

HELPING THE BIG FRIENDS

Nellie's Incredible Shot

by Brigadier General Lon Walter, USAF (Ret)

In the last years of the Korean War, most B-29 strikes against North Korean targets were conducted at night. But during the first year after the F-86A Sabre arrived in Korea, the Superfortresses used tactics quite similar to those employed in World War II, which had ended just five years before the Korean War began. Daylight, high altitude (25,000 to 35,000 ft), precision bombing was the order of the day, and fighter escort was an important part of those bombing missions.

Among the 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing pilots who flew the escort missions, there was great respect for the B-29 aircrews. Their courage and gallantry under fire were always impressive, as the great, lumbering strategic bombers held formation on their bomb runs in spite of incredible anti-aircraft fire over heavily defended targets such as Pyongyang and Sinanju.

As part of the mission "package" for a B-29 strike, the 4th would normally send up a flight of two Sabres (Call sign—"Little Joe") to check the weather over the primary and secondary targets of the B-29s. Timing was critical, and the fighters' arrival over the targets was coordinated with the bombers, inbound from Yokota or Kadena Air Bases. Before turning for home, the "Little Joe" flight leader would radio directly to the commander of the bomber formation, giving him a detailed report of cloud cover and visibility over each target, but without mentioning the name of the target specifically. In some instances, the bomber stream diverted to the secondary target, or cancelled the mission entirely if weather conditions were unsatisfactory.

Subsequent takeoff times for the main force of fighter escorts, usually four flights of four, which might be followed later by another sixteen in relief, were timed to sweep the area between the B-29 target(s) and the MiG bases along the Yalu. In this way, a screen was formed to protect the "Big Friends" when they came within range of the enemy fighters. When the Superforts went against targets in the Yalu area known as "MiG

Alley," of course there was little room for a sweep, and the fighters tried to clear the air before the bombers arrived, then took up positions above the bomber stream to provide close-in protection. Particularly on missions against targets further to the south, such as Pyongyang, once the fighters had patrolled MiG Alley, some or all of the fighters would cover the bombers on their hazardous path from their bomb run's IP (Initial Point) to the target.

Observing these great silver bombers approach and penetrate a block of sky literally blackened with flak bursts was an awesome experience, and the Sabres usually flew above the deadly black cloud or off to one side. As the bombers emerged from the other side of the barrage, it was not unusual to see one or more of them with engines afire, or slowly descending, as the crews bailed out. It was a tragic, heartrending sight.

On many missions, despite the best efforts of the Sabres, MiG-15s would break through the screen to attack the bombers. Whenever possible,

Sabres would take on these MiGs, and the two adversaries could be seen flying through the bomber formations, firing at each other. All the while, as they fought to defend their formation, B-29 gunners were challenged to distinguish swept-winged friend from swept-winged foe. Through all of this, bomber aircraft commanders were radioing for help when they came under attack, and their calls were answered by Sabre flight leaders who needed to know their position in order to come to their aid. The whole frantic scenario

often played out in ten or fifteen minutes at most.

On 9 July 1951, during one such melee, Capt Milton (Nellie) Nelson and his wingman, 2nd Lt Garold R. Beck, of



Capt Nelson gives his crew chief the victory sign from the cockpit of his F-86 Sabrejet after returning from combat with his number two "kill."

(USAF Photo)



Capt Nelson (r) puts the finishing touches on his personal scoreboard of aerial victories over MiG-15 fighters as his crew chief TSgt Perley H. Allen (c) and 1st Lt John D. Hungerford look on.

(USAF Photo)

the 335th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 4th Fighter Wing, were flying close escort for six B-29s when a Superfort aircraft commander asked for help from any F-86 in the vicinity. He said that a MiG-15 was sitting on his tail, and was getting in position to fire. Nelson and Beck quickly spotted the endangered B-29 with the MiG-15 trailing it. They were slightly below and behind the two Sabres, and it was clear that something would have to be done quickly if the bomber was to be saved. Nelson chose a course of action that was calculated to distract the MiG (at least), or to hit him with a difficult shot (at best). Because the Sabres were out of position for a normal "pursuit curve" attack, he chose a hard break into the MiG, and as his gunsight "pipper" traveled rapidly from the nose to the tail of the B-29, he held his fire. As soon as the B-29 was clear, Nelson opened fire on the MiG—a nearly head-on pass with a combined closure rate around 1,000 knots. It was an incredible, almost impossible, deflection shot, but one or more of Capt Nelson's rounds must have hit a vital spot on the Soviet fighter, and as the two Sabres neared the MiG they saw the enemy fighter burst

into flames. The MiG pilot was seen to eject by several other Sabre pilots.

There were more glamorous missions than bomber escort during the Korean Air War, but few could better illustrate the teamwork and dedication that epitomized American airpower. This was Capt Nelson's third victory and two days later he scored again, making him the highest scoring pilot in the theater at the time. He finished his tour with four, but there was no more satisfying victory than the one that surely saved a B-29 and its entire crew.

The author, Brig Gen Lon Walter, is Chairman of the Daedalian Foundation and lives in Austin, Texas. Brig Gen Milton E. (Nellie) Nelson lives in retirement in San Antonio. The old friends and warriors got together recently at Daedalian Headquarter to collaborate on this story.

