

The MiG-15 and the Kadena connection

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3/16/2010 - **KADENA AIR BASE, Japan** -- In the opening stages of the Cold War Kadena Air Base played a pivotal role in the clandestine testing of the first airworthy example of a Soviet MiG-15. The aircraft, its pilot, and the testing performed here at Kadena provided the Air Force invaluable technical information on the capabilities and operational limitations of the MiG-15.

Because of the perceived superiority of the MiG over the Sabre it became very important to the United States to obtain a representative example for comparative testing. To this end Operation MOOLAH came into being in April 1953. General Mark W. Clark, Allied Commander Korea, offered \$100,000 dollars to the first defector that delivered an airworthy MiG-15.

On September 21, 1953, Senior Lieutenant No Kum-Sok made his escape from communist North Korea and became the first defector to deliver to the Far East Air Force an airworthy example of the advanced MiG-15*bis* (*bis* is Russian for "improved"). Interestingly, No Kum-Sok knew nothing of General Clark's \$100,000 dollar offer until after he arrived in South Korea. His arrival also caused considerable internal embarrassment for the Air Force since no monies had been set aside to pay the reward. This was quickly rectified and No Kum-Sok was eventually paid the promised amount.

Senior Lt. No Kum-Sok did not remain long in South Korea. After a brief press conference the next day he was bundled off to Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, later followed by his MiG-15, which was secretly disassembled, crated, and shipped by military transport to Kadena.

For the next seven months No Kum-Sok answered numerous questions on North Korea, its military and the support it received from the Soviet Union and China. Another important task No Kum-Sok performed while at Kadena was teaching the test pilots sent to evaluate the MiG, Major General Albert Boyd, Major Chuck Yeager, and Captain Harold "Tom" Collins, how not to kill themselves while flying the stubby, barrel-shaped aircraft.

Major Yeager declared, "Flying the MiG-15 is the most demanding situation I have ever faced. It's a quirky airplane that has killed a lot of its pilots."

Testing over the course of 11 days revealed that overall the aircraft was a reasonably good fighting machine, but lacked the sophistication of American aircraft like the F-86. During testing Major Yeager discovered that the fastest the MiG could fly was .98 Mach before becoming uncontrollable, a situation that nearly caused him to crash. While the MiG-15 enjoyed a better climb rate and a higher operational ceiling than the F-86, it suffered from problems with oscillation, poor pressurization, unexpected pitch-up at high speeds, unrecoverable spins, no warning of impending stalls, and a particularly dangerous emergency fuel pump that could cause the aircraft to explode if improperly activated.

Despite the MiG's shortcomings, evaluators determined that the MiG-15 and F-86 were nearly equal in performance. Pilot experience and training proved to be the most important determining factor between the two aircraft. Chuck Yeager stated it succinctly when he said, "The pilot with the most experience will whip your ass no matter what you're flying!"

After its extensive testing the MiG was again disassembled with each part carefully scrutinized and evaluated. When it became obvious that North Korea would not ask for the return of the aircraft, an admission that there had been a defection from their elite air force, the MiG was crated and shipped to Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, in late 1954. There it was reassembled once again and flown extensively until damaged by an Royal Air Force officer in 1956. After that the aircraft never flew again and was turned over to the Air Force Museum for restoration and display, where it remains to this day.

Had it not been for Senior Lt. No Kum-Sok deciding to escape from communist North Korea and fly his MiG-15 to freedom on that beautiful September day in 1953, the Air Force might have continued to guess for years about the true performance of this remarkable aircraft.