

The Twilight War

Part V

By: Kenai

Tracer rounds scythed through the air as the griffon formation made another strafing pass and the young second lieutenant huddled down in her foxhole tighter. Damn it, this was *not* supposed to happen; Equestria had been at peace when she joined, she just wanted a way to pay for college! "I think" she yelled over the roar "we've really stepped in it Sergeant."

"Well now Cider" the older Sergeant admonished "such is life. I'd hate to see it ruin your sunny disposition, ma'am."

Second Lieutenant Cider smirked in spite of herself behind her visor, stretching what little bit she could tiredly in her hole. She herself had been fighting for about 72 hours continuously, and was hopped up on the harsh stims the doc had given them. Everypony was pretty raw at this point, but survival instincts had overridden any tendency towards infighting or complaining. Cider flinched again as a cluster of rockets streaked overhead right into the side of the command tent, flames shooting out the flap as the canvas structure was immolated. Bumping up the magnification, she could just make out the armored form of General Archer trotting out, somepony slung over his back and flames licking at his own armor. Cider shook her head, it was almost as if the griffons couldn't kill him, merely make him angrier.

Almost as though the General was aware of her looking in his direction, a private com channel opened over the command net as he continued extinguishing the flames licking his armor. "Lieutenant!" he barked "You take your platoon up that damn hill and dig in. Get that trip-A battery back online, I don't care if Celestia herself drops out of the sky with an escort of dragons, you hold that damned dirt mound, understood?"

Apple Cider went pale behind her visor; did he understand what was involved in pushing up that hill? "Uh. Yes. Yes, sir, I'm on it." She shared a significant look with her Sergeant, even behind the visors. "Does he even realize how suicidal that is?"

"Ours is not to reason why" Sergeant Eiffel responded. He fished around in one of his armor's flank pockets, pulling out a letter. "Give this to my foals, if you would."

Cider accepted the letter wordlessly, nodding in agreement. The Sergeant's foals were currently staying with an aunt, for their mother had died when they were young. It was unfortunate that his duties kept them away from them so often, but such was the life of the service. Cider didn't even want to think of how her family would take her death. Gingerly she slid the letter into a pocket on her breastplate. "Let's be about it Sergeant."

The Sergeant took a deep breath, gathering himself. "Covering fire!" he yelled "Second squad, move up the right flank, NOW!"

As one the platoon responded like a well-oiled machine, first squad poking the barrels of their

weaponry up over their cover, spraying a hail of bullets into the top of the hill, the continuous growl of the miniguns carried by her heavy weapons specialists meshing with the sporadic roars of her rifleponies as they pumped suppression down-range. The Lieutenant joined them; changing targets with swift precision as she saw a dug in griffon flap his wings as if to take off. Digging her forehooves into the soft dirt, the pony grunted as she triggered the weapon. Griffon armor was thick, but their guns were big enough to cope; .50 caliber armor piercing sabot rounds blasted from her barrel in a bone-jarring muzzle flash of flame, large casings falling around her and filling her hole as she tracked her target. Three rounds punched through his thinly armored wing, tearing a hole in the delicate membrane and shattering the wing joint. The unfortunate griffon flopped to the ground, blood pouring from the wound. His comrades were quick to react, dragging him behind the anti-aircraft emplacements atop the hill.

Second platoon took advantage of the lull to move forward, reaching half-way up the hill before the fire became too thick, one of their number (Private Daisy, a distant part of Cider's mind remarked)collapsing as return fire rendered her chest bloody tatters, the rest of second squad digging in behind what cover they could. "Dump yer K-racks and move up!" the Lieutenant ordered.

The K-rack was a staple of the Equestrian Army; in lieu of the grenades most armed forces were accustomed to, the Equestrian armed forces carried an array of micro-rocket launchers on their backs. Aimed by the main weapon's sight, they were laser guided and had a fuse that could be set to multiple detonation modes from contact to air-burst. Each army soldier carried four. Those of her platoon that still had loaded K-racks fired, small rockets tearing through the smoke-filled sky. Reaching their pre-programmed air-burst altitude, they detonated, chain of explosions forcing the griffons back down as lethal fragments showered the ground around them.

