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The Korean War

Thomas Richardson

The Korean War was the product of Korean politics colliding with those of the Cold War. The peninsula, a Japanese colony from 1910, was divided into separate zones of occupation along the 38th parallel by the Soviet Union and the United States after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. This was not intended to be a permanent measure, but efforts to create a national government in 1947–48 foundered on superpower caution and intra-Korean hostility. Instead, the split hardened and gave geographic expression to the divisions within Korean politics. By the end of 1948, the communist Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) had been established in the north, and the ultranationalist Republic of Korea (ROK) in the south.¹

Despite this hardening, neither side accepted the division as permanent. The ROK president, Syngman Rhee, bombastically declared a desire to march north; his northern counterpart, Kim Il Sung, took more concrete measures. Beginning with an uprising on the island of Cheju-do in April 1948, the Communist Party in the south waged a bitter guerrilla war first to try and prevent the formation of the ROK and then to overthrow it.² In 1949 the conflict escalated, as units of the Korean People's Army (KPA) and Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) began clashing along the border. Even as this went on, Kim Il Sung was pressing his Soviet patrons

1 William Stueck, 'The Korean War', in *The Cambridge history of the Cold War*, vol. 1, *Origins*, ed. Melvyn P Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 266–73.

2 Allan R Millett, *The Korean War* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2007), 9–14.

to allow an outright invasion. Josef Stalin refused Kim's requests in March 1949 and again in September, but changed his mind in early 1950. Mao Zedong also signed off on the invasion, albeit reluctantly, in mid-May.³

The invasion itself began in the early hours of 25 June 1950. With significant advantages in firepower and mobility over the ROKA, the KPA advanced rapidly and captured Seoul on 28 June. The reaction from the United States was swift. President Truman and his Cabinet viewed the attack as part of a broader Soviet-directed conspiracy against the entire Western world, and believed a failure to make a stand in Korea would invite aggression elsewhere.⁴ On the evening of 26 June in Washington (mid-morning on 27 June in Korea) Truman authorised US air and naval forces to attack North Korean military forces anywhere below the 38th parallel. Three days later, the President agreed to the deployment of a US Regimental Combat Team to the peninsula. The United States was now firmly committed to saving the ROK.⁵

This US commitment came in the context of a widening international condemnation of the invasion. On 25 June the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had passed Resolution 82, calling for a cessation of the invasion, the withdrawal of the KPA to the 38th parallel, and for UN members to refrain from assisting the DPRK. Resolution 82 was made possible by the absence of the Soviet Union from the UNSC, as a result of an ongoing boycott at the refusal to seat the People's Republic of China rather than the Republic of China. When it became clear this resolution was being ignored, the Security Council adopted Resolution 83 on 27 June.⁶ In recommending 'that the Members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area', Resolution 83 created the conditions necessary for an international military coalition to protect the ROK.⁷

3 Stueck, 'The Korean War', 273–74.

4 Millet, *The Korean War*, 20–21; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 107–8.

5 Robert F Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950–1953* (Washington DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983), 34–37.

6 Millet, *The Korean War*, 21.

7 United Nations Security Council Resolution 83, 27 June 1950, S/1511, at: [unsr.com/en/resolutions/83](http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/83).

Even in this political climate, however, Australian participation in the Korean War was by no means guaranteed. Prime Minister Robert Menzies and much of his Cabinet shared the American view that the invasion of South Korea was part of a broader communist plan directed from Moscow, and they recognised the regional implications of a communist victory. But many of them believed the proper place for Australian forces in opposing communist expansion was in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, within the traditional security architecture of the British Commonwealth. At a meeting of Cabinet on 27 June, it was agreed that the invasion of Korea 'represented only one phase of Russian aggression and that Australia's primary [objective] in the matter of opposing Communism was located in Malaya'.⁸ This was not idle discussion, and at the same meeting it was decided to agree to an outstanding British request for the commitment of a Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) bomber squadron to Malaya.⁹

The notable exception to this view of Australia's strategic orientation was Percy Spender, the Minister for External Affairs. Spender believed Australia needed a security guarantee from the United States and since becoming minister in 1949 had pursued this objective, despite the scepticism of Menzies. The outbreak of the war in Korea seemed to present as a golden opportunity. A substantial commitment of Australian forces, independent of Britain, would build political goodwill in Washington and would help clear the way for an alliance with the United States. It was this belief, as much as a desire to halt communist aggression, that drove Australian involvement in the Korean War.¹⁰

Spender's tactics in achieving his aims have been discussed extensively elsewhere.¹¹ Although the Australian Government had made the decision to withdraw Australian forces from the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF), 3 Battalion Royal Australian Regiment (3RAR), No. 77 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force, and the frigate HMAS *Shoalhaven* were all still in Japan, while *Shoalhaven's* replacement, HMAS *Bataan*, was in Hong Kong. Menzies had agreed on 29 June to commit the *Shoalhaven* and *Bataan* to combat operations after it became clear the British Government had offered ships of its own. The next

8 Cabinet Minute, 27 June 1950, quoted in Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, vol. 1, *Strategy and diplomacy* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1981), 48.

9 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 1, 47–49.

10 Robert O'Neill, 'The Korean War and the origins of ANZUS', in *Munich to Vietnam*, ed. Carl Bridge (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1991), 99–106.

