

Like A Soldier

-A 2300AD Military Short Story-

etranger



Part I

Earth

In the beginning

I shall start this tale from the beginning, as all good stories should. I was born in Leeds, part of the West Riding Metroplex that stretches along the folds of the eastern side of the Pennine Hills of England. Although my family were not at all God fearing atheists I was christened James Henry Anderson in a small rural church not far from the city. My family was a fairly typical one for the time, my father held down two jobs and my mother one. I also had an elder brother, with whom it is fair to say I didn't get along. We lived in a crowded high-rise in Headingley, which was handily placed for my father's main job at the University of Leeds.

My childhood was reassuringly average. School, sports and the usual brushes with those fine fellows in the West Yorkshire Constabulary. I was never a particularly good student, but I had the talent to make up for my lack of application. My real forte was in sports, rugby mainly (traditional League) but I dabbled in others, and in languages. My mother was of Flemish extraction and had insisted on a multi-lingual household, so I could happily bullshit in a scattering of major European languages.

My last years of secondary schooling at Allwoodly Grammar coincided with the outbreak of the Kafer War and the fighting around Eta Bootis. Like most of my classmates I day dreamed of joining the Tanstaaf Free Legion and combing the alien forests of Aurore hunting down the Kafers. Real life documentaries have a lot to answer for! Unlike almost all of my classmates though, it wasn't a phase I grew out of.

My family had never really had any military connections or inclinations, although my mother had done auxiliary national service in France in her youth. My father's side of the family was resolutely non-military, although certain parts had a recidivist bolshie spirit that had seen several distant cousins jailed on Crater for taking part in strike actions. At the time military service was looked down upon by many people as being a last resort, and was indeed the last major employment group which still recruited non-graduates.

My decision to join the army was not an easy one to make, but as a 19 year old I could obtain a Tertiary Education Deferment certificate. The TED allowed non-graduates to join the army for up to three years, after which I could then leave and go to a civilian university or had to study for a qualification within the army's ranks. To be honest the chance of three years away from home, away from study and earning a real wage was a major spur for me, as it is for most of the army's younger recruits.

The Armed Forces Careers Office in Leeds City Centre is an imposing and impressive sight, once past the drab, crumbling exterior that is. Inside it is dominated by slick displays from each of the services vying to attract the eye of the potential recruit. Sophisticated simulators vie with 3D movies, backed by old fashioned hard sell by a variety of immaculately uniformed servicemen. Like many I found that the army was the only service a non-graduate could join without being assigned to three years of scut work. I went with an open and relatively informed mind, knowing that an infantry post was likely to be what I ended up with.

'Well then son, which regiment do you want to join?' asked the Sergeant in the interview room. This had me slightly stumped, 'Er... the Yorkshire Regiment?' A friend of the family had served with this local unit before and had marked my card. 'The Yorkies?' mused the sergeant theatrically, 'a good unit, but the thing is lad you will probably end up serving for three years in Warminster and never get out of Britain.' He drummed his fingers on the desk, 'A lad like you would really want to use the time to get off-world, see the colonies... Do you know that my unit's Second Battalion is deployed on Aurore as we speak?' The man had managed to speak all of the magic recruiting keywords in two sentences, he had me hooked.

'Why what regiment is that?' I asked naively. He reached into his drawer and pulled something out and tossed it onto the desk, it was a maroon beret. 'Why lad, the Parachute Regiment!' It took several videos, a book and a week of further consideration for me to realise it but from that moment my fate was sealed and linked to the Paras.

It wasn't until later in training I found out the recruiting sergeant was also several thousand pounds richer thanks to a bonus paid for getting me into his regiment.

The Hill

I arrived at the Parachute Regiment Depot in Aldershot with a crowd of other apprehensive hopefuls on a coach from the bus station. We all looked so young and nervous. I later found out that the Paras had the largest proportion of young soldiers in the army. Aldershot was a depressing place, a showpiece for 22nd century institutional architecture. The Shot had been nuked by the Russians in the last millennium and to my eye could have done with another dose of the treatment.

The training was gentle at first, mostly fitness work for the kids from the Metroplexes. I was relatively well off but others fell back, doomed to repeat the basic work again and again. The army had been under pressure in parliament to cut back the wastage of recruits in training and were throwing out only the very worst. But many quit on their own, obviously they had been taken in by the recruitment literature and not expected the pre-dawn starts. Most had been surprised by the pace of the work, conditioned by movies to expect to jog about the camp singing like the Americans, or moseying around in the Foreign Legion way. The lung-bursting cross country runs and brutal beating sessions had come as a bit of a shock.

Once the initial fitness phase had finished we got straight into the serious stuff. Tactics, weapons, more fitness, route marches but surprisingly little foot drill. 'Parachute Regiment fights, it doesn't fucking mince about!' was the answer I got when I asked why that was. We 'kids' were also joined by some older recruits at this stage who were a real mixed bunch. One of whom was a lanky Lancastrian lad who'd just been thrown out of the Foreign Legion for brawling after just three weeks of training. He had no real teeth and little conversation but was a tough, wiry little sod and the instructors approved of and tolerated his violent streak. Some others were foreigners from across the Commonwealth on and off-Earth, drawn by rumours of British intervention in the War.

Training was tough and seemed to involve an inordinate amount of being wet and cold. We did things from the basics; we mastered old fashioned map and compass work before progressing to satellite nav aids. We all became marksmen with old fashioned iron sights and conventional rifles before moving onto gyro-stabilised gauss guns. And all through it we marched and marched across country, our classic Bergen backpacks almost becoming part of us. In camp we ran, 'Parachute Regiment runs! It doesn't fucking mince about!' We were soon as lean as greyhounds, in spite of the mounds of army food of dubious nutritional value we shovelled down at every opportunity.

We learnt the history of the Regiment. From the mythical early years of D-Day and Arnhem, through the end of the 2nd Empire to the Falkland Islands. The 3rd World War vied with the establishment of the 3rd Empire, or New Commonwealth, as we should call it, for our attention. We were lectured by soldiers freshly returned from the French Arm on the progress of the war; we actually listened in those classes! We were soon full to the brim with information, weapons, tactics, signals, logistics - you name it, and the instructors were not above waking us in the middle of the night on exercise to test our knowledge either.

The testing four weeks of P Company came and went, but wasn't the part of training most feared by the recruits. That was 'The Hill', or Section Battle Test Phase, every day for a week we moved from our harbour position above Catterick and were forced marched to a hill beyond Bellerby. Where we were told an enemy OP was located, and we attacked up it, once cleared we would come under simulated artillery fire and extract off the Hill. We'd run about six miles and set up a snap ambush, then we'd go and do it again, the sheer mindless repetition really knocked it out of you, but by now nobody was quitting who wasn't injured. Your mates wouldn't let you. What the Hill taught us was to be able to turn on the aggression even when you were on your last legs.

Parachute training was great, we did static-line drops, night jumps and even basic freefall jumps. It was all done on an RAF base and the discipline was so relaxed we could have almost have been on holiday. Then it was back to Aldershot to do some intensive foot drill in preparation for the final passing out parade, 'Parachute Regiment doesn't mince, but when it does mince it fucking does it properly!' My folks turned up to watch and I hope it was a proud day for them, myself I was a bit distracted as I had found out I was to be posted to the 6th Battalion out on the French Arm.

Me and The Gun

My posting out to 6 PARA was good news for me, as most of the other recruits had been sent to the two Earth based Air Assault Brigades, whereas I got to go to the colonies. In fact though, I had a four week wait until the next troopship headed out up Arm. The army, it seemed, wasn't willing to pay for a private ticket for me on one of the Tall Ships, which I thought was a little short sighted.

Instead I was put on to a three week basic machine-gunners cadre at Warminster. It was there I became acquainted with the first true love of my life. The Vickers-Rockwell Model 5, known unto the Army as the Machine Gun 7.5mm L95A1, it's a progressive development of a series of earlier models and in my opinion is as close to perfection as a gun can get. It is the ultimate product of 400 years of evolution from Hiram Maxim's original. Sure, some are flashier, some are heavier, some have higher rates of fire, some do more damage but for an overall package you can't beat the Vickers-Rockwell Model 5.

Instructors from the Infantry Weapons Corps ran the course at Warminster, and to a man they were artists with the VR. We covered every nuance of its role within the platoon and company, and lightly touched on other uses for the weapon system. With a short barrel and plugged into the standard Tactical Integrated Soldier System it was ideal for the light role within the section. With the long barrel and attached to the Advanced Lightweight Powered Tripod, it produces respectable high-rate, long range fire ideal for covering attacks. Add the TISS into that configuration and you had a simple remote sentry system. I could have kissed the man who designed it.

Our course OC at Warminster was a young Green Jacket Captain called Simpson. He'd just returned to service after being badly wounded serving on exchange with the French *Chasseurs à Pied* on Aurore. He was excellent, giving those of us going up arm extra tuition and re-jigging the standard course in order to reflect his own experiences. Battle-run targets took many more rounds to go down, attacks on their rear-arcs were much less effective. He drilled into us the effectiveness of ambush against the *Crapauds*, as he called the Kafers, and we practised them night and day, simulated and live, snap and deliberate. I like to think that what I learned in those three short weeks from Captain Simpson and the others helped me get through what was to come.

Not at all quiet on the Western Front

As I had been going through my six months of basic training the news from the French Arm had gone from bad to worse. The relatively static conflict in the Eta Bootis system escalated hugely as the Kafers rammed a massive fleet into human space. They eviscerated the German colony at Hochbaden, occupied the German former penal colony of Dunkleheim, cordoned off and mercilessly bombarded the French colony of Nous Voila. Fighting continued at Alderhorst and Eta Bootis, reports of Kafer scouts and invasion scares rocketed up and down the Arm.

The space navies were in an utter state of confusion and disunity, except at Eta Bootis where some sort of co-ordinated planning had been achieved. The French under their best admiral, Rochemont, were trying to run the show and regain some of their lost prestige. They weren't overly successful and were managing to alienate most of the other nations in the process. The Germans didn't trust Rochemont as far as they could throw him in King's gravity and wanted revenge for Hochbaden and relief for Dunkleheim. The Americans and Australians were trying to fight the war whilst holding this disparate coalition together as best they could. Overall it was not an auspicious combination.

As for the British, well, except for a couple of squadrons up the Arm, one with Rochemont and one that had disappeared, presumed destroyed when the Kafers took Nous Voila, we were holding up at Queen Alice's Star. The French and Germans had stopped bickering long enough to bleat about 'Perfidious Albion' being willing to fight to the last Frenchman/German/American etc. Had none of these idiots

considered the need for a reserve? That we might not have seen everything the Kafers had to throw at us? Secret though we all wondered why we weren't doing more.

The army had been busy too, reinforcing our forces on New Africa and bringing reserves up to Alicia in the Queen Alice's Star system. Airborne and Commando brigades had been brought there to work with the fleet. Our colonial militaries had started to organise and equip expeditionary forces to back up the regular army.

All in all it was a military mobilisation that Britain had not seen the like of since the abortive Alpha Centauri War a century and a half before. To be honest we were excited, it was finally a chance to add battle honours to our regimental colours that had not changed much since the long, bitter aftermath of the Third World War. The RSN was already adding fresh lustre to famous names like *Camperdown*, *Indefatigable* and *Renown* (even though, some pointed out, these were really names from *the Navy*) and it would soon be our turn. British infantry had beaten every enemy that had come up against us from 1660 onwards, and the *Crapauds*, the name had caught on quickly, would be next.

Our bluster never quite hid our fear of the unknown.

Thin Red Line of Heroes

The end of my course at Warminster left me with a three day leave to kill time before reporting back to Aldershot and starting the long trip out to Alicia to meet up with my new Battalion. I headed back home to Leeds, where since my departure my parents had moved into a smaller apartment in up-scale Chapeltown. They were subdued and worried about my impending departure and I tried to reassure them as best I could. We went for an excellent meal in Bradford, which I paid for from my built-up wages from training. I had thought I had them more relaxed about the prospect of me going off to war, but when we arrived back at the flat some idiot at the BBC decided to show the German movie *Es snows nie im September* about the Arnhem landings (although a modern classic, any Para well tell you it is historically inaccurate!). Mum ended up in floods of tears.

The next day I visited my brother at the communal building he stayed at in Moortown in another vain attempt at patching things up between us. So much for that idea, he always was an idiot and probably always will be.

Instead I ended up going up to Newcastle to visit friends of mine who were at university there, they bunked off lectures and we ended up drinking deep into the night and enjoying the legendary hospitality of the ancient Quayside. I don't know what my friends were learning at university but I did learn three lessons in Newcastle: never drink the Brown Ale and never underestimate the natural friendliness of Geordie lasses. The third is that in times of war and national crisis a Parachute Regiment tattoo can get you an awful lot of free beer (sadly mostly Brown Ale!). Kipling, as usual in these matters, was dead right.

My last day back home was more subdued, only partly because of my hangover. My mum came back from work early and we spent the rest of the day walking on Otley Chevin and Ilkley Moor. It was awkward and mostly silent with only snatches of conversation. That evening I took my dad to one of the local bars and treated each other to a few pints of Tetley's before moving off down town to meet up with some more friends. They had both gone to work before I woke the next morning, I left them a note before getting the train down to London and Aldershot.

HMS *Coltman*

Waving not drowning

I'd never gone off to war before, so I had nothing to compare the experience to, but I had expected it to be a bit more of an event than it turned out to be. At Aldershot the drafts going out, some 60 paratroopers, were gathered together and briefed on the current situation and the units we would be going to. We were then filed through the medical and immunised against *everything*, then we were issued all the personal kit that we were expected to need. As we did I got to know some of the men I'd be travelling with, some I knew from my training but most were experienced soldiers from the four

Core-based battalions. Almost to a man they had the regulation droopy para moustache, which to my immense shame I would later find impossible to grow satisfactorily. They had swindled, threatened and bribed their way out of their battalions to make it out to 6 Airborne Brigade.

We had one last night on the town, although I have to admit I wimped out early as the injections we had earlier were making me feel decidedly sick. I can't say I missed much, the drinking games (mostly stomach churning, occasionally illegal and frequently immoral) were about to get underway. Whilst the un-married soldiers, and many of the married ones, were beginning to see how many of the Para groupies that occupied our favourite bars they could personally and intimately bid farewell to in the course of the night.

The next day we were bussed out to RAF Brize Norton, where we would be loaded onto civilian space planes for the short hop to Clarke Station. I ended up sitting with a cluster of baby paras I had done my recruit training with, insulating ourselves from the rough humour of the Old Sweats. At Brize we filed in through Movement Control, a pretty blond Airwoman scanned our ID as we went through, blushing furiously at the filthy jokes and propositions being put to her.

In the grandly titled Departure Lounge, more accurately Departure Hanger, we mooched around giving the Evil Eye to its other occupants. Apparently we were to share our troopship with a battle group of German Legionnaires. They were a tough looking, hard bitten lot and many were veterans of the Reunification War against France. They served in the British Army to simulate enemy forces, but their numbers had been increased to brigade strength and were being shipped up arm to the war. (Maybe there was something in the claim we were fighting to the last German after all.) They were supposedly the best, most effective armoured brigade in the British Army. I could see fights developing between us and them sooner rather than later.

When our aircraft was eventually ready we trooped out of the hanger across the apron to the garishly coloured spaceplane. There were a few media crews recording events, some families had come up from the Shot, even God help us, some of the groupies were there. The crowd was pretty small, very few had come to wave the German Legionnaires off. As paratroopers we tried to keep our image up, swaggering across the tarmac in our red berets, but it was ruined by a couple of guys waving to their families and blubbing as they did so. Needless to say we ribbed them mercilessly for the next few months, until we finally got bored of it.

Dead Soldiers

There were four troopships waiting for us at the spaceport on Clarke. Her Majesties' Ships *Coltman*, *Hirsch*, *Queripel* and *Tisdall*. All named after Victoria Cross winners from the bitter, genocidal 20th century. Naturally we all wanted to travel on the *Queripel* it being named after a Captain who won the VC with our 10th Battalion at Arnhem. Inevitably we were assigned to travel instead on the *Coltman*, named after a soldier of the North Staffords who was the most decorated British NCO of the Great War. After some discussion we decided that Bill Coltman would have been in the Paras had they existed then and so we decided to adopt him as an honorary paratrooper. I absolutely deny all knowledge about who actually drew a red beret onto his portrait in the ship's wardroom however.

Although the troopers had their own landers capable of travelling to and from orbit without having to dock at the L-4 station we, along with the German Legion's heavy equipment, had travelled up the station on civilian transports to save money and resources as well as making a PR splash for the Francophone media. The troopships came as a bit of a surprise to me, we were travelling at double occupancy and there wasn't enough room to swing a cat on them. It was a world away from the glamorous image of space travel I had been nurturing. Along with a few others I decided to sleep in hammocks in one of the cargo holds, sure it was cold but bearable with a sleeping bag. It really pissed the ships crew off though as it broke half a dozen safety regulations, but the Captain was a decent sort. He'd spent much of his service career out on the frontiers and used to moving troops around. As far as he was concerned as long as we knew the risks it was up to us.

The ship was so overcrowded that we had to eat in almost never-ending cycle. Chefs from the fighting units were pressed into service alongside the regular galley crew in order to keep the food coming. I stupidly volunteered for a general duties party half way through our transit and I honestly couldn't believe how they produced all of that food in such a small kitchen. Mind you tempers frayed frequently

in the kitchens and I finished my duties as quickly as I could. That was the last time I volunteered for anything until one fateful day in Crater. I should have learned that lesson the first time.

The average paratrooper can speak a smattering of French in addition to being passably intelligible in English. My more multi-lingual talents made me something of a liaison between us and the German Legionnaires, or Boxies as we called them (German-Square Head-Box Head- Boxy). Violence between the two units had been relatively low and largely confined to the wardroom. In many ways we were lucky to have been included with the Royal German Legion packet rather than the later Royal Marines one. Given the levels of antipathy and violent disagreement that have existed between us and the Cabbage Heads for centuries it would have been doubtful that the *Coltman* would actually have arrived at her destination intact.

Drinking on the *Coltman* was limited to the traditional 'Two Can Rule' of the British soldier on operations through the centuries. Like the rest of the Toms throughout those centuries we circumvented the Rule with glee, two jerrycans was our limit! At times Cargo Hold 4B resembled a boy scouts' jamboree, with drunken toms clustering around electric heaters singing and joking. Some Boxies from their Light Company had trained with the paras before and would sometimes turn up in the hold with illicit bottles of schnapps. I felt sorry for the driver of the Templer IFV in which we stored most of empties and other rubbish, it was pretty full by the end of the trip, it smelled pretty rancid too.

We got to know a lot of the Boxies pretty well. Many weren't actually Germans though, there was the occasional American but lots of Poles and Czechs and some Dutch and Flemish too. To a man and woman they were all immensely fit and professionally knowledgeable, it actually made me wonder whether the boasting and arrogant aggression that were so prevalent in the Parachute Regiment were actually the best approach to take. They also had one of the most stunningly attractive communications technicians we had ever seen attached to their Light Company HQ. This particular statuesque Dutch Electronic/Information Warfare specialist managed to break just about every Para heart on the ship whilst regarding all of our attempts to get her in the sack with the same amused contempt. Even my trump card launching my patter in fluent Dutch didn't get far. Naturally we all concluded she must have been a lesbian.

I later found out that she had formerly been a Dutch Royal Marine and a volunteer fighter in the struggle for Flemish Independence. She died during a Kafer raid during the Liberation of BCV. What a waste, she was gorgeous.

TANSTAGN: There Ain't No Such Thing As Good News

Our convoy was making its stately way through Bessieres making preparations for the Yule celebrations when we got the news from a passing courier that the *Crapauds* had attacked again. This time at the important colony world of Kimanjano, just one step away from Queen Alice's Star. The defending German and Japanese warship squadrons had again proved to have been slightly less tactical sense than the Bondage Brothers and had been driven off in disarray. French space fighters of the *Lafayette* were attempting to harass the aliens but we didn't hold out much hope for them in the long run.

We soon learnt that that a powerful RSN squadron, that unknown to us had been shadowing our wallowing troopships, had boosted passed us at top speed to run out to reinforce the fleet at QAS. Led by the modern battle-cruiser HMS *Prince of Wales* they included the *Hood*, the renowned pirate-killer *Invincible* and the *Valiant*. One wag pointed out that those ships names had belonged to Royal Navy wet ships that had come to bitter ends. The Second World War had seen the *Hood* destroyed with virtually all hands by the *Bismarck* and the *Prince of Wales* sunk by the Japanese off Malaya. One *Invincible* had been sunk by the Germans (again virtually with all hands) during the First World War (whilst being commanded by a man called Hood!) and another *Invincible* had been sunk by the Russians in the Third World War.

In fact out of these warships only the *Valiant* was lost during the Battle of Beowulf and the later fighting. The others all came through with flying colours. I guess ship names just might carry some form of Karma like many of the more superstitious spacers believe.

Ground fighting on Kimanjano had commenced after an assault landing by the *Crapauds*. The RGL Int Cell had put together a briefing for us on the possible course of action of the campaign. Hosting French and Azanian colonies that had good relations the planet was initially relatively lightly militarised. The shock of Hochbaden had brought in a rush of troops and started a mobilisation of local volunteers and reservists. The French had brought up reinforcements for a mixed Division from Earth and Beowulf, whilst the Azanians had deployed a veldt-hardened Mechanised Brigade and both had some independent units. Passing through the system at the time had been a US Marine Expeditionary Brigade and some attached Texans en-route to join up with Admiral Rochemont. These crack, at least according to themselves, troops had been added to the defending force.

Prevailing opinion was that the defenders couldn't hold out for too long, they really lacked full tactical mobility, but could productively tie down many of the Kafer troops. To us it looked an ideal opportunity for a human counter attack into the Kafers' rear from QAS, send in the Paras to kick their back doors in and then mop up with the two Armoured Brigades. However the Int Officer was a little more pessimistic citing the lack of starlift capacity, and the likelihood that the Fleet would wait for the Kafers next move straight into QAS. It looked like our first fight would be for Alicia. Kimanjano and her defenders were on their own.

The end of the holiday

The news that the Kafers had moved again brought a major change to our journey into Queen Alice's Star. The ships all went to a war footing, stripping down all of the combustibles out of the main living areas. We were summarily evicted from the Cargo Holds and were firmly placed back into our cramped and crowded quarters. Evacuation drills were rigorously practised, although no one liked to point out that at double occupancy the life boat situation on the good ship *Coltman* bared an uncanny resemblance to that on the RMS *Titanic*.

Another factor we tried not to dwell on was that with the departure of the *Prince of Wales* and her escorts we were now being protected only by a pair of ageing frigates. We dubbed the two warships the 'five minute ships' as that was how long we thought they would last up against a Kafer raider. That of course made us the 'six minute ships' as we wouldn't last much longer once the frigates were gone. We slunk through Augereau as stealthily as possible, discharging our drive around the spectacular gas giant Dionysos before making a high-speed run into QAS and the relative safety of the Reserve Fleet.

Alicia

FNG

Our unloading from the *Coltman* onto Churchill orbital station above Beowulf was exceptionally rapid. Unlike the Boxies who had a whole range of equipment to off-load we had only our basic kit and so were pushed straight off onto the station and through the ubiquitous Royal Space Corps movement control. The station looked like a larger version of the *Coltman* with all inflammable fittings stripped down, shops in the main living quarters were closed down and I saw few civilians around. Although some heavily armed and armoured Royal Marines zero G specialists were much in evidence. Within two hours were on a small personnel lander dropping fast towards the planetary surface.

It was raining hard when we arrived and the clouds were heavy and black above our heads in the night sky. We were hustled by local Alicia Defence Force personnel into an ageing bus to whip us off the tarmac of the spaceport. The port seemed to be on a plateau overlooking a large, crowded city on the side of a dark bay. The bus took us around the side of the plateau and down into a long valley away from the city. There were no large towns, but several small villages and hamlets solidly constructed from stone, in the dark several farmers were out working in their fields.

The bus ride took the best part of two hours by our watches. We eventually fetched up inside a sprawling military camp complex, surrounded by razor wire and guarded by local ADF soldiers in brown berets. 'Fucking hell lads!' Shouted one of the toms at the back, 'we've come 20 bloody light years and they've got fucking Hats here as well!' Laughter accompanied a flurry of obscene hand

gestures directed at the gate guards who ignored us with the resignation of men who'd seen this particular airborne display before.

