



Blunt Forces

Maj. Evan Roderick, U.S. Army

Tyson Ross, Ironhorse 6, looked at the map against the wall. 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, U.S. Army, was arrayed on a twenty-mile front running northeast from Baiyangxiang to Qingpingxiang in the former Chinese province of Hunan. Red pinheads indicated the known locations of Falong Cooperative forces; green pinheads showed the operating bases of their Indian enablers. The compressed contour lines did not do the terrain justice.

Truc Duong, his Vietnamese aide, handed him coffee. “Cam oon ban, Chuck.”

Truc smiled. “You realize that it makes the XO uncomfortable when you call me that?”

“That’s because the XO just came from Strat Forces. Up there, America doesn’t have friends.” Ross looked at the S2’s latest estimate, time stamped 18 0300 JUL 2048: *ground sensors to the front of 2-5 Cav indicate wheeled and tracked movement all through the night.* He

Composite graphic by Chris Gardner, Army University Press; original photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

jotted some words down and told the battle captain to relay them to Lancer 6 during the next comms window. Quantum radio transmissions were undetectable, but the radios still used power—power that he preferred to synchronize with electronic deception. Next transmission would be at 0700, one hour from now. Not that it was even necessary. Lancer was experienced enough to follow up on a report like that. The XO walked in.

“Sir! I didn’t know you were up! Did you get an update from the battle captain?”

“Frank. None of the systems are on, and I have

“Say it in Vietnamese, say it fast.” Truc interpreted. The 40th VA launched a quadcopter swarm as a decoy to allow 2-5 CAV’s mini drones to confirm the previous night’s ground sensor reports. The deception failed, with 2-5’s drones destroyed by Indian microwave emitters. But some of the 40th’s quads made it beyond the Falong lines. Pham’s scouts reported seeing tanks on their monitors before the quads were dropped.

“Roger. Thanks, brother. All guidons: inspect your subsequent lines of defense and harden them. Prepare your final line. Expect rehearsal guidance during next

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some experience reading a map board.” The colonel looked at Truc. “I was just telling Chuck here that it would be good for you to spend a few days with Lt. Col. Pham and Ho Chi Minh’s finest in the 40th VA Infantry. Help you get a feel for our outfit” He winked at his aide. “I’ll be back for the update at 0800.”

Ross walked out of the command post, toward the mess. The locals didn’t object much to the South Pacific Alliance’s presence in town; the Americans kept the roads open, and the Republic of Guangdong, with its capital in Hong Kong, was probably the least exploitive of the Chinese republics. Mrs. Tan handed him a bowl of spicy rice noodle soup. “Colonel, sir. When will you get that visa for my son?”

He laughed. “Maybe tomorrow, Mrs. Tan. Maybe tomorrow.” Back outside, he wondered at the legend of America that still persisted around the globe: every nation had a Great Firewall, and even allied governments had little incentive to allow positive coverage of the United States to cross their own Internet barriers. *America is more comfortable than Hunan*, he thought, taking in the sunrise over the Furongzhen waterfalls. But life is no more certain.

“BREAK, BREAK: I need Col. Pham to repeat what he just said.” There were two minutes remaining in the emission window for the morning radio update brief.

comms window. Garryowen 6, no change to your priority of reinforcement. Lancer, I’m riding your way now. Ironhorse 6, out.” He turned to Truc. “Chuck, grab the horses.”

As Truc returned, the quantum switched itself back on. Priority message. *Ironhorse 6, report to division command post. Operations order brief in four hours. Hovercraft linkup at Labachong at ten hundred hours, grid DM 001735. End of transmission.* Ross picked up his saddlebag and walked out. “Change of plans, Chuck. I’m headed to Liqiao.”

“Don’t you want to drive, sir?”

“No. If the Indians brought tanks forward, they have sensors up. I don’t feel like cruising for ten miles on top of a thermal beacon.” He swung up the horse. “Boots in saddle, Chuck. Didi mao!”

Seven months into the occupation, Ross didn’t worry much about Falong operatives inside his lines; the arrival of the SPA and

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Guangdong forces immediately improved the local quality of life, and Guangdong's secret police took care of the remaining unrest. Nevertheless, his sergeant major refused to let him travel without a ten-man escort, lovingly called "F Troop."

