

Aficionado

a short story by David Brin

Originally published as "Life in the Extreme" by Popular Science Magazine Special Edition, 8/98.

Cameras stare across a forbidden desert, monitoring disputed territory in a conflict that is so bitter the opponents cannot even agree what to name it.

One side calls the struggle a war, with countless innocent lives in jeopardy.

The other side claims there are no victims.

And so, suspicious cameras peer and pan, alert for encroachment. Vigilant camouflaged monitors scan from atop hills or under innocuous piles of stones. They hang beneath highway culverts, probing constantly for a hated enemy. For some time -- months, at least -- these guardians have succeeded in staving off incursions across the sandy desolation.

That is, until technology changes yet again, shifting the advantage briefly from defense to offense.

When the enemy struck this time, their first move was to take out those guardian eyes.

Infiltrators arrived at dawn, under the glare of the rising sun. Several hundred little flying machines jettied through the air, skimming very low to the ground on gusts from whispering motors. Each device, no larger than a hummingbird, followed a carefully-scouted path toward its selected target, some stationary camera or sensor. The attackers even looked like native desert birds, in case they were spotted during those crucial last seconds.

Each little drone landed behind the target, in its blind spot, and unfolded wings that transformed into a high resolution graphics displays, depicting perfect false images of the same desert scene. Each robot inserted its illusion in front of the guardian lens -- carefully, so as not to create a suspicious flicker. Other small spy-machines sniffed out camouflaged seismic sensors and embraced them gently, providing new cushioning that would mask the tremors to come.

The robotic attack, covering an area of more than a hundred square kilometers, took only eight minutes to complete. The desert now lay unwatched, undefended.

From over the horizon, giant vehicles started moving in. They converged along several roadways toward the same open area -- seventeen quiet, hybrid-electric rigs... tractor trailers disguised as commercial cargo transports, complete with company holo-logos blazoned on their sides. But when their paths intersected at the chosen rendezvous, a more cryptic purpose revealed itself. Crews wearing dun-colored jumpsuits leaped from the cabs to start unlashng container sections. Auxiliary generators set to work. The air began to swirl with shimmering waves of exotic stench, as pungent volatiles gushed from storage tanks to fill pressurized vessels. Electronic consoles sprang to life, and hinged panels fell away from the trailers, revealing long, tapered objects that lay on slanted ramps.

With a steady whine, each cigar shape lifted its nose from horizontal to vertical, aiming skyward, while stabilizer fins popped open at the tail end. Shouts between the work crews grew more tense as a series of tightly

coordinated countdowns commenced. There wouldn't be much time to spare before the enemy -- sophisticated and wary -- picked up enough clues and figured out what was going on.

Soon every missile was aimed... launch sequences engaged... and targets acquired. All they lacked were payloads.

Abruptly, a dozen figures emerged from an air conditioned van, wearing snug suits of shimmering material and garishly painted helmets. Each one carried a small satchel that hummed and whirred, pumping air to keep the suit cool. Several had trouble walking normally. Their gait seemed rubbery, as if both excited and anxious at the same time. One of the smaller figures even briefly skipped.

A dour-looking woman wearing a badge and a uniform awaited them, holding a clipboard. She confronted the tallest figure, whose helmet bore a motif of flames surrounding a screaming mouth.

"Name and scan," she demanded in a level tone of voice.

The helmet visor swiveled back, revealing a heavily tanned face, about thirty, with eyes the color of a cold sea.

"Hacker Torrey," he said, as her clipboard automatically sought his left iris, reading its unique patterns to confirm his ID. "And yes," he continued. "I affirm that I'm doing this of my own free will. Can we get on with it?"

"Your permits seem to be in order," she replied, unhurriedly. "Your liability bond and waivers have been accepted. The government won't stand in your way."

The tall man shrugged, as if the statement was both expected and irrelevant. He flung the visor back down. There were other forces to worry about, more formidable than mere government. Forces who were desperate to prevent what was about to take place here.

At a signal, all of the suited figures rushed to ladders that launch crew members braced against the side of each rocket. Each hurried up the makeshift gantry and, slipping inside a narrow capsule, squirmed into the cramped couch with unconscious grace, having practiced the motions hundreds of times. Even the novices knew exactly what they were doing. What the dangers might be. The costs and the rewards.

