

EXCELSIOR

CLASS HEAVY CRUISER



Once dubbed “the great experiment”, the *Excelsior* class had a somewhat torturous gestation owing to Starfleet’s fixation with Transwarp, but would go on to become a fleet staple—displacing the *Enterprise* class—and set a record for the longest serving class in history, the last examples being retired well over a century after the class had first entered service.

The latter half of the 23rd Century saw Starfleet performing a delicate balancing act—maintaining a strong defense and staying one step ahead of the Imperial Klingon Defense Forces (IKDF) in the ongoing cold war while at the same time, staying true to its mission of scientific exploration and diplomacy. Undermining all of this was the fact that there was no coherent strategy—either short or long term—that dictated Starfleet’s shipbuilding. As a result, when it came to exploration, the Admiralty seemingly teeter-tottered between building ever-expanding production lots of the diminutive *Oberth* class Scout and one-off variants of established designs (*Phobos* – an offshoot of *Loknar II* and *Tikopai*—an offshoot of *Enterprise*) before introducing a radical, clean sheet design—*Constellation*—that brought a whole new set of problems to the table.

When it came to maintaining a credible defense and deterrent, Starfleet’s solution seemed to be similarly scatterbrained—continue building Dreadnoughts (which had proliferated into 4 overlapping classes—*Federation II*, *Star League*, *Ascension* and *Conquest*) and Strike Cruisers (which now encompassed not only the *Belknap* class, but the *Dahlgren* class as well) while introducing upgunned variants of just about every Frigate and Destroyer in their line.

At the same time, where exploration was concerned, Starfleet’s ‘final frontier’ was currently the extragalactic void beyond the galactic barrier at the edge of the galaxy. The starship *Enterprise* (CH 1701) was the only vessel known to venture beyond the barrier and did so twice. The first voyage in 2264 inflicted severe damage on her

engines and the subsequent details concerning her repairs and voyage home were classified. The second took place in 2268 when the ship was commandeered by Kelvans, who subjected it to extensive modifications so that they might return to their homeworld in the Andromeda Galaxy. Based on comparisons of the data taken from both voyages, it was concluded that a super-warp propulsion system and stronger, remodulated shielding would be

needed for a vessel to safely venture beyond the barrier and avoid the deadly psionic side effects. Dubbed ‘Transwarp’, engineers and those in the admiralty alike were quite taken with the possibilities—both peaceful and otherwise—that this would open.

Unlike past starship classes that went through several design revisions before emerging as final products that were put into production, Starfleet Command took the somewhat unusual step of ordering development of two Transwarp testbed classes. Despite extensive study of *Enterprise* logs and engineering data from their second voyage beyond the Galactic Barrier, the ASDB was unfortunately unable to duplicate the exotic, highly advanced modifications made by the Kelvans. In order to reach the kinds of super-warp speeds needed to facilitate extragalactic travel, their solution relied on creating a controlled wormhole. The effects of a wormhole on a vessel’s warp drive and the propensity for them to create engine imbalances was not exactly a secret. The use of the term ‘wormhole’ was something of a misnomer however, as what the ASDB actually wanted to do was create an artificial subspace channel of sorts that would suck a starship in and then propel it at super-warp speeds (in excess of Warp 20 according to preliminary estimates).

The two starship concepts—codenamed *Ingram* and *Excelsior*—differed wildly in size and capability and each made use of different nacelle designs, UTI-27s from Koeller Warp Technologies for the former and FTWA-1s from Leeding Engines Ltd for the latter.

Initially, the plan was to construct and outfit a single testbed example of each and then begin running complex simulations before proceeding to actual in-field trials. However, given the size of *Ingram* (591 meters long, displacing 2,720,877 metric tons), some in the Admiralty and on the Federation Security Council saw potential in it as a Battleship and ordered an initial production lot of 12 in 2277.

Excelsior on the other hand, was smaller to a degree (467 meters long, displacing 2,150,000 metric tons), but had more sensible/unified aesthetics and gave up virtually nothing in terms of capability. The singular testbed example—CHX 2000—as well as the 12 *Ingrams* ordered, were all completed and had been transferred to the ASDB for testing by 2282. Despite extensive simulations, testing and numerous revisions to the computer systems intended to control the Transwarp Drive, both *Ingram* herself and *Excelsior* experienced near-catastrophic engine implosions on at least 3 separate occasions.

The Admiralty was loathed to give up on the chances of extragalactic exploration and insisted that that development continue. Two separate incidents with both classes though—seemingly unrelated to Transwarp development—would soon put an end to it once and for all.

In 2283, the 12 *Ingrams*—given the collective nickname 'The Great White Fleet' due to their striking pearlescent grey thermacoat finish—were ordered on a grand voyage that would take them from the Federation's core to the outer rim and back, in a tour of virtually all Federation-held territory. In a two-dimensional sense, after departing the Yokohama Naval Yards at Earth, the fleet would head northeast along the Romulan Neutral Zone to Deep Space 6, before turning and heading northwards slightly and turning around, heading west to Deep Space 3. The third (and longest) leg of their journey would see them heading south and slightly west, all the way to Starbase 14. Their last leg would see them head east to the Ceti Alpha star system before maneuvering north, traveling up along the Klingon border on their way back to Earth.

The goals of this voyage were multifaceted. Given the controversy surrounding Transwarp's development and the fact this had begun to seep into the public press, Starfleet Command wanted to get out in front of it and reassert control over the narrative. Projecting power, combatting frontierward adventurism and sending clear signals to both the Klingons and Romulans were also key goals.

For the most part, things went as planned, however stardate 8034.38 (9 October 2283) saw the deadline for the fleet's scheduled return come and go without any notice from any of the 12 ships. Their departure from Starbase 14 on stardate 8019.84 (approx. 3 months, 8 days earlier) was described as routine, however owing to the remoteness of the route on which the ships would make, this was the last recorded contact. Two days

later (stardate 8034.67 – 11 October 2283), Starfleet Command officially declared the ships missing, with an armada scrambled directly to the Mutara star system to search the immediate area and another, smaller force to Starbase 14 to retrace the vessels' last known route.

All told, 20 starships and over 7300 officers and crewmen were involved in the search effort—a massive undertaking and tremendous logistical feat that did not go unnoticed by the Federation General Assembly or the populace at large.

On stardate 8042.44 (4 December 2283), contact was lost with the armada as well. Starfleet immediately dispatched a *Constellation* class Cruiser (the *Antietam*/CA 9769) and a pair of *Oberth* class Scouts (*Banting*/ST 639 and *Sagan*/ST 652) to the Mutara system. Their arrival was recorded on stardate 8050.08 (27 January 2284) and proceeded without incident—their three-week search turning up no debris, lifeboats, trace energy emissions, log buoys or any other evidence indicating what had happened to any of the 26 starships lost.

The aftermath of this incident saw Starfleet Command classify all data regarding the *Ingram* class, the cruise of the 'Great White Fleet' and the subsequent search effort. This, combined with the adamant refusal of the Starfleet C-n-C to answer questions posed by the Federation Security Council fueled rumors of both a coverup and conspiracy. Before these rumors could gain any traction, another incident, this time involving the *Excelsior* took place.

On stardate 8057.71 (19 March 2284), the *Excelsior* was on maneuvers near the Saturn Flight Range when she inexplicably disappeared and then reappeared two weeks later. According to the ship's chronometer however, she had only been gone little more than an hour. Additionally, much of the crew suffered from various psychological and physiological side effects after her 'return', some of them quite severe. Starfleet Command and its Admiralty were able to keep a lid on this for over a year—inquiries into the incident disappearing into a void of bureaucratic malaise and deflected by endless replies of 'no comment'. In early 2285, when the Starship *Enterprise* returned to Earth after its infamous training cruise and Project: Genesis quite literally exploded into the public consciousness, a much bigger scandal erupted. Admiral James Kirk's subsequent theft of the *Enterprise* and sabotage of the *Excelsior* provided the perfect cover for Starfleet to do with *Excelsior* and the Transwarp Development Project what it did with *Ingram*—compartmentalize and classify all data, consigning it to the depths of history permanently.

Along with dispersing the rest of *Excelsior*'s crew, Captain Lawrence Styles and his XO Commander Miguel Darby were quietly reassigned to the USS *Exeter* (CH 1712). A new group of officers and crewmen were assigned, and *Excelsior* underwent a refit, getting among other things, a new bridge module as well as a conventional warp propulsion

system. The bridge module was slightly larger than that developed for the *Enterprise II* class—featuring more direct access to the primary docking port/airlock as well as featuring a small observation/VIP lounge on the same level. This resulted in the actual bridge being more or less identical to that on *Enterprise II*—save for the split helm/navigation stations and an enlarged aft section allowing access to the aforementioned spaces.

Encounters with Klingon *D-12/K'Teremny* and *D-18/Lara'atan* classes (resulting in the destruction of the starships *Hood/CH 1703* and *Kongo/CH 1710*), recent intelligence regarding the development of the *Suvwl'Qeh*, *voDleh/'Emperor'* and *B-10/Kar'hamer* classes as well as a general desire to incorporate greater survivability and redundancy into *Excelsior* vis-à-vis *Enterprise* all played into decisions on how heavily it should be armed. Also playing into those decisions was the Admiralty's growing dissatisfaction and discontent with having a separate 'sub-fleet' of Strike Cruisers (CS) and Dreadnoughts (DN) that it could not readily adapt to other, more mundane missions. The sheer amount of time, resources and personnel spent on developing, building and employing these vessels had stoked throughout the fleet, a desire to adopt a 'multi-mission' ethos that had not been truly seen since the advent of the *Yorktown* (BB 01) class nearly a century prior.

To that end, *Excelsior* equipped 11 Type VIII phaser banks—10 in the saucer (5 dorsal/5 ventral), plus one more covering the hangar bay (dorsally mounted). 5 more single emitter emplacements were featured—1 more centrally mounted between the warp nacelle pylons and then, as on *Enterprise/Enterprise II*, 4 more on the secondary hull's ventral surface. With *Excelsior*, the accepted number of torpedo launchers was now 4—2 fore and 2 aft, mounted just below the secondary hull's centerline (deck 17). Just as important as the weapons that armed her, were the shields which kept her protected. Given the relative size and power of her warp reactor and new FTWA-1 nacelles, the deflector shield system was a quantum leap above that on *Enterprise/Tikopai/Enterprise II*—with a rated capacity of 1,267,900 terajoules vs 702,000. The protection and power afforded by this more powerful system would prove critical in the coming years.

Just as equally imposing as her size and armament was her scientific capabilities. Handily surpassing *Enterprise* and her offshoots and even *Constellation* in the number of science labs (28 in total) and with sensors that could scan farther (11.5 LY max) and measure more, *Excelsior* took the template established by the *Yorktown* (BB 01) class and used it to establish a new benchmark by which all future classes would be judged.

For as imposing as she was on the outside, *Excelsior* was remarkably sparse and utilitarian on the inside. Main Engineering for example, was a surprisingly simple affair. On

Enterprise, it was an open, almost cavernous space. A primary control station was situated in an antechamber on the main level, with a number of smaller control consoles surrounding the vertical intermix chamber on multiple levels. Another horizontal intermix chamber of equal diameter extended aft at some length before smaller plasma conduits branched off and connected to the warp nacelles. On *Excelsior*, things were highly simplified and streamlined, quite surprising given the complexities of the initial Transwarp propulsion system she was designed for. Situated at the aft end of deck 14, access was gained through double-wide doors to port and starboard. In the center of the room, centrally situated in a sunken pit was a large master systems display table that allowed simultaneous monitoring and basic control of every shipboard system. A larger wall-mounted master systems display with accompanying control consoles occupied much of the wall at the forward end of the room, while at the opposite end was the warp reactor core with separate control stations situated around it in a semi-circular fashion. The ASDB, having accumulated almost two decades worth of experience with linear drive, refined the design of *Excelsior's* reactor core. Highly streamlined in appearance, it not only integrated the dilithium crystal converter in a new chamber matrix/articulation frame housed directly within the reactor core itself, but the diameter of the core's horizontal component (which like on *Enterprise*, extended aft to connect with the warp nacelles) was shrunk by 60%. This not only saved an incredible amount of space, but it simplified maintenance and operation to a degree that was previously thought impossible. Rounding things out were jeffries tube access hatches situated along the port and starboard walls, between the warp core and control stations.

Bolstering her survivability in extreme or otherwise unusual situations was an auxiliary control center that closely matched that from the *Constitution* and then *Enterprise/Enterprise II* classes with just a few distinct differences. While Mission Ops and Science stations flanked the main viewscreen, the helm and navigation stations were split up as opposed to being controlled from a single large station, while tactical functions were split off and housed within a separate station behind the CO's chair. Additionally, contained within the engineering alcoves on the other side of the room were jeffries tube access hatches which facilitated movement to and from the control center should the environment in the corridor outside become compromised or otherwise unfeasible for movement.

Shakedown trials of the namesake vessel continued until early 2286, by which time series production had already gotten well underway. Mere weeks after the launch of the *Yorktown* (CH 2033), she was tasked to lead an armada to track down and destroy the IKV *Q'rish*. The *D-18/K'teremny* class Destroyer was responsible for the death of Commodore Lyle Craig, the destruction of the starships *Hood* (CH 1707) and *Ajax* (DD

547) and the mauling of the starship *Moltke* (DD 4417) in retaliation for the *Hood*'s capture of the *K'tinga* class *L'ktja* during the Rykla Dagħ incident the previous year.

Deploying from H'atoria, the *Q'rish* intended to cross the Neutral Zone and attack Starbase 24. Advanced sensor drones and other surveillance assets in place forced the Klingon ship away from open space and toward the highly volatile Azure Nebula, which even the most advanced sensors of the day had trouble penetrating. Somewhat surprisingly, Klingon Imperial Intelligence lacked much beyond the most basic knowledge of *Excelsior*, giving Starfleet the upper edge. Able to withstand the nebula's volatility, the *Yorktown* held station inside, maintaining discreet surveillance. Upon detecting the *Q'rish*, she quickly signaled the rest of her armada—the *Miranda* class *Saratoga* (FH 1887), *Iowa* (FH 1865) and *Oberon* (FH 1880) along with the Soyuz class namesake (FT 1939) and *Vandenburg* (FT 1947). Entering the nebula, all ships targeted separate pockets of sirilium gas surrounding the *Q'rish* and ignited them from a distance, the resulting chain of explosions making quick work of a ship that had bedeviled Starfleet for a number of years.

Moving forward, incidents between Starfleet and the IKDF grew less and less frequent, even as the Klingons introduced ever larger warships and Starfleet inducted more and more *Excelsiors*. In 2289, command of the *Excelsior* herself was transferred to Hikaru Sulu who commanded the ship on a 3 year survey mission, cataloging gaseous anomalies in the Beta Quadrant. At the same time, the ASDB commissioned a modification of the basic *Excelsior* class design to serve as a testbed for new propulsion, sensor and tactical technologies that were beginning to be developed. These modifications took the form of 2 new massive impulse engine housings embedded within the saucer (1 on either side of the existing impulse deck), slightly lengthened warp nacelles with a new ramscoop design & extra 'fairings' at both ends and a modified secondary hull design with distinct bulges at the foreward end, one on either side.

Three examples were eventually produced to this standard. The first would be the next starship to bear the name *Enterprise* (CH 1701-B) in 2293, the *Okinawa* (CH 13958) in 2317 and the *Lakota* (CH 42768) in 2328. Somewhat ironically, the former was launched out of the ashes of a galactic conspiracy while the latter would go on to become involved in one itself.

Concerning the next *Enterprise*, its production and fitting out was accelerated following the Battle of Khitomer in late 2292. That battle represented the culmination of a conspiracy that aimed to halt astropolitical pragmatism and progress away from the hawkish, cold war mentality that had reigned for nearly 80 years. The destruction of a key Klingon industrial base and the assassination of both the Klingon and Federation heads of state were intended to ignite another war between the two powers. However, the crew of the *Enterprise-A* eventually uncovered the plot before it could be brought to

full fruition and ultimately thwarted it at the Klingon world of Khitomer. There, the conspirators planned to assassinate Federation President Ra-ghoratreii during a peace conference and frame the Klingons for it. The *Enterprise* and *Excelsior* arrived to stop it, but were engaged by the IKS *Dakronh*. The *B'rel* class Bird of Prey, commanded by General Chang, had been modified to allow for the limited use of its weaponry while cloaked. Chang utilized this ability to attack IKS *Kronos One* and managed to inflict severe damage on the *Enterprise* before personnel managed to modify a photon torpedo to hone in on *Dakronh*'s plasma emissions. Scoring a successful hit, the Federation ships soon locked in and destroyed the Bird of Prey.

The *Enterprise-A*, while being less than 10 years old, would still require significant time and effort to repair. This, coupled with the fact her command crew had served for 30 years and were nearing retirement, led Starfleet Command to decommission the ship.

