

For Honour - A Firebird Squadron Story

By Colonel Stryker

Part 1 - Ambush

Stryker rolled onto his back and lay still on the deck as he raised a hand to his forehead; it came away sticky and red with blood from the impact with the bulkhead. The Strike Cruiser Hermes had just transitioned from Hyperspace on a routine patrol when the universe had turned on its head with a thunderclap of noise; they'd obviously hit, or been hit by, something, and now the ship seemed to be listing heavily to starboard – a sign that the artificial gravity and inertial dampeners were struggling to compensate.

Not a good sign.

This had meant to be a fairly simple reconnaissance mission, the Hermes broadcasting a New Republic transponder ID and carrying six Firebird squadron fighters just in case they required a Starfighter screen; it had been the first step in Stryker's plan to have his unit operating semi-independently from the Challenge and her battlegroup, allowing them greater freedom of movement and to retain their anonymity while still operating from a carrier. Now that plan seemed to be about to go up in flames along with the Hermes if something wasn't done soon.

Get up, get moving.

Pushing himself off the deck, Stryker steadied himself against the tilt of the vessel and tried to get his bearings; he'd just come from the mess hall, which meant the Bridge was...which way? His only companions in the corridor were two young crewmen, neither of whom had survived the blast. Moments before they'd been chatting and laughing, and he'd been about to reprimand them for not saluting an officer despite his green flight suit when the ship had heaved to one side and everything had gone black. Now they were sprawled on the deck, victims of the harsh impact that could have just as easily ended his own life.

He'd been lucky.

The ship shook again, and this time a worrying tremor ran through the deck; he'd felt it in his X-Wing before, on a smaller scale, it was the vibration of an engine critically out of alignment. On his fighter, he'd simply shut it down and continued on without issue while Sparky repaired it, but on a ship the size of the Hermes such a misalignment could prove fatal; the stress would tear the engine free from its mount with explosive consequences. Fumbling for his commlink, Stryker finally found it and thumbed it on.

"Stryker to Bridge, come in."

Only static answered him; either he'd damaged the commlink in the fall, or there was nobody on the Bridge left alive to answer him.

Time for plan B, then.

"Stryker to Cook, come in."

[Here, boss!]

“I can’t get through to the Bridge, I want you to get down to Auxiliary Control and see what’s going on. Then meet me in the hangar.”

[I’m on it!]

Staggering back the way he came, Stryker found a directory panel that still functioned; the hangar was two decks down but the turboshaft displays were all flashing red – thanks to the impact and, what Stryker now suspected was significant warping of the hull, they were all inoperable. It would be a long climb through the access tunnels with a possible concussion, but if he was going to survive the next few hours, it was his only choice...

Part 2 - Aftermath

The status report wasn't good; the Captain and most of her command staff were dead, victim of a hull breach on the Bridge. Engineering was similarly a mess, with the Chief Engineer unlikely to ever walk again after having been crushed by a falling stanchion. Auxiliary Control was under the command of the ship's very junior Third Officer and a handful of senior ratings, and they were doing their best to coordinate repair efforts. At first it had seemed like they had struck a mine, perhaps a relic of the Clone Wars, but analysis of the damage told a different story – sensors had reported a brief contact moments before the impact, initially written off as a sensor ghost by the operators, but on more detailed analysis showed the culprit of the Hermes' laming.

Those are TIE Phantoms, not many of them around these days...

Hermes had been broadcasting a New Republic transponder, which meant she was fair game to any wannabe warlord or Remnant expedition, but that did nothing to soften the blow of a friendly-fire incident. Not that Stryker was loyal to the Empire, or even the majority of its ideals, but the idea of a sneak attack with cloaked ships just seemed...dishonourable. Tactically sound, yes, but not how warfare should be conducted between governments that both claimed to uphold the values of valour, honour, and peace.

