

FLYING CHEETAHS IN KOREA



2 SQUADRON SAAF

1950 - 1953

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The war in Korea was the first war waged against an aggressor state by the United Nations in the twentieth century. It was unlike any other major conflict in that there was no formal declaration of war to mark its beginning and no peace treaty to mark its end.

For many years there was an extra ordinary lack of recognition by the political masters of both sides accorded to the men who had fought for principles enshrined in the constitution of the communist nation and the Charter of the United Nations.

It is easy to speculate on what political considerations motivated the decision of the South African Government to offer support to the United Nations in the Korean War Theatre

Whatever the reason, the South African Government announced, on 1 August 1950, the intention to place a squadron of the SAAF at the disposal of the United Nations.

The challenge of serving in Korea became the responsibility of No 2 Squadron SAAF, known as the Flying Cheetahs, from their Squadron insignia.

No 2 Squadron had a distinguished history in Africa and Italy during the second World War (1939-1945)

During service in Korea the Squadron, with its support personnel, totalled more 800 men in the field, under the command of Wing Commander JS v B Theron, DSO, DFC, AFC

The Korean contingent left for the Far East on 26 September 1950. On arrival at Yokahama, Japan, The Squadron was deployed to Johnson Air Base where the Squadron was equipped with the F51 Mustang, purchased by South Africa.

The Squadron became operational from K9 Airbase on 19 November 1950. It formed an integral part of the Fifth Air Force's 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing, specializing in close support and ground attack operations.

The Korean War was a particularly savage conflict. It was the first, and until Iraq, the only time that an army fought under U.N. auspices for purely military objectives. It is still the only war since 1945 in which two great powers have encountered one another on the field of battle.

Through it all the South Africans fought with great courage and distinctions, winning many decorations and awards.

For the SAAF as a whole the Korean experience was invaluable, They learned how the USAF operates. They rediscovered their aptitude for improvisation and their capacity for supreme effort under difficult conditions. Their morale soared when they discovered that they were every bit as good as their allies, and much better than the enemy. They rapidly won the admiration and respect of the USAF.

THE F51 MUSTANG



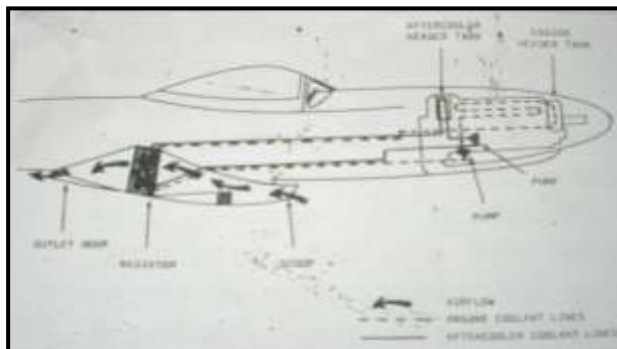
The Mustang brought with it a record of superior performance and manoeuvrability from World War. It was a good carrier of ground attack weapons. It had first class endurance, excellent armament and load carrying capacity.

All Mustang Squadrons used napalm filled bombs manufactured in Japan. This deadly weapon, contained in a streamlined plastic tank that cost a mere US\$ 40, was capable of neutralizing tanks, artillery and enemy troops in horrific fashion.

The Mustang was caught out in Korea by its vulnerability to ground fire.

The main weakness was the exposed cooling system. All the vital parts were exposed to ground fire, including the radiator, the air outlet door and the pipes conveying the glycol coolant to the engine. If a bullet of even the smallest calibre hit any of these parts there would be a rapid loss of coolant. The engine would either seize or catch fire within minutes. The communists were not slow to exploit this vulnerability.

The enemy often made extensive use of flak traps to lure Cheetah pilots into a trap so that they could bring the Mustang down.



