



WHERE FALCONS DARE

THE MIRAGE III RS & FLIEGERSTAFFEL 10

Switzerland's location at the heart of what would have been a crucial battleground, had the Cold War turned hot, meant that tactical reconnaissance formed a key part of the landlocked nation's vital airpower capability. **PETER LEWIS** chronicles the 35-year career of the Dassault Mirage III RS "Amir" with the Swiss Air Force's elite "lone wolf" photo-recce specialists

AS THE TYRES kissed the runway at Dübendorf, near Zürich in Switzerland, on December 17, 2003, Major Markus "Zurigo" Zürcher, commanding officer of *Fliegerstaffel 10*, concluded the last ever flight of a Dassault Mirage III RS in Swiss Air Force service. Suitably adorned with an owl artwork and the legend "Mata Hari" acknowledging its spying role, Amir — Aufklärer (Reconnaissance) Mirage, as it was named in Switzerland — R-2118 taxied back towards the crowds for an emotional farewell attended by Serge Dassault, son of Marcel, the Mirage's father. Had the Cold War turned hot, Switzerland would have maintained its strict neutrality to the

point at which foreign forces were rolling up to the country's borders. There was no emergency masterplan to provide active support for Nato forces if the Soviets pushed west beyond Czechoslovakia. Swiss military aircraft would have been technically considered hostile to both Nato and Warsaw Pact forces had war arrived at Switzerland's boundaries.

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

In the 1970s, exercises devised by Swiss military planners in relation to an emergency war plan always pitched Switzerland fighting "red" forces in an area controlled by "green" forces. The latter were those of Nato to all intents and purposes, and

MAIN PICTURE *Trailing a heat haze through the cold mountain air, an Amir of the Swiss Air Force's Fliegerstaffel 10 twists and turns its way through the mountain range at Ebenfluh, between the Oltschiburg and Axalphoren peaks above Meiringen airfield. The unit's specialised photo-reconnaissance Mirage III RSs became renowned for their "clover leaf" manoeuvres through the mountains around Axalp at high speed and low level. All photographs by PETER LEWIS unless otherwise stated.*

ABOVE LEFT *The unit's distinctive motif, incorporating a falcon's head, inspired by the Falken Brauerei in Schaffhausen, one of Switzerland's oldest breweries, dating back to 1799. The motif was carried in various forms on the unit's Amirs throughout its career.*



although it was generally accepted that the Swiss would not be fighting Nato forces, the concept of strict neutrality prohibited co-operation with what would have still been considered to be allied forces, i.e. friendly with a common enemy in the Warsaw Pact nations.

At this time Munich was ringed with Luftwaffe fighter bases, with more further west in the Eifel region. Memmingen in Bavaria was home to the nuclear-capable Lockheed F-104G Starfighters of JG 34, and the US Army had a massive presence in this part of southern Germany. Nato bases were being prepared for war and hardened aircraft shelters and off-airfield munitions bunkers were being built with great urgency. In a prospective

conflict, air traffic would have been messy and uncoordinated at best. German and American Hawk anti-aircraft surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries scattered across the landscape posed a threat to any aircraft not flying low enough to avoid detection. The Nato tactician's nightmare scenario was a westerly push by Soviet forces, securing the Czechoslovakian border with initial waves of ground-attack MiG-23s and MiG-27s, to be followed with an onslaught of numerically superior tank units.

Fliegerstaffel 10 (F1St 10), the Swiss Air Force's sole reconnaissance squadron, replaced its elderly de Havilland Venoms with supersonic Mirage III RSs in 1968. The unit had more personnel on