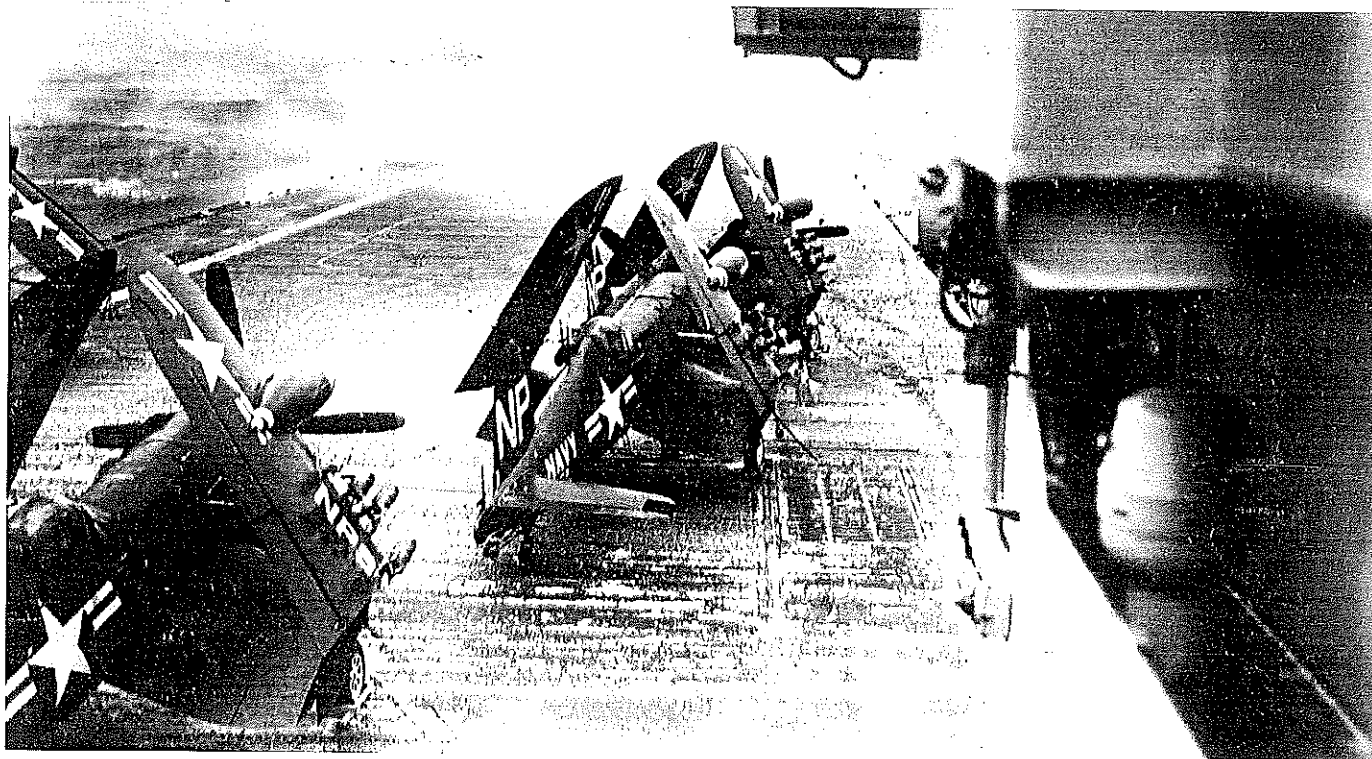


Air-to-Air Combat

THE NEWLY designated attack carrier *Oriskany* (CVA 34) was an *Essex*-class ship built for World War II but had never seen service in that conflict. Numerous improvements remade her into a virtually new class of carrier by the time of her

commissioning on 25 September 1950. Two years later on 28 October 1952, the carrier arrived in the combat area with Air Group 102 consisting of four reserve squadrons—two flying Panther jets, one equipped with Corsairs, and one with Skyraiders.

