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BACKGROUND PAPER  
ON  
USAF ENLISTED AERIAL VICTORIES IN THE KOREAN WAR

When the air war in Korea is discussed or written about, the emphasis is usually centered on the great air battles between USAF F-86 Sabres and Communist MiG-15s. And those air battles are noteworthy. But while less well-known, the air battles fought by enlisted gunners aboard B-29 Superfortress bombers were certainly as heroic and noteworthy. This paper will present both the circumstances and facts of enlisted gunner victories by melding the accounts of their exploits into the context of the total war effort. It will also answer the question of whether a gunner, with a .50-caliber machine gun flying on a propeller-driven bomber, can shoot down a jet fighter flying at perhaps twice the speed of the bomber. (1:90)

When the North Koreans invaded the south, generally they pushed the U.S. and Korean forces easily backwards. Their vastly superior forces could not be stopped. U.S. airpower was used mainly to tactically interdict the enemy to give allied forces an opportunity to organize an effective resistance to stop the Communist advancement. But at the highest USAF command levels, there was the realization that "tactical operations on the battlefield cannot be fully effective unless there is a simultaneous interdiction and destruction of sources behind the battlefield." (3:183) By July 1950, it was already evident that the North Korean Army was receiving much of its support from Communist centers beyond the North Korean borders, which were off limits to U.S. strategic bombers. (3:183) But while U.S. commanders knew attacks against North Korean strategic industries would not be completely decisive, they knew that North Korean industries had made very important contributions to the Japanese war effort in World War II. So they decided that any industries in North Korea contributing to their war effort had to be destroyed as soon as possible. Identification of their vital industrial areas and the supply routes into North Korea from their Communist supporters were the start of the

splitting of the U.S. bombing effort between the tactical interdiction missions and the strategic air attacks. (3:187)

The strategic air campaign, once underway, was very successful. This was primarily due to the complete air superiority the Americans enjoyed. The U.S. Bomber Command was able to schedule bombing raids over targets at wide intervals to allow bombers to arrive back at crowded bases at different times for efficient traffic flow. If the North Koreans had possessed adequate air defenses, these leisurely flights would have been quite dangerous. (3:192) However, in a little over a month, all but one of the strategic bombing objectives had been neutralized by U.S. Bomber Command. The one target that had not been attacked was proscribed because of political considerations. (3:195) As one bomber group commander observed, "Our bombing should have been good. We didn't have any opposition and the bombardiers had all the time in the world to make their bomb runs." (3:195) United Nations forces were able to push the North Koreans back to the 38th parallel and Communist prisoners of war attributed their problems to shortages caused by the loss of key industries in the American bombing campaign. (3:195)

The defeat of the North Korean Army caused an immediate change in the air objectives. On 27 September 1950, all strategic air attacks were canceled against North Korean targets. All air attacks were to be directed against objectives bearing on the tactical situation. (3:167) As the war moved into October 1950, Bomber Command further reduced sorties for its bombers and most of the combat crews believed that their job was done in Korea. By the end of October, two bomber groups were released for return to the United States and the remainder of the B-29 bomber force was ordered to stand down. (3:207) The Eighth Army was much more interested in the air transport of supplies than combat air support. (3:215). Unfortunately, the situation wasn't going to remain this good.

In the summer of 1950, General MacArthur's intelligence officers were concerned about the growing forces gathering in Communist China Manchuria. United Nations war-fighting decisions were being made with the idea of preventing Chinese involvement in the conflict. The Far East Air Force (FEAF) commander, General Stratemeyer, believed that if the Chinese Communists did decide to become involved that their first move would be to employ their air forces. He had reason to be concerned as Chinese antiaircraft gunners had fired upon RB-29 aircraft reconnoitering the border on two occasions. (3:148-149) General Stratemeyer's belief turned out to be prophetic. On the first of November 1950, the Communists revealed they had something much more menacing than the old propeller-driven fighters they had relied on: six swept-wing jet aircraft crossed the Yalu River from China and attacked flight of United Nations propeller-driven attack fighters. All the allied aircraft were able to escape and report their first good look at a Russian-built MiG-15. (3:219)

