

# OPERATION HERKULES

## - The Liberation of Dunkelheim -

### Introduction

By November 2302 the Kafers had been routed from the Beta Canum Cluster. The ground forces of a number of nations were busy rooting out Kafer guerrillas and warships were hunting down their scattered Kafer counterparts. However on the Eta Bootis Finger one world was still held by the aliens, Dunkelheim, occupied as their forward operating base back in June 2301. The initial impetus of the Liberation was spent and Germany found significant difficulty in finding the starlift capability to retake the fortified Dunkelheim. Diplomatic pressures from Germany and her allies were finally able to ensure an offensive to free Dunkelheim could finally be mounted.

### Acknowledgements

The Adlerhorst Alliance is from 'Operation Backdoor' by Charles Gannon. The Australian forces are by A Gubler and the American forces by Jason Weiser and James Boschma. The Asterie Class ship is by Jonathan Pearson.

### Narrative

*Oberleutnant Wilhelm Sandrock swore viciously as his Luki-9 shook with a crushing impact and its engines raced. He'd had three Luki-9s shot out from under him on Beta Canum and one on Aurore and now in less than half a day on Dunkelheim he faced the same fate again. The driver regained control after a vicious skid which nearly dug in the rigid plenum and risked flipping the gun sled. Sandrock tried to slew the main gun towards the pair of Deathsleds but the weapon only showed red on his displays.*

*The Luki almost passed between the two Kafer AFVs, but at the last moment a thrust vector died too fast for the vectronics to stabilise and it jinked into the right hand vehicle. The impact was sickening and knocked him unconscious.*

*The burning smell of the Luki beginning to brew up brought him round, and he scrambled to blow out the hatch. With an aching arm he reached to free his SK-19 but the weapon was mangled and trapped in the rack. He clambered out onto the smouldering hull reaching for his oversized sidearm as he did.*

*The Luki-9 was solidly wedged into the Deathsled its prow just below the alien tank's turret ring, its own remote turret and external cannon were gone. He saw movement on the top of the enemy turret as a groggy looking Kafer commander caught sight of him. Wilhelm staggered along the hull as the Kafer tried to traverse his machine gun cupola. The German tanker shot the alien commander several times at close range smashing shell, arm and head while he struggled with the secondary armament.*

*Wilhelm popped one of the red phosphorous grenades they used to deny their own damaged tanks and dropped it past the bleeding Kafer into the turret. The grenade detonated and he heard the barking of burning Kafers inside. Gingerly and with as much speed as his stunned body could manage he moved back onto the Luki to see if his driver was still alive.*

*It was his fortieth kill, only a couple of Frenchmen could claim more, but this one was definitely the hardest. This 'hexenkessel' was worse than anything else he had experienced on the Rhine, the Somme, Tanstaaf or Beta Canum. They had no choice though, they just had to hold the planethead, no matter what the cost.*

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## **Situation**

The German colony of Dunkelheim in the DM+36 2436 system was occupied by the Kafers in June of 2301 with relatively little resistance. The defending squadron of warships withdrew and there was no coherent opposition on the ground to seriously hamper the Kafer landings. The Kafers went on to establish their main forward operating base in human territory on Dunkelheim, enabling deeper strikes into the Beta Canum cluster.

The colonial Governor Karl Schmidt had laid plans for a guerrilla resistance movement which was later reinforced by German and other allied special forces smuggled in from off-world. This forced the deployment of an increasing number of Kafer troops to Dunkelheim to maintain their control over key points on the world. Additionally Kafer units were unleashed to conduct raids on the human population. The reasoning behind these raids has been often debated and Kafer sadism is commonly identified as the motive. However recently the military intelligence community believed these raids were actually some form of live training against a human enemy.

The special forces operating with guerrillas on Dunkelheim were there in support of a secret plan underway to liberate the colony, known as Operation WOTAN. WOTAN involved the preparation of two German brigades for an opposed landing in a remote area of Dunkelheim and the launching of a conventional campaign against the Kafers. Events conspired against the Germans however. The focus of French and other nations was on the relief of Eta Bootis itself and the Germans found it difficult to gather enough space naval combat power to challenge the Kafer fleets in the Eta Bootis finger. Additionally the Germans could get enough starlift from impressed merchants displaced from the Hochbaden-Dunkelheim routes to carry the two brigades, but were unable to provide for follow on forces.

Finally the defeat of the 2nd Battle of Beta Comae Berenicies and the loss of the DSKM squadron there rendered the abortive WOTAN a moot point. Soon the Kafers surged forward again past the blockaded Nous Voila and on to Kimanjano and Beta Canum where the Germans found themselves locked in a massive ground battle. Virtually the whole force training for WOTAN found itself caught up in this battle including the controlling HQ, IX Korps.

With the Beta Canum Cluster as a whole fighting for its life German concerns moved away from merely worrying about Dunkelheim. A new corps HQ, X Korps was formed, activated and dispatched up Arm, eventually fetching up at Beowulf where it coordinated with the French Armée de Libération and the Commonwealth Expeditionary Force. Fighting units soon followed it while the Neubayern system was prepared as another citadel should the Kafers break through at Beowulf. Meanwhile German diplomacy brought in a number of allies to fight alongside her, including a contribution from the Freihafeners.

X Korps main planning revolved around eventually influencing the on-going battle for Beta Canum, and then reinforcing the surviving German colonies on Joi and Adlerhorst. Payback on Dunkelheim was a long way down the list of priorities, although a small planning cell based in the X Korps HQ at Heorot was involved in updating the existing WOTAN contingencies. X Korps possessed many advantages that IX Korps planning for WOTAN had not; the concentration of the entire German military effort and abundant starlift provided by German registered merchants thrown out of their routes around the cluster.

The Battle of Beowulf lifted the blockade from the X Korps forces being committed to action and together with their Allies they began the counter-offensive soon after the Reserve Fleet's victory. After

pausing in the Kimanjano system until the French led Liberation passed its most critical phase the X Korps main body pushed on to Beta Canum and a further force pressed on to Joi. The landings on Beta Canum were organised by the British onto their New African colony which was largely free of Kafers. X Korps was soon present in strength on the German Continent aiding the mixed bag of human forces who had won a major victory there prior to the arrival of the reinforcements at the 2nd Battle of Uethan. Further troops moved up to reinforce Adlerhorst which had so far escaped invasion.

Taking stock Generaloberst Sebi Metzger, the German Theatre Commander, surveyed the situation and found the current operations were focused on mopping up Beta Canum and to a lesser extent on Joi. That left the Eta Bootis Finger, and specifically Dunkelheim, as his main area of future operations. Consequently he pulled X Korps from day-to-day control of the fighting on Beta Canum as the German Continent was largely free of Kafers and tasked it with planning the renewed attempt to liberate Dunkelheim. WOTAN was to be renamed HERKULES and given to Generalleutnant Hanno Schneider to run.

## **Planning**

Several key factors constrained Generalleutnant Schneider's planning for HERKULES.

The main factor was the chronic weakness of the Deutsches Sternkreigsmarine (DSKM), which had proportionately taken the highest casualties of any human space force. While human fleets had secured most of the Beta Canum Cluster, made Eta Bootis a stronghold and scattered the Kafer Task Forces the systems of the Eta Bootis Finger were far from secure. Indeed Dunkelheim was the main Kafer supply base in this volume and given time the Kafer warships could again coalesce here into a major fleet and already substantial, if uncoordinated, forces were here. For HERKULES to succeed the Germans would need to call upon a multinational effort to secure in-system superiority, requiring a diplomatic effort in combination with military planning.

Second was the inherent difficulty with securing sufficient starlift for the forces required to liberate Dunkelheim. The massed merchant fleet that had brought X Korps from Beowulf was slowly dispersing; some moving military forces, some shifting much needed humanitarian aid and still more returning to trade to try and restart the economy of the cluster. The longer HERKULES waited the less chance it stood of getting off the ground. Indeed Schneider was aware he would increasingly need to call upon starlift capability from Germany's allies.

Closely related to starlift was interface assault capability. Germany had little by the way of assault capability, having concentrated her post-Reunification building programme on warships and certainly had nothing to match France's Escadre d'Interface. Instead she had to rely on older former-Bavarian troopships with limited interface capacity, of which only two of the larger, most capable Fast Troopships remained available. To overcome these difficulties Germany would have to mass her existing capability and call upon help from her allies who had their own operations to conduct.

Schneider had plenty of troops on hand, he believed more than enough for the task, indeed two divisions earmarked for the mission would remain on other colony worlds waiting to be called forwards. His problem would be in transporting and supplying those he would deploy. Every additional soldier he brought forward would mean fewer supplies and overall less fighting capability.

Intelligence was excellent. For nearly 18 months multinational special forces had operated alongside the Widerstand resistance on Dunkelheim and there was little Schneider didn't know about ground force dispositions. Similarly warships and privateer snoops had conducted reconnaissance missions from the edge of the system and had built up a comprehensive picture of Kafer operations in-system.

Germany was well placed for allies on the French Arm. They had just signed the Adlerhorst Alliance, a primarily political compact, with American and Australia to coordinate their efforts against the Kafers. They were also supported by a number of smaller nations with military aid. Most importantly relations on a practical military level were good with other major players on the French Arm including the British, Azanians, Ukrainians and, after some problems, the Japanese. Even France, despite some personality clashes and uneasy relations on Earth had cooperated closely during the Kafer War so far and goodwill still existed between the two.

The main change in the situation from that envisioned in WOTAN was in the larger ground based Kafer garrison. Most of this had been brought in to cope with the operations of the Widerstand and other human forces. Continuous operations over the surface of Dunkelheim had raised these forces to a high general standard of competence. These forces had been reinforced by troops retreating by any means available from the debacles in the Beta Canum Cluster. These were usually forces without heavy equipment as these had been left behind in evacuations, but other well equipped strike formations were also present. In addition rumours of enhanced Kafer ASAT defences are rife.

Almost half of the Kafer force was massed in the area between Goldberg and the Kafer safe-place built around the old spaceport. Numerous other forces were found across the planet dispersed to maintain a firm hold on the civilian population. Schneider liaised closely with Général d'Armée Claude Hebert, trying to learn all he could from French experience of Kimanjano on the likely Kafer reaction to his landing.

The outline plan derived for HERKULES involved a series of preliminary space operations designed to wear down the Kafer forces and identify their defensive strategy. A major combat fleet would then be committed to destroy the in-system defences and clear the way for the invasion force. This force would be dispatched from Vogelheim and Beta Canum and move directly into the assault. Under cover of an orbital bombardment the main force was to be landed some 1000km to the south of Goldberg. Simultaneously Widerstand fighters, special forces and raiding parties from orbit would attack key locations.

Schneider intended to commit to a rapid build-up of forces, utilising techniques pioneered by the French to get his heavy forces into position rapidly. He assessed that the Kafers would intend to hit the Landing Zone as hard and as soon as possible and aimed to defeat this thrust with his mobile forces. Schneider aimed to ensure his spearhead was as heavy and well armoured as possible. He hoped that this defeat away from urban areas would ease the task of mopping up and minimise casualties amongst the colonists. He expected that most of the Kafers mobile forces would come out to oppose the landings, and this would comprise the bulk of their immediate manoeuvre capability.

His forces were ordered to focus on the destruction of the Kafer vehicles, leaving the dismounted infantry to isolation many of hundreds of kilometres from their bases. He aimed to isolate approaching elements and destroy them in detail utilising his speed of action, command and control systems and massed artillery. Although outnumbered in total he believed he could gain the required superiority of combat power at a time and place of his choosing.