For the most part the naval air war in Korea was an air-to-ground affair, but naval aviators got an occasional opportunity to demonstrate their prowess in aerial combat. They performed well even against the highly touted MiG-15, despite the



*Heavy weather off the Korean Peninsula has canceled carrier flight operations for the air wing of carrier *Oriskany* (CVA 34). The ship served in the combat theater from late October 1952 through the harsh winter of 1953.*

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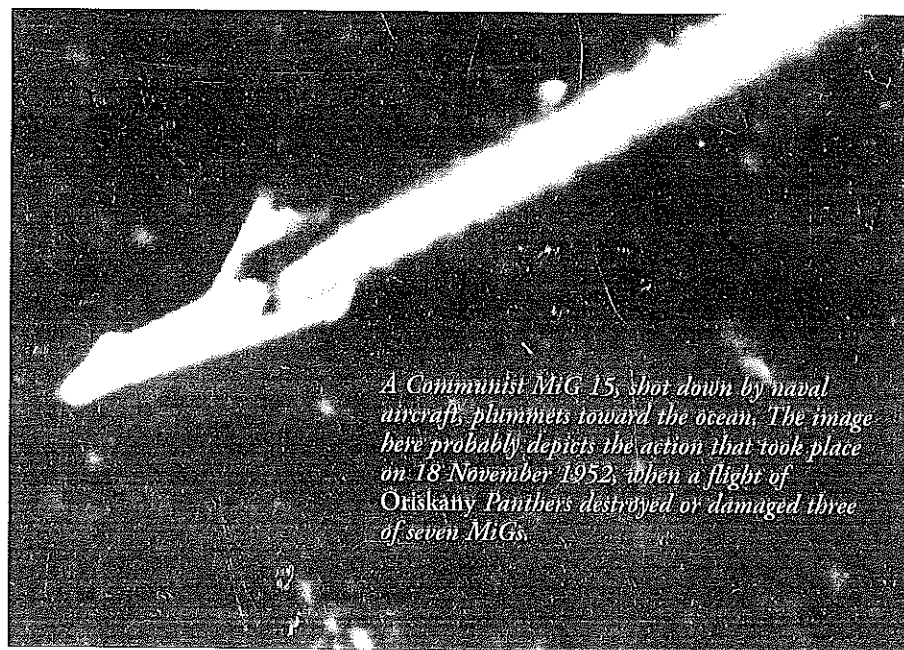
superior qualities of the Soviet-made aircraft and the added advantage of operating from convenient sanctuaries just over the Chinese or Soviet borders.

In November 1952 the *Oriskany* air group concentrated its efforts against industrial targets in northeastern Korea. Because of the task group's proximity to Soviet fighter assets, eight F9F-5 Panthers

But confident of their training and professional skills, Navy pilots never hesitated to tangle with the enemy.

of VF-781's Pacemakers were in the air as combat air patrol. The first of the newer model Panthers to be employed during the Korean War, the F9F-5s, like their predecessors, the F9F-2s and -3s, were outmatched technologically by the fast, agile, swept-wing MiG-15s. But confident of their training and professional skills, Navy pilots never hesitated to tangle with the enemy.

Early in the afternoon of 18 November, the carrier's radar detected a number of unidentified aircraft heading her way. Four of the combat air patrol Panthers led



A Communist MiG-15, shot down by naval aircraft, plummets toward the ocean. The image here probably depicts the action that took place on 18 November 1952, when a flight of Oriskany Panthers destroyed or damaged three of seven MiGs.

