

1994

Encounter Over Korea

Andy MacKenzie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh>



Part of the [Military History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

MacKenzie, Andy "Encounter Over Korea." Canadian Military History 3, 1 (1994)

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

Encounter over Korea

**by Squadron Leader Andy MacKenzie, DFC
as told to Stanley Handman**

I walked into the pilots' room of the 139th Squadron, 51st Wing of the U.S. Fifth Air Force, on the 4th of December, 1952, to find my name posted on the warning board for a mission the following morning. Our outfit, part of 13 Air Base, was stationed about 20 miles south of Seoul. I had joined this group two weeks previously on a tour of temporary duty as a fighter pilot on loan from the Canadian Government. The tour in my case was to last either 50 missions or six months, whichever was completed soonest. I had already flown four missions and this was to be my fifth.

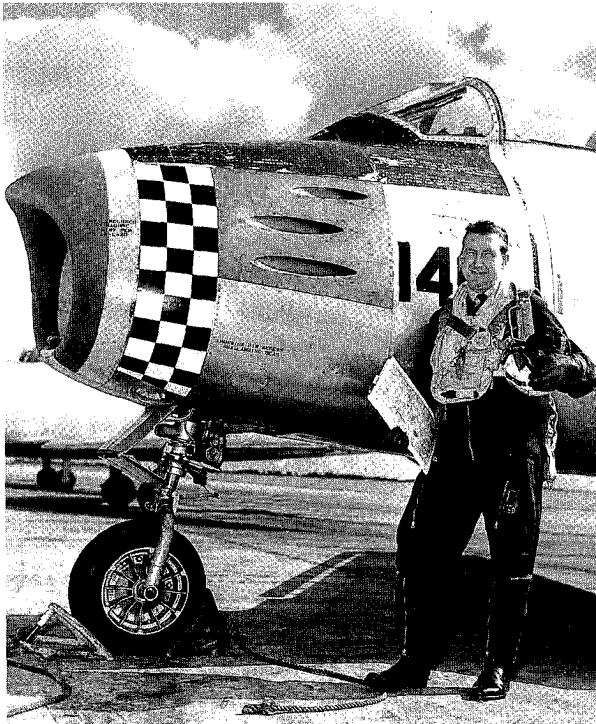
That night I dropped a note to my wife telling her that I had as yet not tangled with the Migs and was hoping for better luck on this mission. As a fighter pilot with the RCAF in World War II, I had been credited with 8¼ enemy planes. "Keep your fingers crossed," I wrote her. I slept pretty soundly and next morning I reported for briefing at 6 a.m. The room was filled with flyers. Five minutes later, Colonel W. Mitchell, Wing C.O., came briskly in and went up to the briefing platform. The buzz of conversation died down as he began to talk.

Though Mitchell did not say so, we knew President Dwight Eisenhower was in Seoul at that very moment. There was the inevitable possibility that his presence would draw an enemy air attack, security being what it was. Mitchell told us that our job was to set up defensive fighter patrols and though he did not tell us why we were setting out on

these missions, we knew, inferentially, the motive behind them. It was hoped we would discourage any enemy aircraft from venturing south of the Yalu River, at least until the President had left, which I believe was later that day.

For some unaccountable reason there was a delay, and we did not hit the air until 1220 hours. I was second to take off. I was flying No. 2 to Major Jack Saunders, our squadron operations officer, piloting a F-86F Sabre. I had flown this type of plane before and was quite familiar with its performance. With Saunders on my left and ahead, we quickly climbed to about 42,000 feet, following the west coast of Korea over the Yellow Sea towards the mouth of the Yalu River. The visibility was excellent. It was a clear cold day, and the sun was high overhead and slightly to the south. On the climb, I noticed that one of our flights was out of contact with the squadron, forcing Saunders to orbit twice over the Yellow Sea, slightly south of the mouth of the Yalu in order to pick up contact with the planes which had strayed.

