IMPERIAL ARMOUR™

VOLUME THREE
SECOND EDITION
THE TAROS CAMPAIGN

WARHAMMER VAULT

WARHAMMER+

WARHAMMER 40,000®

EXPANSION

The Warhammer Vault exists to preserve the rich lore and background of Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer Age of Sigmar. As such, outdated game scenarios and unit rules have been removed from this publication.

IMPERIAL ARMOUR

VOLUME THREE – SECOND EDITION

THE TAROS CAMPAIGN

Forge World

WARHAMMER 40,000

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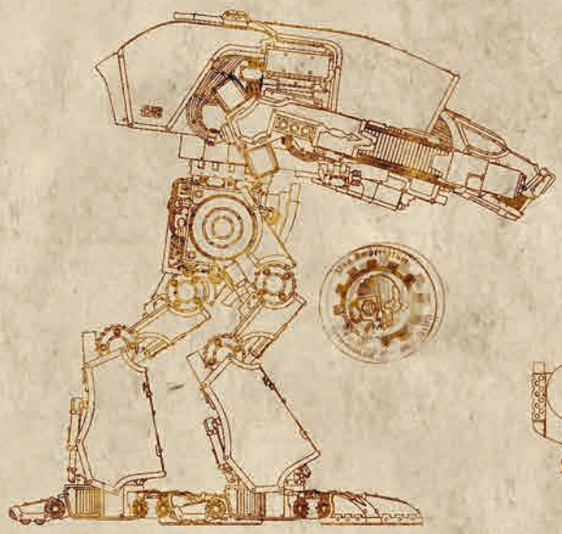
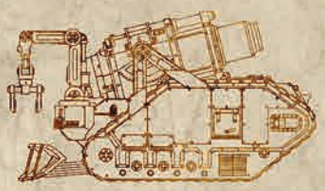


COLLEGIA TITANICA -
WARHOUND SCOUT TITAN



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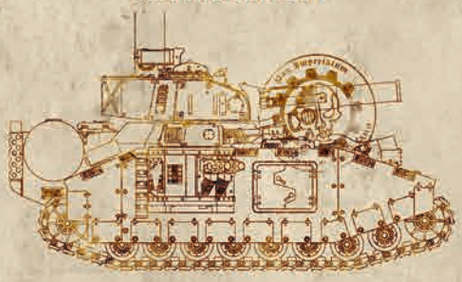
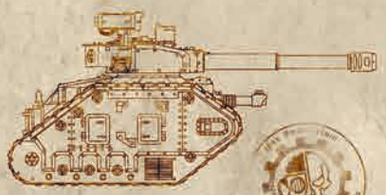
COLOSSUS BOMBARD



IMPERIAL SUPER-HEAVY
BATTLE TANK - BANEBLADE

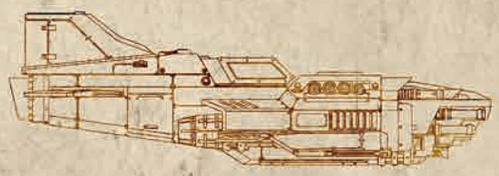


IMPERIAL BATTLE TANK -
LEMAN RUSS VANQUISHER

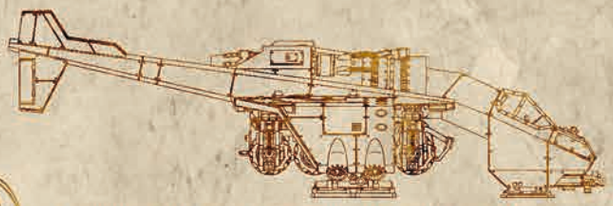
IMPERIAL ARTI
BASILISK AR

IMPERIAL RAPID ASSAULT VEHICLES -
TAUROS; TAUROS VENATOR

IMPERIAL WALKER
SENTINEL [ROCKET



IMPERIAL NAVY - THUNDERBOLT FIGHTER



IMPERIAL NAVY TRANSPORTER - VALKYRIE SKY TALON

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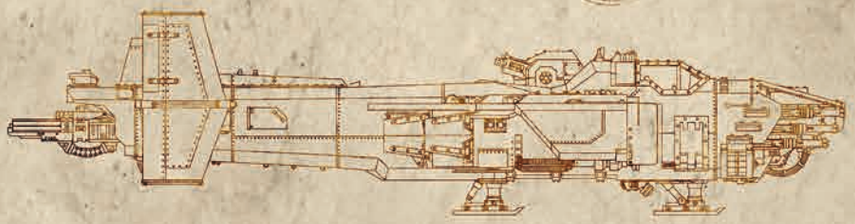

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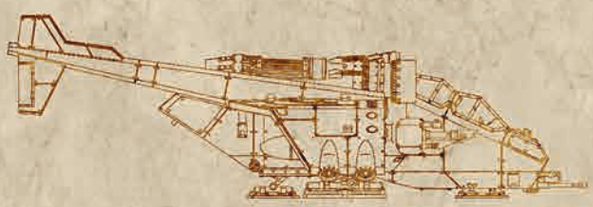
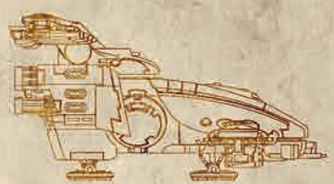
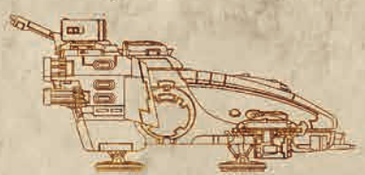


IMPERIAL NAVY - VALKYRIE ASSAULT CARRIER



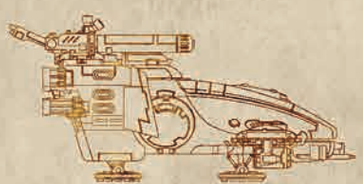
XENOS [TAU] - SKY RAY
MISSILE DEFENCE GUNSHIP



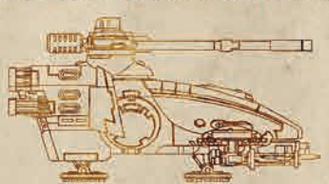
XENOS [TAU] GUNSHIP - HAMMERHEAD
[TWIN-LINKED MISSILE PODS]

XENOS [TAU] CRISIS ARMOUR: XV89 [FUSION BLASTER & FLAMER];
XV84 [FUSION BLASTER & FLAMER]; XV81 [BURSTCANNON; FUSION BLASTER
& SMART MISSILE SYSTEM]; XV8 [PLASMA RIFLE & MISSILE POD].

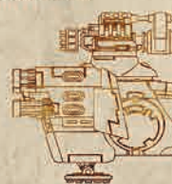
XENOS [TAU] GUNSHIP - HAMMERHEAD
[FUSION CANNON]



XENOS [TAU] GUNSHIP - HAMMERHEAD
[PLASMA CANNON]



XENOS [TAU] GUNSHIP - HAMMERHEAD
[RAILGUN]



XENOS [TAU] GUNSH
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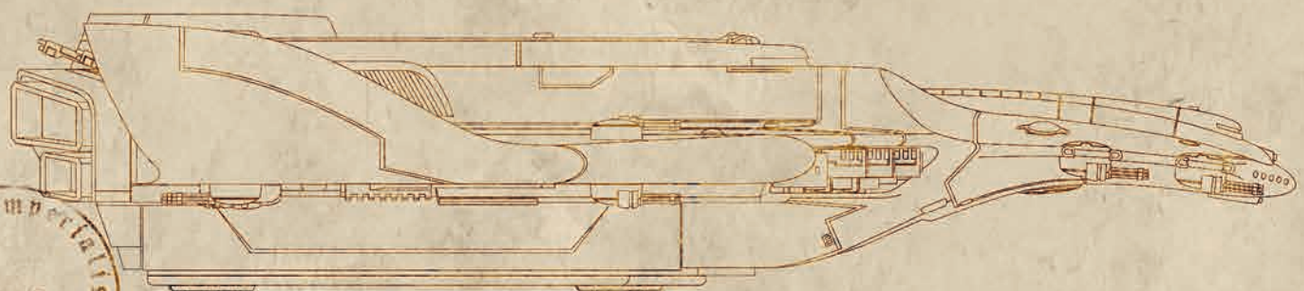
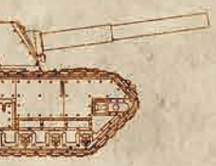
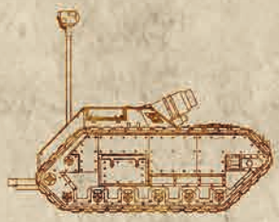


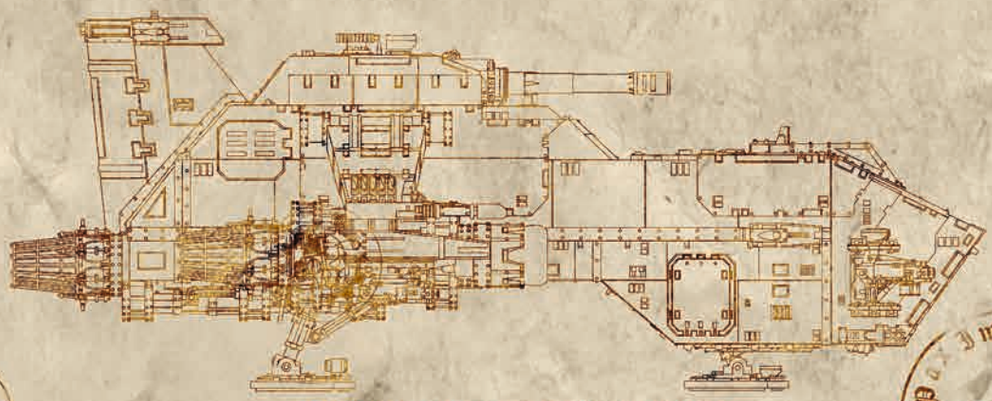
XENOS [TAU] - MANTA SUPER-HEAVY DROPSHIP



LERY VEHICLE -
TILLERY TANK



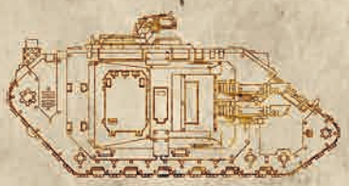
IMPERIAL ARTILLERY VEHICLE -
GRIFFON HEAVY MORTAR CARRIER



ADEPTUS ASTARTES - THUNDERHAWK GUNSHIP

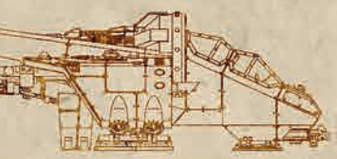
IMPERIAL WALKER -
DROP SENTINEL

IMPERIAL WALKER -
SENTINEL POWER LIFTER

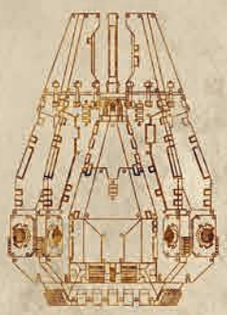


ADEPTUS ASTARTES - LAND RAIDER
PHOBOS MKIIB

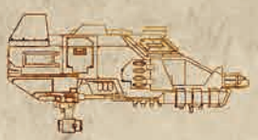
ADEPTUS ASTARTES - RHINO
ARMOURED TROOP CARRIER



IAL NAVY - VULTURE GUNSHIP



ADEPTUS ASTARTES -
DEATHSTORM DROP POD



ADEPTUS ASTARTES -
LAND SPEEDER TEMPEST

ADEPTUS ASTARTES -
LAND SPEEDER [HEAVY BOLTER]

ORDO XENOS

DEPARTMENTO ANALYTICUS

TAROS CAMPAIGN
CARTA MILITARIS

XENOS [TAU] - PIRANHA
[FUSION BLASTER]

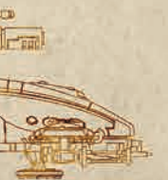
XENOS [TAU] - PIRANHA
[BURST CANNON]

XENOS [TAU] - TETRA
SCOUT SPEEDER

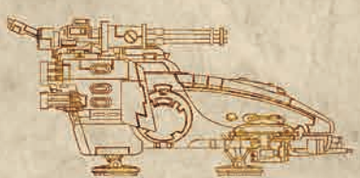
XENOS [TAU] -
HEAVY GUN DRONE
[BURST CANNON]

XENOS [TAU] -
RECONNAISANCE DRONE
[MARKERLIGHT]

XENOS [TAU] - REMOTE SENSOR TOWER



HP - HAMMERHEAD
NNON]



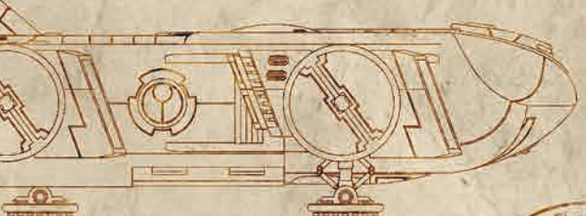
XENOS [TAU] GUNSHIP - HAMMERHEAD
[LONG BARRELLED BURST CANNON]

XENOS [TAU] - DEVILFISH
TROOP CARRIER

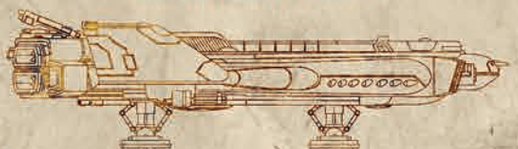
XENOS [TAU] - DRONE SENTRY TURRET
[FUSION BLASTER]

XENOS [TAU] - BARRACUDA
AIR SUPERIORITY FIGHTER

XENOS [TAU] - DRONE SENTRY TURRET
[BURST CANNON]



XENOS [TAU] - ORCA DROP SHIP



XENOS [TAU] - TIGER SHARK
FIGHTER-BOMBER

XENOS [TAU] - DRONE SENTRY TURRET
[PLASMA RIFLE]

HISTORY OF THE TAROS CAMPAIGN

Ion cannon armed Hammerhead gunship of an unknown Hunter Cadre.
This vehicle was engaged with elements of the 89th Tallarn Regiment in the Aestus desert.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD TO WAR

The Imperium of Mankind is vast, comprising over a million planets scattered the length and breadth of the galaxy. It is the greatest empire in human history, but for all the worlds its armies and battlefleets have conquered and the countless xenos races it has cast into oblivion, the terrible truth few men are privy to is that the Imperium's millennia long battle for survival may be failing. For the galaxy is a dark and terrible place and, beset by external wars and internal divisions, Mankind's existence hangs on a knife edge.

In ignorance the wider military might of the Imperium battles on, in part because it knows no alternative, but also because the forces at its disposal are legion. From the colossal firepower of the Titans of the Adeptus Mechanicus to the formidable Space Marines, the elite warriors of the Adeptus Astartes, there is little that can oppose its fearsome gods of war. However effective they are though, their numbers are limited and it is ultimately upon the common man that the burden of war must fall the heaviest; those of the Hammer of the Emperor – the Imperial Guard.

Consisting of billions of men and millions of fighting vehicles, the Imperial Guard is deployed to warzones and garrisons across the galaxy. At any one time its regiments may be engaged in thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of conflicts, and each and every Guardsman requires a constant supply of food and water, weapons and ammunition, and a myriad of other equipment to survive. To manage this logistical nightmare the Departmento Munitorum was created and for millennia it has overseen the supply of men and war materiels to the Imperium's largest armed force. This has always been a vast and complex task, but when the Imperial Guard is mustered en masse to counter an enemy that poses a threat to the Imperium at large such as an Ork Waaagh! or Tyranid hive fleet, the duties it must perform to ensure the smooth functioning of the Emperor's armies grow to epic proportions.

The Return of an Old Foe

As the end of the 41st Millennium drew near, those within the Imperium who were sensitive to such things became aware of an increase in omens and portents warning of an old enemy returning to threaten the empire of Mankind. They foretold that within the Eye of Terror – where warp space and real space overlap and the worshippers of the dark gods rule – the Warmaster of Chaos, Abaddon the Arch-traitor, the Destroyer of Worlds, was gathering his strength for a new assault upon the Imperium.

Driven by the bloody desires of his insane gods and a thirst for vengeance which had not been quenched by ten thousand years of war, Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade would be the largest yet. Like Horus, his master, before him, Abaddon sought the overthrowing of the Emperor's rule and the destruction of the Imperium. To do this he must eventually assault Terra and the capture of the Cadian Gate in the Segmentum Obscurus would likely be his first objective on the road to accomplishing this.

The Cadian Gate however has long been one of the key lynchpins in the strategic defence of Holy Terra. The closest Imperial planet to that much contested region of space, Cadia is a fortress world and one of the most militaristic in the Imperium. Due to its proximity to the Eye of Terror it is protected by fleets of the Imperial Navy, orbited by powerful space stations, and defended by the strongest bastions, each garrisoned by regiments of hardy Cadian Guardsmen. The surrounding systems are also well protected, to the extent that the capture of the Cadian Gate would require an assault on a monumental scale by any enemy force and would plunge the Imperium into its largest single war since the arrival of Hive Fleet Kraken on the distant Eastern Fringe. When Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade struck therefore, a war would ensue of titanic proportions that would require the full weight of the Imperium's resources to be deployed for it to stand any chance of repelling his unholy masses.

War on such a scale does not come secretly or by surprise, and the Imperium was not completely blind to events within the Eye of Terror and the surrounding Segmentum Obscurus. With sages and seers having forecast the dire event long before Abaddon launched his forces, as well as in response to increasing raids in the systems around the Eye of Terror, the Adeptus Mechanicus Exploritas had launched nullships deep into the maleficent void to gather intelligence on what was occurring inside. What they found sent shock waves through the upper echelons of the Imperium.

The twelve High Lords of Terra, the council that governs the Imperium in the Emperor's stead, debated for days what course of action to take. When they had eventually settled upon an agreement, orders were issued and the great wheels of the Departmento Munitorum and various other institutions of the Imperium were set into motion. The region around the Cadian Gate was to be immediately strengthened, reserves were to be found and assigned, weapons, ammunition and supplies were to be stockpiled on armoury worlds, and all available Space Marine Chapters in the vicinity were to make ready and be in a position to respond to the attack when it inevitably came.

Supplying the War Effort

Preparations to counter Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade would directly affect nearly every part of the Segmentum Obscurus and would expand far out into the wider Imperium, whether it was demands for new Imperial Guard regiments from its many tithed worlds or increased production quotas placed upon Forge Worlds to meet supply demands. In the Ultima Segmentum, the largest of the five great Segmentums that divide the Imperium, the effects would be felt as far away as the Eastern Fringe on its furthest borders. There, in the Vulcanis system and covering the entire surface of the eighth moon of the ringed gas giant Stygies, was the Forge World of Stygies VIII. One of the most productive in that region in terms of worth to the Imperial war effort, Stygies VIII stood in the second tier of Forge Worlds, with Mars alone out-producing it.

As a Forge World Stygies VIII does not pay tithes as other worlds within the Imperium do, instead it is bound to supply arms, munitions and equipment to, amongst others, the massed armies of the Imperial Guard. Being of such vital importance, a Forge World's productivity is carefully monitored to meet demand forecasts. Should the Forge World fall behind it will likely have far reaching consequences for those who rely on it to supply them. To prevent this, the Departmento Munitorum devotes a great measure of its time and resources to making sure this does not happen, and as the threat of war with Abaddon increased, a party of Departmento Munitorum officials, including a High Prefect carrying the authority of the Master of the Administratum, arrived on Stygies VIII with a new set of production figures and targets. The preparations to stave off the coming Black Crusade meant that many new Imperial Guard regiments were being raised and these fighting men needed equipping. This would, in part, fall to the Forge World, and immediately the representatives of the Priesthood of Mars on Stygies VIII and the Departmento Munitorum High Prefect met in council to begin to draw together their plans to meet the new requirements.

At this council, the Tech-Priests of Stygies VIII informed the High Prefect that if production was to be increased then more raw and refined materials would need to be found. The lifeblood of any Forge World is the material it consumes, and for production on the scale achievable by the manufactorums of Stygies VIII, vast amounts of minerals and chemicals are constantly required. Mining planets across the Imperium supply these demands and the task of finding new sources as those in current use are exhausted is never ending. Therefore, once the party of Departmento Munitorum officials had returned from Stygies VIII and submitted their report to their overseers, they included within it instructions for the Administratum's auditors to immediately set about searching their records for sources of as yet untapped reserves that had been previously located and catalogued, as well as planetary audits that suggested that extra productivity might be squeezed from existing sources.

It was during this process of evaluation and cross-referencing that the planet of Taros came once again to the Administratum's attention. A small mining world deep in the Ultima Segmentum, previous audits had shown it as unremarkable save for two things: firstly the estimated size of the planet's untapped mineral wealth was immense and secondly, its close proximity to the ever-expanding borders of the xenos Tau Empire.

Armed with the ancient audit, compiled in the 38th Millennium by officials collecting data for just such circumstances, a Departmento Munitorum assessment squad was dispatched to the region. Led by Auditor-prime Nymus Dree, its orders were to inform the Planetary Governor of Taros of his new increased production targets and to ensure that plans were immediately put into place to ensure these targets could best be met. Dree was authorised to use the Departmento Munitorum's ultimate sanction to make sure that they were as, under the conditions of the Pax Imperialis, if the Planetary Governor could not, or would not, meet the increased targets, then he would be replaced by one who could.

An Unexpected Arrival on Taros

A functionary temporarily reporting directly to the upper ranks of the Departmento Munitorum in the region, Auditor-prime Nymus Dree was accompanied on his mission by a High Magos Metallurgicus, an expert in the study of metals. Given the age of the report and the urgency of the matter, Dree wanted immediate confirmation that its figures and calculations were still accurate and would satisfy the needs of Stygies VIII. Knowing that records kept by those placed in charge of such responsibilities were not always well maintained or reflected the whole truth, he held back from announcing his arrival to those in charge of the mining world. The first therefore that Taros' Planetary Governor and mining cartel representatives knew of the delegation was when the transport containing Dree and his team, and its two accompanying Imperial Navy frigates, unexpectedly arrived in-system.

After a long and arduous warp journey, the three ships safely entered orbit around Taros. Boarding a flight of Aquila shuttles, Dree's delegation transferred down to the space port at Taros City (also known as Tarokeen), the planet's only city, where the Planetary Governor, Lord Aulis, and his advisors and officials had already hastily gathered to await the delegation. With due ceremony satisfied, the entire entourage then transferred to the Planetary Governor's Palace, where an official meeting had been quickly scheduled for Dree to inform him of the Adeptus Administratum's revised plans for the mining world. From there Dree would begin a tour of the mining works to interview each of the mining cartels' representatives in person whilst the High Magos Metallurgicus and his team began to assess the quality and purity of the ore currently being supplied by Taros.

Initial Conclusions

When the first meeting between the representatives of the mining world and Auditor-prime Dree had concluded, Planetary Governor Lord Aulis accepted that, with the Departmento Munitorum's guidance, current productivity levels could be increased and that the new targets required to supply additional resources to Stygies VIII were achievable. He promised to do all in his power to meet the targets and, in all respects, was a loyal and convivial host to the Imperium's officials, and therefore to begin with Aulis aroused no suspicion within the delegation.

It was not until Auditor-prime Dree began to visit the outlying mines that he started to grow concerned about mining operations on Taros. He first noticed that there were many abandoned mining sites scarring the deserts, considerably more than had been anticipated given the amount of work previously sanctioned by the planet's tithe quotas. As his suspicions grew Dree tried to investigate further, attempting to visit some of the sites, but each time was told that the lode or ore seam had been mined out and the operation had moved on, leaving little for him to inspect. To the mine owners' representatives this was clearly evidence of industrious hard work, but to the Auditor-prime it was proof that the planet's estimated reserves were being eaten into or were not as large as had been originally claimed in the ancient audit.

As Dree's tour continued, the extent of activity on Taros became clearer. Where the mines were still active, he observed its work gangs blasting ore out in huge strip mining operations on a far larger scale than expected. When the ore had been separated, it was shipped to the space port at Tarokeen and only then did Dree get a true idea of how much of Taros' resources were being plundered. As his entourage approached the facility, vast piles of ore could be seen throughout the space port, filling its yards to overflowing before yet more empty transports arrived to carry it away to be processed elsewhere.

Determined to get an accurate picture of just how much ore had left the planet compared to the mining cartels' actual quotas and what the original audit had estimated was on Taros, each mine was ordered to hand over productivity statements going back two decades. From those who provided their accounts, the Auditor-prime noting for future investigation those that did not, he began to get an overall picture of just how many unsanctioned ore shipments had left Taros and, at the current rates of extraction, the far-reaching effects this could have, in particular, for the resources Stygies VIII was expecting. For now, however, Auditor-prime Dree kept what he had learned to himself.

It took Dree several weeks to gather all the evidence he needed and by the end of his investigation it was obvious that Taros' mines had been over-producing on a massive scale. For years the cartels had been stripping out ore at a greater rate than was required or sanctioned. All this ore had then been shipped to Tarokeen, and although the quotas for refineries and Stygies VIII itself had been dutifully met, the rest of it had vanished. Because there had never been any let-up in the tithed supply it had never been noticed, however, try as he might to find out where it had all gone, for Dree the trail had now gone cold and no document he had seen so far on the planet gave him an idea of where it had gone next. Before leaving Taros, Dree decided to confront the Planetary Governor about the disparity and seek an explanation, although chances were that the senior Imperial representative had been kept just as much in the dark as to what the cartels had been up to.

Aulis did indeed claim ignorance. As far as he was concerned quotas had been met and shipments had been made on time. He didn't concern himself with the day-to-day running of the mines – that was the job of the cartel families. Aulis' rather abrupt response was for the Auditor-prime to "*Ask them himself!*". So Dree did just that, ordering the owners of the largest mines to each attend an investigative hearing to explain their actions. Unsurprisingly, they provided no explanation. They had just dug and blasted, and then dug some more; all the ore they delivered being readily taken off their hands. Ignorance was their defence. Getting nowhere, and suspecting a conspiracy of silence, Dree decided more drastic action was required.

Conspiracy on Taros

Unknown to Dree, his investigations had struck a nerve with the conspirators on Taros. The arrival of his delegation had, to the casual observer, been gracefully received, but his presence had caused widespread concern throughout Taros' ruling elite. The roots of their betrayal had been seeded decades before the wider Imperium had once again turned its attention to the abundant resources on their world as, like the Imperium, the nearby Tau Empire too had an interest in what Taros had to offer.

The Departmento Munitorum delegation, led by Auditor-prime Nymus Dree, arrives at Tarokeen in a flight of Aquila shuttles. Dree's investigations on Taros would uncover evidence of treachery on a vast scale by the mining world's ruling elite.

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HISTORY OF THE TAU EMPIRE

It is believed that the Imperium have known of the existence of the xenos race known as the Tau since the 35th Millennium when an Explorator vessel first discovered its home world, T'au. Located far from Terra on the Eastern Fringe of the galaxy, T'au was originally categorised as a dry world, but with areas of lush vegetation and a large population of native terrestrial xenomorphs. The most advanced of these had only recently developed primitive weapons and mastered fire, so were considered no threat to the Imperium. Therefore, given its abundant resources, and in line with standard procedure, the world was scheduled for cleansing and then re-colonisation.

T'au's fledging inhabitants were saved when the Imperial Navy fleet dispatched to clear the planet was destroyed in a freak and violent warp storm, which also cut off the world from further human contact. Unable to proceed with its plan the Imperium moved on, eventually forgetting about the new race it had discovered. Saved from eradication by luck or fate, the Tau developed rapidly. Over the course of just a few thousand years their race evolved, developing a sophisticated culture and caste system based on dynamic expansion and a holistic philosophy of '*all working together towards one end*'. Driven by their ideal of the '*Greater Good*', the Tau made huge and rapid strides in science and technology until, by the 41st Millennium, they had become a space-faring race with a small but burgeoning empire. As the Tau expanded further into the cosmos it was inevitable that they would eventually come into contact with the Imperium of Man once more, and in their quiet backwater on the Eastern Fringe the Tau finally encountered the Imperium again, one of the more notable occasions being when one of their spacecraft, probably innocently, entered a system containing an Imperial Navy resupply base.

Disregarding or misunderstanding all communications regarding its peaceful intentions, the Tau vessel was attacked by the system's defence ships and was unable to make an escape before being destroyed by them. News of the incident caused alarm within that formidable organisation's hierarchy. Who was this xenos race which had suddenly appeared in the region with such advanced technology? Adeptus Mechanicus geneators investigating DNA taken from the destroyed ship discovered that the genetic material was the same as that originally found on T'au six millennia before. It seemed the primitive alien race that had so narrowly escaped extinction had rapidly evolved.

Rogue traders and merchant captains were dispatched to the Eastern Fringe to investigate further, only to discover that the Tau had already expanded out from their home world and started colonising other worlds throughout the small but densely packed cluster of star systems around it. Several other minor alien races had already been inducted into this small but growing empire, but worse still, several of the Imperium's worlds had also started trading with the xenos race, whose negotiators had learned human languages and customs, and busied themselves making diplomatic contact with surrounding worlds. It was a threat that could not be ignored and the Imperium, fearful of xenos contamination and what this new race might pose to the Emperor's hold on the region, prepared an attack to destroy the Tau.

In 742.M41 the Damocles Gulf Crusade was launched. It failed. Several Tau colony worlds were successfully captured, but a combination of the Tau's advanced military technology, their ferocious xenos allies and an unshakeable belief in the 'Greater Good' eventually halted the Imperium's crusade after a period of bloody fighting. The Tau Empire had survived its first great threat, but at the cost of thousands of lives, a large part of its fleet, and the effective cessation of the Second Sphere Expansion.

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TAU SOCIETY

Incredibly homogenous and characterised by an ethos of 'togetherness', one of the race's greatest strengths is that its members will always work together for the good of all Tau. To foster this their society is divided into five castes, each with its own broad areas of specialisation and responsibility. The Water caste are generally diplomats, politicians and administrators, the Earth caste are artisans, constructors and labourers, and the Air caste are pilots, messengers and spaceship crew. The Fire caste are warriors and protectors, and selective breeding within this caste has developed Tau which are slightly larger and stronger than others. The final, and smallest, caste are the Ethereals. These are a group of counsellors and advisors who seem to have a strong, almost religious, hold over all other Tau. They are regarded with awe and veneration by the members of other castes and act as guides to the castes' leaders.

Unlike many of the races encountered by Mankind, the Tau are not naturally hostile or aggressive. Their dynamic, young and energetic society means that their rapid expansion has brought them into contact with other alien races and it is known, for example, that Tau military forces have fought and defeated several large Ork Waaaghs!. They have also recently encountered the Tyranid hive fleets, which are beginning to threaten the borders of their empire.

The Imperium sees the Tau Empire as a threat (all be it not its greatest threat), and its commanders will not stand by and let a foul xenos race take over the Emperor's worlds or see its citizens forced to submit to its domination. The Imperium has therefore vowed to combat all Tau expansion, and no doubt, in time, the twelve High Lords of Terra would like to see this minor annoyance quashed altogether. A genocidal crusade to exterminate the Tau would therefore be welcomed in some Imperial circles. Indeed, the Ecclesiarch of the Adeptus Ministorum has already drafted several sermons on this very subject. Currently such a crusade is just not possible. Also the Tau Empire, although small by the Imperium's standards, still consists of some hundred worlds and the forces required to conquer them all would be immense. The Tau military have already proven themselves a match for the Imperial Guard, and there are too many other more pressing matters, not least the threat of the Tyranid hive fleets, which are a huge drain on the Imperium's manpower. Lately, there is also the threat of Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade.

In response the Tau are quite willing to match fire with fire. When diplomatic means fail, they are becoming well-versed and more confident in the use of military power to obtain their own ends, and raiding, brush-fire wars, invasions and counter-invasions are becoming increasingly common along the borders of Tau Empire space.

TAU PHYSIOLOGY

The Tau are a roughly humanoid, bipedal race and Fire Warriors in particular appear to possess many qualities broadly similar to human norms, such as endurance levels and pain tolerances. They are generally smaller in stature than humans and possess less body weight and muscle mass. Like most humanoids they have two eyes and a mouth, but a number of other features are significantly different.

To begin with, a Tau's skin has a greyish-green or blue hue, they have no obvious olfactory or auditory organs, and each hand has three digits and a single opposable thumb. The bone structure of their lower legs, ankles and feet also differ. Tau have far shorter tibia and fibia bones than a human but their feet have elongated talus and cuneiform bones and two large, central, weight-bearing toes, meaning at some point they evolved to stand and move without the use of their heels.

The mining world had a breathable atmosphere and, although it was mainly covered by a harsh desert, it had some water and was capable of sustaining life, particularly for the Tau who are better adapted to hot climates than cold. Most of all it had abundant mineral wealth and was therefore noted as a good prospect for future expansion and marked for swift colonisation, but there was one major drawback. Since their first contact with the Imperium the Tau had learned that the Empire of Mankind would not easily give up worlds claimed in their Emperor's name. Any military attack would likely bring forth a swift response, meaning that claiming Taros for themselves would involve a major war, and the Ethereals on T'au did not believe the gains outweighed the risks. For now there were far easier targets so initial plans for an invasion were shelved, but Taros was not forgotten.

Instead of calling upon the Fire caste to capture Taros, the Tau Empire council first turned to the Water caste who in the past had been able to resolve similar situations through diplomacy without a single shot being fired. The Imperium's worlds usually refused all contact with any xenos race and the Water caste had learned through bitter experience that many planetary governors would avoid entering into negotiations with them for fear of repercussions from elsewhere in the Imperium. However deals and small trades could be arranged if everything was kept discreet. Merchant guildmasters and the leaders of trading cartels were on the whole greedy men, and a chance to trade with a race that offered them riches they could not find easily anywhere else on the Eastern Fringe was something few had so far turned down.

A delegation of the most experienced Water caste diplomats was sent to Taros therefore to seek a meeting with its rulers, including amongst them human representatives from other worlds already sympathetic to the Tau cause. Armed with assurances that the Tau Empire had no ambitions to expand further in their region of space and that Taros was completely safe from attack, the diplomats began to weave their story that they were only there to seek small trading contracts. All they sought were some very small amounts of ore in exchange for water purification and recycling technology, as well as some minor luxury goods; items that could make the harsh way of life on Taros that much easier for its social elite.

At first the Planetary Governor baulked at the Water caste's approaches. He knew full well that trading with xenos races was strictly off limits, but the Water caste was prepared for this and over the following months gradually wore down his resolve; a small shipment demonstrating just how beneficial the trade would be for certain interested parties sealing the deal. When Governor Aulis talked to the mine owners and merchants, it took significantly less time for them to come to a decision, each immediately seeing the chance to line their pockets in ways not available to them under the current system. Also, the Imperium's quotas had not been changed in generations, the mining operations were working efficiently and the Administratum was content. Who would know or care if some extra manganese or vanadium ore was blasted out and sold on elsewhere. All knew that other human worlds had grown rich from such operations, the men and women who accompanied the Water caste representatives were proof of that; plus, in the long run, good relations might help keep Tau expansionism at bay. What did they have to lose?

Negotiations were completed some twenty years prior to Dree's arrival. The agreement started very small, no more than a single shipment of manganese and vanadium ore a year but gradually, as the Planetary Governor and the mining cartels grew used to the benefits they received from the arrangement, the amounts supplied increased. Over the next ten years the Tau also slowly gained an increasing say in how mining operations on Taros were run, with several Earth caste delegations visiting during that time to offer assistance and advice, paving their way with gifts of new technology and luxury goods such as precious stones from Tash'var and exotic fruits from Au'taal. Soon those in control of Taros began to grow wealthy on the illicit trade and for almost two decades the Administratum's bureaucrats remained ignorant of what was happening on one of the Emperor's worlds.

The unexpected arrival of the Departmento Munitorum delegation therefore caused much concern amongst the inner circle of Taros' ruling elite. Initially Governor Aulis urged them to act with caution, arguing that they could bluff it out by claiming ignorance and working together to cover up their illicit activities. He believed the delegation would merely perform its duty; the increased tithes could still be met and nothing need ever be found out. Act too hastily and the conspiracy would be uncovered. However, the Planetary Governor did not reckon on the thoroughness of Auditor-prime Dree.

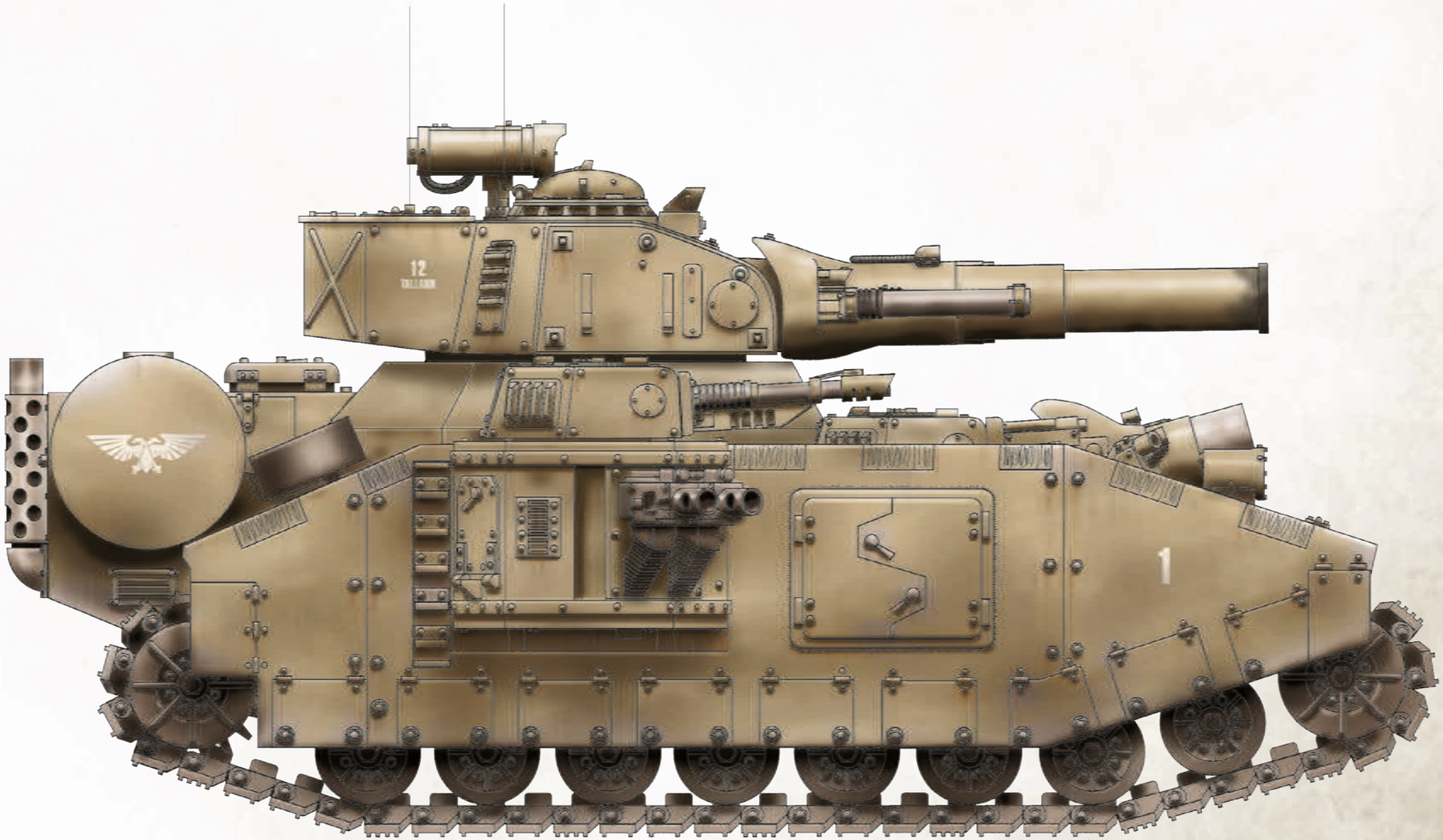
Under his close scrutiny cracks in the cover-up quickly began to appear. As Dree dug even further concern grew until, for the conspirators, the situation was quickly becoming desperate; some mine owners even advocating assassinating the entire delegation and blaming the Tau for their deaths. The Planetary Governor however forbade it. If any harm were to come to the delegation it would only be worse for them all in the long term. His intentions were to find some way of discrediting Auditor-prime Dree's report, continuing to bluff it out until the Emperor's men had left, but unknown to him events far away, and beyond his control, in the Denab system would reveal all…

The Denab Incident

Unrelated to any events around the Eye of Terror or Taros, the Imperial Navy's Patrol Group Ravanor was conducting a routine anti-pirate sweep through the Denab system, an area of wilderness space on the edge of the Damocles Gulf. The five-ship patrol, operating under standing orders to attack and seize suspected pirate vessels or conduct harrying raids against Tau Empire targets of opportunity, was under the command of Captain Darillian of the Dauntless light cruiser *Lord Ravanor*. The patrol had already been out for several months with little success and Captain Darillian was preparing to return to base and report that pirate activity in the area was minimal when the Sword class frigate *VCS-6* of Scadryn squadron, positioned well ahead of the main line, reported sensor contact with three unidentified transport vessels. Suspecting these might be the pirate ships he was hunting, Captain Darillian began a cautious pursuit.

Patrol Group Ravanor stalked the three vessels through the Denab asteroid belt, maintaining a distance that would not reveal their presence and making maximum use of the asteroid belt's cover. For three days they maintained the pursuit, hoping the three vessels would lead them to a pirate base or a rendezvous point, and a far greater prize. Eventually it seemed that Captain Darillian's patience had paid off when they spied the convoy making for a small deep space facility on the edge of the Denab belt. As the ships approached it was revealed to be no pirate base but instead surveyor readings from his leading ship showed the presence of a Tau waystation. Captain Darillian had experience operating around the Damocles Gulf and had encountered such facilities before, scattered in remote locations, but why would three transport freighters be rendezvousing with such a place? Positioning the frigate *VCS-6* to maintain the surveillance, the captain withdrew to report back what he had found to his commanders.

Whilst the *Lord Ravanor* was away, *VCS-6* watched the three Imperial transports dock at the waystation and a single Tau vessel, of the 'Emissary'



Baneblade super-heavy tanks, such as the Tallarn vehicle pictured above, can only be produced on Forge Worlds like Stygies VIII. Should these Forge Worlds run short of the mineral resources supplied by mining worlds such as Taros, then such vehicles would quickly become impossible to construct.

class, leave it shortly afterwards. Hidden within the asteroid belt *VCS-6* waited. Meanwhile Captain Darillian's astropathic-sent report reached Imperial Navy High Command who were equally in the dark regarding the events. Inquiries into the three transport ships had revealed absolutely nothing. Whoever they belonged to, it was obvious they were consorting with a xenos race, and that was an unforgivable crime against the Emperor. New orders were swiftly issued to Patrol Group Ravanor – destroy the Tau Empire waystation and capture the transports; anyone left alive, traitor or Tau, was to be delivered to the sector's fleet headquarters for further investigation.

The *Lord Ravanor* returned to rendezvous with *VCS-6* and prepared to attack. The patrol group would slowly approach the station through the asteroid belt and then attack at all ahead full. The *Lord Ravanor* would engage the waystation whilst the escorts pursued any transports that tried to flee. After crippling the waystation, the *Lord Ravanor* would then grapple alongside a transport and board her to take her as a prize and capture the crew.

The briefing complete, the great plasma reactors of the five Imperial Navy ships roared into life, accelerating them out of the asteroid belt in line astern and directly towards the waystation. With surprise on their side the patrol group raced past the xenos abomination, unleashing a full broadside at short range. Lance batteries and macro cannon roared into the void,

The Tau waystation, hidden on the edge of the Denab system asteroid belt. It was destroyed by Imperial Navy forces after its location was uncovered by Patrol Group Ravanor.

impacting upon the Tau Empire facility with shuddering explosions. Those onboard it attempted to return fire as best they could, but to little effect. One transport was immediately hit and crippled as it lay at berth; the others, as predicted, attempted to disengage and flee. Scadryn squadron however was immediately in pursuit.

It appeared that his surprise attack had worked, but before Captain Darillian could issue the command to begin boarding actions, logisticians onboard his ship reported more Tau vessels approaching fast as a second convoy of transports, accompanied by an escort of Castellan class light warships, appeared on their surveyors. Suddenly, from a one-sided ambush, Patrol Group Ravanor now had a real fight on its hands. Reacting to the new situation the captain recalled his escorts from their pursuit and set a new course to intercept the approaching Tau Empire vessels.

The gruff old captain ordered a new attack, calculating that he had enough firepower to see the Tau convoy off or destroy it entirely. With her four escorts closing in behind her, the *Lord Ravanor* ploughed in amongst the Tau convoy, broadsides blazing from both starboard and port batteries. In return the Tau vessels peppered her back, shields flaring and decks quaking under the impacts of hits from both railguns and ion cannon. It was a bitter and hard fought battle performed at close range, with both sides inflicting heavy damage during the engagement. The Sword class frigates *VCS-6* and *VCS-7* were both crippled, and by the end of the battle the *Lord Ravanor* was limping with engine damage and fires on several decks. But the Tau convoy was scattered, leaving one drifting transport as a wreck and both Castellans, the targets of the *Lord Ravanor's* heaviest guns, as burning hulks. To the cheers of her gun crews, Patrol Group Ravanor had had the best of it and decisively won the skirmish, with only two of the rogue transports escaping.

Captain Darillian gathered his battered but victorious officers and issued orders for the post-battle operations. Boarding parties were to be readied to enter the waystation and crippled transport, with all prisoners brought directly to him. A second party was to board the Tau transport and seize her cargo whilst the ships *VCS-8* and *VCS-9* were to rescue surviving crew from the patrol group's two crippled escorts. After this was complete they would leave the Denab system and head home, battle-scarred but victorious.

Aboard the Tau transport the boarding party found only empty holds. The waystation had been badly damaged and a final bombardment before departing would destroy it beyond salvage. Crewmen from the crippled rogue transport were captured after a brief skirmish with survivors, but upon interrogation it seemed they had no knowledge of the ship's cargo. Their vessel's log recorded that their last port of call had been Taros and the crewmen claimed not to know why they had diverted to the waystation or why their cargo was being unloaded by the Tau. They were just following orders, but orders from whom? That was something others with the skill to extract such information would find out, the prisoners being turned over to Inquisitorial interrogators once the *Lord Ravanor* had returned to port.

Upon his return Captain Darillian was awarded the Order of the Knights of Damocles and promoted to captain of the cruiser *Hammer of Thrace* for his part in winning the engagement. He filed a full report about the '*Denab Incident*', but the truth behind its events remained a mystery to all who had been there and was to do so until the report landed on the desk of Auditor-prime Dree.

For Dree, Patrol Group Ravanor's discovery was evidence of the treachery of Taros' cartels and Planetary Governor he had been hunting for. The three transports had been carrying a cargo of manganese, vanadium and rhenium

The Lord Ravanor and her escort group whilst on a routine anti-pirate patrol. Unknown to those involved, the Denab Incident would reveal the truth about events on Taros, and provoke the Imperium's retaliation.

ore which investigations had shown had been loaded at Taros and was originally destined for refineries which in turn supplied Stygies VIII, but part of that cargo it appears was destined to be transferred to Tau vessels and transported back into the Tau Empire for their own use. This would not have been the first time valuable resources had been given, or more likely sold, to that perfidious race. The patrol group's luck in stumbling across the convoy and waystation had given the Departmento Munitorum official the damning evidence he needed. There was a conspiracy on Taros, a secret deal with the Tau Empire to syphon off mineral resources which belonged to the Imperium. Dree was sure that the Planetary Governor must be at the heart of the conspiracy. Lord Aulis might be all industrious loyalty on the outside, but within there was beating the black heart of a traitor to the Imperium.

Swift Retribution

Auditor-prime Dree presented his report to his superiors for consideration. Matters were now out of his hands. He had no power to decide what to do about Taros, only an Inquisitor would have such sweeping powers to intervene. Knowing it could take months, perhaps even years, for his report to be seen by anybody with real authority, Dree departed Taros and returned to his day-to-day functions. Eventually, his report came to the attention of the Master of the Departmento Munitorum's Office. Such a report, claiming serious breaches of the Pax Imperialis and of Imperial representatives conspiring with a xenos race, sent shockwaves through that great institution, and Dree was summoned to a hearing to explain his findings.

Upon learning of the seriousness of the situation on Taros, the hearing concluded that action needed to be taken immediately, starting with the removal of the current Planetary Governor, who would be replaced with a more trustworthy candidate. To effect this the Administratum considered its options. The first and most obvious resolution was to approach the Officio Assassinorum who could dispatch one of the Imperium's most lethal weapons to Taros to deal swiftly with the traitor, but the simple death of the Planetary Governor would not solve the problem. Taros was close to the Tau Empire, and was obviously viewed by them as a future prospect for Tau expansionist ambitions. The Imperium needed to send their foe a strong message – their interference on Taros would not be tolerated. The matter to be resolved therefore was not just the removal of the Planetary Governor, it was also how to deal with the Tau, and simply assassinating Planetary Governor Lord Aulis would not likely be enough to deter their ambitions.

The Officio Assassinorum was ruled out in favour of a bolder and much larger plan – a coup d'etat. A strike force would target both the Planetary Governor and his supporters, and using maximum force they would demonstrate to the Tau Empire that the Emperor's will to hold on to Taros could be matched by His ability to do so. Then, once the operation was complete, the strike force would be replaced by other troops, forming a temporary garrison to deter any Tau counter-attacks. There was one force capable of such a mission at short notice, the Adeptus Astartes.

The Space Marines would be the Emperor's instrument of divine justice on Taros. During the Damocles Gulf Crusade, the Tau had learned to fear Mankind's finest warriors and a strike force would send an unmistakable message – the Imperium would do everything it could to hold on to Taros. A Space Marine Chapter was quickly identified for the coup d'etat mission and a high level delegation with the relevant intelligence information was immediately dispatched to the Chapter monastery of the Avenging Sons, along with a request, signed by the Master of the Administratum's office, beseeching the Chapter Master for his assistance.

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TAROS PLANETARY SURVEY

Taros System: Four planets (I-IV)
One inhabitable world (Taros II, predominantly referred to as 'Taros')

Size/equatorial distance: 25,750 kilometres
Gravity: .96G
Satellites: Two moons
Population: 12,000,000 approx (human and abhuman)
Rotation Speed: 1,931 kph
Climate Classification: Extreme – hyper arid
Post Terraform Composition: Nitrogen 76%, oxygen 20%, argon 2%, ozone 1%, carbon dioxide 0.2%
Planetary Governor: Lord Uphir Aulis – 19th Ruler of the House Aulis

Climate: Mean average temperate in the coastal sea region is 35°C (95°F), rising to over 50°C (122°F) in the deep deserts. Recorded precipitation minimal – less than 1 mm per annum.

Climatic Regions: Taros is divided into four principal climatic regions: mountains, arid deserts, semi-arid deserts and oceans. Shifting sands and bare rock cover almost 95% of the surface. Low mountainous highlands cover 40% of that area, with no major throughroutes or settlements. The planet is mostly unexplored.

The semi-arid regions, which are concentrated around the coasts, are mostly barren rocky badlands. At ground level strong, sand-filled winds are common, with the seas helping to mediate Taros' extreme temperatures. Surrounding the small seas are the inhabited areas of semi-arid desert [see *the Aestus*]. These regions are home to the planet's hydro-farmers.

There are the two seas on Taros: the Ak-sai and Em-sai. These small landbound seas are Taros' only source of surface water, and are believed to have been artificially created as part of the planet's terraforming during the Dark Age of Technology. The seas are highly alkaline, but provide two thirds of the population's water supply via hydro-processing.

Climatic Phenomenon: High altitude air streams and 'Sand Devils'. Hot air rising from the deep deserts collides with the cooler air from over the polar highland mountainous regions, causing a high-speed river of air in the upper atmosphere which can reach up to 644 kph. If storm clouds meet one of these air streams, they can form into a hurricane which can grow to cover a vast area, lasting for days and sucking up large amounts of sand, eventually becoming a 'Sand Devil' [native designation]. Most blow themselves out in the deep deserts, but occasionally, one will destroy water farms or mining facilities in its path.

Economy: Almost 12,000,000 souls, mostly in or around Taros City (Tarokeen) and the semi-arid regions surrounding the small seas. Taros City is situated in the Aestus region, where several small inland seas form Taros' only surface water.

Tarokeen is the single largest urban area and is also the location of the planet's only spaceport facility.

The general population comprises mostly miners, working long tours of duty at strip mines and quarries located in the desert. Other major industries include water processing and hydro-farming.

Ogryn Labour Force: Several thousand Ogryns were shipped en-masse to Taros in M38 to work in those mines that were sited in the most inhospitable desert regions. Ogryns are still used by many mines as part of the workforce to this day.

Society: Mostly mineworkers and labourers operating in 'work gangs'. A high level of technology is maintained, with many tasks being automated. Ministorum Galaxia missionaries report little in the way of genetic mutation.

Water Supply: Hydro farming is an important industry, as is hydro-processing from the alkaline seas, with all water trade centrally controlled by the Planetary Governor through his official 'water-agents'.

Principal Exports: Mineral ores for ferro-alloys: lead, vanadium, rhenium and manganese.

Vanadium: A toxic silvery-white metallic element, occurring in vanadinite, which is a red/yellow/brownish mineral formed by the weathering of lead ores in desert climates. Used in steel alloys to strengthen and improve durability of materials and as a catalyst in other alloys.

Rhenium: A dense, silvery-white metallic element with a high melting point. Occurring in gadolinite and molybdenite. Used in alloys with tungsten in high temperature-bearing thermocouples.

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Principal Imports: Food and water.

Local Food Supply: Many buildings have their own hydroponic facilities, but the largest are situated around Tarokeen and in the coastal regions, providing 80% of the food supply, with the other 20% being imported from surrounding Imperial worlds. Principal crops are variants of millet and sorghum plants, and ground nuts. Other sources of vitamins and protein come from algae and marine micro-organisms, harvested from the seas and chemically processed to make an edible gruel called 'Kreml' by the natives. This is the staple diet of the miners and other workers.

Urbanisation: Taros City (Tarokeen) has a population of approximately 4,000,000. It acts as an ore transportation point, the centre of the planet's administration, a distribution centre for water and food supplies, and contains other smaller industries. The surrounding hinterland (see *The Aestus*) has the highest density of hydro-farms and water processing plants and mines – there are very few other large settlements. Those that do exist are towns built up around the largest strip mining and quarrying operations.

The Aestus: The hinterland of Tarokeen and the populated area around the seas is called 'the Aestus', and is home to approximately 6,000,000 of Taros' population. Living on scattered hydro-farms and temporary mining settlements around the mining facilities such as Tungusta Station, Fornax, Tyndaris, Gaidamak, Sarych Station, Deucalion and Erebus. This area has the most temperate climate on the planet due to the proximity of the seas and the prevailing wind conditions, hence most of the population reside here.

Other Geological Features
Iracunda Isthmus: The strip of land between the Ak-sai and Em-sai, on which Tarokeen is situated. It is part of the hinterland of Tarokeen and the most densely populated area outside that city.

Great Sand Sea: A vast desert empty except for rolling sand dunes. Huge mineral deposits may still remain undiscovered here.

The Furnace: An area of desert surrounded on all sides by mountains. It is accessible only by air. The highest temperatures on Taros occur here.

The Phyyra Heights: An area of rocky badlands and low hills with a reputation for banditry. The Heights contain lucrative mineral deposits which have yet to be fully exploited.

Known History of Taros
Mostly likely the planet was discovered in the early years of the Dark Age of Technology. No records have been located which specifically refer to the system, but it is known that many systems on the Eastern Fringe were first explored by human colonists at this time.

Early explorers must have noted that although lifeless at that time, the planet's ecosystem was not far from being life sustaining. Temperatures were high (in the great deserts very high), but not to the point of making the world uninhabitable. There was some atmospheric moisture and the planet was rich in mineral wealth.

The draw of the ore deposits made the planet a viable prospect for terraforming. Aided by long forgotten advanced science and technology, Mankind set about terraforming the lifeless desert world into something habitable, and over 5,000 years water was introduced to the planet's surface in the form of seas.

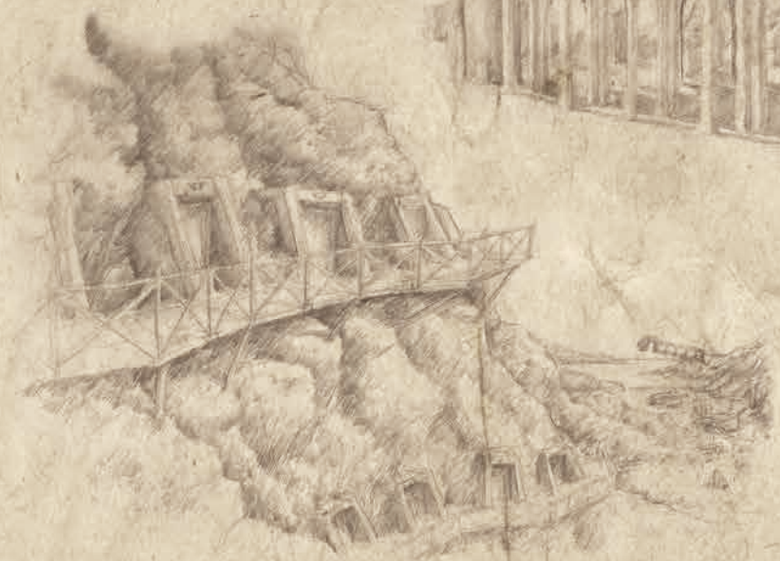
The first confirmed mention of Taros in Imperial archives is in M30, after the Age of Strife. The planet was rediscovered by the armies of the new Imperium as they spread out from Terra. The descendents of the original colonists had barely survived on Taros, degenerating into savage Stone Age tribal groups. The population, probably never large, had dwindled to less than 1,000,000, and in another thousand years all human life on the planet was estimated to have become extinct.

Rediscovery of the planet's mineral wealth resulted in the Imperium re-colonising Taros. The original population were exterminated and new colonists moved in, establishing mining stations and a star port. Over the past ten thousand years under the Imperium's rule, Taros' population has steadily grown to its current level of approximately 12,000,000 souls.

Imperial Guard Recruitment: Taros has raised only eight Imperial Guard regiments. The Taronian 1st was annihilated during the 3rd Black Crusade. The Taronian 2nd and 3rd served as part of the St Saen Crusade and were eventually disbanded, with survivors being absorbed into another Imperial Guard regiment. The fate of the Taronian 4th and 5th is unknown. The Taronian 6th was heavily engaged against Ork forces during Waaagh! Badun and later disbanded, with the surviving manpower being turned over to the 15th Cadian regiment as replacements. The 7th regiment was lost as part of Rogue Trader Foulway Tor's third expedition into the Eastern Fringe. The 8th regiment is currently active as part of the garrison force on Hellion IV.

TAROS PLANETARY SURVEY
REFERENCE FILE: 736/AA/X/i – STRUCTURES/FACILITIES OF NOTE

Mine administratum building or headquarters, raised on columns to form a shaded meeting place underneath and partly dug into the hillside. Subterranean dwellings are common on Taros.

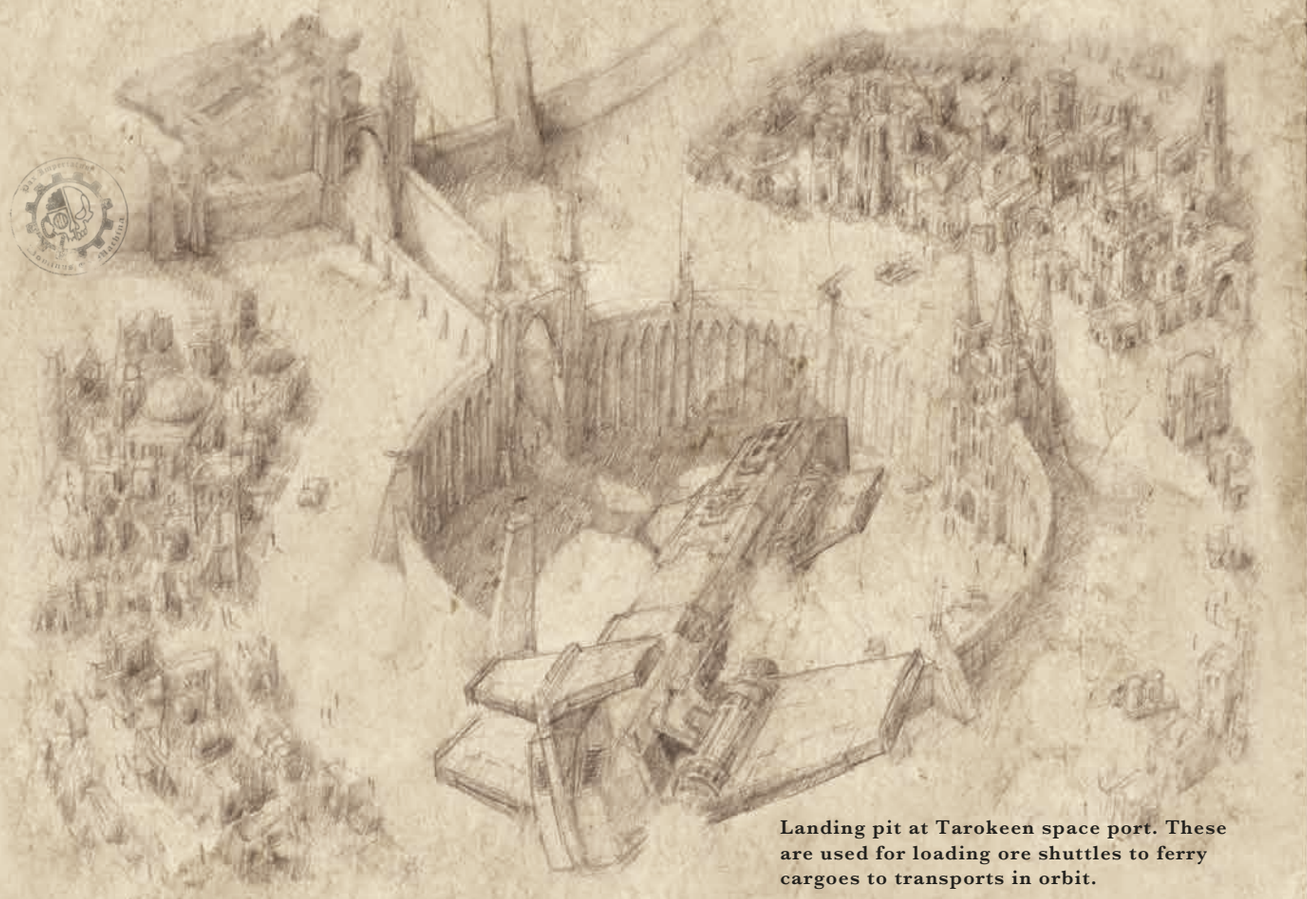


Miners settlement in the deserts. Small caves blasted into the hillside form the accommodation for work gangs.

Common street in Tarokeen. Entrances often lead underground.

