

The Difficulty of Conquering the North

71 OW

written by Lieutenant Major Vuulen Gshonfeld, of the 8th Sun's Own Dragoons Regiment, a supply officer of the Dragoons and quartermaster-in-chief of Deepwood Fields

Our estates in Deepwood Fields were exquisite. We resided in a vast compound of red brick, which in corners and at the gates boasted round towers reminiscent of a fortress, but was otherwise adorned with all the luxuries of a countryside mansion including large smoothglass windows and a large veranda opening on the training fields.

On this rich green grass, one could often see cavaliers of the Sun's Own Dragoons riding alone or in groups, dressed in their smartly cut red uniforms, the sun glinting off their polished helmets and the golden dragonshead crests. These same soldiers stood by the gate and guarding the veranda, standing stiff and straight, their black belts and high black boots polished to a mirror sheen.

The base at Deepwood was extensive. The dragoons' field and barracks were but a small part of it; for leagues in all directions, swathes of wood had been cut down to make space for the camps of tents, the horses and cattle, the wagons and cannons the base hosted. At times, as many as 300'000 men were stationed here. Supply men, such as myself, saw Deepwood as the second most important part of the northern war effort, after the city of Porto Pueblo.

The base was situated at a strategic point, near the edge of Elanthor. It sat at a great three-way junction, where the road west from Porto Pueblo, south to the battlefields in the Spine, and north to the forest war, met. It was also not far from the Everriver and Broad Bridge, the northernmost crossing of the Everriver.

*

When dawn broke, after the officers broke their fast in the gilded dining room of the estates, I would stand outside on the eastern terrace, watching the North Road. Long columns of men dressed in the cream and red of the emperor's army stretched along it, marching to the side since square military carts struggling to get through the mud blocked the road.

The glorious Northern Army under Marshal Tauren numbered upwards of half a million fighting men, equipped with the most modern firearms and tasked by the Emperor himself to conquer the north in the name of the Community. This seasoned army had seen campaigns on Balebu and defeated some of the most powerful forces of the Orcish realm, and now the Sun Empire's entire strength was focused on this single objective. Many officers believed the northern campaign would be even easier than the Balebian reconquest, and the sprawling camps of Pueblosight and Deepwood left little doubt to the empire's power.

And yet, we failed to make quick progress. The fighting in the Spine, where scattered mountain clans had to be rooted out from their fortified holdouts, would lengthen out indefinitely; and the main force failed to make progress in Elanthor. Often Tauren and his generals would command more troops to be sent up, even as supply convoys were mired down and troops on the front line starved.

Deepwood was the strongest point north of the Spine, a key link in Tauren's line of supply. But the stocks of equipment, food, and ammunition were not always sufficiently full. Chronically, we ran out of white shirts for the people's soldiers, so that they had to wear whatever near-white rags they could find and often looked more like a ragged band of mercenaries than imperial men.

*

The emperor's armies claimed victory after victory during the Balebian reconquest; even in the moors facing a capable foe, Marshal Macferth carried the day.

The Northern Campaign, however, has been facing many more difficulties. Many soldiers blame this on the fact that we have fewer resources, as the Community requires men in the south to rebuild; but in truth, the north is in its own right a difficult region to conquer.

Even at the very beginning, we faced difficulties: the way north was barred by the Spine, a range infested with orcs, and clearing these mountains would be a very lengthy task. Instead, we decided to move around the Spine and push further north, in a way treating the range like a castle and besieging it. This was a good plan, and the only option available to us.

Macferth successfully forced the Everriver Vale and established Porto Pueblo at the Moonsea; half the encirclement was achieved. But the second army, which tried to pass the Spine in the east by marching on the Great Glacier, had to retreat after suffering serious casualties to the wilderness, the cold, and orcish skirmishers. And, though the campaign could continue north from Porto Pueblo,

we were since been suffering from the strategic disadvantage of our position: Spine savages flanked us and harassed our supply lines in the Vale, such that Marshal Tauren's army wasn't always sufficiently supplied.

Even if Elanthor connected directly to the Balebian moors, conquering it would not be easy. The forest is the only land bridge to Intralu, and it seems purposefully made to counteract our armies. The dense forest and soft ground inhibits movement, and it is easy for enemy forces to slip behind the front lines; even as Tauren marched north and defeated enemy hosts, thousands of orcs laid behind his army. Our supply lines suffered accordingly, and Tauren was never able to bring his full strength to bear in an engagement. The largest part of our number was spread thin, fighting in vale, mountain, and forest against an elusive foe.

