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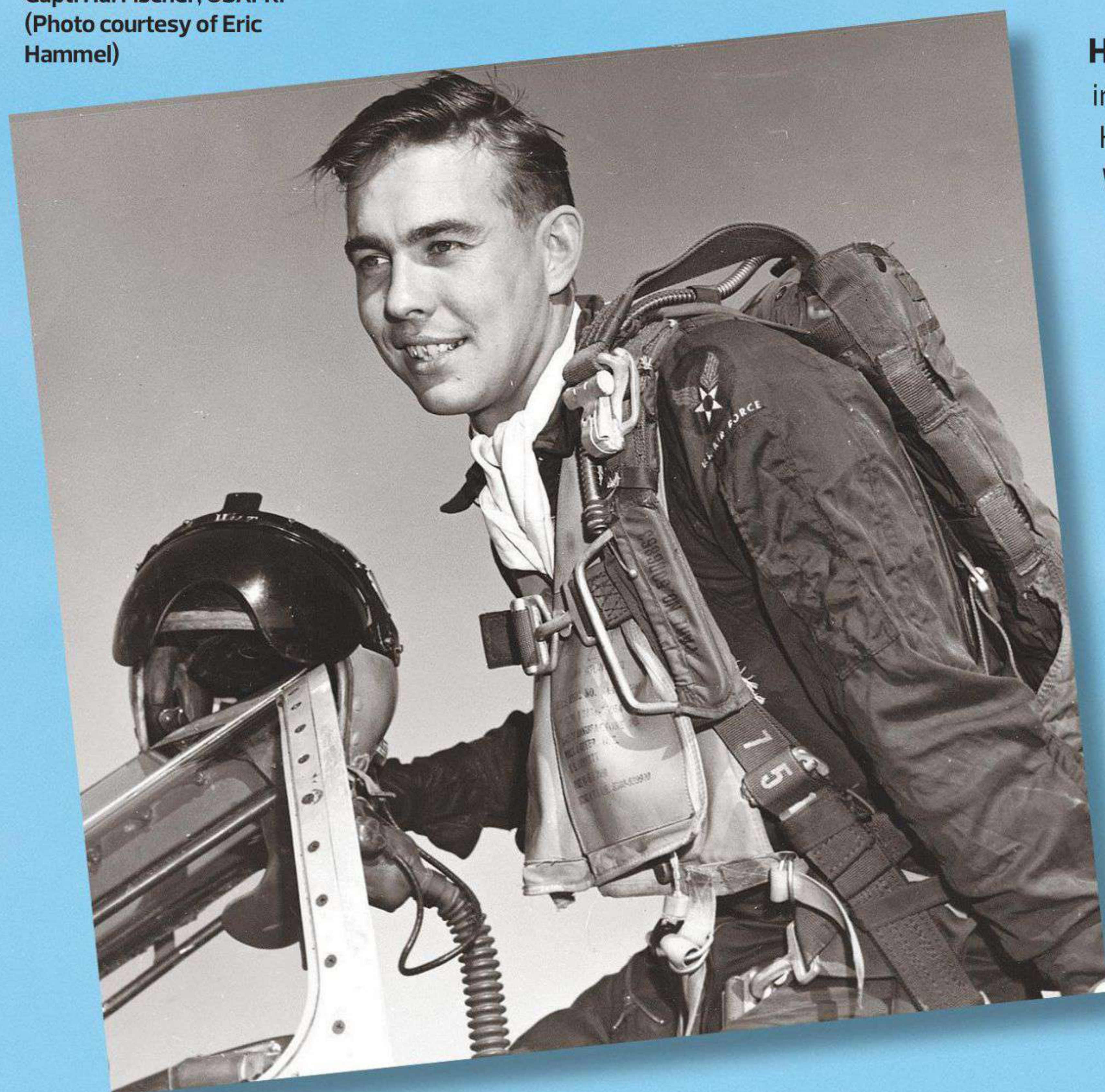
CAPTURED!