Hatches slammed shut and hissed as they sealed. Muffled shouts could be heard as final preparations were completed.

The countdown for the first missile reached zero.

"Yeeeeee-haw!" Hacker Torrey shouted, before a violent kick of ignition flattened him against the airbed. He had done this several times before, yet the sheer ecstatic rush of this moment beat anything else on Earth.

Soon, he would no longer even be part of the Earth... for a little while.

Seconds passed amid a brutal shaking as the rocket clawed its way skyward. A mammoth hand seemed to plant itself on his chest and shove, expelling half the contents of his lungs in a moan of sweet agony. Friction heat and ionization licked the transparent nose cone just inches from his face. Shooting toward the heavens at Mach 15, he felt pinned, helplessly immobile... and completely omnipotent.

I'm a freaking god!

Somehow he drew enough breath to let out another cry -- this time a shout of elated greeting as black space spread before the missile's bubble nose, flecked by a million glittering stars.

Back on the ground, the last rocket was gone. Frenetic cleanup efforts then began, even more anxious than setup had been. Reports from distant warning posts told of incoming flying machines, racing toward the launch site at high speed. Men and women sprinted back and forth across the scorched desert sand, packing up to depart before the enemy arrived.

Only the government official moved languidly, using computerized scanners, meticulously adding up the damage to vegetation, erodible soils, and tiny animals. It was pretty bad, but localized, without appreciable effect on endangered species. A reconditioning service had already been called for. Of course that would not satisfy everybody....

She handed over an estimated bill as the last team member revved his hybrid engine, impatient to be off.

"Aw, man!" he complained, reading the total. "Our club will barely break even on this launch!"

"Then pick a less expensive hobby," she replied, and stepped back as the driver gunned his truck, roaring away in a cloud of dust, incidentally crushing one more small barrel cactus enroute to the highway. The vigilant monitoring system in her clipboard noted this and made an addendum to the excursion society's final bill.

Sitting on the hood of her jeep, she waited for another "club" to arrive. One whose members were just as passionate as the rocketeers. Just as skilled and dedicated, even though both groups hated each other. Sensors announced they were near, coming fast from the west -- radical environmentalists whose no-compromise aim was to preserve nature at all costs.

The official knew what to expect when they arrived, frustrated to find their opponents gone and two acres of precious desert singed. She was going to get another tongue-lashing for being "evenhanded" in a situation where so many insisted you could only choose sides.

Oh well, she thought. It takes a thick skin to work in government nowadays. Nobody thinks you matter much. They don't respect us like in the old days.

Looking up, she watched the last of the rocket contrails start to shear apart, ripped by stratospheric winds. For some reason it always tugged the heart. And while her intellectual sympathies lay closer to the eco-enthusiasts, a part of her deep inside thrilled each time she witnessed one of these launches. So ecstatic -- almost orgiastic -- and joyfully unrestrained.

"Go!" She whispered with a touch of secret envy toward the distant glitters, already arcing over the pinnacle of their brief climb and starting their long plummet toward the Gulf of Mexico.

Hacker Torrey found out something was wrong, just after the stars blurred out.

New flames flickered around the edges of his heat shield, probing every crevice, seeking a way inside. These flickers announced the start of re-entry, one of the best parts of this expensive ride, when his plummeting capsule would shake and resonate, filling every blood vessel with more exhilaration

than you could get anywhere this side of New Vegas. Some called this the new "superextreme hobby"... more dangerous than any other sport and much too costly for anybody but an elite to afford. That fact attracted some rich snobs, who bought tickets just to prove they could, and wound up puking in their respirators or screaming in terror during the long plunge back to Earth.

As far as Hacker was concerned, those fools only got what they deserved. The whole point of having money was to do stuff with it! And if you weren't meant to ride a rocket, you could always find a million other hobbies....

An alarm throbbed. He didn't hear it -- his eardrums had been drugged and clamped to protect them during the flight. Instead, he felt the tremor through a small implant in his lower jaw. In a simple pulse code the computer told him.

GUIDANCE SYSTEM ERROR...
FLIGHT PATH CORRECTION MISFIRED...
CALCULATING TRAJECTORY TO NEW IMPACT ZONE...

