



Reading Room

StarWars FanFiction

POV: The Grand Company

By Lewis "Moose" Gregory

[Navigation buoy R-X927, in the Krella Sector.]

"White Leader to *Anubis*, aren't you guys done yet?" The annoyance and tension was beginning to creep into Commander Sherry "Shok'wave" Krenzel's voice no matter how hard she tried to keep it out.

"White Leader, from *Anubis*," her comm crackled back. "Moving as fast as we can, Commander. Blame your pilots for all the extra ion cannon shots they put into this tub--hell, blame 'em for picking this junkpile in the first place. You guys probably blew up the better ones."

"It's not my fault they decided to put the weapons on the most decrepit one of the lot, Chief," Shok'wave replied icily. "Maybe if you'd rather we left and let you fend for yourselves when the Imperial rescue party shows up..."

"Knock it off, the both of you," a third voice cut in. The voice was unmistakably that of the *Joan d'Arc's* commanding officer, Captain Ralne Orris. "Chief Kathris, estimated time until our prize is operational?"

"Two to four minutes, sir," he replied. Those listening could almost hear him snap to attention. "These Imps didn't take good care of their freighters, this thing was a mess before we attacked it."

"Understood," Orris replied. "Commander, have your fighters maintain their perimeter. *Joan* out." Before Shok'wave could even acknowledge, there was an audible click, and the command channel went dead.

How dare you click your comm off on me, you little... Shok'wave let loose an audible growl inside her flight helmet. She had to admit, Orris knew what he was doing; he was probably one of the finest capital ship commanders in the Alliance, and would no doubt someday gain an MC80, or even MC90, Calamari Star Cruiser of his own. He was also, however, pompous and arrogant, qualities that infuriated White Leader. Relations between the two of them ranged anywhere from grudging respect to open warfare at any given moment, and were subject to change faster than Coruscant's weather.

She took a second and forced herself to calm down before switching off the command channel and back on to the squadron channel. "White Leader to all ships. Maintain perimeter and keep your eyes open. White 6, keep the Training Wing positioned around that freighter; the rest of you, stay with me around the *Joan d'Arc*. Acknowledge."

"White 6 acknowledges." In the cockpit of his own B-Wing, Captain Lewis "Moose" Gregory, the White Squadron Training Officer, took a second to stretch himself--no small feat in a fighter cockpit when you're over 1.9 m tall--and look around. Arachnoid kept good formation off his right side, while Hardrive hovered around them in an A-Wing providing escort. Several kilometers away, the rest of the Training Wing--Tzadkiel

and Grizzly in the B-Wings, with Angelrose and Blitz in the A-wings--also slowly orbited the crippled Imperial freighter, occasionally dodging the odd piece of wreckage.

The mission had, for once, gone smoothly up till now. It was a simple hit-and-fade attack to capture supplies, particularly warheads, which White Squadron and the Alliance were always short of. Alliance Intelligence had discovered that a weapons shipment was being inserted into a normal commercial convoy of household goods in an attempt to disguise it. Obviously, Moose chuckled to himself, it didn't work too well.

And White Squadron did what it did best--convoy ambush. Everything fell into place. The *Joan d'Arc* dropped out of hyperspace right in front of the convoy, blocking its escape route, and the B-Wings and A-Wings of White went to work. The A-Wings easily scattered the weak escort of Assault Gunboats, the B-Wings blasted two escorting Corvettes into so much chaff, and the freighters were theirs for the taking.

It was an oddly chivalrous gesture, Moose mused, to let the crews evacuate the freighters before they were destroyed. Quick inspection passes showed that only one freighter, the one they currently protected, was carrying anything worthwhile. Commercial allure aside, the Alliance High Command apparently didn't think that three freighters full of pots, pans, spatulas, and fifty-four thousand surplus (and overpriced) "Tickle Me Vader" dolls were worth saving. Once the crews evacuated, the ships were destroyed. Those crews were now under guard on the *Joan d'Arc*...freighter crews probably weren't much of a catch, but Alliance Intelligence would appreciate them, nevertheless. And besides, it surely beat trying to breathe vacuum.

"White 6 to Training Wing," Moose called, "hope nobody's getting dizzy flying in circles, 'cause we get to keep doing it. Keep a lookout on the scanners, you know they got an SOS off. I'm expecting an ISD to show up any second now..."

"Actually, it's a VSD!", yelled Lieutenant Commander Avery "Foxfire" Schroeder, the White Executive Officer. "Coming out of hyperspace, twenty-five klicks off the port quarter, z plus twenty!"

Commander Krenzel looked at her scanners. Sure enough, they showed a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer appearing in the distance. The VSD was far enough away that it would be no factor, and was out of position to prevent them from leaving, but its fighter complement could be on top of them in less than two minutes. With no shields and no thrusters, the captured Imperial freighter was dead if a TIE so much as looked at it funny. Shok'wave let loose a string of swear words that would make the most hardened mercenary cargo pilot sit up and take notice.

"I heard that, Commander," Captain Orris deadpanned over the command channel. "Chief, your status?"

