Battle 2:

After 5 hours of combat your tank is cycled out of the combat zone. The foggy rain that had hindered your aim finally clears and a few pale fingers of ochre sunlight poke through the acidic clouds overhead. Your commander, Lt. Campbell, orders a break to lounge on top of the steel hull sharing a few precious cans of vitamin paste (it tastes better than it sounds). It’s a departure from protocol, but not without reason. When you arrive back at the supply depot one of your crewmates, Sgt. Collins, is due for retirement. He and Campbell are the only 2 original crew of your tank E440 “Pom-Pom” (named for the sound of her autocanons and accompanied by a rather lewd painting of a cheerleader on one side of the turret). To mark the occasion, Campbell opens a hidden compartment and reveals a secret bottle of amasec while making a “shhhh” sign over his lips. After giving Collins the first sip the crew passes it round and takes turns teasing him about his future plans. “Don’t know”, he replies. “Never thought I’d make it this far”. You think it’s the first time you’ve seen him crack a smile.  
  
In the aftermath your crew is credited with 2 kills and allotted 3 promotions. One goes to Collins (an obvious choice) and the others to Jackson (more metal than man) and Nowden. L. Cpl. Moran lobbies to get you a promotion as well, but his efforts are met with cold replies of “All rank quotas filled at this time” from the administratum. Nonetheless, you appreciate his efforts.  
  
A few days later you arrive a few minutes late to assist with repairs on the tank. Campbell doesn’t care and you breathe a sigh of relief when you notice that you aren’t the only one who slept in. But soon your comrade’s delay becomes worrisome. “Hey guys, where the hell is Annette?”, you ask.   
  
The innocent question is met with offended stares from your crew. After an awkward silence Campbell says plainly, “We never had an Annette”. You think to smile but no one laughs. Very quickly you realize that he’s serious. Their heads all turn back to their work, leaving you to recall the Commissariat inspection the day prior. As your crew stood fixed at attention in front of your tank ,the Commissar and their psyker had stopped briefly as they waded past your crew. At the time you thought they had perhaps scribbled down a note into their massive roster, but you had not dared turn your eyes. Now you are certain what that note was.

Battle 3:

Good news for you Brendan. Your character Donavan Carscallen survived another battle. I played Liam last night and it was a rough 750 pt match. We were playing the relic mission themed as an Eldar ambush. He got the first turn and Eldar are so fast that he charged most of my army before I even had a chance to shoot. Not your tank, though. Your crew geared into action and pummeled 3 striking scorpions and a banshee first turn. But it wasn't quite enough. The remaining banshees danced through the bushes ahead of an exploding armored sentinel that bathed your vehicle in flaming debris. They leapt towards your tank, their ear splitting cries resonating inside the iron hull. It stunned you and the others gunners just long enough for them to dice the tech-priest escorting your tank. Not that you would have been able to track and fire at their mesmerizing acrobatics at such a close range anyway. That was when Jackson slammed the throttle forward and Pom-pom's engine roared into overdrive, her whirling treads ripping into the soft Earth. You glimpsed one of the Eldar twist effortlessly out of the way, and the other would have done the same had her flowing hair had not gotten caught in the spinning treads. Her masked shrieked briefly once before as she was dragged under the tank. Then...\*thud\*. Pom-pom zoomed through the bush in search of a better position. Campbell shouted over the intercom that wraith guard were approaching from the right and you agreed with his assessment that you'd all be seeing the Emperor much sooner than you'd prefer had they gotten any closer. From your sponson you saw guardsman squad 68 launch a desperate counter attack before disappearing back into the brush. After several minutes of driving the tank came to a halt. You heard the buzzing of hydraulics then the deafening "pom-pom" of the main turret as a shower of autocannon casings rattled onto the floor. You and the other gunners pecked at darting silouettes in the dense brush and you could swear that you hit one (you did 1 wound to an exarch but didn't kill them). Campbell called out a wraightguard kill from the turret and another heavily damaged. The crew erupted in cheers. But amidst the celebration rookie Mark Bowles was screaming into the intercom: " 'nother banshee 3 o'clock closing fast!!!" Jackson slammed into gear and pivoted pom-pom around to bring all weapons on the target. Each of them roared to life against the vaguely seen threat. You caught just one glimpse, but it was enough to assure you that this one was worse than the banshees you had seen earlier. Much worse. Exactly what happened next is hard to recall. In a moment that seemed to fragment like broken glass you remember a scream over the intercom, blinding flashes, molten metal dripping from gashes in the hull, gore spraying from Bowles' once perfect face, ripped wires sparking from Jackson's bionics, and Campbell harking desperate orders into the intercom. Moran must have leapt over to the driver's seat from the hull gun because the tank lurched into reverse, over several trees, possibly through the kool aid man's wall, and down of small embankment before coming to a halt. For some reason that banshee did not pursue you. Thank the Emperor. Because you certainly wouldn't be breathing still if she had.

