

## Feature

# On Time On Target

by Guest Writer **Eric "Flanker56" Johnson**

It was another long, boring week comrades. The thing with a special strike unit, you only do a few missions within a given week. The ratio has dropped since the constant hammering by our coalition forces against the Mutquedah forces. We have studied possible targets, and worked up strike plans, only to have the Major deny them due to lack of a requirement to attack, such as against the mujahid forces attacking Gudauta. So we instead maintain our aircraft, which do require much attention.

This was broken up by Dimitri being sent to strike a supply convoy during his shift. He said that was one of the best missions he has done, but you must realize, we don't do many either. Since we must maintain vigilance, me and Dimitri rotate 12 hours on duty, with 12 hours off from this duty. Such "duty" is that each of us sit around, talk, or work on our aircraft. Sleep is really no problem since there is not much to do. The "major" thing we had to accomplish was subdue the missiles we received. The majority of course were Kh-31p anti-radiation missiles, as well as Kh-29L laser guided missiles. Some air-to-air missiles were included, mainly new R-77 missiles, as well as a handful of AIM-120 missiles from the Americans.

Some "technicians" (I label as such since we *all* suspect they are from CIA) inspected what we did, and were satisfied. They were already aware that we can use their fuel, since back in the Cold War days all Russian aircraft had NATO sized adapters so we could use their fuel once we captured their airfields. Who would have thought that we would be using this in that capacity, only on friendly terms? I have played "volleyball" with these Americans, some of the A-10 pilots and a few F-15 pilots. They constantly boast of how their aircraft is better. But neither is. The A-10 while yes, is in some ways superior to our Su-25, it is slow. The F-15 is highly maneuverable, I was allowed to fly one of their "F-15D" fighters. It was a trainer aircraft much like the Su-27UB airplane.

I must admit, the F-15 would be good if it could fire air-to-ground missiles, then I may consider not flying the Su-33M2 I currently fly. But that's its major drawback. It is capable of the turns necessary to perform strikes, but not the capability to execute that. Such a waste.

Early yesterday, I was approached by Major Grachev while in my hangar, painting the last of the missiles we needed.

*"Comrade Lietenant, how is it?"*

He leaned on the wall, a trickle of sweat coming from his forehead, he may have walked from the Ops building, but I saw the UAZ parked a hundred meters away. He must exercise more.

*"It is fine Comrade Major, I am almost complete with subduing the last of the Kh-29Ls."*

I remarked, as I just completed one. Five more to go, but I have enough available for a "flex" mission, at least requiring six.

*"Good, we have a mission in the works, report at the Ops building at 1800."*

Well, least I didn't have to worry about losing a note. Which also meant that when Dimitri came on, I would be "off", but war demands that you accept this, and so I have. Besides comrades, the prospect of a mission makes us not

complain anyways.

I looked at my watch, only 1314 hours. I could put off the rest of the missiles for now, and catch a nap. You never know when you may need it, and it's hot enough to make you drowsy. Major Grachev nodded, and he walked to his vehicle, to which he promptly left.

Then again, the humidity was always not too good over here anyways, especially near the ocean. Which made me think of other things as I set the brush in the paint thinner, and closed the lid on the paint. The paint itself was nothing special, just a grey to make them less visible on my aircraft. The R-27s did not require much, since putting paint on the missile heads would degrade them to uselessness.

Which brought me back to the current situation.

The IRLF Air Force has been taking serious losses compared to our light losses (light being relative, the VVS was always strong in numbers). Also what has helped the situation was the strike on Sukhumi two days ago with cruise missiles that targeted a good portion of their aircraft, and personnel. The casualty rate was such to technically shut the base down, as well as extensive damage to the runway to render it unusable. Then an airborne Regiment was deployed to secure the airfield. The constant mortar attacks at Gudauta only make it useful for a true diversion airfield. It's only the stubbornness of the Georgians, and perhaps the Canadians that they fly missions from there.

It will only be a matter of time we can get rid of the IRLF irregulars and enjoy the fruits of peacetime.

But then again, war is something we yearn and train for, so if the conflict continues, then we shall see no? That did not mean however, that the SAM threat was light. It only meant we had an easier threat to deal with, since they only fielded the HAWK, and Buk systems, which were also being systematically being reduced one-by-one. An Ironhand mission yesterday netted a lucky British pilot three systems. Naturally of course he was supporting a deep strike mission, so he was unable to completely neutralize the site. So within a day or so they will be active again, continuing to threaten our skies.

Of course a farmer with an Igla could also pose a threat to you as well, as some Su-25 pilots have found out. "Shades of Afghanistan" I heard an American pilot say. For what sunglasses have to do with this "conflict" I do not know. I had told this American pilot. He laughed and said it was slang for it seeming just like Afghanistan. Naturally comrades, did he serve in the war in Afghanistan. He nodded and said he flew F-16s before moving to F-15s. The threat was there, just not as bad as here. Or during the Soviet war with the mujhadeen so long ago.

After cleaning my hands, I straightened up the area for Sgt. Gennedy, and promptly headed to my quarters. To which I took a nap for a couple of hours. Waking up, I lay in bed, listening to the jets fly away, or come in, or pass by, taxiedng to the runway, or to their hangars. I sighed, hopefully this mission will bring some excitement.

I did not have time to talk to Sacha though, I must admit feeling guilty about this. I guess I am attracted to her, but she is in a different unit, and this, and that. I sighed again as I stared at the ceiling. For some times, love is not something I wish to think of. You think too much about that, and you will lose your life due to you not paying attention to the real world. For now, she is merely a distraction. That is all.

An hour before I was to report, I finished my shower, and got ready. I put on my uniform, and put my boots on, and walked to the mess hall for a quick bite to eat. The same cliques were in effect, but I saw however, it was much different. Some stayed in their spots, but some others talked and laughed as well. I saw Lt. Bolenko Vorshkin, one of the lucky Su-24M pilots (lucky in the fact he and his wingman solely shut down Sukhumi), talk with an F-15 pilot. It made me feel better that some change has happened for the better. Soon we might be better friends than enemies, even though the Cold War is over with. We may shake hands and smile at each other, but there is still wariness accorded to each other. I sat by myself today, as most of the time I like to talk with the F-15 pilots and discuss combat. They also complain of boredom, as when you are used to constant operations, your body, and

mind adapt to it, then it becomes second nature. To slow down that rhythm is just the same. You must readapt to the slow pace and then readapt. The human body is a tormented thing comrades. Especially when you are a fighter pilot.

