

109

in your base an' killin' your doodz

LCTN: 51-TAURUS-A2B (Hyades cluster)
 CORD: SAO-76541.0105 (54pc from SOL)
 TIME: 07:33zulu (local 11:29mst)

Rongo was a disaster for the SA. What was supposed to be a quick an' dirty diversionary attack fizzled out when only eighty fighters diverted from Maui. Forty-five squadrons remained behind, and when these guys did show they hung out in space only long enough to cover the ninety-six on Rongo to get out and race back over to Maui.

This was a planned move, the result being that Maui is now on full alert, and they have almost 900 fighters—minus the ships Jessica and the rest shot down near the Kai Pai fashion district.

Which was 48, and that brings the BDF numbers down to 848.

The real targets here at Tū have always been the industrial cities of Kolohe and Whanoke on the massive Greenland sized island of Whare Kino on the other side of the planet Maui.

Kai Pai and Whare Kino are on exact opposite sides of Maui so any direction of travel from one side to the other is as good as any other possible direction you could pick. With their fighters scattering to the northwest for Whare Kino, Jacob and Kagame opt for the down under route over the southern pole while the Warthog recovers the four SA pilots, Jessica's Hydrapedes, and all 48 of the BDF pilots and then dropping those guys off at Kai Pai.

Now at sixty-one kilometers in altitude, holding at Mach-18, Jacob radios Kagame, "Isn't that field commissary goin' up soon?"

["Yea, on Aroha Mai. You out?"]

"I thought that was to be on Aroha Atu?"

["Was, but twenty minutes ago one of our Grigori's was shot at from Atu, so the exchange is getting rerouted to Mai."]

"Well, right now I'm kind of Winchester on Mew-pews."

[“Then land-n-load and we’ll cover ya, Buzzard! I know Dog held all the Green Hornets for dei Ea and b’s, and Yellow Jackets for SEAD and CAS, but I t’ought you’d git di yellow ones?”]

“We’re short on `em, and he wanted to make an exception for me but I insisted that I follow his orders—just like everyone else.”

Kagame laughs, [“I sabe, bu’ you be usin’ di Hydras now?”]

Jacob adores Kagame, and talking to her makes him smile because she’s so comfortable with him that she reverts back to her native pidgin, “Getting a kill-credit ten or twenty minutes after you shoot the damned thing off is like cheating in my book.”

[“I no `gree, that’s when dey just gittin’ started!”]

“I get ch’ya, I’m also gonna top off on AP when I set down.”

[“By de wai, how’s da Baby-P workin’ for ya? I git mine dis Saturday and ah bei wunderin’ if it gon’ be butterin’ my bread or no?”]

“Below Mach-two it’s sorta shit, but two-five and above it’s a bona fide death ray. It’ll butter yer bread if you remember two things. First off is to remember that you got it in hand, let’s start there! Second, is sim your ass off because the lead is counterintuitively short. AP is squirrely an’ takes quite a bit of swag to land the shot.”

[“In deflection mode, is de t’ing any gud?”]

“Practice makes perfect, Ouchie.”

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Now flying past the icy waters of the southern pole, on the tacnet they notice clusters of BDF fighters in groups of thirty, sixty and ninety or more, suddenly pop out of MDDSH far from the current FCAP zone, and drop in over their fighters that went northwest. They dive and race in to add to the cover over the targets on Whare Kino.

They came from everywhere and, again, this was planned for.

After six hundred fighters get through, the FCAP from Rongo plugs that gap and half of the CAP from Rongo shows up and dives in two-hundred kilometers ahead of Jacob and Kagame’s people.

This gives the Annex a paltry 620 Thunderbird fighters to go up against the 1,450 BDF fighters, but with Peña and his entire CAP from Scorch streaking in from their rendezvous point at the barycenter between Hina and Tuna, this adds another 800 Thunderbirds to the SA side of the tally sheet, so it’s pretty much even-Steven now.