TAROS PLANETARY SURVEY
REFERENCE FILE: 736/AA/X/i – STRUCTURES/FACILITIES OF NOTE

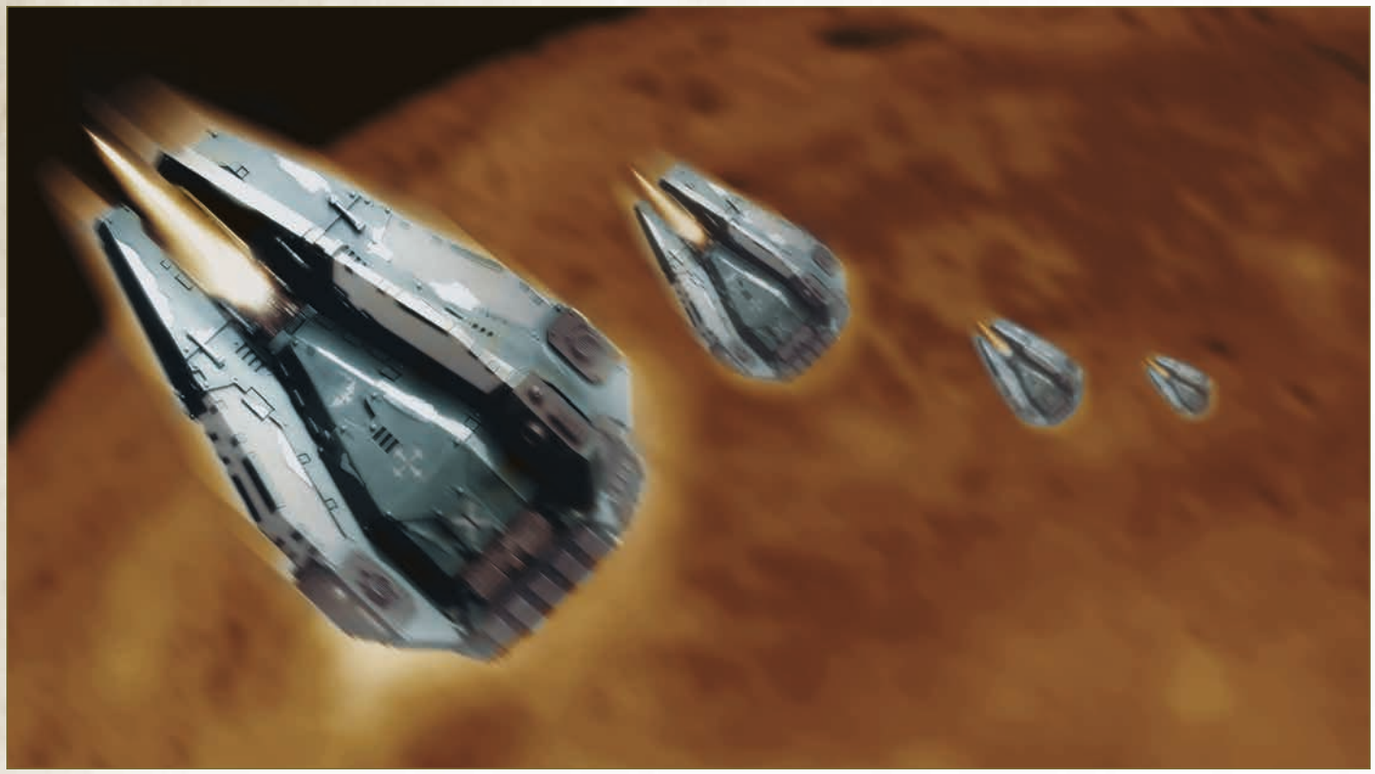
Planetary Governor's residence and inner palace grounds.



Landing pit at Tarokeen space port. These are used for loading ore shuttles to ferry cargoes to transports in orbit.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FIRST TAROS INTERVENTION



The Avenging Sons responded swiftly to the Administratum's request for punitive action to be taken against Taros. After receiving the Administratum delegation, the Chapter Master summoned his company commanders and briefed them on the mission.

" Now hear these words. News has come to us that the Planetary Governor of the Taros system has foresworn the sacred oaths of the Pax Imperialis. He has colluded with xenos scum and put the just and good rule of our Emperor in jeopardy. For these crimes it is judged that his punishment shall be death. The Avenging Sons have been chosen to be the instruments of that sentence. We are honoured to accept.

It shall fall to 2nd Company and Captain Armaros to do the Chapter's duty. Prepare your brethren Brother Captain, but know you are not alone in this mission. The Master of the Forge shall ready the machine spirits of the Armoury to assist you, and battle-brothers of the 1st Company and 10th Company shall also aid you. The Master of the Fleet shall ready the strike cruiser Proxima Justus and by sundown on the second day you shall be embarked. May the tides of the Warp see you safely to Taros, and may the Emperor watch over your souls in the coming battle.

You are to unleash His divine wrath upon this miscreant. Quash all resistance. Leave none that stands against us living. Send out a message from Taros for all to hear. The Emperor stands here and shall not be moved. Now, let us all say the second Prayer of Vengeance together before our brethren depart."

With that 2nd Company readied themselves for battle. Boltguns and power armour were anointed and blessed by the Company Chaplain, whilst Brothers Hakael and Caim were awoken from their slumbers and their Dreadnought systems checked and declared fully functioning by Techmarines. Over the course of twenty four hours the chapter-monastery prepared to depart for war as the 2nd Company, assisted by a squad of the Veteran 1st Company and Scouts of the 10th Company, mustered its full strength.

Captain Armaros and his men embarked onto the Avenging Sons Chapter strike cruiser *Proxima Justus* which, accompanied by a single escort vessel, made best speed out of the system before engaging its powerful warp engines. There would be time enough on the month-long journey for briefing and training, meanwhile the Taros Intervention Force was on its way to battle.

Planning

Whilst bound for the Taros system Captain Armaros began planning his attack. The mission's objective was straightforward – locate and eliminate Planetary Governor Aulis. The operation, however, was also to be a strong show of force: swift, ruthless and brutal in which all opposition was to be destroyed on sight. It was the kind of mission that Space Marine strike forces excelled at and, armed with all the intelligence the Administratum and Auditor-prime Dree could provide, the Captain had planned the assault in detail.

First, he would need to locate the Planetary Governor, whose position was not currently confirmed. The most obvious target to hit would be the Planetary Governor's Palace, Lord Aulis' main residence. Armaros had detailed layouts of the complex with which to plan the assault. If the Planetary Governor had already escaped from there or was not present, then the attack would move into a second phase – a search & destroy operation. This would involve moving the heavier equipment and vehicles onto the ground from orbit and making a sweep through the city and, incase the Planetary Governor had managed to escape from the city before the search began, other likely hiding places were also earmarked for immediate follow-up raids.

During the second phase of the operation Armaros would also need the aid of the *Proxima Justus* in low orbit, utilising its powerful surveillance and sensor equipment and, should resistance be experienced, the strike cruiser's weapons for any orbital bombardments. As a show of force the Imperium's willingness to flatten Tarokeen would send a strong message to the Tau, as well as help to subdue the local population. If Tarokeen's inhabitants felt that they were all suffering for Lord Aulis' crimes then they might turn against him and reveal his hiding place. It was a brutal tactic, but Captain Armaros was a Space Marine with a lifetime of indoctrination and hypno-suggestion that meant he cared not one bit. His duty to the Emperor was all that mattered. In his mind there were no innocents on Taros any more.

Rather than a single building, the Planetary Governor's Palace was a complex of various government buildings, but Aulis' private residence would be the first target. To ensure speed and surprise Armaros planned a drop pod assault, and all of 2nd Company's manpower, aided by the teleporting Terminator veterans of 1st Company, would play their part.

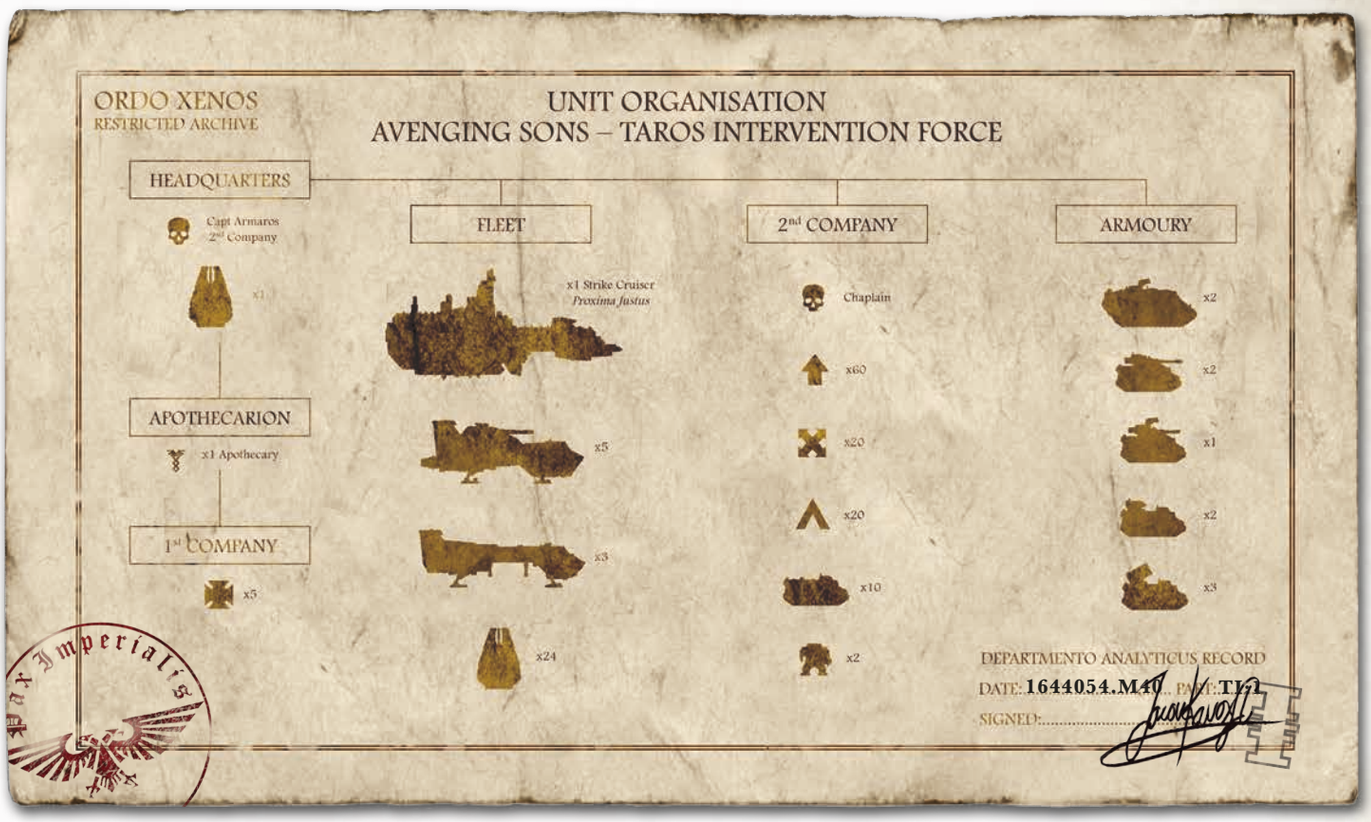
First, four of the six Tactical squads were assigned their roles. Under cover of darkness each would establish a blocking position then, landing close to their target, they would form a roadblock, holding key locations to prevent reinforcements from reaching the palace quickly. This part of the mission would be under the sub-command of Veteran Sergeant Einem of First squad. He would be responsible for holding these locations, moving men between them as he saw fit to reinforce an area if that position came under heavy enemy attack. Armaros, briefing Sergeant Einem, felt this was unlikely as the entire mission was planned as a swift strike. The Captain did not intend to be waiting around long enough for the enemy to react in force.

Isolated by the four blocking squads the Battle Company's two Assault squads, supported by the two remaining Tactical squads, would land within the complex just after a Deathstorm drop pod, which would be the first to impact, unleashing its lethal cargo of missiles indiscriminately upon landing. The assault units would then overcome any remaining resistance at the palatial residence before sweeping through it to locate Lord Aulis. Captain Armaros himself would lead this assault, along with Chaplain Baraqel.

The 1st Company's Terminators would be the ultimate instrument of justice. Once his force had located the Planetary Governor within the palace, Armaros would use his teleport homer to summon the waiting Terminators. Arriving via teleporter, the Terminators would then appear at the location and use their massive close range firepower to eliminate the target.

Immediately upon their success, the codeword 'Justice' would be given and the operation could move into the evacuation phase. Should it not be received after one hour or the override codeword 'Malevolent' be broadcast instead, this would mean the target was not present or had escaped, and all squads would then move on to phase two – search and destroy.

During the first phase there would be a small reserve force consisting of both Devastator squads, the two Dreadnoughts and the Scout squad. Their primary mission would be to cover the company's withdrawal and then form the backbone of a secure perimeter around the Planetary Governor's Palace whilst an evacuation was conducted by Thunderhawk Gunship.



This force would also be relied upon to counter any stronger than expected resistance and, at Captain Armaros' call, they would move to intercept and engage it. With their heavy weapons fire, they should be able to swiftly inflict serious damage, buying 2nd Company enough time for the other squads to complete the mission and either withdraw or move to phase two.

The plan had three factors in its favour, even though it would be attacking into the heart of enemy territory with only one hundred and twenty men, no heavy support or armoured vehicles and no major preparatory bombardment. Firstly, and most importantly, was the element of surprise. The enemy were likely expecting an attack, but did not know when, where or how. Secondly, Taros' main defenders comprised only Planetary Defence Forces and local militia; low quality troops with little discipline and were, by Space Marine standards, poorly equipped. Their morale would also be poor and Armaros expected that, after a swift initial strike, any organized resistance would soon crumble. Thirdly, they possessed an overwhelming concentration of forces – the Avenging Sons' strike force fighting as one, well orchestrated, unit. The enemy would need to call in reinforcements, likely giving Armaros time to complete the mission. Success would require courage, precision and speed, and the Space Marines had all in abundance.

Battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace

The Avenging Sons' strike cruiser *Proxima Justus* disengaged its warp drives and plunged back into real space just beyond the Taros system, where it immediately came to battle stations and made best course for Taros II. Like most Imperial planets Taros was not undefended against an attack from space and had a network of surface-to-orbit missiles and a single squadron of three system defence monitors. It was a force, however, incapable of matching a heavily armed and armoured Space Marine strike cruiser, and although the monitors were given orders to engage it, all three ship captains refused to and mutinied rather than face almost certain destruction. The Space Marines' reputation had travelled before them, ensuring that the *Proxima Justus'* approach to Taros was unimpeded.

Once in orbit the only threat to the vessel would be the planet's missile silos, but these would take some time to target, prepare and launch. Also, upon arrival in orbit the Avenging Sons drop pods would be ready to launch, with the strike cruiser and her escort then withdrawing to a safer distance whilst the ground assault was completed, only moving within range again when required.

The *Proxima Justus* swept into position in low orbit and Captain Armaros gave the order to launch the first drop pod wave before boarding his own drop pod to lead the second wave. The launch operation moved with clockwork precision. One after another the drop pods sped away from the strike cruiser, burning through the atmosphere and plunging downwards, retro-thrusters re-orientating each pod so that it remained true to its pre-programmed landing coordinates.

Seen from the inner courtyard in front of Planetary Governor Aulis' residence, the sky above was soon streaked with fiery comet trails as the drop pods burned through the atmosphere. The distant roar of engines and rushing wind quickly grew louder, then came the sudden hissing roar as retro jets went into full burn to slow the final descent of the rapidly approaching drop pods. Next came a ground-shaking impact which shattered nearby windows and created a rising plume of thick dust. As it cleared the distinctive shape of the Deathstorm drop pod, sitting upright in the courtyard, became visible, its locking bolts already disengaging, allowing the armoured sections they held in place to open.

Stunned onlookers watched as the dust cleared to reveal the Deathstorm drop pod's lethal contents, the courtyard quickly becoming a killing ground as its missiles shot out in all directions. A cacophony of explosions shook the palace, one after another, pulverising masonry and destroying all in their path. The bombardment was brief but intense, turning the courtyard into a hell of shrapnel and flames.

Commencing the main assault, the Deathstorm drop pod unleashes indiscriminate fire about the Planetary Governor's Palace, sowing panic and confusion amongst the unsuspecting defenders.

This was only the beginning as, amidst the sudden missile attack, the fiery contrails of the second wave of drop pods appeared in the sky. Having discharged its missiles, the Deathstorm drop pod fell silent, but then the roar of retro-engines was again heard. With a crashing, jarring impact the new wave of drop pods landed one after another, splitting open to disgorge squads of power armoured giants who moved with intense purpose through the dust, smoke and flames. The battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace had begun in earnest, stunning the defenders who had already borne the brunt of the first attack. Several of those caught in the open had been killed in the initial crossfire, their bodies tossed through the air like rag dolls to lie broken upon the courtyard's now rubble-strewn ground.

As initial resistance waned, Captain Armaros issued commands over his helmet's comm-link and moved towards the target building. Ahead of him the Assault squads were running, bolt pistols drawn, chainswords and frag grenades held ready to assault the building entrance. The distinctive bark and thunderclap explosion of boltgun shells could already be heard as the few defenders who had survived attempted to return fire, lasguns flashing at their foe with little effect.

Those guards that stood their ground to defend the entrance to the palace residence died screaming as the Avenging Sons Assault squads mercilessly tore through them, leaving their victims as little more than bloody offal. Melta charges destroyed the armoured doors and through the explosion leapt the Assault squads. After seeing the results of their initial attack, nobody inside had the metal to stand and fight, and all fled rather than face the Emperor's 'Angels of Death'.

Captain Armaros and his squads swept through the Planetary Governor's residence room-by-room, throwing frag grenades and clearing sections with bursts of bolt pistol fire. Their training doctrines were second nature. Anyone who did not escape fast enough was cut down until eventually the lead squads broke into an inner council chamber where a group of officials and guards had sought sanctuary. The guards opened fire, more in desperation and self-defence than in any hope of victory, denying the Space Marines access to the room. Assuming that Planetary Governor Aulis might be there because the rest of the building had already been cleared, from outside the chamber doorway Armaros activated his teleport homer. The signal was received onboard the *Proxima Justus* and in its teleport chamber five heavily armoured Terminators immediately moved to respond to the summons.

Each was equipped with a storm bolter and power fist, except for one who carried the assault cannon and Veteran Sergeant Foras who wielded the squad's chainfist, a power weapon capable of cutting through just about anything the defenders on Taros might use as cover. The titanic energies of the teleporter made the vessel's room throb with power, lightning flashing and arcing across it as the Tech-Priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus made final adjustments and issued fervent prayers to the spirit of the ancient machine. Their prayers did not fail.

In a blinding flash of white light the Terminator squad vanished, briefly being cast across the Warp before reappearing amidst crackling lightning in the council chamber on Taros far below. The firefight was over in a fraction of a second as the Avenging Sons' assault cannon whirred into life, raking the rest of the room with a devastating barrage of shells which tore up desks and walls. The Avenging Sons storm bolters soon joined in the slaughter, firing their own explosive rounds into the officials and guards. Once the smoke had cleared, none were left standing.

Captain Armaros ordered Apothecary Actium to cross-check DNA samples from the bodies with the Order Famulous records of House Aulis' gene codes. It was information the Administratum had provided at the beginning

A Thunderhawk's eye-view. Tau Empire forces mustering for the assault on the Planetary Governor's Palace.

of the mission and the test would confirm whether the mission had been a success. Meanwhile, the Assault squads and Terminators deployed into holding positions and began to engage the barracks troops who were unaware that they were arriving already too late to save those who had been stationed inside.

Apothecary Actium set about his task, using his narthecium to check the ragged, bloody corpses one by one. Frustratingly, but not unsurprisingly, all failed the gene matching test and Actium informed his captain that Planetary Governor Aulis was not amongst the dead. He must have escaped, or by some stroke of luck, never have been there at all. Captain Armaros cursed and issued the codeword 'Malevolent' over the comm-net. The mission's objective had eluded them. It was time for all under his command to prepare to advance to phase two.

Blocking Position Three

Meanwhile, beyond the Planetary Governor's Palace, the four Space Marine blocking positions had been formed up. Veteran Sergeant Einem had the squads well organised so that upon landing resistance had been swiftly dispatched, but their dominance of the target zone did not remain so for long. After a quiet couple of minutes the sound of jet engines could be heard approaching as overhead the dark swept-wing outline of a Tau Empire Manta swooped over the city, skimming low over its rooftops. The Avenging Sons battle-brothers at each position took aim up the street and did not have long to wait for the full fury of the Tau Empire to be unleashed mercilessly upon them.

Captain Armaros had expected some attempt by outside forces to break through to the palace, but not so soon, and he had not expected them to be well-equipped Tau forces as no xenos vessels had been sighted in the system. The first the Avenging Sons knew of any Tau Empire forces on Taros therefore was the arrival of the Manta over the night-shrouded city; soon Hammerhead gunships, followed by Crisis battlesuits and Devilfish-mounted Fire Warriors, would be closing in on Blocking Position Three. An entire Hunter Cadre was bearing down on the Space Marines, moving at speed to reinforce the defenders of the Planetary Governor's Palace.

At Blocking Position Three the street was suddenly criss-crossed by boltgun and pulse rifle fire; smokey contrails obscuring lines of sight as the squad's missile launcher sent its payload screaming up the street. The missiles impacted upon the front of the Hammerhead in a brilliant explosion which buckled and scorched its armour, but did little to halt the approaching grav-tank. It opened fire immediately in return, punching through buildings with blasts from its long railgun, sending masonry crashing to the street.

The opening skirmish was a one-sided affair, but the Avenging Sons stood their ground and hammered out round after round, refusing to fall back. Sergeant Einem ordered the squad at Blocking Position Two, the nearest Space Marines to Blocking Position Three, to move out and reinforce their battle-brothers. The Tactical squad pounded down the streets towards the sounds of fighting now echoing off the buildings of Tarokeen. At Position Three the situation was deteriorating rapidly. With heavy support and weight of numbers on their side, the Tau quickly advanced down the street. Fire Warriors dodged from doorway to doorway under the covering fire of battlesuits and the Hammerhead. It was fierce and intense, but the remaining Avenging Sons knew they must hold – the longer they fought, the more time they bought their captain to complete his mission. Already several battle-brothers had been killed by heavy weapons fire and others were badly wounded but remained fighting on regardless. Sergeant Andura of the Third Tactical squad was amongst the dead, his broken body lying half buried under fallen masonry after a railgun round impacted next to him.

The arrival of Tactical Squad Two did little to change the balance of the battle, the Tau Hunter cadre was just too strong. Their firepower swept the roads clear, forcing the Space Marines into the cover of the already damaged buildings whilst the Crisis battlesuits led the final assault, leaping down the street on jetpacks to rake the buildings with flamer and fusion cannon fire. Unable to win such a one-sided affair, the survivors of squads two and three were ordered to disengage and fall back to the Planetary Governor's Palace. The remaining Tactical squads at Positions One and Four were also recalled to the palace as Captain Armaros regrouped his full strength. Ten out of the twenty battle-brothers involved in the fighting at Position Three had been killed in the firefight; six more were wounded – heavy losses for Einem's force. Meanwhile, the Tau had broken through the cordon and, leaving a few units to secure the area, moved on towards their objective, the Planetary Governor's Palace.

Defence of the Planetary Governor's Palace – Day 1

Pre-warned of the approaching Tau Hunter Cadre by reports of the firefight at Blocking Position Three, Captain Armaros set about re-organising his forces. Governor Aulis had not been found and time was running out. The presence of strong Tau Empire forces already on Taros had been unexpected and unplanned for. Their swift counter-attack had seized the initiative from the Space Marines and put them on the defensive, meaning that the Avenging Sons were now reacting to whatever the Tau force did. Captain Armaros' immediate task was clear: repel the counter-attack with the forces he had at his disposal. Phase two of the mission and his hunt for the Planetary Governor would now have to wait.

The Tau's next attack was again presaged by the roar of jet engines as Barracudas raced low over Tarokeen to launch rockets into the Planetary Governor's Palace. Already battle-scarred from the Avenging Sons attack, the once elegant buildings were rapidly becoming tattered ruins. Masonry and support beams collapsed under the repeated impacts as fires burned out of control and spread rapidly, smoke from them billowing high into the sky and all the while through the wreckage stalked the armoured bulk of the Avenging Sons Space Marines, each finding positions from which to repel the oncoming attack.

Captain Armaros had few illusions; this would be a stern test of his men. He was now heavily outgunned by the Tau and when it hit, their attack would be powerful and well-coordinated. It would be deadly close quarters combat, building to building, room to room, but this would be to his battle-brothers' advantage. Any Space Marine was easily a match for a Tau Warrior at close range.

The ground fighting followed close behind the Tau's air strike with Tau infantry swiftly infiltrating through the buildings and rail rifle-armed marksmen moving into position at any high points overlooking the palace courtyards they could get to. Firefights started to break out as perimeter squads were engaged by pulse rifle fire and along the surrounding streets came Devilfish transports, from which disembarked Fire Warrior units who attempted to root out the Space Marines with photon grenades and burst cannon fire. Soon each squad was fighting its own small but deadly battle, and as the Tau attempted to press forwards, the Space Marines stood firm and threw them back, inflicting heavy losses in the brutal close quarters combat. The Terminators and Assault squads bore the brunt of the attacks. Stalking from room to room through the now empty and burning barracks buildings they repeatedly charged the enemy, chainswords whirring and storm bolters barking. Against such fierce counter-attacks the Tau gained no headway and eventually retreated, leaving their dead and dying scattered throughout the buildings.

As night fell the remaining Avenging Sons were still holding their positions, but casualties were mounting and the supply situation was becoming serious. Armaros took stock. Ammunition, especially frag and krak grenades, was running low, but he had some eighty one men still battle-worthy, including all the Terminators and both Dreadnoughts. The Tau must also be feeling the strain of battle as the Hunter Cadre had been mauled by the Space Marines' stoic defence. After a day of fighting there was finally a pause. For the first time since the drop pods had landed, Tarokeen did not resound to the thud and boom of gun fire and explosions.

The second night did not pass without sporadic combats breaking out. The Tau sent out small teams to infiltrate into new firing positions, using the darkness as cover, but the Space Marines had their own roving patrols moving through the rubble in pairs or threes. In the darkness short firefights would suddenly erupt when two patrols clashed, only for the Tau to quickly withdraw, and it was now that the Space Marines began to show their true worth. They did not need to sleep like an unaugmented human warrior would have, their power armour supplying them with all they needed to keep fighting at peak efficiency. Their endurance and superior powers of recovery meant that after a day and a night on their feet, they were all still as ready for the fight as the moment they had landed; many bearing wounds that would have killed mere men, but still fighting on regardless.

Defence of the Planetary Governor's Palace – Day 2

The second day dawned with the red haze of fires illuminating the smoke-blackened sky over Tarokeen. Except for the sporadic patrol clashes, the

Avenging Sons disembark from their drop pods in a lightning assault on the Planetary Governor's Palace.

night had been quiet – dawn would see that change. Their infantry-led attack had been repulsed the day before so the Tau now moved their heavier weapons into position to lead the second attack. With jet engines whirring, Hammerheads, Devilfish and battlesuits moved slowly through the streets, drone-controlled burst cannon covering the buildings as they manoeuvred into position to bombard the Planetary Governor's Palace. It seemed that if the Tau could not drive the Space Marines out, then they would annihilate them instead.

For the Avenging Sons the battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace was now a bitter struggle for survival, but their mission was not complete and Captain Armaros was determined to fight on. To do so he needed assistance and called on the *Proxima Justus*. Its hangar decks were full with Thunderhawk gunships and transporters loaded with armoured fighting vehicles, all waiting for the order to launch, but with only a small secure perimeter to land in, sending in the transporters was judged to be too risky. The Thunderhawks, armed for a ground attack mission, would be of great assistance, but with Tau Barracudas patrolling over the combat zone, they would be particularly vulnerable to an airborne attack. For now, therefore, the Thunderhawks would have to be kept safely in reserve incase an evacuation mission was ordered. Only if Armaros' situation became critical would they be called upon.

The first day of the battle had been fierce – day two would see its intensity increase even further. The Tau had used the night-time lull to reinforce their mauled Hunter Cadre. Now they would throw everything they had at the Space Marines in order to destroy them. At first light the Barracudas were ready for new strikes on the Planetary Governor's Palace, then the ground assault would resume. Attacks would commence from all directions, but the main weight of the day's assault would be aimed at the gate. Crush resistance there and the Space Marines would be broken up into small pockets to be mopped up later.

As on day one the Tau attack was presaged by a flight of Barracudas, whose missiles and burst cannon strafed the Space Marines' positions amongst the rubble. Lacking any form of anti-aircraft defence, the warriors of the Emperor could do little against the Barracudas except stay low in their cover and wait for the attack to end. After several low passes, the Barracudas departed to re-arm and the Tau ground bombardment began. With their distinctive whip-crack sound, railgun rounds soon slammed into buildings, then burst cannon pulses ricocheted off walls and rubble. A phalanx of heavy fire hammered the palace, round after round, relentless and merciless. The Tau were blasting at the Space Marines from a distance, building after building being targeted. Roofs collapsed, walls cracked and rounds punched through masonry to explode within. The noise was deafening as the buildings of the Planetary Governor's Palace were systematically destroyed, followed by a choking cloud of dust which rose up to shroud the battlefield.

Opposite the main gate, two Hammerheads slowly manoeuvred down the streets constantly firing on the move, until eventually, under the sheer weight of fire the gatehouse collapsed. The Devastator squad within had attempted to retaliate with their missile launchers and lascannon, but the weight of fire had kept them pinned down. It was punishment not even the mighty Space Marines could withstand for long and it seemed the Tau were attempting to match their foe's legendary merciless brutality.

The bombardment lasted all morning and well into the afternoon. Captain Armaros had little to respond with except his own man-portable heavy weapons. It was an uneven match and with no other option open to him, the Space Marine Captain contacted the *Proxima Justus* to request air support. It was a risk, but the situation on the ground was deteriorating. An air strike by the Thunderhawks' bombs and missiles was quickly planned, but with the Barracudas still in the sky overhead they too would be prime targets.

The Honoured Brother Caim stalks the ruins of the Planetary Governor's Palace.
The Dreadnought armoured battle-brother would later be destroyed during the defence of the palace gates.

As incoming fire from the Tau force impacts all around, the Avenging Sons struggle to hold the palace gates. Savage fighting would eventually see the Tau thrown back, but not without heavy losses amongst the Space Marines.

All five Thunderhawk gunships onboard the strike cruiser launched and made for the Planetary Governor's Palace. It was a powerful strike force, enough to keep the Tau at bay, but first it would have to run the gauntlet of the Barracuda fighters.

As the squadron vectored in on Tarokeen, descending rapidly with their weapons primed, the Barracudas climbed to intercept. The Thunderhawks dove through the fighter screen, heavy bolters blazing as the Tau craft opened fire with burst cannon. Despite the repeated impact of pulse rounds the formation did not waver, keeping their formation tight and on course, and trusting to their thick ceramite armour plating. The Barracudas' fire was ineffective as the Space Marine pilots calmly kept their aircraft on course until they were over the city, whilst the gunners located targets and prepared to open fire with their main weaponry.

The flight of Thunderhawks roared down onto the city, strafing its streets with battle cannon, turbo-lasers and heavy bolters before releasing their bombs. In a firestorm they ripped into the palace's surroundings, explosions tearing through the buildings, gouging great holes in roofs and walls, flames and shrapnel engulfing whole blocks. Across the city buildings were rocked by the concussion of the bombing, the destruction was radiating outwards from the palace.

The air strike appeared to be a success, as in the aftermath the Tau attacks died down to sporadic sniping and skirmishing. What damage to their forces it had actually caused was unknown, but as the roar of the Thunderhawks faded, the Tau withdrew again. It was a brief lull in the battle and did not last long, but it bought Captain Armaros' men precious time to reorganise their defences.

It was at the gate that the hammer blow eventually fell. Hammerheads and battlesuits led the way, attacking at full speed they crashed through the rubble of the gatehouse. The lead Hammerhead was immediately hit by lascannon fire and exploded in a blossoming orange fireball, but weapons fire from the second grav-tank killed the lascannon gunner in return. A krak missile destroyed a Broadside battlesuit but, after the brief firefight, only three Devastator squad members were able to withdraw whilst Devilfish-mounted infantry closed in behind the armoured vanguard.

Captain Armaros realised that he was losing his hold on the situation and his perimeter was in danger of breaking up. Faced with no other choice he committed the Terminator squad to the fight. Wading through blazing fire and blinding smoke the veterans met the Crisis battlesuits in a head-on exchange of fire in which both sides suffered heavy losses. The Space Marines fought for every inch, but the Tau's heavier weapons could not be matched. Three of the veteran Terminators died in the fighting, as did four battlesuits. Brothers Hakael and Caim joined the battle, destroying the second Hammerhead with their heavy Dreadnought weapons before Brother Caim sustained a hit which tore off his left leg, toppling the Dreadnought to the ground and leaving it vulnerable to enemy attack.

For an hour the battle at the gate raged and, led by Chaplain Baraqel, the defenders fought on heroically. The pressure ranged against them was intense and, with the commitment of the Dreadnoughts and Terminators, there were no more reinforcements available. Bolter rounds and missiles shot through the air, holding the Fire Warriors at bay, meanwhile the Tau continued to launch secondary attacks all around the perimeter, pinning the Avenging Sons Space Marine squads in position; units that could otherwise be used to bolster the defence of the gatehouse.

Captain Armaros knew that his position was irretrievable. The Tau had bled his force dry, and now heavy casualties and a lack of ammunition were forcing him to accept that withdrawal was the only course open to him if he wanted to save his Company. It galled him, but resistance here was now greater than his Space Marines could match, and still he had no idea of the enemy's total strength. He knew that his men might hold out for days only to eventually be overwhelmed by their numbers, and at what gain? The Planetary Governor of Taros was now beyond his reach and the Avenging Sons were facing annihilation. Armaros needed to evacuate the survivors and rescue what he could from the mission.

After a brief command meeting in the ruins of the Planetary Governor's residence, Armaros informed the *Proxima Justus* of his decision to evacuate. At nightfall the Thunderhawks were to be launched for an extraction mission and orders were given to all the squad leaders, or stand-in leaders in those squads that had lost their sergeants. At nightfall there would be a staggered withdrawal to the inner courtyard, where one by one the Thunderhawks would land, load up and carry them back to their strike cruiser. It was an operation fraught with difficulty, one which had to be performed swiftly so as to give the encircling Tau forces the minimum time to respond.

Evacuation

As night fell over the battlefield, the Space Marine commander again took stock of the situation. His force had been reduced to approximately forty battle-worthy brothers and one Dreadnought, requiring only two Thunderhawk gunships for the extraction. The other gunships would fly around the complex to provide covering fire, and once they had been rearmed and re-fuelled, the Thunderhawks set about their new mission.

Apothecary Actium started recovering the progenoid glands from all of the fallen battle-brothers he could locate, although some had been buried deep under the ruins of fallen buildings and were beyond reach. It was a vital task if the Chapter's heavy toll in casualties was to be made good as the loss of any gene-seed would be keenly felt. Chaplain Baraqel said prayers for the dead as he stood over the lifeless form of Brother Caim. Once a proud war machine and a hero of the Chapter, he was now nothing more than a smoking wreck of twisted metal and wires. Amongst all those who had died over the last few days, his death was the most grievous for 2nd Company.

Captain Armaros took command of an understrength Tactical squad and the remaining Scouts as the rearguard, and gave orders to the first squads – including Brother Hakael, Apothecary Actium and Chaplain Baraqel – to stand ready to withdraw to the first Thunderhawk when it touched down. After they had blasted off, the second wave was then to abandon their positions, covered by the rearguard, and make for the landing zone. In all the evacuation operation should take no more than ten minutes – not enough time for even the swift forces of the Tau to react in strength.

The distant sound of Thunderhawk engines approached and the evacuation began. Moving slowly through the darkness, crunching over rubble and broken plas-glass, battle-scarred, scorched and wounded, the survivors loaded into the waiting Thunderhawk's hold. Overhead four other gunships circled. Brother Hakael was the last to climb the ramp and it closed behind him as the second Thunderhawk began its approach, the first accelerating away from the battlefield at speed.

Alerted by the noise, Tau patrols cautiously crept forwards to investigate. Where once Space Marines had barred their advance with boltgun fire, now there was nothing. Meanwhile the second transport had already landed and the remaining squads quickly embarked. Captain Armaros fell back to the landing zone, bringing up the rear of his squad, boltgun in hand ready to fire. He ran up the ramp and hit the door mechanism to close it just as the Thunderhawk's triple engines boomed into life and thrust it skywards again. The battle was over – the mission had failed.

ADEPTUS ARBITES OPERATIONS ON TAROS

Every world under the rule of the Imperium has its own Adeptus Arbites Precinct Houses or Fortified Courthouse. The Arbitrators are the Imperium's police and enforcers, tasked with combating and punishing crimes made against the Imperium. Prior to the Avenging Sons' attack, the magister commanding the Adeptus Arbites precinct in Tarokeen received a secure astro-telepathic communication warning him of events about to unfold. It also instructed his precinct to carry out a simultaneous operation to arrest the wealthiest mine owners. These men belonged to the hereditary noble class which had run the mines for generations, but now they had been found guilty of colluding with the Planetary Governor and the Tau Empire, and must also face justice. They were to be arrested, imprisoned in the Precinct House and then turned over to the Space Marine commander.

After receiving his instructions, Magister Skalka knew that his Precinct House was in great danger. If the Planetary Governor was planning on rebelling against the Imperium then, as the representatives of Imperial authority, the Arbites would have to be disposed of first – an attack therefore could come at any time. The Arbites commander did not know when the Space Marine assault would come, but he and his men were prepared to act quickly when it did.

As the Space Marines fought the Tau around the palace, the Arbitrators moved against the mine owners. Away from the city, in the surrounding deserts, fearsome Arbites arrest units, clad in black carapace armour and armed with shotguns, riot mauls and suppression shields, moved in to surround and arrest the cartel families' representatives. Upon arrival at the mines, the Arbites found themselves confronted by gangs of angry mine workers and riots rapidly broke out as the mobs refused all orders to disperse. What hadn't been counted on was that the work gangs were incredibly loyal to their mine, their fellow team members and their masters, and at each mine the attempted arrests quickly became pitched battles against the crudely armed workers. As more miners joined in the fighting, the Arbitrators were forced to withdraw; protected by their workers, the owners were safe from Imperial justice, for now.

Most of the battle-scarred arrest units did not return to the Precinct House in Tarokeen until after the Space Marines had evacuated the planet, leaving Magister Skalka's men trapped on the rebellious world and now heavily outnumbered by Tau Empire forces. They had little hope but to stand firm in the name of the Emperor and await relief.

The Tarokeen Precinct House was attacked and destroyed three days after the Avenging Sons' evacuation. There were no known survivors.

Aftermath

The First Taros Intervention had been a costly defeat for the Imperium – the Tau having inflicted serious damage on the Avenging Sons in two days of intense combat. The damage meted out in return on the xenos force was unknown, but must have also been significant. There had been many confirmed kills and the battlefield was littered with the wrecks of Tau grav-tanks and battlesuits.

The Avenging Sons took the defeat badly. The Chapter's fortress-monastery was filled with battle-brothers who mourned the dead, and its great bell tolled once for each of their own that lost their lives on Taros. Space Marine Chapters enjoy a glorious reputation as the 'Shield of Humanity' and defeat is never taken lightly, the death of Dreadnought Brother Caim weighing heavily upon them all.

Events on Taros, the failure of the Intervention Force and the confirmed report of Tau in strong numbers fighting in defence of the Planetary Governor, forced a change in attitude by officials of the Administratum towards the Taros situation. News of defeat was bad enough, but it seemed that the Tau had already staked a claim to one of the Emperor's worlds. What should have been a minor skirmish proved that there was now a serious threat to the safety of the region. Events around the Eye of Terror might be demanding many of the Imperium's resources, but what had occurred on Taros could not, and would not, be ignored.

Taros was immediately declared *Ex Imperius Rebellis*, a system in rebellion against the Emperor's divine rule. The sacred Pax Imperialis had been torn up by Planetary Governor Aulis, and his actions now made him not just a criminal but also a traitor. Also, it was obvious that the Tau were already on Taros in force and they must be ejected.

The Master of the Administratum signed an edict stating just this, as well as listing the Planetary Governor's crimes (over one hundred in all, most punishable by death). The document, called the *'Taronian Declaration',* was a licence to action a new and significantly larger attack against those who would dare to wrest Taros from the Imperium and next time the attack would not be a surgical strike by a single force of Space Marines. Instead it would require the involvement of all those fighting arms of the Imperium capable of committing forces to repel the xenos aggression.

The decision made, the retaking of Taros was set in motion…

The last Thunderhawk Gunship races skywards. Captain Armaros was forced to evacuate his forces from the palace even though his mission was incomplete. Under the protection of the Tau, the Planetary Governor had escaped, and the Space Marine captain's mission had failed.

TAU FIRE WARRIOR

1. Armour
This Tau Fire Warrior wears the standard issue combat uniform, armour and equipment common to all members of the Fire caste.

His body armour is constructed in two layers. The outer surface is a hard, ultra-dense nanocrystalline metal bonded to an inner layer of high-performance, thermo-set, molecular polythene. The inner layer acts as an energy-absorbent padding which helps to prevent blunt trauma injuries from high velocity impacts, and the highly advanced materials used in its construction are incredibly resilient to penetration weapons and lightweight compared to more conventional materials, such as plasteel.

The construction techniques involved in its creation are unknown to the Imperium – the Adeptus Mechanicus being forbidden from investigating such alien technology by order of the Ordo Xenos.

The elongated and thickened left shoulder pad acts as an additional protective shield, especially when the Fire Warrior is kneeling with his weapon at his shoulder, covering that side of the warrior's body with extra armour.

2. Helmet
It is thought that the distinctive domed Tau combat helmet includes many systems such as communications equipment, night vision sensors, targeting and range-finder information, and access to the Tau command network. It is believed that the helmet includes some form of visual relay, but this is unconfirmed. The markings on his helmet are rank insignia, indicating the Fire Warrior is of the rank of shas'ui (believed to be broadly equivalent to that of an Imperial Guard sergeant).

3. Pulse Carbine
This Tau's personal weapon is his pulse carbine. A short-barrelled, lightweight version of the more common pulse rifle often issued to scout units and for special operations. The carbine sacrifices range for portability and is especially useful at close quarters.

The weapon generates its own induction field, which is used to propel a particle which reacts to the field by breaking down into a plasma state (referred to as a pulse). Power is provided by a powercell, which must be replaced after fifty shots, with Tau powercells believed to be a standard fit for all weapons.

The pulse carbine includes an underslung photon grenade launcher as standard, with the single shot grenade launcher firing a standard issue photon grenade over a short distance. The pulse carbine also mounts a remote thermic sight which, combined with the weapon's advanced stabilisers and recoil reduction, make it highly accurate during aimed fire by its operator.

This Fire Warrior's only other weapon is his bonding knife. Not intended for combat, the ceremonial knife is a symbol that this warrior and his team have performed the Ta'lissera ritual, and that all members of the team are bonded together. It is a rite of deep significance to members of the Fire caste, who pledge themselves to fight together until the last warrior, and a common Fire caste saying is *'Only in death are the bonded parted'*.

As well as the knife itself, the Fire Warriors of a bonded team often incorporate the knife symbol onto their armour. Here it is present on the Fire Warrior's right thigh guard.

4. Equipment
From his belt hangs a sensor unit. The purpose of this device is unknown, although commonly issued to team leaders, and it is thought to be some form of sensor and tracking equipment. Hanging from the webbing braces are two pouches for additional pulse powercells and two smaller signal flare pellets. These have not been encountered by the Imperium's forces before and are believed to be used for visual communications or as a back-up to standard communications for marking his team's location.

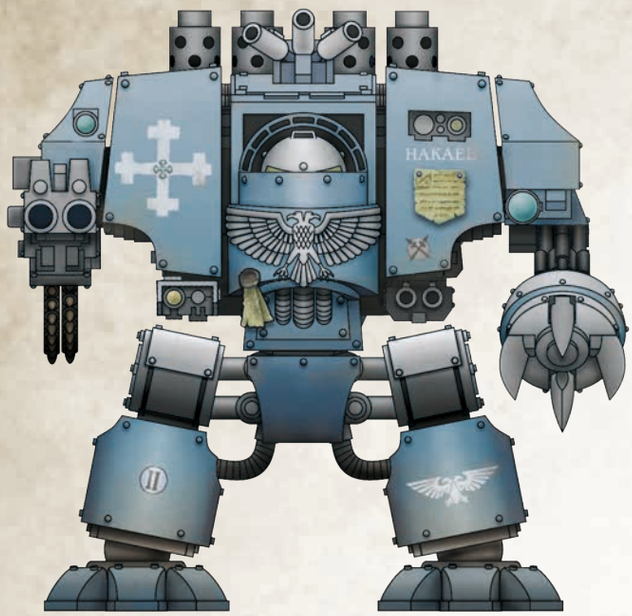
The standard issue webbing belt contains pouches for extra powercells and a container for photon grenades. These can be armed and thrown by hand or loaded into the grenade launcher. A photon grenade is primarily a defensive weapon, detonating with a powerful sonic blast and multi-spectrum light which dazzles and disorientates the enemy. Although non-lethal, the effects can be severe and long lasting.

He has also been issued with EMP grenades. These weapons emit a brief but powerful electro-magnetic pulse which overloads circuitry, causing meltdowns and malfunctions. EMP grenades cannot be fired from the grenade launcher.

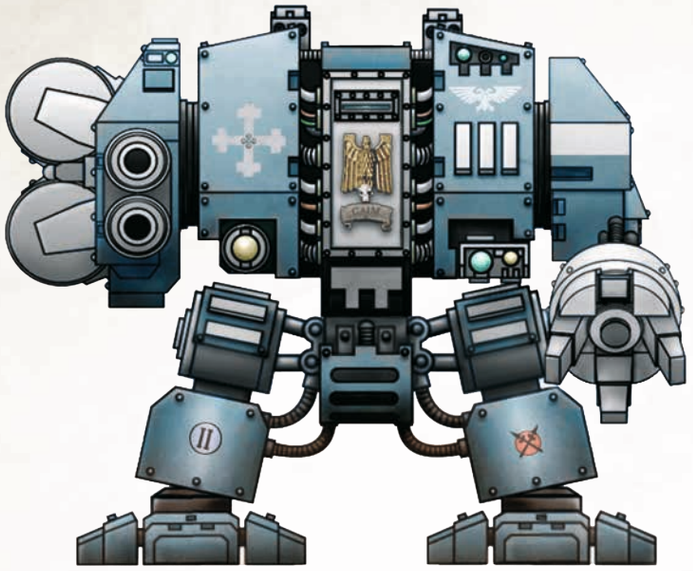
5. Fatigues
The Fire Warrior's one-piece coveralls are constructed of a composite nanocular thread woven into a microscopic super-dense mesh of fibres that help prevent projectile punctures and penetration by bladed weapons, whilst remaining flexible. The material the fatigues are constructed from is also chemically treated to retard flames and the effects of most irritant gases or chemicals. The fatigues are hard wearing and suitable for most environments, and are issued in a variety of colours.

6. Evaporator Unit
This warrior also carries an unusual item never seen before by the Imperium, a bulky container believed to be a water evaporator and storage unit. Each team was issued with this equipment for the Taros Campaign to provide an emergency reserve of water in the planet's desert conditions. A Tau's physical capabilities to resist the effects of dehydration are unknown, but believed to be far in excess of human norms.

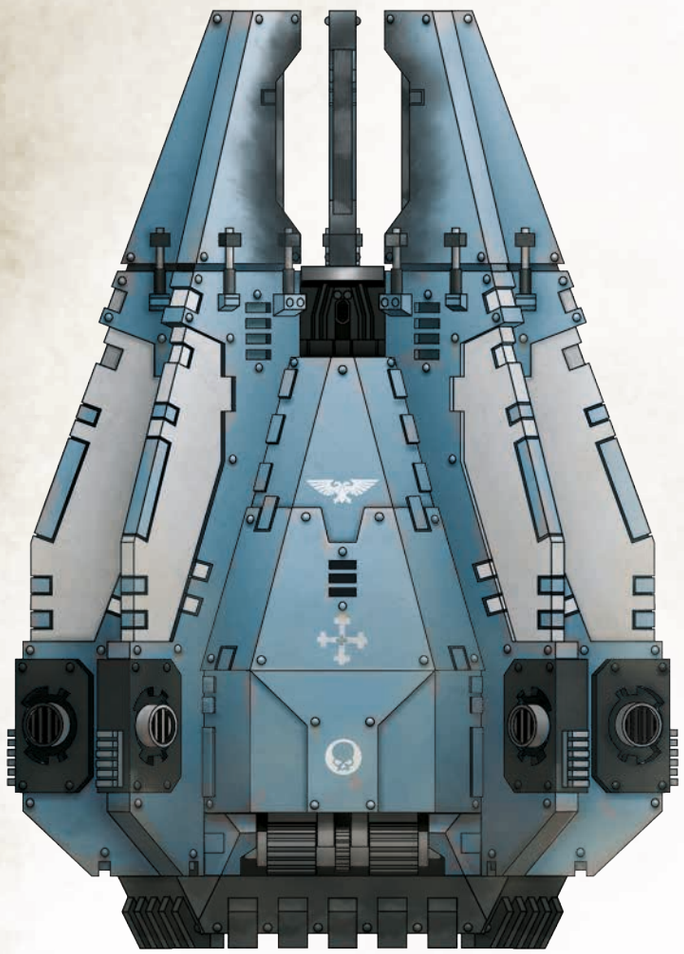
This is Shas'ui Ta'she, leader of a Fire Warrior team of Shas'el K'irri's Hunter Cadre. He is shown equipped for a night time raid on Imperial forces around the Planetary Governor's Palace. Although the mission was successful, Ta'she was killed in the action.



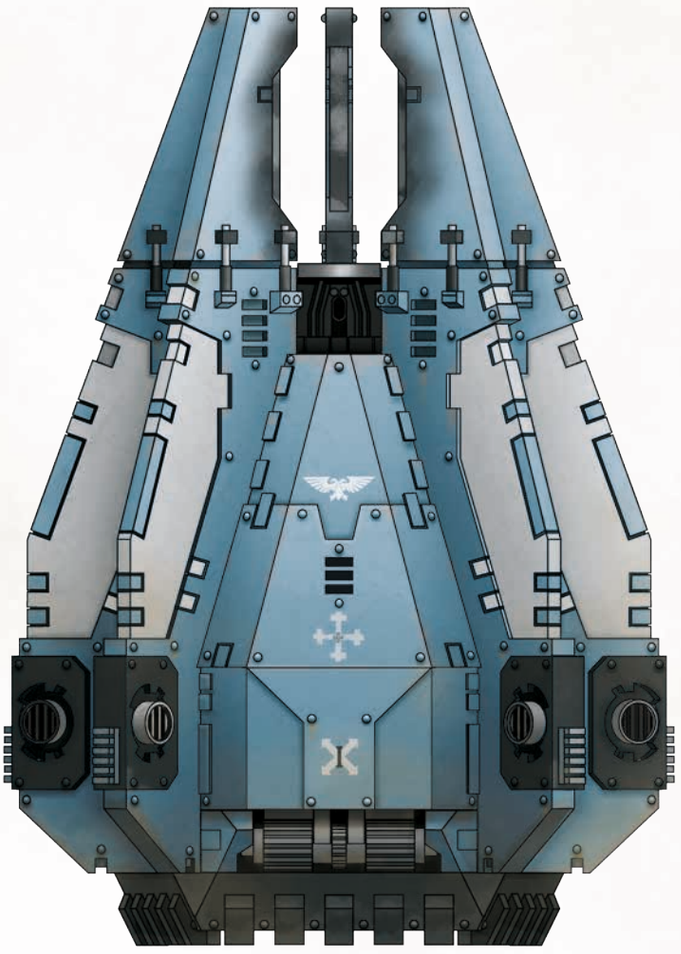
Brother Hakael, a Mk IV Dreadnought of the Avenging Sons Chapter, armed with a powerfist and twin-linked heavy bolters. He bears a Litany of Devotion and purity seal, as well as the 2nd Company badge on his right leg.



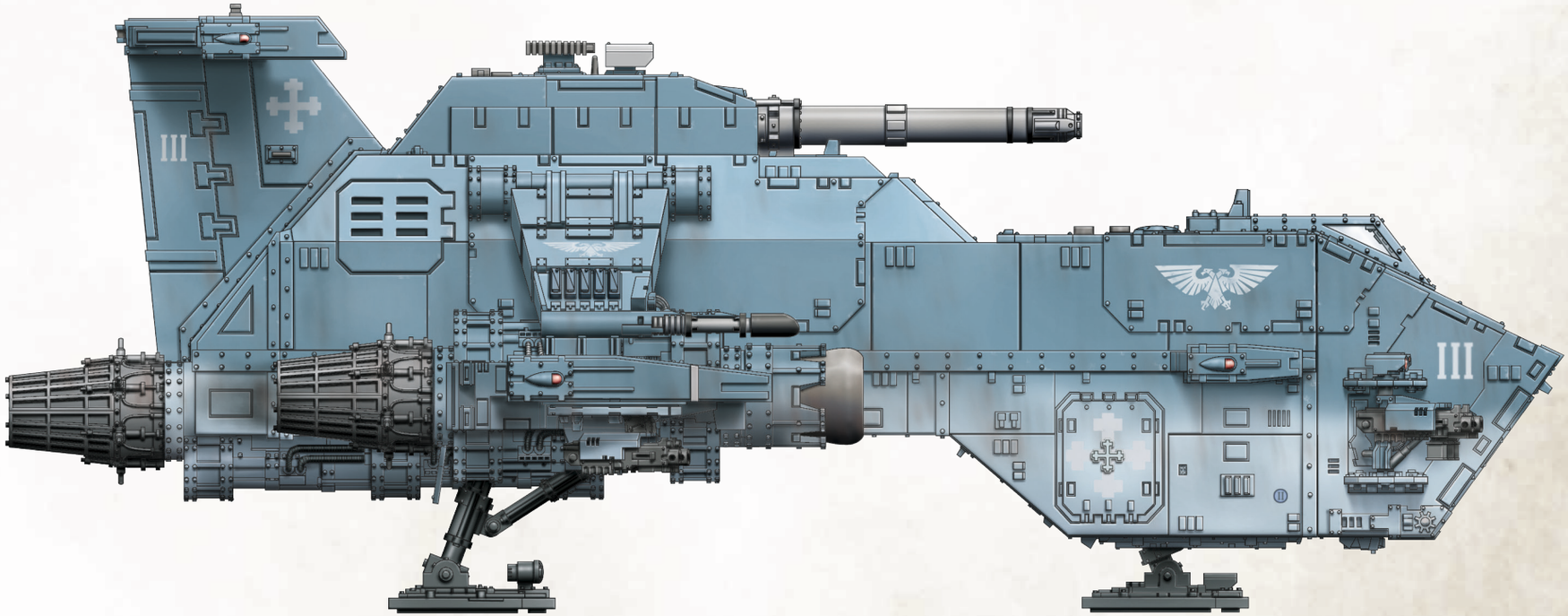
Brother Caim, a Mk V Dreadnought of the Avenging Sons Chapter, armed with a powerfist and twin-linked autocannon. Brother Caim was destroyed during the battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace.



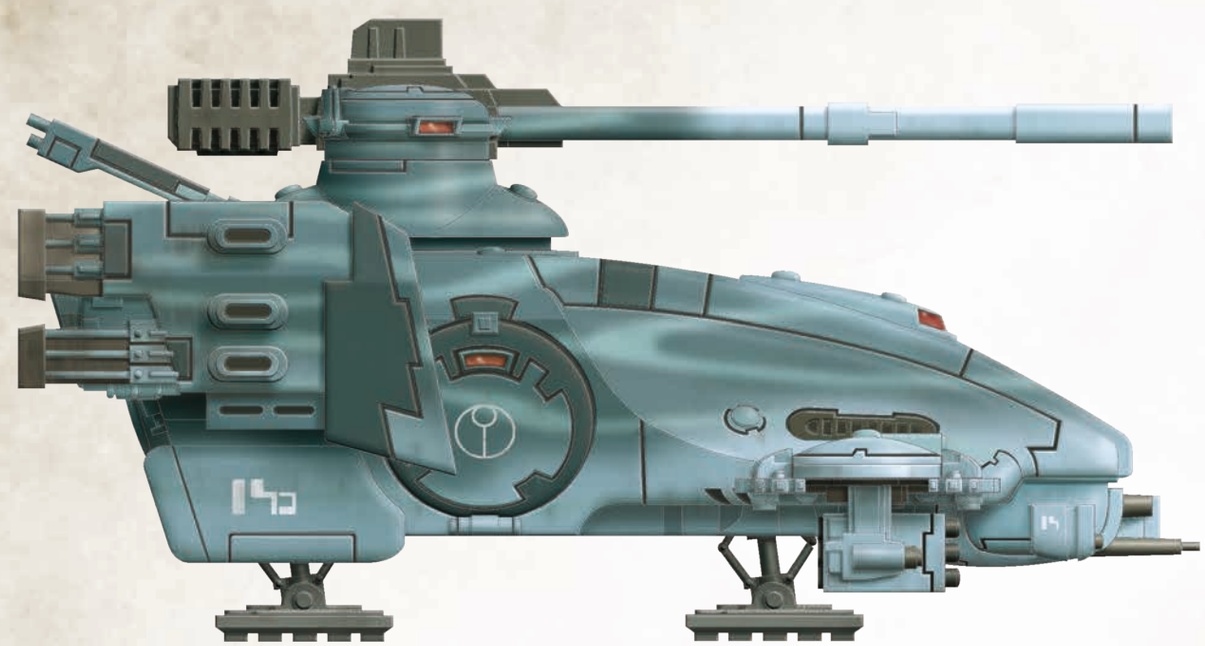
This drop pod bears a skull command badge; it may have been the pod used by 2nd Company's Captain Armaros. Alternatively, it may have been the Deathstorm drop pod used to lead the attack.



Drop pod used by the First Taros Intervention Force during the attack on the Planetary Governor's Palace. This pod bears the badge of the Company's first Assault squad.

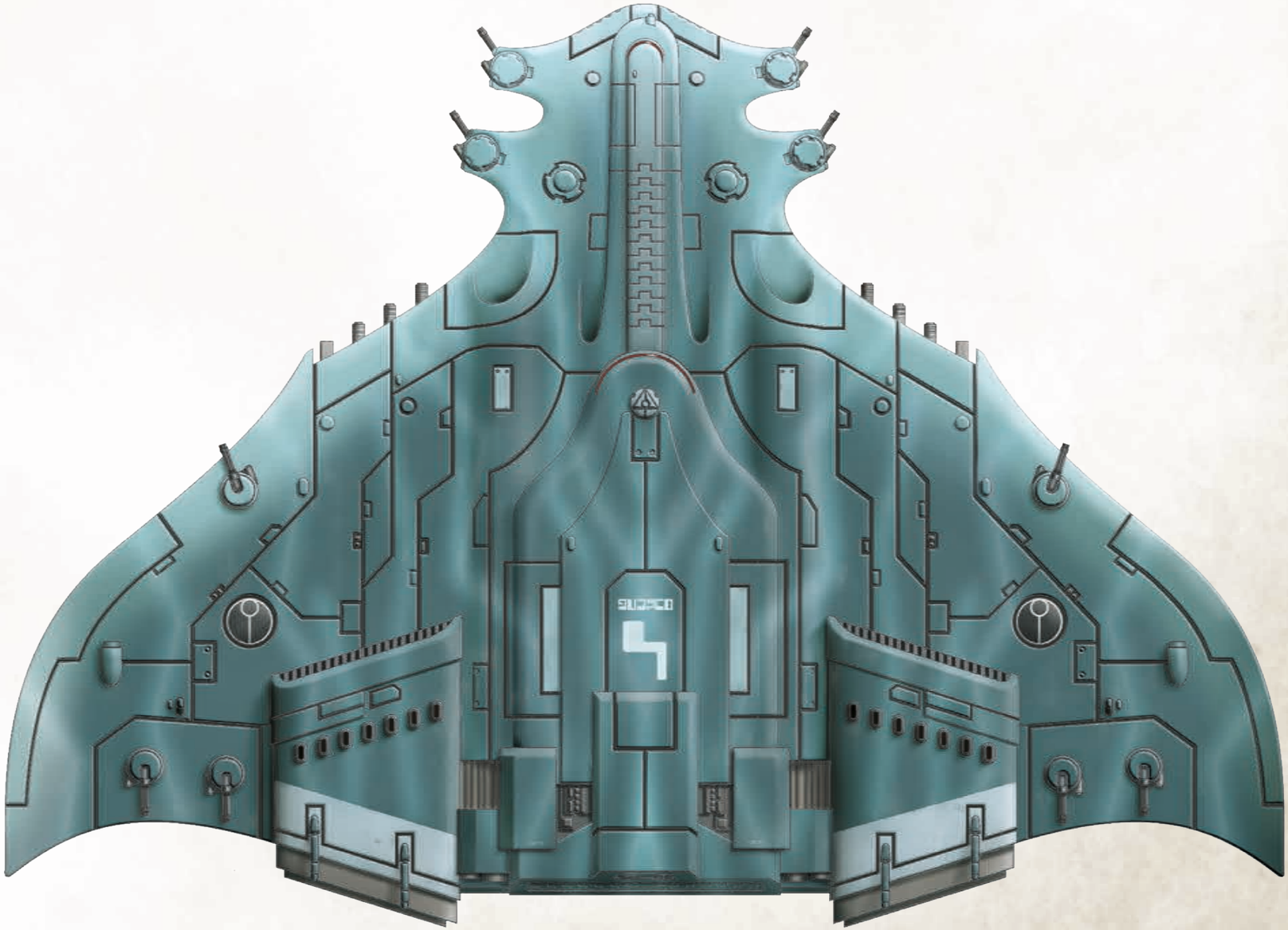


Thunderhawk gunship of the Avenging Sons Chapter. This is the third aircraft deployed with the Taros Intervention Force. It flew ground attack missions before all the Chapter's forces were extracted from the planet.



Hammerhead gunship armed with a railgun. This vehicle took part in the battle at Blocking Position Three, and is camouflaged for night-time operations.

Devilfish troop carrier from the battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace, again prepared for night-time operations. This vehicle was destroyed during the fighting.



Manta. This aircraft's appearance over the city was a complete surprise. It carried the Tau's first response force to the Space Marine attack, and then shuttled in Tau reinforcements throughout the battle for the Planetary Governor's Palace.

CHAPTER THREE

PLANNING THE INVASION

The recapture of Taros was instrumental to the continued operations of the Forge World of Stygies VIII and, to a lesser extent, other dependant Forge Worlds, during the rising war effort against Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade. To ensure its return as swiftly as possible, the appointment of a senior Adeptus Administratum command staff was undertaken immediately to organise and oversee the planning of the operation.

The person chosen to lead them, and also take command of the entire invasion operation, was Lord High Commander Otto Ivan Gustavus; a man with a long military record who had risen from the officer ranks of the Imperial Guard to the upper levels of the Imperium's military hierarchy. Gustavus' first task was to appoint his own command staff and prepare for the invasion. In doing this he would set his men two questions to answer: when could the force they were putting together be ready to invade Taros, and where should that attack fall? His instructions would make the matter clear: the retaking of the Emperor's world from the xenos Tau should happen as soon as possible.

Appointing his staff was no simple matter. The upper echelons of the Imperium's military hierarchy is rife with politics, intriguing, favours owed, debts to repay and self-interest. Gustavus had not risen this high without making a few enemies or without calling on a few favours that he was now in a position to repay.

