

IN THE WAR OF THE FUTURE, DEATH IS AS BLOODY AS EVER!



ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES ROUCH

THE ZONE #1

HARD TARGET
By James Rouch



THE ZONE 1 • HARD TARGET • JAMES ROUCH

THE ZONE



Cover illustration: FV499 Hover armoured personnel carrier (HAPC).

Crew: commander, driver, gunner, radio/radar operator, plus eight infantry.

Armament: 30mm Rarden cannon, 7.92mm AA machine-gun.

Armour: classified, believed to be composite hull, Chobham turret.

Combat weight: 15.4 tons.

Engines: late production models fitted with twin Allison turbofans developing 2,480 hp max speed, classified.

Systems fitted include NBC, night vision, automatic fire-suppression, ECM, decoy and smoke.

generation, passive and active locators.

A planned production of 300 was cut to 60 due to shortage of engines. Issue is limited to Armoured Reconnaissance and Special Anti-tank units. In both roles they have proved highly popular with users, exceptional speed and cross-country performance giving them a survival rate three times that of any other NATO combat vehicle. A major drawback of the type is the difficulty of recovery after battle damage results in total loss of power. Plans for a special transporter were shelved when production was curtailed.

THE ZONE Series by James Rouch:

HARD TARGET
BLIND FIRE
HUNTER KILLER
SKY STRIKE
OVERKILL
KILLING GROUND
PLAGUE BOMB
CIVILIAN SLAUGHTER
BODY COUNT
DEATH MARCH

HARD TARGET
James Rouch



For my parents, John and Marie Rouch

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The characters in this book are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

THE ZONE

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On the eve of the second anniversary of the outbreak of World War III, Russian ground forces have for the fourth time this year used fractional kT nuclear weapons in an attempt to extend the central sector of the War Zone, launching an armoured thrust towards Frankfurt. First reports indicate six warheads employed; estimated individual kilotonnage between point-one and point-three. NATO forces unable to use nuclear demolition devices to contain attack, due to presence of refugee columns being used by the Communists as cover for their troop movements. A counter strike by elements of the American 3rd Armoured Division and West German 5th Infantry Division has checked the Warsaw Pact advance at Aschaffenburg. Enemy losses are put at ninety-seven tanks, one hundred and twenty-two other armoured fighting vehicles, including a number of tracked missile systems. NATO casualties not yet confirmed but stated, unofficially, to be acceptable. Heavy fighting continues.

Fighting in the Northern Sector of the Zone remains at a low level for the second week. Intelligence reports suggest that the Warsaw Pact forces are still regrouping and re-equipping after the heavy losses they sustained when they failed to pinch out the British-held Hanover salient, in June.

For the first time since their mutinies on the opening day of the war, East German troops have been

identified in the front line, near Wolfsberg in Austria. Their presence in that quiet area is taken as an indication that some elements of the GDR forces, after the purges, are now being rehabilitated.

Additions to Official approved list of reference sources for expansion or features.

THE WAR ZONE: A SCAR ACROSS EUROPE. Steiner and Blackburn. A good general background. With maps.

PAWNS OF POLITICS. Doder and Doder, N.Y. A study of the refugee problem inside the Zone.

THE THORN THAT SLOWED THE BEAR. New English Library. A crystal clear analysis of the cumulative consequences of the GDR revolt on the first day of the war. Presented in dramatised form. Compiled from official Intelligence reports, and the only coherent work on the subject.

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ONE

The Russian T84 tank was advancing through the last wisps of the yellow chemical fog at a cautious walking pace. Its broad tracks created hardly a ripple in the poisonous ochre puddles on the surface of the narrow road winding between the blighted fields. In turn the long snout of its cannon, and the two rocket launchers mounted above it, covered a wide arc of ground to either side of its route, as the low dome-shaped turret constantly swivelled back and forth.

Corporal Howard wiped a smear of mud from the field-radar's display screen and called a reading. 'Range is two-thousand now, Sarge. He's hardly moving, still holding the same course. When are we going to clobber him?'

At the far end of the short turf-roofed trench, one of the three men crouched around an improvised card table sat back and took a long hard look at his hand. It was the best Sergeant Hyde had been dealt all morning. His eyes, looking out of a caricature of a face that the plastic surgeons had given up on long ago, flickered once to signal his annoyance at the interruption. None of the other fire-welder components of his features were capable of registering as much. He kept his voice casual, so as not to give anything away to the other players.

'We'll give them a bit longer. Give me a shout when it's down to twelve hundred, or if they change course or speed. Your bid, Libby.'

Unlike the section's senior NCO, Private Libby had welcomed the interruption, hoping it would

terminate the game early. He hated playing poker with Hyde. It wasn't the man's ghastly appearance he'd grown used to that: what he disliked so intensely was the unnatural advantage the sergeant enjoyed in having that expressionless mask.

'One hundred marks.' It was reckless, too much when he only held a pair of kings, but sod it, he'd love to out-bluff the bloody monster just this once.

The third player, Private Collins, kept his eyes glued to his cards without really seeing them. All he wanted to do was avoid looking at Hyde. He'd grabbed at the chance when the sergeant had invited him to sit in, it being virtually the first time anyone had spoken to him in the three days since he'd joined the unit, except to shout an order. And now he fumbled with his cards, forgetting the little he'd known of the game as he fought to conceal his revulsion at Hyde's appearance.

More than the light needed to conduct their game was let in by the crude roof of their shelter. Collins jumped at the sound of an explosion some distance away.

'Sit still.' Libby immediately regretted the sharp note of irritation in his voice, as Hyde upped the ante and started betting again.

Howard brushed a worm from the top of the set. 'Just a stray shell, or some poor bugger stepping on my mine. Nothing for you to worry about. You'll get used to it.'

He glanced at the chemical-level indicator fixed to the wall of the trench. The band of changing color had edged a fraction further along the strip of sensitised paper. 'Pity it isn't all high-explosive. I'm fed up with this stinking chemical shit Ivan keeps chucking about.'

Now the fuzzy red dot working its way down from the top of the green-tinted screen was beginning to pulsate, and pale symbols flashed along the bottom of the grid-marked display. The corporal pursed his lips, turned two of the set's three dials and with practised ease made quick sense of the number that came up.

'The Ruskies in that tin can out there are using detectors.' 'What sort?' Hyde didn't bother to look up. 'Electro-magnetic'

Hyde grunted, and continued to scrutinise his cards.

Collins, on his first active patrol, found it impossible to affect the same casual air as the others. There was none of the tension or drama he'd expected. Nor the state of alertness that his instructors had demanded of him in every exercise during his basic training, and on the demolition course he had subsequently attended. All that was totally lacking in these combat veterans.

