

NORTHAG & CENTAG

A novel of a Cold War turned 'hot'...



by

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Whilst I have always had a keen interest in military history and - within the limits of decency - many brave warriors. I am indebted to the kind gentleman of the Southbourne Tabletop & Boardgamers, and Wessex Wyverns, wargames clubs for their input and assistance concerning technical matters pertaining to the Cold War era, and for their 'wargaming' a suitable plot.

GLOSSARY

AFV Armoured Fighting Vehicle
APC Armoured Personnel Carrier
AMX 30 French tank type
ATGW Anti-Tank Guided Weapon. Anti-tank rockets
BMP WARPAC armoured personnel carrier
CENTAG NATO's CENTral Army Group in West Germany
ENG Electronic News Gathering
FEBA Forward Edge of Battle Area
FIST Forward Infantry Support team FV432 British armoured personnel carrier
IGB Inter-German border: the border between Communists East Germany and Capitalist West Germany
M109 NATO self-propelled artillery gun
MIG Soviet aircraft types. Also a generic term
MLR Multiple Rocket Launcher
NATO The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation: the alliance of Western nations
NORTHAG NATO's NORTHern Army Group in West Germany
OP Observation Post (static or mobile)
Reforger NATO plan to reinforce Europe by bring troops across the Atlantic to match-up with pre-positioned equipment.
T55 Older Soviet main battle tank
T80 Top-of-the-range Soviet main battle tank
US United States
VAB A French type of wheeled APC
WARPAC The Warsaw Treaty 'Pact' of the USSR and its satellite nations

Prologue

September, 1982. It was normal, in 'peacetime', for both NATO and WARPAC to observe each other's manoeuvres; for the sake of, 'transparency'. This was how Lieutenant Tatiana Romanov found herself deep in darkest, capitalist Britain, escorted for *safety* by Political Officer, Major Gorchkov.

And it was clear the British were trying – as indeed she was – to extract maximum military intelligence from them.

"...and I suppose all nations have their security issues", their driver and *escort*, Captain Colin Darcy pulled up the landrover at a small country cottage, near the Wiltshire village of Pemberley. As they dismounted Tatiana noticed him wince somewhat.

So did Gorchkov. "You are injured, Captain?" she waspishly questioned.

"Sadly a wound. Falklands. A few months back".

"Ah!" she smiled. "A war of *colonialist aggression*".

"Indeed", the Englishman shot back. "But we nevertheless beat the Argies *and* restored to the people there the government of their choice".

Tatiana suppressed a laugh. It was unusual for the old Political Officer to be so caught out. She liked this Englishman. Come the inevitable triumph of Marxist-Leninist Socialism he would be an ideal candidate for *re-education*...

"Father!" he opened the door to the cottage.

"Here!" and distinguished older man with a moustache emerged. "Aha! *Dobro pozhalovat', damy!*" he greeted.

"You speak *Russian*?" Olga Gorchkov suspicioned.

"Yes. Colonel Fitzwilliam Darcy, retired", he warmly shook both their hands. "During what you chaps call The Great Patriotic War... I was part of the UK liaison team in Moscow. Is '*Rasputin's*' still there in Gorky Plaza?", his twinkling eyes ran from each in turn. "You're a Political Officer, Major...?"

"...Gorchkov", Olga inadvertently admitted.

"Is old Ivan Smirnoff still there at Section 31? What he didn't know about dialectic materialism wasn't worth knowing. Long retired, I suppose?"

"I know not", she admitted, her suspicions aroused.

Colin inwardly sighed. If his father could 'charm the pants' of most people... he trusted this would remain a metaphor, and not literal...

"*Chay?*" Colonel Fitzwilliam offered. "Later I thought we could go into Salisbury? Show you the cathedral?"

"Architecture is indeed a special interest of mine", Olga admitted her surprise.

Chapter One

August 4th, 1985. "Captain Darcy reporting Sir!" Colin saluted smartly as he entered the tent.

"Quite so", the monocular Brigadier-General Sir Peter Lowe gave him barely a glance. "Blistering barnacles!", he read the latest intel report. "Looks like this really is *it!* Russkies and their WARPAC chums massing on the IGB. My guess is they'll hit us hard and try and separate NORTHAG from CENTAG".

"Of course, Sir", Colin had long suspected that the boundary between NATO's two commands would be a prime Warsaw Pact target.

And now he was to liaise with the Americans, to the south...

"Ah! Kowalski!" the General looked up as woman in US Army fatigues entered. "This is Darcy, you'll be working together..."

"Captain..." Colin tried to contain his surprise.

"Captain Kowalski here is an American *experiment*. Ladies in the front line", General Lowe didn't bat an eyelid.

"Captain!" the American woman saluted – so Colin did likewise. "Captain Karen Kowalski, US 7th Cavalry".

"Captain Colin Darcy, Borsetshire Regiment", he tried to banish from his mind the thought that the 7th had been massacred by Native American Indians at Little Big Horn...

"Tomorrow before dawn then, *tovarich?*" reading his orders carefully... Captain Ivan Denisovich of the 837th Red Banner Division smiled at Yuri Antonov, his political officer.

"Yes. We begin the glorious liberation of the oppressed proletariat of Western Europe".

"I hope they will appreciate our... *socialist realism*", Ivan gently patted the side of his T80 tank, like it was a favoured steed.

"They will if we kill all the capitalists", Yuri's toeing of the Party line frequently bordered on the *ironic*...

"Poor bastards", Corporal Matthew Hay of the Tank Regiment watched as the FV432 armoured personnel carriers clanked to the rear.

"I have no sympathy for footsloggers", his Commander, Captain George Wickham, amused. An out-and-out cavalryman, by a long and distinguished family tradition, he disliked the infantry as the lesser mortals they were. Wasn't that idiot Darcy one? How *dare* the 'squaddie' take umbrage over his

sister. True, she was a pretty little filly... but it was her own damn fault she thought that 'weekend in the Cotswolds' would lead to an *engagement*...

"Rest of the company report in already recced hull-down positions and camoed", Corporal Hay relayed.

"Looks like Ivan's getting ready to rumble..." George surveyed the border between binoculars. "And I don't believe bears sleep-in and hibernate this time of year..."

"Word in the office says your boyfriend is in the Army, Lizzie?" 'UKTV' producer Jock McTavish looked up from the monitor.

"He's not my 'boyfriend'", Lizzie rolled her eyes. "He's a friend I write to, that's all".

"Whatever. Pump him for all the info you can. We're bound to get propaganda bollocks from the Government. Just like we did in the Falklands".

"I doubt he'll have much time to write if there's a war", Lizzie mused – hoped her 'friend' would be alright...

That the world would back down from a potential nuclear war...

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There could be little doubt what the artillery rumbling to the east signalled. "Bl.. *Idiots!*" Colin mumbled aloud as he drove the liaison Landrover towards the US HQ... only for Captain Kowalski to laugh aloud.

"World War III amuses you, Captain?" Colin scoffed.

"No. *You!* You Brits are so *repressed*. You think I ain't heard no swearing?"

