

“The Tomb Platoon”

Task Force Alamo’s 1st Tunnel Clearance Platoon (Provisional)

INTRODUCTION

A unit formed by the Republic of Texas’ Task Force Alamo for operations on Aurore, the 1st Tunnel Clearance Platoon (Provisional), more popularly known as the “Tomb Platoon,” had the unenviable task of demolishing or clearing Kafer Safe Place bunker/tunnel complexes. By a quirk of Texan military policy, the Tomb Platoon was also the only unit of the Texan military at that time where female personnel were directly involved in active, offensive combat operations. Consequently it was a very high profile and politically controversial organization back on Earth while it performed an incredibly arduous and difficult mission on Aurore.

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NARRATIVE

Even in an era when video footage was ubiquitous to the point of overload, the media value of a single image remained. Seven months into his embed with Task Force Alamo, Houston Frontera-Times reporter Pedro Hernandez captured a single frame image that would win him awards, both at home and internationally. Curiously, he had no memory of the shot at all, beyond intellectually knowing when and where it was shot. Even six years back on Earth, Hernandez still did not have clear memories of that day or several after.

But the photo was a marvel.

Hernandez had caught the moment when a squad of the TF Alamo Tunnel Clearance Platoon exited a Kafer Safe Place after going in and rooting out the defenders. In the background a pair of soldiers, in their borrowed USMC assault armor, struggled with a third slumped between

them. Smoke and riot gas trailed out of the bunker entrance behind them, suggesting something infernal.

Centered in the camera's field of view was Corporal Shelby O'Mara, Republic of Texas Army Explosive Ordinance Disposal Technician, just stepping back into the sunlight, a battered DunArmCo Close Assault Gun hanging limply from its sling, greenish-tan except for its blackened muzzle. Hernandez knew her to be a career soldier, nearly 30, with over ten years in service, but in the borrowed Marine armor she looked undersized and perhaps twelve years old. Not all the viewers would understand the five star and wreath "Estrella Solo" logos stenciled on the armor, an affectation unique to the Tunnel Clearance Platoon, though veterans of Wellington's Army might. Rather less obscure in meaning was "Don't Mess with Texas" stenciled across the front of the breast plate in large, IR readable letters.

But what sold the picture, what turned good into gold, was the look on O'Mara's face. A portion of it was the fear suppressants and the neural pathway inhibitors the medics handed out before direct action missions. Most of it . . . most of it was someone finding their way to the surface after their sixth trip down into the claustrophobic darkness to fight Kafers on their terms and on ground of their choosing. In a war saturated with images and video, humanity knew the thousand yard stare, every variation of it, in the eyes of soldiers and refugees and survivors from a dozen worlds.

However, this was that, but more. Blank, dead eyes in a slack face staring right back into the camera without focus or recognition. But there was something more in the gaze, something manic and mad, something atavistic. Hernandez had always thought it to be the animal gaze of a diurnal hominid evolved on broad sweeping plains coming up for air, out of the darkness, down where dragons lived. He knew it to be the escape from a peculiar horror that fascinated humans in legend after legend about heroes venturing down into hell. He wondered if it was the terror-relief evident on the faces of the first Australopithecines to wander deep enough into a cave to experience absolute darkness as they found their way, stumbling, back to sunlight.

The look on O'Mara's face softened as Hernandez' eyes unfocused. He had no memory of taking the photo. Rationally he knew it was the image in his camera's viewfinder the moment a Kafer sniper had shot the soldier standing next to him. Looking at it, though, there was just a blankness and the stink of the riot gas that permeated the air around all the tunnel clearance operations, and the pounding of his heart beat that must have echoed and mimicked the kicking heels of Private Washington as he struggled to breathe through a laser flash-fried throat and died.

Hernandez realized his voice had trailed off, looking over his shoulder at the screen behind him. He felt that moment of fear knowing people were watching and that he had no idea how long he'd been gone in his own head. He forced himself to blink, repeatedly, switches flipping in his head, turning back on, rejoining the world around him. He turned back to the audience in the lecture hall. Some portion, those who had been through it on Aurore or a dozen other places, might understand. The rest . . . those were the ones he feared, the ones who had never known,

seeing the mask slip and realizing that, for all his accolades and awards, all he had really brought home from TanstaafI was madness.

“This was . . . this was October 6th, 2303, a fairly routine sweep by . . . I think it was A Company and the TanstaafI Militia . . . turned up a bunker complex, a ‘Safe Place,’ and so they set up containment and called for the Tomb Platoon . . .”

ORDER OF BATTLE

1st Tunnel Clearance Platoon (Provisional)

Headquarters Squad

1st Squad

Clearance Team A

Clearance Team B

Clearance Team C

2nd Squad

Clearance Team D

Clearance Team E

Clearance Team F

3rd Squad

UGV Support Team

NBC Support Team

HISTORY

The idea of a specially organized unit trained and equipped to clear out Kafer tunnels and fortifications was a pet concept of Lieutenant Colonel James Robert Smith, commander of 1st Battalion, The Alamo Regiment (141st) during the Task Force Alamo deployment. As a junior major some years prior, LTC Smith had served as the Texan military attaché to the TanstaafI colony and was very familiar with the inhospitable nature of the local environment. LTC Smith’s analysis of the situation facing TanstaafI was that it presented the novel problem of a low intensity, guerilla threat that enjoyed absolutely no support whatsoever from the local population. He was convinced that the estimated numbers of remnant Kafers in the colony, the human control of orbital interface for most of the duration of the fighting, the lack of Kafers dead from starvation, and the relative paucity of Kafer raids that appeared to be aimed directly at securing foodstuffs suggested the aliens must have access to substantial stockpiles of rations. (Mythology aside, scientific study indicated an adult Kafer required about the same or only

slightly less caloric intake as an adult human; while larger than humans, Kafers' selective intelligence apparently making their brains more energy thrifty than humans.)

LTC Smith was of the opinion that these stockpiles of rations were the aliens' true center of gravity in the fight on Tanstaafl, and so long as they could access hidden caches of food, individual and groups of Kafers appeared mentally ready and willing to fight to the death. While Smith was not the only person to identify logistics as the key to defeating Kafer remnants on Aurore and elsewhere, he was an extreme advocate and a vocal one, having had his analysis and theories published in not only Texan but also American, Canadian, and British military journals.

