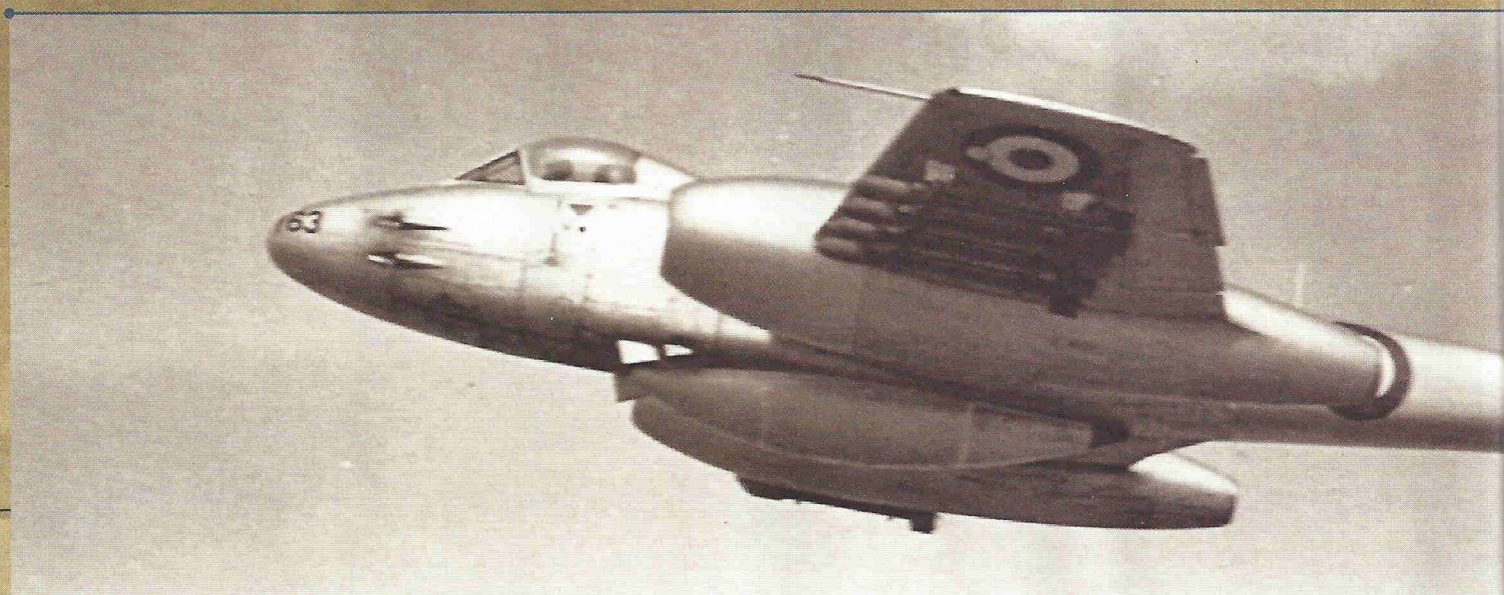


METEORS OVER KOREA

OWEN ZUPP PAYS TRIBUTE TO HIS FATHER, A VETERAN OF 201 MISSIONS IN KOREA'S HOSTILE SKIES

Above
A fully armed Meteor, with ventral tank, getting airborne.

It can only be described as an ambush. On the first day of December 1952 a dozen Meteor F.8s of 77 Squadron, Royal Australian Air Force, clashed with North Korean MiG-15 *Fagots*, flown by pilots from the Soviet Union. In far superior numbers, the enemy came in from above and three Meteors fell to their guns.

The previous day, Phillip Zupp arrived in Korea, a new recruit for 77 Squadron. It was a sobering welcome to the unit, yet in the next seven months he learned his trade as a fighter pilot and went on to fly 201 missions.

The losses of December 1 had a significant impact on the role of 77 Squadron. Recognising that the British jet did not lend itself to aerial combat at altitude with the more nimble, swept-wing MiG-15, the unit was relegated to air-defence patrols. However, the arrival of a new commanding officer, Wg Cdr Ron Susans DSO DFC, saw 77 retasked to ground attack and it was a role that it would excel in.

ACHILLES HEEL

The durability of the British jet was to hold it in good stead against the ever-present ground fire. Missions were flown, or bottomed out, at extremely low level and instances of the ventral tank contacting with Mother Earth are documented. It was also a relatively stable gun platform, although some pilots found it to 'snake' on occasions.

