

NOTES ON MY TOUR IN KOREA - AVM Bill Simmonds

In 1952 Iwakuni was controlled by the RAAF, although US Navy and Marine flying units also operated from the base. No 91 (Maintenance) Wing was the principal unit and was responsible for all the deeper level maintenance of 77 Sqn's Meteors. With battle damage repairs and replacement aircraft arriving by sea from the UK at regular intervals to be assembled, 91 Wing was very busy indeed.

It took nine days to complete my Meteor conversion. I had only four live air to ground gunnery and rocket firing sorties, no air to air gunnery, very little instrument flying and no night flying. Furthermore, when we joined the squadron there was no pilot attack instructor to brief us on air combat tactics.

My tour commenced in April 1952 when I joined the squadron at Kimpo in South Korea with the two others from my course, also two sergeant pilots from No 6 Flying Training School Course. My other three classmates joined us a few weeks later. At the Australian Government's request six experienced RAF pilots arrived at the squadron to help overcome what was rapidly becoming a critical pilot shortage. The majority of the squadron's pilots were trained during WW2 and it was abundantly clear to me that we weren't particularly welcome. We were still being referred to as 'cadets' and were generally regarded as privileged and pampered. After four and a half years in the Air Force we regarded this as offensive. When the Royal Air Force pilots were being briefed by our commanding officer, Wing Commander Susans, he explained the squadron's role and experience levels. The College graduates were actually referred to as 'cadets'. And when one of the RAF pilots suggested that it would be unusual to have cadets in an operational squadron, the CO's response was-"well they were cadets".

About two weeks into his operational tour on the 4th of May Pilot Officer John Surman, flying Number 2 to Ken Murray at around 20,000 feet, shot down a Mig 15. This feat was largely unrecognized by the majority of our pilots, which I thought was shameful.

Only four days later I also shot down a MIG 15. In my case I was flying one of 16 Meteors as number four of four sections in line abreast. We were at 15,000 feet with some 40 or so USAF F-86's mixing it with a large number of MIGs at about 25,000 feet. Unknown to us MIGs were also at our level and to our rear. As my section was on the outside of the formation we were an obvious target. How the 2 MIGs that attacked me and Bomber Hill [my leader] got into firing

range without being seen by others in the formation I'll leave the reader to decide.

The first indication I had of their presence was when I observed three lines of tracers, two red 23mm and one orange 37mm passing directly over my port main plane. Instinctively I rolled to the right, but before I had begun to change direction a MIG passed directly beneath me, with so little separation I could see that the pilot was wearing a leather helmet- there were also red stars on the wings. I immediately reversed left to follow the MIG and when it was about 200-300 feet ahead and going away at an estimated 50-100 knots I fired for five or six seconds (later confirmed by the armorers) until smoke began pouring from the fuselage area. The MIG pitched up violently- it was obviously uncontrollable and the pilot ejected. Meanwhile Bomber Hill's ventral tank had been hit which fortunately he was able to jettison.



Aboard A77-385 8-May

After returning to Kimpo my reception was not unlike John Surman's. I can't recall the CO or any of the flight commanders recognizing my achievement. This was in stark contrast to the reception enjoyed by pilots of the Sabre squadrons on the other side of the runway whenever they successfully engaged MIG15's. I suppose two enemy aircraft being shot down in four days by 'cadets' was just too much.

Later in May Pilot Officer Don Robertson became the first College graduate to be killed in Korea whilst engaged in a rocket attack in the Sohung area. Witnesses observed his Meteor fly straight into the ground. The target was very well defended and it was assumed he had been killed or seriously wounded by small arms fire or that his aircraft has been disabled.

Robertson was a Sword of Honour winner and a very dedicated young officer. Curiously a few days earlier he handed me two letters, one addressed to his father and the other to his girlfriend. I had never been particularly close to Robertson so I wondered why he had asked me to ensure that the letters were delivered. He did tell me he was most concerned about the nature of some of the targets being attacked, in particular the small villages. He believed we were unnecessarily killing civilians, despite the fact that significant explosions were often observed after our rocket attacks. Intelligence reports at the time indicated that it was common practice for the North Koreans to store munitions in civilian houses.

