

# COLD WAR BIRDS

*Bellying up to the challenge of a fighter jet*

BY MICHAEL MAYA CHARLES

“**T**here’s something about jets that always seemed magical to me. When I was a little boy, I would run around the house making jet noises—not propeller noises, like most kids.” Now some 40 years later, Dr. Howard Torman doesn’t need to make-believe he’s a jet pilot; he flies his very own jet fighter, a MiG-15 UTI, whenever his busy schedule permits. As medical correspondent on television’s *CBS This Morning*, Dr. Torman each weekday joins Harry Smith, Paula Zahn, and Mark McEwen with the latest information on a wide variety of health topics, from breast cancer to what to do about your child’s thumbsucking. But his real passion is flying his MiG-15 jet. ■ Owning a jet like this was almost impossible until fairly recently; the U.S. government will not sell surplus American military jets to civilians, though a few have found their way into private hangars through sales to a third-world country, then back to buyers in the United States. Another couple were retrieved from scrap heaps and surplus yards, then pieced back together by creative and enterprising rebuilders. But what broke the jet market wide open recently was the upheaval in the eastern-bloc countries—nothing short of a revolution politically, socially,

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE FIZER

and, perhaps most visibly, economically. In what was communist Russia, China, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, capitalism is sending down new roots. Cash is king; everything, it seems, is for sale, and that includes surplus military aircraft, some for as little as \$25,000.

The reality of owning a cheap jet (if there really is such a thing) is a little different from what it seems. Buying any jet, even one for less than a good used Skyhawk, is a serious investment. The difference between the Skyhawk and the jet warbird is this: The initial purchase price of the jet is just the entry fee; the real cash flow begins *after* the sale. The \$25,000 selling price will buy you a MiG-15 all right, but it comes disassembled in a shipping con-

■

***Buying any jet,  
even one for less  
than a good used  
Skyhawk, is a  
serious investment.***

tainer or crate; it will take another \$75,000 to \$125,000 to make it a safe, certified, airworthy airplane. Because "VFR jet" is one of aviation's great oxymorons, the airplane will need a full complement of radios to allow it to fly in high-altitude positive-control airspace. Even so-called ready-to-fly airplanes will need big chunks of money applied in the right places before they are ready to launch into the stratosphere. Systems updates, repairs or airframe replacements, required American flight instruments, and a thorough going-through by an experienced shop can quickly add up. Dennis Sanders of Sanders Aircraft Technologies in Chino, California, which recently assembled and certified its first L-29 Delfin for a customer, cautions those shopping for a deal: "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is."

Some of these imported jets were current working trainers or fighters taken directly from the flight line, then disassembled and shipped to the United States. A few were "gate guardians," impaled ignominiously for years on a pole outside some military base. Concern over the history of some of these airplanes prompted Czech manufac-



*A few years ago, the presence of MiGs over America would have caused great alarm. Now, aging fighters like the MiG-15 (with its training version, above) are becoming less disturbing sights. CBS's Dr. Howard Torman (right) is just one of a new flock of jet warbird owners.*





turer Aero Vodochody, maker of the L-29 Delfin jet trainer, to write a letter to the Federal Aviation Administration in December 1992. "We feel Aero has the responsibility to alert U.S. agencies, especially FAA, to the fact that possibly unsafe L-29 aircraft may be imported into the U.S. from different countries' aircraft bone yards or storage areas." The FAA misinterpreted the Czech letter and, with admitted little knowledge of these airplanes' original certification or construction and fears of a massive influx of unfamiliar airplanes, declared a moratorium in July 1993 on *all* airplanes certified under experimental exhibition rules. Experimental exhibition is the catch-all category of the certification regulations that these non-U.S.-certified air-

■

*The Feds had  
shot down their jets,  
reducing them  
to expensive  
playground novelties.*

planes are swept into, along with such diverse company as clipped-wing Cubs, Bücker Jungmeisters, Yaks, and Hawker Sea Furys. A chorus of complaints from legitimate sellers of these airplanes; flurries of letters, faxes, and telephone calls; and clarification from Aero Vodochody (it was expressing concern over the pedigree of a *few* airplanes, not those properly sold and certified) prompted the FAA to lift the moratorium in six weeks. But the FAA's action stunned both owners and sellers of these aircraft who recognized that with one broad stroke of the pen, the Feds had shot down their jets, reducing them to expensive playground novelties.