There was another explosion, much closer than the last. The corporal swore, thumped the side of the radar set and swore again.

'Trigger-happy shits. They've clobbered the bloody dish. We're blind.' Hyde fanned out his hand to reveal a full house of jacks and queens, pocketed the modest pile of coins and notes and went over to join Howard. 'Your gadget might be, but I'm not. Move over, I'll take the bugger on visual.'

He knelt on the compacted soil at the bottom of the excavation and pressed his face against the rubber surround of their periscope sight. Friction peeled a flake of purple scar tissue from his brow. He gradually adjusted the magnification until the stencilled red stars on the tank's turret stood out clearly, as did the slapped-on illegible slogans on its skirts of side armour.

He lined up the cross hairs of the sight on the front of the tank at the base of its turret. 'Right, I've got him. Transfer control.' Howard unlooped an extension cable from the back of the radar set and plugged its loose end into the small black box attached to the side of the periscope. A pea-bulb flashed green to signal a good connection and the state of the batteries.

'It's all yours, Sarge.'

'Let's cook some Commies, then.'

Hyde's left thumb strayed to the end of the periscope handle and flipped open a hinged yellow cap to reveal a red button set in the shallow recess beneath it. The thumb hovered for a moment, then crushed down.

At the fringe of a copse of defoliated oaks, a hundred yards to the right of the trench, there was a brief stab of flame as a sharp-nosed broad finned rocket jumped from the ground. A moment later, a long flame spurted from the rear of the anti-tank missile as it accelerated towards its target.

Five seconds into its flight and three-quarters of its journey completed, the missile veered suddenly to the left, lurched back almost on to course, then turned again more sharply and tumbled out of the air. A plume of soil and smoke marked its point of impact.

'The sods are jamming us. Give me an old-fashioned wire-guided system any day.' Hyde jabbed his index finger at the corporal. 'You're the wizard with these bloody gadgets. We've got one round left, right? So those fuckers can't knock it down.'

While Howard broke a seal to open a small inspection panel on the side of the black box, the sergeant kept tracking the Soviet vehicle.

Already made cautious by the radar location dish they had detected and destroyed, and now alarmed by the abortive attack, the crew of the T84 played safe, and rather than use the tank's exceptional high speed to escape, drove it into cover. Amid a cloud of grey exhaust from its V12 diesel, it backed through the remains of a hedge and took up a position among the gaunt soot-stained walls of what had once been a half-timbered barn.

Twice in swift succession, white fire tipped the snout of its cannon and balls of flame roared through the naked oaks, starting blazes among the heaped brown leaves and peeling trunks.

'That should do it.' Howard moved out of Hyde's way. 'It'll take faster reflexes and better electronic counter-measures than that Commie crew has got, to stop the next one.'

'I hope you're right.' Libby was putting away the cards, making ready for a hurried departure. 'I hate to get smeared all over the Hanover salient just because you got a couple of wires crossed.' 'It'll work.' Howard's tone suggested that he resented the implied slur. 'Give it a rest, you two.' Hyde pulled his face away from the viewfinder. The edge of the rubber had left an indentation in the sponge.

tissue of his multiple grafts, a bizarre pattern that circled his eyes. 'Save your bickering for later.' Hyde took up position again.

This time a missile jumped and fled from a patch of sickly yellow bracken, and for the first two and half seconds of its flight executed the same pre-programmed gentle evasive manoeuvres as its unsuccessful predecessor. Then it soared almost vertically into the low cloud and disappeared.

From bitter painful experience Hyde knew the panic the Russian tank men would be feeling at that moment, as the rocket's violent change of course jerked it off the screen of their hostile-fire locator an instant before they could take effective measures against it. Even if they kept their heads there was nothing they could do now, it was even too late to bale out.

Ignoring every distraction, the sergeant kept the crossed black filaments of the periscope sight locked firmly on to the small portion of dusty armour that was all he could see of the T84, tucked away among the distant piles of rubble.

At a height of four hundred feet above the tank, the missile's own seeker system detected the vehicle's metal mass and engine noise. It was already diving to rejoin the line-of-sight flight path dictated by the command unit in the trench, and only had to fractionally steepen the angle of its five-hundred-mile-an-hour descent to deliver its lethal cargo to the vulnerably thin armour of the T84's engine deck.

Nine pounds of shaped explosive charge, generating a colossal temperature, blasted the engine from its mounts and punched through an internal bulkhead to project a stream of vaporised steel into the crew compartment, setting off every round of ammunition in the automatic loader simultaneously.

Seconds after the muted echo of the explosion, the men in the trench felt the faint, short-lived tremor of the shock wave.

'Well, don't bloody hang about, then. We're out of missiles and those buggers might have squawked for help before we took them apart.'

It didn't need Hyde's urging to speed up the rate at which the equipment was being made into compact loads for carrying. Collins would have helped, but every time he thought of a job he could do it was already being done, and usually faster and better than he could have managed. He could only watch in amazement as the sergeant wrenched the periscope from the trench wall, stamped it into scrap and then pulled earth down to bury it completely.

Libby saw the expression of incredulous disbelief on Collins' face, and winked at him. 'It's on limited issue for evaluation, field modifications aren't allowed. We take it back with the seals broken ...' Hyde made a cutting motion with his finger across his throat. 'Better to mark it down as lost in action.'

As Hyde reached up to remove a section of the turf roof, a grotesque figure plunged through, bringing it all down. The unexpected arrival tore off his respirator so that it hung down by one strap across the front of his anti-contamination suit, and jabbed the long slim barrel of a sniper's rifle into Hyde's stomach. The powerful weapon looked top-heavy with its mass of complicated sighting aids. As the sergeant swept the rifle aside the intruder glowered at him, his face colouring with the intensity of emotion that he had difficulty finding words to express.

~~'You rotten bugger. You fucking ugly bastard. You've done it again, you scar-faced lump of shit.'~~ Libby tugged at the rifleman's arm. 'Take it easy, Clarence.' The sniper wrenched himself free. He didn't bring the Enfield up again, but his blazing eyes stayed locked on Hyde. 'You knew I was bloody out there and what did you do, you blew those cruddy Reds to atoms. How can I get a crack at them if they don't bale out of those tin cans? What am I supposed to do, take pot shots at the pieces flying through the air?'

There was no outward reaction from the sergeant. Collins watched, waiting for the answering blast and a string of charges. None came.

Hyde shrugged. 'You can always stay and wait for the next one if you want. Suit yourself.' With that he climbed out and began to walk away.

Clarence went bright red. He whirled round, aiming at Hyde's back. His finger tightened on the trigger and, as it did, he jerked the barrel upwards and pumped five fast shots into the sky over the sergeant's head. Hyde never flinched, simply kept on walking. The action appeared to dissipate the sniper's rage and after a moment he reluctantly tagged along at the back of the file as the others left the trench and followed their sergeant.

