

The Myrmidon **by Avery S. Campbell**

Drill Instructor: Who taught you to make a bed, recruit?

Recruit: My mother, sir.

Drill Instructor (SCREAMING): YOUR MOTHER'S WRONG!!!!

Recruit: But dad . . .

"Major Tem told me to report to you," Captain Exo Merra said after saluting the colonel. His horse, sensing his hesitancy, abruptly stopped as he neared his former commander.

Colonel Damben did not return the salute. Instead, a scrutinizing glower searched the aging captain's bearing, looking for some imperfection that might be useful. The colonel, not much older than Merra, considered himself an expert at appraising human culpability. Broken men with something to hide made the best soldiers. They followed orders and knew their place. Egotistical, defiant, and ambitious men with no apparent flaws threatened the command structure. Major Tem, the annoying firebrand commanding the Royal Tamicon Fire Brigade and Merra's immediate superior, was such a man. Tem especially annoyed General Monmair, Damben's superior. The young Major was an ever-present reminder of the political machinations of Secretary Menziar, the general's rival for the ear of Prince Hektar.

Captain Merra's deportment was quite different than his young commander. He was much older than a typical captain. His graying temples and the crow's feet on the edges of his eyelids told the story of someone promotion had passed over.

"How long have you been a captain?" The colonel finally spoke.

"Not long. I was commissioned a captain after transferring to the Fire Brigade."

"And where were you posted as a lieutenant?"

"To your regiment, sir."

Colonel Damben, with an acknowledged nod, looked away. There was something familiar about the captain. "Lieutenant Merra?" He said to himself and then repeated the name. The captain sat on his horse and said nothing.

"Captain Merra, you owe me."

"Yes, sir," the captain replied, hoping the colonel would not dredge up the unpleasant memory.

"I don't think I need to go into details, do I, Captain Merra?"

"No, sir," was the captain's quick reply.

Drunk, very drunk, the colonel began to remember. It was after a lengthy battle with the Arooks. Pretty, young refugee girls, but one had not been an Arook. Such bad luck. The colonel shook his head.

"What did Major Tem tell you when he told you to report to me?" The colonel turned a wary eye to the captain.

"Nothing, sir."

"He didn't tell you about his part in the attack?"

"No, sir."

That was typical of Major Tem. He wanted all the glory. There was no need to share it with his subordinates.

"Captain Merra, you will command thirty Fire-Launchers. Twenty-four will join the main attack up the center towards the bridge. Take another squad of six to the far-right flank. Deploy them near the river's edge. Have them proceed parallel with the river. We have reconnaissance that tells us the Arooks will be moving up from the shallows in an attempt to break out and come around to our rear. You are to launch Tamicon Fire into the shallows and along the shore when you see or hear this movement. I will send a squad of archers with you as well. I want you to personally take charge of the squad on the flank. Do not act cautiously. Launch the Tamicon Fire and the barrage of arrows the moment you see or hear anything. Is that clear, Captain Merra?"

"Very clear, sir."

"The main attack will occur after you return to take personal command of the twenty-four at the center."

"Yes, sir."

It was dark when Major Tem's handpicked squad of twelve fire launchers approached through the shallows to head off the Arooks' retreat across the bridge. A crescent moon rose on the opposite side of the structure so it would not expose his men to the Arooks until it would be too late. So all Colonel Damben had to do was hold off the main attack until his men were in position. Then, as the Arooks moved back, his men would pelt the bridge's entrance with Tamicon Fire.

The squad made little noise as they moved in pairs through the water, one man with a launcher strapped to his forearm, the other totting the waterproof canister full of Tamicon Fire. They moved at an angle from the shore, wading further from the bank as they advanced towards the bridge. Major Tem wanted water about mid-thigh deep so that the movement through the water would cause little noise. At that depth, they could also keep the Tamicon Fire dry.

