

GROUNDED:

The Aggressor Squadrons

*An inside look at the downfall
of the Air Force's
elite enemy simulation units.*

by Reina Pennington

It seemed like a good idea at the time. Take a group of crack fighter pilots, weapons school graduates, and guys who flew in combat in Vietnam. Give them free access to intelligence sources so they know exactly what the enemy's doing. Give them some airplanes that look and act like enemy airplanes. Then let them go out and fly against other Air Force pilots—show what the enemy might look like in a real war. That was the idea behind the creation of the U.S. Air Force's Aggressor squadrons in 1972.

For combat pilots, the first 10 missions are the riskiest; the Aggressors, together with the Air Force's "Red Flag" war simulations, were designed to give pilots those 10 missions in peacetime. The program rapidly expanded: during their 18-year existence, the Aggressors flew more than 200,000 sorties and made more than a thousand training deployments to U.S. and Allied units around the world.

But within a few years of their creation, some people—very high ranking officers and line pilots among them—began to see the Aggressors as a plague rather than a cure. Some said the Aggressors had ego problems; they pushed young pilots too hard; people got killed.



They were accused of manipulating intelligence data to support outrageous tactics; at the same time, some senior officers pressured them to ignore developments in Soviet tactics that were seen as too dangerous to duplicate.

In the late 1980s, the perceived end of the Soviet threat led to severe cutbacks in the military, and the Aggressors seemed to have outlived their usefulness. In 1990, the Aggressor program—arguably one of the most innovative air training programs in history—was disbanded. Today, many former Aggressors believe that decision may have been a costly mistake.

From the beginning, it was a tough sell. The creation of a squadron specifically devoted to the simulation

Until they were disbanded in 1990, the Air Force's Aggressor squadrons emulated the Soviets in their squadron patches (above), their paint schemes (opposite), and—most importantly—their air combat tactics.

of enemy air combat tactics had never before been attempted; by the standards of the Air Force of those days, the concept was radical. "We got thrown out of almost everybody's office because [they thought] the Aggressor idea was too dangerous," says Randy O'Neill, a former instructor at the Air Force's Fighter Weapons School who, along with fellow instructor Roger Wells, was instrumental in the founding of the program.

Wells, the outstanding graduate in his class at the Fighter Weapons School, had been interested in the idea since 1966, when he had flown F-4s in Vietnam. He still remembers the critique he wrote of the training he'd received: "You taught me everything there is to know about how to fight against another American airplane, but you taught me absolutely nothing about how to fight against the enemy." His experiences clearly pointed him to the need for, in Air Force lingo, "dissimilar air combat training"—training against aircraft different from those the pilots were flying. To Wells, these would ideally be actual enemy aircraft flying enemy tactics. In the early 1970s, O'Neill and Wells began to preach their radical gospel.

On October 15, 1972, their persistence paid off: the 64th Aggressor Squadron was activated at Nellis Air



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USGT FRANKEN

1- PUSH LATCH TO UPEN POSN
2- PULL HANDLE OUT & FT
TO UNLATCH CANOPY

WARNING

CAUTION
RIGHT

1- PUSH LATCH TO UPEN POSN
2- PULL HANDLE OUT & FT
TO UNLATCH CANOPY

NA
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AF

Force Base in Nevada. It would provide adversary forces for Air Force exercises, train new Aggressors, and send Aggressor teams on deployments to operational wings to give academic briefings and fly against the local pilots.

To simulate the primary threat aircraft of the time, the MiG-21, the Aggressors would fly 20 Northrop T-38s on loan from the Air Training Command. Wells' dream of actual MiG-21s would have been far too expensive. The two-seat supersonic trainer resembled the MiG in one particularly important way: its engines did not smoke. In training against other F-4s in preparation for Vietnam, American pilots had become dependent upon spotting the F-4 engines' trail of smoke, visible up to five miles away.

So now the Aggressors had a product—but still no market. "Probably the hardest thing we ever did was to find somebody who wanted to host us for that first deployment," notes Lloyd "Boots" Boothby, the squadron's first commander. "It was like pulling teeth to get anybody to do it." At the time, accident rates in the tactical air forces were high. "Wing commanders were scared to have us come," says Ron Iverson, one of the original Aggressors and later a two-star general. "All they'd heard was there was a bunch of guys out at Nellis flying T-38s, they're going to come and whip up on your guys, and your accident rate will probably go even higher."

Wing commanders were also reluctant to be first because they knew it would put their wing under a microscope. As O'Neill points out, "We knew that when we made our first deployment, everybody and their brother would come down from the Pentagon. Everyone waiting for us to go kill ourselves, the naysayers—we knew they'd be out in force."

Finally, an F-4 replacement training unit at Florida's Homestead Air Force Base agreed to serve

as the first host. The problem was the pilots there were just learning to fly F-4s. "I was really nervous about that," O'Neill admits.

However, the weapons officers at Homestead devised a special program of workup flights for the crews selected to fly against the Aggressors, and in July 1973 the first Aggressor deployment "went off beautifully," O'Neill recalls. That broke the ice. Soon the Aggressors were fulfilling a heavy schedule of "road shows" to operational wings, and a second Aggressor squadron, the 65th, was created at Nellis. The U.S. Air Force in Europe (USAFE) created the 527th Aggressor Squadron at Alconbury Air Base in England, and the Pacific Air Force opened the 26th Aggressor Squadron at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines.

