

Introduction and Disclaimer

I neither create nor own BattleTech and its related universe. I've never worked for FASA, and have no relations whatsoever with the BattleTech universe other than being a fan.

This is my first BattleTech story, so any critique is welcome. As you may notice it's a bit different than other stories. This story is about special operations forces combat, so if you're expecting Assault Mechs slugging against each other with super-destructive weapons and huge amounts of collateral damage, I'm sorry but this story is not for you. On the other hand, if you want to get a glimpse of SOF action in the Inner-Sphere, then hopefully you'll enjoy this story.

Also, I tried to keep the action as 'realistic' as possible, drawing lessons from what I know about current modern infantry combat. There will be no super-human feats, no single-trooper-against-the-world action. I draw my influences from contemporary military reading, especially a book I just finished 'Masters of Chaos'.

The story will contain mature language and situations as well as graphic combat descriptions. War is ugly business, and I won't hide the ugliness. People will die, sometimes horribly. If you feel that this is not for you, or you are sensitive to such issues, please do not read my story.

For the rest of you, thank you for taking the time to read this. I await your feedback. Enjoy the story!

WhiteStone

“Opening Shot” (Chapter 1)

by WarPorcus

Prologue.

The team was hidden on the small ridge. The irregular feature of the terrain, the tall grass, and the fact that the team wore active camouflage uniforms meant that no one within 1.5 meters could detect them. They had been there for more than eight hours. One member of the team was behind and slightly above the other. He had an assault weapon by his side. It was a slug-thrower. He didn't like energy weapons much. The fire signature of a laser or pulse laser weapon acted like a tracer. The people you shoot at can easily tell where you are. The slug-thrower, however, was state of the art. It had a built-in sight that connects to the user's helmet, projecting an aiming reticule on the faceplate. The user can zoom in using the reticule as a reference point. The rifle was being left alone at the moment. The team member's attention was focused on the large image magnifier he was using. The magnifier's night-sight feature was on, sweeping the camp below in a very slow arc, as if the user did not want to miss a single tiny detail.

The other member of the team was also prone. His eye was pressed firmly on the sight of the portable gauss rifle he had. Like his observer, he did not move, although the almost opaque faceplate of his helmet would allow him to safely sip water from a tube extending in every once in a while.

“Target,” the observer announced quietly. The shooter felt his pulse quickened for a fraction of a second, prompting him to quickly adjust his breathing to allow his body to calm down. The observer started rattling off target information, his voice clear and crisp in the intra-team radio that linked them together. “Target 11 o'clock. Camouflage pants, no shirt, shotgun on his back. Range 2,500. Wind Northwest 3 knots.” The shooter had to smile a little. Both he and his observer were relatively new on the portable gauss. They were trained to shoot precision slug-throwers, for which such accurate information on range and wind conditions were necessary for a successful shot. A gauss rifle slug was heavy enough, and fast enough, to have a flat trajectory over distances far exceeding those of slug throwers. It was also almost unaffected by the wind, unless it had traveled far enough to start losing power. ‘Far enough’ for a gauss rifle, however, could be several kilometers. He placed the crosshairs of his sight on the man's head. With a slug-

thrower, he would not risk such a shot on a target 2,500 meters away. The portable gauss made such shots possible.

The high-powered sight meant that he could see his target clearly. A man in his 40s, with graying hair and a pronounced beer belly. He had a cigarette on his mouth and a shotgun slung on his back. The shooter did not feel a thing. The target had ceased being a human being, and turned into, well, a target. "I've got him," he muttered quietly on his radio. He had a perfect shot. He didn't fire, however, until his observer cleared him to do so. The observer was sweeping his magnifier left and right, ensuring the gauss rifle's fire signature would not be detected. They planned to survive the mission, and thus stealth was paramount. "I have the shot," the shooter reiterated softly.

The observer stayed silent. He focused on his task, sweeping slowly from side to side, noticing everything. After the fifth such sweep he was satisfied. "Take the shot," he said to the shooter. The shooter heard his observer clear him. His pulse was steady, his breathing controlled. He didn't feel the wind. He didn't feel the heat of the sun beating down on him. He didn't feel the prickly itch of his sweat soaked body. Both of his eyes were open, sighting with his right on the electro-optical sight affixed on the weapon. The sight provided him with all the necessary targeting data, but he ignored them all. His existence pinpointed to a single, perfect, shot.

