

## “Behind the Line”

by Katie Zajdel  
thumper@coronasquadron.com  
<http://www.coronasquadron.com>

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To Lieutenant Shaun Pellicer, the time immediately following a battle was more difficult to get through than the battle itself. Dogfights were charged events full of adrenaline, instinct, reflex and subconscious reliance on one's training. Once they were over, the adrenaline drained away and the instincts were replaced with more conscious thought processes, assuming the pilot was still alive. It was an abrupt and drastic shift in the state of one's being, a difficulty few rookies anticipated or knew how to deal with properly. To top it all off, the end of a dogfight rarely meant the end of danger, so like everyone else who participated in a battle, fighter pilots were often expected to remain alert and at the top of their game even when dealing with the post-dogfight void and letdown.

That was the state Pellicer found himself in as he guided his X-wing over the forested surface of the planet. Corona Squadron had been called in to provide air support for Rebel army units attempting to seize a small Imperial base. Things had gone better than they usually did on Rebel missions in Pellicer's experience, and after a relatively brief dogfight and a relatively brief surface battle, the victorious Rebels were out sweeping the land and the sky for any Imperial surprises. The Coronas' leader, Commander Quentell Mackin, had split them up by wingpairs for their patrols.

So far the sensors on Pellicer's snubfighter had been quiet, and he hadn't heard any reports from his wingman, Flight Officer Chryse "CC" Cerac, that indicated she had found anything either. Dutifully the pair continued their assigned patrol route, and Pellicer was secretly glad for the training he had received prior to joining the Rebellion that helped him better cope with that post-dogfight emotional crash and force his alertness level to stay high.

A short time later, he credited that training with allowing him to spot the flashing blip on his sensor console before his droid beeped to report it. "I already see it, Trip," Pellicer said to the astromech with just a hint of smug satisfaction. He glanced over the information and then turned his X-wing to head toward the blip's location. Keying his comm, he said, "Six, this is Five."

He noted with approval that CC had already begun turning to stay with him. "You have something, Five?" she asked.

"Affirmative. You should be able to pick it up in a second. Looks like a group of life signs on the ground. Might be one of our teams, but we need to check."

"I'm getting the reading now," CC said, "and I'm seeing the same thing. They're not too far away."

It only took a few moments for Pellicer's X-wing to reach the place where the life signs were supposed to be. They were in a small clearing in the forest, and he circled high above for a moment to get a first look at whatever was down there.

He was able to make out some figures. A group of humanoids in green was standing in positions roughly scattered around another group of humanoids, this one in dark blue uniforms

and standing huddled together. No one seemed to be moving much, especially the blue uniforms. A few seconds later, some blaster bolts flashed into being, and then the humanoids in dark blue uniforms were no longer standing.

“What?!” In one heartbeat Pellicer was changing his sensors to the most focused and detailed setting available. “Six, did you see that?!”

“See what? What’s going on?”

Pellicer didn’t respond and instead pitched his fighter almost straight down, aiming his X-wing’s nose directly at the clearing. He tried to interpret what his sensors were telling him on his short way down, and he was getting a much clearer picture now. The life sign blips resolved into five lifeless bodies together and about ten living ones scattered through the rest of the clearing and now moving quickly toward the trees. When Pellicer finally leveled out at treetop level, he saw that the humanoids in green were some of the Rebel soldiers out patrolling the surface. Corona Five made a tight loop over the clearing and banked steeply to get a good view out his side window at the blue-clad bodies. He recognized the uniforms as those of Imperial scientists.

Pellicer knew he really shouldn’t, but he kicked in his repulsors and landed beside the group of bodies. He unfastened his seat restraints, left his helmet in the cockpit and jumped to the ground, then cautiously made his way closer to the bodies. This was one time it didn’t please him to be right: they definitely were Imperial scientist uniforms, and each person had been shot only once, directly in the chest. One had fallen in such a way that his hands were visible, bound together behind his back. From what he had seen and was seeing, Pellicer’s mind was drawing conclusions he desperately didn’t want it to draw.

“Trip, get as good of a holo image of these as you can.” Careful not to touch the bodies, he slowly backed away from them toward his X-wing, and then he looked around the rest of the clearing. There was no one in sight. “What’s going on? What happened here?” he called to the unseen Rebels. There was no answer.

It only took one more minute for him to be back inside his cockpit and heading skyward. “Come on, Six, we’re heading back,” he said darkly through a tightened throat.

CC broke off from flying high cover for him and settled into position off his wing. “What’s happening?” she asked.

“Not over the comm,” Pellicer said shortly, ending that discussion. He switched frequencies to a private one with the Coronas’ squadron leader. “Lead, Five.”

“Go ahead, Five,” Commander Mackin replied from wherever he was out on patrol as well.

“Sir, there’s something of a...situation. I’m heading back to the base camp with Six, and I really need to talk to you in person immediately.”