Throughout the weekend of 3 November, United Nations airmen worked to regear the air effort which had lapsed in October. On November 5, General MacArthur ordered a two-week maximum air effort. The airmen were to destroy the Korean end of all international bridges on the Manchurian border. He further ordered that, if necessary, combat crews were to be flown to exhaustion. (3:221)

Already, the Communist pilots had developed tactics based on the rules imposed on United Nations pilots. As American aircraft approached the Yalu River to make their bombing runs, the Communist MiGs would take-off from their sanctuary airfield across the border at Antung, climb safely to over 30,000 feet, cross the river and dive down in firing passes against American aircraft, and then scamper back to safety across the Yalu where they would repeat the process. Even American F-80 jet fighters were no match for the flashy MiGs. Both American aircrew morale and mission effectiveness began to suffer. (3:222) On November 8, in the first all-jet air battle, the MiGs proved clearly superior to the F-80s. Nevertheless, MiG

pilots showed their lack of experience and the first MiG was destroyed by Lt Russell J. Brown. (3:223)

The following day an enlisted gunner was also able to draw blood. A RB-29 from the 91st Strategic Reconnaissance Squadron was flying photo coverage near Sinuiju, North Korea, across from the Antung bases. A MiG-15 attempted a tail-level attack. The RB-29's tailgunner, Sgt Harry J. LaVene, observed the attack, got the MiG in his sights, and opened fire. The MiG broke off its attack about 200 yards from the RB-29 and went into a diving turn to the left, smoking profusely. After it descended about 1000 feet it was seen disintegrating. (4:2) Though he saved his aircraft, it was still crippled by flak and ended up crash landing in Japan. After this experience, FEAFF forbade the RB-29's to approach the Yalu, turning the photo recon work over to RF-80 photo planes. (3:228-229)

But this didn't prevent the bombers from returning to the Yalu River to continue the job of destroying the bridges. On 14 November, the B-29's returned to attack the Sinuiju bridges. The MiGs came up to try and stop the bombers. Staff Sergeant Richard W. Fisher was the Central Fire Controller for the B-29 flying in the number 3 position in a formation of four B-29's. A MiG again attempted a tail attack. The tail gunner opened fire, but was unable to continue because of the limiting travel of his gun. The MiG then came within the cone of fire of the upper aft and forward turrets which were controlled by SSgt Fisher. He opened fire and immediately scored hits causing heavy black smoke to pour out of the enemy fighter. He continued firing bursts into the fuselage and wing forward of the canopy. The MiG was observed emitting black smoke until it crashed in the ground. (4:1) Of the first three MiG kills of the Korean War, two were shot down by enlisted gunners. (2:1)

Unfortunately, these losses didn't do much to slow down the MiG attacks against the bombers. B-29's continued to return from missions against the bridges heavily damaged. There were even the occasions when the B-29's were shot down by the MiG interceptors.

(3:226) No more MiGs were shot down by Americans until the F-86 Sabre was introduced in the middle of December to escort the bombers on their raids. (3:250-252)

As the war moved into 1951, the Chinese recognized that the reason they had failed on the ground was because they had failed in the air. Intelligence reports indicated the Chinese planned to learn from their mistakes and were steadily increasing the size of their air force. In December 1950, they possessed 650 combat aircraft; by June 1951, they had 1,050 combat aircraft (445 were MiG-15 fighters). United Nation Air Force leaders viewed this development with dismay. Because of the politico-military restrictions which limited combat to Korea, the Communists held the initiative. They could attack, or not, according to their own purposes. United Nations airmen were limited to maintaining an alert, defensive posture and attempting to counter Communist air actions as they became evident. (3:285) Further, the ground effort was not proceeding well and it was decided to move the U.S. jet fighters out of Korea. This made it very difficult for them to provide adequate escort for bombers attacking near the Yalu River. So FEAF avoided air combat over the entire northwestern area of North Korea allowing the MiGs to reign supreme. This situation is what caused FEAF airmen to call the area "MiG Alley," a name it would retain for the rest of the war. (3:289)

