

dummyblind

In combat, your best, most daring and effective men are, of course, the ones you need most—and are most apt to lose.

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ILLUSTRATED BY LEO SUMMERS

A spotter swished overhead through the dripping night, and Vandersen froze against the mud of the ravine wall. Beneath him, his six dummy-blinds, straggling upwards from the racing streamlet, were also still.

Vandersen cursed mentally—you made the absolute minimum of noise on missions, if you wanted to stay alive, that is—and quickly debated whether to scramble back down the ravine into the tree-shaded safety of the deep, narrow cleft, or chance it where he was, hugging the clayey bank.

He chose the latter course, better to stay still than risk the spotter whipping overhead just as he dived for cover.

Thirty seconds passed. Vandersen chewed mechanically, swallowed saliva, and decided he would live a while longer. The spotter had evidently missed him. There was every reason why it should, of course. What little his camouflage suit gave away would be effectively dissipated, or masked, in the curtain of hissing rain.

He flipped his combat visor down, and took rapid stock of the situation. A square pitched grid of delicate green glowed before his eyes. Away up in the right-hand corner a small red cross nestled in a corner of two green lines. Down towards the bottom center of the grid was a green spot with white overtones. A minute arrowhead, protruding from the green spot, pointed roughly towards the red cross.

Four kilometers to go; another hour, with luck. He had been very lucky so far in covering two kilometers before the spotter crossed his path. His luck might hold; he'd pulled off harder jobs without so much as one exchange of fire. The odds were against it though. He'd probably see plenty of action before the night was out.

Time to part, dummyblinds He levered his chest from the bankside, checked his left knee from slithering on the wet clay, and lifted the dummymaster from where it hung at his belt.

His gloved fingers located and pressed the catch for the routecaster. Five thin, ghostly white lines appeared on his combat screen. Back at camp he had spent several hours poring over maps and estimating journey times over various terrains, before deciding on the operational routes for his five dummyblinds.

The five routes all diverged from the green spot representing his immediate location. Two of them later converged to end at the red cross; the other three, spread over the whole area of the grid, extended to the top of the screen. Between them the five dummyblinds should draw the enemy's attention from him.

On the top of the dummymaster cylinder was a ring of six small knobs. Vandersen gave each of five a full turn clockwise and then manipulated the combination, activated disk in the center. This sent an extremely short-range signal to the dummyblinds; a signal which would not reach hostile sensors.

A few seconds later the five dummyblinds whisked past him, already diverging on their separate paths. At close quarters and in broad daylight, a dummyblind was visible as a knee-high, neutral gray cone, riding on a jet of air and hiding an internal assembly of complex electromagnetic wave distortion equipment.

And most effective equipment, no doubt about that, thought Vandersen, peering after his vanished dummyblinds. At a range in excess of two meters a dummyblind bore a strong resemblance to a man wearing a camouflage suit; strong enough to dupe any man-made sensing device, anyway.

His dummyblinds should be out of the ravine by now. Already, lengthening fat and bright lines were superimposing on the faint ghost lines on the screen, indicating the pre-calculated positions of the dummyblinds.

He tipped the visor back up from his face, and hefted his pack, preparatory to climbing again. Just then the whine of an aircraft turbine cut through the sluicing rain.

Vandersen cursed and became immobile again. By the sound of its motor, this spotter, although it would be unmanned, was bigger than the tiny craft which had flown overhead minutes earlier. Bigger and fitted with better sensors to detect ground intruders.

The whine died away, and then returned as the spotter circled overhead. Vandersen stopped chewing and stood, tense and sweating, praying to an unknown God that the spotter would miss him and his dummyblinds.

The whine faded again and Vandersen began to claw his way up the bank, stumbling and slipping in the total darkness. His solitary remaining dummyblind bobbed obediently behind him.

Above and beyond the ravine was a flat expanse of scrubland. Lying prone in sparse, sodden grass, he lowered his combat visor and cautiously raised his head. As he had expected, the screen indication was negative. Nothing showed apart from the five dummyblinds, the target and himself. The positions of the target and dummyblinds were all pre-calculated, the target was far beyond the range of the feeble sensors built above his visor, and the dummyblinds were specifically constructed to give a minimum of indication.

Under good weather conditions and on open terrain, his sensors had reasonable range, perhaps a couple of kilometers-tonight he doubted if they'd pick up anything more than fifty meters away.

He turned slightly to align his indicator arrow with the red cross. A quick glance through his infrared sensitive visor showed only a sea of pale, lancing streaks of rain.

Shrugging the visor upwards, he palmed rain from his numbed features and squinted blindly into the darkness. No more loitering, he thought grimly, and, rising to a half-crouch, he set off into the storm.

"You are to immobilize enemy field command post Mirabel, and return to base." The brigadier general's manner was curiously offhand and preoccupied and Vandersen had the impression he felt he had more important work to attend to.

"Yes, sir."

"You'll do it. I have faith in that." Again, Vandersen sensed that his commander's mind was on other matters. He wondered how many times the brigadier had sat in this steel-walled operations command room, mouthing such utterances to men embarking on suicide missions.

"Colonel Vandersen, you are now a veteran of ninety-four successful missions." The brigadier general's taut features jerked into a smile, and Vandersen noticed with slight irritation how his right hand half-clenched and wandered over his plastic topped desk towards the papers and tapes in the in-tray. "I have recommended that, after this mission, you be given three months leave followed by transfer to a commando training camp." His right hand raised to silence Vandersen's attempted interruption.

