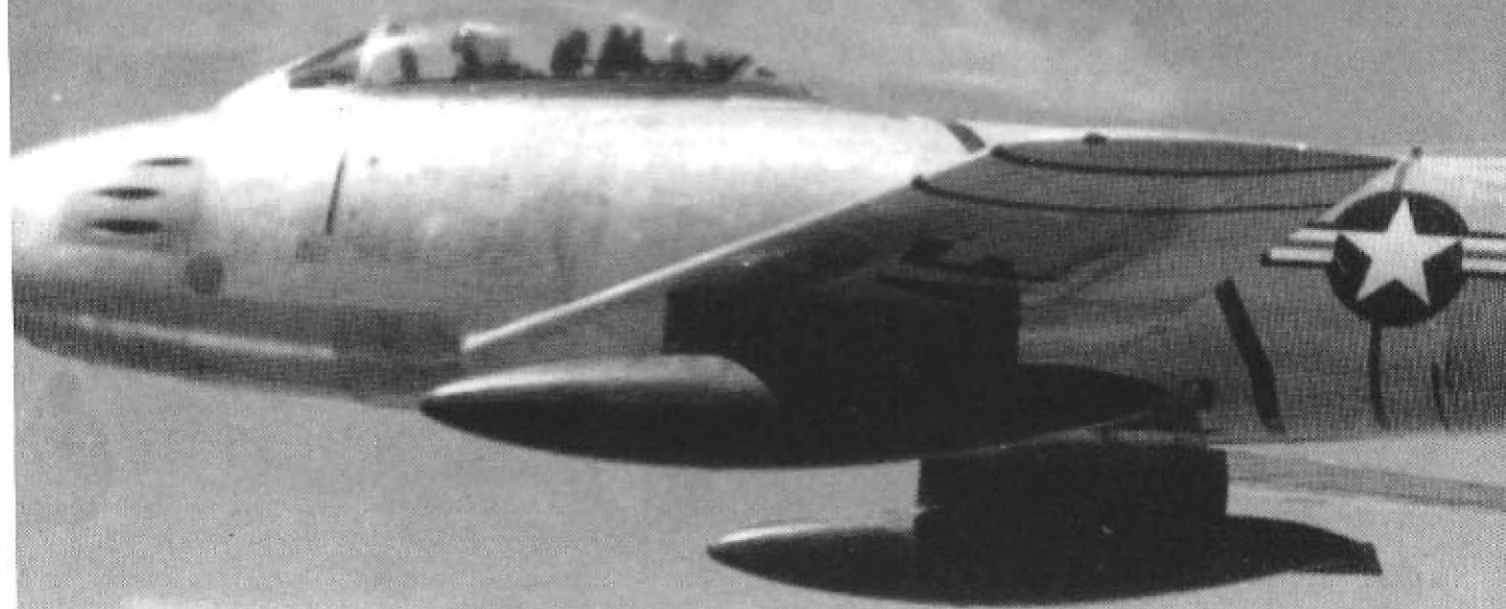
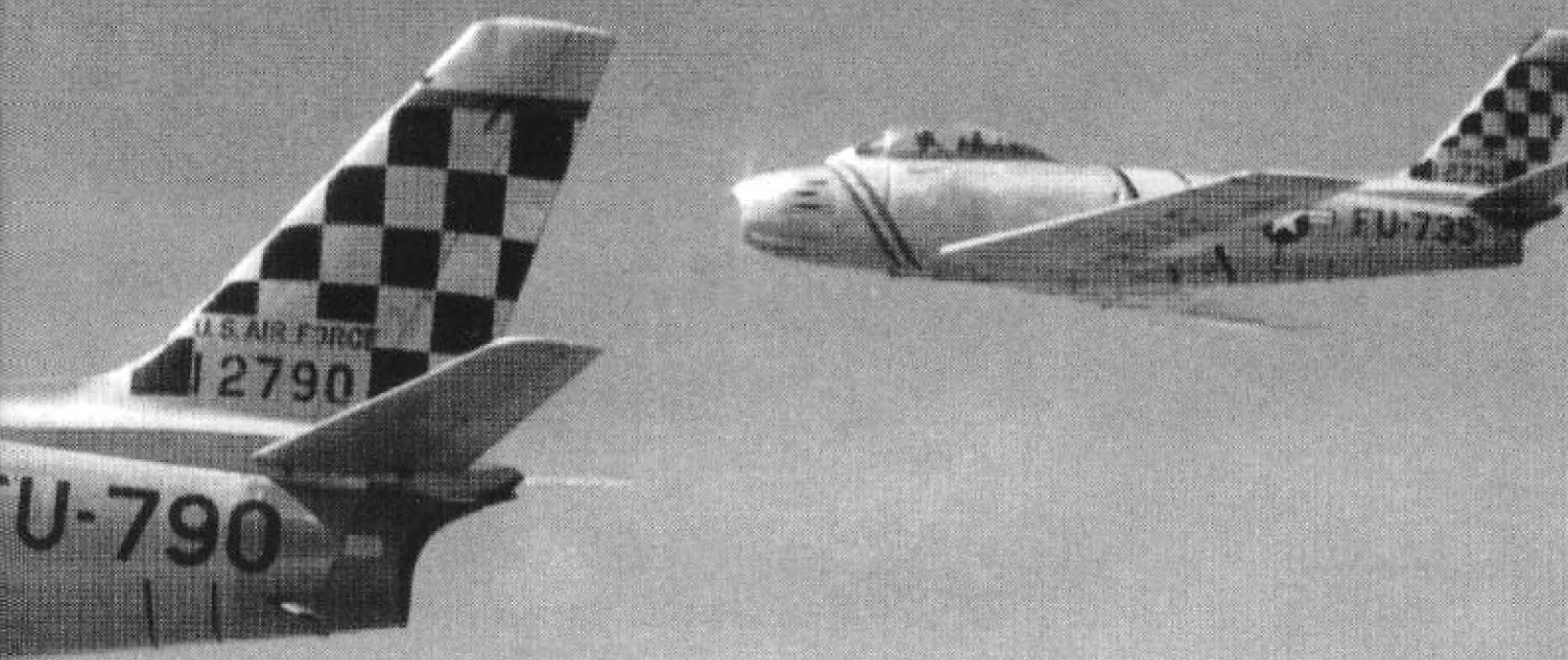