When deployment orders came down for his battalion, there was a certain lack of defined mission or concept from higher military and political levels. "I get the sense," he noted in a journal entry during the deployment train up, "that [political leaders] think that a heavy battalion task force, functioning as Ramrods on steroids, will settle things on Tanstaafl within one year or at least one election cycle." His vision for the deployment was the Texan heavy task force would be wasted functioning reactively as "Ramrods on steroids" and should instead leverage its mobility, firepower, and situational awareness to proactively strike at the Kafers with an aim towards creating more breathing space for the Tanstaafl and its security forces as both struggled to rebuild from years of fighting. For LTC Smith this meant trying to locate and destroy Kafer logistics more than troop concentrations.

LTC Smith envisioned this would involve close combat operations in bunker and tunnel complexes, but during the Earth train up he felt this mission could be accomplished by his battalion's infantry companies as needed with limited retraining or specialization necessary. It was only with the arrival of TF Alamo on Aurore, after conferring with Tanstaafl Free Legion and Militia leadership that Smith and his staff began to grasp how daunting the clearance mission would be. (Typical of many forces from the Core, the Texan battalion – even with extensive briefings and training against an OPFOR modeled on Kafers – arrived on Aurore without having really internalized the degree and nature of Kafer resistance into their thinking and planning. To the Texans' credit, they were very willing to learn from the Tanstaafl security forces, and did not have the same issues about deferring to "mere" colonial forces than some contemporary French and Second Tier units deploying to the French Arm for the first time exhibited.)

Tanstaafl military officers, especially the staff of the TFL Northern Region headquarters, suggested two additional capabilities beyond what TF Alamo deployed with – a specialized tunnel clearance unit and a tracker/K9 unit. LTC Smith was supportive of both concepts, and directed his staff to immediately look at ways to source personnel and equipment to field both

capabilities. It was concluded that the two infantry companies of the Alamo Regiment (141st), the Task Force's engineer company, and the attacked 287th EOD platoon would source personnel for the Tunnel Clearance Platoon, while a Scout Dog platoon would levy personnel from the Task Force's tank company, cavalry troop, and combat support company.

TBC

ORGANIZATION

The Tunnel Clearance Platoon was formed by detaching one rifle squad from each of TF Alamo's two infantry companies, a sapper squad from the Task Force's combat engineer company and one of the 287th EOD Platoon's three EOD squads to form a composite unit. Additional personnel were culled from the TF Alamo Headquarters Company to provide a fairly normal platoon headquarters (the platoon leader and platoon sergeant were both pulled from staff positions, as were a pair of signalers while both assigned medics came from the battalion Treatment Squad in the medical platoon). The platoon headquarters was augmented in day to day operations by a liaison NCO from the 3rd Marine Interface Brigade, another from the Tanstaafl Free Legion, a "Rifleman-Advisor" from the platoon of Texas Riflemen assigned to TF Alamo and an embedded reporter.

Ramrod 174

When Tanstaafl security forces began to slowly go on the offensive against Kafer forces after the initial invasion, they almost immediately learned that Kafer troops, with no other work that needs doing, entrench endlessly. For a force deficient seriously deficient in artillery and support weapons and almost totally lacking in close air support, these bunker and tunnel complexes greatly impeded the advance of forces – and bought time for even stronger defenses further in the hinterland nearer the original Kafer landing zones.

In addition, at the time there was a perceived imperative to capture live Kafers for analysis and interrogation.

TBC

The primary subunits of the platoon were its six Clearance Teams (lettered A-F). Each was built around a standard RTA three-man infantry fire team augmented with two combat engineers from 2/2/A/1-111th Engineers and an EOD specialist from 1st Squad, 287th EOD Platoon. The six-man teams were trained to function in two three-man sub-teams, which allowed quick and easy adaptation of standard Texan military battle drills modeled on three-man infantry fire teams. Team leaders were Privates First Class or Corporals, with team leadership going to the senior assigned member, regardless of unit of origin (and overall squad command going to the senior team leader). While armament would normally consist of a mix of Texan manufactured M5 binary assault rifles, T5 binary carbines, and a plasma gun, basis of issue was modified to

consist of three M5 rifles and three DunArmCo Close Assault Gun combat shotguns, the latter on loan from the USMC. All personnel also carried pistols as secondary weapons.

Throughout the operations of the Tunnel Clearance Platoon, a pressing need for suppressed weapons was repeatedly identified. Inventory of weapons available to the platoon of Texas Rifles was inadequate to support this requirement, nor were suitable weapons or equipment available from TF Alamo's parent USMC brigade. Four to five months into the deployment, a solution in the form of locally manufactured suppressors built by Tanstaaf/Blackjack Arms for M5 rifles and M57 pistols became available. At that point all M5 rifles in a tunnel clearance team were fitted with suppressors and the M57 pistols issued to CAG-gunners were also equipped with suppressors.

Clearance Team members additionally carried flash bangs, fragmentation grenades, riot gas grenades, and various explosive charges as part of their load out. The majority of charges were very small and could be used with (relative) safety in enclosed and underground spaces for breaching tasks. Occasionally, larger satchel charges are deployed (by humans or UGVs) to eliminate encountered strong points, seal tunnels, and the like. All Clearance Team members are trained in charge manufacturing and built what they needed or anticipated needing for any given mission.

Augmenting the six Clearance Teams was a Third Squad organized with two supporting teams. The first of the two was the Unmanned Ground Vehicle team, composed of four personnel from 287th EOD platoon and two additional privates who volunteered from the TF Headquarters Company as drivers. The UGV Team was equipped with a total of six robotic systems customarily used for conventional Explosives Ordnance Disposal. Inventory drawn from standard EOD equipment sets consisted of three *Long Walker* EOD robots and three smaller *Chasseur* reconnaissance UGVs. In addition, the team was equipped with two backpack *Whisperdrone* systems, this UAV having proven useful during clearance/demolition missions for detecting smoke, dust or other disturbances indicative of other tunnel entrances during demolition and gassing operations.