Any more, the air-to-air engagements in this conflict, all to control the air over objectives, has become an all-consuming obsession

by both parties and the numbers over Maui show it. The Annex has 96 Cerberus for CAS, 48 of the older bisE flying as Weasels for SEAD, and only 16 of the bisEa conversions as fighter-interceptors to chase after the infamous IR5 Express. On major engagements, these numbers have simply doubled through the years where the numbers for CAP have more than quadrupled over the same timeperiod.

The fighters about to engage above Ware Kino represents eight percent of the fighter forces for both the Co-op and the Annex, but where the Co-op has been spread thin across hundreds of systems the Annex can focus all of their forces at will.

The other thing to note is that the Annex can continue to build new fighters with impunity but, less than an hour ago, the industrial might of the Co-op is now completely out of the air/spacecraft building business for at least a year to come. This whole time the Annex has been waging a war of attrition against the Co-op's financial resources and budgets but, as of today and going forward, the SA is prosecuting a war of attrition by numbers.

Now, where Kai Pai is about the size and shape of the UK and Ireland shoved together, Whare Kino is huge like Greenland. To the south are the islands of Aroha Atu and Aroha Mai, and both are half and a third the size of Iceland, respectively. Just a Straits of Dover width away from one of two primary targets, here being the industrial zone between the suburbs and the city of Kolohe, the curvature of Maui takes the landmasses out of direct line of sight.

Reaching Aroha Mai at first light, Jacob lands his ship on open ground near the combat field resupply unit. With Kagame and her people flying on to their new CAP assignment, three reloading mechs are extricating themselves from the hold of an HWG98. Jacob hops out of his Thunderbird and, while being shadowed by Bud in a ghost droid, he walks over to the resupply ground crew—where he blunders into the much hated, ball-busting company master-sergeant under Robert Jackson, back when he was young and green.

Jacob has not laid eyes on her since Saiph-6B so he grins big, "Well if it ain't Rita Orozco, how the fuck are ya!"

Orozco turns around, "It's Margarita to you, motherfucker."

Jacob laughs with, "What are you now, a retreat? Seriously, I thought you were gonna be a Master-Sergeant forever!"

She huffs a laugh, then shakes her head with a grim smile, "Nobody thought you'd amount to shit. Look at you!"

Jacob shrugs with, "I still don't amount to shit."

Orozco nods with approval, "You got that right."

Thumbing back he asks, "How long is this gonna take here."

"FAS-T is open for business in just a couple minutes."

"Okay, that sounds great!"

"That's to get the mechs out! Your reload is another six."

Jacob wonders, "Can you give me a full rack of the Mews?"

"Minimums, babe!" Orozco throws her hands up, "You gotta have two of everything an' I can't back-slide on that one! Best I can do is to load you nine Centipedes. Will that shut ch'ya up?"

Jacob nods repeatedly, "That'll have to do."

"Oh shit!" Says Orozco as she turns and high tails it towards her ship, while shouting back to Jacob, "Incoming! Take cover!"

On the tacnet he sees twelve of the older Condor fighters coming in from Aroha Atu, at high speed and low over the water, so he waives his ship away, "Trixie go! Get the fuck out of here!"

As his Thunderbird hops up, spins around and blows out of the area over the treetops, Trixie radios, ["We are E-three outbound."]

Jacob and ghost droid Bud are airborne and flying out the other way towards the trees, the coast and the island of Aroha Atu, with Jacob adding, "Echo-Three outta the AO and steer clear!"

With 23mm bombs going off all around the HWG98, one explodes underneath it and makes the ship flip up into the air, where several bombs hit the exposed underside—splitting the ship into thirds.

As the mechs are now being hammered into scrap, co-pilot Bud asks, ["Don't you want us to circle round and come back for ya when shit's clear? You know we can do that—"]

Jacob cuts him off, "No! Park her outside the Spike and stay the fuck put! Don't budge for anybody. Copy?"

["Okay, echo-three to GOP it is!"]

With the 23mm bombs falling all around for good measure, Orozco and half her crew reverse direction and, now up in the air and above the explosions, they are following Jacob for the coast.

