

Richmond Times Dispatch, Richmond, VA,
August 19, 1907; August 20, 1907; August 22,
1907; November 1, 1907

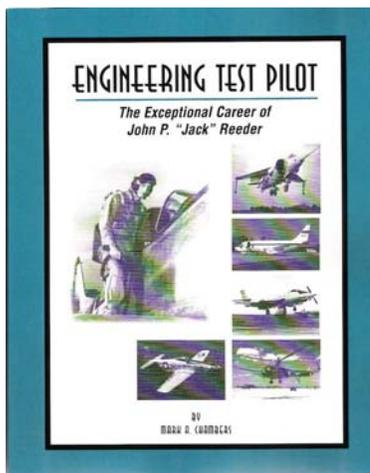
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MIG ALLEY

By: Dale “Chris” Christensen

For: The Williamsburg Eagles Chapter
of the Virginia Aeronautical Historical
Society

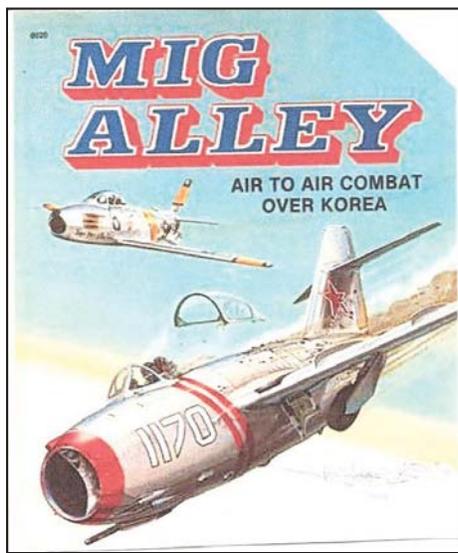
Let me start by saying that I am a Korean Vet, but I
was not there when MIG Alley was a concern. On
June 25th 1950, the North Koreans invaded South
Korea. Ten days later, I had completed all the testing
and had been accepted into the Aviation Cadet flying
training program. I was told to go home and wait.
So many people had applied for cadets, that there was
a huge backlog waiting for class assignments. After
several more delays, I was commissioned and earned
my pilot wings and I arrived at K-2, in Taegu, Korea,
but the shooting war had already ended. However, I
would like to tell you about three fighter pilots that
I knew who were there.

Initially the battle lines swung back and forth for the
entire length of the peninsula. For a time it looked
like the invaders were going to win. They moved
quickly all the way to the “Pusan Perimeter” with
UN forces backed to the sea holding only the lower
southeast corner of Korea. Then MacArthur coun-
terattacked with a massive amphibious landing at
Inchon and our forces recaptured South Korea and
rapidly moved north.

In August 1950, two months after the invasion, a
Soviet air division of 122 MIG-15 jet fighters arrived
in China and set up their headquarters at Antung
on the Yalu River, the border between Chinese
Manchuria and North Korea. Two months later, an
RB-29 reported 75 jets on the ramp at Antung. On
November 1st, a flight of F-51 Mustangs was attacked
by six MIGs with Chinese markings on the Korean
side of the Yalu. Well, that didn’t cause much alarm
because US intelligence thought there were only
a few MIGs and they were flown by Chinese and
Korean pilots. That turned out to be very wrong on
both counts.

MacArthur and his UN advisors actually thought the war was almost over and that they had won. The Far East Air Force (FEAF) believed that the North Korean Air Force was only a motley crew of obsolete Russian aircraft and in a matter of weeks would be wiped out by our Fifth Air Force.

FEAF had about 400 combat aircraft on bases in Japan, Okinawa, Guam and the Philippines. Its



MIG Alley Cover

best fighter was the F-80, the oldest jet in the Air Force, but plenty good against the cast off YAK-7 and YAK-11s. In addition, some propeller-driven F-51s had been pulled out of storage and sent to Korea where they could operate from short, unpaved runways. MacArthur, in a meeting on Wake Island on October 15th, said we'd be home by Thanksgiving and there was little to no chance of Chinese intervention. So, two of the five B-29 Bomb Groups operating in Korea were sent back to the states.

