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## *The forgotten few:* **77 RAAF Squadron in Korea**

by Doug Hurst

*Allen & Unwin: Sydney NSW; 2008; 272 pp.; ISBN 9781741755008; RRP \$29.95 (paperback);  
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The Korean War is often called the Forgotten War and so the title for this book, *The Forgotten Few*, is entirely appropriate. In June 1950, No. 77 Squadron of the Royal Australian Air Force was in Japan, about to go home after a tour with the allied occupation forces. Instead, they went to Korea, flying Mustang fighters as part of a United Nations force helping South Korea fight the invading communists from the north. This book covers the three years No. 77 Squadron spent in the Korean War. It concentrates on operations and the effect that factors such as climate, logistics, and training had on those operations.

Doug Hurst was a Royal Australian Air Force navigator for 33 years and retired as a Group Captain. He flew for 20 years, mostly in maritime squadrons and as an instructor. In retirement he has written numerous articles and seven books. Five of those books deal with aspects of Royal Australian Air Force history, the more recent being *The Fourth Ally – the Dutch Forces in Australia in WWII* (published in 2001 and recently translated into Dutch), *The Forgotten Few* and *Magpies in Vietnam*, which deals with No. 2 Squadron in Vietnam, the disappearance of a Canberra Bomber and crew in 1970, and the search for and the recovery of the crew remains.

If Korea was the forgotten war, it was also the surprise war. In just eight weeks, North Korea occupied all but the southern tip of the peninsula surrounding the vital port city of Pusan. Here the United Nations forces made their stand, halting the enemy at what became known as the Pusan Perimeter and turned the tide of war. No. 77 Squadron played a major role in this pivotal victory, providing some 30 per cent of the airpower at Taegu, the main United Nations airfield defending the perimeter.

United Nations forces subsequently dominated, driving the communists north almost to the Yalu River, which marks the border with China. The squadron relocated to the peninsular, first to Pohang in the south east and then to Hamhung in the north east. Both airfields were badly damaged by previous fighting and their harsh living conditions were soon made worse by the early onset of winter and severe cold the like of which the Australians had never before experienced.

Difficult times became dangerous as well when the Chinese entered the war with over 300,000 troops

and hundreds of MIG-15 jet fighters. With vastly superior numbers they quickly gained ground despite spirited opposition from United Nations air and ground forces. Thousands of United Nations troops were trapped in the frozen mountain areas near the Chosin Reservoir and No. 77 Squadron and other United Nations aircraft were eventually forced to relocate south. From there they continued to fight and to prepare for a new aircraft – the twin-jet Meteor – being bought to counter the high-speed MIG-15.

Five Meteors were quickly lost in early battles with MIGs, which unbeknown to United Nations forces were often flown and controlled by Russian fighter experts deliberately targeting the Meteors for political reasons. Considered outclassed, the Meteors were taken out of “MIG Alley” and became a very effective ground attack, airfield defence and bomber escort squadron.

Targets of all kinds were destroyed in rocket attacks by as many as 16 Meteors at a time. They flew in mountainous country in the half light of dawn and dusk, during freezing winters and in the haze and storms of summer, taking the fight to the enemy throughout North Korea. The MIGs now encountered were flown by regular Chinese pilots and the squadron downed four of them without loss, to finish the war five-all against the MIG-15.

*The Forgotten Few* examines the ordeals of both air crew and maintenance personnel as they fought against a determined and fanatical enemy, while enduring the privations of a war that no-one had expected or prepared for, and the cruel Korean climate.

No. 77 Squadron lost more personnel in Korea than they did in the South West Pacific in World War II.

A book of this quality that deals with the air war over Korea is very much overdue. *The Forgotten Few* is very well written and draws the reader into the battlefields of aerial conflict and air attack against advancing enemy ground forces, while detailing the misery of mud, slush and snow storms endured by the Squadron as they advanced and retreated up and down the Korean Peninsula. It is free from jargon and is a must read, particularly for those with a penchant for military aviation and the Korean War.

**Bob Treloar**