IRONBIRDS MAG

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Dutch F-35s at a Heli Base

30 Years of Roskilde Airshow

INTERVIEW

MURAT KELEŞ

The Birth of SOLOTURK

In this issue

Welcome to the Second Issue of Ironbirds MAG

It is a pleasure to welcome you back to the cockpit for our second installment. After the incredible reception of our debut, we've spent the last few months chasing the scent of jet fuel and history to bring you stories that define the spirit of aviation.

In this issue, we bridge the gap between legacy and the cutting edge. We take you to a Dutch helicopter base to witness the sophisticated, high-stakes integration of **F-35 operations**, exploring how the Lightning II is reshaping European airspace. From there, we shift to the celebratory skies of Denmark, marking the **30th anniversary of the Roskilde Airshow**. Our team was on the scene to capture the magic through exclusive **Air-to-Air (A2A) photography**, bringing you closer to the formation than ever before.

For those who prefer their aviation history on the page, we dive into a cornerstone of combat literature. Our review of **Robert Mason's *Chickenhawk*** revisits the raw, harrowing reality of Huey pilots in Vietnam—a must-read for anyone seeking to understand the soul of a rotary-wing warrior.

The Legend of Solotürk

Our cover story for this issue is one we are particularly proud of. We sat down for an extensive, candid interview with **Murat Keleş**, the founding leader of the **Solotürk Demo Team**.

Having very recently retired from his distinguished post at the Turkish Air Force, Keleş opened up to Ironbirds MAG about his storied career and the monumental task of building a world-class demonstration team from the ground up. It is a detailed, behind-the-scenes look at the precision, the pressure, and the pride of the man who first put the "Solo" in Solotürk.

Whether you are here for the tech, the photography, or the people behind the stick, we hope this issue fuels your passion for flight.

Blue skies and tailwinds,

Evert Keijzer / Boğaç Erkan
The Editorial Team
Ironbirds MAG

INTERVIEW

Boğaç Erkan

Murat Kelеş

The story of a career full of achievements and founding of **SOLOTURK**.

MK

> *My aviation adventure actually began when our state handed a T-41 aircraft to a 17-year-old student who didn't even have a driver's license yet, saying "Take this, you can fly it," after 10 days of training.*

Ironbirds MAG Could you tell us about yourself in general terms? Who is Murat Keleş?

Murat Keleş I was born in 1974 in Malatya, but we are from Samsun. I grew up in Samsun, graduated from Çarşamba High School, and subsequently entered the Air Force Academy in 1991.

In 1995, I completed the Undergraduate Aerospace Engineering program and began my duty as a Second Lieutenant Pilot Candidate. Afterwards, following the route taken by all pilots serving in our air force, I first received flight training in Çiğli. After finishing this training with honors and becoming a pilot, I received F-5 Combat Readiness Transition Training in Konya and arrived at the 143rd Primary Squadron in Ankara in 1998. Thus, my F-16 flight life began.

After becoming an F-16 pilot, I was appointed to Merzifon in 1999. I stayed in Merzifon for about 8 years. The main development of my flying career took place in Merzifon, under the command of the 151st Tunç Squadron. I got married there, and our children were born in Merzifon. We can say that I grew up in Merzifon in every aspect.

In 2007, I was appointed to the 132nd Hançer Squadron. Here, I completed the Weapons and Tactics Instructor Course and became a Weapons and Tactics Instructor.

At the beginning of 2010, I was appointed to the 141st Kurt Squadron Command as the leader of the founding team of Solotürk, and then the establishment efforts for Solotürk began. The years 2010-2011 were spent very intensely, completely occupied with the Solotürk project.

In 2011, we performed numerous demonstrations with Solotürk both in Turkey and around the world. When the demonstration training season was completed at the beginning of 2012, my mission at Solotürk actually came to an end. That same year, TAI was looking for an F-16 test pilot and reached out to ask if I could join. When our air force commander at the time also deemed it appropriate, I left the air force and started my duty at TAI as an F-16 test pilot. I began performing factory exit test flights for the F-16s of both the Turkish Air Force and the Pakistan Air Force that had entered modernization at TAI. In 2013, I attended the International Test Pilot School in Canada to receive test pilot training. Following the course, as a Category 1 and 2 test pilot, I also took part in the development and EASA certification flights of Hürkuş. I left TAI in November 2018. I served as an instructor pilot at AYJET flight school for a period of about six months. During this process, the Air Force's need for qualified pilots was still ongoing; I applied to return to the Air Force as a volunteer, and upon the approval of my petition in November 2019, I returned to the Air Force with the rank of colonel.

I served in Merzifon as the Head of Evaluation and Inspection, and later as the Operations Commander. Afterwards, I was appointed to the Air Force headquarters in Ankara. At the Air Force Command headquarters, I carried out the duties of Electronic Warfare Branch Manager for one year and Flight Training Branch Manager for two years, and in October 2025, I retired as a senior colonel.

Currently, I am serving as the Flight Test and Concept Development Director at AEROS, a company operating in military and civil aviation in Ankara. I am married to Mrs. Vildan; we have two children named Koray and Eda, both of whom are university students.

Ironbirds MAG How did your passion for aviation begin? What drove you to become a military pilot?

Murat Keleş I attended high school at Çarşamba High School. Until then, I had no knowledge of or interest in aviation. In those years, after the student selection exam, the Air Force Academy would send invitation letters to those who scored above a certain level, stating “you may participate in our selections.” I participated in the selections entirely based on that invitation letter. After the selection processes implemented at the Air Force Academy, I qualified to participate in the student selection flights held in Yalova. My aviation adventure actually began when our state handed a T-41 aircraft to a 17-year-old student who didn’t even have a driver’s license yet, saying “take this, you can fly it” after just 10 days of training. Thanks to the flight training I received in Yalova, I was introduced to aviation, and I entered the Air Force Academy in 1991.

Ironbirds MAG Sometimes life develops so interestingly... looking back now, it must seem interesting to you too. You know, a decision made at the age of 17 without having a specific interest in aviation, and its consequences... There was a movie starring Gwyneth Paltrow called Sliding Doors; yours is like the real-life version of that story. Though, when we think about our lives, I suppose this applies to all of us.