AERIAL COMBAT BECAME VERY PERSONAL, VERY QUICKLY

BY ERIC HAMMEL



Capt. Hal Fischer, USAFR.
(Photo courtesy of Eric Hammel)



Harold Edward Fischer Jr. was born May 8, 1925, in Lone Rock, Iowa, and grew up in Swea City, Iowa. He joined the U.S. Navy in World War II and became an aviation cadet in 1944, but he was discharged from the service at the end of the war, before he could complete flight training.

As soon as he had completed two years of college at Iowa State University, Fischer persuaded the U.S. Army to commission him as a second lieutenant of infantry in February 1949. Upon graduation from an infantry course, Fischer simultaneously received orders to Korea as a platoon leader plus orders to begin flight training. Faced with alternatives, 2nd Lt. Fischer did some "inventive paper wrangling" to transfer himself to the Air Force as a pilot trainee. He won his wings in December 1950 and made his way almost directly to Korea, where the war was in its sixth month.



"The Horsemen" F-86 flight-demonstration team commemorates F-86 Sabre Jet pilots Maj. Edwin Heller (51st Fighter Wing), Maj. George Davis, and Capt. M. A. DeLaurell (4th Fighter Wing) over Nellis Air Force Base, in November 2012. (Photo by Brian Silcox)

CAPTURED!

WHEN FISCHER RAISED THE LANDING-GEAR HANDLE, THE SABRE'S WHEELS DID NOT RETRACT, HE HAD NEGLECTED TO REPOSITION THE SWITCH IN THE NOSE-GEAR COMPARTMENT DURING HIS PREFLIGHT. THAT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING OF A VERY BAD DAY.

Korea

Lt. Fischer's initial combat experience was flying Lockheed F-80 Shooting Star jet fighters with the 8th Fighter Wing's 80th Fighter-Bomber Squadron. He flew an obligatory 105 missions in F-80s, then served a stint as a staff officer at Far East Air Force headquarters. He then requested another combat tour and was assigned to the 51st Fighter-Interceptor Wing at Suwon on the west coast, flying North American F-86 Sabres. During 70 missions with the 39th Squadron, he was credited with downing 10 MiG-15 jet fighters between November 26, 1952, and March 21, 1953.

Beginning in early April 1953, U.S. intelligence reported that the Chinese were massing jet bombers in the Mukden area of Manchuria. The news generated fear that United Nations airfields might come under surprise attack. The Allied reaction to the Communists—Chinese and their Soviet allies—flying twin-engine medium bombers near the Yalu River caused the United Nations' forces to expend tremendous resources and energy to ferry their warplanes to more-distant air bases every evening and return them to their home bases every morning.

The task for (then) Capt. Fischer was to escort some evening flights to Taegu or Kunsan and return to his base, K-13, the following day. The

transient quarters at Taegu and Kunsan were austere, depriving adequate sleep for the ferry pilots, who also had to fly combat missions during the work day.

A Bad Day: The Sum of Small Details

After escorting a flight to Kunsan on April 6, 1953, Fischer spent a restless night. The next morning, fog blanketed the field at Kunsan, and the escorts from K-13 had to delay their takeoff until it cleared.

When Fischer raised the landing-gear handle, the Sabre's wheels did not retract. On reflection, the pilot realized that he had neglected to reposition the switch in the nose-gear compartment during his preflight check of his F-86. That was only the beginning of a very bad day.

When Fischer arrived at K-13 with the gear already down, he landed and went directly to the base operations hut, where he found that he had received an application for a Regular Air Force commission. He had to fill it out and hand-deliver it to a general at USAF headquarters when he was relieved of flight duty that day. He wanted a regular commission, but when the paperwork was in front of him, he was reluctant to complete it.

