

Fantasy TopGun Adventure

Emile Niu Jan. 2002

As a boy, I first read about the F-14 Tomcat fighters from Reader's Digest. At times it seem so remote, I could only dream of being a fighter pilot. During mid-1990s, I participated in certain California flying clubs and learned about the news of civilian flying military jets. The news described a program organized by a company MiG, Etc., which put civilian in training and behind the stick of active Migs and Sukhoi fighters. The venture started in 1992 when an investment banker was striking a deal in Moscow found his way to the cockpit of a MiG fighter as a courtesy ride offered by local authority. He then commercialized the activity and marketed the program in the States. I found the fax number of this Florida Company from a Smithsonian magazine and decided to send inquiry to check out the details. It turned out the company was acquired by another party and was renamed "Incredible Adventures". I received fax leaflets on the details of the flights and six months later; I signed up for the program.

It was October 1996, the afternoon weather a bit chili when I finally arrived in Sheremetyero, Moscow. It was a long flight from Hong Kong through transit in London. From the airport, the agent transferred me to Hotel Metropol (same hotel as the movie Dr. Zhivago) where I met James Weber, another TopGun wannabes. The next morning, James and I were transported to Zhukovsky Air Base, the formerly classified military area established during the Soviet era on the outskirts of Moscow as the research and development center of the aviation industry. We were escorted to Gromov Flight Research Institute where the base airfield boasted to have the longest runway in Europe at 17,000 ft in length, which allowed the testing of every type of aircraft available in Russia. Until 1993, Zhukovsky was a "closed town", which would have been unthinkable for anyone to approach without the proper credentials except may be disguised as a Soviet pilot like Clint Eastwood did in the movie "Firefox".

The day began in the administration building where a doctor examined our medical certificates and worked through an hour of physical examination. Then we moved to a classroom where we met August Rainbakh, a test pilot and our instructor. For start, we would fly a subsonic Czech made L-39 jet trainer, called the Albatross where many Warsaw pact fighter pilots earned their wings. After ground school, we had the opportunity to experience simulators. One exercise was to practice ejection

procedure. I watched James ejected smoothly and successfully. Following him, I climbed on to the ejection simulator. I was shown the primary escape switch on my right side and the emergency backup trigger below the seat. "Be sure to sit straight upright when you pull the switch or you will hurt yourself," an instructor advised. The door was closed and the simulator was raised. It was not long before the signal was given and I immediately pull the switch but nothing happened. I retried and the switch proved to be defective. As I got frustrated, the instructor called out, "what are you suppose to do when your switch malfunction!" I put my hand forward to reach for the emergency trigger. It was quite a challenge to pull a tight trigger with my back sitting upright. Before I was ready, I was bailed out of the cockpit.



Ground crew checking oxygen hose and strapping me on to L-39

After lunch, I was suited up with fire-retardant flight suit, helmet and oxygen mask in the ready room. Full gear, I walked out to the field and behave just like a typical tourist. Camera here and there, taking pictures with different MiGs and Sukhoi. While the ground crew prepared the jet, I climbed and seated into the backseat cockpit. The fighter trainer has two seats, front and back in the cockpit where both seats have a full set of instrument and control panels. August stood next to me and explained further about our flight and control. As we took off and climb, I glanced through the big bubble canopy over the grass fields below and felt that I was on a flying convertible. August soon passed the control of stick to me to perform basic banks and turns. This was the first time for me on a stick, not a yoke. The machine reacted smoothly; more responsive than any other trainer I have flown. Although I was briefed on the flight plan, but frankly speaking, I was not sure where I was heading. But the important thing for me was to feel the

aircraft and learn the basic maneuver prior to transition to supersonic jet. August then demonstrated inverted flying and instructed me to roll the same. "Anytime you can't do it, just say 'your control' to me," warned August. As I started showing fatigue on aileron turns, I handed over control to August and we headed back to Zhukovsky. This concluded the first day lesson and my first aerobatics exposure.

On the next day, I had another flight session on L-39 with August. Then, I was introduced to Ural Sultanov, instructor for the Migs and Sukhoi. Ural has been on demonstration tour to Europe and US, and spoke excellent English. I learned from him that China had acquired twenty-four Su-27 from Russia and our fellow mainland Chinese were in training the same time, but to become real TopGuns. For us, Ural would help me to perform all type of combat aerobatics including the famous "Cobra" maneuver, which was shown in Tom Cruise's TopGun movie. However, it was apparent that it took months of practice to train a pilot to do all these aerobatics dogfight tricks and I would be thrilled just to try them out. Notwithstanding Ural was very encouraging, I explained to him my lack of aerobatics experience and asked him to go easy on me.



