

THE LAST MIG KILLER – PART II

Fighter pilot Cesar ‘Rico’ Rodreguez recorded his first Mig ‘kill’ during the Gulf War on January 19, 1991. Seven days later on January 26, with blinding sand storms swirling at up to 50,000 feet and violent thunderstorms creating near-zero visibility at up to 40,000 feet altitude, ‘Rico’ recorded his second kill.



He recalled, “In terrible weather like that only high value asset aircraft monitoring the air space and those of us who protected them were airborne. We had just flown north of Baghdad

and were ready to turn south when one of the **AWAC’s (Airborne Warning and Control Systems)** informed us that Iraqi engine activity had been confirmed at one of their western airfields. So we headed southwest to assess the situation and if need be protect our high value assets.”

“Before too long we saw on radar three contacts that took-off from the airfield and joined up into a formation then headed on a collision course with us. The problem was, we were at 35,000 feet and they were down around 500 feet with nothing but bad weather between us. As we continued, we found a sucker-hole in the weather and jumped through it to get below the clouds in

order to better identify, or better yet, witness the activity between our missiles and the Iraqis. We were able to identify the aircraft as Mig-23s. An AWAC and other sources confirmed they were Mig-23s, so we had all the confirmation we needed to take our shots. We just has to get inside the parameters.”



“We descended from 35,000 feet to about 12,000 to 15,000 feet altitude into position. **Our number one took the first shot against the leader of the Mig formation; his wingman engaged the northern most Mig, and I engaged the southern most Mig. We let loose our missiles at about 13 miles distance.** Number one’s missile apparently didn’t detonate on the lead Mig but definitely got his attention as he started a left hand turn to the north. The lead Mig was trailing smoke so number one’s missile did something to cause damage. Number one pursued the lead Mig and saw it blow up in midair. Rory Gregory was in number

one, a great guy and great fighter pilot. He was killed in a tragic traffic accident about a year later.”

“The other two Migs didn’t want any part of the action so they checked away from their leader. Little did they know that all they were doing was heating up the intercept. As soon as they rolled out, our missiles impacted both Migs. As we flew into that environment at 500 feet, we spotted the two burn marks on the ground. So, we scored three kills that day, which gave Rory and I our second kills of the war.”



“Interestingly, a special forces team retrieved a camera from a Mig that showed the impact of my first Mig kill on January 19. Intelligence evaluated the contents of the film, the film ran out, they reviewed

it again, and spotted that frame that showed the missile impacting the nose of the **Mig-29**. I have a copy of that frame in my office. It proves that lone wolf tactics don’t work; in war or business, it has to be a team effort. My wingman that day, Craig, saved my life.”

Did the Air Force apply new tactics after the Gulf War?

“Absolutely. You know, they took the lessons from the Vietnam War and developed the Red Flag Program at Nellis AFB; they spent ton of money to replicate the complexity of the first five

to ten sorties in combat. The training felt like you were in combat. You bring multiple weapons systems into support of a battle or sortie; it's hard, it's very complex, and it's high risk as confirmed by the number of pilots killed in training. It is not a game; and war is not a game, it is real life and death. Those investments paid off, not just for the Air Force, but also for the Navy, Marines, and Army, to make sure we are ready for war."



"Too, one of the successes of Desert Storm (Gulf War), one of the critical successes, was the training foundation we took from that environment. People ask me, 'If it hadn't been Saddam Hussein, let's say it had been the Russians, how would we have panned out?' My answer is we would have kicked their butts like we did Saddam's because of our training. We would have taken more casualties against the Russians, but we would have been victorious. In today's environment, I have to say we may have

lost our true total focus in certain areas with near-peer foes like Russia and China. They are getting close to where we are today.”

Was the Iraqi Air Force worthy as an adversary?

“In the environment of 1991, we would have beaten anybody; the only thing the Iraqis wanted to do was bloody our noses. It’s what we call the CNN factor. If they had topped us on that mission or any other mission just by shooting down one of our planes, they would have gained significant global sympathy led by the Chinese and Russians to get the coalition to ‘stand down’ or stop being such a bully. The Iraqi’s had a plan, or shared a plan with their advisory partners, and if the plan had worked and the American public got to believing, ‘Oh, my God, another Vietnam,’ then politics could have twisted victory into a defeat. If we look at current operations, and we as a collective coalition leader, we have to consider and understand the CNN effect and take in the appropriate calculus of the actions we take.”

Then you’re a strong advocate for military coalitions?

“Yes. We as a coalition are better than anybody. We have to remember that. We will no longer, nor should we, execute lone wolf tactics in global events. We may do certain things as an individual nation, but the bigger calling is for the coalition to be united, interoperable to quickly beat the enemy.”

