

Star Wars

Short Story Collection

EQUIPMENT

by Matthew Stover

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A Personal Account of the Sub-orbital Action at Haruun Kal, as reported by Auxiliary Heavy-Weapons Specialist CT-6/774.

We popped out of hyperspace above the plane of the ecliptic. Al'har's light was brilliant yellow. Haruun Kal was a bright blue-green crescent.

Two asteroid belts sparkled yellow among the black-and-white starfield: one beyond Haruun Kal's orbit, vast and old, spreading toward the gas giants that swung through the outer system, and a smaller, younger belt in orbit around the planet itself: remnants of what once had been the planet's moon.

I snugged my helmet and checked my armor's life-support parameters, then dogged the transparisteel hatch of the bubble turret.

My helmet's speakers crackled softly. "Comm check," Lieutenant Four-One said.

The Lieutenant's our pilot. The 2nd Lou, cl-33/890, handles nav. He checked in with a "Nav is go." I reported my turret as go, and my port-side partner, ct-014/783, did the same from his.

The Halleck swung down out of interstellar space and inserted into planetary orbit almost halfway out to the moon-belt, more than ten thousand klicks from the surface. Intel had reported a rumor that Haruun Kal might have a small number of planetary-defense ion cannons, and a medium cruiser is a very large target.

Just before we lit engines and lifted out of the Halleck's ship bay, I clicked my comm over to the dedicated turret-freq. "Take care of the equipment, Eight-Three." My partner answered the way he always does: "And the equipment will take care of us, Seven-Four."

That's how we wish each other luck.

The mag-screen de-powered. The ship bay's atmosphere gusted out toward the star in a billow of glittering ice crystals.

Blue-white pinpoints fanned out before us: ion drives of our starfighter escort.

The transparisteel of my bubble-turret hummed with sympathetic resonance as one of the Jadthu-class landers undocked and followed them, then it was our turn.

Our flight leader took point. We sucked ions on left wing. Five gunships left the Halleck.

None would come back.

Take care of your equipment, and your equipment will take care of you.

That's one of the first things they teach us in the creche-schools on Kamino.

Even before we're awake. By the time we are brought to consciousness for skillsdevelopment, the knowledge pumps have drilled "Take care of your equipment" so deeply into our minds that it's more than instinct. It's practically natural law.

We live or die by our equipment.

I am a clone trooper in the Grand Army of the Republic.

My designation is ct-6/774. I serve on a Republic close-assault gunship. I am the starboard bubble-turret gunner.

I love my job. We all do; we're created for it.

But my job is special. Because my partner-ct-014/783, the port bubble-turret gunner-and I are the ones who take care of the equipment.

Our weapons platform, the RHE LAAT/i, is an infantry-support weapon. We soften up and harass the enemy; our targets are bunkers, armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and enemy footsoldiers. When our infantry brothers need to get to the enemy, we're the ones who blast down the door.

The LAAT/i is designed for dropping troops into a hot fire-zone. We're not fast, but we can go anywhere. Our assault weapons are controlled through nav; the navigator runs all three antipersonnel turrets, the main missile launcher and two of the four main cannons. Our laser cannons can punch holes through medium armor, and the missile launchers take care of the heavy stuff; they're mass-driver launchers, so our loads can be customized for the mission. We carry he (high explosive), heap (high explosive armor-piercing) and apf (anti-personnel fragmentation) missiles; we stay away from baradium weapons-too unstable-but detonite and proton-core warheads can handle everything we're likely to come up against.

Our job-me and Eight-Three, the bubble-turret gunners-is to handle everything that comes up against us. Each turret is a sphere of transparisteel that tracks along with our cannons; my partner and I also

each control a launcher loaded with four short-range air-to-air rockets. If anything comes at us, we shoot it down.

That's what I mean about taking care of the equipment.

Let's say we're cracking a hardened bunker on a desert planet. We come in low over the dunes, pumping missiles and cannonfire against the target emplacement.

Let's say you're operating an anti-aircraft cannon half a klick away, and you open fire on us. The pilot and the navigator don't even have to look up. Because I'm there.

Go ahead and take your shot. You won't get two.

Fire a missile at us. I'll blast it to scrap. Launch a proton grenade. I'll blow your head off. Make an attack run riding a speeder bike. But make out your will, first.

Because if you attack us, I will take you out.

That's what I do.

I love my job, and I am very, very good at it.

I have to be: because sometimes my gunship has to do things it's not designed for. That's how it goes when you're fighting a war.

Like at Haruun Kal.

We were assigned to the Republic medium cruiser Halleck, on station in the Ventrana system. A regiment of heavy infantry, twenty Jadthu-class landers, an escort of six starfighters.