By putting on a spurt Collins caught up with Libby. 'How come the Sarge lets him get away with that?' He kept his voice low. 'I'd have gone inside for the rest of me natural for one tenth of that back at basic training camp.'

'Takes a lot to get the Sarge going, in fact I've never seen him lose his rag yet. He don't frighten easy either, he hasn't got a nerve in his body.' Libby didn't bother to copy the precaution of whispering. 'As for Clarence, I reckon he's off his head, a bit at least. Has been ever since a flak-damaged Tupolev came down on his wife and kids in married quarters in Cologne. He was on his way there on a forty-eight hour when it happened, arrived home just in time to pull out what was left of them. He doesn't talk about it, must have been messy. Anyway, now all he lives for is killing Ivans. He's good at it.' He called back to the sniper. 'How many is it now, Clarence?'

'One hundred and ninety-two.' There was no hint of pride or boasting in the matter-of-fact announcement. The sniper went on slotting fresh cartridges into a magazine. 'See what I mean? He's good.'

Back in the trench it had come as a shock to Collins to hear the torrent of obscenity from the usual quiet and reserved man, but this... Of course he knew his speciality, but he'd never realised... nearly two hundred... it was incredible. Clarence, with his neat and fussy ways and his quiet distaste for the crudities of army life ...nearly two hundred!

'...was due to go on an officer-training course, but he had a breakdown and was lucky to stay in at all.'

Collins realised with a start that Libby was still talking. He made non-committal noises to give the impression he'd heard every word. '... Now when he gets leave, he goes back there and sits all the time in the garden of remembrance where their ashes are scattered. One week of grief keeps him killing for six months.'

Their skin was prickling, and their eyes watered and smarted with the concentration of chemicals in the air. Even up-wind of the saturated area, and despite the prophylactics they had taken, the noxious substances still affected their respiration and made breathing both difficult and painful. It was a temptation to run, to get to the sanctuary of their air-conditioned transport as quickly as possible, but that would have been fatal with the high level of toxic material in the atmosphere.

Whole chunks of the landscape through which they trudged looked as if they had been bleached. Where little greenery there still was had a blotched and leprous look.

The sky, filled with the dust and smoke of two years' bitter conflict, was a uniform dull red that betrayed no hint of the sun's position, but trapped its light and spread a meagre portion of it across the alien landscape.

The angular turret-topped hull of the skimmer was a welcome sight when they reached the gorge-shrouded gully. Burke, their combat driver, was waiting.

'Burke by name, and Burk by bloody nature.' Hyde dropped his pack heavily on to the older man's feet. 'You might have turned it round ready for a quick getaway if it were needed. Or doesn't your weary old brain stretch to such mind-boggling initiative?'

Burke scowled, and heaved the kit through the open door set in the hovercraft's front, beside the driver's position. 'I might have done, but an Ivan sky-spy was pissing about overhead earlier, so I thought I'd better keep the Iron Cow as cool as possible, in case it was doing an infra-red survey.' He patted the faded name painted on the starboard hull front.

'You've always got a ruddy answer, haven't you?' The sergeant's sarcasm made no impression on Burke. He clambered aboard to take his seat.

Last to board was Corporal Howard. He carefully stowed the field-radar set, before threading his way down the narrow single compartment of the craft's interior to the built-in radar console at the rear. The instant he activated the complex electronic systems and put on his headset, the front ramp lifted drawbridge-like to seal the doorway and the twin Allison turbofan engines on either side of the crew compartment whined into life.

Burke tapped a proportion of their combined two-and-a-half-thousand horsepower for the lift ducts, and the concertinaed skirts about the hull's lower edge straightened, bulged and rose from the ground as they lifted the fifteen-ton machine.

As the skimmer whirled round almost in its own length, Libby hauled himself into the cramped cannon-armed turret set in the centre of the roof. Hyde sat immediately behind their driver in the command seat, while Clarence leant back on a bench and began to clean his rifle. Only Collins sat bolt upright in the approved and official manner, feet firmly on the floor, heels against the locker under his seat, rump pressed back hard into the angle made by the metal wall of the compartment and the thin padded bench top. The general-purpose machine gun he'd been given the dubious honour of carrying and caring for was between his knees, butt on floor, barrel tip beneath his nose. His satchel of demolition charges, still intact, rested on the seat beside him.

Unlike Clarence, Collins had not been unhappy to see the Russian tank so comprehensively destroyed. He wanted more time to get used to being in action before he took on the task for which he'd trained: finishing off disabled enemy tanks capable of being salvaged and sent back into battle.

After a casual glance at an external contamination monitor, Clarence turned up the air-conditioning to one and a half pounds of positive pressure. 'The wind must have shifted. It's as thick as porridge out there.'

Collins managed to eliminate most of the discomfort by swallowing hard several times, but his ears continued to 'pop' at irregular intervals. Looking forward, he could see the tattered remains of the wiper blades scraping clear arcing tracks across the thick front-vision block.

'There's a beam on us.' Howard's shout echoed through the alloy cocoon, adding fresh discomfort to their ears.

'Identify.' Hyde's response was as punishing. 'Acoustic.'

Several actions in the cramped compartment blended into a single confused tangle of movement. Clarence grabbed a pair of garishly painted grenades from a rack and fired them in rapid sequence from a short barrelled discharger set in the roof behind the turret: Hyde hurled himself toward Collins, shoved him aside and smashed his fist down hard on a large orange stud, one of a colour-coded row.

Simultaneously, the nose of the craft dipped as Burke lifted the forward edge of the skirt to gain even an ounce of speed. The skimmer surged ahead in response as the engines screamed up to full emergency power.

The feeling of tightness in the muscles of his face, the sudden dryness in his mouth, had nothing to do with Collins' fear of the consequences of Burke's manic evasive driving. He knew, as did the others, that somewhere out there a Russian infiltrator had spotted them and was, at that very moment guiding down on their heads an anti-tank missile or shell. There were only seconds...

Hyde's urgent action had released a knobby fibre-glass box from the outside of the hull. It tumbled down the camouflage-painted metal, bounced from the engine pod to the puffed-out wall of the ridged skirt and landed on a tangled mat of rotting vegetation. An instant later it came to rest. Telescopic aerials lanced from it and began to broadcast a blast of white noise that would continue until its power pack was rapidly exhausted, or until it successfully decoyed an enemy warhead riding down the beam focused on the Iron Cow.

In the air above it, the two grenades Clarence had launched rocketed back and forth, giving off dense clouds of exhaust-simulating smoke. Both produced a whining scream that mimicked the full-throttle engine noise of the fast disappearing hovercraft. From the tails of both spewed a series of flares and incendiary pellets, whose combustion temperature dwarfed the shielded infra-red signature of the two Allison turbofans.

