

LCTN: TURA-TAU-4 (Hyades cluster)
CORD: SAO-76618.04 (47pc from SOL)
DATE: 2318ce-NOVEMBER-27-WEDNESDAY
TIME: 08:00zulu (local 12:48mst)

High over the coastal trading city of Nufa, at the mouth of the massive river known as Novyy Belaya, SA32, the Annex battle platform christened the Tamerlane, screeches to an almost instantaneous stop at two-hundred kilometers altitude—and a handful of seconds later it rips out of the area just as speedy-quick as it came in.

In that short period of time they were hanging motionless above the planet, Tamerlane launches five HWG99 Razorback drop ships, referred to simply enough as razors or slicks, as well as six Cerberus fighters, ten Thunderbolts and just one Thunderbird. With no lateral movement, like from an orbital insertion, all twenty-two ships dive straight down for the deck without the pesky heat and buffeting that comes from reentry to slow things down.

Here they're speeding things up.

All platforms have six drop stations underneath the ship and on a combat assault they can drop up to four ships from each station, launching twenty-four ships in all. Because of the time it takes to do that they have to release them below the operational floor of the Co-op spider missiles in case there are a bunch of them scattered about in M3 minefield mode. Here they're launching only one ship per station so for today two-hundred clicks it is.

A quick zip in an' out.

Since there was an open drop station for today's insertion mission, Jacob took that and launches along with the Razorbacks in his littler Thunderbird fighter.

Everything about a drop is counterintuitive because the ship you are in is being pushed up against a cradle attached to one of three

swing arms or against the ceiling itself. This pushing, or in actuality lifting, is tirelessly performed by your ships on-board AG drive and is held securely in place with tons of displacement force without the use of any mechanical or electro-magnetic clamps.

Because of the gravity flow while staging the crew and cargo inside said ship, waiting to drop, are now hanging upside down against their restraints and anchors—when they are actually oriented right side up in a ship within a ship with a downward flow...confused?

Anyway, there are also eight catapult launchers, sixteen on the Trung class, where they can each stage up to four fighters to launch in quick succession but today they are only punching out two per catapult. If they would have staged four then two of the pilots would also be hanging upside down just like the crews in the Razors.

Now, along with the recent updates to the Razorback family of transports and gunships the AG drive has doubled its displacement power, from three-gravities to six-gravities, so going from a stationary 1g while falling up towards a cradle to being ripped out the bottom of the ship and accelerating at 6g's kind of gets all of your attention.

SA fighters can now pull 12g's from this drive system.

While falling away from the Tamerlane at break neck speed, once the Razors rotate nose-down into a dive, the pulseblade engines snap shut and fire. Now equipped with the exact same safety-razor pulseblade engines used on the Thunderbolts, the cryogenic oxygen and hydrogen fuels have been swapped out for liquid nitrogen.

Plasma is still plasma when coming out the back of the engine so, with the massive output of these engines, this thrust matches the Delta-V they could get out of the old oxy-hydro mix which was a nice fuel to have while in space, but cryo nitrogen is way-way safer to handle and store since it is an inert element. The big bonus with the safety-razors is a huge 80% boost in thrust when they open the air intakes and use the ambient atmosphere.

The fighters, on the other hand, don't need to waste cryo-N like this. With 12g's of AG they catch up to the drop ships in seconds and split into groups of two Thunderbolts to screen and one Cerberus to run point for each Razorback. The five groups of ships are already splitting up and dropping at different speeds towards predetermined points over the Novyy Belaya, south of Nufa.

The free Cerberus pulls in close to the Thunderbird, and Peña radios, ["This being my first actual combat drop, how we doin'?"]

Jacob, in the tight cockpit of the Thunderbird, which is the same cockpit as the Cerberus, goes, "You're a fighter jock right? Try it from inside a slick. It's kinda scary then."

["Nope! Nope-nope-nope, if I'm gonna die I want to see it comin'. Know what I mean?"]

"Yeppers but, statistically, they stand a better chance getting to the ground in one piece than we have protecting their asses. If you ever have to Fuck Off or O.P. for a mission—"

Peña cuts him off, ["Nope, I'll stick with this!"]

Jacob laughs, "Dude, everybody gets to have their day in that barrel. One day your number'll come up so don't be surprised."

["I don't like you right now."]

"I get that a lot." Jacob pauses then says with a sense of pride, "Okay, Dog, today this is your baby. Take us in!"

["Righty'o! One-thirty, mark."] Peña then thinks about it and when they hit a hundred and ten kilometers in altitude he realizes, ["Hey, we never gave this thing here a name."]