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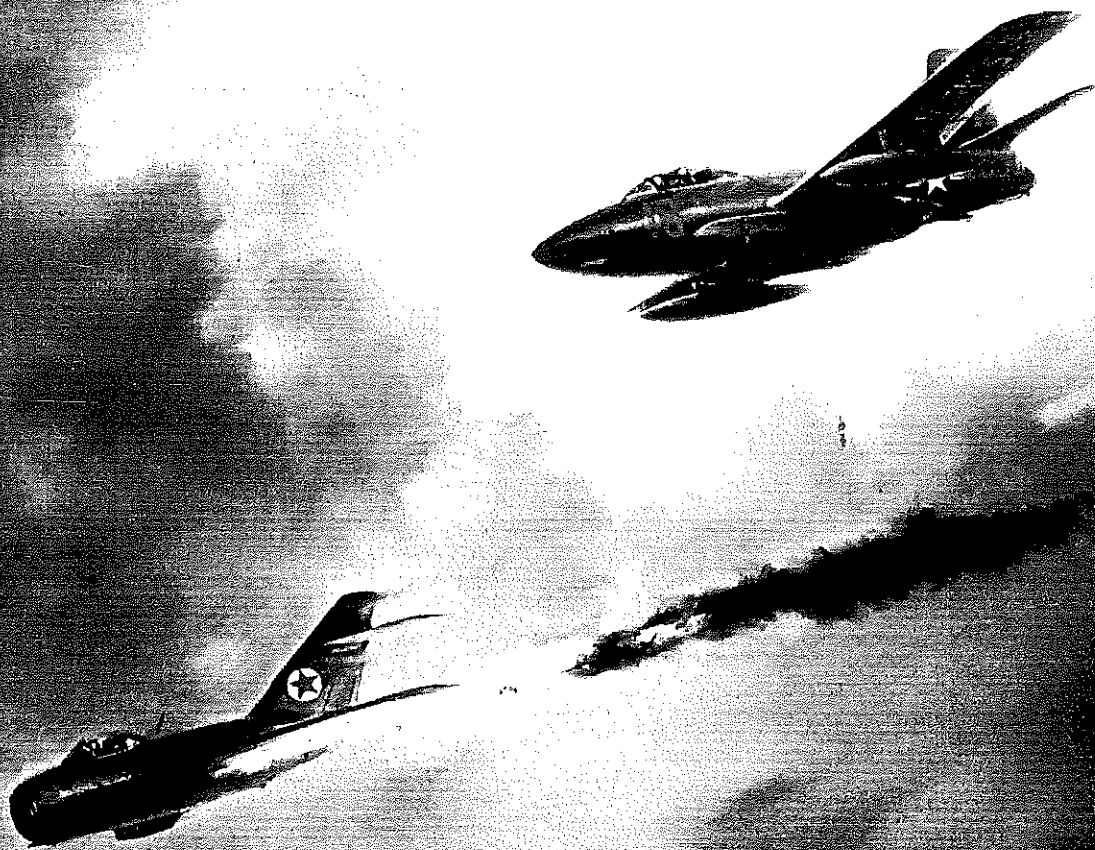
by Lieutenant Claire R. Elwood were dispatched to intercept them. As they closed the enemy formation, Elwood's aircraft developed engine problems that put him out of the action. He detached a two-plane section under Lieutenant E. Royce Williams to climb to altitude and engage what turned out to be seven MiGs.

Four of the swept-wing aircraft made an unsuccessful attack on Williams and his wingman, Lieutenant (jg) David M. Rowlands. Williams scored a hit on one of the MiGs and sent it into a spin. Rowlands followed the MiG down before it splashed into the sea. Williams and Rowlands then mixed it up with the remaining three enemy planes. Rowlands scored a hit that left his MiG smoking. Williams' aircraft was hit and damaged but he was able to take cover in a cloudbank accompanied by Rowland who was now out of ammunition.

At this point the action was joined by Elwood's wingman,

Lieutenant (jg) John D. Middleton, who shot down another MiG. All the Panthers returned safely to the ship. Williams and Middleton were each credited with a MiG kill and Rowland with damaging a third. It was a good score for pilots flying the much less capable Panthers. While the MiGs were almost certainly flown by Soviet pilots in this instance, the superior training of the Navy pilots was enough to make the difference.

