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War at the Edge of the World

Written by Ian Ross

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— TWILIGHT OF EMPIRE —
WAR AT THE EDGE
OF THE WORLD

IAN ROSS



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HISTORICAL NOTE

In AD 284, following half a century of crisis and civil war, military commander Gaius Aurelius Diocletianus (Diocletian) proclaimed himself supreme ruler of the Roman world. Realising that the empire was too large to be ruled effectively by a single man, he appointed Marcus Aurelius Maximianus (Maximian) co-emperor to administer the western provinces.

Eight years later, Diocletian once more reformed the system of government. He and Maximian remained as senior emperors, with the title *Augustus*. Each now took a junior colleague, Constantius in the west and Galerius in the east, with the title of *Caesar*. This rule of four was later called the Tetrarchy.

For over twenty years, the rule of Diocletian and his colleagues provided the firm foundation for a reborn Roman Empire. In time, however, the ambitions and rivalries of powerful men would destroy even the strongest union, and plunge the world once more into chaos.

PROLOGUE

Oxsa, Central Armenia, June AD 298

The army assembled before dawn. All night the legionaries had marched through dry ravines and across rocky slopes, stumbling in the darkness with muffled weapons, forbidden to make a sound as they flanked the enemy position. Now, as the first rays of sun lit the snows of the high mountain ranges, they saw the royal encampment of the King of Persia in the brown valley below them, with their enemies spilling from the gates in confusion. Already in their hearts was the promise of a battle won.

Twenty-five thousand men formed a battle line over a mile long. Massed squadrons of cavalry held the higher ground at the flanks: mailed Sarmatian lancers; Dalmatian light horsemen; mounted archers from Armenia and Osroene. Between them stood five thousand allied Gothic tribesmen in full barbaric array, fierce warriors from beyond the empire's northern boundaries. But at the centre of the line were ten thousand armoured infantrymen drawn from the crack legions of the Danube frontier. As the sun rose, the light gleamed off helmets of burnished iron and bronze, hauberks of mail and scale, the bristling tips of spears and javelins and the serried lines of oval shields. The sky-blue shields of Legion I Jovia bore the eagle and thunderbolt of Jupiter; beside them, the blood-red shields of II Herculia were emblazoned with the naked figure

of Hercules with his club and lion-skin. To either side were the black shields of I Italica, the sea-green of XI Claudia, the white of V Macedonica and the tawny-yellow of IV Flavia.

Six months ago these men had left their garrison fortresses in Moesia and Scythia and marched southwards through Thrace and across the Bosphorus into Asia. At Satala on the upper Euphrates, they had been mustered by the Caesar Galerius, Commander of the East, before crossing the border into Persian-occupied Armenia. Through high mountain passes still bright with snow they had descended to the Armenian uplands, to face the expeditionary force of Narses, Great King of Persia.

And now the enemy was before them, shimmering in the dawn sun-haze. Impossible to guess the number of their host: forty thousand, or maybe twice that. The light caught the flash of their coloured banners, the heavy dazzle of their armoured horses.

In the Roman ranks, men shifted and spat as the sun mounted and the morning grew hot. The legionaries passed waterskins along the lines, tipping back their heads and swigging the cool liquid, letting it spill over their faces and down their necks. The front line was four men deep, spears and javelins readied behind locked shields. Behind them, the reserve cohorts formed another four-deep line, and in between were the tribunes and the standards, long funnels of purple and red silk streaming from the heads of gilded dragons. Dust fogged the air. The soldiers tasted it in their mouths; it gritted between their teeth. Sweat slicked their faces and poured down their bodies beneath the hug of their armour.

Back in the reserve lines, a bull-necked young soldier of II Herculia unlaced his helmet and pulled the hot iron from his head, scrubbing a palm through the short yellow stubble of his scalp. Sweat prickled between his fingers, and he blinked in the glare. A couple of his comrades were following his lead.

‘Helmets *on*,’ the centurion growled. He nodded away to the right. Along the front lines of I Jovia, a big man was approaching on a capering white horse, its trappings gleaming with gemstones. The soldier replaced his helmet and tied the laces beneath his jaw.

