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The Eternity Brigade

Stephen Goldin

**Darsina
PRESS** 

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dedicated to
Lynx Crowe (et al)
for his hard work and his genius

Introduction

Every once in a while artists transcend their craft and cross into that exclusive territory occupied by oracles. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, first published in 1932, predicted that the state, assisted by science, would impose rigid social stratification and rely on mass-media "feelies," mood medications, and hedonism to quiet its citizens. Bob Dylan famously penned the lines, "Sometimes even the President of the United States has to stand naked" in 1965, years before President Richard Nixon's White House tapes left him a spent, naked shell. Now comes Stephen Goldin's prophetic *The Eternity Brigade*.

I first read this science fiction gem at the suggestion of Olga Gardner Galvin, editor/publisher of ENC Press. She told me very little about it, other than that she had a high opinion of it. I soon discovered why. This is fiction grounded in today's headlines—21st century current history detailed with remarkable accuracy. Yet it was first published in 1980, decades earlier. Because its

premise is so based in reality, that makes it all the more chilling when “Eternity” moves into the distant future and describes a scary scenario of endless, gratuitous war fought by soldiers—men and women—gradually enslaved by the process.

Goldin’s novel follows the lives of futuristic U.S. soldiers whose original enlistment agreements are long-forgotten scraps of paper. Placed in suspended animation until needed, they are basically stop-lossed, plunged again and again into the nightmare of vague causes and new battles in which they face an alternating cast of enemies who are often former allies. When they receive furloughs or try civilian life again, they no longer fit into the America that originally recruited them. Eventually, as technology becomes a more precise, frightening tool, not even death can release them from their bottomless pit of servitude. They wake again and again to new nightmares, new alignments, new wars in distant galaxies. Meanwhile, back home, citizens don’t concern themselves about the travails of these front-line soldiers because, after all, they volunteered, didn’t they? The process sustains itself and the possibility of interfering with it becomes more of a fantasy.

Excellent science fiction invents pinpoint parallels with the world we know while turning it on its head. In Goldin’s “Eternity,” honest inquiry has become the province of fools and disturbed rebels, while madness is accepted as reasonable. The author wisely chooses as his chief protagonist Hawk, an ordinary soldier blessed with no more than average intelligence. But there’s an underlying decency to him that his superiors can’t kill. He understands he’s not fighting for his country or his superior officers, but for his front-line buddies, and that makes him dangerous to his real enemy.

Goldin’s *Eternity Brigade* challenges us to examine

the status quo by looking at it through the intriguing, terrifying prism of the disturbing, fascinating future the author creates. It's a work that's particularly dangerous because it also happens to be a great read.

Ivan G. Goldman
Author of *Exit Blue*, a political satire
<http://ivangoldman.blogspot.com/>

“You can’t say that civilization don’t advance . . .
for in every war they kill you in a new way.”

— Will Rogers

Prelude

Hawker knew war in all its perverse permutations. He knew the killing and the pain. He knew the endless waiting in darkness for the enemy attack to begin, that helpless frustration when his fate was in the hands of others. He knew the swift battles, with death and destruction flaring all around him. He knew the quiet and the noise, the calm and the panic. He knew the hatred for the enemy, the scorn for his own superiors, the mystical friendship for his comrades-in-arms. He'd faced the paradoxes of combat and hacked his way through the jungle of its eternal contradictions.

He had mastered the art of mass killing. His original training in slaughter had been on members of his own race, but he had long ago broadened his education, to the point where he could kill any creature his superiors told him was an enemy. Numbers were insignificant; he could kill thousands at the impersonal touch of a button or execute an opposing sentry with his bare hands. Just point him in the right direction and let him do his job.

If Hawker had any opinions of this, his superiors had long ago stopped asking him what they were. He was a creature living solely for war; he had no other purpose. No one knew this better than Hawker himself.

There might be peace when he closed his eyes, but there would be fighting when he opened them again.

This occasion seemed little different from the countless others before it. There were bright lights and noises; Hawker could tell that even with his eyes closed. The ground shook with the force of explosions, but they were either mild or far away. There was no immediate threat, but the situation could not be good.

