

# The MULE incident

By: Hans Olsson

The alarm went off at the same time as the hangar was flooded in red light.

"Milligan! Get down here!" roared the officer on deck.

Milligan obeyed instantly and started climbing down a ladder from where he had tightened some screws at the ceiling.

"Sir?" he asked when he got down to the floor.

"We have a situation here. You know what the red light means, yes?"

"It's the request lamp, sir!"

"No, you imbecill, it's not a bloody request. It's an ORDER lamp! And someone down there has ORDERED a MULE. But we can't provide one since the arm for the pneumatic charger is still disfunctional. Wasn't you supposed to fix that?"

"No sir. That was..." he shrugged at the sight of the officer who got more red in the face by the second.

"I don't care who it was! It wasn't done properly. You Milligan have to go in there and control it manually."

"But..."

"No arguing! Just do it. It's not hard at all. Just go in, charge the battery whenever it's about to run out, and then make sure the damn thing comes to good use down there. And don't worry about the landing. It's perfectly safe. The pod have a parachute and everything. I've done it myself twice during my service, and look at me! Not even a scratch. Now go in there and get the job done. They need the MULE pronto down at base camp on Pagra IV. Just let me put the proper coordinates in." The officer leaned forward and pressed a few buttons on the side of the capsule.

"Yes, sir." Milligan shivered as he climbed into the machine and closed the hatch. He peered out of the small thick glass window towards the officer who already were on his way to push the launch button. Before he had the time to have second thoughts he was sent away, with a force that almost broke his neck.

Onboard the ship a steward who had watched the whole scenario came forward to the officer.

"Sir!" he reported, boots clacking together as he stood before him. "I saw what happened to Milligan and I can't help my curiosity. Is it true that you've traveled with a MULE yourself?"

The commanding officer frowned at him.

"Of course not. You think I'm stupid? But I couldn't say that to the kid. And besides, he should be perfectly safe in that thing. He really should."

Then he marched off and left the steward standing there with a puzzled grin on his face.

Milligan was stunned by the beauty of the scenery. Pagra IV was gigantic, with oceans, jungles, deserts and swamps. It had it all. And he was in orbit of it! But he didn't have much time to watch the beauty before the capsule started to fall into the atmosphere.

A flash of light almost blinded him when the heat struck. He was pushed backwards into the seat while he desperatly tried to find the seatbelt. At the same moment as he managed to strap himself to the safety of the chair the capsule starting to shake and break apart. Some deafening sounds spread through the drop pod when the protecting capsule fell apart. Milligan knew it was intended, he had watched it from afar several times. But fucking hell, he had never been inside one of these things when it happend! His head was tossed to the sides, almost knocking him out. And then suddenly, a whistling sound, and then another neck breaking flinch when the parachute unfolded.

He tried to focus his blurry vision, but he immideately wished he hadn't. The ground came rushing up towards him. All he could do was to close his eyes and wait for the impact that would kill him.

But the landing was smooth. What remained of the drop pod safely fell the last few meters and took ground with a soft "thump". Then the protecting metal cover automatically fell off, like a hatching egg, and the MULE started to roll out.

Milligan was too shaken to notice first, and he only became aware of it when the buzzing sound of the MULE made it through the small cabin. He shook his head and watched out the window. Two gigantic robotic claws reached out just before his eyes. First he thought it was one of them zerg monsters, but he realized it was the MULE that had started the job it was designed for. It slowly grinded thin slices of the huge mineral cliffs in front of him. It would do so for another ten minutes at least before it had to return the cargo to the base.

Where was the base again? Surely somewhere behind him where he could not see. So he had to wait for the robot to finish its task. He glanced at the battery meter. Half empty already. Damn these things consumed power!

Eventually the robot had filled its storage and slowly turned around. Gears and gadgets rattled through the whole motion. The first thing Milligan saw was the Command Center towering up above him. The building was huge, several floors covered by a thick mechanical shell like a turtle. The second thing he noticed was how strangely calm everything was. There were no SCV drivers going back and forth from the Command Center to the mineral cliffs, no colonists and no soldiers. Where was everyone?

Behind the huge building he could see the town that had grown up. It was large even though it only been here for a few months. The federation sure knew how to spread life through the universe. And yet, no one seemed to be around.

At the same moment the MULE started to cough. Milligan sighed, reached for the manual pneumatic charger and started pumping two small metal bars with rubber handles. The battery meter slowly increased, but his energetic effort to do his job shortly paid off. The MULE put the mineral cargo into a hatch at the side of the Command Center and then turned around to go get another round.

