



CHARLES  
COOMBS

**SABRE JET**

**ACE**

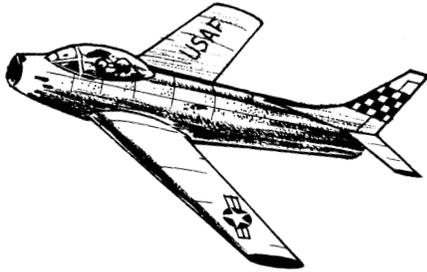


# SABRE JET ACE

BY CHARLES COOMBS

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back cover US Air Force, Suwon Air Base, Korea, May 18, 1953

The F-86F on the cover did fly in the US Air Force beginning in 1952. It is owned and piloted by Doug Matthews, who painstakingly restored it with Classic Fighters of America, and painted it to honor Captain Joseph McConnell Jr.'s last F-86F.

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# CONTENTS

## From Model Planes to Army Medic

- |    |                                |    |
|----|--------------------------------|----|
| 1. | EYES OF AN EAGLE               | 1  |
| 2. | TOO YOUNG FOR THE AIR CORPS    | 10 |
| 3. | THE OLD ONE-TWO                | 16 |
| 4. | PILLS, TAGS, AND BAGS OF FLOUR | 27 |
| 5. | PEARL HARBOR                   | 37 |

## Wings

- |     |                                    |    |
|-----|------------------------------------|----|
| 6.  | AIR CADET                          | 44 |
| 7.  | FLYING SCHOOL                      | 54 |
| 8.  | THE LONG HOP                       | 64 |
| 9.  | CREW OF THE <i>SCREAMING EAGLE</i> | 73 |
| 10. | BANDITS AROUND THE CLOCK           | 82 |
| 11. | BOMBS AWAY!                        | 92 |

## Sizzling Jets

- |     |                 |     |
|-----|-----------------|-----|
| 12. | PILOT WINGS     | 101 |
| 13. | THE TIGER ROARS | 114 |
| 14. | TEN FEET TALL   | 124 |
| 15. | KOREA           | 132 |

## Sabres Over Korea

- |     |                       |     |
|-----|-----------------------|-----|
| 16. | MIG ALLEY             | 141 |
| 17. | FLIGHT LEADER         | 154 |
| 18. | FIRST STAR            | 162 |
| 19. | JET ACE               | 171 |
| 20. | SPECIAL MISSION       | 181 |
| 21. | BAIL OUT              | 188 |
| 22. | BRAVE MEN AND BULLETS | 194 |
| 23. | LAST FLIGHT           | 204 |



## **EYES OF AN EAGLE**

### CHAPTER 1

THE HUM OF A SMALL AIRPLANE sounded across the park of a New Hampshire town. The hum of its engine grew louder as it flew around and around.

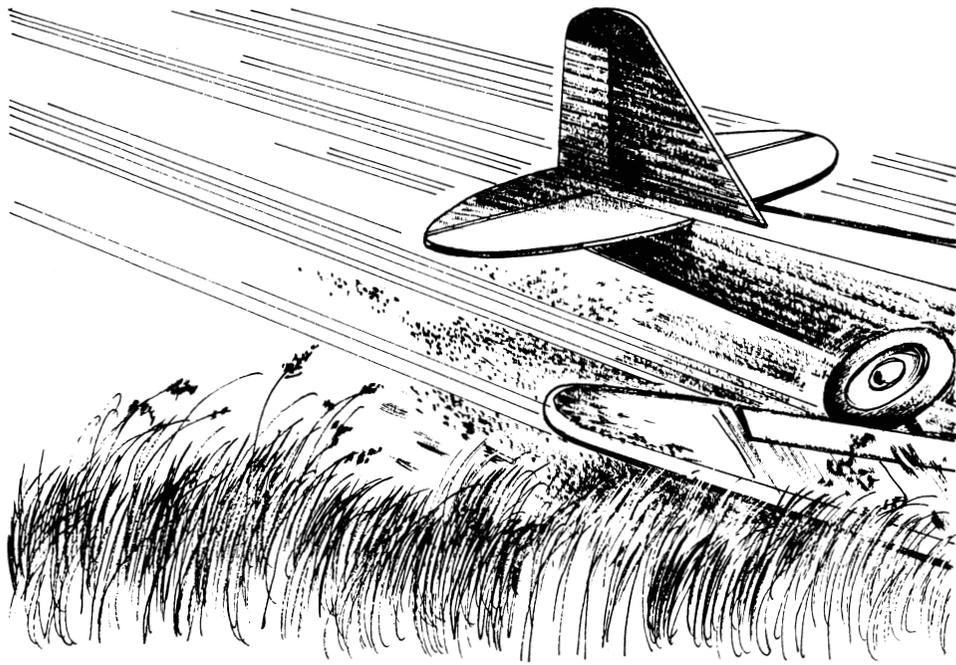
All at once the plane began to wobble. The wing tipped too far to one side. Young Joseph McConnell, Jr. fought with the controls to right the plane. Sweat rolled down his tanned face and into his dark eyes.

