

Mechanics warming up the "Sukes" with fog breaking up over the Volga. Temperature 39° F.
(Photo by John Morrissey)



THE PILOT EXCHANGE

PART 4

by *Patty Wagstaff*

I wish to thank all the IAC members, the U.S. Aerobatic Foundation Board, and everyone who made possible the wonderful opportunity to participate in the Soviet Team training camp at Borky, Russia. The trip was a great success not only from a flying/team exchange standpoint, but from an overall international view. Junket? Vacation? Not really. But it was an invaluable experience.

In early October, I left Tucson for DFW, Frankfurt, then Moscow. After flying for many hours, I arrived in Moscow with Pete and Sara Anderson. Moscow Airport . . . no words to describe it. It is large and it is dark and as soon as you arrive, you KNOW you are in a really foreign place. A place where there is probably no way out for at LEAST a week. Sort of reminds me of Bethel, Alaska, where I worked for a summer. Yes, the Wien Airlines 737 (or the "Wienie Bird") was the ONLY way out . . . no roads, no cars, no trees, no snow machines. THAT Wienie bird was my only link to freedom and I valued its presence. I would watch it take off every day from the windows of the dining room of the Kusko Inn where I worked and waited on construction crews, locals, natives from villages nearby who flew in or brought their skiffs in, or adventurers who realized they somehow took a wrong turn. Well, that was Bethel, Alaska . . . but this is MOSCOW. Why did it somehow seem the same? The prospect of flying the SU-

26M for two weeks kept me going but the bigger thrill was meeting my international competitors face-to-face on their own soil.

Was this the land of the Klingons? Was I Captain Kirk?

The Moscow Airport is decorated with very dark brown cutouts of cake tins on the ceiling. The rest of the airport makes no pretense at "decoration" or "architecture" . . . at least inside. One thing I learned in Russia is that the external appearance of institutions and buildings is very important. The substance seems less so at first.

Of course, that observation was an early one. Later, I discover through reading and visiting and watching that substance runs very deep.

As Americans, we see the best of humanity. We aspire to the best humanity can be. Only luxury can afford that . . . our indignance at inequality, our indignance at injustice. We are ethnocentric only because of isolation. And, what of it. It is only our particular circumstance.

We are very tired when we arrive in Moscow. The helicopter that would

normally pick us up cannot land at Sheremetyevo Airport, so we take a bus. We are met by Jeff Barrie, first of all. He doesn't recognize me right away because my hair is tied up in a ponytail. Oh well, at least I have hair.

We are relieved. After Dallas/Ft. Worth and Frankfurt and all the stuff in between, it is really a treat to see a human and not an automaton.

Jeff greeted us and warned us this was our only chance to get wine or beer, if we so desired. Well, I didn't really listen to him . . . oh yeah, sure. I mean, I've lived in Bethel and Bethel was dry. These were words, however, I would not later forget when I ran out of wine.

I would learn in Russia that besides the wonderful spirit of the people, not much else is available.

We were also greeted by Elena Klimovich and others. They brought us flowers. Later, I realized how special those fresh carnations were. Never again did I see fresh flowers.

We were escorted into the bus, found seats near each other . . . Pete and Sara Anderson, Ellen Dean, John Morrissey, and I. And we began our journey into the north-northeast, to Borky, near Dubna, on the Volga river.

When we arrive in Borky, it is dark and probably 8 PM but who knows what time it is. All I know is that on the way, we are on rutty, gravelly, two-lane roads, reminiscent of

Breugel. No lights in between Borky and Moscow but I did see an oxcart or two. We sleep a lot. It gets dark. We awake briefly but generally sleep and smile.

When we arrive in Borky at the dorm, a small, three story building, Kasum Nazhmudinov greets us. He is paternal and proud of his crew. We all respect him.

It is time, he says, for us to eat. When Kasum tells us what to do, we do it.

We eat at the communal cafeteria in the village of Borky . . . it has about 800 to 1,200 residents. The cafeteria is bright and cheerful that first night, the tables clean, and supplied with butter and dark and white breads. Lots of meat and potatoes. I guess they train a lot. We must carbo load.

First morning, 8 AM breakfast, I think, and then 9 AM briefing. We are in a steppe-like environment, a northern woods, a sub-tundra environment. The sky tinged with yellow, the sulphur crested hills of clouds that hover low in stratus layers across the horizon.

