

# *Birmingham Aero Club Skywriting – A Collection of Aviation Stories*

## **A MIG-15 to Freedom**

**By Dr. Jim Griffin**

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On September 21st, 1953, Lt.No Kum-Sok, North Korean MIG-15 pilot, made a decision that would change his life forever. The MIG he normally flew, number 408, was not available that day and he was assigned number 2057 for the morning flight. He knew that Kimpo air base was just over the border which separated North Korea from the South and was under the control of the Americans flying the much feared F-86 Sabre Jet. Lt. No hated the North Korean Communist war machine but had willingly suffered the brutal and inhumane treatment that was part of the military school that prepared him for training to become a pilot of the Russian designed MIG-15. Surviving the daily dog fights with the Americans had also been a challenge but he knew that freedom and a better way of life awaited him if he could survive the 13 minute flight to Kimpo, through the gauntlet of US fighters and anti-aircraft guns.

History was made that morning when Tom Feltman, on security detail at Kimpo Air Base, looked up and saw the smoke trail of an aircraft landing on the wrong end of the runway. It touched down and streaked by so fast that he barely got a glimpse of the red star on the fuselage. His Air Police jeep wheeled around and headed down the taxiway toward the MIG now pulling in next to the startled ready alert F-86 pilots sitting in their fighters. As Lt. No jumped down from his aircraft, the Sabre pilots realized that America had just been handed its first flying MIG-15.

As director of the Southern Museum of Flight this story caught my attention as an excellent candidate for a diorama which features our F-86 and MIG-15. Plans for the design of the exhibit were made a year ago. We began collecting artifacts and materials to construct the exhibit which will be brought to life by the use of a diorama format. During that time a young Eagle Scout wanted to build a museum related project and built the Quonset hut, now in the museum's south hall, which will be part of the background for the exhibit.

Until recently, most of the information and historical data for the exhibit has come from magazine articles and the four known photos which were not confiscated by the Air Police at Kimpo. Then early one morning I got a call from a gentleman named Tom Feltman. Tom explained that he lived in Birmingham and wanted to talk with me about the Korean War exhibit we were building. Ed Stevenson and I invited him to meet us for breakfast where we discovered that Tom was the same Tom Feltman I had read about in

the literature. He was one of two Air Force "Air Police" on duty near the end of the runway that September morning. Tom's story was fascinating. Once he arrived at the aircraft, officers on the scene ordered him to confiscate all the cameras being used by the growing crowd of onlookers. Tom explained that there were many people in the area with cameras but only a few surviving photos. The Air Police were ordered to remove the film, expose it, and return the empty cameras. Tom will be a genuine asset in the development of our exhibit. Later that week Tom e-mailed Lt. No Kum-Soc and had him contact me at the museum. Lt. No changed his name to Ken Rowe when he moved to the United States in 1953 - No is pronounced Ro (Rowe) in Korean.

Ken now lives in Daytona and we have developed a good relationship via e-mail. He is fascinated by our plans to build a diorama around his defection and has offered to be a speaker in the new speaker series dinners that we are developing as a future museum project. He and Tom Feltman present both sides of truly dramatic story - America's first opportunity to study and test fly the elusive Soviet built MIG. Many US questions were answered when Tom Collins and Chuck Yeager flew the aircraft shortly after the defection. Ken Rowe has written an excellent book, "A MIG-15 to Freedom", which provides a rare, North Korean perspective on world events during the Korean War and a fascinating view inside the minds of Korean leaders of the time. Now you know the personal side of our SMF Korean War Exhibit.