But Colonel Damben did not wait until Major Tem was in position. The flank on his side of the bridge charged forward while the center and the far flank remained quiet. The thundering hooves and the shouts of the men alerted the Arooks nearest Major Tem's squad. A splashing sound came from the shallows, which Captain Merra's men expected. They launched a quick round of Tamicon fire that ignited along the shore and illuminated the small force's advance through the shallows. A wave of Arook and Tamicon arrows descended upon the illuminated squad. In seconds, twelve Tamicon Fire Launchers and Major Tem were twisting and falling in the thigh-high water, caught by the current and taken out into the river's deeper parts. If they were not dead, they soon would be.

The main attack did not wait for Captain Merra to take command of the fire launchers at the center. Instead, it started immediately after the skirmish on the right flank. The Arooks quickly fell back onto the bridge. Only the mass of bodies slowed the Tamicon onslaught as the riders slashed at the crush of Arook defenders. As the dead bodies piled up, the horses stepped over and upon them, crushing their arms, legs, ribs, and skulls. Onwards, the troopers spurred their horses across the bridge and towards the backside of the city of Belamoz.

Once over the Trez River Bridge, Colonel Damben's cavalry hacked the initial Arook defense to pieces before coming to a halt at a more formidable defense line about two hundred yards from the bridge. Damben's infantry crossed the bridge in large numbers and secured the foothold facing the new Arook line. The colonel did not pass over with his men but stayed on the other side of the bridge.

"Colonel?" Captain Merra saluted as he, again, reported to his superior.

"You follow orders well," the colonel deigned.

"Yes, Colonel." The captain nodded, knowing full well what his orders had been.

"Major Tem has not reported back since completing his successful mission," Colonel Damben informed Merra. "Although I must assume that he and his men were killed, they did manage to make it across the river and secure the other side of the bridge for our advance into the city."

He did not look at Captain Merra after his statement, but he clearly wanted a response.

"Yes, sir," Captain Merra obliged, but he had seen no fires on the other side of the bridge. Besides his squad's deployment of Tamicon Fire on the right flank, the new weapon had not been part of the attack.

"I have requested General Monmair to recommend Major Tem for Tamicon's highest award, the Order of the Five-Pointed Star, for his bravery and sacrifice. I have no doubt that he will concur and send the request to Secretary Menziar."

Captain Merra did not reply to this news but waited for the colonel to say what he really had on his mind.

Without pause, Colonel Damben quickly moved on from the obligatory explanation of why Merra was now in charge of the task at hand.

"You will take the remaining fire launchers and proceed across the bridge. Then, with a contingent of archers and infantry, you will attack the center of the Arook defense. Once clearing the center, you will proceed up the main street, burning everything and everyone in your path until you reach the far gate. That gate needs to open for General Monmair's main force to enter the city. You will not fall back until that mission is accomplished."

"Yes, sir. May I ask how far it is from our front line to the gate, sir?"

"Does it matter?"

"No, sir," was the captain's stoic reply.

"You were once a fine officer with much potential. One terrible mistake about ruined you. You have kept your head down and have waited for this moment to redeem yourself and start your way back on the path of promotion. You succeed, and I will see you become Major Merra and receive a commendation."

"Yes, sir."

After a deafening silence, Merra saluted and rode back to his command.

Captain Merra had carried the burden of what had happened years ago for his entire career. At first, he had tried to forget that terrible night. Drunken debauchery, officers enjoying the pleasures of pretty, young Arook girls, girls doing anything and everything for scraps of food for themselves and their families. Yet, one of the girls had not been an Arook girl but instead a Tamicon. He tried to forget and did his best not to think about the crime, but still, that night haunted him, especially when promotion after promotion passed him by.

