

Rescues in Korea



A 3rd Rescue Squadron H-19A plucks a 5th AF pilot, believed to be Capt. Joseph McConnell from the 39th Squadron, from the Yellow Sea in March 1953. Capt. McConnell vowed to repay his 'debt' for the F-86 loss by shooting down more MiGs. He did, scoring 16 before rotating home in May. (credit USAF)

The Under Told Story of Rescues in Korea

In looking back on almost ten years of stories in Sabre jet classics, one finds all-too-frequent mention of an F-86 pilot heading out to sea, ejecting, and being picked up either by helicopter or the SA-16 during the Korean War. Others couldn't make it back to home base, but were rescued from deep in North Korea. Time and again, the rescue crews did their job, flying into incredibly dangerous situations to save pilots from an uncertain future in the hands of the enemy. In a sense, and using present day vernacular, the rescue forces were a "force multiplier" because the pilots they saved were returned to duty and flew many more combat missions. Well known pilots such as Boots Blesse, Cliff Jolley, Joe McConnell Lonnie Moore, Dee Harper, and many more were beneficiaries of the heroics performed by the crews of SA-16s and helicopters of the 3rd Air Rescue Squadron/Group and other helicopter equipped units.

Although space limitations prevent us from printing Dr. Marion's article in its entirety, we are pleased that the AFHF has granted us permission to reprint an excerpt from Dr. Marion's work, and we have chosen his account of a rescue attempt, although unsuccessful, which illustrates the bravery of the rescue aircrews and a particularly heroic act by a Sabre pilot. Dr Marion writes:

But despite many successes, would-be rescuers also knew the pain of being unable to retrieve downed fliers known to have been alive on the ground after going down in enemy territory. On February 3, 1952, Lt. Charles R. Spath, 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, was forced to abandon his jet over North Korea. Later, a flight mate observed Lieutenant Spath on the ground. Using his survival radio, the lieutenant reported that he was unable to walk due to a broken leg. A friendly guerilla team located nearby, monitoring the same radio frequency that Spath was using, decided to intervene. Four of the guerillas reached Spath ahead of enemy soldiers also in the vicinity and moved him to a secure location. Some time later, the guerilla team made contact with Fifth Air Force intelligence personnel who began coordinating a rescue attempt. Capt. Gail W. Poulton, an H-19 pilot in the 3rd Air Rescue Squadron, was offered the mission, which would be particularly hazardous due to the high elevation of the area. After several weeks of meticulous planning, the mission was a "go". Because of certain pieces of information that had been coming

from Spath and the guerillas that somehow didn't seem to fit, Poulton was concerned that the rescue attempt might already have been compromised. Unfortunately, his hunch was correct. Approaching the intended pickup area, Poulton contacted Spath by radio and asked him how many people were at the landing site with him. Spath replied, "I don't know." Suspicious. Poulton said, "We are here to pick you up, if everything down there is OK. You are giving me uncooperative and unclear answers.... I have leveled off and we'll abort this rescue attempt if you don't answer my questions fully ... in the next 15 seconds." - Spath responded quietly, "You can chalk me off for saying this, but get the of hell out of here, its a trap." Tragically, Spath died in captivity some weeks later.