"No arguments, Colonel. With your knowledge and aptitudes, you are worth even more behind the lines than as a combat soldier."

They shook hands and Vandersen strode from the room. Just before the orderly closed the door, Vandersen glanced around. The brigadier's tall form was bent over his desk, his attention once more fully devoted to his stereo maps and requisitions.

The mission was to knock out command post Mirabel. Although this would not impair the individual fighting power of the half dozen unmanned tanks and support weapons defending the six-kilometer stretch of the front covered by Mirabel, it would render them ineffective as a cohesive fighting force.

The war had dragged on for six weary years. Half the world's major cities were radioactive dust; whole populations were sterile and disease-ridden, but the armies in the field were far from beaten, and from the underground factories spewed an endless variety of sophisticated tools of destruction.

The western theater had a fluid front of roughly two thousand four hundred kilometers, defended mainly by mobile, unmanned ground units operating under localized field command. A good many kilometers behind the line lay the heavy armored divisions and infantry units.

If Vandersen succeeded in destroying Mirabel, unmanned units of his own side would occupy the strip of territory. This might, or might not, provoke retaliatory action, ranging from the incursion of a solitary suicide commando to a full scale assault by hundreds of tanks under missile cover. Either way, that was war . . .

If he succeeded. *When* he succeeded, Vandersen corrected himself. Vandersen, the most decorated shock trooper in

the America Corps, the hero of a hundred exploits-sabotage, undersea infantry warfare, assassination. His expressionless scowl beckoned from a million propaganda posters, from magazine covers and history texts.

On television his adventures thrilled the war-fevered denizens of the city warrens of the late Twentieth Century. Doctored fact and fiction were intermingled. Frequently the omitted facts were more starkly horrific than any highly spiced dramaplay.

Three whole months of leave after this mission. He'd wangle leave for Mara from the factory, and together they'd find a quiet beach somewhere far from the war, a haven of peace divorced from parade grounds resounding to the stamp of drilling men, away from munition works, fortress cities in the depths of the earth, and hospitals crammed with post-radiation sufferers. Away from all the rotten filth that was war.

Three months of lazy afternoons on sunny beaches, and evening strolls through cool woodland. A welcome change from patrolling the seared wastes which were once the populous regions of the homeland, never sure whether you were hunter or hunted, never knowing when violent death might take you. . .

Vandersen halted. The ground beneath his feet, rock covered here and there by black, peaty soil, was beginning to slope downwards. He'd traveled perhaps three quarters of a kilometer since releasing the dummyblinds, and he'd be dropping into the next valley.

He could remember the map perfectly. Before him was a fairly deep valley with a broad stream, more of a river, wandering through a patch of not too dense woodland, mixed deciduous and coniferous trees. It might be worth another glance at the map, though, he decided.

He knelt on one knee, noting automatically and with dismay that the rain was thinning, and pulled down his combat visor. Immediately ahead, the hillside beyond the stream showed as a large misty blur on the screen. Oft the hillside was a small, slowly moving white patch.

Damn, Vandersen voiced silently. A quick glance through the infra-red viewer showed a telltale trace of color, probably from a turbine exhaust duct. A tank lay squarely in his path.

It had not seen him. If it did, approximately one half second after being spotted he'd be sprayed with high velocity antipersonnel pellets, followed by a brace of blast missiles.

He flattened against the wet earth, his right hand resting on his laser-pistol. The rain had thinned to a fine drizzle, seeping down through the surrounding darkness.

The tank, as indicated by his combat screen and infra-red viewer, was now stationary. It occupied a commanding position for a considerable area around and in front of the hill. He had a chance of escaping detection by simply crossing the river and scaling the hill, for his camouflage suit was designed to produce a chameleon-like effect of mimicking its surroundings in all respects, acoustic, olfactory and electromagnetic.

The nearest thing to a suit of invisibility which military science could devise, it was, however, by no means absolutely effective. Vandersen began to curse; then checked the futile gesture. He had no intention of ending up as mincemeat, or charred cinder, on this hill or anywhere else, so he hesitated.

If he detoured away from the hill he would add kilometers and precious time to the operation, and time was something he couldn't spare. He could follow the river through the woodland to a point where a tributary joined, then work his way up the tributary valley, behind the hill where the enemy tank waited. There was a fair chance that the wood was patrolled. . .

Abruptly an explosion sounded to the left and slightly forward of Vandersen. The first of his dummyblinds had been eliminated, and his decision made for him. What had been a grim game of hide and seek was now a hunt of deadly ferocity. All units would be on combat alert, and would shoot at anything that moved, or registered, on their various sensors.

He heard two further explosions as he groped his way down through soaked bracken, pistol at the ready. It was probably some luckless rabbit or field mouse.

Silently he slipped into the cover of the trees, and changed course to match that of the river. He did not want to penetrate too deeply, just in case there were enemy patrols around.

The combat screen, set for close range, was a meaningless jumble of overlapping and superimposed microwave images from the surrounding trees. After less than a minute Vandersen had to admit partial defeat. The wood was totally

impassable under either visual or micro wave control. He had no option but to resort to acoustic tracking, and rely on the trees to absorb, or break up and scatter, all incident sound.