By the mid-1970s, the Aggressor program seemed to be on the fast track to success. In 1975 the Aggressors got a new fighter: the F-5E. Built for export, the F-5 was small and sleek, with simple avionics. It could achieve supersonic speeds only in short bursts, and it had tiny fuel tanks. The only weapon system it had was its guns. But in terms of performance, the F-5 was a better simulator of the MiG-21 than the old T-38.

Once they were accepted, the Aggressors visited every operational wing two or three times a year, providing

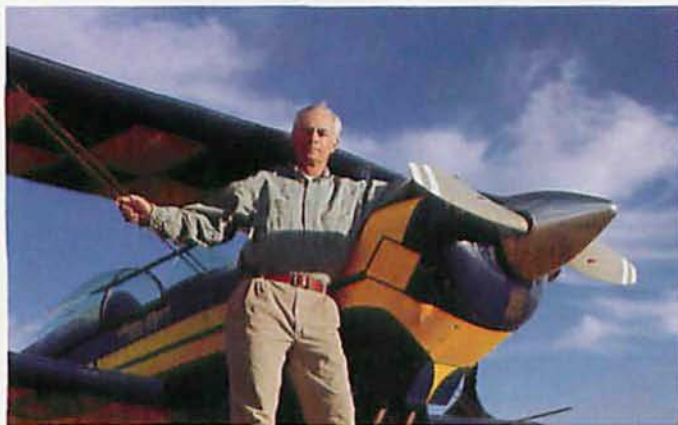
CHAD SLATTERY



both dissimilar air combat training and academic training. In popular parlance, the Aggressors became known as "gomers," a slang word for "enemy" in Vietnam.

The early Aggressor road shows are widely remembered for the quality of training they provided. Jerry "Sparky" Coy, former assistant operations officer of the 65th, says that during a typical road show, six aircraft and seven or eight pilots, plus support personnel, deployed to the host base. About 20 pilots from the host squadron were designated to fly against the Aggressors; generally the host pilots flew once a day, while the Aggressors themselves flew two or three sorties a day. "The host pilots were usually so wrung out after one, that was all they could handle," Coy says.

The type and size of the missions were always tailored to the host unit. Typically for the first few days of a road show the training consisted of a series of single Aggressors flying against sin-



DAVID LEESON

For Lloyd Boothby (above; now a sales manager at a Las Vegas hotel) and Randy O'Neill (left), the Air Force's performance in Vietnam pointed to the need for combat training with dissimilar aircraft. For most of their 18 years, the Aggressors accomplished this with the Northrop F-5 (right), bedecked in large, Soviet-style nose numbers.

gle F-4 crews. Single-ship training flights focused on basic fighter maneuvers rather than specific enemy tactics.

After a few days, the training scenarios might be upgraded to two F-4s against a single Aggressor. Later in the deployment, or if the host pilots were more experienced, two Aggressors would square off against two host pilots. At the leader's call of "Fight's on!" the Aggressors would simulate Soviet air combat tactics, based on classified intelligence information. This would include flying typical Soviet en route formations and diversionary tactics, and simulating the ranges and aspects at which enemy missiles could be fired.

After each flight, the Aggressors conducted debriefings, drawing every turn and maneuver used during the engagements on a blackboard. Aggressor pilots were specially trained to recreate a sortie in its entirety. In the days

before onboard videotape, they relied on memory, brief clips of gun camera film, and tape recorders. Every pilot had his own memorization techniques. Most commonly, Aggressor pilots taped a running monologue during the flight. The maneuvers used, their effectiveness, and the "learning outcomes" were all discussed in the debriefing.

I first encountered the Aggressors as a second lieutenant intelligence officer at Hill Air Force Base in Utah, when they came to fly against one of our F-4 squadrons in 1979. I sat in on every briefing and was enthralled. I had not known that the Air Force had a unit that simulated the Soviets—certainly no one in the intelligence division had mentioned it. Having majored in Soviet studies in college, I couldn't imagine a better job than Aggressor intelligence officer. I cornered the detachment com-

mander, Ron Iverson, in the bar at the officers' club and tried to convince him that my background uniquely qualified me to be the next Aggressor intelligence officer. Within a few months, I'd received special permission to curtail my tour at Hill and transfer to Nellis.

The Aggressors always worked at the junction of operations and intelligence—sadly, a relationship that in the Air Force has usually been weak. The intelligence community was definitely a world apart from the flying community. First there was the problem of security clearances: most pilots were not cleared for highly classified information. Second, there was the physical separation of intelligence and operations. Intelligence personnel worked in vaults, usually at wing headquarters, behind a series of doors secured by locks and entry codes. Pilots couldn't just walk in and ask questions.



GEORGE HALL/CHECK SIX

Tactically relevant intelligence was almost completely lacking during and immediately after the Vietnam war and the Aggressors were among the first to try to remedy that situation. Boots Boothby remembers telling the commander of the Tactical Air Command that there was "a huge, huge wall between operations and intelligence. And the reason it's there is because no fighter pilot was ever going to admit there was something he doesn't know. And intelligence doesn't have the aptitude to know what the pilots need. They're a library, and until someone asks for a book, they don't care what's on the shelf." It was clear to the Aggressors that pilots had to get into the intelligence world. That meant many Aggressors had to get special intelligence clearances. But it cost them; they became ineligible for combat duty until a year after the clearance had expired. It could compromise too many sources if someone with a special intelligence clearance were captured.