(I should explain here that the Para mentality only has room for three types of soldiers: Airborne, who of course can do no wrong. Marines, or Cabbage Heads, who are a bunch of jumped up sailors with homosexual tendencies and are the Arch Enemy of the Holy Airborne. All the rest are crap hats, usually just Hats, so named as they don't get to wear the gucci, go-faster red beret of the Airborne and are just so mundane they're not worth bothering with.)

The bus dropped us off and we were rapidly shown to a group of prefab buildings that were to be our accommodation for the time being. Half an hour later we were hustled into a briefing room in another, larger prefab. Several other paras had appeared wearing the 'Billy Ruffian' brigade patch of 6 Airborne, and were busily catching up with old friends who had arrived in the draft. At the front of the room a slim cavalry officer was chatting to a para Major whilst waiting for the hubbub to die down. After 5 minutes the para officer called us to order and turned us over to the briefer.

'Hello gentlemen, and welcome to Alicia and Camp Mackay. I'm Captain Andrews of the Northern Greys here on Alicia. I'm here to give you a quick briefing on planet Beowulf and Alicia in particular.

'Firstly, local conditions. The Alician day lasts 21 days and 19 hours. Which means you get roughly 11 days of daylight and 11 of night. Obviously this is going to cause you some discomfort until you get used to it. A common problem because of this is mood swings and short tempers. Unfortunately the army doesn't have the time to let you acclimatise so you will all be on a program of medication to help you transition. Each day here is divided into 20 hour sections, so there are 26 of these and 3 hours left over at the end of each cycle, military operations remain on ZULU time.

'Weather here is thankfully quite predictable, day time temperatures range from 15 C at dawn to 40 C at the height of the day, during the night it falls to well below freezing. Rainfall normally occurs for 20 hours just after nightfall, and snow is common for the 20 hours before dawn. Yes, it's predictable but a real ball ache in the field, but with your '82 Pattern personal kit eminently survivable providing you take simple precautions.

'The local wildlife is edible to humans, and you will have to get a taste for it as Terran animals and plants have some difficulty in prospering in the local conditions. However don't go scoffing on any old plant or animal you come across just yet, the full survival course will bring you up to speed. A quick word on aggressive local fauna, anyone here seen the movie "No Escape"? There was a scattering of hands raised and a murmur of assent; we'd all seen that video as soon as we knew we were going to Alicia.

'Okay the Dragon-Bat does exist, but it rarely goes after humans. It is a protected species gentlemen so please do not go around shooting them if you see one out in the field. Similarly there are a range of interesting and often voracious parasites present on Alicia.' He showed us a range of slides showing the effects of some of these on human flesh. 'But all of them are treatable providing you get to a medic in good time, if you don't practise the required drills you could end up like some of these poor buggers, or dead. Anyway the later briefing will cover these in detail.

'Right, on to the other locals. The Alicians are a very conservative people, who are generally reserved, polite and respectful of other people's privacy. The effects of the long days combined with the proximity in which they live in their cities mean they live very structured lives on the whole. If you do go into Aliceport or any of the other cities please be respectful of their traditions and standards. If you really want to go out and get royally shitfaced and chat a slapper up, go to the local town of Grendal's Moor, they're well used to catering to the unique needs of the British squaddie. (We cheered that bit)

'Right that is enough from me for the time being. It is now just coming up to 13:1510 local, get back to your billets and get settled in. Scoff is at 13: 1600, but the QM will be open at 13:1545 in order to issue each of you with a GCS Universal Chronometer. These are expensive bits of kit, so don't loose them. You start your indoctrination with general survival skills at 14: 0600 tomorrow so don't get too drunk later on.'

A half-arsed, pseudo-eclectic conversation

I lay in the shelter bay of a fireteam trench wrapped in my sleeping bag and a sense of self-pitying misery. I could barely sleep, despite the drugs they had doled out to us, the continuous bloody darkness was getting to me badly. I checked my watch, it was now 20: 0113 LIMA, 13Jan02 0841 ZULU, morning rush hour would just be tailing away on Leeds right now. I could also tell what time it was on any of the colonial worlds occupied by humanity. A fat lot of good that was. I now had 15 minutes left before it was my turn to stag on. I snuggled deeper into the bag trying to get comfortable alongside the bulk of the Enfield gauss rifle, and listened to the two soldiers on guard whispering.

'But Jones was an idiot. He had completely lost control of himself and his battalion. If it wasn't for Keeble the whole battalion would have been totally in the shit, and that would have possibly tipped the balance of the whole war.' The cockney voice of Corporal Zwolanski was becoming somewhat excited. 'I'm not denying Keeble was shit hot, he really understood soft core doctrine and should have got to command the battalion for the rest of the war. But to claim we would have lost the war if that particular battle had stalled is shite. Okay, they might have had to bring in some of the Gaylords to help, which we would still be living down, but we still would have won. If anything it might have made the politicians take the whole conflict a little more seriously.' I'd been in the same section as 'Ping' Johnson for a couple of days now and still couldn't get used to his semi-Afrikaans, semi-Canadian accent. He was a colonial, born at Alpha C and come across to us from Wellon's 102 PARA.

'Yeah, well. Why on earth they didn't try out the light tanks on the ground as soon as they got down there I don't know. A couple of extra squadrons could have made a vast difference especially in the final series of battalion actions... That said at least it wasn't an Arnhem.' The two men grunted agreement and fell silent for a while.

'What about the Stendal battle?' asked Johnson. 'Now that was a classic.'

'Fucking right! Spetzatz? Commie air assault? What a pile of cack! That's one we got totally right. I loved the way they started doing the 'Whoa Mohammed' thing again! But seriously putting conscripts up against regulars is always a bad idea. They fought well mind but they'd only expected German territorials, finding Gurkhas and Paras in position instead must have come as a bit of a fucking shock! Mind you Brigadier Phillipson was bloody good as well'

I touched the illumination button on the chronometer as the soldiers chuntered on. The General Colonial Service watch was a thing of robust beauty, dull titanium enclosing and shielding an electromagnetic device of marvellous precision. The timing of military operations was always of fundamental importance, but out in the colonies with different day cycles and systems of time measurement, punctuality was often one of the first things to break down. The GCS enabled the average, earth-born tom to understand when he was, but also ensured vital co-ordination with the starships of the Royal Space Navy. They always ran on ZULU time.

Ping and Zwolanski had now got on to debating the relative merits of WW2 British, German and American airborne divisions. One of the results of the Parachute Regiment's policy of recruiting non-graduates was that after 3 years they either had to leave the army to go into tertiary education or study for a degree in the ranks. Naturally most decided to stay in and study what was closest to their hearts: War Studies (mostly specialising in the Airborne!). As a result although they were never the most eloquent of academics, most soldiers had bachelor degrees and many support company men held masters degrees. It made life somewhat intimidating for young junior officers when broken nosed, gap toothed long service privates began critiquing their plans with historical references to the Napoleonic Wars. Although these interventions would normally begin: 'Hey boss, that fucking old Kraut bastard Blücher tried something like this.'

A message came in over the radio net. 'Golf Two Two Delta, this is Golf Two Zero Bravo. Shut the fuck up you're making enough noise to wake the dead. Over'

'Golf Two Two Delta, acknowledged, out.' The two sentries went quiet. Although in field training we tried to keep as quiet as possible the fact we had no remote sentries to put out meant we weren't taking this exercise entirely seriously. I glanced at the watch again, still twenty five minutes to go. Sighing heavily and bracing myself against the shock of the cold I got up early and swapped with Zwolanski.

A Close Encounter

20: 1320 LIMA, 13Jan02 2048 ZULU.

The digits gleamed at me in my helmet's HUD, calibrated to the GCS watch on my wrist. I ignored it; it would only make me more depressed. Oh well, only another two hours until the patrol was supposed to return, and just a little less time until I was relieved. I was wrapped up in as many layers of clothing as I could find and was still shivering. I'd *never* been as cold as this. I tucked my chin into the zipped up collar of my combat jacket and breathed warm air down the front. It didn't help much. I started fantasising about the heated warmth of my sleeping bag.

We were in a patrol harbour in a small square of woodland, located on the steep side of an otherwise wind-blasted Alician hillside. (Although as far as I could see *all* Alician hillsides were steep and wind-blasted). We'd had to dig shell scrapes to stop the sleeping bags and the soldiers inside them from rolling and sliding down the hill. When we'd occupied the harbour it had taken no little work to lug the Bergens up into the positions. At the moment there were only six of us in the harbour, the rest of the ad-hoc platoon was out on a fighting patrol somewhere a few kilometres away. As a result we were staggering on (standing sentry) two on, two off, until they returned. However as yet again we still had no remote sentries we weren't taking it too seriously.

Currently I was sat on a fragment of sleeping mat (to insulate my arse from the ground) in a frozen shell scrape with my back to a short tree, (which I had carefully inspected for any parasitically inclined lifeforms) and was counting the hours until ENDEX and the finish of this half-arsed acclimatisation and orientation exercise. I wrapped my arms around my Enfield and hugged myself for a bit more warmth.

Something moved out beyond the perimeter. Initially I thought it was just the wind blowing the bushes, but it wasn't. Great, they're going to bump us while the rest of the platoon is somewhere else, how original! I flipped the HUD over to thermal, and resigned myself for a brief firefight (which at least would warm me up a bit) and then my blood froze. The figure out there wasn't human. Bug. It was a fucking bug, a *crapaud*, a CT.

They way it moved was almost human, but not quite. Every couple of paces it pitched forward on all fours, moving its head around as if it was sniffing the ground. Then it would pitch back onto its legs and creep forward, scanning the bushes and undergrowth. In its left hand was a stubby, ugly rifle. Thud Gun my mind automatically labelled it. Its attempts at stealth were almost ridiculous in the face of a thermal imager, but still I dared not move. It came within five metres of my position and stopped to gaze right through me. It pitched forward and sniffed. It was a big, *smelly*, bastard. As it sniffed a bizarre image from an ancient film came into my mind. *Gollum*.

It rose again and moved up the hill to my left. I let my breath whistle out from behind my teeth, it hadn't seen me. It hadn't fucking seen me, because they have very poor night vision. Idiot, remember the lectures! My heart thumped with barely restrained terror. How had it got here? There were no *crapaud* incursions this far up Arm, or was that just a lie? Never mind that, what are you going to do about it? The rifle only held blank training rounds for the exercise. Shit.

A burst of fire ripped out from the left. I jumped up, adrenaline kicking in. The other sentry must have seen it and opened up regardless of the blanks. The *crapaud* crashed through the undergrowth heading back my way. I jumped out to cut it off and swung my rifle at its head. It was looking back over its shoulder and didn't see me. The Enfield hit his temple with a sick-making thud, and he (it?) dropped like a sack of potatoes at my feet. I swung again, smashing the butt down and cracking into his sternum. 'Fuckingwanker!' It yelled at me.

It kicked my legs away from me and I fell, losing the rifle. It rolled onto me bellowing. 'Youfuckingcrazytwat!' A hairy fist pounded into the side of my helmet, my hand slipped down to my fighting knife while I attempted to throw him off. 'Fuckingimbecile!' The two other sentries reached me and hauled the cursing, fighting *crapaud* off, which sent them all sprawling into the bushes. I scrambled up finally getting my knife out of its scabbard, I was thinking to drive my knife under its chin and into the brain when the realisation that it was speaking English hit me.

It came at me again, swearing and swinging its fists. It took a while to calm him down.

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The Alicians had developed a suit that enabled a soldier to pass himself off as a Kafer, and used it frequently for training purposes. It wasn't actually that convincing close up, but I was on thermal and so thought it was the real deal. The other soldiers had also been tipped off about what to expect from other members of the brigade, but the gossip hadn't got as far as me and the other new guys yet.

The still seething pseudo-*Crapaud* was picked up by his support team half an hour later. My rifle butt attack on his head had given him a fairly serious concussion. The rest of the lads were quite pleased with me though. The soldier had been an Alician Marine. Braining a cabbage-head of any nationality and in any circumstances has always been considered a praiseworthy action in the Parachute Regiment.

A Call to Arms

We tabbed back in off our ten day (half a day local) exercise just as it was snowing, the wind whipping a blizzard in off the God forsaken moor that was the bulk of the training area. We were moving fast but it was still bitterly cold. I couldn't wait for dawn, to get out from under the baleful gaze of the big yellow primary moon. We were tabbing, ancient para-speak for fast, long distance marching, along the last stretch of road down to our temporary barracks and there was a constant stream of heavy lorries heading in the same direction. We ran the last mile in and through the main gate, showing the Alician hats just what manner of men we were.

We could see that the whole camp was lit up and in uproar; some of the big vehicle garages had been opened up and were filled with men having their kit checked out of the snow by their NCO's. Other toms were scrambling to and from the stores, while the anti-tank guys were running diagnostics on a pallet of missiles. A world of Shiny New Kit was being delivered, (*always* a worrying sign) we passed an RSN Data rate (a very rare sight on-world) instructing a mixed group of signallers, recce specialists and a couple of Pathfinders on a new comms set. Most of the guys in camp were wearing the blue DZ patch of the 2nd Battalion and the whole barracks was buzzing with anticipation and gossip.

'What's the crack?' shouted our platoon sergeant across to one of his mates.

'2 PARA are on 12 hours notice-to-move. Looks like something's up.'

'What about the rest of the brigade?'

'72 hours NTM, looks like you guys are going to be missing out!'

'Fuck!'

We were quickly roped into helping 2 PARA organise their imminent departure, the other two battalions were still out in the field finishing off the exercise that 2 PARA had been pulled away from. Ping and I ended up helping the Combat Walker Platoon move their ammo supplies on their supporting Lightweight Multi-Purpose Load Carriers, or Quads. The Quad was a high-impact frame built onto four independent active drive wheels and it massed next to nothing. Together with the Hover Rovers it was the battalion's only organic load mover and was used by all the Support Company platoons and the Recce Companies. With a couple of men on board it could move like the proverbial bat, but loaded down and with a trailer it was still a respectable prime mover.

I took the time during a tea break to have a good gawp at the combat walkers which were opened up in one of the garages undergoing last-minute maintenance. The armourers were also loading long belts of 7.5mm into the big ammo pack, 1 in 1 APHE and Tracer. The Bowman-A's looked like something straight out of a Japanese new-wave sci-fi movie. Their armoured shells were cracked open across the front like a half-eaten crab, revealing the soft flesh of the pilot's compartment inside. Inside one nestled a pilot running through diagnostic checks on his weapons tracking sensor package, gun barrels and missile racks twisted and flicked as he did so.

The camp slowly squared itself away, then the seniors were called to the briefing room for an O-Group and the tension was turned another couple of notches. Knots of toms snatching illicit cigarette breaks both passed increasingly bizarre gossip and initiated several baroque practical jokes. A camera crew from Aliceport News turned up at the gate and was refused entry, although to humour them several paras repeatedly trooped past the main gate manpacking the biggest weapons they could get their hands

on. An hour later the seniors re-appeared and set times for their own O-Groups, at that point all of 2 PARA virtually stopped working to go into gossip overdrive. Consequently the guys like me who had been dragged in to help out were worked twice as hard.

We'd just about finished most of the tasks, loading and re-loading Quads to get the optimum centre-of-gravity balance when 2 PARA finished their final briefing. There was the occasional pale face around, but most were heady with anticipation. The rifle platoons again paraded all their personnel kit, paring down what they were to be carrying, little luxuries most people carried on exercise were thrown out. They then went to the armoury to collect their personal weapons. Shortly after that the Company Sergeant Majors started distributing ready use ammunition, piling up gauss magazines, 30mm grenades, belts of 7.5mm link and plasma cells.

Ping turned to me and said, 'well those lucky bastards are definitely off.' And one of those lucky bastards was Corporal Zwolanski, who swanned off to join his new battalion's mortar platoon with an airy wave.

2 PARA's CO arrived to check on the progress of his battalion's preparation. Lieutenant-Colonel Dance was already rigged in his combats, webbing and carrying his Enfield assault rifle. Over his beret he wore a lightweight TISS headset and was already plugged into his command net, I guess his TAC HQ had already set up around the back of the barracks. Dance was an ex-ranker who was a Para Reg loyalist through and through, there were rumours (later I found out entirely true) that he had taken and passed SAS Selection and then told them to stuff it. Following the Colonel were his two bodyguard/signallers, both long service Sergeants with broken noses and regulation neo-Zapata moustaches. Trailing rather more forlornly was the RSM, a big man, seemingly as wide as he was tall, hobbling around on a broken leg and nursing a badly sprained shoulder suffered during a road accident some 60 hours before. He wouldn't be going with his battalion.

Two hours later 2 PARA filed out of the main gate of the camp loaded down in combat order. Bergens were loaded to capacity, tubes containing mortar and missile rounds clipped to the outside of the rucksacks and each pair of troopers lugged more cases of ammo between them. Wreathed in sweat they staggered and swore up the hill to the Landing Zone. The BBC and two other camera crews had joined the Aliceport News team and were dashing about to get some good shots. Spare Quads zipped backwards and forwards ferrying supplies. The Combat Walker platoon moved off as well, it's Bowman A's stalked serenely away through the centre of the media goatfuck. At the centre of it all strode Colonel Dance, snapping instructions into the net one minute, giving a pithy media interview the next, then turning to berate a harassed Royal Space Corps movement control officer. We all thought he was enjoying it far too much.

Finally as the snow began to ease, the battalion was all in position on the landing zone and broken into sticks. In the slowly lightening sky the first of the assault boats appeared, breaking hard and turning in around Powell's Peak, landing lights on. The first Raven transitioned to a hover, its undercarriage unfolding from its belly with insectile grace before settling to the ground. The main ramp whined open and the RSN loadmaster ran down it gesturing to the first stick of paratroopers, who responded, doubling across to the boat as best they could with that hunched gait common both to heavily laden man and those more used to working with tilt-rotors or copters than VTOLs. The stick commander handed the electronic 'flash card' to the loadie (a second Raven roared in to land behind the first) and the platoon lumbered up the ramp. It was loaded and gone inside a minute.

We watched as assault boat after assault boat came down from HMS *Normandy* up in orbit, 18 in total, taking a little over forty minutes to lift the whole of the battalion and its immediate supplies. The final Raven carried the Colonel and his Tac HQ off after a brief exchange of pleasantries with Brigadier Irvine and a senior Alician officer for the benefit of the cameras. The Raven veetoled up from the landing pad, and began to accelerate hard, cracking through the sound barrier before it reached the coast, pouring out energy to meet up with the assault ship high above. Behind it the camp was deadly quiet as the support staff stood around, the RSM limped forlornly back down from the landing zone.

We later found out they were off to Kimanjano with the fleet.

A Soldier's Farewell

As 2 PARA began to file out from the camp I had got myself close to the gate. The RSM was there, resplendent in crisply ironed combats and maroon beret, braced on his pace stick to take the pressure away from his broken leg. He was there to see his battalion off to war, with the words used by every Tommy since the Third World War.

'Good luck Three Platoon. See you in hell.' The RSM rumbled. 'Especially you Private Vincent.'

'See you in hell too sir. We'll be waiting for you.' Vincent shot back.

'Good luck One Platoon. See you in hell.'

'Good luck Major Adams sir, look after my blokes or I will see you in hell.'

'Oh my God, you better give those alien fuckers as many nightmares as you give me Two Platoon. See you in hell...'

Part II

Alicia

Dramatis Personae

Following the dramatic uplift of 2 PARA we were allowed off camp for what remained of the 'night' before being sent to join our new units. So after a brief and exceptionally alcoholic tour of the dubious delights of Grendal's Moor, where we sampled the local beer (an acquired, if potent taste) and Alician Calvados (much more palatable) in some detail until staggering back to the camp for some gonk, we had been brought up in front of an officer on the Brigade staff. Those 43 paratroopers that remained from our draft been parcelled out to the two remaining battalions and brigade units, 21 of us were going to 6 PARA. The bored captain ran through our assignments, Ping and I were off to B Company's No. 5 Platoon.

30 hours after the departure of 2 PARA the remainder of 6 Airborne Brigade returned from exercise, they swept in low over the camp in waves of Alician Defence Force Sea Wyvern tilt-rotors. The troops clumped back to their billets tired and stinking after the final phase, a testing 20 hour live fire exercise to being the cleaning and de-grunging process.

Ping and I watched them in companionable silence. Ping Johnson had come across to us from Wellon's 102 PARA some years before on exchange and he simply hadn't left. He'd met and married a local York girl when serving with 15 Air Assault Brigade in the north of England. He was a likeable and amiable soldier, whose nickname came from his willingness to be volunteered for the more mundane barracks tasks that most other soldiers avoided like the plague. Tall for a paratrooper, he was an excellent soldier, although his personal admin occasionally let him down, I had no idea why he was still a private. Because he'd spent a fair bit of time in Yorkshire we found we had quite a bit in common. Plus I think he saw it as a duty to take the new kid under his wing.

Eventually we were summoned from our block by a stocky corporal in muddy, stinking combats. 'Johnson? Anderson?' I jumped to attention, whilst Ping uncoiled himself from his bunk. 'At ease,' he waved a hand, then offered it. 'I'm Corporal Farrar, Two Two Charlie. Tony will do, I don't stand on ceremony.'

'Ping.'

'Jamie.'

'Right. The rest of the lads are in Block 17, get your whistles and parrots together and I'll see you over there. No rush'

2 Section, 5 Platoon, B Company, 6th Battalion of The Parachute Regiment was huddled at the end of a prefab crowded by the rest of 5 Platoon. We stumbled down the end with our kit, where the section was busily cleaning their various weapon systems. The densely muscled Tony saw us coming and pointed us over to a spare bunk, Ping sank onto the bottom bed and so I was relegated to the un-favoured top bunk.

'Right lads, this is Ping Johnson. This is Jamie Anderson.' He turned to gesture to the other troopers. 'Charlie Fireteam is myself, Fish Williams is point gunner, Vickers team is Dave and Cammy Ferguson. Delta Fireteam commander is Lance Corporal Alan Little and Iain Ferguson, Cammy's brother. You two guys are going to be delta's Vickers team. Okay?'

It suited me down to the ground.

Snuff Movie: Part 1

The view swayed and jerked with the movement of the Raven as it streaked through the upper atmosphere. The toms looked nervous beneath their visors and masks, there was little of the usual joking of a drop, but then no-one had ever done one for real before.

'Red light! Three minutes! Three minutes!' The noise blared in the cabin over the intercom. 'Landing Zone is secure. Repeat. Landing Zone is secure.' There was a murmur of relief in the crowded cabin. 'Thank fuck for that!' came a mutter. The toms gripped their weapons tighter and nervously re-ran their targeting diagnostics.

'One minute. Turning on final.' The compartment became eerily quiet apart from the noise of the engines as the Raven slowed, shuddered and cycled to veetol mode. 'Thirty seconds. Stand by, Stand by.' The heavily laden troops kneeled up, restrained now only by the quick release harness. 'Ten seconds.' The view swept across pales faces, some of which now wore a tight, mad-eyed grin, others just looked sick. 'I have the pathfinders visual. Three. Two. One.' The Raven hit the ground hard, rocking on its undercarriage and sending the soldiers crashing together. Hydraulic rams on overcharge smashed the ramp open. The toms struggled to unbuckle themselves and charge out into immediate defensive positions, dragging their Bergens with them.

In to the view against the stream of paratroopers came a soldier in a soft hat and TISS rig, a German SK-19 tucked under his arm. He talked straight into the camera.

A soft Geordie accent asked, 'Delta Two Zero Alpha?' The view nodded up and down. 'Phantom Three Two Alpha. Sarn't Haynes. Follow me.' The camera flicked back to another soldier laden under his Bergen and the extra weight of an up-link and then staggered after the fast moving Pathfinder. There was an immense roar that sent the view staggering as the Raven boosted away.

The Pathfinder Sergeant led the way to an OP sanger cum command post and dropped into it. It had a rough and ready quality too it, they'd blown the positions with charges. A Pathfinder was at the far end plugged into an up-link, he looked up without expression. The view swung back to the Sergeant who was wrestling with a smart map, the view shook briefly.

