

# COMBAT COMMAND™

TAKE COMMAND...  
IN A NEW ROLE-PLAYING NOVEL

#9

IN THE WORLD OF

## ROBERT ASPRIN'S COLD CASH WAR



## COLD CASH WARRIOR

BY

# ROBERT ASPRIN AND BILL FAWCETT

## *FIRE STORM*

Half the defenders had their backs to the ambush when he gave the order to open fire. Two of the seven fell in the first, unanswered volley. Those who did have time to grab a weapon fired blindly into the jungle.

Tidwell left his M-21 on full auto and sprayed the camp. Several others followed his example. Abstractly, the captain found the display of lights reflecting off the river quite beautiful. Before he had time to reload his empty clip, all firing ended. *There were no more moving targets left . . .*

## Cold Cash Warrior



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**COMBAT COMMAND™**

**IN THE WORLD OF**

**ROBERT  
ASPRIN'S  
COLD CASH  
WAR**

**COLD CASH  
WARRIOR**

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BY

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**ROBERT ASPRIN  
AND BILL FAWCETT**

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ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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## **COLD CASH WARRIOR**

An Ace Book/published by arrangement with  
Bill Fawcett & Associates

PRINTING HISTORY  
Ace edition/December 1989

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Cover art by Don Dixon.

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For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.

ISBN: 0-441-11435-0

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Ace Books are published by The Berkley Publishing Group,  
200 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



# INTRODUCTION

## by Bill Fawcett

You are in command. With the tinny blare of recorded trumpets echoing in your earphones, it's off to battle. Marching behind in their kill suits are your fellow Communications mercenaries, trained warriors, whose fate depends upon the decisions you are about to make.

Combat Command books provide more than just another chance to read the story of an exciting military competition between Clancey and Tidwell, the mercenary officers that originally appeared in the novel *Cold Cash War*. You could simply "read" this book, tracing a route through the sections, but these books are also "games" which let you make the command decisions.

The book is divided into sections rather than chapters. In each section of this game/book a military situation is described. Your choices actually write the book, the story and the ending both being determined by the combat decisions you make.

A careful effort has been made to make this head-to-head battle as "real" as possible. You are given the same information as you would receive in a real combat situation. At the end of each section is a number of choices for what to order next. The consequences of the action you pick are described in the following section. When you make the right decisions, you are closer to successfully completing your mission. When you make a bad decision, men "die," frozen in their kill suits . . . men who are not going to be available for the next battle.

## FIGHTING BATTLES

This book includes a simple game system which simulates combat and other military challenges. Playing the game adds an extra dimension of enjoyment by making you a participant in the adventure. You will need two six-sided dice, a pencil and a sheet of paper to play along with this adventure.

## COMBAT VALUES

In this book the mercenaries you command will be among the elite military men of their world. Each is assigned five values. These values provide the means of comparing the capabilities of the many different military units encountered in this book. These values are:

### Manpower

This value is the number of separate fighting parts of your force. Each unit of Manpower represents one man. Casualties are subtracted from Manpower.

### Ordnance

The quality and power of the weapons used is reflected by their Ordnance Value. All members of a unit commanded will have the same Ordnance Value. In some cases you may command two or more units, each with a different Ordnance Value.

### Attack Strength

This value indicates the ability of the unit to attack an opponent. It is determined by multiplying Manpower by Ordnance ( $\text{Manpower} \times \text{Ordnance} = \text{Attack Strength}$ ). This value can be different for every battle. It will decrease as Manpower is lost and increase if reinforcements are received.

### Melee Strength

This is the hand-to-hand combat value of each member of the unit. In the case of a squad of mercenaries, it represents the martial arts skill and training of each man. In crewed units such as tanks, it represents the fighting ability of the members of the crew and could be used to defend against boarders.

Melee Value replaces Ordnance Value when determining the Attack Strength of a unit in hand-to-hand combat.

## Stealth

This value measures how well the members of your unit can avoid detection. It represents the individual skill of each soldier. The Stealth Value for your unit will be the same for each member of the unit. You would employ stealth to avoid detection by the enemy.

## Morale

This reflects the fighting spirit of the troops you command. Success in battle may raise this value. Unpopular decisions or severe losses can lower it. If you order your unit to attempt something unusually dangerous, the outcome may be affected by their morale level.

# THE COMBAT PROCEDURE

When your unit finds itself in a combat situation, use the following procedure to determine victory or defeat.

1. Compute the Attack Strength of your unit and the opposition ( $\text{Manpower} \times \text{Ordnance or Melee Value} = \text{Attack Strength}$ ).
2. Turn to the charts at the end of this section. The description of the battle tells you which charts to use.
3. Roll two six-sided dice and total the result.
4. Find the Attack Strength of the unit at the top of the chart and the total of the dice rolled on the left-hand column of the chart. The number found where the column and row intersect is the number of casualties inflicted by the unit you were rolling for.
5. Repeat for each side, alternating attacks.

The unit you command always fires first unless otherwise stated.



When you are told there is a combat situation, you will be given all the information needed for both your command and your opponent.

Here is an example of a complete combat:

Hammer's Slammers have come under fire from a force defending a ridge which crosses their line of advance. Alois Hammer has ordered your company of tanks to attack. Your tanks have an Ordnance Value of 8, and you have a Manpower Value of 8 tanks.

Slammers fire using Chart B.

Locals fire using Chart D, with a Combat Strength of 3 and Manpower of 12. (This gives them an Attack Strength of 36.)

To begin, you attack first and roll two 4s for a total of 8. The current Attack Strength of your Slammers is 64 ( $8 \times 8$ ).

## CHART B

### Attack Strength Manpower

Dice  
Roll

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101 +
2	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	4
3	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
4	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
5	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
6	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
7	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5
8	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
9	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
10	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
11	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	7
12	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	8

Read down the 60–70 Attack Strength column until you get to the line for a dice roll of 8. The result is four casualties inflicted on your opponents by your company.

Subtract these casualties from the opposing force before determining their Attack Strength. (Combat is not simultaneous.) After subtracting the four casualties you just inflicted on them, the enemy has a remaining Manpower Value of 8 ( $12 - 4 = 8$ ). This gives them a remaining Attack Value of 24 ( $8 \times 3 = 24$ ).

Roll two six-sided dice for the opposing force's attack and determine the casualties they cause your Slammers' company. Subtract these casualties from your Manpower total on the record sheet. In this case they caused one casualty, giving the Slammers a Manpower of 7 for the next "round" of combat.

This ends one round of combat. Repeat the process for each round. Each time a unit receives a casualty, it will have a lower value for Attack Strength. There will be that many fewer men, tanks or whatever firing.

Continue alternating fire rolls, recalculating the Attack Strength each time to account for casualties, until one side or the other has lost all of its Manpower or special conditions (given in the text) apply. When this occurs, the battle is over.

Losses are permanent and losses from your unit should be subtracted from their total Manpower on your record sheet.

## *SNEAKING, HIDING AND OTHER RECKLESS ACTS*

To determine if a unit is successful in any attempt relating to Stealth or Morale, roll two six-sided dice. If the total rolled is greater than the value listed for the unit, the attempt fails. If the total of the two dice is the same as or less than the current value, the attempt succeeds or the action goes undetected. For example:

Rico decides his squad of Mobile Infantry (M.I.) will try to penetrate the Bug hole unseen. M.I. has a Stealth Value of 8.

A roll of 8 or less on two six-sided dice is needed to succeed. The dice are rolled and the result is a 4 and a 2 for a total of 6. They are able to avoid detection by the Bug guards.

If all of this is clear, then you are ready to turn to Section 1 and take command.



## THE COMBAT CHARTS

After you have made a decision involving a battle, you will be told which chart should be used for your unit and which for the enemy. The chart used is determined by the tactical and strategic situation. Chart A is used when the unit is most effective, and Chart G when least effective. Chart A represents the effectiveness of the Sioux at Little Bighorn and Chart F, Custer. Chart G represents the equivalent of classic Zulus with Assegai (spears) versus modern Leopard tanks. Even a very small force on Chart A can be effective, while even a large number of combatants attacking on Chart G are unlikely to have much effect.

# CHART A

## Attack Strength

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101 +
Dice Roll											
2	0	1	1	2	2	3	3	4	5	6	6
3	0	1	2	2	2	3	4	5	6	7	7
4	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	6	7	8
5	2	2	2	3	3	4	5	5	6	7	8
6	2	2	2	3	4	4	5	6	7	7	8
7	2	2	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	8	8
8	2	3	3	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	9
9	3	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	8	8	9
10	3	4	4	5	5	6	7	7	8	9	10
11	3	4	4	5	6	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	4	4	5	6	7	7	8	9	10	11	12

# CHART B

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101 +
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	4
3	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
4	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
5	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
6	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
7	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5
8	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
9	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
10	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6
11	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	5	6	7
12	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	6	7	8

## CHART C

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2
3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3
4	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3
5	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
6	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4
7	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
8	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
9	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5
10	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	6
11	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6
12	2	3	3	3	4	4	4	5	5	6	7

## CHART D

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2
4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2
5	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3
6	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3
7	0	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4
8	0	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	4	4
9	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	5
10	1	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
11	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5
12	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5	5	6



## CHART E

	1-10	-20	-30	-40	-50	-60	-70	-80	-90	-100	101+
Dice Roll											
2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
5	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2	2
6	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2
7	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2
8	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2
9	0	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
10	0	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	3
11	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3
12	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3

### CHART F

[illegible]

### CHART G

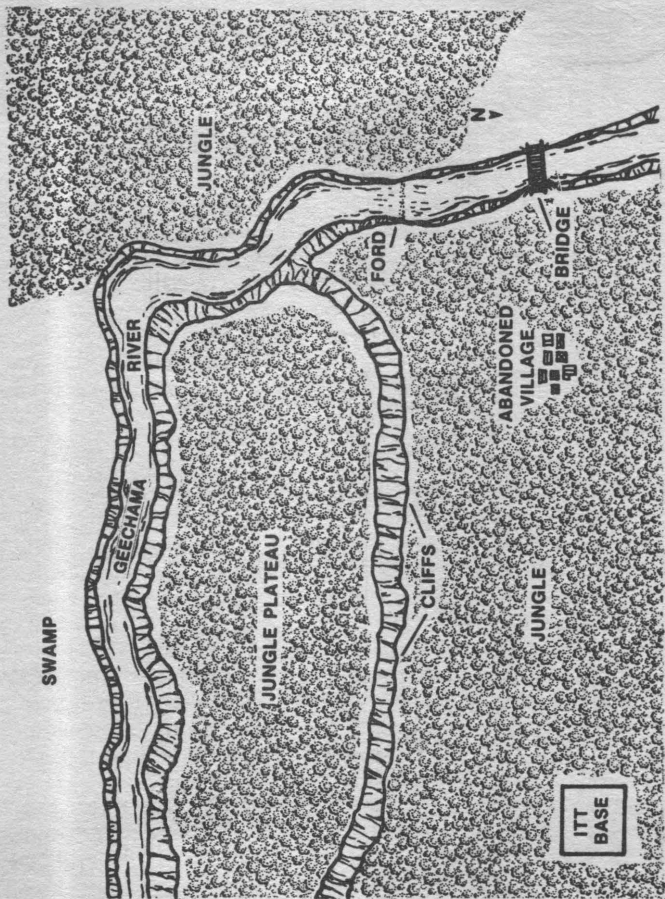
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**COMBAT COMMAND™**

**IN THE WORLD OF**

**ROBERT  
ASPRIN'S  
COLD CASH  
WAR**

**COLD CASH  
WARRIOR**



MAP NO. 3497-24-01

## — 1 —

Up close, with his face pressed down into the layer of rotting leaves, Captain Steve Tidwell decided the worst thing about jungles was that they stank. The insects rummaging a few inches before the mercenary's eyes were just an added annoyance. He had crawled through jungles on three continents and they all had two things in common: bugs and the pungent smell of rot. It wasn't as if Tidwell hadn't been subjected to virtually every foul odor possible, including once kicking in a door and rushing firing into a room laid two deep in week-old bodies; it was just that after a few weeks in any tropical rain forest, everything smelled like it was rotting . . . and most of it was.

Something slightly larger than the mercenary officer's thumb crawled a few inches in front of his eyes. The beetle had a bright green carapace, red eyes and pincers at least an inch long. Tidwell wondered what it was he felt crawling on the back of his neck, but willed himself not to react. Whatever it was had a thousand feet, all sharp. Carefully the mercenary counted heartbeats. After a few moments the sensation ended.

Tidwell might have relaxed then, if he hadn't been staring at the feet of a merc from the other side about half a meter from his helmet. He'd counted their voices and there were at least a dozen Oilers in the patrol, more likely as many as twenty. By mercenary standards this was practically a reconnaissance in force . . . in a place where no one from either side should have been at all.

Patiently the mercenary waited, perspiration soaking the soft padding of his kill suit. A jungle was no place to wear a padded suit that covered seventy percent of your body. The microcomputer built around the suit's waist pressed into his side uncomfortably. It would be over soon, Tidwell realized, still not relaxing. The point man for the patrol had brushed past the feet and disappeared down the trail.

The raucous call of a local bird caused the big Oiler to swing toward the sound, turning directly toward the camou-

## Section 1

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flaged mercenary at his feet. Tidwell found he could sweat more, something a few seconds ago he'd have bet was impossible. Half a step and the Oiler would literally trip over him. If the man looked down, there was a good chance he would be noticed . . . but the bird was high in the green canopy and it had been a long patrol. Responding to an order yelled loud enough to alert every enemy within a mile, the man spun and followed his mates down the trail.

Amateurs, Tidwell thought as he forced himself to wait a hundred heartbeats before moving. They'd taken a fifteen-minute break without bothering to ensure the area was secure. The kill suits were making war too easy . . . at least this war. In a real shooting war half that patrol wouldn't have survived their first week. Those who did survive would be likely to "accidentally" shoot such an incompetent officer out of self-defense.

Steve Tidwell would have resented the suits more if he hadn't been "killed" himself less than a month ago. It had been pure bad luck involving a tricky river crossing and a failure of the comm unit link with the scout he had sent over first. They had been cut down without warning by an Oiler patrol as the rest of the team attempted to cross. His kill suit had frozen as programmed when the quartz-light bullets struck it, robbing him of all movement. Tidwell had nearly drowned in the sluggish river, but had been dragged ashore by an alert judge.

Who would ever have thought he would be in a war with judges? Steve Tidwell wondered at the irony of it. Still, the corporations paid double scale, and it was easier money than he had ever seen in over a decade.

Being killed had meant a week in the spartan precincts of the "morgue," badly ventilated Quonset huts set up inside a barbed-wire compound whose sole purpose was to keep the "casualties" under observation. While the morgue was located less than fifty miles from Brasília, the only city within a thousand miles, you couldn't leave the compound without getting shot with real guns. The corporations were not about to let some disgruntled mercenary turn up for duty before he had sat out the regulation week. It would ruin their carefully controlled war games. To a man like Steve Tidwell, the



enforced boredom of the morgue had been worse than the physical discomfort any real wound might have caused.

Cautiously the mercenary slipped through the jungle to where he had left his own men. Unlike the Oiler patrol, they had waited noiselessly, dispersed in the middle of a patch of dense bushes. Gesturing to them, Captain Tidwell waited until all four men had gathered 'round before sharing his news.

"Enemy patrol," he announced succinctly. One of the rookies eyed the nearby jungle nervously. "They're pulling back now. Nearly twenty of them, all ready to go home, relaxed and real sloppy."

"Do we take them, Major?" Sergeant Shanks asked anxiously, then looked embarrassed. Until the fiasco at the river, Tidwell had been ranked as a major in the Communications Mercenary Contingent. After he had been released from the morgue, the local ITT-iots had demoted him to captain. Then they had him ordered to command an outpost on the quietest part of the 150-mile-long front that the two corporations had agreed to. Nothing had happened there since the negotiated "war" had begun two months earlier.

Tidwell enjoyed watching the veteran's face go from embarrassment to puzzlement as the sergeant realized the implications of an enemy patrol of any size being here. There wasn't supposed to be any Oiler activity in the area. As of this morning's briefing, this was an empty front, with no enemy presence at all.

"There's only a few thousand mercenaries on each side," Tidwell replied. Due to the large number of recruits he'd been commanding, Tidwell had developed the habit of lecturing when time and the situation allowed. The troops fought better when they knew what was going on and why, rather than being expected to blindly follow any order from a superior. "If the Oilers are using one percent of their force to patrol an area, something is up. Besides, you don't see the sloppy confidence they were showing if there's no support within twenty miles."

Both new recruits looked nervous now, afraid the captain was going to order his small patrol to take on twenty men. They had each been to the morgue once already and wanted

## Section 1

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no more of it, especially when their pay was suspended while "dead."

"We might jump them." Tidwell hesitated for just a few seconds, taking the opportunity to gauge the newer men's reactions. One looked ready to break and run. He'd have that one transferred out when they got back. "But it's more important we carry this information back, and we can't risk a radio intercept. Let's go home."

Even Shanks looked relieved, though he had known Tidwell was too good a mercenary to order a suicide attack. If nothing else, this was a great excuse to cut their three-day patrol a full day short.

Jane's Grill could have been located just outside Indianapolis, or maybe Toledo. It had Formica counters and grease on the inside of the windows. A massive air conditioner over the door was the only concession to the restaurant's unusual location. In Peoria, Jane's wouldn't have attracted any notice . . . or many customers. The burgers tended to be thin and the chili painfully hot. Still, the drinks were strong and Jane herself exuded an air of amused tolerance, which was hard to find in a jungle. Located thirty miles from Brasília on the only highway connecting Brazil's capital to the coast, Jane's had the appeal of a familiar friend in a foreign land. The mercenaries had already adopted it as the off-duty gathering place before Tidwell had been assigned to this flank.

Jane, who occasionally contended she had moved to Brazil for her health and inferred a Mafia boyfriend, did most of the serving and made all the drinks. No one had ever seen the cook or knew his name. Most correctly assumed this was to protect him from retribution.

There were two small tables, six booths and a counter holding six, seating a total of thirty-five. While the food at the corporate barracks often tasted better, most mercs chose to eat at Jane's whenever possible. Over twenty men, a few still wearing stained kill suits, were in the restaurant when Tidwell entered and slipped into a corner booth. The mercs were about evenly divided between the Communications and Oil teams, each sitting in small groups with others from their side. A good deal of banter flowed between the two groups,

but it was all very friendly. By unspoken agreement there was never any trouble in Jane's.

As usual, it took Tidwell a few seconds to adjust to the casual nature of their "war" and relax. Jane brought him a double Irish without asking. Out of habit he asked if it was Tullamore Dew and was rewarded with a knowing smile. It never was. Someone had punched up a series of Moody Blues songs on the jukebox earlier, and the familiar refrains blended with the Irish whiskey in helping the mercenary forget that not long before he had been crawling through a jungle. He was well into his second glass and had just about decided to brave the goulash when he heard a familiar voice.

"A bottle of Tully and one ice cube," it demanded as the door crashed open. "And a night with you, love," the speaker added.

"You *wish!*" Jane scoffed, reaching under the bar. Her hand emerged holding a half-full bottle labeled Jamison's.

There was no mistaking Clancey. He had always favored dramatic entrances. Together they had fought in the same wars for over a decade. During the last Arabian fracas Clancey served as his second-in-command. Tidwell scanned his old friend's badges and noted that he was serving as a captain for the Oilers. Several of the men yelled greetings to the Irishman, who saluted them back with his bottle and then took a deep swig. If Clancey was here something was definitely going on, Tidwell decided. For a long moment the ITT mercenary wondered just how to treat the opposition. Then he decided they were both off duty. He waved to attract the man's attention.

Spotting his old friend, Clancey stopped in mid-swallow, almost choking. Without hesitation he hurried across the room to where the other man was sitting alone. The Irish merc's grin grew larger as he approached.

In the hours that followed, both men caught up on the other's activities. Clancey had stayed in Kuwait on the "peace-maker" force until he tired of the desolation and restrictions on alcohol. After drifting back around the States, he had been contacted by another acquaintance and recruited by the Oil Corporation. Tidwell's story was similar, his border duty being spent in the wastes of the antarctic. He'd been recruited by the same man, but for Communications. Both

## Section 1

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agreed the recruiter was the only one getting richer in this war.

Both men carefully avoided all discussion of the recent activities or current duties.

The ITT-iot on the screen was adamant. His life-sized image was projected so clearly that Tidwell had to keep reminding himself to speak toward the dull eye of the camera on the screen's left.

"My superiors feel that your analysis has some merit, Captain," the executive intoned in clipped, pompous tones. He was trying hard to sound military. The gathered mercenaries were also trying hard, but in their case it was not to laugh. Most had left the regular armies just to avoid such tones, from men who at least had earned the right to use them.

"We will be moving a force up to your base. So you had better be right. To do this undetected will take time. I am also allocating one—that's just one—air strike for your use. Use it only if the situation warrants. These strikes are wastefully expensive and we want to conduct this campaign as efficiently as possible."

Sergeant Shanks, one of the few men Tidwell had met who had lasted out their twenty-year enlistment term with the French Foreign Legion, snorted. "To do it cheaply he means."

The ITT-iot executive stuttered for a second and then retreated into officiousness. "You, *Captain*," emphasizing the rank, "will have the chance to be restored to your former rank and pay.

"This war was to settle who will have the rights to take over most of the retail trade in several Western states. We are currently committed to a major offensive. If the Oil Corporation is able to turn our flank, much of the American Southwest will be conceded by the judges. We could even lose the entire market after spending millions. This cannot be allowed!"

There was a general murmur from the over twenty mercenaries assembled around the viewer. As with most mercenary units, command briefings were open for all to attend. "You mean we're fighting over the right to sell toasters in Colorado?" one of the younger men asked skeptically. The executive continued without deigning to recognize the comment.

"We need confirmation," the ITT-iot intoned with what he

must have felt was dramatic flair. "We also need to buy time. You are to take out one of the two sections from the base, determine as much as possible about Oil dispositions and disrupt them where possible."

The Communications executive paused and looked off screen. Every merc in the room ignored him and watched Tidwell, wondering which section he would pick. There'd be a bonus or, more likely, another week in the morgue for whoever he chose.

"It will take three days for the fourth commando to reach you," the figure on the screen concluded. "I have been informed there is a chance that our communications are being monitored. Avoid the use of all but line-of-sight comm units, and minimize your use of those." He was obviously embarrassed at having to admit that the Communications conglomerate had its own communications compromised. Several of the assembled mercenaries came to the same conclusion and began to chuckle.

The executive looked annoyed and broke off the transmission. The room was filled with static hiss until Sergeant Shanks shut off the wall screen with a decisive slap. Then the room was completely silent. Almost as if they had rehearsed the movement, every man in the room turned to face Tidwell.

The mercenary captain realized they were waiting for him to announce which section he would take on the mission. Instinctively he knew that he had to decide immediately. Men quickly lose faith in an indecisive leader.

There were two sections at the base. One was made up of over half a dozen veterans. The other consisted of a newly formed unit of thirteen men, well trained, but generally inexperienced. Due to the conventions of the "war," all infantry were armed with similar weapons.

*You have the choice of either of two sections.*

*If you choose the smaller, veteran unit, turn to Section 2.*

*If you choose the larger but less experienced unit, turn to Section 3.*

—2—

*Your command for this first patrol will be:*

*Manpower 9 (includes Tidwell)*

*Ordnance 7 ( $9 \times 7 = 63$ )*

*Melee 8 ( $9 \times 8 = 72$ )*

*Stealth 8*

*Morale 9*

*Turn to Section 4.*

—3—

*Your command for this first patrol will be:*

*Manpower 14 (includes Tidwell)*

*Ordnance 5 ( $14 \times 5 = 90$ )*

*Melee 5*

*Stealth 6*

*Morale 7*

*Turn to Section 4.*

—4—

The jungle still stank. Five hours the patrol had followed Captain Tidwell through clinging thorns and thick vines. The metal mesh of their kill suits protects where it covers, but not faces or hands. Every man knew that less than a hundred



meters away was a wide trail, but none questioned their leader's choice to avoid it.

It was past noon when they reached the village. Tidwell had noticed the abandoned village on the map when he first took command. The aerial survey showed its central area was large enough to land a chopper in, but he had decided it was too close to the area theoretically held by the Oilers to be of any use.

From the edge of the clearing, the circle of huts looked abandoned. The nearest hut was visibly overgrown, falling apart, but empty. Studying the village more carefully, Tidwell debated whether or not to enter. If there were any Oilers, they would be behind his patrol once they passed, in an ideal position to ambush them. If they did go in and there were Oilers, that was almost as bad. There was little chance they could prevent a warning from getting out if there was an Oiler station here. That was almost as bad as leaving an ambush behind.

He'd just made his mind up to bypass the village when he noticed the shell casing glinting at the edge of the clearing. If there wasn't anyone here now, there had been recently. In this climate brass doesn't keep its shine more than a few days.

*If Tidwell should investigate the village, turn to Section 5.*

*If you choose to bypass the village, turn to Section 6.*

## —5—

After he had spread the remainder of the patrol out along the edge of the village Tidwell ordered two men to check the closest huts. Approaching in short dashes, they entered first one, then a second. Emerging from the second, one man signaled an all-clear while the other covered the remaining dwellings. Captain Tidwell acknowledged with a nod, and the two proceeded to check the other buildings. To the veteran mercenary it seemed a long time before they signaled that all were empty.

## Section 5

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The rest of the men still advanced through the village in two waves, each pausing to cover the other when it moved. A second, more thorough, check of the decaying huts confirmed they were empty. From the center of the circle of buildings Sergeant Shanks whistled softly to gain his captain's attention.

He had found two parallel ruts in the damp soil. Each rut was a few centimeters wide and four meters long. Booted footprints were visible on the outside of the grooves.

"Copter. Maybe a big one," Sergeant Shanks speculated.

"Probably a Northo 91," the officer agreed.

A plan presented itself. One that could accomplish both goals of their mission. If there was a chopper, there had to be a base. Finding the base would tell them a lot. That would certainly prove his suspicions were correct. Blowing it up would also cause the disruption they needed to buy time.

It was funny how dependent tactics became on hardware. If you have copters, you make plans that require them, even if they wouldn't otherwise be needed. Losing one, or even its support facility, might disrupt the entire operation.

Their problem was that helicopters hardly left trails to follow. The base could be anywhere within a hundred square miles of jungle. Tidwell's reverie was disturbed by Corporal Fleisher's warning shout.

The captain and Shanks simultaneously spun to see Neibling, the newest member of the squad, bending over the shell casing which had first attracted their attention.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same or less than the squad's value for Stealth, turn to Section 9.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 10.*

## — 6 —

The village was a no-win situation. With a shrug Tidwell ordered the patrol to skirt the clearing. For two more hours they slashed their way east toward the only firm landmark in the area, the Geechama River.

As the day passed, a gentle mist of rain began to fall, the drops on the foliage making an audible hiss. An hour later the drops had grown until they plopped with respectable authority down on the mercenaries. While the steady rain helped to chase away the ever-present cloud of insects that had dogged the mercenaries since they had entered the rain forest, it soon had filled every leaf with murky water. Many of these leaves were larger than a dinner plate and held a pint or more of rainwater. These mini-reservoirs showered the hapless mercenaries as they pushed their way under them.

Tidwell decided that along with the odor of rot, he also hated the near-constant rain. Those scorching months in Kuwait became more appealing as the memory of dehydration faded to the remembrance of simply being dry.

It was still raining when they heard the chopper. By the sound he judged it to be a big one. The Oilers had opted for a number of helicopters in their Table of Operations and Equipment. Communications had chosen additional troops instead. The rain was still an annoyance, but now they all were grateful it protected them from the infrared scanners that were standard in most patrol choppers.