Once this was complete he would break out from this battle and begin his exploitation. The next objectives would be Goldberg and the Kafer *Safe Place* with the rest of the liberation dependent on how these operations had gone. He was well aware that the campaign would be a long one even after these initial objectives had been seized.

Forces earmarked for HERKULES were identified and began a tailored training regime. One of the most difficult facets was conducting realistic interface assault training, most of which had to be undertaken in simulators. Most units managed at least one proper rehearsal including loading and assault from orbit. Schneider was concerned about the dispersal of his units on three different worlds and their lack of opportunity to train together. However given the tight timelines there was little he could do, however all the key commanders at battalion level above attended two conferences on Beta Canum 4.

## **Commanders**

Generalleutnant Hanno Schneider, commanding X Korps, was appointed as the commander of Operation HERKULES in the summer of 2302. In addition X Korps was to be the controlling headquarters for the mission. Hanno Schneider was a Bavarian officer of the old colonial school, with significant experience training armoured forces on Garten and Nibelungen as well as serving as a Jäger officer on Heidelshemat. He had seen active service in the Central Asian War as a junior officer with both Terran Bavarian and Gartener units. Strongly pro-Reunificationist, he commanded a Bavarian Panzergrenadier Division in the Black Forest in the war with France. Since the war he has been used in a diplomatic capacity leading an ultimately fruitless mission to Freihafen, subsequently as commander of IX Korps and then as Inspector General of Colonial Forces.

When IX Korps was mobilised Schneider was called upon to organise X Korps as its replacement, and then to lead the new corps onto the French Arm. Avuncular, cosmopolitan, professional and highly experienced Schneider proved an ideal appointment. He has fallen foul of some politicians in Berlin who complain about some of his decisions, but remains popular with the troops and with his allies.

Command of the space element of HERKULES was significantly more difficult to arrange. Dunkelheim lay within the sphere of influence of all three of the major human fleets. Borodin's Fleet had outposts in the Hochbaden system but was concentrating its efforts on interdicting the routes to Kafer space and protecting Aurore from raiders. Rochemont's Fleet was still based on Adlerhorst and operating strongly against the Eta Bootis Finger. Graham's Reserve Fleet was operating mainly in the area between Beowulf and Beta Canum but was sending some forces into the Eta Bootis Finger. All three fleets were under strength and in need of rest after months of operations and combat.

Human military space operations had been placed under the overall command of the newly promoted and ennobled British Admiral Lord Graham of Beowulf in September 2302. However operations of Rochemont's Fleet, now predominantly French, were poorly co-ordinated with the rest. Yet the fact remained that Rochemont was best placed to provide the required space force power to the Dunkelheim, an unpalatable fact for Germany. Consequently it was arranged for Graham to be in overall command with Rochemont as area commander, actual operations would be under the command of Germany's veteran and massively experienced commander Konteradmiral Lutke. Thus honours were even throughout the command structure.

Wilhelm Lutke is a living legend, his partnership at Aurore with the Ukrainian admiral Borodin is one of the great epics of the Kafer War. His hard working and forceful energy was the perfect compliment for the brilliant, but diffident Borodin, yet was no tactical novice himself. However the ageing Lutke was on the verge of burn out after five continuous years at the front, yet still no other DSKM commander even came close to his abilities or reputation, or more importantly his ability to stand up to Rochemont. HERKULES will be his swansong before returning to the core.

## **Order of Battle**

Op HERKULES was a massive undertaking: a deliberate assault on a world entirely occupied by the Kafers, a task overmatched only by the massive French-led Liberation of Kimanjano. To accomplish this task a substantial space and ground force was massed. This force was primarily German but also included forces from the other Adlerhorst Alliance nations, American and Australia. Further fighting contingents came from Freihafen, Britain and Austrovenia while other nations contributed support elements.

### **Space Forces**

The space forces required for HERKULES were drawn from all three main Fleets, but were controlled and supplied through Rochemont's Fleet HQ at Vogelheim. The operational commander was Konteradmiral Lutke with his flag in the famous battlecruiser *Bismarck*. The Task Force was task organised into three groups, one to conduct scouting and raiding operations to shape the battlespace, one to conduct the main combat operations and finally the assault group.

### **Task Force Herkules**

#### **Gruppe H1**

##### **Staffeln H11**

*Admiral Scheer* (CG-Ge)

*Kassel* (FF-Ge)

*Schleswig* (FF-Ge)

##### **Staffeln H12**

*Bushranger* (DD-Aus)

*Canberra* (DD-Aus)

##### **Staffeln H13**

*Indefatigable* (DD-UK)

*Illustrious* (DD-UK)  
*Seydlitz* (DD-Ger)

## **Gruppe H2**

### **Staffeln H21**

*Bismarck* (BC-Ger)  
*Bayern* (BB-Ger)  
*Montrose* (CG-UK)  
*Rotterdam* (DD-Ger)  
*Fulda* (DD-Ger)

### **Staffeln H22**

*Richelieu* (BB-Fr)  
*Colbert* (CG-Fr)  
*Gloire* (CG-Fr)  
*Marechal Ney* (DD-Fr)  
*Lansquenet* (DD-Fr)  
*Imperieuse* (FF-Fr)

### **Staffeln H23**

*Jefferson* (CG-US)  
*Kennedy* (CG-US)  
*Brisbane* (DD-Aus)  
*Cayuga* (FF-US)  
*Sioux* (FF-US)

### **Staffeln H24**

*Graf Zeppelin* (CV-Ge)  
*Ark Royal* (CV-UK)  
*Westfalen* (FF-Ge)  
*Ajax* (FF-UK)

## **Gruppe H3**

### **Staffeln H31**

*Ramcke* (Ger)  
*Von Lettow-Vorbeck* (Ger)  
*Altmark* (Ger)  
*Rand der Unbegrenztheit* (Frei)  
*Blauer Traumer* (Frei)

### **Staffeln H32**

*Iwo Jima* (US)  
*Blue Ridge* (US)  
*Tobruk* (Aus)  
*Arnhem* (UK)  
*Hollis* (UK)

### **Staffeln H33**

*Bir Hakeim* (LPA-Fr)  
*Dien Bien Phu* (LPA-Fr)

### **Staffeln H34**

8 x STUFT

### **Staffeln H35**

7 x STUFT

### **Staffeln H36**

*Hannover* (FF Ger)  
*Holstein* (FF-Ger)  
*Brandenburg* (FF-Ger)  
*Castiglione* (FF-Fr)  
*Austerlitz* (FF-Fr)

## **Land Forces.**

The land force for HERKULES is built around a Corps of three combat Divisions. Two are

predominantly mechanised formations tasked with the bulk of the initial combat against the Kafer manoeuvre forces and exploitation against them. The final force is an infantry heavy division which is tasked with consolidation taskings, mopping up the Kafers especially in urban areas. There are also a substantial group of special and raiding forces tasked to the corps.

## **X Korps**

Elements of Kolonial Sonderverband 2  
Elements of Kommando Abteilung 391 'Braunschweig'  
Kommando Abteilung 393 'Steiner'  
Jäger Abteilung 381

## **Luftgeschwader 53**

I Gruppe  
II Gruppe  
III Gruppe  
IV Gruppe

## **4 Kolonial Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Division**

Luftkissenpanzeraufklärungs Abteilung 4  
Luftkissengefectspanzergrenadier Abteilung 4

### **Panzer Kavallerie Regiment 11 (Freihafen)**

#### **1 Luftkissenpanzer Brigade 'Lehr'**

Luftkissenpanzer Abteilung 11  
Luftkissenpanzer Abteilung 12  
Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Abteilung 13  
Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Abteilung 14

#### **14 Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Brigade**

Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Abteilung 141  
Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Abteilung 142  
Luftkissenpanzer Abteilung 143  
Luftkissenpanzer Abteilung 144

## **9 Kolonial Jäger Division**

### **29 Fallschirmjäger Brigade**

291 Fallschirmjäger Bataillon  
292 Fallschirmjäger Bataillon  
293 Fallschirmjäger Bataillon

### **36 Jäger Brigade**

Jäger Bataillon 361  
Jäger Bataillon 362  
Jäger Bataillon 363

### **50 Gebirgsjäger Brigade**

Bayerische Gebirgsjäger Bataillon 231  
Sächsische Grenzschutz Bataillon 3  
Österreichisch-Slowenisch Bundesgebirgsjägerbataillon

## **1st US Marine Division**

1st Marine Reconnaissance Battalion (elements OPCON X Korps)  
3rd Marine Raider Company  
101st Marine Raider Company

#### **4th Marine Interface Brigade**

1-6th Marine Regiment (6th MIU)  
1-7th Marine Regiment (7th MIU)  
2d Tank Battalion (+)

#### **173rd Airborne Brigade (Transorbital)**

1-503d Airborne Infantry  
1-508th Airborne Infantry  
1-509th Airborne Infantry  
E/17th Cavalry  
1-158th Infantry (Mech) (Ellis ARNG)

#### **37th (Commonwealth) Brigade**

18th Squadron, Cavalry Regiment of Australia  
38th Squadron, New Canberra Guides  
1st Battalion, Wundurra Regiment  
1st Battalion, The Gordon Highlanders Battle Group

### **Kafer Forces**

#### **Space force**

The Kafer space forces present in the Dunkelheim system were a mixture of remnant forces left over from all three Task Forces and other reinforcements that had accreted in the system. Most of the ships have significant combat experience but their leadership structure was initially very confused until finally one commander came out ahead of the rest. Unfortunately this commander is from a different group than the ground force commander and one still loyal to the now fallen *Triumphant Destiny*. Human intelligence has designated this fleet Task Force *Tango*.

The main combat power of the force includes 4 BBs, 3 BCs and no fewer than 7 CGs. In addition to this there are five fighter squadrons. There are over 20 Oscar class transports operating as auxiliaries, some used as piquets, and four giant Omega Class troop transports.

#### **Task Force Tango**

Alpha-08 (*Inevitability of Triumph*) - BB  
Alpha-66 (*The One Who Survives*) - BB  
India Alpha-03 (*The Glorious Struggle for Enlightenment*) - BB  
India Alpha-17 (*Disciple of Triumphant Destiny*) - BB  
Beta-01 (*Strength of the Vah*) - BC  
Beta-15 (*Honour of the Vah*) - BC  
Beta-17 (*Enlightenment of the Vah*) - BC  
Epsilon-04 (*Fearless Revenge on the Barbarians*) - CG  
Epsilon-08 (*Hatred of the Barbarians*) - CG  
Epsilon-11 (*Throttles the Barbarians with Prey Gut*) - CG  
Epsilon-18 (*Unseen Stalker of the Barbarians*) - CG  
Epsilon-22 (*Defiler of Barbarian Graves*) - CG  
Epsilon-78 (*Eviscerates the Barbarians with Claws*) - CG  
Epsilon-89 (*Merciless Hunter of the Barbarians*) - CG  
KFS641 (Foxtrot fighter squadron)  
KFS642 (Foxtrot fighter squadron)  
KGS643 (Golf fighter squadron)  
KHS644 (Hotel fighter squadron)  
KHS645 (Hotel fighter squadron)

#### **Land Force**

Kafer land forces total around 40 000 troops but is a heterogeneous force drawn from numerous contingents that have fetched up here. Consequently the force lacks coherence, a comprehensive task organisation, logistic support and command structure. Most numerous are the garrison forces used to

control the local population and suppress the Widerstand. Next most numerous were the assault troops stationed on Dunkelheim in readiness for moves further up in the Beta Canum cluster. There are also infantry forces that have been evacuated from the Beta Canum Cluster following the human counter-offensive. In addition there are also a number of specialist fleet assault troops present who have been disembarked from ships. Lastly troop reinforcements have continued to slip through the blockade from beyond Hochbaden.

