

THE HONCHO

The machines were equal. The pilots were not.

MiG Alley, September 1952. The best Sabre pilot of the war meets the only MiG pilot who will not run — and follows him across a line nobody is supposed to cross. He never learned the other man's name. This is the story the community chose.

THE WAR ABOVE THE YALU

On 25 June 1950 the North Korean People's Army swarmed across the 38th parallel, and American forces went to war under the United Nations flag. Within months, American air power had swept the North Korean air force from the sky. The bombers flew where they pleased. The fighter pilots waited for an enemy who never came up. Air supremacy looked absolute — and then, in November 1950, everything changed.

A new Soviet-built jet appeared over the front: the MiG-15, with a top speed around 670 miles per hour, roughly a hundred miles per hour faster than anything the Americans had in theater. It climbed like nothing anyone had ever chased, it carried cannon that could tear a bomber in half with a single burst, and it did not fly alone. Air supremacy, won early, was suddenly in jeopardy.

The MiGs flew from bases in Manchuria, just across the Yalu River — sanctuary airfields on the Chinese side of the border that American aircraft were forbidden to strike. From that sanctuary they pounced on anything venturing into a six-thousand-square-mile slice of airspace over northwest Korea, then dove back across the river where no one could follow. The pilots who fought there gave that stretch of sky the name history kept: MiG Alley. It became the world's first great jet-against-jet arena — and the proving ground for everything air combat would become.

The American answer was the North American F-86 Sabre, flown in this story by the 4th Fighter Wing. The two jets were closer than any rivals in aviation history, but they were built for different jobs. The MiG-15 was a bomber-killer — light, brutally hard-climbing, cannon-armed, and short-legged. The Sabre was built to fight other fighters: honest at speed, deadly in the dive, and carrying a radar-ranging gunsight that computed the firing solution for its six .50-caliber machine guns. When that sight settled, the first rounds landed. The first Sabre-versus-MiG kill came on 17 December 1950, and for the rest of the war the two machines traded the sky above the Yalu — with the Sabres outnumbered nearly every day they flew. Between two aircraft this evenly matched, the margin was never the machine. It was the man in the box.

THE MAN

Robinson “Robbie” Risner — interviewed on camera throughout the Dogfights episode as Brig. Gen., USAF — arrived in Korea in the spring of 1952, an Oklahoma pilot with a reputation that formed fast. He had flown fighters since the Second World War without ever meeting the enemy, and he came to Korea hungry to make up for it. What the squadron noticed first was not hunger — it was precision. Risner flew the Sabre the way the honchos flew the MiG: as if he had been born in it.

His first MiG kill came in the summer of 1952: a textbook demonstration of the Sabre's gunsight doing exactly what it was designed to do, armor-piercing incendiary rounds sparkling across the MiG — “he lit up like a Christmas tree” — until the vertical stabilizer blew clear away. By September he was one of the sharpest pilots in the wing, with a flight of his own to lead and a name that carried weight on both sides of the river.

THE HONCHOS

Who was actually flying the MiGs? Officially, North Koreans and Chinese — and early in the campaign, the timid, hit-and-run attacks matched inexperienced pilots. They struck from high perches, fired out of range, and dove for the sanctuary of the river the moment a Sabre turned into them. But Moscow was running Korea as a clandestine combat school, and Soviet pilots flew under strict rules built to hide their identity — forbidden even to fly within sixty miles of the sea, for fear a downed Russian would parachute into American hands and prove to the world what everyone already suspected.

In the summer of 1952 the Soviets changed their approach. The trainees gave way to the instructors: high-time fighter pilots, veterans of the Great Patriotic War against the Luftwaffe, men with victories painted on other airplanes in another war. They did not fire from out of range. They did not run for the river. The Americans had a word for the ones who stayed and fought: honchos — from the Japanese for “boss.” When a Sabre pilot called a honcho over the radio, everyone on the frequency understood what it meant. Somebody across the circle knew exactly what he was doing.

THE DUEL

Your film is based on this engagement.

15 September 1952. Risner leads Sabres escorting fighter-bombers against an industrial complex near the Yalu — a target sitting under the largest concentration of MiGs in the theater. The MiGs come up to meet the strike, and Risner engages.

This MiG pilot does not dive for the sanctuary of the river like the others. He turns and fights — reversal against reversal, each man countering the other's best move with his own, a scissors so tight the two jets end up canopy to canopy, close enough to see a face. Risner's own words carry the beat: the man was good, as good as anyone he ever flew against. Every trick Risner had spent a career learning, the honcho answered. And at one point, riding side by side with a man trying to kill him, the honcho raises a hand and shakes his fist — fury and salute in the same gesture, the only conversation the two of them would ever have.

Risner lands hits — pieces come off the tail and fuselage — and the MiG runs for home, but low, not high: down onto the deck, into a dry riverbed, hugging the walls of rock at near-sonic speed with Risner behind him firing whenever the gunsight settles. The chase crosses the Yalu — across the line nobody is supposed to cross — and runs miles into Manchuria, all the way to the MiG's own airfield. The honcho drags him across the field at zero altitude, through the anti-aircraft fire of his own base, trying to scrape the Sabre off his tail in front of the men he flew with. It does not work. The MiG, burning, goes in on the enemy's own doorstep.

Dogfights' episode is direct about the politics underneath the pursuit: crossing into Chinese airspace was officially forbidden except in hot pursuit, the rule was routinely bent, and a conspiracy of silence ran up the chain — commanders chose not to ask, and rolls of incriminating gun camera film had a way of disappearing. The proof of the most extraordinary chase of the war went into the dark. The story survived because the man who flew it did.

EPILOGUE

Risner finished Korea an ace with eight MiGs to his name, and returned to combat over North Vietnam a decade later, leading strikes against the most heavily defended targets in the world. Shot down in September 1965, he spent more than seven years as a prisoner of war — much of it in solitary confinement — and came home in 1973 unbroken, one of the most decorated airmen of his generation.

Dogfights' episode closes where every telling of this story closes: with the man himself, still wondering, half a century on, who the honcho was. Somewhere on the other side of that canopy was a pilot with his own name, his own war, and his own story of the day he met an American he could not shake. He never learned Risner's name either. The fist raised across sixty feet of screaming air is all the two of them ever said to each other — and it was enough.