The United States 5th Air Force Headquarters in Japan exercised operational control over 77 Squadron throughout the Korean War and from time to time the squadron was awarded flying decorations, principally American Air Medals and Distinguished Flying Crosses. The Air Medal was presented on the basis of the number of operational sorties flown. Twenty missions was the requirement for the initial award. Thereafter forty additional sorties was the requirement for a bronze 'oak leaf cluster'. Four bronze was the requirement for a silver cluster. I was chatting with our operations officer, Flight Lieutenant Stan Bromhill just prior to a scheduled presentation of American decorations to 77 Squadron. He told me that a number of American Distinguished Flying Crosses were to be presented and that the CO had been asked to recommend four names, suggesting that the two young pilots who had recently shot down MIG's were worthy of consideration. The awards were later presented by a four star USAF general at a temporary parade ground on the tarmac area with Meteors parked on three sides. During the ceremony Surman and I were both programmed to fly operational sorties over North Korea. Both of us were about as far away as possible from the presentation ceremony! And who received the Distinguished Flying Crosses? Why, the CO, two flight commanders and one of our sergeant pilots of course.

At this stage of the war 77 Squadron was engaged in so called Main Supply Route [MSR] patrols. These were usually flown at dawn and dusk during the summer months

The logistic support of North Korea's troops was provided by hundreds of trucks using the principal north south roads. Sections of these roads were very narrow and situated in deep valleys and in some areas were heavily defended with medium caliber weapons. Many of these were situated a few hundred feet above the roads, so that it was not unusual for these guns to be firing down at us at the same time that truck mounted weapons were also shooting at us.

Truck movements were restricted to the hours of darkness after which they would be driven off the roads and camouflaged until nightfall. Because there was inevitably some movement during dawn and dusk this presented us with the opportunity to attack the convoys. Where possible we would aim to hit the first and last of the trucks if possible. And having successfully destroyed those vehicles the others usually had no escape route. Thereafter it became what the Americans would call a 'turkey shoot'. The Meteor's four 20 mm cannon each firing up to 600 rounds a minute were particularly effective for the task. We also immobilised tanks from time to time by attacking them from the rear where they were the most vulnerable. All of which sounds quite straight forward. Unfortunately that was not the case. Some of the valleys were very steep and the roads windy. Apart from the danger posed by the defensive weapons there was always the potential danger of flying through the debris from exploding trucks. On several occasions I considered myself extremely lucky to have avoided being fatally hit.

On June the 9th John Surman was killed. He and three others were engaged in a road reconnaissance mission on one of North Korea's main supply routes. One of the pilots in the formation told me that it appeared that his Meteor had hit the ground at a very shallow angle, possibly the result of a too low dive recovery. Alternatively the pilot could have been seriously disabled or fatally wounded during the attack. John and I had been very close friends for four and a half years and understandably I was extremely upset at his loss. That night in the Mess one of the flight commanders said to me-"Cheer up Simmonds you have to expect this sort of thing during wartime, you'll get over it". I thought at the time he could have been a little more sympathetic.

Returning to base after one of these sorties I was unable to shut down the port [left] engine. I advised one of the ground staff then vacated the aircraft with the engine still running. A short time later I was presented with a rock about four inches in diameter which had entered the air intake and jammed the high pressure fuel cock and subsequently prevented the engine shut down.

At one stage during the ground attack phase of operations we were using napalm rockets. These weapons attracted some initial interest from our American allies.

They were essentially air to ground 5 inch rockets with the warhead removed and replaced with a metal cylinder with a pointed nose cone. Each cylinder contained about five gallons of napalm. Judging by their aerodynamics, they needed a lot more development. Arming vanes behaved erratically and had to be modified by the squadron armourers to prevent them striking the aircraft. Occasionally a rocket motor would shed a fin -possibly removed by an arming vane. And when this happened the rocket lost its directional stability. On one occasion I had to take drastic evasive action to avoid being hit head on by one of these rogue missiles. Hastily designed and not properly tested they were of limited value. On the other hand the 60 pound high explosive rockets from which they were derived were very effective indeed. Ground attack was a pretty hazardous occupation. In fact it was estimated that throughout the Korean War eighty five percent of aircraft losses below two and a half thousand feet were due to small arms fire. When attacking well defended targets the squadron usually employed sixteen aircraft. The least likely to be hit by ground fire were obviously those first through the target area because there was always an element surprise. Thereafter succeeding aircraft were subjected to more accurate fire. To minimize the danger sections of four aircraft would attack from different directions, although of course this option was not always possible.

Our operations officer, Squadron Leader Ian Parker, [later Air Vice- Marshal] issued a directive to the flying programmer to minimize the risk to individual pilots as much as possible. This meant that the last pilots through a heavily defended target area on a particular mission were to be programmed as some of the first on a subsequent mission. For those of us who hoped to survive the war this directive was very welcome indeed.

The flight commander responsible for the daily flying programme at that time Flight Lieutenant Pete Middleton obviously hadn't been listening, because for the next five consecutive missions I flew number sixteen in the formation and on the sixth I was moved up to fifteen. Furthermore, the last two aircraft in any ground strike mission were required at that time to return over the target for what was called a damage assessment. No doubt 'cadets' were considered to be expendable.