"What?" Hacker shouted, though the rattle and roar of re-entry tore away his words. "To hell with that! I paid for a triple redundancy system --"

He stopped, realizing it was pointless to scream at the computer, which he had installed himself, after all.

"Call the pickup boats and tell them --"

COMMUNICATION SYSTEM ENCRYPTION ERROR...
UNABLE TO UPLOAD PRE-ARRANGED SPECTRUM SPREAD...
UNABLE TO CONTACT RECOVERY TEAMS...

"Override encryption! Send in the clear. Acknowledge!"

No answer came. The pulses in his jaw dissolved into a plaintive, juttering rhythm as sub-processors continued their mysterious crapout. Hacker cursed, pounding the wall of the capsule with his fist. Most amateur rocketeers spent years building their own sub-orbital craft, but Hacker had paid plenty for a "first class" pro model. Someone would answer for this incompetence!

Of course he'd signed waivers. Hacker would have little recourse under the International Extreme Sports Treaty. But there were fifty thousand private investigation and enforcement services on Earth. He knew a few that would bend the uniform ethics guidelines of the Cop Guild, if paid enough in advance.

"You are gonna pay for this!" He vowed, without knowing yet who should get the brunt of his vengeance. The words were only felt as raw vibrations in his throat. Even the sonic pickups in his mandible hit their overload set points and cut out, as turbulence hit a level matching any he had ever known... then went beyond. The angle of re-entry isn't ideal anymore, he realized. And these little sport-capsules don't leave much margin.

I could be a very rich cinder... any moment now.

The realization added a new dimension that had not been there during any of his previous amateur sub-orbital flights. One part of Hacker actually seemed to relish a novel experience, scraping each nerve with a howling veer past death. Another portion could not let go of the galling fact that somebody had goofed. He wasn't getting what he'd paid for.

The world still shook and harsh straps tugged his battered body when Hacker

awoke. Only now the swaying, rocking motion seemed almost restful, taking him back to childhood, when his family used to "escape civilization" on their trimaran wingsail yacht, steering its stiff, upright airfoil straight through gusts that would topple most other wind-driven vessels.

"Idiots!" Hacker's father used to grumble, each time he veered the agile craft to avoiding colliding with some day-tripper who didn't grasp the concept of right-of-way. "The only ones out here used to be people like us, who were raised for this sort of thing. Now the robofacts make so much stuff, even fancy boats, and everybody's got so much free time. Nine billion damn tourists crowding everywhere. It's impossible to find any solitude!"

"The price of prosperity, dear," his mother would reply, more soft-heartedly. "At least everybody's getting enough to eat now. And there's no more talk of revolution."

"But look at the result! This mad craze for hobbies! Everybody's got to be an expert at something. The best at something! I tell you it was better when people had to work hard to survive."

"Except for people like us?"

"Exactly," Father had answered, ignoring his wife's arch tone. "Look how far we have to go nowadays, just to have someplace all to ourselves."

The old man's faith in rugged self-reliance extended to the name he insisted on giving their son. And Hacker inherited -- along with about a billion New Dollars -- the same quest. To do whatever it took to find someplace all his own.

As blurry vision returned, he saw that the space pod lay tilted more than halfway over to its side. It's not supposed to do that, he thought. It should float upright.

A glance to the left explained everything. Ocean surrounded the capsule, but part of the charred heat shield was snagged on a reef of coral branches and spikes that stretched far to the distance, filled with bright fish and undulating subsea vegetation. Nearby, he saw the parasail chute that had softened final impact. Only now, caught by ocean currents, it rhythmically tugged at Hacker's little refuge. With each surge, the bubble canopy plunged closer to a craggy coral outcrop. Soon it struck hard. He did not hear the resulting loud bang, but it made the implant in his jaw throb. Hacker winced, reflexively.

Fumbling, he released the straps and fell over, cringing in pain. That awful re-entry would leave him bruised for weeks. And yet...

And yet, I'll have the best story to tell. No one will be able to match it!

The thought made him feel so good, Hacker decided maybe he wouldn't take everything, when he sued whoever was responsible for the capsule malfunction. Providing the pickup boats came soon, that is.

The bubble nose struck coral again, rattling his bones. A glance told him a hard truth. Materials designed to withstand launch and re-entry stresses might not resist sharp impacts. An ominous crack began to spread.