Murat Keleş When I went there, I didn’t even know I could become a pilot after graduation. I went thinking that it was a military school called the Air Force Academy, and that I would become a soldier when I graduated.

Ironbirds MAG Could you provide brief information about the founding stages of SoloTürk? Also, I am curious as to what the greatest challenge was that you faced during that period.

Murat Keleş Let me see how I can explain it as briefl y as possible. Some thoughts actually began for me in 2001. 2001 was the 90th anniversary of the Air Force’s founding. A comprehensive demonstration organization had been planned in Çiğli. I couldn’t attend, but friends who went were telling me that an F-16 had come from the Netherlands and performed a demonstration flight. I asked, “Who flew from our side, which squadron flew?” They said no, no one flew from our side. As far as I learned, our participation as the Air Force had remained limited to a formation flyover by F-16s. I started researching on the internet, which was just beginning to enter our lives. Who is flying? How do they fly? Then I saw that at that date, although not all were active, America had three F-16 solo teams. In Europe, the Netherlands and Belgium also had F-16 solo teams.

Then I accessed American documents on the internet. As I examined them, I concluded that there was nothing they were doing regarding demonstration flights that we couldn’t do. Then I thought about explaining to my superiors and commanders that we could do something like this as well, but considering my position in the squadron at the time and the squadron’s missions, I evaluated that it would be very difficult to carry out this work there and postponed this thought.

In 2007, I was appointed to the 132nd Hançer Squadron. The Turkish Stars had also been established within the 132nd Squadron in 1992 as a four-aircraft flight command, later separating from the 132nd Squadron to begin serving as the 134th Squadron. With this historical awareness, I was occasionally thinking about how to start this work and trying to do something, but I couldn’t find time for it in the squadron’s intense work pace. I was only able to observe what they did, their training, their rules, etc., by talking to friends serving in the Turkish Stars.

Solotürk and Turkish Stars

While this hustle and bustle was continuing, our Air Force Commander visited our squadron, and while sitting in the squadron lounge, he happened to mention a flight demonstration he had watched abroad. He spoke of this demonstration with such great admiration that I felt if I spoke up right then, he would say, “Form a team and start working immediately.” After seeing our Commander off, I immediately told my squadron commander what I had in mind. I said that since our Commander already had such an experience and appreciation for it, we could do this, and that I already had previous studies on the matter. My commander also looked upon it very positively and asked me to gather my preparations as soon as possible. I quickly started working again. I began putting everything into writing.

Benefiting from both the documents used by the Turkish Stars and international documents, and by incorporating my own knowledge, I began writing a document describing the procedures for using the F-16 aircraft in performance demonstrations. While preparing the draft document, I explained the subject to a superior commander. Although his first reaction was that a demonstration could not be done with a single aircraft, he later said, “If you are going to do it together with the Turkish Stars, it might work; go talk to them and see.” I replied, “Yes, sir.”

This was actually the first challenge. How did we overcome it? We sat down and held several meetings with the Turkish Stars. They were saying that flying in the same formation without being painted in the same paint pattern as the Turkish Stars would not be appropriate for the team logic. For this reason, they thought that we could not fly in the same formation, and that all their training would need to be revised with the addition of a new aircraft to the formation.

Then an idea came to me. I said, “Fine, let’s not fly in the same formation, but let’s fly together... Let’s perform the Turkish Stars show together! You continue with your normal show. I will fly in a way that fills the gaps when you are not on stage.”

Ironbirds MAG Actually, such a performance could have been very, very beautiful.

Murat Keleş I made such an offer because sometimes while watching the Turkish Stars show, I thought these gaps could be quite long. They asked, “How will this work?” I said, for example, we can do it like this: You know how after you take off, some time passes for you to gather your formation… You won’t have to rush there at all; you can gather comfortably. I’ll take off behind you and start my demonstration, and we can intersect in the middle during your first pass, for instance. Until you change your formation for your second maneuver and return, I’ll perform another maneuver and break away to the opposite side. In other words, I will fill the gaps in your show. Accompanied by a presentation, it would be quite beautiful. How far would we continue this? Until the point where the solos break away while you are flying your normal show… At that stage, I would also break away and wait at a suitable altitude where no one can see me. You would execute the rest of your show, and we would meet again before your final maneuver, the “break” (opening). We would perform the break maneuver together. I would land first, and you would land after me. They did this break maneuver once in Samsun in recent years; perhaps you’ve seen it.

I thought they were convinced. In short, everyone had become satisfied that this could happen. This was because it wouldn’t cause major changes in the Turkish Stars’ package, and it opened a path for my goal of performing demonstration flights with a single F-16.

Next, it was time to relay the subject to the Air Force Commander following the chain of command. However, right at that period, a mishap occurred regarding the strikes we were supposed to perform during the Distinguished Observer Day of an Anatolian Eagle exercise to be executed under night conditions. Following this development, we intensified our efforts as a squadron to solve the problem. It was going to take a long time for us to resolve it. Consequently, while this situation continued, no one could go and say, “Commander, we also had this demonstration business.”

Thus, our plans regarding the demonstration flights were postponed. This became our second challenging process. Until when? Until our Air Force Commander visited the squadron in May 2009. During the visit, I said, “Commander, we have a project like this.” We are ready in every aspect to realize it. If you deem it appropriate, we want to start such a training and carry this out—to bring this project to life.

He liked this idea too. But since the Air Force Commander was expected to retire in August at the end of his term, he said it would be a more appropriate course of action to relay it to the new commander in the coming period rather than conveying it now.

Having received a partially positive response from our Commander, I started telling everyone about this project from that date onward. I wanted to create some familiarity, exchange ideas, and brainstorm with people.

The period from May to August passed like this. Of course, I continued my studies during that time and wrote another document.

However, in August, the command level changed completely. All my commanders who knew about this project had been assigned elsewhere, and I was left alone again in Konya. I decided to talk to the new unit commander and start over. I explained the situation to our new commander and how we got to that point, just as I’ve explained to you. I said that if we could somehow present this to the Commander, we could do this; thankfully, he trusted and supported me. And right at this stage, a letter arrived at the base. The year 2011 was to be celebrated as the 100th Anniversary of the Air Force. The Air Force Command was asking the squadrons if they had any proposals or suggestions on this matter. I prepared a letter explaining the details of the project.