They weren't needed. Just twelve seconds into its short life the squawk-box was almost reduced to its component molecules by a Soviet AT-12 anti-tank missile.

Deafened by the howl of their straining power units, Hyde had no way of knowing if their ruse had worked until Burke leapt the speeding skimmer over a shallow ridge, and into the safety of low ground surrounded by rolling hills.

The vehicle's speed fell to a saner pace and they began to drive between serried rows of weed-infested rubble. The battered hulks of rusting cars and trucks and a few drunkenly leaning telegraph poles were the only recognisable features of what had once been a prosperous outer suburb of Hanover.

Burke dropped the speed still further, to cut down the dust raised by their progress and give the perimeter sensors of their battalion's intruder alarm system time to identify them.

Ahead of them loomed the outline of a gutted local shopping centre. Its precast concrete fabric, though blackened and warped by the fires that had raged through it, had survived largely intact. Only a handful of the less robust surrounding buildings had stood up to the repeated bombing and shelling of the area. Most had been levelled by blast and fire, or been reduced to ragged roofless shells.

Moving at a crawl, the Iron Cow nosed into one of the shop fronts, the dangling remnants of neon signs brushing and grating on its roof as it did. The engines were cut and it drifted into the heart of the building, settling to rest inside an enclosure formed of suspended plastic sheeting.

Slow-moving figures shuffled forward, their outlines made indistinct in the gloom by the cumbersome heavy-duty anti-contamination suits and respirators they wore. Each of the apparitions waved the spray-emitting nozzle of a hose in front of him.

Activated bleach slurry ran from the hull, flushing from every crevice the last of any persistent chemicals adhering to it. That done, the skimmer was scalded clean with high-pressure steam jets. A member of the decontamination crew tapped on the driver's vision block and gave a slow motion thumbs-up to the men inside.

There was no rush to leave the cramped quarters. Hyde and his men just sat there, letting the tension drain from them.

Collins declined the tobacco pouch and paper that Burke offered him. 'No, thanks, I don't. Are all the patrols like that?'

It was Corporal Howard who took it on himself to answer, when no one else did. 'They're all different but that was an easy one, if that's what you mean.'

'Think we'll be getting a spot of leave, Sarge?' Burke made a critical examination of the butt he held, then puffed vigorously to keep the last shreds of tobacco alight.

'What's the matter?' Libby came down from the turret seat. 'Don't you like your work?'

'Fuck the work,' Burke growled. 'I'm just saying it'd be nice to have something to look forward to when we got back.'

The slit in the face of Sergeant Hyde that lips would have marked as a mouth barely opened as he spoke. 'I've got a feeling the CO will have something waiting for us, but it won't be a seventy-two'

hour pass.'

TWO

'I don't give a fuck what you think of the plan, just make the shitty thing work.' Colonel Lippincott took the well-chewed pencil stub from between his perfectly capped teeth ' and spat out shreds of wood. 'The orders say this is a joint operation with the British, and as I'll be the bastard catching shit from the Liaison Staff if you screw up, then believe me you'd better not screw up. If you do, and make it back, then you'll be fucking lucky to end up as a private third class, testing piss as beer substitute.'

Major Revell waited until O'l Foul Mouth had finished flecking the floor to the right of his chair with another spattering of spittle and splinters. No effort he could have made would have kept the edge of his voice, so he didn't try. 'OK, so this British tank-hunter squad know the ground, and the whole crazy idea comes from a smart-arse Staff Officer in Brussels, who wants an example of successful cooperation between us and them to counter stories of friction in the press back home. But why, just tell me why, a Commie tank repair shop is so damned important all of a sudden.'

'Shit, we've been in the salient for two weeks now, helping bolster the British defences, you know the picture.' Lippincott picked flakes of blue paint from his fleshy lips and examined them on the ends of his fingers. 'After the balls-up they made of trying to clear this pocket in June, Soviet 2nd Guards ain't exactly the Russian High Command's favourite outfit. Rumour has it they came close to losing their fancy title. They're going to have to try again, but they ain't getting much in the way of new equipment. As things stand we about match them in armour, but somehow they've got their crud on their hands on this crack workshop unit. If their tanks are in prime condition when the show starts again fitted with the latest mods, it could make all the difference.'

'If we know where it is then drop a cruise on it; why send a platoon of my men on a suicide mission?'

A parody of a benevolent grin creased the colonel's rubbery features. 'Suicide is when you die by choice, Major; you ain't got none.' He read the expression on the young officer's deeply sunburnt face, and the grin faded. Hell, Revell gave him the creeps; couldn't take a joke, never laughed, lived like a damned monk: Jesus, he wasn't normal. 'We don't have the exact location, it's just somewhere around Gifhorn. That's a no-go area, stiff with stinking refugees. If we kill so much as a scabby kraut goat I get stick from above, so area weapons are out, saturation, conventional or nuclear.'

'When the hell are we going to stop fighting this war with our damned hands tied behind our backs?' Revell crashed his palms down on the desk top between them. 'Why is it always us who have to be the nice guys? It's time to hit the Reds hard with everything we've got.'

'Don't fucking shout at me, Major.' Revell's outburst had made O'l Foul Mouth jump and now he shouted back. 'You think I don't know how we're hamstrung. I'm up to my fucking arse in directives that originate from shitty do-gooding pressure groups in Germany and England and back in the States. I'd like nothing better than to put aside for each of them a share of the barrel of super-napalm I fancy pouring over the head of every last torturing Commie.'

Lippincott rose half out of his seat, hammering his desk with his fist at every word. 'In the Balkans we were fighting Slavs, Bulgarians, even bloody Cubans, tough cruds, dirty even; but compared with 2nd Guards they're bloody choirboys. 2nd Guards are animals, the lowest; you lift up pig-shit and that's where you'll find them. They tore up the rules two years ago, but our politicians haven't heard that yet, so while the Reds do what they like we have to look twice before we so much as chuck a grenade. But at least you get to smash them sometimes - I fucking don't.'

Revell saw the pinned-up sleeve over the stump of the colonel's left arm and read the bitterness and frustration in his voice. He lowered his own when he spoke again, but every word was punched out sharp and clear.

'Smash them? All we're ever allowed to do is carry out a few raids, maybe lay an ambush or two. The rest of the time we sit in holes in the ground waiting for the next mass Commie attack. We should be taking the war to them in a big way, tearing their eyes out, not pecking at them.'