Selecting his command staff took several weeks of hard work and long drawn-out negotiations. The first position to be filled was not of Gustavus' own choosing however. Commissar General Mordred Van Horcic would be Gustavus' shadow and right-hand man for the duration of the campaign. The high-ranking Commissar was tasked with making sure all the officers of Gustavus' force did their duty, or faced the consequences. A powerful man in his own right, Van Horcic would have the power of life and death over many of the Imperial servants involved in the Taros campaign.

Whether by choice or coercion over the subsequent weeks, Gustavus filled the various appointments. Not all were men he liked or even trusted, many were decisions forced upon him by other political factors, but it was Gustavus' job to bring all these factions together and make them work as one towards ultimate victory for the Imperium.

The High Command staff would ultimately include Venerated High Magos Zadakine Volta, a high-ranking Adeptus Mechanicus representative from Stygies VIII; Fleet Admiral Kotto, appointed by the authorities on Kar Duniash to command the invasion fleet; Lord Marshal De Stael, the overall commander of all Imperial Guard regiments, whose men would bear the brunt of the fighting, and the newly titled Provisioner-prime Nymus Dree from the Departmento Munitorum, who had been granted a place on the High Command staff in recognition of his initial investigation into events on Taros. Others included Air Marshal Denvelt, Staff Colonel Scheja, Deacon Gotz, the appointed representative of Cardinal Astral Velas, and Curator Adept Skel. Many others would follow, including any Space Marine commanders or Titan Legion princeps who would be involved in the fighting.

The High Command would be tasked with organising and planning the invasion, each member having his own area of responsibility and their own staff, aides or retinue to assist them. In all, the High Command staff for the invasion, including all the sub-departments and functionaries, would number approximately three thousand souls.

Pre-invasion Preparations

Before any military plans could be put in place, first Gustavus and his staff needed to know what they were facing. None amongst them, except Dree, had ever heard of Taros before, let alone knew anything about the planet or its system. Gustavus wanted all the information he could get about the mining world: its climate, population, industrial capacity, the ruling body, topography and history; anything which might give him an advantage over what would now in all likelihood be a well-entrenched enemy. It was a huge research task to be undertaken by the Adepts of the Administratum and in charge of the information gathering would be Curator Adept Skel, an Administratum official promoted from the Archive Historicus. Curator Adept Skel had access to thousands of archives throughout the Segmentum and across the Imperium, including copies of documents from the great archives on Terra itself. In those vast repositories of information, thousands of curators, prefects, archivists and menial workers went to work seeking out anything about Taros, and from those ancient records a detailed plan of the planet and its population was slowly compiled. From tithe levels and tax records a picture of the planet's mining industry was built, whilst old censuses revealed the planet's population growth – no piece of data concerning Taros was to be considered too trivial.

A team of lexmechanics and logis, under the command of Magos Volta, was also assigned to the information gathering task. They worked with inhuman speed to compile all the data Skel was producing and with it the Adeptus Mechanicus' part-human, part-machine servants began to forecast the planet's population growth, climate, volcanic activity, atmospheric conditions and orbital cycles. Information stretching back as far as the Great Crusade was analysed, even a scrap of the original Exploritas report on the planet's suitability for terraforming and colonisation was located, catalogued and considered. In all, millions of fragments of information were gathered together: satellite survey images, language studies, missionary reports, journals of long dead Imperial servants who had visited or been stationed on Taros to name but a few. There were old genetic studies on the population and the ruling households carried out by the Ordo Famulous seeking evidence of genetic deviation or mutation, and Adeptus Arbites analysis reports providing details on the crime rate, as well as more up to date geological and seismic surveys. No detail was ignored and anything that might inform Gustavus' staff's decisions was included and it took six months to compile all the information the High Command staff required before the actual invasion planning could get under way.

With this Gustavus had as good a picture of what was facing him as the data gatherers could provide. He knew what the planet was like, the extent of its population, and how this might translate into the Planetary Defence Force's military strength given the equipment that had been supplied to Taros down the years. He knew how the planet might be able to re-equip or resupply its forces, or even create new units. He even had a forecast of what the criminal population of Taros was likely to be (often the first source of manpower for replacement troops). What he didn't know, however, was anything about the Tau's strength on Taros.

Finding information about what the Tau Empire might be planning was far harder, and not a task the Adeptus Administratum could help with. The man on the Lord High Commander's staff assigned to this therefore was Staff Colonel Scheja, Gustavus' Director of Intelligence. A secretive individual, Scheja was a spy master with former experience of working with members of the Inquisition. The Tau, with their philosophy of the '*Greater Good*', were a difficult prospect, and there were few informers or spies on the inside of the Tau Empire. There were some humans, mostly merchants or mercenaries, whose loyalty could be bought by the Imperium, but most men and women within the Tau Empire were simply considered traitors who had abandoned the Emperor. By assessing information from other planets along the borders of the Tau Empire, studying previous estimates of Tau military strength and historical precedents, Colonel Scheja could himself make an educated guess at how strong Tau forces might be on Taros, but without people on the ground, there could be no confirmation of what an Imperial invasion force might face.

Whilst the information gathering was progressing, the other members of the High Command staff were not idle. The Departmento Munitorum officials on the staff began the long process of sourcing the fighting forces and supplies needed for the invasion. Imperial Guard regiments had to be raised, trained and transported across the Imperium and this was no easy task. The demand for troops in the build-up around the Cadian Gate was vast, particularly now as the 'Plague of Unbelief' around the Eye of Terror continued to spread. The Imperial Guard might be huge, but demand for regiments was always far greater than could be supplied.

To counter the effects of increased demand, Gustavus devised a scheme to overestimate the troops' strengths needed. He knew all along that he would not get all the forces he requested, but this way he might get close to his actual requirements. As yet he could give no definitive numbers, but he set the logis adepts to work making an initial statistical analysis, and this gave him a starting point. Before it was submitted the numbers would be modified and gradually evolve into a final figure, but for now it was enough to have a number on which the Departmento Munitorum could base its work on and thus get the slow turning wheels of its bureaucracy rolling.

The 4621st Imperial Guard Army

When the Imperial Guard force needed for the invasion of Taros was founded, it was designated the 4621st Imperial Guard army. It was placed under the command of Lord Marshal De Stael, bearing the honorific title 'Chief of Arms', who would be in overall command of all Imperial Guard ground forces on Taros, meaning that all the generals and colonels of the Imperial Guard regiments constituting the 4621st Army would report to him and his staff.

Gustavus, in consultation with De Stael, began to draw up detailed orders for the forces he would need for a successful outcome to the offensive. The Imperial Guard might be vast, but with demand for regiments currently so high, it was not infinite. No commander ever receives enough troops, and Gustavus and De Stael were no different. De Stael's initial request to Gustavus for twenty one regiments had been turned down immediately. A force of that size could not be found in the tight timescale that Gustavus had devised for the invasion. De Stael, rebuked, had to revise his figures.

The Lord Marshal returned with a more moderate twelve regiment request, which Gustavus accepted, taking it in turn to the Departmento Munitorum. However they refused the number, offering an absolute maximum of ten regiments. After much bartering with Munitorum officials, Gustavus only agreed to attempt the invasion with ten regiments after receiving an oath from High Magos Volta that at least one Titan legion would be committed to the invasion force. Reassured by this promise, Gustavus informed De Stael that the 4621st Army would comprise ten regiments and, for ease of administration, the army should be divided into two corps designated X Corps and XI Corps.

After the prolonged arguments over the size of the Imperial Guard force, Gustavus and De Stael got down to the specifics of building it. The first regiments Gustavus requested were those recruited from Tallarn. Given Taros' desert climate, the men of Tallarn (itself a desert world) would quickly adapt to the conditions. They would make the most effective soldiers when

TAROS INCURSION FORCE – HIGH COMMAND STAFF

LORD HIGH COMMANDER OTTO IVAN GUSTAVUS
A large, barrel-chested, walrus of a man, originally hailing from Valhalla, Gustavus was granted supreme command of the Taros invasion after his successful command during the Vaust Schism. He has had a long and steady rise through the upper ranks of the Imperial Guard; in his youth Gustavus first served as a lieutenant commanding an Armoured Fist platoon, eventually rising to command his regiment, and then being promoted beyond field command into the ranks of the High Command staff. Wounded in action several times, and still proudly bearing the scars, his personal experience and bravery is undoubted. Gustavus is the commander of the entire Taros operation; he commands no actual forces, but has the power to sanction or veto any plans his staff make.

Gustavus' rotund appearance and loud, bellicose manner hides a razor sharp political mind. These are the skills he will have to draw upon heavily in a combined operation such as this invasion. With a full entourage of aide-de-camps, staff officers, Commissars, Adeptus Mechanicus advisors, bureaucrats, etc, he will have to juggle their competing demands for supplies and favour, as well as make strategic decisions that will send tens of thousands of Guardsmen into battle.

COMMISSAR GENERAL MORDRED VAN HORCIC
Gustavus' shadow and right-hand man, Van Horcic is tasked with making sure all the officers within the invasion force do their duty, that or face summary justice. In this he is aided by a large cadre of Commissars attached to every Imperial Guard regiment and Imperial Navy vessel. Van Horcic is a fearful figure, having been seriously disfigured by a melta blast whilst leading an offensive in the Hellblade Mountains on Rynn's World, and now relies on various augments to keep him alive. He is the ultimate arbitrator of justice amongst the invasion force and has the power of life and death over many Imperial servants (excluding those of the Adeptus Astartes and Adeptus Mechanicus). As a Commissar, General Van Horcic is empowered to take over command of any Imperial Guard regiment that is deemed to be failing and appoint a new commander or lead it personally. All Commissars in the invasion force report to Van Horcic, who in turn reports to and advises Lord High Commander Gustavus.

CAPTAIN ORELIUS,
3rd COMPANY, RAPTORS CHAPTER
The highest ranking Space Marine officer in the invasion force, Orelius is a long-serving servant of his Chapter, having fought in many wars and crusades for the past hundred years. His entire company and support units have been committed to the invasion by his Chapter Master, and although Gustavus is the supreme commander, in actuality he has little control over the actions of Orelius and his men. Still, Orelius' experience and the reputation of the Adeptus Astartes makes him a valued member of the command staff. His forces will not be involved in a protracted ground campaign and once their mission is complete, the Space Marines will be withdrawn to their battle barge to prepare for their next deployment. As commander of 3rd Company, and the more battle-experienced, Orelius holds seniority over Captain Kaedes although they share the same rank.
As befits his Chapter's heritage, Orelius is an aggressive commander, who always seeks to take the battle to the enemy and leads from the front.

LORD MARSHAL DE STAEL, CHIEF OF ARMS,
COMMANDER OF 4621st IMPERIAL GUARD ARMY
As the overall commander of all Imperial Guard ground forces on Taros, all generals and colonels of the Imperial Guard regiments report to De Stael and his staff. Although small in stature De Stael has a keen strategic mind, born of experience and detailed study of the *Tactica Imperialis*. A quiet studious man with an eye for detail, De Stael likes to plan carefully before committing any troops. His meticulous (some would say cautious) approach to campaigns and battles has caused frustration with more aggressive commanders in the past. Out of earshot other commanders have nicknamed him 'the Clerk', but De Stael's studious manner hides an inner ruthless streak and iron resolve utterly devoted to serving the Emperor.

De Stael is responsible for putting Gustavus' battle plan into action on the ground. Although he is in overall command of the 4621st, constituting all of the Imperial Guard ground forces for the invasion of Taros, as such Space Marine Chapters and the Legio Ignatum forces do not fall under his remit.

FLEET ADMIRAL KOTTO, COMMANDER
OF THE TAROS INVASION FLEET
Fleet Admiral Kotto is the overall commander of the Imperial Invasion Fleet for the duration of the Taros campaign, and has sanction over any operations that take place outside of Taros' atmosphere. Kotto is a product of the Ultima Segmentum Naval Academy on Kar Duniash. Noble born and groomed for command since birth, he has risen steady through the ranks commanding escorts, light cruisers and cruisers, before being promoted to Fleet Admiral. He is a veteran of campaigns against Ork pirates, Tyranids on the Eastern Fringe and Chaos raiders, but this will be his first command against the Tau Empire.
As well as overall command of the fleet in action, Kotto and his staff are charged with organising, mustering and supplying the invasion fleet vessels for the duration of the campaign. A major problem for Kotto is the number of assault transports and landing craft available to him and his staff to get

Lord Marshal De Stael's forces from orbit to the planet's surface. During the planning stage, Kotto and his staff struggled to acquire enough landing craft to simultaneously transport three Imperial Guard regiments, the minimum required by De Stael's invasion plan.

Confident that his fleet, aided by the Space Marine Chapter's vessels, has enough firepower to fight their way into orbit against any defences that Taros or the Tau can muster, the landings and subsequent flow of supplies are Kotto's primary concern when planning fleet operations. Once all the Imperial Guard troops are on the ground, reinforcing them and keeping them supplied, especially with water, will become one of his highest priorities.

VENERATED HIGH MAGOS ZADAKINE VOLTA
The High Magos sits upon the ruling council of Stygies VIII, and is the highest ranking Adeptus Mechanicus representative on Gustavus' staff. He is the supreme commander of all technical support for the invasion and is the Command staff's main liaison between its commander and those of Stygies VIII. Volta has his own large entourage of logis adepts, Rune Priests, lexmechanics and servitors, and utilises their skills with ruthless logic.

CAPTAIN KAEDES,
6th COMPANY, RAPTORS CHAPTER
Kaedes' role is to provide support and battlefield replacements to Orelius' 3rd Company. As such he is sub-ordinate to Orelius and should Orelius become a casualty, Kaedes is fully able to step in and lead the Raptors battle-brothers on the battlefield. Whilst not as experienced as Orelius, he is still a Space Marine Captain, and has all the respect that rank demands within Gustavus' staff.

STAFF COLONEL SCHEJA,
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE
The brilliant Colonel Scheja has been seconded from his regiment, the Valhallan 28th, to act as the top intelligence officer in Gustavus' High Command staff. His own staff officers study and collate information from all sources: Imperial Guard regiments in the field, Imperial Navy reports, scouting Titans, any and every source the Imperium has available. He has an overview of the wider strategic situation, not just the fighting on the ground on Taros. He is Gustavus' spy master, a secretive individual operating in the shadows, with a greater degree of independence than other commanders. Scheja has previously worked with Inquisitor Hector Rex as part of his personal retinue during the Judgement of Hellanus, an operation which made the Colonel's reputation and catapulted him from a 'mere' prospect as the regimental commander of the Valhallan 28th into the upper ranks of the Imperial Guard's command structure, despite him still being only a Colonel.

PROVISIONER-PRIME NYMUS DREE,
MASTER OF THE VICTUALS
A high-ranking bureaucrat from the Departmento Munitorum, Dree's job is to supply the invasion force with everything it needs, from replacement men, tanks and shells to water, food, tents, etc, and he has a small army of Departmento Munitorum functionaries, clerks and prefects to assist him. He was granted his position on the High Command staff after he requested it, following his investigation into events on Taros which have led up to the war. Although he commands no fighting forces, Dree too is a vital member of Gustavus' staff.

CARDINAL ASTRAL VELAS
It is Cardinal Astral Velas' diocese Taros lies within, along with many other scattered planets and systems, on the Eastern Fringe. Although 'His Worshipfulness' can, by rights, command a place on the High Command staff, in fact, after the first staff meeting he returned to his cardinal world and left a representative to deal with his responsibilities for the coming war. The Cardinal's envoy on the command staff is Deacon Gotz who is the highest ranking Adeptus Ministorum official involved in the campaign. Confessors and Priests attached to Imperial Guard and Imperial Navy units report to the Cardinal via Deacon Gotz.

AIR MARSHAL DENVELT
Supreme Commander of all the Imperial Navy fighter, bomber and tactical squadrons and their operations inside Taros' atmosphere, Denvelt is in charge of planning fighter cover, bomber strikes, transport missions and maintaining the Imperial Navy's logistical situation.

PRINCEPS JERNAY
Jernay is the Adeptus Mechanicus Divisio Militaris commander in the field, a servant of the Legio Ignatum and commander of the Warhound Titan Advensis Primaris. Reporting to Magos Volta, Jernay is actually a servant of the Lords of Mars, and as such would follow their orders in any clash of interest, creating problems in the command structure, with the Titans not actually being directly controlled by the High Command staff.

CURATOR ADEPT SKEL
A high-ranking Administratum official, Skel is the High Command's link to the Administratum's extensive archives and all their ancient records regarding Taros.

it came to important skills such as desert survival techniques and water discipline. Fighting men are fighting men, and any Imperial Guardsmen could be made to adapt to the conditions, but the famed Desert Raiders of Tallarn would be the logical choice.

But Tallarn is only a single world, with a limited supply of men. Most of its existing regiments were already committed to other warzones and ten new regiments could not simply be raised from there alone – the planet's tithes did not allow for such a sudden massive drain of resources. Regardless, a single new regiment could be ordered from Tallarn and that process was immediately instigated. The Tallarn 331st regiment would be raised, equipped and shipped to Taros to see its first action. They would not be the only troops the desert world would send to Taros, however, as three other Tallarn regiments could be withdrawn from their current commitments and embarked for Taros, although all had recently been engaged in battles and also needed replacement men and equipment locating. A fifth regiment, the Tallarn 3rd Armoured, was currently on garrison duty on Balle Prime. If a replacement garrison force could be found, it too would join the invasion force. In all, half the Imperial Guard regiments destined for Taros would be from Tallarn, and these would be combined to form X Corps.

XI Corps would be composed of the other regiments that the Departmento Munitorum could commit to the Taros campaign. Five more regiments still needed to be found – the first being the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment. They were unlike any other in the 4621st Army's order of battle, being an air mobile unit equipped with Valkyrie airborne assault carriers. Against the Tau, mobility would be essential as, with their Mantas and a preponderance of grav-tanks, drones and battlesuits, they were both a fast and highly mobile enemy. Conventional infantry and armoured regiments could not hope to match their speed, and because of this, they would be continually forced to fight on Tau terms. A Drop Troop regiment, although lightly equipped for airborne operations, would help redress the balance and give Lord Marshal De Stael the chance to match the Tau's mobility on a strategic level.

The second unit was one of De Stael's own request. The Sarennian Assault Engineers were, in his opinion, some of the most useful troops in the Segmentum. They were trained and equipped for close quarters combat and for assaulting fortified positions, clearing minefields as well as breaching defence lines. Although few in number, the Sarennians would not be required to fight as one regiment but, before the invasion began, would be sub-divided into platoons and companies and attached to all the other regiments of the 4621st. This would provide a core of assault troops when, as predicted, the time for hard street fighting in Tarokeen arrived.

FORCE DISPOSITION

Listing of all units which were committed to the Taros Campaign

4621st IMPERIAL GUARD ARMY

X Corps

17th Tallarn Desert Raiders Regiment
89th Tallarn Desert Raiders Regiment
331st Tallarn Desert Raiders Regiment
3rd Tallarn Armoured Regiment
12th Tallarn Armoured Regiment
2356th Storm Troopers Company
2378th Storm Troopers Company

XI Corps

23rd Elysian Drop Troops Regiment
11th Sarennian Assault Engineers
114th Cadian Shock Troops Regiment
*19th Krieg Armoured Regiment **
*8th Brimlock Dragoons**

Imperial Navy

Fighter Wings (4): 83rd, 386th, 1002nd & 2774th
Bomber Wings (2): 501st & 2424th
Tactical Wing (1): 71st

Adeptus Astartes

Avenging Sons

1 Company 'Taros Intervention Force'

Raptors Chapter

2 Companies 'Strike Force Orelius'

Adeptus Mechanicus

Enginseers Teams 224
Ordnance Teams 12

Legio Titanicus

Legio Ignatum Scout Titan Battlegroup 1

Departmento Munitorum

Labour Corps 2
Engineer Corps 2
Supply Columns 78

Officio Assassinorum

Agents ..... Classified

Imperial Fleet

Fleet-ground Liaison Teams 5

Ministorum

Ordo Hospitalle Field Hospice 6
Ordo Dialogus Interpreter Teams 19

Administratum

Mortuary Teams 16
Adeptus Archivists 18
Statistician Teams 42

TAROS INVASION FLEET

Ships of the Line

Righteous Power ..... Overlord Class
Star of Cassiopeia ..... Tyrant Class
Black Duke ..... Dictator Class
Hammer of Thrace ..... Lunar Class
August ..... Dauntless Class
Cerebus ..... Dauntless Class

Escorts

Errant Squadron ..... Sword Class
Invincis Squadron ..... Sword Class
Omna Squadron ..... Cobra Class
Novem Squadron ..... Firestorm Class

Transports

Imperius Javelin ..... Armed Transport
Imperius Gauntlet ..... Armed Transport
Imperius Anvil ..... Armed Transport
Graf Derzki ..... Armed Transport
Prince Maud ..... Transport
Marcouf ..... Transport
Saint Machree ..... Transport
Isolde ..... Transport
Son of Jucha ..... Transport
Colossia ..... Heavy Transport
Piety ..... Heavy Transport
Kagul ..... Heavy Transport
Empress of Svedeg ..... Heavy Tanker
Honorus Rex ..... Behemoth Class

ADEPTUS ASTARTES FLEET

Raptors Chapter

War Talon ..... Battle Barge
Escort Vessel ..... Gladius Class

Avenging Sons

Proxima Justus ..... Strike Cruiser

** Despite being part of the 4621st Army, these two regiments never saw action on Taros.*

Other regiments scheduled to join the 4621st Army on Taros were the 114th Cadian Shock Troop regiment, an entirely mechanised unit under the command of Colonel Stranski. Then would come the 8th Brimlock Dragoons, a regiment with experience of fighting against Tau raiders around the Damocles Gulf. The final regiment was harder to place, several were considered and either rejected or found to no longer exist. The 12th Manninen Rangers regiment was assigned for transport, but on arrival turned out to be only the strength of a reinforced company. On Commissar General Van Horcic's orders the regiment was disbanded and the survivors merged into the Tallarn rank and file. The 42nd Mordian regiment was also embarked for Taros, only to be diverted to face Hive Fleet Kraken on the Eastern Fringe. Gustavus' deadline for the invasion was rapidly approaching, and the tenth regiment remained elusive. Eventually, the 19th Krieg Armoured regiment was located, but it would take time to get new orders to them and transport them to Taros, meaning they would not be available for the initial invasion.

X Corps would also be reinforced by two companies of Storm Troopers. These troops were the elite soldiers of the Imperial Guard, equally well trained and equipped. They would provide a useful strengthening of the front line regiments and, like the Sarennians, the two companies would be divided as squads amongst the various other Imperial Guard regiments fighting for possession of Taros.

In De Stael's strategic plan for the campaign, XI Corps would act as the support to X Corps. The Tallarn regiments would be required to do the bulk of the initial fighting, and would also lead the landings. XI Corps would follow on close behind and be fed into the ground campaign once it had started and as required. The actual invasion fleet would only be carrying X Corps when it arrived in the Taros system. It would be the Tallarn Guardsmen's job to get a secure lodgement area established on the planet for XI Corps to reinforce. Once the entirety of X Corps was established, the next priority would be to get the 23rd Elysians in position to give 4621st Army the ability to strike just about anywhere and at anytime. Behind them would come the Cadians, the Brimlock Dragoons and eventually, the men of Krieg.

Other Forces

The Imperial Guard are not the only fighting forces available to the Imperium. When the Adeptus Administratum committed itself to an invasion of Taros, it also sent requests throughout the other fighting arms of the Emperor's armies – first of all to the Adeptus Astartes. The Avenging Sons Chapter had already been engaged on Taros, but they were now rebuilding their strength after their heavy losses and would have to wait to avenge their defeat on the Tau. The other Chapter to make forces available was the Raptors. A strike force of two companies and a battle barge from the Chapter would contribute significantly to the Imperium's combat resources, both on the ground and with the fleet.

Next, High Magos Zadakine Volta had already promised the assistance of a Titan legion, but delivering on the oath proved more difficult. Stygies VIII was the natural Forge World to provide aid in the form of the Legio Honorum, but the legion was already fully committed and there were no battlegroups available to lend their support. To fulfil his oath, Volta had the difficult task of finding replacements. In the end he turned to the overlords of Mars, conversing with the heart of the Cult of the Machine to personally request the aid of the Fabricator General. He had only limited success as the Titan battlegroups were already being committed to the Cadian Gate; the need for the Imperium's greatest fighting machines was pressing if the tide of Chaos was to be stemmed. Volta argued that he had sworn the aid of a legion, and the Adeptus Mechanicus stood to gain much from the recapture of Taros. In the end, the intervention of the Fabricator General secured Volta a small battlegroup from the Legio Ignatum under the command of Princeps Jernay. The main fighting force of the battlegroup was a maniple of four Warhound Titans; hardly the number he had hoped for, but enough to satisfy Volta's oath to Gustavus.

The Departmento Munitorum, as well as raising and transporting regiments, could also provide assistance in the form of indentured engineering and labour corps. These were not combat troops but units for the rear area whose primary role was to dig and build. It was hard, unforgiving work, but their presence helped release Imperial Guard infantry from such arduous and time consuming duties.

Tau Empire infiltrators and stealth troops mounted constant raids on Imperial positions, damaging and destroying vital logistical equipment such as this Trojan support vehicle.

The backbone of the Imperium's assault. Tallarn Armoured companies would match their firepower and armour against that of the Tau.

The Ministorum could also provide assistance, but not in the form of combat troops. Cardinal Astral Velas was not inclined to lend military aid to the Taros Invasion Force. He had only attended the first High Command meeting in person, and after that he left a representative to speak for him, Deacon Gotz. The Cardinal made it clear he was not in favour of this expedition. To him it was a waste of resources that could be put to better use fighting heresy elsewhere in his diocese. Taros was a dust bowl planet of just twelve million souls and its numbers paled into insignificance compared to wars that needed to be fought on hive worlds to save the souls of billions there. The Cardinal felt that it was only the malign influence of the Adeptus Mechanicus lobby that had forced the Adeptus Terra into sanctioning this attack, and he did not fully trust the Cult of the Machine God and their mysterious ways.

The Cardinal therefore would supply no fighting forces, but would do the duty required of him. Priests and Confessors would be found for each of the regiments to maintain watch over the souls of the men of the Imperial Guard. The Orders Dialogus would supply vital support in the form of Tau language experts, the few that were available, and the Order Hospitaller would provide a measure of medical care for the injured, but its contribution was, in truth, pitiful.

Power politics within the upper ranks of the Ecclesiarchy probably had much to do with the Cardinal Astral's reticence. A powerful man in his own right, in shadowy corners it was said that Velas was not a supporter of the current Ecclesiarch and to be lending aid to the invasion might be seen to be responding to the Ecclesiarch's recent anti-xenos sermons. The Cardinal liked to think of himself as his own man, with far greater concerns than twelve million wretched miners. He might also be seeking favour with those factions within the Ministorum that had their own plans for the succession to the Ecclesiarchal Throne on Terra.

The Location of the Attack

Gustavus' command staff had been almost a year in pre-invasion information gathering and mustering of forces; now the time had come for planning the actual attack on Taros. How would they commit the troops they had requested, and how would they keep them supplied once on the ground? One immediate consideration for Gustavus was that the longer he spent planning and mustering, the more likely it was that information might leak out. A traitor from within his ranks with access to classified information might sell it to the Tau for a vast price or the promise of safety within their empire. Pre-warned the Tau would be in a far better position to defeat his attack. Security around the invasion's planning needed to be tight. Colonel Scheja, whose efforts so far to infiltrate a spy onto Taros had come to nought, was given the task of maintaining internal security for the campaign. He would establish a network of informers and spies within High Command and the Imperial Guard regiments; people paid by Scheja to keep their eyes and ears open, and report anything suspicious directly back to him alone.

To aid with internal security, Gustavus ordered that the gathering invasion force should not be concentrated just yet, instead the men would be scattered about surrounding sectors. This way it would seem many other small warzones were being reinforced and, in theory, the build-up would likely go unnoticed until it was too late. This meant that Imperial Guard regimental commanders would not be informed of their actual destination until the last moment.

Drawing on the good work of the previous year, the High Command staff began the invasion planning process. In order to satisfy the demands of the Imperial Guard regimental commanders and Lord Marshal De Stael, three key objectives had to be considered. Firstly, the invasion would need to quickly capture an operational spaceport. If not in the initial assault, then

in the following few days of ground operations. A large spaceport would be vital in maintaining the flow of supplies needed by the forces on the ground once battle was joined.

Secondly, the invasion should be undertaken by at least three Imperial Guard regiments simultaneously. This would be a force large enough to overwhelm all but the strongest resistance and would mean a firm bridgehead could be established between orbit and the planet's surface, strong enough to resist all immediate enemy counter-attacks. Without a secure lodgment area, the Imperium's invasion could be defeated in its first few days.

Thirdly was the question of the water supply on the planet. On a desert world such as Taros, water was a valuable commodity, and was supplied via hydro-plants and recycling facilities. The ground forces would need a secure supply of water rapidly, or anyone fighting there would be unable to operate effectively for long.

These three objectives contributed much to the planning process. Firstly Taros had only one spaceport, in Tarokeen. Hence a direct assault on the city was considered in some detail. Tarokeen was also the centre of the planet's industry and administration. If the war was to be won then Tarokeen would have to be captured. Whilst the traitors or the Tau held the city, the war would continue and the mineral resources needed for Stygies VIII would be unable to leave the planet. The enemy also undoubtedly knew this. Tarokeen and its immediate hinterland, the Iracunda Isthmus, would be the strongest defended part of the entire planet. A direct assault, under the guns defending the city, would invite disaster. Too many enemy ground forces would be waiting for them and too many orbital defences could threaten the invasion fleet. The direct approach was disregarded as being too much of a risk.

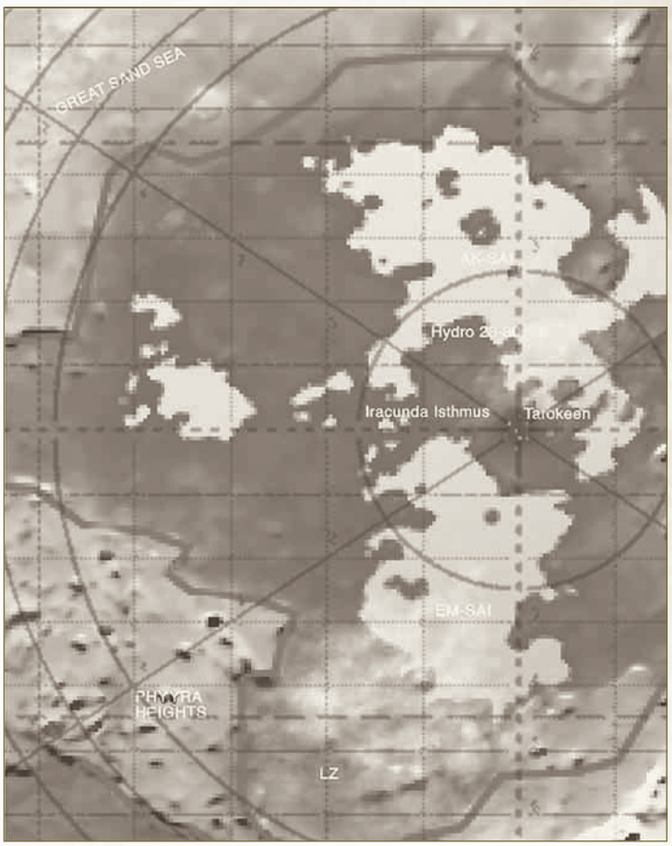
The landing zone would have to be close enough to the ultimate objective to keep supply lines short, but not so close as to risk too much enemy resistance. The practicalities of landing on the far side of the planet and then transporting every man, gun and shell around the world were impossible to overcome. With the invasion fleet in orbit, it was only prudent to get as close to the final objective as possible. As for the spaceport, it would be the priority once sufficient forces had landed. In the meantime an entire Engineer corps would be tasked with constructing a landing site suitable for the delivery of supply ships.

Secondly, the main restriction on the initial attack would be the number of drop ships and assault transports available to the Guardsmen. Fleet Admiral Kotto had the task of organising the Imperial Navy fleet's role in the invasion. He had to find the landing craft needed, but this was no easy task and it was unlikely that enough could be found to simultaneously land three regiments. Gustavus, however, wasn't convinced it was needed. Three regiments would give the invasion force the flexibility to attack several locations at once. De Stael argued for this plan but Gustavus overruled him. To split their forces would be to give up their biggest advantage as attackers. Even if Taros was expecting such an attack – a reasonable assumption – they would have to defend every possible location where an invasion might fall. This would cause Taros' defenders and the Tau to spread their forces thinly. Gustavus' plan would allow their forces to concentrate at a single point in overwhelming numbers.

If the landing was to succeed then the Imperium had to hit one location so hard, its attack could not be repulsed. Although it might be a tempting option, even if only used as a diversion to draw away enemy forces, splitting the ground forces over several landing zones would mean each regiment risked becoming isolated from support and destroyed in detail in subsequent battles. In the end, a single landing zone strategy was settled on and would include as many troops as Fleet Admiral Kotto could find transports for.

The invasion's primary location still needed to be considered. Somewhere within the Aestus, either north or south of the city, was the best option. North would mean increased exposure to the high temperatures and violent storms of the Great Sand Sea. South would be slightly cooler and more stable, but the enemy had probably already recognised this and would likely be better prepared there. In the end, Gustavus preferred the latter option of the two.

Thirdly, the water supply situation was a critical consideration. An unopposed landing in the uninhabited and undefended deep deserts with their high temperatures and lack of any water supply, as well as the risk of desert storms and the massive distance to the objective, rapidly ruled this option out. Wherever the landings eventually occurred, water would have to be supplied from off-world, then shipped in on the heavy tankers in vast quantities at least until sufficient supplies could be captured. Standing orders were to be issued to all regiments that any moisture extraction equipment or hydro-plants captured during the campaign were to be left undamaged and turned over to High Command. In this way the advance could help meet some of its own water requirements. There was no easy answer to this tricky problem. Life on Taros was harsh because water was so scarce, so it would have to be rationed immediately until a secure supply line from off-world could be provided. Extra water evaporation equipment would also be loaded to help alleviate the situation in the short term.



A map showing 'the Aestus', the temperate zone bordering Taros' major seas, which would be the focus of the invasion and the subsequent campaign. All the fighting took place within these four million square kilometres of rugged desert.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE INVASION

At 2392998.M41 the Taros Invasion Fleet officially came into existence under the command of Fleet Admiral Kotto, who raised his flag onboard the Overlord class battle cruiser *Righteous Power*. The six ships of the line, their escort squadrons and the troop transports began assembling, and the holds of the transports were loaded with Imperial Guardsmen, artillery pieces, vehicles, tanks and vast supplies of fuel, food, ammunition and, most vitally, water. The fleet rendezvoused over the course of three days, each transport and its escorts arriving from different systems and forming up into line astern to create the invasion armada.

Each Imperial Guard regiment had been embarked on its assigned transports to a carefully devised timescale, so that all the transports were brought together at the rendezvous point at the same time. As the fleet readied, only X Corps was present. The regiments of XI Corps would follow behind as a second wave after the fleet had fought its way in-system, landed the invasion forces and established a secure lodgement area on the surface. Also not yet present was the Legio Ignatum Titan battlegroup, but the fleet could not wait for stragglers.

Already waiting at the rendezvous point, and forming the head of the column, were the armada's two largest ships, the battle cruiser *Righteous Power* and the Raptors Chapter battle barge *War Talon*. These two ships, and their close escorts, would be the first to arrive in the Taros system. They would be the spearhead of the invasion force, fighting their way in-system towards the objective. The three other cruisers of the line would be following close behind, forming a potent battlegroup in the vanguard of the invasion force. Behind them would come the flotilla of transports, with an escort of light cruisers and frigates for close defence.

Admiral Kotto was in supreme command of all the Imperial fleet aspects of the invasion plan. He did not know what resistance to expect within the Taros system but, from the formation of his fleet, he was preparing to meet Tau ships in a fleet action and to use his largest ships as a shield for the smaller, vulnerable transports.

At 2404998.M41 the astro-telepathic signal was sent to the bridge of the *Righteous Power* instructing the fleet to get under way. Ship after ship engaged its main thrusters and began to follow the lead vessels towards Taros. The long planned-for invasion had finally begun.

The Taros System

After three weeks navigating the fickle tides of warp space, the *Righteous Power* disengaged its warp engines and fell back through the mantle of reality, and out of the Immaterium. Its crew immediately went to

battlestations as klaxons blared through the decks. Directly behind the *Righteous Power* was the *War Talon* – the vanguard of the invasion had arrived. Surprisingly, it found no enemy fleet waiting so Admiral Kotto set course directly for Taros, with surveyor readings still showing no enemy ships in the vicinity as it advanced. The Space Marines verified this; the powerful surveyors onboard their vessel could find no enemy targets.

In the vanguard's wake followed the cruiser-group, the mainstay of Kotto's fighting force. As the *Star of Cassiopeia*, *Black Duke* and *Hammer of Thrace* powered towards their objective, no attack came. The Tau fleet was simply nowhere to be found. In response, several of the escort squadrons were detached to begin patrolling for enemy vessels, but they found nothing too. Maybe the Tau had abandoned the system to its fate, fearing to face the might of the Imperial Navy, or maybe it was a trap? Regardless, Admiral Kotto proceeded towards Taros with due caution.

The expected fight to gain low orbit and allow the invasion forces to disembark never materialised, and the Imperial fleet moved steadily onwards. It seemed there would be no attempt by the Tau to halt the invasion in space, as with each passing minute it became clearer that there was no Tau fleet around. Freed from defensive duties, the *War Talon* powered up and raced ahead, the Raptors commanders keen to begin their planetfall operations. The *War Talon* and her escort were the first to arrive in low orbit over Taros, the rest of the fleet keeping a safe distance until the Space Marines had completed their mission.

Missile Silo Decima

For the landings on Taros, the Raptors Chapter had pledged its 3rd and 6th Companies to the Taros invasion force. Under the command of Captain Orelius, the strike force would also be supported by elements of the Chapter's armoury and fleet, including the firepower of the battle barge *War Talon*.

The mission assigned to, and accepted by, the Raptors was of critical importance to the landings. They were to ensure that a planetary defence missile silo, the only one identified in a position to threaten the invasion fleet as it held a geo-stationary orbit above the landing zone, was destroyed. Code named 'Decima' for the operation, the silo was targeted for destruction.

Silo Decima was part of a network of such facilities around the planet, built by the Imperium as Taros' main defence against hostile aliens. If left unhindered the silos could engage the vulnerable troop transports in orbit. The loss of a single transport would cause a massive loss of manpower for the battle ahead, and could drastically affect the outcome of the landings or the following campaign. It was a risk that could not be taken, Silo Decima must be neutralised before the main Imperial Guard landings could commence.

The target area was to be subjected to a heavy bombardment by two hundred and fifty rounds from the *War Talon's* bombardment cannons, but the danger of even a single operational silo surviving and then scoring a successful hit on a troop transport meant that a strike force had to be assigned to make sure no silos were able to fire on the invasion fleet. If the silos were destroyed by the shelling then all well and good, but there was no guarantee of success unless there were troops on the ground. The underground silos were designed to withstand the heaviest bombardments, and even the fearsome weaponry of the *War Talon* might not be able to put the missiles within beyond use. High Command deemed Silo Decima to be the single greatest threat to the invasion forces and it fell to the Raptors battle-brothers to lead the way and destroy it.

The commanders agreed that Silo Decima would have to be taken by ground assault. The Raptors would be the first Imperial troops to land on Taros, and the 3rd Company of the Raptors Chapter, led by Captain Orelius, and later reinforced by the 6th Company, would be responsible for this vital mission. Only when Silo Decima was eliminated could the Guardsmen waiting in orbit start landing.

The operation was to be a swift surgical strike directly from orbit; there would be no supporting armoured vehicles to assist those on the ground. The objective was simple, to destroy the missile silos at all costs. Once destroyed, the 'Objective Achieved' signal would summon the Chapter's remaining landing craft to reinforce the ground forces with the 6th Company and heavier armour. Once landed, the Space Marines would be ready to strike overland or counter-attack any enemy moving against the landing zone.

Invasion Force Embarkation Plan

(Transport and principal units carried)

Transport Ship	Unit
Righteous Power	*2356th Storm Trooper*
	89th Tallarn
Star of Cassiopeia	*2378th Storm Trooper*
	89th Tallarn
Black Duke	*1002nd Fighter Wing*
	83rd Fighter Wing
	501st Bomber Wing
Hammer of Thrace	*386th Fighter Wing*
	3rd Tallarn Armoured
August	*Departmento Munitorum Engineer Corps*
Cerebus	*Departmento Munitorum Labour Corps*
Imperius Javelin	*17th Tallarn*
Imperius Gauntlet	*17th Tallarn*

Transport Ship	Unit
Imperius Anvil	*17th Tallarn*
Graf Derzki	*89th Tallarn*
Prince Maud	*89th Tallarn*
Saint Machree	*12th Tallarn Armoured*
Isolde	*12th Tallarn Armoured*
Son of Jucha	*12th Tallarn Armoured*
Marcouf	*Ordo Hospitaller 2774th Fighter Wing*
Colossia	*3rd Tallarn Armoured*
Piety	*Departmento Munitorum Labour Corps*
	2424th Bomber Wing
	71st Tactical Wing
Kagul	*331st Tallarn Regiment*
Honorus Rex (not present)	*Legio Ignatum Battlegroup*

Timetable for Raptors Attack

Z-hour -105 ..... Scout drop pod launched
Z-hour -102 ..... Scout drop pod lands
Z-hour -85 ..... Scouts in surveillance positions
Z-hour -32 ..... Orbital bombardment begins
Z-hour -10 ..... All Thunderhawks launch
Z-hour -2 ..... Orbital bombardment ceases
Z-hour +0 ..... Strike Force A deploy from Thunderhawk
Z-hour +6 ..... Hydra turret destroyed – Strike Forces B and C land
Z-hour +9 ..... Strike Force D lands
Z-hour +15 ..... Predicted primary objectives complete
Z-hour +30 ..... Predicted all enemy resistance overcome
Z-hour +40 ..... 6th Company landings begin

Intelligence Gathering

With his invasion mission now confirmed, Captain Orelius set about gathering all the intelligence he could about the target and its defences. From the High Command staff's earlier work there was already some relevant information available to aid the Space Marines' attack.

One of the documents unearthed by Curator Adept Skel's search was a Departmento Munitorum construction report that was almost a thousand years old, and described the construction of a missile site by a penal labour corps. It gave details of what the site contained: two underground missile silos; a command bunker and two personnel shelters with enough room for a hundred strong silo crew and security staff. External defence works included a minefield, ditches and razor wire, and an anti-aircraft position equipped with a Hydra turret, as well as other vehicle shelters and stores. Most of these would be below ground, making them difficult to destroy with conventional artillery; even the *War Talon's* bombardment cannons might not penetrate deep enough. Amongst the data recovered were also three faded vid-slate images of an inspection made by the then Planetary Governor of the site after it came into service. From these images and the construction report, a relatively accurate map could be created of the target.

Attacking the site based on only second hand ancient information was risky. What if the regime or the Tau had upgraded the defences or increased the size or the number of silos? It was not unreasonable to assume that, given the planet's renegade status, the Planetary Governor would seek to increase his defences against an outside attack. Captain Orelius needed some first hand information he could rely on.

Before any of his battle-brothers were committed to the assault, he would send the available Scouts to the surface to reconnoitre the site and relay their findings. His strike force was supported by only one Scout squad and they would be the first to deploy, before any bombardment of the target began. The Scouts' mission would be to survey the site from a distance and relay that information back to the *War Talon* for final adjustments to the attack plan.

Planning and Training

On board the *War Talon*, Orelius and his senior battle-brothers prepared for the coming battle. This assault was the sort of mission they had trained for all their lives, but it still required detailed planning. Specific refresher training in the use of melta-bombs and demolition charges, as well as fire and movement routines and Thunderhawk disembarkation drills were practiced time and again aboard the battle barge until Orelius was satisfied his men were ready.

Orelius was well aware that the initial threat to any planetary assault would be the anti-aircraft defences. These would be high priority targets, as the loss of a Thunderhawk gunship full of thirty battle-brothers could put the whole mission in jeopardy. Before the main force could attack the silos therefore, the Hydra turret would need to be eliminated.

The 3rd Battle Company, being of standard Codex Astartes organisation, contained two Assault squads trained to use jump packs for deep strike operations from high or low altitude. A single Assault squad would be committed to attack the Hydra emplacement and they would be the first wave, led by Veteran Sergeant Igis and deploying from a Thunderhawk gunship at high altitude. Such deployments are usually made from low altitude, to avoid the worst effects of any ground fire, but given the nature of the target, Orelius commanded that the Thunderhawk stay above the maximum known range of the Hydra's autocannon. This way the Thunderhawk carrying the Assault squad could approach with minimal risk. The risk of the Space Marines being hit whilst in free fall was judged far less than that of a Thunderhawk being destroyed or so badly damaged it would be forced to abandon its mission.

The Assault squad was to land as close to their target as was realistically possible, rapidly overcome any Tau or traitor resistance and set melta-charges on the Hydra's turret. The time the Assault squad jumped from their Thunderhawk would be designated as Z-hour and then all other timings for the operation against Silo Decimus would be taken with Z-hour as the base from which to count from. The Scouts would launch in drop pods at Z-hour -105 and land at Z-hour -102, giving them less than an hour minutes after landing to get into position, observe the target and report back their findings. The second wave was scheduled to attack at Z-hour +6, giving Veteran Sergeant Igis and his nine Space Marines just six minutes to knock out the AA turret.

The second wave would comprise the main strike forces: two Thunderhawk gunships each carrying two Tactical squads and a Devastator squad, designated as Strike Forces B and C respectively. The Thunderhawks would land their cargoes inside the battery perimeter, then the squads would disembark to attack the missile silos themselves. A third Thunderhawk would land just behind them carrying Captain Orelius and his Command squad, along with other vital support such as Apothecary, Techmarines, etc, and a reserve force of 3rd Company's remaining two Tactical squads. This was designated as Strike Force D and had a flexible role – to reinforce either of the attacks should they meet with stiff resistance. If all went to plan they would not be needed for the main assault and could be saved to establish a secure perimeter on the ground after the silos were destroyed. The final squad of his company, the second Assault squad, was to remain on the *War Talon* to deploy with 6th Company.

The plan for Strike Forces B and C was simple. The two Tactical squads would advance on the silos under dedicated covering fire from their supporting Devastator squads. Once close enough they would set the demolition charges on the silos' roofs, then fall back to a safe distance and the squad sergeant would detonate the charges, collapsing the silo roof to prevent any missiles being launched.

With their primary objective complete, 3rd Company would then sweep through the rest of the silo site, eliminate any resistance and secure a perimeter before reinforcements and vehicles from 6th Company landed. In all, it was estimated the entire operation would take just half an hour from Z-hour to complete and secure all objectives.

Orbital Bombardment

With the vanguard of the invasion fleet now approaching Taros, the *War Talon* quickly manoeuvred into its bombardment position in a geo-stationary low orbit. Its target location already locked-in, the bombardment cannon and lance turrets prepared to open fire as the planet's rotation slowly brought the target area into the battle barge's line of fire. If the gun crew's mission was successful, then the subsequent attack would be a simple mopping-up operation. With luck, the demolition charges would not be needed at all, and the *War Talon's* big guns would knock out the missile silos with direct hits. This was unlikely though, over such long distances destroying a small armoured target would be difficult.

Whilst the gunners prepared, the flight decks and launch bays of the *War Talon* were a mass of activity. Four Raptors Thunderhawks stood ready to begin the invasion of Taros, their fuel tanks full, every system checked and double-checked. Each individual Space Marine was also prepared for battle. His power armour suit was calibrated for desert environments, adjusting to 99% efficiency regards water recycling and maximum heat dissipation. Bolters and heavy weapons were test fired on the ship's range before being issued, and extra ammunition, grenades, knives, chainswords and bolt pistols were handed out to the files of armoured battle-brothers. Finally, each Tactical squad was issued with two bulky demolition charges, with the squad sergeants being given the detonators so that if any of them were slain in battle, the mission still stood some chance of success.

Before embarkation, the entirety of 3rd Company stood shoulder-to-shoulder in ranks as Captain Orelius addressed them. In a rousing speech he ordered them to bring the Emperor's justice to those that had chosen to turn away from His divine light. Theirs was the honour of striking the first blow and, in life or death, each battle-brother would do the Chapter great honour this day. His speech complete, all knelt before their company Chaplain as he led them in the ritual pre-battle prayers.

The company rose as one as the *War Talon's* bombardment cannon opened fire, the concussion reverberating through the decks. The first shells to fall upon Taros itself would presage the beginning of the invasion as the Raptors Space Marines efficiently filed into position within their Thunderhawk gunships to await launch.

Planetfall

Before the bombardment started, operations had already begun with the Scout squad in their drop pod launching on schedule. It made planetfall safely and the Scouts moved out across the sun-scorched landscape, disguised by their cameleoline cloaks and carrying heavy surveillance equipment, as well as their sniper rifles.

Once in position, the squad set up their equipment and began beaming a secure transmission back to the *War Talon's* operations room. Initial intelligence was correct, the site contained two silos and an AA turret, but the outer ring of defences had been improved with the addition of turret gun emplacements. These heavy weapons might pose a major threat to landing Thunderhawks so, as Captain Orelius watched the relays aboard his vessel, he adjusted his plans accordingly.

Raptors Scouts land in the desert ahead of the main attack.
Their mission was to report on the missile silo's defences and then observe the orbital bombardment.

RAPTORS TACTICAL SQUAD SPACE MARINE

1. Power Armour

This Space Marine wears a suit of Mk VII power armour, sometimes referred to as 'Armorum Impetor' or 'Aquila' pattern armour, although on this particular set of armour the Chapter's artificers have replaced the breastplate with one converted from an older Mk V suit, with the re-instigation of the chest eagle and the power cables relocated to the interior.

All marks of Space Marine armour have many variants. Some do not retain all their original features; others, as in this case, utilise parts from different marks of armour. Each set is usually personalised by each Space Marine, and is revered as a holy relic of the Chapter. Suits, or parts of suits, can be very old and have often been reused many times.

Like all power armour, this suit contains an exoskeletal array of actuators and fibre bundles which replicate muscular commands via a neurone interface that literally plugs into the wearer's spinal column (via his black carapace) to his motor nervous system. Through this interface the heavy armour becomes part of the wearer and responds to his movements and mind-impulse controls without adding any encumbrance despite the suit's weight when inert. The muscle fibre bundles and actuators actually increase the (already considerable) strength of the wearer, allowing him to lift heavier loads or jump greater distances than when not wearing the suit, so that whilst appearing heavy and unwieldy, this Space Marine will experience little burden regards weight as he fights and retains almost his full array of movement and agility.

The outer layer of this powered armour consists of shaped admantium and plasteel plates, encased in a ceramite ablative layer, designed to deflect as well as absorb the energy of incoming blows. The shoulder pads of this suit also contain small auto-responsive plates, which burst outwards due to a micro-explosion to counteract the energy of an incoming attack.

Beneath this layer of armoured protection lies the internal workings of the suit's life support and combat systems. The lower back holds a liquid high protein food store which, when combined with the Space Marine's genetically enhanced metabolism, produces no waste and keeps a Space Marine's body functioning without the need for any other nourishment. During battle there is therefore no need for this Space Marine to stop to eat or drink as the suit provides all his nutrition. On top of this, the suit also has its own back-up power supply and a solar array to recharge this, meaning the suit can operate for a short time without its backpack.

A detox injector with five doses is also built into the Space Marine's power armour. This will counteract the effects of most common poisons and toxins. The injector can also be used for stimulants and, in contravention of *Codex Astartes* guidelines, some Chapters have used it to administer combat drugs.

The palm of the gauntlet contains sensors to read information from weapons held in the Space Marine's hands, and to pass genetic identification codes to the weapons. Without the proper code, this Space Marine's boltgun will not function. The soles of the boots are magnetic, as well as being constructed of a micropore adherent compound, meaning a Space Marine will not slip on even the slickest surfaces. This magnetic function can be turned on or off as needed.

2. Backpack

The main power source for the power armour is situated in its backpack. The highly efficient sub-atomic core within this provides the power for all of the power armour's internal systems. The suit also contains a reserve supply and a back-up micro-solar panel array in case of emergencies. The reserve power source can be recharged via the solar panel, and when fully charged should be enough to last a month (with all non-vital systems used by the Space Marine disabled) without the need for major maintenance or resupplying.

Thermal waste dissipaters form the characteristic nozzles on the backpack and the thermal waste from these can be used as limited manoeuvring thrusters in zero gravity. The backpack also contains this suit's oxygen supply and air purification system which allows the wearer to breathe in toxic environments. Combined with a Space Marine's multi-lung implant, the wearer can operate unhindered in any atmosphere, as well as underwater and in hard vacuum. Air intakes are also situated on the backpack.

The lower part of the backpack is the temperature regulating system. In combat, with the suit functioning at maximum capacity, heat can build up rapidly and cause problems for the Space Marine. Settings for heat control can be adjusted depending upon what environment the suit is operating in, obviously retaining more heat in cold conditions or in the -278°C of deep space than in hot conditions. On Taros, this suit will be optimised for the planet's mean average temperature. Within the armour the wearer will experience only minor temperature fluctuations as the suit maintains the correct temperature to keep the Space Marine operating at peak physical efficiency.

3. Boltgun

As a member of a Tactical squad, this Space Marine's principal weapon is the boltgun. This weapon is a standard model Mk IV with a sickle magazine containing twenty bolts. Each bolt is a rocket propelled, armour-piercing, mass reactive explosive round. Bolts explode after penetrating a target and are capable of destroying small vehicles, as well as having a devastating effect on infantry. The weapon has single shot and semi-automatic settings, firing a burst of three bolts in quick succession. The boltgun also includes a palm print sensor for genetic identification coding.

Brother Kalius of the Raptors Chapter, 3rd Company. He is a veteran brother of 2nd Tactical squad, seen here deployed for the attack on Silo Decima.

4. Helmet
This Space Marine's upgraded Mk VII helmet contains most of the suit's combat systems. All of these helmet systems are referred to by one title: auto-senses. Features include the primary, thought-activated, comms-link and this Space Marine's helmet also has an additional comms-booster and scrambler attachment to block enemy attempts to listen in to communications channels. The right eye also includes a range finder, targeter and target recognition 'friend or foe' upgrades to the helmet's basic set. Such equipment is more common in Devastator squads, but not limited to them.

The visor displays tactical information including maps, waypoint markers and a compass, and can be used to call up weapons data that is passed through the weapon's grip and the palm of the glove. Primarily, this would be an ammunition counter display, but it also gives emergency warnings about overheating and other malfunctions. This helmet also incorporates visual magnification up to x4 which, when combined with the wearer's occulobe implant, means a Space Marine sees very well in most conditions. The visor also includes basic infra-red scanning.

Through his auto-senses, the Space Marine can access the full diagnosis of the armour's operating status and relay information about the external environment such as atmospheric composition, barometric pressure and the presence of harmful chemicals and toxins, etc. Diagnostic sensors are positioned in various places on the suit to scan for such information.

The helmet can also display biological information about the Space Marine himself such as his current heart rate (for both hearts – Space Marines have two), blood pressure, toxin levels and the workings of the Larraman's organ or Oolitic kidney to assess internal damage. These bio-status read-outs can also be broadcast to Space Marine command units for monitoring each battle-brother during battle and training.

As well as containing the communications equipment, the helmet's earpieces screen the wearer from sonic attacks and include amplifiers to the Space Marine's Lyman's ear, giving sharper hearing and allowing the Space Marine to filter out or enhance specific sounds. The benefits of the Lyman's ear also means a Space Marine is unlikely to become dizzy or disorientated, even when hit by strong blast waves.

The grill on the helmet contains a microphone, allowing the wearer to talk normally through the helmet or amplify his voice over a short distance, sometimes useful in the din of battle. If the atmosphere allows, the grill can open to let the wearer breathe it instead, thus preserving his air purification equipment or internal air supply until it is required.

Finally, the helmet visor incorporates an auto-reactive photo-chromatic visor that protects the wearer from light level changes, dimming or blacking out completely should the wearer be exposed to sudden, dazzling light.

5. Relic and Insignia
Strapped to the left shoulder pad are two engraved skulls. These are holy relics which may have been added by (or in recognition of) the former owners of the armour, fellow squad members killed in battle or are those of worthy foes carried as trophies. Many such sub-cults exist throughout the myriad of Space Marine Chapters, with each following its own rituals and traditions, often inherited from the Chapter's recruitment world. These relics will be gifts from the Company Chaplain, rewards for exceptional dedication or bravery in battle.

The plastron chest eagle is worn as the symbol of this Space Marine's loyalty to the Emperor. Such chest eagles are common to all Space Marine Chapters.

The Raptors Chapter badge is a white eagle's head. It is worn on the left shoulder pad (the beak is just visible) and is repeated on the right knee pad.

The right shoulder pads bear the Tactical squad markings (large arrow) and the squad number in roman numerals, in this case the second Tactical squad. Underneath this is a name scroll. This personal cloth scroll bears the Space Marine's name and, like all the non-Codex additions to this armour, will have been assigned by the Company Chaplain to reinforce the Space Marine's faith and morale.

The badge of the Taros Campaign (ie, crossed spears on a red disc) has been temporarily stencilled onto the left leg greave and helmet. This symbol would be carried by all the Emperor's forces fighting on Taros, regardless of which fighting arm or organisation they were from, helping to identify the forces as loyal during combined operations. It will be removed at the conclusion of the campaign.

As a veteran this Space Marine bears his own personal heraldry; a shield pinned to the right shoulder pad, bearing a sun symbol. The meaning of this is unknown, but it may hark back to a time before this Space Marine was recruited.

Finally, this Space Marine's boltgun has twelve kill markings scored onto the weapon's case, probably from previous missions.

6. Grenades and Equipment
In addition to his boltgun, Brother Kalius carries other combat equipment as hanging from his utility belt are two fragmentation grenades. He also carries three spare magazine pouches for his boltgun. The cylindrical object hanging from his back, below the backpack, is harder to identify. Given the nature of the Raptors' first mission on Taros, this may well be a shaped demolition charge carried to destroy the missile silos. Not visible here the Space Marines would also have been carrying krak grenades, and may well also carry a bolt pistol as a secondary weapon.

7. Combat Knife
The Space Marine's last weapon, and his only close combat weapon, is his combat knife. This highly ornate piece, bearing a dedicational eagle crossguard, heavy pommel and a half metre blade is almost a short sword. Used for hand-to-hand combat, it is kept honed to a keen edge.

It is also used during the Chapter's ceremonies and rituals, and will have been blessed before battle. It is not a bayonet, cannot be fitted to the boltgun and must therefore be wielded by hand. Hand-to-hand combat and knife fighting are part of every Space Marine's basic training, instilling skills which will continue to be honed throughout Brother Kalius' service to the Emperor.

Strike Force B was to abandon its target silo and instead use their heavy weapons to engage and destroy the turret emplacements. The three reserve Tactical squads would take over Strike Force B's part of the mission. This left Orelius with no flexible reserve on the ground to counter unexpected enemy moves so he quickly contacted Captain Kaedes of 6th Company. Kaedes' Company was already on standby to reinforce the assault and instead of waiting for 3rd Company to secure the landing zone, Orelius requested two Tactical squads immediately prepare for a drop pod launch and stand by should he need reinforcing at short notice.

Last minute adjustments to the plan complete, Orelius boarded his own Thunderhawk, the ramp closing behind him. The planning was over, now it was time to fight. Down on the surface the Scout squads watched from a safe distance as the orbital bombardment began to impact on the surface. Huge clouds of smoke and dust were thrown up in the desert as the flashes of lance beams and great explosions tore through Taros' surface. It lasted exactly half an hour as an area for five kilometres around the site was smothered in heavy explosions. What damage had actually been done to the silo site was impossible to tell though through the veil of thick dust.

Onboard the *War Talon* the four Thunderhawks received clearance to launch. Rocket engines blasted into life as one after the other the gunships sped from the launch bay and headed for the surface. The first Thunderhawk to pass through the heat of atmospheric entry was that carrying Strike Force A. Inside, ten heavily armed Assault troops, each with a jump pack, chainsword, holstered bolt pistol and a bandolier of melta bombs stood ready. Following instructions from the cockpit, each battle-brother waited in silence for the order to jump.

Its nose still red hot from the stress of atmospheric entry, the forward hold's rear ramp was lowered, blasting all inside with a rush of air. The first squad members stepped forward to the edge, each powering up their jump pack systems. When the order to jump was received through their helmet-comms there was no hesitation – two by two the Assault troops moved over the edge and into the void beyond.

Instantly, each Space Marine entered the Thunderhawk's slipstream, the torrent of fast flowing air created by the Gunship's own forward motion. The impact of hitting it was severe, and each man fought to avoid being flipped to tumble uncontrollably by it. As the forces of gravity pulled the Assault troops downwards, their jump pack motors began to work. At a mere hundred metres above the ground the thrusters ignited to slow the plunging descent, the braking power of the jump pack exerting huge gravitational pressure on them, pressure that would crush a normal man, but protected within his power armour and by his genetically enhanced physique each Assault trooper could overcome the lethal gravitational forces, orientate himself to the landing zone and control the direction of his descent. Using the jump pack's thruster controls, he could then guide himself directly onto the target to a safe landing. From jump to planetfall, the descent took no more than sixty seconds.

The Assault on Silo Decima

As Strike Force A landed, they came under sustained fire from the Hydra emplacement. Explosive autocannon rounds began to kick up the dust and tracers flashed past the Assault troops. Unable to hit their attackers in the sky, the AA gunners had waited and now rained down a hail of shells, all four barrels of the quad-mount thundering. Despite the heavy orbital shelling, it seemed most of the defences had remained intact, as had the silos. The area was scarred with smoking impact craters, but the bombardment had scored no direct hits. All was not lost though as the craters would provide vital cover for the following assault.

On landing, Veteran Sergeant Igis found himself in one such crater. Two of his squad had already been seriously wounded and there was no time

Amidst dust clouds thrown up by their orbital bombardment, Raptors Space Marines press their assault on the missile silo.

A Raptors Tactical squad mops up resistance after destroying Missile Silo Decima, clearing the way for the invasion fleet to move into orbit.

to waste. The crater offered vital cover, but his Assault troops needed to silence the gun before the other Thunderhawks arrived. Gathering the men immediately around him, Veteran Sergeant Igis ordered them to move forwards before launching himself over the crater's rim. The heavy fire was intense, the autocannon barking as their grazing fire flashed across the desert. As the Space Marines rushed forwards, several more were hit, the force of the rounds knocking each one clean off his feet. Veteran Sergeant Igis was the first to arrive, bolt pistol in one hand, melta-bomb in the other. In one mighty power-armoured leap he cleared the emplacement parapet, ducked under the red hot gun barrels and rolled to the base of the turret. He was quickly joined by two of his men. Igis activated his melta-bomb and slapped the magnetic disk to the turret. *"Six seconds!"*, he warned over the comm as the others placed their charges and rolled away.