Sabre Pilot Pickup: Unconventional Contributions to Air Superiority in Korea





Forrest L. Marion

(Overleaf) F-86Es of the 51st FIW in 1952. (AFHRA Photo)

(Near right) One of two new H-19s delivered to the 3d ARS in February 1952. (AFHRA Photo)

(Far right) An H-5 equipped with floats. The H-5s performed short-range rescues and medical evacuations in Korea. (AFHRA Photo)

USAF AIRCRAFT THAT PICKED UP DOWNED FIGHTER PILOTS ... CONTRIBUTED IN THREE WAYS TO THE AIR SUPERIORITY MISSION IN KOREA

THEY RECOVERED KEY COMPONENTS OF MIG AIRCRAFT ... PILOTS COULD "FLY AND FIGHT" AGAIN ...[AND] THEY IMPROVED THE MORALE OF EVERY FIGHTER PILOT



In an interview with the air component commander of NATO's "air effort" against Serbia in 1999, U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short described the tense hours on the war's fourth night.¹ During those hours, the fate of a downed American F-117 pilot hung in the balance and, perhaps with it, the support of a somewhat divided American populace. General Short stated, "I remember a senior officer from another nation who had sat with us most of that night when it was over saying to me, 'I can't tell you how impressed I was with what you were willing to do to get that pilot back, and the clear message being sent that this happened to be an American pilot, but if it had been a Spanish or a Canadian or Italian or German or a Frenchman or a Brit, it wouldn't have mattered, that you were gonna spend everything you had to go in and get him. And me as a member of another NATO air force, I'm impressed by that.' And I remember saying to him: 'It has always been that way in my air force...'" And that was a legacy of Vietnam and a legacy of the Gulf War, that we will go and get a fellow [airman] if it's at all possible." Although the general's remarks were quite insightful, he was wrong on one point: the legacy dated not from Vietnam, but from Korea.²

Much has been written on air superiority during the Korean War, focused mainly on the aerial combat between F-86 and MiG-15. Some attention has been devoted to air-sea rescue, but one gap in the historiography of the "forgotten war" has been the contributions made to U.S./ UN air superiority by the USAF aircraft that picked up downed fighter pilots. Sikorsky-built helicopters, mainly the newer H-19 but to some degree the older, less-capable H-5, and the amphibious Grumman SA-16, contributed in three ways to the air superiority mission in Korea. First, they recovered key components of MiG aircraft, increasing

U.S./UN technical knowledge of the enemy's new and formidable jet fighter. Second, by returning Sabre pilots from behind enemy lines or the hostile waters of the Yellow Sea, the pilots could "fly and fight" again. Third, they improved the morale of every fighter pilot who realized that if the unthinkable happened to him, the USAF would "spend everything...to go in and get him."

In 1951, within nine months of the MiG-15's appearance in Korean skies, two U.S./UN recovery efforts led to increased technical knowledge of the advanced enemy fighter. By March 10, 1951, Lt. Gen. Earle E. Partridge, Fifth Air Force Commander, had decided to make the salvage of a crashed MiG-15 a top priority. Years later he recalled:

*General Ben Chidlaw, head of the Air Materiel Command...told me that we really didn't have any intelligence on the MiG-15, on the physical structure of it and what kind of guns it had and what the ammunition was like, and he said, "Why don't you get one?" And I said, "Why didn't you tell me your Foreign Intelligence Section needed one?"*³

Partridge delegated the task to an enigmatic intelligence genius named Donald Nichols, whom the general described as "an incredible man," one who "could do almost anything," and a "one-man war." Nichols was an Air Force intelligence officer in charge of Special Activities Unit Number One. Three weeks later, Nichols began a training program including parachute jumping, salvaging of aircraft parts, and concealment in enemy territory. Operational plans were still incomplete on April 13, when an F-80 Shooting Star pilot of the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing reported the location of a crashed enemy swept-wing fighter south of Sinanju, North Korea. Word reached Fifth Air

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Date	F-86 Pilot	Unit	Rescue Aircraft	Rescue Location	F-86 Operating Area
13 Sep 51	Pilot Unk	334 FIS	SA16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
06 Oct 51	Lt Bill N. Garrett	4 FIG	SA16	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	SA16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
01 Apr 52	Lt John E. Dews, Jr.	338 FIS	H19	Chodo Island	Mig Alley
02 Apr 52	Lt Joe L. Cannon	25 FIS	H19	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
15 May 52	Lt Harry L. Shumate	25 FIS	Unk	Unk	Mig Alley
18 May 52	Capt Herbert E. Sharp	4 FIG	Helo	Mouth of Yalu R.	Mig Alley
07 Jun 52	Lt Gilbert E. Mann	25 FIS	H19	Vic. Chodo	Vic. Pyongyang
07 Jun 52	Lt Richard S. Drezen, Jr.	25 FIS	SA16/H5	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	H5	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
12 Jul 52	Capt Patrick M. Ellis	16 FIS	H19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
08 Aug 52	Lt James I. Bonini	16 FIS	SA16	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
20 Aug 52	Lt Norman Schmidt	334 FIS	SA16/H19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
04 Sep 52	Lt Ira M. Porter	335 FIS	SA16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
04 Sep 52	Lt Laverne G. Stange	25 FIS	H19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
15 Sep 52	Lt Arthur J. Cuddy	336 FIS	SA16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
28 Sep 52	Maj Alex J. Gillis	335 FIS	H19	Unk	Mig Alley
03 Oct 52	Maj Frederick C. Blesse	334 FIS	SA16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
11 Oct 52	Lt John E. Fagan	336 FIS	H19	NK mud flats	Mig Alley
18 Oct 52	Lt Col Carl W. Stewart	51FIG	Unk	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
21 Nov 52	Maj Vernon J. Lyle	25 FIS	H19	Unk	Mig Alley
21 Nov 52	Lt P.D. Blakely	25 FIS	H19	Unk	Mig Alley
22 Nov 52	Lt Edmund G. Hepner	16 FIS	H19	Vic. Chodo	Mig Alley
28 Dec 52	Lt John J. Breen	16 FIS	SA16	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
25 Jan 53	Capt Murray Winslow	335 FIS	H19	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	H19	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
12 Apr 53	Lt Norman E. Green	335 FIS	SA16	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	H19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
16 May 53	Pilot Unk	Unk	H19	No. of Chodo	Mig Alley
17 May 53	Lt Dorris	12 FBS	H19	Vic. Chodo	Chinnampo, NK
17 May 53	Pilot Unk	4 FIG	H19	Vic. Chodo	Unk
27 May 53	Lt Douglas G. Brenner	25 FIS	SA16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
05 Jun 53	Flt Lt James A. Ryan	16 FIS	SA16	Yellow Sea	Mig Alley
15 Jun 53	Lt Richard W. Frailey	334 FIS	SA16	Mouth of Yalu R.	Mig Alley
16 Jun 53	Pilot Unk	8 FBG	Helo(?)	Vic. Chorwon	North of MLR
29 Jun 53	Maj Flamm D. Harper	18 FBG	H19	Haaju Peninsula	Haaju Peninsula
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, I elected to refer to all USAF lieutenants as "Lt" in the table.