MUSTANG VS MIG

DICK CLIFTON REMEMBERS: (1)

On 20 March 1952 I had led eight SAAF Mustangs on a flak suppression mission in support of the rest of the Wing which followed at a short interval to attack the railway line between Sinuiyu and Sinanju. On the way to the target one of the second section's aircraft developed a rough engine, so I sent the pilot back to base under escort, for we were already deep in enemy territory. The remaining two pilots, Vin Kuhn and Hans Enslin closed up with my section.

I had been unable to contact the promised Sabre top cover and from the IP to the railway line we saw no other aircraft friend or foe. Heavy flak opened up, the flashes pinpointing the target, so we wasted no time attacking. As I pulled out of my bombing dive in a climbing turn to observe results, the sky suddenly seemed full of MiG's, no doubt attracted by the black puffs of bursting shells which had greeted us before the attack. Dave Taylor, my number 4, was hit while pulling out of his dive and there was momentary chaos while I urged the "Cheetahs" to re-form battle formation.

Joe Joubert, Mac McLaughlin and Hans Enslin slid into finger formation as I circled to allow them to catch up. Vin Kuhn with two MiG's after him, managed to fight his way into the protection of a cloud bank. I positioned behind and above Taylor's Mustang which was losing height while heading south, streaming smoke and glycol. He did not answer when I called him repeatedly and was obviously in serious trouble.

Then the MiG's attacked in real earnest. A pair came in extremely fast from nine o'clock high on a quarter attacked which I parried in the conventional way by turning our formation towards them. They were flying too fast to get in behind us and were forced to break upwards. We turned back to cover Taylor, but before I could locate him, the MiG's came in again from three o'clock high and the same manoeuvre had to be repeated.

As we straightened out I was watching these two when Joubert's sharp eyes spotted another MiG sneaking up behind and below me. "MiG's six o'clock below shooting at you leader," he reported and as we broke to port, the enemy overshot relatively slowly with air brakes extended, turning to the left in a shallow climb. Like one man we turned sharply towards the MiG. Hans being in the most advantageous position to bring his guns to bear. "Keep shooting, you're hitting him!" I shouted as I saw a white blur on the MiG's port wing root where 50 calibre explosive incendiaries were hitting home. There was a puff of black smoke, probably from the after-burner as the MiG dived away at high speed followed by the remaining enemy aircraft, no doubt disconcerted by the discovery that Mustangs could hit back.



Dick Clifton decorated in Korea

My No 3 (deputy leader on the mission) Joe Joubert certainly saved my life by spotting the MiG sneaking up on me. The 30 mm shells must surely have hit me seconds later if Joe hadn't warned me in time, for I was an easy target flying straight and level. Joe, who later became Second-in-Command of the squadron, was doing his second tour in Korea, having flown 100 sorties on his first tour. His love of flying led him to follow a career with South African Airways when he left the SAAF shortly after the Korean war.

I have in my scrap book signal from Colonel Toby Moll, the SAAF's Senior Air Liaison Officer with the USAF Far East Air Force HQ in Tokyo, which was prompted by one such mission. It begins: '25 Mar for Clifton from Moll. Congratulations on aggressive display against MiG's. This is further evidence that 2 sqn is upholding fine fighting tradition of SAAF.

CONVERSION TO THE SABRE F-86F-30

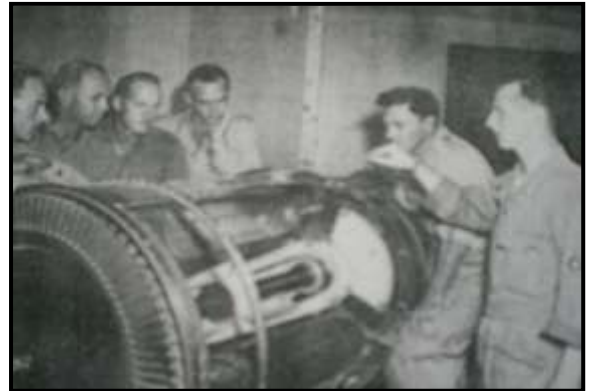
During 1953 the 18th Fighter- Bomber Wing received the Sabres.