A little more than a year later, on stardate 9715.5 (30 November 2293), Captain James Kirk, Captain Montgomery Scott and Commander Pavel Chekov were special guests onboard the *Enterprise-B* for her maiden voyage. The 'voyage' was little more than a press junket—the ship leaving spacedock for Pluto, then looping around and returning. She was manned by a skeleton crew and still had yet to be fully fitted out, lacking a tractor beam emitter and a full compliment of photon torpedoes among other things. While underway, she received a distress call from a pair of *Whorfin* class Transports—the *SS Robert Fox* and *SS Lakul*—bringing El-Aurian refugees to Earth. The transports had become ensnared in a volatile ribbon of temporal energy known as the 'Nexus', which crossed the galaxy every 39 years. Despite being ill-equipped for a rescue mission and commanded by an untried captain—John Harriman—the *Enterprise* moved to intercept the two stricken ships that were approximately 3 light years away. Upon arriving at their location, Harriman suggested disrupting the ribbon's hold by generating a subspace field around them. Given the strength of the gravimetric distortion, this was found to be unfeasible. He then suggested venting plasma from the warp nacelles to try and disrupt the ribbon's hold. This was tried and ultimately proved fruitless—the *Robert Fox* losing hull integrity and exploding in the meantime. Captain Scott then theorized a large antimatter discharge could possibly break the ribbon's hold, the only problem was—like the tractor beam emitter—the *Enterprise* did not have any stores of photon torpedoes currently onboard. Scott then suggested trying to simulate a torpedo detonation using a specially calibrated resonance burst from the main deflector dish. Captain Kirk rushed to an engineering maintenance compartment to modify the deflector relays and was successful. However, as the *Enterprise* came about and began to maneuver away from the ribbon, she was struck by an energy tendril which breached the hull across three decks—including the engineering compartment where Kirk was. He was presumed to have perished in the breach and this mission became notorious for his loss.

In subsequent years, Harriman distinguished himself as an explorer, conducting a long-range mission beyond the Gourami sector in the Beta Quadrant, mapping 142 star systems and making first contact with 17 new races. Beginning in 2303, the *Enterprise* undertook the first of several classified missions for Starfleet Intelligence. In 2307, she underwent an extensive refit at Starbase 11 incorporating advancements introduced with the new *Renaissance* (CH 9778) class—FTWA-3/WF-5 warp engine nacelles, Type IX Phaser Emitters and the DX-12 Fire Control System most notably.

4 years later in 2311, Harriman and the *Enterprise* played pivotal roles in both averting war with the Romulans and effectively isolating them on the astropolitical stage for the better part of five decades. For some time, Starfleet Intelligence had been tracking the rise of Aventeer Vokar in the Imperial Navy. A staunch Romulan chauvinist with something of a ruthless streak, he had by 2311, risen to become the Commander of the Romulan Imperial Navy, holding the rank of Admiral. Many in Starfleet Intelligence and on the Federation Security Council privately worried about the continuing prospects of peace between the Federation and the Empire as long as Vokar held his position and so, an elaborate disinformation operation was concocted to entrap and remove him from power.

The operation revolved around the testbed ship *Universe* (CHX 2999). It was an exotic concept designed by the ASDB in the late 2260s when the concept of transwarp drive was relatively new but discarded less than a decade later after the *Ingram* and *Excelsior* class concepts were developed. Utilizing *Ingram*'s UTI-27 warp engine nacelles, she was outwardly presented as the testbed ship for the new 'Hyperwarp' propulsion system. In reality though, 'Hyperwarp' was merely a rebranding of the failed Transwarp technology, this time with the addition of an outdated Romulan cloaking device used to present a new and different energy signature. Testing the ship extensively in the 'Bonneville Flats' region of the Draken system near the Romulan Neutral Zone, both Harriman and Starfleet Intelligence hoped to deceive the Romulans into thinking the *Universe* was testing a 'first strike' capability. During one such test—which was being secretly observed by the RiN flagship *IRW Tomed*—a malfunction in the drive system resulted in the destruction of the *Universe*. Vokar, aboard the *Tomed*, witnessed this and mistakenly took it as the test of a new metaweapon.

The effect was the same though. When the *Tomed* proceeded to Algeron to present evidence of this to the diplomatic delegations there, Harriman along with SI operatives Elias Vaughn and Drysi Gravenor snuck aboard. After sabotaging the vessel's warp drive and convincing all but a half-dozen of the crew to abandon ship, the Starfleet personnel set a course for the Foxtrot Sector. Once there, they set the *Tomed* on an automated collision course with one of the monitoring stations, escaping to *Enterprise* moments before the ensuing collision destroyed the *Tomed* and most of the monitoring stations.

Outwardly, it appeared that Vokar and his crew had sacrificed themselves in a horrific act of terrorism, killing thousands of Starfleet personnel in a futile effort to spark a war between the Empire and the Federation. In reality though, the outposts—like the *Universe*—had been evacuated, fitted with special ECCM equipment that emitted false biosignatures and their manifests filled with the names of SI operatives who had perished in past operations. The operation was rather extreme, but it achieved its intended aims—removing Vokar and isolating the Romulans. The only sacrifice made on Starfleet's part was the signing of an official treaty (the Treaty of Algeron) which forbade their development or use of cloaking technology.

Following the operation, Harriman relinquished command and was eventually promoted to Admiral. Command of the *Enterprise* passed to Harriman's first officer Demora Sulu who became an explorer in her own right and remained in command until 2321. Thomas Johnson Jr assumed command early in that year and was the last recorded commander of the *Enterprise-B*. Under his command, the *Enterprise* briefly continued its mission of exploration before being assigned to patrol the Cardassian border. In 2328, it was the first Federation starship that responded to render aid to the Bajorans following the Cardassian annexation of their system and home planet. A year later in 2329, the ship disappeared without a trace and was presumed lost with all hands.

Political realities during this period, dictated by the terms of the Khitomer Accords, placed limits on the number and types of starships able to be fielded. For Starfleet, it spelled an end to Battleship production—*Carolina* class production ending with *Pennsylvania* (BB 4414) in 2310. Dreadnoughts were pulled from active service and scrapped as were the *Yorktown* (CV) and *Casablanca* (CVL) Carrier classes, the *Valley Forge* (FH), *Kearsarge II* (CL), *Ortega II* (DH), *Akula II* (DH) and *Daytona* (DH) classes. Likewise, the *Soyuz* (FT), *Akyazi* (DD) and *Midway* (CV) classes were also pulled from service but transferred to the Reserve Forces Command. These limits contributed to a wholesale shift in mindset both in the Starfleet Admiralty as well as the Federation Security Council, regarding starship design, construction and employment. In a very real sense, this was the moment where the fleet's "multi-mission" ethos was born. Starships constructed for a singular purpose/constrained mission profile were now considered not only wasteful (in terms of material and resources), but also politically inconvenient. Going forward, they would have to become adept at a whole host of mission profiles.

Excelsior then, formed a firm foundation for this new philosophy. Not wanting to lose any ground in the exploratory or scientific arenas, class production continued at a rapid clip. It was bolstered on the low end by *La Fayette* and *Centaur* which replaced nearly all Destroyers in the basic patrol, reconnaissance, interdiction and rapid-response roles and in the middle by *Exeter*, which served as a more robust and flexible counterpart to *Miranda*. The multiphasic warp breakthrough of 2297, the introduction of the first multiphasic warp engine nacelle design (FTWA-3/WF-5) in 2299 and then the subsequent

introduction of the *Renaissance* class in 2305 was a watershed moment. Combined with the advent of collimated phaser emitter 'arrays' and isolinear computer technology, *Excelsior* was quite literally made obsolete in the blink of an eye so to speak. By this time though, it had been in production for over two decades and become the literal backbone of the fleet. To both ensure the fleet was able to take full advantage of these advancements and to remain in compliance with treaty limits, *Constellation* class ships were removed from service and placed in the reserves while *Excelsior* class production was halted and nearly 100 spaceframes in various stages of completion were put into storage. Not only did this provide the political latitude for continued full-scale production of *Renaissance*, but also production of the larger, more advanced *Ambassador* class beginning in 2325 as well.

Internal political upheaval within the Klingon Empire (Chancellors Kaarg and Ditagh unable to bring an end to political infighting and bureaucratic brinksmanship) combined with changing political attitudes within the Federation and their emphasis on expanding their exploratory and scientific pursuits led to a call by the Federation General Assembly to revoke or otherwise suspend Article VII (the specific article restricting the number and types of ships able to be built) of the Khitomer Accords. Negotiations on this began shortly after the Federation's first contact with the Cardassian Union in 2328 and continued for several years, well into the reign of Kravokh, son of J'Doq. By 2340, Kravokh's shrewd maneuvering and pragmatic leadership had returned the Empire to prosperity for the first time since the explosion of Praxis. That, plus the advent of the Cardassians as a prominent interstellar threat, led to the Klingon High Council agreeing to suspend Article VII late in that year.

The 100 remaining *Excelsiors* were completed over the next 2 years to a modified 'Block I B' standard—equipping isolinear computer systems, FTWA-3/WF-5 warp engines and more which brought them to a modern standard. The last to enter service was the *Melbourne* (CH 62043) in 2342. A grueling exercise that took up an estimated 40% of Starfleet's total shipyard space, these last 100 ships, even as old as the *Excelsior* design was, entered service none too soon—the Cardassians becoming a problem for the Federation beginning just a few years later.

On stardate 28215 (23 May 2350), the Cardassians attacked the Gamma 7 Outpost that was nearing completion near the volatile 'Badlands' region. Initially utilizing pirate proxies, they baited the USS *Wyoming* (FH 53517) into a pitched battle—first in the area surrounding the outpost and then, once the *Berlin* (CH 14232) and her escorts (*Iowa*/DH 64867; *Triumph*/DH 64853) arrived on station, on the outskirts of the Goralis system. The *Wyoming* sustained moderate damage and ultimately won the battle, but it was a sign of things to come.

What would become known as the first battle in the Federation-Cardassian War took place in 2355, with *Excelsior* playing a major role.

The Cardassian Guard struck out first at the backwater system known as Lyshan. Situated at the extreme edge of Starbase 129's sensor range, it had little in the way of a population—civilian or otherwise—and shipping traffic, making it an ideal place to establish a beachhead. Here, the *Royal Oak* (CH 2013) maintained overwatch, supported by the *Exeter* class *Bunker Hill* (CB 2017), *Curry* class *Leyte Gulf* (CVL 42377) and a quartet of *Miranda* class ships (*Vinson*/FH 3004, *Soryu*/FH 3211, *Cyane*/FH 1890, *Sumter*/FH 1898). Given the after-action reports from the *Wyoming*'s encounter as well as more general data gathered on the Cardassians' capabilities, the Admiralty was confident this constituted more than a sufficient deterrent.

The Cardassians on the other hand, were not so mercurial, nor could they afford to be. Their circumstances dictated that they rely on overwhelming force and their strength in numbers to achieve victory. While their logistical apparatus remained weak, their industrial base was expanding, albeit slowly. Their fleet therefore maintained a nominal growth rate which picked up steam as time went on. It was constituted by three main classes—*Galor*, *Zhoden* and *Akril* and supported by a fourth, *Hideki*. A generation or two behind Starfleet in terms of technological capability, this put them right at, if not slightly below *Excelsior*'s level. *Galor* was closest in terms of capability, to *Enterprise II*, *Zhoden* to *Miranda*, *Akril* to *Akyazi* and *Hideki* to *La Fayette* roughly. They made up for their technological deficiencies though by employing a standard phase-disruptor armament scheme, augmented by Plasma Torpedoes (which put them on par with the Romulans as near as Starfleet Intelligence could figure). Given their position then vis-à-vis Starfleet, the Cardassian Guard committed the bulk of their largest *Galor* class ships to their war effort.

Slightly smaller than *Excelsior*, *Galor* maintained a squat, slightly craggy appearance. The design, based off a creature from Cardassian mythology, was inherently maneuverable and featured a top speed of warp 9.6. Central to its armament were a pair of heavy disruptors, one forward-mounted, the other mounted aft. Marginally more powerful than Starfleet's Type IX Phasers, their rapid recharge rate gave them a slight edge. Larger stores of plasma torpedoes also made up for their relatively primitive targeting scanners (which had no defense against Starfleet's ECM/ECCM systems).

A four pronged strategy saw successive waves of *Hideki* class ships (slightly smaller than *La Fayette* and classified as Cutters), introduced to disorient and distract the Starfleet force. With three squadrons' worth, the stage was set for a bloodbath. Next, a squadron of *Akrils* entered the fray, concentrating mainly on pinning the *Mirandas* down, the eventual arrival of a *Zhoden* squadron doing the same vis-à-vis *Royal Oak* and *Bunker Hill*. The entry of a *Galor* squadron was meant to be the killing blow and indeed, with 10:1 numerical superiority, it should have been.

The *Vinson* and *Cyane* were destroyed in a matter of minutes by successive plasma torpedo barrages, while *Royal Oak*'s navigational deflector was disabled. *Bunker Hill* took the brunt of the assault though—her port phaser cannon destroyed and starboard impulse engine knocked out. Only the presence of starfighters and the skillful use of electronic warfare managed to avert total disaster.

Needing to buy some time to effect repairs, *Bunker Hill* managed to fool the Cardassians and make it appear as if reinforcements were approaching from the far side of the system. They appeared to take the bait and diverted roughly a third of their forces. Completing the ruse, *Leyte Gulf*'s fighters took off in hot pursuit while she led the *Soryu* and *Sumpter* in providing a crude defensive screen for *Bunker Hill*. *Royal Oak* meanwhile, tore into the *Galors* viciously. Using surgical phaser strikes punctuated by photon torpedo barrages, she disabled the impulse engines of her target ship, then used her tractor beam to draw it into a crossfire. Once pinned down, she used her own ECM systems to paint it as a target, letting both her compatriots and the other Cardassians finish the job. Repeated a number of times, this process quickly began to even out the odds.

Meanwhile, the fighter group attempted to keep their quarry away from the battle zone, targeting the Cardassians' propulsion systems and attacking in coordinated waves so as to maintain their own survivability. Their own ECM/ECCM systems, while not as strong or sophisticated enough to repeat *Royal Oak*'s tactics, managed to confuse the *Hidekis* enough to make them easy prey which the fighters then removed from the field with surgical precision before concentrating on the larger ships. Despite losing 4 of. Their own, their efforts ultimately proved successful.

Eventually regrouping with their main body, the fighters eventually found that *Royal Oak* had managed to destroy over half of her *Galor* class opponents—a striking testament to the comprehensive mindset the ASDB used when planning out her armament distribution scheme. *Bunker Hill*, with her impulse drive now fully operational again had wracked up an even more impressive kill count—wiping several *Zhodens* from the field with her phaser cannons and torpedo launchers, while her phaser banks kept her smaller, lighter opponents at bay. Now outnumbering the remaining *Hidekis*, the fighters tore into them with abandon, gradually freeing up the *Sumter* first, followed by the *Soryu*, to take on the bigger targets. Electronic warfare was Starfleet's trump card in this battle, sealing the Cardassians' fate. Once the main portion of their force was destroyed, the remaining Starfleet ships formed up around *Royal Oak* and took off towards the separate, wounded group that the *Leyte Gulf* had initially led astray.

With only 3 *Galors* and 4 *Zhodens* remaining, the Cardassians capital ship advantage was blunted greatly. The only substantive advantage the *Akrils* retained were their small stores of plasma torpedoes. Given that they shared the same, relatively primitive

targeting systems as their larger compatriots, defeating them was just a matter of persistence. *Soryu* broke off and led the fighters in tackling the remaining *Akrils* and *Hidekis* while *Royal Oak* repeated her 'blind and bash' technique with *Leyte Gulf*, *Bunker Hill* and *Sumter* in support.

Though the numbers were more favorable to Starfleet's forces during the battle's final phase, it remained hard-fought and not without loss. *Soryu*'s phaser cannons managed to keep the heat off initially, but as the Cardassians gradually thinned out the fighter ranks, she took on more and more damage, eventually having her starboard warp nacelle sheared off and a trio of holes punched through her primary hull. *Leyte Gulf*, *Bunker Hill* and *Sumter* were seemingly ignored, much of the remaining Cardassian wrath focused on *Royal Oak*. The tenacious *Excelsior* class ship saw her comm systems fried thanks to a series of EPS conduit overloads, while power couplings were severed to her ventral phaser banks. With time however and the use of every last photon torpedo among them, the Cardassians were eventually vanquished.

Compared to the performance of *Anton* and *Baton Rouge* class ships from the Four Years War, *Royal Oak* and her compatriots excelled in every single way. The only qualitative advantage the Cardassians had was numerical superiority. Otherwise, in terms of raw tactical capability, *Excelsior* was judged as being markedly superior to *Galor*. Still, the after-action report, when compared to *Wyoming*'s earlier encounter, provoked an uproar in the Federation Security Council. Following the suspension of Article VII of the Khitomer Accords, Starfleet began development of a quartet of classes—*Steamrunner*, *Norway*, *Sabre* and *Akira*—which spanned the gamut in terms of size and capability and were intended to replace workhorses like *Excelsior*, *Miranda* and *Exeter* in more generalized supporting roles. Handily surpassing those older classes in every conceivable metric, all 4 newer ones had entered service in moderate quantity by 2355, but their rate of production was still relatively slow, earning the Admiralty a stinging rebuke. Therefore, over the next 9 months, production of the above 4 classes was prioritized and sped up – Reserve Force units being replaced with these on the front lines as quickly as conditions permitted.

