

A History of NASIC

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE INTELLIGENCE CENTER

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, OHIO

ATIC's MiG-15bis Exploitation

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A significant part of NASIC's legacy and heritage at Wright-Patterson over the years has involved acquiring, exploiting, and assessing foreign weapon systems. Visitors at the National Museum of the US Air Force have the opportunity to see an aircraft involved in one of the most incredible foreign materiel exploitation stories in history. The MiG-15bis on display is a national treasure that came to the United States at a critical time.

On 21 September 1953, a disenchanted North Korean pilot made a decision that changed his life and American history. Lt No Kum Sok was finished with the North Korean government and determined to make a break for freedom. Lt No was a fighter company commander in the Second Regiment of the North Korean People's Air Force. He had thought about defection a number of times before, yet could not do it until his unit moved south to Sunan Airfield outside of Pyongyang, after the end of the Korean War.

He normally flew MiG-15bis Red 408, but on that day he flew a MiG-15bis with the tactical number Red 2057. His regular aircraft had not yet arrived at Sunan. A pilot named Kim Dae-Soon usually flew Red 2057 in combat. It had been one of the first MiG aircraft smuggled by rail back into North Korea from Manchuria after the cease-fire and reassembled. The "2057" was a recently painted North Korean number, replacing an original Soviet tactical number.

The fact that 2057 was a "bis" model, or advanced model of the MiG-15, made it more desirable for the Americans. Its VK-1 engine had 1,000 pounds more thrust than the RD-45 engine of the earlier version, and had hydraulic ailerons. It was a real catch for the Air Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC, NASIC's predecessor) to get an updated version of this jet.

During his escape, Lt No purposely allowed another pilot to take off first. This was the first flight from Sunan since the war ended, and it was quite an honor. The other pilot readily accepted. Lt No hoped the first pilot would take his time and divert attention from No's planned escape. He flew as second aircraft in the flight of three. Near the end of his flight, No broke to the south instead of landing at Sunan.

It took only about 13 minutes to reach Kimpo Air Base, South Korea. With no F-86 or air defenses as yet noticing him, Lt No chose to make a straight approach. He made



Lt No Kum Sok in full flight gear



The MiG-15bis at Kadena Airbase, Okinawa, after the defection

a downwind landing with F-86 aircraft in the pattern. As a matter of fact, he landed in the opposite direction of an F-86 that was landing on the same runway, and scared the pilot nearly to death. He parked alongside an F-86 sitting alert on the ramp, jumped out of his aircraft, and began shaking hands.

Lt No found out later at a news conference that the United States was offering \$100,000 to the first pilot to fly a MiG-15 to the South. The MiG was partially disassembled by Air Technical Intelligence Center personnel at Kimpo and then flown in a C-124 to Kadena Airbase, Okinawa, to be test-flown. Thus, Project ZETA began. The United States Air Force (USAF) removed the North Korean markings and replaced them with small USAF markings. The US pilots did 11 test flights, pushing the MiG probably harder than the Russians had ever tested it. Test engineers had to modify some of the instrumentation, yet found the MiG very easy to work on.

After the flight tests at Okinawa, the MiG was disassembled and flown to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, where it was thoroughly examined by ATIC personnel before reassembly and more flight-testing. The large TC616 painted on the jet at Wright-Patterson was different than the initial markings on Okinawa. Rumor has it that the "TC" stood for test pilot Tom Collins' initials. But Chuck Yeager was the other main pilot, and Mr. Ken Rowe (Lt No's Americanized name) believed it stood for "Tom and Chuck"!

In March 1954, the jet went to Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, for flight comparisons with the B-47, B-36, F-86, and F-84, as well as infrared testing. It came back to Wright-Patterson in October of that year for more testing. After the 180 hours of flight time it had logged since its last inspection, ATIC technicians completely took the aircraft apart again, reinspected it, and had it ready for more flight-testing by December 1954. On Christmas, 1954, the jet went to Patuxint River, Maryland, for US Navy testing. It returned to Ohio in February 1955. Beginning in August 1955, the aircraft was tested against the F-86K.

The most important lesson learned from ATIC's exploitation was that the technical assessment its analysts had created before the defection was 98-percent correct. Project ZETA validated ATIC methodologies, which affected countless other intelligence products

In April 1956, a British Royal Air Force pilot flying the MiG experienced a hard landing at Wright-Patterson, which badly damaged the nose gear. (Damage to the skin can still be seen.) After negotiating for the jet since 1954, the National Museum of the US Air Force finally obtained it in October 1957. Initially, the museum painted it in a strange configuration of Russian and Korean colors. Now, this wonderful piece of NASIC history can be seen in the exact markings it wore on the day it left North Korea...except for a USAF star still visible under the right wing!



Mr. Ken Rowe (formerly No Kum Sok) flew a MiG-15 in March 2004, more than 50 years after his defection.