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FILE TITLE: Sgt Billie G. Beach, First Aerial Gunner with Two MIG Kills

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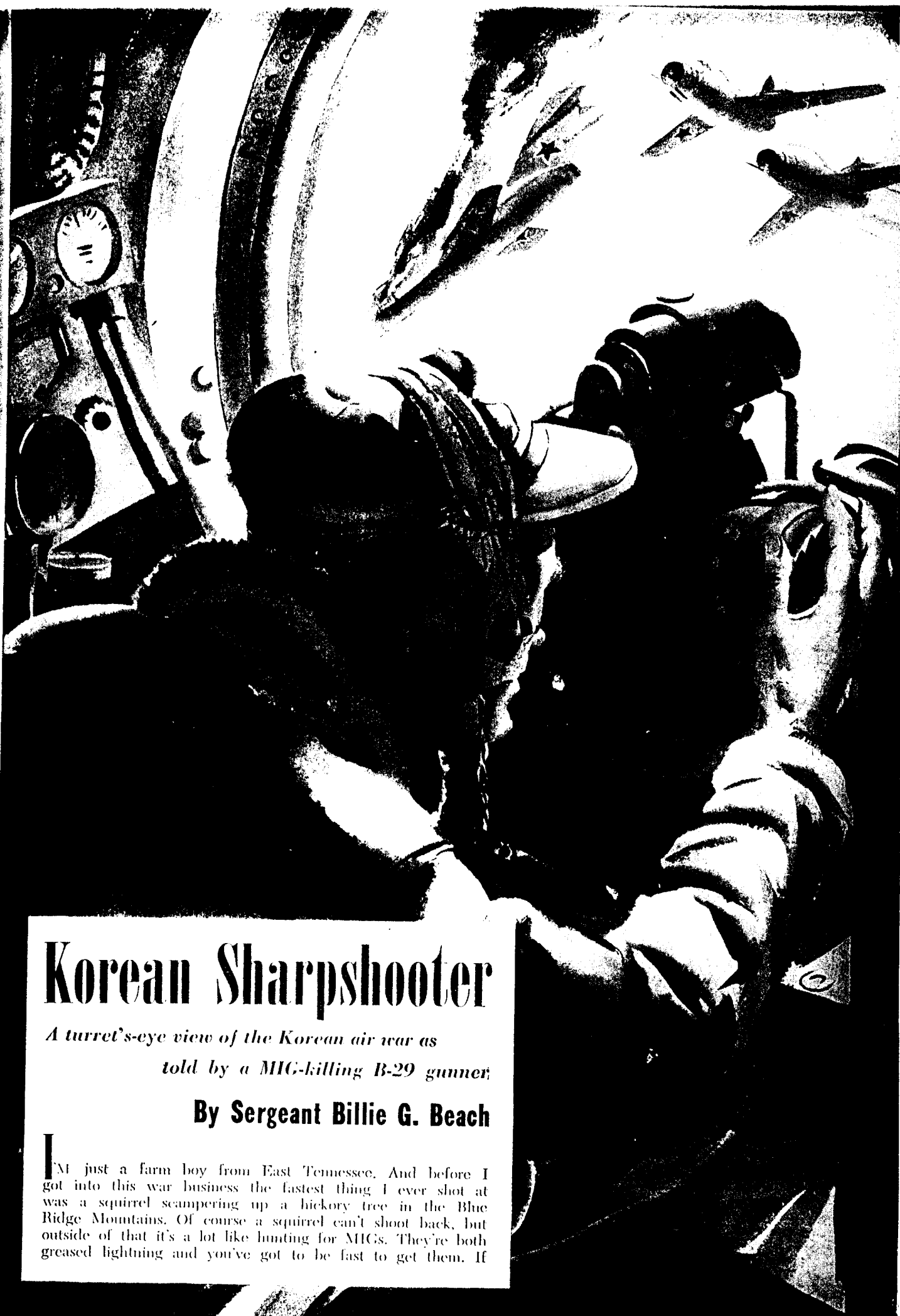
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Korean Sharpshooter

