

## First Flight

### Colonel Stryker (12292)

This was it.

Firebird's first combat mission, after endless simulator sessions and training exercises against the other squadrons of the *Challenge*, they were finally being given the opportunity to get to grips with the enemy. When the briefing had been conducted, the excitement among the pilots of Wing X had been evident even without being able to feel it through the Force; the pilots had had enough of always being on the defensive, they wanted to be the attackers rather than the attacked for once.

And Firebird had been given the opportunity to draw first blood.

Six X-wings and three Y-wings were the first ships to leave the *Challenge's* hangar, escorting a trio of TIE Reapers from Gust Squadron who were acting as electronic countermeasures craft. In the lead fighter, Stryker settled deeper into his ejection seat and adjusted his grip on his control stick and throttle.

"Okay boys and girls, looks like we've got a welcoming party coming out to meet us. Split into teams, just like training, and prepare to engage."

The squadron split into three; two X-wings and a Y-wing each escorting one of the Reapers. It wasn't a by-the-book strategy, but it had worked in training and the development and refinement of dissimilar combat tactics had been one of Firebird's foremost mission goals.

[Beep!]

"I know we're outnumbered, but we've been in tighter spots than this; at least they're not flying Defenders!"

The black and yellow R6 droid seemed to settle deeper into his socket, as if not sharing his pilot's confidence; three to one odds weren't the worst odds they had faced either as part of Red Squadron or on their own, but they also didn't fill his circuits with confidence. On the other hand, an X-wing with a skilled pilot/astromech team would outperform Z-95s any day.

[*Challenge* is launching reinforcements.]

Stryker shrugged as the flight controller's voice crackled in his headset; his people could probably have taken most of the Headhunters deploying ahead of them by themselves, they were better trained and their craft were superior in build quality and maintenance. However, that didn't mean they wouldn't get hurt and the Reapers were ponderous and slow when using their jammers; even a rookie in a Headhunter would be able to spot and hit one using their eyes.

[Fireball, you are weapons free.]

*Finally!*

Bringing up his Proton Torpedo systems, Stryker aimed the crosshairs at the first Headhunter. Sparky beeped as the computer acquired a lock, his tone becoming shrill as he released the weapon at a

range that the Headhunters would not be able to match unless they were similarly-armed. Similar torpedo launches from his companions meant that a total of nine Proton Torpedoes lanced out towards the swarm approaching them head-on; they crossed the distance faster than any sublight vessel could travel, still accelerating to their maximum velocity even as they slammed home; the blasts engulfed several fighters per explosion, and no less than twelve fighters were sent spiralling out of control or destroyed outright in the initial volley.

“Flight leaders, pick your targets. Let’s wrap this up before Inferno get in our way!”

Switching from torpedoes to lasers, Stryker linked them to fire in pairs; slightly reducing the overall rate of fire but increasing the damage per hit would be useful against shielded targets like Headhunters, which would require two or maybe even three direct hits before being put out of action. Taking a snap-shot at the fighter that passed his nose, Stryker saw shields flare and fail, but the target was gone before his follow-up shot could finish it off – such was the turbulent rolling melee the fight had become even as the *Challenge* and her escorts moved towards the Golan platform that was their objective. Already the mighty Star Destroyer was raining heavy ordnance down on the platform, torpedoes and missiles battering at the reinforced shields as the Golan’s crew struggled to accurately return fire; the pirates had found a mighty stronghold, but they lacked the training or the manpower to operate it effectively.

Still, that didn’t mean it wasn’t still a dangerous foe.

[Firebird one there’s a bandit on your tail!]

Stryker swore loudly and diverted whatever discretionary power he had to the engines, increasing his speed by a further twenty percent as he raced away from the volley of laser blasts that would have done significant damage to his shields. The Headhunter, despite being slower, kept up its pursuit and the barrage of deadly energy that began to spark and hiss against the X-wing’s rear shields. It didn’t look like anyone was coming to help, Stryker realised as he saw the towers of the Golan looming before him, so he was going to have to get clever. Closing his S-Foils, Stryker rolled inverted and passed through the Golan’s failing shield bubble to enter the relative safety of the access tunnel that ran its length, launching a spread of flares in his wake to confuse the Headhunter’s targeting. Racing through the tunnel, bare metres of clearance on all sides between him and his own fiery demise, Stryker breathed a small sigh of relief as he exited the other end, opened his S-Foils again and looped back over the top of the station; the Headhunter was there, ripe for the taking, and Stryker patiently lined up his shot.

[Imperial craft; cease fire! We surrender!]

Stryker’s finger moved away from the trigger as the *Challenge* ceased firing and the Golan’s remaining batteries also fell silent; the few remaining Headhunters clustered together under the guns of EvilGrin’s Inferno Squadron while the X-wings and Y-wings of Firebird Squadron, some bearing fresh char marks, regrouped with the Reapers and escorted them back to the challenge to collect boarding parties.

The party that night was...loud... Prior to its merger with the TIE Corps, Infiltrator Wing had long had a reputation for flaunting Imperial regulations and throwing wild parties with alcohol, women and gambling, and the veterans of that organisation had ensured that the tradition continued. Stryker

had shared a drink with his pilots, congratulated the newbies on their first combat kills, and watched as several cans of pink paint had been offloaded next to Lieutenant Turel's X-wing before departing. He knew they should conduct more thorough debriefings before alcohol ruined their memories, but left them to it – he wasn't "one of the boys" any more, so it would be better to just let the pilots have their fun, there was going to be more work to be done before the week was over.

Until then, he had a report to write...