

**EVERY TWELVE
SECONDS...**

By Jeff Kautz

***New Barstow, Xanthe III
Duchy of Andurien
Late May, 3037***

Brevet-Major Danny Spriggs dragged the razor upward along his jawline, the dull blade scraping against the coarse stubble. He had run out of shaving cream weeks ago, but he felt that, as an officer in the Defenders of Andurien, he should present as professional a picture as possible. An example to the troops. That's what the Colonel would have done.

Inspecting his face in the cracked mirror, he rinsed the razor in the rusty water that had pooled in the dirty sink bowl for the past several days. Clean water was another of the luxuries that had run out for Danny and his men long ago. Along with food, medical supplies, ammunition and time.

As if to add ironic emphasis to the already dire situation, the shrill of the enemy loudspeaker sounded again, creeping up and down the front line as it had, unrelentingly, for the past four weeks.

"Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...Every twelve seconds another son of Andurien dies in New Barstow. Tick-tock, tick-tock...When will it be your time, comrade? Tick-tock, tick-tock"

The message repeated, once, twice drifting across the canal on a spring breeze. The same breeze that fanned the fires and dropped swirling clouds of ash that covered the streets of New Barstow like ugly grey snow. The same breeze that carried with it the sickly stench of death.

After so many weeks, the message was beginning to have the desired effect on morale. A man could dig a hole and take cover from enemy fire, or close his eyes to give himself a temporary respite from the horrors of the battlefield, but from the loudspeaker there was no escape. It was impossible to block out, impossible to ignore. Many of the men had taken to stuffing their ears with cotton, a futile measure at best but one that seemed to provide them at least some small relief. Danny thought this dangerous and had tried early on to discourage the practice. A soldier who could not hear was a soldier who could not react to battlefield situations or pass along orders. After a while, though, the unrelenting psychological bombardment had forced him to let up. Some of the troops seemed in danger of cracking, and he no longer had the heart to enforce such discipline in the face of utter hopelessness.

Danny wiped a dingy cloth across his face, patting away the last of the icy water and stared for long moments at the picture he presented in the mirror. The face that stared back at him was no longer his own. Gone was the dashing young Lieutenant, fresh from officer candidate school, full of fervent idealism and ready to carry the torch for Andurien independence. The image in the mirror was now that of a man who appeared much older than his twenty- six years. Dark circles had formed under hollow eyes that had seen too much and deep lines scored like laser burns furrowing his cheeks and brow. His cracked and weathered skin seemed as brittle as parchment paper, and the hair that had not been rubbed away by his helmet straps was beginning to gray. The face reminded Danny not so much of himself but of the Colonel, his father, seven years ago on the last day the two had spent together. Seven years that seemed so far away now, as if it were part of another life, a wispy, fleeting dream devoid of detail that Danny could no longer reform in his mind. So much had happened since then.

I'm glad that you didn't live to see this, Colonel. The Colonel. John Marshall Spriggs, the consummate career military man would never have let discipline break down so far. He would have... It didn't matter. The Colonel was not here. Cancer had taken him before he had a chance to realize his dream of Andurien independence, leaving only Danny to carry on in his place, and Danny felt like a poor substitute.

It had all seemed so right in the beginning. Their cause—the Colonel's cause—had been righteous and their enemy was weak and war-weary. The Capellan Confederation would surely collapse under the weight of an assault by the Anduriens and their Canopian allies. Early on, when the allies took several planets, liberating their citizens, it had seemed a glorious victory was inevitable. However, no one had properly estimated the resolve of House Liao. Weak and tired of war they surely were, but they were also a nation of wounded pride, having lost so much so recently to Hanse Davion's minions. They struck with unstoppable vengeance and drove the allies back across the border. Their attacks were often near suicidal in their recklessness as their warriors sought their hopeless battle.

That was two years ago.