We finally reformed and started eastward on our patrol which had been laid down as parallel to and about 20 miles south of the Yalu River. Mine was the top flight and we were to patrol at 42,000 feet, the others operating at slightly lower levels, ranging from 40,000 feet down to 30,000 feet. There were three squadrons on this mission, with four flights each. (A flight is four aircraft.) We had patrolled once and were half way along



Squadron Leader Andy MacKenzie was the commanding officer of 441 Squadron RCAF, flying the F-86 Sabre, prior to his detached service with the U.S. Air Force in Korea. Photos taken in September 1952. (CFPU PL 62534, 62316)

on our second milk run when the pilot flying No. 3 reported:

"Cobra One, this is Cobra Three, there are some trails at 10 o'clock and slightly above."

This indicated to Major Saunders and to others in the flight (we were all tuned into the same frequency) that there were some Migs about. Saunders quickly snapped back: "Roger, I see them, keep your eyes on them."

By now, it was about 1255 hours. Though my aircraft was moving along fairly well, I had reported to Saunders just a few seconds earlier that my main hydraulic control system had failed and that I was now operating on my auxiliary system. Under normal conditions I should have returned immediately, but because of the arrival of the Migs and my eagerness to tangle with them for the first time, Saunders agreed that we would have a quick go and return to our base as soon as possible.

I could now make out about 20 Migs flying west over the Yalu in a sort of string

formation in two's. Their tactics were to peel off in two's, dive through our formation at high speed, curve back to the right and dive back into China again, figuring we would pursue them, much like a runner trying to steal second who can rush back and be safe on first. Most of our pilots were height conscious. That is, they always looked for enemy planes from above, due to the superiority of the Mig at high altitudes. The Migs could operate more efficiently than we could over 40,000 feet. But I had been tipped off by a friend of mine, Squadron Leader Doug Lindsey of the RCAF, who had flown on these missions, that I should keep my eye out for enemy planes at a lower level too, because of their diving tactics.

As I watched the Migs streaming along, I saw two peel off, cross the Yalu and make for us in a rearing dive. I cocked my wing to the left as I saw them approaching us and they passed underneath me, with their guns blazing away. I was in a perfect position for a bounce — that is an attack from above. I reported this over the radio, saying:

"Cobra lead, this is Cobra Two, two Migs below going to three o'clock, cover me!"

This indicated that I was going to lead an attack on these planes and that Cobra One should protect me against enemy attacks while I was firing. As I started into a dive for the attack, I suddenly realized that I had received no reply from Saunders. I dropped a wing for an instant to see if he was coming with me and to my astonishment found he was turning the opposite way. This meant we would be split up and that I would be going into the attack alone. Normally, we fight in pairs. When I saw what had happened, I decided to reverse my turn and join Saunders. He was now off my left wing and from that direction I could see more Migs coming in, which Saunders apparently had decided to go after. I still did not know whether he had received my communication but because he was leader of the flight I had to take it for granted that he wanted me to remain as No. 2 and to cover him on his attack.

At high altitudes and high speeds, ranging from 500 to 600 mph, turning quickly without loss of speed is difficult. Saunders had turned 180 degrees and was now flying west, and in order to stay with him I had to turn sharply, and as a result, lost speed, which left me way behind him. I still had Saunders in sight at one o'clock high, but to catch him I had to use full power and a shallow dive to regain the speed I had lost in the turn. This dive took me down through another flight of American Sabres. As I started to dive, Saunders called to me:

"Cobra Two, where are you? Am I clear behind?"

"I am at seven o'clock below," I replied, "and you're clear."

At that moment, Saunders started to fire, engaging not the two aircraft which had dived under me, but two others which had come in during this interval.

As I was coming up I was watching the guys behind me because I knew the Americans had a tendency to be a little trigger happy. Just as Saunders started to fire, I noticed fighter fire over my canopy. Before I could take any evasive action, my canopy was blown

off. Simultaneously, there were two strikes on my right aileron, followed by three more in rapid succession on the fuselage. I tried to break to the left to evade more fire but found that my aircraft had gone out of control and I was starting to roll to the left. I couldn't stop. In a few seconds I was barrelling to earth. Since there was no point in staying in the aircraft any longer, I bailed out.