The South African “Flying Cheetahs” converted to the F-86F-30

Both 8 and 18 Fighter –Bomber Wings were equipped with new ground-attack version of the Sabre known as the F-86F-30, fitted with bomb shackles and a modified bomb-gun-rocket sight, and it could carry two 170-gallon long-range fuel tanks. These modifications made for a versatile aircraft; for besides effectiveness in ground attack, ordnance and extra fuel could be jettisoned at the touch of a button and the pilot could switch over to interception. The jets could carry two 1000lb bombs, had a combat radius of 570 miles and were fitted with General Electric J47-GE27 engines giving them a climb rate of 10 000ft a minute and a service ceiling of 50 000ft.

The Sabres compared favourably with the best aircraft available to the communists. The MiG’s had a higher ceiling (56 000ft) and a superior rate climb, but was slightly slower in level flight at sea level, and in the dive. It also tended to be unstable at slower speeds and to go into a spin without warning. The first Sabre was delivered to the squadron on 27 January, an event that caused great excitement, and for the next few days, curious personnel crowded round the aircraft. The diarist of 2 Squadron noted:

If we had charged ten cents admission to view the aircraft, the squadron and the Air Force fund would not need donations for years!



An introduction to a Sabre engine

Although the pilots of 2 Squadron were confident that their new aircraft could match the best that the enemy could send against them, the disparity that worried them during January 1953 was not that between the MiG-15 and the Sabre but between the Mustang and the Sabre. They were faced with the task of converting, under operational conditions, from a piston-engine aircraft to a high-performance jet fighter; though fortunately all but two of them had previously flown Vampire jets during training in South Africa.

On 22 February Ralph Gerneke flew the first operational sortie in a Sabre as No 2 to the CO of 67 Squadron, Major Hagerstrom. CO of the Wing, Colonel Martin, and the CO of 12 Squadron, Major Evans, comprised the rest of the flight. They sighted numerous MiG’s-15s but no contact was made. On 11 March Stan Wells and John Nortjie flew with two USAF pilots on a sweep of the Yalu, and the next day the squadron became fully operational on Sabres when four counter air patrols were flown along the Yula River. These missions marked a turning-point in the history of the SAAF as the Flying Cheetahs became the first South African squadron to go into action with jet aircraft.

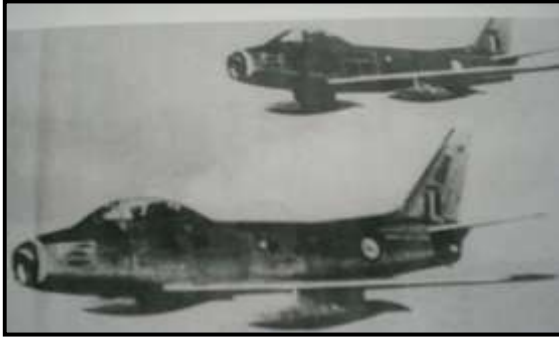
The flying Cheetahs flew their last operational sorties on the Mustang on the 27 December 1952. Some impression of the intensity of their 10 373 ground support sorties may be gauged from the fact that of the 95 F-51 originally purchased from the US government 74 were lost.

MUSTANG

Mustang- jy moet nou huis toe gaan,
Mustang-jy moet nou huis toe gaan,
Mustang-jy moet nou huis toe gaan.....

Want die MiGs hulle skiet vir jou Mustang,
Die Migs hulle skiet vir jou Mustang.
Daar by Sonchon sal die koeels vir jou slaan.
Mustang, jy moet huis toe gaan!

Nee nee nee my Mustang nee,
Nee my Mustang nee – nee my Mustang nee,
Nee, nee, nee my Mustang nee,
Ek gaan nie terug na Sonchon nie!!