Jacob notices them and calls out, "Cloak and slow, Rozco!"

They cloak and slow to below 5-kph as the Condors reach the island and orbit low at eighty-meters altitude. Seeing total destruction of the HWG and mechs, and not seeing anything alive and moving, they shoot off towards the north to sneak in below the Annex CAP.

With Orozco's people going back for any weapons and ammo they can find, she slithers through the foliage and lands on the beach

beside Jacob, who asks, "You thinkin' what I'm thinkin'?"

Orozco says, "I heard a Grigori was shot at."

Jacob can barely see the one lone mountain on Aroha Atua poking above the distant horizon, so he turns to Orozco and wonders out loud, "Something is over there we missed."

Orozco rolls her eyes and, "Ya think?"

With her squad mates appearing with bandoleers of ammo, a cartridge of Micropede missiles, and loose Hornet missiles in hand, Jacob selects a Yellow Jacket and nods with a smile while saying to Orozco's people, "If you're with me...keeping your hands and feet inside the coaster is optional. Let's rawk."

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From the stadium, one can see the Warthogs finishing up the last of the gun runs over Toon Town. From this distance the sounds from the warheads and guns are muffled but eerie just the same.

Up close we have four of the five guppy configurations of the Trident Star Clippers, leased from Qantas, taking off from Main Street USA, with the fifth one slowly taxiing up behind General Giáp as he waits for Richard Blemmings at the top edge of the stadium.

With the ghost droids rising up and loading into the back of a Warthog that is slowly drifting past, Blemmings steps up to Giáp with an outstretched hand, "Make a mess of things, General?"

Giáp smiles while taking his hand, "Quite the mess. A bloody fine mess you could say! How's the first match?"

"Bout ta start the second half."

"Too much passin' and not enough tryin'?"

"Aye, you could say that."

Giáp smiles and asks, "We on for eighteen next week?"

Blemmings points to his bloody and bandaged hand and points out, "Didn't you just lose half your hand?"

"Oh tosh! It's just a couple of digits, mate!"

"I'm not going to give you a handicap for that."

"Did I ask for points when I lost half of me foot?"

Blemmings smiles with, "I expect you to make par."

"Better than!" An aide to the General has stepped up, so Giáp turns to her, "What'll it be, Matilda?"

"Sir, we have one of our personnel holding up the evac."

"Well, have Rand tell the daft bludger to get it in gear!"

She hesitates, blinks then says, "On it, Sir."

Giáp turns back to Blemmings and, "I'm pickin' up the green fees this time, but Tareyton or Wycombe? It's your choice!"

Blemmings smirks, "Ninth course...Tareyton."

Giáp shakes his head, "My gawd, you're a bastard."

"Wha'? You be sayin' I'm takin' advantage of a cripple!"

"Aye, that I am!"

On the tacnet, Rand comes on, ["General Giáp, Sir!"]

"Give me a sec!" Giáp says to Blemmings then asks Rand, "What'll it be, MG? We got everyone accounted for?"

"All but one, sir."

"Who be this wanker, so I can stick my boot up his arse!"

Rand snorts, "That'd be you, Sir!"

"Aaaaaah, so I'm holding things up! I'll be right with ya, MG." Then to Blemmings he gives a fist-bump, "I gotta bug out, so I'll see you on the seventh, me matie!"

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Mau is tidally locked to the gas giant, Taranga, so as this planet continues its counterclockwise orbit, the star Tū starts to light up all of Whare Kino. Jacob, Orozco and her people were able to cover the twenty kilometers under the shadow of the mountain on the island of Aroha Atū, stretched out far over the water towards Aroha Mai, and they made it here without being noticed. Between the fog over the water, and with the camouflage setting of their JACC's dialed in on the despised powderpuff pink, this combination of camo and elements made them nearly impossible to spot as they streaked in under the quickly dissipating shadow.

They hit the beach just as Tū crests the mountainous peaks, then switched to a mottled green camo as they slipped into the jungle.