'Not a fucking chance.' With a neatly manicured nail Lippincott prised a sliver of soggy wood from between his top teeth and flicked it to a far corner of the office. 'You don't think our cruddy political bosses want us to start winning, do you? Shit, no. Of course they'll dole out just enough hardware to let us hold the Reds, and on occasion enough to enable us to mount division strength attacks, with limited objectives of course, to keep up morale and give the newsboys some fresh footage - but they're sure as hell don't want us to start pushing the Commies right back. If that happened, the Reds might be tempted to break that cosy little hot-line agreement and take the war outside the Zone. None of those skunk-faced rats in Westminster or on Capitol Hill want any nukes falling in their back garden.'

'You want me to tell my men that? You want me to tell them we've a job to do. but we mustn't do it too well?'

'Don't get smart, Major. This mission *is* important. The Hanover salient is our last chance to deny the Reds a straight run to Essen and the Ruhr and the Channel. You knock out that workshop, screw up the 2nd Guards Army, and you'll buy us more time to consolidate.'

From the top of a stack of papers in his in-tray the colonel took a type-written sheet and waved it in front of Revell.

'No, it ain't a new brand of arse wiper, it's a note from a two-star general. He says the press will be getting this story. They'll be encouraged to make a big splash about British-American cooperation if the mission goes well. Now I ain't about to disappoint a two-star general, so don't balls it up. No friction, understand? I want everything to go as smoothly as a well-oiled cock up a nice slack fanny, or else.'

* * *

Libby's fist hit PFC Dooley a solid blow in the gut. As he fell to his knees the big American lunged forward and, catching his opponent by surprise, brought him down too. Before Libby could regain his feet Dooley was on him and the breath whistled from them as they pounded each other.

'What the bloody hell is going on here? Break it up.' Corporal Howard pushed through the tight circle

of men that had formed around the combatants and was then in turn pushed aside by his sergeant.

At that moment the more powerfully built American was on top, hands locked about Libby's throat. Hyde hesitated a fraction of a second, undecided which was the best way to end the fight without giving grounds for further aggravation between the Americans and his men. But even as he stepped forward to pull them apart himself, Major Revell came through the crowd on the far side and instantly delivered a savagely powerful chop to the back of Dooley's neck.

Eyes bulging, tongue protruding between teeth half-hidden by foam, he began to topple to the floor. His fall was arrested by the officer, who grabbed his ears and hauled him to his feet.

Revell spoke quietly, never taking his intense pale blue eyes from the semi-conscious man's face. In the general silence the words carried to everyone there. 'Listen to me, Dooley. The colonel said 'no friction', you understand?' The soldier went cross-eyed, attempted to shake his head, winced and nodded. 'One warning only on this one. I know you, Dooley. It happens again and you'll be doing mine clearance with a jack-hammer, OK?'

Dooley's knees had gone rubbery and only the officer's tight grip kept him upright. He nodded, again with the same painful result. Letting go his hold, Revell turned to Hyde. 'Any idea what all this was about?'

'No, Major.' Hyde shook his head. 'No idea at all, but it won't happen again.' By Christ it wouldn't. He wasn't going to be shown up in front of an officer from another unit, American, British or whatever. But especially not in front of this one. Although he'd so far had little contact with the American forces that made up half the NATO troops fighting in Europe, he had in his mind's eye a composite image of a typical Yank officer. Revell didn't fit it at all.

The three hovercraft personnel carriers that would carry them on their mission were almost ready. Sergeant Hyde suspected that the flare-up had occurred as a result of Dooley's constant attempts to pilfer pieces of equipment from the Iron Cow. Libby and Burke had spent weeks gathering together a complete set of accessories for their transport, from wrecks and other unofficial sources and Libby in particular had been steadily growing more irritated with the big American's jackdaw tendencies.

Revell sat on a packing case, occasionally glancing at the map board resting in his lap, but most of the time watching the final preparations going on about the skimmers. Working conditions inside the ruined block of shops that served as a camouflaged company HQ and vehicle repair shed were appalling. The air was permeated with the stench of bleach that failed to lay the taint of cordite from the frequent conventional long-range bombardment missiles with which the Russians pounded the salient. There was only such natural light as filtered in to work by - the generator had been yet another casualty of the current spares shortage - and the floor was littered with debris, grease and broken glass.

Casually, on the transparent cover of the map of northern Germany, the major drew a broad arrow with his blue marker pen, from their present position five miles east of the centre of Hanover, to a point about thirty miles closer to the old East German border, near Gifhorn. He looked at the line, so easily drawn, taking only a second to do. How long would the real journey take, racing from one piece of safe ground, to another, constantly probing for holes in the Russians' network of ground surveillance

radars? It would take all of the remaining few hours of darkness to reach the target area. Most of the way they would be travelling through territory controlled by the Russians. There were gaps in the defences, but the deeper they went the harder the gaps would be to find, and with radio silence orders they could expect no help if they ran into trouble, and the chances were that they would.

There would have to be ten minutes set aside for a final briefing, it certainly wouldn't take longer than that. They had their weapons, a mission and a circle on a map. And that was it.

For two weeks his men had been holding defensive positions, with nothing to do but grow bored and become irritable. And now suddenly it was all rush again. All the preparations for a mission that called for meticulous planning were having to be completed in eight hours.

'We've finished loading now, sir.'

Revell looked up. Master Sergeant Windle was stood casually in front of him. Good dependable old Windle, with the emphasis on old. He should have been rotated back to the States a year ago, but he played on the shortage of experienced sergeants, and wangled one extension after another. Still, while Windle was around, all was well. He'd come through so many actions without a scratch that the men had begun to believe he was immortal and regarded him as the embodiment of their luck. It was theory that the next thirty-six hours would put severely to the test.

'OK, have everyone muster by Hyde's skimmer. Was there something else?' From Windle's perceptible hesitation before turning away he knew there was. 'This British bunch, Major.' Windle needed no second opening. 'Their sergeant's got a face like the phantom of the opera; their driver the laziest creep I ever set eyes on, and the one who goes round with a sniper rifle substituting for a security blanket, well he's off his head.'

'Are you saying we... *you* can't work with them?' 'No, sir, that's not what I'm saying, it's just that...' 'Listen, maybe we've been too insular, too self-contained for too long. Take a real look at our men, Dooley and that mercurial temperament of his, and Nelson with that doll...'

'His mascot, sir.'

'... and Cohen, he believes in Martians.' 'He says that's because he's given up believing in the human race, sir.'

'You get my point though. The main thing is these British are good, damned good or they wouldn't be coming with us. Now let's get this briefing over with.' Revell eased his aching backside off the rough wood of the crate and followed the sergeant. Well, this would be the last of the preliminaries. In twenty minutes they would pull out, to have the benefit of last light when they passed through their own lines and then he would be doing what he did best, fighting.

