

Excerpts from RedZone Incursion by David Norman ©2014:

“Lieutenant Sanders to Protocol!”

“Go for Protocol.”

“Stand by to release Gate-lock D7!”

“Standing by.”

Twelve anti-ram bollards retract into the road.

“Three, two, one ... Go!”

The gate, a sheet of plate Inconel, releases, dropping into its slit with a resounding boom. The experienced driver hits the accelerator and launches us through the threshold into the RedZone at speed, closely followed by five armoured troop carriers and two armoured buggies fanning out to the sides. A metallic hail of rocks hurled by swarming activists bounces off the roof and sides, unrelenting. The first Molotov cocktail explodes harmlessly on the polycarbonate windows ... hundreds yet to come. Several troopers lining the walls of the pan flinch in their harnesses. I hear the upper gate guillotine into place, sealing the gate-lock behind us. The convoy is through. UPV gunners engage “throwers” with rubber baton rounds. I see one fall by the roadside, immolated by his own Molotov, manically thrashing about as activists clear a space around him.

“We have to assume the threat is real. Word’s coming in of a build-up of armed activists in the Newtown slum area. Heavily armed. Not just rock throwers, though there’ll be plenty of those. This is shaping up to be a major rumble. Load live magazines. Repeat, load live magazines!” Clicking reverberates in the cabin as troopers swap yellow magazines for red mags in their carbines.

Again, the teenaged hostile pipes up: “You too, pig! Go with the others. Get out! Leave ... and don’t fuckin’ come back! Leave us the fuck alone! Capitalist scum ain’t welcome in the RedZone!”

I squeeze the trigger, gently. The enemy combatant slumps to the ground. Predictably, the squatters devolve into primitive outbursts of outrage and howls of grief. The deceased’s uncle crawls towards the grenade, but I have closed the gap to shove the cold steel of carbine muzzle into the back of his head.

“I urge you to reconsider.”

Political commentator: “Where do we draw the line? History has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that the unproductive classes of society must be segregated, not just socially and economically, but politically and territorially as well. This realisation has led to the

establishment of the greatest nation of all time, the Federation of Austoria ... the only country ever to have recorded over ninety years of consecutive economic growth.”

The dark night brightens as day. Squinting abruptly, I see twin jets of fire streak downwards and pound the car park in quick succession behind the smouldering wreck of North-District One. An almighty plume of smoke and dust spews skywards like a volcanic eruption. The road shakes. I drag the Thrustmaster down on the left. Responsively, the Veloceptor leaps the footpath and lands heavily on front wheels, bullbar scraping on asphalt. We now speed across the lawn and turn to intercept the fleeing SUV, ripping up grass, spraying clods and mud from the rear wheels.

Machine-gun fire erupts from the accountancy office and rips into the nearing GT from upstairs and street level. The bonnet is tattooed with holes, the windscreen shatters and both ensign and driver are dispatched by multiple rounds. Blood pumps from Nesbitt’s lacerated throat. Lieutenant Davies’ face is compacted. Brown hair surrounds exposed brains and cartilage drips into his lap. South-District One keeps rolling forward, lifeless.

Two junior agents in yellow hazmat suits enter through a sliding door equipped with a bucket, mop and black towels. “Clean up this disgusting fucking whore! She ain’t even toilet trained!” John and Jeff stretch blue latex gloves from their hands, drop them in a waste basket and exit.

Agent Jeff flicks a brown briefcase open on the desk. Two compact black pistols with four magazines each rest in foam cut outs. He picks out one and hands it to me. “For eliminations we recommend you use a .22.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” This is getting ridiculous. They want me to go against the PRA, after they’ve sent them videos of Federal intelligence officers torturing one of their friends to death, just to taunt them, armed with a popgun, with a cute little clown as a sidekick? Is this a fucking joke? They know I’m a trained soldier!

From John: “You leave tomorrow.”

“What if I’m captured?” The intelligence officers exchange furtive glances. Agent Jeff is almost sympathetic. His eyebrows crease and he screws up one corner of his mouth. “Our opposite number, Vileroy ... his methods are shocking.”

His partner agrees: “Appalling. He makes us look like schoolgirls.”

Jeff in earnest: “Don’t be like Ensign Jenkins. Use your suicide pill.”

John, altogether too casual: “Or we’ll use it for you.”

Two female makeup artists and a male stylist are applying the finishing touches to my disguise, fussing over me quite urgently. The transformation is incredible. I barely recognise myself. Looking in the mirror lined with globes, like in a dressing room, I see a terrorist staring back: a complete stranger.

Another Molotov flares and I see a man with crazy eyes and beanie pulled low haul himself over the threshold. His pupils lock onto mine. It's unexpected and shocking. I reach for the first weapon I can find. In the heat of the moment, a hunting knife clatters from my grasp and my assailant fumbles for it, but I am too quick and plunge the blade under his chin, upwards, all the way to the hilt.