The question was how to respond to the atrocity? The Phantom pilots were probably loyal Imperials who happened to have fallen in with a wannabe warlord and the Hermes had been a valid military target given her transponder settings, but they had attacked a vessel of the Emperor's Hammer Strike Fleet and killed TIE Corps personnel in their attack, and such an insult could not go unavenged.

"Commander Cook, do you have a vector for their escape route?"

"Yes sir, after hitting us they continued along their original vector and escaped into Hyperspace. There aren't many systems along that route capable of supporting even a small base, so they either have a carrier or made a micro-jump to throw us off."

Stryker nodded and scratched at the stubble on his chin; never the poster-child of Imperial grooming methods, since rejoining an Infiltrator Wing squadron, he'd allowed his facial hair to grow into a dark scruff and his hair was once again way beyond regulation length.

"Prepare the Probe Droids, I want every system searched for potential bases or carrier vessels; set their scanners to pick up Stygium emissions, if possible."

The junior Lieutenant and now Acting-Captain raised an eyebrow, not comprehending.

"A Stygium Array is what allows the Phantom to cloak; if you can detect the trace emissions from that, you can track a cloaked vessel."

Understanding, Cook immediately departed to program the Probe Droids. That was only stage one of the plan, however; the Probes would inevitably be detected and the Phantom pilots and their compatriots would either fortify their position in anticipation of an attack, or relocate to another sector. The dead would not get their vengeance, and Stryker would be damned before he allowed more of his comrades' blood to be shed by cowards who hid behind technology and denied their

victims the ability to even face their killers. Withdrawing his comlink from his pocket, Stryker strode out of the Auxiliary Control Room with purpose.

“Firebird Squadron, briefing in five minutes.”

His first destination would be the hangar, to see how the few surviving Starfighter mechanics and Astromechs had fared in repairing the damage to Firebird’s remaining craft, and then to see just how many of the Strike Cruiser’s complement of Proton Torpedoes he could cram into them – he intended to ensure that the Hermes’ revenge was swift and decisive, and serve as a warning to any who dared launch unprovoked attacks on the people under his command.

Revenge, he reminded himself, was a facet of the Dark Side of the Force, something he had tried to escape since resigning from the Dark Brotherhood; but in this instance, anger was entirely natural and a reprisal attack was both justified and necessary.

Part 3 – Duel Among the Rocks

Four X-Wings and a U-Wing approached the shattered debris of what had once been a planet; fragments of rock ranging from shards the size of Stryker's fist to those the size of the Challenge floated freely in orbit of the system's star, the once-inhabited planet having been decimated by a mining accident many decades before. The five craft now tracking the bandit Phantoms had been hand-picked for the mission – Lieutenant Colonel Denys had balked at the idea of taking both Flight Leaders with him on their journey aboard the Hermes, but Colonel NiksaVel was more than capable of managing Firebird while they were gone, and Stryker needed his best pilots given the opposition they were likely to face.

Fate, it seemed, was smiling on them today...

[I've got contacts on sensors, boss. Looks like a wave of TIE Interceptors coming from the debris field.]

That was Travis Cook in the U-Wing, packed with extra sensors and acting as the main reconnaissance craft for the mission; Stryker had originally intended to fly Firebird's T-65BR or "Snoopscoot", but that was on the Challenge and nobody had liked the idea of flying an **unarmed** craft into the danger zone. Y-Wings were too slow for such an operation, so Firebird's support U-Wing had been chosen, and Cook had been the logical choice given his experience with the craft, with Lieutenant Turel in the Co-Pilot's Seat as his X-Wing was damaged beyond the Hermes' capacity to repair.

"Lock S-Foils into attack position and break by pairs; Travis, hold back and keep your recorders running."

Stryker and Ricaud broke down and to the left while Talon Jade and Jedgar went high and right, aiming to surround the enemy forces as they came through the centre of the ruined planet.

There they are, the last desperate holdouts of a fallen warlord's regime...