MiGs were a greater danger to propeller-driven aircraft, but U.S. naval aviators like their Royal Navy counterparts did quite well when attacked by the enemy jet. On 10 September 1952, Marine Captain Jesse G. Folmar and his wingman flying Corsairs from *Sicily* were attacked by MiG-15s. While the Marines maneuvered to avoid becoming combat statistics, one of the MiG pilots got careless and Folmar, seizing the opportunity, shot him down. Several MiGs now joined the fight against the two Corsairs, and Folmar's plane took a



Oil painting by R. G. Smith illustrates the shoot-down of an enemy fighter. Courtesy Sharlyn Marsh

mortal hit. The Marine captain bailed out and was soon plucked out of the ocean while his wingman made it safely back to the ship. Folmar's remarkable MiG kill was the only one of the war by a Corsair.

The only American aircraft comparable to the MiG-15 was the swept-wing, North American F-86 Sabre in which U.S. Air Force pilots chalked up a very creditable kill ratio in air-to-air encounters. Naval aviators on exchange duty with the Air Force also flew this aircraft in the vicinity of the Yalu River where they had several

opportunities to engage MiG-15s and show what they could do with the more competitive Sabres. Several became MiG killers. Major John F. Bolt topped the list, scoring six kills to become the Marine Corps' only ace of the Korean War. Major John Glenn, who later became the first American to orbit the earth, was credited with three MiG kills. Navy Lieutenant Walter "Wally" Schirra had one confirmed MiG kill and another probable. He, like Glenn, became one of America's first seven astronauts, the men whom author Tom Wolfe immortalized in his book, *The*

Right Stuff. Navy and Marine Sabre pilots accounted for at least 24 MiGs during the Korean War.

In the latter part of 1952 the Marines of VMF-513, flying Tigercats from K-8 at Kunsan, received a new jet fighter, the Douglas F3D Skyknight. Sometime later the Marine Skyknights moved to the K-6 airfield at Pyongtaek. Two Skyknights were kept airborne nightly and patrolled the sky under radar control from Cho-do, an island off the west coast of Korea. An especially important part of the F3D mission was the escort of B-29s during night air strikes.

The F3D was big for a fighter and it would be a considerable understatement to say its speed and maneuverability were not comparable to the enemy jet fighters it challenged. The F3D did, however, have a state-of-the-art radar system while the MiGs had none and were obliged to rely entirely on information from Ground Controlled Intercept (GCI) sites. The Skyknight's airborne radar along with its trained radar operator sitting side by side with the pilot went far to compensate for the plane's deficiency in flight performance characteristics.

On 3 November 1952 an F3D flown by Major William T. Stratton Jr. and his radar operator Master Sergeant Hans C. Hoglund shot down a jet aircraft which they identified as a Yak-15 but which may have been another type of

