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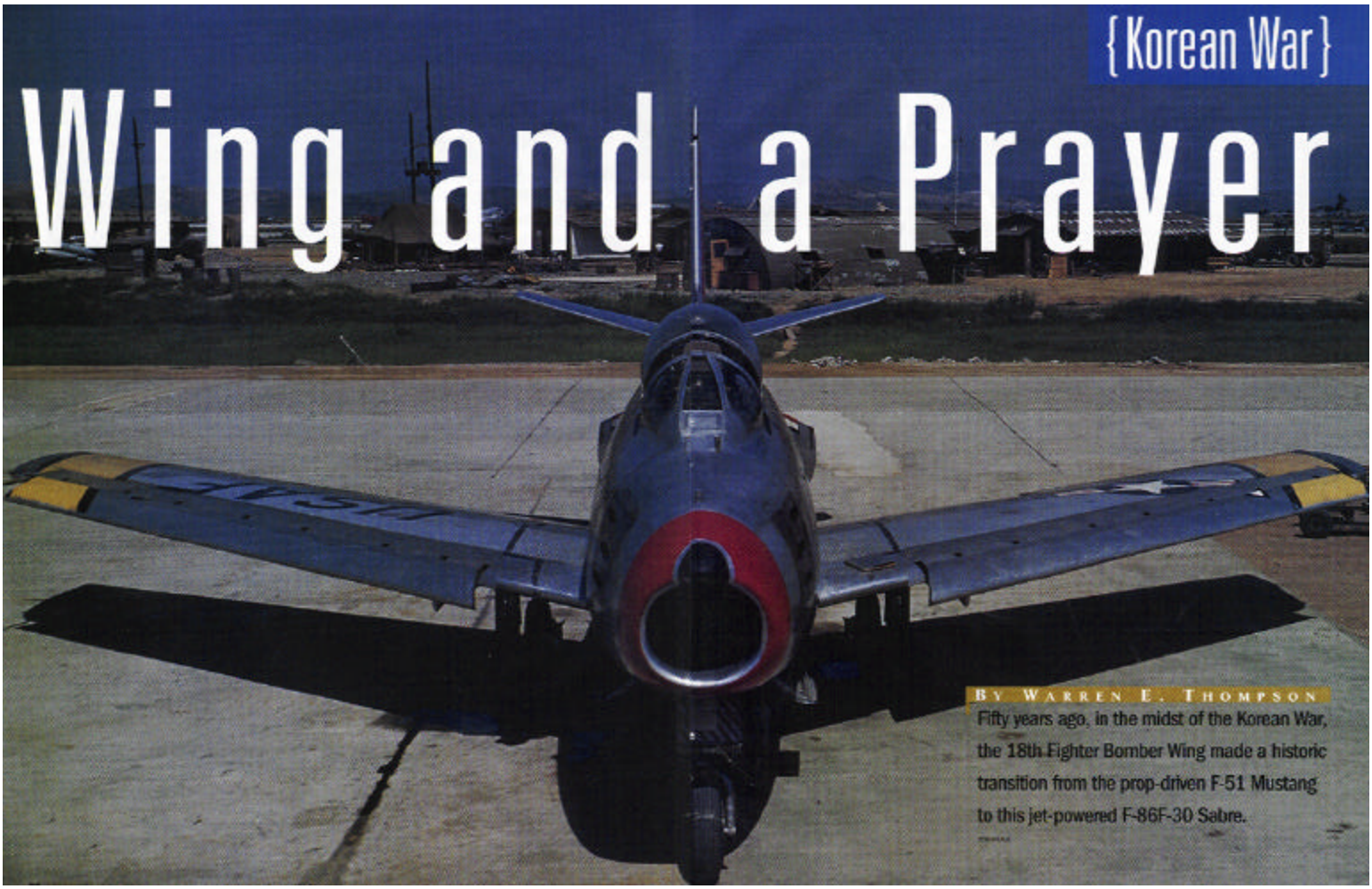

{Korean War}

Wing and a Prayer

BY WARREN E. THOMPSON

Fifty years ago, in the midst of the Korean War, the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing made a historic transition from the prop-driven F-51 Mustang to this jet-powered F-86F-30 Sabre.