That exposed, belly-mounted tank was the Meteor's Achilles heel. The additional 175 imp gals (795 lits) was critical for the range-limited fighter, but could also prove a 'ticking bomb'. The ignition of its volatile contents was responsible for the loss of a number of aircraft and pilots.

Armed with four 20mm nose-mounted Hispano cannons, the Meteor could also carry 60lb (27kg) rocket projectiles, up to eight under each wing. Strikes were made against trains, trucks, bridges, buildings and anything else that contributed to the enemy's infrastructure.

The cold also brought with it several additional hazards. Groundcrews' ungloved hands could freeze on tools and the Meteor's nose-mounted cine camera's lens would become obscured by ice. The ejection seat carried a bladder of emergency water that left pilots on pre-dawn standby sitting on an ice-block – a problem slightly relieved by layers of newspaper.

The operating environment in Korea was in stark contrast to that of Australia. The terrain was characterised by jagged ranges and deep valleys and the depths of the Korean winter blanketed the landscape in snow, making navigation a challenge.

Scrap wood was at a premium as it could be used as fuel in each tent's central pot-bellied stove as well as lining on the walls against the elements. By night, an elderly Russian Polikarpov Po-2 biplane, or 'Bed Check Charlie', would drop small bombs to inflict minimal damage beyond disturbed sleep patterns.

LEARNING CURVE

The runway and taxiways at airfield K-14, Kimpo south of Seoul, were constructed from pierced steel planking and could become slippery in icy conditions. Airframe icing was kept partially at bay by taxiing very close behind a fellow Meteor using jet's efflux to heat the leading edges of the wing. This technique, of course, was of no benefit to the leading aircraft.

Amid this frozen backdrop, Phil taxied out on his first mission, close behind Wal Rivers DFC, an experienced pilot on his second tour having previously flown Mustangs. Phil was in Meteor A77-368, now on display at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

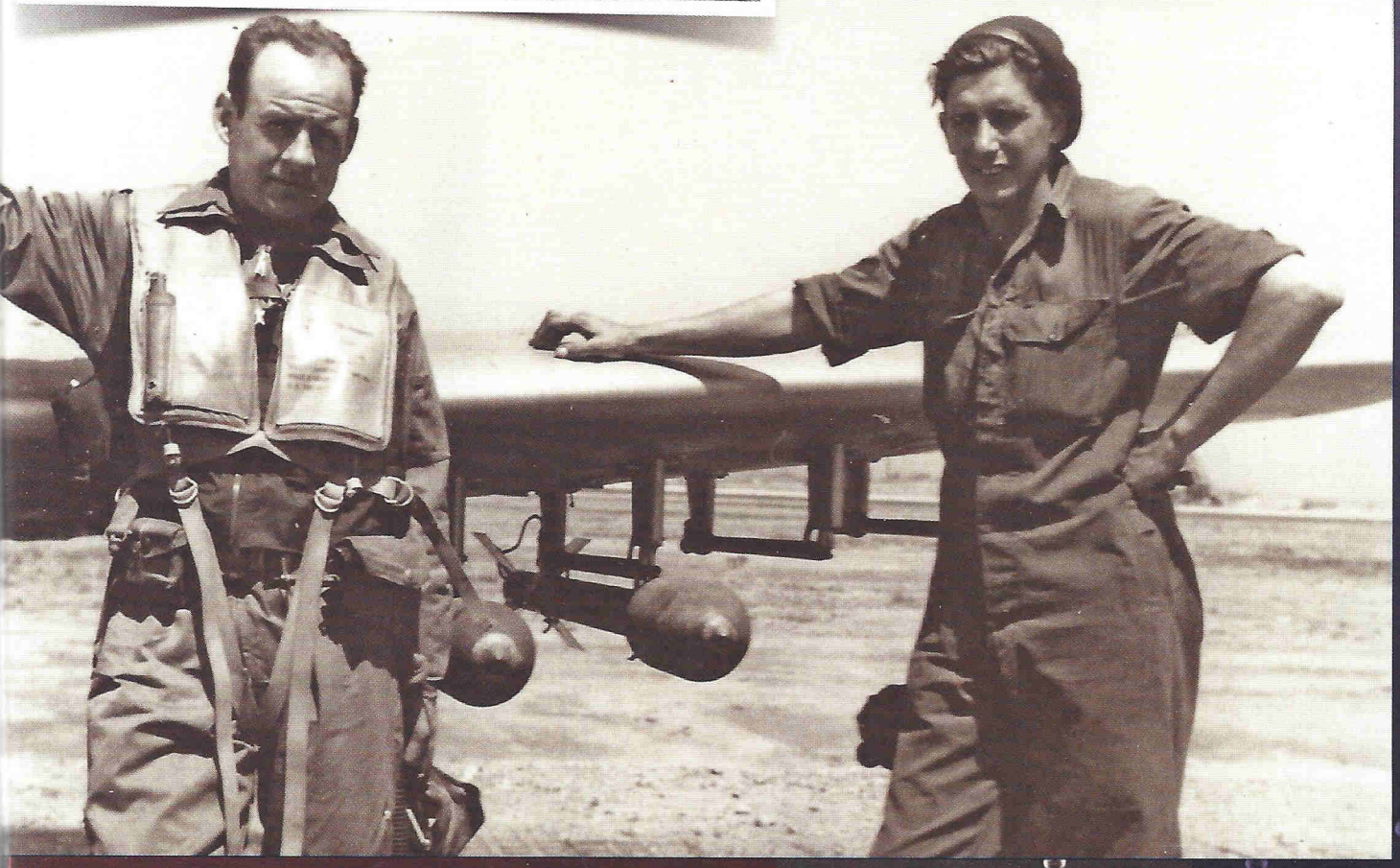
This was intended as a familiarisation flight to acquaint Phil with the terrain, roads and towns to the north of K-14 and the 'bomb line'. However, the order was given without notice to 'scramble' to intercept inbound unidentified aircraft.