"Attempting main engine start now, sir," Kathris replied with the sound of groaning machinery in the background. His men had communications tuned to the fighter frequency, so they knew what was happening outside, and it was evident by the increased urgency in his voice.

"TIEs launching," Foxfire called. "Looks like six Bombers in a vee and six squints on the wings escorting, range twenty-one klicks and inbound. Estimate launch range in...eighty seconds."

Shok'wave sighed. *And this one looked like it was going so well...* "Foxfire, take two A-Wings and intercept at maximum range. Granite, Iceman, form on me, we'll back them up. Moose, hold your people in place, the rest of you, maintain perimeter defense of the *Joan*."

The squadron channel rang with acknowledgements as Foxfire, Ladyfox, and Drake swung into a line abreast formation, with Shok'wave, Granite, and Iceman trailing in their B-Wings, and tore off toward the approaching fighters. The remaining fighters increased speed and began charging shields in preparation for potential close combat.

The Imperial freighter's drives flared to life. "Main engine start!", yelled Chief Kathris. "How about that, the damn thing worked!"

"Don't jinx yourself, Chief," Captain Orris replied. "All ships, download coordinates and prepare to jump out immediately."

"Captain," Shok'wave replied, "intercept ETA is twenty seconds, we can make sure you have a clear jump out..."

"Negative, Commander, the spirit is admirable but we're leaving now," Orris cut her off. "Jump is in fifteen seconds, set coordinates and turn for the jump point, best speed."

Shok'wave fumed again. *One day, Orris, one day...* "White Leader to all fighters, prepare for jump, turn for the jump points and download jump coordinates, point Gamma!"

There was a chorus of groans and protestations over the squadron channel. Foxfire grumbled, "Oh, man, he's such a party pooper...twelve free kills on the wing and he's trying to get us out of here..."

"Orders are orders, Foxfire," Shok'wave growled. *And stupid orders are still orders too, Sherry*, she thought to herself.

The captured Imperial freighter lurched to one side, then began to move forward. Behind it, the *Joan d'Arc* turned to match its course, toward their chosen jump point. Breaking off of their patrol and intercept routes, the A-Wings and B-Wings of White Squadron followed suit.

Before the frustrated eyes of the Imperial pilots, the *Joan d'Arc*, White Squadron, and their captured prize all flashed into hyperspace, and left behind nothing but the wreckage of their battle.

[Orbiting Alliance deep space platform *Brightstar 17*, in the Alderaan Sector.]

Alliance Intelligence hated it when fighter pilots boarded ships that they'd captured in commerce raids. To the Intel officers, the fighter pilots were amateurs, who were likely to accidentally destroy valuable intelligence--or get themselves and the prize blown up by triggering a booby trap. But, in the time-honored tradition of "conquerors" everywhere, almost as soon as the *Joan d'Arc* and the captured freighter had arrived at the Alliance depot platform *Brightstar 17* and fighter recovery had been completed, White Squadron began pestering Shok'wave to visit their captured booty.

Shok'wave, still fuming over her comm exchanges with Orris and Kathris, at first wasn't going to allow it. But she decided to go ahead and ask Captain Orris anyway, more to annoy him than anything else--she was sure that he would turn it down flat and keep the pilots away so Alliance Intel could get first shot at the old barge.

It absolutely blew her away when he agreed that the pilots *could* go visit the freighter.

So she sat in the right seat of White Squadron's Lambda-class shuttle, *Anubis*, shaking her head. She never could get inside Orris' head, nor could anyone else...and to be honest, she wasn't quite sure she wanted to. She wasn't sure she'd like the view.

"The Chief was right," said the shuttle pilot, a young rating who had aspirations of joining the Training Wing someday. He had flown the *Anubis* over during the capture operation. "That thing's a junkheap inside, it beats me why you're taking up your sack time to go look at it."

Shok'wave looked at him somewhat testily, but then calmed herself. It was a valid point--*why would* a bunch of fighter pilots care about a trashed-out old freighter? And yet, the shuttle behind her was almost full--nearly half the squadron, a few marines for security detail, and some *Joan d'Arc* engineers. "Curiosity, I guess," she finally replied. "Curiosity of why we were ordered on this operation, and maybe curiosity about what an Imperial ship--even a freighter--looks like inside."

The rating shrugged. "I guess you're right, ma'am," he said finally. "Maybe I'll never make it as a fighter pilot...I don't think I understand 'em yet."

That elicited the first smile of the day from White Leader. "Neither do I...and I am one."

[Onboard the captured freighter *Belt Lady*.]

"So this is the mighty enemy," Drake mused as the White Squadron pilots wandered into the dimly lit portside hold of the *Belt Lady*. "You'd think the Imperial Navy would keep their ships up better than this. This thing's a toilet with hyperdrive!"

"I don't think I'd insult a toilet by associating it with this ship, lad," Granite replied, pointing to the partially-jammed-open lower loading door, which also served as an emergency blast and decompression door. "If we'd hulled her on this side, she'd have probably lost all her air through that--and I'd lay credits our torps didn't spring that door, either. Bloody deathtrap."