Since the moratorium, experimental exhibition certification has been a hot topic. Last fall, industry leaders, owners, and resale companies met at the Experimental Aircraft Association's (EAA's) headquarters in Oshkosh to discuss the problem of experimental exhibition. In spite of requests by the participants, the FAA was unable to define a safety problem or accident trend in this segment of aviation to justify increased regulation or scrutiny. It seems the perception of



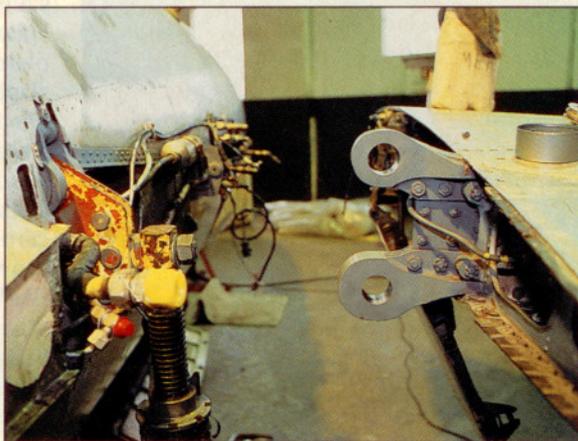
C.J. HEATLEY



thousands of civilians flying military jets bothered the FAA more than any definable problem. Steve Mair, who owns a SIAI Marchetti S-211 jet trainer and is a relatively low-time pilot, summed up the general consensus: "If there is a safety problem or an airworthiness problem, then it should be addressed appropriately, but the FAA has failed to show a reason for their willingness to restrict these airplanes." In spite of the war paint and arrows, the industry and the FAA have made a tentative pact, and the agreed rules will debut in August.

The Exhibition category is not meant for airplanes used for personal transportation; exhibition airplanes are certificated only to be flown to and from air shows or other opportunities for display and for proficiency. This proficiency flying long has been subject to interpretation by each owner and will receive increasing scrutiny under the new rules. Turbine-powered experimental exhibition aircraft issued original airworthiness certificates after July 9, 1993, will be allowed to conduct proficiency flights

*Many times, buying a jet like the MiG means major reassembly. Parts availability, however, is rarely a problem.*



in a 600-mile radius of a designated home airport. A detailed log of the aircraft's activities will be required for annual renewal of the airplane's airworthiness certificate. Owners will have a list of approved airports that they may fly their jets to and from; permission from the FAA will be needed before going anywhere not on the approved list.

The new rules will expand the approved uses from "air show" to "event," which can be interpreted as

organized fly-ins and air races, organized exhibitions, youth education events, shopping mall and school displays—even movie and television productions.

With the roar over the appearance of these old jet warbirds and fears of mass invasion, it's sometimes easy to forget that the realities of jet-airplane ownership (read: ample quantities of American dollars) will keep numbers fairly small. There are actually only about 200 registered jet warbirds in the United States, according to Chuck Parnell, executive director of the Classic Jet Aircraft Association in Oshkosh. His 250-member organization, part of EAA's Warbirds of America, operates a mixed bag of airplanes, from the British-built Vampire, the Paris jet, and the French Fouga Majester, which have been safely owned and operated in this country for more than 15 years, to types like Dr. Torman's MiG-15, which have been in the United States for eight or nine years, to relative newcomers like the Polish Iskras and British Strikemasters. With these and many more types on the horizon,

shouldn't we be concerned about the safety of jet-warbird operators and all those innocent civilians on the ground?

Lance Toland, of Lance Toland Associates in Griffin, Georgia, who claims to insure about half of those 200 jet warbirds, has high marks for the safety of the jet owners. "By and large, the jet-warbird community represents one of the safest groups in the business," he says. To keep it that way, the Classic Jet Aircraft Association is developing an operations manual for jet owner/operators, which they hope will set needed standards for the fleet. It contains recommendations on runway length, noise abatement procedures, airport departure and arrival procedures, mission planning, maintenance and inspection, and minimum pilot training and recurrency. Compliance is not mandatory, though.

Are civilians up to the task of flying these airplanes? After all, the men and women who fly them in the military are chosen after much testing, qualification, and training. No such selection/qualification/elimination process exists in the civilian world. The main qualification for civilian jet-warbird ownership is the ability to write large checks.