"I am an officer and a gentlemen", Colin disliked being mocked. "I was brought up to believe one treats any woman as a lady at all times..."

The tension of the last few days erupted in Karen Kowalski and she burst into gales of laughter. "God! Your wife has you well trained!"

"I am a bachelor", Colin defended. "So clearly she has *not*".

"Me too", Kaz amused as they weaved through a refugee column. "You got a girl back home?" she then sought to break the silence.

"I am corresponding with a close friend", Colin admitted. "You, Captain?" he counter-attacked.

"Just put one son-of-a-bitch out of my misery", she gloated. "How d'you think you'd deal with being captured by the Commies?"

"The Russians drink tea as we do", it was Colin's turn to be wry. "I imagine all will be quite disagreeable, but tolerable. You?"

"I'll dump their bastard samovars in Boston Harbour too", Kaz retorted. "Ain't no Commie bastard takin' this Texas gel alive". She paused. There was no reaction from her English companion. "That was a joke?"

"Apologies, Captain. I was thinking of my Regiment. How they will cope in the front line. Our nickname is 'The Archers'. It'll be quite the Agincourt with those Russian tanks and BMP, instead of French knights".

Above them a wave of jets and helicopters headed west.

'Six Days To the Rhine'...

Chapter Two

"You seem to know a lot about it, Lassie?" Jock was impressed by Lizzie's concise appraisal.

"My father's only just retired from the Army", she admitted. "Rather than keep a huge standing army, all the US and Canadian equipment for their reserves – and our – is pre-positioned in Germany. Stands to reason as air-head for the reinforcements the enemy will be bombarding the UK itself".

"And the government advice. 'Stay put, stay indoors, don't panic buy'".

"They haven't a clue what'll happened now the cats out of the bag", Lizzie reasoned. "Let's just hope it doesn't go nuclear?"

"Och! No wonder all the trains and roads are blocked..."

The mine ploughs having done their work... Captain Denisovich ordered forward his company of T80 tanks.

"The Tommies are not firing at us", driver Gregor Yazutski grunted in his distinctive Kazakh accent.

"They'll be saving their ammunition", Ivan advised. "Intelligence says they do not have much. Proof capitalism doesn't work – is doomed to collapse under its own inherent contradictions", he repeated the Marxist liturgy the Political Officers favoured... privately guessed they were driving into an ambush from all sides...

"But you're a *girl!*" the 'fat controller' exploded in shock.

"I assume 'e, Sir", Jock McTavish weighed in on behalf of his junior, "Lizzie here's as feisty as a Highland wildcat. And she sure knows her stuff".

"I see no one else has volunteered", now she'd been so impulsive... Lizzie saw no choice but to see the thing through. "And my father knows General

Lowe, Commander of our lead armoured division", she decided not to mention her current *correspondence* with Colin Darcy.

"Camera team", the 'fat controller' sighed he agreed she was 'expendable' – and might indeed provide some 'novelty value' with the TV audience. "You'll need the best – with this new ENG stuff..."

"The 837th Red Banner Division is in position and moving forward, Comrade General!" Lieutenant Tatiana Romanov reported. "The paratroops have also been sent".

"Good..." General Alexi Ulanov puffed on his cigar as he hoped for the capture of some capitalist tobacco to replace this Kazakh *der'mo*. "Tell the 837th as a minimum I want the village of Stollen taken by nightfall".

"Of course, Comrade General", Tatiana couldn't help but wonder what was happening to the dashing English officer she had met three years before. Would he too survive?

Maybe she'd get to *interrogate* him...

In his HQ tent General Hank 'Blood and Iron' Kowalski was hasty issuing orders. "Captain Colin Darcy reporting, Sir", he saluted smartly, NATO command protocols long integrated.

"You the *****ing limey old Pete Lowe's sent?" the US General appraised with a most colourful metaphor. "Will that *****ing Welsh bastard hold?"

"I am to coordinate your requirements to him, yes Sir. And he will not retreat unless you too are able to do so. Mutually risk exposing flanks. General Lowe is most concerned the enemy will try and drive a wedge between our commands".

"Goddamn *****ing Commies!" the American general dismissed. "We're gonna wop their asses – just like we did back in 'Nam!"

"Quite so", Colin now doubted the American's grasp of historical fact.

"Go get some chow and report back", the General dismissed.

"A colourful character indeed?" Colin observed to his opposite number as they left the tent.

"That's my Pa!" Karen confirmed what he probably already suspected...

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"All units in position and reporting read..."

Suddenly there was the sound of helicopters - MG and small arms fire. "Idti!" voices were shouting in Russian. "Blistering barnacles!" General Lowe exclaimed and drew his pistol – sure enough two blue-bereted *Spetznaz* Soviet paratroopers burst in to his tent, indiscriminately spraying bullets from their AK74s. Coolly he dispatched one with an aimed shot – Sergeant Benton eliminating the other. Sir Peter aimed again at the entrance – but it was only Captain O'Donnell.

"Two HINDs", he calmly reported. "Raiders – hoped to catch us on the hop".

"Damned inconvenient", Sir Peter holstered his weapon. "Usually commanders have better things to do than take pot-shots at each other".

"You've been hit Sir!"

"Blast it!" Sir Peter realised there was a dampening in his battledress... but it was – but pure chance – his hip flask had stopped a bullet, and leaked. "What a waste of good rum!" the flask had been a gift from Lady Lowe; hand-crafted by industrious peasant villagers in her native Basque area. "O'Donnell!" he collected his wits. "Any prisoners?"

"Two Sir!"

"Get them to the intel people – and have more MGs ready in case of more low-flying choppers".

"Blimey Chalky! There's 'undreds of them!" back at the front Smudger Smith watched down the optics of his Milan missile.

"Russians to the east Sir. Thousands of 'em", colour-sergeant Bourne reported back up the radio net.

"Roger, roger. Hold your fires 'til sure of kills".

Denisovich cursed the failures of reconnaissance as their veritable phalanx of socialist armour rolled forward. Then – suddenly – with a hail of fire the Tommies revealed their position. As per drill his battlegroup pummelled the dangerous enemy infantry whilst artillery attempted to suppress enemy armour – the much-vaunted Chieftains.

At least they'd avoid the minefield concealed in the wheatfield...

"Russkie artillery's got our number!" Corporal Hay reported on the intercom. Stating the blindingly obvious? "All hounds!" Captain Wickham ordered. "This is Foxhunter. Move to alternate positions!" he ordered his company reposition as – through his periscope – he saw the first of the Soviet T62s explode in a sheet of flame. "Idiot Mitchell!" he chastened his own gunner as, however, the dangerous Soviet OP evaded a 120mm round from his own Chieftain...

A remorseless hammer-blow? Denisovich heard Yazuti grunt a Kazakh curse about the Tommies' parentage as – around them - tanks began to explode. 'Lenin's ghost!' he thought. 'Glad I'm in a T80!' But, that said, the liberation of Stollen looked to be on course as 'collational' damage removed the pesky enemy infantry – either to their heaven that didn't exist or scurrying for their rear. Those Hurricane MLRs were worth their inclusion as support...

