Fifty years ago this month, the new US Air Force was thrust into its first armed conflict when war began in Korea.

The Forgotten War

By Walter J. Boyne

FIFTY years ago this month, the United States Air Force, weakened by demobilization and preoccupied with the threat of the Soviet Union, was thrust into its first war as a separate service when North Korea invaded South Korea. The date was June 25, 1950. USAF opened the war with F-82 Twin Mustang machine guns hammering enemy aircraft into the ground. The war ended on July 27, 1953, on a similar note, this time with a famed F-86 Sabre scoring the final air-to-air victory.

In the intervening 37 months of bitter combat, the newly established Air Force proved to one and all that it was ready to fight and to win, regardless of politics, rules of engagement, gaps in procurement budgets, or the prowess of the enemy. The Korean War marked the creation of a professional Air Force that would grow in size and strength for decades to come.

When the North Korean People's Army swept across the 38th parallel into South

It was the first jet war. And the F-80 Shooting Star was USAF's first jet to be used in combat. These F-80s, from the 36th Fighter–Bomber Squadron, are on the flight line, awaiting their next sortie.

Photo by Robert E. Crackel via Warren Thompson

Korea that day in 1950, its troops were well-trained and well-equipped by the Soviet Union. Using Soviet doctrine and equipped with T-34 tanks, heavy artillery pieces, and a small but effective air force, North Korea anticipated an easy victory that would unify the divided nation under the rule of "The Great Leader," Communist dictator Kim Il Sung.

At the time of the North Korean invasion, South Korea had only a constabulary force to defend itself, as the United States had provided it with a minimum of military equipment and training.

Photo by Bill O'Donnell via Warren Thompson

When North Korea invaded the South in June 1950, South Korea had only a constabulary force. Massive numbers of refugees, like this trainload near Suwon, fled the Seoul area in the early days of the war.

Not in the Sphere

The North Korean leadership enjoyed another advantage—the tacit, if somewhat reserved, approval of both Moscow and Beijing. Secretary of State Dean Acheson, in a Jan. 12 appearance at the National Press Club in Washington, said South Korea was not within the US sphere of influence in Asia and therefore would have to defend itself. The Communist leaders well noted the US official's words.

At the time, Acheson's statement reflected a realistic assessment of the state of the US military services, which had suffered a headlong demobilization after World War II and were not adequate to defend US world interests. With the expectation that the US monopoly on atomic weapons would guarantee peace, President Harry Truman had insisted on reducing the annual defense budget to a less-than-bare-bones level of about $13 billion, hardly sufficient for any serious operations.

Despite these military realities, Truman surprised the world when he decided to defend South Korea after all. Terming the conflict a "police action" to ease his way around the power of Congress to declare war, Truman got the United Nations Security Council to adopt a resolution accusing North Korea of unprovoked aggression against the South. This move laid the foundation for the establishment of the United Nations Command that would fight the war.

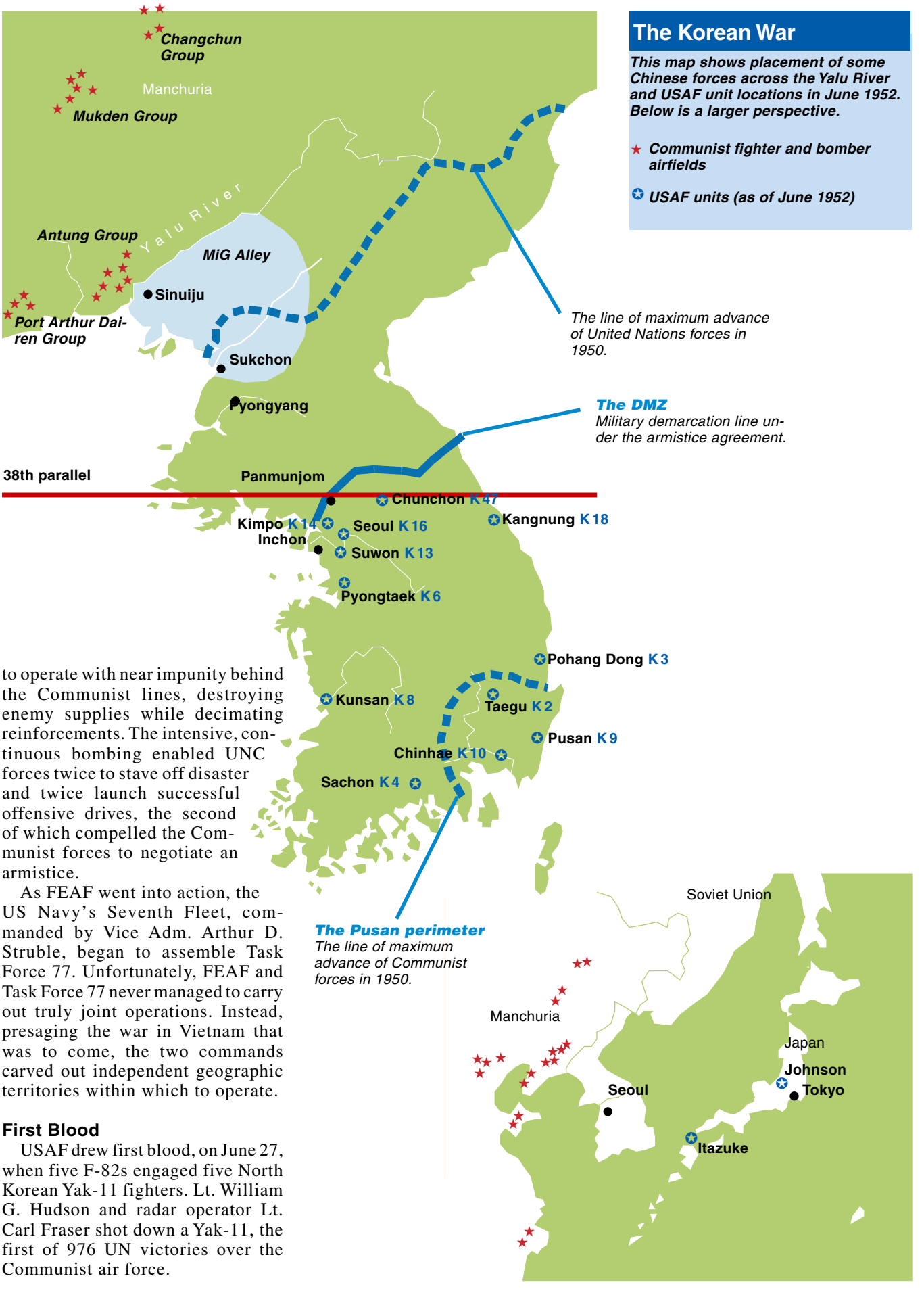
Gen. of the Army Omar N. Bradley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, advised sending troops to oppose North Korea's invasion. However, he felt the greatest threat was the Soviet Union and favored confining the Korean War after China entered. A war with China, he said, would be the wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong enemy. The USAF Chief of Staff, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, concurred with Bradley, for he knew that the first priority of his "shoestring Air Force" was deterring the increasingly bellicose and nuclear-capable Soviet Union.