In time, when the pain of the memory had subsided, he allowed himself to think about it. Yet try as he might, he could never remember the Tamicon girl. First, there had been copious amounts of Thibar Whiskey, a whiskey that you only needed a sip or two to feel sky high. Then, still early in the night, he had laid with an Arook girl. There had been no need to be too forceful. Her momentary resistance was her only way of saying she was not complicit in the act. Yet, prompt submission provided respite from any brutality, although Merra had not been rough with her. She had even spread her legs as he entered her. When he finished, he remembered looking down at her and seeing eyes that pleaded with him to rescue her. Instead, he rolled off her. Within seconds, another Tamicon lieutenant had grabbed her by the hair and lifted her to her knees.

Merra did not stand around to watch the spectacle but instead grabbed another bottle of Thibar Whiskey. Then, sitting down with three or four other lieutenants, passed it amongst themselves. That was all he remembered until the morning when a Tamicon priest and some staff officers woke him. A naked Tamicon girl lay nearby, face down, beaten, and violated in the worst way. She was barely alive.

Colonel Damben, then Captain Damben, had spoken in his defense at his trial. He had seen the young lady earlier in the night. She had looked as Arook as any of the other girls. How would Lieutenant Merra know that a Tamicon girl was among the Arook whores provided for the officers' entertainment?

The court dropped the charges, but the accusations never went away. Lieutenant Merra still heard the mumblings that he had beaten and raped a Tamicon girl. Often, when Merra was near his men, he wondered if they knew about the incident. It did not matter if they did. They kept quiet about it. As a lieutenant and captain, he had quickly disciplined anyone he even suspected of passing on the story. His men had learned never to talk amongst themselves in earshot or even within view of Merra.

"Fall in!" First Sergeant Bonman called out after a nod from the approaching captain.

Thirty men snapped into formation, each wearing a leather, fire-retardant livery with a five-pointed star emblazoned on their chest. A buckle embossed with the five-pointed star secured the red leather belt around their waist. Half of the men held the slingshot contraption in their left hand. A metal extension ran along the forearm with another, longer extension designed to steady the weapon against the upper thigh. The other fifteen men bore the metal canisters awkwardly upon their left hip, secured by a leather belt slung across the opposite shoulder. Engraved on both the slingshots and the canisters was the five-pointed star.

Captain Merra saw no reason to explain the absence of Major Tem. The Major had assumed command once they had crossed the river, but it was his troop.

"Lieutenant," the captain spoke quietly to the young man, Lieutenant Bishof, that stood next to him, "have the men prepare to advance across the bridge. We go into combat shortly."

The lieutenant sharply saluted the captain, but Merra barely acknowledged the salute with a slight wave and walked away.

"First Sergeant Bonman," the lieutenant called out.

"Sir!"

"Have the men fall out and fully prepare for battle. We move out in fifteen minutes."

"Sir!"

Captain Merra returned to his men mounted on his bay mare and gave the order to move out to the lieutenant, who passed it to Sergeant Bonman. The captain reined his horse in the bridge's direction, and the squad followed behind on foot.

The men marched in rough formation, two abreast, with no attempt to keep in step. Merra led the way but was to the far left of the column. Lieutenant Bishof walked directly to the captain's right, with Sergeant Bonman about ten feet behind the lieutenant.

As always, Captain Merra's men were silent. They had done their grumbling during their fifteen minutes of preparation. They had all heard the accusation about their commander and accepted it as true. They knew, too, that execution awaited them if they beat and raped a Tamicon girl.

The quarter-mile-long limestone bridge loomed in front of them wide enough for two wagons to pass along its cobblestoned surface, but no wagons would pass that day. The bay mare halted momentarily at the first obstacle it faced, but Merra urged her on and over the pile of Arook dead. She raised her front legs and leaped to the other side of the carnage. The column veered to its right and marched around the heap and back to its line with the captain.

Bodies lay where they fell the night before; heads partially severed from necks, arms, and legs crushed by the charge of the Tamicon cavalry. It was mid-morning, and the stench of death was already pungent. By the afternoon heat, it would be unbearable.

