

A Challenge In Need Is A Challenge Indeed

Competition Submission by Colonel Stryker (3582 words)

Phase 1: Protect the Challenge

Stryker swore under his breath as the Supafighter in his sights suddenly broke hard to starboard in an arc that was well inside what a T-65 could manage. The faster T-70 was similarly unable to manage such a tight turn without a quick tap on the reverse thrusters which would cost him vital speed, and Stryker instead opted to loop up and over to once again settle on the slower ship's rear. With the original 'Stryker Special' undergoing routine maintenance when the alert signal had gone out, Stryker had opted to appropriate the T-70 for its first live-fire exercise and was increasingly impressed with how it handled – the mock dogfights he had engaged in earlier had shown its potential, but only now was it living up to its reputation.

Diving on his target, Stryker nudged the rudder pedals to get a better deflection shot before squeezing the trigger; the T-70's new KX12 cannons cycled quicker than the KX9s of his T-65, and thanks to more efficient power distribution, recharged faster as well. The pirate vessel simply evaporated under the constant fire, and Stryker allowed himself a quick roll as he passed through the expanding ball of flame and debris. The ship vibrated a little as small pieces of debris bounced off of the fuselage, chipping away the standard Republic-grey paint, but Stryker paid it no mind – the wing and fuselage trim had been painted orange to signify its temporary allegiance to Firebird, but there was no reason applying a more artistic scheme to a ship that might soon be back on its way to the *Avenger*.

Swooping back in to cover the Wing Commander, Stryker formed up on the wing of Denys' Avenger. With Golf and SkyHigh both missing, presumed dead, Woody had been loaned to Flight 2 to act as Jedgar's wingman, meaning Flight 1 was down to three pilots. Rather than complicate matters, Stryker had kept La'an and Ricaud as a pair and assigned himself as a "floater", assisting wherever he was needed; right now, the wingman-less Wing Commander was where that need was greatest. Denys was good, but her fighter's condition matched that of the rest of the *Challenge's* complement of craft; in dire need of a refit or replacement, and a stone's throw from falling apart at the seams.

In the condition we're in, it's no wonder the pirates are racking up the kills against us...

Bitterly, Stryker followed Denys in a bank to attack another cluster of Supafighters making a run on the *Challenge's* Shield Generators; Rapier's mission to the Unknown Regions was claiming lives and for what? They were losing people and equipment at an alarming rate, all because someone had allegedly received a mysterious call through The Force? Though he would never openly discuss it for fear or drawing unwanted attention to his peers and squadron-mates, he knew others felt the same aboard the *Challenge* and wondered whether the seemingly endless pirate forces and conspicuous absence of reinforcements meant this was some kind of test to weed out the unworthy.

There was no time to dwell on that now, of course, as a trio of pirate T-Wings took advantage of his distraction to latch onto his tail. Bolts of scarlet laserfire slashed in at his rear shields, prompting an alarmed squeal from Sparky that his communications array had shorted out. Chopping his throttle down to zero, Stryker triggered his reverse thrusters and rolled ninety degrees to port, forcing two of the three to overshoot. The third ship simply climbed sharply, rolled out, and slashed in on his tail

once again in a mirror of Stryker's own manoeuvre against the Supafighter minutes earlier. Unable to focus on the ships ahead of him boring in on Denys' Avenger and out of range of any worthwhile support, Stryker had to first counter the nimble interceptor that was intent on killing him. The smaller ship matched him manoeuvre for manoeuvre, and Stryker managed (barely) to keep his vulnerable rear out of the T-Wing's sights; the pilot following him was **very** good, and Stryker knew that had he been in his usual ship, he'd likely already be a scattered mess of free-floating atoms. This wasn't his normal ship, however, and it had a trick up its sleeve; with his thumb, Stryker flipped the weapons toggle away from lasers and down to the retractable cannon mounted in the T-70's fuselage, and watched with some satisfaction as the automatic tracking system engaged and blaster bolts began splashing on the T-Wing's forward shields. Briefly surprised by the sudden appearance of a defensive turret, the T-Wing jerked away, allowing Stryker to 'drift' the T-70 in a turn that brought the nimble craft into his line of sight and blasted it into scrap with a quad-linked burst from his cannons.

