

WHISPERS OF THE WOOD



**GAME
SYSTEMS
INC.**

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WORDS FROM THE WOODS

In the immortal words of General Douglas MacArthur, "I have returned!" And just who am I? Well you should ask. Those of you who have been knocking around the Wood for some years may remember me as Your Humble Editor, Dennis Edelen, from 1987 to 1990. In the Summer of '90 I departed the Wood, amidst much sorrow and lamentation, and ventured forth to study and work in other realms. Oddly, and happily enough, my path has twisted back upon itself and I am once more taking up the Editor's quill. It just goes to show - you can take the boy out of the Wood, but you can't take the Wood out of the boy! It's good to be back and I know you missed me. Onward.

In the Lightning Strikes Twice Department, I'm not the only returning GSI vet to once more grace everyone's favorite PBM company - Jason Duerstock is back as well! Our own programing wiz and cutting-edge cut-up has hopped back into the saddle, ready to tackle new projects and break some new PBM ground. Welcome back, Jason!

And as Jason and I return, Bill and Pete depart. For Origins/Gen Con, that is! This month sees *the* gaming blowout of the year unfold in the land of the Brewers, Milwaukee. August 19 - 22 are the dates to circle. I had the pleasure of attending the combined convention a few years ago and it was a blast. Literally every aspect of gaming was represented: Role playing, featuring our own WOOD MEOW, board gaming, miniatures combat, computer gaming, and of course, Play-By-Mail. The PBM industry made one of its strongest showings that year and it's just gotten better and better since. This year's con will be no exception. GSI will once more be sharing space with ICE on the dealer's floor, with Pete and Bill on-hand throughout to answer questions and trade battle tails. Come by and meet the minds behind your favorite postal past-times. Those of you who think you're versed in the lore of Middle-earth can try to stump Bill, our own resident expert.

And of course Bill and Pete will be hosting the annual (and infamous) GSI Question and Answer seminar. This is your chance to get the inside scoop on everything that's hatching in the Wood and to lay to rest all those pesky questions that have been keeping you up at night. The seminar will be held on Thursday, the 20th, at 8:00 PM. Admission, as always, is free, so drop on by. But come early! Space is limited and, in cons past, it's always gone fast. Check your convention programs for the location.

Do we have any special surprises planned? you ask with a hopeful gleam in your eager little eyes. Silly boys, I answer with a knowing smile, of course! Saturday, the 22nd gives you a rare opportunity to meet our own Middle-earth visualist, Amelia James. She'll be at the booth all day to discuss her technique and unique approach to the visions of Prof. Tolkien. And perhaps she'll be persuaded to sketch a few portraits, if asked nicely. I myself am a fawning admirer of her beautiful renderings. Maybe I can catch a red-eye up on Friday night, hmm?

I really can't reveal much more about what we'll have up our sleeves, but I will give you this word of advice: Keep your eyes open! You may just catch a glimpse of Galadriel in the flesh...

A brief note: Third edition Middle-earth PBM rule books are now available. Clear and concise, with all rule revisions and enhancements explained. Just \$5.00, which can be billed to your game account. C-ya! D.E.



ALONG THE PATHWAYS

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WHISPERS OF THE WOOD is a monthly publication primarily for the use and enjoyment of GSI players of EARTHWOOD, EARTHWOOD - THE SEA KINGS, STATE OF WAR, AND ME-PBM™. Subscription rates: \$15.00 for one year (12 issues) or \$25.00 for two years (24 issues). Individual issues cost \$1.75. GSI reserves the right to change these prices without prior notice of any type. Back issues available.

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This Month's Cover: "Assassin"
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The Right Men For the Job

by Marshal General Ironboot

By now, many of you have found yourself in charge of, or in need of, an army. Clearly, it has become important to know what your army can do; its scope and range of uses. What types of missions are your forces best suited for? In this article we'll examine the kinds of armies you can field supported by a Major Town and a 65% tax rate (or an army maintenance cost of 4875 gold and 2500 food per turn). If you were hiring an army of a single troop type, you could hire any one of the following at your Major Town:

Troop Type	Maintenance Gold	Maintenance Food	Number Maintained	Troop Strength	Troop Cost
Heavy Cavalry	6	2	813	7154/ 8130	13000/ 20800
Light Cavalry	3	2	1250	6000/ 6750	10000/ 16000
Heavy Infantry	4	1	1219	7314/ 8228	12188/ 19500
Light Infantry	2	1	2438	7924/ 8838	12188/ 19500
Archers	2	1	2438	10605/ 11702	4875/ 7800
Man-at-Arms	1	1	2500	3250/ 3625	5000/ 8000

(The above table assumes a troop training rank of 30, bronze weapons, and no armor before the "/" and a training rank of 60, bronze weapons, and steel armor following the "/".)

There are various missions that an army can assume. If your goal is to *threaten* enemy unfortified Major Towns and lesser population centers, then the least expensive army is 2500 Men-at-Arms. This Men-at-Arms army is dog meat though should it run into any one else's army. Gold piece for gold piece, any other army will destroy it.