As I sat down and ate my food. I overheard a couple British pilots complain about the boredom of ground attacks. I have felt the same pain, and interested, I had moved closer. Then they started talking about the lack of an air threat. Then one mentions he heard his intel personnel talk about the possibility of Mirages being flown by the IRLF. One complained about how the French *never* disappear, and need to be back in their own pond. I cannot remember exactly what he said, but the words even made me chuckle. But the Mirage? I have obviously heard of this aircraft, but which one? Interested, I questioned this pilot, and he snappily answered the 2000-5. His other buddies excused his behavior, said he hadn't been to the "pub" for a couple of days. I laughed and said I have vodka at my room, and if he is in need of such liquid, he can stop by. I need company. Of course the thought of the Mirage 2000-5 interested me. Just how capable is it? I have never heard of combat operations with it, only pictures from airshows and threat briefings on such aircraft. But they only say what they want to say. To feel the opponent means you experience a life or death struggle, not reading a book about it.

I was too interested, I must leave for my briefing. I said goodbye to my "friends" and headed to the Ops building. I managed to smoke a cigarette quickly and sat down. Major Grachev entered. I stood up and rendered my salute. Tonight was special I assumed, I was alone with him. That special of a mission? or just Dimitri wasn't selected? He will not like this. It is his shift, and not mine. Dimitri was just as qualified, and why am I questioning on this subject? I complain about boredom, but yet ready to deny a possible mission. He returned it and told me to sit down.

*"Alexseyev, you have been selected for an early strike mission tomorrow morning."*

Odd, he was trying to spit the words out. Something was not right.

*"Comrade Major, what is the problem?"*

*"Nothing Lieutenant, it's somewhat excitement over what could be a 'routine' mission for you."*

Honesty.

*"I see Comrade Major, forgive my interruption."*

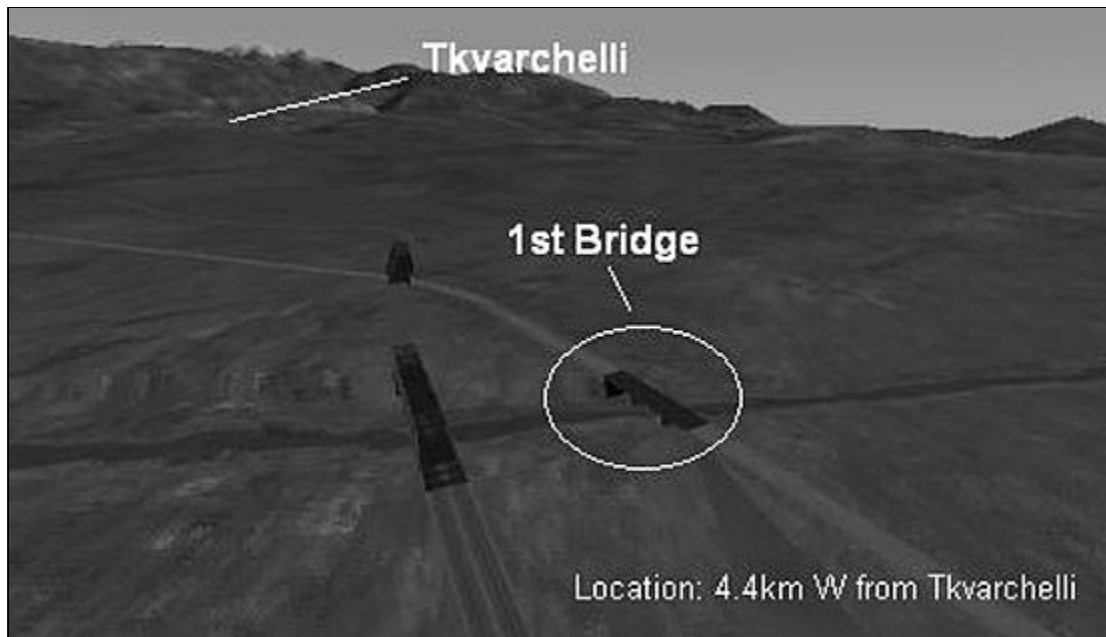
Major Grachev shrugged.

*"Okay, now that the introductions are over with, we will discuss the mission."*

He opened the laptop, and projected on the screen were two bridges, and what looked to be a HAWK site.

*"These two bridges are the main targets for tomorrow's mission, as well as this HAWK Complex:"*

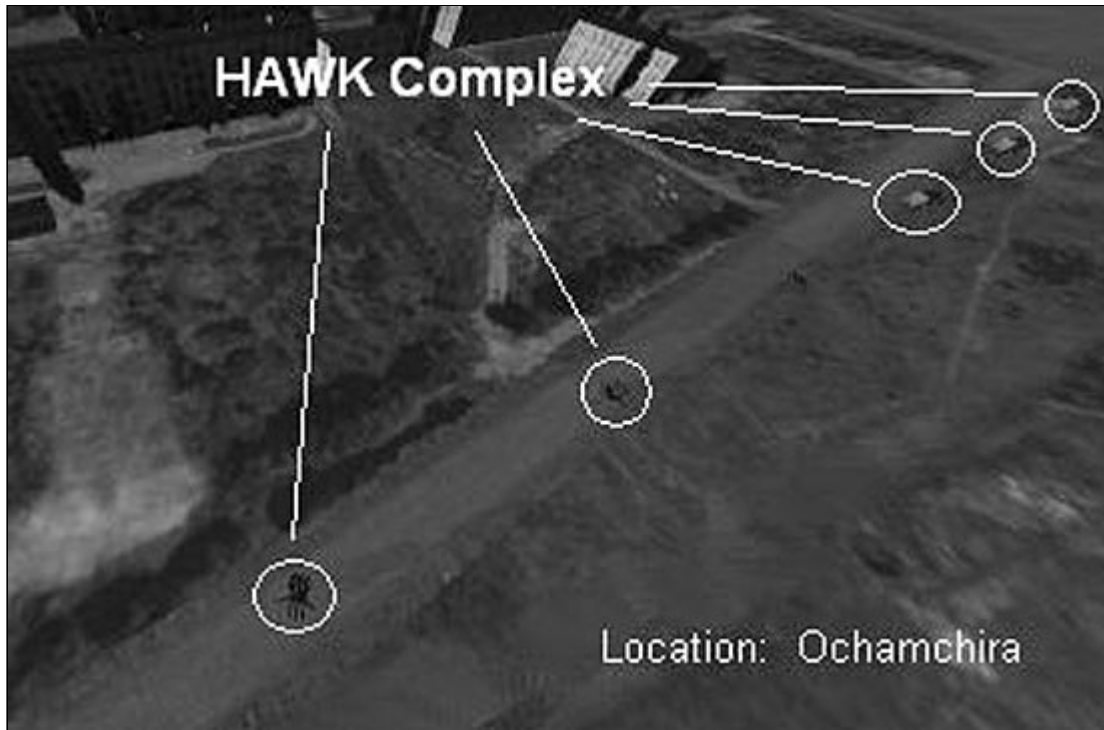
*"These two bridges are the main ground supply route to Tkvarchelli. Since the rail system does not seem to work properly, the rail bridge will not be considered a target."*



*However, if you use the correct munitions on the bridges, there is a chance of damaging it, just in case. The two bridges are termed Targets Alpha and Bravo respectively. There is a Spetznaz team that will be inserted tonight to designate for any laser guided munitions you may use. Preferably against this class of bridge I would recommend Kh-29Ls, Kh-25MLs do not have the necessary warhead for quick destruction."*

He paused, looked at his notes some more.