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Making the transition to an entirely new kind of airplane would be a challenge to pilots even under the best of circumstances. With today's ultrasophisticated, multimillion-dollar aircraft, it would involve months of preparation and training. Yet 50 years ago, a group of pilots with the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing (FBW) made one of the more radical transitions in aviation history — from the World War II-era F-51 Mustang, a propeller-powered plane, to a jet-powered warplane, the F-86F-30 Sabre. And the 18th FBW pilots did this in the toughest circumstances imaginable — at a forward, unfinished base in the midst of the Korean War while flying in hard winter weather. Flying from Osan Air Base (AB) in South Korea in January and February 1953, the 18th FBW developed a new fighter-bomber doctrine for the Sabres using close air-support tactics that played a critical role in the final months of the war.

Out with the old

Based at Clark AB in the Philippines since the end of World War II, the 18th FBW was among the first Air Force units committed to the Korean War in July 1950. For a brief period, the wing operated with four full squadrons, enabling its pilots to log more than 50,000 successful combat sorties in the Mustang.

The decision to bring the new "dash-30" Sabres into Korea was made in the early fall of 1952, and the delivery schedule was slated to begin in November. But construction at Osan AB fell behind schedule, and the new Sabres were delayed. Despite these difficulties, the wing moved to Osan by Dec. 31, while Mustang operations wound down at prior bases of operation at Chinhae and Hoengsong.

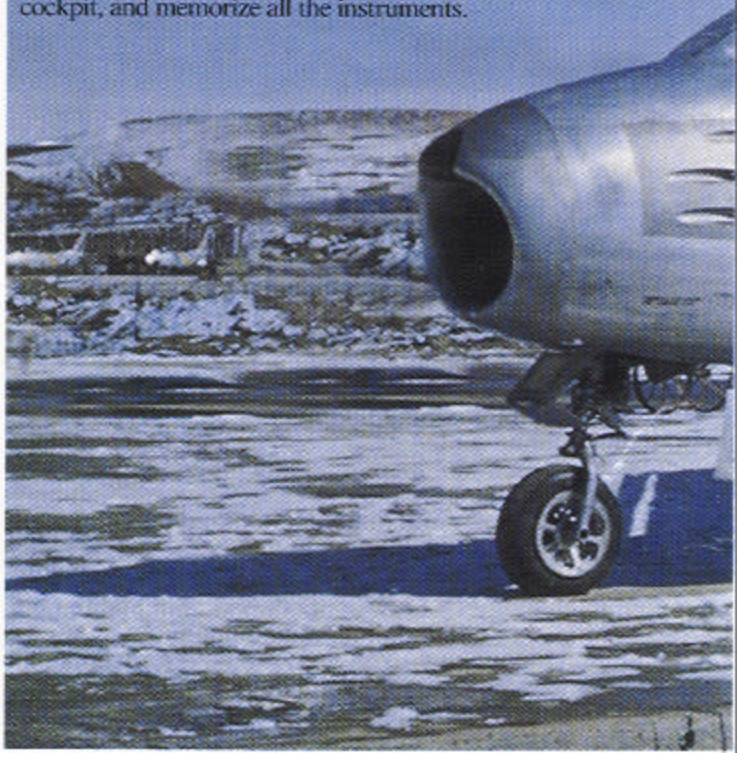
A mobile training detachment arrived at Osan Dec. 29, and the switch over to the Sabre began Jan. 7. Three squadrons, the 12th, the 67th, and the 2nd South African Air Force (SAAF), made up the 18th FBW. The 12th would stand down first, followed by the 2nd SAAF, and the 67th would have the honor of flying the final combat sorties by the Mustang. The Mustang's final day of operation was Jan. 23. The surviving Mustangs were flown to Japan, where most of them wound up flying with the Republic of Korea Air Force (ROKAF).