The difficult task of assisting retreating South Korean forces fell upon USAF's Far East Air Forces, commanded by Lt. Gen. George E. Stratemeyer. FEAF's principal component, the famous Fifth Air Force, called upon assets stationed in Japan, Okinawa, Guam, and the Philippines. All told, 365 F-80 fighters, 32 F-82 fighters, 26 B-26 bombers, and 22 B-29 bombers were mustered for action on the Korean peninsula. As events unfolded, many F-51s were also called into service to serve as fighter–bombers, the first 145 coming from Air National Guard stocks.

Despite its old equipment, FEAF readied itself for battle and soon established air superiority over Korea—superiority that it maintained, with few exceptions, until war's end. Constant air superiority allowed the tactical and strategic bombing force

Photo by Charles Trumbo via Warren Thompson

By October 1950, UN forces had pushed the North Koreans almost to the Yalu River. However, with the arrival of the Chinese "volunteers," the tables turned again. Here, a C-119 evacuates UN forces from Seoul in December 1950.



to operate with near impunity behind the Communist lines, destroying enemy supplies while decimating reinforcements. The intensive, continuous bombing enabled UNC forces twice to stave off disaster and twice launch successful offensive drives, the second of which compelled the Communist forces to negotiate an armistice.

As FEAF went into action, the US Navy's Seventh Fleet, commanded by Vice Adm. Arthur D. Struble, began to assemble Task Force 77. Unfortunately, FEAF and Task Force 77 never managed to carry out truly joint operations. Instead, presaging the war in Vietnam that was to come, the two commands carved out independent geographic territories within which to operate.

First Blood

USAF drew first blood, on June 27, when five F-82s engaged five North Korean Yak-11 fighters. Lt. William G. Hudson and radar operator Lt. Carl Fraser shot down a Yak-11, the first of 976 UN victories over the Communist air force.

Photo by John Redrup via Warren Thompson

B-26s, B-29s, F-80s, and F-82s, like this one, were mustered for action in the opening days of the Korean War. Lt. William Hudson was flying an F-82 Twin Mustang when he scored the first aerial victory of the war on June 27.

The following day, Yak fighters strafed the Suwon airport near Seoul, damaging a B-26 and an F-82 and destroying a C-54. On June 29, 18 B-26s responded by dropping fragmentation bombs that destroyed 25 aircraft at Pyongyang airfield. These and other losses virtually eliminated the North Korean air force.

FEAF assigned its fighters and bombers to two vitally important tasks. The first, which would take only a few days at the start of the war, was to escort the aircraft and ships evacuating American personnel from South Korea to the safety of Japan. The second would take the rest of the war; it was to bomb and strafe Communist positions and supply lines. In the process, arguments would arise as to the relative effectiveness of close air support at the front lines and the interdiction of enemy troops and supplies behind the lines.

These arguments arose from differences in perspective and in the strategic situation. During the early days of the war, profitable targets behind enemy lines had to be forgone because South Korean troops desperately needed close air support since they did not have artillery or armor. The ground assault missions enabled the ground forces to trade space for time.