“Copy that, Five, I’ll be right there.” Mackin’s voice was all business now.

“Thank you, sir. Out.” Pellicer closed the transmission and pushed his throttle in even more.

The flight back to the Rebels’ temporary base camp took less than ten minutes, but it was a constant battle for Pellicer to remain in control of himself during that entire time. If what he thought he had seen was true—and he was pretty certain it was—then it was making him so thoroughly disgusted and angry that those emotions were becoming physical sensations in the pit of his stomach. His squadmates probably wouldn’t have even thought it was possible for him to get so worked up over something.

Finally Pellicer and CC set down at the edge of the base camp. “Trip,” Pellicer said to his

droid while he powered down his fighter, “encrypt all the sensor data from this patrol and be sure to attach location coordinates to the place where the scientists were shot. No one is to gain access to that sensor data without my permission except for me and Commander Mackin, understand? And make a backup copy in your own memory banks too.”

The droid whistled an affirmative, and Pellicer again climbed out of his cockpit and jumped to the ground. CC walked over to him, looking confused and concerned. “Scoop,” she said, addressing Pellicer by his callsign, “what’s going on? You look—really agitated. For you.”

“Mack is going to meet us here,” he answered. “I have to talk to him.” He stepped beside her and lowered his voice. “I think I saw some Rebel soldiers shoot some Imperial prisoners in cold blood.”

CC’s eyes widened. “What?!” She at least managed to keep her voice down. “Are you sure? That can’t be…”

“Not every Rebel is a goody-goody hero, just like not every Imperial is a horrible monster,” Pellicer said harshly. “A lot of Rebels are only here for revenge against the Imps. And those Imperials were COMPNOR scientists. Not military members, but *scientists*, and *bound* scientists at that. No military training to speak of, and they had probably fled the attack.”

CC seemed to be at a loss for words. “But—” she started to say, then she broke off as something caught her eye beyond where Pellicer was standing. She gave an almost imperceptible nod with her head in that direction, and Pellicer turned to look. A Rebel Army captain was purposefully walking toward them.

Pellicer turned to face him, sweeping his eyes once over the sky as he did so. No sign yet of Mackin’s fighter. With a deep breath to compose himself, he briefly exchanged salutes with the captain when the captain came to a stop in front of him.

The pilot forced his expression into the best sabacc-face he could manage and kept his voice neutral. “Captain.”

“Lieutenant.” The blond captain seemed to size him up, and Pellicer was certain that the captain knew what was going on. “Find anything on patrol?”

“No Imperial ships, sir,” said Pellicer.

“And you were patrolling the northeast sector?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see. You sure got back here in a hurry. Didn’t expect any of the starfighters back for a while yet.” The captain considered his words. “I got a report from a ground team out there saying an X-wing essentially buzzed them.”

“I wasn’t low enough to buzz anything, sir, not with all the trees. I saw some lifesigns on my sensors and needed to get close enough to do an ident on them in case they were enemies.”

The captain must have decided that Pellicer knew more than he was letting on, too. He leaned closer and asked in a low voice, “Listen, Lieutenant, just what do you think you saw out there?”

That question confirmed Pellicer’s suspicions about the captain’s level of knowledge. “That’s for me to discuss with my commander, sir.” His voice was equally low and unyielding.

“No, Lieutenant, you didn’t see *anything* out there.”

Pellicer felt a small twinge of victory and righteousness amid the anger and disgust. The fact that the captain wanted him to keep quiet about what he had witnessed was proof enough for the pilot that he needed to press forward with it. “Actually, Captain, I believe I did.”

The captain shook his head. “Look, whatever you thought you saw wasn’t what actually

happened.”

Blast it, where was Mack? “I can’t and won’t make that determination, sir,” Pellicer answered. “I’m just going to give my report and let my commanding officer take it from there in whatever direction he sees fit.”

“But don’t you see?” the captain said in exasperation. “Reporting it won’t help anything. It’ll only hurt the Rebellion. A report will launch an investigation, which will take time, resources and personnel away from more important things. We’ll also lose anyone you report for a time until they’re cleared, and we’re too short on manpower here to be able to afford losing anyone. If you make a report and get people worked up over nothing, you’ll be doing more damage to the Rebellion than anything those soldiers might have done. Besides, how can fewer Imperials in the galaxy be a bad thing?”

Pellicer’s brown eyes flashed angrily, and he straightened himself up, fully aware that he now looked every bit the Imperial officer he had been trained to be before he traded in his TIE pilot flightsuit for this bright orange X-wing one. In fact, from his dark brown military crew cut all the way down to his scuffed but obviously polished boots, that X-wing flightsuit was the only thing about him that didn’t scream “Imperial.” “Captain,” he said, forcing his voice to stay level, “I left the Empire partly because of behavior like what I just saw those soldiers demonstrate, and I won’t tolerate it or turn a blind eye to it here. Acceptance of that type of behavior in its members will destroy the Rebellion thousands of times quicker than any statement I can make or paperwork I can push through.” The pilot snapped off a hasty salute, about-faced and began to walk away.

