

## A Minor Contact

A BattleTech story by  
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Three Shilone fighters dropped like rocks from 10 kilometers high and with crisp white contrails marking their positions pointed themselves nose down. The atmosphere buffeted their sleek bodies and as they put their fusion engines to glowing “full blue” pushed through the disturbing air and came in low and screaming.

Still holding a tight wedge formation they hugged the ground so close they were sucking dirt and debris off of the ground and cramming it into their hypersonic wakes turning rocks and clods of dirt and anything else that wasn't connected to the ground into a deadly projectile.

Baker Company knew they were coming and laid face down in their fighting holes as the multi-ton fighters crossed their positions with a Banshee's shriek that made their teeth ache and short of breath as she left them cowering on their faces.

Two kilometers to Baker's east Love Company watched as the fighters hammered an approaching lance of medium BattleMechs with Long Range Missiles and PPC fire. Colonel Jenna Whitehands adjusted her focus and zoomed in on a brown and green painted *Assassin*. It took what equaled a full flight of LRMs and single PPC blast in its backside and volcanoed in place. The brilliant fusion reactor explosion that signaled its demise put painful white spots in her eyes that stole her vision and made her eyes blink reflexively.

When the spots faded enough for her to see again she raised her magnifiers once more, confirming that the *Assassin* was now a smoking crater and fully out of the tactical picture. She scanned actively again and clenched her jaws fearfully tight; she did not want to see who the survivors of hers and Baker Company's last bit of support might be.

Her brigade commander had told her and Baker's commander earlier that day that they were the rear guard now and that their brigade, or what was left of it, would be withdrawing to the northern bank of the river Seiu. There they would reconsolidate with the remainders of their divisional armor and meet the main Capellan thrust heading for that same bridge head on.

“So,” he had said to her and Leighton MacFarland of Baker Company, “you two are it. I need 6 hours to get us across that river and set into a defensive.” He didn't bat an eye when he said, “Stop them cold, hold them for 6 and exfiltrate back to our lines or--die in place.” Biting the end off a cigar he spat it into the dirt and added, “Just so you know if you don't hold for the full 6 we're all dead. The Capellans outnumber us 3 to 1 in men and machines. But that river”, he gestured at its position on the horizon. “That river will even the field for us.” Reaching into his shoulder bag he produced his map and pointed to the terrain features around them, “These buttes go as high as 100 meters with sheer sides nearing the tops. You're getting the brigade mortar section and one battery of thumpers until it's their turn to jump the river and, he gestured to a stack of metal crates behind him, every anti-'Mech mine we have left.” He lit the cigar and puffed it to life. Getting the end cherry red he gestured to her and MacFarland with its glowing end, “You've got

a medium lance of 'Mechs inbound. Intel says they're a reinforced unit supplemented with some light armor and support troops." He waved an arm at a convoy of heavy haulers passing by them, "It's also no secret we're withdrawing and if it were me on the other side I'd bust a gut to get up here and stomp the crap out of us as we tried to run away. So I'm guessing that's what these guys are coming to do. Grind us up tail first and secure the bridge before we can blow it out of desperation." But if they want to catch us they're gonna have to get by you and that won't happen for at least 6 hours."

And that was it. She watched him get into a VTOL that had so many bullet holes in it she could see daylight through its bodywork and fly away leaving her and MacFarland standing in its rotor wash speechless.

She and MacFarland decided that the best way to get the job done was to put Baker on a pair of buttes that sat on both sides of the road leading to the river. Baker's troops had fanned out across the tops of the buttes and placed explosive charges into their rocky edges and blew tons of rock down their steep slopes and onto the roadway proper. When the dust had settled it looked as she had predicted it would: piss-poor; a roadblock that anybody with engineer's equipment could move out of their way with ease. BattleMechs would barely have to stop for much longer than it took to move the biggest boulders out of the way. That was the plan though. When it was safe Whitehands sent her troops out to emplace a handful of the anti-'Mech mines and a pair of remotely detonated cratering charges. Her vision was that the 'Mech drivers would see their pitiful attempt at blocking the road and just move into the debris field to clear it so their support units could keep up with them.