When Meteors replaced the Mustangs in Korea in 1951 the squadron role was switched from ground attack to air defence. The North American F-86 was the RAAF's preferred replacement, but none were available because the American production line could barely keep pace with the USAF's requirements.

The Gloster Meteor was a jet fighter aircraft designed and built towards the end of World War 2 primarily to intercept high flying bombers. It was also used very effectively at low level to intercept V1 flying bombs. Powered by two Rolls Royce Derwent engines it had excellent acceleration at low and medium altitudes and was quite manoeuvrable. Initially 77 Squadron's Meteors were flown as high as forty thousand feet to provide top cover for the American Sabres. Not only were the Meteors a mismatch for the MIG-15's at these altitudes, they were flown well below their maximum speed ostensibly to improve their endurance. Furthermore with jet aircraft operations in the RAAF in their infancy no effective tactics had been developed.

It is not surprising therefore that the initial encounters with the MIG's were for the most part, unsuccessful. As a result the Meteors were withdrawn from the high altitude intercept role. And following high level discussions at 5th Air Force Headquarters in Japan it was agreed that the Meteors would be employed in the ground attack/interdiction role. The Meteor had not been designed for this role. It had neither the endurance or weapon carrying capability to be used really effectively. It was however, able to sustain quite a lot of airframe damage and the two engines were most reassuring.

Initially the aircraft carried only eight 60lb 5 inch HE rockets and after modification the number was increased to sixteen. Of course the Meteor also had four 30 mm cannons armed with HE rounds capable of firing for about eight seconds. Paradoxically we had more success against MIG-15's while operating in the ground attack role, when aerial engagements took place at lower altitudes.

History records, unfairly in my view, that the Meteor 8 was no match for the MIG-15. At high altitudes it was no contest, but at lower altitudes it was a different proposition. I will come back to this when discussing my exchange tour with the Royal Air Force. As I mentioned earlier our MSR patrols were flown at dawn and dusk during the summer months, resulting in long daylight hours of idleness.

Our accommodation at Kimpo consisted of forty foot long timber framed buildings with canvas roofs. Floors were timbered and in the centre was a combustion heater. Tent 3, the one I shared with three other occupants decided we would use our spare time to smarten it up. As usual when working with Americans suitable materials were readily at hand. The 4th Fighter Wing which was located on the other side of the runway to ourselves was equipped with F-86 Sabres. Their replacement drop tanks were always delivered in huge wooden crates made of cedar, absolutely ideal for our requirements. We planned to divide the 'tent' into two sections, one for beds and the other for relaxation.

Firstly we constructed a ceiling then lined and insulated all the walls. Our four camp stretchers were replaced with four poster single beds which we made ourselves. Instead of spring mattresses, which could not be scrounged, we cut heavy duty truck tubes into strips and stretched them lengthwise and crosswise on the wooden bed frame. Mattresses were laid on top of the rubber. In the other section of the building we built a bar, which was seldom, if ever used, and a small kitchen area for making coffee and a number of chairs. When completed we had ourselves five star accommodation compared with the rest of the squadron.

Contrary to popular belief the MIG-15 was not a supersonic fighter, although it did have very effective weapons (two x 23mm guns and one 37mm cannon). USAF evaluation trials years later confirmed that its performance had been over rated.

While employed in the ground attack role in Korea with an aircraft not specifically designed for this task I believe our contribution was commendable. Ground attack is inherently dangerous. To illustrate this point approximately one third of the squadron was lost every six months.

In retrospect the RAAF was ill prepared for an extended Korean conflict. During the Mustang phase 77 Squadron pilots had far more flying experience than many of the Meteor pilots that followed. The post war pilots were for the most part all too inexperienced to be 'thrown off the deep end', especially in the air defence role where we had had insufficient time to develop any rudimentary air combat tactics. Overall, we lost 52 meteors and 41 pilots from all causes during the Korean conflict, a significant number of these being due to flying accidents.



**Self, Sgt Pilot Tony Armstrong, Sgt Pilot Geoff Lushey
Our last day in Korea**

I completed my operational tour a few days short of my twenty second birthday, when Sgt Pilots Geoff Lushey, Tony Armstrong and myself were told to pack our bags and return to Iwakuni.. We celebrated our imminent return to Australia in the USAF mess with some close friends that night with a mix of joy and sorrow. Happy to have survived the war and sorrow for the six pilots killed during our operational tour and the one POW who was somewhere in North Korea.