



MIG ALLEY 200 MILES

The American F-86 Sabres stopped the MiG-15s—and their Russian pilots—at the Yalu.

MIG ALLEY

By John T. Correll

USAF photo

In August 1950, a Soviet air division with 122 MiG-15 jet fighters arrived in northeastern China and set up headquarters at Antung on the Yalu River, the dividing line between Chinese Manchuria and North Korea. On Oct. 18, an American RB-29 reconnaissance aircraft spotted 75 fighters on the ramp at Antung, but that did not raise much alarm for Gen. Douglas

MacArthur's United Nations Command or the US Far East Air Forces.

Nor was there any great concern on Nov. 1 when a flight of F-51 Mustangs was intercepted by six MiGs in Chinese markings on the Korean side of the Yalu. The Mustangs escaped without harm. US intelligence thought there were only a few of the MiG-15s, and that they were flown by Chinese and North Korean

pilots. Intelligence was wrong in both assumptions.

MacArthur and his advisors believed that the Korean War was almost over and that they had won. In the brief time since North Korea invaded South Korea on June 25, the battle lines had swung back and forth for the entire length of the peninsula. UN forces, mainly from the United States, had come to the aid of South Korea, but

the first round went to the invaders. By Aug. 5, they had overrun nearly all of Korea. The UN forces, their backs to the sea, held only a small enclave in the southeastern corner, behind a defensive line called the “Pusan Perimeter.”

MacArthur counterattacked with an amphibious landing at Inchon, hundreds of miles behind enemy lines. UN forces broke out of the Pusan Perimeter, recaptured South Korea, and advanced relentlessly into the North.

By late October, they had driven the North Korean army almost to the Chinese border. The North Korean Air Force, a motley collection of obsolete Russian airplanes, was wiped out of existence in the first few weeks by Fifth Air Force, the principal component of FEAF.

FEAF had about 400 combat aircraft at bases in Japan, Okinawa, Guam, and the Philippines. Its best fighter was the F-80 Shooting Star, the oldest jet aircraft in the Air Force, but plenty good when the opposition was cast-off Yak-7s and Yak-11s. In addition, there were propeller-driven F-51s, pulled out of storage and sent to Korea where they could fly from short, unpaved runways.

MacArthur met with President Truman on Wake Island on Oct. 15. He told Truman that North Korean resistance would end by Thanksgiving and that the US Third Infantry Division would be “back in Ft. Benning for Christmas dinner.” He said there was little or no chance of Chinese intervention. Two of the five B-29 bomb groups operating in Korea were sent back home.

MacArthur’s assurances fell apart in late November when a communist Chinese ground force of 300,000 crossed the border to join the North Koreans. Together, the two communist armies had

almost twice as many troops as MacArthur’s UN force of 200,000, half of them South Korean. In effect, the Chinese had taken over the war and they soon stopped the UN offensive cold. MacArthur’s army retreated and did not stop until it was 60 miles southeast of the South Korean capital of Seoul.

The air war was also in reversal. The MiG-15 outclassed everything else in the theater. An F-80 shot down a MiG on Nov. 8. The next day, a B-29 gunner got another one. Despite these successes, it was obvious to all that the swept-wing MiG-15 was the superior airplane by far. It was 100 mph faster than the straight-wing F-80 and outran the Mustangs with ease.

Sabre Vs. MiG

Fifth Air Force caught on quickly that the MiG pilots were not Chinese or Koreans. They were Russians. The Americans caught sight of some of them. US intelligence overheard their radio transmissions. The Russians attempted to communicate, as ordered, in Chinese or Korean but reverted to Russian in the heat of battle. Air forces of the three communist nations were controlled by a joint operations center at Antung, but the Russians were clearly dominant.

It would be another 40 years before either the United States or the Soviet Union admitted publicly the participation of Russian pilots in the Korean War. If the news got out, the US government reasoned, public outrage might lead to a broader—and possibly nuclear—conflict with the Soviet Union.

The point in stopping the MiGs was not the fighter battle in itself. If the MiGs had air superiority south of the Yalu, US B-29 bombers would be unable to operate and UN ground forces,

bases, and supply lines would soon come under air attack.

Fortunately, the US Air Force owned the only fighter in the world that could take on the MiG in even battle. During its development, the North American F-86 Sabre had been switched from a straight-wing design to swept wing, which added 70 mph to its top speed. In 1950, it was flying as an air defense interceptor in the United States. The Air Force rushed a wing of F-86s and a wing of straight-wing F-84 Thunderjets to Korea, where they began combat missions in December.