"Sorry Sir", Mitchell apologised. "I think it's dirt in the barrel!"

"Fire the damn thing!" Wickham ordered – only for his gunner to miss *again* as his tanks repositioned to fresh (and hopefully undetected) hull-down positions. At least his other tanks were eliminating T62s at a rate of knots...

"They are amongst us!" the infantry officer reported. Not that Denisovich had time to worry as the pesky Tommie foot came towards his T80, necessitating self-defence as a distraction from the advance. At least they'd now got one of the enemy Chieftains. If it could be recovered they'd see if it's engine was as underpowered as reported...

"Yeah, well, they don't like it up 'em, do they?" Jonesy urged the rest of the Borsetshire's follow Captain Lowe's order to counter-attack *out* of Stollen. "We stay here we're deader than Kathy Kirby's career. Russkie artillery's ranged in good and proper!"

As one man the platoon rushed out the village – into the woods – to grapple with the confused attacking Soviet infantry and their BMP combat vehicles.

"Regroup!" having taken grievous losses Kaptain Chekov ordered. *"Stollen will fall today – but not just now!"*

A rebuff? Denisovich knew this would mean bringing in the second wave as support – a delay to 'liberating' the smouldering a rubble-filled capitalist village. No doubt all the washing-machines would be broken, with little to 'personally liberate'...

"They're pulling back Sir!" Smudger exclaimed.

"They'll be back – and soon!" if a useful temporary respite Captain Glendower Lowe knew they need reorganise the defence... wondered how his father, the General, was faring back at HQ. "Everyone dig it!"

"Bit like that film 'Zulu', Sir?" Hawkins quipped.

"Real life is very different from the pictures", the young captain knew...

O

"I will tell you nothing", Captain Natasha Nitchkov avowed as her interrogators loomed.

"You've already told us you speak excellent English", Major Carstairs observed. "I dare say one does not achieve high rank in the *Spetznaz* without a certain level of... *ability*... We are also aware you would *not* be privy to high level plans. Even that your commanders consider you and your personnel were... *expendable*?"

"Many heroes will fall to liberate the proletariat of Europe", she sniffed back.

"Level three indoctrination", Carstairs casually reported to his assistant. "Send her up the line for further questioning..."

"Colonel Darcy, Sir", back in London the sergeant showed in the venerable retired officer.

"Darcy?" General Crowley, the Chief of the Defence Staff looked up for his sit-rep map. "What have you CI5 chaps got for us?"

"According to my contact in Moscow it seems our Soviet adversaries are somewhat taken aback at our gallant French allies honouring their NATO commitments. I can't possibly think", he smiled wanly, "where they got the impression from they wouldn't".

"Good work!" the General congratulated. "Is your Moscow contact still onside with us?"

"I believe so", Fitzwilliam smiled. "We do bear in mind, of course, she could be double-agent. But I think *not*..."

O

Simultaneous with the Soviet hammer-blow that had fallen upon the British sector... WARPAC forces hit the US Vth Corps. Out in front of the main FEBA were Sheridan tanks of the 7th US Cavalry; already in their pre-set, hull-down, ambush, positions. Lieutenant Seth Pitt knew his troop of air-portable AFV. Some of the older guys had been with him back in 'Nam; tearing 'round there looking for the **it. Now? If Seth had his way he'd chase the commies all the way back to Moscow – the goddam IGB be damned. But orders is orders... and he was there to give the *****ing Russkies a bloody nose that'd make 'em angry enough to go full pelt onto the line of waiting Dragon ATGW and tanks old 'Blood & Iron' had waiting for 'em. Then they'd hit 'em with a counter-attack. No nukes needed...

“Team Houston”, his Southern drawl spoke into his intercom. “This is Big Daddy. Start your engines. We’re about to go hunting bear...”

As mixed reports came in from Stollen General Ulanov puffed upon another cigar. “Tell Gorbachev to press his attack with the utmost vigour”, he ordered.

“*Da*, Comrade General”, Tatiana assented to relay. Kaptain Gorbachev’s job was to cross the River Flosse and force back the American screening force. Today they would see if – as reported – the Yankees would fight better than they had when defeated by the proletariat of Vietnam...

O

Kaptain Nikoli Gorbachev disliked the *quiet* as his force advanced up the main road, to the bridge over the River Flosse. It was *too quiet*. Ominously *quiet* - like Minsk on a bad Saturday night. To his right a HIND attack helicopter fluttered its rotors, on the look-out for concealed American positions; beneath it T72s taking hull-down fire positions behind a hill; to his left T62’s advancing through light woods; before him his infantry in their BMP vehicles. Then the artillery pummelled a wood – from the look of things eliminating Americans laying in ambush; like Red Indians...

“Ok Boys, let ‘em have it!” deciding the moment right Lieutenant Pitt’s 7th cavalry unleashed hell. It wasn’t quite as expected. Shaken by the commie bombardment, the infantry Dragon ATGW teams in the wood missed the advancing enemy BMP... but his Sheridan tanks shot-up some advancing T62’s like an Alabama hoe-down.

“*Zero-in Alphabeat!*” he heard on the radio M109 artillery begin counter-battery fire upon the now revealed enemy art; the FIST OP proving it’s worth...

“*Ty che blyad!*” Nikoli swore as the concealed Yankees shot back. Pressing up the road he cursed the T72s for holding back. He wanted to live too – but there was duty to the Motherland to fulfil in this, *Second*, Great Patriotic War against German fascists and American capitalists. At least his lead BMP were across the river! Old Ulanov couldn’t complain about *that*...

“Let’s go Brandon!” Seth ordered his scout BMP vehicles to launch their counter-attack at the road; while his beloved Sheridans took care of the rest of the T64s. Luckily the Russkie tanks on his left were hanging back.

"Yee ha!" on the radio he heard the regiment's organic choppers – tank-hunting Aircobras – go in to deal with the Russkie choppers and tanks.

"We're holdin' 'em boys! Let's kick ass!" Seth encouraged his team; reckoned they were also getting the upper-hand in the artillery duel...

"Mudak!" Nikoli swore again as the HIND went down in flames. Pressing the assault up the road he saw an American light tank go up in flames – but was it too little too late? Yes, he was across the river, but the Yankees were still resisting. It was a job for the follow-up waves. Attrition was a costly strategy... and how long it would work was open to debate.

That said, the inevitable triumph of Socialism was – as an article of faith – never in *doubt*...

Chapter Three

It was the same dream as before – half nightmare, half recollection. Colin Darcy was back in the Falklands – still a subaltern. It was the assault on Mount Whistledown. Once again it was in slow-motion. His platoon was moving forward. He was urging them on. The mortar bomb exploded. Colin Darcy again felt the extreme pain of the shrapnel – and woke up.

"You Ok?" his American companion questioned.

"Sorry", Colin apologised. "I must have nodded off. Smooth ride this jeep".

"Bad dream?" Kowalski asked (with minor concern).

"More a recurring memory", Colin smiled. "Nothing to worry about".

"I'm stopping for a comfort break", Karen unilaterally declared; steered her Humvee vehicle to the verge.

