



# The Big Bang

by

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## **KOREA, no end**

I have used this name because the war, that had its beginning in the summer of 1950, and was the subject of an armistice in 1953, has never been concluded. With the veiled, and overt threats made by a succession of Kim Il Sung descendents, the activation of nuclear 'tests', and the latest rocket attacks, no end is apparent.

This is far from a comprehensive description of the war, or police action, as it is often euphemistically titled. The UN force consisted of 21 participating nations and the people of the Republic of Korea have expressed their undying gratitude for their liberation ever since.

I have limited my talk to some of the story of Number 77 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, in which I served as a fighter pilot in 1953.

\*A comprehensive coverage of the Australian commitment can be found in a book called, "With the Australians in Korea", edited by Norman Bartlett and published by the Australian War Memorial, Canberra 1954/57.

\*In June 1950, No 77 Squadron was based at Iwakuni, on Honshu, the main island of Japan, in Yamaguchi Prefecture. This was a United States Navy air base situated on the western coast of the beautiful Inland Sea. The squadron operated North American F51 Mustang aircraft and was the last of Australia's original commitment to the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF) in Japan after the end of WW2. It had been overseas for a period of seven years and was rather reluctantly packing up to come home. Because the last few years had been a comfortable period of simple routine surveillance patrols during anti-smuggling watches. Flying had ceased on June 23 and the aircraft were being prepared for shipment back home. No doubt the squadron members and their families, who had been living a rather comfortable life for the last few years, were disappointed at having to return to the 'real' world. Two days later the North Koreans launched their despicable attack, and the squadron was thrown into the thick of it. It was the first combat unit behind the Americans to be involved.

In August, the squadron's forty pilots flew over 800 sorties, destroying tanks, trucks and other vehicles, locomotives and many ammunition and fuel dumps. When the USAF commences B29 raids, the Mustangs flew bomber escort missions.

Then, in April 1951, the squadron re-equipped with the British Gloster Meteor, a twin-engine fighter that proved to be a magnificent ground attack aircraft. By this time the squadron had been in combat for nine months, and suffered the loss of ten pilots, including the squadron Commanding Officer.

Naturally, these operations required transport support from Japan. Initially, one C47 Dakota supplied that service. This was the nucleus of No30 Transport Unit that morphed into No36 Transport Squadron. The RAAF Dakotas in the Korean War carried 100,000 passengers and 13,500,000 lbs of cargo.

Of course, 77 Squadron was not the only Australian fighter presence. The Royal Australian Navy Sea Furies and Fireflies also did a magnificent job. You will hear more about those operations from Noel Knappstein in a later session.

In 1953 the RAAF No 91 (Composite) Wing was still based at Iwakuni, Japan. 91 Wing was the main support group for RAAF operations in South Korea. No 77 (Interceptor Fighter) Squadron was part of the Wing. It was here that I completed my conversion onto the Meteor. In March 1953, after about 15 hours, including training in rocket attacks, I joined the rest of the Squadron at Kimpo (designated K14), not far from the capital of South Korea, Seoul.

We were based on the western side of the field with the 67<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Wing of the 5<sup>th</sup> Air Force, USAF. They operated, North American B26, Invaders (Blackbirds), Lockheed F80, Shooting Stars, plus various other aircraft. They provided our messing and other domestic support.

On the eastern side of the field, was the 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing with their F86, North American Sabres. Their main mission was flying fighter patrols in 'Mig Alley', along the Yalu River that formed the border between North Korea and Chinese Manchuria. This was where they did battle with the Russian built Mig 15s, denying them entry into North Korean airspace. Chinese and North Koreans piloted the Migs. Rumour had it that Russian pilots also took part in some of these battles.

My first two sorties were an East Coast and a West Coast area reconnaissance with an experienced leader, to learn the lay of the land. Then it was, 'Into the fray!'

I have published some short stories about my time in Korea and would like to relate a couple of these. I was personally involved in each account, and nobody else is identified by name.

### The Big Bang

I suppose the 'loudest' mission of the 45 that I flew over North Korea, was the 28<sup>th</sup>. That was a rocket projectile (R/P) strike on rail-marshalling yards north of Chinnampo, on the west coast, and our main type of mission in 1953. We flew quite low on these attacks, and were susceptible to machine gun, and even small arms fire, if an enemy got in a lucky shot.

I was flying the twelfth aircraft over the target in the sixteen-ship formation. As was the Standard Operating Procedure, I switched off the pressurisation as I rolled into the attack at fifteen thousand feet. This was a protective action against explosive de-compression should the cockpit suffer damage during the attack. I lined up on my section of the target area. It was a small group of huts in the south-eastern corner that intelligence had assessed as a troop concentration. As I steadied the graticule of the gyro-gun sight over the centre of the huts, I could just make out the small green-clad figures running from them. Interspersed amongst the green, there were several dressed in white. I knew that these would be civilians, or maybe even family, accompanying the soldiers.