In the aftermath of the Algol Convoy Raid in March of 2356, Starfleet worked to both increase survivability of the *Steamrunner* class and also supplant their *Valkyrie* class Attack Fighter with a heavier, more powerful replacement. That second point very nearly rendered the whole concept of Reserve Forces obsolete overnight. Somewhat larger than *Valkyrie*, the new *Peregrine* class multirole fighter could be operated by one or two crewmembers (pilot + WSO), was fully warp capable (with a top speed of warp 9.2), capable of atmospheric flight and was armed with the same Type VIII Phasers as the majority of the fleet's Reserve Forces (*Excelsior* and *Miranda* most notably). Small, agile and deadly, they nonetheless lacked the robust protection afforded by the deflector shield systems of larger starships. With Starfleet unable to produce *Peregrine* in

the quantities needed to supplant even one Reserve Force starship class, *Excelsior's* place in the overall order of battle was somewhat secured.

The class itself gained a reprieve of sorts, getting a break from combat operations until the Battle of Tyra 2-1/2 years later. In the interim though, two offshoots saw a great deal of combat—*Centaur* and *Curry*. The former was a Frigate, created in the spirit of the *Akyazi* (DD 1000) class and intended not only to replace that, but was intended as an all-encompassing replacement for both the *Miranda* and *Loknar* classes as well as their various offshoots. The latter was a Light Carrier, the only Carrier type spared from Khitomer treaty cutbacks and now seemingly obsolete, given that *Steamrunner* and *Akira* could embark the same number of small craft (36) and function as Light Carriers in their own right. Both provided combat capability and numbers, two attributes Starfleet could not get enough of.

Tyra marked the Cardassians' next attempt at establishing a foothold in Federation space. Starfleet assembled 'Task Force Gamma' and charged it with defense of the area. A formation made up predominantly of the newer classes that the Federation Security Council wanted to replace *Excelsior* long before, it nonetheless maintained formations of *Excelsior* and *Miranda* at its vanguard. Given Tyra's backwater location and its lack of any strategic importance whatsoever, any outside observer would think such a formation would be more than capable of holding the system. Starfleet's losses in previous encounters however, gifted it with a measure of pragmatism which led the Admiralty to assemble a separate battle group for contingency purposes, hiding it inside a nearby asteroid field.

At this point, the Cardassians were squarely on the defensive, scrambling for every advantage they thought they could gain. It didn't blunt their edge per se, but given their comparatively anemic logistical apparatus, it did make them more cautious. *Hideki* fired the opening shots, attacking the Starfleet task force head on in wave after wave. These proved easy pickings for their Starfleet opponents, even the elderly ones. A squadron of larger *Akril* class ships proved slightly more challenging—their maneuverability making them more challenging for the *Mirandas* to target, but their weak shielding making them ripe targets for *Steamrunner*, *Norway* and their more modern compatriots. The more powerful *Zhoden* and *Galor* classes proved decidedly more problematic—the former equipping more powerful disruptors and the latter equipping those plus stronger shields and thicker armor.

Unfortunately, *Miranda* proved once again, to be the weak link. Falling one by one, pressure on the remaining ships increased. Despite making quick work of the *Hidekis*, their superior numbers & plasma torpedo stores claimed several Frigates and even a number of Battlecruisers, proving that even as advanced as they were, they were still not invulnerable.

With these grim circumstances being what they were, Starfleet brought their supporting battle group to the fore. Nearly all active *Carolina* class Battleships were at the center, supported by *Norway* class Destroyers as well as *Curry* class Light Carriers and starfighters of the 12th Attack Wing. Smashing into the Cardassians' right flank, they destroyed a number of ships with a furious opening volley of photon torpedoes. In an effort to establish dominance, these reinforcements split into two groups. One, led by the *Philadelphia* (BB 4402) and *Jamestown* (BB 4406), bore down on the smaller combatants in an effort to take the pressure off the remaining ships of the task force. The other, led by the *California* (BB 4410) and *Maryland* (BB 4413), engaged their larger counterparts.

For all the raw firepower assembled, Starfleet would suffer and suffer grievously. More of the vaunted 'rough rider' classes Starfleet had developed for precisely these mission sets were lost, as were 3 of their once-vaunted Battleships (that, in a way, would portend the future fate of the *Galaxy* class *Odyssey* and *Enterprise-D* in the coming decades). Only the sacrifice of an *Excelsior*—*Galacta* (CH 2003)—as well as the remaining reserve force assets prevented the battle from becoming a total bloodbath.

Following this grievous defeat, Starfleet gained a psychological victory that November at Cuellar. The *Valley Forge* (CH 43305) led an *Excelsior* squadron along with a trio of *Steamrunner* class ships in breaching the Cardassian lines and ambushing a supply convoy that was en route to a forward operating base. Upon reaching the convoy, they immediately broke formation and executed repeating flanking attacks, overwhelming and destroying the transports and their escorts (1 *Galor*, 6 *Akrils*). Even with this defeat and two subsequent ones (at Castor and Kolonia) in the following months, the Cardassians continued to advance towards Aldebaran III on one front and Tarchannen on another. Eventually though, the shortage of supplies became acute and led to a subsequent breakdown in strategic organization. These logistical issues weighed heavily on the Central Command and eventually led to a lull in the fighting.

The Cardassians pinned their chances to get back on the offensive and regain momentum on inflicting comparable logistical damage to Starfleet and pushing them as far back from the border as possible. To do so, they planned two massive thrusts into Federation territory—one would center on the destruction of Starbase 67 while the other involved the total pacification of the Vega Reticuli system where the Cardassians believed a major military command center was located.

Standing between the Cardassians and Vega Reticuli though was Aldebaran. It had been surveyed some 15 years prior in 2344 and had been selected as the site for a major industrial base to support future exploration and colonization/expansion efforts. By 2355, major mining, production and fabrication facilities had been established, along with a Lotus Flower/L-Type space station that serviced and supplied the various vessels operating in the region. With the outbreak of war, personnel and assets flooded into the region, working to establish a major shipbuilding complex in orbit of Aldebaran III. By

2359, the system had gained enough importance that Starfleet had deployed not only a task force, but a reserve force battle group—over 200 starships—to the area.

The battle group was positioned in and around the system's core, protecting the station and the shipyards while the task force was dispersed into squadrons, spread amongst the system's six planets. This battle was notable in that *Centaur* was featured more prominently, outnumbering *Miranda* here by nearly 3 to 1.

The Cardassian task force that intended to push through and on to Aldebaran III approached from the far side of the border, initially detecting only the reserves at the system's center due to extensive sensor masking in place. Aware that they had the rare advantage of numbers in this instance, Starfleet forces proceeded cautiously. They let the Cardassians reach the shipyard and engage their reserves, led by the *Hood* (CH 42296) and *Devonshire* (CB 2219) before they sent three squadrons in from Aldebaran IV—hoping to give the impression this constituted the bulk of their forces. Electronic warfare kept the Cardassians off balance, the introduction of successive Starfleet formations packing wallop after wallop. Soon, with nearly all Starfleet forces committed, the battle disintegrated into an all out melee. Starfighters softened up the larger Cardassian Frigates & Cruisers, with their starship-level phaser weaponry presenting a nearly insurmountable challenge. From there, any remaining Starfleet forces in-system that hadn't yet joined the battle, did so – engaging the Cardassians at point blank range, some starships, such as the *Potemkin* (CH 18253) and *Lexington* (CH 14427), engaging multiple targets at once.

This sound defeat marked the beginning of the end of the Cardassian war effort. Despite the comparative power of plasma torpedoes and a string of early victories, the fragility of their logistical apparatus made resupply & replenishment operations incredibly difficult, that difficulty compounding with each subsequent defeat.

Through the capture of a number of additional Cardassian vessels and careful examination of their databanks, Starfleet Intelligence discovered the existence of a major base at Kelrabi IX. The ninth planet in the resource-rich Kelrabi star system, it was the only Class M world present. With a mild, temperate climate, it added an agricultural dimension to a meager, yet growing industrial center. Prior to the outbreak of war, the Cardassian Guard established a large base ostensibly for administrative purposes, but also to coordinate various in-system activities and to serve as a rudimentary supply hub for forward deployed forces on the frontier. After war broke out, Kelrabi IX gained significant strategic and logistical importance as the only major link to front line forces from the various industrial and military centers in the Union's core.

Even as the Cardassians' fortunes declined throughout the course of the war, the Guard continued to maintain it as an administrative center, carrying out upgrades to help it

serve as a major C3 hub, but doing little to boost its military capability aside from constructing a *Nor* class Space Station (similar in size/function to Starfleet's *Lotus Flower/L-Type*) in this system's core, linked to a network of powerful weapons platforms deployed throughout. This made it a prime target to Starfleet, who, after their defeat at Tyra, sought to sever this logistical link and cripple the Guard's offensive capability altogether.

Late in the month, nearly 80% of Starfleet's active forces were marshaled and set off to end the war once and for all. Over 900 starships, 1200 starfighters and nearly 40,000 personnel embarked on a mission that was described by many in the Admiralty as being 'too big to fail.'

Opposing them in the system were over 300 Cardassian warships deployed in three layers. The outer layer contained the familiar *Hideki* and *Akril* classes, strategically dispersed amongst the web of weapons platforms. The middle layer saw *Zhodens* holding station amongst moons and gas giants, while the inner layer around Kelrabi IX itself was protected by *Galor* class Cruisers.

Starfleet's singular goal was to reach Kelrabi and inflict as much destruction as possible by any means necessary. Making heavy use of photon torpedoes while traveling at warp, they were able to make it past the periphery with little trouble before dropping out of warp at the middle layer. Here, *Excelsiors* assembled for the operation joined with *Steamrunners* and a motley collection of other combatants, once again engaging their counterparts at point blank range before waves of starfighters swarmed into the area and allowed them to punch their way through to their target.

There, the heaviest classes including *Akira*, *Exeter*, *Inchon* and the surviving *Carolinas* engaged the space station. The *Galors* received attention from *Excelsior*, *Steamrunner*, *Norway*, *Centaur* and *Sabre*. Destroying the weapons platforms was somewhat troublesome given the robust shielding aboard the station (Tantok Nor), but through skillful use of tri-cobalt torpedoes targeted around the central core, the station's shields were overwhelmed and she was destroyed in short order. 12 fighter squadrons were redeployed to go after the weapons platforms while the starships swarmed and destroyed their remaining Cardassian opponents.

With its supply lines reduced to ash, a large portion of its fleet lost and Starfleet holding clear tactical and technological superiority, a plurality of analysts assumed the Cardassians would sue for peace. However, given their past history plus intelligence gained thus far, there were some who predicted they would continue low level hostilities when and where they could. What no one in the Federation or Starfleet could anticipate though was that there were many in the Cardassian intelligence establishment who were desperate to end the war before they could be further subjugated.

To that end, agents of the Obsidian Order (the Cardassian intelligence service) had identified a suitable officer—Laen Enkoa—and fed him false intelligence regarding a Federation colony world along the border.

Enkoa had an unremarkable record, but was highly ambitious and was known throughout the Guard's command hierarchy as being overeager. Concurrent with the Federation war, the Union was also embroiled in a low-level conflict with the Talarian Republic. In early 2362, Talarian raiders ambushed the CDK *Rekkel*. Enkoa, part of the ship's security contingent, assumed command after the ship's commander and executive officer were killed. Together with the assistance of the *Rekkel*'s chief engineer, he engaged and destroyed the Talarian attackers—earning himself a small level of distinction.

The falsified intelligence that later found its way into his hands, concerned the planet Setlik III. A mere 3.6 light years from Kelrabi, the planet and greater Setlik system was quite unremarkable—totally uninhabited and lacking in any natural resources of note. Its proximity to both Cardassian space and Kelrabi gave it a measure of strategic significance however and lended credence to the Obsidian Order's assertion that the Federation colony there was cover for a covert military supply depot.

With no permission from higher authority, Enkoa took his new ship, the *Zhoden* class CDS *Lakar* to Setlik III and launched an assault on the colony. His direct superior, Jagul Hanno, was alerted and it was hoped that Hanno would marshal forces and respond quickly enough to prevent much loss of life (while still attracting a Starfleet response). However, the Obsidian Order miscalculated. In the *Lakar*'s initial orbital bombardment and then following the deployment of ground forces, over a third of the colony's population was wiped out.

Hanno arrived with an armada soon after, Enkoa's actions leaving him no choice but to capture the planet and annex the entire system. His primary objective though was to capture Enkoa and take both him and the *Lakar* back to Cardassia. That said (and given the Guard's depleted manpower by that point), only a token occupation force was left behind.

That force was later engaged by the *New Orleans* class USS *Rutledge* (FF 57295) which completed a difficult rescue mission and managed to drive the Cardassians off. When word of the massacre got back to Starfleet Command, the Admiralty belatedly realized that defeat in the traditional military sense would not be enough to bring the Cardassians to heel. This was underscored by the fact the Guard achieved one final victory—completely wiping out the 12th Fleet's 5th Destroyer squadron in an engagement at the Hugora Nebula.

At that point, many in the Admiralty knew what had to be done, yet few had the guts to come out and say it. One of the few was the 12th Fleet's commander, Vice Admiral Edward Sherman. He whole-heartedly endorsed a 'scorched earth' campaign that would rip the 'heart' out of their war effort and crush their resolve once and for all. He never bothered to elaborate on what such a campaign would entail, knowing full well it would not meet with approval from the Federation Security Council and would more than likely provoke an uproar in the General Assembly. He was however, successfully able to convince his superiors the plan *would* work.

On stardate 39666 (13 May 2362), Vice Admiral Sherman was officially placed on detached duty. At his request and by his own design, a battle group was formed from ships of the 12th Fleet and armed with large stores of tri-cobalt torpedoes. This included the *Agincourt* (CH 38672), *Al-Batani* (CH 42995), *Cairo* (CH 42136), *Charleston* (CH 42285) and *Lexington* (CH 2026). Deploying from Starbase 129, they undertook an 18 light year journey to Omekla, obliterating the colony on Omekla III and beginning a rampage that took them across 52 light years. A dozen colonies, 4 fixed installations and a further 30 military and civilian vessels were destroyed before Sherman's forces regrouped at Salva IV inside the volatile region known as the 'Badlands' (the *Excelsior* class being the first to successfully broach and explore the region). There, they covertly monitored communications & intelligence, recording on stardate 39772 (22 June 2362), the petition the Cardassians transmitted that requested an end to hostilities.

All records of 'Sherman's March' as it came to be known, were compartmentalized and classified to the highest level following the return of he and his battle group to Starbase 129. Where *Excelsior* was concerned, use of tri-cobalt torpedoes provided valuable technical data that would go on help further refit efforts in the coming years.

In the immediate post-war period though, *Excelsior* continued to be the most numerous class in service. Production of *Renaissance* had been halted in favor of *Ambassador*, which itself was curtailed following the introduction of both the *Galaxy* and *Nebula* classes—the latter two representing the most ambitious shipbuilding programs to date. The seemingly final pacification of the Tholians along with the Talarian Republic in separate conflicts spelled an end to a tumultuous period for the Federation and its Starfleet. Unlike a century prior however, *Excelsior* would not fade away as *Baton Rouge* had.

The loss of the *Melbourne* and the *Roosevelt* (CH 2573) at the Battle of Wolf 359 in 2366 spurred Starfleet to explore ways to improve *Excelsior*'s tactical prowess. To this end, they reached back to their 'testbed' ships, which had expanded in the intervening years to now include the *Okinawa* (CH 13958) and *Concord* (CH 41776). Starting with the *Lakota* in 2372, phasers were upgraded from Type VIII to Type X units. Additionally, given the extra room in the secondary hull, the 4 2nd Class Torpedo launchers were replaced

with Mk I Burst Fire Units, the oldest such launchers able to load and fire Quantum Torpedoes.

Unfortunately, like the infamous dreadnought *Star Empire* (DN 2116) before it, the *Lakota* would become mired in a conspiracy of its own. Following Starfleet's disastrous first contact with the Dominion and the destruction of the USS *Odyssey* at the hands of the Jem'Hadar in 2371, hawkish elements in governments throughout the Alpha & Beta quadrants became energized and the UFP became the first to experience the effects in 2371. Unlike Vice Admiral Vaughn Rittenhouse, Rear Admiral James Leyton did not seek to start a war, but took extreme exception to President Jaresh-Inyo's lax defensive policies and all but accused him of outright appeasement. Like Rittenhouse though, he maneuvered officers and other allies into key postings throughout the Federation. He then used Starfleet Academy's elite Red Squad to commit sabotage on Earth's infrastructure while at the same time having his operatives manufacture and disseminate evidence that a cloaked Dominion fleet was entering the Alpha Quadrant. His end goal was to remove the civilian government from power and replace it with a military one, headed by him.

