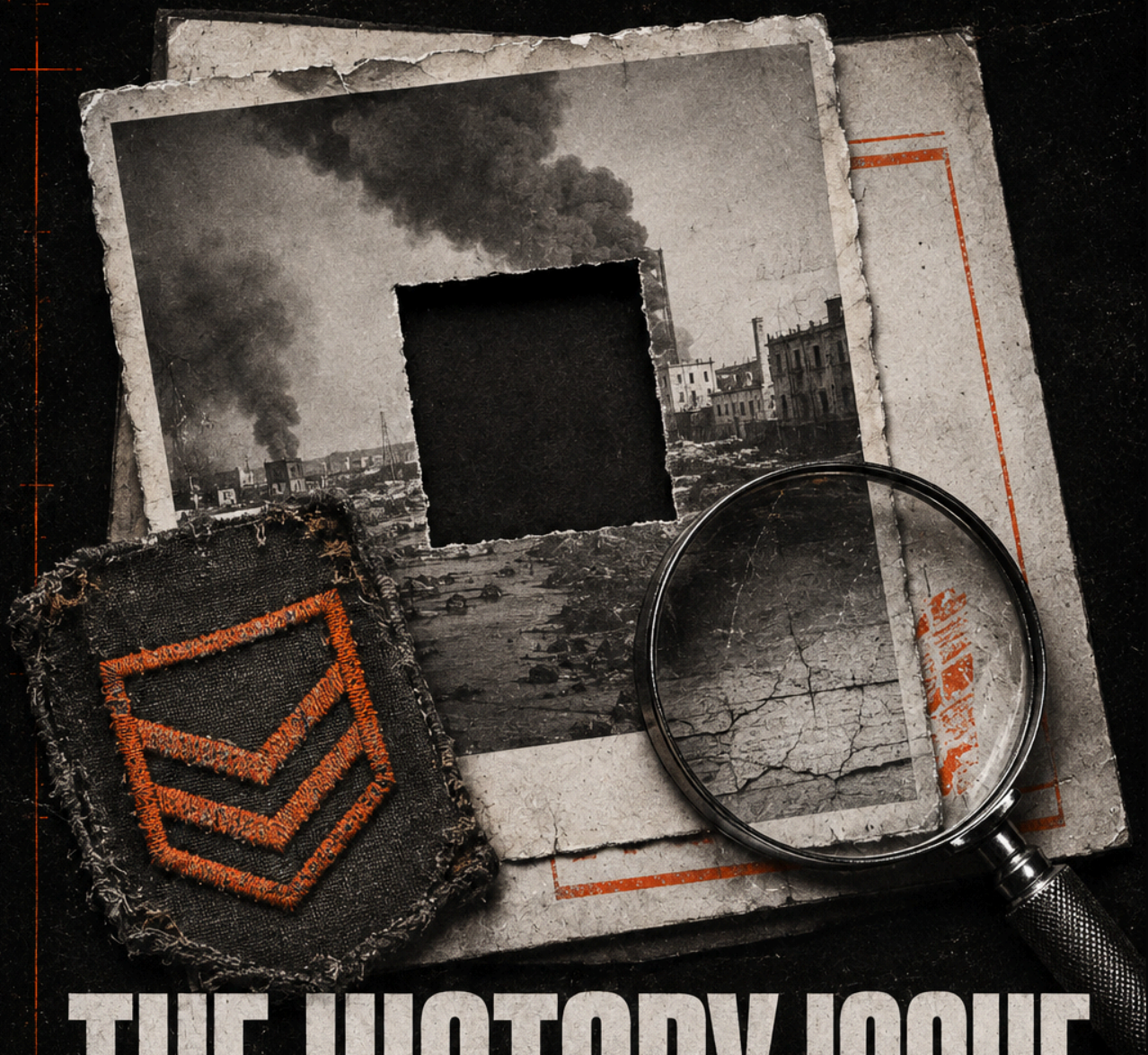


CONFLICT

No. 09 / THE WAR ECONOMY



THE HISTORY ISSUE

CONFLICT / No. 09 / THE HISTORY ISSUE

Complete web issue, formatted for offline reading. Links to referenced articles remain available online.

[Read this issue on Terra Conflictus](#)

[◀ CONFLICT // ALL ISSUES](#)

CONFLICT

Issue 09 — Q2 2066 — The History Issue

WHO OWNS YOUR WAR?

THE SIEGE TAPE: STILL MISSING. STILL FOR SALE. STILL LYING.

PHOENIX REEVES AT 50 — THE CAMERAS STILL DON'T CHANGE HOW SHE FIGHTS

INSIDE THE DOCUMENT WAR RELIC MARKET — WHAT PRE-UPHEAVAL PAPER COSTS NOW

NEO-TORONTO TWENTY YEARS LATER: A CITY DRESSED IN ITS OWN MEMORIAL

THE WORST HISTORY PROFITEERS ALIVE

HOW TO TELL A REAL BATTLE SCAR FROM A BOUGHT ONE

ADVERTISEMENT
CARRADINE & VOSS
HERITAGE ARMS
est. 2048, New Geneva



A sidearm is not a weapon. It is a sentence.

The CARRADINE Model 7 — hand-finished in salt-cured titanium alloy with walnut-composite grip panels machined from recovered pre-Upheaval stock. Each unit ships with a provenance card tracing the grip wood to its source forest, its felling date, and the last structure it occupied before the waters came.

Carried by officers who remember what formality meant.

Available through licensed Heritage Arms dealers. Waiting list: eleven months.

Background verification: thorough. Regret: not included.

CARRADINE & VOSS

The past had better hands.

CONFLICT

Issue 09 — Q2 2066

A contraband glossy from the edge of a dying future

Editor-in-Chief

MAREN SOLBERG

Currently under review by two factions and invited to dinner by a third

Deputy Editor

CROIX BETTANCOURT

Handles everything that requires an apology

Fashion & Field Intelligence

LILA OSUN

Banned from three procurement offices and one private fitting room

Features Editor

DARA KASK

Once embedded, never fully extracted

Culture & Decline

FELIX AMARAL

Writes about nightlife. Sleeps during the day. Correlation unconfirmed.

Copy & Classifieds

REN TAKATA

Reads every classified submission. Trusts none of them. Publishes all of them.

Art Direction

STOLEN. AGAIN.

Legal

WE HAVE BEEN ADVISED NOT TO LIST OUR LEGAL REPRESENTATION AT THIS TIME.

Published quarterly, or whenever we survive long enough. Printed on whatever stock we can source. Distributed through channels we are not at liberty to describe. All views expressed are the publication's. We do not host guest opinions. We barely host our own.

CONTRIBUTORS

SABLE KHOR

Covers procurement fraud and the heritage arms market from whatever bar is closest to the evidence. She was at Neo-Toronto in 2046 as a supply clerk and will not discuss it. Her current piece on the Document War relic trade was filed from a checkpoint that no longer exists. She is welcome at CONFLICT's offices when she is sober, which has not been recently.

TORBEN ASH

Former EO combat correspondent who now freelances for anyone who will pay and several who won't. He spent three weeks at the GSOTC commissary for the EMBEDDED feature and was asked to leave twice. He left once. His work has appeared in Unstable Signals, which he describes as "the other magazine, the one with principles." We choose not to respond.

DR. MIRA OKONKWO

Holds a chair in material culture at the New Lagos Institute that she describes as "decorative." She writes about objects with the precision of a forensic examiner and the appetite of a collector. She was not paid for her piece on the Reeves plate carrier. She was paid in access. The distinction matters to her accountant.

YEGOR SALTZ

Photographs conflict zones, memorial sites, and the insides of private collections he was not invited to enter. His work for the DOs/DON'Ts section was shot over one weekend in Neo-Toronto during the twentieth anniversary commemorations. He describes his approach as "candid." Several subjects have used the word "ambush."

JUNO PALE

Writes the CLASSIFIEDS. She claims this is a creative exercise. We have received four cease-and-desist letters suggesting otherwise.

OPEN WOUNDS

EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED IS NOW FOR SALE

We are, apparently, old enough to have a history.

Not a real history — the Document Wars took care of that. Half the libraries are ash. The municipal records for six continents are either submerged, shredded, or sitting in a UKE archive behind a door that requires three forms of identification, one of which is a bloodline. What we have instead is something worse: a curated history. A history with a gift shop.

Neo-Toronto just held its twentieth anniversary of the Battle. There were commemorative patches. There were commemorative drinks at bars that didn't exist when the shelling started. There was a walking tour — a *walking tour* — of the eastern corridor where Reeves held the line with a platoon that had already been written off by NAF command. The tour guide was twenty-three years old and wore a reproduction Hellfire Harrier field jacket that retails for 1,200 credits. He had never been shot at. His jacket had been pre-distressed to suggest he had.

Meanwhile, Phoenix Reeves herself was in the city. Not for the anniversary. She was there because she lives there, in the same district she defended, in an apartment whose windows still show the repair seams from the barrage. She was not invited to the ceremony. She was not asked to speak. She was, we are told, asked to “consult on accuracy” for a display at the new Heritage Combat Museum, for which she would have been compensated with a membership card.