'They're just putting down some more holes in the reserve position. Now sir, we are currently in this location.' He swept a stylus over the map, highlighting areas in blue. 'Now all we've seen so far have been refugees and a few of the rear guard, some Azanians but mostly French Colonial troops. However this is the prime flanking route into the perimeter. The CT's aren't brilliant sir, but they are bloody persistent expect them here at some stage.

'Now this position and the two platoon positions to the rear give you great enfilade shots onto the road as it emerges from the forest. That is your killing area. Where you are vulnerable is 100 metres beyond this edge of the wood there is a small valley through which this river runs from right to left. Needless to say sir, that is a perfect FUP. Certainly cover it with automatics and remotes, but a standing patrol might be a good idea as well sir. It's all in the overlay download.'

The view bobbed up and down. 'Right, thanks sarn't. Where are you moving to now?'

'Once we've done the handover and downloads, we're off into battle-group reserve.'

'See you in hell then sarn't.'

'You too sir. Mine's a pint if you get there first.'

Range Safety

Delta Fireteam waited in dead ground for our turn on the battle range. Iain was 30 metres away 'up-threat' from the rest of us, the taciturn man relaxed behind his VR5. Alan Little was champing fast on a wad of chewing gum. The fireteam commander was short, fiery and a bundle of energy at the best of times. He wasn't a brilliant soldier by any means but he made up for it by working himself and his soldiers as hard as he could. He was studying his map intently.

'Right. Ping, Jamie.' He gestured to the map with his stylus, he had the magnification right up. 'Right we're here. The range runs up this re-entrant here ending at this ruined building here. What I want you guys to do is.' He spun the map around to face us. 'Right, when we get the go I'm going to bring in the mortars. Right, when that happens I want you to move up this little stream here. Seen?'

'Seen,' we echoed.

'Crawl up to the top here and that will give you clean shots up the rest of the re-entrant. Hopefully with that fire support position you shouldn't have to move much to support me and Iain moving down the way.

'If not. Usual drills, move round following our route in. We'll cover you. Remember watch your targets. This is a CQB range so we'll all be pretty close. Ping really watch the splatter radius on that LPW okay? Right, I'm ugly enough as it is without a face full of plasma making it worse! Jamie you've just done the course on the Vickers so I expect great things from you!' From the range came the sound of the first rounds as the 4 platoon fireteam in front of us began their run on the battle range.

I was seriously nervous at this point. Although I'd done plenty of field firing this was my first time with the battalion. The toms would forgive you an awful lot of misdemeanours if you could cut the mustard as a marksman, and be utterly merciless in picking you apart if you weren't. Expecting the CQB range I'd taken the short barrel with the VR5, it would reduce my long range accuracy above 600m but it was much easier to manoeuvre with at close quarters. The weapon was a couple of years old, nicely worn in and balanced. Its serial number, 978 237, was already engraved on my soul.

I had a 200 round cassette of 7.5mm caseless ball ammo loaded, although I'd yet to make the weapon ready. For the third time I went through the diagnostics checks, making sure the weapon was properly integrated into my helmet TISS. The monacle image over my left eye was sharp and giving me good readings and the 'hot spot' estimated aiming point swept nicely as I moved the weapon. When I took on the first pressure of the trigger the laser ranger would activate and its readings would increase the accuracy of the hot spot.

I noticed Alan grinning at me. 'Still working is it kid?' I grinned and nodded back, trying to relax a bit. From the direct of the range came a running figure wearing a luminous safety vest. It was our platoon commander, an alarmingly young looking man, he slid into our dead ground and came to a halt next to Alan.

'Now now, Two Two Delta. What are ugly guys like you doing on a nice range like this?'

'All right Boss,' replied Alan. 'How goes it?'

'No bad Corporal L, no bad.' He removed his helmet to scratch his close cropped blond hair. 'Right guys. Quick Battle Orders.' Alan brought out his notebook to scratch down vital information.

'Ground: the same as we've been operating on so far. Going is quite tough. Objective is an enemy occupied building at the head of the re-entrant behind me, to be known as YELLOW. It has been freshly occupied and is not fortified nor have any remote sensors or automatics been deployed. Further detail is in the dynamic overlay.

'Situation. Enemy forces. Enemy band Bravo Three has been reduced by air action and we are mopping up isolated pockets of resistance before the enemy can regroup. Strength is between three and five individuals with standard weapons. Friendly forces. The battalion is committed to consolidation of brigade control of region. Company is continuing to clear this sector. The platoon is conducting dispersed pursuit operations to destroy the enemy before they can regroup. You will have access to battalion mortars on call through platoon tac.

'Mission: Bravo Two Two Delta is to completely destroy the enemy at YELLOW. Mission: Bravo Two Two Delta is to completely destroy the enemy at YELLOW.

'Coordination: you are to commence the operation immediately on call. You are in the FUP, LD is the forward edge of the FUP.

'Command: I'm on Company tac 1. Range safety is on Company tac 2.

'Any questions?' Alan paused thoughtfully and then shook his head. 'Good stuff. How are you doing Anderson? Fitting in okay?'

'Fine thank you sir.'

'Good, you've got a good pair of fireteam commanders to learn from. Make the best of it.' He paused looking around, then looked straight at me. 'Have a good time the other cycle in the Moor?' I started blushing like a girl.

Suddenly my earphones boomed 'STOP!!! STOP!!! All callsigns unload. Repeat all callsigns unload ' The platoon commander stood up, looking around, then ran back towards the range. I disengaged the cassette and cleared my Vickers.

'What's up Alan?' He'd swiftly changed tac channels onto the safety net, soon after he'd started laughing. 'That wanker Steve Fullerton has cut it a bit too fine with his muzzle clearance on his LPW and managed to back-splash himself with plasma. Oh well, chill out guys we're not going anywhere for a while. Get a brew on Ping'

They brought in the stand-by tiltwing to rush the unfortunate Private Fullerton to the nearest surgical unit. Soon after the range opened again and we went through it twice that day without incident. Steve turned out to have a 'Blighty One' and was shipped back to Earth to have his mangled hand and forearm replaced. We couldn't work out whether he was the unluckiest man in the battalion or the luckiest. We did know that we couldn't accurately call him a wanker for a good few months, unless he was ambidextrous that was.

Snuff Movie: Part 2

The green image swung drunkenly around catching a clutch of nervous faces streaked with cam cream, one gave a tight thumbs up. The helmet flicked and the first man moved out, stepping cautiously around a token strip of razor wire and bringing his Vickers Gun tight into his shoulder.

The whole formation patrolled out, their formation was probably too tight given their night vision aids but with a four man patrol the commander's control of the limited available firepower took priority over safety from indirect fire threats. The patrol commander was on the left of the team's diamond formation prodding the lead scout forwards with quick hand signals. They passed through a stand of *Crapaud* hover fighting vehicles that had rolled into the company's killing areas earlier in the day. Fires still flickered in some hulks and all the rest quietly glowed with the energy residue of the missiles that destroyed them. The quiet mounds of alien bodies lay all around.

They moved into the tree line and the already cautious speed slowed even further, but never stopped entirely. The patrol was so painstaking that it would have gladdened the heart of the stoniest SI at Brecon's Tactics Wing. Even without the heart rate monitors the nervousness of the team was evident. 100 metres beyond the tree line they began to drop into a steep sided gully thick with brush. There was a jumpy edit and the emerged on the other side, the moving map display tied into the inertial nav (sat nav was u/s as the Kafers had downed all the sats) showed that they were some 600 metres short of the outskirts of the town.

The patrol started picking its way through the scrub, then the view jerked as the soldier wearing the camera stumbled. He stopped himself from falling by bracing his knee and hand on a low, convenient rock and cursed under his breath. The rock moved and he jumped up, a black and alien face blinked up at him. Five rapid shots rang out half blinding the camera as wounds erupted on the creature. All hell broke loose, long and ragged bursts from the Vickers guns hosed down the forest.

'We're in a harbour! They're on the ground!' Shrieked the patrol leader as he pumped yet more shots into the Kafer. The undergrowth erupted as the alien soldiers stumbled to their feet.

'ERV! ERV!' Shouted the rear gunner. He squeezed off aimed shots from the plasma gun as he did so keying off thermal which showed up the difference between human and Kafer in stark contrast. The LPW kicked into his shoulder and the rearing bodies started falling. The roar of the VR started up by his side as oppo dropped into position. 'Move! Move!'

The patrol leader ran back ten metres beyond the two men of the Vickers team, then turned and started shouting. He picked off two bodies with short bursts of flechettes then turned to the grenades. 'Keep moving! Back to the gully!' The white phosphorous grenades bloomed amongst the trees, igniting the still stumbling aliens. 'Move! ERV! ERV!' He fired two more bursts and realised his was the only weapon firing, then turned and sprinted.

'Two Three Delta, This is Two Zero Alpha.' A calm voice talked over the radio. 'Send contact report, over.'

The man panted heavily. 'No shit!' He panted again then added. 'Contact! wait out!' Trees whipped by and the deep throated roar of Kafer weapons started up. He swore explosively as he stumbled into the gully, tripping and falling. He crashed into his lead scout who collapsed back with him deeper into the gully.

'Stop fucking about,' sneered the rear gunner. 'And get to the other side and cover us!' The rear gunner finished refreshing his magazine and resumed scanning from the edge of the gully.

The patrol commander righted himself, pulling the lead scout up as well and headed to the far side of the gully. 'Two Zero Alpha, Contact. We need the QRF, over. Wrong! We're extracting. Request QRF over!'

'Roger, QRF on its way. What is enemy strength and location over?'

'Ahhh, platoon strength plus.' A map display flickered on the screen. 'Grid 7834 9173, Grid 7834 9173. Over'

'Roger. Out'

The rear gunner flashed a look across at his oppo in the Vickers team, who returned a lupine grin, 'well, this is shit isn't it?' He looked back, thermal shapes resolved through the forest back-lit by the phosphorus and burning trees. 'Give them a quick rev then we fuck off back across the gully. Okay?' 'Gotcha.'

An intense burst of firing erupted across the gully and the patrol commander pulled the gauss rifle tight into his shoulder. The firing lasted less than two seconds, the prolonged whoop of a VR on high rate counter-pointed by the tinny ring of the LPW ejecting plasma cells. It was almost instantly replied to from a position across to the right. He went to grenade mode but only heard a dull click, then hit the deck as return fire sizzled towards him through the trees.

'Hello Delta Two Three Delta, this is Sierra Two Three Echo. In position at edge of wood. I have two of your callsign visual. I have no Charlie Tango visible. Over.'

'Roger. We have figures two in gully. Once they are clear we'll extract out. Can you cover us? Over!' There was a brief pause then a snappy; 'Roger, out.'

The two men of the Vickers team crawled out of the gully, scrambling through the undergrowth. As they did there was a rush of shapes. The lead scout's VR barked out in short bursts, the patrol commander tried to fire but the rifle was still on grenade mode. He flipped modes and a scream ripped through the air. He chopped out short bursts at the figures who melted back into the forest. The screaming continued and he hosed the magazine into the far side of the gully. Slow moving tracer rounds flashed back at him.

The life was bubbling out of the lead scout in thermal technicolour as the rear gunner dragged him along the mossy floor, keeping himself as low as possible. The heavy Thud Gun rounds were exploding in the branches and foliage above him but the lip of the gully and a small dip hid them from the worst of the direct fire. The commander crashed into them, grabbed a hand hold on the man's assault rig and started dragging. The Vickers gunner remained quietly behind, waiting for the first rush of the aliens over the lip.

The patrol commander was breathing very quickly, his vital signs spiking dangerously on the display. He glanced continuously to the flanks. The Vickers gunner could hear them coming up the bank and pulled the gun in tight.

The bank exploded either side of him, waves of heat blasting over him. Alien screams came from the gully, they'd been hit with heavy plasma fire blasting through the lip of the gully. 'This is Sierra Two Three Echo, we have them suppressed.' The radio voice was crisp. 'Will the guy with the VR please get out of the way so we can call in the mortars. We've got you covered.'

The screen cut to the almost God-like view provided by a Bowman combat walker's sensor suite. The struggles of the patrol to save the life of the lead scout were in perfect clarity. As were the almost comical attempts of the Kafers to avoid the big plasma rounds.

The rear gunner had just won his latest fight. He'd just managed to stabilise the scout. As he did a humanoid Bowman crashed through the forest and knelt before him, its weapon ports smoking. It scooped the badly injured paratrooper into his arms with surprising tenderness and led the small patrol out of the forest. As they did, artillery and mortar rounds began to fall into the trees across the gully.

Hearts and Minds

I woke in the strangely clean smelling sheets of the cheap hotel. The woman lay beside me, long dark hair falling across clean linen and snowy white skin alike. By any measure she was stunning. She was called Victoria, not Vicky, definitely not Vic and absolutely not V. Victoria.

She was the youngest daughter of a middle class family in Heorot, her father a career civil servant. She was witty, intelligent, intimidatingly well read and quite a bit older than me. I'd seen her in a bar in Grendal's Moor one night. She'd been the centre of attention in the middle of a clutch of the battalion's officers. On a bet from Ping I'd gone across to ask her to dance, she'd accepted, eventually (how?) we'd ended up in bed together. It might have made me some enemies amongst the officers pulling a stunt like that. It had definitely been worth it.

She was a civilian employee of the Alician Defence Forces, some sort of analyst. Her assignment to Grendal's Moor was the Alician equivalent of exile to the Dunkleheim mines for Bavarians. She had told him the night before that she'd acquired a *reputation* in Heorot and so was no longer welcome in her father's home. She'd studied that summer for acceptance in the RSN's Intelligence Service, but had failed the entrance tests. Now she was saving to leave Alicia, to start again somewhere else. She sounded bitter.

I saw her a few times after the night, on one rare 40 hour leave she took me into Aliceport. She was dressed to the nines, while I was in the casuals that were the only civvy clothes I owned at the time. Aliceport was stunning, it was like no city I had ever seen. It was carved into gigantic terraces on the side of a huge peninsular that jutted out into the Rhadamanthine Ocean. The buildings vaulted into the sky, clustering around the enclosed arcologies that were the centrepiece of the whole city.

The buildings were all robust and somewhat austere on the outside, to help protect them from the vagaries of the coastal weather patterns. Inside the arcologies though the huge interior spaces revelled in a riot of colour and formal hanging (literally) gardens. They were hugely technologically advanced as well. However I never quite got used to the way I was being looked at, only kids would stare openly but all the adults would regard me warily as well. Later that night in bed in a sumptuously expensive suite at the Henry X, she told me it was because of my skin.

I was distantly part Ugandan on my father's side of the family and distantly part Moroccan on my mother's side. However this heritage was strong enough to give me a light brown skin colour (coincidentally shared by a good proportion of the British Army's soldiers). She explained that there were very few people of mixed race on Alicia and those that were had come to be regarded with suspicion. Had I not been with her I may well have been stopped by the police or hassled by a group of youths.

I never went back to Aliceport. Grendal's Moor, for all its lack of sophistication, at least accepted you at face value.

Victoria left Alicia before I did, although our relationship had fizzled out long before then. She got a position with the big multi-nationals back on Earth, a fate she seemed more than happy with.

Snuff Movie: Part 3

The last of the rearguard came through before the dawn; a scant platoon of Azanian hover tanks and a bare dozen infantrymen clinging to the blackened and blistered hulls. The shattered looking commander, his black skin almost grey with fatigue, passed on what he could to the OC. His eyes flickered listlessly. The main body of enemy armour was following him and he'd only just made it back through an attempted ambush. The OC asked him to remain with the company to act as a reserve; he just shook his head and led his men away towards the LZ.

The trenches looked unfinished, blown with explosive they'd been reinforced with soil scraped into sandbags but there'd been no time to put in overhead cover on all of them. The men were ready in the early dawn light some still munching on their rations.

The platoon commander moved from trench to trench, re-assuring the men, checking them on their arcs, informing them that the enemy were on their way.

'When's the uplift boss?'

'Dunno, keep steady.'

'Boss! Boss!' A head poked out of the command sanger they'd inherited from the Pathfinders. 'Boss, they're coming! Just passed remote four.'

'Stand to! Stand to!' The screen made a jerky cut.

The APC was recognisably alien. High sided, boxy with no concessions to stealth and it clanked along on tracks. Several of the men suppressed laughter.

'Let 'em into the killing area. Don't fire until they've passed the hulks two platoon.' The APC was joined by five others, alien soldiers crowded the upper deck swaying with the motion. 'Anyone see any armour?'

'Shit, they've got to see us.'

'Maintain VP! Two section take the front of the convoy, three section take the rear.'

The APC's trundled unconcerned along the roadway passed a pair of destroyed vehicles. The alien soldiers clapped and hooted at the sight of the burned out AFVs and the bodies alongside them. The volley of missiles reached out from the human positions on the low ridges. There was no reaction from the APC's and sharp cracks of the missile detonations rumbled back to the human positions. Black smoke erupted and bodies could be seen cart wheeling in to the sky. Most of the vehicles stopped and brewed up, white smoke pouring from the hulls. Two more swung off the road trailing smoke and bodies. A second wave of missiles sped towards them.

Machine gun fire started up from the paratroopers positions and was soon joined by plasma bolts. It lashed down onto the shattered column, picking off the alien soldiers who stumbled about the killing area. Mortar fire also arced in to the maelstrom, shrapnel pinged off breached armour plate. Return fire flickered back, tracer seeking targets, rounds exploding into sandbags.

The firefight lasted 15 minutes, one sided despite the persistence of the aliens trying to close onto the main position. Snipers concealed out on the forward slope killed three Kafers mere metres from the rifle trenches. Finally four walkers moved forward from the reserve position and summarily dispatched the remaining resistance.

The platoon commander sagged back into his sanger.

'So then Sarn't Hal. That wasn't too bad.' His hands shook visibly. 'Was it like that on Aurore?'

'Nah. They didn't have any armour by the time we got there. But the infiltration was always the same.' The screen swung about as if to check his words. 'They'll keep on coming, getting smarter and better. Whilst we just get tired and run out of ammo. We're sitting ducks out here boss, mark my words.'

The sergeant sprung up, stooping to leave the sanger and started bellowing. 'One section keep watching that wood-line! Don't start switching off! 2 i/c's where are my ammo states, CASREP, DESTREP? You are starting to mong it people! Section commanders, get them gripped!'

In Space, No One Can Hear You Prevaricate

Far above Beowulf hung a vast constellation of starships of almost every model and from every starfaring nation. The vast majority of them were merchant ships, slow moving long-haulers forced from their routes in the outer French Arm. Many had slipped through Kafer occupied systems to make it to what they hoped was safety in the lee of the Reserve Fleet. There were some famous names amongst them *L'Oriente*, *Colonial Star II* and *Le Canard Caoutchouc*, survivors of long runs behind the lines.

Once at Queen Alice's Star the merchants had been pressed into military service by the commander of the Reserve Fleet, the British Vice-Admiral Graham. Some had gone willingly, some grudgingly and not a few coerced by marine boarding parties. Some of the merchants were busy in the supply chain back to the Core, bringing in the thousands of soldiers and fighting machines that were flooding onto Beowulf. Others hid in the system, already loaded with combat supplies, ready to support any human counter-attack to Kimanjano and beyond.

Far out-numbered by the merchants was the small, glamorous, transitory presence of the privateers. Converted merchants or couriers, the privateers were mostly government owned or leased ships with additional crew members and ex-space navy captains. Even equipped with tweaked engines and weaponry they were no match for Kafer warships. However they were capable of picking off enemy space fighters from ambush or running down the myriad transports operating in the Kafer lines of communication. Most vitally though they supplemented the regular space navy couriers that made runs through enemy space keeping dispatches and information moving between the fleets and the planets. There were also famous privateers: *Avenger*, *Kingfisher*, *Minerva* and the missing *Schadenfreude*. The valiant, doomed *Bonne Homme Richard* amongst many others.

The most important part of the armada were the warships of the Reserve Fleet. Like sharks ceaselessly cruising in the deep they roamed the emptiness of Queen Alice's Star system on eternal patrol. Surrounded by layers of fighters, corvettes, frigates and destroyers were the cruisers, battleships and the single carrier that represented the core of the Fleet's fighting power. Originally a mostly British force, the Fleet had been continuously reinforced by French, American, German and Ukrainian ships whilst still more warships from other nations patrolled the vital convoy routes back to Earth.

The Fleet built around *Ark Royal* and *Britannia*, *Columbia* and *Prince of Wales*, *Charlemagne* and the flagship *Victory* was the most powerful human fleet ever gathered, but its very multi-nationality was proving its downfall. Admiral Graham, his reputation gained chasing pirates on the Chinese Arm, was forced to spend his time trying to stay on top of an increasingly poisonous power game played out between the contingent commanders and their accompanying diplomatic Viceroy. He was stymied strategically, unable to launch all but the smallest raids since the Entente mission or risk tearing his Fleet apart.

So instead the vast and mighty Reserve Fleet waited astride the only route to Earth, waiting for 'Der Tag', the day when the Kafers would come and try and batter their way through to humanities home. Waiting while the Kafers rampaged through the outer colonies, hampered only by the battered and hunted Fleets of Borodin and Rochemont. On the ground on Beowulf the massed divisions of troops waited as well, waiting for the outcome of the Fleet's planned Battle of Beowulf to decide their fate. Whether they were to counter-attack the occupied colonies in a war of liberation, to defend Beowulfian soil from Kafer assault, or just to be exterminated in a ceaseless bombardment from orbit.

Death From Above

We were no longer 6 Airborne Brigade, we were now 6 Assault Brigade! Someone in the MoD had finally realised that the Gaylord marines of 6 Commando Brigade were so dispersed around the fleet that they couldn't really be expected to fulfil their pre-War task of clearing a planetary landing zone. 2 PARA's fine showing on Kimanjano had shown the MoD who could really be trusted with the task. In our humble opinion we were the finest soldiers humanity had to offer, now we were given a task that would allow us to prove it.

Consequently we received an extra training cycle getting us better acquainted with the assault ships and the Raven assault boats that they used. As 2 PARA had found the tactics of a planetary assault weren't too difficult and had more than a passing resemblance to conventional Air Assault tactics. Secure the landing zone, defend it, hand over to the armour and off into reserve. No dramas really, I don't know why the marines made such a fuss about it.

As well as the name change we received a raft of new specialists and units to better suit us to the assault role. These included Army Air Corps pilots, commando engineers, RSC logisticians and a unit of orbital fire controllers. It would be these last guys, a mix of Army, RSN and even RN and RAF personnel, who could really save our bacon during an armoured counter-attack on a landing zone. That's if the much vaunted Fleet could actually win a battle against the Kafers and win orbital superiority.

Aside from the brief frisson of excitement at our change of role and title we became well and truly stuck in the training regime. In fact as more and more troops arrived from Earth our training priority dropped away and with it much of the interesting training. Instead we did more and more tabbing about the countryside which although very Airborne, gets pretty boring after a while. On the plus side we did

get down to Grendal's Moor with alarming frequency, and battling in the streets with other units and chatting up women kept us pretty sharp in more ways than one.

Snuff Movie: Part 4

'Shit! There's another one. Get him Joe.' The audio distorted with the noise of a VR chopping out short bursts.

'Got the fucker... Get me some more fucking rounds.' The view swung to a young soldier checking the ammo feed into the gun, his face was drawn and reflected stark terror through his sweat smeared cam-cream. 'Good shooting Joey lad.' The soldier looked up briefly from the gun, wide-eyed, the scrim on his helmet had been sliced by shrapnel, the visor shattered. He gave a quick thumbs up and then he leaned back into his sanger, covering his arcs.

The view stumbled and moved past a knot of recumbent paratroopers to the rear of the position. One had been cleanly decapitated by a plasma bolt, they were all on their backs, their ammo pouches having been rifled for ammunition. The view bobbed and muddy ground raced along with the soldier's knees and boots showing at the bottom of the screen.

'Hal! Hal!' The platoon sergeant swung around in the shell scrape where he huddled by the body of the platoon commander. The wire from the radio to his helmet swung with him, the big up-link effectively tied the sergeant to an area some two metres in diameter. A few single rounds rang out and the view swung in that direct then swung back. 'Hal. We need some more seven point five for the Vickers.' The stocky sergeant nodded, 'I fucking know that Mac. Were down to less than four hundred in the reserve.' He brought up a short belt of rounds, 'here's a ton. Make them count.'

'Any chance of more mortar support, the bastards are fucking thick out in that dead ground.'