Without a conscious thought, he began to time his shot with his breathing. Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale . . . he held his breath at the bottom of his exhale. His finger tightened on the trigger slowly and deliberately. The pull was gentle but continuous, the shooter not wanting to spoil his aim. He felt the trigger starting to give way. He kept pulling gently . . . gently . . . the weapon fired. The portable gauss rifle made a sharp, metallic noise as it fired. There was slight electric discharge, bluish and quick, as the powerful electromagnetic coils fired, but no more signatures afterward. No more at the weapon end, that is. The observer saw the target's head seeming to implode for a moment, as the specially designed soft slug traveling at supersonic speed impacted and instantly deformed on impact. The next instant the head disappeared altogether in a red mist and the body fell to the ground. A sharp crack, like a whip, was the only noise that marked the passage of the slug, but none of the soldiers milling around at the tents surrounding noticed it. Not until a young soldier happened to glance at the target, dropped his canteen, and raised an alarm. All hell broke loose at the camp with men running back and forth, fetching weapons and making frantic radio calls.

The team, however, was on the move. Right after the impact was confirmed by the observer, they immediately began sterilizing their area, a meticulous but straightforward process of making sure they left nothing behind. Then the shooter packed up his weapon, dismantling it quickly, and stuffing all the parts into a specially made carrier bag. He unclipped the silenced submachine gun from his back, and covered the observer as he quickly, but carefully, packed his big image magnifier into its case. The case then went into his rucksack, and after picking up his suppressed assault rifle, he, too, was ready.

The team began their escape and evasion. They moved laterally along the ridges, staying under the peak to avoid being silhouetted against the sky, making good use of the contour and vegetation to avoid detection. They moved tactically, with one member moving and the other covering. They could see vehicles and soldiers moving at the camp below, but they were not concerned. They were not spotted yet, and will likely to remain hidden, at such ranges, from any immediate observation. The only risk would be if the soldiers scrambled VTOLs after them, but that risk was minimal, as the nearest hostile VTOL base was well over 250 kilometers away.

The men felt their muscles burn. Eight hours of total stillness, exploded into vigorous movement over rough terrain. They ignored their screaming muscles though, and pushed on. They had to make their LZ in time for the extraction VTOL. Failure to do so would mean that their command would have to send VTOLs over the E&E route they planned earlier, an operation that was highly dangerous for both the team and the VTOLs.

The rocky plain of the LZ appeared in the distance. The men's spirits soared, but in no way did they slack their drill. Move, cover, move, cover. They made the distance in a constant pace, never letting up, never dropping their guard. When they reached the edge of the tree line they stopped, and after locating a concealed depression, then hunkered down. The spotter covered the way they came as the shooter took out a small beacon from his vest. He flipped open the cover on the activation button, and pressed it. They had two sets of radio, both secure with one having surface to orbit capability. They were carried for emergencies, however, with the extraction of this mission already planned to near perfection. After the beacon was activated the team settled to wait. The beacon's signal is heavily encrypted, but with the right equipment, skill, and patience, they could still be tracked. The team never dropped their vigil. Between the two of them, they managed to cover all 360 degrees of their surrounding.

Thirty minutes passed before they heard the rhythmic sound of a VTOL's rotor blades. The shooter looked expectantly south, his eyes trained above the tree line. Finally he saw their ride. The large, black VTOL was barely visible in the receding light of dusk. The shooter reached into a pouch on his vest and pulled out a smoke grenade. The smoke would both inform the pilot where they were and gave him an indication of wind direction. He pulled the pin, released the spoon, and hurled the grenade as far as he could towards the clearing. The grenade emitted yellow smoke immediately as it tumbled towards the ground.

"Juniper Frost this is Long Shot," the observer called into his radio. "Long Shot, Juniper Frost. Authenticate," the VTOL pilot responded. The request of authentication was a necessity to inform the pilot whether the men he was picking up were in the clear, or was under duress and were forced to try to lure him down.

"Juniper Frost, Long Shot authentication is beta-six-four-sierra-bravo-seven-charlie, acknowledge," the observer replied. The VTOL pilot breathed a sigh of relief. The code was clear. "Juniper Frost copies Long Shot. Yellow smoke is you?"