11 See O'Neill, 'The Korean War and the origins of ANZUS'.

day, Spender, well aware the US Air Force (USAF) was desperate for the F-51 Mustangs flown by No. 77 Squadron, convinced Menzies that it too should be offered to the United Nations.¹²

The Minister for External Affairs saved his most audacious effort to use Australian forces to cement a security guarantee. Menzies opposed the commitment of the Australian Army to Korea, believing its proper role in the event of a more general war lay elsewhere. Spender thought otherwise, and consistently argued that an Australian ground commitment to Korea independent of Britain would be immensely well received in Washington. He got his chance on 26 July, when the Australian Government learned that the British Government was going to announce the commitment of troops to Korea by 8 pm (Australian time) that day. Menzies was overseas, sailing from the United Kingdom to the United States onboard the liner *Queen Mary*. Believing Menzies to be out of contact, Spender seized the initiative. He convinced acting prime minister Arthur Fadden and Defence minister Philip McBride of the wisdom of his ideas in time to have a bulletin announcing the commitment of Australian soldiers to Korea to be read out on the ABC's 7 pm news bulletin. Menzies was unimpressed when he learned of what had taken place, but any unhappiness was lessened by the warmth of the reception he got in Washington.¹³

The result of Spender's manoeuvring was that the Australian forces committed to Korea represented what was available, rather than being the product of a coherent long-term plan. By the end of 1950, the Australian presence in Korea consisted of 3RAR, No. 77 Squadron and associated support units, and the destroyers HMAS *Bataan* and HMAS *Warramunga*.¹⁴ This basic structure – an infantry battalion, a fighter squadron, two destroyers or frigates and support units – changed temporarily between September 1951 and January 1952, when the aircraft carrier HMAS *Sydney* raised the number of Royal Australian Navy (RAN) ships deployed to three, and then permanently after April 1952, when a second Australian infantry battalion arrived in theatre. The need for *Sydney* was driven partly by an operational concern; HMS *Glory* needed a refit, and the Royal Navy had no aircraft carriers available to replace her. Yet the decision to send *Sydney* to Korea came in the context of a

12 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 1, 50–53.

13 O'Neill, 'The Korean War and the origins of ANZUS', 103–5.

14 Jeffrey Grey, *A military history of Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 209–10.

formal US request in February 1951 for additional troops, one that the Defence Committee felt Australia unable to respond to.¹⁵ The subsequent commitment of a second battalion in 1952 was a purely political decision; the Defence Committee again argued that any such deployment would badly hurt Australian mobilisation efforts in the event of a wider war, but they were overruled because of a perceived need to build up political capital in Washington.¹⁶

The Army

The fighting in the Korean War can be divided into four stages. The first was the opening North Korean invasion, which lasted from 25 June to early September 1950. In that time the KPA succeeded in pushing UN forces into the Pusan Perimeter in the south-east of the ROK, but was unable to obtain further success. The second phase opened on 15 September, when the US X Corps landed at Inchon, to the west of Seoul. The capture of Inchon marked the start of a UN counteroffensive that routed the KPA and drove them well into the north. By 19 October the Eighth Army had captured the North Korean capital Pyongyang, and one week later the ROKA 6 Division reached the Yalu River – the border between the DPRK and the People's Republic of China.¹⁷

It was this rapid advance that set the stage for the third phase of the war. Apprehensive about the presence of US forces on the Chinese border and under pressure from the Soviet Union, Mao Zedong ordered Chinese forces into the war.¹⁸ Beginning in late October 1950, the Chinese launched a series of offensives that would drive the UN forces out of the north and prompt a major crisis within the UN Command. General Douglas MacArthur wanted to expand the war onto mainland China and use atomic weapons if necessary. President Harry Truman disagreed, and when MacArthur started agitating for his policies in public and in Congress Truman fired him on 11 April 1951.¹⁹

15 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 1, 212–13.

16 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 1, 251.

17 Robert O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War 1950–53*, vol. 2, *Combat operations* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial and the Australian Government Publishing Service, 1985), 30–33.

18 Stueck, 'The Korean War', 278.

19 Stephen R Taaffe, *MacArthur's Korean War generals* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 183–84.

MacArthur's relief and the defeat of the Chinese Fifth Phase Offensive in May marked the start of the fourth and final stage of the war. Neither side had the ability to win an outright military victory on the peninsula, nor had the desire to widen the war outside it. With the frontline now roughly astride the 38th parallel, negotiations between the two sides opened on 10 July in the town of Kaesong. It would take another two years for an agreement to be reached; in the interim, fighting continued.

It was during the second phase that 3RAR entered the war in Korea, landing at Pusan on 28 September 1950. In the two months between the government's commitment of the battalion and its arrival in Korea it had worked frantically to prepare for combat. A steady flow of reinforcements, weapons and equipment arrived in Japan during August and September, as the battalion was brought up from 550 officers and men to a wartime establishment of 960.²⁰ Entire sub-units had to be re-established, and an intensive training program begun. In the midst of this, Lieutenant Colonel FS Walsh's time as the battalion commander expired, and he was replaced by Lieutenant Colonel CH Green. In 1945 Green had earned the distinction of becoming the youngest Australian battalion commander of the Second World War; five years later, and still only 30, he faced an entirely new challenge.²¹

By the time Green arrived on 10 September the Australian Government had already made the decision that 3RAR would operate as part of the British 27 Brigade. Based in Hong Kong, Brigadier Basil Coad possessed only the understrength 1 Battalion, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and 1 Battalion, Middlesex Regiment. The brigade had gone into action in the Pusan Perimeter in late August and participated in the breakout that followed the Inchon landings. The addition of 3RAR gave Coad a third manoeuvre element, but the brigade lacked adequate transportation and remained dependent on the United States for supporting arms such as artillery and armour.²²

On 5 October the brigade, redesignated 27 Commonwealth after the arrival of the Australians, was airlifted to Seoul and placed under the command of the US 1 Cavalry Division. For the next month 3RAR participated in the advance north, fighting a major action in an apple

20 3RAR War Diary, 11 September 1950, Australian War Memorial (AWM): AWM 85 4/20.