Near the end of February 1951, FEAF was informed that it was possible again to escort B-29's into northwestern Korea after jet fighters had been moved back into Korea. Important interdiction targets had not been attacked, so Bomber Command was anxious to continue its raids. The first missions were scheduled for 1 March. (3:293)

As it turned out, a minor tragedy was in the making. F-86 Sabres were unavailable because of airfield damage, so 22 F-80 Shooting Stars were sent instead. The F-80's arrived at the rendezvous station on time, however the 18 B-29's from Japan ran into unexpected head winds and were so late that the jets had to break off their escort and return to base. As a result, the B-29's dropped their bombs without escort. Shortly thereafter, they were attacked

by nine MiGs. The bombers closed into a tight formation, but were no match for the MiGs. One MiG was shot down by a tail gunner on one of the B-29's, Staff Sergeant William H. Finnegan, but it wasn't enough. (4:1) Ten B-29's were damaged; three so badly that they had to make emergency landings in South Korea. (12:3) The Air Force knew it had to take stronger measures to restore air superiority over northwestern Korea. (3:294-295)

Late in March, the big air battles which would determine who owned the sky over northwestern Korea were shaping up. The important international bridges crossing the Yalu River near the MiG base at Antung were once again attacked on March 30. Even with the escort of eight flights of F-86 Sabres, MiG-15's got through and made determined attacks on B-29's from the 28th Bombardment Squadron. (3:296-297) At least sixteen MiGs swarmed all over bombers before the escort fighters could respond. The MiGs closed so fast the gunners were barely able to get their guns to bear on the enemy aircraft. (10:16) Still, two gunners were able to make the MiGs pay for their attacks. Technical Sergeant Charles W. Summers was a tail gunner on a B-29 attacked from the rear. TSgt Summers was able to pour 300-400 rounds into the MiG's intake, causing it to explode in mid-air. (4:1) On another B-29, Staff Sergeant Norman S. Greene was a left gunner. SSgt Greene saw a MiG-15 attacking from the low side and opened fire when it was about 800 yards away. On his second burst, after firing approximately 50 rounds, the MiG also exploded in the air. (4:2)

Unfortunately, the massive railway bridge crossing the Yalu River was battered, but still standing. In a final effort to take it down, all three B-29 groups were ordered to attack the bridge on April 12, 1951. Once again, events didn't happen according to plan. The three bomber groups were strung out, causing the escort fighters to split up which allowed the MiGs to concentrate their attacks against weaker formations. The first bomber formation was attacked by 40-50 MiGs. One B-29 was shot down and five others were damaged. Next, about 20 MiGs attacked the second formation. Again, another bomber was shot down and

one more badly damaged. The final formation was met by only a few wary MiGs and sustained no damage. The MiGs did not escaped unscathed; B-29 gunners claimed ten enemy aircraft destroyed. (3:297-298; 11:12-13; 13:8-9) However, in what would be the best day of the war for gunners, only seven victories were officially confirmed.

The best effort of the day was given by Sergeant Billy G. Beach of the 28th Bombardment Squadron. A right gunner, Sgt Beach was credited with two MiG kills before his bomber was even able to begin its bombing run. (4:2) After the escort fighters pulled the rest of the MiGs away, the crew discovered that their bomber was heavily damaged. Two of their four engines were shot up and feathered. Their right aileron was destroyed and one of their gas tanks had caught fire. The pilot gave the signal for the crew to prepare for bail out, but never gave the signal that would cause the crew to jump. The pilot decided to make the bomb run even though, with two engines out, they couldn't keep up with the rest of the formation. So they made the run alone - and scored direct hits on their target! They were able to limp the bomber far enough toward home to crash land the bomber at a forward fighter base. (1:91) But theirs wasn't the only action that day.