"Copter. Maybe a big one," Sergeant Shanks speculated.

"Probably a Northo 91," the officer agreed.

If there was a chopper, there had to be a base. Finding the base would tell them a lot, Tidwell realized. Blowing it up would also cause the disruption they needed to buy time. It was funny how dependent tactics became on hardware. If you have copters, you make plans that require them, even if they wouldn't otherwise be needed. Losing one, or even its support facility, might disrupt the entire operation.

Their problem was that copters hardly left trails to follow.

## Section 7

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The base could be anywhere within a hundred square miles of jungle. The helicopter never did pass directly over them. In less than a minute the throb of its engines was lost in the sound of falling rain.

*Turn to Section 11.*

## —7—

It was nearly sunset by the time the patrol reached the ford. Twice more they heard helicopters pass overhead, and each time they dived into the deepest brush possible. Tidwell didn't think they had been discovered, but couldn't be sure. If they had, they would find out by the reception they got when they reached the ford.

The sun had set before they approached the ford itself. On the far bank they could see a campfire. Ten minutes of unmoving observation allowed the mercenary to spot the two men patrolling on this side of the river.

The Geechama was considerably wider at the ford, about twenty meters across. A thick rope was stretched between trees, providing assistance for anyone crossing on foot. According to the map's notations, this ford was too deep for anything but amphibious vehicles to cross.

The plan of attack was a simple one. Two men would silently disable the men patrolling this side of the river. If this succeeded, they would attempt to cross as quietly as possible. If undetected, the patrol would continue, leaving the remaining sentries to discover their frozen companions when the watch changed. Nothing would be accomplished by a firefight here. Tidwell wanted that chopper pad, if not an HQ or ammo dump, something important enough to buy a lot of time. Wiping out a few guards wouldn't be enough.

Perversely the moon was bright that night. Patiently Tidwell held his men in check until a bank of clouds obscured it. On either side his four best men began creeping toward the dark shapes of the Oiler guards. It was vital that the guards be taken out silently or the larger force on the far bank would be

alerted. No one relished trying to cross the river under fire, but they would have no choice if discovered.

*River Guards*

*Manpower: 2*

*Melee: 5*

*Four of the ITT mercenaries are attacking. Use the listed Melee Value with a Manpower of 4.*

*The patrol attacks on Chart B.*

*The guards defend on Chart F.*

*If both guards are eliminated in the first round, turn to Section 20.*

*If the battle takes more than one round, turn to Section 18.*

## — 8 —

Moving through the jungle beside the trail, the patrol took over an hour to complete the last mile. Once they heard a truck pass on the trail nearby, but the clank and grind of its engine suggested it was just some local merchant carrying a load of fruit to market. The one grumble voiced about not using the trail was silenced by a venomous look from Sergeant Shanks. When the point man returned with the information that the bridge was just ahead, Tidwell decided to slip forward and have a look himself.

The approaches to the bridge had been recently leveled, leaving a clearing the size of a football field at either end. The trail here was rutted and several treaded vehicles had used it within the last few days.

The bridge had been constructed at a point where the Geechama River narrowed. Swollen by the earlier rain, the river literally roared beneath the single-lane bridge. Even though it had gone up less than a year ago, there were

## Section 8

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already streaks of rust on the pitted steel girders supporting the structure.

There were eight guards near the bridge. Two occupied corrugated-steel guardposts on either end of the bridge. Two more were on the span itself, enjoying the natural air-conditioning the mist that rose from the whitewater provided. All were armed with M-21s. There also was a sandbag emplacement a short distance from the nearest guardpost which contained a machine gun. Surprisingly this was unmanned.

A final pair of guards had moved some distance downstream of the bridge and were fishing at the edge of the clearing. These were probably the men assigned to the machine gun. The mercenary officer noticed that one of these fishermen sat on a helmet featuring lieutenant's bars. Tidwell promised himself the pleasure of shooting this looie himself . . . if they attacked. Anyone that sloppy when in command deserved his personal attention. Since he was one of the opposition, he couldn't have the man court-martialed. Giving him a week in the morgue would be the next best choice. Better the lieutenant learned now than in a real shooting war, and besides, it should be quite satisfying. Incompetence had always annoyed Steve Tidwell.

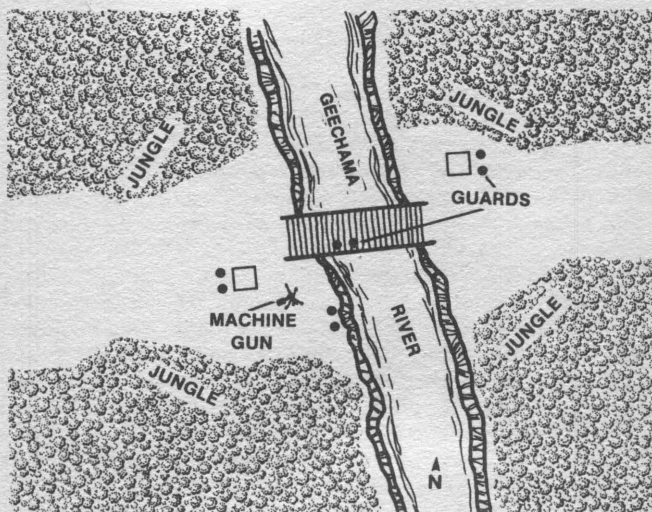
Crawling down out of the tree he had climbed to get a better look at the bridge, the mercenary started back toward his men. They weren't committed yet. They could still move along the river and try the ford, though the risk of discovery remained.

If they attacked now, surprise would be important and hardly guaranteed. The two guards near the bridge had looked alert, even if their officer was not.

*If Tidwell should have attacked the guards, turn to Section 12.*

*If you decide he should have tried to cross at the ford instead, turn to Section 7.*





MAP NO. 3497-24-02

— 9 —

Private Neibling froze with his fingers within inches of touching the casing.

Something was wrong.

Instincts trained by years of real combat screamed a warning. It took the mercenary several seconds of cautious scanning to find the faint outline of a wire buried under the hard-packed earth. It was a booby trap.

Stepping with exaggerated caution over the casing, Neibling followed the faint trace of the wire into the hut. Concealed under a fallen section of roofing was a bomb. This particular bomb sends out a very powerful local signal "killing" every suit within twenty feet. There were also attached smoke and flash pellets, just for effect.

A few minutes later Shanks had disarmed the device. Neither of them wondered anymore if there were any Oilers in the area. They had left behind a greeting card.

*Turn to Section 11.*

— 10 —

The mercenary who had stooped to examine the casing was Wilmont Neibling. He had only been with the unit a few weeks, but had seemed competent. Hiusa's record boasted experience in the Middle East and Mexico.

Unfortunately it only takes one mistake to be dead in a war.

Neibling's error was to very gently touch the shell casing. He had failed to notice a fine wire partially buried in the hard-packed earth. This wire led to the hut and a particularly powerful explosive. Touching the shell casing had disturbed the tiny flow of current in the casing and detonated the booby trap.

The actual explosion was loud, but not very dangerous. You'd have had to be sitting on the charge itself to be injured physically at all. For ten seconds red smoke poured out the numerous holes in the hut's rotted matting.

More important, Neibling suddenly found his kill suit had frozen. He had just become a casualty. The telltale on his wrist indicated that the loss had been registered by the judges and that when his suit freed up, he was to report to the morgue.

Shanks looked furious. Tidwell found himself unable to command the right expletive and settled for groaning. They were lucky that only Neibling had been within the fatal range of the tiny transmitter that was the heart of the trap. This particular bomb sends out a very powerful local signal "killing" every suit within twenty feet. There were also attached smoke and flash pellets, just for effect.

Tidwell sighed as he signaled for the remainder of the patrol to follow him back into the jungle.

*Lower the Manpower of your squad by 1. Then turn to Section 11.*

## — 11 —

It was a discarded battery, the type used in the quartz lights of their M-21 rifles. The rain had stopped and it glinted in the sunlight. Steam was rising from the trail, wide enough here for a jeep to drive along. With the rain ending, the insects had returned in force. Most were kept at bay by the repellent the men had liberally applied to their faces and hands. Shanks waved his hand in a vain effort to banish the pests.

Tidwell and Shanks crouched over the battery, neither wishing to touch it until they were sure it wasn't trapped. Booby traps were a favorite Oiler trick.

This was the fourth indication of Oiler activity that they had found on the trail in the last few miles. Less than a mile ahead was the southernmost of two bridges across the Geechama River. Earlier they had found the rain-filled foot-

## Section 12

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prints of several dozen men. There was really no question that the Oilers were up to something.

"There'll be guards at the bridge," Shanks speculated.

Tidwell nodded his agreement.

"It's likely there'll be several . . ." The sergeant let his voice trail off.

Pulling out a map of the region, the mercenary captain signaled a rest break. With schooled efficiency his men faded into the foliage on both sides of the trail. Tidwell allowed himself to feel a burst of pride. Even the newest mercenaries in his unit were well trained. It felt good to be one of the world's most independent and elite forces.

The map indicated there was a ford a few miles north of the bridge. He knew that if it was on the map, it was sure to be guarded as well, but probably by fewer men. And there was a better chance to sneak across at a ford than over a modern bridge.

Another consideration was that they had been finding indications that this part of the jungle was heavily traveled. So far they had been lucky. There was a chance they would be discovered while crossing the extra few miles to the ford.

*If the patrol should use the ford, turn to Section 7.*

*If the patrol should use the bridge, turn to Section 8.*

## —12—

The plan for the attack was simple. Tidwell sketched the terrain in the mud of the path. They were to attack in three teams. The first group would place itself on the side of the trail even with the bridge. From here they could give fire support to either of the other groups and hopefully ensure no one managed to man the machine gun. The second would approach from the north in the foliage along the bank of the river. They were to get as close as possible before the attack started. Their job was to get onto the bridge as soon as possible and prevent the escape of the guards on the far bank.

Once the second group was in position, Tidwell's team would get close in on the two guards who were fishing. Their opening up on the fishermen was the signal for the others to fire. It looked good on paper, but Tidwell knew there were too many chances of being discovered.

Once the two men who had been on guard were rotated in and briefed, they all moved out. The first fire team was in position minutes later.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the squad's value for Stealth, turn to Section 15.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 17.*

## —13—

Squatting ten meters from the edge of the jungle, Tidwell heard the crack of rifle fire. Dozens of colorful birds flashed past overhead, fleeing the noise. Something had gone wrong. Without even bothering to order the others to follow, he rushed through the last meters of jungle to the edge of the clearing.

Halfway to the bridge, the second group was caught in a cross fire, the guards on the far bank having a clear shot at them. The two fishermen were sprinting toward their gun. The young lieutenant waved his arms and bellowed orders as he ran. He hadn't even brought a weapon with him.

Tidwell paused to fire. Centering the running figure carefully in his sights, he gently squeezed the trigger. As he had expected, it was satisfying to see the officer stumble awkwardly as his suit froze.

Fire from either side told the mercenary that the rest of his team had come up. A defender went down on the far bank, but fire from his team on the far side of the bridge seemed to have slackened as well.

For a modern firefight, this one lasted a long time, almost

## Section 14

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three minutes. It only ended when the first team burst out of the jungle and charged toward the last two remaining defenders, the men in the guardpost on the closer side of the bridge who were using it for cover. This distraction allowed Tidwell's team to close and fire at the post from behind.

As his adrenaline rush faded, Tidwell realized that they had won passage over the bridge, but at a price. They weren't a large enough force to even attempt to hold the bridge and they weren't carrying enough explosives to collapse the sturdy structure. With a raised fist, he signaled the survivors to assemble. Even alone he had to complete the mission or risk the loss of all they had fought over. A failure now would probably get him blacklisted as well. For a moment Steve Tidwell saw the horrible image of himself as a bookkeeper trapped in some pastel office.

*Subtract any casualties from the value for Manpower, then turn to Section 19.*

## — 14 —

Some days it all falls together. This was proving to be one of them. Steve Tidwell decided he had no reason not to smile. On the far side of the bridge the second team was continuing forward undetected. Within another minute they would be under the bridge itself. On either side his team was waiting, weapons already aimed at their targets.

Less than ten meters away the lieutenant had just hooked a fish, his excited whoop having attracted the attention of all the guards. From the bend in his pole, it had to be a big one.

"Pity," the captain thought as he sighted on the center of the man's back and fired. Almost instantly the other teams opened fire as well. Their mock M-21s were realistically loud and dozens of birds took flight from the sound, adding to the confusion.

The lieutenant flopped onto his back, losing his grip on the pole as his suit froze around him. The second fisherman was



the target for the entire rest of the team and followed suit within a second.

One of the two men in the center of the bridge began a broken dash toward the machine gun. Tidwell admired his courage and technique, even as he cut him down with a well-aimed burst. The officer made a mental note to get the man's name.

The second team took out the guards on the far bank when they made a valiant but doomed attempt to cross the bridge. Poor planning, the mercenary decided. The defenders had obviously never rehearsed what to do in case of an attack. He wondered what was on the far side of the river that made the men feel so secure. Then guessed he'd find out.

In less than a minute it was all over, all eight defenders frozen in their kill suits. Not wishing to gloat, Tidwell made sure all were safe from harm and then signaled his men to follow him across the bridge. The next vehicle that came to the bridge would know something had happened. They wanted to be a long way from here when that report was called in.

*Subtract any casualties from the total for Manpower, then turn to Section 19.*

## — 15 —

*Guards at the bridge.*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 5*

*You attack on Chart C.*

*They will fire back on Chart E.*

*If you win the firefight, turn to Section 14.*

*If you lose, turn to Section 29.*

— 16 —

The men were in position, concealed all around the perimeter of the supply dump. Major Tidwell crouched behind a bush and studied the camp visible beyond the thick leaves. The guards were still walking their stations without giving any indication they had seen his patrol. He smiled as a young lieutenant appeared at the entrance to one of the storage sheds. There would never be a better time to begin.

Without bothering to give any order, the mercenary officer began firing. Within a few seconds every man in the patrol had opened up on whatever guard was in front of him. Their first targets stiffened before they were even aware there was an attack.

Cursing under his breath, Tidwell switched to another target when the young lieutenant managed to regain the relative safety of the building he had just left. In a live-ammunition firefight the young officer would have thought twice about seeking shelter among a room full of explosives, but in the Cold Cash War, as some budding author among the Communications mercs had dubbed this pseudo-war, the building was as safe as any foxhole.

The time for finesse had passed and the two sides exchanged fire. The remaining guards had all found shelter among the buildings. Tidwell noticed four new opponents suddenly begin returning his men's fire and then scramble into the jungle on the far side of the camp from Tidwell. There had been men in those tents, probably the night watch. The muffled sound of shots could be heard as they dueled with the Communications mercenaries who had been concealed in that section of the jungle.

To Tidwell's dismay the sound of the shots grew louder. It was unlikely any of his men were advancing firing through the jungle. Something had gone wrong.

An Oiler guard stepped around a building, trying to get a clear shot at a man somewhere to the major's right. It was a

dumb mistake and Tidwell fired a long burst to ensure he paid the price. The man fell, instantly immobilized in his kill suit.

Lights glinted off nearby leaves as the remaining guards in the camp returned his fire. Scrambling to a new position, the mercenary officer crept forward and looked for a target.

A large mantis skittered noisily off a branch as he pulled it aside to get a view of the dump. Tidwell realized he shouldn't have been able to hear it. Where was the sound of the rest of his patrol firing at the guards? It was quiet, much too quiet.

Having wiped out the rest of his force, all of the remaining Oil mercenaries slowly converged on Tidwell's position. He actually got two before the tightening of his suit ended the mission.

He hoped Clancey would share some of the Tully with him . . . when he got out of the morgue.

*Turn to Section 29.*

## — 17 —

*Guards at the bridge*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 5*

*You attack on Chart D.*

*They also will fire back on Chart D.*

*If you win the firefight, turn to Section 13.*

*If you lose, turn to Section 29.*

— 18 —

From where he was crouching inside a bush, all that the mercenary officer could see was the dark outline of the guards against the lighter river. Suddenly outlines seemed to grow larger and then one toppled over. The other split itself into three separate shadows, one of which detached itself with a shriek and dived into the river. The two other shadows followed.

"Damn," Tidwell thought. "More time scrunched down in the stinking decay."

They got the second sentry before he surfaced, but by then it was too late. On the far side of the bank the fire was suddenly extinguished and a voice demanded to know what was going on.

The mercenary calculated that it was too late to back off and try the bridge. By the time they could retrace their steps, the guards would be alerted and probably reinforced. If they could get a few men on the other bank, there would be a chance. It didn't sound like there were that many men on the far bank.

He waved for the men in the water to try for the far shore.

*Guards at the ford*

*Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 5*

*They fire on Chart C.*

*The patrol fires on Chart D for the first four rounds and then on Chart C.*

*If the patrol wins, turn to Section 22.*

*If it is wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

## — 19 —

The jungle on the far side of the Geechama smelled no better and contained just as many annoying insects as the west side had. The patrol had rested for a few hours and then begun at first light. It had been cutting through the dense undergrowth for two hours and still had traveled less than three miles. Tidwell was worried.

There was a lot of territory to scout and the chopper pad could be anywhere. They had to find something more substantial than a well-defended river crossing. That wasn't enough to prove there was a threat to the flank. It was hard for the tired mercenary not to feel that at their current rate whatever offensive Oil had planned would be over before they found anything.

And Tidwell was very tired of being cut by sharp-edged leaves and disturbing spiders the size of his hand.

Pressing on regardless, Tidwell continued to wonder what to do. A few minutes later the point man, Rimoz, appeared and reported that there was a road ahead. Signaling the others to wait, the mercenary followed him to his discovery.

It turned out to be a wide, new road, cut through the jungle by 'dozers and manpower. The road ran north to south and was nowhere on the map. It was so new that there wasn't a single stray plant growing in the roadway. In the rain forest this meant the road had been scraped clear less than a week earlier. Tread marks and tracks from wheeled vehicles abounded in the moist ground.

There was no question as to whether or not the road led to what the mercenary needed to prove himself right. After studying the map, Tidwell decided they would go north. There had been enough patrol activity south of here to pretty well assure the area wasn't sheltering anything too startling. This left the area toward where the Geechama looped widely before turning east.

The big question was one of time.

## Section 20

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*If Tidwell should have tried to save time and use the road, turn to Section 23.*

*If he should accept a much slower pace, but retain the cover of the jungle, turn to Section 26.*

## — 20 —

From where he crouched inside a bush near the river, all that the mercenary officer could see was the dark outline of the guards against the lighter river. Suddenly those outlines seemed to grow larger and then topple over. The muffled whump of a falling body was the only sound that marked the combat.

So far so good.

Then the moon came out. This return of the moonlight meant that they had to delay crossing the ford. In bright moonlight they would be unable to cross undetected.

This meant a nerve-racking wait while everyone worried that someone on the far bank would try to call to their comrades across the river or, worse yet, come over intending to relieve them.

Finally, nearly an hour later, the sky closed over with a thick cloud cover. Relieved, Tidwell decided it was safe to move. Tapping Shanks on the shoulder, he gestured for the sergeant to cross first. They would actually try to cross just above the ford. If anyone slipped, they would still have the rope to grab. Crossing further up, they also wouldn't emerge in the center of the Oiler camp.

At one-minute intervals the men began to cross.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 25.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 27.*



## — 21 —

Half the defenders had their backs to the ambush when he gave the order to open fire. Two of the seven fell in the first, unanswered volley. Those who did have time to grab a weapon fired blindly into the jungle.

Tidwell left his M-21 on full auto and sprayed the camp. Several others followed his example. Abstractly the captain found the display of lights reflecting off the river quite beautiful. Before he had time to reload his empty clip, all firing ended. There were no more moving targets left.

*Turn to Section 19.*

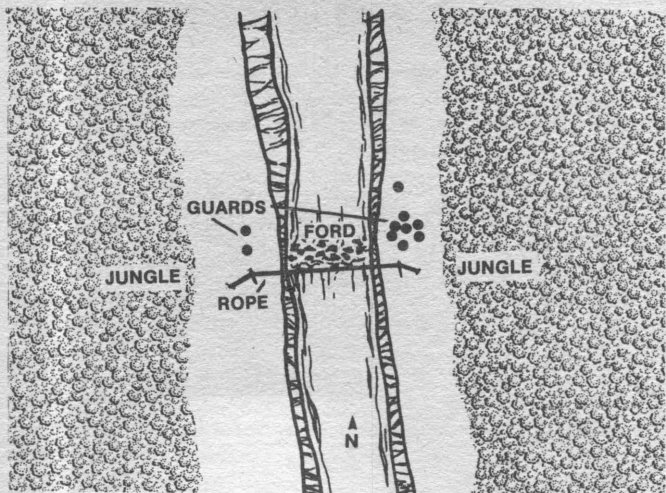
## — 22 —

Most of the guards' fire was at first directed at the sergeant exposed in the water. He dived once more and appeared further downstream near the bank.

Tidwell left his M-21 on full auto and sprayed the camp. Several others followed his example. Abstractly the captain found the display of lights reflecting off the river quite beautiful. A beam of actinic white light glittered off a damp leaf within inches of the mercenary's head.

It was a strange firefight, for each side could see the other only when they fired. If you fired at the wrong time, half a dozen beams answered you. Your only cover was to keep moving and use the confusion caused by the fire of others. The battle really wasn't resolved until Sergeant Shanks worked his way behind the defenders. To him they were easy targets outlined against the lighter surface of the river.

A few seconds after all firing ended, Tidwell cautiously crossed the river. Once across he was relieved to see the sergeant's figure emerge from the undergrowth.



MAP NO. 3497-24-03

"Got 'em all," the noncom observed casually.

The captain waved back an acknowledgment and signaled for the rest of the patrol to cross.

*Turn to Section 19.*

## —23—

It was a pleasure to take two steps in a row without being cut by a leaf or batted by a branch. The afternoon rain had held off longer than usual and the patrol was making good time. Tidwell felt surprisingly good considering how little sleep he'd been allowed lately. Even the ever-present swarm of insects had thinned, many unable to maintain contact due to the brisker pace he was moving at.

Sergeant Shanks, who had been the last man in line, was hurrying when they heard the *whomp-whomp* of an approaching helicopter. He and the captain dived for the same bush, crashing helmets and ending in a tangle of bodies. As the sound grew louder both men froze, Tidwell with his face pressed once more into a pile of decomposing leaves.

Along the road the rest of the mercenaries also scrambled for cover.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 24.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 30.*

— 24 —

“Shi—” The voice cut off in a too familiar manner. It was the sound a man made just before his kill suit froze around him.

Once the chopper had passed, the mercenaries emerged and re-formed on the road. Cautiously Tidwell checked back along the road. Everything seemed okay. Shanks’ low whistle summoned him forward.

Rimoz, their point man, was angry with himself. He had nearly dealt himself out of the mission. Stretched across the road and adjoining stretch of jungle was a nearly invisible wire. The wire connected to a mock claymore mine fastened to the side of a tree at waist level. Hardly a subtle trap and one designed to be easily bypassed if you knew where it was located.

Normally Rimoz would have spotted the wire and disarmed the mine without a second thought. The chopper had distracted him at just the wrong time and he had nearly snapped the trip wire as he plunged through a thorn bush seeking the deeper cover of a stand of broadleaf trees. The point man had never visited the morgue and was proud of the fact. It was well known he had a standing bet at Jane’s with several other mercenaries on the subject. He had come very close to having to buy several dozen rounds.

Tidwell realized he had a problem. If the road was trapped here, there would be other hazards further along as well. They could disarm them, but only if they found them first. All might not be so obviously placed.

Five minutes of searching disclosed a second booby trap concealed less than ten meters down the road. This one was triggered by a sophisticated infrared beam that was quite effectively hidden. The charge on it would have wiped out half the patrol.

They had been given a clear message: no trespassing. The mercenary’s respect for whoever set up this operation rose several notches. The man seemed to have thought of every contingency.

The question now was whether or not to continue down the road. It was possible that the road had served its original purpose and now was nothing but a long, narrow trap. There were too few of them left to take any unnecessary risks.

*If they should continue along the road, turn to Section 28.*

*If they should return to trekking through the jungle, turn to Section 26.*

## — 25 —

It seemed forever before Shanks reached the far side. The next man followed quickly, then a third. The fourth left the water just as Tidwell entered. He found the water to be surprisingly cool. Perhaps, he wished, the crossing would throw off the swarm of insects that still hovered over him.

It didn't, but he wasn't spotted either. Now the mercenary had a decision to make. Did he want to just slip past, or leave this door open for a fast retreat? Fifty meters away he could hear laughter from the direction of the campfire.

There was no chance their passage would stay unnoticed. The two dead guards on the far bank guaranteed that. After some hesitation the captain decided that in this case discretion called for them to attack the remaining guards. There was simply too much chance of being followed and ambushed by these others.

Little planning was needed. The guards would be illuminated by their own fire and have the river to their backs. His mercenaries were to spread out in the jungle along the edge of the camp and open fire on command.

*River Guards*

*Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 5*

*They will fire back on Chart F.*

## Sections 26, 27

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*The patrol will fire on Chart A.*

*If the patrol wins, mark any casualties and turn to Section 21.*

*If they lose the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

## — 26 —

Five minutes of searching disclosed a second booby trap concealed less than ten meters down the road. This one was triggered by a sophisticated infrared beam that was quite effectively hidden. The charge on it would have wiped out half the patrol.

It was time to abandon the road.

After four hours of slogging through the undergrowth, the occasional clearing was a welcome respite. Unconsciously a man relaxes when emerging into sunlight, a factor that many mercenaries used to their advantage when setting ambushes. This also made them an ideal site for taking a break.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is 6 or less, turn to Section 33.*

*If the total is 7 or higher, turn to Section 32.*

## — 27 —

From where he was crouched inside a bush, all that the mercenary officer could see was the dark outline of the guards against their fire. He could see six men squatting, some still eating. Idly he wondered if their field rations were any better than the surplus gunk Communications provided.

Shanks was halfway across the Geechama when the chal-



lenge came. For a few moments the sergeant tried to bluff his way across, slurring his words. Then the night was crossed by the rays of the quartz light in the lone sentry's rifle. Shanks' head disappeared, to reappear several seconds later further downstream.

"Damn. That's cut it," Tidwell murmured as he sighted on the flash of the sentry's M-21.

On the far side of the bank the fire was suddenly extinguished and a voice demanded to know what was going on.

It was obviously too late to try to backtrack to the bridge. By the time they could get there, the mercenary realized, the guards would be alerted and probably reinforced. Tidwell quickly ordered those men not in the water to form a fire line along the bank. He hoped they could provide enough covering fire to allow a few men to get onto the other bank.

*Guards at the ford*

*Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 5*

*They will fire on Chart C.*

*The patrol will fire on Chart D for the first four rounds and then on Chart C.*

*If the patrol wins, subtract any casualties from Manpower and turn to Section 22.*

*If it is wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

## —28—

They had almost no warning before the Skoda B133 personnel carrier swung into sight less than fifty meters ahead of the patrol. No order was needed for every man to scramble for the relative safety of the jungle.

The driver, a civilian in a kill suit, had either panicked or was very courageous. He floored the accelerator and the

## Section 29

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carrier rushed at the diving mercenaries. Quartz beams flashed out from behind the cab as all six Oiler mercenaries began shooting. They had the advantage of shooting down at the fleeing figures of the patrol and the protection of the thick steel sides of their carrier.