From the start, United Nations Command aircraft were effective. For example, on July 10, an enemy column was trapped at a bombed-out bridge near Pyongtaek. F-80s, B-26s, and F-82s destroyed 117 trucks, 38 tanks, and seven half-tracks. This attack, along with others, gutted North Korea's single armored division. Had it survived, it could easily have punched through the UN defensive line at Pusan and driven UNC forces into the sea.

The air campaign led Gen. Walton H. Walker, then commanding US Eighth Army, to say, "I will gladly lay my cards right on the table and state that, 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."

Even later in the war, when such efforts were far less profitable, 30 percent of all United Nations sorties were still close assault attacks in direct support of the troops.

The war in the air and on the ground was divided into five distinct phases. Each phase saw major changes in comparative military power that forced equally wide political swings.

Pusan and Inchon

The first phase lasted from June 25 until Sept. 14, during which UN forces—essentially the South Korean constabulary and a few understrength American units hurriedly rushed to their aid—were driven into an enclave known as the Pusan perimeter. The enemy was unable to break through the besieged force as North Korean supply lines were shredded by constant attacks from B-26s and B-29s and its front-line troops were decimated by close support from the F-80s, F-51s, and B-26s.

General of the Army Douglas A. MacArthur, commander in chief of United Nations Command, unleashed the second phase and reversed the course of the war with his magnificent counterstroke at Inchon on Sept. 15. The amphibious landing of US forces to the rear of the main North Korean force was coupled with a Sept. 16 breakout from the Pusan perimeter. By Oct. 1, the North Korean forces had been thrown back across the 38th parallel, exhausted by battle and depleted by the merciless air assault. The effectiveness of air interdiction became more than obvious, for the speed of the UNC forces' advance was limited by the destruction the air war had inflicted on roads and bridges.

The rout of North Korea's forces was complete, and Allied leaders decided to pursue the enemy all the way to the northern border of North Korea and destroy him. The idea was that, with that objective achieved, the next step would be the unification of the country under South Korea's president, Syngman Rhee.

As UN forces approached the North Korean border with China, Communist Chinese leadership gave several clear warnings that they regarded North Korea as a state within China's sphere of influence and would intervene militarily if China's interests were threatened. Curiously, neither MacArthur nor the Joint Chiefs of Staff believed the warnings. They assumed that neither China nor the Soviet Union would intervene. These views were corroborated by the independent assessments of the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department.

On Nov. 25, however, Communist China made good its warning, intervening with overwhelming numbers of "volunteer" troops and initiating a new phase of the war. Using human wave attacks in place of airpower, Chinese Communist Forces savaged the UN forces during the coldest winter in Korea in more than a century, throwing them back down the peninsula with heavy losses. Communist forces recaptured Seoul, depriving the UN of most of its air bases in the area.

If the Chinese forces had possessed an adequate air force, their

drive would probably have forced United Nations Command from the Korean peninsula. However, intense UN air activity maintained from Japanese bases took the momentum from the Chinese advance. By Jan. 25, 1951, the new Eighth Army commander, Lt. Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, began the fourth phase with a ground advance back up the Korean peninsula, operating always under the cover of continuous air attack on Communist forces. Heavily outnumbered, Ridgway fought a brilliant ground campaign under the umbrella of UN airpower, relentlessly driving the Communists back. Seoul was recaptured on March 15, and the 38th parallel was crossed again by the first week in April.

Photo by Ken LaMoreux via Warren Thompson

B-26 Invaders, like the one shown here, bombed a Pyongyang airfield four days after the war started, destroying 25 aircraft and helping to virtually eliminate the North Korean air force.

Changed Objectives

Despite this resurgence of good fortune, the Chinese intervention had in just three months forced a change in UN goals from total victory to negotiated armistice. Continuous air attacks prevented the Chinese from accumulating stores required for sustained offensives, but close air support became less and less effective as Chinese forces protected themselves with elaborate systems of tunnels and dugouts.

The UN air effort was given full credit at the negotiating table at Panmunjom, where the North Korean Lt. Gen. Nam Il said, "Without the support of the indiscriminate bombing and bombardment by your air and naval forces, your ground forces would have long ago been driven out of the Korean peninsula."

Nam Il's rhetoric notwithstanding, the bombing was in fact quite discriminate, taking out enemy supply columns, transport facilities, and industrial centers. The fifth and final phase of the war lasted until the armistice was finally signed July 27, 1953. The ground war went on at a subdued level, one that still exacted heavy casualties but did not generate much change in the position of battle lines.

Interdiction efforts were stepped up, but there was a missing ingredient. Interdiction is more effective when combined with ground attacks that cause the enemy to consume his stores at a faster rate. The intense political requirement to minimize US casualties prevented this from happening, so that even with 90 or 95 percent of their truck and rail transport destroyed, the Chinese Communist Forces were able to maintain their minimum needs.

The Communists hoarded their supplies and made one last reckless attempt at victory with a large-scale offensive in June 1953, but it was repulsed after the enemy suffered nearly 7,000 casualties.