But Milligan did not wait. He had to talk to someone here. Tell them who he was so they could return him to the starship and tell them that the MULE was delivered. He had a weird feeling running through his guts. It was a little bit too quiet here. He managed to get the hatch up, and climbed out of the MULE just as it began its slow trip back to the minerals.

The air was wonderful, nothing at all like the dry, smoky air on the starship he had just departed from. This was moist, refreshing and the wind blew! For a moment he just stood there taking in the view. Then he realized what he was supposed to do.

"Hello?" he shouted. No answer.

The entrance to the Command Center was on the opposite side, so he headed that way. He figured someone might be inside the dining room. He knew that the colonist areas all looked the same. He had grown up in one on the planet Rexob, named after some ancient emperor, and had seen several other colonist camps on the same planet before he joined the army as a mechanic. His physics wasn't quite fit for the soldier life, but he was good with machines and engines. Although he worked as a handyman more than anything else. But he had never complained. Life on board the starships was better than most other things he could imagine.

When he got past the curved metallic crust he could see the entrance. He also saw something that froze him stiff. Signs of zerg all over the town. A barack and a big hangar was partially covered in organic tissue. Pools of what looked like red and purple goo was slowly dripping from the walls onto the ground. Even though the movement was slow, he could clearly see that the organic creep was spreading towards the Command Center. Towards him. Next to one of the buildings there was movement and he turned his eyes towards that spot while he pressed himself up against the wall.

He had never seen a zerg creature like that one. It looked like a huge purple bubble, half as high as the barack, with four long legs in each corner of the body. Almost like a giant deformed spider. Suddenly it rose, like it could smell that there was a human nearby. Milligan could see a round hole filled with razor sharp teeth beneath its body. And that was when the panic started to kick in. He ran alongside the Command Center, desperate to reach the entrance. Desperate to reach safety. The big doors appeared so suddenly he almost ran past them. But they were closed.

"Let me in!" he screamed while banging his fist against the thick metal doors. He quickly glanced behind his back. The big spider creature had turned around and was on its way to some other

destination in the village. Strange. Surely it must've heard him. Maybe it was deaf by nature and only designed to spread the creep? But he didn't have time to think about it before the doors opened with a metallic cling.

Strong arms reached out for him and dragged him into the safety of the Command Center. He could hear the doors closing again and he almost fell to the ground with relief.

"Who are you?" someone asked.

Milligan looked around and met the eyes of three marines in military uniforms. At first he was surprised to see the army here already, but then he realized that there always was some military at each colony. Pagra IV was deemed to be a very secure planet, but you could never be too sure. And from what he had seen outside that exact statement had just become reality. ? You could never be sure of how far the zerg had spread throughout the universe.

"I'm Milligan. I..."

"You are late. Why didn't you arrive earlier?"

"Well, I came as fast as I could. But the MULE..."

"The MULE is fine. It's the last one we need before we can take off."

Milligan was puzzled. He wasn't sure the marines understood exactly how he had arrive here, but he ignored that question for now.

"Take off where? How long have the zerg been here? We need to evacuate immediately."

"Yes. That's our plan. But we need to fill the cargo halls with minerals first."

"Oh, so that's why you ordered the MULE? But isn't that less important than getting all civilians out of here? Where are the civilians by the way?"

Milligan looked around but could see no one, besides the marines, in the entrance hall. And now when he had had a chance to catch his breath he noticed that the soldiers looked kinda stiff, and talked in a strange manner. Like they held their breaths. When he took a closer look he noticed that they also had a strange gaze in their eyes, like they focused on a spot behind him.

"Everyone is safe. We need to get enough minerals so that we can take off and escape the infestation", muttered one of the marines.

Milligan nodded, not sure he really understood what they meant. But taking off sounded like a good idea.

"You will be escorted to the Welcoming Hall while we wait for take off. Follow me."

One of the marines stared at him until Milligan nodded again. He got shivers from those cold dead eyes, but he figured that was what a veterans eyes looked like. Although the captain on the starship claimed he had fought the zerg several times in the past, Milligan had never seen that gaze in his eyes. But he was in no position to make any arguments, so he followed the soldier.

They went through the entrance hall and through a door to the left. A narrow corridor windled around the curved wall. They passed a door, and Milligan recognized the smell of machinery in there. Oily engines mixed with the scent of tools. That must be machinery for the flying mechanism. He had always been impressed by the fact that Command Centers could take off into air and fly away to escape some immediate threat. The terran technology was impressive. The soldier passed the room without even glancing in there.

