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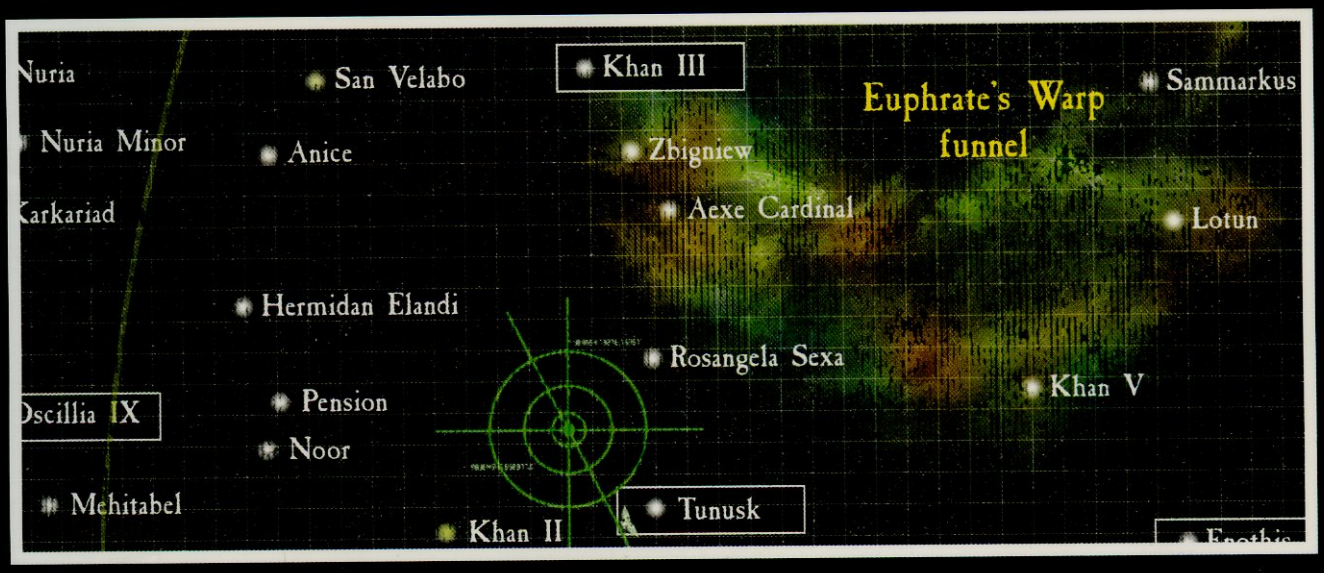

THE SABBAT WORLDS CRUSADE

THE SABBAT WORLDS CRUSADE

755 – 775. M41

A COMPREHENSIVE ACCOUNT OF THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS OF THAT ILLUSTRIOUS CAMPAIGN, COMPILED BY ANTONID BIOTA, A SENIOR TACTICAL ADVISOR AT THE FRONT LINE

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A Black Library Publication

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Producer **Marc Gascoigne**

Thanks **Pete Borlace, Christian Dunn, Glenn More and Nik Vincent**

ISBN 13: 978-1-84416-249-9 ISBN 10: 1-84416-249-4
GW Product code 6004 0181 004

Collector's edition
ISBN 13: 978-1-84416-248-2 ISBN 10: 1-84416-248-6
GW Product code 6004 0181 003

A Black Library publication. First published in the UK in 2005 by BL Publishing, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham NG7 2WS, UK.

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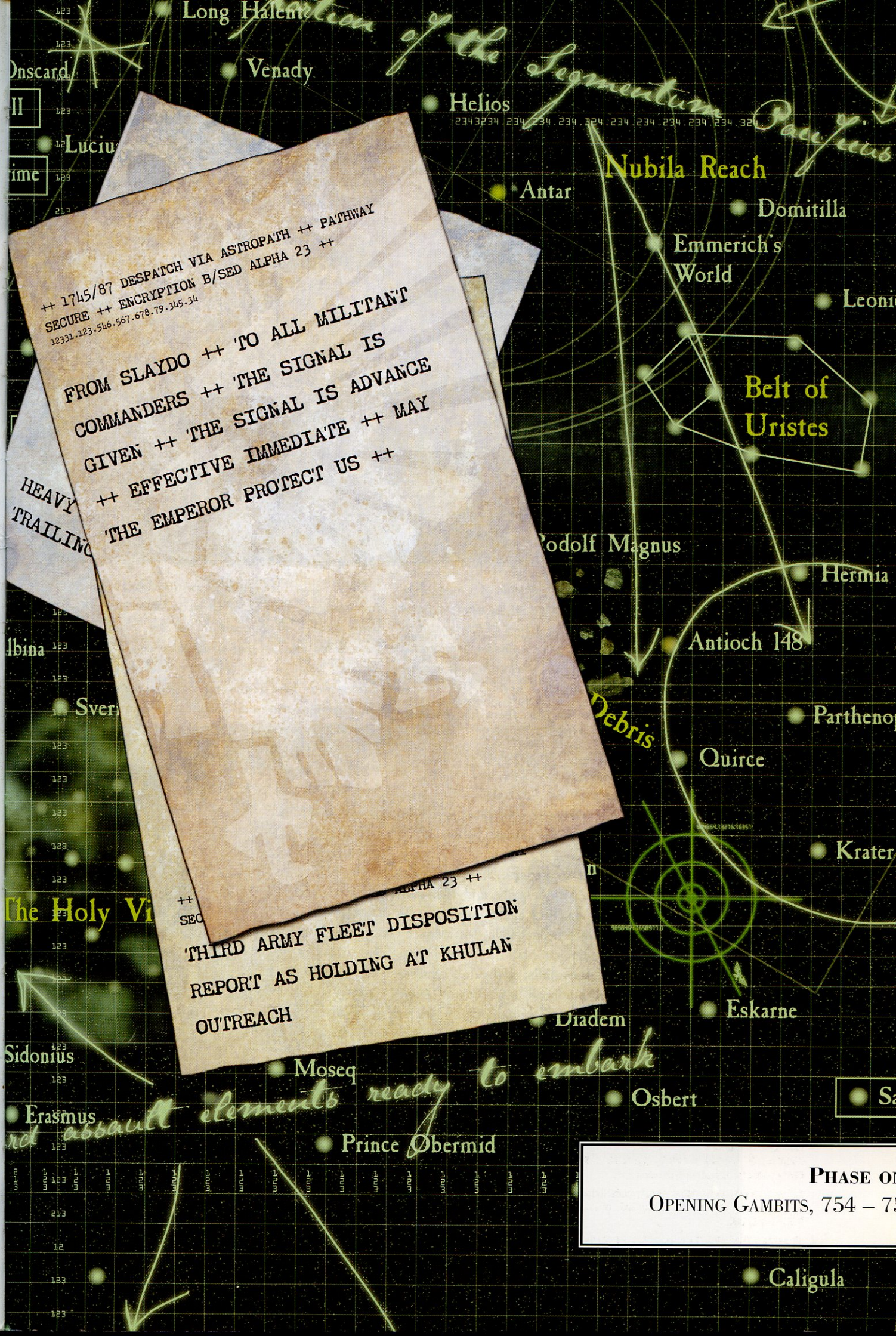
Long Halentation of the Segmentum Pacifus
Onscard
Venady
Helios
Luciu
Nubila Reach
Antar
Domitilla
Emmerich's World
Leoni
Belt of Uristes
HEAVY
TRAILING
Podolf Magnus
Hermia
Antioch 148
Sver
Debris
Parthenon
Quirce
Krater
The Holy Vi
Eskarne
Diadem
Sidonius
Moseq
Osbert
Erasmus
Prince Obermid
Caligula
++ 1745/87 DESPATCH VIA ASTROPATH ++ PATHWAY SECURE ++ ENCRYPTION B/SED ALPHA 23 ++
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FROM SLAYDO ++ TO ALL MILITANT COMMANDERS ++ THE SIGNAL IS GIVEN ++ THE SIGNAL IS ADVANCE ++ EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATE ++ MAY THE EMPEROR PROTECT US ++
THIRD ARMY FLEET DISPOSITION REPORT AS HOLDING AT KHULAN OUTREACH
PHASE ON
OPENING GAMBITS, 754 – 75

(Right) Aquila landers over the Tark Islands, Balhaut.

'The material actions and achievements of a man's lifetime will never match the ambition of his dreams, but a man must still allow himself to dream of the most daring and audacious goals. If he sets modest limits to his dreams, he hobbles the prospects of what he will achieve in life, before he has even begun to live.'

~ Warmaster Slaydo, from his journals

Most honoured sirs, salutations. It is my conspicuous honour to have been charged by the lords militant of the Crusade Armies, and most especially by our esteemed Warmaster, to render this account of the actions of the glorious Sabbat World Crusade for your appraisal.

This book is intended to perform three principal functions. Of the first, it is to describe and dissect in some detail the tactical specifics of the endeavour, so that the key phases might be available for study by command cadre students, historians and the Departmento Tacticae Imperialis. Individual studies have previously been produced (cf. Barnol: *Three Initial Battles of the Sabbat Campaign, Emmony and Saliern: Balhaut Described, Kerondys: Systematic Warfare in the Khan Group* et al), but this official record is the first to place the entirety of the first two decades of the conflict in strategic context.

Of the second, and the most worthy purpose, it is to make an account of the courage and sacrifice of the fighting men and women who have given their lives in the campaign so far, so that their efforts and heroism in the name of the Golden Throne might receive due recognition.

Of the third, it is that of justification. In the years preceding the start of the Crusade, many notable voices were raised in opposition to the action. It was considered too vast and costly an expedition to mount. At Staff level, it was popularly held that the Sabbat Worlds were best written off and abandoned. Now, two decades into the war, despite the progress and the extraordinary victories accomplished, such opinions are being heard again. The war drags on, it is said, and the cost grows ever higher. There is no end in sight. Better for the Imperium to cut its losses and finish with the business now before it is bled dry.

As I write these words, in 775.M41, I can only venture that such attitudes are either heresy, or the opinions of the uninformed. Yes, the war has raged for a full twenty years, and yes, there is still much to accomplish. Some estimate that the campaign is yet barely halfway done. But with this account, I aim to demonstrate that successful prosecution of the Sabbat Crusade is vital tactically, materially and psychologically. As Slaydo wrote: 'Only the most formidable challenges are worth the striving'. I also hope to make clear that if the Imperium cuts its losses now, the consequences will be disastrous.

I trust therefore, sirs, that you will review this account with the keen minds of scholars, hungry to learn, and the clear heads of wise men, eager to judge fairly.

Your servant,

Antonid Biota
Senior Staff Tactician
Departmento Tacticae Imperialis*

** Service Record, Biota, A. Forward Tactical Office (Khulan). 751 to 755. General Advisory Staff, Sabbat Crusade 755 to 766. Office of General Kelso 766 to 769. Office of General Van Voytz 769 to 774. Senior Tactical Officer, Crusade Fifth Army (Van Voytz) 774 to present.*

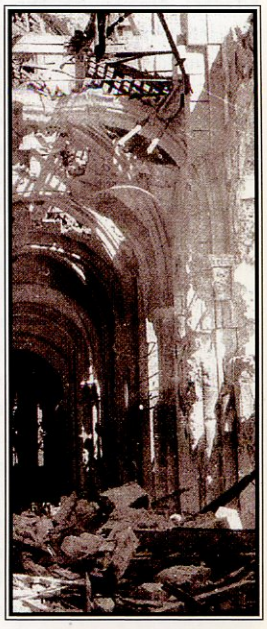
As attested by many archive records, the region known as the Sabbat Worlds was first annexed for Imperial colonisation in M35. Situated along a rimward portion of the Segmentum Pacificus (see chart), the region is composed of over one hundred inhabited systems, subdivided into a number of discrete territories, most notably the Newfound Trailing, the Khan Group, the Cabal Systems, the Carcaradon Cluster and the Erinyes Group. The name 'Sabbat' refers to the region's original redeemer, St Sabbat beati of Hagia.

By M37, the region had become well established as an Imperial holding, with an estimated human population of five trillion and a thriving infrastructure of trade and industry. But it was ever a disputed region, exposed as it was along its rimward flank to the outer dark. The Sabbat Worlds became known as a 'troublesome province', and throughout M38 suffered a series of savage border wars with the Archenemy tribe-armies inhabiting the so-called Sanguinary Worlds situated rimwards of its spinward extents.

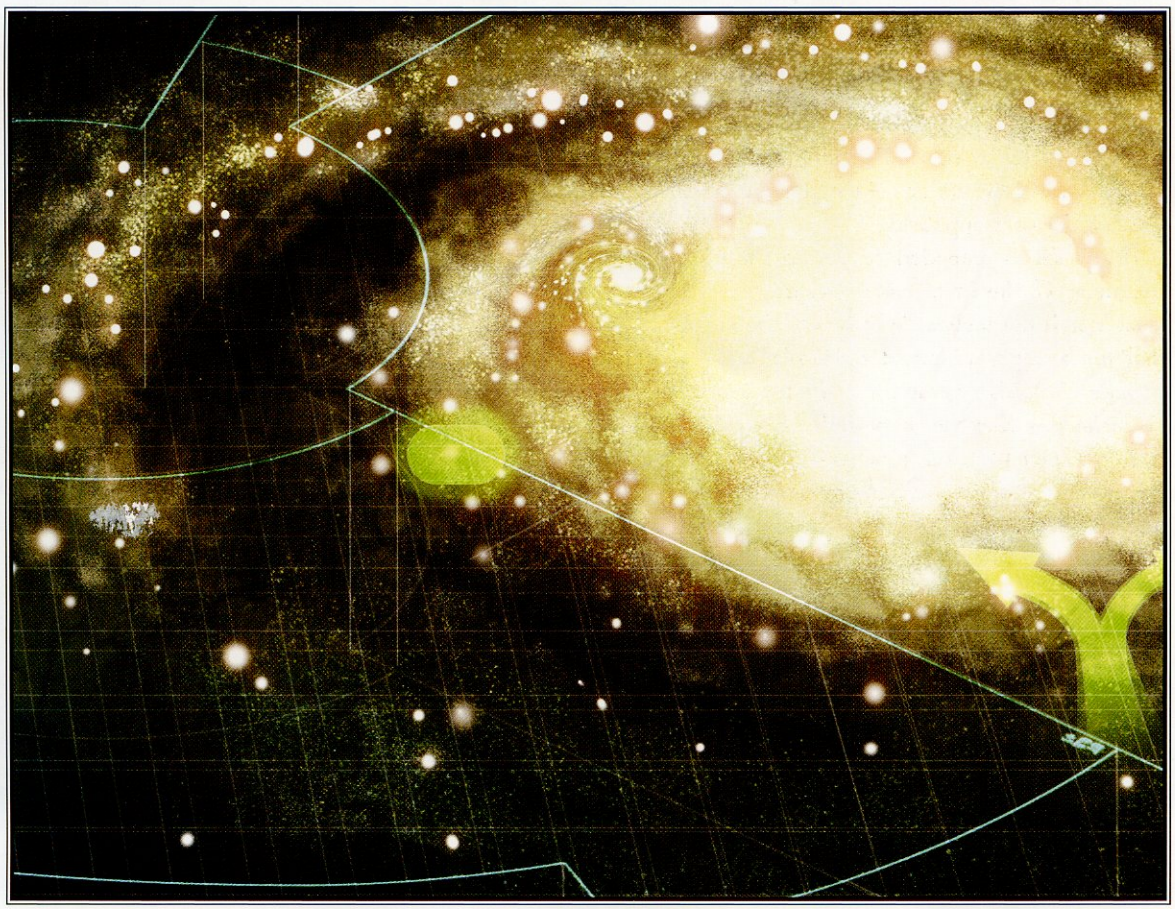
However, during the first centuries of M41, the situation altered dramatically. Rising up under a charismatic warlord, or 'Archon', the Archenemy tribes of the Sanguinary Worlds launched a grievous series of trailward attacks into the region, conquering and destroying as they went. At first, it was thought that this marked a return to the periodic border war tension of M38, but in the years following 600.M41, the full scale of the threat was finally recognised. The forces of the ruinous powers intended no less than to retake the entire region, re-establishing mastery of the worlds they had been driven out of by St Sabbat in M35.

The defence of the Sabbat Worlds at this time was valiant but, it is safe to say in hindsight, unequal to the task. The Sabbat Incursions – 'remigrations' as some xenotribal analysts have called them – were just one of a half-dozen major Chaos invasions suffered by the segmentum as a whole in this period. Resources were woefully stretched (it should be noted that the Imperium was simultaneously fighting eight other significant warfronts throughout its territories, most particularly at the Cadian Gate and Abroxis). Bitter strategic decisions were made at High Command level to determine the best disposition of resistance, and certain areas were sacrificed in order to consolidate lines of defence. It is evident from military archives that it had not been High Command's initial intention to give up the Sabbat Worlds wholesale, but the strike-reach of the Archon's host was severely underestimated.

Sporadic reconquest and occupation of the Sabbat Worlds by the Archenemy of Mankind followed swiftly, and although many Imperial worlds in the region continued to resist – some holding out for decades, some for more than a century – by 740.M41, the Sabbat Worlds could no longer be considered to be under Imperial governance. The so-called 'troublesome province' was reclassified 'unstable/hazardous', and when, in 741, the Civitas Imperialis was officially suspended in the region and the court of the regional Lord Governor removed from Khan Nobilis to Bardolfus in the neighbouring sector for safety, the Sabbat Worlds were regarded as lost.



(Above) The interior of the Templum Imperialis, Khan Nobilis, damaged during air strikes in 741.



***(left)* Departmento cartographicae chart showing the locality of the Sabbat Worlds at the rimward edge of the Segmentum Pacificus, circa 750.M41.**

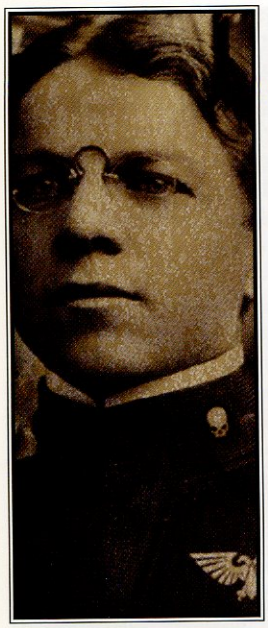
(Right) **This chart, the 'Mappa Imhava' (Library of the Doctrinopolis, Hagia, MS 451/433g), is the only contemporary record of the Sabbat Worlds region from the time of its initial annexation in M35. Though a surprisingly accurate document considering its early date (astrographers calculate that the Mandeville points are only decimal 46 out of phase), much of its detail remains impenetrable to modern study. It is clear, however, at the time of Sabbat, Imperial, or Imperial-loyal client societies existed on a fair number of worlds, particularly those in the Newfound Trailing region.**

Piecemeal colonisation and mercantile advance had begun to open the territory as early as M33, and it is conjectured that there may have been one or more much earlier colonisation advances rebuffed previously in history for which there is little or no surviving documentation. However, despite the Imperial settlements, this was still an extremely dangerous tract of space, certainly beyond the bounds of the Civitas Imperialis. The areas beyond and surrounding the Imperial communities might be summarised as a patchwork of feral worlds, tribal territories and full-scale enemy holdings.

It was on the pastoral world of Hagia that St Sabbat was born circa 500.M35. Despite the body of writing she left behind, little is known about Sabbat except for her achievements. Born the daughter of a common herdsman in the Hagian highlands, she was inspired by a vision – or visions – of the God-Emperor to rise up and lead a 'Great Crusade' against the Ruinous Powers, with the intention of claiming the entire region in the name of the Golden Throne of Terra.

The progress of her one hundred and five year Crusade can be traced here, added to the chart by later hands, presumably the 'Ayatani' priests of her private order, in whose safekeeping the chart remained until the liberation of Hagia in 770.M41.


Rimward
Spinward
Xerxses I
Xerxses II
Xerxses III
Emperor's Light
Urdesh
Euphrate's Warp
Khan III
Jaeger's Field
Tarnagua
Morlond
Van Thal
Gullman's Sinkhole
Tunnsk
Enothis
Summaminus
Laren IV



(Above) **Tactical Officer Antonid Biota.**

(Top right) **The wildflower Islumbine, regarded as sacred to the Saint.**

(Above) **Antique field helm (Boniface pattern) of the type used by Bannek's troopers at the time of Sabbat's original crusade (Imperial Museum, Khan Nobilis).**

(Right) **Pict capture of hostile warcraft annihilating a shrine to Saint Sabbat on Leonides, circa 743. Historically, much of the Archenemy's efforts in the region seem to have been focused on erasing all marks and traces of Sabbat.**

'There are no miracles. There are only men.'

~ St Sabbat, Epistles

Very little can rationally explain how a simple peasant girl could have managed to rally such forces about her in a common cause. Described as a small but beautiful female with green eyes and short, black hair, Sabbat was evidently a holy and sanctified instrument of the divine God-Emperor. In her teachings, we find a voice of simplicity and graceful wisdom that quite belies her upbringing and background. In her achievements, we find a record to shame many lords militant.

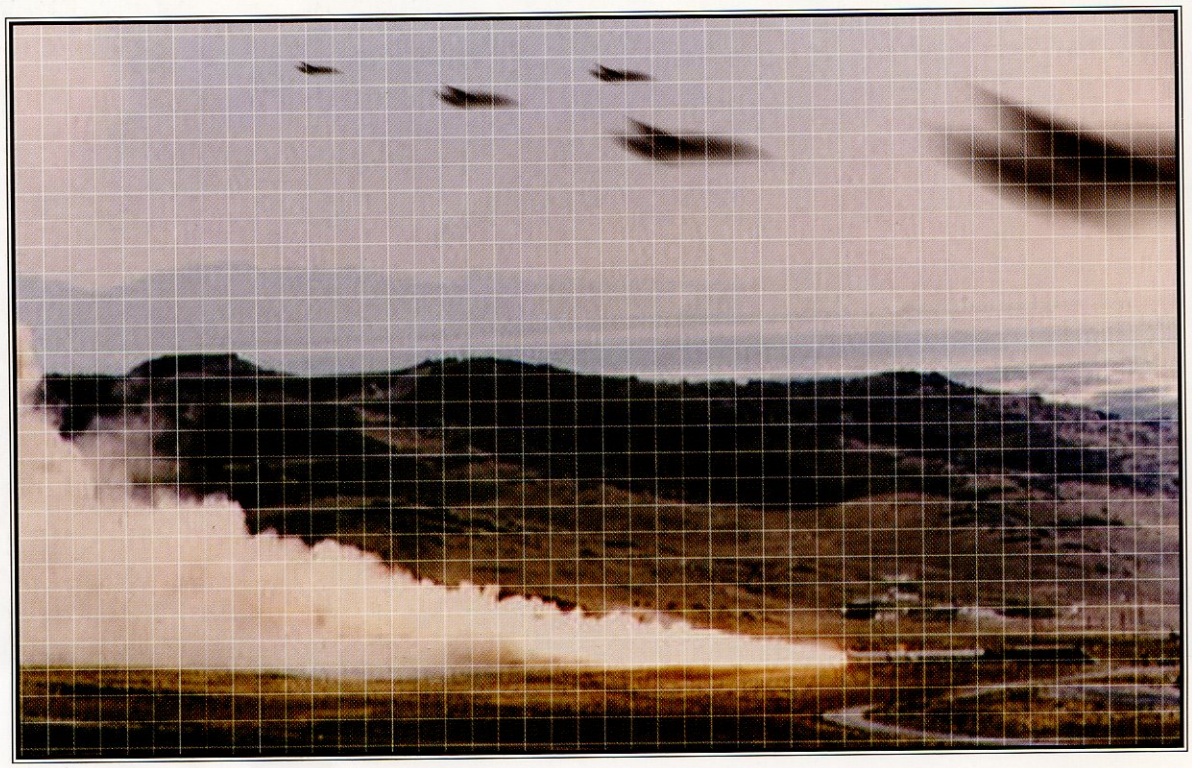
At the height of her powers, she counted at her side Lord Kiodrus, the great field commander, who was also subsequently beatified. She was counselled by the brilliant strategist Faltornus, who devised the principal plans of her campaign, and also many other notables including Lord Garon Vehl, General Rufus Bannek and the martial philosopher Demarchese. Her crusading host included warriors of the Astartes Chapters Brazen Skulls (defunct) and the White Scars, a command of sisters militant, colonial regiments and pilgrim retinues.

It is the archived mention of the sisters militant that has caused some scholars to question the received wisdom of Sabbat's origins. The Saint's Crusade took place almost a thousand years before the Age of Apostasy and the rise of the Adepta Sororitas, but many have conjectured that, far from being a humble shepherd girl, she was a devotee of the Daughters of the Emperor who had somehow travelled across half the galaxy from San Leor to lead the Crusade. Were the Daughters of the Emperor active outside San Leor prior to the time of Vandire? Certainly, relic evidence suggests her command of sisters militant had some apparent connection with the Order of Our Martyred Lady, and it is even possible they could have formed the basis of that order. However, the true nature of the connection, if any, remains firmly in the realm of Imperial myth.

The Saint's Great Crusade endured for one hundred and five years until her martyrdom on Harkalon, where she suffered the Nine Holy Wounds. Warriors of the White Scars brought her body back to Hagia, where it was interred at the Holy Shrinehold.

Crusading continued after her death, but even at the time of her martyrdom, the region was already considered functioning Imperial territory. Full-scale colonisation of the Newfound Trailing and Khan group areas began during her lifetime.

The Imhava or 'roaming' Ayatani of her priesthood continue to travel, where possible, the route of her Crusade from Hagia to Harkalon and back.



(Left) **Saint Sabbat beati, from the frescoe in the undercroft of the Beaticomb, Frenghold.**

'It seems the High Lords of Terra approve of the work we've done together. We've been given our Crusade... The Sabbat Worlds!'

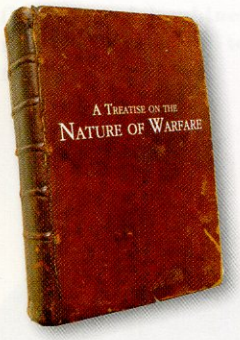
~ Warmaster Slaydo, after Khulan

The notion of an expedition to liberate the Sabbat Worlds was mooted many times in the years following 741, and was especially championed by the exiled lord governor, but little or no enthusiasm could be found for the idea amongst the high echelon military, who considered it too great an investment of time, effort and materials. All, that is, except for Lord Militant Slaydo.

Although already a noted and experienced commander, Slaydo owed his real fame – and consequent influence – to the Khulan Wars (752-754), where he achieved several stunning victories. In a move that capitalised both on his command genius and his huge popularity with the rank and file of the Imperial Guard, the High Lords of Terra declared him Warmaster in 755, and charged him to undertake the liberation of the Sabbat Worlds.

Any envy felt by Slaydo's fellow lords militant at his elevation was tempered by the nature of the task that had been set for him. Many believed it would doom his career. But it became apparent that Slaydo had actively sought ownership of the Crusade, petitioning the

(Right) Formal portrait of Warmaster Slaydo, 755, by Erico Vander Soys, now hanging in the Honorarium, Balhaut.



(Above) Many of Slaydo's battle schemes, such as those drawn up for the theatres of Khulan II and Formal Prime, and his seminal work A Treatise on the Nature of Warfare, are required reading for all command cadre candidates.

High Lords directly during the Khulan campaign. It emerged that Slaydo had long felt a particular duty to conduct the liberation. Even as a lord militant in the Ninth Division Pacificus, he had supported the action and, as early as 732, he had drawn up *A Reasoned Approach to the Reconquest of the Sabbat Territories* for consideration by High Command. Many of his senior commanders and aides have related stories of Slaydo's fundamental passion for the cause of the Saint. He believed it to be an Imperial crime that her hard won territories had been so poorly discarded.

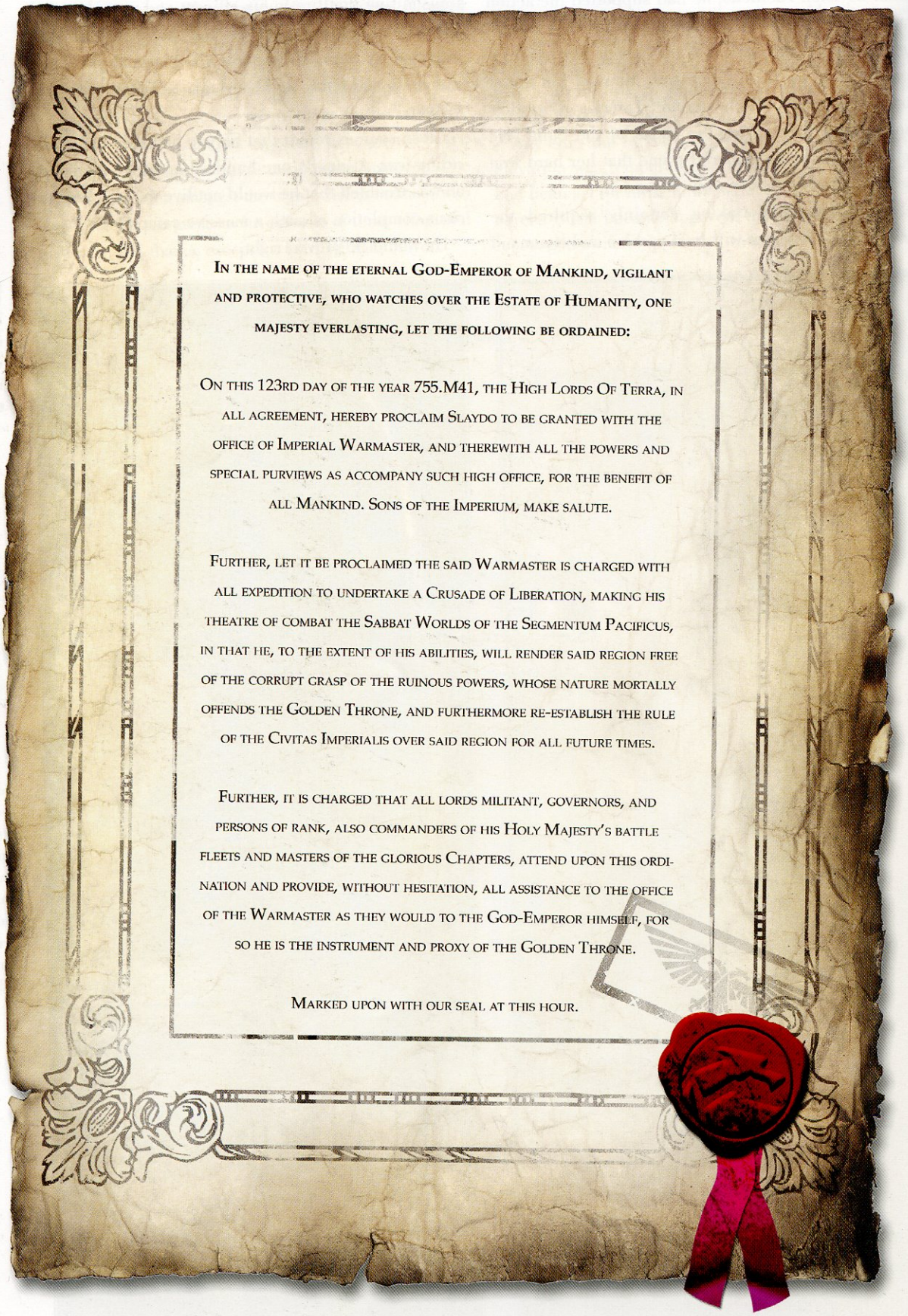
Such a vast undertaking certainly required the leadership of someone with vast passion and command brilliance. Moreover, it required faith, and it is clear that Slaydo not only held a great personal faith to the legacy of Saint Sabbat beati, but was also capable of transmitting that fire to his officers and men. Marshal Blackwood wrote: 'Just as the peasant girl was inflamed by the God-Emperor six thousand years ago to rise up and fight, so the old man is inflamed by her memory.'

Close sources report that Slaydo had only one overriding fear. At nearly one hundred and fifty years old, he was troubled that he would not live to see the victorious completion of such a massive campaign.

He would be proved right.

***(Left)* Detail of the powersword 'Liberatus', presented to Slaydo at the commencement ceremony prior to the start of the Crusade, 755.**

(Right) **Reproduction of the Crusade charter issued by the High Lords of Terra to Slaydo in 755. Three original copies exist: one in the Administratum Library at Bardolfus, one in the personal possession of the current Warmaster, and the third in the hallowed archives of Terra.**



IN THE NAME OF THE ETERNAL GOD-EMPEROR OF MANKIND, VIGILANT AND PROTECTIVE, WHO WATCHES OVER THE ESTATE OF HUMANITY, ONE MAJESTY EVERLASTING, LET THE FOLLOWING BE ORDAINED:

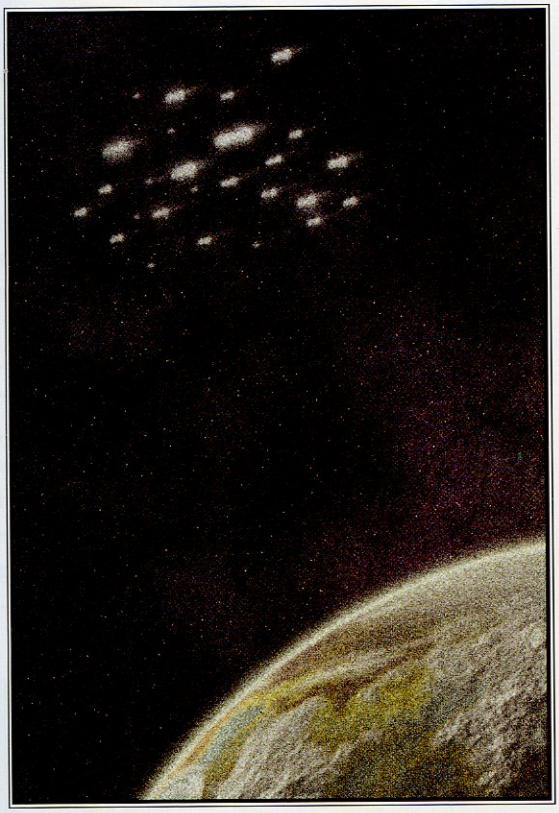
ON THIS 123RD DAY OF THE YEAR 755.M41, THE HIGH LORDS OF TERRA, IN ALL AGREEMENT, HEREBY PROCLAIM SLAYDO TO BE GRANTED WITH THE OFFICE OF IMPERIAL WARMASTER, AND THEREWITH ALL THE POWERS AND SPECIAL PURVIEWS AS ACCOMPANY SUCH HIGH OFFICE, FOR THE BENEFIT OF ALL MANKIND. SONS OF THE IMPERIUM, MAKE SALUTE.

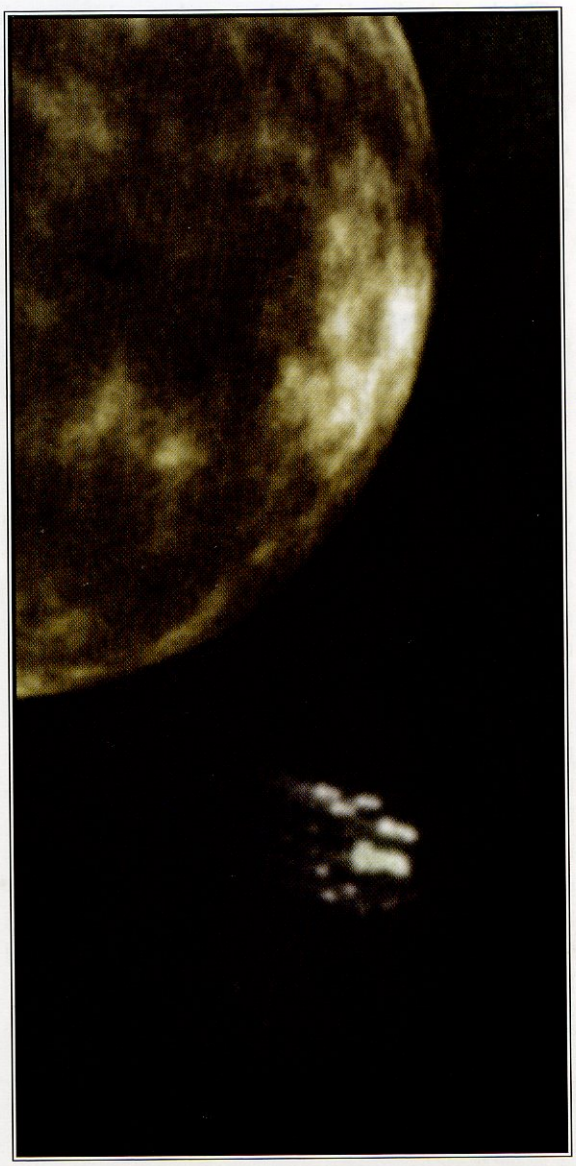
FURTHER, LET IT BE PROCLAIMED THE SAID WARMASTER IS CHARGED WITH ALL EXPEDITION TO UNDERTAKE A CRUSADE OF LIBERATION, MAKING HIS THEATRE OF COMBAT THE SABBAT WORLDS OF THE SEGMENTUM PACIFICUS, IN THAT HE, TO THE EXTENT OF HIS ABILITIES, WILL RENDER SAID REGION FREE OF THE CORRUPT GRASP OF THE RUINOUS POWERS, WHOSE NATURE MORTALLY OFFENDS THE GOLDEN THRONE, AND FURTHERMORE RE-ESTABLISH THE RULE OF THE CIVITAS IMPERIALIS OVER SAID REGION FOR ALL FUTURE TIMES.

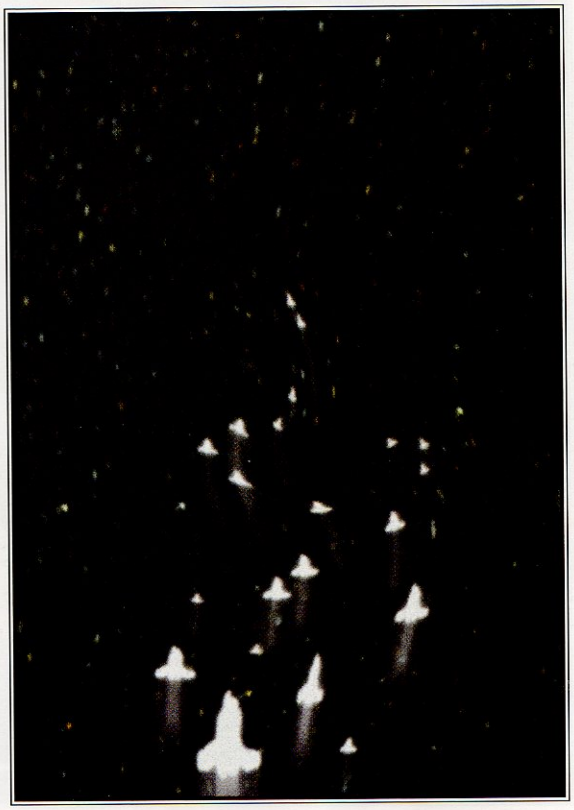
FURTHER, IT IS CHARGED THAT ALL LORDS MILITANT, GOVERNORS, AND PERSONS OF RANK, ALSO COMMANDERS OF HIS HOLY MAJESTY'S BATTLE FLEETS AND MASTERS OF THE GLORIOUS CHAPTERS, ATTEND UPON THIS ORDINATION AND PROVIDE, WITHOUT HESITATION, ALL ASSISTANCE TO THE OFFICE OF THE WARMASTER AS THEY WOULD TO THE GOD-EMPEROR HIMSELF, FOR SO HE IS THE INSTRUMENT AND PROXY OF THE GOLDEN THRONE.

MARKED UPON WITH OUR SEAL AT THIS HOUR.

The Warmaster and his senior staff commanders, along with a great body of tacticians, spent months at Khulan planning the opening phase of advance into the Sabbat Worlds. A number of options were considered until the final scheme, code-named Redrake, was decided upon. All the while, the vast armada of war began to assemble at high anchor staging posts at Khulan, Khulan Outreach, San Sargo, Kazin II, Arvinx Cardinal and the Bethan Halo. On the 266th day of 755, Slaydo sent the signal to advance.







(Top left) **View of the mass advance from Bethan Halo, as captured by pict recorder from the fleet intruder *Rock of Ages*. Notice the battlebarge *Breakspear*, lower left.**

(Left) **The destroyer *Merlin Gault* leads the first element advance from San Sargo towards the translation point. Pict distortion is caused by the proximity to warp transfer.**

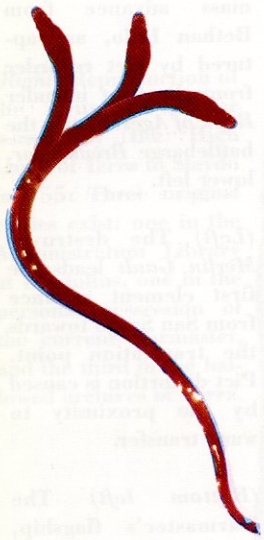
(Bottom left) **The Warmaster's flagship, the *Borealis*, leads the picket ship vanguard away from Khulan high anchor.**

(Bottom right) **'It was as if a constellation had come loose and drifted away across the heavens' said a citizen of San Sargo, witnessing the mass departure of the Crusade fleet elements anchored there.**

CIVITAS IMPERIALIS

An often-misused term assumed to mean, simply, the Imperial rule of law. Its actual meaning is more specific and, as scholars have learned from Warmaster Slaydo's personal diaries, of particular importance to the great leader. At the foundation of the Imperium of man, the Civitas Imperialis was laid down to 'guarantee the safety and assurance of any citizen of the Imperium of Mankind, wherever he or she travels or sets foot within the length and breadth of the Imperium'.

The Civitas was therefore meant to be the hallmark of refined Imperial culture, the measure of its power and security, and it was precisely this, the qualitative perfection of human civilisation, as opposed to the basic 'rule of law', that Slaydo was determined to restore to the Sabbat Worlds.



(Above) **The infamous Serrian Redrake, *Herpatus rubicundus*. Slaydo's admiration of the predator 'which strikes, lightning fast, at two or three targets at once, and always with deadly effect' caused him to code-name the operation after it.**

Slaydo had studied and rejected over thirty attack plans before he lighted upon the scheme that he believed favoured the Imperial strengths the most. Interestingly, it was similar in many details to the opening phase of his *A Reasoned Approach to the Reconquest of the Sabbat Territories* composed twenty-three years earlier.

Operation Redrake offered what Slaydo believed was the best solution to the problems of initial advance. Though an awesome force in its own right, the Crusade fleet was mobile, and entering an extremely well held enemy sector, where the foe was extensively provisioned and dug in.

'To begin a Crusade in these terms is like taking a breaking hammer to a solid wall,' Slaydo wrote. His objectives were fourfold: first, to secure a foothold in the Sabbat Worlds that could be developed; second, to catch the Archenemy unawares; thirdly, to diffuse any enemy response away from a concentrated counterattack on his fleet; fourthly, to provide a quick and, in his words, 'showy' victory to maintain allied morale.

Foremost, Slaydo knew his Crusade would not prosper unless it could take the fight to several fronts from the outset of hostilities. Already, the enemy dispositions had shown signs of preparation, as spies and long-range recon had detected at the very least parts of Slaydo's gathering muster. Redrake involved an intrusive simultaneous invasion of the Newfound Trailing Group, and he chose to focus upon Formal Prime, Onscard and Long Halent, with a fourth fleet division striking far to coreward at Indrid. This divided assault, he hoped, would partition the Archenemy response and confuse any immediate counter strategy.

Slaydo himself led the assault on Formal Prime, selecting the Lords Militant Hummel and Delayni for the attack on Onscard, Generals Dravere and Akkensor for Long Halent, and Lord Militant Cybon for Indrid. Between them, they commanded almost a billion Imperial Guardsmen, along with massive retinues of armour and artillery. Six Chapters of the Adeptus Astartes complemented the Guard force, along with Titan legions provided by the Adeptus Mechanicus, with whom Slaydo had brokered a cooperative pact.

