

ICE GUARD

An Imperial Guard novel

by Steve Lyons

After the withdrawal of Imperial troops is ordered from the ice world of Cressida, a squad of Valhallan Ice Warriors led by the indomitable Colonel Stanislav Steele are sent on a rescue mission to find a stranded Imperial dignitary and bring him off-planet to safety. But the occupying Chaos forces are everywhere, bent on the annihilation of the natives. If that wasn't bad enough, Stanislav and his troops face a race against time as Imperial Battleships in the upper atmosphere are preparing to virus bomb Cressida, destroying all life upon the planet.



About the Author

Steve Lyons has written novels, short stories, radio plays and comic strips for characters including the X-Men, Doctor Who, Strontium Dog and Sapphire & Steel. He has written several non-fiction books about television shows, and contributes to magazines. Ice Guard is his second novel for the Black Library.

•IMPERIAL GUARD•

GUNHEADS
By Steve Parker

IMPERIAL GUARD OMNIBUS ONE
(Featuring the novels FIFTEEN HOURS, DEATH WORLD and
REBEL WINTER)

DESERT RAIDERS
By Lucien Soulban

The following is an excerpt from *Ice Guard* by Steve Lyons, Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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This was the way a world died.

Chaos forces, the Lost and the Damned, had penetrated Alpha Hive, breaking down its walls. Hundreds of thousands of Guardsmen had given their lives to hold them back, to contain them in the outer zones at least, but the advance was relentless.

It was when the generators had blown, when production had ground to a halt, that the evacuation order had been signed. The civilians had been lifted out first, those few who could still be reached and who hadn't been slaughtered or turned traitor. Now it was the turn of the Imperial Guardsmen on the ground.

Cressida had been a proud world once. Its mines had been bountiful, and its refineries and factories the most efficient in the sector. Its standard of living, on the highest hive levels, had been good, and even the underhives had enjoyed a far lower than normal attrition rate. Cressida's subjects had been loyal and happy, with a consequently high rate of population growth. They had been in the process of building their thirteenth hive, and Imperial Guard Command had advanced plans to raise

another Guard regiment from their numbers within ten years.

It had taken less than half that time for Cressida to be invaded, overrun, lost, and finally abandoned.

Colonel Stanislev Steele stood in what had been a mine overseer's office on Alpha Hive's eighty-third level. An explosion had ripped through the room recently, and two of its walls had been torn out. Its ceiling hung precariously over him, and every few seconds the vibrations from a fresh blast below travelled far enough to make it tremble and threaten to give way.

From this uncertain vantage point he could look out over what remained of the outer zones – at the ebb and flow of battle, at fire and smoke and metal, and the bottle-green lines of his regiment, the Valhallan 319th, marking the extent of the enemy's progress through the ruins.

It made sense, of course, that a Valhallan regiment should remain on the front lines, fighting a rearguard action to buy time for the evacuees. Cressida's temperature had been dropping steadily for the past few years – some side effect of the Chaos incursion, although no one had been quite able to explain it – but the men of Steele's world were well used to the freezing cold.

The Ice Warriors, as they called themselves, were also renowned for their tenacity in defence. Fighting in close formation, they held their ground long after the men of most other worlds would have given way.

They found themselves driven back, all the same. Again and again, blossoms of fire erupted within their ranks, and their green lines were broken and then erased, to be redrawn, a little shorter than before and a little further back, but as firmly as ever.

Steele drew his armoured greatcoat tighter around his body, tucked his gloved hands into its loose sleeves. He could have sworn that the temperature had dropped another two degrees in the past day. He checked his augmetics, but they didn't respond. So, he chose to believe his own instincts.

Streaks of light scarred the overcast grey sky: the trails of spacecraft carrying more troops clear of Cressida. They, at least, would live to fight another day, albeit in a different theatre of war, one in which they might stand a chance of winning.

Steele could hear footsteps approaching. His augmented ears filtered the soft sound from the clamour of war cries and the crump of mortars. He turned to greet Sergeant Ivon Gavotski, a tall, thoughtful man, approaching middle age, unflappable.

Gavotski threw up a crisp salute, and announced, 'All done, sir. Orders have been sent to the eight men on our list, and to four more, in case some of the first eight are already dead or can't be located. I filed a requisition order for a Termite with the Departamento Munitorum, and I mentioned the cardinal's name as you suggested. I think I impressed upon the quartermaster the importance of this particular request.'

