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Foreword

If, as the Duke of Wellington said, the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, then certainly the Gulf War - history's most effective air campaign - was won over the deserts of northern Nevada, in the world's most realistic war game, Red Flag.

Commenced a decade and a half before Desert Storm, Red Flag projected Saddam's war to an eerie degree: an interlocking network of MiGs, missiles, guns, and radars, woven together Soviet style and spread out over a seemingly endless and empty desert. That was the puzzle presented to an entire generation of Western pilots who earned their spurs in the Nellis range wars. And if they had never found the solution, Desert Storm would have had a much different, and less satisfactory conclusion.

Red Flag was just hitting its stride when George Hall and I flew to Nellis to research the original book. That was almost a decade ago, quite an exciting time to be hanging around the ramp. The entire American military was undergoing a renaissance then: new weapons, new tactics, new attitude. Red Flag meant the latest jets - Eagles', Falcons, Warthogs - as well as the brilliant Aggressor birds found nowhere else, in their rare Russian plumage; Lizards, Grapes, Gomers, Ghosts. By the light of the Vegas Strip, over the moonscape of the Great Basin, our plucky boys set out to relearn the art and science of air combat, their only hope against the cold precision and sheer numbers of the Soviet Military Machine.

Now, ten years later, it's hard to comprehend how quickly and how completely everything has changed. The Soviet Union - that Evil Empire that Military Monolith - self-destructed, seemingly overnight, and with it went the rationale for virtually the entire US defense build-up. Red Flag was never the same, certainly. No more MiG-5 jockeys babbling pidgin Russian, no more documents classified Cyrillic, no more red stars on the toilet seats in the Aggressor's men's room.

Not soon after that, Desert Storm broke. Although its political significance can perhaps be debated, its military efficacy cannot. It was a complete rout. A triumph of Western military art so great it even took the Pentagon by surprise. Red Flag planners were no doubt ecstatic to see that fifteen years of training and simulation had not been wasted [validation was a question that had nagged Red Flag since its inception]. But no one could have seen more clearly than Air Force strategic thinkers that Desert Storm was something of a fluke; the right war, in the right place, at the right time, against the right kind of enemy.

Military triumph it was, and we will never see the likes of it again.

It's been said that only defeated generals learn from past battles; the victorious merely prepare to fight the last war over again. Red Flag, to its credit, has moved beyond Desert Storm, and is learning and teaching the lessons of the next air war over a more unsettled, though no less dangerous world. HOW it's going about that is the subject of this updated book.

I have not been back to Nellis since 1983. George Hall practically lives there. And why not? His business, after all, is photographing the latest and greatest in tactical aviation, and there's no better place to do that than Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada. It's been said that if you sat long enough in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee, eventually you'd meet everybody worth meeting in the South. Nellis is like that for airplanes.

This update then, is his work. I've limited myself to correcting some youthful excesses and adding bits here and there gleaned from an ensuing decade of tail spotting, hangar flying, and fighter bar hopping. But if the reader can't tell where I leave off and George begins, then that's fine with me.

I never expected this book to live this long. At any rate, I thought I had retired from this business. There was, I thought, a finite number of things you could say about airplanes, and after a half-dozen books and countless magazine articles, I'd said them all. But not too long ago. I was at another air show, staring open-mouthed at a pair of the last surviving F-4s. They screamed in with fantastic grace, smudging the blue sky gray at full military power, sun diamonding off the canopy. Their roar met mine at the top of my throat, flaps and stabilators fluttering, four gray helmets nodding toward me as they arced out of sight towing a scream, then silence, and then I knew I had not ever even gotten close to what flying fighters is really like and I knew I never would. No one ever could.

Michael Skinner
Marietta, Georgia
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