Each Aggressor was required to become an expert in some facet of enemy capabilities. Pilots produced briefings on their specialties—the training of Soviet pilots, their tactics, what future threats would likely entail—and presented them during deployments.

These classified academic briefings became one of the hallmarks of the Aggressor program.

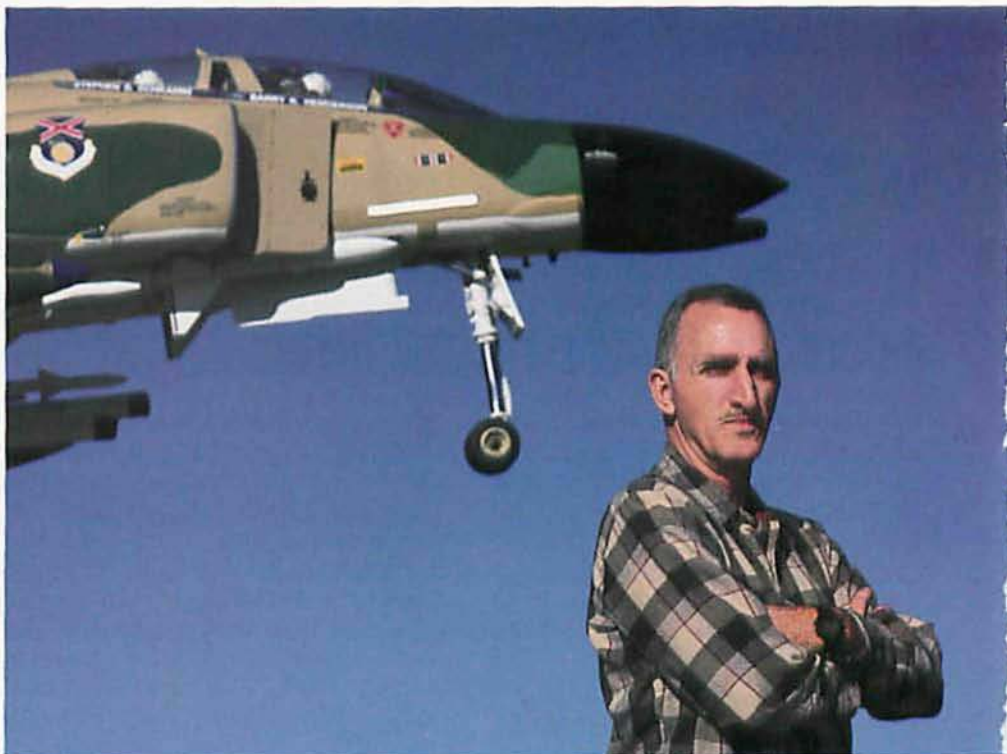
Throughout the 1970s and '80s, the Aggressors were a cornerstone of Air Force air-to-air training. Any time you talked about realism, you were talking about the Aggressors. Even articles in Soviet military journals noted the

benefits of the Aggressors. At the same time, problems had begun creeping into the program.

The Soviets were making steady, if incremental, improvements in tactics and technology. The United States' capabilities were improving almost exponentially. But no provision had been made for automatically upgrading the Aggressors to match the threat. By the late 1970s the Soviets had introduced the MiG-23 Flogger as their frontline fighter; the U.S. Air Force began fielding the F-15 and F-16. Yet the Aggressors continued to fly the outmoded F-5, an increasingly poor simulator against an increasingly capable opponent. It was almost impossible for them to keep pace with the changes.

The F-15's arrival changed the nature of the road shows. In the early days, when the Air Force primarily flew the F-4, most training with the Aggressors involved small engagements—rarely more than two aircraft on each side.

The Aggressors' ubiquitous red star was an homage to the Soviets; some Aggressors today believe their strong identification with the former superpower ultimately limited the value of the training the squadrons provided.



MIKE NITTBRELL



JOHN AMREIN/NORTHROP

There was a lot of emphasis on close-in, within-visual-range fighting. This was because the F-4 had been built as a dual-role fighter and was largely used in that capacity in the Air Force, with the bulk of the training focusing on air-to-ground rather than air-to-air combat. But the F-15 was built specifically for air-to-air combat, and the new F-15 host pilots were already conversant in basic fighter maneuvers and more advanced air combat training. In some people's minds, the need for pure instruction from the Aggressors had diminished.

The superior capabilities of the F-15 also meant "the basic mission changed," Randy O'Neill stresses, "because air-

both visually and on radar, as the F-5, and its performance in air combat was far superior. "The F-16 could turn up its own fanny. It's tough to 'be humble' against that little guy, you know?" Henderson adds, in reference to one of the Aggressors' mottoes.