Note 3: Table 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 personal communications with former F-86 pilots.

THE PARTY PHOTOGRAPHED AND EXTRACTED VITAL COMPONENTS OF THE MIG

Force Headquarters the next morning. After several unsuccessful photo reconnaissance flights to locate the crashed fighter, success came a day later and photo interpretation confirmed the aircraft as a MiG-15. The jet appeared to be unguarded and in relatively good condition, making it an attractive target. The salvage mission was on.⁴

Early on April 17, Mr. Nichols and two Koreans departed Taegu aboard a transport aircraft. Arriving at Seoul, they were joined by four more Koreans. The party soon departed in the 3d Air Rescue Squadron's newly arrived YH-19 helicopter for Paengnyong-do, a friendly-controlled island in the Yellow Sea just below the 38th parallel. After refueling, the helicopter departed and flew north, landing in a barley field two hundred meters from the crashed MiG. Friendly fighters provided cover en route and F-51 Mustangs strafed the area just prior to the helicopter landing. The H-19 pilots

remained in the helicopter, while the salvage party proceeded to the MiG. Overhead, friendly fighters maintained their protective cover. Over the next thirty minutes, the party photographed and extracted vital components of the MiG, including turbine blade, fuselage, and ammunition samples. Using hand grenades, they blew apart the aircraft and obtained the engine exhaust pipe, exhaust pipe cover, and combustion chamber and carried them to the waiting helicopter. Nichols dragged the horizontal stabilizer to the helicopter. By 1700 hours, the H-19 was airborne for Cho-do, an island located less than four miles from the North Korean mainland, forty miles north of the 38th parallel. On the way out of North Korea, near Sinanju, the helicopter came under enemy antiaircraft fire, taking one hit in the blade. Refueling at Cho-do, the H-19 continued south to Paengnyong-do where the salvage party transferred to a 3d Air Rescue Squadron SA-16 amphibian, that flew them to Seoul. From there, they boarded a C-47 for Taegu, arriving that night. Soon, the salvaged parts were en route to Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, for analysis.⁵

Note that this was a "special operation" mission conducted by a team of special operators using Air Rescue aircraft and aircrews. Three months later, another MiG recovery operation engineered by Nichols, this one near Cho-do, salvaged even more components than had the first one. In September 1951, the first issue of the *Fifth Air Force Intelligence Summary* featured a comparison of F-86 and MiG-15 characteristics, an analysis based upon the second MiG recovery operation. Thus, the newly acquired technical knowledge of the MiG-15 already was beginning to reach the F-86 pilots who were flying counter air patrols in "MiG Alley," increasing their understanding of the enemy's capabilities and vulnerabilities.⁶

Rescue and special operations aircraft also contributed to air superiority by picking up downed F-86 pilots from behind enemy lines or out of the Yellow Sea. In one of the earliest Korean War pickups of a fighter pilot from behind enemy lines, on September 4, 1950, an H-5 helicopter belonging to the 3d Air Rescue Squadron picked up Capt. Robert E. Wayne, 35th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, who had bailed out of his F-80 Shooting Star. Three months after Wayne's rescue, Sabres of the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Wing entered combat in Korea. Surprisingly, the earliest verifiable "behind the lines or northern Yellow Sea" rescue took place some ten months later, on September 13, 1951, when a 3d Air Rescue Squadron SA-16 picked up, from the Yellow Sea, a pilot in the 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. From then until the armistice in July 1953, forty-one Sabre pilots were returned to "fly and fight" again. Thirty-seven of these pickups took place in the last sixteen months of the war.⁷

The pickup of downed personnel by helicopter was still a new phenomenon early in the war. Lt. Gen. James D. Hughes, USAF(Ret.), who flew F-80s in Korea in the summer of 1950, recalled that pilots

(Near right) Lt. James I. Bonini and his F-86 in Korea, 1952. On August 8, 1952, Bonini was rescued by an SA-16 from the Yellow Sea in one minute and 10 seconds, one of the fastest water pickups on record. (Photo courtesy of J.I. Bonini)

(Far right) Capt Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., was rescued on April 12, 1953 by a "Special Operations" H-19 helicopter. After his rescue, Capt. McConnell went on to down 8 more MiGs, and became the war's leading ace with 16 aerial victories. (AFHRA Photo)



THE PRACTICE OF PICKING UP DOWNED AIRMEN BECAME A STANDARD PROCEDURE FOR THE U.S. AIR FORCE

PERHAPS ONLY HALF OF ALL PILOTS WHO DECIDED TO ABANDON THEIR AIRCRAFT EVER HAD A REAL CHANCE FOR RESCUE ... SABRE PILOTS ENJOYED A CONSIDERABLY BETTER CHANCE OF RESCUE

in his unit received a blood chit, gold coins, and a "pointie-talkie—that was it. If a pilot went down behind enemy lines, he "expected to have to walk out." The concept of rescue was so new that in March 1951, during the rescue of an F-80 pilot by an H-5 helicopter off the coast of Inchon, a fellow F-80 pilot in the vicinity who was in contact with the helicopter made the following radio call to his distressed flight mate: "Frank, this is Steve. They got an air-rescue aircraft coming out to pick you up, ol' buddy. It's a helicopter, believe it or not! Yeah, a helicopter...beats me where they got it, but they got it. Just hang in there, man." In fact, the H-5 did rescue the downed pilot and flew him to an Army hospital near Seoul.⁸