Almost as if on cue, a slight shudder and groan ran through the ship, probably caused by a momentary glitch in the artificial gravity generators. All the pilots looked at each other.

"Uh...well," Torpedo said, changing the subject and hefting a crowbar borrowed from the *Joan d'Arc's* armory, "let's see what we've got in here, shall we?"

The White Squadron crew dispersed about the ship, still eyeing the overheads a bit suspiciously. Some of them set to work in and around the cargo bays, inspecting to see if the ship really was carrying the missiles and torpedoes that the scanners had indicated. Torpedo, the squadron Tactical Officer, and Vyper, the Intelligence Officer, went forward and began checking out the bridge and ship's computer, hoping to find some piece of data that could lead to future operations--a supply route to an Imperial task group, perhaps, or the location of forward deep-space bases within easy raiding distance.

Meanwhile, Moose and Hardrive headed forward behind Torpedo and Vyper, but turned off short of the bridge. They walked down one of the cramped companionways until they got to an unmarked door. Moose looked down at Hardrive. "Think this is it?"

"Yeah," Hardrive replied, rubbing his chin. "If I remember right, the captain's cabin on these things is usually right around here somewhere, forward near the bridge. It's as good a candidate as any." He glanced over at the status panel mounted outside the door. "Pressure and gravity are good...shall we?"

Moose merely nodded, and they both drew weapons--Hardrive drew his blaster pistol, while Moose pulled a vibrosword from its scabbard and clicked it on. They arranged themselves to either side of the door, in the hopes that any booby trap hooked to the door would blow out into the hallway and spare them the brunt of its force. Then Hardrive reached over and hit the open button.

The door ground and squeaked a bit, but opened. After a couple of seconds without an explosion, the two pilots swung into the doorway, ready in case someone had somehow managed to conceal themselves in the cabin...but there was nothing. All that lay before them was a sloppy, unkempt mess of a stateroom.

The two pilots sheathed their weapons and advanced into the room. The place was strewn with trash...dirty clothes, rags, food wrappers, half-eaten meals, and empty beer bottles. The bedclothes--those few that were still actually *on* the bed--were filthy. Small bric-a-brac and miscellaneous junk littered the floor around the dresser and desk, no doubt knocked off during the attack. Posters of half-naked human and Twi'leki females adorned the walls. And the room reeked of grease, sweat, rotting food, and waste, courtesy of a malfunctioning ventilation system--and judging by the look of the bathroom, a probably malfunctioning toilet as well.

"Well," Hardrive commented dryly. "At least he runs a tight ship."

"Mmm-hmmm," Moose answered absently as he looked over the captain's desk. "Looks like he holds himself to the same high standards as the crew. Stang, the holds in a slave ship probably smell better than this. Oh well...you had all your vaccinations, kid?"

"Yep. Don't worry about me, big guy...bacteria take one look at me and know not to mess with the Drive." He grinned.

So did Moose. "Yeah...they don't want to get ejected out into space with you."

"Now wait a minute, you big oaf, I haven't lost a ship in nearly..."

But Moose had already turned away and was heading for a large footlocker barely visible under a pile of

dirty coveralls. Hardrive, knowing he'd have to wait to get revenge, just grumbled and headed over to the captain's work desk, and began rummaging through the clutter that remained on top of it. Hardrive looked over a moment later when he heard Moose grunting, and saw him struggling to get the footlocker open. "Need a hand, big guy?", Hardrive asked with mock sweetness.

"Uh-uh," Moose replied. He reached down onto his belt, grabbed his official-issue Strongbow Industries White Squadron Collapsible Sledgehammer (model 402, off-white), extended the handle, and in one fluid motion, hauled off and smashed the lock. From inside the footlocker, there came the tinkling of glass, as if bottles were rubbing up against each other.

Hardrive cocked an eyebrow and shook his head. "Brute force again. I always did picture you for that type, that's why you fly those slow B-Wings."

Moose grinned as he retracted the small sledgehammer's handle and hooked it back on his belt. "Yeah, well...you say that like it's a bad thing, Nik. Now, let's see what we've got here that sounds so fragile..." With the latch pulverized, the lid opened easily, revealing...bottles.

Moose went rigid, gaping down into the footlocker. Slowly, almost reverently, he extracted one of over twenty identical bottles as Hardrive looked on with mounting curiosity, and slowly walked over.

"Stang...I never thought I'd ever see this stuff again," Moose muttered as he held a bottle up and examined it. Looking over his shoulder, Hardrive saw it to be a one-liter liquor bottle, probably synthetic glass, labeled "Jacque Dan'eels Bourbon, bottled on Ten'see IV, Dixie Sector."

"So?", Hardrive shrugged. "It's booze. Probably lousy booze, at that, if this guy had it in these quarters. Now come on over here and give me a hand looking through this crap for..." He trailed off when he saw Moose's face...his eyes were locked in an unfocused stare the likes of which Hardrive had never seen before. It was almost as if Moose was looking through the bottle, not at it, as he slowly turned it in his hands.