*"The HAWK system at Tkvarchelli is your primary threat when making your run. I trust you know what to do about that, nyet? This last image is a spysat image of a ship offloading what appears to be a HAWK system."*



*The intel staff personnel got lucky for once, and managed to find out that this is a new shipment of such a system at Ochamchira. Apparently, through their sources, they want to fortify Tkvarchelli and possibly use it as a HQ, at least that's what they think after today's strike by the 586th unit on a radio tower. But I personally do not see the connection between a bunch of terrorists, and some military hardware. More than likely it is the IRLF beefing up their defenses around the Tkvarchelli area."*

*"The mission is simple, we expect the HAWK system to move from the port to Tkvarchelli within the next 24 hours. You are to impede that movement by it's destruction. However, we are not going to wait, at least until the morning. Takeoff is at 0645, be on time, on target no later than 0730. Prayer ends at that time comrade."*

Major Grachev started to collect up the paperwork. He paused, and took another breath.

*"Now Alexei, there is a reason there is nobody else in this room, and why Dimitri is not here. This mission is designed to draw out two IRLF Mirage 2000-5 aircraft that they received from some benefactor. We believe the UAE, since they fly the aircraft. We have people working on that aspect, since we are combat personnel, not spies. We also have a pilot from the 586th selected to intercept those two aircraft. The rest of the unit will fly diversionary flights in order to entice these aircraft into showing up"*

He cleared his throat softly.

*"I do not think I have to mention the name of that pilot."*

He paused for a moment.

*"Colonel Martin has also selected you for this strike, given your past performance when dealing with these matters."*

No, he didn't have to tell me the name comrades. I felt a lump in my throat.

Perhaps I am attracted to this Sacha *too much*. I suddenly feared for her life. Vasily? Maybe — he is a comrade in arms — but I would not shed too many tears upon his death. Dimitri on the other hand is just as capable as I am, and it was odd he was not given in to this mission. He is as trustworthy and I mentioned that to Major Grachev, who

rose his hand.

*"Lietenant, I must remind you that only so many people must know the true nature of the mission. Yes, Dimitri is very trustworthy with state secrets, as well as you are. I fear however that the more people know, the likelihood of it getting out."*

He paused.

*"Though comrade, if he asks to assist you, do not hesitate! You must not tell him the real reason behind the attack. You do not need to know where the SA-10 battery is at, that does and should not concern you, and your mission files do not mention that either."*

*"Yes Sir."*

I replied stupidly, thinking just how do you hide such a system anyways? Perhaps the scientists developed cloaking devices?

*"Report to me status of your aircraft by 2200 tonight, and submit a plan of attack, to include munitions required. Dismissed"*

I nodded, stood up and saluted him, to which he briskly returned. He left me the paperwork as he left the room.

That is one consolation, you are not told to arm your aircraft, that is your responsibility to ensure you come up with the best mix of weaponry. Being advised however, will always happen.

I hurriedly walked out, wondering what Dimitri was doing. Then I saw him, taking a smoke break. I walked up to him.

*"Comrade, what is going on?"*

I lit up another cigarette, and he nodded, he looked in the foulest of moods.

*"Well Alexei, I am unable to perform missions right now."*

Shock hit me.

*"Why is this?"*

*"My right engine has a serious fault. Major Grachev said it would take two weeks to get a new engine. That is why you are carrying mission packets, and I am not."*

Pain is a serious thing, especially to a pilot who cannot fly.

*"I asked him if he could take it from one of the other aircraft, but he flatly denied me that option."*

He shrugged, looked at the flightline, took a long stare and a drag at the time, wishing he was back on the tarmac, rather than doing TOC duty, or more pointedly, secretary duty. Granted there weren't many missions, but knowing you can relax and do practically as you please? It is priceless.

*"So you are doing what now?"*

*"CQ, though I hear Sacha is no longer on it, so now I will not enjoy it."*

He smiled slightly. I cannot blame a friend for his attraction. I do hope we do not lose our friendship over this woman. I chuckled. It was good to see him smile though.

*"Comrade, you are not qualified for a woman such as her, she is looking for a man."*

Then his playfulness broke, he was good to talk to, especially joke around with.

*"Alexseyev please spare me about your manhood, last time I was told, I am bigger than you."*

He smiled bigger, the age old taunts never got old.

*"Well comrade, when I am waking up with her, and you are cleaning your hangar, do not be angry da?"*

He made a face, then shrugged.

*"That is okay, I appreciate the company, perhaps I can assist you in planning?"*

Sometimes he also knew when he was beat in verbal sparring.

Why not? He needed to keep busy, and I had nothing better to do but plan and plan. Besides, he's part of the team, so it is natural to include your wingman. He may have to fly the mission anyways. We finished our cigarettes at our leisure, the mission ahead running through my mind, while Dimitri stood there, impassive. I do hope they do not break him, it would be a shame.

The CQ office was nondescript, pictures of Russian aircraft with sales pitches adorned most of the walls, along with maps of the region and a small phone. Somebody thoughtfully provided a TV, an American more likely, due to the quality of it. It was a Sony, and while it didn't get many channels, there are certain other channels supposedly they watch after hours.

Such is the vice of pilots who are removed from their wives and girlfriends, or those who do not have such an opportunity. Which brought me to Sacha. *Damn!* I'm supposed to be thinking of the mission. But the lunch we had didn't remove her from my mind, and I was standing like a little kid as Dimitri nonchalantly opened the door, and cleared off the table, except for the TV, which was within arms reach of the tallest pilots, and a chair you can lean back in, and use the remote if you leaned back, which was often the case on duty at night, when it was "slow".

I set the mission packets down, acquired a chair from the next office and brought it to the table. I then set down the mission files, and Dimitri brought in two cups of coffee. I nodded thanks, and opened the files, careful not to show everything. He had a slight smile on his face, and I looked up, slightly paranoid. Secretiveness does that to you.

*"What comrade?"*

I couldn't help not asking.

*"Oh, I just added some vodka to the coffee."*

He shrugged indifference, and acquired an ashtray. I have had plenty of time to ponder this mission. Major Grachev knew that I would finish sooner, confident I would do what was necessary. I pulled out the plotted route, and the target area photographs. Dimitri instantly looked at the target area photos.

*"This is too easy priyatel, I could do this with my eyes closed."*

He probably could. I knew it was no sweat. This was just formalities.

*"Da, it is, but yet I must stick my neck out with this one."*

As well as hers too, though she will probably never find out.