Fischer's flight of four F-86s, with him leading, was scheduled for an afternoon mission over the

The 51st FIW was assigned to support the 8th Army breakout, with its F-80Cs initially operating from Itazuke, Japan, in September 1950 and moving in theater a month later. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)



border with North Korea. The pilots were briefed to break up into two-plane elements as soon as they arrived in the patrol area.

After starting his engine, Fischer taxied to the end of the runway and waited for his wingman, who had missed joining up when the flight leader taxied past him. The errant pilot had to be told by the second-element leader to taxi out, which made the flight late for joining the rest of the group. The quartet thus burned precious fuel on the ground and took off late.

As the flight climbed into its patrol area, the pilots noted circling contrails in the center of Korea. Occasionally, two contrails broke off and headed north. Fischer called the second-element leader and requested that he investigate while the first element held its altitude. By the time the Sabres approached the contrails, the Communist warplanes had climbed up and disappeared from the contrail level.

As Fischer flew northward, he spotted a flight of four MiGs, all pulling contrails, as it came across the border. The Sabre pilots attacked as the MiGs passed 2,000 feet beneath them. As the Americans pulled into position, the MiGs reacted to the threat, but before the Communist airmen gained the advantage, Fischer fired his six .50 calibers as the MiGs passed 200 feet to his right.

The Sabre's guns had not been boresighted in the wake of its previous mission, even though it was a matter of policy to boresight all guns after every mission when the guns were fired—specifically to prevent what Fischer's guns were doing on April 7. The airplane had been randomly assigned to Fischer, and he had accepted it because no spares were available. The only thing Fischer could do was curse and face the consequences of his decision to fly.

Before Fischer could correct for the misalignment by adjusting his sight pattern, the F-86s were attacked by four other MiGs that had arrived unseen from above the contrail level.

There was nothing the Americans could do except break off. They all turned, then reversed so that they could bring their guns to bear on the MiGs. It was a nice idea, but the Communist fighters were traveling too fast, so the Sabres set course for the mouth of the Yalu and then headed toward K-13.

Along the way, Fischer's wingman called to say that one of his wingtip fuel tanks was not feeding correctly and he was running out. Before Fischer or his other pilots could react to the news, three MiGs flashed by their noses, heading northward. It was an excellent gunnery setup; Fischer instinctively called a bounce. As he went after the MiGs, the wingman once again sang out that he was low on fuel. Fischer's response was ill advised; he told the others to break for home while he bounced the MiGs.



"Nancy" was a late-model F-86F from the 334th FIS of 4th FIW. The 4th brought the Sabre to war in December 1950. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Of the three MiGs, two were leading the third, which was straggling. Dropping lower, Fischer closed in on the straggler at a tremendous rate of speed. He got off a burst, made a huge lag roll around his prey, and fell onto the MiG's tail. The MiG accelerated, coming even with the two leaders, while the F-86 continued to close in. Fischer rolled over on the number two MiG in the formation and fired a long burst—on target, thanks to his having properly adjusted his gunsight. The bullets stopped the MiG's engine. Meantime, as the stalled MiG dropped back, Fischer switched to the lead Communist fighter and hit it with all his guns at about 1,200 feet. The Communist jet was torn to pieces that flew past Fischer's F-86. He instinctively ducked as the debris shot by.

Fischer now faced two immediate alternatives: go down beneath the next MiG or go over it. He decided on the second choice because he did not want to wind up in front of it.

The Gods of Combat Made His Decision

Before the F-86 ace could put his plan into motion, the throttle came back into his hand. A glance at the instruments revealed that the Sabre's engine was dying, and the speed fell off so rapidly that

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THEN THE PARACHUTE DEPLOYED WITH A SLIGHT JAR. FISCHER LOOKED UP TO CHECK THE PANELS, WHICH WERE ALL FULLY DEPLOYED, SAVE ONE. GOOD ENOUGH, GIVEN THE ALTERNATIVES.

the pilot's body had to be restrained by his shoulder straps. He had been hit by an unseen MiG.

