

Feature

Red Lady Down

A Lock On: Modern Air Combat Mission Report

by **Cat**

The Commander set his jaw in a hard, unyielding line as he looked out into the overcast sky and forced himself to show no emotion, unlike the young lieutenant who slumped in one of the overstuffed chairs before his desk, squeezing a tumbler of clear Vodka in his big hands. I knew I sent them to their deaths, this day. It was my duty, and theirs.

***"It is my fault,
Commander.
She is lost, because
I was too slow..."***

It does nothing to still the pain of her loss.

"Vasily. Tell the story once again. I must know all."

The other man, a tall, handsome, dark-haired pilot, was stricken with grief.

"It is my fault, Commander. She is lost, because I was too slow, I..."

The Commander turned away from the window, steel in his cold blue eyes.

"Now is not the time for grief, Vasily. I must know how Sacha was lost! More of our comrades may be threatened. And I must know where she is now. Begin again."

Vasily swallowed hard, and took a deep breath. Sacha had reported in, breathlessly, from a flight with the American F-15 squadron.

"Vasily, come! We must see the Commander right now, it is urgent. Muqtadeh, he has a Cube battery setting up at Sukhumi base!"

They had raced into his office, pulled him away from a meeting with the Americans, Colonel Martin and Major Kelly, chattering at him in excited Russian, until he held up his hands and called

"Peace, my little eagles! Tell me all."



It is too much to bear! Now, the Sheikh has got his hands on the 3M9M missile battery, as I have told you. It is our version of the HAWK system, and lethal. In convoy on the road from Tkvarcheli, Troy and I saw it. It locked me repeatedly as we fought two ex-Iraqi MiG-29 fighters in the sky over Sukhumi. It painted us as far north as Gudauta, and we could pick it

up on the excellent American TEWS all the way into Sochi. It is a threat we cannot ignore.

As soon as I landed, I taxied to the main terminal at Adler airfield and frantically waved for the GAZ jeep by the flightline. Vasily had been lounging in the ready room, on charge-of-quarters duty manning the section's phones when I hurried into the room. He jumped up and shouted a congratulations across the room for my MiG kills.

"And so you add two more MiGs to your tally, eh, Sacha? It is Ethiopia all over again, but without the Cranes to fly!"

"Vasily, we have no time for this! Come! We must see the Commander right now, it is urgent. Muqtadeh, he has a Cube battery setting up at Sukhumi base!"

The congratulations died on his lips, and he assumed a more serious look.

"And you wish to be the one to kill it, I see. You will get us killed one day, Sacha, you are impetuous..."

"Peace! Come, hurry!" I had no time for this.

Vasily is thoughtful, and sure-handed. But the "Kub," our word for "Cube," the code name for the feared 3M9M system, is setting up even now, and the weather is turning against us. I can see clouds sweeping in from the horizon already. I hope for a quick plan, for we cannot allow the IRLF to have such a potent weapon at its disposal.

The Commander was in a staff meeting with the Americans. We convinced his aide that our news could not wait; a strong IRLF with more SAMs at its disposal is too terrible to consider. We had to stomp it out, like the bug — and quickly! Breathlessly, I told our Commander of the fight over Sukhumi, and of the SAM battery's presence. It is protected by another of the hated Shilka guns. The Commander stood at his large oaken desk, and picked up his telephone, ordering the flight line to prepare two MiG fighters, my 52 Yellow and Vasily's 54 Blue immediately. He nodded, sagely, then unrolled a tactical map on the desk.

"The Kub system takes some time, at least, to prepare. The Sheikh's men will not expect our attack to come so soon. I agree, Sacha. We must strike now, while they are still preparing. Vasily, you are our ground-strike specialist. What are your thoughts?"

***"Now, Sacha, Vasily.
This mission
will be your
most dangerous yet."***

"How long to have a reconnaissance done, sir? Photos would be invaluable."

The Commander smiled broadly.

"And this is what I was discussing with our American friends when you came bursting in, my little falcons. I know of the Kub system, you see. The GRU has warned us that Muqtadeh is planning something like this. Colonel Martin has arranged for the American CIA to help us. A Predator flies over Sukhumi even now, and we have real-time photos of Sukhumi base. But we must strike now. We cannot wait."

He sat and poured three tumblers of Vodka.

"Now, Sacha, Vasily. This mission will be your most dangerous yet. The MiG-29 9-12 has no jammers, no anti-radar

missiles. But if you fly low, you can fly under the Kub system's minimum ceiling. One of you can act as a decoy, as the other goes for the jugular. The attacking falcon, however, exposes himself to the Shilka gun. You must decide who will take the risk."

"Can the Su-25s help us in this, sir?" Vasily is ever pragmatic. The Rook carries the Kh-25MP missile, which can strike enemy radars from afar.