Looping around a large fragment and rolling to avoid colliding with several smaller rocks in his path, Stryker diverted energy away from his engines to his cannons and dropped his sights over the lead Interceptor. A quick burst and the craft disappeared in a hail of metal debris, while Ricaud's strike on the wingman was more surgical – burning through the cockpit and leaving the rest of the ship to continue pilot-less into deep space.

[More fighters' incoming; looks like they're throwing Bombers and a Reaper into the mix!]

Stryker shook his head, the Reaper was a fine craft but it wasn't meant for combat; even escorted sharing one with a quartet of X-Wings piloted by experts was suicide. Still, these pilots weren't bad either; they'd just been taken by surprise. An Interceptor had locked onto Talon's tail and held on tight, peppering the X-Wing's shields with laser fire before Jedgar annihilated it with a well-placed burst of his own, and another had now latched onto Stryker's tail. Shunting power to his engines, Stryker ignored Sparky's warning that the engines were rapidly overheating and pulled a tight turn around the largest rock he could find, rolling through a crevasse and out the other side. The temperature gauges were spiking and the cockpit began to feel increasingly warm as the endlessly-

tinkered engines began to become unstable, and he evened out the power to prevent a catastrophic failure.

Wouldn't do to blow myself up, now, would it?

Ahead of him, lumbering through a clear path in the rocks, was the enemy Reaper; selecting his Ion Missiles, Stryker locked on and fired, grunting with annoyance as the Reaper suddenly disappeared from scanners and the missile wandered off-course. Switching back to lasers, Stryker dropped his crosshairs over the blade-winged craft and held the trigger down so it would rake the craft from bow to stern and back again. The shields buckled with a flash, and the larger ship disappeared in a rolling fireball as its reactor detonated. Of course, that came too late to prevent the Seeker Mine it had deployed locking on to Stryker's X-Wing and racing in his direction.

With a muttered curse, Stryker rolled hard and away and diverted power to his engines once again. A flick of the thumb sent a flurry of seeker warheads from the launcher at the rear of his fighter, the tiny missiles homing in on the incoming mine and detonating it a safe distance from the fleeing X-Wing. That was not the end of Stryker's problems, however; he had become separated from Ricaud and his aft was exposed to enemy fire, rapid-fire laser blasts from a TIE Interceptor slashed in and ate away his rear shields, prompting a violent evasive roll that nearly slammed him into a large rock. Sparky hooted a warning, echoed by the sudden screaming alarms that filled the cockpit – his number four engine was on fire, and the others were beginning to overheat from the constant full-throttle abuse.

"Sparky, shut down number four! See if you can get it online again!"

The little droid beeped an acknowledgement and the alarms abruptly ceased as the burning engine shut down and the internal fire extinguisher deployed. Throttling back to ease the strain on the remaining engines, Stryker rolled through a tight gap between fragments and diverted power to recharging his rear shields as he hit his reverse thrusters. Another solid laser hit rocked his ship before the Interceptor powered past at full power; Stryker launched an Ion Missile without aiming, prompting the Interceptor to roll hard to starboard and right into the X-Wing's sights; the quad-linked laser blast evaporated the fragile ship, leaving nothing but expanding gas in its place.

[Sensors show clear, boss. We got them all!]

Exhaling slowly, Stryker checked over the status boards of the ships in the squad; all had scored kills, even Travis in his U-Wing, and all were damaged to a greater or lesser extent with the exception of Ricaud – his X-Wing had escaped unscathed, and he had achieved the greatest tally of kills of the group. Were Stryker still a young pilot, he might have been jealous of the other pilot's achievements, but he had mellowed with age – what mattered most was that they had survived and were victorious. Now it was time to worry about what these former Imperials had been doing here, and what or who were they protecting?

Part 4 – Investigation

Stryker returned the salutes of a pair of Hammer's Fist Stormtroopers as he passed them in the corridor of the captured Raider. The bulkheads still steamed with residual heat from the fierce firefight that had taken place, and the casualty count had been reportedly high although the bodies had long-since been removed. An officer in the uniform of an Imperial Army officer approached and saluted, he was one of the Hermes' few remaining officers, and had personally led the boarding operation despite being little more than a quartermaster's assistant. Stryker had already recommended the young man a medal and promotion, if any of them lived long enough to submit those reports...