This was the first mission where the lead aircraft in each section of four was fitted with double rocket rails. These allowed the aircraft to carry sixteen, sixty-pound high explosive rockets, that's double the normal payload. As my section leader's barrage erupted in the centre of the target, I released my eight rockets with their napalm heads. This should accurately deliver a forty-gallon fireball, right into the middle of the shattered buildings, completing their destruction, and probably causing death and horrible injuries to those who had not yet fled the target area.

I had heard stories that some pilots deliberately miss-aimed their napalm in similar circumstances, where they thought civilians were in the target area. That would be a difficult decision to make because, ostensibly, it would be a dereliction of duty to take such action. I had never felt any compulsion to do that. But I did suffer nightmares about some of those attacks for many years afterwards.

I had just pulled out of the attack dive when 'BANG!' the canopy **imploded** in a thousand pieces. Momentarily stunned, I could hear above the roar of the airstream, a small, distant voice yelling something like, 'Blue Four are you OK?' As I shook my head to clear my foggy vision, I saw a large hill ahead of me. I realised that if I had been 'out' for a few moments longer, the Meteor would have speared straight into it.

Blood trickled down my forehead and into my eyes. My goggles were gone. The turbulent air behind the windscreen tossed my head around and blasted my eyeballs. I had to squint to keep the wind and cockpit dust out of them. As I set the aircraft in the climb I could see the rest of the aircraft, except for my element leader, were getting away from me. The extra drag caused by the shattered canopy was holding me back.

Blue Three, who was now shepherding me, advised the mission leader of my plight. Somebody suggested over the radio, to jettison what was left of the canopy. The leader immediately came back saying to NOT do that because it would probably hit the tail. He told me to jettison the ventral (belly) tank. That would be empty by now. I did this and was able to catch up. It was a cold, noisy trip back to the home plate.

The issued, World War 2 type, leather helmet offered little protection, but I only suffered minor cuts and scratches. Later on I scrounged a 'bone dome', modern helmet, from the yanks.

Even though I was not seriously wounded, I was admitted to the USAF base hospital for overnight observation and to check for concussion. I remember this cute young American nurse telling me, 'Man! You'll get a Purple Heart for this one.' I told her that our air force didn't issue purple hearts. So she gave me a big kiss on the forehead and said that she was sorry that she couldn't offer any greater reward.

As I mentioned earlier, the reason that we de-pressurised before entering the dive was to prevent explosive **de**compression if we suffered a hit. My incident, and an earlier one, caused the squadron to adopt the practice of leaving the

cockpit pressurisation on during attacks, to prevent this type of **implosion**. The mechanics of the situation are that, with the canopy sealed and in a steep dive, the outside air pressure increases more rapidly than on the inside. This is the reverse of the normal pressurised mode.

Our second-most common type of operation was the armed reconnaissance and interdiction of the main routes. The aim of these patrols was to seek targets of opportunity in the form of convoys or freight trains, denying the enemy the use of their means of communication toward the front line, which was now static.

A section of four Meteors was split into pairs; one element at ten thousand feet, the other flying cover at twelve thousand. On some of those missions we ran into reasonably accurate anti-aircraft fire. The radar-ranged flack bursts would occur at the level of each pair. These deadly black puffs usually trailed behind the aircraft as the gunners set their aim, which luckily wasn't as precise as the radar ranging. As soon as the first burst occurred, the pilots would call it and break away, climbing to disrupt the aim, and the height measurement of the radar. I don't recall that we ever lost any aircraft during this type of mission.

#### Air Raids

One night I was walking from the USAF Officer's Club, back to my tent when the air-raid sirens started screaming. The lights went out! In the dark I fell into the storm-water drain beside the dirt road leading to our squadron area. Suddenly, all hell broke loose in the night sky above as the anti-aircraft guns opened up.

I found myself lying in about four inches of sump oil, a legacy from the Air Service Squadron which, late at night, sprayed the stuff on the base's roads to keep down the dust for a couple of days. I knew that the black, stinking oil would ruin my khakis, but I had more urgent matters to worry about. If I didn't get back to the billet area and into my assigned air-raid trench soon, I would be up before the CO in the morning. Failing to be at one's post while the unit was under attack would be considered a serious matter.

The intruder was 'Bed-check Charlie', an old, Russian PO-2 biplane. The Chinese pilot had come in at low-level, under the radar and would, if following his previous practice, fly around the base about a mile outside the perimeter. He would repeat this for the next four or five nights. As soon as the alarm was raised, almost everyone on the base would go to the trenches, where they would spend most of the next four or five hours. The tactic tended to be very disruptive to everyone's sleep patterns. It was a very effective, and low-cost form of harassment.