Tell us about the Kosovo War.

“Both sides were the beneficiaries of the Gulf War. Yugoslavian air defense was the most challenging we’ve faced as a coalition.

They were one step ahead of us because of their study of Gulf War tactics. On the other hand, what we learned in the Gulf War coupled with the value of the Red Flag Program, those lessons learned were unmatched and Yugoslavia could not stay ahead of the game. Even though they shot down two of our planes, one was a mechanical failure, the other a disruption in flightness. We had a very young force going into battle. For example, my squadron alone, the 493rd, only one of us had real combat experience, and that was me. We had nine lieutenants show up and after a 100 hours of combat time they had more combat time than peacetime training time. They were young, but incredibly mature. Some of them were flying F-15s and F-16s for the first time. These young pilots were exceptional, better prepared to go to war than I was when I arrived at Eglin; their training had been more intense and involved.”

Tell us about your encounter with Mig fighters.



“It was night one. The coalition had three kills, mine was the first. We were coming in from the south to open a tactical corridor to allow access to the area where Yugoslavia was doing the ‘ethnic cleansing’, which of course is the politically correct wording for mass murder of a certain group of human beings. Another group came in from the north to start attacks on the strategic assets in the Belgrade area. A third

attack after my mission would be the Dutch Air Force leading a strike against surface to air missiles sites plus take out Yugoslavian tanks prosecuting the cleansing.”

“A Mig-29 took off from an underground airfield to engage the strike package I was protecting. My four ship package was able to intercept him because obviously the Yugoslavian air defense didn’t see my four ship package. It was a zero-illumination moon night, very dark, they weren’t skilled at night; we were. Night for us was like day, we were adjusted to it, we were trained to do it; the cockpit was designed to fly at night. The Mig was coming through a mountain range and I could see him on radar dodging in and out of the gaps. He climbed to clear a 10,000 foot mountain top and leveled off at about 12,000 feet to initiate his vector for our strike package.”



“Just like in the Gulf War, I had to complete an ID matrix. To complete the requirements meant input from several sources which was not fun and not fully executable. Without the ID matrix, I was still 99% confident of what I was shooting against. I let go an Amraan missile which to date is the longest Amraan shot on record. (The distance is still

classified, but well beyond 37 nautical miles). My ‘time remaining to impact’ clock inside the cockpit began a

countdown, and as I watched 3, 2, 1...then I quickly looked off to my right at my two o'clock position and saw an explosion. I call the explosion 'magnificent' because of the brightness. I'm at 30,000 feet; he's at 10 or maybe 11, 000 and the mountains in the background are covered in snow. So the explosion was magnified by the background of snow. I used the analogy from my sports days; if you connected 10 football fields right next to each other and you had 10 people at the main light switch and told them on a walkie-talkie 3, 2, 1. Now! And they lit up all 10 football fields at the same time; that is exactly what the explosion looked like from 30,000 feet. A big glow on the ground."

Note: Four Air Force pilots have three air-to-air kill credits since the Vietnam War. 'Rico' is the only Air Force pilot who's done it in two different conflicts.

Cesar 'Rico' Rodriguez claims a well-trained monkey could do his job, but the monkey by himself could not do it. It takes a TEAM, from the ground crew, to the weapons technicians, to the young airman who makes their lunch so the pilots can fly a 10 or 11 hour mission, or a Chaplain who offers a pre-mission prayer before takeoff. Yours truly is an Air Force veteran, and I truly understand Rico's point of view. But I must say, if Rico's statement is true, then he is one hell of an intelligent monkey.

His closing comments are poignant: "Russia and China are near-peers now. They're making investments in technology that will disrupt the ability of a coalition to achieve its objectives. I'm a

bit nervous. For instance, if a North Korea or Iran, neither of which are superpowers, were to do something then they will get our full attention, but at the same time if China makes a move in Southeast Asia or Russia makes a move in the North Arctic or on one of its former satellite countries, then America couldn't handle that by herself, plus our coalition strength would come into question. I don't lose sleep over it, I mean, we are still pretty badass and can put the hurt in a lot of areas, but the days of us being the sole superpower and the sole leader of how to curtail such an event by our near-peers are behind us."



"You know, when I retired, because everybody retires and you can't lead the life of a fighter pilot inside a jet forever, but you can lead the life of a fighter pilot in the form of your attitude for life. For instance, my wife gave me a vacuum cleaner when I retired with my name on it, just like I had my name on my fighter jet. She hands it to me with the statement, "Here, this is your new weapons system, get ready to start using it often."

Do you use it often?

"I'm afraid so."