Technological improvements also began to supplant another facet of Aggressor training. Traditionally, the Aggressors were known as masters of debriefing—"chalk talks" that reconstructed the mission and discussed lessons learned. In the 1980s, automated Air Combat Maneuvering Instrumentation (ACMI) ranges began to replace the blackboard. Pods mounted on fight-

Although Roger Wells (left) was instrumental in the founding of the Aggressors, he was not asked to serve with them. "Needless to say, that broke my heart," he says today. Both he and charter Aggressor Earl Henderson (right) believe staffing problems led to the Aggressors' demise.

to-air now doesn't involve getting into a phone booth with a pocket knife, like it did back then. A properly flown F-15 will never close; he'll just shoot you down from 30 miles away—no further questions." Flying the F-4, only really outstanding pilots had been able to beat the Aggressors early in their training, but with the F-15, most pilots could win. "When we started going to the F-15 units, some squadrons became so proficient that we had to do everything we could just to keep our heads above water," Hal Smith remembers. Smith is a soft-spoken, highly intelligent former Aggressor who had been a pilot in a high-risk covert program in Laos during the Vietnam war.

The F-16 was yet another challenge. "With the F-16s, now you don't have even the size advantage" of the small F-5, says Earl Henderson, a former operations officer of the 64th and a charter member of the Aggressors. The F-16 was just as small and hard to see,



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ers relayed information through ground receivers, allowing a master computer to track a fight as it occurred. During the debriefing, the air battle was replayed on a large screen in a 20- to 30-seat theater, in a format a lot like a video game. The ACMI displays could show the relative positions and ranges of each aircraft, how fast they were going, how hard they were turning, and who fired when. It permitted greatly increased accuracy in debriefing.

The problem, according to some Aggressors, was that the quality of the debriefings declined. There was no formal program for using the ACMI in debriefings. "It's a great machine, but it can be too distracting," says Mark

McKenzie. A tall man out of the "strong and silent" mold, McKenzie flew as an Aggressor in Europe, the Pacific, and the states. "Some guys would just sit back and play it and you'd lose control of the debrief—guys would be arguing about shots. The debrief could just fall apart."

Another problem was that ACMI debriefs brought in more observers. Traditionally, Aggressor debriefings occurred in squadron briefing rooms that could accommodate only the pilots involved in the flight. ACMI facilities could seat a lot more observers. "You'd lose the honesty of the debriefing, somehow," McKenzie says. "It's more difficult to have an honest, frank environment when you've got a cast of thousands in there watching what's going on."

Personnel issues—the source of the ego and attitude problems sometimes attributed to the Aggressors—were always a thorny question. From the start, there was a dispute over how the Aggressors should be manned. Roger Wells had dreamed of assembling the Aggressors of "the best fighter pilots in the United States Air Force, the greatest weapons school instructors that walked the face of the earth." Today, he believes staffing problems were what led to the Aggressors' demise. In his Alabama drawl, he says, "before they were ever operational, I knew they were doomed."

While most people never expected the Aggressors to be manned only with weapons school graduates, they did believe that at a minimum, only experienced fighter pilots should become Aggressors. "We could not sustain the quality we needed," says Earl Henderson. A big man with the sort of face you immediately trust, Henderson is universally admired in the Aggressor community. He remembers that "the personnel system said: you guys can't just keep taking the top talent—that's rapping the operational community."

O'Neill says he bitterly resisted watering down the entrance requirements, but the Aggressors couldn't do much about it. He recalls the case of one pilot: "His courage was undoubtedly very high, but his skill at flying fighters was substandard. So consequently he washed out. Well what do you know, about six months went by, and the new [director

of operations] who came in reinstated him in the program and ordered us to graduate the guy. So the standards were getting all terribly twisted."

By the late 1970s, as Henderson remembers things, the Aggressors were being sent a large percentage of pilots with only one fighter assignment under their belts. "You get a kid who was King Kong in his F-15 outfit, and now he's got to fly this fighter that's ten years older than what he was flying, with two-thirds the maneuvering capability, and he's going to go out and get his ass kicked by these average guys he's been flying against," Henderson says. "I think it was disastrous for a number of reasons. These kids didn't have the emotional maturity to do the mission, to be a training aid, to lose, and to like it when they lost."