Standard advice was to stay put and wait for pickup, but this place would be a coffin soon.

I better get out of here.

Hacker flipped his helmet shut and grabbed the emergency exit lever. A reef should mean an island's nearby. Maybe mainland. I'll hoof it ashore, borrow someone's phone, and start dishing out hell.

Only there was no island. Nothing lay in sight but more horrible reef.

Hacker floundered in a choppy undertow. The skin-suit was strong, and his helmet had been made of Gillstuff -- semi-permeable to draw oxygen from seawater. The technology prevented drowning as currents kept yanking him down. But repeated hits by coral outcrops would turn him into hamburger meat soon.

Once, a wave carried him high enough to look around. Ocean, and more ocean. The reef must be a drowned atoll. No boats. No land. No phone.

Sucked below again, he glimpsed the space capsule, caught in a hammer-and-vice wedge and getting smashed to bits. I'm next, he thought, trying to swim for open water, but with each surge he was drawn closer to the same deadly site. Panic clogged his senses as he thrashed and kicked the water, fighting it like some overpowering enemy. Nothing worked, though. Hacker could not even hear his own terrified moans, though the jaw implant kept throbbing with clicks, pulses and weird vibrations, as if the sea had noticed his plight and now watched with detached interest.

Here it comes, he thought, turning away, knowing the next wave cycloid would smash him against those obdurate, rocky spikes.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp poke in the backside. Too early! Another jab, then another, struck the small of his back, feeling nothing like coral. His jaw ached with strange noise as someone or something started pushing him away from the coral anvil. In both panic and astonishment, Hacker whirled to glimpse a sleek, bottle-nosed creature interposed between him and the deadly reef, regarding him curiously, then moving to jab him again with a narrow beak.

This time, he heard his own moan of relief. A dolphin! He reached out for salvation... and after a brief hesitation, the creature let Hacker wrap his arms all around. Then it kicked hard with powerful tail flukes, carrying him away from certain oblivion.

Once in open water, he tried to keep up by swimming alongside his rescuer. But the cetacean grew impatient and resumed pushing Hacker along with its nose. Like hauling an invalid. Which he was, of course, in this environment.

Soon, two more dolphins converged from the left, then another pair from the right. They vocalized a lot, combining sonar clicks with loud squeals that resonated through the crystal waters. Of course Hacker had seen dolphins on countless nature shows, and even played tag with some once, on a diving trip. But soon he started noticing some strange traits shared by this group. For instance, these animals took turns making complex sounds, while glancing at each other or pointing with their beaks... almost as if they were holding conversations. He could swear they were gesturing toward him and sharing amused comments at his expense.

Of course it must be an illusion. Everyone knew that scientists had determined *Truncatus* dolphin intelligence. They were indeed very bright animals -- about chimpanzee equivalent -- but had no true, human-level speech of their own.

And yet, watching a mother lead her infant toward the lair of a big octopus, he heard the baby's quizzical squeaks alternate with slow repetitions from the

parent. Hacker felt sure a particular syncopated popping meant octopus.

Occasionally, one of them would point its bulbous brow toward Hacker, and suddenly the implant in his jaw pulse-clicked like mad. It almost sounded like the code he had learned in order to communicate with the space capsule after his inner ears were clamped to protect them during flight. Hacker concentrated on those vibrations in his jaw, for lack of anything else to listen to.

His suspicions roused further when mealtime came. Out of the east there arrived a big dolphin who apparently had a fishing net snared around him! The sight provoked an unusual sentiment in Hacker -- pity, combined with guilt over what human negligence had done to the poor animal. He slid a knife from his thigh sheath and moved toward the victim, aiming to cut it free.

Another dolphin blocked Hacker. "I'm just trying to help!" He complained, then stopped, staring as other members of the group grabbed the net along one edge. They pulled backward as the "victim" rolled round and round, apparently unharmed. The net unwrapped smoothly till twenty meters flapped free. Ten members of the pod then held it open while others circled behind a nearby school of mullet.