Within the turret the gun crew knew what to expect when they heard the metallic clang of the melta charge being fixed outside. The commander threw open the hatch and leapt clear as the melta charges detonated in sequence; a triple explosion that turned the innards of the Hydra turret into a raging inferno. Molten metal sprayed the compartment within, killing the remaining crew before igniting the ammunition store. Fragments of the gun turret were thrown high into the air as it was ripped apart from the inside. Igis and his men dived for cover, their power armour peppered with flames and shrapnel, but most of the lethal blast cleared them. The first part of the mission was complete. In all three Assault brothers had been seriously wounded in the headlong attack. The others who had been hit were not seriously wounded, each had been saved by the admantium shell of his armour and would continue the fight.

Now the distant sound of Thunderhawk jets could be heard growing louder, and the silo's security platoon, who had survived the orbital bombardment in their underground shelter, began to emerge. At first they faced little fire, only the bolt pistol rounds of Igis' surviving battle-brothers, who were now clustered around the brightly burning wreckage of the AA turret. Then, as the triple jet roar grew closer, heavy bolter fire began to sweep the area. Following it the Thunderhawks raced in, slowed, then their hydraulic landing gear lowered and the aircraft flared back their noses before touching down, their ramps already opening and crashing down to reveal the Space Marines within. The Tactical squads rushed down the ramp and into the battle, boltguns levelled, bolter rounds slashing across the silo compound.

The Planetary Defence Force security squads had seen enough and several raced away rather than face the wrath of the infamous Space Marines. As explosive rounds detonated all around them, the rest sought cover or fled. Meanwhile, the Tactical squads advanced steadily upon their targets, whilst the Devastator squads took up their firing positions. Only seconds after landing, the Thunderhawk behind them powered skywards again, leaving a thickening pall of dust swirling in its wake.

Underground, in the silo command bunker, the weapon's controllers were frantically trying to arm and prepare the missiles for launch. It was still a race against time, however, as to whether the command bunker had a clear target, the *War Talon* stationed in low orbit above it. But could they get their missiles launched before the silos were destroyed?

Overcoming resistance on the ground was simple enough. The security platoon had not offered much in the way of a fight after the first uneven exchanges of fire. The attacking Tactical squads had little to fear from lasgun fire, but the perimeter turret emplacements were a different matter. These weapons were sighted to defend the base against a ground attack, but they could also sweep the silo site with tremendous firepower. Captain Orelius had diverted Strike Force B to engage them, hoping to use the Devastators' heavy weapons to destroy the well-armoured guns, and they were soon engaged in a heavy exchange of weapons fire.

Meanwhile, against only light resistance, Strike Force C had reached its target silo. Having cut through the encircling razor wire with their combat knives, the squads were planting and fusing demolition charges. The first silo was doomed. The second silo however was holding out due to the fire of the turret emplacements, but as the Devastator squad began to win the engagement, destroying the turrets with krak missiles and lascannon hits, the Assault units were closing in on it too.

The desert shook to the sound of the first silo being destroyed. The shaped explosions of the demolition charges splintered the reinforced plascrete silo roof, causing it to collapse and choking the missile launcher tube within with rubble. Any attempt to launch now would be a catastrophe, causing the missile to explode inside. Realising they had the lost the race, the command bunker crew abandoned their posts and fled. Soon the Raptors Space Marines would be blasting in the bunker doors and sweeping the interior with boltgun fire, and the command crew had decided to flee rather than face certain death.

Target Decima had been taken. The second silo was destroyed soon after the first; the last remnants of resistance either surrendering or fleeing. It had been a frantic battle but the Raptors' casualties had been light: one dead, five seriously wounded and twelve lightly wounded. Captain Orelius surveyed the smoke-blackened scene, the dead lying scattered in the sand where they had fallen, his Space Marines moving quickly into new positions to defend the site's perimeter. Upon hearing each squad report in and declare their area of the perimeter secure, he contacted the *War Talon* with instructions to launch 6th Company.

Reinforcements

The rest of the Raptors 6th Company arrived in a flight of Thunderhawk Gunships and transporters, setting down inside the silo site perimeter to unload men, vehicles and fresh ammunition supplies. They had run the same operation countless times in the past, and quickly, smoothly and without a hitch, the Space Marines prepared for the invasion following behind them. They had cleared the way with the kind of ruthless efficiency only the Adeptus Astartes could provide.

Even as the custodians of the strike forces' vehicles climbed aboard their charges and awoke the machine spirits within to life, the Taros invasion fleet was moving into position in orbit. As it did so, Orelius and Kaedes awaited new orders. Their task now was to sit tight, and should any enemy force threaten to attack the landing site, they would launch a fast, armoured, counter-attack into them. They had cleared the way for the Imperial Guard transports, now they must act as a security shield around the landing zone.

Imperial Guard Landings

With the mission objective complete, the signal from Captain Orelius was the cue for the first invasion transports to move into low orbit and begin their own landings. The first Imperial Guard troops to land in enemy territory on Taros were to be infantry companies of the 17th Tallarn regiment. Many felt the elite Storm Trooper companies, specially trained to spearhead the invasion, should be deployed, but this faction in De Stael's staff was overruled. Lord Marshal De Stael wanted a rapid build-up, more men, more heavy weapons, more vehicles and tanks. A Storm Trooper company offered good infantry, but could not provide the heavier equipment. General Barim-Abas of the 17th Tallarn felt that his men had the experience, training and equipment to perform this mission admirably.

The original plan had required enough landing craft to put down three entire Imperial Guard regiments in the first wave. Fleet Admiral Kotto had been unable to supply the vast numbers of landing craft required to fulfil that plan. Instead, the fleet had enough landing craft for just over one regiment. The others would have to wait their turn.

Onboard the sister transports *Imperius Javelin*, *Gauntlet* and *Anvil*, in excess of ten thousand men of the 17th Tallarn regiment were being transferred from their berths to the landing craft and, as well as the men, came their vehicles, equipment and supplies. The men destined for the first wave were equipped with full combat loads: armour, grenades, extra ammunition, rations and water supplies had been issued to the leading infantry companies and they filed into the bellies of the big landing craft, packed in shoulder-to-shoulder in the darkness. The last man onboard from each company was the company commander, ensuring that on landing he would also be the first man off. At the back of each assault company was a Commissar, bringing up the rear to force any malingerers out of the landing craft and into battle.

Whilst the three transports moved into low orbit, the fleet's escort ships took up patrol stations and the larger cruisers piquetted the surrounding region of space to defend the waiting transports against any sudden attack. The *Righteous Power* herself stayed in low orbit with the lead transports, ready to provide orbital bombardment. Aboard several of the landing craft were Imperial Navy shore parties, led by Navy officers from the *Righteous Power*. They were there to act as liaison between the Imperial Guard and the fleet and as fire control teams should resistance be strong enough for the *Righteous Power's* guns to be needed. Also onboard the battle cruiser was Lord Marshal De Stael, in place to oversee landing operations until he could transfer his headquarters to the surface.

After a bumpy descent through the atmosphere, it seemed De Stael had chosen his southern landing ground well. In the deserts of Taros' Aestus, there was no resistance and the landing craft, each packed with men and equipment, were not fired upon, meaning that when the great loading doors opened and the ramps fell, crashing into the desert sand, the men of the Tallarn 17th marched out into scorching temperatures and bright sunlight to find there was no battle, infact the enemy was nowhere to be seen. As the landings proceeded, not a single shot was fired and file by file the lead companies of Imperial Guardsmen marched down the ramps and into the savage, dry heat of Taros. With their officers barking orders the disembarkation was orderly and quick and, immediately upon landing, the companies began to move forwards to begin forming a defensive perimeter.

Following the lead infantry came the first tanks. One after another Leman Russ rumbled down the ramps and followed the men to form strongpoints in the new perimeter. De Stael listened to the reports from the surface of an unopposed landing – so far so good, but the enemy might already be reacting and mustering a counter-attack force. De Stael needed to seize this opportunity and reinforce as rapidly as possible; he didn't know how long it might last. Company by company the 17th Tallarn landed, disembarked and marched away from the landing zone. Once unloaded, the landing craft blasted off and returned to dock with the other transports now moving into low orbit to begin the process again. The 89th Tallarn would be the next regiment to land and with them the transports repeated the same process it had instigated with the 17th Tallarn. The invasion force had its foothold. Now it needed the extra forces and supplies to continue to hold it.

Whilst the regiments of X Corps began the long process of transferring everything from orbit to the landing zones, the Raptors Chapter had already completed its landings. The entirety of the 3rd and 6th Companies, and all their vehicles, were in position surrounding Silo Decima. Captains Orelius and Kaedes placed themselves next to the task force's Damocles Rhino and listened to the incoming reports. The invasion was progressing as planned. No enemy contact had been reported – yet.

As it turned out, the Raptors' assault on Decima was the only combat on the first day of the Taros invasion. It seemed that the enemy had been caught by surprise by the landings and had no forces positioned for an immediate counter-attack. The second day might see the expected attack materialise, but the longer the enemy left it, the stronger the Imperium's forces would become on the planet, and the harder it would be to remove them.

ORDO XENOS
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Raptors Chapter, Strike Force Orelius, Taros Campaign

Table of Organisation

Pax Imperialis

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Days went by and nothing was seen of the enemy. The 17th Tallarn regiment, now dug in behind sand-bagged positions, their artillery batteries located and Leman Russ half buried in the sand, were ordered to begin reconnaissance operations. The Sentinel companies and selected infantry squads were to launch long range patrols out into the surrounding desert to see if they could find any evidence of enemy activity or build-up. The main effort was to be concentrated northwards, the direction the eventual advance would go. As well as reporting enemy sightings, the patrols would also provide useful information about the terrain the regiments faced and their routes of advance.

Meanwhile, behind the 17th Tallarn's front lines, the landing zone was a hive of activity. Landing craft were continually touching down or taking off, with Sentinel powerlifters stomping to and fro carrying ammunition crates and fuel drums. Trojans were dragging fuel and water bowsers between the ships and the supply dumps, and through all this marched columns of men, mostly Tallarn infantry or Storm Trooper platoons, heavily laden with their own fighting kit, or wretched Departmento labour squads, dressed in rags and carrying shovels and picks whilst tanks and Chimera squadrons rumbled through the desert in neat lines. De Stael's build-up was now in full flow.

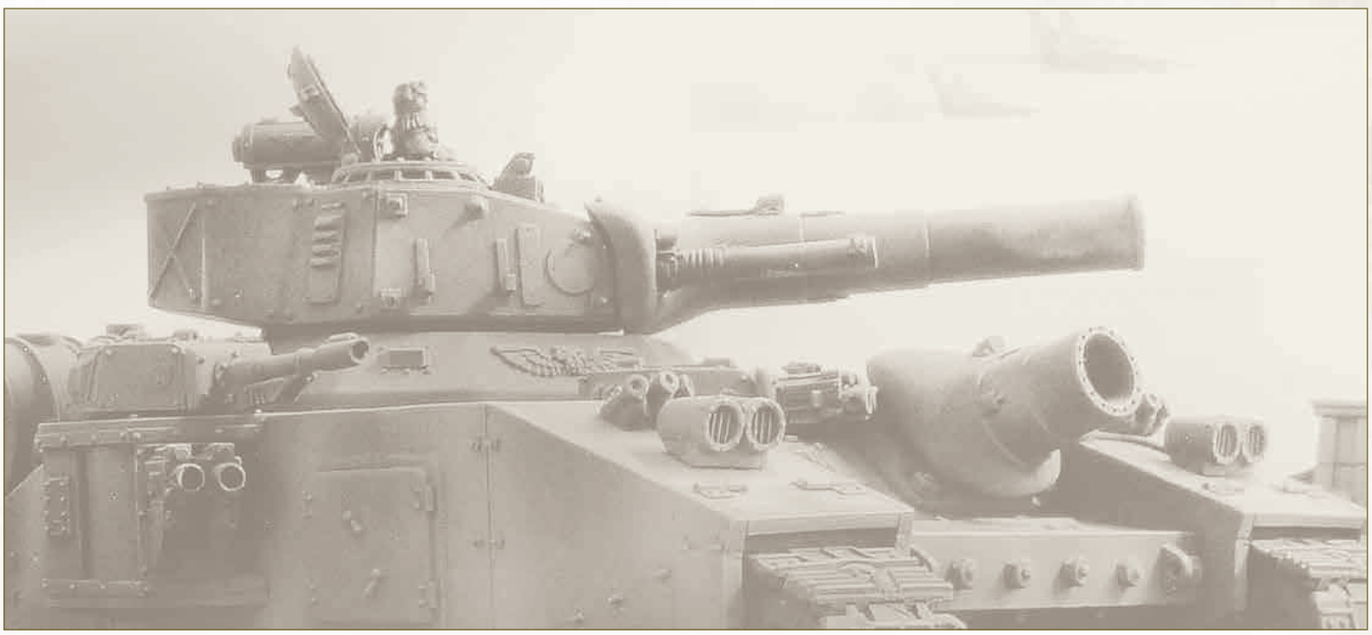
On day four, the first of the Munitorum labour corps was landed and immediately set to work constructing an aircraft landing field. The first of the Imperial Navy fighter squadrons, the 386th, was awaiting onboard the *Hammer of Thrace* for supplies to be put in place before they could transfer to the surface. This was a priority task as the addition of an Imperial Navy Fighter squadron would add greatly to the invasion force's reconnaissance assets. Able to range far and wide over the desert, they could seek out enemy forces at far greater ranges than the Sentinels or Armoured Fist squads already operating there.

For De Stael the landing was a triumph of organisation as the feared Tau counter-attack had never come. The force build-up was going well and, of course, there were problems to be solved: congestion in the landing zone, men or landing craft becoming lost or arriving at the wrong location. Already water supplies were a problem, but the tanker *Empress of Svedeg* was now in orbit and unloading 1,000 tonnes of water a day. At this rate it would still take twenty days to fully unload. The men on the ground needed more, and transporting water was taking up more space in the landing craft than anticipated, slowing the whole landing process down. There was also a shortage of Sentinel Powerlifters for unloading and De Stael requisitioned many from the Tallarn regiments on the perimeter to aid at the landing zone. The knock-on effect of this was that the Tallarn regiments had to use their own manpower to move supplies to the front, where Guardsmen soon found themselves used as pack animals to carry shells to the artillery guns or water cans to the trenches. Platoons given supply duty laboured in the hot sun carrying crate after crate and, in the first week, it became the most hated of duties, but whilst the enemy didn't attack, this inefficient use of combat manpower was not a problem for the 4621st Army.

Supplies of all kinds were now pouring onto Taros: fuel, food, medical supplies, communications equipment, sandbags (by the thousand), replacement vehicles, feed for Rough Rider squadrons, tents – small, medium and large powercells of all kinds, spare track links, spades, pickaxes, jerry cans by the pallet load, razor wire by the kilometre, mines and fuses, right down to boxes of shiny new medals. The landing operation was vast, but even with his first three regiments now in position De Stael was in no hurry to start operations on the ground. The more men and supplies he got in place, the better his ultimate chance of success. In all it took nearly two weeks to move everything down to the planet's surface; two weeks in which the enemy made no sign of attacking.

After being on standby for three days, the Raptors Space Marines were withdrawn back to their battle barge. They had completed their mission and enough Imperial Guard forces were now in place to resist any attack long enough for the Raptors to re-deploy if needed. The only Space Marine squad to remain on the surface was the lone Scout squad, who were to assist in the pre-offensive intelligence gathering.

The Imperium's forces were now securely on Taros and, amazingly, barely a shot had been fired. Reconnaissance reports indicated some enemy activity in the deserts – traces of Tau movement or occupation were found, but as yet there were no definite sightings. If the Tau were out there in the desert then they were playing a patient waiting game. It was De Stael's next task to find them and bring them to battle.



A Baneblade super-heavy tank of the Tallarn Armoured regiments deploys onto Taros.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DESERT WAR

Once a secure landing zone had been established on Taros, the Imperium did not make its move immediately. Instead its forces set up a strong defensive perimeter around the landing zone and began to reinforce and stockpile supplies; a process that lasted two weeks in the oppressive heat. In the meantime, the Tallarn regiments launched Sentinels and long-range infantry patrols into the desert to reconnoitre along expected routes of advance. They encountered nothing. Wherever the enemy were, they were obviously husbanding their strength and refusing to commit to battle.

The second week's build-up saw other Imperial Guard regiments and more Departmento Munitorum units land. Airbases were rapidly constructed by hundreds of indentured workers shipped-in temporarily – forming work crews that toiled day and night, they cleared vast stretches of the rocky landscape upon which landed Imperial Navy aircraft deployed from their carriers in orbit. The 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment were amongst the first to arrive and started the long process of transferring their three thousand men and one hundred and eighty aircraft to the surface.

Only when everything was in order, X Corps was in place and the supply stockpiles were large enough would Lord Marshal De Stael move from his defensive posture to an offensive one. The agreed objective of the ground offensive was to capture Tarokeen and the starport, and his secondary objectives were to find and kill the Planetary Governor and destroy all Tau forces on Taros.

The city of Tarokeen was situated on the Iracunda Isthmus, a strip of land between Taros' two major seas. Its location gave De Stael's planners a problem as the city was only approachable by ground forces from the west or the east. The eastern end of the Iracunda Isthmus was very narrow (less than fifteen kilometres wide) and represented a dangerous bottleneck for the largest regiments. Tau forces could easily block this route of advance and force a stalemate, and with no room to manoeuvre, only costly direct assaults would break through to the city beyond and De Stael did not believe he had the men required for such brutal, attritional warfare. He decided instead to concentrate his efforts on the western end of the isthmus, which was wider and should allow the Imperial Guard's numbers and firepower to tell.

Before the offensive could begin there was a High Command staff meeting onboard the *Righteous Power* which Lord Commander Gustavus attended in person. He was concerned that not threatening the eastern end of the isthmus would allow the defenders to mass their forces at the western end and make any breakthrough far harder to achieve. Gustavus believed a diversion was required to draw any enemy forces away from the isthmus and pin them down, if not by action, then at least by the threat of imminent action.

After a long discussion, it was agreed that a second attack was required, and De Stael adjusted his plans accordingly. For this new task the Lord Marshal requested Space Marine Captain Orelius attend his next planning council as the Raptors Chapter would be required again, this time to launch a major armoured strike from the landing zone eastwards, circling around the south of the southern sea. The Space Marines' objective would be to draw Tau forces to them, and defenders to the eastern end of the Iracunda Isthmus. The Space Marines need not seek to engage the enemy in a decisive battle, but the threat of the Space Marines' presence, if only for a while, would help the main northwards advance by drawing away resistance.

Captain Orelius and his fellow officers strongly disagreed. His battle-brothers were not being usefully employed if they were to act as a mere diversionary force! Vehemently opposed to such a waste of resources,

Captain Orelius declined the mission, but did offer to include his Space Marines alongside the main advance, even to form the spearhead of the first armoured thrust, rather than be "*under-employed in a sideshow to the main campaign*", as he described it in his report. Outraged by Captain Orelius' refusal to sanction De Stael's plan, but unwilling to risk the complete loss of his valuable Space Marines allies, Gustavus insisted De Stael revise his plan.

Instead of the Space Marines making the diversionary eastward thrust, the honour would fall upon the raw recruits that comprised the 331st Tallarn regiment, the conflict on Taros being their first action since being founded. As unblooded troops, the 331st were best given an easier introduction to war against a cunning xenos foe than be thrown into the crucible on the front line. The objective would remain the same as for the Space Marines, but their advance, being mostly on foot, would be somewhat slower. Still, the whole of the regiment's men and tanks marching through the desert should draw the Tau Empire forces to them and out of the path of the main advance. Colonel Usfal Hamid, the commanding officer of the 331st, was summoned and given his orders by De Stael; advance eastwards for thirty days then establish a new defensive blocking position anchored against the south coast of the Em-sai. The 331st regiment's advance would begin on the same day as the main offensive and should be pushed forward with both vigour and aggression. Ultimately, the diversion had to look like it was the real thing.

With the issue of the diversionary spearhead resolved, De Stael turned to planning his main northward offensive. It would advance on a wide front, driving north across the desert and then swing east onto the Iracunda Isthmus. Rather than concentrate all his combat power in one place, De Stael elected to spread it out. This would seem to go against the teachings of the *Tactica Imperialis*, but so far all De Stael's intelligence reports suggested the Tau forces would not be numerous enough to stop him everywhere. If one sector of the advance was halted by the Tau's actions, then another would advance unimpeded. Overall, the offensive would keep moving forwards. A broad advance with the Tallarn regiments side-by-side would make for steady gains so De Stael's offensive timetable called for the Tallarn regiments to make an ambitious twenty kilometres a day, but he expected that in some sectors along the front, the Tau would stand and fight, and that sector would naturally be slowed down or halted by combat. If the Tau committed their forces to battle in one sector, then other sectors would be able to move faster. De Stael's staff believed an average of twenty kilometres a day should be sustainable, especially as the Tallarn units would be operating in a familiar environment. At this rate it would take sixty days of advancing to reach the outskirts of Tarokeen.

With his offensive timetable complete, De Stael turned to his supply officers, enough ammunition, food and, most importantly, water must be stockpiled to enable the plan to work. Reports showed that available stockpiles were currently at approximately half this, enough for thirty days, but supplies continued to flow from orbit unimpeded. De Stael decided that thirty days of supplies was enough to begin with, the rest would continue to follow as the offensive progressed. In hindsight some would question such an unwise move.

De Stael's offensive strategy would see X Corps of 4621st Army take the lead role. It would involve the Tallarn Infantry regiments advancing, using their own Armoured companies and artillery to support the lead infantry platoons. The 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment would be on the right flank and the 3rd Armoured regiment would be kept behind the front line as the Corps reserves, for deployment only if the offensive started to stall.

Arrayed from west to east, the X Corps formation would comprise the 17th Tallarn regiment on the west, 89th Tallarn regiment in the centre and 12th Armoured regiment on the east. Behind them would follow the 3rd Armoured regiment and striking eastwards would be the 331st Tallarn regiment. The other Imperial Guard regiments of XI Corps, once they had been landed, would be held as the strategic reserve. Should this offensive fail to reach Tarokeen, then De Stael would turn to these units and a new plan.

The difficult attack on the eastern end of the Iracunda Isthmus would be spearheaded by the Raptors Space Marines, with the Warhound Titans of Legio Ignatum, who at this point were still enroute, and the Tallarn tanks in support. The weight of this attack should carry the offensive through the bottleneck and on to the outskirts of Tarokeen itself. Once in position around the city, De Stael would besiege the enemy, cutting off any water supplies they had so far secured before the final assault with the fresh regiments from XI Corps.

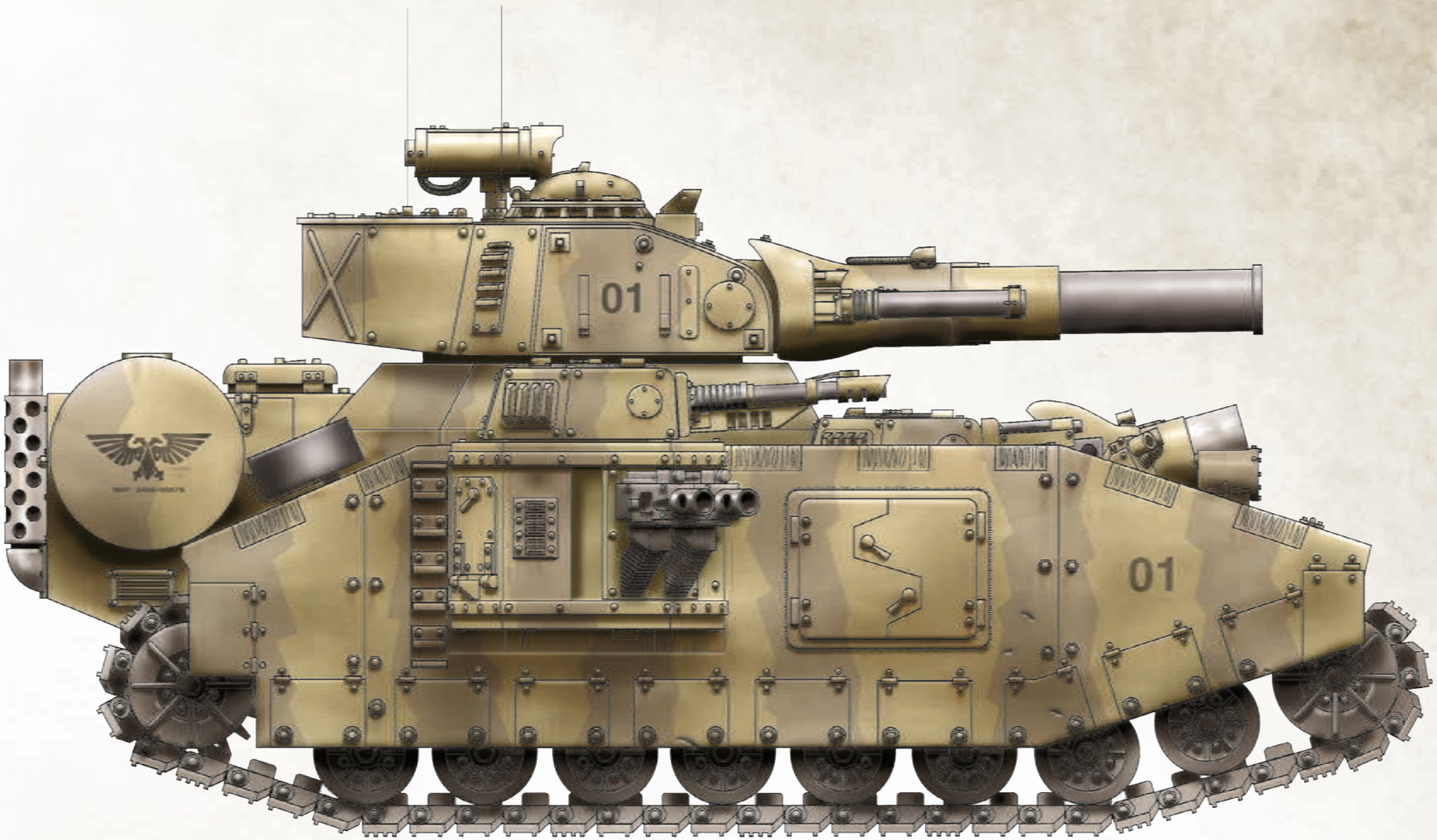
For the thousands of men from Tallarn it would be a long, hard march in brutally hot conditions, but they would have tank support and their artillery would constantly move up to keep the front lines in range. In the air above them, the Imperial Navy would be flying combat air patrols and bombing raids as required from their newly established airbases. The Tau might slow them down and even gain minor victories, but the offensive would press on, grinding ever forwards by its sheer weight of numbers.

The First Offensive – Sixty Days to Tarokeen, Day One

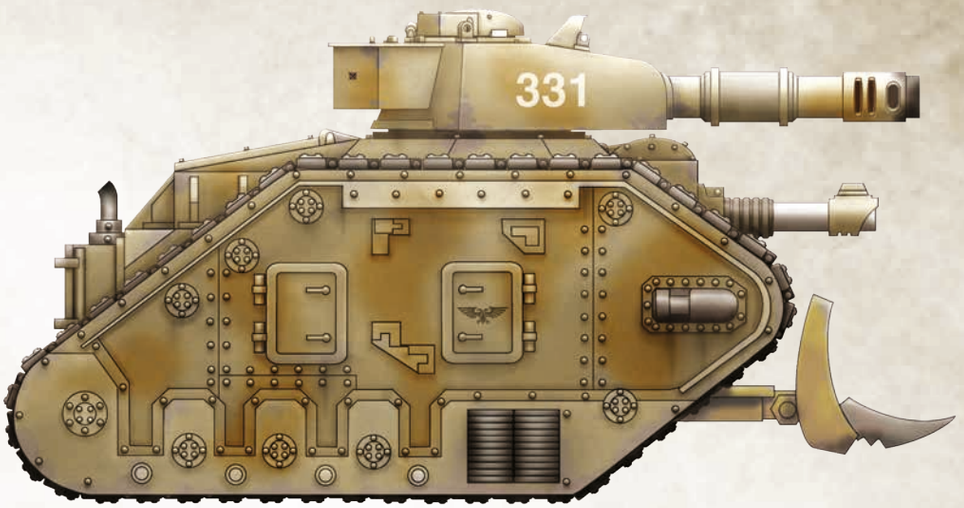
At 514998.M41 De Stael ordered his regimental commanders to begin the long push towards Tarokeen. The offensive began with a sustained rolling artillery bombardment all along the Imperium's front line as mortars, battle cannon, Earthshaker cannon and Griffons leapt into life and sent forth an intense barrage. Thunderous explosions rolled across the desert, the blasts coming so thick and fast that they merged into a single roar. Pillars of smoke and flame shot skywards in a wall of high explosive which crept, metre by metre, across the desert. The rolling barrage lasted for thirty minutes before the infantry began their advance, and even as they rose from their dug-in positions the outgoing artillery shells were still whining and screaming overhead. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the barrage ceased.

Strung out in line abreast, the lead infantry squads began to move forwards at a steady rate and alongside, or just behind them, followed the tanks; Leman Russ grinding across the desert sand, engines revving and belching black fumes into the air. When the front line reached the barrage area, it was a landscape scarred by still smouldering shell craters. The sand had been scorched black, boulders had been shattered into rubble, but there was no evidence that the opening bombardment had hit anything other than the barren desert.

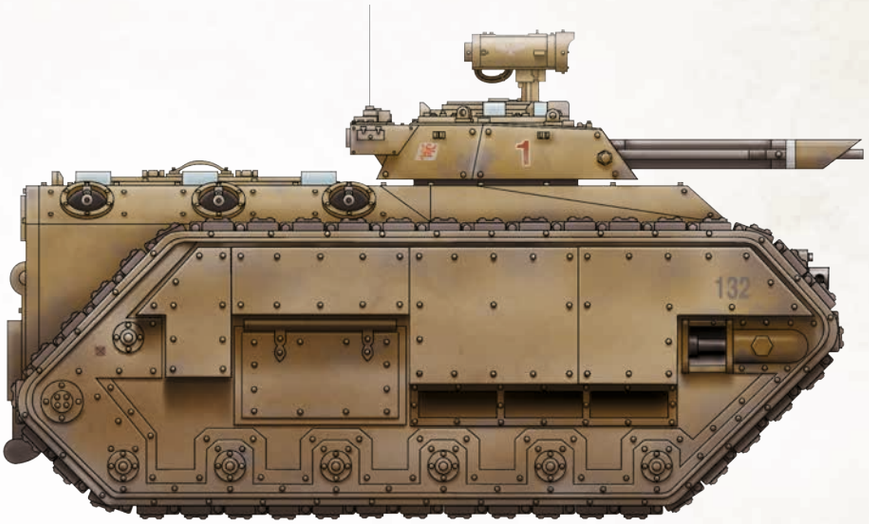
Regardless, the advance moved deeper into the parched wilderness, a steady march that continued all day with still no sign of enemy resistance. Some of the less experienced Guardsmen started to think that perhaps the Tau had already given up on Taros, and that the campaign would be a walk over. From the evidence so far they could have easily be forgiven such an assumption and by nightfall on the first day the forward units had covered the requisite twenty kilometres. As darkness fell, the artillery pieces began to move forwards into new firing positions – already the advance had outpaced their range and it would prove to be a night-long task to drive or drag the weapons forwards, dig new firing positions and prepare for the next day with fresh ammunition supplies from the stockpiles.



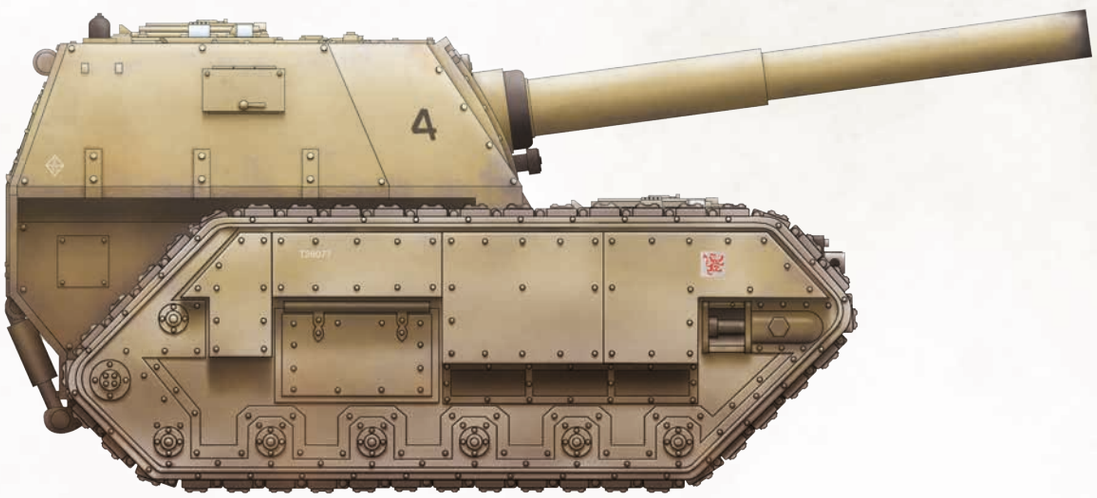
Baneblade of the Tallarn 409th Heavy Tank regiment, first company, attached to the 12th Armoured regiment for the duration of the campaign. A lack of fuel supplies dogged the Super-heavy tanks, reducing their effectiveness. Slow and ponderous, they played little part in the desert war.



Leman Russ of the 3rd Tallarn Armoured regiment. This vehicle, the first of third squadron, was engaged during the Battle of Giadamak, and subsequently abandoned due to lack of fuel during the regiment's withdrawal.



Chimera of the 17th Tallarn regiment. This vehicle is part of the regiment's first Infantry company (an Armoured Fist company). It is the second vehicle of third platoon.



Basilisk of the 331st Tallarn Regiment. This vehicle has been painted a drab brown in preparation for the war on the desert world of Taros.

A Basilisk and Bombard of the Tallarn artillery regiments prepares for the beginning of the Tarokeen offensive.

Day Two

The night was as bitterly cold as the day had been stiflingly hot. Ice had quickly formed on many of the Imperial Guardsmen's weapons during the short hours of darkness, but it would soon melt with the rising sun. Day two was little more than a repeat of day one, but without the pre-planned rolling barrage. Such a high expenditure of ammunition could not be maintained each day and instead the guns were put to a more efficient use targeting locations it was believed the Tau might be occupying. As the artillery and mortars opened fire once more, the infantry began their advance. Morale was high as so far there had been no resistance, by mid-morning, however, all that changed.

The Tau were merely waiting for the Imperium's forces to make their move. Since the moment of the Imperial forces' landing on Taros, their Pathfinder squads and Stealthsuit units had been observing the deployment of the Emperor's units, alerting the Hunter Cadre commanders as to their foe's most likely routes of advance. The Hunter Cadre commanders, following Shas'o R'myr's instructions, were well hidden in the desert and waiting to move forward and counter the advance. They were formidably equipped for mobile desert warfare on Taros, with its wide open battlefields, and engagements which commonly took place at long ranges, most notably with railguns and seeker missiles. Twenty four hours before the offensive was set in motion crack Stealthsuit teams, operating in darkness and evading Imperial Guard patrols, had observed the build-up of equipment and stores, and forecast that the Imperium's forces were readying for an attack. The Tau had left no formations within artillery range, but their mechanized Hunter Cadres were well supplied with Devilfish transports, meaning they could move forwards and react quickly and decisively when the time came.

It was finally judged that the time had come on the second day of the Imperial offensive for their initial assault. The Imperial Guard infantry and tanks had left their perimeter defences of sandbags, razor wire and minefields behind and were now out in the open. All attacks would be swift and aimed at keeping the enemy at a distance, the objective was to inflict casualties then withdraw back into the desert and then reappear when it was most advantageous. With this in mind, the Tau forces engaged in brief long range firefights all along the front on that second day, with the 17th Tallarn regiment suffering the strongest counter-attack at an abandoned mining facility designated Tungusta Station.

The Battle of Tungusta Station

At first light on the second day, the Tallarn 17th regiment resumed its advance along its entire front. The regiment's three Armoured companies formed the cutting edge of the advance, with squadrons of Leman Russ stretching out across the desert sands. Lacking Chimeras, the advance would be set at the pace of the slowest element in the force, the Guardsmen themselves, and on the command of their officers they rose by the score from their hastily dug foxholes whilst alongside them tanks gunned their engines and began to grind slowly forward. Behind them all the artillery once again opened fire from new firing positions, hitting pre-selected targets all along the front in another attempt to suppress or destroy whatever might be waiting out in the desert.

As the combined force of Armoured companies and Tallarn infantry moved out, they encountered their first foe. In anticipation of the advance, a Hunter Cadre had moved forwards into engagement range overnight. These forces had sped to intercept the Imperium's tank spearheads, guided by Pathfinder teams which were already observing the Imperial Guard's preparations from a distance. The faster moving Tau grav-tanks had also arrived in the vicinity of Tungusta Station only minutes before the Imperial advance.

Tungusta Station was a small collection of buildings, lean-tos and old mining equipment abandoned by its operators after the Imperium's forces had arrived. It had already been scouted and then shelled by artillery as part of the preparation for the day's advance, meaning the surrounding area was pockmarked with Basilisk shell craters.

The battle began when the lead tank encountered a hidden Tau Pathfinder squad. Immediately, the Leman Russ opened fire with its battle cannon and, using their markerlights and seeker missiles, the Tau force's return fire immediately knocked it out, causing it to burn fiercely as the crew tumbled out of its hatches and ran away out across the desert. Their position compromised, the Pathfinders quickly withdrew on foot whilst in the distance, on the edge of Tungusta Station, Hammerhead gunships appeared and opened fire with their railguns. The whip-crack sound of the Tau weapons soon filled the air, forcing the surviving Leman Russ to seek cover, firing off smoke launchers and returning fire, their Vanquisher and battle cannon matched against railguns in a deadly long-range duel. With the armoured vehicles pre-occupied in their own private battle, the Imperial Guard infantry, led from the front by their commanding officer, Lieutenant Kavir, pressed forward towards the buildings.

The men of 1st Platoon, 2nd Company advanced towards the outskirts of Tungusta Station only to encounter Fire Warriors supported by Devilfish troop carriers. A fierce fire fight ensued. Lieutenant Kavir was killed during the attack as his command section was overrun and annihilated by counter-attacking Crisis battlesuits, believed to have been the Cadre's shas'el commander in person. Without close armoured support, the Tallarn platoon was heavily outgunned and called for urgent reinforcements, resulting in a Storm Trooper squad being ordered forwards to their location and a Thunderbolt fighter being scrambled to intercept any further incoming enemy forces.

The arrival of more Tau reinforcements, and a low flying Barracuda strafing the battlefield, decisively swung the fight in the Tau's favour. Out-matched, 1st Platoon fell back with heavy losses. Despite the timely arrival of the Storm Trooper reinforcements speeding to the fight in their Chimeras and the Thunderbolt racing low overhead to lend its support, three Leman Russ were soon burning wrecks in the desert. In this sector, the advance had stalled for the day.

As the Imperial Guardsmen withdrew from Tungusta Station, destructive artillery fire was directed onto the buildings, and for several hours Basilisk shells again pounded the entire area. When night fell, a patrol was ordered to investigate the ruins of Tungusta Station. They found little remaining as the enemy had already withdrawn to regroup, leaving only the smouldering wrecks of a single Hammerhead and a Devilfish troop carrier behind. Next morning the advance resumed once more, with 2nd Company's 5th Platoon being ordered into the front line to replace the battle-weary survivors of 1st Platoon, and before the morning was over, 5th Platoon's cautious advance had captured the remains of Tungusta Station without further resistance.

Tungusta Station was just the first of many such attacks throughout the following days, designed to weaken the Imperium's front-line units and temporarily stall them. As time wore on, such sudden, highly focussed and well-executed attacks all along X Corps' front line became a daily hazard.

12th Armoured Regiment's Advance

On the right flank, the 12th Armoured regiment was experiencing similar problems. Tau Hammerheads and Broadsides, with their railguns and mobility, excelled in these conditions and unbroken fields of fire allowed them to target the Leman Russ squadrons first, before manoeuvring to avoid return fire. Once the tanks were destroyed, the Chimeras carrying infantry support were powerless to respond. Crews had to rely upon the weight of the Leman Russ armour for survival, but against the fearsome railguns, it was not always enough. The ominous whip-crack of railguns became a sound each Imperial Guardsman learned to hate and fear. The Tau's weaponry seemed to be able to slice through armour at any range, and at such speed that Guardsmen standing too close would find the air sucked from their lungs as it passed by.

Tau Mantas were used by Tau Empire forces to drop heavy vehicles, like this Hammerhead Gunship and Tau Broadside battlesuit, behind Imperial lines to conduct hit and fade attacks.

TALLARN DESERT RAIDER

1. Clothing

This tank officer wears the general service uniform issued to all Guardsmen serving within Tallarn Imperial Guard regiments, regardless of their specific role. The Tallarn desert smock is a piece of utility clothing made of very hard wearing natural materials which usually hangs to just above the knee in length and often has voluminous sleeves. This veteran commander has modified his smock by narrowing the sleeves, as unwieldy pieces of cloth are not practical when working within the confines of an armoured vehicle. The desert smock traditionally has no pockets; all items usually being carried in the webbing pouches, backpacks or sling bags issued to all ranks. Smocks are manufactured in a wide variety of colours, including desert camouflage patterns. Most are a brown or sandy yellow colour, although there is little standardisation even within the same regiment or company, whilst others may be camouflaged.

The traditional headscarf or 'Shemagh', is the distinctive garment of the Tallarn people and is worn by everybody from that world as a matter of social custom. The Shemagh acts as a protection against the worse effects of the sun's rays, and in the hottest conditions is sometimes worn after being soaked in water to help regulate body temperature and prevent sunstroke. The scarf also doubles as a dust mask, wrapped across the face to prevent the wearer inhaling dust and sand. Combined with goggles, this provides good protection against the worst effects of sandstorms.

Other standard issue clothing (not visible here) include a linen undershirt, combat trousers, heavy-weight marching boots and leg bindings. Tallarn Guardsmen will also scavenge replacement equipment and on campaign uniforms often display minor variations.

This is Captain Suhara of the 17th Tallarn Desert Raiders regiment. He is the commanding officer of the regiment's 1st Armoured company, and is a veteran officer of the regiment, hero of the Yarant III campaign and bearer of the Honorifica Imperialis Armorum. He was also awarded the Medallion Crimson after being injured during the Battle of Byron's Hill.

2. Equipment
This Tallarn officer has goggles that are made of tinted plexiglass based upon a leather construction rather than a metal frame. They are standard issue to all Desert Raiders and provide protection against wind-blown sand and dust, most irritant gases and the dazzling effect of strong sunlight. The lenses are not photo-chromatic, and offer only minimal protection against sudden flashes, such as photon grenade explosions.

The officer still wears his No 38 Mk III plasteel shoulder pads – the right shoulder pad bears the winged skull symbol, showing that the regiment is a fully inducted member of the Imperial Guard. The shoulder pads attach via small buckles to the webbing, and a front and rear plasteel chest and back plate can also be attached to complete the armour. These solid blocks of plasteel are regarded as too heavy by most men and are rarely used, and the protective shoulder pads are often discarded by tank crews who find them encumbering within the confines of an armoured vehicle where they feel they have little need for personal protection.

His webbing and belts are made of leather and are used to hang general equipment, pouches, water canteens, scabbards and holsters from, and as a tank crewman, the officer has little need of extra carrying pouches as his personal kit will be stowed aboard his vehicle. The triple pouch cross-belt contains replacement powercells for his standard issue laspistol (his sidearm is not visible in this picture and is usually stored in the tank). He also has a standard issue canteen, vital in Taros' parched climate.

The officer's only visible weapon is his knife. The distinctive curved knife, known on Tallarn as the 'Khalig', comes in many shapes and sizes, and is preferred by natives of Tallarn over standard issue knives or bayonets. For most Tallarn Guardsmen, it is their only close combat weapon and this is a particularly fine example, with a cast lion's-head pommel and ornate scabbard. It was probably uniquely manufactured and awarded to the officer in recognition of a battlefield victory or a heroic action. The size of a Khalig can vary from that of a small belt knife to those the size of a sword. Tallarn powerswords also mimic this distinctive shape.

3. Badges and Insignia
The officer bears the cloth badges of his regiment on his upper left arm, with 'Tallarn 17' being a common shoulder strip sewn onto all the men's smocks. Underneath this is the regimental arm patch, a red lion rampant on a white background. This patch is issued to all men once their training is complete and they become full members of the 'Desert Lions'. Given the badge's size and colour, many choose not to sew it onto their smock as it can stand out against their camo gear, and simply keep the badge amongst their personal kit instead.

Imperial Guardsmen are often very superstitious and many will carry personal good luck totems, blessed by the regiment's priests, to help protect them from misfortune or injury in battle. These small items vary widely, from the skins of animals native to their home world, to pendants or other jewellery, to scrolls bearing passages from the *Fede Imperialis*. This officer wears the Imperial Eagle badge on his right sleeve, pledging his allegiance to the Emperor in the belief He will protect him in battle.

4. Medals
On his left breast this highly decorated officer displays his medals. The largest of them is the Honorifica Imperialis Armorum, commonly referred to as the 'Tank Battle Badge'. It is awarded for outstanding gallantry in the face of the enemy whilst serving as crew in an armoured vehicle, and is rarely given out. He also bears the Medallion Crimson for being wounded in the line of duty.

Within the 17th Tallarn regiment, it is traditional that any member of the regiment who has served for over five years is awarded a silk sash, regardless of rank. Worn around the waist, under the belt, it is the mark of a veteran campaigner. Men who wear the sash are viewed as senior to men of the same rank who do not bear it. The sash is usually made of the best quality material available and can come in any colour.

Leman Russ Vanquisher of the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment, with a Conqueror and Support Sentinel in close attendance.

With little cover to hide from the railguns, the desert war was proving costly in terms of equipment and, after five days advancing, the 12th Armoured regiment had lost approximately half of its tank strength amongst the forward deployed companies. In return they had inflicted some damage on the enemy, but it was an uneven exchange. Replacement tanks could be found, but not enough to make good all the losses. The regimental commander, Colonel Ahsa-Bilad, recognising that his tank companies needed the extra support, deployed the Basilisks of his 1st Artillery regiment forward to act as assault guns rather than conventional artillery; the big guns once again proving more effective against ground targets than against the Tau's air support.

The tank engagements in those first few days settled into a familiar pattern. First the lead infantry platoons would be advancing in line abreast, directly supported by a Leman Russ. Lying in wait for them would be a single small Tau Pathfinder team, well hidden amongst rocks, who would target the Leman Russ with their markerlights. Then, far to the rear, a volley of seeker missiles would be launched, locking onto the target tank via the markerlight's signal and the first the Imperial Guard commanders on the scene would know about the attack would be the sudden destruction of the tank under multiple missile impacts. In response, other tanks would be moved in to reinforce the area, only to come under long range fire from railguns as Hammerheads skimmed forwards into range. Then, a long range exchange of fire would take place between the armoured vehicles, whilst the Imperial Guard infantry attempted to press forwards whilst under heavy fire.

The infantry in turn would be counter-attacked by Fire Warrior units racing forwards in Devilfish transports, dismounting and again engaging at long range with pulse rifles. The Imperial Guardsmen were outgunned in the infantry firefight, although their squad snipers did achieve some kills with their longer ranged weapons. As the Guardsmen pressed forwards, casualties mounting, they might be able to bring their heavy weapon squads, mortar batteries or, if a forward observer was present, their heavy artillery to bear and as Tallarn firepower began to build up, the Tau would board their transport vehicles and withdraw rapidly, to be followed by their Hammerheads. Ultimately, the battlefield would remain in the Imperial Guard's possession, but at a high cost in tanks and men, and more through the Tau choosing to withdraw than any skill on their part.

Move and Counter-move

As the days passed, Lord Marshal De Stael's staff began to analyse and understand the tactics the Tau had adopted and looked to counter them. First of all the Pathfinder teams needed to be hunted down more vigorously and reconnaissance squads were reinforced with more Sentinel units to aid them in this new mission – neutralise the Tau scouts and the long range ambushes would be harder to achieve. This had some success with scout units regularly clashing in small skirmishes, but the light Sentinels still proved to be vulnerable to the Tau's weaponry and many were lost during these engagements. Each clash between the scout patrols meant though that the front line behind would be free from the seeker missile ambushes and the losses in Sentinels was compensated for by the saving in tanks and men behind them.

Next, De Stael looked to his own mobility to counter the Tau force's speed and for this he turned to the Imperial Navy. The Thunderbolts and Lightnings of the Imperial Navy would provide the solution and if his tanks could not bring the Tau decisively to battle, then his aircraft could. Air patrols over the front line would be increased, with pilots given license to freely locate and engage targets. Squadrons were put on standby to scramble should a front line unit report contact with the enemy, who would then race to the front line and deliver devastating volleys of Hellstrike missiles. The Tau might outrun his artillery, but they could not so easily outrun the Imperial Navy.

As De Stael's tactics evolved, so naturally did the Tau's. For the commanders on both sides, the war was a lethal game of move and counter-move, plan and counter-plan, and with the Imperial Navy heavily active for several days over the front line, the sky criss-crossed with vapour trails and filled with the roar of jet engines. The Imperial Navy's Thunderbolts began to find ground targets, scoring notable successes and inflicting heavier losses on the Tau than the ground forces had managed. The Tau's response was to commit its own air forces in increasing numbers and Barracudas began to be seen over the battlefield, not in a ground attack role, but diving from high altitude to intercept the Imperium's aircraft. From distant bases on the Iracunda Isthmus, the Barracudas kept up patrols to defend their ground forces. The air war over Taros had begun and dogfights soon became commonplace between the two evenly matched forces. This drew the Imperial Navy's resources away from its ground attack role, and once again the Hunter Cadres were freed up for their probing counter-attacks.

Despite the losses and the escalation of the ground war into the skies, the Imperial Guard offensive continued to grind forwards. After ten days it had made up to one hundred and fifty kilometres; it was behind schedule by between thirty to fifty kilometres, but the broad front was still moving northwards.

Storming the Phyyra Heights

The established pattern of the campaign continued as the Imperial Guard moved northwards, but within the first weeks the pace of the advance started to slacken. After twenty days the regiments had covered approximately three hundred kilometres and all were reporting problems with their supply lines. Convoys were not making it to their destination as there was not enough fuel for all the vehicles. Only when it arrived could the regiment push on and attempt to make up for lost time. Water rationing was also having to be strictly enforced, making offensive operations increasingly difficult and slow.

On the front's left flank, the Tallarn 17th regiment was approaching an upland area designated as the Phyyra Heights. These rugged escarpments scarred the distant horizon with their steep slopes, and orders had been received from De Stael's headquarters for the regiment to swing slightly westwards and capture their higher ground, hopefully outflanking the majority of the Tau defenders and opening a clearer path to the Iracunda Isthmus.

For the past seven days the 17th Tallarn regiment's advance towards the Phyyra Heights had gone without incident. The Tau had left the regiment to its slow flank march and twenty five days after the offensive began, the lead platoons found themselves at the foot of a steep, rocky climb into the highlands. The regiment's reconnaissance squads had arrived several days before the main body, moving on foot up the slopes at night, aiming to seek out the best routes through the rocky terrain. Several prospective routes had been identified and the first probe by Sentinel units had not been attacked. The versatile walkers faired well on the steep hillsides, but it was this type of terrain the regiment's supporting tanks would find near impossible to advance through.

Since arriving, the recon squads had spotted a few enemy tracks, but in the process several men had been injured by rockfalls, which at the time were put down to unfortunate accidents. However, they'd so far had no confirmed sightings of the enemy, and had not found any indication of an enemy force present in large enough strength to threaten the continued advance.

Meanwhile, unknown to those below, the Tau's savage allies, the Kroot, were waiting on the higher ground. A few trackers ventured out to keep an eye on the humans and set rockslide booby traps, but the main forces remained hidden, never exposing themselves to the human scouts, knowing that if they were spotted it would bring heavy artillery fire down upon their heads. The Kroot's Master Shaper was clever enough to know that in the dense rocky terrain his ferocious kindred and hounds would be at an advantage. Out of the hills, in the open desert, they would stand little chance. If the Tallarn advance was to be stopped, it would have to be here.

General Barim-Abas issued his orders to his men to capture the high ground. In scorching heat, the lead companies and platoons set off on the arduous climb, Scout squads and Sentinels leading the way. From their caves and rocky hiding places the Kroot emerged, hungry and ready to fight. They scurried downhill to hide behind the first ridge line and, on each Shaper's command, the warbands rose as one, suddenly appearing on the ridge line above the Guardsmen as a long howling line of warriors intent upon their destruction. With hounds baying and Knarlocs shrieking, the Kroot charged headlong downhill. Leaping from rock to rock their momentum carried them into the Imperial Guardsmen below. Suddenly, it was a desperate fight, with some Tallarn units fleeing rather than face the bloodthirsty savages. Meanwhile other squads sought cover, stood, fought and died on the Kroots' blades or were savaged by their wild beasts.

With his vanguard platoons under sudden and heavy enemy counter-attacks, General Barim-Abas ordered all his artillery to open fire on the first ridge line. Directed by forward observer teams on the hillside, mortars and Earthshaker cannon launched repeated barrages up it until fire, smoke and dust engulfed the ridge. The heavy fire gave the lead platoons enough time to withdraw and, mercifully, the Kroot did not follow, preferring to remain amongst the dense cover on the higher ground.

The railgun mounted on the Tau Hammerhead Gunship was the terror of Imperial tank companies, capable of destroying a Leman Russ battletank with ease, at distances at which the Imperium's tanks could not return fire.

Bloodied and weary the Tallarn Guardsmen had been repulsed, but the fighting to claim the Phyyra Heights was just beginning. Over the next ten days, three more attempts to storm the treacherous slopes each ended with the regiment being thrown back with heavy losses. A fourth attack, led personally by General Barim-Abas, did capture the first ridge line, but the 17th Tallarn regiment's offensive had stalled. The only reserve force available to aid them was the Tallarn 3rd Armoured regiment, but their Leman Russ and Chimeras could not operate effectively in the highlands. De Stael wisely refused to commit them. He would seek a breakthrough elsewhere whilst the 17th skirmished with the Kroot for possession of a barren rocky wilderness of little use to either side. For the 17th, it was the high water mark of their advance on Tarokeen, having so far captured three hundred and fifty kilometres of desert.

New Impetuous

With the 17th Tallarn regiment now involved in a protracted battle against Kroot warbands to capture the Phyyra Heights, Lord Marshal De Stael turned to his other three regiments to carry his stalling offensive to the mouth of the Iracunda Isthmus. He ordered his reserve regiment, the 3rd Tallarn Armoured, to reinforce the 89th and 12th Armoured regiments, adding fresh firepower to the front line. The 3rd regiment, under Colonel Hasso Ras-Aziz, was divided into three battlegroups, designated A, B and C. Battlegroup A moved to reinforce 12th Armoured, Battlegroup B moved to reinforce the 89th regiment and Battlegroup C remained as the reserve. The new tanks added a fresh impetuous to the offensive and for a while the pace of the attacking force began to increase again.

At 596998.M41 Battlegroup A, 3rd Armoured, spearheaded a fresh attack. Amidst the heavy diesel stink and creaking tracks of armoured vehicles, the combined weight of the regiment's 1st and 2nd tank companies struck northwards with renewed vigour, a cloud of dust hanging over a wide area of the desert as the tanks passed through it, followed close behind by Chimera carriers and Basilisks. As ever the Tau were waiting, picking off tanks with railguns before falling back again, whilst all the while the attrition continued, the first day alone costing the 3rd regiment six vehicles.

On the third day, the lead elements of Battlegroup A came into sight of the large mining operation at Giadamak, where the land was scarred by deep quarries in the earth and surrounded by towering spoil heaps. Surveying the area through his magnoculars, General Ras-Aziz made plans to attack and capture the mine.

Battle of Giadamak

Giadamak was a huge strip mine where the ground had been torn up over centuries, its deep quarries leaving massive rents in the earth that were surrounded by towering piles of waste rock. It was a desolate and dusty place, home to several thousand miners until the approaching tank columns forced most to flee for safety. The scattered quarries, buildings, workings and equipment hid the defenders well, whilst the desert provided little cover for any approaching attacking force. Where once the sound of the clanking and grinding of heavy machinery had rumbled across the desert, all was now silent but not completely deserted as, aside from the few work gangs who had remained to defend their mine, hidden close by were squads of Fire Warriors scanning the southern horizon for the tell-tale dust columns of approaching Imperial tanks.

Lord Marshal De Stael had suggested that General Ras-Aziz ignore the mining complex and instead strike for the bigger prize of the Iracunda Isthmus, leaving the defenders isolated. The General disagreed as he knew he could not allow a strong Tau force to remain behind his front line. His lead units might reach the Iracunda Isthmus, but the Giadamak defenders could then launch a potentially catastrophic counter-attack from their strong point into the regiment's vulnerable rear. In his opinion the mine must be seized and the defenders killed, captured or forced to withdraw. An attack would clear the way for the continued advance northwards, something the veteran Tallarn General made clear during a briefing onboard De Stael's Leviathan. The attack would begin at first light next day and, with the briefing complete, General Ras-Aziz climbed aboard an Aquila shuttle and flew back to his forward command post to oversee its preparations.

As the first rays of light crept over the dark horizon, the rumble of heavy artillery fire once again rolled out across the desert, Earthshaker and mortar explosions blossoming all around Giadamak. Whilst the gun crews set to work, other Guardsmen gathered ammunition, ration supplies and filled canteens before climbing aboard their vehicles. The regiment's attack plan was simple: two tank companies would envelope the mines, circling to the west and east. When the tank vanguards had met up again, the mine

Leman Russ tanks of the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment awaiting orders in the desert, under the close protection of their Thunderbolt fighter cover.

would be surrounded and cut off from reinforcements. Only then would the infantry would move in, racing forwards in Chimeras behind a rolling barrage of artillery fire before dismounting and closing the last part on foot. It would be the dismounted infantry that would roust the Tau from their hidden positions by way of close quarters fighting and under the covering fire of their transports.

The attack started well, with the tanks moving out to the left and right unmolested by Tau fire. With the crack of artillery still resounding, the Leman Russ columns rumbled forwards in two wide arcs whilst in the centre the Chimeras advanced in line abreast behind a wall of Earthshaker fire. With two hundred yards left, the artillery screen lifted and men dismounted to dash forwards and seize the objective. As the infantry closed in the Tau opened fire, decimating the dismounted Tallarn force with pulse rifle fire. The Tau had created a killing zone in front of their position with interlocking fields of fire and the leading Tallarn infantry were now caught in it. As they attempted to advance through the dust storm the Tau's firepower had kicked up, they became little more than indistinguishable dusty tan figures running, falling, crawling and firing before rising and falling again. The heavy pulse fire was punishing and soon the ground was littered with small hummocks of dead and wounded men. Second company, the first to attack, was repulsed with heavy losses until they were forced to retreat in disarray, leaving one hundred of their dead behind.

His first assault defeated, General Ras-Aziz ordered a fresh Armoured Fist company forwards. This time it would be 3rd Company's turn. Again muzzle flashes erupted from the defenders' lines, scouring the desert with pulse rounds. Chimeras moved forwards to lend their support, multi-lasers whining, heavy bolters chattering return fire. Leading the attack was Captain Hadid. His own Chimera was hit thirty five times by pulse rounds, one eventually penetrating the front armour and killing his driver. Dismounting, the captain rallied his men and led the way on foot, closing in on the objective. The weight of Chimera fire and the platoon's supporting mortars were having an effect, suppressing the defenders as the first Tallarn platoons reached the edge of Giadamak. Now the fighting would become close and personal, and with knives and grenades in hand, squads began stalking through the billowing smoke and rusting machinery, hunting down the entrenched defenders.

Meanwhile, the encircling tanks had completed their envelopment against only light resistance, taking up positions to repel any attempted Tau breakthrough to help the force now surrounded amongst the deep quarries of Giadamak. For hours the battle remained at a stalemate, neither side willing to engage the other en masse, knowing that reinforcements for either side might be sighted on the horizon at any moment. For those Guardsmen fighting amongst the quarries, the conflict was more like street fighting than desert warfare and for three hours the battle was a vicious brawl fought out with grenades, knives and sometimes bare fists. The Tau had little stomach for such combat and the Hunter Cadre commander called for an evacuation. He had inflicted enough damage here, it was now time to cut and run before his force was annihilated. There was little therefore that the Imperium's tank commanders could do as, mid-afternoon, the Tau launched an aerial evacuation of their surrounded squads and from the east a formation of four Orcas, surrounded by a defensive shield of Barracudas, raced in, banked steeply towards the mine and came in to land.

As the Orcas swooped in, burst cannon raking the sand, the Fire Warrior teams withdrew under the covering fire of their sacrificial rearguard. From his command post, General Ras-Aziz watched furious through magnoculars as one by one the Orcas lifted off and banked away northwards, chased by sporadic Hydra flak fire whilst Barracudas circled above.

The survivors of Giadamak moved to mop up the Tau rearguard, quickly rounding up the haggard, wounded and battle-weary xenos. In all sixty three prisoners were taken whilst the 3rd Tallarn regiment's losses stood at three hundred and twenty two killed or wounded and eleven vehicles destroyed. That evening, sixty three Tau bodies were piled into a single mass grave and bulldozed over.

After a day of heavy fighting Giadamak was now a fire scoured wilderness, dotted with artillery impact craters, littered with spent powercells, bloody bandages, smouldering wreckage and the dead of both sides. After another fourteen days of advancing, faced by daily Tau sniping, the front line, led by Battlegroup A, had closed to within fifty kilometres of the objective, but they too were now running out of tanks, fuel and water, and as the front line pushed forward, the lengthening supply lines felt the pressure. The second phase of Shas'o R'myr's plan was starting to reap its rewards. With so many units committed to the rear echelon raids, the Tau commander might no longer have enough Hunter Cadres to stop the offensive, but the regiments of the Imperial Guard were slowly running out of momentum anyway due to logistical needs that looked to soon cripple them.

Tau Raiders

Whilst the 17th regiment fought for the Phyyra Heights and De Stael committed the 3rd Armoured to give his offensive new momentum, the Tau had begun to infiltrate deep into enemy territory. Operating mainly at night, Tau Fire Warrior, Pathfinder and Stealth teams dropped via Orca into the desert and fanned out in search of targets of opportunity. Night after night their craft flew secret transport missions to drop more teams, seeding the Imperial Guards' rear area with raiding parties, under orders to identify supply routes and dumps, headquarters and airfields. Other Pathfinder teams were then dropped with Tetra speeders, allowing them to move with speed to each new target, attack quickly and retreat just as fast when they had inflicted maximum carnage upon their human foe.

Pathfinder and Stealth teams operated in unison to attack Imperial Guard supply columns of Trojans towing trailers full of water, fuel and ammunition. Rear area security was mainly being conducted by Sentinel and Rough Rider squadrons, but these proved ineffective against the small, well-armed Tau teams, meaning that day after day convoy after convoy was ambushed. Soon, supply routes were marked by the blackened hulks of destroyed Trojans and trailers, or the slowly bleaching bones of beasts of burden. In response security was increased, forcing Armoured Fist squads to be withdrawn from front line duty to help defend the vulnerable convoys, taking much needed heavy support away from the main battle.

One large supply dump was destroyed in a night-time raid without a shot being fired, Pathfinder teams infiltrating past the dump's sentries to stealthily set charges amongst the fuel cans and ammunition crates. Just before dawn a huge orange fireball rose out of the desert, waking even Lord Marshal De Stael onboard his Leviathan command vehicle as a tall mushroom cloud of dust and smoke marking the supply dump's location, quickly rose high up into the sky.

