

Volume 2 - Chapter 48 - Mission Briefing

Section 4.2 – Mandatory Creation Parameters for Digital Missions

The governing principle of the UHF Digital Mission system is to provide Marines with combat scenarios that are both engaging and educational, while maintaining operational value for the Corps.

To that end, the following creation parameters are *mandatory* for all DMs created under UHF oversight:

1. Clear, Understandable Goals:

Mission objectives must be simple enough for any Marine to comprehend at first briefing—no convoluted secondary chains. Objectives *must* be actionable from deployment onward, allowing immediate engagement with mission parameters.

2. Mission Type Alignment:

All DMs must adhere to one of the established operational categories listed in Appendix 3 (*Hold the Line, Point Defense, All-Out Assault, etc.*). Variants are permitted only with prior approval from the corresponding Local Simulation Command.

3. Ruleset Grade Selection:

Select from Grade 0 through Grade 5 restrictions, balancing mission complexity with desired training outcomes. Ensure the ruleset complements the intended teaching focus.

4. Enemy AI Configuration:

Designate the core enemy type from the approved AI library. Optional inclusion of randomized high-threat elements (*Enemy Aces, Battlefield Aces, etc.*) is recommended for unpredictability.

Note: **Randomized threats are generated *at mission start*, not during design phase, potentially increasing the intended difficulty beyond initial intentions.**

5. Feasibility by Force Size:

Mission sizes are allowed to scale between 1–5 Platoons (100–500 Marines). Scenarios must remain realistically survivable with optimal execution.

6. Special Modifiers:

Special combat conditions (*environmental hazards, limited visibility, logistical shortages, etc.*) may be applied to train Marines in specific stress conditions. See Appendix 6 for full list.

7. Role Representation:

Role distribution must meet mission-critical ratios. Governing AIs may assist in assigning Role requirements across Platoons to fulfill operational viability (minimum Squad Medics, Heavy Weapons Specialists, etc.). The number of minimum Squad Leaders is *always* equal to the number of total squads planned to be part of the mission.

8. Real-World Scenario Parity:

Mission backstory may be fictional or based on a historical operation. Disclosure of origin to participants is optional, but permitted—Marines may train on simulations of real battles without obfuscation.

9. Defined Timed Endpoint:

Each DM must have a conclusive end-condition compatible with its Grade's ruleset and explainable in-mission (*arrival of reinforcements, destruction of key assets, completion of evacuation, etc.*).

10. Upscale Contingency Protocol:

All missions *must* include an upscaled variant to accommodate high-value participant queues. Minimum trigger conditions: 4× 1-Star MVM Medal holders; or 1x 1-Star MVM Medal and 1× 2-Star MVM Medal holders in the same queue. Adjust parameters in accordance with Appendix 9a to ensure appropriate challenge scaling.

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Failure to meet any of these criteria will result in automatic rejection by the Digital Mission Generation Committee.

Resubmission will be permitted only after deficiencies are addressed in full.

Repeated violations may result in removal of simulation design rights.

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[Excerpt from *UHF MC Operational Handbook – Digital Mission Creation Protocols*, Rev. 227, PFC 943]

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Having been scooped up by an experienced Squad Medic wasn't exactly on Thea's list of planned ways to step into her first Digital Mission, but she had to admit—it beat wandering around the Prep Room, trying to haggle her way into a squad like a good chunk of the lobby was doing right now.

Sure, Chester didn't exactly scream trustworthy.

He'd been the one to stir up that little mess with the two Marines who'd commented on her weapons, only to sweep in afterward like some kind of white-knight recruiter.

Still, given how it turned out, she figured it had been worth the gamble.

'It's really awesome to have this high a Perception, huh?' she thought, a faint smile tugging at her lips as she sat beside Chester on one of the benches with the rest of Wellis' squad.

He'd probably never considered the possibility that a Recon/Sniper Recruit could possibly have enough Perception in their very first Digital Mission to catch the venom in his earlier "advice" to the two Marines.

But her recent focus on actively tracking everything around her was already paying off—it had let her hear it clear as day.

She'd thought, for a moment, about calling him out.

But she knew the type well enough.

She'd seen them plenty of times in arcades across the galaxy—players who preyed on fresh faces to pad their own numbers.

Not the deadweight grifters, but the other kind: The ones just solidly above average in skill. Not good enough to be top-tier on their own, but talented enough, sharp enough—and motivated enough—to *recognize* their limits and build a strategy to work around them.

It wasn't flattering, sure, but Thea didn't care about flattering.

'I don't have to like the guy. He just has to perform.'