In the next instant, a flock of what seemed to be tumbling sparrows shot past Phil's cockpit. He wondered what business they had at such an altitude when the realisation dawned upon him. They weren't birds, they were 20mm shell casings being ejected from the leading Meteor as he tested his cannon.

He felt both stupid and sick. He had tucked right into the path of the shells and they could have easily brought him down. The mission went without further incident and, like most, it was of 40 minutes' duration.

FIRST STRIKE

Phil's first ground attack sortie was typical of 77 Squadron operations at the time. During the previous night US intelligence would identify targets for the next day and send through a 'Frag Order'. The pilots would gather for a briefing from the unit's intelligence officer who would nominate the objective, outline expected anti-aircraft fire and the optimum direction of



Left
Phil Zupp beside a Meteor F.8 in Korea.

Below
Zupp with a member of his groundcrew, 1952. Note the 60lb rocket projectiles under the wing.

STEPS TO THE METEOR

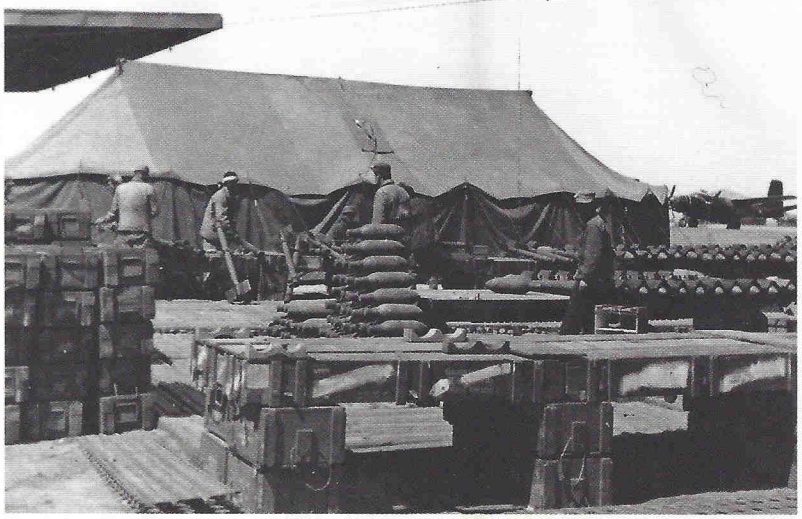
Phil Zupp trained as a navigator in the RAAF during World War Two, transferring to the army when he became surplus to aircrew requirements. He fought in the jungles of New Guinea as a commando before serving in one of the first contingents at Hiroshima, Japan, as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force (BCOF).

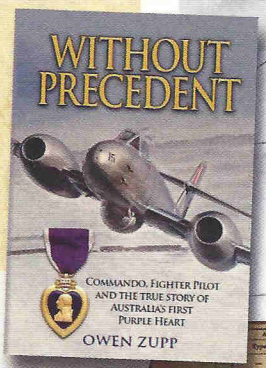
He re-enlisted in the RAAF as a mechanic in 1948 and used his savings to learn to fly privately. He was eventually accepted for pilot training at Point Cook, Victoria. Initially flying on Tiger Moths, he moved on to Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Wirraways.