By 640998.M41 the offensive towards Tarokeen had ground to a halt, lacking both replacements and supplies. The 12th Armoured, spearheaded by Battlegroup A of 3rd Armoured, had almost reached the mouth of the Iracunda Isthmus; the other two infantry regiments on their flank were however lagging far behind. The 17th Tallarn was stuck in the Phyyra Heights and although they had made some small gains, no breakthrough looked imminent. The 89th thinly filled the gap between the two flanks, and far to the south, the 331st had advanced to the southern shores of the Em-sai and was now digging in, but the Tau had not fallen for the feint.

KROOT KNARLOC RIDER

1. Kroot
The Kroot are the most numerous of the Tau Empire's xenos allies. Natives of the jungle world of Pech, which lies within the Tau Empire, the Kroot commonly serve alongside the Tau Hunter Cadres. The details of this arrangement are unknown, but seem to stem from a time when Tau forces liberated several Kroot enclaves from Ork domination. The Kroot have been happy to serve the Tau as mercenaries ever since.

Physiologically, the Kroot have many notable features. They seem to have evolved from an avian genus, and still retain the vestiges of a beak and possess a light skeletal structure. An average Kroot stands 2.3m tall with a lean wiry build, which conceals an immense strength. As tree dwellers they are naturally adept climbers and jumpers, and are able to cover great distances swiftly. Kroot have no ears or nose, but instead have evolved spine sensors from which they receive much of their sensory data. These spines grow from the back of their head and pass information directly to their brain, and so sensitive are these sensor spines infact, it is difficult to hide from a Kroot, making them excellent sentries.

Kroot communicate in their own language, consisting of a series of hoots, whistles and high pitched shrieks, and also seem to rely heavily on smell to communicate. Kroot excrete pungent pheromones, all foul smelling to human senses, but these aromas seem to have deeper meanings to other Kroot and their related animals.

On Pech Kroot live in jagga trees, in tree houses constructed of regurgitated dead wood. Their nest-hives are clustered together in family groups, called kindreds, each being led by a family elder called a Shaper. They are voracious carnivores and have evolved to absorb a meal's DNA into their own body, hence a Kroot can, over time, take on the characteristics of its food. This is the Shaper's main role within the kindred: to direct their evolutionary development by selective feeding.

Kroot seem to be impervious to climate changes, operating effectively in anywhere from sub-zero ice worlds to humid jungles to parched deserts. Extremes of climate do not seem to bother them, infact their diet-based evolution has allowed them to adapt quickly. One kindred has even been identified that has adapted itself to breathe normally in a toxic chlorine atmosphere. Kroot also have the ability to enter hibernation, slowing their bodily functions to enter a deep sleep to conserve energy, and on Pech kindreds hibernate together through many months of the year.

2. Kroot Long Rifle
The Kroot's main weapon is the Kroot long rifle – a breech-loading weapon which must be reloaded after each shot. It is essentially a primitive rifle which uses a chemical propellant to fire a projectile, and until encountering the Tau it was the peak of the Kroot's technological achievement. It seems that the Tau have taken it upon themselves to assist their allies by altering these weapons to fire a charged pulse round, which they supply in vast quantities to Kroot kindreds in service with Tau Empire forces.

Blades are often mounted on the stock and muzzle of the rifle, and the length of the weapon allows it to be wielded as a staff in hand-to-hand combat – a throwback to the Kroot tradition of stave fighting. Kroot naturally excel in close combat and being tall, strong, agile and skilled with their preferred weapon, they are fearsome opponents, and it is these qualities that the Tau prize. This Kroot also carries a large Kroot knife as a secondary weapon, but it is more often used as an eating utensil or tool than as a weapon.

3. Equipment
This Kroot carries a variety of equipment whilst on campaign. Pouches and sacks carry stores of food for the rider and mount, probably taken from previous victims, and one pouch contains extra ammunition for the Kroot rifle. Note that he does not carry a waterskin, vital for humans and Tau in Taros' climate. Other sacks will contain items looted from the battlefield.

The Kroot do not utilise armour, although this Kroot wears a plasteel shoulder pad taken from an Imperial Guardsman. As in many primitive cultures, trophy taking is an important part of the Kroot's warrior code and items from vanquished foes are displayed with pride. Here the warrior also wears a necklace of Kroot Hound claws, perhaps displaying hounds he has raised and trained.

4. Knarloc

The planet Pech is abundant with life. Much of it originates from the same genetic root as the Kroot, but has developed along a slightly different evolutionary path. Some of these creatures adapt and thrive, others die out, but most seem to develop as far as they can and become trapped in an evolutionary cul-de-sac, such as the Kroot Hound and Krootox.

As the name suggests Knarlocs are close relatives of the Great Knarloc. They are smaller, more sociable pack hunters and, as would be expected, have much in common with their larger relative, hunting in a similar way, springing ambushes or using their stamina in long pursuits – the main difference being they live and hunt in packs. Knarloc are voracious hunters, who work together to attack and kill just about any sized prey. Through cooperation they have developed a cunning intelligence, and for this the Kroot seem to respect Knarlocs, revering them as successful hunters.

Kroot only hunt and trap Knarloc young to tame and train. Amongst Kroot kindreds they are highly prized as cavalry mounts, and it is thought to be a symbol of high status within the kindred to ride a Knarloc.

This is an unknown Kroot warrior mounted upon a Knarloc, as encountered during the 17th Tallarn regiment's advance into the Phyyra Heights.

The dense, treacherous terrain of the Phyyra Heights proved little obstacle to the Great Knarlocs of the Tau's bestial allies, the Kroot.

Up until now the air war over Taros had continued daily and was an evenly matched duel, with both sides struggling to gain superiority. The Tau had the edge in numbers, but the Imperium had the edge in experience and it was a battle neither side could afford to lose. Unless the Tau dominated the skies, their defensive strategy would soon falter. If their Barracudas could no longer protect the Hunter Cadres then the Imperial forces would have an advantage in the ground war. The Hunter Cadres would be exposed to repeated air attacks and forced to rely on their Sky Rays for defence, which were proving themselves a potent weapon against ground targets when used in conjunction with small Pathfinder teams. Also, Barracudas and Tiger Sharks were playing a big part in the second phase of the campaign, strafing supply convoys. The Imperial Navy was still putting up an alarming fight, and at this time it was the main threat to Shas'o R'myr's campaign plan. Urgent action was needed to swing the balance of the air war in their favour so the Tau launched a daring raid to destroy all Imperial Navy aircraft still on the ground.

Small Stealthsuit teams had already infiltrated the Imperial Guard rear area. Operating only at night their mission was to find and report the location of Imperial supply dumps and convoy routes. They had been under strict orders not to engage the enemy, just to find potential targets for other strike forces to attack. Now they received new instructions: their mission was instead to locate the airbases as their new highest priority targets.

When a patrolling Stealth team reported the location of the forward airbase, Shas'el K'irri responded quickly. Utilising only his best Fire Warrior teams he gathered an elite strike force. His plan was simple but very dangerous. In a daring night-time raid, a single Orca loaded with troops would fly low over the desert and pass directly over the airstrip. The Fire Warrior teams and their support units would jump out and, under the covering fire of drones and Crisis battlesuits, destroy all the grounded aircraft with EMP grenades. Shas'el K'irri would lead the attack himself.

After the drop the Orca would circle round and return to land directly on the airfield. Once the enemy aircraft were destroyed and the Orca had landed, the teams would fall back to it and make a rapid escape, covered by a flight of Barracudas scrambled to intercept any Imperial pursuit. Surprise would be on their side, but once the airbase realised it was under attack they would respond quickly and in force. K'irri warned all his chosen shas'la that the chances of survival were low. They would be deep in enemy territory and should anything go wrong, they would be cut off. But should they succeed then it could have a dramatic effect on the current balance of power in the region. It was a risk worth taking for the Greater Good.

To start with the attack went as planned. The Orca, equipped with blacksun filters and a disruption pod to make it difficult to track, approached the airfield, skimming fast and low over the desert. On its final approach to the target the Orca attracted the attention of the airbase's anti-aircraft defences and sustained several hits as its Hydra flak guns opened fire. This did little to affect the mission and once over the airfield, the rear ramp lowered and the Tau troops immediately went into action. As tracers from the Hydra's autocannon lit up the night sky, the Fire Warrior teams raced towards the stationary aircraft whilst the Shas'el's Crisis battlesuits leapt towards the Hydra platforms, silencing them with multiple hits from plasma rifles and missile pods. Illuminated by the fires of the burning Hydra, an emplaced multi-laser guarding the perimeter fence found its range, destroying a battlesuit, which exploded in a shower of sparks.

Pinned in their command post by fire from gun drones, the Imperial Guard command section called for urgent assistance. Other security squads were already rushing to their aid when first to arrive was a squadron of Sentinels, attached to the airbase for rear area security duty. The already confused night-fight escalated, pulse rounds and lasgun blasts criss-crossing the airfield until, in a series of sudden bright explosions, one after another aircraft began to explode. In all, six explosions in quick succession lit the darkness, fountaining flames and sparks from the cockpits of the grounded Thunderbolts. The destruction of the aircraft did not see the end of the fighting however. The Orca had circled the base and returned to land on the runway. Such a large target attracted a lot of fire from the defenders and it attempted to return fire with its own burst cannon, only to be rocked by repeated impacts. One engine began to burn, crippling the aircraft and preventing it from taking off again. Gradually the flames engulfed the Orca, forcing the crew to abandon ship.

The mission had achieved its objective, but for the attacking Tau teams, there was no longer any escape back to their own forces. Deep in enemy

territory they fought on throughout the night until overwhelmed by the defenders. Every raider was either killed, or wounded and captured in the attack, including Shas'el K'irri.

As dawn broke it revealed the results of the intense fighting over the area. Six aircraft were now smouldering wrecks, along with the Hydra turrets that had attempted to protect them. In return, scattered across the battlefield were the remains of Tau battlesuits and the gutted Orca, flames still flickering from inside the stricken dropship. The airbase was shrouded in acrid smoke and littered with the dead and wounded of both sides, and was a scene of utter devastation. The cost had been heavy on both sides. The Imperial Navy had suffered the loss of its aircraft and the airbase was out of action until the debris could be cleared. The Tau had lost their entire raiding force in the strike. What the overall effect on the campaign would be, it was too early to tell.

The Air War over Taros

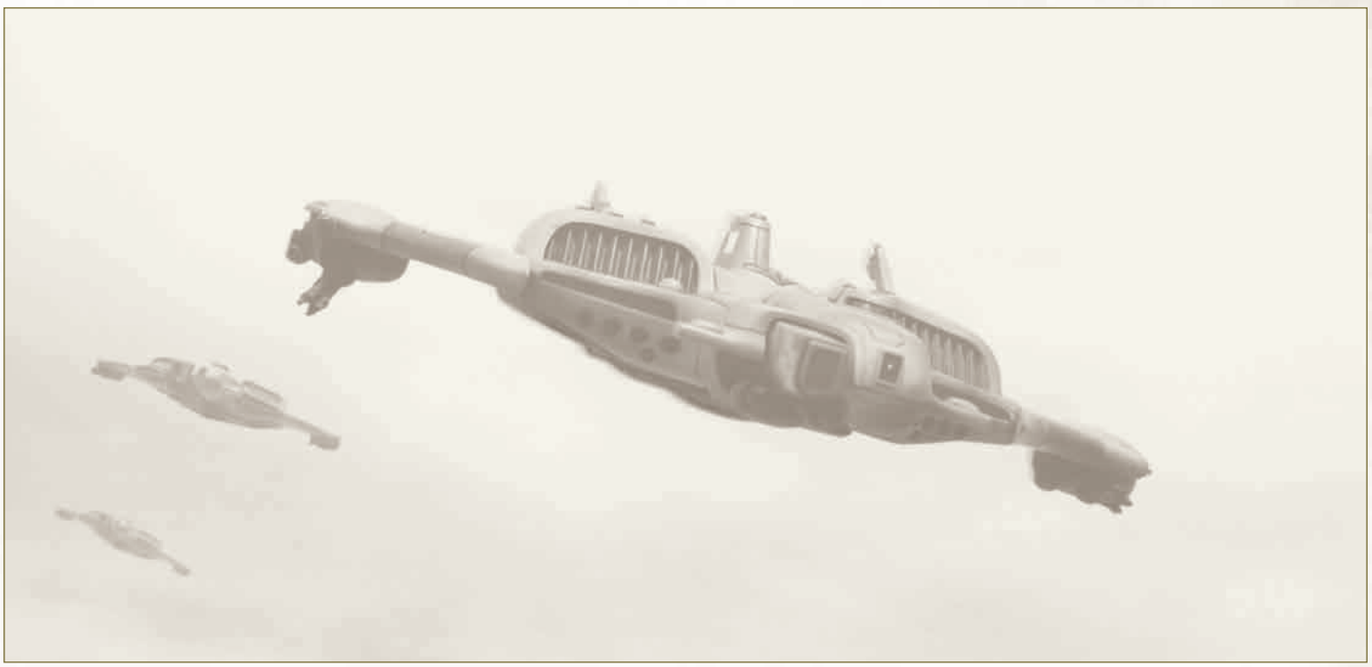
The attack on the airbase was not the end of the Tau force's raids. Each night more supply dumps would be located and then targeted by Pathfinders whilst convoys continued to be ambushed by stealth teams or strafed by Barracudas. It was a plan designed to cripple the frontline regiments by reducing their supplies to a trickle, and it was working. Also of concern for De Stael was the Tau's growing air superiority on the mining world. They had obviously established a network of airfields on Taros, with smaller forward bases hidden in the deserts and larger facilities closer to Tarokeen. There they had assembled an unknown quantity of aircraft, but Air Marshall Denvelt was estimating at least ten squadron-sized groups, maybe one hundred and twenty Barracudas and forty Tiger Sharks.

Despite losses inflicted by Imperial Navy Fighter squadrons, the Tau were airborne relentlessly. The situation had not been helped by the Tau raid against one of Denvelt's forward airbases and the loss of six fighter aircraft in one night. In all the Imperial Navy had four fighter wings, two bomber wings and one tactical wing committed to the Taros campaign. At the start of the campaign Air Marshal Denvelt commanded seventy eight fighters, of which the vast majority were Thunderbolts as well as twenty four Marauder bombers and eighteen Valkyrie transports (not including those of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment). Since the campaign had begun, he had received no replacements, despite repeated requests.

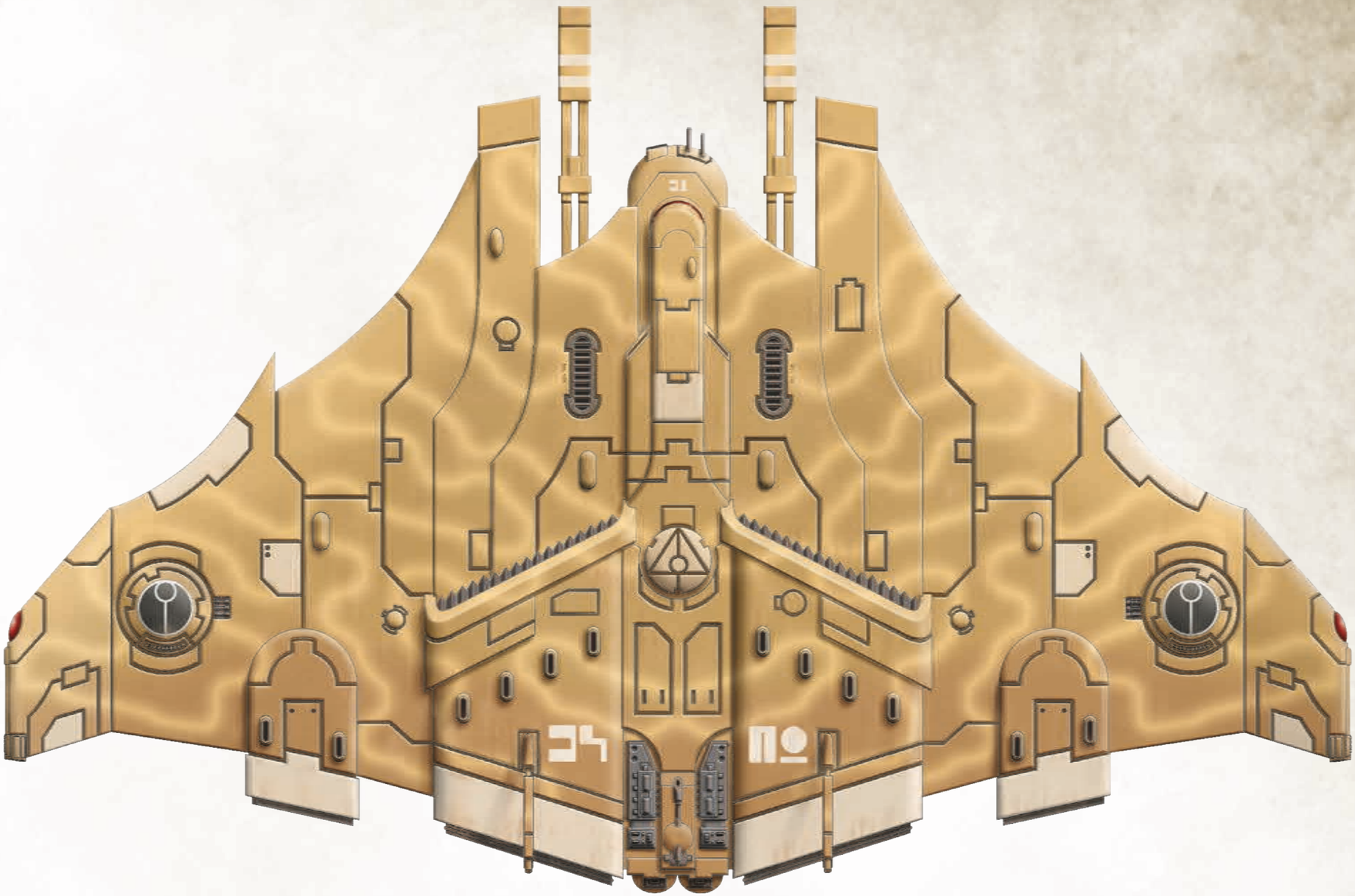
The squadrons were starting to feel the strain of prolonged combat. As well as aircraft and aircrew losses, the fuel situation was not good, and air-dropped munitions were running low. Imperial airbases were mostly situated far to the rear, close to the original landing zone where Departmento Munitorum Engineer and Labour corps had been instructed to construct them. As the front advanced, this left the aircraft further and further behind, with longer flight times and therefore less time in the air over the battlefield. An original plan to move fighter bases forwards had been cancelled. Since the Tau raid it was considered too risky to expose grounded aircraft to roving Stealth teams. As it was all airbase security had been increased, with forces being drawn from the forward Imperial Guard regiments to do so.

In the meantime, the bomber squadrons had hammered Tarokeen and the Iracunda Isthmus with repeated air raids, pounding the city and suspected Tau bases. It seemed to be having little effect on the Tau. Attempts to hit Tau Hunter Cadres in the desert expended a disproportionate amount of munitions for slim results and bomber losses to the ever present Barracudas had become alarming, reaching five in the first two days. Just like the ground war, the air war was slowly slipping away from the Emperor's forces.

Regardless of the losses in the air, what this meant for the Imperial Guardsmen on the ground was that they now faced the ever-present danger of low level Barracuda attacks. Advancing into enemy territory pretty much unchallenged, the Tau aircraft flew low over the desert, hugging valleys and ridge lines, only to rise suddenly in a whirl of ion cannon fire, missiles and burst cannon that raked up the sand and sent all enemy forces on the ground diving for the nearest cover, which was always in limited supply. Supply convoys were naturally a priority target and suffered heavy losses as, without reinforcements, the Imperial Navy struggled to defend them. By the time Operation Comet was launched, Air Marshal Denvelt commanded just thirty seven fighters, twelve bombers and thirteen Valkyries. Still no replacements had reached him, and none ever would.

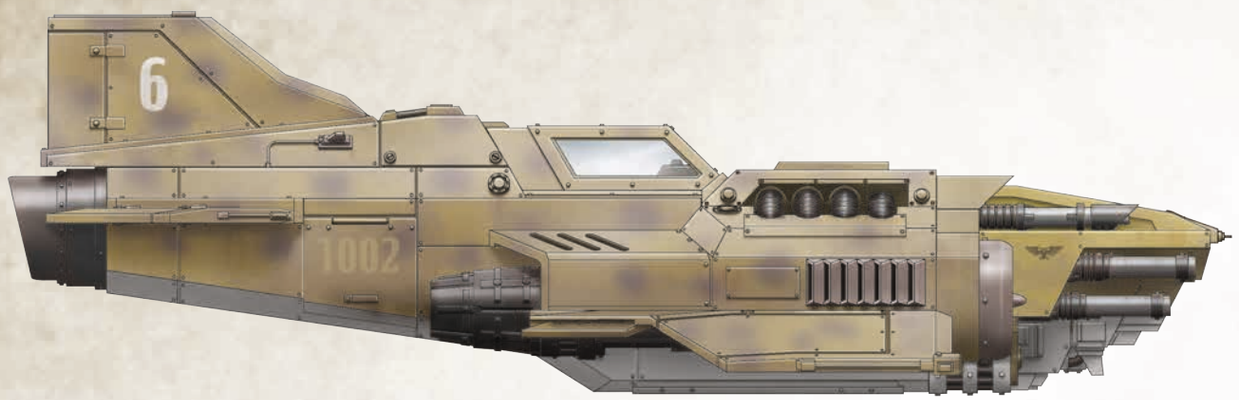


A flight of Barracudas in the skies above Taros. These vehicles were used in prodigious numbers by Tau Empire forces to gain aerial superiority.

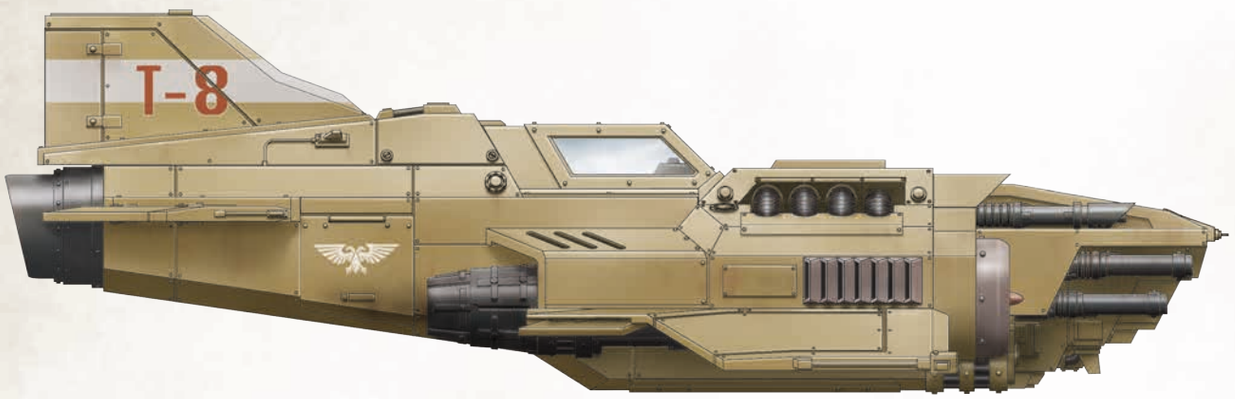


Tiger Shark AX-1-0, the very latest in Tau ground attack aircraft, unleashed with devastating effect for the first time on Taros. So far only a single aircraft of this type has been identified.

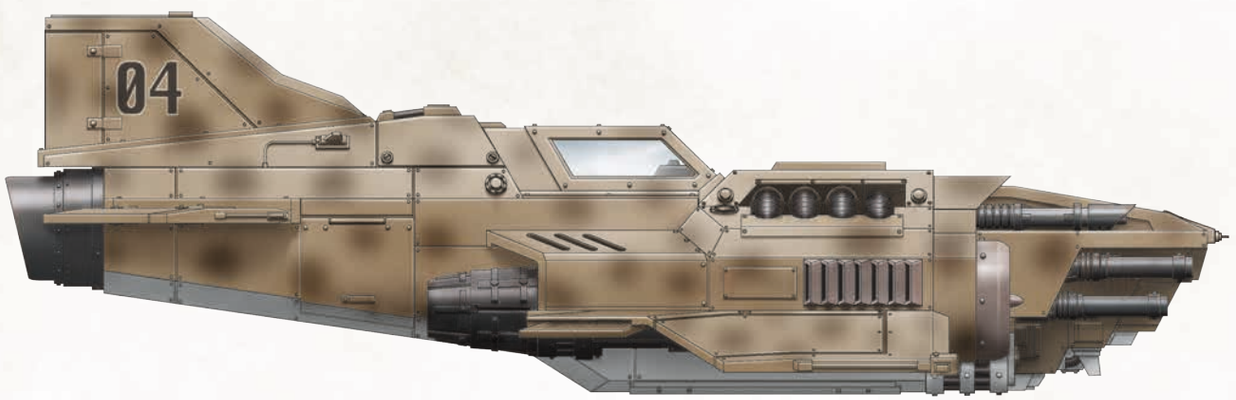
Barracuda superiority fighter. The mainstay of the Tau Empire's Air caste forces on Taros. This aircraft was sighted over the Aestus desert by the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment.



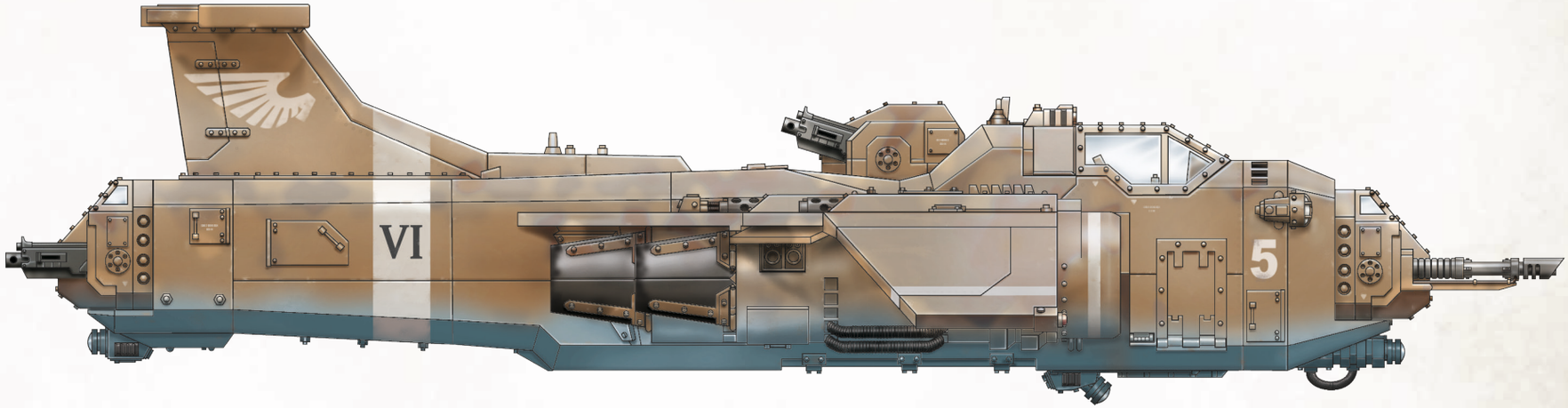
Thunderbolt heavy fighter of 1002nd Fighter wing. This is the wing's sixth aircraft.



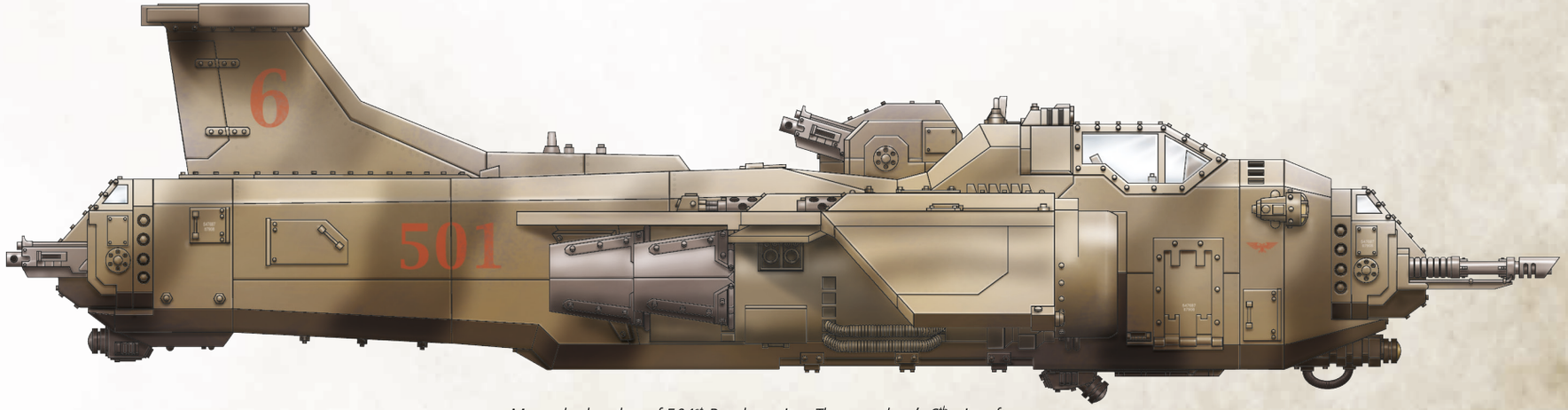
Thunderbolt heavy fighter of 386th Fighter wing. This is the eighth aircraft of 'T' squadron.



Thunderbolt heavy fighter of 83rd Fighter wing. This is the wing's fourth aircraft.



Marauder bomber of the 2424th Bomber wing. This is the squadron's 5th aircraft. The significance of the 'VI' symbol is not known.

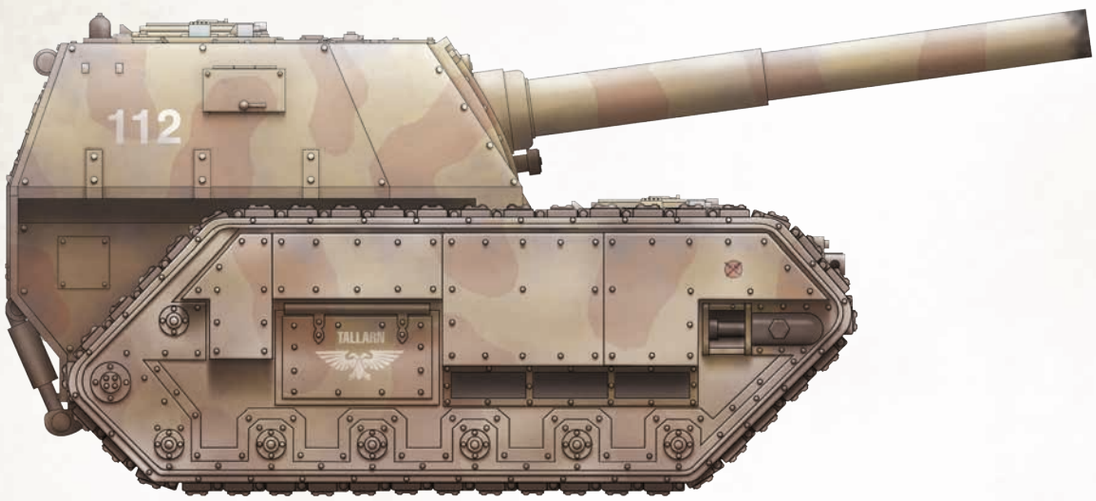


Marauder bomber of 501st Bomber wing. The squadron's 6th aircraft.

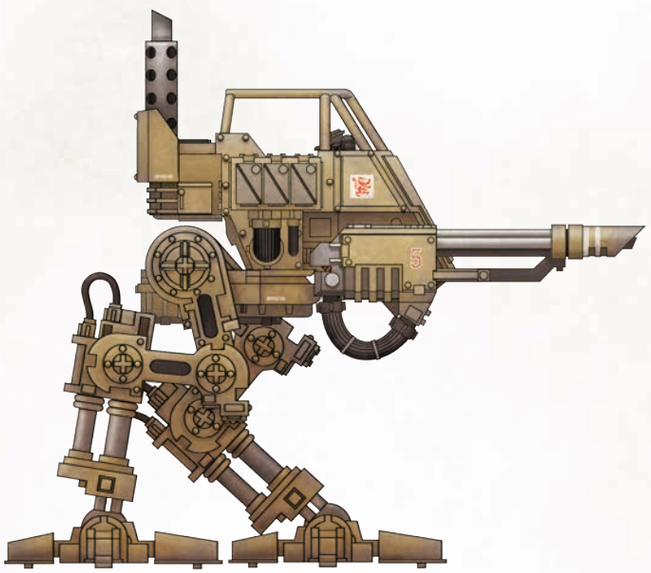
Orca transport, camouflaged for night operations. This aircraft was destroyed during a Tau raid.

Manta. This craft was spotted over Tarokeen before the Tau's attack upon the Planetary Governor's Palace. It is camouflaged for night-time operations.

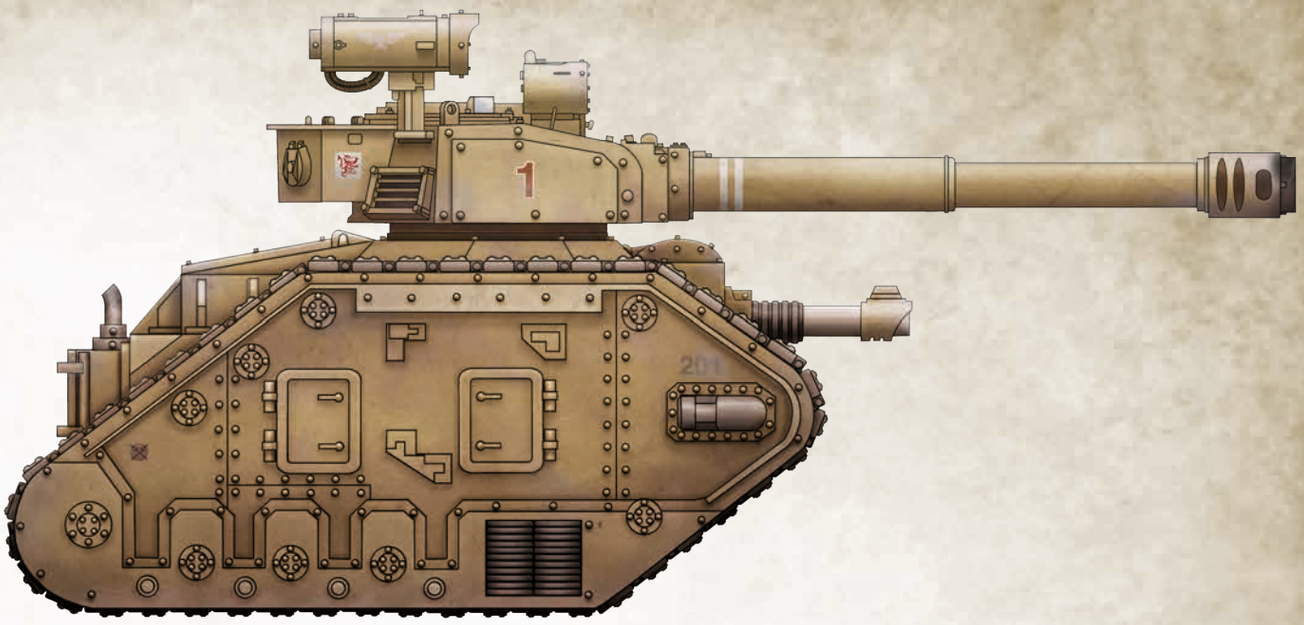
Leman Russ of the 17th Tallarn regiment. Second Armoured company, second squadron, fourth vehicle. It bears the regimental badge of a red lion rampant on the turret.



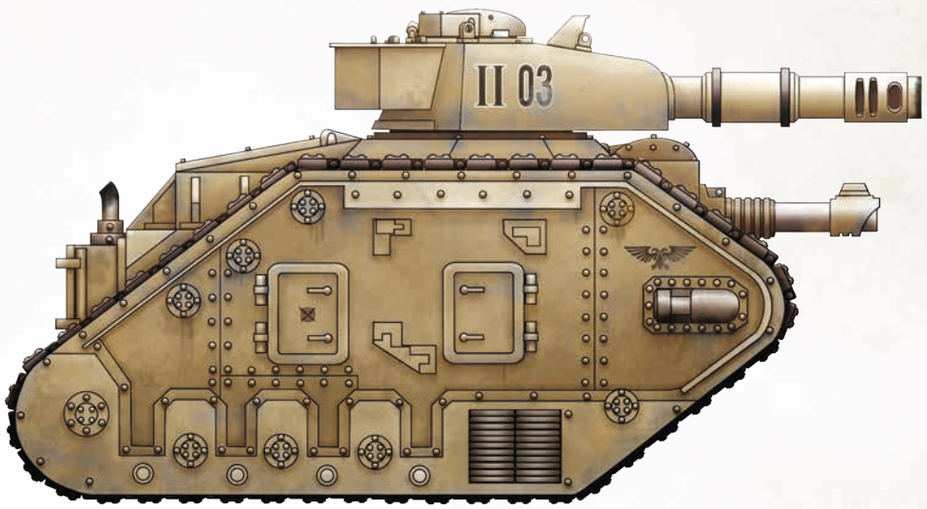
Basilisk of the 17th Tallarn Regiment. This is the second gun of the first Artillery company.



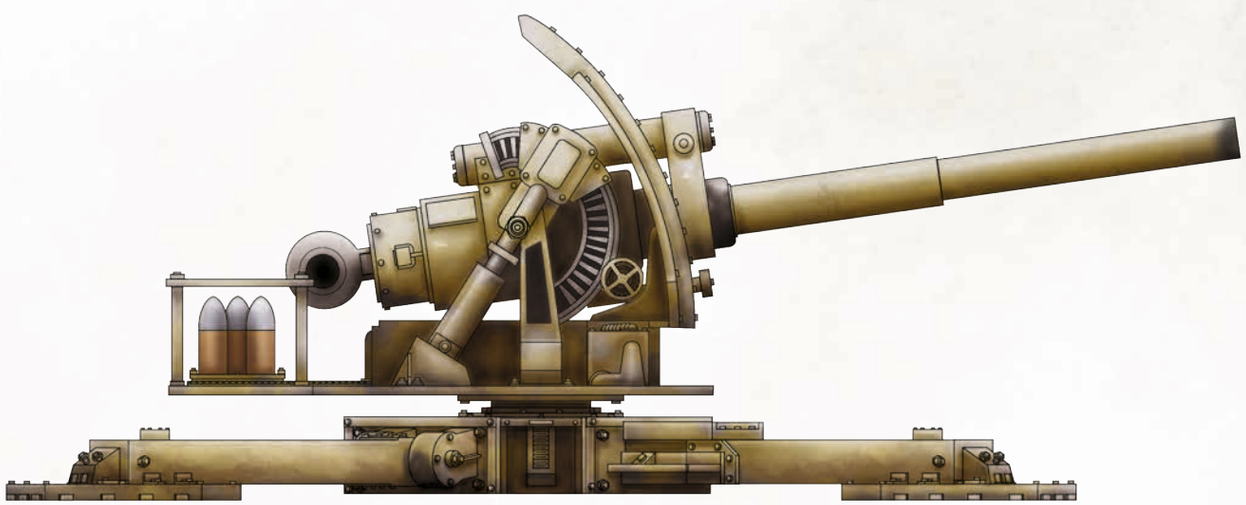
Sentinel Scout walker of the Tallarn 17th regiment. This is the regiment's standard reconnaissance vehicle, which they also heavily deploy for rear-echelon security.



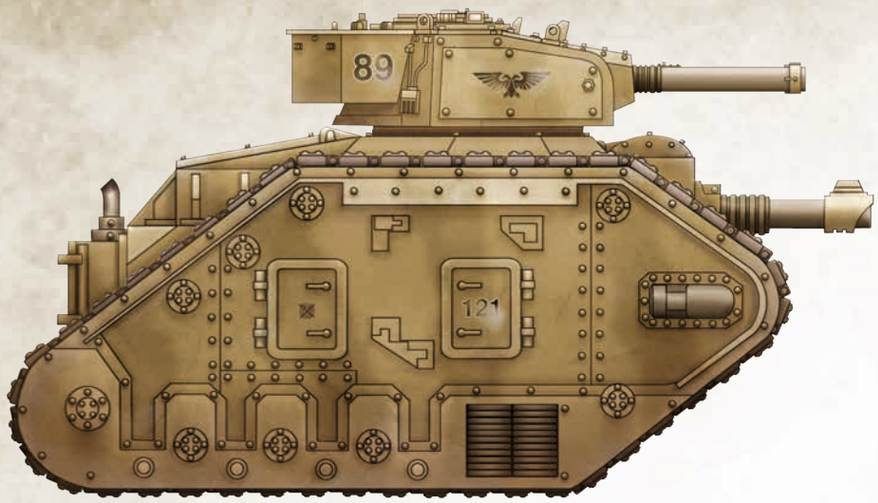
Leman Russ Vanquisher of the 17th Tallarn regiment. This is the command vehicle of second Armoured company. It was destroyed during the Tau's counter-attack at Tungusta Station.



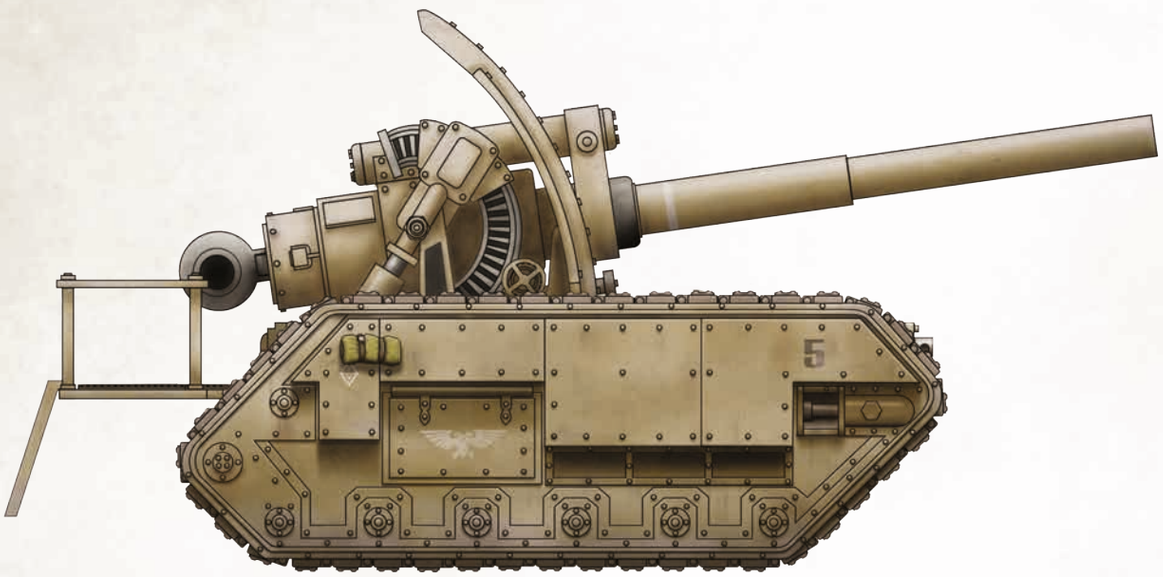
Leman Russ of the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment, 2nd Armoured company, 3rd squadron. Note that it bears the crossed spears of the Taros Campaign badge.



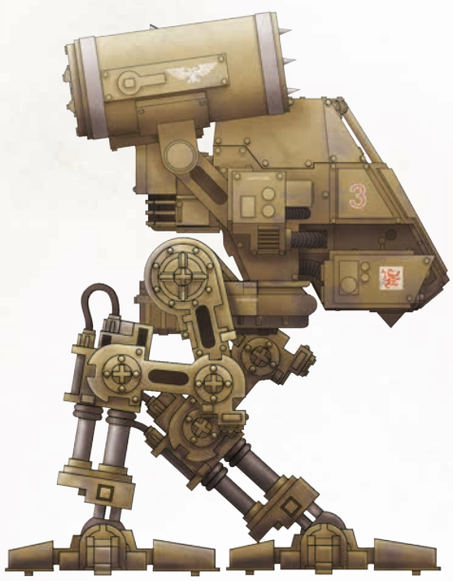
Earthshaker artillery platform of the 89th Tallarn regiment. Many of the Tallarn regiment's artillery companies relied upon static weapons.



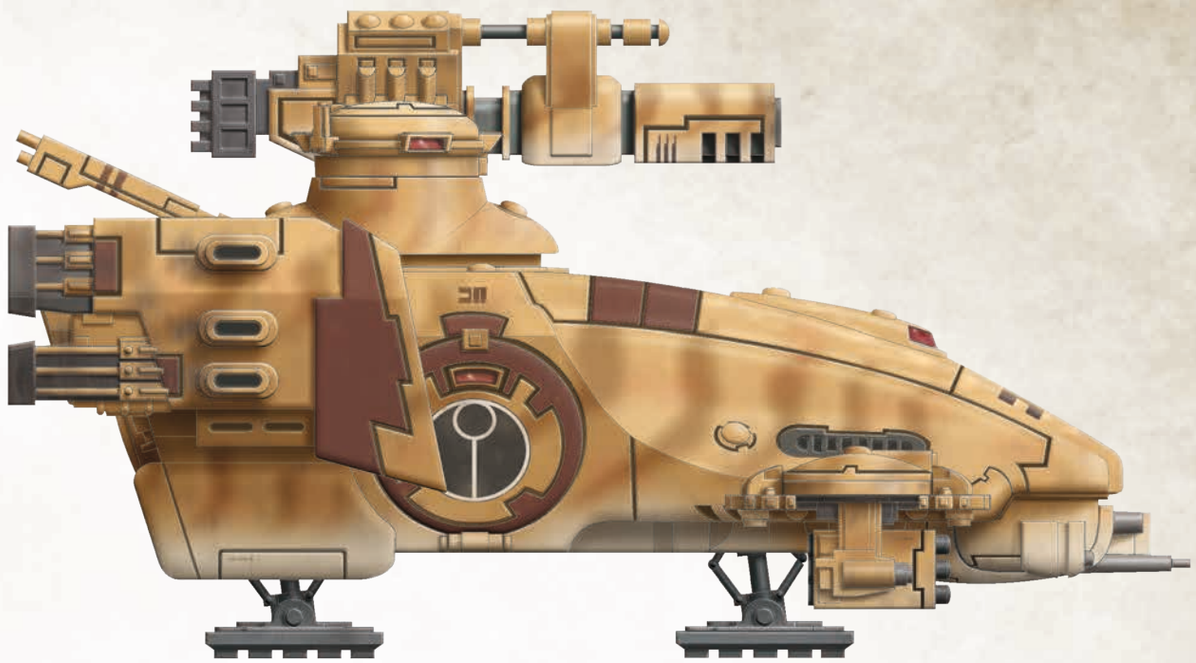
Leman Russ Exterminator of the 89th Tallarn Regiment. Most of the Tallarn regiments utilised their Exterminators as protection for supply convoys, their twin autocannon proving effective as stopgap anti-aircraft weapons due to their high rate of fire.



Basilisk of the 17th Tallarn Regiment. Batteries freely mixed the enclosed and unenclosed guns.



Support Sentinel of the 17th Tallarn regiment. Unlike other marks of Sentinels, these are not Scout vehicles, instead being deployed alongside infantry companies for direct fire support.

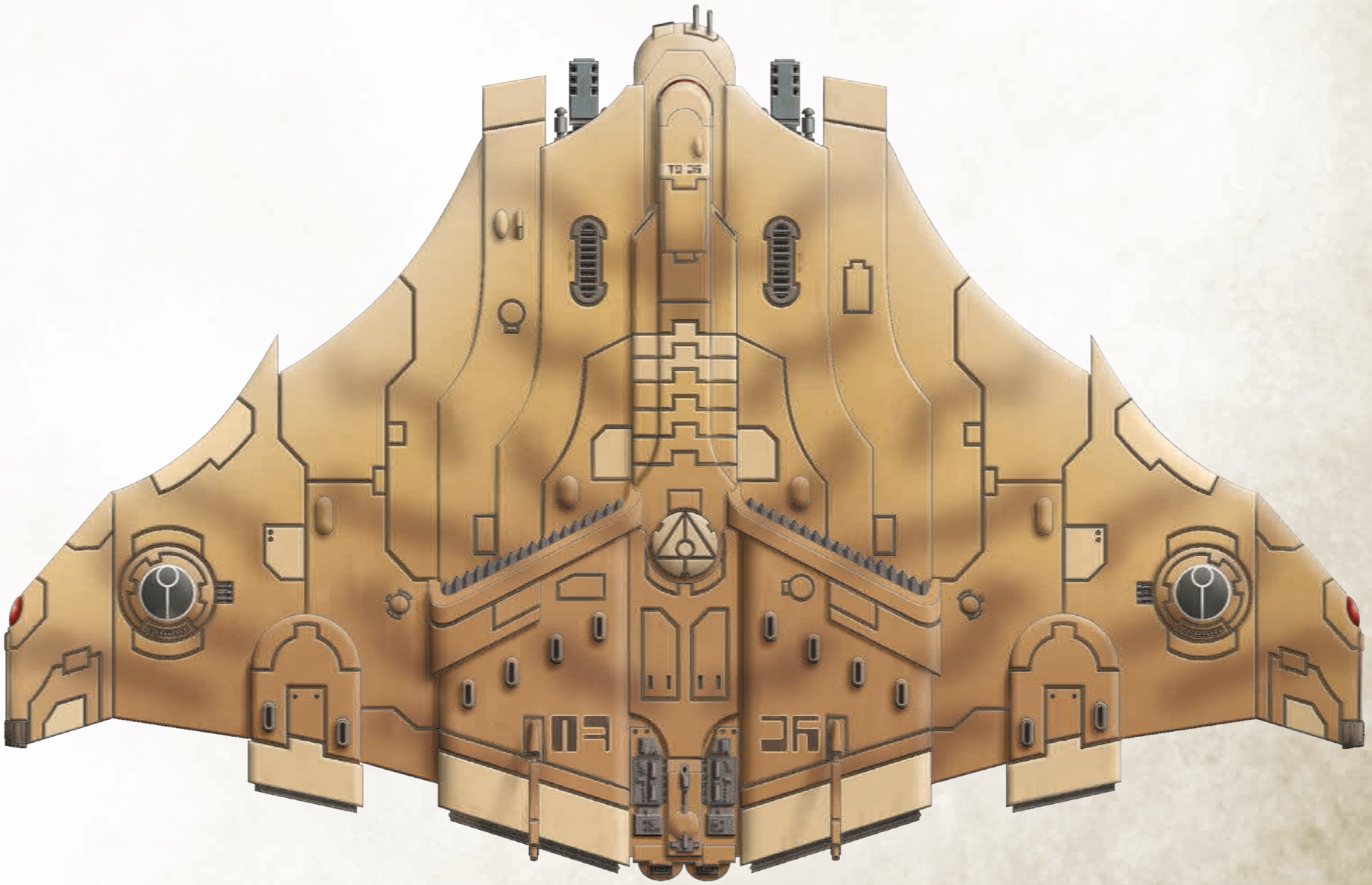


Ion cannon armed Hammerhead with smart missile system, part of Shas'el Phor'yinn's Hunter Cadre.

Sky Ray missile defence gunship with smart missile system, part of Shas'el Shi'Eldi's Hunter Cadre. This vehicle was identified at Tungusta Station.

Railgun armed Hammerhead with smart missile system, part of Shas'el Shi'Eldi's Hunter Cadre. The railgun armed Hammerheads formed the backbone of the Tau's defence.

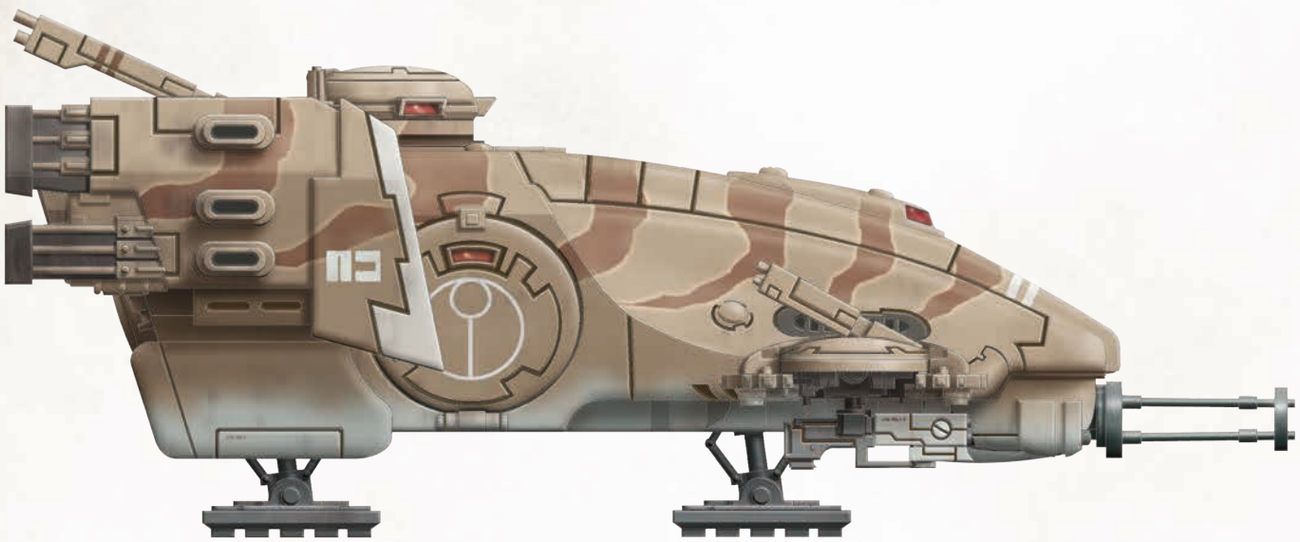
Devilfish transport, part of Shas'el Shi'Eldi's Hunter Cadre. This vehicle was destroyed at Tungusta Station.



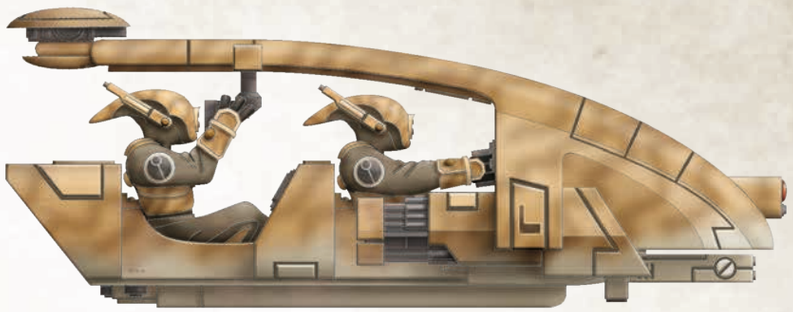
Tiger Shark, the Air Caste heavy combat aircraft, used to support Hunter Cadre front-line operations in the desert.

XV84 battlesuit, Commander Shas'el Shi'Eldi, as identified during the Tungusta Station counter-attack and in subsequent actions.

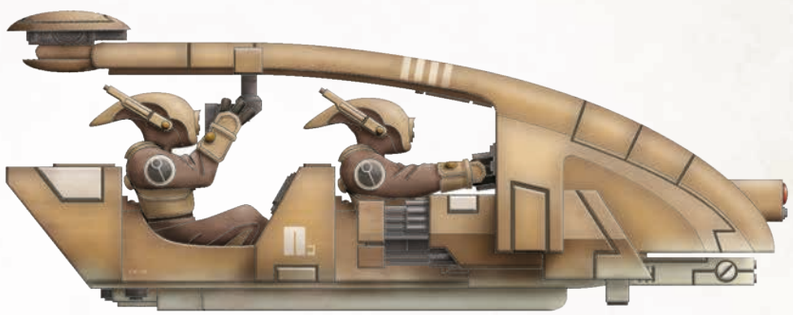
XV89 battlesuit, Commander Shas'el Phor'yinn, armed with fusion blaster and burst cannon. This is a personalised Commander suit and colour scheme.



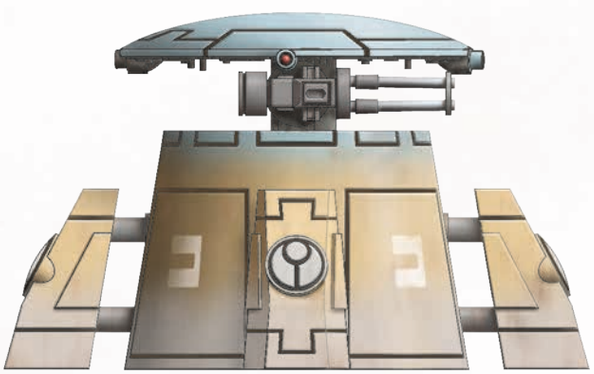
Devilfish troop transport of an unknown Hunter Cadre. This was a Pathfinder transport vehicle which was destroyed during the Battle of Giadamak.



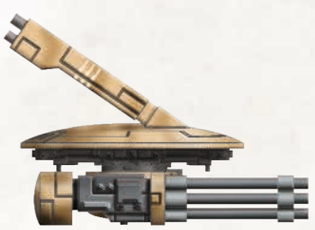
Tetra Scout speeder of an unknown Hunter Cadre, identified operating in the Aestus desert by the 89th Tallarn regiment.



Tetra Scout speeder of Hunter Cadre Shi'Eldi.



Drone sentry turret encountered by the 12th Armoured regiment. It is camouflaged for deployment against a skyline.



Heavy Gun Drone of Hunter Cadre K'irri which was destroyed during a Tau force's raid on an Imperial Navy airbase.

CHAPTER SIX

OPERATION COMET

THE BATTLE FOR HYDRO-PROCESSING PLANT 23-30

Operation Comet: Overview of Battle

By 639998.M41 the war on Taros had been ongoing for forty two days. The deserts were littered with the debris of the many battles and De Stael's men were now starting to feel the effects of the Tau Empire strategy biting. They were weary and morale was low after weeks of daily raids, ambushes, strafing runs and counter-attacks. The Tallarn regiments were drained of men and equipment, and there were no longer any supply lines which could be considered secure. Almost all stockpiles of food, fuel and, most importantly, water were now categorised dangerously low, with no prospect of quickly building them up again due to the near constant attacks by Tau Empire forces on Imperial convoys.

The lack of fuel had stalled the offensive. The Leman Russ and Chimeras were now strictly rationed, with each regiment trying to husband its dwindling supplies, but worse still was the lack of water. In the cruel heat of the day the men could not operate without it, and although those from Tallarn had a greater tolerance for dehydration than most, and knew how best to conserve their water supplies, even they could not go for days in such high temperatures with empty canteens.

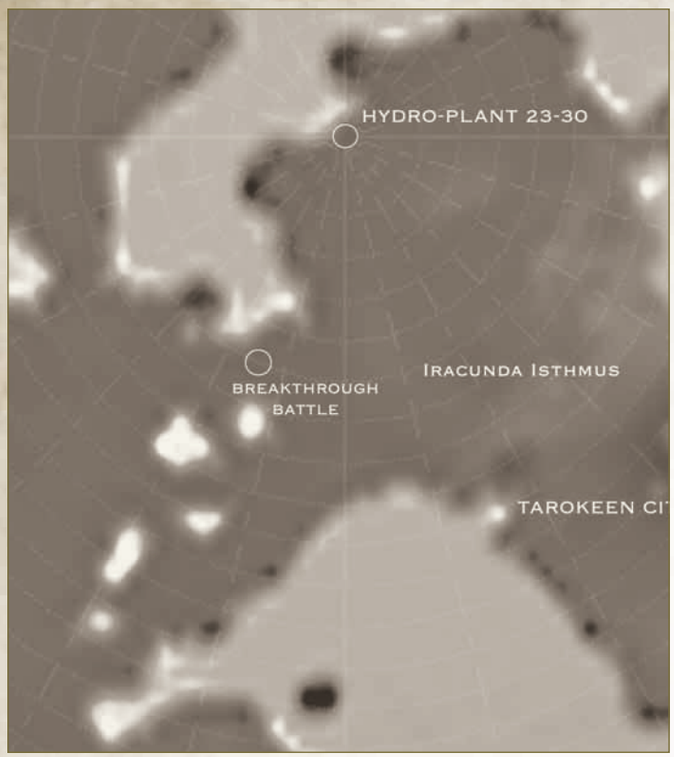
Already, under the burning sun, Guardsmen had started to drop from the effects of dehydration. Growing numbers of casualties were further affecting the fighting strength of all regiments. For the commanders of the Taros Invasion force, it was an ominous sign of worse to come. The situation was bad now, but it would only get worse unless a secure supply of water could be found. Soon the Guardsmen would be faced with the prospect of dying of thirst in the desert or surrendering to the Tau and relying on their mercy. Such a prospect could not even be considered, especially within earshot of a Commissar, but unless drastic action was taken soon, De Stael's X Corps would have no regiments left to fight with. A logistical crisis was engulfing the staff of the 4621st Army and was becoming critical.

On 640998.M41 a staff meeting was held onboard De Stael's Leviathan command vehicle, present were all the regimental commanders of the army, along with representatives from Lord Commander Gustavus' High Command. Pulled back temporarily from their positions, senior officers and staff crowded into De Stael's map-filled briefing room, their objective to determine how to best continue the war given the current supply restrictions.

Amongst the heated debate it was General Syckava of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment that proposed the initial idea for Operation Comet (as it was later to be christened). His idea was to seize Taros' main means of producing water and turn it to their own use. As well as the small hydro-farms the Tallarn regiments had already captured – some that had been put out of action by the Tau and some which were still able to supply small amounts of water – Syckava argued that the 4621st Army should change its objective and target the larger hydro-processing plants. The coastal areas of the Aestus region were the location of the planet's largest hydro-processing plants, which drew in the highly alkaline sea water and converted it into clean water before pumping it down pipelines to Tarokeen. The largest processing facility on Taros was Hydro-Processing Plant 23-30, situated towards the eastern end of the Iracunda Isthmus, and if they could capture the plant intact then the army would have enough water to press on to Tarokeen.

Operation Comet gets underway. Valkyries transporting the first lift take off from their airbase.

During the initial landings, Elysian Drop Troops faced fierce attacks from the Kroot garrison. Note the incoming Vulture gunship, providing the squad's heavy firepower.



The Iracunda Isthmus, showing the advance of the 114th Cadian regiment in support of the Elysian attack on Hydro-plant 23-30.

Syckava's Plan

The task was of massive importance to the continuation of the war, and was therefore entrusted to General Syckava's men. The long idle Drop Troops were impatient for action and De Stael had already turned down three separate requests from Syckava for drops to aid the advance, but the deteriorating situation at the front now demanded that the Lord Marshall commit his carefully husbanded reserves. The Elysians were an elite, highly-trained, well-equipped regiment and General Syckava was keen to see them get involved. Operation Comet would be his chance and he was given a three-day deadline to plan and prepare the attack, which would see his entire regiment dropped to capture the hydro-processing plant. The 23rd regiment would then hold the facility whilst a new offensive to push through onto the Iracunda Isthmus moved to link up with the Elysians.

