The Forgotten Aviators:

The British Contribution To United Nations Air Power During The Korean War 1950-1953

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"My number 2 said "MiGs at 12 o'clock" so I looked and there were 8 MiGs. I think they were experienced pilots. They were about 250 mph faster than us and they were making an attack on us and then pulling straight up and then coming back. Then they got fed up with this, the 4 that I had, and one of them decided to make an attack on me. That was his fatal mistake because I could turn so much quicker than he could, and at low-level he had reduced his speed to get near me. And so in no time at all, I had got behind him and I fired until he went down and hit the ground."

These opening words by Peter 'Hoagy' Carmichael were taken from an interview with Max Hastings for the television programme 'The War in Korea' in 1988, when he was describing a very historic day for the Fleet Air Arm. On 9 August 1952 Lieutenant Peter Carmichael RN was leading a formation of 4 Sea Fury aircraft of 802 Squadron operating from HMS Ocean when they encountered 8 Communist MiG-15 aircraft. In the ensuing 5 minute dog-fight one MiG-15 was destroyed and 2 others badly damaged; this truly remarkable feat was achieved without a scratch to the Sea Furies. Indeed, to Lieutenant Carmichael had fallen the unique distinction of being the only piston-engined aircraft pilot to shoot down a jet-engined aircraft, a formidable testimony to the Sea Fury's ruggedness and its excellent dog-fighting characteristics. But this is just one account of the many British airmen of the Fleet Air Arm, Royal Air Force and Army Air Corps who flew in the Korean War between 1950 and 1953 – are they the 'Forgotten Aviators'?

On 25 June 1950 North Korean forces crossed the 38th Parallel and invaded South Korea. In response to a Security Council recommendation that the United Nations should provide assistance to repel the invasion, 16 nations, including the United States of America and the United Kingdom, came to the aid of the Republic of Korea. A unified command under the leadership of the United States was established on 8 July 1950. This sudden and unexpected involvement in a limited war in a distant corner of the globe created many difficulties for the United Kingdom. British armed forces had been steadily and rapidly run down since the end of World War II and a new mobilisation was most unwelcome, both politically and economically. Nevertheless, a limited mobilisation was required if a worthwhile contribution was to be made to operations in Korea. The British Army was heavily committed in Malaya and elsewhere at that time and found great difficulty in raising a force to support this new emergency. However, a number of British brigades were formed during the first few months and these were subsequently combined into the 1st Commonwealth Division on 28 July 1951. The Royal Air Force was also very heavily committed to the Malayan Emergency and its overall contribution to resolving the new conflict in Korea was perforce limited. There were other reasons why the Royal Air Force did not send a larger air component to Korea and these will be outlined later in the paper. The Royal Navy could play only a limited role in the Malayan Emergency in view of that country's mainly landlocked nature, and was therefore able to provide a number of ships, including aircraft-carriers, to the United Nations coalition in Korea.

The long and bloody battles of the Korean War were to last until 2200 hours on 27 July 1953 when a cease-fire came into effect between the Chinese-backed North Korean forces and the United Nations Command. Many books and articles have been written on most aspects of the Korean War in the intervening years, some of which are detailed in the bibliography at the end of this paper. However, few accounts have been produced on the role of British air power in the Korean War. In an attempt to record some of the more important events, this article will outline the contribution made by the Fleet Air Arm, Royal Air Force and Army Air Corps to the overall war effort.

SEA FURIES, FIREFLIES AND SEAFIRES

United States, British and Commonwealth aircraft-carriers were active throughout the Korean War. The air power contribution from the Royal Navy was not insignificant, with HMS Triumph on active service from July to September 1950 and HMS Theseus from October 1950 to April 1951. Two other British aircraft-carriers saw extensive action, with HMS Glory undertaking 3 separate periods of active service between April 1951 and May 1953 and HMS Ocean involved in operations for 2 periods between May 1952 and July 1953. In all, 10 Fleet Air Arm squadrons were involved in combat air operations of various types, flying such aircraft as the Supermarine Seafire, Hawker Sea Fury and Fairey Firefly. A Westland Dragonfly helicopter was also embarked on a number of carriers for utility and search and rescue roles. The Vickers-Supermarine Sea Otter amphibian was

still in service at the time and flew from HMS Triumph and HMS Theseus, again in the search and rescue and communications roles. Participation in the Korean War provided the Royal Navy, and in particular its aircraft-carrier force, with a timely reminder of the realities of modern warfare.[1] Their performances were admitted on all sides to be outstanding, but this was rendered possible only by the virtual absence of enemy air activity. Had there been opposition on an appreciable scale, so much effort would have been required for fighter defence of the carriers that offensive operations would have been severely curtailed. The combat operations that did take place were achieved through extremely hard work, much improvisation and the acceptance of calculated risks. At times the weather conditions, especially during the winter months, were atrocious. Flying accidents were not uncommon and aircraft serviceability rates fluctuated markedly throughout the campaign. As witnessed by Lieutenant William Jacob RN, a Firefly pilot with 812 Squadron and later with 825 Squadron, carrier operations could be unpredictable and unforgiving:

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> *"We flew from dawn to dusk every day and by my recollection we flew about 70 sorties a day with a complement of about 24 aeroplanes. We did lose a lot of people, either because they were shot down or because they had some defect with the aeroplane. The aeroplanes were much less sophisticated than they are now and were not anything like as reliable. One particular person I remember, his aeroplane wheels and hook wouldn't come down, so he had to ditch beside the carrier. We all watched him, and he never got out, we never saw him again, despite the fact that a rescue helicopter was airborne and the carrier was only 200 or 300 yards away."* [2]

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Fleet Air Arm aircraft were used in a wide range of air power roles and missions. They flew sorties in what we now term air interdiction, close air support, tactical air reconnaissance, airfield attack and fighter escort. This was a remarkable achievement with obsolete aircraft such as the Firefly and Seafire. The Royal Navy also had other problems with which to contend. Some ships were undermanned and ill-equipped or supplied for the many and wide ranging tasks to which they were to be committed. For example, catapulting arrangements for the Firefly required so much preparation as to make its launching by this means scarcely worthwhile. In a report dated 2 – 5 July 1950 the captain of HMS Triumph went on to state:

> *'Very little Firefly I catapulting has been done because the catapult is always required for launching the Seafire 47. It takes 2 hours to fit the legs to the trolley for launching the Firefly I, their catapulting rate is slow and the catapult is then useless to the Seafire until converted back again.'*[3]

A wind speed of 34 knots over the deck was needed to launch Fireflies with 500 lb bombs, but if there was only a light breeze, Triumph's engines could not bring her up to that speed. At that time the Seafire 47 was not fitted with bomb racks, and therefore the only armament available on the aircraft was the air defence cannon and air-to-ground rockets. This did not give many options to those planning air operations or the aircrews involved. Among aircraft and warships alike there were

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communications problems due to obsolescent equipment, requiring high maintenance or, where new radios had arrived, a want of maintenance manuals.[4] The vast majority of these problems arose from the deployment of a fleet underfunded and over committed. Most of the British aircraft-carriers involved in the Korean War were Colossus Class light fleet carriers, and therefore the Royal Navy component of the United Nations maritime force was inclined to look admiringly at the advanced systems of their United States counterparts, notably in the much larger fleet carrier the USS Valley Forge. This modern carrier could operate up to 100 aircraft with a mixed complement of Corsairs, Skyraiders and Panthers, plus 14 helicopters. In contrast, the British carriers usually operated with approximately 25 fixed-wing aircraft.

During the Korean War, the various air forces flying in support of the United Nations did not come under a unified command and control system. The airspace management procedures were either non-existent or very rudimentary. This lack of a central air tasking agency led to confusion between friendly air forces; for example, Fleet Air Arm pilots operating from aircraft-carriers had no real idea of what the other air arms such as the Royal Air Force, United States Air Force and United States Navy were tasked to fly from one day to the next. This far from ideal state of affairs could always lead to ‘friendly fire’ or ‘blue on blue’ incidents, and the inevitable occurred very early on in the war. On 28 July 1950 HMS Triumph and HMS Comus were sailing off the east coast of Korea when a flight of Seafires from 800 Squadron was launched to investigate an unknown radar contact which turned out to be several B-29 Super Fortress aircraft flying in formation. Commissioned Pilot D R White, who was flying as number 3 in his Seafire, passed one of the American aircraft at a range of approximately 300 yards when, for no apparent reason, it opened fire on him and the first burst of machine-gun fire hit his aircraft in the rear fuel tank. Commissioned Pilot White immediately rolled his aircraft onto its back and baled out. Unfortunately, the sea was too rough to launch the search and rescue Sea Otter from HMS Triumph but he was picked up by the United States Navy destroyer Eversole after about an hour in

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the water. He was found to be suffering from burns to his face, arms and shoulders, but his condition otherwise appeared to be satisfactory.[5]

The Super Fortress aircraft were from the 22nd Bombardment Group and on this day were flying towards their main target, the Seoul marshalling yards. On numerous occasions earlier in the month the B-29s had been intercepted by North Korean Air Force Yak aircraft. Indeed, a 19th Group B-29 had been shot down by Yaks on 12 July. Prior to the unfortunate incident on 28 July, the 22nd Bombardment Group commander had instructed his gunners to fire at any unidentified fighters within range which pointed its nose at one of the bombers.[6] All the pieces were in place for a 'blue on blue' incident. When 4 unidentified aircraft suddenly broke out of rain clouds and headed toward the tail of a 22nd Group B-29, first the tail gunner and then the central fire-control gunner blazed away at them. All members of the bomber crew who saw the unknown plane identified it as a Yak, but it was the Seafire piloted by the unlucky White. However, when viewed at certain angles, the Seafire and Yak did not look too dissimilar.

Three days later, HMS Triumph secured alongside in the port of Kure and underwent a short period of self-refit and aircraft maintenance. During this time a signal was received from Lieutenant General George E Stratemeyer, United States Air Force, Commander Far East Air Forces, expressing regret for the incident on 28 July, but also suggesting that all aircraft should keep out of gun range of the B-29s.[7] The actual text of the signal was drafted the day after the incident and is reproduced below.