He prepared himself for the training probe, that sharp mental stab which, in a fraction of a second, could implant all the background material he'd need to comprehend the current situation. He knew from experience that the information would flash through his brain in an instant. He would be dizzy for a moment, and then anything he needed to know would be at his fingertips.

But the probe didn't come. Hawker stood in place, muscles tensed, but nothing happened for almost a minute. Then there was a string of profanity uttered by someone in front of him. Most of it was in a language Hawker couldn't understand, but he was fluent enough in the art of imprecation to recognize the pattern perfectly. Annoyed that they'd changed procedures on him *again*, Hawker opened his eyes to face reality once more.

He blinked at the brightness. All around him he could sense his fellow resurrectees reacting the same way. There were rumblings and muttered curses, the rustling sounds of small movements multiplied hundreds of times. There was an acrid smell in the air, a smell of something burning, perhaps something that had once been alive. Despite the burning, though, the room was cold and Hawker was naked. That was the part he disliked most. He'd long ago given up being self-conscious about his body—most of his comrades

were from races that didn't care how a naked human looked—but he hated the vulnerability that came with the lack of clothing. Anything covering his body—be it as simple as a toga or as complex as a personal force field—would make him feel safe, but nudity was uncomfortable.

As his eyes adjusted, he took in his surroundings with professional detachment. He was standing in a crowd of other resurrectees, perhaps as many as two hundred. A third of them were humans, male and female, the rest of various races. All were oxygen breathers, all were from planets with similar gravities and environments. Little details like these told Hawker more about the situation than his superiors would have guessed possible.

He knew, for example, that this world was basically Earthlike; he could breathe and move around without too many restrictions, which was at least a small blessing. The mixture of races made it seem more like a civil war than a war of expansion or conquest; in the latter, high command preferred to use homogeneous platoons because it was easier to instill in them a feeling of racial antagonism. In a mixed group like this it was counter-productive to stir up feelings of alien prejudice.

Since high command had gone to the trouble of selecting members of races that could survive in the same habitat, Hawker knew that this was likely a battle on a relatively small scale. For larger actions they would all be issued battle suits of one kind or another, suitable for creatures from any environment. There was also the implication that this side was losing the battle, or at least poorly equipped. High command seldom selected a ragtag bunch like this unless there was no other choice.

He reached these conclusions without conscious

thought. He'd fought so many battles in so many wars that the conditions of fighting were second nature. It hardly mattered any more; nothing did. Winning and losing were merely opposite sides of the same coin, and he'd lived with pain and deprivation so long they were as much a part of him as his left arm. Even death itself was scant respite; he'd probably died hundreds of times by now, though fortunately the resurrection process spared him those memories.

The room they were in was large and drafty, brightly lit with a diffuse glow from walls and ceiling. There were many doors to both the left and right, while the entire front wall was a holographic field. The field was filled with symbols and lines, a surrealistic map of some place Hawker couldn't even guess at. The symbols made no sense, but they rarely did, to him. Hawker was no strategist or tactician. He was a fighter.

A sergeant stood before the troops. It was an alien, tall and barrel-chested with arms looking powerful enough to tear a man in half. It wore an unfamiliar uniform, with insignia Hawker couldn't identify, but there was no mistaking that it was a sergeant. Even though the title of sergeant had disappeared centuries ago, along with all the other rankings as Hawker had first known them, the role of a sergeant remained unchanged. Someone had to goad the fighters, instruct them, lead them into battle. Titles could change, beings could change, but sergeants went on forever.

Even as Hawker looked about himself, sizing up the situation, the sergeant barked an order in some language Hawker did not understand. There was no mistaking the command, though. The entire room snapped to attention.

The sergeant looked them over with the same air of disdain sergeants have always affected. Then, when he

was satisfied that the troops were in hand, he lectured them in the same incomprehensible tongue he'd first spoken. Hawker stood, naked and cold and progressively more annoyed at the bureaucratic fuck-up that created this farcical situation. The troops weren't even separated according to language, and no translator sets had been provided! Hawker had taken hypno implants of at least two dozen languages at various times, and this one still did not fall within any of them. The situation must be very bad indeed for high command to screw up this badly.

