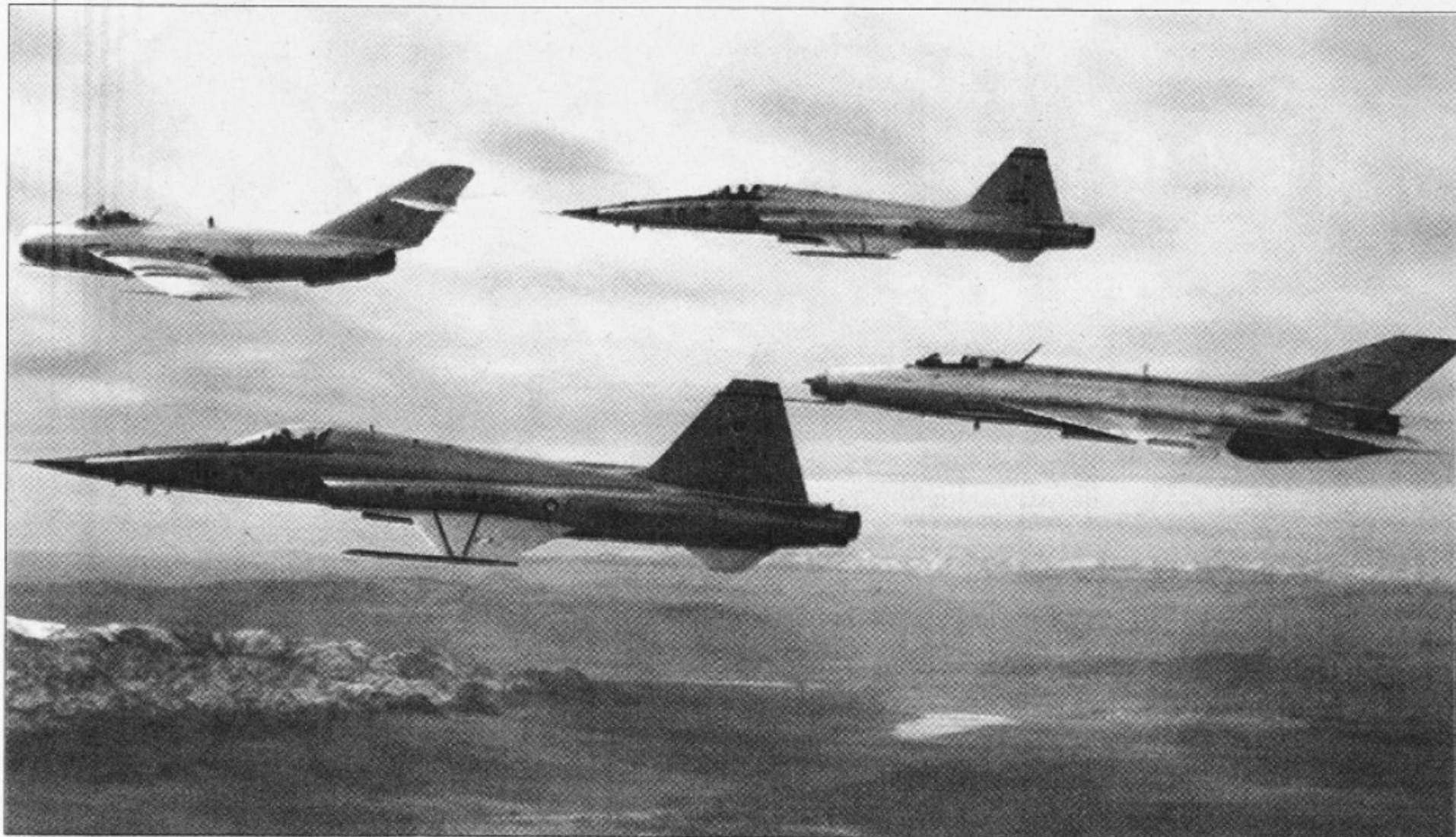


AirForceTimes this week



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Training with MiGs

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Two F-5s from the 64th Fighter Weapons Squadron fly with a MiG-17 and a MiG-21 in this circa-1979 photo. The author of a new book about the formerly classified program to train U.S. pilots against the Soviet fighters found that some of the pilots still had trouble opening up about their experience.