*"Lead with Kh-31ps, then hit the bridges, then take out the convoy, that is what I would do, and comrade, I can see it in your eyes."*

Dimitri should not be in the CQ desk — he should have a crystal ball.

*"Da, seems like the best course of action to me."*

I lit a harsh cigarette, and thought on the convoy.

*"Though Denevich, I must consider the convoy. I could use KMGU-2 dispensers, or cluster bombs, but the quantity somehow escapes me. Though I only have RBK-250s, on multiple ejector racks for six or three per point, and I must have enough to at least cause some damage."*

*"I see."*

Dimitri too lit a cigarette, rubbing his chin, then thought.

*"It depends on the profile nyet?"*

I saw it.

*"Of course Denevich! I must come along the road, and drop at the lead portion of the convoy, while constantly triggering the fire switch. I must use the aeronautical mode for this attack, yes."*

I nodded satisfactorily. Dimitri shrugged, some sorrow on his face. "Denevich, I see your pain, and you must accept it. I can ask around for you, and see if you can fill a slot. Matter of fact comrade, one of the Su-34 units is coming, with a less than full crew. I will recommend you fly with them until you can get your aircraft up and running again." He nodded, some enlightenment on his face. Wingman are priceless, and you must take care of each other. Or else you will not survive anywhere.

*"Plus comrade, I must sleep too. Da! I will recommend you be my alternate pilot, to get you out of this infernal hole."*

*"Comrade no, I cannot accept this."*

This was a sappy scene in the CQ office, but you must realize you must make sacrifices in order to advance both your career, and help those who feel weak. I never thought of this in regard to Denevich, but now I do.

*"Da, I will. Now let's stop holding hands and get back to the mission! Tell me, how many bombs should I bring?"*

*"Twelve would suit the mission fine comrade. Therefore if your attack profile is to the sea, you drop as many as you can, turn around quickly, and expend the rest, therefore you can get rid of all ordnance, and be on your way. How is that for a duty officer?"*

Dimitri winked. I had this impulse to tell him the real reason behind the mission, but I could not tell him.

*"It might make the front page of ITAR-TASS comrade, you never know..."*

*"Da, priyatel, you are number one!"*



Dimitri echoed that with a middle finger. Strange habits when you work with Americans.

*"Then Moscow would promote me and send me to a training unit with only females."*

*"Da, maybe, maybe. I doubt it."*

*"True comrade, true. Perhaps you will be sent to a unit full of homosexual men, and no chance of leaving. That would suit you."*

He smiled, taking a drag of his cigarette.

*"I think you put in too much vodka comrade, maybe you should get some fresh air, while I go back to the hangar and get with Gennedy about the weapons."*

I took my time putting the files back, making sure nothing was left behind.

*"You will never get his vodka, you know that."*

He said, looking outside the windows, his cigarette idly burning away, he was watching a pair of British Tornados take off. I saw him sigh, but I would rectify this situation. A pilot is not good for the desk when young. Energy wasted on paperwork for people who are tasked with such duties. Dimitri was not, and I must ensure that he leaves this hole before he wastes away. I said good-bye, and walked to my UAZ, started it up and headed to the hangar.

Sergeant Gennedy was playing cards with Private Boris Molenko, a stout man who was adept at loading weapons on the aircraft. Him and Sgt. Gennedy were laughing at a joke, and Sgt. Gennedy nodded to Molenko, who promptly started to leave. I waved him to stay seated. I have to appreciate the helpers as well.

*"Tonight, I will win your vodka."*

A large laughter echoed through the hangar, followed by coughing inspired by drink and cigarettes.

*"Surely sir you are drunk!"*

*"No, I will win tonight!"*

*"No, I will keep my bottle, I assume you have weapons for me to load?"*

*"Two Kh-31ps, two Kh-29Ls, and twelve RBK-250s on six point ejector racks on the wings, plus two R-77s, and two AIM-120s"*

*"Three hours."*

*"I see you three hours! Private Molenko, you are the sole witness. I am to start timing, nyet?"*

*"Let me get the crew, and then you start timing"*

*"I will be in my office, location is Tkvarcheli."*

With that I left.

The aircraft had a full 100% fuel load, so it would be interesting how he would accomplish this task within three

hours. But Sgt. Gennedy knew how to manage that fully. He has had enough drills to do that. Ten minutes later Sgt. Gennedy had knocked on the door.

*"Start timing comrade Lietenant."*

I did. After twenty minutes, I went to report to Major Grachev.

*"Sgt. Gennedy has... two hours and 40 minutes until the aircraft is ready for flight."*

Major Grachev chuckled.

*"So I see, what is your weapons loadout then?"*

*"Two Kh-31ps, two Kh-29Ls, twelve RBK-250s, and four air-to-air missiles, plus he must reconfigure the fuel to allow me to takeoff."*

*"Good, profile?"*

*"Lo-hi-lo sir. Additionally, a possible divert to Gudauta"*

*"There is a low MANPAD threat for sure, but the Mutqedah has thrown in some surprises as well comrade."*

*"I will handle it Major."*

*"Good, I accept, anything else?"*

*"Da, I wish to have Dimitri as my reserve pilot, he is not to be wasting away at the CQ desk."*

*"I will consider this. Dismissed."*

After meeting with Major Grachev, I walked to the cafeteria, hoping to find some snacks for tomorrow's mission. While low level flight is the most demanding of them all, you must realize, you only need one hand. You see comrades, to effect a low level strike means that you must pay constant attention to the world outside of your canopy, not the throttle. Understand now? Good, because it is also nerve-wracking, so you must eat while flying. I will not eat during an air-to-air combat mission however!

As I mingled through the snacks, I noticed somebody staring at me. I turned slightly, and it was Vasily. I simply nodded and walked out of the cafeteria. Nyet, I do not understand his annoyance with me. Perhaps he is *jealous*? *Of what?* I must concentrate on the mission!

As I walked to my UAZ, I thought over the flight time. I figured with the configuration, I would get maybe a maximum of 800 km/h. However it is a low level mission, so I must account for movement in the mountain ridges. So I came up with around 15 minute flight to the target, and maybe ten minutes while performing the attack. Maybe more. It can happen. I must also take my time for these to show up, so whoever is (*un*)lucky enough to pull the mission of engaging in air combat with these aircraft is allowed free airspace.

Perhaps I should divert to Gudauta in order to stay away from this fight. It is not me to run — but if I can — I will. While I am capable of air-to-air combat, I must say that the mission demands I do not be in the area. I would like the kill of two or even one Mirage to paint on the side of my aircraft. I have to decorate my aircraft suitably. But I must acquiesce as well to the mission. My time is not over with. I will get a chance to prove my air combat worthiness — even in self defense.