Jason Nowden had been serving as Campbell's loader in the turret when the banshee's blade sliced through and decapitated him. The hit incapacitated pom-pom's turret, and after surveying the damage, the Magos commanded that the damaged turret be fully removed and pom-pom be re-purposed as a recovery tank. It was a sad day for the crew, not least for Martin Campbell, who served with her from the very beginning. But it seems that Martin was destined for other things anyhow. "I reckon you've had about enough.", the company commander told him. "We need to fill some vacancies in the general staff." You later find out that he's being taken out of a combat role to serve as an advisor. The crew can't help but feel like it's a major loss. But at the same time you're all happy for him. If any man deserved a discharge from the dangers of combat, it was him. He told you once of how he earned the Macharian Cross that now glitters atop his breast. "Ork warboss was smashing the eradicator tank up ahead of us. I couldn't get a clean shot at first but by some miracle the tank got moving again and everything lined up suddenly. So I gave the old greenskin a good stubbin'. 13 feet tall. Couldn't believe it." But that wasn't the half of it. When you first joined the crew you remember Collins making some jabbing remark about some distant paramour of Campbell's. It was the only time it ever came up. But beneath the man's rebellious façade you got the sense there was a private side to him. Perhaps this secret lady was even the inspiration for the cheer leader that /used/ to painted on pom-pom's turret. Unfortunately you never get the chance to ask him before he is transferred to his new assignment. Command confirmed the wraithguard and as a result your crew was allotted some promotions. You're a Lance corporal now - eligible to command a tank if it weren't for Moran being a rank above you. But rumors are abound that a fresh wave of recruits are shipping in soon. That'll cause a shake up for sure. You reckon that it's worthwhile thinking about whether you want to stay with this crew or transfer to commanding a tank of your own, and if so, what type you would request. Oh and one last thing. Your request for a bionic eye has been approved. But then Sgt. Ben Moran makes a tongue-in-cheek quip that everyone and their dog (quite literally) has a bionic eye these days. Only a bad-ass would go into battle wearing an eye-patch. He obviously only means it as a jab. But perhaps he's right? (The bionic eye removes the missing eye flaw and gives you the bionic eye skill. If you stick with the eye patch I'll remove the missing eye flaw and add "awesome eye-patch" as a skill.)

It’s a sunny and calm afternoon when your crew is working to tow a wrecked Chimera from a ditch for salvage. Destroyed in a recent air raid against its convoy, the hull is charred and holed. You consider the sight with a grimace, when suddenly the wind howls to life and a dark shadow blankets the trembling earth. You instinctively reach for your las-carbine, but as you pop open the hatch to cover your exposed crewmates, you find them in no apparent alarm; their necks arched upwards at the awesome behemoth above. It’s an Imperial starship. A troop transport, in fact. The deafening hum of its dual stadium-sized engines rumbles the forest and sends flocks of birds bursting from the trees. It plods through the sky above you and descends in the direction of your base. “New kids”, Guardsman Bowles comments. Then the crew returns to work.

That night the mess is filled beyond capacity with new, very pale, faces. After piling your trays with bland rations your crew searches for a spot to eat before Cpl. Wells shouts you over to a free spot. But no sooner have you settled down to eat before a bearded guardsman approaches.

“You fellas crew 440?”

“E440, yeah”

“The Major wants to chat with you.”

The crew trade some confused glances before Moran drops his cutlery in visible irritation. Cpl. Wells shoves what he can of his rations into his mouth you all make your way across the base to the officer’s lodge. Wells is still chewing on something when you come to attention outside the door. Jackson kicks him and whispers “Are you f-ing serious right now?” Moran adjusts his uniform and knocks, an obnoxious swallowing noise interrupting the tense silence.

The door swings open to reveal a hunched administratum adept with a pot-marked skin.

“The Major will see you now”

Moran, Jackson, and yourself file into the hallway beyond the door when you hear adept hiss at the rookies of your crew.