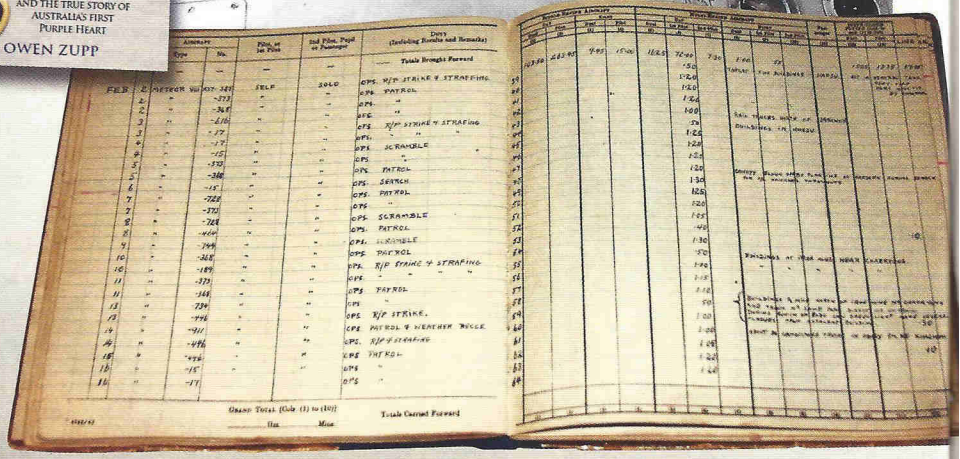
North Korea invaded the South on June 25, 1950, just as Phil was adapting to the Wirraway. Over the following months Phil converted to the twin-engined Airspeed Oxford before graduating as a sergeant pilot in February 1951.

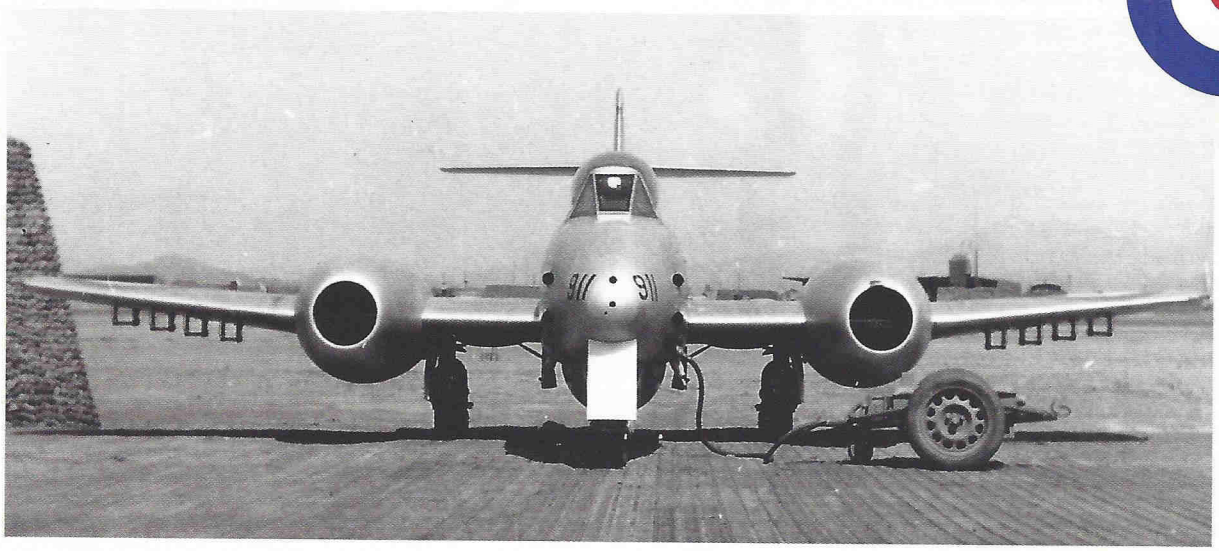
Converting to the Mustang, he was trained in fighter tactics and ground attack with 3 Squadron, before the transition to jets via Vampire F.30s. As there were no two-seat Vampires available, Phil's first experience of a jet, a nosewheel and a pressurised cockpit all occurred on that initial solo sortie. Phil went to Japan in 1951 and his conversion to the Meteor took place at Iwakuni. This included the luxury of two hours in a dual-seat T.7 with an instructor. This was only the second twin he had piloted, after the Oxford with its wooden propellers. Phil's next flight in the Meteor was to set course for Korea.