Our engineers failed to build strong roads in the soft ground; they placed logs wherever they could, but north of Deepwood there were only tracks of mud. The roads we had were not safe, being constantly under threat of attack from some orcish tribe hiding in the woods.

It is to note that the orcs of Elanthor were cunning. Some were forest tribes who followed old traditions, traveling light and hiding from our patrols among the trees, but then coming forth whenever they spied a weak target. Others were regular troops from the fallen empire, fled here when the Orders on Balebu or Bao-Mou collapsed; or they were reserves trained for the front line. They were commanded by some of the Orders' best officers and were capable of giving open battle. Both kinds understood the situation and sought to use their greater numbers and supplies to the full advantage; they used forests and hill forts, and weakened our advantages of firearms and discipline by fighting where there was cover and dense woods hindered formations and communications.

*

Perhaps it is fitting to illustrate the kind of fighting that happened in Elanthor with a personal experience. I was a supply officer in our strongest Elantrian holdfast, so needless to say, I did not expect to see any armed orcs at all - but the nature of the campaign was such that fighting at all places, even far in the rear, was to be expected.

I was woken in the middle of the night. The halls of the estate were silent; everyone was asleep, I had the camp command's nightwatch. As I stepped out of the dark building, however, I heard the first sounds that something was amiss: horns of alert were blowing, and there were sporadic and distant pops of gunfire. Some group of orcs had attacked the Broad Bridge from the south; since it was

impossible any enemy could cross, the watch officer had chosen only to call for support from the nearby regiments rather than sound a general alert.

I rode south in due haste. In the northern parts of the camp around the dragoons' barracks, the night was silent except for the fifty red-clad soldiers on nightwatch who were rushing to their mounts. Our dozen horses pounded through the night, and a short while later I stood by the side of Lieutenant-Major Tomm Ternfield of the Sun's Own Artillery.

We stood in the Ardhelm Battery, whose eight field guns overlooked the South Road and the long wooden bridge that spanned into the darkness. Soldiers in gold-spiked helmets bustled around me, trying to make out something in the darkness. The defense protocols were well-drilled: the artillery and machine gun positions were silent but ready, a triple line of infantry stood across the road, and the sizeable reinforcement units stood in orderly ranks in the field further back.

It was hard to tell what was going on. On the distant opposite shore, the small fortress that defended the bridge was clearly burning, but everything else was dark and silent. There were occasional shouts and cracks of gunfire from the third and last stone gatehouse on the bridge; from the distance of two arrowcurves, it was difficult to make out nigh anything.

It was clear that orcs had attacked; the occasional wounded men who'd come running out of the darkness had told as much. But what they were trying to achieve baffled me; the surprise was over, they could not hope to cross the final stretch of bridge alive; the machine guns, score cannons, and uncounted riflemen saw to that.

When it grew clear that the gatehouse was more or less in enemy hands, I gave the cannoneers leave to fire suppressive grapeshot to suppress enemy fire. My main worry was to not damage the stone fortification, because the costs of repairing it and delays in supplies and troops to the south would be too great. Better to wait until morning and, if they were still there, let the army officers deal with them.

Occasionally, shots rang out from the gatehouse. Given the white plumes of smoke, it seemed the orcs were using *muskets*. Well, even imprecise lead could kill, so whenever a musket cracked one or three cannons answered.

I made my way down to the group of officers who were standing on the road behind the line of riflemen. As I greeted them, a more concerted volley of shots rang out from the gatehouse, and soon after a heavy-caliber machine gun in the crenellations started thudding out shells. Cannons and guns of our own answered, but the line of riflemen took several hits, and soldiers went down, shrieking in pain.

I ordered the line back and sent in a fresh unit of troops in loose formation, to take precise shots at any targets that revealed themselves.

We took preventive measures to make sure there would be no bad surprises by morning. I ordered the reserve infantry moved further back, so no stray shots would hit them, and I told Lieutenant Dagmer Affenberg - the commander of the recently arrived nightwatch dragoon company - to patrol the shore in groups of three, making sure no orcs snuck in through the water and attacked our sides. I also sent a courier with orders to check that all watchtowers were properly manned, and set twice their number of watchposts.

It was then a dreaded sound reached us: the long moan of a warhorn, the signal for a general alert. Moments later, my signals man rushed forward: on his display, a red gem insistently flashed. The 6th Division's camp, northernmost in Deepwood, was under attack.