The going was much easier as he picked his way between the tree trunks shown as blips of reflected sound on the screen. Even so he frequently stumbled on the uneven ground, tripped over half-exposed roots, or was forced to backtrack when he found his way barred by thickets of tangled shrubs. Once a spotter passed overhead, without causing him much concern. Frequent explosions in the far and mid-distance were a further reminder of the activities of his hunters.

He couldn't be more than two hundred meters from the confluence of the river and its tributary. Already his position would be hidden from the waiting tank, by the curve of the hill.

Just then he heard the first faint thrashing sounds ahead. Instantly he cut off the acoustic tracker, for at close range the emitted sonic pulses would display his position like a beacon.

The combat screen, energized for sound reception only, indicated clearly the approaching object. Hidden behind a tree trunk, with only the tips of his visor's sensors exposed, Vandersen waited while enemy minitank trundled by.

After the last thrashing sounds had faded into the night, he continued his journey through the dark wood. Through the patter of rainwater, dripping from leaves and branches, he heard the slow murmur of flowing water.

The *ping* of anti-personnel pellets saved his life. As the first of a stream of tiny projectiles whipped no more than a handspan wide of him, he dived headlong to his left. A second later a blinding white gush of flame roared through where he'd been.

Flinging his visor from his face, he scrambled on, desperately seeking cover. Before he'd taken two steps, a terrifying barrier of white flame appeared an arm's length ahead of him. His suit and the camouflage paint on his face saved him from radiant heat burns, but they would be no protection at all if the fiery jet caught him.

The burst of flame died abruptly. He stilled the dummyblind—he didn't want it tagging along, getting under his heels while he fought for his life.

He counted three and then scurried on without changing course. The orange-white tongue lashed out again, this time aimed far behind him. For brief seconds, in the flaring brilliance shed by the flame-thrower he glimpsed his adversary against a background of straight and dark tree trunks.

The thing hunting him was a walking nightmare, a skeletal creature of dull, rustless steel and hidden microcircuitry, a parody of mankind with a fuel-cell for a heart and a computer for a brain, electro-hydraulic drive units in place of muscles and a belly full of low-gel napalm.

Robotroop units had been used from time to time with limited success. As an infantryman the robotrooper was of indifferent quality, principally through inherent lack of initiative and a disastrous tendency to fight anything within range, including its own comrades, human and automatic.

Here in the darkness, however, pitted against a single man, it constituted a dangerous and almost indestructible foe.

It had lost contact with him when he dived out of sight, and was hopefully probing in various directions with the flamethrower. Vandersen knew he had scant seconds before missiles began to rain down, for the robotrooper would be beaming information back to Mirabel.

Before the glare of the flamethrower died he lobbed a couple of frag grenades at his enemy. The first overshot and exploded harmlessly on the ground, the other hit the robotrooper square on its upper torso, bounced a little and tumbled to explode at knee height.

As Vandersen had feared, the robotrooper seemed completely uninjured by the grenade. All he had hoped to do was destroy some of the more vital sensors which were distributed over the thing's body.

He could not understand why no missiles had arrived yet. He was Well within range of the tank on the hillside. Just then he heard the far off thrashing noise of one or more approaching vehicles. So that was it. The human soldiers at Mirabel had decided to bring in help for the robotrooper.

A lance of flame suddenly shot out from the flamethrower in the thing's lower torso, and Vandersen glimpsed it with its arms outstretched. It turned methodically, its left arm gun spraying A.P. pellets while the other launched body-heat-seeking missiles at intervals of roughly four seconds.

He had to get away before help came for the robotrooper. For that matter it would only be a short time before it caught him with its guns or flamethrower.

His own missile launcher was too cumbersome to use at close range against his weaving, pirouetting opponent, and his laser pistol was too weak to damage it severely. If he could give it a thermal grenade at very short range. . . . But how? He had seen his frag grenade bounce off to explode harmlessly. If he could somehow place a thermal grenade in contact with the thing's bulging head, or lodge it between head and shoulder. . .

He flattened lower against the forest floor as a randomly aimed stream of pellets passed overhead, cutting off a small branch of a tree which fell lightly onto his shoulders.

The slight impact seemed to plant the germ of an idea in his mind. It took moments only to knot the end of his thin, high-strength scaling cord around the knobbed handle of a thermal grenade. Gently and soundlessly he picked up the broken branch and threw it over the robotrooper's head.

He didn't hear the branch hit the ground, but his adversary did, and whirled instantly in the direction of the noise, a tongue of roaring flame and streams of pellets and missiles lashing at its imagined prey.

Vandersen flitted towards the robotrooper. He had to get nearer, as close as he could, in fact, before the mechanical soldier sensed him. When he was little more than six meters from it he yanked the fire pin from the grenade and lobbed it towards his enemy.

His aim was good. As he hit the dirt he saw the thermal grenade, outlined against the glare from the flamethrower, fall beyond the shoulder of the robot.

At the impact of the scaling cord on its shoulder, the robotrooper abruptly stopped firing. In the total darkness and silence, Vandersen heaved gently on the scaling cord. At best he had about a second before the robotrooper assessed the situation and began blasting again.

The cord became suddenly taut, just as, with a frightening *whoosh* of flame, a missile shot from the robot soldier's right arm. Vandersen, watching through a darkened visor, watched a brilliant white ball of light appear at head height in the direction of the robot.