She declined.

This is the issue about history, which means it is the issue about theft. Because that is what happens to the past in a world that burned its own records — whoever rebuilds it gets to own it. The Document Wars weren't just about destroying information. They were about creating a market for it. Every scrap of pre-Upheaval paper is now worth more than the building it was stored in. Every surviving artifact from a famous engagement is a commodity. Every operator who lived through something that matters is a brand whether they agreed to it or not.

In this issue: Sable Khor traces a single piece of recovered plate armor from the Battle of Neo-Toronto through the private collection circuit (page 40). Torben Ash spends three weeks at the GSOTC commissary listening to tournament competitors argue about battles they weren't born for (page 26). We rank the worst history profiteers

currently drawing breath (page 20). We tell you how to spot a fake battle scar, which is increasingly relevant because the fake ones are now better quality than the real thing (page 35). And in the CLASSIFIEDS, someone is selling the Siege Tape again. They are always selling the Siege Tape.

Standards are eroding. Memory is not — it's appreciating. Violently.

— The Editors

THIS MONTH IN DECLINE

1

THE NEO-TORONTO HERITAGE COMBAT MUSEUM OPENS TO MIXED REVIEWS AND ONE ARREST

The museum's centerpiece is a reconstructed section of the eastern barricade, built from "original materials" that three independent assessors have confirmed are 60% original, 30% reproduction, and 10% materials from a different barricade in a different city. A former Harrier sergeant was removed from the opening gala after loudly identifying the wrong barricade. She was correct. The museum has not issued a correction. Admission is 40 credits. Veterans pay full price.

2

THE CRACKERJACK ALMANAC RELEASES ITS TENTH EDITION — NOW WITH A "LEGENDS" SECTION

The unofficial publication, distributed on data chips through channels the commission pretends not to notice, has added a retrospective wing. Operator statistics going back to the tournament's founding, cross-referenced with post-tournament field records where available. The Almanac's editors remain anonymous. Their data remains better sourced than most faction intelligence. The "Legends" designation requires: minimum three tournament appearances, one podium finish, and confirmed survival. The survival requirement disqualifies more entries than the podium one.

3

DOCUMENT WAR RELICS NOW OUTPERFORM CONVENTIONAL BLACK-MARKET INVESTMENTS

A single pre-Opheaval municipal water-quality report from coastal Florida sold at private auction in New Geneva last month for 8,400 credits. The buyer was an EO-affiliated collector. The seller was, according to the auction house, “a private individual with provenance documentation.” The provenance documentation was itself probably worth more than the report. We are now in a market where the proof that something is real is more valuable than the thing. Adjust your portfolios accordingly.

4

HELLFIRE HARRIER REUNION DINNER IN NEO-TORONTO QUIETLY MOVED TO SMALLER VENUE

The original reservation was for forty-six seats. Twenty-two confirmed. Eleven attended. The venue change was attributed to “logistical considerations.” The logistical consideration is that twenty-four people who were supposed to be there are dead, retired to locations they don’t disclose, or declined because they do not wish to sit in a restaurant that now overlooks a gift shop selling patches with their unit insignia.

5

NAF COMMAND ANNOUNCES “HERITAGE OPERATOR” PROGRAM

A new designation for active-duty operators who have served in engagements now classified as “historically significant.” The designation comes with a shoulder tab, a modest pay supplement, and mandatory participation in two public-engagement events per year. Three operators have already requested transfer to units whose engagements are not historically significant. The requests were denied with language described as “firm but celebratory.”

6

COUNTERFEIT SIEGE TAPE MARKET REACHES NEW SOPHISTICATION

The latest generation of fake Siege Tapes now includes fabricated commission watermarks, convincing artifact noise, and audio that — while clearly synthetic — is good enough to fool anyone who has never heard the real thing, which is everyone, because the real thing has never been released. One vendor in the GSOTC's unofficial trade layer is offering “authenticated” copies with a certificate of provenance from the commission itself. The commission has issued a statement confirming it does not authenticate recordings it does not acknowledge exist.

7

“BUILT NOT BORN — STILL HERE” APPEARS ON NEO-TORONTO MEMORIAL WALL

The gene-forged graffiti, usually confined to GSOTC competitor staging areas, was found spray-painted on the Neo-Toronto Battle Memorial's eastern face during anniversary week. The memorial lists 312 names. Fourteen of them were gene-forged. The graffiti appeared next to those fourteen names specifically. It was cleaned within six hours. Photographs circulated for six months.

8

PCU DUNE SPECTERS PUBLISH REGIMENTAL HISTORY — IN POETRY

The 140-page volume, printed on sand-colored stock with gilt lettering, covers the regiment's founding, its first three major engagements, and the Siege of Al-Karak Pass in verse form. Free verse, mostly. Some sections scan. The quality is uneven but occasionally startling. The Specters' commanding officer, asked about the choice of format, said: “Doctrine manuals lie. Poetry just fails.”

9

PRIVATE COLLECTOR ACQUIRES VALKYRIE VOLKOV'S FIELD GLASSES

The binoculars used by Major Aleksandra Volkov during the New Moscow blockade breakthrough have surfaced in a UKE private collection after thirty years in what the auction catalog described as “institutional custody.” Institutional custody means someone in EO command had them in a drawer. The buyer paid 22,000 credits. Volkov’s surviving family members were not consulted. An EO spokesperson described the sale as “consistent with disposal protocols for decommissioned personal effects.” Volkov’s granddaughter described the sale differently. We will not print what she said, but we admire the specificity of her anatomical references.

10

THE GSOTC COMMISSARY NOW SERVES A DRINK CALLED “THE PHOENIX”

Orange liqueur, synthetic bourbon, and a float of something red that the bartender describes as “commemorative.” It costs 18 credits. The drink is, by all accounts, terrible. It sells constantly. Phoenix Reeves has not commented. We suspect she doesn’t know. We further suspect that when she finds out, the commissary’s insurance premiums will increase.

11

SOMEONE IS MAPPING EVERY DOCUMENT WAR BURN SITE

An anonymous cartographic project, distributed through the same dead-drop networks as the Crackerjack Almanac, is producing detailed maps of confirmed and suspected Document War destruction sites across four continents. Each map includes the estimated volume of destroyed records, the faction or entity believed responsible, and — most provocatively — what the destroyed documents contained, reconstructed from surviving indexes and cross-references. Three maps have been released so far. The fourth, reportedly covering NAF sites, has been delayed. The delay has not been explained.

12

TEMPEST RIDERS MEMORIAL PLAQUE STOLEN FROM NEW MOSCOW. AGAIN.

The bronze plaque commemorating the Volkov blockade run has been stolen for the third time in four years. The first theft was attributed to scrap dealers. The second to EO revisionists. The third has not been attributed to anyone, though the plaque was found listed on a collector's forum within forty-eight hours, starting bid 6,000 credits. The listing described the plaque's condition as "excellent, with authentic weather patina." The weather patina is from being bolted to an exterior wall in New Moscow. The patina is the only honest thing about this.

DOs / DON'Ts OF THE THEATER

DO

The retired Harrier NCO at the Neo-Toronto anniversary wearing her original field boots — resoled twice, scuffed to a specific and unreproducible gray, laced in the pre-2050 pattern that nobody teaches anymore. The boots are ugly. The boots are a credential. She walked past three people wearing reproduction versions of her unit's jacket and did not make eye contact. Correct.

DON'T

The heritage combat museum docent in a brand-new Hellfire Harrier reproduction field jacket with the tags still visible at the collar. The jacket retails for 1,200 credits. It has been pre-distressed with a process that makes it look like it survived a barrage. It has survived a retail transaction. Not the same thing.

DO

The Dune Specters sniper at the Crackerjack alumni dinner wearing civilian clothes — plain, dark, unadorned, no unit insignia, no patches, no commemorative anything. Ghost Medal energy. If you have to announce your history, you don't have one.

DON'T

The NAF procurement officer at the same dinner wearing four campaign ribbons, a heritage operator tab, and a commemorative sidearm holster from a battle he supported logistically from a rear-area office 600 kilometers from the engagement. The holster is beautiful. The holster is a lie worn on the hip.

DO

The gene-forged Crackerjack veteran with the visible drift tremor in her left hand, wearing a watch on that wrist specifically so you can see the tremor move the dial. Not hiding it. Not performing it. Just wearing her history on the hand that earned it.

DON'T

The biotech investor at the Neo-Toronto gala wearing a “Prometheus-era aesthetic” wristband — a fashion accessory designed to evoke the look of early gene-forged medical monitoring equipment without any of the function, the pain, or the meaning. Cost: 400 credits. Insult value: incalculable.

DO

The EO Tempest Rider lieutenant who showed up to Volkov’s memorial service in an unmodified dress uniform that predates three regulation changes. The uniform is technically non-compliant. The uniform is also thirty years closer to what Volkov actually wore. The protocol officer noticed. The protocol officer said nothing. Also correct.

DON'T

The collector who attended the same memorial service wearing Volkov’s actual rank insignia, purchased at auction, pinned to a civilian blazer. When challenged, he produced the receipt. The receipt does not outrank the insignia. The insignia does not belong on a blazer. The blazer does not belong at a memorial. Everything about this is wrong at every resolution.

