

Red Flag On a



Airmen prep Indian Air Force Su-30MKI Flankers at Nellis AFB, Nev., for a nighttime Red Flag mission.

Global Stage

**Some of the world's best fighter aircraft
debuted at Nellis.**

Photography by Ted Carlson



Three of the world's most powerful fighters have premiered at Red Flag. They are: India's Su-30MKI Flanker; the French Rafale; and South Korea's F-15K, the most advanced version of the Eagle. They were matched with and against operational F-15s and F-16s from USAF in two weeks of exercises meant first to practice large force-on-force battles and then a simulated air campaign. The airmen involved are still digesting what they learned at the August event, with all players emphasizing their own successes. [1] An Eglin AFB, Fla.-based F-15D gets a once over before launch. [2] Indian Air Force ground support personnel gear up a Flanker for a mission. India brought eight Su-30s, two Il-78s—a tanker and an AWACS-type variant—and an Il-76 Candido cargo aircraft. Prior to Red Flag, the IAF airmen "spun up" for a week at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, getting accustomed to high altitudes and the dramatic terrain.



[3] An F-15E from RAF Lakenheath, Britain, gets airborne. [4] An F-16CJ of Eglin's 53rd Wing, which flew suppression of enemy air defenses sweeps, but

carried air-to-air weapons as well. [5] A Nellis-based Aggressor F-15C of the 56th Squadron, wearing two-tone desert camouflage, pops the brakes after landing.



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[1] Wing Commander Anup Kumar Sen of the IAF flies an Il-78 Midas tanker during a Red Flag mission. [2] A trio of 64th Aggressor Squadron F-16s, with camouflage simulating that of several air forces, gets ready to rumble. The Viper's power and small size can simulate a wide variety of threats. [3] Three of the four French Rafale fighters of EC01.07 squadron that made the trip to Nellis. The Rafales flew with air-to-air armament including MICA radar missiles. [4] A Navy EA-6B Prowler, among those that provided SEAD and jamming support. The Prowlers came from NAS Whidbey Island, Wash. [5] The IAF Flankers have thrust-vectoring nozzles and canards for increased agility. The Flanker is larger than the F-15, but in the right hands, is equally deadly.

[1] Indian flight and ground crews display their Midas tanker. **[2]** An Aggressor F-15 shows off its wrap-around desert camo. Both Eagles and Flankers flew in full operational configuration, with drop tanks, pods, and weapons, for a more realistic experience. Some visitors to Red Flag fly in "clean" configuration, sporting only imaginary weapons, to enhance performance. **[3]** A 48th Fighter Wing F-15E taxis back for a postflight check. Note the Litening II targeting pod behind the main gear. The license-built pods were supplied by Israel, and are similar to pods in USAF service. Russian-designed fighters, once handicapped only by inferior electronics, are now the equal of their Western counterparts, thanks to collaboration on avionics. **[5]** An F-15C of Eglin's 33rd Wing, bristling with air-to-air Sidewinders and AMRAAMs.



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[1] A French pilot slides into his two-seat Rafale B. France also flies a naval variant of the Rafale from its aircraft carriers. Despite years of aggressive marketing, France has yet to win a foreign customer for the Rafale, which was the first non-US fighter to have some stealthy attributes. [2] An E-3B returns to Nellis after a mission. The AWACS are essential in managing the wargame and providing warning that "the bad guys" are coming. [3] A Florida Air National Guard F-15A on afterburner. The ANG unit flew air cover with both A and C model Eagles. [4] In some scenarios, "Red Air" such as this Aggressor F-15 can regenerate and get back in the fight, and allow for multiple engagements per day. [5] The 492nd's "squadron bird" touches down. Although Nellis is facing some "encroachment" issues from nearby civilian construction, the range's premier air combat training space remains a national treasure.

[1] A Flanker from the IAF taxis past a USAF F-15 during a Red Flag exercise. **[2]** A South Korean F-15K Slam Eagle. The factory-fresh aircraft look externally similar to their F-15E Strike Eagle brethren in USAF service, but carry powerful active electronically scanned array radars not unlike those in the F-22. **[3]** An F-15C of the 58th Fighter Squadron—the “Gorillas”—loaded for any air-to-air threat. **[4]** The Prowler has a crew of four, and sometimes flies with a mixed Navy-USAF crew, as the two services jointly use the aircraft. That will end in the next couple of years when the Navy retires the aircraft in favor of the EA-18G Growler. **[5]** Many squadrons have evolved unique salutes, as this Viper pilot of the 57th Fighter Wing demonstrates. Note his joint helmet mounted cueing system, which enhances situational awareness and allows targeting missiles off-boresight.





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[1] Flankers of India's 20 Squadron deployed to Nellis and were assigned air-to-ground missions, aided by their Litening II pods, as well as some air-to-air engagements. These were not handpicked crews, but an operational squadron, with rookies and experienced crew members alike. USAF pilots got to see what a thrust-vectoring Flanker can do—both at long range and at the merge—in the hands of everyday pilots. [2] The IL-76MD airlifter that accompanied India's contingent. It can open its cargo door in flight to drop pallets or parachutists. [3] A ROKAF Slam Eagle awaits a night sortie on the Nellis ramp. [4] To get to Mountain Home, then Nellis, the IAF Flankers transited Turkey, France, Portugal, and Maine. The international participants in Red Flag flew largely as a coalition; it was not intended to be a "bowl game" of the world's best fighters. ■