*Oiler Personnel Carrier*

*Manpower: 6 (the civilian was unarmed)*

*Ordnance: 5*

*The mercenaries in the carrier fire on Chart C.*

*The patrol returns fire on Chart D.*

*If all the men in the carrier are killed, turn to Section 35.*

*If all those in the patrol are wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

## — 29 —

Adding insult to injury, a dragonfly landed on the tip of Tidwell's nose. It was a big, ugly specimen and it made the mercenary nervous even though he knew most dragonflies don't bite. Besides, its tiny wings batting against his cheeks tickled. The jungle still stank as well. Waiting for his suit to unfreeze, the mercenary had nothing to do but contemplate the variety of foul odors and wonder how far down the ITT-iots would bust him this time. Damn pencil pushers.

After a time Tidwell admitted to himself that he wasn't as mad at his bosses as at himself. He should have succeeded. The mission was possible. He had failed.

The judge who picked him up wore all black like a Sunday school teacher . . . or a mortician, the mercenary realized, suddenly getting the joke. He didn't find it very funny.

*This mission is a bust. Fortunately you can simply go back in this book and try again. Where you start over can be wherever you feel you made a crucial error, or you can try your last mission again by turning to either Section 1, Section 41 or Section 66. Better luck this time.*

## — 30 —

“Shi—” The voice was cut off in an all too familiar manner. It was the sound a man made just before his kill suit froze around him.

Once the chopper had passed, they began to sort themselves out. Cautiously Tidwell checked back along the road. Everything seemed okay. Shanks’ low whistle summoned him forward.

Rimoz, their point man, lay frozen, his face reflecting the frustration he had to be feeling. There had been a trip wire across the road. Hardly a subtle trap and one designed to be easily disarmed. The wire connected to a mock claymore mine fastened to the side of a tree at waist level.

Normally Rimoz would have spotted the wire and disarmed the mine without a hitch. The chopper had distracted him at just the wrong time. He had missed seeing the wire as he plunged through a thorn bush seeking the deeper cover of a stand of broadleaf trees. One foot was still tangled in the thin cord, and the telltale on the mine glowed red.

After arranging Rimoz as comfortably as possible, Tidwell led the men a short distance further down the road. It was a breach of protocol to remain in the area of a kill, simply because to do so slowed the judges in getting to him.

Tidwell had another concern. If the road was trapped, there would be other hazards as well. The mercenary’s respect for whoever set up this operation rose several notches. The man seemed to have thought of every contingency.

The question now was whether or not to continue down the road. It was not unlikely that the road had served its purpose and now was nothing but a long, narrow trap. There were too few of them left to take any unnecessary risks.

*Subtract 1 from the patrol's Manpower.*

*If they should continue along the road, turn to Section 28.*

*If they should return to trekking through the jungle, turn to Section 26.*

## — 31 —

*Oiler Monitoring Team*

*Manpower: 6*

*Ordnance: 5*

*The Oilers fire on Chart E.*

*Tidwell's patrol fires on Chart B.*

*If the Oiler Monitoring Team is wiped out, turn to Section 37.*

*If they defeat the patrol, turn to Section 29.*

## — 32 —

The sunny, innocent-appearing clearing meant trouble, but not the kind they expected. The problem wasn't an ambush, but a more natural hazard.

There are over one hundred species of poisonous snakes in the Amazon Basin. These range from ten-foot-long, fifty-pound monsters to a few smaller than a man's little finger. When Walt Berrick sat down on the fallen tree trunk, he made a cursory check but failed to see the thin brown shape of a Jana snake. The reptile's subtle pattern of browns and grays made it nearly invisible nestled in a crack in the decaying tree. Normally the tiny Jana would have fled from such a

proportionally gigantic threat, but Walt sat down directly on top of it. The terrified creature responded with the only defense with which nature had endowed it. It bit that part of the hapless mercenary that was descending over it.

With a startled shriek the thin, neatly bearded mercenary jumped to his feet, dropping his M-21 and grabbing behind himself with both hands. The Jana took this opportunity to slither away into the jungle. For a few moments Walt danced clawing at his posterior while those around him laughed uncontrollably. When he dropped to his knees and continued to clutch at the wound, the laughter stopped and Tidwell ran to his assistance.

By cutting away the seat of his pants with his survival knife the officer exposed the punctures. Already the skin around them was swollen and had turned a sickly purple.

"Antivenom," Tidwell ordered as the other men gathered round. "Someone take lookout."

Suddenly the situation was no longer funny.

"And the shocker," the mercenary captain added, tearing the seat of Berrick's pants completely open.

Seconds later Shanks passed over a small plastic box. Inside this box was a powerful capacitor. Outside were only a switch and two contacts jutting out from one edge. No one knew why sending an electric current through a snakebite helped neutralize the poison, but it did.

Tidwell yelled "Clear," not because this was procedure, but because he had seen doctors yell the same thing when electroshocking heart attack victims. After placing the contacts on either side of the twin punctures, the officer activated them. Berrick's muscles twitched as the charge surged across the wound. By now he was barely conscious and scarcely noticed.

A few minutes after the antivenom had been injected into the bitten mercenary's femoral artery, his breathing regularized. Ten minutes later Walt Berrick was unconscious, but out of danger.

This added another entry on the growing list of things the mercenary hated about the jungle. He couldn't simply leave Berrick behind. But to call for an evac pickup with their communication compromised would endanger the mission. It would virtually pinpoint them for the Oilers.

Nor could they stay with him. It could be days before the man was able to move. If he did need better care, it would be homicidal to try to treat him in the field when some of the most modern hospitals on the continent were only minutes away by helicopter.

For several minutes Steve Tidwell agonized to find a solution. It was a funny war where there were no real deaths. Back in the Arabian action they had been forced to leave a wounded man behind on several occasions. Regrettable, but somehow different. Here, in a "war" where no one was supposed to really die, to do such a thing seemed monstrous.

Yet it was the same dilemma. A choice between the man and the mission.

It was a question by a swarthy Berber, incongruously named Thomas Thomkins, that inspired the solution.

"Won't his kill suit register him as dead?" the former nomad asked with a heavy accent, while looking down at Berrick's still figure.

"Don't disturb the captain," Shanks snapped, and then was surprised to see the officer smiling.

"What'll get someone here faster than anything?" Tidwell asked aloud, and then continued before anyone could answer, "I'll show you."

To everyone's surprise the captain took three steps back and proceeded to "shoot" Berrick with his M-21. Seconds later the suit began to freeze, contorting the unconscious man into an awkward position on the ground. There was a nasty murmur from all the men except Shanks, who kept his face carefully blank. Tidwell then bent over the "dead" man and drew his knife. A real knife, not one of those that slip back into the handle when used. One of the other mercenaries started toward them, but was stopped by Shanks.

"Just watch the captain," the sergeant advised.

Tidwell cut through the heavy material containing the key circuits of Berrick's kill suit. With two more strokes he opened the entire back of the suit and pulled the man free. In a control room at the undisclosed location of the judges' computer center a raucous set of alarms went off. They would be there in minutes, just as Tidwell knew. There was nothing the judges were more concerned about than preventing a violation of their protocols.



Within seconds the last of the mercenaries realized what their officer had done. All were smiling with relief and embarrassment as they reentered the jungle. Less than ten minutes later they heard the distinct whoosh of the silenced helicopters the judges preferred to use. Knowing the poisoned man to be in good hands, Tidwell felt a tenseness in his back relax.

Now all he had to do was find the chopper pad and blow it up.

*Subtract 1 man from your patrol's Manpower.*

*If this leaves only 1 man, turn to Section 29.*

*If there are still 2 or more men left, turn to Section 33.*

## —33—

The first hint they had was the squeal of disc brakes as a truck pulled to a halt on the road. Their route had once more taken them close to the winding road and twice they had crossed it staying on a northern compass bearing. Deciding to see for himself, Tidwell crept forward.

The truck was a small troop transporter of the kind favored by many European armies. Probably a Skoda B133, he decided. It had very little armor and an open top. This one held six men in the rear compartment. They all wore Oiler uniforms. Even more pleasantly there was a seventh, unarmed man driving, wearing a tie under his kill suit. This had to be an Oil Slicker, one of their executives.

As Tidwell watched, the civilian snapped an order over his shoulder. One of the mercenaries responded by hopping out of the carrier and moving toward Tidwell.

For a moment the Communications merc wondered if he had been seen, then was relieved when the Oiler merc stopped a few meters short and disconnected a wire from a packet attached to a tree. Deactivating a booby trap, Tidwell realized.

Then, instead of continuing down the road, the civilian got

## Section 34

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out and ordered the others to follow. After a short time it was plain that they were setting up some sort of communications device. When they raised up a large directional antenna, it became obvious how Oil was monitoring Communications' transmissions. They must have had teams like this all along the front, just behind the combat lines.

Under the supervision of the civilian, the Oilers completed the assembly in only a few minutes. Then all the Oiler mercs except one slouched down into the shade of the carrier. This remaining mercenary snapped an order and a large black man struggled to his feet and hefted his rifle.

Having seen enough, Tidwell crawled a safe distance away and then hurried back to the waiting patrol. Bringing in some of that monitoring equipment would enable his side to restore integrity to their communications. If all else failed, that alone would justify the mission.

There were two choices as to how to go about it. They could hit the Oilers while they were resting or hope they packed up again and continued in the same direction, allowing his section to ambush them as they passed. Crowded into that small Czech personnel carrier, their response would be hampered.

*If they should hit them immediately, turn to Section 31.*

*If they should wait to ambush them, turn to Section 34.*

## — 34 —

The sun was setting when Tidwell finally gave up waiting for the Czech personnel carrier to pass. Discouraged, he ordered the patrol to follow and led them down the road toward where the monitoring station had been set up. He knew there was no guarantee the Oilers would continue farther down the road and they hadn't. A pity, since he had set up such a perfect ambush. "That's war," he consoled himself. It was a matter of breaks. The winner got the right ones and used them. They hadn't gotten one.

When they got close, the captain ordered everyone into the jungle. If the Oilers were still there, he wanted to hit them hard and fast. If they weren't still set up, at least they'd have only wasted a few more minutes on top of the hours they had already waited uselessly.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is 8 or less, turn to Section 36.*

*If the total is 9 or greater, turn to Section 39.*

## — 35 —

As they landed, each of the Communications mercenaries opened fire from whatever position they were in. When the firing ended Shanks realized he was curled around some sort of giant mushroom. The cross fire from both sides of the road soon cut down those in the more exposed rear of the Czech-made personnel carrier, though not before the Oilers' fire extracted its own price.

Someone else in the patrol managed the pleasure of freezing the Oil Slicker. This caused the truck to slam hard into a grove of saplings. To compensate for not getting the man himself, Tidwell enjoyed the look on the junior executive's face when he began pulling key parts out of the wreckage of a receiver and antenna they found in the rear of the vehicle. This Slicker was going to be in big trouble when he got out of the morgue and reported how their monitoring scheme had been blown.

*Record that you have the key parts of the monitoring equipment. Then turn to Section 38.*

— 36 —

With a whoop the Communications mercenaries rushed out firing at full auto. Birds scattered and small animals slid into the thick growth and stayed very still. Then Shanks swore in a loud, even voice.

No one was there.

Nothing remained but a few tire tracks and holes where the antenna had been propped. Half a day lost and nothing to show for it.

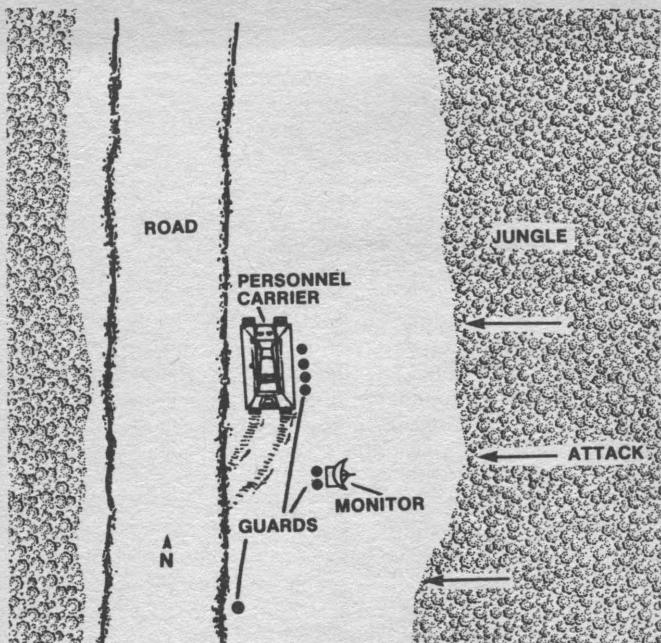
*Turn to Section 38.*

— 37 —

Hurrying to where the Oilers were still setting up the monitoring station, everyone in the Section opened up with full automatic as they reached the edge of the jungle. If it had been a real shooting war, the Oiler mercenaries would never have known what hit them. The lone guard was paying more attention to the road than the jungle and was the first to fall frozen.

Someone else in the patrol managed to be the one who got the Oil Slicker, but Tidwell enjoyed the look on the junior executive's face when he began pulling the key parts out of the receiver and antenna. This Slicker would be in big trouble when he got out of the morgue and reported how their monitoring scheme had been blown.

*Record that you have the key parts of the monitoring equipment and then turn to Section 38.*



MAP NO. 3497-24-04

— 38 —

The second night out in the jungle is always the worst. The first night you are still fresh enough to endure the discomforts with some equanimity. Even though you hardly sleep, there's enough reserve to keep you moving the second day. Around sunset of the second day all your reserves have been spent.

The second night you're almost too exhausted to sleep. When you do manage to doze off, it's a troubled sleep, the kind any unusual sound will disturb. At night a jungle comes alive. Cats prowl, the night birds sing, thousands of species of insects emerge; all forming a veritable symphony of strange noises.

It was just before dawn when the pale, soft, ten-inch-long moth wing brushed past Tidwell's face. Whatever he had been dreaming must have been horrible and violent, for when he came fully awake, the captain was standing and holding his unsheathed survival knife extended arm's length in front of him. The outstretched hand was shaking.

Deciding any more sleep was an unlikely option, the mercenary leaned back and tried to get a better perspective on their situation. They had been on patrol two days and were deep in Oiler territory. Somewhere nearby there was a base, maybe more than one. He had seen signs of no fewer than forty Oiler mercenaries, a personnel carrier and at least one helicopter. Nearly enough to prove something significant was being set up. Even the ITT-iots would realize there was too much hardware for this to stay a quiet sector.

The new road led to somewhere, but that place could be miles away. How could he pass quickly down a road filled with enemy forces and still retain surprise? Once they did could they cause enough trouble to delay whatever the Oil Slickers had planned? Their need to move undetected made reaching anywhere important nearly impossible.

The solution backfired and wheezed its way down the nearby road just after dawn. Then it broke down within a dozen meters of where they were camped. It was a vintage



Ford truck that might have been shipped here during World War II. The doors were missing and it had been painted bright yellow with cheap house paint. The back was completely filled with large pink melons.

Trying to act casual, Tidwell and Shanks walked up to the driver. Both of them spoke Portuguese well enough to be understood. The old farmer would know they were mercenaries by their kill suits, but they hoped he wouldn't know or care which side they were on. It was likely that this far into their lines all he had ever seen were Oilers.

"Good day." Tidwell tried to sound cheerful. The way he felt it took an effort.

"Not so good for me," the local groaned without looking up from his hood.

"Trouble?" Shanks inquired helpfully.

"This is my son's truck," the farmer explained. "He has gone away to the army and left our family only this wreck. No one to help me on our poor farm." The term he used for "wreck" was the Portuguese word for "crotchety old woman."

"Sounds like you have it rough," the captain sympathized.

This was enough to start the old man on a long lament about how cruel the world was and how heartless modern youth had become. His melons will now rot on the roadside and his family starve. After several minutes Shanks signaled he had found the problem and that the engine could be made to run.

Playing the part of the sympathetic sucker, Tidwell offered to buy the truck. The old farmer immediately forgot this was supposed to be a charity offer and haggled for the better part of ten minutes. The price they agreed to was slightly more than Shanks guessed the battered vehicle and melons were worth, but Tidwell planned to expense the cost in any case. As an afterthought he also purchased the colorful blanket that the old man had used to cover the holes in the bench seat that stretched across the cab.

An hour later Shanks had reconnected a loose generator and cleaned six thoroughly fouled spark plugs. The old farmer's final word of advice was not to drive over ten miles an hour, as the engine might still blow up. As he climbed into the back he also commented that there were virtually no brakes, so they should avoid steep hills.

There was no way to disguise his kill suit, so Tidwell slit the blanket and wore it like a poncho. It was not quite the local style, but looked native enough to pass. After two days in the field it took no effort for him to look scruffy and unshaven. The mercenary hoped he would pass as one of the hundreds of local farmers who sold their produce in the markets at Brasília.

They all had melon for breakfast and then buried themselves in those that remained. Before noon the truck and its unlikely cargo were grinding up the road.

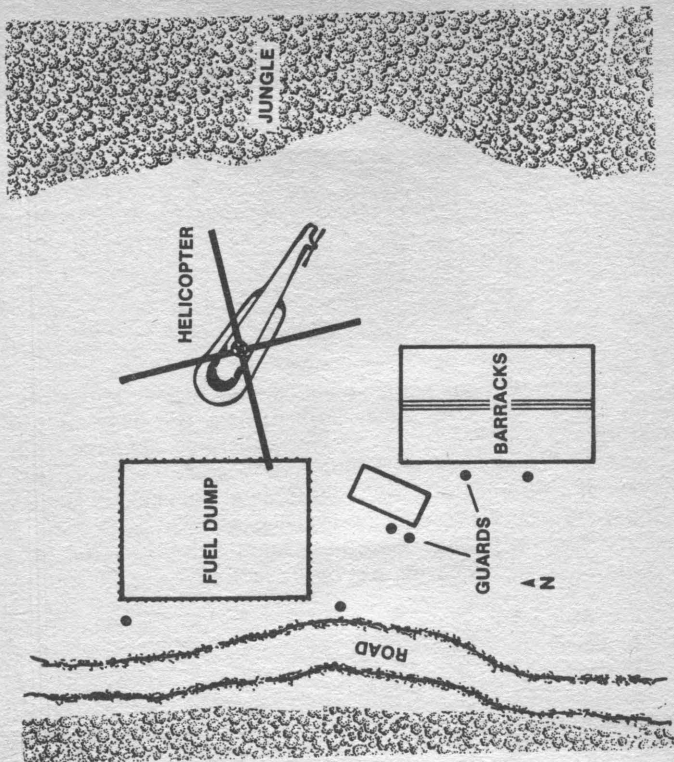
The chopper pad contained a small fuel dump. Judging by the size, it was to service a lot more than the single Northo 91 parked next to it. As they drove past, the mercenaries surveyed the base.

There was a small barracks, a trailer with a radio antenna, a fenced-in area containing several hundred barrels of fuel, and the helicopter. Only four guards were visible, though another emerged from the barracks to relieve himself in the jungle as they passed. It was a nice setup. The guards weren't too alert, but someone had to know what he was doing in order to have established this base without being detected. He and Clancey had done something like this for the CIA once, in Africa, the Ogaden. It had been a refueling depot for some RDF choppers.

Tidwell was tempted to stop the truck and order an attack while they still had surprise. The guards were not suspicious and he could pull right up to the ones by the fuel dump. It was likely they were more concerned with stopping the locals from pilfering than with the possibility of being attacked this far inside their own lines. There was no way to tell if this was all the guards there were or if the barracks held a dozen more.

Another choice that had to be considered was for them to continue past and then sneak back through the jungle. They'd had a lot of success with attacking out of the jungle in the past. This might also allow someone to plant the charge before the shooting started.

A third possibility also came to mind. The ITT-iot had offered an air strike. He could call one in and watch safely from down the road. He'd be proved right and the Oilers' plans disrupted with one stroke.



MAP NO. 3497-24-05

*If they should attack immediately, turn to Section 45.*

*If they should try to sneak up from the jungle, turn to Section 44.*

*If Tidwell should call for an air strike, turn to Section 43.*

## — 39 —

To Tidwell's relief, the Oilers were still busily monitoring his side's signals when they arrived. They still had only one sentry out and this one had strayed a distance down the road, probably assuming any trouble had to come the same way they did, by truck or carrier. Swatting at the cloud of insects hovering near his face, Tidwell understood why.

As soon as his men were in position Tidwell opened fire, followed instantly by the rest of the patrol.

*Oiler Monitoring team*

*Manpower: 6*

*Ordnance: 5*

*The Oilers fire on Chart E.*

*Tidwell's patrol fires on Chart C.*

*If the Oiler Monitoring Team is wiped out, turn to Section 37.*

*If they defeat the patrol, turn to Section 29.*

## — 40 —

The jungle seemed unusually still as the mercenary officer slipped along the edge of the clearing around the Oiler base. It made him jumpy, wondering if maybe there wasn't an Oiler patrol deeper in. As he reached the point where the foliage

grew closest to the helicopter, he decided it didn't make any difference. They couldn't just pull out leaving everything intact.

"Mongol 4," he muttered into the compact radio built into the shoulder of his kill suit. "It's a go."

"You got it, Mongol leader," was Shanks' cheerful reply.

From his vantage point Tidwell could see his men moving in bounds toward the barracks. The building itself blocked them from the guards' view as they advanced.

When they hit the door of the barracks, his men let out a yell that was clearly audible across the compound. All four guards turned and raced toward the building.

Then Tidwell was up and running toward the chopper. Seconds later he had planted his "charge." One minute after that, red smoke poured from the "explosive" and the chopper was officially disabled.

Now they only had to deal with the minor matter of the remaining guards. They couldn't leave them behind.

*Base Garrison*

*Manpower: 4/7*

*Ordnance: 5*

*The Oiler garrison fires on Chart D.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart B.*

*Only the four Oiler mercenaries on guard duty, minus any casualties, will fire back in the first two rounds. Four of the remaining seven Oilers are immediately knocked out in their barracks and never enter the firefight. The remaining three defenders will hurry out of the radio trailer, joining the battle on the third round.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

*If the patrol wins, turn to Section 41.*

—41—

Compared to the last time they had spoken, the ITT-iot was almost friendly.

"The Command Committee agrees with your estimate of the situation."

"Nice of them." Tidwell couldn't resist the dig. He had gotten back just before sunset, less than three hours ago. His first hour had been spent reporting the results of his reconnaissance. This was followed by a hot shower and a steak. The mercenary considered it an accomplishment that he had made it through the meal without falling asleep. Slightly less than an hour ago he had finally allowed himself to collapse. Now after less than one hour's sleep, he wasn't feeling very tolerant.

"We also commend you on your successful patrol confirming our suspicions." Now that they were confirmed, it became "their" suspicions. "We feel you are the right man to lead a preventive strike into the region," the Communications executive continued.

The mercenary tried to look alert, but his eyes kept drooping. No matter how urgent, he couldn't leave until dawn. He wondered if the ITT-iot would ever finish and let him get back to sleep.

"Of course, with these increased responsibilities you will be returned to your former rank. Congratulations, Major." The Communications exec finished with what was obviously meant to be the "big announcement" and cut off the circuit.

Several of the men in the room cheered quietly or murmured their congratulations. Tidwell tried to look pleased, but was sure he only looked tired.

The next morning the mercenary major looked over the Table of Operations and Equipment. As usual the TOE was simple and his employers had spent only enough to supply the barest minimum needed for the mission. The mercenary took this philosophically. If he wanted to overwhelm the enemy



with hardware, he could have stayed in one of the national armies. Still, it should be enough. After a night's sleep the freedom and dash of a preventive strike had appeal.

*The size of the unit that the Communications Corporation has assigned to Tidwell depends upon the success you had on the reconnaissance mission. The more he accomplished on the last mission, the greater their faith in him and the more men they will be willing to risk under his command.*

*The basic squad assigned will be 16 men with a Morale level of 8.*

*If the radio intercept parts were captured on the recon mission, add 4 men to this total and increase their Morale by 1. (Fifty percent need not have survived to receive this bonus.)*

*If at the end of the mission over fifty percent of the men assigned to it survived (that's 4 or 7, depending on your choice of squads and including Tidwell himself), then increase this number by 4 (more) men and increase their Morale by an additional 1. You do not need to have found the radio to receive this bonus.*

*Major Tidwell's new command will then be comprised of either 16, 20 or 24 men. Their values will be:*

*Manpower: 16 (or 20 or 24)  
(includes Tidwell)*

*Ordnance:  
3( $16 \times 3 = 48$ )  
( $20 \times 3 = 60$ )*

*Melee:  
4 ( $24 \times 3 = 72$ )  
( $16 \times 4 = 64$ )*

*Melee: 4( $24 \times 3 = 72$ )  
( $16 \times 4 = 64$ )*

*Stealth: 8 ( $20 \times 4 = 80$ )  
( $24 \times 4 = 96$ )*

*Morale: 8 (or 9 or 10)*

## Section 41

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*(The lower Ordnance and Melee values used from now on are simply adjusted to allow you to handle the larger size of unit on the combat charts. The values for the opposition have been similarly diminished.)*

*These men are all armed with the M-21 assault rifle. This is the specially devised rifle whose beam activates the "kill" command on the mercenaries' special suits. These rifles also carry a full clip of standard 7.62mm rounds. Should a suit not react to two definite hits by the light beams, the mercenaries can revert to real fire.*

*The men Tidwell has been assigned are divided into two sections of equal size. Major Tidwell is to command the left section himself. The right section is commanded by Lieutenant Randall Neilson. His sergeant will be Eddy Allinov, a short, blond New Yorker with a thick Brooklyn accent. Losses between the squads will be balanced between firefights so that both remain equal in size. If there is an odd number, the extra mercenary will be in Tidwell's squad. Tidwell will be the last "killed" and Neilson should be the second to last.*

*You may wish to create a new record sheet incorporating the new values and number of troops. Be sure to mark any casualties off alternately from each squad. If you wish to make the next section more challenging, attempt to complete it with the minimum of 16 mercenaries.*

Major Tidwell hadn't worked with Randall Neilson before, but he liked the Canadian's looks. Neilson was a big man, well over six feet and thickly muscled. He wore a plaid lumberjack shirt under his kill suit despite the warm weather. Maybe he really had been a lumberjack at one time. Few men start life as mercenaries.

"This mission is twofold," Tidwell explained to Neilson and the two sergeants. "There is a new road running north and south just beyond the west branch of the Geechama River. It represents one hell of a lot of labor. Our bureaucratic bosses would like us to find out where it goes. The best way to do that will be to cut northwest and across the plateau. We should cross the road near where the Geechama turns east."

An orderly nudged the door of the briefing room open and at Tidwell's nod entered with a pitcher of beer and four glasses. The briefing was temporarily suspended while they all drained their first glass and poured themselves a refill. The bitter Brazilian beer had never tasted better and Tidwell realized this was because he was enjoying himself. The next few days were going to be rough, but hardly boring.

"The second objective we have been assigned," he continued, "is to cause so many problems for the Oilers they think we have at least a company in the field. Hopefully that will make them hesitant to attack until we really do have a company or two on hand.

"Our offensive in the center is making progress, but we've committed nearly every man and weapon to it. This means this flank is vulnerable. Those Oil Slickers are up to something. If it's a major attack, they could roll up half the army.

"Incidentally, I've been told we'll be getting a success bonus if we can pull this off. We leave at 0600 hours. Have the men ready at 0530. See me individually if there are any further questions.

"Dismissed."

Jane's was still an amazing combination of modern technology and grease. Like most mercenaries, Tidwell preferred the grease.

This time Clancey was there when he arrived. Once more they went through the rituals of greeting and making sure the other wanted company. It was Clancey's turn to buy and he sounded as if he had been drinking for quite a while already.

"Heard you've been busy," Clancey commented after several minutes of relaxed silence.

"Sort of," Tidwell answered noncommittally.

"Figured it had to be you." He grinned, visibly proud of his friend and opponent's success.

For the umpteenth time the major wondered at how this "deathless" war scrambled attitudes. In a war where men actually died he and Clancey would have made sure they fought on the same side. Now both found that the competition added extra excitement to even routine actions.