The pickup of so many Sabre pilots illustrates that during the Korean War the practice of picking up downed airmen became a standard procedure for the U.S. Air Force. During World War II, when air-sea rescue was in its infancy, the chances for a downed airman to be rescued were slim, regardless of the type of rescue vehicle used. But in Korea, downed USAF airmen had roughly a one-in-ten chance of being rescued. While ten percent may not seem impressive, one must consider that many pilots never had a real opportunity for rescue. Some failed to get out of their aircraft, others perished at some point between getting out and hitting the ground or water, some were captured almost immediately upon landing, and still others died from exposure to the elements or drowned before rescuers could reach them. Taking these factors into consideration, a rough estimate is that perhaps only half of all pilots who decided to abandon their aircraft ever had a real chance for rescue.⁹

In spite of such obstacles, Sabre pilots enjoyed a considerably better chance of rescue than one-in-ten, probably about one-in-four, for which there were several reasons. First, because they operated

at altitudes usually above 30,000 feet, if the aircraft was hit or sustained mechanical problems, the pilot could use his altitude—as well as an excellent glide ratio—to make his way toward friendly territory, normally toward the designated "bail out" area near Cho-do, a northern island used by friendly radar, Air Rescue, and "special ops" elements. In one case in August 1952, Lt. James I. Bonini, 16th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, was picked up by an SA-16 after having been in the water for only one minute and ten seconds, one of the war's quickest rescues from the water. The lieutenant had experienced engine flameout while operating at 40,000 feet near the Yalu and had glided for approximately 110 miles to Cho-do before leaving his jet. Although Bonini glided farther than most Sabre pilots in similar straits, others followed the same general procedure, which found its way into Maj. Frederick C. Blesse's 1955 USAF Fighter Weapons School tactics manual.¹⁰

Second, the geography of the Korean peninsula favored the Sabre pilot. Most aerial engagements took place north of the Chongchon River, if not always between that river and the Yalu. Many engagements took place not far from the coast, which meant that, if a Sabre pilot needed to prepare to eject but still had a flyable jet, the flight toward Cho-do was only one-half the distance to home base. Furthermore, it was almost entirely over water. Those were important considerations, suggested by the fact that of the forty-one Sabre pilots included in this study, fourteen were rescued from the vicinity of Cho-do (several pilots landed on the island but most in the waters nearby), ten others from waters (including coastal mudflats) somewhere north of Cho-do, and ten from unknown parts of the Yellow Sea but presumably north of the 38th parallel. Thus, at least thirty-four of forty-one Sabre pilots rescued from north of the

BETWEEN JUNE 7 AND SEPTEMBER 15, 1952, 3D AIR RESCUE SQUADRON AIRCRAFT PERFORMED TEN CONSECUTIVE SABRE PILOT PICKUPS FROM THE YELLOW SEA AREA



38th parallel were picked up from the general area of the Yellow Sea. During one period, between June 7 and September 15, 1952, 3d Air Rescue Squadron aircraft performed ten consecutive Sabre pilot pickups from the Yellow Sea area, four of them from the vicinity of Cho-do. On September 4, Rescue aircraft pulled two Sabre pilots from the water, Lts. Ira M. Porter and Laverne G. Stange. That day Stange had downed one MiG and Porter two. Porter destroyed another MiG in December.¹¹

Two other factors contributed to the relatively high rate of rescue for Sabre pilots—Allied naval supremacy in the Yellow Sea, and the fact that MiG pilots generally remained over the North-western portion of the peninsula, avoiding the Yellow Sea. Former North Korean MiG-15 pilot Kenneth H. Rowe, ("Lt. No Kum-Sok" prior to his defection in 1953) recalled this reluctance was due to the enemy's lack of any rescue capability for downed MiG pilots.¹² Thus, once a Sabre pilot was "feet wet," his chances were very good for an undisturbed flight as far south as he could manage, and if he could reach the water safely he was spared from any anxiety about the enemy's navy. Thus, the Sabre's high operating altitude, favorable Korean geography, friendly naval supremacy, and MiG operating limitations combined to offer F-86 pilots considerably better odds of returning to "fly and fight" another day than without such advantages. Of course, even these advantages would not have amounted to much if Air Rescue and special operations forces had not been available and willing to go well north in many cases to perform the actual pickups.

Although daring rescues of pilots from behind enemy lines or the Yellow Sea became almost commonplace in Korea, three particular F-86 pilot rescues at different times in the war illustrate the basic pickup modes accounting for almost all those

rescues performed by aircraft: by SA-16 in the Yellow Sea; by H-19 in the Yellow Sea; and by helicopter, H-5 or H-19, from the North Korean mainland. In October 1951, in the earliest known "behind the lines" rescue of a Sabre pilot whose identity has been determined, an SA-16 piloted by Capt. Robert C. Mason landed just off the west coast of North Korea near Sinanju to retrieve Lt. Bill N. Garrett, who had crash-landed his disabled F-86 after sustaining battle damage in MiG Alley. The SA-16 pilot "landed in the water and quickly guided the plane toward the partly submerged mudflat where the Sabrejet pilot, having difficulty in swimming, was ducking under the water to avoid the enemy bullets." As Mason's amphibian closed to within about 100 yards of Garrett, his crew realized that the Sabre pilot was too exhausted to make it much farther. Despite enemy mortar and flak bursts, Mason "picked up the gear [and] opened the throttles and waddled up to him." Reaching Garrett, the rescue crew hauled him aboard. With Captain Mason "alternating between reverse and forward thrust [the SA-16] splashed for deeper water," and, after a few seconds' delay which must have seemed like an eternity, managed to back out. Moments later, the SA-16 and its grateful passenger were on their way home.¹³

Lieutenant Garrett's rescue was one of twelve SA-16 rescues of Sabre pilots in the war. F-86 pilots in trouble, who managed to reach the Yellow Sea—or at least the coastal mudflats, as in Garrett's case—before abandoning their jets, permitted the SA-16 to take advantage of its capability of landing on the water. Moreover, the SA-16 also enjoyed speed and range advantages over the helicopters. Of the thirty-two F-86 pilots rescued from the Yellow Sea (excluding two who landed on Cho-do), SA-16s accounted for twelve, H-19s for twelve; helicopters (either H-5 or H-19) accounted