21 Wayne Klintworth, 'Formation of the Royal Australian Regiment', in *Duty first: A history of the Royal Australian Regiment*, ed. David Horner and Jean Bou (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 52.

22 Jeffrey Grey, 'The regiment's first war', in Horner and Bou, *Duty first*, 57.

orchard north of Yongyu on 22 October and helping the brigade clear and hold Chongju between 25 and 27 October. Despite its heavy losses over the previous months, the KPA continued to mount a determined defence, utilising armour and artillery alongside well-dug-in and camouflaged infantry.²³ Although Australian losses during this period were relatively light, among them was Lieutenant Colonel Green. On 30 October he was wounded by a shell fragment and died two days later. His replacement was Lieutenant Colonel Walsh.²⁴

Green's death coincided with the Chinese entry into the war. The Australians' first encounter with this new enemy, on 5 November, left Coad dissatisfied with Walsh's performance and led to the Australian's immediate relief.²⁵ The battalion's third commander within a fortnight, Major IB Ferguson, would endure a difficult first month. The events of 5 November had been part of the Chinese First Phase Offensive, little more than spoiling attack to gain a sense of UN Command strength and intentions. The main effort, the Second Phase Offensive, opened on 26 November. Within days the ROK II Corps had given way, and the Eighth Army began to withdraw.²⁶

The retreat itself was a bitter affair. From the start of the conflict certain US Army units had suffered from an absence of cohesion and leadership, and these problems became all too apparent during the desperate journey south.²⁷ The nadir occurred on 30 November when the brigade held open a corridor for the 2 US Infantry Division to retreat through. As the 3RAR war diary noted:

as was obvious then and as later confirmed by official US Army reports, 2nd US Division ... were completely disorganized and were not withdrawing in any sort of military fashion.

So poor was American discipline that units were firing randomly as they moved through the Commonwealth position, killing a soldier from the Middlesex.²⁸

23 See for example 3RAR War Diary, 19 October 1950, AWM: AWM 85 4/21.

24 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 74–76.

25 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 76–77.

26 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 2, 68.

27 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 65.

28 3RAR War Diary, 30 November 1950, AWM: AWM 85 4/22.

Brigadier Coad had already been critical in private of US performance during the UN counteroffensive – now he was scathing. This British dissatisfaction with US performance, coming as it did during a moment of wider diplomatic crisis brought on by the Chinese entry into the war, was taken seriously in Washington. It would have been a serious blow to the UN coalition if a senior partner had expressed public dismay at the fighting ability of US troops. Ultimately, the solution lay with a more general improvement in US performance, brought about by improved leadership within the Eighth Army and a greater flow of reinforcements to frontline formations. Yet is interesting to note that 3RAR's position as part of a larger Commonwealth formation rather than an independent Australian one appears to have insulated Australia from the worst of this intra-coalition disagreement.²⁹

The worst of the retreat ended on 11 December, when the brigade went into IX Corps reserve. Even this was not a rest; on 13 December 6 Platoon B Company got into a firefight with one of the guerrilla groups that continued to lurk in the rear areas of the UN Command.³⁰ Ten days later, General Walker, the Eighth Army commander, was killed in a road accident. His successor, General Matthew B Ridgway, succeeded in stabilising the UN line and began a series of limited counteroffensives. 3RAR participated in Operation THUNDERBOLT (25 January) and KILLER (21 February), both of which saw an overall improvement in the performance of the Eighth Army. During this period, 27 Brigade was strengthened by the arrival of 16 Field Regiment Royal New Zealand Artillery in January and 2 Battalion, Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry (2PPCLI) in March.³¹

The last sequence of the third phase of the war was the Chinese Fifth Phase Offensive, which commenced on 22 April and lasted until 20 May. The opening communist attack led to the collapse of 6 ROK Division. On the afternoon of the 23 April, 27 Brigade was warned to establish a defensive position north of the village of Kapyong, across a wide valley. As ROK soldiers began retreating down the valley, 3RAR occupied Hill 504 east of the river and 2PPCLI Hill 677 to the west. A fierce fight developed early on the morning of 24 April, in front of both 3RAR's

29 Jeffrey Grey, *The Commonwealth armies and the Korean War: An alliance study* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1988), 78–80, 86–87.

30 3RAR War Diary, 13 December 1950, AWM: AWM 85 4/23.