'No chance at the moment, they're keeping their powder dry. The French fighters have stopped flying as well. I think recall could come in an hour or so.'

'That's going to leave it tight for us to break clean.' The tired sergeant didn't bother to reply.

∞

There was a rush at the wire on the right. The firefight raged briefly, grenades cracking into the breach. Mortar rounds whistled in and phosphorous blossomed in the night. Alien screams came in eerily over the sound of the firing. One paratrooper jumped up to get better shots at the burning, stumbling figures then was pulled down by another soldier. The firing stopped, but the mortar rounds kept on coming in, now Shake and Bake with HE in the mix as well.

∞

'Shit Hal... there can't be more than 20 of the bastards out there.'

The sergeant gave a cynical laugh, 'More than there are of us in here.'

'They've got to realise we're down to our last rounds now.'

'I think they're in a similar situation. If they can get a couple of APCs or an ammo replen up here we are in the shit and no mistake.'

∞

Finally the evacuation had started on the perimeter. The Ravens were boosting out over the position, dumping their ordnance at in depth targets, before powering off to the *Normandy*. After the second pass the men cheered the navy crews as they tore past, they even stood up in the open for the first time in thirty hours. The valley around them was a wasteland of craters and burning Crapaud vehicles, the Ravens added in new pyres with every pass, beyond the woods secondary explosions ripped through the town.

'Stop that fucking about!' The Sergeant stomped up and down the lines, gripping his men back into battle-discipline. 'We aren't out of the shit yet, get your weapons sorted out! 2 i/c's on me! Lets get the last of the ammo divvied up.' Despite the Sergeant's best effort morale was high with the platoon's survivors; even the grim task of bagging up their comrade's bodies didn't damp it down. There were

still enemy out beyond the wire, a couple made an outflanking attack but were cut down by sniper fire from near the supporting platoon's position.

In 15 minutes the first two Ravens arrived for the company, picking up the rear platoons first and attracting some inaccurate indirect fire. They pivoted and returned fire, rippling out missiles and long lines of cannon shells into the darkness. They were on the ground only for a minute as the battered paras raced on, dragging the dead and injured with them.

'Stand-by!' shouted the Sergeant into the platoon net. 'Pick-up in figures 6! Get ready to move'
'Why didn't they pick us up with the rest of the company? They could have risked it?'
'Clear the net!'

The Kafer indirect fire increased in intensity, a plasma round splashed into a soldier's sanger and blasted him bloody. A pair of paras swarmed over to him, trying to hold him together with shell dressings and willpower. One of them went down as well, shrapnel slicing through his upper legs. His femoral artery gushed blood onto the ground.

'Bastards! Fucking bastards!' The Sergeant swore and tore out of his shell scrape. 'Prepare to move! We're leaving!'
'Hal! Can the Ravens hit this fucking mortar?'
'They're not fucking coming! The fucking fleet is bastard fucking off! We're moving now, I'm not staying on this hill one bastard minute longer.'
'Hal, we'll never get through the perimeter! Jordie and Ken aren't going anywhere!'
'Mac! I don't give a shit. I'm going to fucking give it a try. Kill that fucking video feed'

The rest was just static.

A Planet Far, Far Away

Tony Farrar was our leader and our totem. He'd been there, done it and bought two or three T-shirts whilst he was at it. He was unflappable, impeccable and immensely tough in the field. The platoon commander sought his opinion at every opportunity and the platoon sergeant hardly bothered our section with the usual petty harassment. He could drink his not inconsiderable weight in pints whilst still being able to charm the birds from the trees. He had an effect on Alician women I've yet to see equalled, he mixed charm, courtesy and roguishness in equal measure.

He was from a military family with a long heritage of service, reaching back to a VC with the paras in World War III. He'd been born in Aldershot on Earth but raised in its namesake on Beta Canum. His father had transferred from the Royal Engineers to take a commission in the New Africa Regiment whilst emigrating with his new family. Tony was a lively child, then a somewhat unruly adolescent and had become a boy soldier at the earliest opportunity, earning a place with a locally stationed Para battalion.

Peacetime soldiering hadn't suited him, even on the frontier, and he left after his three years to join the Légion Étrangère, the French Foreign Legion. He'd survived the brutal training alongside the human flotsam that composed the bulk of the Legion's strength. He'd made it into the Legion's elite I/2e REP and served with them on Aurore in the darkest days of the battles with the Kafer invaders. He'd made several more trips back to Aurore and then stayed on the disputed world with a training team.

He had an endless supply of stories from Aurore: fast moving battles in the depths of *Le Bled*, crawling through the heart of the stinking swamps of *Novoa Kiyev*, raiding off *la Mer de Sal*. Walking openly up to three Kafer soldiers and shooting them all neatly in the head while they looked at him curiously. Nearly being killed by a bomb set by one of the myriad political factions in Tanstaaf City whilst body-guarding a French General. He didn't tell them out of self-aggrandisement, well mostly not, but as warnings and lessons to us young, impressionable soldiers.

After his five year stint with the Legion he'd returned home to New Africa to settle down and recuperate from the wounds he'd suffered that night in Tanstaaf. However the Kafers had come again, smashing Hochbaden, and he'd returned to the Colours invoking his reserve commitment and being welcomed back into the Parachute Regiment with open arms.

With his scars and shaven head, brown skin and tattoos he was an obvious target for young Alician rowdies who sometimes travelled up to Grendal's Moor from the cities looking for trouble (and usually finding it.) However I never saw him have to raise his fists, or voice, in anger. He could diffuse tension in a dozen ways and I always wondered how he could read people so well.

Tony was our leader and our totem. With him we felt invincible. Naturally we were to be proved seriously wrong.

Snuff Movie: Part 5

'Right gentlemen, you've just seen some camera footage from the western end of the perimeter that should give you a taste of what 2 PARA have faced. It is also a heads-up for what you may well be facing in the near future. A more detailed de-brief will be available once the Slime have finished their analysis.' Major Quinn looked up from the podium. 'I'm now going to run through the official brief on Operation ENTANTE. This is restricted of course, but take notes for when you write your memoirs.'

'The Kafers entered the Kimanjano system on the 5th of December 2301. However their strategy was notably more cautious than it's ever been before, and as a result the first contact didn't take place until the 12th of December. The Kafers came out on top as faulty tactics and poor liaison between the German and Japanese defenders allowed the aliens to defeat them in detail. As a result most of the system defence was left to fighters from the *Lafayette* and MSIF operating from concealed bases in the belt.' As the OC spoke the projector constantly updated itself to reflect what he was talking about, bathing him in black, green or blue light in turn.

'The landings began on the 17th with the usual orbital attacks preceding the assault. However the French fighter operations acted as an effective fleet-in-being and restricted the number of ships available to deliver these assaults. The ground fighting was especially fierce, especially in the areas around Fromme. French and American regular troops held the main positions whilst guerrilla units used the hills to deliver raids against the Kafer rear-echelon.

'Initial resistance was very effective, with joint operations playing to the strengths of each of the national contingents being carried out with aplomb. The Battle of the Nouvelle Vendee where the US Marines combined with Legionnaires to annihilate a Kafer column attacking a concentration of guerrilla fighters is a prime example. However attrition and Kafer reinforcements including heavy units began to swing the campaign in favour of the aliens. By the 1st of January the French were only just hanging on to the northern outskirts of Fromme, the whole Azanian colony had been overrun and fall back positions were being prepared to the west of La Trove.

'At this time planning was begun for an attempt to evacuate the remaining field forces should the defence fail entirely. However despite the sterling work by the *Lafayette* only Rochemont's or the Reserve Fleet had the capability to open the way for the troopships. At this stage the Reserve Fleet was still outnumbered, however Admiral Graham put contingency planning in motion. Further Kafer heavy reinforcements landed on the 10th of January and General du Bois sent out a message that his position was becoming untenable.

'Operation ENTANTE was activated on the 12th of January and Rear Admiral Green RSN was instructed to begin final planning. On the 14th Task Force Green was formed from Anglo-French elements of the Reserve Fleet, with *Prince of Wales* as the flag. Two ground force battalions were stood to and embarked with the fleet to form a rear-guard for the operation if necessary. These were the French 2nd/8th Marine Paras and our own 2 PARA. It should be stressed here that the aims of Operation Entente were to rescue as many soldiers from Kimanjano as possible, whilst not risking substantial losses of warships.' Inevitable muttering spread round the room at that statement.

'It looked for a while as if the operation wasn't going to happen. The enemy fleet was still too strong for the operation to go ahead. I have to stress that a rapid reverse in the fighting could have resulted in the loss of all our available assault shipping. I don't need to tell you guys about how that could have been a bad thing do I? Anyway, on the 22nd the privateer *Kingfisher* arrived from Kimanjano with the news that a large Kafer squadron had left the system heading up-arm. In addition an American squadron had arrived at QAS and agreed for its cruisers to take-part in Operation Entente.

'Task Force Green arrived in Kimanjano on the 25th and began a battle of nerves with the Kafer fleet. On the ground the situation had deteriorated with the Kafer's taking the final positions in La Trove with the aid of heavy ground tanks. However a fierce action by the Americans on the right of the position allowed the main force to retreat in reasonable order to what General du Bois referred to as the *Ne Plus Ultra* line, his final defensive position in the mountains.

'The two assault ships HMS *Normandy* and IFS *Verdun* landed their troops at key points in the NPU perimeter to relieve the militia units. The evacuation continued rapidly with the troopships filling up with rear echelon and militia troops, in the meantime the Franco-American rear-guard was fighting back from La Trove, and the main Kafer forces were close behind. Orbital bombardment was employed to buy the retreating units some breathing space. However isolated Kafer bands had already attempted to push through the NPU perimeter, but without much success.

'With most of the human forces now in the perimeter, only armoured and artillery units remained to back up the Paras. In the meantime the evacuation went into overdrive, increasing numbers of human refugees were also arriving begging to be taken off as well. But strict rules had to be followed, and many remained behind once the ships left.

'The 27th saw the first main attack on the *NPU* line, with several different columns attacking in an uncoordinated manner at both British and French positions. The prepared positions combined with counter-attacks by remaining US and French armour staved off most of the Kafer mechanised forces during the night. However the daylight saw increasing infantry attacks, and with ammunition and support dwindling casualties in the perimeter started rising quickly.

'By midday COMASLAN decided to call an end to the operation. The perimeter posts were isolated with some Kafer bands now behind them in amongst the landing zones. In addition a major Kafer battle group had returned to the system, and time was running out. The assault ships sent down their landers to extract the surviving rearguard, however some landers and troops had to be left behind as the Kafer battle group moved towards Kimanjano. Covered by Task Force Green the landing group managed to return to QAS with no major casualties, as did the warships.

'I know most of you have lost mates with 2 PARA, and are bitter that others of them were left behind. But this operation has been pretty successful. We've managed to retrieve a division of battle hardened troops from Kimanjano, we've not lost their hard won experience. And now we have some of our own, next time we fight those fuckers we'll be fighting on our terms. Carry on Sergeant Major.'

Uneasy Listening Newsak

We paid an inordinate amount of attention to the news, Alician TV being otherwise remarkably dull, the local serial dramas were too obscure, the imported ones we'd already seen and frankly there was no decent porn. It was our link to the outside universe, even as heavily censored as it obviously was. The fall of Kimanjano was followed shortly after by the return of just over half of a battered 2 PARA, they'd taken a hammering but had stood there ground. Naturally combined with their exploits on Aurore they were very much taken with their own prowess. Such arrogance naturally led to a touch of internecine violence within the brigade between the more hot-headed toms.

Just when we thought that it couldn't get much worse it promptly did. Beta Canum 4 was the jewel in the crown of the French Arm, an almost ideal world home to some 45 million colonists from France, Germany and Britain. A breadbasket and transport hub for the whole cluster, the world had as much potential as Earth or Tirane. The brigade had been stationed there in the years before the war; all of the soldiers had families, friends and sweethearts on the world.

The Kafers came there in early February whilst on Beowulf we were all expecting an assault to come our way. The French civil authorities panicked and cut that renowned surface to orbit elevator, the Beanstalk. With it went most of their power generation facilities as well as nearly 5000 unlucky passengers lost as the beanstalk whipped away from the world (a fact hushed up at the time). The Kafers then customarily defeated the usual desultory resistance from the space navy defenders (the Germans again) and began pounding the surface and landing troops.

The news we received from the Francophone media reported that the fighting lasted only a week before capitulation. We were shocked, disbelieving and depressed. BC-4 was a well garrisoned world, ideal for both manoeuvre and guerrilla warfare. Also it had a British colony, New Africa, protected by a division of British and colonial troops. Whilst they weren't Airborne they were good soldiers, were the Kafers *that* formidable? 2 PARA's experience at Aurore and Kimanjano suggested otherwise but we began to lose a touch of our once unshakeable moral superiority all the same.

The real problem was that BCV was the brigade's home station and the news hit different people in different ways. Some became desperate to get back to BCV, others went to pieces not knowing what was happening to their loved ones. My lads took their cue from Tony, who managed to maintain an air of calm in spite of constantly worrying about his folks.

Before the war it was reckoned that planetary invasions were militarily impossible. The logistic requirements, economic dislocation and problems of suppressing a hostile indigenous population were deemed insurmountable. As a result before the war we were trained with colonial troubleshooting interventions and counter-insurgency operations in mind. The Kafers on the other hand seemed to have limitless resources and legions of fanatical soldiers who were more than willing to kill every colonist out of hand.

The bad news continued. A further British colony, Crater at Henry's Star was also taken also without much of a fight. The Kafers seemed to be massing to take that other prime colony world at 61 Ursae Majoris. News reached us that the French world at BCB was being subjected to a genocidal orbital bombardment that was pounding any settlement larger than a hamlet. Millions had surely died.

However the courageous couriers, privateers and the occasional destroyer that ran the lines also began to bring us snatches of encouragement. Admiral Rochemont, who was almost as good as he thought he was, was still holding out at Adlerhorst. The fleet cut off at Eta Bootis was still in being and under the direction of a diffident, but tactically precocious, Ukrainian had won some notable victories. Best of all though was the news that BCV-4 wasn't totally finished, the French colony was occupied but there were fierce conflicts elsewhere on the world. New Africa was still fighting, morale rose once again.

Der Tag

Quite frankly 'Der Tag' was all a bit of an anti-climax. We'd been stood to at a Landing Zone on the 7th of July ZULU, co-located with the Ravens, ready to do the immediate counter-landing operations we'd planned. The Kafer fleet had been reported leaving Kimanjano and heading our way. Naturally after a week of sitting around we'd all got completely bored, on the 12th Tony and Sarn't K had scored a jolly out onto a range to plan for us, as reserve company, to get a bit of shooting practise in. They roped me along as a driver. The range recce had taken less than an hour, so we'd spent the rest of the time in an exceptionally remote local pub. Naturally with comms turned off to avoid any unwanted interruption of our illicit pint.

By the time we rolled back into base, we found that the Battle of Beowulf had started, been fought and we'd won! Naturally it wasn't quite as simple as that but it was good enough for us and the head shed to declare Victory in our Time. It was time to hit the bar. I don't remember much more about the 12th of July!

7 PARA had a rude awakening the next 'day'; they were bounced out to help the Alicians hunt down a few Kafer troops that had made it to the surface. We also had a rude awakening. Admiral Graham was launching an immediate counter-attack and the brigade was going to be at the cutting edge.

Part III

HMS *Normandy*

Travelling in style

HMS *Normandy* was even more crowded than the *Coltman* had been, but she was a state-of-the-art vessel in anyone's estimation. She was a specialist assault ship capable of landing a battalion group of troops and their supporting arms onto a world from orbit either to secure a landing zone or conduct wide ranging raiding operations. *Normandy* had also been designed to be fast and stealthy enough to run with the main body of the Fleet or with a detached task force. She was armed and armoured well enough to fight a delaying action and run for the safety of the FTL shelf if caught by superior forces.

She'd come off the slips at Hawking Station above Tirane in late 2295 and was crashed into a long series of work up exercises culminating in PURPLE LION the first real test of the Assault Landing Group (ASLAN). *Normandy* had then mostly been involved in more exercises or moving British units around the French Arm like a conventional trooper.

Her first association with the Airborne had some when she'd run 2 PARA up to Aurore, and then brought them back only days before the Invasion had hit Hochbaden. She was never used in her envisioned raiding role though, there was never time to mass enough space force combat power to make such a mission feasible. Instead the Commandos operated off smaller ships, destroyers, frigates or privateers. The ship had been tasked to help regroup the British deployment forces at Beowulf.

So far in 2302 *Normandy* had had a very good year, alongside her French cousin *Verdun* she'd been a key part of the task force that had rescued much of the Kimanjano garrison. The deployment of 2 PARA from her decks had proven her design concept excellently under the harshest conditions. That she hadn't been able to recover all of 2 PARA we didn't blame the ship for, the task force had pulled out so quickly that she had to leave behind two of her own Raven assault boats.

At the Battle of Beowulf she and her newly commissioned sister ship HMS *Arnhem* had formed an auxiliary squadron with some of the privateers. Together they'd preyed on the vast logistical tail that followed the Kafer battle fleet. Her hull still bore the scars but they'd caused a huge scare for the aliens; their fighter escorts killed, the transports had scattered and a portion of the battle fleet was lured away from the decisive main action to try and protect them.

It had been a huge gamble to take with the RSN's only real assault capable shipping, but it had proved an astute use of weapons by Admiral Graham. The *Normandy's* crew of 'Black and Silvers' were inordinately proud of her and her austere, dryly amusing Captain. Alongside the laser burns on the hull was a freshly painted jolly roger and several kill markings.

The *Normandy* was a long, blunt, black needle packed with drives, sensors and weapons and surrounded by a pair of wide, rotating rings. One contained the troop decks and the other the bays for the 20 Ravens of 1201 Naval Interface Squadron. All in all it left little room for all the soldiers crammed on-board her. 6 PARA Battle Group and friends numbered well over 1000 strong and we were jammed in like sardines. At least unlike the stately *Coltman* this ship had a fair chance of surviving a random encounter with a Kafer squadron.

Do Not Disturb

The gap between my bunk and that above me was barely enough to allow me to roll onto my side. I wondered how some of the more heavily built guys, especially in Support Company, were getting on. All eight of us in Bravo Two Two were jammed into a 2 meter cube cabin, in addition to which our weapons, combat rig and emergency p-suits were also stored in the room with us. We were deep in the warzone and Battalion Part 1 Orders told us we were to be ready for combat at a moments notice. (We'd like to see the look on the face of any Kafer unit that tried to board us!) In practise it meant that getting in and out of the cabin became an exercise in contortionism.

The rest of the section was playing cards. I didn't gamble but as I (as the FNG or Crow) had the one of the unloved floor bunks so was getting a perfect view of the proceedings. As well of the rest of the guys feet.

I'd been spending quiet a lot of time in my pit catching up on my gonk. As soon as we'd boosted from the surface of Beowulf we'd gone onto ZULU time. My body had just about got used to the wacky Beowulf LIMA time, and now I was suddenly jolted back out of it. I was trying to drowse, but every thirty seconds a running platoon pounded passed the slightly ajar bulkhead door running round the main corridor to maintain fitness. In boots they were noisy sods.

Fish Williams was still in the game against Iain. Fish was bitching again, trying to psyche Iain out a bit, but as usual the big Scot was imperturbable.

'I can't believe 2 PARA has got the cushy job yet again. Typical, we get stuffed in this tin can and they get to travel on a bloody liner. I tell you, Dancey must be getting his leg over with Admiral Graham to get all of the gucci jobs that they do.' It was an article of faith amongst us that 2 PARA was on board the luxurious fast liner *Colonial Star II*. 7 PARA were thought to be on-board the *Arnhem*, the brigade staff were on the *De Lancey* an exploration ship assigned to the Fleet as a command vessel. That left no room for 2 PARA, people claimed to have overheard officers talking about the *CSII* being along for the ride.

'Mind you I bet the Canadians are having the best time, I bet that ship they came up on is like a mobile palace. You know how well the Canadians look after their troops.' The Canadian Airborne Regiment had recently run up to Beowulf in advance of the arrival of a Canadian Armoured Brigade, and had been attached to us. They lacked the specialist training we'd received on Beowulf but they were tough, high quality troops and were a welcome addition.

'Rubbish,' Tony lounged amongst the combat rigs. 'The *Merritt* is a troopship like the *Hollis* or the *Cooper*. It doesn't have the legs to run with this sort of flotilla. If they are along for the ride they'll be with 2 PARA on the *Colonial Star* or another ship like that.' Once on board cast iron OPSEC had been imposed. We had very little contact with the Black and Silvers and those that we did meet wouldn't talk, rumour control had gone into overdrive.

Fish lost the hand. The cards were dealt again.
'So, where do you think we are then?'

Liberation Days

Even more so than with most periods of the Kafer War, the events immediately after 'Der Tag' were all rather confusing. The post-War accounts and memoirs were tainted with the justifications and egotism of the main players. Anyone who has read Rochemont's *L'Invasion!* knows who the chief offender is. Unfortunately the combined Admiralties have kept all their after-action reports heavily classified and the official histories are still virtually worthless. As at the time I was shoe-horned into the troop decks of the *Normandy* most of this section is taken from Admiral Graham's memoirs. They are terse and partially censored at least have some level of even-handedness and strangely enough for a senior B&S officer even admits to some personal fallibility!

Graham's Fleet had paused for less than a week to recover from the bruising Battle of Beowulf. Sorting out those ships too damaged to take part in the counter-attack, those that could be temporarily repaired and those that would have to go into dry dock. As they did so an armada of transport ships closed on Beowulf and began to load troops and equipment from the surface. It was a long process and Graham didn't wait for its completion, instead he headed out in pursuit of the Kafers back towards Kimanjano. He took every available warship and a small flotilla of assault ships manned by elite troops (that's us folks!) ready to take advantage of any opportunity to liberate Kimanjano.

The remnants of the Kafer fleet were wallowing in orbit close to Kimanjano. Graham had expected 10 capital ships but instead found 8 in various states of repair. The Kafers had been arguing amongst themselves as to who was in command, vital repairs had gone uncompleted because of lack of co-operation. Re-armed with American produced missiles (which, for all the claims of the US Marines,

were in the opinion of many people the real war winning contribution made by America) Graham's Fleet fell on them like wolves.

The 3rd Battle of Kimanjano was as decisive for the humans as the 1st had been for the aliens. A further four Kafer capital ships were destroyed and the remainder badly damaged as they were driven off. The Kafer fleet train that was in-system to replenish and repair their task force was savaged and scattered causing irrecoverable damage to the Kafer war effort. Privately Graham rated the destruction of these vital assets as a greater blow to the aliens than the defeat at Beowulf. Naturally his rival Rochemont doesn't even bother to mention the incident.

It is recurrent through British military history that defensively minded British commanders who consistently achieve success are regarded as inferior to the more flamboyant, offensively minded opponents they defeat. Wellington and Napoleon are the main exhibit for the defence, but Montgomery and Rommel, Heller and Malinsky are other examples. I guess being consistent is inferior to being inconstant but with a talent for self-promotion. No matter how frequently Graham is pilloried in the international press, he saved our bacon.

In the aftermath of the battle small teams of French special forces were dropped onto Kimanjano in the face of heavy opposition. Several frigates took damage from ground-to-orbit fires and LEO proved a dangerous place to be. *L'Alsacien* barely made it to safety after internal fires caused by a missile hit killed half her crew. Footage of the crippled French frigate trailing debris across the backdrop of Kimanjano became one of the defining images of the war.

In any event the teams from 1e RPIMa and others reported that the Kafers were strongly entrenched and that the human resistance was scattered and not able to launch an effective attack to take pressure away from the landings. Instead it was decided to wait for the main liberation forces to arrive from Beowulf before launching a deliberate attack. In the meantime Graham pushed units out into neighbouring systems, scouting, screening and harassing.

The Liberation of Kimanjano was the 'big deal' of the war so far. Three brigades were to make an assault landing whilst a further five divisions would compose an immediate follow-up with a further three divisions in reserve. Kimanjano was to be a mainly French party with only the Americans and Azanians invited to play a major supporting role. The Brits, Germans and the others were to only be a part of the reserve.

French Marine Paras supported by the US Marines and Azanian Paras made assault landings north of La Trove under the cover of substantial orbital bombardment. Once on the ground though the Kafers hit back, driving straight at the planethead and for several days the result was in the balance but eventually they won out. Aided by heavy forces reinforcing the planethead and other units raiding behind the lines from orbit they cracked the Kafer offensive and hit out themselves. The campaign for Kimanjano was just beginning but already the elite assault troops had paid in blood.