Throttling back to the T-70's rated maximum speed, which Sparky had already improved upon through a few choice modifications to the fuel injectors, Stryker quickly caught up with Denys and her two pursuers. One of them was limping away minus an engine but the second appeared to be locked in a death-spiral with the Lieutenant Colonel's Avenger, one that the Imperial craft was losing ground on. Using a piece of debris as cover from the T-Wing's sensors, Stryker pounced on the T-Wing as it finally turned inside the Avenger and lined up a shot; his lasers chewed through the T-Wing which just seemed to disintegrate rather than explode. A cheerful beep from behind him informed him that the communications array was functioning again, and a quick check of the sensor board told him that the remaining Supafighters had been driven off or destroyed.

The *Challenge* was safe for now, but unless the cruisers and Victory Star Destroyer were knocked out, that was not going to last...

Part 2: Standoff

The results of a wing-wide check-in were grim; of the seventy-three fighters carried aboard the *Challenge*, less than half remained combat effective; pilots were exhausted, power cells were depleted, fuel was low and almost all ordnance capable of putting a dent in a capital ship had been expended. Fortunately, the pirates seemed to be having their own logistical issues; with the Supafighter attack turned back, they would be forced to rely on older and slower ships to carry out their next assault if they decided to continue to follow the strategy they'd adopted at the start of the battle.

Stryker looked out at the ragged remnants of his squadron; several of the craft were damaged, but all were still functional. Woody's X-Wing was missing an S-Foil and the attached S-Foil, Turel was down an engine but his Astromech was reportedly close to bringing it back online, Travis' Y-Wing was missing its Ion Cannon Turret, and NiksaVel's Astromech was headless and sparking away. Eagle Squadron were in a similar situation with three X-Wings were damaged but still flyable and only Talon Jade's craft crippled beyond repair, with Commander Djinn's communications damaged, command now fell to Horus Blackheart which would either make or break the squadron if any of them lived long enough to file an after-action report. Even with that damage, they'd gotten away better than Inferno, which had suffered close to fifty percent effective losses, but fortunately none killed. Tempest had come through without any major casualties but their Missile Boats were out of ordnance and were more of a hindrance than a help in a dogfight. Cyclone Squadron had borne the brunt of the casualties, however, their headlong charge into the guns of the enemy had damaged one of the heavies but had come at a cost – their Missile Boats and their TIE Avenger escorts had been gunned down by precise counter-fire, including their CMDR and SQXO, with the few survivors being shepherded home by the Defenders.

Things looked bleak for the haggard defenders of the *Challenge*, they would have to hope that Thunder's stealth mission to locate reinforcements and direct them to the battle site would prove effective – three dozen Starfighters and a crippled Star Destroyer would not last long against the forces arrayed against them, obviously part of some paramilitary group rather than the pirates they had first been identified as. The failings of the so-called New Republic were once again exposed, their hypocrisy and laissez-faire attitude had allowed such factions to spring up in the areas that the New Republic had no interest in, and good men and women were dying because of their arrogance.

[What's the play, boss?]

Rolling his neck and feeling something pop, Stryker grunted as he keyed his comm. back to the private channel he shared with his Flight Leaders to answer Travis' question.

"We wait and see; we can't mount another all-out attack, so we play the defensive game and hope they get tired I guess."

[Why aren't they coming at us?]

That, Stryker conceded, was a **very** good question – the *Challenge* was a sitting duck, she had teeth but not the power to effectively use them, so why were the pirates just sitting there? Had the bombers done more damage than they'd first assumed? Was there some kind of command and control concern that they weren't aware of? Or were they just being overly cautious?

“I don’t know, perhaps they think we’re bait for a trap? Not every day you catch a Star Destroyer with its pants down...”

That much was true; the rest of the Battlegroup was missing, nobody knew where it had gone, and it hadn’t exactly rushed to their aid when it had been called for. Stryker’s uneasy feeling that they’d been abandoned because of some perceived slight against the Grand Admiral was getting worse, festering in the pit of his stomach. If this was a test, it had been taken too far, and if it wasn’t – someone had screwed up in a manner not seen since the Death Star had been launched with a vulnerable weak spot.

Someone would have to die, if that were the case...

[We’ve got movement; looks like the heavies are coming in to play.]

It was true, the heavy cruisers were slowly moving into formation to close with the *Challenge* from her vulnerable rear quarters with the *Victory* close behind. Alerted to the danger, the TIE Reapers of Gust Squadron finished dispensing tactical shield generators and repair droids and withdrew once again to the safety of the *Challenge’s* hangars. There hadn’t been time for the utility craft of the Storm Clouds to launch their resupply craft, so the remnants of Wing X would be forced to engage with whatever fuel and ammunition they had remaining.