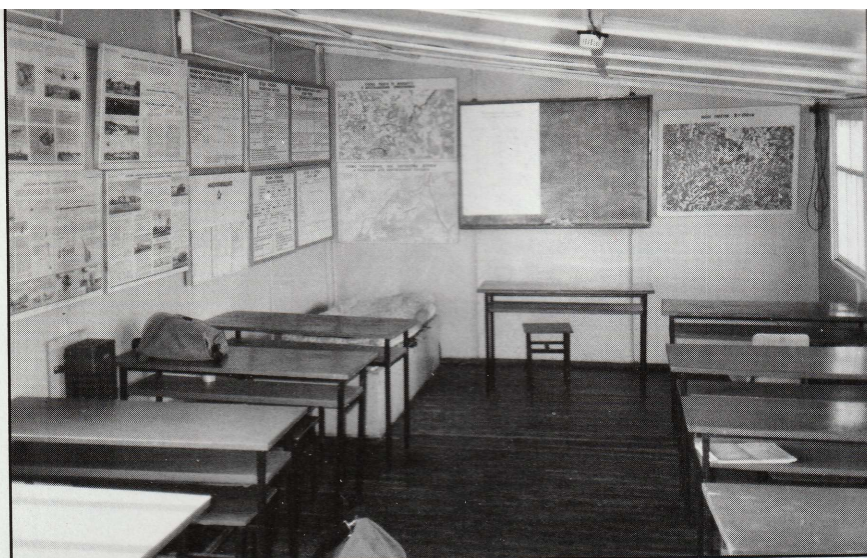
It is early autumn, before the hardest freeze, but still frost lies on the windows and canvas covers over the Sukhois in the morning.

After the early morning fog lifts, we are treated to the sight of seven beautiful Sukhois lying in wait on a concrete ramp paralleling the runway at Borky.

The runway is about 4,000 feet long, lying roughly north-south. I keep getting the cardinal headings backwards. We're not sure where the sun is supposed to be. The Sukhois are flanked on either side by tan and red Yak 52's and a Yak 55. The two-seat Yak 52 is powered by the same engine as the SU-26, as is the Yak 55. The Vedenyev . . . 360 hp, that never, and I mean never breaks.

We walk the hundred yards to the briefing room, laying off the runway on pcp, installed some time during the Great War. It is somewhat muddy, but still green, chilly in the morning, and like arctic air, it warms up in the afternoon and whenever the sun is out.

Kasum holds the briefing in the front of the classroom. The Soviets are dressed in Team gear, paramilitary camo pants, green khaki jackets,



Inside the pilot briefing room. Note the bed for recovering from "G" fatigue. Its use was encouraged.

(Photo by John Morrissey)

some blue jumpsuits. Tennis shoes. Bad haircuts but they're all in good shape.

Kasum reads from various charts . . . I believe them to be schedules. He says the Americans will fly twice each day after the initiation flights in the Yak 52 and 55. We decided between us who would go first (I would go last) and I awaited my turn. Each of the others — John, Ellen, and Pete — came back from their flights laughing and shaking their heads. Not from amusement in particular but because of the difference in airplanes. A new respect for the abilities of the Russian pilots.

It is my turn. Victor Smolin is my Yak 52 host. The sky is overcast at about 1,500 AGL. I wonder if we will do many aerobatics. We take off on 6, climb over the Volga, and Victor tells me about the various zones or sectors we will be flying in. Zona one, Zona two, and Zona three. Zona one is the closest to the Box over the airfield. Zona two and zona three are somewhat away from the river, and to be honest, I was so blown away by the scenery and the fact that I was scooting along the Russian airways with Victor Smolin in a Yak 52, I wasn't sure where Zona two and Zona three were after that. We flew to Dubna, an exotic town 15 kilometers from Borky, where Mr. Tupolev, the famous aircraft engineer, was born. A Tupolev sits in the center of town, on display.

It was time to do aerobatics, and Victor climbs through a cloud layer. I was really pleased that we had an artificial horizon of sorts. I felt myself cringing, until we broke out into the most beautiful sky above the clouds, on top. The sky was that yellow and pink northern light, the clouds perfect puffs. Victor does a couple of ver-

tical rolls, loops, and snaps and gives me the controls.