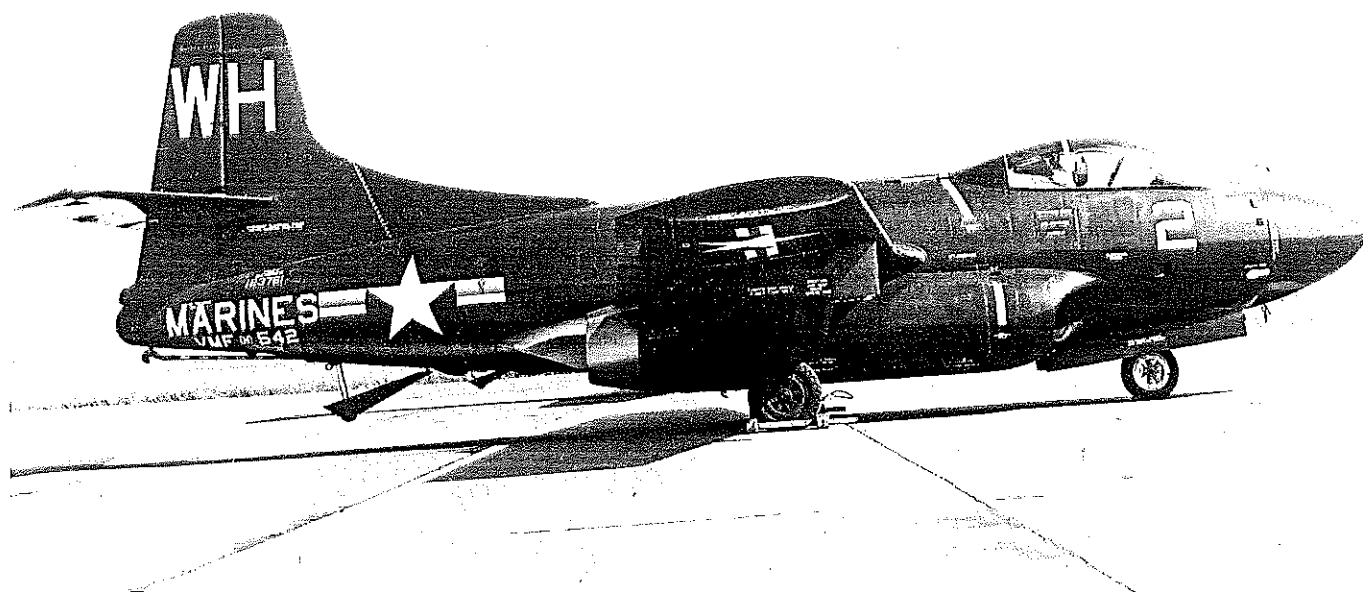
Communists launched attacks to gain territory to their south that would be recognized in the truce.

enemy jet. It was the world's first combat encounter of jet aircraft at night. A few nights later Captain Oliver R. Davis and Warrant Officer Dramus F. Fessler bagged the squadron's first MiG-15. Altogether, five enemy jet fighters including four MiG-15s would fall

to the Marine Skyknights between November 1952 and January 1953.

During the next few months of 1953, Task Force 77 aircraft were employed in a variety of tasks, including close air support, attacks on enemy supply lines and storage facilities, and strikes against industrial targets. The port city of Chongjin on the northeast coast of North Korea was plastered by the air groups from *Philippine Sea* and *Oriskany* on 13 April. Other targets on the northeast coast were hit by aircraft from *Oriskany* and *Princeton* on the 21st.

On 26 April, Armistice talks that had been stalled resumed with a discussion of the difficult matter of prisoner exchange. In early June, with the repatriation problem largely agreed upon, the Communists launched attacks to gain territory to their south that would be recognized



The Douglas F3D Skyknight, the Navy Department's third type of jet aircraft deployed to Korea, proved to be an excellent escort for Air Force B-29 bombers conducting nighttime missions.

in the truce. On 6 June, Vice Admiral Clark ordered the maximum effort of his fleet to prevent this from happening. Aircraft from four fast carriers, *Boxer*, *Lake Champlain* (CVA 39), *Philippine Sea*, and *Princeton* pulled out all stops to provide close air support to UN troops. On 16 June the terms of the armistice were agreed to but fighting continued until the last moment.

A Navy detachment of Composite Squadron 4 headed by Lieutenant G. G. O'Rourke arrived at K-6 on 21 June, having been transported to Korea by way of the attack carrier *Lake Champlain*. The Skynights were ill suited to carrier operations, however, because of their canted tailpipes. If the planes sat in

one spot for a brief time with engines running, they were likely to set fire to teak decks, a phenomenon that did not endear O'Rourke's detachment to the carrier skipper. In addition, the planes' heavy weight taxed the under-powered hydraulic catapults. As a consequence, the Skynights were sent ashore to operate with the Marines of VMF-513 who were glad to receive the extra planes, pilots, radar operators, and crewmen.