Beaters! Hacker recognized the hunting technique. They'll drive fish into the net! But how --

He watched, awed as the dolphins expertly cornered and snared their meal, divvied up the catch, then tidied up by rolling the net back around the original volunteer, who sped off to the east. Well I'm a blue-nosed gopher, he mused. Then one of his rescuers approached Hacker with a fish clutched in its jaws. It made offering motions, but then yanked back when he reached for it.

The jaw implant repeated a rhythm over and over. It's trying to teach me, he realized.

"Is that the pulse code for fish?" He asked, knowing water would carry his voice, but never expecting the creature to grasp spoken English.

To his amazement, the dolphin shook its head. No.

"Uh." He continued. "Does it mean food? Eat? Welcome stranger?"

An approving blat greeted his final guess, and the Tursiops flicked the mullet toward Hacker, who felt suddenly ravenous. He tore the fish apart, stuffing bits through his helmet's chowlock.

Welcome stranger? He pondered. That's mighty abstract for a dumb beast to say. Though I'll admit, it's friendly.

That day passed, and then a tense night that he spent clutching a sleeping dolphin by moonlight, while clouds of phosphorescent plankton drifted by. Fortunately, the same selective-permeability technology that enabled his helmet to draw oxygen from the sea also provided a trickle of fresh water, filling a small reservoir near his cheek. I've got to buy stock in this company, he thought, making a checklist for when he was picked up tomorrow.

Only pickup never came. The next morning and afternoon passed pretty much the same, without catching sight of land or boats. The world always felt so crowded, he thought. Now it seems endless and unexplored.

Hacker started earning his meals by helping hold the fishing net when the group harvested dinner. The second night he felt more relaxed, dozing while

the dolphins' clickety gossip seemed to flow up his jaw and into his dreams. On the third morning, and each of those that followed, he felt he understood just a bit more of their simple language.

He lost track of how many days and nights passed. Slowly, Hacker stopped worrying about where the pickup boats could be. Angry thoughts about lawsuits and revenge rubbed away under relentless massaging by current and tide. Immersed in the dolphins' communal sound field, he began concerning himself instead with daily problems of the Tribe, like when two young males got into a fight, smacking each other with their beaks and flukes until adults had to forcibly separate them. Using both sign language and his growing vocabulary of click-code, Hacker learned that a female (whose complex name he shortened to "Chee-Chee") was in heat. The young brawlers held little hope of mating with her. Still, their nervous energy needed an outlet. At least no one had been seriously harmed.

An oldtimer -- Kray-Kray -- shyly presented a pectoral fin to Hacker, who used his knife to dig out several wormlike parasites. "You should see a real doctor," he urged, as if one gave verbal advice to dolphins every day.

Helpers go away, Kray-Kray tried to explain in click code. Fins need hands. Helper hands.

It supported Hacker's theory that something had been done to these creatures. An alteration that had made them distinctly different than others of their species. But what? The mystery grew each time he witnessed some behavior that just couldn't be natural.

Then, one day the whole Tribe grew excited, spraying nervous clicks everywhere. Soon Hacker saw they were approaching an undersea habitat dome hidden in a narrow canyon, near a coast where waves met shore.

Shore.... The word tasted strange after all these days -- weeks? -- spent languidly swimming, listening, and learning to enjoy raw fish. Time had different properties down here. It felt odd to contemplate leaving this watery realm, returning where he clearly belonged -- the surface world of air, earth, cities, machines, and nine billion humans, forced to inhale each others' humid breath everywhere they went.

That's why we dive into our own worlds. Ten thousand hobbies. A million ways to be special, each person striving to be expert at some arcane art... like rocketing into space. Psychologists approved, saying that frenetic amateurism was a much healthier response than the most likely alternative -- war. They called this the "Century of Aficionados," a time when governments and professional societies could not keep up with private expertise, which spread at lightning speed across the WorldNet. A renaissance, lacking only a clear sense of purpose.

The prospect of soon rejoining that culture left Hacker pensive. What's the point of so much obsessive activity, unless it leads toward something worthwhile?

The dolphins voiced a similar thought in their simple but expressive click-language.

If you're good at diving -- dive for fish! #
If you have a fine voice -- sing for others! #
If you're great at leaping -- bite the sun!

Hacker knew he should clamber up the nearby beach now to call his partners and

brokers. Tell them he was alive. Get back to business. But instead he followed his new friends to the hidden habitat dome. Maybe I'll learn what's been done to them, and why.