The controls feel a bit mushy and it took a lot of rudder to keep the airplane headed in the desired direction. The rudder was very sensitive so there was some overcontrolling on my part. Still, after several maneuvers I began to get the feel of the Yak 52. I was beginning to enjoy this. This is what I'm here for. Victor was as blown as I was. I believe he was thinking, "Wow! What an amazing thing. Here I am flying dual with an American team pilot. Who ever thought this would happen?" I believe we both had smiles on our faces for the same reason.

Time for akro is over, and we punch down through a hole in the clouds. A really small hole. It was great to see the little village beneath me . . . the garden dacha plots. We are going to do some sightseeing.

Victor takes me over the Volga river below treetop level. We cruise down the river waving our wings at the occasional fishing boat, and below the onion dome minarets of a mosque in grays, blues, and whites. Aviators are brothers and sisters, but we are in a truly different country.

Back at the airfield, it is time to leave. Time to relax before dinner. The mechanics put the planes away. They preflight and refuel and oil the airplanes. They anticipate what the airplane needs and respond very quickly to the requests and needs of the pilots. The mechanics put the heavy canvas covers on the Sukhois and Yaks at night that cover the fuselages, canopies, and wings.

For dinner, we eat at the cafeteria in town again and sit down to meat and potatoes, good hearty bread and butter, tea, bulgur wheat or white

rice, which is somewhat less appealing drenched with ladles of butter.

Interesting, there is not a lot of talking during dinner and as soon as Kasum and a couple of others are done, dinner is over. Everyone clears their plates and prepares to depart. No lingering over evening cigarettes. Time to go back to the dorm.

Day 2 — I am slated to fly the single-seat Yak 55. We have watched Kasum fly the 55 in Zona one, the most visible of all zonas, closest to the airport. He looks like a master.

The Yak 55 is pretty hot. It's not an SU-26, but that 360 horsepower really provides a lot of torque. It gets off in perhaps 500 feet or so. I am cleared on the radio for which Guido Lepore has sent me an adapter. I had it fixed to my headset in Oklahoma before I left. Guido gave me lots of good advice, too, like bring gifts, dictionary, toilet paper, snacks, and treats.

I turned right, what I thought was to the north, but later found that it was to the south. Hmmm. Cleared to Zona one by the man in the checker-board control tower with lots of antennas. Cleared on my own away from the airport, to fly . . . over the Volga river.

The Yak 55 was really fun to fly. This is what all Russian pilots fly be-

fore they transition to the Sukhois. The Russian Nationals are flown in the Yak 55. Of course, we use left rudder instead of right, and the airplane rolls better to the right. The roll rate is moderately fast, it has fairly good vertical performance, but oh, that rudder. If only I could stop overcontrolling it, I too could master this airplane. In any case, I really enjoy myself and treasure the experience of rolling, looping, and generally cavorting around the sky in this amazing airplane.

Times flies when you're having fun, and the 20 minutes we are allotted per flight is up pretty quick. "Patty," I hear, "end flight!" "Patty, return." Ok, Patty is landing. Patty landing. Now.

The seat in the Yak 55 is not as reclined as in the SU-26, but it is reclined, putting the pilot's legs up more nearly level with their eyeballs. If you have ever flown a Sukhoi, you'll know what I mean. Feels strange on the ground but as soon as you get off, it feels great.

The controls are heavier than a Pitts, or an Extra or Cub. Ailerons tend to overcenter slightly, making rolls hard to stop precisely, but it would only be a short time before you could get used to it. I am sure that a secret to flying this airplane is able use of its rudder.

We break for lunch at about 11:30 AM or so, and take the bus to the caf. Another solid meal of meat, potatoes, and as it often seems to be the larger of the three meals of the day, we have either borscht or milk soup, tea, more bread, pickled cabbage, pickled fish. Nothing fresh, but good stick-to-your-ribs type of stuff. Very hearty.

We like the bus driver, Andrei. He is a really cheerful, friendly guy. I brought the carton of Marlboros and ended up giving them all to Andrei.

He takes us back to the airfield. After lunch, we retire to our rooms for a rest, a writing of postcards, or just trying to find Radio Free America on the shortwave to see what is going on with the Clarence Thomas hearings. The Soviet MTV isn't bad as rock and roll, like flying, is a universal language.

