

Hickock's Heavy Cavalry

Payday

By: Methuselah

Castle Badajoz
Bastogne Peninsula
Othello

Badajoz had once been a proud Castle Brian in the Star League's heyday. It had served as the defensive heart of the planet Othello, its thick walls and heavy weapon emplacements keeping safe the means by which to wage war against whoever dared to assault the planet. It had been brutally shattered twice. First, during the Amaris rebellion when a tactical nuclear device was detonated to keep it 'safe' from the hands of General Kerensky's armies. Although it was rebuilt following the war it had been broken more completely the second time, its fortress walls torn apart by BattleMechs, its innards charred by unceasing bombing runs. Again it had been rebuilt, though to a standard nowhere near the original in terms of endurance and complexity. Despite this, it still remained one of the best centres for defence upon the planet and among the local star systems. Countless battles had been won by the personnel who served at Badajoz, and yet for all their skill and valour Badajoz was falling for the third time in its history. This time, to a mercenary regiment.

Three Battalion was heavily engaged amongst the once-proud outer walls of Badajoz. Piles of rubble had spilled about the numerous breaches of the wall, providing ample cover for the defending troops to open fire from in a determined attempt to keep the mercenaries out. A storm of fire licked out from the defenders; tracers from heavy-calibre machine guns that chattered incessantly, the intermittent swoosh of rocket-propelled grenades, and above all else the fire of BattleMech-grade weapons raining down on the implacable line of mercenary 'Mechs.

Major Tom Welkes' *Banshee* stumbled as a brace of long-range missiles hit his 'Mech in the right shoulder. Holding back the urge to curse he dropped his targeting reticule over where his thermal imaging display highlighted the source of the attack and cut loose the power of his *Banshee*'s extended-range Particle Projection Cannon. The actinic bolt left a deep white afterimage on the Major's thermal display and tellingly the incoming missile fire slackened off somewhat.

'Bravo company, you're ranging too far forwards. Toggle back two-hundred metres and use your missiles more.'

'*Wilco Major. Bravo is falling back as requested.*' The transmission came through just as dirty and messy, just like the fighting had been. The castle's defenders had fought hard, but they were low on supplies, machines and morale. They were desperate.

'*Major, Charlie here. We've got heavy resistance on the hill.*' The youthful voice of Charlie Company's captain was obscured by the booming reports of autocannon fire. '*Can you spare any backup Sir?*'

'Not as this time Charlie. Proceed with caution, but take that hill on-schedule or its Three Batt's ass on the line. Confirm?'

'*Confirmed sir. It's going to be messy.*'

'Just do the best you can son.' Major Welkes hated being so hard on the kid. He grinned wryly to himself as that errant descriptor popped unbidden into his head. At his age, everyone under thirty was just a kid. 'Central, this is Three Batt. We've got heavy resistance on hill Brubaker. Is any support available?' He doubted very much if any support was available, but then again today might just be his lucky day.

'*No support is available at this time Major.*' A woman's voice answered him, unblemished by weapon fire or battlefield static. Today might not be so lucky after all he mused, small-calibre rounds dancing off the armoured skin of his BattleMech like summer rain.

Captain Ryan Ogonowicz ducked his *Dragon Fire* into the dubious cover of a blasted storage silo before pausing to gather his breath. 'Fox lance I want you to draw their fire while Shotgun reforms fifty metres forward.'

'Roger that Shotgun. Fox lance is hitting them.'

True to their word the intermittent weapons fire picked up with renewed intensity as Fox lance broke cover to fire on the hilltop's defenders. The hill was a key to the castle in more ways than one. Although it afforded only a marginally better firing position it overlooked a number of routes through which the defenders of Badajoz could sally forth in an attempt to break out.

'Shotgun advance! Fox lance go to ground, Hound lance open fire. Keep their heads down as best you can.' Captain Ogonowicz's ungainly 'Mech pivoted and charged out of the ruined silo and down a debris-strewn road before running into a wall of weapon fire.

Boiled armour compound and smoke from missile contrails obscured his forward vision horribly and all around he could hear the sounds of battle. By instinct more than design he kept the *Dragon Fire* on it's feet and charged into what appeared to be the ruin of a nearby building. 'No good sir. They're tearing me apart! I've got to disengage!' A woman's voice on his lance communication band. It was Jess in the company's *Stealth*.

'Get to cover, Jess. Cover us Hound lance! Shotgun, go to ground.' He vented his frustration in a wordless growl of frustration as he checked the damage to his 'Mech. Armour was gone all over the front with patches looking dangerously close to being breached.