She listened to the fighters' shrill engines fade and sighed wistfully. The three fighters her commander had wrangled into a single support run had elated her, giving her a small touch of hope but it had also reinforced the fact that her task was nearly hopeless. No, not nearly. Fully hopeless. She wasn't the type that was prone to a pessimist's outlook on life but this time she felt that it was all over for her and her soldiers. The only thing left to do was issue the insurance checks and write the letters home.

As she stared down at the fighters' handiwork she took a deep breath that made her toes tingle started panning the area hoping that maybe two or three of the 'Mechs had been taken out or were beat to hell enough to skew the odds a little more in their favor. No such luck. The *Assassin* was gone but she could still see a *Cicada*, a *Sentinel*, and *Blackjack* staggering about in the grey-black smoke clouds.

Captain MacFarland grabbed a hunk of thorn brush that had landed on top of him and tossed it out of his hole. Despite not being able hear clearly yet he ran to the edge of "his" butte and looked out.

One 'Mech had cratered, leaving little more than glowing red hot scraps of metal laying on the road top and the three survivors looked a little battered and really, really mad. They all stood side by side on the road looking up at him on his circular perch. One of the 'Mechs, a pod bodied *Sentinel* swiveled toward him a touch more and fired. His mind registered the flash from the AC-5's barrel, but before it made an actual intellectual

connection as to what had happened he was airborne. Then as he was floating and flipping amidst rocks, burning grass and smoke it dawned on him. *He shot at me!*

He awoke when a medic flashed an ammonia inhalant under his nose. Jerking his eyes wide he snorted, coughed and shouted, “That dirty SOB shot at me!”

“Mechs inbound!” a soldier behind him yelled.

The medic attending him snapped his kit shut and chuckled, “Looks like they’re comin to make sure they got ya sir.”

Gasping in pain MacFarland got to his feet and moved towards the edge again. This time though he crawled the last few meters to the edge for a look. Through his magnifiers he could see them coming. A *Cicada*, a *Blackjack*, and the *Sentinel* that tried to vaporize him. They were striding up the yellow lined road towards them and their rocky roadblock in a steady mechanical cadence.

He and Captain Whitehands had developed their plan under the notion that the pursuing forces would consider the rock obstacles a pitiful, desperate gesture and just use their ’Mechs to bulldoze their way through it.

So, to reinforce this notion he had only detailed two platoons of his infantry down to the roadblock with SRM launchers. He snickered picturing the surprise on their faces when they started taking volleys of SRMs and as they pushed through the obstacles wanting to destroy his offensive little infantrymen then hitting the mines they had hidden in the debris and then the cratering charges.

The three surviving machines made their way to within a half kilometer of the roadblock then slowed to a half-step and started actively scanning on all bandwidths. On a butte similar to MacFarland’s two kilometers behind the roadblock their battalion mortar section went to work.

MacFarland heard the three batteries of three tubes each volley out a string of low rumbling *keerrruumphs!* and started swearing. “Dammit! I said wait for **my** signal you idiots!”

Captain Whitehands was also “upset” by the early arrival of supporting mortar fire. The plan had been to call it in when they got to the roadblock, not as they approached. But she also knew that their battalion mortar officer was an addlebrained nincompoop, which is how he got to be the mortar officer in the first place. As such, he was right on time and on target as only an idiot of his caliber could be.

One of her platoon leaders sided up to her and sneaked a peak through his magnifiers and asked, “So, do you think Capn’ MacFarland is hatin life right now ma’am?”

Without turning she said cynically, “No, he is one of those kinds of people who aren’t happy unless they’re being crapped on.”

“He must be in heaven then.”