*A turret's-eye view of the Korean air war as
told by a MIG-killing B-29 gunner*

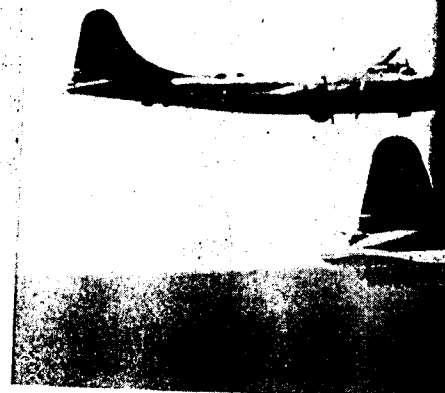
By Sergeant Billie G. Beach

I'M just a farm boy from East Tennessee. And before I got into this war business the fastest thing I ever shot at was a squirrel scampering up a hickory tree in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Of course a squirrel can't shoot back, but outside of that it's a lot like hunting for MIGs. They're both greased lightning and you've got to be fast to get them. If



THE AUTHOR

At this counting Sergeant Billie G. Beach, 21-year-old B-29 gunner has shot down more MIGs than any other aerial gunner in the Far East Air Force Bomber Command. The Moshem, Tennessee, airman, stationed on Okinawa with the 19th Bomb Group, downed two within five minutes of each other on April 12. His record has earned him a recommendation for the Distinguished Service Cross. Here is his story:



you miss on the first shot you generally don't get a second chance.

You only have a split second to spot your target, draw your bead and fire. But you've got to be cool and deliberate. I never saw a jumpy, excited guy drop a squirrel. And I don't think I'm off base when I say that goes for jet airplanes, too.

I was just an extra gunner when the 19th Bomb Group got a hurry-up call to move from Guam to Okinawa last June. When we first started working over the Commies, I didn't get a chance to go along unless a regular crew member was sick or had some other duty. As a matter of fact, I didn't get a permanent assignment until three missions before my big day.

Those first months of the war were just so much flying time for us gunners. We sat and watched—maybe ate an apple or read a book or a comic magazine—while the bombardiers and pilots did all the work.

There was some flak but all a gunner could do was help pray that it wouldn't find us.

We came into our own early this year when the Reds brought in their jets. At first it was an off-hand pass here and there. The Commie pilots were skittish and wouldn't get close enough to get our range.

But they kept getting bolder and bolder. They started shooting up the Superforts. It got so you hadn't lived if you didn't come back with a few bullet holes in your plane.

So we got fighter escort for the big missions. And the aerial gunners on the bombers were back at war—something more than excess baggage for the first time.

I decided I wanted to knock down one of those MIGs. We used to have a lot of arguments about whether a

gunner with a .50 caliber machine gun on a propeller-driven bomber could bag a jet fighter flying at maybe twice the speed.

I said it could be done and I promised myself I'd prove it. I didn't realize at the time, though, how near carrying out that pledge would take me and the crew to our deaths.

It happened on my nineteenth mission (I now have 26)—my third flight out as the regular right gunner on the B-29, "No Sweat."

The briefing officer told us it would be one of the most dangerous missions of the war. Our targets were those bridges across the Yalu over which the Chinese were shipping all their men and supplies.

We were told the flak would be thick and accurate and that MIGs would be on our tails in large numbers. Our targets were in sight of the big Red airbase just across the Yalu River—in the deep end of "MIG Alley."

Twelve Superforts, in flights of four, were assigned to the mission. A cover of F-84s and F-86s was scheduled to rendezvous with us over Korea before we headed out for enemy territory.

They loaded the "No Sweat" with 2,000-pound bombs.

We took off at dawn. The day broke bright and clear—perfect for flying. We could make a visual drop.

About 40 minutes out we test-fired our guns. Mine was working smooth as clockwork.

Then we settled down for a long ride.

I pulled out a book from my hip pocket and settled down to enjoy the flight.

I wasn't thinking about anything in particular, certainly not MIGs. In the back of my mind I was sort of

wondering about the flight lunch I was hoping I would get one boned chicken in it—most of 'em are not so tasty.

After about two and a half hours we began to climb. We pulled up to 21,000 feet before leveling off. The planes pulled into formation. Over Korea we picked up the fight according to schedule.

It was about noon when we became the alert that we were approaching the target area. Everybody got ready for the bomb run. We were less than five minutes away from the bridges.

The sun was shining brightly, though it was 35 degrees below zero outside and the mountains below were snow-covered, we were comfortable in the pressurized cabin. I had on only my flight suit and a fur-collared B-15 jacket.

