

From Dawn till Dusk

"It's 3AM in the morning. While most people still sleep, one Branch of service here on Nexus is just beginning its workday. Please join me, Kimberly Flowers, for Nexus Night News' in-depth look at a day in the operational life of Flight Operations as we follow the men and women of the 13th Fighter Squadron."

As Kim finished her last sentence, as if on cue, a fighter took off behind her and the obligatory jingle played as the words: "***From Dawn till Dusk***" faded out of the screen.

"While most of us have little if any interaction with the fighters stationed here, they do form an integral component of Nexus' offensive and defensive capabilities. It all begins in what for most of us is the middle of the night when the first shift of ground personnel reports for duty. Master Chief Petty Officer Roberta Penske is the Chief Ground Technician for the 13th Squadron."

"Some say we're crazy for getting up this early, working this long, and doing all kinds of things so that the glamour boys and girls in the cockpits can take all the glory. But the truth is that every one of us is part of a team that includes the pilots and their craft. If one of us doesn't do our jobs, people die. It's just that simple. And it quickly teaches you responsibility."

"By three-thirty," Kim's narration continued as the scene changed to one of Roberta lecturing her charges on some point or the other, "*the day's first staff briefing is conducted. While it mainly concerns fighter maintenance and repair schedules and thus is not mandatory for pilots or tactical officers to attend, it is not uncommon to have a few show up. Today Ensign Hussan 'Cowboy' Farina joins the briefing.*"

"Well, ma'am," Cowboy began to the assembled techs, "our drills yesterday yielded some data that seems to indicate the need for some recalibration in the target acquisition package of birds three, seven, and nine. If y'all could please run diagnostics and recalibrations, we'd mightily appreciate it."

"Let's see," started Roberta as she consulted her datapadd. "We got sensor diagnostics scheduled on three and seven, so no problem there. I'll move nine up in the queue as long as she's not scheduled for flight duty between 0900 and 1100. How's that?"

"Ah'll down check the bird for the remainder of the morning, ma'am," Cowboy replied as he noted the entry in his datapadd.

"Good. Sashi, Blair? Can you take care of this or do I need to assign anyone else? I think Gene is free at that time, no?" Noting that Sashi indicated that she and Blair could take of it, Roberta moved on to the next item...

"After the briefing concludes, the maintenance personnel begin their busy work day. Pilots and tactical officers are not due to report until 5AM, so Ensign Farina takes the extra hour to work out in one of the gym facilities on the Flight Deck where he is joined by several other early risers," Kim informed the audience as the picture changed from the briefing room to the gym.

"No pain, no gain, y'all," Cowboy chided his fellow officers as he continued to lift weights.

"Easy for you to say, weight-boy," Tactical Officer Ensign Brett "RoughRider" Dallenbach answered him from the boxing ring. "You don't have to spar with.... *Ow!*"

As Brett hit the canvas, his diminutive opponent finished the sentence for him.

"... the academy feather weight boxing champion three years running and don't you forget it!" Pilot Ensign Desiree "Ravyn" MacRae proudly proclaimed.

"Floats like a butterfly and stings like a... err..." tactical officer Rusty "Flyer" Shephard interjected from the treadmill.

"*Bee!*" shouted RoughRider as he rubbed his jaw. "For gosh sakes, Flyer. Don't you remember anything?"

"But Ravyn's too pretty to be an ugly old bee," Flyer began defensively as a collective groan arose from the around the gym.

"Such good natured teasing," Kim narrates as the scene plays out, *"is part of the camaraderie of being a pilot."*

"If the Old Man puts me on report for the shiner you gave me," RoughRider declared to a smiling Ravyn, "I'm taking you down with me."

Rather than answer him, Ravyn grinned as she flicked her towel in his direction.

"The 'Old Man' in question is the Director of Flight Operations who is in charge of all fighter activity aboard Nexus. Our Station Commander, Captain Kyle D. Argent, a pilot of some renown as well as this years winner of the

prestigious Rigel Cup is currently occupying the position. I asked Captain Argent about the internal structure of the Flight Branch."

"The Flight Branch currently has one division that we call the Grandmasters, named after the highest position one can achieve in chess. In fact, you'll notice that all the nicknames of the Grandmasters' wings and squadrons use chess as a theme. Currently, the division has three wings: the 425th also known as the Knights, the 206th also known as the Bishops, and the 503rd also known as the Rooks. Each wing, in turn has four squadrons. Each of the squadrons is named after a color: black, silver, blue and gold. As an example, the 425th Wing is comprised of the Black Knights also known as the 13th Squadron; the Silver Knights also known as the 18th Squadron; the 24th Squadron also known as the Blue Knights and the 73rd Squadron also known as the Gold Knights. Please note, however, that in official reports we don't use the nicknames. They are for internal use only. Lastly, each pilot and tactical officer usually has his 'call sign', a nickname of sorts assigned by one's peers usually to denote some accomplishment or achievement."