"I need to wake myself up", Colin mused, "before we report to General Lowe. That pond looks ideal..."

O

"The follow-up waves have pushed the capitalists back, Comrade General!" Lieutenant Tatiana Romanov presented the casualty reports to Ulanov.

"Da..." he puffed on his cigar - this time a 'liberated' one. "Intelligence were wrong about the French. They too must now be dealt with... That tower in Paris should come down any day soon"

O

With 'Cobham armour' fitted as upgrade... the front of a Chieftain tank displayed a long, thick protruding gun, with two symmetrical bulges on either side. If not a keen student of Dr Freud... Captain Karen Kowalski nevertheless wonder the similarities as her Brit counterpart emerged from the pool in just his underwear.

His scarring was interesting, too. "Where you get the scars?" determined to embarrass his repressed English po-ness she stepped out of the Humvee with her coffee.

"Is it normal in the American Army to spy upon fellow officers whilst they bathe?" Colin *refused* to be embarrassed as he sought his shirt.

"You ain't got no girl back home. Ain't seeing nothing here what breaks the Girl Scouts' code". She paused. "And you ain't answered my question?"

"Shrapnel, Falklands", Colin huffed. "Final assault on Mount Whistledown".

"You get a medal for that?" she teased.

"Yes thank you, *Captain*", Colin found his trousers. "I assume this means you've *failed* your experiment to get ladies on the front-line as equals?" again securely clothed he promptly counter-attacked.

"What?"

"Sexual harassment of a fellow officer? Most... *unprofessional*?"

Karen veritably *bristled*. "You gonna report me?"

"No", Colin shrugged. "But I suggest - *Madam* – you consider how you would feel, were the boot on the other foot, so to speak. That it was *I* who had *voyeured* upon *you*. Sauce for the goose must be sauce for the gander, must it not? All things being *equal*?"

Karen was about to laugh... then took his point. "Goddammit you're right".

"They times are a-changing, Captain", Colin presaged. "It's freedom and equality we're fighting for here. That cuts both ways. Shall we get moving?" he felt proud he'd won the exchange on points...

O

In the south, in Bavaria, progress had been exceptionally good. Munich had been liberated... though General Sergi Nitchkov was personally discombobulated by his daughter, Natasha, being reported 'missing'. Better dead than imprisoned in a capitalist *gulag*...

"Orders, General!" his aide entered the tent.

"See to it!" Sergi read and endorsed.

'Dig in...' indeed. Someone had seriously miscalculated the West's response.

It must be a French counter-attack coming...

O

"What you stoppin' for!" Karen complained.

"News team", Colin didn't qualify - merely pulled up and got out.

"Puncture?" he casually sauntered over to the ENG team.

"Colin!" the girl reporter duly exclaimed her glee.

"Miss Bennett", he acknowledged formality. "I'm on duty".

"This is Tom Dally, my cameraman", understanding Lizzie proudly enthused.

"And Trevor Howard, my soundman. I'm now 'UKTV's reporter at the front".

"My counterpart, Captain Kowalski, United States Army", Colin saw Karen had joined them.

"Can't be caught out in the open", scanning the sky for MIGs Kaz cautioned.

"Quite so!" Colin agreed. "Please, climb aboard, allo f you. Miss Bennett is a TV reporter", he informed Karen of the obvious.

"Sorry I haven't written - been a little bit busy", Lizzie apologised as her team hoisted their kit aboard the American jeep.

"Likewise", Colin smiled as she went to organise her team. As she made to move off Karen quietly grabbed his arm.

"When you say... '*correspond with*' is that some English code for..."

"Miss Bennett and I are *close friends*", Colin clarified. "There is no... *formal obligation* between us, as *yet*".

"In English, please? That mean you're *dating*?"

"I believe that would be the nearest translation into American", Colin walked off - then turned back. "Miss Bennett is *not* the kind of lady to observe a gentleman's private ablutions..."

As Colin drove, Karen found herself having to field lots of damn-fool questions from his 'ongoing date'; whilst her team filmed it all.

"That's classified", she answered yet again. "Gotta be careful the Russkies ain't watching your show, right?"

"But the close liaison between NATO powers must surely be giving them pause in this war? America's involvement from the very start. *This time*?"

If it was barbed comment... Karen reckoned she could take irritating 'Mary Poppins' in a fistfight... Yet knew this was not the time.

"Yep. This is our war, rather than one we're dragged into", she responded.

"We're gonna wop Ivan's arse and hand it back to him".

"'Arse' isn't on the allowed list of words", Trevor protested.

"Bleep it!" Colin sought to bridge troubled waters. "Captain Kowalski is from Texas. They use many colourful metaphors there..."

O

Colonel Lacoste was known to his men as '*Le Crocodile*' for good reason. Driving hard – literally and metaphorically – he'd already taken his *Group de bataille* far into Germany. Indeed, he'd deployed a speed and alacrity the Great Napoleon would envy. And now? It was to France that had fallen the honour of delivering the first great counter-blow...

O

"*What!*" Lizzie exclaimed as Trevor and Tom listened in to the call from 'base'. "That's miles away!"

"*Och, Lassie, it's what they want*", Jock would brook no denial. "*And you speak their lingo*".

"Yes but..."

"*Och, there's a news blackout at the front. This way you get away with it. Fix your van and get going. Over and out*".

"Fiddlesticks!" mindful of the American captain's colourful language Lizzie exclaimed.

"Let's just go", Trevor suggested. "Less chance of being killed behind the lines. Am I right, or am I right?"

"Good luck", Colin sought now to engage his friend. "I trust we'll meet up again when this is all over.

"Er, yes", Lizzie felt awkward with the others' eyes on them. "Dinner at '*The Red Lion*', was it not?"

"It was", Colin too felt parting such sweet sorrow...

Chapter Four

"Blistering barnacles!" it ran right against General Sir Peter Lowe's nature to retreat... but needs must NATO retain a united and linked front WARPAC couldn't work around. "Captain Kowalski!" he requested his American liaison, "Darcy!" he then called up his own Captain. "Inform General Kowalski to the south and General Nietzsche to the north we will withdraw as requested to concord lines".

"The enemy can't have unlimited reserves, Sir?" Colin reasoned their offensive couldn't last forever. "We've got their measure".

"It's who'll break first", though it stuck in his craw to admit it... Sir Peter knew much would depend on the French...

O

"I will still tell you nothing", Captain Natasha Nitchkov avowed as her latest interrogators loomed. They were clever these English. Their so-called 'prison camp' with its brick buildings and bunk beds was more like a Leningrad hotel than a *gulag*.

"Return her to her hut", the sneering Englishwoman amused... trusted the hidden microphones would provide suitable intelligence...

oOo

Tom and Trevor looked 'quizzically' as their reporter presented her credentials... and the French colonel spewed a stream of rapid-fire dialogue.

"Colonel Lacoste is using many colourful metaphors to express his apprehension at our being here", Lizzie gently qualified.