He paused only long enough to re-activate the dummyblind on a course which would take it across the river some distance downstream; then he was on his feet, running past the burning robotrooper, sprinting on through the woods. He had no need of his various seeing aids, the trees and fern around him were clearly visible in the blinding light from the still burning thermal grenade.

He looked around once as he ran. The robotrooper was still on its feet, but was hardly in operational condition. Its entire right shoulder had melted in the heat from the thermal grenade, the arm had fallen off, and all that remained of its head was a small stump of near incandescent metal. It staggered around blindly, shedding streamers of molten slag.

Then the world seemed to explode around the running man. At least half a dozen missiles must have landed in the vicinity of the stricken robotrooper. A giant fist of blast picked up Vandersen, as a child might snatch at a toy soldier, and hurled him against the base of a tree trunk.

He lay dazed and injured as earth and splintered timber showered around him. There was no waiting though, not if you wanted to survive. He dragged himself to his feet, and tried to forget the devastating ache in his head. His only chance was to get across the stream and out of the wood before the minitanks closed in on him.

Both his arms were injured; the right one was numb from the elbow down, and as he tried to raise his left hand the grating of broken bones forced a stifled shriek of agony out of him.

His right hand was slippery with blood, but he managed to pull down his combat visor, which, miraculously, was still in functional order. On the screen three white splotches glowed intermittently through the trees, about a hundred meters behind him. They were heading towards him, and in his present condition, hot and bleeding, he hadn't a chance of avoiding detection.

Apart from his arms, he was, as far as he could tell, uninjured, but he couldn't carry on without some treatment for his wounds.

A small flat pack of quicksalve hung at his belt, and by inserting the nozzle pipe up the sleeve of his suit he was able to spray most of his left arm. It wasn't easy to handle the pack with his left hand, but the pain of his broken arm was already beginning to recede, and he managed to repeat the treatment on his right arm.

Then he sprayed the pack itself, to mask all trace of blood.

The salve would initiate healing processes locally, but, more important, it would give him a chance of evading the olfactory sensors of his pursuers.

The stream was visible only as a blank stretch in the darkness of drizzly night. The level was rising after the heavy rain, and by dawn the stream would be a racing brown torrent. Vandersen hesitated briefly, undecided whether to cross at this point or cany on downstream before crossing.

An ominous clank and screech of steel treads, from among the trees behind him, made his decision for him. He waded in, wincing at the chinking scrape of gravel underfoot, but not slowing down, for the pursuing tanks could only be seconds from the stream.

Abruptly the whirr of a spotter sounded above him. He stood absolutely still, waiting for the sound of the motor to fade. It didn't; the spotter was hovering almost directly above him, and as he waited the broad conical beam of a small searchlight suddenly shot from the spotter and bathed him in light.

He took a quick shot at the light source, missed, and then stuck the pistol back in its holster before diving under the water.

It wasn't really swimming; he was using his good right arm and doing a scissor-kick with his legs, but he kept bumping against the streambed, and every few seconds a vagary of the current would bowl him over, or would twirl him end for end. His suit and visor had automatically sealed at all exposed points, and the oxygen tank in his pack was meeting his respiratory needs.

His erratic course downstream was traced on his combat screen, although the screen sensors could pick up nothing while he was underwater. Roughly two hundred meters downstream of the point where he had entered the water, the stream was considerably broader and shallower. The patrolling tanks would probably be waiting, expecting him to crawl out at this point.

Just before he had covered half the distance, he swam hard for the far bank. As soon as the water was too shallow for swimming, he cautiously raised his visored head above the surface.

Eight enemy ground vehicles were registered on the screen, within little more than a stone's throw. Four of them were spaced along the bank-side he was lying under, two were on the other side, and the remaining pair were standing in the shallows downstream of him. Overhead three spotters weaved intertwined figure-eight patterns.

The precalculated position of his sixth dummyblind was about fifty meters short of the shallow stretch of stream. The chances were it had already been eliminated, though. Cautiously he raised his visor from his face.

The entire stream and flanking woodland were bathed in brilliance from the swinging searchlights of the minitanks and spotters. He could imagine the excitement in the enemy HQ, with personnel clustered around the visual and sensor screens, straining for a glimpse of telltale movement, or patch of color.

The water was warmer. For several minutes he had lain with his visor just breaking surface, studying with grim fascination the movements of the minitanks and spotters on his combat screen. Now he could feel an unmistakable warmth in the water washing over his limbs.

Two of the minitanks had entered the water a little upstream of the point where he had left the bank. So that was it; they intended to boil him alive by pumping in heat, probably from a nuclear source. The water was now unpleasantly hot, and at best he could stand it for only a minute or so longer. Then he must emerge to almost certain death.

There was very little chance of evading detection in the glare of the enemy's searchlights, which contained every spectral band the sensors could handle, from microwave to the far UV. Good as his camouflage suit was, it could not duplicate its surroundings perfectly under brilliant illumination.

He had no alternative to trying, though; his flesh was already prickling. Easing upwards his visor, he began to crawl onto the bank.

Dense clouds of steam, from the near-boiling water, drifted through the probing searchlight beams. Fine, it would give him at least a ghost of a chance.

One of the minitanks across the stream switched its beam to the opposing bankside. The beam picked its way carefully along the stream edge towards Vandersen, who, with slow but desperate movements, was trying to inch his way clear

of the stream.

The beam wandered closer to the sweating Vandersen.. He became completely still as the brilliant disk of light moved within an arm's length of him.