Striking my shoulders with hammer fists, Marian screams: "You crazy bastard, you've murdered him! Why the fuck did you do that? You didn't have to kill him! You figured out I was seeing him? Is that it? You're jealous?" "Wait a second!" My hand raises to fend off her blows. "Just fucking wait!" She stops. "Here ... check this out." I pull up my jeans and extract the playing cards given to me by Agent Jeff. Marian – AKA Agent Strauss – is furious. Her threatening expression says, This better be good! Still a bit shaky from the sex and violence, I fumble the cards somewhat, but manage to pluck out the Jack of Clubs. Marian's pupils widen in shock and her facial expression collapses. The hand-sized picture portrays her dead boyfriend with the words PRA TERRORIST – LOW PRIORITY above and ALIAS "CRASH" underneath.

A pained expression from Marian: "They're just kids!"

"So are you! What do you think they'd do to you if they found out you're a Federal Agent? Huh?" A flicker of fear crosses her pretty face.

Shafts of platinum moonlight cast a deathly pall over the Ten of Clubs, about twenty years old, with greasy, matted hair, long spiked spindles of it. Just as I reach him, he awakens and attempts to rise with jaw dropped like a street sweeper's dozer-blades. I grip his throat, squeeze hard, plunge him into the bedding, shove the bolt gun between possum's eyes and push the switch. Tattooed lids shrivel up like sultanas. Blood pumps from his forehead like a tap.

With her left hand she puts three bullets into the mixed-blood's face and, with her right, simultaneously slams a pneumatic bolt through the darker man's temple. The clapping gunshots make me wince. It was a beautifully executed manoeuvre.

I raise the carbine and two vibrating bursts of orange flame leap from the muzzle, eliminating both armed activists in their sleep before they can pose a threat. Others are jolted awake. There is much screaming. Ears ring in the confined space. "Lie face-down on the floor and no harm will come to you!" I announce in the manner of a Federal Trooper. "Resistance will not be tolerated!"

The street is lifeless but for a few shiftworkers on scooters and one old man peddling a mobile kitchen. All the squats are dark and boarded up for the night. Only psychopaths and thugs, extremists, drug runners, street dealers, rapists and thrill-killers are out at this hour of the morning.

I kneel down to his level and smile directly into his petrified eyes, dark and glossy like motor oil. "Allow me to introduce myself, lowlife. I'm Commander Blake Sanders of the Federal Intelligence Security Corps. Pleased to make your acquaintance!" When I flick the carbine to zippo mode, a small blue flame hisses from the muzzle.

The pre-dawn traffic is intensifying; beeping horns, puttering two-stroke engines, clattering metal frames. Weaving our way through a forest of outrageous vehicles – hand-pushed carts, gas-powered rickshaws, three-person bicycles, trucks, cars, buggies, water buffaloes, donkeys and an army of scooters – we're splitting five or six lanes in a two-lane street. It's crazy.

I tap the trigger thrice. Crimson stains radiate from Davis' heart over his yellow shirt. His corpulent cranium seems to have been smashed apart with a hammer and prised open with a crowbar. Egg-shell fragments of hairy skull dangle by threads of scalp, peeling from an exposed, aborted skull-foetus. Women scream, cupping their faces. Men shield their eyes from the horrific spectacle. People start running for the exits. Pandemonium.

There is an awkward moment. We're both rooted to the spot, transfixed by the other's presence, trying hard to read intentions. I regret not having my .22 ready like the others. The livid activist's full attention is on me; he reaches under his jacket and I do the same. I'm faster with the crossdraw holster and get off two head shots and two in the chest before the undergraduate manages to fire the silver gun in his hand. He staggers backwards with arms elevated like a demented marionette.

It's sickening work. Every fibre of my being protests what I'm being coerced into forcing myself to do and I find it difficult to resist the urge to vomit. I gag and cough up deep draughts of phlegm and hawk them onto the floor. Slicing further into the gushing red hole I've created, something hard snares the blade's edge. I've hit bone. As I pull the knife free to cut deeply again, a hand on my wrist stops me.

"Careful, the artery! He'll bleed out."

The funny thing about being indiscriminately rifle butted by jeering members of the PRA, my mortal enemy featuring prominently among them, is that while some vicious blows are relatively painless, others, seemingly benign, hurt like hell when they clip certain body parts: elbows, kneecaps, kidneys. This is the first time I have been on the receiving end of such treatment. Having served several stints in riot control as a Federal Trooper, as well as four tours of duty in foreign theatres of combat, I can recall on occasions having dished it out. Such is life.

Unwin: "Coming to you live from Gate-lock D7 on the Oxford Street cusp, the launch of the 159th Expeditionary Force of the Public Order and Riot Squad of Austorian Federal Defence! And what a beautiful evening it promises to be! Ladies and gentlemen, we welcome Lieutenant Roy Silberston to the central commentary position."