They passed small detachments of laborers assigned to the engineers whose job was to find the few Tamicon bodies and remove them to the rear. There were not many compared to the numbers of Arooks, although the enemy had managed to bring down three horses. Arook civilians unfortunate enough to find themselves on the wrong side of the river and compelled to work lifted the dead carcasses up and over the railing and into the River Trez below. After the horses, they would toss their dead into the current.

The river entrance of Belamoz, the only side without massive stone walls, had faced Colonel Damben's force since they had left General Monmair's main army. Crossing the river miles upstream, they had begun the siege of Outer Belamoz, the settlement of wharves and warehouses that supplied the city across the bridge. Unlike Belamoz, Outer Belamoz had no fortified walls. Still, its network of commissaries, depots, and barracks, especially the barracks, allowed it to hold out against the Tamicon onslaught for nearly two weeks.

How many Arook soldiers remained inside the main city? It was hard to guess, but hundreds if not thousands were already dead through the rampage of Major Tem's fires, the cavalry charges, and the ever-advancing infantry. And wounded? It was just as hard to say how many of them made it back across the bridge. There were no Arook wounded on the Outer Belamoz side of the river. Tamicon took no prisoners.

Captain Merra had seen carnage like this before. The last Arookian war, some twelve years ago, had been just as bloody. But, the Arooks had shown no mercy, so they received none. The battle preceding the damning night had lasted two weeks. First, Arook forces attacked the tiny village of Tammook on Tamicon's side of the frontier. Then, in retaliation, Tamicon had laid siege to Vitz, a large and well-defended town nearby. When Vitz finally fell, Tamicon rolled over the Arooks and took their revenge. The Arooks must have rounded up Tammook girls for their pleasure after the attack. What other reason would have there been for Tamicon women to be in Vitz?

Halfway across the Trez River Bridge, Merra saw little evidence of the Arook retreat; most of the Arooks had died defending the entrance. As he neared the far end of the bridge, he witnessed the results of the enemy's last-ditch effort to stop Tamicon's advance into the city. Arook archers had let go of a deadly salvo that had impaled many of the frenzied chargers. Now gangs of impressed Arooks dragged the dead horses towards the middle of the bridge and tossed them over into the deeper and faster current. Women and old men tugged and pushed the carcasses inches at a time. Tamicon guards with anxious eyes and swords drawn or arrows nocked, watched and hoped for any slackening of effort in the doomed prisoners.

A woman slipped in her effort to push the horse and stumbled to the hard stone. She did not hurry to rise and was struck with an arrow between her breasts when she finally made it to her feet. Her face held an expression of surprise as Captain Merra rode by. He emitted no emotion or recognition of the woman as she fell upon the carcass.

His mare weaving its way through the pile of dead horses, Merra exited the bridge, pivoted his mount, and watched his men enter Belamoz. With a nod to Lieutenant Bishof and shouts of 'troop, halt' and 'at ease' from Sergeant Bonman, thirty royal fire-launchers waited as Merra conferred with subordinates commanding the two companies detached to his small battalion.

One hundred infantry soldiers typically armed with shields, pikes, and short swords would leave their pikes behind and their swords sheathed. Half would lead the advance, protecting the fire launchers. Half would protect the fifty archers bringing up the rear. Both commanders, aware of who Captain Merra was, understood explicitly that the captain was in charge.

Colonel Damben's main force struck the middle of the Arook line and created the opening for Merra's battalion. They shot through the gap, entered the street, and began their push towards the gate.

The archers launched an onslaught of arrows that momentarily pushed the Arooks undercover. Merra and his squadron used the time to form an arch behind the protecting infantry. The fire launchers got as close as possible to the infantrymen's shields and slung the Tamicon Fire towards both sides and the street's center. The fire was already running wild when the Arooks popped up from their cover. With Merra's nod to his subordinate officers, the infantry advanced another thirty yards up the street with the fire launchers shuffling behind them. The archers followed and shot another volley into the retreating and regrouping Arooks.