31 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 77–80.

company positions and around its HQ. By the time 3RAR was withdrawn on the afternoon of the 24th, 32 Australians were dead, 59 had been wounded and three captured. The cost to the Chinese was much higher, but more importantly they had been prevented from breaking through the UN position.³²

From May to September 1951, 3RAR was engaged in halting the remainder of the Chinese Fifth Phase Offensive and conducting limited UN counterattacks to restore the line. During this period, several more important administrative changes occurred. Both British battalions and the headquarters of 27 Commonwealth Brigade were replaced by new units from the United Kingdom, and the brigade consequently renamed 28 Commonwealth Brigade. The brigade was then combined with 25 Canadian and 29 British brigades and an Indian field ambulance to form 1 Commonwealth Division. At the same time, 3RAR began to experience a high rate of personnel turnover, as those who had originally served with the battalion became eligible to return to Australia. Although the battalion remained at its wartime establishment, the loss of so many experienced personnel was less than ideal.³³

The final large, mobile battle fought by an Australian unit in Korea was the seizure of Maryang-San in early October. Operation COMMANDO was conceived as an offensive by US I Corps to improve the UN position along what became known as the Jamestown line. As part of this, 1 Commonwealth Division was assigned to seize two key hills – Kowang-San (Hill 355) and Maryang-San (Hill 317). 3RAR's role was to support the initial assault on Hill 355 and then capture Hill 317. The division's attack began on 3 October, with 3RAR assaulting their main objective two days later. Although the initial assault was successful, the Australians continued to fight around the feature until the early morning of 8 October. In capturing Maryang-San, 3RAR had destroyed an estimated two Chinese battalions, at a cost of 20 killed in action and 89 wounded. The Official Historian, Robert O'Neill, argued that 'the victory at Maryang San is probably the greatest single feat of the Australian Army during the Korean war'.³⁴

32 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 81–84.

33 Grey, 'The regiment's first war', 85.

34 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 2, 200.

From the end of COMMANDO in October 1951 to the ceasefire in July 1953, the war in Korea was a static one. What this meant for the Australian battalions – for 3RAR was joined by 1RAR in April 1952 – was a war of digging, patrolling and camouflage.³⁵ ‘Static’ can be a misleading term; the failure to return a war of manoeuvre did not mean, as Jeffrey Grey has pointed out, ‘that the fighting did not continue, or did so at a reduced and somehow less dangerous pace’.³⁶ Even in the absence of major action, the insistence from US I Corps leadership that units maintain an aggressive posture – and in particular mount raids to ‘snatch’ prisoners – caused considerable friction with 1 Commonwealth Division. The Chinese were skilled and aggressive fighters who possessed large numbers of automatic weapons; coming to grips with them at night was an extremely dangerous business. Commonwealth commanders remained unconvinced of the utility of ‘snatch’ raids, but could not ignore orders from higher headquarters. It was one of the few points of operational friction in the coalition relationship in the final two years of the war.³⁷

The arrival of a second Australian battalion within 28 Brigade meant that Australian personnel were now in the majority, and so command of the brigade went to an Australian. The first such officer was Brigadier Thomas Daly, who took command in July 1952; his successor, Brigadier JGN Wilton, arrived in March 1953 and held the position until the ceasefire. Daly took the opportunity to put Australian officers into what was an entirely British headquarters, and exercise his own command style. Having a dominion officer in charge of British battalions was an unusual arrangement and one that was not entirely well received, but not to the extent that it impacted operational effectiveness.³⁸

The Australian battalions rotated again in April 1953, with 2RAR replacing 1RAR.³⁹ Three months later, the ceasefire came into effect. The sudden transition from war to peace (albeit a fragile one) was startling. In the days leading up to the ceasefire, the Chinese fiercely bombarded Australian forward positions and mounted strong attacks on the neighbouring 1 US Marine Division, which were successfully repulsed. The ceasefire was signed at 10:00 am on 27 July 1953 and went into effect at 10:00 pm

35 Grey, ‘The regiment’s first war’, 89.

36 Grey, ‘The regiment’s first war’, 88.

37 Jeffrey Grey, *A soldier’s soldier: A biography of Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Daly* (Cambridge; Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 79–80.

38 Grey, *A soldier’s soldier*, 76–78.

39 O’Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 2, 216–19.

on the same day. Just over 12 hours later, 3RAR's intelligence officer, Lieutenant JM Mathers, toured one of the Marine positions. The ferocity of the Chinese bombardment was reflected in the fact most of the bunkers and trenches had been destroyed, and there were around 70 Chinese bodies scattered in front of the defences. Yet amid this carnage, Mathers noted the 'very young' Chinese stretcher-bearers recovering casualties 'were friendly towards us'.⁴⁰ It was an apt end for a limited war.

No. 77 Squadron at war

Even before it was formally committed to combat by the Australian Government on 30 June, No. 77 Squadron Royal Australian Air Force was in high demand. Unlike the jet-powered F-80C Shooting Star operated by USAF squadrons in Japan, the F-51 Mustang flown by the Australians had the range to loiter over Korea and the ability to operate from temporary strips on the peninsula.⁴¹ As early as 26 June, the US Fifth Air Force was asking if Australian Mustangs were available to provide air cover for the evacuation of US citizens from Seoul. So intense was the desire for Mustangs that a week after the Australian Government agreed to commit No. 77 Squadron, the USAF decided to convert six jet squadrons in Japan back to the F-51.⁴²

This need for Mustangs, and the worsening military situation, helps explain the intensive operations of No. 77 in the opening months of the war. The squadron flew its first sorties over Korea on 2 July and its first strike mission three days later.⁴³ A routine quickly emerged for No. 77 Squadron. Each day four flights of four Mustangs would take off from Iwakuni in Japan and land at Taegu, a makeshift strip within UN lines. From there they would fly anything up to six sorties in a single day, refuelling and rearming where necessary, before returning to Iwakuni in the evening.⁴⁴ It was an intense schedule for the Australians, with each day lasting from around 4:15 am to 6:30 pm, and flying taking place most days.⁴⁵ As the North Korean air force had largely been destroyed, the

40 3RAR War Diary, 28 July 1953, AWM: AWM85 4/55.