Steele nodded, and said, ‘I just hope the men we have chosen are as good as their records suggest they are. This could be the most important mission the 319th has ever undertaken, the one that will decide how we are remembered.’

He turned back to the battlefield, on which an array of Chaos-controlled tanks – Leman Russ Demolishers – had managed to gain some purchase in the rubble to advance. The Ice Warriors’ tanks were responding, moving clumsily into position, trying to draw a fresh defensive line across this new, unexpected front.

‘At any rate,’ sighed Steele, ‘it appears it may be the last.’

He wasn’t exaggerating. The war on Cressida had been long and hard, and his men, their ranks already depleted after campaigns on Dellenos IV and Tempest, had suffered heavy casualties. He had heard the whispers, heard that when all this was over the survivors of the Valhallan 319th would be absorbed into other regiments, that their glorious history would come to an end.

It was starting to snow – but in contrast to the pure white, cleansing falls of his home world, these snowflakes were a dirty grey in colour.

Trooper Pozhar squinted down the sights of his lasgun, and scowled as a bone-biting wind whipped up a flurry of grey snow, obscuring his view of the enemy.

His trigger finger itched with the enforced delay. On the front line, a man could be dead in a second, without even seeing what had hit him. Pozhar was determined to make each second count. Even so, he didn't want to waste power – not just because that would be a sin against the Emperor, but because he was down to his last pack. He had just clicked it into his gun, reciting the Litany of Loading as he did so in deference to the machine-spirits.

So, Pozhar held his fire until dark shapes began to loom through the haze, and then he thumbed his power pack setting to full auto and squeezed off fully a quarter of its charge in a deadly, low-level barrage across the rubble.

Many of the shapes crumpled, but as always there were more out there, many more. They clambered over the bodies of the fallen, bearing down on him. They were greeted by the percussion cracks of a hundred more lasguns, Pozhar's comrades following his lead, and a score of frag grenades burst and filled the air with a cloud of blood and dismembered limbs, but still they came.

Pozhar could see them now, and he felt a surge of rage at the sight of their tattered uniforms. They were the worst kind of foe: Traitor Guard. He didn't recognise their colours. So many regiments had turned on Cressida in the past few years that he had lost track of them all.

They were close enough for the Valhallans' cover to mean very little. The traitors raised their guns, and Pozhar's ears popped with the retorts of las-fire from

both fronts. He had been crouching behind a half-demolished wall, but it had been all but chipped away by las-beams. A lucky shot penetrated the fur hat, and the head, of the trooper beside him, and Pozhar was left exposed.

It could only be a matter of minutes now. Soon, the order would come to fall back again, to surrender a little more ground to the enemy. But Pozhar was a Valhallan Ice Warrior, and until that order came, he would not give a centimetre.

The traitors swept over him, hardly seeming to notice that he was alive and still standing. Perhaps they expected him to fall and be trampled, but instead he cannoned into the stomach of the nearest of them, disarming him, sending him to the ground. Two more traitors rounded on Pozhar, but he dropped beneath their lunges and swung his gun like a club, scoring a pair of palpable hits to a chin and a forehead. Then his micro-bead earpiece crackled into life, and he heard the urgent voice of a vox-operator, instructing him to fall back and report to the platoon commander.

He could almost have laughed at the timing of it. The traitors were pressing in all around him, and he could measure the rest of his life in seconds. It didn't matter. A red mist had settled over Pozhar, and he felt as if he was standing outside of his body as instinct took over and he punched and kicked and swiped, and jammed the muzzle of his lasgun into one traitor's stomach and blew out his guts.

It was over too soon, of course. He was borne to the ground by sheer weight of numbers. He reached into his greatcoat for a frag grenade and prepared to go out in a ball of fire that would consume ten or more alongside him.

‘Do you hear me, Pozhar? Get your sorry carcass back here fast. Word is, you’re being reassigned, by order of Colonel Steele himself.’

The explosion deadened his ears, heat searing his skin, and he thought for a moment that his senses were deceiving him because he hadn’t yet pulled out the pin.

The grenade that had gone off had not been his. It had been thrown by a comrade, evidently unaware of Pozhar’s position. Friendly fire – and friendly indeed, because, by the Emperor’s will, Pozhar had been protected from the force of the blast by the press of bodies around him. He lay on his back, drained by his unexpected escape, almost smothered by a pile of corpses. And he had been doubly blessed, because for now he was hidden from the rest of the traitors.

