

On Guard over MiG Alley: The James P. Hagerstrom Story

by
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During the Korean War, Air Guardsmen flew 39,530 combat sorties, destroyed 39 enemy aircraft, and produced four aces, and one two-war ace: James P. Hagerstrom. In many respects the embodiment of the Guard's doctrine of readiness, Hagerstrom stands out as one of service's virtuoso pilots, emerging from the Korean War as one of only 6 two-war aces in American history.

The son of an electrician, Jim Hagerstrom was born in 1921 and grew up in Waterloo, Iowa. He entered college in 1941 at Iowa State, but left during his sophomore year to join Aviation Cadets. During World War II, he flew 170 missions with the 8th Fighter Squadron in New Guinea and shot down 6 Japanese planes. On one mission, Hagerstrom and another pilot took on 15 Japanese fighters in an attempt to rescue two P-38s; in the process, he bagged 4 aircraft.

After the war, Jim left the Army Air Forces, earned a college degree from Iowa State Teacher's College, and then went into the municipal bonds business in Houston, Texas. There, he joined the 111th Fighter-Bomber Squadron of the Texas Guard, and flew F-51 Mustangs. Although many of his regular Air Force colleagues viewed Hagerstrom's unit as "the bottom of the heap," Hagerstrom looked back at his Guard experiences with fond memories:

I could take a Mustang and go to a bond sale a thousand miles away. You got your own Mustang instead of flying the airlines. It was faster and you could go when

you wanted to go. I was flying 500 hours a year, much more time than the 200 hours a year I would have gotten in the Air Force.

As a Guardsman, Hagerstrom brought honor to his unit by flying the F-51 and P-38 in the 1948 Cleveland Air Races.

In October 1950, Major Hagerstrom, now the commander of the 111th squadron, mobilized with his unit for service in Korea. He later transferred to the 334th squadron, a regular unit with the Air Force's 18th Wing. Hagerstrom left the United States determined to become a two war ace. To give himself an edge, Hagerstrom studied every intelligence report he could find on the MiG-15, and even convinced an optometrist to grind him a special pair of half mirrored glasses which enabled him to see at twenty feet what a normal person would see at ten. He also ordered a customized winter white flight suit made of raw silk for maximum insulation, and packed his own survival kit with extra food, medicine, and .22 caliber Hornet rifle.

Once in Korea, Hagerstrom drew up a metric conversion table for his aircraft and lead patrols over MiG Alley at metric altitudes to improve his odds of spotting enemy aircraft. Hagerstrom shot down the 18th Wing's first MiG of the war on 21 November 1952. His next kill took place on Christmas day, 1952. No one wanted to fly Christmas, but Jim volunteered, and sure enough, his element received a radar plot from ground control. He lined his pipper up on the tail of a MiG at the extreme altitude of 50,000 feet, but held his fire, fearing that a shot would stall his F-86. Before Jim could fire, the MiG pilot bailed out at 45,000 on a 20-degree below zero day; he probably froze to death on the way down during his 30 minute parachute descent to earth.

By 27 March 1953, Hagerstrom had 4.5 MiG-15 kills to his credit, and only needed a half a credit more to achieve the coveted double ace status. Now flying with the 67th Squadron of the Fourth Wing, he gave the following speech to his flight that day: “Gentlemen, I’ve been living on coffee; I haven’t been sleeping; I’ve got to do this thing; I’m gonna do it; and if you don’t want to go with me, that’s fine, I’ll understand. We are going to go up there and give it one good try south of the Yalu, and if we don’t scare anything up, I’m going after them today.” Sure enough, Hagerstrom’s flight picked up 6 MiGs just north of the Yalu river in China. Jim got behind one them and began “hammering him” with his 50 caliber guns. As bullets sliced through the MiG’s canopy, Hagerstrom glanced quickly over his shoulder to check his flight’s position. “I saw my number four man with a MiG right behind him, shooting at him. I hollered, ‘pull it tighter Snow, he’s got you.’” Hagerstrom reversed back, pulled around, and took a shot. “It was just a hip shot, you know. It had no deflection, no nothing, just boom, like that. Just sheer ass luck. It knocked his wing tip off.” the MiG pilot broke off his attack on Snow and headed down. At 15,000 feet, Hagerstrom pulled up because in a Mach 1 dive, the F-86 needs at least 10,000 feet to recover. The MiG also pulled up, and as he did so, Jim hit him again. The two planes then went into a vertical climb, “and every time my pipper was in his tail pipe, I’d give him a burst and another burst and another burst. I ended up coming up canopy to canopy with him.” As the two planes approached zero air speed, Hagerstrom slid off the MiG at 36,000 feet. “He was sitting there, smoke and shit coming out of his airplane right above his air base. I saw him lean down and blow his canopy. And as he straightened up his head, he looked over at me. Then he leaned his head back and blew the seat out. So I thought, ‘I wonder what he’s going to tell those guys at the officers club

tonight because he's going to be landing very close to his own air base.' Seeing a burning MiG crash on your own base can cause a hell of a morale problem.”

Hagerstrom would receive credit for destroying that MiG and the first MiG he engaged that day. He went on to bag another MiG on 13 April and then the Air Force transferred him home. On his last day in Korea, Jim was in the operations hut in his class A uniform waiting for a C-47 flight to Japan. A friend in ops suddenly came over to him and told him that four aircraft were desperately needed over a sensitive area. “I’ll do it,” he volunteered, “and I turned to the ops officers and told them we have an instant mission: you’re two, you’re three, you’re four, and ‘Sam Kratz’ will be the leader—that’s me.” The radar operator then vectored them into a gaggle of MiGs and Hagerstrom got his last MiG of the war.

With 8.5 MiGs to his credit and a Silver star with five oak clusters, Hagerstrom opted to stay in the regular Air Force after the war. Hagerstrom ended up taking over a squadron of F-86s at Foster AFB in Victoria, Texas, and then heading the Far East Air Forces’ fighter branch in Japan in 1956. From Japan, he journeyed to Taiwan to train Republic of China fighter pilots. After a stint in Hawaii on the Pacific Air Forces’ staff, Jim joined the staff of the Air Force Office of Inspector General, and got a law degree at Loyola University in Los Angeles. In 1965, the Air Force sent Colonel Hagerstrom to Vietnam to run the Seventh Air Force’s combat operations center. Jim quickly became embroiled in disputes with the Army over the roles and missions of Air Force assets attached to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). Hagerstrom argued that Air Force planes in South Vietnam should be used to strike targets in North Vietnam, but General William Westmoreland, the MACV commander, wanted the planes used to

support Army operations “in-country.” Westmoreland ultimately fired Hagerstrom over the issue.

Upon retirement in 1967, Hagerstrom spent his remaining days practicing law in Guam and pursuing his other great love—sailing his homemade sailboat around the Pacific. Colonel James Hagerstrom died on July 1994 and was buried with military honors at Arlington National Cemetery. Today, Jim Hagerstrom’s memory lives on with the 111th squadron in Houston, where a maintenance hanger was named after him in 1957.

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