While man for man, Heavy Cavalry are the toughest troops in Middle-earth, gold piece for gold piece, Heavy Infantry will defeat Heavy Cavalry with similar equipment, leadership, training, and morale. If the goal of the army you are raising is to *defeat* the enemy on the battlefield, hire Heavy Infantry. The number of Heavy Infantry a Major Town can support will also present enough of a force to enable you to threaten unfortified Towns and lesser population centers.

For purely *offensive operations*, however, Heavy Cavalry is still a good choice. They are more mobile than Heavy Infantry, allowing you to reach enemy towns quicker. However, when your army reaches a population center, you will have to fight for anything Town-sized or larger, for the 813 Heavy Cavalry a Major Town will support will not be enough of

a force to threaten with.

Light Cavalry are good for *dual missions*. 1250 is a large enough force to threaten all unfortified Towns and also packs a fairly good combat punch as well. Excellent for patrol missions or to send out marauding in enemy territory. Your mobility gives you a wider choice of targets than Infantry will, making it harder for the enemy to pin you down. (The reason that I say a Major Town will support 1250 rather than 1625 Light Cavalry is because a Major Town will only feed 1250. If you have other food sources, by all means, hire 1625.)

Light Infantry compare to Light Cavalry in the same way that heavy Infantry compare to Heavy Cavalry. Gold piece for gold piece, the only forces that will beat the Light Infantry in combat are Heavy Cavalry and Heavy Infantry. The larger number of Light Infantry for the price increases your odds at threatening population centers while still maintaining combat punch.

Archers are similar to Light Infantry, with more punch in the first round of combat and less staying power.

In summary:

If your mission is to *defeat* enemy armies, hire and send Heavy Infantry.

If your mission is to take undefended enemy population centers by *threat*, send Men-at-Arms.

If your mission is to take defended enemy population centers by *threat*, send Archers or Light Infantry.

If your mission is to *maraud* behind enemy lines, hire and send Heavy Cavalry where the enemy armies are strong and Light Cavalry where enemy armies are weak.

If you can afford it, raising two different armies and sending them out together allows you the luxury of fighting using two different tactics, or of fighting with one and threatening with the other. Good luck, choose your enemy and then take him down.

The Passing of an Age

By: Will Parker

With the defeat of an ancient evil,
Comes the end of a dark and bloody age.
Triumphs and sorrows bring forth a new day,
One that will be brighter says the wise sage.
The Dark Lord is gone and his minions beat,
Only the Free stand tall upon the field.
The day is theirs and so tomorrow too,
Only the future can reveal the yield.
However, with the passing of the age,
So pass the Elves across the Western Sea.
Too, do the Dwarves retreat to halls of stone,
Leaving only Man, the last of the Free.
So dawns the age of Mankind, be it so,
For better or for worse, no one can know.

PERSONALS: BARBS & BRAGS

Every current player in a GSI game is entitled to a free forty word submission to this column each issue, for each of their games. Submissions require a \$2.00 charge after the first 40 free words for each additional 40 (41-80 words is \$2.00 etc). GSI reserves the right to edit or refuse material.

GENERAL

Are There No Worthy Dark Servant Opponents!

We, the White Council, are a group of newer players who are looking for 10 worthy Dark Servant players to challenge us in a Grudge-match Game. So far no one deems themselves skilled enough to challenge us. If you can swallow your fear and accept our challenge, contact GSI and ask to confront the White Council. We are waiting!

Middle-earth™ PBM

GAME 2

The Great Playtest has come to an end and the Free Peoples have conquered. The Sinda invite all to Lorien for celebration and thanksgiving. Weep for those we lost to evil, yet laugh, for we are now free forever.

Gallantrisydy

I've never gotten a "Dear John" letter from a game company before. You can't stop it. It's been going for two years. No, no, no, phooey, arg! No hard feelings, everyone.

Rhudaur

GAME 3

The saga continues. As Ren the Unclean parties in Rhovanion, 3000 sturdy Dwarves march on Morannon.

Baaltroc

No wonder the Dwarves are losing, - they can't add! Only three pitiful Free People remain to oppose Sauron's will. Or were you counting on the Eothraim saving you? Too bad, they're history!

Uvatha

GAME 10

It is said a clan is measured by the might of their enemies. Great Cardolan is fallen. All hail this mighty foe.

Enion
Lord of Dunland

GAME 9

Intelligence reports have determined that only the Dwarves and Noldo Elves remain of the Free People. With three-to-one odds, victory is only delayed by the time it will take our armies to cross the mountains.

Akhorahil

GAME 12

General Daonghlas,
Whup!!! Turnabout is fair play, as your Dunlending chariotmen do to our mixed force what Tros' chariotmen did to Arthedain's. At least now no more light footmen! Meanwhile, we have more cavalry every day...

Ovatha II of Khand

Easterling Lords,
Greetings, noble foes! Of all Sauron's minions, South Gondor has always felt that the men of Khand were the most honorable. Best of luck when we cross swords on the battle field.