But in the meantime, I received word that there were studies suggesting the project could happen, but that it would be more appropriate to carry it out at the 141st Squadron Command. I experienced another challenging process here. The day I received that news, I went to the unit commander in a near-tearful state, feeling like the project was slipping through our fingers, and explained the situation. Thankfully, our base commander took an interest. Then, he spoke with the office that prepared that letter. I won’t go into too much detail, but the commander there reached out to me and said, “If you want it so much, we’ll take you there.” It had only been two years since I arrived in Konya. During that period, we experienced great indecision as a family.

Our children were still small and in school—at the primary and kindergarten levels. We had just settled into our routine… My wife was working. We were living in government housing. We thought long and hard about how it could work, but we concluded that we would be upset if I wasn’t a part of it. If I didn’t express my willingness, this work was going to be done somehow in 2011, but I wouldn’t be in it. In the end, we decided that I should not let go of this project. Then, in December 2010, they assigned me to the 141st Squadron.

We were assigned as a founding team of three. The other two friends, Fatih Batmaz and Yalın Ahbab, were already there. I was assigned as the founding team leader. At the beginning of January, we gathered in Ankara and began our work. What followed is a separate process—I can explain that another time—but the founding process, from the idea stage to taking concrete shape, was a difficult and painful period that lasted about two years.

Ironbirds MAG Just like with everything else. Generally, the emergence of beautiful things happens after somewhat painful processes.

Murat Keleş At the start of the project, there was a thought about whether we should receive training from an outside source. After all, we were doing something brand new. At that time, I always used this analogy: This is a show. Think of it like a stage performance. You don’t get trained for a stage show simply by copying the

person performing it. I would use the example of a world-famous stand-up comedian. They are incredibly successful performers. But if we went to that comedian and said, “We want to be performers just like you” and took their training, would we become just like them? This is something we had to create within ourselves. We thought that by knowing the rules of the stage, we had to produce and present our own show with our own choreography and our own experience.

When starting a training program, there are three basic requirements: an instructor, a training document to follow, and a student who meets the necessary criteria for the training. As students, the three of us were already volunteers. I had already prepared all the necessary documents for the training process. There was the issue of an instructor that we couldn’t quite meet, but all three of us were F-16 instructors ourselves, and we were at a level where we could implement the rules specified in the training documents as instructor pilots.

We conveyed all of this in writing and verbally to the command levels, and our commander trusted us and decided that we could train ourselves. This was also a difficult process to overcome. In the end, a demonstration emerged that was unique and more successful than other teams.

Ironbirds MAG I was there in 2011, during the 100th-anniversary celebrations of our air force. There is a moment I have never forgotten. After the demonstration ended and you landed, the spectators rushed onto the taxiway, and you had to stop. I was right there, somewhere between you and the crowd on the taxiway. What was Murat Keleş feeling in the cockpit at that moment? I mean, after all the thoughts over those two years—will it happen, won't it happen, if it does, how will it be—you appeared before an audience for the first time, and then this event occurred right after the show. What were you thinking at that moment?

Murat Keleş (Laughs) That event... here is how I experienced it in the cockpit: The 100th-anniversary celebration of our air force was the first major international organization we participated in, and it was our first flight in front of such a crowded and enthusiastic audience. I had started flight training in May 2010, and the anniversary activity was in June 2011. So, I had been preparing for demonstration flights for a year. By then, I was simply performing my routine flight, just as I did every day. Performing the demonstration flawlessly was what mattered to me. I strove to do every detail correctly; I tried to perform within the limits and according to the rules. I was in radio contact with the flight safety observer on the ground, and we were generally talking about the maneuvers and their limits—peak altitude, what the next maneuver would be, and so on.

Of course, I didn't know what was happening down below. After successfully completing the demonstration and landing, I began taxiing back toward the parking area. I was waving to the visitors on my way. Then, there was a sudden surge in the crowd; people started running toward the runway like that. There were tapes and security guards separating the flight line from the spectator line, but the people were in such a state of enthusiasm that they tore through the tapes, bypassed the security, and began running toward the aircraft as a massive crowd. This was an unexpected move for us. When I saw this, my first reflex was to stop immediately where I was and evaluate how I should move. After all, I am inside an aircraft with its engine running, and people are running toward it as if they want to embrace the plane, without thinking of the potential consequences. But I realized that when I stopped, people became even more excited and sped up as if in a race. I made a quick decision right there and increased the throttle.

When I opened the throttle and the sound of the engine increased, the people slowed down, and I took that opportunity to leave the area. It was a moment where I experienced mixed emotions but quickly did what needed to be done. Of course, seeing the interest and enthusiasm of our people also made me quite happy.

Ironbirds MAG Without a doubt, we watch Solotürk with great pleasure, and we are certainly aware that this is a team effort. In your opinion, what is the biggest difference that sets Solotürk apart from other solo F-16 demonstration teams?

Murat Keleş It's exactly what I mentioned earlier... We talked a lot and thought deeply about how to establish an emotional bond with the audience, especially during the choreography stage. First, we practiced the maneuvers individually in the training area. We worked on what we could do with an F-16 that would offer visual richness.

Then, we thought about who would come to watch us. Children will come, students will come, university students, aviation students, pilot candidates, and pilots.

People who have no interest in aviation at all—elderly men and women—will come. Consequently, we thought we needed to include something that would appeal to each of them individually.

For example, slow flight... children love slow flight, for instance. Because they can follow it, they can understand what is happening, and they can see us inside. Or, let there be maneuvers that would make pilots wonder how they do that, so that after the show, they might think, "If I were to do this, how would I manage it?" We tried to include maneuvers in our choreography that would appeal to every segment of the audience separately, and we supported these with the narration.

In fact, what set us apart from other F-16 teams was the emotion we created within the public. We managed to say to the people, "We are Turks, and we are demonstrating the strength and capabilities of the Turkish people for you through the unique costumes of our aircraft and team, and our original performance." I think that was what made SoloTürk unique.