I pulled up to the hangar, and could hear the machine noise that is associated with hard work, and checked in with security. Once I entered, it looked like ants were crawling all over my aircraft. I knew the GSh-301 was fully loaded, but he had one worker checking the weapon system nonetheless. Two workers were assembling the bomb racks, both of them using a small overhead crane to position the bombs carefully, the fuze safety ribbons still dangling from the tip. One would move the bomb into place, while the other merely guided the bomb onto the mating point. I could see Sgt. Gennedy and two other soldiers use a cart with a lift to position the second Kh-31p onto the right intake, being careful. I could see the glass of the Kh-29L in between the engine pods, and had no doubt that the other one was behind it.

I do not spot check, much less need to worry about him. He is a man. I treat him like one despite rank. He has visited my house, and we have shared stories together over vodka. We are professional at work, but friends at the same time, and we know how to "turn off" when we need to. The only spot checking I am guilty of is when I do my pre-flight walkaround. That is a necessity regardless of relationship with your ground crew. And he has yet to be totally screwed-up. There has been *once* when he failed to install the launch connectors on two R-73s for a training flight. That is how the "Vodka Challenge" came about. I demand he do his work and like any Russian, he likes vodka. So he has a worthy goal to look forward after doing hard work.

As I watched, the last Kh-31p was installed, and they double checked the launch connectors. I did not pay attention to the cockpit until I saw movement. Sgt. Gennedy yelled to the cockpit, and the person in the cockpit gave a thumbs up. I liked that, why not just check it right there, than have the pilot realize the connectors are not correct? And too often it was at the worst moment, such as taxiedng to take off. I checked the wingtips and saw that the R-77s and AMRAAMs were mounted already. They were of course the easiest and most of the time were already mounted on the aircraft with the safety streamers hanging-off them.

The worker at the cannon finished his checks, then slid off the wing, careful not to hit the canard as he slid onto the lift. He then stood up, lowered himself down, then moved to where the bomb crew was working on the first multiple ejector rack. I noticed a similar one was on the right side of the aircraft, this one on the left. Efficient. I saw Gennedy yell at that soldier, then motioned him to the fuel truck. Ahhh, that is how he wanted to get rid of the fuel, but how?

The driver hurriedly went to the ATZ-10 refueling vehicle and proceeded to back up with Gennedy's guidance, putting the vehicle just to the left front fuselage. There was a main fuel nozzle there, so he must be taking the weight off the fuselage, which was not a bad idea, while leaving room for the workers to concentrate on assembling the bomb racks. I absentmindedly looked at the timer.

He has one hour and ten minutes left.

He walked to one of the other small crane controls, and moved the crane to a contraption with a fuel hose sticking out of it. It must be some sort of pump, so he could somehow drain the aircraft of fuel.

It was a safety precaution to allow aircraft to discharge fuel in flight, but not on the ground! I was slightly worried, but still very curious on how he was supposed to do this. So I leaned on the wall, and watched. He moved the contraption via crane on the top of the ATZ-10, then the driver attached the hose to the fuel nozzle. After the driver secured the top, double-checking the connections. He then opened the fuel nozzle and turned on the pump. The noise was slightly deafening, and the man in the cockpit was staring at something intently. Perhaps the fuel gauge, as that's the only thing worth watching in there.

I turned my attention back to the bomb makers. They were taking a break behind a newly assembled MER-6 with the RBK-250s glistening in the lights. They contrasted with the dull scheme of the aircraft and I made a mental note to paint them subdued as well. I felt that any weapon system I would choose to use *will be subdued* with paint. They drank water, and Sgt. Gennedy and his assistant moved the trolley to the underside of the number 9 station. Using the hydraulics, they carefully raised the assembly until it was perfectly aligned. The bomb makers finished their short break, and then moved on to the other side, while Molenko and Gennedy verified the connections. Gennedy

yelled, and the man in the cockpit pressed a few buttons, looked at the HUD, then gave a thumbs up. Gennedy nodded, then motioned to the bomb makers. Molenko walked swiftly to help them as Gennedy paused and took his own break. He was getting old too quickly, but he still had the vitality of some of the younger soldiers.

Gennedy looked around, noticed me watching then nodded. A smile appeared on his lips, and he tapped his wrist. I instinctively looked at my watch, and gave him a thumbs up.

He had forty-five minutes to go.

He echoed it, and I felt like a cigarette was in order. Such efficiency! I reminded himself to award him for such service, along with his crew, as a pilot is as confident as the quality of his ground crew. I lit my cigarette, and peacefully smoked away, not minding the guards, or the sounds coming from the hangar. When I was finished, I stepped inside, and saw that the second bomb rack was halfway done. Of course, when you have twice the personnel working on the same project, it moves faster.

The man with the fuel pump was finished, as per the wave-off from the man in the cockpit. The driver turned off the nozzle then disconnected the fuel hose. He then moved the pump on the ground near the truck. After securing everything, he drove the truck off, parking it where it was previously. I was slightly curious how much time was left.

With fifteen minutes to spare, the last MER-6 was installed with everybody walking around, shaking the weapons slightly to verify the mounting on the aircraft. I felt somewhat annoyed by this. This is *my* responsibility, but I realized, it was *their* responsibility to ensure I have properly secured weapons.

I watched them clean up the area, and then Sgt. Gennedy released them for a well deserved break. He walked over to me, a grin all over his face.

*"Ten minutes left da?"*

I looked at my watch. Yes, ten minutes early.

*"Da, very well, and very efficient I must say, I will try to put in awards for your work, as they are deserved. Just have your men finish their break for a half hour, then take care of anything you need with them, and release them. I need four at 0530 tomorrow morning....."*

I then realized I had a question on my mind.

*"How much fuel did you take out with that contraption?"*

*"Twenty percent, so you will have an 80% loadout when you takeoff. Enough for you to reach the target, loiter and then come back. Of course you can divert to Gudauta if needed, but you should have enough fuel to return to here."*

He wiped sweat off his brow. It is a shame he does not want to be promoted.

*"I will go and finish up, then sleep, enjoy your vodka."*

I winked, returned to my office, picked up what was needed, then left to the UAZ. He smiled, then ordered his men to join him in celebration of their hard work's goal. Tomorrow will be another day, and perhaps an interesting one. Least not for the mystery pilot. And in a way, I hoped Sacha would not be on that flight.

As I walked to my UAZ, I thought over the flight time. I figured with the configuration, I would get maybe a maximum of 800 km/h. However it is a low level mission, so I must account for movement in the mountain ridges. So I came up with around 15 minute flight to the target, and maybe ten minutes while performing the attack. Maybe more. It

can happen. I must also take my time for these to show up, so whoever is (*un*)lucky enough to pull the mission of engaging in air combat with these aircraft is allowed free airspace.

