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VFA-82 Marauders Ba

By Lt. Joe Guerrein

Photos by Erik Hildebrandt

Training for air-to-air combat is one of the most fun—and challenging—things an aviator can do. Each opportunity to fly to fight brings unique situations that can be approached from many angles. But for the most part, we face the same aggressor pilots, in the same “friendly” jets, using the same bad-guy tactics in familiar op areas.

Last September, after months of planning, the *Marauders* of Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 82 broke away from routine turnaround training fare when they “invaded” Germany to take on the MiG-29. After working through all the logistical issues and coordinating with the U.S. Air Force, VFA-82 flew nine F/A-18s from NAS Cecil Field, Fla., to Laage Air Base, Germany. The name chosen for this detachment was “Ambitious Venture.”

Little MiGs Over Germany

A MiG-29 *Fulcrum* is cast in the starring role in the video from a VFA-82 *Marauder* gun camera.



The *Marauders* flew eight of their own F/A-18Cs and borrowed one two-seat *Hornet* from VFA-106 in order to participate in back-seat exchange rides with the German aircrews. At dusk on 4 September, two U.S. Air Force KC-10 *Extender* tankers, with *Hornets* in trail, left Florida on a 10.5-hour flight across the Atlantic. The transit required 10 in-flight refuelings along a route which took the *Hornets* up the East

Coast and across the Atlantic just south of Iceland. Upon detaching from the tankers, VFA-82 became the first U.S. Navy squadron to land at Laage Air Base.

On arrival, the most obvious indication that this base was not like most western bases was the hardened, earth-



Right, a study in detail of the business end of a *Fulcrum* preparing to launch. Below, *Marauder* pilots gained firsthand experience on *Fulcrum* capabilities through familiarization flights in a two-seat MiG-29.





Photo by Capt. John Leenhouts



Above, a *Hornet* and *Fulcrum* trio return to Laage after a successful training flight. Left, *Fulcrums* are often hangared in earthen revetments once intended to protect against attack from NATO aircraft during the cold war.

covered hangars that housed MiG-29 *Fulcrums* and F-4 *Phantom IIs* left over from the cold war era. The VFA-82 aircrews were greeted warmly by the aviators of the German Jagdgeschwader 73 (73rd Fighter Wing) and treated to good food, drink and conversation.

Having arrived on a Friday, the *Marauders* had the weekend to adjust to the new time zone and explore the town of Rostock; however, the minds of the aircrews were on what the first move would be when they reached the merge with a real MiG-29.

On 7 September, the first one-versus-one duel between a *Fulcrum* and a *Hornet* was flown. In addition to the MiG dogfights, sorties were also taking place with F-4s from the 2 Jagdstaffel (2nd Fighter Squadron). Most pilots were anxiously awaiting their first merge with a MiG. One by

one, pilots coming back from a mission were mobbed by fellow aviators asking how they did, what worked and what didn't. After a few days, the focus switched to maneuvers using a mixture of *Fulcrums* and *Phantoms*. The *Marauders* concentrated on improving tactics and trying new ideas to see what would work against the MiG, which provided a challenging platform to train against. The Luftwaffe pilots' excellent English skills and training helped the com-

bined operations run smoothly.

The *Marauder* maintenance department came through once again by keeping the jets airborne at a field far from home. Maintaining aircraft flying an average of 18 sorties a day is no small task, but maintenance crews worked day and night fixing everything from loose bolts to replacing an engine. Without their expertise, this detachment could not have taken place. The *Marauders* were also impressed with the German mainte-





Above, a cooperative MiG-29 *Fulcrum* shows off the design which makes it a front-line air-to-air fighter. Opposite, "Fight's on!" Lt. Mark Swedenborg faces off with his *Fulcrum*-flying opponent.

nance personnel, who contributed many off-duty hours and were vital to the success of the detachment.

The *Marauders* packed up their gear and headed home on 18 September. The squadron spent the night in Mildenhall, England, before once again snuggling up behind the Air Force tankers for the

transatlantic flight back to NAS Cecil Field. The long flight gave aviators and maintenance personnel a chance to reflect on not only the great training, but also the unique opportunity this detachment presented. The benefits in international relations, morale and tactical lessons learned were immense. The

Marauders are confident that the experience in Germany has prepared them for any future conflict in which they face a *Fulcrum* at the merge.



Lt. Guerrein is VFA-82's public affairs officer.