Despite the size of mobilisation, the attacks were conducted as lightning strikes, with the Imperial forces engaging almost directly from retranslation.

Long Halent fell immediately, due for the most part to an Imperial miscalculation of the enemy numbers there. More modest than originally believed, the hostile forces were quickly overwhelmed.

Less than three weeks later, Onscard was also taken. After a brief fleet engagement on initial approach, the fight for Onscard centred on the capital city Ferwen, where enemy resistance was focused. A major artillery battle, lasting three days, broke the city open and allowed the Imperial Guard to storm the walls. Some bitter pockets of resistance lingered in the outlying cities of Tenash and Bruleans, but these were extinguished by the start of 756.

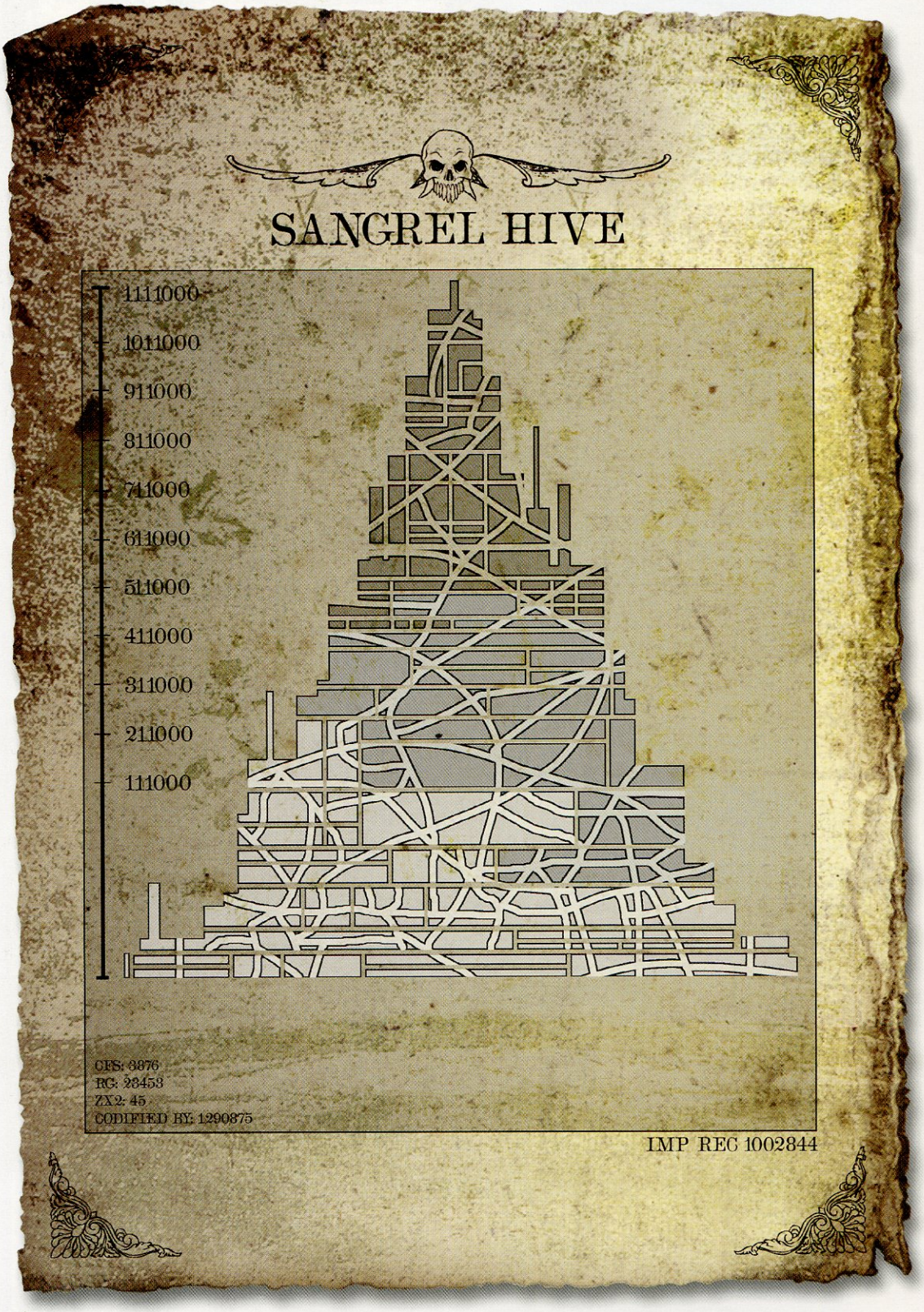
(Right) **Earthshakers of the 101st Latarii 'Gargantuans' pummel the distant skyline of Ferwen City, Onscard.**

(Left) **Ferwen City, showing the disposition of the besieging Imperial batteries.**

Formal Prime – with its warren-like depths of ancient hives and mouldering sub-stacks – gave Slaydo his first substantive opposition, and also his first taste of how bloody the Crusade would become.

The Warmaster had estimated that Formal Prime would take six weeks to overcome, but he reckoned without two important facts: the complexity of the terrain and the fanaticism of the opposition.

The initial assault went well: indeed, the speed of the orbit-to-soil deployment of the Crusade regiments (2.6 hours) remains a record in the proud annals of the Guard. But then progress began to founder. Dug into the undersinks of the ancient, rotting hives on Formal Prime, the enemy forces were led by the so-called 'Charismites', the zealot devotees of Magister Shebol Red-Hand, who orchestrated fierce resistance. At one



***(Right)* Sangrel Hive, Formal Prime. Auspex returns reveal the depth and complexity of the enemy held sub-sink.**

stage, two hundred Imperial Guardsman were dying for every metre taken.

As the assault entered its eleventh week, with casualties mounting, Slaydo fell into a foul temper. Of the four worlds targeted under Operation Redrake, Formal Prime was the largest, most populous, and most important. For those very reasons, Slaydo had led the attack there personally. His reputation was at stake, as was the overall morale of the Crusade. He had not expected either to be under serious threat so early on in the campaign. 'We have barely begun,' he railed at his senior staff. 'Show me men who know how to fight!'*

The impasse was only broken by Slaydo's deployment of the White Scars of the Adeptus Astartes, who purged the hive and crucified the Charismites along the boulevard approaches of the Formal Prime hives.

Lord Militant Cybon's assault on Indrid – the 'counter-punch' of Operation Redrake – began well, but foundered as rapid reinforcement was brought in from

Melsar and Taliscant. Caught on two fronts, Cybon proved himself to be worthy of the command Slaydo placed on him, and executed a feint withdrawal that led significant portions of the enemy collective onto his ranged batteries at Colquis. Then began a long, ground-in land war that lasted well into 756, which was concluded when Cybon, not for the last time, utilised orbital bombardment at the expense of ground troops.

Marshal Blackwood, serving under Cybon, protested the use of orbit weapons. 'I am but Slaydo's man,' Cybon is reported as replying. Though not stated openly, it is thought this clash led to Blackwood's transfer to the Ashek theatre.

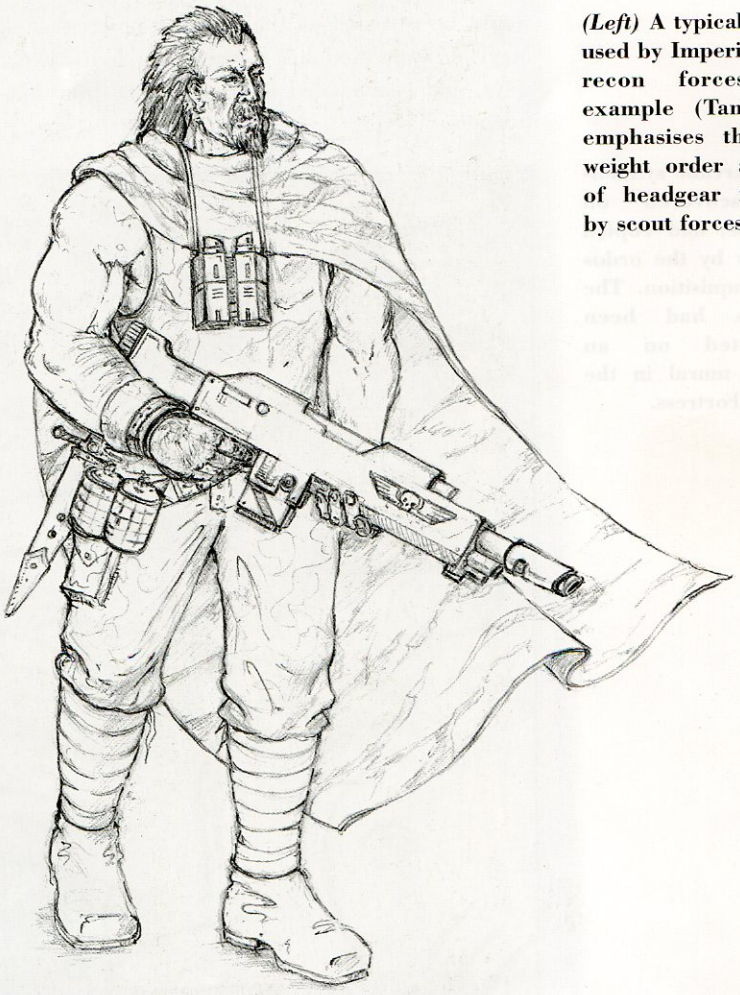
By the second half of 756, Operation Redrake had succeeded in its aims, despite setbacks, and the mood

(Left) **Unidentified White Scars brother during the assault of the undersink, Mestrick Hive, Formal Prime.**

of the conquerors was still high. The way was open for the follow up assaults, a phase Slaydo dubbed Newfound. Serious opposition to the Crusade encroachment was gathering at Gotthrone, Lucius, Hesketh, Cociaminus, Fornax Aleph, Ambold Eleven, Ashek II, Melsar and Taliscant. But Slaydo saw these objectives simply as a 'glittering pathway' that would lead him to his real goal, the stronghold world of Balhaut.

It was a glittering pathway that would take him the best part of a decade to walk.

(Far left) **Cybon's fleet elements commence their bombardment of Indrid.**



(Left) **A typical field kit used by Imperial Guard recon forces. This example (Tanith 1st) emphasises the lightweight order and lack of headgear favoured by scout forces.**

** The famous reply: 'Follow me to the morgue, sir, and I'll show you plenty!' has always been attributed to Lord General Curell, but on his deathbed in 765, Curell insisted the words had been uttered by his deputy, a young, and at that time, unremarkable man named Macaroth.*

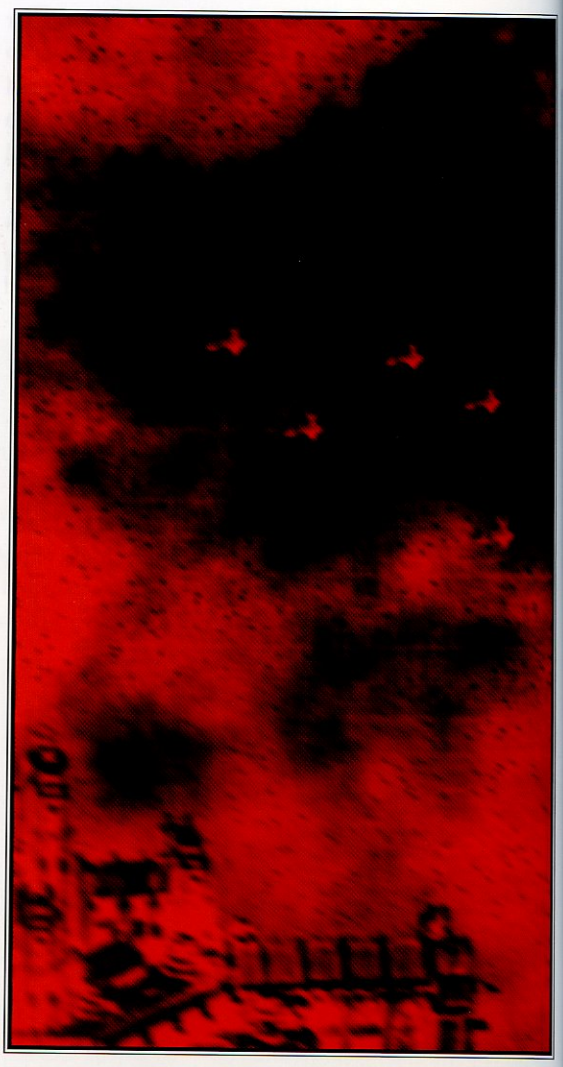
(Right) The starfort line at Taliscant cycles power to main batteries in preparation for fleet attack.

Formal Prime gave the Crusade leadership its first glimpse of the Archenemy command structure. Previously, the enemy forces had been considered as little more than a loose coalition of tribes and clans, allied under the 'Archon', or chief, and modelled far more along the lines of heretical cult structure than a true military system.

Operation Redrake quickly disabused the Imperials of that notion. Though undoubtedly a confederation driven by principles of blasphemous cult zealotry, the Archenemy was far more disciplined and capable than initially imagined. Slaydo also hoped to find the enemy compromised by its chain of command in that the absolute authority of the Archon could not hope to effectively orchestrate such a mass of resistance scattered over many worlds.

It became apparent that the Archon had devolved power to a number of powerful 'Magisters', or lieutenant warlords, who commanded particular sites and regions in his name. Most of these Magisters were the charismatic hub of their own private cult or tribal force, and it is possible that these patterns and divisions originated in the tribal structures of the Sanguinary Worlds.

It was not long before the names of these notorious warlords became known to the Crusade forces: Shebol Red-Hand, Heritor Asphodel, Sholen Skara, Enok Innokenti, Rusheck Vakkim, Anakwanar Sek, Qux of the Eyeless, Sharenidy and Nokad the Blighted. More would be revealed as the Crusade progressed. Each Magister expressed his depravity in individual, vile ways, and commanded utter allegiance from his cult troopers.



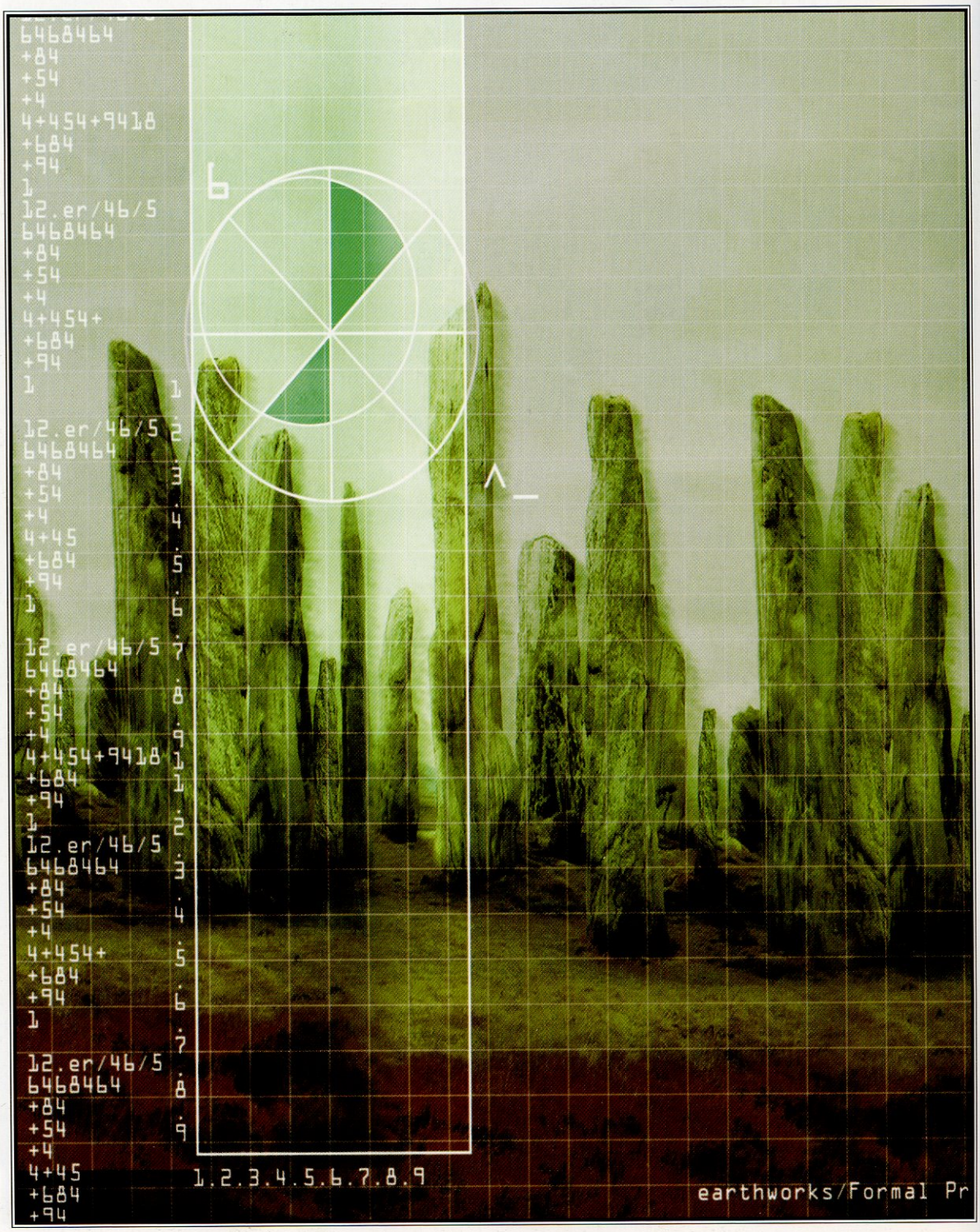
(Right) Arcane symbology discovered on Gotthrone, and copied for study by the ordos of the Inquisition. The markings had been overpainted on an Imperial mural in the Consul's Fortress.

(Left) **Recruitment propaganda such as this was widely published during the build up to hostilities, and continues to be used to maintain troop reserves.**

(Right) Reliquary recovered from Sardis Mons on Long Halent in 759. The tombchest was sealed within an extensive barrow, which was covered in a layer of mixed human bones to a depth of three metres. The inscriptions on the side suggest it contains 'the most glorious Archon', and it is conjectured that this was the formal burial of Nadzybar's predecessor, possibly a blood relative.

The overlord of the Archenemy forces, or Archon, was identified as a powerful sect-leader called Nadzybar. Little is known of this creature's origins or background, nor is it properly understood how he came to pre-eminence over the other Magisters. It is possible his authority was based on clan ritual and hereditary power. Certainly, as far as can be made out, Nadzybar had been in command of the Archenemy forces in the Sabbat Worlds since at least 634, and it is possible his rule and influence predates even that. Nadzybar may even have been the warlord to first rally the ruinous powers into retaking the Sabbat Worlds, though this would suggest an unnaturally extended lifespan.

(Right) One of a series of ninety-seven megalithic earthworks on Formal Prime raised circa 745 to commemorate the so-called majesty of the Archon.



++ 50/92 ULTRA-PATCH VIA L-O-S PICTER ++ URGENT ++

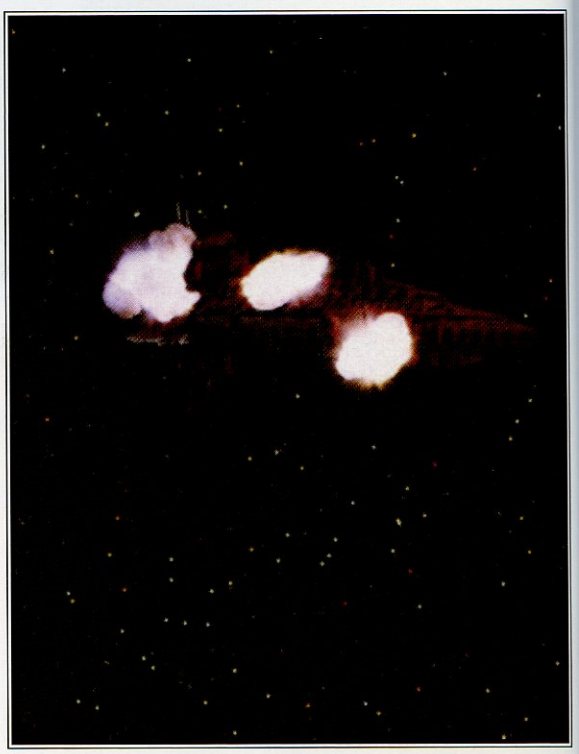
FROM IMPERIAL CRUISER SAINT OMER
++ TAKING SUSTAINED FIRE FROM
SURFACE ++ ARCHENEMY FLEET
ELEMENTS CLOSING ++ THE KARNAK
IS GONE ++ THE DUKE GIANN IS
BURNING ++ THERE IS NO WAY
THROUGH ++ THERE IS NO WAY OUT
++ WE (message terminated)

FIERCE FIGHTING NOW
ALONG SUPPLY LINE EIGHT

REQUEST HEAVY SUPPORT IMMEDIATE

PHASE TWO

THE BLOODY PATH TO BALHAUT,
756 – 764



(Right) **Unidentified enemy warship, possibly the *White Thorn*, on fire off Venady, 760.**

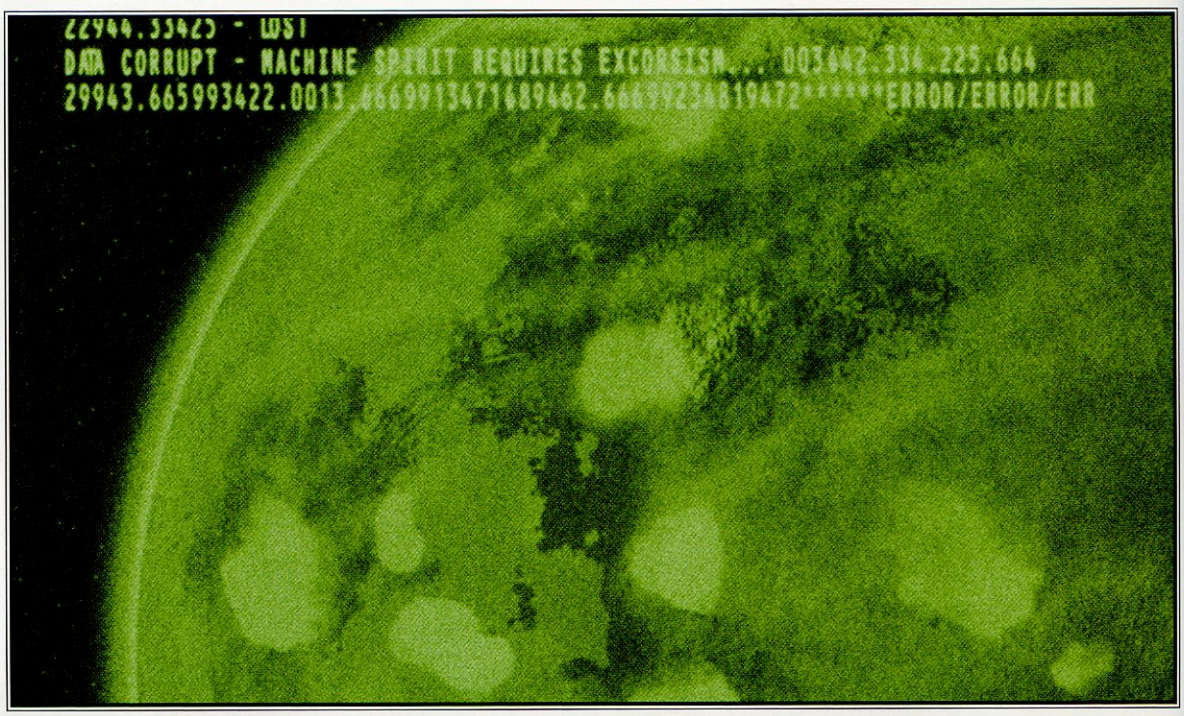
It is hard to tell if Warmaster Slaydo fully appreciated the struggle Operation Newfound would entail when he set it in motion. Certainly, he was aware that opposition was going to be intense, but from his tactical records we can see that he revised his estimated liberation date for Balhaut thirty-seven times between 756 and 761, suggesting that hard slog was slowing down his calculated schedule time and time again.

Slaydo's command was instinctive and fluid. He deftly overlapped one operational phase with another so that no gaps or vulnerabilities in his battle line could be exploited. Newfound sprung immediately from its prequel, Redrake, launching a blistering fan of assaults into the Newfound Trailing from the footholds Redrake had established.

Opposition to the often complex line of Imperial advance came in three forms. First, there were the bodies of enemy population dug into various world sites, armoured against attack and prepared for resistance. These populations – some of them millions strong – were often under the leadership of a sacred charismatic, sometimes a Magister. Secondly, there were the counter-assault forces sent by the Archon to meet the Imperial push. These, in the form of raider fleets and military convoys, were highly mobile and able to concentrate their attacks on the Imperial front echelon, often denying them the clarity and freedom to mount attacks on target worlds. In the last two months of 756 alone, eight significant fleet engagements took place between Gotthrone, Hisk and Halina.

Thirdly there were the mobile opportunists. Smaller in number, these raiding forces were often composed of forces or force-units in retreat from Redrake victories at Long Halent, Onscard and Formal Prime, as well as elements that had abandoned worlds in the face of Imperial advance. The least structured and ordered of the enemy types, the opportunist factions plagued the Crusade deployment by running raids and guerrilla assaults on supply lines and relay depots. At Hesketh, early in 757, an opportunist squadron raided the high anchor dispersal point, destroying three ships of the line, including the medium cruiser *Lord Falchion*. Lord Militant Delayni was subsequently given the job of rooting out these groups of raider opportunists, many of which appeared to be operating behind the line of Imperial advance. Taking good advice from the Navy commanders working with him, Delayni fared well, initially obliterating a raider group off Long Halent in 757, and then two more at Gotthrone in 758. By 760, he had located and annihilated guerrilla squadrons at Venady, and destroyed the notorious raider leader Pater Burbethol during a series of actions at Urus.

(Right) **Fire control pict-feed from the Strike Cruiser *Antipathy*. The surface of Urus lights up as Lord Militant Delayni's suppression raids against Burbethol's strongholds intensifies.**

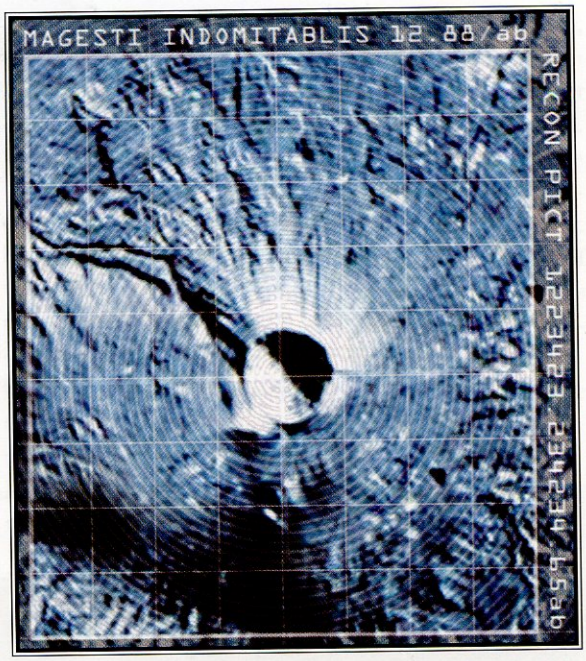


~ ASHEK II ~

The towering hives of Ashek II were occupied by the forces loyal to one of the most notable Magisters encountered in the early years of the Crusade. Heritor Asphodel, so named because of his sworn intention to 'inherit' all Imperial worlds in the name of Chaos, was perhaps the most tactically gifted Magister serving the Archon, rivalled only by the notorious and brilliant Anakwanar Sek. Beyond his talent for strategy, Asphodel also delighted in the creation and employment of grotesque war machines ('woe machines'), many of which it is believed he designed himself. Some authorities (cf Blowmane: *Arts of War*, Esperon and Culeth: *On the Practises of the Archenemy*) speculate that somewhere in Asphodel's background there was some connection to a forge world or even to the Cult Mechanicus itself.

The prosecution of Ashek II had begun early in 756, but the scale of the fighting increased in 757 when Marshal Blackwood was transferred in from Indrid to take command of the Guard forces. Almost at once, Blackwood recognised the futility of sending infantry waves against Asphodel's woe machines, and petitioned Slaydo for significant armour reinforcements. In his journal, in 757, Blackwood wrote: 'The scale of the enemy woe machines is almost unimaginable, the sheer cruelty (of them) extraordinary: great flywheels fixed with blades, scissoring jaws, vast wheels designed purely for crushing, insectoid crawlers breathing flame from draconian snouts. They are the mechanisms of an insane torturer made real and magnified to giant proportions. The Imperial Guard is many things, but in the end, it is only flesh and bone and blood, and these (machines) are fashioned simply to strip and rend and break those mortal substances quite utterly.'

Three brigades of armour, including the Mershan 45th and the 2nd Narmenian Heavy (under Colonel Mazzen), were provided, but real gains were only made when a nearly full strength squadron of Titans arrived to support the assault. This was the first significant deployment of the Adeptus Mechanicus war engines in the Crusade. Though Slaydo had spent a great deal of time and energy coopting the Adeptus into the Crusade force, the priesthood of Mars had been reluctant to field the machines they had supplied, suggesting archly to Slaydo that the monstrous Titans should remain in a 'support role, pending serious misadventure'. This attitude aggrieved Slaydo ('I have Titans to use,' he is reported as saying, 'so let me damn well use them. A sword is of no value until it is drawn.').



***(Left)* Recon pict showing the crater formed by the catastrophic destruction of the Warlord Titan *Majesti Indomitabilis*, lost with all hands when its autoloader magazine was penetrated by rocket attack.**

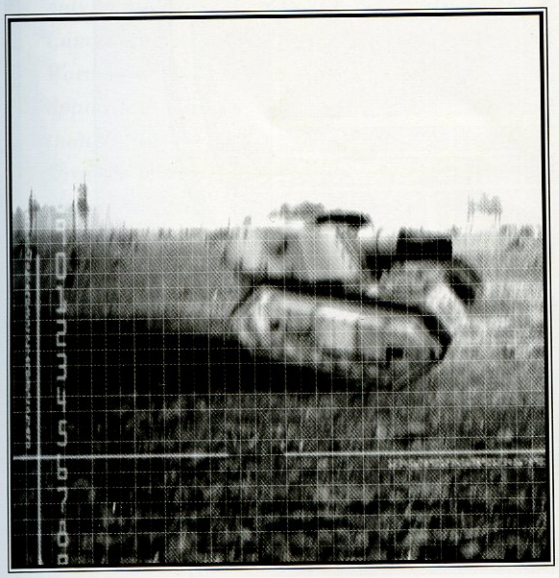
It is believed that Slaydo, with his trademark cunning, goaded the Adeptus in deployment by making sure they were routinely copied on all intelligence traffic from Ashek II, including Colonel Mazzen's suggestion that Heritor Asphodel was somehow connected to the Cult Mechanicus. Dismayed by the inference, the Adeptus deployed immediately, anxious to either prove the conjecture false or wipe out such a blasphemous link. Led by the monumental and ancient Emperor Titan *Imperious Corporalis*, the war machines of Mars engaged the Heritor's murderous 'toys of woe and fatality'. The subsequent battle lasted three months, and afterwards more Guardsmen required psychiatric support to cope with the stress trauma caused by the sheer scale of the machine combat they had witnessed than actually needed medical treatment for wounds.

The term 'burning ladders to hell', now commonly used to describe the fiery destruction of any tall hive city, was coined by Marshal Blackwood while he observed the conflagration consuming several of Ashek II's monumental sky-steeples.

In defeat, Heritor Asphodel fled Ashek II. His unique brand of spite would not be encountered again until Balhaut.

'Everywhere we looked, giant metal gods duelled with giant metal daemons. The very ground gasped at the weight of them, the very sky shook. We were like ants under their feet. As tiny as ants. Of no more [expletive excised] consequence than ants.'

~ Trooper first class Kel Greydi, Echo Company, Pragar 6th, after Ashek II



***(Left)* Colonel Mazzen's Narmenian Heavies lead the charge through the Western Defile, High Hive, Ashek II.**

'I, for one, was bloody glad to see the Snakes power in. Beautiful bastards, they are. I owe them my life and my soul.'

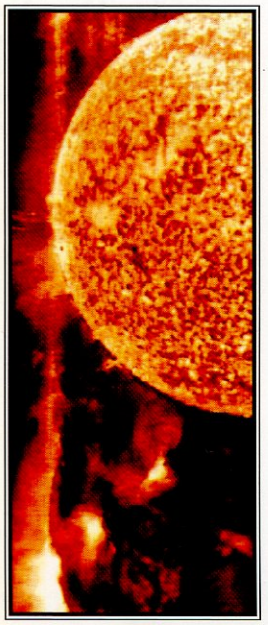
~ Major Goff Kurtane, 9th Radial Sarpoy (Support Weapons)

During the planning stages at Khulan, prior to Crusade commencement, Ambold Eleven had regularly been proposed as one of the likely opening phase targets. Its strategic importance on the trailing edge of the Sabbat Worlds had been particularly championed by Lord Militant General Hechtor Dravere, who favoured what was known as the 'Mid-line Assault' theory, which had the backing of a clique amongst the command cadre staff. As late as a week before commencement, Ambold Eleven was still on the table, but at the final hour, Slaydo overruled the scheme, and formalised the Opening Phase Acquisition Plan (OPAP 176/1) that became known as Operation Redrake (q.v.).

Thus, Ambold Eleven became instead a target for the second phase, Operation Newfound, and the assault began in the middle of 756. A swift and brutal fleet action commanded by Admiral Karslae decimated the orbital forts and destroyed enemy shipping at both high and low anchor, allowing troop forces under General Dilen Belfry to execute an overnight drop from orbit into the enemy strongholds of Pelbury Civitas, Upper Ganff and Amboldus Hive. Three waves of troop attacks were driven back by the Archenemy between days 201 and 288 of that year. The enemy forces dug in at those locations were not especially well supplied or

(Right) **Pelbury Civitas, Ambold Eleven, as recorded by the Tacticae Imperialis. Note the concentric wall defences that created the dead-spaces of crossfire known as 'Begulin's Folly'.**

(Below) **In flare activity surrounding the photosphere of the Ambold system's local star, it is possible to see the death-flashes of three archenemy warships, hounded to destruction by Karslae's fleet.**



formidable, but they benefited massively from the sturdy concentric wall defences of the Ambold citadels. Nine and a half thousand Guardsmen were lost trying to breach those walls.

Belfry himself was killed in a mortar attack. His subordinate, Colonel Begulin of the Sarpoy Regiments, attempted to consolidate the losses, but foolishly managed to trap the main portion of his forces at Pelbury Civitas between the third and fourth wall lines. Frantic signals were sent. Warriors of the Iron Snakes Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes, en route to Sverren, voluntarily diverted and made assault on the Ambold Eleven target cities to relieve the pinned and desperate Guard forces. Their attack was timely and, witnesses agree, extraordinary. Heedless of their own safety, the Space Marines of proud Ithaka came in via drop-pods and put Pelbury Civitas and Amboldus Hive to the sword. Twenty-nine thousand Archenemy troopers were slaughtered, with a loss of only eight Iron Snakes, a victorious feat that is still celebrated in song and story. Upper Ganff fell a week later. Under the command of Brother Captain Pheus, the Iron Snakes stormed the wall ring and executed the Archenemy leaders by crurifracture.

Colonel Begulin was subsequently executed by the Commissariat for his gross leadership errors.

(Above) **Merit crests issued to Karslae and his first captain, after Ambold Eleven.**

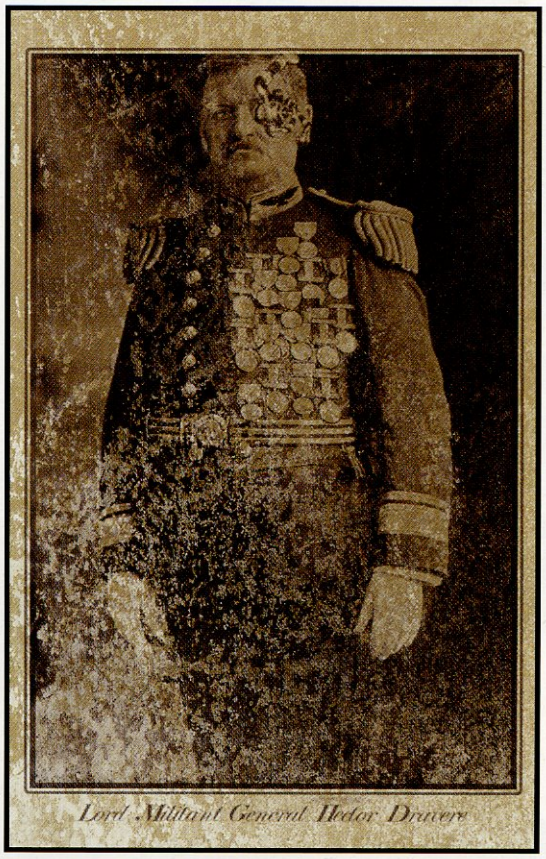
HECHTOR DRAVERE

An old school, traditionalist commander, Dravere was for a long time the most heavily decorated and commended officer in the Segmentum Pacificus. In a long career prior to the Sabbat Crusade, he had taken many victories, usually with the aid of his favoured Guard regiment, the Jantine Patricians. Characterised as a blowhard and a rigid thinker, who deserved only a few of the medals he wore, Dravere is easy to dismiss, but it is worth remembering that, as a commander of men, he won Parfelis from the orks in 730, subjugated the Frateris Uprising on Skolnik in 737, orchestrated the Balance Wars in the Kartheope System 740–743, and was one of the first commanders to encounter and survive the tyranid menace.

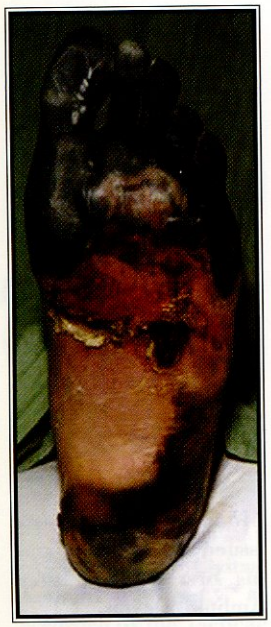
Dravere's main failing was his stiffness and lack of motility in command. He was an infamous waster of men (he once claimed he could choke the Eye of Terror if he had enough men to march into it), and his superior attitude made him few friends in High Command. Participating, though only in support, during the Khulan Campaign, Dravere fully expected to rise to Warmaster, and was dismayed to see Slaydo appointed. The two men were never friends, though Slaydo had sense enough to treat Dravere with apparent respect. It is understood that Slaydo rejected Ambold Eleven as a primary assault target simply because Dravere championed it, and in that alone we may see the fallibility of great men. Slaydo did not want to garnish Dravere with any credit for the opening assault, and Ambold Eleven simply did not fit neatly into the long cherished plan of attack he had drawn up in his **A Reasoned Approach To The Reconquest of the Sabbat Territories** ***in 732. It is perhaps significant that Slaydo charged Dravere (along with General Akkensor) with the 'easy' win at Long Halent during Redrake.***

Self-promoting and notoriously ambitious, Dravere needled Slaydo right up to the latter's death in 765, and then politically fought other contenders, such as Cybon, for promotion to Warmaster in Slaydo's place. He was famously unsuccessful.

A bitter man, Dravere was killed in action during the assault on Menazoid Epsilon, less than eight months after Slaydo's death, in late 765.



Lord Militant General Hector Dravere



***(Above)* Frostbite, along with trench foot, claimed many victims during the forced march across the Vovof Tundra (pict courtesy Medicae Diagnostic Register).**

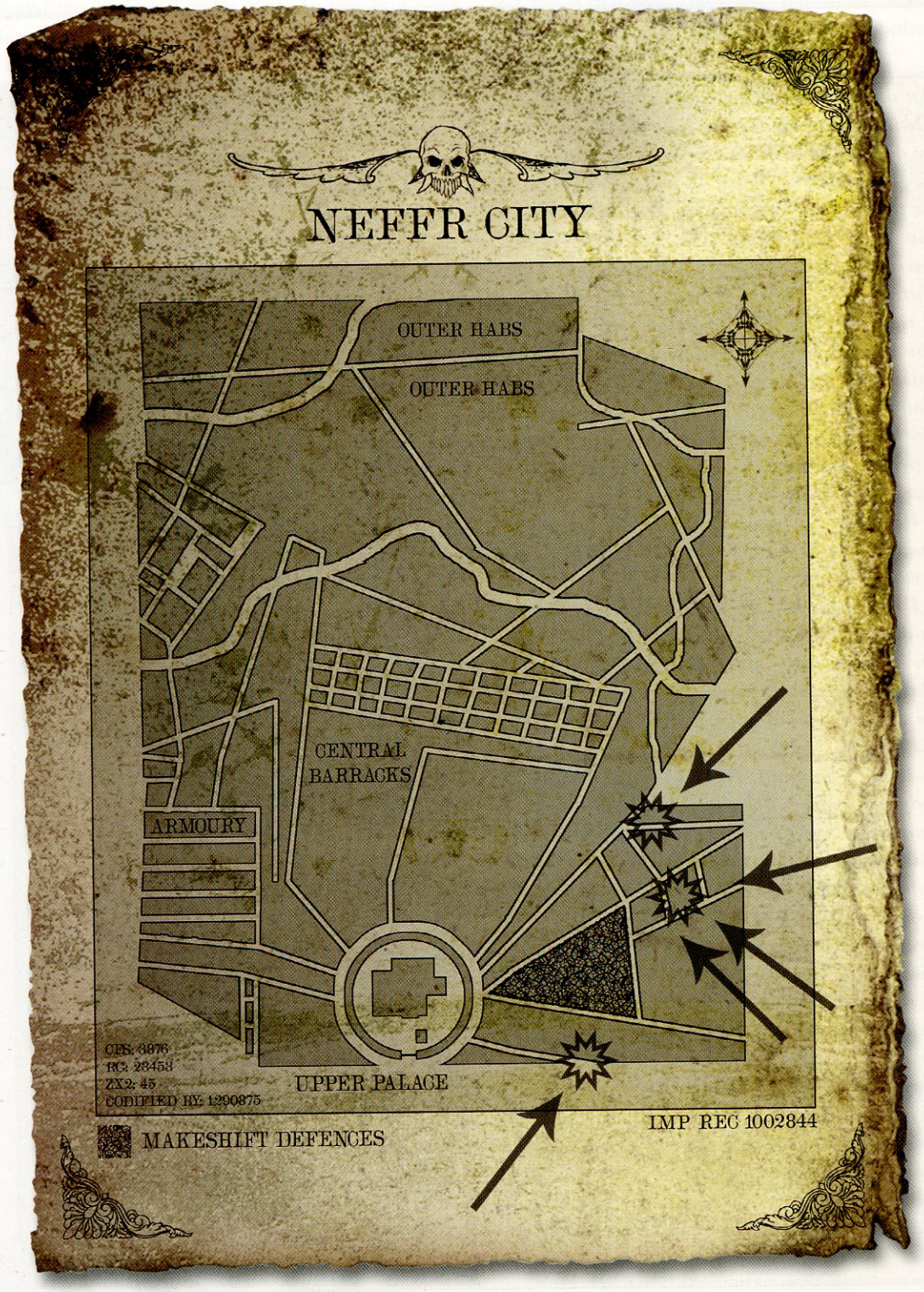
***(Right)* Tacticae plan of Neffr City, showing the focus of Bulledin's assault.**

'I like them birds. They bring down the fire.'
~ Trooper Mel Androvy, 345th Karusar, of the air assault.

Strategically central to the region known as the Holy Visage (so named for its apparent simulacrum to the face of Saint Sabbat beati when viewed from coreward at a distance of 19.3 parsecs/resolved), Sverren was a key world in the remit of Operation Newfound. Guard legions commanded by Lord Militant Humel and General Bulledin invaded at Candlemas, 757, and routed the hostile forces gathered under Magister Kuvelo, who perished during the initial assault.