This new ground offensive to break through onto the isthmus would force De Stael to turn to the last fresh forces he had. Firstly, there were the Raptors Space Marines. From orbit they could directly aid the Elysians, but being independent and separate from 4621st Army's supply problems they would be better deployed on the ground as an armoured breakthrough force to lead the attack. Neither the 3rd or 12th Tallarn Armoured regiments currently in the field were judged to still have the required combat power for the breakthrough.

In support of the Space Marines would be the Warhound Titans of Legio Ignatum. They had arrived late and as yet had not been committed, but now these great war machines would lend their considerable weight to the attack. Their firepower and speed would drive them through the defenders and allow a fast moving relief column to reach Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 quickly. It was unlikely the Tau had anything capable of stopping the Warhounds on the planet.

The obvious choice for the relief column itself was the 114th Cadian regiment, an entirely mechanised unit. As yet the Cadians had not seen combat on Taros, but the Chimera-borne infantry would be well suited to a rapid advance. Colonel Stranski, the regiment's commanding officer, was given his orders. The Cadians were the last of De Stael's reserves from XI Corps, but if he did not commit his remaining forces to battle now, then he would surely lose the war. For the operation De Stael ordered that the 114th be given top priority for fuel supplies and the Tallarn regiments should turn over any remaining stockpiles as well, leaving them with only emergency fuel. This order effectively ended the five Tallarn regiments' capability to conduct offensive operations, making the Desert Raiders now a purely static defence force.

For the 23rd Elysian Drop Troops and General Syckava, three days was an incredibly tight deadline to plan the operation, but his regiment had planned and executed many such attacks before and relied on that experience to get Operation Comet off the ground quickly. The objective, as Syckava explained to his sub-officers, was to seize Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 by a lightning assault performed with pinpoint accuracy. The hydro-plant must be taken largely intact, with collateral damage restricted to a minimum. The plant would be of no use to the war effort if, in capturing it, it was reduced to scrap metal. After the attack, the regiment must hold the facility until the relieving ground forces reached them to take over.

To carry his forces to their objective, Syckava's staff quickly developed a plan with three distinct airborne operations: transportation, protection and re-supply. This process started by assessing the available aircraft. The 23rd regiment was only as mobile as it had enough aircraft to carry it. The regiment had approximately enough Valkyrie airborne assault carriers to commit half the regiment in one lift, but not all the carriers could be dedicated to the transport mission. Some would be needed for the resupply mission, whilst the regiment's own Vultures and the support of an Imperial Navy Fighter wing would provide the protection. The attack would have to be split into separate lifts. Essential heavy equipment, such as heavy weapons and Sentinels, would be included only on a strict priority basis. A loading schedule was quickly compiled, including everything from the initial assault platoons and their supporting heavy equipment, to extra ammunition, fuel and enough food and water for the squads to last an estimated three days in combat.

General Syckava was anxious that the second lift should take place as quickly behind the first as it could, preferably on the same day. He knew that with less than half his regiment deployed, and lacking much of their heavier equipment, his men would be vulnerable to a swift Tau counter-attack. Once Operation Comet commenced, it would be assumed that the Tau would move quickly to eliminate the new threat, the second lift therefore would be a race against time. The General was well aware that the Tau could move their Manta-borne Hunter Cadres very quickly so Syckava pressed for his second wave to be loaded and launched on the same day, but it was not possible. The distance from the Elysian airbase to the target was one thousand and fifty kilometres – meaning that the round trip would take between three to four hours. All the Valkyrie transports would already require extra external fuel tanks to get them to the target and back again, and once back, there would need to be maintenance and battle damage repairs carried out, refuelling and a new loading schedule executed. Inevitably, the loading schedule would be further delayed by the loss of aircraft and crews during the first lift. Two lifts in one day would not be possible, instead the second lift would have to follow on day two.

General Syckava's next decision was whether this should be a daylight or night-time attack. Night would help preserve surprise, but would create extra problems for his men and pilots. Only a few aircraft were fitted with night vision equipment, and given the accuracy needed he could not allow

23rd ELYSIAN DROP TROOP REGIMENT UNITS

Regimental Command

Headquarters Staff
Medical Company
Signals Company
Service Company
Recon Squadron
Attached Commissars

1st Drop Infantry Company
2nd Drop Infantry Company
3rd Drop Infantry Company
4th Drop Infantry Company
5th Drop Infantry Company
6th Drop Infantry Company
7th Drop Infantry Company
8th Drop Infantry Company
9th Sentinel Company
10th Sentinel Company

Permanently Attached

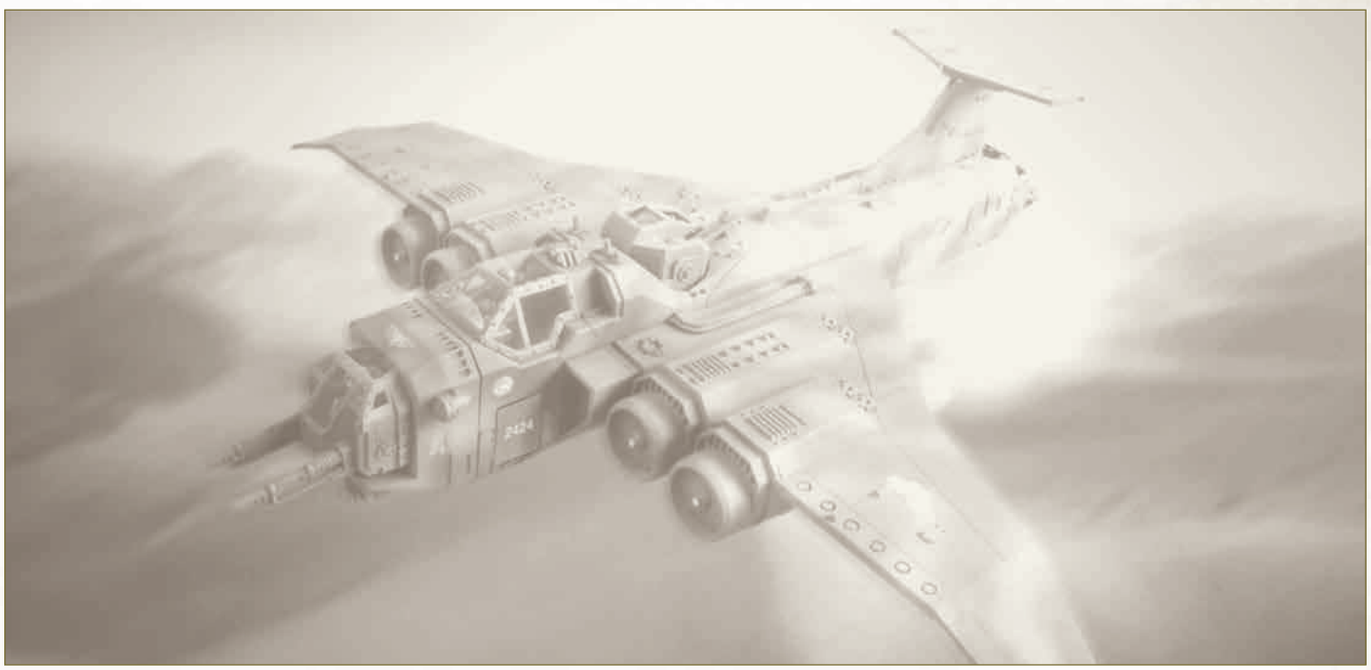
709th	Storm Trooper Company
1344th	Storm Troopers Company
184th	Imperial Navy Tactical Wing

his aircrews to attack the facility without night vision targeters – their bombs and rockets would cause too much damage to it. Also, dropping into the area at night on grav-chutes would endanger the assault platoons. The plant was a large industrial complex; not an easy place to land even in daylight, and with restricted vision at night he would lose men as they hit obstacles whilst landing. By attacking in daylight his forces could do so with more accuracy. Night or day, losses in men and equipment were inevitable, but the advantages of daylight far outweighed the advantages of a surprise night-time attack.

Amongst three days of hectic planning every task was urgent for the staff of the Drop Troop regiment, but one important preparation for the attack was target reconnaissance. General Syckava's men needed to know what they would be facing when they hit the ground. Given the surprise nature of the operation, the General could not afford to pre-empt the attack by dropping reconnaissance squads close to the target. Should the squads be spotted or captured, he might lose his element of surprise. There was no time to infiltrate squads on the ground so his only option was orbital surveillance and high-altitude aerial reconnaissance by a specially equipped Marauder bomber of 2424th Bomber wing. This limited the risk of alerting the defenders to the imminent attack and could provide images of the target area, which could be turned into maps, but they could not give details of any garrison force. Enemy strength would therefore remain a mystery until the battle started, but General Syckava believed that his entire regiment and their support would be enough to overwhelm any garrison.

Detailed planning for the attack was also hurried through and the officers to lead the assault were briefed. The priority targets of the first lift would be the central control complex, the lifting station, pumping stations 1, 2 and 3 and the holding tanks, which should already contain huge quantities of pure water. If the site was destroyed in the fighting, the holding tanks would still be a valuable consolation prize.

Secondary targets would be the chlorination works, both the main and reserve pumping stations, and the generator house. All were to be captured by the first attack wave. The second wave would reinforce the first wave



The 2424th squadron Marauder on its surveillance mission. Operation Comet suffered from a lack of good intelligence. Without time for proper reconnaissance, the Elysians jumped into the unknown.

and throw a defensive perimeter around the entire complex to meet the expected Tau counter-attack. Upon landing with the second wave, the regimental headquarters would be established in the administration block.

Soon, the deadline for launching Operation Comet arrived. It was a daring plan, but fraught with dangers. Within High Command many felt it was being conducted with too much haste and running too many risks. Was it hamstrung by a lack of aircraft? Did the two-lift plan compromise the attack? Worse still, did it leave the first lift too vulnerable to a Tau counter-attack? Comet also lacked good reconnaissance and intelligence information, and there was also the risk of the relief forces' breakthrough on the Iracunda Isthmus being delayed or seriously defeated. Even bad weather could affect the Drop Troops' ability to resupply. The 23rd Elysian regiment could easily be heading for a disaster and, given the stakes, a botched operation could cost the Imperium's forces the war and the planet.

Despite the strong objections, General Syckava felt his mission was achievable with the forces at his disposal. He was confident he could take the processing plant and hold it for three days against whatever the Tau threw at him. It was running no more risks than any drop operation ever faced and with a water supply firmly in their hands, the 4621st Army's main supply headache would be solved and the advance to Tarokeen could then continue. Operation Comet was to be the turning point of the campaign.

First Lift

At their barren desert airbase, surrounded by the small camo shelter-tents that had been home to the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment for the past four weeks, the aircraft and men of the first lift were preparing for take-off. It was the first light of dawn and the low sun was already burning off the last of the night's freezing cold. The assault companies waited in neat rows, each man weighed down with his combat kit and grav-chute pack whilst alongside them stood squads of burly Storm Troopers; these men would be the first to land.

Meanwhile pilots, co-pilots and door-gunners were mounting their Valkyrie carriers and Vulture gunships, and running through final pre-flight checks and powering up systems. One after another they fired up their twin F75-MV afterburning turbojets, the din rising to a crescendo as the turbines accelerated to full speed. Engine tests completed they powered down again, engines idling to a low rumble before lowering the rear access ramps and awaiting the mission launch codeword.

Squad by squad, platoon by platoon, company by company, the Drop Troops marched into their transports, up the ramps and into their seating positions. Once each squad was in and secure the sergeant hit the ramp close button, sealing the Guardsmen inside until the order to jump came. The atmosphere was tense but this was it, after weeks of waiting in the deserts the Elysians were finally going to get into the war and fight the Tau.

For the men assigned to the second lift, coolly awaiting their turn, the take-off was an awesome spectacle. One hundred and sixty Valkyries and thirty Vultures simultaneously powered up their engines, creating a deafening roar that shook the ground and rolled out for kilometres across the flat desert sands. One after another the aircraft began to slowly rise, kicking up swirling sand and dust as they lifted clear. To the observers it was an unstoppable airborne armada. Wave after wave of Valkyries and Vultures

A Valkyrie rearms and refuels, ready to transport the regiment's second lift.
Overhead, Vulture gunships head out on another sortie in support of those already in battle.

Hydro-plant 23-30 was defended by many drone sentry turrets, along with a human and Kroot garrison. Here, a turret is engaged by a Hellstrike missile as Kroot advance to engage the Drop Troops.

climbed slowly to altitude and began to circle, awaiting the other aircraft of their formations before synchronising speeds and racing away northwards. Flying in platoon formations, one behind the other in a single stream of aircraft, the carriers and gunships made for a marshalling point north of the airbase. There they would rendezvous with their air cover, fighters from the 1002nd Fighter wing, whose role it was to protect the vulnerable air convoy from enemy fighter attacks. Flying alongside and above the Valkyries, fifteen Thunderbolts formed a shield around the Drop Troops.

Keeping low for maximum concealment, the entire armada swept low over the desert floor. On the ground the rumble of so many approaching engines soon became a roar that filled the sky with thunder. In the deserts below, Tallarn Imperial Guardsmen looked up to see the stream of aircraft soar overhead, formation after formation crossing the sky and heading for the distant horizon. They were not the only ones to see the Drop Troops heading north, as from their hiding places scattered Tau Pathfinder and Stealthsuit units also witnessed the air armada and quickly reported the sighting to their commanders. A major attack was imminent, but as yet the Tau did not know where the blow would fall.

For the Storm Trooper squads in the vanguard of the air-train, the flight to the target lasted two hours. The journey was not without incident as an accidental mid-air collision destroyed two aircraft. One Valkyrie carrier suffered engine failure and was forced to make an emergency landing in the desert and twice during the journey aircraft were targeted by seeker missiles, locked-on by markerlights from the ground. Both times the missiles impacted, destroying a Vulture and forcing another Valkyrie (this one carrying Captain Lohgan, the commander of 2nd Company) to crash land.

Ten minutes out from the target the Valkyries transporting the Elysian squads climbed to jump altitude, the engine pitch rising as the aircraft strained upwards. Meanwhile the Storm Troopers kept a lower altitude, they would deploy via fast ropes directly into battle, supported by Vulture gunships. As the Valkyrie formations climbed higher, squad sergeants raised their men and readied them to jump, each man checking his grav-chute was working, then securing his respirator and helmet visor in place. With a last prayer to the Emperor mumbled over the whine of hydraulic pistons as the rear ramps opened, they were now over the target; the jump lights turned green and the assault squads plunged out into the sky.

As the Drop Troops jumped, the vanguard of the attack was already arriving over the processing plant. The approaching craft had been met by ground fire as the garrison, alerted by the thunder of approaching jet engines, streamed out to meet their airborne attackers. Lasgun rounds and heavy bolter tracers snaked up to meet the low flying Valkyries and Vultures, shots bouncing off nose cones and engine cowlings as the Valkyries slowed to hover over their objectives. From the wing winch ropes descended, followed by the Storm Troopers sliding down directly into battle. Above them the Vultures were strafing targets, returning heavy bolter fire with their own heavy weapons, the Vulture gunners under strict orders to minimise collateral damage meaning they could not unleash their full arsenal.

It was mid-morning and the battle had begun. The processing plant's lifting station and first pumping station were the objectives of the 23rd regiment's 3rd Company, under the command of Captain Malik. His orders were to capture both intact and hold them until relieved by troops from the second lift. Malik's action to capture the objectives was typical of the battles fought throughout Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 during the first assault. Two Storm Trooper squads would be the first wave, deployed directly onto the target from hovering Valkyries, with a Vulture gunship in close support. The elite squads would set up homing beacons and take the brunt of the initial fighting as the rest of Malik's company grav-chuted into the target area, guided by the beacons. Once those squads regrouped the captain would lead 1st Platoon against the pumping station, whilst 2nd Platoon and 3rd platoon attacked the lifting station. Fourth platoon would be held in reserve, waiting on the ground to reinforce the defences once both were captured. The company's heavy weapons platoon was split between the infantry platoons, a fire support squad with 2nd and 3rd platoons, the mortars with the reserve squads and the anti-tank teams with the Captain for direct support during his main assault.

As soon as they had landed, the two Storm Trooper squads came under heavy fire from drone sentry turrets. The turrets, equipped with disruption-field generators, had not been detected by the aerial reconnaissance. Taking heavy fire, and with casualties mounting, the Storm Troopers deployed the beacons but were quickly pinned down. The turrets were only silenced by strikes from the supporting Vulture gunship, but already they had inflicted a heavy toll on the elite troops. This left the pumping station still strongly held by a garrison force of human auxiliaries.

ELYSIAN DROP TROOPER

1. Helmet
The Drop Trooper's helmet is a Type 5 pressure helmet. A bulky and infamously uncomfortable piece of equipment, it is worn for high-altitude drops. As standard it incorporates air lines which draw from dispensers in the trooper's grav-chute to stabilise the trooper's inner ear pressure. A dangerous aspect of high-altitude jumping is the rapidly increasing air pressure during the trooper's descent. This pressure needs to be continually equalized and pressure-equalizing ear protectors prevent the rapid increase from bursting the trooper's eardrums which, although not fatal, is painful enough to render a Drop Trooper a non-combatant.

The heavy helmet is constructed of reinforced plasteel, with extra armour protection incorporated into the front of it. The basic helmet also contains a tinted flash suppression visor and a short-range communications receiver. All vox-operators wear a variant of the Type 5 helmet with comms-booster equipment built in.

2. Armour
The Drop Trooper's armour is constructed of cast, lightweight synthi-plas – this provides a good level of protection whilst keeping weight to a minimum. As Drop Troops will often operate for extended periods away from supply lines, they must carry a lot of extra equipment themselves. Weight saving is important to reduce encumbrance during drops and to allow space for extra ammunition, grenades, ration packs, etc.

Each troop is issued a chest and back plate, complete with respirator and air hose attachments for the air supply (required at high altitude) and attached shoulder pads. Separate elbow pads and knee pads give extra protection in combat and on landing – some veteran troopers discard these pads after landing to help reduce their overall weight, especially if operating in difficult terrain, but most troopers prefer the extra protection. On Taros all armour was painted codex grey.

3. Clothing
The Guardsman wears a PT-38 jumpsuit; a one piece reinforced coverall made of hard wearing synthi-canvas. It is supplied in a variety of colours and camouflage schemes, and on Taros a sandy coloured jumpsuit was used. The jumpsuit can be worn with a thermal liner for high altitude drops where temperatures in the upper atmosphere are sub-zero. On Taros the lining was not issued due to the climate at ground level and the altitude of the jump. The jumpsuit is always worn with gloves and a respirator mask which prevents wind burn on exposed skin. Wind burn is a side effect of rapid free fall, much like friction burns, but caused by friction with the air.

The jumpsuit includes thick quilted pads on the upper arms and legs, referred to as 'impact pads'. These help reduce the effects of blunt trauma from impacts and give additional protection during a collision or hard landing, the pads being filled with foam to absorb and distribute the energy of an impact. The jumpsuit also includes a variety of pockets for extra storage space.

The Drop Trooper also wears the distinctive tall jump boots of his kind, designed to give strong ankle support upon landing, and jump gloves, one being pushed through the belt.

4. Lasgun
The trooper's Accatran pattern Mk IV lasgun is a lightweight weapon manufactured on Forge World Accatran and supplied to the 23rd Elysian regiment. Its overall length is shortened by its 'bullpup' design, with the powercell positioned behind the handle. This is ideal for Drop Troops who must crowd into the troop compartment of a Valkyrie, carrying all their kit into battle, and who often need more spare ammunition, rations, water, etc, to operate beyond supply lines, as well as wearing a bulky grav-chute. Extra carrying capacity and weight is always at a premium for Drop infantry.

To conserve ammunition and reduce wastage, the weapon only has a single shot setting and cannot be used for automatic fire. It uses a standard power pack, good for fifty shots, and operates in the 19 megathule range. The power pack can be recharged by exposing its thermal cells to heat or light, but the recharging takes time, and cannot generally be done during combat so extra power packs are always carried.

The Mark IVc variant lasgun includes an auxiliary krak grenade launcher mounted under the barrel. This is a short range, single shot weapon issued to officers and NCOs for additional squad level close support. The lasgun also has a carrying handle and solar converter for power pack recharging. This model of lasgun does not include a bayonet lug and Elysian Guardsmen must fight with their knife if engaged in hand-to-hand combat.

Many Elysian regiments prefer to equip themselves with assault shotguns for extra close range combat upon landing. Although this is true, General Syckava (the commanding officer of the 23rd regiment) believed this drastically reduced the regiment's firepower in the longer term whilst defending an objective. Some veteran troops still chose to take a shotgun, but the rank-and-file were all issued lasguns as standard.

5. Equipment

The grav-chute (not shown here) is a complex piece of equipment issued solely to Drop Troop regiments and Storm Troopers for special missions. It is worn across the shoulders, above the backpack, and because of its weight and bulk is usually discarded immediately upon landing, freeing up the Drop Trooper to fight less encumbered. Grav-chutes only operate at a set altitude and the troops are in free fall until theirs activates, controlling their descent with their body's position. The grav-chute slows the final descent, but impact with the ground is still hard and upon landing troops must roll with the impact to absorb the shock. Drop regiments spend much of their time training to control the free-fall descent, in collision avoidance and practicing landing procedure. Despite this accidents are not uncommon and grav-chuting is inherently dangerous. During a high level jump from 10,000 feet, it will take approximately two minutes to reach the ground.

This is Trooper Hyde of the 1st Fire Support squad, Heavy Weapons platoon, 6th Company, seen here during Operation Comet, wearing the standard uniform, armour and equipment issued to all members of the 23rd regiment on Taros. He was wounded in action on the third day of the battle, defending Hydro-processing Plant 23-30. It is currently unknown whether he was killed in action or became a prisoner of war.

Part of each Guardsman's drop equipment is a respirator mask (worn on the chest plate), and a small oxygen tank (incorporated into the back plate) used for high altitude deployments – this air supply is not large enough for it to be used in hostile environments. The mask covers the lower half of the face which is not protected by the helmet and the entire respirator unit is attached to the air supply via underarm pipes.

Other standard equipment issued for Operation Comet and worn by the Drop Trooper includes two ammunition pouches, a water canteen, two fragmentation grenades, a krak grenade, a combat knife and the Elysian's own tactical load-bearing backpack, worn under the grav-chute on the lower back and complimented by two side pouches. Rations and personal kit are also stored here.

6. Drop Canister

Behind the trooper is a drop canister. These large containers are used to land a wide variety of equipment into a drop zone. For heavy weapons teams they will contain the heavy weapon itself (heavy bolter, missile launcher or mortar) and spare ammunition, which must be recovered by the crew before going into action. During an operation other drop canisters will be landed containing spare ammunition, rations, water, fuel, medical supplies and all manner of spare equipment.

Due to their size, Elysian Drop Troops refer to drop canisters as 'coffins', and after a battle they are often put to this use.

7. Insignia

The regimental insignia of the 23rd Elysian regiment is a winged spear in front of a sun and this Drop Trooper bears it painted onto his chest plate. The Taros Campaign badge has been temporarily stencilled onto the left knee pad, and this will be overpainted before the regiment's next deployment.

The Drop Trooper wears his company number on the right shoulder pad. In this case 6th Company, whilst regimental command staff use the letter C. The left shoulder is blank for troopers and has a red stripe for veterans (those with at least eight combat drops). Officers have a more decorative left shoulder pad: the winged skull for low ranking officers (sergeants and lieutenants) and a laurel-wreathed skull for high ranking officers (captains and above).

As a low ranking trooper this Guardsman's helmet remains codex grey. NCOs and officers use a system of stripes on the back of the helmet to identify themselves on the battlefield: sergeants use a white stripe, lieutenants use a yellow stripe and higher-ranking officers use a yellow stripe trimmed with red.

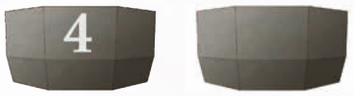
The cast skull badge worn on the left breast is an honorific and is a regimental citation for the 23rd Elysian regiment's part in the Assault on Fort Moros. It can be worn by all members of the regiment, whether they took part in the operation or not.

The scratch marks on the side of the helmet are a personal addition to the trooper's kit, and many members of the regiment will record the number of combat drops they have made in this way. Amongst the Elysians it is an unofficial badge of seniority; the more drops survived, the more senior the trooper amongst his fellow squad members.

Helmet front – standard to all Drop Troops

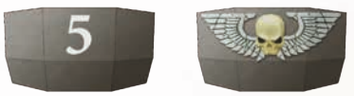
Left shoulder pad: Veteran

Drop Trooper



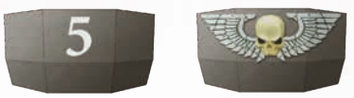
Right shoulder pad: Company Number
Left shoulder pad: No marking

Sergeant



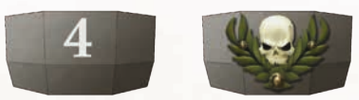
Right shoulder pad: Company Number
Left shoulder pad: Winged Skull

Lieutenant



Right shoulder pad: Company Number
Left shoulder pad: Winged Skull

Captain



Right shoulder pad: Company Number
Left shoulder pad: Wreathed Skull

Colonel

Right shoulder pad: Command 'C'
Left shoulder pad: Wreathed Skull

As the Storm Troopers were engaging the enemy, Malik's men were hitting the ground, shaking off their grav-chute packs and reorganising into their squads, each group of men rallying on their sergeant swiftly and efficiently. The processing plant was already echoing to the sounds of gunfire, explosions and the roar of jet engines and, quickly regrouping, it was therefore up to 1st Platoon to clear the defenders. Leading from the front, with Commissar Graal alongside him, Malik closed on the pumping station. Engaging in a firefight he found the defenders were well entrenched and fought tenaciously. Exchanging heavy fire the Captain looked to break the deadlock and led 1st Platoon's assault. Yelling the regiment's motto "*From the skies!*" Malik rushed in. As fragmentation grenades exploded all around, his assaulting squads set about clearing the pumping station in an intense close quarters fight, only to find the pumping station was also occupied by Kroot mercenaries. The assault had overrun the human defenders, but the bloodthirsty Kroot were a different proposition. With the Captain fighting desperately in hand-to-hand combat, 1st Platoon's squads were repelled, falling back before the savage aliens under the covering fire of frag and krak missiles. Captain Malik was killed during the confused withdrawal; his mutilated and half-eaten body later reported seen hanging from the pipe works.

Their first assault bloodily repulsed and with their commanding officer dead, Commissar Graal now took command of the Elysian attack. He set about rallying the forces, including the surviving Storm Troopers. Reports were arriving that the first Tau response to the attack, a flight of Tiger Shark bombers, was closing rapidly. The battle was intensifying and damage was mounting. The flight of Tiger Sharks overflew the plant, streaking low and scattering clouds of drones in their wake. It seemed the Tau were deploying any forces they had available to defend the site and, reinforced by the drones, the Kroot defenders continued to fire from cover. It would take another assault to clear them.

To prepare for the second assault, Commissar Graal sent a runner back to the mortar squad; he needed the defenders softening up with a bombardment before attacking. Crouching in cover amongst the pipes, storage tanks and detritus, the Elysian Guardsmen waited for the mortar barrage to do its work before, driven forwards by their Commissar, they rushed the pumping station a second time.

It was hard fighting again, but the accurate mortar barrage had shaken the Kroot. The surviving Guardsmen swept in and overwhelmed the remaining defenders, capturing the pumping station. Graal immediately called forwards 4th Platoon to reinforce them. In response the Kroot rallied and tried to charge back, but too many Guardsmen were now waiting for them, and most of their xenos foe were cut down by lasgun fire. The battle for Pumping Station 1 had been costly. Over half of 1st Platoon and the Storm Troopers were dead or injured, and the objective itself had taken severe damage in the attack and mortar shelling.

By dusk, after a day of combat, Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 was captured, and all the primary and secondary objectives were in the hands of the Elysian Drop Troops. There were still some enemy stragglers and snipers hiding out amongst the industrial debris, and Drop Trooper squads were cautiously patrolling through the holding tanks and pipelines hunting them down. The fighting had been fierce and the garrison had given a surprisingly strong account of themselves. Outnumbered and outgunned by the Elysian air mobile firepower the human traitors could have easily broken and run, but instead they, along with their Kroot allies, had fought mercilessly hard all day, and many locations had been badly damaged because of their strong defence.

Day Two – Crisis of the Second Lift

The entire lift process was repeated again on the second morning, with the second wave being loaded and lifting off to reinforce the first lift. Overnight the hydro-plant had been secured, stragglers had been rounded up and a perimeter established around the base. The men of the second lift would now jump into that perimeter and move to reinforce it. Unlike the first morning, the element of surprise had been lost, and the Tau were now waiting. They were also mobilising to retake Hydro-processing Plant 23-30, their Mantas loading up fresh Hunter Cadres.

The first lift had bypassed the Tau defences relatively unscathed, but the second lift had a far harder task and the Tau diverted all available Barracudas to intercept the air train. The Valkyries and Vultures, although potent weapons in their own right, were no match for high performance jet fighters in a dogfight, and flying in formation they were vulnerable. The Imperial Navy continued to provide fighter protection and as the second lift approached the target they encountered the incoming Barracudas. Thunderbolts and Barracudas soon twisted and turned in the air, strafing each other with autocannon and burst cannon as they wrestled for superiority. By now, the two sets of pilots were old foes, many having already learned the other's tricks. As dogfights raged around them, the transports raced on towards the target, but those Barracudas that broke through created havoc amongst the formations. Scattered like sheep before wolves the Valkyries tried to escape the Barracudas, but seven were quickly shot down. The scattering of the formations would also cause problems over the target. Many units were expecting to be reinforced, but confusion now reigned as squads became lost and intermingled, but despite the unexpected losses, the remaining Valkyries bravely flew on.

On the ground dawn had seen the start of the Tau counter-attack. Weary from the previous day's combat and with many units low on ammunition, the Elysian platoons now dug-in around the hydro-plant saw the great winged shadows of the dreaded Mantas approaching over the desert. Shimmering in the morning heat haze, the Mantas began to deploy their cargoes. The Tau attack would come soon.

All around the perimeter – from buildings turned into heavy weapons strong points, on walkways, behind barricades of steel piping, from slit trenches dug in the sand or behind sandbagged positions – tense, dusty, hollow-eyed Drop Troopers awaited the inevitable Tau attack. Isolated they were now surrounded on three sides with their backs to the sea. When it came, the Tau attack could come from any direction. As they checked their weapons or sharpened knives one last time, the Guardsmen were heartened by the thought of the second lift winging its way closer by the minute. Following that drop would be the Imperial Guard relief column, even now rumbling across the desert towards them. The Elysian Guardsmen had to fight hard and hang on until the reinforcements arrived.

The morning's battle started with a wave of Tiger Shark bombers. Just as on the day before the Tau Empire bombers raced in low. This time rather than dropping more drones, they unleashed missiles and ion cannons, blasting the hydro-processing plant with massed fire. Regardless of the damage they were inflicting on the facility the Tau's ammunition pounded the Elysians, preparing for their ground attack. As explosions mushroomed about them, all the Guardsmen could do was hug their cover closely and wait for the ordeal to end. As the noise of the aerial bombardment faded, the whine of approaching jet engines grew. From all directions came Devilfish transports and Hammerhead tanks, and Fire Warriors with their distinctive long pulse rifles could be seen scurrying forwards into range, and with them came the battlesuits. The attack had begun.

ORDO XENOS
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DEPARTMENTO ANALYTICUS RECORD

HYDRO-PROCESSING PLANT 23-30

1. Pumping Station 1 – primary to secondary
2. Pumping Station 2 – secondary to tertiary
3. Pumping Station 3 – tertiary to holding tanks
4. Administration block
5. Central control complex
6. Barracks block
7. Main gate
8. Second gate
9. Inlet pipe
10. Lift station and grinding pumps – sea to primary
11. Settling tanks
12. Main holding tanks
13. Biochemical storage tanks
14. Chemical feeder pumps
15. Secondary purification works – aeralin tanks
16. Secondary settling tanks
17. Chlorination works
18. Holding tanks for pure water
19. Reserve holding tanks (emergency supplies of pure water)
20. Mains pumping station and mains pipelines – holding to mains
21. Reserve mains pumping station
22. Warehousing – storage for equipment and spare parts
23. Manufacturing workshop
24. Generator house (emergency power supply)
25. Causeway

A drone sentry turret burns as Drop Troops fight in the smoke-blackened inferno of the wrecked hydro-plant.

The Tau attacked with a calm, ruthless ferocity, blasting the Elysians with heavy weapons and massed pulse fire in a long range firefight. They easily outgunned the Guardsmen, but the Elysians were not powerless to respond. Their own heavy weapons, mortars and Sentinels returned fire and rounds slashed across the no-man's land between the two forces, but the Drop Troops held their positions as the firefight intensified. Well dug-in and concealed the Elysians could not be moved by firepower alone. They would have to be rooted out with grenades and in bloody hand-to-hand combat. Their attackers were reluctant to use such methods – yet.

With the firefight still raging around the perimeter, the Valkyries and escorting gunships of the second lift came into view over the southern horizon. Climbing to jump altitude the men inside were already waiting to deploy directly into the battle – reinforcements had arrived to even up the odds.

The second lift jumped directly into the battle, but was exposed to the Tau's heaviest fire as they fell. Looking down from the rear ramp of his Valkyrie, General Syckava could see the panorama of battle laid out beneath him. He could see the Tau armoured vehicles and infantry, and hear the hail of fire that now waited to greet his men. A few moments later he was out of the door and falling through the weaving curtain of weapons fire thrown up by the Tau forces. As he fell he saw one Valkyrie, both engines gushing flames, plunge towards the ground to impact in an orange fireball in the desert. Another was hit by a missile and nose dived into the sea. In their attempts to avoid the Tau's anti-aircraft fire the pilots of the Valkyries took emergency evasive action, but as the transports manoeuvred the carefully planned formations of Drop Troops were being scattered across the desert surrounding the target. Some fell within the perimeter, other plunged into the toxic sea and died screaming in agony, whilst more fell amongst the surrounding Tau forces, shot down as they fell.

The second lift had jumped into a storm of weapons fire. Already it was scattered and taking heavy losses. On the ground the firefight had paused whilst the Tau turned every gun they had on the second lift. Defenceless men were being killed in mid-air, their bodies tumbling down to hit the ground dead. For the men of the first lift it was a respite from the heavy fire, but a heart-breaking disaster for the operation's chances of success. Hammered in the air the men of the second lift now had to try to regroup, find their way to defensive positions and get into the fight.

General Syckava hit the ground within the perimeter on the southern edge of the hydro-plant. He ran for cover, still bearing the weight of his grav-chute and as he ran a stray pulse round struck him through the arm and knocked him off his feet. Other men ran to aid their general and dragged him to safety out of the line of fire. A medic was called for, but as the battle unfolded, the regiment's commanding officer was seriously wounded and out of the fight.

The surviving Valkyries sped away, many peppered with holes or limping on single engines. The Vultures had tried to respond to the Tau, swooping in to unleash rockets and autocannon rounds, but their fuel tanks would only allow them to linger for so long before they had to return to refuel. The pilots did what they could for the defenders before following the Valkyries back to base.

The regiment's second-in-command, Colonel Balach, was informed of Syckava's wound and that he was now in charge of all the ground forces. From his position on top of the administration block, watching the Vultures flitting about the desert, dodging fire then popping up to launch salvoes of missiles, the Colonel realised that air support was the key to keeping the Tau at bay and surviving the cauldron of fire that the regiment was now trapped in. He needed more air support – fast. Colonel Balach sent

Chimeras of the Cadian 114th Regiment advance towards the Iracunda Isthmus along with Legio Ignatum Warhound Titans. The Titan pictured on the right is the Advensis Primaris, later destroyed in the fighting.

a priority communication to General De Stael's headquarters making just such a request. "*Holding objective. Surrounded by enemy forces in great strength. Urgently require air support to sustain perimeter. Please advise on likely ETA of relief force.*"

The message was heard loud and clear by both Lord Marshal De Stael and the Tau commanders, who were listening in from within their Manta. As the Imperial Navy scrambled a fighter wing to join the fray, the Tau Barracudas vectored in to intercept them. Now the effects of the Tau's earlier daring raid on the airbase were felt. Already most of the Imperial Navy's fighters were in the air supporting the relief column and protecting the surviving air-train returning to base. This third request stretched the Imperial Navy's remaining resources. They had received no replacement aircraft since the campaign had started and fuel supplies were starting to run low. In all only six air worthy Thunderbolts could be found for the new mission – it wasn't enough. The six Thunderbolts encountered twelve Barracudas as they approached the target and, after four aircraft were shot down, the surviving Thunderbolts found themselves fleeing back to base. Colonel Balach did not get his much needed air support and was now on his own.

At Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 sporadic firefights continued for the rest of the day and through the night. The Tau were content to sit back and besiege the defenders, wearing them down with long range weapons fire whilst husbanding their forces for a final assault to clear the plant.

Day Three – The End of 23-30

With the Imperial Navy unable to assist them, the 23rd Elysians had to rely on their own Vultures. After returning to base the gunships re-armed, refuelled and set off again. They would provide constant rolling air cover for the men on the ground, but the distance between their base and the battle meant they could never stay for long. Still, throughout the day and night the Vulture gunships skimmed in and unleashed their firepower before returning to base, the skies illuminated by the fiery streaks of missile launchers and the distant crump of warhead impacts.

After two days and nights of fighting, Hydro-processing Plant 23-30 had been pounded into rubble. Tau heavy weapons and Elysian counter-fire was reducing the area into little more than a growing pile of junk metal. It was a ravaged landscape, pitted by mortar craters, covered with the wreckage of twisted and charred pipes, and littered with splintered steel, ash and the bodies of the dead. Tracks were barricaded with the husks of burned-out Sentinels and half-demolished water and chemical storage tanks, their contents long since dashed upon the sand, stood sentry over the battlefield. Within this steel jungle crawled the survivors, crouching in cover, their uniforms ragged, dirty and bloody. They were all tired, exhausted from two days and nights of constant fighting, and the threat of a renewed Tau offensive in the night had kept them all awake, meaning few had gotten the rest they so desperately needed.

After the previous day's long range bombardment the surrounding Tau forces now closed in to finish the job. Well aware of the relief column closing in, the Tau set about reducing the perimeter quickly. When dawn broke they mercilessly unleashed their biggest weapon and a Manta swooped in over the hydro-plant, casting an ominous shadow over the Guardsmen beneath like a great bird of prey. The Elysians had no answer to the Manta's firepower. Its drone-controlled burst cannon turrets raked the site in a cascade of fire. With the Guardsmen pinned down by such heavy fire the battlesuits then moved in, followed by Fire Warrior teams.

Under the wings of their Manta support, the Tau finally closed in and used their heaviest weapons at point blank range. The Elysians fought back hard, but even with their Vulture air support attacking the Manta they could not hope to win such an uneven battle. Slowly the Tau cleared the ruins, section by section and the Elysians fought bravely, then fell back or died, until only small pockets of resistance remained around the control complex and the causeway to the primary treatment centre. In the mid afternoon, the Tau commander requested a ceasefire and asked that the remaining defenders surrender. He informed Colonel Balach that there was nothing to be gained by continuing the pointless slaughter. The battle was lost, his relief was

not coming – to die now was to die in vain. Colonel Balach, now wounded himself, refused to surrender and vowed to fight on. By nightfall he was dead and the 23rd Elysian regiment had been all but annihilated.

The Tau Fire Warriors rounded up the few survivors, including General Syckava, disarmed them then loaded them into the holds of their Mantas. Soon more of the huge transports landed and began to collect the Hunter Cadres for redeployment. They left behind a twisted, smoke shrouded battlefield, littered with wreckage and the dead. Operation Comet was over – it too had failed.

Operation Comet: Space Marine Breakthrough

Since the offensive towards Tarokeen had stalled, there had been little fighting between the Tallarn regiments and the Tau. The Tallarns had made small advances and continued harassing artillery fire but, short on supplies and critically low on water, they dug-in to conserve what supplies they had. The men set about laying minefields and razor wire in front of their positions and whilst the Imperial Guard were not advancing, the Tau did not counter-attack. With the Guardsmen marooned in the desert, the Hunter Cadres conserved their own strength for the battles still to come.

It was critical to the success of Operation Comet, and maybe the outcome of the war, that relief forces reached the Drop Troops in three days. Before any relief force could make its advance though, a breakthrough had to be made through the western end of the isthmus. For the ground forces to reach there, they would have to traverse the narrow strips of land between the small seas and lakes in the region. Channelled by the terrain, any attack would have to be directly into the teeth of the Hunter Cadres' firepower.

The Tallarn regiments were no longer fit for the offensive. They had lost too many of their men and most of their tanks in the long drive north. The war was entering a critical phase and had rested on Operation Comet succeeding. De Stael turned to the best troops he still had. Firstly, the Raptors Space Marines. Captain Orelius' battle-brothers had seen little ground action; it was time to commit them again. The Space Marines would be the spearhead of the thrust, supported by the Titans of Legio Ignatum. The Warhounds were the Imperium's largest war machines on Taros, it was unlikely the Tau had any answer to them. Between these two forces they would smash through the narrow terrain, sweeping aside any resistance and clearing the way for the mechanized 114th Cadian regiment to strike north to reach Hydro-processing Plant 23-30. The breakthrough operation would begin on the same day as the Elysians launched Operation Comet.

Captains Orelius and Kaedes oversaw the Space Marines' preparations for the attack. Thunderhawk transporters started their work, transferring Land Raiders, Predators, Whirlwinds and Rhinos from the *War Talon* to the surface whilst Techmarines armed and blessed the vehicles. The battle-brothers of the 2nd and 6th Companies mustered for an armoured engagement. Thunderhawk transporters plunged from orbit to land at the assigned assembly area, just west of the northern end of the isthmus entrance. On board the transporters were Land Raiders, Predators, Whirlwinds and Rhinos, all carrying the squads of 3rd Company. The attack would come swiftly, giving the Tau minimum time to respond, and it would come in overwhelming force. It would be spearheaded by the armour of the Raptors Chapter, supported by the firepower of the Warhound Titans, with the 114th regiment awaiting the breakthrough to begin their own mission – the relief of Hydro-processing Plant 23-30.

While the Space Marines assembled, the Warhound Titans of Legio Ignatum were stalking north to join them, striding through the deserts accompanied by the sprawling Chimera formations of the Cadian regiment. For the first time in the campaign, the Tau would experience a true army of the Imperium, the combined weight of the Imperium's fighting forces committed as one.

Land Raiders of the Raptors Chapter, and a Warhound Titan of Legio Ignatum, spearhead the breakthrough into the Iracunda Isthmus.

Eight hundred kilometres to the south, the Valkyries and Vultures of the Elysian Drop Troop regiment were just taking off as the Space Marines and Warhounds went into battle. Their target area was at the northern end of the entrance to the isthmus. Their objective was to clear all Tau forces, punching a gap for the Imperial Guard to race through.

The Tau's Pathfinder forward observers must have seen the Warhound Titans, standing fourteen metres tall above the desert as they stalked forwards. The Tau were prepared for an attack and, as ever, their Hunter Cadres responded quickly to the call from their forward scouts. In earlier engagements the Tau had always been able to make the most of their long-ranged weaponry to pick off Leman Russ and Chimeras. Now they faced Titans, equipped with massive weaponry and protective void shields, the advantage lay with the Imperium. This would be a different battle.

The Warhounds engaged the Hammerheads at maximum range, blazing away with massive turbo-lasers. The Space Marines sped forwards, their Land Raiders leading the way with Whirlwinds in close support and Predators on the flanks. Hoping to halt the assault the Tau could no longer simply give ground before the attack, they had to stand and fight, and this was to the Space Marines' advantage. The Raptors strike force could close the distance and start to engage with their highly accurate lascannon and, conducted with speed, accuracy and their trade mark aggression, they tore into the Tau defenders, deploying Devastator squads from Rhinos to lend their fire support. Suddenly the Tau were suffering heavy losses. With void shields flaring against railgun hits, the Warhounds strode forwards, obliterating entire vehicles with a single hit from their weaponry and stomping on the wreckage as they advanced. For the first time on Taros the Tau fell back having had the worst of an engagement, the desert marked by tell tale columns of smoke rising from the burning hulks of their vehicles. The Warhounds continually stalked forwards, obliterating anything in their path, and along with the Space Marines now advancing about their feet, the combined force thrust a sword clean through the Tau defences and opened the way onto the Iracunda Isthmus. The Tau rallied and the arrival of a fresh Hunter Cadre saw the fighting intensify again. This time the Tau would deploy a new weapon. No Imperial commander had ever encountered this new mark of Tiger Shark before and the aircraft came in fast, skimming the desert so low it kicked up a dust cloud before climbing over a shallow rise to open fire. Missiles rippled from the aircraft's wings, flaring bright against Warhound *Advensis Primaris'* void shields. The explosions overpowered the generators, which cut out and the following shots from the Tiger Shark's twin railguns struck the Warhound squarely in the hull. With devastating power, two hypersonic shots tore through the thick armour plates in an explosion that showered the surrounding desert in molten shrapnel. Critically wounded, the Warhound staggered backwards under the impacts, tottered and, to the astonishment of all, fell.

Where once Imperial commanders had thought the Titans untouchable to all but a Manta's firepower, suddenly the Tau Empire had a new tactical weapon capable of bringing down their mighty war machines. The wreckage of *Advensis Primaris* lay billowing oily smoke as the sand settled over her. Inside the crew lay dead at the controls, including High Princeps Jernay, killed by agonising bolts of pain that had fed directly into his brain from the Titan's mind-impulse controls. It was a bitter and unexpected loss and the remaining three Titans withdrew rather than face another strafing run. Their mission was already complete; the 114th Cadians were now able to begin their strike northwards.

The Space Marines and Warhounds had advanced the required fifty kilometres in just a day of fighting. Skirmishing continued in the area all day, with Space Marine patrols hunting down any Tau stragglers or Pathfinder teams bold enough to return to the battlefield, whilst behind them the 114th Cadians roared their engines into life.

Wreckage of the Tau defenders litters the desert as the Titans and Space Marines advance.

From bitter experience fighting Titans in other warzones, the Tau Empire upgraded the killing power of the Tiger Shark. This newly modified craft, designated the 'Tiger Shark AX-1-0', destroyed an Imperial Warhound, forcing the Legio Ignatum to withdraw from the deserts of Taros or face further devastating losses.

Despite the victory, the loss of *Advensis Primaris* was a worrying development, the Tau had obviously learned from their previous experiences fighting the Imperium's greatest war machines. In the past Hunter Cadres had faired poorly against Titans, now the Tau had developed a weapon capable of fighting back. The new Tiger Shark had been upgraded to carry two heavy railguns, sacrificing its standard payload and ion cannon for the kind of firepower usually only mounted on Mantas or spacecraft.

Operation Comet: Imperial Guard Reinforcements

The completion of the Raptors' attack was the signal for the 114th Cadian regiment to begin its part of the operation. The regiment's mission was to relieve the Elysian Drop Troops who were already fighting to secure the hydro-plant. The Chimera-borne mechanised regiment was to dash to link up with them and had two days to cover one hundred and fifty kilometres of hostile, potentially enemy infiltrated, desert.

The Space Marines and Warhounds had cleared the way and now the Imperial Guard, under the direction of Colonel Stranski raced forwards. Leading the force were reconnaissance troops, squadrons of Salamander scout vehicles and behind them came the bulk of the regiment, infantry platoons advancing in formation in their own Chimera armoured carriers. Finally, there was the regiment's artillery support, Griffon mortar carriers replacing the slower Basilisks. Colonel Stranski had already decided that the Basilisks should not take part in the operation. The artillery pieces could not keep up with the pace of the advance, indirect firepower would have to be provided by the mortars and the Imperial Navy, whose aircraft were again overhead protecting the Chimera columns. The Elysians could not afford for the Cadians to be delayed by anything – this mission was a race against time.

The grinding tracks and rumbling engines of the Chimeras raised tall dust columns as the armoured infantry formations sped northwards – tall dust columns that the Tau could easily spot and track. The Tau had suffered their heaviest losses yet fighting the breakthrough and had already started to load Hunter Cadres into Mantas to move against the Elysian drop zone; the Chimera columns now driving deep into their territory could not be stopped and the Tau faced a difficult tactical problem – where to commit their available troops? Should it be into stopping the column or overwhelming the Drop Troops? If the column was attacked then the Elysians might hold out. If the Elysians were destroyed then the Chimera columns would arrive finding nothing to relieve. So the Tau let the Cadians advance. They would not seek to halt or destroy the 114th's armoured columns, only to delay them long enough for the battle at the processing plant to be won. For delaying actions the Tau commanders turned to light forces of Pathfinders, supported by Piranhas and Devilfish-mounted Fire Warriors. These would harass the column with ambushes and sniping, but were not to engage

ORDO XENOS
RESTRICTED ARCHIVE

Raptors Chapter, Iracunda Breakthrough Force

Table of Organisation

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in open battle. As the flying column of Chimeras roared across the desert flats, Pathfinder teams on Tetra speeders raced into the area ahead of the advance to observe their movement and prepare the ground with Orca dropped remote sensor towers. Meanwhile, the main Hunter Cadres moved their full force against Hydro-processing Plant 23-30, with instructions to overwhelm the defenders in a maximum of two days.

Riding in the cupola of his command Chimera, Colonel 'Snake' Stranski could watch his regiments advance, arrayed company behind company, with a reconnaissance screen in front. It was a majestic sight; Chimera after Chimera gunning its engines and pounding headlong across the sands. Overhead the contrails of Imperial Navy Thunderbolts criss-crossed the sky. His advance had started well and for the first day his men saw little of the enemy.

On the second day, that changed as his scouts and vanguard platoons came under surprise attack from concealed Tau forces. For the first time, Imperial Guardsmen encountered distinctive tall, thin Tau observation towers. Following the sightings several Chimeras were destroyed by seeker missile strikes, seemingly launched out of nowhere and each time the Tau attacked it caused the threatened units to halt, disembark troops and begin to hunt down the foe. This caused delays and the Colonel ordered only units that came under direct attack to engage the enemy. Any following units should bypass the danger zone and move forwards, the regiment would become strung out but it would keep the advance moving.

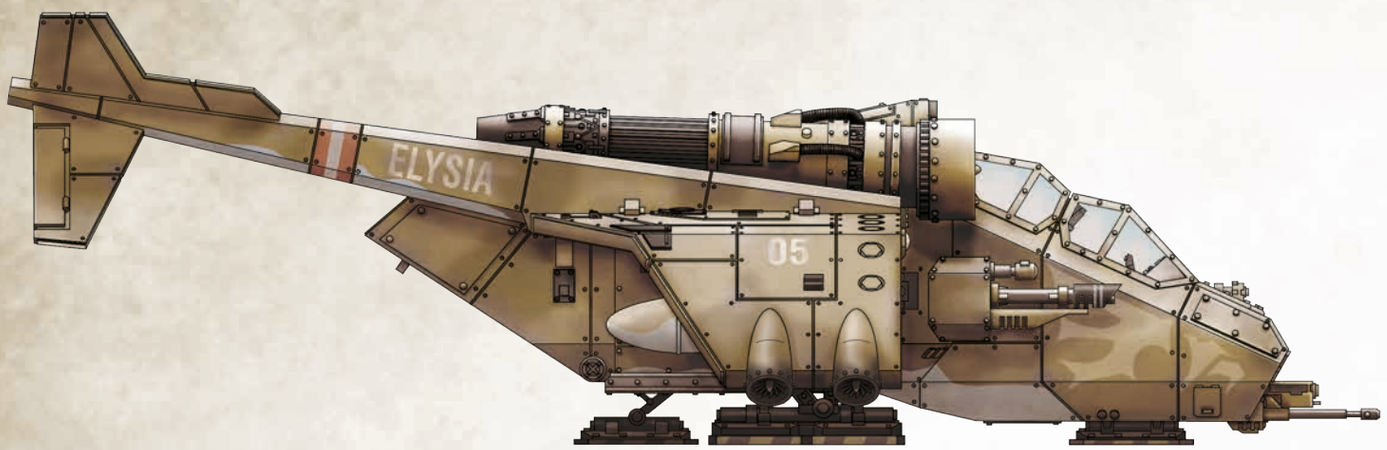
On that second morning alone there were six separate Tau ambushes, each one causing losses and a delay. What had been a glorious headlong charge the day before was now a stop-start running battle, and the 114th was being stalled. The delays caused the 114th regiment to fall behind schedule and by nightfall they were still thirty kilometres short of their destination. News from the processing plant was not encouraging as that evening communications with Colonel Balach and his beleaguered defenders had been lost. 4621st Army Command no longer had any idea what was happening on the ground at Hydro-processing Plant 23-30.

That night, in desperation, Stranski organised a long range patrol to strike out ahead of his main units. Under cover of darkness they must reach the processing plant regardless of the cost. Using only his fastest vehicles, the Salamanders, he would personally lead the mission.

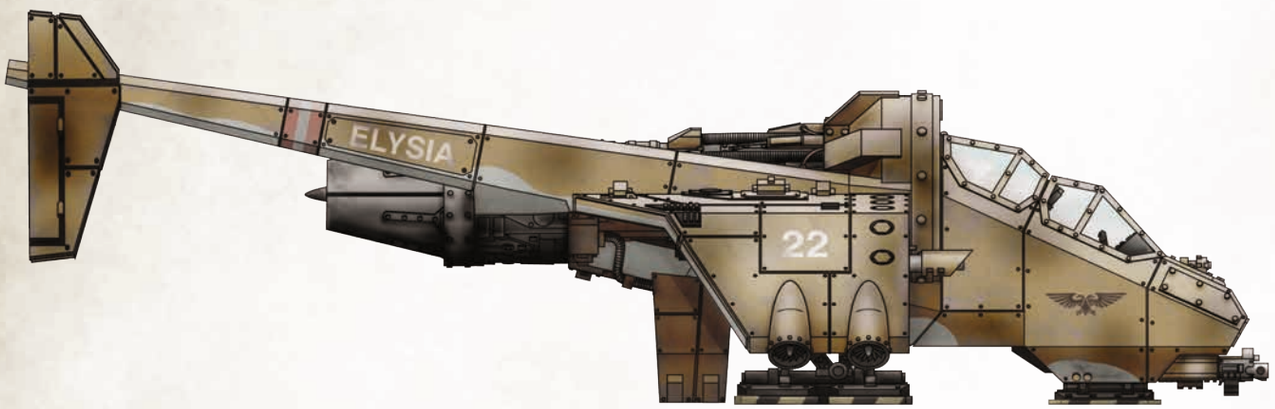
The eight Salamander patrols reached the facility before dawn, speeding across the desert on their over-powered engines. In the end the lead units of the 114th were only four hours late, but it was four hours too much for their comrades. As first light broke, Colonel Stranski and his Cadian reconnaissance crews were the first witnesses to the carnage the Tau had unleashed. The processing plant was a smouldering, blackened ruin of pipes and storage tanks. Thick smoke and dust hung in the air over the shattered detritus of battle and, crunching through the rubble, they found burned-out Sentinels, Valkyrie crash sites, destroyed heavy weapons, wrecked Tau Devilfish and battlesuits, and the dead of both sides. Fires still raged, but all else was eerily quiet.

The main body of the 114th began arriving a few hours after dawn and the Cadian Guardsmen searched the ruins for survivors. None were found – the Tau had already done the job thoroughly. By mid-afternoon Colonel Stranski ordered his regiment to mount up and withdraw back to the Tallarn lines. There was no point in holding the shattered ruins, no water could be supplied from here. His men had fought over one hundred and fifty kilometres for nothing. The mission had failed.

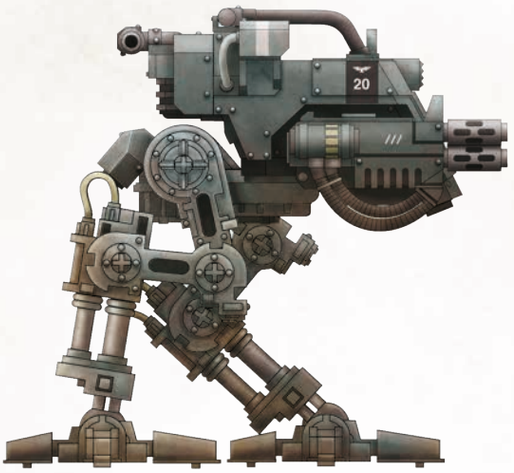
The Cadian's Chimeras come under attack during the relief operation.



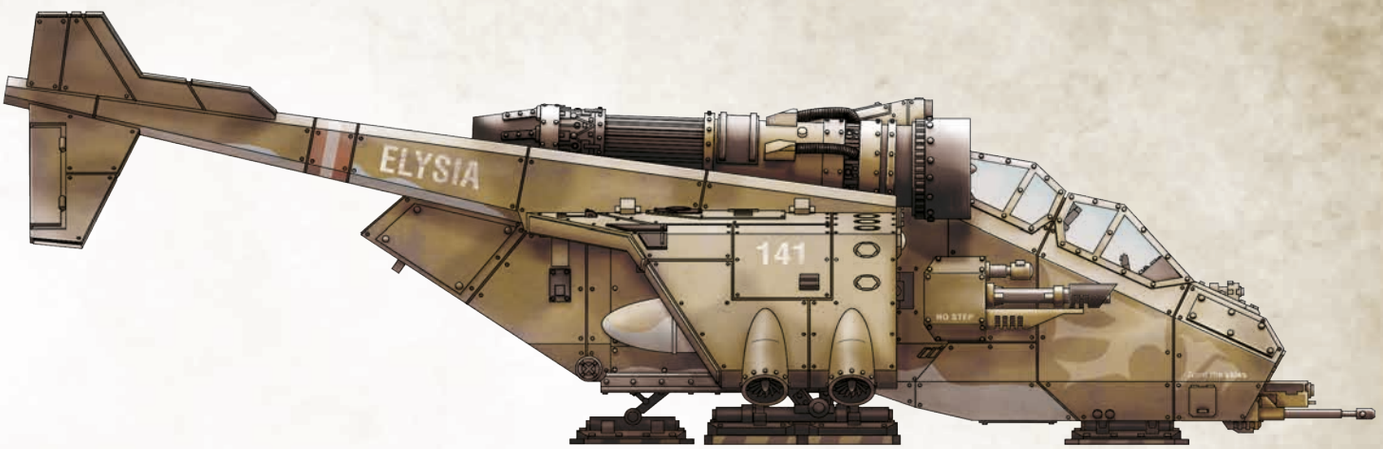
Valkyrie airborne assault carrier of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment.
This is the regiment's fifth aircraft, camouflaged for Operation Comet.



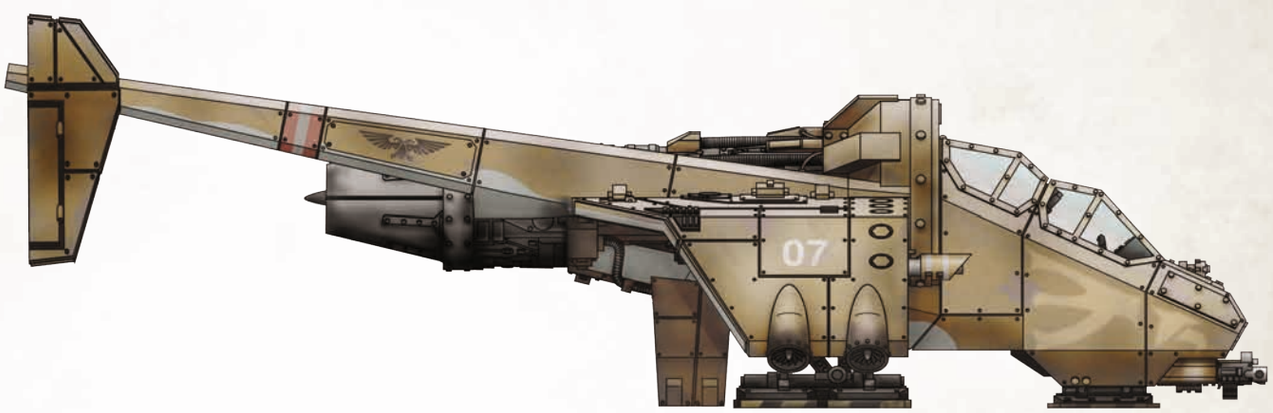
Vulture gunship of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment.
This is the regiment's twenty-second aircraft, camouflaged for Operation Comet.



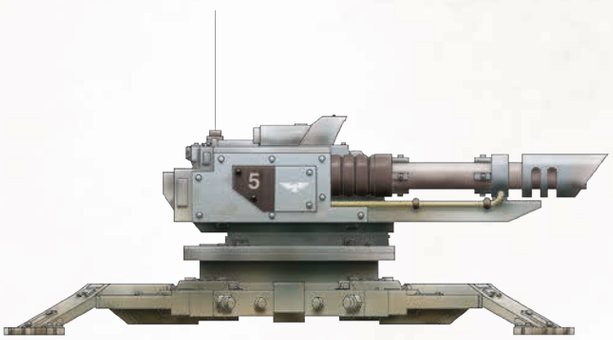
Drop Sentinel of the 23rd Elysian regiment, armed with a multi-melta. This vehicle is in Codex grey.



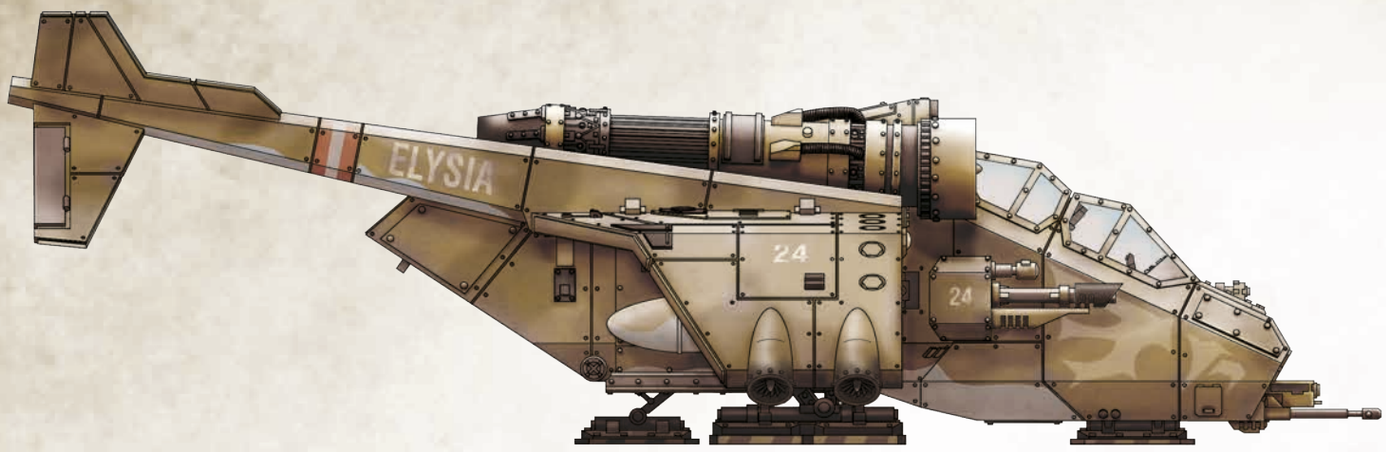
Valkyrie airborne assault carrier of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment. This is aircraft 141, shot down during Operation Comet.