“Yeah, he must because if having three ’Mechs comin at ya isn’t getting crapped on right and proper I can’t imagine, no, scratch that, I don’t want to know what is.” She stared intently at the spectacle before her. Most of the heavy mortar rounds wouldn’t hurt the war machines; just piss the MechWarriors inside them right off.

They had scheduled four volleys to be fired at the minimum: HE—HEDP—WP and Seekers. The seekers were the wild card though. They were an old school round designed

to be fired and as they arced down use a sensor to locate the largest hunk of metal they could find and home in on it. When she heard that they were scheduled for firing she blanched. “Bloody unreliable, brainless things they are.” She had griped to the mortar officer who shrugged her concerns off. They’d hit a damned belt buckle if that was the only metal thing they could find in the target area.

She didn’t tell MacFarland that though, somebody had to be in place when they started firing, but that was exactly why she was keeping her Savannah Master hovercrafts well away from the impact area. One of those rounds may only rattle a Mechjock around or bust up some armor plates, but that same one round would turn a hovercraft into a stripe of garbage and hamburger.

True to her predictions the ’Mechs ignored the falling explosives and trudged forward towards MacFarland’s position. What they hadn’t paid any attention to was that the White Phosphorus rounds were detonating all around them into giant white and orange blooms. They were showering the whole area with burning phosphorus chunks and creating a smoke screen, not to mention a hellacious grassfire that stretched laterally behind them and totally obscured their visuals and heat sensors: which was exactly what they were after anyway. When she was sure that their screens were really cooking she turned to the platoon leader next to her, “Saddle up and go tear up their support units.”

“Yes ma’am.” He saluted and moved out yelling for his troops to tear down their camo screens and move out.

MacFarland chewed on a red and white striped coffee stirring stick and felt the titans’s steps get closer and closer. Beside him two soldiers were chest deep in a fighting position and lining up a portable PPC. He could read from their eyes that they were getting mad. Like MacFarland and all other infantrymen they hated BattleMechs. They hated them more than anything else in the universe. Even more than crotch rot they hated them. They hated the way they loomed above them all like malevolent gods, smashing everyone and everything with their ponderous metal feet and the way they incinerated the lands they trod on. What was worse than the ’Mechs in their minds were the men and women who piloted them. They were cowards. They shielded themselves in their machines and acted as omnipotent deities with no responsibilities to anyone. They killed on whims, their angry childlike fits uncontained destroyed homes and hospitals or whatever else they could find. His men in the last year of their fighting had lost many friends to the mighty BattleMechs, but they had likewise brought many of them down. That is what MacFarland was living for anymore. He lived to see that ejection chair go screaming into the sky and when his men bought those mighty MechWarriors before him in chains he gloated and kicked them. Stripped of their machines they were pathetic things to him and he loved to chain them naked to a tree and beg mortal men like him for water and food. Now, on his belly, he watched in a mixture of giddy anticipation, moral outrage and straight fear as the BattleMechs strode forward. Soon, he thought, Captain Whitehands would go to work with her Savannahs and then the party would start in earnest.

MacFarland’s communications operator had tried to bet him 10 C-bills that the *Blackjack* would come for them and the *Cicada* and *Sentinel* would move to clear the road.

“What makes you say that son?”

“C’mon sir, you wanna take the bet or not?”

“Well, no actually.”

The young man snapped his finger at the lost opportunity. “The *Blackjack* is the only one with jump-jets sir.” He confessed.

*The man thinks I’m an idiot...* True to his prediction though the *Blackjack* peeled away from the other two and started up the burning, grassy slope of his perch.

Four kilometers away six Savannah master hovercrafts slid across unbearably rocky ground on cushions of air. Nearing speeds of 100 kph they flew straight and true. Their targets were a gathering of repair and supply trucks that belonged to the approaching BattleMechs.