Moving up with the first squad, the Lieutenant stopped only to prod the second sqad. "Move! Up that hill or the griffons will be the last of yer problems!" Two of the privates looked at each other and back to the el-tee, she was right, they decided, about the griffons being the least of their worries and they resumed their advance. The Lieutenant flinched as the supersonic *crack* of a round barely missing her head whizzed past her, only to watch as Sergeant Eiffel popped up, firing back on the unfortunate griffon with short, controlled bursts. A trio of neatly placed rounds hammered in through the griffon's visor, pulping her face and putting her down. The Sergeant nodded wordlessly, trudging up the hill after the rest of the platoon.

Only this war, a distant part of the Lieutenant's mind noted, would result in this craziness. They were damn near in hoof-to-hoof range. They had only another ten meters or so to go till they reached the top of the hill; the problem was the last three was a nearly vertical grade. "First Squad!" she bellowed over the hurricane of noise "Covering fire, Second Squad up 'n over!"

The platoon was nearly at the top of the small plateau; only a small ledge separated them from the AAA battery that was their objective. Even unmanned and deactivated the vehicles comprising the battery were impressive; quad-tracked mobile SAM launchers formed the core of the battery, with a handful of towed, quad-barreled, radar controlled Anti-Air guns to provide close-in protection. What griffons remained to defend the hill was huddled behind the battery, but Cider knew that was deceptive. Whoever was in command over there had to know just as well as General Archer that this battery was a

critical part of their defenses, they wouldn't yield easily.

The Lieutenant hefted her hoof up, armor and muscles straining as she edged over the lip. Bullets arced over and around her everywhere, friendly suppressive fire apparently having little deterrent effect. Her immunity didn't last long; the large caliber rounds favored by Griffon Mobile Infantry were quite capable of shearing even through ground armor. Impact after impact slammed into her armor, cracking the plates and thudding into her body. Cider uttered a strangled cry, pitching forward into the ground even as the rest of the platoon continued to advance.

Effiel saw his Lieutenant go down, eyes narrowing as he locked in on her killer. The griffon was obviously panicked, crouched down behind one of the Surface to Air Missile vehicles, spraying fire from its rifle. He had no more rockets in his K-rack, and he couldn't get a clear shot on her. It would have to be a melee kill. The Equestrian Army did not make a habit of engaging in close quarters battle, but it was one of those anachronisms they still trained in for this very occasion. Ostensibly, one would presume that a Griffon, with their powerful talons and higher agility would have the edge in such combat; what they forgot was that a pony in armor out massed a griffon by almost twice as much. The Sergeant flicked a safety off on his armor, and then stamped his fore hooves in the ground. Heavy, spring loaded blades clicked into position. Lacking opposable digits, melee combat became a little more difficult for a modern army, and the engineers that built their armor had gotten a little creative. Whilst Equestrian dress uniform still carried a lance for ceremonial purposes, they were far too cumbersome for battlefield use; instead they had opted for deployable blades in the fore hooves where they could be utilized with the most precision. Effiel crouched down on the other side of the vehicle, waiting for his moment to pounce. Watching as the griffon swung its gun around to engage another target, he pounced. Powerful leg muscles toned by a decade of PT and augmented by a layer of reactive material and hydraulics catapulted him up and over, his knives scything down and into the side of the griffon's skull with a sickening thud. Her comrades turned to engage him, but not even they had time to do more than utter a startled squawk as he turned and lashed out with his rear legs, knocking the lighter griffons to the ground with the force of sledgehammer. Follow-up stabs with his fore hooves put them out of their misery, crimson blood splashing across his armor as he dispatched them with cold detachment.

Triumph and relief flooded through the platoon as they realized what they had accomplished, though it was short lived. Sergeant Effiel trotted back over to the el-tee. She raised her head groggily, breath coming in heavy pants. He looked her over; all told he'd seen worse. The heavy-caliber rounds had cracked her chest plate, but the under layer held so she just had the wind knocked out of her, her legs were a little worse off, at least one round had scythed clean through her front-left leg. He stamped his hooves in the ground again, sheathing his blades. Gingerly he rolled her onto her back, sprawling the pony out in a decidedly undignified manner. Ripping off the Velcro cover, he examined her medical display. As he predicted, she was in pain, but otherwise healthy, with the armor's integrated tourniquets already in place. Typing in the medical override code, he gave her a small dose of morphine, rolling her back upright. She swayed in place, but stood, huffing and shaking her head to clear it.