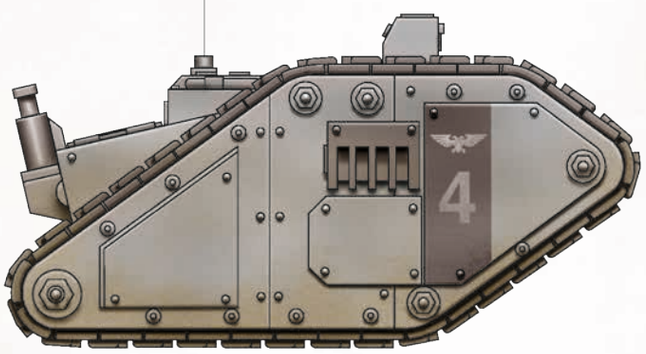
Vulture gunship of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment. This is the regiment's seventh aircraft, camouflaged for Operation Comet. Note that it has the 'diving eagle' insignia on its nose mounting, an unofficial addition to many aircraft by their crews.



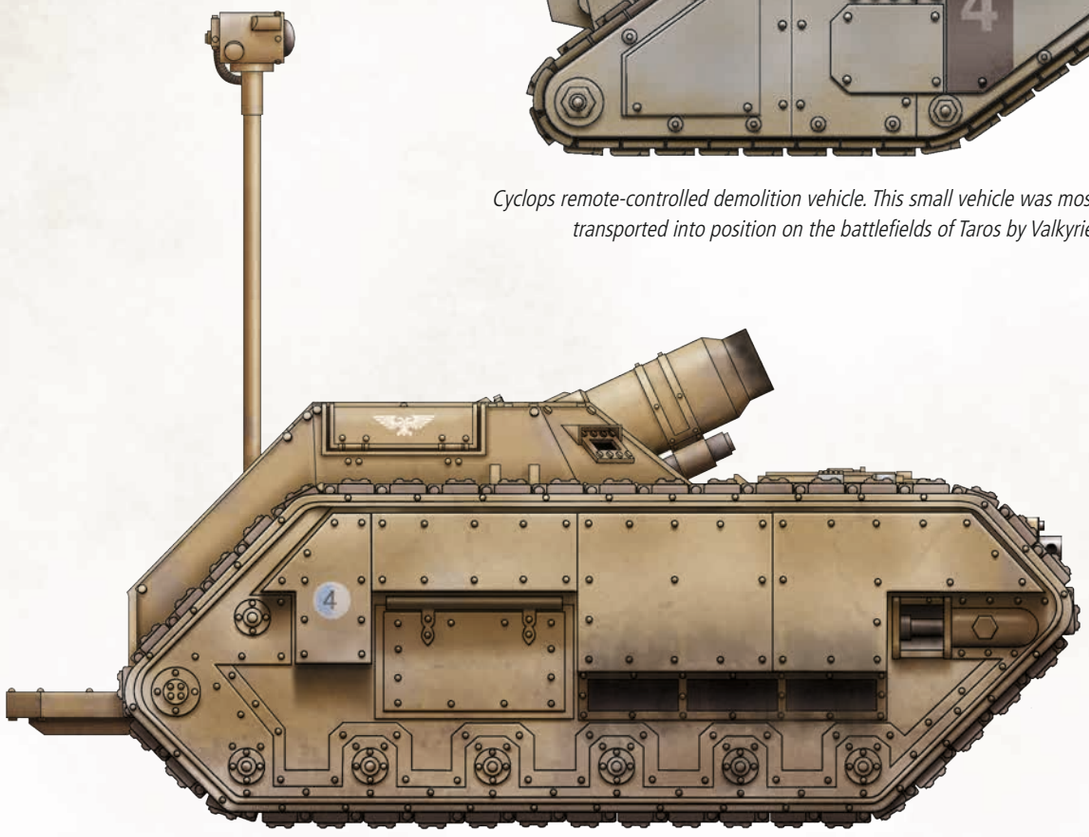
Tarantula sentry gun, with lascannons, of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment. Small enough to be carried in a Valkyrie, sentry guns added valuable heavy weapons support to the regiment's defensive perimeter.



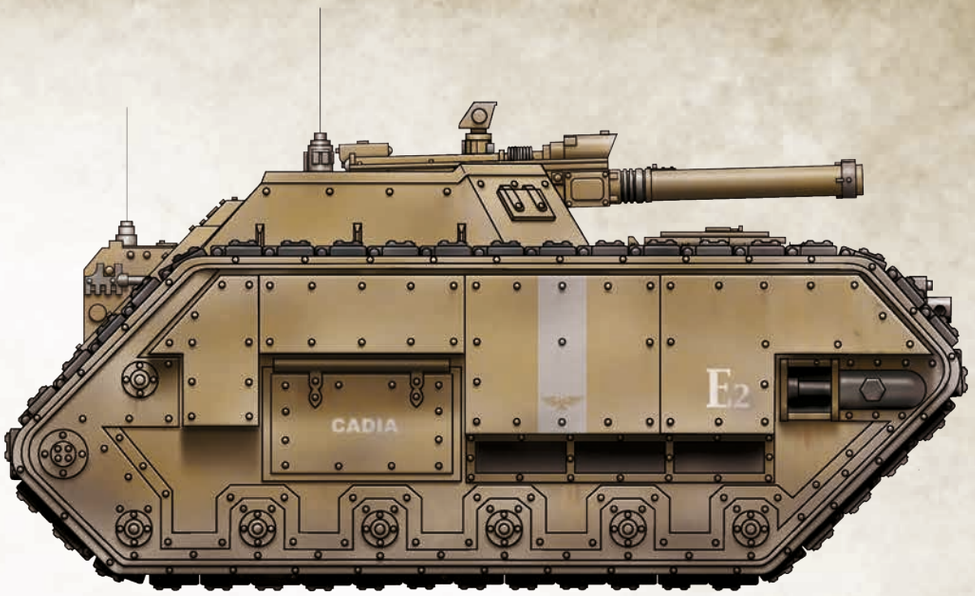
Valkyrie airborne assault carrier of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment.
This is the regiment's twenty-fourth aircraft, camouflaged for Operation Comet.
Due to the objective's distance, all Valkyries had to be equipped with additional fuel tanks.



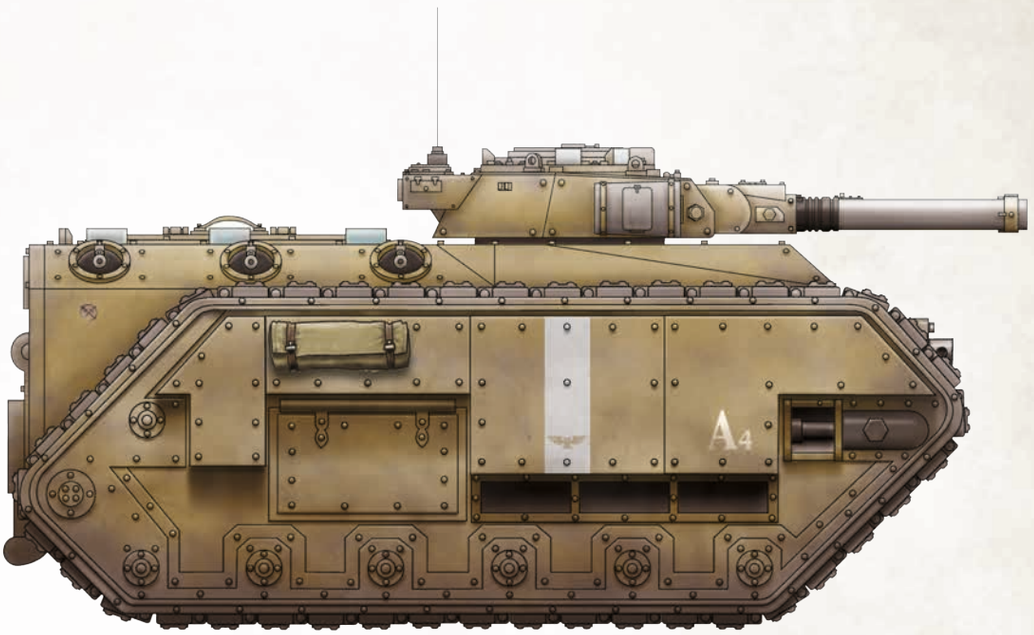
Cyclops remote-controlled demolition vehicle. This small vehicle was most effectively transported into position on the battlefields of Taros by Valkyries.



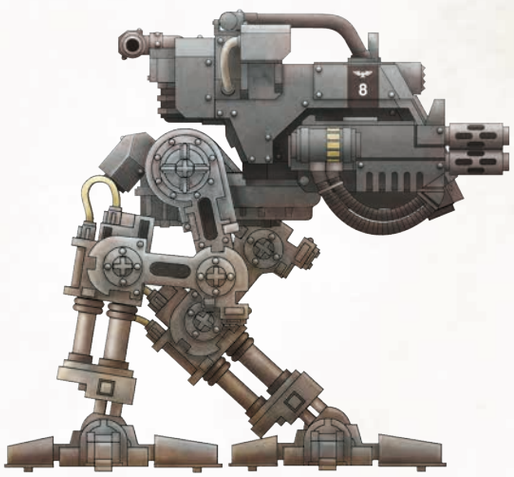
Griffon mortar carrier of the Cadian 114th regiment. Due to their speed, Griffons provided the regiment's main artillery support during the push to Hydro-plant 23-30.



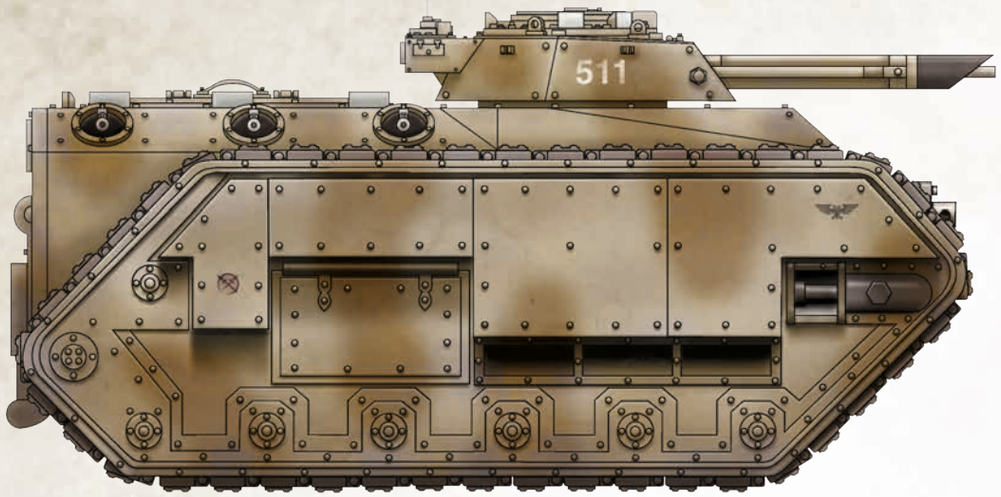
Salamander Scout vehicle of the 114th Cadian regiment, E Company,
Leading the way, this vehicle was amongst the first to reach the Hydro-plant.



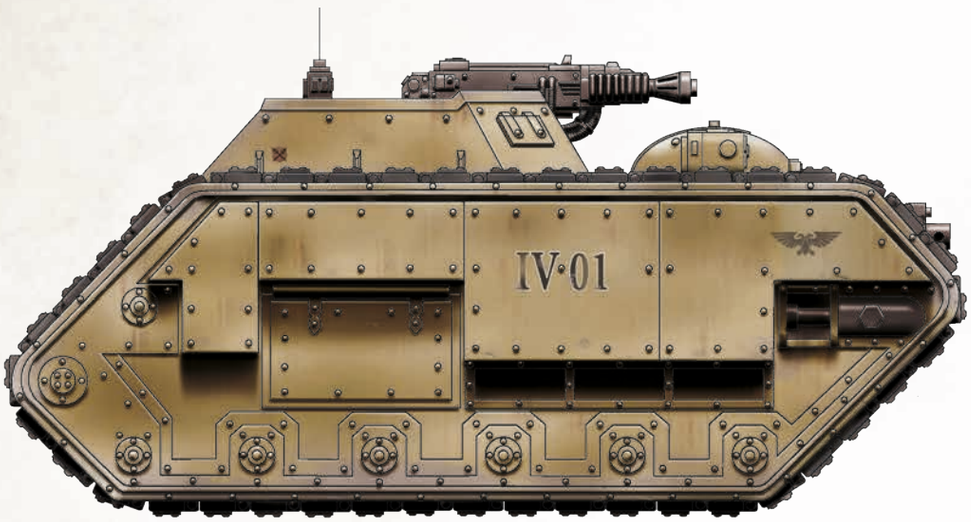
Chimera of the 114th Cadian regiment, A company, during the Relief of Hydro-plant 23-30.



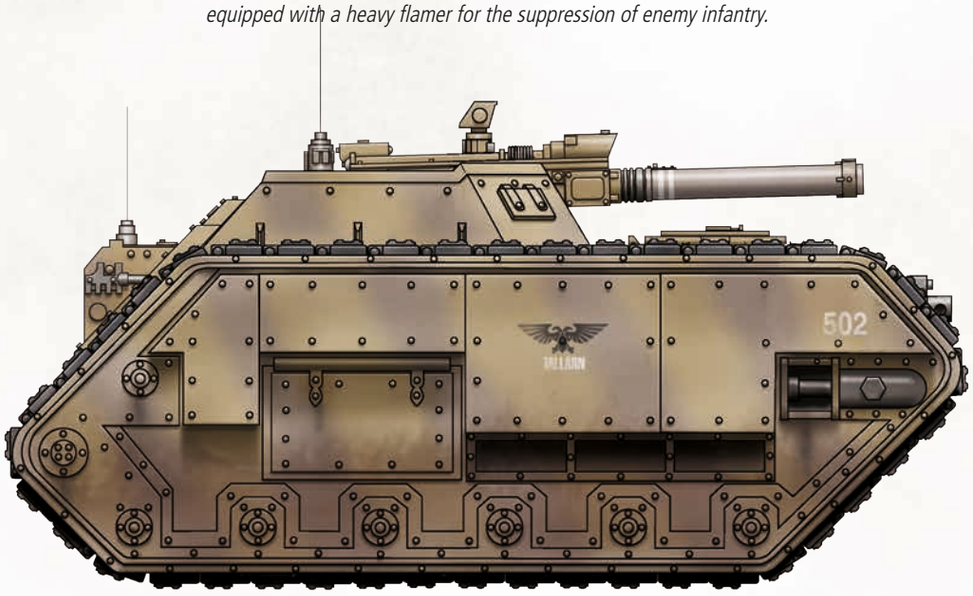
Drop Sentinel of the 23rd Elysian Regiment. This is vehicle number 8. All forty-two
of the regiment's Sentinels were captured or destroyed during Operation Comet.



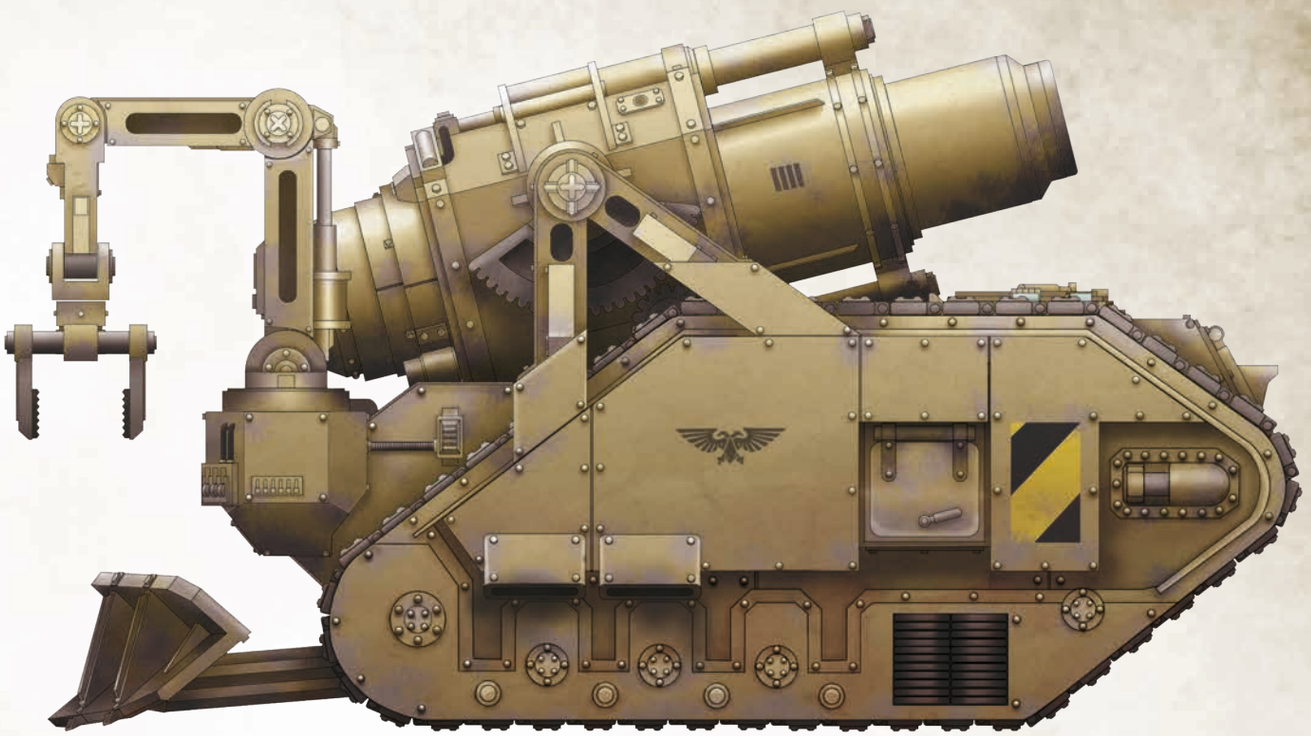
Chimera of the 3rd Tallarn Armoured regiment, during the Battle of Giadamak.



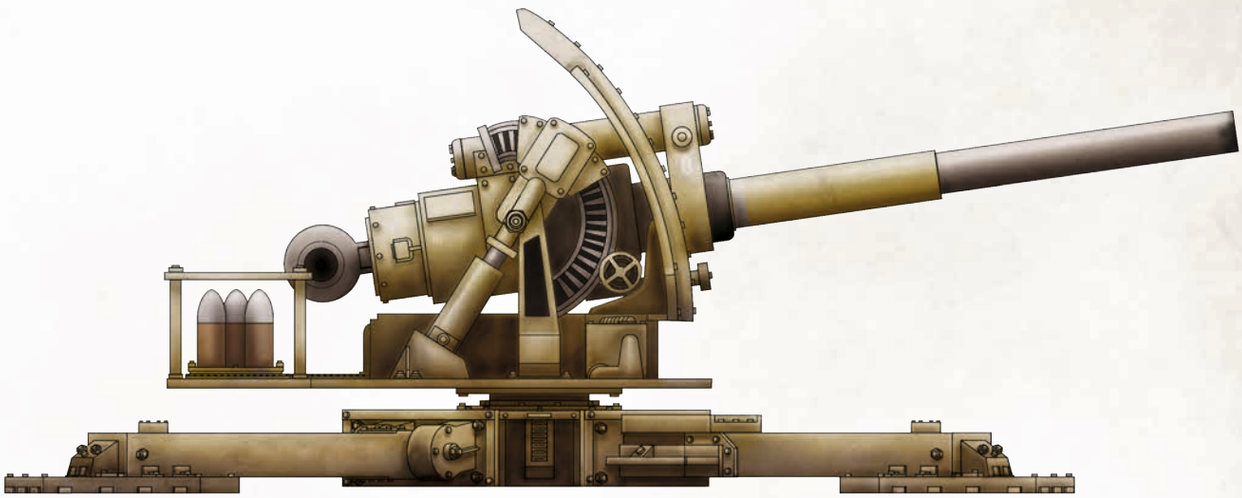
Salamander Command vehicle of the 12th Tallarn Armoured Regiment, equipped with a heavy flamer for the suppression of enemy infantry.



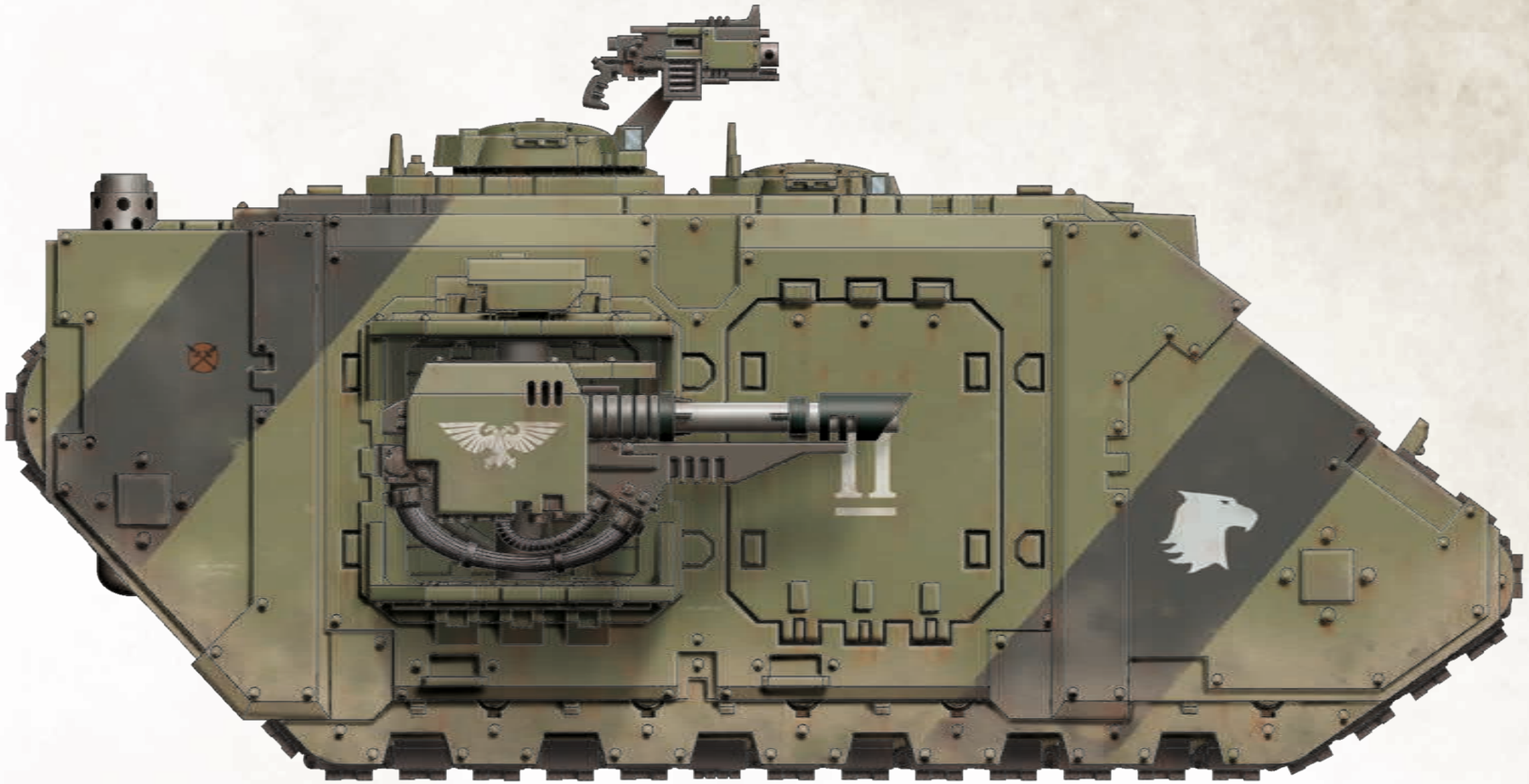
Salamander scout vehicle of the 3rd Tallarn Armoured Regiment. These highly manoeuvrable vehicles undertook reconnaissance operations for the heavy tanks of the Imperial Armoured regiments.



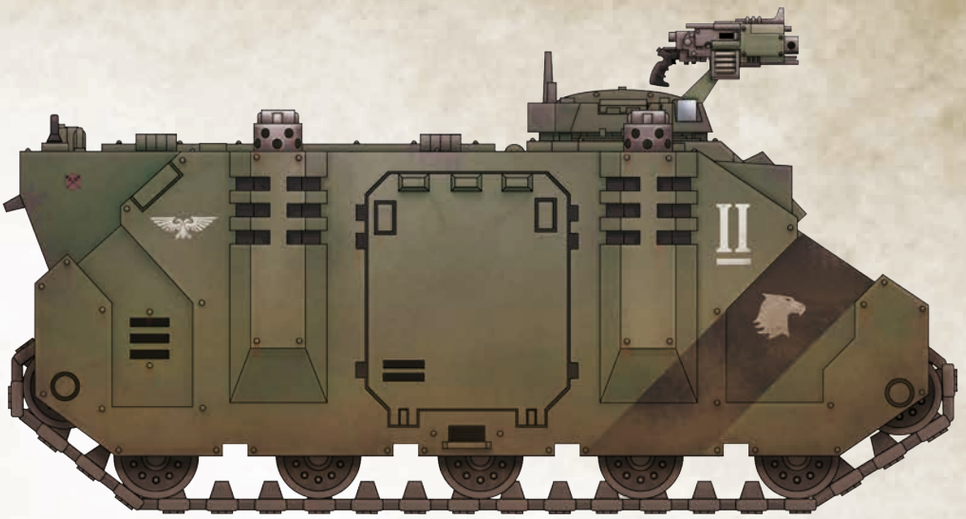
Bombard Heavy Seige Mortar. The 17th Tallarn regiment included a single heavy artillery company of six Bombards, which saw sustained action during fighting in the Phyyra Heights.



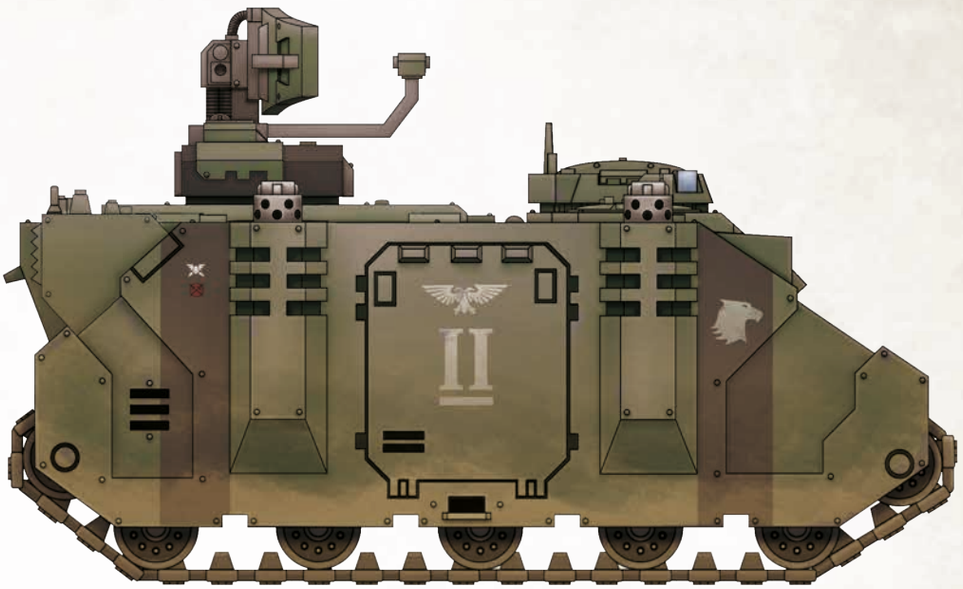
Earthshaker Platform of the 17th Tallarn regiment. Note the replacement barrel, as yet unpainted, an indication of the platform's heavy use during the regiment's advance.



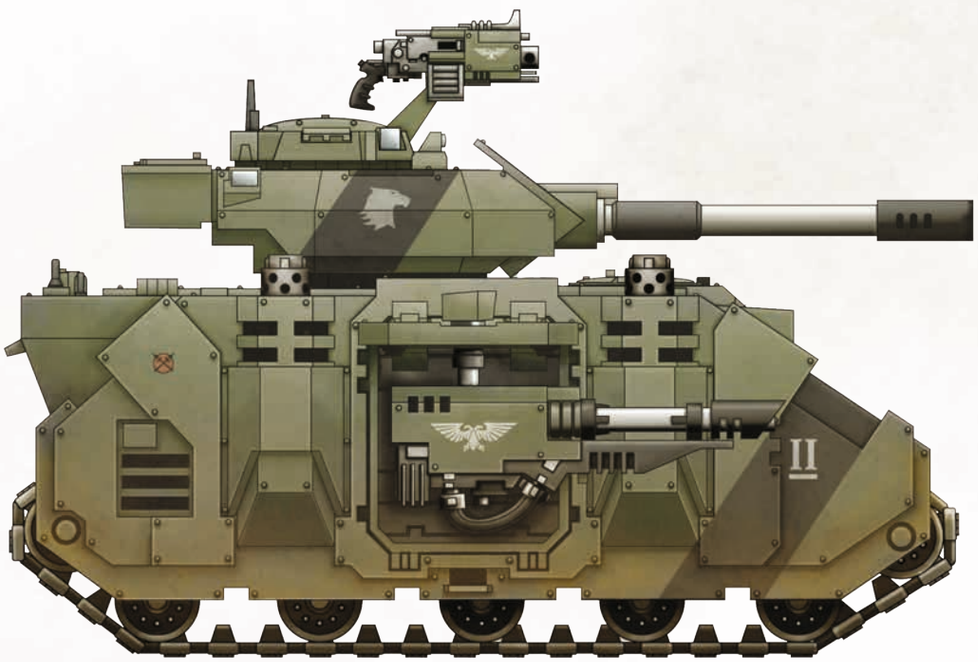
Land Raider with additional spaced armour, as deployed for the Iracunda Breakthrough.



Raptors Chapter Rhino of 2nd Company, bearing the Taros Campaign badge.

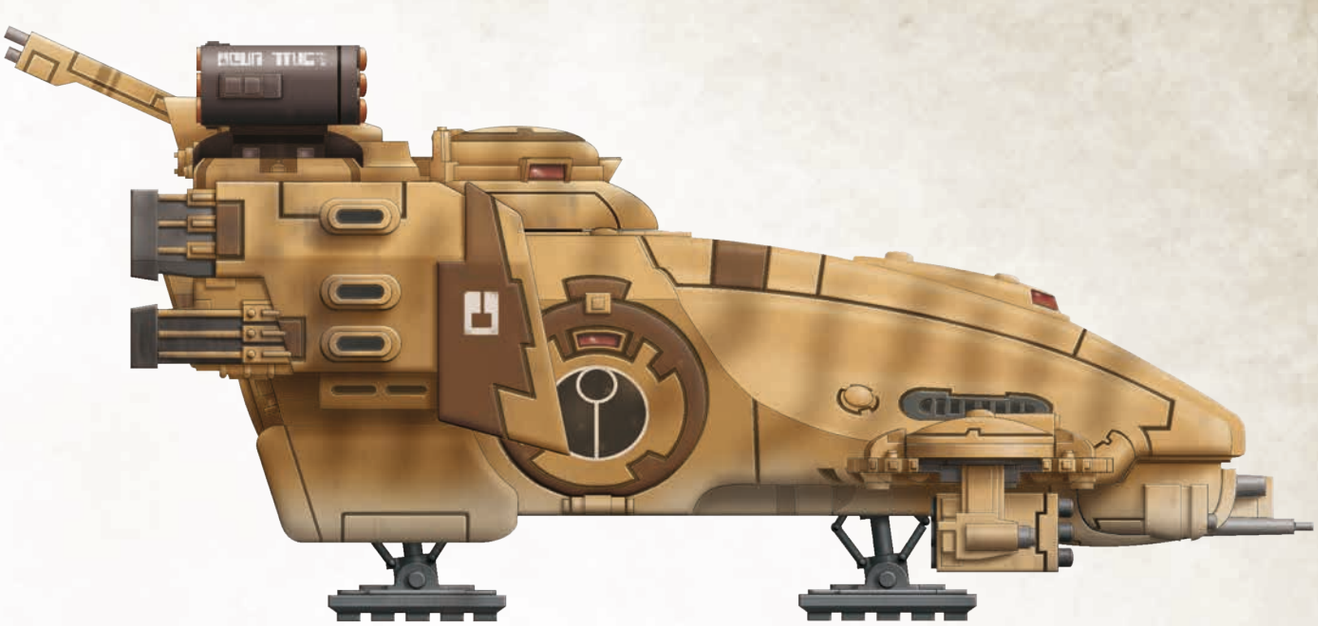


Damocles Command Rhino of 2nd Company, used to coordinate the Chapter's ground operations throughout the campaign.

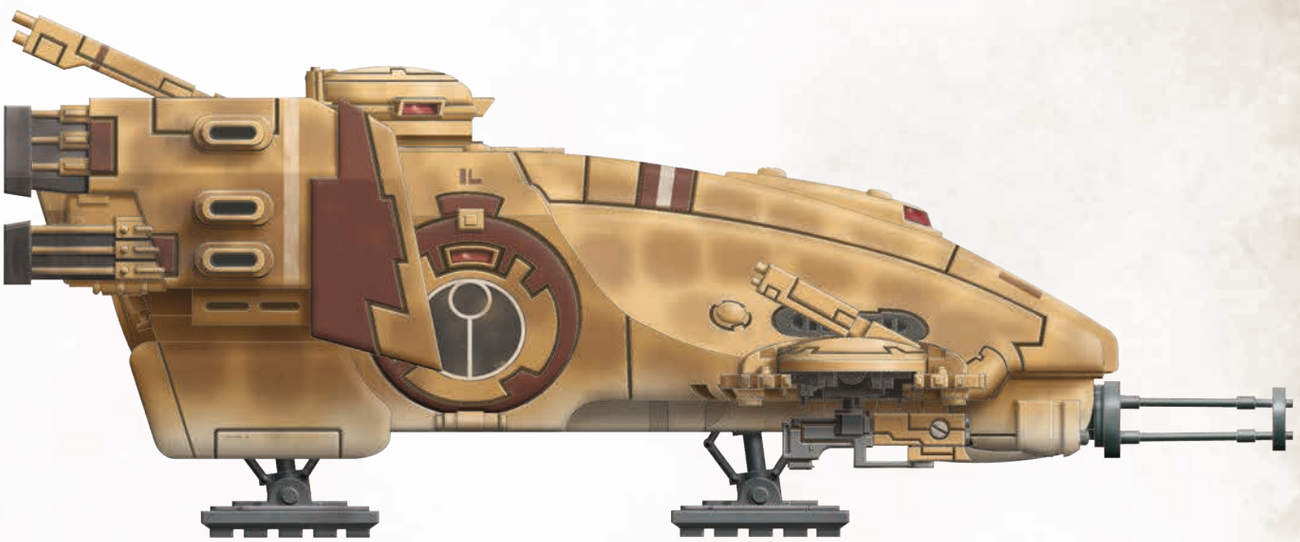


Predator Destructor with extra armour of the Raptors Chapter, deployed during the Iracunda Breakthrough.

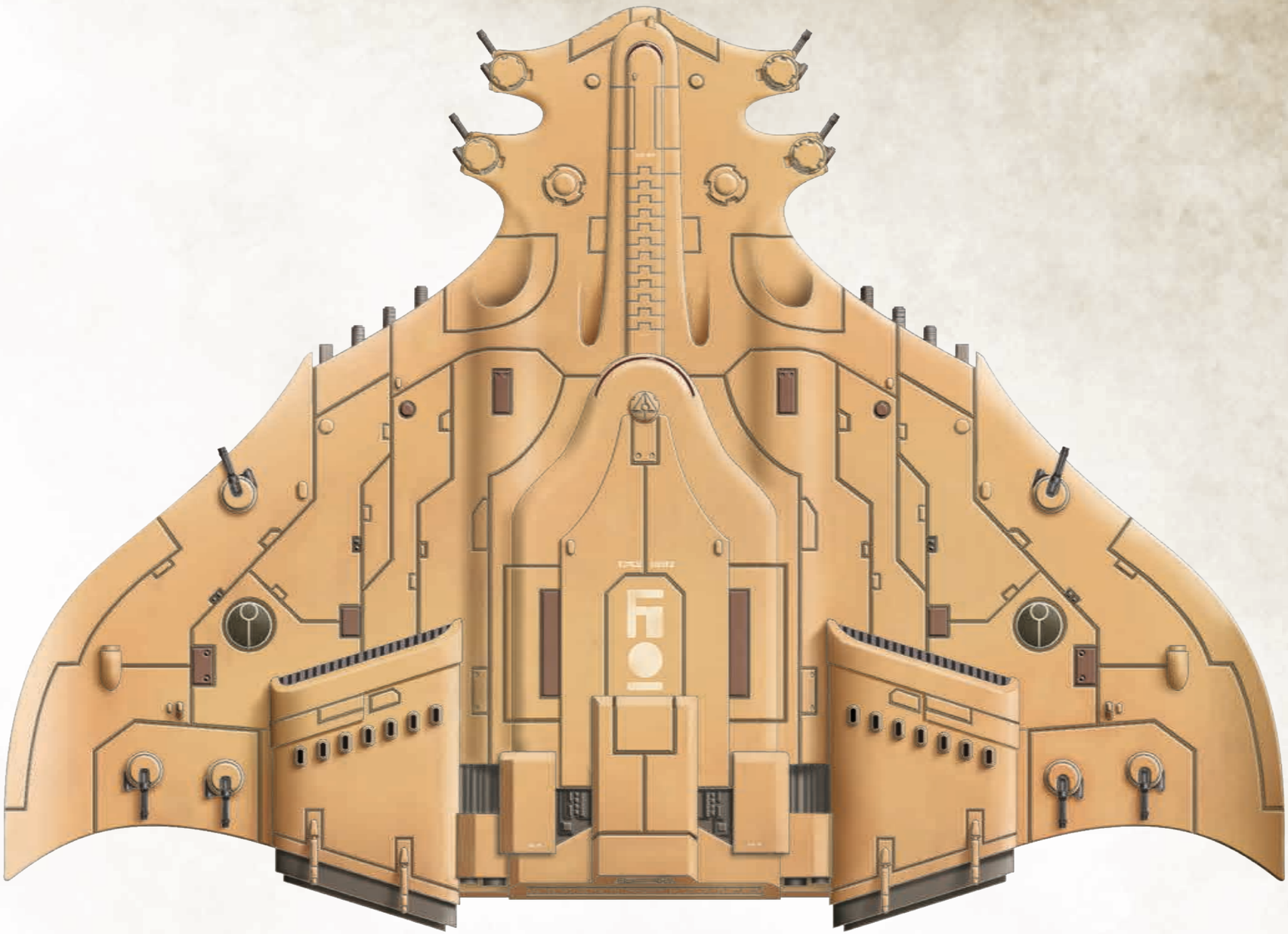
Warhound Titan Advensis Secundus, armed with a plasma blastgun and Vulcan mega-bolter, as deployed for the Iracunda Breakthrough.



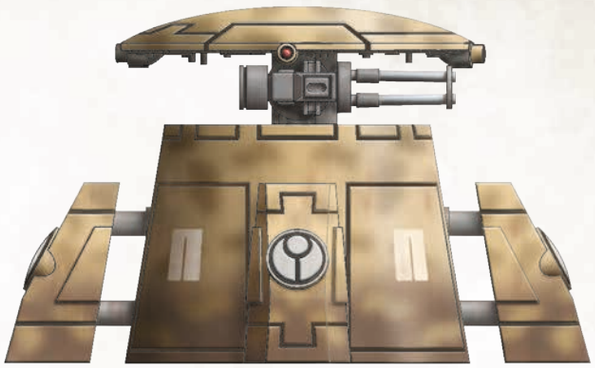
Hammerhead gunship, armed with twin missile pods. This vehicle belongs to an unknown Hunter Cadre, but took part in the attack on Hydro-plant 23-30.



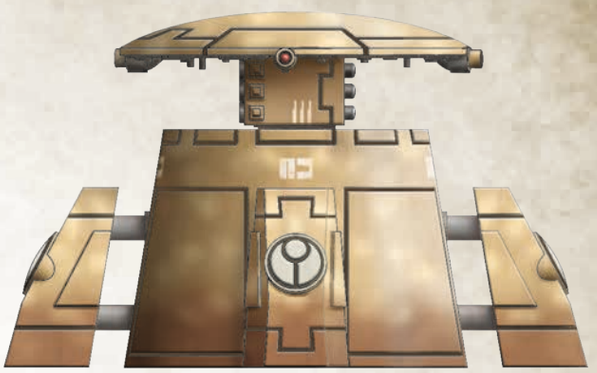
Devilfish transport, part of the same Hunter Cadre. This vehicle was destroyed during the Tau's final assault.



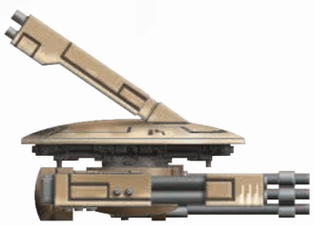
One of many Tau Empire Manta used to transport entire Cadres of Tau Empire warriors across the vast deserts of Taros. These vehicles provided the Tau with a key strategic advantage in the Taros Campaign.



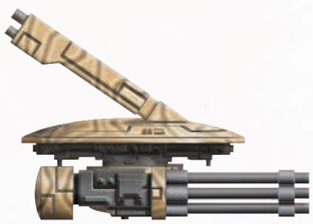
Drone sentry turret with burst cannons.
Encountered and destroyed by the 114th Cadian regiment.



Drone sentry turret with missile pods, encountered by
a Sentinel scout patrol of the 89th Tallarn regiment.

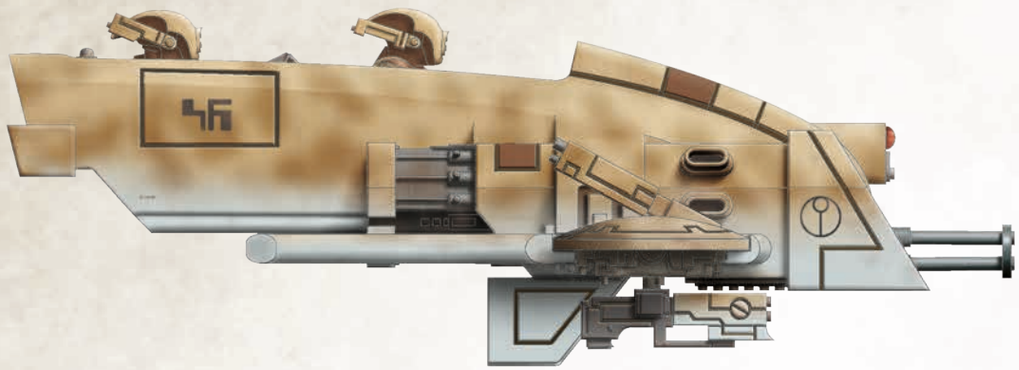


Heavy Gun Drone with markerlight and a burst cannon.
Part of the attack on Hydro-plant 23-30.

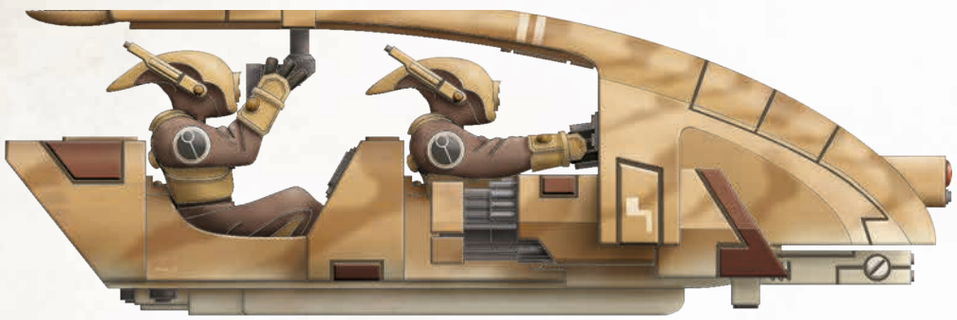


Heavy Gun Drone with twin burst cannons.
Also part of the attack on Hydro-plant 23-30.

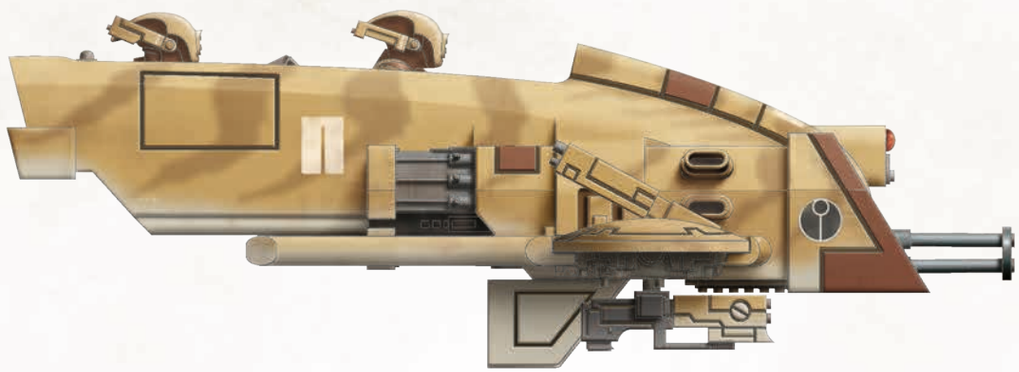
Remote sensor tower with sky line camouflage,
destroyed by the 114th Cadian regiment.



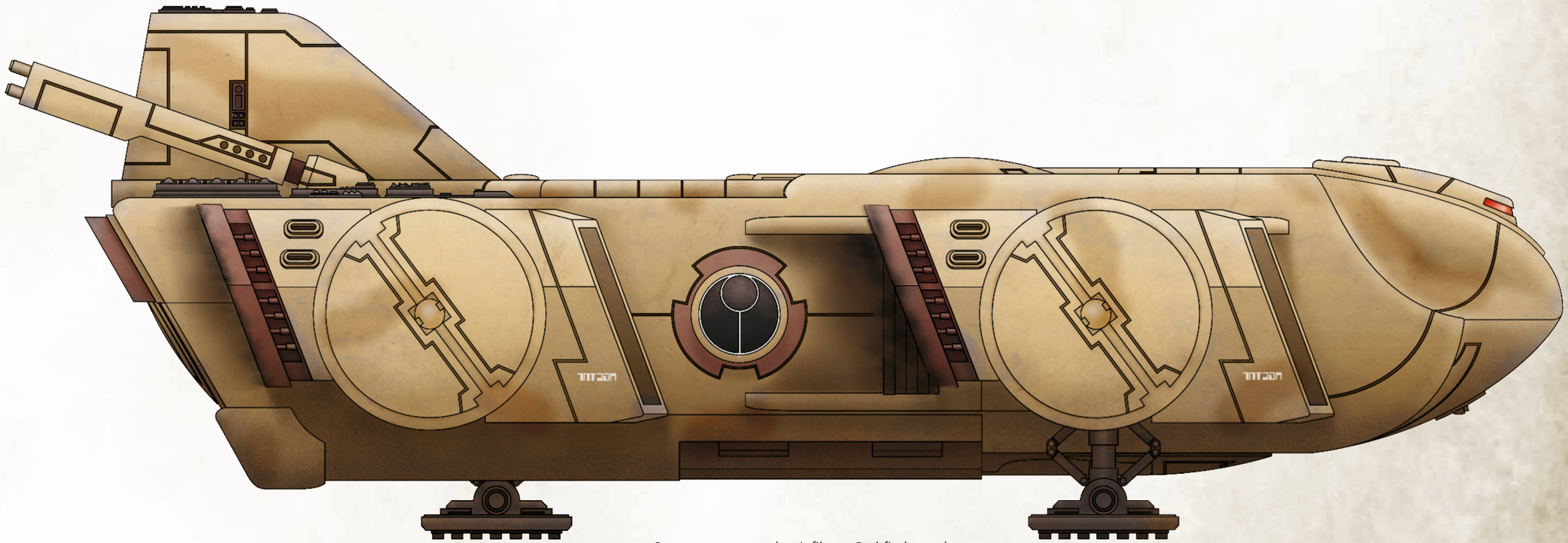
Piranha with a burst cannon, identified during the 114th Cadian regiment's push northwards.



Tetra scout speeder, again part of the Tau forces harassing the 114th Cadian regiment's advance.



Piranha of Hunter Cadre Shi'Eldi, destroyed by the Tallarn 17th regiment.



Orca transport, used to infiltrate Pathfinder and Stealthsuit teams into the Imperium's force's rear lines.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EVACUATION

The defeat of Operation Comet sent Lord Commander Gustavus' High Command reeling. The war on Taros against the Tau had taken a turn for the worse and the failure of the airborne operation would have wide reaching consequences, most immediately within the command structure of the 4621st Army itself.

On board the *Righteous Power,* Commissar General Mordred Van Horcic arrived to meet with Gustavus, interrupting an Imperial Navy briefing meeting with his demands to see the Lord Commander immediately. The Guardsmen on the door had futilely tried to bar his path, but the Commissar would not be held back and, threatening to have any man who got in his way arrested, Van Horcic barged in.

Gustavus sat impassively whilst the Commissar General delivered instructions for the removal of the entire staff of the 4621st Army. They had failed in their duty to the Emperor and whilst losses were acceptable, failure was not. The surface campaign had become a shambles and Taros was slipping from the Imperium's grasp. In particular Lord Marshal De Stael was to be replaced, by no less than the Commissar General himself.

Unknown to the Commissar General, Gustavus had been well aware of his views long before Van Horcic had made his dramatic entrance. One of Colonel Scheja's informers had leaked the news of Van Horcic's intentions, and the Lord Commander was prepared. Gustavus knew that Commissar Van Horcic was well within his rights to take command of the failing operation, but Lord Marshal De Stael had been a loyal and dutiful servant of the Imperial Guard and deserved better than the summary execution that now awaited him at the hands of Van Horcic.

That morning Colonel Scheja had been dispatched to the surface carrying sealed orders for De Stael. It informed the Lord Marshal that he was to be relieved of his command and that he faced two stark choices: turn himself over as a prisoner to Colonel Scheja, who would accompany him to the brig onboard the *Righteous Power* to await trial, or take command of a frontline platoon and lead an immediate counter-attack against the Tau, from which he would likely not return. Exhausted from his work and stung by the defeat of Operation Comet, De Stael asked Colonel Scheja to await his decision outside, he would be just a few moments. In the cramped corridor of the Leviathan Scheja waited patiently until the low hum of the Leviathan's generators was broken by the sudden discharge of a laspistol from within the office. Rather than face execution or be disgraced and condemned to a penal regiment, Lord Marshal De Stael had found his own solution and taken the only way out which kept his martial honour intact.

The arrival of Commissar General Van Horcic and his aides saw much of the other top brass of the 4621st Army arrested. In a day of turmoil and confusion six officers were executed after resisting arrest, and sixty two other officers and aides would be given a chance to die well in the service of the Emperor after being transported to a penal regiment. After his purge Commissar General Van Horcic was now in supreme command of all Imperial Guard and Departmento Munitorum operations on Taros. It was his task to salvage something from the faltering campaign, if only as many men as he could.

The turmoil amongst High Command did little to help the fighting men on the ground. The supply situation was critical and losses to dehydration were now far in excess of those from combat. Without finding new water supplies fast, the remaining regiments would soon be beyond anything resembling combat

readiness. When Van Horcic oversaw his first briefing on the army's status, reports from all the regimental commanders stressed that without new supplies their regiments would not last more than another week, ten days at the most, and any sudden Tau attack might shatter them completely.

Van Horcic's first order was to shorten the over-stretched supply lines. It would mean a retreat, but better that than total destruction. At that moment it was taking a Trojan bearing a fuel trailer on average three days to reach the front line, all the time running the gauntlet of roving Stealth teams and strafing Barracudas. The trails worn through the desert that passed as supply routes were now overshadowed with the burned-out hulks of Trojans and trailers, evidence of the Tau's strategy of attacking the Imperium's support network in order to affect the rest of the army.

All of the regimental commanders were given licence to withdraw back towards the landing zone. Equipment that could not be moved would be destroyed and Rough Rider squadrons were ordered to slaughter their animals to conserve water. Next Van Horcic summoned Fleet Admiral Kotto and informed him that his fleet would be required to escort a new series of convoys into the Taros system, carrying more water, fuel and new replacement equipment, especially aircraft for the fighter squadrons. Should these fail to arrive, the Admiral would also be replaced. The ultimatum was simple, break the Tau blockade or face a firing squad.

A Fatal Mistake

Seriously wounded and taken prisoner by the Tau, General Syckava of the 23rd Elysian Drop Troop regiment was the highest ranking Imperial officer captured during the Taros campaign. His regiment had been all but annihilated at Hydro-processing Plant 23-30, but he had survived. Because of his rank the General had been singled out from the other prisoners by his captors, given medical treatment on his shattered arm and transported under guard to the headquarters of the Tau supreme commander on Taros, Shas'o R'myr. Tau operations were being conducted from a compact command complex situated in some old mine workings underneath a nondescript cluster of old buildings just west of Tarokeen. There the bloodied and battleworn General was led down to meet his nemesis and within waited the Shas'o, and alongside him stood his advisor in long priestly robes. Another civilian, a diplomat or negotiator, was also present to act as an interpreter, as were their bodyguards.

The Shas'o commended Syckava on his regiment's courage and bravery, but argued that he must now realise that the war on Taros was lost. He assured the General that Taros would soon be part of the Tau Empire and, after questioning the General about his force's remaining strength, and their future intentions (all questions which the General stoically refused to answer) the Ethereal invited the General to act as an emissary on behalf of the Tau Empire. His first task would be to deliver the offer of a ceasefire to end the bloodshed, which would allow the humans to withdraw unmolested if they disarmed. The Tau would allow transport ships free access to Taros to evacuate their soldiers and personnel under the ceasefire agreement, as long as the largest war ships withdrew from the system first. The Ethereal also offered to turn over the renegade Planetary Governor Aulis, whom they had under close guard, in a prisoner exchange for all the Tau captives the Emperor's forces were holding.

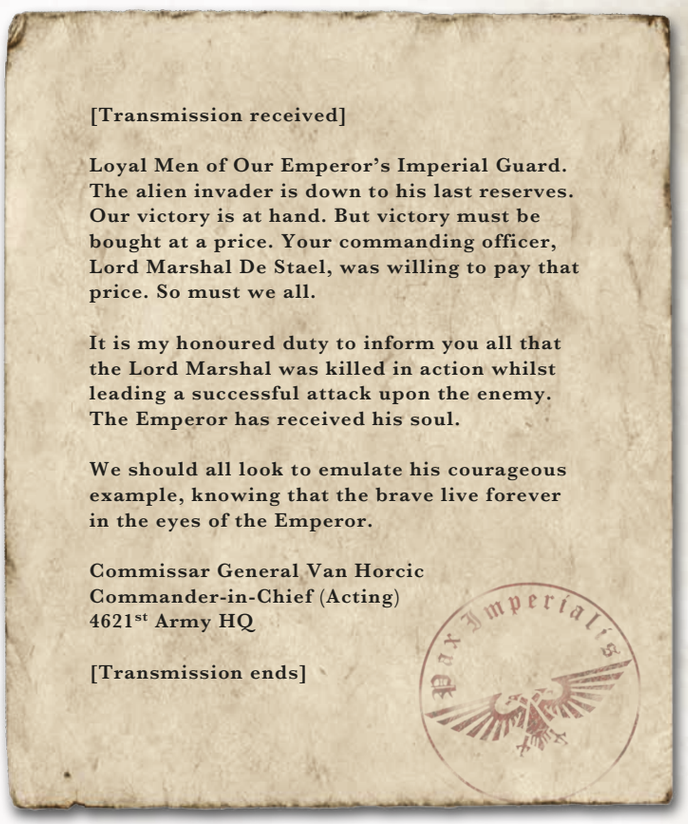
In return for his assistance the General would be assured a new position commanding the human auxiliaries now under the Tau's control on Taros. With the Emperor's forces defeated, the post of 'Commander of the Taros Garrison' would be his for life, an honoured position with all the attendant wealth and status human commanders seemed to crave, but only if he helped the Tau now.

General Syckava flatly refused the Ethereal's offer. To act as an emissary and offer terms of surrender to his commanders would turn him into a traitor. He would not be a messenger and broker a ceasefire, even if it bought him a future life of luxury. If the Tau wanted the Emperor's forces off of Taros, they would have to eject them themselves.

Rebuffed, the Shas'o sent the General back to rejoin the other loyal Imperial prisoners – however letting him into the heart of their lair had been an unwise lapse in security that would cost the Tau forces on Taros dearly. Despite his severe wound, all the time he had been a prisoner General Syckava had been observing and taking in as much intelligence on the Tau as he could, and as a high ranking officer he'd had access to maps and classified information regarding Taros and the overall campaign plan that the other prisoners had not.

Now he would put that knowledge to good use. From his observations he already had a good idea of where the Tau command post was located, and from his transport's flight path a good idea of which mine he was being held in. General Syckava had been a loyal servant of the Imperium all his life, he was still one and refused to surrender to xenos scum. He planned to escape or die in the attempt, and gathering a small group of Elysian prisoners about him, men who were still loyal to their former commander, Syckava devised a plan to escape from the mine and strike out for the nearest Imperial Guard front lines.

He did not wait long to act. On the first night at the mine Syckava and the five men overwhelmed three traitor human guards, stole their weapons and water canteens and struck out into the desert, splitting up to confuse pursuit. Using his inside knowledge Syckava headed westwards, to where he believed the 331st Tallarn regiment's lines were positioned.



[Transmission received]

Loyal Men of Our Emperor's Imperial Guard. The alien invader is down to his last reserves. Our victory is at hand. But victory must be bought at a price. Your commanding officer, Lord Marshal De Stael, was willing to pay that price. So must we all.

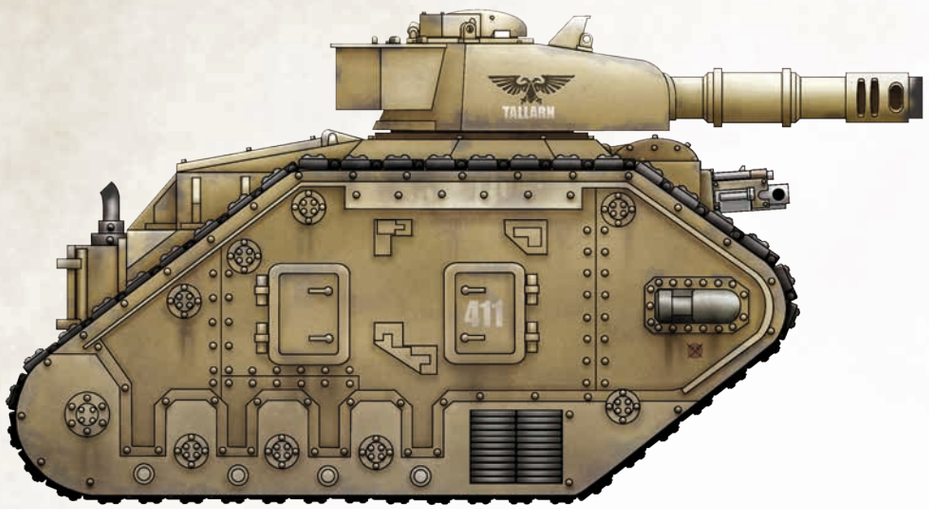
It is my honoured duty to inform you all that the Lord Marshal was killed in action whilst leading a successful attack upon the enemy. The Emperor has received his soul.

We should all look to emulate his courageous example, knowing that the brave live forever in the eyes of the Emperor.

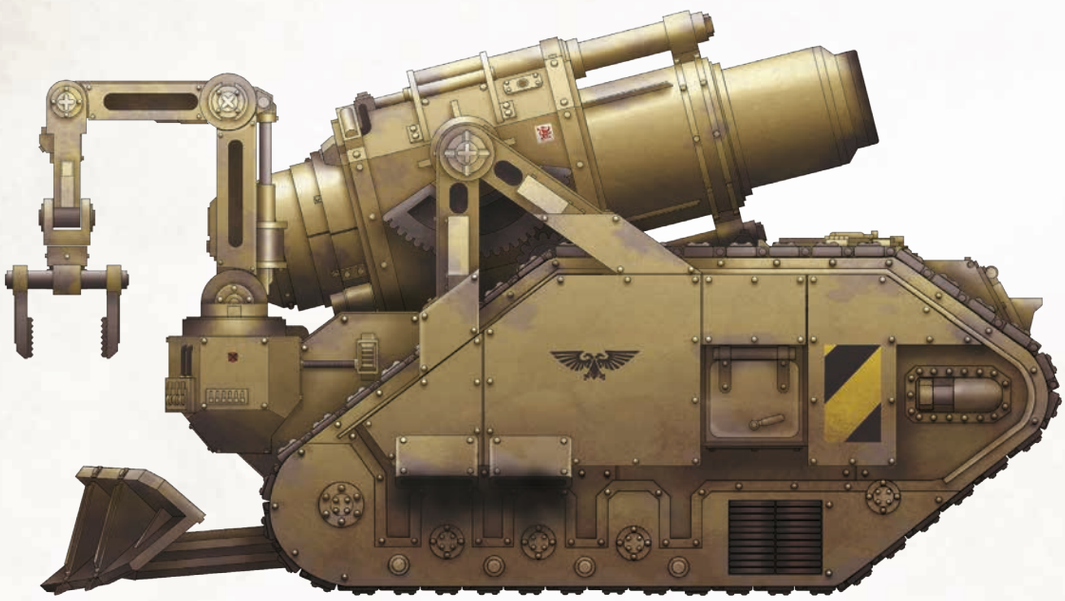
Commissar General Van Horcic
Commander-in-Chief (Acting)
4621st Army HQ

[Transmission ends]

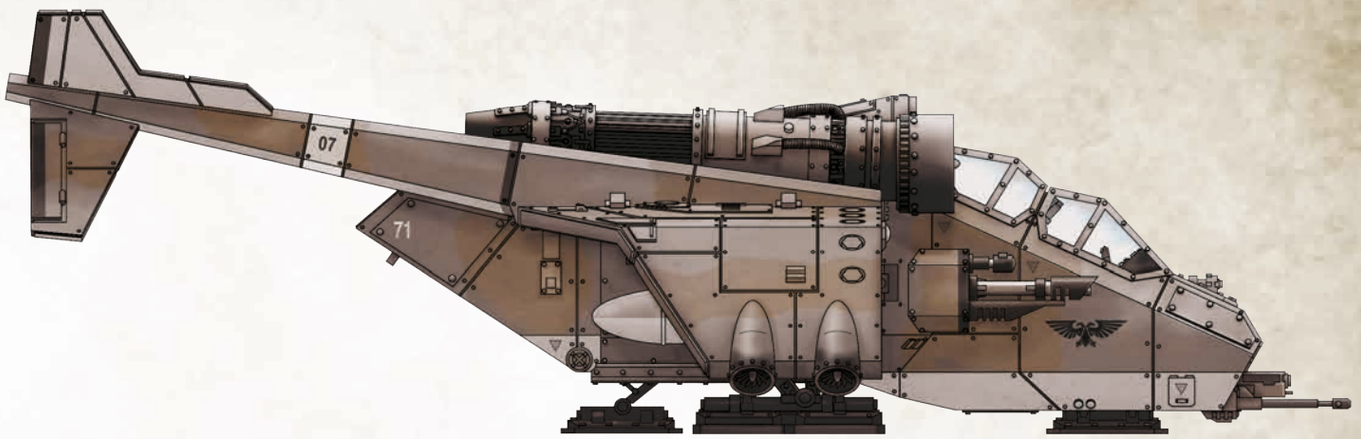
Copy of a transmission issued to all Imperial Guard units by 4621st HQ.