As I mentioned, the "costume" design of the aircraft also provided a great contribution. Regarding the design, we worked with Mr. Murat Dorkip. Mr. Murat is a veteran of graphic design and brand management. Our aircraft was designed to convey this emotion. After all, we are a position of representation. We conducted a long-term collaboration with Mr. Murat to emphasize the things we represent on the aircraft itself.

Ironbirds MAG As someone whose hobby is in a field where visuals are paramount, I must say that the eagle is a genius detail. It truly adds a magnificent atmosphere to the plane.

Murat Keleş The eagle on the wing being visible from certain angles is very impressive. For instance, the eagle representing the Turkish Air Force was painted in glossy black over a matte black wing. Then, representing the Turkish flag, the golden crescent and star were designed in gold on the underside of the aircraft, which is its largest surface. We also have our silver star on top, representing the star of the century.

Ironbirds MAG If I may, I would like to talk a little about your test piloting days. I believe you were on duty during the Hürkuş test processes. Could you tell us about your test pilot career?

Murat Keleş It was like this: the Hürkuş A made its first flight in August 2013. At that time, I was in Canada for the test pilot course. After finishing the course and returning, I began flying the Hürkuş at the start of 2014. The certification process for the Hürkuş continued for three years, until 2016.

There was a difficult and long certification process stemming from designing and producing a propeller-driven aircraft with a powerful engine. For example, I flew all of the spin tests, which are the most critical test processes. While performing spin tests, a parachute integration was required for the aircraft in case the plane could not recover from the spin using its own controls. We had to wait a long time to find the suitable parachute system and integrate it into the aircraft.

Ironbirds MAG This parachute system was to be mounted on the aircraft, right?

Murat Keleş Yes, exactly. The parachute I am talking about is one that would be mounted on the tail of the aircraft. It's similar to those found on ultralight category aircraft, but its purpose isn't to lower the plane to the ground in an emergency. The purpose of this parachute is to bring the aircraft—should it fail to recover from a spin—into a vertical, nose-down position when fired. Once that position is reached, the parachute is jettisoned, and the spin recovery process is completed. It's actually called a spin chute.

Afterward, as part of the certification tests, the aircraft passed all required tests and completed its EASA certification in July 2016, receiving its type certificate under the name TT32. In 2017, I also had the chance to fly the Hürkuş to the Paris Airshow, where I successfully performed demonstration flights for a week in front of nearly all representatives of world aviation and represented my country.

Following that, production began on the Hürkuş B for the Air Force. After the Hürkuş A, we transitioned to a glass cockpit, and several modernizations were made to the avionics systems. I was fortunate enough to perform the maiden flight of the Hürkuş B produced for the Air Force.

Ironbirds MAG Without a doubt, aviation is a team effort, especially when certain things are being done for the first time. Everyone must fulfill their duties properly, and the team must move with firm steps within a certain framework of trust. Within this context, there is something I am curious about... What does a test pilot, taking his place in the cockpit of an aircraft that has never flown before, feel before that first flight?

Murat Keleş Good question. Let me explain the process this way.

Actually, the "first flight" is not the first time a test pilot sits in the aircraft's cockpit. Prior to that, during a long process, we perform various tests inside the plane. First, ground tests are conducted. All systems are checked individually. Then, taxi tests begin. Brakes, taxiing controls, etc., are performed. We reach a certain speed on the taxiway to check the aircraft's controls and its reactions to the pilot's inputs. Afterward, high-speed taxi tests are conducted. In high-speed taxi tests, we accelerate the aircraft to speeds close to takeoff speed to see its reactions at that stage. We check whether all systems work together and appropriately. The subsequent first flight is actually like a continuation of this process.

In short, the first flight is like taking one more step for us. It's a process like a baby first rolling on the ground, then starting to crawl, and then standing up on two feet. Of course, it is very exciting, but everything proceeds so controlled that we are essentially just passing another test step within the normal process. That is our job: to carry out yet another successful test step.

For example, we accelerate to a certain speed for the first time. Then, we continue by reaching a slightly higher speed or flying just a bit higher than the altitude we previously climbed to.

But having one of the team members perform this flight with an aircraft produced by our own team is a matter of great pride. It's like people trusting you and handing over their newborn child for you to raise; the responsibility and feeling of that are very different. It's not something I can truly put into words.

Ironbirds MAG We talked about Solotürk, we talked about test piloting. But today's topic is drones. There are incredible developments; it's constantly evolving and changing. Between jet-powered drones, drone carriers, and drones that can lock onto aircraft and fire air-to-air missiles, it's not even easy to keep up with the developments. UAVs and UCAVs. In this framework, how do you see the future of combat piloting? Do you think pilots will continue to fly in the cockpit, or will they turn into PC operators over time?

Murat Keleş My assessment is that for passenger-carrying platforms, piloted operations will continue. For the safety of life and property in the cabin, there needs to be someone in the cockpit to take responsibility until a sufficient level of autonomous proficiency is reached. I believe this will continue for quite some time.

Ironbirds MAG As you know, there are studies to reduce this to a single person, and the aviation industry is debating whether single-pilot cockpits are possible.

Murat Keleş: It could be a single person. Ultimately, a large portion of procedures in passenger aircraft will be handled by automation, and this ratio will increase over time. However, I believe human intervention will be necessary to resolve potential unexpected malfunctions. Most aviation accidents occur because an unexpected event happens at an unexpected moment, or because several small, expected glitches align in a specific sequence. Due to this uncertainty, I evaluate that human intervention will be needed for a while longer.

However, in combat operations, things are a bit different. Ultimately, ammunition is used to damage the opposing side or achieve certain objectives. If you have a platform that can accomplish this without a human, there is no need to risk human life.

This both reduces costs and lowers risk. For manned platforms, the priority is safety. The certification criteria to ensure the safety of a human inside an aircraft are much stricter, but when there is no human inside, these criteria become more flexible. The criteria there shift toward making the aircraft safe enough not to harm third parties. This significantly lowers the cost. I believe risks can be taken more easily.

