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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GENERALS HELP THEMSELVES ***



The fleet came in at four o'clock.

With no one to help him, it seemed the General was lost. But the enemy was soon to discover that—

GENERALS HELP THEMSELVES

By M. C. Pease

"DID IT go well?" the aide asked.

The admiral, affectionately known as the Old Man, did not reply until he'd closed the door, crossed the room, and dropped into the chair at his desk. Then he said:

"Go well? It did not go at all. Every blasted one of them, from the President on down, can think of nothing but the way the Combine over-ran Venus. When I mention P-boats, they shout that the Venusians depended on P-boats, too, and got smashed by the Combine's dreadnoughts in one battle. 'You can't argue with it, man,' they tell me. And they won't listen."

"But the Venusians fought their P-ships idiotically,"

the aide complained. "It was just plain silly to let small, light, fast ships slug it out with dreadnoughts. If they had used Plan K—"

The Old Man snorted.

"Are you trying to convince me? I've staked my whole reputation on Plan K. They wouldn't give me the money to build a balanced space-fleet, even when the fleets of the Combine of Jupiterian Satellite States were staring them in the face. So, I took what I could get and poured it into P-boats. I threw all our engineering and scientific staff into making them faster and more maneuverable than anyone ever thought a space-ship could be. I got them to build me electronic computers that could direct that speed. And, two years ago, every cent I could lay my hands on went to install the computers on all our ships."

"I remember," the aide said.

"But, now the chips are down, the people have funk'd out on me. I am one of the most hated men in the Federation. They say I destroyed their Navy. And, we are not going to get a chance to try Plan K. They decided, today, to accept the Combine's offer to send envoys in a month to discuss possible revision of the Treaty of Porran. When I left, they were wondering if there was any chance of getting out for less than Base Q."

"But, good lord, sir, Base Q supplies nine tenths of all our power. The Combine will have a strangle hold on us, if they get that."

"Quite. But the people will give it to them, rather than fight. And the President will sign."

"Surely, sir, the people are not all cowards?"

"No. If they had time to think, they would fight. That's why the Combine is striking now. The people are panicky. Hysterical. The collapse of Venus was so sudden, and the disaster to their P-boats so complete. They've just lost hope. Most people would rather live under a dictator than die to no purpose. They've just lost hope."

The pounding of the Old Man's fist measured his words and the depth of his anger.

"If we could only make them hope. Somehow. Anyhow."

Suddenly, his clenched fist stopped in mid-air. He frowned. Slowly, his hand opened. The frown relaxed and a smile replaced it.

"Maybe we can, at that. Maybe we can." He leaned back with his eyes half closed. His aide knew better than to interrupt him. Ten minutes later, he opened his eyes.

"Make arrangements to have Commander Morgan take command of Base Q as soon as possible. Within two days at the outside." His manner was curt and clipped. "And bring him here to me before he leaves."

"Yes, sir. But may I say, sir, I do not understand?"

"You're not supposed to."

"Yes, sir."

The aide was a competent man. Orders were written that afternoon, in complete disregard of normal red-tape. Base Q was advised of the imminent shift. Commander Stanley Morgan boarded a jet plane on the Australian desert that night. The next morning, he was shown into the Old Man's office.

"Commander," the Old Man said after the preliminaries were taken care of, "as you are well aware, you have been in considerable disgrace, recently, for getting too close to the Venusian-Combine war, in defiance of orders. It has been felt, in certain quarters, that you might have caused a serious international crisis."

THE JUNIOR officer started to speak, but the admiral waved him to silence.

"You could, if you like, point out that the crisis has come, anyhow. As a matter of fact, I never felt that that phase of your action was too important. I did, however, deplore your disregard of orders—and still do." He paused a moment, while his steel gray eyes studied the younger man. "You are about to receive new orders. It is absolutely imperative that these orders be obeyed explicitly." His pointing finger punctuated his words with slow emphasis.