"Okay, then have at it!"

["This mission, I dub thee...distractamundo!"]

When a flight is on open channel and pilots hear something they approve of they'll click their mic buttons, which cycles their unit, and this broadcasts a subtle "snick" on the channel. Holding the mic button down gives a negative recycled "buzz" but here they are getting dozens of repeated clicks of approval from the pilots on the team.

Jacob nods with a smile, "Then distractamundo it is."

Mach scale is relative to altitude and air pressure, i.e. bars, so the higher you are vertically, and the thinner the air, the lower the Mach speed is when compared to the same mps or kph at sea level. That is, they do not match one for one. While descending straight down there is a point where Mach increases while kph either holds or decreases so pilots pretty much ignore Mach until they hit an altitude, usually between twenty and fifty kilometers, where the scale would start to become relevant and that depends on the specific planet and its atmospheric pressure.

Here on Nufa its forty-five clicks.

It's still a sliding scale but here at Mach-8, with everyone now using only the pulseblade engines, the time it takes for Peña to call out, "Rotate forty" they rip past forty-five kilometers and hit forty clicks where they aerodynamically pitch their noses up and start to spread out in a long string over the Novvy Belaya.

At this point, they are breaking like mad using their AG drive.

With this extreme maneuver the five Razorbacks and their

escorts start to slow down at significantly different rates and, like synchronized swimmers they spread out to hit five target points over a four-hundred kilometer stretch along the river south of Nufa. Where the coastal city of Nufa is actually clear of clouds for once, which is a rarity, the rainforest that dominates this planet has them packed in today with sporadic precipitation.

Peña calls out, ["Thirty seconds."]

The assault teams rip into the clouds and break through at a half a kilometer, and as the slicks level out at fifty meters over the seven-kilometer wide river, at just below Mach-1, they hear Peña call out the final mark, ["Drop in ten!"]

At the seven second mark, on all five of the drop ships the drogue chutes unfurl and start to pull the main chutes out. With people you would normally slow down to about two-hundred kph for a pallet extraction but, since these are robotic combat droids and drones being delivered, then they can extract at near Mach without a problem because nobody will get dead from it.

At one second, right before the main chutes snap open, the razors pitch up by two degrees to help the extraction. There is a slight tug on the ships as the chutes yank hard and rip the pallet assemblies out the back of the ship—which consists of the pallet racking, the flooring of the cargo hold, as well as the rear hatches with a violence.

With the pallet extraction assemblies falling away the pilots are free to take direct control of their ships.

With the breaking rockets igniting, the pallet assemblies have already slowed down to below three-hundred kph where they hit the river like a sled. Kicking up huge fans of water, the pallets then dig in nose first and come to a screeching stop. It takes ten seconds for them to slip below the surface and, instead of cutting the chutes loose, those are pulled underwater along with racking and the cargo.

Inside a minute all the droids and drones are free from the pallets and are moving underwater towards their jumping off points.

Peña has been watching the tactical situation coming in, and it's his call what they do to get out. Right now they have four F51 Condors launching out of Nufa, and fifteen more coming up to meet them from the Nufimsky Metro-District, outside of Net Basha. The flight from Nufimsky is all of eighteen minutes out and a non-issue, it's the four from Nufa that's the potential problem.

Peña orders, ["Okay, people, lets E-Three in twenty seconds. Initiate climb to the southwest and at one klick altitude change course towards the east. Stay in the clouds on that heading below Mach-1 for five minutes then zoom up an' outta here."]

Peña gets the acknowledgements as they start their climb.

With the Razors and escorts entering the clouds, Jacob asks, "So, Dog, how you wanna to do this here?"

["This is so much cleaner than Taiji."]

"Yes it is."

["You bagged eleven, dude. People are still talkin' about it."]

"We knew it was going to be a mess, and it was."

Peña starts laughing, ["You ripped your god-damned wings off goin' after those two IR5 that shot my three-eighty out from under my ass! Man that was fucking legendary."] There is a short pause, then, ["Okay, you're higher up so I say you bait. Extend towards the southwest and drag them out that way. I'll go under and around, behind 'em."]

"Spook or shoot?"

As Peña slips into the clouds below he says, ["They've gotta be BDF old timers. I'd rather not shoot these guys down."]

With the condors now at eighty kilometers out, and screaming in, Jacob starts accelerating, "I fully agree."

Within ninety seconds Jacob has the four fighters on his tail but he's outpacing them and keeping ahead of them by ten kilometers at over Mach-5. Three minutes later he starts to slow just enough for them to get inside ten kilometers where the two lead fighters each fire a centipede missile after him. This forces Jacob to pour on the coal and boost his speed to Mach-5.8 which is just under the wing rip speed at this altitude or, more specifically, 500 millibar.