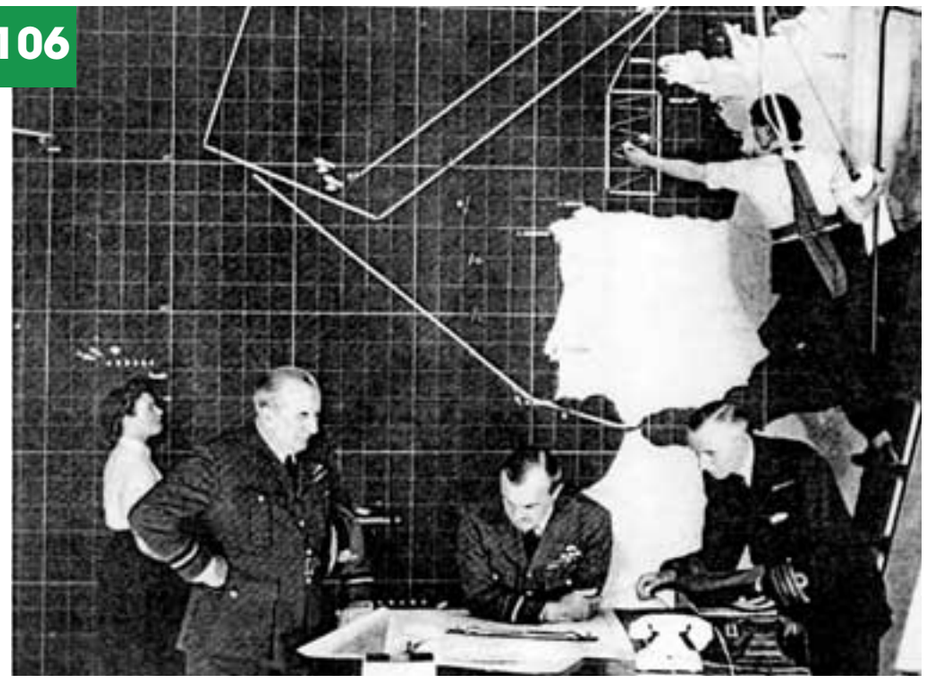
> MESSAGE TO COMNAVFE. INFO COPIES TO CINCFE, COM 7TH FLEET, CG BOMBCOM.
>
> REQUEST YOU PASS FOLLOWING MESSAGE TO ROYAL NAVY:
>
> SINCERELY REGRET INSTANCE SEAFIRE AIRCRAFT APPARENTLY FIRED UPON BY OUR B-29S AND ONE SEAFIRE WAS SET AFIRE. HAPPY THAT PILOT WAS RESCUED. ACTION UNDER WAY TO REVISE ELECTRONIC RECOGNITIONS PROCEDURES TO PRECLUDE FUTURE UNFORTUNATE INSTANCES. HOPE YOU WILL INSTRUCT ROYAL NAVY PILOTS TO REMAIN OUTSIDE OF .50-CALIBRE MACHINE GUN RANGE WHEN ATTEMPTING TO IDENTIFY, PRIOR TO AN ATTACK, FOUR-ENGINE AIRCRAFT. SIGNED STRATEMEYER.

Decorations for distinguished services against the enemy were awarded to 165 officers and men of the Royal Navy and a further 289 were mentioned in dispatches

The highest proportion of operations flown by Fleet Air Arm aircraft were close air support or air interdiction missions. Some of the combat statistics achieved by the Fleet Air Arm during the Korean War were remarkable. For example, approximately 15,200 bombs of varying weights were delivered on and around various targets. Also, 57,600 three-inch rocket projectiles and over three million rounds of ammunition were fired from aircraft during the campaign. But sadly, 26 Fleet Air Arm aircrew lost their lives on operations. One Royal Air Force navigator, a flight lieutenant attached to 810 Squadron, HMS Theseus, was killed on 13 March 1951 when his Firefly aircraft crashed a few miles away from a bridge near Sariwon. The crash was due either to having been hit by anti-aircraft fire or to damage sustained from bomb burst fragments; the Fleet Air Arm pilot was also lost. A further 7 Royal Navy aircrew were killed in flying accidents. Considering that the 10 squadrons involved flew nearly 23,000 operational sorties, these losses were mercifully light.[8] Decorations for distinguished services against the enemy were awarded to 165 officers and men of the Royal Navy and a further 289 were mentioned in dispatches. An important aspect of the British naval air power effort lay in the fine morale maintained throughout the war. Despite long periods at sea, the drudgery of patrols and the very hazardous missions flown during the tropical heat of the summers and the extreme cold in the winters, the morale of the aircrew and ships' companies never wavered or flagged.