The MiG-15 and the Sabre were well matched. The MiG, smaller and lighter, had less range, but it was faster and climbed better. On the other hand, it was unstable at high speeds and its pilots were nowhere nearly as good as the Sabre pilots. Neither airplane was optimally armed. The Sabre had six .50 caliber machine guns that could spit out 1,200 shots per minute each, but the rounds were too light to knock down a MiG unless the engagement was close-in. The MiG had three cannons—two 23 mm and one 37 mm—but they fired too slowly for good accuracy against the fast-moving Sabre.

The F-86s got the best of it. By the end of the year, the Sabres had shot down at least eight MiGs, with two more probably destroyed. Only one Sabre had been lost. However, as the UN forces retreated into South Korea, Fifth Air Force lost its forward airfields and had to pull the Sabres back to Japan, where they could not reach the MiG stronghold along the Yalu. In February 1951, the enemy ruled the skies in a wedge-shaped area between the Chongchon and the Yalu that US pilots called “MiG Alley.”

As MacArthur’s ground forces regrouped and pushed northward again, the F-86s and F-84s returned to their Korean bases and resumed operations from there in March. Seoul was recaptured in June 1951, and the US Eighth Army advanced a short distance into North Korea.

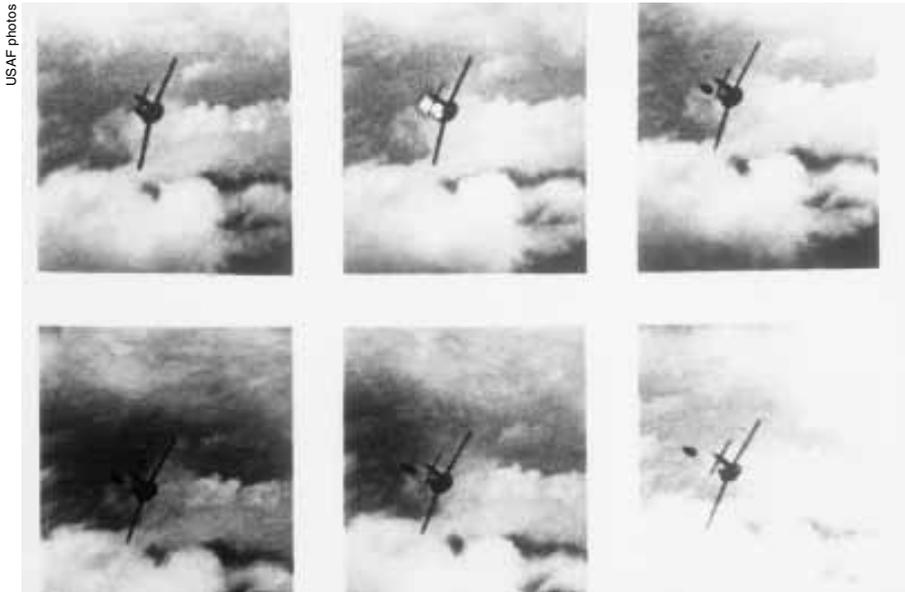
It was about 200 miles to MiG Alley from the Sabre bases at Kimpo and Suwon. Fuel limitations allowed the F-86 to remain in MiG Alley for about 20 minutes, and less if they engaged in combat. Fifth Air Force staggered the missions so the next flight of F-86s arrived before the previous patrol had to depart. Time in the battle area was not a factor for the MiG pilots, who could wait until the F-86s approached before launching from Antung and other Manchurian bases across the river.

As always, the F-86s were outnumbered. In June 1951, the Soviets and

Photo by Robert Lund via Warren Thompson



F-86 Sabres from the 336th Fighter Squadron fly out of Kimpo AB, South Korea, on a MiG hunting mission.



USAF photos

This sequence of photos shows a MiG pilot ejecting from his aircraft after having been hit with crippling fire from an F-86 Sabre.

Chinese had more than 445 MiGs in theater, whereas the US had only 44 Sabres in Korea and another 45 in Japan. Nevertheless, these few squadrons were able to seize air superiority, which the F-86s held continuously to the end of the war. Between December 1950 and July 1951, the Sabres shot down 41 MiGs while losing five of their own.