"No, Vasily. We have not the time to prepare the Georgians for this, and our own Su-25 section is not yet airworthy. And the Americans have no antiradar missiles."

The Commander lit a strong Turkish cigarette.

"And the British Tornados patrol in the air today, Combat Air Patrol over the Black Sea. They are the only ones that carry the ALARM. It will take longer than we have to call them in and prepare them and their crews for this mission. The planning began, Sacha, while you and Captain Barker were returning from Sukhumi. Our intelligence tells us that the IRLF has no more aircraft for now, and we must not allow them to obtain any under SAM cover."

Vasily nodded. "Then we must depend on our superior agility. Cluster weapons for the flight lead, and rockets for both of us."

I considered. "I will go after the radar?"

"Da. I will draw their fire, Sacha, and you bomb it well. Do this in a single pass, if you can. If we must finish the site with rockets we can, but it will open us to the Shilka that guards the base."

I trust Vasily in this. It was already near time to fly.

We drove to the weapons depot and supervised as the weapons, B-8 rocket pods and two KMGU-2f pods loaded with AO-25 bomblets were loaded onto the wagons, then sent to the flight line. They were quickly loaded, and I gently lowered myself into the K-36 ejection seat.



It is overcast now. Kolya, the meteorologist, had warned Troy and I not to linger over Sukhumi for this. Visibility would be excellent for us, for a time. But in the afternoon... not so much. Afternoon rains had set in.



Turbulence at all levels buffeted us as the MiGs rocketed off the airstrip into the grey sky.



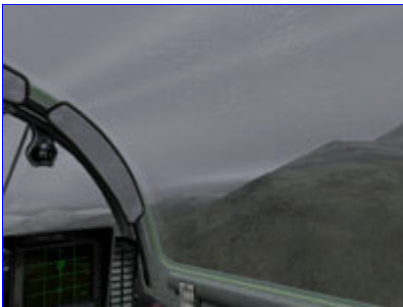
Ground control had computed a flight plan to keep us close to the ground and through mountain valleys, to be near as possible to Sukhumi base before we would break cover and engage. Vasily snuggled in tight to my wing as we entered the river network, sweeping into narrow gorges at near-supersonic speeds, jouncing up and down in the turbulent air.



"It is like our first trip to Sukhumi, Sacha! Remember how we bounced down the coast?"

"Yes, like the rubber ball."

We flashed over ridge-lines and down into green, tree-lined valleys.



Waypoint 7 is the Initial Point. There, Vasily and I would separate. I, to dash for the radar vehicle, which you Westerners call the "Straight-Flush," at high speed and CCIP the bomblets onto target. Thanks to the Predator, we had GCI relay of its location. It would be marked with a diamond in my HUD.

The action began sooner than I expected, as we near Waypoint 7. We turned at Waypoint 6 for the IP, into a wall of cloud.

Suddenly, my collision alarm blares... there are mountaintops here... and I cannot see them.

I *must* fly higher!



As I do, the SPO-15 "Beryoza" flashes bright red, a steady tone. Off, then on again.



"Two, mud-spike twelve o'clock. A medium-range air defense system. One, we are too high. We must get lower, he has us locked up."

The SAM is alternating between Vasily and myself. He may not know yet that there are two of us. I nose down, breaking out of cloud into a small valley and foiling the lock for the moment.

"One, IP."

"Two, running in."

Vasily breaks high, as we agreed. Immediately, the Cube has him. Vasily calmly announces the fact as I go into "Zem-lya" air-to-ground mode.

"Two, SAM launch twelve o'clock. Going defensive."



The 3M9M is radio-command guided. They must keep Vasily locked as the missile flies. He frantically manuevers as I call encouragement to him. The first SAM, he beams. It cannot match his flight-path and finally falls short.



"Keep it up, two! Target in sight, in hot!"



"Roger. Missile launch, two o'clock. Going defensive."

Another SAM in the air.

I see it blast off its tracked launcher through my HUD as I concentrate on the bomb-run.

Behind me, Vasily ducks over a ridge-line, foiling the lock again as I close, at an oblique angle with the airfield.



I am too low to maintain the "NP" drop-cue. I will have to bunt the nose just before target and hold it long enough to stabilize. It is a procedure fraught with risk. I may pitch long. But it is the only way. If I ascend, I will be the SAM's next target.



"Pickle!"