Abruptly the blinding beam leaped away and sped across the stream. All the beams were moving now, to where, caught squarely in a spotter's beam, a manlike figure jinked and twisted desperately.

Watching from the darkened bankside, Vandersen could hardly believe his luck. The dummyblind was responding to the stimulus of the light beams, and was behaving just as would a human fugitive in similar circumstances.

Twice the dodging, running form escaped the probing white pencils, then no fewer than six beams transfixed it in a pool of blinding radiance. A jet of fire from a minitank hit the dummyblind, almost bowling it over.

Hopelessly the burning form plodded on. Another fiery lance from a second minitank impaled it and the dummyblind, now a quite unrecognizable flaming mass, flopped sideways. Almost contemptuously a minitank loosed a cannon shell which blasted it into a shower of incandescent debris. Vandersen missed the finale of the grim dramaplay. By then he was deep in the wood, moving easily and surely under acoustic control.

The rain had returned, and was pounding with chill vigor on the man lying full length on wet bogland. Although his suit was waterproof, Van-dersen was very cold and weary. He had long since ceased to feel emotions when on mission, unless the everpresent undercurrent of fear could be classed as such.

This was how he wanted to be. There was a difference between fear and panic. Fear lent you a healthy respect for the enemy, and discouraged foolhardiness, while panic caused you to make lethal mistakes.

Controlled fear went hand in hand with caution, and it was this which had enabled him to survive almost a hundred missions, and now bade him lie here in the rain, considering the final phase of his assault.

He had halted on a slight rise, to scan the bare kilometer of grassy plain between him and enemy command post Mirabel. Not that there was anything to see; the darkness and lashing rain took care of that. The combat screen was no help either. The only thing registering upon it "live" was himself. The known position of Mirabel was indicated; but the command center itself made no impression on the screen sensors. As for enemy tanks, robotroopers or human personnel, there could be a whole army waiting for all the screen knew about it.

Still, if he could not see the enemy, they had even less chance of detecting him.

If he waited until dawn, Mirabel would present a fairly easy target for his hand rocket-launcher. The snag was that the enemy's exploder-interceptors would effectively screen out most of his missiles, and he would almost inevitably die within seconds.

No, this was the best way, in almost total darkness under the worst of weather conditions. All he had to do was get close enough to Mirabel to lob a fusion bomb among the bristling probes and transmitters on the roof of the command post, and then sprint madly to get clear in the four seconds before the ensuing miniature nova illuminated the area in a premature sunrise.

He had made good time, considering the episodes with the robotrooper and in the stream, and the detouring path he had taken to throw off his trackers. His two dummyblinds, if by good luck they were still operating, would now be one kilometer from Mirabel, approaching from south southwest and east respectively, while he spiraled in from the north.

The visor pulled down over his face, he moved off at a crouching lope, for target Mirabel. . .

Despite the poor conditions, the combat screen was useful; twice it helped him pick his way through mine fields, the first conventionally below ground, and the second consisting of a scatter of aerial mines, wandering apparently aimlessly at anything from ground level to chest height.

If a spotter sensed him now, he was finished. There was no cover at all on this flat tract of moorland, and he hadn't the slightest doubt that the least indication of any intruder here, barely a stone's throw from command center, would invoke a deluge of artillery, or missile fire, from the center.

It wasn't a spotter he encountered, but a tank. One moment his screen was clear; the next there was a large white patch almost touching the green spot representing himself. He flipped up his visor, at the same time diving flat, just as a huge black shape loomed out of the rain.

There was not even time to roll aside from the path of the tank. He had a brief impression of a dark mass rushing at his

face, coupled with a blast of cold air; then the heavy but flexible pressure skirt of the tank struck his visor with stunning force, gave at the impact, mounted his head and raked over his body to his heels.

His senses half beaten from him, it seemed to Vandersen that he had strayed into a tornado. Howling winds lashed and pummeled his sprawled form, threatening to rip his suit and pack from his back.

Realization came swiftly; he was underneath a hovertank. With understanding came the horror of knowing what would happen if the tank suddenly cut its jets. He had a nightmarish vision of the tank settling lower as the jet died, settling until its underside structural members touched the ground, crushing him like an insect. ••

The tank had stopped for some reason, and for all he knew it might cut its jets at any instant. He had no intention of waiting to find out

It was totally dark under the hovertank, and his combat screen was blotted by one huge white blur—the proximity of the tank had overwhelmed the screen sensors. He began to crawl.

He inched his way through the black maelstrom. After what seemed a long time he noticed that the blast of air was becoming predominantly horizontal. He crawled swiftly in the direction of the airstream, and experienced grim relief when his knuckles rapped against the pressure skirt.

It was then the idea came to him. On finding himself under the tank, his first and instinctive reaction had been to escape. Now he was wondering if he could use the tank strategically.

If he guessed right, the tank above him was a Mark 10 Hector, a medium-sized job with attack-missiles, heavy cannon and twin rotors mounted fore and aft in a figure-eight arrangement. She was heavily armored with supersteel, but not on the underside, not on the small deck areas connecting the two "O"s of the figure-eight.

Sweat-drenched, half cursing and half praying, he wormed along the pressure skirt, until he located the strip of plate he was seeking. Precious seconds passed while he fumbled in his pack for the electron beam gun. The gap between the discharge ducts tapered to a minimum of just over the girth of his hips. He managed at the third attempt to wedge himself in the gap, clear of the ground.