And us: five rhy LAAT/i-s.

We weren't supposed to know why we were there, naturally; just as naturally, we knew anyway. It was clear this would be a VIP extraction on a hostile planet.

It wasn't hard to figure. Those Jadthu-class landers are basically just flying bunkers. They go in fast, land, then stand there and take a pounding until it's time to take off again. Nothing but armor, engines, two heavy laser turrets and an Arakyn Caltrop-5 chaff gun. They're plenty fast in a straight line, but they are the opposite of nimble. There is no evasive action in a Jadthu.

The Halleck had twenty of them: that meant the landing-zone would be hot.

Maybe very hot. Maybe nova-class. The starfighters were for orbital cover. Suborbital and atmospheric cover was our job.

Ventran is on the Gevarno Loop, one of half a dozen systems linked by hyperspace lanes that run through Al'har. Haruun Kal is the only habitable planet in the Al'har system.

Haruun Kal is Separatist.

General Windu-that's Jedi Master Mace Windu, General of the Grand Army of the Republic and Senior Member of the Jedi Council-had gone dirtside on Haruun Kal, alone and undercover, tracking a rogue Jedi. Why had a General gone in personally? We didn't know. Why had he gone in alone? We didn't ask.

We didn't care.

It wasn't our business.

This is what we knew: If nothing went wrong, we wouldn't have anything to do.

We'd cruise our station in the Ventran system for a week or two, then jump back for reassignment.

Something went wrong.

Our business was to get General Windu out again.

The moon-belt was where they were hiding. Waiting for us.

The whole system was a trap.

They must have been there for weeks, powered down, clamped to drifting asteroids.

Undetectable. Waiting for a Republic ship to enter orbit.

Which the Halleck had just done.

Against the glittering weave of the belt, they were close enough to invisible that I couldn't pick them out until Lt. Nine-Oh muttered from nav: "Hostiles incoming.

On intercept. But not for us, sir! They're after the Halleck!" Lt. One-Four: "How many, nav?"

"Calculating. No. Sorry, sir. No hard numbers available. Sensors keep picking up more."

"How many so far? What are we looking at?"

"Acceleration and drive output profiles indicate starfighters. Droid starfighters, sir." Automated weapons systems directed by sophisticated droid brains.

"Probably Geonosian. So far, I'm reading sixty-four."

"Sixty-four!"

"Strike that. Ninety-one. One-oh-five. One-twenty-eight, sir." One hundred and twenty-eight droid starfighters streaked toward us: a vast array of crescent sparks haloed by blue-white ion scatter. Faster, more maneuverable, and more heavily armed than anything in our little twelve-ship flotilla-and the droid brains piloting those starfighters have reflexes that operate at the speed of light.

And the Halleck was directly in their path.

"Hear that, turrets? This will be hot space. Repeat: we are entering hot space."

"Starboard reads, sir," I told him as I charged my cannon. "And I am go."

"Port reads, sir. Go."

"Signal from the Halleck, sir!" Nine-Oh said. "Recall: All ships abort. The Halleck is under attack-she's all alone back there, sir!"

"Not for long." Lt. Four-One spun our ship through a spiral that whipped us around and aimed us back toward the Halleck. The cruiser was a star-specked wedge of shadow transiting the grid of droid starfighter drive-streams. Now turbolasers started blasting out from that shadow toward the grid; from here the huge particle beams looked like hairlines of blue light. I worked my pedals and swung the fire-control yoke so that the turret's servo-boom angled my weapon to bear on the grid-formation of starfighters.

I knew Eight-Three was doing exactly the same.

"Fire at will, turrets." They were still far beyond the effective range of my cannon. I squeezed the yoke anyway. Even through my armored gloves, the hum of the yoke buzzed up my arms as four arcs of electric blue energy joined in front of the cannon's oval reflector-shield, then flashed away through the vacuum. I held the triggers down. Concentrating on evading the Halleck's turbolasers, a droid starfighter might just blunder into one of my shots by accident. You never know.

The grid formation began to break up as the droids took evasive action. Our own starfighters-all six of them-flashed past us in pairs that swung and scissored and looped into battle.

We made for the Halleck as fast as our external drives could push us. Our gunship was never intended to dogfight against starfighters. That didn't stop us. It didn't slow us down. But we never got there.

They came out of nowhere.

The first I knew of the new ambushers was when our ship shuddered under multiple cannon-blasts. A droid starfighter flashed past not thirty

meters from my turret. I twisted my yoke and the turret spun and my bolt caught one of the starfighter's aft control-surfaces. It broke up as it spun, but I didn't have time to enjoy the view because they were all over us.

