

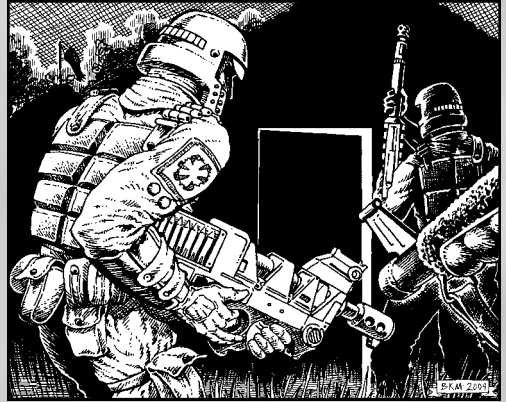
BATTLECORPS

THE PIRATE HUNT

By Dan C. Duval

Mica V
Mica Majority
8 April 3067

MacGraw leaned back in his harness, trying to relax as the airstream rattled and shook the lander. He fingered the new Guardian's pip on his collar and mused that these were not the first set of those particular pips he had worn, not even the first set he had been promoted into. That first set was just before those pirate bastards took out New Dallas. Before they killed Andrea and the kids.



They had not killed him yet, though they tried. He would hunt them down and burn them out, stump and root.

And if his highness Captain Aperleau—riding in the other *Mark VII* landing craft—had his way, MacGraw would be giving these pips up soon, too.

When raiding a pirate base, it would be nice to have more than two small landers, with only eight men in each, but a planet was a very big place and one battalion of the Borderers spread very thinly over it. According to the briefing, a flight of *Seydlitzes* from the Third would be on a five-minute call, if they were needed.

Recon images showed six barns, lined up eave-to-eave, with nothing else around them, a very suspicious layout for a farm or dairy. Especially when the end barn was six times the length of the others, and tall enough to hide a DropShip inside. The planned landing zone was practically on top of the barns

He glanced down the double row of men in the lander cabin, facing each other, four on each side. Forest camo and tiger facepaint. Weapons locked in their racks. Veterans all.

The Outworlds Alliance suffered from pirate raids for decades, for centuries, most quick hit-and-run attacks taking food and weapons. But the last few years the raids had become larger and started getting close to the factories the Alliance depended upon

to supply the regiments, or to the warehouses where spare parts and ammunition were stored. At least, whatever military supplies that President Avellar had not sold for cash.

MacGraw had survived such a raid himself, before he'd even started in school.



Along with the other boys in the family, MacGraw slept in a blanket on the floor, while his mother slept in one bed, and his five sisters shared the other two. The tiny room they lived in made for cramped sleeping but at least it was warm in the winter. He remembered that they used to have rats, but the dumb ones ended up in the pot and the smart ones went somewhere else.

He awoke to the sounds of shouting outside, of crashes, the splintering of wood. And screams. High-pitched screams of women. Higher-pitched screams of agony. All of the kids sat up where they were, most blinking their eyes from sleepiness, while some of the younger ones started to snifle.

Mother leapt out of her bed and fell to her knees next to it, scrambling around underneath the mattress.



"Prepare for landing," crackled over his headset and MacGraw lifted up the tactical display tied to his lapel. A colored circle showed the world, Mica V, with a red cross in the middle of the circle and a tiny green dot almost on top of it.

They were in luck. The plan was for all of the teams to land at their scattered targets simultaneously. The shaded line of the terminator bisected the red cross in the middle of the display. His team would arrive right at local dawn. The tactically perfect time to arrive.

He thumbed one of the buttons on the unit and zoomed the picture in, until he had a schematic of the area around the barns. In this view, the barns were just rectangles of fine lines, all in a row, with that one long one reaching about halfway across the height of the display. Even though they were about to land, none of the green dots signifying friendly troops were on the screen yet.

When the landers touched down, the dots would just suddenly appear on the display.

Given any luck, any people around those barns would think the same, that the Borderers just suddenly appeared.

The speakers crackled again. "Landing jets, two seconds."

"Rig it up, children!" he roared.

