

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

## ***F-86: Jim, Joe, and the “Missing Man”***

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**KEY WORDS:** F-86 James Jabara Joseph McConnell Speed Holman Korea

*Allied military aviators were surprised at the start of WWII by the appearance of the Japanese “Zero” fighter plane, which could easily outfly everything in our inventory. Another surprise came later in the War, with the appearance of the Me-262 jet fighter, which had a 100 MPH advantage over the Allies fastest fighter. One more surprise came during the Korean Conflict, when the MiG-15 fighter made its appearance. In all three cases, the U.S. Air Force found ways to counter these surprises. With the MiG-15, it was the F-86 Sabre fighter, and some very good pilots!*

### **At NASM’s Udvar-Hazy Center**

I am glad to see that the National Air and Space Museum is (partially) re-opening after an extended closure period due to the COVID-19 virus. While the original National Mall building continues to undergo renovation, the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center near Dulles Airport re-opened earlier this month.

The UHC has some of NASM’s best “large” artifacts, including the Space Shuttle *Discovery*, the B-29 *Enola Gay*, a Concorde, an SR-71 and more. It is organized in three basic parts: Space Hall, home of the *Discovery* and other rocketry/Space items; Commercial aviation, with the Concorde, a Constellation, and the beautiful Boeing Stratoliner; and military aviation. The latter section is organized into sections chronologically: WWI, WWII, and post-WWII. I really like how the curators laid out the sections, especially for those fighter aircraft associated with the Korean and Vietnam Conflicts. In one area, an F-86 is lined up next to its principal foe, the MiG-15; across the aisle, the F-4 Phantom is lined up against the MiG-21.

The focus of this week’s Item is the **F-86**, because two significant Korean Conflict milestones involving the F-86 have anniversaries this week.

The development of the jet caused a big change in aerial combat tactics. The planes were flying much faster, to the point where the planes could tolerate maneuvers their pilots could not, at least not without a “G-suit” that would compress their bodies to prevent maneuver-induced blackouts. The air-to-air missile had not been developed yet, so the jet jocks fought with banks of .50-caliber machine guns, an increasingly-difficult weapon to use at the prevailing high speeds and altitudes of jet combat.

### **James Jabara, First Jet versus Jet Ace**

James Jabara was born on October 10, 1923, in Muskogee, Oklahoma, the son of Lebanese immigrants. His family moved to Wichita when he was young, and he worked in his family's grocery and dreamed of becoming a fighter pilot, inspired by stories about Eddie Rickenbacker and his fellow WWI ace pilots. After graduating from high school, he enlisted as an aviation cadet, and overcame obstacles to earn his wings in October, 1943.

Jabara was sent to the ETO where he flew the P-51 Mustang in the Ninth Air Force. At that stage of the War, the Ninth did a lot of ground attack missions. On one mission, his canopy was shattered by an enemy fighter, but he stayed with his plane and shot down a fighter despite the cold wind blowing through his cockpit. He had to bail out of another P-51 after colliding with a teammate, and suffered another mid-air collision, with a German this time. In that one, both pilots bailed out, landed close together, and shook hands. He flew a total of 108 combat missions, and was well-known for his ever-present cigar and his enjoyment of the camaraderie of the O-Club.

A return to the ZI and a stint as a flight instructor came after his first tour in the ETO, and he returned for a second in early 1945. He earned a DFC and 1.5 victories for his WWII record.

After V-E Day, Jabara opted to not go to college but rather attend the Tactical Air School at Tyndall AFB, after which he was stationed in Okinawa, where he transitioned to jets, the P-80. He started his family (he would eventually have four children), got promoted to Captain, and joined the 4<sup>th</sup> Fighter-Interceptor Wing, flying the new F-86.

The Korean Conflict broke out on June 25, 1950. The USSR was helping the North, providing their new MiG-15 jet, along with pilots, pilot trainers, and other support. The USA countered by similarly supporting the South; Jabara's unit was the first squadron of F-86s to base there, arriving on December 13, 1950. He immediately began flying combat missions, and scored his first confirmed air victory over a MiG-15 on April 3, 1951. Three other victories came in quick succession, combining with his 1.5 in WWII to make him an "Ace."

Jabara's squadron rotated back to the States not long after that, but he wasn't finished fighting, and asked for transfer to a different squadron so he could remain in combat. While he was already officially an "Ace," he wanted five victories (or more) in jet-versus-jet fights. This big moment came on **May 20, 1951, seventy years ago**, when he managed to shoot down two MiG-15s in spite of being unable to jettison one of his wing-tip fuel tanks (SOP required him to abort and return to base under such circumstances). He was awarded the DFC for this feat, and sent home for a publicity tour.

Jabara was a big hit at home. His dad's store was mobbed, and Wichita threw him a big parade. He even visited his father's home village in Lebanon. He was slated for training duty, but asked for and received a second combat tour. He would shoot down another nine MiG-15s, the last on July 15, 1953. He would fly two additional sorties, hoping to catch/pass our next Item star, but alas, saw no MiGs on either flight.

