

My Favorite Fighter-Bomber Sabre Story

By Flamm D. Harper - published in Sabre Jet Classics/Winter 1993 (Vol 2, No. 4).

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This story will break tradition. It is about a truly unique fighter-bomber mission flown by the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing near the end of the Korean War. The sorties flown were *never* authorized by 5th Air Force Headquarters! In addition, the mission was probably the first large-scale, night fighter-bomber operation conducted in combat. And to top that, it was probably one of the most effective fighter-bomber missions ever flown, with results having an immediate impact on the war and the peace talks at Panmunjom, Korea. Have you heard of an instance where 120 fighter-bomber sorties stopped a million man enemy offensive? My story has never been published but can easily be verified by 5th Air Force and 8th Army records. No, I have not lost my mind, nor have forty years fogged my memory enough to disqualify my statements. But during our 1992 *F-86 Sabre Pilots Association* reunion, I was advised that even pilots who flew several sorties against those targets were unaware of their impact. My purpose therefore is to clear the record as to what the men of the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing accomplished on the night of July 15, 1953.

Prior to the resumption of peace talks in Korea in April 1953, ground activity along the front was at a standstill. The lines for the United Nations' and North Korean forces were heavily fortified and deeply dug in. Many U.S. 8th Army bunkers consisted of three or four underground levels. They contained not only essential fortifications, but also all the comforts of home! To minimize losses, Headquarters for 5th Air Force established a 3,000-foot minimum altitude for our attacks. This limitation had been in effect for many months.

After the peace talks resumed, the Chinese became more aggressive whereas the efforts of UN Forces were directed toward the status quo. The Chinese launched a major ground offensive by mid-June to gain an advantage at the peace talks. The main thrust of their attack broke through our defensive lines and was out in the open on the main road to Seoul, located approximately sixty miles southwest. 8th Army did not have the reserves to stop this. Their actions were limited to attempting to close the hole in our line, thereby blunting the enemy's spearhead. It was therefore up to the 5th Air Force to neutralize it, and so minimum altitudes for ground attacks were eliminated. Our frag orders for the first time included fighter sweeps, and our effort was directed at the breakout area. So many flights were scrambled supporting the Tactical Air Control Center's (TACC) requirements that it was difficult maintaining the ground alert status directed in our frag orders. Even with this, though, it was rare to find a real, worthwhile target. For the most part, they did not exist during the last year of the war!

On July 15, 1953, both Colonel Frank Perego, our 18th Wing Commander, and Colonel Maurice Martin, our 18th Group Commander, were attending a conference in Tokyo. Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Stell was our acting group commander. At this time I was a Captain with a spot promotion to Major. I was the Group Operations Officer for the 18th Fighter-Bomber

Page Two

Group. I was a junior officer who had not yet learned the fine art of "keeping my buttocks covered."

By 1700 hours we completed every mission assigned, or about 92 sorties. Two flights were still north of the Main Line of Resistance (MLR), but at the Combat Operations Center, we were putting the day's activities to bed. Harry Evans, commander of the 12th Squadron, was leading a flight still north of the MLR. At this time Harry contacted our Combat Operations Center by radio and said he had located about 100 enemy boxcars in a marshalling yard near the front. Everything they shot *exploded*, indicating munitions! He also said another nearby marshalling yard was *loaded* with boxcars! He then gave the map coordinates. Finally a *real* target emerged!

By definition, we were a day fighter outfit, but night was rapidly approaching. I knew that by morning the munitions would be dispersed and this prime target would no longer exist. *Instant action was required*. While the Combat Operation Center's duty officer relayed the "scramble" order and target data to our two flights on alert, I contacted the duty officer in the Combat Operations Center at 5th Air Force Headquarters. I gave the data on the targets Harry located, and I stressed the need for *immediate* action. I advised I would launch our alert flights against these targets while he obtained the necessary authority.