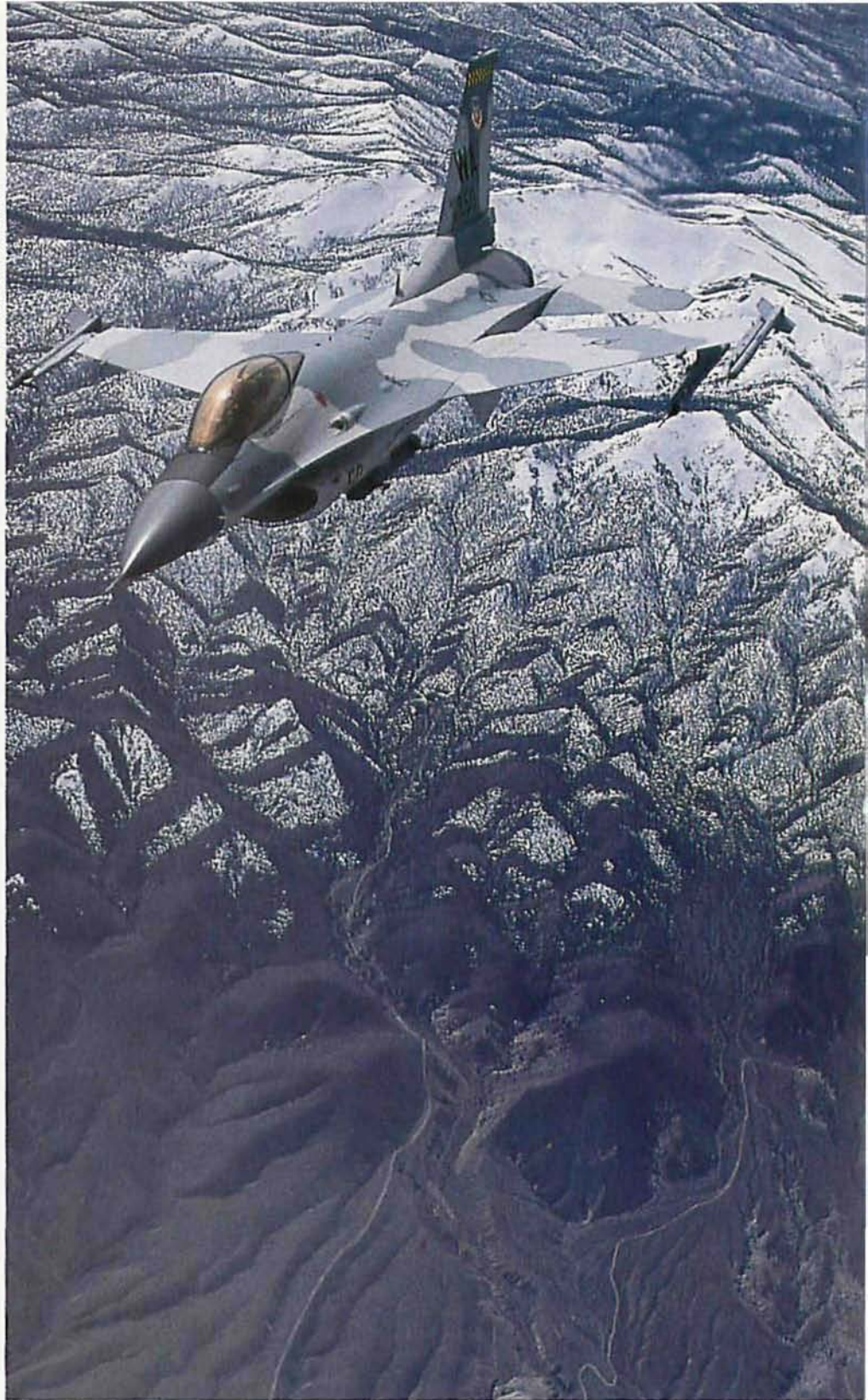
Yet that was the purpose of the Aggressors. As Ed Clements, another charter Aggressor, explains, "The best possible feeling for an Aggressor was to come back from a flight out of breath, tired, and sweaty, knowing he used every tactic, employed every advantage he knows, and still did not come away with a 'kill.'"

Learning to be that sort of instructor was extremely difficult for some of the younger pilots. In operational units, fighter pilots do everything they can to fight and win. But in the Aggressors, they were asked to pull their punches, to keep the fight to a level where the opponent could learn the most. "Some of them weren't able to do that without making it very obvious they didn't like it," Henderson says. "They were young buck warriors. They wanted to go out and kick some ass, take some names."

Being a good Aggressor demanded more than just experience, maturity, and flying skill; it also required a certain type of personality. "You think of an Aggressor as a macho fighter pilot, but it's more than just stick-and-rudder skills," Mark McKenzie says. "The key is being able to steer a debrief or conversation toward valid learning. You have to have that core, innate ability to listen, interpret, and articulate things in an unpoliticized way."

It's hard to say where or why some of the Aggressors began to lose their "be humble" attitude. When I first arrived at Nellis in 1980, I went through

RANDY JOLLY/AERO GRAPHICS



the ground academics course with one class of Aggressors. Someone designed a patch for our class that prominently displayed the words "be humble" in the center. Across the top of the patch, however, was written "Oh Lord, it's hard to..." At the time I thought it was just a play on the popular country song, but later I wondered if it indicated deeper

troubles in the Aggressors.

Concerns about flight safety also continually hounded the program. "Flying safety and combat capability are diametrically opposed," says Boots Boothby. "I just wish to hell somebody would explain to people: Who cares about an accident rate? You kill them in wartime or you kill them in peacetime; the ones



who get killed are the ones who aren't going to make it. And they don't pay you flying pay because you're going to live as long as the other guys."

Boothby's attitude is commonly held but rarely expressed officially (and Boothby himself is quick to note that no accidents occurred under his command). Many fighter pilots believe that

combat training is inevitably a weeding process. The more realistic your training, the higher the risk involved—but the result, it is believed, is a much more capable operational force.

"Some commanders were afraid to have the Aggressors around," Jerry Coy recalls. "We were blamed for so much stuff that we had absolutely nothing to

The F-16s the Aggressors finally received were a mixed blessing; they performed better than the old F-5s, but they couldn't provide the dissimilarity necessary for training.

do with." The problem, in Coy's opinion, was that the Air Force got carried away with air-to-air training. Sometimes the Aggressors flew against units that had little or no preparation in air-to-air training. In the excitement of the fight, some host pilots who were unaccustomed to the demands of combat found themselves in over their heads. In maneuvering to avoid being "killed," some stalled or spun their aircraft; a few ended up dead. One notorious pair of accidents occurred in the early 1980s, when the Aggressors were training pilots in a reconnaissance squadron to defend themselves against an enemy attack. On two consecutive days, RF-4s went out of control during training missions. One crew ejected successfully, but the other did not and both the pilot and navigator were killed. "We were doing [basic fighter maneuvers] with these reconnaissance pilots who did nothing more than fly fast, straight and level," Coy says. "We did not recruit those people to come out there and fly, believe me. They didn't know how to handle situations if they let their aircraft get out of control. And the Aggressors were blamed for this." He noted that it was higher headquarters and not the Aggressors who decided which units needed the training.