41 Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950–1953*, 68.

42 Futrell, *The United States Air Force in Korea 1950–1953*, 70.

43 Alan Stephens, *Going solo: The Royal Australian Air Force, 1946–1971* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995), 225–26.

44 Stephens, *Going solo*, 226.

45 Richard Cresswell, interview, 17 September 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, No. 582.

missions were focused on close air support of UN troops, and interdiction of communist supply lines. With their distinctive 'Dropkick' callsign, No. 77 became a familiar presence for the beleaguered soldiers of the Eighth Army.⁴⁶

Even without a serious enemy air threat, or the vast amounts of light flak that would come to cover North Korea in the static phase of the war, the levels of danger were high for the Australian pilots. Ground attack missions required skilful flying, as pilots went into dives at low level to ensure accurate delivery of ordinance. Casualties were inevitable. On 7 July Squadron Leader Graham Strout, Spence's deputy, was killed during a raid on Samchok; Spence himself was killed when his Mustang failed to pull out of a dive on 9 September.⁴⁷

Spence's death occurred as the UN forces began their long journey north, and No. 77 Squadron followed close behind. In mid-October the squadron moved, along with the USAF Mustang group, to Pohang, and again a month later to Hamhung in North Korea. The squadron's stay north of the 38th parallel was only brief, however; with the Chinese steadily driving UN forces back, the Australians relocated to Pusan East on 3 December. Throughout this period, and until the squadron was withdrawn to re-equip with the jet-powered Gloster Meteor in April 1951, a steady operational tempo was maintained.⁴⁸

The emergence of the MiG-15 in Korean skies in November 1950 was the prompt for Australian authorities to seek a replacement for the Mustang. Flown by Soviet pilots, the MiGs had startled UN observers with performance levels that were superior to every UN fighter then in theatre.⁴⁹ It was quickly made clear to the RAAF that its first preference, the North American F-86 Sabre, would not be available until 1954. Instead it was able to secure 36 Meteor Mk VIIIs from Britain. Although it was powered by twin jet engines, the straight-winged Meteor had first debuted in combat in 1944 and was a clear generation behind the MiG-15 and the F-86. While aware of this, senior officers within the USAF and

46 Milton Cottey, interview, 19 September 2003, Australians at War Film Archive, No. 863.

47 Stephens, *Going solo*, 227.

48 Stephens, *Going solo*, 228–31.

49 Douglas C Dildy and Warren E Thompson, *F-86 Sabre vs MiG-15: Korea 1950–53* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2013), 75–76.

RAF did not believe the gap between the Meteor and the MiG-15 was so great as to make the former unsuitable in an air-to-air role. It would be up to No. 77 Squadron to put this idea to the test.⁵⁰

In the event, the gap would prove too great. A series of dogfights between 29 August and 5 September 1951 left one Meteor destroyed and two damaged, for no losses on the Soviet side. The commander of No. 77, Wing Commander Gordon Steege, requested that the Meteors be limited to operations south of the Chongchon River.⁵¹ This prompted some disquiet amongst the upper echelons of the RAF and USAF, who were concerned by the political implications of limiting Meteor usage at a time when a swathe of NATO air forces were being equipped with the type. Senior British and American officers believed that Steege had thrown in the towel far too early and argued that, while acknowledging the limitations of the Meteor, deficiencies in Australian tactics and training were to blame for the poor results.⁵² Steege, for his part, maintained that the gap in performance was simply too big for the Meteor to do anything but try and survive against a competently flown MiG.⁵³

Any lingering doubts were settled on 1 December 1951, when three Meteors were destroyed in a dogfight by MiGs of 176 GvIAP (the *Gvardeyskiy Istrebitel'nyi Aviatsionnyi Polk* – Guards Fighter Air Regiment), with no loss on the Soviet side.⁵⁴ In the aftermath the Australians were immediately relegated to air defence tasks. It was a bitter blow to professional pride made even more difficult by the fact that air defence duties were, in the words of a contemporary Australian report, ‘a “soul destroying” task at the best of times’.⁵⁵ It also created a certain degree of tension within the coalition. Airfield space for jet units was at a premium in Korea, and No. 77 was one of just three squadrons based at Kimpo. The USAF began threatening to evict the squadron for a more useful unit. Finding an

50 Stephens, *Going solo*, 231–32.

51 Stephens, *Going solo*, 235.

52 Ministry of Defence, London to British Embassy Tokyo, Bouchier from Chiefs of Staff, 12 September 1951, UK National Archives (TNA): AIR 8/1709; Weyland to Johnson, 30 September 1951, TNA: AIR 8/1709; British Embassy Tokyo to Ministry of Defence, London, Chiefs of Staff from Bouchier, 19 September 1951, TNA: AIR 8/1709.

53 ‘No. 77 (I/F) Squadron Monthly Tactical Report No. 3/51’, n.d., TNA: AIR 8/1709.