“Not you!”

You find the Major puzzling over a stack of papers behind a luxurious desk in his warmly lit office. He glances above his half moon-shaped spectacles and removes the pipe from his mouth, inviting you to enter.

“At ease, gentlemen. We’ve received some new tanks and I’m trying to figure out who should crew them. I’m afraid I’ll have to break up your crew. Jackson and Moran, you’ll each take a tank of your own. Carscallen …”

The major flips over a page and pauses, idly tapping his pipe against the desk while he considers the roster.

“Hmm, it looks like you’re an operation behind the others…I’d be willing to assign you a crew of your own. Or you could stay with either Moran or Jackson for another op. Up to you. But do tell me what gun you’d prefer.”

(There are three categories of tank to choose from. Siege (Demolisher, Eradicator), Standard (Battle Tank and Vanquisher), and Specialist (Punisher, Exterminator, Executioner)

The munitorium menial leads you across the supply depot. The mud, crisscrossed with tire tracks, sucks at your heels after every step. He takes you to a lesser-used corner of the depot where the cacophony of engines and machinery sounds almost distant.

“This one”, he says flatly, and points you towards the covered outline of a Leman Russ. The tip of its main gun juts out menacingly from beneath the camouflage blanket. You nod in acknowledgement, then approach to undo a few ties of the cover, throwing back a corner to reveal a weathered, battle-tested hull.

Impatiently you fold back another piece of the cover. As it peels away, you first find the remnants of nose art – eroded to the point of illegibility – then the much newer, brighter number, B185, stenciled next to it.

“Must be salvage”, you reckon under your breath. “Wonder what happened to the last crew.”

You climb to the turret, pulling back the rest of the cover as you move. Then, slowly but purposefully, you crank open the hatch.

A pungent, rusty, waft stirs below and a pale beam of sunlight sweeps across the interior as the hatch grinds open. Where it stops, a bloody handprint claws at the hull in mute desperation.

“Hey!” you call towards the menial in a moment of irritation that the munitorium couldn’t be bothered to even clean the gore from this blessed machine. But he’s gone, and only the muffled noise of distant machinery keeps the moment from being haunting. Shaking your head in annoyance, you click on a glow-globe and descend into the dark machine.

More blood, spent casings, and a healthy layer of dust coat the steel floor. Sweeping the casings to the side with your foot, you duck and twist your way to the driver’s station. In the light of the glow globe you can tell the mechanisms look worn but otherwise workable. Curiously, you push your eyes into the padded viewfinder of the periscope, seeing the opposite end of the depot projected behind familiar range-marking crosshairs.

“Don”

An icy hand tugs on your shoulder and you spin in your seat to confront the unfamiliar voice. But, nothing. Only a tattered lanyard sways from the knob of a silent radio. Your heart rate climbs to a thudding beat then settles as, gradually, the lanyard sways to a halt. Surely it was the just the lanyard that caught your shoulder. Surely.

There is a lot of work to do to get B185 in working order. Better find your crew.

That afternoon you assemble your crew. They’re a motley one, no doubt, and a few of them you recognize from the inter-platoon bloodbowl match a day earlier. They form up side-by-side in the parade square in front of the depot, awaiting your inspection. You wade past, sizing them up and comparing them to the roster. It’s the first time you’ve been on the harking end of some orders.

Andres, 25. Former administratum clerk. Based on the bloodbowl match he must have been a messenger of some sort, because you can hardly imagine a scribe who could tackle and weave like /that/.

Khim, 18. That can’t be right, can it? His face is red with acne and the way he stands at attention wouldn’t even cut it for a conscript. Might explain why he hasn’t even made the rank of guardsman. What kind of idiot would try to join the guard under aged anyway? He must really have something to prove. And at least he’s small enough to make a tough target.

Phillip, 34. Spent a long time in the PDF. And it shows. His marksman score is even better than yours. You think he’d make a good hull gunner.

Wells, 23. Also PDF. Also cocky. But his likeness to Phillips ends there. Whatever reserve he joined scarcely saw action…or even exercise.

Klein, 39. The oldest of the crew and, unsurprisingly, somewhat hard to relate to. But his stamina seems infinite and you reckon that he’ll finish any job you give him. Spent his life working the fields. That might make him a good driver.

Your tank prowls up the cratered street. Jackson’s Punisher is close behind, and its sponsons scan each crevasses of the passing ruins. Moran is up some other street.