Her motto had always been simple: Better a competent asshole, like Desmond, than a friendly anchor dragging you down. In a mission, you could ignore a personality you didn't mesh with—but you couldn't ignore someone dropping a grenade at your feet on accident, or even worse, *tanking your score*.

So someone like Chester? Perfect.

In her eyes, these were *exactly* the kind of people worth queuing up with in missions like this.

And to have that opportunity handed to her on a silver-rarity platter without even having to lift a finger?

'Couldn't have asked for a better start, honestly.'

Leaning back against the cool metal of the locker behind her, quietly pleased with how things had gone so far, Thea let herself relax and kept lazily scanning the Prep Room.

Marines milled about in varying states of readiness—some checking weapons, some chatting in tight squad-sized circles, others standing off alone, radiating that "don't bother me" energy.

Her eyes moved from group to group, mentally tallying the rough spread of Roles she could spot, noting the gear choices, the way people carried themselves, and—most telling of all—how confident they looked.

A few had that casual ease of veterans, leaning on their lockers with weapons already slung, while others were clearly fresh, fidgeting with straps or re-checking menus like they'd missed something.

She'd only entered the Prep Room toward the tail end of selection—maybe one of the last fifteen or so people to load in—so most of the early chaos had already passed her by.

'Should've made my loadout decisions faster, I guess...' she thought, a faint pang of curiosity cutting through her calm. *'Hope nothing major went down in here while I was picking gear.'*

Her gaze drifted sideways to Chester, who was also watching the room with quiet focus, eyes flicking between clusters of Marines. *'Maybe I should just ask him...?'*

She dismissed the idea almost as soon as it surfaced.

If this was anything like Sundawn's prep stages, the early part wasn't all that important.

It was mostly over-eager Squad Leaders scrambling to fill their rosters with the first promising faces they could charm—or pressure—into joining, while the smart ones bided their time, watching and waiting for the best squads to take shape before committing.

And judging by the way Chester had moved the instant she'd agreed to follow him—cutting straight across the room like he already had his target picked—Thea was about ninety-nine percent certain her guess was spot on...

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By the time the status indicator in the top right corner ticked down to zero and flashed its update, every Marine had found a squad—some of them only just scraping in at the last second, practically begging to get squeezed into an oversized team. Thea knew full well she could've been one of those poor sods if it hadn't been for Chester's timely interference.

Things moved fast after that.

All the Squad Leaders filed into one of the side rooms, the heavy door sliding shut behind them. Whatever they were discussing didn't take long; just a few minutes later, the rest of the platoon got the call to follow.

"Alright, let's go," Chester said to her, as if she could somehow miss the massive notification dead-center in her vision instructing her to move to the adjacent room for the mission briefing. "Next up's just a quick brief about the mission, nothing to worry about."

"Gotcha," Thea replied, half-listening as she fell into step behind him and the rest of Wellis' squad, the flow of Marines funneling into the next chamber.

The briefing room was big—wide enough for the whole platoon, with rows of seats neatly arranged in perfect lines.

Each row seemed to be tagged for a specific squad, because Wellis' crew didn't stop until they'd passed several empty sections before finally choosing one toward the middle.

Just before she sat down, Thea caught the faint, almost ghostly text floating above her chair—*Wellis' Squad*—visible only when she focused on it.

Mystery solved.

Once everyone had settled in, fifteen of the sixteen Squad Leaders took their places near the front, standing slightly behind a single man positioned at the center.

Clearly, he was the one in charge here.

Her first thought when she saw him was, '*He's like Lucas' scruffier brother, huh?*'

The man was massive—taller than even Lucas and Isabella by a good ten centimeters—and clad in the unmistakable bulk of Super-Heavy armor.

The design wasn't identical to Lucas' Stalwart rig, but the type was the same: Enormous angular plating, reinforced joints, and the kind of imposing silhouette that drew every eye in the room; or Battlefield.

The massive man stepped forward, his voice carrying effortlessly across the room as he opened with a deep, steady, "Brothers and Sisters."

"I'm Sergeant Kalt," he continued, his tone both commanding and oddly warm, "and by unanimous agreement among your Squad Leaders, I've been designated as Commanding Officer for this Digital Mission. I thank them for their trust, and I promise you this—I'll do my damnest to get every single one of you through this DM without fail."

He took a moment to scan the room, letting the words settle before pressing on.

"I also want to give a special welcome to any new Recruits with us today. You've just finished your first Assessment and now you're trickling into DMs across the galaxy, without much pre-amble. You're stepping into something big here. I ask all of you others—veterans and returning Marines alike—to welcome the new blood with open arms, open ears, and open minds."

