

THE LOST FLEET

RELENTLESS

JACK CAMPBELL



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Praise for

THE LOST FLEET: VALIANT

“Fast paced and enjoyable . . . Readers who enjoyed David Weber’s Honor Harrington books, Ian Douglas’s Space Marines, or Walter Hunt’s Dark Wing series should also enjoy this series.”

—*SFRevu*

“The series is military SF, rigorously extrapolated in the classic tradition of hard SF. The laws of physics and the effects of relativity govern the battles and shape the action, while military virtues and ideals like honor and courage shape the conduct and personalities of the more admirable characters . . . Jack Campbell does a good job of fulfilling the requirements of both military SF and hard SF in *The Lost Fleet: Valiant*, and the novel will please fans of both forms.”

—*Sci Fi Weekly*

“Will grip the audience . . . Black Jack is a fascinating hero . . . Fans will appreciate the fourth *Lost Fleet* tale.”

—*Alternative Worlds*

“Refreshingly well written with no pretensions to be anything more than it is—lively adventure.”

—*Don D’Ammassa, Critical Mass*

“This wonderfully well-plotted story is strongly reminiscent of the old Hornblower novels, featuring exciting and believable battles with the fascinating addition of military tactics. The story brings back the true meaning of romance and captures the spirit of strong men and women facing unimaginable odds with courage and honor. It carries you along on the adventure, and you’re eager to go where it takes you.”

—*Romantic Times*

THE LOST FLEET: COURAGEOUS

“Definitely recommend[ed] to people . . . [who] thoroughly enjoy military science fiction and probably some people who would just enjoy a good military story.”

—*BookSpot Central*

“It’s almost nonstop action and conflict . . . Jack Campbell does an excellent job with the space battles . . . It’s a hall-mark of his talent in this arena that he can coordinate such large battles and make them both exciting and coherent, so that even someone without a military background of [his] own can follow and enjoy the action . . . The Lost Fleet is some of the best military science fiction on the shelves to-day, and *Courageous* doesn’t disappoint in the least. I’ll eagerly be awaiting the next installment in the series.”

—*SF Site*

THE LOST FLEET: FEARLESS

“Straightforward, solidly written military space opera . . . It’s all good fun, and Campbell has actually given some thought to the problems of combat in space.”

—*Don D’Ammassa, Critical Mass*

“Another satisfying [Campbell] cocktail to slake the thirst of fans who like their space operas with a refreshing moral and intellectual chaser . . . The Lost Fleet deserves to find a home on your bookshelf.”

—*SF Reviews.net*

“A great and gripping read. It’s a fast-paced roller coaster of action and intrigue, with realistic characters and situations.”

—*TCM Reviews*

THE LOST FLEET: DAUNTLESS

“A rousing adventure.”

—*William C. Dietz*

“Jack Campbell’s dazzling new series is military science fiction at its best. Not only does he tell a yarn of great adventure and action, but he also develops the characters with satisfying depth. I thoroughly enjoyed this rip-roaring read, and I can hardly wait for the next book.”

—Catherine Asaro, *Nebula Award-winning author of Diamond Star*

“Black Jack Geary is very real, very human, and so compelling he’ll leave you wanting more. Jack Campbell knows fleet actions, and it shows . . . [*The Lost Fleet: Dauntless* is] the best novel of its type that I’ve read.”

—David Sherman, *coauthor of the Starfist series*

“A slam-bang good read that kept me up at night . . . a solid, thoughtful, and exciting novel loaded with edge-of-your-seat combat.”

—Elizabeth Moon, *Nebula Award-winning author of Victory Conditions*

“[*Dauntless*] should please many fans of old-fashioned hard SF.”

—*Sci Fi Weekly*

“Readers will admire and like [Geary], who believes in honor, teamwork, and civilized behavior . . . This is a hardmilitary -science novel with space battles out of *Star Wars*. The battle scenes are so intricately described that readers will be able to visualize them . . . A fast-paced but intricate story line and fully developed characters turn this novel into a fun reading experience. Fans of David Weber, Elizabeth Moon, and Peter F. Hamilton will find *The Lost Fleet: Dauntless* thoroughly enjoyable.”