I was at about 40,000 feet when I hit the air. Luckily my ejection seat had worked like a charm and I found myself tumbling through space at about 500 miles an hour, my arms and legs thrashing about. At this speed, the air tore at my body, pulling off my wrist watch, my helmet, gloves, oxygen mask, and an escape kit which had been tightly tied to the seat of my parachute. As quickly as possible I released my seat (to which I was still attached) and kicked it away. I had not yet pulled my chute. This being my first bail out, the thought passed through my mind, "I wonder if this damn thing will work." Normally, if you bail out at that altitude and lose your oxygen supply, it is advisable to free drop to about 15,000 feet. But I decided not to wait and pulled by chute immediately.

It was wonderful to feel the jerk of the straps and see that beautiful white expanse of silk blossoming out in the sky above. Everything seemed strangely quiet. Gone were the noises of battle, the exploding shells, and the din of radio chatter in my ears. In their place was the soft swishing sound of air spilling out of my chute as I slowly swung back and forth in the sky. It was cold as hell. Except for this I found the drop not unpleasant. It was a bit difficult to breathe at that height but apart from a little choking up, I did not lose consciousness. It was pretty much like sitting in the top seat of a Ferris wheel. The feeling of dropping was absent, and even though I was going down at a fair rate, it seemed so slow that I wondered if I was going to hang up in the sky all day.

Underneath I could see the Yalu River, part of north-east China and the big power station on the Yalu and the mountainous terrain of North Korea. My descent had actually slowed down as I neared the earth

but conversely, I got the sensation of dropping faster. I was beginning to wonder where I would land and what my chances of evading capture would be because it looked to me from where I sat dangling in the sky that I might drop into enemy territory. The line of battle was far south, in the area of the 38th parallel and I was over North Korea. As I got down to about 12,000 feet I could plainly make out houses, roads and moving vehicles. The drop from then on appeared very rapid indeed. As I neared the ground, I could see two trucks coming around a bend in the road and obviously heading in my direction. The thought passed through my mind that I should try to slip my chute so I could slip sideways and thus present a poorer target if they opened fire on me. It would also enable me to put more distance between us. I tried this but found that I was too weak from lack of oxygen and had too little strength in my arms to work this successfully. So I gave up on the idea and continued to drop as before. Below, the trucks were still coming along the road and following my descent. The lower I got, the more clearly I could make out that there were soldiers in the trucks.