Must have been at least half a wing: thirty-two ships. They were everywhere.

Four-one had our gunship spinning and whirling and dodging side to side: from the turret it looked like the whole galaxy was yanking itself in random directions around me. All I could do was hold on to my fire-control yoke and try not to hit friendly ships. My cannon sprayed green fire and I scored on at least five hits-two of them kills-but there were always more incoming.

I saw the lander crack open and then explode: huge chunks of its armor spun out like ship-sized shrapnel to crush two of the starfighters that had blasted it. I saw another LAAT/i drifting through a slow barrel-roll, its engines dark, sparks spitting out through the twisted blast-gap where its cockpit used to be. One of its bubble-turrets was shattered; in the other, a trooper struggled with the turret's access hatch. I never got a chance to see if that gunner made it out; another flight of enemy fighters swarmed around us, and I was too busy shooting to watch.

Then I felt a shock that bounced my turret. The spin of the galaxy changed, and I knew I was in trouble.

That last shock had been a cannon-blast hitting my turret's servo-boom. It had blown my turret right off the ship. Now it wasn't even really a turret anymore. It was just a bubble.

Spinning lazily, I drifted through the battle.

I didn't have any illusions about surviving. Turret-gunners don't wear repulsorpacks; no room in there. My emergency repulsorpack was back in the troop bay of my gunship. If my gunship even existed anymore.

From inside my slowly spinning bubble, I saw the rest of the battle. I saw the Halleck absorb blast after blast, until a pair of droid starfighters streaked in and rammed the bridge. I saw the other nineteen landers undock from the cruiser and lumber through the swarm of hostiles. I saw the cruiser streak away into hyperspace.

I saw landers peeled like meatfruit, spilling troopers into orbit. These were the heavy infantry and the rp troopers-the repulsorpack men. They knew they were going to die. So each and every one of them decided to die fighting. How do I know that?

They are my brothers. And that's what I would do.

The heavy infantry opened up on the droid starfighters with their handweapons and small arms; some of them scattered miniature minefields of magnetized proton grenades. Others had shoulder-fired light missile launchers. Some of the rp troopers had nothing but their dc-15 blaster

carbines, which couldn't put much of a dent in a starfighter, so they used their repulsorpacks to deliberately move themselves into the paths of streaking enemy ships. At orbital combat speeds of thousands of kilometers per hour, a starfighter that strikes a combatarmored trooper might as well be flying straight into the side of an asteroid.

The landers did what they could to help us out; those chaff guns they carry shoot out huge clouds of durasteel fragments, intended to confuse enemy sensors and interfere with enemy cannonfire. Those fragments don't have the velocity to penetrate the armor of drifting troopers, but any enemy ship whipping through a cloud of them at a couple thousand kph just comes apart.

But the landers hadn't come out there to fight for us; General Windu had ordered the whole regiment down to the surface. I imagine you've already heard about the Battle of Lorshan Pass, and the firestorm in Pelek Baw, and everything else that happened planetside.

I wasn't in any of that.

Though I did fire the last shot in the orbital battle.

Most of the landers broke through, and pretty much all the droid starfighters followed them in. After that, things got pretty peaceful there in orbit.

Most of us were dead.

RP troopers flew from one drifting body to the next, gathering those who'd survived and salvaging life-support packs from the armor of the corpses. A couple of the rp troopers stopped by my bubble; they managed to halt my spin, but there wasn't much else they could do for me, and we all knew it.

I was headed down into the atmosphere.

That was when we saw the last of the starfighters, heading right toward us. It was pursuing what was, to me, the single most beautiful thing I should ever hope to see: battered, shot full of holes, one wing gone, limping along on a single engine at half-power, one bubble turret missing, the other smashed: an LAAT/i.

My LAAT/i.

Missiles exhausted, it was trying to hold off the droid starfighter with pinpoint fire from its antipersonnel turrets, without much luck.

But I had a surprise. Bubble turrets pack powercells to maintain weapon-charge for short periods if all enginepower is shunted to maneuvering.

I still had a couple of shots left.

The RP troopers who had stabilized me rotated my turret and steadied it for the shot, and I led the enemy ship and squeezed the fire-control yoke - And it flew right into my shot.

I enjoyed the explosion.

Between the RP troopers and my ship, we collected every single one of the drifting survivors. The gunship was in no shape for atmospheric flight, so we limped out to the moon-belt and docked on to an asteroid. The lieutenants put me in for a commendation.

Salvaged life-support packs kept us all breathing for two standard days-which was when the Republic task force arrived.

The first thing they did was pick up survivors.

Because we are equipment, too.

As long as the Republic takes care of us, we'll take care of it.