Perhaps I should divert to Gudauta in order to stay away from this fight. It is not me to run — but if I can — I will. While I am capable of air-to-air combat, I must say that the mission demands I do not be in the area. I would like the kill of two or even one Mirage to paint on the side of my aircraft. I have to decorate my aircraft suitably. But I must acquiesce as well to the mission. My time is not over with. I will get a chance to prove my air combat worthiness — even in self defense.

I pulled up to the hangar, and could hear the machine noise that is associated with hard work, and checked in with security. Once I entered, it looked like ants were crawling all over my aircraft. I knew the GSh-301 was fully loaded, but he had one worker checking the weapon system nonetheless. Two workers were assembling the bomb racks, both of them using a small overhead crane to position the bombs carefully, the fuze safety ribbons still dangling from the tip. One would move the bomb into place, while the other merely guided the bomb onto the mating point. I could see Sgt. Gennedy and two other soldiers use a cart with a lift to position the second Kh-31p onto the right intake, being careful. I could see the glass of the Kh-29L in between the engine pods, and had no doubt that the other one was behind it.

I do not spot check, much less need to worry about him. He is a man. I treat him like one despite rank. He has visited my house, and we have shared stories together over vodka. We are professional at work, but friends at the same time, and we know how to "turn off" when we need to. The only spot checking I am guilty of is when I do my pre-flight walkaround. That is a necessity regardless of relationship with your ground crew. And he has yet to be totally screwed-up. There has been *once* when he failed to install the launch connectors on two R-73s for a training flight. That is how the "Vodka Challenge" came about. I demand he do his work and like any Russian, he likes vodka. So he has a worthy goal to look forward after doing hard work.

As I watched, the last Kh-31p was installed, and they double checked the launch connectors. I did not pay attention to the cockpit until I saw movement. Sgt. Gennedy yelled to the cockpit, and the person in the cockpit gave a thumbs up. I liked that, why not just check it right there, than have the pilot realize the connectors are not correct? And too often it was at the worst moment, such as taxiedng to take off. I checked the wingtips and saw that the R-77s and AMRAAMs were mounted already. They were of course the easiest and most of the time were already mounted on the aircraft with the safety streamers hanging-off them.

The worker at the cannon finished his checks, then slid off the wing, careful not to hit the canard as he slid onto the lift. He then stood up, lowered himself down, then moved to where the bomb crew was working on the first multiple ejector rack. I noticed a similar one was on the right side of the aircraft, this one on the left. Efficient. I saw Gennedy yell at that soldier, then motioned him to the fuel truck. Ahhh, that is how he wanted to get rid of the fuel, but how?

The driver hurriedly went to the ATZ-10 refueling vehicle and proceeded to back up with Gennedy's guidance, putting the vehicle just to the left front fuselage. There was a main fuel nozzle there, so he must be taking the weight off the fuselage, which was not a bad idea, while leaving room for the workers to concentrate on assembling the bomb racks. I absentmindedly looked at the timer.

He has one hour and ten minutes left.

He walked to one of the other small crane controls, and moved the crane to a contraption with a fuel hose sticking out of it. It must be some sort of pump, so he could somehow drain the aircraft of fuel.

It was a safety precaution to allow aircraft to discharge fuel in flight, but not on the ground! I was slightly worried, but still very curious on how he was supposed to do this. So I leaned on the wall, and watched. He moved the contraption via crane on the top of the ATZ-10, then the driver attached the hose to the fuel nozzle. After the driver secured the top, double-checking the connections. He then opened the fuel nozzle and turned on the pump. The

noise was slightly deafening, and the man in the cockpit was staring at something intently. Perhaps the fuel gauge, as that's the only thing worth watching in there.

I turned my attention back to the bomb makers. They were taking a break behind a newly assembled MER-6 with the RBK-250s glistening in the lights. They contrasted with the dull scheme of the aircraft and I made a mental note to paint them subdued as well. I felt that any weapon system I would choose to use *will be subdued* with paint. They drank water, and Sgt. Gennedy and his assistant moved the trolley to the underside of the number 9 station. Using the hydraulics, they carefully raised the assembly until it was perfectly aligned. The bomb makers finished their short break, and then moved on to the other side, while Molenko and Gennedy verified the connections. Gennedy yelled, and the man in the cockpit pressed a few buttons, looked at the HUD, then gave a thumbs up. Gennedy nodded, then motioned to the bomb makers. Molenko walked swiftly to help them as Gennedy paused and took his own break. He was getting old too quickly, but he still had the vitality of some of the younger soldiers.

Gennedy looked around, noticed me watching then nodded. A smile appeared on his lips, and he tapped his wrist. I instinctively looked at my watch, and gave him a thumbs up.

He had forty-five minutes to go.

He echoed it, and I felt like a cigarette was in order. Such efficiency! I reminded himself to award him for such service, along with his crew, as a pilot is as confident as the quality of his ground crew. I lit my cigarette, and peacefully smoked away, not minding the guards, or the sounds coming from the hangar. When I was finished, I stepped inside, and saw that the second bomb rack was halfway done. Of course, when you have twice the personnel working on the same project, it moves faster.

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I woke up at 0500. I did not dream — but did feel refreshed — as the new day started. Well, the morning darkness at least. After forcing myself out of bed, I walked to the bathroom, and turned on the shower. I felt like I needed a jerk, so I turned it all the way cold. *That woke me up!* After a yelp, I quickly added hot water, and proceeded to take a shower. I needed one after last night. I just simply lay down, and promptly fell asleep. So refreshed comrades, and ready to partake in what seemed like one of the more interesting missions.

I drove straight to the hangar, smoking in the vehicle. It was against base regulations, but then again, at night everybody breaks these rules, and this morning was no exception. I was still groggy, and drove swiftly as well. Fast enough to get there at a reasonable time, but to also not annoy the Security Police cars that the USAF brought along with them. It seemed I had to worry more about getting a ticket than what I had to face on a mission. Such a world these days. I parked, and finished my cigarette. I went through the checks at the door, then was let inside. I walked to my office, and promptly changed into my flight suit. Some butterflies were in my stomach, but they did not annoy me too much. I was too busy preparing to let them affect me. I opened the safe, and pulled out the shoulder holster with my Makarov still there. I had gotten this from a US Army Lieutenant who was a liaison at the time. He had left, and traded some aviators boots so I could have the holster. I liked this a lot. It enabled you to simply wear your sidearm, and was quite comfortable and did not get in the way of the flight suit. I loaded and charged the weapon, then re-holstered it.

Pulling out my pack of cigarettes, I set one cigarette on the desk, for when I return to the airfield. I grabbed my flight helmet, then stepped outside. Gennedy's four workers were there. I had them re-inspect the connections, while one opened the hangar doors. After that, they began the task of removing the safety pins on the weapons.

After they were complete, I did my pre-flight checks, and then the most senior member saluted me as I taxied out with the canopy open, wings folded, and the sun already starting to warm the chilly air outside. I may never (want to) set foot on a carrier, but it is a carrier plane, and I must respect that. Besides, the aircraft looks threatening with just its wings folded.