Date	F-86 Pilot	Unit	Rescue Aircraft	Rescue Location	F-86 Operating area
13 Sep 51	Pilot unk	334 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
06 Oct 51	Lt Bill N. Garrett	4 FIG	SA-16	Chongchon R.	Mig Alley
13 Dec 51	Capt Ken D. Chandler	336 FIS	Helo	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
18 Dec 51	Lt George M. Pistole	25 FIS	SA-16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
01 Apr 52	Lt John E. Dews, Jr.	336 FIS	H-19	Chodo Island	Mig Alley
02 Apr 52	Lt Joe L. Cannon	25 FIS	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
15 May 52	Lt Harry L. Shumate	25 FIS	Unk	Unk	Mig Alley
07 Jun 52	Lt Gilbert E. Mann	25 FIS	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Vic. Pyongyang
07 Jun 52	Lt Rich'd S. Drezen, Jr.	25 FIS	SA-16/H-5	Yellow Sea	Vic. Pyongyang
08 Jun 52	Lt Robert Chesney	334 FIS	Unk	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
04 Jul 52	Capt Clifford D. Jolley	335 FIS	H-5	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
12 Jul 52	Capt Patrick M. Ellis	16 FIS	H-19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
06 Aug 52	Lt James I. Bonini	16 FIS	SA-16	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
20 Aug 52	Lt Norman Schmidt	334 FIS	SA-16/H-19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
04 Sep 52	Lt Ira M. Porter	335 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
04 Sep 52	Lt Laverne G. Strange	25 FIS	H-19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
15 Sep 52	Lt Arthur J. Cuddy	336 FIS	SA-16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
28 Sep 52	Maj Alex J. Gillis	335 FIS	H-19	Unk	Mig Alley
03 Oct 52	Maj Frederick C. Blesse	334 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
11 Oct 52	Lt John E. Fagan	336 FIS	H-19	NK mud flats	Mig Alley
16 Oct 52	Lt Col Carl W. Stewart	51 FIG	Unk	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
21 Nov 52	Maj Vernon J. Lyle	25 FIS	H-19	Unk	Mig Alley
21 Nov 52	Lt P.D. Blakely	25 FIS	H-19	Unk	Mig Alley
22 Nov 52	Lt Edmund G. Hepner	16 FIS	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
28 Dec 52	Lt John J. Breen	16 FIS	SA-16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
25 Jan 53	Capt Murray Winslow	335 FIS	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
31 Mar 53	Lt Frank D. Frazier	336 FIS	Unk	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
12 Apr 53	Capt Jos. C. McConnell	39 FIS	H-19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
12 Apr 53	Lt Norman E. Green	335 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
16 Apr 53	Lt Robert E. Crackel	8 FBG	Helo	Chodo Island	Mig Alley
30 Apr 53	Capt Lonnie R. Moore	335 FIS	H-19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
16 May 53	Pilot Unk	Unk	H-19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
17 May 53	Lt Dorris	12 FBS	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Chinnampo, NK
17 May 53	Pilot Unk	4 FIG	H-19	Vic. Chodo	Unk
27 May 53	Lt Douglas G. Brenner	25 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
05 Jun 53	Flt Lt James A Ryan	16 FIS	SA-16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
15 Jun 53	Lt Richard W. Frailey	334 FIS	SA-16	Mouth of Yalu	Mig Alley
16 Jun 53	Pilot Unk	8 FBG	Helo(?)	Vic. Chorwon	North of MLR
29 Jun 53	Maj Flamm D. Harper	18 FBG	H-19	Haeju Pen.	Haeju Pen.
11 Jul 53	Pilot Unk	8 FBG	Helo	Unk	North of MLR

Note 1: "Chodo Island" indicates pilot landed on the ground at Chodo; "No. of Chodo" indicates a water landing north of Chodo; "Vic. Chodo" indicates vicinity of Chodo (either on ground or nearby waters); "MLR" indicates the main line of resistance (i.e., "the front"); "Unk" indicates data unknown.

Note 2: Some primary sources are in disagreement as to whether particular pilots wore the rank of second lieutenant or first lieutenant at a given time. For the sake of simplicity, all USAF lieutenants are referred to as "Lt" in the table.

Note 3: Table is based on various sources, especially the following F-86 unit histories (AFHRA); 3rd Air Rescue Squadron/Group histories (AFHRA); Headquarters Far East Air Forces Daily Combat Operations Reports (AFHRA, between 12 Apr 52 and 27 Jul 53); information on F-86 losses compiled by Ron Maynard, Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office, Arlington, Va.; Air Force Times; various communications with former F-86 pilots.