

A History of NASIC

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE INTELLIGENCE CENTER

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, OHIO

Colonel Tomb and Other Mythology

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Over many years, the National Air and Space Intelligence Center (NASIC) and the National Museum of the United States Air Force (NMUSAF) have fostered close formal and informal relationships. Back in the days when NASIC was the Foreign Technology Division (FTD) and NMUSAF was the US Air Force Museum, I remember joking with Geoff Hay, a close friend and the Museum's Director of Acquisitions, that I always got excited when a C-5 Galaxy landed at Wright-Patterson. It meant that something new had arrived for either the Museum or FTD.

One such new arrival occurred in 1986, when a MiG-17/FRESCO, donated by the government of Egypt, arrived at the Museum. This was an exciting new acquisition for the Museum to include in its display of Vietnam War era artifacts. However, before putting the aircraft on display, the Museum wanted to paint the aircraft in authentic North Vietnamese Air Force markings. That's when our informal and formal relationships swung into action.

One of the informal relationships I maintained with the Museum was through the local chapter of the International Plastic Modeler's Society (IPMS). Through this organization, I became good friends with Geoff Hays and Tom Brewer, one of the staff members of the Museum Foundation. Through IPMS, both of my friends were aware of my passion for modeling MiG jets. When the MiG arrived at the museum, Tom called me at work and asked if I could suggest a camouflage scheme used by MiG-17 aircraft in the North Vietnamese Air Force.

I agreed to look into it, and searched FTD's archives trying to find photographs of North Vietnamese MiG-17 fighters. I had no luck. Although we had numerous MiG-17 photographs, none was North Vietnamese. I was, however, aware of an open-source book by author Lou Drendel entitled *And Kill MiGs...* Mr. Drendel's book published black and white pictures of North Vietnamese MiG aircraft that he in turn had obtained from the Japanese aviation magazine, *Koku-Fan*. He had photos of two MiG-17 fighters, side numbers 2533 and 3020. Aircraft 2533 was unpainted. Its finish was natural metal with just the top of the vertical stabilizer painted red. Aircraft 3020 was camouflaged in an irregular pattern of light and dark green. I suggested to Tom that one of these schemes would be best to use.

Tom told me that he also knew of Mr. Drendel's book, but that neither of these camouflage schemes would be suitable for the Museum's MiG. The MiG received from Egypt was in pretty sorry shape. Years of exposure to harsh desert conditions had left the skin of the aircraft corroded and worn. To make the aircraft suitable for display, a lot of Bondo body compound would be necessary to fill in all the holes. For this reason, the aircraft could not be left in natural metal finish and would have to be camouflaged. Aircraft 3020 was camouflaged, but to explain why the Museum thought this scheme to be unsuitable, we have to explore a little Vietnam War-era mythology.



MiG-17 Number 3020 (Koku-Fan)



During the Vietnam War, the myth grew that North Vietnam had an exceedingly hot fighter pilot named Colonel Tomb. Col Tomb was reputed to be North Vietnam's top scoring ace. When the Koku-Fan photographs were published, readers noted the six kill markings on the side of aircraft 3020 and assumed that this aircraft was the



MiG-17 of North Vietnamese Air Force taking off from Gia Lam (Koku-Fan)

personal mount of Col Tomb. The mythology deepened when, on 10 May 1972, US Navy ace Lt Randy "Duke" Cunningham met and defeated in combat a very capable MiG-17 pilot. After this engagement, Duke Cunningham was credited with shooting down Col Tomb, becoming the Navy's only ace of the Vietnam War. Once so credited, everyone naturally assumed that Col Tomb was flying MiG-17 number 3020 when he was shot down. The legend of Colonel Tomb has since been debunked, but at the time the Museum was restoring its MiG-17, the myth was still widely believed.

So why would depicting the Museum's MiG-17 as aircraft 3020 be unsuitable? Because according to the legend, aircraft 3020 was shot down by the US Navy! We can't have an aircraft that was destroyed by the Navy exhibited in the Air Force Museum.

Shortly after these discussions with Tom Brewer, a request for information on North Vietnamese MiG-17 aircraft came from the Museum through official channels. Because I was the unofficial FTD expert on camouflage and markings, the official request also found its way to my desk. I again replied that their choices were limited, 2533 in natural metal or 3020 in irregular light and dark green pattern. Apparently, Museum officials finally figured that they had no choice. They swallowed their pride and painted their MiG-17 as 3020. But the myth of Col Tomb and the rivalry over who shot him down continue to amuse me.



MiG-17/FRESCO (Source – National Museum of the US Air Force)