Pre-flight check on MiG-29 inside the hangar

After another session of ground school 101, it was on to fitting room again but this time fitted with G-suit. While ground crew helped me to settle down in the cockpit of MiG-29, Ural climbed next to my cockpit and briefed me on the control instruments. In particular, Ural emphasized he would be the aeronautic decision-maker for the flight and should we elect to get out of the cockpit for a free fall and a parachute jump practice, he would pull the ejection trigger for us. As the canopy came down into place, Ural asked me

if I wanted to start the flight with a demonstration loop, which was performed by Blue Angel and other aerobatics team in air show. The idea was appealing to me and I said, "Let's go for it." As we started up the engine, the electronic check list was an eye opener for me even though I did not understand Russian. The tower cleared us to taxi and we pulled out of the hanger. I was excited to see a childhood dream finally coming to life. We taxi to position in hold on the runway and waited a few minutes while the tower clear the area for this stunt. As the word from the tower was given, Ural turned on the afterburners. The engine roared as lightning with exhaust in orange flame, 36,600 pounds of thrust produced by Kilmov turbofans blasted us off the runway for a short field takeoff. The rolling speed was so intense that a Ferrari accelerating from 0 – 60 mph in 3 sec would be matchless as Ural rotated within 4 seconds at 160 knots. I felt like being hit on the stomach and pushed back on the seat by the G force. Under precise control of Ural, the machine accelerated to a vertical climb seconds off the ground. In no time, we were inverted looking at the airport. We completed the loop 100 ft above the runway and continued to shoot vertical with two aileron rolls on the climb. Ural then lowered the nose for an angle climb increasing to 40,000 ft/min (the jet was rated at a phenomenal 65,000 ft/min). Compared to the typical climb rate of 500 – 1,000 ft/min on propeller trainers, I was literally stunned. As we level off at 30,000 ft in less than a minute, Ural cried out "your control" and we headed for the aerobatics zone where I had the opportunity to experience zero weight tail slide, slow roll, splits, Cobra and others. I was eager to play Tom Cruise against pursuit fighter and followed Ural's instruction step by step over the intercom to attempt the famous Cobra. As I turned off the AOA (angle of attack) limiter and performed a near vertical climb, Ural taught me to reduce the power levers and pitched the nose down. This was not quite a stall but rather an abrupt dive immediately after a steep climb so that the pursuit fighter would pass right by. During the course of abrupt dive, I felt my blood speeding upside down and the G-suit tightening on my arms and legs. I felt blacking out and did not manage to call out "your control" to Ural. Before I could come into senses, Ural had already regained control and pull ahead in level flight to follow any pursuit fighter that would have passed by. With my blood boiling across the body, I declined on Ural's invitation to pull another six-G's maneuver. We went on and tested the supersonic speed of the bird at over Mach 2. Upon return to the airport, Ural insisted I do a few aileron rolls over the airport to demonstrate to the ground crew what I had tried. We entered the airport with a combination of half-Cuban, Immelmann, multiple aileron

rolls and ended with slow rolls before entering the pattern. In reality, Ural coached and helped me on the stick all the way. As we descended at 140 knots to final approach, Ural wanted me to flare the aircraft. I got confused as I could not see the runway horizon clearly from the student seat – the backseat pilot. Unexpectedly, an electronic mirror was lowered from the top of canopy. With the state of art design, the mirror presented a clear view in front to me as if I was on the front seat. Fifteen tons of metal touched down on ground liked icing on cake and the eagle has landed.



We taxi back to the ramp and Ural congratulated me on my first MiG flight. As I stepped down on the ladder from the cockpit, Incredible Adventures representative Julia Ragona was there to greet me with video and still camera to celebrate my first flight on a superiority fighter, certainly an aviation milestone for me.

On the following day, Ural briefed me on a high altitude interceptor, MiG-25 Foxbat that boasted a speed of over Mach 3. However, there was inconvenience as the air base run out of fuel. I was told the fuel truck was being detained on the way by local authority and the base had sent personnel to negotiate for the release of the truck. Reluctantly, I took the day off to tour Moscow, which actually worked out fine for me. The week ended with a presentation of certificate of flights and exchange of souvenirs with instructors.





The monster Soyuz/Tumansky engine of MiG-25 Cockpit of Su-27 Flanker

It has been over five years since my jet fighter adventure and I heard other club members had embarked on similar exhilarating experience every once in a while. However, there might be others that have given a thought but then procrastinated. Local television station ATV had sent "non-pilot" to check out the MiGs over a year ago. Therefore, club member pilots who are interested in control of fighter jets but has doubts on what if - "takeoff with no delays", browse the web site of Incredible adventures at www.incredible-adventures.com. Life is either an incredible adventure...or nothing at all.

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