Duns01, Prince of South Gondor

GAME 13

My Fellow Free Peoples,

Beware - yet another of our population centers has fallen prey to a vicious wave of attacks by Dark assassins. For your own safety, please restrict trade and visitation to all North Gondor population centers. We regret this inconvenience.

B'Kae
North Gondor Minister of Safety

We would've joined the Dark Servants eventually, but you thought that it would be more fun to attack us. Now the Gondors are frolicking freely through Mordor and the Haradwaith have checked Corsair expansion. Who profited from Haruth Aaman's assassination, turn 3?

Ulfacs of the Harad

North Gondor and Co -

When will you learn? First, you offer several vulnerable targets at Barad-dûr, and now the gutters of Osgiliath fill with blood! Any more threats to Mordor, as well as Dudannis or any other bothersome pickpockets, will be similarly erased! The Joint Mordor Special Operatives are also planning vacations to Harondor - three "warnings" there were obviously not enough.

Cormic
JMSDF Spokesman

GAME 14

All praise the Dark Lord Sauron!

Haruth Ramam lays in Morgoth's Bosom awaiting the Dark Lord's triumph, when all who have served him well shall return to be the Lords of the Earth! Lord Carlon of the Harad, rightful King of Gondor and all the Southern Lands shall crush the infidels that

have dared to set foot on our Sacred Land! Death to the accursed Corsairs and their masters, the posturing and prancing pigs of Southern Gondor. Northern Gondor, you are next. So speaks I,

Meesh Tôroglêrs
High Priest of the Haradwaith

GAME 15

Due to the tiring length of this exercise, the deaths and disinterest of the Free Peoples, and the lack of cooperation of the Noldo Elves, the Easterlings have declared sides in the hopes of ending the strife.

May Sauron live forever!

GAME 16

The Sons of Sauron would like to express the deepest sympathies for the loss of Ellapan. NOT!!!

Sauron - 1
Noldo - 0

Keep your wood fairies where they belong, or else!!

The Son of Sauron

GAME 18

The Dark Servants don't take kindly to being lied to. Beware of our wrath, Akhorahil.

The Sons of Sauron!

Prince Celdrahil,

Your sails have been sighted meandering off my coasts. Sail away or become driftwood on my shores.

So sayeth Lord of the Seas,
Sea-Captian Angamaite
P.S. Angamaite means IRON HAND and that's what I will use to crush that puny navy of yours. So come in force or not at all!

The Mordor Association for Higher Education wishes to thank

Northern Gondor for its continuing support of the Hoarmurath school for assassins and thieves.

Hoarmurath the Mighty
P.S. Your army won't live to see another turn!!

GAME 19

Journal Entry:

Arrived at our southern stronghold today. Found Warlord Bondan already recruiting new troops to join my army. News from Gondor is heartening. War should be over by Winter.

Regent Meneldir

Adûnaphel is now quiet forever. The Haradrim armies seek new blood to spill. Ji Indûr, if you survive Gondorian wrath, I'll be there to crush what's left of you. There seems to be a shortage of Nazgûl to mash.

Zarendarger (22)

GAME 21

Eothraim,

If wishes were horses,
beggars would ride.

Message from the South

GAME 22

Reports indicate a surge in Free People activity. We understand that there are no fewer than five joint military operations against the Servants in motion.

Dwarven Intelligence

Just in: Ahudaur falls soon!

GAME 23

Free People:

Southern Gondor and the Corsairs rule the Great Sea. The Haradwaith fleet is no more. The Quiet Avenger's fleet is in hiding. Now begins in earnest the battle

for Harandon.

Raven, the Guardian of
the Free People

Evil Guys,

I have not yet begun to fight.
Athaulf

Uirdik's in two,
Mahcared astride an ass
In the hereafter -
The Eothraim froth and
Pledge revenge,
The Nazgûl shake
With laughter.

Ji

GAME 24

Dear Players,

I lost a character, his name is Tormog. He's driving a Brink's armored chariot filled with good guy gold. Also some dead good guys on the hood, apples in mouth. Please send him to -

Urzahil

666 Barad-dur Place
Sauronville, Mordor
Thanks, #20

GAME 26

To all Neutrals!

It is time to choose a side in the growing war that is at hand. If you wait until one side has the upper hand, then you are not needed. You shall then be dealt with.

As the wind blows, so go the rumors. Once again, no one speaks for the Corsairs except the Corsairs. If we take exception to your actions, you will hear from us. We are still neutral. We will resist being coerced into declaring allegiance with either side. Our nation may appear weak, but our

wills are strong.

Cryândil

King of the Corsairs

GAME 27

Ahudaur - your bad taste in allegiance is going to cost you.
Cardolan - get off your duff and start acting like an ally!

All Free Peoples are invited to a big party at Carn Dum. Join the club, or bring one of your own!

Bain I, Main Dwarf-guy

GAME 28

Obituary Column

Three notable Dwarves died this past month. Gain I and Threlin were personally challenged at Dol Guldur and lost. Bain I was brutally assassinated and had all his artifacts removed. Finally, after four sickness spells, Beneoracer disappeared.