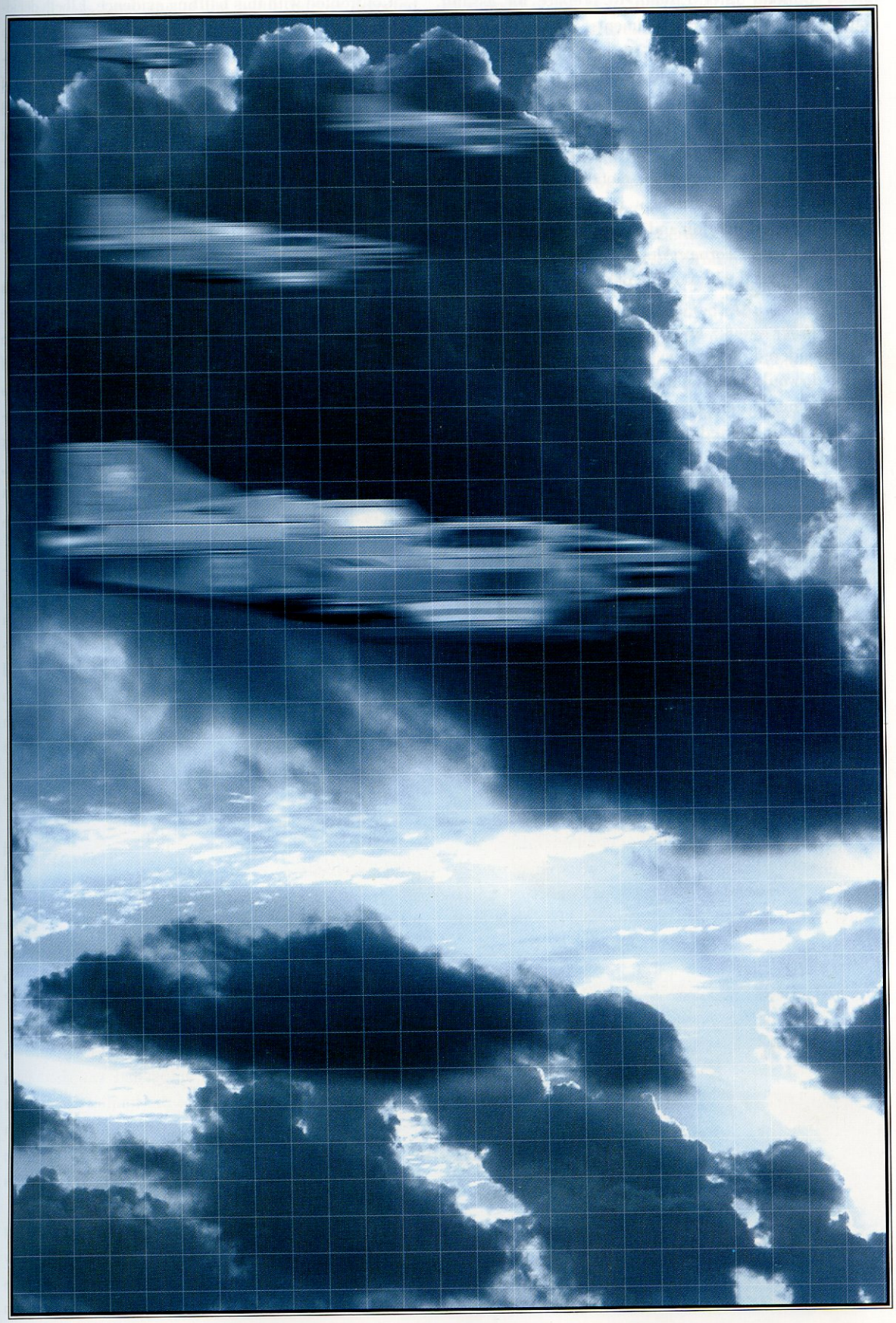
However, the assault stymied and was forced to dig in because of bad weather. The fleeing warriors of the Archenemy were able to regroup and attempt a repulse of the Imperial forces, concentrating their efforts on Neffr City and the pier towns of Colchis and Rammery.

Braving the winter storms and heavy rain, Bulledin pushed his battalions south and then west across the Vovof tundra, and encircled Rammery, which fell after a short siege. Humel focused on Colchis, and

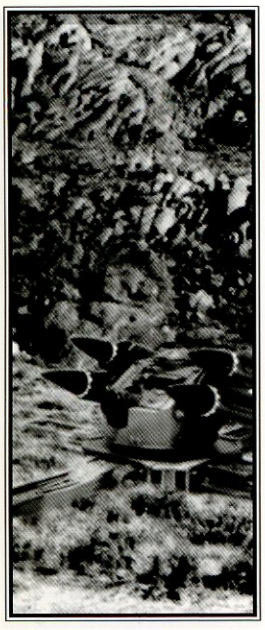


eventually won air superiority after a six-week aerial campaign (Humel was to become famous for his habit of favouring air power, most significantly at Enothis in 773.M41 q.v.).

Neffr City was a harder nut to crack. During eight weeks of assault, into the summer of 758, Bulledin lost three thousand men for the gain of two kilometres. Faced with such a failure, the noble Bulledin offered his resignation to Slaydo. It was refused. 'Do it again,' Slaydo sent back as a despatch. Bulledin did so. On the 241st day of 758, backed by a single Warlord Titan (*Victrix Impassionata*) loaned by the Cult Mechanicus, Bulledin's forces overran the walls of Neffr City and stormed the Upper Palace. Pater Bucher, the Magister's second, died resisting capture.



***(Left)* Thunderbolts of the 5th Khulan Flight Wing roll in on the target, Colchis.**



(Above) **One of the ominously abandoned defence batteries on Fornax Aleph.**

Fornax Aleph, as well as being the location of a famous Imperial victory, was also the site of one of the most unnerving and inexplicable episodes of the early Crusade. By 757, long-range fleet recon had established Fornax Aleph to be an enemy bastion with significant hive cities and what appeared to be a fleet reserve. Heavy fighting was expected in-system, and Slaydo directed an invasion force of the Guard, under General Jater Elbeth, to prepare for assault. Elbeth's resource of nine regiments, two of which were armour brigades, was to be further reinforced by the Iron Snakes, fresh from their intervention at Ambold Eleven the previous year.

The assault was delayed twice because of warp-storm activity, the second outbreak of which forced the Iron Snake battle barges into a four-month holding pattern at the Albina Beacon. Elbeth's invasion fleet suffered warp-storm perturbation and was scattered. As a result, Elbeth arrived at Fornax Aleph with only a third of his complement, and with no sign of the promised Astartes support.

Elbeth, a cautious man of great tactical wit (Elbeth was considered one of Slaydo's 'rising stars' and, had he lived, would have undoubtedly risen to the rank of lord militant and enjoyed full army command), initially, and rightly, aborted his assault run, realising that he was too poorly supplied with men and munitions to take an entire world. He moved his carrier ships to an out-system translation point, and prepared to hold there until reinforcements arrived or, in the event of attack, translate out to safety.

However, Elbeth decided not to waste the opportunity of being so close to the target world, and directed the Rapid Pursuit Frigate *Ziegler* to undertake an intruder pass through the Fornax Aleph inner system to assess enemy strength and disposition. The operation took place on the 303 day of 757. To the bafflement of Elbeth's tacticae staff, the *Ziegler* encountered zero resistance. No orbital defence batteries fired on it, no ships were launched to engage. The *Ziegler* reported the high-anchor points and orbital yards to be entirely empty of ships, either military or commercial.

Furthermore, it found no trace whatsoever of electromagnetic activity on the world's surface. No vox substrate, no power or industry, no motion. The great hives of Fornax Aleph read as empty and dead.

(Right) **Pict of an Iron Snakes lander during the assault drop onto Fornax Aleph.**

No fault could be identified in either the *Ziegler*'s findings or its auspex systems. The following day, the cruiser *Claudia*, Elbeth's flagship, repeated the run. Identical results were obtained. Not only was there no sign of human life in Fornax Aleph's hives, the hinterlands and countryside were also empty, quashing the notion that the inhabitants had fled the cities for the safety of the rural interior.

Confronted with this baffling evidence, Elbeth decided to take advantage and land a spearhead force in advance of the reinforcements. A week after the intruder passes, he deployed his units: two full regiments of Wrawbach Heavy Infantry (the 34th and the 52nd 'Fighting Felids') and the Vitrian 10th Armoured Brigade, a total of sixteen thousand men and eight hundred fighting vehicles.

The assault, by drop and lifter, was made at night, and bracketed the central hive of Chysoom. Elbeth led his forces in person.

There was no resistance. Elbeth's forces found a world entirely devoid of life. The great hives were empty, as if the vast population had vanished in an instant. Half eaten meals were found on hab tables, half finished games of regicide in street parlours. There was no power, but it was easily restored by a team of enginseers. Elbeth initially suspected plague or some other Great Mortality, but there were no bodies or burial pits, no sign of struggle or disaster. The population of Fornax Aleph had simply disappeared, without explanation, leaving behind an eerie, vacant world.

Elbeth fortified his position in preparation for reinforcement. It is evident from his log that he was unnerved, and a sense of haunted discomfort settled on his men, even the ordinarily stoic Vitrians. Most chillingly of all, odd, anguished screams were reported throughout the hives, often at the dead of night. No source or origin for the screams was ever found. Elbeth sent extensive reports back to Slaydo, appraising the Warmaster of what he called 'the fearful absence we have uncovered'. On the first day of 758, transmissions from Elbeth's liberation force ceased.

Delayed by the warp-storms, the Iron Snakes arrived on Fornax Aleph eighty days later. Three hundred strong, they made planet-drop immediately, under the command of Brother Captain Cules. The normally unruffled demeanour of the proud Iron Snakes was markedly absent from their brief initial signal 'To Slaydo, Warmaster. My lord, there is no one here at all.'

Fornax Aleph was as empty as Elbeth had found it. Distressingly, there was now no sign of Elbeth and his liberation force either. His ships had vanished from orbit, and there was no sign of the landed units, apart from two drop pods that were washed up on the beach at Sydronal. Whatever mysterious fate had befallen the population of Fornax Aleph had now overtaken Elbeth's men too.

The Iron Snakes spent a month scouring the planet for clues, and their battle barges searched the nearby in-system. No sign of Elbeth, or his sizeable force, was discovered, save for a single Vitrian tank, a Leman

Russ Conqueror that was found eighty storeys up on the roof of a hab stack in Chysoom. All the vox headsets were missing, apart from the last thirty centimetres of cord plugged into the outlets. The ends of the cords had been severed and somehow fused. No sign of the crew remained, apart from a single gauntlet, in which a calcified human hand was found, still gripping the gearbox lever.

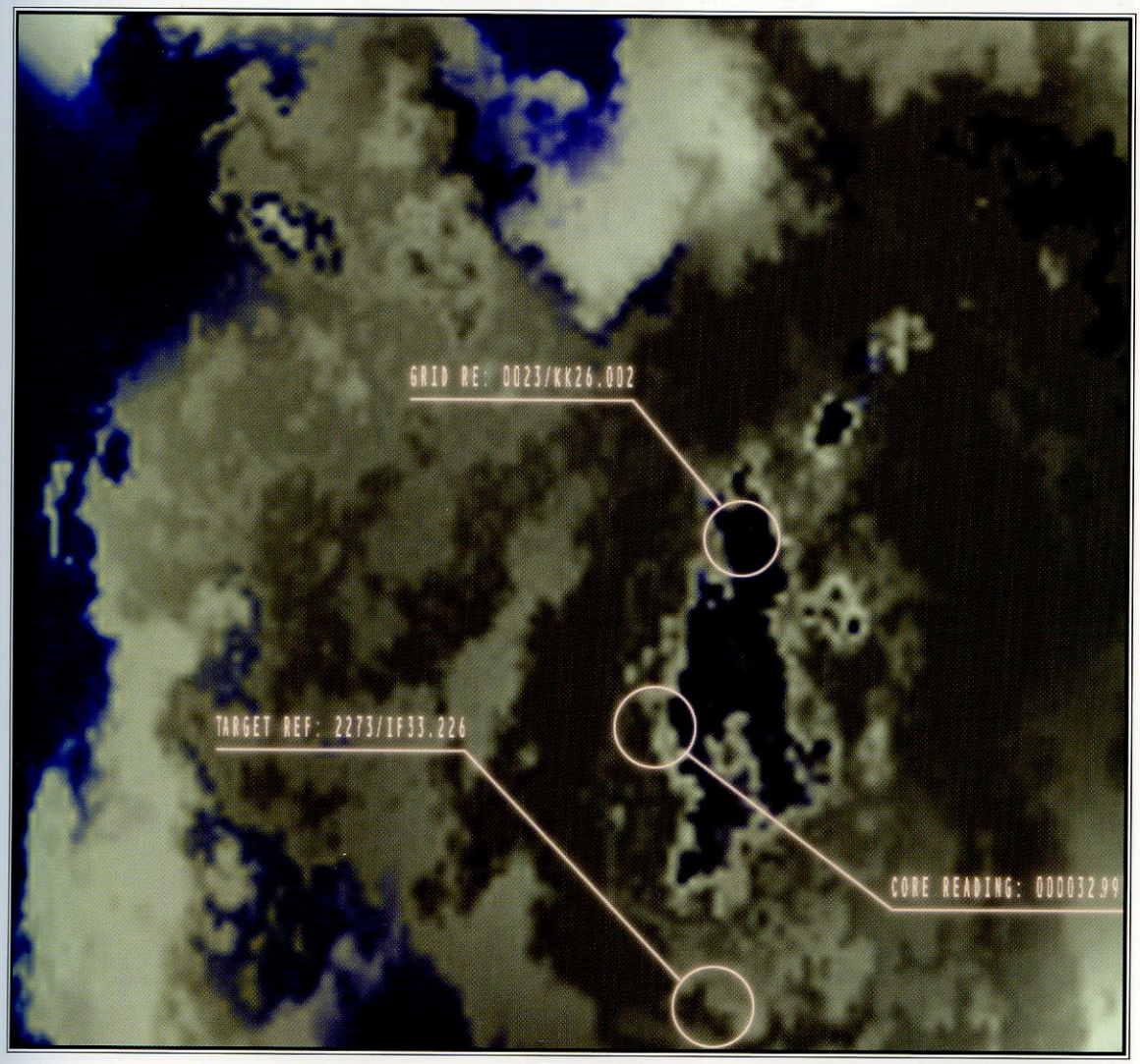
Three days later, one of the battle barges detected what appeared to be the *Claudia* in fatal orbit around the system's sun. The ship, whatever it was, succumbed to gravity and was burned up before it could be formally identified.

It is only proper to suggest that the Iron Snakes were unsettled by the situation. Slaydo signalled them to withdraw before a similar nameless fate befell them too, but on the 130th day of 757, circumstances changed again, dramatically. A comet or meteor, previously undetected, struck Fornax Aleph in the polar regions. The impact was catastrophic, and many great natural disasters followed, including the collapse of the Northern Ice Shelf and the eruption of a volcanic chain in the southern hemisphere. The Iron Snakes rode out the devastation, and the nuclear winter that followed. But the impact had brought with it a more shocking consequence. Hordes of daemons, or 'daemon-things', infested the empty planet, pouring out of the blasted north to congregate around the hives. A ghastly, furious war then began, with the Iron Snakes besieged by the infernal beasts. For a fuller account of this, the reader is directed to Feswick's masterful *Long Night of Daemony* and also the Archives of the Renowned Chapter of Ithaka, codex 3345.6, spool 4591.

In the first month of 759, the delayed portions of Elbeth's assault force arrived in-system and deployed in support of the Iron Snakes, but by then the valiant Marines had destroyed the daemonic enemy and emerged victorious. This 'long battle through the endless night', as Cules called it, had cost them dearly, but Fornax Aleph had been cleansed. The heroic fortitude of the Iron Snakes had now won them two of the most famous victories in the early Crusade, though both feats would be eclipsed by their later efforts at Presarius.

No viable explanation for the Fornax Aleph 'vanishings' has ever been made. Certainly, as various sources have suggested (cf. Feswick, Burburek, Kerondys et al), the influence of the warp-storm disturbance afflicting the area should not be discounted. At the time of writing, Fornax Aleph has been garrisoned by the Imperium for fifteen years, and a program of re-colonisation is underway to repopulate the empty hives. No further 'vanishings' have been experienced, or any other significant strangeness, although reports of unexplained screams in the dead of night continue to this day.

***(Above)* Liquor flask of a bleakly humorous design popular amongst the Guard forces garrisoning Fornax Aleph. On the reverse, an inscription reads, 'Drink deep, for who knows what the night may bring?'**



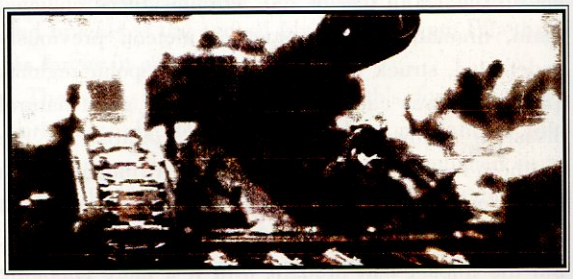
***(Left)* Chysoom Hive, Fornax Aleph. From the initial auspex scans of the frigate *Ziegler*. The absence of heat/activity returns is marked.**

Many in Slaydo's 'inner circle', and in that of his successor, eventually came to regard Cociaminus as a poisoned chalice. Known as the 'world that refused to die', Cociaminus is certainly one of the most problematic targets in the Newfound Trailing. Some sources estimate it has collectively cost more Imperial lives to take and retake Cociaminus over the years than were lost in the siege of Morlond, the notorious Fortress World. This is entirely probable. Only the archives of the Holy Munitorum can assess the losses fully, but it is a reasonable conjecture that, between 760 and 773, over eight million Imperial Guardsmen perished fighting for the planet.

The start had been auspicious. A wing of Slaydo's Operation Newfound dubbed the 'second front' reached Cociaminus in 760, and a series of assaults were made under the command of General Kelso and General Forgues (the latter replaced after two months by Lord Militant Vichres, following an argument between Forgues and the Warmaster). Kelso, famous for his trust in armour, directed the main thrust of the assault, winning three hive cities (Harshen, Bolliqen and Nazeth) in a six-month period. He deployed the Narmenian 1st Armoured, under Colonel (later General) Grizmund in a punishment of the outer habs of Harshen where resistance was strongest. Two significant tank battles took place on the dune seas outside Harshen, and Grizmund won his spurs and sealed the reputation that would take him on to later glory.

Despite such triumphs, the war on Cociaminus was tediously sluggish. After an extensive and punishing ground war, the world was finally taken in 762. By then, Vichres had been killed (during the infamous Sabre Bridge debacle), but, despite the cost, another line of advance had been created towards the all-important Balhaut.

Cociaminus' future was to be troubled. Following Balhaut, it was retaken twice by the fleeing forces of the Archenemy, and three further campaigns, each one long and bitter, were fought there, the last one ending in Imperial domination in 773.

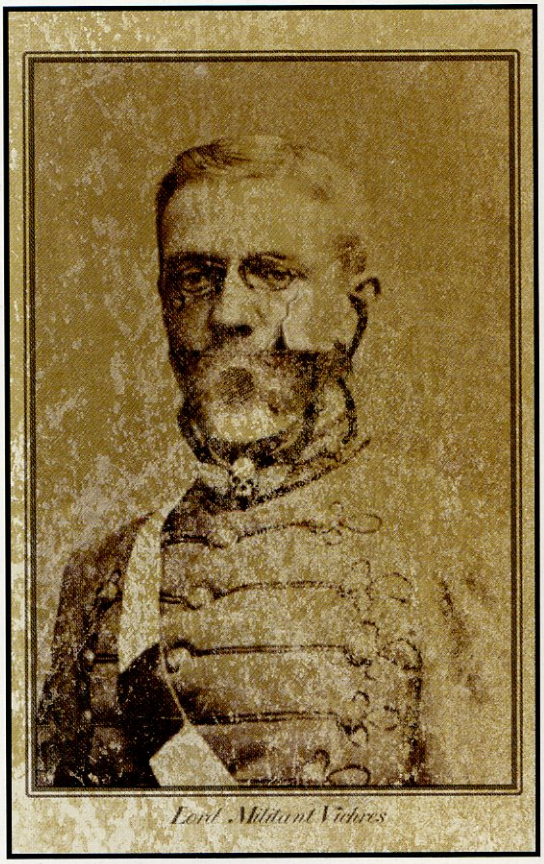


(Right) **Narmenian armour units prosecute the second of the decisive tank battles outside Harshen, 761.**

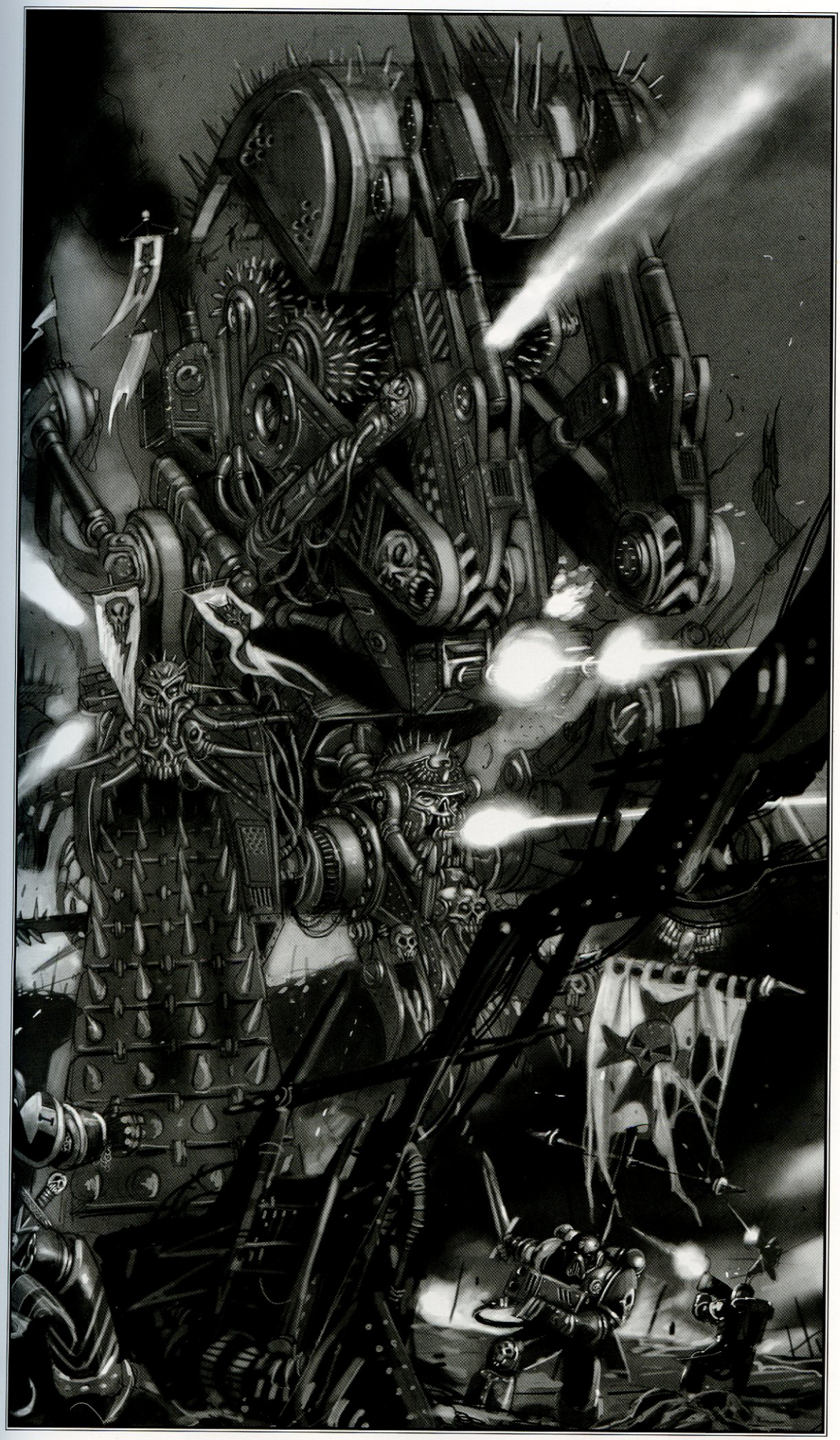
LORD MILITANT VICHRES

Lord Militant Vichres was certainly one of the most senior officers to die during Operation Newfound. An old friend and stalwart ally of Slaydo, Vichres was sent to Cociaminus to depose General Forgues, whose behaviour had become increasingly erratic. Contemporary sources describe Vichres as 'solid' and 'reliable', from which it might be supposed that he was not an especially gifted tactical commander, but this evaluation does not do the man credit. Vichres had a particular talent for leadership that might be regarded as a 'common touch', and was regularly to be found at the front line, dealing with officers first hand and mixing with the regular infantry.

This very visible leadership style made him a popular figure, though it may also account for his demise. Advancing to Santries Point at Nazeth to co-ordinate troop disposition, Vichres was supplied with erroneous intelligence reports suggesting that the highway at Sabre Bridge was clear for safe passage. Vichres and forty-seven men in his retinue, were killed in an armour ambush. The source of the misleading intelligence was never established, though it is possible it was a devious trick of misinformation orchestrated by the enemy. Vichres was buried with full honours at the Imperial Temple at Harshen, though his tomb was later and most disgracefully defiled and robbed by Archenemy forces in 766.



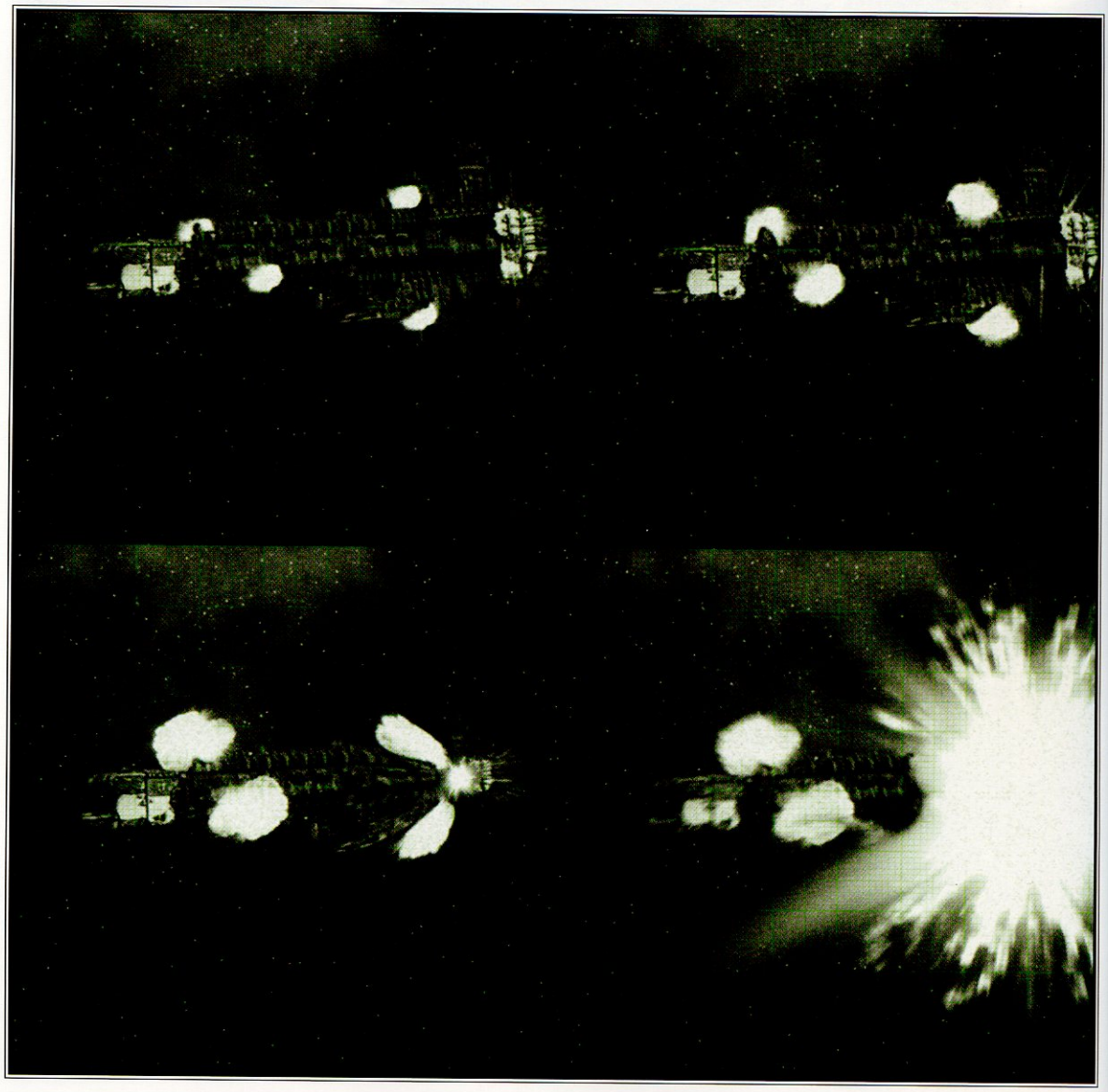
Lord Militant Vichres



(Left) **Artist's rendition, from Marshal Blackwood's own eyewitness accounts, of one of the notorious 'woe machines' encountered on Ashek II in 757. Asphodel's mechanical blasphemies would be met on several further occasions (Painting detail courtesy of the Collection of the Honorarium, Balhaut).**

(*Right*) 1st Narmenian, commanded by Captain Bell Gustig.

(*Right*) Sequenced pict capture showing the destruction of the *Godefroy Magnificat* during the Cociaminus assault.



Casualty Listings

CONFIDENTIAL

AV:23
BC: 234.6
WTD: 345
QQD: A/B
DTD: A
TOG: 32423
ASD: 34
TGT: 324

Casualty listings for the period ending 244.762.AB1

Locality: Cociaminus. Data collected from field observers and Joint Medical staff tabulated via records held at Principle Imperial Field station, Kerasha

Unit	base figure	of which dead
3rd Devash	244	235
Bale Highlanders	45	22
21st Sarpoy	4[illegible]	215 (est)
11th Polladen	1234	774
Kirven Light (aux)	74	74
St Khoran 88th	2345	2257
St Khoran 81st	571	472
Pragar 20th	1234	1211 (est)
Pragar 13th	211	71
Pragar 46th (light)	125	97
Manth Grenadiers	157	107
303rd Smothrace	2317	1999
Ontanople Rifles	2[illegible]74	1982
Ontanople Pioneers	21	12
Latarii Gundogs	347	278
Narmenian 1st	21	17
Narmenian 3rd	41	21
Urdesh 33rd	432	432

Other remarks:

Kerasha Sector heard unconfirmed losses of 234
2nd Light Cavalry (skirmishers) all contact lost (2341 units) pending update

Ratified by the office of Munitorium

Prefect James Doherty

Statement authorised this 244th day of 762 by commanding officer, theatre, General Kelso

Kelso

Imperial Records office 45629/AB/123

(Left) **Copy of one of the periodic casualty statements, Cociaminus. The steady attrition of manpower is all too evident.**

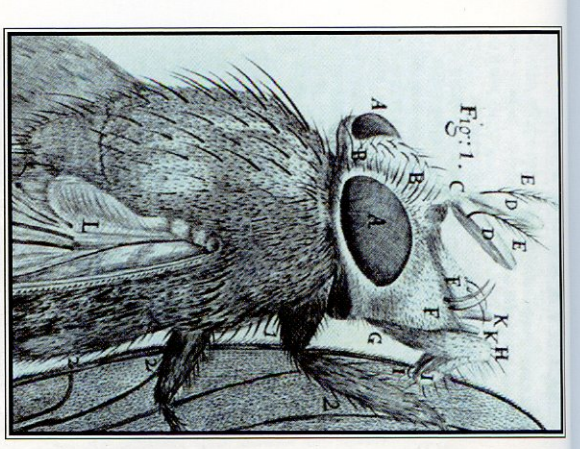
(Right) Southern Continental Leaf-tick, Sverren. Extraordinarily toxic, this insect directly caused the deaths of 1,671 Guardsmen during the Second Sverren Campaign.

The bitter and protracted warfare on Cociaminus was just one of the significant impediments weathered by Operation Newfound. Outbreaks of rosepock distemper on Formal Prime and Lucius aggravated the speed of reinforcement delivery to the frontline, and Eco's Hope was rendered unviable as a staging world between 758 and 759 due to an unexpectedly severe drought and famine.

Then, in 760, just as Slaydo was beginning to believe that Newfound was at last winning him enough ground to strike at Balhaut, a fierce and bloody counter-assault, led by Archon Nadzybar himself, ripped through the territory midline. Sverren, which had been in Imperial hands since 758, was overrun. For the second time in five years, the planet found itself the site of major warfare.

This time, the fighting was focused in the tropical Southern Continent. General Bulledin, whose experience of the land war on Sverren two years prior had hardly been good, found himself charged with the command of the Imperial Forces. His orders were to 'deny the enemy advantage' and hold Sverren's key fuel depots until relief forces could reach him.

Perhaps reminded of his earlier struggles with the Sverren theatre, Bulledin orchestrated a bold and successful resistance. 'This place will not belabour me twice,' he wrote in his journals. His determination may



have been vital in preserving the morale of the Imperial forces. In 761, when the relief convoys arrived, it was finally determined that Bulledin's armies had been resisting both Magister Sholen Skara, commanding his atrocious brethren the Kith, and the hosts of Archon Nadzybar himself. The Archenemy forces were driven back to the jungle-walled cities of the Southern Continent, where they stood firm in the face of serious attack.

After sixteen months the Archenemy strengths were broken, and they fell into disarray, the momentum of their counter-strike spent. Skara and the Archon began their retreat, via a lengthy but undecided scrap on Valens 160, to the final kismet on Balhaut itself.

(Right) Bomber sorties against Sverren's southern walled cities begin to weaken the grip of Archon Nadzybar.

(Left) **Page from Feswick's *Operational Critique of The Pacificus Crusades.***

Blood, sweat and providence

Examined on a broader scope, the fortunes of the Later Imperial Crusades, especially those conducted in the Sabbat Worlds and the Recondite Spiral, may be characterised by certain 'tipping points', or moments of pivot, where the entire prosperity of the overall schemes depend on the result of smaller, discrete actions or events. Some, such as Balhaut (765) or Macaroth's deliberate overstretching of his resources in the Khan Group (772-773), were quite clearly significant at the time, but the most interesting tipping points, from the historian's perspective, are those where the negative ramifications were not obvious until much later.

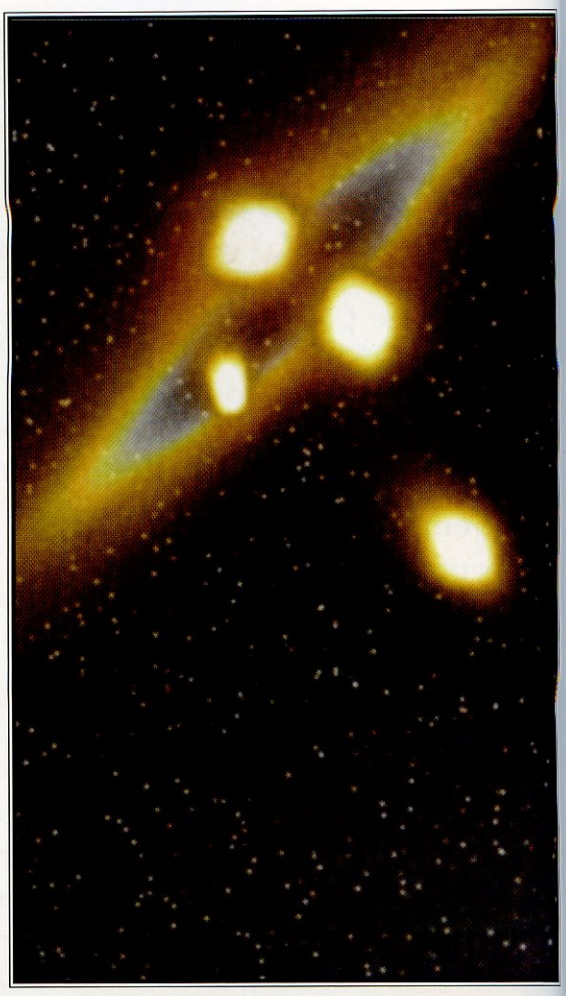
Good examples of this would be Kranstien's refusal to abandon Recondite Alpha and the second war fought on Sverren (760–762). This latter campaign is often mentioned as an inspiring footnote concerning the determination of one man (Bulledin) to succeed cleanly where he had previously struggled. Bulledin was driven by his pride, and it is evident he did not appreciate the full scale of the opposition until much later. Had a less determined man been in command of the Sverren holding forces or, indeed, if Bulledin had been more aware of the odds against him, it is likely that Sverren would have been lost by Midwinter 760. Here, we may observe the 'what if?' of a true tipping point, for an Archenemy victory on Sverren would have ripped a catastrophic division across the mid-line of Slaydo's advance, and undoubtedly caused the Crusade to collapse in upon itself. Right up until his death, Slaydo remained coy on the matter, and refused to be drawn into speculation, but he must have been aware of how close his Crusade had come to failure and how, by the Emperor's grace, a small measure of blood, sweat and providence had swung the pivot of fate in his direction.

{9}

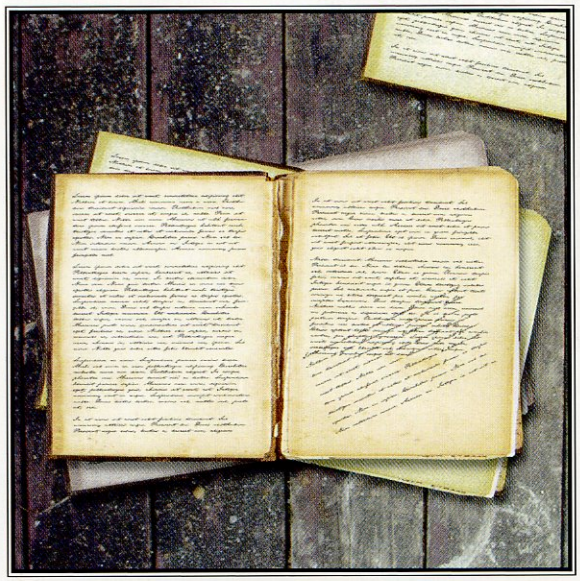
(Right) Drive flares recorded as fleet components accelerate towards their translation point during the advance on Balhaut.

Slaydo's patience was wearing thin. Not in his wildest dreams had he imagined the second phase of the war would take so long to accomplish. Voices around him, especially those of Cybon and Dravere, urged him to reconsider tactics and review the formulation of the Crusade. Balhaut had been Slaydo's cherished goal since the start of hostilities. He regarded it as a target of both tactical and psychological import. In his journals in 763, Slaydo wrote:

'They come to me, like sour dogs, bewailing the slog, lamenting the losses, but it is only quick, fast glory they desire. Rascals championing alternate schemes of war petition me daily. I send them away. We have a scheme of war, one that has taken us [this long] to engineer. I will not be turned from it now. What, and waste the lives that have been lost? The suggestion is treason. The Rook* berates me with calls for a rimward approach, and I know that the Old Gong** fancies those chances. Let them yap. It has always been Balhaut. It will always be Balhaut. These worlds turn upon that axis.'



***(Right) The Collected Writings of Faltornus*, Elzepin Edition, from Slaydo's own collection. Found amongst the Warmaster's possessions after his death, the work was heavily annotated in Slaydo's own hand, and contained over one thousand and fifty place–marks of torn note paper (Reproduction courtesy of the Collection of the Honorarium, Balhaut).**



From the minutes of High Command briefings, we may discern the alternative plans proposed by the likes of Cybon and Dravere and the commanders close to them. Cybon was all for rejecting Balhaut and turning the scope of the Crusade rimwards with the intention of annexing the sparsely defended Nubila Reach and the Belt of Uristes, providing a swift and direct route to the industrial worlds of the Newfound Trailing, such as Fortis Binary, Ornetta, Verghast and Licero. Dravere favoured a similar tactical expression, while other extremists, including Lord Generals Curell and Demanth, recommended an actual halt of a year or two so that Imperial acquisitions could be consolidated and a new border firmly established from which future Crusade phases might be launched.

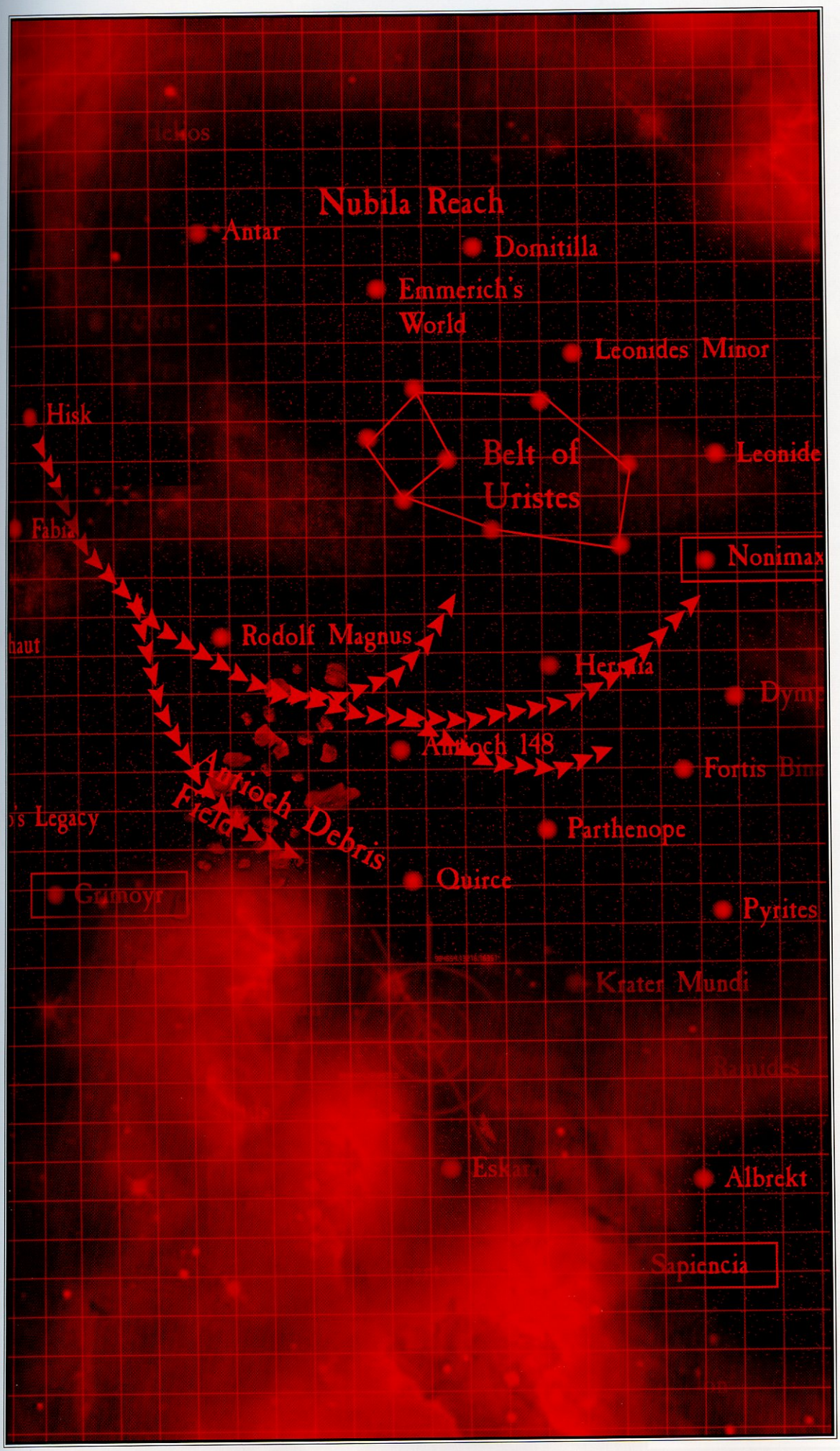
All the alternatives had some degree of merit, and it is tempting to see simple stubbornness as the reason for Slaydo's refusal to compromise. But Slaydo's fixation with Balhaut had genuine tactical sense to it. It was undoubtedly a key world, governing as it did most lateral shipping routes, and was served by a number of crucial Mandeville points. The Archon considered it very much a 'seat of power', and to oust the Archenemy from Balhaut was to deliver a body blow to the Archon's pride and sense of power. Furthermore, Slaydo believed that a rimward turn around Balhaut would leave the Crusade force dangerously exposed along its coreward flank, a vulnerability that might persist for years if the Imperial forces did not neutralise Balhaut and its neighbouring strongholds.