Another problem was the question of how strictly the Aggressors' training should simulate Soviet tactics. Many Aggressors believed such simulations should have been just the starting point for Aggressor training, not the be-all and end-all. But the Aggressors were told to justify everything they did in terms of simulating the Soviets.

Several Aggressors told me about the time General Wilbur Creech, the commander of the Tactical Air Command, sent his director of operations, Larry Welch, to Nellis in 1978 to investigate the alleged problems with the Aggressors. ("A witch hunt, I guess, would be the best name for it," Henderson says.) Aggressor tactics were closely scrutinized. One young pilot admitted to Welch that a tactic he presented in a briefing had been observed in Soviet training only once: he tried to justify its use as a tactic that a Third World nation could use. According to Henderson, "General Welch said something like 'We can go to war against any

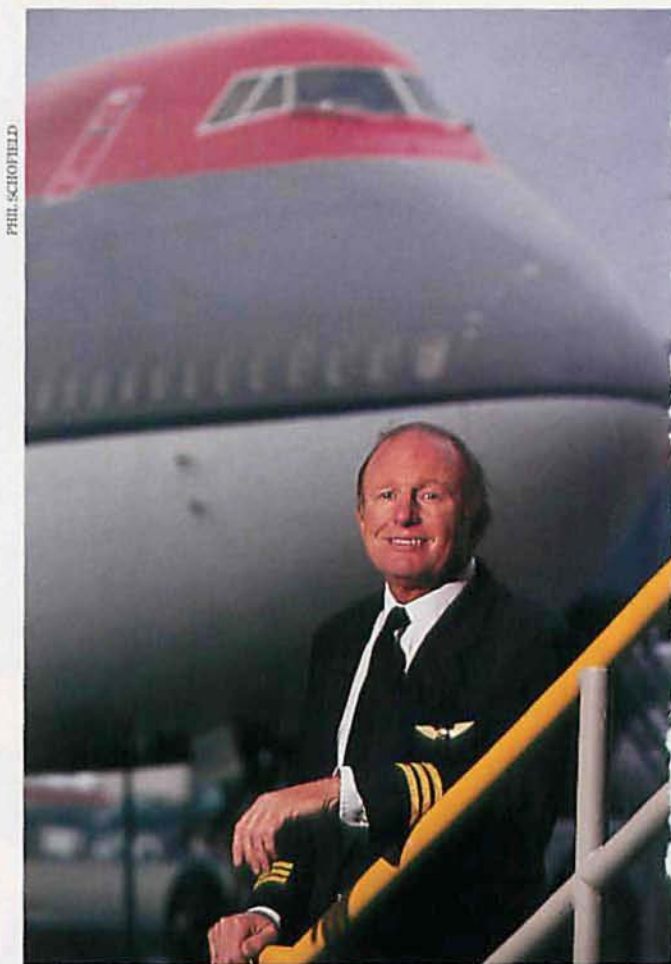
Like many of his former colleagues, Hal Smith (right; now an airline captain) thinks the end of the Soviet Union shouldn't have meant the end of the Aggressors.

The new Adversary Tactics group, under the leadership of Mark Dulaney (opposite), carries on some of the Aggressors' work in a limited fashion.

Third World country and screw it up ten ways from Sunday, and we're still going to win. But if we go against the Soviets, we'll have only one chance. We'd better be doing it right, based on exactly what the Soviets are doing.' "

One Aggressor remembers, "One argument I heard a lot at the time was: We've shown them all this real Soviet stuff. But say we're in day five of the war—aren't the Soviets going to say, 'Hey boys, this is stupid! All our comrades are dying!' And they'll make some natural evolution in their tactics. It's never been observed, but that doesn't mean it ain't ever gonna happen in the war."

"I don't for a minute believe the Soviets would have suddenly become proficient in a real conflict," says Lieutenant Colonel Tom Smith, a USAF Aggressor and Desert Storm veteran currently working in the Pentagon. But he also questions the value of limiting the Aggressors to observed enemy tactics; he believes the squadrons should have had more flexibility to react to situations in a natural way. For example, the Aggressors operated under rules of engagement that prevented them from dodging long-range radar-guided missile shots simulated by the F-15s and F-16s. "In combat, even Iraqis flying MiG-25 Foxbats proved smarter than that," Smith says. "They weren't clever enough to improvise new tactics during a war, but I think the Iraqis were human enough to dodge missiles on shots they were aware of. The failure



of the Aggressors to fill in the gap and behave realistically in an all-aspect environment may have hurt the training value in the long run, and I believe the [U.S.] air community sensed that."

When I was the Aggressor intelligence officer in the early 1980s, I knew there were gaps in our intelligence information. Our collection techniques were often compared to looking through a soda straw. It seemed obvious to me that the Aggressors should give the Soviets the benefit of a doubt and err on the side of better training.