By now the British, German and Commonwealth forces had slipped away from Kimanjano. We were heading to Beta Canum to take care of our own outstanding business. The French and Americans had proved themselves in the first big assault, and we were next.

Beta Canum - 4

Our Friends From The North

We'd been manning the road block for three hours now, and according to my GCS we weren't far away from dawn. The road block was some forty clicks from the centre of LZ Golf in the Meakon Valley and under the boost path. Going by the noise of the interface craft going over the landings were in full swing, if things were going well we'd have the Scots Greys Battle Group some 15 km behind us ready to counter-attack anything that probed the perimeter. In an expanding volume out from our positions OP and mobile recce patrols manned by Pathfinders and our brigade recce teams were scanning for signs of friends or enemies. The landings had been unopposed so far, but it didn't pay to get sloppy.

2 Section were actually manning the roadblock and the shallow line of Fokker mines. I don't know why we'd been lumbered with this job but we were by far the most vulnerable to enemy fire. 3 Section with a section from the anti-tanks were in positions on the high ground some 500m to our rear giving us some element of close protection. 1 Section were undertaking roaming patrols around the area. We had a Pathfinder callsign, Phantom One Three, up the road some 5km north in an OP giving us advance warning. My immediate protection rested in the shape of a shallow shell scrape and parapet of sandbags I'd constructed in 3 sweaty hours.

The only visitor we'd had so far were the OC with his Tac HQ and an old New African farmer and his wife. They'd arrived from the hills in a horse drawn trap heading back to their farm in the valley. They'd continued trying to run their farm during the nights but dared not sleep in the buildings fearing a CT sweep. Now they were heading back. Their attitude towards us was a mixed one, pleased to see us but angry we'd not got their sooner. We were to find it was a typical one.

I was catching a crafty cigarette with Dave, Charlie Fireteam's plasma gunner, who was resolutely catching up on smoking time he'd lost on the *Normandy*, when a message came in from the PC to expect visitors. We stubbed out the fags (in the space of five hours on operations I'd become a fairly serious smoker) and hid the butts under a sandbag and dusted ourselves off.

Five minutes later I spotted a pair of ACV's approaching the position from the north. I tracked them in with the VR's optics. They were heavily laden HR 500's with guns, missiles and black box counter measures hanging off them. Bundled cam nets stowed on the roll bars and above the plenum also altered their profile. Tony stood up and walked to the centre of the road he snapped his fingers at my shell scrape motioning one of us to join him. I looked at Dave, who nudged me back; I glared but stood up and walked over to join Tony. The HR 500's slowed and slalomed through the roadblock obstacles and Fokker mines coming to a halt by the side of us.

The crew were bearded, clad in stinking combats with faces filthy with cam cream and dirt. However each of them wore a crumpled sand coloured beret under a sleek black TISS rig. My jaw dropped, they were never supposed to wear those in public! The languid figure sitting behind the bonnet mounted VR-5 in the command seat uncoiled himself to stand in front of Tony.

'Morning, good to see the airborne has finally arrived.' From his cut glass accent I pegged him as originally being Guards, Cavalry or Greenjacket. 'Romeo Three Zero, we're expected' Tony nodded and relayed the information through to our Zero.

I have to admit that I was still gawking. The man in front of me looked amused, 'do we smell that bad?' 'Er, no sir.' I swallowed. 'I've never seen a rifle like that before sir, what is it?' 'Don't call me sir, only amateurs do that in the field.' He hefted the stubby bullpup. 'It's a Verbat. Custom built using Thud Gun components but much better balanced for a human. Great for living off the enemy's supplies. A good bit of kit, we build them here on New Africa.'

Tony was still talking to the PC on the net, so I plucked up my courage and asked another question. 'How come you're all wearing berets. I thought you didn't do that?' He grinned again, shaping the beret on his head with his gloved hands.

'No we don't. I still feel a bit nervous about it. Basically this world is in the shit and no mistake. There are remnants of so many different units and guerrilla forces around that it is simpler just to wear them when we're working with other units. We don't have to do half as much explaining.'

Tony finished on the net, 'okay you're clear through all the check points from here.'

'Cheers mate,' the guy folded himself back in to the command seat. The HR500 began to move off followed by the second vehicle. From the rear of that HR, surrounded by weapons and missile tubes and manning a Green Hunter firing post, a clear shaven soldier waved briefly at Tony. I recoiled backwards, nearly standing on a Fokker mine before Tony snapped me upright. The mans face was heavily scarred, with especially bad marks around his eyes, from which eerie cat-like eyes blinked at us, pupil slits heavily dilated. In seconds they were gone.

I stared at them as they departed. 'What the fuck was that? Tony?'

The corporal shrugged. 'He was a sniper in 2 PARA when I was first in. He was on Aureore with the BAT-Cube for a while. Last time I heard he'd been posted missing after a firefight in the Hotback. Looks like the Kafers took him.'

'But his eyes...'

'Pod eyes mate, look like limited editions, mil spec jobs. Some of the guys in Deuxième Rep had them. CT's must have blinded him by the looks of it.' He paused for a couple of seconds, face thoughtful under his visor. 'Get back to your position.'

Breakout

The situation on Beta Canum was confused to say the least. The Kafers had never completely occupied the planet, most of New Africa had remained free although several of her cities were taken or destroyed. The French Continent had surrendered almost entirely, the destruction of her armies in front of Premier combined with the collapse of society caused by the loss of the Beanstalk served to destroy their will to fight on. The Germans had received the next heaviest blow and fought hard losing many of her soldiers and eventually had to evacuate. New Africa was the least developed continent and had the smallest force against them, the commanders had chosen harassment to set piece battles and much of the military survived, bloodied but intact.

The Kafers had moved on without securing the planet properly, taking many of their soldiers with them and leaving a small garrison. New Africa became the centre of the resistance to the occupation scouring her own lands of marauding Kafers, containing garrisons in strong points and launching raids onto the other continents. Rochemont's Fleet attempted to liberate the world by landing a mere two brigades of Foreign Legion Paratroopers and American Marines on the planet and marched on Premier. All the élan of those two elite bodies came to nothing, the attack faltered and then almost became a rout as the Kafers reclaimed orbital superiority and landed fresh troops. Rochemont's men were abandoned and survived only by fighting their way to the relative safety of New Africa.

Another attempt at liberation was launched by Rochemont in July shortly before 'Der Tag'. This time the troops, French Colonial Paras and the soon-to-become-legendary 'Raven Brigade' landed on New Africa and joined up with the local forces and surviving Anglo-German armour already massed to support an uprising on the German Continent. The resulting 2nd Battle of Uethan had savaged the remaining Kafer manoeuvre forces but also had ground down the humans. Fortunately we arrived only days after the end of the battle with a massive influx of force. The Battle of Uethan had been a titanic struggle between two desperate forces and a vital, hard fought victory for humanity. There were still over 80 000 Kafer soldiers present on Beta Canum although, luckily, most of them were nowhere near us.

In New Africa though there were still pockets of Kafers holding key areas and infrastructure, not to mention two major cities. It was part of our job to winkle them out, at bayonet point if we had to, but hopefully with something a bit more powerful.

Fire Mission

'Fuck me! Fuck! Me.' Alan said it for all of us. 'You don't see that every day.'

The mushroom cloud towered over the intervening ridge line. The blast wave had already thrummed through our ankles and smashed down the trees on the ridge. The iconic cloud just kept on climbing.

'That is fucking outrageous.' Fish piped up. 'Awesome.'

Tony sipped scalding coffee from his scratched, battered and thoroughly disreputable looking RSN issue mug (keeps hot or cold and you can drink from it in any gravity conditions and sticks to just about any surface. Oh yeah they were as rare as rocking horse shit.) He leaned back to take in the full extent of the explosion. 'Once seen, never forgotten.'

Fish was building himself up. 'How can anything live through that? Fucking hell, we should hit every fucking Bug world like this. That would sort the fuckers out.' A crazy grin etched itself on his face. 'Fucking genocide... nah, that ain't right. Xenocide isn't it? Fucking bomb them back to the bastard stone age, or whatever was the height of their civilisation!'

'That's what they tried here Fish,' Tony said quietly. 'They've tried that on us; Aurore, here, Nous Voila, Joi, don't forget Hochbaden either.' He took another sip. 'It hasn't worked on us. What makes you think it'll work on them?'

'Oh right, live and let live, eh? Tony. Didn't have you down as a CT lover.' Tony went quiet. Fish had worked with him long enough to get the message and shut his mouth. I barely followed the exchange, watching the small twitches in my hands as I clamped them to the Vickers in an attempt to stop them shaking visibly. My skin was clammy, bowls loose and my stomach churning.

We'd been on the ground less than 30 hours. COMASLAN had made the decision to secure the old military spaceport south of New Aldershot, the mammoth landing strips would ease the problem of bringing in the big shuttles that carried many times the payload of the agile assault boats like the Raven. However the guys from Romeo Three Zero and the New African irregulars (the Irregs) they worked with said that there was a small CT presence there. They were a force pinned down by constant sniping and harassment but the Irregs hadn't the strength to dig them out and the British and New African regulars had bigger fish to fry. Consequently the brigade was to secure the spaceport, 7 PARA to clear the terminals and bunkers with 6 PARA in reserve. But before we went anywhere the CT's were going to get a pasting, so far the fleet was obliging in style.

We might have been in reserve, with two hours of artillery and orbital strikes to watch before we moved, but the strain was beginning to tell. Iain and Cammy had become strangely loquacious. Ping and Alan were nervous and pouring over a map pointing out obvious features to each other. Fish was even more obnoxious than usual. Dave was plying me with cigs and meaningless banter. Tony was Tony, but even more so than normal. Some bright spark up at brigade had obviously decided that keeping us waiting two hours to watch the fireworks would perk up morale. We'd have been better off crashing straight in there.

As I drew on my umpteenth fag (I was owing Dave a fair bit of cancer stick money by now) I tried a bit of introspection, to see if I could analyse away the fear. I was surprised to find I was actually thinking about very little. I was expecting to be reminiscing about home, friends, family, lost loves (although the last wouldn't take me all that long) as you were supposed to do according to the movies. Instead there was just fear. Copper tasting, no-duff, absolutely out of my hands fear. The only thing I could compare it to was the time I'd crashed a friend's car down some dark country lane in West Yorkshire when I was 17 - something bad had been done, events were in motion and there was nothing I could do about it.

Approach

Tony walked back from a quick conflagration with the boss. 'Get your kit on. We're moving in five. We're going up early.'

I pulled myself to my feet, settling the ammo filled daysack uncomfortably on my back and fiddling my jump helmet. In the distance a battery of self propelled 175's was firing a harassing shoot onto the space port, they had no artillery for counter-battery so it really was a duck shoot. Unfortunately the gunners would have to go deep into the ground to dig out the CT's from the subterranean ammo bunkers we'd helpfully put in for them over 50 years ago. If we were lucky we wouldn't have to clear them either. 7 PARA had that dubious honour.

The real concern was if there was any ammo or POL left down there. Clearance would be seriously complicated if it was. In any event the fleet was going to put deep penetrating kinetic rounds through each bunker simultaneously on H-Hour. We hoped that was going to do the business without screwing up the runways, although for all we knew the three big vacuum bombs the fleet had laid down so far might have done that already.

We were being moved forwards to an assembly area on a motley fleet of vehicles, whatever we could get our hands on with much of the second echelon transport tied up somewhere in the interface landing schedule. Half of 5 Platoon were perched on a Scots Greys hover ammo carrier, it was still fully laden with rounds. At least we wouldn't know what hit us if we copped one, they wouldn't even find bodies. I tried to reassure myself with the thought that the crewmen did this for a living, slipping between fluid lines of marauding war machines in search of their tanks to rearm.

The hover vehicle slid over fields heavy with crops, even moving only at a quarter of its top speed in respect of the paratroopers clinging like limpets to its hull, the plants were battered into a sticky layer of pulp on its bow. One para out of sight towards the back was sneezing explosively from the pollen in the air. I looked back and around, the adrenaline starting to flow, the best part of a battlegroup was visible as it moved across the grasslands. Like our vehicle the AFV's and carriers were all heavy with perching troops, from time to time they slalomed around scorched vehicle hulks left from the battles earlier in the year.

Tony, up near the cupola, saw me glancing about and gave me a lupine grin. 'Can't beat this shit Jamie. Fucking history in the making.' I nodded and clutched harder as the skimmer dropped into dead ground. It detoured around a battery of light guns dismounted from their portees, their crews digging down as fast as they could, stacks of ammo ready to the rear of the gun line. Para-gunners were as physically hard as any artillerymen across the centuries, a different beast from the rest of the artillery breed. Even now they had to feed their pack guns by hand; sweat and muscle as important as propellant. They gestured, waved as we passed, shouting something that was whipped away by the wind.

See you in hell.

Contact

The ground sang as kinetic rounds sliced into the ground. Debris erupted into the already heavily smoked off sky and secondary explosions began to boil off. Overwatched by a squadron of the Greys, 7 PARA's company strong assault groups moved forwards accompanied by sappers laden with napalm projectors and EOD drones. Artillery rounds shrieked overhead in ones and twos. We'd been told that OPs had the port under observation and had the whole brigade's guns and mortars on call to engage even individual targets, 40 mile snipers indeed. It was something we'd never do against a human enemy, but here we were going to use every advantage we had.

B Company moved after 7 PARA at the head of our unit. We were tasked to provide immediate small arms direct fire on call from our sister battalion. As a result I was laden with the tripod and had the Long Barrel mounted on the VR-5. The rest of the section was heavy with 7.5mm link and Green Hunter missile tubes.

Our approach followed the assaulting battalion through the half flattened, heavily matted genmod corn that surrounded the spaceport. We were sweating unnaturally and we inched forwards as the battalion in front of us began jumping off into its pre-planned attacks. In amongst the corn we couldn't see a damn thing, but we could hear the tempo of the attack gathering pace. Small arms fire increasing to a crescendo, the mortar bombs were near silent until they detonated, artillery certainly wasn't. Perhaps the most impressive was the supersonic crack of the hovertanks' 75mm mass drivers.

I fretted near the back of the section, at times wishing we'd move a bit more quickly, most often hoping 7 PARA would do the job without us needing to go forwards...

"Two-Two! Prepare to move!" We all had comms but Tony shouted it any way as he scrambled up and down the tight knot of men that was a section giving us a last visual check. Forcing eye contact on us to check we were on 'receive' and not drifting. "Listen in. The platoon is going to move over a blast berm one hundred metres to our front. Thirty metres in front of that is a series of craters the arty has just put in, we're going to put a fire base down. Two-Two on the right and Two-One, left. We're being covered by Two-Three and the walkers. Range will be 800 metres or so. Lets move."

We scrambled after him through the corn, we could hear the other sections moving alongside us. Up ahead a pair of walkers crouched behind the berm, scanning over the top with their small sensor turrets. All too sudden we were moving up and over. We sprinted in fireteam blobs, keeping together to cut down the time they had to react, then fanning out once we hit the open. A supersonic projectile flashed towards us from the burning buildings in the distance, a Tom in 1 Section took it in the body and simply burst apart. The cover fire opened up, rounds ripping overhead. Slow, glowing tracer came back towards us.

Ping dragged me down into one of the craters that I'd barely noticed, I sprawled at the bottom. Ping was already firing, deliberate well aimed shots, the LPW's mechanism ringing as it ejected the scalding

hot cells. I gazed at him in amazement, only barely aware of the friendly and enemy fire passing over the shallow protection. He looked down at me.

"Aren't you playing then?"

A jolt of shame spread through me. How long had I been sitting there watching Ping? How many guys had been hit and killed whilst I sat transfixed? Shit. I unhooked the tripod, ramming it into the ground next to Ping. I switched it on, hearing the distinctive buzz, then snapped the Vickers onto it. Something zipped past me, and I clipped the TISS feed into the side of the sight. The tripod whirred as it settled, which gave me an opportunity to go 'heads up' and select some targets. I saw lines of fire, 7.5mm mostly, ripping into a set of shattered brick work buildings.

"8 Mils to the left of the middle building! Plasma gunner behind brick pile!" Bellowed Alan from a hole over to our left. "Vickers team take him!" From now on Alan would pick targets, Ping and I would engage them and Iain would provide close protection, suppressive fire during barrel or mag changes and an extra set of eyes. I laid the gun on target, spotting only a heat shadow of the Kafer plasma gunner near a pile of rubble. Double checked the settings then after an exasperated, profane prompt from Ping, opened fire.

Reorg

The gun stopped bucking. I switched out the magazine in a couple of seconds throwing the empty behind me with the others. I snapped the feed shut and looked up again over the steaming barrel. Seeing I was ready Ping resumed scraping together a parapet of sorts to give us some sort of cover to the front.

We'd been firing from this position for more than half an hour now, raking the ground where we thought the Kafer reserve was. Combined with the indirect fire that was blasting the area they were completely suppressed with no return fire for more than 15 minutes. Even with the audio compensators in my jump helmet my ears were ringing and my hands sore from the vibration and heat of the gun. I'd fired well over 1000 rounds so far and a barrel coolant change was coming up.

The PC and Radio Op kept on giving us updates from the main fight. 7 PARA were making progress in fighting through the ruins of the airport both above and below the ground. We could hear the sound of napalm projectors and thermobaric satchel charges even from here. Assault Pioneers clad in Royal Marine issue combat vacc suits - we called them the apocalypse squad and they looked hell-born - were working their way through the hellish underground ruins of the bunkers incinerating everything in their path. The Kafer stay-behinds had little chance to fight back as both booby traps and their own ammunition detonated before the pioneers were vulnerable. Heat and asphyxiation pushing them back, crowding them out.

"Reference! Building 1 to 20 mils left. Enemy! Watch and Shoot! Watch and Shoot!" The fire order came over the net from the PC as calmly as if he was calling it on range. I laid the gun on target, punching the beaten zone into the gun sight which shunted the data to the tripod. 7 PARA's A Company were about to finish clearing the last bunker and expected the CT's to come spilling out of the exit to avoid the flames.

Suddenly they were there. Black shapes, indistinct, moving fast. The gun erupted by my head before I noticed I'd triggered it. The rest of the company also let rip and I couldn't see my strike or make out my tracer from the blizzard that whipped in. In seconds it was over, of the ten or twenty figures none made it through the beaten zone. I whipped out the empty cassette and snapped another one in, barely noticing the Platoon Sergeant cutting about behind us replenishing the ammo.

On the Platoon Net: "Two-Two. Prepare to move. Prepare to move. One bound forward to the edge of the tarmac." My hands moved quickly, readying the gun for a move. Pulling a pair of cassettes towards me.

"Move now! Move now!" I snapped the gun from the tripod and sprang up. Finding myself suddenly with not enough hands. Alan jumped in and snatched up the tripod. I followed him, ammo in one hand and red hot Vickers gun in the other. We made twenty metres, a blur of motion and I buckled, smashed to the ground.

The Vickers was bent in two. I couldn't breath. Blood covered me. I tried to stand and fell again. Light flickered over me. I blacked out. I came to on my knees looking at a corpse with no head, life blood still pumping out its neck arteries. Warmth was seeping through my combats and I still couldn't breath. Someone was shouting at me. My arms didn't work. I toppled over on to my back.

The sky that was so blue this morning was grey with smoke and was slowly turning black.

Got smashed? Get MASHed!

The sheets were fresh and starched. I wondered if Victoria was there, but then I remembered where I was now. My chest and arms were swathed in bandages and my face was tight with scarring, somewhere a machine beeped reassuringly. The quiet sounds of the nurses at work in a busy ward came and went. I was in the recovery ward for light injuries in a Dutch Army Field Hospital. A slow smile came over my face for a second, and then I remembered why I was there.

The ward was inside a tent, itself pitched inside a ruined warehouse complex on the outskirts of New Aldershot, which was no prettier than the old Aldershot. (The tents enabled the ward to be kept cleaner by a degree of magnitude.) It had been in business for three days and I'd been here even before it was established, when the brigade's Field Ambulance was based here. They'd stabilised me properly once 6 PARA's medics had finished with me, dragging me off the airport, and then palmed me off to the Cloggies to finish putting me back together.

When I'd come to, an extremely hairy Dutch nurse (male unfortunately) had handed me a couple of flimsy 'bluey' printout sheets. One was my fortnightly (arriving either once every two months or three in a day) letter from my mother. The other was a note from Tony.

Hope you're okay. Shit Happens! You better get your arse back here soon, we need a good Vickers gunner. Shame about Alan.

Keep your head down

Tony & the boys

I still couldn't recall what had happened with total clarity, although the pieces were starting to come together. The big Dutch nurse - we called him Florence - showed me my med report one morning. 17 pieces of foreign matter they'd pulled from me; 11 pieces of Kafer rocket grenade casing, 4 pieces of a Vickers-Rockwell Model 5 and two shards of human bone DNA typed to Lance Corporal Alan Little - B22D 6 PARA KIA. Strangely enough it was one of those shards, a fragment of cranium, that nearly killed me, ripping through an artery in my chest as easily as the proverbial knife through butter.

They'd stripped me of my combats and washed me somewhere along the CASEVAC line. (I hoped it was one of the double-X Cloggies who had got the latter job rather than Florence.) Thoughtfully they'd saved my beret from the incinerator, and it sat beside the bed. The back of it was crusty with dried blood and other matter. I prayed it was mine and not Alan's. I thought it maybe would be better to break in a new beret rather than wear that one again.

Faulty Towers

My stay in the ward at the CLOGMASH (*not* its real title) was pretty brief. They tried to ship me back to somewhere else but I feared getting lost in the replacement chain bureaucracy and wanted to get back to battalion as soon as possible. The doctors wouldn't sign off on me yet, in spite of the rapid progress my relatively light wounds were making. So instead they kept me and a couple of like-minded inmates (err... patients) at the hospital on light duties supplementing an already overstretched guard force. We got on like a house on fire with the Dutch toms and some of us got on even better with some of the nursing staff (XX flavour), although sadly (typically!), I had no luck!

One morning the second week I was there they packed four of us off with a Medic team and a load of med supplies into a suburb of New Middlesex some 30 kays away. The supply of casualties had dried

up temporarily, the worst of the fighting now far away, so the CLOGMASH CO released some of his resources to aid the CIVPOP and back up the hard pressed relief agencies. I shared the back of a little skimmer with Mark, a long serving Canadian Airborne Master Corporal who somehow managed to look even younger than I did. He'd caught a packet when a panicky Irreg sentry opened up on him on D+2 and taken a couple of rounds of 5.5mm in a shoulder.

Getting away from our shabby warehouse, combined with the glorious day did wonders for our morale. The rolling Grasslands of the central belt of New Africa were as stunning as the pictures and films made out. Their rapid cycle of fire aided growth had already blotted out the ruin of the heavy fighting only months earlier. Only the few vehicle hulks, mostly Kafer as the human vehicles had been salvaged long before, and the occasional radiation hot spots showed where the British and New African forces had picked their fights with the aliens.

We crested a ridge and came down on to the main road into New Middlesex, the change was stark. The road had been hit from orbit in several places, so we paralleled the road and the two way stream of civilian refugees travelling on it. The Light Division and urban Irregs had liberated the city fully only weeks earlier and displaced people couldn't make up their minds whether it better to go to the city or away from it. The arrival of aid from off world had only made the situation worse.

We got closer to the high-rise suburb of Portious, and we got our first glimpse of the revenge the locals were wrecking on those they believed had worked with the Kafers. They were known as Quislings and they dangled from the lamp posts like obscene fruit, blackening and swelling to ripeness. Many had co-operated with the aliens in an attempt to lessen the effects of occupation, some had done it to grasp at power but most had done it to get more food for their families. Now that New Middlesex was free the revenge had been swift in coming and random accusations flew and the innocent died with the guilty, whole families being wiped out by mob justice.

We set up in the bottom floor of one of the buildings on the edge of Haydon's Mall. A pair of harassed Life Foundation workers had set up an aid point there the week before and they tried to dispense what help they could from stocks that were routinely looted most nights. The medics set up alongside them and took on all-comers dispensing what medicine and treatment they could. A snaking queue soon formed of malnourished and ragged people as word of our presence spread. The Irreg MP's who 'protected' the Life Foundation guys tried to shake us down for protection, but we soon fucked them off. They were more than 9/10th's vigilante; vicious, sociopathic boys with guns. We were Airborne and while we might have been injured we weren't going to take any shit from them.