Silberston: "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Yes, Greg, conditions are absolutely perfect for tonight's event. No rain forecast and clear skies, humidity at 45 per cent ... a slight breeze in from the west at twenty-three kilometres per hour shouldn't affect the performance of the Federal convoy too much at all ..."

The lead vehicle, wider than the others – bulkier, and slightly darker in camouflage – waits for the huge roller door to thunder fully open, then rolls slowly onto Oxford Street to assume pole position at the front of the convoy, facing the insertion point.

An amplified voice booms through the public address system:

"IMV One: Expeditionary Specialist Austin Worthington!"

The specialist's youthful, rugged face appears on a huge LED screen set into the wall above the gate with statistics: age, weight, birthplace, years of service, number of incursions, other tours of duty, medals awarded, favourite pastimes, goals and ambitions.

A huge crowd – larger than normal – cheers, wolf-whistling, stomping feet in elation for this unusual event: a scheduled program. Upheld morphones film the action. Shrill groupies jump excitedly. Supporters rush barricades, waving digital posters of their favourite troopers and brandishing signs of support for friends and loved ones.

Silberston: "And that was just a flawless entry onto the pitch from Specialist Worthington."

It's absolutely magnificent the way he handles an Infantry Mobility Vehicle!"

Unwin: "Absolutely! I'd expect nothing less from such a solid driver. How many incursions has it been for 'the greyhound' now? Seven?"

Silberston: "I believe it's been eight. Remember, he filled in for Specialist St. John O'Rorke back when he injured himself in a crash in the Stanmore slum area?"

Unwin: "Yes, that's right. If you include the interchange this makes it Worthington's eighth incursion to date, making him the most experienced specialist in the convoy and the perfect choice for IMV One. Hey, Roy ... from memory, wasn't O'Rorke decapitated in that crash? Or was it the next time round in the Five Dock Ghetto?"

Frenzied scenes of hullabaloo accompany Harrel's image onscreen. He is commonly regarded as the greatest UPV driver in history. Some of the older men around the pubs rate Specialist Wayne Reynolds from the Lewisham uprising, or even Specialist Jim Savage from the early days of the Federation, slightly higher. Generally the most coveted cards in the collections of schoolboys are of those three greats. To see one of them in the flesh is a privilege and an honour for the spectators, one they will be able to regale their children and grandchildren with. After the incursion, there will be a chance for members of the public to meet and greet the stars of the expedition. The queue for Specialist Harrel to sign posters and cards will undoubtedly be the longest. Vision from the UPV's Blockercam comes onto the huge display, showing the line of IMVs in front, much to the joy of the onlookers.

The feed switches to a camera inside the barracks garage. A crew team in coloured overalls gathers around a hoist and wall displays, some inspecting data logs from the street sweeper's computer. The crew chief waves to the camera.

Unwin: "UPV One certainly does have a fantastic support team there."

Harrel revs the V-8 engine loudly ... and the crowd's jubilation intensifies.

Silberston: "No arguments there, pal. Listen to that note! What a beautifully fine-tuned machine!"

Correspondent Johnson, in navy helmet and flak jacket with MEDIA front and back, addresses the military officer: "Commandant Hawtree, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to apprise the general public on the details of this mission."

Colonel: "Not at all, correspondent."

Johnson: "Best wishes, sir, for this 159th Expeditionary Force under Lieutenant Gibson."

Colonel: "Thank you."

Johnson: "We were all sadly moved by the passing of Blake Sanders this week. It has been said he died single-handedly engaging a PRA rocket battery behind enemy lines."

Colonel: "That is affirmative. He was on a rescue mission for Ensign Jenkins when he was

diverted to the scene of an impromptu attack by personnel of the Intelligence Security Corps.”

Johnson: “Speculation is rife that he was killed not by PRA hostiles, but by a Federal airstrike. Killed by friendly fire.”

Colonel: “The details are hazy. We know Sanders called in the airstrike to prevent a lethal rocket attack. Whether he was killed by extremists or as a result of the sortie we will never know. Of one thing we can be certain: Sanders, recently promoted to the rank of Commander, died bravely, gladly sacrificing himself for his nation. In this respect I envy him. No words can praise highly enough those among the ranks of the Blessed Fallen.”

Johnson: “Sir, I propose we hold a minute’s silence for Commander Sanders.”

The colonel checks the time on the display – 5:57PM: “An excellent suggestion,” Hawtree offers sagely.