Now, Danny and his men—what was left of them—faced their own hopeless battle. But just a few short months ago, everything had been different. Victory and final freedom for Andurien was

within their grasp, despite the Capellan setbacks. Duncan Marik was dead and his forces routed. But, like the Capellans before them, the Free Worlds troops rallied and delivered a series of startling blows to the Andurians.

Now it was they who were on the run. The Fifth Marik Militia was pushing into New Barstow and Danny's battalion was one of a handful of units left behind to buy time for the bulk of the allied troops to escape.

To trade their lives for time.

...Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...

Danny rubbed his sleeve on the dirty window of his makeshift headquarters and peered out over a city in ruins. Smoke and ash obscured the sun. The skeletal remains of buildings jutted forth from massive piles of rubble. The burned-out hulks of vehicles smoldered and popped. The once beautiful canal that fronted their positions was so choked with mud and debris that water no longer flowed. The devastation was total and complete. Still, Danny could not suppress a smile at the sight of a group of his men thrashing their legs and arms to form "ash angels" by the waters edge, laughing in the face of almost certain death.

How he admired them, their courage, their conviction. Even in the most desperate of times, they retained a sense of camaraderie. Most of the men and women in Danny's battalion were not professional soldiers. In their past lives, they had been factory workers, salesmen, police officers, members of the unsanctioned Andurien Reserves who put aside their blue collar civilian lives to train together on weekends. They were, for the most part, people accustomed to hardship.

Danny suspected that was the reason most of them had transitioned so well into their current roles as tankers, artillery gunners and infantrymen. Whatever the reason, he was as proud of every one of them as any father could be of his children.

The smile that crossed Danny's face whenever he thought of his troops was familiar. Danny had seen it soften the Colonel's normally stoic features on many occasions, for the final time on the day when they had last spoken. The day Danny's unit was called up to participate in the invasion of the Capellan Confederation.

Are you still proud of me, Colonel? Is this what you wanted?

...Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...

Gathering his helmet and sidearm, Danny left the headquarters. He presumed it to have been a boarding house at a time before the war, when it still had a second floor. He walked toward the canal side where his men gathered around their parked vehicles.

The canal bisected the city of New Barstow along a north-south axis. The Free Worlds troops under Colonel Garibaldi had attacked in mid-April, pushing the Defenders of Andurien back further with each new assault. The current defensive line, established on the eastern bank of the canal, was meant to be the final barrier. Command had ordered the bridges blown but there were no explosives left and ammunition was too precious to spare on what would have been a futile gesture in any case. Marik troops had actually reached the eastern side ahead of the Anduriens at several points and established strongly held bridgeheads. The canal itself was only a few hundred meters across at its widest point; hardly enough of an obstacle to deter jump capable BattleMechs.

So the Defenders of Andurien had been forced to abandon the city altogether or else become completely surrounded. Danny's battalion was one of the unlucky few units picked to stay behind, delaying the enemy for as long as their equipment and their resolve held out.

...Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock...

Danny found his crew lounging beside their Von Luckner tank, which Private Tim Nichols had named "Lucy B" in honor of his girlfriend. Like the rest of the crew, Nichols was young, not yet even old enough to order a beer on most of the worlds where he had been asked to shed blood. He was the first to snap to attention, hopping down from the tank's front fender where he had been eating chow. The rest of the crew quickly followed suit.

"At ease, guys."

Danny had worked with this same crew since the beginning of the crusade and had developed a relaxed rapport with them. In truth, they were tight, like a family. Even Danny's quick rise in rank after Major Mitchell's death had not come between them. Danny welcomed the closeness most times, but other times the thought of losing these men, a possibility that seemed ever more likely as the end drew nearer, brought him to the brink of physical incapacitation.

The Colonel had always cautioned him against getting too close to those who served under him.

You'll care too much. A time will come when you must give them an order that may result in their deaths, and you won't be able to do it. You won't have the stomach for it.

The Colonel had been right about so many things.