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THE AWARENESS OF FRIENDLY AIR RESCUE AND SPECIAL OPERATIONS ASSETS MUST HAVE EASED THE ANXIETIES OF MANY PILOTS

for three, and in five cases the rescue vehicle was unidentified.¹⁴

On September 4, 1952, two Sabre pilots were picked up behind enemy lines. An H-19 from the 3d Air Rescue Squadron picked up one of the two men rescued that day, an SA-16 accounting for the other. Lt. Laverne G. Stange, 25th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, had downed a MiG and in the process had sustained damage to his aircraft. Heading out to sea, Stange abandoned his jet and was preparing to be rescued by a Navy helicopter—which instead, apparently lost power and crashed into the water. Fortunately, an H-19 piloted by Maj. Roy A. Thompson, also was in the vicinity and after arriving on scene used the helicopter's hoist to pick up all three survivors—the two Navy crewmen and Stange.¹⁵

Only a month before the armistice, one of the few pickups of an F-86 pilot from an inland location behind enemy lines took place. On June 29, 1953, Maj. Flamm "Dee" Harper, 18th Fighter-Bomber Group, had his Sabrejet shot up on a bombing sortie over North Korea's Haeju Peninsula. Unable to make it out to sea with his aircraft on fire, he ejected over land about five miles from the coast. Landing hard on a boulder, he sustained broken ribs and temporary paralysis but managed to begin evading, intending to head for the coast. Discovering that his survival radio was dead, however, and realizing that his best signaling device was his parachute, Harper headed back to retrieve his chute. But two enemy soldiers had already noticed it. Harper shot both soldiers. F-84 Thunderjets having spotted him and relayed his position to the rescue helicopter, Harper recalled that a few minutes later, "certainly the most beautiful bird I had ever seen,"—an H-19—popped over the ridgeline above his head. Minutes later, hanging in the helicopter's sling, he was reeled in by a crewman, one of only five rescued "fighter-bomber" Sabre pilots in this study.¹⁶

Dramatic rescues notwithstanding, perhaps the most tangible way to measure the importance of the pickup of Sabre pilots to the air superiority mission comes from looking at the MiG kills achieved by previously rescued Sabre pilots. No fewer than seven Sabre pilots—three of them aces—went on to achieve 27 aerial victories following their rescues. Top-scoring triple ace Capt. Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., was rescued by helicopter from the Yellow Sea on April 12, 1953, and achieved eight of his sixteen aerial victories after that date. Contrary to the news stories, McConnell was picked up not by a 3d Air Rescue H-19 but by one belonging to a helicopter detachment of a special operations unit, the 581st Air Resupply and Communications Wing. At the time, however, the rescue was attributed to the 3d squadron, including the production of a staged photo since used in many publications, in an apparent attempt by Fifth Air Force to protect the identity of the classified helicopter detachment. Two other aces, Capt. Lonnie R. Moore, a double ace, and Clifford D. Jolley, earned 8.5 and 5.0 aerial victories, respec-

tively, following their rescues. Four lesser known Sabre pilots, Capt. Murray A. Winslow and Lts. Frank D. Frazier, Edmund G. Hepner, and Ira M. Porter, went on to earn a total of 5.5 aerial victory credits after their pickups. In addition to downing one MiG following his rescue in November 1952, Lieutenant Hepner was also credited with having damaged two MiGs. Others in addition to Hepner did likewise, but in a conflict with so many MiGs actually confirmed as destroyed—well over 800 for the entire war—the accounting of mere "damage" and "probable" downed MiGs, tended to be ignored. Thus, the rescues of Sabre pilots who continued to engage in aerial combat in Korea contributed even more to air superiority than can be measured simply by the tallying of aerial victories against MiGs.¹⁷

Another subtle aspect revealing the importance of the rescue of Sabre pilots to air superiority concerns the standard tactic of F-86s flying in two-ship formation during engagements with the enemy. The flight leader's job was to shoot down enemy aircraft; his wingman's job was to protect the leader from being "bounced" by MiGs. Most "kills" were achieved by flight leads, but in cases where there was a question of who had actually downed a MiG, the credit went to the leader, not his wingman. This increases the difficulty of gauging the importance to air superiority of the phenomenon of previously rescued wingmen going on to fly with leaders who achieved aerial victories. But it was a team effort, and wingmen were vital contributors to such victories.¹⁸

The case of Lt. Arthur J. Cuddy illustrates this point. On September 15, 1952, Cuddy, a wingman in the 336th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, was forced to abandon his jet over the Yellow Sea. He was rescued by SA-16 and returned to combat status within 48 hours. Six days later, Cuddy flew as wingman for Capt. Robinson Risner when the latter downed two MiGs to become an ace. According to Risner's account, Cuddy "started a bounce on two MIG's," which led to Risner's first of two aerial victories that day. Although Cuddy received no official recognition, he had directly contributed to at least one of his flight leader's aerial victories, a feat made possible by Cuddy's rescue by SA-16. Moreover, one may speculate that Cuddy was better able to focus on the task at hand knowing from firsthand experience only days earlier that if he went down for any reason every effort would be made to bring him home.¹⁹

A third area of contribution concerned fighter pilot morale. Although less easily demonstrable than the aforementioned areas, one can readily imagine that the awareness of friendly Air Rescue and special operations assets must have eased the anxieties of many pilots to some degree. Those who owe their lives to an SA-16 or helicopter crew who plucked them from life-threatening circumstances often could not say enough about the importance of air rescue in the war. Several F-86 pilots provide a glimpse of the importance of knowing that someone would be looking for them, if not literally wait-