The sergeant spoke for twenty minutes, making frequent references to the holographic map behind him. Sometimes he spoke matter-of-factly, sometimes in a bellow of exhortation. Hawker stood in place like a good soldier, listening to every incomprehensible word and not even bothering to make sense out of it. He'd long ago given up on that. War never made sense; you just blundered through it any way you could.

During the sergeant's speech, the ground continued to shake. The enemy bombardment, if that was what it was, grew closer. Neither the sergeant nor the troops took any notice of it, but there was plenty of commotion outside the doors on either side of the briefing room. Running footsteps, shouts, practically an odor of panic seeping in under the cracks. Things were not going well at all.

None of that was Hawker's concern. His only job was to fight, and it didn't matter whether his side won or lost. The fighting was all that counted, and it would continue to the end of time. The merry-go-round wouldn't stop, and there was no way to get off.

His briefing finished, the sergeant dismissed the troops. Those who had understood him turned to the left and began filing out those doors. Those who hadn't

—and Hawker was far from the only one—followed the others' example. No one spoke much until they were through the door, out of the sergeant's immediate sight. Then a flood of babble broke loose.

"Anyone here speak English?" Hawker yelled into the general din. When there was no response he asked again, then worked his way down through the list of other languages he spoke with some degree of comprehension. Finally, when he'd worked his way down to Vandik, he got an answer. "Here."

Hawker and his answerer kept shouting at each other in Vandik, closing the gap between them until they finally drew together. Hawker found himself confronting a female humanoid who came barely to his shoulders. She, too, was naked, but covered with a yellow-green downy fur. Hawker tried to remember the name of her race, but found he couldn't. They had been enemies at one time in the distant past, but had long since become allies.

"Could you understand what he said?" Hawker asked in his imperfect Vandik.

The female answered in an accent so thick he could barely make out what she said. Her grammatical structure, too, seemed strangled—although his knowledge of Vandik was centuries old and God only knew what had happened to the language in the interim.

"Is civil war," she said. "Is being this town fighting on all sides around. Bunker is this in which we are. Is will be fighting up top. Is must for us to hold off fighting for six hours. Is reinforcements will be coming at then. Is now for us to go get uniforms and weapons. This way."

Hawker followed his tiny compatriot to the supply line, where uniforms were being doled out by laconic quartermasters. When his turn came, the being in

charge gave him no more than a quick glance and reached behind him onto a shelf. He thrust the uniform and mess kit into Hawker's face and brushed Hawker aside to deal with the next man in line.

The uniform was a chocolate brown, one-piece jumpsuit with a uniseal seam up the front and a red armband on the left sleeve. Hawker struggled into it, hopping first on one leg and then the other while being jostled by the other soldiers around him, all struggling to get into their own uniforms. The jumpsuit was at least a size and a half too large, and he almost found himself wishing this were a world with a hostile environment; at least then the army took slightly better care to see that battle armor fit the wearer.

The only place where the size of this uniform was crucial was in the gloves; he'd be handling weapons, and he didn't want excess material getting in his way. He pulled the gloves down as tight as he could, making a slight tuck at the wrists to hold the fabric in place. The fingertips were still too long, but there was little he could do about that right now. Maybe if he was issued a knife he could cut the tips off altogether.

He fastened the mess kit to his waist and hurried after the woman he'd spoken to. He found himself standing in another line—this time for weapons disbursement. Two other soldiers had gotten into line between her and him, though, and he had no languages in common with either of them, so he could only stand impatiently and wait his turn.

When he finally reached the front, the clerk asked him a question. Hawker shook his head to indicate he couldn't understand. Nodding, the clerk half turned and gestured at the rack of weaponry behind him. Obviously Hawker was being given a choice of what he wanted.