The second team is the Nuclear/Biological/Chemical Support Team, built by pooling all the NBC defense specialists from the Task Force (a total of six personnel, headed by a corporal). The NBC Team's function has no bearing on their conventional wartime mission of maintaining unit protective and decontamination gear and the like, but their job was surplus to requirements on Aurore and someone at TF Headquarters concluded their training provided some natural affinity to the offensive use of chemical weapons. Consequently, they were detailed to the Tunnel Clearance Platoon to handle to preparation and deployment of riot gas into Kafer Safe

Places. TF Alamo had no equipment in its inventory to even begin to accomplish this mission, but an NCO from the Tanstaafi Free Legion with experience in using riot gas on Kafer tunnels was detailed to assist with building the necessary equipment.

Each of the NBC Support Team's two vehicles had a large compressor/blower unit fitted in the cargo compartment, with 100 meters of large diameter ducting carried on the vehicle as well. Gas was deployed through the simple expedient of hauling a hose to entrance to a tunnel and then pumping the gas in. Each of the team's two vehicles also carried some simple decontamination equipment (a pressure washer, immersion heater and aluminum garbage can) to allow Clearance Team members to decontaminate themselves and their gear after exposure to gas during clearance operations.

MOBILITY

To effectively perform their mission of closing with and clearing or destroying Kafer bunker complexes, the Tunnel Clearance Platoon had to be able to reach objectives in a timely manner. While airmobile operations were sometimes an option, and trained for, the preferred method was to either dispatch ground vehicle convoys from the platoon to link up with maneuver elements who had run into a complex extensive enough to warrant use of the platoon or to attach elements of the platoon to units expecting to encounter Kafer Safe Places.

Ground transportation, therefore, required hover mobility to match maneuver forces. The platoon had at its disposal the three M24T3 hover personnel carriers belonging to its two infantry and one sapper squad as a starting point. First Squad of 287th EOD was, however, wheel mobile and there were no vehicles organic at all to the NBC Support Team or platoon headquarters. Drawing on attritional stores TF Alamo had shipped to Aurore with, the platoon was augmented with eight M760 armored cargo carriers for mobility.

As finally equipped, the platoon was configured with the Headquarters Squad operating on one of the M24T3 hover PCs (partially converted to the M24T4 command carrier format with additional communications and computers). The two Clearance Team squads were each equipped with one M24T3 and two M760s (one vehicle per six man team being required due to extra equipment and a desire for space to don the USMC assault ensembles under armor so clearance team members could travel partially de-kitted to reduce fatigue. (Clearance Teams only deploy in the presence of other TF Alamo or allied forces, so Clearance Team members drive, command, and gun on the assigned vehicles, leaving them unmanned when deployed.) The two support teams in the 3rd Squad each have a pair of M760s assigned. The M760s assigned to the UGV Support Team have been modified with internal work stations and an

internal spall shield to allow robotic systems to be both deployed under fire and operated by crewmen under armor. The NBC Support Team's vehicles have compressors and gas blowers fitted in their cargo compartment, allowing gas to be prepped and delivered from under armor (once ducting is emplaced).

All M760s have defensive remote turrets fitted mounting M99 machineguns firing the well respected 9mm caseless APHE round. The two infantry squads assigned to the platoon had a total of six Mk 2A2 PGMPs issued and the platoon developed field expedient mounts allowing the plasma guns to be mounted on M760s' remote turrets and fired with acceptable accuracy, though the guns cannot be reloaded under armor. All four of the M760s assigned to 3rd Squad mount the dual M99/PGMP turrets and one M760 per Clearance Squad has one fitted as well.

TACTICS, TECHNIQUES, AND PROCEDURES

The mission of the Tunnel Clearance Platoon was to address substantial Kafer Safe Places. These facilities frequently had exploitable intelligence value and almost always contained substantial stockpiles of supplies. Due to the intricacies of Kafer entrenchments it was frequently later determined that just destroying known fighting positions and collapsing detected tunnel entrances failed to deny these supplies to Kafer forces, who would simply access the Safe Place from alternate, concealed entrances (or remain safely inside in the first place) after human forces swept through the area. On Aurore, where Kafers suffered from the same inability to metabolize indigenous flora and fauna as humans, destroying any locatable stockpiles of rations was generally held to be vital to eradicating Kafer remnants.

The central concept for Tunnel Clearance Platoon operations was that they would be extremely deliberate in nature. Rather than trying to rely on speed, surprise, and violence of action to snatch the initiative back from smart Kafers in tunnel complexes they knew intimately, Clearance Teams would try to neutralize the defensive advantages of Safe Places by flooding them with riot control agents and augmenting human assaulters with robotic systems to reconnoiter complexes and engage identified targets. While there was a hope that clearance operations would ultimately amount to little more than killing or capturing Kafers overwhelmed by tear gas and robot-delivered munitions, the more realistic expectation was that extensive preparation could at least make a deliberate assault into a Kafer Safe Place a survivable mission rather than the suicide mission many human forces had found it to be in the past.

In a classic/optimal deployment scenario, an element of the Tunnel Clearance Platoon was called up after a maneuver element made contact with Kafer forces and determined they have encountered a bunker/tunnel complex in the course of developing that contact. Before Tunnel

Clearance teams arrive, line units stabilize the situation by dealing with any Kafer forces active on the surface and by destroying any located bunkers. The line unit then sets up a cordon around the tunnel entrance(s), providing both an inner perimeter force covering the tunnel entrance and an outer perimeter screening the entrance from any other Kafer forces in the area. Due to the intricacies of Kafer defensive works and the inventiveness of smart Kafers, the security the inner perimeter provides Tunnel Clearance Teams is vital, as teams prepping tunnel entrances for clearance operations are frequently engaged from previously undetected fighting positions or by Kafer forces counter attacking from the entrance itself or from other (again previously undetected) entrances.

Ideally, the line unit would already have a *Whisperdrone* deployed before Clearance Teams arrived, but on arrival the first order of business (after locating something approximating a covered and concealed position near the Kafer defenses) would be deployment of an unmanned system to provide close reconnaissance of the area and tunnel entrance(s). This was often done initially by *Whisperdrone* with a *Chasseur* UGV then moving in to develop the situation. In a worst case scenario, a pair of human assaulters would approach a tunnel entrance to deploy an "Eight Ball" fiber optic camera, with both the remainder of their team and the inner cordon elements providing overwatch, possibly deploying smoke or providing active suppressive fire depending on the circumstances. If close reconnaissance of a tunnel was done by humans, normal SOP was for the soldier carrying the camera unit to provide initial security while the other soldier prepped the entrance with a hand grenade and then took over security while the camera was deployed.