Then the tail gunner shouted into the interphone:

"MIGs, about 30 of 'em, coming in at six o'clock."

I had just taken a big bite out of a juicy apple I had tucked into my jacket. I don't know to this day what happened to that apple. It just disappeared.

They were MIGs all right. They were coming in fast at six o'clock and breaking away at four—right in line with my sights. They shot at the tail first and then swung to attack us amidships.

They were coming so close I could see the orange fire spit from the barrels of their .20 millimeter cannons.

I started firing as soon as I got one in range.

I caught my first MIG on the breakaway. I tracked him and kept firing short bursts. He got out about 900 yards before I saw he was out of control.



The last I saw of him he was spinning like crazy—straight down. One of the crewmen saw the plane crash.

Still they came.

Three minutes and four passes later, I spied this other baby coming in at 1:30, low. I picked him up 1200 yards away. I chopped into him with short, steady bursts.

That MIG got out about 400 yards and keeled over on one side. I watched it go into a headlong dive and crash and explode on the mountain below.

That was the last shot I've had at a MIG. And I had about 100 rounds of ammo left in my belts.

The fighters moved in and got the MIGs off us. But in the eight minutes they were on us they hurt the "No Sweat" plenty bad.

Both the number two and four engines were shot up and had to be feathered. The right aileron was shot out. The interphone conked out. The number two gas tank caught fire.

Our formation was broken up. Two of the four planes went down in flames. I saw one of them explode on the side of a mountain. Nobody saw anyone bail out.

The third ship had to turn back but it made it to Okinawa okay.

The fighters were gone and we were all alone. The pilot rang the alert bell—three rings, the signal for "prepare to bail out."

All of a sudden I realized I was scared, plenty scared. I'd never jumped before.

Then the Commies on the ground started throwing flak at us. I couldn't hear it but I could see the little black puffs jumping up at us. Bursts caught us along the wings and engines.

But the bail-out signal didn't come.

It dawned on us that we were going to make our bomb run anyway. The pilot tried to catch up with the flight in front of us, but with two engines gone we couldn't make it.

We went it alone. It seemed we were suspended there in space. Like a big bird with a broken wing, we limped in over the bridges.

But we got them—direct hits, smack on the nose.

The "Old Man" sent word back that he was going to try to make it back to the lines, or as close as he could get us to them. But he told us to be prepared to jump on a second's notice.

The next hour was the longest I've spent in my young life.

I was shaking. I chewed my fingernails into the quicks. I broke out in a cold sweat.

I prayed.

We lost altitude. The captain had to depressurize the cabin.

It got so cold we nearly froze.

With each ticking minute we dropped closer and closer to the mountaintops. They looked like big hands, reaching up to pull us down. I thought for sure that we were goners—if not killed in the crash, then doomed to capture behind the enemy lines.

It was the most spectacular flying I've ever seen. We were just barely in the air when the plane broke out over the Han River flats and over an advance fighter strip.

The runway was much too short but we went in anyway. It was the last chance and we made it. The landing gear had been riddled and collapsed when we touched down.

We slid in on the belly and nose wheel.

The old "No Sweat" came to a halt with her nose over the road running alongside the airstrip. It was 0200 and she disrupted traffic.

But after 90 missions during the last war and I don't know how many in this one she had come through once more—she brought her crew home safely.

We examined ourselves and found nothing worse than shrapnel scratches. But after inspecting the plane we realized what a miracle that was.

It looked like a sieve. There were flak holes in the wings big enough to stick your head through. The sides looked like Swiss cheese.

We spent that night at the fighter strip and hitched a C-47 ride to another Korean airstrip the next morning. There we boarded a C-54 for the return to Okinawa.

We were treated like heroes when we got home. I was put in for the Distinguished Flying Cross.

I certainly don't want another day like April 12, but I want to stay in the Air Force and fly—even if it does mean more close scrapes.

I joined the Air Force when I was 19 because I wanted to get away from the farm. I don't regret the decision. I'm looking forward to rotation only because I want to see the folks again—Mom, Dad, and my three brothers and four sisters.

As far as I'm concerned, only two things bother me.

I hated to see the "No Sweat" scrapped because I'd like to have had the pleasure of painting the two MIG symbols over my gun.

And I'm sorry we got a new commanding officer two weeks before I made the kills.

The Group's old CO had promised a prize to the first man to down a MIG—a four-day pass in Tokyo.

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