

THE fortuitous arrival of the defecting Mozambique Air Force MIG-17 with a pilot seeking political asylum at Hoedspruit Air Base on Wednesday will be the cherry on top of the cake for the "birthday" reunion there tomorrow of No 2 Fighter Squadron SAAF — the "Cheetah" Squadron.

For this was the squadron that represented South Africa's military contribution towards the United Nations force that fought against the communists in the Korean War during 1953-54. Cheetah pilots there flew Mustangs and Sabres against Russian MIG-15s which later were developed into 17s.

So some of the veterans who will be among the 120 officers gathering for a reunion at the Lowveld base for a reunion extending over tomorrow and Saturday may be doubly glad that the party planned for last year to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the establishment of the squadron — and its baptism of battle in Kenya, Italian Somaliland and Abyssinia in 1940 — was postponed until now.

No fewer than six general officers at present serving on the headquarters staff of the Defence Force are ex-Cheetah Squadron pilots: Lieutenant-General Mike Muller, Chief of the Air Force; Major-General Eddie Plenaar, Inspector-General SAAF; Dennis Earp, Director-General Operations, SAAF; Jannie van Loggerenberg, Chief of Air Staff Operations; Danie van Niekerk, Chief of Air Staff Logistics; and Butch Crafford, the Quartermaster-General.

Two former Chiefs of the Air Force, Ray Armstrong and Bob Rogers — with 24 honours the most highly decorated men in the history of

A TOAST TO THE ACES OF CHEETAH SQUADRON

By CAREL BIRKBY

the SAAF — were also Cheetah pilots who served in both the Second World War and the Korean War.

The squadron's exploits in the Far East entitle it to claim that it has fought in more spheres of battle than any other air unit, with no fewer than 17 battle honours or its colours covering East and North Africa and Europe.

Its Korean exploits earned its members a cascade of decorations. Among these were a number of DSOs and DFCs plus, from the Americans, 55 DFCs, 175 Air Medals, 152 clusters to the Air Medal, 42 Bronze Stars, two Silver Stars and three Legion of Merits.

During the Second World War its fighter pilots also earned a galaxy of decorations, among them six DSOs and 25 DFCs (including bars).

The squadron in its 41 years has flown many types of aircraft, steadily more sophisticated — in East Africa, Gladiators, Furies, Gauntlets and

Hurricanes, Tomahawks and Kittyhawks; in Europe, Spitfire IXs; in Korea Mustangs and Sabres; back home, Haarvards for training and Vampires. Now they have Mirage F1 supersonic fighters.

The squadron owes its proud nickname to its early days in Kenya, when a farmer at Nanyuki offered it a Cheetah as a pet while a South African bomber squadron adopted a lion cub. Now again the squadron has a cheetah as a mascot at Hoedspruit. Named, Aqua, it is the gift of a Lowveld farmer.

Wilfred Isaacs, the South African business and cricket personality who was a Cheetah pilot during the Second World War and is now the unit's honorary colonel, said last night:

"For its Far Eastern service in the 1960s the squadron received the US Presidential Unit Citation and a similar honour from the President of Korea. But it cherishes even more the order issued by the commander of the 18th Fighter Bomber Wing in which it served. This order went:

'In memory of our gallant South African comrades, it is hereby established as a new policy that at all Retreat ceremonies held by this Wing, the playing of our national anthem shall be preceded by playing the introductory bars of the South African national anthem, Die Stem van Suid Afrika. All personnel of this wing will render the same honour to this anthem as to our own.

'This is a heartening reminder of a long standing friendship between the United States and South Africa — a friendship based on service in a common cause, now likely to become warm again.'

RDM. 10/7/81