The *Lakota* served as Leyton's personal flagship and thus, was in a key role itself. Having served with Benjamin Sisko extensively aboard the *Okinawa* and being well aware of his encounter with the Jem'Hadar, Leyton sent the *Lakota* to bring him and Constable Odo to Earth from Deep Space Nine. Attempting to convince Sisko of the necessity of action regarding the Dominion had the opposite effect however, raising his and Odo's suspicions. When the duo ultimately uncovered evidence of Leyton's plotting, they covertly contacted Major Kira Nerys aboard DS9. She managed to capture one of Leyton's collaborators operating aboard the station and sought to return him to Earth aboard the USS *Defiant*.

En route, she was intercepted by the *Lakota* who—under the command of Leyton's adjutant, Erika Benteen—had orders to destroy her. A fierce firefight ensued, with large amounts of damage and casualties inflicted on both sides. When Leyton requested a status update and reiterated his order that the *Defiant* was not to reach Earth under any circumstances, he also ordered Benteen to use the *Lakota*'s stores of quantum torpedoes to destroy her. At this, she balked and stood down, escorting the *Defiant* into orbit.

Despite the *Lakota*'s performance vis-à-vis her newer, smaller opponent, Starfleet Command opted against wide-scale deployment of these upgrades, opting instead for a more conservative upgrade track – Type IX Phasers along with upgraded deflector shields, upgraded sensors and more. While this upgrade process took longer with the oldest examples, once completed *Excelsior* became the functional equivalent of *Ambassador*. Given the sizeable disparity in the number of operational examples of the

two classes, this upgrade program was a solid force multiplier that paid dividends at a time when Starfleet was shifting towards smaller numbers of larger or otherwise more complex vessels.

The one caveat to this was the *Intrepid* (CL 74600) class. Vastly smaller (344m L, 700,000mT displacement vs 467m L, 2,150,000mT displacement), it was more advanced than *Excelsior* by many orders of magnitude—featuring a wholly new bio-neural computer system, along with maneuverability and firepower that far exceeded anything in its size class. Most notably, the ASDB had finally achieved the level of simplicity in maintenance and operation it hadn't seen since *Excelsior* was initially launched. Unfortunately, given the fleet's shipbuilding priorities, the chances of *Intrepid* ever reaching service in equivalent numbers was but a distant dream, ensuring a place for her older, larger brethren for years to come.

When the Dominion launched their invasion of the Alpha Quadrant and brought war back to the Federation's collective consciousness in late 2373, *Excelsior*, along with *Miranda* and *Centaur* provided an important backstop that would only become more important as the war escalated. In the intervening years following the Battle of Wolf 359 and prior to the war's outbreak, Starfleet had introduced all manner of ship classes—ranging from the diminutive *Springfield* to the lumbering *Korolev*. Eventually, they settled on *Ambassador* (and later *Nebula* and *Galaxy*) as their 'prestige' classes while *Akira*, *Steamrunner*, *Norway* and *Sabre* became the 'workhorses'. All of these taken together roughly equaled *Excelsior* in terms of numbers, but of course, Starfleet Command could not afford to just blithely throw the entirety of its assets into the war effort.

Save for the Battle of Torros III, where a combined Federation-Klingon task force destroyed a burgeoning Cardassian-Dominion shipyard complex, the opening months of the conflict were marked by the capture of Deep Space Nine and several grievous defeats, including at Ronara and New France.

The latter saw Starfleet's Reserve Forces Command hurriedly assemble its many assets—principally *Excelsior* and *Miranda*, but also *Constellation* and *Centaur* as well as many other classes—into three fleets, the 14th, 19th and 21st. Augmented by heavier classes such as *Korolev* and *Ambassador* at squadron level strength or better, they were more than a match for the Cardassians, but a decidedly poor one vis-a-vis the Dominion.

Attacking with numerical superiority, the Dominion forced the 14th & 19th fleets to flee before they were eviscerated while the 21st Fleet fell back to the Tibor Nebula. Here, the *Hood* (CH 42296) distinguished herself and quickly began building a fearsome reputation. Escorted by the *Centaur* class *Oriskany* (FF 42785) and *Garibaldi* (FF 42688), she tore into the pursuing Cardassians and together with other assets, destroyed the

Cardassian flagship CDS *Shyllira*. The *Hood* and her consorts also managed to destroy the bulk of the Cardassian assets overall (primarily smaller *Akril* class Destroyers and *Hideki* class Cutters) before Cardassian reserves—constituted by their new *Kondal* class Battlecruisers—and their Dominion counterparts forced them to flee as well.

Unlike the Four Years War, where Starfleet relied on its Reserve Forces to shoulder much of the combat burden while it hurriedly constructed more modern and powerful combatants to beat back the Klingons, they already had the necessary ships in service to face the Dominion. This time, it was just a question of numbers. Also, once the ASDB had figured out how to counter the Dominion's phased polaron weaponry, *Excelsior's* survivability was greatly enhanced—unlike *Baton Rouge* which was little more than an oversized punching bag for the IKDF to pounce upon.

Aside from the loss of the *Charleston* (CH 42285) and *Ticonderoga* (CH 14429) at the First Battle of Vulcan (where they were destroyed along with 125 other ships of the 5th Fleet), *Excelsior* was deployed more and more sparingly as time went on (and newer, more powerful ships were launched and deployed to the front lines).

The slow, grinding pace of the war and the hellish rate of attrition amongst Starfleet's forces however, led to the Admiralty using Reserve Force assets to bolster several front-line formations. The 5th Fleet in particular was recapitalized with a number of *Excelsiors*—*Hood*, *Concord*, *Yorktown*, *Valley Forge* (CH 43305), *Fredrickson* (CH 42111), *Berlin* (CH 14232), *Crazy Horse* (CH 50446) and *Repulse* (CH 2544)—in addition to numerous *Miranda* and *Centaur* examples.

The experience of these classes against the Cardassians proved instrumental in Starfleet's subsequent victory at the Battle of Bolarus. As at Tyra, the Cardassians predicated their victory on superior numbers, hoping to overwhelm their Starfleet opponents. Starfleet grouped large numbers of newer, more powerful starships into the 20th and 21st fleets. Together with an IKDF task force, they engaged the Cardassians and Dominion 2 systems away—at Stameris IV—and inflicted heavy losses. The 5th Fleet was gathered around Bolarus and engaged the enemy 2 days later, in what was known as Operation: Blue Room.

After inflicting those aforementioned losses, the two Starfleet formations and their Klingon allies retreated back to Bolarus. The Dominion and Cardassians pursued them, reforming into a broad crescent and hoping to envelop them in a pincer, despite their inferior numbers.

Vice Admiral Halliwell put the Klingons at his vanguard and backed them up with the *Hood*, *Valley Forge*, *Repulse*, *Nautilus* (FH 31910), *Trial* (FH 1948), *Alabama* (FH 11502) and *Olympia* (FH 11546). Tearing into the center of the enemy formation, they proved most adept at clearing the field of Jem'Hadar Attack Ships and Cardassian *Hidekis*. Once those targets were eliminated, they fell back and provided fire support as Halliwell divided his regular forces into 4 separate groups.

The *Hood* and most of her compatriots formed up behind the *Nebula* class *Lexington* (CA 61832). Together with a multitude of *Defiant* class ships and multiple wings of starfighters, not to mention the IKDF forces, they fared remarkably well despite facing greater numbers of larger and heavier opponents.

Their fiercest opponent were the Cardassians' *Kondals*. The Dominion's Battlecruisers were more or less fixed assets as were the Cardassians' *Galors*. *Kondal* though and the slightly smaller *Zhoden* had the maneuverability and firepower to challenge newer Starfleet ships like *Akira* and *Steamrunner* on equal terms.

As most of the recent battles had gone, this one eventually devolved into a vicious, but drawn-out melee. While most of their other compatriots (and especially the Klingons) busied themselves with the Cardassians, the *Hood* and her consorts broke off and engaged the Dominion Battlecruisers. Though the disparity in technology and firepower was glaringly obvious, the effort Starfleet put into upgrading *Excelsior* nevertheless paid off. Maneuvering underneath each Battlecruiser, the *Hood*, *Valley Forge* and *Repulse* were able to target vital systems such as sensors and impulse engines and used the combined firepower of their dorsal phaser banks to inflict considerable damage. Then, as their targets attempted to come about and bring their own weapons to bear, they would each reposition themselves and utilize Photon Torpedoes to finish them off.

As these leviathans gradually disappeared from the field, the pressure on the Cardassians increased correspondingly. The *Galors* fought viciously but had little hope of victory given the allies' superior numbers. *Zhoden* and *Kondal* on the other hand were just as maneuverable as their Starfleet counterparts and proved nearly impossible to engage head on.

Eventually though, word reached both the Allies and the Dominion/Cardassians of a separate Klingon attack that claimed the Dominion's nearby supply flotilla. Without fresh stocks of ketrecel white, any operation this deep inside enemy territory would be a futile one and with that said, the Dominion & Cardassians quickly withdrew to a more defensible position closer to the Cardassian border.

Capitalizing on this short, but impressive string of successes, Starfleet Command turned their attention to Deep Space Nine. Up to this point, much of the Admiralty still believed

that the key to securing and holding the Alpha Quadrant was Earth, rather than DS9 and the Bajoran Wormhole, as argued by Captain Benjamin Sisko. Knowing that the Dominion had vast reserves of ships and troops waiting in the Gamma Quadrant and that it was only a matter of time before they dismantled the minefield surrounding the wormhole's Alpha Quadrant terminus, he and Vice Admiral William Ross were the principal proponents of an effort to retake the station.

Given the rather grievous losses Starfleet had suffered thus far and the fact that their current deployment strategy kept ships like *Sovereign* off the front lines, a full third of the combined force was made up by reserves – principally *Miranda*, *Centaur* and *Excelsior*.

Like Operation Blue Room, Operation Return as formulated by Sisko involved a four-pronged assault on the Dominion at DS9. Underscoring the weakness behind Starfleet's deployment strategy, there was no single fleet, or multiples thereof, in the vicinity. The operation relied on elements of the 2nd (stationed at Kontanka along the frontier), 5th (stationed at the Vulcan border) and 9th (stationed at Kalandra) Fleets as well as a separate contingent of IKDF assets rendezvousing at Starbase 375 before setting off for DS9.

The *Hood*, *Archer*, *Valley Forge*, *Frederickson* and *Sarek* led the contingent of *Excelsiors* that were spread mainly between the 2nd and 5th Fleets. Together with a contingent of *Nebula* and *Akira* class ships, they made up the Cruiser 'wings' present.

Thanks to the Dominion's use of antigraviton emitters that could bring down Starfleet's minefield around the wormhole, time was no longer on the allies' side. The 9th Fleet was still days away and there was not yet any indication IKDF assets would be forthcoming. Setting off early therefore, *Excelsior*'s importance could not be understated.

Dominion intelligence was every bit the equal of Starfleet's and as such, Starfleet's moves were no surprise. A massive force of 1,254 ships was sent to establish a static blockade that would ideally repel and destroy the invaders. By this time however, Starfleet's combat experience had been greatly sharpened. No longer did they need worry so much about formations and "choreography". The Dominion's swarm tactics and propensity to employ brute force meant that contributions of individual fleet assets now dictated the outcome of engagements.

Tactical disparities (shield strength, weapon power etc) aside, Starfleet's efforts in engineering *Excelsior* to engage multiple opponents simultaneously were validated many times over. The Cardassian *Hidekis* and Jem'Hadar Attack Ships were the only mobile targets to speak of and while their newer compatriots like *Nebula*—armed with more sophisticated phaser arrays instead of banks—had a slightly easier time acquiring and engaging those targets, the *Excelsiors* kept pace.

After nearly 3 hours of probing actions and hit-and-run attacks by Starfleet's attack fighter squadrons, Captain Sisko ordered an all-out charge at the Dominion's center, with any ships that made it through under direct orders not to stop until they reached Deep Space Nine. Despite *Excelsior*'s surprising survivability vis-à-vis her newer enemy, Starfleet being outnumbered by over 2 to 1 made this phase of the battle incredibly grueling. *Miranda* class ships, utilized in large numbers here, fell in quick succession. The assembled *Centaurs* attempted to reform and provide a screen for their larger cousins, but the odds were very much stacked against them.

Just as it appeared the Starfleet task force was about to be definitively crushed, a Klingon armada smashed into the Dominion's right flank. Vor'cha class Attack Cruisers, screened by multiple *B'Rel* squadrons tore through the Cardassians and threw the Jem'Hadar off balance, causing them to divide their attention. This momentum shift brought new vigor to Starfleet's fighting and did well to take pressure off of the assembled reserve forces. While most of the newer classes continued to fight individually or in small groups, the surviving *Mirandas*—which continued to fall—formed up behind the *Excelsiors* and *Centaurs*. By combining their firepower, they were able to clear the *Hidekis* and Attack Ships from the field and sideline the larger Cardassian and Jem'Hadar vessels with some effort.

Multiple enemy ships falling in quick succession opened a hole for the battered *Defiant* to slip through, escaping to DS9. Unfortunately, both the *Defiant* as well as Major Kira and her small cadre of allies on the station were too late to prevent the Dominion from dismantling the minefield. With no other alternatives, Captain Sisko took his ship into the wormhole, where he and his crew faced down almost 3000 Dominion ships and with them, almost certain destruction. Only the last-minute intervention by the enigmatic Bajoran Prophets spared them from this destruction, Sisko's pleas causing them to make the Dominion reinforcements simply vanish.

While Sisko and the *Defiant* were occupied in the wormhole, the Starfleet task force and their Klingon allies had ground down the Dominion and Cardassians to the point where 200 allied ships were able to break away and head toward the station. This sudden change of fortune caused the Dominion to abandon DS9 and withdraw their remaining forces to Cardassian territory. This victory, while immensely important strategically, also carried with it tactical and political implications as well.

The relative successes of *Excelsior*, *Centaur* and *Miranda* as demonstrated here, gave Starfleet just enough breathing room to continue production of 'prestige' classes like *Nebula*, *Galaxy* and *Sovereign* as well as new ones such as *Intrepid* (CLX 74600) -- just not ones that would actually make a more substantial difference on the battlefield (such as *Akira*, *Norway*, *Steamrunner* and *Sabre*—all of which continued production at the

same snail's pace they had maintained for almost two decades).

To their credit, Starfleet did use the general lull in hostilities that took hold, to introduce the *Defiant* (DDX 74205) class. A compact, utilitarian design, *Defiant* was bristling with firepower, required a minimal crew compliment and could be produced in quantity relatively quickly. It was an impressive class that, to even the most cynical observer, promised to change Starfleet's fortunes on the battlefield. Unfortunately, those promises were quickly dashed during the Dominion's subsequent raid on Coridan.

Following their defeat in Operation Return, the Dominion not only moved to expand their ship production but shifted their overall strategy, putting more of an emphasis on asymmetric warfare rather than trying to defeat the allies in open combat. To that end, they started striking at the allies' logistical chokepoints, the biggest of which was the dilithium-rich world of Coridan—currently defended by both the 6th and 16th Fleets.

The latter was a relatively young unit, formed in the aftermath of the Borg Incursion of 2367 and commanded by Vice Admiral Alynna Nechayev. A shrewd tactician, she was one of the main proponents of including the *Sovereign* class in the war and attached 5 examples to the 16th. Along with numerous *Defiants* (which were finally starting to enter service in quantity), this made it an imposing force.

Dominion Battlecruisers along with Cardassian *Kondals* though, kept them pinned down long enough for a formation of Attack Ships to approach the planet and collapse the dilithium mining complex on the surface with ultritium concussion devices. These ships were eventually destroyed, but in the time it took Starfleet to drive off their main force, 1500 miners were lost along with 10 starships.

To be fair, this was an example of an enemy pressing their advantage of numerical superiority as opposed to technological superiority or brute force. So even with as tough as *Excelsior* proved to be, their contributions here, made little difference. To catch up in the game of numbers, the Admiralty finally relented and gave newer, tougher classes (like *Akira*) their due, but *Excelsior* still had plenty of life left in it.

The Battle of Betazed proved to be a crucible for the aging *Excelsior*— the events of stardate 51721.3 laying bare the consequences of that dependence.

Nearly two dozen *Excelsior* class vessels were attached to Rear Admiral Masc's 10th Fleet, many of them assigned to long-range patrols and auxiliary support roles during the fleet's unannounced training exercise. Their slower warp acceleration curves and larger sensor profiles rendered them especially vulnerable once the Dominion/Cardassian strike

force executed its five-pronged ambush. Several were caught in the outer flanks of the formation and suffered catastrophic losses in the opening salvo.

The *Tecumseh* (CH 14934) managed to hold its own during the first wave, scoring confirmed kills against two Jem'Hadar attack ships before succumbing to a coordinated polaron barrage that split its primary hull open mid-turn. The *Oppenheimer* (CH 2047), an older unit with minimal retrofits, was destroyed with all hands after its impulse manifold ruptured during emergency evasive maneuvers — a reminder that many *Excelsiors* were being pushed far beyond their original service life without uniform modernization.

Despite these setbacks, a handful of *Excelsior*-class captains distinguished themselves under fire. The *Atlantis* (CH 32710) and Hood coordinated a defensive action around a crippled Norway-class Destroyer, laying down overlapping phaser suppressions while covering its evacuation. Their combined action delayed a flanking wing of Cardassian Galors long enough for elements of the fleet's core to regroup — albeit briefly — before the Dominion's larger vessels broke through.

