

## 15. Here it Comes Now!

At the lightening, trumpets and bugles were sounding the length of the Constitutional Forces lines, and the chaps breakfasted in comfort while Gweene toured their positions and had a comforting word with the men who had overnighted in their trenches and foxholes close to the bridge: though those on picket duty throughout the plant had found for themselves something better in the way of shelter for their night, which was undisturbed save for a plaintif pistol shot from time to time, or the occasionally piteous cry of a wounded worker.

It had been a quiet period without event, except for the rumour which swept the lines in the early hours: some schoolgirls from the besieged camp had somehow got among the Constitutionlists and were partying from foxhole to dugout to bunker, and handing it out to whoever wanted it!

But the rumour - for it appeared to be no more than that - died the sort of death such rumours do, for nobody knew anybody who had actually seen these girls: and anyway, it was simply impossible for anyone to get off the island camp. That, after all, was the whole point of the exercise: the workers were trapped, and shortly would be reduced - that was the word Gweene used that morning - in as perfect a demonstration of zero-elevation multi-media artillery fire as could be imagined.

All morning, then, the infantry-support howitzers (these were on maximum elevation, naturally), the artillery pieces, the self-propelled guns and the light armour were drawn to form a semi-circle along the shore: and at noon the bombardment began, in the form of armour-piercing shells at first, followed by anti-personnel ordnance of various

advanced and high-end formats. Afterwards, by way of exercise and celebration, some incendiary devices were lobbed into the camp too, which very soon was an inferno from one end to the other. The accommodation huts vapourised, and then the gymnasium - it which it was supposed many might have taken refuge - exploded in a great ball of fire. In the heat, the razor-wire around the old women's compound was seen to melt; and even the four watchtowers began to disintegrate. The light-fibre cabins atop them burned at once: and - to great cheers from the watching Constitutionalists - the quick-release emergency modules dropped away into the flames below.

Then the alloy lattice towers themselves began to melt - and quite soon had gently collapsed back into the carnage of the camp. Finally, and by way of bringing the early stages of the siege to a close, Gweene personally ordered his howitzers to drop deep-penetration shells into the burning ruin, for fear that any few remaining workers might have taken refuge in the service ducts and sanitation tunnels below the floor of the burning camp: or might even have dug themselves desperate shallow bunkers for a doomed last stand. Officers watching the fall of shot through field glasses were able to report, however, that no sign of life had been seen throughout the entire bombardment.

That concluded the early part of the work, though the heat was now so great that the gunners had to move back a bit, in the cause of comfort: at which there was a general issue of treble-rums all round, quickly followed by another general issue of similar size.

After lunch, by which time the flimsy structures of the camp had burned themselves quite out and had begun to cool, it was time to lower the bridge, and send pioneer detachments onto the island to

capture for interrogation, or process in a summary way, any few who might still have survived the bombing.

This was a leisurely matter, naturally. With some ceremony - and a rousing speech from Gweene - the bridge came down and tentative pioneers were sent at once into the camp. After a spell of some thirty minutes, however, none was to be seen: and there was no response either to the cries of trumpet and calls of bugle. A second unit of pioneers was sent into the smoking ruins: it too failed to return. An officer on observation duties was quite sure he had seen some of its members at the far end of the camp, even thought he had also seen what looked like a struggle; but there was still too much smoke, and Gweene dismissed the report as fantasy fuelled by rum. It was at this point, then, that he ordered a formation of heavily-armed marines to storm across the bridge and shoot on sight any survivors.

The marines were almost over the bridge when a unit of outstandingly filthy members of the Angling Alliance popped from the camp's sanitation pipes and hurled dynamite into the leading ranks before disappearing in an instant. Numerous marines were blown into small pieces and others, though not dismembered, were hurled over the bridge and into the sea. After a moment's understandable confusion, the remainder pressed forward: at which a shrieking mob of workers, dressed in boots, combat oils and shades, threw itself on Gweene's soldiers. In the close-combat conditions that at once ensued, firearms were perfectly useless: and savage hand-to-boot fighting surged on the bridge.

On such a narrow front, weight of numbers was less important than morale and ferocity of intent; and the workers (their leading members were sporting headbands of the finest peacock feathers)

did dreadful damage with their sharpened scaffold-bars and double-headed battle-axes in best welded stainless. Back they drove the soldiers, until they had nearly taken possession of the bridge: but Gweene ordered more men forward and slowly the sure press of numbers began to push the workers - ever so slowly - back into the camp, and climbing by now over the bodies of the dead and mortally wounded.

With a final rush, the soldiers broke through over the island end of the bridge, screaming in triumph: and in a moment the workers had disappeared. In the tumult an officer roared an order that the bunkers must be searched at once: but the first three that were examined had been booby-trapped, and exploded with a terrible roar, hurling body-parts across the smouldering camp. Other troops, however, were already pouring across the bridge and racing to every point on the island, to root out those few survivors who had dared challenge them.

