

By Cdr. Peter B. Mersky, USNR (Ret.)

Elward, Brad & Peter Davies. *U.S. Navy F-4 Phantom II MiG Killers 1965–70*. Osprey Publishing, Elms Court, Chapel Way, Botley, Oxford, OX2 9LP, UK. 2001. Distributed in the USA by Motorbooks International, 729 Prospect Ave., PO Box 1, Osceola, WI 54020. 96 pp. Ill. \$18.95.

Number 26 in Osprey's Combat Aircraft series, this new title is the first of a two-volume set. The second book will deal with Navy (and the few Marine) F-4 MiG killers 1971–1973. This book discusses in detail many of the kills achieved by *Phantom II* crews in the first half of the air war over Southeast Asia. Several of the engagements have rarely been described, such as the first F-4 kill and loss on 9 April 1965 involving VF-96's Ltjg. Terrance Murphy and Ens. Ronald Fegan. These two young aviators engaged and shot down Communist Chinese MiG-17s, but were themselves shot down in an incident that was hushed up until recently.

The photos are great, and the color profiles by Jim Laurier are also well done. A color folio also includes four maps showing routes, MiG-kill locations and MiG bases.

The authors describe the development of the Navy's "missile mentality" before Vietnam when the McDonnell F-3B *Demon* relied on the first generation of air-to-air missiles. Actually, VF-161 might have used its *Demons* in 1965 in Vietnam if the squadron hadn't been tapped to transition to the F-4 and left *Oriskany's* (CV 34) air wing just before the ship sailed. To provide commonality between the two embarked fighter squadrons, VMF(AW)-212 brought its F-8E *Crusaders* to join VF-162 for the deployment.

There is an interesting discussion of problems with the over-restrictive rules of engagement and with air-to-air missiles, such as the AIM-7 Sparrow and early models of the AIM-9 Sidewinder. Elward and Davies also track individual F-4s and their careers in various squadrons. This new addition to an open-ended series of great, affordable references adds significantly to the growing literature on the Vietnam air war.

Toperczer, Istvan. *MiG-21 Units of the Vietnam War*.

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A follow-on to the author's history of MiG-17 units in Vietnam, this book is Number 29 in Osprey's Combat Aircraft series. It has a fine spread of photos showing aircraft details and markings, and the folio of color profiles is good, although the MiG-21 *Fishbed* usually flew in unexciting natural metal with limited individual markings relegated to nose numbers and

occasional kill markings. A few were camouflaged in hurried applications of greens and grays. The color folio includes photos mostly of museum display aircraft and an unusual two-page presentation of postal stamps commemorating various events of the Vietnamese experience in the air war, such as shootdowns of American aircraft.

The Vietnamese People's Air Force (VPAF) got its first MiG-21s in late 1965, and the C and D models had engaged U.S. aircraft by early 1966 with the 921st Fighter Regiment based at Noi Bai, northwest of Hanoi. The narrative gives details of careers of North Vietnamese aces; an appendix notes there were 13. The top VPAF ace, Nguyen Van Coc, scored 9 kills while flying with the 921st. The author finally lays to rest the legend of 13-kill ace "Colonel Tomb," the final victim of VF-96's ace team of Cunningham and Driscoll on 10 May 1972. He also ventures that this F-4 *Phantom II* crew was actually shot down by another MiG-21 pilot, Le Thanh Dao, who had spotted the F-4J, sneaked in behind and shot a missile up its tailpipe. The accepted reason for the loss has always been a surface-to-air missile (SAM).

The author details early problems with the speedy little delta and how the VPAF came up with tactics to best use the MiG's advantages. The first MiG-21 kill of a manned aircraft (the VPAF also shot down several unmanned reconnaissance drones) was an F-105 *Thunderchief* on 7 June 1966, although the USAF didn't record a loss on that day. This highlights an ongoing conflict with previous MiG-17 books in getting claims and records to agree. There are constant variances between American and Vietnamese logs, and the Americans often attributed a loss to flak or SAMs, not MiGs.

Toperczer's book is full of interesting tidbits from the VPAF's side of the war. For example, during the USAF's legendary Operation Bolo MiG sweep on 2 January 1967, two Vietnamese aces, including Nguyen Van Coc, were shot down by Col. Robin Olds' F-4s in action over the MiGs' home field at Noi Bai. Then, there's the harrowing experience of the crew of a *Mongol* (the MiG-21's two-seat trainer version), a Soviet instructor pilot and his VPAF student. On 11 November 1972 while out on a training sortie, they were overrun by a flight of F-4s. Unarmed and with a limited fuel supply, the *Mongol* crew threw their MiG all over the sky to evade several missile shots from the aggressive *Phantom IIs*. Eventually, the MiG's engine flamed out and they ejected. Yet, according to the author, neither the Air Force or Navy claimed a MiG that day.

All in all, this is a fascinating look at the VPAF's war, which leaves plenty of room for discussion on both sides.