

Group Captain Gordon Harvey DFC 27 March 1923 - 8 May 2017



Group Captain Gordon Harvey DFC passed away on 8 May 2017, aged 94, and was privately cremated. He was a fighter pilot in Korea and became a Prisoner of War by the North Koreans.

North Korea is well known today for its ruthless and at times brutal regime. If anything, it was even harsher during the Korean war. Allied POWs were severely mistreated, suffering physically and mentally and sometimes dying as a result.

Six RAAF pilots and an RAF colleague flying with 77 Squadron in the war became POWs. Unlike many others, all seven survived the lashings, forced marches, malnutrition and other inhuman treatment routinely inflicted on POWs by their fanatical captors and lived to tell their tale.

Gordon Harvey was one of the six RAAF POWs. He was at Iwakuni in Japan when the war broke out on 25 June 1950, flying Mustangs with 77 Squadron as part of the Allied occupation forces. From there he flew on the squadron's first mission over the north escorting USAF B-29 bombers attacking a communist airfield during the first week in July.

The squadron soon switched to the ground attack role for most missions. This was demanding and dangerous work that took a steady toll on aircraft and pilots, but his luck held, he survived seven months of ground attack and was awarded a DFC for his part in this work.

Then, on 19 January 1951 during a 12 aircraft attack on the Chinese Army HQ at Pyongyang, his engine was hit by ground fire and lost power. He calmly announced he was 'going to belly land this aircraft', did so and climbed out unharmed.

Running low on fuel, the other Mustangs called for a rescue helicopter and returned home. Some time later a USAF Mustang arrived, provided some top cover and dropped a note saying a helicopter was on the way. But it was almost dark and no helicopter arrived. A dawn flight by the squadron next day found his downed aircraft with signs of activity around it, but no pilot. Gordon Harvey was now a POW and would remain so for 32 months.

His first five weeks in captivity were very severe, being spent in a North Korean prison they called 'Pok's Palace' after the ruthless major in charge. They rose at 5:30 each day, went to bed at sunset and were given only two meagre meals of rice or sorghum and some weak vegetable soup each day.

In late April 1951 he escaped, along with two Americans. Recaptured, they were treated so badly one of the Americans died. Gordon was put in a two metre deep hole for 45 days until all the prisoners were moved to a Chinese camp near the Yalu river. Here the physical treatment was a little less harsh, but they were forced to attend political lectures for eight hours a day and appear attentive or face punishment.

Despite all this abuse, he recovered after he was released and was soon fit to fly again, and went on to a long RAAF career. In this he was no doubt helped by a quiet but determined manner, and high professional and personal standards. A previous CAF, Jake Newham, recently described him as: 'one of the finest; upright in every sense and a great pilot'.

This view is borne out by his post-Korea career that included commanding both 76 and 77 Squadrons, a tour with the fledgling Malaysian Air Force helping it get established; an exchange tour with the USAF flying F-100 Super Sabres and time as the air attaché in Paris.

In all, he spent more than three years in Korea – seven months fighting the Communists and 32 months being mistreated by them. The war ended in 1953, 64 years ago, and would be unknown to most Australians were it not for the outrageous behaviour of North Korea's communist regime.

As it is, there are almost daily reminders of that while Korea is still divided and the north is still run by ruthless fanatics, South Korea is democratic and free - thanks in no small part to men like Gordon Harvey. May he rest in peace.

Doug Hurst