After lunch, I get to fly MY Sukhoi. We are each assigned our own Sukhoi. Actually, Ellen and I are to fly the pink Sukhoi with the modified seat

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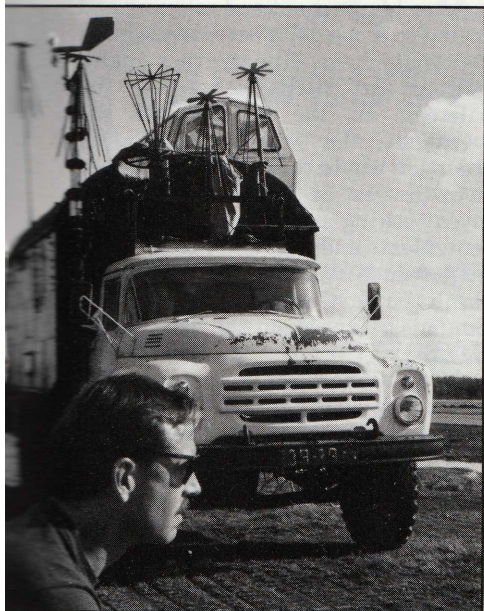
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Pete Anderson and the "truck" — used for communications.

(Photo by John Morrissey)

for small people.

Ellen and I fly the pink one, John and Pete a blue and white one. The finishes and paint work on these newer Sukhoi is really getting slick. Very nice work, indeed.

Victor and Elena Klimovich brief us on starting procedures. Although I had flown the SU-26 once before at Pompano Air Center, it had been awhile and I realize what a logical transition airplane the 55 had been.

Flying the Sukhoi is a thrill. 360 pulsating horses up front, sitting up high. Your knees are staring at your eyeballs. The wings are in line with your sternum. The machine is painted some wild color. It was exciting at PAC, but after all, this is Russia.

We are cleared for take-off by the man in the portable control tower. Probably Kasum whose eagle eye sees everything. "Patty, take off."

As one puts the power to the Big Suk, or as the Soviets term it . . . the "Soo".

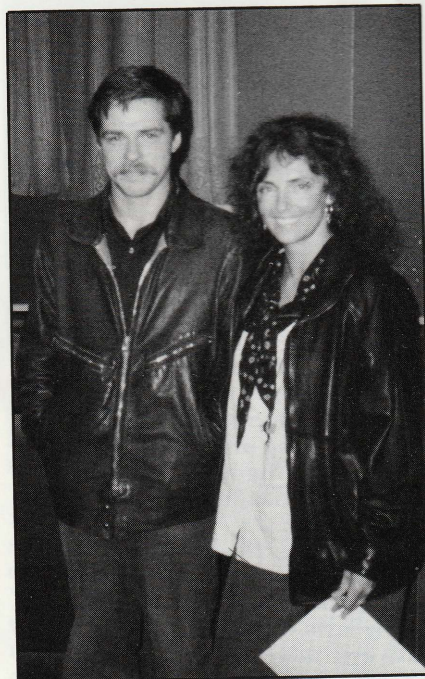
It JUMPS off the runway. Sort of all three wheels at once. You don't gently let the tailwheel pop up and then swiftly fly it off, because the prop is so close to the ground. One is always conscious of the huge rotated piece of metal . . . as it was in Borky . . . and it did shake a lot . . . or the three-bladed MT prop we sport in the U.S., as they do at WAC's and Europeans.

As soon as you're off, the seat position feels really good. This is the way it is supposed to be even if you do have to wear toe straps.

I ask, "Where do I go? Box or Zone one?" "Patty, box, Patty, box." OK. So everyone can see me. I can handle it. We are all in the same boat, me and Pete and Ellen and John. We can all make fun of each other. I think, once I'm off the ground, over the rolling tundra-steppe, that I will concentrate on verticals and rolls and some snap rolls. Just get the feel of it. It feels good. It rolls like a maniac. It has a lot of vertical. And, I admit, I am jaded. I fly what to me is the best airplane in the world and yes, of course, I am impressed with the Russian airplanes, especially when they are flown in the hands of a master.

Master, I am not, on my first flight, but I can see that there is potential for me. Besides being a little different, it is an honest and eager airplane. It

24 JUNE 1992



The Champs — Sergi Rochmanin, 1991 Soviet National Champion, and Patty Wagstaff, 1991 U.S. National Aerobatic Champion.

(Photo by John Morrissey)

is a wonderful, fantastic airplane. There has never been another airplane like it.

