounts of North Korean resources, material and human, and Pyongyang was running out of gas. Around the Pusan perimeter, North Koreans proved vulnerable to an extensive close air support campaign. More than 60 percent of Air Force sorties were devoted to attack of forces on the battlefield. In August, FEAF airmen were flying an average of 239 air support sorties per day.

Thus, while the North Koreans mustered some 150,000 troops near Pusan, their armor had been pounded to a shambles. Moreover, airpower kept enemy forces pinned down, so much so that they tended to move and fight mostly at night.

In one memorable mission, Aug.



**An Air Force F-80 strafes North Korean vehicles along a road north of the 38th parallel. Allied airpower accounted for 75 percent of kills of North Korean tanks.**



**World War II-era B-29s were a mainstay of the interdiction effort on the peninsula. The coming of the MiG-15s, however, posed a lethal threat, and USAF soon retired the Superfortress. Here, a B-29 gets an engine change.**

16, a total of 98 Air Force B-29 bombers blasted a seven-mile-long strip along the Naktong River, delivering bombs whose blast effect was equivalent to that of 30,000 rounds of standard artillery. After the strike, the bombing commander, Maj. Gen. Emmett O'Donnell Jr., spent more than two hours personally examining the area. He reported that nothing—soldier, truck, or tank—was moving.

### Human Waves

On Aug. 31, the North Koreans unleashed a last-ditch offensive. They were cut off from their supply lines and were now desperate for replacement weapons. By early September, Communist generals were sending great human attack waves forward without rifles, instructed to pick up what they could from dead and wounded on the battlefield. On Sept. 15, MacArthur's daring amphibious landing at Inchon took the North Korean units from the rear and effectively ended the first phase of the war. The ROK government returned to Seoul on Sept. 29 even as the North Koreans surrendered or fled en masse.

By fall, UN forces were rolling up the Korean peninsula toward the Yalu, the mighty river that constituted the border between North Korea and China. Though China had indirectly warned Washington that it might intervene if UN forces came too close to its territory, MacArthur

was confident Beijing was bluffing.

"They have no air force," he told Truman. "Now that we have bases for our Air Force in Korea, if the Chinese tried to get down to Pyongyang there would be the greatest slaughter."

Even so, at 1:45 p.m. on Nov. 1, six swept-wing aircraft painted a burned green-silver raced across the Yalu and jumped a USAF T-6 Mosquito forward air controller and a flight of Mustangs. The US aircraft managed to escape, and, back at base, the Mosquito pilot reported the star-

ling news: He believed they had been attacked by Soviet-built MiG-15 fighters.

China thus had served notice of its intentions. On Nov. 25, 180,000 Chinese "volunteer" ground troops entered the war, and the second phase of the conflict began.

In initial wrangles in the area of Korea that would later become famous as "MiG Alley," American pilots in fact weren't facing Chinese. It was only much later that US intelligence determined it was Soviets themselves who were flying the first MiG sorties. Chinese were not allowed to handle the jets in combat operations until some time later.

The Soviets wore North Korean uniforms and attempted to speak Korean while airborne, reading phrases off tablets carried in the cockpit. Snatches of Russian heard on the radio and the sight of "Chinese" with Caucasian features soon raised American suspicion. It was not until the USSR's 1991 collapse and the opening of its archives that such suspicions were confirmed.

The entry of MiG-15s into Korean combat changed the air war. While the hardy F-51s could turn with the jets, particularly at lower altitudes, US F-80 Shooting Stars were slower than the MiGs and generally outclassed. Even more vulnerable were the lumbering B-29s, old now and reclassified as medium bombers but a mainstay of the interdiction effort against transport lines



**Taechon Air Field was devastated by a ferocious bombing campaign. In the course of the war, the Air Force flew 720,980 sorties, dropped 476,000 tons of ordnance, and destroyed or damaged 2,100 enemy aircraft.**

and depots. Eventually FEAF was forced to end most daylight B-29 operations and use the Superforts primarily at night.

### Enter the Sabres

The US would have to fight to regain air superiority, and, with the arrival of large numbers of F-86 Sabres, they did just that.

The first Sabre unit to move to the theater was the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing, headquartered at Langley AFB, Va. It got there in record time, though inadequate waterproofing caused most aircraft to suffer from salt spray corrosion during the sea journey from California to Japan. On Dec. 17, 1950, 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing pilots made their first patrol into MiG Alley. Four enemy aircraft rose to greet



*In December 1950, F-86s began arriving in large numbers. The rugged, swept-wing aircraft proved more than a match for the MiGs. Superior flight controls and pilot skill restored US air superiority over the peninsula.*



*Thirty-eight USAF pilots became aces during the Korean War. Here, Col. Harrison Thyng, Maj. Frederick Blesse, and Capt. Clifford Jolley count off their current victory credits after Blesse's return from a mission.*

them, probably believing they were slow F-80s. By the time the confused enemy saw their mistake it was too late.

Lt. Col. Bruce H. Hinton broke downward at more than Mach .95, turned inside one MiG, and gave it a short burst that caused it to begin trailing fuel. When another came into his sights, he fired at a range of about 800 feet, and it rolled and burst into flames. It was the first of what would be 792 F-86 victories over MiG-15s, at a return cost of 76 Sabres.

The F-86 had begun life as a

straight-wing fighter, but experimental versions weren't as fast as the Air Force wanted. At Air Force request, builder North American Aviation studied a captured Messerschmitt Me-262 swept-wing assembly and eventually incorporated the German jet's unique leading-edge slat design into F-86 production models.