Close reconnaissance (provided it indicated deployment of Clearance Teams) was followed by deployment of gas, with either humans or a *Longwalker* UGV dragging ducting from the NBC Support Team vehicle to the tunnel entrance. Though the gas was heavier than air and would sink naturally into most tunnel complexes, it was generally preferred to get the hose at least five to ten meters into the tunnel if feasible to enhance dispersion. Experiments and the experience of the TFL's Ramrod 174 team suggested that 30 minute prep with gas, and gas continuing to be pushed into the system as clearance began, was optimal.

Depending on the configuration of the tunnel entrance, an initial entry would preferentially be made with one of the UGV systems (the *Chasseurs*, if available, were generally able to traverse any tunnel configuration humans and Kafers could transit, *Long Walkers* sometimes had difficulty with steep or vertical entrances). Barring that, again an "Eight Ball" fiber optic camera unit could be thrown into the tunnel. In all cases, the goal was to reconnoiter an initial lodgement for assaulters before humans made entry. Initial assessment aimed to discover both any Kafers covering the entry as well as mines, booby traps, or mechanical ambushes (of which

the Kafers were quite fond). *Long Walkers* were preferred for initial reconnaissance, as their armament allowed them to engage any Kafers in the immediate area of the entrance.

How many Clearance Team members deployed into a tunnel system depended on the circumstances. Each Clearance Team was trained to operate in two three man sub-teams (using standard Texan battle drills for close quarters combat for three man fire teams), with usually one three man team entering and the other half of the team standing by to support or assault through the first half-team. Depending on the size of the tunnel complex additional teams might be pushed in to follow up the first team, particularly if resistance were encountered.

In extreme cases, both Clearance squads might be deployed or even standard infantry employed to hold secured sections of a complex while Clearance Teams pushed forward. A central tenet of clearance doctrine was that assaults/clearances were completed in one push; pulling out of a complex and returning the next day or similar was felt to be unacceptable, giving the Kafers far too many opportunities to prepare effective counter measures to further incursions.

TBC

PERSONNEL SELECTION AND TRAINING

While assignment to the Tunnel Clearance Platoon was not voluntary as originally formed, it was found during training that a portion of personnel selected were not suited to the mission. This mainly occurred during training in simulated tunnels where, even with standard issue fear suppressants, some were not able to overcome claustrophobia, though some other complications also arose. In some cases, substitutions were made with personnel already assigned to the platoon (such that a couple of NBC specialists found themselves on Clearance Teams and their place taken by an infantryman and sapper), but eventually the platoon had to call for a half dozen volunteers to fill out its ranks after personnel were returned to their parent units.

The recruiting issue continued to present itself in response to casualties and burn out. During TF Alamo's deployment the platoon suffered seven killed (five underground), fourteen wounded (six seriously enough to require evacuation back to Earth), and five personnel who "red lined" after multiple missions and were no longer able to function underground. Volunteers were sought from within the Task Force and from among replacement personnel arriving from Earth. With the platoon having a high profile back on Earth, many arriving

replacements volunteered for the unit immediately on arrival. Notably, approximately 70% of all female soldiers arriving on Aurore as replacements volunteered or attempted to volunteer for service in the platoon.

The platoon never established a definitive selection and training process for new personnel. The typical pattern was to have any potential applicant interview with the platoon commander, platoon sergeant, and the squad leader they would be serving under. If the initial interview went well, the applicant would then be put through a week or two (depending on other unit taskings) of basic skills training that doubled as a serious “gut check” with an especial focus on ability to function in confined spaces, darkness, and under the effects of “Tunnel Special” gas. This process tended to identify those who lacked the proper mindset for the work. In some more unfortunate cases, new personnel did not receive significantly more training than that before operational deployment, though the preference was to spend some amount of time integrating new personnel into their assigned clearance team. The fact that the platoon’s tactics and battle drills were strongly based on standard Texas infantry skills taught to all recruits, regardless of branch of service, did help streamline transition of new personnel to the teams though the unusual operating environment obviously created difficulties as well.

PERSONALITIES

Corporal Adam Carlisle, Brigade of Texas Rifles

A reconnaissance team leader in 1st Platoon, 1st Independent Company, Brigade of Texas Rifles, Corporal Adam Carlisle had the misfortune of suffering a major shoulder injury during combatives training when TF Alamo was en route to Aurore. Corrective surgery on ship was partially successful in addressing the injury, but full recovery would require either extensive and lengthy physical therapy or a return to the Core for access to medical treatment and technologies not available on Aurore.

With 1/1st Independent Company facing a huge remit to conduct foreign internal defense as well as special reconnaissance and direct action missions, the commanding officer for 1/1st Independent Company was loathe to lose an experienced NCO. He also, philosophically, loathed the idea of ordering any Texas Rifleman away from a warzone and back to Earth without the agreement of that soldier. When asked, Corporal Carlisle did not agree to being sent back to Earth. Consequently, the platoon’s senior Rifleman-Medic evaluated Corporal Carlisle as subject only to short term light duty of an unspecified duration but otherwise fit for combat service.

While able to wear issue body armor and operate his assigned duty weapon (though both would probably be against medical advice were the matter referred higher than 1/1st Independent Company's organic medical assets), Corporal Carlisle lacked full use of his left arm and was unable to carry a rucksack or other heavy loads. Consequently, the intent was to assign him to the Mobile Training Team the platoon was forming to work alongside US Special Forces personnel on assignment with the Tanstaaf Militia. With some misgivings about Cpl Carlisle's medical limitations, the commander of 1/1st Independent Company instead posted him as "Rifleman-Advisor" to the newly forming Tunnel Clearance Platoon, instructing on combat marksmanship, explosive and other forms of breaching, and close quarters battle techniques. By the time the platoon became operational, his condition was improved enough to safely operate outside the wire, even if he was still unable to resume his full duties as a member of 1/1st Independent Company.

So he remained with the Tomb Platoon in what was ostensibly, and officially, a purely advisory and non-operational capacity. Corporal Carlisle took the initiative to modify the platoon's battle roster in TF Alamo's computer systems to add a "Private A. Carlos" to the rolls in a "present/non-pay" status (a bit of subsequent minor bribery of the soldier maintaining the database in the battalion's personnel section kept this fiction on the books). Corporal Carlisle has consistently been documented in all operations as attached to platoon headquarters, while Private Carlos has been documented as participating several clearance and other direct action missions.

