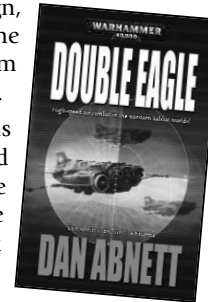


DOUBLE EAGLE

A WARHAMMER 40,000 novel by Dan Abnett

IN THE BLOOD-SOAKED Sabbat worlds campaign, the Imperial crusade force fights to eradicate the dread legions of Chaos and liberate the system from the carnage wrought by the Dark Powers.

Warmaster Macaroth's huge crusade force is attempting to halt a massive counter-attack led by the Chaos Lord, Anakwanar Sek and on the war-torn world of Enothis, Imperial forces are plunged into near rout. Only the constant sorties of the Phantine Fighter Corps can buy enough time for the Imperial ground troops to regroup and launch a counter-attack. As the battle for air supremacy unfolds, the fate of the crusade hangs in the balance...



Dan Abnett lives and works in Maidstone, Kent, in England. Well known for his comic work, his work for the Black Library includes the popular strips Lone Wolves, Darkblade and Titan, the best-selling Gaunt's Ghosts novels, and the acclaimed Inquisitor Eisenhorn trilogy. He was voted 'Best Writer Now' at the National Comic Awards 2003.

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from DOUBLE EAGLE

A new hardback from Black Library

Over the Lida Valley, 15.16

IT WASN'T AN auspicious start to their first official sortie. A bright, promising day had turned sour in the time it had taken to get their machines aloft. At ten thousand metres, with a lousy eight-tenths cloud, and an even more lousy side wind, they were running up the wide valley of the River Lida towards the mountains.

Jagdea's normally sweet-running Thunderbolt, serial Zero-Two, was flying rough and heavy. Too long in the belly-hold of a Navy carrier, Jagdea supposed. The devoted maintenance crews had done their best to keep systems at optimum, but there was no substitute for regular flying time. Apart from the delivery run to Theda MAB South, all the Thunderbolts in Umbra Flight had been out of use for three and a half months.

Then again, she wondered, maybe it was her. Serial Zero-Two wasn't the only thing not to have flown in three and a half months. Jagdea felt clumsy and inept. She'd even made a sloppy job of take-off. They'd had simulators on the carrier of course, regular sessions to keep them sharp, but it wasn't the same, just like turning a bird's turbofans over on the flight deck every morning wasn't the same.

Good flying. Seekan's presumably honestly meant remark now seemed like a jinx.

They were flying in unit teams of four machines. With her were Van Tull, Espere and Marquall. Blansher had the second

unit four about forty kilometres behind them, and Asche the third, running a wide patrol over the Littoral. Essentially, Umbra Flight had split into three independent Interceptor units. That was optimum size for routine hunting or opportunist intercept work. If more than three or four Thunderbolts tried to share the same slice of sky, things tended to get a little crowded.

Anyway, this wasn't a hunt. It was a shakedown. A little wind-in-the-hair run to get pilots and machines into the swing of things. Umbra Flight had traditionally been a Lightning wing, but after the liberation of Phantine, they'd switched to the heavier Thunderbolts, and come to love them during the air war on Urdesh Minor. Sometimes Jagdea missed the sprightly performance of the III-IX Lightning, the exhilarating rates of its climb and dive, the darting grace of its turns. The Thunderbolt was almost half as heavy again and, at lower speeds, particularly climbing, it felt as if it barely had the power to lift its massively armoured body. But it was heavy and robust, and could soak up the sort of punishment that would send a Lightning fluttering to its doom like a moth. It had longer legs too, and a snout-full of killware. Where the Lightning was a playful ambush-cat, the Thunderbolt was a full-grown carnodon. Blansher had once said that a pilot flew the Lightning for the joy of flying, and the Thunderbolt for the joy of killing. That seemed about right to Jagdea. She adored her Bolt. It was muscular, indomitable, responsive.

Except on days like today. The port fan was simply not running clean. There was nothing on the display, but she could feel it, something in the rhythm of the engine tone.

She checked the fuel. Roughly a third gone, and they hadn't opted for reserve tanks. She keyed the vox.

'Umbra Four-One Leader to Four-One Flight. Let me hear you.'

'Umbra Three, Four-A.' Of course he was. Van Tull was always Four-A.

'Umbra Five, I'll be fine once I've remembered what the controls do.'

'Roger that, Five. I know the feeling,' Jagdea returned.