History declassified

Book explores once-secret MiG program

By Bruce Rolfsen
rolfsen@militarytimes.com

Steve Davies heard the rumors. For years, U.S. pilots flew Soviet MiG fighters from a secret base in the Nevada desert.

The evidence was scant, Davies recalled. There was a blurry picture of a MiG. There were magazine stories speculating on what the MiGs were doing. There were souvenir MiG control sticks displayed in commanders' offices.

When Davies left his business career in 2001 to write about aviation history, he began pursuing the MiG rumors.

"I knew someone who was in the [MiG] squadron," Davies recalled. "He wouldn't talk."

Another former pilot in the squadron told Davis in 2005, "I can't talk to you either."

Davies' break came in November 2006. The Air Force declassified details of the project, code named "Constant Peg," freeing pilots, maintainers and others involved with the decade-long effort to speak about their time with

MiG-17 Frescos, MiG-21 Fishbeds and MiG-23 Floggers.

After interviewing more than 60 people and sorting through volumes of records, Davies wrote "Red Eagles: America's Secret MiGs," a detailed history of Constant Peg and the MiG programs that paved the way. Osprey Publishing released the book in September.

It was hard for many pilots to open up about their tours flying MiGs, Davies said. "I still can't believe I can talk to someone" was a common refrain he heard.

Constant Peg's start in 1977 grew from the decision to give operational pilots experience flying against MiGs, Davies said. Before then, operational pilots rarely flew against the MiGs.

Since the Korean War, MiG fighters were the primary threat to U.S. pilots. The Soviet and American militaries constantly looked for ways to achieve performance and tactical advantages over each other. Each advance made by American designers was countered by the Soviets.

As the U.S. Air Force pieced together a makeshift fleet of MiGs from former Soviet allies, a select group of pilots flew the MiGs and figured out their weaknesses and sometimes surprising strengths, such as being hard to see straight on.

Davies' book lays out how the MiG unit, at first designated the 4477th Test and Evaluation Flight, was established with a high degree of concealment, so secretly that the unit set up its own base on the Tonopah Training Range, about 150 miles northwest of Nellis Air Force Base, Nev. A Navy pilot assigned to the nascent unit came up with the nickname Red Eagles.

Money was not a problem for the secret unit, Davies found. While finance officers rarely knew where the money was headed, they knew the project had the blessing of Air Force leadership, Davies said. Just how many millions of dollars was spent to acquire and maintain the MiGs is still classified.

During Constant Peg's decade of training, about 70 pilots, including some Navy and Marine Corps fliers, had assignments to the squadron, Davies found. Most arrived with experience as aggressor squadron aviators or as weapons school graduates. The pilots commuted daily to Tonopah from homes in Las Vegas.

Many enlisted and commissioned maintainers assigned to the squadron spent four days straight at the base, coming home for weekends.

If wives or others asked what they were up to, the pilots told them only that it was a classified test project, Davies said.



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Maj. Thomas Drake poses with his MiG-23MS Flogger E, "Red 49." When Drake left the unit, he remarked that the MiG-23 had tried to kill him on every sortie.

The U.S. obtained MiGs and spare parts from nations who had changed sides in the Cold War. But detailed operations and repair manuals were rare or badly translated from the original Russian, adding to the challenges faced by U.S. pilots and maintainers.

When post-Cold War budget cuts started, it was hard to justify the expenses of Constant Peg. The Air Force also found it didn't need its own MiG unit when many former Soviet Bloc air forces were more than happy for U.S. fighters to fly against their Soviet-built aircraft.

Constant Peg's planes either were destroyed or became displays. Davies interviewed one

pilot who found his old MiG-21 in a museum with his name still painted on the side of the jet.

