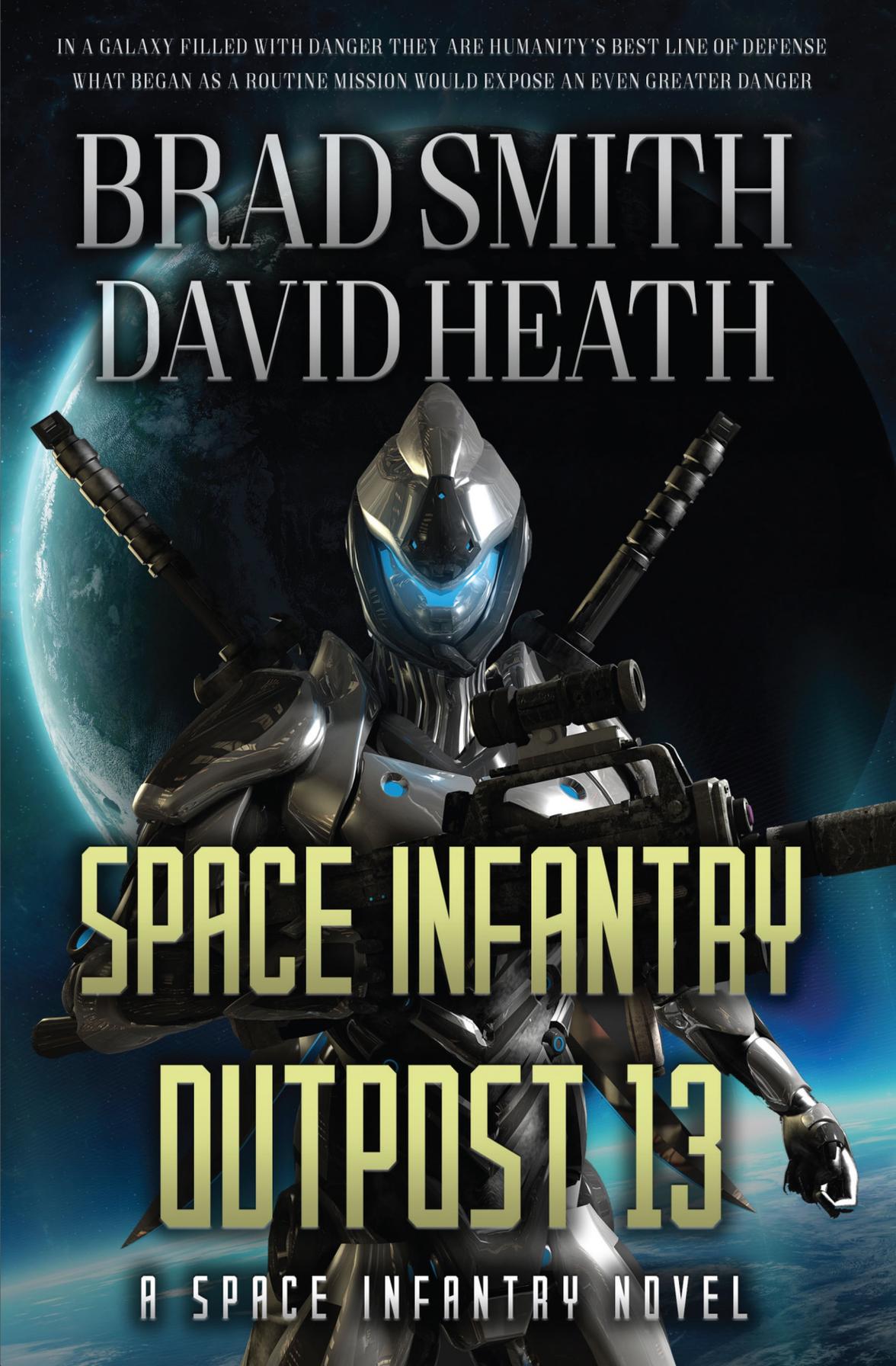


IN A GALAXY FILLED WITH DANGER THEY ARE HUMANITY'S BEST LINE OF DEFENSE
WHAT BEGAN AS A ROUTINE MISSION WOULD EXPOSE AN EVEN GREATER DANGER

BRAD SMITH
DAVID HEATH



SPACE INFANTRY
OUTPOST 13

A SPACE INFANTRY NOVEL

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This novel is a work of fiction. All of the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously.

DEDICATION

To Maya and Hiro

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INTRODUCTION

It's nice to be back here again. After writing about World War III in my other books, Lock 'n Load head honcho David Heath made me an offer I couldn't refuse and asked me to switch my focus to science fiction.

I didn't say yes too quickly. I had tried my hand at writing science fiction years ago and the results were mixed. After gathering years of experience as a writer and learning the ropes, I finally figured out what had gone wrong. My first clumsy stab at the genre was thwarted due to my own ignorance - I wasn't aware of SF's very specific story structure and the unique reader demands that made those stories work.

