MiG Hunter

Twelve MiG-15s were poised to attack the fighter-bombers that were beating up a North Korean railroad. F-86 pilot George Davis knew they had to be stopped.

BY JOHN L. FRISBEE

In late November 1950, Chinese Communist armies entered the Korean War in overwhelming numbers, forcing United Nations troops to retreat from North Korea to positions south of the Thirty-eighth Parallel. By the spring of 1951, due in large part to air support provided by Far East Air Forces (FEAF), the United Nations Command had regained the initiative. Communist armies soon stood at the brink of military disaster. On June 23, Jacob Malik, Soviet delegate to the United Nations Security Council, proposed cease-fire talks, which both sides accepted. The talks began on July 10.

Almost immediately, it was apparent that the Communists were using the lull in fighting to build up stockpiles that would allow them to resume the offensive. FEAF's Fifth Air Force F-84 fighter-bombers and B-26s and Bomber Command's B-29s launched a round-the-clock interdiction campaign against lines of communication in North Korea.

The cease-fire talks broke down in August. Early the following month, the Chinese Air Force, with more than 500 MiG-15 jet fighters opposed by fewer than 100 USAF F-86 Sabres—the only plane that could match the MiG in air-to-air combat—began an all-out drive to win air superiority in the North and defeat the crucially important interdiction campaign. It was the job of the F-86 pilots to keep swarms of Chinese MiGs—some of them flown by Russian pilots—off the backs of the bombers, fighter-bombers, and recce planes lest the balance be tilted once more in favor of the Communists.

As the air war over MiG Alley reached a fever pitch, thirty-year-old Maj. George A. Davis reported for duty with the renowned 4th Fighter Interceptor Wing based at Kimpo, some 200 miles south of the Yalu River, where many of the great jet battles took place. Davis was no neophyte. He had shot down seven Japanese planes during World War II, and after the war had been a member of the Air Force jet demonstration team, a forerunner of USAF's Thunderbirds, first flying F-80s, then F-86s.

There are two kinds of fighter pilots—the hunters and the hunted. George Davis not only was a superb, combat-experienced fighter pilot. He was a hunter.

Davis flew his first jet combat mission on November 1, 1951. On November 27, he downed two MiG-15s, and three days later one MiG and three Tu-2 bombers. Two MiGs went down before his guns on December 5, and four more on December 13. In seventeen days, he had become the leading Korean ace, with twelve victories, and had won the Distinguished Service Cross. Then there was a dry spell of a few weeks when Communist pilots stayed at altitude and refused to fight. That ended in February.

On February 10, 1952, George Davis led his sixtieth jet mission over North Korea—a formation of four F-86s on combat patrol to protect fighter-bombers targeted against railroads near Kunu-ri. Major Davis's element leader ran out of oxygen and had to return to Kimpo with his wingman, leaving Davis and the fourth F-86 to continue the patrol alone.

A few minutes later, Davis spotted a formation of twelve MiG-15s heading south toward an area where the F-84 fighter-bombers were working. Disregarding the odds, Davis maneuvered into attack position and dove into the enemy formation, exploding one MiG on his first pass. With fighters on his tail, Davis shot down a second MiG and then, rather than dive to safety, continued his attack in a hazardous maneuver: He reduced speed to slide behind another enemy fighter. One of the remaining MiGs came in from seven o'clock, firing at close range. Davis's F-86 went out of control and crashed on a mountain a few miles south of the Yalu. The MiG formation had been disrupted, the F-84s completed their interdiction mission, but the Air Force lost one of its greatest and most courageous warriors.

Several months later, Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Nathan F. Twining presented the Medal of Honor posthumously to George Davis's young widow at a ceremony attended by more than 2,000 guests, including many members of Congress.

When the Korean War ended on July 27, 1953, only three Air Force pilots—Capt. Joseph McConnell (sixteen victories), Maj. James Jabara (fifteen), and Capt. Manuel Fernandez (fourteen and a half)—had surpassed George Davis's fourteen victories that were won in less than three months.

That record ended in a supreme act of valor. ■

Medal of Honor winner George Davis is one of USAF's top all-time aces.