Think of the first flight of an airplane. During the first flight, everything is prepared with the pilot's safety as the top priority. But during the first flight of a UAV, the priority shifts to ensuring it doesn't harm third parties in the event of a crash. Therefore, these are two very different paths.

Intelligent or AI-supported systems are more reliable. Developments aimed at reducing human error are ongoing. My guess is that we won't see a transition to entirely unmanned passenger air transport in our lifetime. As for fighter jets, I think they could reach a 50/50 ratio, where manned and unmanned platforms continue to perform missions together.

Ironbirds MAG Within the framework of what you can share... could you tell us about the riskiest, most dangerous, or most unnerving situation you encountered during your piloting life, as well as your happiest moment?

Murat Keleş An unnerving situation immediately comes to mind. During my days as a test pilot at TAI, I was reading about aircraft accidents on F-16.net one weekend. One accident caught my attention. If I recall correctly, an F-16 flying from Japan to Alaska experienced an engine failure over the Pacific and the pilot ejected. The plane crashed into the ocean, and the pilot was rescued. Later, they determined the failure was in the fuel system, caused by the Main Fuel Shut-Off Valve (FSOV) closing on its own. I read that and moved on.

That same week, I was test-flying a Pakistani F-16. During test flights, we perform many system checks. Sometimes we simulate malfunctions to see if they are correctly displayed to the pilot. During this flight, after some test steps, I saw an error code on the MFD that shouldn't have been there. I started checking what it was. Meanwhile, the plane was flying fine—no immediate trouble. Then I encountered an error code on the list that said "FSOV NOT FULLY OPEN." Remembering the accident I had just read about, I thought, "Oh no." The valve controlling the fuel to the engine might be slowly closing. I immediately began a climb and brought my landing airfield, Akıncı, into my "glide cone." I notified the necessary stations that my engine might stall. That day, until I safely brought the plane down and landed, my heart was pounding. It was probably only a 3–5 minute process, but I was quite anxious thinking the engine could stop and I might have to land with a dead engine. But I landed safely, and the engine didn't stop.

Ironbirds MAG And your happiest moment?

Murat Keleş I think I experienced the happiest days of my professional life in Çiğli. It wasn't just a single moment, but the entire process surrounding the 100th-anniversary celebrations made me very happy. I can never forget those days; they were times when I felt both immense pride and great happiness—it was indescribable.

Ironbirds MAG As someone who was in the audience, I must say the 100th-anniversary celebrations were a very successful organization. Seeing all those teams together was magnificent for us. I'd like to express our gratitude once more to everyone who contributed back then.

Murat Keleş Those days were the proudest and happiest of my life. It was a team effort. We aviators never do anything alone. For example, if the crew chief doesn't

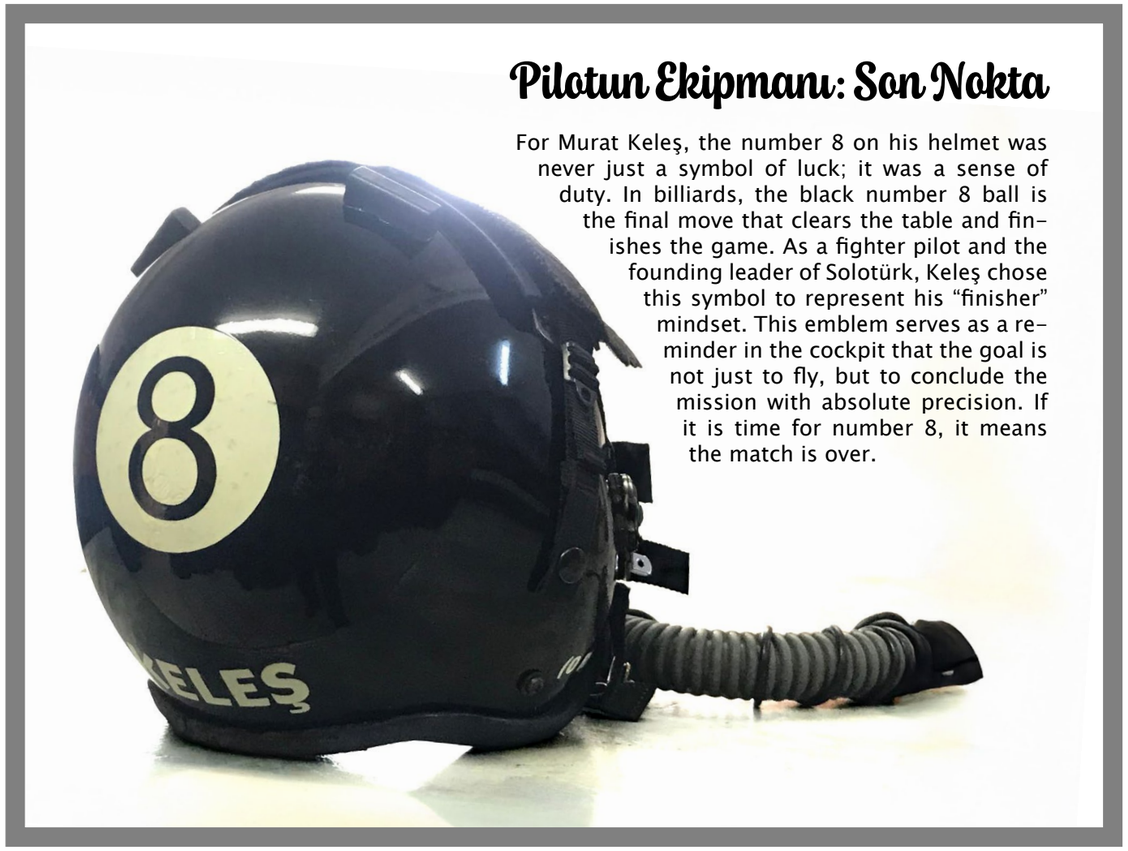
pull the wheel chocks, the plane cannot move. We work as a team. Therefore, our work is something done together by everyone, from the soldier standing guard at the gate to the commander in charge, from the pilot taking off to the controller serving in the tower.

Ironbirds MAG There are many young people who follow you and accept you as a role model. Many are eagerly pursuing a career like yours. What advice would you have for them?