DO

The SCA guerrilla veteran at the checkpoint bar, drinking alone, wearing a jacket with exactly one patch — his unit’s original, threadbare, barely legible. He was offered 3,000 credits for it by a collector at the next table. He did not respond. The collector left. The patch stayed. This is how history should work.

DON'T

Carrying a “heritage sidearm” — a reproduction of a famous commander’s personal weapon, serialized and sold in limited editions — to a social event in a combat zone where people carry actual sidearms for actual reasons. You are wearing a quotation to a conversation. Everyone notices.

DO

Pre-Upheaval reading glasses, wire-frame, prescription, clearly used, worn by an NCB archivist who actually reads documents that survived the burn. Functional. Specific. Not a costume. The glasses have a scratch on the left lens that she has not repaired because the scratch is from a shelf collapse in the New Prague archive and she considers it a professional credential.

DON'T

“Vintage-style” data chip readers carried as accessories by people who do not read data chips, do not have data chips, and would not know a Document War archive index from a restaurant menu. The aesthetic of knowledge is not knowledge. Put it away.

WHAT THEY'RE WEARING TO THE WAR

01

THE REEVES-ERA HARRIER FIELD JACKET (REPRODUCTION)

ManufacturerKOLTAR Tactical Heritage, Neo-Toronto

MaterialsPoly-aramid shell with synthetic moleskin lining, brass-finish snap closures, pre-distressed via chemical wash to simulate “twenty years of operational wear in a controlled retail environment”

Signal ValueYou admire the Battle of Neo-Toronto. You admire it enough to spend 1,200 credits but not enough to learn that the original jackets used a cotton-canvas blend that would fail every modern ballistic standard. The reproduction is technically superior to the original in every way except the one that matters: provenance.

SurvivabilityExcellent. It is a well-made jacket. It will protect you from weather, light abrasion, and the discomfort of not having a personality.

VERDICT: The jacket people wear to feel like they were there. Sold alongside the experience of having not been.

02

VOLKOV MEMORIAL OFFICER'S GLOVES

ManufacturerUnmarked. Distributed through EO-adjacent heritage markets.

MaterialsGoat-leather palms, silk-blend lining, embossed with the Tempest Riders crest on the left gauntlet. The crest is 4mm too large, which is how you know they're not original issue.

Signal ValueEO sympathy, military romanticism, and enough disposable income to accessorize your nostalgia. The gloves are beautiful. They suggest a hand that has commanded armored columns. They fit a hand that has commanded a wine list.

SurvivabilityThe leather is genuine and would hold up to moderate field use. No one who buys these will subject them to field use.

VERDICT: Grief, tailored.

03

DOCUMENT WAR ARCHIVAL GLOVES (AUTHENTIC)

Materials White cotton, thin-gauge, with anti-static treatment. Yellowed with age. Some pairs show graphite smudging on the thumb and forefinger from handling original documents.

Signal Value You handle things that survived the burn. You are trusted enough to touch them. In a world where most paper is ash, these gloves are a higher-clearance credential than most faction IDs.

Survivability They are cotton gloves. They will not save your life. They might save something more important.

VERDICT: The only status glove that matters. Earns every stain.

04

CRACKERJACK ALUMNI PINS

Materials Brushed titanium disc, 15mm diameter, laser-etched with competition year and operator callsign. No faction insignia.

Signal Value You competed. You survived. The biometric data from your performance is in a commission archive and will outlive you. The pin is the public-facing version of a much larger file.

Survivability Indestructible, which is the point. Several have been recovered from operators who were not.

VERDICT: Not for sale. Which is why the counterfeits cost 800 credits.

05

PROMETHEUS-ERA GENE-FORGED MEDICAL CUFF (ORIGINAL)

Materials Rubberized polymer band, 40mm wide, with embedded biometric sensors (non-functional in surviving examples). Interior shows skin-contact discoloration from long-term wear.

Signal Value This is not fashion. This is evidence. Worn now by gene-forged rights advocates, certain operators who understand what it represents, and — increasingly, unforgivably — by collectors who display them in glass cases next to their wine.

Survivability The cuff survived its wearer. That is the survivability review.

VERDICT: Handle with care. Or better yet, don't handle it at all.

WORST PEOPLE ALIVE

THE WORST HISTORY PROFITEERS CURRENTLY DRAWING BREATH

1

CASSIUS VANE

Heritage Combat Museum, Founder & Director

Vane made his money in post-flood real estate speculation in Neo-Toronto's submerged districts, buying waterlogged properties at collapse prices and holding them until the memorial economy made the neighborhood valuable again. He then pivoted to "heritage combat tourism," which is the phrase you use when "war profiteering" has too many syllables. His museum charges veterans full admission to see their own history displayed incorrectly. The eastern barricade reconstruction uses the wrong barricade. He knows this. He was told. He nodded, smiled, and said the words "narrative truth." We have not recovered.

2

THE SIEGE TAPE SYNDICATE

Various

Not one person but an entire cottage industry of vendors selling fabricated copies of the commission's unreleased footage of the 2051 Crackerjack Siege. At least fourteen distinct versions are currently in circulation, none authentic, all profitable. The most expensive — a "director's cut" with fabricated commission commentary — sold for 4,200 credits. The buyer was reportedly satisfied. Satisfaction, in this context, is its own punishment.

3

LT. COL. YURI GRADENKO (RET.)

“Official Historian,” EO Eastern Command

Gradenko’s three-volume history of the Eurasian Oligarchy’s military campaigns has been adopted as a reference text in four EO-administered academies. It omits the Siege of New Moscow. Not the details. Not the context. The entire siege. Asked about this in an interview he gave to Unstable Signals — the other magazine, the principled one — he said the siege was “operationally inconclusive.” Valkyrie Volkov broke a blockade. Gradenko has rewritten it as a weather event.

4

MERIDIAN BIOHERITAGE LLC

A company that acquires personal effects of deceased gene-forged operators, has them authenticated, encases them in display-grade resin, and sells them as “bioheritage artifacts.” Current catalog includes a drift-monitoring cuff, a set of suppression med vials (empty), and a pair of modified running shoes from a lynx-template operator who died in a training accident in 2059. The operator’s family was not informed. The shoes retail for 6,800 credits. The resin is very clear.

5

ANIKA CROSS

Tactical Heritage Influencer

Cross has 1.2 million followers across three platform networks. Her content consists of wearing reproduction military gear from famous engagements while visiting the locations where those engagements occurred. Her Neo-Toronto content — filmed at the eastern corridor during anniversary week — featured her in a reproduction Harrier jacket doing a “gear review” while standing where seventeen people died. The review was positive. She gave the jacket four stars. She deducted one star for the sleeve length. We deduct all five stars for the existence of Anika Cross.

6

THE “PROMETHEUS LEAGUE ARCHIVES” AUCTION HOUSE

An anonymous operation selling what it claims are recovered documents from the Prometheus League. The documents are beautifully fabricated. The paper stock is wrong. The typefaces are wrong. The League didn’t use letterhead because they were ideological saboteurs, not a corporation. The auction house knows this. The buyers don’t. The profit margin does not require authenticity. It requires appetite.

7

COMMANDER GREGOR HASS

NAF “Heritage Operator” Program Administrator

The man who designed the Heritage Operator designation and its mandatory public-engagement requirements. Hass has never served in an engagement classified as historically significant. He has served in an office where the classification decisions are made. He decides who becomes history and then requires them to perform it. Three operators have requested transfer to avoid his program. He denied all three. The denials were, he noted, “consistent with the program’s retention goals.”

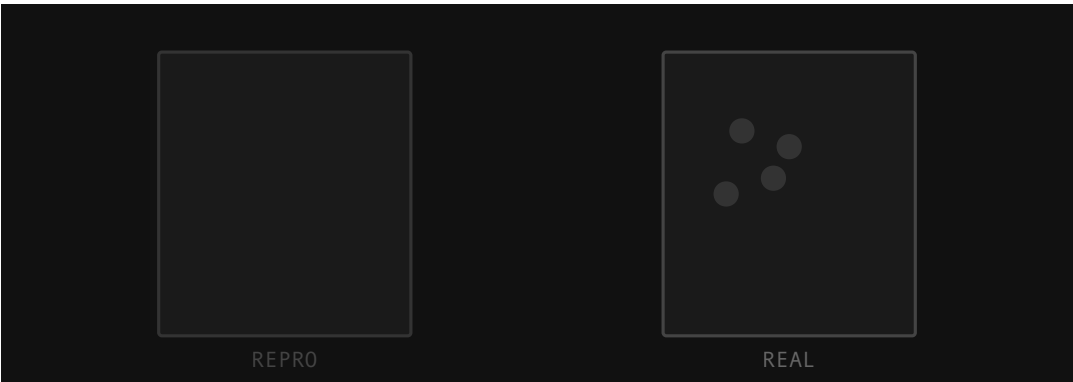
FIELD FAILURES

01



Wearing the wrong history is a fashion mistake. Wearing three contradictory histories is a résumé. Pick a war and commit.