The electron beam gun was a favorite tool for partisans, who, after approaching a tank from a blind angle, used it to burn a fist-sized hole into which they would stuff a couple of grenades, with satisfying effect.

The hole which Vandersen trepanned out was much larger, yet after only six seconds application of the gun the heavy metal disk swung down and dropped past his hand.

The control compartment into which he crawled was cramped and noisy, a metal-walled cell containing smaller metallic cells from which energized circuitry, pulsing fluids and clicking cams controlled the tank's multiple functions.

It seemed incredible to Vandersen, glancing around in the light of his visor beam that when the tank was under hand control, three men would be crammed in this tiny box. There was so little room they had to phase their breathing . . .

Most of the control units were double-banked, and, in the event of failure, activation passed automatically to the sleeping unit. Vandersen's expert eye was searching for the equipment controlling the heavy cannon. The tank was under way again at a steady twenty knots, but the intruder was not concerned; he was fairly certain the vehicle was on local patrol, and a glance at the combat screen showed that it was following a circular route around Mirabel.

The journey was in no respect comfortable; every change in contour or direction made the control capsule heave and joggle. The designers had chosen the easy way, and had lavished thermal, acoustic and vibration insulation on the equipment, leaving the rest of the compartment unsprung and cruelly exposed to the fierce heat and endless scream of the turbines.

Comfort, however, was the least concern of the crouching commando. He worked quickly and surely on various standby units. Frequently he checked his work, and twice had to correct mistakes. First, he fed Mirabel's coordinates into the tiny gun-laying computer, and then he arranged for fragmentation and thermal shells to be fired alternately at maximum rate, three rounds per second, and at maximum elevation.

The tank gun would lob shells onto the top of the enemy control center, where the detector probes and control aerials clustered thickly. Vandersen had little doubt the tank would be blasted into molten fragments seconds after it failed to respond to the continuous control monitor signal from center Mirabel, and defensive exploder-interceptors would eliminate a good fifty percent of the bombardment. It could nevertheless act as a useful decoy to occupy the enemy's attention while he approached close enough to throw his fusion bomb among the control probes.

Obtaining a time-delay unit proved the most formidable obstacle to the completion of his work. The most suitable item of equipment was part of a system which automatically shut down the tank's main drive unit at irregular intervals, for a brief period of acoustic monitoring of the locality.

The standby item was awkwardly positioned, and Vandersen expended priceless minutes in removing it and then installing it in its new location. Finally he set the timer to activate his pirate control system in fifteen minutes time.

This would allow him sufficient time to spiral in to attack range just before the tank launched its own rebellious assault on Mirabel, at the same time as his two dummyblinds, if they still survived, passed close to the enemy command post. Then he would attack.

The tank was still following a roughly circular course around Mirabel when Vandersen dropped through the hole he had cut in the lower deck. He lay motionless on the ground for a full minute as the muted scream of the tank's gas turbines died in the rain-filled darkness.

Crouching on mossy bogland, he adjusted the position of the fusion bomb so that the top end of the handle was just below the opening in the pack. When he needed the bomb, all he would have to do was ease the pack open, reach over his shoulder to pull out the bomb, and then insert the firing pin. The bomb would detonate four seconds after he released the safety button in the handle.

He was shivering and half numb with cold beneath the wet camouflage suit, when he pulled himself to his feet. Fine, it reduced still further the chance of the enemy sensors picking up his body heat. Rain spattered off him as he moved in at a slow lope towards his target.

The screen showed nothing save a vague and barely discernible roiling, an indication of the local storm pattern. He hoped there was nothing else shielded by the curtain of rain, waiting to blast any intruder.

Now there was less than two hundred meters radial distance between him and Mirabel. In just five minutes the hovertank would swing its turret to bear on the command center, and he would be waiting in the shadows. . .

"FREEZE, VANDERSEN!" The bellowed words sounded metallicly. Simultaneously six spots of light appeared around him on the combat screen.

"One move and you're dead," the loudspeaker voice continued. He had stood absolutely motionless from the moment when the voice first sounded. There were probably a dozen weapons poised to annihilate him at his slightest move.

"Lift your visor—slowly." The voice was very precise and careful. He obeyed, moving like a man in a slow-motion film. As the visor raised, brilliant lights dazzled him. He was ringed by searchlights.

He stood, bathed in light, unable even to see his foes, human or mechanical, who watched him from the darkness beyond the zone of brilliance.

Dumbly and wearily he followed the commands of the disembodied voice. The visor unit was deposited on the ground, followed by his laser pistol, belt and pack. Finally he unzipped his camouflage suit and began to peel the garment from his shoulders.

The faint prick of a high velocity, anesthetic spray stung his neck. As his knees buckled, the blinding lights suddenly dwindled and receded into the dark tide sweeping over him.

"You did fine, Colonel Vandersen, just fine." The prison camp commandant was, like Vandersen, a big man. Like Vandersen, he was also intelligent. There the resemblance ended, Vandersen's hard, unsmiling and whip-taut manner contrasting starkly with the other's jovial and relaxed air. But for the russet combat tunic, with amber collar tabs and shoulder badge depicting a key, he might have been, not a soldier and jailer, but a successful business man negotiating a deal in plastic ovenware, or some other everyday commodity.

"I believe you *are* Colonel Vandersen?" he continued gently; "Colonel Eric Vandersen?"