Together with our brave allies, the valiant troops of the Eothraim have crushed the two strongest evil armies in Ahovanion, led by Sauron's witless lackeys, Dûran and Gothmog. Six thousand orcs and trolls were slaughtered in the bloodbaths at Dol Guldur and Buhr Anthar, and only the foul smoke and stench of their burning, stinking carcasses bore tidings of the events to their dark master (in whichever orc-hole he now cowers).

Wretched servants of evil, gaze upon my magnificent cavalry and despair! For with our hoofbeats comes defeat and with our swords, death!

Mahrcared

First Marshal of the Eothraim
P.S. Ovatha: You're next. I suggest that you begin making provisions for your soon-to-be widows and orphans!

Well, for my birthday (July 1) the guys were going to paint the walls of Shrel-Kain bright red for me (just like I always wanted). Unfortunately, the cost was a bit too high. But then Uvatha sent me a late present - his entire army came over and painted the walls; though I can't help but notice that the paint bears a striking resemblance to blood.

Naurmegil
Northmen

Adunaphel's nation rejoices in its freedom. Its citizenry now happily pay Gondorian taxes. The Quiet Avenger became the Silenced Avenger. O.K., maybe "happily" is a bit of a stretch, but the rest is "dead" right.

Subedei Bahadur
Southern Gondor

GAME 30

Fools!

Think not the dealings of the Easterlings and the Free Peoples have escaped notice! I have seen the Lantern's glow on the Easterling standard! Take heed! For Darkness engulfs the South and like a cancer spreads!

Akhorahil

The Blind Sorcerer

GAME 31

Arintine's "At The Movies":

Unlawful Entry - Sauron's minions pour into Gondor, only to discover what happens to uninvited guests.

Far and Away - The Long Rider's destination after being crushed by the Northmen and the Dwarves.

GAME 33

Silently, the ancient gates of Minas Anor swung wide, not to welcome a victorious army, but instead to embrace a fallen leader. To Rath Dinen they carried his

body. When Tarondor was at last laid to rest, his son Telûmehtar took the winged crown from his father's hands and placed it on his own head. Swearing neither vengeance nor revenge, he simply swore to carry on his father's dream. Long he stood in silence...

Naurmegil
Northern Gondor

GAME 34

Is that the best you can do, Celdrahil? All that Gondor trash you left outside of Uamag does perfume the air. Never thought I'd see an army out-swim a navy, HA! Ah, Teldûmeir, I see you want some of the same... Now how does that Necro spell go...

Zarendarger (17)
P.S. Baaltroc of Game #3, thanks for the favor. How about teaming up for a second go?

Er-Mûrazôr,
Where did you go? We wanted to play but you went home.

GAME 35

The Long Rider apparently has sent his navy (under Uvatha himself) and an army to destroy Lest and Barlin's navy. However, we doubt Uvatha expected the Kâzhad!

Erigarion
From the Northmen News

Mûrazôr,
Let the war begin. I shall visit Carn Dum very soon.
Baaltroc

GAME 36

Ren - You silly French type. Beware or we shall make you take a bath!
Dark Poet - Roses are red, violets are blue, try it again and we'll sic

the Haiku on you.
Argeleb Too

GAME 37

Hail to thee, O' Mighty Lords of Middle-earth!

I am declaring my complete neutrality. Any actions taken against my nation by either alliance will result in my immediate joining of the other side.

Prince Arfanhil
of proud Rhudaur

GAME 39

Receiving their orders from Khamûl himself, each of his agents gasped in horror, then breathed a sigh of relief as they realized that the Dragon Lord's lower case e's looked more like l's. They then bowed low before the statue of the King, asking for forgiveness, thankful that it was in fact Elves that they were supposed to kill.

Naurmegil
Dragon Lord

The war that destroys the harmony of Arda rages unabated. The voice of peace and reason goes unheeded. Death, destruction, theft and treachery progress apace. Hmm... So far, things go about as one would expect.

Jebel Noyon
Haradwaith

GAME 40

The challenge begins again and alliances are hastily forming. Surrounded by deadly foes, I will prevail. The forces of Murazor will not cease in their quest for the One Ring!

Makar

Greetings, Lords of Middle-earth,
The Easterlings and the Haradwaith proclaim a Pact of Steel and Trade. All Neutrals are invited to join.

Lords Uvatha II and
Haruth Ramam

Arda shall be but a blackened bauble for Morgoth's delight; a scorched plaything. Darkness flows and none may stem the tide.
The Dark Prophet

"Ride out, protectors of the realm, Captains at the helm, sail across a sea of light."

The Neon Knights

EARTHWOOD ORIGINAL

GAME 229

#13 Rume 1314
A spy's feast, owned by #13, Rumonians.

#23 Hinuiar 1718
Owned by #7, Dark Elves
+3 Wild Men.

#3 Mahal 1620
Owner #3, Mt. Dwarves

The Dark Sorcerer will help cut down the numbers.