It is not easier or harder than our airplanes to fly. It just takes an experienced hand to get the best out of it. That is half the fun, getting the experience. Here it was in Borky, Russia or USSR or Soviet Union, no one was really sure, WHERE we were, flying a plane that I wanted to get some serious experience in.

I cannot fly below 300 feet and I am not told what to practice. I can fly for 20 minutes. The Sukhoi has great ailerons, they stop pretty much where you want them to. The roll rate is really dazzling, and can spin your gyros. The snap rolls take some technique. I am not sure that I ever learned the Russian technique, but perhaps there are different ways to snap roll it. We can ask Rick Massegee.

The scenario is that we will fly two times a day max in the SU-26 but if we wish, we can take up the 55 or 52 as well. There are no provisions made for critiquing, no direction actually given. We begin to critique ourselves based on how we view the Russian

pilots flying, especially the snap rolls which to me were the key to really learning to fly the airplane.

Elena and Alexander Liubarets and Victor Shmiel are the least shy and volunteer to critique us. During the first few days, we are all shy. This is a revolution. American pilots in the Soviet training camp . . . a totally new concept, as it was for us only two years ago at Nationals and even this year at Fond du Lac. In the small picture, the shortsighted ones might feel a little combative about this arrangement. This is only to be expected from people whose ideas are locked into World War II and the 50's. We are all victims. We are also all victors.

A feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood is beginning to develop to a greater degree. We begin to laugh at the same jokes, understand the same internal politics.

One evening, we spend the evening with Elena and Sverta watching the 1989 Tuchino airshow. Sometimes after dinner, we played ping-pong. I spent some time in my room wondering how Bob's case was doing and plotting desperately to make a long distance phone call, while trying to tune in Radio Free America.

The days are relatively short as far north as we were. After we flew, we parked the airplanes in a line, along the taxiway.

After hanging out and relaxing and trying to scope out a beer somewhere, we would have dinner every night. During the week, we ate at the cafeteria in the village. On the weekends, the women, more often than not, would cook dinner and serve it to the rest of the group. They enjoyed cooking and the food was excellent. Meats and eggs and cheeses, cabbage salads and breads and beets. I think the physical effort of flying the Sukhoi balanced out the heavy foods we had.

After dinner, some people would play chess, some ping-pong, some visit in Pete and Sara's room where the nerve center gravitated. They did have the refrigerator with special snacks and beverages sent specially from Moscow. Sara thought ahead and brought an entire bag filled with Cheez-Its and Pecan Sandies.

I felt that we were being taken care of very well, at the highest of standards, and even though we were made

to feel a part of the group, we were in company with the cream of the of the cream and they deserved it.

The Soviet Team is chosen by aptitude and personality. They are all good and well trained by the time they get to fly the Sukhoi and try out for the Team. Some of the Team pilots have been National Champions in the Yak 55. The Nationals are only flown in the 55.

Not all of the heavy hitters are at the fall training camp. I believe there are four training sessions a year, for approximately three weeks to one month each time. Natalya Sergeeva takes some time off. We don't see Irina Adabash. Victor Smolin is training other pilots and working on formation flying with Elena in the 52's and 55's.

Nikolai Nikitiuk arrives a few days after the training starts in his Lada from somewhere south of Moscow. Vitas Lapenas drives from Vilnius on his way to Moscow for a visit in his little red Lada and we have a good visit. Nikolai Timofeev arrives later in the training session but doesn't

participate much in the flying. Most of the flying is done by the younger, newer pilots who are actually trying out for the Team. The more experienced of the group go out to Zona two and three or work on formation.

At the briefing each morning in the little building next to the airfield a couple of hundred yards away from the dormitory, Kasum presided and decided who would fly what plane and at what time. I believe that critiquing was less formal than our Team critiquing sessions are. No videotaping, for instance, and not every flight was critiqued. Pilots chipped in and critiqued as the need arose.

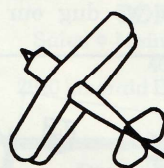
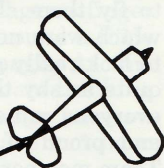
We would fly twice each day, and after a couple of days getting the feel of the airplane and the lay of the land, we ask each other to critique us. This seems to be pretty helpful and by the fourth or fifth day we ask Elena or Victor Smolin to critique us during our flights. Several of the pilots, especially Shmiel and Liubarets were very helpful to me in describing snap roll techniques.