"At 5AM, the remaining pilots and tactical officers file into the locker room and suit up for their duty cycle. Currently, there are some 250 pilots and tactical officers assigned to Nexus. Some sixty of them are on duty at any given time with another 60 on standby and 60 more on stand down. Nexus is capable of berthing many times more pilots and craft but, as our current political climate is one of relative peace, the complement has been optimized for standard defensive and support duties. At 530AM, the Director of Flight Operations conducts the first major briefing of the day. Roughly 150 pilots and tactical officers attend this morning briefing including most of the officers who have just having come off shift and several on standby."

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," Captain Argent began, "Commander Lysander and I have reviewed the tactical data from yesterday's exercises and have compiled some notes that we would like you to review before this morning's initial engagement. Please note that Commander Lysander and I will be flying lead aggressor today and we expect you to give us your very best. In other notes, Fighter Nine of the 13th has been downchecked for the remainder of the morning. So please adjust your flight itineraries accordingly. Now for the particulars of today's exercise, Commander Lysander will out line that for you."

"Lars 'Viking' Lysander currently wears several hats," Kim narrated as the audience watched Lars move to the podium. "He is the Deputy Director of Flight Operations as well as the Wing Commander for the 425th Flight Wing. Nexus has three flight wings with four squadrons and each squadron consists of 10 pilots and 10 tactical officers. The briefing he is conducting concerns the three squadrons that are currently on duty shift. Officers from other units generally

sit in on such briefings to ensure continuity of information between all the wings and squadrons."

"Today's exercise is a pretty straight forward cap ship interdiction. Elements of the 13th and 49th squadrons will intercept the freighter *Wyvern* at point 823 by 76 by 543. *Wyvern's* IFF signature reports it to be a Tellarite freighter two days out of a mining colony on Rigel XII. However, we have grounds to suspect that this data may not be accurate. Visual reconnaissance and sensor data will be required for you to complete your primary objectives. Should the freighter exhibit any hostile intentions, elements of the 86th will stand ready to reinforce. Your secondary objectives are to track down and eliminate a cloaked orbital platform suspected of smuggling activities. To this end, you will be outfitted with high yield warheads and improved recon gear. Any questions?"

"Any intel on the smuggling station, Comm'der," Cowboy piped up.

"We suspect it is located in geosync over the Southern Hemisphere of Arktura which would explain why our station sensors have had little luck tracking it. As with most smuggling outfits, we suspect there are no defensive capabilities *per se* but do exercise caution. Full peacetime rules of engagement are in effect and therefore any and all effort should be made for the inhabitants of the platform to surrender before any shots are fired. Anything else?"

"What do we do with the freighter if we suspect something fishy?" Ravyn asked while busily taking notes.

"Encrypt and send a signal back to the station and they will dispatch a couple of gunboats to take her in. Do not engage her yourself unless fired upon first. Understood?" Commander Lysander replied as his eyes swept as he noted a sea of nodding heads.

"Very well. That concludes this morning's briefing. Don't forget to have your preflight physicals done and as always, exercise caution out there. Dismissed!"

The scene from the briefing room dissolved into that of the hangar deck.

"By 615AM, four fighters each from the two participating squadrons form up and launch in rapid succession," Kim continued her narration. "Current security regulations prohibit us from showing any fighter footage from the exercise itself. After an hour, the first units to return to station do so quietly and somberly. They were eliminated from the exercise and now begin the process of analyzing what went wrong."

The scene shifted from the landing fighters to a pair of officers standing dejectedly next to their landed craft.

Ensign Brett "RoughRider" Dallenbach stated with a tinge of disgust in his voice. "The Wyvern certainly wasn't any ordinary freighter out there! As soon as we scanned him, hatches kept popping off everything and disruptor emplacements started cutting loose on us. Damn Q-ship."

Pilot Ensign Desiree "Ravyn" MacRae added to that of her tactical officer. "In the end, one of us cut lose with one of those big asteroid shakers on him and he stood his weapons down. But not before smoking two of us. God only knows what that orbital platform would have had in store for us."