The Oracle Speaks

Got a question about your game you can't seem to find an answer to? Ask the Oracle!

MIDDLE-EARTH PBM

If I order a Commander in charge of an army to post a camp and the order fails, do I still have to pay the 4000 gold? If an Emissary fails to create a camp, do I still pay the 2000?

Nope. If the orders fail, the gold's not spent. Why pay something for nothing?

I've had a few different orders fail and they've all ended with the same phrase "at this time". What does this mean?

A number of orders that don't succeed generate the messages "at this time" or "continued efforts may help". If you see this, it basically means that your random roll to determine success wasn't high enough - you needed an eighty to post the camp and the computer rolled a fifty, for example. You know the old saying: "Try, try again."

The only ways of improving your Mage rank are through the use of order 710, Prentice Magery, through personal challenges, and through the use of an artifact, correct?

You are correct, Sir! The way of the Mage is an arduous and demanding one with no short cuts.

How many troops does it require to *siege* a population center? Is it the same as required to threaten?

The exact number of troops needed to siege a population center is something which is not spelled out. It is similar to threaten, but somewhat easier.

If I have a character with a Command rank of 30 and an Emissary rank of 35, what will his or her Challenge rank be?

Assuming the other two ranks come in at zero, his or her Challenge rank would be 100% of the Command rank (in this case, 30), plus 25% of each of the remaining ranks (in our example, only the Emissary rank of 35), for a total of 39. Your character's Challenge rank is determined by current skill ranks, so it will change over the course of the game.

Why are most Agent orders "Hard"?

Actually, only about nine of the possible 25 Agent orders are rated as "Hard", those dealing with the more shady side of covert operations. There are two reasons for this. The first is realism - the kinds of things that Agents will be asked to do are just difficult to carry off. Stealing gold or artifacts from secured fortresses, sabotaging structures or stores in patrolled districts, kidnapping or killing someone - by their very nature, these are risky, dangerous tasks. How many banks have *you* successfully robbed? If the timing isn't perfect, if everything doesn't go off like clockwork, the action will fail. To reflect this basic fact of criminal life, these activities are rated as "Hard".

The second reason relates to game balance - successful Agent activities can drastically affect the face of the game. They can easily upset a player's entire strategy. To balance and moderate this possible impact, Agent activities are made a little more difficult and challenging. It's not just a job, it's an adventure!

How do Companies, or characters traveling in a Company, deal with encounters?

If your Company runs across any of the various people, creatures, or places that constitute an encounter, the message will appear on ONE company member's result sheet. However, the opportunity that the encounter represents would be considered to be open to ALL Company members. Your Company could elect to deal with the encounter in one of two ways:

1) ONE Company member (the best skilled or the most expendable) could be selected to interact with the encounter, sparing the others the pain or profit OR

2) EVERY member of the Company could list a reaction on their individual turnsheets, risking Company-wide gains or losses. In this instance, the order of how the encountered being or event would affect the Company members would be randomly determined.

Every encounter represents a momentous event, potent with risk and reward. How your Company chooses to deal with it would really depend on how boldly or cautiously you want to play.

STATE OF WAR

What determines which player goes first in each phase? Is it random, or does it have anything to do with what orders each player gives?

The order is determined randomly for each phase, the selection process has nothing to do with what orders are being given. If it did, we'd all give those guaranteed first-starter orders, wouldn't we?

Address any questions you may have about your game to "The Oracle Speaks". Printed inquiries may be signed or anonymous but please include your name and game number when submitting.

"Status report, Hagameyer."

"Screwed, sir, solidly screwed."

Mason ran a hand over his face. A headache was just beginning to throb behind his eyes. "What does that mean, exactly?" he asked.

Hagameyer shrugged. "The rear axle's blown and the entire cooling assembly's been shredded. This baby ain't moving *anywhere*."

"Great." Mason slapped the hood of the APC. "Why the hell didn't anybody spot the damn mine before we hit it? Who was on scope?"

"I was, sir," Adams piped up. "I didn't see a thing. It must'a not registered."

"Probably plastic," Bronski rumbled, "an M19."

"That's just swell." Mason turned angrily and stared at the crippled carrier. Damn tin can gets taken out by a plastic mine! This whole mission was going down the D-spose. "Alright," he said, turning back to the three men, "clear it and clean it. We'll slog it on foot." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "We still got a job to do."

"Yes, Sir." They moved to their task.

They marched on through the night, struggling under the extra weight of equipment. Mason called a halt just as dawn was beginning to stain the sky a soft pink.

"O.K., where are we? Hagameyer, who's got the map?"

"I do, sir," Adams answered, unfolding the dog-eared Triple A map. "We've been paralleling Interstate 81 for the last few miles. We're somewhere between Sugar Notch to the east and Nanticoke to the west."

"Okay, we'll make for Nanticoke and see what we find. Bronski, why don't you take point?"

"Uh-uh. Hagameyer can take point."

"Up yours, Bronski. The Lou told you to do it."