"Truth is, many of these airplanes are easier to fly than my Baron," says insurance man Toland. The real issue, though, is how they must be flown and maintained to provide an acceptable level of safety. These are jets, after all, and the best way to fly them is the way the military, corporations, and airlines have flown jets for years: procedurally and by the book. Things happen faster in jets than in turboprops and piston airplanes. A low pass at 250 knots requires more planning, precision, and practice than in a Cessna 182 or Beech Bonanza. Cross country in an airplane that carries only 1.5 hours of fuel requires real flight planning, especially if the weather is less than perfect. Toland said there have been a few accidents, and they get a lot of attention, but the reasons seem to have few things in common other than pilot inexperience or stupidity. Most important, very few of the accidents are due to airplane failures.

When asked what it would cost to insure a private pilot with no jet time in a MiG and 1,000 hours total time, Toland replied bluntly, "I wouldn't.

That would be irresponsible." He wants the pilot to have previous experience in straight-wing jet trainers or Learjets or prior military time before insuring them in any swept-wing jet. Toland said the insurance bill for a qualified pilot would be about 3 percent on the hull value (we used an airplane valued at \$100,000) and another \$2,000 for liability coverage.

To enter the world of jet ownership, Dr. Torman knew he would have to get good training. He turned to two professionals, John Penney and Rick Vandam, of MiG Masters, who had been recommended by Aviation Classics,

■

***The secret to all  
these airplanes is  
they convert  
green money into  
jet noise and fun.***

Limited, where he bought his jet. Both experienced jet pilots, with Penney being one of the most experienced MiG pilots in the country, these professionals come to training sessions armed with tests and training curricula adapted from their own military training, test piloting, and airline flying.

With an ATP, little jet experience, and only 1,000 hours total time, Dr. Torman's first step into the world of jet flying was to obtain a certificate called an LOA, or letter of authorization, from the FAA. Required for each type of turbine or large warbird to be flown, he found that it wasn't easy to get. "As I came to know my instructors, I learned that it was not a simple proposition of 'write checks—get an LOA.'" He started with ground school, complete with slides and overheads, manuals to read, and written tests to take. "Then we marched through the whole basic fighter-pilot syllabus with low-level work, aerobatics, and military-style formation flying." After a little over 15 hours of dual instruction, instructor Penney turned Dr. Torman loose in the jet. That was four years ago, and the training has continued ever since.

Maintenance is a major expense in operating these jets (an annual inspection runs about \$7,500—if there are no surprises), but parts are generally not

a problem, according to owners. Even turbine engines like the MiG's Lis-2b are available and seem a steal at only \$8,000 a copy.

Dr. Torman figures it costs somewhere between \$1,000 to \$1,500 per hour to operate his airplane, with nearly half of that cost in fuel alone: The airplane burns between 250 and 350 gallons per hour, depending on whether he's going cross country or flying low levels. He flies 25 to 40 hours per year, with an average hop of .7 hour. Most of the flying is local; cross countries are rather brief affairs due to the minimal fuel capacity. Internal fuel is only 263 gallons; external drop tanks (made of wood) hold another 105 gallons each, bringing the total to 473 gallons, enough fuel for about an hour's flight with 45 minutes' reserve. The rough equivalent would be to plan a cross country in a Skyhawk with 15 gallons on board.

The secret to all these airplanes is they convert green money into jet noise and fun. For Dr. Torman, in spite of the costs, the risks, the quirks, and the commitment to training, owning a MiG is the realization of a boyhood dream. "It's a real live, honest-to-God swept-wing fighter that defines what I always wanted my flying to be," he says. Of course, if he wins the lottery and has a little change rattling around in his flight suit, he might look at a JPATS next-generation jet military trainer if it becomes available. "That would be wonderful to have and fly, something a bit more docile and forgiving as I get older. But I enjoy the challenge of flying my MiG. It's like skiing a really steep hill." And, he adds, perhaps recalling childhood memories of whooshing a jet model through the hallways of his boyhood home, "It's a lot of fun." □

*For more information, contact Classic Jet Aircraft Association, 414/426-4800; MiG Masters, 303/290-0457; Aviation Classics, Limited, 702/972-5540; Lance Toland Associates, 800/282-1219. Torman's company, TACAIR Systems, Limited, flies this MiG under U.S. military contract and performs in air shows and movie productions. TACAIR Systems, Limited, 71 Washington Street, Reno, Nevada 89503.*

*Michael Maya Charles, AOPA 10826528, is a captain for a major U.S. airline. He has more than 28 years and 13,000 hours of flying experience.* *Continued*