'Shotgun, Hound here. We're down to reserves on ballistic ammunition and missiles. When's our support due?' Hound lance consisted of the best part of the company's heavy metal; a *Catapult*, two *Jaegermechs* and an *Archer* belonging to the lance commander. The company had progressed some three hundred metres closer to engaging the hill's defenders thanks to the sterling work of Hound lance *and spending ammunition like it's going out of style* Captain Ogonowicz thought miserably.

'I'll find out Hound. Charlie company resume snap shooting at any sources of incoming fire. Keep off the ballistics unless you have a clear shot.' He toggled his comms over to his direct line to Major Welkes. 'Major, Charlie here. My support lance is almost out of ammo and resistance is increasing. I can't take the objective without either support or significant casualties. I'm sorry Sir.'

'Confirmed Charlie. I can get you one flyby from Archangel and that's it. I'll hand you over to Support command.' The Major sounded exhausted to Captain Ogonowicz's ears, no doubt he sounded the same after so much fighting.

'Belay that, Major.' An authoritative voice interjected. The Colonel's voice, a shocked Ryan surmised. 'Charlie Company I want you to reform as best you can and on my mark charge forwards. Can you do that for me?'

'Sir yes we can. Just give us the mark.'

'I will. You've got two minutes to reform.'

'Charlie Company, Gunslinger Company will be on station in twenty seconds. Are your people in position?' Colonel Hickock kept his voice measured and calm as his *Marauder II* BattleMech strode forwards at close to fifty kilometres an hour. Ahead of him a small village of abbreviated office blocks, warehouses and storage silos lay burning under the caress of weapons fire that had gone astray.

'Confirmed Gunslinger lead, we're ready to move.' The Colonel had to concentrate briefly to make out the transmission buried within the battlefield static. A flick of his wrist toggled his communications over to the command company frequency with practiced ease.

'Gunslinger Company go weapons free and open fire on the hill's defending forces.' The command company, twelve Heavy and Assault weight BattleMechs spread out in line abreast signalled back their affirmative responses with great economy of speech, then they opened fire. The first huge barrage smashed into the low fortifications upon the hill and liberally washed them with enough firepower to crack a *Union* class DropShip like a hard-boiled egg.

The second came down from the skies as four heavy aerospace fighters dropped out of the clouds and over the small fortified camp upon the hill. In their wake followed a tidal wave of explosions as they dropped thousand pound bombs on the militia positions.

'Gunslinger Company, advance line abreast. Charlie Company, follow in our wake. Central, Gunslinger lead is engaging the enemy.'

The back-canted legs of his *Marauder II* powered colonel Logan Hickock forwards into the dispirited defenders of Hill Brubaker. Where their morale had begun to falter from the sudden, unexpected and overwhelming influx of hostile fire, the sight of two full companies of BattleMechs all but shattered it.

To each side Logan could hear the thunderous ripples of BattleMech-grade weapons being let loose and joined in with his own extended range Particle Projection Cannons. The first burnt a long glassy scar into the smouldering soil of the hilltop; the second connected with an armoured personnel carrier and bored a huge molten hole through it at an awkward angle, almost ripping the vehicle in half.

Then it was the turn of his Luxor Ballistic-X autocannons to add to the overwhelming press of firepower that the company exerted, one shredding the side of a building, the second tearing apart a small missile nest and ripping apart the infantrymen crewing the man-portable launchers.

'Central, this is Thornton from Two Batt. Fire from the Castle has slackened off considerably, they've left some rearguards but the bulk of the unit seems to be pulling out.' Colonel Hickock pulled his attention away from the targeting reticule and opened communications to the command company.

'Gunslingers engage at maximum speed, Charlies follow suit; we need to take this hill quickly. The militia are trying to disengage.' He delivered his orders quickly, professionally and calmly in contrast to the rising tide of bile in his guts. Fighting the cold sweat and clammy palms that rose up from nowhere he focused his mind in the here-and-now.

It was the impact of a basketball-sized ball of metal hitting his BattleMech at supersonic speed that brought him back into the present as training and latent survival instinct took hold. Inside the cockpit Logan was thrown against his five-point restraining harness with palpable force, but with the sudden flush of adrenaline that flooded his brain he barely noticed it. He was concentrating on the *Atlas* that had stepped forth to lead the hill's defenders in a counter charge.

Captain Kim Yancey thrust her feet down hard on the throttle pedals of her AS7-K *Atlas* and set the massive BattleMech into a lumbering run down the hill towards the veritable meat grinder of mercenary BattleMechs that threatened to overwhelm her position. A conventional victory was impossible against such a weight of machines, all she and her unit needed to do to win was delay them. A few minutes for the rest of the regiment to escape the death trap that Castle Badajoz had turned into.