'Umbra Eight. Okay here.'

Marquall sounded unhappy still. The stupid business with Gettering had knocked him back, the last thing a novice wanted on his first day out. He'd tried to make light of it, remarking that his Bolt was now called *The Smear*, because Racklae hadn't had time to do any more than paint out his nose art with a wash of undercoat. But Jagdea knew he'd been hurt.

'Let's refresh the pattern, flight,' she said. 'Eight, you slip into point, Five and Three change over. I'll take the hanger.'

They all responded, 'Okay'. A nice little manoeuvre test to get them flexing their brains Jagdea reckoned, and getting Marquall up in what was technically lead position might do his confidence some good.

'On the mark... three, two, one... execute.'

Unit fours flew in a line formation, with one machine forward and another two flanking to rear on either side. The fourth, or 'hanger', flanked one or other of the wingmen to rear, forming an asymmetrical V. It was an excellent pack formation, each pilot covered by his comrades, the hanger able to switch from side to side as needed. Currently, Jagdea was in point, with Van Tull to her port and Espere to her starboard, Marquall at Espere's five as the hanger.

On her mark, they shuffled the deck. Jagdea throttled down and slid back out of the point of the V. Van Tull rolled three-sixty high and Espere did the same, but in reverse and low, until the two wingmen had swapped places. Marquall peeled out low, then gunned forward under the V and pulled ahead before dropping to cruise speed and coming up gently. The two wingmen then matched speeds and flanked him sweetly to his five and seven. Jagdea throttled back again, just a touch, and came around onto Espere's five.

Textbook. The first thing that had gone right all day.

'Nice work, flight. Very slick. Let's stay put for another five.'

The undercast was thinning. They had about six-tenths cloud now, and dark patches of the Lida's arable valley appeared below them, distant patchworks of field-systems, irrigation webs and hydroponic rafts.

'Flight Leader?' It was Van Tull.

'Go, Three.'

'Check your auspex. I'm tagging eight or nine contacts below us at twelve kilometres, south, inbound.'

Sure enough. Jagdea's scope showed seven pippers, moving north-east at under three thousand metres. Not eight or nine, but that could just be the conditions masking returns.

'Umbra Four-One Leader to Operations. Come in, Operations.'

'Receiving, Umbra Four-One Leader.'

Jagdea reached forward with her heavily-gloved left hand and transmitted the auspex fix.

'Four-One Lead. Should there be anything up?'

'Plenty, Four-One Leader, but not there.'

'Understood, Operations. We'll check it out.' Jagdea shifted in her seat, and tweaked the air-mix a little richer. 'Lead to flight. I'll take a look.' That was the hanger's job, to peel off for sweeps. 'Hold it here and come around three points south.' There was no time to shuffle the deck again, which meant she was leaving Marquall at point. A good idea? No time even to worry about it. 'Umbra Eight, you have point. Stand by to stoop if I need you.'

'Read that, Leader. I've got it.'

At last. A touch of excitement in the boy's voice. Good. He could do with this. Besides, Van Tull was right there, solid and dependable. And Espere was a consummate wingman.

Jagdea kicked the afterburners a touch and rolled out, feeling the delicious punch of G as she inverted and began to dive away, wide, to the left of the trio V. The long dive loaded power into her wings, and she was touching two thousand kph as she closed on the targets. Enough load to pull off beautifully if they were friendly. Enough punch to turn it into an intercept if they weren't.

Five kilometres and closing.

Four.

The sky was suddenly very clear, less than four tenths cloud. The vast green rift of the Lida Valley stretched out beneath her, and for the first time she could see the hazy line of the Makanites.

Three kilometres. There they were. Below her still, but closing at an alarming rate because they were travelling towards

her, and adding her speed to their own. Nine machines. Clustered rather than in formation.

At two kilometres, she identified their pattern. Cyclones. A flight of Cyclones, Enothian PDF. The delta-winged double props were painted in a grey and white dazzle, and running north hard, possibly at the top of their performance.

What the hell were they doing here? Were they... running?

Instinct made Jagdea flip off the red safety covers of her main guns.

'Cyclone intruders, Cyclone intruders, this is Umbra Four-One Leader-' she started to say into her vox-mask.

But she stopped. One of the tail-end Cyclones wobbled and exploded. The brief fireball was fuel-rich and sent streamers of white smoke twirling away into the clear air. The flaming debris dropped towards the field-system below.