Murat Keleş If the subject is piloting, there are certain requirements, of course. First is health. They must meet the medical standards required for piloting. These criteria are clearly defined in regulations.

Second, aviation is conducted in English all over the world. They must develop their English enough to perform this profession.

Third is to truly want it and not give up. Piloting is a profession that can be learned. Just as we go to courses and learn how to drive when we don't know how, piloting is a profession that can be learned by taking courses. But the process is long. It is a profession where a great deal of information and skill must be learned within a certain timeframe.



Pilotun Ekipmanı: Son Nokta

For Murat Keleş, the number 8 on his helmet was never just a symbol of luck; it was a sense of duty. In billiards, the black number 8 ball is the final move that clears the table and finishes the game. As a fighter pilot and the founding leader of Solotürk, Keleş chose this symbol to represent his "finisher" mindset. This emblem serves as a reminder in the cockpit that the goal is not just to fly, but to conclude the mission with absolute precision. If it is time for number 8, it means the match is over.

Therefore, they must also possess the mental strength to endure this pace. Think back to when you first learned to drive. Think about how difficult it is to release the clutch and press the gas at the same time in a manual car, especially doing it on a hill without rolling back. But after a while, you realize everything has become automatic. You stop thinking about it; everything has become a reflex. You start focusing on following the lane more smoothly, changing gears without thinking, moving on a hill without rolling back, and so on—you start progressing by building upon what you know. In piloting, this process of "building upon" never ends. You constantly continue to learn new things and evolve. A career isn't built in an instant; it is the result of years of training and experience. Ultimately, I can say to our youth: Let your dreams be big, but let your efforts be even bigger than your dreams.

Ironbirds MAG You made room for us and took time out of your busy schedule. Thank you very much, and we wish you success in your new position.

Murat Keleş It was a very pleasant conversation for me as well, thank you.

BEYOND THE FENCE

F-35 Lightning II Operations at a Dutch Helicopter Base

Imagine driving your car on the road, and suddenly the traffic lights go red. And a train-like barrier comes down, and just in front of you a **Dutch F-35** lands. An amazing sight, but not unusual for this Dutch Airbase: **RNLAF Gilze Rijen AB**.

If you know the country of **The Netherlands**, you know how extremely densely populated it is. One problem that comes with that is **noise pollution** for the cities, towns, and villages that are close to a Dutch military airbase.

The Royal Netherlands Air Force today has only two F-35 bases (a third will be operational in the near future), and already these have many restrictions to keep the **jet noise levels** acceptable for the nearby cities and towns. To be able to expand their flying operations and not exceed these **noise abatements**, they opted for a smart and simple solution!

Dutch F-35 landing at Gilze Rijen airbase, crossing the road. Notice the cars stopped at the traffic light in the background.

Every month, they plan for operational missions to make an afternoon stop (and full **afterburner takeoff**) on a different airbase that does not normally house the **fixed-wing fighter**. This can be a civilian airport, or in this case, a Military helicopter base.

Ironbirds Magazine was present to witness one of these exchanges.

The RNLAF Gilze-Rijen Airbase used to be (a long time ago) an F-5 jet base and still has its long runway. Now it is home to the Dutch **Chinook, Apache, and Cougar** helicopters. It is quite a busy airbase, but the noise levels compared to an F-35 base are very low. The base is also very well-known for the **civilian road that crosses the approach**, so the aircraft fly very low over this road, where stopping or standing still is not allowed (cars, bicycles, and pedestrians).

Dutch F-35s taxiing to their parking position, usually used by the **Apache** helicopters.

Please notice the marked nose wheel doors. The **F-35 nose wheel doors** will sometimes have a squadron logo (**Tiger head for 313 sq**) and a name (here **WOLF** and **RHINO**).

Rhino is a Cameri **FACO**-built **Lightning II**. Delivered in **2022**, this **F-35A** has **FMS 20-5661**. It has the **313 sq** logo on the tail and nose wheel door, and also on the tail (between stripes) the **ACC** letters, meaning **Air Combat Command**.

Wolf is a **Cameri FACO**-built **Lightning II** (FMS serial **22-5760**) and was delivered to the **Koninklijke Luchtmacht** (KLu, Royal Netherlands Air Force) on **23 November 2024**. Although still unmarked, it flies with the **Tiger Squadron** since that moment.

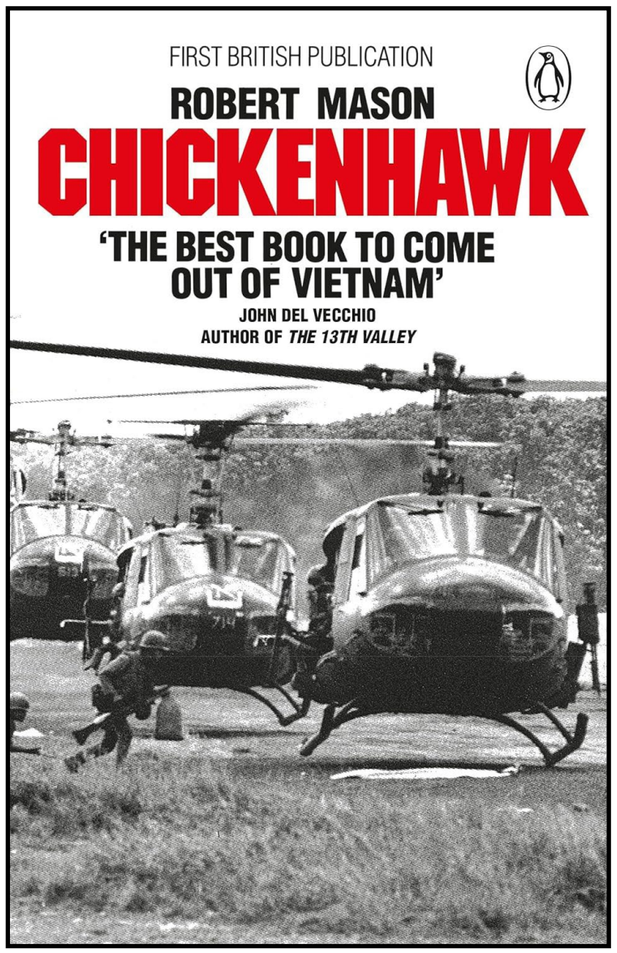
BOOK REVIEW

Here at Ironbirds MAG, we love reading books all about flying, especially true stories. The more detailed a book is with small aviation nuances, the higher the praise it gets from us.