02



Collector placed the reproduction on the left — the position of honor in EO display tradition. The real one is on the right. The real one has holes. The reproduction has a certificate. The collector chose the certificate. The collector is wrong.

03



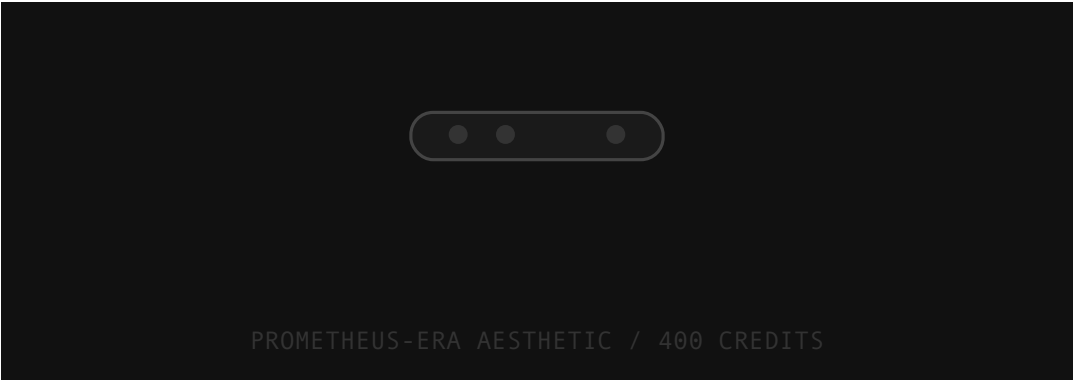
Counterfeit pin, wrong font on the year engraving, and the callsign reads “APEX,” which has never appeared in any Almanac edition. The man is at a social event in the GSOTC observation gallery. He is standing next to actual competitors. He is smiling. They are not.

04



Ceremonial enough for dinner. Too commemorative for a checkpoint. The guard didn’t know it was a reproduction. The guard responded as if it were real. The owner responded as if he were in a museum. The gap between those responses is measured in trigger pressure.

05



The original cuffs monitored drift in gene-forged operators who didn't know if they'd be the same person in the morning. This one monitors your step count. 400 credits. Worn on the wrist that has never trembled involuntarily.

06



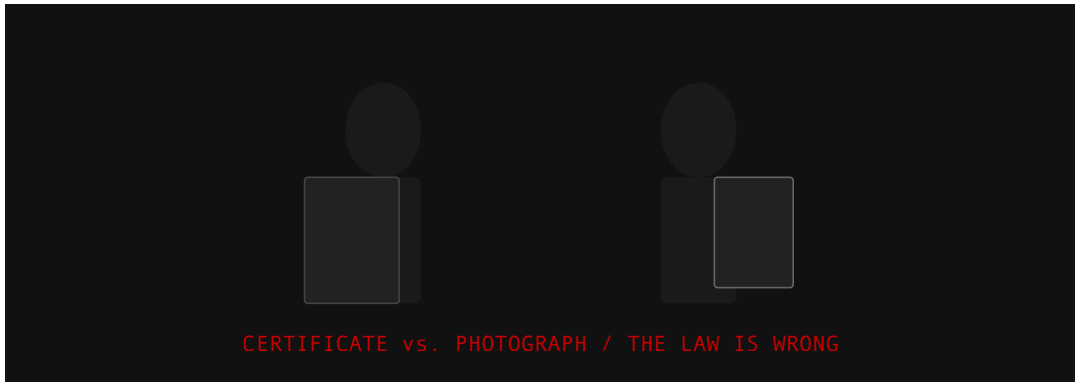
Commemorative drinks at a combat site. The drink is orange. The corridor is where the field hospital overflow was staged. The tour guide is explaining the tactical significance of the position. He is standing where the triage area was. He is enthusiastic. Nobody in this photograph has triage debt.

07



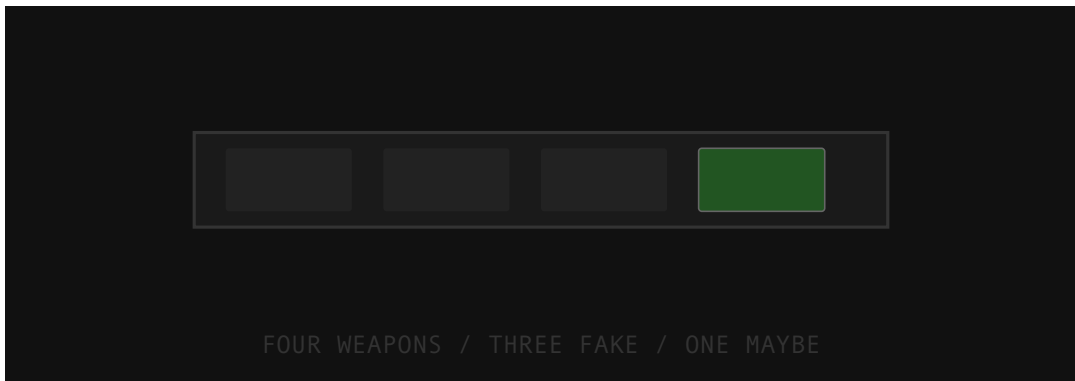
Contents: archival gloves (white, unstained), UV document scanner (still in packaging), acid-free storage sleeves (factory sealed), leather carrying case (monogrammed). Total cost: 3,800 credits. Documents recovered: zero. This is a costume for a job nobody hired you to do.

08



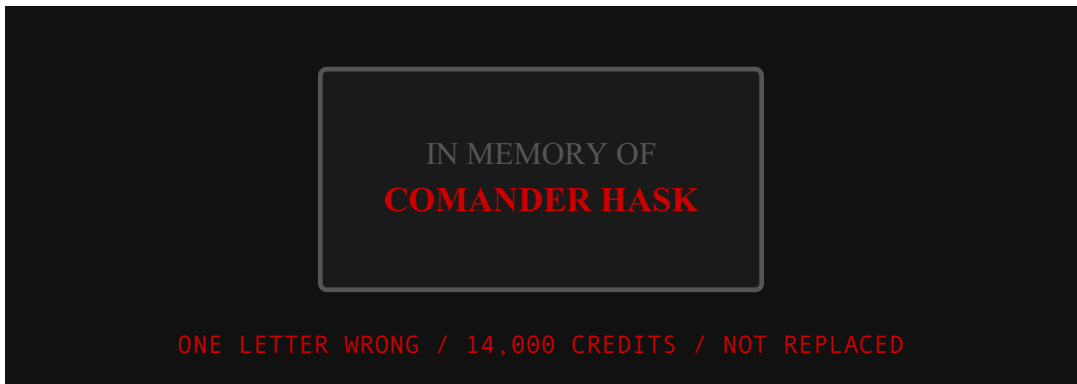
The certificate authenticates a recovered radio from the Battle of Al-Karak Pass. The photograph shows the man on the right using that radio during the battle. The man on the left bought the radio. The man on the right used it. The certificate belongs to the buyer. The radio belongs to the man who bled on it. The law disagrees. The law is wrong.

09



Three of them are reproductions. One might be real. The real one — if it is real — belonged to an operator who is still alive and has not been asked about its provenance. The dealer's response: "Provenance is a living document." Provenance is not a living document. Provenance is a fact. Facts do not have a sales department.

10



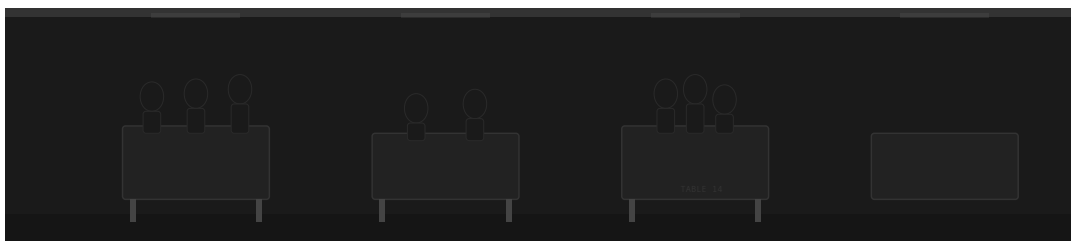
One letter wrong. The memorial cost 14,000 credits. The commanding officer's surviving daughter sent a correction. The correction was acknowledged. The plaque was not replaced. The letter remains wrong. This is how history works now: expensive, permanent, and almost right.

EMBEDDED

THE COMMISSARY KNOWS WHO YOU WERE

Three weeks at the GSOTC, where tournament competitors eat bad food, drink worse liquor, and argue about battles that happened before they were born

By Torben Ash



The commissary at the Global Special Operations Training Center serves food twenty-four hours a day, which is either a logistical convenience or a philosophical position about how operators experience time. The menu does not change. The coffee is a war crime committed against beans. The lighting — flat, institutional, the color of a headache — has not been updated since the facility was built, and the facility was built to train people to kill each other in controlled environments, so aesthetics were not the priority. The chairs are bolted to the floor. This matters. You will understand why later.

