

Operation Red Purchase, Operation Quick Buck and Operation Central Buy-out

In the early days of the Sino-Soviet War, a US Air Force Intelligence officer, Captain Harry Rounds suggested a plan to his superiors. Based upon the Korean War era Operation Moolah, it proposed rewarding any Soviet pilot who defected with his aircraft. The rewards would include asylum, anonymity and a new identity (if requested) and a financial reward depending on the age of the aircraft.

Initially the response was negative, the US Government feeling that it could not be seen to be championing defections in a war between two third parties. The DIA however proposed that it could be presented as a Chinese operation and this was agreed. Overtures were made to the Chinese who agreed in return for a share of the intelligence gained. A sticking point was however the destination of any Soviet pilots. The US again did not want to be seen as involved but the Chinese did not think that defections would occur without the promise of a US final destination. Eventually the decision was made that information would include the wording “and travel onward to a country of the pilot’s choice.” With everything in agreement a US team secretly crossed into China from India.

As 1996 dawned the scheme was put into action, radio broadcasts were made, leaflets dropped, cleaners were bribed to distribute leaflets and Chinese pilots were even given them in case they were shot down and captured.

On 17th January 1996, Operation Red Purchase had it’s first success when Captain Marco Tilchenko defected in his SU25T. Flying south he kept broadcasting his intentions on the designated channel and was quickly escorted by a pair of Chinese fighters. Captain Tilchenko told his captors that he was disillusioned about the war. Psychological evaluation suggested that he was suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after his experiences in Afghanistan. Tilchenko requested that he be allowed to travel to the United States (although he joked to one of his interrogators, “anywhere but here or Afghanistan will do”). This was quietly granted and Captain Tilchenko was secretly flown to Japan where he was given the identity of Leon Pavlov a Russian-American naval mechanic who was being discharged from the navy. From here he was flown to the US where after extensive debriefing was used to help evaluate US Army air defence tactics.

Records of further defections in China are unfortunately not available as they were either destroyed or are still secret to this day. References in other documents however show that at least 20 other pilots are thought to have defected.

With the start of the war in Europe, it was decided that the same tactics would be used there and on 22nd January 1997, Operation Quick Buck was launched although now the wording became citizenship in any NATO country. With the intensity of the air to air fighting however, defection was harder although the Northern and Southern fronts both had some response. Unfortunately the natural secrecy of these operations linked to the destruction of the nuclear exchanges have resulted in little documentary evidence remaining. Evidence of the success of the programme however includes a Yak41 that was flown to Seattle in early 1998 that is currently on show in the Air

Museum there. In Europe a Mig25RBV (although missing most of the avionics) is housed in the Oslo War Memorial Museum. It is believed that this also came from the same programme.

It is known that a similar operation was conducted against Italy but little is known about this. The author Elaine Hook in her book *Strange Bedfellows: The Mafia and the CIA* (Apple Press 2007), has suggested that this was called Operation Roman Market but no concrete evidence has been found.

In Iran, Operation Central Buy-out, a similar programme was also a success with the last defection occurring on 15th July 2002 when a Soviet Mig29 landed in Bander Abbas. The aircraft was handed over to the Iranian Air Force. Reports indicate that it was still in service at the start of the Saudi War and was shot down in January 2009 over southern Kuwait. The name of the pilot has been lost but it is recorded he travelled to the US when American troops withdrew from Iran.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about these operations is the unintended side-effect. Pact officials worried that their pilots may defect removed a number of pilots who were considered suspect from flight rosters (including the ace Valentin Chernenko) and ensured that pilots and wing-men watched each other for attempts to defect. In cases where the leaflets were dropped on air fields, combat capability often suffered by up to 20%. Unfortunately for NATO, this fact did not become known until after the war when pilots sceptical about their losses in dropping the leaflets were stunned.