Of the twenty-three *Excelsior*-class ships present at Betazed, fifteen were confirmed lost, five were critically damaged and later scrapped, and only three remained operational after the engagement. One of those, the *Agincourt* (CH 38672) limped away with 78% hull integrity compromised and was later decommissioned due to irreparable structural microfractures.

The battle reignited debate within the Admiralty about the future viability of *Excelsior*-class ships in major fleet actions. While their versatility and ease of production had made them indispensable throughout the 24th century, Betazed marked the last time more than a dozen were deployed as a core element of a primary fleet. Going forward, most were relegated to logistics, border patrol, or planetary defense duties — secondary theaters where survivability wasn't measured against Dominion battlecruisers.

In the aftermath, the loss of so many *Excelsiors* wasn't merely tactical — it was symbolic. It marked a clear turning point: the quiet retirement of Starfleet's workhorse, not with celebration or ceremony, but in fire and plasma — a relic class overwhelmed in a war that had moved on without it.

With the 10th Fleet now shattered and Betazed in Dominion hands, Starfleet Command

scrambled to reposition sufficient forces to safeguard the Federation's inner worlds. The first priority was Vulcan—targeted by Dominion forces for the second time. In orbit over 40 Eridani V, Vice Admiral Salok's 5th Fleet stood as the last line of defense.

The battle that followed marked two grim milestones: the first confirmed deployment of the Dominion's colossal Battleship in open combat, and the first successful destruction of one by allied forces. Spanning over 2,000 meters, the Battleship was a monstrous apex predator—bristling with firepower, wrapped in heavy deflector shielding, and encased in dense armor. Its only true weaknesses were familiar ones: ponderous maneuvering and broad gaps in its weapon coverage.

The Battleship was supported by a reinforced Dominion line composed of Battlecruisers, *Galor*-, *Kondal*-, and *Zhoden*-class Cardassian ships, with Jem'Hadar Attack Ships and *Hideki*-class Corvettes forming a fast, aggressive vanguard.

Despite being outmatched on paper, Salok's response was calm, surgical, and precise. His first priority: eliminate the Dominion Battleship.

Akira- and *Steamrunner*-class ships were assigned to pierce the enemy formation and close with the Battleship, delivering punishing torpedo strikes at near point-blank range. *Galaxy*- and *Nebula*-class cruisers were ordered to engage the Dominion's heavy escorts. *Intrepid*-class ships—this battle marking their baptism of fire—joined *Norway*-class destroyers in striking the Cardassian main body. *Sabres*, starfighters, and lighter elements moved to disrupt the Jem'Hadar flanking push.

Critically, *Excelsior*-class ships—many retrofitted and hardened after decades of service—formed a stabilizing midline between the forward torpedo elements and the more fragile *Intrepid* and *Norway* formations. Ships like *Hood* and *Ulysses* (CH 22975) provided long-range phaser support, layered point-defense fire, and emergency recovery cover for crippled frigates and escorts.

The engagement lasted nearly six hours. Starfleet's tactical execution was grueling but effective. *Steamrunner*-class vessels led with focused phaser strikes to weaken shield nodes along the Battleship's hull. *Akira*-class ships moved in immediately after, unleashing full torpedo payloads across the weakened vectors. The battle took a heavy toll—*Bremerton* (FH 52451) was destroyed during a torpedo run, and *Al Rashid* (FH 52479) was severely damaged and forced to withdraw. *Excelsior*-class ships absorbed multiple blows during Cardassian flanking attempts, with *Lakota* (CH 23722) crippled during an effort to screen *Intrepid* (NX 74600) from concentrated fire.

Once the Dominion leviathan was destroyed, the tactical logic of Salok's plan became evident. The *Akiras* regrouped and, with what torpedoes remained, joined their *Galaxy* and *Nebula* counterparts in eliminating the remaining Battlecruisers. *Steamrunners* shifted to mopping up the disordered Cardassian forces. *Excelsior*-class ships, operating

in concert with *Sabres* and *Intrepids*, cleared surviving Jem'Hadar pockets while providing suppression fire for damaged units.

Even with the formidable capabilities of Admiral Salok's flagship—*Gibraltar* (CH 75001)--the cost was steep. Klingon reinforcements arrived only after the Dominion Battleship had been neutralized. Their arrival helped stabilize the system and eventually forced the Dominion to retreat to a fallback position six light-years from Vulcan.

Allied losses totaled over 250 ships.

At the last moment, Dominion forces shifted course, bypassing Alpha Centauri and instead striking the Benezar system—a well-defended target anchored by the 11th Fleet and ringed with orbital defense platforms. Though formidable on paper, even these defenses were vulnerable to the Dominion's numerical and tactical superiority.

The 11th Fleet fought tenaciously but was ultimately destroyed, following the tragic example of the 10th at Betazed. However, the defense grid inflicted devastating damage before being overrun; multiple Dominion ships were vaporized outright by precision tricobalt detonations.

Starfleet responded with urgency. The 14th Fleet, previously stationed at Alpha Centauri, was redeployed at high warp and arrived in-system just as Dominion and Cardassian forces were moving to consolidate control of the outer perimeter. Though the enemy managed to seize several tricobalt payloads intact, full system control eluded them.

Upon arrival, 14th Fleet elements split into four maneuver groups. Among them, the *Nebula*-class *Fe'garren* (CA 72105) took a direct tricobalt strike and was crippled. *Tolstoy* (FH 52150) and *Archon* (FH 56037), both *Steamrunner*-class, quickly rallied alongside the Ambassador-class *Forrestal* (CH 26512) to deliver a retaliatory strike on the Dominion center.

Excelsior-class ships, notably *Herschel* (CH 22844) and *Tenacity* (CH 24508), formed a protective wedge between the damaged *Fe'garren* and the Dominion's encircling frigates. Their presence bought critical minutes for force regrouping. Though aging by this stage in the war, these ships proved their worth—*Herschel* alone destroyed three Jem'Hadar Attack Ships during the first 12 minutes of combat, using precision phaser bursts and targeted torpedo suppression.

Just as Starfleet momentum began to build and the Dominion line faltered, reinforcements from the Kalandra sector surged into the battlespace—hammering into the 14th Fleet's right flank. The counter-attack was overwhelming. Despite sharp maneuvering and textbook withdrawal coordination, the 14th suffered catastrophic

losses. *Forrestal*, *Archon*, and *Tolstoy* were among only 46 vessels to escape the system, many of them limping and severely damaged.

Excelsior-class ships formed the backbone of the rear guard, with *Tenacity* (CH 24508) and *Challenger* (CH 22261) conducting running engagements to buy time for fleet withdrawal. Several *Excelsior*-class vessels were lost in the process, but their sacrifice prevented total annihilation.

While Bizar fell under Dominion control, it would not remain so for long. Unlike the strategic collapse at Betazed, Starfleet retained partial perimeter access and would retake the system within the year.

Throughout most of 2374, Starfleet remained on the defensive. Shipyards had been bombed, sabotaged, or overwhelmed. Supply lines were fractured. The Federation's core worlds felt increasingly surrounded. Klingon assistance, while invaluable, brought its own limits—the Imperial Defense Forces were already stretched thin in their campaigns against the Cardassians and Dominion alike.

Enter the Romulans.

The Romulan Imperial Navy was formidable, but its political isolationism and strategic arrogance had rendered it a wild card. Their non-aggression pact with the Dominion, brokered with little thought to long-term consequences, left the Empire on the sidelines—secure for the moment, but ultimately expendable. That delusion ended with the death of Senator Merken Vreenak.

Thanks to the morally flexible alliance of Starfleet Captain Benjamin Sisko and former Obsidian Order operative Elim Garak, a forged holorecording was created showing Weyoun and Legate Damar plotting an invasion of Romulan space. The target of this forgery was Vreenak himself—a former Vice Chairman of the Tal Shiar and a hardline nationalist who had long viewed the war as a solution to the Romulan Empire's strategic deadlock. He saw through the deception quickly. Garak had anticipated this and, without Sisko's knowledge, sabotaged the Senator's shuttle. Vreenak was killed in orbit shortly after departing Deep Space Nine.

In hindsight, his death accomplished what no argument ever could: it brought the Romulans into the war.

The declaration came swiftly. The Romulan fleet mobilized within days, launching retaliatory strikes against more than a dozen Cardassian targets across the Federation border. Unlike the Klingons, the Romulans preferred the shadows—cloaking technology augmented by ECM systems, sensor-dampening hull composites, and tightly disciplined

attack patterns. Their doctrine hinged on ambush and overwhelming first strikes. Decloak, annihilate, and vanish.

Notably, this marked the first large-scale deployment of Romulan warship classes beyond the venerable *D'Deridex*. New vessels such as the *Aelahl*-class (an enormous command warbird rivaling even the Sovereign), the *Ar'kif*-class (a tactical assault ship reminiscent of Starfleet's *Steamrunner*), and the nimble *P'vash*-class (a disruptor-packed strike craft akin to the *Defiant*) expanded the Empire's known arsenal dramatically.

Their first major operation in coordination with Starfleet would be the liberation of Bizar.

The closest available Federation formation was the 7th Fleet—its shattered remnants having barely escaped the carnage at Tyra. After extensive repairs at Starbase 235 and Earth, it had only been restored to half-strength when redeployed. The 7th, now led by *Venture* (CH 71854), entered the Bizar system and began probing the outer perimeter.

Data on force composition and ship positions were quietly transmitted to the cloaked Romulan strike group trailing behind. At the vanguard of the 7th were ships of the *Norway*- and *Steamrunner*-classes, reinforced by *Excelsiors*—veteran vessels like *Potemkin* (CH 22044) and *Grissom* (CH 23317)—assigned to serve as midline fire support and counter-ambush platforms.

As the 7th Fleet engaged Cardassian forward elements—Galors shielded by Kondal and Zhoden screens, with Jem'Hadar Attack Ships swarming through the gaps—the Romulans completed their silent encirclement. When the trap was sprung, it was total. Romulan vessels decloaked and opened fire in a synchronized broadside, plasma torpedoes and disruptor beams cutting clean through exposed Dominion formations.

As the Romulans locked down the Cardassians, Federation ships pivoted to confront the Jem'Hadar. *Steamrunners* and *Norways* moved to intercept, working in tandem. *Discovery* (FH 52333) proved especially effective—using feint torpedo volleys to draw the Jem'Hadar into pursuit before coordinating with *Kodiak*, *Zephyr*, and *Sacramento* to cut off their retreat.

Excelsior-class vessels played a crucial role in this phase. Ships like *Lexington* (CH 22695) and *Coronado* (CH 23021) used their wide firing arcs and upgraded phaser systems to pin down Jem'Hadar elements attempting to regroup or flee. These older ships served as mobile gun platforms—sturdy, resilient, and essential in maintaining pressure across a widening front.

Deeper into the system, resistance stiffened. Jem'Hadar Battlecruisers emerged alongside Galor formations to challenge *Venture* and her primary escorts, including *Oppenheimer* (CA 622057) and *Osceola* (CB 62497). *Akira*-class vessels flanked the formation to disrupt enemy cohesion. Drawing enemy fire, the Federation line carefully drew the Dominion forces into a false sense of security.

The *Aelahl*-class warbird made its debut in the battle's second phase. With its advanced beam-type disruptor banks—mounted both forward and along the centerline—it delivered devastating volleys from multiple angles. Though slightly less powerful than the Negh'var's heavy disruptor cannons, the *Aelahl*'s beams fired more quickly and across wider arcs. After a series of pinpoint disruptor barrages weakened Jem'Hadar shielding, a concentrated salvo of plasma torpedoes tore through their formation.

Starfleet ships moved in for the kill. *Steamrunners* delivered surgical phaser bursts. *Galaxy*- and *Akira*-class ships loosed final volleys. *Excelsior*-class ships moved in line with them, hammering the remaining Cardassians and providing cover for damaged *Norways* attempting withdrawal.

With space superiority achieved, attention turned to the surface. The Romulans took charge here as well—deploying a full Imperial Legion brigade backed by artillery, armored support, and Tal Prai'ex special operations units. In just over a week, all remaining Jem'Hadar ground units were exterminated.

Benzar was retaken—but not before thousands of Benzites had been massacred. The cost was high. But for the first time in over a year of war, Starfleet and its allies had achieved a decisive, multi-domain victory.

Though the Romulans had proven decisive at Benzar, their attention soon shifted elsewhere—drawn to growing instability near the Velos Corridor and internal political unrest along the Reman frontier. With their forces preoccupied and the Klingons exhausted, Starfleet stood alone when the Dominion launched its next major push.

The objective: the Argolis Cluster. If seized, it would open a direct route to Vulcan and threaten the Federation's inner core.

Starfleet's response was desperate. The 7th Fleet—still battered from Benzar, understrength, and short on resupply—was dispatched to intercept the Dominion at the Tibor Nebula.

From the start, the odds were grim. Starfleet was outnumbered 3-to-1. Even at full strength, the best-case ratio would have been 2-to-1 against. Still, *Venture* (CH 71854) led the fleet forward, sweeping vast arcs of phaser fire into incoming Jem'Hadar formations, vaporizing torpedoes mid-flight and shredding smaller enemy vessels with brutal efficiency.

Her escorts followed tightly: *Discovery* (FH 52333), *Zephyr*, *Kodiak*, and *Sacramento*, along with agile wings of *Norway* and *Sabre*-class escorts. These ships operated in cohesive swarms—diving at targets in tight phaser formations and peeling away just before impact. For a time, it worked. Enemy ships fell at a 2:1 rate.

Among the heavier ships holding the flanks were multiple *Excelsiors*—*Rehoboth* (CH 22366) and *Potomac* (CH 22603) among them—providing sustained torpedo fire and long-range phaser cover to blunt Jem'Hadar encirclement attempts. Though aging, the *Excelsiors* proved essential in preventing a total rout, acting as rally points when the smaller ships were scattered.

But even the best tactics couldn't overcome overwhelming numbers. With no Romulan support and Klingon units deployed elsewhere, the 7th was slowly pulled apart. *Rehoboth* was lost with all hands; *Potomac* suffered a catastrophic plasma rupture and had to be scuttled by her own crew.

In the end, only *Venture*, *Oppenheimer* (CA 622057), *Osceola* (CB 62497), and *Akira* (CB 62497) escaped. The rest of the 7th Fleet—over 70 ships—was annihilated.

The Dominion misread the aftermath of Tibor. Interpreting Starfleet's retreat as total collapse, they redeployed the remnants of their force to strike Vulcan once more. This time, however, Starfleet was waiting.

The 5th Fleet, under the command of Admiral Salok, held firm at 40 Eridani. Reinforcements from the 6th and 13th Fleets brought the Federation's strength to over 500 ships—outnumbering the Dominion/Cardassian force for the first time in months.

The 6th Fleet deployed heavy combatants—*Nebula*, *Akira*, *Korolev*, and *Ambassador*-class ships. The 13th brought lighter assets: *Norway*, *Steamrunner*, and *Centaur*-class vessels. Key to the defensive line were several *Excelsior*-class veterans: *Renown* (CH 23142), *Shenandoah* (CH 22408), and *Wellington* (CH 22289). Though increasingly relegated to support roles, these ships served as reliable keystones—projecting steady fire, absorbing hits that would've crippled newer but more lightly armored designs, and anchoring multi-vector assaults.

As before, Salok's flagship *Gibraltar* served as the focal point of the formation. Defending her was *Indianapolis* (CH 10535), an *Ambassador*-class warhorse flanked by *Matewan*, *Iron Horse*, and heavy frigates *Solaris* (FH 54129) and *Trebuchet* (FH 55781).

Rather than meet the enemy in a direct head-on clash, Salok deployed one of his most audacious strategies yet. Most of the 13th Fleet, along with *Excelsior*, *Norway*, and *Centaur*-class groups from the 6th, were hidden within the system's Oort cloud—masked by ionized debris and magnetic interference.

When the Dominion forces charged toward the Federation's seemingly static wall, Salok gave the order: wave attacks, grouped by ship class, targeting specific enemy systems. *Norway* and *Sabre*-class ships swarmed to disable shields and weapons. Centaurs pinned flanking fighters. *Akiras* and *Nebulas* pummeled disabled hulls into wreckage.

Excelsior-class ships launched overlapping torpedo barrages, stitching the battlefield with constant mid-range fire and locking down escape corridors.

Losses were still heavy. *Wellington* was destroyed by a concentrated salvo of plasma torpedoes. *Shenandoah* was badly damaged and had to be towed from the field. But Starfleet held its ground.

Then came the bait. Salok ordered a partial withdrawal—smaller ships peeled off toward the system's center as if retreating. Predictably, the Dominion pursued. As they broke formation, chasing their quarry, *Gibraltar* sent a single encoded burst.

Moments later, the hidden ships of the 13th Fleet emerged from the Oort cloud in full force—Excelsior, Steamrunner, and Akira-class ships cutting across Dominion flanks in tightly spaced battle groups. The Dominion-Cadrassian formation was sealed in.