"These orders place you in command of Base Q. The Treaty of Porran, among other things, designates the asteroid Quanlik, or Base Q, as being the territory solely of the Federation and suitable for the establishment of a delta-level energy converter. Because this converter is the prime source of gamma-level, degenerate matter which is used as the fuel for nearly all our power generators, Base Q is recognized as a prime defense area of the Federation. A sphere, one hundred thousand miles radius about Quanlik, was designated by the treaty as a primary zone. Any ship or ships entering this zone may be ordered to leave within one hour. Upon failure to comply, our military forces may take such action as they deem necessary. A sphere, twenty thousand miles radius, is designated as the secondary zone. Assuming the prior warning has been given upon their entrance into the primary zone, full action may be taken against any ship entering this without delay or further warning.

"Standing orders with regard to Base Q are that any ship entering the primary zone shall be warned immediately. Upon failure to comply, after the one hour period, full action shall be taken with the forces stationed on Quanlik. Any ship entering the secondary zone shall be brought to action as soon as possible without warning.

"Your orders direct you to assume command of Base Q and to comply with existing standing orders regarding the maintenance of its security until and unless advised of a change in the standing orders or the Treaty of Porran." The Old Man paused for effect. "Any questions?"

"Yes, sir," the younger man said. "I am wondering if I should inquire what events you are anticipating. Would it be wise for me to ask?"

"No!" The monosyllable cracked out like a shot.

"No further questions, sir."

"I have one. While you were in Australia, I presume you kept well informed on recent developments of Plan K?"

"Yes, sir. The school I commanded taught advanced theory of Plan K."

"Very good. You will proceed immediately to Base Q. As a final word I will repeat the absolute necessity of obeying your orders *to the letter*! Good luck."

The young man saluted, collected his orders and walked out. Two hours later, he was in space.

COMMANDER MORGAN'S office was perched in a plastic bubble high on a crag overlooking Base Q. Directly below it lay a few of the multitude of locks that provided haven for the protecting fleet of P-ships. A vast array of domes and other geometrical shapes bore witness to the hive of machine-shops, storerooms, offices, et al, that kept the fleet operating. And on the far horizon towered the mighty structure of the delta-level converter, the reason for the existence of Base Q. A quarter of a million tons of high-test steel and special alloys, machined to tolerances of less than a thousandth of an inch, with another hundred thousand tons of control equipment, it was yet delicate enough so that it could not have functioned in the gravity field of any planet. This asteroid, small as it was, was barely below the permissible limit.

The Commander sat at his desk, watching the latest flashes in the news-caster. They were not good. At this very moment, the President of the Federation was in conference with the representatives of the Combine, discussing the wording of the protocol that would probably be signed in a few hours. And no word—no hint—that anyone in the Federation outside the services was willing to dare anything at all. A red light flashed on his desk. A buzzer sounded a strident call. He flipped a switch. "Commander talking."

"Far-Search talking. Report contact with large group of ships, probably dreadnought warships. Range, two one oh. Bearing, four oh dash one nine. Speed, seven five. Course, approaching. That is all."

"Keep me advised any change or further details. Advise when contact range is one five oh."

"Wilco."

The Commander pressed a button on his desk. In response, his staff quickly assembled to brief him on the immediate status of Base Q as a war-making machine. As a matter of routine, it was always kept fully ready. His staff merely confirmed this for him.

Seventy-five thousand miles out in space, the Radars of the Far-Search net swept their paths. Men labored over their plotting tables, noting the information the radar echoes brought back; slowly piecing together the picture. Tight communication beams relayed the data back to the base as fast as it was obtained.

About an hour later, the red light flashed again. The assembled staff fell quiet as the Commander flipped the switch, again. "Commander talking."

"Far-Search talking. Contact previously reported now range one five oh. Bearing, four one dash one seven. Course, approaching. Speed, six nine. Estimated twenty-three ships, dreadnought type, plus small ship screen. Battle formation. That is all."