One further reason for Slaydo's conviction may be found in his journal, an entry dated 023.758:

'Balhaut [remains] my desire and my objective, even yet. I walk in Her Steps, and what mattered to Faltornus matters to me too.'

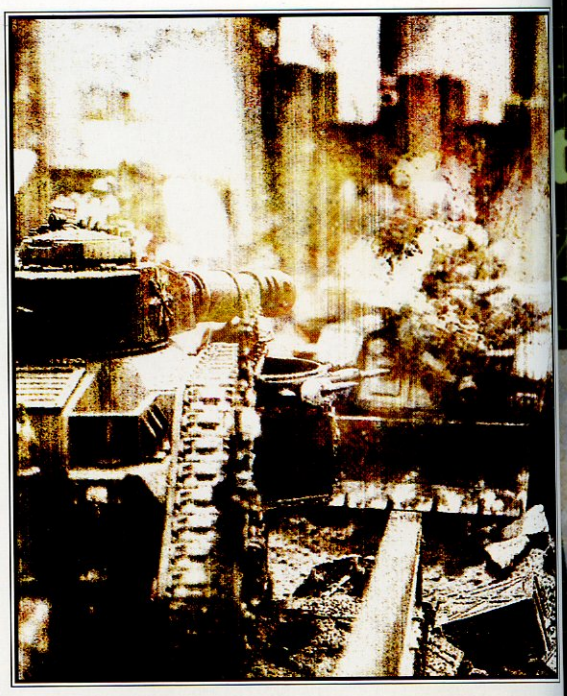
This passing comment is easy to overlook, and Slaydo certainly never used it as an argument with the likes of Cybon. But the inference is clear: Balhaut had been a strongly contested world during St Sabbat beati's original campaign, and her great advisor, Faltornus, whom Slaydo especially admired, had been very direct and forthright in his opinion of its importance. As in so many aspects of his warfare in the Sabbat Worlds, Slaydo was paying great respect to the wisdom and beliefs of the figures that had inspired him to undertake the Crusade in the first place.

** Slaydo's private name for Cybon, referring to the Lord Militant's warcrest of black carrion birds.*
*** Dravere. Slaydo's nickname mocks the Lord General's conspicuous display of medals and honours.*



(Left) **Chart detail showing Cybon's proposed rimward expedition, circa 763 (Tacticae Imperialis Archives, slate 456.56, annex 34i.K)**

(Top right) Gun-cam pict capture. Unidentified Imperial tank makes a clean kill during street fighting, Cociaminus, circa 761.



In early 764, Archon Nadzybar, still in retreat from Sverren, began to rally his forces, calling upon many of his Magisters and warlords to form a unified host against the Crusade. It is clear that Nadzybar intended to draw the Crusade force towards Fabia, where he believed he could obliterate it in a single major engagement.

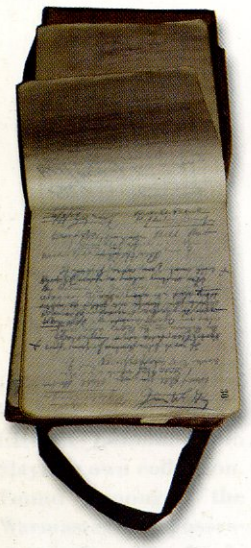
Ironically, this dream of a single, decisive clash was shared, in part, by his adversary, Slaydo. The long and complex warring of Operation Newfound had been both a scheme of consolidation and an attempt to corral the enemy into full-scale confrontation. As far as Slaydo was concerned, the site of that clash would be Balhaut, as he had planned from the start.

Never once straying from his intended objective, Slaydo revealed himself to be a master of subterfuge. Recognising the Archon's effort to draw the Crusade to Fabia, Slaydo ordered a series of fleet dispositions and troop movements along the Fornax Aleph/Fabia trade route and the Hesketh/Cociaminus shipping lanes that appeared to suggest he was taking the bait. Furthermore, suspecting (rightly enough) that enemy spies existed within the vast mechanism of the Crusade war machine, he began to sprinkle disinformation into intelligence traffic and Munitorum orders, adding credibility to this ruse.

Troop movement orders (deep coded so that they would not actually be followed by the Munitorium) requested fast relay of strike ready and veteran regiments to the Fabian system, and extensive policy documents were leaked from the office of the Grand Admiral of the Battle fleet concerning the means by which a full scale fleet deployment might be sustained and fuelled at Hisk. Slaydo even went as far as to suddenly voice support for Cybon's 'rimward alternative', seeing it as a 'viable option if we close at Fabia'. One can only speculate as to how hard Lord Militant Cybon had to swallow his pride in order to go along with the charade. In later years, he wrote of 'how galling it was to see my sound and honest plan torn up, discarded and then re-used as a sop to tempt the animal-foe into the snare.'

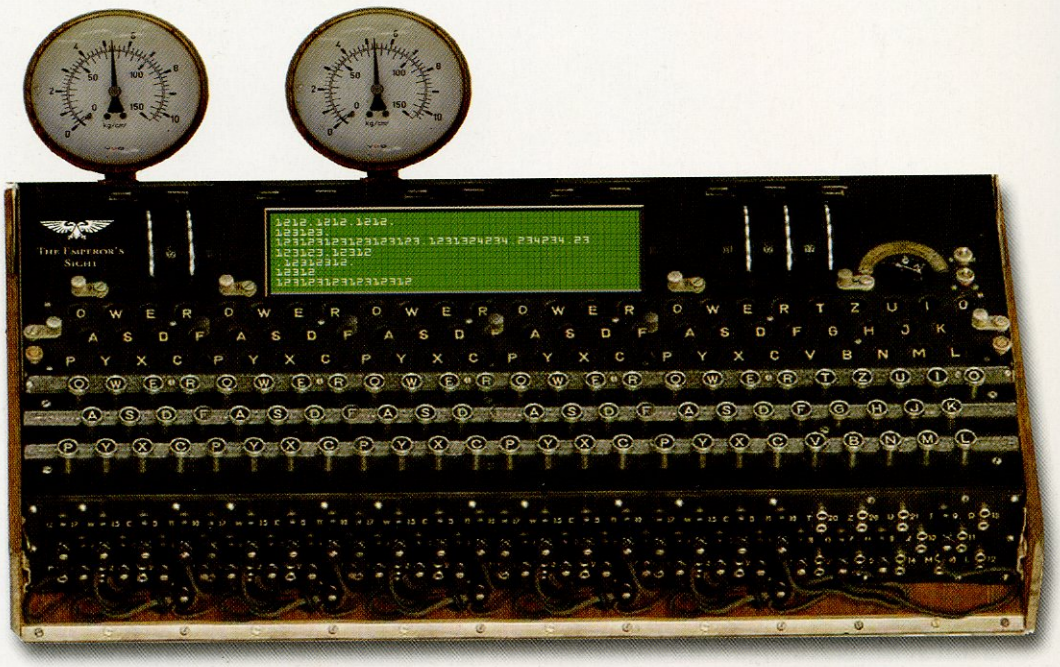
Unaware, we must suppose, of how expertly he was being manoeuvred into a gross mistake, Archon Nadzybar gathered his considerable forces and prepared to spring his own trap. In 765, in preparation for his massive assault of Fabia, the Archon brought his forces to Balhaut for a brief period of rearming and resupply. Balhaut had, by then, been under the control of Magister Sholen Skara for several years.

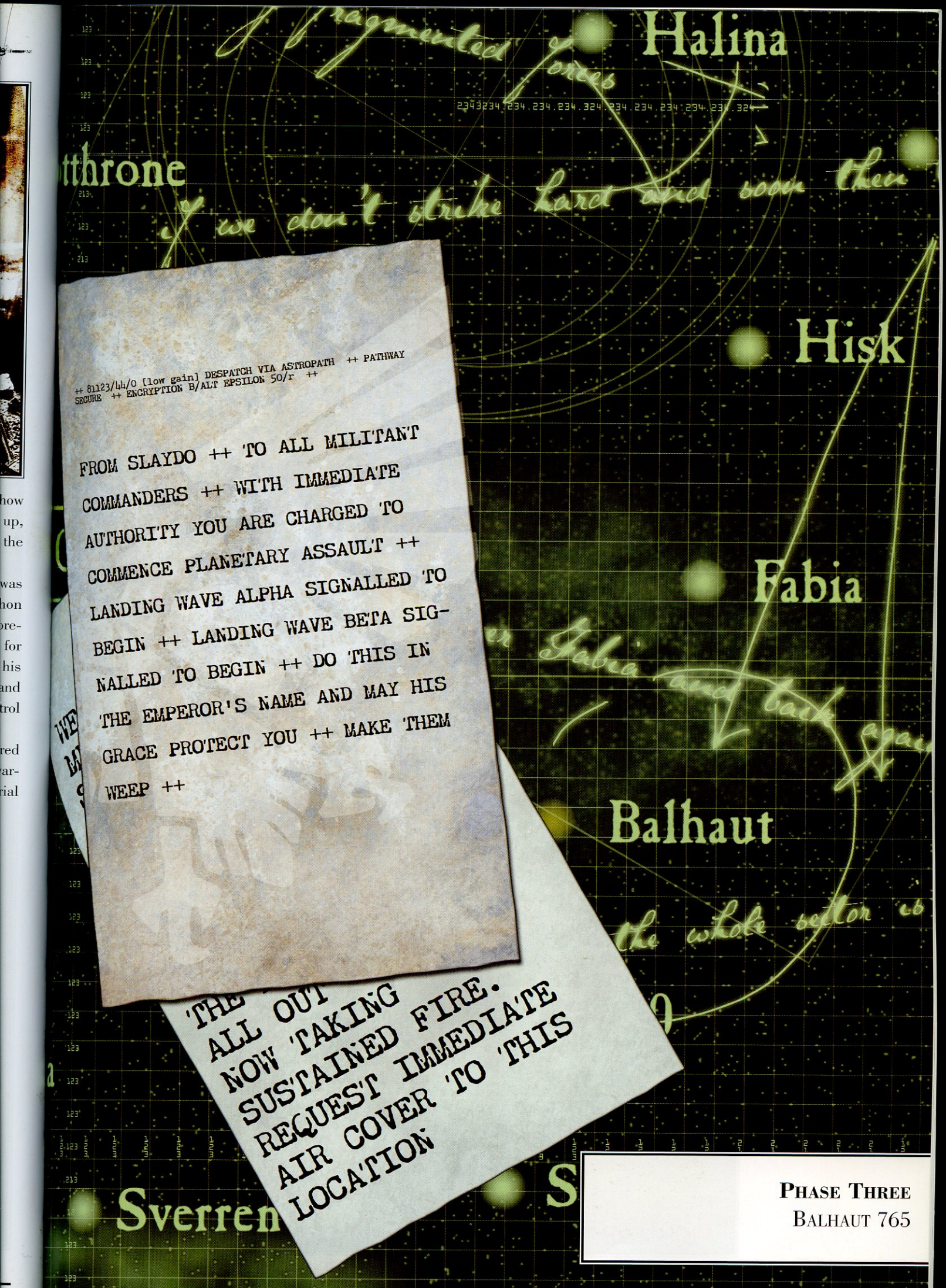
It was there, gathered in vast numbers as it prepared for the all-out assault of Fabia, that the Archon's warhost was catastrophically surprised by the Imperial Crusade.



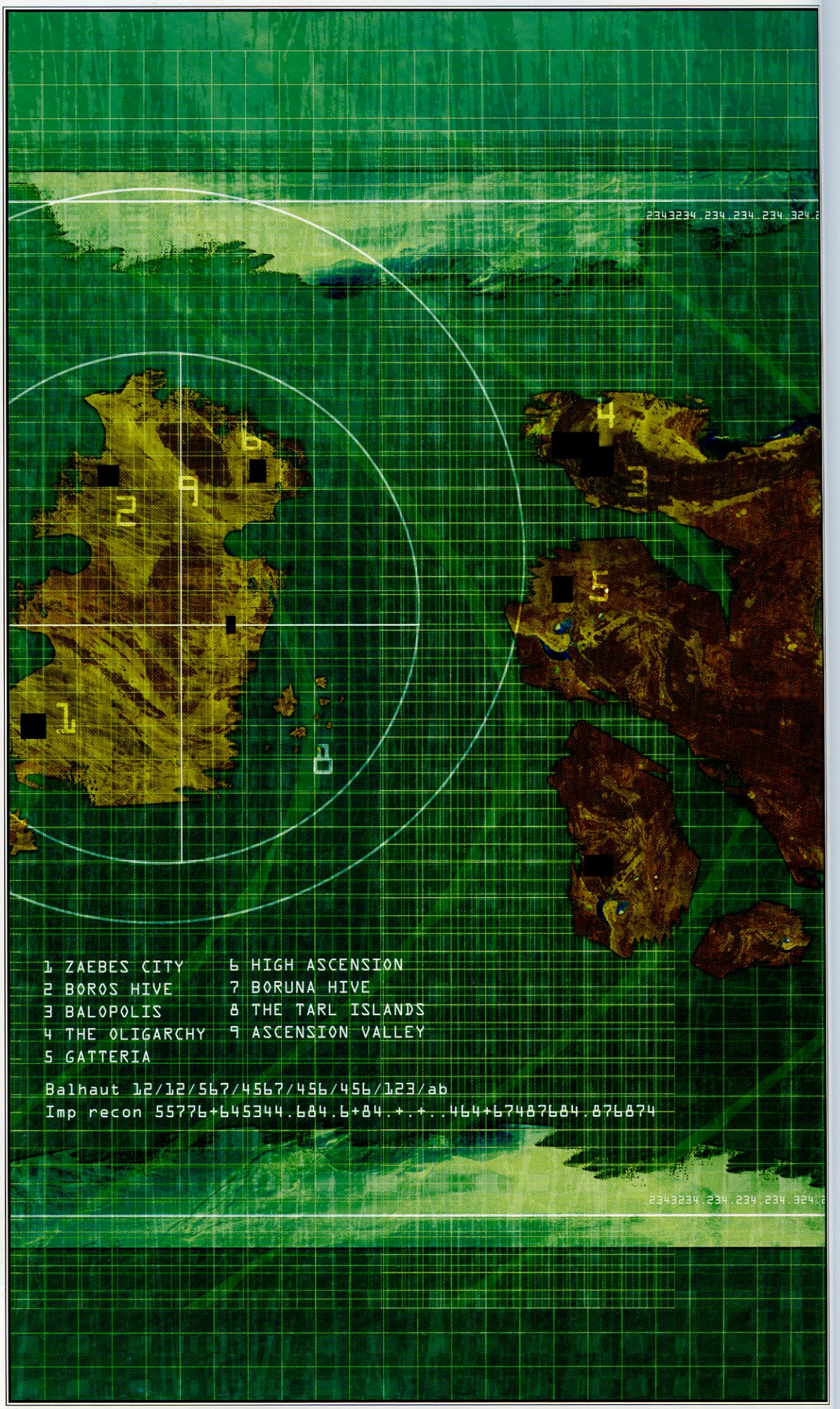
(Above) Policy documents, contained in their original courier folder, of the type leaked as part of the disinformation efforts.

(Right) Captured Imperial KF12 Decryption sets, recovered from Archenemy hands after Balhaut. The Archon's forces used such devices to eavesdrop on Crusade despatches, a fact Slaydo exploited brilliantly to feed disinformation about his ambitions for Fabia.





Phase Three
Balhaut 765

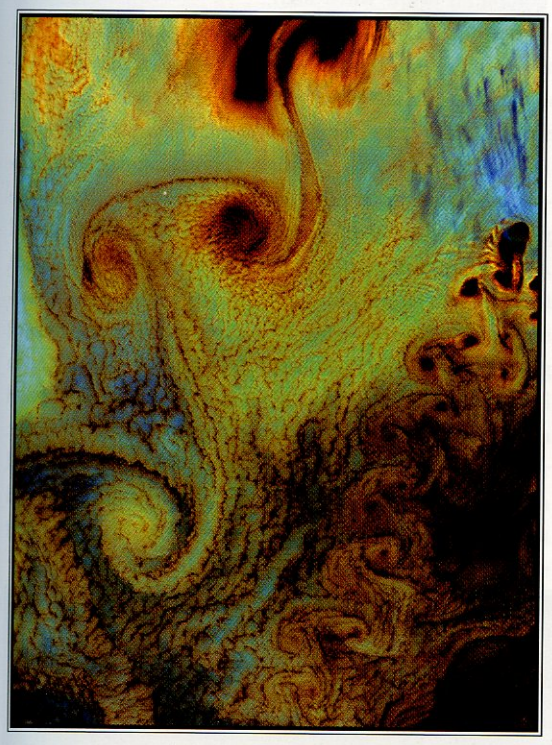


(Right) **Balhaut, at the time of the invasion, 765. This chart is a reproduction of the codified 'master chart' used by the Tacticae Imperialis, though certain restricted material has been withheld.**

'I have dreamed of this many times, but in my worst nightmares I did not witness this.'

~ Slaydo, at Balhaut

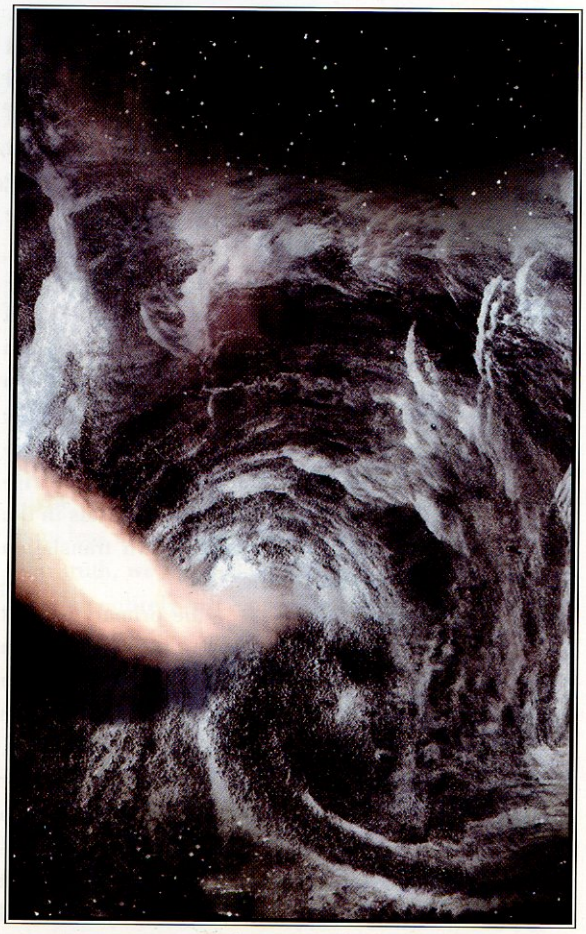
An astropathic non-verbal contact chant followed by an abort key/AP silence of exactly thirty-two seconds duration – together, the sort of failed communication echo regularly received by both sides in the central warzone, but actually a specifically prepared and broadcast code sequence – signalled the start of the war on Balhaut. If the Archenemy listening posts had any idea they had just detected anything other than the echo of an aborted transmission, they did not react. By the time there was any concrete



Imperial comm-traffic to intercept, the mass fleet assault had already begun.

Slaydo's assault plan was code-named Hell Storm*, and was constructed around the following key principles:

i) Fleet assault to achieve orbital superiority and to cause as much gross damage to enemy shipping as possible.
ii) Sustained orbital bombardment of key surface regions.
iii) Rapid and covered landing of primary planetary assault forces.
iv) Initial assault phase as primary landed forces acquire objectives.
v) Rapid and covered landing of secondary planetary assault phases in reinforcement, contingent on the outcome of earlier phases.



(Left) Warp-flare signalling the translation point of Gharnhorst's second wave, as recorded by one of the ship's in Kristor's spearhead.

(Far left) Pict-feed from an Imperial lander showing cloud cover over the Tark Islands drop zone.

Many history texts limit their account of the Balhaut action to that list of Slaydo's objectives, noting that in all particulars he was successful. Though Balhaut remains a shining example of a planned military action that went according to plan (as far as such events can ever be said to do) and brought about the desired victory, the stages of the fighting deserve closer scrutiny, both for the fine tactical detail and the temperament, under pressure, of the line officers who saw the plan to practical fruition.

Of the principal zones of the assault, the Tark Islands were given to General Oliphant, Zaebes City to Marshal Blackwood, the Western Plains to Lord Militant Cybon, Bal Prime to Marshal Kyter, Boruna Hive to General Scalia and Balopolis to General Curell. Marshals Bazer and Fylesa were ordered to oversee the Southern pacification, and General Saulton was given the task of taking and holding the refinery complex at Gatteria.

Slaydo himself elected to command the assault on the Oligarchy itself. One may note from the command order the difference in his attitudes to those two thorns in his side, Cybon and Dravere. Slaydo liked neither of them, but the fact that he trusted Cybon with the Western Plains, while Dravere was relegated to supervision of the reinforcement phases, shows that he recognised genuine military ability and was able to set personal differences aside when it mattered most.

** Slaydo chose the name on a whim, supposing it had vengeful connotations that spoke of the serious harm he intended to mete out upon the Archenemy. However, in the last hours of his life, becoming increasingly aware of, and horrified at, the vast human cost of his expedition, the Warmaster was heard to regret the name, reflecting that he had consigned his own men to a 'storm of hell'. Ever snide, Hechtor Dravere remarked that Slaydo might have been happier with the death tolls if he had named his assault 'something better disposed, such as a constitutional in fine parkland, or tea on the terrace.'*

***(Above)* Trooper of the Volpone 50th 'Blue-bloods', one of the prestige regiments deployed at the Oligarchy.**

The fleet assault was organised in four waves. The first 'spearhead' wave, an echelon of rapid attack warships under Admiral Kristor, arrived in the Balhaut system sixteen hours before the start of hostilities, entering real-space via a translation point on the far side of the local star, then using the radiating mass of that body to conceal its formation from the archenemy's planetary detector grids.

The second wave – troopships, mass conveyance vessels and heavy orbital assaulters under the control of Vice Admiral Gharnhorst – arrived via an out-system translation point five hours later, and held position within the sugar and hydrocarbon clouds beyond the system edge. Both of these waves aimed to get on station in readiness without detection, and the warp ripples caused by the gathering Archenemy vessels in the Balhaut system served to mask their own translation and mass-displacement patterns.

Admiral Shaever's third wave – the primary assault warships – translated directly into the inner system zone at the start of the attack, leading the immediate assault on the high and low anchor stations and the orbital batteries.

Following Shaever's signal of engagement, Kristor brought the first wave out from the star's flare pattern and struck hard and fast at the day-side defences, ripping through the great orbital dock facilities of Balhaut Highstation and Hallidan Threshold. Only then did Gharnhorst's third wave begin to move in-system, preparing for surface assault as it came in behind the massing warships.

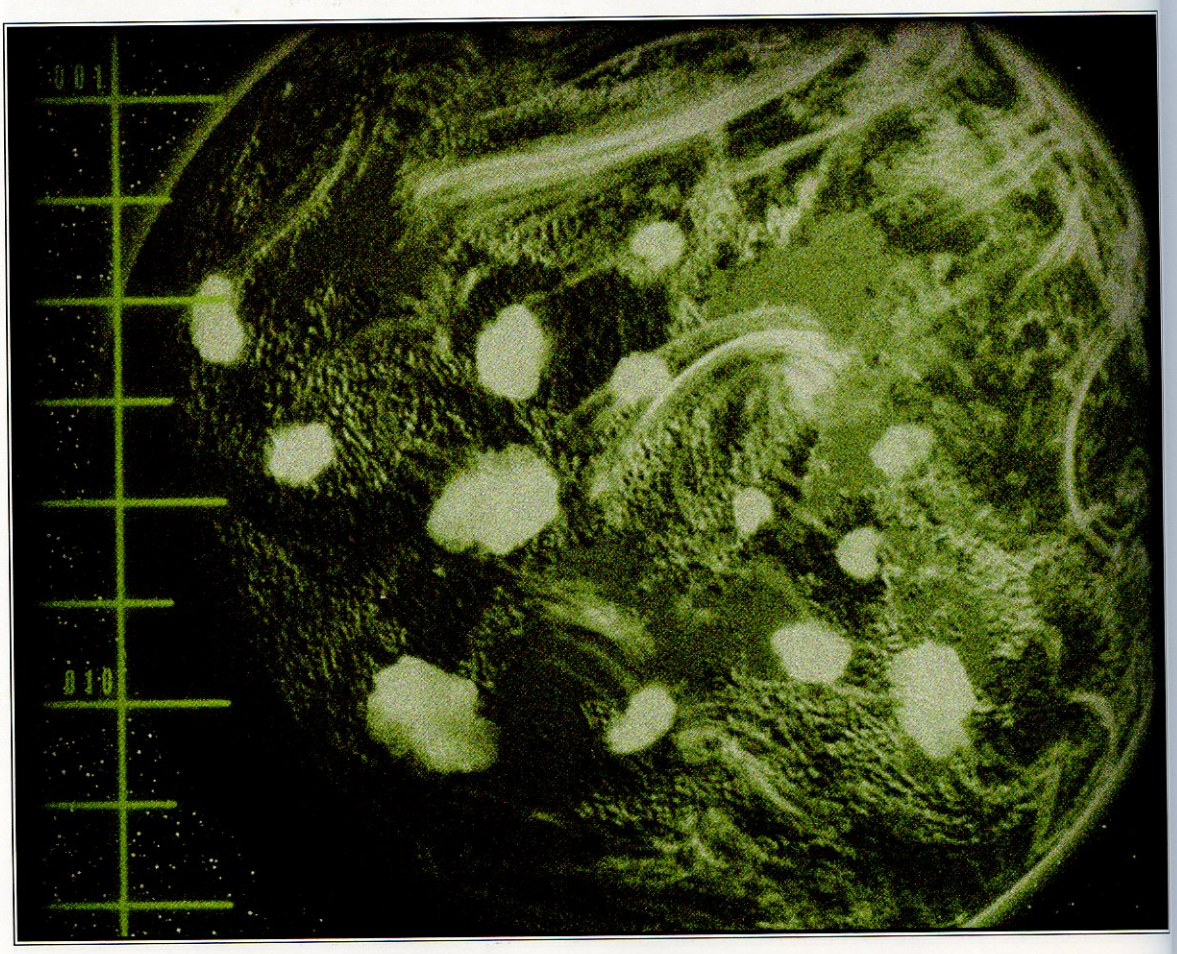
The fourth wave, commanded by Vice Admiral Sanloque, then arrived in the out-system, carrying the mass reinforcement divisions.

Immense orbital and near-space warfare lit up the Balhaut skies. It is estimated that in the first six hours, fifty-two percent of the archenemy fleet was annihilated at anchor station, and a further twelve percent was destroyed in combat after launch. Imperial losses ran at nine per cent, though the proportional toll was especially high amongst the fighter and light attack craft engaging the orbital batteries. Admiral Shaever's flagship, the *Myrmidon*, was also lost in a ship-to-ship duel with two enemy cruisers, the *Bloodmark* and the *Destitution*. Vice Admiral Von Haegl then assumed command of the third wave.

By the end of hour twenty-one, orbital superiority had been achieved, though warship engagement would continue right through the duration of the battle, some of it spilling into the out-system as enemy warships attempted to flee or evade. Planetary bombardment commenced, delivering grave punishment to key surface targets. At one point, eyewitnesses report, it appeared as if the entire northern cusp of the Western continent was on fire.

By hour thirty-three, with the orbital bombardment still fierce in some zones, the planetary drop began in earnest. Guard forces, including armour, were delivered via drop pod, dropship, landing boat and bulk lifter. The scale of the landings would not be equalled until Morlond, and even that would not match the global scope of the Balhaut assault. Around thirty-two per cent

***(Right)* Pict source showing the frightening extent of the surface bombardment.**



(left) **Vulture gunship over Zaebes City.**

of troop strength was lost during landing, either destroyed in the air or directly on planetfall, though in some areas this figure was much higher. North of the Oligarchy, the percentage ran to eighty-four.

By hour forty-four, intense ground fighting had ignited on the Western Plains, where Cybon's vast landing force engaged with motorised armies of the Archenemy. Cybon's northward push, bitter and costly, would last for nine days, and culminate in the catastrophic battle of Ascension Valley. Extraordinary levels of fighting were also occurring at Balopolis, where General Curell's forces found themselves in direct contention with the (so-called) Kith, commanded by Magister Sholen Skara. Curell reported: 'I have never seen such fury, nor such devastation. Every street corner is a last stand, every hab stack an apocalypse. I have seen epic battles in the street, fighting as desperate and violent as any combat undertaken by men, and yet each one is quickly eclipsed and forgotten by the next.'

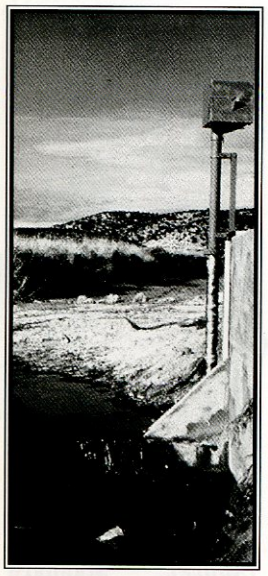
Curell himself was severely injured soon after hour forty-eight, and forced to withdraw, his place taken first by General Korsen (killed around hour fifty-three) and then by Marshal Bernz (killed during hour fifty-eight). With General Delayni unable to get through to take command, control of the Balopolis theatre fell, by default, to the senior surviving officer amongst Curell's staff, Commander Macaroth. On hearing this news, and the desperate plight of the Guard at Balopolis, Slaydo sent an immediate dispatch, promoting Macaroth to the brevet rank of Marshal 'in order that so young a fellow might receive adequate respect from the men at that thankless hour'.

In truth, we may suspect, Slaydo believed Balopolis to be an entirely lost cause. Indeed, by hour sixty-five, the overall situation was very bad. Blackwood had secured Zaebes City, and both Bal Prime and the Gatterian refineries were reported as close to falling. But the Tark Islands assault was turning into a bloodbath, and appalling losses had been taken at Boruna Hive and the Western Plains.

Slaydo himself was facing the very worst of it personally. His landing force, the second largest single Imperial army fielded after Cybon's, was cutting a path into the enemy heartland, the Oligarchy. Ranged against it were the hosts of four Magisters, including the infamous Heritor Asphodel, and the murderous cult army of the Archon himself.

(Above) **Standard Guard munitions carrier. 18.5 million such items were brought to the surface with the first wave of deployment.**

(Left) **Abandoned pillbox defenses at Balopolis. Note the rockcrete/ply construction.**



(Above) **Overrun enemy emplacement, Ascension Valley, looking north towards the uplands. Driving up past remote rockcrete fortifications such as this, Cybon's armoured host was soon to encounter Qull's tank divisions.**

Slaydo's assault on the Oligarchy raged for ten days. Nadzybar's grip was strong on this ancient and well-fortified zone, and he was staunchly supported by the woe machines of the Heritor, Asphodel. The terrain also rendered progress ponderously slow; the orbital bombardment had reduced much of the hinterland approach to rubble, and a series of storms, possibly generated by the thick smoke, effecting Balhaut's weather patterns, reduced the area to an expanse of mud lakes. Several thousand Guardsmen perished in these conditions, either sucked down by the slurry or slaughtered when they became mired. Chemical agents polluted the air in some regions, creating a toxic, brimstone atmosphere that further burdened the Imperial infantry by forcing them to fight encumbered by heavy re-breathers.

The first breakthrough came on day five, when warriors of the White Scars broke through the defence line at the Hallow Wall and routed the forces of Magister Khul Kolesh. Kolesh himself died during a savage gun battle in the cloisters of the Sirene Palace. On day seven, squads of the Silver Guard under Chapter Master Veegum broke through the outer line of the Emancipatory, where they were held fast by Chaos dreadnoughts and woe machines until the deadlock was broken by a massed armour support involving the Pardus 12th, the Ketzok 18th, 21st and 22nd, the Mariner 18th ('Panthers') and the 2nd Vitrian Mobile.

His pathway opened, Veegum led the Silver Guard through, taking the Emancipatory in two hours and storming the Monastery of St Kiodrus with the aid of the Volpone 50th (Bluebloods), the Pragar 10th and the Kolstec 477th Light Support. Also on day seven, the Jantine Patricians and elements of the Mordian Iron Guard 11th took the precinct of the Oligarchy, held it for three hours before being driven back, then counter-assaulted the following morning and took it for a second time.

But the Tower of the Plutocrat and the central precincts of the citadel continued to withstand assault. On the afternoon of the ninth day, Slaydo drove his left flank against the indomitable Oligarchy Gate. This desperate attack was nominally commanded by Captain Allentis of the Silver Guard, but his charge was devastated by the Heritor's murderous engines. Thus, the first unit to reach the Oligarchy Gate was the Hyrkan 8th, which famously managed to breach the enemy buttress fields and blow wide the gateway that had resisted nine days of assault. The Hyrkan breakthrough was swiftly supported by the Silver Guard, the Kolstec 'Hammers' and four armoured divisions. The Tower of the Plutocrat fell later that day following an intense assault by the Hyrkan forces.

Slaydo himself entered the inner precincts, at the head of eight regiments, including his own bodyguard force, and by dawn on the tenth day, had begun an attack of the High Palace compound where Nadzybar had taken up position.

~ THE TARK ISLANDS ~

General Oliphant's attack on the Tark Islands lasted for nineteen days, the longest fighting phase of the war on

(Right) **Vast palls of smoke fill the skies above the Tark Island group as the gas mines burn.**

Balhaut (though pacification and suppression campaigns on outlying and inner city zones continued for eight months after victory was declared). The 'pocket resistance' of the scattered island group explains the protracted nature of this action and the high death toll, although human cost from the outset was extreme. In the first hour of the assault, three bulk lifters, carrying between 9,000 and 9,500 men, came down in the sea short of Tark Magnus due to a data error and were destroyed by heavy fire from shore batteries before any of the personnel aboard could get clear.

The primary targets of the Tark Islands were the gas mines and refineries that, along with the massive complexes at Gatteria, provided Balhaut with the majority of its fuel reserves and power. While Gatteria was secured with relatively little material loss, two of the principle gas mines at Tark were ignited (probably by the Archenemy) and massive fuel resources were lost. The subsequent fires burned for five years, causing colossal damage to the climate systems of the southern hemisphere. At the time of writing, it is understood that some gas reserves beneath the sea floor are still combusting. Oliphant, distressed that his command had not taken the prized island group cleanly, resigned his post and later committed suicide (768).

~ ASCENSION VALLEY ~

The climax of Cybon's campaign on the Western Plains – and the greatest set piece battle of the entire operation – took place on the ninth day of fighting. News had just broken that Scalia had taken Boruna Hive and, invigorated by that knowledge, and reinforced with fourth wave landings (days six and seven), Cybon swept his armoured columns up the Luminar Estuary and closed with the forces of Magister Qull in the throat of Ascension Valley. After sixteen hours of savage fighting, and with the support of the Titan legions, Cybon took High Ascension itself and declared the Western Continent under Imperial jurisdiction.

***(Left)* View via gunnery station pict feed, the *Heaven Forfend*. A staged-release load of incendiary mines falls towards Zaebes City.**

***(Left)* Devastated outer habs, Bal Prime.**

By the eighth day of the campaign, the ferocious enemy resistance in Balopolis began to falter. Against all the odds, Macaroth had succeeded in rallying his splintered forces to drive a lancing attack into the determindly-held central wards. Fighting was so intense, even sources who were present are unable to provide any exact or detailed account of the course of events. 'Most men knew nothing more than what was happening in the immediate vicinity,' wrote one Guardsman, 'as, amid the fire and tumult, every man's world closed down to the few metres of space around him. There was little to see and little to know except death.'

Whether Macaroth himself had a better comprehension is not recorded. Certainly, he was right in the thick of the fighting, and it is hard to imagine how he would have had the oversight or communication links to provide any kind of comprehensive command perspective. It must be surmised that Macaroth was basing his field orders more on intuition than data. As his later career has amply demonstrated, Macaroth was ever a commander who trusted his own wit and instincts, often with a disregard for contrary information.

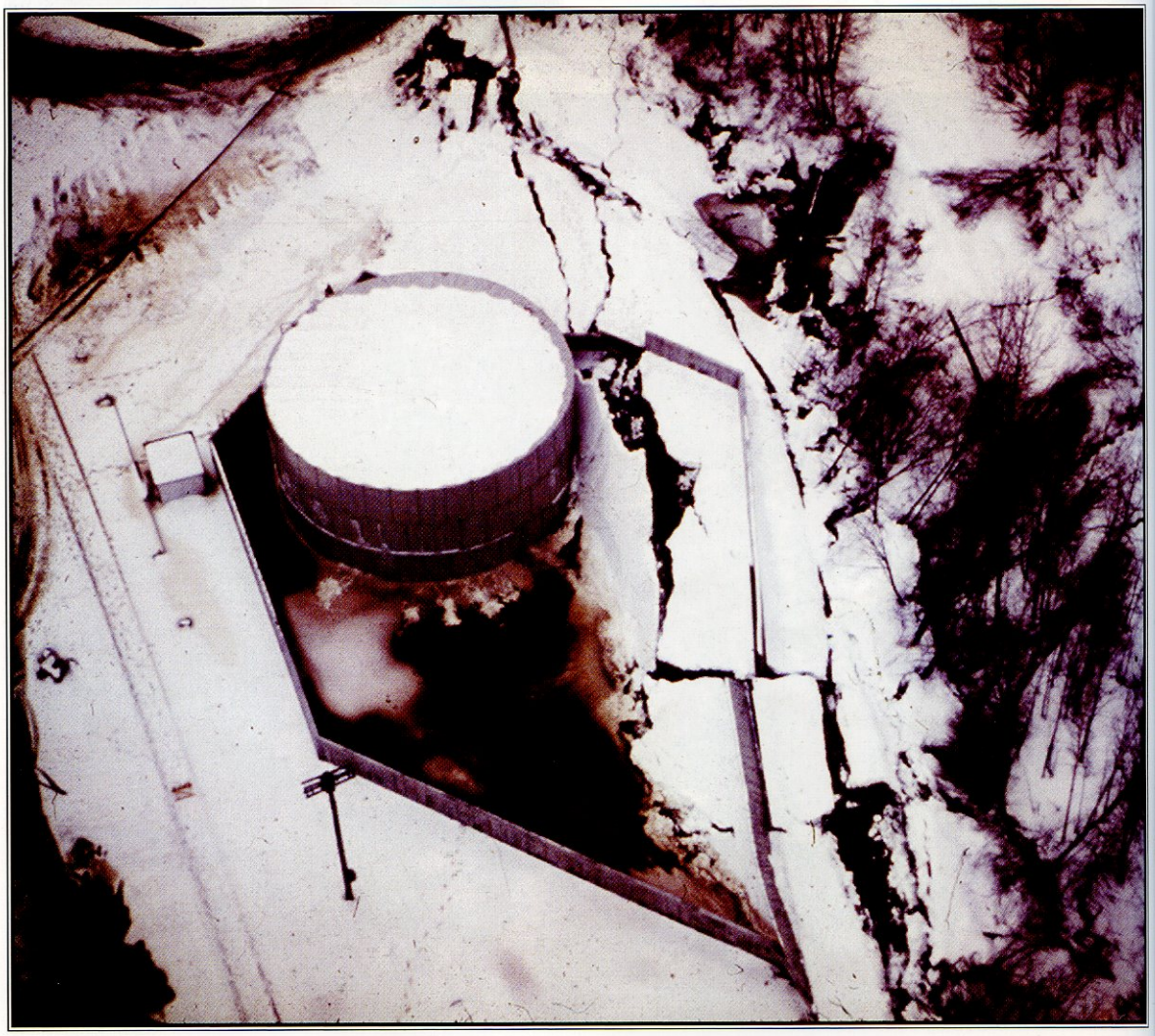
In the early hours of the morning on the ninth day, Macaroth's forces punched through banks of chlorine gas released by the enemy and stormed the last of the central wards. By day's end, Balopolis had turned from rout to unexpected Imperial victory, and Macaroth had unequivocally established his credentials as a commander to be taken seriously.

~ THE HIGH PALACE ~

Slaydo received word of Macaroth's success on the tenth day as he pressed his final advance on the High Palace of the Oligarchy. He was reported as being 'struck mute with great admiration'. By now the bitter price of taking Balhaut was all too evident to him. He seemed 'weary and fatalistic', said one officer, 'as if the weight of many worlds hung upon him'. 'I never saw him look so fatigued,' recalled another, 'for there ever had been a fire in his eyes and now it seemed long gone.'

Some fire, it seemed, still remained. When Colonel Helmud of the Pragar regiments remarked to the Warmaster that 'the Palace will be ours, sir, but for a few thousand lives', Slaydo replied 'Start with mine!', took up his powersword, and personally led the first attack wave before anybody could dissuade him.

Brutal firefights took place in the cloisters and compartments of the once-regal palace, including one sustained exchange in the Water Garden that lasted four hours. Slaydo may have been seriously wounded at some time during this stage of the battle – either a blade or projectile puncture to the stomach – but it was



(Right) **Part of the refinery complex at Gatteria. After hostilities had ceased, the climactic change triggered by the smoke and dust particulates in the upper atmosphere caused even the equatorial zones of Balhaut to experience a harsh and prolonged nuclear winter.**

not evident at the time and was only discovered by the medicae when Slaydo was on his deathbed. He showed no signs of faltering.

It is often written that Slaydo and Nadzybar met face-to-face because such a head-on clash was their destiny and had been ordained by fate. It is more likely that Slaydo was actively seeking out the Archon, driven by sheer will to exterminate his nemesis. It is also probable that Nadzybar – who by that stage knew the war was lost and flight impossible – desired a final reckoning and a chance to end his life delivering a singular blow to Crusade morale.

At hour eighteen of the tenth day, with the Hyrkan's flanking his position on the stairs of the main concourse and the Silver Guard, Kolstec infantry and Elitor Heavy Support holding the line at the College of Archives, Slaydo's command force encountered the Archon and his bodyguard elite on the Western Palisade.

The Warmaster and the foul Archon joined in single combat of such belligerent intensity that 'most were driven from the chamber by the fury of it'. The fight lasted between six and eleven minutes, depending on sources, and during its course, Slaydo took two mortal wounds that he somehow managed to rally through, maintaining his pressure of attack, before delivering a lethal blow to Nadzybar.

Dying, the Archon fell back, and his cult followers flooded the Palisade in an effort to carry him to safety. Imperial Guard units broke through this riot, putting many cultists to their deaths (a great number of the enemy had quit fighting and were seized by uncontrollable lamentation). Warmaster Slaydo was found, close to death, lying on the marble floor of the West Atrium.

(Left) The ruins of Balopolis.

There was no doubt at all that he was far beyond medicae help; his grievous wounds included several that had been inflicted by the Archon's cultists during their efforts to bear Nadzybar away, out of Slaydo's grasp. It is said Slaydo was found clutching an effigy of Saint Sabbat, though this may be apocryphal.