The prior existence of Space Infantry solved those problems - it came with a universe that had already been sketched out with broad but defining strokes. David had a specific vision of what kind of story he wanted to tell and the flavor it should offer. To top it off, he presented me with a manuscript that was a bit rough but needed just a little extra panache in places. To be honest, he was harder than he should have been on himself. David is a very good storyteller.

I used the existing storyline and David's advice as my handholds back into the science fiction genre. The result is what you have in front of you right now. If all went as well as we hoped, you'll encounter a group of characters similar to what you would find in

the Space Infantry: Resurgence game from Lock 'n Load Publishing. Hopefully, this won't be the last time you've read about these people. There are plenty of fun stories to tell in this fertile setting.

Hard science fiction fans be warned: My aim with this book was to entertain. There is little here that might please hardcore aficionados.

This book is about action and it is meant to give readers a zoomed-in look at the men and women who populate the ranks of the Space Infantry team, much like those found in the game. Like *Starship Troopers* (the book and the movie - I love them both for very different reasons), my story is about how a group of people grow together in the face of battle. The wider political and military context is alluded to rather than spelled out, but I'd be happy to expand on this in future books if the demand is there for it.

Thanks always for purchasing and reading my books. If you're so inclined, drop me a line at the Lock 'n Load Publishing forums and let me know what you think. I'm notoriously bad at replying to messages, but I do read what's out there, and I take the constructive comments to heart.

Sincerely,

Brad Smith

April 2019

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As usual, I owe a big thanks to the folks at Lock ‘n Load Publishing who had faith enough in my writing to choose me for this great project. David Heath ‘s suggestions and guidance were very helpful. Illustrations by Marc von Martial were on point, as always, and added much to the story. Thanks to Blackwell Hird and Gottardo Zancani for designing an excellent game.

SPACE INFANTRY

OUTPOST 13

BRAD SMITH
DAVID HEATH

VERTIGO

Will Hudson *pushed* through the wall of flames that engulfed half of Deck 34A. The immense heat radiated through his exoskeleton suit and seared his flesh.

Cradled in his arms was a limp figure, the last of the engineering team that had fought and nearly died trying to save the ship from going down. All Hudson had to do was get this guy on an escape pod then get ready to die.

Simple.

Three alarm blasts blared along the hallways - a final warning that few evacuation pods remained. Hudson's mask fogged up with each warm humid exhalation as he trudged forward. The entire ship shuddered right before another explosion ripped through its upper decks.

A sideways glance through the nearby window revealed a mass of debris flung off into space. Among the jagged pieces were telltale markings of the ship's control tower and forecandle along with its cargo of Athenium and other rare minerals.

The Kyushu groaned and creaked in the throes of death. It was clear now she couldn't be saved - not even with the herculean efforts of a thousand-man crew to douse the raging inferno that ran wild through it like a ravenous animal.

As one of the grunts aboard, Hudson's duty had been to help protect her.

When the minor refueling accident triggered a conflagration, he did his best to assist the engineering team. Hudson didn't know squat about all the fancy equipment – but he knew how to turn a wrench. Like the other 'geers, he had worked his butt off to save her until it was clear they had lost the battle.

Hudson planted his right foot and watched the suit's hydraulics respond in kind. The metallic boot bore down on the pod's hatch. A steel aperture swished open, and he set the wounded man inside the pod like a mother putting a sleeping child to bed.

As the pod doors rotated shut, the engineer's eyelids fluttered open. Hudson stood up and hammered on the release mechanism.

A placid feminine voice counted down from three to zero. The pod shot out of the hull. Its path toward the surface of the nearby planet was marked by a pencil-thin trail of light.

A deep rumbling welled up from within the bowels of the stricken ship. The approaching fires retreated as if they had been suddenly tamed by some higher power. Hudson understood the significance of this reprieve - the end had come and not a moment too soon.

The faces of his dead brothers and sisters flashed through his brain. A soothing thought calmed him, and he repeated it again and again like a mantra.

Soon.

A beam crashed down from the ceiling and sent Hudson tumbling along the long corridor. As the ship wrenched itself apart, his suit's alarms beeped and whined uselessly. He clung to a bulkhead and prayed that his death would be painless and quick. In the next life, he would meet them all again. Hudson could see the reunion now – a blissful celebration that would make him whole again.

The hull ripped open from stem to stern. Hudson was propelled out among the scattered debris of steel wreckage that was once the pride of the Colonial Government.

As he drifted toward the pearl-hued planet far below, Hudson closed his eyes and waited for the end.

It never came.

Nick Smith bolted upright in bed. The sheets were soaked in sweat and an icy barren sensation swept over him. It had been years since he had dreamed about the incident. Why had it returned now?