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Only a month before the armistice, one of the few pickups of an F-86 pilot from an inland location behind enemy lines took place. On June 29, 1953, Maj. Flamm "Dee" Harper, 18th Fighter-Bomber Group, had his Sabrejet shot up on a bombing sortie over North Korea's Haeju Peninsula. Unable to make it out to sea with his aircraft on fire, he ejected over land about five miles from the coast. Landing hard on a boulder, he sustained broken ribs and temporary paralysis but managed to begin evading, intending to head for the coast. Discovering that his survival radio was dead, however, and realizing that his best signaling device was his parachute, Harper headed back to retrieve his chute. But two enemy soldiers had already noticed it. Harper shot both soldiers. F-84 Thunderjets having spotted him and relayed his position to the rescue helicopter, Harper recalled that a few minutes later, "certainly the most beautiful bird I had ever seen,"—an H-19—popped over the ridgeline above his head. Minutes later, hanging in the helicopter's sling, he was reeled in by a crewman, one of only five rescued "fighter-bomber" Sabre pilots in this study.¹⁶

Dramatic rescues notwithstanding, perhaps the most tangible way to measure the importance of the pickup of Sabre pilots to the air superiority mission comes from looking at the MiG kills achieved by previously rescued Sabre pilots. No fewer than seven Sabre pilots—three of them aces—went on to achieve 27 aerial victories following their rescues. Top-scoring triple ace Capt. Joseph C. McConnell, Jr., was rescued by helicopter from the Yellow Sea on April 12, 1953, and achieved eight of his sixteen aerial victories after that date. Contrary to the news stories, McConnell was picked up not by a 3d Air Rescue H-19 but by one belonging to a helicopter detachment of a special operations unit, the 581st Air Resupply and Communications Wing. At the time, however, the rescue was attributed to the 3d squadron, including the production of a staged photo since used in many publications, in an apparent attempt by Fifth Air Force to protect the identity of the classified helicopter detachment. Two other aces, Capt. Lonnie R. Moore, a double ace, and Clifford D. Jolley, earned 8.5 and 5.0 aerial victories, respec-

tively, following their rescues. Four lesser known Sabre pilots, Capt. Murray A. Winslow and Lts. Frank D. Frazier, Edmund G. Hepner, and Ira M. Porter, went on to earn a total of 5.5 aerial victory credits after their pickups. In addition to downing one MiG following his rescue in November 1952, Lieutenant Hepner was also credited with having damaged two MiGs. Others in addition to Hepner did likewise, but in a conflict with so many MiGs actually confirmed as destroyed—well over 800 for the entire war—the accounting of mere "damage" and "probable" downed MiGs, tended to be ignored. Thus, the rescues of Sabre pilots who continued to engage in aerial combat in Korea contributed even more to air superiority than can be measured simply by the tallying of aerial victories against MiGs.¹⁷

Another subtle aspect revealing the importance of the rescue of Sabre pilots to air superiority concerns the standard tactic of F-86s flying in two-ship formation during engagements with the enemy. The flight leader's job was to shoot down enemy aircraft; his wingman's job was to protect the leader from being "bounced" by MiGs. Most "kills" were achieved by flight leads, but in cases where there was a question of who had actually downed a MiG, the credit went to the leader, not his wingman. This increases the difficulty of gauging the importance to air superiority of the phenomenon of previously rescued wingmen going on to fly with leaders who achieved aerial victories. But it was a team effort, and wingmen were vital contributors to such victories.¹⁸

The case of Lt. Arthur J. Cuddy illustrates this point. On September 15, 1952, Cuddy, a wingman in the 336th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, was forced to abandon his jet over the Yellow Sea. He was rescued by SA-16 and returned to combat status within 48 hours. Six days later, Cuddy flew as wingman for Capt. Robinson Risner when the latter downed two MiGs to become an ace. According to Risner's account, Cuddy "started a bounce on two MIG's," which led to Risner's first of two aerial victories that day. Although Cuddy received no official recognition, he had directly contributed to at least one of his flight leader's aerial victories, a feat made possible by Cuddy's rescue by SA-16. Moreover, one may speculate that Cuddy was better able to focus on the task at hand knowing from firsthand experience only days earlier that if he went down for any reason every effort would be made to bring him home.¹⁹

A third area of contribution concerned fighter pilot morale. Although less easily demonstrable than the aforementioned areas, one can readily imagine that the awareness of friendly Air Rescue and special operations assets must have eased the anxieties of many pilots to some degree. Those who owe their lives to an SA-16 or helicopter crew who plucked them from life-threatening circumstances often could not say enough about the importance of air rescue in the war. Several F-86 pilots provide a glimpse of the importance of knowing that someone would be looking for them, if not literally wait-



(Above) Lt. Norman E. Green was rescued from the Yellow Sea on April 12, 1953, by an SA-16. (Photo courtesy of N.E. Green)

ing for them to hit the water—as was sometimes the case for pilots ejecting in the “bail out” area near Cho-do. One 336th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron pilot, John E. Dews, Jr., thought that the presence of rescue assets played a “significant” part in maintaining fighter pilot morale. “They’d come get you,” recalled Dews, who on his fourth sortie of the day on April 1, 1952—flying “old 032,” reputedly the oldest and worst airplane in the 4th Fighter-Interceptor Group—was hit by MiGs and forced to roll over the side of his Sabre to get out. Dews was picked up by a 3d Air Rescue Squadron H-19 and flown to safety and medical care.

Lt. Col. (later Col.) Klair E. Back, who commanded 3d ARS for most of the war. (AFHRA Photo)



**WOULD-BE
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Norman E. Green, of the 335th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, rescued by SA-16 on April 12, 1953, put it succinctly: “The rescue and recovery pilots and crews were major players and contributors to the Air Force’s superiority in Korea. Fighter pilots could not have been so successful without them.” In another communication, Green expanded on his earlier thoughts:

because of this [rescue] support we were able to put aside concerns for personal survival and were free to concentrate on shooting down MiGs. Confidence in the rescue services was so high we never questioned that they would be there if we needed them. And they certainly were.²⁰

Richard W. Frailey, a Sabre pilot with the 334th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, recalled that rescue was taught in the ground school known as “Clobber College” and that the knowledge of rescue assets “certainly did” impact morale favorably. Frailey’s own rescue by an SA-16 from the mouth of the Yalu River heightened his own remembrance of this aspect of the Korean War. On June 15, 1953, Frailey was inadvertently fired upon and shot down by his own flight lead, none other than Maj. James Jabara. Incidentally, Jabara received no aerial victory credit that day, while the Far East Air Forces Combat Operations Report stated innocuously that F-86 serial number 2923 (Frailey’s) was “lost opnl [operational], not due to eny [enemy] action. Plt [pilot] picked-up.”²¹