"*Dubois!*" the Colonel suddenly shouted. "*Il mérite le fardeau!*"

"*Allez, sil vous plait*", saluting smartly the young lieutenant bundled the *équipe de caméra anglaise* out. "We call him 'Zer Crocodile'", he confided.

"Lacoste? Crocodile?" Tom suppressed a laugh.

"*Oui*", the junior officer radioed ahead to warn *Capitaine Dubois*...

As they walked the compound Lizzie's keen eye noticed a hive of activity; though quite who the '*dames de soutien logistique*' were she couldn't fathom. Clearly civilians, she guessed they must be some kind 'ENSA' entertainment corps. Parisian models, *peut etre*? Their *allure* was certainly amusing Tom and Trevor's puerile natures...

"*Mademoiselle Bennett, mon Captain*", the Lieutenant reported – then left.

"Ah!" expecting an Anglo-Saxon harridan... Pierre Dubois turned – and was surprised at the attractive looking young woman before him. "*Mademoiselle Bennett*", he smiled as he inhaled upon his *Galois*. "You do not look English?"

"You, Sir, look much *Gallic*", Lizzie was perfunctory back as she and her team climbed in beside the Frenchman in his APC. "I and my team – Tom Dally and Trevor Howard – are from *UKTV*. We're here to report the war from the French perspective, for our viewers?"

"Oui", Pierre amused. "I have 'ad orders to cooperate as such. One of our teams from *TV France* is with your forces *aussi*".

"Can we just go and film and record anywhere?" Tom asked.

"*Dacord*", the captain agreed. "Any bad my men tell you 'no', *n'est pas*?"

"We'll comply", Tom agreed. 'Traitors', Lizzie thought as he and Trevor enthusiastically scampered off to get some footage; leaving her alone in a tiny steel box with their 'ally'.

"So, *Mademoiselle* Bennett?" Pierre poured two glasses of *vin rouge*. "What would you like to know zat I can tell you?"

"No, thank you, not on duty", Lizzie declined the wine. "How soon do you expect to be in action?"

"Soon", he smiled. "Ivan is about to get 'is biggest *botter le cul*¹ since we beat 'im in the Crimea. Zen *aussi* with zer 'elp of you English, of course".

"You seem... *confident*?" (Lizzie thought of another word for 'arrogant').

The French captain simply smiled. "Let us just say zer spirit of zer Great Napoleon lives on, 'ere, in my unit".

And then all hell broke loose. "*Sacre bleu!*" Pierre exclaimed as a sudden salvo of Soviet rocket-fire came in. "*Arretez-vous!*" he ordered Lizzie remain put as he dived outside into the mayhem. "*Arretez-vous aussi!*" he ordered Tom and Trevor stay under the vehicle they'd taken cover beneath.

As Dubois *allez-vite* Lizzie noticed her team were carefully filming – also that a *grognard* was lying wounded by shrapnel. Without thought for his own safety Dubois went to pull the wounded *soldat francais* over his shoulder - and off to the armoured ambulance, all the way under fire. Despite herself she felt a swell of *feminine admiration* for the insufferable Frenchman.

The firestorm passed and Dubois returned. So too did Tom and Trevor. "Got all that on film", the latter triumphed.

"Send it back to the studio", Lizzie decided. "I'll record a report to go with it. That was most... *brave*?" turning to Dubois she begrudgingly complimented.

"Pah!" he simply shrugged and lit a fresh cigarette. "Zay are *mes enfants*, *n'est pas*? What is danger compared to upholding zer honour of France, no?"

'Pompous as well as arrogant' thought Lizzie. Handsome too - and knew it. She felt her blood boil with extreme *irritation*. Despite his extreme good looks, bravery, secure income and healthy countenance... she decided he was the last man on Earth she could ever be prevailed upon to marry...

¹ Literally 'arse-kicking' (Ed.)

Chapter Five

"I got my back to Rhine and I need those Reforger guys now!" trying to control his temper General Hank 'Blood and Iron' Kowalski spoke to the Supreme Commander on a secure conference call.

"*You just hold on for now*", came the calm reply. "*And no nuclear release either. Out!*"

"Goddam *****ing Commies!" orders being orders Hank swore. "Local counter-attacks", he decided. "We gotta keep Ivan off-balance... You Brits able t'do the same?" he then turned to his liaison officer.

"General Lowe too believes in aggressive defence", Colon confirmed... knew they had the luxury of being nearer UK reinforcements.

And it was *then* the artillery stonk came in...

'At least she is alive', Sergi Nitchkov crushed the Red Cross notification in his hand. 'After the war she will be free', he wondered if his daughter Natasha was being mis-treated in an English prison camp. Forced to clean the floors for Phillip The Terrible or some such...

But there was no time to think of that now. The capitalists were making a counter-attack in his sector, and it must be held so WARPAC armies in the north could liberate the Ruhr and bring the war to a successful conclusion. Marshal Kutuzov had defeated Napoleon at Borodino; so too would he beat the French again...

"Blasted shrapnel again..." Colin Darcy was sanguine of his fresh wounds. "Dashed unlucky..." loss of blood made him fall unconscious.

"He's AB negative", the medic checked the Brit's dog-tag. "Gee, that's rare".

"He needs blood?" Karen guessed.

"About a pint, Ma'am yes Ma'am".

"I'm AB negative", she knew. "Let's do *this*..."

"...I cannot say how many, but I counted them all out, and I counted them all out and I counted them all back again", UKTV's Lizzie Bennett continued her piece to camera concerning the French recce force. "By the time you hear this, developments on this front will be much clearer. Elizabeth Bennett, UKTV, somewhere in Germany".

"That's a good take ", Trevor approved the technical quality of the sound. "Send that?"

"Yep", Tom agreed the visuals were also up to muster. "Time to interview your friend, Boss?" he now teased Lizzie.

"Captain Dubois is not my *friend*", she iced back.

"Go on!" Trevor joined in.

"The man is totally infuriating..." Lizzie insisted; thoughts of the Frenchman she'd been assigned to now vexing her day and night. But, duty is duty, and she and her team dutifully trooped towards the command APC.

It was a hive of bustling activity. "I cannot accommodate you now, *Mademoiselle*", Pierre shrugged at her with a smile. "*Ils frappe les Soviets immediatement*".

"Can we come along?" Lizzie questioned.

"I cannot be responsible for you", Pierre denied. "You will get in zer way. I would be most upset were anything adverse 'appen to you and your team".

"I am responsible for *myself*!" Lizzie angrily refused to be patronised. "How very dare you!"

"I 'ave my orders and my honour, *Mademoiselle*. But – when I return – I will agree to talk to you then, *n'est pas*? Per'aps we break-out the champagne, no?" he strode off.

"He's right you know?" Tom suggested.

"I don't wanna die", Trevor agreed.

"You two *always* take his side!" Lizzie growled her total frustration with life, the universe, and everything...

oOo

Bratwurst was a vital village crossroads in Bavaria. The reports suggested the Soviets were holding it in some force, but the *ville* had been thoroughly reconnoitred by *operations speciales*. Outnumbered? Such detail mattered little to Lacoste. What mattered was outdoing France's German allies, on their home turf.