"Uh...Moose?" Hardrive tapped his Training Officer on the shoulder. "Moose? White T9 to White 6, come in please? We've got the rest of this cabin to go through, just tag it and the Intel guys might give you what's left..."

That seemed to snap Moose out of whatever trance he was in. "Uh...no." He put the bottle back in the footlocker and looked frantically around the floor until his eyes fell on the dirty coveralls that had covered the footlocker. He began grabbing them and stuffing them in the locker, trying to pad the loosely packed bottles. "Nik, give me a hand padding this stuff so we can get this thing out of here," he said hurriedly as he continued to grab and throw dirty clothes.

Hardrive's eyes grew wide. "Wait a minute, boss, Shoks expressly forbade us to take *anything* off this barge, remember? No souvenirs? Intel's going to have her ass if anything leaves this ship before they get a chance to check it, and if that happens, it's going to roll downhill to *us*! And there's no way we're going to be able to sneak *that*!--he gestured at the bulky footlocker--"out of here. It must weigh forty kilos or more!"

Moose stopped packing and looked at Hardrive. It was a disquieting look, equal parts pleading, angry, frantic, and distant. "You just let me handle Sherry, Nik," Moose replied. "But I need your help to get this thing--and more importantly, those bottles--out of here and back on board the *Joan* in one piece. Now hand me those shirts."

Hardrive didn't move. Instead, he folded his arms and looked askance at his superior officer. "Is that an order, Captain?", he asked, biting off the last word.

Moose turned back around to him, furious. He opened his mouth to say something, then stopped and just stared silently at his longtime squadmate for several seconds. "No, Flight Cadet, it isn't an order," he finally said quietly. "It's me asking you for a favor."

Hardrive looked at him for a second, then looked back down at the floor. "Don't do that, man.....awwwww, you know I can't say no when you do that earnest good-hearted shtick on me. All right, all right, I'll help. Maybe *you'll* get busted down to Flight Cadet and I can be *your* boss next time." Hardrive reached down and began half-heartedly throwing cloth into the footlocker, muttering "I've got a bad feeling about this..."

"Just where the **hell** do you think you're going with that, Captain?"

Moose and Hardrive had managed to carry the heavy footlocker almost to the *Belt Lady's* airlock. But just when one might think that they had managed to pull off at least part of their mission, Fate intervened...and the intervention involved Commander Krenzel herself, a blind corner, and an unplanned impact.

In other words, she literally walked right into Moose, Hardrive, one decrepit footlocker, and twenty-two liters of Jacque Dan'eels bourbon.

"Well? I'm waiting, Moose!", Shok'wave barked, actually tapping her foot with impatience. "And don't try and sneak off, Hardrive, I can see you back there!" Hardrive, who had managed to retreat partially around the corner without being seen--so he'd thought--sheepishly moved back out into the hallway, and assumed an unassuming, contrite, head-down, looking at the floor, "please don't hurt me Commander" stance. Hardrive was one of the Alliance's braver pilots...but then again, this wasn't combat, he wasn't in an A-Wing's cockpit, and, after all, there's a difference between bravery and foolhardiness.

"Well, uh, Commander," Moose stammered, "we, uh, I mean I, found this in the captain's cabin, and, well, ma'am, I decided that it might make good..."

"You *decided*," she said icily. "After I told you, twice, explicitly, on the ride over here that there would be no memento-hunting...you 'decided' to sneak this...this...*thing* back onboard. Well, I sure as hell hope that this footlocker is worth a long stint in my doghouse, Captain, because I do **not** take kindly to having my orders disobeyed!" She walked around to the front of the trunk. "So let's see what's in here that's so important it's worth disobeying a direct order and risking the entire squadron's reputation with Alliance Intelligence, shall we?" She flipped open the lid, threw off the dirty clothes, and picked up a bottle.

"Bourbon?", she said, the anger in her voice rising even higher. "You're going to put yourself at risk of a court-martial over *bourbon*?? What's wrong, that last Blue Stuff we nearly liberated not working for you any more, Captain? And another thing...Flight Cadet, what are you doing mixed up in this anyway, you don't even drink!"

"Um...well, I could start, if that would help, ma'am," Hardrive replied.

Shok'wave and Moose both gave Hardrive a look that could freeze bacta solid.

"On second thought, that's not such a good idea, I guess, ma'am, so I'll just stand right here." He shuffled back a step, but not before making eye contact with Moose and drawing his right index finger across his throat.

"Commander," Moose cut in. "Leave Nik out of it, I convinced him to do it as a favor to me, he's not really involved." Moose didn't see Hardrive nodding fervently behind him until another withering look from Shok'wave stopped it. "That particular brand of bourbon has...well, I don't quite know how to put it...sentimental value?"

By this time, the noise of the discussion had echoed up and down the companionways of the freighter so much that several of the White Squadron pilots had gathered around. Shok'wave was preparing to unleash a full salvo of wrath on Moose and Hardrive when she looked around and realized she had an audience. She forced herself to hold back. The squadron had had a hard time of things lately, and shredding the two popular pilots in front of their peers--and in Moose's case, subordinates as well--would be very bad for morale. No, she thought, there had to be another way...and it came to her.