He was comfortable on horses, having ridden since the gas ran out in the Pike County Civil Defense Force twenty years ago. Ross' piece of rural America organized quickly as other places descended into anarchy, its small population and fertile soil conferring significant advantages during the crisis. The story was much different in China. Between the PRC's brutal attempts to regain control, nuclear exchanges between warlords, the breaking of the Three Gorges Dam, the end of U.S. food imports, and general chaos across the country, only one in ten Chinese citizens alive in 2025 remained so in 2040. While the Americans called that time "The Collapse," it was known to the Chinese as "The Sorrow."

Like most kids in the 20s, Ross knew nothing about the unrest in China until the PRC strong-armed Twitter into blocking news about it, creating a scandal in America that further galvanized the Patriot Party. When he enlisted in 2025, his father asked him what he thought of the rumors that the United States and Russia were cooperating to destroy Chinese nuclear capabilities. Ross didn't think much about it at all until the day before he shipped off—the day it was lights out across America.

He learned, much later, that the People's Republic of China detonated a hypersonic nuclear bomb at high altitude over North Dakota. The blast itself only killed nearby airline passengers, but the electromagnetic pulse surged destruction across America's electrical grid. Western Russia received the same treatment, but it was Uncle Sam who turned Beijing into a pool of glass. It took five years for America to restore order at home and another three for the Orbital War to begin. As he rode past peasants working the rice paddies, Ross wondered if they even knew about the war going on a hundred miles above them. The United States, India, and Russia emerged as the space-faring nations after The Collapse, seizing all private space ventures and openly weaponizing space. As the 2030s wore on, few satellites remained active, and the Earth was surrounded by a shell of debris from a decade of competition. It had been five years since any nation attempted a launch, each afraid of the other's hunters in orbit.

He dismounted his horse and boarded the hovercraft, wondering what the Space Force actually did these days.

"Hindus must really need cell phones if they're willing to stack up in this damn terrain." Col. Abe Meyer, the commander of 2nd Brigade, yelled across the tarmac. "How many tons of rhenium is a brigade worth?" Ross got off the hovercraft. They shook hands. Ross replied.

"If you're asking STRATFOR, it's three. Although I think the theater commander would accept one for your brigade." The two laughed as they walked into the headquarters.

Rare earth elements. That was why 1st CAV was in Hunan, and that is why Ross and Meyer were at this operations briefing. Restoring civilization to its level before The Collapse required rare earths, and the pickings were easiest in southeast China. It was why the SPA supported Hong Kong's expansion to the mainland. And it was ostensibly why India was preparing an offensive in 1st CAV's area of operations. The division commander opened the brief.

"Multisource intelligence indicates that Indian support to the Falong Cooperative in the 1st CAV area of operations now exceeds corps strength. It appears that Falong and Indian forces are preparing to seize Zhangjiajie in 2nd Brigade's AO, likely to open up another line of operation toward the upper Yangtze rare earth fields." Meyer nudged Ross and smiled. The commander continued. "As you know, division recon efforts have been increasingly thwarted by Indian countermeasures, and the theater commander has restricted our ground recon to five kilometers beyond the front to limit the risk of escalation. In light of recent analysis, she has agreed to move the ground limit of advance north to Highway 305, otherwise known as Phase Line Cobalt. Second Corps commander approved my request for a ground recon-in-force up to that line. This will serve the dual purpose of determining what is actually to our front, as well as spoiling any potential attack. Any comments before we begin?"

Ross stood up. "Yeah Tyson, I heard about Lancer's tanks. Meyer's got more to his front. ELINT and SIGINT confirmed." Ross sat down. The division G3 began to brief. Ross turned to Meyer. "Did you actually SEE those tanks?"

“No.”

The sky was dark by the time Ross boarded the return hovercraft. He studied the division’s execution matrix as the craft began to rise. 20 0415 JUL: *Fryer on, buzzer on.* He was surprised that STRATFOR provided more than a twenty-four hour notice of the arrival of a multi-domain assault force. With an unknown situation in space and the ubiquity of high-energy countermeasures, STRATFOR only attached MDAFs to Army divisions if it thought the danger was small enough, or the opportunity large enough, to risk the military’s most expensive toys. Ross wasn’t sure which category this operation fell into.

20 0430 JUL: *Suppression of enemy air and EMS defense complete, MDAF launch hunter/killer swarms.* Ross remembered the day in 2029 that a drone swarm arrived at his command

post in Kampsville on the west bank of the Illinois River. After surrounding his position, one of the drones opened an audio link to a U.S. Army battalion commander on the eastern side. Ross crossed the river and returned to his headquarters with the commander, who then met with his own. Three hours later, the Pike County Civil Defense Force was redesignated as the 123rd Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army, with Ross awarded a direct commission to captain. When the drones left, Ross thanked God he still flew the Stars and Stripes outside his headquarters.