54 ‘No. 77 Squadron Tactical Report for the period 1 Nov 51 to 15 Dec 51’, 16 January 1952, National Archives of Australia (NAA): A11250, 28/17/AIR; Igor Seidov, *Red devils over the Yalu: A chronicle of Soviet aerial operations in the Korean War 1950–53* (Solihull: Helion & Company, 2014), 273.

55 ‘No. 77 (I.F.) Squadron – Tactical Report for the period 15 Dec 51 to 15 Jan 52’, 21 February 1952, NAA: A11250, 28/17/AIR.

expanded role for the Meteors now became not just a matter of restoring pride and unit morale, but also ensuring the squadron remained a valued part of the UN coalition.⁵⁶

The answer came with Wing Commander RT Susans, who succeeded Steege as commander of the squadron at the end of December 1951. Susans pressed for the Meteors to be fitted with rails for unguided rockets and trialled in a ground attack role. An initial sortie on 8 January proved to be a success, and the remainder of the squadron quickly transitioned into the role. The ability to generate over 1,000 sorties a month, at a time when the USAF was conducting a series of massive campaigns designed to destroy communist logistics networks across the peninsula, was also welcome.⁵⁷

The switch to a ground attack role did not mean the complete end of encounters with MiGs, however. When necessary, the Meteors continued to be tasked in escort or fighter roles that invited the potential for air combat. From the start of 1952 to the armistice in July 1953, No. 77 Squadron would claim three MiG-15s destroyed and a further two damaged, with only one Meteor damaged in return.⁵⁸ Yet overall air-to-air combat remained a rarity for Meteor pilots after December 1951, and the majority of an individual pilot's tour in Korea would be spent attacking ground targets.⁵⁹

Some Australian pilots would argue after the war that the success against MiGs in 1952–53 showed that Steege's decision had been premature and that with better training and tactics the Meteor could have given a better account of itself – thus avoiding the entire unfortunate episode. Yet it is hard in retrospect to criticise Steege's actions. As he noted in early September 1951, the MiG's higher Mach number meant it could be controlled at higher speeds than the Meteor and thus – if competently flown – dictate the entire engagement. The aircraft shot down by the Australians in 1952–53 appear to have been piloted by inexperienced Chinese rather than Soviet flyers who were unaware of this key performance advantage.⁶⁰ Even Air Vice Marshal Cecil Bouchier, the senior RAF officer in Korea

56 Stephens, *Going solo*, 237.

57 Stephens, *Going solo*, 237–38.

58 David Wilson, 'Appendix 3: Aerial balance sheet', in *Lion over Korea: 77 Fighter Squadron RAAF 1950–53* (Belconnen: Banner Books, 1994).

59 Stephens, *Going solo*, 238.

60 Seidov, *Red devils over the 38th parallel*, 275–76.

and a strong critic of Steege, cautioned his superiors in London from drawing 'false conclusions' from the Meteor renaissance in May 1952: 'the MIG 15 can always dictate the fight and it has a superior performance which should make it impossible for a Meteor ever to shoot it down in equal combat'.⁶¹

Steege's decision not only reflected this basic technical reality but also an understanding that the RAAF simply could not sustain the level of attrition experienced by No. 77 Squadron in late 1951.⁶² This in turn reflected a basic unpreparedness on the part of the RAAF for active participation in a high-intensity conflict.⁶³ Steege was left trying to balance Australia's strategic objective of garnering American approval with the operational reality that his squadron could not continue to do what was asked of it. While Susans ultimately crafted an acceptable solution by converting the Meteor to a ground attack role, the fact remained the government's goals had diverged from what was possible because of a failure of capability.

The Navy

Like the other two services, the initial commitment of the RAN to the Korean War was governed by what was available. The *Tribal*-class destroyer HMAS *Bataan* had left Sydney on 31 May to relieve the modified *River*-class frigate *Shoalhaven* on BCOF duties. When the Menzies Government authorised both ships to be put at UN disposal on 29 June, *Bataan* was en route to Kure from Hong Kong and *Shoalhaven* was in Kure. The latter was put to immediate use, escorting a US ammunition ship into Pusan on 1 July. When *Bataan* arrived on 6 July, she too was put to work escorting convoys to Pusan, and enforcing the UN blockade of the western coast.⁶⁴

These tasks lacked obvious glamour but were crucial to the war in Korea. Although North Korea's navy amounted to a handful of ex-Kriegsmarine torpedo boats and ex-Soviet submarine chasers, an audacious attempt to capture Pusan from the sea on the first night of the invasion showed they

61 British Embassy Tokyo to Air Ministry London, 'For Chiefs of Air Staff from Bouchier', 10 May 1952, TNA: AIR 8/1709.

62 'No. 77 Squadron Tactical Report for the period 1 Nov 51 to 15 Dec 51', 16 January 1952, NAA: A11250 28/17/AIR; Weyland to Johnson, 30 September 1951, TNA: AIR 8/1709.