"I mean, who else would they send . . . that could get in *and* away again?" The Oiler captain settled back and watched Tidwell through half-closed eyes.

Maybe he wasn't as drunk as he appeared, Tidwell speculated. There was one way to find out.

"Care for a bit of competition shooting tomorrow evening?" he asked the other mercenary. "We can get the range after dinner."

"If you're here," Clancey answered with an only slightly slurred voice.

"Bet you a bottle of Irish," Tidwell challenged, hoping, but not expecting, his friend to take the bait.

The Irishman's grin showed he hadn't been even slightly deceived. "Okay, a bottle on the upcoming shoot." Tidwell was sure his friend wasn't referring to any pistol competition.

After the two bottles of Tullamore Dew were purchased and left with Jane, the verbal sparring ended and the friends settled into a relaxed evening of old stories. Both left early, neither admitting he expected to be up early.

The officers studied their field map. To the northwest of the Communications camp was a no-man's-land comprised of a hilly rain forest gradually rising to a tree-covered plateau. Beyond the plateau lay the area originally assigned to the Oil forces when the "war" had started. Dozens of native paths wound through the jungle, most abandoned and overgrown since the government displaced the locals to make room for the battlefield. Unless they discovered another road, it would be a grueling slog to the suspected Oiler encampment.

A tropical rain forest is not warm in the early morning hours. For those few minutes before the sun bakes the moisture off the leaves above, the air is surprisingly brisk. A rain forest is also extremely damp from the moisture that has condensed out of the cool night air on the bottoms of the leaves, even when the nearly inevitable late night rain hasn't fallen.

Thus, Tidwell found himself in the rather novel situation of being chilled as well as thoroughly soaked by runoff from the still-damp leaves. He hoped Clancey was having an equally miserable start to his day. Unfortunately, knowing the Irishman,

the major had no doubt he had figured some way to sleep late and then conned a chopper ride to wherever he was stationed.

Later, after ten hours of slogging along overgrown trails, everyone in the patrol was hot and miserable. They had been following a path that led generally toward the plateau and were currently using a native trail. Their discomfort was heightened by the need to proceed cautiously. There was also a good chance voice and radio detectors had been planted along the most likely penetration routes. The Oilers had had months to infiltrate the area. Months when the ITT-iots that ran their side labeled the area as "quiet" and ignored it. As a result the patrol was spread with each man several meters behind the last. This and the need for radio silence meant that all commands had to be passed along the line using hand signals. The major was almost looking forward to their first firefight. After that their presence would be announced and he could use the radios built into every mercenary's helmet. Hell of a waste working for the Communications Corporation and not being able to use their employer's products.

It was near dusk when the signal came. Tidwell had been worrying about where they would camp for the night and nearly missed it. The merc ahead of him was raising a clenched fist and then lowering it.

"Enemy ahead."

The officer passed on the alert and then moved quickly forward. He needed more information and everyone in the patrol was well trained. They'd wait just off the trail until attacked or ordered to do otherwise.

He met the point man retreating at a trot.

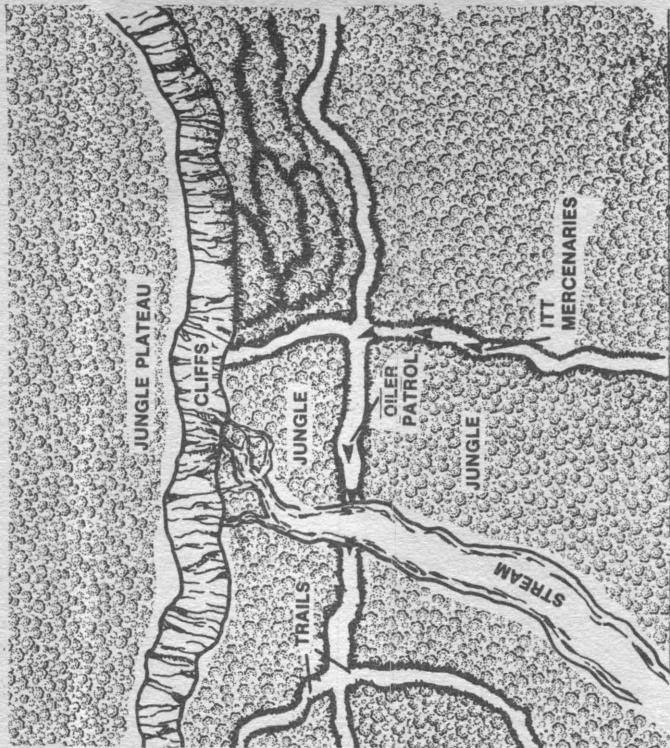
"Oiler patrol," the mercenary informed him, using a complicated series of gestures the mercenaries had adopted from the SAS decades ago. For those skilled at using it, the sign-language communication was almost as fast as normal speech.

"I saw three, maybe four."

"Coming this way?" Tidwell asked.

"No, on a cross-trail, maybe twenty meters up." The private was catching his breath and paused before signing the rest of his reply. "On recon. Looking for us?"

The major ignored the question. It didn't matter. He ordered the mercenary back to his station. It was unlikely the



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Oilers knew they were here. This was probably a routine perimeter patrol. At least he knew they were headed in the right direction. There was still nearly an hour until full dark. The decision now was whether to let the patrol pass or catch up to it and hit it from behind.

*If they should stay concealed and let the patrol pass, turn to Section 47.*

*If they should attack the Oiler patrol, turn to Section 49.*

## —42—

The jungle seemed quiet as the patrol slunk toward the Oil base. It made the mercenary officer jumpy, wondering if maybe they weren't the only ones sneaking along the edge of the clearing. Just as he reached the point where the foliage grew closest to the grounded helicopter, a short burst of fire rattled loudly.

That had been M-21 fire, his men. The mercenary officer waited for the sound of return fire to be audible over the shouts of the now alerted camp guards.

Mumbling an obscenity, he made a quick decision. They couldn't pull out leaving the chopper intact. It would be up and after them in minutes.

"Mongol One," he ordered brusquely, "let's go."

Shanks' cheerful acknowledgment was lost in the roar of small arms fire. From all around the arc of jungle, his patrol opened up on the defenders. More Oiler mercs poured out of the barracks, the first few falling frozen within a few steps. Tidwell barked out a few orders, then had to concentrate on the defenders who were lighting up the leaves around his position.

*Base Garrison*

*Remaining Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 5*

## Section 43

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*Oiler Garrison fires on Chart C.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart B.*

*If the Oilers win, turn to Section 29.*

*If the patrol wins, turn to Section 41.*

## —43—

His first impulse was to just pull over and watch the fun. Then, for his own peace of mind, the mercenary did a U-turn and hurried back past the base a second time. Nothing had changed. Tidwell parked the truck just out of sight of the Oiler base.

"This is Mongol 3 to Mongol 1, over," the captain spoke into the compact comm unit attached to his kill suit. After ten seconds of sputtering static he got a reply.

"Mongol 1 here. Whatever happened to radio silence?" The radio operator sounded annoyed. They had probably disturbed his lunch.

"I need an air strike on coordinates A squared 7," Tidwell continued, ignoring the question. "Top priority," he concluded.

"Air strike on AA7, request confirmed, entire force available to be sent," the voice assured. "It'll take a few minutes to pull 'em up from the center. Someone must believe in you," it finished in a more friendly tone.

"Now we just wait," Shanks observed happily.

"I hope that was brief enough to prevent our being located," the captain worried aloud. "We have a long way to get back."

Less than fifteen minutes later the air strike appeared in the form of two air-condor ground-attack helicopters. Tidwell was impressed. Someone *had* believed in him. Then he realized that Communications had started with six such aircraft three days ago. Four must have been lost in the offensive further south. No wonder they could only spare him one strike.

From the edge of the jungle they could see the condors make their first pass. As they went by, sensors on the sides of the grounded Northo 91 were washed by quartz beams. Red smoke poured from either side, adding a dramatic effect to the raid. Tidwell knew the controls were now frozen. A red light that flashed over the fuel dump signified it also had been lost. The acrid red smoke drifted over to where the patrol was hiding, indicating the dump was now considered destroyed.

"Don't you just love the smell of napalm? It's the smell . . ." one of the men started to misquote. Another pushed him over in mock disgust.

Tidwell had to agree. It certainly was a strange way to fight a war.

*Turn to Section 41.*

## — 44 —

His first impulse was to just pull over and watch the fun. Then, for his own peace of mind, the mercenary made a U-turn and hurried past the base a second time. Nothing had changed. Tidwell parked the truck just out of sight of the Oiler base. This also placed them so that the base wasn't between them and the nearest friendly territory.

The plan called for Tidwell to work his way through the jungle until he was even with the chopper. Then he was to risk a short broadcast signaling the remainder of the patrol to begin moving toward the barracks. If they reached that building undetected, they were to burst in, knock out anyone inside it and use it for a fire base to engage those guards already on duty. The captain was to use the distraction this caused to plant his "explosive" charge on the helicopter. The blast should knock out both the chopper and the fuel dump.

That was the plan.

## Section 45

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*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the squad's value for Stealth, turn to Section 40.*

*If the total is greater than this value, turn to Section 42.*

## —45—

“Let’s get ’em,” Tidwell yelled as he lifted his M-21 off the seat of the old Ford. Steering with one hand, he sprayed the guards near the fuel dump. The remaining men in the patrol poured out of the truck, knocking melons onto the ground. Under the cover of their fire Tidwell dashed over to the chopper and planted his “explosives.” One minute later red smoke poured from the “explosive” and the big gunship was officially disabled.

*Base Garrison*

*Manpower: 4/11*

*Ordnance: 5*

*The Oiler garrison fires on Chart D.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart C.*

*Four Oiler mercenaries, minus casualties, will fire back on the first two rounds. The remaining seven Oilers will join the battle on the third round.*

*If Tidwell’s men win, subtract any casualties and turn to Section 41.*

*If the Oilers win the fight, turn to Section 29.*

## —46—

They kept going for an hour after the ambush ended. It had been a matter of seconds to wipe out the entire Oiler force. There was even a chance they had been quick enough that no one had the abortive report of the attack. Too bad, for that meant the worst of both worlds. They couldn't stay in this area in case their presence was known, and they couldn't have the luxury of radio contact while moving through the darkness in case it wasn't. Tidwell found he was tired when his adrenaline level had settled back to normal.

The trek away from where they had staged the ambush was made even more odious by the evening shower. It chose to rain harder and longer than normal, the rain penetrating the ceiling of leaves and falling on the mercenaries in large heavy blobs. Three miles closer to the plateau they camped, each man sheltered by a thin plastic blanket stretched between trees and bushes. Except for the man on watch, they were asleep within minutes.

*Turn to Section 50.*

## —47—

The Oiler patrol continued. Tidwell ordered Allinov to shadow it until he was sure it would not double back. When the sergeant appeared a half hour later, he reported that the patrol had settled in for the night about a mile away. Tidwell found he was tired when his adrenaline level had settled back to normal. He would have preferred to make camp here, but they would have too much chance of attracting the Oilers' attention. They would have to move on, even in the dark, until they had put a few more miles between themselves and that perimeter patrol. Besides, he rationalized as he pulled on

his pack, this way they would penetrate the enemy's outer perimeter in the darkness.

The trek to where it was safe to make camp was made even more odious by the evening shower. This night it rained harder and longer than normal, the rain penetrating the ceiling of leaves and falling on the mercenaries in large heavy blobs. Within ten minutes everyone was soaked for the second time that day and the normally comfortable kill suits began to chafe where they rubbed under the arms and at the groin. Three miles closer to the plateau they camped, each man sheltered by a thin plastic blanket stretched between trees and bushes. Except for the man on watch, they were asleep within minutes.

*Turn to Section 50.*

## — 48 —

A vine caught on his foot and for the fifth time in the last hour Tidwell nearly slid down the overgrown slope of the cliff. It had looked high from the point where they started the climb and the cliff's looks had not been deceiving. Even with the abundance of plants clinging to the rock, the actual climbing had been strenuous, but easier than feared. The tropical sun beating down on their backs as it rose higher and the humidity made the effort a true test of endurance. Sweat moistened every portion of the officer's uniform and stung his eyes. For yet another time Tidwell regretted not having chosen the easier route to the top. He glanced up and saw that they had only a dozen meters more to go. The patrol was spread out on the slope, both behind and beside him, with each mercenary having picked his own way up.

Then there was a movement at the edge of the cliff above. A face appeared from around a bush covered in yellow blossoms. It was a young man, red-haired and freckled. Tidwell didn't need to see the top of his kill suit to know this wasn't any native. The redhead's worried shout as he pulled back confirmed the mercenary officer's worst fears.



As Tidwell struggled to free his rifle one-handed a second face appeared. The same face popped out for a second look and then a voice began shouting orders. Fire erupted from several spots along the slope above.

At least, the mercenary consoled himself, there was no question as to whether or not they had been detected.

He began tripping the throat mike on his helmet. "Use what cover you can. Return fire. On three, odd men advance." He snapped out the orders. Then opened fire himself.

Hanging on the cliff, he felt vulnerable and exposed.

*Oiler Cliff Guards*

*Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 21*

*Oilers fire on Chart B.*

*Tidwell's patrol returns fire on Chart D.*

*The Oilers, due to their position, fire first.*

*If there are still Oilers left after three rounds of combat, turn to Section 51.*

*If the patrol is destroyed, turn to Section 29.*

*If the Communications patrol is victorious, turn to Section 54.*

## —49—

The rough leaves cut their exposed skin as the Communications mercenaries rushed down the trail after the Oiler patrol, their haste modified only by the need not to alert their prey.

Major Tidwell found he was enjoying himself. On days when he was feeling philosophical he would even admit that

## Section 49

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this was a large part of why he had chosen to be a mercenary. The surge of adrenaline as you raced to face the enemy. The satisfaction of a job well done. Now if they could just figure a way to fight wars where it was air-conditioned.

He had tried being a junior executive. That jungle was no less dangerous than the one he now raced through, but you lost yourself to the corporation. People didn't try to shoot you, but they sniped at your pride. There were no enemies, or rather you never knew who your enemy was. Nor were there any lasting friends. He had found this out the hard way. When he had walked away from the business suits and the Monday briefings, he found clean, direct warfare of a mercenary a relief. Here he knew who the enemy was, whom he could trust.

They spotted the tail man just as the enemy patrol rounded a curve. Leading, Tidwell slowed and wasn't noticed. He waited until the bulk of his unit had caught up and then led them on. There wouldn't be much finesse on this one. Simply a matter of using surprise and their greater numbers. A hard, fast strike and they might escape without casualties.

Sergeant Allinov to his left was the first to open fire. Over his headset Tidwell could hear a frantic report from the corporal leading the Oilers.

*Oiler Perimeter Patrol*

*Manpower: 5*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 15*

*The Oilers fire on Chart C.*

*Tidwell's squad fires on Chart C as well.*

*If they wipe out the Oiler patrol, turn to Section 46.*

*If all the Communications mercenaries are lost, turn to Section 29.*

## — 50 —

The raucous scream of a Tectec parrot brought Tidwell to his feet, weapon ready, just after dawn. Deserts, he remembered fondly, tended to be both silent and empty. His own reaction had awakened most of the others, so he decided they might as well get an early start. After a quick breakfast of canned rations, possibly Pakistani War surplus, he guessed from the faded label, the mercenary officer climbed the largest tree he could find and got their bearings. He was surprised how close they had come to the edge of the plateau.

The ridge was something of an anomaly in the Amazon Basin. Sometime in the distant past tectonic forces had split the underlying rock and slid one side of the split upward. The result, after eons of erosion, was a hundred-meter-high cliff running for miles through the jungle. According to the topographical maps, the cliff face was steep, but climbable almost anywhere. From where he hung in the tree Tidwell decided this assessment had been overly optimistic. He could see only one section, possibly cut by moving water, where they could gain the top without actually climbing it like a mountain.

The problem was that if this was the only reasonable route to the top of the plateau, it was sure to be guarded. On the other hand, if they tried to climb the cliff anywhere else, they would be horribly vulnerable to attack from above. If they had been detected, there would be patrols all along the edge. He didn't look forward to having his suit freeze him in position while clinging to a 70-degree slope.

*If they should move toward the more gradual route, turn to Section 59.*

*If they should go to the closest, but steep, face of the cliff and climb it there, turn to Section 48.*

—51—

The brilliant targeting lights of the Oilers' M-21s spotted the leaves of the bush Tidwell crouched behind. The air was full of the reports of the mock rifles as they maintained a steady flow of force on the advancing mercenaries.

To his left he could see that Neilson had nearly reached the top. From what he could tell there had only been about half a dozen men firing down at them, fewer now. Unfortunately there were also fewer men firing up as well.

*If the perimeter patrol that was discovered earlier was ambushed and destroyed, turn to Section 52.*

*If it was not engaged earlier, turn to Section 71.*

—52—

*Continue to roll the combat as usual.*

*If all the Oilers are finally "killed" in the combat, turn to Section 54. Remember, the Oilers fire first each round due to their superior location.*

*If the ITT patrol is wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

—53—

The trail wound along the cut in the cliff's face, following the original bed of the stream that had flowed there. The clay and rocks underfoot were still slick from the constant rain. It was impossible to walk without dislodging a few pebbles. As each one clattered down the streambed the major remembered how sensitive the surveillance devices he had used in that raid on the Katjura Oasis were. They were Israeli-made, or at least labeled in Hebrew. He wondered how relations were between the Oil Corporation and the Israelis. He hoped as strained as ever.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 56.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 58.*

—54—

Like most of the mercenaries climbing with him, Tidwell tried to plant himself firmly each time he swung further up the slope. With all the vegetation, there was little likelihood of a "kill" falling all of the way down the slope. On the other hand, a helpless fall ending in a solid impact against a tree trunk could be fatal. He had already seen one of his men slip, but Allinov managed to grab him by the leg and secure him to a bush.

Neilson had finally reached the top. Tidwell tried to see how many men were still accompanying him, but couldn't stick his head up far enough to get a count before most had crawled over the edge and disappeared.

## Section 55

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The sounds of the battle changed as the men that reached the top opened fire on the remaining defenders. The fire over Tidwell's head slackened and he risked a hurried scramble to the top. By the time he reached the edge, the firing had stopped. Pulling himself onto the relatively flat plateau, he nearly rammed into a fallen Oiler mercenary. It was the redhead he had seen earlier. The man gave him a weak smile.

*Turn to Section 55.*

## — 55 —

At the top of the plateau was a well-worn path. The jungle in this area will reclaim a trail in days. A few of the vines in this Amazon Basin grow so quickly they literally take only hours to block a path. Within a week, any trail that is not used regularly has to be cleared again. This trail was clear and worn almost to dirt. It confirmed Tidwell's suspicion that there had been a lot of activity in the area. Too much to be the prelude to anything but a major Oiler effort.

Somewhere on this trail, he decided, must be a suitable first target for disruption. They could travel either to the north or to the south. The other, more gradual route they chose not to take up the plateau was to the south. There could be anything, even a major concealed base, to the north. It was almost evening, so either way they would have to march several hours in darkness. An unpleasant prospect in a jungle. Not only is the rain more frequent at night, but a number of the local ecology's least appealing critters are nocturnal.

*If the patrol should take the trail north, turn to Section 79.*

*If they should take it to the south, turn to Section 81.*



## —56—

Even though the point man was closer, Lieutenant Neilson was the one who spotted the suspicious piece of metal poking out from the mud of the trail. It was coated dull black, but a tiny edge had been worn bright by pebbles washed past.

"Freeze," he bellowed, ignoring the silent-movement order.

Everyone but Tidwell froze. The major rushed forward to see what was happening. He was more than a little upset. If there were any sound monitors, everyone from here to Brasília now knew where they were.

"Lieutenant," he whispered in tightly restrained tones, "what the hell is going on?"

"Better I show you," Neilson replied confidently. He then edged cautiously along the side of the trail until he was just ahead of the point man. Pointing at the metal tab jutting from the streambed, he shrugged.

"Okay, check it out," the major ordered brusquely.

After stripping off everything made of metal, Neilson kneeled over the deadly device. Many of the new mines were magnetic, some even reacted to vibration, but that type would have gone off already in anything as active as a streambed. This mine turned out to be the old-fashioned style which would explode whenever anyone stepped on a trip wire stretched just below the rocks and pebbles. He and the major edged forward. The mines stretched for nearly a hundred meters along the trail. At the far end they found the entrance to an alternate route hidden by a cut bush. This route paralleled the minefield-covered path just out of sight of the "real" trail. Going back down the safe route, Tidwell appeared almost behind Allinov. Before he could say anything the sergeant had spun and was about to fire.

Tidwell smiled his approval. There was no longer any question that something big was planned. No one went to all

this trouble for a quiet sector. He led the patrol up the safe route. Almost an hour had been lost and if there were mines, there were likely sound monitors. If anyone had been listening, Neilson's scream would have been hard to miss.

*Turn to Section 61.*

## —57—

"Allinov, have your squad take the men below. Keep them from picking off Neilson's squad." Tidwell snapped out the orders. Every second wasted could mean another of his men down.

"Neilson, get over the top *now!*" Tidwell shrieked into his helmet microphone while doubling his rate of fire. They had to win within the next few seconds or be wiped out.

The six men with Allinov rained fire down at the Oilers. Two fell immediately and the rest scrambled for cover. Risking his own loss, Tidwell shifted to a bush closer to the edge, firing rapidly to keep as many as possible of the Oilers on the plateau from firing at Neilson.

The sound of the battle changed when the rest of the men reached the top and opened fire on the remaining defenders. The fire over Tidwell's head slackened and he risked a hurried scramble to the top. By the time he reached the edge, the firing had stopped. Pulling himself onto the relatively flat plateau, he nearly rammed into a fallen Oiler mercenary. It was the redhead he had seen earlier. The man gave him a weak smile. Tidwell liked his spunk and checked his tags. He decided to try to recruit the boy after he got out of the morgue.

Allinov crawled over the edge a minute later and reported that the last two survivors of the perimeter patrol below had either left or been "killed." Lying on his back panting, Tidwell nodded his approval.

*Turn to Section 55.*

## —58—

Even though the point man was closer, Lieutenant Neilson was the one who spotted the suspicious piece of metal poking out from the mud of the trail. It was coated dull black, but a tiny edge had been worn bright by pebbles washed past.

"Freeze," he bellowed, ignoring the silent-movement order.

He was too late by a fraction of a second. The point man shifted his weight forward and a loud *blam* was followed by billowing red smoke which filled the trail around the hapless mercenary. When the smoke had cleared, he lay paralyzed by his kill suit, "dead" and looking frustrated.

The major rushed forward to see what was happening. He was more than a little upset. Everyone from here to Brasília knew where they were now. He could only hope the explosion was attributed to the local wildlife.

"Lieutenant," he demanded in tightly restrained tones, "what the hell is going on?"

"Minefield," Neilson replied quickly. He then edged cautiously along the side of the trail until he was just ahead of the fallen point man. Pointing at a bulge in the clay, he shrugged.

"Okay, check it out," the major ordered brusquely.

After stripping off everything made of metal Neilson knelt over the device. Many mines were magnetic now, some even reacted to vibration, but that type would have gone off already in anything as active as a streambed. This mine turned out to be an old-fashioned style that would explode when anyone stepped on a trip wire stretched just below the rocks and pebbles. They were lucky that only the point man was affected. The major and the lieutenant edged forward. The mines stretched for nearly a hundred meters along the trail. At the far end of the minefield they found the entrance to an alternate route hidden by a cut bush. This route paralleled the minefield and ran just out of sight of the "real" trail. Going back down the safe route, Tidwell appeared almost behind Allinov. Before he could say anything the sergeant had spun and was about to fire.

Tidwell smiled his approval. There was no longer any question that something big was planned. No one went to all this trouble for a quiet sector. He led the patrol up the safe route. Almost an hour had been lost and if there were mines, there were likely sound monitors. If anyone had been listening, Neilson's scream would have been hard to miss.

*Mark one more casualty off your record sheet.*

*Turn to Section 61.*

## — 59 —

Where they reached it, the cliff face was steep and daunting. The brush-covered rocks certainly didn't invite climbing. Much more inviting, and probably more deadly, was the wide, well-cleared trail leading up the center of the crack to the plateau above.

It was clear they had to proceed cautiously. Tidwell signaled Neilson to take the lead himself. The big Canadian moved through the jungle with impressive smoothness. They had proceeded up the path less than a hundred paces when the lieutenant hurried back to him.

"Something doesn't feel right," he reported. Anywhere else a hunch like this would be disregarded, but not among highly trained mercenaries. If there was a problem, then it was probably something the man had noticed, but not consciously recognized. Something his subconscious was screaming over. You became an old mercenary by listening to your hunches.

"On the road or in the jungle?" Tidwell asked, concerned.

Neilson shrugged self-consciously. "Not sure. Just a hinky feel."

It could be an ambush or more patrols coming in from behind them. If so, hurrying up the trail would be the best course. The more time spent thrashing through the trees or up exposed cliffs, the higher the probability of being spotted.

Then again it could be something ahead, and climbing the cliffs would avoid it. Hardly an appealing choice, but possibly the safer one.

*If the patrol should proceed cautiously up the trail, turn to Section 53.*

*If they should instead climb the cliff on one side, turn to Section 48.*

## — 60 —

Neilson led the first charge with his men spread wide behind him. From the volume of fire, Tidwell estimated at least six defenders, probably a few more. Only Neilson was still moving seconds later, diving into a shallow depression in the trail. Beams from the M-21s danced in the dirt around him. Both sides fired and the valley was filled with beams in the gathering dusk.

The rest of the Communications patrol opened up in support. Beams from the bunker answered, playing over the cliff face behind them.

The bunker emitted a scrambled radio message.

"Movement drill," Tidwell ordered. No use keeping radio silence any longer.

Immediately the well-trained mercenaries began a pattern of fire and movement. The Oilers were having trouble spotting their attackers in the darker canyon. Tidwell realized that they were firing only at the muzzle flashes of his men's weapons. Each mercenary kept moving, advancing in a zig-zag pattern, pausing only to fire a quick burst and then dive away.

For a few seconds it looked like the assault would soon be over. If they could get to within hand-grenade range of the bunker, it would end quickly. Tidwell was ready to rush forward himself. Then a man fell nearby, the beam splattering off the center of his chest. When a second man fell, the major

## Section 60

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realized what had happened. Someone in the bunker had a night scope.

"Everyone to cover!" he yelled, forgetting about his helmet radio. "Dig in fast and fire only at a sure target." He finished in more controlled tones.

Then he waited. On a windswept plateau in the Ogaden he had been shown by a shriveled Frenchman that the real disadvantage of any night scope was that it needed faintly glowing filaments to generate its infrared beam. Now he watched for the telltale flicker of red light.

For minutes nothing. No one fired and a few of the braver insects began to chirp again.

Then a spark glimmered on the left side of the bunker. A cigarette? Maybe, since many mercenaries were among the last to give up the suicidal habit. No one bent on seeing old age become a mercenary. He sat perfectly still, studying the red glow.

No, this light source was too even. There was no flare when the smoker drew in. Edging forward, he sighted a few inches below the glowing filaments. The three shots, fired in rapid succession, sounded loud. The abruptly cut-off obscenity as the suit of the scope-using sniper froze on him was almost louder. A second string of expletives was definitely louder. These resulted from the discovery that the sensitive sight had broken when dropped by the now paralyzed casualty.

"Let's get 'em," the major ordered. "Like I said, movement drill."

When they got close to the bunker, all firing ceased. A grenade was thrown in a firing slit and Tidwell smashed through its only door firing. Inside he found only the "dead," glaring at him with annoyance. The place was a mess. Not one of the casualties was in his full uniform. Until they had upset things, this obviously had been soft duty. The major hoped one of the frozen men was the officer in charge.