Three MiGs were downed by gunners from the 30th Bombardment Squadron. Sergeant Royal A. Veatch, a right gunner, was able to use short bursts to cause his MiG to spin out of control in flames. (4:3) Sergeant Lyle R. Patterson was a Central Fire Control gunner who used only approximately 120 rounds to cause the MiG attacking his bomber to spin out of control until it hit the ground. (4:2-3) Finally, Staff Sergeant Robert A. Winslow, also a Central Fire Control gunner, started firing at a MiG when it was just 50 feet above the B-29's vertical stabilizer. SSgt Winslow's firing caused an explosion in the enemy aircraft's tail pipe which seemed to cause it to lose control. It was observed spinning and crashing into the ground. (4:2)



The final two MiGs destroyed on 12 April were credited to gunners from the 371st Bombardment Squadron. The first kill was by Staff Sergeant Ercel S. Dye. From his tail gunner position, he started firing on an attacking MiG when it was 1000 yards away. He continued firing until the MiG approached to fifty feet. The MiG then broke away into a vertical dive and was seen flying into the ground and exploding. (4:1) The last MiG kill of the day was credited to Sergeant David R. Stime. Sgt Stime opened fire on two MiGs attacking his bomber from the left side. One MiG broke away apparently unharmed, but he continued firing on the other MiG until it fell off to the right in a vertical dive. It was unable to regain control and was observed crashing by an escort fighter. (4:3)

Even taking into account the heavy losses inflicted on the MiGs by the gunners, the loss of three U.S. bombers was a prohibitive loss. Therefore, General Stratemeyer directed that B-29 attacks in the Sinuiju area, near the Antung fighter bases, would be discontinued until some better way could be found to protect them. (3:298-300) Unfortunately, the North Koreans were repairing and rehabilitating airfields throughout North Korea. The B-29's were needed to neutralize the airfields before the Communists were able to move fighters forward. The Sabre pilots improved their battle tactics allowing them to provide better bomber protection, so the B-29's headed north again. (3:301)

Gunners did not score their next victory until 31 May 1951 and it came at an unexpected place. Two B-29's were waiting for their Sabre escorts about 75 miles southeast of Sinuiju when they were surprised by 12 MiGs. The MiGs rarely ventured so far from the Yalu River. Fortunately, the MiG pilots were unable to make a successful firing pass against the bombers, giving the bomber's gunners an opportunity to fight back. (3:307) In this case, Staff Sergeant Michael R. Martocchia, a Central Fire Control gunner with the 28th Bombardment Squadron, opened fire on a MiG-15 attacking from the right rear of his bomber. As it came abreast of his bomber, he fired about 100 rounds. The left aileron on the MiG was

damaged and pieces of the fuselage chipped off. The MiG pilot then decided he'd had enough and bailed out of his stricken aircraft, causing the MiG to crash. (5:1)

On the next day, June 1, four B-29 bombers were attempting to destroy a railway bridge northwest of Sinanju, North Korea. The escorting fighters had run short of fuel and were forced to depart. A few minutes later, 25 MiGs attacked out of the sun. The MiGs shot the wing off one bomber and damaged two others, but the B-29 gunners made them pay. (3:307) First, Staff Sergeant James C. Davis, a tail gunner with the 28th Bombardment Squadron, started firing on a MiG attacking directly from behind his bomber. He kept firing until the gun stopped as they hit the limit stops. The MiG was seen trailing black smoke as it fell below the B-29. (5:1) The next MiG kill came at approximately the same time and was accomplished by Sergeant Earl A. Kanop. Also a tail gunner with the 28th, Sgt Kanop started tracking his MiG while it was about 1,200 yards out. He waited until it had approached to about 6000 yards before opening fire. He immediately scored hits as parts were observed falling of the MiG. The MiG fell off the attack and was seen plummeting toward the ground, smoking and burning. (5:1)

At about this time, the MiG pilots improved their tactics and it would be another month and a half before the B-29 gunners would shoot down a MiG. (3:311) On 9 July, a flight of MiGs intercepted six B-29's from the 30th Bombardment Squadron as they turned off their target run at Sinanju Airfield. (3:312) The Central Fire Control gunner for the lead bomber, Sergeant Gus C. Opfer, was credited with shooting down two MiGs in that attack. The first MiG attacked from the right rear. Sgt Opfer waited until the MiG was within 800 yards before opening fire. He continued to fire until the MiG began to smoke and finally burst into flames. The plane hit the water and disintegrated. The second MiG attempted an attack from the left rear and Sgt Opfer opened fire at an approximate distance of 1000-1200 yards. The result

was the same: the enemy plane burst into flames and spun into the water. (6:1) The next day, on 10 July, the war entered a new phase. (3:373)