Rapid intervention was required. I called for Chief-Sergeant Grimm, a veteran gold-crest, and ordered him take ten men from Affenberg's company. 'As you command', he responded curtly, and we rushed to our mounts.

We left the defense of the bridge in the hands of the other officers and galloped north along the road, passing by the long ranks of waiting infantry. Soon after, we met a column of white-clad men marching the other way; by their banners, they were the entire 7th Duke's Hold Regiment, come to reinforce Broad Bridge.

I stopped my mount and ordered the chief-sergeant at the head of the column to halt the march, then rode some distance down to the gaggle of mounted officers. A lieutenant-colonel in red was commanding; I ordered him to turn his unit around and march north, where he would be much more dearly needed.

We then continued on our ride along the road. In time, we passed once again by the dragoon barracks. All lights were on, but only the men of the reserve nightwatch company were out, at the side of their mounts. I dispatched a silver-crested courier to the barracks; the dragoons would be sorely needed on the battlefield. My group did not break its gallop, however, and we soon passed the estates. We turned left at the track leading off to the left, following it. The 6th Division was encamped around 5 minutes' ride from the North Road.

In parts, the forest pressed close to the track. As we passed one such thicket and rode into the open field beyond, we were greeted by an uncoordinated volley of musket fire from our right flank. Some horses reared, some riders tumbled to the ground. We turned our mounts around, and saw perhaps two dozen shadows ahead of us, creeping through the grass. I drew my rapier, quickly rallying the troops and lining up for a charge. Clearly, the orcs thought we were an easy target since they were twice our number; some broke formation and started creeping

forward, bayonets ready. But when we began our charge toward the enemy, our ranks suddenly swelled as fifty more dragoons swooped in around us - the second nightwatch company had not been far behind, and the thicket had hidden their approach. Two muskets cracked, but they were not aimed properly, and we were upon them. The orcs desperately tried to flee. I caught one in the left shoulder with my blade, and my horse trampled him as he fell.

Then the encounter was over. The situation was such: three arrowcurves to the west laid a dark line of forest, beyond which was the camp. The rolling thunder of artillery and the din of infantry fighting could clearly be heard from there. Around the same distance northwest, in the midst of the field, a cluster of buildings was aflame; clearly, more orcs were at work there.

I ordered the lieutenant and his company to ride north, to wipe out these reavers and secure our flank from any surprises. I sent a courier back, to guide the main force of dragoons once it arrived. Discretion was of the essence: there was clearly very little fighting on this side of the battlefield, and I knew General Fierce Garngrey, Deepwood's commander-in-chief and the commander of the 21st Division, would approach the battlefield from the southwest. The power of unexpected shock cavalry on the orcs' eastern flank might be invaluable.

When I beheld the battlefield through the silent trees, my breath was taken away. The vast field of tents had been trampled or burned, so that now, distraught groups of riflemen were fighting the massed gray ranks of some orcish host. A long row of artillery, clearly orcish because of the cannons' ancient design, had been drawn up on hills to the north, and columns of orcs - some of which were dressed in the grey linen of the fallen empire, and others in traditional furs and leathers - were still streaming onto the battlefield.

The force of dragoons, no fewer than one thousand, had lined up unseen in the dark woods. By then the regiment's colonel had retaken command, and we had received word both from soldiers fleeing the field and couriers sent by General Fierce. The dragoons were well informed, strategically positioned, and ready to strike in exemplarily disciplined fashion.

The orcish host was well engaged. Fierce had been unable to draw up any artillery, but his ranked infantry was able to hold back the orcs. Twice, regular cavalry attempted to charge their lines, but they were repelled both times by massed gunfire. The orcs had automatic rifles of far eastern make. On the third charge, the cavalry masked an infantry advance. When the two forces met and clashed, the hidden dragoons began their charge. Our rifles thundered, breaking apart enemy units before they had a chance to notice us and reform. As the trot turned to gallop, rifles were stowed and gleaming steel was drawn. Foes broke and

ran before the thunder of our hooves, and we were among them, smashing apart the long columns of reinforcements and swinging around to charge the artillery. This left our backs open to the main force, but the orcs had lost their mettle and broke ranks everywhere. We destroyed the cannons, and the remainder of the battle consisted of running down fleeing orcs.

*

Of course, this had been a strong orcish attack. It was led by Thurgenuk, a renowned warlord. His origins are disputed - some say he was a Guard commander on Balebu, others mark him a clan chief from Bao-Mou, and official archives call him a high officer of the Final Order - though I have reason to believe he was a regular commander of the fallen empire's army on Litchy.