The surviving members of Slaydo's bodyguard complement stormed the Palisade, slaughtering any enemy combatants they could find. Archon Nadzybar's corpse was later discovered at the foot of the Plutocrat Steps amongst a heap of massacred bodies. Slaydo's men had cut down fleeing cultists indiscriminately, including those carrying the palanquin, and only afterwards was the identity of their burden established.

(Left) Detail of the painting 'The Pride of Elitor at The Western Palisade', artist unknown, Elitor School (Courtesy of the Museum of War, Elitor Magna).

(Right) *The Death of Slaydo*, by Ran Vjyruk (Pacificus Collection). A popular theory contests that the painter used artistic license to include Macaroth amongst the mourning figures (second from left). No evidence has even been found to suggest this was Ran Vjyruk's intention, but if it was, it was a purely symbolic invention as, at the time of Slaydo's death, Macaroth was many thousands of kilometres away in Balopolis.

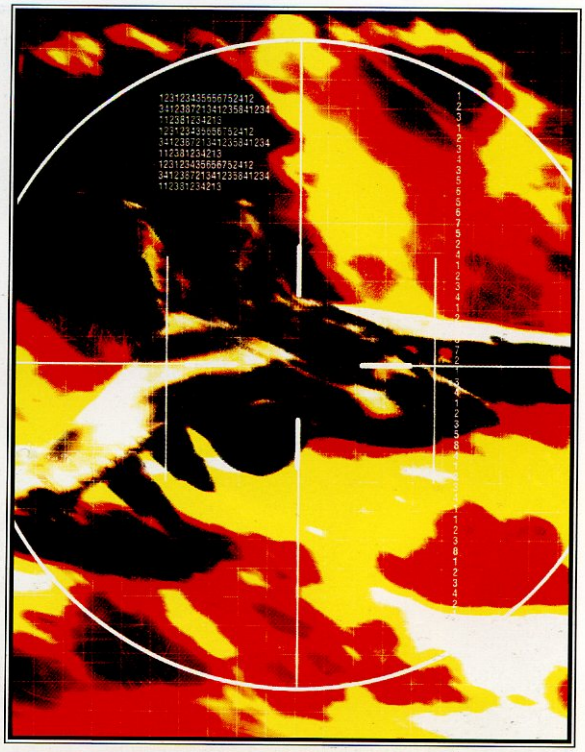
'I am done, and yet I am undone.'

~ attr. Slaydo, on his deathbed.

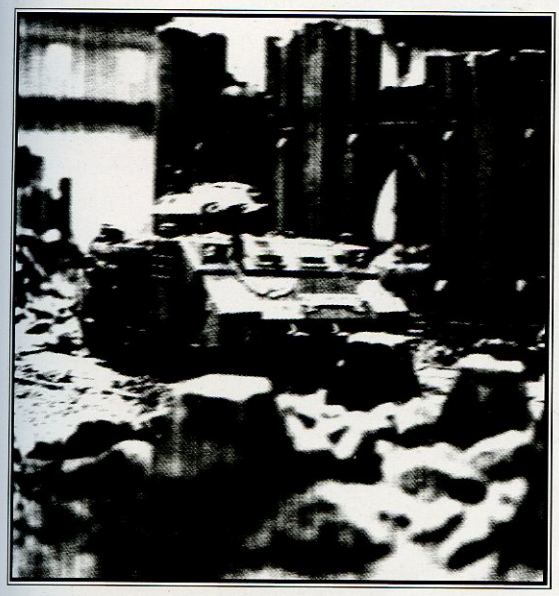
Slaydo lived long enough to see the victory at Balhaut sealed, though sporadic fighting and pacification efforts continued for a considerable time. His fears that he would not live to see the purging of the entire Sabbat Worlds completed were proved right, though many contemporary witnesses report that he went to his death with quiet contentment and resignation, as if he had been fully expecting it.

It is possible that very much more esoteric elements were at work. Some claim that Slaydo so intently followed what he called 'the guidance of the Saint' that he regularly consulted the tarot and the priesthood. Two sources make a strong case for Slaydo actually being a true instrument of spiritual power, and say that not only was his death foretold but that Slaydo knew, as early as 756, that he was fated to die on Balhaut. It might be supposed then that Slaydo's primary anxiety during the battle of Balhaut was not the span of his own life, but the nature of his successor. If Slaydo truly had been 'holding on for a sign' in those last hours, it may explain his almost unseemly investment of support in Macaroth. However, as is more likely, if mundane, Slaydo recognised what brittle infighting might follow his death, and had no desire to see the Crusade unnecessarily riven with internal dispute. There was a great victory to capitalise on, and only a strong leader could do that.

Slaydo's corpse was laid to rest with full ceremony in a purpose-built mausoleum, The Honorarium, on Balhaut. The vast program to restore and rebuild Balhaut's shattered cities is barely underway even today.



(Left) Navy Lightning, briefly framed in the rangefinder of Imperial guns, Tark Islands. In the whirl of combat, fast and accurate target recognition was vital.



(Far left) Silver Guard forces at the Oligarchy.

LEGACY OF THE MAGISTERS

Most of the Archon's brutal followers perished during the war on Balhaut, with lamentable exceptions. Magister Allikarn managed to flee the planet, only to be tracked down and destroyed during a fleet action in the out-system nine days later. During the confusion at Balopolis, Sholen Skara and a large contingent of his Kith followers succeeded in escaping the fires of Balhaut. Heritor Asphodel, realising the untenable position of the Archon's strengths, also quit the planet (possibly on the fifth or sixth day of the assault on the Oligarchy) and left Nadzybar to face the Crusade forces alone. Both Skara and the Heritor would pose future threats to the Crusade armies.

In the aftermath of the fighting, as the Imperial forces secured their occupation, the legacy of these monsters was revealed. Sholen Skara's murder-camps on the Balopolis Peninsula contained hideous evidence of the genocide the Magister had wrought on the population of Balhaut, perhaps for no other reason than entertainment. In compounds around the Oligarchy, proof was found of the medical experimentation Asphodel had performed on thousands of live subjects. Terrible mental distress and even insanity plagued many of the Imperial personnel who witnessed these discoveries, and drove others on in relentless obsession to destroy the perpetrators forever.

(Right) **Portrait of Macaroth by Hassan Kediil, commissioned to mark his succession. The Warmaster was keen to establish for himself just as glorious an image as his illustrious predecessor.**

~ THE RIVALS ~

Lord Militant Cybon was the strongest placed contender for the role of Warmaster, for he combined seniority of command with a creditable history of victories.

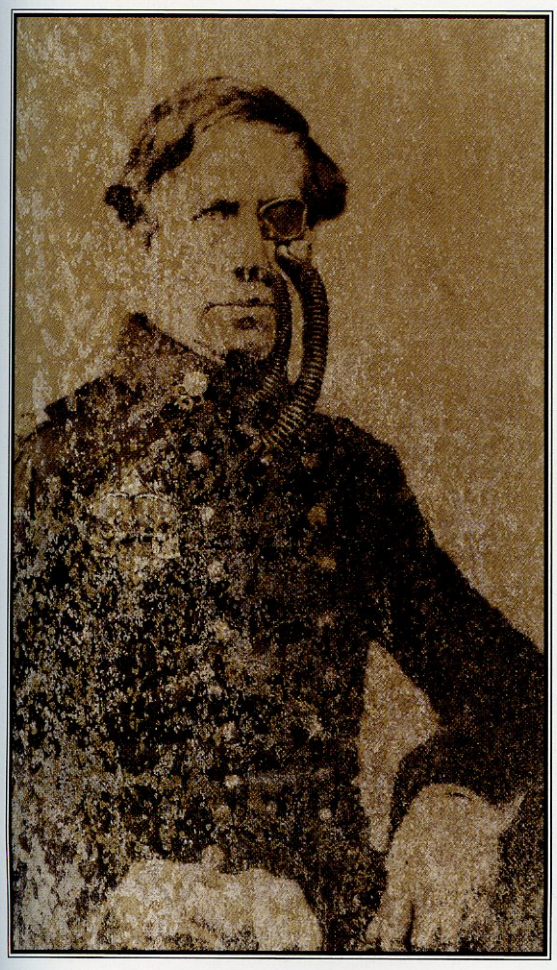
Cybon had Slaydo's admiration as a leader, and might have expected Slaydo's favour and support in the light of the Western Plains Campaign and the victory at Ascension Valley. However, Cybon's career had been dogged with rumours of his barbaric attitude to the common soldiery, a trait Slaydo despised.

Hechtor Dravere was the other leading contender, though it is unlikely Slaydo would ever have given his backing to the man (even though Dravere, in his arrogance, fully expected it).

Slaydo believed – and there was evidence to support his feeling – that Dravere's competency in command was patchy, and that many of his decorations were undeserved. Like Cybon, Dravere was a brutal man, and much given to using the regular infantry as gun fodder. After Macaroth's appointment, it is rumoured that Dravere became involved in a conspiracy to overthrow him and take his place as Warmaster. If it is true, any evidence of a conspiracy has been suppressed by the Commissariat, and Dravere himself was killed in action on Menazoid Epsilon before any such insurrection could occur.

General Kelso would have been a popular choice amongst the moderates and the rank and file, and his ability in command was not disputed.

(Left) **Imperial tanks clear the streets of Boruna Hive.**



(Far left) **Admiral Kristor.**

However, Kelso lacked both the charisma that the very highest office demanded, and also the influence of powerful men. He had no power base in High Command and no powerful allies in the Navy. Slaydo may have considered Kelso, because he liked him, but he probably decided against him because he knew Kelso would ultimately be a weak choice.

Marshal Hardiker had seen little or no action in the Crusade, and his service record was not a glorious list of honours. However, he was ambitious and noble-born, with powerful ties to the Khulan aristocracy as well as reported influence with the Sector Governor.

If Slaydo had died without appointing a successor, it is possible Hardiker might have managed to manoeuvre himself into position with the help of his powerful backers.

Admiral Kristor was also in contention for a time, strongly supported by the battlefleet senior staff who wanted to see a Navy commander directing the Crusade.

Kristor also had the support of at least two of the High Lords, but in an arena dominated by the Imperial Guard, even such influence could not succeed in making Kristor Warmaster. It is, however, supposed that if Macaroth had not brought himself to Slaydo's attention, Kristor might well have been Slaydo's favoured choice, simply because his appointment would cut across all the bickering and in-fighting between the lords militant.

On his deathbed, Slaydo appointed Macaroth his successor as Warmaster in terms that brooked no argument from the lords militant. Cybon, Dravere and others were inflamed with rage at the decision, regarding Macaroth as too young and too junior.

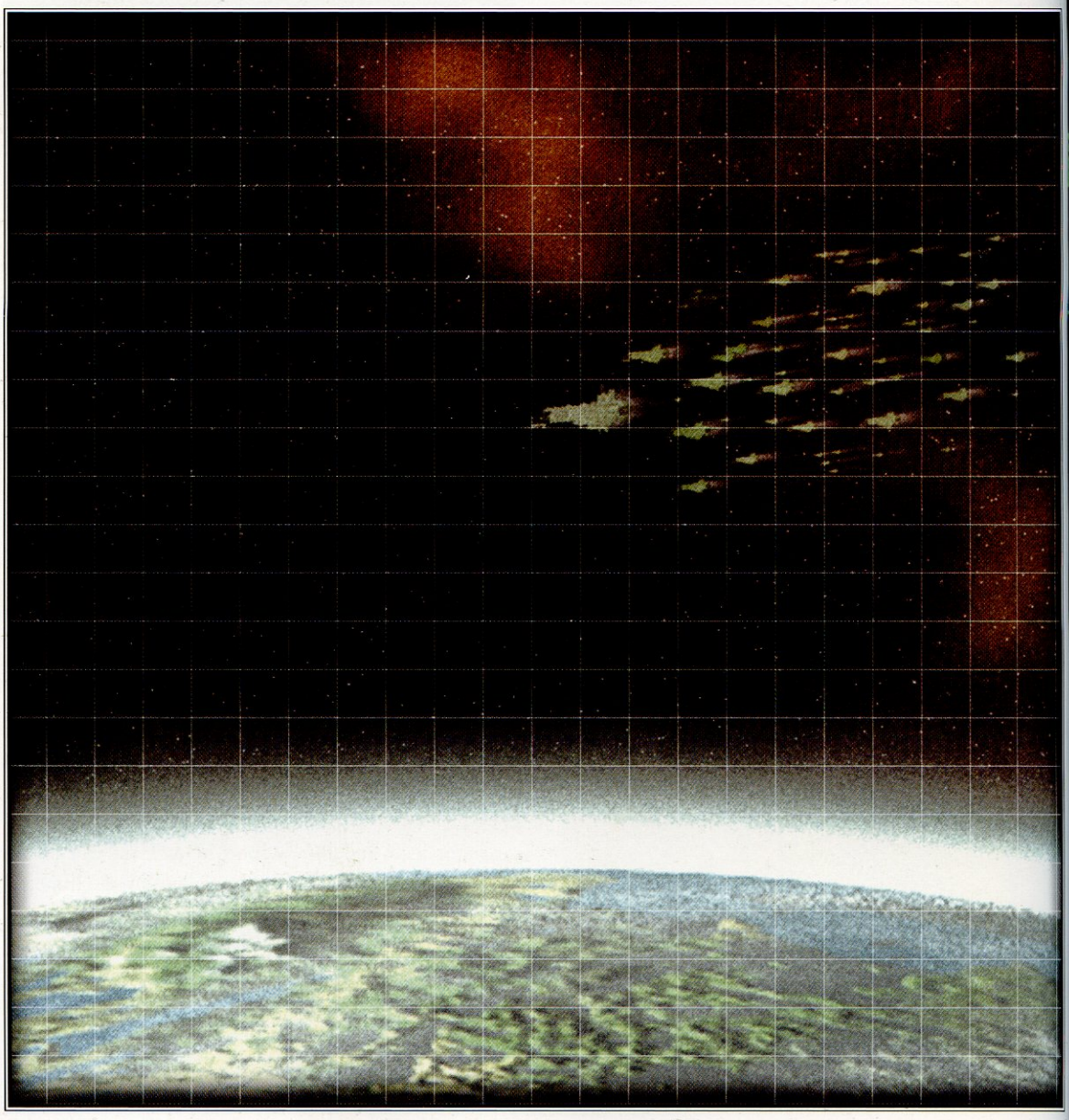
A lesser man than Macaroth might have been ousted from the position early on, especially given the power and influence of the most senior lords, but the very fact that he clung on and outplayed them politically showed that the young Warmaster had the ideal talent and temperament for the role. Others in High Command respected Slaydo's appointment largely because of their deep affection for the 'old man'.

Macaroth's rise to power was notoriously rapid. Comparatively young at the time of his appointment, he had nevertheless chalked up several impressive victories as Curell's deputy, a fact often (and deliberately) overlooked by his detractors. His extraordinary handling of the Balopolis front simply cemented his reputation. However, it is only fair to say that Macaroth could also be idiosyncratic and wilful, attributes that frustrated and sometimes alarmed the senior staff. The early phase of Macaroth's command would be taken up as much with appeasing those disaffected with his promotion as it was with war.

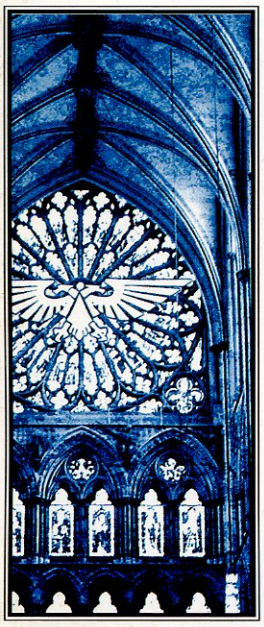
Of course, in the decade since Balhaut, Macaroth has come to be regarded as one of the foremost military exponents of his era, building on the solid gains of his noble predecessor and adding to them a spark of inspiration, the 'blue flame behind the eyes' as Bulledin called it. This, perhaps is what Slaydo had recognised.

It is perhaps salutary to remember that, at the start of his reign as Warmaster in 765, Macaroth was described as 'mercurial and often spiteful', and also as 'a small, unimpressive man given over to bouts of petulance and cruelty'. It is evident he was difficult to like on a personal level, with a volatile temper. However, these foibles may have been the necessary by-products of his sudden elevation to power, and of his dazzling, intuitive intellect. Macaroth's tactics are invariably distinguished by daring and risk-taking, by instinct and intuition, a trend he established at Balopolis and continued to demonstrate from the very start of his warmastery with his extraordinary, multipoint prosecution of the Cabal Salient.

(Right) **From high anchor at Balhaut, the Crusade fleet runs out in honour of Macaroth's appointment.**



(Below) **The High Basilica, Balopolis, where Macaroth's election was ceremonially ratified.**



++ 460 b-fib 1228/1 [wide gain] DESPATCH VIA ASTROPATH ++ PATHWAY SECURE ++ ENCRYPTION ZETA 3 (pattern F) ++

FROM THE WARMASTER ++ TO ALL MILITANT COMMANDERS ++ IT HAS BEEN MADE KNOWN THAT SOME COMMANDERS OF MEN BELIEVE MISCALCULATIONS HAVE BEEN MADE IN THE AFTERMATH OF BALHAUT REGARDING THE STRATEGIC RESPONSE TO THE ARCHENEMY'S RETREAT ++ ANY OFFICERS WITH SUCH MISGIVINGS ARE INVITED TO ATTEND ME PERSONALLY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE TO PRESENT THE NATURE OF THEIR CONCERNS FULLY AND COMPLETELY ++

WITHO[illegible] IF WE ARE [illegible] MUST NOT BE [illegible]

ASSURE THE WARMASTER [illegible]AT NO SUCH OPINION IS HELD BY ANY MAN IN MY STAFF OFFICE

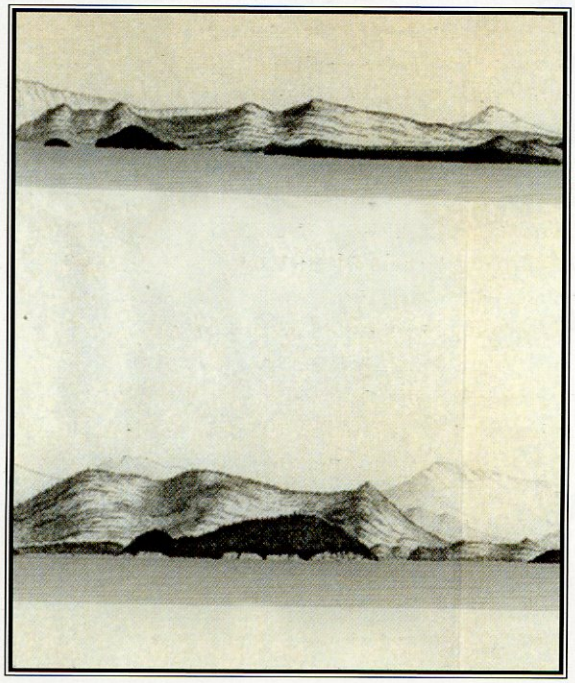
THE WARMASTER'S DECISIONS ARE BEYOND REPROOF

REFUTE ANY SUGGESTION THAT THE WARMASTER'S STRATEGY HAS BEEN QUESTIONED AT ANY TIME

PHASE FOUR

THE CABAL SALIENT, 765–773

Just like Slaydo before him, Macaroth fixed his aim on an objective that, by any standards, would take a considerable length of time to achieve. A comparative study of these aims is highly illuminating in the differences it reveals between Slaydo and his young successor.



(Right) **The changing face of Balhaut. Relief maps show how catastrophically the orbital bombardment altered the coastline around Balopolis.**

Slaydo had made Balhaut his primary objective for the early period of the Crusade: a single, crucial world that, once taken, would consolidate his force's progress through, and hold upon, the trailing Sabbat Worlds. Some believed Balhaut was too ambitious, and it should be remembered that the road to a victory there grew ever longer, much to Slaydo's frustration. Slaydo initially believed Balhaut could be his within a year or two of the start of the campaign. In reality, it took a decade. It is fair to summarise, then, that Slaydo undertook an ambitious goal, dangerously underestimated the effort and time needed to achieve it, but ultimately vindicated his choice through hard work, determination and a dogmatic refusal to weaken or dilute his plan.

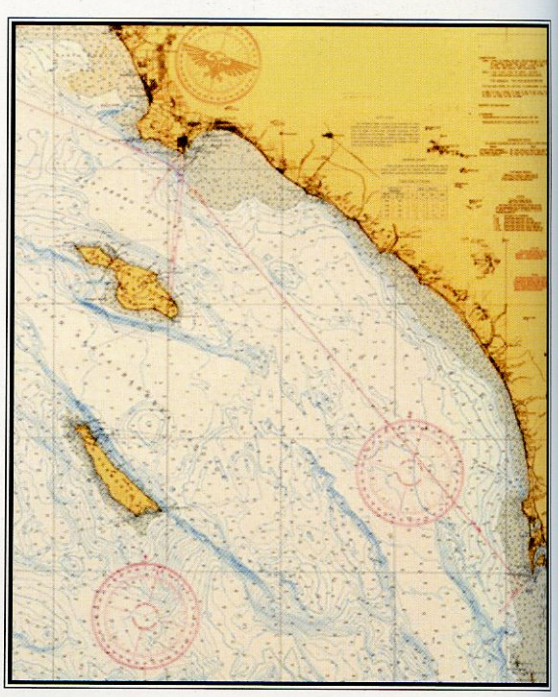
By contrast, Macaroth's objective – the Cabal Systems – was not one world but a great parcel of planetary systems that, furthermore, lay a considerable distance to spinward from the Crusade's leading edge in 765. Just to reach the Cabal Systems, the Crusade host had to pacify a wide tract of the Newfound Trailing and the complex and well-defended Khan Group. By declaring the Cabal Systems his target of choice, Macaroth was effectively committing the Imperial forces to an undertaking of such fabulous ambition as to make Slaydo's focus on Balhaut seem modest and cautious.

Many saw this as ample proof that Macaroth was signally lacking in the wisdom and tactical sense required to manage the conflict as Warmaster. The scale of his ambition was regarded as nothing short of laughable. 'The arrogance of the man,' wrote Cybon in 766, 'is matched only by his incompetence. This decision [which he seeks] to foist upon us demonstrates he simply does not understand what is out there, or what it will take to vanquish it.' For his part, Veegum caustically described Macaroth's aims as 'the Rebus gambit', making reference to a planet that was just about the most spinward of all the Sabbat Worlds, implying that Macaroth might as well have demanded they take the rest of the entire territory in one go. Kelso, though much more conciliatory and diplomatic, clearly agreed in spirit when he wrote 'the [Cabal Systems] is a worthy goal, but perhaps due consideration might be given to the steps along that path, which manifestly are worthy enough goals in themselves'.

Adding to the dismay rife amongst the senior staff was the news that significant elements of the Archenemy host had 'broken loose' after Balhaut. Quite apart from those enemy forces that had fled Balhaut, many more, which had been en route to reinforce their Archon, diverted or withdrew when word of the defeat reached them. The inner quadrants of the Newfound Trailing seethed with enemy retinues running for cover or repositioning along new lines. Many worlds in the region were sacked, or even destroyed outright, in the Archenemy's frenzy to regroup. Macaroth was criticised in all quarters for not consolidating the immediate position post-Balhaut. It was believed he should have mobilised several of the Crusade armies with the immediate task of chasing down and annihilating these fugitive elements before they could dig in. Worlds, it was said, could have been spared.

Perhaps that is true. And perhaps, if Fate had truly turned against the Imperial forces during some of the most desperate and risky episodes of Macaroth's Cabal endeavour, our military histories and annals might now record Macaroth's warmastery as an outright failure, founded on mistakes, miscalculations

(Right) **Later charts vividly reveal the collapse of the continental shelf at Balopolis, and the extent of the subsequent flooding.**



'TO THE HEAD, NOT THE LIMBS'

Bardheen, in his Tactical Imperatives, writes:

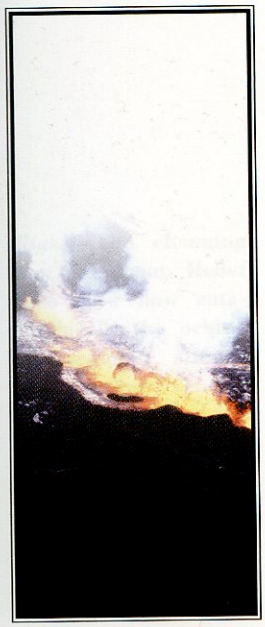
Warmaster Macaroth was accused of not consolidating [the aftermath of Balhaut], but it is evident consolidation was his primary aim. He simply did not consolidate in the way Slaydo might have done; that is to say he did not order an incremental, system-by-system securement of the immediate territory [coupled with a] firm prosecution of the fleeing enemy forces, before pushing on from a stabilised base against the next line of dispute. Macaroth knew Slaydo had set the enemy running, and wished to capitalise on this weakness by thrusting forward boldly, 'on the hunt', instead of labouring to tidy up loose ends. The Cabal Systems zone, ringed as it was by the infamous 'fortress worlds', would be a gargantuan trophy to take, and Macaroth sought to bring the Crusade into striking distance of the Cabal group, before the Archenemy could gain the advantage by gathering at that point. Macaroth was also well aware that the forces of the Ruinous Powers had lost their Archon. They lacked genuine centralised authority, and Macaroth's hope was to drive a devastating lance into their heart by making an orchestrated move that none of the scattered enemy sections could predict, or rally against swiftly enough. In short, he did not wish to waste time and manpower cleansing the disorganised, scattered components of the enemy, but rather strike at the centre. As he wrote, 'I will aim my stroke to the head, not the limbs.' No one, not the Archenemy, nor even Macaroth's generals and marshals, expected him to drive the Crusade spinward across two major system groups to the threshold of the Cabal Systems, so that is precisely what he did.

***(Left)* Blueblood armour on the streets of Malthus, Grimoyr.**

and disastrously overweening ambition. But hindsight, of course, allows us to celebrate how Macaroth's incisive plan was ultimately vindicated. Kerondys, in *Systematic Warfare In The Khan Group*, describes Macaroth as 'everything that Slaydo was, magnified to such a degree that what in Slaydo had seemed bold, in Macaroth seemed reckless, what in Slaydo had seemed genius, in Macaroth seemed insanity.' Though glib, the appraisal is fair. Macaroth brought to the war the same intelligent, instinctive grasp of tactics that Slaydo had possessed, but he employed it on a far greater scale, often to the point where the staff officers around him were simply unable to appreciate the long-term consequences of his decisions.

Macaroth hated over-caution, and delighted in what has been described as 'risk-taking', but it is perhaps more proper to say that he intuited and calculated risks to a finer degree than most. Throughout the push towards the Cabal Systems, Macaroth showed himself to be a speculative commander, peculiarly – almost presciently – sensitive to the rewards and pitfalls of daring actions. Some of the lord generals, including, to an extent, even Cybon himself, came to admire and respect this tenacious ability. To others, he would remain, for many years to come, 'the Gambler'.

Bold and ingenious though it was, Macaroth's drive towards the Cabal Systems was to prove a long and bloody process. On more than one occasion, as the advance became dangerously overstretched, it seemed doomed to certain failure simply by Macaroth's unquenchable thirst for victory, and vindication in the eyes of his generals.



(Above) **Aerial view of the warzone, Nonimax.**

(Right) **Primary Hive, Presarius. Deep beneath this city and its neighbours lay the infamous 'black deeps' of the tectonic foundries and, for the Iron Snakes, the opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty and courage for the third time in the campaign.**

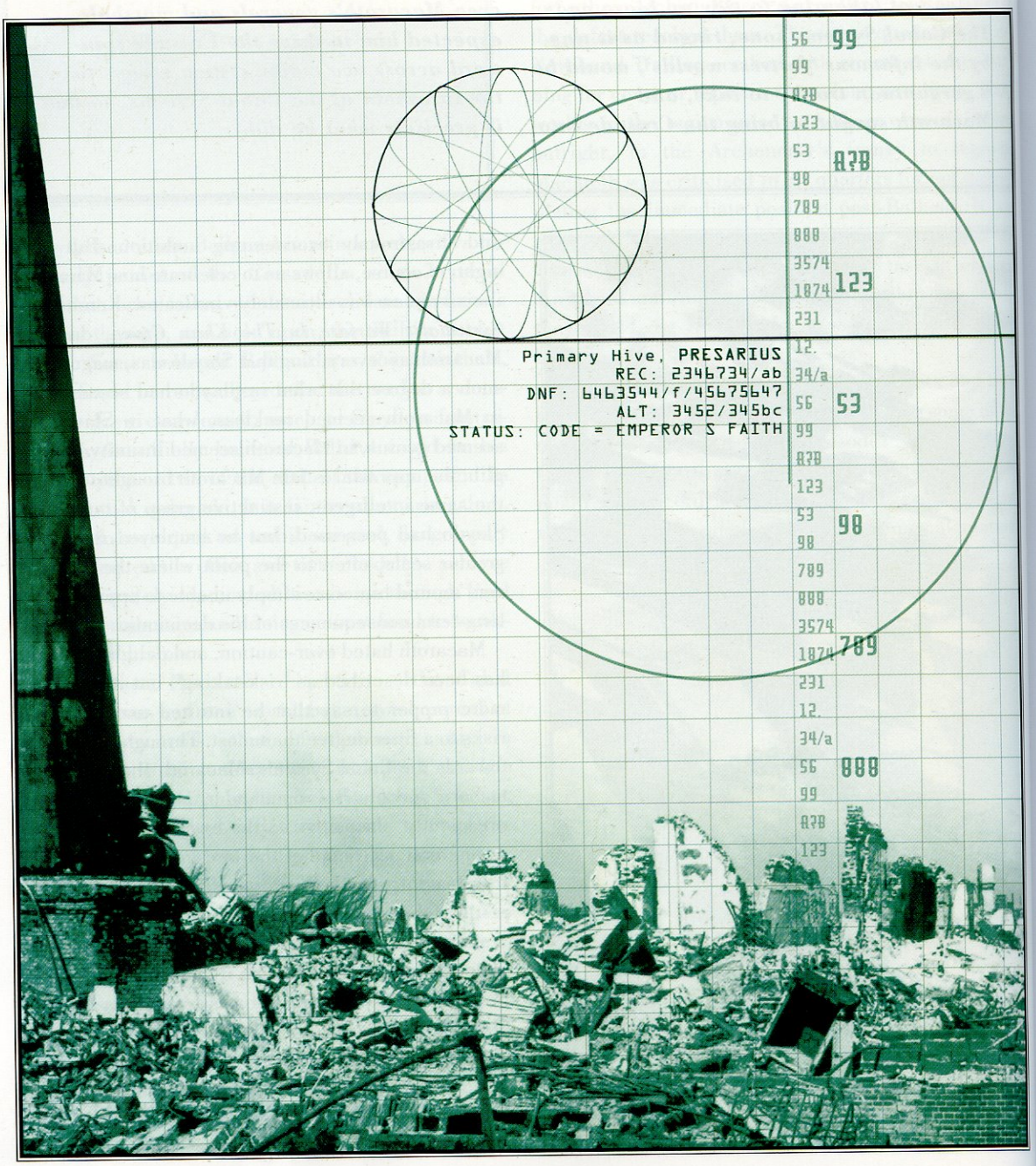
From the close of 765 onwards, the Crusade armies began their massive spinward advance, invading and liberating worlds right across the central belt of the Newfound Trailing Group. Separate actions took place as far to rimward as Nonimax and the Menazoid Clasp, and as far to coreward as Nacedon.

Nonimax was one of the first planets to be assaulted under Macaroth's leadership. A hive world with considerable agricultural significance, Nonimax was vital to Munitorum supply flows. Macaroth's prosecution of the planet was enhanced by his deft deployment of the Pragar regiments, which spearheaded the reconquest in six quick weeks, proving to the gainsayers that the new Warmaster keenly understood the particular strengths and merits of each Guard unit under his command.

Another early success came on Grimoyr, where preliminary stages of fighting had begun at least a year prior to Balhaut and ground on to little if any good effect. Macaroth handed theatre command to the later disgraced Lord General Noches Sturm, in control of the Royal Volpone 50th, who delivered a rapid and accomplished victory in a single week. The Volpone capitalised on their armour support, and vanquished the forces of Magister Sharenidy in the streets of the capital city, Malthus. Sharenidy chose suicide rather than capture.

Mobility was Macaroth's watchword. At regimental strength, battlefield troop units were rapidly deployed onto each target world, and then conveyed to the next with all speed, as soon as said target world was under the control of second echelon occupation forces. This hit-and-run process enabled the most experienced and effective units of battlefield veterans to progress swiftly from one theatre to another, maintaining their fighting edge and tight drill. It was not uncommon, between 765 and 769, for Imperial Guard units to have seen combat on eight or more worlds.

Most of the theatres in this vigorous four-year portion of the advance were wars of liberation, as on Presarius, Sapiencia, Fortis Binary, Monthax, Prince Obermid,



Voltemand, Albrecht and Fortis Binary. Of these, perhaps Presarius was the most outstanding engagement. Marines of the Iron Snakes Chapter added fulsomely to the victory wreaths already won during the Crusade, by forcing battle with a partly mechanised mutant underclass in the tectonic foundries under the main hives. Cut off twice from Imperial lines of supply by enemy action, the Iron Snakes eventually exhausted their ammunition supplies and were forced to fight hand-to-hand with close quarter weapons against the malign and feral foe. The battle lasted nine straight days, and almost all the mutants were exterminated, for the loss of thirty-nine Marines. Veegum of the Silver Guard honoured the courage of the Iron Snakes by having his own Marines bow, bareheaded, to the Snakes on their return.

Inevitably, other actions did not prosper half so well. The hive world, Oscillia IX, saw several gross miscalculations on the part of the Imperial commanders charged to that theatre. These officers, some of them later disgraced at a military inquiry, were 'New Minted' commanders, part of a cadre of officers that Macaroth had raised up with him after Balhaut. It might be regarded as one of Macaroth's blind spots that he expected such fast-tracked junior officers to display the same innate gifts of command that he possessed. Dragged into the limelight on his coat tails, few did, although Urienz is the obvious exception. Especially bloody, and as costly as the similar damned actions on Karkariad, Oscillia IX was eventually wrested from Archenemy hands, but not before Macaroth had uttered his famous words 'Too much blood. Too much, too much. I cannot afford this spill, for the Emperor's sake.'

The true disaster of this fiercely contested period was, of course, Parthenope.

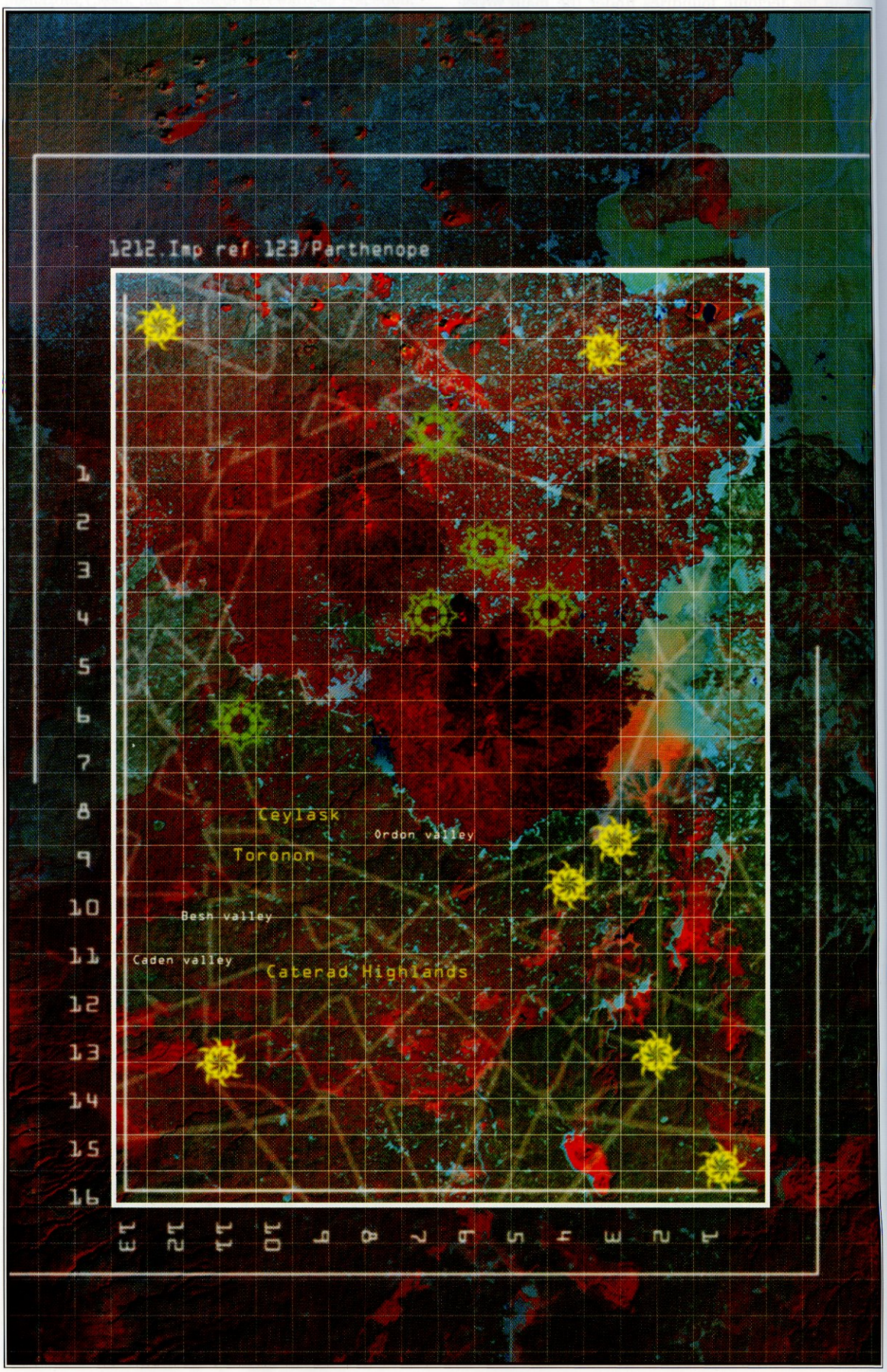
(Above) **Just some of the seventy-eight evidentiary archives compiled during the Oscillia IX Inquiry. The tribunal's findings were as damning as they were extensive.**

(Left) **Pict shot of Karborse City, Oscillia IX. The devastation in the hive zones was widespread.**

This was a crushing defeat to the Crusade force, occurring in 767. A more extensive detailing of the events may be found in Emmony and Saliern's exhaustive *A Summary Of The Parthenope Disaster.*

One of Nadzybar's most notorious Magisters, Qux of the Eyeless, rallied his forces at Parthenope after the flight from Balhaut, having already raided Rodolf Magnus and Hermia, and left their cities ablaze. Twenty divisions, under the command of General Onator, were

(Right) Parthenope, the focus of the fighting. The Archenemy forces hold the terrain advantage.



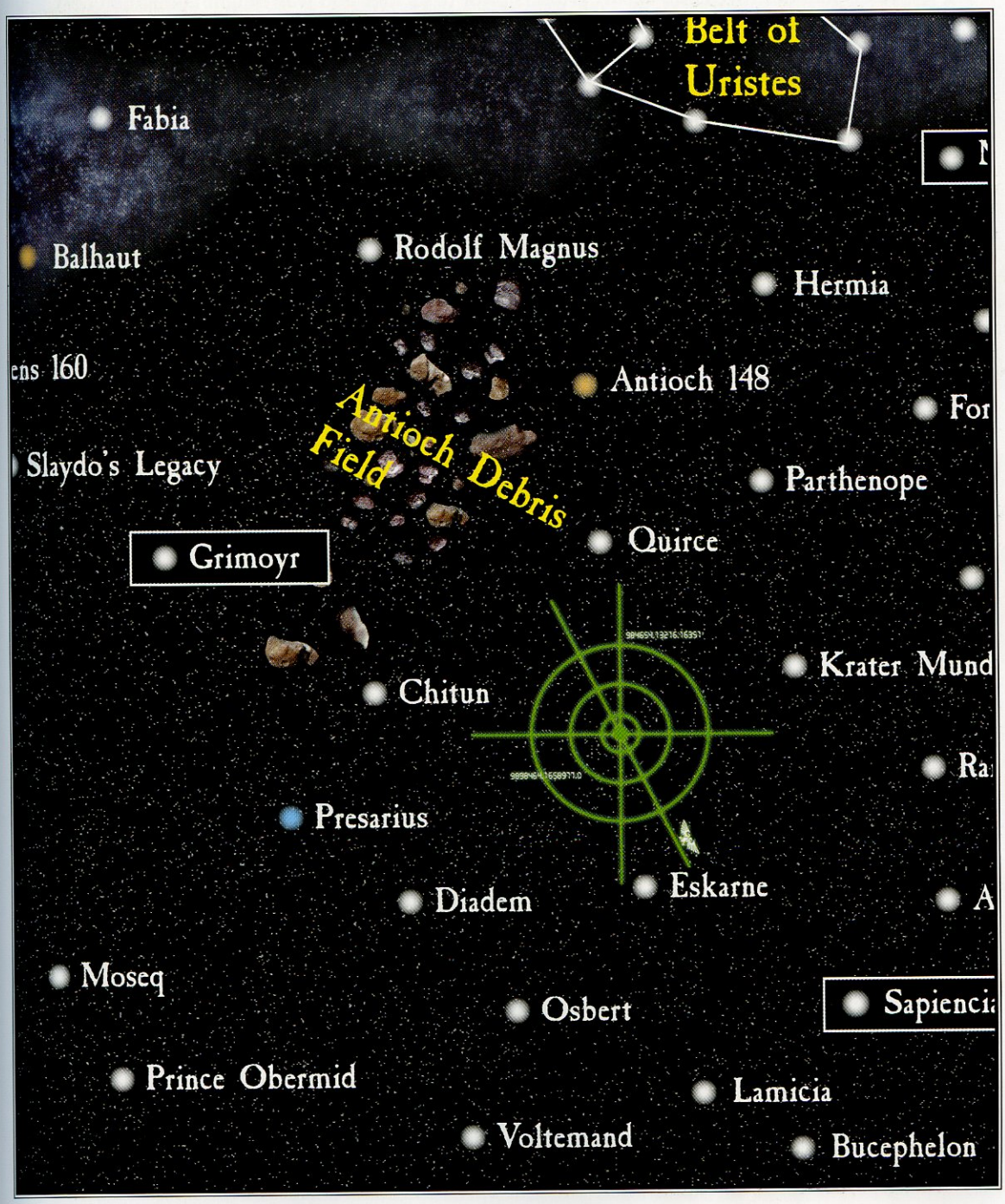
sent in to resecure the world, but Onator may have been complacent following the famous result at Balhaut.

Magister Qux's forces at first seemed to collapse under the initial assault, but this was merely a ruse to coax the Imperial troops into an advance across the Caterad Highlands. Qux then closed around, outflanked Onator, and set about destroying the Imperial force.

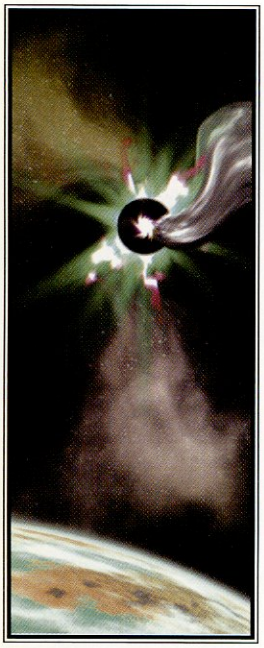
Beset from all sides, Onator sent desperate signals for assistance, and began an attempt to withdraw his principal strengths down from the Highlands into the mining towns of Toronon and Ceylask. One Guard division, comprising the Samothrace 4th, the 2nd Mnenomite and the 23rd and 26th Baldackian Fusiliers, found itself cut off from the rest of the retreating force, and stood ground in the Besh Valley, only to be exterminated during a five hour artillery bombardment.