Having a support train trailing behind them was definitely a break from current military tradition. BattleMechs usually forayed forward from a dropship or a well defended logistic base and returned to it for re-supply and repairs. So valuable were the supplies the machines needed to operate that it was rare to have them in even a relatively exposed position. This break from tradition was going to be a boon or a bust for Love Company. Captain Whitehands was betting her pension, and her life, that those trucks were far too important to let her troops maul like she was going to try and do. She was hoping that at least one of the ’Mechs would break off and run back to defend them. Hopefully, when one of them broke away she would send the last of her hovercraft into the smoke and attack the remaining two. What she secretly hoped in heart was that at least one of those ’Mechs had jump jets and would bound up to MacFarland’s perch to stomp the crap out of him and leave her with just one to deal with directly.

The hovercraft ate the distance between themselves and the support trucks in no time flat. Waiting for their reticules to “go gold” the gunners watched as the drivers and passengers jumped out of their rigs and ran for cover amongst the rocks and grass of the ground around them. Their sights went “gold” almost immediately after the last man dove from his truck. Together they all began to fire raking the assembled trucks with machineguns and laser fire. The copper-jacketed rounds pierced the thin skins of the doors and engine cowls but ricocheted off of the heavy wheels and hydraulic booms, sending sparks and burning flakes of metal into the air. The small lasers burned narrow trenches in those heavier pieces of ferrotitanium and literally sliced through the thin skins like they were soft cheese.

Some of the mechanics set up a heavy machinegun near some rocks and began firing back at their attackers. Speed was the only thing that saved them from taking serious damage. The mechanics had to swivel their gun so fast to keep them in their sights that most of their rounds missed wide. Not all though. Those rounds that connected shredded everything and everybody in their paths before blowing out the other side leaving blood and torn metal to mark their passage.

Whitehands smiled with satisfaction as her hovercraft circled like hungry Piranhas and nibbled at the collection of trucks. Satisfied that they had done enough damage she radioed to their leader, “Okay, that’s enough. You ruin them and they’ll just abandon it all and then we’ll be screwed to the wall.”

“Roger ma’am.” Came his quick reply.

Now the hovercraft were using their lasers only and intentionally missing most of their targets. They did, however, aim for the machinegun crew that was riddling them with holes. Their leader wasn’t interested in the weapon either. He was waiting. He was waiting for one of the ’Mechs to come to the rescue. Once that happened it was a whole new game. They would disperse when it got close enough to engage them and run away like thieves but to keep them away the ’Mech would have to stay close to provide constant protection. He was betting on many of the trucks needing repairs just to get moving again; he had instructed his gunners to focus on mobility kills i.e. tires, engines and what not. It was the classic divide and conquer put to the test again.

Within minutes of their attack the *Cicada* burst through the smoke clouds and sprinted towards its precious support vehicles to rescue them. The platoon leader watched nervously as it galloped toward them. He was waiting for it to begin firing. That was their signal to run to the far side of the convoy and be a total pain in their ass until they were dead or relieved.

MacFarland dove face first into his hole and hunkered down. He and his men had put it to the *Blackjack* as it came for them. They had fired from the edge of the buttes with their SRMs and portable PPCs without let up. Right before it fired its Jump Jets to come up get them he saw at least half a dozen good rents in its armor. His gunners were very experienced and would fire directly at those wounds to exploit them. He only hoped that the sixty men he had spread across the two buttes would live long enough to do the job.

The ground shook as the *Blackjack* landed and just like groundhogs MacFarland’s soldiers popped up from their holes and peppered it with fire. Many of his troops only had rifles, but they popped up too and dumped full clips at the bipedal machine to keep the MechWarrior inside it busy.

The rocket fire was literally deafening as they seared the air and struck the ’Mech in an almost never ceasing stream. The hot fragments rained down on them all and sounded like rain as they fell but when they landed on their clothing they burnt straight through and scorched their flesh.

He took a moment to slap at a fragment that had burnt through to his neck and then looked over the lip of his hole. It was not an encouraging sight at all. The *Blackjack* operator was walking from hole to hole and firing right into it with its heavy lasers. The soldiers cowering inside them never even knew what happened to them as the sun-hot beam destroyed them in place.