—*SFRevu*

Ace Books by Jack Campbell

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To Doug Tillyer (aka “Hellfire”),
a man who loved books, ideas,
and people, who brightened many a convention
and panel with his remarks,
and who left his wife and the rest of us
far too soon and will be deeply missed.

For S., as always.

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THE ALLIANCE FLEET

CAPTAIN JOHN GEARY,

Commanding (acting)

As reorganized following the losses suffered immediately prior to Captain Geary assuming command in the Syndic home system.

Ship names in bold are those lost in action, with the name of the star system of their loss given afterward.

SECOND BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Gallant
Indomitable
Glorious
Magnificent

FOURTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Warrior (lost at Lakota II)
Triumph (lost at Vidha)
Vengeance
Revenge

THIRD BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Paladin (lost at Lakota)
Orion
Majestic (lost at Lakota II)
Conqueror

FIFTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Fearless
Resolution
Redoubtable
Warspite

SEVENTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Indefatigable (lost at Lakota)
Audacious (lost at Lakota)
Defiant (lost at Lakota)

TENTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Colossus
Amazon
Spartan
Guardian

FIRST BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Courageous
Formidable
Intrepid
Renown (lost at Lakota)

FOURTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Dauntless (flagship)
Daring
Terrible (lost at Ilion)
Victorious

SIXTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Polaris (lost at Vidha)

Vanguard (lost at Vidha)

Illustrious

Incredible

EIGHTH BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Relentless

Reprisal

Superb

Splendid

FIRST SCOUT BATTLESHIP DIVISION

Arrogant (lost at Kaliban)

Exemplar

Braveheart (lost at Cavalos)

SECOND BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Leviathan

Dragon

Steadfast

Valiant

FIFTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Invincible (lost at Ilion)

Repulse (lost in Syndic
home system)

Furious

Implacable

SEVENTH BATTLE CRUISER DIVISION

Opportune (lost at Cavalos)

Brilliant

Inspire

THIRD FAST FLEET AUXILIARIES DIVISION

Titan

Witch

Jinn

Goblin

THIRTY-SEVEN SURVIVING HEAVY CRUISERS IN SEVEN DIVISIONS

First Heavy Cruiser Division

Third Heavy Cruiser Division

Fourth Heavy Cruiser Division

Fifth Heavy Cruiser Division

Seventh Heavy Cruiser Division

Eighth Heavy Cruiser Division

Tenth Heavy Cruiser Division

minus

Invidious (lost at Kaliban)

Cuirass (lost at Sutrah)

Crest, *War-Coat*, *Ram*, and *Citadel* (lost at Vidha)

Basinet and *Sallet* (lost at Lakota)

Utap, *Vambrace*, and *Fascine* (lost at Lakota II)

Armet and *Gusoku* (lost at Cavalos)

SIXTY-TWO SURVIVING LIGHT CRUISERS IN TEN SQUADRONS

First Light Cruiser Squadron

Second Light Cruiser Squadron

Third Light Cruiser Squadron
Fifth Light Cruiser Squadron
Sixth Light Cruiser Squadron
Eighth Light Cruiser Squadron
Ninth Light Cruiser Squadron Tenth Light Cruiser Squadron
Eleventh Light Cruiser Squadron
Fourteenth Light Cruiser Squadron
minus

Swift (lost at Kaliban)
Pommel, Sling, Bolo, and Staff (lost at Vidha)
Spur, Damascene, and Swept-Guard (lost at Lakota)
Brigandine, Carte, and Ote (lost at Lakota II)
Kote and Cercle (lost at Cavalos)

ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-THREE SURVIVING DESTROYERS IN TWENTY SQUADRONS

First Destroyer Squadron
Second Destroyer Squadron
Third Destroyer Squadron
Fourth Destroyer Squadron
Sixth Destroyer Squadron
Seventh Destroyer Squadron
Ninth Destroyer Squadron
Tenth Destroyer Squadron
Twelfth Destroyer Squadron
Fourteenth Destroyer Squadron
Sixteenth Destroyer Squadron
Seventeenth Destroyer Squadron
Twentieth Destroyer Squadron
Twenty-first Destroyer Squadron
Twenty-third Destroyer Squadron
Twenty-fifth Destroyer Squadron
Twenty-seventh Destroyer Squadron
Twenty-eighth Destroyer Squadron
Thirtieth Destroyer Squadron
Thirty-second Destroyer Squadron
minus