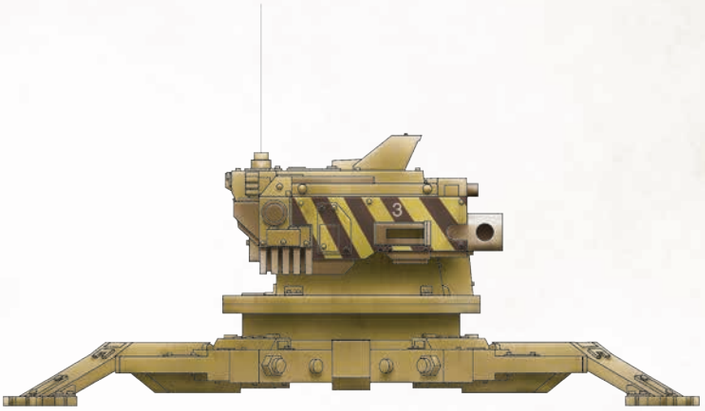
Leman Russ of the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment. This vehicle is armed with a different hull-mounted heavy bolter from the usual pattern weapon. This seems to be a field replacement for a damaged lascannon.



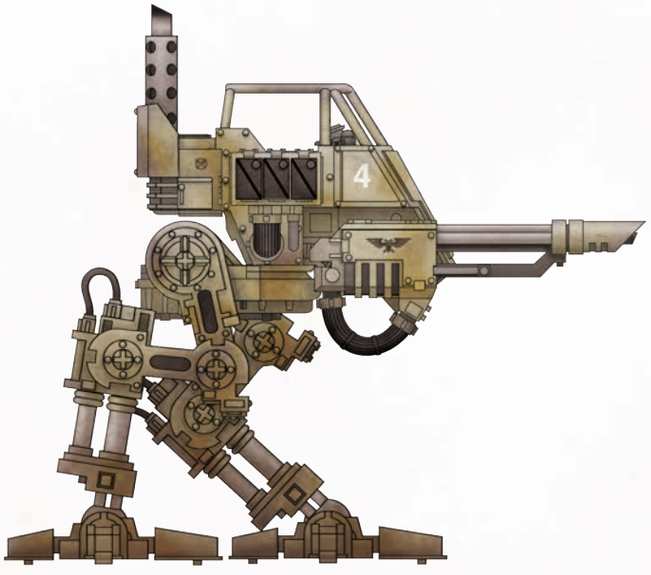
Bombard of the 17th Tallarn regiment. Due to lack of fuel, this vehicle was destroyed by the regiment when it received orders to withdraw from the Phyyra Heights.



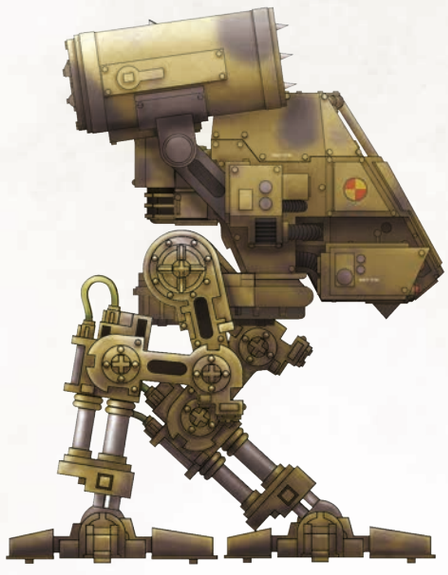
Valkyrie of the 71st Imperial Navy Tactical wing, used during Operation Deathblow.
On its return journey, this aircraft ditched in the desert and its crew were never recovered.



Tarantula sentry gun of the Elysian 23rd Regiment. These simple automated weapons were launched from Valkyrie Sky Talons to clear drop zones of enemy troops.



Sentinel Scout walker of the 17th Tallarn regiment. This vehicle is from the reconnaissance squadron of 4th Infantry company.



Support Sentinel of the 12th Tallarn Armoured regiment.

The guards did not bother to organise any pursuit. There was nowhere to run to, and without supplies they knew that nobody could survive the deserts of Taros for long. In their eyes the escapees were already dead men.

They were nearly right. After three days under the merciless sun Syckava was close to death. Stumbling westwards, down to the last dregs of his water, face and hands blistered by the heat he finally collapsed. In a final desperate act, rather than lay down and die he scraped a vague outline of a large aquila into the sand and prayed to the Emperor that, somehow, somebody would see it. Fate intervened, or perhaps the Emperor heard his prayers, because a Thunderbolt fighter on a reconnaissance sweep over the desert noticed the familiar shape in the landscape and swooped in for a closer look. Knowing there were no friendly forces operating in the sector, after his pass the pilot reported his sighting and a long range infantry patrol from the 331st Tallarn regiment was diverted to take a closer look. The Desert Raiders squad found the unconscious general lying face down close to his improvised sign, barely alive, and immediately called for a Valkyrie to evacuate him and themselves. General Syckava had made it back to his own side. None of his fellow escapees, however, were ever found.

Recovering on an Ordo Hospitaller field-hospice pallet the General recounted his observations in full. By a combination of bravery, faith and blind luck he had survived and could now provide the vital intelligence the forces of the Imperium on Taros so desperately needed, including the location of the Tau headquarters. When Commissar General Van Horcic received the new data he realised it was an opportunity too good to miss. Here was information that might finally swing the balance of the war.

Operation 'Deathblow'

By a miracle the Emperor had delivered the location of the Tau supreme headquarters into Van Horcic's hands. Now he planned to launch a strike that might change the outcome of the war in one blow and for the mission he would need the aid of Lord Commander Gustavus, Colonel Scheja and the Officio Assassinorum.

After hearing his plan Gustavus agreed to it on one concession – that Van Horcic put the entire operation in the capable hands of Colonel Scheja. The Colonel would organise, plan and execute Operation Deathblow and his mission would be to wipe out the Tau commanders in one strike. Horcic agreed and also sent a priority astro-telepathic message requesting that an Officio Assassinorum agent be dispatched to Taros. The request was sanctioned, the instrument of Commander 'Longknife's' destruction would be a servant of the Eversor temple. There was no doubt that this would be a suicidal assault, with the agent not expected to survive its encounter with the Tau, but then neither would any enemy it encountered.

Armed with the location of the Tau headquarters, Scheja planned his mission. It would involve two strike teams. Red team would be the assassin, who would be dropped into the desert then make its way to the location, destroying anything or anybody inside the base. Blue team would be a hand picked platoon of Storm Troopers from the 2378th Storm Trooper company. They would be flown in by Valkyries to launch a diversionary attack and, under cover of their attack, Red team would get close to its targets.

The Storm Troopers would all be volunteers as striking deep into enemy territory and attacking such an undoubtedly well protected target was likely to be a one way trip. Knowing full well that he was most likely signing his own death warrant, Colonel Scheja requested and was given command of Blue team himself. Even the aircraft crewmen from 71st Tactical wing would be volunteers, because to reach the target area meant there would not be enough fuel for a return trip. Instead the Valkyries would have to be ditched in the desert and the crews would destroy their aircraft before striking out on foot, each issued with a survival kit in the slim hope it might help get them back to the Imperium's lines, but it was still highly likely that Tau patrols would find them and pick them up. Operation Deathblow would begin as soon as Red team arrived and could be prepared, programmed with its target's information, then deployed. Meanwhile, Scheja visited the 2378th Storm Trooper company and gathered together thirty volunteers.

At 684998.M41, as part of a fresh supply convoy, the transport *Son of Jucha* successfully arrived in-system and delivered its cargo of war materiels, fuel and a large black container, attended by four Adeptus Mechanicus Tech-Priests, to the *Righteous Power*. It was a bio-stasis chamber inside which, suspended in amniotic fluids, was one of the most lethal weapons in the Imperium's massive arsenal, an Eversor assassin – a psychopathic one-man killing machine that would hunt down its target remorselessly.

Preparations began immediately. The Eversor was programmed via hypno-suggestion which detailed its mission, the location and its targets. Once its programming was complete, the still unconscious assassin was equipped with its weaponry: a power sword, neuro-gauntlet and executioner pistol. The toxin within the gun's ammunition had been developed by the Eversor temple specifically to affect a Tau's nervous system, and would kill them in seconds. Finally, the self-destruct mechanism surgically implanted into the assassin's chest was armed. Should the assassin's bio-readouts drop below a certain level then it would detonate, killing the assassin and anything close by. Even in death the Eversor was lethal, and with a final litany from its Tech-Priest attendants, its bio-stasis chamber was carefully inserted into a drop pod and launched towards the unsuspecting desert world below.

The drop pod made planetfall about sixty kilometres from the target. Whilst still in mid-air unseen lights inside the stasis pod blinked on and life support systems began to breathe life into the Eversor within, its neuro-gauntleted hand slowly flexing into a fist the first sign of its awakening. As the drop pod landed undetected on the desert sands, fluids automatically drained from the bio-chamber which then opened with a sudden hiss as remote restraining bolts exploded, umbilical cords and sensor needles retracting from the figure within. Freed from the sarcophagus the assassin stepped out into the dying sunlight and, pausing only to survey its surroundings for any immediate threats, set off across the sands, moving swiftly and keeping low to the ground, its pistol always at the ready. Red team was closing on the target as planned and by nightfall it would arrive.

At the same time Colonel Scheja's Storm Troopers were soaring over the deserts in their transports, three Valkyries flying low, all attempting to avoid contact with the enemy for as long as possible. The men within had orders to attack their target with everything they could, and keep pressing the attack for as long as possible each, except for Scheja, unaware that the real assault would be coming in the deadly form of the Eversor assassin.

Skimming over the desert the Valkyries had escaped notice until a drone-controlled early warning device had sounded at the Tau base. Its defence teams immediately rushed to man their weapons as the three Valkyries swooped in, flared and hovered briefly as the Storm Trooper squads repelled the few final metres before hitting the sand and dashing clear. Spotting their attackers in the darkness, the Tau opened fire and the Storm Troopers replied with equal ferocity. The darkness was illuminated by the vivid flash of pulse rounds and tracers as, crouching low and pressing forwards, the Storm Troopers braved the assault. Meanwhile the Valkyries blasted away, circled and swooped back down, their multi-lasers blazing a brilliant trail of lights across the darkness as they soared overhead.

Valkyries of 71st Tactical wing draw fire as they approach the target area. Within, they carry members of 2378th Storm Trooper Company on a suicidal diversionary attack against the Tau force's commanders on Taros.

Colonel Scheja led his squad towards the buildings, dodging through pulse rifle fire to find cover behind the first one they came to. There he pulled a frag grenade from his harness, armed it and flung it through an open window. He followed up the explosion with a burst of plasma pistol fire as his men surged in through the doors and quickly captured the building. Outside, amidst the confusion and noise, a black-clad terror appeared.

Passing like a shadow the unseen assassin slipped quietly towards the main Tau compound. One Tau Fire Warrior looked up from reloading his weapon to find himself looking straight into the eyes of a black shrouded figure wearing a deathly pale skull mask. Swift as a cat the assassin plunged the needle-like spikes of its gloved hand into the warrior's neck, the Tau guard dying in silent convulsions before he could react as his nervous system was shredded by the toxin. Without a second glance the Eversor moved on. Driven by its thirst for violence and unhindered by the darkness, it soon found the entrance it had been hunting for. As the battle raged about it, the Eversor placed a melta-charge on the doorway, set the timer and stepped back. As the charge detonated it burst into a sudden sprint, slamming through the flaming, ruined doorway and springing down the ladder within.

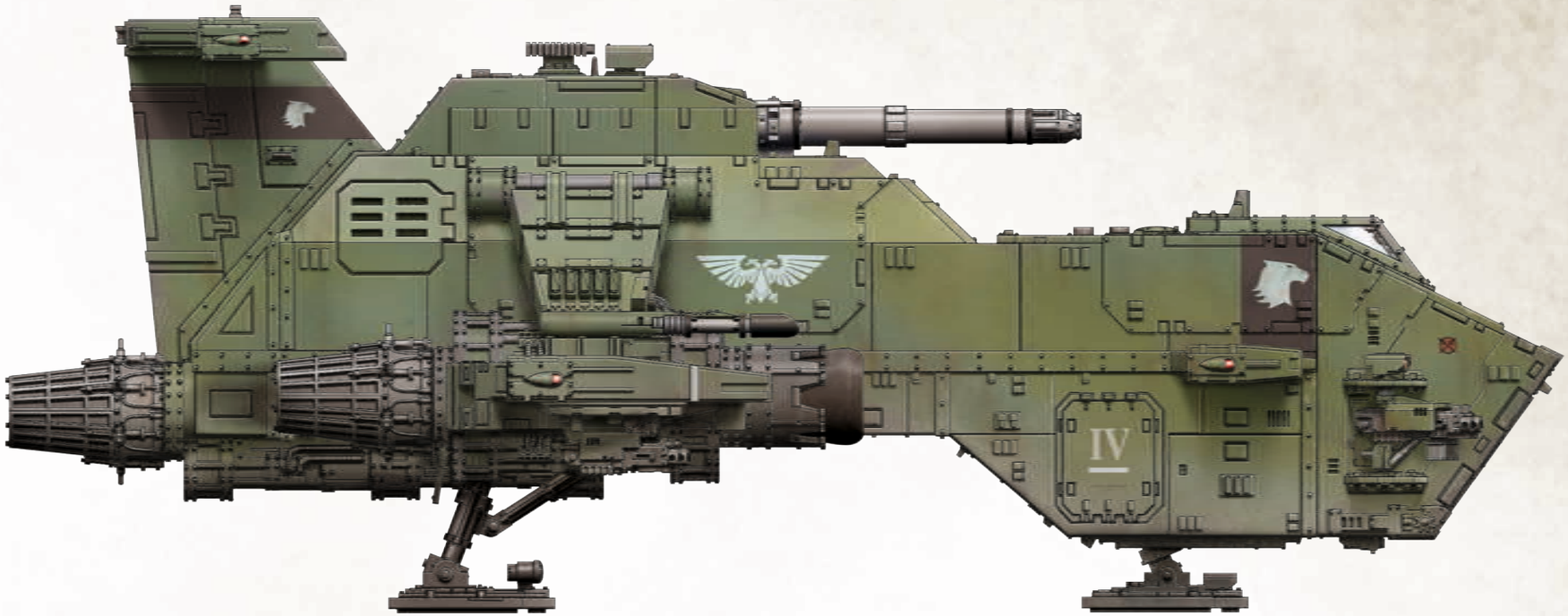
Inside the Tau were taken completely unawares. A sustained burst of needle pistol fire flung two Tau against the far wall where they slumped, dead in an instant from the toxins coursing through their veins. Without pause the assassin rolled forwards, under the hasty return shots of a couple of other Tau, and rose firing again, the third and fourth Tau both quickly dropping to the ground dead.

Its magazine now empty, the Eversor discarded its pistol and as it moved along the low corridors two more desperate defenders rushed at the black-clad assassin who ducked low under their fire to sweep the first off its feet. It then lunged forwards to impale the sixth through the stomach with its gleaming power blade, the Eversor's attacks becoming a blur of destruction. Then, leaving its victims gurgling wetly on the floor, the assassin stepped through the next door and into the Tau command centre.

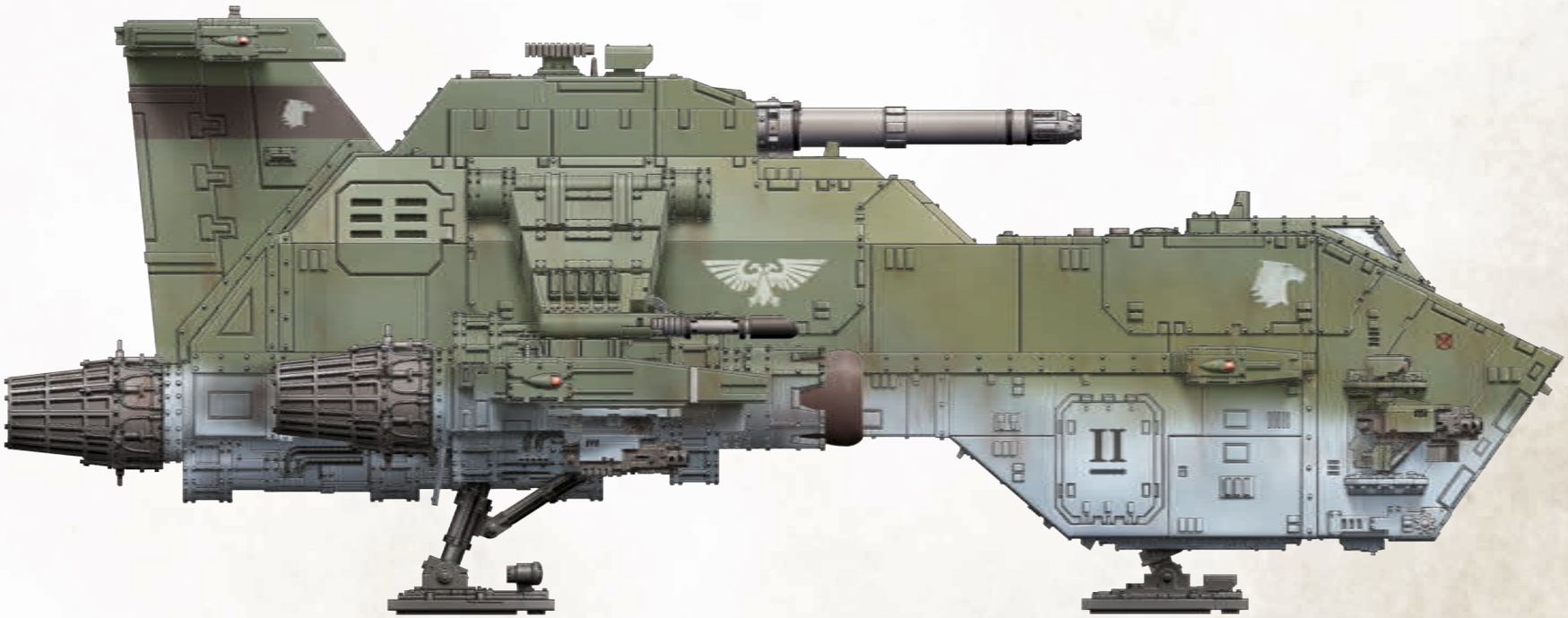
Within stood the slim, robed figure of the Ethereal and his two attendant bodyguards. Without fear the Eversor Assassin sprang forwards, power sword in one hand, neuro gauntlet ready to strike out with on the other. For the Ethereal there was nowhere to run and no chance of escape, and without hesitating the assassin struck. The neuro-gauntlet slashed forwards and then back, cutting its bodyguards down, who fell to the ground writhing in excruciating agony.

At that instant more bodyguards burst into the control centre to rescue their revered leader. In a blaze of pulse fire the Eversor was hit and knocked to the floor. Ignoring its wounds the assassin reached out its deadly gloved hand to grab the Ethereal as he tried to dodge away. Tripped by the attack, the Ethereal cried out and fell, and the wounded Eversor sprang upon him, pinning him to the floor. The Ethereal's bodyguards fired again, striking the Eversor square through the torso and spraying blood across the walls and floor. Any lesser creature might have cried out in pain but as the Eversor's life blood pumped away it hung on to the struggling Ethereal, and with its last rattling breath started to laugh.

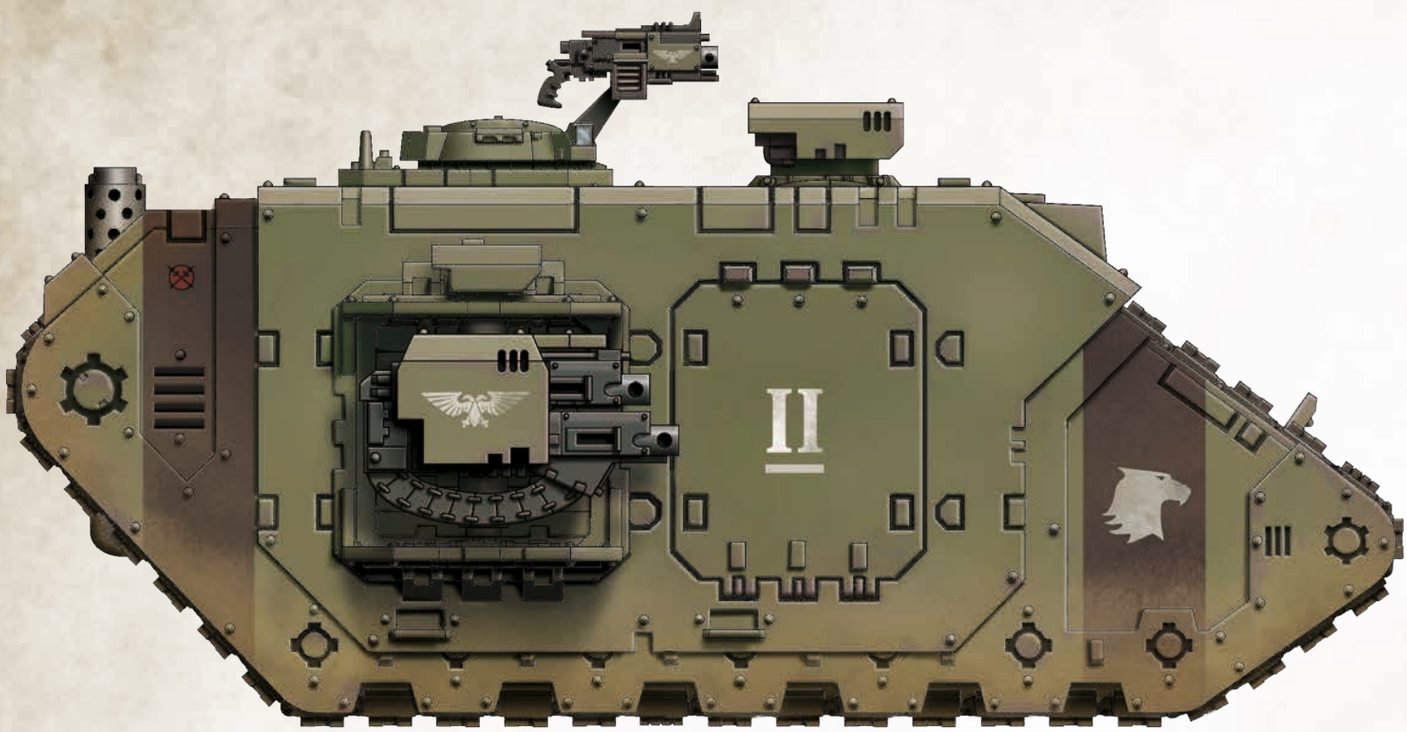
Elsewhere Colonel Scheja and his men were still engaged in their battle against the Tau defenders when the compound was suddenly rocked by an explosion from within its control centre. From his position Colonel Scheja instinctively ducked into cover as a shower of burning debris rained down about him and his men. All the Tau warriors fighting them could do was look on in horror and dismay – the command centre had become an inferno, gouting flames and smoke; anyone inside was undoubtedly dead, including their beloved Ethereal.



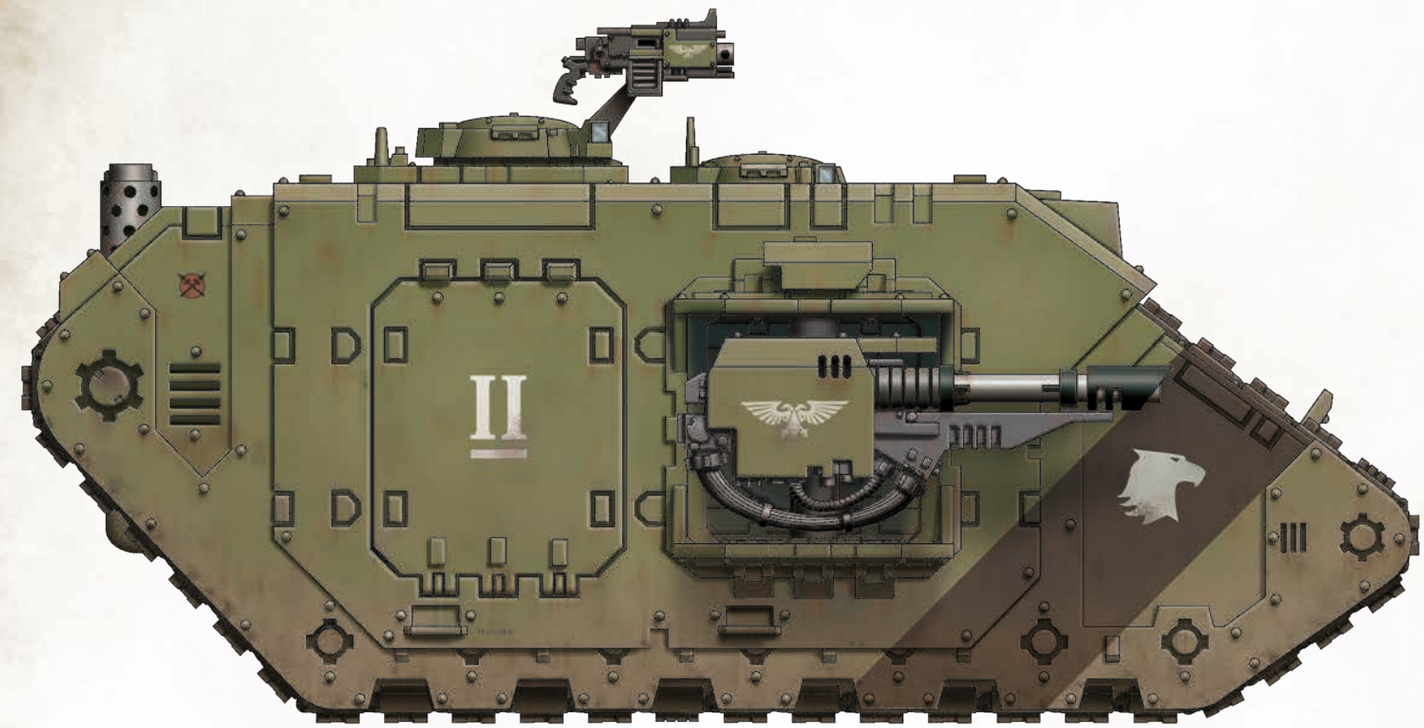
Thunderhawk gunship of the Raptors Chapter. This is the fourth Thunderhawk of the strike force, seeing action in all of the Chapter's engagements of the Taros Campaign.



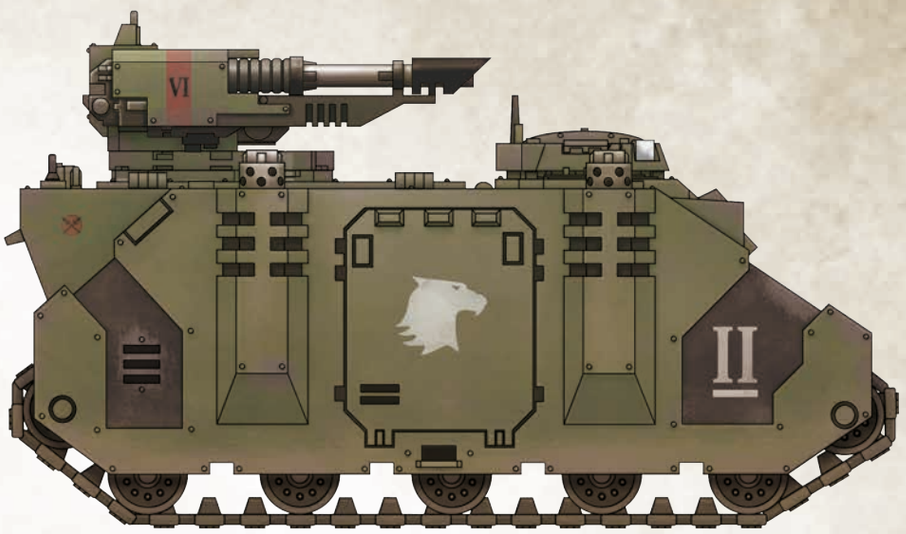
Thunderhawk gunship of the Raptors Chapter. This is the second Thunderhawk of the strike force.
Due to careful planning and expert execution, no Thunderhawks were lost during the fighting on Taros.



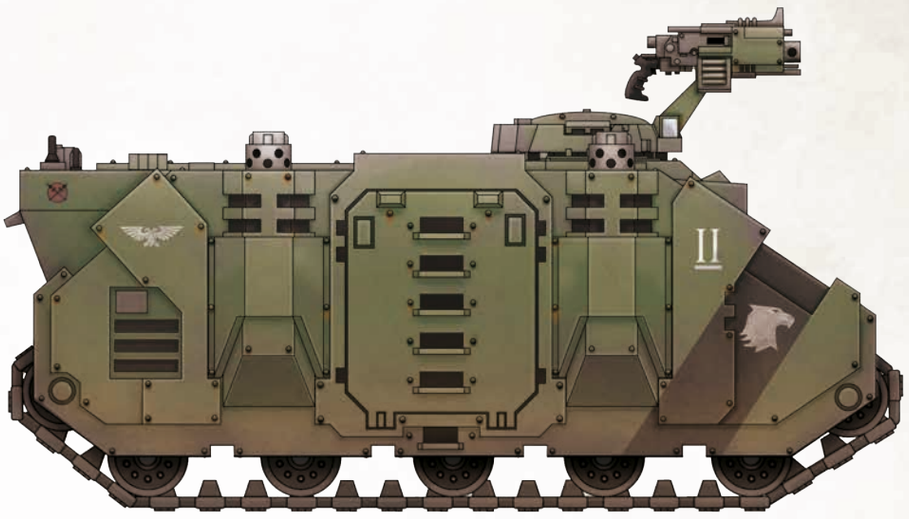
Land Raider Prometheus of 2nd Company. This was Captain Orelius' command vehicle during the Iracunda Breakthrough, and was also deployed to defend the landing zones during the evacuation.



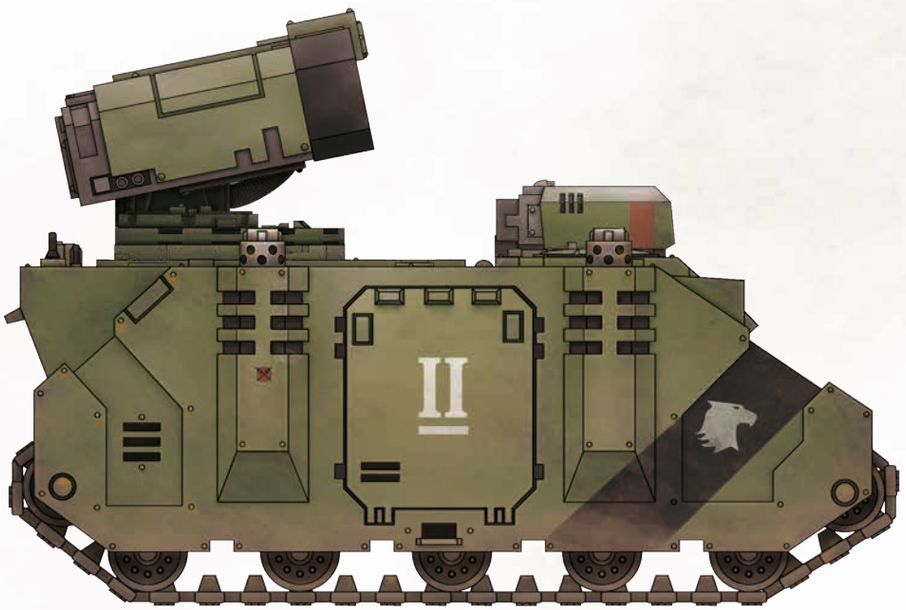
Land Raider of 2nd Company. This Land Raider was deployed to support all of the Chapter's engagements, and was severely damaged before being evacuated during the defence of the landing zones.



Razorback with twin lascannon of 2nd Company.



Rhino with additional armour of 2nd Company. This vehicle was destroyed during the final battle of the Taros Campaign.



Whirlwind of the 2nd Company. This vehicle mounts a Helios pattern anti-aircraft launcher instead of the more usual Hyperios pattern.

As the command centre burned around them, Colonel Scheja and his Storm Troopers fought on, but Tau reinforcements were already on the way and soon they were overwhelmed. The Colonel and his men were all killed – this time the Imperial attackers would be offered no mercy by the vengeful Tau.

Operation Deathblow had been a suicide mission, and it had almost worked. The Ethereal, Aun'Vre, was dead, but Shas'o R'myr had survived. When the Eversor struck he had already been outside, personally leading his bodyguard squad against the Storm Troopers. Commander 'Longknife' had been wounded in the fighting, but he had not been inside the control room when the Eversor had self-destructed. For the Tau this was only a small mercy in a night of terrible horror, and the loss of their precious Ethereal sent the entire Taros Coalition force into shock and grief. For many days afterwards the Hunter Cadres were stunned into inactivity by their loss, but after the grief came a growing sense of rage against the men who had plotted this heinous attack. It was an anger that swelled inside each Tau warrior into a vengeful wrath that the humans would soon feel the full weight of. There could be no mercy now, only vengeance. The Tau battle cry was no longer "*For the Greater Good!*", instead it was "*For Aun'Vre!*".

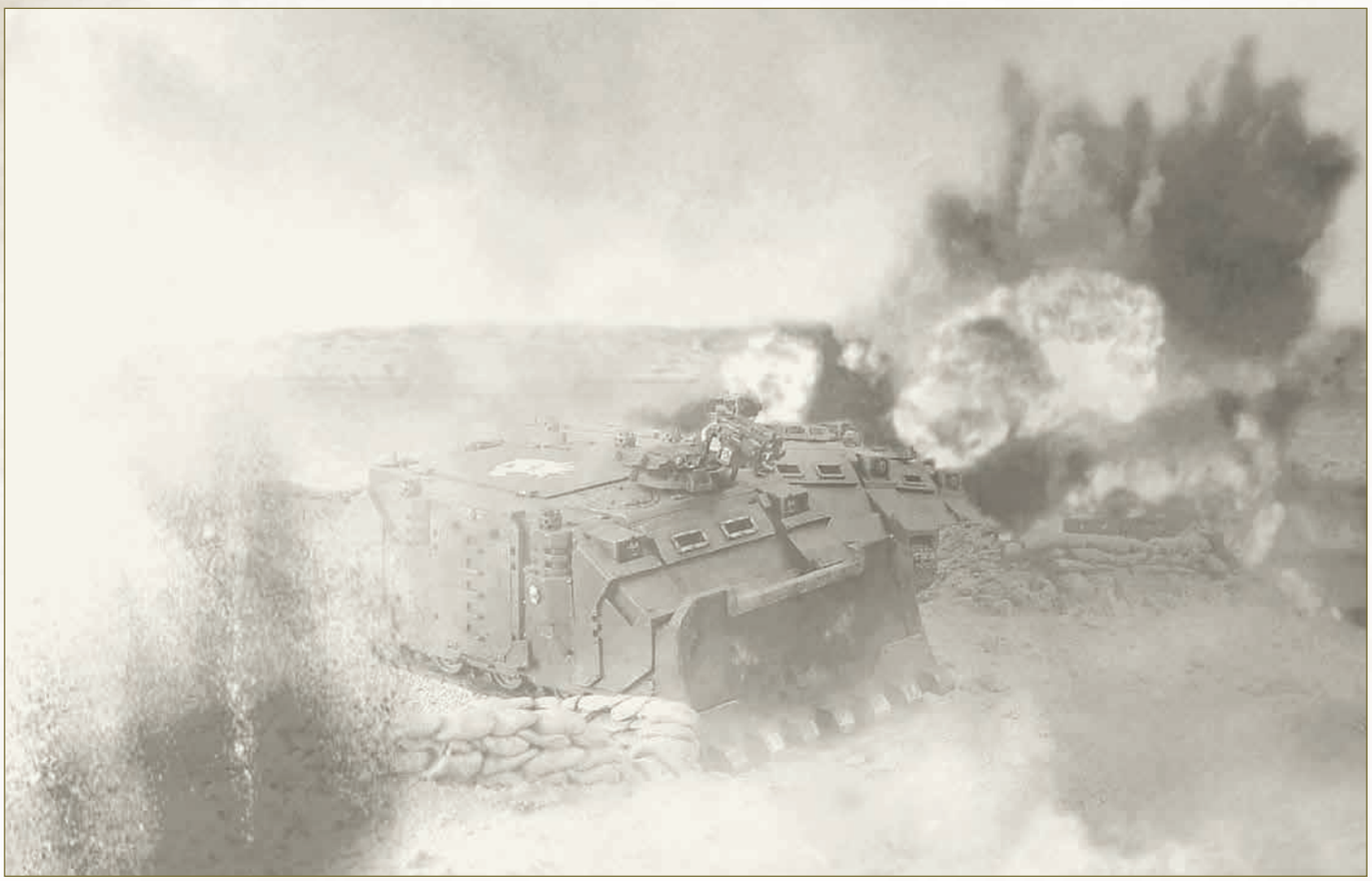
Evacuation

After a week of stunned inactivity and grief, the Tau turned the full force of their anger against the Imperial Guard regiments now falling back through the desert. Their defensive operations were replaced by a new offensive, aimed at shattering the Imperial Guard and ending the war swiftly. Shas'o R'myr set about reorganising his surviving Hunter Cadres for the offensive. The Imperium's forces had been severely weakened but they were not defeated yet.

With its Guardsmen in no shape to fight back, the evacuation of all those who remained alive on Taros was ordered at 718998.M41 by Lord Commander Gustavus. The Taros campaign had lasted just ninety days, from the time the first ships had arrived in-system, and had failed. Commissar General Van Horcic was outraged by Gustavus' decision, but recognized that there was no hope of victory. The order stood. All that was left for him to do was quickly salvage what forces he could before they too were destroyed.

With the Tau now on the offensive, the withdrawal of the Tallarn accelerated and, with the threat of enemy forces breathing down their necks, whether imagined or real, the Guardsmen fell back pell-mell towards the landing zones. What had once been a massive army that moved with military precision was quickly in danger of becoming a disorganised rabble and the desert soon became a dumping ground as Guardsmen abandoned their vehicles and equipment in their flight for survival. Hundreds of Chimera and Leman Russ hulls soon littered the barren landscape whilst officers tried futilely to impose order and keep their squads, platoons and companies together. In the meantime commissars barked warnings that any man seen throwing away his weapon would be treated as a deserter and shot.

Long columns of exhausted Guardsmen tramped south through the desert, moving slowly past countless abandoned Leman Russ and Chimera, their fuel tanks long since run dry. Rations and water canteens were the only prized items, heavy weapons and even spare ammunition being dumped enroute. Men rooted through the hulks of tanks and Chimeras in search of forgotten water cans and looted canteens from the dead of previous battles, shaking out their last few drops in desperation. Tormented by thirst the entirety of X Corps streamed south over ground it had fought so hard to win. It was a broken army, no longer capable of making a stand.



Raptors Rhino caught in the opening salvos of the Tau force's retaliation against the death of their Ethereal.
With the Space Marines on the defensive, these Rhinos are located towards the rear, ready to move forward if required.

A target scan captures a Tau Shas'el as he directs his Hunter Cadre in the final attack of the Taros Campaign.

With their enemy in full retreat, the Tau could now exact the revenge they so desired. The Guardsmen were easy pickings and Barracudas and Tiger Sharks took off constantly to lay waste to the retreating army. Orcas landed combat teams, who mercilessly ambushed the retreating Tallarn Guardsmen, slaughtering them or rounding them up as prisoners. With the Tau now attacking, and word of ambushes spreading, the disorganised retreat soon became a rout, and after four days it was a shambles. Some officers tried to put together rearguard actions to hold the Tau off and to buy those ahead of them time, but it was a hopeless gesture and all the ad-hoc rearguard units were wiped out in the futile firefights.

In the wake of the evacuation order the Tau simply mopped up, taking thousands of their enemy as prisoners and marching them away to captivity. For many capture was better than death from thirst under the merciless sun. Some stragglers made it through – most did not. To all intents and purposes four Tallarn regiments had ceased to exist. Of X Corps only the 331st regiment had managed to make their withdrawal in good order, and thousands of them would be evacuated over the following days. The 114th Cadian regiment also fared well, with their Chimeras piled high with men they raced southwards as far as their fuel would carry them before abandoning their vehicles and marching the rest of the way. Most of the regiment made it, if not many of their Chimeras. The remaining Titans of Legio Ignatum also returned intact and, on Tech Magus Volta's direct orders, were immediately taken away to safety.

A lucky few of the other retreating squads were rescued as the surviving Valkyries of the 23rd Elysian regiment were put to good use ferrying units back to the landing zone. High-ranking officers, command units and Storm Trooper squads were given preference, but after these had all been rescued Tallarn infantry started to pile aboard the airborne carriers for a fast trip back. On arrival they joined the growing queues waiting to board the landing craft for the trip into orbit.

The first stragglers on foot started to arrive at the landing zones at 752998.M41. The evacuation had been in progress for eleven days and much of the most important equipment and personnel had already been moved into orbit. The end was in sight, but the Tau had one last concerted attack to unleash upon the fleeing army.

The Last Battle

Disorder ruled the landing grounds as crowds of desperate Guardsmen, fearful of being left to the mercy of the Tau, clamoured to get on board transports. Commissars and Storm Troopers fought a losing battle to keep order, threatening the crowds with loaded weapons and shooting those who broke through their cordon. High ranking officers were the first to board, along with important Administratum officials, whilst much of the remaining available space was taken up by equipment, considered much harder to replace than the abundance of Guardsmen always at the Imperium's disposal. Meantime responsibility for the protection of the landing zone had fallen to the Raptors Chapter. Captain Orelius' Space Marines had deployed back onto Taros and thrown a defensive perimeter around the landing grounds, and in many places they occupied the defences erected by the Tallarn regiments when they had landed.

At 769998.M41 dawn broke as a yellow molten orb over the mountains, forewarning of another blisteringly hot day. Soon the heat haze was shimmering across the desert as the Raptors' sentries looked out across the sand. With the yellow dawn came the distinctive swept wing shapes of Tau Mantas, approaching low like massive birds of prey to hover in the dusty heat haze and disembark their Hunter Cadres. The Emperor's forces were beaten, but the Tau's thirst for revenge was so great that Shas'o R'myr ordered one last attack directly against the landing grounds. Any who did not escape now would be stranded on Taros forever, but standing between the Tau and the landing zone were the Space Marines of the Raptors Chapter.

As the Tau ferried in their forces and mustered for the attack, the Space Marines reinforced their defences with what reserves Captains Orelius and Kaedes had and braced themselves for one last battle. Their objective was to buy time for the evacuating troops and if the Space Marines' defences broke, then the landing grounds would be overrun as well. The longer the Raptors could hold, the more troops would escape to fight another day.

The first thrust came from the east. Supported by long range fire from Mantas hovering on the distant horizon, huge railgun rounds started to impact about the defensive positions, flinging rock and earth skywards. Following close behind, Hammerheads and Broadside battlesuits joined the fusillade, their rounds slamming into Space Marine positions. Fire Warriors and battlesuits, led by Shas'o R'myr himself, closed in, to which Space Marine heavy weapons and Whirlwinds responded. The Tau closed to within two hundred metres of the dug-in Space Marines, but there their attack faltered and soon Hammerheads and battlesuits alike were burning furiously in the morning light, dozens of Tau corpses littering the sand as those lucky to have survived the Raptors' attack retreated.

A second assault came from the west in much greater force. Again the railgun rounds slammed home and once again the Raptors stood firm, fighting hard to hold back the oncoming tide. A Manta closed in, rounding upon the entrenchments with volleys of missiles. Captain Kaedes committed his last reserves, and a sally of 6th Company Land Speeders swooped overhead, racing out to attack the Manta at close range. The small skimmers dodged and weaved as heavy bolters rattled and multi-meltas roared. Three were destroyed in the battle, but the Manta withdrew rather than risk further damage.

As his losses built, Captain Kaedes strode from dug-out to dug-out, directing counter fire and urging his hard-pressed battle-brothers on until a plasma blast, which immolated a Predator tank, also critically wounded him, peppering him with molten shrapnel. Kaedes was dragged to safety, his upper torso and right arm mutilated by the intense heat. It was only the skill of an apothecary who stabilised him and his own super-human physique that kept Kaedes alive. He would not fight again as he had on so many battlefields, but upon returning to the Chapter fortress his valour would earn him the honour of being interred in a Dreadnought.

By mid-afternoon the Tau forces were spent. They had battered near constantly at the Space Marine positions, but failed to break them. Meanwhile, the last landing craft had been hurriedly loading their human cargo as, with the sound of the battle reverberating all around them, hordes of Guardsmen crowded into the holds. Once full, the ramps were raised and the great loading doors rolled shut. Anybody not onboard now would be left on Taros for good.

The lift-off of the last landing craft freed Captain Orelius to order the evacuation of his own forces. They had stood as the shield between the Tau and the evacuation all day, and at great cost, but as night fell, the Thunderhawks deployed to lift the battle-brothers clear. By the time the Raptors' evacuation operation was complete, the remaining transports and their escorts were already retreating out of the system. The Raptors' battle barge would be the last Imperial vessel to leave, bringing up the rear as the fleet made the warp jump out of the Taros system. The Tau fleet did not pursue as new orders now stayed their hand. The prize was the Tau's, they had won Taros and expanded the empire. The campaign was over.

A Tau Empire Hammerhead Gunship unleashes the long range firepower of its railgun. These fearsome weapons proved a constant threat to Imperial tank columns.

A Raptors' Land Raider engages the enemy during the final battle of the Taros Campaign. The Space Marines' rearguard action bought time for the last transports to reach orbit.

Epilogue

The war on Taros had cost the Imperial Guard in excess of five complete regiments, and the 3rd and 12th Tallarn Armoured regiments had lost all their combat vehicles and much of their equipment. The survivors would be pooled together to reform an under-strength 3rd regiment, which could then be rebuilt. The 17th and 89th Tallarn regiments had ceased to exist as coherent forces during the retreat, and most of their men were now Tau captives, condemned to labour in Taros' mines for the Greater Good. The remnants were given over to the 331st regiment, which had survived the campaign remarkably well. It now had its first campaign honour and a new core of veterans, and would go on to serve in other warzones. The 23rd Elysian Drop Troops had been all but annihilated during Operation Comet, although the regiment still retained over one hundred aircraft. The regiment would be reformed with a new recruitment of men from their home world and would rise to fight again. The 114th Cadian regiment had lost only several hundred men, but over ninety percent of its vehicles. It could be quickly re-equipped with new Chimeras mothballed as war reserves and would soon be ready for redeployment to the Cadian Gate. The Legio Ignatum, however, had lost one of its four Warhound Titans, a loss keenly felt by the princeps and crews who had fought alongside it.

For the Imperium the death toll was huge. It was estimated that ten thousand Guardsmen had been killed and fifteen thousand were wounded. As many as twenty thousand may have been captured by the Tau, and approximately three hundred and fifty tanks had been lost, as well as over seven hundred Chimeras and two hundred artillery pieces. Aircraft losses totalled sixty eight out of seventy eight.

Whilst the Tau Empire forces on the planet had been assaulting the Imperium's troops, an attack by their fleet had inflicted serious damage upon the ships of the Imperial Navy that had been patrolling in-system. Fleet Admiral Kotto's Taros invasion fleet had lost the cruiser *Hammer of Thrace*, the light cruiser Cerebus and eight escorts. The battlecruiser *Righteous Power* was damaged, as was the *Black Duke*. Both would require significant work at the Kar Duniash shipyards before they would be able to return to duty.

Aside from the loss of so many fighting men, vehicles and craft, the Tau Empire's taking of Taros had wider implications for the Imperium. The mining world's resources had already been assigned to the rising war effort against Abaddon's 13th Black Crusade, and although other sources of ore could be found to feed the forges of Stygies VIII elsewhere, delays would be inevitable.

It was estimated that Shas'o R'myr commanded a Tau coalition consisting of at least one hundred Hunter Cadres, a grand total of between eight thousand and nine thousand Fire Warriors and perhaps as many as five thousand Kroot allies. Added to this were in excess of eight thousand human deserters who fought for the Tau cause. Actual Tau Empire numbers and losses throughout and after the battle remained unknown to the Imperium, but must have also numbered in the thousands. The Imperial fleet too could confirm kills on only one Custodian class carrier, the *A'rho*, and eight escort vessels.

Following their victory, the planet and its mineral resources were now firmly in Tau hands. Over the following years the Tau would increase their grip on T'ros and as their young empire expanded, ships from T'au and Dal'yth would soon be in orbit, loaded with xenos colonists. Meanwhile the Imperium was powerless to strike back as other priorities took precedence. Another invasion would require a far greater force than that sent to Taros under Lord Commander Gustavus and it was just not possible at that time to retaliate. There would be no second invasion for the foreseeable future, and with T'ros secure, the Ethereal councillors on T'au shifted their gaze to the new borders of their empire and eyed the next world for conquest…

ORDO XENOS

DEPARTMENTO ANALYTICUS RECORD

CAMPAIGN ANALYSIS OF TAU DEFENSIVE STRATEGY ON TAROS

Subsequent analysis of the campaign on Taros through a study of reports, the interrogation of captured enemy combatants, signals intercept data and other [classified] sources has revealed much of how the Tau fought on Taros. Much of this information was compiled by Colonel Scheja, and was submitted to the Administratum and the Office of the Lord Commander Militant during the campaign, prior to the Colonel being killed in combat.

For the Tau Shas'ar'tol (High Command) a world such as Taros was perfect for their expansionist ambitions given its ample resources and location. It did however present a number of issues which would have to be resolved. After being invited to help defend Taros by those traitors who supported their cause there, the Tau's subsequent swift conquest meant they had more new territory than they could effectively defend. When the Imperium reacted and counter-attacked, the Tau could not occupy every part of the planet and therefore Imperium forces were able to land just about anywhere. It appeared that the size of the expected Imperial attack was also a concern for Tau commanders, with plans to ship additional warriors into the system should the battle seem as if it was no longer going in their favour.

To aid their manpower problems in the meantime, it has been ascertained that the Tau arranged to induct as many of the old Planetary Defence Forces as they could. The Tau were already well accustomed to using such 'xenos' troops, and rather than waste them as cannon fodder, actually respected their fighting qualities and treated them in a manner some would consider fair. After time in Tau service, many such traitor units became keen to aid the 'Greater Good' and fought well for their new xenos commanders. This was contrary to initial Imperial expectations of poor morale amongst indentured troops.

We can surmise that long discussions took place on T'au about the situation on Taros. Many counsellors must have argued that in order for the conquest of Taros to be successful any Imperial invasion must be immediately hurled back, causing maximum damage to prevent or delay any additional retaliation. Such a heavy defeat, they must have assumed, would persuade the Imperium of Man never to try to invade again and that the planet was now lost to it. On the ground and in space the Tau were determined to match force with force.

These Tau must have also argued that by the time the Imperium could organise another invasion attempt the situation on the Tau Empire's frontier would have moved on. The next planet would already have been targeted and the Imperium's focus would have to shift to its defence also, meaning Taros would be forgotten. It seems that, in their opinion, what the situation on Taros needed was a rapid build-up of more Hunter Cadres and more Kroot mercenaries in order to militarise the system, build defence stations in orbit and make a show of strength that the Imperium might baulk at.

But the commander of the Tau's military forces already on Taros, identified as Shas'o R'myr, guided by the Ethereal Aun'Vre, was already planning a different strategy. Rather than rely on more troops and a large fleet presence in system, R'myr was more conservative in his needs. He already had experience fighting Imperial Guard forces and had learned something of their strengths and weaknesses.

Shas'ar'tol Shas'o R'myr believed that to try to defeat the Imperium in an open battle was a mistake. He had little doubt his forces could achieve victory this way, but only at a high cost – perhaps a greater price than the Tau Empire should pay for the conquest of Taros. If it came to a pitched battle, the Imperium would send more forces and the battle would escalate, then more ships, more men and more tanks would follow the first wave, and although the Tau might destroy them, victory would not be quick and the cost in lives would be great.

Worse still, R'myr was concerned that the Tau fleet was not capable of inflicting a wholly decisive defeat on the Imperium's vessels if it came to a fleet engagement.

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The vast firepower of the Imperium's ships would always give it the advantage in a straight fight and to R'myr the Tau fleet was not a war fleet but a colonisation fleet. To stand and fight in space would be a mistake and cost the Tau Empire heavily. Instead they should offer minimal resistance and allow the Imperium to gain orbit and land its troops. In R'myr's plan, the war for Taros could be won on the ground, in its scorching deserts rather than in the cold depths of space.

For his strategy, Shas'o R'myr was using the Tau doctrine of Kauyon or the 'patient hunter'. This time the hunter's lure would be the absence of Tau forces. He allowed the Imperium onto Taros, then drew them deeper into the deserts before striking and cutting off the Imperium's lifeline of supplies. This was the Imperium's weakness. Their soldiers would need food, ammunition and water to fight, and if his forces could destroy their supply lines, it would bring about a rapid success. Once battle was joined on the surface, R'myr then turned to the Tau doctrine of Mont'ka or the 'killing blow'. The Tau's ground war therefore had two separate but linked missions.

First, having used the absence of troops as a lure to draw the Imperial forces into the open, out of their defensive positions and into the deserts, R'myr struck hard, targeting the forward Imperial units with the long range firepower of his Hammerheads and Broadsides. Rapid strikes by mobile armoured Hunter Cadres, hitting the Imperial forces hard then quickly withdrawing and dispersing, slowed any advance and sapped Imperial manpower and morale. In the open desert he was maximizing his advantage regards range and avoiding expensive close quarters battle. He gave ground before the advance, never staying to fight for more than a localised counter-attack, and this way he stretched Imperial supply lines whilst making them pay daily in manpower and fighting machines. When the Imperium's attack was over-extended and weary from weeks of combat, the second phase then commenced.

Next, using Mantas and Orcas, R'myr launched a series of swift and stealthy Hunter Cadres deep behind enemy lines to attack rear installations and supply columns, putting his most vigorous Shas'el commanders in charge of this operation. Making wide use of Stealth suits, Pathfinders and aircraft the teams located and attacked supply dumps and convoys, airbases and headquarters, sowing confusion and denying the front line security for its supply lines. Combined with new fleet operations in the system which were specifically targeting the Imperial transport vessels, he managed to cut off the Imperial Guard regiment's lifeline of supplies, support and reinforcements, leaving them stranded in the desert. The Imperium's weakness was its huge logistical tail and this was where the Shas'el concentrated their efforts.

From interrogations it is now known that many Tau Hunter Cadre commanders in the shas'ar'tol thought the plan was overly defensive and too easily handed the initiative to the Imperium. They believed that the Imperium would be at its weakest during its planetary landings and would have preferred to smash them with a large counter-attack, meaning the war would be over before it had started.

This theory was sound enough, but in practice, given the planet's size and the Imperium's perceived dominance of the surrounding space lanes, how could R'myr stop an invasion? Once in low orbit the Imperium would have the entire planet to choose from. Certain areas could be ignored, like the inhospitable deserts and mountains but, from the perspective of the Tau forces, the area to be defended was still vast. Only by spreading their troops thinly would there be any likelihood of forces being available for an immediate counter-attack, and thinly spread forces would mean not enough firepower to overrun the landing zones. Concentrating their assets too early would present the Imperium with a good target for its heaviest weapons or an orbital bombardment. This was considered a huge risk, because a sustained orbital bombardment might tear Tau forces apart before battle even started.

Ultimately for the Tau R'myr's tactics worked, and for those who have to fight that xenos race in the future they are hereby sanctioned for study.

Pax Imperialis

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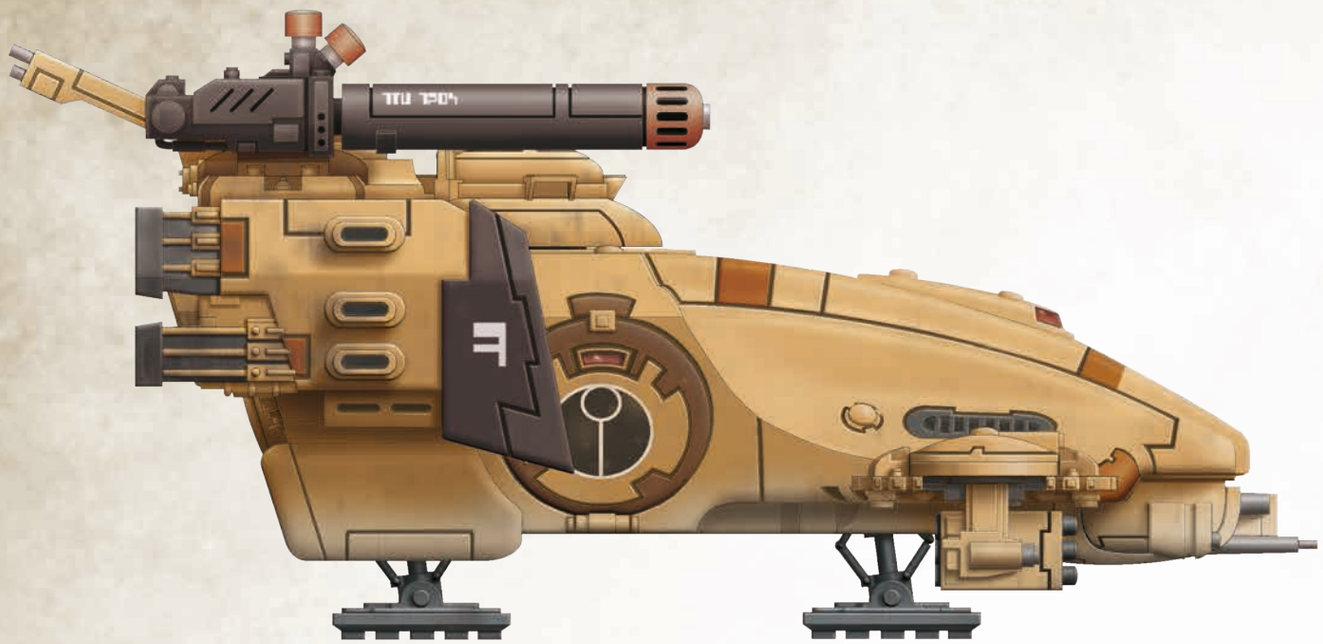
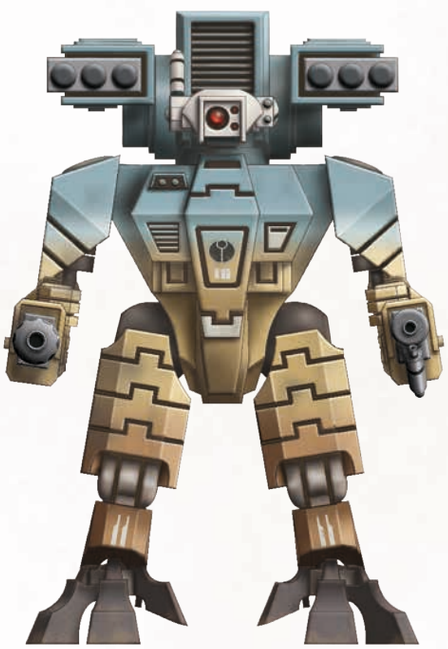
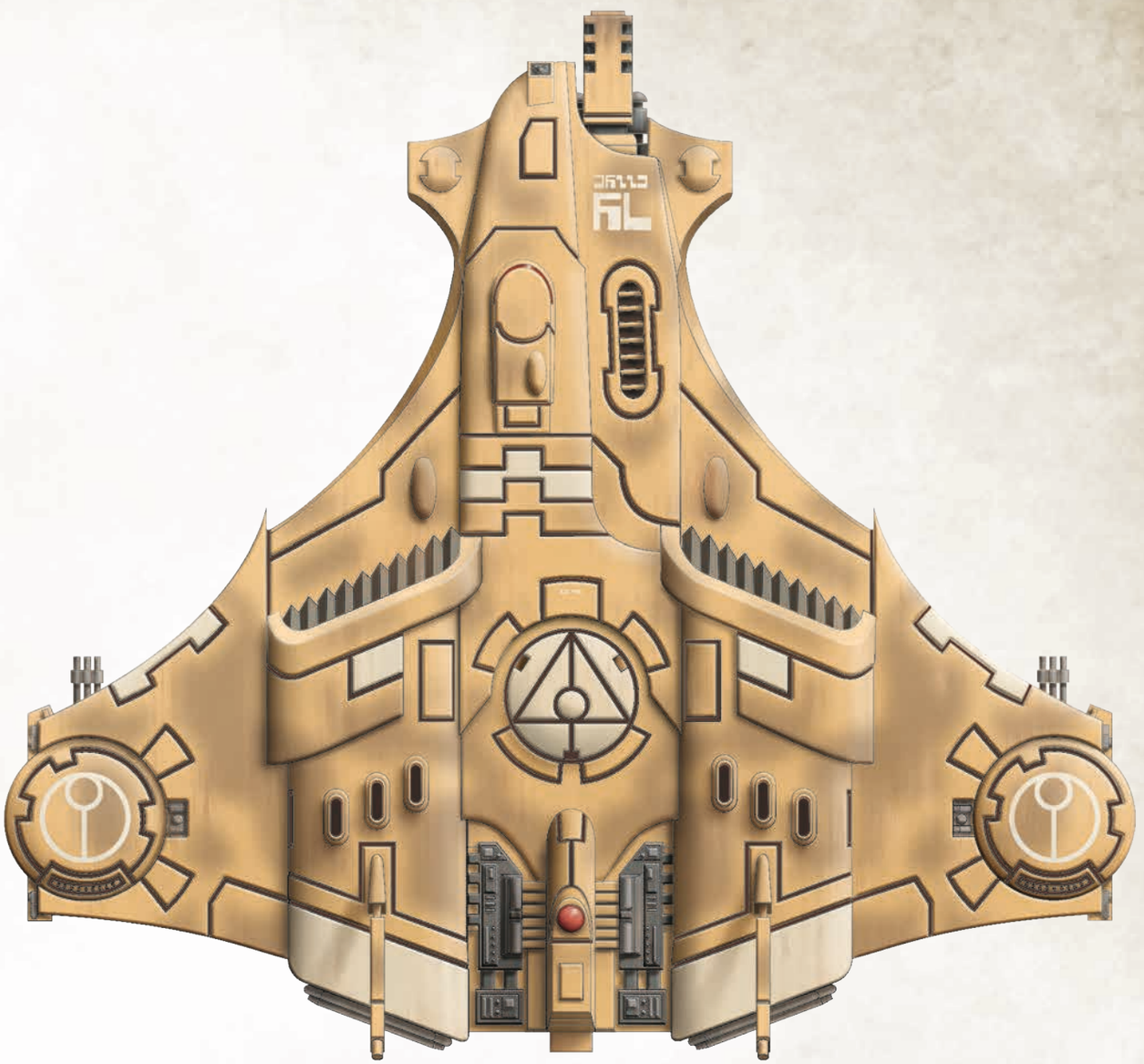


Hammerhead gunship with twin plasma cannons of an unidentified Hunter Cadre.

XV84 Crisis battlesuit armed with a burst cannon and plasma rifle. The pilot's identity is unknown.



XV81 Crisis battlesuit armed with smart missiles, a plasma rifle and flamer. This is Shas'el K'irri, killed leading a Tau raid.



Barracuda superiority fighter. Although exact figures are unknown, it is thought that the Tau deployed an estimated one hundred and fifty such aircraft to Taros, and they played a major role in their ultimate victory.

Manta. One of several such aircraft that delivered Hunter Cadres to the Imperial landing zones and supported the Tau's attack with long-range fire.