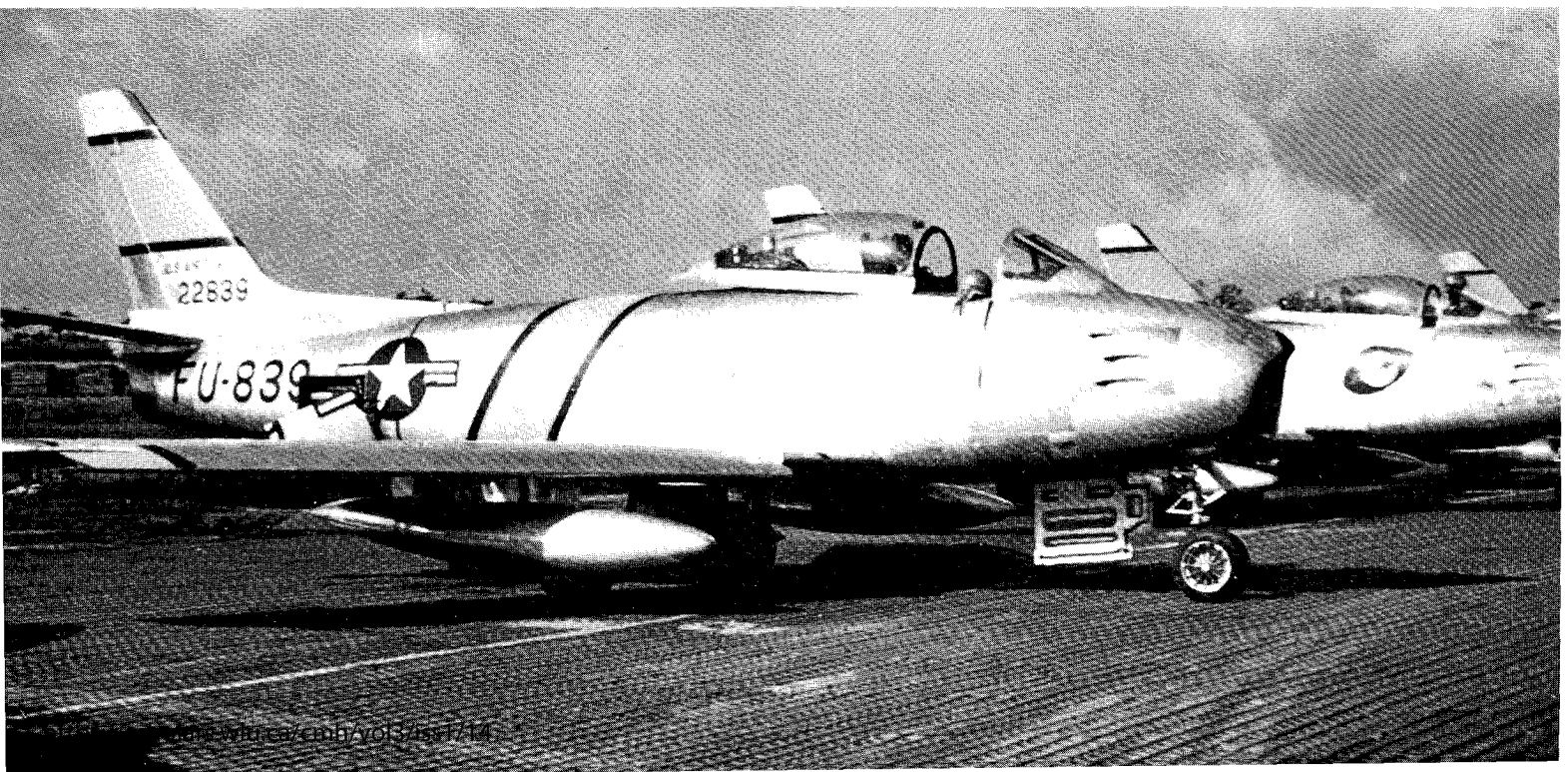
I finally hit the ground, landing on the side of a mountain, about 30 feet from an old

woman gathering grass for fuel. I'll never forget the surprised look on her face when I lighted at her feet. But after glancing up curiously, she went right ahead with her work and paid no further attention to me. The trucks had now arrived at the bottom of the hill where I was busy removing my parachute, and dropping every piece of gear I could to make it easier for me to run for it. I thought that if I could get over the mountain it would put me out of sight of the soldiers and with luck I might hide and wait for nightfall. But as I scrambled on all fours up the side of the mountain I glanced over my shoulder and saw the two trucks screech to a halt, the soldiers jump out and come running after me, shouting as they ran. Some were armed with Tommy guns, others with rifles. There were 15 men in each truck and all 30 were hard at my heels. They were shouting and waving me to come back, loosing a warning volley of fire. I could hear the bullets bouncing off the rocks around me.

I realized that in my weakened condition I would never be able to reach the top of the mountain. So I stopped, got to my feet, turned to face my pursuers and waited. They continued to beckon to me as they advanced, but the firing stopped. I then began to walk

Canadair-built F-86E Sabres of the USAF, similar to the aircraft flown by MacKenzie, wait on steel matted tarmac at their base in Korea.

(Courtesy of Larry Milberry, CANAV Books Collection)



down the mountain to meet them. Halfway down I was surrounded. No attempt was made to strike me, but they kept me covered with their weapons. One man, who appeared to be the leader, motioned to me to raise my hands. I did so. Then he and several of my companions started to strip me of my .45 revolver which was in my armpit holster and some of my clothing, such as my G-suit and Mae West. Then they emptied my pockets of cigarettes, cigarette lighter and other personal articles.

While they were doing this I looked them over with interest. The majority appeared to be Chinese but amongst them I noticed one Korean officer. The leader of the group, however, was Chinese. I could not tell whether he was an officer because Chinese soldiers (so far as I have ever been able to learn) wear no rank badges.

I was then escorted down the hill to where the trucks were parked. As I approached the bottom of the hill, a civilian detached himself from a knot of people standing around and started to take a swing at me, but several of my captors intervened and pushed him away. I was then helped into one of the trucks.