The garrison for Dunkelheim eventually climbed to 20 000 soldiers who were widely dispersed, but well armed and equipped. The garrison force has been in frequent contact with the human colonists and its soldiers are becoming increasingly attuned to the tactics used by the resistance. Consequently the garrison force is fairly competent and is not an easy mark by any means.

There are some 10 000 Kafer soldiers present in depot on Dunkelheim who were earmarked as assault troops or reinforcements for the Beta Canum Cluster. They were engaged in training activities during their stay on Dunkelheim although some would reinforce the garrison in response to resistance activities. Indeed much of the garrison was provided through transfers from the depot. These soldiers are fairly inexperienced, almost blank slate Kafers, but are well trained on their own kit and are well equipped. The soldiers comprise much of the main counter-attack force and reserve.

There are 4000 soldiers present who have been evacuated from various worlds in the Beta Canum Cluster. They are experienced but lacking in equipment. Some has been procured but these units are far from being up to full equipment scales. They will form part of the reserve and have been tasked with defending some of the major urban centres.

Since the disaster at Beowulf no fewer than 3500 Kafer soldiers have been landed on Dunkelheim from the Kafer sphere, some were due for the depot and others as direct reinforcements for captured worlds. They are inexperienced and patchily equipped; some are up to scale, but others have nothing but Thudguns. They will also be tasked with urban operations.

There are some 960 elite ship's troop complement soldiers present. These are lightly equipped but the most highly trained soldiers in the Kafer order of battle. They are very experienced soldiers in fighting against Kafers and humans. They form the closest the Kafers have to human commando forces and will be held in reserve for specific operations.

Kafer forces have a wide variety of equipment available including examples of all the major types of AFV have been reported. Indeed the Kafer commander has been able to assemble several powerful armoured battlegroups some of which include the formidable CCC-1 Behemoth heavy battle tank. The Kafer force also has perhaps the best developed air wing deployed to any human world. Initially formed to provide extra mobility to Kafer troops suppressing human resistance it has also developed a strong ground attack capability.

A key component of the Kafer defence is the extensive use of fortification. Most notable is the massive *Zitadelle* built around the space port nearly 1500km north of the capital of Goldberg. The *Zitadelle* is unusual for a Kafer *Safe Place* in that it is largely above ground; however Widerstand reports that substantial subterranean excavations have been ongoing since the occupation. This complex operates as a command centre and base for interface operations with both aircraft and Hotel-Class stutterwarp capable fighters. It is heavily armed with an array of missiles, including ASAT, and numerous powerful energy weapons.

While the *Zitadelle* is the most notable defended locality there are many others ranging from supply depots to temporary patrol bases to major fortifications. Of special importance is the *Safe Place* built under Goldberg using that city's underground travel system and sewers as its base. Experience on Beta Canum, Crater and Kimanjano has shown that reducing these bases will be costly in both time and manpower.

## **Unit descriptions**

### **Gruppe H1**

Gruppe H1 is the designation given to the force assembled to scout and raid the Dunkelheim system

prior to the main operations of Op HERKULES. It includes three squadrons of ships and is under the command of the Australian Commodore 'Sandy' Shane. Two of the squadrons are highly experienced; Shane's Australians won their spurs at Eta Bootis and Commodore Campbell's Anglo-German force raided out of Grosshiddenshafen. The third squadron is comprised of elements of the old *Bayern* group and a German frigate from Rochemont's Fleet with wide experience of the region.

## **Gruppe H2**

Gruppe H2 is main space combat force tasked with the destruction of Kafer forces within the Dunkelheim system. Commanded directly by Lutke it is drawn from each of the major Fleets and is a powerful strike force divided into four squadrons. The German squadron is built around the capital ships *Bismarck* and *Bayern*. The French squadron is drawn from the French 3rd Fleet, the core of Rochemont's fleet, and is built around his flagship *Richelieu* with two powerful *Suffren*-Class cruisers and is the strongest squadron. The American Squadron is built around two Fast Missile Cruisers and a capable Australian destroyer but is somewhat hampered by the presence of two slower frigates. The final squadron has two fighter carriers, the German *Graf Zeppelin* and the British *Ark Royal* together with their goalkeepers and embarked fighter squadrons.

## **Gruppe H3**

Gruppe H3 is the interface assault group comprising 3 assault squadrons, 2 transport squadrons and an escort squadron. One assault squadron includes three German fast troopships and a pair of Freihafener armed merchants and is tasked with landing 4.Lk.PzGren.Div and lead assault troops. The French 1e Division de Debarquement is also present to land the bulk of 4.Lk.PzGren.Div's heavy equipment and rear echelon and then assist in the landing of follow on troops and supplies. The final squadron includes American, Australian and British assault shipping whose role is to land 1 MARDIV.

The two transport squadrons are made up of impressed merchant ships, seconded colony ships and liners. One squadron carries the follow on troops for who there was no room on the assault ships. The other squadron carries the supplies vital to the success of the operation and includes massive Metal and Asterie Class vessels. The small escort squadron of frigates is tasked with close defence of the ships whilst disembarking troops.

## **X Corps**

X Corps is Germany's dedicated operational deployment corps for the French Arm. It was formed from the remaining HQ elements of IX Korps on Earth and individuals from the other regular corps and has been responsible for German liberation operations on Beta Canum and Joi. It has been the lead agency in planning Op HERKULES following on from the stillborn Op WOTAN. X Corps consists of a mobile Tac HQ commanded by General Schneider and a Rear HQ currently based on Beta Canum.

Troops under the direct command include special forces troops from KS.2 (many of whom have already spent a year or more on operations on Dunkelheim), elements of Kdo.Abt.391 and the whole of Kdo.Abt.393. In addition to this for HERKULES X Corps would have assigned elements from USMC Force Recon, Australian SAS and British SPS. They also have the orbital assault specialists of Jäger Abteilung 381 under command.

The main fighting power of the corps lies in its three combat divisions described below. In addition a further two German divisions are in reserve, many of whose soldiers are forward deployed as battle casualty replacements. In addition there is a number of Allied forces in reserve, including a US Army contingent due to replace the US Marine element.

## **Luftgeschwader 53**

Luftgeschwader 53 is the Luftwaffe's contribution to HERKULES. It is a mixed interface operations group which has been tailored for the support of HERKULES and little resembles any other German formation of similar size. Interface operations have consistently proved difficult during the liberation operations and a large tranche of shipping has been given over to make LG 53 and allied air elements a useful part of HERKULES.

I Gruppe consists of 36 manned *Donnerschlag* fighter-bomber aircraft, these are versatile and robust aircraft with veteran pilots are divided into three squadrons. II Gruppe is the air defence element equipped with 54 *Wirbelsturm D* UCAVs and also has three squadrons. While the *Wirbelsturm* is optimised for air defence it has a secondary ground attack capability. II Gruppe also contains a group of hypervelocity SAM system. III Gruppe is tasked with air transport and includes a squadron of the ubiquitous Loadmaster IIIs and a squadron of Vampyr heavy X-Wing transports. Lastly IV Gruppe is tasked with supporting the other parts of LG 53 and includes AEW and AAR drones as well as engineering and ground defence assets.

#### **4 Kolonial Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Division**

4.Lk.PzGren.Div is one of IX Korps' standing formations, and is usually stationed on Earth as a reserve for operations in the Core, American and Chinese Arms. Mobilised as part of IX Korps the division was brought forward to Neubayern and one of its brigades was sent forward to the Beta Canum Cluster. Following the fall of Kimanjano the division was brought up to Beowulf where it trained both for defensive and liberation operations. It was in the latter role that the division saw action on Beta Canum reinforcing the remnants of 8.Lk.PzGren.Div.

Since the Liberation the division has undergone a substantial change having its original brigades re-assigned and taking new formations under command. It has been specifically tasked with the liberation of Dunkelheim and has been involved in dedicated training and planning for HERKULES. The division is assigned two German heavy manoeuvre brigades and a Freihafener reconnaissance unit.

#### **9 Kolonial Jäger Division**

9.Jg.Div is the reborn Jg.Div.zvB which played such a role in the campaign for the German Continent of Beta Canum. The division has immense experience of light role combat with the Kafers and is well drilled and efficient formation. It has been brought in to HERKULES primarily to reinforce the anticipated mopping up operations.

The division has left two of its Beta Canum raised brigades at home and retains only the battle hardened 36.Jg.Bde of its original complement from the defence of Beta Canum. It has been reinforced by a brigade of paratroopers and a brigade of mountain troops from Earth, both with counter-Kafer experience on Beta Canum.

#### **1st Marine Division**

The United State Marine Corps' 1st Marine Division represents the commitment of the other members of the Adlerhorst Alliance to Op HERKULES. The 1st Marine Division is the tactical HQ of the Marine Extra-Solar Contingency Force, as such it is its first mission as an operational entity. Previous USMC operations in the war have been at brigade level under French higher command. However the division has been planning for this operation for several months.

1 MARDIV consists of three brigades; one US Marine, one US Army airborne brigade and one Australian. It also has its own recon and raider elements and is well provided with interface assault assets.

#### **Panzer Kavallerie Regiment 11**

PKR.11 is a Freihafen unit with a unique history, having served three different nations during its existence. Raised by the US as a horsed cavalry unit it passed into the control of Bavaria following the 3rd World War. After nearly three centuries of service the regiment objected to the incorporation of Bavaria into the new Germany and was disbanded, reforming in the former Bavarian colony of Freihafen. Ironically given its opposition to the reunification of Germany it now finds itself serving in a German division, a sign of the growing rapprochement between Germany and Freihafen.

PKR.11 is a brigade (-) sized armoured reconnaissance formation packing a substantial punch and well used to covering huge areas of ground. It is a mobile combined arms formation including armoured, reconnaissance, infantry, artillery and air elements in its composition. The unit has seen only minor action on Beta Canum but has key leaders with combat experience reaching back to the Central Asian

War.

### **1 Luftkissenpanzer Brigade 'Lehr'**

1.Lk.Pz.Bde is a regular Bundesarmee brigade normally assigned to 1.Lk.Pz.Div. Originally formed in the 2280s to test a new generation of pan-German armoured vehicles it formed the kernel of the expanded division. 1.Lk.Pz.Bde is predominantly manned by conscript troops on extended contracts and is one of the first such German formations to be deployed to the French Arm. The brigade has been dispatched to Beta Canum specifically to take part in Op HERAKLES. It has four mixed armour and armoured infantry battalions.

### **14 Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Brigade**

14.Lk.PzGren.Bde is a regular IX Korps brigade comprised of long service professional soldiers. The brigade has been deployed on Vogelheim for nearly a decade and was equipped with near obsolete equipment as a consequence of part of the Treaty of Darwin accords. It did not see action during the invasion, although it trained very hard and has since been re-equipped with modern equipment. The brigade still carries the famous greyhound insignia of the 8.Lk.PzGren.Div although it has been assigned to 4.Lk.PzGren.Div for Op HERKULES. It has four mixed armour and armoured infantry battalions.

### **29 Fallschirmjäger Brigade**

29.FJg.Bde is one of the regular airborne 'green devil' brigades of the Bundesarmee on Earth. It was one of the first core-based German formations to be sent to the French Arm in anticipation of Op WOTAN. However the continued Kafer assault caused the unit to relocate to Adlerhorst where it languished until becoming involved in the 3rd Liberation of Beta Canum. Although a conscript formation it is well regarded as a professional and well drilled brigade, it has three light mechanised airlanding battalions.