A sudden wave of cheering came from the ranks of the Joviani, the legionaries throwing up their hands and clashing their spears against their shields. The man on the white horse returned their salute. From down the line, the men of II Herculia could see him clearly now – his heavy red face and cropped black beard, his massive frame in a gilded breastplate, the purple cloak streaming behind him. Galerius, Caesar of the East. Their commander.

The emperor rode closer, the standards dipping as he passed. Behind him rode his senior tribunes and his mounted bodyguard; every man in the cohort tensed and craned forward, trying to catch the words of the address.

‘Herculiani!’ the emperor called, his horse backing and kicking dust, ‘down there in the valley you see the last enemies of the Roman race!’ His voice was high and straining, strange from such a big man, but thin and metallic, each word like worked brass. ‘They think, these Persian slaves, that they’ve already defeated the flower of the Roman army! But it was only a small force that they met a year ago, from the eastern legions. Now, my brothers, they have you to contend with – Danubians! Herculiani!’

A massed shout from the ranks, the beginning of a chant, *Rome and Hercules, Rome and Hercules...* The soldiers shoved together, jostling, eager.

Galerius threw up his palm for silence. His voice cracked and snarled as he yelled to them. ‘We’ve disturbed the Great King’s breakfast!’

Laughter from the troops, a rattle of spearshafts against shield rims.

‘Now... now this pack of yelping Babylonian dogs are coming up here to *demand an apology!*’

The laughter doubled, the clatter grew louder.

‘Are you going to give them what they want?’

‘NO!’ A shout from massed throats.

‘Are you going to send them crying back to their kennels?’

‘YES! *Rome and Hercules, Rome and Hercules...*’

‘When they come against us, brothers, remember you are men of the Danube! This scum of the Euphrates cannot stand up to you! Remember you are men of Hercules! Here on this hillside, brothers, we build the walls of Rome. Unbreakable!’

The chant grew to a wild cheer, a percussive tumult, men flinging up their hands in salute. The emperor turned on his horse, waving to right and left as his purple standard snapped above him, then urged his mount forward again.

Once more the quiet returned, the dust settling as the officers ordered their men back into formation. Clack and rattle of spear and shield, javelin and dart. The young soldier had seen the lie of the land as they had deployed: the slope dropped beneath them to a narrow stream, and then rose on the far side to the Persian camp. It was a good position – the momentum of the enemy charge would be broken as they crossed the stream, and then they had the slope ahead of them. All the Roman infantry had to do was stand their ground: against their solid anvil the swinging hammers of the allied cavalry would break the army of Persia.

Now the troops could hear the strange music from the enemy camp, the high metal screaming of Persian trumpets, the rattle and throb of drums so alien and unmanly to the Roman ear. Through the glare and dust they could see the banners racing

forward and back as the mass of the enemy poured from their camp and assembled in battle formation. Heavy in leg and stomach, the soldiers waited in the sweating light.

‘Steady, steady,’ the centurion said. His face was impassive, sunburnt. Behind him, the big youth with the yellow hair stared into the middle distance, through the ranks of the forward cohorts and across the valley at the force gathering against them. He had served five years already in the legions, but this would be his first experience of pitched battle. The temptation to advance was strong – to close the distance with the enemy, bring things to a conclusion. To remain in formation under the coming storm would be a trial.

‘Remember what the emperor said, boys,’ the centurion said quietly. ‘Hold firm, no buckling. If we’re needed we’ll move up, but not before.’

The soldier gripped his shield, the shaft of his spear; he put his trust in them, and in his brothers to either side of him.

The ranks of the forward line tensed, feet shifting in the dust. The front two ranks held the shield wall, spears levelled, trusting that the enemy horses would not charge into that barrier of bristling iron. The third rank raised javelins to their shoulders, while the fourth readied the throwing-darts that the Herculiani called ‘wasps’, cruel iron spikes each fletched like a short arrow, with a bulbous lead weight painted with stripes of yellow and black.