Considering the seriousness of the situation, I never once thought we may *not* receive such authority. The duty officer at the Combat Operations Center at 5th Air Force was also advised we would load and man all available aircraft for immediate strikes against these targets. Within fifteen minutes we were ready to launch 16 additional aircraft. Again I contacted the duty officer at 5th AF for authority. I was advised that the commanding general was at dinner, and that they did not want to disturb him. Again, I advised the duty officer that we would launch the flights that were ready. Meanwhile we would turn everything around upon landing as well as augment the force as rapidly as possible. He agreed to work on the necessary authority for conducting our operation.

At this point, I told the duty officer in our Combat Operations Center to keep 5th Air Force advised on all actions we were taking.

By now this had become a *major* operation at K-55 where we were stationed. Bombs and munitions were moved from the dump to the flight line. Maps with appropriate photography were supplied to aircrews by our intelligence office. Every organization on base was putting on a maximum effort to support our operation. At this time, I was the *only one* on base who knew that *none* of this *had been authorized or directed by 5th Air Force*.

We continued launching flights. The sun set and darkness arrived. I was advised by the commanders of both the 67th and 12th Squadrons to continue. The fires within the targets were so extensive that our pilots *could read their instruments without their cockpit lights!* I later heard from some that, "The whole valley in the target area looked like daylight." Another

Page Three

recalled, " We did not need maps or photos. We just headed north, and when we got to 6,000 feet, *we could see the fires on the horizon.*" The drama continued. As the night wore on, stratus clouds moved between K-55 and our target. Our aircrews were logging about 40 minutes of weather on each sortie.

We were fully aware of the danger. Colonels Evans and Stanton, commanders of the 12th and 67th, took turns controlling the attacks as they reported into the target. After sustained attacks had been underway for several hours, a C-47 with a forward air controller arrived to take charge.

Two officers and a sergeant manned the Combat Operations Center to coordinate the operation. I had not advised Colonel Stell we lacked authority for the sorties, a *serious* breach of command authority, because up to this, I had not considered 5th Air Force approval to be a problem. In my mind, I *knew* approval was *imminent*. I was just busy doing my job hacking through the red tape.

As an aside, both Colonel Stell and I were in DNIF status. He was recovering from burns received several weeks earlier while pulling Captain Tex Beneke from a burning F-86 that had crashed on take off. I had bailed out of a burning F-86 and was seriously injured upon landing in North Korea on the 29th of June. I had only recently been released from a hospital and was still recovering.

I continued contacting the Combat Operations Center at 5th Air Force Headquarters for authority. At one point I requested they order me to stop or else obtain authority, but neither occurred! In my opinion, the response from the 18th had been so fast and of such a magnitude that after the general completed dinner, no one wanted to tell him he had missed the war! But by 2100 hours, I knew I had been hung out to dry! At best, I figured 5th Air Force would sweep the operation under the carpet. In my defense, we were striking the only *real* target I had seen during the seven months I was in combat. I was also aware that after going this far, I had better finish the job. I made the personal decision to remain silent about the authority. There was no need for anyone else to be open for court martial. *Operations continued.*

Shortly after midnight, we lost one pilot and two Sabres from groundfire. Lieutenant Don Forbes bailed out and was in No Man's Land. Because of these losses, I knew our operation could not be swept under the carpet. We shut down shortly thereafter feeling assured our target had been destroyed. For the day, The 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing produced 212 sorties, of which 120 had not been authorized.

Memories fade over the years, and I no longer recall who was lost. Don Forbes was more fortunate. 8th Army recovered him. He was with friendly forces before dawn and enjoyed a hearty breakfast. Undoubtedly, his was an event with high drama if the story could be told. Years later, unfortunately, Don was killed in a C-47.

Page Four

About 0300 hours on the 16th, I met the 5th Air Force courier to pick up our frag order. Included in the coming day's tasking was a message for Colonels Perego and Martin directing them, "To return to 5th Air Force Headquarters immediately. Do not stop at K-55 enroute. Repeat, do not stop at K-55 enroute." I was well aware of the significance. The investigation into our nighttime activities had begun before I went to bed!