He heard his friend Steve call to him, “Hey, Mac! What’s the matter?”

There was no time to answer. Suddenly the plane nosed down sharply. The tip of one wing almost hit a tall tree in the park.

“Pull her up, Mac!” The shout rang out again. “Pull her up!”

Mac tugged at the control stick. But he could not pull the plane out of the dive. He jerked at the controls again. Hard. A wire snapped.



Now, with a broken control stick, there was no way for Mac to keep his plane in the air. As it dived straight toward the ground, he braced himself and waited.

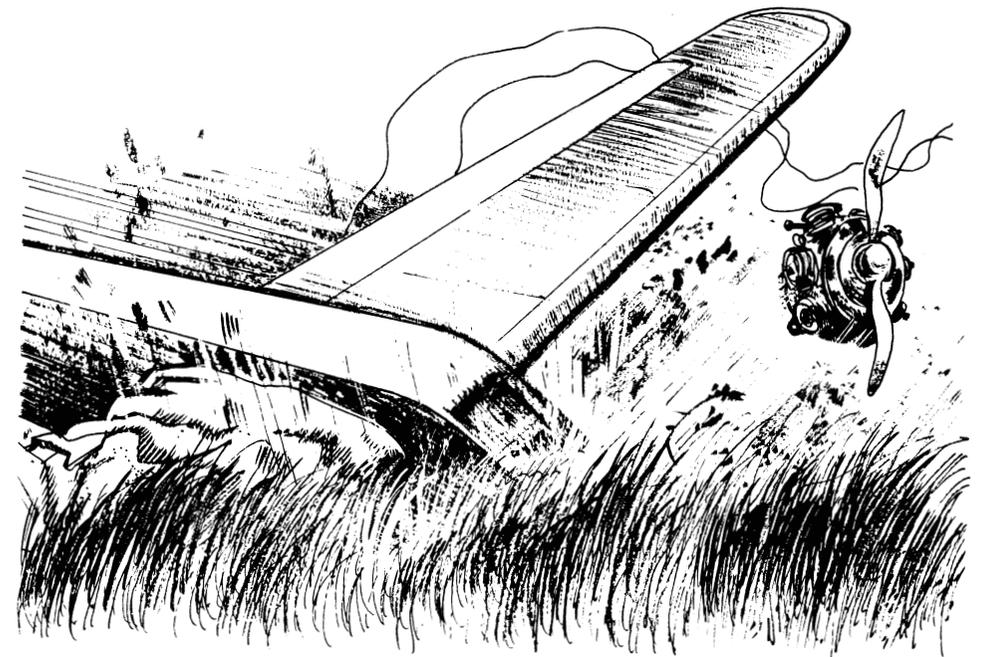
Crash!

Pieces of the plane flew everywhere. Mac ducked as the small engine whizzed past him. Pieces of wood, parts of the wing, bits of metal fell around him. Then everything was quiet.

“Hey, Mac,” Steve was calling to him again. “Are you hurt?”

Mac shook his head and turned to his friend, Steve Davis. He saw the worry in Steve’s blue eyes, and grinned.

“No. I’m not hurt,” he answered. “Who gets hurt flying a model airplane?”



Steve took off his thick horn-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes. “When she crashed, the engine broke loose and went flying through the air like a bullet.”

“I saw it just in time to duck,” Mac said.

“Lucky for you. It might have taken off the top of your head.”

Mac laughed. He tugged at his dark hair. “See. Still in one piece. But I can’t say the same for our model airplane.”

He looked at the broken pieces that were scattered over the ground.

“It’s a wreck, all right,” Steve agreed. “And we paid a lot just for that engine alone, Mac.”

“Don’t I know it! Remember how hard we worked cutting grass to earn the money?”

Mac leaned down and picked up a piece of the broken wing. He looked at it for a second, then tossed it away.

“What happened?” Steve asked.

Mac held up the short piece of the stick he still had in his hand. Only minutes before it had been the control stick of their model plane. Two thin wires had stretched from each end of the stick to the model. By using these wires—by tipping the stick back and forth—a “pilot” could fly the plane, guiding it from the ground.