It is a calm moment, despite the radio traffic. As you taxi to the runway. It is your moment of peace before the pressure of the mission sets in on you. But it felt good to be on a mission too, as well as the cool morning air.

As I taxied to the ramp from the HAS, I noticed one particular aircraft just entering the runway for takeoff. The Ukrainian splinter scheme was unmistakable. I could not make out the nose area, which identified Sacha or Vasily, but I was apprehensive nonetheless. I guided my aircraft carefully as I tried to make out the nose. I wished I could move faster! But I must obey the speed limits on the tarmac like everybody else. So I merely wished well to the pilot whether it was Sacha — or even Vasily, in spite of his annoying behavior. Dasvidanya lucky one, come back alive...

I saw the aircraft move forward, and the air shook with the sole aircraft's afterburners as it sped down the runway. I too just made it to the runway when the aircraft was quickly moving upward into the air. I too would be in the air, but not as high. I closed the canopy as soon as I stopped the aircraft, nearly perfectly aligned with the middle of the runway. It is not complicated, just something you try to do as a habit. I then unfolded the wings, and checked all the instruments, and I exhaled deeply, then keyed the mike.

*"Tower this is Hammer 11, request permission to takeoff."*

*"Hammer 11, this is Tower, standby."*

I swore to myself. The MiG is by far the most fast climbing aircraft in the Russian military has to offer, and the 9.13 is no less capable. A few minutes later the radioman came on the radio. I absentmindedly looked at my watch, 0645. At least I was on time.

*"Hammer 11, this is Tower, you have permission to takeoff."*

*"Tower this is Hammer 11, spasiba."*

I usually spoke in English, since most of them were English. The wonders of a multinational operation. Besides, Major Grachev does not mind me speaking in my native tongue. He is Russian, nyet?

I held the brakes down and pushed the throttle forward with a practiced ease. The ALF-31s screamed as it fought the wheel brakes. Or more exactly... the wheel brakes fought the engines. After a few seconds, I released the brakes, and like it's namesake, the aircraft leapt forward gracefully and I began the journey. I added some "up" trim as that always helps during takeoff. The nose gently rose, and after 280 km/h, I pulled the stick gently, and within seconds, was airborne.



Immediately retracting the gear, I let the aircraft build up speed, then made a gentle turn back towards the auxiliary runway. I had been cleared to fly over this one in order for my mission. Major Grachev works wonders, which is why I do not give him problems. He can give me more. I had to be gentle at this moment, as I yet did not have necessary speed, and the aircraft moved a bit slow, but the weapon load did not affect maneuverability... too much.

I flew today "Route 2", which I termed a valley that led eastward, then allowed me movement south. Most of it is easily flyable, with no major concerns, other than the normal ones of course. I had too much time, so I must do something with my time. The other route, in my other mission, was "Route 1" I had contemplated Route 1, but I have had used it quite a bit, and sometimes too many high places, so I will use it for other missions. But Route 2 was more lower, and I can easily navigate towards Tkvarchelli with the waypoint route loaded into the computer. The route at this time was easily navigable, so I did not have any problems reaching the target area. If it were not for low-level flying, I would have slept enroute. With no credible air threat, it is easy to get lax on duty.



As I made my way to the valley that would eventually take me to the target area, I monitored the tactical frequency.

*"Captain Scarlet, Destiny Angel out of Adler for one-eight thousand, entering your zone."*

*"Hallo, Destiny Angel. Clear for your mission as filed. Set IFF according to plan and squawk, please."*

*"Roger."*

I merely smiled in my oxygen mask as I headed in the mouth of the valley. It was Sacha! I wished her luck as I sped along the valley, headed to my target area.

Again comrades, for me to describe the flight to the target area would only put you to sleep, so I will omit that. However, I will say that mountain flying is most impressive.





When I had passed the border, I had decided to check in with the AWACs for any threat aircraft that may be lurking about.

*"Captain Scarlet, Nevsky requests air picture."*

It is not often I contact the AWACs controller as I am trying to reduce the electronic emissions from my aircraft.

While it is not of course a true stealth fighter, or never will be, I do like to play it safe.

Besides, they monitor my flight, I just do not announce it. Major Grachev handles that end for me. I also used English, since most of the controllers do not speak Russian. I sometimes wished the A-50 was up, due to the fact I can deal with Russians.

*"Nevsky, Captain Scarlet, picture is clear."*

*"Thank you Captain Scarlet, Nevsky out."*



I merely did that to maybe give some hope to Sacha, in what manner I do not readily know, but I guess I wanted her to hear my voice?

I *must not* think about affairs of this manner as I flew along the valley floor searching for smoke trails of a mujahid gunner. I was too close to the border to not look. It was not the time to be pursuing matters of the heart.

Once I was 41 kilometers from the target bridge — well inside the engagement circle of the two HAWK systems — I pulled the aircraft up leaving my Kh-31ps active, as I was going to engage them first.

You must unfortunately expose yourself to the hostile radar system in order to engage it. Unlike the British ALARM, which allows you to fire it into the sky, then when it itself detects a hostile threat, it will engage it. Surely our scientists can come up with something similar?

I started to hear the tones on the TWD, and I maneuvered the aircraft to align the Kh-31p's seeker head towards the first threat, the one system at Ochamchira.

I got launch authorization, and fired.







The Kh-31p had been modified from the earlier variants, to take an upward launch profile. This is more akin to the air-to-air missile launch. This reduced the chance of buildings, or other obstructions from preventing engagement, as well as increasing range.

I then turned east, and dove for the protective cover of the mountains. While I may have been outside it's engagement area, I did not want to take the chance.

After waiting, I oriented towards Tkvarcheli, using the TWD as my sniffer for my remaining missile.

Upon detecting the second hostile HAWK, and pressing the lock button...

...I got authorization, and my last anti-radiation missile left my aircraft.



Again, I brought my aircraft into the protective shroud of the mountains, and after a minute, ejected some flares and chaff for any other systems that may be lurking about, particularly mujahid gunners.

I waited some more, then I oriented to the two bridges that were my first set of targets.

Ironhand missions require patience and thinking in order to survive. You may *think* you have the target system, but what the Americans call "Uncle Murphy" comes into play. You must wait, flying a generally safe profile, then come back up and see if your weapons have engaged the target. If successful, then it is nothing. If however, they miss, then it will be interesting indeed!

I shed the mountains, and bore in on the first bridge.

At first I was going to make a "double tap"... fire at both bridges in one pass. However, I must contact the Spetznaz spotter / designator before I make the attack.

*"Hawk 23, this is Hammer 11, designate Target Alpha."*

*"Hammer 11, this is Hawk 23, designating Target Alpha, however I do see your aircraft, and you will not properly engage Target Alpha, suggest switch to Target Bravo."*

I had not considered the angle too well. I shrugged as I screamed towards the bridges, no time to argue either.

