

# Time of the Dragons: Part I

by John Doucette

Major Patrick E. Farthington walked around his F-15 Eagle, performing a visual check before taking to the night skies. The two drop tanks were securely in place, as were the eight Sidewinder heat-seeking missiles mounted on the fuselage and under each wing. He made sure the air intakes for his twin engines were clear of any foreign objects. A flame-out was bad enough in peacetime; in combat it would prove fatal.

Farthington continued around to the front of the aircraft looking for cracks or missing rivets. He found none. Lastly he climbed into the cockpit, his hand momentarily brushing over the twenty insignias that marked his kills in five years of war.

He sat in the cockpit and went over the instrumentation, making sure nothing was wrong. He was particularly thorough checking the escape mechanism. After fifteen minutes he was satisfied. He sat back in the seat, letting the cool night air wash over him.

His thoughts were not on the mission, but on the past. Just five brief years ago, Patrick Farthington had been a newly-commissioned lieutenant in the Canadian Armed Forces flying CF-18 Hornets out of CFB Petawawa in Ontario. That was before IT happened. 'IT' was an occurrence the scientists, those who were still alive, were still trying to explain. But if the scientists did not know why IT happened, they did know what. More or less.

All over the globe at roughly the same time, something right out of science-fiction movies happened. Dozens of gates, whether to another dimension, universe, or world was still debatable, opened and something out of Man's nightmares came through. Dragons.

Red, blue, white, black, and green, they swept down on the cities and laid waste to much of the Northern Hemisphere. The Southern Hemisphere got off lightly by comparison, which is to say only half of the major

cities were destroyed. Civilization crumbled and mankind hovered on the brink of a second Dark Age.

All hope was not lost. There were a few enclaves of humanity that fought back. What was the United States was one. The Soviet Union another. There were others too, but it was the two superpowers with their technologically advanced armies that were primarily responsible for staving off the slide into anarchy.

The war was not an easy one. Dragons could be killed by missiles and cannon fire, that much was clear. But dragons could kill also. The red dragons' fire breath was expected; after all, that particular attribute was commonly associated with dragons in ancient lore. The breath weapons of the other kinds of dragons came as a shock. The lightning of the blues, the acid stream of the blacks, and the blast of cold from the whites were particularly devastating to aircraft, the primary weapon of defense. Casualties rose quickly. A second surprise was the dragons' ability to use magic, the Force, whatever you preferred. Casualties skyrocketed. The war continued merrily along.

Farthington was a major in the Northern Confederacy's (what was left of Canada and the United States) Air Defense Force after only three years, a very rapid rate of advancement. He was one of the very few left from pre-war days. He'd even earned the nickname 'St. George' because of his number of kills. He was commanding officer of the squadron given the task of defending what was once Eastern Canada.

He led two to three sorties per day, combatting the dragons in their own element. And while it could be said that Farthington's squadron ruled the day, it was the dragons who ruled the night.

This night he was preparing to lead yet another of the 'clean and sweep' missions, hunting down the dragons and killing them. Without being killed, if

possible.

He checked his watch. Ten minutes until the flight was airborne. The ground crews were on the field readying each of the four fighters. The ground crews

had their jobs down to a science. They could fuel and arm an F-15 in twenty minutes; no mean feat when one takes into account that the level of technology was sharply reduced from pre-war days. The capability to produce advanced fighter aircraft was still there albeit at a fraction of pre-war production, which was not that spectacular to begin with. Most fighters were from those pre-war days, kept operating by cannibalizing damaged or otherwise unoperable aircraft. The day was soon approaching when there would be none left to fly. Farthington was jolted out of his reverie by his crew-chief climbing the ladder to the cockpit.

"Nerves again, sir?" Sergeant Wilkins asked in his Georgian accent.

"I always get nervous flying at night, Geoff."

"You know, you might try dropping by the ready-room before a flight instead of sitting here." Wilkins and Farthington had worked together for the past year, ever since Farthington had started flying out of Detroit. The two had developed as close a friendship as an officer and NCO could have, Farthington running interference with his superiors when Wilkins' 'supply runs' got a little too blatant, Wilkins taking it upon himself to make sure the lonely Canadian felt as much at home as anyone whose country has been all-but-destroyed can be.

"I know, Geoff, I know." Farthington stared at the semi-ruined skyline of Detroit for several minutes before turning back to his friend. "I have a bad feeling about this one. I don't think I'll come back."

"Now you listen here, sir," Wilkins said, the concern evident in his voice.

"I don't want any more talk about not comin' back. You wouldn't have lasted this long if you weren't good. And besides, you got a woman waitin' for you at home. Don't forget, you and Susan promised to have Marie and I over for dinner next week. Marie's lookin' forward to it and I don't want to disappoint her. So let's put this 'not comin' back' crap out of your head."

Farthington smiled, but Wilkins could still see the doubt in the black eyes that were older than any twenty-nine year-old's eyes had a right to be.

"Right, Geoff. Don't worry."

"Uh-huh," Wilkins said. "Well, you're all set." He climbed down the ladder and started for the hangar, but paused after going only a few feet. He turned and shouted up at Farthington, "And try not to get as many holes in it this time!"

Farthington gave him a thumbs-up gesture, all he could do over the sound of the engines powering up. The three other F-15's that constituted the rest of Eagle Flight were powering up as well, the ground crews being up to their usual standards.

The flight taxied to the runway and positioned themselves for a hot scramble. "Tower, this is Eagle One," Farthington said into his microphone. "Eagle Flight is ready for takeoff and requests clearance, over."

The tower's response came quickly. "Clearance granted. Good hunting and good luck. Out."

Farthington shoved the throttle forward and he and his wingman roared down the runway. They were just lifting off

when the remaining aircraft began rolling. Farthington circled until the other two aircraft formed on him. "Alright, gentlemen, here we go. Stay alert and remember what you were taught in air combat school and you might survive. Maintain radio silence. Eagle One, out." With that, Eagle Flight soared north.

Wilkins watched them go, the exhaust from their engines being all he could discern. "Come back safely, boys," he said. He stayed where he was until the aircraft were out of sight. Then he turned and slowly walked towards the Operations bunker. He prayed he would see Patrick Farthington alive and whole when the mission was over.