I'm here because Dara Kask, my editor, called this "the history issue" and said she wanted "something about how the past lives in the present." I said I could do that from a bar in Neo-Toronto. She said the GSOTC commissary is better because the people there are younger and more violent and the contradictions are closer to the surface. She was right. She is always right. This is why she is an editor and I am here, drinking institutional coffee at 0200, watching a table of Crackerjack competitors argue about the Battle of Neo-Toronto like it was a disagreement they could settle with enough volume.

The argument has been going on for forty minutes. It started over dinner — or what passes for dinner here, a protein-and-carb assembly that tastes like duty — when a Hellfire Harrier corporal named Vasquez said the eastern barricade defense was “the most overrated tactical decision of the last twenty years.” This is the kind of statement that, in a civilian context, would generate a spirited debate. In the GSOTC commissary, among operators who compete in a tournament that broadcasts their performance to four billion people, it generates something closer to a court martial conducted by people who have not been granted the authority.

The response came from across the table. A Phantom Viper — callsign Thorn, real name withheld because she looked at me like she would make the withholding unnecessary — set down her fork and said: “Name one commander who could have held that corridor with what Reeves had.”

Vasquez said: “Volkov.”

The table went quiet.

Nobody fights like Reeves. That’s the point. The cameras don’t change how she fights. How many people at this table can say that?

— Dune Specter, alumni, Table 14

Not the comfortable quiet. The quiet that precedes either enlightenment or damage. This is the specific silence of the commissary — the institution runs on it. Four factions, six gene-forged templates, and every manner of operator from career soldiers to tournament prima donnas, all eating the same terrible food in the same terrible light, and the only thing separating conversation from violence is the understanding that the chairs are bolted to the floor and the commission’s automated systems track every physical altercation within the facility.

II.

The GSOTC is, by design, a place without history. The terrain reconfigures. The urban blocks rebuild. The tundra melts and refreezes on a forty-minute cycle. Nothing here is permanent because permanence would compromise the facility’s neutrality.

This is, of course, a lie. The GSOTC is drowning in history. It just pretends not to be.

The commissary walls are bare concrete. No murals, no plaques, no commemorative anything. But the tables have been scarred by thirty years of operators who cannot stop carving. Callsigns. Unit numbers. Dates. The maintenance crews sand them down between tournament seasons, but the deeper ones survive, and if you know what you're looking for you can trace a lineage of competition through the damage. Someone, years ago, carved "GS + AV — ATRIUM 2051" into the underside of Table 14, which is either a memorial to Gallagher and Sokolova's confrontation with The Viper during the Siege or someone's initials and a date they thought was romantic. The commission has not investigated. The commission does not investigate furniture.

I mention the carving to a NAF logistics officer named Brenn who is using the commissary as a de facto office, spreading data chips across his tray like a man who has confused a cafeteria with a command center. He looks at me and says: "Every surface in this building is a document."

The Document Wars burned the libraries but they couldn't burn the commissary. People write themselves into the world when they think no one's recording. This table is a primary source.

— Brenn, NAF logistics officer

Brenn, it turns out, is part of the Heritage Operator program. He says the phrase "historically significant" the way someone might say "terminal diagnosis." Not with despair. With resignation.

"I was at the Suez incident," he says. "Five years ago. Dock security engagement, twelve hours, three casualties. Routine by any measure. Then someone in NAF PR decided the Suez incident was historically significant because it involved the first confirmed use of an AI-assisted targeting system in a maritime engagement. Now I have a shoulder tab and I give talks at schools."

"Do you enjoy the talks?"

"The children ask if I've killed people. I tell them I'm a logistics officer. They lose interest immediately. This is the healthiest response I've encountered in the Heritage Operator program."

III.

The arguments about history in the commissary are constant, recursive, and strangely formal. They have the structure of academic debates conducted by people who could break each other's arms.

The first is about whether the Prometheus League were heroes or accelerators of collapse. An SCA operator — quiet, young, sitting alone — said the only true thing anyone said all night: “They stole from everyone and gave to everyone. That’s not heroism. That’s logistics with an ideology.” Nobody argued with that. It was too precise to contest.

The second argument is about gene-forged operators in historical engagements. A lynx-template operator from the NAF, second-gen program, Reeves reflex line, speaks with the controlled precision of someone whose anger has been refined into data. She lists the gene-forged casualties at Neo-Toronto — fourteen, she says, fourteen names on the memorial wall — and then she lists the number of times those names appear in the Heritage Combat Museum’s exhibits.

“Zero,” she says. “The museum has a gene-forged section. It is about the science. Not the people. The science section includes a reproduction drift-monitoring cuff behind glass. The cuff belonged to someone. The exhibit does not say who.”

What I care about is that the museum put the cuff in a case and didn’t put a name on it. That’s what history looks like when it’s bought instead of lived.

— Gene-forged operator, lynx-template, NAF

The third argument is about the Siege of 2051. A Void Walkers competitor — one of their single-name operators, this one called Margin — ends the argument with a sentence I write down immediately because it’s the kind of thing that sounds like an epitaph:

“The Siege happened. The tape doesn’t matter. What matters is that every person in this room knows the story and none of you were there. That’s what history is. The story you inherited from someone else’s survival.”

Vasquez says: “That’s deep, Margin.”

Margin says: “It’s not deep. It’s Tuesday.”

IV.

On my eighth day, I find the Crackerjack Almanac editor. It's 0300 and there's a woman at Table 9 with a portable data reader and a cup of coffee that has clearly been refilled many times. She is cross-referencing operator statistics.

"I'm updating the Legends section," she says. "Minimum three tournaments, one podium, confirmed survival. You know what the hardest part is? Confirmed survival. Not because they're dead. Because some of them disappeared. Ghost Medal types don't want to be found. That's the whole point. They were effective in the margins. The margins don't have forwarding addresses."

She shows me a list. Twelve callsigns. Seven confirmed alive. Three confirmed dead. Two unknown. Both unknowns are gene-forged. First-gen Prometheus-era stock. Their programs don't exist anymore. Their medical records were in facilities that burned during the Document Wars.

"History isn't just what happened," she says. "It's what we can verify happened. And verification requires records, and records require someone to keep them, and someone to keep them requires someone who thinks the keeping matters. The Document Wars weren't about destroying knowledge. They were about destroying the infrastructure of keeping. Once the keeping stops, everything after that is... negotiable."

V.

My last night. I'm at Table 14 — the one with the Siege carving underneath — when a woman sits across from me. Fifties. Short hair. A scar on her right forearm that runs from wrist to elbow in a line too straight to be accidental and too old to be recent. No patches. No insignia. No commemorative anything.

"I was at Neo-Toronto," she says. "Not the east corridor. The north approach. Unglamorous. No commanding officer with a legend. Just a unit of thirty people holding a road that the assault force needed and we had. We held it for nine hours. Eleven of us walked off that road. The Heritage Combat Museum has a display about the eastern corridor. It does not have a display about the north approach. Nobody writes about the north approach."

"Would you like someone to?"

She considers this for a long time.

“No,” she says. “I would like someone to know it happened without being told it was important. That’s all. I don’t want a museum or a patch or a walking tour. I want a world that knows the difference between what was displayed and what was real.”

Your magazine. CONFLICT. I’ve read it. You’re smug and overwritten and you care about boots too much. But you don’t sell history. Not yet. Don’t start.

— North approach veteran, unnamed

She leaves. I sit at Table 14 for a long time. I run my hand under the table’s edge. I feel the carving. GS + AV — ATRIUM 2051. Somebody’s memorial. Somebody’s record. Cut into a surface the maintenance crews will sand down and someone else will cut again.

The commissary hums. The new competitors are arguing about Reeves. They are twenty years old and they know the story and none of them were there. Margin was right. This is what history is. The story you inherited from someone else’s survival.

I file my notes at 0400. The readings are not encouraging.

ADVERTISEMENT



MERIDIAN

ARCHIVE RECOVERY SOLUTIONS

Because what survived deserves better than a drawer.

Professional document recovery, authentication, and preservation for pre-Upheaval paper records, data cores, and institutional archives. Climate-controlled transit.

Biometric-locked storage. Provenance documentation that will satisfy any collector, any court, and most faction intelligence services.

Our extraction teams operate in twelve territories. Our authentication laboratory in New Geneva has processed over 40,000 items since 2057. Our client list is confidential. Our results are not.

Meridian Archive Recovery Solutions is not affiliated with any faction government or military intelligence service. All transactions are conducted under New Zealand Sanctuary arbitration protocols.

WE FIND WHAT THE FIRES MISSED.

THE MANUAL

HOW TO TELL A REAL BATTLE SCAR FROM A BOUGHT ONE

A field guide for the age of heritage fraud

By Sable Khor

PRELIMINARY NOTE: If you are reading this because you want to buy convincing fake scars, this guide will help you identify the ones that aren't convincing, which will by extension teach you what convincing looks like, which makes this guide both a consumer protection document and an instructional manual for fraud. We accept this contradiction. We are a magazine.

1. THE MARKET EXISTS. ACCEPT THIS.

The heritage combat economy is now worth, by conservative estimates from sources who refused to be named and whom we paid for the privilege of refusing, approximately 2.3 billion credits annually. This includes: reproduction gear, commemorative weapons, authenticated relics, fabricated relics sold as authenticated, private museum admissions, heritage tourism, and — increasingly — cosmetic scarification designed to simulate combat injuries.

