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As a MiG flies over Moscow, a man's dream takes flight

By: Emily Craighead , Staff Writer



Jim Rodney sits in the cockpit of an Italian SIAI Marchetti SF-260, a plane very much unlike the one he plans to fly over Moscow in May -- a MiG-29 fighter jet.

A 40th birthday celebration includes \$12,000 adventure in fighter plane.

WEST WINDSOR — For Jim Rodney, the perils of a daily commute to Manhattan and the thrill of reading bedtime stories to his three children fall short of the adrenaline rush he's after.

He could climb onto the roof of his Newport Drive house for an awe-inspiring view of the neighborhood, but he's afraid of heights.

So Mr. Rodney will celebrate his 40th birthday by traveling twice the speed of sound 80,000 feet above the earth in a Russian fighter jet.

"Since I was a child, I always liked planes, from building models with my dad to visiting airports with my grandfather," he said, sitting in his living room with both feet firmly on the ground, his wife, Sue, next to him and his youngest son, Coby, 22 months, on his lap.

A near-vertical takeoff from Zhukovsky Air Base near Moscow in a MiG-29 is a far cry from playing with model planes or hopping on a

commercial jet at Newark International Airport, and Mr. Rodney said he expects it will be the experience of a lifetime.

A trader on Wall Street who never found the time to get a pilot's license, he said his profession demands some of the same skills required of a pilot.

"The career I chose is similar in that it is high-pressure, high-intensity," Mr. Rodney said. "Being 6 foot 4 inches tall and wearing glasses, I know being a professional fighter pilot wasn't for me."

But he didn't let those physical attributes clip his wings. Although he has no pilot's license, his flight in a MiG in May won't be his first aviation adventure outside of a commercial jet.

In his early 20s, while on a tour of the California wine country, Mr. Rodney came across a small airport offering tourists flights in a World War II Japanese biplane. Then for his 30th birthday, Mr. Rodney took to the skies over Arizona for three dog fights in an Italian plane, the SIAI Marchetti SF-260.

The idea of flying in a MiG — the closest thing to an F-15 available to the public — seemed like a distant and unrealistic wish.

"For many of (our clients), it's a childhood dream come true," MiGs over Moscow Sales Director Greg Claxton said in a phone interview from his office in Sarasota, Fla. "Other guys flew against MiGs in wartime situations, and they've always wanted to try it and see what the competition is like."

The Federal Aviation Administration does not allow the public to fly fighter jets, so Incredible Adventures, the parent company of MiGs over Moscow, offers flights in Russia and South Africa.

About 2,000 people have flown with MiGs over Moscow since the company was founded in 1993.

Ms. Rodney is not standing in the way of her husband's goal to realize his dream of flying a MiG. She says she is nervous about his five-day trip to Moscow in May, but she sounds excited when she talks about what the experience will mean to him.

"The one thing that differentiates Jim from everyone else I know is that we all have goals and aspirations, but I don't think anyone goes to such lengths to achieve them," she said. "I knew there was no chance I could dissuade him from doing this," she said.

Mr. Rodney will set off on his \$12,000 adventure after work May 20 and arrive in Moscow the next morning. He will go through a medical check and ejection-seat training, and he'll be fitted with a flight suit to prevent him from blacking out from the high acceleration and G-force during the flight.

Once in the air, he will be able to maneuver the plane through dual controls during part of the 30-minute flight.

The supersonic flights are an adventure for the doctors, lawyers and businessmen who venture to the edge of the earth's atmosphere, according to Mr. Claxton, but they are also an opportunity for the Russian test pilots who pilot the flights to sharpen their skills.

"It helps subsidize their flights to keep them current," he said.

The pilots perform acrobatic maneuvers like the cobra, where the nose of the aircraft tips up nearly 90 degrees while the plane comes to an almost complete stop before continuing in the original direction — without losing altitude.

Clients can decide how extreme they want their ride to be, according to Mr. Claxton, who noted, "The pilots do want to give you an enjoyable experience."

It is likely that Mr. Rodney's head will still be in the clouds when he returns to work May 25 — and with his 50th birthday a little more than a decade away, he is already contemplating a trip into space.



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