

Book Review

The MiG Diaries: Fighter Pilot Memoirs & Accounts of Cuban, SAAF and Angolan Air Combat in Southern African Skies

Eduardo González Sarría and Lionel Reid

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The age-old adage – a story always has three sides: yours, mine, and the truth – also applies here. Apt words to describe a truly remarkable book. For 40 years, readers of authoritative South African (SA) literature covering the aerial war over Angola (1976–1988) and the South African Air Force (SAAF) history, have believed that Johan Rankin (3 Squadron, SAAF) shot down two Cuban MiG-21s over southern Angola, when in fact one of the MiGs made it home, albeit on a wing and a prayer. For 40 years, an SAAF C-130 crew believed they were targeted by an SA-2 surface-to-air missile (SAM) system, when in fact they were nearly shot down by a Cuban MiG-23 flown by Eduardo González Sarría himself. Only when two sides of the same story were analysed and timelines were compared, did the stories become one: the truth.

The MiG Diaries is a true and brilliant account of some of the aerial warfare encounters of the Angolan conflict during the 1970s and 1980s. In an SA context, most of these accounts are well known, and have been discussed and written about for many years. These accounts however have all been marred by one big limitation: the stories were told based on reports of SAAF aircrew alone. Moreover, no matter how accurate and authentic these accounts are, no story can ever really be declared truthful if not validated by the other side. And this is exactly where Lionel Reid, a former SAAF pilot involved in the Bush War (1966–1989) and Lt Col. Eduardo González Sarría, a Cuban pilot who flew MiG-21s and MiG-23s in Angola, have managed to fill a 40-year-old void. They have succeeded in addressing uncertainties that have been lingering for a very long time in the minds of those involved on both the SAAF and the Cuban and Angolan sides, providing a fresh and more inclusive view of the aerial war in Angola.

The MiG Diaries is in essence an account of the aerial war in Angola between 1976 and 1988, primarily from the viewpoint of the Cuban aircrew involved. Throughout the book, it is evident that the authors prioritised the factual correctness of all mentioned encounters. To this end, the authors made an effort to track down and interview numerous personnel involved, not just from the SA and Cuban sides, but also from the Angolan and even Soviet sides. No effort was spared to achieve a nuanced and detailed view of all the encounters.

Being the author of two previous books (in Spanish) on the subject, Eduardo González Sarría was already in possession of various recorded encounters and photographs from former colleagues. These, in conjunction with similar books by SA writers, provided the perfect foundation for *The MiG Diaries*. In the book, particular emphasis is placed on the experiences and contributions of Lt Col. Eduardo González Sarría, who completed three separate operational tours in Angola between 1976 and 1988. His first deployment in 1976 was as a 26-year-old, rookie MiG-21 pilot. He returned as a MiG-23 squadron commander in 1985 for his second tour, during which he played a pivotal role in all MiG-23 operations. His final tour saw him being part of a safety board delegation in 1988.

As a former SAAF pilot involved in the war, full-time airline pilot, and avid military aviation enthusiast, Lionel Reid has always had a fascination with the details of the Angolan conflict. After reading one of Sarría's books, Reid identified an opportunity to piece together a book project aimed at eradicating decades of one-sided narratives. A few emails between two old foes soon blossomed into a lasting friendship between Reid and Sarría, and the birth of *The MiG Diaries*.

The MiG Diaries aims to eradicate misconceptions and uncertainties related to the aerial war component of the Angolan conflict, and deliberately circumvents controversial politics. The events covered in the book are well known and have been covered in many books in the past, from an SA as well as a Cuban and Angolan viewpoint. For the first time, however, these well-known stories are synchronised, presenting a complete picture of numerous air encounters in detail. The book manages to effect an amazed “wow!-is-that-what-happened” response from the reader, especially among those who have been confronted with one-sided narratives for many years. The prime example here is the subject of the air-to-air MiG-21 losses in November 1981 and October 1982. In both these cases, Maj. Johann Rankin (3 Squadron, SAAF) managed to engage a Cuban MiG-21 with the 30 mm cannon of his Mirage F1CZ. The first MiG-21 shootdown on 6 November 1981 was clear, and no doubt ever existed in the minds of either side about the outcome of that engagement. The second MiG-21 “shootdown” on 5 October 1982 could however never be confirmed by the SAAF. A large explosion noted on the gun camera footage led to the belief that the MiG-21 could not have survived the engagement. For many years, the SA narrative was that Johann Rankin downed two MiG-21s. In fact, Raciél Marrero Rodríguez, the pilot of the stricken Cuban MiG-21, achieved a marvellous feat that day, and managed to land a very badly damaged aircraft at Lubango. For an avid reader of SAAF history, this revelation undoubtedly affected a very surprised response from the reviewer. Many more such examples are discussed in detail in *The MiG Diaries*. Another big revelation for the reviewer was to realise that most Angolan and Cuban aircraft shootdowns scored by a South African during the Angolan war was not by a pilot, but by an electronic warfare turned air-defence operator by the name of Flight Sergeant Johan Strydom. And the bigger “wow!” affected here was to realise that he shot these aircraft down with a Soviet-made SA-9 (self-propelled anti-aircraft missile system), captured from the Angolans. The mystery surrounding these encounters and many more have finally been debunked.

The aerial war turned well in favour of the Cubans during the mid-1980s. The access to MiG-23s equipped with all-aspect missiles stacked the odds squarely in their favour. This was highlighted in September 1987, when Arthur Piercy's Mirage F1CZ was badly damaged by an AA-8 air-to-air missile fired from a MiG-23. The aerial war was primarily conducted over Angolan territory, which inherently meant that SAAF aircraft often had to operate well outside friendly radar coverage, and well inside dense enemy radar coverage. This forced the SAAF to concentrate on low-level operations in an attempt to remain below enemy radar coverage for as long as possible. The ground attack tactics and doctrine developed by the SAAF during the Angolan conflict were extremely effective, and the SAAF carried out many successful strikes deep in Angolan territory. As many similar books before, *The MiG Diaries* highlights the inability of the SAAF air combat component to attain and maintain air superiority over southern Angola during the mid- to late 1980s. This was primarily due to a lack of proper over-the-horizon friendly radar coverage (i.e. airborne early warning and control system or AWACS), the lack of proper all-aspect short-range missile systems, and the lack of proper beyond-visual-range missiles.

The MiG Diaries tells the story of the Cuban, Angolan, and SA pilots who fought during the Angolan conflict. The book was written by two pilots who were intimately involved in the conflict, and experiences are brought to life by a magnificent selection of pencil sketches by Sean Thackwray, a former SAAF fighter pilot himself. The book allows the reader to become part of the war, sitting in the cockpit, feeling the kick of the afterburner, and smelling the cordite from a fired cannon. It is a must-read for all military aviation enthusiasts and aerial warfare historians.

General Carlo Gagiano (former Chief of the SAAF) aptly noted to Lionel Reid that this was probably the last chance to tell the story of the aerial war over Angola correctly. With memories fading and war heroes passing on, the authors should be commended for achieving this objective. Although ideologies might differ, one certainty remains, pilots will be pilots. The camaraderie, crew room banter, passion for flying, and love for our machines cut across all differences.

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