

THE LAST MIG KILLER

Cesar 'Rico' Rodriguez described his youthful home as, "Where we unpacked our luggage." An admitted military brat, Rico was born in El Paso, TX at Ft. Bliss, the son of a career Army soldier. He recalled, "My father was Puerto Rican and my mother was Cuban. We spent a lot of time in Puerto Rico when my father deployed to places like Thule, Greenland. When people ask me my roots, I use the analogy of the Saguaro Cactus. It grows a couple of inches per year; its roots are not deep but very wide to absorb nutrients. Well, military kids grow wide roots quickly at a new base; we learn a lot, even though we sometimes act like we don't like it, we were ahead of other kids. I mean, when the teacher mentions a country or unfamiliar location, we could say, 'Hey, I was there.' We were global children, and my family still is. Our son is in Barcelona as an architect and our daughter just returned from a deployment to Korea."

Why the Citadel?



"I had applied for West Point but there's a clause that said you must apply from your birthplace, so at that time I didn't qualify. Then I submitted for entry into either Virginia Military Institute or The Citadel. The Citadel replied first to the affirmative, so I went to The Citadel...not knowing what I was getting into!"

What did you get into?

“Let me say up front, the things I learned at The Citadel gave me confidence in combat, it made it easy for me compared to other people. However, had it not been for the Catholic priest at the Citadel, I would have quit during my freshman year. The priest told me on several occasions, ‘You can do this, look at the positive.’ Many times I wondered why I was there; other times I absolutely loved it, the lessons in leadership, how to follow if needed, the discipline, and building self-confidence which was reinforced from my military upbringing. Yeah, it was mentally and physically challenging, but you cannot look at life through a rear view mirror. After my freshman year, I never looked back, always looking forward, made lifelong friends and our Citadel community remains strong.”

Your family was Army; why did you choose the Air Force?

“Well, I started out in Army ROTC but my roommate wanted to fly and said I should take the test for pilot training with him...it’s sort of funny, really, I had no aspiration to fly, but took the test anyway. Lo and behold, I did well in the national rankings and was nominated for flight school. I could have chosen the Navy or Marines, but the Army didn’t have many opportunities at the time. Then the Air Force called and told me, ‘You were not on our radar screen; we haven’t been tracking you at all, but you did damn good on the tests.’ They offered me a scholarship for my remaining two years at The Citadel, and I’m thinking, ‘Well, hell,

yeah,' so I passed the physical tests and graduated as a 2nd Lt. in the Air Force."

Tell us about flight training.

"I qualified at The Citadel as a pilot on a Cessna 172 and loved to like being in the air. Once in the Air Force, I trained on the subsonic T-37 Tweet, also known as the Dragonfly, then the supersonic T-38 Talon, both a whole new flying environment compared to the Cessna 172."

What aircraft were you eventually assigned to fly?



"The lovable and durable A-10 Thunderbolt, better known as the Warthog. The aircraft was actually built around the 30mm GAU-8 Avenger rotating cannon, and built for one purpose: ground support. I deployed to South Korea with the aircraft and of course the real threat was North Korea. We had to stay sharp,

constantly training to give us an edge if war came. A lot of guys had flown combat in Vietnam and learning from them was amazing. The Warthog is still flying today, still relevant, with a service expectancy that could keep it in service to 2040.”

When did you transition to the F-15?



“At Holloman AFB, New Mexico. All the instructors were prior weapons systems officers and we had a great jet to do our job. Once familiar with the F-15, I was assigned to Eglin AFB, Florida. **At the time, the F-15 did not carry**

bombs, it was built for air to air, 24/7. Eglin was a great place to train and practice. We’d go supersonic off the coast, fly as high as you wanted, continually testing new weapons systems. I guess we were like kids in a candy store. We received upgraded F-15 with new technology. They looked the same, but the technology was as different as night and day. There were three squadrons at Eglin, lots of competition, and if something was heating up we were first to go.”

Tell us about your roll in Operation Just Cause, the invasion of Panama.

“We had a crucial but little known roll in Operation Just Cause, flying CAP (Combat Air Patrol) around Cuban airspace to keep them from doing something really stupid. The F-15 jets didn’t

provide direct support but we did have air visibility on what was taking place.

Unlike the Gulf War?

“Exactly. I think I can provide a very unique perspective on our situation. When Saddam Hussein’s military invaded Kuwait, the Department of Defense couldn’t even spell the names of the airbases we’d be flying from. Our military was basically focused on Russia and North Korea, so there was an immediate, quick spin in learning. It took a lot of support just to get us there and then sustain us. The same with the Army. When we deployed a big blueprint like that, it took tons and tons of equipment just to move inches. At least we were on the heels of the Reagan heyday, we had no peers for our mission. To clarify, we had no technical peer, but we had threat-peers from Iraq’s allies, with interest in the balance of power in the region, like Russia, Iran, and China. They may have pushed Saddam Hussein into such a bold move.”