Dagger and Venom (lost at Kaliban)
Anelace, Baselard, and Mace (lost at Sutrah)
Celt, Akhu, Sickle, Leaf, Bolt, Sabot, Flint, Needle, Dart,

Sting, Limpet, and Cudgel (lost at Vidha)

Falcata (lost at Ilion)

War-Hammer, Prasa, Talwar, and Xiphos (lost at Lakota)

Armllet, Flanconade, Kukri, Hastarii, Petard, and Spiculum

(lost at Lakota II)

Flail, Ndziga, Tabar, Cestus, and Balta (lost at Cavalos)

SECOND FLEET MARINE FORCE

Colonel Carabali commanding (acting)

Originally 1,560 Marines divided into detachments on battle cruisers and battleships. Approximately 1,200 surviving following losses in ground actions and on destroyed warships.

ONE

THE structure of the Alliance heavy cruiser *Merlon* shuddered again and again as hell lances fired by Syndicate Worlds warships ripped into and through her. Commander John Geary grabbed for support as a volley of Syndic grapeshot struck *Merlon's* port side, the impacts of the solid metal balls vaporizing part of the hull. Wiping a hand across his eyes to clear away sweat, Geary blinked through the fumes the overloaded and failing life-support systems couldn't clear out of the atmosphere inside the ship. His first real combat action might also turn out to be his last. *Merlon* tumbled helplessly through space, unable to control her motion, and the final hell lance still working on the Alliance warship went silent as more enemy fire ripped into her.

There wasn't anything else he could do. It was time to go.

Geary cursed as he got the emergency destruct panel open and punched in the authorization code. Another volley of hell lances sliced into *Merlon*, and more indicator lights on the bridge went out, shifted to blinking damage status. Geary pulled on his survival suit helmet, knowing that he had only ten minutes before the power core overloaded and *Merlon* exploded. But Geary paused before he left the bridge. He'd ordered the remaining members of the crew off once it was clear that he alone could handle the few operational weapons and the final act of self-destruction. He'd bought all the time he could for his crew to get clear.

But *Merlon* had been his ship, and he hated to leave her to her death.

Another rumble and *Merlon's* out-of-control tumble rolled sideways and up as more Syndic grapeshot slammed into her, the passageways around Geary rotating dizzily, bulkheads thrusting suddenly toward him, then away, sometimes slamming painfully into him. His search became more desperate as he kept passing escape-pod berths either empty or with mangled remnants of their rescuers' craft still wedged in place.

He finally found one with a yellow status light, indicating damage, but he had no choice. Inside, he sealed the hatch, strapped in, slapped the eject control, felt the force of the acceleration pin him to the seat as the escape pod tore away from *Merlon's* death throes.

The pod's propulsion cut off, much earlier than it should have. No communications. No maneuvering controls. Environmental systems degraded. Geary's seat reclined automatically as the escape pod prepared to put him into survival sleep, a frozen state where his body could rest safely until his escape pod was recovered. As Geary's consciousness faded, his eyes on the blinking damage lights of the escape pod as they winked out into dormant status, he knew that someone would come looking for him. The Alliance fleet would repel the Syndic surprise attacks, reestablish control of the space around the star Grendel, and search for survivors from *Merlon*. He'd be picked up in no time.

He opened his eyes on a blur of lights and shapes, his body feeling as if it were filled with ice and his thoughts coming slowly and with difficulty. People were talking. He tried to make out the words as the blurry shapes began to resolve themselves into men and women in uniform. One man with a confident voice was speaking. "It's really him? You've confirmed it?"

"DNA match with fleet records is perfect," another voice said. "This is Captain Geary. He's been

badly physically stressed by the duration of his survival sleep. It's a miracle he came through this well. It's a miracle he came through at all."