The *Marauder II* that she'd sighted hanging back a little from the charge quickly regained its balance and turned to face her head on with its arms outstretched and drawing a bead upon her.

She let off a snap shot with the extended-range large laser mounted on her mount's left arm and twisted the 'Mech's torso to the right sharply before even noticing that her snap shot had caught the *Marauder II* above the cockpit. Her target seemed entirely unaffected by the close hit, opening fire with an erPPC and gouging armour compound from her *Atlas*'s weakened left leg; burning through some of the myomer bundles covering the shin.

At that point, in the midst of battle and with three BattleMechs painting her *Atlas* with targeting lasers, physics took over. Her mighty war machine, one of the Kings of the battlefield, fell flat on its face into the tarmac underneath its feet as its leg momentarily gave way. Lasers coruscated the air where her 'Mech had almost been and an observer would have been forgiven for thinking that luck was on her side that day.

A judiciously placed shotgun round from one of the *Marauder II*'s LB-X autocannons ripped open the armour across her BattleMech's broad back and left her needing to regain her feet with all haste before a second wave of fire took advantage of this weakness. A militia *Demon* bought her the time to regain her feet, pulling up alongside her and drawing incoming fire like a lodestone. It seemed to

collapse in on itself just as Captain Yancey brought her 'Mech to it's feet and opened up on the *verdamnt Marauder II* with a ripple of long-range missiles that peppered the mercenary with small fiery explosions. Battling her urge to concentrate everything she had on her primary aggressor she forced her 'Mech into reverse and turned to open fire on a mercenary *JaegerMech* which had dared to open fire on her with it's small-bore autocannons. It's right-hand torso caved in under the hammer blow of a gauss round, then the 'Mech itself fell lifeless as a blast from one of the *Atlas*'s large lasers found the gaping wound and smashed through it and into the target's gyroscope housing.

Her victory was short-lived; her *Atlas* staggered again as a pair of extended-range PPCs slugged deep trenches into the armour composite upon its chest and hip, ruining the launch ports of her missile launcher. 'Yancey to Golf Company, am taking heavy fire – can anyone assist?'

She took the chance to glance around quickly as her 'Mech lumbered towards cover. All around her lay the butchered corpses of men and women under her command, funeral pyres rising from the burning 'Mechs her friends had piloted into battle. This had long since ceased being a battle, it had become a slaughter.

Her friends were dead, and now she was alone. Outnumbered. Outgunned.

Captain Ogonowicz back-pedalled his *Dragon Fire* with extreme haste as a militia *Atlas* burst through a warehouse wall in front of him. 'Charlie lead is engaging a militia *Atlas*! Any nearby units disengage and lend support!'

In a moment of panic he dropped the targeting reticule over the monstrously proportioned assault-weight BattleMech and triggered his gauss rifle off at less than twenty metres. The metal slug failed to make any discernable impact, bouncing off the right glacis plate of the *Atlas* at an awkward angle. 'C'mon Charlies! Support me!'

His *Dragon Fire* was shoved back brutally by a combination of large laser blasts and the impact force of one hundred tonnes moving downhill at almost sixty kilometres per hour. Wrapped in the clumsy embrace of the *Atlas*, the two 'Mechs tumbled awkwardly to the ground and slid backwards for an easy ten metres, ripping up the asphalt road surface as they went.

Ryan all but panicked as he regained his senses. The *Atlas* was still on top of his 'Mech, chopping with open hands at the elongated back of his low-profiled BattleMech. Heavy, metallic clangs resounded through the cockpit with the sound of tuneless church bells as the armour plates above him were buckled and smashed by titanic blows. With no options, and no chance of climbing from underneath the monster, Ryan sucked down a deep breath and took the only chance he had.

His open hand slapped down onto the alpha-strike button and set off the sum total of weapons mounted upon his BattleMech. His ears felt as though stuffed with as his weapons fired at point blank range, savaging the *Atlas* atop him and halting the attempt to dig the spine out of his 'Mech. His fusion engine spiked momentarily to provide the weapons with the momentous power demands they made, making itself felt with a wave of heat that caused Ryan's skin to suddenly bathe itself in sweat and pressed down upon him much like the *Atlas* was doing to his 'Mech.