Although a few of the details were blurred by the passage of time, the nocturnal visions had recaptured the raw sensation of terror amid the flames and certainty of impending death.

The only thing missing was the aftermath - joining the Space Infantry, losing his old identity, and being assigned a brand-new name and face. Although it lacked death's finality, the SI program had offered a new life – and perhaps a way out of his rut of despair. In haste, he had signed the enlistment papers and resolved to never look back at what he had lost.

But now his old life was creeping back in. At first it had been little things – time spent gazing at old photographs or listening to old songs. Ever so slowly, it had ramped up into dreams and nightmares. Despite the second chance at life and the new people who surrounded him, a sense of solitude clung to his insides and refused to depart.

Afraid that doing so might open the floodgates even further, he had talked to no one about it. Instead, he had spent his nights chiding himself for thinking about his former life. How long had it been again since the accident transformed his life?

Three long years.

Will Hudson was dead. Long live Nicholas Smith.

The soft white glowing digits of the antique clock read 0429. A choking panic welled up. In less than a minute, the alarm would go off and something horrible would happen. Smith had no idea what it was. He just knew he had to prevent it.

His fingers fumbled over the machine's sleek upper surface. He pressed and flicked and turned at buttons and knobs and switches. But just like the echoes of the past, the "ALARM ON" light refused to disappear.

Soon, that bleating would fill his head and something worse than death would come and swallow him whole.

Like a grenade, he flung the clock toward the opposite wall with all the strength he could muster.

Halfway through its flight, the cord ripped out of the socket and cracked like a whip. When the machine struck the hard metal surface, it let out a sick garbled shriek before it shattered into a million pieces.

Wrapped in the silent darkness of the squad bay, Smith tried to banish the dread. His eyes closed and he conjured forth the soft warm sands of an alien beach beneath an endless blue sky. The sun's tender rays lingered over him while soothing waves lapped at the nearby shore.

It didn't take long for the sun to turn a bloody shade of red and for the sands to blow along a hot ceaseless wind. No matter how hard he fought it, the vision of paradise was robbed of him one sensation at a time. Very soon, all that remained was the dusty barren planet of his childhood.

As the fuzzy shapes gathered form in his mind, the door to the head clanged shut. With the gloom clinging to his insides, Smith rose on unsteady feet and padded over the cold metallic floor. Reaching for the door, the lights in the squad bay slammed on and Smith reflexively threw his hands up to shield his eyes.

Too late. The flickering florescent glare stabbed at his visual cortex like an ice pick.

"Dammit!" he shouted.

Over the sound of fast-running water came the voice of his roommate, Noah Stoltz.

"You can wait a freakin' minute."

There was little left to do but settle for a morning shave.

Smith grunted and turned to the mirror. Tepid water splashed over a face lined with regret at the previous night's booze-soaked celebration to the end of another grueling training day.

A lie.

It was more than that. Something deep inside him had shifted. Staring at the hard ridges of bony cheeks, the high forehead, and the angular chin was enough to propel the question to the front of his mind.

Who the hell am I?

The official answer for the last three years had seemed so easy. He was Nicholas Martin Smith.

It was a simple name that had been assigned upon joining the Space Infantry.

Since a small but notable percentage of his DNA could be traced far back to Anglo-Saxon descent, the possible list of names had been shortened to those that were most characteristic of such an ethnic background. A computer selected it as the best fit for his size, weight, and complexion – and that was all there was to it. He was untraceable – a non-entity among Union and its countless planets. Like all the others in the Space Infantry, he had become a ghost.

The cold steel razor scraped along a stubbled cheek. In his younger days, Smith had always felt more comfortable with a patch of facial hair to hide his face behind. It was as though a soft wall of hair could partially shield him from the unpleasant realities that one encountered throughout the course of a normal day.

Though that one simple comfort may have been afforded to Will Hudson, it was denied to Smith. Although he knew the reason for it was due to strict military regulations, it just seemed like yet another affront to his sense of self.

The idea flashed in front of his eyes for a moment, and again he tried to banish it. But this time, it wouldn't budge. Instead, it rang out loud and clear.

Quit.

He would leave the Space Infantry soon – disappear without a trace and spend the rest of his years back on Grimgate, where his family had lived, worked, and died. Maybe he could find a piece of his old self back there in the dirt.

The blade swept down again, revealing a smooth lean face that was not his own.

The shower door whooshed open and a tall athletic figure stepped out of the misty haze. Around his waist was wrapped a large towel, the last clean one in the squad bay. Smith considered strangling his squad mate with the pair of dog tags that clung to his neck but refrained. Sergeant White would have docked his pay for that.

“Lookin’ good champ,” said Stoltz, in his characteristic flippant tones. “You sleep in a dumpster last night?”

“Yeah,” was all Smith could manage.