But there was no one, living or dead, to be found in the ruins: not one body, no trace of any worker whatsoever, and all that was to be discovered was the sad remains of both troops of pioneers, who were no more. The camp was utterly empty, and as if it had never been occupied. The puzzled soldiers looked round and about - where had everyone gone?

And then, from the very furthest end of the great plant, they saw a shield flash in the sun from the summit of the flare boom, and then a second from the pentagon semi-sub's derrick-head - and a moment later a third answered these from the shattered alloy tent of the cogging hall roof.

A sergeant said in awe, 'Christ, lads, they're all over in the factory': and at that very moment the crazed battle-cries of the

workforce began to ring throughout the mighty plant, and the workers' army came forth to confront its enemy.

Finnegan, meanwhile, was on trial in the cogging hall, in the great plant's centre: and at first there was some resistance to his suggestion that he join the workers' cause. But the tribunal was at length impressed by the enterprise and courage that he had displayed in making his way through the lines of the Constitutional Forces and into the heart of the plant. This had not been an easy endeavour, not least on account of the effects of the double sensation he had taken the previous evening; and his report of the crossing was so confused, indeed so unlikely, that for a time he might well have faced the gallows, which were visibly to hand and, indeed, at present occupied. But when he explained about the double sensation the tribunal became less severe in aspect: and when he mentioned his connection with Old Jacob - as the men seemed to call Jake with some considerable reverence - then all was quickly forgiven.

Indeed, Finnegan hardly knew how he had come to be in the cogging hall that morning; though he had certainly watched Gweene's reduction of the camp, and seen the plumes of smoke move black and slow into the sky. Then he had seen a signal flashed from the summit of the flare boom, quite deliberately flashed across the plant: and the next moment thousands of workers stormed from the mouths of tunnels and flooded into the plant, at once hurling themselves on the few soldiers stationed there as a light guard.

Without pause the army of labour - which was quite clearly under some sort of unified military command - began to arm itself in pre-arranged fashion: and when that process was complete it

extended its lines in attack formation and with one mighty roar began to move out of the plant towards Major Gweene's positions.

Finnegan, perhaps on account of his former relationship with management, was assigned duties with a suicide squad of lady diggermen dressed in the uniforms of Security: and though the work was dangerous in principle, it was delightfully easy in practice. All the ladies, after all, had had a good sensation themselves and had more for combat emergencies (such as Finnegan): and thus they hurled themselves without fear on the enemy foxholes to which they had been assigned. Throughout this attack, the enemy on whom they had targeted their efforts listened to popular music of various genres on portable and self-powered devices, and displayed a remarkable lassitude with regard to their fate. Slaughtered were all that came conveniently to hand.

Then for a time Finnegan and the lasses made themselves comfortable among the dead for a breather and general introductions, rifled the pockets of the enemy for signs of substance abuse, and had another sensation themselves from their own combat medical rations, just for the nerve and general vitality. After a while, Finnegan felt himself all over, and asked in a humble sort of way, 'Why do they call us a suicide squad then?'

'Easy, man', said one of the diggermen, 'get in our way and you're dead'.

'Meat', says another with the big round eyes on her, and laughing too, the boy wasn't so keen on the way she was looking at him at all.

They now found themselves towards the left flank of the workers' army, and somewhat to the rear, for during their refreshment-break the line had swept forward, albeit rather

unevenly. Down towards the sea, the line appeared to be taking a bad pounding from Gweene's entry level howitzers, and the advance seemed to be stalled. Out on the left wing, however, resistance had been light and the workers had stormed forward at first, but - by this stage having moved beyond the gigantic platforms on which the great plant sat - had become trapped in the deepest part of the bog: and a number of testudos were already sinking there, with desperate cries for assistance, or that they be shot where they lay, and that the cause be victorious!

In the centre of the line all was going well. Assault engineers were laying temporary causeways under heavy fire towards the enemy, which was by now dug-in around the raw-product tanks and vaults. As soon as these engineers had finished their task, suicide assault squads stormed onto the enemy guns. A crowbar brigade, dressed in naught but burnished greaves and welding masks, and smeared in heavy-duty combat grease, hurled itself on the enemy gunners with terrible cries of vengeance. A battalion of chain-mailed lady puddlers, running as like the wind, charged after their comrades, brandishing their tridents and throwing nets.

A murderous struggle ensued: and for some time Gweene's forces gave way, and it seemed that a wedge had been driven directly into his positions. Had his forces then been split apart, the workers' army might have closed on the enemy and annihilated him at once. But by now Gweene had hauled two light pieces to the summit of the management jack-up: and their sustained fire, once the range had been found, claimed terrible losses among the workers' forward fighting battalions.