This warlord, commanding one of the largest infantry and skirmisher hosts in Elanthor, managed to pass around Marshal Tauren's armies, coordinate his attack with a mountain clan for the diversion on Broad Bridge, and fall upon the 6th Division's camp before anyone noticed. He had a huge host, perhaps as numerous as the 6th and 21st divisions combined, and was well equipped with some of the last orcish cannons as well as some modern firearms.

Of course, his force was defeated and the casualties he caused were far fewer than the glory we claimed in the name of the Community, but this is just one illustration of the ambushes and dishonorable attacks our forces suffered during the Northern Campaign.

*

One year after Thurgenuk's attack, Tauren broke through Elanthor and crossed the frozen Mere-that-Was onto Intralu proper. The war for Elanthor is officially won, though we are still fighting the hosts of Brekk and Sohstre, and tribes continue raiding our roads. The honored marshal is focusing his best forces in Intralu, defeating the orcish legions and foul Gezznyr elves that threaten our citadels, but as ever the Northern Campaign suffers from delays and problems in the line of supply. We have been on Intralu for six years, and yet we have progressed no further than the southern coast.

Of course, there are many reasons for these delays. We face no weak enemy on Intralu: these orcs are well equipped and, in part, are drawn from the ranks of the fallen empire's regular infantry. I do not seek to subtract from the glory won by our brothers during the Balebian reconquest, but these foes are powerful and defeating them is very valorous. The Intralian orcs have many shamans with

nefarious magics, and Gezznyr support in the form of warriors, modern equipment, and the dishonorable murder of officers is a further trouble.

But, I believe the foe is made so much more difficult to defeat because our armies are at a disadvantage. Even Tauren's own regiments do not have sufficient ammunition, food regularly runs out, and troops are often forced to wait in citadels until supplies arrive.

Currently, our supply lines run primarily through the Moonsea. Goods brought to Porto Pueblo are transferred to ships and brought directly to citadels along the coast, where all our armies are garrisoned.

But we do not have sufficient ships in the Moonsea to transport all the goods we need. Only once have the emperor's ships passed the Ferd Strait and entered the Moonsea, when Commodore Steinner bravely led his *Repugnant* and the other ships through the gap. But both fleets that followed failed to pierce through the Treasmasher fleets in the strait, and we are now desperately short on ships; I should even remark that the Imperial Navy's lack of sailors is quite dire, as I hear that there are great many ships lying at berth in the south, unused, due to a lack of men to sail them. I do not doubt that a fleet of any strength would be able to defeat Treasmasher once and for all.

In addition, our shortage of ships might be somewhat relieved if the arsenal in Porto Pueblo were completed. In the name of the Intralian armies, I duly remark that a Moonsea Fleet would help us bring the Sun's Light to all the coasts that touch it, and beg that the pleas for funding from Commodore Steinner of Porto Pueblo be answered.

*

If I may indulge in a hopeful fantasy for the future. I sincerely believe in the inevitable victory of the Sun's Light and the insurmountable strength of the Community, but the Northern Campaign could be won with far greater ease if certain things were achieved first.

Currently, all supplies for the north are loaded onto barges in northern Balebu and are shipped up along the Everriver, then transferred onto carts in Pueblosight and brought the rest of the way to Porto Pueblo. But this is a very slow process, and there is a bottleneck on the road; even if we had enough ships in the Moonsea, the throughput of the supply line to Porto Pueblo is insufficient to allow the army to operate at full capacity.

Instead, I humbly hope that the project of a double-rail line up to Porto Pueblo be completed in the shortest delays. Not only would this allow the speedy transport of

large volumes of goods and people, greatly supporting the war effort, but it would also allow more flexible and stronger operations in the Everriver Vale; protecting the supply line from mountain raiders, for example, would become much easier. I heard the news that the Imperial Chancellery Office for Railroads reduced the project to a single line, and deprioritized the budget in favor of lines in southern industrial regions, with great sadness. I sincerely hope the capital importance of a railroad to Porto Pueblo be recognized.

Perhaps, I might even indulge in a more optimistic fantasy. Though seeing Porto Pueblo well supplied would fill me with joy, this would only resolve part of the problem; many members of the Community live in the north, in the lands north of the Spine, in Elanthor, and on Intralu. They would be well served if a railway line were additionally drawn eastwards, reaching to Galena and the rich dwarven forges there, and perhaps, in a glorious feat of engineering, a line was drawn north, piercing through the woods, surging over the Mere-that-Was on strong metal arcs, and bringing the Sun's Light to the citadels of Intralu.