

FLIGHT OF THE INTRUDER

Like *The Hunt for Red October*, the movie **Flight of the Intruder** began life as a novel published by the Naval Institute Press. In fact, *Red October* and **Flight** were the first and only novels to be released by the small Annapolis, Maryland, publishing company, which had specialized exclusively in scholarly books about naval warfare.

So why did the Naval Institute make an exception in the case of *Red October* and **Flight of the Intruder**? Even a cursory look at the two stories suggests one obvious reason: Both are so meticulously based on fact they could well have been true stories.

Flight of the Intruder, in particular, comes by its authenticity easily enough. Stephen Coonts, its author, is a 43-year-old Denver lawyer who spent two years fighting in Vietnam. Flying from the aircraft carrier "Enterprise," Coonts logged 1,600 hours in an A-6

Intruder, a low-altitude bomber, carrying out scores of missions over North and South Vietnam and Laos, and winning a dozen combat decorations including the Distinguished Flying Cross.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the central character in **Flight** is Lt. Jake Grafton (Brad Johnson), an A-6 Intruder pilot frustrated with the senselessness of his combat orders. Time after time he is sent out to bomb negligible targets — truck parking lots, previously destroyed power plants, empty farmhouses — each time risking his own life as well as that of his crew. He knows politics, not military strategy, has dictated insignificant targets.

"So in desperation," as John Lehman described it in his *Wall Street Journal* review of **Flight**, "Jake Grafton and his navigator, 'Tiger' Cole [Willem Dafoe], do what thousands of naval aviators dreamed of at the time. They plan



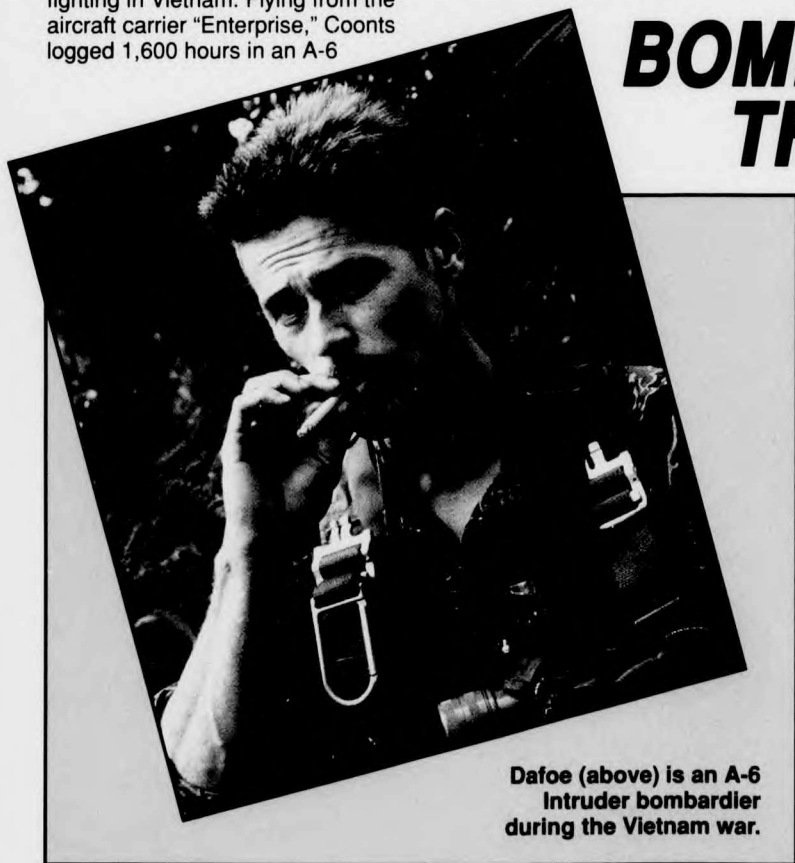
From left: Brad Johnson is pilot Lt. Jake Grafton; Danny Glover plays Commander Frank Camparelli, a bulldog squadron leader; and Willem Dafoe is Lt. Commander Virgil "Tiger" Cole.

and fly an illicit diversion from their assigned, useless targets" and bomb a missile depot in downtown Hanoi. Lehman knew what Coonts and Jake Grafton and thousands of other aviators dreamed of because Lehman, too, was an A-6 Intruder pilot and, at the time he wrote

October 1989 with two days of filming at Pearl Harbor, which doubled for Subic Bay in the Philippines.

The cast and crew — which includes Danny Glover as Jake's bulldog squadron leader and Rosanna Arquette as the war

BOMBER PILOTS ATTACK THE POLITICS OF WAR



Dafoe (above) is an A-6 Intruder bombardier during the Vietnam war.

his review in 1986, was Ronald Reagan's Secretary of the Navy.

Flight of the Intruder struck a realistic chord in one other sense — the ambivalence of its central character. In a lot of conventional wartime fiction the hero knows exactly what he's about. Vietnam, however, was not a conventional war, and Jake Grafton is not a conventional hero. "Jake is not portrayed as a superman," observed John Stubing in his *Best Sellers* review. "Rather, he is a human being caught up in the dilemmas of war." Jake even reflects sometimes on the unseen victims of the bombs he drops. Nor does Coonts glorify violence. "He shows what combat is like," noted Stubing, "and it is terrifying."

In turning the book into a film, director John Milius has clearly gone after a cinematic realism to match Coonts's literary honesty. Principal photography began in

widow with whom Jake becomes involved — then moved to the Hawaiian island of Kauai where the Philippine red-light district of Po City was re-created. Scenes in the men's officers club and quarters were filmed at the U.S. Navy's Barking Sands Missile Range.

"Mr. Coonts deals with this reality in an unpretentious manner," wrote reviewer Lehman. "He attempts no preachments or grand lessons. And unlike the think-tank experts who have never been there, he has no grand designs for Pentagon reform. He merely describes, with force, how it really was, operating in a system drained of common sense by bureaucracy, yet sustained by the camaraderie of rare and honorable men."

Flight of the Intruder opens in theatres across Canada in January.

— Lyle Slack