The Federal Anthem plays softly, a slow, instrumental version of the patriotic hymn of nationhood. Federal flags flutter at half-mast from the IMVs, UPVs, the Gatehouse, Parliament House, every official building in the zone and many, many dwellings and many, many members of the crowd. A montage of images of Blake Sanders transitions on the LED screen, some in civilian attire, some military, some portraying him in the heat of battle. A photograph of him and Ensign Jenkins in Domestic Surveillance uniforms elicits loud wailing which carries on the warm breeze. At least half the people in the crowd are women. Well over half of those gathered to witness the launch of this incursion weep inconsolably. An emotional sixty seconds for a nation in grief elapses.

Johnson wipes moisture from his eyes. His voice trembles: “Thank you, sir, from the bottom of my heart. Another question: it has been rumored that this incursion is in fact a mission to rescue Ensign Jenkins. Is this true?”

Colonel: “I can neither confirm nor deny that allegation. Thank you, correspondent, there will be no further questions.”

A short public broadcast plays a message composed of numerous voices, male and female, young and old. Faces appear onscreen as they read in turn:

“Almost a century ago,”

“With foresight and wisdom,”

“The modern leaders separated the Red and Blue Zones,”

“And the Federation of Austoria was born!”

“Since then we have prospered,”

“Expanded our territories,”

“Pacified those who trespassed against us,”

“And forged a New Empire,”

“Blessed by the chosen few,”

“With financial stability and economic growth for all!”  
A deluge of cheering erupts from the crowd.

Silberston: “Let’s have a brief look at the security footage Red-side of the wall.”

Unwin: “My God, there are a lot of activists tonight. Look at that! They’re banked up all the way down past Liverpool Street!”

Silberston: “Gee there’s some nasty-looking fellows waiting out there.”

Unwin: “Well, they won’t have to wait much longer!”

Silberston: “It’s quite interesting, really, the way they organise all those Molotovs. It actually requires a lot of preparation ...”

Specialists switch on primary engines. Gas turbines erupt into life along the runway strip; heat signatures shimmer the air behind vehicles in the convoy.

Polycarbonate windows are blasted outwards, spinning, borne aloft by flames – a tempestuous whirlwind of fire. The red-hot mobility vehicle strays drastically off-course and ploughs into a screaming herd of activists, engulfing them in a speeding conflagration, mowing them down with fire and metal.

“Holy shit!” Marian has found the access panel into the storage area and unzipped a large sports bag. “There’s an arsenal in here! Two carbines, a couple of nine-mil USPs, a Remington shotgun!” My sweetheart extracts the shortened weapon and fingers it lovingly, eyebrows raised, wide-mouthed awe planted on her cute face. “Whoah! There’s at least twenty merc grenades, gas bombs, whatever this is, a full sniper kit and heaps of spare mags! It’s like Christmas!”

“Welcome to the military.”

Racing along the water’s edge, the floating market below closes early for the night, doubtless due to the presence of a Federal convoy in the vicinity. Like a man possessed, RickRock accelerates rapidly, taking full advantage of the wide plaza. Local hoons drag-racing along the strip are humbled by the high-performance vehicle streaking past. Flames spurt from the triple exhaust; high-pitched spinning rotors harmonise with the screeching roar of the turboshaft engine.

Eureka Nine and Eureka Twelve, the first pair of Strike-Fighters deployed, rocket from the north in tight formation, already performing aerobatic stunts in the form of well-rehearsed

evasive manoeuvres. At a range of sixty kilometres they shoot upwards, two metallic birds of prey functioning as one. Upon attainment of fifty thousand feet, they level out for a fleeting moment of weightlessness before commencing their dive-bombing descent.

Eureka Six loops upwards into a vertical climb at full power, then loses momentum and freefalls backwards until her nose drops. She gracefully flips out of the tail slide in a quarter-loop then rolls upright and barrels towards enemy Tiger-tanks to deliver her payload of missiles, JDAMs and machine-cannons. The pilot of Eureka Sixteen pushes his stick forwards and pitches the jet earthbound, nose passing through the horizon until snap-rolling level to follow Eureka Six.

Bullets are sewn down the side of a replica Camry, exploding its windscreen and side windows, puncturing the tyres and petrol tank. It deviates course into an overtaking motorcycle, sending crusty riders hurtling to the gutter. Their bike cartwheels along the footpath until it crunches against a metal outside plant. The white sedan catches alight and rips through a block-squat's flimsy panelling, spreading fire like a communicable disease to the unfortunate toque-wearing inhabitants within.

Two motorbikes round the corner menacingly. One dreadlocked passenger already shoots a replica AK-47 in our direction. The other appears to have an RPG pointing at the sky. Marian leans across Richie's lap and operates the dash-display. Once locked on a target, she thumbs the hat switch and lobs a 40-mm mercury grenade into the approaching motorcycle. It detonates on impact with the rider's chest, rupturing body parts in a horizontal pillar of flame. A quick repositioning of crosshairs ... obliterates the second rider and passenger. Charred corpses are flung backwards like shooting-gallery targets. The battered bike spins through the air.