### **36 Jäger Brigade**

36.Jg.Bde is one of the most colourful and toughest brigades in the German Army. A long service IX Korps unit originally formed prior to the War of German Reunification around German ex-Legion Etrangere soldiers and is still manned with a large number of ex-mercenaries and colonials. The brigade saw severe fighting in the invasion of Beta Canum and gained a reputation for hard fighting even after relocating to New Africa. The brigade is somewhat talismanic for the German people and its presence in Op HERKULES is a major morale boost. The brigade has three light role battalions which have recently been reinforced to replace combat losses.

### **50 Gebirgsjäger Brigade**

The 50.GJg.Bde is a new formation raised from 1.GJg.Div which is nominally a reserve division assigned to the mainly Saxon V Korps on Earth. It has been sent to the French Arm to assist in the clearing of Beta Canum's Ludwigberge mountains and has now been assigned to HERKULES. The brigade consists of Bavarian, Saxon and Austrovenian light role mountain infantry battalions. The brigade some minor actions on Beta Canum.

### **4th Marine Interface Brigade**

The US Marines' 4th MIB is a highly experienced brigade with many significant high intensity counter-Kafer operations. The brigade was assigned to the mainly French 3rd Fleet of Admiral Rochemont and operated out of Adlerhorst. It was heavily involved in the 1st Liberation of Beta Canum alongside the French Foreign Legion paratroops, but was forced to retreat to New Africa where it was based until recently. Rebuilt, the brigade has been training specifically for HERKULES and has its original two mechanised infantry battalions who have been strongly reinforced and one armoured battalion transferred from 1st MIB which has been in action twice on Kimanjano. This action is likely to be the brigade's last before rotation however its skills and experience in opposed orbital assault have resulted in its inclusion.

### **173d Airborne Brigade (Transorbital)**

The 'Herd' is one of the US Army's key intervention brigades, trained for operations anywhere in human space. It has recently been deployed to the French Arm partly to replace some played out US Marine formations. The brigade saw action in the closing stages of the Battle of Fromme on Kimanjano and has undergone specific counter-Kafer training on Beowulf, including training in clearing *safe places*. The 173d Abn Bde is powerful force and has three light role infantry battalions, a cavalry squadron and, unusually, a mechanised infantry battalion from the Ellis National Guard.

### **37th (Commonwealth) Brigade**

37 Bde is a regular Australian brigade normally assigned to the 1st Division on Earth, it was the third and last of three Australian brigades dispatched to the French Arm. It was deployed initially to Adlerhorst and has not yet seen action against the Kafers, and it will be returned home with the conclusion of HERKULES. Consequently the brigade is eager to see action and has been training hard.

37 Bde did not deploy from Earth with its usual complement, instead mixing two armoured battalions with an airmobile infantry battalion from another division. It has been reinforced for HERKULES by a British armoured infantry battalion brought forward from Beowulf and so qualifies for the Commonwealth identifier. The brigade is a lively mixture of New Canberran, Aboriginal, Queenslander and Scottish soldiers.

### **Space Phase**

The opening moves of Op HERKULES were unspectacular and little more than a continuation of previous efforts against the system run by the three major Fleets. The major change however was that command of the operation had shifted to Admiral Lutke.

The three squadron commanders of Gruppe H1 had already met at Grosshidenhafen and a plan of action for the interdiction and reconnaissance of DM+36 2436 put into place. All operations would work out of Grosshidenhafen allowing the ships to deploy to DM+36 2436 and return without needing to discharge their drives. This would give H1 significant tactical flexibility although Grosshidenhafen was never a totally secure system.

Commodores Shane, Campbell and Kershner would provide interdiction and reconnaissance on the three major vectors into the system. In addition one of the squadrons would provide a QRF to attack targets of opportunity, while a squadron drawn from Gruppe H2 would be on stand-by to provide heavier support. This part of the mission was underway by the last week of October 2302.

It quickly became obvious that the interdiction task was one that could only be totally effective if more striking power was available. A complete blockade of the system was impossible but a toll could be taken on the Kafer ships entering the system. The *Gloire* and the *Marechal Ney* notably picked off a damaged *Beta* class, the *Marechal Ney* and *Lansquenet* ambushed a large supply convoy and the British squadron accounted for a careless *Epsilon*. However from three weeks of action it was clear to Shane that the enemy's fleet was only growing stronger in the system. Consequently he advised Lutke that major combat operations should begin sooner rather than later.

Shane stepped up the pace of raiding operations, especially targeting isolated piquets. However this backfired when Campbell's squadron became involved in a running conflict with a squadron of *Epsilons* after engaging a group of *Oscars*. Campbell extracted his squadron but both the *Illustrious* and the *Seydlitz* were damaged in the encounter. Shane's operations also provoked Task Force Tango into an operation against Grosshidenhafen. Weakened by the withdrawal of Campbell's ships for running repairs Shane was fortunate that the fast privateer *Kingfisher* tracked the departure of the strong Kafer squadron built around two *Alphas*, a *Beta* and three *Epsilons* allowed him to recall the Anglo-German squadron and alert Lutke.

The 2nd Battle of Grosshidenhafen was an unambiguous victory for Lutke. Campbell's battered squadron, in combination with the always willing *Lansquenet* and *Ney*, acted as the bait for the Kafer squadron to become embroiled in the often fought over battleground of Grosshidenhafen. The powerful Gruppe H2 sortied from Vogelheim as soon as news reached them of the Kafer move with

every major warship bar the *Richelieu*.

While the Kafer squadron was in pursuit of Campbell the main body of Lutke's striking force had already arrived and Lutke divided the Gruppe in three; keeping the *Bismarck's* squadron as one and unleashing the French cruisers to reinforce Campbell, the remainder would remain in reserve and discharge their drives. The arrival of *Colbert* and *Gloire* allowed Campbell to switch on to the offensive in combination with in-system minefields and the standing fighter force. He drew the Kafer squadron into ambush, destroying an *Epsilon*, but alerting the alien commander to the danger he was in. The battle then became a pursuit with the heavy human forces pounding the Kafers as they ran for the FTL shelf, losing the *Beta* to a rearguard action.

However when the Kafers ran for DM+36 2436 they were unknowingly shadowed by the other half of Lutke's fleet, including the fast striking American-Australian squadron as well as the British and German carriers and the veterans *Bismarck* and *Bayern*. At DM+36 2436 Kershner's squadron intercepted a Kafer courier running in front of the retreating squadron denying the Kafers advance news of the debacle at Grosshiddenshafen. Indeed the human forces reached DM+36 2436 before the Kafers and lay in wait.

The resulting combat on the edge of the FTL shelf completed the victory started in the neighbouring system. The Kafer ships were battered, low on munitions and unready for the human force. Set upon by a combined force of three squadrons and swarmed by a mass of Wespe and Harrier fighters the Kafer squadron was annihilated in the space of two hours, long before help could come from the centre of the system. The human force returned to Vogelheim in victory and to replenish and undertake repairs, however Lutke pushed for a quick turn around to exploit his victory.

Unfortunately the defeat of the Kafer squadron had given Lutke an opportunity which the slow turn around at Vogelheim squandered. The Kafers pulled in all their picquets from the edge of the system, denying Shane's depleted force easy targets and concentrating the minds of the Kafer commanders on the defence of the inner system. Shane's ships increasingly had to penetrate deeper and deeper into DM+36 2436 to track Kafer movements and increasingly they were detected and pursued from the system.

At Vogelheim Lutke came under verbal attack from Rochemont for his *pas de temerite* and unwillingness to attack straight into the system. However Lutke needed the time to alert the landing force to undertake final embarking procedures for a D-Day in 14 days time, in addition the 2nd Battle of Grosshiddenshafen had depleted his force of stores and munitions and Lutke was not for taking undue risks. His position was supported by Graham, further poisoning the Briton's spiky relationship with Rochemont, and also later, more reluctantly, by Borodin.

Lutke's main force entered DM+36 2436 from Grosshiddenshafen on the 7th of December 2302. Gruppe H2 deployed in battle formation for transit to the inner system. Shane's Gruppe H1 was deployed on the rim of the FTL shelf to interdict any incoming Kafer ships or stop any escaping from the system covering the two main vectors.

TF Tango was now down to a force of 3 BBs, 2 BCs and 3 CGs supported by several squadrons of fighters and numerous auxiliary ships of dubious value. TF Herkules was in much better shape having yet to suffer the loss of a single ship although 1 CG and 3 DDs had taken significant damage in the 2nd Battle of Grosshiddenshafen and were being repaired at Vogelheim. Shane's screening force now consisted of 1 CG, 3 DDs and 2 FFs. Lutke's Gruppe H2 had no fewer than 2 CVs, 2 BBs, 1 BC, 4 CGs, 4 DDs, 5 FFs and many fighters. He overmatched his opponents, but not decisively, indeed Admiral Graham was busy assembling a force at BCB from the Reserve Fleet to reinforce Lutke should he not be able to achieve a knockout blow.

The Battle of Dunkelheim commenced on the 9th of December after Gruppe H2's arrival in the inner system. During the run in the American-Australian squadron provided the outer screen and destroyed no fewer than three Oscar Class auxiliaries. Only hours before the battle was joined Lutke was half expecting the Kafers to fight from around Dunkelheim itself behind a layer of sentinel mines and surface launched missiles. Instead the entirety of TF Tango put out direct into the teeth of Lutke's force.

The preliminary battle was the largest since Beowulf with almost one hundred fighters and scores of

missiles involved in a major small unit action. The *Ark Royal's* fighter group was now a veteran force that had played a vital role at Beowulf, 3rd Kimanjano and the aftermath of 2nd Grosshidenhafen. The German fighters from the *Graf Zeppelin* were less experienced as a unit but many pilots had served in colonial defence squadrons in the Beta Canum Cluster and were hungry for revenge. The smaller squadrons from the battleships were even more highly experienced. For their part the Kafer pilots were some of their most experienced fighters, but had much less in-depth training than their human opponents.

The human fighters won their superiority over the Kafers in a hard fought half hour of combat operations, destroying more than twenty Kafer fighters, but losing eight of their own in turn. The exhausted fighters on both sides pulled back to re-arm, as they did the main body of TF Tango closed on the human force through the heavy cloud of radiation. With fighter submunitions expended and many missiles already depleted the human force's volley of missiles was much smaller than it needed to be to turn back the Kafer charge to close combat. Most of the Kafer warships took serious damage however and Epsilon-78 took a catastrophic hit.

Rather than pulling away Lutke committed his heavy ships into close combat against the Kafers with the *Bismarck*, *Bayern* and *Richelieu* pairing off against the Kafer battleships and *Gloire* and *Montrose* engaging the Betas. The other ships sheered off screening the close battle from the smaller Kafer ships and surviving fighters, while Kafer auxiliaries began to close in.

At this stage Lutke's uncommitted H23 Squadron of American and Australian ships was committed into the fray, engaging the key Kafer battleships one at a time with volleys of missiles while they were locked into the broadside battles. The old partnership of the *Lansquenet* and *Ney* started at the other end of the Kafer squadron, hammering away at the vulnerable Epsilons. The *Imperieuse*, *Richelieu's* long-serving goalkeeper was smashed seconds into the battle.

The outnumbered Kafer ships began to be knocked out, one by one, but they didn't go down lightly. The *Bayern* was left dead in space with a disabled drive and was saved only by the intervention of *Rotterdam* and *Fulda*. *Bismarck* suffered serious internal fires and only the skills of her veteran crew brought these under control while the ship fought on. At this point the Kafer fighter force again intervened forcing the human ships to pull away from their opponents who took the opportunity to break contact entirely vectoring towards the outer system.