Although it was now late in the war, O'Rourke's Detachment 44N was immediately put to work, and the VC-4 pilots were able to get in a number of nocturnal combat air patrols and B-29 escort missions. They made several contacts with enemy night fighters. One Navy

Skynight was credited with a possible MiG kill but, unfortunately, was lost to another MiG in the same engagement. With the war now coming swiftly to a close, naval aviators made sure that their presence was felt until the very end. Planes from the four attack carriers positioned off the east coast of Korea were constantly in action with records broken for numbers of sorties set on 24, 25, and 26 July. Almost all of these sorties were flown in support of ground forces at the front. Planes from the escort carrier *Bairoko* in the Yellow Sea and Marine aircraft ashore made major contributions.

The Armistice Agreement was signed at 10:00 a.m. Korean time on 27 July 1953.



The painting of the Armistice signing at Panmunjon, 27 July 1953, by Orlando S. Lagman. Army General Mark Clark signs the document as Vice Admiral Robert Briscoe, Commander Naval Forces, Far East, and Vice Admiral J. J. Clark, Commander Seventh Fleet, witness the historic moment that ended the Korean War.

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Acknowledgments

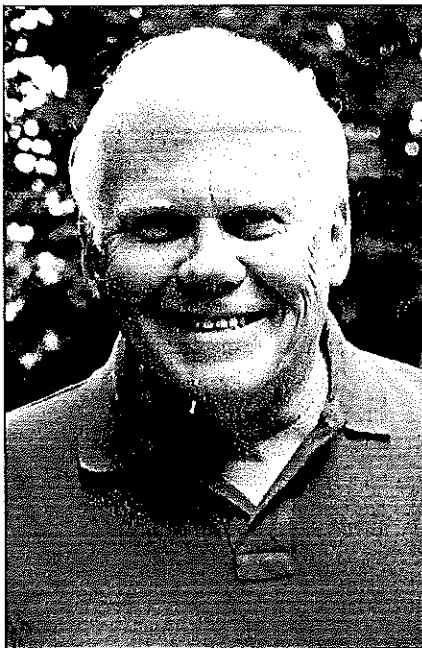
The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance and support of historian Roy Grossnick who heads the Aviation History Branch of the Naval Historical Center and of historian Mark Evans also of that office. Captain Rosario Rausa, USNR (Ret.), editor of *Wings of Gold*, the magazine of the Association of Naval Aviation, opened his files and shared historical photographs as did Sandra Russell, managing editor of *Naval*

Aviation News magazine. Morgan Wilbur, the art director of *NANews*, contributed art and design services. Sharlyn Marsh, daughter of celebrated aviation artist R. G. Smith, kindly provided color transparencies of her father's paintings and permission to use them in this monograph. Finally, kudos to Senior Editor Sandra Doyle for a superb job of editing this manuscript and making all the pieces come together.

About the Author

Richard C. Knott writes on the subject of naval aviation from the broad perspective of a long and varied career. Enlisting at age 17, he served as an aviation machinist's mate in one of the Navy's early Panther jet fighter squadrons and was a "plank owner" on board USS *Oriskany*. He left the Navy to attend college and later was commissioned, completed flight training, and was designated a naval aviator. His operational squadron tours were in antisubmarine warfare where he flew Martin Marlin P5M flying boats and Lockheed P-3 Orions with a tour in Vietnam.

Shore duty included an assignment with the United Nations Command component of the Military Armistice Commission in Korea. He was a member of the original three-man negotiating team that met with the



North Koreans in an attempt to secure the release of USS *Pueblo* and her crew. Later he served as a politico-military analyst in the office of the Chief of Naval Operations, as an exchange officer with the Department of State, and as a law-of-the-sea specialist in the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

In his final tours of duty, he served as editor of *Naval Aviation News* magazine and headed the Naval Aviation History and Publications Division of the Naval Historical Center before retiring in 1986 after more than thirty years of naval service. Captain Knott holds bachelor's and master's degrees and is a graduate of the Naval War College. He has written three books on naval aviation, edited a fourth, and has authored numerous magazine articles on the subject.

Suggested Reading

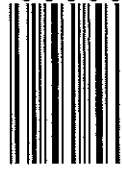
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