"We take the hill?" she enquired.

"Yes ma'am."

A griffon ground-attack squad swooped over their companions in the distance, and Cider narrowed her eyes in anger. "Let's get that battery back online, Sergeant."

Eiffel nodded. The battery's original crew were all dead, corpses scattered around their charges, but they all had enough familiarity with the system to set it up, they just needed someone to bring the system back online. "Megabyte, get your flank over here!"

The armored pony trotted over obediently, even as the rest of the squad fanned out to start fending off the Griffons counter-attacking up the other side of the hill. The Lieutenant looked past him out onto the battlefield. Their pocket had shrunk more even in the short time it had taken them to retake the hill, and she could just make out the 2nd Brigade Combat Team engaged heavily in the distance, tracer rounds and missiles arcing back and forth. The pony came up to them, bracing as if to salute but catching himself as he remembered his surroundings. "Ma'am, sir" he nodded respectfully.

Megabyte was their resident "techie", if any of them could get their defense net back online it was him. "I need this battery back online yesterday, but we don't have the manpower or know-how to crew these vehicles, can you tie them into the tac net with the other batteries and let them control the guns?" the Lieutenant asked.

The techie hummed to himself as he thought it over. "It's not the best solution, but it should be doable. The problem is the guns. Respectfully, they are relics we never thought we'd actually need, and their firmware isn't compatible with the cross-"

"A simple yes or no will suffice" the Lieutenant interrupted, smiling in spite of herself.

"Oh" he seemed slightly embarrassed "then yes."

"Get on it then, we're going to have company soon." The Lieutenant looked down the slope of the hill. Already she could see griffon fire teams skulking around cover and behind trees. What were they waiting for?

She didn't have long to wait for the answer; the high pitched whistle of incoming artillery coming for them was followed by the massive explosion of a 155mm howitzer round, gouging out a giant fountain of dirt. Explosions began walking up the hill as the battery zeroed in on them, and Cider felt the cold sweat of fear trickle down her back, in spite of the moisture absorbing cloth she was clad in. Counter-battery fire answered from behind her, rumbling boom of the guns mixed with the whoosh of an MLRS battery. The artillery barrage ceased and the griffons made a break for it, suppressive fire pelting the ponies cover and the hillside. The Lieutenant ground her teeth; 12 ponies even with the advantage of terrain couldn't hope to hold the ground against what looked like damn near an entire battalion of griffons! Cider was about to issue an order when she felt the massive bulk of Sergeant Effiel pin her to the ground, just as a barrage of unguided rockets streaked in from the clouds, reducing the inactive anti-air gun behind them to so much scrap. The griffons pierced the cloud layer, swooping in over them and rolling neatly out of the way of the answering small-arms fire from the ponies.

Cider stood to her feet, stamping the ground angrily. Clicking through her com channels she

selected General Archer. "We've taken the hill" she said without introduction "but I don-" she was cut off as another rocket streaked overhead, explosion carrying clearly through the radio "don't think we can hold!"

"You damn well better!" the General answered "I've got a BCT about to be cut off and surrounded, I ain't got nothin to spare!"

"General" she said hotly "I'm asking you to re-task some support to this hill, or we're all dead!"

"And let more of them slip in behind BCT 2? There's nothing more I can do! Hold damn you, or I'll come up there and kick your flank myself! Archer clear."

Effiel stared at his Lieutenant, not needing to hear the conversation to know what had been said. "I take it we're alone."

"Copy that" Cider responded gruffly. "Let's dig in and hope they don't bring anything heavy to bear on us." Cider settled in behind some heavy ration crates, scraping away enough dirt to be able to duck down. An exultant whoop from behind her startled her, and she turned just in time to see a full barrage of surface to air missiles streak into the sky. At least that would be one threat she wouldn't need to worry about. All other sound of the battlefield was drowned out as the guns came online, spewing a torrent of proximity-fused rounds into the air.