They were advancing past him, booted feet striking the ground near his head, more bodies falling – adding to the pile – as his Valhallan comrades retrenched and a fresh burst of las-fire scythed into their foes. The voice was still squawking in Pozhar’s ear, and he did laugh then, a near-hysterical outburst of relief and fear and defiance all mingled together.

It took him a minute to calm down, to be able to assess the situation in which he found himself. He was alone, behind the enemy’s front line, and the only way to

survive in such a position was to stay where he was, to play dead. Which was out of the question – because not only would it have been a dereliction of duty, but there was also the matter of his unexpected summons to consider, and the tantalising prospect that he had been chosen to receive some great honour.

If Colonel Steele had asked for him by name, if he had a mission that he felt only Pozhar could undertake, then Pozhar would be there. Whatever it took.

They had taken the enemy by surprise.

The Chaos forces had pulled their artillery from this flank, believing it shielded by the heaped wreckage of a city street, thinking it impossible for the Imperial tanks to break through here. They had reckoned without an Ice Warrior named Grayle.

Grayle knew vehicles – not like a tech-priest knew them, from the inside out, but he had an instinct about them. It was almost as if he could bond with their spirits, and push them to incredible new heights of performance. And right now, he was at the controls of a Leman Russ Annihilator battle tank, and its sixty-tonne chassis was heaving, juddering fit to tear itself apart, and yet it was finding traction, finding a path somehow across the ruins.

Trooper Barreski, up in the turret, was able to look down on the battlefield – and as a knife-sharp blast of wind parted the snow curtain for a second, he fancied he could see the expressions of surprise and horror on

the masses of the traitors, cultists and mutants as they saw what was coming their way.

Then the debris shifted, and it felt as if the tank had dropped out from beneath him, taking his stomach with it.

‘Hey, Grayle,’ he yelled out over the engine’s near-deafening roar, ‘steady on down there. You keep driving like that, you’ll get this crate decorated in a nice shade of this morning’s rations!’

As he spoke, the tank tore through the fragile remains of a building, its dozer blade collapsing the walls with ease. A stone beam bounced across Barreski’s turret, and he ducked, avoiding decapitation by a centimetre. He picked himself up, filled his cheeks with air and expelled it slowly. He was less concerned with himself, and more with his guns: twin lascannons, objects of great beauty to him. It would have been a shame to have brought them this far and not put them to their intended use.

By the Emperor’s grace, however, there was no real damage done. The beam had glanced off the left cannon, put a dent in its barrel, and the calibration had been thrown off a little, but he could compensate for that.

Then, with another great bump and a dip, they were on even ground, picking up speed, and the enemy was in Barreski’s field of vision again, on a level with the tank. No obstructions remained between them.

The Chaos forces were undisciplined, some paralysed in the face of the approaching juggernaut,

while some tried to fight and others simply turned and fled. They were getting in each other's way, falling over each other, their resistance collapsing before Barreski had loosed off a single shot.

The sponson gunners beat him to it, unleashing heavy bolter fire. Barreski bided his time, using his vantage point to survey the scene, seeking his optimum targets and taking aim, knowing that the lascannons' slow recharging cycle meant that he had to make every shot count.

He aimed for a giant of a man, towering over the rank and file, his face an eruption of pustules, his hair clinging to his head in clumps. Barreski could almost smell the Chaos stink on the mutant. He gave it both lascannons and let their recoil reverberate through him, through his bones, invigorating him with their power. The twin beams seemed to dissect the sky with their thunderous cracks, and when one of them struck true, the mutant was vaporised.

The Leman Russ ploughed into the Chaos army, pushing its soldiers back with its blade, mowing down those who couldn't get out of its way, powdering their bones and pulping their flesh.

Inevitably a few heretics survived – the lucky ones. And those that did found themselves behind the tank, in the sponson guns' blind spots – and, knowing their hand-held weapons were useless against its plasteel hull, they concentrated their fire on the one vulnerable spot they could see: Barreski's head.

He dropped down into the turret, abandoning his lascannons reluctantly; like the sponson guns, they only had a forty-five degree arc of fire. He swung the pintle-mounted heavy stubber, and laid down a discouraging hail of bullets in the tank's wake even though he couldn't see to aim it properly.