Now negotiating the undergrowth, it only takes them a few minutes of weaving between the trees and foliage before they stumble onto a clearing where all the undergrowth is missing. Under the massive trees of Aroha Atū they blunder into a hidden Co-op airbase. This expanse is two kilometers wide and full of Quonset huts, aircraft hangers and an airfield that's missing it's aircraft.

Having stepped out into the edge of the clearing, a hundred meters away from a guard post laced with automatic weapons, Jacob is hidden in plain site as he says on channel, "This was unexpected."

Orozco replies, "A whole lotta tooth here!"

"A battalion's worth, if that?"

"At least that!"

"This is why intel was baffled by Maui. We couldn't see 'em!"

"I thought the thing shot at the Grigori was shoulder fired."

"It was." Jacob shakes his head slowly, saying, "We thought Atu was a shit OP, but this is a fucking, full on airbase-base."

Orozco asks, "Whaddya wanna do 'bout it?"

"Report on it, maybe?"

Suddenly, a sonic boom hits as a pair of Condors screeches almost to a stop, and then slides in under the trees from the beach while undetected by the Annex from nearby Whare Kino.

Orozco then asks, "What else?"

"Sit tight and keep reporting!" Jacob shrugs and looks back at her, "What's ten of us gonna do to tha place?"

Now, there was a light rain here mid-morning, just an hour before sunrise and, when that boom hit, it shook the water from the leaves high above them. That mist took some time to drift down to where they are and, when it lands on Jacob, the kaleidoscope of colors from the holographic cloak pinpoints where he is standing.

Orozco points out, "You're cloak is on?"

With the guards scrambling for their weapons, Jacob nods as he switches it off, "Yea, uuuuuuh, yea, it was."

"Ya know, we don't really use it much anymore."

Jacob has dropped to hug the ground, and while rolling behind a mound, "I haven't trained for ground action in quite some time!"

With the bolts ripping past him, overhead by two feet, Orozco laughs, "Well, Graves, you're gonna hav'ta bone up real fast!"

While strings of fire are whipping back and forth across the jungle growth, keeping Orozco and her people down, Jacob rolls on his back and pumps a wonton grenade at them.

The guard post is disintegrated from the 1k-KEG blast, and as bodies spiral into the air, Orozco says "Overkill, maybe?"

"It's all I got!" Jacob then fires off the remaining four bombs

that drop in on four hangers. With them going up in massive fireballs, Jacob scans the Yellow Jacket and pulls up the interface. Identical to the Hydrapede toolkit, he checks off the 'Red Shell Mode' box and throws it into the air while saying, "Fly, be free!"

The Yellow Jacket's AI identifies the Condors and zig-zags towards them. It drops a Micropede on the ships and rips past them before the little missile connects. The two fighters are shredded by the blast as the Yellow Jacket snakes along looking for more fighters.

Jacob says on channel, "Shock works to our advantage, guys. If you want in on this then follow me and cover the flanks!"

Bud in his droid leapfrogs past him and holds at the destroyed post, while laughing, "Sounds like a God-damned blast!"

Orazco squats next to Jacob and hands him a bandoleer of ammo and a sling of grenade tubes, "Count me in!"

He smiles at her, "It's gonna get messy!"

She nods, "Music to my ears."

Jumping up, they advance on the post and race past it to the closest destroyed hanger, while Jacob calls up, "Dog, you here yet?"

Peña comes on channel right when a BDF platoon opens up on them, ["You're on Aroha Atu? What the fuck you doin' out there!"]

Returning fire with his forearm mounted 5.77mm chain guns, Jacob says matter of factly, "Kinda getting' shot at, that's what."

["Needs some air? Want me to send Thumper?"]

"Sure! Three or four of them would help."

["What did you say you're doin'?"]

"Shooting up an airbase!"

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Jessica pops out of her jump close to Kirin, immediately drops and blows through the orbital tracks around Sapphire at way too high of speed while making a mayday call to air and space traffic control. The ship was venting so getting to an altitude with breathable pressure enough to offset the loss was critical. Leveling out at ten-thousand feet, high above Blank Stump, the Stiller family's ears start to pop when pressure increases inside the hold of the ship.