Now one of the long control wires was broken. Mac pointed to it and said, “I think I twisted the wires some way or other. Maybe when I tried to make the plane do a loop. Anyway, when it nosed over and started to dive I jerked too hard on the stick. A wire broke. Cr-rr-ash!”

Steve nodded. “Well, there isn’t much you can do when a control wire breaks.”

“Just wait for the crash.”

“We’ll put stronger wires on our next model,” Steve said. “Let’s go home and get started.”

Mac looked at his friend. What a pal! Steve might be a little shy. Skinny, too. At times he reminded Mac of an owl, looking out through his thick glasses.

In fact, Mac and Steve were about as much like

each other as black and white or hot and cold. But they were friends. Good friends.

“How about it?” Steve spoke up again. “We still have enough wood left to make another model.”

Mac grinned. You couldn’t help liking a fellow like Steve. A fellow who wouldn’t give up, who wouldn’t quit when things went wrong.

“Sure, we could do it,” Mac said, “only—”

“What’s the matter, Mac?”

“Well, I was thinking we might lay off making another model for a while.”

“Lay off? You mean quit?”

Mac didn’t like the word. “No, not quit,” he answered. “Just do something else.”

“Like what?”

Mac didn’t answer right away. How could he tell Steve what was on his mind? How could he tell this skinny, shy boy of his new plan?

It would mean the end of their being together. But not the end of being good friends. Distance didn’t matter to friends. A friend was a friend if he was right here beside you, or if he was a thousand miles away.

“Do something like what?” Steve asked again, pulling Mac out of his thoughts.

“Well, it’s just this,” Mac answered. “It’s about time



for me to start learning how to fly a real plane, Steve. After all, we can't fly models all our lives."

"All our lives! We're only seventeen."

"You're seventeen." Mac threw back his shoulders. "I'm eighteen, and if I'm ever going to be a pilot, I should get started."

"So that's it," Steve said, nodding his head. "So that's what has been bothering you. Mac, you would

make a good pilot. One of the best. But how will you pay for flying lessons? How can you make enough money for that?"

"I've figured out a plan, Steve. And I think it will work."

Mac pointed to some buildings across from the park. "What's that big white building over there?"

"It's the post office," Steve answered. "The Dover Post Office."

"Right you are," Mac said. "And see that sign in front of it? The one that says:

UNCLE SAM NEEDS YOU!

BE A FLIER

JOIN THE ARMY AIR CORPS."

Steve looked at Mac and then at the sign again. "You—you mean you can read it from here!"

Mac wished he had said nothing about being able to read the sign. Both boys loved flying with all their hearts. Both knew that a pilot needed good sharp eyes. Both knew the day would come when Mac would go on alone. For his dream—his one dream—to become a pilot was nothing new.

The two boys were quiet for a while, each busy with his own thoughts.

At last it was Steve who said, "You'll make it. You

have eyes like an eagle. Mac, the eagle! That's what I'll call—"

Mac broke in with a laugh. "Say, that's great! An eagle can fly. And anything that can fly is for me. That's why I'm going to join the Air Corps."

"They'll be lucky to get you."

Mac smiled. What a friend! "Thanks, Steve. Boy, I wish we could go in together."

"With my eyes?" Steve asked. "I haven't a chance, Mac."

"You could be a mechanic or something. You're a whiz at fixing engines. Why not? The more I think of it—"

"I'm only seventeen," Steve reminded. "And besides, I told my folks I'd wait. After all, I haven't finished high school yet like you."

"I forgot. You're right. Wait until you are out of school. I know my folks wouldn't have agreed for me to join until I had graduated."

"Then you have talked it over with them?"

"Sure," Mac answered. "I wouldn't do anything like joining the Air Corps without talking it over with my folks."

"When are you going to enlist?"

An idea came to Mac. "Why not today? Why not right now?"

Steve looked at him. "Boy, you don't take much time to make up your mind."

"No point in holding off."

"I'll miss you," Steve said. "But no matter what happens, I sure wish you the best luck in the world."

Mac swallowed hard. And for some reason he couldn't explain, he kicked at a piece of broken airplane wing lying on the grass.

"Want to come along with me to the post office?" he asked.

Steve shook his head. "No, I'll wait here. And thanks, Mac. Thanks a lot."

"Thanks for what?"

"For being my friend."

"That was easy, pal."

Mac turned away and headed across the park. Behind him he heard Steve blowing his nose. But he didn't look back to see why. He knew.

His own eyes filled a little at the thought of their parting.



## TOO YOUNG FOR THE AIR CORPS

### CHAPTER 2

MAC CUT ACROSS the park to the Dover Post Office. Running up the steps, he turned and waved to Steve. Then seeing himself in the glass door, he stopped and smoothed down his dark hair.