"We've captured their database mostly intact, sir; it seems they were heading towards the Unknown Regions as part of a small task force when they suffered engine trouble. The fighters you encountered were left behind as an escort."

"And the Phantoms?"

"Gone, sir; they moved on with the rest of their task force. Their next scheduled stop was two systems away, but there is no guarantee that their orders did not change after they departed."

Stryker nodded, his brow furrowed. A lead was a lead, but what were the odds of another Imperial unit heading towards the Unknown Regions along a similar path to Rapier's expedition? It didn't make a whole lot of sense, and though Squadron Commanders were not privy to the big picture, it was unlikely that other elements were set to rendezvous with the Avenger's task force without the fleet's officers being made aware of it...

"Download everything you have, then withdraw to the Hermes. We're leaving."

"And the prisoners?"

Stryker glanced down the hallway to the Mess Hall where the dozen or so survivors of the battle were currently under guard; they'd been given access to basic medical treatment, but the Hermes' need had been greater and the Raider's MedBay had been ransacked to re-stock the Strike Cruiser's depleted supplies.

"We're not barbarians, Lieutenant. Their weapons and engines are disabled, but they have life support; they can send a distress call and pray for rescue."

"And if no rescue comes?"

Stryker looked back at the Lieutenant with cold eyes that made the younger man shudder.

"Then they'd best make their peace with fate..."

Part 5 – The Convoy

The search continued for days before any actionable intelligence was discovered; the enemy ships had indeed changed their rendezvous coordinates after abandoning their crippled Raider, and so the Hermes had continued onwards along what the crew established was the most efficient route towards the Unknown Regions. After a week of fruitless patrols, Stryker had been prepared to call off the search and return to the Challenge; it was only when a garbled distress call talking of “ghost ships” came in that they had a solid lead.

The convoy was New Republic in allegiance, but was transporting medical supplies to a world beleaguered by plague and travelling without any escort – despite the protests of the Hermes’ officers, Stryker decided to commit Firebird to the convoy’s rescue. This was not a matter of politics or loyalty to any particular regime; it was about being a decent person and protecting those who could not protect themselves.

As in the asteroid field, four X-Wings and a U-Wing dropped from Hyperspace and immediately went into combat formation with Cook’s U-Wing loaded with Seeker Mines and automated Turrets to ward off any fighter that might try and take advantage of the larger craft’s slower speed. Ahead, the convoy burned; Stryker knew they wouldn’t arrive in time to save everyone, but the Phantoms had been ruthlessly efficient and over half of the convoy was already destroyed. Blood boiling, Stryker armed his laser cannons and settled into his ejection seat; he could feel the anger in his fellow pilots, the fear of the convoy crews, and the cold ruthlessness of the Phantom pilots. That they felt no compassion, no remorse, only made Stryker angrier and he heard something in the control stick pop as he squeezed it tighter.

“Engage at will, fire to disable if possible; we need prisoners.”

The formation split, Stryker and Ricaud going to port while Jade and Jedgar went to starboard; the Phantoms had seen them coming and rushed to cloak and ambush their attackers, but they had not counted on the determination of their pursuers, five of whom were Force-sensitive and didn’t need their eyes or targeting computers to attack their targets. Stryker’s first blast hulled a Phantom as its shields dropped, vaporising engine compartments and the cockpit, while Ricaud skilfully disabled his target with an Ion Missile. Jade and Jedgar reported another Phantom destroyed while the fourth cloaked and accelerated out-system at a rate that even the heavily-modified X-Wings could not match.

[This is the medical transport ‘Hope’ to unknown fighters; we don’t know where you came from, but thank you. They came out of nowhere.]