Yes. People are buying scars.

Not metaphorical scars. Physical ones. Applied via controlled thermal, chemical, or surgical methods by a growing network of “heritage body modification” practitioners who operate in the gray space between cosmetic surgery and historical cosplay. The results range from crude to sophisticated. The good ones are very good. But they are not good enough. Here is how to tell.

2. DEPTH AND DIRECTION

Real combat scars are rarely symmetrical. Shrapnel enters from a point of origin — an explosion — and the fragments travel in patterns dictated by the device, the distance, the angle, and whatever was between the device and the body. This produces scars that radiate, cluster, and vary in depth according to fragment size and velocity.

Bought scars are applied by a practitioner working on a body that is lying still. The depth is consistent because the tool is consistent. The direction suggests a source point, but the source point is aesthetic — chosen for visual impact — rather than ballistic. Look for scars that seem to originate from a dramatically satisfying angle. Real shrapnel does not care about drama.

3. HEALING ENVIRONMENT

A scar that healed in the field looks different from a scar that healed in a clinic. Field-healed scars show evidence of movement during healing — the tissue stretched, tore slightly, re-healed at different rates. Clinic scars heal evenly because the patient was still and the environment was controlled.

Heritage scars heal in clinics. They have the evenness of medical care. If someone tells you they got their scar at Neo-Toronto and the scar looks like it healed in a penthouse with good lighting and nutritional support, the scar did not happen at Neo-Toronto.

4. COMPANION DAMAGE

A real injury rarely arrives alone. The engagement that produced the scar also produced bruising, abrasion, secondary cuts, and stress marks on the surrounding tissue. Over time, these companion injuries heal and fade at different rates, producing a complex surface that tells the story of the entire event, not just the primary wound.

Bought scars have no companions. The skin around them is untroubled. This is the most reliable indicator. A scar without context is a scar without history.

5. THE BEARER'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE SCAR

This is the subjective test, but it is the most accurate.

A person with a real combat scar does not display it. They do not angle their arm so you can see it. They do not mention it unless asked, and when asked, they answer with either precision (“second engagement, north approach, fragmentation device, the medic got to it in about four minutes”) or deflection (“old story”).

A person with a bought scar positions their body so the scar is visible. They wear sleeves that end just above it. They wait for you to notice. When you notice, they offer a story. The story is detailed, dramatic, and satisfying.

Real histories do not satisfy. They inform. If someone’s scar comes with a narrative that has a beginning, middle, and end, the scar was purchased and the narrative was part of the package.

6. THE GENE-FORGED EXCEPTION

Gene-forged operators heal differently. Template-dependent accelerated healing produces scars with specific characteristics: narrower, smoother, with a faint metallic sheen in some template lines due to the modified collagen response. Gene-forged combat scars are simultaneously harder to fake and easier to verify because the healing signature is template-specific.

Do not attempt to fake a gene-forged scar. The forged themselves will know. The way they will communicate this knowledge to you will not involve words.

7. FINAL NOTE

If you buy a scar, we will not judge you. We will describe you. That is worse.

MATERIAL CULTURE

THE PLATE CARRIER THAT OUTLIVED ITS OWNER, ITS UNIT, AND ITS WAR

Tracing a single piece of armor from the Battle of Neo-Toronto to a private collection, and everything it lost along the way

By Dr. Mira Okonkwo



The plate carrier was manufactured in 2043 by Kellar Tactical Industries, a NAF-contracted defense supplier that no longer exists. The company collapsed in 2051 after a procurement scandal involving substandard ceramic inserts that passed quality control because the quality control process had been contracted to a subsidiary of Kellar Tactical Industries. The carrier survived the company. It survived its wearer. It survived its war. It is now in a glass case in a private collection in New Geneva, lit from below by a warm-spectrum LED that gives the faded aramid fiber a golden hue it never possessed in the field.

I am looking at it. I have been given one hour. The collector — who has requested anonymity — is watching me from a leather chair with a drink that costs more than the carrier did when it was issued. He is polite. He is knowledgeable. He is the kind of person who uses the word “provenance” as a verb.

The carrier shows four impact marks. Three on the front chest panel, clustered in a group that suggests a burst from a fixed position. The fourth impact is on the left shoulder panel, higher velocity, different angle, suggesting a second shooter or a ricochet. The ceramic insert behind the fourth impact is cracked but intact. It stopped the round. The carrier did its job.

What is on the carrier is a field modification: a strip of OD-green tape across the upper back, hand-cut, with a callsign written in black marker. The callsign reads “NORTH.”

I know who NORTH was. The Hellfire Harrier regimental records identify NORTH as Corporal Dana Czerny, age twenty-three at the time of the battle, killed in action on the second day of the engagement. Corporal Czerny did not die from the rounds that hit her plate carrier. She died from a wound to the lower abdomen, below the carrier’s coverage area.

I think the mystery is part of the value.

— The collector, on being asked if he would want to know who NORTH was

The collector paid 18,000 credits. “I consider it a preservation effort,” he says. He is sincere. This is the problem with the heritage combat market — the people in it are often genuinely motivated by a desire to preserve, and the preservation is real, and the objects are safer in their glass cases than they would be in a government warehouse. But preservation is not neutral. It is a transfer of custody. He added lighting. He added climate control. He added interpretation. He subtracted the name.

I speak with Corporal Czerny’s mother. She is seventy-one. She is careful with her words.

“The NAF asked for it back,” she says. “They said it was government property. I said Dana was government property too, when it was convenient. They sent a form. I sent the carrier. I kept the photograph of her wearing it. That’s the part I needed.”

She pauses. “Is it in a museum?”

“A private collection.”

“Is it treated well?”

“It’s in a glass case with good lighting.”

Dana would have hated that. She hated being looked at. She was a corporal. Corporals do the work. Officers get the display cases.

— Corporal Czerny's mother

The carrier will outlast the collector, the collection, and the market that brought them together. Aramid fiber does not degrade at any meaningful rate under these conditions. In fifty years, a hundred years, someone will open this case and find an object that survived everything except its own context.

NORTH will still be written on the back. Nobody will know who she was. The mystery will still be part of the value.

THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED

WHAT HISTORY COSTS: AN EVENING WITH THE WOMAN WHO SOLD THE VOLKOV GLASSES

An interview with Sylvie Marchetti, director of private acquisitions at Halder & Kain auction house, conducted at a rooftop bar in New Geneva overlooking the lake, the mountains, and the moral compromises of the heritage combat market

By Maren Solberg

The bar is called ALTO. It is on the forty-second floor of a building that survived the Upheaval by being expensive enough to maintain and remote enough from the coast to avoid the first floods. The cocktails are 35 credits each. The view is of Lake Geneva and, beyond it, the Alps, which have lost enough snow cover in the last forty years that the peaks look startled, like someone undressed them without asking. Sylvie Marchetti is drinking something clear with a single olive. She is wearing a gray silk blouse, no jewelry, and shoes that cost more than the bar tab.

She is the person who sold Valkyrie Volkov's field glasses for 22,000 credits. She is the person Volkov's granddaughter called — and I'm paraphrasing the less anatomically specific portions — a “ghoul in heels.”

“The glasses were consigned to us by the EO Ministry of Defence under their standard disposal protocol for decommissioned personal effects of deceased service members,” she begins. She has clearly rehearsed this.

“Volkov isn't deceased,” I say.

“Major Volkov is deceased.”

“I mean the family. The granddaughter.”

“The family was not the consigning party.”

“I know who the consigning party was. I’m asking whether you considered the family.”

Emotional connection is not legal ownership.

— Sylvie Marchetti, Halder & Kain

“We followed all applicable legal protocols,” she says. “The family’s emotional connection to the items is understandable and we respect it. But emotional connection is not legal ownership.”

“You’re describing a legal framework that was designed to decommission boots and mess kits. Not the personal effects of one of the most famous military commanders in modern history.”

“The framework doesn’t distinguish between famous and unfamous items.”

“The price does.”

She sets her drink down. “Yes,” she says. “The price does.”

“Twenty years is the heritage threshold,” she explains later. “It’s when living memory starts to compete with institutional memory. The people who were there are still alive, but they’re aging, and the generation that wasn’t there is old enough to have disposable income and nostalgia for a war they experienced through broadcasts. That generation wants objects. Objects are certainty in a world where the records burned.”

I note that she uses “the records burned” without attribution — as though it happened like weather, not like arson.

“The Document Wars are outside my professional scope,” she says when I mention this.

“They’re the reason your market exists.”

“Yes. And the floods are the reason lakefront property is expensive. Cause and market are not the same conversation.”

Near the end, I ask her what she would not sell.

“The Siege Tape,” she says. “If it exists. If it were consigned. I would not sell it.”

“Why?”

Because some records are not objects. Some records are obligations. The Siege Tape — if it exists — is a document of what happened when the competition became a battle and the operators became soldiers and the audience became witnesses. That's not heritage. That's accountability. You don't put accountability in a glass case.

— Marchetti

"You put field glasses in a glass case."