Merra's little battalion inched forward. The barrage of arrows forced the Arooks back long enough for the fire launchers to fire their igniting projectiles into the structures and the Arook defenses. The Arooks piled crates, cabinets, desks, and tables into the middle of the street to stop the advance, but this only made kindling for the Tamicon Fire. However, it did slow the Tamicon soldier's progress until the pile burnt itself down enough for them to move on.

Behind the stockpiles of furniture, the Arooks amassed in ever-increasing numbers. When the battalion broke through the burning rubble, the archers had a turkey shoot, but the number of Arooks became more than their arrows could push back. As the Arooks sacrificed themselves to the archers and the flames, they bought time to construct greater woodpiles and amass even more Arooks behind the next obstacle. More significantly, the martyred Arooks steadily whittled down Merra's advancing force. They targeted the archers and the protecting infantry, reducing the number of men defending the fire launchers. Merra knew that, in time, only his squad of Tamicon Fire Launchers would remain to force the gate open.

With the fortress wall growing tall in front of them, the battalion faced the last mountain of furniture. It stood two hundred yards, maybe less, in front of the gate. And on the wall stood a great force of Arook archers, their arrows nocked, their bows pointed down, not yet aimed at Merra and his men. Standing above the main gate, at the archers' center, was an Arook in a white robe and hive-shaped turban.

The captain knew his orders not to retreat until the gate was open. He knew, too, what he would find on the other side of the blockade if the other woodpiles were any indication. Once the stockpile burnt itself down, a last stand of Arooks would be on the other side. His archers decimated from above; what remained of his battalion would be at the mercy of the Arooks.

Merra, for a moment, thought of retreat. He had lived with his shame for over a decade. He could live with this new shame as well. Looking back along the way they had come, he saw the gauntlet of fire he and his men had created on either side of the street. Flames shot high into the air as two, and three-storied buildings collapsed around them. There was no way back, and forward meant dying a martyr's death, but they were dead either way. Merra's squad readied their launchers and threw their projectiles into the wooden blockade. The men on the wall held their bows at the ready.

Merra's men shot only one volley into the pile. After that, they would need all they had left to, hopefully, set the wooden gate ablaze.

It was a waiting game now. The massive pile would burn down. Merra's battalion would move forward. Ignoring the Arooks on the wall and targeting the enemy on the other side of the blockade, his archers would not survive the onslaught from above. Under the protection of the plodding infantry, the fire launchers would take one last shot at the gate. Living a life of shame or dying a hero's death did not seem much different to Captain Merra now.

The inevitable facing him, Captain Merra's thoughts began to coalesce. First, he had no memory of The Tamicon girl he had allegedly beaten and raped. Then there was the question of why

Colonel Damben, then Captain Damben, had come to his defense? After all this time, he still had no answers.

As if there were answers somewhere other than himself, Captain Merra looked at the Arook archers. Why did he hate them so? It was like questioning his fate; he did not know why. He hated them, and he hated himself. He only knew he hated the Arooks more.

Why was that so? Again, he had no answer as to why he hated the Arooks. Was it their sacrilege against Estoi? He did not think so. He did not care about Estoi. He did believe in him, or instead, he knew he existed. Still, since the night of the beating and raping of the Tamicon girl, Merra accepted that Estoi had no place for him. When he was a child, his mother had told him that no one was outside Estoi's grace, but his mother had been wrong.

If he was outside Estoi's grace, he might not be outside Stra's. He gazed at the tall man in the white robe and the hive-shaped turban and knew even having the thought was blasphemy. There was no grace in the faith of Stra. He did not know much about that faith but knew enough that he would find no mercy there. Still, there was little in the faith of Estoi, either.

Surrounded by flames, Captain Merra felt amazingly cool.

His men, though, sweated and cooked from the heat. It was hot. It had to be, Merra thought, but he was not. His men looked at him, and as they had done in every one of his commands, they did not speak nor grumble, but it was different this time. They could see that he was calm and showed no fear or panic.

As the wooden blockade burnt down, his men gathered around him, and for the first time in years, his men drew strength from him.