By now only four Kafer ships remained in the fight and all of these were badly damaged, the remaining BC Beta-15 was little more than a powered hulk. However they now had the surviving Kafer fighters and their remaining missiles covering their rear and a substantial force of Oscar auxiliaries were drawing close to provide further protection.

Lutke's view from the bridge of the *Bismarck* was satisfied but worried by the damage to his entire fleet. Two of the three heavy hitters of the TF were seriously damaged and many of the other ships were also seriously reduced in performance while the *Sioux* and *Fulda* were only a little better off than the *Imperieuse*. His fighters were still to be re-armed and lacked their heavy submunition punch. Worst of all his vital ship-killing missiles were almost totally expended. He faced being forced to being unable to finish off his enemy and complete his victory.

Instead he sent the H23 Squadron under Rear-Admiral Richard G. Spence to screen the retreating Kafer force and for Commodore Shane to mass his force and prepare to use them against the remnants of TF Tango. Spence's H23 was almost depleted of its SIM-14 missiles and was only able to follow up the Kafers while Shane's force would take time to come into engagement range. Lutke then began to re-consolidate his force and get his fighters re-armed, he dispatched his couriers waiting on the edge of the system to Grosshidenhafen and BCB to pass on news of his victory and to initiate the next part of the campaign.

An hour later a squadron built around *Richelieu* and *Ark Royal* was dispatched to reinforce Spence's squadron. The pursuit of the remnants of TF Tango was not pressed to the finish. Lutke preferred to usher the running force away from the system rather than to go for an annihilation battle hoping to avoid further casualties to his own battered fleet. The human force were, however, able to pick off half a dozen Oscar auxiliaries and as many fighters whilst ensuring the destruction of the damaged Beta and the remaining Epsilon with no loss to themselves.

Lutke was subsequently castigated by Rochemont for the escape of the two Kafer battleships including the notorious *Alpha-66*. However he had succeeded in obtaining in-system superiority for the outright loss of only one minor ship, although several others were seriously damaged and would require repair at fleet bases at Vogelheim or Queen Alice's Star. It took Lutke a further 48 hours to complete the neutralisation of Kafer satellites and the disabled battleship being used as a station above Dunkelheim. Crack German marines from the *Bismarck* conducted a boarding and clearance of the station hulk mopping up the remaining Kafers in a vicious close quarter battle. Human communications, navigation and spy satellites were then seeded into orbit.

The high ground was now dominated but was far from secure. The Kafer *Zitadelle* was making its presence felt and began knocking down low orbiting satellites. It then became involved in duelling with the human cruisers in high orbit lofting submunition carrying ASATs at targets of opportunity. The base's powerful armament rendered counter-fire ineffective and even kinetic harpoon attacks were unable to suppress the *Zitadelle*.

### **Interface/Special Forces Phase**

The arrival in-system of Gruppe H3 on the 18th of December marked the start of interface operations against the Kafers. However on the ground the Widerstand was already stepping up harassing attacks in cooperation with special forces. On a larger scale the Governor Schmidt began orchestrating long planned contingency operations for a general uprising coordinated with the landings. Preliminary operations to fix portions of the garrison in place had already begun and information gathering was stepped up a gear.

On the 21st of December the first teams of special forces were landed from ships operating in the *Zitadelle's* blind spot. Teams from KS.2 and Force Recon were landed this first night by a mixture of drop capsule and assault boats. They were soon followed by more German, American, Australian and British teams, included in this second wave were companies from Kdo.Abt.393 and the 3rd Marine Raiders with specific direct action missions. These teams were given a number of days to set up their missions and be in place for their operations to coincide with the main landings.

The *Zitadelle* was beginning to dominate the immediate tactical decision making process. Several commanders had pushed for the complete destruction of the *Zitadelle* either by overwhelming orbital kinetic attack or by nuclear demolition. However the fate of hundreds of Dunkelheimers held as slave labour in the base combined with domestic political pressure to spare damage to the spaceport facilities had ruled this out. Now the ASAT defences were forcing changes in the orbital bombardment programme. Targets such as identified supply dumps were still being hit but a constant orbital overwatch could not be maintained.

Christmas Eve 2302 was L-Day for Operation HERKULES, the first day of landing operations. Across Dunkelheim attacks were launched by the Widerstand and regular forces; Kafer garrisons found themselves under seeming spontaneous attack during the night. The Kafers had been awaiting such an event and fought back ferociously. While only a few isolated detachments were overwhelmed most were pinned in position by these attacks. The special forces had more high value targets attacking key air bases, air defence and command sites. Other high value targets were hit by orbital bombardment attacks. In general these highly planned attacks were very successful and effectively paralysed Kafer command structures for the initial key period of the landings. Other special forces teams maintained observation on key locations for the forthcoming battle.

In addition to these targets there were three larger scale raids launched on the night of L-Day. Kompanie 2 of Kdo.Abt.393 assaulted a Kafer prison complex on the outskirts of Neues Berlin freeing a number of key prisoners. The same unit's Kompanie 3 cut the main Goldberg-Neues Berlin railway. The most daring raid was undertaken by the 3rd Marine Raiders who attempted to infiltrate the *Zitadelle* through underground tunnels. The Raiders were able to penetrate the complex but were almost overwhelmed by the Kafer response. In a battle that raged for several hours underground the Raiders fought their way clear, but at a heavy cost with over half the unit killed or missing.

### **Landing Phase**

The Kafer response had been hampered and a number of cruisers and destroyers were suppressing the *Zitadelle* even as the 3rd Raiders fought beneath it. It was then the landings began. The assault shipping of Staffels H31 and H32 closed the planet in a tightly controlled sequence disgorging the first waves of assault boats onto the Landing Zone. The first elements to land were the recce and command elements of 4.LkPzGren Division at LZ Afrika where teams from KS.2 and a crack Widerstand unit waited for them. The main body of 14.LkPzGren Brigade was the main effort and the fighting echelon of the brigade was complete on the ground two hours into the operation.

Far to the north a diversionary operation was being put into action as the landers of the *Iwo Jima* and *Blue Ridge* put the 1st MIB's 2d Tank Battalion onto the ground at LZ Tripoli. This all-arms combat group was to operate against the Kafers and the *Zitadelle* in an aggressive manner to pin mobile forces in this area. This daring operation had been a controversial part of the overall mission but had eventually been agreed to by General Schneider, after lobbying by the USMC who believed they had the capability to complete the mission successfully.

The Kafer response was rapid. *Zmei* strike aircraft soon appeared over LZ Tripoli and were beaten off only with difficulty. A further smaller raid was launched against LZ Afrika but with less success. A number of armoured battle groups were readied for action but did not yet begin to move against the Landing Zones.

At dawn on L-Day 14.LkPzGren Brigade was complete on the ground, as were the HQ elements of 4.LkPzGren Division, and they were pushing out an ever expanding perimeter. A small number of UCAVs from II/LG 53 were already in operation as construction engineers began building a landing strip capable of taking the larger landers. The first soldiers of 1.LkPz Brigade were already landing and two hours later the spectacular dead drop of the brigade and division's heavy equipment was started from the Metal Class ship *Atalante*. The massive cargo containers were landed onto a new LZ Marokko, a barren 20 km long strip of land. Key crewmen were driven quickly out to open and activate the vehicles, a process that took significantly longer than the half an hour the drop took. Around 5% of the vehicles were damaged or destroyed in the drop, an acceptable number in the circumstances.

The Kafer armoured forces now began to move against the landings with several forces moving from positions south of Goldberg. One battlegroup consisting of several battalion sized units or hordes set out to spar with the US Marines 2d Tanks to the west of the *Zitadelle*. In the south several hordes were spotted moving into position with more coming down from the *Zitadelle* and was designated as Battle Group Alpha. Their movement was tracked by satellite and special forces OPs.

Around midday on L-Day a second large scale dead-drop was undertaken onto a new LZ. This drop consisted of supplies, ammunition and fuel cracking modules and formed the basis of the Corps Maintenance Area. Further supplies were held in orbit as a reserve and could be dead-dropped on request.

The first contacts occurred between the Kafer spearheads and the screening force of Luftkissenpanzeraufklärungs Abteilung 4. The German reconnaissance troops destroyed a number of AFVs and called in long range artillery strikes before giving up their ground. 4.LkPzGren Division commander began to shape the battle space massing his artillery and his 14 Brigade to counter attack the Kafer spearhead. By this time the German ground forces were some 200km from the initial LZ and had some elbow room to trade ground for time.

It was at this time the *Zitadelle* launched a volley of ballistic missiles towards the human landing areas. Most of these were destroyed in the boost phase by warships delivering orbital support. Several minutes later a tactical nuclear detonation occurred on LZ Afrika as a solitary Kafer cruise missile penetrated the defences and exploded. LZ Afrika was relatively deserted but the construction engineers working on the landing strip were annihilated. Blast and flash effects caused another 1000 casualties in rear area echelon troops and amongst the Luftwaffe contingent and no fewer than 4 landers were destroyed. General Schneider automatically suspended further landings. The supply effort was thrown into utter confusion as the CMA commander attempted to spread out his key supply dumps and maximise survivability in the face of a further nuclear release.

On the frontline the recce elements of 4.LkPzGren Division were beginning to fall back under greater pressure as three armoured groups spearheading the counter strike were identified. It quickly became

obvious that the vanguards of these forces were fully alert and there would be no opportunity to 'break clean' and reset the engagement. 14.Bde would have to strike without the usual advantages human armoured forces had taken for granted. However unlike the French light armour at Kimanjano the brigade was a line unit equipped with the most modern and heavily armoured AFVs available. 1.Bde was massing quickly and could be expected to join the battle in hours.

14.Bde was committed to a pre-arranged deployment with two of its Kampfgruppe tackling the central axis of the Kafer advance in a defensive battle whilst the remaining two Kampfgruppe were to launch diversionary attacks on the flanks without becoming decisively engaged. The aim was to utilise the long range punch of the LkPz-IX and strip away Kafer AFVs from the infantry who could then be contained and dealt with at leisure. 1.LkPz.Bde was to be prepared to either reinforce the defensive battle, launch counter-penetrations or launch a pursuit battle.

These tactics had been utilised on many other occasions and the Kafer commanders were aware of their use and had developed countermeasures. The leading battlegroup echelons were led by the best Kafer commanders possible and their crews were fully alert in their CAC-1 hovertanks. The limited Kafer artillery assets were grouped forwards to provide instant support to suppress human dismounted ATGW teams.

The first contacts came as LkPz.Abt.144 conducted a passage of lines with the recce screen which had been pushed hard by the Kafer vanguard. For most of the German crewmen it was their first contact with Kafer armour, the *kämpfer* of 14.Bde had spent the war on the surface of Adlerhorst waiting for an invasion that never came; now they had their chance. The initial clash was vicious and bloody on both sides, the Germans were denied easy long range shots thanks to skilful Kafer use of the ground and massing of hovertanks at key parts of the line. The battle became a swirling manoeuvre fight conducted largely at close range, confused even more by the re-appearance of Kafer fighter aircraft. Nevertheless the Luki crews held their own and began to slow the alien advance.

The situation on the flanks was less successful as the Kafer brushed aside or bypassed attempts by the *panzergrenadier* battalions to slow their vanguards. Indeed on the eastern flank LkPzGren.Abt.141 became embroiled in a fight with the trailing infantry columns amidst an abandoned mining complex.

Schneider, Lutke and the leading contingent commanders, with the exception of the commander of 4.LkPzGren.Div held an immediate radio conference as to the future of the landings in the face of the Kafer nuclear attack. The majority were in favour of continuing the assault immediately with 4 Division over 80% landed and in contact and with the US Marines 2d Tank Battalion established but with forces beginning to move against it. However the consensus was that the *Zitadelle* had to be more strongly suppressed by orbital bombardment regardless of the risk to the civilian workers and Marine Raiders.