While the ground war could be charted with a series of lines on a map, the air war was a fluid encounter conducted almost solely over North Korean territory. The exceptions were the rare and quickly blunted attempts by the Communists to attack behind UN lines and a few inadvertent excursions across the Yalu River by wandering US airmen.

Public attention quickly focused on the battles between UN and Communist fighter aircraft, not so much because of the importance of the outcome but because of the glamour attached to dogfights between swept-wing fighters.

The fighter aces deserved their acclaim, for the Communist forces were never able to achieve even temporary air superiority. Had they done so, they would have introduced

Photo by Ward Odenwald via Warren Thompson

The C-46 Commando gained great fame airlifting supplies over "The Hump" during World War II and served again in the Korean War. Here, paratroopers jump from the transport into North Korea during a UN offensive.

Photo by Bob Amendolea via Warren Thompson

B-29s required a large, well-trained crew like this one, with the 19th Bomb Group at Kadena AB, Japan. These bombers were assigned difficult targets such as depots, industrial facilities, and the Yalu River bridges.

the large numbers of ground attack and light bomber aircraft available to the Soviet air force, forcing UN ground forces to abandon their positions. At one time, the Communists had more than 100 Il-28 jet bombers in the theater, and they presented a tremendous threat to UN airfields.

Grievous Losses

FEAF suffered grievous losses, losing 1,466 aircraft. The Navy, Marines, and friendly foreign air forces lost an additional 520 airplanes. Of the total of 1,986 aircraft, 1,041 were lost to enemy action (147 in air-to-air combat). Another 816 were lost to hostile ground fire and 78 to unknown causes. Best estimates of the Communist losses indicate that about 900 were shot down in aerial combat, of which more than 800 were MiG-15s. Another 1,800 were estimated to have been lost in accidents.

The single most effective Communist defense against UN air forces was directed against daylight B-29 bombing raids. There were simply too few F-86 Sabres to protect the bomber formations from slashing MiG-15 attacks. Heavy losses forced the B-29s to resort to night bombing attacks. Crews, aided by new equipment such as short-range navigation radar, known as shoran, became adept at night bombing and even engaged in close support. In one instance, radar directed bombs were dropped with great effect within 400 yards of US positions.

The Soviet Union came to North Korea's aid in the fall of 1950 by secretly sending regular Soviet air force fighter units with Soviet pilots who were permitted to fly from Chinese bases under North Korean colors. They came in small numbers at first but soon expanded to a fleet of more than 900 MiG-15 fighters in the theater. In contrast, USAF was never able to field more than about 150 F-86s in Korea, and for much of the time, as many as half of these were out of commission for lack of spare parts.

By May 1952, the Soviets supplemented their fighter force with a complete ground-controlled intercept system. From then on, the MiGs operated under close ground control, skillfully using the advantages conferred by geography and the stringent American rules of engagement. Korean geography dictated that American fighters would have to fly the length of the Korean peninsula to arrive in the target area with fuel for only 25 minutes of combat. In contrast, the Communist aircraft could take off from airfields north of the Yalu River, climb to altitude unmolested, engage in combat at will, and then, if necessary, glide back to home base. The US rules of engagement decreed that the Yalu was not to be crossed and Chinese airfields were not to be molested.

The first combat with Soviet MiGs came on Nov. 8, 1950. A flight of the swept-wing MiG interceptors jumped F-80Cs of the 51st Fighter–Interceptor Wing, escorting B-29s in an attack on Sinuiju airfield. Lt. Russell J. Brown, with five of his six .50-caliber machine guns jammed, put his F-80C Shooting Star behind a MiG-15 and shot it down, thus becoming the victor in the first jet-fighter-vs.-jet-fighter combat in history.

It was obvious, however, that the F-80 was no match for the MiG-15. Vandenberg knew that there were only about 150 F-86s available for continental air defense and that fewer than a dozen per month were being

Photo by O.W. Jensen via Warren Thompson

Synonymous with the Korean War, the F-86 began operations there Dec. 15, 1950. Two days later came the first Sabre-vs.-MiG victory. This 16th FS checkertail is returning from a mission over MiG Alley.

built. Nonetheless, on Nov. 8, Vandenberg ordered 49 Sabres of the 4th Fighter–Interceptor Wing into action. Vandenberg also picked the 27th Fighter Escort Wing, flying F-84s, to go to war.

The First Sabre Victory

On Dec. 17, Lt. Col. Bruce H. Hinton, commanding officer of the 336th Fighter–Interceptor Squadron, damaged one MiG-15 and shot down another in the first Sabre-vs.-MiG encounter. It was the first of 792 victories for the Sabres.

The engagement set the pattern for a long series of combats over "MiG Alley," a narrow triangle of land south of the Yalu River in the northwestern corner of Korea. The Sabres, operating in flights of four, would fly all the way up the peninsula, hoping to find MiGs that would engage in battle.

The MiG-15 and the F-86As were well-matched opponents, with the MiG's lighter weight conferring a speed and altitude advantage that often permitted it to dictate whether or not combat would take place. The F-86A was a superior gun platform. It was also more ruggedly built and equipped with redundant flight control systems for safety.