Something crimson and hooked ran in past it so fast it was climbing out of range again before Jagdea had realised what it was.

'Bats! Bats! Bats!' she yelled into her vox.

Guns live, Jagdea turned and rolled in on them, her Thunderbolt trembling with power. Six Locust-pattern bats, the lightest and most nimble of the Archenemy's vector-planes, all painted crimson or mauve, were harrying the heels of the Cyclone pack.

They were all over them. To her left, she saw another Cyclone explode, and another pitch left, trailing tarry smoke as it foundered down in a wide sweep towards the ground.

Two Locusts slipped under her, but she had the third, braking back to trim over on another Cyclone. In the hairs, pimper blinking.

Jagdea thumbed the gun-stud.

Serial Zero-Two lurched as the twin-linked lascannons in the nose spat off.

Brilliant daggers of light flew out of her machine, zagging down through the sky towards the bat. Struck, it rolled over and staggered sideways, then started to make white smoke as it curved away, falling, falling.

'Bag one,' Jagdea snarled into her mask. 'Four-One Leader to flight, I have engaged. I repeat, I have engaged.'

She half-heard a response from Marquall, but the meaning of it was lost as she inverted again, viffing hard to increase her turn rate, her ears popping with hard-G as she sidestepped an incoming Locust. A glimpse. The blinking flashes of the gun-ports, the blur of mauve wings.

As she came nose up, throttle out as far as it could go, she saw two Cyclones blunder past, followed by a banking Locust. All three were in view for less than a second.

None of Umbra Flight were carrying rack weapons on this sortie, certainly nothing guided or air-to-air. Jagdea would have to rely entirely on boresight shooting.

She pushed the nose over and kicked right rudder, heaving the heavy machine around. The horizon swung madly. A Cyclone went by under her, emitting sporadic brown smoke. The banking Locust had already pulled out of sight, but there was another, scarlet like blood, turning in towards the wounded Enothian machine.

She made another deep dive, fans shrieking, G pressing the mask into her face and making her see spots. She had the Locust for a moment. Then it viffed sideways on its reactor jets, a non-ballistic wobble to the side, but instinct set her ready to do the same and compensate. It was purely a gut thing that she got it right: the Locust had gone the way she would have done.

Jagdea punched las-shots at it and hit something, because the slipstream suddenly filled with black smoke and shreds of wing casing. The Locust vanished, then she made it out again as she rolled. It was heading away east. Was it going down or running? There was no way to confirm. The old, foremost rule: don't stay on a target.

She came around again and made a shallow climb that slid her between two of the racing Cyclones. Her auspex began bleating. Something had a lock on her. She rolled, craning her head back over her left shoulder, then her right. Where the hell was it? Las-shots scorched past her port side and her machine bucked hard. There were suddenly raking scorch marks on her port wing. She rolled and turned again. Still the lock held. More shots, stitching past on her right now. She dipped her wing and banked out, catching her speed and opening the reactor nozzles so she almost turned end on end. The Locust went right by her,

overshooting. She saw the bone-white kill marks under its canopy sill.

THREE THOUSAND METRES above her, Marquall began his turn, standing on his port wing, gazing down at the spiralling machines through the cloud cover below. Van Tull and Espere matched his turn.

'Stoop and sting,' Marquall instructed. God-Emperor, but he'd waited his whole life to say that for real.

'On your lead, Eight,' Van Tull responded calmly.

'Just say when,' added Espere.

'My mark... three, two... mark!'

The three Bolts curved away, speed climbing as they dropped. Intercept dive. Marquall could see Jagdea, and two of the bats. The other machines were local prop-drives. He was coming down on them so very fast...

Guns! Throne of Earth, he'd almost forgotten to switch live in his excitement. He wrenched back the switch cover. There was a bat, snaking left under his wing. Surely, they'd seen the three Bolts coming down on them? Who cared?

He had a lock, and he squeezed. His machine rocked as it unloaded. Marquall swore aloud. He'd meant to select auto-cannon, but the toggle was across on las. He'd sprayed off almost half his battery load in one go and not even hit anything.

Except... Over there, a Cyclone. Falling, coming apart, weeping flame. Marquall blinked hard, sweat drooling inside his mask. *Shit, no!* Please say he hadn't done that! Please!

'Eight! Have you got a malfunction? Marquall?' Van Tull's voice exploded out of the speakers.

Marquall snapped awake. He'd only been staring at the Cyclone for a second or two, but that was more than enough. His dive had punched him down through the fight layer. A miserable overshoot.