SUNDERLANDS, METEORS AND SABRES

As outlined earlier, the start of the war in Korea could not have come at a more difficult time for the Royal Air Force. The emergency in Malaya was at its height and the Service was suffering from what we now term 'overstretch'. In 1950 Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor was Chief of the Air Staff, and he and the other Chiefs of Staff saw countering the Russian threat in Europe as their main effort. Of paramount importance was establishing the NATO military structure in Europe and strengthening the forces available to the Alliance. The Royal Air Force was seen as central to this process and it was inconceivable that it should be weakened by sending combat squadrons to the Korean theatre of operations.[9] There was, however, one way in which the Royal Air Force could immediately assist. With the initial Communist drive in Korea taking them rapidly southwards to Pusan, it was clear that the land forces would need the support of maritime aircraft to blockade the enemy's supply ports. At the time of the invasion, the Sunderlands of 88 Squadron from Hong Kong were exercising with Royal Navy and United States Navy ships in the Sea of Japan. The Sunderlands at once became involved in the conflict and were soon joined by more Sunderlands from 205 Squadron and 209 Squadron from Singapore. The Sunderlands were located at the ex-Japanese naval air base of Iwakuni in Japan, about 100 miles from the southern coast of Korea. Although the Sunderlands had other duties over the waters around Malaya, their roles were not as closely connected to the internal security operations as those of the



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local land-based squadrons and some of the aircraft could be spared. Consequently, a pattern emerged whereby each of the 3 Sunderland squadrons spent a month at Iwakuni in turn and this continued for the rest of the war.[10]

For Air Chief Marshal Sir John Slessor the immediate difficulty in the Korean commitment was not a lack of combat aircraft and war supplies but an almost critical shortage of manpower. On 21 July 1950 he wrote a minute to Sir Harold Parker, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Defence:

'You asked me to let you have for the Minister's information a short note on personnel requirements. The first point to realise is that the RAF today is some 20,000 men short of establishments. These establishments are not lavish for our present commitments. We quite definitely have not got any 'fat' on the Air Force – we had two years ago but it has all been sweated off. Within that problem is the more important one of the unbalance of trades and the very serious shortage in some of the really key trades without which the others cannot keep aircraft in the air….for instance, in January this year Wireless Fitters were only 50% of establishment, as were Radar Fitters (air); Electricians about 60% of establishment and Ground Wireless Mechanics 65%…'[11]

The Chief of the Air Staff went on to state that:

'We must retain a far higher proportion of regulars now due for discharge and the RAF can only meet its minimum foreseeable commitments if the term of National Service is increased to 2 years.'[12]

These and similar comments from the other Chiefs of Staff stimulated much debate within the Cabinet. High on the agenda for Cabinet meetings during this period was a proposal to increase pay for the armed forces, but it also became evident that they must first decide whether the length for national service was to be increased. For example, an extension of 6 months would add 80,000 men to the strength of the Army and the Royal Air Force. During the latter part of August 1950 it was finally decided that the length of national service would be increased and an additional £56 million would be made available for pay. In broad terms, the planned increase of 28,000 men for the Royal Air Force would fill ground crew vacancies and permit flying training for national servicemen. It was hoped that these changes would improve the overall combat effectiveness of the Royal

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Air Force; however, they did not result in the Service sending close air support, fighter or bomber squadrons to Korea.

The Sunderlands of 88, 205 and 209 Squadrons formed the Far East Flying Boat Wing which participated fully throughout the 3 years of war. These aircraft were integrated at Iwakuni with patrol squadrons of the United States Navy, and their role was to maintain the blockade of Korean ports. To achieve these missions the Sunderlands came under the operational command and control of the United States Navy from their base at Sasebo. On a day-to-day basis, operational control was exercised from a United States Navy flying boat depot ship moored in Iwakuni Bay. The ship also controlled the United States Navy Mariner flying boat squadrons based at Iwakuni and these aircraft operated in a similar role to the Sunderlands. A common flying programme was developed and the patrols flown by the British and American aircraft were very closely coordinated. The blockade of the North Korean ports was the principal task; however, the Sunderlands also flew convoy protection patrols in support of the United Nation maritime forces. There was a threat to friendly shipping from North Korean surface vessels and mines, and the Sunderland crews depended upon a temperamental surface surveillance radar and the ‘Mark One eyeball’ when hunting enemy ships.

The tasking was onerous. The patrols were often of 12 hours duration, the weather was usually unkind and the aircraft were unheated and very draughty. Temperatures in the region of minus 20 Celsius were not uncommon and airframe icing was a frequent hazard.[13] The blockade of ports held by the North Koreans had to be maintained around the clock and night flying proved to be even more demanding. The Sunderlands also had to carry out weather reconnaissance which was usually flown at night over the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan. Sea level pressure readings were required for more accurate weather forecasting and the crews operated at very low level at night using a rather unreliable radio altimeter. This was a risky enterprise in good weather and downright dangerous when flying in cloud. Nevertheless, there were no reported accidents and the meteorological data obtained by the aircrews was passed by radio to ships in the area and back to the shore-based controlling authority. The information was then used to assist in the planning of air operations throughout the Korean theatre.