"It could be the whole Soviet concept ended up being the death knell," Henderson says. "We got ourselves locked into this death spiral about being Soviet." When the Soviet Union disappeared, people began to question the value of enemy simulation—and of the Aggressor program.

Yet the biggest problem was probably money. It was tough to keep up with enemy tactics while flying an aircraft that was two generations behind in performance—sort of like getting into a Ford Pinto and trying to drive it like you were in a Corvette. For a long time

the Aggressors tried to continue Soviet tactics by simulating MiG-23s during the beyond-visual-range portion of an engagement; they replicated MiG-23 formations and tactics to try to show what they would look like to an F-15's radar. But there was no way the F-5 could pretend to be a MiG-23 in a visual fight; the Flogger was significantly faster in straight flight, more sluggish in turns, and completely different in other performance characteristics.

Year by year, the decision to spend money for new Aggressor aircraft was delayed. In the Air Force, "bang for the buck" was measured in terms of combat-capable aircraft; the Aggressors just didn't fall into that category. There were too many badly needed improvements in the operational force; training was way down the priority list.

In early 1989 the Air Force finally decided to upgrade the Aggressors to the F-16. Ironically, according to Tom Smith,

this might have been the final nail in the coffin. Giving the Aggressors F-16s violated one of the basic tenets of the Aggressor charter: providing dissimilar air combat training. The F-16 "was not dissimilar to the most plentiful aircraft in our inventory," Smith says.

A few months later, the Air Force decided to disband the Aggressors altogether. The Aggressors staged their last road show in August 1990, when the 64th went to Eglin Air Force Base in Florida to train F-15 pilots who were preparing to deploy to Desert Shield. In October 1990, the 64th—the first and, finally, the last Aggressor squadron—closed its doors.

Today, one unofficial remnant of the Aggressors survives: the Adversary Tactics Division of Red Flag. The name was changed to dissociate the unit from the Aggressors, but there are many similarities. The Adversary group flies the

F-16C, painted in "threat" paint schemes, and provides a core of air-to-air adversary forces at major Air Force exercises. Adversary pilots still provide academic briefings, and the division is housed behind a door with the traditional red star of the Aggressors. The main difference is in scope. Adversary Tactics consists of six aircraft and 10 full-time pilots. The pilots fly only during exercises; there are no more road shows except for occasional academic presentations.

When I interviewed the Adversary's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mark "Dula" Dulaney, last October, I asked him, "Who is the enemy these days?" He replied, "I don't know, you tell me. We replicate mostly Russian-type systems because those systems and training are in place in most hot spots in the world that we might face in a future conflict." But they've also added what they call "gray world systems." The



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gray world, he explained, is not "red" (enemy) or "blue" (the United States), but all that other stuff out there—French, Swedish, whatever weapons systems might be sold to and employed by potential adversaries.

In a sense, the lack of a central threat makes the Adversaries' job more difficult than that of the old Aggressors. Based on parameters for various threat aircraft, Adversary pilots restrict their power and maneuvering and use different avionics settings to attempt to replicate an enemy's search and lock-on ranges and so forth. "You're always looking down at your card, saying, 'What are my ranges today?'" Dulaney says. "Yeah. There's a lot of number crunching that goes on."

Speaking in 1992 at the 20th anniversary of the Aggressor's founding, Ron Iverson claimed that because of the Adversaries, "the quality of training that the original Aggressors tried to bring to our Air Force has not changed. The discipline's there, the attitude's there, the 'be humble' is there, and they're doing exactly what we want them to do." But with F-16s, others point out, the dissimilarity has been lost, the road shows have been lost, and, to a large extent, the unique Aggressor academics program has been lost.