*Turn to Section 66.*



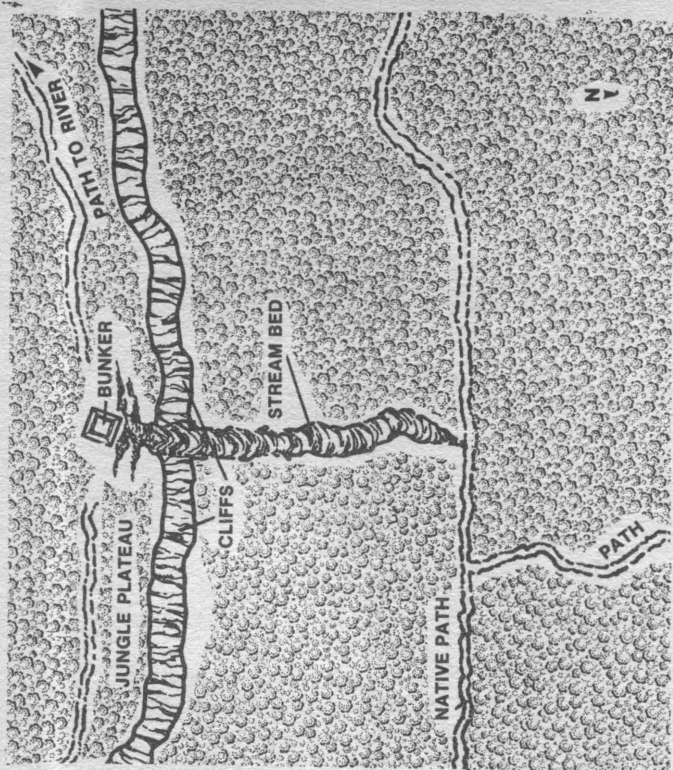
## —61—

Another hour of careful climbing and they had almost reached the plateau. It was almost dark. Based upon their map the far side sloped relatively gently down to the Geechama River. Allinov's squad had taken the lead and the major knew there was a good chance there would be some sort of a guardpost at the top of the trail. He was right.

The position was a bunker made of logs, large trees being easily found in a rain forest, and mud, which was even more abundant than trees. It was hard to tell how many men were in the position or if there were others concealed elsewhere. With all of the noise earlier, it seemed highly likely anyone inside would be expecting trouble. An animal might trip off the land mine, but not shout a warning.

An even worse problem was that the bunker was placed at the end of where the trail had been bordered by steep cliffs for the past several hundred meters. To assault the position would be costly, but there was no way to bypass it. This would also be the quickest choice. They could try to sneak past in the dark, but the darkness was a weak ally in the age of modern detection devices.

Tidwell could order Neilson to backtrack to where his section could climb the cliff and attack the bunker from a second side. The problem here would be one of coordination. If they used their helmet radios to coordinate their attacks, they would alert the bunker (and everyone else for a hundred miles) to their actions. If they didn't use the radios, it was probable Neilson wouldn't be in position when the firing started. The long wait on the trail while he got into position was another concern. There was virtually no cover along the cliffs. If they waited, either for dark or for Neilson to move onto the bunker's flank, there was a good chance that they would be discovered. Someone traveled regularly up the trail. As a last resort they could simply go back down the trail and try to climb the cliff face at first light. At least then they wouldn't have to attack a fortified position on a limited front.



MAP NO. 3497-24-07

*If they should immediately assault the bunker, turn to Section 65.*

*If the patrol should wait until dark and then attempt to sneak past, turn to Section 64.*

*If Neilson should be sent off in a flanking movement, turn to Section 67.*

*If the Communications patrol should go back down and climb the cliff face in the morning, turn to Section 48.*

*If they should call in their onetime air strike to eliminate the bunker, turn to Section 93.*

## — 62 —

Neilson led the first charge with his men spread wide behind him. From the volume of fire Tidwell estimated at least six defenders, probably a few more. Only Neilson was still moving seconds later, diving into a shallow depression in the trail. Beams from the M-21s danced in the dirt around him. Both sides fired and the valley was filled with beams in the gathering dusk.

Tidwell counted eight light sources. Another man fell nearby as a beam activated his kill suit.

Too many and too well dug in. Best they retreat and tackle the cliffs in the morning. Resigned, the mercenary officer flipped on his helmet radio. No reason left to stay quiet.

"Section one, cease fire and pull back," he ordered. "Two, provide cover."

Sun Tzu once said that wisdom in battle is knowing not when to attack, but when to retreat and fight another time.

*Turn to Section 48.*

— 63 —

The buzzing of his wrist alarm saved the major from the embarrassment of having Allinov find him asleep. He opened his eyes to see the dark shape of the large sergeant approaching. Pulling himself carefully to his feet and stifling the urge to stretch, he greeted the sergeant.

"Time to move," Tidwell said, trying to sound cheerful, or at least alert.

"Yes, sir," the big mercenary acknowledged smartly.

"I'll lead the first section. You and Neilson stick with the second," the major ordered, stifling a yawn. If anyone was going to get a trip to the morgue because of his orders, he could at least lead from the front.

The first hundred meters were under the relative cover of a gentle curve in the trail. As per his orders, the first section was strung out at three-meter intervals. If they were discovered, this would help minimize the casualties. Crouching behind a knee-high rock, Tidwell searched for their best route.

They would have a lesser likelihood of being seen if they stayed near one of the cliff faces. Then again this was where any detection devices would be hidden. A light flickered inside the bunker where one of the shades was pulled aside. Someone there was nervous, probably correctly guessed the cause of the noise they had made earlier on the trail up here. If there were any detectors, he knew they would be turned on and monitored.

*If Tidwell should lead them along the open area halfway between the cliff and the bunker, turn to Section 68.*

*If he should lead them close to the cliff, turn to Section 70.*

— 64 —

“It will be night in less than an hour,” Tidwell explained to Neilson and the sergeants. “Until then I propose to pull back. We will attempt to get past as soon as it’s full dark.”

The mercenaries nodded their approval. One of the traits that made up a mercenary, at least an old mercenary, was an aversion to suicidal assaults. If there was any other chance to pass the bunker, it was worth a try.

The men dispersed to the edge of the trail, ordered to make as little noise as possible. Allinov himself watched the back trail while Neilson kept watch for anyone leaving the bunker itself. Settling into a crevice on the side of the cliff, Tidwell tried to relax.

*If the perimeter patrol encountered in the jungle was defeated earlier, turn to Section 63.*

*If it was not attacked earlier, turn to Section 69.*

— 65 —

*Oiler Bunker*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 24*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart B.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell’s mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 80.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

*During the firefight, instead of firing, Tidwell can order his remaining men to withdraw back down the trail and they will attempt the cliff instead in the morning. If this is chosen, turn to Section 62. Be sure to mark off any casualties.*

— 66 —

A haze of smoke still hung over the neutralized bunker when the Communications patrol formed up and left. The men were tired, but all understood the need to get away from this location as soon as possible.

That night all slept soundly. Tidwell took the last watch himself. It was cool in the jungle and the plateau didn't rise far enough to make any difference in the pervasive humidity. Still, the mercenary hardly noticed. He was concerned with the hard decision as to whether they should continue or pull back. They had stirred up enough action to distract any Oiler forces in the area. It certainly meant steps were being taken to locate and eliminate his force, and that might even slow the suspected offensive. Perhaps this would be enough to satisfy the bookkeepers.

Probably not, he decided, sighing. It would be nice, but they had done nothing that couldn't be attributed to a few men. What was needed was something spectacular. The "destruction" of whatever was located at the end of the road he had found on the last patrol would do. Besides, he was curious as to what was there.

Smiling, the mercenary admitted there was another reason for deciding to stay: somewhere out here was Clancey. By now his old friend had to have figured out who had caused all of the problems. There were still those bottles of Tullamore Dew to decide the ownership of.

The dawn found Tidwell tired, but charged with renewed enthusiasm.

"Let's go," he urged the other mercenaries as they struggled to wake up. Most replied with groans or in less polite



terms. When their complaining became more creative, Tidwell knew they were ready to travel.

After the last patrol the major had been worried about crossing the Geechama unobserved. To his relief the ford he chose for crossing the river was unguarded. He would have relaxed more, though, if the far side of the river hadn't proven to be a swamp. There were a few trails through the knee-deep black water, but the patrol couldn't risk using even those, not after rather spectacularly announcing their presence already. Even those trails wouldn't have discouraged the swarms of insects that formed a dense cloud around each mercenary. Nor did the powerful, and malodorous, repellent discourage more than a few of the less determined species. Tidwell's list of why he hated jungles was soon several insects longer.

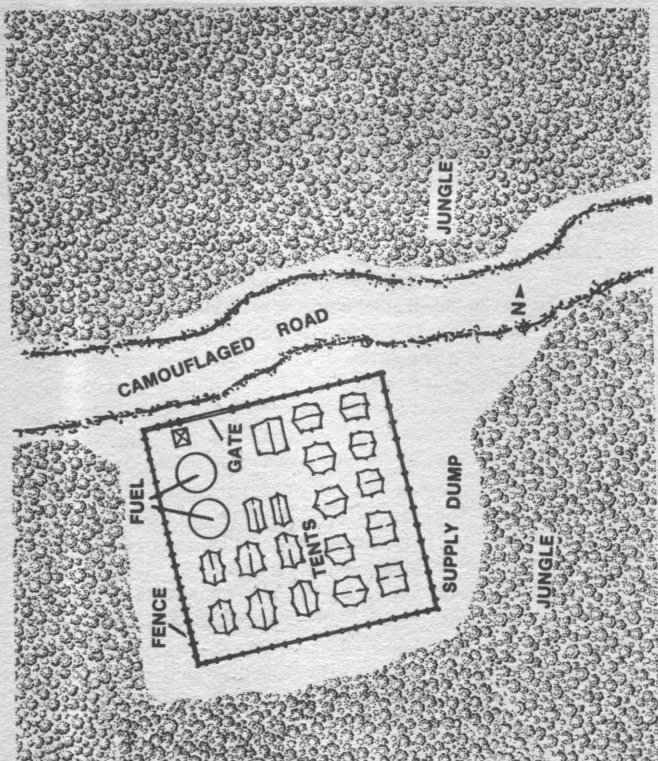
The next night's camp in the swamp qualified as the third most unpleasant experience Tidwell had survived. The second had occurred in the seventh grade and the first was too unpleasant to recall. The morgue was still awaiting classification. Therefore he was almost relieved when late the next morning Allinov reported an end to the swamp and beyond it sat a major Oiler installation. At least they had a chance to be somewhere dry.

The base turned out to be an ammunition and fuel dump. It was carefully camouflaged with netting so as to be virtually invisible from above. Even the road that led into it was covered with a metal mesh that was painted with camouflage colors.

The entire base was surrounded by a barbed-wire-topped hurricane fence. To date it had been mostly needed to keep out the local fauna. Outside the fence, the jungle had been cleared back for about ten meters. A number of spotlights were visible on the edges of the storage sheds.

After twenty minutes of observing the location, Tidwell had seen a total of seven Oilers guarding the installation. They appeared alert and had probably been warned of a possible attack. Still, they all seemed to be stationed on the perimeter of the camp and so were vulnerable to a quick strike. An unknown number of additional guards might be asleep in tents pitched in the center of the compound.

It was still three hours before the sun set and there would



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be a bright moon for two hours after that. If they hit now, they might be able to wipe out the defenders while firing from the comparative safety of the jungle. There were eight demolition charges in Neilson's pack. If they waited until dark, there was a small chance they could plant those undetected and blow the facility without risking a firefight. This was also a ripe target for an air strike. Any hit on an ammunition storage shed and the judges would declare the entire base destroyed.

*If the patrol should attack now, turn to Section 99.*

*If they should wait until dark, turn to Section 97.*

*If Tidwell should call for an air strike, turn to Section 98.*

## —67—

A strongly held bunker in the center of a narrow passage would be a murderous target for an assault. While they had to hurry, the compromise of sending half his forces around the flank would take some time. Still, that was better than the losses they would receive in an unaided assault.

For the first hour of waiting, Tidwell was too nervous to relax. It should take Neilson no less than three hours to get into position. He had allowed five. While checking the sentries for the third time, the major was approached by Sergeant Allinov.

"Men all resting," the veteran hinted. "They want to be fresh and alert when it counts." Subtlety was evidently not one of the noncom's strong skills, but his point was well taken. If Tidwell was overtired, the men in his command could pay the price for it. Chastised, the mercenary officer found a spot where water had dug a small cave in the cliff face, set his wrist alarm and tried to relax.

*If the perimeter patrol encountered in the jungle was attacked earlier, turn to Section 78.*

*If it was not attacked earlier, turn to Section 75.*

— 68 —

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total of these dice is the same as or less than the patrol's Stealth Value of 8, turn to Section 74.*

*If the total is 9 or greater, turn to Section 73.*

— 69 —

The buzzing of his wrist alarm saved the major from the embarrassment of having Allinov find him asleep. He opened his eyes to see the dark shape of the large sergeant approaching. Pulling himself carefully to his feet and stifling the urge to stretch, he greeted the sergeant.

"Time to move," Tidwell said, trying to sound cheerful, or at least awake.

"Yes, sir," the big mercenary acknowledged.

"I'll lead the first section. You and Neilson stick with the second," the major ordered briskly. If anyone was going to get a trip to the morgue following his orders, he could at least accompany them.

The first hundred meters were under the relative cover of a gentle curve in the trail. After this he ordered the first section strung out at three-meter intervals. If they were discovered, this would help minimize casualties. Once the bunker was in sight, the major crouched behind a knee-high rock and searched the dimly moonlit canyon for their best route.

Without warning the rattle of M-21 fire filled the canyon. At first the mercenary thought that someone had sneaked ahead and been noticed by the bunker. But there were no muzzle flashes visible in the fortification's fire slits. Then he

realized the sound came from behind him, from back down the trail. Seconds later Neilson ran up and reported.

"Someone was coming up the trail behind us," he explained, panting. "Figured it couldn't be from our side. Got our tail man . . . must have been sloppy."

As they hurried back, streaks of light flashed off the cliff behind them. Someone in the bunker had seen their movement and was firing where the major had been concealed seconds earlier.

By the time Tidwell retraced his steps back down the path, the firing had stopped. Sergeant Allinov cheerfully informed him that all of the Oiler patrol had been "killed." Going back to inspect the annoyed "bodies," the major realized this was the same patrol they had encountered the day before.

Stray shots were still lighting up the area around the bunker as the now alert defenders fired at shadows.

So much for stealth and surprise.

*Turn to Section 65.*

## —70—

Moving cautiously toward the cliff ahead, Tidwell's eyes were attracted to the regular lines of a head-sized box sitting among the rubble. He recognized a sound detector, a model that would normally be connected by wire to a bunker.

Moving as quietly as possible, Tidwell crept up to the device. Running his hand along the ground, he detected a roughness where the wire was buried. It took almost five minutes to soundlessly brush the moist earth away and expose the wire. Then a quick cut with his survival knife and the detector was useless.

The mercenary waited to make sure that no one was going to come and investigate and then moved more easily back to the waiting men. He warned them to be alert for more detectors and they began to slip past the bunker.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

## Section 71

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*If the total of these dice is 6 or less than 6 (the patrol's Stealth Value minus 2 because of the detection devices near the cliff), turn to Section 74.*

*If the total is 7 or greater, turn to Section 77.*

## —71—

Like most of the mercenaries, Tidwell tried to plant himself firmly each time he swung up the slope. With all the vegetation, there was little likelihood of a "kill" falling all of the way down the slope. On the other hand, a helpless fall ending in a solid impact against a tree trunk could be fatal. He had already seen one of his men slip, but Allinov managed to grab him by the leg and secure him to a bush.

Neilson almost reached the top. Tidwell tried to see how many men were still accompanying him, but couldn't stick his head up far enough to get a count.

Then the officer heard the sound of gunfire behind and below them. Glancing down, and fighting the vertigo this brings, he saw five more Oilers pouring fire up the slope. Sickened, he realized the guards above must have called in the patrol they saw yesterday. He saw a man from his section "killed." The casualty slid a few feet down the slope until he came to rest in a bush. The suit constricts too tightly to allow you to swear loudly, but the "dead" merc's expression said enough.

*Add 5 to the total number firing for Oil. All Oilers now fire on Chart A.*

*Tidwell's mercenaries now fire on Chart C.*

*Lower Tidwell's patrol's Morale on the record sheet by 1 point.*

*If the Communications patrol wins the firefight, turn to Section 57.*

*If they are wiped out, turn to Section 29.*



## —72—

Tidwell threw a fist-sized rock against the far side of the opening that led to the bunker. A sputter of M-21 fire answered instantly. The major counted eight light sources.

Too many men and too well dug in, he decided. Best they retreat and tackle the cliffs in the morning. Resigned, he flipped on his helmet radio. No reason left to stay quiet.

"Section one, pull back," he ordered. "Two, provide cover."

*Turn to Section 48.*

## —73—

The first sign that they were detected was a startled cry from the bunker. They were not yet even within sight of the log fort when the first shots began to light up the canyon. Trapped in the open, there was no choice but to retreat. While scrambling back to the relative safety of the cliff face, and then out of sight around the curve in the trail, the major was impressed with the wide variety of languages the dark shape ahead of him was able to swear in.

For the next few minutes stray shots from the bunker glistened off the stone of the cliff's walls. Crouched so that he could just barely see the entire bunker, the mercenary officer knew he had to decide what they were going to do and act quickly.

They could rush the bunker and hope to overwhelm it. His only other choice seemed to be to retreat back down the trail and then try to climb the cliff face in the morning.

Sun Tzu had once said that wisdom in battle is knowing not when to attack, but when to retreat and fight another

time. As the beams from the Oilers' laser sights lit the canyon, the thought had a lot of appeal.

*If they should try to assault the bunker, turn to Section 65.*

*If they should retreat and try the cliff face in the morning, turn to Section 72.*

## —74—

It can take an hour to move a hundred meters if you are a pro and intend to do it completely silently. By the end of the hour you will have moved the distance it might take you a minute to walk, but you'll feel like you just ran several miles.

When he had crept as far as even with the bunker, Tidwell found himself tiring. The strain from creeping on all fours so silently began to make his shoulders shake. He risked a glance at the bunker and was surprised to see a thin line of light. Perhaps nervous about being trapped in the building, perhaps simply unthinking, the defenders had literally left their back door open.

Signaling to the mercenary behind to cover him, the major slipped toward that enticing line of light. He was surprised and elated when he was able to lean gently on the rough logs a few inches from the opening.

A length of rope served as a handle. The door itself must have been salvaged from another building, as it was a commercially manufactured interior door, the hollow kind that really wouldn't have served on any bunker in a real war. It was open only a fraction of an inch, but enough for the mercenary to see it wasn't barred or locked. Drawing a grenade, he signaled the man designated to support him to get ready. Pulling the pin, he counted to three and then jerked the door open just far enough to lob the grenade in.

Red smoke poured from the firing slits on all sides of the bunker. The few strangled cries were cut off abruptly as the defenders' suits stiffened.

Staying out of any possible line of fire, Tidwell threw the

door open. In the closed room the smoke would be unbearable for a man trapped by an activated kill suit. Once the smoke had cleared, he risked a quick look, then entered cautiously.

Eight men were sprawled in frozen suits. One was leaning against the wall with a scrape on his forehead. He looked a bit dazed. The major carefully shifted him until he was resting as close to flat on the floor as possible. The Oiler looked grateful.

There was a radio on the table. It was actually still broadcasting. Using the butt of his M-21, Tidwell knocked it off the air, literally and permanently.

*Turn to Section 66.*

## —75—

It took a few seconds after Neilson started talking for Tidwell to realize that they were supposed to be maintaining radio silence. His next thought was that Neilson was too good of an officer to break silence without a good cause. Glancing at his watch, the major saw that less than two hours had passed since the sections were divided. Without moving he listened to the exchange.

"One more in the bush to your right, Brian." It was Neilson's voice.

"Who are these bastards?" answered another, fainter voice. That had to be one of the privates. Their helmet radios had less range.

"Shut up and get down," Neilson chastised. "You're in my line of fire."

The sounds of gunshots were audible in the background.

"Got another one," came an unknown but satisfied tone.

"I think they got Thompson," moaned a mercenary.

"Only one left. Anyone see him?" Neilson tried to restore some control.

Another burst of fire followed.

"Runnin' away toward the jungle," came the answer.

## Section 76

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A final burst of fire and then silence. Hardly breathing, Tidwell listened to the hiss of his radio.

“Major, you’ve got to be listening.” Neilson’s voice was steady but concerned. “We ran into that patrol we passed on yesterday. I can make the objective on schedule, but have lost two—repeat two—effectives. I will continue as planned unless ordered otherwise.”

For a few seconds Major Tidwell debated calling him off, but decided there was no gain in doing so. They still needed to get past the bunker, and even one man’s covering fire could make the difference.

*Cross two casualties off your record sheet. Then turn to Section 78.*

## —76—

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 24*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart B.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell’s mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*At the beginning of the second and all following rounds, roll one six-sided die. Ignore any roll of 1 or 4. If a 5 or 6 is rolled, Neilson’s attack on the back of the bunker begins. At this point the Oiler mercs must use Chart C instead of B. The Communications mercs continue to fire on Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 92.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

## —77—

They got as close as they could to the edge of whatever the Oil Corporation had constructed and then slipped behind a line of thick-leaved bushes. Six Oiler guards were less than five meters ahead of them. Beyond was a clear area and then a number of dark shapes.

Crouching low to retain the cover of the undergrowth, Tidwell led his men forward. At the edge of the Oiler base he almost tripped from surprise. Parked in neat rows were two dozen Argent armored ATV assault vehicles. Produced by Rolls-Royce, these were the most versatile troop carriers in the world. They held ten men and could move through anything but solid rock. Each also mounted a 20mm cannon in a small turret over the cab and a .50-caliber machine gun in the rear. These vehicles had to represent over a quarter of the total Oil force allotment. How do you destroy half an acre of armored vehicles? You just can't shoot their tires out. They had treads.

Men could be seen moving among several buildings to the right. Beyond where the Argents were parked sat two fuel tanks, identical to those they had "destroyed" the day before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. But it would only work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread. If even half of the personnel carriers survived, they would easily roll up all of the current Communications forces in the area. While Tidwell was gauging the distance to the fuel tanks, his attention was attracted to the 20mm cannon on each vehicle. At close range that cannon could cripple the other ATVs.

*See map in Section 104.*

*If they should try to use one of the ATVs to destroy the others, turn to Section 111.*

*If they should try to drain the tanks and then light the fuel, turn to Section 113.*

*If the one air strike allowed Tidwell has not yet been used, it can now be called for. If this is chosen, turn to Section 124.*

## —78—

“Piece of cake.” Neilson’s voice was loud in the major’s ears as he gave the signal notifying Tidwell the lieutenant was in place. It was two in the morning and hopefully the men in the bunker would be at least groggy, if not asleep.

*During the firefight, instead of firing for any round, Tidwell can order his remaining men to withdraw back down the trail. If he does, they will attempt the cliff instead in the morning. If this is chosen at any time, stop rolling the combat and turn to Section 62. Be sure to mark off any casualties taken before your withdrawal.*

*Turn to Section 76 to begin the assault.*

## —79—

Nothing and no one. After a long hot day’s walk to the north the trail was beginning to show signs of less use, not more. Tidwell was about ready to order everyone to backtrack south when the point man signaled a contact.

It was another Oiler patrol. Five men were visible in this one, and even as the major approached to assess them, they spooked into the jungle alongside the trail.

“Enemy contact,” said a strange voice over his helmet radio, which was set to automatically receive any Oiler signals over a certain strength. There was no question their exact location was about to be called in by the squad he had just watched disperse into the undergrowth.



“Location Baker—seven; block niner,” the same voice said, confirming his fear. “We are going to engage.”

Tidwell was surprised at that decision. Either the Oilers had underestimated the size of his force, or they were looking for a few weeks’ vacation in the morgue.

“Neilson left, Marengo,” he ordered over his helmet radio. No use keeping radio silence when you have already been pinpointed. The prearranged plan he had signaled for was simple. After a few rounds he and the first section would fall back. When the Oilers pursued, Neilson was to hit them in their flank and rear.

The first rounds were fired just as Neilson led his section off the trail. They were going to have to stand and hold off the Oilers until he was in position. Jungle fighting is often frustrating because you don’t know what is happening even a few meters away. Somewhere to his left a Spanish obscenity was cut off as a kill suit froze up. There was no way of knowing which side the wearer was employed by.

All they could do was stand and fight it out until Neilson signaled he was ready. The trouble was this was the enemy’s regular stomping grounds, and if they knew this little patch of terrain too well, it would be his section that got stomped.

### *Oiler Ridgeline Patrol*

*Manpower: 5*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 15*

*The Oilers fire on Chart B.*

*The ITT patrol returns fire on Chart C and begins with only half their strength firing.*

*At the start of each round, roll one six-sided die. Ignore any roll of 1 to 4. Anytime you roll a 5 or a 6, Neilson is in position. From that time on, the Communications mercenaries fire on Chart A and all of their remaining force may fire.*

*If the Communications patrol wins the firefight, turn to Section 84.*

*If they are all “killed,” turn to Section 29.*

—80—

*Oiler Bunker*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 24*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart B.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell's mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 86.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

—81—

They risked a small fire that night. That and the inevitable evening rain holding off until nearly midnight helped cheer the men. The next morning everyone was ready to continue, if not enthused.

Neilson, fast becoming everyone's favorite "point officer," spotted a patch of land mines before they entered the field. Tidwell suspected if there had been a vote, Neilson would have been heading the patrol after that. Then again, if only the soldiers voted, there wouldn't be any wars at all. In a way they weren't in a war, he realized. The stakes were the same for the winners, but the kill suits sure made losing a lot more palatable. He wished there was some way to make some of the fanatics he had fought with (and for) opt for them as well. Sighing, he had to admit it seemed unlikely that men who casually ordered civilian buildings bombed would be

convinced to spare the lives of the professional soldiers. Still, it would make his life a lot easier, not to say longer.

The major was still trying to figure out how to convince a certain notoriously bloodthirsty African dictator to accept kill suits when they rounded a curve and the jungle ended abruptly. Everything for a circle fifty meters across had been burned clear. It had been done recently, new shoots just beginning to poke through the ash. At the far side of the cleared area, sitting at the top of the more gradual route up, was the bunker.

A shot sounded and everyone dived for cover. So much for not being noticed. Nor could they simply bypass the fortification. Hopefully they would have to come back this way after their mission. Even if they could go back by a different route, it wasn't safe to leave as many men as could be in the bunker behind them. That would almost guarantee being caught between two forces at some point later in the mission.

Still, the approach to the log-and-mud fort promised to be expensive. Then again, waiting might give the Oilers a chance to bring a second force and they could be trapped between them and the bunker.

The major's helmet radio erupted with static, then a voice calmly announced that he was at the bunker at the head of alpha trail and they were engaged by enemy forces of unknown size. The reply was scrambled and he shut off the set.

They had definitely forfeited, once more, the element of surprise.

*If they should attack the bunker now, turn to Section 80.*

*If the patrol should bypass the bunker, turn to Section 82.*

*If they should wait until darkness and assault the bunker then, turn to Section 83.*

— 82 —

At first, to bypass the bunker seemed the worst of the options. Then with everything considered there was hardly a choice. The mercenary officer had an idea. The broadcast had said "unknown size." If this worked, they would have an easier time of it. If it failed, they still could assault the position later. Tidwell winced at the thought.

But a liability could become an asset if the men in the bunker were as anxious as they seemed.

