

Excerpt from 'Mercenary Groups of Illyria', the comprehensive mercenary guide written by the retired general, Thomas Lannigold:

“Those who think of Barbarians as nothing more than strong but stupid brutes should try throwing that belief in the grizzled faces of the mercenaries who band under the Crimson Dawn banner – and watch as their ignorant assumption is brutally dispelled.

The Barbarians of Crimson Dawn are a company of cold, hard men. They have only contempt for what they see as the morally corrupt trappings of the ‘soft’ southern kingdoms. It would however be a mistake to equate this aversion to the comforts of civilization with a lack of intelligence. Uncultured, unmannered, unrefined? Most certainly. But those traits speak of a lack of erudition, a lack of knowledge. The true stupidity lies in underestimating these northern heathens. Many a man has mocked these taciturn Barbarians, thinking them slow and stupid, only to later fall prey to their base cunning and crafty ways.

One of my most able commanders once said, only half in jest, that this legendary Barbarian guile must already be flowing in the blood of these northerners as soon as they come into the world. His exact words were: *Those tiny bundles of future malice and trickery, squalling like the ice demons in their heathen folklore.* Well, a man deep in his cups is given to garrulous (and poetic) flights of fancy. I’m not one to entertain such nonsense. But, from all that I’ve seen in my many years, I’d be a fool to dismiss the man’s proposition in its entirety.

I speak from life-and-death experience on the battlefield when I say that these devious savages are several times more vicious than the rest of their northern kin. Any time you meet you a Crimson Dawn mercenary in the field, it would in your best interest to clutch your weapon a little tighter, draw your focus in, and brace your shield arm for the attack that is to come, for every man (or is that animal?) in their company possesses at least three years’ worth of battle experience. That’s the very minimum a fresh recruit would need to join their ranks. But of course, anyone can just say anything, so Crimson Dawn has a little test to weed out the truth, one where the applicant enters a ring unarmed, and goes face-to-face against three armed men, each one a Crimson Dawn man who’s been with the company for at least a year. The three mercenaries are given leave to beat the applicant within an inch of his life. As for the applicant, he gets to join the company if he can knock one of the three men unconscious. If he knocks out all three, he’ll join the company as a veteran member, and will be allocated a higher share of the company’s spoils going forward. As you’d imagine, this test quickly thins the ranks of the hopefuls, scaring off the green boys, the fork-tongued, and the merely competent.

So that Barbarian with the crimson bracers squaring off against you on the battlefield? He’ll be one of the most ornery, battle-hardened warriors you’ll ever face, a member of an elite killing unit who’ll not spare a moment’s hesitation in his pursuit to make a corpse of you.

From the intelligence we’ve gathered on Crimson Dawn, one thing is exceedingly clear: they’re highly competent. I’ll take that extra step and be bold and say that they might be among the strongest mercenary groups out there. The price for their services is such that even the Illyrian

Trade Council has complained (in private, of course) about the dent Crimson Dawn inflicts on their collective money pouches. But that dent is backed up by a solid reputation, and a record that is hard to look beyond: Crimson Dawn has only been on the losing side once, and that was twelve years ago, in the Battle of the Four Winds, under a leader who was less ruthless, less efficient than the man who leads the company today.

In terms of composition, Crimson Dawn has a good mix of every unit type. But as you'd expect of Barbarians, their cavalry and ambush units are especially mobile and strong. A word of warning: never let their horsemen outflank you. If they get you on both sides, you should, in all haste, parley for your complete surrender, unless you want a massacre on your hands.

Back in the Winter of Northbitten, I led our Northern Vanguard into the forested, rolling hills of Kal Tirikan. We were headed for Holback, on a mission to root out a large bandit group that had been stirring all sorts of trouble for us further south. We were no more than ten miles away from Holback when suddenly the forest we had been traversing was filled with a cacophony of hoots and cries. Fear pierced our armor, striking us straight through the heart. Before I could bark out an order, it seemed as if the entire forest was coming alive, an evergreen beast jolted wide awake from its ancient slumber. There was movement everywhere, from down in the thick, dense underbrush, to up high in the treetops. Barbarians burst forth from the verdant foliage, snarling and howling like wolves that had the measure of our blood, their faces and bodies striped with the dark warpaint that had made it easy for them to blend in with their surroundings as they shadowed us. I fouled the air with a curse when I caught sight of the distinctive red bracers on their arms – the red bracers of Crimson Dawn.