The centipede is a long-range Mach-6+ missile, yes, but the old ones struggle to hit max speed so gaining on Jacob is slow going. At two kilometers out Jacob tube-launches a 20/20 cluster bomb backwards to take care of them early but, as it is with aggressive weapon systems, the bomb killed the missiles and still had thirty-eight bomblets on board so, for giggles, it starts to yaw and pitch and rocket thrust to intercept the Condors because they are in range.

Just as the centipedes were blown to smithereens the five Razors and their escorts burst out from the clouds over three hundred kilometers away, and with clear skies above them they race for space. At the same time Peña shoots out of the clouds from right below the Condors and, noticing the 20/20 bomb spinning in towards the lead ships, he corkscrews away from his intended jump-scare, that would be shooting up through the middle of them, and opts to zoom climb up behind the two trailing Condors instead.

What the two lead pilots were focused on was a mystery to Jacob, Peña and the trailing Condors. Either it was the Razors getting away or Peña climbing up their ass, or whatever it was they did not notice the weapon slipping in between them until it showered both with sixteen bomblets split and shared evenly, each with a one-ton yield.

The follow on Condors did notice and they snap maneuver out of reach of this evil bomblet dispensing machine that is now spiraling towards them. The number three Condor breaks away clean but his wingman, however, flies right through Peña's reticle at only seventy meters distance—where on auto-sweep mode the AI fires the Cerberus' eighty-eight which rips the 8.80mm rounds across his back—sniping off his right canard, gutting the AG drive pod in the fuselage, and ripping off his left wing.

Where the pilots from the first two Condors had no aircraft left to detach their cockpits from, this ship's cockpit falls away from the wreckage and the pilot ejects from that.

As their number three fighter dives and streaks away, Peña snarls, ["God damn it! That was not the plan!"]

Jacob laughs, "Shit happens, Dog!"

["But I'll take it if that's okay! Did the first two make it?"]

"One ejected. The other pod is still falling."

["Idiots!"]

"The others are about eleven minutes away."

["Let's get outta here."]

"I'll follow you out."

Peña's Cerberus fighter lifts up and starts accelerating like mad and, within twenty seconds, Jacob's Thunderbird pulls to within two kilometers off Peña's right shoulder. Now pushing 110 kilometers altitude they rip out of the area at 0.6 of light speed in MDDSH, and then zig zag out to two AU where they stop to spool for a jump.

Jacob asks, "What time is our rendezvous with the Maiden?"

["Seventeen hundred hours. That's eight and a half hours we gotta kill until then."]

"How 'bout I buy you a burger. We can go to that place in L.A. you've been talking up a streak. Tommy's is it?"

Peña laughs, ["They're closed, dude. It's midnight there."]

"Oh yea. That's out."

["Your tab, your choice. Think of someplace."]

While pulling in to nestle his ship belly to belly with Peña's, Jacob goes, "Hey, I know the place! Black Star, it's in Moscow. They're not half bad and they'd be open for lunch now."

["Burgers?"]

"Yea! We can land at *Vnukovo* and I got some buddies there at the Sukhoi satellite facility who worked on adopting the E-blocks to their Forty-Sevens, and now they're itching to see the Seventy-Four. Biggest-Six wanted me to fly one in when I could, so now's good!"

Peña adds, ["Sure! Let's go surprise the shit out'uv 'em!"]

Seconds later a baby-baby black hole yawns wide to swallow both ships and poof—they're gone.

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As rescue crews pick up the two surviving BDF pilots, and scrape the dead one up off the jungle floor, the fighters from the Nufimsky District searched in vain all along the Novyy Belaya looking for any sign of the SA. They burned over six hours in a fruitless search and, finding nothing, they finally head for home.

Two hours later it's dusk, with the star Tura-Tau dropping below the horizon, and at a preset time every twenty clicks or so along a five hundred kilometer stretch of the river, a single ghost droid emerges from the water and scouts the rain forest near the bank.

Five minutes later those droids are joined by two more, and those are followed by 150 PacMan combat drones.

Three of these teams head north, and in two hours they will encircle the Co-op base outside Nufa that is manned by over 5,000 BDF troops. The twenty-two remaining teams race south for the vast grasslands surrounding Net Basha. There they'll find three bases and over sixty Co-op facilities spread out far and wide and stocked with a combined total of over 36,000 mixed BDF and CDF troopers.

The word for today is "mayhem" and the tee-off time is set for six-hundred hours, local.

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