Owen Zupp is the author of Without Precedent *the story of his father, Australia's first recipient of the Purple Heart. More details at:* **www.owenzupp.com**









Clockwise from left
A Meteor on the pierced steel planking at Kimpo.

Meteors getting airborne at Kimpo.

Pages from Phil's 77 Squadron logbook.

In the cockpit of a Meteor.

Armourers readying rockets for loading.

attack and the planned route of escape. The current 'bomb line' and Main Supply Route (MSR) were highlighted as were emergency details, US-held islands and search and rescue bases.

On this occasion, the target was buildings near Chinnampo to the south of the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, and on the northern shore of the Taedong River. The four pilots had been briefed to remain clear of Haeju en route as the port city was a known hotspot for anti-aircraft fire.

A large building sat on the edge of the frozen harbour and was easily identifiable from altitude. The Meteors descended to 5,000ft (1,524m) with the four aircraft slipping, one behind the other, into a 'line astern' formation. Wg Cdr Susans rolled into a 30° dive and the others followed close behind while varying their direction to avoid the anti-aircraft guns that were now inevitably tracking them.

The dive angle had to be held steady for ten to 20 seconds so the gunsight computer could assess the correct graticule position. Passing through 1,500ft, the pilots depressed the button on the top of the control column to release their rockets from their rails. Within seconds the projectiles were erupting in flames and raining devastation on the building below.

As the air filled with smoke and fragments, the pilots pulled their jets into a climbing turn with their throttles advanced to full power. The heavier, faster Meteor did not pull out of a dive like the Mustang they had trained on and this inertia had accounted for the loss of pilots on operations. In the absence of g-suits, the increased force of gravity was kept at bay by tensed guts as blacking out was a real threat, as was flying through the debris rising from the target.

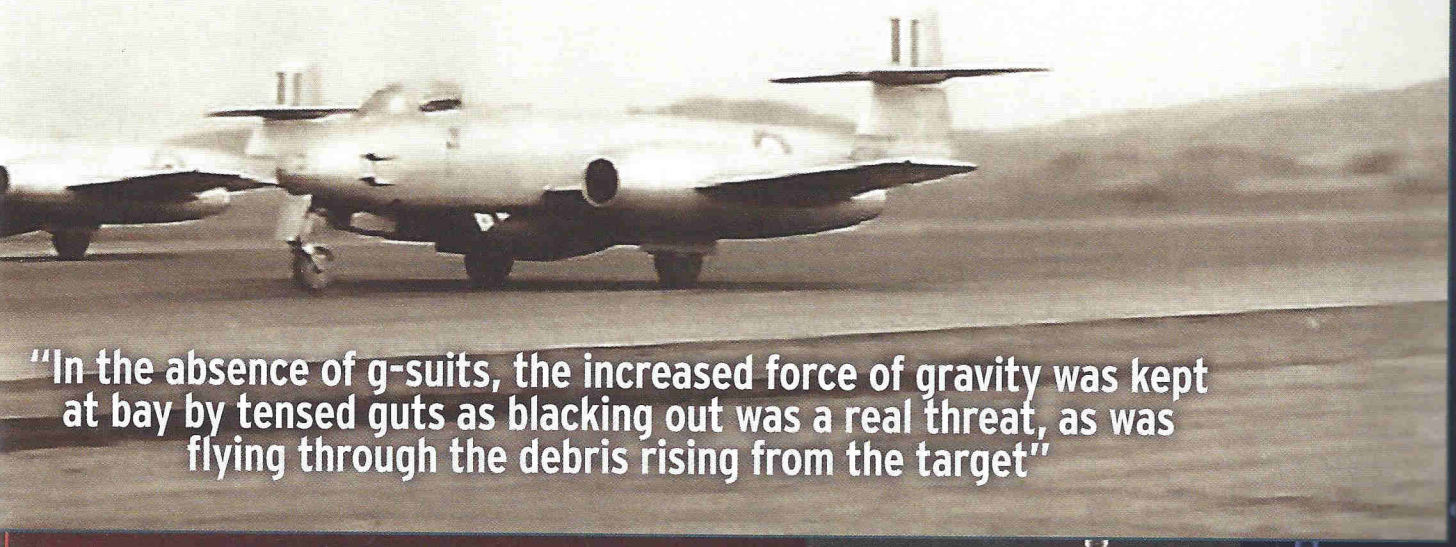
Clear of the target and at a safe altitude, Susans called for each member of 'Godfrey Flight' to check in on the radio. It was the standard means of taking a 'head count' before they re-formed into 'finger four' and set course for Kimpo.