It ignored the rockets and PPC fire that were savaging its body because the MechWarrior knew he or she was in a race against time too. He was betting that he could kill all his men before they could bring him down and as his men died one by one like a gopher under a pile driver MacFarland felt that he or she was going to win.

Doom crept up his spine and tried to inspire him to retreat. He couldn’t though. He couldn’t for two stupid and simple reasons: 1) he had nowhere to run to; 2) his mission was to hold or die or hold and die or die. Running wasn’t an option.

He yelled for his soldiers to keep firing despite knowing his death was minutes away, but when an huge explosion from below filled the air with a million rocks and dust so thick it blocked out the sun he felt a spark of hope.

His men on the road must have lured one of the 'Mechs into the roadblock far enough to set off the explosives they had buried. He watched the *Blackjack*'s reaction and as the rocks quit falling it broke from its methodical execution of his soldiers, ran to the edge of the butte and jumped down to the road.

The *Sentinel* was torn up. Most of the armor surrounding its front had been shattered. The AC5 it had tried to kill MacFarland earlier with was gone and its right leg was a tattered mess of myomer and broken actuators. With only one working leg the pilot tried to hobble away from the blast site, but its actions were too slow and clumsy and MacFarland's men wasted no time unloading on it.

MacFarland counted eight hits from shoulder SRM launchers and one good shot from a man-pack PPC scoring solidly before the *Blackjack* arrived on pillars of molten plasma and started scattering his men with heavy laser fire and stomping feet.

Using the *Blackjack* as support both 'Mechs left the impact area and headed towards the marooned support vehicles and their lone defender.

Captain Whitehands slammed the hatch on her hovercraft and told her driver, "Hit it." Her section of six hovercraft waited until the *Blackjack* and *Sentinel* were halfway to their support section and as they crossed that imaginary line she keyed her microphone.

"All units this is Hammer 6 go for the *Blackjack*, pattern 1."

If she heard their replies nobody could tell. She just stared at the tottering 'Mechs through her targeting reticule as if she were willing the 'Mech to die. This was a make or break point now. She and Mac had given them a solid kick in the nuts for their trouble, but if they were able to regroup and rearm she and he were going to die for sure. There would be no more divide and conquer they would advance as a unit and rip them apart. Even if they didn't all die they would fail. She needed to use her craft to maim the *Blackjack*; get a mobility kill on it and keep it and the *Sentinel* from linking up.

She had 12 hovercraft at 8 am that morning and now as she headed for the limping 'Mechs she had 9. Three had gotten destroyed by the *Cicada* as they harassed it and the stranded repair section. Nine hovercraft against two shot up 'Mechs were shitty odds at best, but as her hovercraft ripped across the open ground she decided that it didn't matter because she would die before facing her comrades and telling them they lost because of her.

The retreating 'Mechs stopped and watched her craft come at them like killer bees. Her hovercraft juked left and right and did their damndest to be an impossible target but as their distance closed to 300 meters their aim got much better.

Hammer 1 was on her right and in the blink of an eye exploded into flaming bits as the *Blackjack*'s heavy laser ripped it up. 7 and 5 were next. Seven's skirt got scorched by the *Sentinel* and sagged quickly to the ground and dug its nose into the earth. Its fans were still moving at thousands of RPMs when they hit the ground and the rocks protruding from it. The torque from its whirling fans hitting a fixed object chucked it sideways right into Hammer Five and the two of them became a mess of bounding parts and flaming bodies.

At 150 meters they started their circle of death and commenced a relentless attack on the stationary BattleMechs. Like mosquitoes on an Elephant they stung the *Blackjack* over and over again. The main difference between her section's first attack and the one underway now was her section mounted SRM launchers instead of lasers. The SRM warheads burst their way through its mauled armor and worked on the damage already caused by MacFarland's infantrymen.