His tone softened slightly, though it still carried that same pressing weight. "Recruits, you don't have to identify yourselves if you don't want to. You're free to stay quiet, stay hidden as much as you like. You've got enough on your plates learning how these missions work without the whole room staring at you."

Thea found herself appreciating that. A lot.

That simple bit of consideration was enough to bump the Sergeant straight onto her internal "Nice Guy" list.

"Now then," Kalt went on, "if there were any organisational issues during squad creation, now's the time to speak up."

His gaze swept over the room again. Silence. Not a single voice raised.

“Good. Then let’s move on to the main part.”

He squared his shoulders slightly, addressing the line of Squad Leaders. “Squad Leaders—please ready up and confirm your final squad compositions, and your agreement to offer operational command to me for this run.”

For a moment, nothing visible happened.

Then, without so much as a sound, the Status Indicator in the top right corner blinked and shifted to read: [Final Mission Briefing].

Right on cue, a datapad shimmered into existence in front of Kalt, hanging weightlessly in the air until he reached out with one massive, armor-plated hand and plucked it from the void.

The metal fingers of his gauntlet tapped across its surface for barely three seconds before his movements froze.

His eyes widened a fraction, then he dragged one huge, armored palm over his face and let out a long, drawn-out sigh that seemed to carry the weight of the entire platoon. “Haaaaa...”

“Sergeant Kalt?” one of the Squad Leaders ventured, his voice cautious but unable to mask the curiosity that rippled through the entire room.

Even Thea found herself leaning forward slightly, trying to read the man’s reaction.

Kalt lowered his hand and cleared his throat.

“I am... forced to *amend* my previous statement,” he said slowly, almost begrudgingly. “I will no longer attempt to get *every single one of you* through this DM... but rather *any single one of you*.”

The room stirred, a few Marines exchanging confused glances.

Without elaborating, Kalt gave a short, almost lazy flick of his wrist, and the contents of the datapad leapt from his hands to the massive wall-mounted display behind the Squad Leaders.

Thea’s eyes locked on the bold, glaring letters now dominating the screen—bright red, large enough that nobody in the room could pretend not to see them.

“WARNING: HIGH-VALUE QUEUE DETECTED. UPSCALED MISSION PROTOCOLS WILL BE ENGAGED. MISSION BRIEFING HAS BEEN ADJUSTED ACCORDINGLY.”

The reaction from the room was instant and loud, a chorus of groans, muttered curses, and outright protests.

One Marine in the back let out an exasperated bark of laughter followed by, “Of *course* it’s a damned HVQ—why wouldn’t it be today?”

Another just slumped forward in his seat, hands dragging down his face like the weight of the galaxy had just landed on his shoulders.

A woman near the aisle muttered, “Great, just great... goodbye easy payout,” while a younger Marine actually stood halfway up in his seat, voice sharp with panic: “Are you fucking kidding me? This was supposed to be a Grade Zero warm-up!”

Someone else, a broad-shouldered Heavy with an almost feral grin, just chuckled darkly, cracking his knuckles and saying, “About time we had a *real* fight,” which earned him more than a dozen death-stares.

Even Chester, normally so composed and clearly confident in his ability to milk a mission for all it was worth, was staring at the warning like his carefully constructed plan had just gone up in a spectacular IgT-fueled self-immolation.

Thea, meanwhile, was simply... lost.

She had no idea what “High-Value Queue” actually meant, and judging from the mix of dread and barely-contained excitement in the room, it was either something really good or really bad—*probably* both.

Thankfully, Sergeant Kalt didn’t let the suspense linger.

“Seems we’ve got more MVM medal winners in here than any of us thought,” he began, voice calm but carrying a weight that silenced most of the chatter. “I knew about one one-star, but apparently, we’ve got at least three more hiding in the ranks—that’s enough to trip the HVQ protocols.”

One of the Squad Leaders behind him shrugged. “Could also be a two-star,” he offered.

Another shook his head immediately. “Nah. We’d *damn well* know if we had a two-star in here. Trust me, they’re not exactly easy to mistake for a one-star.”

“Correct. Far more likely for there to be three hidden one-stars who didn’t want to tip their hand,” Kalt agreed, his eyes scanning the assembled Marines.

Thea frowned, turning that over in her head.

She was *certain* she’d agreed to the prompt before the DM started—hadn’t she?

But as she glanced down at herself, realization hit hard enough to make her wince.