‘Here they come!’ cried a voice from the front ranks. The officers called for silence, but the men in the reserve cohorts needed no warning: already they could hear the rolling thunder of hooves, the braying of horses, as the Persian cavalry crossed the stream below them and powered up the slope towards their line. The stone-hard ground began to vibrate beneath their feet. Behind him the young soldier heard one of his comrades

muttering a prayer. He spoke the words himself: *‘Unconquered Sun, Lord of Heaven, Destroyer of Darkness, Your light between us and evil...’*

A high whirring and flickering above them now: slingshot and arrows arcing over their heads at the advancing enemy. The men of the forward cohorts joined the barrage, hurling their spiked darts and light javelins. Missiles filled the air like blown chaff at harvest; already the Persian light cavalry had closed on the front line, wheeling and shooting their powerful bows. Arrows clattered together in the air, battering down against the massed Roman shields. Screams of injured men rose into the dust.

‘Keep your heads up,’ the centurion called. ‘They’re not shooting at us – not yet.’

The fog of dust thrown up by the cavalry rolled across the hillside, staining the sky yellow and then brown, plunging the battle into an unnatural twilight. The noise of arrows against shields was like heavy rain on a tiled roof, as the Persian archers probed for a chink in the Roman line.

Then from the right there was an explosion of noise: the first wedge of Persian cataphract lancers had crashed against a weak point in the front rank of Legion I Jovia. Armoured men on armoured horses, each half a ton of flesh, iron and bronze. They pressed forward against the shields, trying to force their way through by weight and power, the riders wielding their long lances overarm as they struck down across the shield rims into the packed bodies behind.

From the reserve cohorts of II Herculia the young soldier could see little of the fighting, only the lances rising and falling, the sway of the Joviani standards. But he could hear it: a shrieking battering din like an armour workshop and an iron foundry combined, cut through with the screams of the dying.

He could feel the blood hammering in his chest and throat, and his body was liquid with sweat beneath the weight of his bronze scale cuirass. The desire to move forward and engage was almost unbearable, the only counter to the desire to turn and flee. Hold steady, he told himself. The air tasted of blood, dust and horses.

Cheers from the Joviani: the first cataphract assault had been driven off. But now horns were blaring from the left: the front ranks of II Herculia were under attack. A volley of shouts and screams, the thunder of armoured bodies in collision.

‘The line’s breached!’ the centurion cried. ‘Ready to move – follow my lead.’ He turned to the big young legionary behind him. ‘You, knucklehead,’ he said, rough-voiced. ‘Watch my back, and don’t let any of those bastards get behind me!’ The young soldier nodded, impassive. In his pale eyes was a look of slow dumb strength.

The centurion raised his spear and then swung it down to the left. The men of his century hefted shields and spears, gulped air, squared their shoulders. The furnace of battle was hot in their faces now.

‘To the left – advance!’

Close-packed, the men of the reserve moved as one body, following the centurion along the rear of the front-rank cohorts. Now that they were moving the battle took form: there were men lying in the bloodied dust, wounded and dying where they had been dragged from the battle line, and the ground was littered with arrows and broken javelins, blood matting into the dirt. Heads lowered behind shield rims, the men moved at a jog trot as the noise of the fighting swelled around them.

Ahead, they could see the breach. The Persian horse archers had opened a gap between two front-rank units, and the cataphracts had smashed their way through and hurled

themselves against the reserves. In the choking dust men and horses reeled together. Over the rim of his raised shield the young soldier saw a riderless horse, maddened and kicking, brought down by a flung javelin; an armoured cataphract turned circles, striking out with his lance at the infantry ringing him on all sides; more horsemen, massively encased in gleaming metal, forcing their way in through the breach; everywhere the slash and hack of blades, thrust of spears, battering of shields, men and horses screaming.

‘After me!’ The centurion’s voice sounded distant in the dust and tumult. ‘Wedge formation!’

Shields together, spears levelled, the century advanced into the mesh of combat. The young soldier felt his body burning with nervous energy; sweat poured into his eyes and blurred his vision. He was treading the dead underfoot now. An arrow thudded into his shield; another snicked off his helmet.

Edging forward, their feet sliding into the slime of mud and blood, the wall of men wheeled to close the breach. Then, as the dust cleared for a moment, they saw another wedge of armoured cavalry charging towards them, aiming to forge a path through the remnants of the front-rank men.

‘Wasps!’ shouted the centurion, and at once each man behind him snatched the weighted darts from the hollow of his shield. A moment to aim, another to throw. The darts pelted against the oncoming cavalry, iron spikes burying themselves in exposed flesh and catching in the bronze scales of their armour.