A rumble descended from the clouds. Instinctively, all heads turned upward as if their eyes could detect the source of the sound.

"Sounds like rain," joked the loader, Thegn Sanchez, knowing full well that the sound was not that of distant thunder.

Hundreds of meters behind their defensive line the first rounds of the artillery barrage crashed into the city, pulverizing whatever lay in their path. Two more rounds came screaming in, landing closer this time. Their impacts shook the ground and their ripping shrieks drowned out all other sound, except for the loudspeaker, which droned on above the cacophony.

...When will it be your time, comrade?

...Tick-tock, tick-tock...

Along the canal bank, men scrambled into action. Armor crews swarmed over their vehicles, infantry squads mounted APCs or moved out on foot to occupy prepared positions in the rubble. The crew of the Lucy B reacted with efficiency born of repetition. They moved with a sense of urgent calm, without a trace of panic, yet Danny could read the tense anticipation in their expressions. Along the canal bank, Danny witnessed the crews of his remaining tanks, two Manticores and another Von Luckner, mounting their rides.

Danny slid down the turret hatch into the commander's cupola and eased into the seat, fastening his five-point harness. He dogged the hatch shut and leaned forward to rest his forehead against the padded periscope enclosure. His hands caressed a pair of joysticks, which he would use to traverse the cupola, affording himself a three hundred sixty degree view of his surroundings. If need be, he could also use the sticks to control the tank's weapons systems.

The crewmen sounded off in turn as they assumed their duty positions and performed systems checks. A blast of heat roiled through the interior of the vehicle as the Lucy B's rare and valuable fusion power plant roared to life and the tank lurched forward at a slow crawl.

Opening the battalion comm channel, Danny began to receive reports from his forward-most elements concerning the enemy troop movements. They were pushing into the city from the west with `Mechs supported by tanks and infantry. Danny had only what was left of his armor and infantry to throw into their path. Any Andurien `Mech that was still capable of operating under its own power had been pulled out days ago. The huge machines were considered too valuable to risk in a rear guard action. Unlike men. There were always more men.

Danny ordered the other vehicle of his lance, the Von Luckner belonging to Master Banner Gary, to lead out across the nearest canal bridge and directed Nichols to follow at a safe distance. The Manticores, under Lieutenant Leetch, would cross the canal and support the infantry along the right flank.

Artillery blasts were striking all along the canal bank, the enemy gunners having found the range. The Defenders answered, their own guns lashing out like dragons spitting long tongues of flame as they began counter-battery operations. But even over the crashing of the guns, the radio chatter, the roar of the engine, Danny still could not shake the din of the loudspeaker, with its ticking clock and haunting voice, as if its rhythms were imbedded in his brain.

...Tick-tock, tick-tock...

"Enemy armor, eleven o'clock!"

The excited voice belonged to Master Banner Gary, his tank's turret already turning to meet the threat. Danny saw it as well and called out the location to Sergeant Moritz, the Lucy B's chief gunnery officer.

Two Galleon tanks, urban camouflage colors slapped over their purple parade ground paint scheme, crawled over a pile of rubble, their treads struggling for purchase on the broken terrain. Galleons were light tanks, possessing neither the armor nor the firepower to stand toe to toe against the heavy Von Luckners. What they did have was an excellent communications array that they could use to direct artillery strikes or call in reinforcements. They would have to be dealt with swiftly.

Gary's first shot caught the lead Galleon as it crested a debris pile, the 130-millimeter projectile ripping open the light tank's thinly armored belly like it was made of tissue paper.

The Galleon belched smoke and slid down the near side of the slope, fire licking from its crew hatches.

Surveying the scene through his periscope, Danny felt himself hoping that the enemy crew would be able to exit the wreck, but there was no time. The Galleon disappeared in a consuming fireball that shredded the light vehicle, flipping it into the air and depositing it on its roof. It was a death Danny would not have wished on friend or foe.