'Hold on Captain. I'm here.' From the unobscured side window he caught sight of a thick back-canted leg lashing out to deliver a swift kick to the side torso of the *Atlas*, rocking it off of Ryan and his brutalised BattleMech. Above him, long tongues of fire from autocannon muzzles and the actinic flash of PPCs swept over and into the *Atlas* to render it out-of-action, smoking, and dead.

'Everything ok in there?' It was the Colonel and his *Marauder II* that had saved him.

'Yeah... thanks Colonel. Not their lucky day was it?'

He smiled with a small touch of pride as he heard his commanding officer chuckle over the comm. 'I guess not, Captain.' The Colonel replied with good humour as his Assault weight *Marauder II* turned around and stalked off to reform with the rest of the command company.

'Major, Goose lance is pinned down by a mixed armour lance and infantry firing from hardened emplacements. We need a hit-and-fade from Hen lance quickly before they bring up reinforcements.'

Inside the castle walls the labyrinthine layout of old and new buildings, warehouses, partially buried hangars and defensive emplacements made for a bitter close-quarters battle.

'Hen lance is moving on your position, Goose. Wolf lance is circling around to cut off their retreat.' Major Lockheart signalled to the rest of his personal lance to keep pace with him after passing his orders across to Hen lance. Maintaining the line of battle that had existed before Three Battalion had entered the castle would prove not just difficult but also dangerous in such cramped confines, so the Major had settled for a loose but coherent advance. One Batt and Three Batt were circling around the castle to hold the militia's forthcoming breakout attempt, while Two Batt carried out the regiment's dirty work.

'Goose lance is engaging. Stand by.'

The roar of autocannon fire, followed by the dull explosions of long-range missiles told Flint all he needed to know. 'Wolf lance, take up positions at the cross-roads.' Nudging his *Devastator* into the courtyard of a squat building barely taller than his BattleMech, he tightened his grip upon the control sticks of his massive ride and flicked his target tracking system to active mode.

'Hen lance has pushed them back. I think they're trying to lure us into something...'

'Roger that Hen. Follow them, but keep your eyes open.'

'Confirmed. They should be under your guns any minute now.'

And they were. Led by two *Brutus* assault tanks the small column roared towards them for a hundred metres before realising that the wolf was no longer behind them, it was in front of them, and it was hungry.

Before it had even fired a shot one of the militia tanks was consumed by barrage of fire from three 'Mechs. The second took a snap shot before attempting to flee down an intersection just too narrow for it and was torn to pieces moments later, jammed head-first into its intended escape route. Staring certain death in the face, the remaining mix of armoured personnel carriers and light armour disengaged their engines and popped their hatches as a display of surrender.

Major Lockheart toggled his external speaker and strode his *Devastator* forwards into the middle of the intersection. 'Soldiers of the Othello Planetary Defence Force. Dismount from your vehicles and lay your weapons upon the ground. You are now prisoners of Hickock's Heavy Cavalry and shall be treated as prisoners of war under the Ares Conventions.'

He paused for a moment to give them a chance to either exit their vehicles, and when after twenty seconds none had done so, he moved his finger over to toggle his loudspeaker.

'Oh shit Major! I've got armoured infantry on me!'

'Me too! They're all over me!'

'Goddamnit! Drop and roll, people, you know the drill.' Their voices were those of panicked men, and with good reason. Armoured infantry could withstand a hit from most BattleMech grade weapons and possessed equipment that allowed them to rip armour plating off to wreak havoc on the delicate internal systems of a BattleMech. Or worse, to crack open a cockpit.

As two of the four BattleMechs in his lance rolled about on the ground he stepped his own machine closer to them and set about picking off the overgrown ticks with paired medium lasers.

'Sir.' The voice of his one unengaged MechWarrior interrupted his delicate task. *'The prisoners are getting out of their vehicles. They're carrying out a lot of ordinance with them. Looks like...inferno SRMs! Infernos!'*

The relatively quiet street was filled with the roar of two-dozen short-range missiles being fired. Missiles with warheads containing a sticky propellant that burnt with an incredible heat. Missiles that could cook a MechWarrior alive in his BattleMech.

The impact of those warheads, and the whooshing roar of their ignition was followed by Wolf lance's *Gallowglas* scouring the street with its entire complement of lasers to leave nothing more than liquid asphalt and scorched vehicles behind.

'Christ sir, my cockpit shield's on fire, my heat sinks are redlining, I'm going to eject!'

'Belay that, MechWarrior!' Major Lockheart bellowed over his comms system, marching his 'Mech up to the thrashing, burning form of the *Gallowglas*. Had the stricken MechWarrior ejected, he would have been burnt to death before his ejection seat had achieved enough height to deploy its parachute. 'Loxely, Sheldon, are you ok now?'

