

Excerpt:

The Last Raider



CHAPTER I

July 4, 1994

Lieutenant Cody “Archer” Bridger sat patiently in the briefing room waiting for the Air Group Commander to appear. *I wonder what Mom and Dad and Rachel are doing right now. I wish I could be there celebrating the 4th with them.* Visions of countless parades and the night sky filled with fireworks brought a grin to his face.

“What are you smiling about, Archer?” Cody’s Radar Intercept Officer (RIO) Lieutenant JG Perry Judd sat in the leather chair next to Cody. The two friends were awaiting the briefing for their next mission.

“Just feeling a little nostalgic about back when I was a kid in Provo. Mom and Dad always took us to the parade down University Avenue and the fireworks in Liberty Park.” Cody wondered if his parents and Rachel were keeping the tradition alive.

“Copy that, partner. Back in Ohio we did pretty much the same thing. We’re a family of seven kids. Mom, Aunt Clara, and my sisters Milly and Betty Jo always put together a huge picnic on the fourth while my dad and Uncle Harold sat on the porch drinking beers and talking sports. I hear ‘The Big Stick’ throws a pretty good celebration. Maybe we’ll be back in time for the fireworks.” Perry turned his eyes toward the hatch and noted Commander Karl Messner step into the room. “Captain on deck!” he announced. Both of the officers stood at attention and held a salute.

“As you were, gentlemen. Take your seats.” Messner walked over to a table where he laid out a manila folder, which he opened, and began to shuffle through a small stack of charts and satellite photos.

The Commanding Officer of VFA-41, the fourteen F-14s known as the “Black Aces” squadron, motioned to a sailor to turn on the projector. A moment later the screen was filled with an aerial view of the region around Sarajevo in the former Soviet state of Yugoslavia. A red line defined the borders of the Serbian controlled territory.

“As you gentlemen are aware, Sarajevo has been under siege by rebel Serbian forces for over two years. What started in ’92 hasn’t changed, that is until now. Four days ago, Serbian rebels attacked a U.N. convoy of weapons consisting of small arms, shoulder-launched surface-to-air missiles, and anti-tank weapons. The incident took place here ...” Messner aimed his pointer at the screen “... about twelve kilometers northeast of Sarajevo. Those weapons were used to shoot down a U.N. helicopter outside Sarajevo. Our best intel suggests a large-scale Serbian buildup in the area in preparation for a major assault against the city. We need to get photographic evidence of what the Serbs are up to, if anything. That’s your next mission: to fly a photo recon sortie into the area. You two get the short straw on this one ... questions?” Messner offered.

Cody cleared his throat. “Yes sir. It looks like we’ll be violating the no-fly zone in order to get what we need. Will we have air cover?”

“Negative, Lieutenant. We can’t afford to create an incident by sending in an entire flight of armed aircraft. You’ll be on your own. Your target is this area outside Sarajevo,” Messner pointed to a red circle on the map. “The details are in your mission packet. You’ll want to get in and out fast, gentlemen. Two armed Tomcats will be orbiting here, just inside friendly airspace, to escort you back to the Roosevelt. Wheels up at 0840, gentlemen.”

Cody and Perry stood as Messner left the room. The two walked out of the briefing room and headed to the ready room to don their G-suits and other gear for the mission.

“I don’t like this, Archer. We don’t have any backup in case we meet hostiles up there. We’re going inside enemy territory with no teeth. What if we’re engaged by MiGs?” Perry wanted some reassurance, or maybe some expression of concern from Cody that matched the unpleasant sour taste of fear in his mouth. He swallowed hard and pushed the feeling to the back of his mind.

“Relax, Per. Five minutes in and five minutes out. Our guys will be orbiting on the edge of the no-fly zone. All we have to do is make it clear of Serbian airspace and we’re home free,” Cody replied.

Forty minutes later, the two friends climbed the ladders to the open cockpit of their F-14 Fighter/Reconnaissance jet. The Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night (LANTIRN) system had been swapped out for a photo-recon mission employing the Tactical Airborne Reconnaissance Pod System (TARPS). They were tasked to locate and photograph military strongholds of the Serbian forces of the Republika Sprska in and around Sarajevo.