Her Spectre’s Cloak, wrapped snugly across the front of her torso thanks to the awkward cross-strap setup for her triple-DMR loadout, was covering her entire chest. Which meant the medal embedded in her armor, right above her heart, was buried under layers of adaptive camouflage fabric.

Nobody could have possibly seen it, even if they had known it was there and explicitly tried.

She facepalmed hard.

The sharp movement caught Chester's attention.

He glanced over, and clearly misreading her embarrassment, leaned in just enough to say, "Relax. You'll be fine as long as you stick with me. Even with the upscale, we'll get through this in one piece."

Thea didn't even have to answer Chester before Kalt's voice cracked through the room like a whip.

"Everyone—sit *down* and *shut up*!"

The shift in tone was jarring. Gone was the calm, reassuring weight he'd carried before.

This was the bark of a drill sergeant, sharp enough to make even the most seasoned Marines in the room straighten up without thinking. The easy-going warmth had been stripped away, replaced by something hard-edged and commanding.

"This DM," Kalt continued, his voice cutting through the murmurs, "just turned into a *gauntlet*. The usual sixty percent clear rate for Tauron 9? On the upscaled version, that drops to twenty-eight."

A wave of horrified looks rippled across the platoon.

A few Marines couldn't stop the half-formed complaints slipping past their lips—but one glance from Kalt's steel-grey eyes was enough to shut them up cold.

"Updated parameters," he went on, not giving them a moment to stew. "Our original ten trench lines? Cut in half—we'll be working with five. Enemy numbers are tripled. We've also lost eleven heavy machine gun emplacements, four bunkers, and one of our two pre-prepared trap-trench lines. We'll have only one left to lure them into and blow up. Make it count."

Thea felt the tension in the room spike.

Even without a deep knowledge of this particular DM's layout, she understood that was bad news layered on top of worse news.

"This won't be easy by any metric," Kalt admitted, "but remember: You've got several MVM Medal winners on your side. Consider that the equivalent of having up to four Battlefield Aces in this platoon. They're not quite the same, of course, but close enough to make the point."

That earned a few sidelong glances, but Thea noticed almost everyone's eyes settle on a single Marine halfway down the row—a wiry man who suddenly looked like someone had swapped his armor out for a heat suit.

He was sweating hard, eyes fixed on the floor.

'Is that the other MVM the Squad Leader mentioned earlier...?' Thea couldn't help but think.

Kalt gave no hint either way.

Instead, he flicked a hand, and the full mission briefing was transferred directly to everyone's personal datapads. "Read it when you're bored," he said dryly. "Though I doubt any of you will find the time for that."

He scanned the room. "Questions?"

Silence.

Then, from somewhere near the back, a voice spoke up.

"Sir—who are the other MVMs? We could plan around them better if we knew."

"Denied," Kalt said instantly, not even blinking. "There is no need for them to identify themselves. If they want to, they can. If not, you'll work with what you've got and keep moving. If there are no more questions, we're done here."

With that, he gave the signal to move, striding toward the eastern-most door with heavy, deliberate steps. "Focus up, brothers and sisters. *Take this seriously*. I don't care if it's your first DM or your hundredth—you treat this like your life depends on it. An upscaled DM is nothing short of an invaluable opportunity. You'll only get a *handful* of these in your entire career. So fight for every last point you can grab; you won't see another like this anytime soon."

He didn't wait for a reaction.

With a firm push, the door slid open, revealing a dimly lit wall of pure white light that pulsed faintly, almost like it was alive.

Kalt stepped through without hesitation, his bulk vanishing into the glow.

The rest of the platoon followed in silence, boots clunking against the deck, the air heavy with a mix of nerves and grim focus. It wasn't the tense, ready-to-snap kind of silence—it was the quiet you'd hear before a funeral march, the kind where nobody wanted to be the first to break it.

Meanwhile, Thea had other thoughts occupying her mind.

'This is shaping up to sound surprisingly fun,' she mused, doing her best to smother the grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. *'Hard mode with extra rewards? I was just gonna use this run to mess around with a few things, but now? Now I can actually get some real gains out of it, too. Fuck yeah!'*

One by one, the Marines stepped into the white light and vanished, their silhouettes swallowed whole in an instant.

Thea waited her turn, boots shifting against the deck, until the line in front of her was gone and the glow filled her vision.

She stepped through expecting... *something*.

A rush of warmth, the crackle of static, maybe even a strange pull in her gut.

Instead, nothing.

No sound, no sensation—just the sudden, jarring shift to standing on the crest of a hill.

Below her stretched the gray-brown churn of the upcoming battlefield, half-frozen mud and churned slush glistening under a pale sky.