He could have saved his breath: these were veterans. They had not loosened their harnesses since they left the DropShip. None of them had chambered rounds and the two heavy-weapons men with their Gauss SMGs had not charged their weapons.

And those Gauss SMGs. Each fire team was organized around a single heavy weapon, usually a light or medium machine gun, backed up with riflemen. Two weeks before, however, some tech twonks showed up with four of these things. Brand new and right off the crate, since they were still wrapped in plastic.

Besides the heavy round they fired, the Gauss gunner could carry almost twice the number of rounds of a regular machine gunner: machine gun rounds consisted of bullet, cartridge, and propellant, while the Gauss rounds were just the 4mm ferro-nickel bullets. The Gauss SMGs power packs could be recharged from any vehicle or aerospace craft, as long as an adapter was available. With the power packs, the Gauss gunner carried more overall weight, but the double load of rounds did not add any bulk.

The downside, of course, was recharging the power packs. Since they had no spare power packs, they could not carry extras. One load of rounds and the gunner had to return to his support craft to get a recharge and a new ammo load.

But for close-in, heavy support, the Gauss was sweet, since the barrel did not overheat. The gunner could spray bursts as fast as he could swap magazines and pull the trigger.

MacGraw glanced at his own weapon, a smoothbore autoloading shotgun with a big cylindrical magazine hanging under it. Another surprise present brought in by the twonks. Thirty 13mm low-velocity rounds. Perfect for close-in work. And even if they did not penetrate body armor, the energy of the round might well knock an enemy down. Only semi-automatic, but after touching off an entire magazine on the range, his shoulder would not have appreciated a fully automatic weapon.

He would have preferred something that did not require him to keep track of how many rounds he had fired, but then these kinetic rounds would not reflect off a bright piece of metal and burn down the gunner, like a laser rifle might do.

Over his ten years in the Line, he'd never seen so many new weapons all at once.

Not that he was complaining about getting new equipment for a change. Maybe the rumors of Clan Snow Raven involvement with the Alliance were not rumors after all.

The lander made a sudden looping swing and, when the fusion drives lit off with an overwhelming roar, that familiar giant hand pressed MacGraw into his harness and compressed his spine until his breathing stopped and his vision narrowed to a tiny tunnel. Seven hundred klicks per hour to zero in ten seconds. Then the bottom dropped out and the lander hit with a thud, rocking slightly for a few moments.

Not bad. It didn't feel like the pilot dropped them more than about three meters that time.

He snatched at his tactical again. Two groups of green dots. One group in front of the big barn, the other at the other end of the line of barns. He hoped the pilots got it right: his group was supposed to hit the big barn. Maybe they even had the lander pointed the right way.

He slapped at the harness release in the middle of his chest and the straps popped from the buckle and retracted into the seat. He grabbed up his autoloader from its rack near his knee and had his foot on the threshold when the lander ramp slammed down on ordinary dirt.

A wall of cold, damp air rolled over him, rushing in to replace the warm, dry air of the lander. The sudden chill made his sinuses ache.

A barn door occupied most of his field of view, not twenty meters away. OK, these boys can fly, after all.

He glanced down to his right and saw the line of barns, one after another, each enough like the one next to it that they could have been stamped out by a machine.

And each of them absolutely filthy. Webs filled with dust hung at the edges of the doors, streaks of dirt ran down from the edges

of the roof, and tufts of grass and thorned canes. edged the bottom of the doors. At the sides of the barn, clumps of vines leaned against the walls, with tiny paths beaten down between the barns, just wide enough that the thorns would not catch at the shoulders of an adult passing through.

Away to the left stretched a gentle hill thickly forested with some sort of scrub oak or maybe vine maple, irregular patches of grass under them. What he could see of the sky was already a light blue, promising the sun would appear any second.

And the place was dead quiet.

He snapped the bolt on his autoloader and thumbed the safety off. It's all live from here on.

He ran the two steps down the gentle slope of the ramp and humped his way to a personnel door next to the main doors of the barn. This had been used recently: none of the vine canes had crept across it and only one corner had a tiny triangle of webs in it.