63 Stephens, *Going solo*, 244.

64 'HMAS Shoalhaven, Report of Proceedings, July 1950', 7 August 1950, AWM: AWM78 313/3; 'HMAS Bataan, Report of Proceedings, July 1950', 7 August 1950, AWM: AWM78 58/3.

appreciated the potential of sea power.⁶⁵ The entire UN effort in Korea rested on the ability to supply and reinforce the Eighth Army from the sea; securing these lines of communication was thus paramount. As it became clear the communist naval threat was minimal, the range of missions for UN naval forces rapidly expanded. Naval elements conducted amphibious landings, evacuations and raids. Gunfire support missions to interdict enemy supply lines or in direct support of UN troops were routine. US and British aircraft carriers conducted strikes up and down the peninsula, and screening them became an important task for other UN units.⁶⁶

It was into this environment that *Bataan* and *Warramunga*, which replaced *Shoalhaven* at the end of August, operated. *Bataan* had been part of the force that screened the landings of 1 Cavalry Division at Pohang Dong on 18 July, and both destroyers were part of the covering force for the Inchon landings in mid-September.⁶⁷ So rapid was the UN advance that by the start of November both destroyers found themselves, along with HMCS *Cayuga*, *Athabaskan* and *Sioux*, and USS *Forest B. Royal*, blockading the Yalu Gulf. Yet within days UN forces began to retreat, and both destroyers were part of the evacuation of Chinnampo on 5 December. By the end of the month, the Australians were back where they had started in September: off Inchon, where *Bataan* provided daily gunfire support to 25 Infantry Division.⁶⁸

As the frontline stabilised in early 1951, both Australian destroyers returned to what had become routine duties: screening larger British and American vessels, enforcing the blockade and providing gunfire support for troops ashore. *Bataan* was relieved by the frigate HMAS *Murchison* in May 1951, *Warramunga* by the new destroyer HMAS *Anzac* in August. In total, four RAN frigates and four RAN destroyers served in Korea, with all four destroyers completing two tours. The operations of HMAS *Tobruk* in the war's final month were as typical as any. She began the month escorting the light carrier HMS *Ocean*, spent several days replenishing in Saesbo, then conducted a war patrol on the east coast, where she enforced the blockade, conducted bombardments of communist installations and

65 Thomas J Cutler, 'Sea power and defense of the Pusan Pocket' in *The U.S. Navy in the Korean War*, ed. Edward J Marolda (Naval Institute Press, 2013), 16–17.

66 Cutler, 'Sea power and defense of the Pusan Pocket', 17–30.

67 Tom Frame, *No pleasure cruise: The story of the Royal Australian Navy* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 210–11.

68 'HMAS Bataan, Report of Proceedings, December 1950', 5 January 1951, AWM: AWM78 58/3.

shore batteries, sank a junk suspected of minelaying, operated in support of guerrilla groups on offshore islands and searched for a downed USAF bomber crew.⁶⁹

While these tasks became routine, they were far from safe or easy. *Bataan* fired the first shots of the Navy's war in Korea on 1 August 1950 when, while in company of the cruiser HMS *Belfast*, she was engaged by a shore battery near Haeju, northwest of Inchon.⁷⁰ Communist gunners proved more than willing to trade blows with UN ships, and while Australia's ships suffered only a few hits throughout the war many of their compatriots were not so lucky. Mines also represented a major threat, both inshore and at sea. HMAS *Bataan* recorded a typical event in April 1951:

On another occasion whilst screening the carriers in bad visibility our 'next ahead' 'ATHABASKAN' reported cheerfully over T.B.S. [Talk Between Ships] that he had just sighted a floating mine directly ahead of 'BATAAN' (DD). The few moments that elapsed until the mine was sighted were anxious ones but, with this prior warning, the danger was easily avoided and the mine was sunk by gunfire a minute or two later.⁷¹

Beyond mines and shore batteries, the other great threat to Australian ships were local conditions. Korea's west coast was characterised by 'shallow waters, extensive sandbanks, rapid tidal currents and narrow channels'.⁷² Combined with Korea's subarctic weather and the threat of hidden shore batteries and mines, patrols demanded a high level of seamanship from Australian crews at all times.

The most extreme example of the way in which enemy action and navigational hazards could combine to endanger Australian ships was HMAS *Murchison*'s time in the Han estuary. Conceived in July 1951, Operation HAN aimed to 'to probe forward as far as navigation would allow, into the HAN RIVER, to demonstrate Allied control of this area'.⁷³ The audience for this demonstration was the negotiators at Kaesong, with UN naval commanders hoping that sound of gunfire in the river

69 'HMAS Tobruk, Report of Proceedings, July 1953', 31 July 1953, AWM: AWM78 343/2.

70 Cutler, 'Sea power and defense of the Pusan Pocket', 20–21.

71 'HMAS Bataan, Report of Proceedings, April 1951', 5 May 1951, AWM: AWM78 58/3.

72 Anthony Cooper, *HMAS Bataan, 1952: An Australian warship in the Korean War* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010), 68–69.