The northern slope had been carved into five jagged rows of trenches, their dark earthworks stark against the gray mud, all braced to meet whatever would come crawling out of the forest some three hundred meters beyond the final line.

'Not quite Rog'An Prime... but close enough. I can work with this,' she thought, already running through firing angles and potential sniper nests in her head—until Chester's voice cut through her planning, snapping her back to reality.

This wasn't the Cube Trial.

She wasn't a lone gun this time. She actually had a squad to worry about.

"Stick with me, Thea," he said, his voice tight with focus. "Let's figure out where the CO wants Wellis' Squad to set up."

She figured there was no point in wasting mental effort when she could just follow Chester's lead for now. So she trailed him down the slope as the rest of the platoon began swarming into their positions.

For the next ten minutes, they prepped the trench lines as best they could.

Most of the work had already been done—the mission parameters had provided everything from packed earth walls and sandbag barriers to several HMG nests, three reinforced bunkers, and the trap-trench in the center of the defensive line.

One button press, and the whole thing would explode like an angry volcano, turning into a killing pit for any poor bastards caught nearby.

Orders came down, and Wellis' Squad was assigned to the eastern flank of the trench system—though there were still three more squads between them and the far edge.

"Would've preferred the outer-most flank again... but I guess this'll do," she muttered under her breath, setting up in the section marked with their squad's tag.

Every twenty meters or so, the trench walls opened into reinforced firing alcoves—low, narrow kill-slots shielded with durasteel plates—and their squad had been given several to cover.

Wellis split the group evenly.

Chester, Thea, and two Medium-armored Marines—Marie and Falks—took the eastern position. The remaining three, plus one last-minute member snagged right before the Prep Room closed, were set up in the western pocket of their sector.

The plan was simple: Hold each alcove as long as possible, then collapse inward to the next closest one, both teams falling back toward each other until the squad was reunited.

Only then would they pull back to the next trenchline.

'Pretty smart for a rush-job plan,' Thea admitted to herself. Then she smirked faintly. *'Sucks for Chester though—he's gonna have to sprint the whole damn length of our sector if someone on the far side gets hit.'*

She would've much preferred having a Defensive Heavy parked beside her, but Wellis had already claimed the only one in their squad for his half of the trenchline.

'Eh, I made it through the Cube Trial without one—at least for a while. This'll work out... somehow.'

The thought didn't bother her as much as it should have.

That steady, sharpened focus she always slipped into before a fight—the thing players online had often called Battlefield Trance—was already starting to take over.

She knelt briefly, securing her backpack into a tucked corner of the firing alcove.

It was positioned so she could reach it in seconds if she needed extra mags, medkits, or a quick grab-and-run, but far enough out of the way that it wouldn't snag her legs mid-firefight.

Her hands moved automatically as she unholstered her three DMRs.

First came her trusty Laser-variant Gram, then the two newcomers she'd just picked up at Abundant Ammunitions: One Ballistic, one Gauss.

"Time to see where the differences really are," she muttered, a grin tugging at the corners of her mouth. She propped the Ballistic and Laser-Gram against the trench wall for quick access, settling the Laser onto her shoulder to start off with.

To her left, Marie, Falks, and Chester were going through the same ritual—checking mags, chambering rounds, doing quick optics calibrations—all while keeping an eye on the ticking timer in the corner of their vision.

Thea's fingers brushed against the strap securing her cloak around her chest—the same strap keeping the Laser-Gram from simply dropping from her hands.

For a moment, she considered undoing it entirely just to see Chester's face when the MVM medal glinted in plain sight.

The idea almost made her smirk, but she pushed it aside.

'Better keep the strap where it is for now. Who knows how long this alcove'll last before we're moving, and losing it will make carrying all three a pain. Maybe three DMRs really was a bit overkill... but hey, too late now.'

Then, the timer finally struck 0:00:00.

A sharp, almost metallic chime rang in her ears as a crisp notification cut across her vision:

[DIGITAL MISSION START: Tauron 9 – Hold The Line – Upscaled Version]

[Mission Objective: Hold the uppermost trenchline for six hours and forty-five minutes until relief forces arrive, denying enemy forces any advance toward the hilltop.]

[Respawns: 0]

The numbers shifted instantly, rolling over into a fresh countdown:

[Mission Complete: 6:44:59]

The glow of the objective text faded, leaving only the ticking clock in the corner of her vision.

Thea felt her pulse pick up—not from nerves, but from the familiar edge of anticipation curling through her chest. The grin she'd been keeping in check finally broke free, stretching across her face as her fingers tightened around her rifle's grip.

'Showtime...'