This form of attack was a copy of the technique used by the Russians against the German army during WWII.

Of course the base defences swung into action and put on a display to rival the 4th of July. The anti-aircraft fire never managed to shoot down these interlopers. Every so often they would fly over the airfield and drop a few mortar shells, just to ensure that everyone was still dutifully spending the night in the trenches. From these vantage points all could enjoy the splendid exhibition of red, green and white tracer, interspersed with bright flashes of exploding projectiles from larger ordnance. The noise, the 'pyrotechnic' display, and smell of burning cordite made for quite an impressive, even exciting show. In the long run though, it was one experience all could well do without.

After a couple of nights of this harassment the CO's instruction was something like: 'When the air-raid sirens start their wailing, stay in your cot and try to get some sleep. If the bombs start to fall, rush to your trench.'

One night one of the lads in the squadron lines reckoned he had a bead on the intruder and cooked off a magazine of .303 rounds from his rifle, in the general direction of the aircraft. All he got for his drunken initiative was a reprimand from the old man the next day.

They tried everything to get those blighters, F86 Sabres and Navy Panther jet fighters. The jets were too fast and kept overshooting the target aircraft. They even sent a radar-equipped C47 Dakota transport plane up to ten thousand feet to shadow 'ole bed-check'. When the Dak was over the enemy, he'd drop a myriad of parachute flares in a vain attempt to illuminate the biplane for the gunners below. It's a wonder they never brought down the 'gooney bird' instead.

Nothing seemed to work! However, they finally shot down a couple of them, with the radar equipped, night-fighter version of the F4U, Chance Vought Corsair. These were slower, piston-engine aircraft. At the lower closing speeds, the US marine pilots were able to show their sharp-shooting skills to better advantage.

The base came under a few of those attacks while I was there.

'Pull up! Pull up'

There's an old air force saying that, 'There are two types of pilot, those who have landed with their wheels up, and those who are going to.' Well, I reckoned that I belonged to the first group because I made forced landing in an F51 Mustang on a beach near Williamtown NSW during my fighter operational training. On this mission I learned that you could still belong to the second group if you tried hard enough.

One day, during our twelve-aircraft mission's departure from Kimpo, the tower put out a general broadcast that one of the Meteors had lost a wheel on take-off. So on our way out we all inspected each other's undersides, and all reported that all wheel doors appeared closed and normal. So the mission continued as planned.

We returned to the circuit after a reasonably hectic attack, low on fuel, and all wondering who had lost a wheel. Each section of four aircraft flew around the circuit, remaining in formation as we checked each other's landing gear. It was discovered that one of the Meteors had shed a tyre tread, like those big trucks do. The pilot was able to make a gentle, and safe, landing on the bald tyre.

I was in the last section and we were getting very short of fuel. I remembered one my mate's experience when he was last to land after a long mission. He ran out of fuel on final approach and put it down, rather seriously, in the underrun. The aircraft was severely damaged and he was injured. The pressure continued to build.

I don't remember to this day, pulling the wheels up after all the inspecting, and forgetting to put them down again. I turned final and was trying to see if I had three green undercarriage indicator lights. With the bright summer sun shining on the instrument panel, I couldn't tell if the lights were green, or out. Of course, if I'd looked at the gear lever, I would have seen that it was still in the up position.

Aerodrome control position a mobile control vehicle, callsign 'Mobile', at the approach end of the runway specifically to look out for such events. Actually they are not that uncommon, even in less hectic circumstances.

As I was trying to see if the undercarriage lights were green, the American voice on the radio called, 'Meteor on final, pull-up'. This was an abbreviation for, 'Pull up and go around'. The phraseology is foreign to Australian pilots. We just say 'go around'. So I didn't realise that the call was meant for me. Understand here that we are talking about a rapid succession of events.

He called again with a slightly frantic tone, 'Meteor, pull up, you have no wheels', and he fired some red Verey flares. Finally the penny dropped. No way was I going around, I'd probably run out of fuel. I slammed the lever down, and sweated on the lights. They came up three greens at about a hundred feet or less and I was home and hosed. Phew!!

Naturally I came in for some ribbing when I got back to the flight hut debriefing. I was certainly very thankful for the guy in mobile, even if he did speak a 'foreign language'.

## Friendly Fire

My only involvement in this event was as a bystander, and a member of the squadron involved. I have included it to show how a string of mistakes and mishaps, and plain bad luck can lead to a nasty outcome.

I was sitting outside my tent reading one afternoon when a very loud, short burst of machine gun fire accompanied by explosions, startled me. Screaming, ricocheting rounds seemed to pass right over my head. One of the senior pilots came running by calling, 'That was 20mm, it came from our lines'. A few of us headed toward the tarmac area.