The Team eats together during

breakfast, lunch, and dinner and it is a real training camp. We were supposed to originally go to Essentuki, in Soviet Georgia, but it wasn't to be our destiny. There were political troubles and no fuel to be had either.

The countryside was very northern looking and the village very small. The locals lived in apartment buildings, but had plots with little dachas, or A-frame type houses and garden plots. Personal cars are not the norm, and people walk to and from their plots. It's great, people walking a lot, families together. Most of the people are not overweight and look to be in pretty good shape.

Dubna is about 15 kilometers away. We plot to go have dinner there one night as they say there is a hotel with a pretty good restaurant. It is not that easy, and never transpires. We do go to Dubna one evening to make long distance calls. The phone at the dorm is a wind-up affair from which we can only call Moscow. So it is an adventure as we put our orders in to the lady behind the desk and wait in line behind a family from Mongolia. We



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As the days go on, we become part of the group. The language begins to make sense, even if the brown water in my bathroom doesn't. We are treated good, but like all the other pilots. It is a gentle, quiet, and thoughtful group who seem to care much for each other and each other's needs. We exchange gifts and learn each other's language. One evening we make popcorn. As we dug our

The economy is a disaster area, as we all know, and many people don't know where the next meal is coming from much less how to support an en-

My last night, I leave at 1 AM. My flight departs Moscow for Frankfurt at 6 AM. That gives us 3 hours to drive to Moscow and 2 to check in. We should leave earlier, I suppose. Nik

26 JUNE 1992

Timofeev is driving me to the airport in his car through the thickest fog I have ever seen. The road is narrow with no shoulders and we see almost no cars all night. We run into a police box and the black-booted man with a greatcoat comes out and checks our papers. He makes us both nervous even though we have nothing to hide. Flashes of movies I have seen. Generally, B & W, cinema noire.

Nikolai and I have a lot of time to talk about funding and airshows and what the Russian Team will do. I say, we have the same problem. We struggle for funding every year, and our future is really just about as uncertain, or so we think at times. Guess we just have to keep trying and believing in what we do.

The Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow is a real nightmare. There are no ticket counters, no computers, only miles of sleepy and sleeping people laying on top of their bags looking like hell. I suppose I fit in really well. It's a big brown and concrete edifice, with no real aesthetic value. I am told to get in line 2 hours before my flight. The bored, uninterested young immigration and customs agents finger their papers and look around a little before waving you through. At this point, I don't care. All I am thinking about is that fresh orange juice on Lufthansa that I will have in 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Finally, I make it with my suitcases which are substantially lighter than they were when I arrived. I am at the ticket agents for my flight. Sorry, they say. You are not on the list! No! This cannot be happening to me. I grab the heavily made-up woman by the collar and shake her until her teeth rattle. No, no. You will not do this to me, you understand, you swine. You will let me on that airplane. I will pay for a first class ticket with my own American Express card or with cash that I brought especially for emergencies like this one. Just get me on that plane. If I don't have a fresh piece of lettuce soon I will die. Somehow, I communicate my wishes across the language barrier, and they allow me to pay an exorbitantly higher price for a first class ticket. Later on, I find out this is not an unusual circumstance . . . smells of scam . . .

To wrap it up, I am proud to have been chosen to participate in this historic exchange. I was warned that it would be like camping out indoors, but found the accommodations more than satisfactory. I was warned that the Sukhois were not user-friendly, and while I believe one has to respect them for the awesome machines they are, they are just an airplane. I had some expectations, but generally tried . . . as all my Team members . . . to fit in and have an open mind. We were treated exceptionally well by gracious hosts, and we were treated the same as each of the pilots was. We found we are all in the same boat together even though we have different training techniques. We are both struggling for funding to continue our programs. And, I believe each of us, American or Russian, was left with the feeling the sport of aerobatics and aviation in general had bridged another gap.

I remember my first world contest in England in 1986. It was very, very difficult to make any contact with the Soviet pilots. Very few spoke English and the ones who did were either not allowed or were too shy to speak it. They travelled only in groups and it was impossible to have a one-on-one conversation with any of the team members. It struck me that the only acceptable mode of communication

universally accepted was playing chess. It was a GAME that was able to bring us together. Chess is also a sport with champions and structure and a history, like aerobatics, that has brought us together as well. We have transcended the wars, in our own small way.



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