20 0500 JUL: *1st BDE cross PL IRON, fix ENY to front.* That was his mission. Tie down whatever Furongs or Indians or whoever was to his front so that 2nd Brigade could attack north. His attack would be on foot, with only his own cannon artillery in support. A 1st CAV grunt on Luzon in 1944 would feel right at home in this operation. Ross didn’t have room to complain, having refused two assignments to

STRATFOR in the past. The Army was analog, nicknamed “Blunt Forces” by the high-tech amalgamation of the Air Force, Navy, and Marines that became U.S. Strategic Forces. Ross preferred to lead soldiers instead of machines, accepting his career ceiling as a result.

One or more STRATFOR assignments were required for promotion to general officer. Promotion to three-star included a full transfer into STRATFOR. Standing apart, and appropriately aloof, was the Space Force. No transfer to the Space Force ever came back to Earth-bound formations.

20 0530 JUL: *2nd BDE attack across PL IRON.* He got off the hovercraft. Truc was waiting. The time was 2100. “What’s the plan, sir?” Ross mounted his horse.

“We attack north the morning after tomorrow. By zero seven, it will be over, or it will be desperate.”

0330. The predawn sky was tinged deep purple, the air fragrant with plum blossoms.

Ross returned to his forward bunker, having spent the last hour visiting 2-8 CAV Stallion troopers on the line. He watched the RTO update friendly locations on the map. The division commander had restricted their limit of reconnaissance until H-hour, but Ross neglected to tell Lt. Col. Pham. Now the 40th had three observation posts north of Phase Line Iron. Their next report was due in thirty minutes. Ross was still uncomfortable about the tanks. He was even more uncomfortable that Abe and his brigade were about to attack without “Battle Drill EDM.” Any move made without flooding the EMS with noise was tantamount to suicide, but the MDAF commander insisted that his assets could not function under those conditions, and that EDM wouldn’t be necessary after 0430 in any case.

Once operations began, the low power signature of the quantum radio would be lost amongst the other noise, allowing for free operation. For now though, the



Image courtesy of Pixabay.com

CP was quiet. His S3 was taking a nap. Darius could sleep anywhere, at any time. He claimed he was still catching up for the sleep he didn't get as a lost kid, running from Scavengers in Los Angeles in the late '20s. Fifteen more minutes.

Ross paced. He couldn't wait any longer. As he picked up the hand mic, Lt. Col. Pham came across the net in slow and deliberate English: "Ironhorse 6, this is Cobra 6: my scout is on this net, transmitting from OP near Phase Line Cobalt. Listen to this." The scout had set his quantum to transmit the radio traffic his signal

“ This is Stallion 6; the enemy has breached our minefield. Destroyed a dozen T-90s. They keep coming. I'm out of antitank missiles. Request final protective fires at the following location... ”

intercept device was receiving. The voice was speaking in Russian. Ross knew that his XO back in the main command post was hearing the same thing and keyed the mic.

"Frank! Pipe this into the second quantum and tune it to the division intel channel!" He stopped talking, his ears perked up. Perpendicular to his front line, Ross heard the faint echo of a thruster through the valley. He placed his fingerprint on the quantum's kill sensor, switching it and all others on the brigade's network off. He threw Truc to the ground and tackled the S3 off his chair. A blinding flash erupted across the northern horizon.

No heat. Good sign. The wind was blowing hard to the northeast. Also good. The S3 reactivated the net and called for guidon reports. In rapid sequence, they all reported no immediate battle damage or casualties. That one was small, thought Ross. Darius tuned the quantum to division. "Pegasus X-Ray, this is Ironhorse 3. Negative BDA from nuke in Ironhorse."

"Tell them we are going to defend here until told otherwise." Darius did. No response. He grabbed the mic. "Pegasus 6, this is Ironhorse 6. Do you read?"

"Ironhorse 6, this is Blackjack 6." It was Meyer. His voice was soft. "I'm not feeling so great over here. Pegasus walked up and out of my bunker right before the flash, so I'm guessing he's taking today off too." Meyer coughed. "I think it's safe to assume the Hindus aren't interested in Zhangaaee ... Shangzee ... whatever

the f**k this town is. Only other road is through you. Good luck ... I think I'll lie down now."

