



# AIR COMBAT OVER THE EASTERN FRONT AND KOREA:

## A SOVIET FIGHTER PILOT REMEMBERS

BY **SERGEI KRAMARENKO**

(translated by **Vladimir Krupnik** and **John Armstrong**)

BARNSELY, SOUTH YORKSHIRE:

PEN & SWORD PRESS LTD, 2009

164 PAGES

ISBN 978-1-84415-735-8

Review by

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Often when I am studying a particular air power campaign, I cannot help but feel that there is something missing—the view from the other side. To my mind, important elements in understanding our chosen profession are how an adversary prepared to contest allied (or coalition) air power, how they adapted during the campaign, and how they perceived air power's impact. Unfortunately, there are not a lot of English-language books that provide this type of perspective, especially ones that focus on post-World War II conflicts. Fortunately, this is slowly changing, and one of the most recent additions is *Air Combat Over The Eastern Front and Korea: A Soviet Fighter Pilot Remembers*.

This book appears to be the second in The Red Air Force at War series which consists of the translated recollections of Soviet airmen. In the case of this book, fighter pilot Sergei Kramarenko begins by chronicling his experiences in combat against the German *Luftwaffe* on the Eastern Front during World War II. It begins as a story of young men who, with scant flight training, are sent to the front to fly against a skilled adversary equipped with superior aircraft. Survival had more to do with luck than skill as Kramarenko and his comrades learned their trade. Shot down in 1943 by an unseen German fighter in the skies over Kursk,

Kramarenko was severely burned and spent a brief time as a prisoner of war before being freed by his countrymen. This brief period of captivity would cause him to be labelled as politically suspect and impact his post-war military career.

After recovering from his wounds, Kramarenko returned to a changed Soviet Air Force. Experience and increasing numbers of modern aircraft permitted the Soviets to meet the *Luftwaffe* on more even terms. Kramarenko's descriptions of combat against German fighters take on an air of calm professionalism as he details actions against German bombers and the still formidable *Messerschmitt* Me-109s and *Focke-Wulf* 190s—the hunted has become the hunter. An ace many times over, he was made a Hero of the Soviet Union and finished the war at an airstrip just outside of Berlin. Less than six years later, the Korean War erupted, and he was flying in combat again. However, this time it was as a “volunteer” and his adversaries were former allies.

The majority of the fighter pilots dispatched to assist North Korea were combat veterans; equipped with the MiG-15 jet fighter, they very quickly made their presence known. However, due to political requirements the volunteers were not permitted to wear Soviet uniforms,

flew in aircraft painted in North Korean colours, and were forbidden to operate in areas where—if shot down—they might be captured. In a very real sense, they shared the same frustrations that the United Nations airmen (whom they were flying against) felt. For example, the United Nations airmen were forbidden to pursue the MiGs outside of Korean airspace.

Having achieved air superiority, if not air supremacy, the United Nations air forces (primarily American and British) had made liberal use of propeller-driven aircraft such as the P-51 Mustang and B-29 bomber. When there was insufficient jet fighter protection (in the form of the ubiquitous F-86 Sabre), Kramarenko and his fellow pilots made operations conducted by these “vintage” aircraft extremely hazardous. Jet-on-jet combat was frequent and the MiG-15 in the hands of skilled pilots could hold its own against the Sabre and was superior to the F-80, F-84 and British built Meteors.

Kramarenko’s description of air-to-air combat in Korea is quite detailed. There is very little Soviet-era rhetoric included in the book, and the reader is quickly left with the impression that they would be at home as a fighter pilot in any air force. It was fascinating to read about how the Soviet pilots were selected and trained as well as how they performed against their adversaries. As the narrative unfolds, a quite different picture of the air war in Korea is told. It becomes the story of how a small number of Soviet airmen fought with skill and tenacity against a numerically superior enemy. Nor were hostile aircraft the only danger that the Soviet pilots had to contend with. As Kramarenko notes, whenever the average North Korean farmer came in contact with any airman—usually as a result from a hurried departure from a damaged aircraft—they considered him the enemy, and more than one Soviet pilot met their death at the hands of their allies.

Although readers might scoff at some of the numbers of aerial victories claimed by Kramarenko for both himself and the Soviet fighter units, this should not detract from the book as a whole. As noted by the translators several times throughout the book, claims are often difficult

to reconcile with actual losses and **all** air forces have tended to exaggerate their performance at one time or another. The translators also provide some much welcome explanations of Russian slang that is used in the narrative and occasionally offers brief explanations of the major events in which Kramarenko was taking part, but there could have been more.

In all, the book is an easy read and quite interesting. It provides a unique Soviet perspective for both World War II and the Korean War. The description of air combat has the potential to provide some unique insight into the Korean air campaign—especially if read in conjunction with a Western history of the conflict. Finally, although it is sometimes easy within an air force to submerge oneself within the technology and see combat as the destruction of a target or the elimination of a fuzzy-picture on a video feed, we should never forget the human element of our enemy *du jour*. ■

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