"Of course it was a miracle!" the big voice boomed. A face leaned close, and Geary blinked in focus, making out a uniform that was the color of the Alliance fleet but otherwise different in detail. The man beaming at him bore the stars of an admiral, but Geary didn't recognize him. "Captain Geary?"

"C . . . C . . . Com . . . man . . . der . . . Geary," he finally managed to reply.

"*Captain* Geary!" the admiral insisted. "You were promoted!"

Promoted? Why? How long had he been out? Where was he?

"What . . . ship?" Geary gasped, looking around. From the size of the sick bay, this ship was much larger than *Merlon*.

The admiral smiled. "You're aboard the battle cruiser *Dauntless*, flagship of the Alliance fleet!"

Nothing made sense. There wasn't any battle cruiser in the Alliance fleet named *Dauntless*. "Crew . . . my . . . crew?" Geary managed to say.

The admiral frowned and stepped back, motioning forward a woman who wore captain's insignia. Geary's gaze left the woman's face, unsettled by her expression of awe and distracted by the number of combat-action ribbons on the left breast of her uniform. Dozens of them, but that was ridiculous. Topping her rows of ribbons was the one for the Alliance Fleet Cross. He couldn't even remember the last time one of those had been awarded. "I'm Captain Desjani," the woman said, "commanding officer of *Dauntless*. I regret to inform you that the last surviving member of the crew of your heavy cruiser died about forty-five years ago."

Geary stared. Forty-five years? "How . . . long?"

"Captain Geary, you were in survival sleep for ninety-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-three days. Only the fact that the pod had a single occupant enabled it to keep you alive so long." She made a spiritual gesture he recognized. "By the grace of our ancestors and the mercy of the living stars you lived, and you have returned."

One hundred years? A wave of shock rode through Geary's slow-moving thoughts as he tried to absorb the news, not even trying to grasp why the woman had apparently seen some religious significance in his survival.

The bad news having been delivered by someone else, the admiral leaned forward again with another big smile. "Yes, Black Jack, you have returned!"

He'd never liked the Black Jack nickname. But if Geary managed to show his reaction, the admiral didn't notice it, speaking as if he was giving a speech. "Black Jack Geary, back from the dead, just as predicted in the legends, to help the Alliance win its greatest victory and finally put an end to this war with the Syndics!"

Returned? Legends? The war was still going on after a century?

Everyone he had known must be dead.

Who were these people and who did they think he was?

JOHN Geary bolted awake in his stateroom aboard *Dauntless*, gazing up at the overhead, breathing heavily and sweating even though his insides felt a lingering memory of the ice that had once filled him. It had been a while since he'd had flashbacks to the last moments of *Merlon* and his awakening aboard *Dauntless* a century later. He sat up, kneading his forehead with one hand while he tried to calm his breathing. Around him loomed the darkened outlines of his stateroom.

The admiral with the big voice had died in the Syndicate Worlds' home star system after his plan to win the war had turned out to be an ambush by the Syndics. A lot of other people and Alliance warships had died with him. The survivors had turned to the legendary Black Jack Geary to save them, and despite Geary's abhorrence of the impossibly heroic figure that legends claimed Black Jack had been, he'd been forced to assume command of the fleet. After all, his commissioning date to captain had been almost a century earlier, and no other surviving officer in the fleet had anywhere near that much seniority. A number of them had doubted he could do it, doubted that he was truly the hero of legend, but even though Geary privately shared those doubts, he'd known that he had to try.

And so far he'd done what seemed impossible. He'd brought the Alliance fleet back through Syndic space, a long, fighting retreat using every skill he'd learned a century ago, skills lost to the fleet in the decades of bloodbath the war had become after *Merlon's* destruction.

His eyes went to the star display floating over the table in his stateroom. He'd left it active when he went to sleep, centered on the star Dilawa. Still inside Syndic space, but only three more jumps away from reaching safety in Alliance space. He was so close to saving those who had believed he could save them. But the fleet was still inside enemy territory, still had to fight its way past the Syndic flotilla that would surely be waiting at the end of one of those jumps, and the loss of the *Merlon* had come back to haunt him.

