West Point '49 in the Korean War

FROM THE HUDSON TO THE YALU

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Before volunteering for Korea, D. D. Overton had been flying F-84s in England. At K-2, it developed that D. D. had more F-84 time than the rest of his squadron put together. The original group, after completing a hundred missions, were all rotating home about the same time. The new arrivals, mostly National Guardsmen, had very little jet time. Soon D. D. was made squadron operations officer, a job normally reserved for a major. Then, when the squadron commander broke his arm, D. D. ended up leading the squadron, or sometimes even the group, when his turn came to fly a mission.
mortal company commanded by Murray Williams. The supply channels had worked so well, in fact, that when the regimental commander asked Hayes if he needed anything, all Hayes could think to say was that they never seemed able to get any lighter fluid.

For three days, Charlie Company practiced for the coming attack on terrain similar to the objective area. Then they ran patrols to learn the best routes to their objective. Shortly before the attack, as tension was mounting, Hayes saw an unfamiliar figure crawling up the trench toward him. It was the warrant officer who handled regimental PX supplies. From the pained expression on his face, it was obvious the man was not at all happy about having to visit a frontline rifle company.

The warrant thrust a small paper bag into Hayes' hands and said, "Thanks to you, I got chewed out. Here's your damned lighter fluid!"

Hayes laughed at the irony of the situation, then thanked the man, who was wasting no time in making his departure. On 1 August the attack jumped off in the rain, and under cover of darkness, crawling through mud, Charlie Company got within fifteen feet of the Chinese position before being detected. At that point the enemy began throwing grenades, and heavy firing erupted from both small arms and mortars. The fighting intensified, and by the time the objective was secured, more than two hundred Chinese bodies covered the area. In the action, Charlie Company suffered four killed and fourteen wounded. Hayes, one of the wounded, was evacuated to an aid station, where he was patched up by a young dentist who had been pressed into emergency service, then further evacuated to Pusan and eventually to the Swedish hospital ship anchored offshore.

About the time Hayes Metzger was wounded, D. D. Overton was completing his tour in F-84s. He had flown 102 missions, had bombed railroads, dams, trains, cement plants, and power plants. He had gone to the front to be with ground troops, had flown the T-6 "Mosquito" spotter plane, been with the Navy on the carrier USS Valley Forge, visited the Marines at Pusan (where baseball great Ted Williams was flying), and hit Pyongyang three times in one day amid the heaviest flak anyone could remember.

All this should have been enough for anyone. D. D., however, wanted a chance to fly the hot F-86. With an assist from his CO, he received permission for fifty additional missions with an F-86 unit. At Suwon, he joined the 16th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron led by Col. Ed Heller, a top pilot who'd become an ace in Europe during World War II.

Over the next several months, D. D. flew a variety of F-86 missions, had several close calls, encountered many MiGs, and possibly damaged a few of them. It was on 21 January, 1953, however, during his forty-sixth F-86 mission, that he was credited with his first aerial victory. He spotted a flight of four MiGs, attacked one of them, and scored hits on the wing and tail section. The MiG turned to the right, began trailing black smoke, spun out of control, and was last seen going straight down. Just three minutes later, D. D. attacked a second MiG, his shots sending it out of control and into a steep dive, with fuel streaming from the right wing.

Amazingly, D. D. then shot down MiGs on each of the next two
days, making it four aerial victories within a three-day period. On 22 January, as reported in General Orders, “he initiated a diving attack on one of a flight of two MiGs ... scoring hits on the wings, fuselage, and tail pipe sections. The enemy aircraft was observed to crash into the ground and explode near Uiju.” His fourth victory, on 23 January, also occurred near Uiju.

On the following day, D. D. flew F-86 mission No. 49, or overall mission No. 151. On that day, 24 January, he was called to be on a sweep flight led by Colonel Heller, who would fly the No. 1 position. Heller’s wingman, in No. 2, was a pilot named Smith. The No. 3 element lead would be Major Herrick, the new squadron operations officer. Overton would fly No. 4 as Herrick’s wingman.

D. D. was a bit upset at having to be a wingman, since he had only two more missions to fly and needed one more MiG to reach the magic number of five. Heller, whom D. D. considered one of the greatest, pacified him, saying he needed Herrick back in one piece and D. D. had better see to it or he’d “stuff his ragged tail up his exhaust pipe.” D. D. came back with a sassy response, at which Heller, slapping him on the back and grinning, said that was no way to speak to a superior officer. In high spirits, the two of them walked together out to their planes.

They proceeded directly to the Yalu. Soon they were in the midst of a large flight of MiGs. Heller and Herrick became separated, and suddenly D. D. and Herrick were all alone. They managed to get behind two MiGs. Herrick shot down one, D. D. shot down the other, and they returned to base. Overton felt on top of the world. He had five MiGs to his credit, and after one more mission he’d be on his way home.

It was fifteen years before D. D. again saw Colonel Heller, who was shot down in China, seriously injured on bailout, and made a Chinese POW. He was freed two years after the war along with seven others when Henry Kissinger made a special mission to China to obtain their release.

Apparently some Swiss neutrals, on a train in China heading for the truce talks at Panmunjom, had seen the contrails in the sky and had stopped to watch the show. They had seen Heller go down and had also seen the two MiGs shot down by Herrick and Overton.

Next morning D. D. was called to meet with his wing commander and a colonel from 5th Air Force HQ. The visitor asked D. D. one question. “Were you over the Yalu yesterday?”

D. D. might have quibbled, saying he wasn’t sure, or that he was in hot pursuit, or argued that wherever he was, he was No. 4 in a flight of four and only following his leaders. Instead, the honorable Overton merely answered, “Yes sir.”

For some time, F-86 pilots, angry over the MiGs’ unfair Manchurian sanctuary, had flown across the Yalu. The orders forbidding this had been largely ignored, and the wing commander, who had himself crossed over on occasion (D. D. had seen him), had condoned it. However, there was concern higher up that this particular incident might embarrass the UN negotiators at Panmunjom. A scapegoat was needed, and apparently D. D. was selected.

D. D. never knew what the wing commander told the people at headquarters, or what they told him. All he knew was that next day he was called in, reprimanded, and told he was being grounded and sent home. He would lose his spot captaining, revert to the grade of first lieutenant, and would receive no awards or decorations for his Korean service. Back in the States, he was assigned to an airbase in Maine that had no planes. It was a disillusioning conclusion to what had been a remarkable tour of duty. A few months later, jet ace D. D. Overton resigned his commission.

The peace talks dragged on, with many stumbling blocks along the way. Perhaps the greatest barrier to a settlement was the question of POW repatriation. In January of 1952, the UN team had said no prisoner should be returned to Communist control against his will. Then, three months later, when a poll found that of 132,000 military POWs, only 70,000 wanted repatriation, the enraged Communist negotiators walked out of Panmunjom.

The talks were recessed more or less indefinitely, and the Red propaganda machine went into high gear, hurling charges that the United States was using germ warfare, mistreating POWs, and bargaining in bad faith.

In the spring of 1953, following the inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower, the Communist position softened a bit on the prisoner issue. An agreement was reached for an exchange of sick and wounded POWs, and Operation Little Switch took place between 20 April and 3 May.

While Little Switch was going on, senior negotiators resumed their talks at Panmunjom. Once again POW repatriation was the main topic. At last, on 27 June, the POW matter and other issues having been more or less resolved, the armistice agreement was signed. Shortly thereafter, Gen. Mark Clark, the UN commander, cautioned that the armistice was only a military agreement to stop the shooting so the opposing sides could seek a political solution to the conflict.