"This is bravo squad," the major announced loudly into his throat microphone. "We have encountered a bunker and will bypass as ordered. Have suffered casualties and have only four effectives. Shall we continue the mission?" He put a little whine in his voice at the end.

After a pause he added, "Yes, sir, sorry, sir," as if he had just been upbraided by a superior.

With his radio off he turned to Allinov. "Sergeant, you and four men are to move along the edge of the jungle to the far side. Once you are across from this position, take up concealed firing positions. Everyone else is to stay concealed here, but ready to fire."

Smiling, the veteran merc nodded his approval. Five minutes later the five men were crashing through the jungle along the perimeter of the burned-out area. Occasionally Allinov would stop and fire a few rounds at the bunker. Once they reached the other side, it became quiet again.

After ten minutes there was another exchange of scrambled radio signals between the bunker and their headquarters. Five minutes later the door to the bunker opened and six men emerged. One stretched as he exited and all the Oiler mercenaries seemed happy to be outdoors. They formed on what must have been the officer or noncom in charge and moved toward the place from which Allinov had last fired. When the Oilers were exactly as far from the jungle as the bunker, Tidwell gave the order to open fire.

His men had been picking their targets for over a minute. The

enemy mercenaries fell quickly. Only one survived long enough to turn and try to get back to the bunker. He didn't make it.

"Let's take that bunker," the major yelled loud enough to be heard without his radio. Cheering, the patrol charged the log building. Rifle fire answered from inside.

*Oiler Bunker*

*Manpower: 2*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 6*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart B.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell's mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 86.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

## —83—

The next hours were nervous ones for Tidwell and his men. At any moment they expected to see a chopper arrive bringing reinforcements to the bunker.

Nothing appeared. Finally an hour after dark the moon set and the major ordered his men into position.

A whispered signal was passed from man to man around the perimeter of the burned-out area. They would try to creep as close to the bunker as possible before opening fire.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than 8, the patrol's Stealth Value, turn to Section 91.*

*If the total is 9 or higher, turn to Section 95.*

— 84 —

"Pull back." Tidwell allowed a certain edge of panic to creep into his voice. There was a chance the Oilers were monitoring him as well. If so, it wouldn't hurt for them to think he was panicking.

On either side he could barely make out the dark forms of his section as it pulled back along the sides of the ride trail. As hoped, the Oilers followed. Snapping off a few last shots at a half-seen figure, the major hurried back in a low crouch.

Fifty yards in he saw Allinov. The rest of the section had already been stationed in a line across both sides of the trail. The first of the Oilers were just approaching. They also stayed in the thick underbrush and avoided the trail itself.

Picking a target, Tidwell fired a three-round burst. The man dropped, but squirmed behind a bush seconds later. "Get 'em, Randy," he ordered, annoyed at the miss. It had been his first clear target in the firefight.

"Yes, sir!" came the lieutenant's enthusiastic reply.

Within seconds their second section had swept down on the Oilers' flank and rear. In less than a minute the firing stopped.

"I count five," Lieutenant Neilson confirmed over his helmet radio. It was all over. Unfortunately their presence had been confirmed and they were located. Tidwell had no choice but to order a night march, moving along the trail until they were far enough from this area. This would ensure a few hours' undetected rest. He hoped they wouldn't run into any mined stretches. While they had won, this whole firefight accomplished nothing more than eliminating a few Oilers at too great a cost. The mercenaries in the patrol were aware of this as well. Nor were the already exhausted men enthused by the necessity of yet another night march.



*Be sure to subtract any casualties from the record sheet.*

*Subtract 1 from the unit's Morale, as their confidence in Tidwell's judgment is shaken.*

*Turn to Section 81.*

## — 85 —

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's current value for Morale, turn to Section 80.*

*If the total is greater than the current value, turn to Section 90.*

## — 86 —

As Tidwell led the first section toward the bunker, the rest of the Communications patrol opened up in support. Beams from the bunker answered, playing over the jungle behind them.

"Movement drill," Tidwell ordered.

Immediately the well-trained mercenaries began a pattern of fire and movement. Each mercenary kept moving, advancing in a zigzag pattern, pausing only to fire a quick burst and then dive away.

For a few seconds it looked like the assault would soon be over. If they could get to within hand-grenade range of the bunker, it would end quickly. What they needed was more cover. The grenades! Exploding outside the building, they wouldn't harm the men firing from the bunker, but the smoke they generated would provide some cover for the assault.

## Section 87

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"Neilson, give me a few grenades by the bunker," Tidwell ordered hastily. "Everyone down!"

Five seconds later three of the mock grenades exploded and thick red smoke poured from them. It rose quickly, hiding the bunker from view. Tidwell hoped the smoke also blinded anyone inside the bunker.

"Like I said, movement drill," the major ordered. He found he was smiling.

When they got close to the bunker, all firing from inside had ceased. The problem with firing slits is they restrict your area of fire. Once you are in close to one, you are safe. The major threw a grenade into the bunker through a firing slit and then kicked in the door. Inside he found only the "dead," glaring at him with annoyance.

The place was a mess. Not one of the casualties was in full uniform. Until he had upset things, this obviously had been a soft-duty assignment. He hoped one of the frozen men was the officer in charge.

*Turn to Section 66.*

## —87—

Neilson took out the last Oiler by creeping through the jungle until he was behind him. Tidwell knew the firefight had taken too long. More Oilers would be converging on this spot. Well, he had considered a diversion. Now they had to get out of here quickly. Then they could be both the diversion and the attack.

That is, if they managed to get the rest of the way to the Oiler base without being detected.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 104.*

*If the total is 9 or higher, turn to Section 88.*

## — 88 —

“Identify yourselves.” The voice came from a tall black man who had just stepped out from behind a bush. He wore the insignia of an Oiler lieutenant.

Tidwell didn’t even bother to reply. He simply opened fire, dropping the man where he stood. Then he was nearly hit as shots came from both sides of where the man had stood. It was another Oiler patrol. Once more the major worried how many more Oilers were in the area.

*Oiler Patrol*

*Manpower: 4*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 12*

*Both sides fire on Chart C.*

*Keep track of the number of rounds of combat you roll. If the firefight lasts more than five rounds, a second patrol will join the first. Add 3 to the remaining Oiler Manpower at the start of the sixth round of combat. If the firefight lasts more than twelve rounds, a third squad of 4 men will join the Oilers at the start of the thirteenth round.*

*If the Communications mercenaries are victorious, turn to Section 131.*

*If they are defeated, turn to Section 29.*

— 89 —

*Oiler Bunker*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 24*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart C.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell's mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 94.*

*If the Oilers win the firefight, turn to Section 29.*

— 90 —

"Let's get 'em," Tidwell bellowed in fine dramatic form as he burst from the brush. The crackle of rifle fire from the bunker was loud in his ears. After a few hurried steps he threw himself into the ashes.

No one had followed.

Scrambling back to the relative safety of the jungle, he found Neilson and Allinov waiting. The old sergeant looked embarrassed. Neilson's face was a deep red and his gestures angry.

"Sorry, sir," he apologized. "They simply didn't move," he explained lamely.

"Uh, the men feel we should bypass the bunker," Allinov added weakly. "Don't see any gain by attackin' it now."

Fuming, Tidwell realized he had two choices: bypass the bunker and chance being trapped later or call off the mission. In

a war where you don't really get killed, you can't simply threaten to shoot a man for insubordination. For a while he considered a third choice: shooting those men who refused to attack. After all, they would only have to spend a week in the morgue. But satisfying as this might sound, it would accomplish nothing.

After a long time the major made up his mind. They would have to bypass the bunker. Still, it irked him and he would make sure these men would never serve under him again.

Major Tidwell was also a good enough officer to realize that experienced mercenaries didn't mutiny casually. He had to put much of the blame for their actions on himself.

*Lower the patrol's Morale 1 point because of this incident.*

*Turn to Section 82.*

## — 91 —

Suddenly the door to the bunker opened and there was a flash like a pistol going off, a real one. Everyone instinctively dived for cover. With a loud thud a flare illuminated the area around the bunker. The entire patrol was clearly visible in the acrid, chemical light.

*Oiler Bunker*

*Manpower: 8*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 24*

*The defenders in the bunker fire on Chart B.*

*The defenders in the heavy cover are hard to hit. Tidwell's mercenaries attack using Chart D.*

*If the Communications patrol successfully assaults the bunker, turn to Section 95.*

*If they fail, turn to Section 29.*

— 92 —

Tidwell led the first charge himself with the remaining section spread wide behind him. From the volume of fire he was able to estimate at least six defenders, probably a few more. The return fire was intense. Where was Neilson? the major wondered while diving into a shallow depression on the trail. The other mercenaries emulated him and scrambled for cover. Beams from the M-21s danced in the dirt around him. Then both sides were firing rapidly and the valley was filled with light beams in the gathering dusk.

The rest of the Communications patrol had opened up in support of those who had been advancing. Beams from the bunker answered, playing over the cliff face behind them. Then Neilson opened up from the jungle behind the building and this fire slackened as the defenders tried to adjust to the new threat.

“Movement drill,” Tidwell ordered.

Immediately the well-trained mercenaries began a pattern of fire and movement. On the far side of the clearing at the head of the trail he could see the remainder of the other section advance as well. The defenders’ fire was disjointed. The Oilers were having trouble spotting their attackers in the darker canyon. Tidwell realized that they were firing only at the muzzle flashes of his men’s weapons. Each mercenary kept moving, advancing in a zigzag pattern, pausing only to fire a quick burst and then dive away.

For a few seconds it looked like the assault would soon be over. If they could get to within hand-grenade range of the bunker, it would end quickly. Tidwell was ready to rush forward himself. Then a man fell nearby, the beam splattering off the center of his chest. When a second man fell, the major realized what was happening. Someone in the bunker had a night scope.

“Everyone to cover!” He almost yelled the command, forgetting about his helmet radio. “Dig in fast and fire only with a sure target,” he finished more calmly.



Then he waited. On a windswept plateau in the Ogaden he had been shown by a shriveled Frenchman that the real disadvantage of any night scope was that it needed filaments to generate its infrared beam. Now he watched for the telltale flicker of light.

For minutes nothing was visible. No one fired and a few of the braver insects began to chirp again.

Then a spark glimmered on the left side of the bunker. A cigarette? Maybe, since mercenaries were among the last to give up the suicidal habit. No one bent on seeing old age become a mercenary.

No, too even a glow, Tidwell decided. Edging forward, he sighted a few inches below the red filaments. His three shots, fired in rapid succession, sounded loud as they echoed off the canyon walls. The abruptly cut-off obscenity that followed as the sniper's suit froze on him was louder. A second string of expletives was even louder. These resulted from the discovery that the sensitive infrared sight had broken when the gun was dropped by the now paralyzed Oiler.

"Let's get 'em," the major ordered. "Like I said, movement drill." Men rushed at the bunker from both sides.

When they were flat against the bunker, all firing ceased. Once a grenade was dropped through a firing slit, even the Oiler's cursing stopped.

Staying out of any possible line of fire, Tidwell pulled the bunker's only door open. In the closed room the smoke from the grenades would be unbearable for a man trapped by an activated kill suit. Once the smoke had cleared, he risked a quick look. Then he entered cautiously.

Eight men were sprawled in frozen suits. One was leaning against the wall with a scrape on his forehead. He looked a bit dazed and must have been running when the grenade exploded. The major carefully shifted him until he was resting as close to flat on the floor as was possible in his awkward posture. The Oiler looked grateful.

There was a radio on the table. It was still playing some of the raucous wailing that was currently popular in Brasília. Using the butt of his M-21, Tidwell knocked it off the air, and off the table as well.

*Turn to Section 66.*

— 93 —

There didn't seem to be any other reasonable choice. If they approached the bunker, they would be detected. There was no cover near it and the losses would be prohibitive. Better technology than casualties.

"This is Kublai to Xanadu." Tidwell began raising the gain on his command radio. Seconds later the base answered. "Xanadu here."

"I need Strike One now," the major requested. "Will illuminate when unit is observed."

"Acknowledged and ordered," came the response after a short pause. "Can I have the coordinates?"

For the next few minutes Tidwell gave the coordinates and suggested the approach the attack chopper should use. Less than half an hour later he could hear the whomp of a General Dynamics Avenger as the chopper angled along the edge of the plateau.

"Strike One, I have you on visual," the major informed the pilot. "You are just half a klick to the wash. On my mark turn left ninety degrees . . . mark."

The machine's noise grew as it raced overhead.

"Flares," the mercenary ordered.

Just beyond the firing angle of the bunker Allinov fired two parachute flares into the air. The entire canyon, including the bunker, was lit by their harsh blue-white light.

"I have visual," the copter pilot confirmed. "Firing now." There was a distant hiss as two armor-penetrating rockets sped from the aircraft. With a single whomp they slammed into the thick wall of the bunker. The narrow canyon was quickly filled with yellow smoke.

"Confirm two hits." The chopper pilot sounded pleased with himself. It had been a textbook example of a night strike.

No one fired as they approached the log-and-mud building. Just to be sure, Neilson tossed a grenade through one of the

firing slits. When the red smoke had cleared, Tidwell kicked on the door.

Eight men were sprawled in frozen suits. One was leaning against the wall with a scrape on his forehead. He looked a bit dazed. The major carefully shifted him until he was resting as close to flat on the floor as possible. The Oiler looked grateful.

There was a radio on the table. It was actually still broadcasting. Using the butt of his M-21, Tidwell knocked it off the air, literally and permanently.

*You have used the only air strike available. Mark this on your record sheet. You may not choose this option, even when listed, again.*

*Turn to Section 66.*

## — 94 —

It can take an hour to move a hundred meters if you are a pro and intend to do it completely silently. By the end of that hour you will have only moved the same distance it might take you a minute to walk, but you'll feel like you just ran several miles.

Bolts of actinic yellow light filled the air. There was an agonized cry of frustration as a kill suit activated. The major thought he recognized the voice but could not be sure. After a few seconds everyone in his patrol had stopped advancing and the bunker's fire slackened. A minute later it had ceased entirely. Ten minutes after that, Tidwell whispered the order to continue their stealthy advance.

The strain from creeping silently was beginning to make his shoulders shake. He was already halfway to the bunker and no shot had been fired. Risking a glance at the fortification, the mercenary was surprised to see a thin line of light.

Perhaps nervous about being trapped in the building, perhaps simply unthinking, the defenders had literally left their back door open.

Signaling for the mercenary a few meters behind to cover him, the major slipped toward the enticing line of light. He was surprised and elated when he was able to lean gently on the rough logs a few inches from the opening.

A length of rope served as the handle. The door itself must have been salvaged from another building, as it was a commercially manufactured interior door, the hollow kind that would never have suited a bunker in a real war. It was open only a fraction of an inch, but that was enough for the mercenary to see it wasn't locked. Evidently those inside were planning on making a rapid withdrawal. Priming a grenade, he signaled the man supporting him to get ready. Releasing the handle, he counted to three and then jerked the door open just far enough to lob the grenade in.

Red smoke poured from the firing slits on all sides of the bunker. The few strangled cries were cut off as the defenders' suits stiffened.

Still staying out of any possible line of fire, Tidwell threw the door open. In the closed room that smoke would be unbearable for a man trapped by an activated kill suit. Once the smoke had cleared, he risked a quick look. Then he entered cautiously.

Eight men were sprawled in frozen suits. One was leaning against the wall with a scrape on his forehead. He looked a bit dazed and must have been running across the room when the grenade went off. The major carefully shifted him until he was resting as close to flat on the floor as possible. The Oiler looked grateful.

There was a radio on the table. It was actually still broadcasting. Using the butt of his M-21, Tidwell knocked it off the air, literally and permanently.

*Turn to Section 66.*

## — 95 —

A man on the ground is an easy target when lit up by a parachute flare. In the three minutes it would take to burn out, Tidwell knew they would be wiped out. Stealth obviously would no longer serve. All he could do was minimize casualties and storm the bunker in the glare of the chemical light.

"Movement drill," Tidwell ordered, keeping his voice carefully level.

Immediately the well-trained Communications mercenaries began a pattern of fire and movement. Each mercenary kept moving, advancing in a zigzag pattern, pausing only to fire a quick burst and then dive away.

What they needed was more cover. The grenades! Even if they couldn't harm the men firing from inside the bunker, the smoke they gathered would provide cover.

"Neilson, give me a few grenades by the bunker," Tidwell requested. "Everyone down!" he added hastily.

The small grenades exploded and thick red smoke poured from them, hiding the bunker from view. The smoke, Tidwell hoped, would also blind anyone inside the bunker.

"Let's get 'em," the major ordered, sounding almost cheerful. "Like I said, movement drill."

When they reached the walls of the bunker, all firing ceased. The problem with firing slits was that they restricted your area of fire. Once you are in close to one, the defenders can't get a shot at you and you are safe. Following a grenade thrown through a firing slit into the bunker, Tidwell found only the "dead." All eight of them were glaring at him with annoyance.

The place was a mess. Not one of the casualties was in his full uniform. Until he had upset things, this obviously had been soft duty. He hoped one of the frozen men was the officer in charge.

At this point the flare finally burned out. The red smoke from the grenade was beginning to make the mercenary's

eyes water. Annoyed, the major lit a lantern on the table and rejoined his men. He wouldn't want a judge hurting himself in the dark when they came to recover this latest batch for the morgue.

*Be sure to subtract any casualties from your record sheet.*

*Turn to Section 66.*

## — 96 —

The men were in position, concealed all around the perimeter of the supply dump. Major Tidwell studied the camp visible beyond the thick leaves of the bush he was crouched behind. The guards were still walking their stations without giving any indication they had seen his patrol get into place. He smiled as a young lieutenant appeared at the entrance to one of the storage sheds. There would never be a better time to begin.

Without bothering to give the order, the mercenary officer began firing. Within a few seconds every man in the patrol had opened up on the guard in front of him. The first guards stiffened before they were even aware they were under attack.

Cursing under his breath, Tidwell switched to another target when the young lieutenant managed to regain the relative safety of the building he had just left. In a live-ammunition firefight the young officer would have thought twice about seeking shelter among a room full of explosives, but in the Cold Cash War, as some budding author among the Communications mercs had dubbed this pseudo-war, it was as safe as any foxhole.

The time for finesse had passed and now the two sides exchanged fire. The remaining guards had all found shelter among the buildings. Four new opponents suddenly began returning his men's fire and then scrambled into the jungle on the far side of the camp from Tidwell. The muffled sound of shots could be heard as they dueled with the Communications



mercenaries who had been concealed in that section of the jungle.

An Oiler guard stood, trying to get a clear shot at a man somewhere to the major's right. It was a dumb mistake and Tidwell fired a long burst to ensure he paid the price. The man fell, immobilized by his kill suit.

Neilson took advantage of the gap in the defender's fire that the fallen man's loss had created, and dashed across the open area. He quickly cut through the fence and dived for the relative safety of the shadows near a building. Once inside the dump, he began carefully stalking the remaining defenders and dispatching them. When Tidwell saw one of the Oiler guards slipping behind to return the favor in kind, the major crept into one of the buildings and nailed him as he skulked past.

Leaning against the wall of a shed, Tidwell realized the firefight was over. Based upon the fact that he still remained unfrozen, they must have won.

Smiling, he began rigging charges against the nearest buildings. As he did so, the major thought it was a pity they couldn't have the satisfaction of actually watching the sheds full of ammunition and fuel blow up. To his left he could see that Allinov was also setting the charges he was carrying. A real pity, the mercenary thought, recalling the spectacular explosion a Shiite artillery ammunition dump had once made. It had covered almost half an acre and left a much larger crater. After that day, Tidwell had always been sure he had left his mark on Iran.

*Turn to Section 16.*

## — 97 —

The wait for darkness was as nerve-racking as ever. The patrol was spread out just off the road so as to be ready to ambush anyone arriving to reinforce the dump. Twice they heard a distant sound which might have been the engine of a vehicle, but nothing had appeared.

Just before sunset the insects from the swamp did arrive. They swarmed overhead so thickly Tidwell was afraid they would give away his position. One large fly actually looked familiar and he wondered if he was developing some sort of a bug fan club, or perhaps more accurately was being featured as leftovers for an insect gourmet club.

The next hours were spent trying to slap and smash as many of the flying pests as possible, while still remaining fairly quiet. By the time the Bug War was over, the moon was low and it was time to start.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth (8), turn to Section 103.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 101.*

## — 98 —

"This is Kublai to Xanadu." Tidwell began raising the gain on his command radio. Seconds later the base answered.

"Xanadu here."

"I need Strike One now," the major requested. "Can give guidance if needed."

"Acknowledged and ordered. You may expect Tambu within the hour," came the response after a short pause. "Can I have the coordinates?"

For the next few minutes Tidwell gave them coordinates for the dump. Less than an hour later he could hear the whomp of a General Dynamics Avenger as it sped over the jungle's canopy above them. Tidwell swung himself up a tree and surveyed the sky. To his left he could see the sleek form of the assault helicopter. A dozen ground-attack rockets packed with high "explosives" were racked under stubby wings. Cautiously the mercenary inflated a bright orange balloon and let it rise on a nylon cord. This would provide a base from which he could give directions.

"I see your marker," a voice acknowledged in his helmet.

"Tambu, I have you on visual," the major informed the pilot. "You are just half a klick to target, forty-five degrees to your left." The chopper passed overhead and angled toward the dump. "On my mark turn left ninety degrees . . . mark."

The noise from the assault chopper's tubby blades grew louder as it accelerated.

"I have visual," the copter pilot confirmed. "Never would have spotted this baby . . . firing now." There was a distant hiss as two rockets sped from the aircraft. With a single thump they slammed into the ground just short of the base. Blue smoke poured from where they had hit.

"Short ten meters," the major called in the correction. The helicopter swung to make a second pass. This time he slowed to hover only a few hundred meters short of the supply base. Small-arms fire flashed from the camp, but he held steady.

Two rockets flashed from the Avenger, followed by a second pair. Their smoke traced gentle arcs that ended at the center of the Oiler base. There was a loud popping sound as the rockets' mock charges exploded and the entire base was covered with blue smoke.

"Request confirmation of four hits." The chopper pilot sounded pleased with himself.

"Four confirmed," the mercenary agreed. "Thank you, Tambu. That will be all."

"Call me anytime," was the pilot's cheery reply as the small gunship spun in place and dashed away over the swamp beyond.

As the smoke cleared Tidwell could see the still forms of the dump's guards. The judges or the on-site "war" computer seemingly had decided the supply dump went up in one big blast. There must have been both ammunition and fuel stored here. There appeared to be no "survivors."

*You have used the only air strike available. Mark this on your record sheet. You may not choose this option, even when listed, again.*

*Turn to Section 100.*

— 99 —

*Supply Dump*

*Manpower: 7 (then 11)*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 21*

*The guards return fire on Chart D, then C.*

*Tidwell's forces fire on Chart B, then C.*

*At first the guards are surprised and will fire at the concealed mercenaries on Chart D. After two rounds 4 guards who were sleeping in the center of the camp will join the firefight and those who remain will have found cover. Beginning with the third round, add these 4 additional defenders to the Oiler Manpower and they will now fight on Chart C. The Communications patrol will on this round have lost the element of surprise and will fire on Chart C as well.*

*If the patrol defeats the camp's guards, turn to Section 96.*

*If they are defeated, turn to Section 16.*

— 100 —

There was no question they had caused enough disruption to throw the Oilers' timetable off. This made returning to friendly territory the major's first concern. There were several possible routes, the most obvious being to simply retrace their steps. The trip through swamp and jungle had little appeal, but it was probably the safest route. They could take the road to Brasília, but it was considered neutral territory, and while exiting the war zone wouldn't get them a trip to the morgue,

it would cost everyone a mandatory week of inaction—without pay. Tidwell even considered building a raft and trying to run down the Geechama River to the road they had discovered on his last patrol. A fairly easy route led from it to the Communications camp. The problem was that men on rafts were such easy targets. The prospect of having his suit freeze up while he was in fast-flowing water didn't sound like a very good idea.

At the end of that last mission they had been lucky enough to commandeer a vehicle. Every vehicle in the now "destroyed" supply dump had either not worked or been designated as rubble. Next time, the major reminded himself, he should take the time to pull a few trucks out before setting off the charges. Still, they hadn't known how soon Oiler reinforcements might have arrived.

There was also the definite possibility of running into whatever all these roads had been constructed to carry. It was doubtful that the Oilers had used up their force allotment to purchase any tanks, but some of the less expensive armored vehicles were probable in view of all the effort they had put into roadways. They would be just as deadly to anyone in a soft-skinned vehicle. After all, they were Oil and there was a certain logic to Oil choosing to use a number of vehicles, even if most of the trucks in Brazil actually used alcohol for fuel. Oil always did like things that went *vroom*. That would also explain why the Communications offensive in the center was encountering less resistance than expected.

"Something coming." The words crackled over the major's helmet. It was Allinov's voice. The sergeant had been watching the camouflaged road. Tidwell waited for more information. This could be anything from a local sneaking through the area with a truck full of produce to a company-sized relief column.

"Sounds like a single vehicle, maybe a small truck," the sergeant clarified. "I'm going to let it pass. Get ready near the dump."

Neilson and the remaining members of the patrol began to distribute themselves along one side of the road. You didn't ambush a truck from both sides simply because there was too much chance of a stray shot hitting your own men.

Deciding to give themselves an extra edge, the major had

one of the "destroyed" trucks from the supply dump pushed it out to block the road. The red "X" on the side of the truck marked it as a wreck. The last mercenary had just made it into the brush when the sounds of an engine warned them the truck was approaching.

Less than a minute later a three-quarter-ton truck, barely more than a large pickup, appeared on the road. There was a .50-caliber machine gun mounted over the cab. The truck slowed as it neared the truck that was blocking its progress. The mercenary swiveled the machine gun, trying to cover the jungle on both sides.

"Aw, shit," the truck's driver yelled, sensing the ambush. Gears ground as he tried to slam them into reverse while still rolling forward. As if this had been the signal to fire, everyone in the patrol opened up. It was a sign of the respect they all held for that heavy machine gun that everyone's first shot was at the merc manning it. The truck was under the shade of several tall trees and the numerous points where their beams hit the suit were easily visible. He was lit up as if by a spotlight. Since no one was firing at him, the driver had time to get the truck rolling back out of the ambush. His profanities and another man's whining protests were audible even over the gunfire.

Despite the heavy fire, it looked as if the truck might even back up far enough to reach safety, until Allinov stepped out onto the side of the road just as the truck pulled past and calmly fired his M-21 into the cab. As the driver's suit stiffened, automatic safeties slowed the truck so that when it finally did skid off the road, it struck the bushes at the edge of the forest fairly gently. Allinov was the first man to reach the truck.

The sergeant was grinning madly as he dragged the vehicle's only remaining "live" passenger to meet the rest of the patrol hurrying toward the truck. The man had a large bruise on his forehead and stumbled as he was dragged along.

"You ain't gonna believe what I got me!" the noncom yelled when the others were close enough to hear. Then his grin got even wider and he announced, "We got us a real Oiler executive."

Everyone let out a whoop. It wasn't often that any of the bosses dirtied their boots, something that was the topic of



much amused speculation among those mercenaries who worked for them. Still, it was every mercenary's goal to nail one. Tidwell's personal reaction was that it was a pity it wasn't an ITT-iot instead. There were several he would be happy to accidentally shoot. He chuckled. Perhaps *that* was why executive visits were so rare.

When the two parties met, Allinov passed over the contents of the man's pockets. There was a wallet, full of the local money, a comb, a Texas driver's license and a folded piece of paper, which turned out to be part of a map. It had evidently been torn from the corner of a larger sheet. There were lines on it that looked suspiciously like the road network in this area. Over one symbol on the right side was the stylized propeller in a box that represented air support.

"Mr. Speltman?" Using the name on the license, Tidwell greeted the angry executive. "I assume you are Ricardo Speltman."