Unfortunately, he didn't know the precise conditions under which he'd be working. He didn't know how close he'd be to the enemy, nor what their arms or defenses would be like. He'd have to choose general-purpose weapons with the broadest possible application and hope to use them to his advantage. There wasn't much selection. His side, the forces defending this town, were obviously pressed to the wall, and were trying to hang on with the scantiest of resources.

Of those weapons with which he was familiar, he chose four grenades, an energy rifle, a wide-dispersion laser pistol and a pair of throwing knives. He'd be able to fight anything coming within a hundred meters of him; beyond that range, it was someone else's concern.

Dressed and armed, now, he looked around to see what came next. People were organizing themselves into squads of ten. Hawker looked about and found the alien—a Spardian, he suddenly recalled—who'd talked to him in Vandik. Her group was not yet complete, so he went over to join her. If worst came to worst, he'd at least have one member of his squad to talk to.

The leader of this particular squad was a human, but Hawker quickly established that the two of them had no language in common. Once again the Spardian was pressed into service as a translator, informing Hawker that their squad had been assigned to defend Sector 14 against possible breakthroughs by enemy troops. Hawker nodded. There wasn't much more he needed to know; he could take his lead from the rest of the squad.

When everyone was outfitted, the sergeant reappeared and said a few more words—probably last-minute instructions and/or words of encouragement. No one really listened; each squad was busy trying to make itself into a fighting unit rather than the random

assortment of individuals it actually was. Perhaps the sergeant himself finally realized he was hindering more than helping, for he shut up abruptly and let the squad leaders do their job.

There was little enough time for that. All too quickly, the troops were pointed to the elevators and brought to the surface, where they'd be dispersed to their particular sectors.

Hawker's first glimpse of the surface confirmed all his suspicions. The town they were defending was in bad shape; in fact, to all appearances it was lost already.

The sky overhead was dark, despite having two suns above the horizon. Clouds of black smoke hung over the city, evidence of fires wrought by enemy weapons. Although the air on this planet should have been breathable, the stinging sensation of smoke made it far from pleasant. There were tears in Hawker's eyes, and he wished there'd been gas masks available; rubbing at his eyes with the backs of his hands, he followed the rest of his squad to their designated sector.

All about them was rubble and desolation. Hawker had no idea what world he was on, what the original inhabitants had been like or how splendid their town had looked before falling to the ravages of this war. He could only see the end result: no building over four stories stood intact, and even the smaller ones had windows shattered by the constant bombardment of enemy artillery; large impact craters dotted the streets, hindering progress; vehicles abandoned, overturned, burned; dead bodies lying everywhere, some killed directly by enemy fire, others indirectly by being trapped under a collapsing building. And nowhere, other than his fellow troopers, could Hawker see a sign of life. Everyone capable of fleeing had already deserted the city, leaving

the opposing armies to decide the issue.

Let the soldiers fight it out, the citizens said by their actions. *Then tell us what the outcome is*. At times like this, Hawker often wondered what the difference was between cowardice and common sense.

The squad moved quickly through the empty streets, crouched low to avoid possible gunfire and taking cover behind deserted buildings along the way. Overhead, an occasional ball of blue flame would drift lazily through the sky. Hawker had never seen anything quite like them in battle before, but he hardly had to be told they were dangerous. His guesses about them were confirmed when one of the blue fireballs brushed lightly against the top of a building several hundred meters away. The structure promptly exploded, knocking the entire squad to their knees and showering the area with tiny bits of rubble, hardly more than a fine dust. Hawker instinctively covered his head, but he needn't have bothered; the blue fireballs didn't leave pieces big enough to cause any damage.

Their sector, it turned out, was an area of some ten square blocks near the outskirts of the inner city. The neighborhood had been oriented toward small businesses and shops, with few tall buildings and only a scattering of residences. As a result, it had fared better than some other, more important target areas. Only a couple of structures had suffered even minor damage, there were no casualties lying about, and the streets were quite passable.