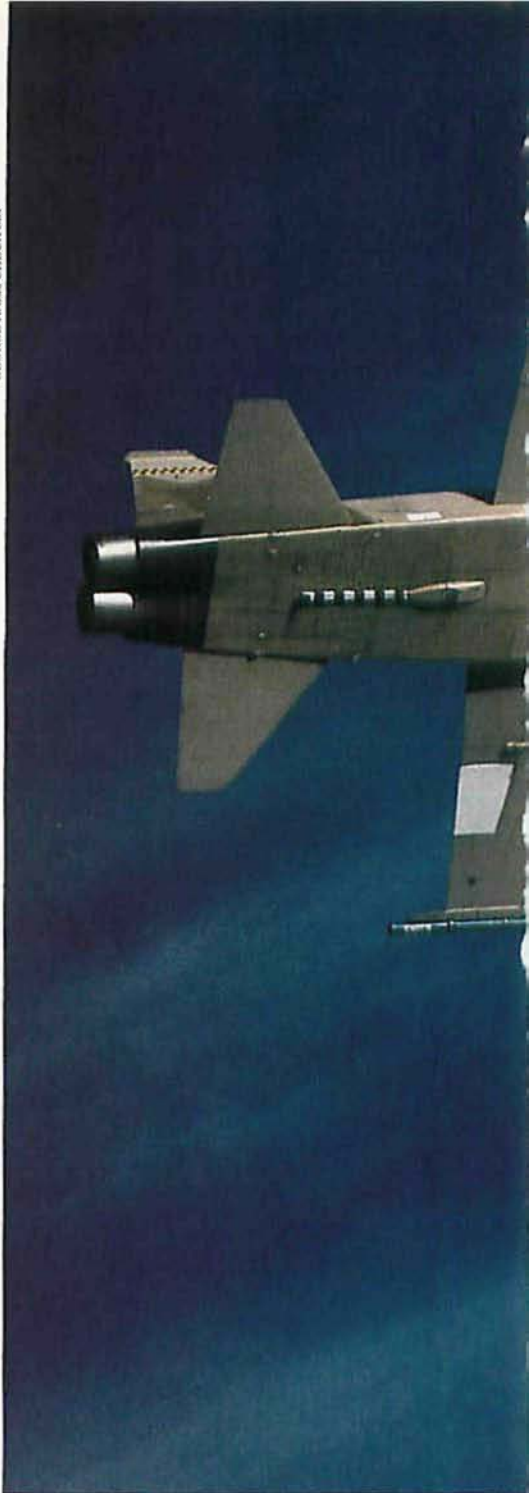
An old military maxim is that you will

fight the way you train. The Air Force that flew in Desert Storm trained against the Aggressors. How will today's Air Force, with no dedicated adversary training, perform in a future war?

"I think that we're going to live to regret having done away with the Aggressor program," Jerry Coy says. One way the Air Force is compensating for closing down the Aggressor squadrons is by having operational wings train against each other. "With the Aggressors, the only agenda was to make the guys that we were flying against better," says Coy. "And you just don't see that whenever you're doing dissimilar air combat training with another operational unit. That's definitely a shortcoming in the way things are being done now."

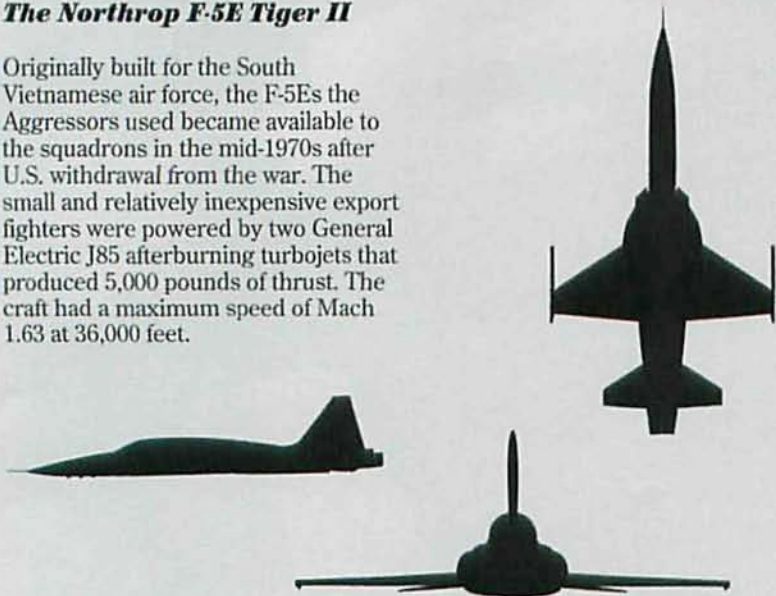
Many former Aggressors told me that they believe the Air Force is flying more conservatively today than it was a few years ago. "The gomers are already sorely missed, even I can tell," says Rich Cline, recently retired from active duty. "Every wing commander that has a clue could tell the proficiency of every air-to-air unit has fallen off considerably since the Aggressor program closed up shop." Even Adversary Tactics commander Dulaney notes, "People in the active Air Force continually tell me, 'We really miss the train-

GEORGE HALL/CHECK SIX



The Northrop F-5E Tiger II

Originally built for the South Vietnamese air force, the F-5Es the Aggressors used became available to the squadrons in the mid-1970s after U.S. withdrawal from the war. The small and relatively inexpensive export fighters were powered by two General Electric J85 afterburning turbojets that produced 5,000 pounds of thrust. The craft had a maximum speed of Mach 1.63 at 36,000 feet.



ing like we used to have.' I get that every time I go some place."

"The idea of disbanding the Aggressors because the Soviets go away is ridiculous," says Hal Smith. "It should have been the kind of thing where you had adversaries, and you fight adversary tactics as you saw fit, based on whatever you could dream up." Rich Cline also notes, "There's still a need for a professional air-to-air adversarial unit that puts training first—instead of putting winning first, like every other unit."

"The mental process of learning your



enemy inside and out and training to a razor's edge to defeat that threat is applicable anywhere against any adversary," says Desert Storm veteran Tom Smith. He compares this process to creating a "learning template" that can be applied to any enemy. "Those of us who fought in Iraq prepared ourselves in just that manner, and the process of applying that learning template worked wonderfully. I'm not sure it would have had we not refined the template against a long-time opponent like the former Soviet Union."

"It doesn't matter if the Air Force has got 13 wings or 39, the Aggressor part of the program is vitally important to the combat effectiveness of the military," Roger Wells says. "I'll tell you what I would do if I was God for a day, if I ran all the military in America. Ten percent of my forces would be Aggressors. Because I would want to be able, every day that I train, to go against a realistic enemy. I'd have Aggressors in the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, space force, whatever. That would always be a part of it." ←

A team of F-5s displays a range of Warsaw Pact camouflage schemes in use in the Aggressors' heyday. Today, the lack of a central enemy to train against has made the Adversaries' job more difficult.