After notifying the appropriate units about our tasking for the day, I went to bed. After the day's events, I was totally exhausted and extremely shaken, considering that I was not in good physical shape to begin with. With visions of a court martial and a possible sentence in Leavenworth, I went into shock prior to falling asleep.

During my dealings with the Combat Control Center at 5th Air Force the following day, no one discussed the previous day's operations.

About 1430 hours, Colonel Martin walked into my office. I said, "Do you know when to be off base?" He replied, "Kid, you had a pretty busy day yesterday, didn't you?" After a considerable pause, he continued, "As Air Force officers we are all required to make decisions. Yesterday, you made the *right* decision. If you never make another decision, you have earned your pay for the rest of your career." He told me that 8th Army Headquarters' Intelligence had hard information that the Chinese intended to launch a *million-man offensive*, but it *never* came. During the previous night the 18th destroyed the *munitions required* for the attack. I was also informed I would not be court martialed for my audacity, but neither would I be decorated nor cited. In fact, this was the last I would *ever* hear about this. It took forty years to realize the truth of that statement.

It was not until our 1992 *F-86 Sabre Pilots Association's* reunion in Las Vegas while speaking with James Neale, Donald McNamara and James Campbell (the latter two are former presidents of the *F-86 Sabre Pilots Association*) that I realized that the pilots who flew those sorties did not know their positive contribution. Stopping a million man offensive *before it started* had a major impact on the peace talks. The Peace Treaty for the Korean War was signed on July 27, 1953, less than two weeks after our strikes. How does one evaluate the consequences of an event that "never" occurred, such as a major Chinese offensive in the closing days of the war? If we could answer that question then we would have the answer to the following question: Would the date and terms of the Korean peace treaty have been the same if the Chinese had successfully launched their attack on July 16, 1953? These thoughts had never before entered my mind. It is highly probable that air power had a greater impact on securing peace than is currently credited by most historians.

I developed this article to let my fellow F-86 pilots from the 18th Fighter-Bomber Wing, and many other supporters, know the importance of those night combat sorties. Yes, this is *my* favorite Sabre story. Possibly because it is imprinted in my mind with indelible ink and I did not end up in Leavenworth.

Page Five

Before I finish, I will pay tribute to Colonel Maurice L. Martin. I worked for him prior to Korea. He was one incredible commander! He *demande*d our best. With his bushy eyebrows and piercing eyes, he could look through a man, but at the same time, he was *extremely* fair. If we were right he would support us all the way. I do not know what transpired with 5th Air Force, but I credit "Marty" with protecting my backside through those discussions.

After witnessing the Air Force's expertise in *Desert Storm*, no one questions the value of the realistic combat aircrew training conducted at Nellis Air Force Base or the value of the USAF Fighter Weapons School and *Red Flag* exercises. Only a few old timers know that it was Colonel Martin's vision and grasp of tactical air operations that began the evolution that training underwent at Nellis.

Colonel Martin was the Training Group Commander at Nellis when the Korean War started. Overnight the mission at Nellis changed from F-51 advanced flight training to combat crew training in F-80s. "Marty" recognized the value of realistic combat aircrew training and was willing to accept the casualties rather than pass them to the combat commands. He staked his career on this. Both he and Colonel Bruce Hinton supported these concepts before a Congressional Committee investigating aircraft losses at Nellis. Pushing his vision, he started the Fighter Weapons School at Nellis to improve the quality of instruction throughout the Air Force. Concurrently, Army surplus tanks, trucks and other older equipment were moved onto the gunnery ranges north of Nellis as tactical training targets. We know the evolution this has undergone. Colonel Martin prepared the groundwork for this. Generals John Roberts, John Giraudo, Alvin Tacon and many others later contributed toward making "Marty's" vision a reality.

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