Quisling

Mark and I heard the screaming from outside. We ignored it for a couple of minutes but became increasingly concerned when it didn't stop, the Dutch medic commander waved us off to check it out. Mark grabbed a med pack and led me out. The screaming had reduced to a whimper but thirty metres down the street a largish crowd, mostly men but some women had also gathered. A couple of Irreg 'MP's' stood by.

Mark shouldered his way through the mass and I followed. This drew some swearing and cursing from those barged out of the way which tailed off when they saw our red berets and backed away a touch. The inner circle parted to reveal a battered, nearly naked woman sprawled on the ground. A hard faced youth was in the process of fastening his trousers, laughing with an acne infested friend who booted the girl hard between the legs. The girl whimpered, face and naked legs already smeared with blood, her head clean shaved.

The youth saw us coming, 'What's this. Our liberating heroes come to help us out.' He picked up a rifle from where it was propped up against a wall. "Didn't anyone tell you you're six months too fucking late." His jeer was echoed by several in the crowd. The spotty teenager began to unfasten his belt as the girl cringed on the ground. 'Tell you what though, we'll let you have a go with this collaborator bitch once Phil's finished with her.' I caught my breath, unable to see Mark's face, my hand strayed to the carbine that hung below my right arm.

'Yeah, you fuck the quisling bitch Canada!' spat a ragged woman from the crowd. The ugly mood was becoming uglier. I wanted no part of this but if we pulled the girl out of there the crowd could turn on

us. I saw Mark nodding and grinning with the youth, I heard him clearly say; 'Like I'm going to do that.' Then he disarmed him without breaking stride, whipping the wooden stocked rifle away from him.

The youth hit the ground howling, streaming blood from a broken nose and clutching his balls, the rifle butt shattered by the impact. The spotty Phil stumbled as he tried to defend himself, hampered by the trousers round his ankles. Mark snatched him half upright, and smashed him twice in the face before letting him drop. I spun around fearful of the crowd bringing my carbine up to high port but Mark pushed me towards the girl forcing the med pack on me.

'You are a bunch of animals and should be fucking ashamed of yourselves.'

'She's got the mark, she's a quisling. Who cares, she deserves worse.'

'You know that? Do you fuck, I bet you don't know this girl's name.' He manhandled a burly man out of the way. He held the crowd back from me by force of his personality and the fire of his indignation.

The girl was bleeding from facial wounds. Her face showing signs of repeated battering over the course of weeks. I sprayed on some on Anti-Sep, about the limit of my medical skills. Her cheek bore the roughly branded mark of Kafer claws, roughly applied by some human to mark her as a collaborator for all to see. Her head was covered in a scratchy down as her shaven hair started to re-grow. I guessed that she'd been raped once just now and God knows how many times in the previous weeks. Way beyond my limited skills to deal with.

'She needs the meds.' Mark was browbeating the Irreg MP's. I stood her up, alarmingly thin beneath my arm and walked he threw the crowd. They parted in front of me, hatred clear on their faces. A woman spat full in my face, resisting the urge to retaliate I gave her my best Airborne smile.

'Everyone gets one for free love. Don't test my generosity.' I guess she saw how close to the edge I was and backed off. We cleared the crowd and the abuse started, fierce and virulent, but they didn't follow.

The Cloggies cleaned up the girl but they never got her to talk so traumatised was she. We had no idea of her name, only that she was around 15 years of age. They took her back to the CLOGMASH that night where she helped out around the wards for a couple of weeks. The unit had to move in advance of the Bayview operation and they were forced to leave most of the mixed bag of auxiliaries they'd acquired behind. I later learned the girl had suicided soon after, a quick death from overdose more preferable to her than the life she could expect to lead marked out as a quisling in a brutalised colony.

Part IV

Beta Canum Venaticorum - 4

Hello Stranger

Finding the battalion again was not as easy as I'd expected. The whole military system across BCV-4 was in uproar. II Corps and the urbane General Brooke (the man who put the Super! into supercilious) had arrived and fallen straight into a dispute with the New Africa Manoeuvre Force and General 'Red Fred' Frederickson (the man who put the social into socialist). Troops were flooding onto BCV from all corners now: Germans, French, British and Commonwealth expeditionary forces with multi-national International Brigades following on from the Terran regulars. Almost as soon as they landed they were being sent to all corners of the planet to root out Kafer Remnants. The survivors of units who soon reformed into light fighting formations; Kafers never, ever surrendered. As a result of these arrivals logistics was in a complete turmoil, snafu'ed to hell and back.

I was dropped into some tedious transit camp at New Aldershot, waiting for transport. The place was soul destroying. It was filled with malingerers, Lack of Moral Fibre types from just about every unit present, who had no desire to get anywhere. The staff running it were even worse. On the outskirts of the tented camp a shanty town of desperate traders, children and refugees had rapidly grown up. In their desperation for money, rations or just anything they could trade they'd do just about anything. The depravities on offer and the willingness of some of my fellow soldiers to take advantage of them frankly sickened me. The Irreg MP's, now semi-regularised, were in charge of security and were behind, and profiting from, most of the worst abuses.

At the camp a small quorum of Paras, known to ourselves as the Escape Committee, began to form as guys filtered back from the field hospitals. Our attempts to get out of Club Mad were constantly stymied by bureaucratic inertia. At one stage we began re-enacting 'Escape from Siberia', starting to dig our tunnel from the middle of the football pitch and talking with comedy French accents. An attempt to indent for a Horse, Vaulting, Wooden (room for two tunnellers inside) was also stymied by the powers that be. We filled the rest of the time running endless circuits around the camp, just to show the idle Hats who was boss.

Luckily Lieutenant Delacourt arrived to lead our escape efforts. DLC was ever so slightly insane. He'd joined the part-time 21 Special Air Service Regiment at the age of 17, reputedly he'd been in training for this since he was 10. He'd then gone to Sandhurst after he'd graduated, shone like the madman he was and then been commissioned into the Parachute Regiment. He was fast-tracked into the Brigade Pathfinders and the rumours were he was going straight for Selection once he was eligible. He was, it must be said, a great officer; knowledgeable, fit, morally courageous, good with the blokes, blah, blah, blah...

It was just he was utterly fearless and unburdened by any trace of self doubt in the way only a British Public School education can make a man. He had this look about him, you just knew he would walk out unscathed from the fires of hell (he already had a Military Cross from Kimanjano) but all his blokes would be dead in a row behind him though. I stayed as far away from him as I possibly could, naturally I eventually failed.

Anyway the, in most ways, admirable Lt DLC had managed to irritate, cajole, threaten and just outright blag our way onto a rough-strip capable transport aircraft heading out the where the brigade was re-grouping. The trip, in a battered old Loadmaster II, was utterly horrifying. Nevertheless we finally managed after 3 stops and 15 hours, to get back to the brigade support area. 3 hours later I was back with B Company.

Vodka Air

We waited by the side of the temporary apron. DLC was arguing with a set of multinational MOVCON and Irreg MP personnel. The MP's (a relatively professional example of the breed) were complaining

that we were deserters without the proper paperwork, which technically was true, but when did deserters head towards the action? The MOVCON, led by some RAF bluffer (I'll never say a bad word against RSC Movements Control again) were complaining about us cluttering up their strip and jumping the queue.

The rest of the Escape Committee lounged about, playing cards and shooting the shit. We looked a completely motley crew, outfitted in a dozen different types of uniform and carrying God only knows what equipment. I was no exception having been given a royal send-off by the Cloggies and given the run of their 'left luggage' stores filled with kit taken from their unluckier patients. My pride and joy were a set of Scandinavian Union Defence Force Jaeger Boots (Size 43), which kicked the shit out of the British Army issue. I'd also acquired, amongst other things, a Dutch Army survival kit, German Space Marine combat gloves, an *evil* looking Alician combat knife (HR Giger meets Fairbairn & Sykes) and a Czech 10mm pistol (one of those single handed, fully auto jobs Inspector Singh uses on the trid.) At my ear was a small kafer skull earring, carved from kafer carapace and sold around the camps by little kids. In fact the only thing we had in common was the go-fasta beret, Airborne!

We were a mere 50 metres away from our aircraft, it was a Loadmaster II made locally under license from some massive American industrial conglomerate that rented half of Congress to ensure its survival through the centuries. It was a simple, rugged lump of metal, whose design principles hadn't altered much from its predecessors over three hundred years ago. This robust simplicity made it ideal for colony worlds and military service. Its drooping wings and rotund bulk, white civvy livery splotched over with green and brown paint, hulked over us, shading those who weren't sunbathing.

Our particular beast was over 50 years old and had at least 5 previous, not always careful, owners. Currently it was under temporary lease to the New African Defence Force from its Australian owned holding company. Its crew had stayed with it throughout, the loadies were native New Africans but the flight crew were a bunch of wild eyed Khazaks, ageing expatriate veterans of the Central Asian War of the mid-80's. They'd spent most of the current war shuttling supplies around, dodging Kafer ground troops and orbital strikes. They'd even made combat drops of elements of the Light Division in the Chill Valley. The smell of vodka from them all would get you drunk at 30 paces, but the fact they were still alive spoke volumes for their skill.

The Loadmaster II was never the most comfortable method of transportation, I'd done much of my jump training from a very similar Atlas and for me it rarely failed to induce vomiting. Vodka Air disdained normal methods of planning flight paths and relied on a complex system of air and tactical mapping overlaid with half remembered details and local gossip about possibly sites of Kafer missile systems. Consequently half the time they were flying tactically along the bottoms of valleys. There was no way in hell I could sleep, unlike the rest of the boys who were sacked out along the side of the fuselage wedged between the skin and the heavy load in the centre.

Instead I sat up in the small cabin behind the flight deck playing chess with the Flight Engineer, who was ethnic Russian. He was sat at his console, peering at a range of displays and a big, clunky defence systems readout. At no time did he look at the chessboard, he played the game in his head and he never failed to beat me with consummate ease. It was humbling, (I had always rated my abilities at chess) a bit embarrassing but at least it staved off the vomiting for a couple of hours.

New Faces Pt.1

6 PARA was dug in around the village of Cornish Gate some 50 klicks east from the still occupied city of Bayview. Cornish Gate was on the old airfoil transit line from New Middlesex and we covered both it and the road that ran alongside it for most of its length. Between us and the city was a widely spaced recce screen posted to detect any Kafer perimeter force attacking out of the city while we built up. Our positions around Cornish Gate were well dug in and sited for anti-armour defence. Rumours were that the CTs had no armour left, but we weren't taking chances.

I'd finally arrived back with the section after having been passed up the chain through the Echelons and having been re-equipped as I went. The QM guys had tried to buy my new boots off me but I wasn't having any of it. My new Vickers was entirely that, fresh from an orbital factory above Beowulf and with some new software additions in the sighting system. I hoped I'd have the chance to balance and zero it soon, before we went into action.

The guys were in a rear slope position on a wooded ridgeline and taking it pretty easy. They woke Tony up when I got there and he greeted me like a long lost brother. He took the piss out of me mercilessly. Ripping me for my hair cut ('you fucking hippy'), my boots ('what the fuck are they!?'), my new knife ('what the fuck is that!?'), my new unauthorised firearm ('do you know how to fucking use that!?'), to how long it'd taken me to get back ('have you been on fucking holiday!?') and generally made me feel welcome.

B Company had changed in my three weeks or so of absence since the fight at the space port. The battalion had been involved in numerous skirmishes and mopping up actions across the continent. Although none had yet matched the set piece on D+1 they'd all taken a steady toll on the number of troopers in the rifle companies. To make matters worse there were few reinforcements coming down the line so we were all under strength.

They hadn't replaced Alan, but Dave had come across from Charlie to be Fireteam commander for Delta. As well as being champion smoker of the section, Dave was actually a pretty switched on cookie. He just hated responsibility. He was one of those long service private soldiers the British Army is built around. He'd done a lot of stuff, mostly with the Support Company; as a recce operator and then with the DF platoon. The last position he'd been thrown out of for reasons he'd yet to discuss with me. Anyway, he'd definitely be a change of style from Alan.

I settled back in with the section, even offering to take on some extra stags. Although to be honest that phase didn't last too long. Still, after a long time away, and as much fun as the Escape Committee had been. It felt like I was home.

New Faces Pt.2

We were pulling a stint on VCP duty down on the main road. A pretty boring job, providing a bit of extra muscle for the MPs controlling the roads making sure civilian traffic between us and the Kafer held zone was kept to a minimum. But as we were in brigade reserve this was the sort of tasks we were getting. Not a lot of glamour we all agreed.

In my state of soldierly boredom; face looking interested, brain in absolute neutral, I'd only just noticed the latest convoy wasn't one of ours. As the hover trucks passed, from the back came a torrent of abuse.

'Hoi, you fucking Pommie shits!' An amazonesque female soldier half hanging from the back of the tailgate shrieked. 'You can't fight for shit. Call yourself paratroopers you fucking twats!' Her colleagues cheered her on.

I stood somewhat gobsmacked and failed to engage my brain in time to reply. As the line of trucks passed the volley of insults continued from every other vehicle.

'Fuck off!' I managed to squeak at one point, provoking an outbreak of hooting from the back of a truck and embarrassing myself back into silence. I noticed one of the MPs grinning from ear to ear.

'Never seen a para stuck for words before, mad arse Aussies.' The MP shook his head in admiration as the convoy trailed off into the distance.

'Fuck off you monkey.' Said I. Restoring a touch of my wounded Airborne pride.

Flying Circus

Turns out the Kafers did have a bit of armour left after all. A battle group had debouched from Bayview in an attempt to savage a deliberately exposed forward position. They walked slap into an ambush and inside of four hours the bulk of two of our armoured brigades had engaged them. Two companies, one from 6 PARA and one from 2 PARA had been tasked to provide an immediate airmobile follow up force.

In the quick set of orders we'd received we were told we would be hunting down platoon sized groups of broken enemy. The intent was to hit them before they started coalescing into larger groupings. A combination of airmobile and mechanised troops with gunship and artillery support would stop this and exploit the destruction of the battle group. Muttering was starting in the ranks; the battle group hadn't been destroyed yet and the tasking was very short notice.

We were timed to load up at midday, but the plan changed as soon as it was made. The head shed planned for our lift to come from the Ravens of 1201 Squadron off the *Normandy* but it turned out they weren't available so stand-ins had to be procured.

We waited on the Landing Zone in our sticks. The day was already stretching on and bets were being taken as to when the mission would be scrubbed. Major Quinn kept walking round, keeping us updated on the battle ranging all of 30km away. Hover AFVs were rushing up in manoeuvre lanes on either side of the LZ being fed into the battle. Thunderclap concentrations of artillery were hissing over us with no little regularity. We ran through what rehearsals we could think of, this sort of stuff was similar to our orbital assault role, then settled down in the crushed genmod wheat. I found myself almost unable to keep my eyes open, so let myself drift off to sleep.

'Tilt wings are coming in mate.' Ping shook me awake. The company was crashing noisily about; it looked like it was going to happen even though we only had a couple of hours of daylight left. I had the tripod with me but had opted for the Short Barrel for the Vickers for ease of manoeuvre. We carried only our assault vests and daysacks filled with ammo and spare batteries, but every man carried a Green Hunter tube.

'What the fuck are they?' The sky was filled with a motley mixture of tilt-rotor aircraft. Most had semi-military camo schemes applied over dayglow civilian paint schemes. I smiled; it looked like Vodka Air had some competition. The others weren't so convinced though.

'Those fucking things look battered!'
'I'm not fucking going on that!'
'Looks like Monty Python's Flying fucking Circus!'

As it turns out it actually was the Flying Circus; at least that was what this squadron of New African air force reservists called themselves. Our sticks stumbled onto the aircraft as they arrived, crushing into the hot bellies of the tilt-rotors and strapping in or for a few unlucky ones just bracing themselves as best they could. Our tilt-rotor had obviously been some sort of VIP transport in its former life, but now was just a stripped out shell.

We lifted off fast, turning and accelerating away from the LZs which were too close to the FEMZ for comfort. However we were soon back on the ground at a safer LZ. We had half an hour to wait as the squadron's leaders conferred with our officers and tied in with the gunships that would be escorting us into the Manoeuvre Zone so we had the chance of talking to the loadies.

It turns out the aircrews had been mobilised the day the French cut away the Beanstalk and had been flying operationally ever since. They'd seen action on every continent of Beta Canum and in every role and had a cocky edge to them that we were unused to, flying as we had been with humourlessly professional Alician and RSN pilots. Their confidence was infectious. The bulkhead behind the pilot was covered in unit 'zap' stickers; Light Infantry, Greenjackets, New African Light Infantry, New Middlesex Scottish, Green Howards, Légion Étrangère, US Marines. It looked like we were in the hands of a competent taxi firm.

Battle plans finally firmed up the idling engines spun up to full power. In seconds the squadron was off, splitting into four ship formations and flying at zero feet. Despite the building anxiety there were the usual wild grins amongst the soldiers in the back in the anticipation of one hell of a ride.

Eagle Day

We knew our time was coming when the loadmasters opened the doors and airflow battered around the interior of the craft. The loadies unlocked their big Australian 12mm machine guns, pushing them into position through the doors, made them ready and started scanning for targets which worried me, what

were they hoping to hit like that? Someone was humming the regimental march in to the net, getting some nervous laughter in reply. From my position near the front of the aircraft I could just see through one of the front doors and as the aircraft banked I saw a gunship flash by, dangerously close. I was thankful though, the influx of fresh air helped stave off my nausea.

‘Chalk One, listen in,’ the Boss, still alarmingly young to my eyes, cleared the net. ‘We’re coming in on a concentration of CT infantry, it’s around platoon strength, on foot and making a run for it. We’re going to be the sweep team with Chalk Two, Chalk Three is the stop team and Chalk Four is the reserve. Once on the ground shake out quick, the axis is a bearing of 6000 mils. I want Two One left of axis and Two Two to the right. The gunships are working them over now and we have arty on call. That means they are going to be alert, so be switched on guys.’

He looked at his watch. He held up two fingers and shouted, ‘Two minutes!’ A call we echoed through the ship. I saw some of the experienced guys brace themselves and slip the crash harness quick release. I realised I was going to be one of the last guys of the 18 on the tilt-rotor to get down the ramp. The thought provoked a wave of anxiety. I wasn’t worried too much about being shot, I’d been there, bought the t-shirt (in fact it was a CLOGMASH one and I was wearing it) but for some reason the thought of being trapped on one of these things on fire really shit me up.

The tilt-rotor swung around alarmingly with the engines screaming, the exterior lit up with decoys being fired away from the fuselage. For a second we’d climbed a touch and I got a glimpse of a wide plain covered with the funeral pyres of burning AFVs. Then we dived with sickening suddenness towards the ground.

‘Thirty seconds!’ One of the toms vomited half way down the bay, the smell set off two of the others and I gagged furiously. Tears stood out on my eyes.

The loadie on the rear ramp started firing, the big gun chattering out rounds. Then the front gunner started only a meter away from me. The hearing protection in my jump helmet deadened the noise but I could still feel the heavy vibration through the frame of the aircraft. The tilt-rotor bucked like it was being flown by a mad man, which I’d guessed by this stage it probably was. The Ravens were never like this, sure the landing could be a bit tense but they were all near silent efficiency. This was close to insanity.

‘Ten seconds!’ We landed short in five.

It seemed as if it took an age to debus, encumbered as we were by ammo and Green Hunters and constricted by an airframe not designed for this sort of thing. I pushed Ping all the way, sparked by a sudden terror and ignoring his shouted complaints. We hustled out to the left and became aware of ordnance striking a few hundred metres up-axis of us. Tony was shouting out. Small arms fire was ringing out and the tilt-rotor leapt back into the air, engines screaming and attracting a burst of slow moving CT tracer. We were back in the game, my adrenaline spiked by the landing and the freedom of being away from the tiltwing.

Mopping Up

The CT body was still smouldering where the white phosphorous continued to burn into its skin and carapace. Even the smell was alien, a hint of liquorice in the air. Night was coming in quickly.

Ping and I looked down at it, mesmerised by a combination of physical exhaustion and for me fascination. I’d never been this close to one of them before. Well, I’d seen skulls and hides for sale around New Middlesex and New Aldershot in my time there, but never one this recently dead.

Around us some of the Toms were engaged in a spot of casual butchery/souvenir collecting. Heads, fingers and equipment fetched a good price. Carapaces were worth the most, but they were supposedly a sod to get off and awkward to transport.

It was about two hours since we had been dropped off by the Flying Circus, but it seemed a lot less. The pursuit of the CTs had been fast and violent. Fixed in position by the gunships we put in hard kill attacks on each position with overwhelming firepower. We’d all had the briefings about how tricky the

CTs were and weren't up for taking any chances. If we were in doubt we'd introduce ourselves with a Green Hunter fired on inertial in the direct fire role. There wasn't usually much left after that, but we'd make sure with grenades and small arms.

Overkill? Certainly and I was proud of it. I was in one piece and so were my mates bar a couple of minor injuries. Dead is not just for Christmas after all.

The sound of the approaching Flying Circus caused the Toms to break off their profit making enterprises as the section commanders shouted them back into sticks ready to re-embark. They were tracking another group of broken enemy and the birds had an ammo replen aboard. We were in for a busy old night.

My Own Little Slice of Stalingrad

Newsflash: Real FISH is shit.

During basic training Fighting In Someone's House (FISH), or whatever urban ops acronym is currently in fashion, is the best thing going. We loved it. A lot of the lads had a little 'breaking and entering' history and took to it like a duck to water. It was fast, furious and a little deadly. The last was no big deal; it just meant an early ENDEX and a head start on cleaning your weapon.

I was now three days into the real thing and it was slow, painstaking and bloody deadly. A lot of the advantages we had, optics and comms etc were reduced in effectiveness. The CTs were in their element here, where their fearlessness and close quarter battle skills were at a premium. Plus there were just plain more of them than there were of us, the lead elements could go forward but there were not enough troops to consolidate behind us and our lines were vulnerable.

B Company found itself operating almost as a self-contained army, reliant only on itself and isolated from the companies a street away on either side. All the time we were maintaining an all round defence we couldn't let slip for a minute; 360 degrees and up and down. The battalion itself was maintaining a forward line that we moved forwards at night, grabbing another block at a time. During the daytime we secured forward line allowing armoured forces to pass through and smash Kafer strong points before withdrawing. To our rear were New African troops, trying to consolidate, wrinkle out stay behinds and prevent infiltrators. Resupply came up to us in a heavily armoured convoy.

Newly lofted surveillance satellites were next to useless as the Kafers kept well concealed. Every time we put a recce drone in the air a Snapfire knocked it out, and they had more missiles than we had drones. Everything was done with manned and remote sensors and ranges were cut right down – well planned assaults and breakthroughs were difficult as we just didn't know where the enemy's depth positions were. It was an attrition battle and it wasn't pretty.

6 PARA was fighting its way up the A16 southerly road into Bayview, New Africa's once beautiful second city. It wasn't so pretty now, and neither were we. We were strung out, lacking sleep and without any real chance of being replaced at the sharp end. An increasing number of troops were being fed into the offensive but casualties kept bleeding the units and contracting their frontage.

The Light Division, whose command we came under, had liberated New Middlesex with some ease in the weeks before we landed. However they had a much smaller force to deal with and an armed and aggressive civilian population to help them. At Bayview the CTs had their backs to the wall and the population had long been forced away. The New African guerrillas who were supporting us, a much more disciplined breed than the New Middlesex Irregs, were too few in number.

It was a war for the infantry soldier and we died in droves. I agree totally with Wilfred Owen (Hat Rupert though he was), it isn't Dulce and it certainly isn't Decorum to die for your country.

Lance Corporal Sam Forester, Her Majesty's Trained Killer

Sam Forester was one of the battalion's snipers and along with his oppo he'd been assigned to the B Company Group for the attack on Bayview. I'd hadn't had much to do with the snipers during my time with the battalion so far, but we shared a fighting position for a while when we were in Bayview.

The position was in a top corner of a piquet building at the very edge of the advance. It was about noon and a little light rain was coming in off the bay. This was a reserve stag position and I was in here with my gun and the remote sensor displays for these arcs. The main stag was downstairs with a tripod mounted VR set up as a sentry gun.

