



U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO

American Sabres whisk past Japan's Mount Fuji, en route to a Korean base. Limited in range, U.S. planes operate close to front



ACME

Back from battle over the Yalu River, a formation of F-86s peels off to land while ground crews get others ready for combat. Korean air battles all occur near Communists' "privileged sanctuary" across Yalu



ACME

Talking shop. L. to r., Navy Lt. Cmdr. Paul Pugh, who flies with Air Force, has downed two MIGs; Lt. Col. Glenn T. Eagleston; Col. John Meyer; Lt. Col. Bruce Hinton; Capt. J. O. Roberts; Lt. J. M. Odiorne

Collier's for April 21, 1951

# SABRES *vs.* MIGs

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**E**VERY American pilot who has tangled with a Russian-built MIG-15 fighter high over the frozen Yalu River recognizes the new jet war in Korea for exactly what it is: a warmup for World War III, if and when it comes.

It is a clear case of the best standard Russian jet (bearing Chinese Communist markings, to be sure) against the best standard American jets. The answer to the important question of how they stack up is surely being studied every bit as critically in Red Air Force headquarters in Moscow as it is in the Pentagon.

Well, how *do* they stack up?

After their first five months of combat, the ratio of the "kills" scored by the F-86 Sabre, the U.S. jet most nearly comparable to the MIG-15, stood at 8 MIGs to 1 Sabre.

Read at face value, this would seem to indicate vast superiority on the part of the American jets. Such, however, is definitely not the case. Box scores are impressive, but this one can be dangerously misleading if it creates the belief that our Sabres are anywhere near eight times better than the Russian jet.

Those who should know best about this are the pilots who have engaged the MIGs in actual combat. Sabre pilots in Colonel George F. Smith's 4th Fighter Wing, now in Korea, produced some sobering comments:

"We feel that the Sabre has a very slight—and we do mean *slight*—edge over the MIG," they told me. "It is by no means the healthy edge we wish it were."

"The MIG-15 is a fine airplane, better than we ever expected it to be, better than we like to see the enemy have."

"Naturally," they continued, "we think the Sabre is the finest fighter that flies. If so—and make no mistake about it—then the MIG-15 is certainly the *second* best tactical aircraft in the world."

How, then, can our air officers account for the highly favorable combat results? How is it that planes such as the Navy's F9F Panthers or the USAF's F-80 Shooting Stars, with maximum speeds probably 100 miles an hour slower than the Russian fighter, have been able to shoot down some MIGs? And how, indeed, has even a slower-flying, propeller-driven plane like our F-51 Mustang been able to inflict damage on this slick enemy jet?

This is where a number of qualifying factors enter in. First of all there is the question of speed: almost all the MIGs accounted for by Sabres have been shot down while the American jet was plumb on the MIG's tail. Here, the very slight speed advantage the Sabre possesses—perhaps 10 miles an hour at level flight and 20 mph while diving—has spelled the difference between victory and failure.

In the case of slower-flying Panthers and Shooting Stars, as well as F-51s, it is a question of tactics (and rather a large amount of luck) compensating for the difference in performance. For instance,

speed handicaps can often be overcome by skill on the part of the pilot. A slower-flying plane has greater maneuverability, which a sharp pilot can turn to his advantage unless his opponent is really on his toes. Our F-80 jet pilots, for example, learned early in the game from slow Yak-9s of the North Korean air force what the MIG pilots are learning now.

"If you are in a fast plane and you try to keep up in a turn with a slower, more maneuverable plane, you've had it," the F-80 pilots said in the first week of the Korean war. "The slower plane can turn inside you and get his guns on you before you have even completed your turn. The only way to get him is to dive in on him, make a fast hit-and-run pass, and nail him with your first bursts."

Fortunately, it has taken the MIG pilots a long time to learn this, and the F-80 pilots have capitalized, with marked success, on their ability to make tighter, faster turns. Typical of the pilots' accounts on this subject is that of Captain Clyde Whaley, of Caldwell, Texas, one of the first F-80 fliers to fight it out with the MIGs early last November:

"I was between this MIG and the border," he relates. "We went up and down between 15,000 and 25,000 feet at least three times. But he kept making

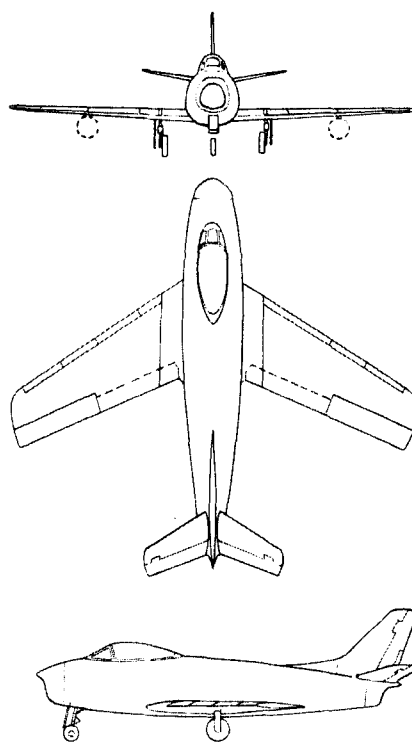
mistakes—each time when he could have eluded me and run safely for home, he turned. I'd catch up a little, give him a squirt from my .50s and keep him from getting across the border. Finally, after minutes of combat, he made his last turn and managed to head for the river. I shoved everything forward, got into range again and started firing. He did two uncontrolled snap-rolls to the right, went down in a screaming corkscrew spiral and disappeared in the haze at 5,000 feet."

Major C. M. Isaacson, of Mahanomen, Minnesota, operations officer for the 51st Fighter Group (F-80), had several brushes with MIGs which he summed up this way: "What you need is a swivel-neck and mirrors in your head. If you can see the MIG coming, you can maneuver into a position where he can't get you, but where you can get him. But if you don't see him and he's on your tail, you're a dead duck; you can never outrun him."

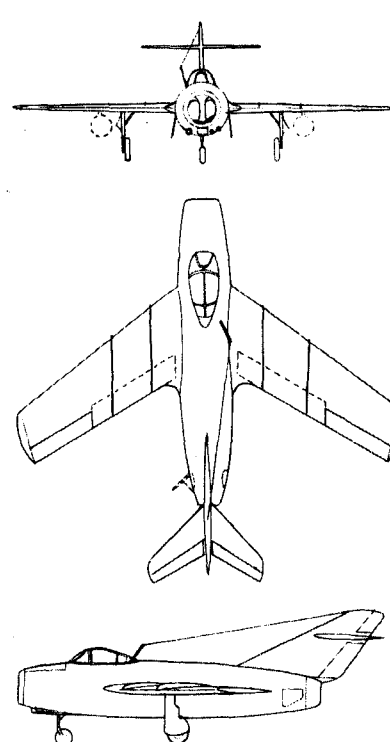
Part of the success we've had, then, even against great odds, is certainly due to what must be judged superior tactics. But another contributing factor is surely accurate gunnery. For some reason, the MIG pilots' gunnery has not been at all comparable to the Americans'—a situation you are not likely to hear any of our fighter boys complain about.

"I should be dead," they (*Continued on page 68*)

F-86-A SABRE



MIG-15



**The adversaries.** In the air they look much alike, especially from the top and side, but front view shows distinctive characteristics  
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