He paused in front of the door, waiting for Cooper to fumble a flash-bang out and yank its pin. When Cooper nodded, MacGraw kicked the door next to the knob and it splintered, slamming open with a crash and almost bouncing closed again, but not before Cooper flipped the grenade through the opening.

The explosion was loud and sharp, slamming the door shut, fully snapping the knob off and bouncing back open again, with MacGraw already heading through, sighting down the length of his autoloader. Clearing the door, he stepped to his right, clearing the doorway for the next man, and scanned the room with the muzzle of his weapon.

By the time his eyes had adjusted, he saw a roomful of dirty, scrawny kids, crying, crawling on their hands and knees—or just their knees—to cluster around the only adult in the room, a fat woman with wild hair and not the cleanest nightgown he had ever seen. The wailing had just begun but it rapidly wound up to full volume.

The room was nearly as cold as outside, despite what looked like at least eight people crammed into a space that couldn't be more than five meters square.

He scanned again, found no men or weapons, and latched his gaze onto a door in the back wall.

With his left hand, he signaled Cooper and the man behind him—unrecognizable now in identical camo, harness and helmet, the stock of his autoloader covering half of his face—to the door and stepped toward the woman, the muzzle of the autoloader turned on her, never letting it waver.

“You! What’s in there? Who else is here?”

The woman, children climbing up her thighs and cringing behind her knees, almost fell. Tears ran down her face and the hem of her nightdress darkened: she’d peed herself.

He let the muzzle droop a little, not enough that he couldn’t hit her with a round in the belly with a touch to the trigger, but not pointing at her face anymore.

“N-n-no w-w—no one,” she said.

That felt straight to him, so he looked out the door, to catch the eye of Merriandez, one of the heavy-weapon troopers. He flicked a finger at him, waited until Merriandez got inside the door then pointed at the door at the back, now flanked by Cooper and probably Berditz, like gargoyles protecting the gates of hell. He closed his fist and Merriandez nodded, setting himself with one foot placed well behind him, leaning into his weapon.

The Gauss SMG did not look like much more than an assault rifle. Merriandez thumbed the power activation on the SMG and a high-pitched whine sang from the weapon. He looked at MacGraw.

Cooper and probably-Berditz watched MacGraw, though they still kept their muzzles pointed at the door.

MacGraw held up three fingers, then two, then one and Merriandez pumped burst after burst into the door, which disintegrated under the rounds. The sound of splintering wood overwhelmed the quiet whipping sound of the sub-sonic rounds.

Cooper—and it really was Berditz, he now saw—pushed their way through the door and jumped to either side, as MacGraw came through low and dived to the floor, splashing up a cloud of dust and dirt that obscured his vision for a few moments. He suppressed the urge to sneeze.

Nothing.

Two hundred meters away, the far end of the barn looked like a sieve, the newly-risen sun casting dozens of tiny beams through

the holes the Gauss SMG had made in the far wall, each shining down on an empty floor covered in dust, trash, and clumps of old, moldy hay.

Clambering to his feet, MacGraw glanced around. Nothing that looked like any sort of contraband. No boxes or bulky items covered in plastic tarps, just broken farm tools and odd scraps of metal, all covered in dust and webs. The floor showed footprints in the dust, but all the feet were small. Kids, probably scavenging for wood.

If anyone had ever tried to hide something in here, it was years and years ago.

He tilted the microphone up to his mouth and clicked his transmit button twice.

"Go," he heard in his earpiece.

"MacGraw. Nothing here, Captain."

"Look around and see if you can find anything."

"Sir, you don't understand. There never was anything here. Dirt all over everything. Spider webs. Nothing has been in this place for years." He turned back to the small room, the children still huddled around the woman. She held one of the youngest in her arms.



The shouting and crashing outside got closer.

When his mother abruptly stood up and waved her hand behind her, the other kids scampered across the floor, ducking behind her bed and under the other two beds.

He didn't really think about it but found himself at her hip. His head didn't even come to her armpit yet, but she looked down at him and gave him a smile, then reached her left arm around his shoulders and gave him a squeeze.

The tramp of boots and the growling voices stopped at their door.