Your base?

“Northwest Saudi Arabia, Tabuk Airbase. We had about 28 to 30 aircraft and co-shared the base with Saudi F-5s.”

Tell us about your first engagement.

“That was on January 19, 1991. We were in the third day of the war and I had already flown seven sorties. That’s unheard of in peacetime flying. We took off at zero-dark thirty, 0300, for a defensive counter-air mission. My four ships were to protect our

high value assets in the air in the western sector of the war zone. Basically, our job was to protect against enemy aircraft popping up to catch us by surprise. About five hours into the mission, the Intelligence community identified a target set that was not in the air tasking order. So we scrambled to offensive air to attack location to attack plan. Half of our squadron was stuck on the ground due to bad weather, so two of our four ship sortie were moved to support the offensive air mission.”



“We launched into Iraq. The first four F-15s encountered Migs and F-1 Mirages, several of them, as soon as they crossed the border. They got into a turning fight and ended up not having enough fuel to move on to

the counter air mission. So, my wingman, Craig Underhill, and I, were moved from the tail end of the strike package to the front. As the strike package got close to their target, we had our first encounter, **two Mig-29 Fulcrums coming out of Baghdad**. They came in and executed what I called a ‘drag movement’, basically trying to pull us into the Baghdad defensive area. Well, they tricked us; they had our attention. We were suddenly within SAM (surface to air missile) range; we realized we weren’t in position to take a shot plus were being targeted by Iraqi missiles. That’s when a third element of surprise got into the game. The AWAC (Airborne Warning and Control System) informed us of

threats 8 to 10 miles out, so we quickly maneuvered into that position.”



“I spotted the first Mig, but I had to do an ID matrix to do a missile shot. Unfortunately, he locked onto me first before I completed my ID matrix which forced me to initiate defensive measures. Thank heaven, Craig, my wingman, had completed his ID matrix and took a shot. The Mig was about 3 miles off my right wing, so when my wingman’s missile hit the Mig that was very close and personal to me. Not only did I realize that I had been close to dying, but I saw firsthand what a missile does to a

fully loaded Mig. The destruction was pretty amazing, a huge fireball. Right after that enormous fireball, the AWAC informed me that another Mig was about 10 miles north of us. I made a decision as the formation leader not to turn south and run but to turn north to engage. Find 'em and fight 'em."

"At about 8,000 feet altitude, I was on a nose-to-nose collision course with the Mig. I knew he was there, but he didn't know I was there. I couldn't take a shot pre-merge because the Mig looked a lot like some of our planes in our inventory, so I had to be ultra-conservative and confirm it was a hostile jet. I crossed about 50 feet off his left wing and we both started what we call in the air to air business, a two-circle fight. I turned towards his tail; he turned towards my tail, from a God's-eye view you'd see two distinct circles between the flight paths of the two jets."

"We merged around 8,000 feet. By the time we hit the second merge of our two flight paths I had already established behind his 3/9 line and we were starting to drive both of our airplanes towards the ground, obviously gravity taking its effect. We did two 360 degree turns descending from 8,000 to 6,000 to below 4,000. Then both of us were at approximately 1,000 feet above the ground when I pulled up my nose into a lead position on the Mig to tighten up my weapons opportunity with a Sparrow missile. He may have thought I was pulling up into a gut-shot position, which I wasn't, but his response to my maneuver was to roll inverted and try to do a split-S from approximately 700

feet above the ground. That wasn't something you could do from that height."

When I saw the Mig roll inverted, I immediately pulled up to reestablish some turning room should he make his maneuver successfully so I could take a missile shot. At about 2,000 feet, I rolled inverted and looked to where the Mig should have been. Well, he was impacting the ground in another dramatic fireball. That was my first credited kill, a maneuver kill, me driving a Mig into the ground."

If I recall properly, you were locked on coming back to base.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that, sort of. My wingman and I were approaching one of our tankers for fuel when Saudi F-15s locked onto us. I conveyed to the AWAC controller who had communications comp with the Saudi F-15s that I was climbing on his vector and if they didn't stop locking me up then I'd take appropriate actions. Well, the Saudi F-15s understood what I meant, turned south and skedaddled."



PART II NEXT WEEK: Rico's second kill in Iraq, and his third kill during the NATO mission called Operation Noble Allies to stop Yugoslavia's 'ethnic cleansing' of Albanians in 1999. American forces called the Kosovo war Operation Noble Anvil.