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The flying rates achieved by the Sunderlands are worthy of note. More than 1,100 missions were flown by the 3 squadrons, amounting to 12,500 flying hours. This meant that each crew flew between 60 and 70 sorties. This equates to about 7 sorties per month during the period of each crew's attachment, with many individual aircrew members achieving 2,000 hours of demanding flying during their tour with the Wing.[14] No Sunderlands were lost from enemy action and, as far as is known, no enemy aircraft were shot down by them. For their exceptional service throughout the war in Korea, one Order of the British Empire, 25 Distinguished Flying Crosses and Distinguished Flying Medals and many Mentions In Despatches were awarded to personnel of the Far East Flying Boat Wing. However, one aircraft was lost, with all 14 men on board being killed, when it crashed on Formosa (Taiwan) while on a ferry flight back to Seletar via Hong Kong. One aircraft crashed on landing at night at Iwakuni in bad weather with the loss of 4 crewmen and another aircraft was destroyed by very severe weather conditions at Iwakuni when, due to unserviceability, it was unable to depart before a typhoon hit the area.[15]

Tragic circumstances surrounded the loss of the 205 Squadron Sunderland which crashed on Formosa. The explanation given at the time of the accident was that the aircraft was some 60 miles off its planned track, at night and possibly in deteriorating weather conditions. A navigational error may have set in during the process of changing from one aeronautical chart to another. A contributory factor, it was thought, was the absence of a radar on board. The aircraft had been stripped of its serviceable radar set before departure, along with other components which were required back at Iwakuni to keep the other Sunderlands fully operational. The supply of spare parts from the main operating base at Seletar, Singapore to Iwakuni was often inadequate and the practice of 'robbing' parts from an aircraft due to return home was not uncommon. The chain of events leading up to this unfortunate accident seem to have a recurring theme: an on-board system unserviceable or missing, as in this case, and a

navigational error at night in poor weather with the aircraft approaching the coast or high ground. Too many aircraft have been lost in this way over the years.

Another formal Royal Air Force contribution to air power in the Korean War was the loan of pilots to 77 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, and to the 4th and 51st Fighter Intercept Wings of the United States Air Force.

"ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS ARE MY WINGS SWEPT BACK"

At the outbreak of the Korean War, 77 Fighter Squadron, equipped with the P-51 Mustang, was Australia's remaining contribution to the Allied air forces left in Japan after the end of World War II. Squadron personnel were actively celebrating their imminent return to Australia when Communist North Korean forces invaded South Korea. The Australians were soon engaged on air operations and found themselves at war, flying obsolete aircraft. Many close air support and escort missions were flown from Iwakuni, until the Squadron moved to Korea in October 1950. The situation in Korea required that 77 Squadron be re-equipped with a modern jet fighter as a matter of urgency. There is no doubt that the Mustang was a superb aircraft for the role in which 77 Squadron flew it during the first months of the Korean conflict. But with the advent of the Soviet MiG-15 during November 1950, it was obvious that the superior performance of that aircraft could make further operations by piston-engine fighters in Korea fraught with danger, if not suicidal.[16] The replacement aircraft for 77 Squadron had to be readily available and capable of being put into service with the least possible delay. On 6 December 1950 it was announced that 36 Gloster Meteor F Mk 8 fighters and 4 Meteor T Mk 7 twin-seat trainers would be purchased by the Australian Government, with delivery of the first 12 aircraft within 3 to 4 months. No doubt the Gloster aircraft salesmen were helped by the fact that the Meteor was standard equipment for Royal Air Force Fighter Command at that time!

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new jet. Interestingly, no Australian pilots were sent to the United Kingdom for training, as it was decided that 77 Squadron would use the Royal Air Force pilots as instructors. However, a 13 strong team of Royal Australian Air Force technicians was sent to the Gloster factory for training on the Meteor. By 24 February 1951, 15 Meteor F Mk 8 and 2 T Mk 7 aircraft were shipped to Iwakuni in Japan as deck cargo on a Royal Navy Light Fleet Carrier and formal training on the new aircraft started on 11 April 1951.[17] At the end of June 1951 Squadron Leader Dick Cresswell, Commanding Officer 77 Squadron, wrote in his monthly report:

> *'The squadron has completed almost three months of conversion training onto Meteor aircraft and I can say confidently that the pilots are now ready to take these aircraft into combat.'*[18]

It took approximately 8 months for the Royal Australian Air Force to select a new aircraft, accept delivery and train the pilots to combat-ready status, a truly remarkable achievement which would be impossible to emulate in the 21st Century. Towards the end of July 1951, 77 Squadron moved to a new location at Kimpo air base in South Korea and on 29 July 1951, 16 Meteors flew the Royal Australian Air Force's first jet fighter combat mission. The Meteor was tasked in the interception role and the first missions were invariably fighter sweep or combat air patrols.

It was soon found that in air-to-air combat the swept-wing Communist MiG-15 aircraft out performed the Meteors. Having had one aircraft shot down and 2 others damaged by MiG-15s on 29 July 1951, it was decided that 77 Squadron would be employed in a different role. During September 1951 the Squadron commenced its new role flying bomber escort and airfield defence sorties, a duty the pilots loathed. But it was painfully obvious that even in this role the Meteors were no match for the MiG-15s, and after losing 3 aircraft in one engagement on 1 December 1951 the Squadron was switched to duties where MiGs were unlikely to be encountered. Again, this decision was extremely unpopular with the aircrew and a more aggressive role was

keenly sought. After some improvisation the Meteors were used in the ground attack role, with United States Air Force F-86 Sabres coordinating their operations to provide protection from any marauding MiGs. At that time, a popular song on the Australian squadron was “All I want for Christmas are my wings swept back”.[19]