There was a chance of reaching the mouth of the Yalu River, where Fischer might be rescued, but he quickly calculated that he would arrive at zero altitude in an airplane that was way more likely to sink if it were ditched than to float long enough for Fischer to exit the cockpit. Nevertheless, Fischer found ditching more appealing than bailing out over enemy territory, where there was no chance of rescue.

Having just decided to ride the F-86 into the waves, Fischer suddenly smelled and saw smoke as it infiltrated the cockpit. The dying Sabre was on fire.

That left no room for choices. For any chance of living, Fischer had to eject before the jet blew up—probably in a matter of a few seconds.

Eject!

The luckless pilot reached down for the handle that jettisoned the canopy. Then he pulled another handle up, leaned back in his seat, placed his feet in a pair of stirrups, and squeezed the trigger. The Sabre was at 2,000 feet, traveling at 450 knots.

A 37mm shell blew the ejection seat upward at a terrific velocity, causing Fischer to momentarily black out. As he recovered, he and his seat were rotating rapidly in space.

Fischer pulled his ripcord and braced for a jolt from the deploying parachute. But he felt nothing. Then the parachute deployed with a slight jar. Fischer looked up to check the panels, which were all fully deployed, save one. Good enough, given the alternatives.

Instinctively, Fischer scanned the sky around him. He saw a MiG that was trailing a long stream of flame as it turned lazily toward him. He thought for sure that the MiG pilot would fire on him, but the MiG turned lazily away, perhaps because the pilot was incapacitated or dead, or had already abandoned his airplane.

Fischer next turned his attention to landing. The terrain below was rocky, hilly scrubland. Trees grew beside rocky crags. Landing was going to be ugly. He was drifting toward the side of a small hill. The stillness of the land was surprising. Fischer could hear voices shouting from the ground, from all directions. He had been seen and was about to have company.

His landing was cushioned at the last moment when the parachute canopy caught in the branches of a scrub tree. After releasing the chute harness, he assessed his situation. There was a lot of blood on his scarf, so he gingerly felt his ear. His helmet was ripped off during the ejection, tearing the flesh. He was soaked with sweat and bathed

in cold air. A feeling of complete exhaustion overcame him as his supply of adrenaline ran out. He wanted to climb the hill and hide, but he could not make his body get up. About all he could manage was a tired crawl. He checked his watch: 1720 hours. He felt that, if he could hide out until dark, he might be able to elude pursuers, whom he could hear all around his hill.

Fischer discarded his life vest and moved away from where he had landed. He dragged his parachute from the small tree that had snagged it so that its stark white color would not give him away to searchers. He did keep his chrome-plated .45-caliber pistol.

Captured!

Fischer crested the ridge in a direction to get him away from the landing site without being seen, crossed a ravine, and approached the crest of the next hill. He looked for a place to hide or dig in, but the ground was open in all directions and offered no haven.

He prepared to crest the second hill but stopped in his tracks when he heard a voice from the other side of the hill. He crouched down and waited. Shortly a sun-tanned Asian man in farmer's garb appeared along the ravine Fischer had just crossed. The man appeared to the Iowa-raised pilot as if searching for a lost cow. Seeing that the farmer was unarmed, Fischer lowered his pistol. There was no threat, and in this area, he might be a friendly agent who might help get Fischer to safety.

The farmer very cautiously stepped to within 20 feet of Fischer before he saw him but gave no indication of being surprised. He made some mild motions with his hands, reinforcing the pilot's hope that he was a friend.

Fischer made an instant assessment: The man would lead him to shelter. Putting all his trust in the farmer, he followed him down the ravine.

At the bottom of the ravine, the pair was suddenly confronted by a large group of peasants carrying every type of agricultural tool imaginable and a few old rifles. Fischer knew then that he had been captured.