*"Designate Target Bravo."*

*"Designating Target Bravo."*





The missile flew true into its target and destroyed it.



Then I overshot the destroyed bridge, pulling an escape maneuver.

After a little, I turned around. I still searched the sky, despite the maneuver, for mujahid gunners. Still no smoke trails. Either I am lucky, or they are waiting for the perfect time to shoot me out of the sky.

*"Hawk 23, designate Target Alpha."*

I managed to be clear despite the G's that were pushing me to the seat.

*"Roger, designating Target Alpha."*

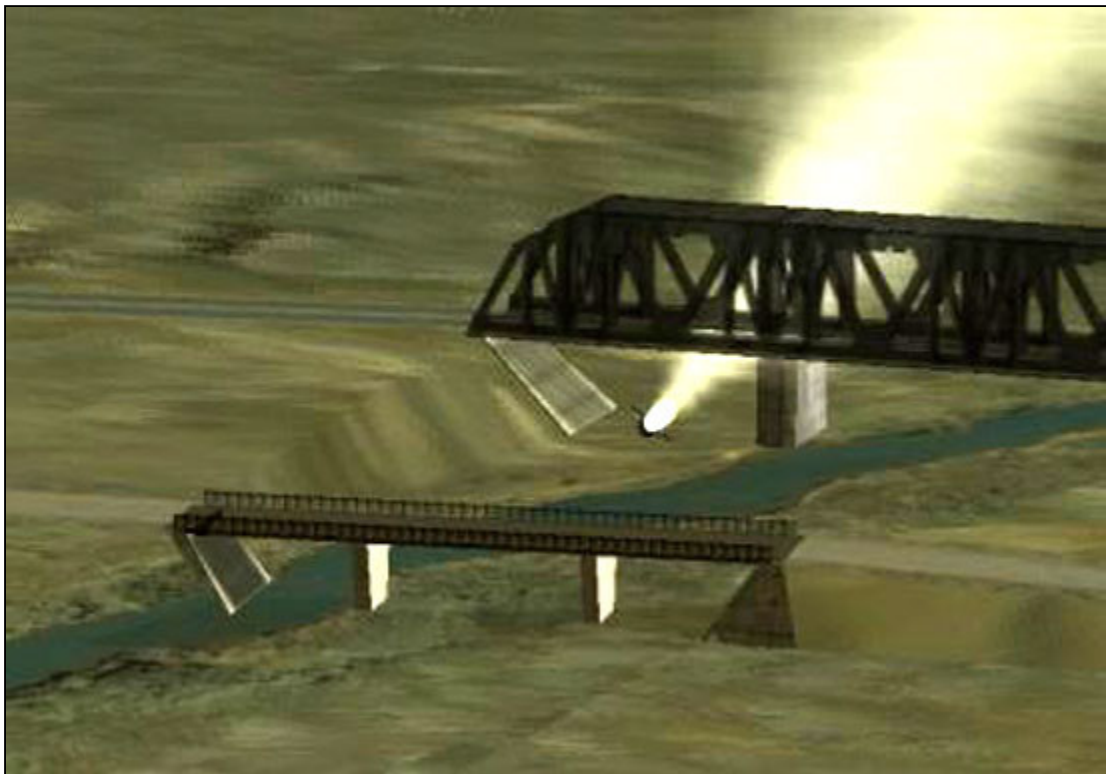




I then oriented the aircraft to the first bridge, and locked onto the laser designator, then fired.



The missile again, flew true to the target, and destroyed it.



I overflew the target, then oriented towards Ochamchira, where the last of my targets were. I ejected chaff and

flares, expecting a MANPADs from a mujahid gunner, but surprisingly, none came towards me.

Perhaps they are sleeping? I was flying quite a vulnerable profile, and it was apparent my second Kh-31p did the job it was supposed to.

Heading towards the town, I flew lower than the normal minimum height for the RBK-250s. I then overrode that, feeling I was going at a respectable speed to not worry about that. Besides, they are cluster bomb units, the explosion is not that of a FAB-500!

I lined up on the first target, and chose to drop only two to ensure I was aligned properly. I was not, but I was able to hit the target anyways.



After overflying the city, I was eyeing the sky, as well as the MLWS, expecting a parting shot from a mujahid gunner, but no missiles came at me.

I flew out to the ocean, perhaps taking my time. The rearview camera showed no damage to civilian buildings. Shattered glass I would expect, but apparently no buildings were hit. It does not make good if you kill civilians who may or may not side with you in a conflict. The intention is to not make them side with the enemy.

I would log possibly a half hour's mission, but the success is worth it. I only hoped as I turned back for the hopefully final pass that Sacha would be as lucky as I would. Though I am sure she has more excitement than I!

I realigned to the target area with the smoke clearly visible in the morning sky as well as the fires from the bridges kilometers away.



After adjusting the aircraft, I felt I had aligned properly, and went "Winchester" on bombs.



Sgt. Gennedy had installed a camera behind the cockpit. It was small, and practical for bomb attacks, so I could verify at the time whether I had struck.



As I left the area, I noticed quite a few fires. There is going to be less worried pilots today!



The return home was uneventful comrades, but I will mention that it is a good thing I chose to divert to Gudauta. The Su-33M2 can consume large amounts of fuel, especially when you are using afterburner!

Yes, there was *still* a MANPAD / SAM threat, but you must realize that they will have fired when they have. I therefore let the autopilot fly me home, while I pulled out a snack, ate it in silence, and enjoyed the breathtaking view of the mountain area. It is truly beautiful, only marred by the constant conflict that it has to deal with here.



Upon entering the ILS path to the aerodrome, I let it go for a few minutes, then disengaged the autopilot. Landing is perhaps one of the most joyful experiences, save for an aircraft cruiser!

I only could imagine the feeling of what Sacha must be going through, facing two Mirage 2000-5s alone as I taxied back to the hangar.

Then I heard the unmistakable intonation of contacts as I was powering down the aircraft, Sgt. Gennedy himself driving the tractor that would push me back into the hangar...



*"Destiny Angel, snap 130."*

*"Ready to copy."*

*"Bandits, bandits, bearing 133 for 92, angels low, hot. Confirm two, repeat, two hostiles. Weapons hot."*

*"Roger. Master arm on."*

After that I had turned off the radio. It was useless to monitor. I would hear about it within an hour, after I debriefed Major Grachev.

To her however, I wished a small prayer: Dasvidanya Rodina for you my fellow pilot, may you come back to her arms.



## System Specs

- Sony VAIO notebook
- 2.80 GHz CPU
- 448MB RAM
- ATi IGP 345M video card
- WindowsXP Home
- Microsoft Sidewinder Precision 2 joystick