After a short while they entered another corridor to the right, with a spiral stair case leading up to upper deck. They went up, passed another narrow corridor and suddenly they were in the dining hall. The soldier stopped, almost as if he didn't know where to proceed. The room was empty. Tables and chairs where spread around the room. He could see a big screen on the right side on the wall for news broadcasts, but it was turned off and only showed reflections of the room. Milligan also noted a sign over a doorway across the room stating "Welcoming Hall".

"Maybe it's that way?" he suggested and nodded towards the door.

"Yes. That's exactly what I was thinking. Follow me", said the marine and started to walk.

Milligan shrugged, but followed the soldier. That was when he saw something move underneath the soldiers shirt. It looked like a small hunch creeping across the soldiers back, visible only for a second, but Milligan saw it. He froze when he realized what was going on. The marines were infested by some zerg disease.

His heart started to pound so hard that he couldn't hear anything else. What was going on? How far had the disease spread? Was he in danger? He had to get out of there, right now! But the soldier turned around, giving him one of the weird looks while his big fists clenched the rifle he was carrying. Milligan swallowed. He couldn't run away just like that. And at the same time he now dreaded to stay with the man. So what to do? He decided that he had to compromise.

When they reached the doorway they were in another corridor. The soldier went to the left. Milligan focused on a spot in the soldier's neck, took a deep breath and punched him as hard as he could in the back of his head. Then he turned around and started to run in the opposite direction.

At first he just ran. The corridor slowly turned to the right and ended in a fork. He went to the left without a thought. When he ran he noticed that the corridor was turning slightly to the left. When he thought about it it made perfect sense. The Command Center wasn't that big, so if he followed this corridor all the way around he would end up back where he started, which would be near the infested marine. Once he realized this he quickly searched for an alternate way. He found a staircase to the left, leading up and further into the building. A door was open to his right and he ran towards it.

He stumbled into the room, fell on the floor but managed to get up. He threw himself on the door and managed to close it shut. Before the door closed he could hear the running steps of the infested marine behind him. He slowly backed away from the door, waiting for the creatures outside to bust in. A slam rattled the door and made Milligan's heart almost pop out of his body, but that was it. Some more mellow thumps on the door. They couldn't get in! At least not right away. For now he was safe. Probably not for long and certainly not forever though.

Milligan swallowed and looked around. When he saw the room he was more and more discouraged by the second. The room was a trap. He could go nowhere from here. There was only the door leading in and out, and outside the door there were these... things. And it was only a matter of time before they could break in, one way or another. He remembered the real soldiers back on the starship talking about banelings. Those huge scarab-like creatures filled with acid, exploding into unlucky soldiers and melting them away like they were butter in a frying pan. Would the zerg use banelings on the door if they couldn't get it open? Would they use it on him? Milligan didn't want to melt in excruciating pain. Nor would he want to become one of those infested mindless creatures.

So he stood up and looked around looking for something he could use. In worst case maybe there was a gun in here that he could... No, there had to be other options. There must be! He started to search the room and it took him awhile to realize where he actually was. The control room. One side filled with monitors and buttons. He froze for a second when he thought it over. He was in a Command Center, damnit! If he could figure out the controls he could lift off and fly away. Away to a safe place. Or a safer place anyway.

He wasn't entirely sure how to fly the thing, but there was no time to lose. He pressed a few buttons and managed to start two of the screens. What he saw sent another cold chill up his spine. He saw two rooms. One was filled with creatures that had once been humans. Now they were horribly transformed into moaning creatures with tentacles growing out of their bodies. That was their fate and that was Milligan's fate too if he didn't manage to escape.

The other room chilled his blood even more. There were the remaining survivors of the whole colony, all cramped up in some sort of confined cargo hall. He counted to around fifty survivors, but then he saw one of the infested marines enter and brutally dragging a screaming woman away. A few seconds later he could see that the same woman ended up in the other room. There was a brief moment when the creatures paused and looked at the newcomer. Then they attacked. Milligan was too paralyzed to look away, yet he wished he had never seen that. The creatures ate parts of the women. One zerg creature sprayed her in some sort of brown fungal slime, and then he could actually see how she started to transform, or the remaining parts of her at least. Her skin was bubbling and crackling when small tentacles and spines broke out of her body.

Milligan finally looked away. He felt sick. Rather suicide than that. But rather escape than suicide of course. So he swallowed again, tried to get the panic under control and then he carefully looked at the control panel again. There seemed to be around twenty people that were still human. How

long would it take for them to transform, and more importantly, what would happen after that? He had to rescue himself and those people before that.