'I'm okay, I'm okay!' he yelled, and instinctively pulled on the stick. It was a rookie mistake. He was coming up far too hard, bleeding off all the power he'd gained from the dive as his machine struggled to climb again. His airspeed dropped to a crawl.

'You stupid fool!' he cried aloud.

'Eight? Say again?'

'I'm all right!' he snapped, swinging into a wide, curving turn to nurse some speed back into his wings. Almost at once, a Locust went past in front of him. With a jolt, he fired wildly, missed.

Pearly las-shot dwindled away in front of him. A tone sounded. Weapons batteries out. He'd just done it again. He hadn't deselected, and now his primary weapons were spent and dry. All thirty shots wasted in two futile bursts.

JAGDEA HAD LOOKED up as her three wingmen came stooping into the fight. Van Tull's machine went over across her two, and expertly splashed a banking Locust. The bat fire-balled, and Van Tull's Thunderbolt rolled as it swept through the flame wash, its slipstream sucking fire and debris out behind it in a curious string. Espere made a fine pass, but his chosen target viffed at the last moment and went wide. Espere flattened neatly, dummied, and then rolled out left chasing another bat.

Jagdea wasn't quite sure what was going on with Marquall. The kid had come in like his arse was on fire, and unloaded a ridiculous quantity of las-power. Virgin nerves? Maybe. Maybe that explained why he'd also dropped long and then mushed off all his power in the worst dive recovery she'd seen outside of flight school.

She wanted to break off and go to cover him, but the Locust was back on her, getting intermittent locks as she jinked and twisted.

'Four-One Leader to Umbra Five.'

'Go, Lead!'

'Espere. Cover the boy, for Throne's sake!'

'On it!'

Espere turned his Bolt over and burned towards Umbra Eight. It was wallowing now, making tentative jinks.

'Eight, this is Five. You okay?'

'Yeah, I'm... yeah.'

'Eight, do you have a weapons malfunction?'

'Negative, Eight.'

'You just nailed the sky with what looked like full batteries.'

'Negative, negative. I'm fine.'

Espere shook his head. He was tense himself. Very tense, and it wasn't just the fly-fight. Alone amongst the pilots of Umbra Flight, Pers Espere had not settled well with the Thunderbolts. He missed his old Lightning more than he could explain. In dispersal, the others would sit around, lauding their Bolts, and talking about them like they were lovers, wives, husbands. Espere just didn't feel that way. His machine, serial Nine-Nine, did not suit him. It was an old machine, a veteran bird, lovingly maintained by the fitter teams. Espere didn't know if it was Thunderbolts in general that disagreed with him, or Nine-Nine in particular. He was fighting with it all the time, wrestling to get it to do what he wanted. He had come to loathe the prospect of each sortie.

In an Imperium where diligently-maintained war machines were often ten, twelve, fifteen times older than their pilots or drivers, there were plenty of tales of particular planes or tanks carrying a jinx. Cursed machines, plaguing the lives of their users until they were themselves destroyed. Serial Nine-Nine had a long and patchy record. Six pilots dead or maimed at the controls, two bad landings, three major refits. Espere had once asked Hemmen, his chief fitter, if Nine-Nine was jinxed. Hemmen had laughed, not altogether reassuringly, and said not. The following morning, there'd been a refuelling mishap. A junior fitter had been torched so badly he'd left the skin of his hands fused to Nine-Nine's fuselage.

He tried not to think about it, even though he'd made four kills in his old Lightning, and none in this machine. It was constantly coming home with shot-holes to patch.

Espere settled in beside Marquall's machine. Espere was an expert wingman. He knew how to fly cover and watch a fellow pilot's back. That's why Jagdea had called him to do this, and that's what he'd do. But he was tense. Marquall was alarming him with his antics. There was a gauge light on for a drop in lube-pressure. What was that about? Had he taken a hit he didn't know about?

Mind on the game, Pers. Mind on the game. The boy needed all his help.

'Come about, Eight. Let's see if we can't do some good here.'

He looked over at the machine alongside him, and saw Marquall's red-helmeted head nod eagerly, his thumb coming up. Sunlight glinted off the canopy.

Sunlight glinted off something else.

'Break! Break! *Break!*' Espere yelled. The two Bolts scissored up and away violently as the mauve shape snapped by. Espere's damage recorder started beeping.

'Eight? Where are you?' Espere rasped, struggling with the stick as he tried to right the plane.