Probably too passable, Hawker thought, surveying the scene with a professional eye. *The enemy could march a battalion through these streets, and all we've got is a ten-man squad to stop them*. He was already making mental notes of the most effective places to use his grenades to block the streets, should it be necessary.

They came to a halt and the squad leader broke them down into two-man teams, each to patrol its own area within the sector. Since the Spardian was the only squad member Hawker could communicate with, he found himself teamed up with her again. They said little as they marched out to their post, at the most forward area of the sector. Hawker surmised his squad leader wasn't happy having someone he couldn't talk to, and had purposely assigned him to the front lines. Hawker was the most expendable person in the group.

He and the Spardian woman scouted their area and quickly found a secure vantage point in a narrow stairway leading down to a cellar. Peering over the top they had an almost unobstructed view of the street in both directions, while being reasonably safe themselves. With that accomplished, they settled in to wait.

He tried to talk some more with the woman, to find out whether she knew any more of the situation than he did. Their mutual command of the Vandik language, however, was only good enough for the most basic communication, and the woman was not very talkative anyway. Perhaps she resented being sacrificed at the front lines merely because she was the only one who could communicate with Hawker. She told him tersely that she, like he, was a dub, and that the sergeant had only sketched the situation briefly. Then she reverted to sullen silence, implying Hawker should do the same.

Hawker settled back against the wall and waited for the enemy to make its move. He'd learned long ago that a soldier has to cherish any quiet moment he can find. From the way this battle seemed to be going, things wouldn't be quiet for long.

He pawed through the mess kit they'd given him, looking for a cigarette. It was, by now, a vain hope; he hadn't seen any tobacco for centuries. There were other

drugs to act as mild stimulants or euphorants, but he'd never found them quite the same. *Damn! You wouldn't think it was that hard to dub a fucking cigarette, would you?*

He sighed. The army never did anything right; why should he have expected them to start with that?

There were three tubes of the pasty stuff they called food. Each tube was a different color, and each had a written description in a language Hawker couldn't read. He wasn't particularly hungry at the moment—resurrection always re-created him at a state halfway between lunch and dinner—but he'd learned to grab a meal when he could. Hawker sucked on the tubes of paste, still reflecting that it would have been just as easy for them to dub good food. But he was probably going to die soon anyway.

Two of the tubes filled him up, and he was debating whether to open the third when his partner tensed. He hadn't seen any motion upstairs himself, but the Spardian was facing the opposite direction. Hawker quickly stuck the unopened tube back in his kit, fastened it securely to his belt, and took up his energy rifle.

Any animosity the Spardian felt toward him vanished now. The alien woman spoke a few words into the comm on her wrist, letting the squad leader know something was happening here, then raised her own weapon in readiness. Cautiously she crept up the stairs until the top of her head was barely even with ground level. Hawker was content to let her take the lead in these matters; his spirit of adventure had evaporated long ago.

The Spardian motioned for him to come up close behind her. When he had done so, she whispered for him to stay there while she ran to a vantage point across the street, where she could get a better view of

what was happening. Hawker nodded and brought his rifle up, ready to cover her during her charge. The woman braced herself, then darted out from cover onto the street and across the way to a recessed doorway. The instant she left, Hawker was up with his rifle ready, aimed down the street where his partner had been looking. But he saw nothing, and the Spardian made it across the street without drawing any enemy fire.

Hawker lowered his rifle, but did not relax. Something had spooked the Spardian, and he was not about to take chances. He peered through the smoky gloom that pervaded the city, even here in this untouched neighborhood, looking both ways along the street for the slightest signs of trouble.

There was a movement back in the direction from which they'd come. Hawker spun, rifle at the ready once more. A tall, thin figure was making its way through the haze toward the Spardian. It was not any member of their squad, that Hawker knew for certain. A memory sparked in his mind, an image of an army of these gaunt figures charging up a hill at him—quite unmistakably the memory of an enemy.

The Spardian was busy watching the front; she wouldn't see the creature approaching her from behind. Hawker thought to yell out a warning, but didn't want to betray both of them to any enemy within earshot. Lifting his rifle, he fired one quick bolt at the approaching figure, and the alien toppled to the ground, dead.