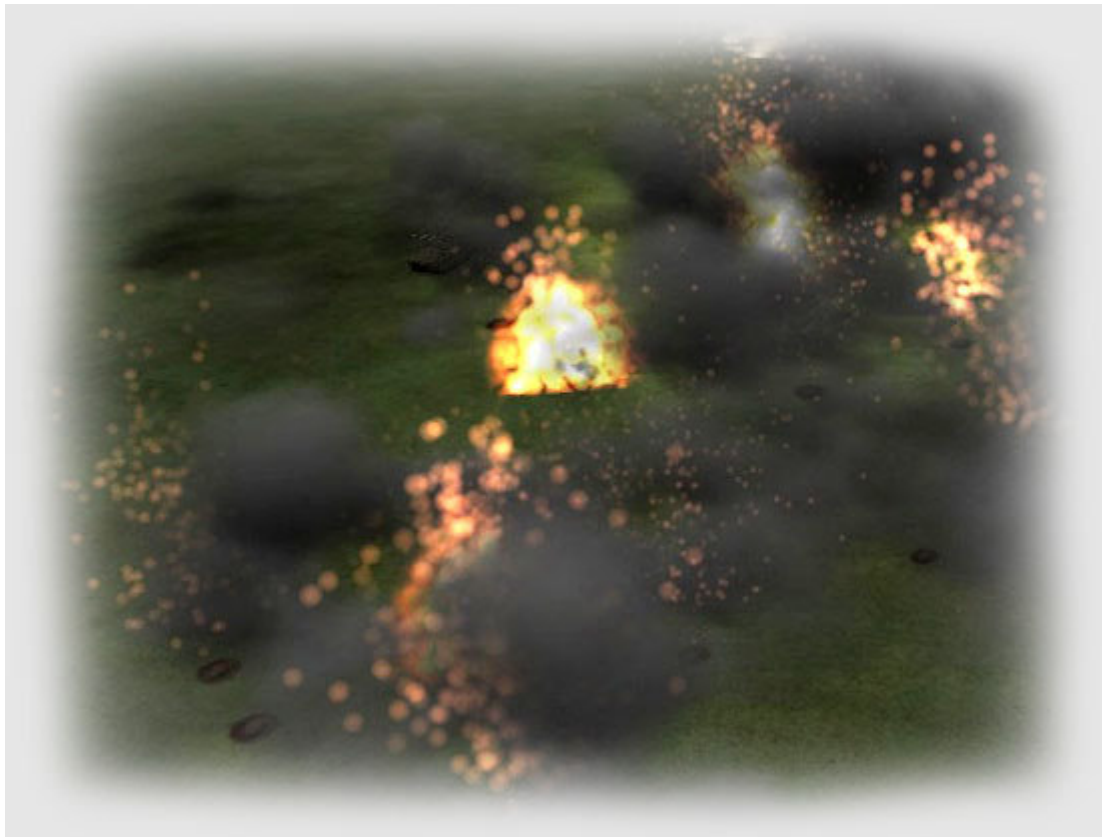
I ram the throttles into their stops as the bomblets drop free...



... and afterburn my way across the target just as a third missile launches beneath me. I hold my breath and pull back on the stick as the MiG claws for the sky.

I pull a six-g turn to put my nose into position for a rocket run, ignoring bright yellow tracer from the Shilka gun.

Did I get him?



My SPO-15 blares defeat at me, and drops silent, as Vasily calls out *"SAM launch, four o'clock. Going defensive."*

"I missed him!"

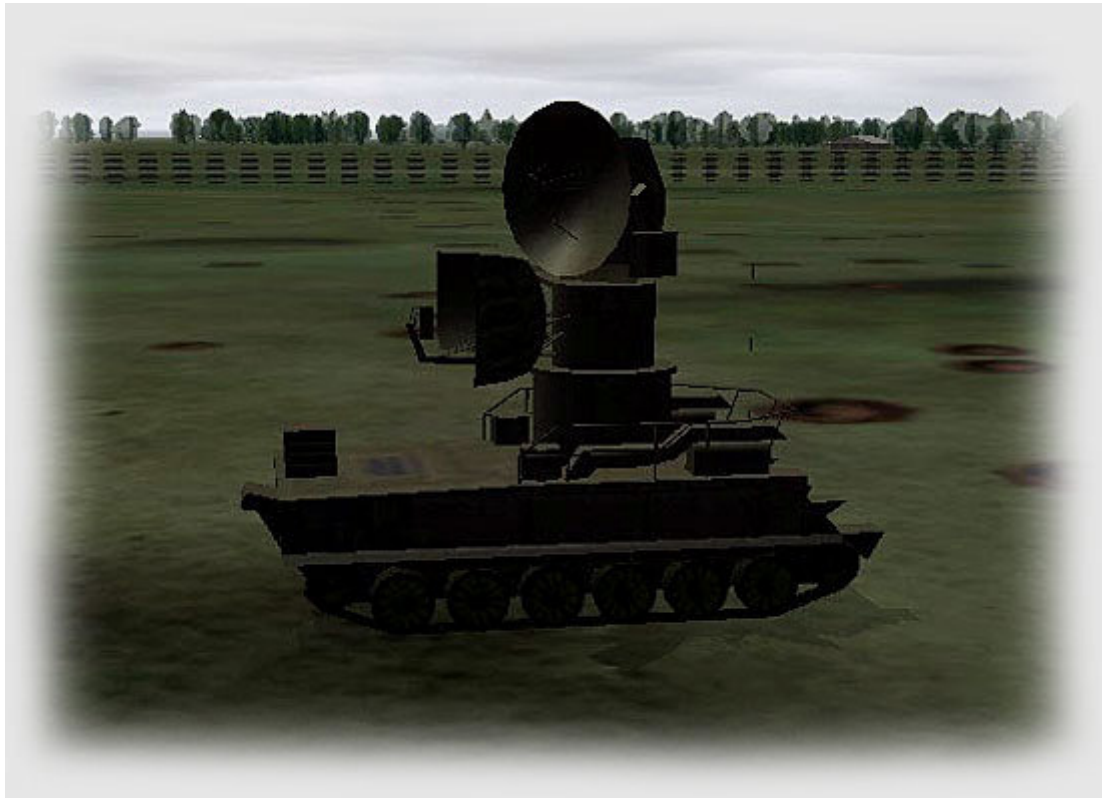
"Roger. Running in."