Witnessing the destruction of their comrades, the crew of the second Galleon attempted to back down the rubble slope and flee. Moritz's shot flew high but still managed to shear away the medium laser turret, robbing the vehicle of its only significant firepower.

Gary's crew lit up the enemy tank with a full SRM volley which punched several large holes through the weak side armor and tore away one of its tracks.

The Galleon skewed around and stopped, its hatches flying open. The machine's two-man crew, having no desire to end up like their fellows, abandoned the tank and disappeared into the rubble. Danny loosed a few volleys from the Lucy B's machinegun to discourage them from attempting to return.

Ahead, Master Banner Gary's tank traded SRM fire with a squad of infantry that had holed up in the ruins to his front. Moritz directed Nichols to rotate the Lucy B slightly in order to engage another

squad that was attempting to move down the right flank using the shattered buildings as cover.

Moritz pounded the enemy troops with SRM fire, pinning them.

They answered with a furious burst of small arms fire. Rounds pinged off the Lucy B's hull like deadly hail, chipping away at the tank while searching for weak spots in the Star Slab armor. Another SRM volley crashed among the enemy squad and their fire slackened. Two long blasts from the hull-mounted flamer ended their resistance with grave finality.

Through his periscope, Danny watched, horrified as a lone enemy trooper staggered from the conflagration engulfed in flames and trailing oily black smoke. A short burst of machinegun fire put an end to the man's agony.

...Tick-tock, tick-tock...

"...last of it boss!"

Moritz's voice in his ear snapped Danny back to reality. They were out of missiles and down to their last few rounds for the main gun. Master Banner Gary reported a similar situation.

Danny's own wire-frame schematic showed some armor degradation along the front glacis and down the Lucy B's starboard side.

Sanchez was reporting minor engine damage.

Reports from his subcommanders spoke of a bleak situation. Free Worlds troops were attacking at all points along the front, and their forward units had begun to strike out from their bridgeheads in an attempt to surround the defenders. Danny scrambled to assess the situation and deploy his depleted units into the best positions to repel the attacks, all the while knowing it was an impossible task. They were simply too few, too weakened from the weeks of sustained fighting. Not enough. Nothing they could do would be enough.

...Tick-tock, tick-tock...

"Movement ahead," Master Banner Gary's voice carried an air of near panic. "It's big!"

Near the end of the street, the gutted shell of a six-story office building shattered and crumbled in a cascading shower of concrete and steel. A wave of dust rolled over the Lucy B, exploiting the cracks in her seals and seeping into the fissures between her armor plates, obscuring vision and fouling sensors. The chalky, white substance caked Danny's nose and throat. He coughed and spat, all the while wishing he had donned the now useless breather mask that hung unfastened below his chin.

From within the cloud, an enemy *Rifleman* emerged like an apparition, its barrel-arms spitting gouts of flame as hot shell casings rained down into the rubble. The giant machine tracked its fire down and across the turret of Gary's Von Luckner, shattering armor plate. Behind the *Rifleman*, another immense, humanoid shape loomed out of the dust and smoke. A *Vindicator*.

"Sanchez, load AP!" Danny's hands tightened on the joysticks. "Hit that *Rifleman*!"

...*Tick-tock*...

The *Rifleman* poured more fire into Gary's tank, risking his heat to add a large laser to the fusillade. Armor cracked and buckled.

Blue lightning leapt forward from the *Vindicator's* particle cannon to crash into the tank's side, leaving a jagged scar of molten plating and several damaged road wheels in its wake.

"Back up Gary! Get out of there!"

Danny would never know if Gary heard the order. A brace of missiles corkscrewed in, churning up the ground around Gary's tank and temporarily obscuring it from view. When the smoke cleared, Danny could see that Gary's radio antenna had been sheared away. Gary stood his ground, defiantly loosing another volley in the direction of the *Rifleman*.

His shot went wide.