Ross tried to hail the division's deputy commander and chief of staff. Nothing. He was getting angry. He called for 3rd Brigade's commander: "Greywolf 6, this is Ironhorse."

"Ironhorse, this is Greywolf. Just got my quantum back up." "Jim, Abe is dead. So is the old man." A moment passed. "Well. Guess you are in charge now, Ty."

The next four hours were a blur of transmissions, explosions, anxiety, and resolve for Ross: "Guidons, EDM! I say

again, activate E-D-M. Attack cancelled. Defend in place. Line of sight comms and VHF radio traffic authorized. Frank, make sure corps knows what's happening."

"Ironhorse, this is Pham, enemy tanks moving south of PL Cobalt. My 1st and 2nd companies are in contact with Indian infantry."

"Garryowen 6, move to Attack Position Turtle, keep your tanks at REDCON 1."

"Ironhorse, this is Greywolf, I'm moving to occupy your subsequent battle positions on PL Amber." Truc grabbed a microwave gun and zapped some drones flying overhead. Truc grabbed his boss and the quantum operator and led them to a new bunker. Darius followed with the map.

"This is Stallion 6; the enemy has breached our minefield. Destroyed a dozen T-90s. They keep coming. I'm out of antitank missiles. Request final protective fires at the following location ..."

"Dragon 6, fire EMP artillery in depth from Stallion's grid all the way to Cobalt along Route Denver. All guidons stand by for lights out, monitor this net for 'shot over.' Move all comms back to brigade quantum."

"Ironhorse, Garryowen 3 here. We are slant sixteen for M60s, slant four for M1s. Russians are moving south on Denver, keeping a tight formation, but we can't seem to score any more hits ... Ah. That's why: they've got a Dome moving with them. Stand by." A messenger from 2-5 CAV arrived; Lancer was

bounding back to Phase Line Quartz. 2-12 CAV was struggling to break contact. The 40th was down to one company, engaging in hand-to-hand combat. 2-12 CAV broke contact. 3rd Brigade attempting to destroy the Dome. Lancer out of ammunition.

Message from Corps: "All units in vicinity of Route Denver, get off the highway, turn off systems. Fourth MDAF inbound, will clear from Phase Line Quartz to Phase Line Cobalt. All units stand by for orbital strike." *That's odd*, thought Ross.

He walked out of the bunker and looked up. Dozens of meteors, their tails colored pink from the rising sun, streaked across the sky.

Ross lit his second cigarette as the med drone scanned his body. There was no point in arguing with his sergeant major, so he let the medic check him out. "No obvious radiation damage, sir. You can hold onto your nano pill for now."

He looked at his sergeant major. "Call's already been put out, sir. Everyone took theirs yesterday right after the blast. Should last another day until we rotate the rest through the hospital for gene rehab." Ross still couldn't believe that technology advanced this far in spite of The Collapse. Not far enough to save Abe, but enough to let his troopers fight in all kinds of radiation without long-term damage. He embraced his sergeant major. "Clint, I'm very happy you're alive."

Truc walked up with the horses; he still had the microwave gun. Ross put out his cigarette and tightened the saddle. Truc caught his attention, pointing to the hovercraft landing a hundred meters away. A passenger emerged and removed its helmet. Golden locks escaped. "S**t." She waved and motioned for him to come aboard. He gave a thumbs up. "Chuck, tell the XO that the theater commander is here. Hopefully this won't take long."

General Guthrie's hovercraft was a command variant, complete with a holographic situation display. She showed him the starting disposition of the three SPA and four Guangdong corps in south China and then played back the battle as she saw it unfold at the Theater Command headquarters. 1st CAV didn't get the worst. 2nd Infantry Division lost two brigades to tactical nukes, and an entire Guangdong corps ceased to exist. She zoomed in so he could see his division's

fight, ending with 3rd Brigade's counterattack to Phase Line Cobalt. "Helluva fight, Colonel." She scrolled out, showing the globe when the orbital strike occurred. Flashes of light flickered across Russia, India, and China. A few flickered in Africa and South America as well. She paused the playback and looked at him. He looked back. "Well?"

"I'm not sure what to say, ma'am ... Does this mean the war's over?"

She laughed. "What war? Has anyone *declared* war in the past hundred years? The last four decades taught us what our grandparents couldn't: peace is just a momentary absence of violence."