They came at us from all sides, employing wolf-pack tactics. They'd divided themselves loosely into four units, with two units holding back while the other two launched an all-out attack before falling back a small distance to draw us toward them, at which point the two units that had been holding back charged us, catching us in disarray. Then it was just a repeat of the same pattern of attack. It was chaos. It was fang and claw, taking turns raking our flanks, front, and rear.

If it weren't for the collective wits of both myself and my right-hand man, Elgars Larrenbac, we might have lost far more men than we did. As it was, Crimson Dawn must have scythed down two score of our numbers before we regrouped.

Chaos and bedlam raged all around us. It was the perfect moment for *him* to descend upon us. Honehn. The giant of a man, the steely-eyed and iron-fisted leader of Crimson Dawn. The smears of ghastly red warpaint on his face made him look more demon than man, fitting imagery given how he was treading among fallen men. He certainly fought like one, twin axes swirling in deadly arcs, showering every man nearby in a deluge of blood and brains. Elgars would have been cleaved in twain had I not pulled him back right before one of those axes came whistling down, slicing the frosty air where his head had been.

In the end, we managed to retreat to a higher vantage point, where our marksmen quickly dug in and began making their presence known. After suffering what must have been no more than a dozen casualties, the mercenaries did something both unexpected and inexplicable: they retreated from the battlefield. Not in a haphazard, turned-tail, cockerel-losing-its-head way, of course – Honehn and his men have far too much experience and training for that. They fell back in methodical fashion, each man covering for another until it was their turn to fall back. As Crimson Dawn disappeared back into the forest, there was a look of utter confusion plastered on the faces of our survivors.

The green boys and fools believed that Crimson Dawn retreated because they feared our terrain advantage. Did we have the higher ground? Yes, but as advantages go, it was about a finger's width. You think Barbarians quake in fear at the thought of charging up an incline? With trees for cover? We had the higher ground, yes, but we were in Barbarian lands, caught in forests and hills they've lived and fought in for hundreds of years. Maybe they might have lost a few more men if they'd charged up the hill, but I'm sure if that had happened, we'd have lost even more. No, I'll not insult Honehn and his men by even entertaining this ridiculous notion.

The way some of our men told it round the campfire was that our marksmen brought down Bojornehn, younger brother to Honehn, which caused the leader of Crimson Dawn to lose heart and call for the retreat. Another laughable notion. If these men had bothered to educate themselves on the Crimson Dawn leader, they would have known that had we indeed sent Bojornehn to Death's realm, you could best your last copper piece that Honehn would have come flying straight *at* us, the angel of vengeance and death itself.

Others japed that such was the price of Crimson Dawn's battle prowess that the bandit group could pay for only half a skirmish's worth of fighting. It might have been said in jest, but there's probably more truth to that than all the other foolish notions mentioned above.

As for me, I believe that Honehn took stock of the situation, concluded that he and his men had inflicted enough damage and that we would back off to lick our wounds –we did – thus buying his bandit paymasters the time they needed to flee their encampment. I think he was unwilling to put any more of his men at risk, given our slight terrain advantage and the fact that he'd already fulfilled his end of the bargain. He was already getting paid a handsome sum. Why get greedy and put the lives of his men at risk? Discretion is the better part of valor.

Of course, all that's just conjecture on my part. Unless Honehn decides to come to my home one day to share a tankard of mulled wine, I'll probably never know for certain what he was thinking when he called for the retreat. But, if my educated guesswork is what really went through Honehn's head the moment before he pulled his men back, then I salute him. Because he did what I would have done, given the circumstances. A shrewd man, and a great one, after my own heart. There are those who weren't there that have whispered, gossiped like hens, that the battle that day was Crimson Dawn's second loss. Fools! Simpletons! Loss? Not even close!"