"*Part de gâteau*", Dubois considered the dubious odds when - to everyone's surprise – reinforcements clattered in -in the form of Renaud's AMX 30 company.

"*Magnifique!*" they all exclaimed together...

If deploying forward made for inviting enemy artillery fire... Sergi Nitchkov wished to keep the vital Bratwurst crossroads clear. It was with surprise, therefore that the French attacked from the outset with their full force. A bold manoeuvre? The enemy assault was preceded by massive air attacks. His aide,

Putin, suggested it was the Mirages of the legendary *Aeronauts*, operating out of Dijon... but Sergi considered this merely fanciful... but also a way to justify failure he filed for future reference. The *Frantsuzkiy* also employed attack helicopters – and his mis-placed AAGW failed to prevent this attack as the enemy's thinly armoured AMX 30s rushed on – like Napoleon's cavalry attacking the Great Redoubt at Borodino. Worse – up the road streamed French VAB apcs. Casualties on both sides were grievous – yet on came the Gallic tide – heedless of risk and full of *elan* – Nitchkov's tanks soon suppressed – his infantry holding the *commune* itself pinned the enemy *grande batterie*...

"*Zut alors!*" Pierre Dubois muttered. If Renaud was making progress *a la droit*... in front of him the enemy's venerable T55s were fighting back had – infantry VABs exploding *sur la rue* like *touristique anglaise* obliged to pay a Parisian waiter's tip...

Suddenly there was a huge explosion. In a tank designed for speed - the chiffon-like armour of his AMX gave way – and smoke filled the turret. *C'est fini?* "*Mettre en dépôt! Allez! Vite!*" Pierre ordered his crew out... suddenly felt light-headed. "*Je suis blessé!*" he saw he'd lost much blood, his final thought before oblivion a *sang froid* dream of a *romancer érotiquement* with the comely, yet feisty, English reporter who so irritated him...

"*Cherti!*" Nitchkov exclaimed as – his force pummelled to *banta der'mo* the surviving enemy infantry – like Napoleon's Old Guard – assaulted and took Bratwurst. "Pull back!" he gave the order to retreat – anxious to avoid his daughter's fate of being taken prisoner.

Though, to be fair, he imagined in a French prison camp the food would be infinitely better than in an English one...

oOo

"...Elizabeth Bennett, for UKTV, with the French army, at a location in Bavaria", she finished her report on the action at Bratwurst. "Get that?" she checked with Tom and Trevor – didn't wait for a reply as she *finally* saw someone she knew pass. "Lieutenant?" she questioned (in French). "I'm sure you're all very *busy* after a battle... but is it possible to interview my contact, Capitaine Dubois?"

"No Mademoiselle", he replied in kind. "Have you not *heard?* He has been wounded. Excuse me", busy on errands for 'le Crocodile', he passed on.

"What's up?" Tom saw the blood drain from his reporter's face.

"Pierre... I mean *Capitaine Dubois* has been wounded", Lizzie distractedly mused what to do next.

Her camera and sound men looked at each other knowingly. "He'll be alright", Trevor teased.

"Bet French nurses are cute", Tom joined in.

"Give him something to live for", Trevor added his own amusement.

Lizzie sternly rolled her eyes at their sexism.

"Human interest factor?" Trevor decided to help her out. "If he's still nearby we could go interview?"

"Someone here to see you, Sir", the (female) nurse smiled sweetly.

"What?" Colin sat up in the US field hospital bed – like M*A*S*H but nowhere near as funny. "*Captain!*" flummoxed he saw it was Karen Kowalski. "I apologise for being obliged to abandon my post".

"They say you'll be up and about in a week?" she, instead, simply grinned at him in amusement.

"I understand I have you to thank for my transfusion", Colin was suitably grateful. "Thank you, Captain. Dashed awkward having a rare blood group".

"We're off-duty", Karen smiled. "Guess, *Colin*, you can call me 'Karen'. Hey – we *have* now shared bodily fluids, right?"

"*Madam!*" in his weakened state he was shocked by such *innuendo* – especially as another passing nurse laughed aloud.

"Is he behaving himself?" Karen amused.

"He ain't got no cheque yet", the nurse likewise teased.

"*What?*" Colin exasperated.

"No sweat", Karen dismissed. "It'll all be on Uncle Sam – like your NHS *thang*. You sure seem in your career to attract shrapnel like a magnet?"

"I take solace that *you*, yourself, were not wounded, Miss Kowalski".

"Miss Kowalski?" Kaz amused. "Wow! Makes me sound like a character in a Catherine Meadows novel".

"Are we not being informal?" Colin chuckled back his minor triumph.

"Sure", Kaz played along. "Guess that makes you... 'Mr Darcy', right?"

"Please don't", Colin was so fed-up of that 'joke'...

"Should you be smoking in a hospital?" Lizzie queried her contact.

"Eet is but a forward dressing station", Pierre Dubois amused as he blew a smoke-ring.

Tom and Trevor laughed (for they were all talking in English)

"Even so..." Lizzie waved the smoke away. "You don't seem *badly wounded?*"

"I am sorry to disappoint you by surviving", Pierre grinned. "*Oui*. Of course I will answer all your questions".

"How's your girlfriend taking your wounding?" Tom decided to mischievously intervene.

"That position is currently *vacant*", Dubois winked at the Englishwoman. "But I will need a new tank too. Tell *le monde* we need new, how you say, 'kit'..." he (most professionally) continued to discuss the battle that had just occurred... and Lizzie Bennett decided she needed to have 'words' with her crew...

They were behaving like minor characters in a Catherine Meadows novel...

oOo

"They're coming on in the same old style", O'Donnell amused it was just like the film '*Waterloo*'.

"Then we'll meet them in the same old style", General Sir Peter Lowe shot back. "Have everyone stand to *alert*! Tell Hank Kowalski we'll hold if he will", he turned to the new US liaison.

"Goddam it we will too Sir yes Sir!" the American confirmed...

"Report General!" Hawkins saluted.

"Blistering barnacles!" the General exclaimed. "Jerry's being hard-pressed too. The ruddy Russkies are certainly going for it..."

"You don't *understand*!" Colin tried to reason with the American doctor. "If I am no longer required as liaison I *must* rejoin my Regiment! The Borchesters need all the help they can get!"

"If you don't sit down Captain – I'll sedate you. You ain't fit for no duty".

"Aggh!" Colin let out a frustrated sigh.

"It's Ok Doc", he saw Karen approach (for, indeed, they were now on first name terms). "I'll calm him down".

The doctor departed. "'Calm me down', *Captain*?" Colin protested.

"You crazy Brit!" she sighed and rolled her eyes. "Ok, *sush*! I'ma breaking yous outta here. I got a Humvee outside with more than enough gas to do it..."

"*Sheisse*!" *Kaptein* Hans Schmidt explained as he clambered into his faithful Leopard II tank, 'Number 131'. "Start up!" he ordered his driver. His tanks and a scratch infantry company were in ambush between Bad Gotten and Scholagen... and a fresh Soviet assault was expected. Inevitably his thoughts

strayed to those of his cousin, also called Hans, who back in Hitler's war had also fought 'Ivan'...