"I'll take point," Adams said. "I kind'a feel responsible for puttin' us on foot."

"Alright, Adams." Mason waved him forward. Just once, he thought, could he give an order and not get an argument? Nobody respected authority anymore. All these ex-guardsmen and damn volunteers didn't know anything about proper soldiering. The mission had begun easily enough, a straight forward seek and destroy. The Feds were operating a Falcon hunting satellite out of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, and the glorious United Forces of the Nation of New Jersey were totally useless unless the sat' was put out of business.

Mason had volunteered immediately. It sounded like just the opportunity he needed to make a name for himself: very important and not too risky. He'd roll in, do the job and roll out a national hero. And only two months out of the Academy. He could almost feel the captain's bars. But things got complicated right from the start. Sergeant Decker got blown to Hell by a New York raiding squad the night before they were to leave, leaving Mason with these three who didn't give a damn about his bars. Losing the APC was just the cherry on top.

"Can we take a break, sir? My back is killing me."

"No we can't, Hagameyer. We're on a strict time schedule with this one."

"We're already four hours behind, sir. The way I figure it, what difference will another twenty minutes make?"

"I said no and I mean no."

"Meyer's right," said Bronski, turning around to face Mason. "A few minutes won't hurt. It wouldn't do a damn bit of good if we arrived on time but dragging our asses."

Mason looked from one to the other, shaking his head. "O.K. Fine. Let's take

a break. And while we're at it, why don't we just take the rest of the day off! Never mind that we've got buddies who are gonna get cut to ribbons by that satellite. You people seem to forget that the only reason that we're able to sneak in here so nice and unmolested like, is because of those diversionary maneuvers going on at the southern border. And as soon as all that activity looks too threatening, the Feds are gonna start popping 'em off!" He stopped, out of breath, and glared at the two men. They turned to one another and shrugged.

"A few minutes won't hurt," Bronski repeated.

Mason stared incredulously. I don't believe this, he thought. He threw up his hands. "Fine. Do what you want." He stalked off angrily as Hagameyer called Adams in.

"... this perfectly clear. It is my firm belief that our once Great Nation has been brought to this troubled state by certain undesirable elements we have allowed to spring up among us. I refer to the liberal, bleeding-hearts, I refer to the subversive non-christians of questionable racial stock, I refer to the retarded and the mentally deranged. On them I place the blame for your troubles and mine. No longer can true, white Americans tolerate their presence. They must be stamped out! To this end I have passed through Congress the Only Solution Act. This Act will serve to separate and eliminate -"

"Turn that crap off," Bronski said.

"Nah," Hagameyer replied. "I get a kick out of it. Do people really *believe* this crap?"

"I think it's scary," Adams said.

"You think everything's scary."

Bronski stood up suddenly and waved his hand for silence.

Mason looked up from where he sat a few yards away. "What is it, a tank?"

Bronski shook his head. "I don't think so. Armored car or APC, most likely."

"How many?" Adams asked, his face pale.

"Sounds like only one."

Mason smiled. "Here comes our ride, boys. Load up."

They quickly recovered their gear and made a fast trot for the road. The highway was banked up about five feet with drainage ditches running parallel on either side. It curved out of sight into the trees.

"Bronski, you and Hagameyer take the far ditch. When it comes into sight, cover it with the LAW. Don't fire unless I signal. Adams, you'll stay with me. Okay, let's do it."

They took up their positions and waited. The growling of the vehicle had become very loud, accompanied by a rattling, metallic squeal. After a moment it came around the curve and into view. It was a drab green personnel carrier, twenty feet long, heavily armored and riding on four ultra-inflated, flex-steel tires. It had seen battle recently. There were long ragged scars in the armor plating and the entire rear section was blackened and warped. The I.D. markings in the front were still legible: the Statue of Liberty backed by a rising sun. New York.

Mason rose to a half kneel and fired a short burst across the front of the vehicle. The APC growled to a halt. He licked his lips. "Alright," he called, "everybody out."

The upper hatch swung up. Mason tensed, cross hairs centered just above the opening. The hatch fell back with a clang and a head popped up. It was a young man with spiked blonde hair, sunglasses, and a red bandana around his neck. He looked at Mason with open curiosity.

"What's up, Doc?"

"Keep your hands inside the vehicle and order your men out."

"Can't do that, Jersey. I'm the only one left."

Mason frowned. "What makes you think I'm from New Jersey?"

The man smiled. "Accent."

"Dismount, wise-ass," Mason barked.

"Sorry, Jersey. Can't leave the vehicle. Orders."

"If you do not dismount immediately, I'll shoot you."

"That wouldn't be too wise. This machine gun," the blond man gestured with his head to the gun mounted just behind him, "is an M2HB, fully computer actualized with a 360 swivel mount. It fires 40 millimeter M381 high explosive shells at a rate of 150 per minute. Even before I opened this hatch, the targeting 'puter was locked on you and your posse, and my finger is on the firing button. I'm willing to bet I can get you before you can get me. Wanna try?"