He was alarmed when a head appeared over the turret's rim.

The cultist must have just missed being crushed, found himself alongside the tank, behind the sponson guns, and seized the opportunity to leap on board, to climb. He was ill-equipped, his body armour salvaged from many sources, some too small for him, some too large, and his only weapon appeared to be a knife. Still, the element of surprise made him a threat.

Barreski managed to shoulder his lasgun in time. The cultist was leaping for him with a snarl when a beam stabbed through his heart. His momentum kept him going, but by the time he hit the Ice Warrior he was already dead. Barreski risked raising his head, peering over the side of the turret, to see a second cultist climbing towards him. A single las-beam was enough to shake the man's grip and send him falling, screaming, beneath the tank's heavy tracks.

The Chaos army was reacting, slowly, to the incursion of this lone Imperial vehicle into its midst, starting to turn its war machines around. This was what the Ice Warriors had wanted, of course. Their attack had been calculated to distract, to take the pressure off their front lines, and to give their comrades time to regroup, to

renew their defence of a stretch of land that would otherwise have been lost.

There were hundreds of foot soldiers in the path of the Chaos tanks, but their operators seemed no more concerned than Grayle had been about who they might crush beneath their treads. Explosive rounds burst against the Leman Russ's armoured hide, but this was where its lascannons, with their superior range and firepower, came into their own. It was not for nothing that they were known as tank-killers.

Barreski was in his element as his cannons roared. He concentrated his fire on a Chaos-held Imperial Salamander, its slight form surging ahead of its fellows, its autocannon spitting furiously. He scored one direct hit, two, three, four, until he had blown it apart. In the heat of the moment, he could almost have forgotten where he was, seeing only his targets lined up in front of him as if on a range.

And then those targets were close enough to start to hit back, for their own guns to do some real damage, and Grayle had slammed the battle tank into reverse, but Barreski knew he couldn't go far with the ruins still piled up behind him.

The cannons were out of power. Barreski yelled down at the loader below to work faster, to chug the heavy, new cell into place, to give him more shots while he could. The Chaos tanks had formed an arc in front of them, closing in, the port sponson gun was lost, and of course there was no hope of back-up out here.

He couldn't complain. The whole crew had known what they were getting into when Barreski had suggested this, when Grayle had confirmed that he could drive them into position, when the tank commander had approved their plan.

They had achieved their goal, delivered a good, solid blow to the enemy and slowed their advance, and that was all they could have hoped for.

This had always been a suicide run.

The war on Cressida was lost.

Trooper Mikhaelev had seen it weeks ago. There was something about the scent, the feel, of the air, as if the planet itself had given up. He had heard that whole continents had been transformed in days, verdant fields devolving into arctic tundra – and even here, where the walls of civilisation had only just begun to come down, there were patches of a freezing purple fungus sprouting amid the wreckage.

Mikhaelev knelt on the plinth of a statue – of whom he couldn't tell, as a frag blast had cut it off at the knees – and steadied his missile launcher against his shoulder. He saw the shape of an enemy tank, and he sent a Krak missile whistling over the heads of his squad, and of nine more ranks of Ice Warriors. He didn't wait to see if he had struck the tank, too busy with the cumbersome task of reloading. He should have had a comrade to assist him, but the last one had been cut down in the enemy's last push and hadn't yet been replaced.

When he tried to fire again, the launcher clicked and jammed, and Mikhaelev let out a resigned sigh and reached for his lasgun. At the rate at which his comrades were falling, he would be on the front line soon, anyhow.

It was all right for the clerks at Naval Command, he thought. They could afford to dither, so reluctant to lose a productive world that they had hung on to hope long after hope had died. They should have ordered this withdrawal long ago. They could have spared millions of Guardsmen to fight again – but to them, those Guardsmen’s lives were only numbers on a data-slate, so what did they care?

It didn’t especially bother Mikhaelev that he was going to die today. It just rankled with him that it would be for nothing.

Then a voice crackled over his earpiece, and rewrote his destiny.

He slipped down from the plinth and made his way deeper into the hive, still lugging the useless, heavy missile launcher along with him in case a tech-priest could salvage it. He thought about the summons he had received, and it cheered him up a little to think how irritated his commander would be to let him go.

So, Colonel Stanislev Steele was putting together a special mission, and he wanted Mikhaelev on board. The only question Mikhaelev had was... why me?

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