Schneider was urged to land as much combat power as possible with the landings now in the critical phase, a view with which he strongly agreed. He consequently launched the second wave of landings aiming to land the initial elements of the Australian 37 Bde and PKR11. Operations by *Blue Ridge* and *Iwo Jima* with the USMC's 6 and 7 MIU busy cross decking from transports, were put on hold whilst 2d Tank Battalion's operations were underway. The decision had yet to be made to withdraw or reinforce the American Marine force in the north. The infantry follow on forces were to remain embarked whilst the manoeuvre action was being fought.

On the ground the situation for the 14.LkPzGren.Bde was becoming critical, whilst the centre of the Kafer advance was in check the flank vanguards were pushing through the German defence. The reserve battalion LkPz.Abt.143 was committed to keep the route of retreat open for LkPz.Abt.144. At the same time LkPzGren.Abt.141 was attempting to extract from its fight with the Kafer infantry in the mining complex and was taking significant casualties. The flanking action by LkPz.Abt.143 in combination with two companies of LkPzGren.Abt.142 annihilated the vanguard of the western Kafer force. However the extraction of LkPz.Abt.144 went less well with the loss of over 20 AFVs when caught in enfilade fire from the eastern Kafer force. In the meantime the conscripts of Panzer Lehr were preparing to enter the conflict.

Far to the north the 2d Tank Bn had its first contacts with the strong Kafer forces sallying from the *Zitadelle*. The USMC 2d Tank Bn were the most combat hardened armoured unit in the force having

fought in two campaigns on Kimanjano and had trained hard for this particular mission. They were hampered however by their obsolescent M9B hovertanks. They were also outnumbered by more than three to one, after initially getting into a position for their small artillery element to launch a bombardment of the *Zitadelle* they were then forced into a long retreat action attempting to maximise the stand-off range of their missile armaments. The Marines quickly found themselves in fight for survival as the pursuing Kafers streamed after them.

In the south 1.LkPz.Bde 'Lehr' were launched in a counter-attack against the Kafer attack with two Luki Abteilungen 11 and 12 attacking through the disrupted western flank. The attack was pressed with immense aggression by the young soldiers and was aided immensely by massed artillery fire from the division's gunners who were now in position. The two battalions quickly found themselves in the very heart of the Kafer assault forces and in a '*hexenkessel*' a close quarters attrition battle against the Kafer CAC-1's that had been fighting all day. The fighting was reinforced by a further assault by elements of 14.LkPz.Gren.Bde pinching out the Kafer salient. As night fell on L-Day across Dunkelheim the Kafer remnants were streaming north to regroup but the German division had lost over 150 AFVs to the Kafer's 250.

On the eastern flank LkPzGren.Abt.141 still had almost 100 panzergrenadiers cut off in the sprawling mining complex as night fell and after having taken significant casualties in trying to reach them was now preparing a deliberate attack with the aid of LkPz.Abt.143 and the divisional artillery. In the complex itself the remnants of two isolated companies were in close combat with over 500 Kafer soldiers. In the north 2d Tank Battalion was fighting for its life as darkness fell, the Marines were exacting a fearsome toll from the Kafers, but were slowly being ground down by individual losses of AFVs especially as their supply of Striker missiles was now depleted.

That night the second wave of Op HERKULES got underway with the dead drop of the lead elements of the Australian 37 Brigade onto LZ GALLIPOLI and the insertion of PKR11 onto LZ SCHWARTZPFERD close to LZ AFRIKA. 37 Bde was fortunate to have the integral assault capability of the LPA's *Tobruk* and *Arnhem* and PKR11 was supported by the large Freihafener merchants allowing a very rapid deployment of these powerful forces. Although the deployment of 37 Bde's airmobile infantry battalion would be delayed by the need to cross-deck the troops from transports. At the same time the American assault ships began to download 6 and 7 MIU to LZ GUADALCANAL, again in the vicinity of LZ AFRIKA along with the HQ of 4 MIB.

Two hours after last light LkPzGren.Abt.141 launched its deliberate attack to relieve the besieged companies. The attack ran into initial opposition by Kafer teams firing the advanced '*Can Killer*' ATGW but dismounted attacks by panzergrenadiers cleared these positions and allowed the *kampfgruppe* to break into the Kafer defensive perimeter and after an hour of intense fighting retrieve the 60 survivors of the battle whilst killing a large number of Kafer soldiers. The *kampfgruppe* however would be unable to operate in the offensive role for at least two days.

In the north the 2d Tank Bn was making its attempt at a final break clean, leaving nearly half of its AFVs behind it and some 40 marines missing in action in addition to almost 60 casualties. Only once the agile Ravens of the *Arnhem* became available was the battalion able to make good its escape. Out of the debacle some good news came when SOCAV elements of the US 2-3d ACR were able to rescue the survivors of the 3rd Marine Raiders and be uplifted by the Ravens.

The morning of L+1 saw the establishment of a front line in the area that had seen the first clash between the Kafers and 14.LkPzGren.Bde. Of the human forces 1.LkPz.Bde held the line with the aid of the divisional recce unit and was in good shape having swept up a number of retreating Kafer infantry units on the way. 14.LkPzGren.Bde was reconstituting in a position 60km to the rear and just receiving replacement crews and AFVs.

The Freiwehr's PKR11 had come forward and was probing the flanks of the Kafer force and identifying reinforcement routes. The powerful 37 Commonwealth Brigade was attached to 4 Division and in position far to the flanks to aid Panzer Lehr or respond to opportunities provided by PKR11. The USMC's 4 MIB(-) was consolidating on the ground although would be without 2d Tank Bn for at least 48 hours. In the area around the Landing Zones LG53 was completing its preparations and would have the strike fighters I/LG53 ready to fly its first sorties in the day.

By midday the Panzer Lehr Brigade began to push forward with the recce elements of LkPzAufs.Abt.4 to engage consolidating elements of the Kafer position. There were few CAC-1's left but the legendarily tenacious Kafer infantry were already preparing defensive positions. Generalmajor Richter was loath to allow this and began probing forward to engage and seize key terrain features.

Panzer Lehr, with the divisional assault infantry LkGfPzGren.Abt.4 under command, did this with alacrity, massing firepower and close support artillery before launching assaults on key positions. Isolated Kafer warbands stood little chance against this concentrated firepower especially lacking counter-battery capability against the German artillery and air strikes. This was the second day of the *Hexenkessel* but saw much fewer casualties than the first with the exception of losses to the long range *Can Killers* from ambush.

The fighting continued into the night on L+1 and saw steady progress by 1.LkPz.Bde and 4 Luftkissenpanzergrenadier Division begin to switch over to the offensive.

#### *OP BERSHEEBA*

As the landing continued past noon on L+1 the first Kafer reinforcements were approaching from the north. This force was part of the one that had successfully forced 2TB to withdraw from its raid on the *Zitadelle*. It had undertaken an impressive forced march over 600km to reinforce the initial Kafer force but its components were straggling over 200km. This force was named as BG Beta and was now composed of no fewer than seven 'horde' sized component units and numbered nearly 3500 soldiers. The bulk of these Kafers were from the depot troops nominated for counter-attack duties but were reinforced by two 'hordes' of garrison troops re-equipped with AFVs.

Initial contact with KBG Beta was by the Freihafener Panzer Kavallerie Regiment Nr.11 which had been ranging around the flanks and to the rear of the initial Kafer force. The drones of 8/PKR11 had been standing off and tracking the oncoming force and cueing long range missile and orbital strikes on refuelling locations. In line with the direction received from 4.LkPzGren.Div the Freiwehr force was attempting to avoid becoming seriously involved in a screening battle with KBG Beta and instead shaping the Kafer force for a deliberate attack by a follow on force. Two of PKR11's recce companies had picked up the leading Kafer elements some 500km from the LZs and only 300km south of the *Zitadelle*.

That follow on attack was shaping up to be delivered by the mainly Australian 37 Commonwealth Brigade which was now massed some 100km east of the *Hexenkessel* with the exception of its airmobile battalion which was still close to LZ GALLIPOLI whilst its tiltrotor transports were readied. 37 Bde was well placed to deliver the attack having been kept clear of the *Hexenkessel*. The brigade had the luxury of almost 24 hours of planning time to tackle BG Beta and had some of its recce elements and liaison officers forward with PKR11's Tac HQ.

Brigade Commandant Hughes faced the same problems as his German counterparts in tackling the Kafer CAC-1s that would spearhead the KBG whilst avoiding decisive engagement with the following infantry. Hughes was in agreement with Generalmajor Richter of 4.LkPzGren.Div that he needed to minimise the time between the engagement of the recce element and the hand over to the main force battle ensuring that the number of aware Kafers was kept to a minimum. Ideally there would be no recce battle allowing 37 Bde to commence a fresh engagement. The limiting factor however would be the need to ensure that KBG Beta would not be in position to reinforce KBG Alpha.

Generalmajor Richter agreed to Hughes' request to have the rocket artillery batteries of the division's two close support artillery battalions assigned to 37 Bde in order to deliver minefields into the close battle. Hughes assigned a main Killing Area (KA CHAUVEL) for the brigade based on his appreciation as well as reconnaissance by PKR11 and simulations by his battle staff. The KA was far from ideal in normal human terms as engagement ranges were not always favourable for long range shots however the closer country allowed the Kafers to be channelled more effectively. In addition Hughes was confident about the abilities of his Gatto hover tanks in close combat with CAC-1s thanks to their heavy frontal armour. He also hoped to make good use of his infantry ATGW capability.

The battle for KA CHAUVEL opened at dusk on L+1 with elements of PKR11 and 37 Bde launching attacks into the flank and vanguard of the Kafer advance. 1, 4 and 6 Kompanies of PKR11 engaged the

Kafer vanguard, concentrating their effort as usual on the vital CAC-1s. The Freihafeners fought a classical cavalry screening battle, avoiding the Kafer response and falling back to better positions. 37 Bde launched its attack 'two up' with 18 CAV and 38 GUIDES in line and 1 GORDONS following up in reserve. Simultaneously the supporting artillery batteries launched a massive SCATMIN deployment whilst their sappers had their SCATMIN systems close behind the leading units.

The massive Australian Gatto hover tanks smashed in to the flank of the Kafers utilising a mixture of missiles and high power plasma weapons. The Kafer response was badly hampered by the presence of the newly delivered minefields and the initial assault was wildly successful. They retreated two hours later as Kafer resistance strengthened having lost a mere ten Gattos to over a hundred Kafer AFVs, although the Guides' A Coy had been badly mauled in one engagement. In doing so they passed through a defensive position established by the 1st Gordon Highlanders Battle Group in the heart of KA CHAUVEL.

The Kafer pursuit, shaped by the minefields and the rearguard actions of the Australian cavalry entered the Gordon's killing area. The main firepower of the battle group's defence rested on the two squadrons of Montgomery hover tanks from the 4th (Queen's Own) Dragoons who reinforced the Highlanders, yet the infantry also had good dug in anti-tank capability complementing the Dragoons. The initial piecemeal attacks were shot apart and also saw the destruction of a group of CCC-1 'Behemoth' heavy ground tanks. The defence of the Gordons, bolstered by flanking attacks by the 18 CAV and the New Canberra Guides, lasted until dawn of L+2 when the battle group broke contact successfully.