Onator secured Toronon, but failed to hold on to Ceylask, which was razed by the Magister's advance. After three weeks besieged at Toronon, Onator's hopes were raised when the Adeptus Mechanicus sent in support, but these hopes were quickly dashed. Qux was ably provided with war machines from one of the Traitor Legions, and the Mechanicus reinforcements were obliterated in a nine-day battle of staggering fury. After that, annihilation was complete. Details of the final fate of Onator and his remaining men has been suppressed by the Inquisition for morale reasons.

But the disaster did not stop there. Emboldened by his bloody triumph, Qux sent out his warships, and pursued to destruction the fleet components that had brought the hapless Onator, and his Mechanicus allies, to Parthenope. This massive clash of mainline vessels, the third largest single fleet engagement of the campaign to date, resulted in total victory for the Ruinous Powers, and created the vast Antioch debris field, a memorial to the weakness of overconfidence.



***(Left)* Enlarged detail of sector map, showing the debris field and Parthenope.**



(Above) Vast stellar destruction, visible from orbit over Quirce, marks the creation of the Antioch debris field.

(Right) Some of the key losses sustained during the Parthenope disaster. Extract from the Navy's own casualty ledger.

Parthenope, losses, cont.

(file 5 of 14)

Carnis Nobilis, lost with all hands.

Aestophanhive, mined, later boarded and sacked.

Gauntlet of the Emperor, lost after sustained bombardment sparked a reactor fire. The vessel had destroyed two enemy cruisers prior to its loss, and was caught and annihilated whilst trying to guard the retreat of the stricken battleship *Saint Orientale.*

Guild Mechanicus Mass Cargo Conveyance *Brutitor,* one of nineteen such vessels destroyed in the engagement.

Wrath of Macharius, abandoned then annihilated. The vessel had crippled one enemy frigate, possibly the *Recurve Blade*, and forced a critical drive detonation aboard the Chaos battleship *Prudence Vile*, before being overwhelmed by fighter-bomber assault.

Eternal Light, lost with all hands.

Sacred Vow, last sighted, drifting, after a serious enginarium fire. It is believed the vessel was later vaporised by mines.

Starfury 11-pattern *Killer Kiss* (tail number 11891) of Captain Loden Spayel, lost to anti-ship batteries after a two-hour defence of the cruiser *Signum Nobilis*, during which Spayel scored nineteen confirmed kills.

Starfury 11(e)–pattern ('Emil' version) *Void Mistress* (tail number 47292) of Commander Belanna Kortisan, lost during fighter-swarm dog fighting after recording eleven confirmed kills.

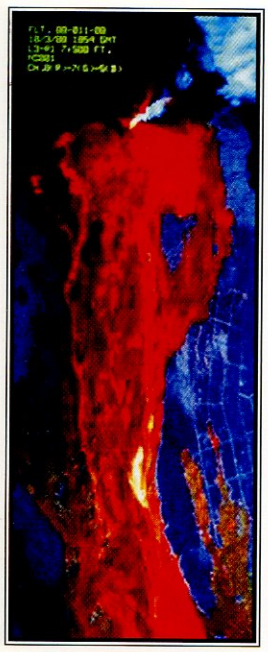
Victory of Summoner Gate, immolated after ramming the Archenemy heavy cruiser *Unnatural Causes*. The enemy vessel was also destroyed.

Imperial records dept. 10734536/ab3. Report trancribed by servitorHalen IV(b).
The strength of the Emperor is Humanity, and the strength of Humanity is the Emperor.

[23]

It is My Duty to Enguage the Fo, as it has been tort to me by my Sargent, and instructed upon me by my Master, who is the War Master of all, beloved Slaydo, who has given me this fine Gun. For I am Proud to be a Gard of the Impereum, and to be its Stonch Defender against the woes of the Arch Enemy, so damn his name. I am in a tunnel, and I hav been heer in this tunnel for some days and the air is Bad, and there is a stink in it. We hav little of water, all between us. The lite is thin, and there is a rank odor. Men are dying. It makes me Jump and say a little pren to the Thrown when I heer them dye nearabouts. Much screeming and showting ther is, and a smell of blood. Ther is also a sound, of a plunk plunk tipe, which my Sargent tells me at last is the noys of gun s fire coming at us. I wood not hav nown, having not herd it befor now. I think I will like it Plenty when the enemy is all ded. But for now, I no I must say my prers and remembr it is My Duty to Enguage the Fo.

(Left) **Hand-written testament found inside a mess tin recovered from the undersink of Sangrel Hive, Formal Prime. The identity of the trooper remains unknown.**



(Above) Orbital scan of the Bay of Belano, Sapiencia, circa 768.

Macaroth later described the first five years of his tenure as Warmaster as 'that time I spent chasing the horizon' (Journals VII, iii, 3), and often, in conversation or digression, has given the impression that the entire approach phase was an ad hoc improvisation, a 'mad, blind rush' towards the goal (Journals IV, ix, 71). Certainly, as we have established, fluid speed was a primary concern, with bounding lines of cover and supply, and diligent, autonomous, reactive leadership vital to the effective progress of the Imperial advance.

But vital too was Macaroth's own complex tactical framework. As early as 766, the various prongs of the advancing Imperial force were laying the groundwork for Macaroth's eventual, multi-point assault upon the Cabal Systems. During this period, the Warmaster's foremost advisors were Imperial Tactician Wilbar Maessen and High Senior Claudator of the Munitorum. In his Discourses, Claudator writes:

'At an early stage in 766, the Warmaster invited me to review a tactical chart of the Newfound/Khan margins upon which he had appended a deployment scheme in his own hand. I spent two days reviewing the details, comprehending them clearly as a plan for ranged advance that correctly and economically made the best use of accessible system bases, provision lines and viable warp routes; in simple terms, it represented the fastest programme of advance along the paths of least resistance. I approved the scheme, and complimented him on his economy. Then he showed me, with genuine modesty, how the scheme matched up to his intended attack pattern on the Cabal Systems, an operation that was then several years away and utterly hypothetical. The attack pattern, a complex but ingenious pincer that took in nineteen primary targets, was highly laudable, but what was truly astonishing was the perfection with which the two schemes meshed. I realised, with some shame, that I had reviewed his scheme of advance and utterly failed to see how elegant and finely judged it was, in terms of bringing the requisite fleet and Guard resources to the correct points, properly furnished with lines of supply, reinforcement and space for reactive manoeuvre. He had done this, it appeared to me, without the aid of a logic engine. What seemed at first to be a frantic scurry to gain ground was in fact the perfect foundation of his intended attack.'

In his own, unpublished Notes and Marginalia, Maessen says:

'There was a structure in even his most random suggestions. I came to notice this early on. Minor orders to deploy this auxiliary or that support group, decisions that seemed to be day-to-day conveniences, had concealed within them long-term exigencies. He was plotting four or five moves ahead of the rest of us.'

In the preparation of this volume, the author was able to consult various honoured members of High Command, including Bulledin, Van Voytz, Kelso, Hummel and Blackwood. All independently note this trait in the Warmaster for scrupulous forward planning 'without any wasted effort' as Marshal Blackwood described it. None ever remembered Warmaster Macaroth to attend a war room session with any notes or data slates to hand. 'It was all in his head,' General Kelso said. 'In every respect and detail, the process of the war, past, present and still to come, was inside his mind.'

***(Right)* Armour advances during the liberation of the forge world, Urdesh.**

KEY JEOPARDIES

In his comprehensive *Pacificus Wars*, Saliern enumerates the 'eight hundred and forty-three key jeopardies' that he believes faced Macaroth during this period of the Crusade. For our purposes here, the specific dangers may be simplified to three main themes:

i) Overstretch. Even at the time, this appeared to many tactical advisors as the Crusade's most likely stumbling block. Ironically, it would be increasingly likely to come about the more successful Warmaster Macaroth's scheme became. If the leading edge and advancing lines of Macaroth's racing push accomplished their objectives and were not checked, there was a danger that the Crusade host could seriously over-reach itself, attenuating lines of supply and exposing flank vulnerabilities. High Senior Claudator, well versed in the capabilities of the Munitorium, made it his particular duty to keep this danger in the Warmaster's mind, and prevent a repeat of the Carthusia Incident during the Sidrian Wars (693.M41), when Lord Militant Gloman's Forward Army Group outstripped its lines of supply during an advancement phase and was cut off and exterminated by the Sidrian Federalists.

ii) A new Archon. It was an inevitable fact that, despite any dynastic infighting, the Archenemy host would eventually select a new Archon from amongst the paters and Magisters surviving Balhaut. At the very least, a new Archon would inject motivational impetus, and drive, into the enemy forces. Worst still, a new Archon, gifted in strategy, might centralise the tactics of the Ruinous Powers and properly orchestrate their efforts against the Crusade. Imperial Intelligence struggled hard to obtain details about whom or what was likely to win the war of succession, piecing together scraps of data and rumours gathered (often at a great price) along the front line. By 769, it was evident the front-runner was the potent and brilliant 'Anarch', otherwise known as Magister Anakwanar Sek.

iii) Counter offensive. Linked directly to the two points above, this danger represents more than just a revitalisation of the Archenemy forces under a new Archon. Some senior officers, amongst them Blackwood, Urienz and Federich, were convinced that the enemy might do more than just toughen its resolve; it might attempt to execute a counter-strike to the Crusade flank, especially if said flank was exposed because of overstretch.

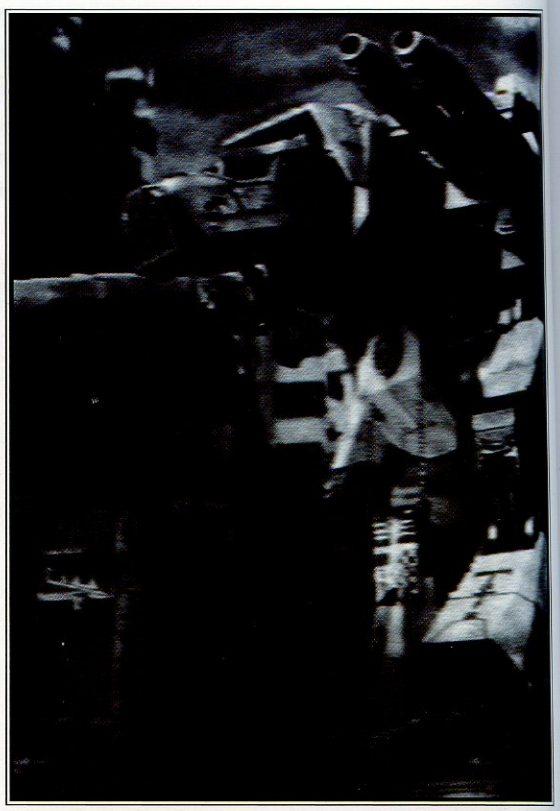
(Right) A Warhound Titan engages during the reconquest of the Urdeshi heartland.

Almost as many worlds were caught up in the aftershock of the enemy retreat from Balhaut in 765 as were directly assaulted by the Crusade forces. Some of these were 'visited' or 'seeded' by fleeing enemy elements seeking hideaways or bolt-holes, or new opportunities to rebuild footholds. A list of the worlds that endured such a plight would include Sapiencia, Verghast, Aexe Cardinal, Lamicia, Erasmus, Unida and, of course, poor, contested Cociaminus (see page 30). Many of these would be rescued from their suffering, though not before Imperial lives had been corrupted and lost.

Another significant world to suffer this fate was Urdesh. One of the principal forge worlds of the Sabbat Worlds, situated in the rimward zones of the Khan Group, Urdesh had resisted the predatory attacks of the Ruinous Powers for many years, but finally succumbed to mass assault in the post-Balhaut period, 766–67.M41. As a consequence, many of its stockpiled weapons and armoured war machines fell into enemy hands, and were then used against Imperial Guard regiments during the course of the campaign.

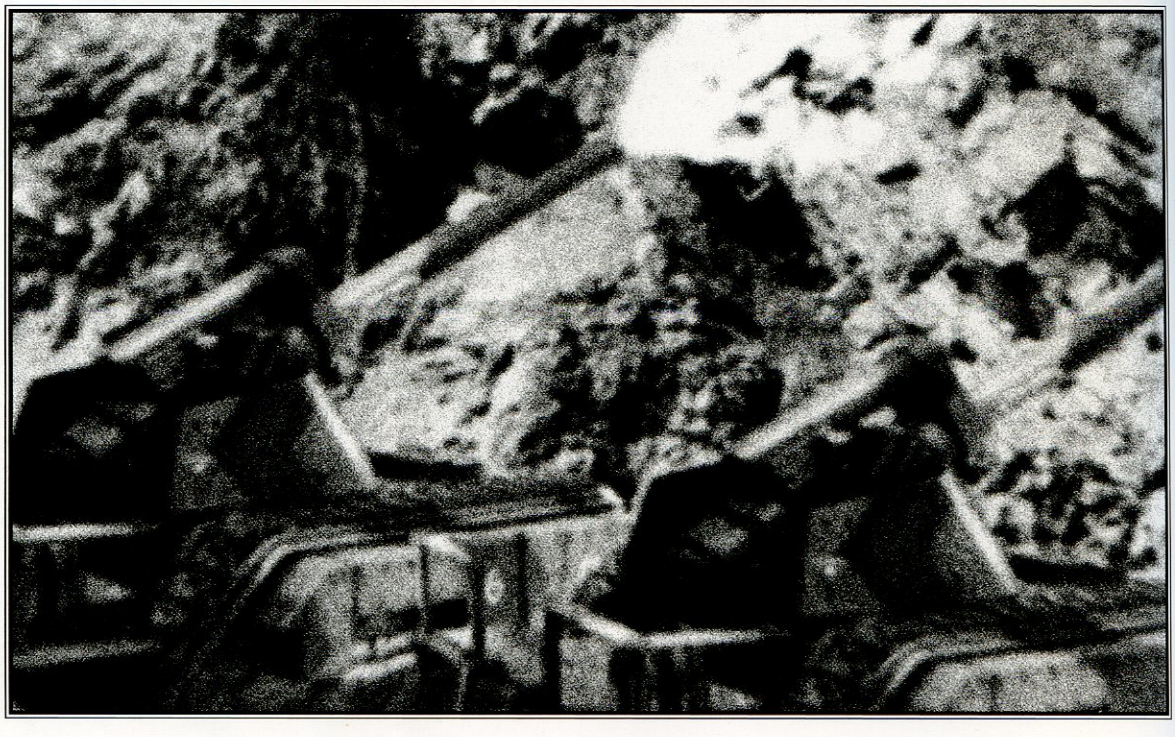
Urdesh, finally liberated in the first few months of 772, produced famously potent projectile weapons including the U90 assault cannon, as well as light and heavy armour pieces, many of which were utilised by Chaos forces, including Blood Pact and, later, the Sons of Sek. Urdeshi armour patterns that were to become ubiquitous as enemy machines included the STeG 4 light armoured cars, N20 and N22 pattern half-tracks, Usurper pattern self-propelled guns, AT70 Reaver pattern battle tanks and the monstrous AT83 Brigand pattern super tanks.

Urdesh had a proud tradition of founding excellent Guard regiments, units noted for their shock troop and assault capabilities, and famous for their black and white 'puzzle camo' battledress. A full eight regiments were active off-world at the time of the forge world's capture, including the Urdesh Fourth (light), Sixth and Tenth, and the famous Seventh Urdeshi Storm-troop. These units continued to serve with excellence in various theatres of the war, and some were able to return to fight in the final liberation of their world in 772.

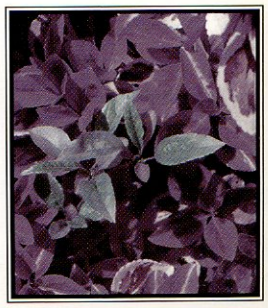


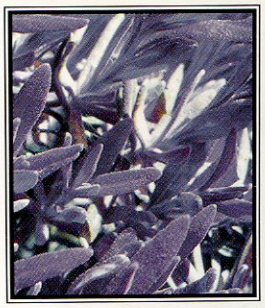
Other worlds and units were not quite so fortunate. With their homeworld, Carthage Major, in enemy hands from 758, the Latarii 'Gundogs' came to be regarded as the archetypical 'homeless' regiment, fighting on regardless, with no home to return to. Sometimes rogue, sometimes suicidal, the Gundogs earned themselves a fine reputation thanks to a whole series of actions across the Newfound Trailing.

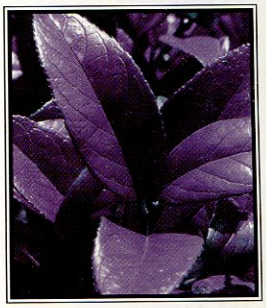
(Right) Urdesh pattern Basilisk. This is typical of the armoured fighting vehicles produced by that forge world, which fell into enemy hands and were turned on Imperial forces.



(Left) Archenemy ritual art, discovered on a furnace siding, Forge 12, Urdesh (mural size 4m x 6m).







(Above) Monochrome foliage and 'soot weeds' from the polluted forests of Urdesh. Historically, the Urdeshi penchant for black and white camouflage probably arose as a response to these conditions.

General Federich described them as 'valiant no-hopers, desperadoes, who will take on the risks that other units shrink from, simply because they have nothing left to lose. The immortality of the Latarii Gundogs was secured during the fighting on Lamicia in the latter months of 767. Lamicia*, a particularly ancient Imperial holding, whose venerable cities contained some of the oldest continuous-use Ecclesiarchy temples in the Sabbat Worlds, was occupied by a comparatively small force of Archenemy units, and the Gundogs were sent in, with Sarpoy armoured support, to reclaim the capital, Lammarus.

The resulting battle, primarily centred on the precincts of the King's Household, concluded with what appeared to be a clear victory for the Latarii, but the enemy commander (identity unknown) managed, in the final few hours of the struggle, to have his cult priests ritually unleash a daemonic entity into the city. This foul thing raged berserk through the inner precincts, slaughtering thousands, including the bulk of the Sarpoy crews. In a staggeringly selfless last stand, the Gundogs lured the daemon into a trap in the volcanic ducts beyond the outer Household walls, and destroyed it by detonating an explosive device of unknown origin.

None of the Gundogs survived the blast. The subsequent volcanic eruptions continued for many years, the venting lava 'stained red with the blood of those brave souls who had so valiantly purged the place of corruption'. Ironically, the Latarii Gundogs' homeworld Carthage Major was later liberated. Only in death were they no longer dispossessed.

Another dispossessed regiment of note was the so-called Ghosts of Tanith. Tanith, a forest world of little tactical significance, was assaulted, engulfed and destroyed in late 765 by a portion of the Archenemy fleet that had broken trailwards after Balhaut, a move that took the Tacticae Imperialis by surprise. Tanith was one of six minor worlds annihilated in the locality during that rabid counterstrike. At the time of the assault, a Guard founding was in progress, the first of its kind to be raised in the planet's history. Of the regiments created, only one – known as the 'Tanith First and Only' – escaped the total destruction of their homeworld. Forming a skilful, specialist scout unit, the Tanith Ghosts have continued to serve creditably in the Crusade efforts, earning particular distinction at Verghast, Hagia and Herodor.

** Lamicia's age and heritage are such that mention of it in Imperial records often betrays signs of the old local dialect, perpetuated in its civic documents and charters. The capital city, Lammarus (Low Gothic) is often written as 'Lamarous', and the name of the world itself may sometimes be written as 'Lamacia'.*

(Right) **Part of the massive beachhead defences at Oskray Island on the Bay of Belano, Sapiencia, fractured during the mass landing assault.**

In his sermon of blessing at the Warmaster's election ceremony on Balhaut in 765, Ecclesiarch Tarquel Benedictor Osonius proclaimed Macaroth's true duty was to 'rid these stars of the Ruinous Powers, and all fell blight contaminating them, and accomplish, with the provident grace of the God-Emperor, an ending unto the daemons that stain the Imperium of Mankind with their foul distemper'. During the rapid and violent advance phase of 765 to 769, Macaroth's forces made this pledge a reality on several occasions as it bore down on the Cabal Systems. Some of Nadzybar's most infamous and despised Magisters were at last overtaken and annihilated.

~ SHOLEN SKARA ~

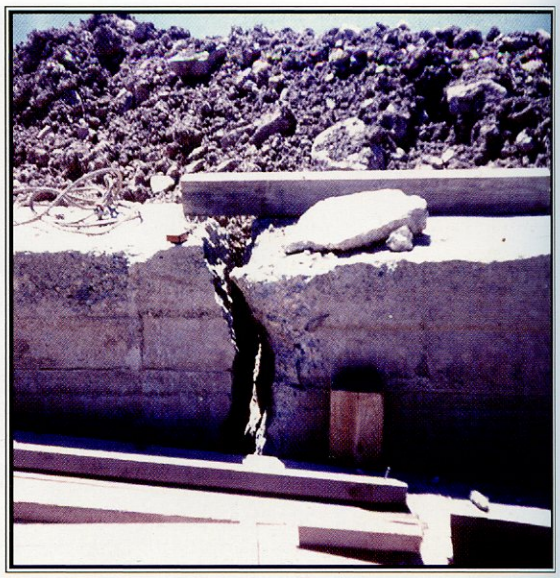
Following his escape from Balhaut, the fiend known as Sholen Skara took refuge on Sapiencia, a world geographically dominated by oceans. Here, supported by his heathen Kith followers, the architect of the Balopolis Peninsula murder-camps established a new stronghold, from which he intended to mount counter-strike operations at Voltemand and Caligula. His plans were swiftly brought to an end when the Imperial Guard reconquered Sapiencia after a single mass

(Right) **An image of the monstrous Heritor, from printed leaflets recovered from Ferrozoica. It is not clear if this is a true likeness, or a symbolic rendering designed for propaganda purposes.**

assault in early 768. This invasion, a masterful orbital drop onto the beach lines of the primary island groups, proved to be one of the Crusade's swiftest victories, thanks in the main to the opportune early capture of the genocidal Magister. The vile Kith destroyed themselves in a mass suicide ritual determined by the tenets of their own death cult beliefs. Sholen Skara craved death himself, seeing it as his apotheosis after a life in the service of destruction, but he was denied this, and his murderous career ended in the hands of the Inquisitorial ordos.

~ RUSHECK VAKKIM ~

Face to face conflict with Magister Rusheck Vakkim had long been dreaded by High Command. As early as 756, his name and reputation as one of the most formidable enemy commanders had become well known to Imperial Intelligence sources, but due to the vagaries of circumstances, his forces – known as the



G'uttkhra, or Thorns of Heaven – had not yet been directly encountered by Imperial forces.

On three occasions between 757 and 763, his war fleet had been identified, moving into support Archenemy actions, but each time the threat came to nothing. He became something of a bogeyman in the Crusade mindset, a constant threat waiting just out of sight, choosing the most auspicious moment to strike. Certainly, Vakkim appears to have been one of the most guileful and cautious of the enemy Magisters, a stealthy, predatory warlord who preferred deceit and subterfuge to outright war.

A series of savage raids on civilian centres along the edge of the Khan Group in 764 were attributed to his followers, and added to his reputation for cunning and the ability to side-step military confrontation in favour of soft targets. In 765, Vakkim was undoubtedly in command of the principal reinforcement hosts heading to Balhaut to support the Archon after Slaydo's Fabian Ruse. Recognising he was too late to deny Imperial victory, Vakkim once again preferred to slip away rather than allow himself to be caught in a full scale battle.

It is believed that Vakkim's forces were amongst those that obliterated six minor worlds in the coreward Newfound Trailing, including the forest world Tanith, in late 765.

In 768, his war fleet, for so long the subject of rumour and fearful myth, was discovered by surprise at high anchor above Nyzon II. General Urienz, the brightest and best of Macaroth's 'new minted' commanders, had been directing a line of advance towards Alpha Madrigo when his recon squadrons identified the Magister's ships on station.

Urienz, never one for trepidation, ordered an immediate engagement, taking Vakkim unawares. The orbital battle, which swiftly became a ship-to-ship boarding action, was bloody and furious, and in its course, the Thorns of Heaven proved themselves to be every bit the nightmare foes that myth had built them up to be. However, Urienz was victorious, personally leading the boarding action of the Magister's own warship, *Crown*

of Thorns. Vakkim was captured, only to escape custody by means that are still not fully understood.

In the ensuing confusion, Vakkim and nine of his G'uttkhra managed to flee to the surface of Nyzon II, but they were hunted down two days later by a kill team lead by Urienz's brilliant protégé, Commander Lang Mowzer. Cornered in an out-hab district of Penetor Hive, Vakkim and his followers were all exterminated during a brutal gun battle.

~ HERITOR ASPHODEL ~

The massive hive world, Verghast, witnessed the end of the notorious Heritor Asphodel in 769. Having fled Balhaut, the Heritor's forces reached Verghast at some point in 766/7 and managed to infiltrate and entirely corrupt the population of Ferrozoica, one of the most dominant hive cities there. Inter-hive civil war erupted, lasting fifty days, and the focus of the savage fighting was the besieged city of Vervunhive.

Asphodel was eventually slain during a specialist infiltration mission by the Imperial Guard forces protecting the hive, and his forces were subsequently annihilated by a massed flotilla of the Battlefleet Majoris Segmentum Pacificus that had arrived to break the siege.

***(Left)* Vervunhive, circa 769. The Heritor's assault would come from the south.**

The assault on the Cabal Systems itself began in 770.M41. A great proportion of the vast Crusade force, now more subdivided than ever into discrete military units, was still advancing across the Newfound Trailing and Khan groups, but a significant enough portion of the Imperial host was now in position to commence its attack.

Macaroth had made no secret of his admiration for Slaydo's Operation Redrake, and shared his predecessor's willingness to deconstruct the main strength of his fleet into individual taskforces that could deliver simultaneous attacks on several target zones. However, as with everything Slaydo had done, Macaroth intended to do it bigger and more ambitiously.

Described in *A History of the Later Imperial Crusades* as a 'bravura, multi-point invasion scheme', Macaroth's attack plan called for a simultaneous assault of nineteen key planets in the Cabal Systems, including three of the notorious 'fortress worlds'. Intelligence reported that, despite the Crusade's speed of advance, the Archenemy was already well dug in along the Cabal Systems' trailing line. Furthermore, it was becoming clear that a new Archon had finally come to power, centralising the authority of the Ruinous Powers for the first time since Balhaut.

The assault's first phase was spectacularly successful. By the end of 770, eight worlds had fallen, including the fortress planets Solveig and Aphra, and inroads had been made deep into the Cabal Systems Group, enough to drive a significant disposition of the Archenemy forces into retreat towards the Carcaradon Cluster. Macaroth himself was gleeful when he heard this particular news. Along with the Erinyes Group, the Carcaradon Cluster formed the spinward portion of the Sabbat Worlds, touching on the marginal sectors of non-Imperial space, known as the Sanguinary Worlds, from which the Archenemy forces had originally emerged. For the first time since before the start of the Crusade itself, there was a palpable sense that overall victory could be achieved and that the Archenemy could be driven back into the hellish, primitive outer wastes of the halo stars that had sired him.

Macaroth's recklessness in 'rushing' towards the Cabal Systems seemed to have been justified, and his tactical skill amply proven. Now, it seemed, finally enjoying the confident support of all the lords militant, he pressed the Crusade into the Cabal Systems with renewed fury, declaring he would have them purged by midwinter 771.

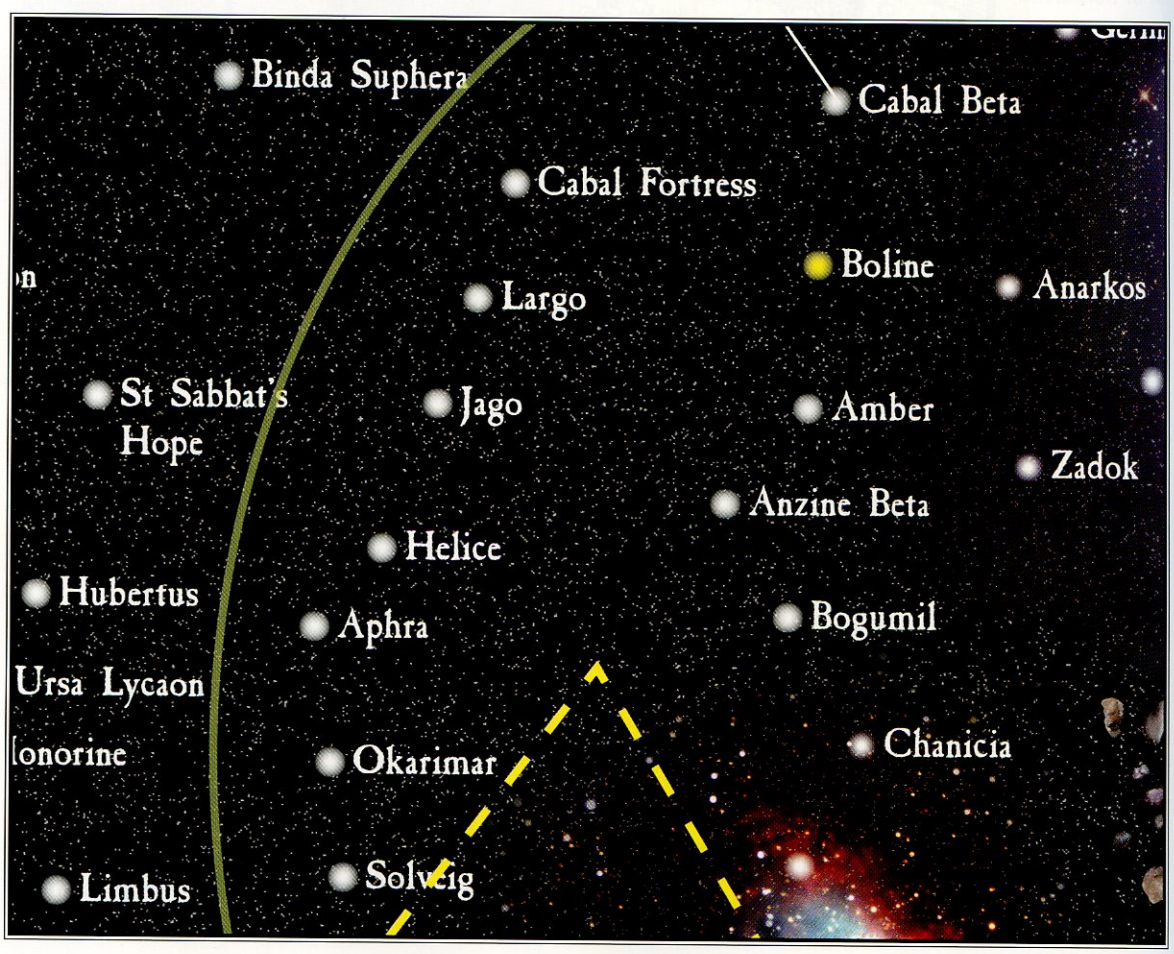
It was a boast he would come to regret. Several target worlds in the Cabal Systems remained resistant to his attacks, especially Canemara, Jago and Morlond, the most implacable fortress world of them all.

In 771, the entire Cabal push juddered to a halt. The Archenemy had at last begun to do more than simply resist. It was striking back.

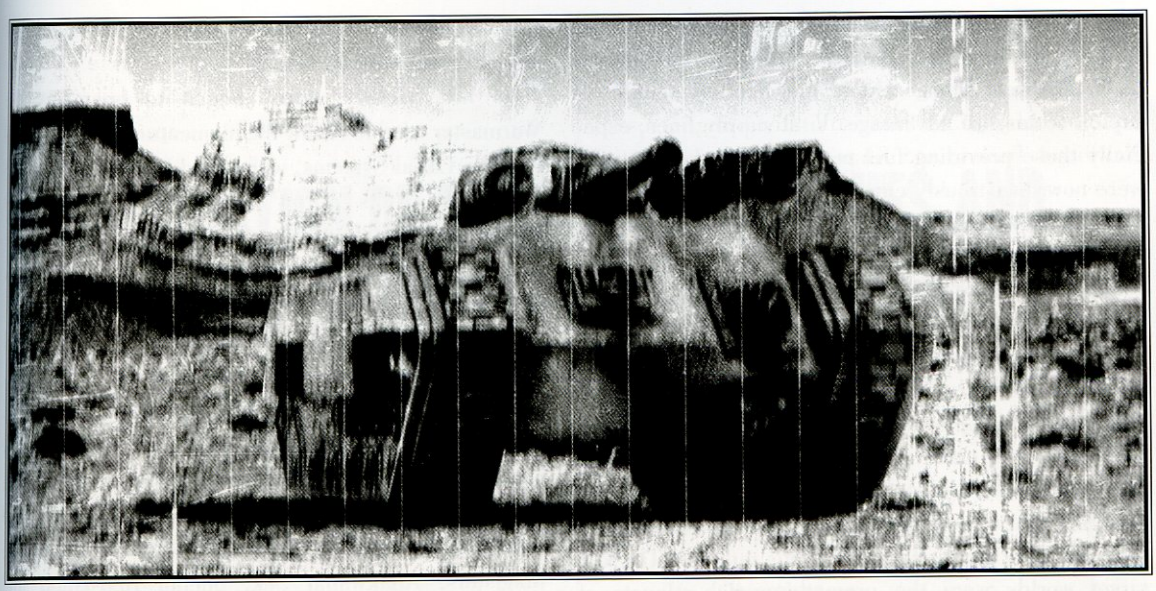
And this time, the Archenemy had a name once more. That name was Urlock Gaur.

~ THE NEW ARCHON ~

After protracted infighting, a new Archon had emerged from the ranks of the warlords to take Nadzybar's place.



(Right) **The trailing zones of the Cabal Systems, showing the border worlds assaulted during Macaroth's initial phase (770–771).**



(Left) **Imperial defences at Khan V are overrun by the Gaur's counter-strike.**

Early reports of his name and/or title reported it as 'Orlock Gor' or sometimes 'Orlock Gowah', but these proved to be just phonetic variations derived through translation and transcriber devices. The new Archon's name was formalised in Low Gothic as Urlock Gaur.

Urlock Gaur had evidently beaten many rival Magisters to become Archon. Indeed, this internecine warfare between tribal septs and clans may have contributed greatly to the lack of unified resistance encountered by the Crusade as it advanced on the Cabal Systems. Certainly, more than one world was discovered littered with the aftermath of great battles in which no Imperial had taken part. The Crusade was to find Urlock Gaur a robust, savage commander, unimaginative and brutal in his tactical approach to the war. It seems likely that Urlock Gaur had won the title of Archon simply on the basis of his devastating military strength.

That great strength, as the Imperial forces were soon to learn, was the Blood Pact, a supremely able fighting force whose practice and methodology was ultimately modelled on that of the Imperial Guard itself.

Myths spoke of the Blood Pact order arising on an outworld called Ghourra or Gaurra in the Sanguinary Worlds on the edge of the disputed Sabbat territories many thousands of years before. The dynastic, tribal society of Ghourra was ruled by a feudal overlord, or Gaur (alt 'Ghour' or 'Gour'). The Gaur surrounded himself with an elite warrior priesthood, who conducted the ritual observances by which the Gaur made tribute to his daemon-god. This priesthood evolved over time into an outright bodyguard, which practised its martial skills as strictly and diligently as the priesthood had conducted its necromantic rights.

As the Gaur's strength grew, and his influence began to spread to neighbouring worlds, it was this bodyguard force that led the conquering armies. Soon it became a mark of respect to be 'bloody pacted' to the ruling Gaur. Numbers grew, recruited from vassal worlds, and the bodyguard became an army in its own right. Thus was the Blood Pact spawned.

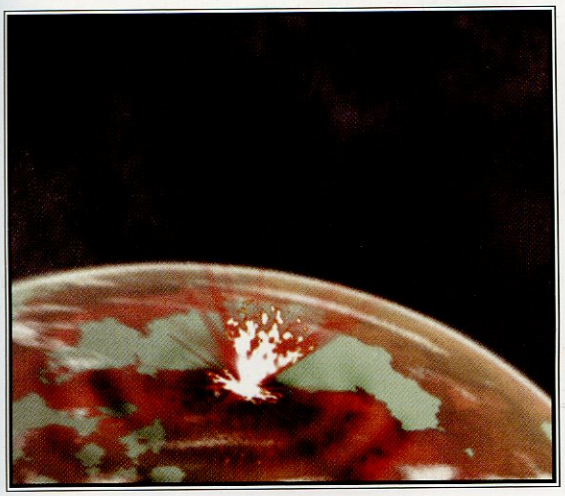
Uniquely, the Gaur himself personally inducts every single member of the Blood Pact into service. To prove his allegiance in blood to both the Gaur and the Blood God, each aspirant ritually gashes his hands on the sharpened edges of the Gaur's battle armour.

From an Imperial perspective, the first notice given of Urlock Gaur's appearance was a series of lightning raids along the coreward fringe of the Khan Group in the middle of 771. Then, more strenuous resistance was encountered in the Cabal System itself, along with the first, alarmist reports of the emerging Blood Pact.

Less than a month later, Urlock Gaur struck more profoundly. Believed at first to be a particularly militant Magister, it quickly became apparent that the Gaur was far more than that. He was able to call upon vast reserves of troops, and mobilise other, potent Magisters under his command. By 772, there was no doubt whatsoever that Urlock Gaur was the new Archon.

By then, in the bleak closing months of 771, he had unleashed an inspired counter-offensive along the Crusade's coreward flank taking, in quick succession, Enothis, Khan V, Caius Innate and Belshiir Binary.

In a dramatically short period, the three key dangers haunting Macaroth's plan manifested themselves. A new Archon had arisen to unify the enemy, he had mounted a wounding counter-strike against the Crusade flank, and that flank, over stretched, was woefully exposed.



(Left) **Pict capture from orbital drone-sat showing the start of the bombardment at Enothis.**

Macaroth's overreaching push into the Cabal Systems had created a salient, vulnerable on three sides, which the Archon sought to exploit to his full advantage. Vital supply lines, especially those providing fuel resources for the Crusade, were now disastrously constricted, or even cut. Unless fresh supply lines could be forged, and new fuel reserves made available, the hard-won gains in the Cabal Systems would be lost. At best, the Imperial forces would be forced into retreat. At worst, the salient would collapse and they would be overrun.

Raging, the Warmaster hastily redeployed significant elements of his spinward flank, along with allied support units, in a make or break effort to reopen supply lines. Generals Urienz, Van Voytz and Federich, and lords militant Cybon and Delayni were placed in command of army groups to achieve this purpose. The key target worlds were the promethium-rich planets of Gigar, Aondrift Nova, Anaximander and Mirridon, the forge world Urdesh, Tanzina IV and Ariadne with their solid fuel reserves, and the vapour mills of Rydol and Phantine.

Between the end of 771 and the middle part of 772, these commanders conducted desperate, sometimes improvised, operations to secure the target worlds, their aim being to open up what Macaroth had dubbed 'victory veins' to keep the Crusade alive. Only at Ariadne, where a superior Blood Pact force denied Urienz, did any of these attempts fail.

As his 'victory veins' began to open up, the Warmaster tried to renew the momentum of his advance into the Cabal Systems, which had been so strong and successful in its initial phase. The fortress world Morlond still held out – indeed, Morlond's local zone was so comprehensively mined that Imperial forces were only just now reaching the planet itself.

Evidence suggested that the Archon himself had withdrawn into the Carcaradon Cluster to mass a full-scale counter attack, and Macaroth was desperate to break past Morlond and confront him. Macaroth was also aware that his second priority was to defend the Cabal Salient. The Gaur had left the ongoing coreward flank attack under the command of his most capable Magisters: Anakwanar Sek, Shebol Red-Hand and Enok Innokenti.

With typically instinctive flair, Macaroth decided to divide the Crusade force between his most trusted commanders to meet these threats. Many voices were raised in objection. The Navy commanders in particular believed that the Warmaster had only survived his gamble at Cabal by the thinnest of margins, and now saw him about to repeat the risk on an even greater scale. Macaroth, as usual, dismissed their objections.