"Roger that. Yellow smoke is us, Frost out," the observer packed up his radio and waited until the VTOL landed. As soon as the big helicopter touched the ground, the team bolted from their spot. They ran fast towards the waiting helo and practically jumped in. The pilot didn't wait for his crew chief in the back to strap the men in before taking off. Then men stowed their gear and strapped in themselves. For the first time in a couple of days they allowed themselves to be completely relaxed. They felt the strain draining and fatigue setting in. The shooter looked over his partner and smiled. "Tough couple of days." They had been a team for years. Their experiences bonded them closer than brothers.

"Tell me about it," the observer chuckled. "I can't wait 'till we get back on base. A good shower and sleep is all I need," he continued.

The shooter looked down and smiled to himself. "Yeah, sounds good. Hopefully that little show we pulled is enough to close the contract. I don't see these yokels being a threat after their brain is gone."

The crew chief walked over to the team. "You guys look like you could use these," he handed the team a couple of cans. The sniper looked at the cans in delight, "Hey! Beer! That's nice of you!" He popped the can open and took a big gulp. "How'd it go?" The crew chief asked.

The observer answered for his shooter, "We got him. It's all good now." The crew chief stood and smiled. "Good. The boss will be happy. Welcome home gentlemen."

Harlech
Planet Outreach
1300hrs 25 March 3065

For thousands of years, one of the main tenets of the service industry had been to make sure that contracts were fulfilled to the satisfaction of both parties. The clients hiring a service provider, for instance, would hate to see their money wasted on results that were less than they expect. Outreach's economy relied on the services provided by the mercenary companies using it as base, and thus enforced the judgments of the Mercenary Review and Bonding Commission to the letter.

Every Private Military Company wishing to claim payment for services it rendered must appear before the Commission to have their claims verified. The Commission then will contact the client to ascertain the terms of the contract and the successful conclusion of that contract before approving the PMC's money to be paid. The Wolf's Dragoons' watchful eyes made sure that violent disputes were rare to say the least.

That day a man appeared before the Commission to claim his company's payment. The man was tall and heavily built. His dark skin gleamed in the low lights of the chamber, accentuated by his graying hair. The man's fatherly face bore an easy, infectious, smile.

"As you can see from these transcripts, and as you have ascertained from your communications to my client, our mission was concluded satisfactorily. The details of the operations had all been downloaded to your datapads for your private review. I think, however, we can all conclude that my company has fulfilled its contractual obligations and thus deserving of our payment." The man spoke confidently to the members of the board.

"Of course, Colonel Stone," the Wolf Dragoons representative answered. It was the Dragoon's term to sit in the Commission. The other representatives were from the Kell Hounds and, as always, ComStar. "The client confirmed it, and will authorize the transfer of the C-bills, minus the 5% charge, of course, immediately. You should have it in your company's account later today."

“Colonel Stone,” the ComStar representative spoke suddenly.

“Yes, Precentor?”

“There is, however, the matter of your transport to the planet. A DropShip captain filed a complaint against you and your men, citing incidents of...’coercion’. Would you care to shed light on the matter?”

“Precentor, I did what I had to in order to fulfill the contract given to me. That DropShip captain was...less than cooperative” – at this the Kell Hounds representative snorted in amusement – “...and I had to talk some sense into her. That’s all. No permanent damage.”

“No permanent damage, Colonel? What about non permanent ones then?”

The Colonel smiled. This time he directed his comments on the two soldiers sitting on either side of the Precentor. “I believe that depends on how...sensitive the good Captain was, sir. They don’t make ‘em like they used to these days.”

The Wolf Dragoons representative couldn’t suppress his guffaw, to the irritation of the Precentor. The Kell Hound, however, grinned openly. “I believe the Colonel outlined his case well enough. Don’t you agree gentlemen?”

The Dragoons’ man picked it up immediately. “Indeed he did. Wouldn’t you say so, Precentor?”

Precentor Laurence Athorn didn’t really appreciate the joke. A bureaucrat, all he saw was that his immediate future would be occupied by forms, letters, and vidcalls. When ComStar had monopoly over PMC operations, the Colonel would not have gotten away with what he did. Now, the majority of the Commission seemed intent on letting the Colonel do just that. He sighed, knowing that he just had to suck it up. “Very well Colonel. This hearing is over. Please consult our clerk to arrange for the funds transfer. In the mean time, please keep such incidents to a minimum, if you would.”

“That I will, Precentor,” the Colonel smiled. “That I will.”