"It felt like a war yesterday morning. Feels like peace in bed back in Texas."

She laughed again. "Fair enough, Ty. The God Rods should buy us some peace ... of a kind ... for a while. Right now, the Russians and Indians are trying to figure out how we put so many tungsten rods into orbit without their knowledge. If they don't accept the new lines of control in China in two hours, they will receive more."

Ross thought aloud back to Sunday school. "And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron ..."

Guthrie looked at him thoughtfully. "Tyson. This isn't about the apocalypse. It isn't even about ruling the world. It's about survival."

He looked at her, puzzled. "Why do you think that we spill so much blood in China and Africa over resources that we can get at home?"

"Because it's easier in China."

"Paying Australians to destroy their environment and sell us theirs would be easier. But it's easiest in the Asteroid Belt, harvested by autonomous drones." He was only surprised for a moment before his blood started to boil. He glared.

Guthrie continued. "You see Tyson, this 'war' is about preventing the others from competing in space. Denying them resources, forcing them to spend money on terrestrial weapons, putting their best and brightest in the trenches instead of in the stars. Your troopers bleed so that we have the time and space to win. In space. THAT is where we win the real war." Silence. Ross glanced over at the situation display, the hologram still paused at the moment following the orbital strike.

"Seems like we've won in space." The general frowned. She took a deep breath and shut the

hovercraft's outer ramp. When she sat back down, her smile had returned.

"Tyson. The assets we sent back to Earth represent a fraction of a fraction of what we have mined from the asteroids. Most of it goes to Jupiter, whose magnetic field masks what we are building in its orbit." Guthrie paused.

"A doomsday weapon."

"Hope." She looked at him earnestly. "For the past fifteen years, we have been building a device. A gate, if you will, that will allow us to bend spacetime and begin settling the stars. Project Hope is the largest engineering feat ever attempted, by orders of magnitude. A ring half the size of the moon, built by replicating machinery, maneuvered to prevent its observation from Earth, and monitored by orbiting colonies established in the mid '30s. We have another ten years before it is complete. Every action we take on Earth serves to prevent our enemies from destroying the only hope we have of surviving this age."

He imagined it: a huge circle, set against the red-orange striations of the gas giant. He saw a spacecraft flying into the center, filled with immigrants on a one-way journey to a new home. He asked, "When it's complete, will all this be over?"

"I don't know." She sighed. "Part of me wonders if, a thousand years from now, the descendants of the first pioneers will be having this same discussion, justifying their actions as the only way to escape a hopeless situation ... Or maybe we'll get it right on the next planet." Her eyes brightened. "That's my hope."

Ross didn't press further. "I appreciate you telling me this, ma'am. It means a lot to an old grunt." He took a breath. "So what's next?"

She stood up. He followed. "Let's start with a promotion to brigadier general." Ross blinked. "And now that you know the deepest secrets of the Strategic Council, you are hereby transferred to STRATFOR. I signed the authorizations on the way up here. STRATFOR-Homeland alerted your wife a few hours ago, and she'll meet you in Monterrey. After a year of indoctrination, you'll be ready to command a division again." She opened the ramp. The craft started its engines.

"You have forty-eight hours to say goodbye to your troopers, general. Don't worry about the Division-I dropped off the new Pegasus 6 on the way here." She shook his hand. "Good luck, Tyson." Ross disembarked. The hovercraft rose. Truc met him halfway with the horses.

The sun's last light blended with the eastern sky, the first stars appearing in the glow. Ross gazed upward, as if for the first time. His pockets were filled with medals for Lt. Col. Pham's troopers. Hot blue flames still roared from a destroyed Dome's supercells on the road in front of them. They steered the horses wide to avoid the heat. "Are you a general now or somethin'?" asked Truc. As they put the fire to their rear, Ross found Jupiter in the night.

"Somethin' like that Chuck." ■

Glossary

BDA—battle damage assessment

CAV—cavalry

CP—command post

EDM—Electronic deception measures

ELINT—electronic intelligence

EMP—electromagnetic pulse

EMS—electromagnetic spectrum

H-hour—The specific hour an operation commences

PL—phase line

MDAF—multi-domain assault force

OP—observation post

REDCON—readiness condition

RTO—radio/telephone operator

S2—intelligence officer

S3—operations officer

SIGINT—signals intelligence

SPA—South Pacific Alliance

STRATFOR—Strategic Forces

VA—Vietnamese Army

VHF—very high frequency

XO—executive officer