Just like his father before him, back in The Great Patriotic War, Colonel Sergi Voroshnikov was expecting a German ambush; 'retreat' an art they had perfected back then. "Keep off the roads!" he ordered his T72 battalion. He fully expected pre-fired artillery fire or mines...

"Command requires the factory captured within thirty minutes", the Political Officer reminded.

"Command are getting rash", Sergi knew they were talking out of their bottoms as he issued orders for the attack...and prayed to the God he wasn't allowed to believe in. "Forward at the double!" he ordered a dash attack...

"...it's the call of duty", aching like heck Colin explained as Karen drove. "Very much a *pro* of the British regimental system".

"If you say so", Karen grinned. "Yous guys is as crazy as the Marines", the sound of gunfire indicated they were approaching the FEBA.

And then a stray shell exploded – which threw the Humvee off the road. "Leaking gas!" Karen foresaw as she pulled the wounded Brit away. Just in time too! As the Humvee's gas-tank exploded she threw herself upon her allied compatriot to protect him from the blast...

The uncomfortable BMP 2 rumbled up the road. If Petyr Zilensky suspected they were being used to prod the capitalists into exposing their ambush positions... So, he said nothing, lest he scare the new 'recruits'. He knew the rest of the command was using cover to circle around the wood to their front: the one that barred their way to the objective.

Then he saw the blood had drained from one of the kids' faces. "Somedays, it's like the German proletariat don't wish to be liberated", he joked to lighten the youngster's mood.

And then all hell broke loose on the column...

Was he *dead*? Colin awoke to find he was being kissed by an angel. Only – as he came to his senses – he realised it wasn't an 'angel' *at all* – but rather Karen Kowalski!

"*Captain!*" he exclaimed his horror.

"Kiss of life!" she grinned. "You weren't a breathin'".

"Was I *not*?" Colin confused – saw his wound had again slightly opened.

"Can you walk?" seeing it too Karen got to her feet, was now serious.

"It would appear, *Captain*, we have to..." Colin fought to stand. "Perhaps we can hitch a lift to my regiment..." despite the loss of blood he felt his *physical admiration* for Karen suddenly – and unexpectedly - *grow*...

"*Sheisse!*" Hans realised the main enemy force was attempting to flank them – work around the position. "*Beschuss!* Fire!" he ordered – knew right now he could do with some serious anti-tank helicopter support. Still, Ivan didn't seem to have any today either...

"Like rain through a grate..." if he'd sprung the enemy ambush Sergi's conscience knew the losses had been high. But, but *manoeuvre* and ignoring losses they seemed to be carrying the day as firefights began.

"*Leopards!*" someone shouted.

"Thin armour!" he reminded his gunner the 'party line'. "Order close assault", if he gave command the victory they required he'd at least keep the Political Officer *happy*...

There was a huge 'thump' and explosion. "*Alle raus!*" Hans guessed you never saw coming the Spandril missile that finally gets you. Another lost position, another retreat?

If they fell back and further they'd be in Belgium...

At least with close fighting Petyr knew even the enemy couldn't shell you. "We're to hold!" someone shouted. "All objectives secured".

"Well done, *Syn*", he cheered the ashen-faced youth. "First time?"

"No. I've been scared lost of times".

"They'll rest us now", Comradely slapped him on the shoulder. "All quiet on the western front for the rest of the day, eh..?"

Such was the shortage of transport caused by defence cuts... reinforcements from the UK were being brought in by bus, much like in The Great War.

"I ain't been on a London bus before?" Karen again checked Colin's wound.

"It's an 'unarmoured motorised transport'", he defended as the bus pulled-up and the reinforcements alighted.

"Captain..." now they were alone Colin perplexed. "Did I *really* stop breathing".

"Even *unconscious* you're a good kisser", she shot back. "Fancy a date when all this is over?"

"Captain!" Colin exclaimed.

"First aid post over there", Karen directed. "let's get you patched up and find your regiment", she realised she's kissed a Brit – and she liked it...

Colin Darcy, meanwhile, realised he'd best write a letter to Lizzie...

oOo

Firing up Leopard 131... Hans Schmidt prepared for the Manstein-like counter-attack - direct-from-retreat - to gain control of the vital crossroads from the Soviets, at the village of Kaiser's Eiche and it's nearby motel...

Reinforced after the battle, Colonel Sergi Voroshnikov had been expecting yet another West German blocking action – not a full riposte from retreat...

"Forward Comrades!" The Political Officer urged. "The German proletariat must be liberated!"

That was all very well and good, but this time the artillery fire was ineffective – the capitalists stealing a march and moving first – friendly artillery fire ineffective - and his scout BMP shot-up by the ubiquitous Leopards...

"Read it!" Lizzie raged at her team – threw the letter at them.

"He just says that Captain Kowalski broke him out of hospital and helped him rejoin his unit?" Tom shrugged.

"That's good, isn't it?" having a teenage daughter himself Trevor was a bit more circumspect.

"That's the... *woman* we met on the road!" Lizzie perplexed.

"But I thought you and Captain Darcy were just 'friends'?" Tom confused.

"*She's an American!*" Lizzie perplexed.

"What's it to you?" despite Trevor's look of 'no' Tom persisted.

"Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson?" Lizzie angered. "They *all* want to come over here and steal *Englishmen!*" she stomped of...

"What did I say?" Tom confused.

"Mate", Trevor explained, "just because she's not sure if she wants to snog him... doesn't mean she don't want no one else too".

"Women!" Tom was glad he was comfortably married...

'Manoeuvre – keep going!' that was the doctrine. Heedless of further casualties Sergi pressed on. One of the hateful Leopards was destroyed – but the seized village was at least holding. Foolish NATO - scrimping of their infantry. Had these German fathers learnt nothing at Stalingrad? If their tanks were imperious to most infantry weapons his *otrady* yet held the village...

Despite huge losses...

Attrition? *Nien danke!* Hans pulled back his leopards to concede a worthless motel. They had, at least inflicted huge losses on the enemy – one he hoped they could not sustain...

“Captain Dubois”, seeing the perplexing Frenchman was alone Lizzie strode in his APC. “Forgive me. I hope you are feeling better?”

“*Oui, Mademoiselle.* Back to duty, *n’est pas?* ‘Ow can I ‘elp you?”

“In vain I have struggled”, Lizzie paced. “My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire you. In declaring myself thus I'm fully aware that I will be going expressly against the wishes of all good moral behaviour for an Englishwoman...”

“Pah!” Pierre amused. “I feel it too” – boldly he strode across and kissed her...

Chapter Six

??

TO BE CONTINUED...

1991

General Abdul Hussain stared through his binoculars at the heat haze. Given the airstrikes the Coalition attack could not be long delayed. Intelligence reported he was facing the British 7th Armoured. Or the Americans. He hoped it was the British: their Challenger tanks (reputedly) often broke down. A hopeful lie? Either way the enemy's 'kit' was a generation ahead of his. But that did not matter. It would truly be, 'the mother of all battles...'