The group of about 30 Chinese milled around and inspected Fischer as if he were a creature from another planet, but they exhibited no hostility, just wariness and curiosity. After they lifted the automatic from Fischer's immersion suit, they escorted him to a small hut near the bottom of the ravine. Once inside, they directed him to lie down and rest.

While giving way to his own curiosity, Fischer concluded that they thought he was a Soviet pilot. Using the hiatus to good purpose, the American

Opposite: These F-86F-30 series Sabres represent the ultimate fighter brought to the theater with an upgraded J-47-GE-27 non-afterburning engine of nearly 6,000 lb. of thrust. In addition, the new 6-3 slatless leading-edge wing extension significantly improved the turning radius. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)





A fine aerial view of a late-war F-86F-30 Sabre from the 25th FIS based at K-13 (Suwon). (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

formulated a plan that might exploit the confusion. He decided to make it as plain as he could that he wanted to go to the nearest air base, Dapu, which he knew was just a few miles away. Toward that end, he simply got up from the bed and set out on his own. When the peasants protested, he insisted by sign and word that he was going. Acting on pure bravado, he thus managed to get 50 or 60 feet ahead of the locals, who reluctantly followed him. A number of children followed him more closely than the adults.

At length, Fischer considered running down the road, but the immersion suit precluded this; he would overheat in no time, and the tight garment also restricted his motion.

This early F-86E-1 from the 51st FIS before the addition of the checkerboard tail markings. The early "E" model was essentially an F-86A with an all-flying stabilizer. (Photo courtesy of Stan Piet)

Enter the Chinese People's Liberation Army

Shortly thereafter, another group, evidently militia, approached the procession and got into an argument with the farmers. The civilians wanted Fischer to continue on in the direction of the airfield, but the militiamen wanted him to go the other way. Both groups began to push him, and for a moment, the issue was debated more violently than he desired. When one of the militiamen, evidently the leader, secured some wire, the pilot was sure he was going to be strung up, so he acquiesced and sat down by the side of the road. Two of the militiamen, who carried rifles, positioned themselves uncomfortably close to Fischer. Escape was out of the question.

An American-type jeep with four Chinese People's Liberation Army soldiers arrived from the direction of Dapu. With more force than was necessary, Fischer was tossed into the back seat. The driver then turned in the direction of the airfield to which the crowd on the road had been headed moments earlier. About a mile farther along, the road was blocked by the remains of Fischer's F-86.

As the jeep rolled to a stop, a soldier whom Fischer pegged as a Russian officer came alongside, with a look of pure hatred on his face. Backing him up were four Soviet enlisted men, who had been loading F-86 scrap aboard a Soviet-style military truck. The four Chinese soldiers who had arrived aboard the jeep held Fischer down while the Soviet officer searched his pockets, until he found the American's identification papers.



As soon as the officer had Fischer's ID, the jeep drove to a small village, which Fischer pegged as the headquarters of the Chinese army in the area. None of the Chinese soldiers wore stars on their caps, which meant they were on their way to Korea.

The four guards guided their prisoner into what appeared to be a large meeting hall. The pilot was placed in the center of the room, on a chair that stood on a packed-earth floor. At one end of the room was a telephone, which he sure would be used to help determine what to do with him. Chinese soldiers peered in through windows and doors.

One of the soldiers, braver than most, brought out Fischer's portable oxygen cylinder and attempted to ask the pilot what it was for. When Fischer pulled the activating pin, the soldier almost dropped from fright and made a frantic attempt to shut it off but to no avail. Fischer also spotted his .45 on the hip of a Chinese soldier, apparently very proud of the weapon.

After innumerable telephone calls, a squad of Chinese soldiers arrived and indicated that Fischer was to leave with them, and they all exited to another American-type vehicle, a carryall. Squeezed in between two soldiers, Fischer was driven to various villages so that the population could view the American pilot who had been shot down and captured. Conspicuous among the villages were the youth groups, Communist "pioneers." The pilot understood that he was already a political prisoner.