This relative parity in performance meant that the decisive element in combat was the individual pilot. In the opening encounters, both the American and the Communist aircraft were flown by experienced veteran pilots of World War II. The Americans proved to be better trained and more aggressive. In time, the Communists used Korea as a training ground for younger Soviet pilots and their Chinese and North Korean counterparts. In a similar way, the American veterans were soon supplemented by a new generation of eager pilots, fresh from flying school.

Over the course of the war, USAF pilots, aided by the introduction of improved models of the F-86, dominated MiG Alley, achieving a victory ratio of 10-to-1. Thirty-eight USAF pilots became aces, along with one each from the Navy and the Marine Corps. The race to be the leading ace was hotly contested and was finally won by Capt. Joseph C. McConnell Jr., with 16 victories. He was followed closely by Maj. James Jabara, with 15, and Capt. Manuel J. Fernandez with 14.5. Only in recent years has it been disclosed that the Soviet Union claimed no less than 44 aces during the Korean War, the list being led by Capt. Nikolay Sutiagin with 21 victories. All told, the Soviet pilots claimed more than 1,000 victories.

Photo by Leo Fournier via Warren Thompson

Both sides put experienced World War II pilots in the cockpit. In USAF, 38 pilots became aces, including then–Capt. James Jabara (in a World War II A-2 jacket), here discussing his fifth and sixth kills.

As important as aces and victories were to the war and to morale, the greatest benefit to USAF from the combat over MiG Alley was the generation of experienced leaders it created. Many World War II aces, such as Col. Francis S. "Gabby" Gabreski, Col. Harrison R. Thyng, and Lt. Col. Vermont Garrison, proved themselves to be first-rate combat unit leaders. Others, such as (later) Maj. Gen. Frederick C. "Boots" Blesse and (later) Brig. Gen. Robinson Risner, rose to leadership positions. Sadly, other potentially great leaders, such as Maj. George A. Davis Jr., Jabara, and McConnell, were killed in combat or in post-war accidents.

The final air-to-air victory of the Korean War was scored by Capt. Ralph S. Parr Jr., who shot down an Il-12 transport on July 27, 1953, after having previously destroyed nine MiG-15s.

Enter Weyland

When Stratemeyer suffered a severe heart attack on May 20, 1951, Lt. Gen. Otto P. Weyland was selected to succeed him. At the same time, Maj. Gen. Frank F. Everest was named commander of Fifth Air Force. Weyland had greater influence on the course of the air war than any other individual. Famed for his support of Patton's Third Army during World War II, Weyland believed in air interdiction, particularly in Korea, where the enemy was adept at digging in. He had to face opposition from his Army counterparts, who wanted to have the same degree of close air support that Marine air units were providing Marines on the ground. Although Weyland had loyal backers in MacArthur and Eighth Army's Walker, his tactics were often criticized by Maj. Gen. Edward M. Almond, X Corps commander.

Weyland felt that he was achieving the right balance between air interdiction and close air support with the limited means he had at hand. The B-26s flew the first and last bombing missions of the war, along with more than 55,000 others, of which 80 percent were at night. It was a tough and dangerous mission, flying low through the North Korean mountains to seek out trains and supply columns. The B-26s, often flying through the pitch black of thunderstorms, could unleash as many as 10 500-pound general-purpose or cluster bombs on the enemy below.

The B-29s were assigned difficult point targets such as bridges and supply depots, as well as industrial facilities. The bridges across the Yalu were particularly tricky, for the rules of engagement made it necessary for the bombers to fly parallel

Photo by Harold Taylor via Warren Thompson

Low and slow, in an extremely dangerous job, T-6s flew forward air control, or "mosquito" missions. The observer in the second seat spotted enemy troops and gun emplacements for the pilot to mark with smoke rockets.

to the river to avoid an incursion of enemy territory.

Despite their age and accumulated hours, the B-29s flew almost every day of the war. In some 21,000 sorties, they dropped about 167,000 tons of bombs. Equipment and tactics were improved and shoran was introduced to increase bombing accuracy. Losses were heavy—at least 16 were shot down over North Korea, and many more so damaged that they were lost on the journey home.

The Chinese made the series of interdiction campaigns difficult because they had huge reserves of manpower and sufficient trucks to move forward at night the comparatively limited amount of supplies they required. (A Chinese division required about 45 tons of supplies per day, compared to the 610 tons required by an American division.) The transportation routes could not be kept permanently destroyed and the Chinese simply waited until sufficient stores accumulated to continue fighting.

Strangulation Hold

The interdiction campaign was given various titles over time—Operation Strangle being one of the less fortunate selections—but in the end it was the air pressure campaign that operated most consistently for the longest period. The campaign was devised under the direction of then–Brig. Gen. Jacob E. Smart in the spring of 1952 and was focused on the types of targets that would have the greatest impact on the enemy's capability. Over time, the air pressure campaign restricted the number of Communist troops available to the enemy for action, and, in Nam Il's words, enabled the outnumbered UN forces to hold their positions. It may not have been all that Weyland wanted, but it was the one essential key to securing an armistice. Its ultimate vindication lies in the fact that the US objective was achieved without the necessity of resorting to nuclear weapons, as it was prepared to do if either China or the Soviet Union expanded the war.