"By 830AM," Kim's narration continued as the scene shifted to the Command and Control Center, *"the preliminary data from the search and destroy fighters in orbit -- known as Mobile 1 -- is relayed to the Command and Control Center -- C&C -- which oversees the Flight Deck and coordinates such activities with the Station Command Center or S-C-C. The SCC comprises the Station Commander, Station Executive Officer, Station Chief of Operations and their support staff."*

"Looks like they've got a bead on 'em," one tech replied to the other seated before the Command and Control Center's main console.

"Yep," he replied to his partner, then flicked the link open to their fighters in the field. "Mobile 1, this is home base, we've got some readings for you to check out. Move to grid point 86 by 23 by 76. There's some definite distortion in that area -- possibly a cloaking device."

"Roger that," replied the pilot over the link.

"But within minutes, the exercise that was presented as being so routine turns more serious."

"We've got missile fire! Repeat! Positive missile launch and lock from unidentified bogie," a pilot from Mobile 1 blared over his comlink to the C&C.

"The sudden act of hostility sets the Command and Control Center ablaze with activity. Orders are issued. Intelligence and data are demanded. Reinforcements are committed. A sudden sense of panic is almost instantly muted by the cool professionalism of the officers in charge."

"Mobile 1, you have permission to engage hostile object. Repeat, you have permission to engage," the Flight Officer in Charge ordered his fighters in the field.

"Roger that!... Damn, they got Cowboy!" one pilot shouted over the C&C comlink.

"Cover me boys," shouted another pilot. "I'm going in!"

"Within seconds, the crisis that had so suddenly burst forth is concluded with a definitive strike by the fighter crafts heavy armament."

"Ye-es! We smoked that puppy!" shouted a tech in Command and Control with glee as several officers exchanged high fives.

"With the objectives of their exercise complete, the remaining craft begin their return to station. Ensign Hassan Farina, call sign Cowboy, who was 'eliminated' during the raid on the smuggler's platform, is one of the first to land. After nearly three hours in the cockpit under the tensest of circumstances, it is not unusual to see a pilot be physically drained in much the way Ensign Farina appears here."

The scene dissolved to one of Cowboy wearily sitting next to the landing gear of his fighter craft, alternately hanging his head or leaning back.

"It's not really the physical exhaustion that gets to you. For that you can train, work out, stuff like that. But ah just really died out there and that's not the first time either. You just gotta hope that when the real thing comes our way, you're prepared. Looks like more sim time for me tonight. Dangit!"

"But even as Cowboy tiredly begins reflecting on his situation, alert klaxons begin sounding around us."

"What the sam hell?" Cowboy shouted as he stood up.

"Several of the maintenance personnel begin clustering around the nearest terminal to get the latest updates from Command and Control Center."

"What's up?" Cowboy asked them as he had rushed over.

"Company. Looks like that freighter you guys disabled got off a message. Look what warped in," Roberta Penske, Chief Maintenance Tech of the 13th Squadron replied. "Looks like an old D7 cap ship and several fighters of unspecified origin. They've knocked out the gunboats we sent out to tow the freighter back to the station. Now, the enemy D7 is going to tow the crippled freighter back to enemy base I presume. *Wait!* C&C just ordered the 86th's incoming fighters to intercept with the 13th and 49th already in the theatre to

assist and augment. *Damn!* Some of our guys look pretty chewed up. They sure as hell shouldn't be committed to a iron-bomb raid like this."

"As the various technicians take their assigned duty stations and the last of the relief elements launch, both pilot and technician alike remain glued to the tactical displays watching as their comrades one by one are seemingly decimated by the opposing force. Finally, one of them manages to break through and drop a heavy passive guidance missile into the attacking capital ship. The weapon, which is designed to pound heavily reinforced and shielded ground installations, buckles the D7's shields almost immediately. But, by this time, the enemy's defending force has been so sufficiently devastated that any sort of counteroffensive is impossible. Rather than face the incoming reinforcements and possibly risk losing everything, the raiding party decides to sever its tractor tow of the crippled freighter and withdraw from the system. The parameters of the exercise have been fulfilled and the alert status is stood down. A general recall is issued and within several minutes, fighters begin landing in force back on Nexus."

With the landing fighters as a backdrop, Kim continues her narration.

"At 945AM, the elements recently engaged in this combat exercise gather for their initial debriefing. There will be several more over the next few hours, with a complete tactical analysis to follow the next day. Captain Argent, who flew one of the 'unspecified fighter craft', conducts the debrief personally."