The word spilled out like a runny yoke. It carried no sense of the intended curtness that might have ended the conversation then and there. Stoltz failed to get the message and pressed on without due heed.

“You think it’s possible we’ll get through today without being zero-tasked? Because that would be awesome.”

Smith lifted his wrist and checked a watch that did not exist.

“Y’know, breakfast is almost finished down at the mess,” he said. “Better hurry. I hear the runny eggs and burnt toast are the best in the solar system.”

Stoltz shrugged, threw some pit stick on, then ambled out of the head. At last, Smith was alone to nurse his self-loathing. He tried his best not to glance in the mirror as he finished shaving. The attempt cost him two tiny cuts astride his jugular. A trickle of bright crimson streamed over his fingers, and the smell sent his mind reeling back in time, twenty years in the past.

He kneeled over the body and wailed. The blood that pooled underneath it was still fresh and smelled of iron. Though young Will Hudson begged and pleaded his papa to wake up this instant, the man lay there in the dirt - shot down like a dog in the street by a jumpy sheriff during a miner’s strike.

All they’d been asking for was a few extra credits a month. Thirteen of the men lay dead on the dusty ground, and none of them would see another penny. The voice of his older brother spoke the words that made it all too real.

Daddy’s gone, Will. We’re on our own.

When he finally came back to the present, he found himself standing in front of the mirror. His hands were stained with dried brownish blood and the water ran cold. How long had he been there this time?

He strolled into the squad bay to find Lisa Hayes sitting on his bed with the jagged shards of the alarm clock in her lap. Smith halted in his tracks as the diminutive girl looked up and locked eyes with him. A scowl tumbled across her thin face.

Her head swung slightly to one side, an effort to remove the unruly strands of blonde hair that hung in front of her eye.

Smith nearly smiled. She had no idea how beautiful she looked at just that moment.

“What is wrong with you?” she said. “Lemme guess. You can’t shoot any bugs so you need to take out your aggression on a poor defenseless alarm clock.”

“You planning to make a bomb out of that?”

Hayes tilted her head and gave a playful smile. “That doesn’t sound like such a bad idea. You can test it out for me when I get it fixed.”

“Hilarious. Care to tell me why you’re here? Or maybe I don’t need to ask.” Smith took a step closer and grinned as he waved the hand towel in front of his waist like a bullfighter. Hayes appeared unimpressed.

“Those days are long over, buddy. Get a grip.”

Smith knew the score but had no shame about their shared past. Years ago, they had been a thing. Once upon a time, she was an MP and he was a lowly recruit who went AWOL from training. It took her all of two hours to find his sorry butt flat broke and beaten up at the skeeziest biker bar in town.

She had gone easy on him in the official report – enough to help him avoid getting kicked out of the Space Infantry. Somehow, he had caught her eye despite all the bruises.

He looked her up again after graduation, and it was fun until things got complicated. Now they were in the same squad together and personal attachments like that had become a luxury that no one could afford.

“So why are you here then?” he asked. “And by the way, what time is it?”

“Stoltz said you looked rough,” she said. “I wanted to talk to you about something important. It’ll just take a minute.”

Smith ran a hand over a dry scalp and tossed the hand towel in the corner. Hayes didn’t flinch at the sight of his body.

“Look,” he said. “If you think I’m gonna sit here and talk about my feelings like some kinda pansy, you know me even less than I thought you did. I’m hungover and I’m tired.”

For most people, that's a cause for reflection. For me, it's a Tuesday. So let's cut the crap and get to the training room or White's gonna eat us for breakfast."

A wince flashed across her face before she collected herself. Smith knew he had just made a misstep, but he couldn't figure it out. He was fine! Why had she come here to dig?

"Suit yourself." She got up and sauntered to the door.

Smith worked his right leg into his fatigues while he chomped on a power bar.

"Suits me just fine," he muttered.

"By the way," said Hayes. "It's 0450. I've hidden your webbing somewhere in this room. You got ten minutes to get dressed and haul your cute little butt to the training room. Good luck!"

"What?!"

The door slid shut behind her. Smith scarfed down the remnants of his breakfast while jamming limbs into various holes in his garments. With his fatigues finally on, he searched high and low for his tactical web harness. It wasn't under the bed.

Not in the closet. Definitely not in the footlocker. It had been stashed, instead, under Stoltz's pillow. Smith cursed when he found it, then held the belt chest-high and pressed the buckle. The web gear harness shot out of the openings along the sides and slid around his waist and chest.

There was no time to check his attire in the mirror. Smith raced out of the room and counted down the seconds as he raced along the crowded corridors.

"I am dead! I am so dead! Five! Four! Three! Two! One!"

The door to the training room flew open.

Smith's gut churned.

In his head, an alarm was about to go off.

Something horrible was about to happen.

He just knew.