Dooley was forced to admit, at least to himself, that the driver of the Iron Cow was good, damned good. Private Burke might be an all-time record gold-bricker, but Jesus, could he throw that thing around. For the first time since the major had told him he'd be travelling with him and Cohen on Hyde's skimmer he began to feel less unhappy. If he had to be going into battle again, and with the major they always seemed to be, then he might as well go in with a combat driver good enough to get them back out again.

The interior of the vehicle was lit by a dull red glow from a single bulb over Howard's radar console and more faintly at the front end of the compartment by the pale green glow given off by the screen the driver's image intensifier.

With most of the mission's stores on board, stacked in the narrow centre aisle, there was little room for the passenger's legs. Libby and Cohen had their feet up on cases of incendiary grenades.

There was little talking among the men sitting cramped together on the benches. The salient was behind them now. Ahead lay thirty miles of what was a free-fire zone after dark. Surveillance radar, intruder alarms and sophisticated night sights having made fighting after sunset a practical reality, had also just about brought it to an end.

At night the battlefield belonged to the technicians. One man at a console could do the job of fifty sentries, and could call down in seconds a weight of fire sufficient to halt and smash a regiment of tanks.

So Howard sat at his board, watching for active radars focused on them, ready to jam any he found and monitoring the compact but powerful electronic devices the Iron Cow carried to blanket her own emissions and avoid their detection by enemy passive detectors. Most of the tasks were handled by the on-board computer, but the equipment could fail and then his speed of action would be their only protection.

Science had given Burke the means by which to drive at approaching the vehicle's top speed at night but it could do nothing to smooth the route they were forced to take if they were to avoid the Russian most likely points of concentration. War in the Zone was a giant game of hide-and-seek with a deadly booby prize for the losers.

And so the three carriers wove a complex snaking course through the fields and woods, sometimes taking to the beds of streams for a distance, mud and water splashing up their hulls and turning into puffs of steam in the exhaust from their turbines. At other times they would use a stretch of road or lane, and the hurtling trio would skim through an abandoned village or past a huddle of refugee shelters and slew back on to the fields beyond.

And that was the final horrific ingredient of the Zone. Few of the civilians whose homes lay within had moved out. Areas existed where rural life went on much as before, but they were shrinking green oases in a dying landscape. Many would willingly have gone, a lot had tried, but the population beyond the Zone's boundaries feared contamination; from the chemicals they knew were being used from radiation brought about by the many small-yield tactical nuclear weapons that had been used and most of all from the mythical bacterial weapons that featured so strongly in each new rumour: and so the civilians caught in the Zone were literally forced to stay.

It was worst in the big camps in the north of the Zone. There civilisation had collapsed and even the armies avoided them, save as now when the Russians were using a settlement as cover for activities they didn't want disturbed.

Revell had been watching Clarence take the cartridges from a spare Enfield magazine and clean the

one at a time, before inspecting and replacing them. He reached across and took one of the long slender bullets from the cloth in which they nestled, and held it up against the light. Two small nicks were visible, just below its pointed tip. 'How long you been using dum-dums?'

Clarence went on with his work, not bothering to look up. 'Since I found out the Russians were using them, about three months. You don't approve?' 'My men have known a bit longer.' Revell handed the round back. 'We've been using them nearer six.'

Tucked up in a corner, his slight frame wrapped in cumbersome body armour, Abe Cohen closed his eyes and tried to sleep. It wouldn't come. Hell, he felt awful, like his stomach was about to climb his throat and hurl itself out of his mouth complete, in one great heave. It was worse than being seasick. At least at sea there was some sort of regular motion; it was still horrible but at least you knew what was coming. These skimmers were something else. He hugged his arms across his stomach, not that he could feel the contact through an inch of laminated fibre-glass and metal mesh, and tried again. He didn't care how tough the job they were going to do was, he'd happily have taken on the whole of 2nd Guards Army if only it meant getting out of this bucking bucket.

'There was a beam on us then,' Howard called out. 'Take what evasive action you have to, but stay on this general heading.' Hyde had given their driver the order before he remembered the major. He looked to see the officer's reaction.

Revell understood, and nodded. 'Don't forget we've got a brood bringing up the rear.' 'Another one. The Ruskies are looking for us now.' A tight skidding turn almost threw Howard from his seat.

If Burke was making life uncomfortable for Cohen, he was also making it very difficult for the distant Russian radar operators who were trying to pick them up and plot their course.

Hedges and fences collapsed before the skimmers' onslaught. A small group of houses that couldn't even be glorified by the name of village were grazed and shaken as the racing hovercrafts scraped by using their outline as cover and to confuse the enemy radar.

It worked, but the gap had widened between the Iron Cow and the following vehicles. They chased after the British craft, almost nose to tail, as their drivers pushed themselves to the limit to keep up with Burke's fast progress between the houses.

Seven hundred yards from the hamlet, from a spot not quite within the fringes of a plantation of pine trees there was a rapid succession of stabs of light as a multi-barrelled Russian ZSU-23 anti-aircraft turret opened up with all four of its 23mm cannon. Tracer arced through the night towards the ill-spaced files of NATO machines.

THREE

A fifty-round burst of mixed explosive and armour-piercing shells struck the side of a brick-built tractor shed in front of the leading American skimmer. Part of the structure's

corrugated iron roof was blasted off, and the second vehicle of the racing pair had to plough through an avalanche of falling bricks and beams as the decayed fabric of the building collapsed into its path.

The enemy gun-layer made a fractional adjustment to his aim, and his second burst caught the tail-end vehicle of the file as it turned into a narrow alleyway between a row of houses and a church.

Six of the high velocity shells smashed into its port engine, two more gouged their way across the skimmer's roof behind the turret. An explosive round self-destructed amid a tangle of external stowed equipment, sending saws and hawsers and shovel handles spinning away into the night. The last three armour-piercing shells plunged in through the vehicle's rear plate, between the engine exhausts, their impacts marked by showers of white sparks.

Its remaining engine screaming at full power the hovercraft, towing thick white smoke, careered through a wild tight turn and thundered into the front of a boarded-up store. Its speed took it right inside and clouds of dust hid where it came to rest. A massive explosion lifted the building and bright flame bubbled from every window. The roof sagged, and then the whole property crashed down to bury the wreck.

'You'll have to pull forward. I can't see the bugger.' Burke made no move to do as their turret gunner urged, and drive the Iron Cow from the cover of the derelict cottage so that Libby could retaliate with their cannon armament.

Revell was standing looking out of the command cupola, just forward of the main turret. He watched as the other remaining skimmer took up a position across the street, nestling against a row of deserted houses. 'We're not going anywhere while he's out there.'

Hyde had been watching the scanner console over Howard's shoulder. 'Might be an idea to try though Major. That flak tank is calling for help.'