CC was beside him in an instant. “Wow, you *are* mad,” she said under her breath to him in amazement.

From behind them, Pellicer heard the Army captain call, “Wait. I’ve got a brother in Starfighter Command, in a pretty good position. I can have some strings pulled—”

*Threatening to come after me through my own chain of command now?* Pellicer thought disdainfully. He kept walking.

“—and I can get you your own squadron.”

In spite of himself, Pellicer stopped.

CC stopped a step or two later and looked back at her wingman in surprise.

“I mean it. He told me recently he’s looking for a few squadron commanders. X-wings. Perfect condition, just sitting around waiting to fly.” From the sounds of his voice, the captain was walking toward them.

Pellicer told his feet to move. Then he ordered them. Then he begged them. But they ignored him. They were listening instead to the other voice inside, the one that was made irrationally giddy by merely repeating the words *my own squadron*. His heart beat faster, his feet turned him around to face the captain, and Pellicer hated himself for it all. He clamped down hard on his tongue while he still had control over that part of himself.

The captain was indeed walking up to him. “I mean, what fighter pilot *wouldn’t* want his own squadron?” the captain asked smoothly. “And if you were in the Empire like you said, just from the tiny bit I’ve come to know about you from our conversation, I’ll bet you were a career-minded Imperial, weren’t you? A leader. A go-getter. An officer striving to rise through the ranks.”

Career-minded was an understatement. Pellicer’s personal goal had been to command a TIE squadron before he was the age his father had been when he was given his first command of

an Imperial ship. Beyond that, he had even set his sights on the admiralty some day.

“And here in the Alliance you’re, what, a lieutenant?” the captain continued. “You should be more. You could be.”

He had thought he would be by now. He liked the Coronas a lot, but there was no real promotion potential with them unless someone was killed, and that wasn’t something Pellicer hoped for.

“All you need to do is just forget about reporting anything you saw. Do less than you’re planning to do and get a promotion. It doesn’t work that way often. Win-win. So tell me, what are you going to name your new squadron?”

Pellicer stood there, frozen. Part of his mind could readily identify every bad attempt at flattery and persuasion by the captain, but the other part that was so enamored with the idea of actually becoming a squadron commander couldn’t care less about the captain’s verbal tactics. This was actually beginning to scare him: he had never truly realized before how much of a hold that particular dream had over him. Blast, he wanted this so badly he could taste it.

He could imagine himself in an X-wing, leading eleven other pilots into battle, or even leading them through drills and maneuvers to make them the sharpest, most successful squadron around. He could make them the best. All it would take would be hard work, discipline and practice. Practice fights, practice maneuvers. Training in tactics and even things like how to deal with that post-dogfight emotional crash. Then more practice. Until they were perfect.

In his mind’s eye, he began to lead his squadron on another practice run over a planet. Looking down, he saw that the planet was covered with forests. There was a clearing below. And in the clearing were green and blue figures—

That mental image jolted him out of his fantasy so abruptly that he jumped a little bit. Something deep down warned him that this wonderful squadron of his would be tainted with the memories of those blue-clad figures every day of his life and the memory of how he had dishonorably attained his squadron commander position. He was better than that, wasn’t he? How could he accept a blood-stained squadron? Pellicer felt some of that old disgust come back, though now it was aimed at himself. That self-disgust tarnished his glittering fantasies more quickly than any logic could. Squadron leaders earned their positions by being honorable and doing the right thing. To get there by any other way would be an insult to the position and to himself.

He wished dreams didn’t have to die quite so hard, especially when they were within reach. But damn it, it was within reach...

The wind carried the whine of X-wing engines to him from behind. The weakening voice inside desperately tried one more tactic, connecting that sound to an image of his own squadron landing behind him. The other voice was stronger now, though, mercilessly smothering the desire-filled voice and stating in no uncertain terms that the sound belonged to Mackin’s fighter.

Pellicer noticed that CC had stepped into his field of view. “Scoop?” she asked. Her normally cheerful voice sounded worried.

Career-driven Imperials would kill themselves for letting an opportunity as big as this one go by...but Shaun Pellicer wasn’t exactly a career-driven Imperial anymore. He swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth and forced out his words. “I’ll be giving my full and detailed report on everything I saw during my patrol to my commanding officer. He can proceed with it as he sees fit.” He was glad he was done talking because his throat had tightened again.

Foregoing the salute this time, Pellicer turned and walked toward Commander Mackin’s

X-wing.

*“They say that every man has a price at which he'll do anything. I like to think it's the other way around: every man has a line; a line he won't cross over no matter what the cost.” -Robert Fraser, “The Blue Line,” Due South*

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*The End*

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