Six Sabre pilots and one F4U Corsair aviator—U.S. Marine Corps Capt. Jesse G. Folmar—were rescued on the same day they scored aerial victories (i.e., in most cases shortly if not immediately after having downed a MiG). The best known among that group was double-ace Maj. Frederick C. Blesse, who, on October 3, 1952, was forced to abandon his jet due to fuel exhaustion following combat in “MiG Alley” during which he had downed his ninth MiG to become a double ace. One can imagine the morale of Blesse’s fellow fighter pilots would have been hurt had the leading living ace at that time not been rescued shortly by SA-16 from the Yellow Sea. Others rescued were U.S. Marine Corps exchange pilot Maj. Alex J. Gillis, Maj. Vernon J. Lyle, Capt. Ken D. Chandler, and Lts. Ira M. Porter and Laverne G. Stange—all of the USAF. Undoubtedly, the fact that none of these MiG killers were lost must have bolstered morale in their units.²²

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 guerrilla team located nearby, monitoring the same radio frequency that Spath was using,

"YOU CAN CHALK ME OFF FOR SAYING THIS, BUT GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE, IT'S A TRAP."

MiG killers in the 4th FIG, in August 1952. Maj. Frederick C. Blesse (top left) was rescued by an SA-16 on October 3, 1952, just after downing his ninth MiG. (AFHRA Photo)

decided to intervene. Four of the guerrillas reached Spath ahead of the enemy soldiers also in the vicinity and moved him to a secure location. Some time later, the guerrilla 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 3d 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 guerrillas 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 asked several more questions to which he received equally ambiguous responses. Finally, 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 discontinued my approach ...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 hell out of here, it's a trap." Tragically, Spath died in captivity some weeks later.²³

In another valorous but unsuccessful rescue attempt a year later, an H-19 belonging to the classified helicopter detachment of the 581st Air Resupply and Communications Wing

*flew to an area just twenty-six miles from the Chinese city of Antung in an attempt to pick up a downed British exchange pilot whose location had been reported. Before dawn on March 27, 1953, an SA-16...escorted the H-19 from Cho-do to the vicinity of a peninsula near Ch'olsan, North Korea, orbited offshore at low altitude [in an extremely vulnerable position] while the H-19 searched for the pilot, and escorted the helicopter on its return to Cho-do.*²⁴

Although the H-19 copilot, Robert F. Sullivan, did not recall the downed pilot's identity, most likely it was Squadron Leader Graham S. Hulse, a Royal Air Force exchange pilot assigned to the 336th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. Two weeks earlier, on March 13, Hulse had been forced to abandon his F-86 over North Korea following aerial combat in which he was credited with one-half an aerial victory against a MiG. Apparently, Fifth Air Force intelligence had believed him to be an evader or in the care of friendly guerrillas, hence the reason for the attempted rescue on what was one of the deepest penetrations of the war by helicopter. But the H-19 located only a concentration of well-armed enemy troops in the area in which Hulse had been reported, was fired upon, and barely made it back to Cho-do on its remaining fuel, landing on the beach. Sadly, the British pilot's story, whether of Hulse or someone else, remains unsolved. But it is noteworthy that in this case crews belonging to the Air Rescue and "special ops" communities—the SA-16 and H-19, respectively—teamed up for the attempted, if unsuccessful, Sabre pilot pickup.²⁵

Thus, fifty years ago in Korea the U.S. Air Force's Air Rescue and special operations communities performed an overlooked but critical role contributing to the all-important air superiority mission in the war. On at least two occasions, helicopters picked up key components of downed MiG-15s which increased the Sabre pilots' technical knowledge of the enemy's new jet fighter. H-19 and H-5 helicopters and SA-16 amphibians retrieved at least forty-one F-86 pilots from North Korea or the northern waters of the Yellow Sea to "fly and fight" again, at least seven of whom went on to down MiGs in aerial combat. And, perhaps, most important, the presence of Air Rescue and "special ops" aircrews lifted the morale of our fighter pilots who always knew in the back of their minds, and as General Short's companion put it, "that you were gonna spend everything you had to go in and get him." The barren hills and icy waters of Korea were where that legacy was born, a legacy alive and well today.²⁶