Revell surveyed the country ahead. It was half a mile to the next substantial cover, a belt of woodland flanking the road.

'Aw, Major,' Dooley had been listening, 'we ain't gonna get in a fire fight with a flak wagon, are we Jesus, that thing fires four thousand rounds a minute. All we've got is one barrel against their four and three-round clips against their belt feed.'

Now that he had at last realised that they had stopped moving, Cohen began to take an interest in what was going on. 'Yeah, and they've got micro-wave radar. So it's not too hot in the ground mode, but we ain't got any.'

The mound of blazing rubble that marked where the last skimmer had come to rest illuminated a considerable and expanding area in the centre of the settlement. Buildings adjoining it were already steaming and were liable to add their fuel to the conflagration at any moment.

'I don't think we have any choice.' Even as Revell made up his mind, there was a massive detonation and the cottage alongside dissolved inside a roaring ball of fire. Bricks and slates crashed on to the hull and turret and rained down in the road.

Two more similarly massive concussions cratered the road behind them and blasted out the end wall of the church.

There was just time to grab a handhold before, on the major's command, Burke sent the machine gun surging forward. Like the others, they knew that those first gigantic blasts were just the ranging shots, the precursors of a much larger salvo of 240mm rockets to come.

Through a rear-facing periscope Revell saw that Windle's skimmer, though slower off the mark, was following.

More of the huge fin-stabilised rockets began to fall as they cleared the last of the straggling buildings. The houses were torn apart, their roofs lifted off and their contents scattered across the streets and gardens. Trees and telegraph poles caught by the blast were scorched, shredded and toppled to the ground. The air was filled with flying leaves and whipping lengths of wire.

Libby opened up with the cannon an instant after the last obstructing corner of a house was cleared, so fast it seemed he could hardly have had time to sight his target, let alone take aim.

Slower by a couple of seconds, the flak tank replied to the three armour-piercing incendiary rounds sent against it with a ripple of twenty of its own.

The skimmer's wild gyrations, as Burke threw it through a rapid succession of sharp turns to avoid craters that suddenly gaped in front of them, proved no problem for the stabiliser holding the 30mm gun on target. Libby got off another clip as the last shell from the flak tank scooped a gob of metal from an angle of the roof, before exploding with an eardrum punishing roar on the side of the turret.

At the moment he mentally predicted, and at precisely the correct range, Libby saw on his thermal imager the pinkish shimmer of a distant angular outline blossom into a tall column of chasing shades of bright red. A check through the day-sight confirmed that, seven hundred yards away, the edge of a small wood was being brilliantly lit by a rising shower of incandescence, as the Russian vehicle and its ammunition burned in spectacular fashion.

'It's just there, at the side of the road, by the burning tree.' Hyde backed off the periscope and looked at Revell's look. 'I knew this was going to be a shitty job.' Dooley smacked a large fist into a dirty palm as he and Cohen waited to hear what had happened to the other skimmer. 'Is it a direct hit, Major?'

'Pretty close. There's a hell of a big hole in the road, right under their front end.' The other carrier lay a good three hundred yards back along the road. It was prominently lit by the fires among the branches of the tall tree, and stood in the middle of a tract of featureless land that didn't offer a scrap of cover. There was the possibility that it was under enemy observation already. Taking the Iron Cow back there could kill them all.

'There's no sign of movement.' It was at moments like this that Revell felt the full weight of his command responsibility.

'Two or three men might make it safely on foot, just to check it out.' Hyde realised what was going on through the officer's head, and offered an alternative. 'We'll send two.' The choice as to which two

took Revell only a moment. 'Dooley and Clarence, off you go. And move. I don't want to be hanging about here for long.'

The flames from the distant houses threw long tongues of light and shadow across the fields, and the road stood out as a curling grey ribbon against the mixed and shifting shades of the farmland.

Hugging the hedgerow, the pair worked their way towards the stricken vehicle. The erratic circle of light from the guttering flames in the oak showed it standing just the other side of a wide steaming crater. One of the engine pods had been ripped off and whirled away by the blast.

'Christ, it's taken a belting.' As they drew nearer, Dooley could see where the near miss by the powerful missile had shattered the vehicle's front as far back as the commander's cupola. The ridged skirts had been slashed and holed by fragments, and a couple of panels had gone altogether. There was a strong smell of kerosene, and hydraulic fluid spurted from a distorted ram attached to what was left of the ramp.

Smoke was curling from beneath the hull as Clarence crouched and kept watch, while Dooley tackled the buckled metal barring entrance to the crew compartment. Above them the breeze fanned sparks from the burning tree. With a loud creaking and rending the warped panel suddenly ceased its resistance. The floor was slippery, and the passengers lay locked together in a tangle of arms and legs. Dooley tugged at a limb and someone groaned. 'Give me a hand.'

Together they hauled out a tall black. He was covered in blood from a mass of cuts, but apart from being dazed appeared to have no other injuries. They sat him at the crater's edge, where he rapidly began to recover, and went back in to investigate another source of groaning, nearer the back.

Several of the passengers had been decapitated by the scything hunks of metal that had come through the front. A head rolled under Clarence's foot as he climbed over the heaped bodies to reach the other survivor. He had to grit his teeth and close his mind to what it was he was clambering over. He hated any form of physical contact, loathed the feel of other flesh on his. Even a handshake was more than he could abide.

The proximity of others when travelling in the skimmer was something he'd forced himself to tolerate, but only because it served his purpose. He regarded it as a battle taxi; it took him to the killing ground so he put up with the crowding and jostling and smell. But it took a great effort for him to touch the still warm bodies, slippery and stinking of blood and vomit and half-digested food spilled from opened stomachs.

The second survivor was in a bad way, with an ugly gaping wound in the side of his head that the largest field dressing couldn't completely cover. Leaving him with the black, they returned for a last check.

Clarence stood and concentrated. 'Do you hear something?' He listened, but all Dooley could hear was the tree crackling outside, and an occasional ticking from the remaining engine as it cooled. 'Let's get out, this can is brewing up.'

As he went to leave, Dooley stopped abruptly and looked at a tangle of wire and distorted metalwork

He reached in and pulled a couple of loose sheets of aluminium aside. 'It's the Sarge!'

Master Sergeant Windle was still alive. He had fallen from the commander's seat and been almost completely hidden by the mass of metal that the external explosion had forced back and wrapped around him. His injuries were terrible, but he retained a measure of consciousness and limply gestured with his remaining hand to Dooley.

Even uniting their efforts, there was no way Clarence and the big man could free the sergeant from the tangled metal. Smoke was filtering into the compartment, and the pool of blood on the hull floor was beginning to boil. The stink of burning rubber now swamped all other smells.