Private First Class Christian "Good Gorilla" Eldredge

The team leader of Clearance Team B, PFC Eldredge was a six year veteran of the Alamo Regiment (141st), all with the First Battalion, within which he earned a reputation as being incredibly determined, and nearly superhuman in his endurance, while simultaneously not being the most out of the box thinker and incredibly unlucky with any piece of technology. He gained some media notice and notoriety on Earth after reporter Pedro Hernandez sent home interview footage of another Tomb Platoon soldier stating of PFC Eldredge, "If you lock him in an empty room all day with two bowling balls, Eldredge will somehow lose one and break the other in half – and if told to, he will then march 50 kilometers without water and smash a Kafer's head in with the broken bowling ball. And he'll never think to ask you why any of that happened. He'll just do it."

First Lieutenant David Guzman, The Alamo Regiment (141st)

Platoon leader of the Tunnel Clearance Platoon, 1LT David Guzman, of Abilene, was assigned to battalion staff of 1/The Alamo Regiment (141st) during the train up for the TF Alamo deployment after having served as a rifle platoon and mortar platoon leader with 1-5th Texas

Regiment in the 2nd Texas Mechanized Division. While the limits of his special qualifications for running the Tunnel Clearance Platoon were that he was available as the assistant battalion motor officer, 1LT Guzman proved himself to be an effective leader and, perhaps more important for a large and complex unit, to be an extremely gifted organizer and administrator.

First Lieutenant Guzman did not participate clearance operations, remaining topside on all operations, but was well liked and respected by his subordinates for aggressively pursuing their welfare and tirelessly “taking HEAT rounds” from higher headquarters to allow his NCOs and troops to effectively train for and then execute their mission. This included a poorly concealed feud with the Task Force supply officer whose support for the Tomb Platoon was (debatably) less than satisfactory.

Pedro Hernandez

A reporter from the *Houston Frontera-Times*, Pedro Hernandez had spent significant parts of a decade long career covering wars and troubles in Central Asia, South America and elsewhere. With the planned deployment of TF Alamo, Hernandez was contracted by his publication and a consortium of other southern Texas media outlets to be one of the dozen or so journalists to accompany the Task Force to Aurore. In an organization saturated with media coverage, finding a niche was difficult and Hernandez lacked some of the ties with the Republic of Texas Army that other embedded reporters possessed. In the initial days dirtside he was, essentially, stuck inside the wire at Camp Travis filing human interest stories while his contemporaries were outside on combat patrols and sweeps with the Task Force’s line units.

Attracted to small arms fire at the flat range inside the perimeter at Camp Travis one day, he discovered a grizzled and partially disabled Texas Rifleman and giant Samoan Tanstaaf Free Legionnaire putting a jumble of assorted personnel through their paces in full assault armor against targets at close range. He shot a bit of footage, talked to the troops about what sounded like an interesting mission and lingered to watch the second phase of the day’s training after a lunch break. The afternoon’s training was for extreme close quarters battle, with personnel making runs through a trench complex with training guns and reactive targets, also facing random ambush from the Samoan Legionnaire who would drop into the trench in front of, behind, or onto them without warning and attack at point blank range, delivering blows that looked staggering even with training gear and the rigid and inertial armor suits for protection. That footage, with the Texas Rifleman’s voice over narration about training the unit to go at the Kafers under the worst conditions imaginable led many nightly newscasts in Texas weeks later, edging out footage of Texan troops in contact in some cases. Even before the positive feedback from Earth, however, Hernandez had found his home in TF Alamo and became the Tomb Platoon’s official embed in short order.

Once embedded with the platoon, Hernandez proved popular with the troops, not complaining when he was required to blend in by wearing full USMC assault armor (the standard “Don’t Mess With Texas” stencil being replaced with “Fourth Estate, Tunnel Clearance Platoon” on his armor) and eventually requesting small arms training and a weapon after another embedded reporter was shot and killed during a patrol with B Company of the Alamo Regiment. While Hernandez never “went under” on an active mission with a Clearance Team, he did accompany teams into secured tunnels and bunkers for demolition missions. He cemented his status as an adoptive member of the platoon during an early clearance operation where he was observed by several platoon members to drop his camera during an above-ground firefight to assist one of the platoon medics in dragging a wounded soldier to cover and helping treat his wounds.

Unlike most of his peers, who rotated back to Earth after six months, Hernandez remained embedded with TF Alamo for the duration of its one year deployment, despite being twice slightly wounded by indirect fire and suffering a serious concussion from an unanticipated secondary explosion during a tunnel demolition operation. When asked about the extended duration of his field time during an interview afterwards, Hernandez stated, “After most of six months living day in and day out with those guys – with my guys – I just couldn’t pack up and go and leave them in the middle of it. We ran out of objectivity on Aurore about the same time the coffee from Earth ran out. Some grade school kids from Fort Worth shipped us more coffee in care packages. Nobody sent more objectivity.”

Lance Corporal Fetu “Lolo” Lolofietele, Tanstaaf Free Legion

A Samoan volunteer to the Tanstaaf Free Legion who found fighting Kafers more appealing than trying to eke out a living as a mechanic and handyman in an economic backwater of the Japanese sphere of influence in the Pacific, LCpl Fetu “Lolo” Lolofietele was one of the original members of the TFL’s “Crack Suicide Squad” (Ramrod 174) which pioneered tunnel clearance operations within the Tanstaaf security forces. When another squad member suggested pumping riot gases into Kafer tunnels on a mass scale rather than trying to rely on gas grenades deployed as clearance operations progressed, Lolo developed the first gas blower system in a couple days using equipment salvaged from abandoned farms and ranches in Ramrod 17’s area of operations. After refining his basic design, Lolo found himself promoted to Lance Corporal, awarded a pay bonus as the TFL’s only “Master Chemical Deployment Technician” (a title created for him), and sent as part of a training team to expand the knowledge base of deliberate clearance operations within the TFL and Militia. The Tanstaaf security forces eventually cooled on the idea of aggressively clearing Kafer tunnel complexes (the fascination with capturing live Kafers having passed and casualties having steadily mounted) and adopted a doctrine in favor of the lower casualty approach of demolishing any tunnel entrances

discovered, ideally from a distance. With the change in doctrine, Lolo found himself posted back to Ramrod 174 as a team leader.