This new phase was ushered in with the first meeting between the United Nations and the Communist truce-talk delegation in Kaesong, South Korea. This turn of events was possible because both the United Nations and the Communists abandoned their identical political objectives of unifying Korea by military force. The United Nations, once it realized it could not accomplish the bigger goal, had no reason to go farther north of the 38th parallel than the defensible terrain they held in July 1951. Over the conference table at Kaesong, both sides were beginning to seek acceptable terms for ending hostilities in Korea. (3:373)

With ground forces basically holding onto current positions, the war in the air became more intense. The Communists tried harder than ever to wrest control of the skies away from the Americans. They held a numerical advantage in MiGs: they possessed 445 MiG-15s to just 89 F-86 Sabres in theater for the Americans. All requests for more air-superiority fighters from the states were denied. Moreover, the Communist pilots were displaying a growing familiarity and skill with their jets. They continued to develop new tactics and were ranging much further south to tangle with the allied aircraft. For several months, the more experienced U.S. pilots were able to keep the MiGs away from the bombers, but finally the sheer numbers worked against the Americans and MiGs were again causing havoc with the bombers. (3:402-405,408)

The Communists increased the pressure by beginning an aggressive airfield repair and rehabilitation program again. FEAF knew that attacking them would probably result in some of the stiffest Communist resistance of the war. Night bombing techniques were being developed to aid the situation, but it was going slowly. General Kelly (who had replaced General Stratemeyer as commander of FEAF) believed that the airfield neutralization bombing needed to speeded up. He felt he had no other alternative but to lay on formation attacks by daylight.

These raids would result in three of the bloodiest air battles of the war and again involve the enlisted gunners. (3:408-410)

The first raid took place on 23 October 1951 against one of the Communist airfields. This time the MiGs were well-briefed and prepared. First some one hundred MiGs engaged the Sabre escort force and screened the F-86's away from the bombers. (3:410) The nine B-29 bombers from the 307th Bombardment Wing were then attacked by at least fifty MiGs, which shot down three of the bombers within minutes. Five more bombers were extensively damaged. The Communists would concentrate as many as twenty fighters on one bomber, coming in from all angles and making it nearly impossible for the gunners to effectively fire at them. (14:19-20) Still, two gunners were able to knock down MiGs in defense of their aircraft. The first was Staff Sergeant Jerry M. Webb, a tail gunner, who started firing at two MiGs making a level attack from the rear. He hit one of the MiGs many times at the wing root, causing it to swerve away smoking. Other crew members were able to confirm that it disintegrated in mid-air. (7:1) The other MiG was shot down by Sergeant Fred R. Spivey. He was a central fire control gunner and caught the MiG attacking from the right forward area of the aircraft. He started firing at 1,200 yards and continued until it was just 10 yards away. The MiG passed above his bomber, emitting smoke and losing parts. It was observed falling out of control. (7:2)

The next day, another eight bombers were sent from a different wing to attack a bypass railway bridge at Sunchon, south of MiG Alley. Despite the fighter escort, the B-29's were systematically attacked by some 40-70 MiGs. But in the running fight, B-29 gunners were only able to shoot down one MiG. (3:411) This MiG was credited to Technical Sergeant Harold M. Setters of the 344th Bombardment Squadron. He was the Central Fire Control gunner for the lead plane in the formation. As the MiG passed over his aircraft TSgt Setters succeeded in

scoring numerous hits causing it to smoke profusely and break into a downward maneuver. The MiG continued its descent until it crashed into the ground. (7:1)

For two days, all daylight B-29 bombing raids were canceled while operations officers evaluated the situation. But on the 27th, Bomber Command sent eight B-29's to attack a railway bypass bridge at Sinanju. Since Sabre pilots had reported that the MiGs would not fight over water, the bombers were routed over the Yellow Sea for as long as possible. But in the short time while the bombers turned inland to attack the bridge, some 95 MiGs overwhelmed the escort fighters and attacked the bombers. The Superfortress gunners were credited with six MiG kills in the ten-minute battle. (3:411)

The first MiG was shot down by Sergeant Leeman M. Tankersley of the 93rd Bombardment Squadron. He was the Central Fire Control gunner in the lead flight of bombers. The MiG attempted to attack from above but Sgt Tankersley was able to score hits on the MiG from a distance of about 1,600 yards. When it pulled-out, it was seen smoking, with pieces falling from its mid-section. It continued its maneuver downward, spinning until it hit the ground. (7:2) The next two MiGs were shot down by gunners in the second formation.