Everything went into full reverse in late November when a Chinese communist ground force of 300,000 men crossed the border to join the North Koreans. Together the two communist armies had almost twice as many troops as our UN force of 200,000, and half of ours were South Koreans. The communists had taken over the war and MacArthur retreated and did not stop till he was 60 miles southeast of Seoul, the South Korean capital.

The air war was also in reversal. The MIG-15 out-classed everything else in the theater. On November

8th, an F-80 shot down a MIG and the next day a B-29 gunner got one, but despite this, it was obvious to all that the swept wing fighter was the superior airplane by far. It was 100 mph faster than the F-80 and easily outran the Mustangs.

Fifth Air Force quickly caught on that the MIG pilots were not Chinese or Koreans. They were Russians. Some of them were actually seen and numerous radio transmissions were overheard by US intelligence sources. The Russians had been ordered to speak Chinese or Korean, but often, in the heat of battle, reverted to their own native language. Air forces of all three communist nations were controlled by the joint command center at Antung, but the Russians were clearly dominant.

It would be another 40 years before either Russia or the US publicly admitted the participation of Russian pilots in the Korean War. It was feared that 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 itself. If the communists had air superiority south of the Yalu, our B-29s would be unable to operate and UN ground forces and bases and supply lines would be under constant air attack. Fortunately, the US already had the only fighter in the world that could challenge the MIG in even battle. During its development, the North American F-86 Sabre had been switched from a straight wing design to swept wings which added 70 mph to its top speed. The F-86D was already being flown as an all weather air defense interceptor in the US. The Air Force rushed a wing of F-86s and wing of straight wing F-84 Thunderjets to Korea where they began combat missions in December 1950.

It wasn't long until the F-86s came out on top ! By the end of the year, they had shot down at least eight MIGs and had two more probable kills. Only one Sabre had been lost. However, as MacArthur's forces retreated into South Korea, Fifth Air Force lost its forward airfields and had to withdraw the Sabres back to Japan where they could no longer reach the

MIG stronghold across the Yalu. In February 1951, the enemy ruled the skies in a wedge shaped area between the Chongchon and the Yalu rivers that the Allied pilots called "MIG Alley."

Here are some facts about three of the heroes of MIG alley:

In June 1965, I was graduating from the Air Command and Staff College and our guest speaker at our graduation Dining-In was Lt Col Robinson Risner. He had been shot down while flying an F-105 in North Vietnam, was rescued and then sent back to the states on a kind of motivational temporary duty trip to visit the Academies and other schools like our ACSC. I sat near him at the Dining-In, so I was able to speak with him throughout much of the dinner. Robbie was born in Mammoth Spring, Arkansas in 1925 and graduated from Central High School in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1942. He enlisted in the Army Air Corps in April 43 and attended flight training at Williams Field, Arizona in May 1944. He then flew P-38 and P-39 aircraft in Panama. In August of 46, he was relieved from active duty and became a member of the Oklahoma Air National Guard flying P-51s. Five years later he was recalled to active duty to fly RF-80 aircraft.



MIG Alley and MIG ramp photo

In May 1952 he joined the 4th Wing at Kimpo, Korea where he flew more than 100 combat missions in the F-86 and was credited with eight enemy aircraft destroyed, becoming the 20th jet ace during the Korean War. In August 1964 he became the commander of the 67th Tactical Fighter Squadron at Kadena AB, Okinawa flying F-105s. While on temporary duty at Korat AB in Thailand, he was shot down over North Vietnam in April 1965

and was rescued. Following this, he visited us at ACSC. Then in September, after returning to Korat, he was shot down again, but this time was captured. He spent seven years in the Hanoi Hilton and was repatriated in February 1973. Before retiring in August 1976 as a Brigadier General, he flew the F-4 and the F-111