When TF Alamo began reinventing the wheel that Ramrod 174 had explored early in the fight on Tanstaaf, Lolo's former commanding officer in Ramrod 17 was now the operations officer for the TFL Northern Command at Equator Flats. Lolo was the only member of the original "Crack Suicide Squad" still both alive and on active service, and was recommended for secondment to the Texans to assist with technical issues. Though nominally posted to the NBC Support Team to assist with building and operating blower units for riot gasses, he was also an invaluable training asset for the Clearance Teams, having clocked more time "under" than anyone still alive and serving with the Tanstaaf Security Forces.

Though his orders are to not actively participate with Clearance Teams, LCpl Lolofietele did not find this arrangement acceptable after spending significant time training the Clearance Teams. The enterprising Corporal Carlisle from the Texas Rifles (c.f.) addressed this situation by adding a "Private Pacifico" to the platoon rolls, who has made numerous trips "under" while Lance Corporal Lolofietele maintained his assigned advisory status.

This fiction is, quite obviously, politely maintained, as even among the Texan troops the two meter tall Samoan (outfitted in the largest set of assault armor in the USMC inventory on Aurore) stands out. The fact that he insists on carrying one of the rather distinctive tomahawks issued to members of Ramrod 174 further elevated his profile until the Tomb Platoon began manufacturing copies. Among the rank and file of the platoon his presence on a clearance operation is actively sought; as one of (and possibly the most) experienced soldiers in human space when it comes to time in Kafer tunnels his utility rises above his actual formidable abilities and has a certain talismanic value as well.

Corporal Shelby O'Mara, Republic of Texas Army Corps of Engineers

The squad leader of 1st Squad, 287th EOD Platoon, Corporal O'Mara is the senior female soldier in the Tomb Platoon, leading Clearance Team E and the 2nd Clearance Squad. Having enlisted in the Republic of Texas Army at age 18 (women not being subject to the Texan draft), she initially served as a construction equipment operator in the RTA Corps of Engineers, volunteering for Explosive Ordnance Disposal training after two years in service. Circa 2303 she is 28 years old, with her eight years of experience in the career field including completion of advanced training with the Texas Department of Public Safety and both the US and Brazilian militaries as well as the RTA's in house training programs. Cpl O'Mara was considered the best trained and most experienced of 287th EOD's three squad leaders, prompting the assignment of her and her squad to the tunnel clearance platoon.

Gunnery Sergeant Jacob Stanton, United States Marine Corps

Having spent most of his sixteen year career in the United States Marine Corps assigned to units tasked to the Caribbean theater of operations, Gunnery Sergeant Jacob Stanton found himself one of numerous officers and NCOs hastily reassigned to the 3rd Marine Interface Brigade to bring it up to full strength for deployment to the French Arm as the Kafer War intensified. Though a career infantryman and senior in his current rank, Stanton had no background in interface or exoatmospheric operations, and so found himself posted to a supply NCO billet in 3rd MIB's brigade staff rather than assigned to a line unit. (This was a not unusual occurrence, as the early phases of the Kafer War highlighted the dirty secret of tensions between Earth based "fighting Marines" and the flashy but expensively under-employed "space Marines;" as the war dragged on this issue informally resolved itself quickly.)

With his background in the "Gulf Marines," Stanton had frequently trained with Texan troops, including a year-long exchange with the 6th Battalion of the Texas Frontier Regiment (8th Texas). During a chance encounter on Tanstaafl with a Texan officer he knew from his time with the 6/Texas Frontier Regiment, Stanton learned of the Tunnel Clearance Platoon's formation and pressing need for better body armor and other equipment for their specialized mission.

As an under employed logistics NCO, GySgt Stanton quickly determined that he had access to the means to resolve the situation and advised both the Texan officer and his own chain of command of the situation. As an enterprising combat arms Marine who was debating either chronic alcoholism or taking up knitting to pass his time on brigade staff, Stanton also managed to strongly suggest that a liaison NCO with extensive knowledge of the Texan military should accompany the loaned equipment, partly to look after it, partly to deconflict any joint operations with USMC or US Army forces, and also to observe operations for any lessons learned that might be of use to the United States Marine Corps.

Stanton was, in short order, accompanying a truck load of USMC assault armor, combat shotguns, man portable *Whisperdrones* and other equipment surplus to current 3rd MIB requirements to TF Alamo's base camp at Worththetrip with loosely worded orders requiring he remain with the Tunnel Clearance Platoon as an observer and periodically submit after action reviews and other reports to 3rd MIB headquarters. GySgt Stanton took these orders and translated them into essentially becoming the *de facto* gunnery sergeant for the Tunnel Clearance Platoon, supervising logistics and leveraging his direct access to 3rd MIB supplies to address ongoing issues the Tomb Platoon had with the Task Force Alamo S-4.

Sergeant Roberto Thibodeaux, The Alamo Regiment (141st)

A career NCO in the Republic of Texas Army, Sgt. Roberto Thibodeaux has served fourteen of his twenty years in service with The Alamo Regiment (141st), the remaining six having been spent split between the Brigade of Texas Rifles (a year with the 1st Battalion and then two years on colonial service with the 2nd Battalion) and as an instructor for basic trainees and junior NCOs with the 144th Training Regiment. Sgt. Thibodeaux was assigned as the platoon sergeant of the TF Alamo Communications and Signal Security Platoon when deployed, but was deemed to have an ideal background to serve as the senior NCO for the Tunnel Clearance Platoon (and the senior communication specialist in the Commo Platoon was deemed capable of filling the platoon sergeant slot).

Though unable to handpick his subordinate NCOs and troops, Sgt. Thibodeaux was handed a solid team to work with and an experienced platoon leader who gave him room to train the platoon as needed. Once the platoon went operational, any time it was operating in two sections (a frequent occurrence), Sgt. Thibodeaux led one half of the platoon while 1LT Guzman commanded the other.