Close air support was not overlooked. The B-26s, F-51s, F-80s, and F-84s applied pressure during the day, with F-86s joining in after January 1953. USAF flew a total of 250,000 ground attack sorties. Viewed with some suspicion at first because of their high speed and short loiter time, the jets experienced a loss rate less than that of the Mustangs. Losses to ground fire were high, however, and this, in combination with a chronic shortage of spare parts, reduced the number of aircraft available for sorties.

The F-84s, which had gone into action in early December 1950, proved to be especially effective because of their long range and heavy bomb loads. While they were at a disadvantage in high-altitude combat with the MiGs, a capable pilot could more than hold his own at lower altitudes.

Lt. Jay Brentlinger was assigned to Luke AFB, Ariz., where training losses averaged a man dead every one-and-one-third days. Sent to Korea he soon found himself one of two pilots in the 429th Fighter–Bomber Squadron qualified to make attacks on the front lines, where he flew 70 missions. He recalls today that they used to estimate they got more rounds fired at them on a mission than the average foot soldier experienced in a year. Brentlinger regarded the F-84 as an excellent airplane, rugged and able to place its two 1,000-pound

Photo by Charles Hauver via Warren Thompson

Then–Capt. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr.—who became USAF's first African–American four-star—takes a break from flying the 101 combat missions he completed in the Korean War.

bombs on target, regardless of the opposition.

The UN air effort was handicapped by the fact that the source of the majority of the Communist army's supplies lay behind the borders of China and the Soviet Union and were off-limits to destruction. As during World War II, the selection of targets shifted over time. Airfields in North Korea were the first priority, and these were soon suppressed, the enemy taking his aircraft behind the Yalu. Rail lines and truck routes were next, but the results were never as satisfactory as Weyland wished. Periodically, the many bridges became the target, although the Chinese proved adept at improvising and making repairs.

Photo by Jim Hanson via Warren Thompson

The success of USAF's bombing effort was largely due to reconnaissance done by pilots such as the 15th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron's Lt. Norman Fredkin, ready to fly his unarmed RF-80A out of Kimpo AB, South Korea.

The Dam-Busters

In June 1952, a series of attacks were made on the North Korean hydroelectric systems. Over a four-day period, almost 1,300 sorties were flown by US fighter–bombers, including Navy and Marine aircraft, shutting down 90 percent of the power available. Attention then shifted to industrial targets, which were soon eliminated. Airfields became the primary target when it was observed that the Chinese were building many airfields in North Korea for use after the armistice was signed. By May 1953, the focus was placed on the dams that controlled the irrigation system so vital to rice production.

In all these efforts, the Air Force effort was nobly complemented by US Navy and Marine Corps aviation. The Navy's Task Force 77 aircraft flew 167,552 sorties and dropped 120,000 tons of bombs. Naval and Marine Corps aircraft were primarily the piston-engine Vought F4U Corsairs and Douglas Skyraiders, supplemented by Grumman F9F Panthers. The Marines dropped 82,000 tons of bombs during more than 107,000 sorties. Additional ground support was supplied by South Korea (F-51s), Australia (F-51s and Meteors), and South Africa (F-51s and F-86s.)

The success of the bombing effort had depended in large part upon the excellent reconnaissance provided by a very small number of aircraft and aircrews. The first reconnaissance mission, flown by 1st Lt. Bryce Poe II in an RF-80A, took place on June 28, 1950. More than 60,000 reconnaissance sorties would be flown by the time the war ended.

Then–Maj. Gen. William H. Tunner, who had been the mastermind behind the Berlin Airlift, demonstrated his outstanding leadership and managerial ability in Korea. There, the 315th Air Division used about 210 semiobsolescent aircraft to establish excellent cargo and combat capability. Douglas C-47s and C-54s formed the backbone of the force, supplemented by Curtiss C-46 Commandos, C-119s, and a handful of the new Douglas C-124s. In the worst of weathers, with hodgepodge equipment, the airlifters flew more than 200,000 sorties, carrying 2.6 million passengers and 400,000 tons of freight. They also participated in two major combat operations in the early months of the war. The first, at Sukchon, saw 2,860 paratroopers and 300 tons of equipment dropped in a near-perfect operation on Oct. 20, 1950. The second took place on March 23, 1951, when 3,447 paratroopers and 220 tons of equipment were dropped at Munsan-ni.

Tunner's concept of centralized control of airlift assets proved to be effective, but he saw the need for a new transport, one that would combine speed, range, cargo carrying ability, and short-field capability. His vision would be fulfilled during the Vietnam War by the C-130, which would make its first flight a year after the Korean War ended.

The war in Korea would see the beginning of another discipline that would reach its high point in the Vietnam War, the Air Rescue Service. In Korea, 254 airmen would be picked up from behind enemy lines by what became the 3rd Air Rescue Group. Ill-equipped initially with Vultee L-5 Sentinel liaison aircraft and converted B-17s, it eventually used the SA-16 Albatross flying boat and the H-5 and H-19 helicopters. From a very small beginning, and with minimal resources, the Air Rescue Service became a vital part of the air war.