Many of the 18th FBW's pilots were close to finishing their required 100 missions. It wouldn't have been logical for them to go through an extensive — and expensive — training period in the new Sabre only to rotate back to the United States after a few missions. Instead, pilots with fewer than 50 missions automatically entered the program. The rest had three options: finish their tour with a forward air control "Mosquito" squadron; become advisors to the Mustang-equipped ROKAF; or extend their tours and have a chance to fly the new Sabres.

In with the new

Classroom instruction was strictly business, with as many as three different classes going on at the same time, eight hours a day, seven days a week. The fast pace enabled all of the 18th's pilots to be checked out in the new aircraft by Feb. 25, only 49 days after training began and only 32 days after the final Mustang mission.

To get the pilots checked out in jets, the 18th FBW had borrowed three T-33s from nearby F-84 units at Taegu and Kunsan. These speedy trainers were put to the test for several weeks as the transitioning pilots got the feel of flying a jet aircraft. Once the first new Sabres began arriving during the third week of January, the new pilots could become familiar with the F-model's cockpit. In the final stages of the classroom regimen, pilots were required to take their F-86 operations manual out on the flight line, climb into a Sabre cockpit, and memorize all the instruments.



The basic training syllabus for 18th wing pilots consisted of eight transition flights (T-33 and F-86F combined), eight formation flights (close formation with some combat "spread"), five camera gunnery flights (flown against each other), eight combat formation flights (mostly tactics and maneuvers), two instrument flights (one in the T-33 and one in an F-86F with a safety chase), a navigation flight, and two Yalu sweeps (an opportunity to practice their new air-to-air tactics and go after Soviet-built MiG-15s).

Maj. Howard "Ebe" Ebersole was the squadron operations officer with the 12th during this period and one of two original instructors to take on the fighter-bomber Sabre. "My flight instruction was mostly with the South African and 12th squadron pilots," he says. "I would rise at 0530 hours, awaken the instructors that were on the a.m. shift, check the aircraft schedule, eat breakfast, and go fly."

Heavy snowfall during December and January is typical for the Korean peninsula, and the winter of 1952–53 proved no exception. Temperatures hovered in the teens or lower. "It was mighty dark on the flight line during January and February," recalls Ebersole.

By late February, the wing had achieved remarkable progress toward completing the transition, but it still had a

BOARDMAN REED; BELOW: F.G. SMART

A new Sabre rests on snowy ground in Korea. (above) The 12th squadron's shark-mouthed Mustangs had perhaps the most distinctive markings of any F-51s in Korea.

BOB MIKULAS; BELOW, KEN HOOK

long way to go to be fully operational. Of the 76 pilots listed on the wing roster, 8 percent were considered combat ready, 28 percent were in the final stages of their training, and 64 percent were halfway through the regimen. The wing could form up only a couple of flights for a close-support mission.

Fortunately, the first week of March brought a personnel windfall that accelerated the wing's reentry into the action. "The 12th squadron received 16 Nellis [Air Force Base]-trained, fresh-from-the-USA F-86 pilots," Ebersole explains. "All of them were second lieutenants, and they filled our squadron's table of organization for the allotted number of pilots. Now we could get on with the war and do what we were supposed to be doing."

Growing Pains

Still, the transition didn't come off without a hitch. Among the most important and expensive items used by all F-86 squadrons were the external fuel tanks, without which the Sabres wouldn't have enough fuel to take on MiG-15s once they established their Combat Air Patrol over MiG Alley. But when pilots punched off the external tanks, the tanks could tumble off and bang on the wings and flaps, potentially causing extensive damage. Instead of dropping straight down, the tanks would fly up and sometimes knock off the pitot tube, which created a major problem: Without an airspeed indicator, landing the aircraft at the proper speed was challenging. Every time a pilot punched off a pair of the expensive tanks, someone would say, "There goes another Cadillac."

Fortunately, this situation was remedied quickly. "The airmen that supported our operation deserved more recognition and medals than the pilots that flew the aircraft," Ebersole says. "They were heroes in my estimation."

Other problems occured: One rainy morning, one of the pilots heard a series of thuds. He looked out to find that half the F-86s for an upcoming mission had dropped their 500-pound bombs onto the ramp. (Fortunately, they hadn't dropped far enough to arm themselves.)