Though criticized by some for perceived lax standards (many felt the ubiquitous “Don’t Mess With Texas” logos on unit body armor should have been replaced with simple national flashes, for instance), Sgt Thibodeaux was intensely focused on standards that directly impacted unit readiness for combat. While his troops never appeared ready for the parade ground, weapons and equipment were always maintained meticulously, platoon vehicles had some of the highest readiness rates in the Task Force, and any down time was endlessly filled with refresher training. Sgt. Thibodeaux stated his goals to the newly formed platoon members that all members would be able to “shoot to the standards of the Brigade [of Texas Rifles] and function as an infantryman, sapper, and medic as needed whatever their previous training – and do it all underground, in the pitch black, in a tunnel full of tear gas.” His troops eventually met (and maintained) that standard throughout the TF Alamo deployment.

PERSONAL EQUIPMENT

Small Arms and Support Weapons

As noted previously, each six man Clearance Team is armed with three M5 binary assault rifles and three DunArmCo CAG combat shotguns. The 9mm portion of the M5 is the primary components used for engagements during tunnel clearance, but personnel also load 30mm APERS rounds for engaging Kafers and carry 30mm breaching rounds that can be used to defeat locked doors or similar obstacles. Doors are not common in Kafer tunnel complexes (though

not unheard of) and so breaching rounds are usually just single loaded as needed and Clearance Team members typically carry two rounds each. Explosive rounds are used very sparingly and very selectively in tunnels, for obvious reasons. When employed, high explosive, proximity fuzed rounds were preferred, with blast overpressure being at least as effective a wounding mechanism in confined spaces as actual fragmentation.

Members of the Headquarters Squad carry a mix of M5 rifles and T5 carbines, while all members of the UGV and NBC Support Teams carry the T5 carbine. All personnel assigned to the platoon also carry M57 pistols as secondary weapons. (Notably, the platoon's embedded reporter also carried a T5 carbine and M57 pistol, in addition to his audiovisual recording equipment.) The platoon has no support weapons except for those mounted on its various vehicles.

Personnel from the Tanstaaf Free Legion Ramrod 174 clearance squad originally adopted locally produced tomahawks as weapons and breaching tools for use in tunnels. The Ramrod 174 "tunnel 'hawks" were a mix of historical human examples and the frequently seen Kafer "K-Hawks." The basic design was a 40cm long tomahawk (including the vertical spike) made of 8mm thick steel bar stock with the head consisting of an axe backed by a five centimeter long back spike and another five centimeter spike projecting up from the head of the 'hawk to allow it to be used as a stabbing weapon as well (a very helpful feature in confined spaces). Both vertical and back spikes are reinforced and profiled such that they can be used as pry bars for mechanical breaching operations. After LCpl Lolofietele reported to the Tunnel Clearance Platoon from the TFL with an example of this weapon, it was almost immediately copied by Texan soldiers assigned to the Tunnel Clearance Platoon (and subsequently by many other units assigned to TF Alamo). By the time the Tunnel Clearance Platoon became operational, all members of the platoon were issued "Tunnel Hawks" and almost all Clearance Team members carried them on operations (and primarily used as field tools rather than weapons).

GAME MECHANICS

Tunnel Hawk: For game mechanics, treat as a hatchet (same DPV for both the hatchet head and stabbing with either spike.)

Air Knife: Generally treat as a knife. The compressed air cylinder is a one use item, with a 70% chance the cylinder will discharge on a strike. If the cylinder discharges, it is DPV 0.8, otherwise (and

for all subsequent attacks) treat as a standard knife.

Most personnel carried their pistols in chest holsters and/or easily accessible, small (10-12cm blade) knives on their upper torso. A perennial

fear for personnel was being taken to the ground by a Kafer and facing a “ground and pound” situation involving whatever weapons the Kafer could bring to bear and the greater bulk and mass of the Kafer. Personnel equipped themselves such that they had weapons accessible on their upper torso that could be immediately brought to bear in such a scenario (and frequently trained to deploy them).

A few personnel were more creative with close defense weapons. Several had compressed air knives or spikes custom made by a blade smith in Tanstaaf City. These devices were each custom made, but tended to be heavy, square profiled stiletto blades about 15cm in length with CO2 canisters in the handle and a trigger mechanism in the hilt (drawing the weapon from its sheath would arm it). The idea, like the diver-defense shark picks they were based on, was that the compressed air would discharge into a stab wound and cause massive internal injuries. Experimental use (on dead Kafers) suggested a torso wound would tend to be immediately fatal, while a wound into major muscle groups of a limb would be immediately crippling. Accounts of actual documented use are scarce, though of two known instances one was immediately fatal as advertised, while in the other the trigger mechanism failed to initiate (though it still produced wounds that would have ultimately proved fatal to the Kafer in question had it not been shot by another team member).

Body Armor

All members of TF Alamo deployed to Aurore with RTA standard infantry combat uniforms, consisting of non-rigid armor flak suits, inertial body armor vests, and high threat helmets. For TF Alamo personnel involved in foot patrols and extended sweeps to clear Kafers from the surface, this ensemble was considered hot and an wearisome impediment to mobility. For members of the Tomb Platoon, the standard Texan armor ensemble simply provided inadequate levels of protection for their mission. EOD personnel were equipped with the much heavier inertial and rigid armor associated with their mission, but this ensemble was not intended for general battlefield use and wholly inappropriate to the close combat/clearance mission. The Task Force’s Texas Riflemen from 1st Platoon, 1st Independent Company, Brigade of Texas Rifles did have specialized equipment for direct action missions, but both they and TF headquarters were loathe to decrease their overall mission capabilities by transferring that equipment to the provisional Tunnel Clearance Platoon.

An acceptable solution was found in the form of the assault armor ensemble the USMC had in limited service for direct action/*sturmtaktik* style operations, and which was immediately available on Aurore and supportable through the USMC/US Army supply chain TF Alamo was largely dependent on anyway. Though the initial goal was to outfit members of the Clearance Teams with the armor, the USMC was able to source enough armor to fully equip the platoon. Though the armor was considered miserable for extended wear, the proximity of headquarters and support squad members to occupied tunnel complexes dictated use by all platoon personnel. The Texan troops addressed the USMC Eagle-Globe-Anchor emblem on the breast plates of the suits, as issued, by over-spraying them with a paint stencil declaring “Don’t Mess With Texas.”

The USMC assault armor suits consist of an inertial armor base suit providing fragmentation protection and some mitigation of blast effects (AV 0.2) worn in conjunction with a rigid torso armor and arm and leg protection (AV 2 for torso, AV 1 for limbs) plus a high threat helmet (AV 2). The ensemble is designed such that the arm and leg armor can be removed based on mission requirements, etc., though as used by the Tunnel Clearance Platoon the full suit is used. The inertial armor under suits include integral tourniquets in the upper arm and upper leg, and have Velcro panels allowing rapid access to the interior of the elbow and throat for medical treatment.