“Joe McConnell reporting, sir,” he said, looking at himself. “Five feet eight inches of flying fighting man. Show me my plane.”

He stopped. “Better not try it that way,” he told himself. “They’ll kick me out on my ear before I even see a plane.”

Mac opened the door and went inside. He hurried down a long hall to a sign on a door marked UNITED STATES ARMY. ENLIST HERE.

Since the door was open, Mac threw back his shoulders and walked into the room. The room was a small one. Just big enough to hold a desk, a few chairs lined up along a wall, and a small table.



A soldier, wearing a tan uniform with the three stripes of an army sergeant, was sitting at the desk.

“What can I do for you?” he said, putting down the papers he had been reading. “Want to sign up to be a soldier?”

“I would rather sign up to be a pilot, sir,” Mac answered.

The sergeant looked him over carefully. Mac “stood tall,” as they say. He hoped it would make him look ready and fit to be a pilot in the Army Air Corps.

“At ease,” the sergeant said, smiling. “You will have your fill of standing at attention once you are in the army. So you want to be a pilot—a flying cadet?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s your name?”

“Joseph McConnell, Jr., sir. But everyone calls me Mac.”

“How old are you, Mac?”

“Eighteen, sir.”

The sergeant shook his head. “Eighteen is too young to sign up for pilot training.”

“But, sir, the sign out front says the army needs fliers.”

“We do. There’s a war going on in Europe, you know. The United States may be in it one of these days. We must be ready. Sure, we need fliers. But we want them to be at least twenty-one years old.”

“I can run faster and fight harder than some fellows I know who are twenty-one.” Mac stopped, his face red. “Sir, I didn’t mean to sound off.”

“That’s all right. Sure, you’re a husky fellow. But can you think better than a twenty-one-year-old?”

Mac listened quietly as the sergeant went on. “It

takes brains to fly a plane, boy. Sure, you need to be strong and quick with your muscles. But you need to be sharp and quick with your brain, too. That takes practice, Mac. It takes experience. Most fellows just haven’t had enough practice in thinking by the time they are eighteen.”

“I can think, sir,” Mac said. He wasn’t going to give up without a real try. “I finished high school this summer. Class of 1940. I’ve studied flying, and—”

The sergeant cut in, “I can’t sign you up for pilot training, Mac. Rules are rules.”

“I didn’t know it was a rule, sir.”

The sergeant smiled. “That’s all right. I don’t mind listening to a guy who knows what he wants and has enough spirit to go after it.”

Mac laughed. “Well, I guess I’ll just wait three more years and then try again.”

“There’s a better way, Mac.”

“What’s that?”

“Join the army now,” the sergeant answered. “Train to be a soldier. Get most of your marching and digging and stuff like that behind you. Then, when you’re twenty-one, you’re all ready. If—”

“If? If what, sir?”

“If you pass the tests,” the sergeant answered. “It takes a lot to become a flier, Mac. Not everyone can

make the grade. A flier has to have a sharp mind. He has to be in the best of health. If you can pass all the tests of the Air Corps you might make it as a pilot. Some day. It's up to you."

The sergeant sure made it sound like a tough job to become a flier.

"What do you say, Mac?" the sergeant asked. "Want to enlist now? And maybe fly later?"

"If you think that's the best way to do it."

"Good." The sergeant handed Mac some papers to fill out. "No way to be sure. But we need fliers badly. The war in Europe is a long way from being over. If we get into it, we'll need a lot more fliers than we have now."

Mac filled out the army forms and gave them back to the sergeant. "When do I report for duty?" he asked.

"You'll get a notice telling you when and where to report."

"Maybe they will send me to an air base."

The sergeant smiled. "There's not much chance for that, Mac. But you've got the right spirit. Keep it up and I'll bet my sergeant's stripes that one of these days you will be a pilot. Just don't give up."

"I won't," Mac said as he turned to leave. "I sure won't."



"It's the teamwork out here that counts. The lone wolf stuff is out. Your life always depends on your wingman and his life on you. I may get credit for a MiG, but it's the team that does it, not myself alone."

—Captain Joseph C. McConnell, Jr.

*Sabre Jet Ace* is a story based upon the military records and flying deeds of the world's first triple jet ace—Captain Joseph C. McConnell, Jr. This is Mac's story. But it is also the story of daring young airmen, fighting their battles high in the sky—of blazing machine guns—of planes falling in flames. *Sabre Jet Ace* is more than a war story of men and planes. It is a story of all brave men fighting for what is right and good—freedom.

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