Still celebrating their mad escape, the excitement is winding down as the 101b takes a straight shot into the Church Key and lands at the flight line at the foot of the spike. Samantha is already back in

her street clothes when they land, with the ladder to exit the ship having dropped as they touch down.

Jessica is in this strange post-combat deadpan mode, with heightened awareness and everything moving along in slow-mo, and as she slips out of the pilot's station, with her helmet assembly already off, Samantha plants a big wet one on her mouth.

"I gotta go!" She kisses Jessica a second time and heads for the ladder, saying, "We gotta do that again!" Leaping down the stairs, she whoops and hollers and, "I shot down three fighters!"

Vince's family is already on their feet, with the celebratory cheer having passed, and each one thanks her as they descend to the flight line outside. After his fifteen-year-old grandson salutes Jessica, then disembarks, Stiller stares at Jessica with genuine gratitude.

He stresses to her, "I owe you."

She shakes her head, "You don't owe me shit, Vince."

He pats her on the arm, "How 'bout I buy you a shot of rye."

As he leaves the ship, she says to him, "I'll hold you to that!"

Jessica dismounts from her JACC, and as she starts to dress five of the ghost droids stand at attention and salute her before they leave. All except Nicole who says, "You did good today."

"I don't feel it." Having slipped on her shoes, Jessica stands then says through clinched teeth, "I could've done better."

"These ghosts units have been ordered off. See me soon?" Jessica nods, yes, so Nicole gives her a one-finger salute, "The ship is fucked up, but everyone made it out alive. Ya did good!"

As Nicole exits, Jessica calls out to her, "See ya tomorrow!"

Jessica takes a minute to drink in the interior of the ship. She added an office and small bedroom and this has been like a second home to her over the last few years. With cracks in the hull and losing atmosphere, then popping the emergency oxygen masks on the way down, means her ship is a total and it will never fly again.

Jessica turns to the ladder, and before she descends she pats the bulkhead and quietly says to herself, "Thank you."

She steps out onto the flight line and takes a quick peek at the damage to the hull in the back of the ship. Shaking her head, she walks to the grassy knoll where a huge crowd has formed, and upon seeing her they start to applaud and cheer as she climbs the small hill towards Scott, Maria, Bill and Jace Verdugo.

As is their custom in the Annex, she does not acknowledge

the praise, nor make eye contact with anyone in the crowd as she squares off with Scott and the others.

Already knowing the answer, and according to custom, she has to ask, "How long to make her flight ready?"

Scott glances at Bill and then, with a smile, he says to Jessica, "No can do, buckaroo! What we got's here is a total."

With the applause finally starting to die down, tears well up in Jessica's eyes when Maria says to her, "Ya did good today, Red."

Through clinched teeth, Jessica shrugs, "Whatever."

Bill says to her, "Breathe, sugar. Just breathe."

Scott says, "Babe, you did do good today!"

She protests, "My ship is scrap now."

Maria adds, "It did its job."

Scott adds, "I pathed your file...that flight out was nuts!"

Bill huffs a laugh, "Yup, that was some spectacular aviatin'!"

With tears streaming down her cheeks, and about to hurl, Jessica hisses through clinched teeth, "I feel like such a Mary Sue!"

Scott puts a hand on her shoulder, leans in and says to her, "Get a grip, breathe deep. Looong deep breaths."

With her taking those real deep breaths, Maria grins and says, "Adrenaline is a motherfucker, ain't it?"

Jessica nods yes, and again through the teeth, "Ya think?"

Scott then opens up to her, "Everyone called your ship the Millennium Falcon as a joke. We couldn't understand the point of the thing until just now." Jessica's brow frowns as he continues, "I talked to Paleo before you landed and your replacement, the b-one, will get the Mbande substrate in the armor and the Butterfly engines. We will also configure it how you originally wanted it. Like Kiel's a-four."

In disbelief, she goes, "Ooo'kay?"

