

## **Exercise Load Diffuser 08 spotlights fighter pilot skills and diplomacy**

*Historical deployment for the United States and Hungary*

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Against a crisp blue eastern European sky, the classic battle of man and machine danced overhead as Airmen witnessed the aerial dogfights of supersonic fighter aircraft; many for the first time in their careers. The Dissimilar Air Combat Training (DACT) exercise termed 'Load Diffuser 08' deployed men and women of the 159th Fighter Wing, Louisiana Air National Guard, to Kecskemet, Hungary, from June 12-29.

"This exercise pitted the Hungarian Air Force's (HuAF) MiG-29 Fulcrums and JAS-39 Gripens against the U.S. Air Force's F-15 Eagles," said Col. Michael Lopinto, F-15 pilot and commander of the 159th FW. "We flew 10 fighters and one C-130 with over 176 of our personnel to take part."

DACT, against the Russian-built MiG-29 and the newly-acquired Gripens, offers a unique opportunity for American fighter pilots to validate and hone their combat skills.

The history of the MiG-29 started in 1969 when the Soviet Union learned of the Air Force's 'F-X' program, which resulted in the F-15 Eagle. "Much of our training is based upon the MiG-29 as an adversary," Lopinto added, "so the opportunity to train against them and learn from their pilots is an honor."

In the early 1990s, the HuAF acquired 28 MiG-29s from Russia as part of the payment of Russian debts to Hungary. In 1997, Hungary spent about \$560 million on defense and on March 12, 1999, the country joined NATO. In the move for modernization, Hungary decided in 2001 to buy 14 Gripens. The first wave of the Swedish-built aircraft arrived in Kecskemet March 21, 2006, to supplement their existing fleet of MiG-29s. Unfortunately, only a small number of MiG-29s remain active today.

DACT was the focus of the deployment. "We demonstrated the capabilities of the F-15, and the HuAF did the same with the Fulcrum and the Gripen," said Lt. Col. Scott Tyler, F-15 pilot and vice commander of the 159th. "On every sortie U.S. and HuAF pilots applied lessons learned from previous flights and became better warriors as members of the NATO team."

This was the first time a deployment of this size had taken place at Szentgyörgyi Dezső Air Base, the only jet fighter unit of the Magyar Honvédség.

"My first dogfight against a MiG-29 was the greatest sortie of my life," said Tyler. "We fought as warriors but debriefed as friends." Tyler, an instructor pilot, also took the opportunity to fly in the back seat of the Gripen for hands-on teaching.

High morale and esprit de corps echoed from each 159th FW pilot and crew chief that worked together to generate sorties. In 10 flying days, the wing flew up to 14 sorties a day. Pilots climbed down from the cockpits after their flights and the look on their faces told the story: They just had the time of their lives. "This is the aircraft we were trained to fight against," said Maj. John "Dingo" Freed. "This is it. This is the best flying ever."

Maj. Gen. Robert Bailey, the Air National Guard assistant to the commander, U.S. Air Forces, Europe, Ramstein Air Base, Germany, was very impressed with what he saw during his visit to the exercise. He was proud to see the Louisiana Airman on the flightline working on the F-15s. "I think it is so wonderful to see the Airmen from both countries on the ramp. It was exactly what I was expecting - watching and learning. In the end, it really is about building relationships."

One day, a HuAF pilot flew the MiG-29 for an aerial display of its prowess and agility right over the flightline. It soared through S-turns, loops, immelmans, and split-S maneuvers to everyone's fascination.

Staff Sgt Mark Lutz, 159th Electric Shop, kept his eyes skyward for the entire show. "This is so great; I am impressed with the durability of the MiG!"

"The HuAF maintenance guys are just as interested in our aircraft as we are theirs," said Senior Airman Nile Romero, 159th Avionics. This was Romero's first deployment outside of the United States.

Sgt. Balazs "Luki" Lukacs, HuAF engine airframe technician, said, "so many things: friendship, technician knowledge about the F-15s; I know much more about Louisiana [which is] very interesting for me. I have a very good impression about Louisiana people now that we have experience working together."

The opportunity for young Airmen to travel to other parts of the world and work with people from different backgrounds was an important aspect of the mission. "To be able to deploy and see how these people work and play is incredible," said Master Sgt. Mark Cusimano, 159th crew chief. "It's the interaction of it all, it's been awesome, just like old times, and the young guys can't get enough of it."

Even though no 159th FW Airmen spoke fluent Hungarian, social contact still happened. "Learning to interact with the Hungarians, despite language barriers, was the best. It is good to know there are other nations that have a common interest," said Senior Airman Josh Latiolias, 159th Weapons.

The primary mission for the deployment was, in fact, diplomacy. According to Wikipedia, diplomacy is the art and practice of conducting negotiations between representatives of groups or states. It usually refers to international diplomacy, the conduct of international relations through the intercession of professional diplomats with regard to issues of peace-making, trade, war, economics and culture.

History was made and the path of diplomacy apparent when the men and women of the 159th FW stepped foot in Kecskemet - a town of less than 100,000. It lies halfway between Budapest and Szeged, 86 kilometers from both of them; almost equal distance from the country's two big rivers, the Danube and the Tisza.

Kecskemet has preserved its market-town character for centuries. The presence of 176 Airmen certainly didn't go unnoticed. The townsfolk welcomed the military visitors with kindness and openness. Sidewalk cafés and coffee shops were filled with evening outings by members of the U.S. Air Force and HuAF.

On a trip to the American embassy in Budapest, several members of the Louisiana contingent were granted a visit with the American ambassador to Hungary, April H. Foley. She was pleased to know how well the interaction was going.

"This deployment is more about diplomacy and building relationships," she stressed. "I am very excited about the interaction between the Louisiana Air National Guard and the Hungarian Air Force." Foley was also keen on the economic impact their presence would have for the town of Kecskemet.

"In the course of two-weeks, the HuAF have become more than just NATO allies, they have become our Hungarian friends," said Lopinto, on the last day of flying with the Hungarians. "It has been outstanding. As we end our deployment, we should be proud of the impact we have had on our Hungarian friends. I am getting great reports about the camaraderie shared by all."

"We met two weeks ago," said Col. Nandor Kilian, HuAf 59th Wing commander, during an end-of-deployment gathering. "We did not know how the others do business. We did not know what to expect. We have gained an affirmative answer, we are feeling [that] you are our cooperative friends and we can go together to fight, if we must."