"Your objective," Captain Argent began back in the briefing room, still clad in his flight suit, "was to investigate and secure a suspicious freighter which turned out to be a Q-ship of some kind, bristling with latest spec Klingon disruptor emplacements. Despite the element of surprise and superior weaponry, you were able to disable the ship with a loss rate of 25%. By the way, Dallenbach, according to our analysis, you survived the engagement. The second target, the orbital smuggling platform turned out to be much more heavily armed than initially thought with photon missile emplacements and military grade shielding. Hawthorne led the strike against the platform that thankfully, was successful. Farina, however, was ruled a casualty."

Captain Argent paused to check his notes, then continued. "All and all, this was a good performance in an exceptionally difficult situation as your objects and targets changed from moment to moment. Your teams, nevertheless, adapted to the situation with poise and alert readiness to successfully conclude the mission objectives. However, according to station records, the crippled freighter, upon monitoring the destruction of the smuggling platform, sent out a general distress signal. This was almost instantaneously answered by a small enemy task force consisting of a pre-refit D7 capital ship, which leads us to believe that the elements involved were not

connected to the Klingon Empire in any way, shape, or form along with several fighters. Current intel has it that the bogies may have been Luzon pirates, which would explain the presence of what we were later able to identify as Orion Sunburst-class fighters. The enemy task force managed to drive off the two gunboats dispatched to tow in the Q-ship and since they were closest, the ships of Mobile 1 diverted to intercept the task force ASAP. Commander Lysander and I quickly dispatched half of your intercepting force, however, our luck failed us when Petillo managed to sneak in and drop one of the heavy bombs on our capital ship."

Argent paused to allow them to slap 13th Squadron Pilot Ltjg Payat "Raider" Petillo on the back. Once they settled down, Captain Argent continued.

"With the safety of our capital ship compromised and your relief force incoming, we decided to make a tactical withdrawal leaving behind the Q-ship but preserving the far more expensive Klingon D7 Capital Ship. In the end, out of a total force of eight fighters, six were ruled casualties with a seventh probably beyond repair. A total of ten pilots and tactical officers were ruled KIA with one MIA. In general, Mobile 1 completed all the requirements of mission with the Q-ship now in our custody and conclusive proof of a strong smuggling presence in our system. However, the high casualty rate to me personally is unacceptable."

Captain Argent snapped off his datapadd and faced his officers straight on. "This certainly is an extreme test of what may be demanded of you in a time of battle, but the more capable you are of coordinating and staging such an attack now, the more likely you are to turn it away in a hot situation. I expect everyone to follow up this exercise with sufficient sim time to analyze the mission and their participation therein in detail for tomorrow's tactical analysis briefing. Until then, you are dismissed. Now, go hit the showers. Your BO is stinking up the joint!"

"By the time the morning shift is in the showers," Kim narrated as Captain Argent left the podium with LtCdr Lysander and a new face taking his place, "a new shift is about to go on duty and another duty briefing is conducted. Lieutenant Commander Lysander and the Wing Commander of the 206th Flight Wing, Lieutenant Commander Kavindra Courage, will conduct the briefing. Another exercise is outlined and implemented, just as a third one will be implemented during the third duty shift later that day. In the meantime, after a quick lunch in the mess hall, the members of the 13th's first shift who are now on standby duty, proceeds to study and analyze their actions from earlier this day."

"Yeah, look at that! I closed in too fast and left Cowboy wide open. Sorry about that bud," 13th Squadron Pilot Ltjg Payat "Raider" Petillo apologetically told Cowboy.

"But in the end, you ironbombed that D7. That was mad-dog crazy shit, ole buddy. Absolutely mad-dog crazy!" replied a smiling Cowboy.

"But, he also took himself out in the process. How could we have gotten through the situation without having to resort to suicide bombing?" Squadron Commander LtCdr Kieran "Blackie" Hawthorne asked his 13th Squadron.

"How many bombs did you guys have left when you went to intercept?" Ravyn asked.

"Blackie and Raider had one left each," answered Flyer.

"Then, ah would have just lobbed 'em into the general vicinity of the ship on a delayed action fuse and turned around and be somewhere else when they'all went up," Cowboy declared.

"Yeah, I like that thought. A bit unconventional and chances are, we wouldn't have hurt the D7 that badly, but it would have bought us some time," RoughRider tossed out.

"The officers quickly enter the alternate mission tactical analysis into the sophisticated simulation software that is available for their general use," Kim narrated as the officers continued their animated discussion.

"Will you look at that!" Blackie told everyone, "the detonation took out one of enemy fighters."