Details we especially love to see in an aviation book:

- The use of the historically correct callsigns, aircraft types, frequencies
- Human connection based on personal experiences
- The psychological and emotional toll; focus on “why” and “how”

At the moment, we are fully immersed in **Vietnam War** books, and we would like to start with a classic: **Chickenhawk**. This book is from a pilot who flew the ‘**Huey’ (UH-1 Iroquois) ‘slick**’ helicopter during the conflict. I have noticed many aviation fans love this book, and it has even been classroom material for non-English speaking (army) helicopter pilots learning the English names for helicopter instruments and general flight procedures.



Many people, of course myself included, will reread this book over time.

Training and the Controls

Chickenhawk is by **Robert Mason**, following his time as a Huey pilot in Vietnam. The book starts with Mason’s account of helicopter training with the army. Details of how the controls work were given throughout. With little to no prior knowledge of the controls, you’re given a crash course on what they do, with many things counteracting many other things at all times. He describes flight school and the training they did, and the inevitable crashes experienced by some trainee pilots.

> *“But this is war.*
>
> *Everybody gets hurt in a war. Hell, we can’t go crying about the innocents that get killed. Innocents have been getting knocked off in wars since the beginning of time. If we want to win this thing for the Vietnamese we got to be ready to see it as it is: War, plain and simple and nasty.*

The Wild Ride Begins

From there, Mason talks about being assigned to the Cavalry, the journey to Vietnam by ship, and his initial camp. It’s from this point that the book becomes a wild ride. Once the missions start coming, you start feeling uncomfortable when he discusses ‘an easy flight,’ expecting the VC to open up from the trees or any number of dangers over there.

The Human Side of Conflict

What I really liked about the book is that Mason's narrative is particularly human. He doesn't talk about things in a "gung-ho" way; he is visibly phased by the death all around him and suffers as a consequence.

The Cavalry had a reputation over there, and you can tell there are moments when he's uncomfortable with what is happening. VC hiding in a group of civilians? The gunner takes them all out. Uprooting villagers from one location where generations have lived, and moving them somewhere totally new.

Landing in what he calls hot LZs (Landing Zones, under fire from the VC), he sees friends and fellow pilots shot and killed, has near misses, and starts to feel the futility of the conflict. While the papers and press at home were telling the world they were winning, he is never so sure, as no one on the ground (or in the air) truly knows.

Our editor, Boğaç Erkan, inside an UH-1.
1995, Erzurum, Türkiye.

BELL UH-1H "HUEY"
Built in 1967, this UH-1 is in M.S.Ö. Air & Space Museum
Sivrihisar, Eskişehir, Türkiye
msomuseum.com

★★★★★

Final Verdict

CHICKENHAWK contains some of the most vivid, astoundingly intense descriptions of flying ever written. It is a devastating account of men at war, of courage and cowardice, boredom and exhilaration, lasting friendship and sudden death. It is not a book for weak stomachs, but its powerful message will stay in the memory long after the last page is turned. It's brilliant, and the human side of it is refreshing to read; we recommend it to anyone.

IRONBIRDS MAG recommends buying this book. Also, it has come to our attention that some online libraries have this classic available for downloading and it is available as an audio book. If you like to read from a screen, please search the internet for Chickenhawk EPUB.

Please let us know if you appreciate these kinds of book reviews!

Celebrating 30 Years of Roskilde: An Ironbird's Eye View

By Team Ironbird

August 2025 marked a milestone for the Danish aviation calendar as the **Roskilde Airshow** celebrated its 30th anniversary. Nestled just 30 kilometers from the bustling heart of Copenhagen, Roskilde Airfield—typically a hub for general aviation and VIP transport—transformed into a high-octane stage for one of Europe's most beloved biannual events. Known for its relaxed, family-friendly atmosphere, the 2025 edition proved that after three decades, Roskilde has only grown in prestige, delivering a powerful experience that cemented its reputation as a premier international event.

For **Team Ironbird**, the mission was clear but daunting: Capture the essence of the anniversary through dedicated air-to-air photography. With an influx of world-class aircraft arriving as early as a week before the show, our editorial team was forced to make some difficult choices. Prioritizing local Danish legends and the massive contingent from our southern neighbors, we took to the skies to document the highlights of the 2025 season.

The Shifting Colors of the Merlin

Our sorties began with a mesmerizing encounter "down low" over the Danish waters. We joined a local training flight with the **SAR AgustaWestland EH-101 Merlin** (now the Leonardo AW101). Operating under the callsign **RESCUE31** (tail M-507), this massive airframe is a sight to behold. What makes the Merlin particularly captivating for a photographer is its unique green metallic paint; depending on the angle of the sun, the airframe shifts from a deep, obsidian black to a shimmering gold. Though our window of opportunity was brief, the results were nothing short of cinematic.

Engineering Marvels: The Great Belt Bridge

To provide a backdrop worthy of the show's scale, we headed toward the **Great Belt Bridge (Storebæltsbroen)**. This architectural titan, connecting Zealand and Funen, offered the perfect geometric contrast to the organic lines of the German Army helicopters.

First up was the **NH Industries NH90 Display Team**. Flying with the display aircraft (**German Army 15 Bravo, tail 78+32**) and its static counterpart (15 Juliet, tail 79+09), we worked to find compositions that portrayed the NH90's versatility against the massive suspension cables of the East Bridge.

The pace didn't slow down. We quickly repositioned to intercept the inbound **EC665 Tiger** attack helicopters. Representing the **German Army Solo Tiger Display Team**, these pilots favored the bridge as a navigational "land structure" to minimize over-water transit. We were blessed with golden-hour light as **01 Foxtrot (tail 74+68)** and **01 Golf (tail 74+60)** maneuvered for our lenses, concluding the session with a series of sharp, aggressive level breaks.