It wasn't that hard actually. One screen showed a clear picture of the nature outside of the Command Center. Another small screen had some green bars, almost filled, indicating that the mechanics of the Command Center were intact and fully functional. Finally some luck! And he was so happy he was a good mechanic after all. It was like the Command Center controls were actually talking to him.

"Push this button over here. Yes. Pull this handle to this point. Good. Initiate launch by igniting the fuel. Perfect!"

So he pushed buttons and pulled handles until he could hear the engine in full throttle. He dared to cast a brief glance at the screens and to his satisfaction could see how the infested humans and zerg creatures froze in surprise. Milligan really hoped that they did not have any banelings, and that the door to the control room was safe from attacks. If so this could actually go well. He pressed the final handle forward and felt a small rush in his knees when the Command Center lifted off. Through the screen showing the outside of the Command Center he could see how zergs was streaming in from all directions in a futile attempt to stop the escape. But it was too late. Milligan and his cargo was already high up in the air. They could not stop him. Unless of course there were mutalisks around. Or other flying nightmares. He quickly went through his school book memories of the zerg race. How fast could a mutalisk spawn from an infested zerg area? If he recalled correctly it was a matter of hours, so he should be safe. Unless they already patrolled the air...

He pushed those thoughts aside and grabbed a satellite phone hanging on the wall. He pushed the button for direct communication with the most nearby starship in orbit. After only two, very long, tones someone answered! Milligan was so relieved he almost cried at the sound of a human voice.

"This is Bison Gamma control center. Identify yourself and state your request", asked a female voice.

"It's me, Milligan!" he shouted before realizing the person on the other side of the line had most likely never heard of him.

"I'm a crew member of your ship. I was sent down to Rexob in order to aid colonists down here, but it turns out the whole area is crawling with zerg!"

"Are you sure?" the woman asked with just a tad bit doubt in her voice.

"Yes I'm sure. Wait, I think I can send you some live photage of the situation here. Hang on a second. Please, hang on!"

"But..."

But Milligan had already put the phone on the control panel and was already looking for a transmitting device. He found it almost immediately and started to send the horrible things in the locked storage room where the zerg infestation was on-going. He reached for the phone again, just in time to hear the woman gasp.

"Oh my... I'll have to report this", she hissed.

"Yes yes, report it. But please get me out of here! I'm in a Command Center now which I was able to take control of. I'm flying the damn thing right now. But I don't know if the zerg are capable of breaking the door. If they are..."

"I understand. But you must wait until I clear this with my superior."

"Wait.. Wait!" shouted Milligan. Suddenly he felt an extreme urge for company. He didn't want to be alone in this metallic, floating coffin which reaked of death and zerg. But the woman was already gone. All he could do was to hold the phone and wait for her to come back. He held it so hard that his fist went white and he started to lose his grip from the exhaustion before she finally returned.

"Okey sir. We have a rescue plan ready. There's a ridge about two kilometers north of your position. Can you fly the Command Center to the highest point there? We will send down a vessel to pick you up."

"That's fantastic news! But wait! You realize there are zerg onboard here, right?"

"We are aware of that. Just pilot the Command Center to the ridge and we will take care of it. I'll contact you again when we are ready to pick you up."

Click.

Milligan frowned. How could she just hang up on him like that? But there was no time to be angry at such trivial things right now. He hung up the phone and looked at the controls again.

Flying the Command Center turned out to be ridiculously easy. All he had to do was to make sure he was heading north and then just push a handle forward. It had almost been harder to keep an eye on the MULE and the pneumatic charger than flying this thing. But he was glad it was so easy. Below him he could see trees and fields of grass passing by. He flew for about five minutes when he passed over a small river and when he was over it he could clearly see the ridge. For a brief second he was wondering if the Command Center could really climb that thing, but it turned out to be no problem at all. The automatic flying control kept him safely and constantly about ten meters above ground, even when the steep side of the ridge started to kick in.

Suddenly he was up, scared to his bone that the Command Center would tip over and tumble all the way down into the valley below. A valley that was probably filled with zerg, or other hungry creatures. But nothing happened and the Command Center steadily remained in place.

Ten minutes went by before he heard the phone crackling. He grabbed the phone so fast that he almost broke it and was relieved to hear the female voice again.

"Sir? Are you in there?"

"Yes", he screamed.

"Good. We have a vessel above you now. All you need to do now is to turn on the collision detection unit for the husk of the Command Center once we pick you up. We don't want to have you sliding around inside the vessel and breaking any walls in there. Do you understand?"

"Yes! I think so."

She carefully explained how the controls for the collision detection unit looked like and Milligan found it almost immediately and turned it on by flipping a small switch.

"Alright, the controls are on. Now please get me out." His voice was trembling, but he hoped the woman couldn't hear it.