The Sabres were far from perfect. They were not supersonic, and their .50-caliber armament did not pack the punch of the MiG's 23 mm and 37 mm cannons. The lighter MiGs could climb and accelerate faster

and reach higher altitudes. They turned tighter in some situations, as well. But MiGs were prone to slip into uncontrolled spins; FEAF estimated that North Korea lost about 35 in this way. Sabres were able to dive faster and were more stable in high-speed turns. F-86 flight controls were superior and its airframe more rugged.

All USAF aces of the Korean War flew Sabres. By war's end, 439 F-86s were on hand in the Korean theater, out of a total combat aircraft strength of 1,459.

China's entry into the war made it clear that any United States attempt to forcibly unify the Korean peninsula risked the detonation of worldwide war. As UN ground forces reeled backward from Chinese attacks in that bleak winter of 1950-51, the US goal changed from military victory to political cease-fire.

This phase of the fighting was a desperate struggle. At no point was US airpower more important to the survival of American troops. To the west, Eighth Army had disengaged from the enemy and begun retreating toward South Korea. To the east, X Corps did the same thing. Behind them, Air Force B-29s, B-26s, and fighter-attack squadrons pounded the enemy's bridges, supply dumps, and forces.

In December, FEAF aircraft flew 7,654 armed reconnaissance and interdiction sorties, killing some 6,700 Communist soldiers. In the first quar-



**The prop-driven B-26 pounded the enemy's bridges, supply dumps, and fielded forces. An Invader from the 3rd Bombardment Wing dropped the last bombs of the war, just 24 minutes before hostilities officially ceased.**

ter of 1951, USAF aircraft destroyed more than 4,200 vehicles, according to a 5th Air Force estimate.

### Backhanded Compliment

The effectiveness of the interdiction campaign can be deduced from the fact that all major Chinese offensives in the first half of 1951 were timed for periods of bad weather, when airpower would be somewhat constrained. In July 1951, as cease-fire discussions got under way, North Korean chief delegate Lt. Gen. Nam Il said it was airpower that had prevented defeat for the UN side. "Without the support of the indiscriminate bombing and bombardment of your air and naval forces, your ground forces would have long ago been driven out of the Korean peninsula by our powerful and battle-skilled ground forces," he said.

Negotiations dragged on for months. Fearful that China was using the lull to replenish front-line forces, FEAF bombers launched an intensive railway interdiction effort—Operation Strangle—that for a time limited the enemy to night truck convoys.

By 1952, this campaign was producing diminishing results, but USAF had turned back a concerted Chinese effort to establish air superiority in the northwest of the country. Through the remaining months of the war, US aircraft applied pressure everywhere north of the 38th parallel.

In a final jab to speed truce negotiations, US commanders authorized attacks against North Korea's irrigation dams. On May 13, 1953, four waves of 59 F-84 Thunderjets attacked the Toksan Dam, about 20 miles north of Pyongyang. At dusk the 2,400-foot-wide earth-and-stone structure was still standing, but it broke in the night, releasing a swirling flood that washed out five bridges on an important rail line, destroyed two miles of the country's main north-south highway, inundated Sunan Airfield, and ripped up five square miles of rice paddies.

Later, Gen. Otto P. Weyland, FEAF commander, would rate the Toksan raid, along with a similar one against the Chasan Dam, as one of the two most spectacular fighter-bomber strikes of the war.

As the armistice point neared, Air Force aircraft continued to carry out operations—almost until the last possible moment. A B-26 from the 3rd Bombardment Wing dropped the final bombs of the war a scant 24 minutes before hostilities officially ceased.

The record shows that, in three years of war, the new Air Force produced a mammoth effort. Of more than one million total sorties by UN

aircraft, 720,980 were flown by USAF crews. The Air Force dropped 476,000 tons of ordnance and destroyed or damaged more than 2,100 enemy aircraft. Its interdiction efforts were a major part of the UN coalition's offensive power. Air forces accounted for 72 percent of all adversary artillery destroyed, as well as 75 percent of all tanks and 47 percent of all troops, according to USAF statistics.

### Great Cost

These results came at great cost. USAF suffered 1,841 battle casualties, of which 1,180 were killed in action. It lost 1,466 aircraft to hostile action or other causes.

For the Air Force, the Korean conflict was also the hinge of the jet age. All F-82 Twin Mustangs had been removed from the theater by war's end. F-51 strength had been cut from 190 to 65. Meanwhile, the number of modern F-86 Sabres in the Far East had gone from zero to 184.

As the fighter force turned over, so did the bombers. The Air Force had retired nearly all of its B-29s by the end of 1954, and they were replaced by new B-47 Stratojet aircraft. By 1955 the B-52 Stratofortress would be entering the inventory in substantial numbers, as prop B-36s were phased out of heavy bombardment units.

The war left USAF with a profound appreciation for combat readiness. Washington in general saw what had happened when US military cutbacks tempted Communist aggression, and it was disinclined to let such a thing happen again. At the time, Korea seemed proof positive that the Soviet Union and its satellites were intent on global expansion. Where might they strike next?

The Air Force had 48 active wings when the Korean War began, but shortly thereafter the Pentagon authorized USAF to expand to 143 wings. After the war, President Eisenhower reduced that number only slightly—the new goal was 137 wings. The Cold War was on and in earnest. ■

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