Within minutes, the largest Dominion warships were destroyed or disabled. Jem'Hadar Attack Ships, denied escape or reinforcement, were cut down piecemeal. The Cardassians, battered and demoralized, broke formation and fled.

Vulcan was secure. Starfleet had not only survived—it had struck back, hard. The tide had begun to turn.

Following the stunning victory at Vulcan, momentum finally shifted back toward the Federation Alliance. Starfleet Command, sensing the opportunity to strike while the Dominion was off balance, quickly pivoted from defense to offense. The goal: recapture Betazed. But even with renewed morale and growing Klingon-Romulan coordination, three successive offensives by the 2nd Fleet failed catastrophically. Since annihilating the 10th Fleet, the Dominion had heavily reinforced Betazed, turning the system into a fortress. Each liberation attempt ended with brutal losses.

Faced with the reality that no amount of defense would bring them closer to victory, the Admiralty resolved to seize the initiative. Late in 2374, they greenlit a new offensive—not against Betazed, but against the frontier system of **Chin'toka**.

Though sparsely populated, Chin'toka was the perfect strategic pivot. Like Minos Korva for the Federation, it held more value as a launchpad than as an end in itself. Capturing it would grant the Alliance a clear line into the Cardassian heartland. Oddly, Dominion defenses in the system were light—barely six squadrons of Jem'Hadar Attack Ships patrolled the perimeter.

Given the system's geography and the anticipated need to land and hold ground forces, a full third of the Starfleet contribution came from reserve lines. **Excelsior** and **Miranda**-class vessels, long relegated to patrol or convoy duty, were suddenly indispensable. Their torpedo payloads, phaser coverage, and troop transport capacity made them ideal for both initial assaults and post-battle occupation.

Among the Excelsior-class units deployed were **Lakota (CH 42768)**, **Gettysburg (CH 21907)**, and **Dresden (CH 22834)**—each of them hardened veterans from earlier engagements at Tyra, Vulcan, or Benzar. While lacking the regenerative shielding of newer classes, their robust frames and wide phaser arcs made them effective at suppressing Jem'Hadar flanking runs.

The Jem'Hadar wasted no time initiating a full-frontal assault—launching suicidal kamikaze attacks with horrifying precision. Ships like *Ticonderoga (DD 41901)* and *Mashhad (FH 52188)* were shredded in seconds. But as tragic as the losses were, these attacks were tactical diversions meant to distract the fleet long enough for the **Cardassians to activate a hidden ace**.

Rather than defend Chin'toka with ships alone, the Cardassians had deployed a vast network of **automated weapons platforms**, each armed with multiple heavy disruptor banks and an endless barrage of plasma torpedoes. Powered by a central generator hidden on a heavily shielded asteroid, the network was both lethal and self-sustaining.

Realizing the nature of the trap, the Alliance moved swiftly to take down the remaining Jem'Hadar and destroy as many platforms as they could before activation. *Steamrunner* and Akira-class vessels spearheaded those assaults, leveraging precision strikes and torpedo salvos at close range. A number of Excelsiors, including **Lakota** and **Dresden**, provided sustained phaser support, knocking out several yet-inactive platforms with pre-emptive volleys.

But the Cardassians got there first. With chilling synchronization, the entire network came online. Immediately, the tide turned.

Platforms tore through Allied ships at alarming speed. The *Adirondack* and *Geronimo (CB 62501)* were vaporized before they could initiate evasive maneuvers. Even larger ships—*Nebulas*, *Ambassadors*, *Sovereigns*—were shredded by concentrated fire. *Gettysburg*, already battered from Benzar, took multiple torpedo hits and was lost with all hands.

Starfleet identified the source of the power grid quickly. The *USS Hood (CH 42296)*, supported by *Nautilus (FH 31910)* and *Tian An Men (FH 22984)*, attempted a direct assault on the asteroid. Despite overwhelming firepower, their barrage proved ineffective—the asteroid's defenses rivaled that of any known battlecruiser, its shields enhanced with Dominion tech. *Tian An Men*, though damaged, remained on station and covered the others with wide phaser arcs.

It was *Defiant* that ultimately turned the tide. Using its navigational deflector, her crew imprinted a Starfleet warp signature onto the asteroid. The result: the weapons platforms mistook the asteroid for a friendly Starfleet vessel. They opened fire.

The asteroid detonated moments later.

With its power core destroyed, the weapons network began collapsing. Starfleet and Romulan ships, seizing the moment, moved to finish off the remaining active platforms. Excelsior-class ships, many now critically low on torpedoes, closed to mid-range and employed phaser volleys with mechanical precision.

Meanwhile, Klingon ground forces—transported aboard older *K't'inga* and *Vor'cha*-class cruisers—landed on Chin'toka's two major worlds. Combat was fierce, but with orbital fire support, the Jem'Hadar garrisons were eradicated in under two days.

The cost of victory was immense. Nearly 80 ships were lost, and many more damaged. But Chin'toka was the first Dominion-held system to fall—and the first sign the tide of war might finally be turning.

This victory came at a cost, however. While Captain Benjamin Sisko and a handful of senior personnel were away from Deep Space Nine, Gul Dukat—now possessed by the Pah Wraith Kosst Amojan—boarded the station, murdered Commander Jadzia Dax, and triggered the collapse of the Bajoran Wormhole. According to Bajoran religious doctrine, such an event would precipitate the Reckoning—an apocalyptic clash between the Prophets and the Pah Wraiths. The symbolic and spiritual blow to both Starfleet and Bajoran morale was immense.

From that point onward, the Dominion War settled into a bitter, grinding rhythm. The Cardassians and Jem'Hadar kept Chin'toka under continuous siege, determined to wear down the occupying Federation forces through attrition. Meanwhile, Starfleet launched multiple unsuccessful campaigns to retake Betazed, each incurring unacceptable losses. Neither front yielded meaningful progress. The lone bright spot during this period came from the Klingon Defense Forces, whose daring “cavalry raid” on the Monac Shipyards—timed with a solar flare—inflicted devastating losses on the Dominion's fleet reserves.

Three months later, a vision led Captain Sisko to the desert world of Tyree, where—assisted by his father Joseph, his son Jake, and Commander Ezri Dax—he unearthed the long-lost Orb of the Prophets. Once released, the Prophet within re-entered the Celestial Temple and expelled the Pah Wraith, reopening the wormhole. While its strategic value had been reduced due to Dominion logistical rerouting, the event provided a much-needed morale boost to the Federation Alliance, reigniting hopes of final victory.

Even so, Dominion harassment of Chin'toka remained relentless. One particularly drawn-out skirmish occurred at AR-558, a barren rock harboring a major Dominion subspace communications relay. Starfleet Marines secured the installation shortly after the initial assault but quickly found themselves in a nightmarish fight to hold it. AR-558's cavernous terrain favored the Jem'Hadar, who launched wave after wave of probing attacks, ambushes, and mine-laying operations. The garrison, initially at company strength, was reduced to just four squads before reinforcements arrived via the USS *Defiant*.

Once Defiant personnel reprogrammed captured Dominion anti-personnel mines and turned them against the attackers, the tide began to turn. The Sovereign-class *Veracruz* (CH 75400) evacuated the wounded while the *Cimmarron* and *Denver* (FH 53471) deployed reinforcements, materiel, and a Corps of Engineers team that successfully cracked the relay's encryption. The intelligence gathered proved instrumental in coordinating a rejuvenated 10th Fleet offensive in the Kalandra sector and stabilizing the increasingly volatile Bolian front.

Still, Dominion lines held—until stardate 52793.6 (3 February 2376), when Starfleet, the Klingons, and the Romulans launched a massive three-pronged assault on Verdonis, a heavily fortified Dominion/Cardassian stronghold located 1.5 light years from Bolarus. The 6th Fleet led Starfleet's contribution, using a combination of *Sabre*, *Norway*, and *B'rel*-class vessels to disrupt enemy screening formations while heavier *Steamrunner* and *K'Tinga*-class ships targeted key vessels to unbalance Dominion cohesion.

Akira and *Vor'Cha*-class warships held back to provide long-range support, acting as anchors for shifting formations. The Romulans initiated a cloaked advance, using their *Ar'kif* and *Aelahl*-class cruisers to slip past defensive lines, gather targeting telemetry, and execute a surprise coordinated strike. When they decloaked, their disruptor and plasma torpedo salvo eliminated nearly 30% of the enemy's capital fleet. *Vor'Chas* followed with brutal point-blank disruptor barrages. The *Akiras* unleashed spreads of quantum torpedoes into the chaos.

Excelsior—long thought past their prime but still sturdy and combat-proven—were deployed in squadron formation at the flanks of the allied advance. Ships such as *Lexington* (CH 22837), *Yeager* (CH 23120), and *Exeter* (CH 23589) played critical roles in neutralizing fleeing Jem'Hadar Attack Ships attempting to regroup or break through the allied net. Their updated targeting systems and proven resilience allowed them to engage enemy destroyers with precision phaser barrages and spread-pattern photon salvos. While their top-end firepower was limited, their reliability in fleet coordination and damage mitigation remained invaluable.

Once the field had been sufficiently thinned, the remaining *Excelsior* and *Steamrunner*-class vessels rejoined the heavier assault formations to finish off the remaining Dominion battlecruisers. After four hours of grinding combat, large wings of Starfleet and Klingon starfighters launched a final coordinated strike, eliminating the last vestiges of resistance. Jem'Hadar suicide attacks were suppressed with overlapping torpedo fire from *Sovereign*, *Galaxy*, *Vor'Cha*, and *Aelahl*-class ships, preventing a repeat of Chin'toka's earlier losses.

The victory at Verdonis pushed Dominion lines back four light years to the Daxura system. With the 6th Fleet now free to redeploy, Starfleet Command committed it to reinforce

ongoing operations in the Kalandra sector—signaling the beginning of the Dominion's long retreat.

With the war settling once again into a bloody stalemate, the Dominion sought more than just another surprise victory to shift momentum. They found it through a new and dangerous ally: the Breen Confederacy. After the allies' capture of Chin'toka and the critical comms relay at AR-558, the Female Changeling made secret overtures to Thot Gor, de facto leader of the Breen. Tempted by visions of conquest and Dominion patronage, Gor traveled to Cardassia Prime and formalized the alliance in short order.

Not content to simply join the war effort, Gor launched a preemptive strike of staggering boldness. On stardate 52827.4 (16 February 2376), a Breen armada of over 300 ships, equipped with phase-cloaking technology, entered Sector 001 undetected. They passed the Mars Defense Perimeter, slipped past elements of the 3rd Fleet, and entered Earth orbit. What followed was an unrelenting orbital bombardment—disruptor strikes rained down across the planet's surface. Starfleet Headquarters in Marin County California was nearly obliterated. San Francisco, Paris, and Yokohama were all left in ruins. The death toll was staggering: over 12 million, including 5 million Starfleet personnel.

Though the Breen attackers were ultimately destroyed by a joint defense consisting of the 3rd Fleet, the 1st Interceptor Wing of Starfighter Command, and orbital defense platforms, the psychological damage was profound. Concurrently, Breen forces launched a new assault on Chin'toka, breaking through defensive lines at two points. Their frigates, though only modestly armored and lacking maneuverability, were soon revealed to be carriers of a terrifying new weapon: an energy dampening pulse that neutralized matter-antimatter reactions on contact, effectively disabling ships in place.

Starfleet and Romulan vessels, caught unaware, were rendered defenseless. Breen and Cardassian forces tore through the fleet's immobilized formations, annihilating ships wholesale. Escape pods were deliberately spared on orders from the Female Changeling—an act of psychological warfare intended to send broken survivors home. These pods were recovered at the system's edge by a small task force under the command of the *Endeavor* (CA 71805), *Goddard* (CH 59621), and *Gander* (FH 63109).

Efforts to counter the weapon initially failed. Federation and Romulan engineers were stymied by its disruptive effects on power intermix systems. The Klingons, however, stumbled upon a workaround by accident. A containment failure aboard the IKC *Ki'tang* forced its engineering crew to alter the intermix ratio, boosting tritium levels in a way that rendered the dampening field ineffective. The “supercharged” plasma reaction resisted shutdown, giving Klingon ships a tactical edge. The workaround spread rapidly, and with it, Klingon forces took up the brunt of frontline duty—executing fierce counterassaults on the Romulan and Klingon frontier sectors.

Their victory at Septimus III—secured by 15 divisions of Imperial Guard and Black Staff commandos—proved decisive. It also planted the seeds of rebellion within Cardassia. The Breen's rising influence, coupled with the senseless loss of over 500,000 Cardassian reserve troops at Septimus following a Dominion betrayal, pushed Legate Damar, Dukat's former successor, to turn against his allies.

Though this shift didn't immediately favor the Federation, it signaled that the Dominion's internal alliances were beginning to fracture. Meanwhile, the Klingon High Command underwent its own upheaval. Martok, lauded as the architect of numerous Klingon victories, earned immense popularity—too much for Chancellor Gowron to tolerate. In a series of poorly planned operations intended to undermine Martok, the IKDF suffered multiple defeats. Eventually, Gowron was slain in ritual combat by Worf, son of Mogh, who declined leadership and passed the mantle to Martok.

Even with renewed resolve, the Federation still lacked a defense against the Breen weapon. Their only hope lay in capturing one. A joint Starfleet–Cardassian insurgency team launched a raid on the Kelvas Shipyards, successfully exfiltrating a Jem'Hadar Attack Ship equipped with a functioning energy dampener. Rather than risk the narrow corridor to Deep Space Nine, they crossed into unclaimed space, looped back into Federation territory, and delivered the ship to Starbase 129. There, the Corps of Engineers cracked its systems and developed a software-based countermeasure that could be installed fleet-wide with minimal delay.

While this bolstered Federation readiness, Betazed remained under Dominion occupation—its supply lines cut after the earlier victory at the Tibor Nebula. Sentok Nor served as the enemy's primary base of operations: part maintenance station, part hatchery, and the headquarters of Unit 137, led by the notorious Dr. Crell Moset. Starfleet Intelligence confirmed his role in grotesque experiments on humanoids, prompting the Federation Security Council to demand his capture.

Spearheading the liberation operation was the regenerated 7th Fleet under *Royal Sovereign* (CH 75300) and *Stephen Decatur* (CB 66015), supported by a heavy *Steamrunner* formation led by *Santa Fe* (FH 54287). The 10th and 12th Fleets under *Hyperion* (CH 78905) and *Yamato* (CH 75808), respectively, provided reinforcement. The Klingons and Romulans, both seeking retribution after earlier Breen incursions, committed substantial ground and naval forces. Of note were veteran *Excelsior*-class ships such as *Charleston* (CH 23778), *Arkhangelsk* (CH 22560), and *Achilles* (CH 23009), which escorted troop transports and played key roles in holding flanking Dominion defenders at bay.

Unusually, Starfleet allowed the Klingons to lead the main assault. Smashing through enemy lines with brute force, they sowed chaos and disarray. The Romulans followed from behind, decloaking only when within striking distance of priority targets—cutting down Dominion command ships and collapsing their coordination.

Sentok Nor fell to Starfleet. *Hyperion*, *Yamato*, and *Royal Sovereign* spearheaded a surgical disabling of its defense systems before deploying multiple Marine detachments. Fighting was brutal—room by room—but ultimately successful. Dr. Moset was apprehended in his medical lab. What the boarding teams found—and what they later extracted from the station's databanks—was horrifying beyond description. Yet it would pale in comparison to what awaited them on the surface.

Once Moset was in custody and full data recovery confirmed, Sentok Nor was obliterated by concentrated phaser bombardment. Starfleet, Klingon, and Romulan forces descended on Betazed soon after. The planetary capital, along with over 60% of its major urban centers, had been devastated. In total, more than 75 million civilians were killed—through forced labor, wartime atrocities, and Unit 137's "medical" experimentation.

The carnage stunned even the Romulans. Klingons, usually unmoved by suffering, stood silent in reverence and rage. Starfleet personnel, though disciplined, were seething with anger not seen since Earth's pre-Federation days. The liberation of Betazed was complete—but the price, and the memories, would shape Federation policy for decades to come.

Fortunately, by the time the Dominion and its servitors had been expelled from the Chin'toka system, anti-Breen modifications had been successfully tested and installed across a wide enough swath of allied ships to present a credible strategic threat. This, more than any single defeat, compelled the Dominion to withdraw most of its forward-deployed forces back toward the Cardassian home system.

In the wake of that withdrawal, Starfleet initiated a major realignment. Deep Space Nine and the DMZ/Cardassian frontier became the new strategic focus. Prior to this, nearly two-thirds of the total *Akira* contingent had been kept in the core systems to protect key worlds and installations. But with *Sovereigns* increasingly taking over high-priority defense roles, almost every remaining *Akira* was now shifted forward—deployed to Deep Space Nine, the DMZ, and key Romulan and Klingon flanking zones, leaving behind only token numbers to patrol Earth and Sector 001.