By then, the headstrong MacArthur had been ousted from command. The strategic priorities for Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were the defense of the United States and Western Europe. They were committed to restoring the independence of South Korea, but they did not want a full-scale land war in Asia. MacArthur argued that the Far East was more important than Europe, insisted on pushing to the Yalu, and wanted to challenge the Chinese. When MacArthur went public with his arguments, Truman fired him on April 9 and replaced him with Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway.

In July 1951, the war entered a new phase. Both sides gave up on the idea of decisive victory and the objective became an armistice on favorable terms. The ground battle line settled into a stalemate near the border between North and South Korea. For the next two years, the goals were to negotiate from a position of strength in the truce talks and to secure advantageous force dispositions and deployments approaching the armistice.

By tacit mutual understanding, neither side pressed the air battle as hard as it could have. To preclude widening the war, US bombers and fighters did not

strike the air bases or supply lines in Manchuria, and the F-86s were forbidden to follow the MiGs across the Yalu, even in “hot pursuit.”

Sanctuaries

F-86 pilots violated the prohibition regularly, but only one border crosser—Capt. Dolphin D. Overton III—was ever fully punished for the transgression. It was Overton’s bad luck that Swiss observers, crossing Manchuria en route to the peace talks at Panmunjom, saw the dogfight in which Overton was involved, well inside Chinese territory. The Air Force decided to make an example of Overton, stripped him of two Distinguished Flying Crosses, held up credit for five MiGs he had shot down, and sent him home summarily. Overton resigned his commission and his medals were not restored until years later.

The American side had sanctuaries as well. The MiGs did not pursue damaged Sabres over the US-controlled Yellow Sea. MiGs crossed the Yalu to attack Sabres and B-29 bombers in MiG Alley and sometimes farther south. However, aircraft from the Manchurian bases did not bomb or strafe UN installations or personnel, nor did they try to disrupt supply lines from South Korean ports to the battlefield. The United States had sent word through intermediaries that massed attacks on UN forces would lead to attacks on the bases from which the attacks originated. Besides, the Soviets and Chinese did not want to widen the war either.

These constraints did not apply to fighters or bombers operating from bases in North Korea. US airpower had put all

such bases out of business in 1950, but in late 1951, the communist forces began construction of 34 airfields with runways of 5,000 feet or longer. If they succeeded in deploying MiGs to these fields, they could extend the no-man’s-land of MiG Alley all the way south to Pyongyang and be in a position to challenge US air superiority over the front lines. There were also about 100 Il-28 jet bombers in the theater, big trouble if they were able to operate with MiG escorts from bases in North Korea.

B-29 bombers, protected by fighter escorts, struck hard at the airfields under construction and the MiGs were not able to stop them. By the end of the year, the base-building effort in North Korea had stopped. In all of North Korea, only two airfields were in operation, Sinuiju (known to the Americans as “Sunny Joe”) and Uiju, on the southern side of the Yalu, opposite Antung.

Ironically, the only enemy aircraft to bomb Fifth Air Force bases during the war was “Bedcheck Charlie,” a hopelessly obsolete Polikarpov Po-2 wood and fabric biplane that flew so slow (around 80 knots) and low that it was difficult for air defenses to handle. The Bedcheck Charlie name derived from its tendency to show up around midnight. PO-2s visited South Korea almost every night in June 1952, and among the targets bombed was the President’s mansion in Seoul. These raids amounted mostly to a nuisance but sometimes did real damage.

In 1952, the enemy air order of battle in the Far East stabilized at about 7,000 aircraft, of which 5,000 were Russian, 2,000 were Chinese, and 270 were North Korean. At peak strength, the communist forces had more than 900 MiGs in the theater. USAF never had more than 150 Sabres there.

The Soviets kept two air divisions on duty in Manchuria, regularly rotating them out as entire units and replacing them with fresh ones. At least 12 Soviet air divisions were rotated through Korea during the war to gain experience and training. The Americans noted a cycle of competence among the MiG pilots, peaking as a division finished its tour. By 1953, the Russians had largely dropped the pretense that they were Chinese or North Koreans and the MiGs often flew openly with Soviet markings. And, as the war stretched on, Chinese and North Korean pilots took on a rising share of the MiG-15 missions.