"Advise at range one one oh."

"Wilco."

The Commander turned to his staff. "Sound a general alert." His words were clipped and clear. He flipped a second switch on his desk. "Radio, this is the Commander. Get me a direct beam to the Chief of Staff. Highest urgency. Scramble with sequence Charlie."

His office had emptied by now, with officers running to their posts as the siren of the general alert wailed through the corridors. As its urgent call died off, a green light showed on his desk, indicating contact with earth. "Morgan, Commander, Base Q, requesting direct line to Chief of Staff. Highest urgency."

"Go ahead, Morgan." The Old Man's voice sounded peculiar after passing through the scrambling and unscrambling machines that twisted the sounds into queer pieces and distributed them among several frequencies and methods of modulation. But, even so, it had a note of strain in it that was not artificial.

"Sir, when you gave me my orders, here, you directed me to obey them *to the letter*, without question or cavil. Is that right, sir?"

"Yes, it is." There was a threat in the Old Man's voice.

"Then, sir, would you tell me if there has been any change in those orders since my arrival? Aside from administrative details, of course?"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Very good, sir. Sorry to have bothered you."

"Not at all. Quite right. Good luck. Signing out."

Morgan thought the Old Man sounded relieved at the end. And he could not be quite sure, but he thought he heard the Admiral mutter "And good hunting," as the connection broke.

He summoned his aide to take over the office while he went down to the center of the asteroid where I.C., the information center, was located, where he would assume direct command of the base.

AS HE ENTERED I.C., the Ships Supply Officer reported all ships fully loaded and fueled with gamma-matter, ready for flight. The Missile Officer reported all ships equipped with war-head missiles. The Lock Officer reported all locks manned and ready. Base Q was ready.

As he climbed to his chair over the plotting tank, he noted with satisfaction the controlled tautness of the men's faces. They too, were ready.

As the glowing points of yellow light that represented the enemy fleet crossed the dimly lit sphere in the tank that indicated the one hundred thousand mile radius marking the edge of the primary zone, he took a microphone from a man waiting, nearby.

"Base Q to unknown fleet. I have you bearing four one dash one seven. Range one oh oh. Identify yourself. Identify yourself. Over." His words were spaced out with painful clarity. A hush had fallen over I.C.

The loud-speaker on the wall came to life with a squawk, after a few seconds.

"Fleet Four to Base Q. This is Fleet Four, operating under orders from the Jupiterian Combine. Over."

"Base Q to Fleet Four. According to the Treaty of Porran, space within a radius of one hundred thousand miles of Base Q has been designated a primary defense zone of the Federation. I therefore order you to leave this zone within one hour. Failure to comply will make you liable to full action on our part. I have the time, now, as one three four seven. You have until one four four seven to comply. I further warn you that an approach within twenty thousand miles will make you liable to immediate action, regardless of time. Over."

The men in the room stared, open-mouthed. All had dreamed of hearing these words spoken in these tones to the Combine. A cheer might have been given, had it not been for discipline.

In a few seconds, the loud-speaker squawked again. "Fleet Four to Base Q. Our orders are to assume a position at twenty-five thousand miles radius pending renegotiation of the Treaty of Porran. I suggest you contact your headquarters before doing anything rash. Over."

The Commander sat with a smile on his lips. Quietly he handed the microphone back to the radioman. In a minute, the loud-speaker squawked, again. "Fleet Four to Base Q. Did you receive my last transmission? Acknowledge, please. Over."

The radioman looked at the Commander, questioningly, but he only shook his head.

"Can't you turn that damn squawk-box off? It's distracting."

As the minutes crept by, the bright dots in the tank moved closer. The Commander took the Public Address microphone.