Sam had left his oppo sleeping to come up and observe the buildings across the road that would be our next objective. He had a heavy barrelled Enfield LSW rather than a sniper rifle, his partner Jan the Man (one of our somewhat butch female soldiers) had that. At these close ranges the Enfield was probably just as effective as the sniper rifle anyway. Sam had grunted a greeting then set himself up to observe, at one time plugging his TISS into the remote sensor feed I was monitoring. It wasn't a particularly companionable silence, his concentration and annoyance at distraction was clear to see. He came away an hour and a half later at the same time as I came off stag.

We both had some scoff and a brew in the admin room and chatted as we did. Sam was a southerner; well educated and well spoken, if I hadn't known his rank I'd have assumed him to be an officer. He was an interesting guy; an unlikely boy soldier and battalion boxer and footballer. The army was everything to him, his main focus in life, in spite of what seemed like many accomplishments outside of the ranks. He was competitive to a fault and suffered no fools.

Most of all he was a shooter. He'd represented the Para Reg at Bisley when just out of the depot, and had made the Top 10 in the NADF Skill-At-Arms meet in 2300. Although a 6 PARA man he'd got himself attached to 2 PARA for their stint on Aurore and I avidly devoured his stories from the front. I guess more than a year in the ranks hadn't lessened my appetite for war stories at all.

The snipers had been busy since we'd landed on Beta Canum. The Kafers were particularly vulnerable to this form of warfare. Sam it seemed had racked up a fair number of kills, although he claimed not to be keeping count. When we'd been mopping up the Kafers on the plains the week before, he'd been airborne in a scout VTOL taking long range shots. Some guys had all the luck.

I wondered why he was only a Lance Corporal, he'd been in for a little over five years and was obviously a switched on cookie. He'd be a shoe-in for a Corporal's slot or even a Commission. He just laughed at me.

'Eventually maybe, at the minute I'm just having too much fun.' Worryingly I believed him.

Stand To

There was a long burst from the sentry gun and I woke with a start.

'Stand to! Stand to!' The shout went up more small arms fire erupted and the house was ringing to a cacophony of rapid fire. I kicked out from under the sleeping bag (I'd taken to sleeping under rather than in it for just this reason) grabbing my jump helmet and Vickers and stumbling the few feet to my fighting position. Dave was already there bobbing at the back of the room, observing out while I got my jump helmet on.

'All Two Two callsigns, this is Two Two Charlie. Be aware enemy have just made a rush into Three One's piquet house Blue Four and have entered that building. Keep watch on your arcs, they've just made a rush for this building and lost a few guys.' Tony's radio report was calm and seconds later he grabbed me from my position to a firing position in another room looking out on to the contested piquet. The firing position was a small hole dug through the wall just above floor level and it gave a narrow but well protected arc of fire.

House Blue Four was rocking with explosions, someone wasn't sparing the grenades. Small arms fire could also be heard as the firing from my own building died down. I switched to thermal and could see some of the action on the near side of the building through the wall. There was a fireteam of 6 Platoon toms fighting in the upper story of the building, holding the stairs. Try as I could, I couldn't get an image of their attackers as they were too far on the other side of the building. The VR was capable of shooting through the brickwork and a burst of fifty could make a mess of anyone's day. The LPWs were equally as handy with greater penetration and showering superheated masonry around the interior.

As I watched the fireteam fight on and fires start in the building I began to worry for the rest of the section. Eight men should have held that piquet, although with our casualties it could have been a couple fewer.

'Charlie this is Delta Two, I have four friendlies in the house on thermal. Do we know how many there should be over?'

'Charlie. Negative wait out.'

As I watched a volley of plasma fire ripped up through the building opposite, fired from the downstairs upwards. The defenders scrambled away screaming, one hit in the guts, felled by the steaming wound. There was a rush on the stairs inside Blue Four and I opened up instinctively, firing through the walls, others from the building did the same. Fish Williams rushed into my room and let rip through the open window with long whooping bursts of 7.5mm and swearing. The fire stopped the Kafers as the defenders dragged the wounded man from the room to one near the rear. Kafer grenades were lobbed into the room they'd just vacated, smoke and dust swirled around obscuring Blue Four.

'They're coming out. Cover them!'

The lead man dropped out of the back window and half caught the wounded man lowered out to him limp and unprotesting. The other two dropped out after him. We fired bursts into the lower windows of the building hoping to suppress the enemy inside. I just hoped that any of our guys cut off inside the building had their heads down. The lead man sprinted across to our building and passed out of my sight; the wounded man, gut wound steaming, hoisted between the two uninjured men.

They got halfway across when a rifle grenade hit them. The para on the left had taken the main force of the blast and his bloody remains quivered and spurted on the ground, but the other two were also smashed to the deck. The newly wounded man howling at a shattered arm, the other lay motionless on the deck.

There was a shocked silence, broken by Fish shouting with rage. He jammed himself in the corner of the window to get the best angle he could and started firing. He was exposed but uncaring. More fire was going down from the front of our building, at least four VRs at rapid rate. I put more fire down into Blue Four, I couldn't see any movement but didn't really care.

Smoke was thrown into the gap between the two buildings and a fireteam scrambled out to get the wounded out of the KA. At the same time mortar fire began to whistle onto positions to the front of our building. Fish hurled his helmet at the back wall and started kicking about in a rage. It took Tony to calm him down – the boys from Three-One had been friends of his.

Only one man escaped unscathed from the six who had manned the house, another was badly injured by the rifle grenade blast and had been evacuated. The other four were dead, the man gut shot with plasma dying before Two One Delta could get him back into our house. We retook Blue Four at last light and found it empty except for two bodies; a Lance Jack smashed to pulp by grenade and a dead Tom with a fighting knife in his hand. His LPW was a metre behind him with a jammed plasma cell locking the firing mechanism; he'd been riddled with 12.1mm Thud Gun rounds. They'd been on stag and overwhelmed in seconds – there was no quarter here or anywhere in Bayview.

More Character than a Battalion of Paras

6 PARA Battle Group ground its way up the route of the A16 north in towards the city centre. To our left were 2 PARA, to our right was 7 PARA and further right, linking in with the New African Light Brigade were the Canadian Airborne.

Naturally we of 6 PARA regarded ourselves as the premier battalion in the brigade. We were a hard fighting, hard drinking unit raised in the colonies. More often than not we were deployed on the frontier well away from peacetime soldiering on Earth. There were still a lot of colonial accents in the ranks of the battalion and we were proud of the pre-war reputation we had based on solid soldiering on exercise.

2 PARA were the aristocrats of the brigade – the Arnhem Battalion as they sometimes, wrongly, styled themselves. By far the oldest of the units they had a good 250 years on us and 7 PARA. It was also a unit with a strongly Scottish character. Most irritatingly it seemed that they always got the best jobs when the brigade was handing out missions; they'd been the ones sent to Aurore and they'd got the nod for ENTENTE on Kimanjano. Okay, they'd also had the casualties, but it seemed the sun always shone on 2 PARA. Gits.

7 PARA were an odd bunch of fish. They'd been raised an eternal year after ourselves, and did we not let them forget it! Unlike us they'd been formed on Earth at the Shot and this was only their second rotation with the brigade on the frontier. They'd usually undertaken the air assault role on Earth, indeed they were still the acknowledged anti-armour experts in the brigade. In terms of character they lacked our boisterousness or 2nd Battalion's assuredness. In fact as far as the two senior battalions in the brigade were concerned they were so boring they were in danger of being mistaken for Hats.

The Canadians were welcome guests to the brigade. They were tough, professional boys although to our eyes there was something not quite right; something a bit American, or maybe French, about the way they did things. We paras prized out irrational prejudices. This was their regiment's second war against an alien species, having being involved in the one-sided Slaver War against the Sung. We were more than a bit jealous about that.

In addition to the infantry battalions the brigade had a raft of other troops attached; engineers, artillery, logisticians and the like. The worst of them all were the Pathfinders, the brigade close recce group drawn from volunteers across the brigade. All the regular paras hated them; the pathfinders thought they were something special. I had to give them there due though, you learned to fight if you were a pathfinder, they had no shortage of challengers when downtown and on the piss.

All Change

Delta sprinted across the open ground, passing under the elevated airfoil track and dropping into position by one of the pillars. I was already breathing heavily; I had the tripod (why? I never seemed to use it these days), the short barrel and a stack of ammo. Charlie were there all too soon and bounded passed us, halting short of a ruined tram. Then delta was up again and moving. We were down to six men now; Iain had taken a packet of shrapnel from one of our own grenades and had been back-loaded three days ago.

Being this exposed in the open after a week of troglodyte fighting felt unnatural and an invitation for disaster to strike us. Looking left and right the whole company was advancing across the open ground in skirmish order. To our front was the neo-Victoriana Bayview Waterloo Station a mere several hundred metres from the waterfront and what we were promised was the last battalion objective. The Kafer resistance was collapsing across the city and we were eager to finish the job.

B Company was approaching across the open ground and rail yards to the south under the protection of darkness, snipers and the heavy machine guns and plasma weapons of the Direct Fire Platoon. They hadn't opened up yet, but were laid on and ready to do so should we be fired upon. The run-in was hard going across the tracks and on image intensification. In all the company was feeling run down after a full week of combat operations and perhaps a little spooked by the bold move.

We continued to pepper-pot forwards; charlie and delta, charlie and delta, and were soon closing in on a logjam of shattered trams. I startled as a round cracked overhead and picked up my pace, hoping it was a sniper taking out a sentry.

We were panting hard as we reached the trams. Firing erupted meters ahead of us where 4 Platoon were pushing through a gap in the trams.

‘Contact!’ The call cleared the net. Recce had said there were no Kafer piquets by these trams, they’d used them as an OP. Bloody CTs were so fucking unreliable you could actually rely on them being where they’d fuck your plan up. Mind you something similar could be said of our recce boys, they were always fucking up.

‘Bollocks,’ Tony wasn’t impressed, ‘what a lot of shit.’ The cracking of Enfield fire and thud of grenades was close by. The lead platoons were now clustered against the trams and the reserve had stopped a couple of hundred meters back by the airfoil line. The OC was here with his Tac party and he wasn’t happy. ‘Get your platoon moving Mr Taylor! Push them right, we can’t get held up here.’

‘Boss!’ Tony shouted. ‘We’ll go over! Fish move.’ Taylor looked a touch confused as Fish pulled himself up on to the top of the tram. Tony and Cammy swiftly followed. Dave, Ping and I gave them a few seconds then followed them up. As I did so I sliced my hand open on some of the Perspex, swearing and scattering blood.

The top of the mangled trams was just about the scariest place I’d ever been. Once I’d reached the top the DF boys opened up at a target further back and 12mm 1BIT (it looks much more impressive than any laser or plasma fire) started ripping overhead. So I scrambled over the bent and ripped metal bent double, expecting to get a round in the arse at any moment. At least it took my mind off how exposed I was. A few metres away along the carriage Fish and Tony opened up with a few seconds of gunfire. By the time I was there it was all over, and they dropped down the other side of the carriages. When I joined them I saw they’d caught the CTs 4 Platoon were sparing with unawares from the flank, caught close together they been chopped down with ease.

The Boss told Tony to push on so off we went, moving under an umbrella of 12mm 1BIT pyrotechnics and the occasional plasma bolt. We were through the first defence and Tony was eager to get us deeper more quickly and off the open ground. We moved in alongside a sunken tramline which gave us a fair bit of cover, Fish in the lead as front gunner. We started getting incoming and blasted back, suppressing and moving on trying not to get bogged down, hoping the supporting fire would pick up on our tracer strike. It was 200 metres from the trams to the edge of the station and we made it unscathed. The Support Company boys had done us proud.

5 Platoon’s task was to secure the southern edge of the upper level of the station where the airfoil trains came in. A Company behind us would have the dubious task of securing the lower levels after 4 Platoon gained a foothold down there. There was only one way up to the upper level, a fire escape up through the building. If there were any Kafers at the top of the stairs we’d be in real trouble.

Two Two prepared to secure the stairs. Two One were already up behind us and the Boss was waiting for us to give him the thumbs up. I was on one knee covering along the wall looking out onto the bay, my knee pad grinding into the mounds of shattered glass blasted from the framework of the station. Dave tapped me on the shoulder and gave me the sign; we’d go in pairs now entering the stairs at Green. No firing for a change trying to take them by surprise. Dave and I first. Shit.

The door was already damaged by numerous HMG rounds and ripped off its hinges and it fell with a clatter as I went to open it. I cringed at the noise but cracked on; stepping in and covering my arcs upwards. Dave moved past me going up to the first landing. I followed and past him in turn, hoping to get to the top as soon as possible. The stairwell was solid concrete, perfect for grenades and channelling blast. We reached the top unscathed, un-contacted and hopelessly thankful. Now there was another door in front of us.

Tony was already there and gave us the signal; go Red. Thank fuck! A grenade went first then I put twenty rounds through the re-closed door, Dave ripping it open once I did. There was a shattered corridor but no bugs. We moved into the corridor, my HUD overlaid with glowing thermal. At the end the corridor opened out onto the main platform where tracer from the supporting guns was streaking past a metre above the floor. We’d made it; the rest of the company would soon begin to move up.

Raining Bugs

The DF platoon checked fire as we got to the end of the corridor. We pushed our weapons round first scanning gingerly for targets through the narrow field of view provided by the optics. Then slowly moved our heads round.

The platform stretched away for 600 metres under a latticework ceiling which let the starlight illuminate an interior filled with benches, bridges, spiral staircases and large areas of hanging garden on suspended platforms.

We took incoming, rounds spiralling towards us from the roof. Expecting a grenade we scrambled back down the corridor where the next section was waiting wide-eyed and panting. Two Three was stacked back down the stairwell.

‘He’s up in the roof under-hang, I fucking saw him.’ Dave’s eyes were wide with the adrenaline spike. ‘Jaime, Fish watch my strike, we’ll go on three.’

We went on three, dashing back to the corner. I saw him before Dave fired; a small heat source on a service platform near the roof. I gave him a good forty rounds of 7.5mm, my strike merging with Fish’s and the sharp flash of the LPW bolt.

The CT came down the direct route, cartwheeling dramatically down together with a shower of high impact glass from the roof.

It was only then I noticed Dave was down, his jaw mashed obscenely, blood bubbling where his mouth should be. There was a smell of shit... I stood appalled then Fish punched me out of the way. Tony was already dragging Dave down the corridor.

We hadn’t made it after all. How could I have tempted fate like that?

Shaky Ground

It was the first beer for a week and a half. It felt like months had gone by since the last time I’d had a cool, crisp Heineken.

We were clad in the same stinking combat kit we’d worn for weeks but as soon as we’d come off the hovertrucks we’d had a pair of beers pushed into our hands. I swigged the first without thinking; it tasted somewhere the other side of marvellous.

We collected our bergens and dragged them into hollow square as if by instinct. It was a lot smaller than it used to be. I looked at my hands as I sat on my Bergen and they were shaking, the adrenaline ebbing out of me and relief swamping me. My face ached where my eye was swollen. I looked around at my four friends, closer to me now than anyone.

We had long stopped saying ‘see you in hell’ to each other. Too many of us were already there, we had no wish to bring anymore bad future on ourselves.

I curled up around my bergen and slept, too tired to feel anything.

Part V

Henry's Star

Change of Scene

I came to the somewhat disheartening conclusion that star travel is not all it is cracked up to be. When you've been on one troop ship, you've been on them all. *Arnhem* (what a superb name for a ship!) was sadly identical to her sister ship *Normandy*. Same corridors, same jam packed rooms, same tight lipped B&S crew – do they screen these guys for humour during their selection process? In spite of our best efforts we couldn't get a laugh out of one of them if we'd have kept trying until Christmas.

So it was with no little relief that we loaded onto the Ravens in the forward wheel of the *Arnhem* at the end of the short trip across to Henry's Star. We'd been uplifted from outside Bayview by the 1202 NIS Ravens with only light scales and key equipment. There was an impressed merchant ship in orbit which had come in from the orbital factories above Beowulf loaded to the gunwhales with fresh equipment, munitions and vehicles for us. Much cheaper than uplifting all our kit, this was left to be used by other units or the NADF. Although we all knew there were a few bergans that were heavier than they should be as guys helped themselves. Well, what the hell, there was a war on.

In an utter contrast with our experience with the Flying Circus, 1202 brought us right back to a degree of sanity with a non-opposed landing direct onto the spaceport of Rimview. The boys all thought it was just like a peacetime trooping move, although I couldn't comment as I'd never done one of those. It was noticeable that increasingly the older guys assumed I'd been in for several more years than I had and were always asking if I remembered so-and-so, who'd probably been serving when I was in school smoking illicit fags behind the bike shed. I felt I was ageing rather more rapidly than nature intended. Must have been all the tabs I was smoking.

We stalked across the pad at Rimview through the thin air and admired the shattered frontage of the terminal building which was a temporary home to the brigade while more permanent lodgings could be found. The spaceport had been the site of a famous battle earlier in the year when the French marines tried to liberate the colony. They'd been pinned down and chopped up but sheer bottle and aggression aided by an uprising in the city had rescued them. It had been another of Admiral Rochemont's little brain waves. Genius, another successful 'liberation' to go into his memoirs, dunno why we bothered to turn up really seen as according to him all the CTs were dead already.

In reality the whole of 6 Assault Brigade was being rushed out here from BCV because the liberation was a sham. The city was free but the rest of the colony was still lousy with CTs and they were dug deep into the mine complexes which provided them with ready made fortifications. The French hadn't even tried to dig them out and the local military establishment was patently not up to the job. The pre-war garrison battalion from the Coldstreamers had done what they could, a reinforcement of a Royal Marines Commando had been far too little. Fucking Cabbage Heads. Now it was our turn.

Another load of Crap Hats and Monkeys

There are crap hats, then there are Crap Hats. The Crater Regiment were perhaps the worst of the bunch. We were held firm at the space port while the down loading continued from the ships above us. The situation was safe enough for most of the brigade to come across on the old troopers like the *Coltman* and they were inevitably slower to unload than the *Arnhem*. Plus there was a world of shiny new kit to come down from the merchant, unpack, store and distribute.

Consequently there were plenty of work details to work through and briefings to attend, while at night the CQMS had organised a bar. Two Can rule of course! The PTIs beasted the booze out of us every morning with the sort of sessions I hadn't experienced since I was a crow in the Shot. The thin air up on the rim of the eponymous Crater really didn't help much.

We were confined to camp for the most part, however I had some distant cousins who lived in Rimview and I was keen to try and find out what had happened to them. A rapid series of interviews with the Platoon Sarn't, Platoon Commander and Officer Commanding got me a four hour pass out of the spaceport to go into Rimview and try and track them down.

That was the plan anyway. As it was I only just got out of the gate after some egregious harassment from this bunch of Divot Crap Hats on the gate. I was about to get a bit Airborne with them when they relented. I really couldn't get the attitude of these guys, although perhaps they resented having us come in to do their job for them. From all I'd heard they were piss poor soldiers anyway.

As it happened getting into Rimview proper took a bit of doing, taxis and busses were conspicuous by their absence. What little local traffic there was seemed incredibly unwilling to offer a lift to a British soldier in combat undress. So I doubled most of the way into the city before some kind soul, a Dayside miner, took pity on me and gave me a lift in the last kay. A good job he did too, my acclimatisation wasn't holding up too well and I was well and truly blowing out of my arse.

Rimview seemed to have held up better than most New African cities I'd seen. The city wasn't really defensible in the face of an enemy who would have gladly nuked the place at the smallest pretext. The Guards garrison and a kernel of the resistance retreated into the tunnels that riddled the rock under the city down to the crater floor and conducted a guerrilla war from there. It was only when the French launched their *coup de main* that the garrison sallied from the tunnels in force. The result was a few key buildings were completely trashed while the rest seemed oddly untouched, although architecturally it looked like it never had much to crow about anyway.

My Good Samaritan had dropped me off in the square in the centre of the city and left me to find my own way. I was getting a lot of odd looks from the off, some suspicious and some curious but very few with any warmth in them. I got lucky again and found a Kurkri Bar in the first street I walked down.

Kurkris are legends, they are as widespread, if far less numerous, as Irish bars, but are found in some of the most extreme places. Inevitably run by some ageing British Old Sweat they spring up wherever war and confrontation are and cater for the thirst of soldiers, aid workers and media types alike. Most fold a few months after setting up, an unlucky few are destroyed in action, while others thrive to become part of the local landscape. This particular one was set up in a small avenue between two buildings and was run by a bustling pair of former Gurkhas.

I established my credentials with a Tiger beer and a whisky chaser as the two Gurungs chattered away with me, seeking for gossip of the war. I happily complied and was soon on round two. A quick check of my trusty GCS Chronometer brought me back to reality and I sought out some directions. They quickly checked that I really wanted to go down that end of town, apparently pretty anti-government, but once reassured of my sanity they drew me a quick sketch map. I left, promising to come back another night and bring some of the guys with me.

Turns out that I never got to the bad side of town. I was intercepted by a Crater Defence Force provo squad, not even real MPs but Crater Regiment RPs. They tried to pull me on drunk and disorderly, being incorrectly dressed (must have been the Jaeger boots) and breaking curfew. I told them to fuck off and tried to walk away, the biggest one of them clipped me and I went Airborne on them. They pounded me into the pavement in short order, 4 vs 1 isn't good odds, conquering hero para beret or not. *Not* my finest hour.

People in Glasshouses

I must have looked like battered shit, my face was mashed and blood soaked the front of my combats. The PC came to bail me out and he had a face like thunder. I suddenly felt as if my 19 years had five taken off and it was as bad as the day my dad came to pick me up from Chapeltown nick.

Back at the spaceport they threw me, not unkindly, into the guardhouse. The guard were from 2 PARA and they sorted me out with a medic coming to check me over, they then got me cleaned up with one of them getting me some clean kit. Tony came to see me and have a banter, told me not to worry about it, and left me with higher morale than when he first came. The guard got me a burning hot curry from the cookhouse and even snuck me in a couple of beers. I'll never say a bad word about 2 PARA again.

The next couple of days were spent in the guardhouse. Our monkeys came to interview me, as did some of the Crater Defence Force ones. The battalion adjutant, one of the most *unusual* officers I'd ever met, told me I'd likely be in for a stint in the Glasshouse. Cheers mate!

As it turns out the battalion was deployed into the field to begin work up training only a day latter and I went back with them. I never heard anything more about the charges; I guess there were more important things to worry about going on in Crater. Although I have to admit, law abiding member of the community that I usually am while not in the green, it did give me some sleepless nights.

Of course it might have been something to do with the results of a brigade 'walking out' the night before we redeployed. I heard they beat seven shades of shit out of every CDF MP and RP they ran into and intimidated the British Crater Police patrols away from intervening. A good night out by all accounts; certainly sent a message to certain parts of the Establishment.

Private Robert Menzies Clayton

Replacements had flooded in to the brigade from Earth as a result of the fighting on Beta Canum. The supply never kept up with demand however, casualties were heavy and the gap of thirty odd light years made for a tenuous supply chain. We took a number of locally recruited volunteers as a result, usually reservists. Most were from the British Isles however and as green as I had been less than a year ago.

Bravo Two Two had Pte Bob Clayton on draft a week after our arrival on Crater. Bob was a citizen soldier from the Scottish based 15 PARA, a weekend warrior TAVR soldier. Bob was a decent bloke, intelligent, fit, funny and completely out of his depth.

Little Bobbie thought he'd been there and bought the T-shirt. Okay, he'd done a cut down P Company and the usual TA infantry gig. Apart from that he'd done a bit of training at Sennybridge, done some drops on a fortnight's camp in North Africa – which of course made him a real warrior. Legend in his own lunchtime.

Looking back we could have been a bit more welcoming. Wee Bobbie managed to get off on the wrong foot with us straight away and we made life misery for him. We had another reinforcement at the same time, a young regular whose name I never remember, he and Bobbie had been friends on the trip out but he got casevaced a matter of days after he arrived.

Bobbie didn't last much longer than his mate, he had an ND – negligent discharge – on stag one night, and then that was him. We backloaded him out of the unit to some rear echelon job, we gave him a good kicking before he went. There wasn't really any malice in it, just casual brutality in response to a stupid fuck up that could have killed one of us.