OP BERSHEEBA had pulled off a very fine achievement in blunting KBG Beta and causing very serious casualties on their vital armoured vehicles with relatively small casualties. They had also bought time for the complete landing of 4 MIB and HQ 1st Marine Division whilst at the same time the light mechanised 29 and 173d Brigades had begun to land.

#### *Higher Command*

General Schneider was very pleased with the conduct of the battle so far although casualties in the first day had exceeded projections those on the second had been much lower. In 48 hours human forces had lost in the order of 200 AFVs, mostly hover tanks, and suffered almost 600 killed and a further 2000 injured almost half to the nuclear strike. Three of his manoeuvre battle groups had been badly mauled and a further eight seen fierce action. In return his soldiers had destroyed over 400 Kafer AFVs, including most of their key CAC-1 hover tanks, and killed hundreds of foot soldiers. His intelligence staff calculated some 8000 Kafers were involved in the major action. His units were already regenerating whereas the Kafer elements were no longer functioning as massed units capable of smashing his Landing Zones.

The General's main concern was now the containment of the thousands of dismounted Kafer soldiers to the front of his position. He no longer feared their offensive potential but their innate defensive ability could cost him thousands of casualties to defeat. Instead he was looking to contain the Kafers as best he could and bypass with his main forces to reach Goldberg and the *Zitadelle*.

In Goldberg Widerstand resistance fighters had been joined by a popular uprising of the citizens in battling the almost intact Kafer garrison. A Kafer backlash and massacre was becoming a distinct possibility. Scenes like these had been repeated across Dunkelheim but the General could give the brave citizens little support whilst the fate of the main landings was still unclear. The *Zitadelle* was still a threat although it was being continuously suppressed by orbital fire. The General ideally wished to move his Landing Zones and logistics areas forward closer to Goldberg, but to do this the ASAT and SAMs of the Kafer fortress had to be neutralised.

Schneider decided to regroup his forces slightly and planned to launch them at their next objectives and commence his breakout. 4 Division had been heavily engaged but 14.LkPzGren.Bde had three of its *kampfgruppe* online again while 1.LkPz.Bde had been in constant fighting but casualties had been lighter. The Division was to strike out for Goldberg, bypassing the two Kafer forces with elements of PKR.11 in the lead, 14 LkPzGren.Bde and 29 FJg.Bdes following and Panzer Lehr Brigade bringing up the rear as it disengaged from the *Hexenkessel*.

The newly landed 1 MARDIV was to take 37 Bde back under command and together with 4 MIB and

most of the 173d Airborne and make best speed to the *Zitadelle*. To contain the two Kafer battlegroups Schneider was to combine elements of his special forces with the mechanised E Sqn 17th Cavalry, 1-158th Infantry and artillery from the US 173d Airborne. Their aim was to keep the enemy under observation and hit him as hard as possible using dedicated orbital firepower. These forces were grouped together under command of the Deputy Commander of 1 MARDIV with an ad-hoc HQ as TF NORMANDY.

Schnieder's sometimes unreliable SIGINT revealed that Kafer command structures had largely disintegrated with the main ground commander isolated at the *Zitadelle* and other commander beginning to fight their own battles.

In orbit Schneider retained the HQ of 9 Division together with two Jäger Brigades and two crack light infantry battalions. All of these forces he intended to retain until he secured closer Landing Zones near Goldberg.

### **Breakout Phase**

The Breakout Phase of Op HERKULES commenced on the mid-morning of L+2 once E/17 Cav was able to take over the recce battle from in contact forces. In the west 2 and 3/PKR11 led 4 Division en-route to Goldberg along MSR ROMMEL whilst 4/PKR11 (trapped on the wrong side of the Kafer force) and recce elements of 37 Bde began blazing the trail for 1 MARDIV on MSR TARAWA towards the *Zitadelle*. Logistic support was to come from dead drop supplies until support from the CMA could be firmly established.

1 LkPz.Bde took longer than expected to break contact and withdrew to leaguer and recover, similarly 37 Bde also took an operational pause to recover from BERSHEEBA while its recce elements forged onwards with 4/PKR11. In its place 4 MIB(-) passed through and the 1st Marine Recon Bn caught up with the recce elements and took the Freihafener cavalry company under temporary command.

In the centre TF NORMANDY took on its role from the German and Freihafen elements in observing the the slowly retreating Kafers. Special forces and 17th Cavalry OPs were especially successful in bringing orbital fire to bear on Kafer infantry columns whilst special hunter killer groups were formed to destroy surviving Kafer AFVs to further target Kafer mobility. The most serious threat was a group of around 10 CCC-1 Behemoths in KBG Beta which formed a kernel of resistance that the lightly equipped TF NORMANDY could take on only with great care.

4 LkPzGren.Div's advance went very smoothly with opposition limited to small contingents moving up to reinforce the Kafer troops in contact which were easily identified by human UAVs, isolated by recce elements and smashed by manoeuvre units if required. It soon became obvious that the Kafers in Goldberg were launching a counter-offensive against the uprising but also digging in a position to the south of Goldberg to hold off human reinforcements. KS.2 operators were engaged in both fighting in the city and reconnaissance of the position on the Strauss Ridge and were providing significant intelligence.

1 MARDIV was also making solid progress across more difficult terrain with the 6th and 7th Marines taking turns at destroying isolated pockets of resistance. The Marines' route was through an area with many small settlements and mines and they gained great help both from the Widerstand, local people and occasional Allied special forces contingents. MG Martin wanted to isolate the fortress with his two manoeuvre brigades and then assault with the infantry of the 173d Airborne and his remaining Marine Raiders. He aimed to have all the principle ASAT and SAM weaponry knocked out before beginning the assault.

#### *Battle of Strauss Ridge*

The Strauss Ridge dominates the southern approaches to Goldberg straddling the main access road. It comprises low lying hills rising into a plateau which drops sharply away into the approaches of Goldberg. In happier times it was fertile farmland and scattered with small holiday retreats. During the occupation it had been a mainstay of the resistance and the site of much Kafer raiding. The commencement of HERKULES had seen the Kafer commander of the Goldberg garrison push some of his local reserves, mostly depot troops, onto the ridge to prepare a defence under one of his most

trusted subordinates.

This move late on L Day brought the Kafers into direct contact with Widerstand forces who put up a spirited defence including several ambushes on the steep approaches before falling back. The Kafers then began constructing a position to make best use of their ATGWs, relatively static infantry and an AFV based counter attack force. On L+1 further reinforcements were dispatched, some of who were ambushed on the way out of the city suburbs. Goldberg was a city truly at war with thousands of human residents under arms against the garrison.

Leading elements of 3/PKR11 reached the ridge at midnight on L+2 having dashed 600km in half a day to rendezvous with KS.2 and Widerstand leaders. By dawn on L+3 the leading elements of 14.LkPzGren.Bde were in position and artillery was taking targets under fire. Inside an hour Kafer reconnaissance units had pushed forwards into contact with the forward screen of 3/PKR11 and LkPzAufs.Abt.4. Although forewarned the human defence forces were forced back and took significant casualties as the Kafers closed aggressively. Widerstand units were also hit hard before the Kafers withdrew in the face of pressure from LkPz.Abt.143.

Leaving 14.LkPzGren.Bde in position to the front of the Kafer position GenMaj Richter bypassed Strauss Ridge at dusk on L+3 with the rest of his force with 29 Fallschirmjäger Brigade in the lead flanking to the east through a series of small townships. The Green Devils were forced to engage several small Kafer units as they did so, slowing the rate of advance significantly. Often it was necessary to destroy local buildings to defeat the hard-fighting Kafers. As they did so Kafer positions on the Ridge were engaged with artillery strikes directed by SF teams and forward observers. The density of *Snappfire* launchers on the position making it difficult for drones to get on station forcing a reliance on the forward teams.

Kafer positions on the ridge found it difficult to influence the battle and several company sized units began to advance down off the feature to be hit by artillery. The survivors managed to reinforce the small garrisons in the townships slowing down the advance even further. In addition the German paras began to come under heavy rocket fire from Goldberg's *Safe Place* itself, which resulted in increasing casualties until anti-aircraft systems from 4.LkPzGren.Div were moved to counter the threat.

At the height of the confusion a horde sized unit including several CCC-1s and CAC-1s and numerous infantry began to descend from the ridge to assault 29 Brigade. Orbital and artillery fire were brought to bear and a counter-attack launched from the still under strength LkPz.Abt.144. This *kampfgruppe* took casualties from the Kafer ATGW belt but was able to hit the horde in the flank and disable most of the remaining AFVs. One pair of CCC-1s remained active and were able to conduct a fighting withdrawal back to the ridge in spite of everything the humans could throw at them.

As dawn rose on L+4 with 29.FGj.Bde still heavily engaged to the east of the ridge 14.LkPzGren.Div began an assault on the western flank with its two Panzergrenadier *kampfgruppe* in the assault with help from LkGfPzGren.Abt.4. Prior artillery preparation and the aid of SF and Widerstand forces made this initial assault very successful clearing 4km along the ridge. Resistance stiffened as they approached the key road way and the advance slowed significantly. Some Kafers began to abandon the ridge, crowding the main road down the northern slope of the feature which was attacked with SCATMIN and anti-personnel rounds to maximise casualties. Others simply dug in tighter on the eastern side of the ridge.

In the meantime 1.LkPz.Bde had launched its own wide flanking move along a route identified by elements of PKR11 and was now approaching Goldberg from the east with very little resistance.

GenMaj Richter now had two of his brigades heavily engaged on Strauss Ridge and involved in clearance of Kafer infantry, always a time consuming activity. His remaining brigade was poised either to attack into the rear of Strauss Ridge or to begin to attack in towards Goldberg. His major worry now was his very heavy expenditure of indirect fire munitions and several dead drops had to be organised almost directly on his gun lines.

By midday on L+4 14.LkPzGren.Bde had cleared to the main road on Strauss Ridge and 29.FGj.Bde was beginning to fighting its way up the western slopes. 1.LkPz.Bde was already in the western suburbs of Goldberg, to a rapturous reception, whilst a *kampfgruppe* backed up by PKR11 was

operating to the north of Strauss Ridge against stragglers and threatening the rear of the collapsing position.

### *Battle of the Zitadelle*

1 MARDIV's approach to the *Zitadelle* was disrupted by numerous contacts with small Kafer garrisons, straggling support elements of KBG Bravo and the occasional air strike. MG Martin maintained the momentum with the aggressive advance of 1st Marine Recon and the 6th and 7th MIUs and was in position 100km south-west of the stronghold and ready to engage the remaining screening force by dawn on L+3. He also received reinforcement from the reorganised 2d Tank Battalion which was flown forward at low level by HMS *Arnhem*'s Ravens.

1 MARDIV's first move was the seizure of the Beckstein Plateau 50km south of the stronghold a mission undertaken by 37 Bde's 38 GUIDES against minimal resistance from a Kafer reconnaissance screen. There they installed a battery of Luftwaffe manned hypervelocity SAMs from II/53JG to engage any ASAT or SAM missile launches from the *Zitadelle* protected by the 1st Wundurras.

4 MIB and 37 Bde deployed on either side of the Plateau and began to range in search of Kafer defenders. A sharp clash took place between 2 TB and a company of CAC-1 Deathsleds in which the Marine tankers took revenge for their defeat four days before picking off the Kafers at range with their Strikers. Except for some additional minor engagements the Kafers retreated back to the defences around the stronghold and hunkered down awaiting the return of elements of KBG Bravo to even up the odds against them.

1 MARDIV quickly began to launch attacks aimed at destroying the bases key support weaponry. The large missile silos were too deeply buried to be vulnerable but surviving rocket, artillery and direct systems were. The *Zitadelle* was already a shambles after four days of orbital bombardment but with the direction of Force Recon and SASR teams the surviving systems were quickly targeted. The runway was finally put out of action by SCATMIN stranding a number of Kafer atmosphere and space fighters.