Swimming under and through a portal pool, he was surprised to find the place deserted. No humans anywhere. Finally, Hacker saw a hand-scrawled sign.

Project Uplift Suspended!

We ran out of cash. Court costs ate everything.

This structure is deeded to our finned friends.

Be nice to them.

May they someday join us as equals.

There followed a WorldNet access number, verifying that the little dolphin clan actually owned this building, which they now used to store their nets, toys and a few tools. But Hacker knew from their plaintive calls the real reason they kept coming back. Each time they hoped to find that their "hand-friends" had returned.

Unsteady on rubbery legs, he crept from the pool to look in various chambers. Laboratories, mostly. In one, he recognized a gene-splicing apparatus made by one of his own companies.

Project Uplift? Oh yes. I remember hearing about this.

It had been featured in the news, a year or two ago. Both professional and amateur media had swarmed over a small group of "kooks" whose aim was to alter several animal species, giving them human-level intelligence. Foes of all kinds had attacked the endeavor. Religions called it sacrilegious. Eco-enthusiasts decried meddling in Nature's wisdom. Tolerance-fetishists demanded that native dolphin "culture" be left alone, while others rifkined the proposal, predicting mutants would escape the labs to endanger humanity. One problem with diversity in an age of amateurs was that your hobby might attract ire from a myriad others, especially those whose particular passion was indignant disapproval, with a bent for litigation.

This "Uplift Project" could not survive the rough-and-tumble battle that ensued. A great many modern endeavors didn't.

Survival of the fittest, he mused. An enterprise this dramatic and controversial has to attract strong support, or it's doomed.

He glanced back at the pool, where members of the Tribe had taken up a game of water polo, calling fouls and shouting at each other as they batted a ball from one goal to the next, keeping score with raucous sonar clicks.

Hacker wondered. Would the "uplift" changes carry through from one generation to the next? Could this new genome spread among wild dolphins? If so, might the project have already succeeded beyond its founders' dreams, or its detractors' worst nightmare?

What if the work resumed, finishing what got started here? Would it enrich our lives to argue philosophy with a dolphin? Or to collaborate with a smart chimp, at work or at play? If other species speak and start creating new things, will they be treated as equals -- as co-members of our civilization -- or as the next discriminated class?

Some critics were probably right. For humans to attempt such a thing would be like an orphaned and abused teen trying to foster a wild baby. There were bound to be mistakes and tragedies along the way.

Are we good enough? Wise enough? Do we deserve such power?

It wasn't the sort question Hacker used to ask himself. He felt changed by his experience at sea. At the same time, he realized that just asking the question was part of the answer.

Maybe it'll work both ways. They say you only grow while helping others.

His father would have called that "romantic nonsense." And yet...

Exploring one of the laboratories, Hacker found a cheap but working phone that someone had left behind -- then had to work at a lab bench for an hour, modifying it to tap the sonic implant in his jaw. He was about to call his manager and broker -- before they had a chance to declare him dead and start liquidating his empire. But then Hacker stopped.

He paused, then keyed the code for his lawyer instead.

At first Gloria Bickerton could not believe he survived. She wouldn't stop shouting with joy. I didn't know anyone liked me that much, he mused, carrying the phone back to the dome's atrium. He arrived in time to witness the water polo game conclude in a frothy finale.

"Before you arrange a pickup, there's something I want you to do for me," he told Gloria, after she calmed down. Hacker gave her the WorldNet codes for the Uplift Project, and asked her to find out everything about it, including the current disposition of its assets and technology -- and how to contact the experts whose work had been interrupted here.

Gloria asked him why. He started to reply.

"I think I've come up with a new..."

Hacker stopped there, having almost said the word hobby. But suddenly he realized that he had never felt this way about anything before. Not even the exhilaration of rocketry. For the first time he burned with a real ambition. Something worth fighting for.

In the pool, several members of the Tribe were now busy winding their precious net around the torso of the biggest male, preparing to go foraging again. Hacker overheard them gossiping as they worked, and chuckled when he understood one of their crude jokes. A good natured jibe at his expense.

Well, a sense of humor is a good start. Our civilization could use more of that.

"I think --" He resumed telling his lawyer.

"I think I know what I want to do with my life."

THE END