Cheetah Sabres in formation

South African Flying Cheetahs maintained their reputation on the F86 Sabre. They demonstrated to the many doubters that the F86 was a first class ground support aeroplane. It could be adapted to carry bombs and napalm, and was equally at home in high level combat air patrols.

Altogether the South African flew 2032 operational sorties in their Sabres and lost only four of them. They certainly deserved the award of a US Presidential Unit Citation, the three Legion of Merit awards, the two Silver Stars and the fifty American Distinguished flying Crosses accorded to South Africa's No 2 Squadron.

GROUND CREW

So often in air operations the exploits of aircrew personnel receive far more publicity than the fine work done by the ground crew.

It is common cause that the Cheetah serving crews were in every way superior to the USAF ground crews. The daily sortie rate of No 2 Squadron SAAF was consistently better than the other three squadrons of 18 Fighter Bomber Wing USAF.

Our ground crew were all P.F. volunteers who took great pride in their work. They could repair unserviceable parts, when necessary. This was one of the reasons why No 2 Squadron's rate of serviceability was always so good.

Cheetah Squadron ground crews always showed a great interest in their aircraft and the pilots who flew them, imbuing confidence in the pilots who knew that their lives depended on well cared for aircraft.



In February 1952, observing ground crew swarming over a Mustang as it landed at KIO Base, 5th USAF Inspectors immediately identified this team spirit as a major factor in the excellent turn-around time achieved by the Flying Cheetahs.

An example of the outstanding technical ability of No 2 Squadron Erks was the creation of a new Mustang to augment the dwindling supply of new aircraft. Three Mustangs that had been written off as damaged beyond repair were cannibalised to create a new serviceable, aircraft. Mustang 325 flew within a month of permission being given to proceed with the project.

This was a feat of engineering hard to match in any location, never mind a forward base such as KIO, a mere landing strip known as Dogpatch.

LOUIS NELL REMEMBERS.

Matriculating at an early age, I joined the Military Gym and then, while there, volunteered to go to Langebaan as an Air Force recruit. (This volunteering was motivated by the fact that the AF got a meat pie and a salad at lunch on Wednesdays!) We were six of us who went in one group. During our stay at Langebaan, the call from the UN came for volunteers for Korea. Being under age, only 17, I had to get special permission from my dad to join the forces for the UN.

We shipped to Korea on the SS Tigerberg via various ports of call. Mauritius, Mombasa, Beira and then to Ceylon etc were but a few, until we reached our destination. The poor deck crew had a time and a half with us young men – we loved it when in rough seas – this meant that we'd sit on deck chairs and slide from rail to rail (never mind the scoring on the deck from the chairs!) At Beira we thought we'd hire a boat as the ship had to await the tides to be able to put out to sea and our stay was lengthy. We rowed out between the ships at the harbour, became extremely hot, jumped into the shark infested waters and had to swim – never mind

the one in the boat rowing, he'd try to evade your attempts to get back into the boat – bugger the sharks that could attack you! One realized afterwards how dangerous it really was.....

The first thing that really sticks in my memory was the stench around you. Seoul was virtually flattened, except for an area around the railway station.

We were first stationed at K46 and became orientated with surroundings, work fatigue etc.

If we had worked the 12o'clock shift the mess usually provided hot chocolate/coffee pancakes and syrup. During air raids and our midnight meal was the former; we'd blandly sit it out, while our American counterparts ran for the foxholes/trenches nearby. To cause a bit more panic for fun, just like any 18/19 yr old, we'd sometimes throw the flapjacks and syrup at them and then we'd check out who would go for a shower after the all clear had sounded.

To have the engines warmed and ready for take off for sorties, we'd burn a special machine with a blower under the engine – this was during the severe winter months with temperatures well below zero. The South African's weren't allowed to stay for 2 consecutive winters as they are very severe. With fewer ground crew we still managed to get our blokes off into the air much quicker than the Americans, although they had an abundance of ground crew.