Hawker's partner saw the flash of his rifle and turned in time to see the victim fall. At first she froze; then, after checking the front to make sure she wouldn't be seen, she left her doorway and ran back to the dead body to check it out. She knelt beside it for a moment, then shook her head and ducked for cover once more inside a storefront. She spoke into her wrist comm

again, and this time her voice came out of the unit built into the fabric of Hawker's sleeve. "Why did you that?"

"That was a..." Hawker strove to remember the name of that creature's race. "A Cenarchad. We fought them not long ago."

"Is being fifty years past. Cenarchads to us are allied." Her tone made it clear she thought him almost as bad a menace as the enemy troops out there.

"Well how the hell was I supposed to know?" Hawker exploded. "I was trying to save your fucking life. You sure as shit didn't bother telling me how to tell the difference between friend and enemy. If you don't want any more fuck-ups, you damn well better explain a few things."

The Spardian was quiet for a moment, probably translating his outburst into terms she could understand and then holding in her own temper. When she did speak, her words were well modulated and controlled. "Is being civil war now almost one year whole. Other side leaders stealing our records, dubbing our people. We having only back-up patterns. Old knowledge is ungood—is friends, enemies on both sides."

Hawker paused to consider. If the enemy did have a copy of the soldiers' molecular patterns, the battlefield would be utter chaos. "How do we know who to shoot, then?" he asked.

"Is look at armband. Red is us, blue is they."

Hawker looked at the colored band on his left arm. Thinking back on it, all the uniforms issued in the bunker had red armbands. Checking more carefully, he could see that the band was just loosely basted on. "What's to keep someone from changing armbands?"

Across the street, he could see the Spardian shrug. "No one liking being shot by own side in accident." She paused. "Not even Cenarchads."

Hawker ignored her sarcasm. True, it would probably be easy enough to change armbands and infiltrate the enemy lines—but imagine the irony of returning to your own side and being shot as the enemy. It was probably being done, but Hawker had no stomach for that double-sided game.

“I sometimes think that’s your strongest asset.” It was Green’s voice coming back to him after all these centuries. *“You have no imagination. You see only straight forward, without looking to either side. If there’s an enemy there, you shoot. You don’t worry about peripheral issues. People with imagination waste too much energy thinking about incidentals. Keep it up, Hawk, even if they kid you. You’re really the strongest of the lot, when I think about it.”*

Poor Green. Hawker had a sudden recollection of that final image, of Green in his arms, begging not to be forgotten. *I still remember you, David,* Hawker thought. *That’s one thing I won’t let them take away, no matter how long I live.*

Whatever the Spardian woman had seen—or thought she’d seen—there was nothing on the street now. She and Hawker waited in their respective niches on opposite sides of the thoroughfare for half an hour, with no signs of further activity. Far away, on the other side of the city, they could hear the fireballs exploding and the buildings tumbling. But there was too much distance to make it sound real; from here, there were no sounds of gunfire, no screams of charging soldiers shouting obscenities at one another, no wailing, moaning, or smell of death. Hawker was beginning to think he’d lucked out this time.

Then it all came at once: a swarm of blue fireballs falling like hailstones. Hawker hardly had time to spot them before they were down. The first three hit in the

street, jarring the ground like a powerful earthquake and biting huge holes in the paved surface. Hawker was knocked sideways against the wall, so hard it knocked the energy rifle out of his hands. He stooped to retrieve it and was jarred by a second explosion, even nearer. He scooped the weapon up blindly and raced out of the stairwell. That was no place to be when the walls came tumbling down.

But the street was no better. Volley after volley of the fireballs came in, and there was no defense against them. Buildings on the other side of the street were already demolished; Hawker could see no sign of his partner. He was looking around for a place to run, a place to hide, when a fireball hit the building right beside him. The top stories exploded in a rain of dust, but the lower levels, jarred beyond endurance, began to collapse. Hawker dove back into his stairwell, just as the building tumbled down around him, burying him beneath a mountain of debris.