Damn, Mason thought. Damn, damn! "Why don't you just blast us then?"

The New Yorker looked thoughtful. "I might. But I'm curious. What're you guys doing out here? I thought all your forces were gathering in the south."

"Why should I tell you?"

"No reason. I think I can guess, anyway. And if I'm right, then we're here for the same purpose. Shall I hazard a guess?"

Mason said nothing, hating the smug son-of-a-bitch.

"My guess is that you're here to knock out the laser satellite at Williamsport. All that activity down south is just a distraction. Am I right?"

"Maybe."

The New Yorker laughed. "Obviously. You'll never get there in time on foot, though. Pretty soon the Feds'll get bored of just watching your people parade around and start carving them up."

"What do you suggest, then?" Mason asked, sarcastically

"A mutually beneficial compromise. We came in to hit the base, too, but we ran into some heavy Federal firepower not too long back and I'm the only one who made it out. Now I got a vehicle that'll get me where I want to go, but there's not much I can do by myself. You, on the other hand, got plenty of man power but no transportation. You see what I'm getting at?"

"You wanna join forces."

"Why not? Right now, that satellite's more of a threat to both of us than we are to each other. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Go for it!" Mason heard Hagameyer yell. Damn, he was being backed into a corner. Of course, he could agree and then kill the bastard when he was off his guard.

The New Yorker was waiting expectantly.

Mason shrugged. "All right. A truce. For now."

The New Yorker relaxed visibly. "Good. Well, climb aboard."

"Bronski, Hagameyer, come on." Mason walked over to the APC with Adams. The New Yorker opened the side hatch.

"I'm Cooper. Welcome aboard."

The four of them climbed into the cramped interior of the vehicle and settled in. As Mason took a seat close to the front, Cooper said, "By the way, I lied about the machine gun. It's a piece of crap. No hard feelings though, huh?"

Mason lunged forward and grabbed him by the collar. "You smart ass! What's to stop me from dusting you right now?"

Cooper stared Mason in the eye before answering. "This vehicle is computer driven. The drive 'puter is voice activated and keyed to only one voice. Mine. And this time, I *am* telling the truth."

"We could run a bypass."

"Sure. Except that this vehicle is also self monitoring. If she notices any tampering with the existing systems, she'll self destruct her central drive unit." He smiled innocently. "So if you want to make it to Williamsport you'd better make sure nothing bad happens to me."

"Damn!" Mason released him and slumped down in his seat. "Damn, damn."

They rolled into Nanticoke at mid-afternoon. It was like driving into a cemetery. The once thriving community lay in shroud, a forgotten relic of a gone-away time.

"This is creepy," Hagameyer commented from the upper hatch. He gazed around the silent streets, the carefully boarded store fronts. "Where did everybody go?"

"Drafted, relocated, killed, who knows?" Cooper answered.

"Man." Hagameyer's boots hit the metal floor with a clang. "Talk about a ghost town."

They rolled on, the sound of the engine echoing hollowly through the deserted community. Cooper came to a sudden stop and leaned forward, staring wide eyed out the narrow window. "Jesus!" he murmured softly.

"What is it?" Mason moved next to him and peered out. "Good God! So this is where they all went."

"What is it?" Adams called as he and Bronski stood up.

Yawning before them, in the middle of what had been the town's major intersection, was a huge circular pit. It was filled to the top with charred skeletons.

"The Nanticoke Crematorium," Cooper whispered.

"It must have been the Euro-plague," Mason said.

"But that ended six years ago," a note of fear crept into Adams' voice, "didn't it?"

"Six years, forgotten in a nameless grave." Bronski shook his head sadly.

"Hey guys!" Hagameyer called from above. "How 'bout we get the hell outta here, okay?"

"Yeah. Good idea," Cooper said, sitting back. "Everybody grab a seat." He spoke quick commands to the APC. It backed up slowly and executed a wide left turn, circling the pit and cutting through an Exxon station painted with faded, fluorescent letters: NO GAS.

Hagameyer, Adams and Bronski crowded at the little side hatch window, watching the pit with morbid fascination as they moved past. Suddenly, Hagameyer thumped Adams on the back and shouted "BOO!!"

Adams screamed and leapt back, falling over the row of seats. Hagameyer doubled over in hysterics, tears streaming down his face.

Adams angrily got to his feet. "Oh yeah, real funny! Asshole!"

"Oh God, that was good. You jumped a mile," Hagameyer stammered breathlessly. "Oh God!" He wiped his eyes, chuckling lightly.

Adams sat down heavily. "Why don't you grow up, Hagameyer. You make me sick."

"Hey, is it my fault you don't have a sense of humor?"

"Quiet down, all of you," Mason snapped. "Hagameyer, you're on report when we get back." He turned back to the front. Hagameyer took a seat, making faces at Mason's back. Bronski chuckled.

An hour later, they had left the town behind and were passing through the semi-suburban areas. In the distance they could see the girder framework of the Susquehanna Bridge.

"Looks good from here," Cooper commented.

"Let's hope."

"You're not a very chipper guy, are you, Jersey?"