I learned much later that Bobbie transferred to the Crater Defence Force proper and ended up as a bit of a hero. Won a Military Medal defending some tiny Dayside community out way beyond the back of beyond, who knew he had it in him? Guess we should have.

Bloody Nose

6 PARA's first action on Crater hadn't gone well to say the least, and morale was bouncing along the bottom. We were the finest infantry for five light years (and then some) and we'd done a pretty bloody good impersonation of Kitchener's Armies on the First Day of the Somme. We'd lost some fucking incredible guys because we'd had to pit human flesh against APHE bullets, it was fucking shite and we knew it.

The officers took the brunt of the hostility and a couple of times it had come to fists. Luckily the Para Reg took some of the British Army's finest for its officers and most of them could stand a fight as well as the hardest Tom. After the first couple of occasions the NCOs had swung behind the officers and stamped out the unrest. People say the British Army hasn't mutinied in several hundred years, what rubbish; most battalions come close once a year.

We'd taken on a Kafer stronghold on the edge of the Dayside, some deep mine that barely scratched a living which the CTs had taken over after being bounced out of Rimview. 'Intelligence' reckoned for a bare hundred CT infantry, which following Bayview we thought would be easy pickings. Big mistake.

We took on their perimeter posts in classic skirmish fashion and got ourselves in a right old mess. The wadis and broken terrain were a nightmare to clear, the CTs blending in easily with the dusty ground. We had no armour support and only mortars for indirect fire support and the Smart AP rounds that had proved so useful in New Africa were baffled by the Crateran conditions. We were down to classic *mano-y-bug* firefights that were far too close to a fair fight for comfort. We rolled up the perimeters but took far too many casualties in doing so.

That's when the problems really started as we then had to break in to the subterranean mine complex. The sappers didn't have enough explosive to make our own entry, so we had to do it the hard way and storm the entrances. What a fucking slaughter – Wellington might well have recognised the scene from breaches of Badajoz. We only got in when the pioneers brought up the napalm throwers and we burnt our way in, incinerating our own dead and wounded as we did.

Tony led what was left of 5 Platoon through the maelstrom; the Boss and Platoon Sarn't were already down so Tony was the man. We fought our way down, room by room, corridor by corridor, using grenades like they were going out of fashion. Losing guys at every turn other guys from B Coy were fed down to us. I stuck close by Tony, missing death and mutilation by inches only as Toms dropped either side of us. It was like Dante's descent into the bottom circles of hell, but in slow motion. It took a day to complete the clearance and even then we thought many had escaped into the galleries of the mines, so we just blew them to seal them in.

Storm Brewing

The clusterfuck of our first battalion attack on Crater had led to some pretty searching questions being asked and some 'lessons learned' being dusted off and applied. They went looking for a vanguard for the brigade, volunteers from the battalion, the cream of the fighters. They wanted the hard core of guys who had the guts and nuts to spearhead an assault on the mine complexes the CTs were holed up in.

6 PARA held a parade at Rimview where the CO gave the speech of his life. I was in the ranks but alongside guys I barely knew, the old 5 Platoon was gone, most of the battalion was in a similar state. Around me stood a motley bunch, drafts from the other regular battalions, volunteer reservists and newly trained recruits straight from depot. They might have been half decent guys but I didn't give a damn for any of them, they hadn't been through New Aldershot, Bayview or the last little stunt. Ping was wired up to some fucking machine in the hospital and Cammy was as dead as his brother. Only Tony, Fish and I remained from the Bravo Two Two of Alicia.

It was a set up, key guys had been primed, I realised later. The CO called for volunteers and Tony banged a pace forward, down the line three of the hardest fuckers in the battalion also stepped forward. I wavered for a second, no way was I in their league. Then Fish stepped up as well, no time to think, I was a better man than him and I wasn't staying to babysit the kids. I took the pace forward.

We were to be the Brigade Storm Troop, two platoons strong. Tony was promoted again to lead one of the platoons, whilst *Captain* Delacorte was the OC. We were pampered pets by any measure but we trained like demons. We fired thousands of live rounds in the tunnels under the city perfecting our drills, fighting in pairs in the pitch black. We lost a fair few guys during training, but those that made it through got to wear the old Napoleonic 'VS' badge with laurels on our arms. The VS stood for Valiant Stormer, although Very Stupid was a close second.

We were regarded as being bastard mad by the rest of the Brigade, hat ruperts called us the 'Forlorn Hope'. But to ourselves we were the Imperial Stormtroopers, first in to any mine we attacked on Crater. The walkers would clear the enemy off the surface, the engineers would find us a way in and then we'd go in and do the business. Zap all the CT's we'd see and get a foothold and then let the rest of the brigade in to finish off.

We were a disparate bunch, mostly hard case Paras, but also some Box Heads, Cabbage Heads and a couple of local Divots. Casualty rates proved to be fucking outrageous, but the rewards were worth it, we got danger money and we got almost as many medals as an American cargo loader. With a stormer's badge on your sleeve you never wanted for women or beer in Rimview on I & I either!

We got all sorts joining, but the wannabe-a-hero types never lasted too long, either died or cracked up. The guys that lasted longest were the long service privates and NCO's, guys with droopy moustaches and broken noses who'd been in the battalions fifteen odd years without getting anywhere. When it came down to it they were as tough as old boots and would never let you down. Mopping up after Phillips's Deep we found this one guy from New Glasgow dead with a Kafer's flesh in his mouth, he'd run out of ammo and went for the CT with his knife and teeth.

Myself, I reckoned that being a storm trooper was absolutely gleaming. The way I saw it we got in first before the CT's got switched on, killed a bunch of them and then handed it over to the rest of the guys who had to deal with a bunch of smart angry bugs. In addition I got away from all the routine bull shit in the battalion, did some awesome training, and was armed with a mint German gat so what could be better? Of course I was only 19 at the time, I soon learned better at KDC.

Travelling in Style Part 2

We swayed along in time to the movements of the bulk of Her Majesties Land Ship *Annihilator*. The *Annie* was 150 tonnes of heavily armed and armoured hovercraft crewed by members of the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve of Crater and sailor-soldiers of the Royal Naval Brigade. The Crateran RNVR had been the brainchild of the local Naval Attaché during the Occupation. Looking for a job now that his plush office was home to a bug commander he took charge of the organisation of the many large hovercraft that supported and linked the many mines across the surface of the planet.

Although most of the Crateran crews had no love for the army they had strangely little objection to being co-opted into the Royal Navy. Strange because the surface of Crater was had little in the way of standing water and was no much more than a dust-bowl. I guess the irony appealed to the bone dry Crateran sense of humour.

Although the colony had been liberated several militarised hovercraft still supported the war effort against the Kafer's holding out in the inhospitable Dayside. The bigger ones, *Behemoth*, *Hercules*, *Titan*, *Leviathan* and the like were capable of supporting a company of troops as a mobile and armoured base. However smaller hovercraft had recently been modified to move units of infantry, combat walkers and special forces closer to harm's way. *Annie* was the first of these, equipped with mass drivers, plasma guns, missiles, mortars and rocket artillery she was a CT's worst nightmare. The ride was pretty queasy for those with a weak stomach, but we could live with that.

Annihilator's belly was packed with 2 Platoon of the Storm Troop and a full platoon of Combat Walkers from the Provisional Battlegroup. The head shed had quickly realised that on Crater CWs had a value all their own. The Coldstream Guards battalion garrisoning Crater had two platoons or 48 Bowmans as part of its normal compliment and these had quickly proven their worth.

The arrival of 6 Assault Brigade and the Royal German Legion's 2nd Light Company had brought another six platoons of CWs to Crater along with replacement Bowman and pilots for the Coldstreamers. These were formed into the so-called Provisional Combat Walker Battlegroup, more commonly known as the Provisional Battlegroup with companies of Airborne, Guards and German manned walkers. Their internal rivalry was fearsome and the combat power of nearly 200 Bowmans was a major factor in what was becoming known as the 'Dayside Campaign'.

The *Annie* was part of the *Titan* Task Force and was up-threat from the mothership in a cloud of sensor drones and backed by a troop of Montgomery hovertanks from the German Legion.

The Longest Day

Crater's Dayside is stunningly inhospitable to man. The twin suns of Henry's Star give a good attempt at baking the life out of everything that moves under it while it is in the sky, oh yeah and one of them never sets.

Temperatures are usually around the 50 degree mark, but can vary rapidly rocket to 90 degrees during solar flares. The air is so thin and weak in oxygen that you need to wear a mask to function effectively for any length of time. The combination of twin suns and thin atmosphere mean that UV radiation is pretty high, we wore desert capes, goggles and kept our heads covered at all times. Our camouflage was a garish high contrast pattern which looked like WW2's *Tirpitz* after an explosion in a paint factory.

Yet despite this there was mineral wealth to be extracted under the Dayside's baked soil and wadis. Corporations and wildcat miners ranged the wild and fortunes could be made. Many more went not for money but to escape the attentions of the Conglomerate, but the total Dayside population before the war would have barely topped 10 000. These guys were so tight lipped they made the Rimmers look positively gregarious, we had some attached as scouts.

The Kafers on Crater were a wily bunch. During the occupation they had set up fall back positions in the Dayside that went largely unnoticed. Several of the major deep mining complexes were occupied. The population was enslaved or driven out into the wastes to die. No one really noticed until they were driven out from Rimview, the expected mopping up operation turned into something entirely more serious. They had the logistics set up to survive; we had neither the troops nor the supplies to destroy them.

Oh yeah, one last thing, out there water is as rare as rocking horse shit.

Travelling in Style Pt.3

The big hovercraft like the *Annie* and her larger cousins were our answer to the problem of operations on the Dayside. We took our bases and our logistics with us. The recipe had worked well at Eisen's Tower, although we'd still had to smash and now General O'Connor had launched us on what we assumed was the final exploitation phase to finish the last remnants of the force that had held Eisen's Tower.

The *Titan* was tooled up to the gunnells and prepped for a long trip into the hinterland still held by the enemy. The bulk of the Crater Defence Force was recovering following the storm of Eisen's Tower and we were on our own. The only problem was that the route into his rear areas for a sled the size of *Titan* was through the pass at Yellow 14, if we didn't take Yellow 14 we had 300km extra to travel. Yellow 14 was a killer vulnerable point, and we knew the CTs had it garrisoned. Getting through was going to be as hairy an operation as we'd ever undertaken. Luckily we had an ace in the hole.

Annie and her cohorts were 30 km out in front of *Titan*, 20 minutes travel time for the sled and what we were allotted to seize and clear Yellow 14. The plan was a good one, whether it would survive contact with the enemy, that was a Lv 50 million question.

The first element had been in place for 70 hours already, a deep recce team from the ASLAN Pathfinders inserted by Raven and who had infiltrated through the Wadis on foot. They'd been in an OP overlooking Yellow 14 and observing the garrison. Vastly high above the Pathfinders hung the battlecruiser *Duke of York* in a bombardment orbit, already dispensing kinetic attack munitions.

Four of these inert kinetic attack munitions lashed down impacting on the pre-designated targets landing with the impact of kilotonnes of high explosive. Seconds later WASP attack rockets from the *Titan* saturated the target area making the ground boil with the impact. Following up was the simultaneous arrival of the leading Montgomeries and four Ravens flying in a company of 7 PARA to secure the high ground overlooking Yellow 14.

The *Annie* cruised in and the Stormers put in a number of hard kills on isolated CT fighting positions. A relatively easy proposition with the firepower we had to hand. *Titan* arrived exactly on time and roared through the pass in close formation with the remainder of the RGL company's AFVs deployed around her. We collapsed out position, the *Annie* extracting with the Montgomeries and the Ravens collecting both the Paras and the Pathfinders. The *Duke* lobbed in another couple of KAMs and that was it. Job done.

I mention this otherwise unremarkable action as it was the first and only military operation I was every involved in that went off absolutely without a hitch.

Intercourse and Intoxication

Edge Street was the raciest district in Rimview and it was our stamping ground. *Titan* and her escorts had been behind CT lines for weeks before being relieved by another carrier *Hercules*. We were extracted off *Titan*'s deck by hopper as she closed on Eisen's Tower and flown back to Rimview. We were scheduled for another operation and were being given an expedited stand-down period. In other words it was time for I&I, our infinitely preferable version of R&R.

We were being paid popstar wages and were living a pornstar lifestyle. Edge Street was ours for the taking, anything we wanted we could have. We were living fast and dying faster, and our dubious glamour it drew groupies and hangers on like flies. There were wannabes amongst them, scions of rich Conglomerate families as well as the desperate; girls with no families or connections living on the edge as much as we were.

It was a rapid whirl of drinks, fighting, drugs and women. We broke half a dozen of the Queen's Regulations every time we stepped out of the barracks, but what were they going to do? Send us on a Forlorn Hope? Tony had only one rule, we were straight and sober on operations even when we were fighting dirty. The various MP and RP patrols went nowhere near us, they wouldn't have dared.

The girl was called Marie. She was broken from a harsh childhood and the occupation but with steel still running through her. I was helpless before her, besotted in spite of her open infidelities and flirtations (not to mention my own). We were drawn to each other despite ourselves. I was involved in several fights because of her, inevitably bringing the rest of the platoon boiling into the action. We were like drowning people clinging to each other in the wreckage, inevitably ending up with each other at the end of the night. She sobbed every time I left her, holding me tight and soaking my hair with her tears and begging me not to go back to the Dayside.

I always left though, it was what I did.

Poor Doomed *Hercules*

Titan and *Annihilators*' rampage around the CT's rear areas had inspired High Command no end and when we came out we were replaced by the *Hercules* and her Task Force. They crossed over through Yellow 14, the same route that we had taken in and out. Big mistake, as they say in the movies.

The CT's had learnt, they did not try to hold the crossing point in force. Instead they had it under observation and cued a land attack missile attack from an as previous unknown strongpoint. Now CT LAMs are notoriously inaccurate, best used for hitting cities or large bases, but they found *Hercules* easily enough.

The *Hercules* was smashed by the impact of two missiles, ripping apart her hydrogen fuel tankage and sparking almost instantaneous secondary explosions throughout the vessel. She died in seconds, her fission plant miraculously not adding to the instant devastation but Yellow 14 took some serious fallout, not that it made much difference to its habitability. The explosion was felt all the way back to Eisen's Tower.

As the Task Force had been shaken out for the crossing casualties weren't as high as they could have been, only a hundred died with many more wounded. Back in his office in Rimview the former Naval Attaché commander of the RNVRC deadpanned that; 'there is something wrong with our bloody

landships today'. There was nothing wrong with them, they were just civvy heavy lifters pressed into military service.

The death of *Hercules* was a disaster both for the casualties we took and the loss of the movement capacity she represented. We also got to find out the CTs had yet another fall back position – soon to be named *Krak des Chevaliers* by a classically minded officer somewhere in the Crater Defence Force, we called it KDC..

Krak des Chevaliers: Approach

There is nothing in the world quite as strange as seeing your own name in print for the first time. For this reason I'll reproduce part of an article on our assault into Krak des Chevaliers. The other reason is that I can barely remember the approach so this will have to do. The author also got my age wrong, I was twenty by then!

Colour Sergeant Farrar led his assault team into position through the immediate defensive cordon of sweating sappers, up the narrow re-entrant. His breather mask sucked onto his face and the heavy equipment and armour plate he carried caused his cooling vest to have very little effect in the heat of midday. He knew the route from the recce the night before but could have followed the stinking CT corpses and the three shattered frames of burnt out combat walkers just as easily. Near the top of the re-entrant as it closed into a small gully waited the sapper troop officer in charge of the breaching. The high contrast pattern camo that made you look like a gaudy yellow, blue and white half arsed fancy dress impersonation of a German WW2 pocket battleship in camp at Rimview blended in nicely out on the Dayside.

Farrar dropped onto his knee by the officer; the rest of the 'forlorn hope' sank and found cover; young Private Anderson pushed by with his short barrelled VR-5 to provide cover further up. He was only 19 and already a tested combat veteran and a reliable soldier; the teenage paratrooper was no longer the fresh-faced crow straight from depot of eight months ago.

'Tony,' the sapper looked stressed from 20 straight hours of breaching preparations. 'The primary breach was cut half an hour ago during the last stonk of the main entrance. It's a good breach into the main lift tunnel, and there's been no reaction. I've had my dems team in there for the last half an hour and they've rigged the wallbangers. If the escapee is right that will take you straight into the main security nexus for the complex as per the plan.'

The Colour Sergeant turned around to scrambled and slip back down the slope. He passed Sergeant Meredith his 2i/c and told him the assault was still to go on the initial orders. Further down in the shadow cast by a gutted RGL combat walker Farrar found the Company Commander of the follow on force from 6 PARA and his point platoon commander; a scarred former-Colour Sergeant commissioned in the field four weeks ago.

'Sir, the sappers have made the entrance into the lift shaft and have prepared the secondary breaches. Has the breach at ALMEIRA been successful?'

'Aye Faz,' answered Major Quinn. 'They're on schedule, and in position.'
'The assault will go ahead as per my O Group. H-Hr at 0147 ZULU.' The two 6 PARA officers glanced at their GCS watches. They were all synchronised on GUNNERTIME. *'Just make sure that your platoon is right up my arse when we go in. My lads will get you in and we'll pay blood to do it, but just make sure, damn sure we can take the counter-attack.'* The pale eyed, teak hard lieutenant nodded.

Farrar slogged up to the head of his assault team passing Anderson who was quietly talking to the sapper guide who would lead them into the enemy complex. The tunnel into the side of the hill had been carved by plasma cutters and descended steeply down into the dark. Once the assault was underway the engineers would detonate charges to widen the tunnel but for now the overheating assault team had to crawl cursing along the solidified rock. Once inside there was a short, but vertiginous climb down a small wire ladder until the came to a platform welded to the side of the disused lift shaft that had formed the heart of the mining complex the Kafers had occupied. Then an echoing descent along metal narrow stairs took them further into the heart of the stronghold known as

the Krak des Chevaliers. It seemed unbelievable that the CTs couldn't hear them coming, his 25 men sounded like a division of crap hats.

Finally they were ready, almost stumbling over four nervous sappers who had long since finished setting up the wallbangers and were left alone in the bleak darkness of the lift shaft. The sapper sergeant identified himself with hand gestures that glowed serenely in Farrar's thermal vision. Behind the wall to their left there were at least twenty CTs, the audio equipment they had brought couldn't tell them better than that. Farrar gave a tight feral grin and passed to information back, the more CTs they killed to begin with the better. When the wallbangers went off, they'd spray plasma and molten rock into the chamber beyond carving a three metre wide gap. Farrar's men, half of the brigade's elite Storm Troop would dash in and kill anything still alive. Then they would fan out, racing and killing against time to create a viable defensive perimeter and then try to survive long enough to hand over to the reinforcing paratroopers.

*His team took up positions and Farrar felt the fear rush into him and he began to shake. Unlike all the other mines they'd stormed this time it was the big one, KDC held at least 500 bugs. The last formed unit on Crater, and his skin crawled at the thought. The nerves were normally held at bay by how busy he was before an attack, but this pause was a killer no many how times you did it. He looked up to an expectant sapper, the time glowing digitally in his HUD and for the first time of the day he spoke into his radio.
'Do it.'*

The shaft erupted.

Adam Marks, Ares Press 2303

Krak des Chevaliers: Execution

We poured through the gap after the explosion and into a maelstrom. The CT in the chamber beyond had mostly been shredded and the others were blasted stupid. It was a slaughterhouse. We finished them there and then, going for headshots on thermal in the swirling dust and flickering light. Then we pushed on using the route we'd learnt in the simulators from the mine's blue prints.

I was carrying a VR-5 with a short barrel and grenade launcher attachment – it was heavier than my usual German SK-19 carbine but held more rounds. I'd had to give up the Czech cavalry pistol but instead had a Velvet handcannon a snub nosed carbine which fired captured Kafer ammo. It was unwieldy but would put a bug on its arse with a single shot. I was wreathed in ammo cassettes, explosives and grenades and had the Alician commando knife strapped upside down on my webbing and a punch knife hidden in a pocket.

The next corridor saw us gun down a pair of confused looking CTs and we pushed past them into the next gallery which should have led us to the CT command post. It didn't; instead we found a collapsed ceiling and several thousand tonnes of rock. It seemed here where the navy's new *Prometheus* sat system didn't reach our intel had failed us. We were fucked and we knew it but Tony didn't hesitate, we had a secondary route only it would take us far longer.

Another explosion rocked the complex. We hoped that was the second breach, led by the other half of the troop and Captain Delacourt, going in on the other side of the mines.

We grenaded our way forward through increasing resistance down the first stair well we came to. We were starting to take casualties now as the Kafers came alive but we had to get to the other side of the command centre. We had some advantages in the dark confined tunnels; our drills, firepower and thermal sights. The CTs were rubbish in the blackness and had nowhere to hide, but they had numbers, determination and their own firepower. We had to seal the routes we didn't take while the 6 PARA boys came on behind us. Tunnel fighting just took numbers.

The slick drills broke down quickly but we fought forwards in pairs – through a long barracks complex that smelt of CT dung. There was no terror in the way we fought, but there was fear, desperation and hatred.

They stopped us at a junction just short of the command centre. They had fire coming down both corridors which we just couldn't break. Tony was the first to go down, his heart cored by plasma fire – he just looked surprised. We tried to break through with blockbusters, but the Kafers held, two more of us dying in the attempt.

Eventually we broke them with thermobaric rockets and a close assault. I ended up in a knife fight with a CT rifleman in the rush, the barbaric Alician knife finally coming into its own as I carved his guts open. He managed to get a good few stabs of his own through gaps in my armour and into my ribs before he collapsed. I struggled up and swung up the handcannon just too late as another CT pumped a pair of grenades into my hip and legs.

The only thing I remember was Fish standing over me, muzzle blast lighting up the walls and the faces of the counter attacking bugs.

Krak des Chevaliers: Aftermath

We took KDC in the end, but at a fearsome cost. The Stormers were a spent force, we never got to the command post and 6 PARA had to take it for us. Our half of the troop had 4 left on their feet, Delacourt's half had five, including him of course.

All in all the brigade took 50% casualties in taking the mines, all too many of them dead. We'd have never made it if it hadn't been for the support arms of the Brigade filling in as infantry. You'd expect the engineers and artillery guys to be able to stand in as infantry when required, but when push came to shove underground at Krak the loggies, sigs and all the rest of them stood up too. They made the difference and killed the bugs or pushed them deep underground.

We took the complex and remarkably saved a large number of the humans kept as slave labour as well.

KDC was retained as an outlying base for the few Kafers who were operating further out on the Dayside. We all knew well enough now that a few victories were enough to wipe these guys out forever. On every world we'd fought on the guerrillas campaign would run long and fierce for maybe decades.

It was the Kafers greatest strength; they never surrendered, they never lost heart, they just loved to fight in a way even the hardest human soldiers couldn't match.

The End

What about me? Well I nearly died down there in the mine, and part of me did. They pulled me out with a shattered pelvis and leg, broken ribs, collapsed lung and an intestinal tract full of shrapnel and bone fragments.

My stay in hospital at Rimview was short and I was soon evacuated back to Alicia and then after a month or so back to earth. I barely saw anyone I knew in these hospitals. Only my fellow seriously wounded from the brigade. It gave me too much time to think.

The fighting fury that had sustained me on Crater passed with Tony and the others. The Storm Troop had been disbanded, so I heard, and the remnants of the Brigade sent back to Alicia to re-build. Time for others to take on the fight.

The medics say I should make a full recovery, although by the time I'm walking again my time in the Army will be over. Soldiering is a young man's game, and I no longer feel young in spite of my years. Instead I'm planning to go to university and try to do the things most young people do. Although I fear I will no longer fit in with my artificial bones and fearsome nightmares.

Of my brothers in the original Two Section only Fish escaped unharmed and half were dead. I'll never forget them, although Fish I might try to. Tony's infectious charisma and fury, Alan's fierce work ethic, Iain and Cammy's quiet competence. Dave and Ping survived but were almost as badly mangled as me,

although I hear Dave is parachuting again already. Many of us were awarded medals, Tony's posthumous VC foremost amongst them, but in truth they are very hollow things.

However when I am able I shall wear those medals and march with the others on the second Sunday in November. I shall recite and honour the words nearly four hundred years old; *at the going down of the sun, I will remember them.*

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