"Here they come" the older Sergeant remarked. The El-Tee tore her gaze from the sky, attention forcibly brought back to the battlefield as grenades sailed towards them

"Down!" she ordered, dropping behind the crate. A grenade landed barely a meter away, detonating with a great thunderclap of noise and sending up a fountain of dirt. Lieutenant Cider popped back up, spraying fire at the horde of rushing griffons, some flying low to the ground, others galloping at them in a long, loping stride. Clearly they had abandoned all pretense of subtlety. "Gentlecolts" Cider said "Prepare to defend yourselves." Cider checked her sidearm and the ammunition feed into the rifle on her back.

The enemy was at the base of the hill now, popping heated smoke grenades that not even their thermal could see through to obfuscate their movements. The platoon filled the clouds with lead to little effect. It was as though they were pouring water on an ant mound, merely causing more to swarm forward. Eager griffons rushed through the cloud, emerging to fall short as the entrenched ponies mowed them down, and their comrades using their bodies for cover to return accurate fire of their own.

Cider winced as one after another of her own platoon fell to the onslaught. And another. One of her young privates fell to the ground, clutching at a wound before the pony next to him dosed him with morphine and he got back up into the fight. They were half-way up the hill now, grenades exploding all around the platoon with deep concussive booms. Time seemed to slow for Cider as a griffon; his armor decorated with the stripe of a veteran scaled the hill just as her gun clicked empty. She yanked her sidearm to bear, squeezing the trigger desperately, the massive revolver style weapon slamming back into its mount as the griffon fell backwards off the hill. The gun clicked empty and Cider ducked down,

flipping her visor to drop the spent cylinder with her teeth, slamming a spare home.

Sergeant Effiel toppled over backwards, staggering as a round slammed into his shoulder. The burly pony merely grunted, staggering back to his feet to return fire. Panic began to well in Cider as she realized how surrounded they were; griffons were now on the hill behind them, exchanging pot shots with one of her heavy weapons specialists even as the SAMs continued to fire into the sky.

Shearing through the tornado of bullets, missiles, and grenades enveloping the hill, a three-griffon formation blasted by overhead, sonic boom forcing everyone, griffon and pony alike down as it buffeted them. *"Wait a minute"* Lieutenant Cider thought to herself *"if that was griffon, it wouldn't have gotten that close."*

"Megabyte!" she called out to the pony still managing the SAM battery "Was that one of ours?"

"Yes!" he cried ecstatically "I've got the Supreme Commander herself on the horn, she wants to talk to you!"

The young Lieutenant sighed in relief; no more of her ponies would be dying today. "This is Lieutenant Cider, Second Battalion, Bravo Company, 1st Platoon, How can I help you ma'am."

"Lieutenant, are you the ranking officer on Hill 252?" Dash asked.

"Uh, yes, yes ma'am." she ducked as another bullet whizzed by. The arrival of the Air Force hadn't deterred the griffons: yet.

"Congratulations Lieutenant, you're now my forward air controller. I've got assets stacking up from 100 meters right on up to a thousand; you tell me where you need em."

"With pleasure, ma'am. I need immediate CAS on my position, bring it in danger close!"

"Copy that Lieutenant, we're gonna bring the hill down, I'd suggest you duck. 20 seconds."

Cider switched to the platoon net "Get your heads down, we've got support coming in 20 seconds!" She pushed herself down deeper into her hole, counting away the time. If even a single pony up there was off target even a little they were good as dead.

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Cider looked up as the first ponies streaked in, heavy flight armor adorning them. It was the dedicated ground attack armor, thick heavy plates supporting multiple pylon mounted rocket launchers and 30mm autocannon. Casings showered to the ground as they streaked by guns blazing, tearing through the onrushing griffons like so much tissue paper. Ponies in even heavier bomber gear flew higher, distant specks raining high explosive down on the rear lines of the griffons. Massive explosions shattered their

ranks as dirty orange fireballs incinerated them alive, concussive force reverberating through the ground under Ciders hooves. All told it was roughly 10 kilotons of high explosive, but the Air Force wasn't done yet. They arched off into the distance to relieve the beleaguered BCT to the north, and Cider watched, mouth agape as a familiar purple and green dragon pierced the clouds, improvised armor and weaponry strapped to his hide. Cargo pods on his flank opened, and free fall bombs tumbled to the ground.

The griffons were shattered; the day had started with them on the verge of victory, now half their number remained, and they withdrew at best speed back towards their homeland, ponies of the ERAF harrying them the entire way.

Cider slumped down into her hole, spent. It was time for a nap.