73 'HMAS Murchison, Report of Proceedings, July 1951', 8 August 1951, AWM: AWM78 228/1.

would be able to be heard at the negotiating table.⁷⁴ Responsibility fell on Task Group 95.1 (TG 95.1), which consisted of a mixture of British, New Zealand, Australian and Korean frigates. Rear-Admiral Alan Scott-Moncrieff, of the UK Royal Navy, who commanded the Commonwealth Task Group, was sceptical of the value of the operation, but it went ahead anyway.⁷⁵

From the outset the operation was demanding, with the frigates having to send out boats and survey parties in an effort to find channels through the mud flats to allow them to close with the enemy.⁷⁶ Initial enemy resistance was light, but on 28 September *Murchison* was ambushed as she completed her turn at anchor to return down the river. Fire came from anti-tank guns, heavy machine guns, bazookas and small arms in concealed position. So close was the distance that the Australians replied over open sights, with weapons under individual control. When a rain squall came in, *Murchison* was forced to anchor for fear of running aground; when the rain cleared a cable party had to raise the anchor while totally exposed, and then gunfire resumed.⁷⁷ Despite being hit numerous times *Murchison* suffered only a handful of light wounds and the loss of a Bofors gun. An even more intense ambush two days later resulted in one serious casualty, and Operation HAN ended shortly after. Despite the volume of enemy fire on both occasions, the captain of *Murchison*, Lieutenant Commander (later Commodore) Dollard, remained convinced the biggest threat of his ship had been the tides and mudflats.

The multinational command arrangements in Korea also caused some friction for the RAN, at least initially. Australian commanders found the orders from American commanders extremely detailed, so much so that they choked off initiative and were hard to comprehend or process in the time available. American signals and tactical procedure publications were so numerous that they presented problems of compliance and storage.⁷⁸ Although the issue of detailed orders had also been present in the Second

74 Alistair Cooper, 'The Korean War era', in *The Royal Australian Navy: A history*, ed. David Stevens (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2006), 175.

75 Cooper, 'The Korean War era', 175.

76 'HMAS Murchison, Report of Proceedings, July 1951', 8 August 1951, AWM: AWM78 228/1.

77 Commodore Allen Nelson Dollard DSC RAN (Rtd) interviewed by Lieutenant Commander Tony Hughes RANR, 22 November 2002, AWM: AWMS02803, 16.

78 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 2, 417–18.

World War, the passage of five years was enough to erase operational experience of it, and commanders had to readjust.⁷⁹ By mid-1951 the captain of HMAS *Bataan* was reporting that

during the past few months it has been apparent that the United Nations Navy in Korea has been operating more and more as a composite force using common doctrines and standardized procedures with complete success ... the stage has now been reached when it is the rule and not the exception to operate ships drawn from the United States and British Commonwealth Navies together in units as small as Task Elements with the certain knowledge that they will work as an efficient and happy team.⁸⁰

Even the presence of ships from non-English-speaking navies, such as HMNS *Piet Hein*, was handled smoothly.⁸¹

The one significant departure from the RAN pattern of destroyer and frigate operations was the deployment of the light carrier HMAS *Sydney*. Carrying an air group of 22 Sea Fury fighters and 12 Firefly attack aircraft, between 4 October 1951 and 25 January 1952 she conducted seven war patrols, primarily off the west coast.⁸² Typical missions for the air group included combat air patrol, spotting for naval gunnery, search and rescue, and strike missions. It was the latter sorties that were the most dangerous. Like their RAAF counterparts, Navy pilots flew a mixture of close air support and interdiction missions against targets that were increasingly smothered in light flak. *Sydney* lost 10 aircraft to enemy action and another three to accidents, with three pilots killed.

The experience of the *Sydney* and her air group have come to dominate accounts of RAN participation in Korea. As the only Australian aircraft carrier to serve in combat operations in any war, she holds an obvious fascination for those interested in Australian naval affairs. Yet in retrospect the significance of her deployment lay in the circumstances in which it came about. It was yet another demonstration of the way in which the Australian Government was keenly aware of the political consequences of its decisions regarding force structure in Korea, and reacted accordingly.

79 O'Neill, *Australia in the Korean War*, vol. 2, 417–18; Frame, *No pleasure cruise*, 212–13.

80 'HMAS Bataan, Report of Proceedings, May 1951', 1 June 1951, AWM: AWM78 58/3.

81 'HMAS Condamine Report of Proceedings, December 1952', 1 January 1953, AWM: AWM78 88/3.

82 Cooper, 'The Korean War era', 177.

Conclusion

Australia entered the Korean War looking to fulfil two major objectives. The first was to use the commitment of Australian forces to clear the way towards a security pact with the United States. This was accomplished in September 1951, with the signing of the Australia, New Zealand and United States (ANZUS) agreement. The second was to preserve the independence of the Republic of Korea and to demonstrate the willingness of Western nations to resist what Canberra perceived to be monolithic communist aggression. In some senses this objective was largely achieved by mid-1951, when it became clear to all parties that there would be no outright military victory on the peninsula; but it was not consolidated until July 1953, with the signing of the armistice.

Crucially, there was no tension between these two objectives, and by actively participating in the fighting Australian commanders worked towards both. Alliance warfare delivered its share of irritations, but Australian forces were insulated from these to an extent by their participation in Commonwealth formations on land and at sea. The controversy around the role of No. 77 Squadron in the second half of 1951 did show that the commitment of Australian forces came with potential political downsides. Yet this issue was solved relatively quickly, and in retrospect while British and American commanders hinted at Australian underperformance, their primary concern was the reputation of the Gloster Meteor.

Australian success in Korea came at a significant human cost: 306 Australians were killed in action across all three services, a further 32 died in accidents or of illness, and 1,216 were wounded. Twenty-nine Australians ended up as prisoners of war, where they were subject to brutal treatment and attempted indoctrination; one prisoner was treated so badly they died. Although ultimately overshadowed by Vietnam in popular memory, it was a hefty price to pay for guarantees of Australian security.

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