"Field glasses are objects."

"They were in Volkov's hands when she made the decision that saved New Moscow."

"Yes."

"Isn't that a record of a decision?"

She finishes her drink. The olive is gone.

"You're very good at this," she says.

"I'm an editor," I say. "We're worse than journalists. We ask the question and then we watch you answer it."

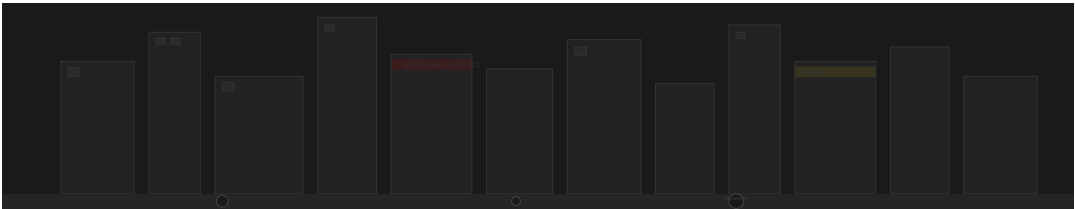
We settle the bill. She pays. This is appropriate. The heritage market can afford it.

CITY OF BAD IDEAS

NEO-TORONTO TWENTY YEARS LATER

A city dressed in its own memorial

By Torben Ash



You arrive at Neo-Toronto by rail because the road approach passes through the eastern corridor and the eastern corridor is, as of this year, a heritage district, which means the speed limit is reduced, the signage is commemorative, and the potholes from the 2046 barrage have been preserved under clear polymer as “tactile history installations.” They are potholes. They have been museumified.

The city itself is what happens when a place that survived something terrible decides to make the survival its primary export. The skyline is a mix of original structures — scarred, repaired, functional — and new construction that has been designed to look like it survived something, which is an architectural lie so common in Neo-Toronto that it has its own term: “heritage-adjacent development.” Buildings with pre-stressed concrete facades. Windows with cosmetic repair seams. The aesthetic is: we were here. The truth is: the developer was not.

The Heritage Combat Museum is in the old logistics depot on the eastern corridor. The admission desk is staffed by a young man in a reproduction Hellfire Harrier jacket. I ask him if the jacket is part of the uniform. He says it’s “encouraged by management.” I buy a ticket. 40 credits. I do not ask about the veteran discount because there is no veteran discount, which tells you everything.

The gift shop sells reproduction Harrier jackets (1,200 credits), commemorative patches (45 credits), and a coffee mug that reads “NEO-TORONTO: WE HELD.” The mug costs 22 credits. The “we” does the most work.

I buy the mug because I am weak and because the irony will sustain me longer than the coffee.

The memorial economy has changed the city’s relationship to itself. The eastern corridor — which is, in practical terms, a residential and commercial district where people live and buy groceries — now has a dual identity. A woman watering plants on a balcony above a “heritage walking trail” marker told me: “I live on the tour route. Three times a week, groups walk past my building while a guide explains what happened here. What happened here is I bought an apartment. What happened here before that is what they came to see. I didn’t. I came for the square footage.”

The Hellfire Harrier reunion dinner is tonight. Eleven attendees, down from a projected forty-six. I am not invited. But I am in the bar next door, which shares a wall and, due to Neo-Toronto’s aging ventilation systems, an atmosphere.

I can hear them. Not the words — the tone. The tone of people who share a thing that cannot be shared with anyone else. Laughter that arrives suddenly and leaves suddenly. Silences that are not awkward because the people in them know what the silence contains. The clink of glasses raised for people who are not at the table.

Eleven people. Twenty years. A wall of glass between them and a city that has turned their worst day into a walking tour.

I leave Neo-Toronto by rail. I am carrying a coffee mug that says “WE HELD” and I did not hold anything. I was not there. Nobody on this train was. The mug is warm in my hands and the history in it is borrowed and the coffee will be terrible and I will drink it anyway because that is what you do with inherited things. You use them without earning them and you hope the people who paid the real price don’t notice or, failing that, don’t mind too much.

They mind. They always mind. But they’re polite about it, mostly, because they survived something that teaches you which fights are worth having and a magazine journalist with a commemorative mug is not one of them.

NOBODY ADMIT THIS EXISTS

Commission archivist reportedly approached by three factions simultaneously regarding biometric data from pre-2060 Crackerjack competitions. The data includes gene-forged performance baselines that predate current template documentation. The archivist has not responded. The archivist may not exist. The factions are not named. A complete, indexed catalog of Document War burn sites in NAF territory was offered to the New Prague Archive and declined. The catalog's author is unknown. The New Prague Archive's director, asked for comment, said: "We are a library. We accept books."

Phoenix Reeves seen entering the Heritage Combat Museum after closing hours, alone, two days before the public opening. Duration of visit: forty minutes. She has not discussed the visit. Security footage from that evening was "automatically recycled per standard retention protocols."

Three separate vendors at the GSOTC's unofficial trade layer now offer "Prometheus League membership cards." The League did not have membership cards. The League did not have memberships. The cards are beautifully designed.

An EO military historian has submitted a 400-page manuscript to six publishers arguing that the Siege of New Moscow was "strategically inconsequential." The manuscript reportedly does not mention Valkyrie Volkov by name. It refers to "the commanding officer of the relief column." The commanding officer of the relief column was Valkyrie Volkov.

The Void Walkers' last known Crackerjack competitor — callsign Margin — was seen in the GSOTC commissary fourteen days after the current tournament season ended. Margin was eating alone. Margin is always eating alone. This is not a rumor. This is a description.

Someone has been leaving fresh flowers at the gene-forged names on the Neo-Toronto memorial wall. Weekly. Same flowers: white, synthetic, military cemetery standard. No card. No camera captures of the individual. Maintenance has stopped removing them.

A data chip containing what appears to be an unredacted operational record of the Battle of Neo-Toronto's north approach was found in the GSOTC commissary, under Table 14. The chip was turned in to facility security. Facility security logged it as "personal property, unclaimed." The commissary's automated monitoring system does not record what is placed under tables. This is either an oversight or a policy.

The Crackerjack Almanac's tenth edition contains a statistical anomaly: two operators from different factions, competing twelve years apart, show identical performance signatures across seven measured categories. The Almanac's editors have flagged this

with a footnote that reads: “Coincidence or continuity. We report. You decide.” The Almanac has never editorialized before.

Persistent rumor that a pre-Upheaval military AI — dormant since the 2040s — was briefly activated during the 2051 Siege. The activation lasted eleven seconds. In eleven seconds, the GSOTC’s automated enforcement systems transitioned from standard monitoring to full combat interdiction mode. The protocols were not known to include combat interdiction mode prior to the Siege. They do now.

The woman who carved “GS + AV — ATRIUM 2051” under Table 14 is, per one unverified source, still alive and still competing. Not under those initials. Not for the same faction. Not in the same body. The source has not been verified. The source was drinking. The commissary was dark. The chairs were still bolted to the floor.

A complete archive of Dead Channel Radio broadcasts is reportedly in the possession of the same individual who purchased Volkov’s field glasses. If this is true, one person owns both the instruments of history and the instruments of its unauthorized broadcast. This is either a coincidence or a collection strategy. In New Geneva, these are the same thing.

EXPENSIVE TRASH

KOLTAR TACTICAL HERITAGE "REEVES LINE" FIELD JACKET

1,200 CR

Poly-aramid shell, synthetic moleskin lining, pre-distressed to simulate twenty years of service. The construction is genuinely good. As a jacket, it works. As a heritage item, it is a costume with a price tag that conveys seriousness without earning it. You will look like you survived something. You will not have survived it.

VERDICT: Buys belonging. Does not earn it.

HALDER & KAIN "PROVENANCE SERIES" DISPLAY CASE

4,600 CR

Climate-controlled, UV-filtered, biometric-locked. The LED lighting system offers six color-temperature presets: "daylight," "field," "memorial," "auction," "private viewing," and — bewilderingly — "romantic." There is something about putting a plate carrier behind glass that makes the armor look like it surrendered.

VERDICT: The most beautiful coffin in the catalog. Preserves everything except meaning.

CRACKERJACK ALMANAC, TENTH EDITION

85 CR

Unofficial, unauthorized, and more reliable than any faction-published record. The Legends section is new and worth the upgrade alone. 85 credits for a data chip that contains better intelligence than most faction offices produce in a quarter. The only criticism: the interface is ugly. Function over form. This is, of course, the Almanac's entire point.

VERDICT: Earns the price. Earns more than the price. The ugliest essential purchase in theater.

CARRADINE & VOSS MODEL 7 "HERITAGE" SIDEARM

8,400 CR

Hand-finished titanium alloy. Walnut-composite grip panels from recovered pre-Upheaval stock. The weapon is mechanically excellent. The problem is not the gun. The gun is beautiful. The problem is the context: a sidearm designed to be admired rather than used, carried to events where it will be seen rather than situations where it will be needed. It is a sentence disguised as a weapon. The sentence says: I can afford to carry history on my hip.

VERDICT: Ceremonial enough for dinner. Accurate enough for the walk home. But you're not walking home from anything that requires accuracy.