(Right) **Ouranberg, Phantine. Perched on a mountain peak above the planetary smog (known as the Scald), Ouranberg was one of the key vapour mill sites Van Voytz reclaimed for Imperial use.**

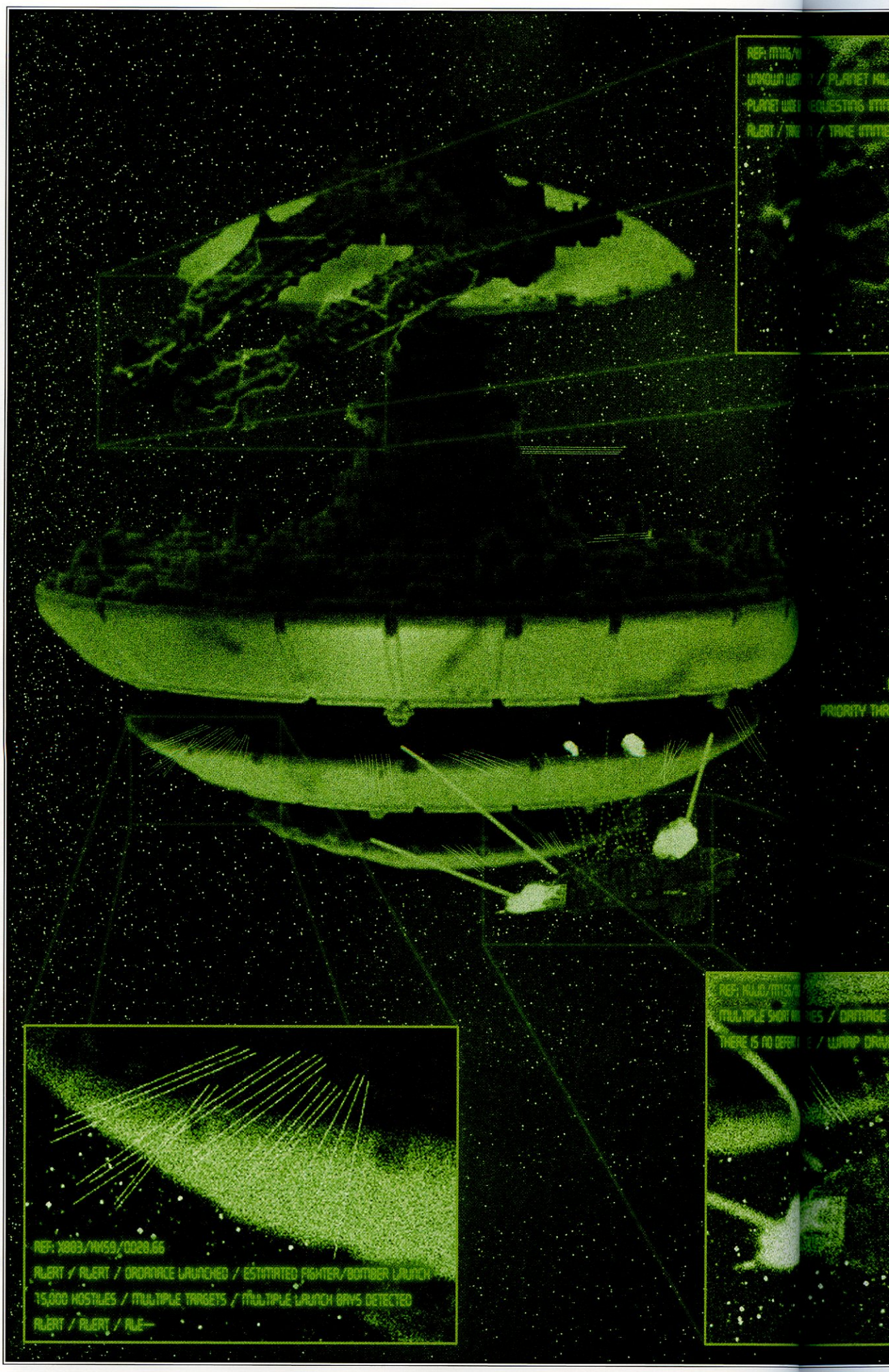
(Left) **Macaroth's division of forces.**

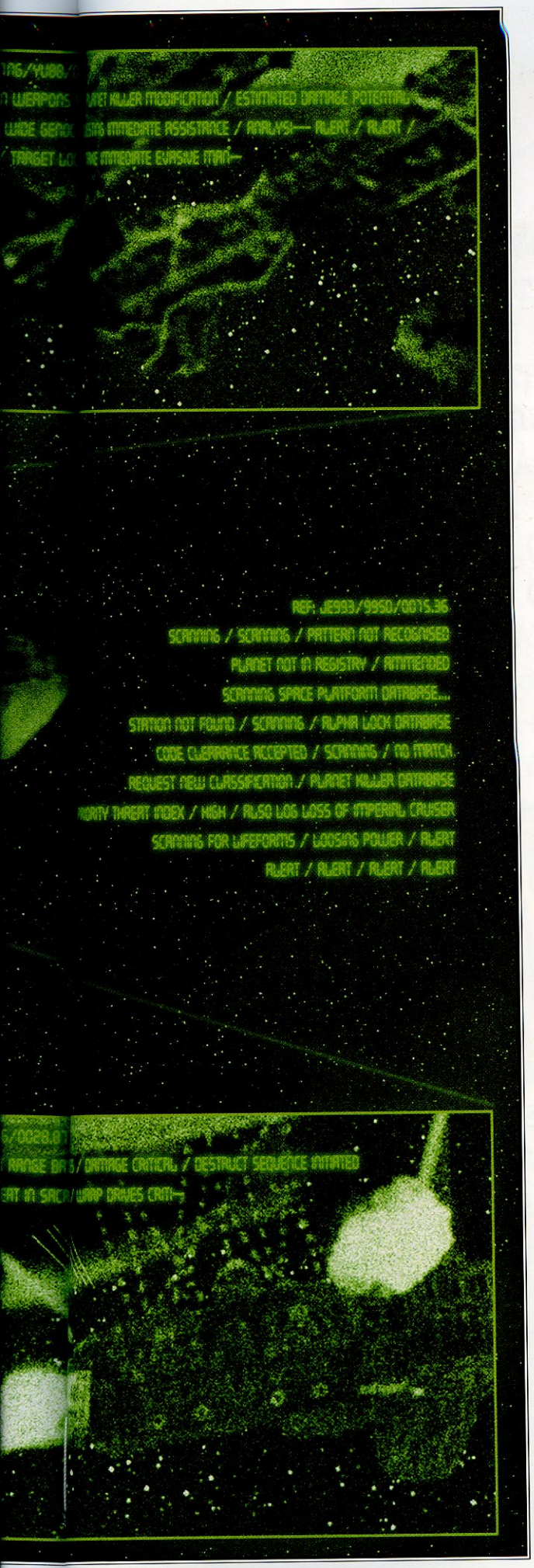
DISPOSITION OF THE CRUSADE ARMIES AND THEIR OBJECTIVES, CIRCA 772.M41

Force	Commander(s)	Objectives
Crusade Ninth Army	Lord Militant Humel	Directed to Enothis to engage Magister Sek
Crusade Eighth Army Crusade Sixth Army	General Kelso Chapter Master Veegum	Directed into the Khan Group to prosecute Magister Innokenti
Crusade Seventh Army	Marshal Blackwood	Directed to coreward, to defend the line of reinforcement through Belshiir Binary and Alpha Madrigo
Crusade Second Army	General Bulledin	Directed to spinward to protect the line of reinforcement via Urdesh
Crusade Fifth Army	General Luschiem	Tasked with rear-guarding the Warmaster's main advance
Crusade First Army Crusade Third Army Crusade Fourth Army	Warmaster Macaroth Lord Militant Cybon General Urienz	Continued prosecution of Morlond and the Cabal Systems

Imperial records dept. 54321.A
Addendum to Sabbat Crusades report 56723456
Requested access code 23A.
A copy of this report is available by request from Imperial records office 36418/Bastro IV

(Right) **High-scan strategium display of Morlond.**



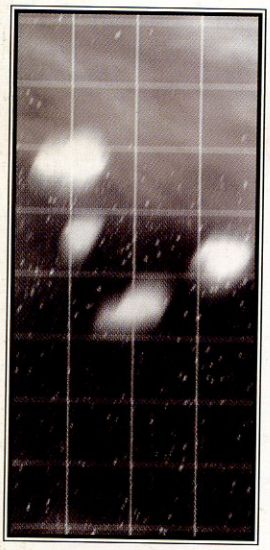


Morlond, the oldest and biggest of the Cabal System fortress worlds, was the thorn in Macaroth's side. Devastatingly well-defended, it served as a base station for Archenemy fleet units, and was also capable of unleashing crippling long range bombardments. Approach routes to the Morlond system itself, and into the local plane of Morlond, were a supreme challenge of themselves. The zone was densely seeded with magnetic-reactive mines, spread in shoal patterns that automatically reconfigured and adjusted their spread every two days. Archenemy fleet traffic was able to move unmolested through the mine fields provided it possessed the correct cipher engines that would decode the existing shoal pattern and reveal the cleared paths of approach.

THE FORTRESS WORLDS

Theories abound as to the exact origin of the fortress worlds. Though occupied and armed by the forces of the Imperium, and latterly by the hosts of the Archenemy, the structures themselves pre-date human activity in the region. Indeed, over eight levels of prior occupation have been identified by xenoarchaeologists, indicating periodic habitation by several precursor species dating back over eight million years. Two of these precursor species, the Kinebrach, and Species K43811D, are known from Imperial records, but the others belong to previously unknown and, presumably, extinct cultures. The longest periods of occupation appear to have been by the Kinebrach (circa M15 to M31), which fits contemporaneously the understood span of the Kinebrach culture, and by an unidentified species, which apparently inhabited the fortress worlds for a stretch of almost three quarters of a million years, ending in -M4. It is not clear if any of these occupying species, with the exception of the Kinebrach, used the worlds for military and/or defensive purposes.

The identity of the world builders themselves is unknown, though other examples of similar planetary constructions have been found in Imperial Space. Davidovitch, in his Antique Structures and Anomalies, asserts that such formidable sites can only have been wrought for purposes of defence, and the alignment of the fortress worlds seems to support this. But to protect what, and from who? Certainly, the deep 'rampart' constructions and massive exterior armour provide an excellent basis for the configuration of both close and long range weapons, and an extensive network of ducts and channels make it possible for effective power and communication systems to be laced throughout each of the fortress worlds. Imperial pioneers experienced no difficulty in converting the worlds for use as fortresses (the only obstacle was the sheer quantity of arms and equipment required). When the worlds fell to the Archenemy forces, this conversion work was capitalised upon, and the fortress worlds became amongst the most monumental bastions in known space.



(Above) **Pict capture from the fire control station of the Imperial cruiser *Light of the Throne*, at Kahn II. Distinctive energy flashes and dissipation waves were the first warning of mass Arch-enemy attack.**

By 773, the eighteenth year of the Crusade campaign, the Imperial force was subdivided, hard-pressed and over stretched, fighting simultaneous actions right across the Khan Group and the trailward half of the Cabal Systems.

There, Morlond refused to buckle under Macaroth's assault, and as long as Morlond stood, the spinward impetus of the Crusade would be stalled. Macaroth fervently wished to be able to drive forward into a decisive war with the core military strengths of the Archon in the Carcaradon Cluster, before the Archon could gain the upper hand by pushing trailwards and taking the fight to the Imperial lines.

At no prior moment in the Crusade's history had warfare been spread out across such a grievously wide scope. 'Old Slaydo,' Cybon wrote in early 773, 'would be appalled. He would have never broken out so broadly. The tight, focused, methodical approach he favoured has vanished entirely in this far-flung pandemonium.'

If Cybon considered the situation at that point to be 'far-flung pandemonium', he had reckoned without the turn of events that was to follow. Since the start of the previous year, the Crusade's coreward flank had been increasingly harried by counter-strike raids conducted by some of the Archon's key warlord lieutenants. If these raids increased in intensity, Macaroth's force risked being split in two, with the greater portion of it, along with the Warmaster himself, cut off and surrounded at the Cabal Salient. Annihilation could be the only sequel to such a disaster.

Macaroth was all too aware of the danger, and the imponderable nature of the problem. He could not remain overstretched, for fear of a further punishing flank attack, but neither could he spare any forces from the Cabal frontline, as a weakening there would leave his vanguard vulnerable to Gaur. Either option seemed cursed with failure. Macaroth simply had to decide which one to risk. Famously, he showed Cybon two identical cups of wine and asked the Lord Militant to pick one, saying 'One is elixir, one is poison.' 'How can I tell them apart?' Cybon asked. 'By taking one up and tasting it,' replied the Warmaster.

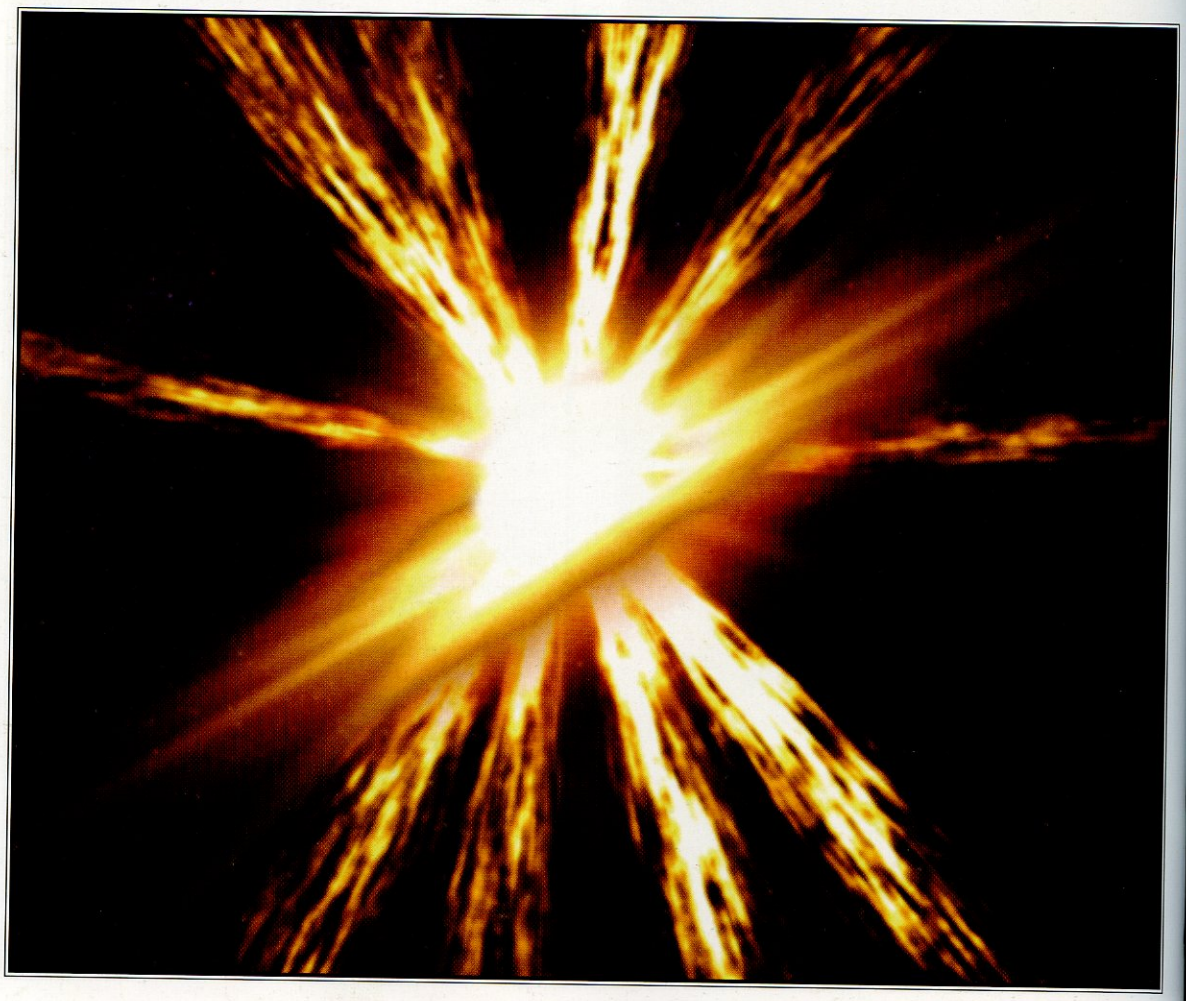
Macaroth eventually decided to remain as he was, risking overstretch, and fight on to take Morlond and the Cabal Systems with one last effort. 'May the Emperor bless me, or forget me,' he remarked.

It seemed that the God-Emperor chose the latter. In the third quarter of 773, Gaur's Magisters Enok Innokenti and Anakwanar Sek launched a murderous, catastrophic flank attack into the Khan Group from both corewards and rimwards. Supported by hosts of warriors, cultists, war machines and air power, the Magisters' counter-strike was designed for one, sole purpose: to bisect the Crusade force across the Khans and decapitate it.

What followed was a time of looming defeat, disaster, brinksmanship and the most desperate warfare of the Crusade.

And along with that came a miracle or two.

(Right) **The auspex plates at the Royal Observatory at Salome Point, Korazon, record the huge glare flash caused by the destruction of the world's orbiting starfort. The flash was of such intensity it burned out the observatory's sensitive deep space scopes.**



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EMERGENCY ++ EMERGENCY ++
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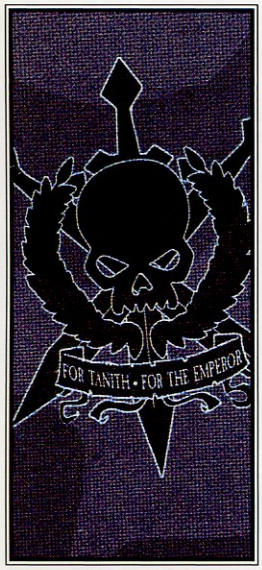
PHASE FIVE
THE KHAN GROUP, 773–775



(Above) **Regimental symbol of the Tanith 1st.**

'Such things I saw that morning, such terrible things.

The drop ships, like a dark blizzard, raining down through the summer sky. The fire patterns, bursting across the habs in the Low City. I remember wondering, where the hell are the defences? Where the hell is the PDF? I thought we were supposed to be winning. And then, oh Holy Throne, how I saw that we were not! The Blood Pact fell upon us, like carrion beasts. Warfare drenched the streets in great storms of las fire. My best friend, his son, and my good neighbour Mamzel Durek, they all died in front of me, cut down as we ran to the Portis Street public bunker. I sheltered there for a while, but I could not stay, even though my other good friends and neighbours pleaded with me to remain in safe cover. I could not. I had to find my family. I ran out, into the streets. The sky had become as black as clotted blood. I found my home, all that remained of it, but I dared not look inside. Then the Blood Pact found me. The first thing they did was put out my eyes. I am grateful to them for that. It spared me from seeing what befell my homeworld afterwards.'

~ verbal testimony of Alberd Kallowen, citizen of Brunhild, rescued from a Blood Pact Slave Facility on Tarnagua, 774.

(Right) **Detail from the painting 'Tarnagua Weeps', by Myron Kanil (Courtesy curators of the Warmaster's private collection).**

'I woke up, and realised it was not the alarm that had woken me. It was still dark, but a great and terrible fire that burned in the west of the city lighted up the southern sky. I got up at once, put on my PDF fatigues, and secured my autorifle from the strongbox under the stairs [...] by the time I reached the assembly point at Manciple Square, the fires had spread, and a tremendous pink glow bathed the sky to the south. Our local officer, Captain Gyvens, formed us up at once and [...told us...] there was "trouble with insurgents in the western sector", and that we were to go quickly to help secure the bastion there. Gyvens was greatly vexed [...when we...] pressed him on this. "Insurgents," was all he would say. "What about those streaks of fire in the sky there?" I asked. "What [expletives deleted] are those?" He had the gall to tell us they were meteors, and expect us to believe him. I saw the raid on Sanction Island five years back, I know what [expletive deleted] an orbit drop looks like, and I told that to Gyvens. He stared at me, and then he started to weep. After that, we were pretty much on our own.'

~ verbal testimony of PDF Corporal Jenna Goreck, recovered alive from the ruins of Fedrianhive, Khan V, in the winter of 775.

'They came right past us. I mean they came right past us! How the hell does a fleet of ships come around the firing point of an Imperial Escort Frigate hammering wide with all guns? I mean, how? We gave them the full spinal weapon punch, and I'm sure we torched at least one of those bastards, but still they came in. I was relogicking the target variables when second gunner Redmond showed me the repeater screen view of Sierra Four. My sacred Throne, the atmosphere was on fire! The captain translated us out shortly after that, and we ended up in the big show at Korazon, for our sins. I've never felt so helpless.'

~ debrief interview record of third gunnery officer Massim Gaegol, crewed to the Imperial Fast Escort Widdershins, following the assault on Sierra IV, 773.

'I had often wondered what the difference was, you know? I mean, they're just men too, right? Humans, just like us. I often thought about that. I know we're not meant to. They tell us it's heresy. Is this heresy? Am I speaking heresy? [Interviewer's voice insists not] All right, then. That's all right. I just had found myself wondering, from time to time, that's all. We're men, they're men. Sure, we understand a different set of values, but human is human, am I right? [Murmur from interviewer] No, no, that's [expletive deleted] right, my friend! No, we are [expletive deleted] not. Not at all. Not one bit. I suppose I kind of wanted to meet them, face to face, to find out what the fuss was really about. [Question from interviewer] Fuss? All the "get thee behind me, Chaos" stuff, that's what! I mean, we've been bred to believe they're just an abomination, but that always troubled me. They're an abomination, but they're also men. How does that work? I mean, how the [expletive deleted] does that work, really? [Comment from interviewer] Yes, I found out. Yes, I did. On the streets of Ironhive, I found out. I saw them at work. The Blood Pact. I saw what they did. Murder, rape, desecration, that wasn't the half of it. My dear Throne, they weren't men that could do that! They weren't human. Not at all. That answered my burning [expletive deleted] question quick enough. Throne, how we laid into them. I had my las on full auto for as long as the clips held out. Night after night, we were cooking them back to power in the barrel stoves. I killed plenty. They weren't no men.'

~ transcript of interrogation conducted by the Commissariat on an unnamed Imperial Guardsman evacuated from the rout at Sierra Two. The subject was later executed for heresy.

'He slew my father with a black sword, which he put directly through my father's body so that all the blood it cometh out at once. Then he struck me with the same black sword, across the head.'

~ verbal testimony of Garl Vichies, aged nine, whose apparently dead body was recovered from the death pits on Ariadne in 774.

'Please! Please, Throne, no! No! I beg of you I beg of you–'

~ signal transcribed from Addolorata Station nine, 773. It was the last signal received from that world.

'I didn't want to die, I really didn't. Now I wish I had.'

~ comment recorded from a survivor of the Eloise Penalty Camps on her liberation.

'I want them burned. Burned! Burned away into dust and denied. Can I make it any plainer to you, Cybon? You, Urienz? For Throne's sake, Bulledin, make a fist of your forces and deny them. Can't you see I'm busy here?'

~ Warmaster Macaroth, at Morlond, 773.

In my capacity as official compiler of this chronicle, I have chosen to select the above quotations to introduce this, the final section of my work. They set the mood well, I believe. It should not come as any surprise to those who study this volume that I had many, many more quite appropriate samples with which to dress this monologue. The above were winnowed out from over nine thousand suitable commentaries. Throne, but the Khan Group counterstrikes hurt us! If I appear less composed and ordered at this point in the narrative, let me apologise. It suits a historian to be divorced from his subject matter, and I cannot claim to be that. At the time of writing, I am secured at the command centre on Ancreon Sextus, and the true muster of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade is, to my mind, just beginning. I have been involved in this war, caught up in it since the earliest stages, and now I am deeply wrapped up in its actions. I have seen fire and loss, bloodshed and calamity. I have fought, man to man, on the line, more than once. How many historians can claim that, I wonder?

I venture, then, that I may make so bold as to suggest one further quote to begin this chapter:

'We serve the word of the Anarch, whose voice drowns out all others.'

~ Catechism of the Archenemy.

Sek and Innokenti, Magisters both, had all but severed the neck of the Imperial thrust into the Cabal Systems. By the end of 773, they had both established their murderous credentials, and sliced across the Imperial realm of command, bisecting the Khan Group in a most extraordinary display of considered and well-judged leadership.

It is still, at this time, impossible to calculate Imperial losses, both military and civilian, with any degree of accuracy. As the wave of predatory attacks swept through the Khan Group, panic spread from world to world like a plague. Three worlds were ravished to the point of extinction, and on another three, the scale of warfare, crippling the ecosystems there, created nuclear winters. It is also, as yet, impossible to enumerate the quantity of penalty camps and murder centres established by the advancing foe on Khan Group worlds, or to even estimate the quantity of people consumed by those abominable places.

Even flight offered poor salvation. Evacuation fleets of refugees fled threatened or attacked worlds. Many were never heard from again. One, a convoy of eight mass conveyances, bearing some ninety-three thousand citizens from Frenghold, ran straight into an enemy picket on the edges of the Euphrates Funnel and was obliterated. Another (five Great Merchant cargomen), was discovered adrift off Rydol. All the crews, and the refugees – some seven thousand civilians – were dead, victims of an air-borne pestilence that the forces of the Archenemy had brought to the world they had been trying to escape from. A third (twenty ships, mixed class,

***(Left)* An unidentified, abandoned super-heavy tank, Rydol.**

***(Above)* The *Intangible* auto-destructs.**

one hundred and forty thousand refugees) escaped Khan II and got as far as San Velabo. There, the fleet stations and Navy lines, fearing the worst and close to panic, mistook them for an enemy formation translating in and fired on them. Six ships had been lost by the time the mistake was realised and firing halted. Six ships... over thirty thousand innocent souls.

A similar fate befell many others, and the infamous Addolorata Incident is a sobering example. Crucial to the military effect of the Magisters' attacks was the use of terror as a weapon. Historically, many Chaos invasions have been announced by the jamming or blocking of vox and astropathic transmissions, the sudden cessation of broadcasts from a stricken world. But both Sek and Innokenti delighted in leaving such lines open. Indeed, both would often deliberately broadcast chilling transmissions from worlds they had seized: reports of victories, or of mutilations dispensed.

Isolated pockets of Imperial resistance were playfully allowed to transmit their last, frantic screams for help. Receiving worlds, as yet untouched, cowered in fear at the messages, and became gripped in panic. Under such conditions, mistakes and miscalculations were only to be expected. It is reckoned at least four of the worlds that fell to the counter-strikes fell simply because, having heard the distant fate of other planets, they were too terrified to co-ordinate successful defences.

Tacticians agree that Magister Sek was the orchestrator of this abominable propaganda. Sek, perhaps the most gifted and brilliant of all the Archenemy warlords, specialises in what might be called 'emotional warfare'. It is clear he – if such a thing can be called a 'he' – thoroughly understands the importance of intellectual weakness in battle, and owns a particular fascination with the use of words as weapons. Unlike many of the Magisters, the Gaur included, Sek has demonstrated a wilful and evil finesse in his strategy, breaking target worlds into submission with a few, well-chosen broadcasts of terror where a fleet bombardment might have taken weeks. The Imperium must not underestimate the stealth and guile of the enemy. We expect furious physical assault, and the calumny of whispering taint. We do not seem prepared for the enemy to exhibit cleverness or subtlety.

Sek, and to a lesser extent Innokenti, wanted the Imperial worlds to know that devastation was approaching. He wanted to lock his targets in fear and make them ripe for invasion. He wanted the target worlds to know that he was coming.

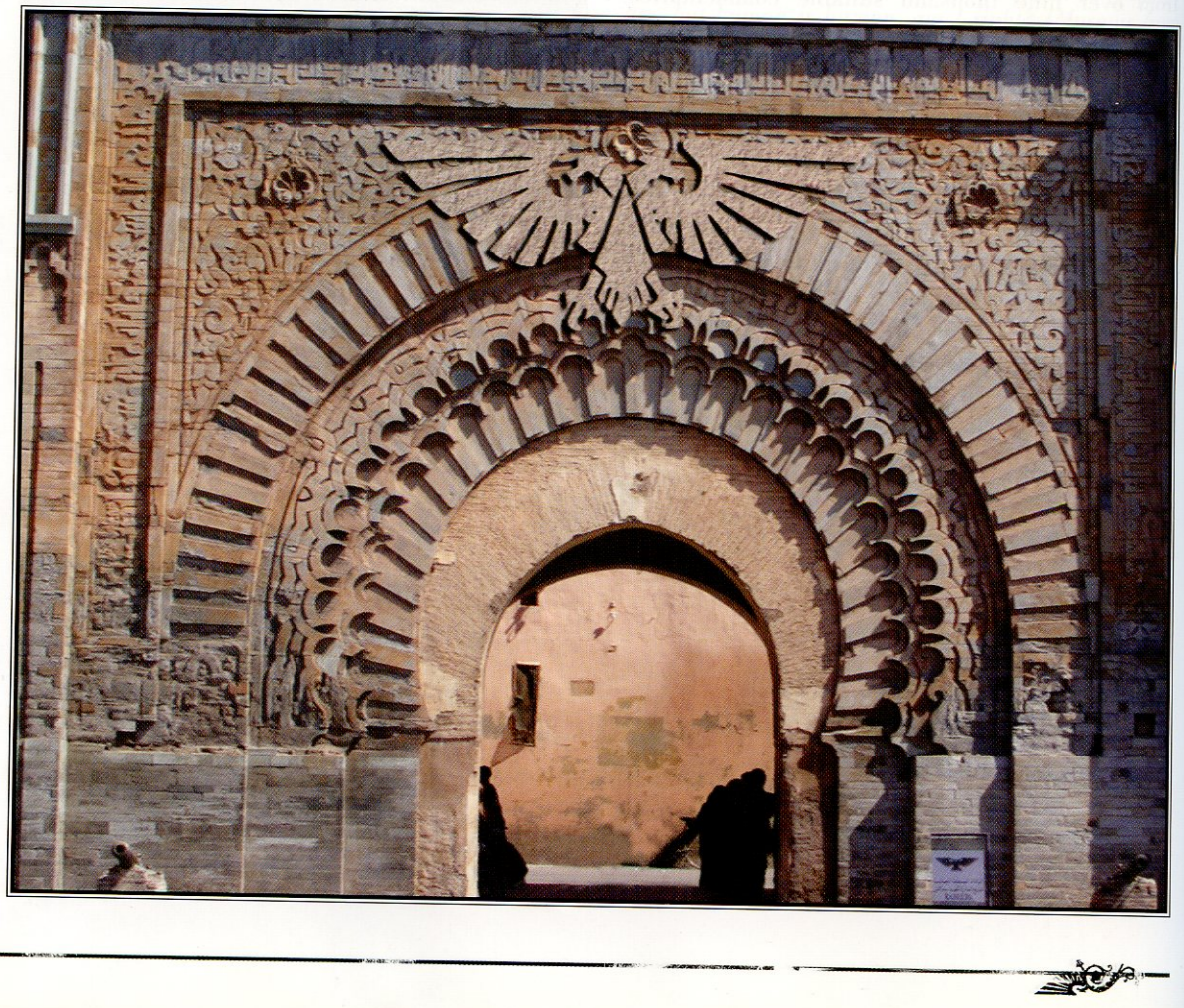
More than anything else, he wanted the target worlds in the Khan Group to know that the Blood Pact was coming.

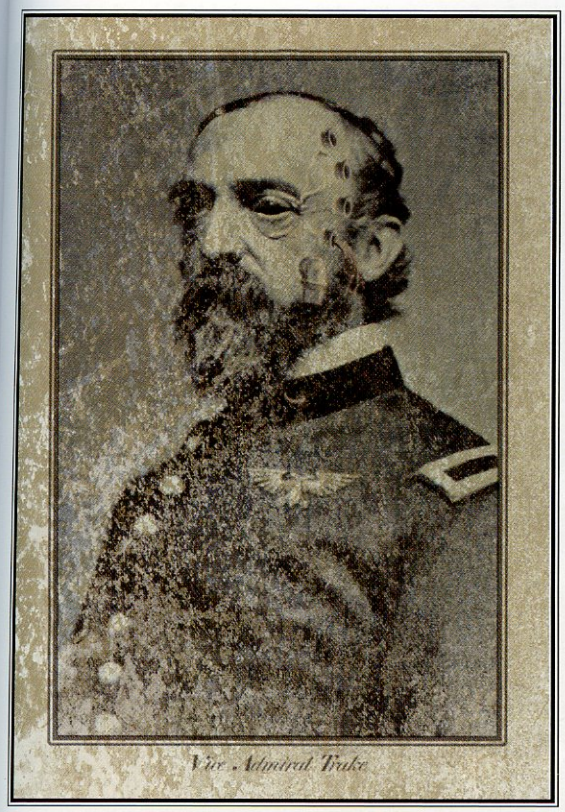
~ THE ADDOLORATA INCIDENT ~

At the close of 773, Lord Militant Delayni ordered a fast attack flotilla out of San Velabo to alter course from Lotun, and translate to Addolorata to take up defensive station there. inteligence had placed an Archenemy formation less than two weeks away from Addolorata.

The flotilla comprised three heavy cruisers, the *Tarquin*, the *Hastur* and the *Shako*, two Brandish Class super heavy destroyers, the *Sire Oswald Whitemere* and

***(Right)* Arbites station, Khan IV. Sites such as this, even in ruins, became focal points for survivors desperately seeking information on missing relatives.**





(Left) Vice Admiral Trake.

the *No Quarter*, five Sabre class light destroyers, and the dreadnought *Intangible*. It was commanded by Vice-Admiral Alber vander Trake. Trake was an experienced and proven fleet officer, who had scored several successes during the post-Balhaut scouring. Many believed he would rise to high rank in due time, possibly even to Grand Admiral of the Segmentum Pacificus Fleet. From the bridge of the *Intangible*, one of the most magnificent and heavily armed vessels in all the rimward fleets, Trake ordered his flotilla around in a spectacular side-step, bearing off the Mandeville Point at 198.272 Crucis, and translating three times in a brilliantly executed inner run towards Addolorata. His aim was to arrive before the Archenemy.

He succeeded, by two days. Tragically, the systems defence grid of Addolorata, braced to expect enemy intrusion, kicked off automatically at his arrival. Believing he was already too late and was now under attack, Trake ordered his flotilla to return fire.

The spontaneous detonation of one of the three orbital star-forts defending Addolorata told Trake he had made a gross error. By then, the *Hastur* was lost and the *Intangible* itself was on fire and listing badly. Taking heavy fire as he regrouped, Trake desperately tried to explain the situation to Addolorata Command-and-Control. In the confused circumstances, this took three hours. The *Sire Oswald Whitemere* suffered a critical hit from a star-port battery during this period, and vaporised with a loss of all hands.

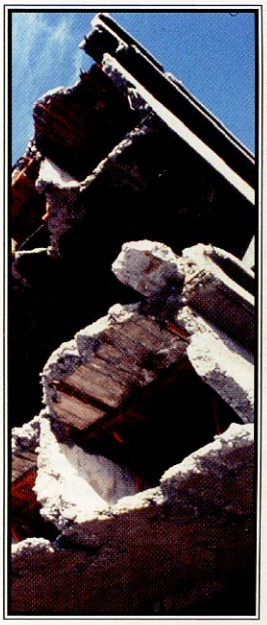
Trake eventually persuaded the Addolorata systems defence to cease fire, and tried to marshal his flotilla into a planet-guard formation. Warp-echo traces suggested the Archenemy was not far behind them. By then, the *Intangible* was foundering and close to death. Trake quit the dreadnought, and took up command from the bridge of the *No Quarter*.

But Trake had not counted for his second in command, Commodore Willer Waldesh. Gravely hurt during the opening phase of that misbegotten battle, Waldesh had been left in command of the stricken *Intangible*, to oversee the evacuation and abandonment of the famous vessel. Possibly bewildered by the action, or unhinged by pain, Waldesh ordered gunners lively, and ignited main engines, intent on attacking one of the remaining star forts.

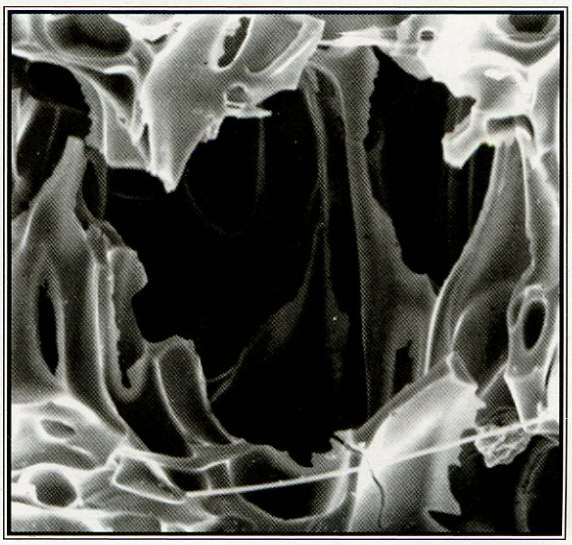
It is quite evident from his transmissions that he truly believed the star fort to be an enemy vessel. First officer Bernod Falkor (posthumously decorated for valour) realised the mistake and attempted to wrest command from the raving Waldesh. Shot eight times 'for mutiny' by Waldesh, Falkor survived long enough to kill his erstwhile commander with a bolt pistol. At that stage, the *Intangible* was on a ramming course towards the star fort. Falkor triggered auto-destruct, and annihilated the great vessel with all remaining hands just three AU short of the orbital fortress.

Mortified, Trake apparently lost his grip on command at this point. When the Archenemy fleet of thirty main formation ships translated in, his flotilla was woefully under-extended. The battle lasted eight hours, and the *No Quarter* was lost in the first forty-five minutes. Trake did not live to see the awful calamity that consumed Addolorata, though given his track record, it is quite likely his flotilla would have denied the enemy before it reached the planet if better circumstances had prevailed. In the closing stages of the void fight, the *Tarquin*, dying and on fire, began to drop away towards the outer atmosphere, and one of the remaining star forts was forced to open fire and obliterate it before it began re-entry and impacted on the surface. Having already fired upon their would-be saviours by mistake, it is reported that the star fort gunners had tears in their eyes as they 'put down' the *Tarquin*.

It was a futile mercy killing. Whatever damage the impact of the *Tarquin* might have done, by the next morning, Addolorata was lost, and the star forts above it reduced to smouldering wrecks.



***(Above)* Interhive skimway on Khan V (detail). Orbital bombardment two hundred and sixty kilometres away created the tremor that sheared these rockcrete pylons. The continental crust convulsed in a six thousand-kilometre radius, producing devastation such as this.**



***(Left)* Orbital pict, showing the exhaled atmosphere shell of Frenghold as it floods away into near space and dies. The work of Innokenti.**

(Right) **The Blood Pact. This striking image was rendered by an unnamed PDF trooper on Ariadne.**

The battlefield impact of the enemy cadre known as the Blood Pact cannot be understated. Encountered initially in the years directly following Balhaut, it was the Blood Pact's use in the Khan counter-strike that emphatically established its reputation as a capable and highly trained military force.

Beyond its primary function as a lethally effective combat tool, the Blood Pact has also become an insidious weapon of propaganda. The name alone has embedded itself in the parlance of the fearful Imperial populace. The image of the Blood Pact trooper in his snarling mask and blood red uniform has become a bogeyman to the average Sabbat citizen, the stuff of nightmare, rumour and grossly distorted folklore. While it is evident that the Blood Pact has been responsible for countless actual atrocities, word of mouth has convicted them of every horror imaginable. It is reported that on some outlying worlds, away from the front, harvest failures, outbreaks of swine-fever and other such problems are commonly blamed on the Blood Pact. 'What they conquer and tear down by force of arms is bad enough,' wrote Blackwood in 775, 'but the damage done by the very dread of them is disastrous.'

~ THE TRUE AND NATURAL LIKENESS ~

In his *Discourse Upon The Vile And Hateful Servants Of Ruin*, Barnol writes:

The true and natural likeness of the beings sworn into the vile Blood Pact is rarely seen, for they choose to conceal their faces behind snarling iron face-masks of a crude and ancient pattern. It is certain for the most part they are humans or human-mutants, though unconfirmed rumours speak of other xenosbreed creatures inducted into their ranks.

In general terms, the Blood Pact warriors encountered by Imperial forces usually resemble a ragged or barbaric regiment of the Imperial Guard. They wear fabric battledress uniforms either looted from the corpses of Guardsmen, or manufactured to resemble a basic Imperial design. Over this are worn packs, webbings and the usual assortment of infantry kit, including heavy field boots and a steel bowl-helmet. Because their kit, equipment and battle dress is essentially a mix of plunder and homemade, no two Blood Pact troopers are ever identical. Their appearance is rough and ill-kempt: their clothing torn, patched and dirty, and helmets chipped and grazed.

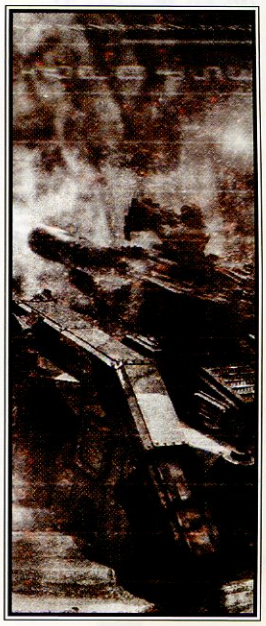
True to their name, the warriors of the Pact present themselves in blood red. The bowl helmets are painted an arterial crimson, and the uniforms dyed red. It is common knowledge that the blood of enemies is used for this latter purpose, as one of the Pact's sorcerous rituals prior to battle. As a result, the Blood Pact warriors exude a revolting, charnel stink, made even less pleasant by the unguents and oils with which they anoint their bodies, and their own parlous standards of hygiene.

The only exposed part of a Blood Pact warrior's body is his hands. These remain bare and ungloved to display the ghastly ritual scars across the palms and knuckles, made at the time of induction to the Pact. In cases where Blood Pact troops have been captured, or when opportunities have arisen to examine their corpses, it has often been found that this ritual scarring covers other parts of the body and face.

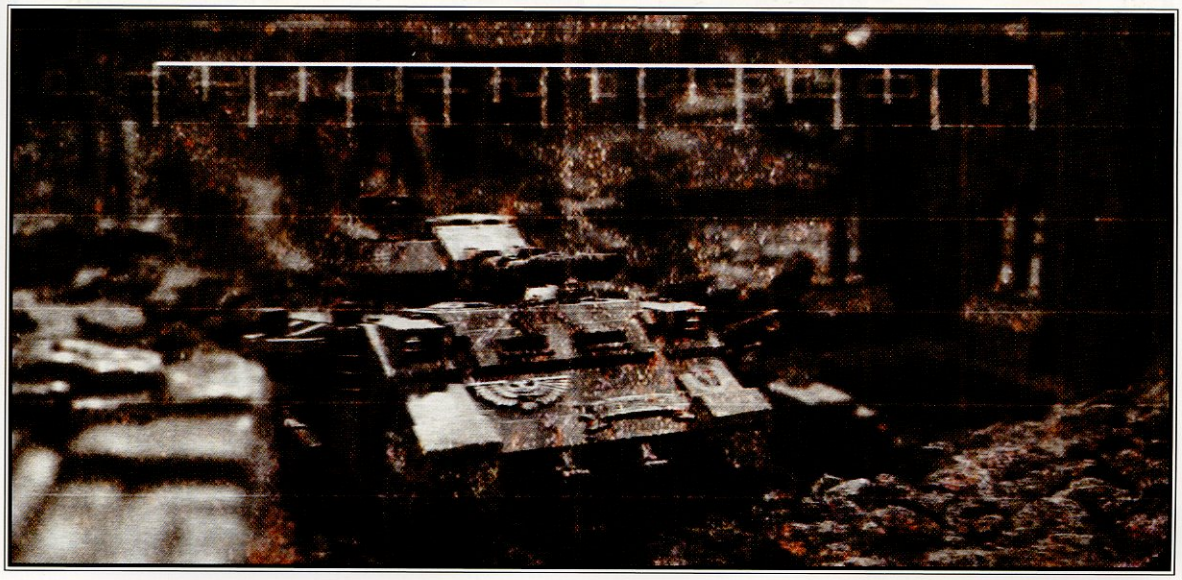
The ritual iron visors – known as grotesques – worn by the Blood Pact are variations on a single basic design. The masks portray a howling, screaming, grimacing (some say leering) face, often with a great hooked nose, or chin, or both, like a carnival masque. For most ranks, this mask is pitch black, though senior commanders may wear silver or even gold grotesques. Such officers also affect uniforms styles equivalent to the Imperial Guard, with epaulets, gold frogging and jackboots etc.

The Blood Pact speak all the languages of corruption, and – due to their many origin worlds – a heterodox mix of Imperial dialects and sub-dialects as well. However, [Warmaster Macaroth's tactical advisors] have determined that the Blood Pact use their own unique 'battle-tongue' or combat jargon in the theatre. This, so far, has proved indecipherable.

The Blood Pact, by their very nature, have no homeworld. They recruit from the murky feral worlds of the



(Above) **A captured Imperial tank crewed by Blood Pact warriors, Enothis.**



(Left) **Lord Militant Humel's armour brigades in retreat from the southern Trinity Hives, Enothis.**

(Right) Phantine Thunderbolts on a sortie over the Interior Desert, Enothis, 773. The Phantine, originating from a world without significant dry land, excelled as pilots, and were unique amongst the Imperial Guard in their use and deployment of aircraft, usually the province of the Imperial Navy. The aircraft pictured are from the Phantine XX 'Double Eagle' Wing, whose contribution to the air war on Enothis was without peer.

(Above) Squadron badge of the Phantine XX.

Chaos Marches beyond Imperial territory, and also from the populations of worlds they conquer and overrun.

Every member of the Blood Pact (and tactical estimates suggest there may be as many as three-quarters of a million Blood Pact warriors) is personally inducted into service by the Gaur himself. To prove his allegiance in blood to both the Gaur and the Blood God, each aspirant ritually gashes his hands on the sharpened edges of the Gaur's battle armour.

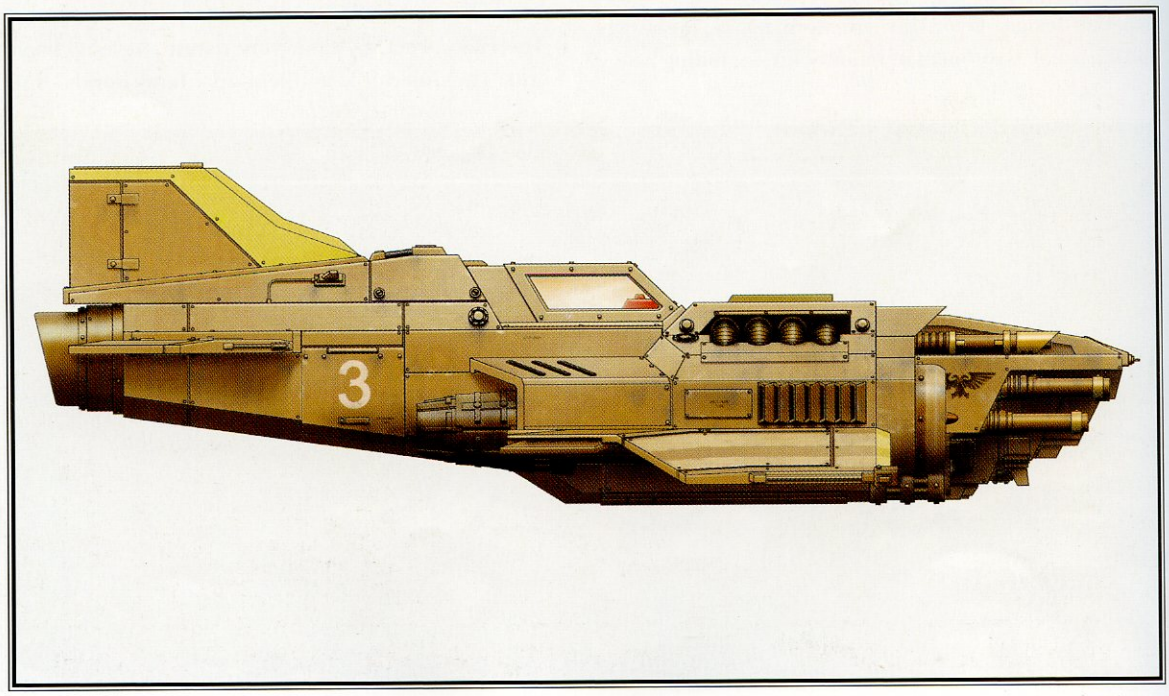
Gaur's Blood Pact had been encountered in combat during the early years of the Crusade, but never properly identified. However, once he became Archon, the Blood Pact became a backbone element of the Chaos host. It is believed many other Archenemy units and divisions, wishing to prove their loyalty to the new Archon, converted to the Blood Pact. The trained and disciplined nature of the Pact also appealed to the many converted, corrupted or traitorous Imperial Guard units captured during Nadzybar's occupation of the Sabbat Worlds. Within just a few years, the Crusade forces came to recognise the Blood Pact as the elite infantry of the Archenemy.