They were driven back, and Gweene's lines reformed: and for a time the guns fell silent, as both armies drew bloody breath. And

then Gweene's guns began to speak again, and with them the wholesale retreat of the workers' army. For the first time that morning, the prospect of defeat - and the terrible reprisals it would bring - presented to the army of labour its grim, malevolent face.

But the line held, or almost held, although at terrible cost. Very quickly, the right wing towards the sea fell into rapid retreat, for the Constitutionals had most of their guns, and their best-armed soldiers there. Soon, the workers had been driven from the dock and storage areas, and had been forced to retreat to a strongpoint at the mouth of the underground conveyor stream. Here, they received their final orders from the signallers on the flare boom:

- hold out until we have cleared our heavy armour from the stream.

As a result, a savage struggle ensued. Sappers and miners went at once to work and other engineers tossed emergency obstacles in the way of the enemy, while suicide grenadiers from the All Site Temperance Union advanced in close-order across the few yards between the trenches, hurling sticks of explosives directly into the enemy ranks. When constitutional gunfire cut down some of their number, crazed coppers and catering staff in chain-mail panties, wave upon wave, stormed through the gaps with trident and net and poisoned crowbar. On account of this heroism a determined resistance was put up: but by the time Gweene's men had brought up ladders and assault engines, the end was near. Terrible hand-to-mouth fighting ensued; and the enemy was driven back briefly from the walls. As they attacked again, the flare boom signalled urgently:

- stream cleared of heavy armour, fall back now.

But there was no one to read it, no one to respond: for the heroic workers, the oriental seamen among them, were all dead, and Gweene's soldiers swarmed into the strongpoint.

But here, Gweene's left wing chose to remain. Certainly, lightly-armed and fast-response units continued to fight their way into the seaward end of the plant, and made significant, if hotly contested, gains on the Alpha and Beta production lines. But heavy units were switched up towards the centre of the line, with a view to driving a reinforced and deadly phalanx into the heart of the plant. Gweene's right wing was emptied of resources too, for it had fought very sluggishly all morning and courts-martial were in prospect, and though it moved forward slowly, the officers had to lash the men from their positions and popular music, and curse them for their indolence.

Briefly, there was a setback for the Major's forces. Tunnel fighters had discovered an underground dungeon, obviously the work of Security. Among its manacles and instruments, they found the bones of all those workers who had been dismissed the camp and - it had been believed - sent away from it. They also recovered some desperate survivors of the dungeon who could scarcely be described as living: skeletal old men and women, all with flowing silver beards, and who limped into the daylight, cursing and demanding vengeance. This discovery enraged the workers, and encouraged them to further effort: but though it delayed Gweene's advance, it did not stop it.

Soon, the Constitutionals were close to the victory they sought. Lightly armed frogmen units were swarming in the labyrinth of service tunnels and cabling ducts below the plant, while Alpine-style commandos fought their way across the tented alloy roofs. Again, there was hand-to-hand fighting on the flare boom, on the wrecked overhead railway, and on three of the great hammerhead

cranes. Terrible combat was also reported from the pitch-dark conveyor stream, and murderous fighting surged the length of the cracking plant and rolling mill.

But directly in front of the furnace hall a static siege engine, spot welded from H-beam, was hurling furnace-toasted random-rubble boulders directly down into the enemy ranks with terrifying effect. A stream of fork-lifts carried ammunition straight from manufactory to front line. Under the command of a one-eyed giant in a bandana, teams of steel-toed and peacock-feathered welders, albeit at the cost of terrible casualties, kept the enemy - briefly - at bay.

Finnegan and the rest of his suicide unit returned to the furnace hall, the scene of his fateful tribunal just a few short hours earlier, for further orders. With the enemy at the gate, a scene of immense confusion reigned. Fork lifts raced from the furnaces with freshly-warmed gabions and boulders for the front. Runners dashed to and from the outlying combat posts. Signallers with flags - a deadly occupation - rushed to the roof with urgent messages for the distant wings of the army. Shattered units re-assembled in the melee, with much roaring of orders and cries of despair. Long lines of wounded, walking and stretchered, formed at triage and dressing station.

And yet at the heart of this desperate scene was to be found a calm spot, where the leadership of the Secret Military Organisation was gathered in conference. All of the staff officers, Finnegan noticed, were former members of the Classics Society, and most of the regimental men had once belonged to the Tunnelling League. (Some, of course, had been members of both). At their centre stood Jake, still with harpoon, but sporting now too a splendid pair of field

glasses. He was bent over a set of maps and signal flimsies, and had assumed an extraordinary style of command.

But after a while he says to the officers gathered around him, 'That's it, boys. There's no more we can do. We're close to the end now. You have all fought well, but we can't do the impossible. That man Gweene will attack any time now and that will be the end of it'.