Still the cataphracts came on in a compact mass – at their head, a rider in silvered scales with green and scarlet plumes, angling his lance overhead in a double-hand grip.

‘Form up!’ The centurion’s cry sounded distant through the churning dust. ‘Lock shields – close the line!’

The battle had narrowed to only ten paces in each direction. The advancing horses came on at a heavy trot, blinkered and unswerving; they appeared unstoppable, an armoured avalanche.

Shields locked into a wall – thin, but enough to turn some of the cataphracts aside. Horses shied and stamped as they saw the row of bright ovals and the levelled spearpoints. The leader in the plumes and silvered scales dragged back on his reins, and his horse reared up. It towered above the legionary line, hooves striking at air. The young soldier saw the rider's face for a moment, bone-white with a flaring black beard.

Then the horse crashed forward again, one lashing hoof striking the centurion's raised shield. The centurion went down under the blow, and the rider leaned from the saddle as he drove the long lance over his head. With all the weight of horse and rider behind it, the lance sheared through the centurion's chest and pinned him to the dirt. Hooves kicked at the corpse, trampling it.

The young soldier hurled his spear into the advancing wall of horsemen, and it jarred against an armoured flank and arced away. Now the line was fractured, men bunching behind their shields and cowering back as the cataphracts once more urged their mounts forward. The soldier stood rooted, feet spread in the muddy dust, above the mangled body of his centurion. Without thinking, he drew the broad-bladed sword from his scabbard. He saw the plumed rider pluck an iron-headed mace from his saddle bow. He could almost feel the hot breath of the horse in his face, the rush of the mace as it swung down at him.

He raised his shield and caught the blow – the shock of it almost buckled him. The rim of his shield swung back and jarred against the nasal bar of his helmet, and he felt an explosion of pain between his eyes.

Blood was in his mouth. He saw the horse rearing again, the rider turning in the saddle with the mace raised for the killing blow. Feet grounded in the dirt, legs braced, he took a firm grip on his shield.

There is a hollow at the heart of fear; he was trained to find it and make it his own. The noise of battle fell away, the screams and the roar of combat, the blinding dust and the glare. The armoured horse turned against the brightness of the sky, its legs kicking, and as it fell forward he threw himself behind the shield, the muscles of his shoulder bunched against the wood – one solid lunge, all his weight behind it – and he felt the impact as a great punch through his body, a jarring shock that burst pain through his shoulder and across his ribs.

The horse staggered, reeling, the rider thrown off balance and pitching in the saddle.

His shield arm was dead, the pain a solid pulse, and his face ran with blood, but he held his ground and struck out with his sword, the long blade wheeling through the air in an overarm cut.

He felt nothing, no impact, and thought the blow had gone wide – then wet heat sprayed across his face, and when he blinked his eyes clear he saw something round and dark plummet heavily into the dust at his feet.

The horse shied back, kicking; the rider still straddled the animal's back, his arms loose and stiff, streamers of bright blood jetting from the hacked stump of his neck.

The soldier stared, uncomprehending at first. Pain filled his head and body, raw and brutal, but he was still on his feet, still alive. And now there were others alongside him, raising their shields beside his. Overhead flew the darts and the javelins. The panicked horse with its headless rider bolted forward, and the shield wall opened to let it through, still carrying its grisly

trophy. The other cataphracts had turned as the momentum of their charge died under the hail of iron. Some were caught, ringed by Roman blades, and cut down. The wall of shields held; the gap in the line was closed. Then the horns sounded the advance, brassy and triumphant, the men of the legion stepped forward in unison, climbing over the bodies of the slain and the broken corpse of their centurion.

The young soldier felt only the pump of pain through his body. Time and distance had no meaning now. A wrack of broken weapons and bodies, tumbled men and horses, caught at his feet. Around him he could hear the victory chant, *ROME AND HERCULES, ROME AND HERCULES*. The slope was taking him downwards, through the battleground and into the area of scattered slaughter, where the allied cavalry had already cut up the fugitives. His head was ringing, his vision shrunk to a bright wavering funnel ahead of him. He saw Persian banners trampled in the dust, the stream running red with blood, corpses sprawled in the shallows. The water had widened and he could not think why, then he glanced to the left and saw the vast bulk of a dead elephant, fletched with arrows, blocking the stream. He took a few more staggering steps forward and collapsed. He barely felt the arms that caught him and eased him down onto the solid ground.