Ralph Parr was a legend at Williams Air Force Base where I attended basic and advanced pilot training and he had once been an instructor there at Willie. I never had a chance to meet him, but I heard many stories about his flying abilities. He was born in Portsmouth, Virginia in 1924 and enlisted in the US Army reserve in November 1942. He entered the aviation cadet program and earned his wings and commission in February, 1944. He was the son of a navy pilot and flew his first combat missions as a P-38 fighter pilot in the Pacific Theater in the final weeks of the war with Japan. He witnessed the smoke still rising from Hiroshima. In 1948, he transitioned into jet aircraft and saw combat duty as an F-80 pilot during the opening days of the Korean War and then again as an F-86 pilot during the last seven weeks of that war, where he managed to shoot down ten enemy aircraft in aerial combat, being credited with the last aircraft shot down in the Korean War. It is said that he hit every aircraft he ever fired at. He became an Ace in just 11 days, finishing the war as the eleventh double ace. Later, he helped bring the F-4 into the USAF inventory and was one of its first instructor pilots. He served as an F-4 squadron commander and flew two combat tours in Southeast Asia where he earned both the Distinguished Service Cross and the Air Force Cross while Deputy Commander of the 12th Fighter Wing. Colonel Parr retired in 1976 with over 6000 hours in fighter aircraft and over 60 decorations.

The third hero I want to talk about is a Marine pilot named John P. Flynn. My first assignment in the states after Korea was at Bergstrom AFB, Texas and Major Flynn was my squadron operations officer. Flynn was a Native American from

South Dakota. He was a big guy, maybe 6-4 or 6-5, a very dear friend, a great guy with a fantastic sense of humor and a respected leader. We used



MIG Fight

to deploy by squadron to Matagorda Island off the Texas gulf coast for our weapons training, since we had no bombing range around Austin. There was no club there so after flying each day, the BOQ dayroom became our “bar.” In the early evening, after dark and after several beers, the Chief would grab a flashlight, a gunny sack and head out into the area just off the field. He would come back in an hour or two with the sack half full of diamondback rattlesnakes. He caught them barehanded with just a flashlight. He didn’t grow up on a reservation, but many in his family did, so he spent much time there and said they used to do that all the time back in South Dakota. He was one of the unsung heroes of the Korean War. Flying the F7F Tigercat, twin engine night tactical fighter, Capt Flynn was shot down about 11pm on May 14th 1952 while attacking ground targets near MIG Alley. He was captured and subjected to intensive interrogation by both North Korean and Chinese Communist Air Force personnel. He came under brutal pressure and treatment to admit the use of bacteriological warfare in an intensive effort to obtain a written confession from him. He suffered extreme torture and almost continuous solitary confinement when not being interrogated. Ultimately he faced a Chinese court, was convicted of being a war criminal and sentenced to 20 years hard labor. He was told he would never be repatriated and would be sent to China to serve

his sentence. Despite the severe treatment and threats, he was one of the few Americans who resisted the communists and never signed their requested admission statement. His story was the inspiration for one of the characters in the book “A Ride to Panmunjom” by fellow prisoner CPO Duane Thorin. The story had a positive influence on the DOD revised Code of Conduct for American POWs, published shortly after the prisoners returned from North Korean prison camps. Chief Flynn didn’t shoot down any MIGs, but his story certainly ranks among the heroes of MIG Alley. By the way, there are still over 8000 Americans still unaccounted for in Korea - M I A - bodies not identified/ bodies not recovered - 8176 to be exact.

The engagements in MIG Alley seemed distant from the war because the F-86s kept them that way. Had the enemy been able to deploy the MIGs and IL-28 bombers farther south, bringing airpower to bear on UN ground forces, the war might have had a very different outcome. As it was, UN forces were able to operate without much concern about enemy air attack.

It is remarkable that the F-86 pilots were able to prevail with a 7 - to - 1 kill ratio, - - if not even better, - - over the highly rated MIG15s, 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 done better than that.