That was a gloomy moment for everyone, and there wasn't much time to lose now. Finnegan and his suicide squad tried to jump the walking-wounded queue for one of the dressing stations attached to the Charlie line, but were driven back to the end of it with lusty cries of anger. When they got to the head of it at last, Finnegan asked for a double ration for himself, and the same for his squad.

'You don't look injured to me', said a cheeky medic, 'at all'.

'It's psychological injury', Finnegan said, with earnest confidence, 'and that's the worst kind of the lot'.

'Maybe you would be better with something to calm you down then', the medic said.

'Oh no', says the boy, 'it's not that serious, and we want to be jived right up for the final battle, we're a suicide unit you know'.

'Aren't we all', says the medic ungraciously, and gave them all with his shovel a good belter of stuff.

Then they rushed over to one of the Alpha dressing stations, where everyone was on stretchers and it was easier to get to the head of the queue quickly. The medic there takes one look at them and says, 'You lot clear off, you've just been over at the Charlie station, do you think I am blind?'

One of the suicide girls says, 'Listen pal, you just gave a triple combat ration to that bear in the line, and what he gets, we get'.

‘That’s because he’s a bear’, the medic said, rather weakly, ‘and has a lot more body tissue than you’.

‘And he got a triple shot at the Charlie counter too’, the girl said in a very ugly tone.

She ran a pink tongue along the edge of her short close-combat bayonet and gave the medic a peculiar look. So they got their ladle of stuff: though that left plenty for the rest of the queue. With what had been taken from the tanks and vaults in the storage zone, there was enough stuff for twenty armies, and big ones too: though it was going down quick, on account of the combat outside.

That felt better now! They could take on giants in their immortality and if things went the other way not one of them would notice anything anyway, and one of the girls wondered if there wasn’t a bar around the place for a spot of rest and recreation, a drink or two would do no harm, or maybe a wee place to lay down a head for a while. She gave Finnegan another funny look, one of them looks that made the boy feel a wee bit uneasy with the way things were going.

But at that moment three voices cried out from above, ‘Ho! Finnegan man’, and when the boy turned round who should it be but the three wee cousins, right up there on full-extension fitters’ stilts and all still with the red and white ties on them, maybe for the group identity bonding.

‘Gracious girls’, says Finnegan pretending a shiver and sniffing in a prodigious sort of way, ‘are you no cold at all?’

But the cousins, who wore nothing (not counting the ties) except short fighting skirts in light mail and generous quantities of combat grease, said that they weren’t feeling it cold at all. They were all carrying their throwing nets in a fetching off-the-shoulder style, and their tridents ran with fresh red blood.

‘Well girls’, says the boy, getting serious and looking hard at their eyes, ‘so that’s it, you’ll all be set for the massacre of us any minute now’.

The cousins said they didn’t mind which way it went, they had been out last night with the assault chemists and had spiked the whole centre of the Constitutional Forces, they would be out of it for days any minute now, and wouldn’t see any fighting till Christmas.

‘Come to think of it’, says one of them, ‘we’ll be out of it ourselves till then too’.

‘Still an all’, says Finnegan, ‘we don’t have long till they’re in here and they’ll murder the lot of us, and that’s just the men with any luck, you’d better get over there to the dressing stations and get your share in quick’.

But the wee cousins just laughed, they said they’d had their share already all right, and they couldn’t cram any more in just for the time being.

Says Soso with a spot of pity, ‘Oh Finnegan, have faith in Old Jacob. Don’t you see what he’s done? We attacked with light infantry and lured the enemy into thinking they could counter-attack with impunity and drive a wedge into our centre. Now their lines are vulnerable on the extended flanks which, being extended, do not command an adequate defensive capacity’.

‘In a moment’, says Remedios, ‘we will spring the trap and hurl our armoured and motorised formations against them, and they will be smashed and utterly destroyed’.

Says the third wee cousin, ever so wisely, ‘And that’s not counting the big mines the Tunnelling League has been working on these last few weeks’.

‘By Jove!’, says the boy, ‘is that what they’re giving you at the blackboard nowadays?’

But before there could be a reply, singing began to roll the length of the mighty plant: insolent songs of a folkist nature once more, songs of defiance in the face of defeat, songs of victory delayed - but certain.

And then the massed pipe bands of the workers’ army (there were three bands in all) began to play, the very best of fighting music and all the same tune too; taking up the spirit of the songs that rolled in the plant and marching out from its glazed canopies and vaulted concourse ceilings directly into the line of rebel fire.

After a short pause, perhaps to find the range or terminate luncheon, Major Gweene’s guns began to speak once more: this time with greater asperity than ever before.

‘Here it comes now’, Finnegan screamed about the tumult: and he and his squad of lady diggermen ran at once to their final battle positions.