"As stated on my identity disk, Eric Vandersen, European army colonel, serial number 235 . . ."

"That's all right, colonel," the commandant interrupted, "I'm not an interrogator. This is just an informal chat between, I suppose you could say, the best of enemies. Besides, since you are Vandersen, we know all about you."

For all his geniality, there seemed something false in the commandant's manner. Vandersen wondered why, in making his last remark, he had found it necessary to lower both his eyes and his tone of voice.

He drew deeply on the cigarette the commandant had given him two minutes earlier. He was puzzled. He had been unconscious from the time of his capture until his guards had revived him a couple of hours ago. Since then they had made no attempt to interrogate him. Instead they had allowed him to shower, had treated his wounds, had clothed him in new prison fatigues colored fluorescent sky blue, and had given him a plain but welcome meal.

"Thank you." His tone was unintentionally laconic. "So far the treatment I have received has been astonishing. The best I had hoped for was a whiff of noxene, or an A.P. pellet. Am I in the hands of the Americans, or the British?"

"Neither, we're Canadians, actually. My name is Stonebanks." Some of the joviality faded from his face, and it seemed to Vandersen that something sick came into his eyes. For a few moments his attention was distracted, and he glanced around his office as though seeking inspiration from the light gray walls and darker gray furniture.

"I'm not an inhumane man, Vandersen. I wouldn't be talking to you like this if I were."

"Why are you talking to me, then?"

The other lowered his eyes again. "I have ... er ... certain information to give you."

Vandersen wondered what was behind the careful hesitancy of the Canadian officer. "Which, no doubt, you are willing to disclose at a price. I'm listening, commander."

"Uh . . . look, Colonel Vandersen, I hold no animosity for you." His mouth twisted in embarrassment. "In fact, I don't even regard you as an enemy, although I am obliged to intern you."

Incredible as it was, it seemed to Vandersen that Stonebanks really believed the nonsense he was talking.

"Turn the other cheek, eh, commander? Love thine enemy as thyself."

"I said I don't regard you as an enemy, which is different from loving your enemy." Stonebanks seemed at a loss for words. There was an uncomfortable pause while he toyed with the switch of the dictowrite unit on his desk. He gave an unconscious half-sigh.

Vandersen waited patiently. He reasoned there was little else he could do, not with two guards standing behind him with sub-laserguns at the ready. There was something definitely irritating in the commandant's manner; an evasiveness, and something else which he couldn't put his finger on, but which was vaguely familiar.

"We thought we had you in the wood, you know." The commandant was smiling again. "The robotrooper had you pinned down and the mini-tanks were only meters away. That was a clever trick with the thermal grenade.

"There again; we had you pinned down at the river, till your dummyblind came on the scene. We were fooled all right until we got a spectrographic indication when we blasted the thing. You were hiding in the river when we boiled it, weren't you?"

"I have given you my name, rank and serial number, and that's all you will get, Commander." Vandersen felt better now that the pattern was emerging. Soften him up a little with compliments and sympathy; then carry on with a few questions.

Stonebanks did not seem to have heard his prisoner's curt reply. "Yeah, your dummyblinds gave us a time, sure enough. Every time we spotted one it tied half our force down for several minutes. And burning your way into that tank, now; that was something. Still, you're Vandersen, and that was just the sort of trick you might pull.

"But fixing that tank the way you did—! There was the whole of the duty watch at Mirabel standing gawking at the screen, watching them bring you in unconscious. Then our own tank suddenly swings its turret to bear on the command center—"

"You mean it destroyed the target?" In his excitement Vandersen jumped from his chair. A big hand grabbed his collar and rammed him back down. Any thoughts of retaliation he might have had were stillborn as the muzzle of the other guard's lasergun pressed coldly into his neck.

"I mean just that." Stonebank's voice held admiration. He waved the guard away from Vandersen. "The command center's defense systems would automatically engage an intruder, but would require a direct order from human personnel before firing on our own tank, and by the time our dreaming warriors had their fingers on the buttons the tank had got off about twelve shots, four of which got past the interceptors, and that was the end of Mirabel as a command unit. Our recy planes, flying over the area just after dawn, reported that your forces were in full control.

"Well, what do you say? Oh, come on man. You succeeded brilliantly, and I have nothing but respect for you."

"What do I say?" Vandersen paused, his mind reaching after the fading vision of Mara, himself and their retreat from the cares of war. In its place there stretched the bleak vista of months, or years, of captivity. "Thank you for telling me this. It is worth knowing."

There was, however, still something bothering him. There were things he did not understand; technical matters, which Stonebanks might explain. There was something more than technicalities, though; an undefinable but persistent falseness in the whole situation.

"Commander Stonebanks, as a soldier and as a man, I am grateful for what you have done for me today." He paused as the other nodded in acknowledgment. "Two points puzzle me, however—" Was it his imagination, or had Stonebanks stiffened slightly at his words?

"How did you nail me with such precision and certainty, Commander, in that black wilderness? I would have thought it easier to find a grain of soot at the bottom of a coal mine, then get a fix on me in those conditions."

"A pressure-sensitive grid, Colonel, lying in a ring around Mirabel," Stonebanks replied, his slightly apprehensive air giving way to triumph. "The latest thing from our weapons designers. A grid just below soil level, which gives a characteristic signal when a man walks over it, a signal different from that produced by a dummyblind gliding across it."