The high threat helmet component is sealable for use in an NBC environment (or vacuum) and the suit can be fitted with a life support unit allowing its use in vacuum environments. Tunnel Clearance Platoon personnel use a smaller life support unit that enriches air flow through their NBC filters with additional oxygen. The helmet is also fitted with integral thermal imaging and image intensification systems that project onto the faceplate’s HUD. The suits themselves have transponders for battlefield tracking and IFF, though underground on Aurore they are largely useless.

Game Statistics: Treat as the standard Full Body Combat Armor, as per standard 2300AD rules.

UNIT EQUIPMENT

Long Walker Mk.VII (Mil) Explosive Ordnance Disposal UGV

The *Long Walkers* are a popular series of EOD robots developed primarily for the law enforcement market by the Toronto-based Canadian Protective Services (CPS) Corporation. Though upgraded from the initial Mark I to the current Mark VII version, the basic format has remained the same, consisting of tracked chassis fitted with a maneuverable sensor head on an articulated neck, a weapons station capable of mounting various ordnance (water jet guns,

shotguns, and lasers are all options), and a pair of arms with human like hands allowing an EOD technician to perform gross and fine manipulations of devices remotely. The *Long Walker* is intended to be operated via an encrypted data link, but can also be equipped to operate via a fiber optic cable when there are concerns about either electronic emissions or signals security.

The *Mark VII (Mil)* version of the *Long Walker* is a militarized model designed with an alternate weapons mount allowing it to carry both a water jet cannon and a kinetic or directed energy weapon, light armor (AV 0.4) and an enhanced power plant. The Tunnel Clearance Platoon *Long Walkers* removed the water cannon to mount an M99 light machinegun fitted with a 400 round ammunition cassette and a Luce-7B laser rifle/grenade launcher combination, and add additional armor to the front of the chassis (AV 1.2, front, 0.4 on other aspects). While human Clearance Team members do not use explosive 30mm rounds underground, the *Long Walkers* are loaded with 30mm HE rounds, which are fiercely effective in confined spaces due to blast and overpressure. The robots are also usually equipped with up to a half dozen small explosive charges (1-4 explosive points per charge) that can be emplaced with the robot's manipulator arms, usually equipped with sixty second time fuse delays. Finally, the *Long Walkers* are equipped with pintle hooks welded to the front and back of the frames allowing them to secure the drag handles on Clearance Team members' armor, and facilitating casualty recovery and evacuation from underground. The pintle hooks can also be used for other tasks, such as dragging hose to tunnel mouths for gas deployment.

Type: Unmanned Ground Vehicle, **Crew:** 0, **Weight:** 200 kg, **Armor:** Suspension: 0.4, Front: 1.2, All Other Faces: 0.4, **Armament:** One dual weapons mount (see above), **Ammunition:** Carried as cargo, **Signature:** 1, **Evasion:** 0, **Sensor Range:** 1 km, **Cargo:** 150 kg (dragged), **Max Speed:** 50 kph, **Cruising Speed:** 25 kph, **Combat Movement:** 100 m, **Off-Road Mobility:** Halved, **Power Plant:** Batteries sufficient for four hours mobile operations (up to 16 hours if stationary and operating at reduced power) **Fuel Capacity:** N/A, **Fuel Consumption:** N/A, **Endurance:** 4 hours mobile operations, up to 16 hours static operations with only surveillance/sensor operations, **Price:** Lv 20,000 (approximate)

“Tunnel Special” Riot Control Agent

The gas used for tunnel clearances was specially prepared by the members of the NBC Support Team. The riot control portion of “Tunnel Special” consisted of a mix of approximately 60% capsaicin based riot gas, 30% vomit agent, and approximately 10% of an aerosolized benzodiazepine. The first two components were both somewhat effective on Kafers, but in neither case were they as effective as they would be against humans. In combination, however, they proved effective. The benzodiazepine component was believed (circa 2303) to somewhat interfere with Kafers becoming or sustaining “smartness” though again the

biochemical effects on Kafers did not precisely match those seen with humans and it was eventually concluded that this effect was slight and inconsistent enough to not warrant the cost or effort involved. The overall mix was then cut with conventional HC smoke in the NBC Support Team's blower units when pumped into tunnel complexes. The final product was a debilitating riot agent that was generally non-lethal in humans or Kafers (though potentially lethal to either in high concentration) combined with a visual obscurant that blocked both human and Kafer vision but which did not interfere with thermal imaging equipment used by Clearance Platoon members. The HC smoke component also helped in identifying concealed tunnel entrances and bunkers for units providing security topside during a clearance operation.

"Tunnel Special" was also a somewhat persistent agent, producing low level irritant effects for weeks or even months after application if not exposed to sunlight, which would break it down in short order. It was hoped this would discourage Kafer re-use of any portion of a complex that was not destroyed, though evidence that this was actually the case was inconclusive.

The downside of "Tunnel Special" was that it was much more effective against humans than Kafers. (This was addressed later in the war with the development of both lethal and non-lethal chemical agents tailored to Kafer biology with reduced or negligible effects on human troops, but circa 2303 "Tunnel Special" was state of the art.) A Clearance Team member with a compromised NBC system could rapidly become a combat-ineffective casualty and learning to operate, even briefly, under the effects of the gas was one of the most difficult aspects of Clearance Team training. Psychological assessment of team members before the platoon became active found that the most common fears and sources of anxiety for Clearance Team members related to the risk of cave ins and other aspects of operating underground. Reassessment after four months of operations found that the number one fear of all Clearance Team members was a hand to hand fight with Kafers involving their helmet's NBC seal being compromised. Even with focused training to address this anxiety and contingency, subsequent reassessment found that while troops felt better prepared to deal with that event, it was still generally their primary fear during clearance operations.

Effects: In normal concentrations, exposure to "Tunnel Special" obscures unaided vision as outlined above, but does not interfere with thermal imaging. For Kafers it increases the difficulty level of all tasks by one level. For humans, it increases the difficulty of all tasks by two levels. Personnel in protective masks or the equivalent ignore the effects of the gas, except for the obscurant aspect.

*****TBC*****