For a moment, Stryker considered not replying. Despite being mostly apolitical, he had already rendered aid to the enemy and risked a firing squad upon his return to the Hermes, communicating with them would simply exacerbate the issue. On the other hand, what harm was there in accepting the gratitude of a frightened civilian and maybe getting a little extra intelligence at the time?

“This is Starbird One, you’re lucky we were in the area! We’d hoped to plan next year’s display season in secret out here, we were under the impression this sector was deserted.”

[So were we! It's an honour to meet you Starbird, maybe we'll see you at the Liberation Day Festival next year?]

Stryker grimaced; he'd been to the Liberation Day Festival on Coruscant and it was exactly what one would expect from the capital of the New Republic; bloated and pointless. That watching the New Republic Precision Flight Team (aka Starbird Squadron) perform had inspired him to learn to fly was the only real benefit he'd seen to the event.

"You can count on it. Good luck, Hope, and May The Force Be With You!"

The words threatened to catch in Stryker's throat, but he forced them out and gave the lead transport a little wing-wave as he passed, looping round the convoy to form up with the rest of his squadron as Cook's U-Wing locked onto the disabled Phantom and towed it towards their planned departure point. Though he doubted the Phantom's crew would allow their equipment or persons to be taken intact, any information about the craft was useful, and would lead to the downfall of those who would attack others without cause or warning...

Part 6 – Revenge

They had them!

Long-range sensors had detected a pair of old Arquitens-class Light Cruisers escorting an old Imperial-I-class Star Destroyer at sublight through a local system; it looked as though the Raider hadn't been the only ship suffering from engine trouble, as the radiation emissions from all three ships betrayed the conditions of their main reactors – they'd probably not been properly overhauled in years, and though the power drop-off would blind their sensors and cripple their shields, it would also make engaging them decidedly dangerous – nobody wanted to fly through dense clouds of radiation if they could help it, shielded Starfighter or not.

With Cook in his U-Wing and Turel now piloting the U-Wing, six Starfighters and a battered Strike Cruiser pounced on the hostile craft. By using canny piloting abilities and a stroke or three of luck, the small force had approached in the shadow of a large gas giant and had flown through its upper atmosphere to catch the Star Destroyer and her escorts – it was risky, as the atmosphere was turbulent and the slightest slip would see a craft sucked into the crushing gravity well, but it had paid off. The three vessels had no idea they were being pursued, and there was nowhere for them to hide.

“Take the escorts first, watch for enemy fighters.”

As one, ten Proton Torpedoes and a pair of Ion Torpedoes lanced from the Starfighter formation, the nearest Arquitens barely had time to register the presence of the incoming weapons on their radiation-blinded sensors before the Ion Torpedoes struck; blue sparks cascaded across the hull, shorting out power conduits to weapons emplacements and blowing out the external lights. The Proton Torpedoes followed, carving deep rents in the hull and severing the starboard sublight engine; burning madly, the Light Cruiser fell out of formation and was slowly dragged into the blood-red clouds of the gas giant.

[We have incoming, boss!]

There they were. A group of six TIE Phantoms leading two dozen more standard TIE models; the Imperial-I generally carried a whole wing, which meant the craft they'd ambushed earlier in the asteroid field had likely been from this vessel and had not been replaced. It was three against one, but Firebird had faced tougher odds and come out on top in the past.

“Break by pairs, take the Phantoms first. Hermes, you have the Cruiser.”

[Copy that, Firebird. Good luck!]

Stryker and Ricaud broke to starboard and climbed relative to the planet while Jade and Jedgar passed beneath the burning cruiser to attack from below. Their craft not designed for Starfighter combat, Cook and Turel stayed back to guard the Hermes against opportunistic attacks from the demi-wing of fighters arrayed against them. The Phantoms had cloaked, leaving only the standard TIEs to face off against four of Firebird's best pilots; with forward shields reinforced, the X-Wings shrugged off the long-range fire as the closure rate increased, the same could not be said for the fragile TIEs; a constant spray of fire from the four X-Wings reduced over half a dozen of them to

scrap; some destroyed outright while several more span out of control trailing debris and vital gases. The survivors continued in against the Hermes only to meet the wrath of Cook's rotary cannons and the turrets and mines deployed by Turel's Y-Wing. With the line fighters scattering, Stryker and Ricaud went after the first decloaking Phantom, only to be separated as a second Phantom appeared between them, laser cannons firing wildly. Firing his reverse thrusters, Stryker looked up as the Phantom zoomed overhead and began to cloak, straight into the line of Stryker's laser-fire; the dagger-like craft did not explode, but went into a wild spin into the void shedding hull plating and internal components.