TAIL-END CHARLIE

The following months were hectic and Phil did not always return unscathed. Often his Meteor was damaged by ground fire, an inevitable consequence of his preference to be the last over the target – or 'Tail-end Charlie'. The method in Phil's perceived madness was that he had the ability to see where the preceding aircraft's rockets or tracers were striking. This could be an indication of the conditions, such as a tailwind, if the shots were landing long.

Possibly his closest call came on February 6, 1952, a month in which the squadron flew more than 1,000 missions. Searching for a downed pilot in the Sibyon-Ni area, Phil thought he had caught a glimpse of a pilot's red 'marker scarf' on the snow. As he wrenched the Meteor around, vapour streaming from its wing tips, he struggled to recapture the object he'd seen.

His next memory was the deafening roar as his cockpit exploded around him. With the canopy in pieces, the freezing airflow rushed by at



"In the absence of g-suits, the increased force of gravity was kept at bay by tensed guts as blacking out was a real threat, as was flying through the debris rising from the target"

Right
Damage to Phil's canopy during the mission of February 6, 1952.

Below left
Inspecting a ventral tank after in-flight damage.

Below right
A 'blood chit', offering a reward to help the 'American flier' return to his unit.

Bottom
Meteor F.8 A77-134 'Spooks' with battle damage to the rudder.

300kts. He heaved back on the control column as his Meteor's ventral tank was perilously close to the ground.

Struggling to gain his orientation, he reached to straighten the askew oxygen mask and shattered goggles, his face stinging from embedded Perspex and shrapnel. He later recalled: "There seemed an inordinate amount of blood. It was over me, the cockpit and the 'clocks'."

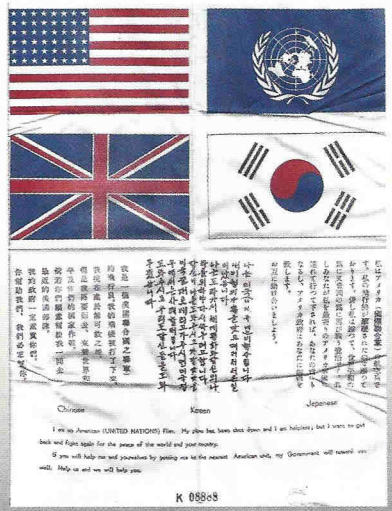
He pointed the Meteor south and swept past Kaesong as he set course for Kimpo. Inbound he advised the controller that he had been hit and, as the result of further enquiry, stated he had injuries to the head. An Aussie drawl came across the frequency: "Don't worry 'Zuppie', that's your hardest part."

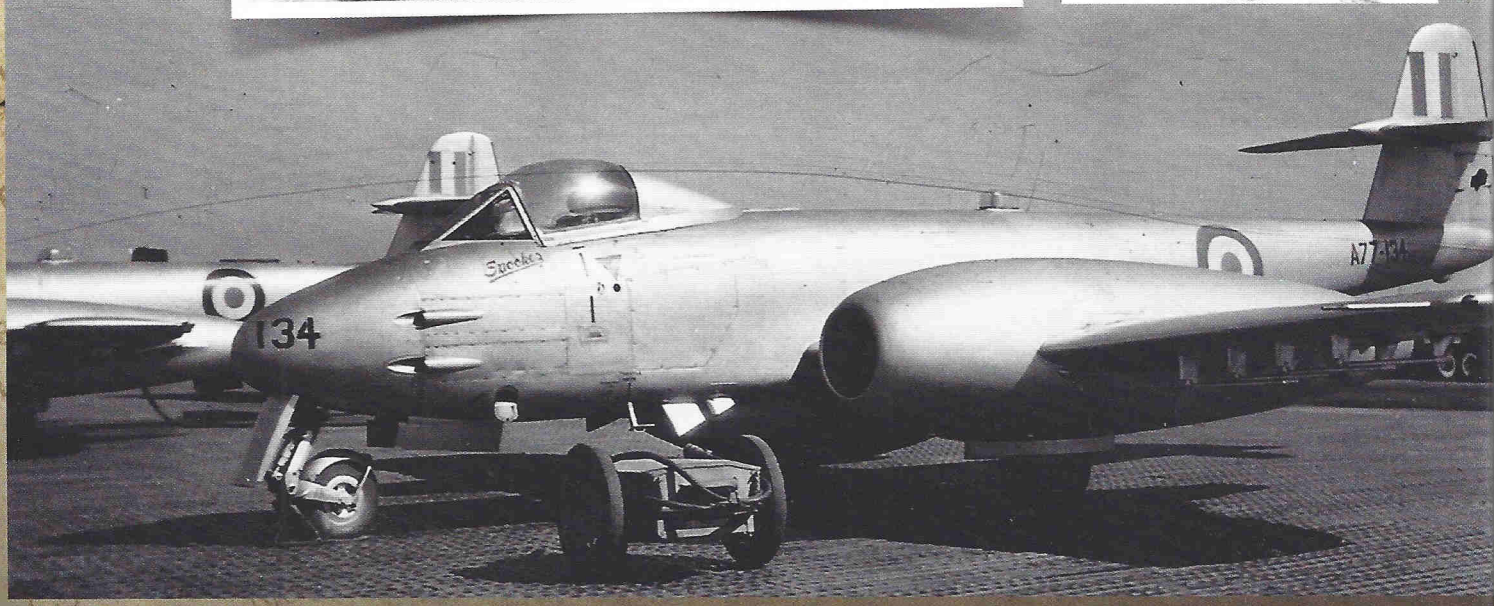
After landing without event, he reported to the medical staff and completed his debrief. Next day, Phil participated in two missions.