"The twenty-three in the tail as a stinger gun, we just never thought about it before and it makes perfect sense now!"

Maria adds, "We just have to figure out the ballistics."

Bill then says, "We're gonna build about forty of the b-ones."

Maria laughs, "Everyone is going to want one now!"

"That's a no shit." Scott huffs a laugh, then asks pointedly, "How many did ya shoot down today?"

Jessica shrugs, "I guess...by my count it was twenty-eight?"

"Just so you know, you're Hydras have been workin' overtime and your final tally is thirty-three." Scott puts a finger up to shut her up so he could finish the count, "The two Hydras from early on, they shot down the three ships that were RTB. The group that extended, a Djinn got a little careless and got its ass handed back to it. Also, those flights coming in from the east flew under the bombs you had hanging in the air and they bagged an Enfield that couldn't get away!"

Jessica's face scowls in protest, "I was already gone."

"It is what it is! It's what you're gonna hav'ta settle for."

"That's fucking stupid." Jessica then notices Jace Verdugo, and he seems familiar so she asks, "You're my father's wingman?"

He nods, "Jace Verdugo, at your service."

Jessica's eyes squint while asking, "Do I know you?"

Verdugo shrugs, "I just wanted to say, thanks for the burrito."

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Now, where Peña had command of the overall operation for today, he had two missions that launched simultaneously and those were Scorch and Rongo. Peña led the CAP attack at Scorch and it was better than a resounding success. Twenty-three light years away was the diversionary attack on the planet Rongo that tried to pull air resources from the planet Maui, and the Annex lost half of an hour trying to figure out that they were being played.

In that time the Co-op was able to pull fighters in from over thirty different systems to offset the numbers that the Annex was sure to bring, so the SA lost a guaranteed numerical advantage.

Sure, the four hundred that were let go from Scorch never would have been able to get through once FCAP locked down the lower orbital tracks of Maui, but those guys happened to be a no show.

Anyway, for defensive flying, in sizeable groups, you have the Lufbery Circle combinations, and Thach Weave variants, but for an attacker there are ways of chipping away at those. What the BDF has come up with is an odd combination of both—taken to the vertical. Since "stall" in flight is not really a thing anymore, the BDF has formed a column of fighters, ten kilometers wide by twenty high, that are over both Whanoke in the north, and Kolohe in the south.

With the Djinn on the outside of the columns performing crazy ellipticals, consisting of power dives followed by zoom climbs, and the Enfield doing lazy banks in the middle of it to cover them, this left the

Annex scratching their heads and wondering what to do?

See, for the ground assault in Whanoke the SA assigned two regiments from SA36, led by Gudici, who are in an attack force that consists of twenty slicks and ten Warthogs, then for Kolohe there is an identical force from SA96, led by Venkatesh. They would have landed some time ago, but with the BDF fighters over the targets in a brilliant defensive arrangement the assault teams can't really approach and land without getting their hair mussed more than just a tad. Peña and team has to control the air for them to be able to stick that landing.

Then the annoyance factor is jacked up more with three of the latest IR5 Express who are giving a merry chase 100 kilometers out with eight bisEa trailing after them and looking for an angle.

A week from now Jacob, Peña, Cyzk, and Kati Connors will figure out a counter to this defensive formation, which will require the use of their 23mm cannon for the first time in air to air combat, from a safe distance of course but, for now, Peña has already thrown his hands up and called in the 'oh fuck it' option.

...They have Thin Blu on the way.

Peña was expecting to get Bob some trigger time on CAP but, with the call from Jacob just now, he has pulled himself, Bob, along with Sheron Pilliod and Clint Wanganui who have become dedicated CAS pilots over the last two years.

Orozco's corporal had the airbase mapped and on the tacnet in the six minutes it takes Peña, Sheron, Clint and Bob to blow in and hit the area with MiDAR; and while studying the data with his FAC hat on, Peña calls Jacob, "Where do you want it, Buzzard?"