"All right then," she said, calming down. "If this stuff has such sentimental value to you that you'd disobey my direct orders for it, then I'm sure it wouldn't be a problem for all of us to adjourn back to the Bomb Shelter and for you to tell *all* of us about why it means so much to you. And then I can tell everyone what your punishment will be for disobeying a direct order, so there will be no chance that it will happen again. That isn't a problem...is it, Captain?" She smiled, and in the mood she was obviously in, it was a smile that meant she wasn't going to take "no" for an answer.

Moose swallowed hard, painfully aware of both his CO's penetrating stare and the muffled "oh boy, are you going to get it" snickers of his squadmates. "Uh...no, ma'am," he finally said quietly. "No problem at all."

"Good," Shok'wave replied with mock sweetness. "Then the two of you need to pick this up and take it to the *Anubis*. We'll meet there in five minutes, and in the Bomb Shelter in fifteen minutes after arrival back on the *Joan*. Oh, and bring your storytelling skills, Captain, because this had *better* be good..."

[Forward auxiliary cargo hold Three-Alpha, the "Bomb Shelter", on the *Joan d'Arc*.]

The very existence of the Bomb Shelter was still a closely guarded secret among White Squadron and a few other select people, since Captain Orris had long vowed to find and close the hidden meeting place and bar for the pilots. So having all the pilots come to the Bomb Shelter was a rare thing, since it was, after all, very hard to hide that many starfighter pilots, especially if they started drinking. With the increasing size of the squad--over twenty pilots between White Squadron and the White Training Wing--it was tough for everyone to find a place to sit down in the cramped hold, but eventually, everyone squeezed in. Foxfire, a talented drink mixer in addition to being an efficient squadron XO and crack interceptor pilot, took her traditional place behind the makeshift bar, upon which were placed all twenty-two one-liter bottles of Jacques Dan'eels. As the pilots came in, she poured each one their favorite drink--Shok'wave's Long Island Iced Tea, Hardrive's chocolate milk, Joker's Blue Stuff--until all were served and seated. When they were, Shok'wave stood up.

"All right, I'm sure the rumor mill has already gotten around to everyone about what's going on," she began. "Do you all remember that I told you--twice--on the shuttle ride over to the Imperial freighter that there was to be absolutely no filching of items from that ship, however small they were, upon orders from Alliance Intelligence?"

Everyone nodded and murmured, "Yes, ma'am." Everyone, that is, except Moose and Hardrive, who found something very interesting on the ceiling to look at momentarily.

"Well, apparently Captain Gregory here had some sort of ear problem--or, more likely, brain damage--because he attempted to bring back all of *that*," she continued, gesturing to the twenty-two bottles of liquor on the bar. The people who hadn't been privy to the "discussion" onboard the *Belt Lady* raised their eyebrows and looked at Moose, who sat on a stool near the bar, looking very much like one about to be led to the gallows.

"The Captain informed me," Shok'wave continued again after the murmuring died down, "that the bottles have some sort of 'sentimental value' to him. So...before I place him on permanent starfighter-washing duty and assign him to Dustmop Wing for the duration of his natural life, I decided that it would be appropriate for him to explain to his squadmates the reasons that would cause him to subject all of us to the uncomfortable scrutiny of Alliance Intelligence. So now, I give the floor to you, Moose...please explain to us why you did what you did." She stepped back and sat down with a flourish, crossed her legs, sat back, and picked up her drink.

Moose downed the rest of his beer in one gulp, got up, and walked over in front of the bar. The eyes of the entire squad were on him. He glanced back to Foxfire, who already had a second beer waiting on the bar, and she smiled briefly at him and flashed him a thumbs-up.

"Well, Captain?", Shok'wave said loudly from her front-row perch. "We're all waiting!" Moose turned back around and looked at her...if he didn't know any better, he swore she was actually enjoying watching him sweat. *Actually*, he thought to himself, *I don't know any better...*

Moose cleared his throat and began to speak. "Uh...well...when I first got picked up by the Alliance and told them my story and that I wanted to fly starfighters, they didn't believe me. They told me it would take months for them to cross-check everything I'd told them and that they wouldn't let me near a starfighter until they could, because it would be a security risk. But, since I was big, strong, and willing to volunteer, they weren't going to pass me up completely. So...they put me in the infantry.

"A month after I first got taken to the *Cathleen* for debriefing, they'd pushed me through some real basic infantry training and shipped me to this little backwater world called Ten'see IV, in the Dixie Sector. Ten'see IV was well out of the way from a lot of the main trade routes, but the climate was temperate and the local population was mostly human colonist farmers that didn't like the Empire's taxes and low food prices. So they'd joined the Alliance, and we had a small presence there--a starfighter base with about a dozen Z-95s and a few Y-Wings, a listening post, a couple of infantry companies, stuff like that.