You’re all here because recon reported a large force of the damned moving into the city overnight and it’s likely that they’ll try and break the line. Not if your crew has anything to say about it. Now if only they’d show their warp-mangled faces so you could –

The air ignites with blinding flashes of las-fire. Hisses and moans bellow through the tank as armor plates are seared by lascanon hits. At the same instant your gunners unleash sprays of blind-fire into the nearest ruins. But as the turret swivels round and you peer through the reticule, you just can’t find where those traitors are.

There! A lascanon beam flashes from a distant ruin and you see it simultaneously with the rush of superheated air that roars through your hull. A second hit from another angle sends the whole tank recoiling from the blast of its own armor vaporizing. Just as you prepare to take the shot, the power quits in a shower of sparks that culminate with the glow of burning electrical wire.

You drop from the turret to escape the flames but hit the ground hard as your leg passes right through the floor like some ghostly apparition. The left sponson where Wells once gunned is a mangled wreck, and you spend a moment in horror watching the fingers of a severed hand still twitching at the trigger, the body behind it now a choking cloud of ash.

You try to bring yourself to your feet, but once again your leg passes phantomlike through the floor. A jet of flame bursts from a hydraulic tube where your head would have been, and time begins to melt into slow motion.

The magazines. The whirling firestorm in the turret grows and swallows the battle canon shells. You whisper a final prayer to the Emperor, thanking Him for the opportunity you’ve had to serve His holy command, and prepare for the inevitable.

But then a hissing cloud of white smoke plunges the tank into darkness. Someone grabs you, and as they pull you through the emergency hatch you have the first glimpse of your missing leg. Pre-cauterized, fortunately, by whatever las-blast took it off.

Klein drags you to the safety of a nearby ruin, a fire extinguisher clanging at his belt, while Jackson’s punisher canon buzzes to life in the background. You count the others as they dart from the wreck. Andres, Philipp, Khim. Everyone but Wells.

The shock of your wound begins to wear off. Your breathing settles, and in moments you can speak again.

“Give. Give me your vox”, you stutter at Khim, who managed to bring with him the handheld back-up, and he hands it over.

With the image of that first las-blast still seared into your retina, you click the channel to fire support.

“Red Suzie, Red Suzie, this is Russ 185, gun emplacements at north edge of region bravo, requesting support.”

“Russ 185, Red Suzie. Mortars on their way. Stand by”

Muffled explosions rumble down the street. Staring at the potmarked shell of your tank, you are filled with anger. But at the end of the day, you survived, and those lascanon teams won’t.

“I’d call that a win”, remarks Andres.

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Days later, with the grease of your bionic leg still fresh, a salvage sergeant strolls up to you with the key to B185.

“Still ran. Not sure why you’d abandon her like that. You’re lucky I don’t write you up to the Commissar for giving equipment to the traitors.”

You’re doing your best to endure the crackling propaganda broadcast in the medical ward for the 754th loop when a commotion breaks out in the waiting area. Your curiosity gets the better of you, and so you throw the stained blanket of your recovery bed back and try to see what’s going on, only to be punished by an electric pain jolting up your thigh. Your bionic leg twitches, and the buzz attracts the attention of the spidery-armed tech-priest who promptly berates you with a garbled binary screech. An aged and much kinder nurse zips to your bedside to help you back in place.

“No walking until the muscles bind, my dear. You know that”, she reminds you.

Behind her the door swings open, an excited guardsmen pushing through.

“Vox just in! Our boys took the refinery!”

A wave of half-hearted cheers mixed with the usual moans of agony sweeps across the room. As the aged nurse moves to help another maimed soldier, you are left to ruminate on your own mixed feelings. Any victory is a good victory, no doubt. But after getting wrecked on your first operation in charge of your own tank, Horus-be-damned it hurts to not get to share it alongside your comrades. Guardsman Philipps in the bed next to you with a missing arm has a frown painted on his face, and seems to share the sentiment.

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You are awoken that night by the distant squeal of tank treads. Sleepless, you peak around the ward and find the coast clear. Pealing away the blanket carefully this time, you rotate yourself and set your feet to the ground. The tug of the bionic’s immense weight elicits a painful wince at first, but soon that weight disappears amidst the clicking of servos. And, spreading your arms to achieve shakey balance, you stand.

Slowly, you limp across the ward towards the door, confidence in your balance improving with each step. A silent rotation of the knob, a light pull, a cringe-inducing but undetected creak, and you’re out into the cool night air.