Vasily is lining up for a rocket strike as well. I must stop the SAM from firing a fifth time. Vasily is vulnerable, as am I now. The SAM cannot fire at us both.



I come from the sea. Vasily, from the mountains.

The "Straight Flush" is looking away from me; Vasily is calling defensive again, meaning the SAM is locking him for another shot.



I line up my B-8 rockets and trigger two long salvos, using the flaming wreck of two 3M9M launcher vehicles from my last pass as the aim-off point. As I do, my SPO-15 locks and gives a steady tone. I glance down, and see it's a short-range lock-on — *it's the Shilka!* He's tracking me across the airfield! *Ohmigod!* I punch in afterburner, not waiting to see what the rockets do.

"One, defensive triple-A! Vasily, watch the..."



The B-8 rockets were in the air as the 23mm rounds burned neat lines through the speeding MiG over Sukhumi airfield. Intent on their prey below, they took no notice as the fiery pile of duralumin, unfired munitions, and JP-5 fell from the sky it had just commanded, blasting a crater across the end of the base's only runway.

"Sacha! No! No!"

They flew, as Vasily Sandakchiev watched Sacha's jet fall, impacting all around the beleaguered mobile radar.



The IRLF crew manning the radar system displayed great courage that day, tracking Vasily in and firing a last shot at him, a final exclamation of defiance even as Sacha's rockets began to impact, enveloping them in flying earth, fire, and smoke, their funeral pyre.

Enraged, Vasily lined up and cruelly barraged the remaining launchers with



rockets, expending his last...

...and all his 30mm cannon ammunition, in a futile attempt to damage the AAA gun that had brought her down.



He circled high above Sukhumi, out of the Shilka's range, anxiously scanning the base below with his binoculars as the angry, impotent radar gun shook its electronic fist at him from below.



He desperately called for evacuation aircraft, knowing that there would be no rescue for her from the very headquarters of the enemy — if she lived.

He could see a crowd of vehicles gathering near the wreck of 52 Yellow. Humvees.

He choked back the bile in his mouth.

"Turks."



"The Americans' Predator confirmed what you told us. The Turks have taken her... if Sacha lives."

The Commander sat back in his leather chair, his face darkening.

"Better than Muqtadeh's men. After all, with the overcast and the low altitude, and the battle, it is possible that you did not see her eject, Vasily Sergeyvich. And the Cube is broken. You have done well. I myself could not have done more."

"She was trying to protect me, sir. It is my fault. I should have been faster."

"Nonsense. Four missiles you defeated as she ran in to target, and a fifth after she fell. No one could have been faster. Sacha knows well the risks which she takes. As do you. Now, I have a job for you."

I will put him back on his horse. I have need of him now, greatly. So does Sacha, if she is still alive.

"I wish the squadron to be called together. And the Americans too. Muqtadeh and his allies will pay a price in blood."

System Specs

- AMD Athlon 3000+ processor
- MachSpeed N2PAP-Lite motherboard with onboard Aureal AC97 sound
- PNY Technologies Verto NVIDIA GeForce 4 Ti 4600 video card with 128mb DDR
- 1GB Kingston PC2700 DDR DRAM
- Creative 12x CD-ROM
- Maxtor 40GB main drive
- DirectX Version 9.0a
- Windows 2000 with SP4
- Thrustmaster Fox2 Pro USB joystick