[Need some help, here!]

Ricaud was in trouble, that first Phantom had somehow turned the tables on him and was now flanked by a pair of Interceptors that were nibbling away at the X-Wing's rear shields. Ricaud's port upper engine exploded under the combined attack, the S-Foil spinning off into space as the X-Wing burst into flames and tried to roll away from its attackers. Gritting his teeth, Stryker rolled in behind the trio and expertly dispatched the two Interceptors with quad-linked laser blasts as the Phantom overhauled Ricaud's crippled X-Wing and pivoted one hundred and eighty degrees, unleashing five cannons' worth of laser fire on Stryker.

Cursing loudly, Stryker rolled hard to port, then to starboard, firing his reverse thrusters but was otherwise unable to shake the Phantom that was now latched onto his tail; he had allowed himself to be baited by Ricaud's plight and now was going to meet a similar fate unless he did something clever; the Phantom was faster and more agile, and if he scored a direct hit, would blast through the X-Wing's rear shields as though they didn't even exist. The others all had their hands full, by the sounds of things, so he was alone and was going to have to think fast and get creative if he was to survive this ordeal.

Putting his discretionary power into his engines, Stryker heard the warning beeps indicating that the engine cores were rapidly approaching their maximum rated temperature, and aimed his X-Wing at the Star Destroyer; the larger ship would offer him cover in the forms of sensor antennae and cannon turrets, and would also throw off the Phantom's sensors with its bulk. Of course, he'd have to survive long enough to make it to the hull surface, first.

"Hold on to something Sparky, we're going in!"

Skimming the Star Destroyer's surface, Stryker took pot-shots at turrets with his cannons as he passed, sweeping from side-to-side in order to disrupt the enemy's aim as much as possible. Predictably, the Phantom was riding his tail, putting a linked blast into the X-Wing that stripped its shields at the same moment one of the Destroyer's cannons grazed the Phantom and once again evened the odds. The Command Tower was approaching rapidly, and Stryker knew he'd have to break off or go around; both options presenting him with an easy target.

Or I could thread the needle...

Pulling hard back on the stick, Stryker zoomed into a climb that would take him over the top of the tower before rolling inverted and opening fire on the shield domes, the first one burst like an egg while the second vented smoke and screened Stryker's fighter as he closed his S-Foils and slipped through the gap between the Bridge and the Tractor Beam scanners. Throttling back, Stryker

coasted through the gap and watched with a predatory grin as the Phantom raced overhead; opening his S-Foils, he put a single quad-linked burst into the area where fighter's dorsal fin met the hull. The engines belched smoke as the fin tore free, and Stryker watched the formerly razor-like craft suddenly become ungainly with the handling characteristics of a sleeping Bantha; it continued to accelerate towards the planet, slamming into the second Arquitens just fore of the engine compartments, the explosion tearing the smaller cruiser in two.

"Firebird one to Hermes, the Destroyer is all yours. Firebird Nine, feel free to help."

It didn't take long; the Destroyer's overworked and poorly-maintained reactor could not keep up with the strain and breached, the sixteen-hundred metre craft vanished in a starburst that left afterimages on retinas for days. With Ricaud's fighter recovered, the Hermes licked its new wounds and began the journey back towards the Challenge – their mission technically a failure, but an enemy of the Emperor's Hammer defeated nonetheless.

However, the question remained; who were these people? And what were they doing out here?