'I can't see it! I can't see it!'

Espere could see him well enough. Marquall was above and to his right, turning really badly into a terrible climb. Espere hit the juice and started to rise.

'Pull in, Eight! You're going to stall if you turn that tight!'

Silence. The horrendous weight of high G was preventing the kid from answering.

Don't black out... don't black out... Espere willed. Shit! There was the bat again, stooping in from the east, cannons blazing. Marquall's Bolt shuddered as it was hit, but the impact seemed to settle him out. Or snap him awake.

Espere hit reheat and came around hard in a port turn-and-roll, viffing gently to set himself up on the Locust as it crossed. He'd be damned if he'd let the kid get killed on his virgin run.

Espere opened up. Autocannons. A neat burst with good deflection. The Locust trembled, side hit, and then broke left.

Then, out of nowhere, there was another bat, coming in straight. Espere kicked the rudder and came in tight, shielding Marquall's bird with his own machine as he tipped his nose towards the attacker.

Marquall saw what was happening about a second too late. Espere's plane rocked wildly. Pieces of plating sheared off, part of the rudder, part of an engine duct. The canopy shattered but stayed on. The Locust went by under them both like a comet, doing well over 500 kph.

'Umbra Five! Umbra Five! Are you all right?'

Umbra Five wobbled and began exuding a trickle of grey smoke.

'Umbra Five?'

'I'm okay,' Espere's voice answered. 'I'm okay.'

ESPERE HAD BEEN hit, Jagdea was pretty certain of that. As she threw her bird to and fro, the bat on her neck, she glimpsed Espere take a slice-by.

Where was he now? No way of telling. She was banking and the world was coming round. The bat was right on her.

She pulled into a crisp turn. The auspex collision monitor suddenly squealed.

A Commonwealth Cyclone was flying right across her path.

Jagdea slammed the stick forward to avoid it, and went under the delta-wing, her turbofans shrilling as the Thunderbolt started to power dive. The ground was rushing up at her, the curlicue line of the Lida, the squared-off field beds and hydroponic assemblies. Getting out of this dive was going to be hard.

Target lock wailed. Okay then, harder still. The bat was on her, following her down.

Coming out of this, she'd have to pull three or four Gs. That was possible, provided the pilot was ready for it. She tensed her torso and legs, the recommended 'grip' manoeuvre, and yanked the stick.

Here it came. Wham! Already she weighed about a thousand kilos, feeling her heart and lungs pressing on her diaphragm. Spots in front of her eyes. The start of tunnel vision. 'Grip' position helped hold the blood in her head so she wouldn't black out.

She levelled off at around fifty metres, so low over the agricultural waterways her plane raised a bow-wave of spray off the field ponds. She glimpsed water aurochs scattering across a field. Bank to the right, to avoid a pump station's tower, then left again. Her slipstream ripped the plastek sheeting off a field of waterbeet. The bat was right on her six. Target lock. *Ping! Ping! Ping!*

She hit the speed brakes, her harness snapped her back into her seat. The bat went right over her, starting to turn and climb desperately.

She viffed into its reactive turn and hammered it with three salvoes from her lascannons. It turned to port, apparently unharmed, then suddenly screwed over into a nosedive and planted itself so hard into the middle of a hydroponics raft, the impact sent a tidal wave ripple flushing out beyond the field boundaries.

Jagdea turned south, rising, as a column of smoke boiled up from the farmland behind her.

'Lead, you with us?' Van Tull voxed.

'Four-A,' she replied. 'Umbra Five, you okay?'

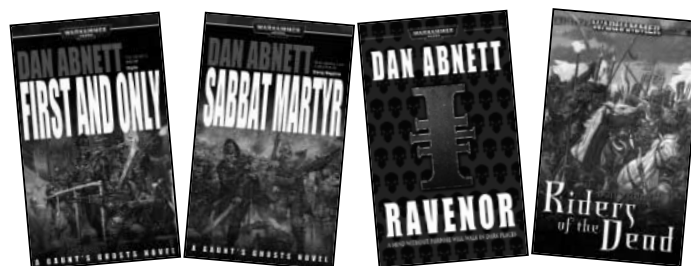
'Fine,' Espere responded.

The remaining Locusts had fled. Jagdea had Four-One turn in to escort the rest of the Cyclones home. She'd made two kills, with one probable, raising her career tally to nineteen. Van Tull had made one, raising his to eleven.

Not too shabby.

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