"Well, somebody must've gotten word to Emperor Wrinklepuss that the base was there, because a month after I got there, the Empire sent a huge task force into the system to reassert control. Two ISDs and supporting task groups, fully stocked. We had maybe a dozen Z-95s and four Y-Wings to fend them off with...not that we ever got the chance."

He paused to take a sip of beer, then continued. "We must've had an Imperial spy in the garrison or infiltrators on the ground, because the warning and orbital defense systems--what passed for them, anyway--were completely disabled. The first warning we had that the Empire was visiting was when proton torpedoes fired from low orbit started airbursting over the base. They caught us with our pants down, and they hit us with everything they had, typical Imperial style. It took maybe ten minutes maximum for a few waves of Gunboats and TIE Bombers to flatten the fighter base and listening post. I don't think any of the fighters ever lifted, they were blown up in the revetments or crushed in the hangars." He turned to his Training Wing, who were sitting mostly together on one side of the room. "That's why I keep telling you guys that atmospheric ground attack is so important. I should know. I lived through one."

"Captain," Shok'wave interjected. "I wasn't expecting your autobiography..."

"It's all pertinent, Commander," Moose replied. "You put me up for ridicule in front of everyone, at least let me say my whole story before passing judgement." A couple of the newer members of the squadron gasped. Not a lot of commanding officers would stand for a remark like that, but Shok'wave had known Moose for quite a while, and it didn't seem to bother her...much.

"All right, then," she motioned with her drink glass. "Continue."

Moose nodded to her, took another sip of beer, and kept going. "Once they'd wrecked everything from above, they landed their stormtrooper complement, complete with heavy weapons--landing barges, AT-ATs, AT-STs, scout walkers, speeders, heavy transports, and all with full Gunboat support from above. It's not like they needed it, there were maybe four hundred of us in the garrison, and two-thirds of those were out of action from the bombardment--killed, wounded, trapped in rubble, or had already run off in panic. But they attacked anyway, and dropped right on top of the Alliance base. They came so fast that anybody who didn't run for the woods immediately, who tried to stay and fight for even a few seconds, never made it out." His voice trailed off.

He cleared his throat and continued. "About forty of us managed to get out--most of my infantry platoon, a few of the miscellaneous base personnel, and one or two fighter pilots. We only had an old Chief Sergeant to lead us, all our officers were dead. We had no transport, no weapons heavier than my Packered Mortar Gun, and only as many supplies as we could grab on the way out. So we ran up into the hills away from the base, hoping we could hide out until help arrived--if it arrived. We walked and walked and walked, a night and a day, until I thought we'd all keel over, when we came upon a bunch of buildings back up on a hillside. It was the Jacques Dan'eels Distillery." Moose reached back and picked up one of the bottles, showing everyone the label. "Everyone on-planet had told us that it was the best bourbon in the Outer Rim, but none of us could afford it on a Private's salary." He put the bottle back down.

"We knew the Imps were pursuing us closely, and we knew that they were going to find us and catch us real soon. So the Chief Sergeant says 'Boys, this is as good a place as any to make a stand, so here we stand, and here we die.' The place was completely abandoned--I guess they fled with the shooting started--and we had the run of the whole compound. We were most all young, all convinced that we were done for anyway, so I guess it was natural that two of the guys broke open the doors to the warehouse where they kept the finished product and started handing it out to everybody--hell, what were they going to do, arrest us for petty larceny?"

"We gave ourselves a wake like the galaxy's never seen. Every last one of us was blind drunk. We were all running around, yelling, whooping, saying good-bye to each other, firing off blasters and throwing thermal detonators. It's a miracle we didn't hit a chemical tank or something and blow ourselves up." Moose paused to let out a mirthless, humorless chuckle at some hidden thought, then kept going. "Well, all of a sudden, one of the road guards runs back into the compound screaming 'Stormtroopers coming up the road!' And sure enough, a couple of hundred troopers were coming up the road, on foot. The woods were too thick for them to use speeder bikes much, and they'd left their transports and heavy armor behind for some reason. All they had with them were two AT-STs, and they were lagging behind on the road."

"They'd routed us so easily at the spaceport that I'm sure they expected us to just keep running ahead of them until they ran us down. And for most reasonable men, that's what would've happened. But we were so pumped up on liquid courage we decided to stay and fight. We were so drunk we thought that the forty of us

with hand weapons could take out two hundred armored stormtroopers and two chicken walkers! So we hid in the buildings, snuggled down in the brush and behind the trees, and let them come out into the open in the compound."

A vacant look entered Moose's eyes as he continued. "When the first few ranks got into range and hadn't spotted us yet, we opened up with everything we had--blasters, detonators, a few rounds from my mortar gun, and what small amount of explosives we had. The lead group never knew what hit them and the rest scattered for cover. We were screaming at the top of our lungs and kept pressing the fight. I saw guys leap up from behind bushes, charge armored troopers, knock them down with a blaster shot, and then rip off their helmet and cut their throat with a dagger. We were insane, completely berserk. We'd probably killed, wounded, or run off almost half of them when they finally got their act together and brought up the AT-STs."