1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Pacific Air Forces Korean War Symposium, Honolulu, Hawaii, Jun. 25-28, 2001. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the following individuals: Larry Davis, editor of *SabreJet Classics*; Ron Maynard, DoD POW/Missing Personnel Office, Arlington, Va.; Ron Thurlow, Beaver Creek, Ohio; Dr. Timothy Warnock, Air Force Historical Research Agency (AFHRA hereinafter), Maxwell AFB, Ala.; and Prof. Kenneth Werrell, College of Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education, Maxwell AFB, Ala. Note that this study focuses on operations conducted by USAF Air Rescue Service ("Air Rescue" hereinafter) and "special operations" aircraft. While fully aware that in some cases F-86 pilots were returned home from behind enemy lines in operations involving crash boats, ground parties, guerrilla forces, and other means, those rescues are beyond the scope of this study.
2. Intvw, Lt. Gen. Michael C. Short, USAF, with PBS, n.d.
3. Hist., Fifth Air Force (FAF), Jan.-Jun. 1951, vol. II (AFHRA); Oral History Intvw (OHI), Gen. Earle E. Partridge with U.S. Air Force Academy (USAF) interviewer, Feb. 16, 1977, pp. 62-64 (AFHRA).
4. *Ibid.* See *Air Power History*, Michael E. Haas, "In the Devil's Shadow," Vol. 48, No. 4, (Winter 2001): 18-27; another Korean War participant, Col. Frank E. Merritt, said of Nichols: "He was an amazing person who'd go behind the lines.... spoke Korean fluently, and was loved by all the South Koreans.... in fact General Rhee [the South Korean president] would take this man's word over anybody's.... He would even bring pictures back that we couldn't believe that he was able to get." See OHI, Merritt with USAFA interviewer, Dec. 8, 1977, pp. 17, 59-60 (AFHRA).
5. Hist., FAF, Jan.-Jun. 1951, vol. II (AFHRA).
6. Forrest L. Marion, unpublished manuscript written for Air Force Special Operations Command History Office (AFSOC hereinafter), Hurlburt Field, Fla., "Air Force Special Operations Korean War Chronology," Aug. 3, 1998; *FAF Intelligence Summary*, Aug. 16-Sep. 15, 1951.
7. Note that this figure does not take into account pilots picked up on the friendly side of the front or from waters just off the coast of friendly-controlled territory, such as the Han River estuary or more southern coastal areas. If such rescues were included, the figure would be somewhat higher. Edward B. Crevonis and Howard Meeks, compilers, "Study of the Third Air Rescue Squadron in Relation to the Korean War, Period Covered May 1, 1950 to Dec. 31, 1950," p. 117 (AFHRA); *USAF Credits For The Destruction Of Enemy Aircraft, Korean War* (Washington, D.C., 1975), p. 36. See table on page 23.
8. Intvw, Hughes with author, Honolulu, Hawaii, Jun. 26, 2001; Richard C. Kirkland, *Tales of a War Pilot* (Washington and London, 1999), p. 112.
9. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., *Search and Rescue in Southeast Asia* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Air Force History, 1992), pp. 5-14; Forrest L. Marion, "The Grand Experiment: Detachment F's Helicopter Combat Operations in Korea, 1950-1953," *Air Power History* Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 1993): 48-51.
10. James I. Bonini, "Take the Easy Way," *Combat Crew* [Strategic Air Command], May 1965, pp. 13-15; telephone intvw, Bonini with author, Feb. 7, 2001; Table 1, "F-86 Pilots Rescued"; Frederick C. Blesse, *No Guts, No Glory* (Nellis AFB, Nev., 1955), p. 46.
11. *USAF Credits*, pp. 29, 34; See table on page 23.
12. Intvw, Rowe with author, Honolulu, Hawaii, Jun. 27, 2001; Michael M. Boll, unpublished MS, AWC, "Soviet-American Air Combat over Korea," San Jose State Univ.
13. Hist., 3d Air Rescue Squadron (3 ARS) (Flt C, Pt IV), Oct. 1951 (AFHRA); "Third Air Rescue Squadron Saves 100th Downed Pilot," *Misawa Air Base Piloteer*, copy of article located in Hist., 3 ARS, Nov. 1951 (AFHRA). This copy does not identify the source but likely was the Misawa base paper. The SA-16 pilot, Robert C. Mason, served in Flight C, 3 ARS, stationed at Misawa AB, Japan; e-mails, Mason to author, Dec. 14, 1999; Mason to Dr. Ken Werrell, Jun. 13, 2000.
14. Forrest L. Marion, "The Dumbo's will get us in no time," *Air Force SA-16 Combat Operations in the Korean War Theater, 1950-1953*, *Air Power History* Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 1999): 27; Table 1, "F-86 Pilots Rescued."
15. *Air Force Times*, Sep. 27, 1952; The other four days on which two Sabre pilots were rescued from behind enemy lines were Jun. 7 and Nov. 21, 1952; Apr. 12 and May 17, 1953. See table on page 23.
16. [Flamm] Dee Harper, "No. 1 Snafu," *SabreJet Classics* 4 (Fall 1996): 7-11; e-mail, Harper to author, Sep. 28, 2000;
17. A. Timothy Warnock, ed., *USAF in Korea: A Chronology, 1950-1953* (Washington, D.C., 2000), p. 80; Michael E. Haas, *Apollo's Warriors: United States Air Force Special Operations during the Cold War* (Maxwell AFB, Ala., 1997), p. 89. See table on page 23.
18. Intvw, John E. Dews with author, Maxwell AFB, Ala., Dec. 10, 1999; telephone intvw, Bonini with author, Feb. 7, 2001; John Lowery, "MiG Fever," *Air and Space Smithsonian* Vol. 14 (Apr./May 99): 16-17; ltr, Lowery to Perry Turner (editor, *Air and Space Smithsonian*), Jun. 9, 1999, copy in possession of author.
19. "MiG Killers," *Air Reservist*, Feb. 1953, 4.
20. Dews intvw; ltr, Green to author, Sep. 10, 2000, and telephone intvw with author, Jan. 23, 2001; ltr, Green to author, Jan. 23, 2001; Green's Individual Flight Record (Air Force Form 5), Apr. 1953, copy in possession of author.
21. Intvw, Frailey with author, Dec. 8, 1999; Lowery, "MiG Fever," pp. 16-17; Hqs., Far East Air Forces Daily Combat Operations Reports, Jun. 1953 (AFHRA); See table on page 23.
22. Roy A. Grossnick, *United States Naval Aviation, 1910-1995* (Washington, 1997), p. 768; Hist., 3 Air Rescue Group (38 ARS, Pt IV), Jul.-Dec. 1952 (AFHRA); *USAF Credits*, pp. 5, 7, 14, 23, 29, 34.
23. Gail W. Poulton, unpublished ms., "Jell Green-4, Another Sad Ending!" included in materials provided to AFHRA, George A. Hagelthorn to Capt. Donna B. Roberts (AFHRA), Aug. 2, 1999, copy in possession of author. Note that the selflessness and valor of Lieutenant Spath were not always manifested in similar circumstances. In another case, on May 24, 1953, a "snatch recovery" equipped C-47 was apparently drawn into a trap and fired upon as it passed overhead a downed B-29 pilot who had reported that the area was clear for the attempted pickup; see "Aborted rescue haunts Santa Fe pilot," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, Dec. 29, 1997; Intvw, Col. David M. Taylor (USAF, Ret.) with author, Jul. 8, 1998, Charlottesville, Va., copies of audio tape at AFHRA and AFSOC.
24. Marion, "The Dumbo's will get us," p. 26.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 29; ltr, Sullivan to author, May 17, 1995; various communications, Sullivan with author, 1995-2000; *USAF Credits*, p. 18. The H-19 aircraft commander was Capt. Frank Westerman; the SA-16 aircraft commander was Lt. Augusto D. Muzio. The British Ministry of Defence's Air Historical Branch Casualty Index lists Squadron Leader Hulse as presumed killed on Mar. 13, 1953; ltr, Alan Thomas to author, Feb. 3, 2000.
26. Air Rescue Service held the lion's share of USAF helicopter capability and airframes during the Korean War. In the last decade and a half the balance of the Air Force's rotary-winged capability has shifted to the "special operations" community.