The jet catapulted from the deck of CVN-71 and climbed to 3,000 ft before turning toward the eastern coastline of the Adriatic Sea. Ten minutes later, the F-14 began orbiting on-station over a predetermined point in Serbian-controlled airspace approximately 7,000 ft above and 12 mi east of Sarajevo. Intelligence reported the buildup of a Serbian Army outpost near the city and the presence of Serbian MiG-21s in the area in direct violation of the U.N. no fly zone.

“Okay, Per, keep your eyes out for bogeys and light up the cameras. Coming up on target in 3 ... 2 ... 1.”

The RIO captured the targeted locations, one after the other, as Cody flew the Tomcat on a predetermined grid pattern.

“That’s the last one, Archer. Let’s bug outta here!”

“Roger that. I’ll feel a lot better once we’re back on-board the Roosevelt.” He hadn’t been able to calm his uneasy sense of something going wrong that began in the briefing room, but no MiGs had made their presence known, and they got some good photos of the Serbian encampment that would keep the intelligence people busy. The F-14 turned back toward the carrier.

“Looks like another routine sortie, Per, let’s head for home,” Cody said with more confidence than he felt.

“Roger that, Archer. We got some good pics of the Serbian base. I can’t be sure, but I think they’re setting up a mobile missile site. I can’t wait to get our recon photos back to the Roosevelt.”

“Yeah, well I hope it was worth the trip. NATO must have thought it was important enough to violate its own no-fly rule.” Cody banked the fighter west toward the Adriatic Sea and home.

The ten-inch screen of Lt. Judd’s Programmable Tactical Information Display (PTID) lit up.

“Bogeys inbound. One ... no, two SAMs.” Perry called out. Cody saw them at the same time and immediately went to full military power while he pulled sharply back on the control stick and put the fighter into a high-g climb. Pulling between 8 g and 10 g, Cody released a bloom of hot burning magnesium flares and banked hard right to draw-off the bogey. The lead SAM took the bait and exploded harmlessly below and behind them. Cody rolled the fighter over and pulled the power all the way back, banking hard at a 90-degree plane to the remaining inbound missile’s path. As he completed his turn, he applied after-burner and held his bank angle while he released another bloom of flares, but the missile had already jinked toward them. The explosion rocked the jet and alarms blared in the cockpit. His port engine failed.

“Port engine out!”

With his heart pounding in his chest, Cody expertly manipulated ailerons, rudder, elevator, and throttle against the F-14’s tendency to drop out of controlled flight after high-g turns. His airspeed suddenly dropped by 200 kn because of the drag on the airframe caused by the maneuvers and loss of one engine. “Archer” brought the F-14 out of the flat spin and advanced the throttle on the remaining good engine.

“We’re still good, Per. Let’s grab some altitude.” Cody couldn’t suppress a nervous break in his voice. The missile hit had shaken him badly, but his training took over and he suppressed his growing urge to panic. *Thank you, Lord*, he thought. With his heart rate and emotions under control, he applied afterburner to the good engine and put the Tomcat into a steep climb.

“Roger that, Archer. That was too close.” the RIO said shakily.

At that moment, the compressor on the right TF30 turbofan engine failed, and the light went out on the remaining engine.

“Alarm! Starboard engine flameout!” Cody’s trained eyes scanned the multi-function display and engine parameters. He immediately noted the compressor problem. *No ... please, NO!* His mind shouted.

With no power and at an altitude of only 3,000 ft above the surface, Cody knew he didn't have enough altitude to attempt a windmill restart of his only good engine. They could not hope to make it to safety.

"Eject! Eject! Eject!" Cody commanded as he rolled the plane back to level flight, popped the canopy and pushed his head against the contoured seatback. First his RIO pulled his ejection lever, followed a fraction of a second later by Lieutenant Bridger. Seven seconds after the flameout two bright trails of rocket flame propelled the airmen up and away from the crippled jet.