"We couldn't do a damn thing against those chicken walkers. They barrelled up toward us, making us keep our heads down by just firing wildly, trying to set brush on fire and maybe get a lucky hit on someone. We didn't have any blasters heavy enough to stop them, they just shed our carbine and pistol fire. I tried to put a mortar round or two into them, but they moved too fast to hit them with a mortar gun. Once the walkers got up close to us, the troopers rallied around them, and the tide turned. We kept fighting like madman...but we didn't have a chance."

Moose sighed, composing himself slightly, and finished his beer. "I had moved up onto the reverse slope of a drainage ditch about twenty meters behind one of the squads, trying to lay down some covering fire. Suddenly, I heard somebody yelling behind me. I turned around and saw my best friend in the outfit, this crazy Corellian guy named Farga, running out of one of the warehouses and back up toward the squad, carrying a double-armful of Jacque Dan'eels bottles. Something had possessed him to get up in the middle of the firefight, run back to the warehouse, grab more booze, and try to bring it back up to us across fifty meters of open ground. Well, he was halfway across when one of the chicken walkers rounded another building corner about thirty meters away. He never had a chance...the walker drew a bead on him and let him have it with both cannon. He went down and the bottles went flying."

Moose paused again to compose himself, looking at the floor. When he looked back up, there was the faintest hint of moisture in his eyes. "I lost it. I just completely went crazy. I jumped up off the embankment and charged the walker head-on. How it didn't kill me, I'll never know--maybe it never saw me, maybe it had a malfunction, maybe it figured I wasn't worth wasting the ergs of energy on, it beats me. But I covered the thirty or forty meters up to that thing in nothing flat. I did the only thing I could think of, which was to put both of my remaining mortar gun rounds straight up into the bottom of the walker. They shouldn't have hurt it, since we didn't have armor-piercing ammo, but the second shot caught something important. I heard this muffled 'boom' from inside the walker and it started to wobble. I ran back toward the squad, and got out from underneath it before it went over on me. I still have the shrapnel scars in my left shoulder from where I caught some fragments when it hit the ground and blew up. I fell down right by Farga's body...he was dead, sure enough. I didn't have another weapon on me, and was out of ammo for the mortar gun, so for some weird reason I threw the gun away, grabbed up three bottles of bourbon with my good arm, got up, and started running."

"The troopers were overrunning the buildings by then, and we were dying left and right. They weren't taking any prisoners after that ambush we led them into. I saw at least two wounded guys get blaster shots in the head as I ran into the woods. I ran into two other guys from the platoon, guys I didn't know well but who were friends of Farga's. I only ever knew them as Peyga and Talfashee. The three of us thought about going back out and dying with our mates, but the old Chief Sergeant saw us and motioned for us to run for it, right as a stormtrooper ducked out from around a building and caught him in the face with the butt of his blaster carbine." He shrugged. "So we ran."

The Bomb Shelter was silent for several seconds. Then Moose continued on, more softly. "We hid out in the woods for three days. After that, Alliance forces showed up and the Imperials withdrew. When we got back down to the remnants of the spaceport, we found out that we were the only three people from the entire garrison to survive. Everybody else was either dead or a prisoner." Moose looked around the room. "I don't know how many of you guys were there, but it was Blue Squadron and the *Happy Jack* that ran the Imperials off." His gaze returned to Shok'wave. "The first Rebel starfighter I ever saw in actual combat was an X-Wing--your husband's X-Wing, Commander--as it blew up the last Imperial Gunboat leaving the atmosphere. I'll never forget it."

Blitz, sitting down front, nodded. "I was there, I remember the Ten'see IV operation. The attack caught everyone off guard, including Intelligence. We beat them up pretty badly--took out four Corvettes and really tore up one of the ISDs--but we couldn't save the garrison or the 10% of the population that the Imperials

executed or took into forced labor. Seven hundred thousand people." He shook his head. "That atrocity put the entire Dixie Sector firmly in our camp, but it was such a price to pay for it." Blitz looked over at Shok'wave. "He's not making any of this up, Shoks...I was in on the debriefing of some of the local population. The story sounds perfectly plausible."

Shok'wave, who up until now had had her gaze fixed on Moose, looked over at Blitz and nodded. "I remember Matt talking about it...despite the fact that he did all that damage with no casualties, he never considered it much of a victory because all the slave ships got away." She turned back to Moose. "Continue, Captain."

Moose nodded to her. "Anyway...the three of us left the planet and went our separate ways, but we each took one of Farga's bottles. We said that we'd only open them if we were ever re-united, which wasn't really likely considering that we were going into different branches of the Alliance military. We decided that if one of us died, another one would get his bottle, and if one person ever had all three, then he could open them. But we weren't going to ever open them unless that happened, or we were together again."

Moose paused again, then continued. "We never reunited. Tal and I went into pilot training about the same time, but he died in a Z-95 training accident. One of the shield capacitors in the old Z-95 he was flying blew out and knocked out his life support, and he was dead by the time S&R got to him. Peyga got his bottle, but then Peyga died on Hoth when his heavy laser tower got blown up by an AT-AT. So I had all three bottles. I was the last survivor of the garrison. The only one left."