To fill the void these front-line assets left behind, Reserve Forces Command undertook its largest single deployment since the war began. The veteran *Excelsior* class returned in force. Alongside the equally-aged *Carolina*-class Battleships, *Excelsiors* formed the backbone of multi-role reserve strike groups. These formations were designed for autonomous patrol and interdiction, centered around command-and-control vessels of the *Conquest* (DN 2589), *Dahlgren* (CS 2500), *Exeter* (CB 2200), and *Excelsior* (CH 2000) classes. Supporting vessels included Light Cruisers of the *Kearsarge II* (CL 1500), Attack Frigates from the *Soyuz* (FT 1940) line, Heavy Frigates like the *Valley Forge* (FH 2970), and Destroyers of the *Akula II* (DH 4700) and *Akyazi* (DD 1010) classes.

This flexible force structure allowed Starfleet to push its surveillance net further into the frontier without sacrificing tactical depth. Meanwhile, *Renaissance* (CH 9778), *Springfield*, and *Challenger*-class starships backfilled former *Steamrunner* assignments closer to the core.

At Deep Space Nine and throughout the Bajoran system, the Allies had amassed nearly 10,000 starships. Debate raged within the command staff over whether to launch a final offensive or hold the line and bleed the Dominion dry. Vice Admiral Ross argued for containment. Martok, by contrast, insisted that the Jem'Hadar's ability to regenerate both ships and soldiers made that approach suicidal. Eventually, Romulan General Velal agreed with Martok—choosing bold action over stagnation.

Within two days of crossing the border, the combined Allied fleet encountered the Dominion's last redoubt outside the Cardassian home system. Unlike past battles that emphasized tactical choreography, this engagement was simple and brutal: Starfleet would break the center, while Klingon and Romulan elements attacked the flanks.

The Dominion compensated for their deteriorating manpower and ship losses by placing their massive dreadnoughts in interlocked defensive formations. These ships held the line, battering the Starfleet core assault and stalling Klingon and Romulan flanking efforts. Among the Starfleet force were squadrons of *Excelsior*-class cruisers—relegated by some to second-line duty, but here proving instrumental. Their long-range torpedo platforms and heavy shields allowed them to function as mobile artillery, pounding Dominion dreadnoughts from distance while shielding lighter assets from reprisal. *Excelsior*-class ships such as the *Lakota* and *Mandela* (CH 20217) were seen spearheading cruiser formations alongside *Nebulas* and *Galaxies*, laying down phaser barrages and executing precision warp strafes across Dominion flanks.

Simultaneously, on Cardassia Prime, Legate Damar's insurgents plunged the planet into chaos. They managed to disrupt power to every Dominion facility, severing coordination with their fleet above. Enraged, the Female Changeling ordered the Jem'Hadar to initiate full-scale genocide against the Cardassian population. Lakarian City was annihilated within minutes—2 million dead.

But the effect was not what she intended. Rather than cow the Cardassians, the massacre turned even loyalist elements of the Guard against the Dominion. Soon, Cardassian ships began turning on their former allies in orbit.

The battle above devolved into pure attrition. The Romulan flagship *D'ridthau* was lost, along with a third of the Allied fleet. With the Klingons and Romulans flagging and no reinforcements en route, defeat seemed possible. But the defection of the Cardassians flipped the balance. Dominion ships found themselves surrounded, their tactical cohesion shattered.

As the Allies encircled Cardassia Prime, Bajoran Colonel Kira Nerys led a strike team that captured the Female Changeling inside Dominion command. When she refused to surrender, Kira contacted the *USS Defiant*, where Security Chief Odo appealed to Sisko for permission to intervene. Beaming down, Odo linked with her—healing the morphogenic virus engineered by Section 31 and offering to rejoin the Great Link to spread the cure.

In return, she surrendered. Her orders were obeyed. The war—finally—was over.

The Dominion War should have been the end.

By all logic and engineering estimates, the *Excelsior*-class should have been retired decades earlier. But war, necessity, and the sheer resilience of her frame kept her in the fight. When the war ended in 2375, battered *Excelsior* hulls limped home alongside ships a fraction of their age. And when peace came, they were among the first reassigned — not to drydock, but to reconstruction.

Federation space had been ravaged. Entire sectors along the Cardassian border were in shambles. *Excelsior*-class vessels, long since relegated to auxiliary and patrol roles, found themselves re-tasked for humanitarian aid, infrastructure support, and colony rebuilding. Their wide saucers and cavernous secondary hulls made them ideal platforms for mobile logistics. Dozens were retrofitted with modular facilities — refugee housing, replicator farms, medical bays, command relays. For five years, these ships were everywhere. Quiet, constant, dependable.

But the calm did not last.

In 2381, the Borg returned. Not in stealth or assimilation raids, but with genocidal fury — an armada of hundreds of cubes sweeping through the Alpha and Beta Quadrants with one mission: extermination.

Starfleet's newest and most advanced ships — *Sovereigns*, *Defiants*, *Odysseys* — were thrust to the front. But with over a hundred worlds under threat, even ships thought obsolete were pulled back into the line. Roughly thirty *Excelsior*-class vessels were rearmed and dispatched into combat zones. Many were tasked with planetary defense, shielding civilian evacuations as cubes closed in. A few, like *Hokkaido* (CH 36244) and *New Jakarta* (CH 35788), stood in formation alongside far newer warships — and were lost in the opening engagements.

But some endured.

The *Galileo* (CH 37051) successfully evacuated over 75,000 civilians from the Tenevi system before the planet's surface was razed. The *Richmond* (CH 35102) and *Ashoka* (CH 36587) coordinated counterstrikes from moons orbiting the Vega colonies, holding

the line long enough for reinforcements to arrive. These weren't glorious victories — they were desperate, stubborn, and slow. But they mattered.

When the Borg threat was finally repelled — at unimaginable cost — the rebuilding began all over again. Once again, the *Excelsiors* answered. They towed crippled ships. Reestablished subspace links. Delivered atmospheric processors and hydroponic kits to shattered colonies. Several were re-tasked as mobile command ships coordinating civil engineering efforts on devastated worlds. Their frames groaned under the stress, their computers straining to keep up with 24th-century systems — but they performed.

And yet, time is inexorable.

By 2385, Starfleet's newer designs — *Renaissance*, *Ambassador*, the last waves of *Nebula* and *Galaxy* retrofits — began to outpace the *Excelsior* in every arena. With quantum slipstream drives becoming a strategic imperative, and fleet doctrine shifting toward multi-mission modularity, the *Excelsior* was simply no longer fit for purpose.

By 2389, the drawdown had begun.

Some hulls — those with too much damage or wear — were scrapped outright. Others were quietly transferred to colonial militias and planetary defense forces, stripped of advanced systems but kept spaceworthy. A few were converted into museum ships or training hulks. But most simply... stopped. They were brought to Utopia Planitia, Antares Fleet Yards, or Earth Spacedock and stood down with quiet ceremony.

The *Lexington* (CH 37892) was the last.

A relic of another century, she had survived the Dominion War, shielded evacuating convoys during the Borg Invasion, and spent her final years coordinating reconstruction across the Rigel sector. Her systems were outdated; her frame pushed to the limit — but she still sailed true. In her final mission, she delivered a payload of terraforming drones to a devastated colony on New Berlin IV.

When she docked at Earth Spacedock, her crew stood at attention along the hull. No cameras. No speech. Just a quiet handover — and then she was gone.

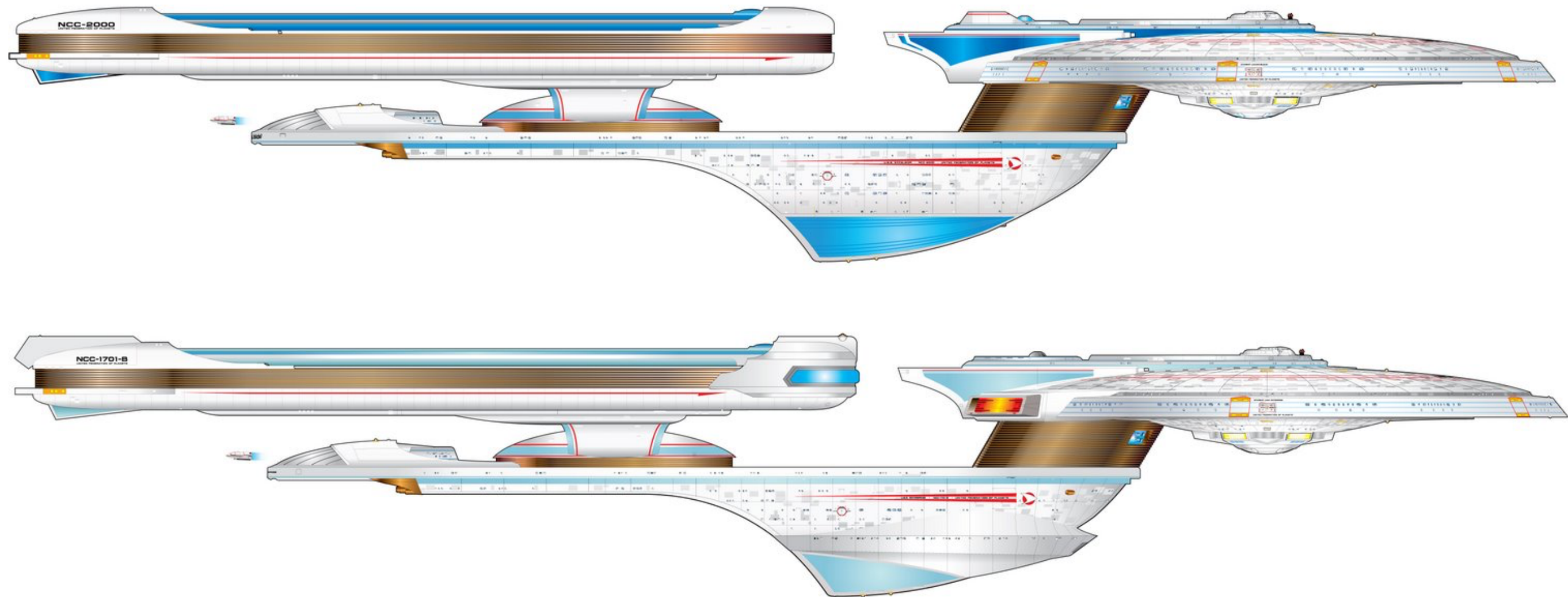
In total, the *Excelsior*-class served Starfleet for over a century and a half. She had been a cruiser, a scout, a carrier, a hospital, and a lifeboat. She had outlived the enemies who first challenged her and had stood defiant against the ones who came later. In the end, she did not go out in fire and fury — but in duty, and in silence.

Her star had finally set.

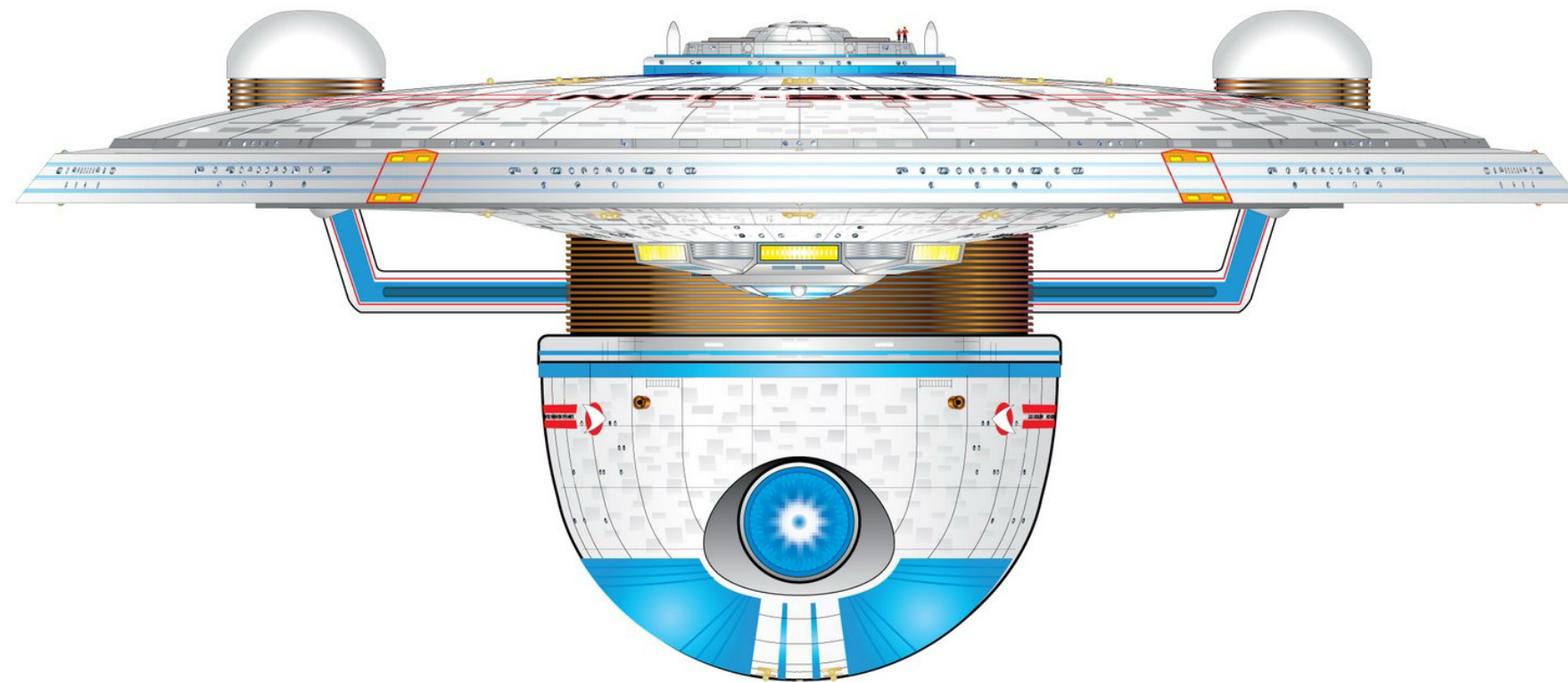
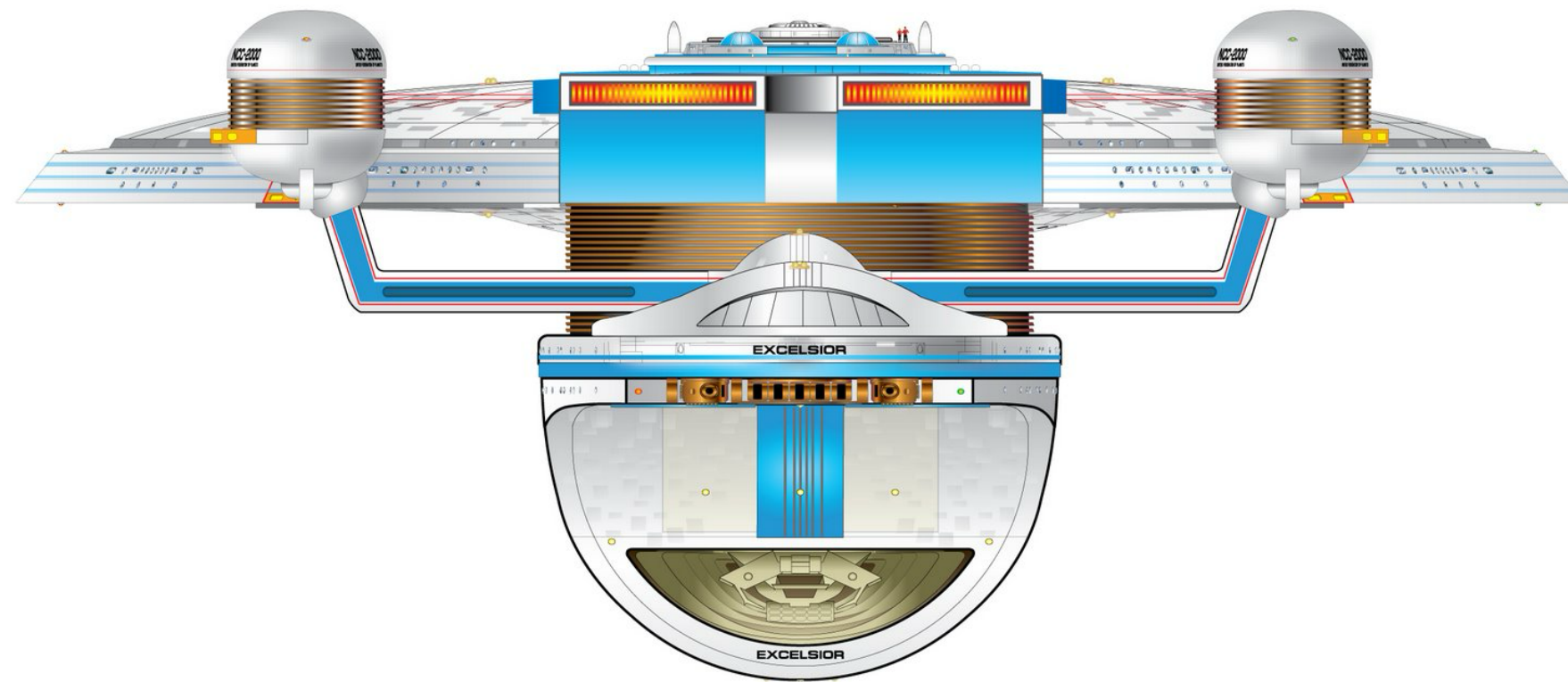
But her shadow would stretch on forever.