Corporal Leonard B. Eversole, 30th Bombardment Squadron, was the Central Fire Control gunner in the number two aircraft. One of the MiGs came up from underneath the formation, leveled off and flew parallel to Corporal Eversole's bomber. Corporal Eversole started firing on the MiG at a range of 40 yards. It received many hits, started smoking profusely from its wing fairing, and then began to fall to the ground. Crew members observed it exploding in mid-air. Private First Class Harry E. Ruch, 28th Bombardment Squadron, was the right gunner in the lead aircraft of the second formation. After dropping their bombs, Private Ruch's bomber was attacked by a formation of six MiG-15's. He concentrated his fire on the lead aircraft until it was only 200 yards out. At that point, the MiG had large flames pouring from its trailing edge. It began falling and crashed into the earth. (8:1)

Next, Sergeant Merle A. Goff, 28th Bombardment Squadron, was credited with two kills as the tail gunner on the lead aircraft of the second formation. After dropping their bombs, Sgt Goff's bomber was attacked by several MiGs from the right side. Two MiGs broke toward the tail of the bomber, right into Sgt Goff's gunsights. He covered both MiGs with fire starting at 800 yards. One MiG was hit immediately and started spinning violently, later hitting the ground. He continued firing on the other MiG until it got out about 2000 yards, after which it fell off on its left wing and dived into the ground. (7:1-2)

On the same bomber, the Central Fire Control gunner, Staff Sergeant Michael R. Martocchia was credited with a MiG kill, giving him a total of two kills for the war. The single MiG made a pass from high and behind the bomber. It dove within ten yards of SSgt Martocchia's gun, directly into his sights. He poured heavy fire into the MiG until it was about 100 yards in a climbing turn. Then the MiG's canopy was seen flying off in pieces and the MiG began to fall sharply downward, crashing into the ground. (7:1)

October had been a good month for the MiG killers; 35 MiGs were destroyed, nine by B-29 gunners. (2:6-7) But FEAF had lost seven Sabres, five B-29's, and three other aircraft to aerial combat. The B-29 losses were especially significant and many pessimists were saying the old bombers were through in Korea. (3:411-412) At a conference in Japan on 28 October, FEAF leadership agreed that virtually no amount of fighter escort could keep MiGs off the bombers. But instead of refusing to use the old bombers, General Kelly proposed that Bomber Command operate only at night. As soon as possible, General Kelly wanted to develop "shoran" bombing as the principle attack capability of Bomber Command. Using beacons on the ground and transceivers in the bombers, shoran bombing allowed the B-29's to accurately and safely conduct bombing raids. Bomber command was able to start shoran bombing attacks in November 1951 and it effectively ended the MiG threat to the bombers. (3:416) The next, and last, enlisted gunner victory would not occur until September 1952.

This last victory was credited to both Airman First Class Robert L. Davis and Airman First Class Robert W. Smith of the 343rd Bombardment Squadron. A1C Davis was the right gunner and A1C Smith was the tail gunner of a B-29 attacking the North Korean capital at night. A propeller-driven enemy aircraft made a firing pass and was not identified by the gunners until it was within 50-60 yards of the B-29. Both gunners started firing immediately and continued until it was out of range in an uncontrolled dive, with flames trailing from its engine. (9:1)

The enlisted gunners, flying in their old, slow bombers, proved that they were able to take on the newest and fastest fighters the Communists could throw at them and make them pay heavily. Twenty-six MiG-15 fighters and one propeller-driven fighter were confirmed destroyed by gunners. They didn't get the glory like the Sabre pilots received, but they certainly did the job. Let us not forget.

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