He picked a bottle off the bar again and stared at it as he spoke. "I uncorked the first bottle the first night I joined Buccaneer Squadron, and shared it with the guys on the *Liberty*. The second bottle, that went the days after I left Buccaneer, when I didn't have a squadron any more and I wasn't sure if I was going to stay in the Alliance. And the third bottle...you guys probably don't remember it, but the third bottle was part of the spread during the Formal Ceremony last year." He couldn't help but smirk. "Most of you guys have probably already had a sip of this stuff and never even knew it." He turned around to face Shok'wave. "Including you, Commander."

Foxfire spoke up. "I kind of hate to say it, Moose, but you still haven't explained why you picked this stuff up and brought it back over here."

Moose turned back to Foxfire. "Well...to be honest, Commander, I just don't know. Every time I see this stuff, I think about Ten'see IV. I think about forty of the bravest men I ever knew, men that assaulted five times their number of Imperial troops and almost pulled it off. I think about Peyga and Talfashee and Farga. I think about the explosions and the collapsing buildings and the death and the utter senselessness of the Empire attacking that planet. I think about seven hundred thousand people that never saw their homes again." He turned around, looking at the floor. "And sometimes...I think about why I'm still here...and they aren't."

His story completed, he turned back to Shok'wave. "That's it, ma'am." Without waiting for a response, he walked over to his chair and sat down.

The room was deathly quiet as Shok'wave got up and walked to the bar, picked up one of the bottles, looked at it, and cleared her throat. "I did give specific orders, Captain, and you did disobey them. I can't ignore that, that, no matter how noble your reasons, you know that. My problem now, is to come up with a suitable punishment for your offense." She examined the bottle closely for several more seconds, before putting it down emphatically on the bar.

"Captain, I'm afraid I can't allow you to keep possession of this contraband. This liquor is going to have to be confiscated in the name of the Squadron. I...uh...do believe that this cargo hold is a secure enough place to hold it, wouldn't you agree, Foxfire?"

In spite of herself, Foxfire couldn't help smiling a little. "Yes, ma'am. This hold is regularly secured, it should be quite sufficient to keep...shall we say, 'unauthorized', users from getting to the liquor. Is the entire Squadron to be considered 'authorized', ma'am?"

Shok'wave turned back to Moose and looked him over. "Yes. The entire squadron. We can take it from him, but it wouldn't be fair not to give the Captain occasional visitation rights." That brought a chuckle from the entire assembly, except from Moose, who was beet red and still highly embarrassed.

"Uh, Commander?", Torpedo raised his hand. "What about Intelligence? If the freighter captain mentions

that he had a footlocker, and mentions what was in it, how are we going to explain it being missing?"

Hardrive interjected before Shok'wave could answer. "That room was *really* messy, ma'am. I mean, it was bad. If that captain says there was a footlocker in there...well, I mean, it could be most anywhere. And besides, isn't there some salvage law that says it's ours anyway?"

Vyper grinned at them both. "Don't worry about it, guys," he said. "We've got nearly an hour still before Intelligence is due over there. We'll just send the *Anubis* back over there with the footlocker and everything that was in it...minus the confiscated contraband, of course."

Shok'wave shook her head. "Vyper, that's a positively Imperial thought."

Vyper grinned even more broadly. "I'll take that as a compliment, Commander."

Shok'wave laughed and handed the bottle in her hands to Foxfire. "Now, I believe that anyone that wants some should have some of this bourbon. Foxfire, set them up!" The pilots cheered, and shots of the Jacques Dan'eels were quickly poured for those pilots who wanted them. Some stayed with their alternative beverages, prompting Foxfire to tease Hardrive, "You sure you should be having that much chocolate milk, Nik? You might have to fly patrol later!"

When everyone had their glasses filled, Shok'wave held up her hand before anyone took a sip. She turned back to Moose. "You're not off the hook yet, Captain. You brought us this stuff...you have to give the first toast."

Moose dropped his head and shook it as the rest of the pilots shouted "Toast! Toast!". Finally, he yelled "All right, all right!", stepped forward and raised his shot glass.

"These bottles," he began, "represent a lot of lives lost fighting the Empire. We all know someone who's died at their hands, we all have our own personal war stories to tell. We all have our own reasons for being here and for doing what we do. But one thing that binds us all together is that we know that one day, our cause will prevail and the Emperor will fall. Maybe tomorrow, maybe not even in our lifetimes, but we all know that it's going to happen."

He held the glass out. "So...a toast to all those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for this Rebellion. May we keep the memory of that grand company sacred, and may their loss give us the strength to achieve our victory."

There was a chorus of "hear hears!" and much clinking of glasses as the White Squadron pilots toasted and downed their drinks. Foxfire stowed the excess bottles in the liquor lockup, and the pilots sat back to congratulate themselves on another mission well done...and another rest well-earned.

THE END



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Last update of this page: 30 Jul 2001