On the night of L+3 both forward brigades launched assaults on two Kafer forward positions outside of the main perimeter. The Gordon Highlanders, with a company of Wundurras under command, assaulted one, the 7th Marines the other. These were both successful, although fighting continued until after daybreak on L+4, and freed up the assault routes into the stronghold.

MG Martin was pleased with his progress and was ready to launch a breach of the fortress. His main concern was the suppression of the ASAT and long range SAMs, but with the Luftwaffe in position he felt confident and no firings had taken place since L+2. He was also concerned about artillery expenditure, but felt that this was not as serious a problem as it would be for 4.LkPzGren.Div.

### *Higher Command*

Gen Schneider was increasingly confident of the outcome of his battle with Strauss Ridge about to fall and 1 MARDIV effectively neutralising the *Zitadelle*. He decided to commit 9 Jäger Division from his orbital reserve with its two remaining brigades for the forthcoming Battle of Goldberg. 4.LkPzGren.Div had suffered significant infantry casualties on Strauss Ridge and was nearing exhaustion; additionally his supply of battle casualty replacements for the division was nearly finished.

TF NORMANDY was struggling to contain a mass transit of Kafer foot soldiers from the Hexenkessel as columns of bands formed and began slogging northwards. Raids, artillery fire together with orbital and air strikes punished the Kafers, but couldn't break up the formations.

Schneider's priority was to begin the liberation of Goldberg, where civilian casualties were mounting in the uprising, with several massacres reported, pushing his infantry in as quickly as possible. He then needed to ensure the fall of the *Zitadelle* and open the main spaceport up as quickly as possible. Lastly he needed to keep track of the retreating remnants of KBG Alpha and Bravo and ensure they didn't link up with the defenders of Goldberg. His greatest concern was the fragility of his logistics with supply links to the CMA very vulnerable and most supplies were coming in to the F Echelon through dead drops.

Kafer forces in the north around Neu Berlin had made no move towards reinforcing their colleagues in the south and Schneider felt confident he could wrap up the initial phases of the contact before that happened. He retained his two reserve infantry battalions for interface raiding operations to slow their movement if required.

9.Jg.Div began landing on LZs to the south of Strauss Ridge in the evening of L+4 with a mass drop of equipment followed by landings using agile CIT-III, Raven and Zenith landers together with large French Rotons. The bulk of the division and its two brigades were on the ground by the next morning as 4.LkPzGren.Div finished its clearance of the Strauss Ridge, a feat which cost it a further 2000 casualties and left it at 50% of its normal fighting power.

## **Consolidation Phase**

### *Battle of the Zitadelle*

As 9.Jg.Div was completing its landings 1 MARDIV launched its assault on the Zitadelle attempting to create two breaches in the south-west and south-east of the perimeter.

4 MIB launched the initial assault with the 6th Marines in the vanguard together with the 101st Marine Raiders breaking into a vulnerable part of the fortifications. With the rest of the brigade massed providing fire support and isolating the entry point the worst fighting was for the bunkers and trenches. It was here that the DNAMs of the Raiders particularly distinguished themselves in close combat against the aliens. Immediate counterattacks were launched from flanking positions and reinforcements from the 7th Marines had to be fed into the battle to prevent the breach collapsing.

To the east 37 Brigade launched its attacks on a slightly wider front opposite the old Terminal building, this time with the Wundurras in the lead jumping off from the bastion seized earlier in the day. The Gattos of the cavalry units giving intimate fire support with their heavy plasma guns enabled the Wundurras to gain their foothold, but like the Marines had to fight hard to hold it. Brigade Commandant Hughes launched a second attack to take the pressure off the Wundurras led by the Gordons at the Eastern Gate. It was the Gordons third major action and they were unable to seize the gate although they were withdrawn in relatively good order. They had however relieved the pressure on the Wundurras, who were now firmly in control of their breach.

In the west the first elements of 1-508th Infantry began to pass through the battered Marines and begin to clear the interior of the stronghold. In the east 1-503d also began to pass through the Commonwealth Brigade and begin to clear the terminal. At the same time as the Gordons launched another attack on the East Gate reinforced with dismounts from the Guides and to the strains of 'Cock o'the North' they finally seized their objective.

1 MARDIVs armour was now in overwatch and could bring overwhelming firepower to bear on the Kafers but the close in infantry fighting was still ferocious, especially to clear subterranean galleries of the *Zitadelle*. The upper structures were clear by dusk on L+5 but the depths still had been barely touched. The 173d Abn Bde would continue to clear the structure over the coming days but sadly survivors of the slave labour force were few and far between.

### *TF NORMANDY*

TF NORMANDY was still struggling to contain the mobile Kafer force, although inflicting severe casualties for few losses in return. With the *Zitadelle* almost clear 37 Bde was re-tasked with reinforcing TF NORMANDY, and took under command 2 TB and 1st Marine Recon Bn whilst leaving behind the Wundurras.

The addition of a further five battalions to the two stretched units of TF NORMANDY greatly eased the containment problem and by L+10 the Kafer force now something around 2000 soldiers had largely gone to ground in the difficult terrain 300km south east of Goldberg riven with Camelinsekten habitats and the watching brief returned to German elements from 4 Division. TF NORMANDY and 37 Brigade returned to the *Zitadelle* where they prepared for further operations towards Goldberg should it be required whilst construction engineers repaired the runway and catapult.

## *Battle of Goldberg*

4.LkPzGren.Div had completed its clearance of the ridge by midday on L+5 and Panzer Lehr was already in contact in the eastern suburbs of Goldberg. The always willing PKR11 cleared the route from the ridge to the southern suburbs with the aid of LkPz.Abt.11 clearing Kafer stragglers from the road. Defences had been prepared on this side of the city but probes found many to be abandoned and some occupied by the Widerstand. Elements of 14.LkPzGren.Bde and 4.LkPzGren.Div troops joined PKR11 and secured the line of departure for 9 Jäger Division to pass through.

At dusk on L+5 36.Jg.Bde passed through the city limits and began to fight through. It was a chaotic scene with resistance fighters, rejoicing locals and Kafer stay-behinds all combining to create an immensely chaotic battle picture. The veteran *kampfers* of 36.Jg.Bde took it all in their stride and made good progress forward towards the aliens' main defensive lines in the city centre. Behind them 50.GbJg.Bde also entered the city in combination with 14.LkPzGren.Bde which had been assigned to 9.Jg.Div for the attack to provide armoured support.

29.FJg.Bde was consolidating on the ridge but would soon move across to support Panzer Lehr and 4 Division which was moving in slowly from the east. LkPzAuf.Abt.4 and PKR11 formed a screen around the west and north of the city to intercept retreating Kafers or reinforcements.

The arrival of Scheider's forces had swung the events of the uprising decisively in the favour of the humans and the Kafers began to fall back to strong points. The German infantry and Widerstand fighters took advantage of the massive firepower available and the brave citizens who helped root out concealed Kafers and destroy the aliens in detail. Strong points would be reduced by artillery, sometimes in direct fire, or airstrikes before being stormed.

More crack forces troops entered the battle with the arrival of Kommando Abteilung 393, Jäger Abteilung 381 and the Marines from the *Bismarck* and *Bayern*. These forces aided the collapse of a number of Kafer positions.

It was however a slow and bloody business which would not be complete until L+15 when the German flag was finally hoisted over the city's ruined Governor's palace by General Schneider and Governor Schmidt resplendent in dusty combat uniform.

## **Further Operations**

With the liberation of Goldberg the initial phase of HERKULES had been completed and the force assembled for it began to disperse. Lutke assumed control of a much smaller force and the impressed merchant ships began to return to trade. Many warships returned to the control of their original fleets or to new taskings and only the *Bismarck* remained out of the capital ships.

On the surface the US Marines were preparing to be replaced as a US Army Divisional HQ and a fresh Army brigade came into take over from the battered 4 MIB which was due for a well earned rest. 37 Commonwealth Brigade was also ready to depart with the Australians returning to Earth and the British to their parent Division on Alicia. They were to be replaced by a smaller composite force of British and Australians.

Of the two German divisions 4.LkPzGren.Div was a shadow of its former self and awaiting replacements of men and machines, although it was still providing ad-hoc groups to support other forces. 9.Jg.Div had taken heavy casualties in the clearance of Goldberg but was in relatively good shape. A further German Jäger Division was en-route from Beta Canum and Adlerhorst and would bolster Schneider's force. Schneider and Governor Schmidt were now also trying to create combat groups from the best of the Widerstand forces to bolster the regulars.

Scheider's forces were consolidating around Goldberg and the spaceport but were well aware that they had only dealt with maybe a quarter of the Kafer troops on Dunkelheim. Planning was underway with the objective of liberating Neu Berlin and the rest of the planet under the code name Op DONAR. HERKULES was officially over.

## **Conclusion**

Op HERKULES was undoubtedly the most successful opposed landing undertaken during the Liberation. Schneider was able to take on the Kafer counter-attack on his own terms with frontline heavy mechanised forces. His two strong German armoured brigades had performed exceptionally well in holding off the initial attack and the Australian 37 Brigade conducted a fine spoiling attack on the second wave killing its momentum.

In addition to the fighting quality of his troops he also had superb intelligence from in place SF and resistance fighters and numerous tactical recce forces of great skill. These combined with orbital strikes, strong artillery and then air support to give the humans overmatch of firepower when required. He concentrated his efforts on destruction of enemy AFVs and only when absolutely required would close to finish the robust and highly survivable Kafer infantry.

The spoiling raid on the *Zitadelle* by the 3d Marine Raiders and 2d Tank Battalion was badly miscalculated and added little to the plan save extra casualties. Similarly the logistical effort misfired with the expensively established CMA unable to support the forward troops during the breakout phase. Only dead drops of materiel allowed the attacks to continue at times.

The greatest weakness of HERKULES was its lack of follow on forces, where unlike the liberations of Kimanjano or Beta Canum there were insufficient forces to continue on and aid the uprising of poorly coordinated colonist. A pause had to be called once Goldberg was captured and many towns under Kafer occupation were wiped out and Neu Berlin almost totally abandoned. This was a limitation forced on Schnieder back his lack of starlift.

In the event Operation HERKULES was largely successful and went someway to restoring German morale and prestige as they took the key role in liberating the last of their occupied colonies. It also strengthened the links with the Americans and other Allies and rid the Kafers of their last functioning fleet base on the Eta Bootis Finger.

## **Author's Notes**

The liberation of Dunkelheim was first described in the module 'Operation Overlord' written by Clare Hess. This described the liberation as being entirely conducted by a brigade of the US Marine Corps. However it has proved to be one of the more controversial 2300AD modules and many find it very unsatisfactory, even its very title is a matter of annoyance for the historically minded. This is my take on the liberation of Dunkelheim. It makes no claim to canon status, but hopefully is a little more realistic than previous attempts.

The size of the invasion force is based on what I see are the requirements for an assault on such a defended target given a realistic defending force. The numbers of Kafers on Dunkelheim are based on numbers of Kafers on Aureore as described in the Aureore Sourcebook and Kafer Dawn and a realistic appraisal of how many troops would be required to hold the population of Dunkelheim in check.

The decision to give overall command of space operations to Admiral Graham, and the Adlerhorst Alliance is taken from Operation Back Door by J Gammon. I don't agree, however, with Gammon's conclusions about the nature of French power and the development of the Adlerhorst Alliance as a counterweight, especially given the canon America's closeness to France.

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