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Pakistan's F-16s Battled Soviet Jets—and Shot Down the Future Vice President of Russia

Tragedy.

by Sebastien Roblin

In 1977, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq overthrew Pakistan's civilian president in a coup. He proceeded to institute hardline Islamist laws throughout Pakistan, and began rebuilding Pakistani military power after its humiliating defeat in a 1971 war with India.

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Washington found that Zia's policies dovetailed conveniently with getting Pakistani assistance in supporting Mujahideen insurgents fighting Communist forces. Thus, Pakistani and U.S. agents collaborated in organizing and arming militants proliferating in Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan.

In retaliation, Soviet and Democratic Republic of Afghanistan Air Force (DRAAF) jet bombers began crossing into Pakistani airspace to blast those refugee camps. The Pakistani military deployed J-6 fighters (Chinese-built MiG-19 clones) capable of Mach 1 speed and two radars to defend the border, but these proved too slow and the patrol and radar coverage too spotty, so none of the raids were intercepted.

Thus in 1981, Zia persuaded the Reagan administration to authorize sale of forty F-16As and two-seat F-16Bs, which would be received between 1983-1986. The then cutting-edge fourth-generation fighter was affordable, extremely maneuverable due to its aerodynamically unstable design (compensated for with fly-by-wire controls), and could still attain high speeds and carry heavy payloads.

However, early production F-16s lacked the capability to fire radar-guided beyond-visual range missiles. This meant Pakistani Falcons needed to get up close to their opponents to use their AIM-9P and more advanced AIM-9L Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles—or their 20-millimeter Vulcan cannons.

In 1986, the F-16s of the PAF's No. 9 Griffin and 14 Shaheen squadrons were finally ready to begin flying combat air patrols along the Afghan border. That year, Soviet and Afghan forces began a series of offensive targeting mujahideen bases in the Panshir valley, supported with intensified bombardments of refugee camps.

On May 17, 1986 two F-16As were vectored towards two DRAAF Su-22M3K penetrating Pakistani airspace near Parachinar. The Sukhois were rugged swing-wing supersonic fighter bombers that often suffered heavy losses in Cold War conflicts.

The PAF F-16s closed within six miles and Squadron Leader Hameed Qadri launched a Sidewinder which failed to hit. The Su-22 promptly belted back for the Afghan border. Qadri fired off a second AIM-9L which first flew wide off the Sukhoi, then curled around and slammed into its target.

In an account published by the PAF, Qadri describes that he raced towards the second Su-22, which he engaged with a gun:

“The other aircraft was in a left turn. His radius of turn and my energy state gave me enough confidence that I could easily achieve kill parameters both with missile and guns. During the turn, I found myself hitting the fringes of AIM-9P missile. I pulled a high yo-yo as I was in a totally offensive position. My target was now in a nose-down and heading towards Afghan territory. After apexing, I quickly rolled back and fired a three-second burst on the exiting Su-22. I stopped firing when a trail of smoke and flash from his aircraft confirmed a lethal kill. Through a split 'S', I headed east of Parachinar.”

However, the Afghan Air Force confirmed losing only one jet, though the engagement led to a major decrease in attacks on refugee camps.

Furthermore, the Soviet VVS deployed MiG-23MLD fighters to protect Afghan Su-22s.

Qadri encountered the MiGs a month later, but neither side opened fire. Nearly a year later on April 16 1987, F-16s chased down DRAAF Su-22s again near Thal, managing to overtake the supersonic jets despite having to attack from lower altitude. Squadron Leader Badar-us-Islam shot down the Sukhoi of Lt. Col. Abdul Jameel, who ejected and was captured on Pakistani soil.

By 1987, Soviets records indicate that Pakistani fighters had begun roaming into Afghan airspace—particularly harassing efforts to provide aerial resupply to besieged garrisons like Khost, only ten miles across the border.

On March 30, 1987 two F-16s intercepted an An-26 twin-turboprop cargo plane near Khost, each striking it with one Sidewinder from just under a mile away. The ponderous cargo plane crashed into the snowy mountains below, killing all 39 aboard. Over the course of the conflict, Pakistani F-16 pilots also claimed the destruction of several Mi-8 transports helicopter, another An-26 on a reconnaissance mission in 1989, and a maneuver kill versus an An-24 transport which was actually attempting to defect.