"Don't worry. Someone will pick you up."

And then he saw a big shadow descending above him. He imagined he could hear the metallic clinking when hatches opened up on the vessel that was about to pick him up, but all he heard was his heart pounding. But then he actually saw, on an outside camera, how the vessel lowered itself and how its metallic jaws slowly closed around the Command Center. And then he was inside its dark, yet wonderful, comfort. It was almost as if he could feel the familiar smell of oil mixed with dry air. But he was not out of the Command Center yet. Not out of danger.

"Sir. Please lower the Command Center so that our forces can board", the female voice shattered the silence so suddenly he almost jumped a meter up in the air. But he quickly regained control over himself.

"Okey. I'll do it", he responded.

He found the proper button and handle and could feel that the Command Center was dropping altitude. A few seconds later it touched the closed hatches of the vessel that had come to save him.

"Okey. It's landed now. What's next?"

He waited for the woman to respond, but the phone was silent. On the screen though he could see how marines, real marines, were approaching the Command Center. All was silent where he stood, but through the screen he could imagine how everything sounded. He saw when they forced the door with explosives, and how zerg was streaming out to defend their fortress. But they were killed almost instantly from the fire of the rifles. Then he could see how the marines moved into the Command Center in small group. It was at that moment he was the most scared, not knowing if they would get to him in time, nor if they would get the rest of the victims out. His hands were shaking so much he had a hard time controlling the cameras so he had no idea how far the marines had come.

When someone finally banged on the door to the control room he was almost too afraid to open it. What if it was a trick from the zerg? What if he opened and one of those infested marines stood outside, grinning, and ready to throw him into that other room? But eventually he shook those

feelings off and went to open the door. He found himself staring into the blackness of a rifle, but then someone shouted behind it.

"Clear! The pilot is alive!"

It was true, he was saved! Milligan couldn't remember much of what happened next. He was escorted out of the Command Center by the marines. And then escorted of the vessel and onto the starship. Later he heard that purging the Command Center from the zerg took the whole day and that some creatures almost escaped into the vessel. But it was all a blurry mess of voices, impressions and exhaustion. When he found a bed that night he fell asleep before he had a chance to take all his cloths off.

Two days later he was back in the machine shop working with engines again when the officer approached him.

"Milligan!" he proclaimed, happy as ever. "Walk with me."

"Yes, sir."

They walked along the edge of the big hall, past a few Thors that was in for repair and under a banshee that was hanging on thick steel wires from the ceiling.

"You did a good job down there on Rexob", the officer started, "but there has been some issues since."

"What kind of issues?"

"Well you see, you saved twenty three lives when you managed to breach the zerg infested area and fly out with that Command Center. I'll say kid, that I'm sorry I missed the sight of it! But regardless, there were some economical damage as well."

"What kind of economical damage?" Milligan didn't like the tone of the officers voice. It was almost cheerful, yet sharp and filled with seriousness.

"It appears that the infestation were harder than we anticipated, and that the zerg creep had seeped into the Command Center itself. So when you brought it aboard the vessel some of the creep spread to it. It was mere luck that someone discovered it in time. If not, no one knows what could've happened. Creep in the engines clogging everything up. Parasites crawling all over the starship with the risk of a new infestation. But luckily we stopped it in time."

"That's good to hear", whispered Milligan, suddenly terrified of what could've happened up here, trapped on a spaceship filled with zerg and with no where to run.

"Certainly good! But the vessel was ruined due to it, so the army had to blow it up. Safely outside the perimeter of the starship of course!"

"Of course."

"But someone has to be blamed for the material damage you see, and that said someone put the whole starship in risk when he brought that Command Center onboard."

"But sir! I was only doing as told..." Milligan tried to protest.

"I know. But there's nothing I could do. I have a proposition for you though, that can remedy your mistake."

"What is it?"

"Well, either you can go to jail for a few months. Nothing hard about it, might even do you good. I've done it myself a couple of times. No worries there at all!"

"Or...?"

"I got a proposition from a man... He want you in some sort of training program."

"What kinda of training?"

"I can't really say. But..." The officer glanced over his shoulder and then leaned forward. "I think it's for a ghost academy."

"But sir! I'm no gho..."

"Be silent Milligan. This MULE incident was quite nasty. And expensive. I would really recommend to think this offer through. It's that or jail. So, what do you say?"

The officer stopped and gave Milligan a huge smile.

"Think about it for an hour or so. I'm sure you'll make a good choice."

He left Milligan there, strolling away like it was raining while muttering to himself: “Ghost material they say. I’ll be damned...”