"Of course I am. But why did this man stop us? I am not a combatant. I demand you set me free this moment," the Oiler insisted, speaking rapidly. He was a small man, over fifty and slightly built. The bruise didn't seem serious and the man's speech was clear. The executive actually had on a gray pinstripe suit under his kill suit. It had to be intensely uncomfortable in the Amazon heat and humidity.

"I am afraid you are wrong," the major replied in a soft, almost inaudible voice.

"What? You are surely mistaken." The Oil executive's face was getting red. "I am a cost accountant, not one of your guerrillas."

Tapping the kill suit the man wore, Tidwell smiled. "By the conventions of this conflict anyone wearing a kill suit is considered a combatant," he explained. "And you are wearing a kill suit."

"But they said I had to wear one to enter the war zone." The older man was almost spitting. Here was someone who was obviously used to throwing his weight around, at least with those he considered his inferiors.

"Exactly my point," the mercenary agreed. "The rules of war, and I quote, state that 'any employee of a corporation whose forces are engaged is required to wear a kill suit when

in any combat zone. A combatant is defined as everyone in a kill suit.' That means you."

The executive started to reply, but all that came out was incoherent sounds. He waved his arms as he tried to speak.

Tidwell couldn't hide his smile any longer. He was beginning to enjoy this. The rest of the patrol showed less restraint. All had begun laughing madly and one was clinging to a tree, shaking from the laughter so hard he was unable to stand without help.

After a few moments the executive himself had to be supported between Neilson and Tidwell. The man had been hyperventilating. His face was purple. The Oiler tried to control himself, taking slow, deep breaths as the two mercenaries supported him. When the laughter had subsided, he eyed the two men's weapons nervously.

Sure that his captive would be okay, the major opened his mouth to bait the executive once more, then reminded himself that his purpose should be to get information, not entertainment.

"Why are you here?" he asked, trying to sound forceful rather than amused.

The Oiler looked at him, but said nothing.

"What are you doing here?" Tidwell insisted.

"I am not required to answer that," the Oiler executive answered, regaining his composure somewhat.

The mercenary carefully looked him up and down again. "I suppose you aren't." Turning to Neilson, he spoke as if Speltman wasn't still standing between them. "Do you think he will slow us down? That swamp was murder."

"So long as he doesn't get bitten like Walt." The lieutenant kept his face perfectly straight. "Or just swells up like Tommy did. Mars knows what got him. Hell of a way to die."

"No one dies in this war!" Speltman insisted weakly.

"That's not true," Tidwell corrected. "Actually no one shoots anyone. But casualties from accidents are inevitable, and I believe budgeted for." He couldn't resist that last comment. The older man's eyes grew wider.

"At least we found their bodies," Tidwell argued. "Two out of three isn't bad."

"Yeah, but even they had boots," Neilson objected, pointing at the Italian wing-tip shoes sticking out below the legs of the executive's kill suit.

"Well, if he can't make it, we can always shoot him and hope the judges reach him before the crocs do," Tidwell replied equally solemnly.

"Gentlemen, I am not amused," Speltman blustered, but his complexion had now changed from deep red to almost paper-white. His gray hair looked dark in contrast.

Neilson kept prodding. "At least he's got spunk."

Tidwell softened. "Maybe we ought to give him a chance."

"No way!" the lieutenant protested.

"After all, he is only *sort* of a combatant."

"That's right," Speltman encouraged.

"But we're all looking forward to watching the bugs eat him." Neilson sounded plaintive. From across the road Allinov growled his agreement.

"But if the gentleman is willing to talk to us . . ." Tidwell let the words trail off.

"Only if you insist," Allinov piped in, then turned and walked away as if disgusted. The major could see the sergeant break up once he was out of sight of the worried-looking executive.

Holding the scrap of map between them, Tidwell spoke quickly, hoping to make sure the executive didn't notice the sergeant's amusement.

"Isn't that the sign for airmobile forces?" the mercenary asked, casually pointing to a symbol in the upper right corner of the scrap of map that had been in the wallet.

"I wouldn't know," the civilian stammered.

"Why the hell would a mobile formation need a lousy pencil pusher?" Tidwell asked in suddenly hostile tones.

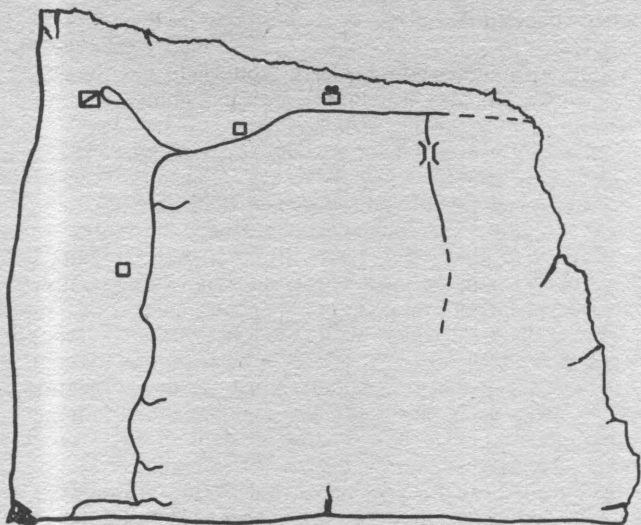
"When they are over budget as usual," Speltman snapped back, and then froze, his mouth still open.

"You said you are an accountant, keep the books?" Tidwell continued without a pause, his tone once more friendly.

Speltman nodded.

"Clancey and the rest of your boys are really that far over budget? Aren't mobile strike forces so . . . so un-cost-effective?" The major asked it just as casually as the last question.

The pin-striped executive seemed to wilt. He nodded once more, slowly this time. For a few seconds neither man said anything.



TORN SECTION OF MAP



MAP NO. 3497-24-09

"I see there was a leak," Speltman said, transparently trying to probe.

Tidwell decided there was no reason not to let them worry. "A big one," he said.

"Should have known after someone hit the helicopter base." The executive sounded bitter. "I told them things weren't balancing out."

"That's why we had to start our offensive here first," Tidwell bluffed further. "The rest of the company should be in position by now. Pity we have to miss the fight."

"Almost caught you, though," came back the reply. As Tidwell had suspected, things were about to break. He hoped they had bought enough time for more troops to come up. A mobile force could cut through ten times their number of foot sloggers.

"I suppose a bright man like you might want to make a little money on the side?" Suddenly Speltman was talking quickly. "After all, you are in this for the money . . . if you catch my drift?"

The major didn't know whether to be offended or laugh. The man's dialogue was straight out of a grade B movie he had seen the month before. He couldn't remember the name, but it had featured Humphrey Bogart. Evidently Speltman wasn't normally the one who offered the bribes. Probably he was more worried about how he would record the expense than anything else. Still, the major felt he had better cut him off. It would be too easy for the mercenary to forget that the man was a civilian and become angry at the inference he would sell out.

"I think you have said enough." Despite his control, Tidwell noticed there was an edge to his voice, a real one.

There seemed little else to be gotten from quizzing Speltman. And the major was beginning to feel both angry and contrastingly a bit sorry for the man. The executive was trying hard in a situation that had to be totally alien to him. If the position were reversed, the major wondered if he would fare any better in the staff meeting of an accounting department. Or if they would have any more consideration than he could afford to give.

They couldn't take him along, not really. Nor could they simply leave the man behind. Besides, Speltman was an

executive, if an Oiler one. It just didn't seem right to let him off scot-free. Yet stranding him in the jungle was liable to get him killed for real. A fate worse than even a cost accountant deserved. It wasn't like he was with the Internal Revenue. Evidently the best thing for the man was to simply "shoot" him here and let the judges take care of him. A few had just arrived at the dump and were busy posting "Destroyed" signs on all the buildings.

The executive was almost grateful when Neilson explained they wouldn't take him along and so were forced to "shoot" him. The lieutenant even allowed him to settle onto a chair next to one of the tents before beaming the older man's kill suit.

Tidwell wondered how he would like the morgue.

"Kublai to Xanadu."

"Xanadu here."

"We encountered an Oiler executive. Confirmed attack imminent. Suspect the presence of an air mobile strike force."

"Damn," replied a different voice. "We aren't ready yet. Did you buy us any time?"

"Found us a major dump," Tidwell confirmed. "Bet there is a bunch of Slickers looking for us as well. We will try to slip back starting tonight. Can we get a diversion?"

"Negative to both. Please stand by," was the enigmatic reply.

A third voice came on the radio, the voice of an older man. "You are to locate and destroy the Oiler mobile forces," it began.

"Who is this?" the major demanded. The man had to be mad. Even without casualties they wouldn't have been able to stop the entire Oiler offensive. That was the whole idea of this raid: to buy time to get into position a force large enough to do just that.

"Cameron. Todd H. Cameron, vice-president of Special Projects." The voice sounded as if he expected his name to be recognized, and it was.

Cameron was the top ITT-iot in the whole war. His name was at the top of all the funny pyramids Tidwell had studied during orientation. For all practical purposes he was *the* boss.



"And you wish us to continue?" the mercenary still had to ask. It was suicidal.

"I am ordering you to find that mobile force and cripple it." Cameron sounded adamant.

"Very well, sir." There seemed nothing else to say.

"Good. There will be a big bonus for everyone involved. That will be all."

There had better be, Tidwell told himself as he shut off his helmet radio. They were all destined for a vacation in the morgue.

To say the news was met with less than enthusiasm would be a gross understatement. The mercenaries of the patrol were now tired, they had lost casualties, and this new mission sounded hopeless. Even Allinov looked upset. Tidwell knew he could order them to follow him, but then they would be less than useless. He made a speech promising the bonus and pointing out that the chance for glory far overbalanced the risk of being "killed" in this deathless war. The major hoped that the same logic that had caused the Oiler troops to fight to the last man would now inspire his own men. Even as he spoke, he wondered if he wanted them to agree to continue.

Withdrawing a short distance and trying to look busy studying the scrap of map they had taken from Speltman, Tidwell waited while the remaining members of his patrol debated.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Morale, turn to Section 102.*

*If the total rolled is greater, turn to Section 108.*

## — 101 —

The men were in position, concealed all around the perimeter of the supply dump. Major Tidwell studied the camp visible beyond the thick leaves of the bush he was crouched behind. The guards were still walking their stations without giving

any indication they had seen his patrol get into place. He smiled as a young lieutenant appeared at the entrance to one of the storage sheds. There would never be a better time to begin.

The mercenary officer had covered about half the distance to the fence when he heard the first shots. Inside the camp everyone was suddenly alert. There were more shots and then a steady rattle of small-arms fire. Two guards rushed out from behind a building less than ten meters away. Opening fire, Tidwell dived for the meager cover of a small depression in the cleared ground.

*Guards*

*Manpower: 9*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 27*

*The defenders will fire on Chart C.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart D.*

*If the attack succeeds, turn to Section 107.*

*If the assault fails, turn to Section 29.*

## — 102 —

Tidwell watched the remnants of his patrol as they spoke in low tones to each other. Occasionally one or the other would glance at him self-consciously. The major resigned himself to going back. Mentally he began to prepare what he would tell the ITT-iot. You could only push men so far. Even good men, and these were among the world's best.

It was hard to blame them. The patrol had been away for over a week, fought several firefights and accomplished more than was originally intended. For the last three days they had been constantly fighting either the terrain or the Oilers. Most of them were pushing the limits of their endurance, and a few might not make it through another night march.

Enthusiastic men who wanted to succeed might have some chance at knocking out whatever the mark on the map indicated. Tired men without any real drive were sure to fail, and Tidwell was too much of a professional not to know this. He played with the concept of going on alone, but that would be more grandstanding than an effective alternative. And it would leave Neilson to take the heat.

"Let's go home," he suggested reluctantly.

There was no cheer. Slowly, almost hesitantly, the men picked up their weapons. It would be a long walk. Later the major would call in the information they were coming back. That ITT-iot would be angry, but they didn't shoot you in the corporate armies, just blackballed you. And after this mission, there was a good chance he could sign on with the Oilers anyhow. A few of them obviously needed to be shaped up and it would be good to work with Clancey again.

They got to the road and Allinov gave the order, "Left face!" He was smiling broadly, as were all the mercenaries. Left wasn't toward home. It was toward the enemy and whatever was marked on the map.

"Thank you," Tidwell managed, grinning with relief. He looked at the dirty, red-eyed men walking beside him. A few smiled back.

Sometimes it felt good to be in command—at those times when the men were as tough, talented and loyal as these were. Had it not risked attracting unwanted attention, the officer would have whistled as he walked the next hundred meters. Instead he settled for slapping a mosquito that had just settled on his arm.

"Major Tidwell?" The red light on his intercom lit as the voice spoke. That meant that this signal was on the Oiler frequency, but asking for him. For a few moments the major suspected a trap. The mercenaries on both sides knew the other's radio frequencies, but they rarely spoke. Not when each word would be monitored and analyzed by the pencil pushers who signed their checks.

"Hey, Steve, you monitoring this channel?" It was Clancey's voice. Oh, what the hell.

"Clancey?"

"Yeah, they told me you got to monitor us. How are you doing?" The other mercenary sounded cheerful.

Tidwell chuckled. "You ought to know." If they were sure enough it was him causing their problems to let Clancey play around with their communications, he might as well enjoy himself. He knew Clancey well enough to know there was no chance he was selling out, although a few had.

"Yeah, thought we were tighter than that," Clancey admitted.

"Too many bookkeepers on your side." The major couldn't help ribbing his old comrade a bit.

"That's why I'm calling," the Oiler merc explained, picking up on the major's comment. "We seem to have lost a bookkeeper. You haven't seen one have you?"

"Why?"

"His bosses, who are my bosses, are getting nervous. Seems he's someone important's uncle or something."

"Older man, graying, wears a stuffy suit," Tidwell confirmed.

"Turns red a lot," Clancey added. There was a sputter from somewhere further from the microphone.

"He's okay," the major assured his friend. Then after a pause he added, "You should be able to talk to him in about two weeks."

"What?" The strangled cry was in a different voice.

"After he gets out of the morgue," the mercenary finished. There was a long pause.

"I think you've gotten somebody important here mad." There was a slight touch of amusement in his friend's tone. Then he was serious again. "I guess I'd better not say anything more. Hey . . ."

The conversation ended with a click.

It is rather easy to find a two-acre enclosure when you know where it is. From the top of a tree Tidwell could see the nets that hid whatever the Oil Corporation had there. The nearest corner of the camouflage net was less than two miles away. Tidwell's problem was to get close enough to see what was there.

In the last four hours they had dodged six different Oiler patrols. Two had carried devices that Neilson recognized as

radio signal locators. They were looking for someone and it didn't take much intuition to realize who. The major had hoped the bulk of the effort would be concentrated on the potential routes he might have taken to return to friendly territory after hitting the ammo dump. He suspected Clancey's hand in all this activity around the only major target left. In an exchange of roles, he would have been worried the Irishman would be up to the exact thing he was.

The Oiler patrol dispersed as Tidwell examined the options. The most appealing course was to call in an air strike. They could sit at a safe distance and let the hardware do their work for them. Though its effectiveness would be limited by the camouflage netting obscuring the area, it would still save a lot of trouble. At least it would if they could keep from getting shot up during the period between calling for it and its arrival. A definite risk with some of the enemy patrols carrying radio range finders.

What it all settled down to, Tidwell had to admit, was either they called for a strike now and hoped for the best or they took a look themselves. Then all they had to do was destroy or cripple whatever forces they found. Probably only a company or two of Oil's best mercs. Maybe odds of ten, twenty to one. Back in the ITT corporate offices they probably watch old John Wayne movies and would figure this was no problem, a real piece of cake.

Having resigned himself to getting close to or even into that camp, the major turned his thoughts to how to do it.

Three possibilities presented themselves. None were that promising. The first was to split the patrol. Half the men, section two under Allinov, would create a diversion to draw away the forces searching for them and distract the guards on the camp's perimeter. This unfortunately also meant the sure loss of the diversionary force. His second plan was to attempt to capture one of the several vehicles they had been hearing dashing along the road. Then they could try a Trojan horse madeira once more. It had worked on the last patrol, although they hadn't been facing Clancey that time. Finally they could simply attempt to sneak up to the camp through the jungle and hope to avoid detection.

## Section 103

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*If Tidwell should call for an air strike over the entire area, turn to Section 110.*

*If they should split the patrol with half to create a diversion, turn to Section 104.*

*If they should try to hijack a truck and bluff their way in, turn to Section 109.*

*If they should attempt a stealthy approach through the jungle, turn to Section 106.*

## — 103 —

There was no way to judge which approach to the camp would be best. It was clearly visible in the light cast by the small spotlights located along the buildings on the outside of the compound. Someone had enough sense to place them so they lit up the edge of the jungle rather than the defenders themselves. You don't protect an area by lighting it. That only makes the defenders easier targets. It appeared they would actually have better cover once they were in the dump than while trying to enter it.

The major ordered his men to spread themselves evenly around the perimeter. In half an hour each man would try to sneak into the camp unseen. Anyone near detection was to abort his attempt and be prepared to give covering fire. This plan would give them the best chance to infiltrate some men into the dump. It also generated the greatest likelihood that one of them would be seen.

Two guards were just passing along the part of the fence closest to the major when the gunfire started. Someone must have been spotted before the rest even had a chance to advance. Lousy luck. The major was about to order everyone to back off when the two guards unslung their M-21s and dashed out of sight between the buildings. It looked as if they were rushing off to join the firefight on the far side of the camp. If they were just running for cover, Tidwell realized he



was going to be in trouble as he burst out of the brush and ran to the closest section of the fence. Within seconds he had snipped through the soft metal fence and was inside.

No one had fired at him. He hoped this wasn't part of Clancey's command. If so he was going to have to have a long talk with his buddy about his men maintaining alertness and duty drills. There was no way both of those guards should have left their station.

A face appeared on Tidwell's right and he barely managed to stop himself from reflexively firing into it. It was Lieutenant Neilson. They had lost the element of surprise, but still would be slugging it out on equal terms with the defenders now that some of them were within the camp itself. The sound of weapons firing was still audible on the far sides of the buildings. It would be even better if most of the defenders still thought they had stopped the assault outside their wire. Then they would be facing the other way.

Wordlessly the two mercenaries grinned, turned and hurried through the buildings.

*Guards*

*Manpower: 9*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 27*

*The defenders will fire on Chart D.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart B.*

*If the attack succeeds, turn to Section 105.*

*If the assault fails, turn to Section 29.*

## — 104 —

They got as close to the edge of whatever the Oil Corporation had constructed here. Six Oiler guards were less than three meters ahead of them. Beyond was a clear area and then a number of large, dark shapes. For several minutes they had

been hearing the sound of engines starting. Tidwell looked at his watch. Three minutes left until Neilson began the diversion.

The Oilers on guard duty seemed relaxed. From the look of their kill suits they had been patrolling the jungle earlier. All were stained and damp. They probably had been rotated to this duty to get a rest.

At one minute the officer took careful aim at the nearest of the Oiler guards. They seemed unaware of their peril.

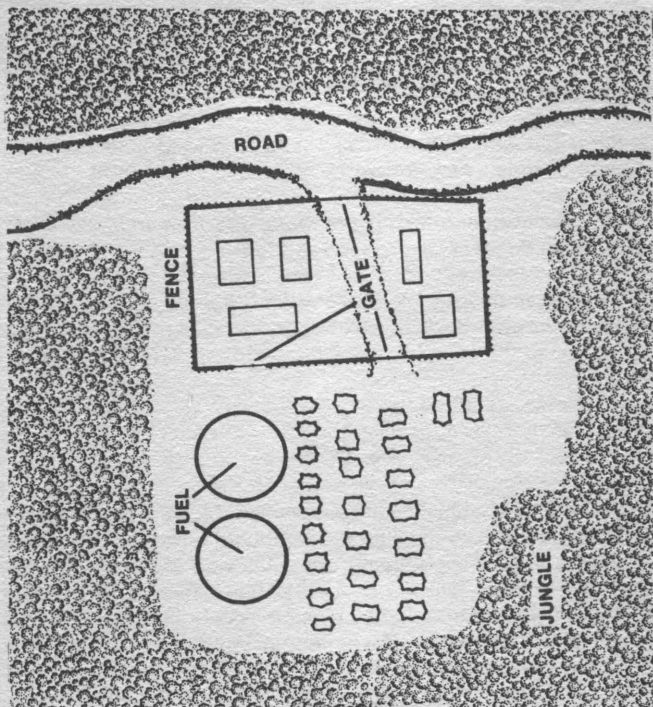
The explosions Neilson set off were quite real. There had been several sticks of authentic dynamite in the Oiler ammo dump. These probably had been used for clearing the road. Trees rarely accepted a judge's determination they had been felled.

As the sound of the blasts rolled over them, the perimeter guards in front of the patrol moved toward the sound. Crouched, Tidwell led his men forward. At the edge of the Oiler base he almost tripped in surprise. This was a laager and the Oilers had concentrated here what had to be all of their armored vehicles. Parked in neat rows were two dozen Argent armored ATVs (called A cubes by most military men). Produced by Rolls-Royce, these were the most versatile troop carriers in the world. Each held ten men and could move through anything but solid rock. Each also mounted a 20mm cannon in a small turret over the cab and a .50-caliber machine gun in the rear. These vehicles had to represent over a quarter of the total Oil force allotment.

Now that Tidwell had found the enemy, there was another problem. How do you destroy half an acre of armored vehicles? They had no more demolition charges and you just can't shoot them up with M-21s.

A number of men were visible moving among several permanent buildings on their right. Beyond the Argents stood two fuel tanks, identical to those they had "destroyed" the day before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. At least it was a chance. It might even work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread under them all. If even half of this number of A cubes survived, they would have easily rolled up all the Communications forces in the area.

While the major was gauging the distance to the fuel tanks, his attention was attracted to the 20mm cannon on each



MAP NO. 3497-24-10

## Section 105

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vehicle. At close range one of those cannons could cripple the other ATVs.

*If they should try to use one of the ATVs to destroy the others, turn to Section 111.*

*If they should try to drain the tanks and then light the fuel, turn to Section 113.*

*If the one air strike allowed Tidwell has not yet been used, this can now be called for. If this is chosen, turn to Section 124.*

## — 105 —

Several of the guards dropped when Tidwell and Neilson hit them from behind. The rest scattered among the various buildings of the supply dump. The men who had been trapped outside the fence rushed in to join the melee. There was a surreal quality to dodging among the poorly lit sheds and, on every shot, having to make sure your target wasn't a friendly before firing. Until it ended Tidwell was never even sure how many of his own men had joined him among the buildings.

Finally the firing just stopped. Not sure they had eliminated all of the guards, the patrol split into two-man teams to plant their "charges" on all the buildings. One mercenary would keep watch while the other set them in place.

Smiling, Tidwell began rigging charges against the nearest buildings. Allinov hovered nearby watching the shadows and fingering his M-21 nervously. As he attached a glob of mock plastique to a shed full of boxes marked "Mines," the major thought what a pity they couldn't have the satisfaction of actually watching the sheds blow up. A real pity, the mercenary thought, recalling the spectacular explosion a Shiite artillery ammunition dump had once made. It had contained an estimated fifty thousand artillery rounds and left a crater half a mile across. Sighing, Tidwell moved on to the next building.

*Turn to Section 100.*

## — 106 —

The Oiler patrols became more frequent as they got closer to the position marked on the map. Crouching under a bush, Tidwell watched the most recent group of mercenaries they had encountered push their way through the jungle less than five meters away. It was getting harder every mile to even more at all without being seen.

A few minutes later the way looked clear and Neilson took the point. They had proceeded to within a mile of whatever was marked on the map.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 131.*

*If the total is 9 or higher, turn to Section 126.*

## — 107 —

The fire was quick and intense. The major felt exposed and kept up a steady stream of fire just to keep the guards from getting a clear hit at him. He discovered he was rapidly running out of clips for his M-21. Finally Tidwell managed to shoot one of the guards who tried to dash across an open space between two buildings. But a second defender nearly got him while he did it. Allinov appeared inside the compound a moment later and nailed the second defender.

Jumping to his feet, the officer dashed for the wire. Allinov was already out of sight. There was another long burst and then quiet. The lull lasted for less than a minute, and then firing could be heard in several parts of the camp. By this

time Tidwell was inside the wire and moving cautiously among the sheds.

A face appeared in a window on Tidwell's right and he barely managed to stop himself from reflexively firing into it. It turned out to be Lieutenant Neilson. The officers exchanged glances. They had lost the element of surprise, but would be slugging it out on equal terms with the defenders now that they were within the camp itself. If most of the defenders still thought they had stopped the assault outside their wire, even the two of them could break the battle wide open.

The constant chatter of small-arms fire echoed off the buildings. Wordlessly the two mercenaries hurried toward the sound of gunfire. By the time they had reached the far side of the camp, only one defender was still firing. That guard was flat on top of a shed and had most of the patrol pinned down. Tidwell boosted Neilson onto the roof of another building and then waited.

It was over three minutes until the lieutenant got the shot he wanted. He fired a three-round burst and they heard the sound of a body sliding off the roof of the next building. Tidwell hurried over to where it had fallen. One could get badly hurt falling like that while trapped in a frozen kill suit.

As he reached the fallen guard he realized how strangely his values had become skewed by this deathless war. He also decided that it wasn't really a bad thing, being able to feel compassion for your enemies.

It turned out the man was all right, though he did have a bruise on his cheek. The major and lieutenant shifted him to a better position and the merc smiled back his gratitude. That was the best he could do. It was nearly impossible to get enough breath to talk in a tightened kill suit. Hurrying off, Tidwell asked Neilson to check the man's wrist ID. He was the type the major liked to keep track of for future employment, on his side.

Smiling, the major began rigging charges against the nearest buildings. As he did so, the major thought it was a pity they couldn't have the satisfaction of actually watching the sheds full of ammunition and fuel blow up. To his left he



could see Allinov setting the mock plastique charges he was carrying against two very real fuel tanks. A real pity, the mercenary thought, recalling the spectacular explosion a Shi-ite artillery ammunition dump had once made.

*Turn to Section 100.*

## — 108 —

There was no question as to the mercenaries' decision. Their self-conscious look and the way they avoided meeting the major's eyes conveyed the message quite effectively. It was Allinov who actually spoke up.

"We will obey any order you give, Major." He seemed to have trouble saying the rest. After clearing his throat the sergeant added, "Though most of the men feel we've done enough."

It was hard to blame them. The patrol had been away for over a week, fought several firefights and already accomplished more than was originally intended. They had completed their original mission successfully. For the last three days they had been constantly fighting either the jungle or the Oilers. Most of them were pushing the limits of their endurance and a few simply would not make it through another night march.

Enthusiastic men who wanted to succeed might have some chance at knocking out whatever that mark on the map indicated. Tired men without any real drive were sure to fail, and Tidwell was too much of a professional not to admit this to himself.

"Let's go home," he suggested reluctantly.

There was no cheer. Slowly, almost hesitantly, the men picked up their weapons. It would be a long walk. Later the major would call in the information they were coming back. That ITT-iot would be angry, but they didn't shoot you in the corporate armies. They just blackballed you. And after this mission, there was a good chance he could sign on with the Oilers anyhow. A few of them obviously needed to be shaped up and it would be good to work with Clancey again.

*The mission is over, ending, though, not with a bang . . .*

*While the mission was a partial success, more was possible. If you would like to try again, turn to Section 1. If you wish only to refight this last patrol, start with Section 41.*

## — 109 —

They had to set up the ambush very carefully. The area was still crowded with Oiler patrols searching for them. If there was a long firefight, the noise was bound to draw more unfriendlies than they could hope to handle.