The Korean War fought to a stalemate even as the United States Air Force struggled to build a meaningful deterrent to the Soviet Union. When it was over, many conclusions were drawn, some correct, some not.

The most important lesson learned was the necessity of having a professional Air Force, ready to go to war on short notice and not reliant on a long buildup to achieve combat capability. ▪

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Korean War Chronology

1950

June 25. North Korean troops, 135,000 strong, invade South Korea, starting Korean War.

June 27. (June 26 in Washington) President Truman orders US air and naval forces to provide military cover and support for South Koreans.

June 27. (June 26 in New York) UN Security Council calls on member nations to help South Korea repel invasion.

June 27. Lt. William G. Hudson, flying an F-82, destroys a Yak-11 near Seoul, first enemy aircraft shot down in war.

June 28. North Korean forces capture Seoul.

June 30. (June 29 in Washington) President Truman authorizes Gen. Douglas MacArthur to dispatch air forces against targets in North Korea.

July 5. Task Force Smith, first US ground unit to arrive in Korea, engages North Koreans at Battle of Osan.

July 7. US designated UN executive agent for action in Korea.

July 8. Gen. Douglas MacArthur named commander in chief of United Nations Command.

July 24. UN Command activated.

Aug. 1. North Koreans push retreating UN forces into Pusan perimeter.

Aug. 4–Sept. 16. UN troops mount successful defense of Pusan perimeter.

Sept. 15. US and allied forces land US Marines and US Army troops at Inchon.

Sept. 16–27. US Eighth Army breaks out of Pusan perimeter.

Sept. 27. US and allies recapture Seoul after week of fighting.

Sept. 28. The 7th Fighter–Bomber Squadron, first jet fighter squadron to operate from a base in Korea, moves from Itazuke, Japan, to Taegu.

Sept. 30. UN forces cross 38th parallel into North Korea.

Oct. 4. Chinese leader Mao Zedong secretly orders "volunteers" into Korea to fight on side of North Korea.

Oct. 19–25. US Eighth Army seizes Pyongyang; UN forces push North Korean forces nearly to Yalu River.

Oct. 25–27. Chinese Communist Forces launch first phase of their Korean offensive.

Oct. 25–Nov. 3. CCF engages South Korean troops 40 miles south of Yalu River, halting US ground forces attack.

Nov. 1. Soviet–built MiG-15 makes its first appearance in Korean War.

Nov. 6. MacArthur charges Chinese with unlawful aggression.

Nov. 8. Lt. Russell J. Brown, flying an F-80, downs a North Korean MiG-15 in first all-jet aerial combat victory.

Nov. 8–26. USAF B-29s and Navy aircraft attack Yalu River bridges in attempt to isolate battlefield.

Nov. 16. Truman declares no hostile intent toward China.

Nov. 25–Dec. 9. Chinese launch second phase of offensive.

Nov. 27–Dec. 9. Battle of Chosin Reservoir. Encircled 1st Marine Division fights southward.

Nov. 29–30. US Eighth Army and US X Corps withdraw in face of Chinese offensive.

Dec. 5. US and UN forces abandon Pyongyang. Communist forces reoccupy Pyongyang.

Dec. 14. UN creates cease-fire committee and presents cease-fire resolution to China.

Dec. 15. F-86 Sabre begins operating in Korea. UN forces withdraw below 38th parallel.

Dec. 22. China rejects cease-fire.

Dec. 25. Communist forces recross 38th parallel into South Korea.

Dec. 26. Lt. Gen. Matthew Ridgway assumes command of ground forces in Korea.

Dec. 31–Jan. 5. Chinese force of 500,000 troops launches third-phase offensive.

1951

Jan. 4. US and UN forces evacuate Seoul in the face of a major Communist assault.

Jan. 25. UN forces launch counteroffensive.

Feb. 11–17. CCF launches fourth-phase offensive.

Feb. 13–17. US Eighth Army retakes Inchon and Kimpo airfield, defeats CCF at Chipyong-ni and other locations.

March 7. UN forces launch Operation Ripper to drive Communist forces back to 38th parallel.

March 14–April 5. US Eighth Army retakes Seoul, again crosses 38th parallel into North Korea, heads toward Yalu.

April 11. Truman relieves MacArthur, who had criticized US war policies, and appoints Ridgway to succeed him.

April 12. War's first major air battle. More than 40 MiG-15s attack a B-29 formation, shooting down two. Eleven MiGs are destroyed.

April 22–30. China's first spring offensive, first step in its fifth phase.

May 16–23. China launches second spring offensive, makes initial gains.

May 20. Capt. James Jabara becomes Air Force's first Korean War ace. CCF advance halted.

May 31. Operation Strangle, massive air interdiction campaign initiated by FEAF and allies.

July 1. Kim Il Sung, North Korea's leader, and Peng Teh-huai, head of Chinese "volunteers," agree to discuss armistice.