"Attention, all personnel, this is the Commander talking. The Fourth Fleet of the Combine entered the Zone twenty minutes ago. They were given an ultimatum but are showing no indication of compliance. Therefore, we are going to blast hell out of them." The echoes from his voice rolled back from speakers all over the base. "The people at home do not think we can do it. I know we can. I have not asked their permission. It is not needed. My orders are explicit and fully cover the situation. My orders to you are equally explicit. Go out there and teach the bloody bastards a lesson." He turned back to the men in I.C. "Scramble flights one, two, three, and four. Others to follow at intervals of five minutes until all are in space. Flight plan King Baker. Initial Time, one four five oh. Execute."

The talkers took up the chant.

"Flight one. Flight one. Scramble. Scramble. Execute."

"Flight two ..."

Etc.

In the tank, green points of light moved out. The first four came into position and stopped in the four quadrants of the circle of which the center was the point at which the enemy would be at Initial Time. The following flights moved out to other points on the circle.

Time seemed to stop. In I.C., the Flight Directors gave the orders that moved their flights into position and briefed them on future tactics in quiet voices. The electronic computers and other devices moved silently. The clock made no noise as its hands moved towards the final moment.

The Commander moved some dials under his hands. He pushed a button and a red light showed on the lead dreadnought of the enemy column.

"This is the initial target." The designation was relayed to the flights.

The second hand of the clock was making its final sweep. All voices quieted. The Commander raised his fist. As the clock's hand came to the top, his fist slashed down.

"Execute!" The battle was on.

FLIGHT COMMANDER DENNIS, Flight One, heard the final word as he sat in the small bubble on top of the dense package of machinery that was a P-ship. Swiftly, his hands closed switches. The course had already been chosen and fed into the automatic computers under him. He merely gave the signal to execute. In response, the ship seemed to pick itself up and hurl itself down the radius of the circle to the waiting enemy fleet.

He could not see them, but he knew that, behind him, lay the other nine ships of the flight, in column, spaced so close that an error in calculation of but a few millionths of a second would have caused disaster. But the automatic and inconceivably fast and accurate calculators in the ships, tied together by tight communication beams, held them there in safety.

As he came within range of possible enemy action, Dennis pressed another button, and the Random Computer took command. Operated by the noise a vacuum tube generates because electrons are discrete particles, it gave random orders, weighted only by a preference to bring the ship's course back to the remembered target.

The column behind obeyed these same orders. The whole flight seemed to jitter across space, moving at random but coming back to a reasonably good course towards the target, utterly confusing any enemy fire-control computers.

To the men in the ships, one to each, it seemed as if their very nerve cells must jar apart. They felt themselves incapable of coherent action, or, even, thought. But they did not need coherency. Their function was done until the ship was out of danger, when a new formation would be made, a new target designated, and a new order to execute given.

Because the electronic computers took care of the attack. They had to. No human could react as fast as was needed. Out from the enemy ships reached fingers of pure delta-field, reaching for gamma-matter. The touch of a finger meant death in a fiery inferno as the gamma-matter that fueled the ship and formed the war-heads of their lethal eggs would release its total energy. There was only one defense. The delta-field could be propagated only in a narrow beam, and at a rate much slower than the speed of light. By keeping the enemy computers confused, they kept those beams wandering aimlessly through space, always where the little ships might have been, but were not. Unless their luck ran out.

Flight One kept moving in, with constantly increasing speed, except for random variations. Once through the outer screen of small ships, a relay closed and the link was broken between the ships of the column. Each then moved in independent manner. The designated target was an area to the computers, rather than a ship. Radar beams reached out to find specific targets. As they found them and moved close, the random computer switched off for a small moment of time, while the missiles were dispatched on a true bearing. And then the ships moved on, leaving their eggs behind them.

The eggs moved in with fantastic acceleration to their targets. Half their energy went into that acceleration, to get them there before the delta beams could find them. The other half was given up in incandescent heat when they found their targets. Becoming pinpoints of pure star matter, they seared their way into the enemy vitals. But, even with their fantastically concentrated energy, it was not enough. For the dreadnoughts were armored with densely degenerate matter, impervious to any but a direct hit, and compartmented to require many hits.