Mason gave him a sour look. As they approached the bridge, Mason's trepidations were justified. Left unattended for several years, the girder work had rusted heavily and had collapsed in several places. The concrete was severely cracked and pitted and grass had sprouted from several large crevices across its surface. Down below, two supporting pylons had split and now tilted at strange angles. Cooper and Mason studied the bridge in silence for a few

moments.

"Well, what do you think?"

Cooper shrugged. "Bad. But not too bad. It's only the center section that worries me. Ya wanna go for it?"

Mason frowned. Of course the bastard would make it his decision. He looked over the bridge again. It didn't look promising, but the alternative was worse. It would take at least a day to find another way across, and that was a day they just didn't have. Damn, backed into a corner again!

"All right, let's give it a try. If it gets too rough we can always come back."

Cooper smiled. "That's what I like to see: a man who's not afraid to gamble. Okay, here we go." He murmured into the speaker grid and they started forward.

Mason watched intently as they moved onto the bridge, the girders crisscrossing all about them. He felt a slow chill as they eased along.

As they reached the center of the bridge, a deep metallic groaning filled the cabin and steadily increased. Cooper was sweating as he coaxed the vehicle onward. The groaning grew louder until it sounded as though the entire sky was tearing loose and falling in. The vehicle suddenly lurched to the right, toppling Adams and Bronski onto the floor.

"Ooooooh shit!" Hagameyer moaned, grabbing hold of an overhead bar.

Cooper was screaming orders as the groaning gave way to a gut wrenching series of snaps and concussions. With a squeal of rubber, the APC shot forward, bouncing crazily as the black top split and warped.

"Go, go, go!" Mason yelled, hands white knuckled as he gripped the sides of his chair.

And then suddenly they were clear, rolling down the ramp and onto the road. The vehicle jerked to a stop, throwing them all forward. For a long moment no one moved or spoke. Then Hagameyer let out a short bark of laughter. "We made it! I don't believe it, we made it! Oh God, I don't ever wanna do anything like that again. They can keep their lousy 500 notes a month."

"Is everybody all right?" Mason demanded sharply.

Bronski grunted and climbed back into his seat. "I think I just lost twenty pounds. All of it brown."

Mason turned to Cooper. "Let's get moving. Cooper?"

"I'm okay," Cooper said, holding up a hand. "Just give me a minute to enjoy life." He blew out his breath in a rush. "Geez, what a ride." He turned back to the speaker and gave his orders. They moved off, gaining speed until the bridge vanished from view.

They reached the outlying suburbs of Williamsport a little after sundown. The small communities had been completely deserted and left to rot - buildings fallen in, pavement cracked and choked with weeds. In one area, an entire row of houses had been destroyed by fire.

"We'll head north a little ways," Cooper said to Mason, "through these empty areas. The base is just outside the city's northern limit."

"I know that," Mason growled. "Our intelligence is just as good as yours."

Cooper shrugged. "We'll see."

They rode on for another hour, leaving the ruins behind and entering a rolling, wooded zone. Cooper brought the vehicle to a halt. "We should leave her here and go on by foot."

Mason checked the map. "The base is another three miles to the north."

"It should be."

"Okay." He turned to the others. "Load up."

"Lieutenant, do you want to take both demo' satchels?"

Mason was about to say yes, of course, but a sudden thought struck him. He smiled. "No, Adams. One should do the job. Leave the other here." He slung his M16 and surveyed the group.

Adams was fastening the last few clasps on his demo' satchel while Bronski hooked the two LAW rocket launchers to his body harness. Adams slipped the satchel onto his back and picked up his M16.

"Everybody ready?" Mason asked.

Bronski smiled and lifted his splatter gun. "Let's fill some graves."

Mason turned to Hagameyer, "You stay here and guard the vehicle."

"If it's all the same to you," Cooper said, "I'll stay here and guard the vehicle."

"No way. You'd be gone the minute we turned our backs. You're coming with us." He turned back to Hagameyer. "Give us an hour and a half and then come running. We're gonna need a fast pick-up once the satellite blows."

"It's going to take him longer than that to push this baby three miles," Cooper said.

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head in frustration. "Think, Jersey. This vehicle is voice activated, remember?"

"Oh shit, that's right."

"That's why I have to stay behind. If I go with you, you got no pickup."

Damn it! Mason thought. Why was this guy always right? Adams, Bronski, and Hagameyer were all watching him, waiting for him to say something.

"You'd never make it back three miles on foot with the feds on your tail," Cooper said matter of factly.

"Okay. What the hell. We'll trust the New Yorker. What've we got to lose, right?"

"Jersey, I want to see the base go as badly as you do. I'm not going to run out on you."

"Oh, well now that makes me feel a whole lot better."

"Can we get going? We're losing time," Hagameyer said, annoyed.

Mason glared at him for a moment then turned back to Cooper. "You'd just better be there."

The four men climbed out of the vehicle. "Bronski, take point. Let's move it." They set off into the night.

("...Among Thieves" concludes next issue.)