Geary exhaled wearily, then dug in a drawer for a ration bar. He eyed the bar dubiously. Like most of the food left in the fleet, the bar had come from Syndic stockpiles abandoned in place where marginal star systems had been deserted after the introduction of the hypernet. It was food even though the Syndics didn't think worth hauling away. While no doubt long past its expiration date, the bar and the other food they'd picked up had been frozen in airless vacuum since abandonment and technically remained edible.

The bar had a propaganda wrapper featuring impossibly heroic-looking Syndic ground troops marching from left to right. He tore the wrapper open, trying to avoid reading the ingredients, then started biting off and swallowing chunks of it. Despite his best efforts to avoid tasting the thing, he still ended up wincing at the flavor. Sailors in the Alliance fleet often complained about the food they got, but one of the few virtues of these Syndic supplies was that (aside from keeping you alive) they also made the Alliance rations taste wonderful by comparison.

And, as the ancient joke went, not only was the food terrible but there wasn't enough of it. The bar sat like a lead ball in Geary's stomach, but that wasn't why he didn't get another. A fleet cut off from resupply and trapped in enemy territory had to get by on short rations. He wouldn't eat better than his sailors. Though considering the quality of the Syndic food, "better" probably wasn't the right term.

His comm panel buzzed urgently, and Geary hit the acknowledge button.

“Captain Geary, enemy ships have arrived at the jump point from Cavalos.”

He slapped another control, and the star display winked out, to be replaced with a display showing just the Dilawa Star System and the ships within it. There hadn't been much in the way of Syndica Worlds' warships left in the Cavalos Star System when the Alliance fleet departed, unless you counted the wreckage of the Syndic warships that orbited Cavalos in slowly spreading clouds of debris.

But there were plenty more Syndic warships hunting Geary's fleet, and the Alliance fleet was increasingly feeling the strain of the long retreat through Syndic space. Not all of the wreckage left in Cavalos had belonged to Syndic warships. The Alliance battle cruiser *Opportune*, the scout battleship *Braveheart*, and nine Alliance cruisers and destroyers had also been lost in the battle there, some torn apart in the battle and some blown to pieces on Geary's orders because they had been too badly damaged to keep up with the retreating fleet.

The pressure was wearing on him as well. His mind kept dwelling on the losses suffered thus far by the Alliance fleet, which was probably why he was getting post-traumatic-stress flashbacks again.

With an effort, he focused on what was happening now. “Only one HuK and two nickel corvettes,” Geary commented.

“That's right,” Captain Desjani replied, her image popping up next to the display. She was on the bridge, of course, watching over her ship. “Too bad they're almost three light-hours away. *Dauntless* hell-lance crews would enjoy the target practice.”

“Not that your hell-lance crews need target practice, Tanya,” Geary agreed, his remark earning him a proud grin from Desjani. As she'd noted, the jump point was three light-hours distant from where the Alliance fleet was located deeper inside the star system, which meant the images he was seeing of the Syndic warships were three hours old. “No one's following them in. They must be scouts.”

“Agreed. We expect to see one of the nickels brake to stay near the jump point. The other nickel and the Hunter-Killer should accelerate toward the jump points for Kalixa and Heradao.” She paused. “This is the first time I've seen a nickel corvette outside a Syndic-occupied star system. Those things are so obsolete I'm surprised they risk them in jump space.”

So obsolete, in fact, that nickel corvettes had been operating a hundred years ago, back when they had been given that nickname by the Alliance because they were seen as cheap and easily expended in battle. Back when the war began. Images from his flashback returned, of nickel corvettes making firing runs on *Merlon*.

“Sir?” Desjani asked.

Geary shook his head, startled to realize he'd let his mind drift like that. “Sorry.”

Only Geary might have been able to see the concern in the look Desjani gave him, but she went on speaking as if everything was routine. “The first nickel corvette may jump back for Cavalos in a little while to let them know we're still here.” Her expression shifted, now professionally unrevealing. “Since we are still here.”

“We need everything we can salvage from the materiel the Syndics left behind when they pulled the last people out of this star system decades ago,” Geary replied, trying not to speak angrily in response to Desjani's prodding.

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