The outlook was bleak, the possibilities of success were minimal, but going out in a blaze of glory seemed apt for a squadron with the name Firebird...

Part 3: The Last Stand

Stryker swore loudly as debris from a TIE Interceptor, he assumed one of Inferno's, bounced off of the T-70's port-upper S-Foil and battered down what was left of his shields. Behind him, the *Challenge* fought like a wounded Rancor – her shield generators aflame, forward superstructure holed in a dozen places, and what was left of her weapons screamed ineffectual defiance at the Victory as it bored in for the kill.

Though she was dying, the *Challenge* and her pilots refused to die alone; the lead heavy cruiser was a burning wreck, victim of a lucky shot that pierced a seam in its shields and cored it from bow to stern. The second cruiser was having difficulty manoeuvring thanks to damage to its engines, but the third had positioned itself squarely in the blind spot behind the *Challenge's* command tower and was doing considerable damage to the larger ship's engines. The Victory, smelling blood, was circling the crippled *Challenge* like a shark, raking her from bow to stern with Turbolaser and Ion Cannon fire. Sporadic bursts of Concussion Missiles tore through any Starfighters attempting to get close, leaving the aging cruiser virtually untouched and free to rain death and destruction down upon the once-noble Star Destroyer.

Banking to starboard, Stryker raked a passing TIE Bomber with fire, shearing it in two as he pounced on a flight of T-Wings making a run at one of the *Challenge's* remaining turrets with his cannons blazing as fast as they could cycle. Sparky hooted a warning that the cannons were overheating, but he tuned the little droid out; he would willingly melt the cannons and ram the first target of opportunity if it was what it would take to keep his friends and comrades alive, though deep down he knew that the day would not be theirs – their sacrifice, the heroic effort against the odds, would be forgotten and the *Challenge* would go down in history as the Star Destroyer ambushed and overwhelmed by bandits.

[The Bridge is gone! Repeat, the Bridge is gone!]

Stryker abandoned his pursuit of the remaining crippled T-Wing and reversed course, to see a crater spewing flame where the *Challenge's* Command Bridge had once been. A wave of searing anger washed over him as he mentally tallied up the dead, over three dozen, including the *Challenge's* Captain and High Admiral Dempsey – he and Dempsey had never been all that close, but they had understood and respected each other. With her death and the withdrawal of Denys' fighter due to battle damage, command of the Wing fell to Silwar Naillo in Tempest One; except nobody had heard from him since he'd taken what was left of his people in an attack run on the third cruiser. That meant Stryker was nominally in charge, at least until Naillo reappeared, but the Wing was now just a mass of disparate classes of fighters vainly fighting for survival – there wasn't anything to command...

Sparky howled as laserfire chewed into his fighter's aft section, tearing chunks of ferrosphere paint coating and ridding the T-70 of its remaining advantage against hostile missile locks. Hauling back on the controls, Stryker reversed the nimble craft in a flick-roll around one of the *Challenge's* remaining turbolaser turrets and zeroed in on the craft attacking him – it was an Assault Shuttle; one of twelve he could see on sensors, full of boarding troops, and it had decided that he was of particular worth. Now able to see him properly on sensors, the Assault Shuttle switched to its turret-mounted ion cannons in an attempt to disable the valuable starfighter even as its friends went after what was left

of the *Challenge*; with the ship in the state it was, the crew would be hard-pressed to mount a worthwhile defence and if Auxiliary Control was taken, they'd probably just open all of the airlocks and space whoever was left. That could not be allowed to happen.

"Firebird One to all remaining craft, target the Assault Shuttles. We can't let even one of these bastards set foot in our home."

There were fewer acknowledgements than he'd have liked, but almost as one the fighters that were able turned on the Assault Shuttles. The larger craft were tough customers when taken one-on-one, but under concentrated fire they were little more than turreted coffins, and the first one fell quite quickly. The second and third were tougher prospects, flying in formation and using their overlapping fields of fire to inflict a heavy price on what was left of Inferno Squadron despite the heroic efforts of Colonel Marenta in their sole remaining TIE Reaper, launching tactical shields and repair droids as fast as her wounded ship could cycle its launchers. It was Lieutenant Commander WoofWolffe who broke through the weapons-fire first, delivering a fatal blow to the trailing Assault Shuttle before being disabled by the leader. NiksaVel and Travis nailed the second one; NiksaVel's turret ion cannon disabling the craft before Travis' rotary cannon literally ripped it in two.