After Korea, Jabara's career continued to progress well. He became a squadron commander, flew combat missions in the F-104 Starfighter over Taiwan, graduated from the Air War College,

and flew the first supersonic bomber, the B-58. He promoted to Colonel, and became a Wing Commander (the youngest at that rank at that time). He even got in a combat mission over Vietnam in 1966, flying a bombing mission in the F-100 Super Sabre. He was scheduled to fly more, but first was given some leave to re-locate his family to South Carolina after which he'd return to southeast Asia. His family would convoy from Homestead AFB to their new home, his wife and three children in one car, and his daughter driving him in their VW. She lost control of the car in a construction zone, rolled, and both she and her father suffered fatal injuries. They are buried together at Arlington.

Tragedy struck his family further in 2002, when his grandson, Nicholas J. Jabara, was killed during flight training in Texas. He and his pilot instructor had been practicing touch-and-go landings, when they crashed returning to base (the PI was flying at the time).

Wichita's airport was named in his honor, and the U.S. Air Force Academy created an award in his name, given annually to the Academy graduate who "demonstrates superior performance in fields directly involved with aerospace vehicles." He was named posthumously to the Kansas Aviation Hall of Fame in 2006.

### **Joseph McConnell, Top Fighter Ace in Korea**

Joseph C. McConnell, Jr. was born on January 30, 1922, in Dover, New Hampshire (MoH submarine skipper Dick O'Kane's hometown). Not much is recorded about his early years. What we do know is that his military career began with his enlistment in the Army Medical Corps on October 15, 1940. He served in that capacity until 1943, when he entered the Army's Aviation Cadet Program.

Piloting, however, was not to be his role for the duration. He was trained as a navigator, and flew 60 combat missions as a B-24 navigator in the 448<sup>th</sup> Bomber Group based in England. But he still wanted to be a pilot, not a navigator, so after the War, he remained in the AAF and finally won his wings in 1948.

McConnell served in several fighter squadrons before the Korean Conflict broke out on June 25, 1950. He applied for combat duty, and was assigned to the 39<sup>th</sup> Fighter/Interceptor Squadron, stationed in South Korea, in September, 1952. There he began learning the ins-and-outs of jet combat. His growing piloting skills and experience, and his unusually sharp eyesight, foreshadowed big things in his future.

McConnell got hot in January, 1953. In a four-month period, he would shoot down 16 MiG-15s, passing and besting James Jabara by a single victory to become the GOAT jet-versus-jet combat pilot.

Those four months were not without great peril. He would have one of the great dogfights in over Korea, reminiscent of the [epic clash](#) between Saburo Sakai and "Pug" Southerland over [Guadalcanal](#) in 1942. It happened on April 12, 1953.

Russian Ace Semyon Fedorets (he would record 7 kills during his time in Korea) took off that morning, on a mission to help defend the Suiho Dam from an attack by F-84 Thunderjets. He

saw a MiG-15 under attack from F-58s, and shot down one of our guys on his comrade's tail (2Lt. Norman Green would stay aloft long enough to bail out over the East China Sea and be recovered OK by a carrier-based helicopter). But while this was going on, McConnell was approaching the scene, leading his flight of four.

Fedoret's flight separated into elements, and McConnell followed him and his wingman, who alertly called out the threat. Fedoret immediately banked hard left, and Joe was able to pull enough lead to send a few out a few shots, a couple of which hit Fedoret's MiG. He cut hard right, and saw his F-86 foe slow sharply, using flaps to kill speed. Fedoret recognized the danger of the soon-to-come roll toward his tail, and fired off a quick burst without aiming, and rolled to turn the tables on McConnell. As he did so, he saw a few of his bullets hit the P-58, knocking a large hole in its right wing near its base.

What Fedoret did not see was McConnell's reaction to the lucky strikes. He barrel-rolled hard and came up beneath Fedoret, and blasted him with his six fifties. His MiG-15 was toast, but he was able to safely bail out and live to fight another day. But he had fatally crippled McConnell's F-86.

McConnell's element leader saw the combat sequence, and flew up alongside McConnell's smoke-trailing F-86. He contacted air-sea rescue (McConnell's radio was out and his engine was producing only partial power), and Mac followed young Green to the safety of the South China Sea. The helo guys had enough time to get into position, and they picked Mac up so quickly that he "barely got wet."

McConnell's score continued to climb, until he was at 13, within striking distance of James Jabara's all-jet fifteen. His biggest day came on **May 18**.

Mac and his wingman were coming back in from patrol that morning, when they saw a pair of MiG-15s in the distance. Mac winged one, while the MiGs called frantically for support. They got it. A lot. MiGs began showing up in large numbers. McConnell shot two of them off the tail of his wingman. The fact that there were so many MiGs after the two of them probably saved them; the MiGs were getting in each other's way! The two F-86s, very low on fuel, finally made it south of the Yalu River and safety.

