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Government of Australia – Department of Veteran’s Affairs
Nominal Roll of Australian Veterans of the Korean War

Royal Australian Air Force

The Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) began its involvement in the Korean War just one week after the invasion of South Korea. On 2 July 1950, No. 77 (Fighter) Squadron RAAF, based in Iwakuni, Japan, as part of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force, flew its Mustang fighters into combat for the first time as a unit of the United Nations Command.

No. 77 Squadron was the only RAAF combat squadron committed to Korea by the Australian Government, and it remained on active service there until the end of the war. Initially the Australians were tasked with escorting American bombers to and from their targets as well as carrying out low-level air strikes of their own. The latter involved attacking bridges, railway lines and other targets in an attempt to disrupt and slow down the North Korean advance. The Mustang fighters, with which the squadron had been equipped since the end of the Second World War, were easily adapted to the ground attack role in Korea. Capable of operating from rough airstrips in the forward area, these aircraft were heavily armed with six 0.5-inch calibre machine-guns and either six high-explosive rockets or two 227-kilogram bombs slung under the wings. At the height of the desperate American and South Korean defence of the Pusan Perimeter, the Australian pilots, although still officially based in Japan, would often operate their Mustangs from a forward airstrip at Taegu, inside the Perimeter, flying anything up to six combat missions in a day.

The Australians quickly developed a reputation for excellence in the ground attack role but this recognition came at a heavy price. While the North Korean air force was soon driven from the sky, Communist ground-based anti-aircraft defences continued to pose a formidable threat to all UNC aircrews, but those engaged in ground attack missions were particularly vulnerable as they had to fly at low levels to hit their targets. Less than a week after beginning operations, No. 77 Squadron suffered its first combat fatality of the war when Squadron Leader Graham Strout, a flight commander, was shot down by North Korean ground fire during an air -strike on the Samchok rail yards. Casualties mounted over the following months, including on 9 September 1950 the popular squadron commander, Wing Commander Lou Spence.

That same month, as the UNC launched its dramatic counter-offensive towards the 38th Parallel, the American Fifth Air Force, of which No. 77 Squadron was a part, began moving its fighter units to re-captured bases on the Korean peninsula. The

Australians henceforth operated primarily from airbases within South Korea for the rest of the war. The living conditions on these bases were very basic and air and ground crews alike had to endure searing heat in summer, and freezing temperatures in winter, with only canvas tents for shelter.

In October 1950, all RAAF units attached to the United Nations Command were grouped into the newly formed No. 91 (Composite) Wing. In addition to No. 77 Squadron, the Wing included No. 491 (Maintenance) Squadron, No. 391 (Base) Squadron and No. 30 Communications Flight. A servicing section from No. 491 Squadron was attached to No. 77 Squadron in Korea to allow some major inspection and overhaul work on the aircraft to be undertaken in the field, and additional personnel were brought over from Japan on an ad hoc basis to assist in this work when required. Personnel from No. 391 Squadron were also sometimes detached for temporary duty with No. 77 Squadron.

No. 30 Communications Flight, redesignated No. 30 Transport Unit shortly thereafter, was equipped with Douglas Dakota transport aircraft and provided a vital link between No. 77 Squadron in Korea and the rest of No. 91 (Composite) Wing, which remained based in Japan. The aircrews of No. 30 Transport Unit made regular flights into South Korea, carrying troops and supplies in and evacuating wounded, injured and sick Australian and other British Commonwealth personnel on the return journey. Nursing sisters of the RAAF Nursing Service accompanied the aircrews on the aero-medical evacuation flights. On 7 March 1953 No. 30 Transport Unit had its status upgraded to that of a full squadron and was reconstituted as No. 36 (Transport) Squadron.

In April 1951 No. 77 Squadron was temporarily withdrawn to Japan to be re-equipped with British-built Gloster Meteor jet fighters. Previously, only one or two pilots on exchange with the United States Air Force had flown jet combat missions in Korea. After an intense two-month conversion from the prop-driven Mustangs to the jet-powered Meteors the squadron returned to operational duties in Korea in July 1951. On its return the squadron was stationed at Kimpo air base, just outside Seoul, and would remain based there, alongside dozens of American and other UNC squadrons, until the end of the conflict. Initially the Australians hoped that the new jets would allow No. 77 Squadron to resume its classic fighter role, but the Meteors proved incapable of holding their own in 'dog fights' against the Chinese and Soviet MiG-15s.

As a consequence, in September 1951 No. 77 Squadron found itself forbidden to carry out fighter sweeps over North Korea and relegated to second-line air defence duties. Frustrated by these restrictions and aware that the newly-acquired Meteor would not be replaced any time soon, in December the RAAF decided to once again employ No. 77 Squadron in the ground attack role. This was something of a gamble as no other operator of the Meteor, including the Royal Air Force, had thought the aircraft was suited to this role. However the Meteor made up for its disappointing performance as a fighter by proving to be one of the best ground attack aircraft of

the war. In addition to its four 20-mm cannons the Australians installed rails to carry eight high-explosive rockets under the Meteor's wings, and this gave it the ability to deliver devastating and concentrated salvoes of firepower against ground targets.

But once again casualties were high, with about one in four of No. 77 Squadron's pilots killed or captured by the time of the Armistice. At the end of the war, No. 77 Squadron had flown 18,872 sorties but lost 34 Australian pilots killed in battle or accidents and six prisoners of war, along with four British exchange pilots killed and one prisoner of war. In the aftermath of the Armistice No. 77 Squadron remained in Korea until October 1954 when it returned once more to Japan, before finally departing for Australia aboard the aircraft carrier HMAS Vengeance in November. No. 491 (Maintenance) Squadron was disbanded and its personnel sent home the following month. The rest of No. 91 (Composite) Wing did not follow until March 1955. However two of No. 36 (Transport) Squadron's Dakotas and their crews were left behind to form the RAAF Transport Flight Japan. This small RAAF unit maintained a regular service between Japan and Korea carrying people, mail and freight until it too was finally withdrawn to Australia in June 1956.