The *Challenge* gunners claimed two craft of their own before the remaining turrets were silenced by cannon-fire, the majestic ship now drifting listlessly through space bleeding debris and precious oxygen through a dozen or more hull breaches. The battle was lost, that much was obvious; what fighters he had left were no match for the cruisers the enemy had brought to the battle, but retreat was no longer an option – Inferno's ships didn't have hyperdrives, and the craft that did were all damaged to a point where they'd not get far anyway. They would simply have to hold on until the end.

"My friends, we might not have been able to save the *Challenge*, but we can make sure she doesn't die unavenged. It's been an honour serving with you all."

[I wouldn't count us out just yet, Colonel!]

Part 4: Reinforcements!

The voice was familiar, but it took Stryker a moment to process it, and reflexively flinched as cruiser-grade turbolaser fire flashed above his canopy and vaporised the Assault Shuttle closing with his ship. Wheeling about, Stryker whooped for joy – the twelve TIE Phantoms of Thunder Squadron led the remainder of Battlegroup 3 into the battle; the twelve Reapers of Gust Squadron deploying tactical shields and repair droids to all who needed them, while the Raider-class Corvettes of Lightning and Blizzard Groups surrounded the stricken *Challenge* and blazed away at any small craft brave enough to close with them.

It was the larger ships that had the greatest contribution, though; led by the *Hermes*, six cruiser-grade ships opened fire simultaneously on the Victory-class ship's weakened rear shields. Sustained turbolaser, ion cannon, concussion missile and proton torpedo collapsed the shields in seconds and began to eat away at the Star Destroyer's engines, which spat flame and debris with every critical hit.

The two heavy cruisers tried to intervene, to protect their flagship, but the remaining *Challenge* fighters swarmed them, distracting their gunners and picking off turrets even as the demi-squadrons from the five Arquitens-class Light Cruisers attacked their engines and command and control centres. Even as the Victory went up in a flash of white light, the result of a catastrophic reactor breach, the ships kept firing into the cruisers. At one point, it even looked as though one was about to surrender before a turbolaser blast from the *Thunderchild* destroyed the bridge and sent it reeling out of control. No order had been given, but too many lives had been lost for mercy to be shown, though to the credit of those mourning lost comrades; disabled craft and escape pods were left alone. There was still honour among the grieving pilots, although the pirates may have later wished for a swift death than incarceration.

Stryker rallied the remaining craft once again and withdrew them to the edges of the engagement to prevent any of the smaller craft from attempting an escape or a sneak attack on the Interdictor *Fairchild*, and conserve what little fuel and power they had left. Some pilots protested, but few were in a position to argue when the X-Wings of both Firebird **and** Eagle Squadron assumed a "protective" cordon around the rest of the craft – the threat was implied rather than expressly stated, but there was little mention of returning to the battle.

After what seemed like an eternity, but had probably only been an hour or two of hard fighting, it was suddenly over. Space was littered with the detritus of a space battle, and the Search-and-Rescue craft went to their business; most of the pilots who had seen their craft disabled had survived, and there were several lucky souls snatched from the cold vacuum of space whose life support gear had worked as intended; Colonel Naiilo among them. As the remaining craft recovered to whatever ship had the hangar space to house them, there was a growing feeling of unease – could the *Challenge* be salvaged? What would happen to the survivors? As pilots came off their combat highs, the grief began to hit, as did the anger. Whoever had orchestrated this would pay, dearly.

Conclusion:

The *Challenge* would fly again, the damage to her superstructure less serious than had initially been believed. Her Bridge would require extensive repairs, but Auxiliary Control remained untouched, so she was still able to make way under control of her crew. Of the ten thousand or so crew aboard, over a thousand were dead or missing – a drop in the ocean in the days of the Galactic Empire, but a significant loss for the much smaller Emperor's Hammer. The dead were no longer the faceless backbone of the Imperial Navy, they were husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, and they had died for what? Some kind of test? A freak accident? The anger and grief only continued to grow as speculation about what caused the ambush spread; had Dempsey been incompetent? Had someone betrayed them? These were questions that the survivors knew they might never know the answer to.

The good news was that the High Admiral herself would recover; the Captain had pushed her out of the Bridge before the torpedoes hit, sacrificing himself to save his Admiral. She would be confined to quarters for a week or so to recuperate, which left the Battlegroup effectively under the command of the *Fairchild's* captain until then, but she would return.

A memorial service would be held for those who had lost their lives in the service to the *Challenge*, but that would not give the closure the pilots and crew wanted. They would find the identities of those who orchestrated of this travesty, then they would hunt them down, and finally they would kill them...