It turned out rain had gotten inside the cockpits of some of the Sabres, whose canopies were slightly open. A leather-covered red button used to salvo the ordnance served as a panic button in case a pilot suddenly had to dump the external fuel tanks and bombs in an emergency situation. The rainwater shorted out the switch, causing the bombs to be dropped on the ramp.

Technology and weather weren't the only hitches: the runway at Osan AB could trip up an unwary pilot. The base was not fully completed when the 18th occupied it during the latter months of the war. "The shoulders to the runway, taxiways, and parking areas had not been stabilized nor graded flush with the concrete. The drop at the edge of the concrete ranged from 3 to 12 inches in some spots," recalls Maj. Flamm "Dee" Harper, the 18th group operations

Transitioning pilots were given a taste of the Sabre's powerful ejection seat.
(above) A Sabre returns from a combat mission, its ordnance gone but its external fuel tanks intact.

officer during that period. "A young pilot landing on a wet, slick runway with a heavy load [when his bombs had failed to release] faced a real challenge. If he got in trouble and a wheel left the hard surface of the runway, he washed out the aircraft."

Success Aloft

By June 30 the complexion of the unit had changed dramatically. There were now 127 pilots on the roster, with 82 percent classified as combat ready; most, if not all, already had logged several combat missions. The remaining 18 percent were new replacements coming into the wing, all of whom already had received advanced training in jets at Nellis Air Force Base but had to be checked out in the required air-to-air and ground-support tactics.

The pilots became well-versed in air-to-air tactics. Their forte was putting bombs right on the assigned targets, a feat permitted by a great bomb sight. "The manual pipper control that we had been given after we had been in combat with the F-86F for a while was one of the best things to happen to us, because it contributed heavily to improving our accuracy," says Ebersole. "We had a radar ranging device of sorts, and when you would roll over on your back and go down at about a 45 degree angle, you might end up being anywhere between 25 degrees and 70 degrees. ... One of the things we did [with the pipper control] was take a grease pencil and a straight edge and put a 45 degree line on the left side of the canopy. So, when you [were] in your dive and that line [was] on the horizon, you would have exactly 45 degrees. This gave us much better accuracy on our dive bomb runs."

"North American flying legend Bob Hoover came over and demonstrated [the maneuver] using one of our 12th squadron Sabres," Ebersole recalls. "He also did the 'Hoover' demo of aerobatics while he was there, and [18th FBW pilots] learned a lot about what the Sabre was capable of from him."

The close air-support tactics developed by the 18th during the final three months of the war helped make the F-86 an excellent bomb delivery platform. "The Sabre was an excellent 'mud mover,' " Harper says. "It could carry two 1,000-pound bombs [and] two 120-gallon external fuel tanks plus 1,800 rounds of .50-caliber ammunition to any point in North Korea."

With the Sabre's speed, "it took us less time to accomplish the mission," says Harper, "and we were off the target so fast that our chances of getting hit by the automatic weapons [that were] defending the area was greatly reduced. During the early summer months when it was getting hot, we did not have to use [jet-assisted takeoff] to get airborne with our heavy loads like the F-84s over at Taegu and Kunsan did."

The Sabre possessed another important advantage: "We could confuse the enemy radar/communications because they could not tell the difference between our aircraft and the fighter interceptor Sabres," Ebersole explains. "In the F-86, we were capable of entering a dive-bomb run at 30,000 feet toward the general target area. With speed brakes out and at idle power, the airspeed would stabilize at about .85 Mach. After identification of the specific target at about 20,000 feet, while still in a dive, you could make the necessary adjustments for the attack. On many occasions, the enemy did not know we were in the area until the bombs impacted."

During the final 10 weeks of the war, the 8th and 18th FBWs kept pressure on Chinese troops and rolling stock with six squadrons of dash-30 Sabres. After the war ended, the 18th FBW remained at Osan until the fall of 1954, when it moved to Okinawa and converted to the F-100. The new fighter-bomber Sabre had proved a major asset to United Nations ground forces in the Korean War. ★