However, the Pakistani fighter jock's luck turned two weeks later when two No.9 Squadron F-16s ambushed four MiG-23s of the Soviet 120 th

Fighter Regiment as they plastered a mujahideen supply bases in Djaware, Pakistan with cluster bombs. As Soviet Lt. Col. Pochitalkin led his unit in evasive maneuvers he saw an airplane plummet towards the earth in flames below him.

This was not a MiG, but the F-16 of Lt. Shahi Sikander, who had inadvertently been acquired by an AIM-9L fired by his wingman. Sikander parachuted down to Afghan soil, where he and the wreckage of his plane were smuggled back to Pakistan by Mujahideen. Some Russian sources claim Sikander was actually shot down by a Soviet jet —though the MiGs were not carrying air-to-air missiles— or had somehow plowed into the rain of cluster bomblets.

In 1988, as Soviet ground forces withdrew from Afghanistan, DRAAF and Soviet aviation units began a ferocious new bombardment campaign in a last-ditch effort to save the crumbling Afghan Communist government.

On August 8, Col Alexander Ruts koy, commander of a regiment of slow but heavily armored Su-25 Frogfoot attack jets—was leading a night raid on the Maranshah refugee camp when his four-ship flight was bounced by two F-16As of the 14th fighter squadron. Ruts koy turned hard towards the F-16s, perhaps seeking to draw them away, and believing the heat-seeking missile would lose its track if his plane's hot tail-pipe was facing away from it. But the AIM-9L was designed to engage targets from all aspects, and the detonations of its proximity

warhead broke the “flying tank” in two.

Rutskoy ejected over Pakistani soil and was captured. Exchanged back to Russia, he was decorated as a hero of the Soviet Union and went on to become vice president of Russia under Boris Yeltsin, before leading an attempted coup in 1993.

A month after Rutskoy’s shootdown, a formation of twelve Soviet MiG-23s—eight loaded with bombs, and four carrying R-24 air-to-air missiles, zipped into Pakistani airspace near the Kunar valley at 32,000 feet—probably seeking to lure PAF F-16s into an ambush.

Obligingly, two F-16s raced towards the swing-wing fighters at only 11,000 feet. However, the Soviet radars failed to detect the lower-flying F-16s amidst the ground clutter. A Sidewinder fired at a steep angle by Squadron Leader Khalid Mahmood managed to riddle one MiG-23 with shrapnel, which limped back home for a crash landing. Two MiGs peeled away to engage the F-16s in a dogfight. But while Pakistani pilots claimed two MiG-23 kills, Soviet records show no additional aircraft were lost.

On November 3, 1988 the PAF would bag its final jet kill when Lt. Khalid Mahmood shot down a DRAAF Su-22. Pakistan formally credits its F-16 pilots with 10 kills during the conflict, while Soviet records confirm the loss of three Su-22s, an Su-25 and An-26. Some sources claim the PAF shot down at least a dozen more aircraft during the

Soviet war in Afghanistan which ostensibly were not formally credited because they involved violations of Afghan airspace. Those interested in a more extensive accounting of the Pakistani-Afghan air battles are recommended to consult the following compilations of Pakistani air combat narratives.

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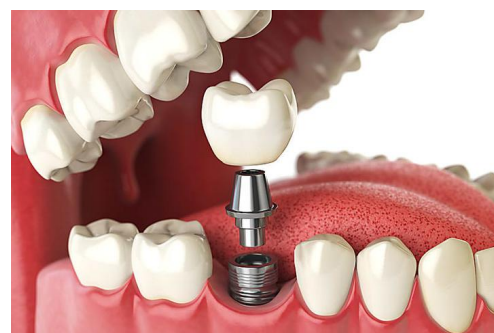
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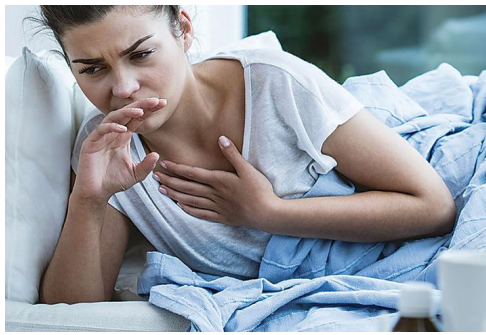


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