July 10. Armistice negotiations begin at Kaesong.

Aug. 22. Negotiations suspended.

Sept. 20. Operation Summit, first helicopter deployment of a combat unit.

Oct. 25. Armistice talks resume at new site, Panmunjom.

Nov. 27. Sides agree on 38th parallel as line of demarcation.

Nov. 30. Force of 31 F-86 Sabres engage 44 enemy aircraft and knock down eight Tu-2 bombers, three La-9 propeller-driven fighters, and one MiG-15.

1952

April 19. UN delegation says only 54,000 North Koreans and 5,100 Chinese of 132,000 Communist POWs wish to return home.

May 2. Communists reject UN proposals for voluntary repatriation.

May 12. Army Gen. Mark Clark succeeds Ridgway, confronts military deadlock, stalled negotiations, violent POW situation.

June 23. FEAF and Navy aircraft launch massive airstrikes against North Korea's hydroelectric power grid.

Aug. 29. In war's heaviest air raid, FEAF and carrier airplanes launch 1,403-sortie assault on Pyongyang.

Oct. 8. Talks break down over POWs. UN delegation suspends negotiations.

Nov. 1. US tests first thermonuclear device at Eniwetok Atoll in Marshall Islands.

Nov. 4. Eisenhower elected 34th President, defeating Adlai Stevenson.

Dec. 25. Battle of T-Bone Hill. US defenders repel Chinese forces in intense firefight, one of many battles fought to gain or maintain control of elevated sites, such as Bloody Ridge, Heartbreak Ridge, Old Baldy, Pork Chop Hill (see below), Punchbowl, and Sniper's Ridge.

1953

Jan. 20. Eisenhower inaugurated in Washington.

March 5. Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin dies.

March 21. Communists agree to exchange sick and wounded POWs.

March 30. Communists propose that prisoners unwilling to be repatriated be placed in temporary custody of neutral nation.

April 16–18. Battle of Pork Chop Hill. US infantry regiments suffer heavy casualties.

April 20–May 3. Operation Little Switch, exchange of sick and wounded POWs.

April 26. Armistice negotiations resume at Panmunjom.

May 13. Raid on Toksan Dam, dramatic strike by F-84s, destroys a major irrigation system, rice crops, and miles of major highways and railways.

May 25. UN negotiating team proposes nonrepatriated POWs remain in neutral custody for 120 days after armistice.

May 28. South Korea rejects latest proposal and boycotts talks.

June 8. UN and Communist negotiators agree to neutral nation repatriation committee.

June 15–30. Communist forces attack US I Corps.

June 17. Agreement on new line of demarcation for truce.

June 18. South Koreans unilaterally release about 25,000 POWs.

June 30. FEAF F-86s destroy 16 MiGs, largest number shot down in one day.

July 6–10. 7th Infantry Division ordered to evacuate positions on Pork Chop Hill after five days of fighting.

July 13–20. Battle of Kumsong River Salient, last Communist offensive.

July 19. Negotiators at Panmunjom agree on all points.

July 24–26. Final US ground combat takes place in "Boulder City" area.

July 27. Armistice signed at Panmunjom at 10 a.m.

July 27. In war's last air victory, F-86 downs enemy transport near Manchurian border.

July 27. Korean War armistice goes into effect at 10:01 p.m.

Korean War Air Operations Summary

Combat Sorties, Far East Air Forces	
Counterair	66,997
Interdiction	192,581
Close Support	57,665
Cargo	181,659
Miscellaneous	222,078
Total FEAF (USAF)	720,980

Combat Sorties, All UN Forces	
US Air Force	720,980
US Navy	167,552
US Marine Corps	107,303
Allied air forces	44,873
Total UN	1,040,708

Tons of Ordnance Delivered	
US Air Force	476,000
US Navy	120,000
US Marine Corps	82,000
Allied air forces	20,000
Total UN	698,000

Far East Air Forces, Ordnance Expended	
Tons of bombs	386,037
Tons of napalm	32,357
Rockets	313,600
Smoke rockets	55,797
Machine gun rounds	16,853,100

Enemy Losses to UN Aircraft	
Aircraft	976
Tanks	1,327
Vehicles	82,920
Locomotives	963
Railway cars	10,407
Bridges	1,153
Buildings	118,231
Tunnels	65
Gun positions	8,663
Bunkers	8,839
Oil storage tanks	16
Barges and boats	593
Railway cuts	28,621
Troops killed	184,808

Enemy Aircraft Destroyed by US Air Force	
Air-to-air	900
MiG-15	823
Other	77
Air-to-ground	53
Total	953

USAF Aircraft Losses to Enemy Action	
Air-to-air	139
Ground fire	550
Cause unknown	68
Total	757

Korean War Casualties

United States	
Killed in action	33,651
Wounded	103,000
Missing	8,177
POW	7,000
South Korea	
Killed in action	59,000
Wounded	291,000
British Commonwealth	
Killed in action	1,263
Wounded	4,817
Other UN Allies	
Killed in action	1,800
Wounded	7,000
China and North Korea (est.)	
Killed	500,000+
Wounded	1,000,000+

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