Pulling her arm from him, over his head, she put her hand in the middle of his chest and pushed him around behind her.

It suddenly became quiet. One of the kids behind him started to cry out but one of the older kids must have muffled it, because it cut off immediately.

MacGraw clutched at her nightgown, right at her hip, the warm feel of her heat seeping into his hand.

With a crash, the door burst open.



"Check the other structures."

"C'mon, Captain. There's nothing here but a bunch of kids, slowly starving to death."

"Check the other structures."

Slapping the mike down from his mouth, he snapped, "Crap!"

He waved Merriandez outside. He called to the two men still inside the main barn. "Poke around. See if there's anything at all out there worth a damn."

He stomped outside to find the rest of his team. Merriandez snapped a fresh magazine into his weapon. Jedderson, fourth of Merriandez's team, stood outside the door, scanning the woods.

MacGraw pointed at Jollof, a big, wide man, but still the junior man of the group. Junior meaning all crap jobs came to him. "Run me a perimeter, kid. Two hundred out. See if you can find anything." He reached up and tapped the microphone hanging under his own chin. "Command 2. Keep talking." The big kid nodded, hefted his autoloader, and disappeared around the side of the lander.

MacGraw flicked at the controls at his waist and Jollof's voice muttered over the top of the open hum of the primary command channel, Command 1. *Our imperious leader is not talking to anyone at the moment.*

He waved to the other three: Beck on the second Gauss SMG, and the next-most junior members, PJ and Abollo, the two of them almost twins in their camos and face paint, even though Abollo was a shiny black man and PJ as pink as a baby. "C'mon." He turned and started toward the next barn, his autoloader dangling at the end of his arm.

The whole point of this mission was to find where the pirates were based, the pirates that kept raiding into Alliance space. Over the last few months, the Borderers had been checking out possible bases on the unaligned worlds but, like here, they kept turning up empty.

And Aperleau wanted to waste time scaring the hell out of a bunch of squatters.

He wanted those bastards. Any pirates they found might or might not be the ones that took out New Dallas, but they were pirates. Scum.

He reached the personnel door of the next barn. He should wait for PJ and Abollo, but he knew there was nothing here.

He kicked the door in. It flew off its hinges with a satisfying *crunch*.



The morning light glared into his eyes and he couldn't see anything but a man-shaped shadow filling the door. His bowels went liquid and his knees almost gave way, but he saw the dull, dark barrel of the old shotgun swing up in his mothers hands. He jumped when it went off, the bang louder than anything he had ever heard in his life, as the shadow seemed to leap backwards and fall flat on its back in the dirt in front of the house. The whole room filled with stinging smoke that rasped at his throat and burned in his eyes.

Out in the sunlight, though, laying in the dirt, it was just a man. Not a soldier in uniform, just a man in dirty clothes, carrying some sort of pistol. A pirate, someone told him later.

The man's right leg twitched for a long time, though the rest of him lay very still.



The shot caught MacGraw in the throat. It wasn't really painful, it just sort of stung, though he couldn't catch his breath. He staggered back a step and his knees gave way.

A small detached voice in his head said 'Shock.'

Hands caught his shoulders and eased him slowly to one side, until he lay in the dirt. He felt grit dig into his cheek, then a hot, liquid ooze touched him and spread beneath his eye.

He wanted to cough, to catch a breath, and he could feel his chest heave, but nothing moved. Shouts sounded far away and he could see boots and little puffs of dust. Was that a woman in a nightgown they dragged by him?

A hand pulled at his shoulder and rolled him onto his back.

Merriandez doubled as their medic. His face stared down, framed by the pretty blue sky. A large hand swung out of nowhere, a white pad in its palm, and pressed against the side of his throat.

Other hands fumbled at his helmet strap, gently slid the helmet out from under his head, and let his head down. The cold, cold dirt seemed to suck the heat from the back of his head.

"He can't breathe," Merriandez growled. "I'll have to do a cut-down."

Though his chest continued to heave, MacGraw did not really feel a part of it. His body would do what it would do, while he just watched the sky and the faces and the flash of a scalpel and wondered what it all meant.

Would his leg twitch, too?

The End