Heavy Metal and Precision

The transport category was equally well-represented. We enjoyed a high-altitude sortie with the **German Air Force Airbus A400M (Callsign GAF115, tail 54+40)**, benefiting from the crisp, thin air that made the aircraft's details pop.

However, a personal highlight for the team was our first-ever encounter with the **Embraer C-390 Millennium**. Belonging to the **Portuguese Air Force**, this crew was incredibly gracious. Despite having just completed a grueling **2,500 km ferry flight**, they performed precision formation flying for our cameras, showcasing the agility of the Brazilian-made airlifter.


26902
FORÇA AÉREA PORTUGUESA

The Home Guard’s New Addition

No report on Roskilde 2025 would be complete without mentioning the newest asset in the Danish skies: the **Hjemmeværnet** (**Danish Home Guard**) **De Havilland Twin Otter**. Inducted into service in **early 2025**, this rugged aircraft has already become a vital asset for both **Signals Intelligence (SIGINT)** and **Search and Rescue (SAR)** roles. Seeing it in its element provided a fitting tribute to the future of Danish aviation.

A Landmark Success

The sheer scale of international support—highlighted by Germany's impressive ten-aircraft contribution—spoke volumes about the respect Roskilde commands. While we missed the CH-53 due to a last-minute cancellation, the array of warbirds, fast jets, and helicopters more than filled the gap.

As the sun set on the 30th-anniversary celebrations, the 2025 Roskilde Airshow left us with more than just full memory cards; it left us with a reminder of why we fly. It is an event that balances the technical prowess of modern military aviation with the warmth of a community gathering—a true "Ironbird" favorite.


E-006
N-973
ROYAL DANISH AIR FORCE
1950-2025


B-583
ROYAL DANISH AIR FORCE


N-973
ROYAL DANISH AIR FORCE
1950-2025
ET187
E-006


831
281
210

The ‘Dannebrog’ F-16 E-006 is a F-16AM Fighting Falcon jet aircraft of the Royal Danish Air Force (RDAF).

In 2024, the aircraft was given a unique livery in the colors of the Danish flag, the ‘Dannebrog’. The design, created by Mads Bangsø, utilizes ten different metallic shades, a first for a military operational aircraft.

The livery commemorates both the 50th anniversary of the F-16 and Denmark’s role in the history of this iconic fighter aircraft.

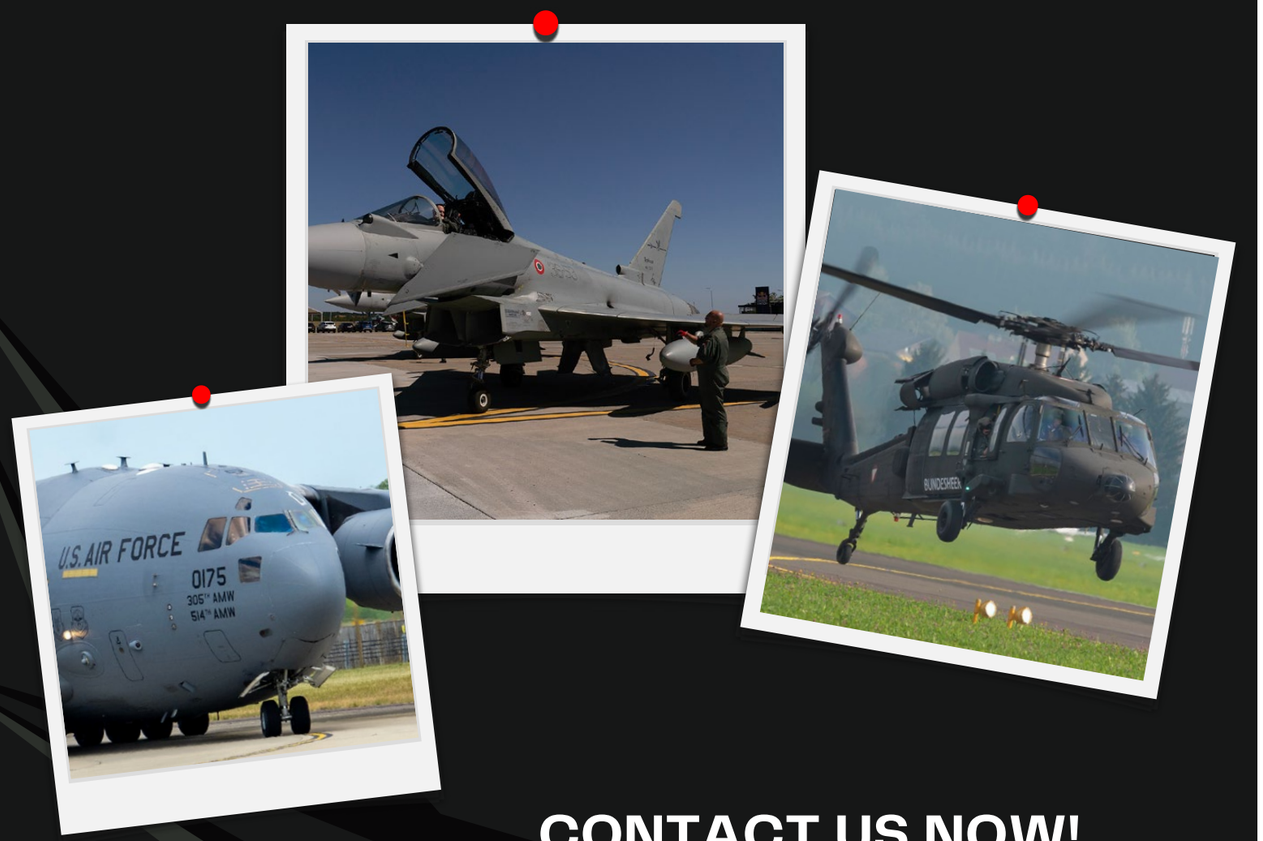
The E-006 frequently serves as the display aircraft for the Royal Danish Air Force F-16 Solo Display team and participates in airshows throughout Europe.

CONTACT US IF YOU WANT TO BE

IN THE MAG!

We can visit your squadron or base!

- We can visit your sq during a exercise.
- Your squadron has an anniversary?
- Your team has a new livery?
- Last year in service?



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