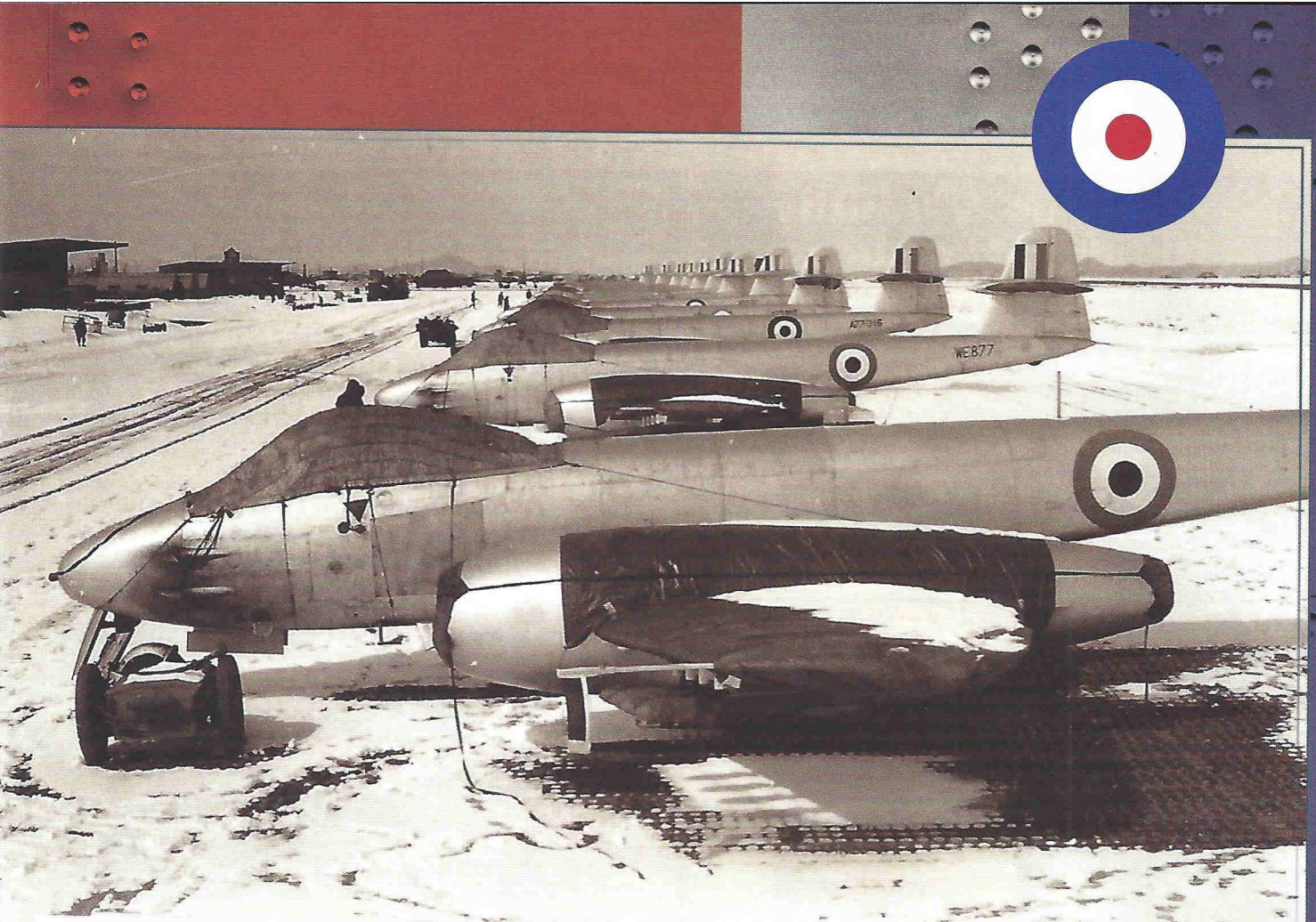
HEADING HOME

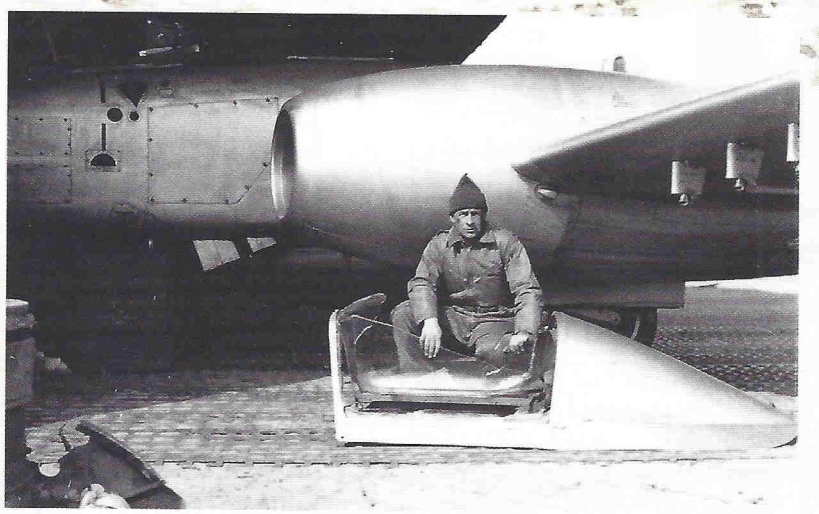
Korea is often called the 'Forgotten War', lost somewhere between the enormity of World War Two and the controversy of Vietnam. During

"Despite shock and low altitude Sergeant Zupp was able to regain control of his aircraft and return safely to base. His outstanding courage and superior airmanship on this occasion reflects great credit upon himself..."









Above
Muffled Meteors on a snowy flight line at Kimpo, 1952.

Left centre
Being presented with the US Air Medal.

Left
Phil inspecting his damaged Meteor, February 1952.
ALL VIA AUTHOR

its service, 77 Squadron RAAF lost more than 40 pilots - a ratio of about one-in-four that served.

In his time in Korea, Sgt Phillip Zupp was mentioned in despatches and awarded the US Air Medal. Unknown to him, he was also the first Australian to be presented with the US Purple Heart for his actions on February 6. The right to wear the decoration was apparently denied and its saga only surfaced in the 1990s when the Presidential citation and other documents came to light.

The citation read: "Sergeant Phillip Zupp distinguished himself by displaying outstanding courage while flying a Meteor Mk.8 in carrying out a search for a downed pilot in an area heavily defended by enemy anti-aircraft fire. Sergeant Zupp sighted what he believed to be distress panels and in coming down to a dangerously low altitude to investigate he received an explosive burst of enemy fire which destroyed his canopy and wounded him in the face.

"Despite shock and low altitude Sergeant Zupp was able to regain control of his aircraft and return safely to base. [His] outstanding courage and superior airmanship on this occasion reflects great credit upon himself, his comrades in arms of the United Nations and the Royal Australian Air Force."

A pilot never knew when his final sortie was to take place. In July 1952, Phil knew that his time must be drawing near, but he also wanted to make the '200 mission' mark, which was substantial for a single tour. Despite the miserable weather in the area, he achieved his goal and on June 11 flew his 201st mission, an armed reconnaissance along the MSR, which left five buildings and two trucks reduced to burning wreckage.

As he began to unstrap his helmet back at Kimpo, he saw the acting commanding officer, Sqn Ldr Bill Bennett DFC, walking towards his Meteor with a smile on his face. Bill leaned into the cockpit, placed his hand on Phil's shoulder and uttered simply: "Good job son. You're going home."