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Jacob and everyone has advanced a quarter of the way into the base and are approaching the destroyed Condors, all the while the firefight they are having with a company sized unit, dug in beside a maintenance depot 150 meters out, is picking up fast.

While Bud covers him, Jacob pats on the two intact cockpits to get the pilot's attention. He then makes hand gestures to ask if they are going to stay put. First, he points at them both, makes a fist, then points at the ground—where both pilots nod big and give him a thumbs up, where he gives them a thumbs up in return.

Stuck in the middle of a real nasty firefight, and Spooky having dropped bombs everywhere, these cockpits are cozy, stocked and are indestructible enough to keep both pilots safe for now.

On channel, Jacob says, "Leave them be, they're staying put."

It's here that Peña asks where he wants it, so Jacob goes, "We are in a firefight with Homer and I'm plum out of wontons!"

Peña laughs, ["That's what we're here for!"]

"How 'bout ya drop a five-k, marked on the tacnet, one-fifty meters out along zero-zero-fiver. You copy that, Dog?"

["I copy, how thick is the foliage above you?"]

"Pretty thick. Maybe twenty-meters or so?"

["We'll have to blow the canopy first."]

Peña makes the first run and rakes the top of the canopy with 23mm fire. This cuts huge swath out of foliage it but it takes Bob and Sharon's run to finally blast through it, making it rain debris all over the maintenance depot and troops below. It's here that Clint picks up his Navigation Point to roll in with the 5k.

Now, the IR5 have been lapping the whole area, looking for little opportunities that pop up here and there, and four CAS ships out from under CAP by a whole thirty clicks was just too enticing. With two bisEa hot on his tail, the IR5 pulls his nose in by fifteen degrees and lets loose four Centipede-Azul. Two Azul race up after the fighters in CAP, and since the missiles are climbing Pena ignores them because it's obvious where they're going. He doesn't see the two Azul hugging the surface of the ocean while also heading north—right for them.

At the NavP, Clint turns on a dime and take's a south to north heading to drop his bomb on the maintenance depot. Since the target is deep in the foliage, he has to launch the 5k-KGE bomb on a lazy ballistic trajectory. He slows his ship and pulls his nose up to lob it in the cut, and when he fires it at a low power setting, you can see the thing kind of hang in the air as it moseys its way to target.

On CAS over thick jungle, low over the treetops means life, so as Clint dips his nose to drop altitude before he makes his turn away, he hears Peña say over the CAS channel, "Oh shit!!"

The lead Azul streaks in and, pops all of its mini-missiles a fraction of a second before going right up Clint's ass. And with those little things spiraling away, Peña, Bob and Sheron all scatter to get away from the minis and a second Azul that blows through and, not turning back, continues on to find a target on CAP thirty clicks away.

The back half of Clint's ship is vaporized and the forward half, with him in the cockpit, tumbles and spirals into the cut they made in the treetops. He cartwheels into the depot below—and as fate would have it, the 5k bomb follows him in.

After the cataclysmic 5k blast, Jacob and the others brush off and push on while other bombs have queued up elsewhere...

Two Razorbacks slip into position two-hundred kilometers in altitude with one above Whanoke in the north and the second over Kolohe in the south. Both ships have two of the custom six-shooter pods with the Thin Blu rocket assisted penetrator bombs. Within seconds of opening the pods, the bombs are pickled off.

Frank Zamboni announces on the general mission frequency, ["TRDS away! Thirty-eight seconds until impact."]

The bombs reach Mach-30 as they enter the thicker part of the atmosphere, leaving a fiery plasma trail behind as they cut through the air, and with the terminal decent-to-impact motor firing off in the last five seconds. They maintain a brisk Mach-26 as they slam into their respective industrial zones in a lovely spiral pattern.

Twelve one-kiloton warheads go off underground outside of Kolohe, and twelve outside of Whanoke, and the blasts are contained underground, yes, but they raise the surface by a few scant meters in a rippling motion from the center to the outer regions of the target. Worse yet, the harmonics from the explosions are compounded when the blast chambers collapse and this effectively shatters the entire site when the surface drops below where it started from—effectively razing the entire industrial zone, but that's not all...