The Blood Pact is a martial force of distinction, a fact that often takes its enemies by surprise. The forces of Chaos are often feral, ruthless and zealous and – while savage assets in battle – these qualities often mitigate against effective battlefield operation. Unlike, for example, the Kith who followed Sholen Skara, the Blood Pact is not an army of poorly equipped fanatics who overrun their enemies by sheer berserk fury. The Blood Pact is drilled and trained in warfare techniques to a standard of competence at least equivalent to the Imperial Guard. They have excellent (often captured) communication systems, and an unshakeable chain of command, meaning they can be confidently deployed with tactical precision. The Blood Pact can hit specific targets or accomplish specific missions, and individual warriors have the intelligence and field training to

operate independently, if necessary, for the Pact's interests. This is what makes them so dangerous. They are not mindless fanatics, they are excellent battlefield soldiers in the sworn service of Chaos.

The sheer efficiency of Blood Pact operations can be demonstrated by the battle of the Akkorite Peninsula on Belshiir Binary in 771. A force of two hundred Blood Pact troopers, supported by four stalk tanks and two loxatl brood groups, cut off, overwhelmed and annihilated a force of three thousand Imperial Guardsmen. The Pact force was commanded by an officer called Vesh Etogaur (the second word possibly indicative of rank, as in 'demi-gaur' or colonel). Under his strict command, the Pact force lay in baking heat for three days without faltering or breaking line until the Imperial unit had moved into the cone of their ambush. The resulting slaughter lasted twenty-two minutes.

(Right) Navy Thunderbolt, Cypra-Mundi Pattern XXI, of the One Hundred and First Pacificus Navy Elite Wing, the 'Apostles'. Plane shown is serial 4548456, flown by Major Dario Quint, 'Ace of Aces'.



The Khan Group phase of the Sabbat Crusade is especially distinguished by the unilateral actions that saved Imperial interests. Many worlds in the zone found themselves fighting alone, and it was the happenstance combination of successful actions that finally turned the tide, rather than any overall strategy. Three theatres in particular helped to pivot fortune around to favour the Imperial armies: Khan III, Herodor and Enothis.

Lord Militant Humel had command of the Imperial forces on Enothis, and found himself facing the full ferocity of Magister Sek's invasion. Sek's first strike was at the southern Trinity Hives, which he quickly possessed, and Humel sought to drive the Magister out with a full-scale ground war, a 'land armada'. But the offensive toppled disastrously, even as it reached the gates of the Trinity Hives, and Humel's brigades were forced into flight, northwards across the Interior Desert.

It was a desperate situation. Humel needed to withdraw and regroup his forces into the hive cities on the shores of the Zophonian Sea, where they might be resupplied, repaired and rearmed and, with reinforcement from off-world and from the Northern Commonwealth, attempt a counter offensive.

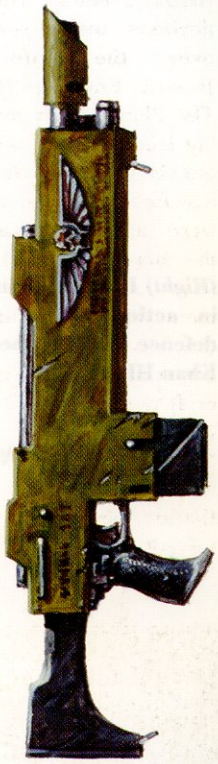
But there was a great likelihood that the fleeing Imperial hosts would be obliterated en masse before they ever reached the inland sea. Making brilliant use of airpower, working off massive land carriers, Sek's armies were close to overtaking the retreat. By Day 260, 773, there was every chance that the Archenemy's air arm would extend past the hapless ground army and begin to decimate the inner hives.

Humel, taking sage advice from the Phantine Admiral Ornoff, switched his entire emphasis to an air war, raising an airborne resistance that flew to deny the enemy approach and made every effort to protect the toiling land forces fleeing northwards.

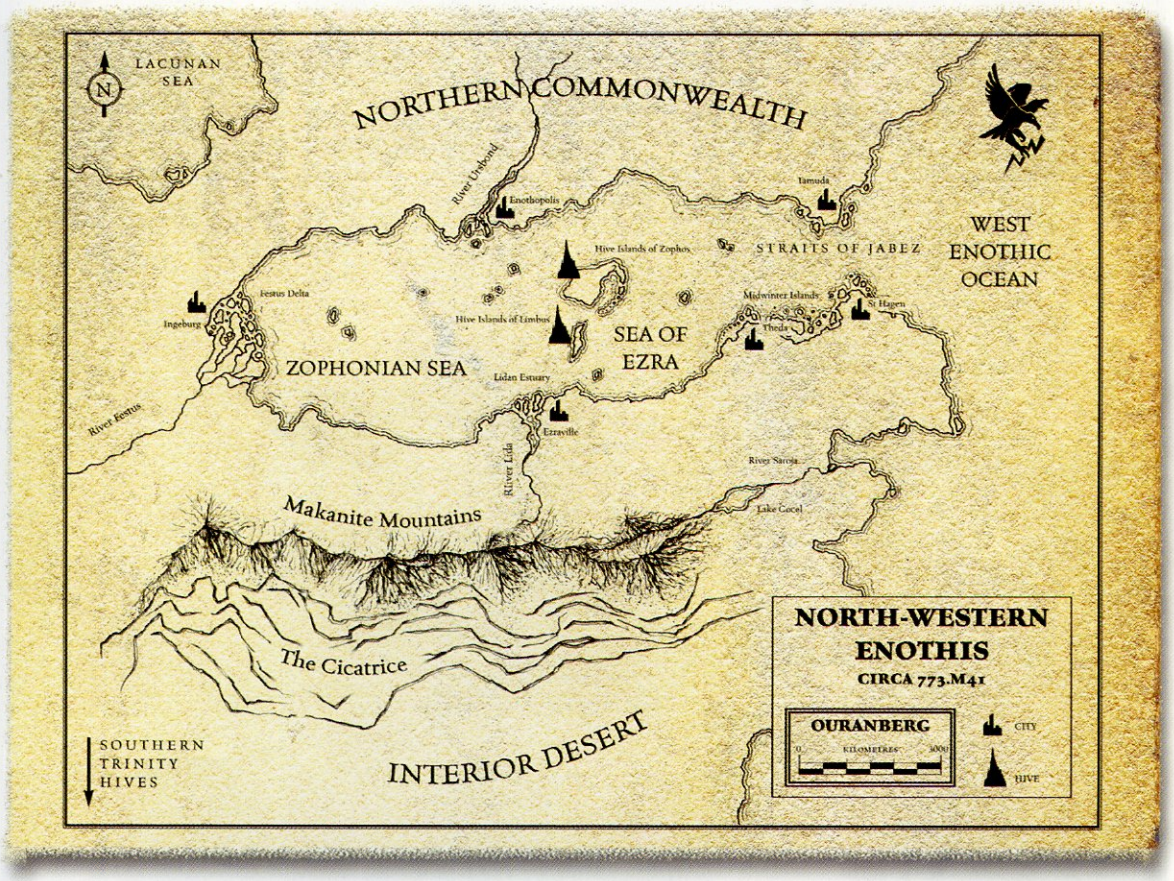
Under Ornoff's direction, the Imperials lofted every flier they had. The backbone of the defence was the squadrons of the Imperial Navy: principally, Thunderbolt and Lightning fighters, chasing air superiority, with Marauders running seek-and-destroy missions at the advancing enemy ground forces. Local air force and PDF flight wings heroically supported the Navy, many of whom were sent aloft in antiquated and outclassed planes.

The aerial fighting became murderously intense. Enemy bomber formations began to penetrate across the Southern Littoral, and the coast was abandoned.

The war came to a head on the 270th day of 773, the so-called Battle of the Zophonian Sea. Flying around the clock from carrier groups and island runways, the Imperial fliers staged a superhuman defence against the relentless waves of enemy planes. It remains the largest and most elaborate air battle of the entire Sabbat Crusade to date. The Archenemy suffered such a scale of losses on that day that its advance faltered. Lord Militant Humel swiftly capitalised on this hiatus, and drove his counter offensive south. After months of savage fighting, the Trinity Hives finally fell on 62nd day of 774. By that time, Magister Sek had fled the planet. Humel had proved that, through sheer valour and determination, the Khan Group attack could be repulsed.



(Above) **Mark IV short pattern lasgun.**



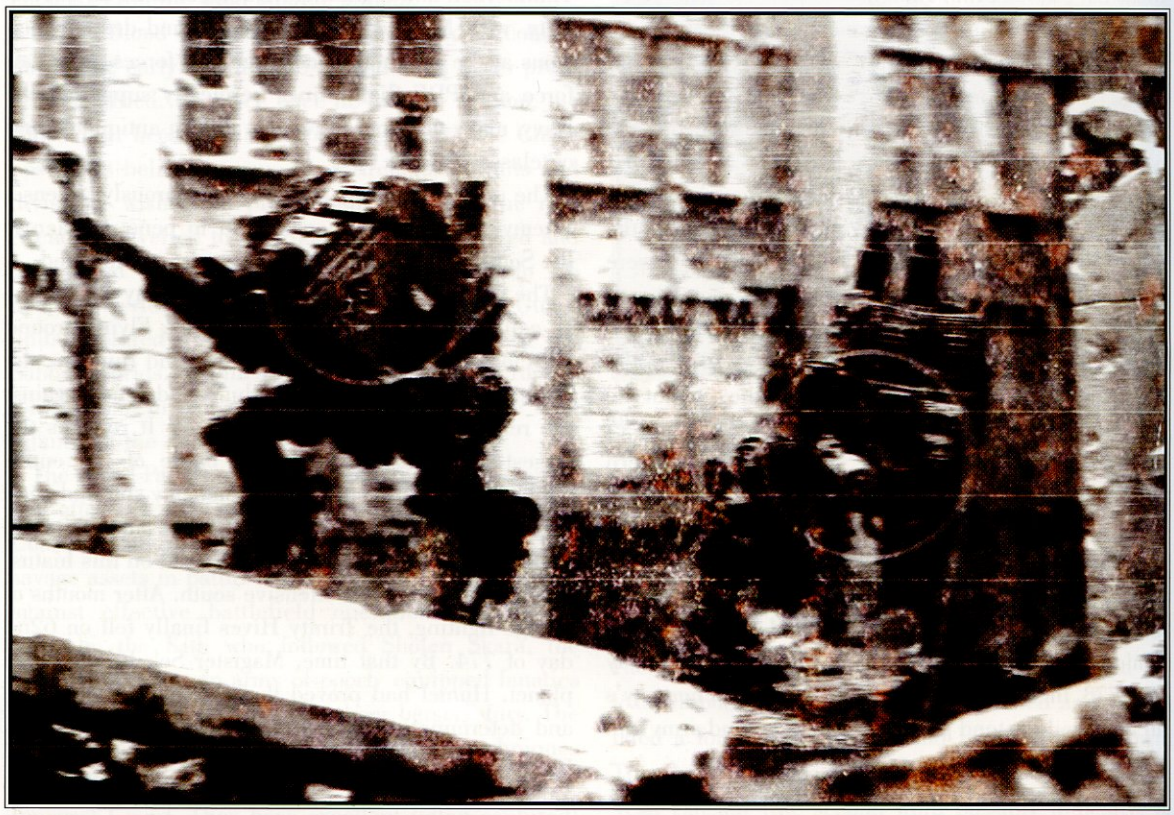
(Left) **The Enothis warzone.**

Central to the phase of conflict in the Khan Group, the battle for Khan III lingered on from 773 to 775, and in it we may see the second of the supreme triumphs of Imperial might in this period, a warfare perhaps as significant as Enothis or Herodor.

On Khan III, the forces of Magister Shebol Red-Hand had moved in to support the main strike of Enok Innokenti. Magister Shebol was a notorious monster, who had left a tranche of worlds burning in his wake. But he lacked organisation and discipline. On Khan III, he found himself pitted against Lord General Bulledin, perhaps the most careful and focused of all Macaroth's staff.

The Magister deposed his forces across the Taintive Valley Basin and the Elshore Uplands in an attempt

(Right) Pardus Sentinels in action during the defence of Hive Khena, Khan III.



(Right) Narmenian armour breaks through at Bale's Field.

to break Bulledin's hold of the twin hives Khena and Khenor. Supported well by Pardus and Narmenian armour brigades, Bulledin forced an opening along a fenland pass known as Bale's Field, and then sent foot companies of the Roane Deepers and the Samothrace 9th in behind the angle of defence. Bale's Field and the uplands overlooking it became a killing ground, where five Archenemy troopers were lost for every Guardsman.

Magister Shebol then panicked, and drew in his outerguard around the town of Forenss. A heavy tank battle ensued along the edge of Bale's Field, but Bulledin pressed in with surgical efficiency, and pushed three battalions of the Roane Deepers in country, with Titan support.

Forenss burned, and Magister Shebol fled to the highlands, where he was surrounded by Narmenian armour commanded by Bulledin himself.

Popular stories say that Bulledin met and slew Shebol on that high ground, in personal combat, although many regard that as hearsay. Historically speaking, all that matters is that Shobel Red-Hand died there.

Bulledin had won a major victory, even though enemy forces would continue fighting for twenty-two months.

(Left) **Khan Nobilis.**

The battle for Herodor lasted for less than two months, and was a comparatively small operation compared to such grand scale clashes as Enothis. However, its importance cannot be underestimated. Though the Khan Group counter-strike continued to rage for a long while afterwards, Herodor is agreed by most to be the turning point for Imperial fortunes.

Many tantalising and as yet unanswered questions surround the war for Herodor. The planet was of no great tactical significance, yet Magister Innokenti chose to lead the assault there personally. Some conjecture that he knew, by some arcane means, what was about to happen, and wanted to prevent it.

Herodor's only claim to significance was that it was one of the 'Holy Worlds' visited by Saint Sabbat Beati during her original Crusade through the region, thousands of years earlier. A sacred balneary shrine dedicated to her forms the religious centre of the principle city, the Civitas Beati. As the counter-strike tore through the Khan Group, an Imperial Guard force, commanded by Lord General Lugo and supported by the local PDF, occupied the Civitas Beati in order to defend it from attack.

Precise information about what exactly happened next is unclear. All that can be said reliably is that during the early stages of the attack, a young woman emerged from the rank and file Imperial citizenry, claiming to be the reincarnated saint.

Some commentators have suggested that this 'reincarnation' was deceit orchestrated by Lugo and other, unknown collaborators. It is claimed 'the saint' was an actress, a young girl selected and carefully rehearsed by Lugo to play the part. If this is true, it was no doubt Lugo's intention to boost Imperial morale. He may also have intended to boost his own career: Lugo was well known to be an ambitious man.

However, it now appears that the truth is something rather more extraordinary. Whatever her origins, and whatever the machinations of Lugo, the girl undeniably took on the mantle of the beati, becoming Saint Sabbat to all intents and purposes. She stirred and inflamed Imperial resolve, but this was more than good acting. There is evidence she exhibited powers and abilities beyond the scope of normal mortals. To the glory of Terra and the Emperor of Mankind, His most holy saint Sabbat Beati was reborn on Herodor close to the end of 773. Perhaps the foul Innokenti had foreseen this.

If so, his foresight did him no good. Rallying around the Saint, the Imperial forces engaged Innokenti's host at the Civitas Beati. In a ferocious city fight, the Saint and her army – which included the Tanith First and Only, a Guard unit she seems to have deputised as her personal bodyguard – slew Innokenti and put his forces to rout.

The timing was perfect. Warmaster Macaroth's assault on the fortress world Morlond had at last resolved in victory, and Macaroth was able to deploy part of his martial force back into the Khan Group in support of the beleaguered second front. If Innokenti had not been detained by the fight for Herodor, it is likely his advance would have pushed on and finished the job of fatally decapitating the Crusade line.

Suddenly, the Archenemy's counter-strike was on the back foot. For all their gains, for all their bloody victories, for all the carnage they had wrought upon the Khan Group, the Magisters had failed where it really mattered. Their spirit and their deadly intent were broken, the calamitous effect of their manoeuvre spoiled. Invigorated by the wildfire news of the return of the Saint, Imperial forces buckled down to deny the Gaur's minions.

As I write these words, the Crusade Second Front is still warring to wrest the enemy – particularly the legions of Anakwanar Sek – from the coreward and spinward fringes of the Khan Group. This bitter conflict is projected to last for some years yet. But for the miracle of Herodor, we would already have been overwhelmed and exterminated.

(Right) **Tacticae schematic of the Civitas Beati, Herodor, circa 773/4. This small hive was the site of the miracle that changed the course of the Sabbat Worlds Crusade entirely.**

(Left) **Artist's rendition, from eyewitness accounts, of a member of Innokenti's elite retinue, Herodor.**

Latterly, the Sabbat Crusade has revealed many new enemy weapons to the Imperial codifiers. It is apparent that the Archenemy lacks nothing in ingenuity when it comes to devising war machines and other mechanisms of death. The constructs of Heritor Asphodel alone have occupied the attention of many experts, and this author would direct those readers especially interested in the Heritor's 'Woe Machines' to Adept Tanguel's detailed concordance *The Machines and Devices of the Abomination Asphodel*. This scholarly treatise is available for study from the archives of all primary forge worlds, although it should be noted that an Inquisitorial clearance of magenta or higher is necessary to procure them.

Other weapons, other constructions, have appeared like nightmares through the smoke and fumes of many war zones. Rumours abound of a device called a stumble-gun that has wrought destruction upon infantry companies in a number of theatres. From Frenghold and Khan II come reports of a war engine known as a thorn wyrm, and from Tarnagua, we hear dire warnings of a killing machine dubbed the Slaughtertower by Guard units. From Gereon, and six other worlds, come stories of warp weapons referred to as wirewolves or corposant corpses.

Perhaps the most ubiquitous new weapon faced by Imperial forces is the stalk tank. Light and fast, highly mobile, and well armed, these walking war machines have been fielded in numerous conflicts throughout the Sabbat Worlds. Evidently cheap to manufacture in large numbers, the stalk tanks are normally deployed as an infantry support weapon, usually reinforcing Blood Pact assaults. Far lighter and faster than conventional tanks, the stalk tanks carry heavy weapons that ordinarily would require trained crews to serve. Their insectoid design, quite repulsive to human eyes, is no doubt a deliberate fear strategy. Troopers are said to be greatly disturbed by their scuttling behaviour and characteristic noise.

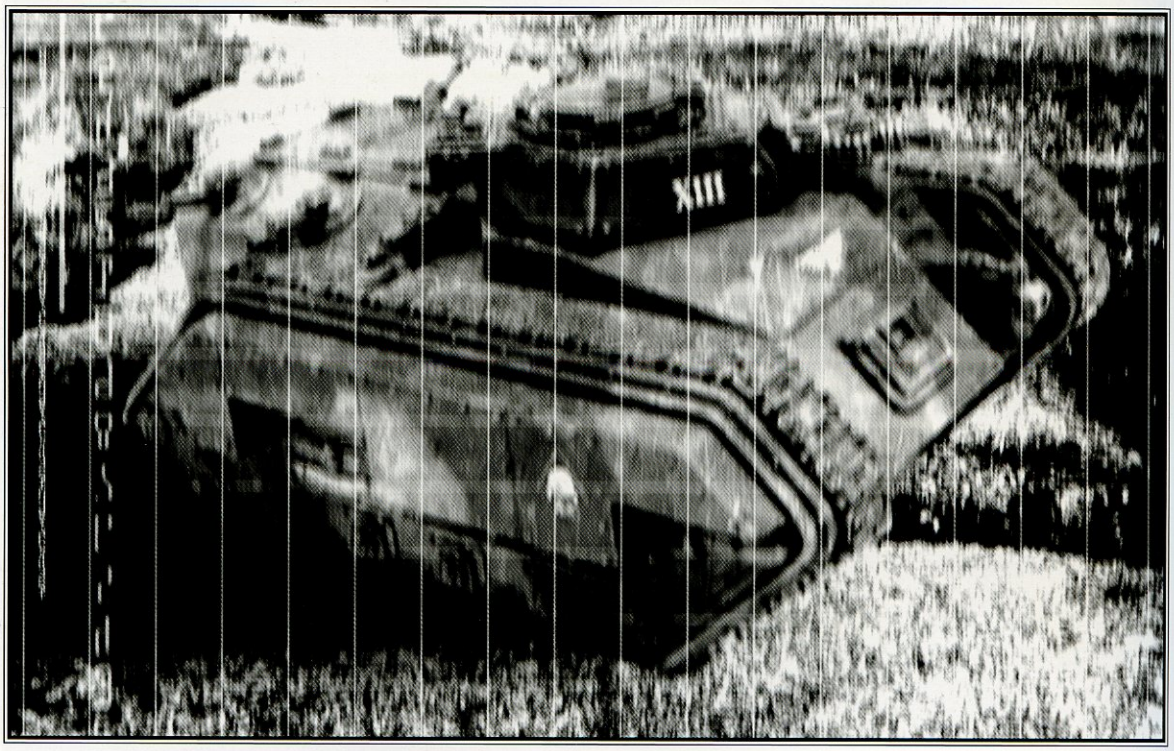
A single operator, organically plumbed into the biomechanisms of the drive, normally controls a stalk tank. A number of variants have been observed, most usually exhibiting basic differences in weapon mount description. However, as these sketches make clear, some stalk tanks have been designed to house battlefield psykers.

The illustrations on the facing page have been taken from the note books of tech-adept Romulus Gwelt, a trained observer sent out by the Mechanicus to accompany the Guard advance and gather data for study and reverse-engineering work. Assigned to the 9th Roane Deepers on Tarnagua, Gwelt produced nineteen note books crammed with detailed observational sketches. The adept was killed in the last month of 774, during an insurgency raid, but his notebooks were recovered and sent to Urdesh for study. The author thanks the High Adepts of Urdesh Forge for their permission to reproduce these images.

In his marginalia, Gwelt wrote:

'Of all the nefarious engines of destruction I have seen the Archenemy field, the so-called stalk tanks are the most divisive. Light and fast, they deploy like an infantryman, or at least like a fire team, yet the type of normal fire [which would kill an infantry man] is soaked up by their segmented armour plating. In my experience, it takes an anti-tank missile at least, normally a shoulder-fired round, to damage one of these mechanisms. They occupy, as it were, a space in the food chain between fighting man and battle tank, a light, supportive, fluid role, and one that we do not have an equivalent response to. If the Ruinous Powers win this Great and Holy War, I would attribute a portion of that victory to the niche predator that is the stalk tank.'

***(Right)* Imperial vehicle under fire from stalk tanks, Tarnagua. Shortly after this pict capture was taken, the vehicle was destroyed.**



(Left) **Some of tech-adept Gwelt's field observations.**

(Right) Cadian Guardsman. Cadian regiments were amongst the first to report encounters with the Loxatl.

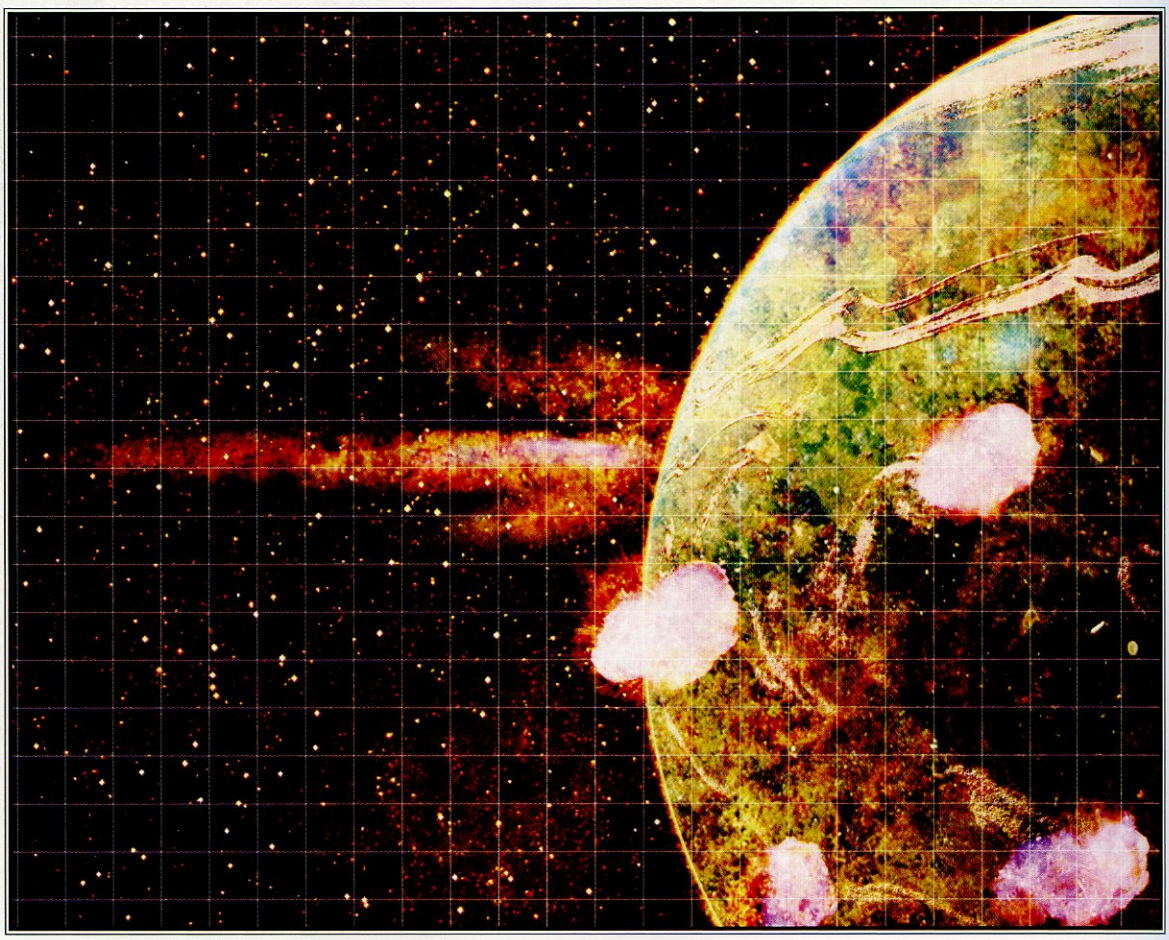
A marked trait of the Blood Pact is its willingness to collaborate with xenos breeds and alien mercenaries from the outworlds and Marches to achieve military objectives. Most notably, the Blood Pact often operates alongside non-human mercenaries called the loxatl, using them as shock troops.

The loxatl are sinuous, non-humanoid quadrupeds evolved from amphibian forms. Slightly larger than an average human, they are extremely swift and dexterous, and use large dew-claws to give them purchase on any surface, allowing them to run up walls and across ceilings. Out of water, the vision, hearing and smell of these grey-skinned aliens are dull, and they rely on powerful taste and vibration sensing to hunt and corner prey.

The loxatl use a weapon of alien design known as a flechette blaster. They carry these powerful weapons – along with ammunition bandoliers – on their torsos, mounted on mechanical armatures that fire the weapons via some unknown mind impulse device. This leaves a loxatl's limbs free for climbing. The blasters fire deadly shot-bursts filled with millions of razor-sharp filaments that shred grievous wounds in flesh and armour.

Loxatl are believed to operate in small 'brood group' units of biological kin, communicating by vibration, subsonic calls and – when in close proximity – iridescent patterning that they are able to flash and move across their skins. Imperial Guardsmen have reported that nearby loxatl activity can often be detected by a nauseating smell, a mix of rancid milk and crushed mint.

(Right) Strategium scan of the first assaults on Ancreon Sextus. At the time of writing, the war there is fierce and unresolved.



(Left) **Artistic rendition by trained delineators of the Ordo Xenos, recently declassified, showing the mercenary agents known as the Loxatl. Note the torso-harnessed flechette cannon.**

(Detail) **The Loxatl dew-claw.**

(Above) **The 10th Cosgar Armoured storm into Halper Hive, Okarimar.**

Warmaster Macaroth's stubborn assault on the fortress world Morlond finally succeeded at the close of 773. Behind him, his forces were in disarray, and the impetus of the Crusade advance was broken.

The fate of the Crusade teetered at this point. Macaroth had followed through on Slaydo's original promise, and had cut his way into the Carcaradon Cluster, pushing the forces of Gaur into the backward end of the Sabbat Worlds. The Saint, reborn, was now with him, and Imperial strengths reinvigorated.

But his second front and lines of support were in a parlous state. By the close of 775, as the Crusade entered its third decade, Imperial forces found themselves fighting on two fronts: as the Warmaster led the front edge in towards the enemy, many of his generals were locked in survival wars along the flank, desperately trying to drive off the Archenemy segments that harassed their frontal assault.

Cybon was charged with unifying and strengthening the support and the flank. It was a task that he clearly despised. Sources close to him report that he felt it was an insult to be sent back to 'mop up the dirt'. Cybon, great lord of battles, felt his place should be at the front line of the advance. In a communiqué to the Warmaster dated 322, 775, Cybon wrote:

'Have I not killed enough for you, my bloodthirsty lord? Why do you unman me with this dismal, janitorial role? Must I be forced to follow your glory, pace by pace, cleaning up the debris you leave in your wake, while you grant trust in lesser men to pierce the enemy's heart-worlds?'

Macaroth's was blunt. In an answer the following day, the Warmaster simply sent the word 'Yes'.

By 'lesser men', Cybon had made reference to Urienz and Lemmensholtz, two of the rising stars in Macaroth's command group. Urienz especially had distinguished himself in the assault on the Cabal Systems. Cybon resented that greatly.

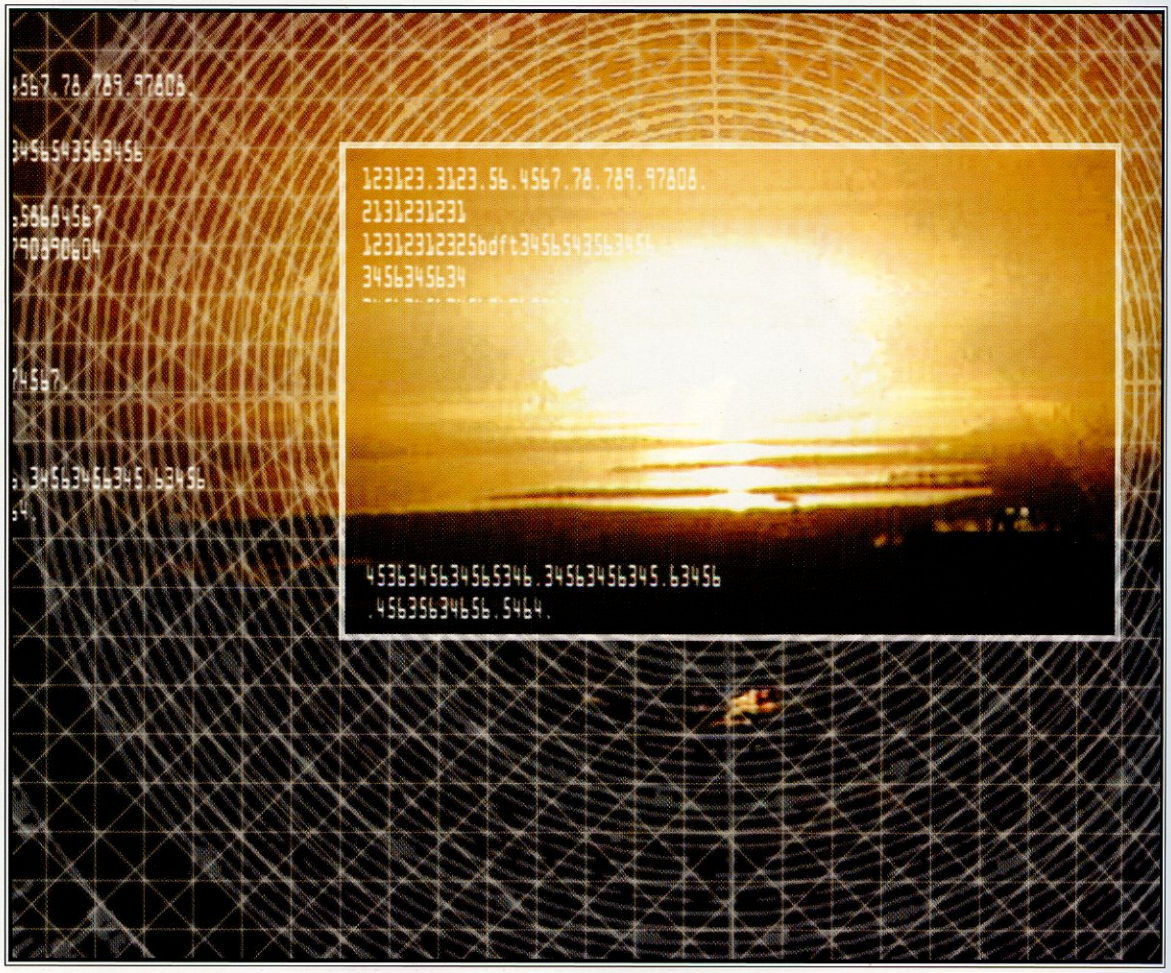
So did Marshal Blackwood, who, like Cybon, surely had nothing left to prove. Macaroth sent Blackwood to the rear, ordering him to secure the rimward line. 'I would, sir, but there's nothing on the rimward line,' Blackwood famously declared during a formal dinner.

Macaroth sent him anyway.

A Warmaster is a Warmaster. One cannot pretend to understand the inner workings of the mind in such a great person. From the outside, it seems that Macaroth might have been favouring his new generals at the expense of tried and tested war-leaders. One can certainly appreciate the resentment felt by Cybon and Blackwood.

History is about to tell us, true or false. Perhaps Macaroth sent his elder commanders back to make room for his new blood. Alternatively, Macaroth understood how dangerous and pressing the Second Front would become. The Warmaster had never underestimated the genius of Anakwanar Sek. Perhaps he was sending his brightest and best back where they would do most good.

(Right) **Radius City, Bogumil, falls to an Imperial Navy Strike. Warmaster Macaroth sacrificed eight million Imperial citizens in the name of the Emperor. The *Tacticae Imperialis* concurs he was probably right to do so.**



(Left) **A formal portrait by an artist in the employ of the archenemy, recovered from the ruins of Sparshad Celsior, Ancreon Sextus. It is believed to show a likeness of Magister Anakwanar Sek, 'whose voice drowns out all others'.**

(Right) **A picture of the Sons of Sek. So far, they have been a terror weapon, a threat. The author believes that they will yet rise to plague us.**

Theory grows. It seems now a clear fact that, at the turn of 775, the greatest threat to Imperial security in the Sabbat Worlds comes from the flank, and from the forces of Magister 'Anarch' Sek. The Second Front of the Crusade, forced mainly by novice boys and first founders, is finding itself pushed to the limit by the Sek's forces. Cybon and Blackwood try to stiffen resolve, but the line generals see the danger. Barthol Van Voytz, in a letter dated 356, 775, writes:

'There is a taint here on the Second Front. A weakness. Men turn, fall away, flee. I have not a single body of troopers that has the proper spirit in it.'

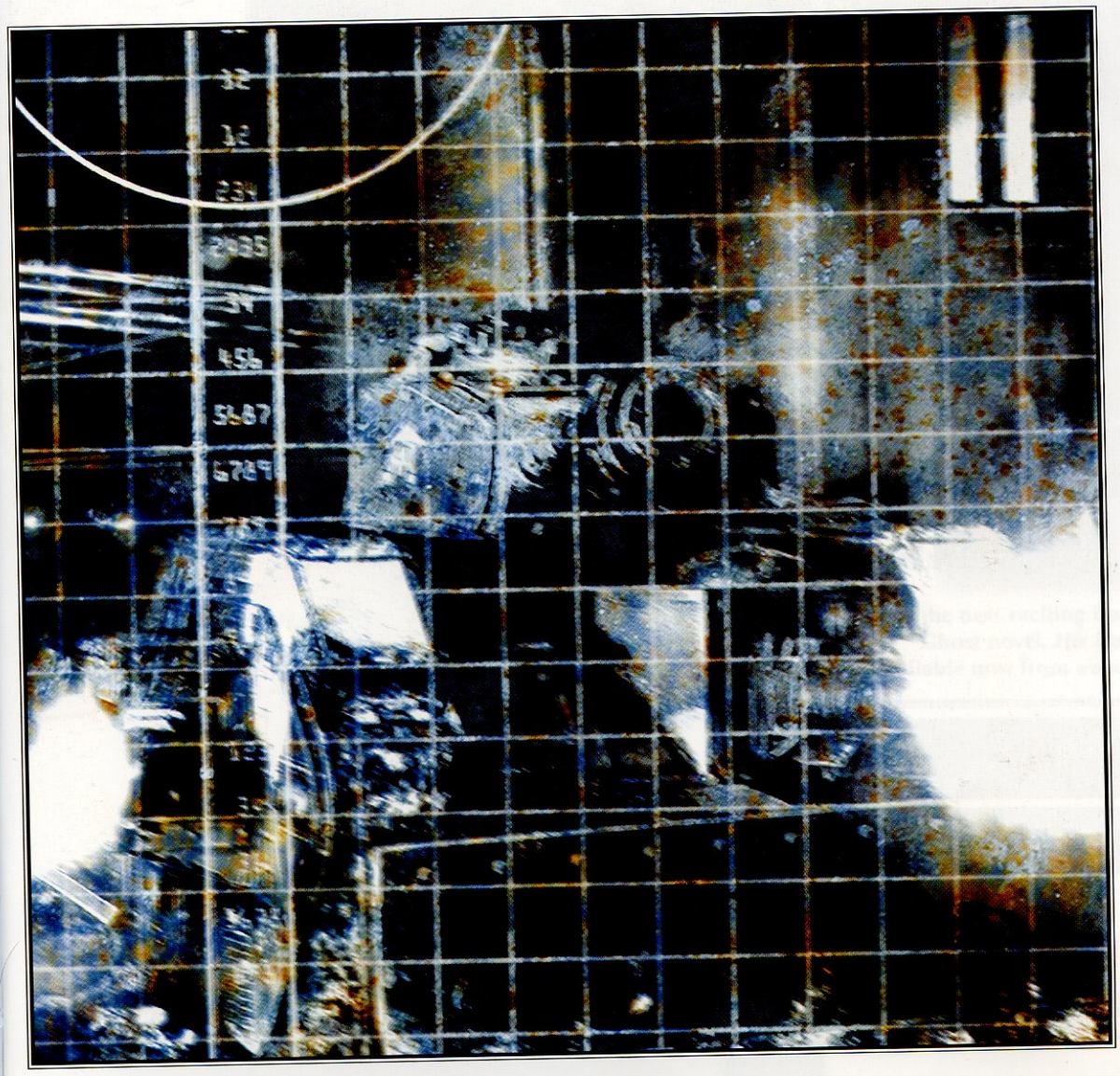
Rumours have also emerged of a new threat. It appears that Sek has raised a fighting force of his own, to rival the Gaur's Blood Pact. Called the Sons of Sek, this host clearly represents a challenge to Urlock Gaur's pre-eminence as Archon. A civil war amongst the Ruinous Powers might yet begin.

In the meantime, the Crusade forces can only suffer.For the record, my name is Antonid Biota. I am an imperial tactician, assigned to the staff of Lord General Van Voytz. I have been a part of this campaign for all of its twenty years. I have tried to show you the shape of it in this volume, the aims, and the merits. When I began, I wanted to show you more.

I must be satisfied. This war is not yet done, and I believe it will not be done for years. The Archon and Sek prove to be relentless, implacable foes. Cleansing this zone of stars from the taint of Chaos, and restoring it to the proud state that the holy Saint first established, will take the courage and blood of many more warriors. I urge those who read this document to lend their support to the ongoing war efforts. It is not a time to back away from the Crusade, not a time at all to say 'enough' and withdraw. Not only is victory well within our sights, true jeopardy waits if we relinquish our efforts. In the Sabbat Worlds, the Imperium of Man has met with the most organised and militarised strand of the Ruinous Powers yet encountered.

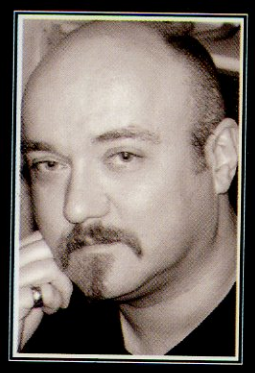
We must continue to pursue this threat, even out into the Sanguinary Worlds, and eradicate it utterly, or it will return. Should it be left to heal its wounds and rise again, the host of the Archon might sweep back to take more than just the Sabbat Worlds from us. Warmaster Macaroth himself has been emphatic on the subject: 'This holy Crusade is akin to surgery. One does not halt when one has had enough. One sees the procedure through to the end.'

The Sabbat Crusade has come a long way. The future is now ours to decide.



(Left) **An Imperial tank, captured, polluted, and sent back into the warzone as an instrument of the Archon.**

'There are no miracles. There are only men.'
~ Saint Sabbat, Epistles.



Dan Abnett lives and works in Kent, in England. His work for the Black Library includes the popular comic strips *Lone Wolves*, *Titan* and *Inquisitor Ascendant*, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy.

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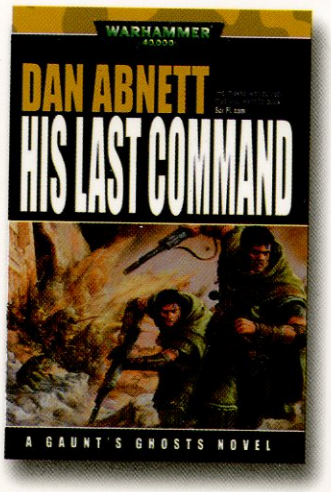

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'It seems the High Lords of Terra approve of the work we've done together. We've been given our Crusade, the Sabbat Worlds.'

~ Warmaster Slaydo, after Khulan

War in the Sabbat Worlds has raged for twenty years. The glorious armies of the Imperium battle the dread forces of Chaos in their bid to bring the sector back into the Emperor's embrace. Victory hangs in the balance, and one mistake could seal the fate of billions.

The uncountable hordes of Chaos vie for control over hundreds of populated planets. Battles are fought tooth and nail on land, in the air and the depthless reaches of space. The Imperium forges into enemy held territory, but they face a foe that is both tenacious and organised. Move follows countermove, and the greatest tacticians of the age vie to out-think an enemy who forces the Imperium pay for every advance with the blood of her sons and daughters.

This book is the official Imperium history of this ongoing campaign. The text is written by Antonid Biota, a senior tactician on the front line, who has been in the thick of the combat right from the beginning.

The Sabbat Worlds Crusade is a deadly conflict between good and evil, but it is far from certain that good will win through.