

# Cuban MiGs: The Defenders of Castro's Air Force

Published 2022

***Cuban MiGs: The Defenders of Castro's Air Force*** by Hélio Higuchi and Paulo Roberto Bastos Junior. Harpia Publishing, 2022, 137 pp.

Comparable to other Latin American Air Forces, the development of Cuba's *Defensa Antiaérea y Fuerza Aérea Revolucionaria* (Antiaircraft Defense and Revolutionary Air Force - DAAFAR) has been influenced by great power economic, geographic, and political dynamics since the formation of the first Cuban military aviation unit in 1913. Within that context, Cuba has never produced its own combat aircraft and instead has relied on imported aircraft from both eastern and western hemispheric suppliers. Of these imports, the most renowned in the latter half of the twentieth century was the Russian built Mikoyan-Gurevich (MiG) fighter aircraft. As a result, Cuba's airpower history is also a reflection of the MiG jet aircraft development in the post World War Two and Cold War eras. In *Cuban MiGs: The Defenders of Castro's Air Force*, authors Hélio Higuchi and Paulo Roberto Bastos Junior shed an informative light on the history of an air force, that due to the nature of the Communist regime it serves, is sometimes limited by both the deliberate misinformation and the ideological bias that have been the hallmarks of Cuba's government since 1959.

Higuchi and Bastos' early chapters help set the stage for the development of the modern Cuban Air Force from the pre-Castro and Revolutionary eras when the air force was known as the *Fuerzas Aereas del Ejercito de Cuba* (FAEC) under various Cuban leaders and supported by the United States. During the period between 1913 to 1953, the Cuban government obtained most aircraft from the US (with one exception in the late 1950s), ranging from the Curtis Hawk I pursuit plane (circa 1930s) to Lend-Lease aircraft like the North American AT-6 Texan and P-47D Thunderbolts (1940s), to early Cold War aircraft like the T-28 Trojan Trainer and the British made Hawker Sea Fury FB. 11 (1950s). It was during the Revolutionary period from 1953 to 1961, when Fidel Castro's rebel forces fought and overthrew Cuba's last democratically elected President, Fulgencio Batista, and were then forced to deal with numerous counter-revolutionary attacks, including the US backed Playa Giron (Bay of Pigs) invasion, that Cuba's modern air force began to take shape using a mixture of captured pre-revolution military FAEC equipment as well as civilian Piper Tri-Pacer and Cessna 310 aircraft.

The *Cuban MiGs'* authors then detail how the early 1960's United States trade embargos and more friendly relations with the Soviet Union led Cuba to receive

its first modern jet fighter aircraft in the form of subsonic MiG-15 (NATO name Fagot) and supersonic MiG-19 (NATO name Farmer) fighters, ancillary support equipment, and Soviet technicians. Only then did the DAAFAR have a cutting-edge technology suitable for defending the Cuban island against perceived and real threats from the United States and Cuban Counter Revolutionaries. These Russian built aircraft, along with an approximate twenty-four strong Soviet Air Force regiment of MiG-21s (NATO name Fishbed), which later transferred to three DAAFAR squadrons, would serve as a vital part of Cuban and Soviet defenses during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. These aircraft protected the Soviet R-12 Dvina (NATO name SS-4 Sandal) medium range and R-14 Chusovaya (NATO name SS-5 Skean) intermediate range nuclear ballistic missiles stationed along the Cuban northwestern coast, which threatened half the United States and most of southeastern Canada. Following the mostly peaceful resolution to the crisis (one US U-2 Spy plane was shot down by the Soviet “advisors”), although the Soviet missiles were withdrawn, thirty-six MiG-17s (NATO name Fresco) and two-hundred and forty-six upgraded Fishbeds were delivered to Cuba between 1963 and 1989 to help bolster Cuba’s defenses against a possible US invasion.

The end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union also figure prominently in *Cuban MiGs*’ Chapter 6, which describes some of the last Soviet era made jet fighters imported to Cuba, the MiG-23 (NATO name Flogger) and MiG-29 (NATO name Fulcrum), which were to apex foreign built MiG fighters serving the DAAFAR. The first Floggers arrived in 1978 to complement the DAAFAR’s backbone, the MiG-21. A total of 80 MiG-23s were delivered in several batches by 1989. The 1978 acquisition of the first MiG-23s worried the US Government, as speculation arose on the Flogger’s capability to carry nuclear bombs, in direct challenge to the non-aggression pact signed by the US and USSR in 1962. However, in 1979, a report by the US State Department found that the Flogger models fielded in Cuba were not configured to carry such devices. In the 1980s, the DAAFAR began plans to re-equip its frontline squadrons with more modern fighters, such as the MiG-29. However, the timing for the sale of these fighter aircraft could not have been worse for the DAAFAR, even with Cuba’s economic improvements in the 1990s. Cuba’s non-existent aerospace manufacturing industry, in a command directed economy with heavy reliance on foreign military aid, did not provide the DAAFAR with the ability to maintain its aircraft and fighter fleet. By 2022 only three MiG-29s, twenty-four MiG-24s, and eleven MiG-21s remained, although most were kept in storage for future use.

Of particular interest to Latin American airpower experts is the *Cuban MiGs*’ detailed description of the DAAFAR’s global deployment of advisors, pilots, and

aircraft in support of the Soviet Union's Cold War attempts to destabilize pro-western democracies in Africa (Angola, 1975–1991, Ethiopia, 1977–1978, and Guinea and Portuguese Guinea, 1973–1974), Asia (North Vietnam, 1967–1975), the Middle East (South Yemen, 1973–1976 and Syria, 1973–1974), and South America (Nicaragua, 1974). The authors also discuss the lesser known 1970, 1977, and 1980 incursions by DAAFAR MiGs into Bahamian and Dominican Republic airspaces as an aggressive show of force against these countries, following those democracies' arrests of crews manning Cuban flagged vessels violating international arms and fishing treaties. Finally, *Cuban MiGs* addresses the role of the DAAFAR's planning and execution of the 1996 *Operación Escorpión* (Operation Scorpion), which resulted in the shutdown and death of four Americans aboard two unarmed twin engine Cessna 337 Skymaster aircraft, operated by the anti-communist non-profit civil organization *Hermanos al Rescate* (Brothers to the Rescue), who were dropping pro-democracy leaflets over international waters, hoping prevailing winds would carry the papers to the Cuban island.

For military air planners, *Cuban MiGs* provides the reader a detailed unclassified description of the training, manning, and organization of the DAAFAR. Due to the secretive nature of Cuba's Communist government, the majority of the photos are of medium quality. However, the color prints of various of the DAAFAR MiG fleet, from MiG-15s to MiG-29s provide excellent detail; although some readers may find the image of one MiG-21 marked with a profile of Ernesto "Che" Guevara, the equivalent of painting an image of Mao or Hitler on the side of an aircraft, disturbing. Finally, detailed family trees and identification guides with aircraft markings and serial numbers, and unit organizational charts make this book a must have for students of Latin American air power. Regrettably, the book lacks a chapter addressing DAAFAR maintenance and fuel/ammunition infrastructure (of what little may still exist since the fall of the Soviet Union), vital to the employment of modern combat aircraft. Including DAAFAR supporting organizations would provide a clearer picture how Cuban commanders might employ their remaining fleet of aircraft in future conflicts and perhaps insight on how China may find an opportunity to expand their global military influence in the western hemisphere. The team of Hélio Higuchi and Paulo Roberto Bastos Junior, working with Harpia Publishing, has produced an excellent book for their readers.

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