The carryall's final destination was Dapu, the airfield that Fischer had attempted to reach on his own. If he had convinced the Chinese that he was a MiG pilot, he might have found a way to escape, perhaps by stealing an airplane. He had no desire to be a prisoner of a hostile, ungoverned mob.

They all entered a large barracks area, where Fischer was blindfolded, then moved on to a large building, where he was remanded to a dormitory in which many Chinese soldiers lay on beds or sat at tables. An individual who seemed to be in charge indicated to Fischer that food was available and that he would not be shot. A soldier who spoke some English asked the pilot the number of his airplane. Fischer gave them a number that satisfied them. An omelet arrived shortly, and Fischer

found it very satisfying. Curious soldiers made such a to-do gawking at the foreign prisoner that finally the windows had to be covered over.

Eventually, a soldier arrived to ask Fischer to remove his undershirt. Fischer did this with assistance from the guard, then put it back on, with no idea in the world what that request was about.

Next Fischer was taken across the street to a room with a bunk. The Chinese soldier or airman

Prominently featured above the instrument panel of the F-86F Sabre is the A-1CM gunsight, coupled with the APG-30 radar to compute range automatically. Ejection-seat handles are marked with yellow and black bands. (Photo by Brian Silcox)



AN INDIVIDUAL WHO SEEMED TO BE IN CHARGE INDICATED TO FISCHER THAT FOOD WAS AVAILABLE AND THAT HE WOULD NOT BE SHOT.



The F-86 Sabre can trace its roots back to pre-WW II German research as well as captured German aircraft, such as the P.1101. The F-86 was initially designed with straight wings but was redesigned as the result of German research coming into American hands. (Photo by Paul Bowen)



The 4th Fighter Wing F-86s were readily identified by the yellow tail stripes, while most Korea-based Sabres had fuselage chevrons. The Fighting Eagle emblem dates back to the Eagle Squadron roots of the WW II 4th Fighter Group at Debden, England. (Photo by Brian Silcox)



on the top bunk woke up, then went back to sleep. The pilot was given a blanket and told to go to bed while a guard sat on a chair in the middle of the room. Fischer thought it would be impossible to sleep under those circumstances, but sleep became a form of escape for him.

A Political Prisoner

Because he was over Chinese territory when shot down, Fischer was eventually convicted of "violating the sacred territorial air of China." He was incarcerated in Mukden, (Manchuria) China, with three other pilots for two years, until June 1955. He spent most of his captivity in solitary confinement.

Upon his return to the United States, Fischer earned a bachelor's degree in industrial administration and a master's degree in industrial psychology at Iowa State, where he remained with the ROTC program. Thereafter, most of his assignments were in the fields of intelligence and human factors. He served in Vietnam as chief of an Air Force advisory team at Bien Hoa Air Base, flying Republic of Vietnam Air Force helicopters as well as jet and piston fighters on numerous combat missions. He retired with the rank of colonel in May 1978.

In April 1994, Fischer traveled to Ukraine to meet former Soviet Air Force pilots from the Korean War. During the reunion, he met one

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of those he engaged on April 7, 1953. The former Soviet pilot told Fischer that his bullets hit the MiG-15 piloted by Senior Lt. Konstantin Ugramov 22 times in the rudder, right wing root, and fuselage. Ugramov managed to land (though with great difficulty), but the number of gun-camera hits cited were enough to count as a kill under the U.S. Air Force rules in force at the time of the engagement. Fischer also learned that he was shot down by Capt. Gregory Berelidze, a six-victory ace who was himself shot down and killed before war's end. Based on information Fischer obtained from his former adversaries and other sources, it appears that on his last mission, he downed one of the three MiGs he directly encountered and severely damaged another.

Hal Fischer passed away on April 30, 2009, at the age of 83. †