"As soon as they got an indication at Mirabel, they swung every sensor they had onto you, and with that sort of amplification they couldn't fail to pick you up. You know the rest of the story. . .

"Fair enough. My other question is, how did your people know who I was?"

That was the question. Almost before he had spoken the look of evasion came to Stonebanks. Not only evasion, however; there was something else, a preoccupation with other thoughts. Preoccupation. Vandersen suddenly realized what had haunted him since the discussion began. Stonebanks had the same air of evasion, hesitancy and preoccupation as the brigadier who had sent him on the mission. An air of unease, of concealed knowledge; of shame, almost.

Stonebanks's eyes were not on his. "It gets no easier," he muttered, half to himself. "I'm going to be blunt, Colonel. What would you say if I told you you were not Vandersen?"

"I'd say you were mad."

"Exactly. Colonel, I'd like to ask you something. What do you know about psychotrans surgery?"

Vandersen was becoming tired of the air of mystery which accompanied every utterance of Stonebanks, but he had to smile at the term used.

"It sounds like something from one of those TV space shows before the war took over every channel. No, I've never heard of it." He shook his head as Stonebanks pushed an opened packet of cigarettes towards him.

The commandant took one for himself, picked up his lighter and thumbed aside the small switchplate. Two seconds later the tiny disk exposed glowed bright red as the lighter's fuel cell supplied electrical energy.

"Personality transfer, then," said the commandant. He replaced the lighter on the desk. "Have you heard of that?"

"Heard talk of it, that's all."

"More than talk, Colonel; an established surgical technique in widespread military use."

"Commander Stonebanks," began Vandersen, annoyance rising in his tone, "are you telling me somebody's been monkeying around with my mind?"

"More than that. I said this was never easy."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Vandersen was on his feet now, lunging towards Stonebanks. All he intended was to ask the man to stop talking riddles; to pick on someone else to toy with.

The guards thought otherwise. The quicker of the pair caught Vandersen's right shoulder and spun him around. A foolhardy act, as he realized when he recovered consciousness an hour later.

The heel of Vandersen's open hand slammed with practiced ease, under the nose of the guard, snapping back his head. A hard first in the solar plexus ended the execution.

The other guard's lasergun was swinging up with deadly intent, just as Vandersen dived at his knees. The gun went spinning and guard and prisoner rolled together briefly on the planked floor. Then the guard was doubled in agony and Vandersen was crouched, the sublaser-gun in his hands leveled at the commandant's throat.

"Now, Commander," he rasped, "the truth-" He broke off at the sound of heavy boots in the corridor, followed by a thunderous hammering on the door. "Tell them to stay there, or you'll have a new mouth—in your throat"

Stonebanks had not moved during the brief struggle. All geniality gone now, he was white-faced, but his hands were flat and steady on the paperstrewn desk. His mouth and eyes were hard slits of concentration as he faced Vandersen.

"Guards," he shouted. "This is a secondary alert An aimed prisoner is in my office; do not enter."

"All right, Vandersen. I tried to break it to you gently. But you want the truth. Five years ago the medical branch of the European Weapons Ministry perfected a surgical technique with which the personality of an individual may be transferred to another person. The personality pattern and all memories of the recipient are first removed, to be replaced by those of the donor-

"You're lying!" Under a film of sweat, Vandersen's face was mottled yellow from the re-awakened pain in his shoulder.

"In addition, physical and neurological qualities such as agility, sensory response and reflex activity are largely replaced. Subjectively and, to a slightly reduced degree, in terms of performance, the recipient becomes a duplicate of the donor."

"I don't believe you. This is some filthy trick to brainwash me." The eyes were wild now, but the gun did not waver in the big hands.

"No, if s no trick. I'm sorry, but you're no more Vandersen than I am. The *real* Vandersen was killed eighteen months ago on the Arctic front. He lives on in tape form in your processing units, and in the hundreds of dupes manufactured each year. Vandersen, the most formidable, resourceful and versatile fighter of the war, the only man who can come up with a different answer every time."

The room was suddenly silent. Slowly and carefully Stonebanks lit a cigarette, and then lobbed the packet and the lighter to Vandersen, who caught them onehanded.

Vandersen sucked on the cigarette, and exhaled tiredly. "I don't believe you," he said.

"I know," replied Stonebanks, "you can't." There was a lot more he could have told his prisoner turned captor, but the words had dried up in his throat.

He could have told him that not only was Vandersen's personality printed on his mind; he was conditioned to believe he was Vandersen. He could tell him that erasure of the Vandersen print would leave him a blank, characterless amnesiac who would have to relearn everything from how to read and write to handling eating utensils, a helpless creature.

How could he tell a man, who thought he was a national hero, that in fact he was a mindless pawn, one of many anonymous thousands used by both sides in this miserable war, who had no more identity or volition than the factory-built robotrooper?

"Put the gun down," he said finally. "If you don't, you'll be cut down the second you leave this room. Those are the guards' orders, whatever the circumstances. Besides, I have something to show you."

The commandant, the remaining conscious guard, and the man who thought he was Vandersen, walked together from the room.

Blinking their eyes at the bright sunlight, they emerged into a large compound, ringed by barbed wire and high watchtowers. Five hundred prisoners were standing in rank formation.

The commandant stepped onto a platform and clicked on the microphone. "Attention men. When called, the following will take one pace forward. Vandersen—!"

All five hundred stepped forward.