'I'm ok sir. I'm getting the last one off of Loxely now.'

'Good. Yates, hold still or I'm going to crack your cockpit. I'm going to try and wipe the worst off of your cockpit shield.' Gently, he manipulated the muzzle-ended arms of his 'Mech to wipe the blazing jelly from the cockpit shield of his subordinate.

'Uh, sir.'

'Yes Loxely?'

'Sir, your back's on fire.'

Fort Celine
Near New Valencia
Othello

Colonel Hickock exited the *Hawk Moth* VTOL smoothly, brushing down his dress uniform with practiced hands as he took in the surroundings. Since the surrender of the militia almost a week ago, the 2nd New Ivaarsen Chausers had made planet fall and claimed the now-defunct militia base outside of Othello's capital city.

Today was to be the last day of their contract with Duke Leto Ivaarsen. With the planet now in control of forces loyal to Prince Victor, all that remained was the final hand-over of command to the newly arrived Chausers. In less than twenty-four hours he expected to aboard one of the Heavy Cavalry's DropShips and bound for Outreach soon afterwards.

Now, however, was time for business. A smartly dressed young man in the dark blue of a New Ivaarsen Chausers dress uniform approached him briskly, eyes barely flickering to the forked lightning scar that dominated the right side of the Colonel's face. 'Colonel Hickock?' The young Chauser asked brightly. Upon the Colonel's nod, he continued. 'If you'll follow me Lieutenant General Stephenson-Voss is waiting in the command post.'

They exchanged no further words as they crossed the small courtyard to an unimpressive block of a building with a pair of rifle bearing guards stood outside underneath a flag that flying the regimental insignia. The guards drew themselves up at the sight of two officers, saluting as they entered the building.

Although blunt and uninspiring from the outside, inside the building it was cool, clean and well lit instead of the substandard construction it's exterior purported it to be. 'Almost there now Colonel. If you take the first door on your left down this corridor you'll be at the Lieutenant General's office.'

'Thank you.' Logan Hickock replied as his guide made an abbreviated salute and returned to whatever duties he had been assigned. He found the door in under a minute, despite the blooming pain in his right leg and the limp it often threw into his walk when he least expected it. No matter, he thought to himself as he reached to knock at the door. Aside from the time he acquired it, it had never been a harbinger of tragedy.

'Come in.' A woman's voice sounded from behind the chipboard door. And so he entered the office of the commanding officer of a regiment nominally sworn to Prince Victor Davion. It was a sparsely furnished office with a window view over the fort's parade ground. Behind an unimposing desk, Lieutenant General Winona Stephenson-Voss sat behind a small pile of hardcopy. An equally unimpressive woman, she wore her chestnut hair in a severe military braid, drawing her skin tight over her face and alleviating the deep crows feet at either side of her eyes. 'Take a seat Colonel, I'll be with you in just a moment. I just have to put the finishing touches to this schedule.'

Holding back a sigh of relief as he took the weight off of his right leg, Colonel Logan Hickock sat down onto a utilitarian grey office chair. 'Your people did a very thorough job, Colonel. Of the militia's materiel as of eight weeks ago, only forty percent is still operational. It'll be three months before I can get my regiment off-planet and back into the war.'

'Lieutenant General. My regiment was contracted to neutralize the planetary defence force. If you wanted them neutralized *and* with a certain percentage of equipment remaining, I would have had to charge a higher rate.' It was hard to keep an even tone to his voice as his regiment was slandered in front of him, but he managed it. Though only just.

‘Well, I won’t begin to mention the amount of collateral damage your people inflicted in taking Castle Badajoz. As you said, your people fulfilled their contract admirably. It must be nice to only have to worry about payday and nothing else.’

‘Speaking of pay, Lieutenant General, may I assume that the money has been transferred into the regimental account?’

‘I signed the order this morning. Thirty million C-bills is pretty good money for six weeks work. I just hope your people are off the planet inside twenty-four hours. I’d hate to have to declared you a hostile military force inside Federated Commonwealth space.’ She levelled her eyes at him like gauss rifle barrels.

‘Have a nice day Lieutenant General. I know I will. After all, thirty million C-bills is a decent payday by anyone’s standards.’ Standing and turning in one smooth motion, he made his way out of the suddenly cramped office and back out into the corridor. As with far too many line officers he’d met, the Lieutenant General was apparently suffering a serious case of merc envy. His regiment had done the job right down to the smallest detail. No sub clause unfulfilled, no objective unachieved. But then, that was what a crack regiment did. It concentrated on the payday.