The MiGs had some good days, but the Sabres had more of them. On June 30, 1953, the Sabres shot down 16 MiGs,



Capt. Joseph McConnell Jr. in the cockpit of his aircraft *Beauteous Butch II*. McConnell became the top US ace in the Korean war. Note the 16 “kill” stars on the fuselage.

the largest number of victories in a single day, although they came close to that total on at least three other occasions. The sighting of enemy aircraft south of MiG Alley became increasingly rare. According to a contemporary joke, soldiers identified any fighter or bomber they saw as a “B-2.” When newcomers asked, “What’s a B-2?” the veterans would answer, “Be too bad if they weren’t ours.”

The B-29s systematically destroyed such industry as existed in North Korea, and the Soviets maintained their numerical advantage in the air only by replacing the MiGs and other aircraft shot down by the Americans. By the end of the war, not a single airfield in North Korea remained in condition for the landing of jet aircraft.

Both sides upgraded their fighter forces. The Soviet Union introduced the MiG-15 “bis” with improved capabilities, and the US deployed the E and F models of the F-86. Dissatisfied with the performance of the Sabre’s machine gun, the Air Force developed a 20 mm cannon to replace it. The war was nearly over before combat testing of the cannon was completed, but the cannon became standard armament for the follow-on F-86H.

When Stalin died March 5, 1953, the Russians shifted their attention to the struggle for succession of power in the Soviet Union. By early May, the Russians had withdrawn from Manchuria and turned the MiGs over to the Chinese and the North Koreans. The communist forces launched their last big ground offensive in June, hoping to establish

new demarcation lines before the truce, but the operation failed for lack of air support. The war ended with the armistice on July 27.

The Numbers

The final score of the F-86 against the MiG-15 has been hashed and rehashed many times. According to the Air Force’s assessment immediately following the war, US fighters overall had shot down 14 enemy aircraft for every USAF aircraft lost in battle. The ratio in MiG Alley was said to be 10-to-1, with the Sabres shooting down 792 MiGs while losing 78 of their own.

“The ratio of victories in air-to-air battles has undergone several revisions over the years,” said Air Force historian William T. Y’Blood in a study commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Korean War. “After the war, the USAF believed it had inflicted a 14-to-1 margin over the communists in the air-to-air battles. The ratio was dropped to 10-to-1 following further studies of the claims. Later studies suggest that a 7-to-1 ratio is a truer indication of these battles.” The Chinese acknowledged losing 224 MiG-15s. The Russians have not revealed their losses, but neither have they disputed the 7-to-1 ratio.

Forty-one American pilots—including one from the Marine Corps and one from the Navy—were aces in the Korean War, shooting down five or more enemy aircraft. Most of the aces

were older airmen, many with experience in World War II. The top ace was Capt. Joseph C. McConnell Jr., with 16 victories. He had been a B-24 navigator during World War II. The 39 USAF aces accounted for almost 40 percent of the Sabre victories. The leading Soviet ace was Capt. Nikolai V. Sutyagin, who claimed 21 American aircraft, including 15 Sabres, shot down.

Navy and Marine fighters had a substantial part in the war, but mostly in air-to-ground missions. Navy and Marine pilots flying the F-9F Panther got a few MiGs, but their airplane was not truly competitive. Some aviators from those services flew as exchange pilots with the Air Force. Among them was a future astronaut, Marine Corps Maj. John H. Glenn, who shot down three MiGs as an F-86 pilot in 1953.

Korea is often thought of as a ground war in which airpower—especially the fighter engagements in MiG Alley, far from the ground battle lines—is regarded as peripheral if not insignificant. In actuality, airpower, both in air-to-ground and air-to-air roles, was of critical strategic importance. Air superiority missions accounted for nine percent of total Air Force sorties. Another 48 percent were interdiction, and 20 percent were close air support. After UN forces held at the Pusan Perimeter and then broke out, Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker, commander of the US Eighth Army, said, “If it had not been for the air support that we received from the Fifth Air Force, we would not have been able to stay in Korea.”

The engagements in MiG Alley seemed distant because the F-86s kept them that way. Had the enemy been able to deploy MiG-15s and Il-28 bombers farther south, attack the base infrastructure, interdict supply lines, and bring airpower to bear on UN ground forces, the war might have had a different outcome. As it was, UN forces on the ground as well as bombers and transports were able to operate without much concern about enemy air attack.

It is remarkable that the F-86 pilots were able to prevail by a 7-to-1 margin, if not better, over the highly rated MiG-15s which outnumbered them by a wide margin. Moreover, the Sabres held air superiority over nearly all of Korea for the entire war. Not many air forces have ever done better than that. ■

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