The recurring theme of 77 Squadron’s operations over Korea was deficiency in pilot numbers. However, in April 1952 final approval was obtained for the Royal Air Force to despatch Meteor pilots for service with 77 Squadron. It was planned that 4 Royal Air Force pilots would be attached to the Australian squadron during each alternate month, commencing during September 1952. In effect, 5 pilots arrived at Kimpo air base during each of the months of September, October and November to play their role in the conflict.[20] By the end of the Korean War, 29 Royal Air Force officers had served with 77 Squadron. The experience was not wasted for one of them, Flying Officer Keith Williamson, subsequently became the Chief of the Air Staff, and eventually several others also reached very high rank. In total, 4 Distinguished Flying Crosses and 6 Mentions in Despatches were awarded to Royal Air Force pilots flying with the Royal Australian Air Force, but 5 pilots lost their lives in combat. Flying Officer M O Berg RAF was shot down by anti-aircraft fire on 27 August 1952 and had to eject from his Meteor. He evaded capture by North Korean and Chinese ground forces for 8 days before becoming a prisoner of war. He was released on 1 September 1953.

“ROYAL AIR FORCE PILOTS IN MIG ALLEY!”

The assistance which the United States Air Force most desired during the early stages of the war was advice and guidance from the Royal Air Force on tactical operations, and particularly in night intruder tactics. Two highly decorated and experienced Royal Air Force officers, Wing Commander P G Wykeham-Barnes (later Air Marshal Sir Peter Wykeham) and Wing Commander J E Johnson (later Air Vice-Marshal Johnson) were therefore attached to the 5th United States Tactical Air Force. Both went to Korea in the closing months of 1950, where the Americans gave them every opportunity to see what was going on and allowed them to fly a number of operational sorties. The reports they produced were critical of the way in which a number of air operations were being planned and executed.

Firstly, it was their contention that air superiority, which had been quickly won at the start of the war, was now being taken for granted. Secondly, air power was being widely regarded as meaning merely close air support for the land forces. Finally, the important principles of air interdiction had not been fully understood at the start of the war. Wing Commander Johnson went on to state:

> *‘One of the fundamental lessons is that at the outbreak of hostilities both the Air Force and Army units were quite unprepared to participate in joint air-ground operations. The other is that the basic doctrine laid down at the end of World War II for air-ground operations is still valid.’*[21]

It seemed that many of the crucial lessons learnt by the Allies about tactical air operations and air-ground cooperation at the end of the World War II had been overlooked or forgotten. It was also another example of individual armed forces believing they could win a war on their own.

Wing Commander Wykeham-Barnes used his night intruder experience to good effect. He flew many missions with the Americans and found that a lack of coordination between the different types of aircraft being used in this role was failing to produce the best results. He went on to produce a new plan for night intruder operations in which squadrons were allocated specific target areas to avoid interference with one another. Furthermore, he proposed a technique using flares for identification of targets and helped to develop a much improved air-to-ground communications system. Without doubt, these 2 highly experienced Royal Air Force officers established a very close working relationship with the United States Air Force and they opened the way for more British pilots to be accepted by the Americans.

Another senior Royal Air Force officer played a prominent part in consolidating Anglo-American relationships during the early part of the Korean conflict. Air Vice-Marshal C H Bouchier was appointed to General MacArthur's Headquarters as Senior Military Liaison Officer between General MacArthur (as Commander-in-Chief of the United Nations forces operating in support of South Korea) and the British Chiefs of Staff. Air Vice-Marshal Bouchier, as the senior Royal Air Force representative in Japan, made detailed arrangements within the Korean theatre of operations for British pilots to fly in combat with the United States Air Force. However, it was the Chief of the Air Staff writing personally to General Vandenberg, the Chief of Staff of the United States Air Force, proposing that Royal Air Force pilots should fly with the American F-86 Sabre squadrons, which really triggered this important British contribution to the air war in Korea.

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Carefully selected Royal Air Force pilots from the Central Fighter Establishment at West Raynham were among the first to be sent to the American fighter squadrons in Korea. However, a new training system was soon introduced which entailed sending the British crews to Nellis Air Force base in America for conversion to the F-86 Sabre before

being posted to one of the Fighter Intercept Wings in Korea. One of the pilots to follow this route to air combat operations was Flight Lieutenant John Nicholls (Later Air Marshal Sir John Nicholls):

> *"On 28 June 1952 I did my first operational sortie, which was a fighter sweep out. We didn't see a thing. The area for operations for the Sabres was mostly what became known in press jargon as MiG Alley, a sort of quarter-circle shape bordered on the north by the Yalu River up to the areas of the dam, about a hundred or so miles in from the Yellow Sea, and then in a sweep down to the south-west to Pyongyang, the North Korean capital. It was in that area, initially, that most MiGs were found…"*[22]

Approximately 2 months later John Nicholls was credited with 2 MiGs damaged in a single sortie and went on to be credited with 2 MiGs destroyed and a total of 3 damaged. He was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. He flew his hundredth combat mission in the F-86 Sabre on 9 December 1952, and having completed a full operational tour left Korea for the United Kingdom the next morning. By the end of the war, 21 Royal Air Force pilots had served with the 4th and 51st Fighter Intercept Wings. These officers distinguished themselves and made a significant contribution to air combat operations, and a number were awarded both British and American decorations. In total, 3 pilots were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. Sadly, 4 Royal Air Force officers lost their lives whilst serving with the United States Air Force.