...*Every twelve seconds*...

The Lucy B rocked backward as Moritz engaged the *Rifleman*, blasting the sixty-ton machine high in the torso.

The `Mech staggered backward under the massive blow but it was too little, too late. Ruby spears from the *Rifleman's* torsos burned into Gary's tank, exploiting the holes already punched in the turret and front plate. The tank's remaining autocannon rounds cooked off inside the vehicle. The resulting explosion flipped the seventy-five ton tank into the air and ripped the turret free. An unrecognizable, burning scar was all that remained where the tank had been.

One vehicle.

Four men.

Friends.

...*Tick-tock*...

A wave of heat blasted through the Lucy B as Moritz hammered the *Rifleman* with another round, this one shredding armor and myomer beneath the machine's left knee joint. The `Mech spun slowly and crashed to the ground, only to be replaced by the *Vindicator*, whose PPC beam washed over the Lucy B, sending charred and melted plating spinning off in all directions. A missile strike hammered into the rear deck.

Klaxons screamed in Danny's headset. A flashing red indicator on his HUD warned of a fire in the engine compartment. The Lucy B's automatic fire control systems took over, flooding the engine compartment with flame retardant foam. The supercooled foam created a dense, white chemical mist that overwhelmed the already sweltering interior. Danny gasped and wheezed as the noxious chemical invaded his lungs. They could not take much more of this type of pounding.

The *Rifleman* was already regaining his feet, arms swinging into line with the Lucy B.

"Nichols, get us in close."

Danny knew their only chance was to get as close to the enemy as possible. The `Mechs they faced were configured for combat at long range; their weapons would be less effective at the poin-

blank ranges where the Von Luckner excelled. Danny repeated his order but the Lucy B did not move. The *Vindicator's* PPC glowed with blue light as it prepared another charge.

...Tick-tock...

Assuming his comm had been knocked out, Danny used the toe of his boot to tap Nichols on the back of his helmet. The man's body slumped forward in his seat to rest against the driver's console.

No!

"Sanchez, take over for Nichols! All ahead full..."

The Lucy B rocked again under another assault. Autocannon rounds tore into the turret and front plate, their echoes reverberating through the crew compartment.

The *Rifleman* had returned to the fight.

Still, the Lucy B remained motionless.

...Tick-tock...Every twelve seconds...

Danny undid the quick release on his five-point harness and slipped down into the stifling interior of the tank. Smoke and burnt propellant stung his eyes and seared his nostrils as he searched the cramped confines for any sign of life. Sanchez' body was sprawled on the floor, wedged between the loaders seat and the tank's massive gearbox. Danny felt for a pulse but found none.

*...another son of Andurien dies in
New Barstow...*

Danny heard a shallow cough. Moritz was still alive but in bad shape, his body covered with a mixture of dust, cordite, chemical foam and blood.

The tank shook again. The few remaining interior lights winked out as another PPC strike fused the electronics.

The Lucy B was doomed. The revolution was doomed. The mission would not succeed. The dream was dead. Just like Gary and Nichols and Sanchez and all the others that Danny had failed to protect. Only he and Moritz were left and no matter what, Danny would not fail him. It was all that mattered now. Maybe it was all that had ever mattered.

Just as his father had predicted.

Damn you, Colonel! You were always so right. Why did you always have to be so right?

...When will it be your time, comrade?...

He wrestled the wounded sergeant from the gunner's seat and, hauling him down from the turret, half-carried, half-dragged him toward the front of the tank. If they could only make it to the front escape hatch...

...Tick-tock, tick-tock...

The Lucy B bucked and trembled, quaking under a new series of impacts.

Danny reached forward through the smoke. Groped for the emergency hatch release.