He had never spoken to his men about leadership or duty, and he would not start now. But he felt something come over him, some truth emanating from them. They were taking power from him and he from them. They still looked hot as hell to him on the outside, but they were not mulling around like doomed men.

A peace came over him, and he felt forgiven for his past.

Was he now in Estoi's grace? Not the Estoi he knew or people talked about, but suddenly something seemed real inside him. It was not in Estoi's grace. He was not 'in' anything unless the oven of fire surrounded them. It was mercy and forgiveness. His men had forgiven him.

Something greater than himself had forgiven him, too. Maybe it was Estoi, but he did not know for sure, and it did not matter. Something more significant than he had shown him mercy. Why this understanding had not come before now, he did not know, and like so many other questions, it did not matter. It only mattered that forgiveness had come.

Forgiveness had come for the raping of the Arook girl.

He knew that was true deep inside him. He saw the face clearly, and although, at the time, he refused to acknowledge it, the woman killed on the bridge had been that girl. He saw his past wrong, accepted it, and could now move on.

But the Tamicon girl?

He felt nothing for that wrong.

Why not?

Words as clear to him as if spoken aloud came into his mind.

"You did not commit that act."

"It wasn't me," Captain Merra spoke aloud, convicting someone from his past. Someone else had beaten and raped the Tamicon girl and placed her unconscious body next to the passed-out young lieutenant. He had carried someone else's crime with him for years. The crime he committed against the Arook girl had been his, and he had suffered for that sin, and it was for that sin that mercy had taken so long to come.

It did not matter who had committed the crime against the Tamicon girl. They were all guilty. Everyone who had been there that night was guilty of the deed. It was then the epiphany hit him.

We hate Arooks, so we do not have to consider why we hate ourselves.

Looking at the Arook in the white robe, Captain Merra no longer hated him, but he knew that did not change the situation.

"It's time. Form the lines."

And with those words, the archers nocked their arrows, the infantry soldiers stepped in front of the fire launchers, and they waited for the last layers of wood to burn down to clear the blockade.

On the other side, to their surprise, there were no Arooks. The gate stood undefended about a hundred yards in their front.

Merra gave his archers the order to target the men on the wall. The Arooks on the bastion still had the advantage of shooting downwards. Merra ordered all the men forward through the fire's remnants, making the angle for the Arook archers steeper.

Merra expected an ambush from the street's sides as they moved through the fire, but it was only the arrows from above that his men faced. It was still a long way to the gate, and his archers were not having the success targeting the Arooks as they had against his men.

The Arooks targeted Merra's archers; then, they aimed at the fire launchers' protection, the infantry soldiers with their shields.

Less than ten yards from the gate, the remaining infantry shielded the last three Tamicon Fire launchers. Then, finally, they gathered all the projectiles they had, and the captain gave the order to rise.

The shields came up, pressing against the deluge of arrows, and Merra and his fire launchers rose under their cover. The infantry soldiers protecting the launchers died first. The shields clattered to the street, but three projectiles ignited on impact against the gate. Merra's men threw another, the final volley of Tamicon Fire against the gate with their last breaths. It was enough. The gate was ablaze.

The captain may not have been the last to die, but like so many things, it did not matter. The last thing he saw was Damben's cavalry crashing through the right flank. The Arooks he had expected to make a last stand at the gate had instead made their last stand against the cavalry. But, like so many things, neither defense mattered.

Exo Merra was now at peace, even with the insurmountable grief he felt for the woman on the bridge. He no longer regarded that terrible night as an unpropitious assault on his career and character but was delighted it had occurred. Without it, he would have never understood the consummation of living.

THE END

Avery S. Campbell (AKA Joel Walker) submitted this story as a debut piece for another realm. It very nearly got lost in the scramble for publication. I spent some time looking for it, but it was time well spent. It's a terrific debut and I look forward to Avery/Joel's future efforts. Let us know what you think on our BBS.