A gaping wound in his throat had deprived the sergeant of speech, but he pointed repeatedly to Dooley's slung Colt Commando submachine gun and then to himself. His meaning was abundantly clear. Understanding that he was trapped, and aware that the craft was burning, he didn't want to be still alive when the flames reached him.

'Shit. I can't do that. What the hell does he want to go getting himself into a mess like this for?' Dooley half-raised the short-barrelled version of the M16, then lowered it again.

'It's that or leave him to burn. We've still got to get the other two back to the Cow.' Clarence looked at his watch. They'd already been gone too long. 'What are you going to do?'

'Oh Jesus. Killing him would be like killing our luck.' The Colt was heavy in Dooley's hands, its metal and plastic wet with the sweat of his palms. He looked at Clarence, sensing that the sergeant's eyes were still on him.

'You want me to do it?'

Small spurts of red flame came from an electronics panel at the back, adding further urgency. Dooley snatched up a .45 automatic from the floor and tried to fit it into Windle's hand, moulding the stained fingers around it. The moment he let go, it fell from the nerveless grasp and clattered back to the floor.

'Yeah, yeah you do it.' The big man stepped aside. Clarence borrowed Dooley's submachine gun, refraining from using his own rifle for a task such as this. He pushed the tip of the flash suppressor within an inch of the dying man's open mouth, and fired. The noise in the small metal compartment was painful.

As the back of his head flew off, Windle's body arched forward in a spasm. The dead man's teeth clamped hard on the barrel as the muscles of his jaw locked.

At the moment of firing Dooley was already going out, now he looked back to see the sniper struggling to extract the weapon from the face of the corpse.

'Come on, it's burning.'

'Do you damn well think I don't know that. Your blasted sergeant won't let go.'

Acrid smoke from burning wiring filled the skimmer with fumes that made breathing difficult. ~~section of the floor was taking on a wrinkled semi-molten look. Grey brain matter boiled like foam~~ a never ending stream from the eyes of a severed head.

Hurrying back in, Dooley put his foot on the dead sergeant's face and, as Clarence wrenched the weapon back and forth, teeth snapped and splintered and it was suddenly free.

Pushing one and carrying the other survivor they raced back to their transport. Even as Dooley, last on board, was stepping on to the ramp the craft lifted and they were under way again.

'Rinehart, you're a lucky shit.' Abe Cohen kept saying it as he watched Hyde binding two field dressings arranged side by side to cover the gaping hole in Nelson's head. 'When a clean-living bum like that gets hit, and even old Windle buys it, how come a bum like you sails through with only a few scratches? Hell, this shitty war is all mixed up.'

'Must be on account of my fine and wholesome nature. I guess God is just smiling down on one of his favourite children.'

Dooley leant across and leered into the black's broad features. 'Oh yeah, then how come you had to get treatment for a dose of the pox last year. Tell me, Jango, where does that fit in with 'wholesome'?' 'That's a damned lie. I ain't used that weapon in such a long time I don't reckon it could fire any more.' His leer matched Dooley's.

'Let's have some quiet in here. This is Indian country, we could run into trouble anytime.' 'Hey, Major, that weren't no boy scout troop we tangled with back there.'

Dooley was ignored. Officer and sergeant were busy conferring over a large scale map.

'We should be able to cross the river here.' With his little finger Hyde indicated a spot seven miles down stream from Gifhorn. 'If we do it there we avoid having to cross the Oker as well. If we travel parallel with the bank, once we're over it'll bring us to the camp.'

'OK everybody.' Revell reached for his 12 gauge assault rifle. 'I want you all on your toes. We'll be slowing for a river crossing in about ten minutes. I'm hoping we can make it without trouble but...'

The skimmer shuddered and lurched sideways under the impact of a massive blow. As the lights went out, the last thing Collins saw was Corporal Howard arching back from the radar console with a huge hole in his chest.

FOUR

'Shut your bloody noise. Shut up.' Hyde's voice boomed out of the darkness. The confused babble of curses and shouts that had filled the compartment the instant after impact ceased, but Revell still had to shout to make himself heard above the crash and clatter of loosened panels and external stores when he realised the internal communication system had failed.

‘Keep moving, into those woods dead ahead. Get us in there.’ Intermittent showers of sparks from exposed wiring in the ruins of the scanner console provided the only illumination. By the erratic light Burke could be seen fighting to keep the skimmer on course. The smooth ride was gone, the craft dipped continually to one side and bucked at every minor undulation. All of Burke’s skills couldn’t prevent the Iron Cow travelling with a peculiar crab-like motion.

‘The buggers have taken off some of the ride-skirt. We can’t go far like this.’ Saplings began to snap before them as they plunged into the woods. Others, more pliant, scraped noisily under the buoyant tanks beneath the cabin of the rushing vehicle, to whiplash back to an upright position after passing.

Another high velocity tungsten-tipped round zipped past, losing fractions of its armour-defeating speed with every bough it sheered and trunk it clipped.

Blue flame showed briefly among the spark-lit innards of the radar console, before Cohen at last managed to score a direct hit with a well directed squirt from a fire-extinguisher.

The continuous minor collisions stopped as the craft slewed across a rutted track, and then its front dipped violently as it nosed over the edge of a steep decline. Turbo-fans screaming in reverse, the skimmer slithered down out of control. There was a succession of heavy bruising impacts and jumps as the vehicle defeated and ran over several large trees, throwing the men about; then a cascade of hail-like sounds as masses of stones and gravel pummelled the metal hull. A final jarring collision that brought Libby tumbling down out of his turret and the Iron Cow came to rest.

Revell lunged forward to prevent Burke from reversing them off whatever it was that had at last arrested their mad career. ‘Let’s see where we are first.’

The driver’s screen was still working, but with its limited field of vision revealed nothing but a section of steeply rising bank immediately in front of them. It was liberally dotted with substantial trees whose gnarled exposed roots bound the mossy slope together.

The view he obtained using the all round infra-red facility in the turret was more informative.

They had come to rest in a shallow stream bed, against the still massive remains of a storm-toppled elm, at the bottom of a steep-sided ravine. Behind them, a number of uprooted trees marked the descent.

Using the periscopes, Hyde had been carrying out a similar inspection. ‘Looks like as good a place as any, Major, to stop and see what the damage is.’

‘I agree. Post two men with the MG at the top of the slope behind us, where they can keep a watch on that track. Then I want a damage report, and fast.’

The beam of a torch flickered across Corporal Howard’s ruined torso to his white, blood-flecked dead mask. His body still lay where it had originally come to rest, wedged between the ammunition box and a bench. For a while the light hovered about the wide-eyed face, then moved on as Hyde turned the holed scanner board.

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