For the conversions from Mustangs to Sabres, we were sent on a course in Japan. The SA chaps all came back with 80%+ certificates. Most chuffed. On returning to camp, we were given orders to dump all parts pertaining to the Mustang. We'd row out to sea and dump the engines, tools etc in deep waters. We had a large platform over the boat on which we placed the engines so as to be able to just tip them into the water.

During the winter of 1952 K46 was sited +_60km South West of Seoul. The temperatures at night were -20C to 30C. Our wooden framed canvas tent for work and sleep, was warmed by two paraffin heaters with a 44 gallon drum just outside the tent.

One night, Tom Butler who was our maintenance mechanic, during an air raid fell into the sewerage canal! – Poor Tom had to be hosed down in an adjacent tent! He had to sleep at the MT section and so spent the cold night in seclusion at the base! Another chap, Curly Botha (no hair at all!) after a few drinks fell into the same trench and had to spend the night in the armament section!

K10 was the Maintenance Base where changing 20mm cannon barrels and complete 0.5 Browning Machine guns in those low temperatures was not so easy. As K46 was adjacent to the sea, the old barrels and other scrap was dumped into the sea. **(Oh pollution!)**

We were short of transport till a few enterprising pilots 'lifted' an American Service Jeep. They were in Seoul when they espied this Jeep chained to a tree in the main street! Daar was'n plan gemaak and the result was the Jeep was repainted with the Springbok emblem on the sides.

At the advance operating base, K46, transporting of original 500lb bombs was done. Two 500lb bombs were loaded on each aircraft. One day while transporting 500lb phosphor bombs from the dump to the airbase, a large snow bank lifted the rear of the trailer on which the bombs rested. This unhooked the trailer and the bombs fell gently off and scattered in all directions at the start of the runway. While the aircraft were returning from a sortie, I had to use the cherry picker to reload.

Cocoa was a favourite drink and while waiting for aircraft to return, Flappie Botes (huge ears) would be sent to the American mess where he had to return with a drum of hot drinks!

We had a couple of local labourers who assisted us in pushing the bomb dollies to the aircraft. One day while reloading, we realized that the load was phosphor with fuses fitted on top and at the bottom of the tank. This was later changed back to normal bomb loads. It so happened that these tanks were fitted down with fuses and while removing the fuses somebody had to unscrew the bottom fuse first, with the result that some of the mixture leaked out. Besides anything else, this fluid was highly volatile/flammable, and even to wipe your hands in the sand could set off a spark and so cause a fire/explosion, and with the aircraft parked around the area. Boots had to be removed in this area as even a spark from some a boot on metal or tone could cause an explosion and so destroy the parked aircraft surrounding the area. Even the pilots were asked to help out as the total of Armourers at K46 was only 4.

The American armourers was 46 strong and we were only 4 and we flew 25 aircrafts 3 times a day. The four include the SM and Corporal de la Ray.

For its operations in Korea, KOREA 50-53 was added to the other eighteen battle honours, won in World War Two, on the Squadron colours.

50 YEARS LATER

The Korean Veterans Association has hosted a revisit programme over the last five decades, A delegation of South African Veterans visited Korea on the fiftieth anniversary of the cessation of hostilities, Val and Louis Nell joined that delegation.

No other country in the world has paid tribute to the nations who came to their aid as Korea has done.



The flags of South Africa and America on parade for the last time



There are only two other countries who acknowledge the SAAF aid given to them in World War two, In Poland Liberators of 31 Squadron flew from Italy to Warsaw to drop food and supplies to the beleaguered city. The SAAF ferried supplies to Berlin, under siege by the Russians. These deeds are remembered yearly by memorial services in South Africa.



For the South African Korean War Veterans it is an honour for our veterans to be feted and remembered by the country of Korea.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article was prepared from Information supplied by: Doreen Lewer and Louis & Val Nell

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