Postscript

by Bruce McIntyre

After MacKenzie was shot down, he was transported by truck from village to village, never making contact with other UN personnel. After six days of constant movement, MacKenzie was transported to a prison camp inside Manchuria. It was here that MacKenzie would spend the next two years, quite often in solitary confinement. Andrew MacKenzie was the only Canadian prisoner of war who was interned inside Chinese territory.

At the time of his capture, MacKenzie was under the impression that the Chinese

did not take prisoners and after giving his name, rank and serial number, challenged his Chinese guards to execute him immediately. Needless to say, they did not. The Chinese "lenient policy" as described to MacKenzie was based on their doctrine of interrogation, indoctrination and internment. The Chinese pressured MacKenzie to falsify statements regarding his flight plan and his knowledge of bacteriological warfare.

Similar to American pilots taken during the war, MacKenzie's ordeal became a daily ritual of questioning regarding all aspects of western and eastern ideology, and the presence of the United Nations in Southeast Asia. Along with the questioning, MacKenzie experienced a three month period of solitary bed arrest. For eight hours a day he was forced to sit on the edge of his bed with his hands on his knees and stare at the wall six feet in front of him. During this time he was not allowed to move or sleep, the guards dealing harshly with any infractions.

After he was released from solitary confinement, MacKenzie came into contact with an American pilot, and one of his best friends, Hal Fischer. MacKenzie, Fischer, and two other American prisoners remained in China long after the truce had been signed on 27 July 1953. MacKenzie was not released until a further 16 months had passed.

For two years Andy MacKenzie endured degradation and humiliation at the hands of his captors without ever providing them with the valuable information that could have led to a propaganda coup. Specifically, the Chinese tried to pressure MacKenzie into signing a note stating he had been shot down by an American pilot. The Chinese had reason to believe that this was true, but could not prove it. To his credit, MacKenzie did not cave in to Chinese demands. It was not until December 1980, in a *Toronto Star* feature, that MacKenzie finally acknowledged to the public that he had indeed been shot down by an American. Though the incident was unfortunate, a number of factors conspired in its occurrence. These include the similar appearance of the Mig-15 and F-86, the speed of the encounter (over 700 knots) and the

attack-like maneuver which took MacKenzie's aircraft through a friendly formation.

MacKenzie's sense of duty and loyalty to his country and his fellow pilots is unchallenged. MacKenzie could easily have supplied the Chinese with the information they wanted early in his incarceration and received special treatment. MacKenzie has never asked for any sympathy for his ordeal. He is the first to state that he was an ordinary man imprisoned in an extraordinary situation. All he has asked is that Canadians be made aware of the experience that he and others survived. It is an honour to meet this request.

(The account by Andy MacKenzie, with minor changes, first appeared in the *Ottawa Journal* in 1955.)

Andrew MacKenzie enlisted in the RCAF in June 1940. He flew 257 combat missions in Northwest Europe with 421 and 403 Squadrons claiming 8 enemy aircraft destroyed. He was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. After a brief flirtation with civilian life, MacKenzie re-enlisted in 1946, quickly rising to command 441 Squadron flying F-86 Sabres. Following his Korean War experience, MacKenzie remained in the RCAF, retiring in 1967.

Bruce McIntyre is currently completing his graduate studies at the University of Waterloo. He is involved in a study of Canadian POWs captured during the Korean War.

MUSEUM OF THE REGIMENTS

Come and experience the history of four famous Calgary-based army regiments through war and peacekeeping.

Free Admission - Open Six Days a Week

(Closed Wednesdays, 24-26 December and 1 January)

10 a.m. to 4 p.m. — Labour Day to 30 June

10 a.m. to 6 p.m. — 1 July to Labour Day

**Historical Military Vehicle Park • Imperial Oil Gallery
Amoco Theatre • Flight Line Deli and Gift Shop**

Bus Parking—Wheelchair Access

Located at 4520 Crowchild Trail SW, Calgary, Alberta, T3E 1T8
(Across from CFB Calgary), For Further Information Phone (403) 240-7674