



To meet the threat of the MiGs, the US rushed F-86E Sabres to Korea.

Sabres *and Aces*

These rare color images present some of the pilots and aircraft that made history in the Korean War.



Photo by Harry Schumate

In the early hours of June 25, 1950, North Korea struck across the 38th parallel into South Korea, plunging the United States into war. The entry of the Chinese and Soviet communist forces and weapons into the war created difficulties for American forces, particularly with the introduction of the swept-wing MiG-15.

In December 1950, the US, realizing the possibility of losing control of the skies, quickly rushed three squadrons of F-86 Sabres to the Far East.

At right, the 16th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron's A Flight departs MiG Alley—an area near the Yalu River in North Korea famed for air-to-air combat. The Sabres are returning to Suwon AB, South Korea, after a routine combat air patrol.



Photo by Phil Hunt

Photo by J.W. Manney



The Huff, shown at left, was assigned to Lt. James L. Thompson of the 39th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. Thompson shot down a MiG-15 that had a dragon painted on its side and, on returning to Suwon, had a similar image painted on his Sabre. Thompson is credited with two MiG kills.

The F-86 Sabre was superior to the MiG-15 in its turns and dives, but the MiG had better acceleration and rate of climb and could reach higher altitudes.

Capt. James Jabara (center right, talking to newsmen) became the first jet ace in history on May 20, 1951, claiming his fifth and sixth kills on the same mission. All of his confirmed kills were against MiG-15s.

After completing two separate tours in Korea, Jabara finished as the second highest scoring ace in the war, with a total of 15 kills.



Photo by Ed Fletcher



Lt. Col. George I. Ruddell, at left, commanded the 39th FIS and was credited with eight kills in the Korean War. Below, a scoreboard placed outside an operations tent at Suwon itemizes the 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron's victories.



Above, Capt. Manuel J. "Pete" Fernandez, with 14.5 confirmed victories, ranked third on the ace list. He flew with the 334th FIS, based at Kimpo AB, South Korea. At right, pilots from the 25th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron were often identified by their bright red scarves. Standing at far right is 1st Lt. Iven C. Kincheloe Jr., a Korean War ace with five confirmed kills.



F-86 units required a large number of external fuel tanks. Lack of such tanks could and did hamper effective combat air patrol in MiG Alley. Fuel economy was a problem for both sides.

At left, some of the aircraft and tanks at Suwon, home of the 51st Fighter Wing.

At right, an F-86 of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing displays the wing's trademark checkered vertical stabilizer.

The 51st began the war flying the F-80, an airplane that had ruled supreme in the area up until that time. However, the MiG-15 proved to be superior.

In early 1951, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force Chief of Staff, ordered 75 new F-86Es sent to the Far East.



Photo by James Lindsay

Photo by Wayne Rose



Lt. Col. Clyde Wade holds up a freshly painted sign that reads "25,000th sortie." The F-86 aircraft in the background were from the 39th FIS.

The 51st FW's pilots flew more than 45,000 sorties and shot down more than 300 MiG-15s. The wing produced 14 aces.

Photo by Archie Buie



Unfortunately for its pilots, Sabre cockpits in winter months were jammed to capacity with clothing and survival gear (above). At right, an F-86 from the 336th FIS patrols Korean skies.



Photo by Houston Tuel

Photo by Karl Dittmer



Photo by Karl Dittmer



Photo by Philip Davis



Above, Capt. Troy Cope poses with Rosie, one of the F-86s he flew with the 334th FIS. Cope was shot down over the Yalu River in 1952 and was missing in action until more than 50 years later, when his remains were recovered in China and returned to the US for burial in 2005.

Top center, Capt. Clifford D. Jolley, an ace with seven victories, displays his helmet, hand-painted to match the name of his F-86. Top right, Lt. Philip Davis shows off the artwork on his 16th FIS Sabre.

Right, two F-86 Sabres head north to MiG Alley on a combat air patrol.



Photo by Karl Dittmer

Photo by Robert Cassatt



Photo by Paul Peterson



Above, F-86Fs are reconfigured for four 20 mm cannons, as part of the secret Project Gunval, created as a result of Sabre pilots' complaints that their machine guns did not pack enough punch. At Osan AB, South Korea, Lt. Robert Cassatt (left) stands by MiG Poison, Maj. James P. Hagerstrom's Sabre.

Col. Francis S. Gabreski, a World War II ace, commanded the 51st FW until June 1952, when he was succeeded by Col. John W. Mitchell. At right, Mitchell returns from a mission in his F-86, Mitch's Squitch.

Mitchell completed his tour in the Korean War with four MiG kills, but his fame stems from his World War II exploits. As commanding officer of the 339th Fighter Squadron at Guadalcanal, Mitchell led 18 P-38 Lightnings on the clandestine mission that killed Japan's Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto. Mitchell was credited with 11 kills during World War II.



Photo by Earl Shutt

Photo by Al Shortt



Left, members of the 80th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, called the "Headhunters," are suited up and ready for another mission. Pictured (l-r) are: 2nd Lt. Vince Bakies, 2nd Lt. Bob Debenport, 2nd Lt. Al Shortt, 2nd Lt. Dick Wyatt, 2nd Lt. Ray Eason, and 1st Lt. Ken Dye.

Photo by James Carter



Above, the commander of the 8th Fighter-Bomber Wing personalized his Sabre by having the colors of all three squadrons painted on the vertical stabilizer. At right, Lt. Joel Perry of the 12th Fighter-Bomber Squadron checks out his yellow-nosed F-86 while a crew chief stands by.



Photo by Robert Hook

Photo by Fred Kummer



Photo by Leo Fournier



Photo by Bill Nowadnick



Photo by Cliff Nunnery

At right, in photo above, 1st Lt. Charles A. Gabriel (later, Air Force Chief of Staff) chats with fellow 16th FIS pilot Lt. Fred Kummer. Gabriel flew more than 100 combat missions in P-51s and F-86s during the war. Top center, Lt. Ralph D. Gibson, pictured on duty at Suwon, flew with the 335th FIS and was credited with five MiG kills.

Top right, this F-86 safely returned to Suwon after taking hits by a MiG's 37 mm cannon. Also at top right, the 67th Fighter-Bomber Squadron services an F-86 on the tarmac.

At right, Vice President Richard M. Nixon tours the cockpit of an F-86 with double ace Capt. Ralph S. Parr Jr.



Photo by Donald Showen

Photo by J.W. Manney



Capt. Joseph C. McConnell Jr. was the highest scoring ace during the Korean War. He shot down 16 MiG-15s in four months. His Sabre, Beauteous Butch II, is shown at left. Altogether, the conflict over Korea saw 39 F-86 pilots achieve ace status. ■

Photographers: Archie Buie, Joe Canon, Doug Carter, James Carter, Robert Cassatt, Harold Chitwoods, Philip Davis, Karl Dittmer, Ed Fletcher, Leo Fournier, Robert Hook, Phil Hunt, Fred Kummer, James Leatherbee, James Lindsay, Cliff Nunnery, Bill Nowadnick, J.W. Manney, Paul Peterson, Wayne Rose, Al Shortt, Donald Showen, Earl Shutt, Houston Tuel, T.R. White. All photos from the collection of Warren Thompson. Captions by Dina Elshinnawi, Air Force Magazine Editorial Associate.