What had happened was that one of the Meteors in the maintenance shelter, had fired twelve high explosive rounds, three from each of its four Hispano 20mm cannons.

Some time later, after the military police, ambulance and fire trucks had departed we were advised as to what had happened. I'll describe as best I can remember, the effect and the cause of this event.

About half of the rounds exploded as they hit the corrugated iron, back wall of the three-sided 'shed' that was our maintenance facility. No one was injured at this point. The rest of them passed through the wall, and about three of those struck a vacant sealed parking area, ricocheting over our tent lines. Two more hit the corner of a hut reducing a table inside to matchwood.

The last round missed the corner of the building. It passed through the wall of the next hut, exploding on the back of a chair that was occupied by an American airman, killing him instantly. He was the only person in the building.

This was a horrific outcome, especially as the airman had only a couple of days left before heading home at the end of his tour of duty.

The string of errors leading to this accident was something like this: -

- The last three rounds of each cannon's ammunition belt had been left in the belt feed mechanism, and the breechblocks were still in the rear (cocked) position. The guns had not been cleared after the last mission.
- The aircraft was on jacks so the 'weight on wheels' armament safety switch was closed.
- The electrical circuits were live and the master switch on, to facilitate maintenance.
- The safety catch on the control column 'trigger' was off.
- A fitter was standing on the pilot's seat working on the back of the ejection seat. He reached around to push the stick out of his way, and



squeezed the trigger, firing the guns.

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This was a classic breakdown of safety precautions.

Naturally, relations between we Aussies and the Yanks were somewhat strained for a while.

### Seoul Buddies

In November 2001, I had the honour to return to South Korea, at the invitation of the Chief of Staff, ROKAF. We were told that there were supposed to be 18 ex-RAAF and about 50 USAF veterans. Well, only three ex No 77 Sqn pilots accompanied by two of our wives and three USAF types and one daughter came. Just nine of us! It was right after 9/11, so the impression that our Korean hosts had was that this was the reason so few turned out. For six wonderful days we were hosted full time by a colonel, a major and a delightful young lady tour guide. Of course there was also a string of interpreters, baggage handlers and aides to augment our entourage. They treated us like royalty. Many times we were told that if the UN had not come in 1950, they would be just like North Korea is today. When I saw Seoul in 1953 it was largely wrecked and I think the tallest building was about 6 stories. Now, it was a magnificent, modern metropolis of shiny skyscrapers, new cars, and bustling crowds. What a difference 50 years, and a free democracy, can make.

The nine of us were hosted to a magnificent, formal 'dining in' at the Hilton on top of a hill overlooking the city. There were many speeches, presentations of plaques and gifts and all had a great time. The President of the Korean Veterans Association, a retired army general, presented we veterans with a special medal. It was all very remarkable.

We visited various historical sites, restaurants, and the DMZ over the next couple of days. Then we were flown in a C130 Hercules, with a planeload of ROKAF vets to the fighter base at Kangnung on the east coast. That night some of us attended a wonderful concert and fire-works display and the next day, a big parade at the base.

There was an impressive drill demonstration, and a flying display by their equivalent to the 'Roulettes' in Korean designed and built jet trainers. At the end of this display two of the aircraft taxied in from each side of the reviewing area and angle parked in front of the stand where the dignitaries, about 50 ROKAF vets and we nine were seated. As the two young pilots climbed down from their aircraft, two young women in traditional dress approached them and placed a wreath of brightly coloured flowers around their necks. Then the Chief of Staff explained that during the war, when a pilot returned from his hundredth mission, this was how he was greeted.

Then a long line of jeeps stopped in front of the stand and about forty older men boarded them in pairs, standing in the back and holding a purpose installed rail for support. These were the 'Hundred Mission Men'. Our UN hundred mission men, one RAAF and one USAF, manned the front jeep. This jeep flew our national flags. They were then driven past the drill squads and received a general salute.

They disembarked in front and lined up for photographs. THEN, from each side of the stand a troupe of older women in traditional dress proceeded out to the men and placed garlands of flowers around their necks, as the General explained that these were mainly the same women who had done that, 50 years earlier. Talk about accolades and tears!

Back in Seoul we attended a commemorative service for the Korean veterans on their memorial day, Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> November. Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> was a free day. So, because it was our 'Armistice Day' and the Americans' 'Veterans Day', we all went to the magnificent war memorial/museum. There, in the UN gallery where all the names of the fallen from the 21 nations who came to the aid of the Koreans are engraved, we held our own little commemorative observance.

We then said farewell to our wonderful hosts, and our new American friends, and made our separate ways home. I will always hold vivid and fond memories of that return to Korea, and hold dear to my heart the friendships we made with our Seoul Buddies.