MERIDIAN "HERITAGE AUTHENTICATION CERTIFICATE"

450 CR

The piece of paper — actual paper, high-cotton stock, watermarked — that transforms a piece of decommissioned military equipment into a collectible. Without the certificate, the object is surplus. With it, the object is heritage. It does not include the name of the person who wore it, used it, or died wearing it. This omission is described as "standard practice."

VERDICT: The most profitable 450 credits in the heritage economy. Turns metal into money. Turns people into "provenance."

OBITUARIES FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DEAD YET

THE UNOFFICIAL HISTORY

b. whenever the first person told a war story differently than it happened • d. 2066,
cause of death: authentication

The Unofficial History — oral, improvised, contradictory, alive — died this quarter when the heritage authentication industry grew large enough to require it to produce documentation. For decades, the Unofficial History lived in commissary arguments, bar stories, regimental lore, and the specific way a veteran would say “that’s not how it happened” when a younger operator quoted the textbook. It required no certificates. It survived on repetition and amendment. It was wrong as often as it was right, and the wrongness was the point — a story that changes with each telling is a story that still belongs to the people who tell it. The Unofficial History is survived by the Crackerjack Almanac, which has done its best, and the Heritage Combat Museum, which has not. No services are planned. The wake is at every commissary table where someone is arguing about Reeves. Bring your own coffee. It will be terrible. This is correct.

THE REGIMENTAL DINNER

b. the first time soldiers who survived something sat down together afterward • d.
2066, cause of death: insufficient attendance

The Regimental Dinner died in Neo-Toronto when a table set for forty-six was reduced to eleven. The real cause is the slow erosion of the event’s purpose — once, it was a meal among people who shared something unspeakable. Now it is a “heritage social event” in a restaurant that sells the view of where the event’s attendees nearly died. The dinner is survived by eleven veterans, a reservation system, and a city that has turned the worst night of their lives into a prix fixe.

THE VETERAN'S DISCOUNT

b. the first time a business decided that service deserved a lower price • d. never born, cause of death: the Heritage Combat Museum charges full admission

The Veteran's Discount was rumored to exist in various retail and cultural establishments throughout the post-Upheaval world. Reports of its existence have never been confirmed in Neo-Toronto's heritage district, where operators who defended the city can purchase reproductions of their own equipment at market price and visit a museum about their own battle for 40 credits. The Veteran's Discount is survived by the full-price economy and a vague cultural memory that people who bled for something used to get a break. No services. The deceased was never formally acknowledged.

FIELD REPAIR

b. the first time someone fixed their own gear because nobody else would • d. 2066, cause of death: the aftermarket

Field Repair — the art of fixing what broke with what was available, producing objects that were ugly, functional, and biographical — died when the heritage market discovered that field-repaired items sell for more than factory-original ones. The repair is now the value. The tape, the wire, the improvised stitching that once meant “this operator couldn't get a replacement” now means “this object has character.” Field Repair is survived by its counterfeit. The funeral will be held in a gift shop.

CLASSIFIEDS / PERSONAL ADS / BOUNTY ADS

SEEKING

Original Hellfire Harrier unit patches, pre-2050 issue, cotton-embroidered. Not reproductions. Will verify with UV fluorescence. Paying market plus 40%. Veterans preferred. Collectors tolerated.

— HH-LEGACY

FOR SALE

“Authenticated” Siege Tape, commission watermark, full 22-minute runtime. Fourth-generation copy. Price negotiable. Before you ask: no, it’s not real. But it’s the best not-real version currently available. Satisfaction guaranteed or your credulity refunded.

— ATRIUM MEDIA

PERSONAL

To the woman who carved initials under Table 14 in the commissary: I found your message. I know who GS and AV are. If you’re still competing, I’d like to buy you a coffee. The commissary coffee is terrible but the location is appropriate.

— TABLE14

WANTED

Information regarding the removal of items from NAF Logistics Facility NT-7, Neo-Toronto, between March and August 2062. “Disposal per standard protocol” and “actual disposal” are not the same event. We are not law enforcement. We are not journalists. We are accountants, and accountants are worse.

— LEDGER GROUP

FOR SALE

Pre-Upheaval municipal water-quality reports, Florida coastal region, 2018-2029. Complete set. Authenticated by Meridian. Documents are in excellent condition considering they spent twenty years in a filing cabinet underwater. The filing cabinet is also available.

— ARCHIVE DIRECT

MEMORIAL

For the operators of the north approach, Neo-Toronto, 2046. Twenty years late. No speeches. No museum representatives. Bring nothing commemorative. Wear what you wore then or wear nothing special. Location disclosed upon confirmation of service record.

— NORTH APPROACH ALUMNI

PERSONAL

Gradenko — we read the manuscript. Chapter 7 is missing a siege. You know which one. Fix it or we publish the version with the siege. We have sources. You have a reputation. The math is simple.

— FRIENDS OF VOLKOV

SEEKING

Gene-forged medical monitoring cuff, Prometheus-era. Must have original skin-contact discoloration. Will not purchase from Meridian Bioheritage. Will not purchase from any vendor who cannot confirm the previous owner consented to the sale. This is not negotiable.

— BUILT NOT BORN COLLECTIVE

FOR SALE

Heritage authentication certificates, blank, Meridian watermark, high-cotton stock. Wholesale quantities available. Before you report this: the certificates are blank. What you write on them is your business.

— [UNNAMED]

PERSONAL

To Phoenix Reeves, if you read this publication (and we know you do, because you once described it as “smug and overwritten,” which means you read it closely enough to form a literary opinion): the museum is wrong about the barricade. Come correct the record or we will, and our version will be louder and less polite.

— THE EDITORS OF CONFLICT

SEEKING

Dead Channel Radio Crackerjack Night recordings, any year. Will pay in credits, data, or favors of equivalent value. The favor economy is underrated.

— FREQUENCY

BOUNTY

500 credits for the confirmed identity of the individual leaving flowers at the gene-forged names on the Neo-Toronto memorial wall. This is not a threat. This is an attempt to say thank you.

— GENE-FORGED VETERANS NETWORK

FOR SALE

Crackerjack Alumni pin, genuine, with callsign and year. The callsign is mine. The year was my last. I am selling this because I need the money more than I need the memory. If that sentence bothers you, good. It should. Starting bid 2,000 credits.

— [CALLSIGN REDACTED]

PERSONAL

MARGIN — you were right about history. It's Tuesday. It's always Tuesday. Coffee? Same table.

— ASH

SEEKING

Kellar Tactical Industries internal documents related to the recall that never happened. The left shoulder strap. You know the defect. We know who it affected. Bankruptcy does not seal guilt.

— CZERNY FAMILY REPRESENTATIVE

WANTED

Contributors for an independent oral history project documenting non-famous engagements. We are not a museum. We are not a publisher. We are a recording device and a willingness to listen. No heritage authentication required. Just memory. Memory is enough.

— THE KEEPING PROJECT

FOR SALE

One commemorative coffee mug, "NEO-TORONTO: WE HELD," gently used, purchased from the Heritage Combat Museum gift shop in a moment of weakness. 22 credits or best offer. The mug is not special. The guilt is free.

— T. ASH, CARE OF THIS PUBLICATION

THE KEEPING

There is a word for what we do with the things that survive: we keep them. We keep letters. We keep boots. We keep the plate carrier with four impact marks and a callsign in fading marker. We keep the binoculars that a dead woman used to see the way through a blockade. We keep the mug that says WE HELD. We keep the scar. We keep the argument about Reeves. We keep the silence at the reunion dinner. We keep the flowers on the memorial wall.

The question this issue asks — the question every department, every caption, every classified asks in its own damaged way — is not whether we should keep these things. We should. The question is who gets to hold them.

The collector holds the plate carrier behind glass. The auction house holds the binoculars behind a provenance certificate. The museum holds the barricade behind a 40-credit admission price. The commission holds the Siege Tape behind a denial. The Almanac holds the statistics behind anonymity. The city holds the potholes behind polymer. Everyone is holding something. Nobody is holding it for free.

And somewhere in a commissary with terrible coffee and bolted chairs, an operator with a tremor in her left hand holds a coffee cup and the cup shakes and the shaking is the realest history in the room and nobody has put it in a case and nobody has priced it and nobody has authenticated it and it does not need a certificate because it is happening now, to her, in her hand, and the keeping is not a choice. The keeping is a condition.

We are a magazine that cares too much about boots. We know this. But we also know that boots tell you who was where and what they walked through and whether they came back and whether anyone noticed. The boots are intelligence. The scar is intelligence. The silence at the table is intelligence. The flowers on the wall are intelligence.

History is not what happened. History is what was kept, by whom, and at what cost.

The cost is always too high. The keeping is always necessary.

We will not stop noticing what people wear while they do it.

— M.S.

CONFLICT

Issue 09 — Published quarterly, or whenever we survive.

Printed on whatever stock we can source. Distributed through channels we decline to describe.

Standards are eroding. Memory is not.



“Every surface in this building is a document.”

— Brenn, NAF logistics, Heritage Operator, commissary regular, Table 14

CONFLICT

Issue 09 — Q2 2066