"And the other one," Flyer interjected, "got shook up pretty bad. It's a safe bet that unless he was completely mentally deficient, he would have gotten the hell out of there -- fast!"

"Damage to the enemy cap ship was somewhat moderate but probably enough to make them break off as well. And even so, our reinforcements would have been right on top of them in no time," RoughRider added.

"Dangit. We really did walk the pooch, didn't we?" Cowboy moaned.

"Score another one for the Old Man," Blackie told them.

"As the session continues, an almost reverential sense of respect washes over the officers as they slowly but surely analyze the scenario their superior

officers had given them. As every nuance is explored, a growing sense of reverence for the tactical ability of the Interim Director of Flight Operations begins to manifest itself."

"Argent?" Cowboy asked. "He's the man! Ah mean, this guy has just done it all! It's no fluke that he's won the Rigel Cup five times and did y'all see the battlestripes on his bird?"

"Captain Argent has over 2000 combat sorties more than any other active pilot today. He's bound to know more about these things than most of us ever will," Ravyn commented solemnly.

The scene switches from the officers in the briefing room to that of LtCdr Lars "Viking" Lysander standing near his fighter about to take off for the second scenerio.

"Captain Argent was the one who nursed me through Flight School ten years ago. There probably isn't a more diabolical tactical mind in a cockpit today. He always could come up with just *the* most hazardous scenarios you could *ever* think of. But truth to be told, none of us were off any worse for having been through what he put us through," LtCdr Lars 'Viking' Lysander added.

"I asked 'Viking' about his recent 'demotion' from Acting Director of Flight Operations to Flight Exec for Captain Argent. The reply I received is unexpectedly candid."

"At first, I was upset, for sure. But truth to be told, I'd done something wrong and the skipper called me on it. It came down to something he taught us a long time ago in Flight School. A single mistake is easy to make. Correcting it, however, is a much more difficult endeavor. Personally, I'm grateful for the little 'reminder' he was willing to give me, but I suppose that's his job. He hangs in there with people long after others have given up on them. I guess that's why he's the Ironman."

"A little probing about that particular call sign nets an interesting story."

"During a rear guard action at Edcom XII," Cowboy piped up in their wardroom as they were now on standby duty. "Captain Argent and his wingman, Terrence Blair got sucked in by a couple of interditors that the Szatrappi used to suck small craft out of warp space. They'all managed to play hide-n-seek in a nearby nebula for most of the day and then after nearly sixteen hours of cat-n-mouse, Argent proceeded to do the unthinkable. He began a single-handed attack on the cap ship task force that was protecting the interditors. By the time reinforcements showed up, he'd hit-n-faded half a

dozen cap ships by himself and Blair took out the two interdictors. Biggest single damn kill total of any pilot in any one action -- ever. Twenty-two hours of non-stop combat. After that, they'd damned well better call y'all Ironman."

"Actually, it was the Szatrappi who started calling him 'human made of iron' because even they couldn't believe what he'd done. The nickname kinda stuck after that," Ravyn added.

"I read his after action report and tactical summary on that particular engagement in the Academy. It was just incredible! Last week, I asked the Captain about Edcom XII and he told me that he'd gotten lucky. Can you believe it?" Flyer wondered aloud.

"Yeah, he said that if he'd been the DFO in that situation, he would have busted whoever pulled such a reckless stunt right out of the Fighter Corps. Never mind give them a medal!" RoughRider added.

"Even as the flight crew of the 13th Squadron deliberate their success or lack thereof from earlier this morning, life on the Flight Deck goes on," Kim narrated as the picture changed from the tactical room back to the Flight Deck. *"It's now three in the afternoon and Chief Penske and her crew have completed their duty shift."*

"Double shifts sure take a lot out of you. But hey, we've got all of tomorrow off. Time to go home. Look after the kids, make sure the spouse hasn't yet run off with that cute yeoman the skipper has. Stuff like that."

"Another shift of ground personnel takes their place and the cycle begins anew. Day in, day out, three hundred and sixty five days a year, for there is no rest on the Flight Deck. Even as members of the 13th Squadron finish their standby cycle and go off to visit the gym, have dinner or entertain themselves, another group takes their place."

The long shot of the flight deck dissolves into one of a tight shot of Kim in a neatly pressed jumper similar to the ones worn by the flight crew just as the program jingle begins playing softly in the background.

"We hope that tonight's program has given you some insight into just how life on the Flight Deck is for the many men and women who make up Nexus' Fighter Defense Force. This is Kimberly Flowers for Nexus Nightly News."

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