While the Air Force has told Constant Peg's story, Davies said the MiG evaluation projects preceding Constant Peg are still largely classified. Davies also believes that the Air Force still secretly flies a few MiGs as tactics and new air-to-air weapons are developed.

If the U.S. MiG pilots had a common thread beyond their skills, it was their willingness to share their knowledge, Davies said. "They could teach someone a lesson, but feel humble about it," Davies said. "Everyone was keen to say, 'I'm not special.'" □

AN EXCERPT FROM 'RED EAGLES: AMERICA'S SECRET MiGs'

On July 17, 1979, MiG operations at Tonopah began. In the days before, six MiG-21s and two MiG-17s had been flown in from Groom Lake. Lt. Col Gailard Peck flew the first MiG-21 sortie from Tonopah, and Capt. Joe Oberle the first MiG-17.

Coordinating the first operational squadron exposures flown out of Tonopah, Oberle remembered, was a matter of identifying units that were coming in to participate in Red Flag, or that were deployed in specifically for CONSTANT PEG. In the case of the former, a squadron would deploy to Nellis Air Force Base, Nev., with absolutely no idea that they were going to do anything other than Red Flag. However, for the duration of the two-week exercise, two or three pilots per day would be taken off the flying schedule and told instead to report to another building on

the Nellis compound for some unspecified training. In the case of the latter, the squadron would usually send a small cadre of six aircraft and as many as eight pilots.

The Blue Air pilots, no doubt mystified, would arrive at the 4477th Test and Evaluation Flight's plain white trailer vans located in the Fighter Weapons School parking lot, away from the main hub of flying operations. There they would be greeted by one or two unfamiliar pilots wearing the yellow and black checkered scarves of the Nellis elite beneath the collars of their flight suits, and on their left shoulders a circular patch depicting a Soviet-styled red eagle with wings spreading either side of a white five-point star. In red at the bottom of the circle were the numbers and letters "4477th TEF." At the top

was written "Red Eagles."

The Blue Air pilots would be seated in a small briefing room in the trailers, and were finally read into the CONSTANT PEG program. "They had the fear of God hammered into them," Peck said. "We left them in no doubt that any divulgence of the program's secrets would be dealt with in the most severe of ways." The Red Eagle pilots would brief them, usually in small groups of two or four, about what they were going to see the next day, how the sorties were going to be sequenced, and what would be demonstrated while airborne.

The next morning, the Red Eagle pilots left Nellis early, arriving at Tonopah range in the Cessna or a borrowed Aggressor T-38. As the first two Blue Air pilots briefed the sortie at Nellis and stepped to their jets for take-off, the two Bandit pilots

would be getting ready to man the MiGs. Approaching the airfield at a prearranged time, and broadcasting their position on the Red Eagles' radio frequency, the Blue Air pilots would announce their imminent arrival. Oberle explained: "We'd be in the cockpit, and as soon as we heard them check in, we'd crank and taxi out to the end of the runway. When they got overhead we'd take off and they would join up with us to get their first look at an airborne asset."

A record of each pilot to undergo exposure to the MiGs was filed at Tonopah, allowing the 4477th TEF to determine who had received what training, and against which aircraft, for future reference. This was critical because not only was it desired that the Red Eagles expose as many frontline fighter pilots as possible, but also because each pilot could participate in three different types of exposure with each MiG type during the course

of his career.

The three-stage exposure program now differed in its overall aggression and tone from that which had been flown prior to the arrival of the MiGs at Tonopah. Whereas the exposures prior to September 1979 had essentially gone straight for the kill, with dogfighting on the first sortie and 2 vs. 2 or even 4 vs. 2 on the third sortie, the new regime took a more gradual approach. Stage one, the first exposure, incorporated a performance profile (PP), followed by a brief stint of BFM at the end if fuel allowed. The PP constituted the new, more gentle introduction to the MiGs and would often start with an interception using the visiting pilot's radar, followed by a visual join up. "You'd be there in this little biddy MiG-17, with your head sticking out above the canopy rail, and the guy's eyes would just about pop out of his head as he joined up with you in formation," Peck chuckled. □