The flights moved in and passed on through. And other flights came in. And others followed them. The first flights halted, found each other, turned, and drove in again. Pass and repass. A myriad of blue-white flashes gave measure of the struggle.

ON BASE Q, in the I.C. room, the Commander watched the tank. Curt orders designated new target areas as the enemy fleet broke up under the whiplash. Slowly, one by one, the points of light that marked the enemy vanished, leaving only the void.

Finally, as must any fleet that faces annihilation, they turned and fled. The battle was over. All that remained was to give the orders to bring the flights home. And that was soon done.

The Commander got up. He stretched. He was tired. He glanced at the clock. Two hours and forty minutes. Very quick, indeed, as space battles usually went. But, then, he thought grimly, this had been the first battle ever fought under the whiplash of Plan K.

But, now, there was a report to be made. And he did not know how to do it. As he walked back wearily to his office, he tried out phrases in his mind. None seemed to fit.

His aide was bending over the facsimile machine as he came in. "Priority orders from the General

Staff, just coming in, sir."

The Commander looked at the machine. "General Staff to Commander, Base Q, Urgent, Immediate Action," he read. "You are hereby advised that a protocol has been signed at Washington, D.C., with representatives of the Combine, revising the Treaty of Porran to the extent that Base Q shall be jointly administered by yourself and the Commander, Fourth Fleet, Jupiterian Combine, until such time as its further dispensation shall have been agreed. You will, therefore, admit said Fleet upon demand, permitting it to take up such stations as it may desire, in either zone, or to land, in whole or in part, and to disembark such of its personnel as its commanding officer may direct. You will make arrangements with its commanding officer for the joint administration of the base. You will be held responsible for the smooth operation and successful accomplishment of this undertaking. These orders are effective immediately."

Commander Morgan smiled.

"Send this reply immediately," he said to his aide. "Open code. Commander, Base Q, to General Staff, Highest urgency. Acknowledge receipt recent orders regarding protocol revising Treaty of Porran. Regret unable to comply. Due to recent argument over interpretation of Treaty of Porran, Fourth Fleet, Combine, no longer exists. Request further orders."

He laughed.

On earth, the officer who took the message gaped at it. Seizing a telephone, he dictated it to the Old Man's aide. But when the Old Man saw it, he only smiled, coldly.

And his smile was bleak and cold, too, when he laid it before the President and the Cabinet an hour later. Shortly afterwards, when the President broadcast it to the people, they sat, stunned. It was not until the next day that they finally read its significance and started celebrating. But the Old Man had ceased smiling by that time, and was planning possible future battles.

A MONTH LATER, Morgan sat again in the Old Man's office. Having presented his report and swallowed the unpleasant pill that, as he was now a hero, there were speeches to make and banquets to be bored at, he was talking informally.

"What I can't understand, sir, is why they came in. They only had to wait a couple of hours and the whole kit and caboodle would have been dumped in their laps. Yet they come barging in and give us exactly the opening we want. I don't get it."

"That *is* an interesting question," the Old Man replied with a shadow of a twinkle. "You might almost think they had intercepted an order I sent to our Intelligence Officer, on Q, to sabotage the Converter if the protocol was signed."

The Commander jumped. "Was that order given, sir?"


"Yes, it was. But it was countermanded an hour later. Different channel, however. I remembered they had broken the code of the first channel."

He paused a moment. "That illustrates a good point to remember, Morgan. You intercept enemy messages and break their code. A very useful trick. Also very dangerous, if the enemy discovers you have broken it, and you don't know that he knows. Very dangerous, indeed."

The young man laughed. The older one smiled, bleakly.

As Morgan looked out the window, he saw the public news-casters spelling out the full mobilization of the Federation. A glow filled his heart as he realized the people were now willing, if they had to, to fight to defend their freedom.

THE END

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