AUSTERS, BIRD DOGS AND MOSQUITOES

Of all the aircraft types operated by the United Nations in Korea, the most hated and feared – if the statements of captured enemy soldiers were to be believed – were the 'Mosquitoes', the T-6, L-17, L-19 and L-20 tactical control aircraft flown in support of the American ground forces. Used for battlefield reconnaissance and artillery spotting, the sudden appearance of one of these aircraft, popping up briefly from behind some feature of the terrain, was invariably the prelude to an air strike or artillery bombardment. The Communist ground forces went to great lengths to shoot down these small, slow and very vulnerable aircraft. During the spring of 1951, having observed the effectiveness of the 'Mosquitoes' at first hand, the British Commonwealth Division in Korea made repeated requests for the establishment of its own observation aircraft units. The first of these, 1913 Light Liaison Flight, was formed at Middle Wallop in June 1951 with Auster AOP 6 aircraft and shipped to Korea. The second unit, 1903 Independent Air Observation Post Flight, was taken from the relatively relaxed atmosphere of Hong Kong and sent to airstrips in the Commonwealth Division's area. Although Royal Air Force units (the only ones to operate from Korean soil), the 2 Flights were manned with British Army pilots and the Auster aircraft were serviced by Royal Air Force and Army ground personnel in roughly equal numbers.

Although 1913 Flight's main task was liaison, its Austers undertook visual reconnaissance missions from the moment they arrived in Korea. The Flight also possessed one Cessna L-19 'Bird Dog' on loan from the American 8th Army and the British pilots pronounced the L-19 superior to the Auster in most respects. The principal role of 1903 Flight was counter

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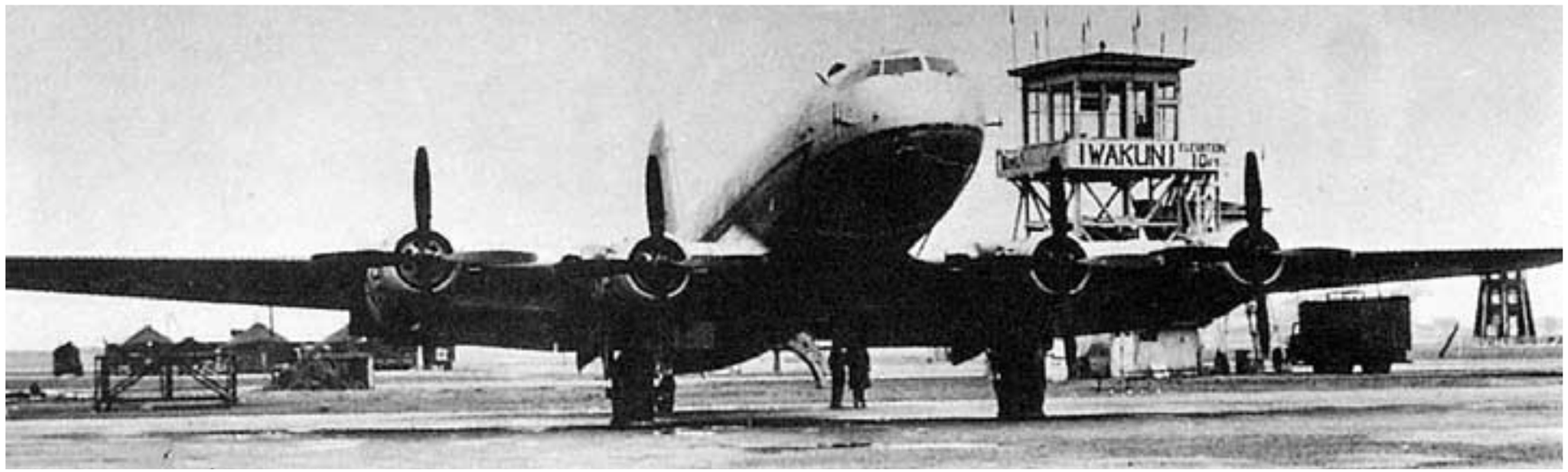
bombardment, which involved locating enemy gun positions and assisting friendly artillery to engage them. The pilots also reported on enemy ground activity and carried out photographic reconnaissance. A daily average of 7 sorties was flown, with each pilot putting in about 45 hours flying each month.[23] In spite of the vulnerability of these fragile little aircraft, casualties were relatively light. Nevertheless, 2 aircraft were shot down with the loss of their pilots and one leading aircraftman was drowned when an Auster in which he was flying as an observer crashed into the Imjin River on 12 May 1953. No less than 2,935 Air Observation Post sorties were flown during the campaign and it must be remembered that there were never more, and usually less than 10 aircraft available to the 2 Flights.[24]

The only other British aircraft to be involved in the war were the transport aircraft of the Royal Air Force. These aircraft, principally the Hastings, helped to provide the essential supply links between Singapore, Hong Kong and Iwakuni in Japan. They also had the crucial task of casualty evacuation.