They were supposed to be 'acclimatised'. Yet the dry heat of the desert was something Major Colin Darcy of the Dorsetshire Regiment could never quite reconcile himself to. Pulling aside the tent flap he saluted.

"Ah! Darcy!" the monocular veteran, General Sir Peter Lowe acknowledged. "Slight change of plan. I want your battlegroup to take these crossroads here", he pointed to the map.

"Al Jollsen?" Colin noted. "It's in the middle of nowhere?"

"Metalled road, Sir. Few and far between", a callow youth of an ADC Lieutenant reported.

"Thank you, Hay", the General silenced. "HQ want to secure the lateral routes, just in case".

"Can do", Colin nodded... guessed the ADC had been too young for the war...

O

The dust storm was all around. General Hussain deployed facing south, the direction intelligence said the invaders would come from. First were his less effective T55s, then his main force of T62s, then in reserve his T72s. Based upon reports of the last two days the enemy would be tough to stop. As for air cover... who knew? In Saddam's Iraq truth and fiction were interchangeable...

Then the dust began to clear - and it was from the north-west they came. Enemy tanks – Challengers – and attack helicopters. In seconds the precious T72s erupted in flame or drove off – their morale shattered – also some of Hussain's vital motorised infantry. Panic? "Into cover!" he was urged by an urgent aide...

'Even Wickham's learnt from the war...' despite all that had happened in the intervening years Colin couldn't *help* but resent the tanker who'd so wronged his sister; nearly a decade before. With the Iraqi T72s neutralised he knew the

Challengers had little to fear from the remaining enemy armour. Then a spandrel missile from a recon vehicle shot past – a miss – and the attack Lynx erupted in flame. Through the haze he could make out some badly positioned T62s advance. Again, Wickham's Challengers made short work, using their longer range. An RAF Tornado breezed in to knock out more...

Ambush! "Pesky foot-sloggers!" Captain George Wickham was irritated one of his tanks took a telling hit – yet continued in action. True to form the incompetent supporting infantry attacked the position with the bayonet – but were repulsed.

"Got the last of the T55s", a report came on the intercom.

"Let's go save our infantry's bacon yet again", George was laconic. Perhaps after *this* war he'd finally get the promotion he so richly deserved...

"Basra!" his command in ruins Hussain ordered his driver. But it was not to be – a shot from an enemy AT gun and his M113 APC erupted in flame...

"Report to General Lowe crossroads secure", Colin ordered his RT operator.

"Permission to advance, Major", even over the intercom Wickham's near insubordination was apparent.

"Negative *Captain*. Regroup and prepare!" Colin replied. "I suspect they're not finished yet", experience during the war suggested nothing was ever this 'easy'...

O

General Abdul Hussain sucked on his looted cigarette and nodded. Commanding a unit of elite Republican Guard he knew he had the artillery support his late namesake had not been provided with.

"Attack!" he ordered his 2IC, Aziz. "Before the enemy consolidates! While he is over-extended", he knew this time they had the initiative...

"Sir..." came back the smart salute...

"*Already!*" Colin scanned the advancing dust cloud. No time to properly dig in it was face the enemy host before fully-re-grouping. Gazing through his binoculars from the crossroads he could see enemy T55's on his left. 'He's shown his hand', he thought. "Sergeant Hay!" he barked. "Order Captain Wickham to swing his tanks around and hit their flank!"

And it was then – unlike the battle of but hours before – Iraqi artillery came in to play...

The slaughter was terrible... but the enemy light forces holding the crossroads were pushed back – flanking fire from the advancing T55s knocking out one of the hated Challengers. “It goes well”, Hussain declared (he could afford the losses).

But then – nemesis. An enemy Tornado swooped in – and in seconds his reserve T72s were burning metal; the enemy anti-tank Lynx seeming to also lead a charmed life...

It was now an attrition battle Colin couldn't afford to fight. ‘Quantity has a quality all of its own’, he recalled from somewhere. Employing flexible defence he abandoned the vital crossroads for the moment, the better to conserve his forces. Somehow an enemy airstrike came in as darkness began to fall.

“It's like that film, Sir”, Sergeant Hay suggested. “‘Zulu’. There's thousands of the blighters...”

“Mm...” Colin dressed his minor wound. “RT!” he ordered the operator. “Inform the General we're pulling back to regroup. We'll attack again in the morning”, it was now ‘flexible defence’...

“I've two tanks KO'd that need repairs”, at this point Captain George Wickham breezed up. “If the Iraqis quieten for the night and dig in we can roll again in the morning”.

“Thank you, Captain”, Colin forced himself to be polite to the man who had so wronged his sister, all those years ago.

For his part George Wickham delighted at his superior's ‘failure’. He was a chance to finally advance his career...

“Dig in!” Hussain ordered his weary and decimated infantry. “They'll be back come daylight”. He also knew reports from elsewhere were indicating a general disaster; a full retreat back towards Basra. At least he held the battlefield...

NEXT GAME

The British hold the crossroads. The Iraqi's will attack on.

The (reduced) British battlegroup is as follows:-

Battlegroup HQ. (7 pts) (ERAS 6, 7, 8 & 9)

1 X Wombat Team + FV432 (3 pts)

1 X SLR HQ (Major Darcy) + FV432 (1 pt)

1 X SLR Observer + FV432 (1 pt)

UNITS

'C' Squadron, Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (ERAS 8 & 9 ONLY)

HQ

1 X Challengers (with Chobham armour)

2 X Platoons of 2 Challengers with Chobham armour *DICE BEFORE PLAY*

– ON A 1-3 TWO CHALLENGERS ARE NOT AVAILABLE DUE TO BREAKDOWN

'B' Company, 1st Batt, Dorsetshire Regt. 13pts (ERAS 7, 8 & 9 ONLY)

HQ

1 X Milan Team

1 X SLR HQ

1 X SLR Spotter

1st Platoon

3 X Carl Gustav AT teams

1 X 2" Mortar team

1 X GPMG SF team

1 X GPMG / 66mm AT teams

TPT 3 X WARRIOR (ERAS 8 & 9 ONLY)

SUPPORT

1 X M109 SP Gun (ERAS 7, 8 & 9 ONLY)

The (revised) British battlegroup is as follows:-

FORMATION HQ.

General Hussain (ERAS 7 & 8)

HQ

1 X M113

1 X SLR HQ (General Hussain) with Grail AAGW

1 X Rifle team

UNITS

Tank Company 5 X T62 tanks (ERAS 7 & 8)

Tank Platoon 3 X T72 tanks (ERAS 7 & 8)

Conscript coy. (ERAS 6+)

1 X HQ AK47

1 X AK47

1 X 120mm mortar

1st Plat

2 X RPG7 tank hunters

4 X AK47

2nd Plat

2 X RPG7 tank hunters

4 X AK47

5 X BRDM APCs

1 X AH-1 Gazelle HOT helicopter² (ERAS 7 & 8)

FROM TURN 4 A 'RELIEF COLUMN' WILL ARRIVE. Miss Meadows has detailed it's composition, but it will remain secret from players as a 'surprise'.

TO BE CONTINUED...