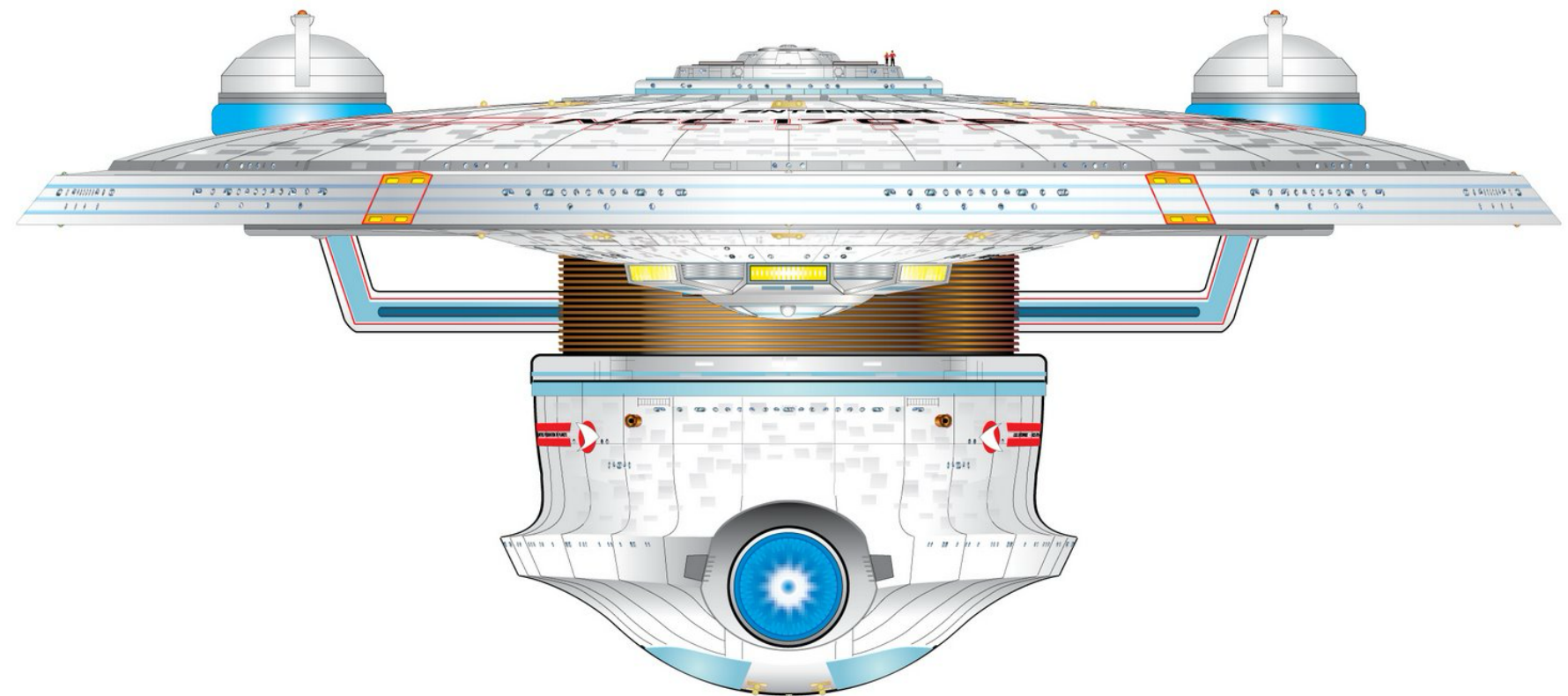
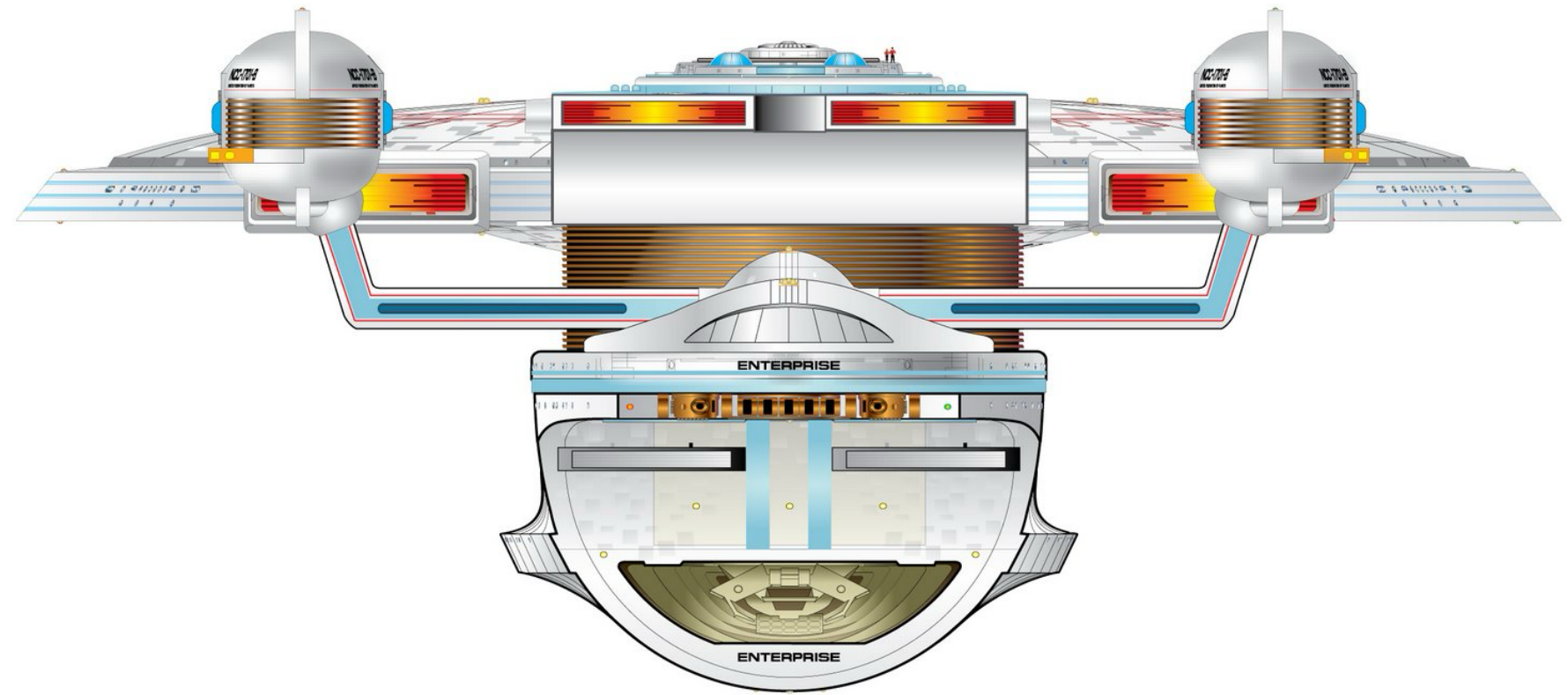
Excelsior class, original configuration (top) circa 2285

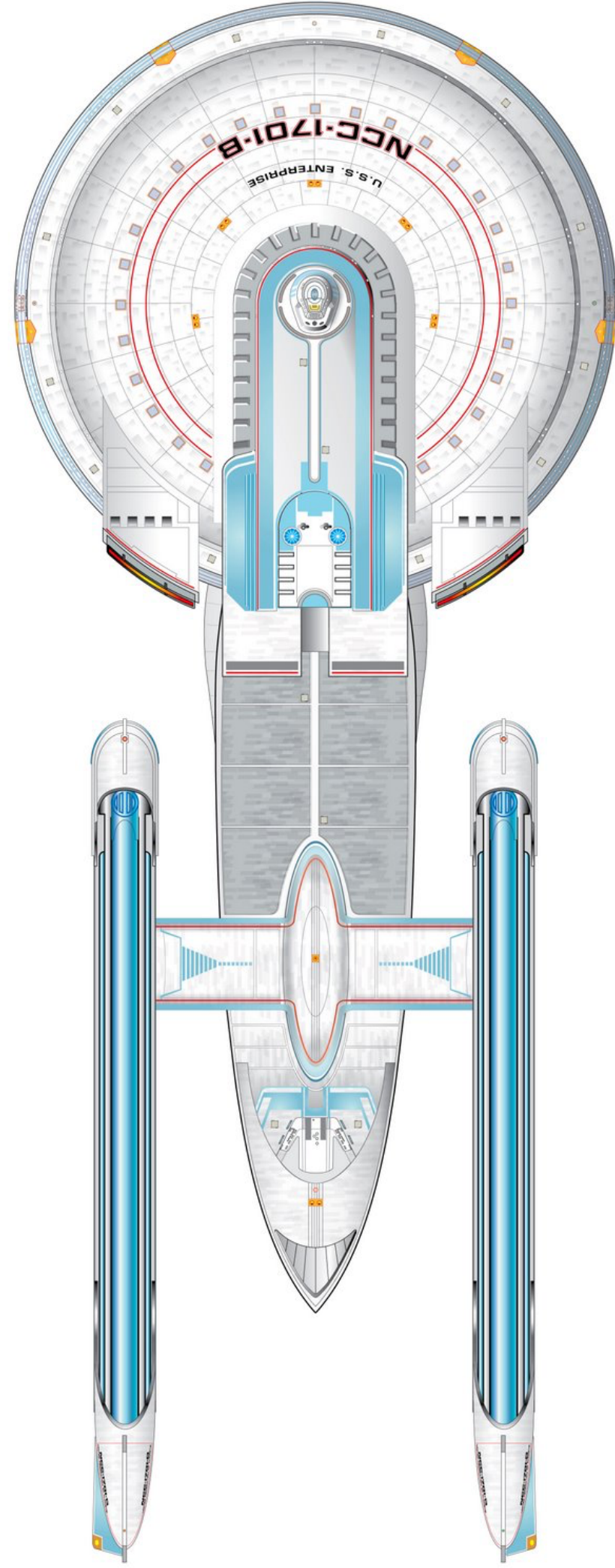
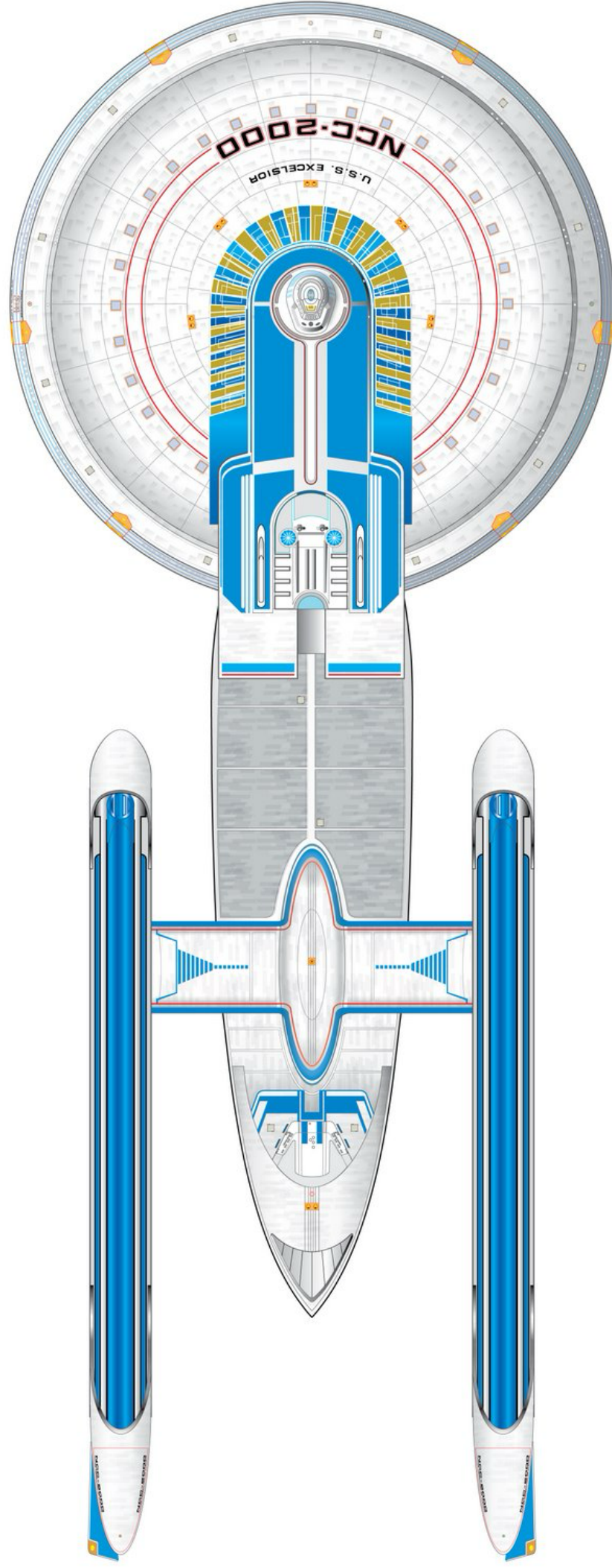
Excelsior class, modified configuration (bottom) circa 2293

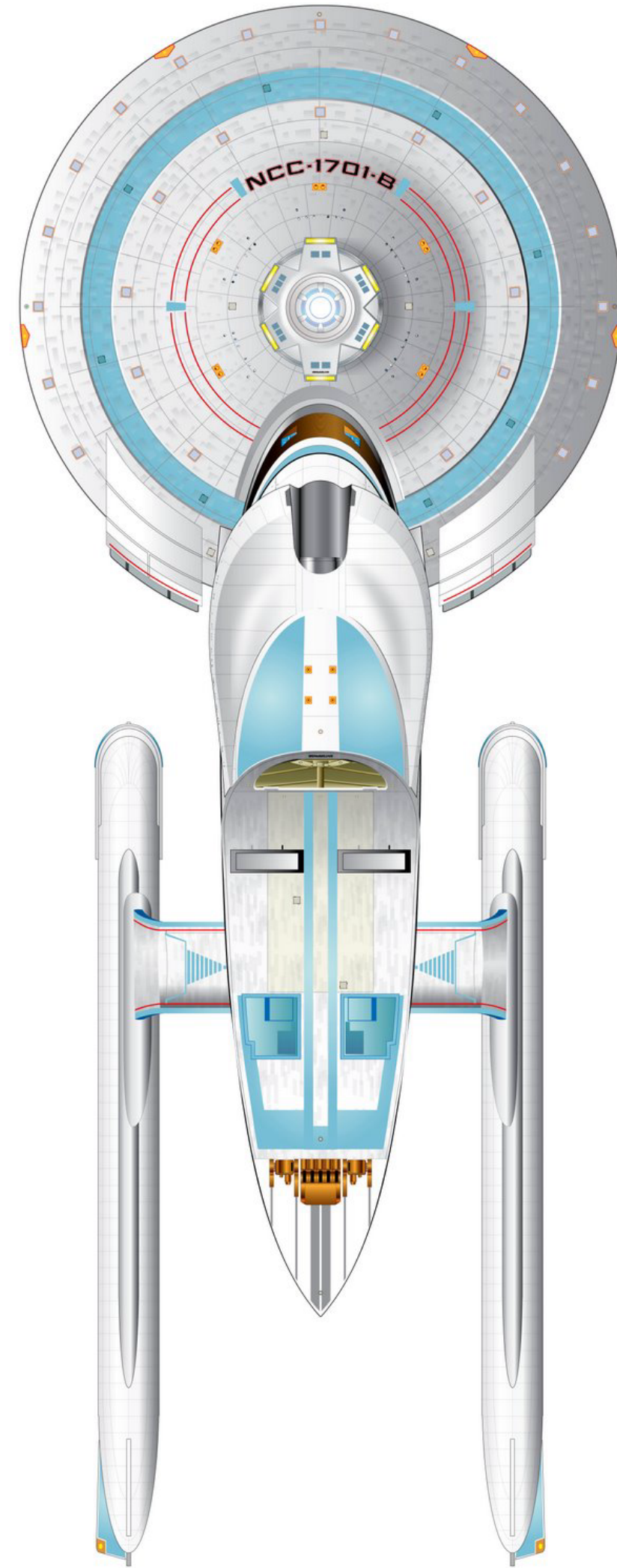


Class	Excelsior	Mass	2,150,000 metric tons	Armament	11 Type VIII Phaser Banks (2285-2372)
Classification	Heavy Cruiser				5 Type VIII Phaser Emitters (2285-2372)
		Compliment	705		11 Type IX Phaser Banks (2372-90)
Service	2285-2390				5 Type IX Phaser Emitters (2372-90)
Number Active	0				4 2 nd Class Photon Torpedo Launchers
Length	467m				
Beam	185m			Defense Systems	Standard Deflector Shield System
Height	100m				total capacity 1,201,500 TerraJoules (2285-2372)
Decks	28				1,441,800 TerraJoules (2372-90)
					Standard Duranium Double Hull









Bibliography

Logo—'viperaviator' ([DeviantArt](#))

Design—Steve Gawley, Bill George, John Eaves

Schematics—Gustavo Castillo ([Gustavo Castillo's Designs](#))