McConnell's reputation soared. He had just become a "triple ace," tying Jabara.

Even better, a lot of high brass had been in the communications center during this fight, and heard Mac's audacious reply to his wingman's call of dozens of MiGs after them, "Great, we've got them all to ourselves!" But best of all, McConnell flew another sortie later that day, and added another victory to his tally, becoming the most successful fighter pilot of the Korean Conflict, a victory tally that stands to this day.

McConnell was immediately ordered home. Like so many other F-86 pilots, McConnell's talents and experience made him highly-suited for flight test. He was posted to Edwards AFB, and given the task of testing systems on the "H" variant of the F-86 design, a version large enough and powerful enough to take a nuclear weapon on a long-range mission, much like the initial design plans for the F-105 Thunderchief a few years later.

New aircraft, even if they are just up-grades to an existing successful design, often have a lot of teething pains, and the F-86H was no exception.

On August 24, 1954, McConnell took off in an F-86H for a series of tests. His hydraulic system suffered a total failure, rendering his aileron and elevator control surfaces completely unusable. He coulda/shoulda bailed out right then and there, but he decided that he could “save the plane” and make it back to the playa using only throttle and rudder. He almost made it, but hit some turbulence on approach that he couldn’t overcome. He tried to eject then, but was too low.

His colleagues, as they did for James Jabara, performed a “missing man” overflight at his funeral. A flight of fighters flew over, with the element leader position vacant, signifying the collective loss of a friend.

### **The “Missing Man” Formation**

The heroic WWI image of brave knights of the air jousting with machine gun swords thrilled and inspired both public and young soon-to-be-pilots. The derring-do of our guys, and the dreaded skill of theirs going one-on-one high above captured a lot of attention. After the War, the greater capabilities of aircraft, and the skill of the pilots of the day, made for big crowds at barnstorming events.

Wing-walking, elaborate aerobatics, flat-out displays of pure speed, parachute jumping, and other stunts were wildly popular.

One of the most popular such pilots in the late 1920’s was Charles Holman, known as “Speed” because of his prowess with motorcycle racing. But flight demonstrations and air racing paid better, so that became his focus, and he was really good at it.

Speed won a cross-country air race in 1927, and that, and his record, attracted the attention of executives who would soon form Northwest Airlines, and they hired him as their first pilot. But his coming commercial aviation work didn’t keep him from acting like a barnstormer. For example, in 1928, he flew over St. Paul for five hours, performing one loop-the-loop after another, a total of 1,433, a World Record. He took some chances with Northwest too, performing an outside loop in one of their planes (without passengers). Well maybe that was OK, because Speed had also become a major investor in his employer. Pilot licensing came in about this same time, and Speed got his in 1927, signed by Orville Wright, no less.

On May 17, 1931, Speed Holman starred in an airshow at the opening of the Omaha Airport. Twenty thousand spectators were there, and Speed was ready to oblige. He beat up the field, then lined up for his big finale, an inverted low-altitude flight right in front of the grandstand. His aircraft smoothly rolled inverted, but then nose-dived into the ground, right in front of the huge audience.

Speed was later honored by admission into the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame, and by the naming of St. Paul’s airport, “Holman Field.” But an even more lasting legacy came during his

funeral service, when a formation of military aircraft flew over, with one plane's slot, Speed's place, symbolically empty.

Speed may or may not have been the first so recognized by his peers, but he certainly was the one that got the most publicity. Huge numbers attended his funeral and related ceremonies, and the news media carried his story nationwide. A similar formation flew over Air Force General Hoyt Vandenberg's funeral at Arlington in 1954.

The practice of sending off a prominent aviator with a formation missing one plane was perhaps not common, but was certainly not unknown, in military circles. It would burst onto the mind of the public with a similar overflight for Joseph McConnell's funeral, or more accurately, the Hollywood version of the "Missing Man" as witnessed by McConnell in that movie.

McConnell was such a well-known public figure, and Hollywood was in the throes of the supporting the Cold War, that they were in the process of filming a biographical major motion picture about him when he died in flight test. The 1955 picture, *The McConnell Story*, starred Alan Ladd and June Allyson. A test pilot had died the day Ladd (McConnell) and his wife were house hunting in Apple Valley, just outside Edwards AFB. A flight of aircraft comes across, fast and low, and then suddenly the element leader pulled up sharply (in a Hollywood theatrical flourish), climbing away from the other three. June seemed perplexed, until Alan explained it was the "Missing Man" formation, flown to honor a fallen colleague (and there were a LOT of them at Edwards in the early 1950s!).

The publicity from a spotlight in a big-budget patriotic movie, and the beautifully-apt and easy-to-understand symbolism of a flight colleague suddenly "called heavenward," really resonated with the public, making the "Missing Man" formation a common form of honor.

**CODA:** Not only was Joseph McConnell honored with a "Missing Man" formation during his funeral at Arlington, Colonel Jabara was also similarly honored at his memorial service at Homestead AFB (he was actually buried at Arlington).

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