The remaining men from both sections hid themselves on one side of the road. There would be little hope for using a deception to stop their quarry. Many of the trucks they had seen carried radios. If their target called in, they would not only be located, but the call would alert the Oilers to the fact that they had a truck. They had to strike so quickly there was no chance of their targets getting a message out.

The sound of engines brought everyone into position. The first vehicle was a truck, and Tidwell aimed at the driver. The men had been assigned different targets to ensure everyone was at least shot at, if not hit and disabled.

Then he pulled back the rifle as a second vehicle appeared behind the first, then a third.

“Hold your fire.” The major risked the brief break in radio silence. If even one man fired, they were in trouble. The fourth vehicle had turned out to be an armored scout car bristling with machine guns. The patrol all cowered in the thick growth, well aware of the firepower the scout car carried. When the first truck passed within a few meters of the officer, he noticed it was full of Oiler mercenaries. He almost laughed. There was a good chance they were looking for him. It was a consolation that at least they were moving away from whatever camp was their target.

A second, smaller convoy, also moving east, passed by fifteen minutes later. Another hour after that, a single truck appeared on the road. It was going west, toward their target.

Five men were visible in the back. All were dressed in kill suits. Tidwell knew they would have to either fight these men now or deal with them when they reached their target.

"Let's take 'em," he ordered in a low voice. It was the longest signal he could risk over the radio.

*Oiler Truck*

*Manpower: 7*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 21*

*The Oilers fire on Chart D.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart B.*

*If they succeed in eliminating the men in the truck, turn to Section 116.*

*If they fail and are all eliminated, turn to Section 29.*

## — 110 —

*If you have already used an air strike anywhere earlier in this book, turn to Section 114.*

*If you have not used your air strike before, turn to Section 117.*

## — 111 —

Rushing over to the nearest ATV, Tidwell had visions of driving one down the row spraying the other troop carriers with its cannon. He could almost hear the whack of AP rounds slamming through their thin armor.

Locked.

## Section 111

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And the door was armored. No way he could even shoot his way in. Then there was a hoarse yell to the frustrated officer's right and a spatter of rifle fire. They had been spotted!

"Randy, get in here!" Tidwell radioed, no longer concerned about maintaining radio silence. They most certainly had been located by the men firing at them from twenty meters away. There was no answer. Either the other section was in a situation where they had to stay silent, or they had already been wiped out.

Light from M-21 shots reflected off the side of the ATV over the mercenary's head. There were more shouts and then more gunfire. Nearby rifles crackled as Tidwell's men returned fire. Their only advantage was they were all together and the Oilers would have to identify their targets before firing. Anyone they saw had to be an enemy.

"Xanadu, this is Kublai. We got about twenty Argents parked here, but we got trouble." At least the base would know what they faced. There wasn't time to wait for a reply.

*Oiler Mercenaries*

*Manpower: 13*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 39*

*The defenders fire on Chart C.*

*The Communications patrol fires on Chart B.*

*Remember that only the first section is in the firefight (half the total mercenaries left).*

*If the Communications mercenaries win, turn to Section 115.*

*If they are wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

## —112—

Before he lit the rapidly growing puddle, Tidwell made sure no mercenary from either side was frozen where he might be burned. A shot glittered near his face and he dived down behind the relative safety of an A cube. The alcoholic fuel literally lapped at his feet. The jungle was just a short dash away. Tidwell began for the first time to believe they just might pull it off.

Still crouched behind the ATV, the major noticed no more shots were being fired. Either they had eliminated the batch of Oilers currently in the laager, or he was the last survivor of his patrol. Either way it was time to act. The match lit on his first attempt. With a whoosh the fuel caught.

It might have been possible to mock the destruction of the vehicles once the fuel had spread. Somehow that hadn't seemed right. After weeks of real suffering and exhaustion, Tidwell felt he deserved the satisfaction of creating a real disaster. Let the bookkeepers have something to write off for all his efforts.

The major decided to report in. "Xanadu, this is Tidwell." There was no use maintaining radio silence. Every Oiler in the war must have known where he was by now.

*Turn to Section 132.*

## —113—

Their best choice appeared to be to open the fuel tanks and burn the Argents. When they smashed open the valves of the first of the massive tanks, the clear, pungent fuel poured onto the ground and began to spread. Within a few seconds the smell of alcohol filled the air and everyone's eyes began to tear. Just as they finished opening the second fuel tank, one of the Oiler patrols returned to the laager.

Tidwell knew they had to hold the mercenaries away until the fuel alcohol had spread under all of the vehicles. Then a single match would complete their mission. And create a most satisfying bonfire.

This time the section had the advantage of being inside the laager firing out. And given luck, a bit of surprise. Tidwell noticed that the new Oilers were walking casually up to the front gate. All kill suits looked alike and they were too far away for the difference in unit badges to be visible. If they didn't notice the lack of a gate guard, they would be surprised when the patrol opened up on them.

*Oiler Mercenaries*

*Manpower: 11*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 33*

*The Oil force fires on Chart D.*

*Communications mercenaries fire one round on Chart A and all following rounds on Chart B.*

*The Oilers have to be kept in the firefight for five rounds. If any of Tidwell's patrol survives after five complete rounds, then the fuel will have spread sufficiently to destroy all the ATVs.*

*If Tidwell's men are successful, turn to Section 112.*

*If they fail, turn to Section 29.*

## — 114 —

"Xanadu, this is Kublai." Tidwell knew he had to talk fast or be located.

"Xanadu here."

"I need Strike Two at 235, gamma 47."

There was a short pause. Then a different voice answered.



"None available, Kublai."

"But we have the location pinpointed!" the major protested.

"Sorry, but those are the rules. We had only enough points for one strike left and you have already used it. No more points, no air support. All other airmobile ordnance has been allocated to the assault."

"Well, transfer some," the major insisted.

"Sorry, accounting won't allow the field transfer of allocated materials," was the by-the-book reply.

There seemed nothing else to say.

*Turn back to the section you just read (and make a different choice).*

## — 115 —

The firefight lasted for almost ten minutes. Long by anyone's standards. When it ended, Tidwell still couldn't understand how they had won. Oiler bodies were strewn across the laager. They still hadn't heard from the second section. It looked like they would have to write that whole force off. The best choice they had left was to open the fuel tanks and burn the Argents. When they opened the valves, the smell of alcohol pervaded the air. The Communications mercenaries made sure to drag all the frozen mercs free of the danger area.

Just as they finished, more Oiler mercenaries returned to the laager. They had to hold them away until the fuel alcohol had spread under all of the vehicles. Then a single match would complete the mission.

This time the section had the advantage of being inside the laager firing out. And given luck, a bit of surprise. Major Tidwell noticed that the new Oilers were walking casually up to the front gate. All kill suits looked alike and they were too far away for the difference in unit badges to be visible. If they didn't notice the lack of a gate guard, they would be surprised when the patrol opened up on them.

## Section 116

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*Oiler Mercenaries*

*Manpower: 9*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 27*

*The Oil force fires on Chart D.*

*Communications mercenaries fire one round on Chart A and all following rounds on Chart B.*

*The Oilers have to be kept in the firefight for five rounds. If any of Tidwell's patrol survives for five complete rounds, then the fuel will have spread sufficiently to destroy all the ATVs.*

*If Tidwell's men are successful or eliminate all of the returning Oiler mercenaries, turn to Section 112.*

*If they fail, turn to Section 29.*

## — 116 —

When the firing ended, the mercenaries swarmed onto the truck. Its former passengers were lifted off and stacked just off the road. The judges could recover them anywhere, and leaving them in sight would alert any Oilers that passed to the fact that one of their trucks had been hijacked.

Everything now depended upon their ability to bluff their way close to, if not into, that Oiler base. Beyond that the mercenary officer could plan very little. Until he knew what they were up against, there was nothing he could decide at all.

After days of walking through jungle and swamp, Tidwell enjoyed riding in the comparative luxury of the truck's passenger seat. That alone seemed almost worth the risk. Or so he felt until he saw the roadblock.

Five men stood near a jeep. All were armed and they had just let another truck pass. Before Neilson could stop the truck, they had been spotted. Nor was turning around really

possible in any case, because the roadblock had been carefully placed where the road was too narrow to turn around. Three choices were possible, and the decision had to be made in seconds. The mercenary's first urge was to bluff. But if they were expecting him, Clancey might have given them his description. This left the classic solutions of either avoiding the problem, which in this case meant leaving the truck and approaching through the jungle, or facing it head-on. Head-on with all guns blazing.

*If they should try to bluff their way through the roadblock, turn to Section 120.*

*If the patrol should try to shoot their way through the roadblock, turn to Section 119.*

*If they should abandon the truck and try to approach the base from the jungle, turn to Section 106.*

## —117—

"Xanadu, this is Kublai." Tidwell knew he had to talk fast or be located.

"Xanadu here."

"I need Strike One at 235, gamma 47."

There was a short pause. Then a different voice answered.

"Tambu to leave in three."

Less than half an hour later the major could hear the whomp of a General Dynamics Avenger as the chopper swooped in and ran along the treetops. From his position in a tall tree the mercenary saw the gunship as a speck against the near cloudless sky.

"Strike One, I have you on visual," the major informed the pilot. "You are three clicks from target. On my mark turn left ninety degrees . . . mark."

The machine's noise grew as it raced overhead.

"It's just ahead of you," the mercenary pointed out.

They would have to make this quick. Those patrols with the radio detectors would be homing in on his signal.

"I have a visual fix," the copter pilot confirmed. He had a Hispanic accent. "By Maria's shroud, that sucker's big. The only way I'm gonna knock it out is to hit the ammo dump or some fuel stocks. Can you locate?"

"That's a negative," the mercenary had to admit.

"Then I'll have to fire blind." The pilot sounded discouraged.

Six rockets streaked away from the stubby wings of the helicopter. Six more followed seconds later. They left a trail of yellow smoke, and then blue smoke poured through the camouflage netting where they had hit. Hopeful, Tidwell watched for the green smoke that would designate secondary explosions, that they had hit something important.

Nothing.

He waited longer. Still nothing.

Then a yellow streak of smoke sailed up from somewhere inside the Oiler laager. The assault copter slewed wildly as the pilot avoided the SAM. Even without an active warhead, getting nailed by one of those rockets was dangerous. The mercenary could hardly blame the pilot when he decided to leave. There was little more he could do once his missiles had been expended.

"Thanks anyhow," Tidwell offered as the gunship disappeared into the pale blue sky. Then he climbed down to join the rest of his patrol. They were going to have to do it the hard way. His choices remained the same. But they had to act quickly. The gunship's attack must have stirred up the entire Oiler camp.

*If they should split the patrol with half to create a diversion, turn to Section 104.*

*If they should try to hijack a truck and bluff their way in, turn to Section 109.*

*If they should attempt a stealthy approach through the jungle, turn to Section 106.*

## — 118 —

“Look, we were training outside Brasília until three hours ago,” the major explained. “They didn’t give us time to change. We weren’t even supposed to get activated unless the flanking attack failed.”

The sergeant studied the mercenary officer’s face. The major tried to look tired and annoyed, and the former wasn’t hard. He was counting on the typical noncom’s reluctance to antagonize an officer to carry them past.

“Okay, take ’em to the barracks, back of the enclosure on the right,” the noncom relented, gesturing them through the gate. Without hesitating Neilson slammed the truck into gear and sped into the enclosure. When he didn’t stop at the barracks, but instead continued into the laager where the armored ATVs were parked, one of the men at the gate shouted.

The truck slammed to a stop in the middle of three rows of Argents. The men in the back dived from the truck and spread out among the personnel carriers. Only one Oiler was visible inside the area and he was holding a wrench, not a rifle. Standing with his hands in sight, the mechanic smiled wryly. Tidwell was about to order his men not to shoot him when a stray shot from his own side froze him. The mechanic met the major’s eyes. His expression came as close to a shrug as you could get without moving your shoulders.

Fire from the Oilers increased as more of them became aware the laager had been invaded. Ducking behind one of the Argents, the major looked at the rows of armored vehicles. How do you destroy half an acre of armored vehicles? You just can’t shoot them up with M-21s.

Men could be seen hurriedly moving among the buildings a hundred meters to the right. Beyond the Argents were two fuel tanks, identical to those they had “destroyed” the day before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. It might work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread. If even half of the

carriers survived, they would easily roll up the current Communications forces in the area. While the major was gauging the distance to the fuel tanks, his attention was attracted to the 20mm cannon on each vehicle. At close range one of those cannons could cripple the other ATVs.

*If they should try to use one of the ATVs to destroy the others, turn to Section 111.*

*If they should try to drain the tanks and then light the fuel, turn to Section 113.*

## — 119 —

*Roadblock*

*Manpower: 5*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 15*

*The men at the roadblock fire on Chart B.*

*The patrol fires from the truck on Chart C.*

*If Tidwell's men win the firefight, turn to Section 122.*

*If they are all hit, turn to Section 29.*

## — 120 —

“Sir, could I see your papers?” the sergeant in command of the roadblock asked.

“I’m afraid we don’t have any,” Tidwell apologized. “These are new men. Captain Clancey ordered me to get them to the base to search for a raiding group that is in the area. Seems it



is something personal for him.” The mercenary officer tried to sound annoyed.

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total is the same as or less than the patrol's value for Stealth, turn to Section 123.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 130.*

## — 121 —

The truck slammed to a stop in the middle of three rows of Argents. The mercenaries dived from the back and spread out among the personnel carriers. Only one Oiler was visible in the laager and he wasn't armed. Standing with his hands in sight, the mechanic smiled wryly at their Communications badges. Tidwell was about to order his men not to shoot him when a stray shot from his own side flattened him. He met the major's eyes. His expression came as close to a shrug as you could get without moving your shoulders.

Fire from the Oilers increased rapidly as more Oilers became aware their laager had been invaded. Ducking behind one of the Argents, the major looked at the rows of armored vehicles. How do you destroy half an acre of ATVs? You can't just shoot out their treads.

More men could be seen moving quickly among several buildings a hundred meters to the right. Beyond the Argents were two fuel tanks, identical to those they had “destroyed” the day before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. It would work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread. If even half of the carriers survived, they would easily roll up the current Communications forces in the area. As he gauged the distance to the fuel tanks, the major's attention was attracted to the 20mm cannon on each vehicle. At close range one of those cannons could cripple the other ATVs.

*If they should try to use one of the ATVs to destroy the others, turn to Section 111.*

*If they should try to drain the tanks and then light the fuel, turn to Section 113.*

## — 122 —

The fight at the roadblock was short and intense. Neither side had any real cover and men fell quickly on both sides. Fortunately for them the mercenaries in the truck fired first, faster and more accurately. By the time their truck had rolled to a stop, the last of the Oilers had fallen.

They drove the jeep off the road and hid both it and the Oiler mercs behind some branches broken off nearby bushes. The foliage wouldn't interfere with the judges tracing the kill suits' radios, but it would prevent their former opponents being seen by others passing by.

There were no more incidents until they reached the Oiler base itself. As they slowed by the gate, several men came out to meet them. All the men's uniforms were stained in a similar manner to those of the men in the truck. They must also have been moving through the jungle recently. Tidwell knew this meant they were more than just garrison troops; these mercenaries were part of the attack force, trained veterans psyched for action.

"Back already?" began a sergeant walking up to the window near Neilson. "I thought everyone was out trying to run down that Commy patrol? Huh." He had noticed the major's unfamiliar face and stooped a few feet short of the truck.

"Afternoon, Sergeant." Tidwell bent over and spoke quickly. "We have a load of recruits here. Where do you want them?"

While the sergeant looked them over, Tidwell looked into the camp. The major almost whistled. Parked in neat rows on the far side of the laager were two dozen Argent armored ATV assault vehicles, often called A cubes. Produced by Rolls-Royce, these were the most versatile troop carriers in the world. They held ten men and could move through any-

thing but solid rock. Each also mounted a 20mm cannon in a small turret over the cab and a .50-caliber machine gun in the rear. These vehicles had to represent over a quarter of the total points in the Oiler force allotment. No wonder their attack in the center was meeting less opposition than expected.

Men could be seen moving among several buildings a hundred meters to the right. Beyond the Argents were two fuel tanks, identical to those they had “destroyed” the day before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. It would work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread. If they didn’t and even half of the personnel carriers survived, they would be enough to easily roll up the current Communications forces in the area.

“May I see your papers, sir?” the sergeant requested politely. The major hoped his surprise at the sight of the ATVs hadn’t shown.

“Look, Captain Clancey told me to run these men here to help in the search for some old buddy of his.” Tidwell tried to sound righteous. “There was no time to get papers.”

“How’d you get through the roadblock?” the suspicious noncom asked. He was eyeing the mercenaries’ stained kill suits. Tidwell realized they hardly looked like fresh recruits.

“Roadblock?” the Communications mercenary attempted to bluff.

*See the map in Section 104.*

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total rolled is 6 or less than 6 (the patrol’s value for Stealth minus 2), turn to Section 118.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 125.*

— 123 —

“That’s who we are looking for,” the sergeant acknowledged. “But you’re gonna have trouble without papers.”

Tidwell shrugged. “Not much I can do now. That Irishman was a bit busy when we left.”

“What does Captain Clancey look like?” the noncom checked.

Tidwell gave him an accurate, if mildly profane, description. Both laughed and the men around the jeep relaxed.

The sergeant pulled a pad from the jeep. “Here is a travel pass. I can’t sign the authorization, but you being a major ought to be able to. I can countersign.”

A minute later Sergeant Orlowski’s signature was next to that of Major Frederick Barbarossa. Waving his thanks, Tidwell gestured for Neilson to drive on. Once out of sight of the guardpost, Tidwell showed Neilson the signature. Both officers began to chuckle. Moments later they were roaring with laughter, caused more by relief than by the major’s using the name of the ancient Teutonic hero.

*Turn to Section 127.*

— 124 —

*If you have already used an air strike anywhere earlier in this book, turn to Section 114.*

*If you have not used your air strike before, turn to Section 128.*

## — 125 —

“I think you had better have your men get out of the truck.” The sergeant’s voice was suddenly hard. He began to swing his own rifle around to ready. A shot from the back of the truck froze him in mid-action. Tidwell began firing at those men near the gate while Neilson slammed the truck into gear and raced through the gate.

*Oilers at Gate*

*Manpower: 6*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 18*

*The gate guards will fire on Chart C.*

*The patrol will fire from the truck on Chart B.*

*If after three rounds any members of the patrol remain active, turn to Section 121.*

*If they are all “killed” in three rounds, turn to Section 29.*

## — 126 —

The first warning they had that the patrol had been spotted was the sound of M-21 fire from behind them. Diving out of reflex into the thicker undergrowth, Tidwell spun with his rifle ready. They had to finish this firefight quickly before the other patrols could vector in on the sound of their gunfire.

*Oiler Patrol*

*Manpower: 5*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 15*

*Both sides fire on Chart C.*

*Keep track of the number of rounds of combat you roll. If the firefight lasts more than five rounds, a second patrol will join the first. Add 5 to the remaining Oiler Manpower at the start of the sixth round of combat. If the firefight lasts more than twelve rounds, a third squad of 6 men will join the Oilers at the start of the thirteenth round.*

*If the Communications mercenaries are victorious, turn to Section 87.*

*If they are defeated, turn to Section 29.*

## — 127 —

There were no more incidents until they reached the Oiler laager itself. As they slowed by the camp's gate, several men came out to stop them.

"Back already?" began a sergeant walking up to the window near Neilson. "I thought everyone was out trying to run down that Commy patrol, huh?" He had noticed the lieutenant's unfamiliar face and stopped a few feet short of the truck.

"Afternoon, Sergeant." Tidwell bent over and spoke quickly. "We have a load of recruits here. Where do you want them?"

Looking into the camp, Tidwell almost whistled. Parked in neat rows on the far side of the laager were two dozen Argent armored ATV assault vehicles, "A cubes" in military slang. Produced by Rolls-Royce, these were the most versatile troop carriers in the world. They held ten men each and could move through anything but solid rock. Each also mounted a 20mm cannon in a small turret over the cab and a .50-caliber machine gun in the rear. These vehicles had to represent over a quarter of the total Oil force allotment.

Men could be seen moving among several buildings a hundred meters to the right. Beyond the Argents were two fuel tanks, identical to those they had "destroyed" the day



before. If they could drain those tanks and then ignite them, that might do the job. It might work if they could hold off the Oilers long enough for the fuel to spread. If even half of the carriers survived, they would easily roll up all of the current Communications forces in the area.

"May I see your papers, sir?" the sergeant requested politely. The major hoped his surprise at the sight of the ATVs hadn't shown.

"Look, Captain Clancey told me to run them here to help." Tidwell tried to sound righteous. "There was no time to get papers."

"How'd you get through the roadblock with no pass?" the suspicious noncom asked. He was eyeing the mercenaries' stained kill suits. Tidwell realized they hardly looked like new recruits.

"You mean this?" Tidwell offered the sheet he had obtained from the sergeant at the roadblock.

The noncom studied the pass, obviously not completely satisfied with it.

*See the map in Section 104.*

*Roll two six-sided dice.*

*If the total rolled is 9 or less than 9 (the patrol's value for Stealth plus 1), turn to Section 118.*

*If the total is greater, turn to Section 125.*

## — 128 —

"Xanadu, this is Kublai." Tidwell knew he had to talk fast or be located.

"Xanadu here."

"I need Strike Two at 235, gamma 47."

There was a short pause. Then a different voice answered.

"Found it?"

"Yeah, and Strike One had better hurry." Tidwell was hardly in the mood for small talk.

## Section 129

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“Acknowledged, strike released, ETA twenty-two minutes. Listen for code name Tambu.”

Now all they had to do was hang on until the strike got close and then pull back. The major was feeling pretty good about things until there was a shout from the direction of the buildings. Gunfire followed as Oilers rushed through the gate that led into the laager.

*Oiler Mercenaries*

*Manpower: 11*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 33*

*The Oil force fires on Chart D.*

*Communications mercenaries fire one round on Chart A and all following rounds on Chart B.*

*The Oilers have to survive the firefight going for five rounds. If any of Tidwell's patrol survives after five complete rounds, turn to Section 129.*

*If they fail, turn to Section 29.*

## — 129 —

Less than half an hour later the major could hear the whomp of a General Dynamics Avenger over the sporadic crack of gunfire. It grew louder as the chopper swooped in and ran along the treetops. It was time to pull back into the jungle and watch the fun.

“Let's get out of here!” Tidwell yelled for the benefit of anyone monitoring their command frequencies. Those remaining scrambled back into the jungle. Tidwell climbed a tree from which he could see both the Oiler laager and the approaching General Dynamics Avenger. From his position in the tree the mercenary saw the gunship as a speck against the near cloudless sky.

"Strike One, I have you on visual," the major informed the pilot. "You are three clicks from target. On my mark turn left ninety degrees . . . mark."

The machine's noise grew as it raced overhead.

"Tambu, it's just in front of you, five hundred meters due east of the target zone," the mercenary advised.

They would have to make this quick. The patrols equipped with radio detectors would be homing in on his signal, and the rest on the sound of the chopper.

"I have visual sighting," the copter pilot confirmed. "By Maria's shroud, that sucker's big. The only way I'm gonna knock it out is to hit the ammo dump or fuel stooks. Can you locate?"

"That's a yes," the mercenary officer was happy to say.

For the next minute Tidwell directed the assault copter until it stood less than a hundred meters from the rows of parked personnel carriers.

"A few degrees left," was the final adjustment. It was just as well. Someone in the Oiler laager had noticed his outline in the tree and figured out who was directing the helicopter. A bright light lit up a thick leaf inches from Tidwell's head.

Seconds later six rockets streaked away from beneath the stubby wings of the helicopter. Six more followed. The rockets left a trail of yellow smoke, and then blue smoke poured through the camouflage netting where they hit. Hopeful, Tidwell watched for the green smoke that would designate secondary explosions.

Green smoke poured from one of the Argents. Then the two beside it. Then smoke burst from the packet on the side of the closest fuel tank. Within a minute the entire compound was obscured as thick green smoke poured from nearly every vehicle.

Then a yellow streak of smoke sailed up from somewhere inside the Oiler camp. The assault copter slewed wildly as the pilot avoided the SAM. Even if they were used without a warhead, getting nailed by one of those rockets was dangerous. The mercenary could hardly blame the pilot when he decided to leave. There was little more he could have done now that his missiles had been expended.

"Nice shooting, Tambu," Tidwell complimented as the gunship disappeared into the pale blue sky. Then he climbed down to join the rest of his cheering patrol.

*Turn to Section 132.*

— 130 —

“I think you and your men had better get out of that truck.” The noncom’s voice was suddenly suspicious. He backed away and the other men near the jeep raised their M-21s.

Almost casually, Tidwell shot the sergeant before he could bring his weapon to bear.

*Roadblock*

*Manpower: 5*

*Ordnance: 3*

*Initial Attack Strength: 15*

*Both sides fire on Chart C.*

*If the Communications patrol wins, turn to Section 122.*

*If they are wiped out, turn to Section 29.*

— 131 —

When the last Oiler fell, Tidwell jumped to his feet and ran in the direction of the Oiler laager. There had been too many shots fired to worry any more about stealth. They had to get to the chopper before someone reinforced the perimeter.

Behind him he could hear the others thrashing through the undergrowth. Stumbling on a vine, he crashed into a man-thick tree. The rough bark cut into his face and hands.

The lieutenant helped him back to his feet.

“Hell of a way to fight a war,” the Canadian murmured.

“Piece of cake,” Tidwell observed ironically.

Then both men were too busy dashing through the thick undergrowth to say any more.

*Turn to Section 77.*

## — 132 —

The last survivors of the Communications patrol were hiding among the roots of a tree Tidwell couldn't even guess the name of. Above them it appeared to be a type of oak, but the burls of the root system were spread above the ground, creating a maze of knee-high roots. After they destroyed the laager the patrol had scrambled back into the jungle. Numerous Oiler patrols had nearly brought them to bay.

Exhausted and nearly out of ammunition, the major was discouraged. He wouldn't have bet another bottle of Tully on getting back to their own lines. Well, he certainly had fulfilled the objective. Although that was not strictly true, he almost laughed at the thought. No longer was it necessary for them to try to slow down the Oil timetable. They had completely neutralized the cutting edge of their attack force. Once he got out of the morgue, he would enjoy sharing the bottles with Clancey. The Irishman would have to agree this one was his victory, although it would have been much more satisfying to get out again as well.

The animal noises in the surrounding jungle began to fade until the silence was noticeable. Everyone pressed himself lower among the burls beneath the unnamed tree. Then the *whomp-whomp* of a helicopter moving slowly over the forest canopy became audible.

"Hey, Steve, you down there?" Clancey's voice was loud in the mercenary's helmet. The red telltale warned that the broadcast was over an Oiler frequency. There was no way he would answer. That might allow the Oilers to locate them. There was no way to tell how the helicopter was equipped. He did resent Clancey using their friendship this way.

"Listen, Major," the voice continued, "call your people. It's all over."

The Communications mercenary hesitated. The sound of the helicopter was fading.

"Look, you won, buddy," the Irishman insisted. "Check it out."

Tidwell was tempted. That would mean a ride back and a long rest. Just what he wanted to hear. Again he decided not to use the radio. When an opponent told you what you wanted to hear, it was time to be suspicious.

"Okay, I wouldn't believe me either," Clancey tried again. "I'm just trying to save you a lousy walk."

There was a pause. The major thought a section of the foliage twenty meters away was moving strangely. He sighted his M-21 on the spot.

"Tell you what," Clancey offered, "I'll bet you a case of Irish against a drink at Jane's it's all over. That's straight and this is an open channel now."

This sure was a weird war. Smiling, the mercenary stood. It felt good to do so without having to look over his shoulder.

He keyed on his own microphone. "You already owe me those two bottles at Jane's. Pick me up and let's go get started on them."



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