The cherry on top are another two Razorbacks who are only at sixty kilometers altitude above Whanoke and Kolohe. After Thin Blu streaks by, they slip in and when over the target they each pallet drop the entire deck of the ship. On the deck pallet are 28 transport bricks, each with 128 Centipede missiles. The bricks are set to burst apart when released—and as this happens it sets free 3,584 missiles that shoot straight down to a predetermined point on the map where, ten seconds short of contact, releases all six of their Micropede missiles that deliver a total of seven-thousand KGE of explosives. Both targets each receive a total of 25,088,000 kilograms of explosive force spread out over forty square kilometers.

It's not total destruction, but it'll do!

Jacob, Bud and Orozco reach a crater of what was the depot, laced with the body parts of the dead BDF company. Looking at the crushed canopy of the Cerberus lying there, and the mangled JACC containing a quite dead Clint Wanganui, he pulls the suit with Clint out of the wreckage.

Receiving fire from another BDF company trying to advance on the crater, Jacob leaves Bud there to cover them. With everyone pulling back to the closest hanger, Jacob one-hand drags Clint's body

with them. As Orozco's people are laying down fire, Bud now falls back to their position. Jacob pulls up a com-link and launches it while telling Orozco to walk Thumper in to push this group back.

As he and Orozco's people are picking off troopers trying to push on them, Boxter Hartcourt answers, ["Hello, dear Jacob!"]

Jacob is blasting away with his scorpion gun, "Hey Box!"

["From all the popping I hear I'm curious what you're up to?"]

"Well, Aroha Atu. I'm in your base an' killin' your doodz."

["On Maui!"] Boxter snickers, ["Well, son, that's not my base and not my dudes, so is this a social or business call today?"]

"Actually, it's a family matter. Clint is dead."

Boxter gives a low chuckle under his breath, ["Oh, how tragic, but before I weep for the loss of the lil' tyke, are you sure 'bout that? At my lofty station, one must know proof positive before we start pulling strings. Don't want to run afoul of the Wanganui's."]

"I pulled him out of the wreckage. It'll be a closed coffin."

["Oh how opportune! This distraction will pay hefty dividends. By the way, how did the little bugger bite the bullet?"]

"An IR5 shot him down, but the five-k bomb he launched seconds before he crashed, the weapon, it landed on top of 'im."

["Well now, I must find a way to reward that Express pilot. Need help pin-pointing the base up north?"]

"Thanks but we found it, and the alert went out for them to evacuate. We're gonna drop a couple of twenty-twenties on it."

["For your edification, I just now received an alert that Bristol is pulling their forces out of Maui. Looks like you were successful!"]

Looking at a text alert on the tacnet, Jacob nods big saying, "And I just got an alert that we're standing down and letting 'em go."

["After you bomb the base in the north?"]

With the fire from both sides dropping off to nothing, Jacob shrugs and adds, "There's no need to now."

["How unfortunate."] Boxter's mood changes when he says, ["On a side note, I'm still gnawing over the fact that my youngest child managed to wheedled her way onto one of your missions with her betrothed. I want to personally thank you for clearing their six."]

"Sorry, Box. That was supposed to be uneventful."

["We both know that, in our endeavors, nothing is uneventful

when it's supposed to be."]

Jacob smiles, saying, "Yea, you're right about that!"

["You know, Jacob, I'm glad both sides in this conflict are working together like we do."]

Jacob shakes his head, "This standing down and letting people get away when hitting an objective is kinda like delaying the inevitable. Aren't we putting the meat back into the machine here?"

["Well, if you had your way it'd be over with too soon!"]

"I don't understand what you and Ramirez have goin' on."

["Common goals? The way it's going, and cutting through the bull, Rho Tau may very well be an all in event. I can only pray!"]

Jacob wonders, "How would that be good?"

Boxter gives a little laugh then says, ["When we close the books on all this, we'll need a...definitive end to hostilities."]

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