A man wearing an olive drab jumpsuit waited at a sidewalk café across the street from the Commission building. His jumpsuit top was rolled down to his waist with the sleeves tied around his waist, revealing a t-shirt of similar color. He had on a pair of small, square sunglasses on and was contently sipping his coffee, watching the front entrance of the building. It was a nice day on

Outreach, but then again the planet was not known for its extreme weather. Like most everyone else on the planet, the man was a contractor.

Harlech was always busy. The mercenary central of the Inner Sphere, the city bustles with contractors either looking for work, transiting, or on R&R after a contract. Adding to the crowd were representatives from all House militaries, multi-world corporations, or other parties looking to hire a group of mercenaries to undertake one mission or another. The third most prevalent group on the planet was the arms merchants. Everything from Assault-class BattleMechs down to the most innovative and modern individual weapons and gear could be found in the city. This group was also as diverse as the two previous ones. They ranged from broke mercenaries trying to sell whatever weapon they could spare to get off-planet or pay-off debts or any other reasons, to booths of the largest, most well-known weapons manufacturers in the Inner Sphere. To the three main groups one could add mechanics, ships' captains, MechWarriors without rides, Aerojocks, and everything else that came to mind.

The man sitting at the café was watching the crowd. He was looking for the wrong look, the wrong gestures. A flicker of the eye, someone who paused to do something ordinary – like retying the laces of a boot – too long. His vigil, however, was because of habit, if anything else. Although mercenaries could be a rowdy crowd, the Dragoon's strict law against carrying side-arms in public – unless especially licensed by local Dragoon security forces – as well as their close watch of the goings on of the city meant that rowdiness generally stayed at acceptable levels.

As the Colonel stepped out of the Commission, he stood and walked over. “Judging by the look on your face, I'd say we got the C-bills Bob.” He spoke easily to his friend.

“Yeah, we pulled in quite a bit. The contract was honored.”

“Just like that, huh?” The man was right to be skeptical. ComStar officials had been more and more tightfisted with money lately.

“Well, the Precentor tried something. I had that nicely controlled, though. It was nice to have a Kell Hound and a Dragoon to sit there as well.”

“I knew they'd try something. What's going on anyway? ComStar ran out of cash or something?”

“What, with monopoly over HPG generators? I don't think so. They have more money than they could possibly spend. It's probably just some bureaucrat getting greedy.”

“Humph. Wouldn’t put it past them. Anyway, I heard something that might interest you.”

“What’s that?” The Colonel was instantly intrigued. Jonas Green was his XO, and they went back a long way. The Colonel first met him when he was a young officer in the Federated Commonwealth Foxes Five group, while Jonas led a star of elite infantrymen for the Dragoons. They worked together on several missions and developed a deep respect towards each other, a respect that transformed into the fast friendship that had endured the years. When the Colonel left the service and started his new venture, his first choice of command was Jonas, who came over with his team and became the core of the company. In the years they knew each other, the Colonel found that Jonas had an excellent nose for good information. If he found something interesting, it was always worth listening to.

“I heard through the grapevine that four former members of DEST are in town.” DEST was the Draconis Combine’s elite strike team. “I also heard they are looking for work.”

“That’s rare. I’ve never met a DEST operator working in the private sector before, let alone four. Doesn’t that make them *ronin*?” The Draconis Combine military was constructed roughly along the lines of ancient Japanese samurai warriors. Although Combine mercenary MechWarriors were a common sight in the Inner Sphere, for a DEST operator, who was the *crème de la crème* of the DCMS, to become mercenaries, essentially *ronin* – masterless warriors – was nearly unheard of. DEST operators were unflinchingly, and fanatically, loyal to the Combine. They saw themselves as the true descendants of the samurai, and thus would serve the combine to the death.

“More importantly,” the Colonel continued, “we need to find out what they did. Were they disgraced? Criminals of some sort? We don’t need those kind of people, Sharky.” Sharky was Jonas Green’s nickname from his time in the Dragoons. The word came from ‘Land-Shark’, a nickname the infantry gave to snipers.

“I don’t know. All I heard was that they’re in town. We could use them for Second Group, you know.”

“Not if they’re up to no good. I don’t want to take in fugitives and the like. Could you find out about them? Maybe some details of their discharge?”

“I’ll see if I can find out. Where are we heading now? The Hiring Hall?”

“Nah. I think I’m gonna go get some chow. C’mon, its on me.”

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