Rumbling towards the base is an enormous Hellhammer tank. Behind it, a convoy of Basilisks and other Chimera-derived hulls. But after counting the passing vehicles you notice one missing.

You limp closer and blend in with the gathering crews as the convoy pulls into the depot. It’s easy; the flood lamps of the depot are left dark so as not to attract enemy bombers, and the only lights are the flickering ends of cigarettes lifted and lowered between puffs of pale breath. The scene is one of screaming wounded, scrambling crews, and resting guardsmen, all set to the chorus of the still purring diesel engines in the blackness of the night. You search around futilely for a familiar face until you recognize a voice on a passing truck.

A swarm of silhouettes engulfs the vehicle where it stops and a line of stretchers streams away with the moans of the dying. The chill air is getting to you now, and you wade impatiently through the crowd until at last you find the vaguely familiar figure.

It’s Bowles, though it takes you a moment to recognize the deep scars across his face in the tenuous light. One of his arms is in a blood-soaked sling stuffed with gauze. The other directs the offloading, but has a small metallic chain drooping from the firm clench of his hand and glinting. He stops instantly when he sees you approach, and for a moment you both stare at each other while he breathes heavily with fatigue.

“I’m sorry, Don. I’m so god-damned sorry.”

He forces the chain into your hand and strides past, his chin quivering slightly you think, to join the procession of wounded and equipment as they vanish into the crevasses of the night. It’s a dog-tag. And though there is hardly enough light to read it, you can feel the engraving with your fingers.

M-O-R-A-N

Another battle, Brendan. I don't have time to write a narrative but here's the summary.

Your company was ambushed by a pocket of Tyranids that had recently landed on a marsh planet. Your commanding officer was expecting this, and so the opening volley of fire levelled the trees and blasted most of the genestealers apart before they had a chance to get close. Bowles was in a Demolisher tank and lobed a shell right at the feet of some monstrous beast, leaving it riddled with shrapnel and oozing colorful liquids. His gunners were poised to finish it off, but something went wrong. Nobody shot.

The beast got closer and vengefully ripped into the tank, spitting and vomiting corrosive venom into the enclosed space. You swivelled your turret to assist, placing the crosshairs directly over the beast's abdomen, and prepared to fire, but... didn't.

"Wait. Load AP!", you commanded after a moment of cool calculation. Your Russ' high explosive shells would wreak havoc Bowles' stalled tank if you fired so close. A whiff of Xenos venom might not kill them instantly, but a 110 pounder exploding 5 feet in front of them would.

Wheeler nodded and unloaded the last shell, slamming an adamantium-tipped shell in its place.

"Re-"

The gun kicked back with a loud \*pang\* before Wheeler had even finished the word "ready". The round screamed through the air with a unique whistle of death and plunged into the soft body of the Tyranid monster just step in front of Bowles' tank. The creature let out a mucousal cry and dropped dead on the spot. Venom-encrusted gashes marked the front of Bowles' tank, but you'd have to wait until later to find out if you had been fast enough. For now, there were more xenos to slay...

Your tank was beset by two lictors that massacred the guard squad guarding your flanks (they even got the legendary Sgt. Joseph Crump who was, spookily enough, on his 13th battle). They piled in and kept you from firing, but another squad of guardsmen moved in and put them to rest.

As soon as the coast was clear you rushed over to Bowles' tank. His driver and hull gunner had both been eaten alive. The rest of the crew were poisoned and clinging to life on death’s door. You didn’t know what could be done to save them, but the ever handy Klein did.

He fashioned a suction device out of spare parts and used it to draw venom out of the crew’s wounds. For two of them even this genius effort wasn’t enough, and they died foaming at the mouth. But it should have been 3. Bowles, despite having enough poison in his system to fell a grox, somehow pulled through. He and one of his gunners lived. They both earned a Triple Skull.

For your performance, your crew was allotted one Macharian cross to award to whoever you saw most fit. You could have given it to yourself, after all that last second call to load AP shells was certainly worthy, but that would have been in bad taste. You decided instead of give it to Klein. You owed him your life after the wreck that claimed your leg. And besides, he seemed to embody every positive thing one could say about agri-worlders. Private, down-to-earth, tireless, and most of all, trustworthy.

Later it was determined that that the recoil from Bowles’ demolisher canon had been so extreme that it had knocked the timing belt loose and stalled the engine. Perhaps your tank isn’t the only one with a less than happy machine spirit.