Around and around they went, each missile striking one of the 'Mechs and tearing off just one more hunk of armor. Soon she could see by the way the *Blackjack* was jerking back and forth to get a shot its operator was getting frustrated with her high speed craft's stinging attacks.

What happened next was a surprise. The *Blackjack* let the *Sentinel* drop to the ground and ran to the support vehicles.

"He's probably going to come back with the *Cicada*." She said into her mike. Leg the *Sentinel* before they get here!"

The Savannah's slowed to 50 Kph and took careful aim at the 'Mech's mangled leg and braving the fire from its stranded and furious pilot destroyed it from mid-thigh down. Whitehands smiled in feral satisfaction as the 'Mech fell like an oak and crashed into the ground with a tooth rattling impact.

*Hostages change everything* she thought. She had her section back away from the maimed 'Mech and waited for what was going to happen next. The 'Mechs were going to have to make the next move.

"Why don't you guys just surrender?" A voice on her radio said. "We'll take it easy on you, I promise."

Whitehands rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "They always say stuff like this." She said to her driver. "Like we're idiots. The day I'm afraid of a second rate merc is the day I retire. It's the friggin Capellans that bother me."

"Mercenary," She barked into her mike, "we aren't leaving for at least three hours. So we can do this two ways. One, we stare at each other and try to come up with a plan that won't end up with the guy in the *Sentinel* dying in a ball of fire or two we wait and when we leave you can have him back. Think about it: you've already lost one 'Mech, we've shot the hell out of the *Sentinel* and the *Blackjack*, not to mention your support section. This job can't be paying enough to cover those kinds of expenses."

"Maybe not, but our reputation and MRBC rating is on the line."

Stuck in the warm confines of her Savannah Master Whitehands felt it turning to crap on her. She flipped frequencies and told MacFarland to get ready for another attack. Then switching back to the general frequency she said, "You know what merc, do what you can afford. I will promise you this though: that *Sentinel* is going into high orbit no matter what. I got enough C-9 with me to make sure you never find enough to make a set of cuff links.

"I know you will." The voice replied in a sad but altogether accepting way.

A third voice blurted out, "Hey!!! You better not leave me to die you bastard! If you do I'll drop out of my contract and go to work for them! Total BULLSHIT !!!"

"Woo, just shut up and let me handle this." The first merc replied.

“No! I will not shut up! You **will** do whatever it takes to get me out of this...”

Whitehands tuned them out as they started arguing between themselves. She really didn't care what happened as long as they burned up time doing it. Every minute they wasted screwing off was one less minute she had to spend fighting them.

Eventually a third voice drowned them both out, “You two done yet? Huh? You sound like a pack of old women fighting over a chicken fer chrissakes!” When nobody spoke the voice continued, “Woo, fuck you. You signed the contract. It said the same thing as mine. You bail the 'Mech is ours and you are ass out. You switch sides you're fair game and I'll pop you just like I would any other 'Mech. Got me?”

“Yes.” Said Woo, who was clearly unhappy with his current position in things.

Captain Whitehands had no idea who was talking, but he sounded more like a commander than any had so far so she said to him, “Look, I don't know who you are, but here it is: You move to refit or rearm and we'll attack. First the *Sentinel* goes up and then your support vehicles. After that we'll deal with you. In essence: you may destroy all of us, but its going to be so expensive you go broke winning.”

Colonel Gilford flipped the smoldering stub of his cigar into the river and lit a fresh one with a battered lighter.

“So let me see if I understand you? You told them that they'd go broke winning the battle?”

“Yes sir, that's exactly what I told them. After we got the hell beat out of us though.”

A series of dull explosions cut him off as he was about to speak and together he, MacFarland and Whitehands watched the bridge drop into the black depths of the river and disappear under its swirling currents.

“Well, fact is I don't care how you did it, I'm just glad you did and, believe it or not I'm glad you all didn't have to die to do it---this time.” He pulled out his map and pointed to a series of red triangles on it and laughed bitterly. “But in three more hours that may all change.”

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