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FINALE

The Second World War confirmed the decisive importance of aircraft in tactical support of ground operations. An excellent example being the potent system of land/air warfare developed by Lieutenant General Sir Bernard Montgomery and Air Vice-Marshal Arthur Coningham during the Desert War of 1942. This doctrine for land/air cooperation also achieved some spectacular results during the campaign in Northwest Europe in 1944, when the ground attack aircraft of the Second Tactical Air Force, flying in support of Montgomery's 21st Army Group, proved to be a battle winning combination. Yet while these conclusions were readily accepted by a number of generals and senior British airmen, and even by military historians and defence intellectuals, in the years following World War II they were less enthusiastically adopted by senior military commanders in the United States. Indeed, it had taken just 5 years for the hard learnt lessons of the Second World War to be neglected at the start of the war in Korea. At the time, Wing Commander J E Johnson commented on these failings:

> *"There was a lack of cooperation between the air force and army at all levels. US Air Force morale was very high, and they thought they were doing a vital job. But there were not the army officers present at briefings that we had in Europe in World War II. In the first months [in Korea] forward air control seemed very limited."*[25]

Wing Commander 'Johnnie' Johnson was forthright in his views and quite critical of the way in which air operations were being conducted at the start of the Korean War, and in doing so, played a significant part in improving land/air cooperation. He realised that air power doctrine had not necessarily become dogma, but even worse, it had been forgotten.

It was not just aircrew who made this outstanding contribution to United Nations air power in Korea

It was not just aircrew who made this outstanding contribution to United Nations air power in Korea. There were many aircraft maintenance engineers and technicians who served on the aircraft-carriers of the Royal Navy, and we should not overlook the many ground crew who kept the Sunderlands and Austers flying throughout the war. Usually working in terrible weather conditions and often at night, they did a first-class job. Extreme cold during the winter months added to the problems faced by the ground crews, yet owing to its routine and unspectacular nature, their work was rarely publicised. Other Royal Air Force officers and airmen from the ground branches also played their part. During the period of the Korean War, the United States Air Force suffered a number of manning shortfalls in some important ground trades, not least that of photographic interpreter. The 5th Tactical Air Force was therefore reinforced with a small team of officers and airmen sent out from the United Kingdom who were skilled in interpreting aerial photographs of camouflaged installations.[26]

The conflict in Korea is better known for the first all-jet air warfare in history. For 32 months, from November 1950 to July 1953, the United States Air Force F-86 Sabres and Russian-built MiG-15s tangled in the skies above Korea in swirling air battles. Vast dogfights swooped from very high altitudes, where the MiG-15 enjoyed advantages, down to lower levels, where the Sabre was

the master. In terms of aircraft design, swept-wing technology had come of age. The war in the air was dominated by the United States Air Force, but it should not be forgotten that Britain made a modest but significant contribution to United Nations air power in the Korean War.

NOTES

1 John R P Lansdown, *With the Carriers in Korea* (Wilmslow: Crécy Publishing Ltd, 1997), P 454.
2 William Jacob during an interview with Max Hastings for the television programme "The War in Korea" , 1988.
3 Anthony Farrar-Hockley, *The British Part in the Korean War, Vol One* (London: HMSO, 1990), P61.
4 Idem.
5 John R P Lansdown, Op Cit, P23.
6 Robert F Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea* (Washington DC: Office Of Air Force History, 1983), P101.
7 William T Y'Blood (Ed), The Three Wars of Lt Gen George E Stratemeyer, His Korean War Diary (Washington DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1999), P87.
8 John R P Lansdown, Op Cit, P461.
9 Air Commodore H Probert, 'The Royal Air Force and the Korean War', *Air Clues*, Nov 1987, P442.
10 Idem.
11 Minute from Chief of the Air Staff (CAS) to Sir Harold Parker, DEFE 7/1927 dated 21 July 1950.
12 Ibid.
13 Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, *Eastward, A History of the Royal Air Force in the Far East 1945 – 1972*, (London: HMSO, 1984), P115.
14 Idem.
15 Air Vice-Marshal G A Chesworth CB OBE DFC RAF, '*Sunderland Operations in Korea*', speaking at a RAF Historical Society Seminar, RAF Museum Hendon, 30 March 1999.
16 David Wilson, *Lion over Korea – 77 Fighter Squadron RAAF 1950-53* (Belconnen: Banner Books, 1994), P63.
17 Ibid P69.
18 Ibid P78.
19 Air Vice-Marshal John Price CBE DL RAF (Retd), '*With the Royal Australian Air Force in Korea*', speaking at a RAF Historical Society Seminar, RAF Museum Hendon, 30 March 1999. (AVM Price flew with 77 Squadron RAAF in Korea in 1953).
20 David Wilson, Op Cit, P137.
21 Extract from 'The Royal Air Force and the Korean War', *Air Clues*, Nov 1987, P444.
22 John Nicholls, 'Air Operations in Korea', in *There Shall be Wings* by Max Arthur (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993) P431.
23 Robert Jackson, *Air War Korea 1950-1953* (Shrewsbury: Airlife Publishing, 1998), P113.
24 Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, Op Cit, P117.
25 Group Captain 'Johnnie' Johnson quoted from Max Hastings, '*The Korean War*', (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1987), P306.
26 Air Chief Marshal Sir David Lee, Op Cit, P114.

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