'This is going to hurt,' a voice said, 'but not for long.' He felt a wrenching pressure in his shoulder and pain burst through him. He was awake, staring into the sweating face of a bearded army surgeon.

'Don't know how long you were walking around with a dislocated shoulder,' the doctor said, swabbing at his face with a damp rag, 'but that should fix it. You need to rest, though.'

There's a lot of blood on you, but not too much of it's yours.'

'Did we win?' he heard himself saying. His tongue felt dead. The doctor grinned.

'Oh, yes,' he said.

Then he was on his feet again, his left arm bound up in a sling. Ranks of men opened before him, and a centurion he did not recognise was leading him forward. Teeth clenched, he tried to breathe slowly through his nose and not curse aloud at the fierce ache in his shoulder.

Noise of horns, and voices raised in acclamation. To his right he saw a raised mound heaped with Persian weapons and banners. A figure loomed up before him, out of the bright haze: he saw a glowering red face, a black beard above a gilded cuirass.

'Come on now, lad,' the centurion behind him said in a harsh whisper. 'Don't you know how to greet your emperor properly?'

'No need for ceremony,' the man in the gilded armour cried. 'We're all brothers here! Brothers in victory!' He raised his arm, and just for a moment the young soldier feared he was about to be clapped on the shoulder. Galerius, he remembered – this was the Caesar Galerius.

'Dominus!' the centurion said, with a slight bow. 'This is the soldier who stopped the cataphracts breaking through the front line of the Herculiani. He killed the leader – flicked off his head with a single blow! I saw it myself.'

'What's your name, soldier?' the emperor demanded.

He opened his mouth, but his throat was dry and he could not speak.

'His name's Knucklehead!' somebody called out, laughing.

'His name's Aurelius Castus. Ninth Cohort, century of Priscus.'

'Aurelius Castus,' the emperor called, almost shouting so all around could hear him. 'A true warrior of Rome! A true

Herculian! Tribune Constantine, present this man with the torque of valour.'

Cheers from the assembled soldiers. Another officer was stepping forward now, a tall young man with a raw flushed face and a heavy jaw. In his hands was a circlet of twisted gold with a clasp of linked horse-heads. The young soldier stood still, trying not to flinch, as the tribune fastened the torque around his neck.

Caesar Galerius had already moved away, congratulating other men, awarding further decorations. From the raised mound, surrounded by the spoils of war, he turned to address the assembled troops.

'Persia is yours,' he cried, in his thin metallic voice. 'The empire is yours! Joviani, Herculiani, Claudiani, Flaviani, victorious! Unbreakable!'

He slept for thirty-six hours, and missed the plundering of the Persian camp. But he heard about it later – the Great King's treasury, his priests and ministers, even the ladies of the royal Zenana were all in Roman hands now. The soldiers were gluttoned with gold. One man had found a tooled leather pouch full of round grey stones; he threw the stones away and kept the pouch, and became the laughing stock of his cohort. The stones he had discarded were pearls, lost in the dust now, but the soldiers were so rich that nobody cared.

Narses was beaten, a fugitive in his own domain, but still Galerius led his army onwards, east down the Araxes and then south across the border into Media Atropatene. Everywhere cities opened their gates, chieftains knelt before the conquerors from the west. Through Corduene and Adiabene they marched, down from the tight cold air of the highlands to the summer

heat of the Tigris valley. The mighty Persian Empire, Rome's oldest and most implacable foe, collapsed before them.

Turning westwards, they forced a crossing of the Tigris above the ruins of Nineveh and marched out onto the plains of Mesopotamia. Then, after breaking the siege of Nisibis, they turned south down the wide flat valley of the Tigris. All the way to Ctesiphon, the young soldier marched with his comrades of II Herculia in the vanguard of the army. When the Persian capital surrendered, he joined them in their parade through the streets, their spears garlanded with laurel.

For the rest of his life he would have the memory of this victory. He kept that thought in his mind on the long hard march home, back up the Euphrates and across the Syrian plains to Antioch and the distant garrison forts of the Danube frontier. Surely nothing in the remainder of his days would match the glory of that campaign: into old age he would dream of it.

So he told himself. But he could know nothing of what his future held.