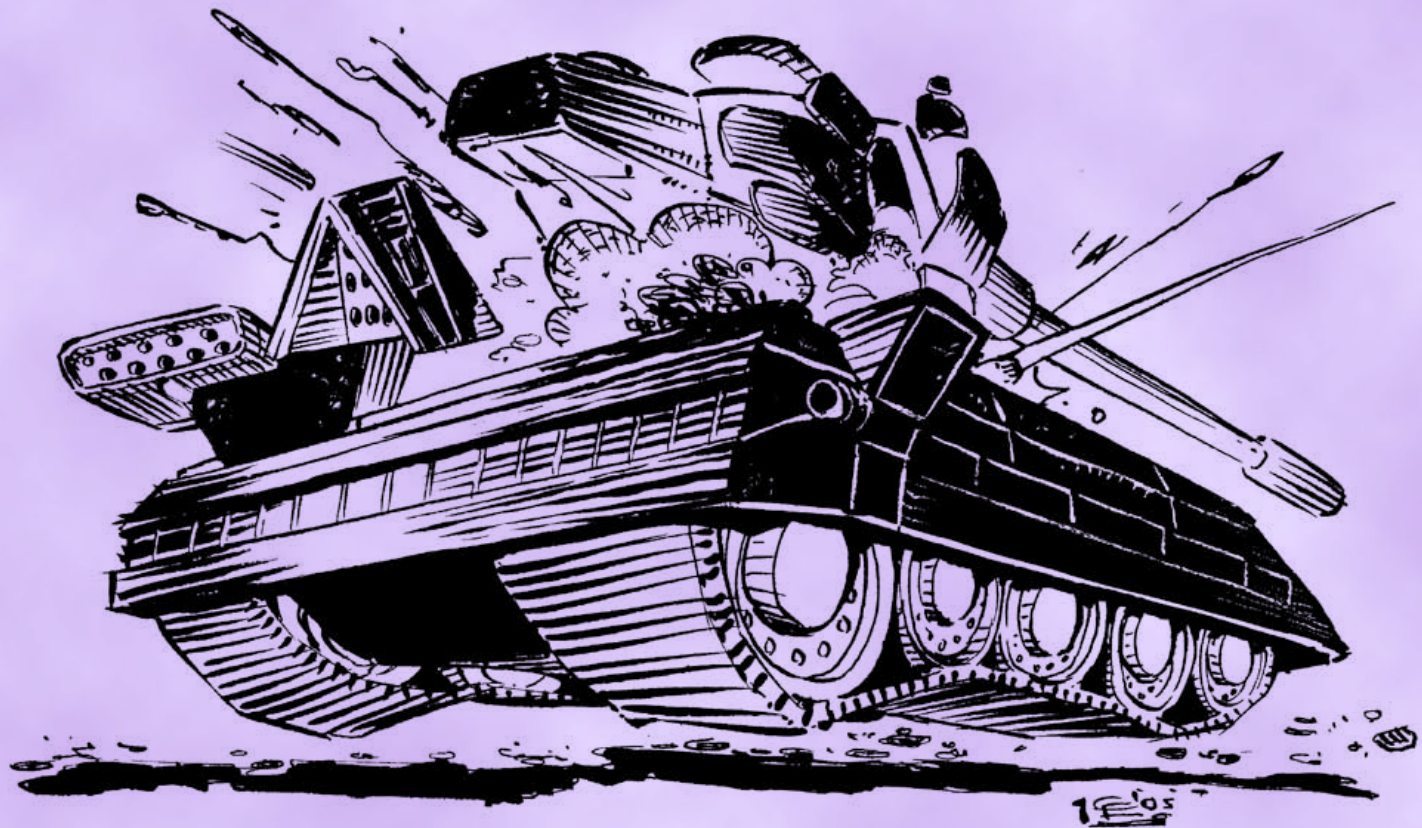
A massive tremor shook the tank and a blast of heat knocked him to the floor and punched the air from his lungs.

His fingers slipped from the hatch handle.

No more time. No more time.

Are you still proud of me father?

...Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick...



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