

Project Hush
By William Tenn

I guess I'm just a stickler, a perfectionist, but if you do a thing, I always say, you might as well do it right. Everything satisfied me about the security measures on our assignment except one--the official Army designation. Project Hush.

I don't know who thought it up, and I certainly would never ask, but whoever it was, he should have known better. Damn it, when you want a project kept secret, you don't give it a designation like that! You give it something neutral, some name like the Manhattan and Overlord they used in World War II, which won't excite anybody's curiosity.

But we were stuck with Project Hush and we had to take extra measures to ensure secrecy. A couple of times a week, everyone on the project had to report to Psycho for DD & HA--dream detailing and hypnoanalysis--instead of the usual monthly visit. Naturally, the commanding general of the heavily fortified research post to which we were attached could not ask what we were doing, under penalty of court-martial, but he had to be given further instructions to shut off his imagination like a faucet every time he heard an explosion. Some idiot in Washington was actually going to list Project Hush in the military budget by name! It took fast action, I can tell you, to have it entered under Miscellaneous "X" Research.

Well, we'd covered the unforgivable blunder, though not easily, and now we could get down to the real business of the project. You know, of course, about the A-bomb, H-bomb, and C-bomb because information that they existed had been declassified. You don't know about the other weapons being devised--and neither did we, reasonably enough, since they weren't our business--but we had been given properly guarded notification that they were in the works. Project Hush was set up to counter the new weapons.

Our goal was not just to reach the Moon. We had done that on June 24, 1967 with an unmanned ship that carried instruments to report back data on soil, temperature, cosmic rays and so on. Unfortunately, it was put out of commission by a rock slide.

An unmanned rocket would be useless against the new weapons. We had to get to the Moon before any other country did and set up a permanent station--an armed one--and do it without anybody else knowing about it.

I guess you see now why we on (damn the name!) Project Hush were so concerned about security. But we felt pretty sure, before we took off, that we had plugged every possible leak.

We had, all right. Nobody even knew we had raised ship.

We landed at the northern tip of Mare Nubium, just off Regiomontanus, and, after planting a flag with appropriate throat-catching ceremony, had swung into the realities of the tasks we had practiced on so many dry runs back on Earth.

Major Monroe Gridley prepared the big rocket, with its tiny cubicle of living space, for the return journey to Earth which he alone would make.

Lieutenant-colonel Thomas Hawthorne painstakingly examined our provisions and portable quarters for any damage that might have been incurred in landing.

And I, Colonel Benjamin Rice, first commanding officer of Army Base No. 1 on the Moon, dragged crate after enormous crate out of the ship on my aching academic back and piled them in the spot two hundred feet away where the plastic dome would be built.

We all finished at just about the same time, as per schedule, and went into Phase Two.

Monroe and I started work on building the dome. It was a simple prefab affair, but big enough to require an awful lot of assembling. Then, after it was built, we faced the real problem--getting all the complex internal machinery in place and in operating order.

Meanwhile, Tom Hawthorne took his plump self off in the single-seater rocket

which, up to then, had doubled as a life-boat.

The schedule called for him to make a rough three-hour scouting survey in an ever-widening spiral from our dome. This had been regarded as a probable waste of time, rocket fuel, and manpower--but a necessary precaution. He was supposed to watch for such things as bug-eyed monsters out for a stroll on the Lunar landscape. Basically, however, Tom's survey was intended to supply extra geological and astronomical meat for the report which Monroe was to carry back to Army Headquarters on Earth.

Tom was back in forty minutes. His round face, inside its transparent bubble helmet, was fish-belly white. And so were ours, once he told us what he'd seen.

He had seen another dome.

"The other side of Mare Nubium--in the Rhiphaen Mountains," he babbled excitedly. "It's a little bigger than ours, and it's a little flatter on top. And it's not translucent, either, with splotches of different colors here and there--it's a dull, dark, heavy gray. But that's all there is to see."

"No markings on the dome?" I asked worriedly. "No signs of anyone--or anything--around it?"

"Neither, Colonel." I noticed he was calling me by my rank for the first time since the trip started, which meant he was saying in effect, "Man, have you got a decision to make!"

"Hey, Tom," Monroe put in. "Couldn't be just a regularly shaped bump in the ground, could it?"

"I'm a geologist, Monroe. I can distinguish artificial from natural topography. Besides--" he looked up--"I just remembered something I left out. There's a brand-new tiny crater near the dome--the kind usually left by a rocket exhaust."

"Rocket exhaust?" I seized on that. "Rockets, eh?"

Tom grinned a little sympathetically. "Spaceship exhaust, I should have said. You can't tell from the crater what kind of propulsive device these characters are using. It's not the same kind of crater our rear-jets leave, if that helps any."

Of course it didn't. So we went into our ship and had a council of war. And I do mean war. Both Tom and Monroe were calling me Colonel in every other sentence. I used their first names every chance I got.

Still, no one but me could reach a decision. About what to do, I mean.

"Look," I said at last, "here are the possibilities. They know we are here--either from watching us land a couple of hours ago or from observing Tom's scoutship--or they do not know we are here. They are either humans from Earth--in which case they are in all probability enemy nationals--or they are alien creatures from another planet--in which case they may be friends, enemies or what-have-you. I think common sense and standard military procedure demand that we consider them hostile until we have evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, we proceed with extreme caution, so as not to precipitate an interplanetary war with potentially friendly Martians, or whatever they are.

"All right. It's vitally important that Army Headquarters be informed of this immediately. But since Moon-to-Earth radio is still on the drawing boards, the only way we can get through is to send Monroe back with the ship. If we do, we run the risk of having our garrison force, Tom and me, captured while he's making the return trip. In that case, their side winds up in possession of important information concerning our personnel and equipment, while our side has only the bare knowledge that somebody or something else has a base on the Moon. So our primary need is more information.

"Therefore, I suggest that I sit in the dome on one end of a telephone hookup with Tom, who will sit in the ship, his hand over the firing button, ready to blast off for Earth the moment he gets the order from me. Monroe will take the single-seater down to the Rhiphad Mountains, landing as close to the other dome as he thinks safe. He will then proceed the rest of the way on foot, doing the best scouting job he can in a spacesuit.

"He will not use his radio, except for agreed-upon non-sense syllables to

designate landing the single-seater, coming upon the dome by foot, and warning me to tell Tom to take off. If he's captured, remembering that the first purpose of a scout is acquiring and transmitting knowledge of the enemy, he will snap his suit radio on full volume and pass on as much data as time and the enemy's reflexes permit. How does that sound to you?"

They both nodded. As far as they were concerned, the command decision had been made. But I was sitting under two inches of sweat.

"One question," Tom said. "Why did you pick Monroe for the scout?"

"I was afraid you'd ask that," I told him. "We're three extremely unathletic Ph.D's who have been in the Army since we finished our schooling. There isn't too much choice. But I remembered that Monroe is half Indian--Arapahoe, isn't it, Monroe?--and I'm hoping blood will tell."

"Only trouble, Colonel," Monroe said slowly as he rose, "is that I'm one-fourth Indian and even that . . . Didn't I ever tell you that my great-grandfather was the only Arapahoe scout who was with Custer at the Little Big Horn? He'd been positive Sitting Bull was miles away. However, I'll do my best. And if I heroically don't come back, would you please persuade the Security Officer of our section to clear my name for use in the history books? Under the circumstances, I think it's the least he could do."

I promised to do my best, of course.

After he took off, I sat in the dome over the telephone connection to Tom and hated myself for picking Monroe to do the job. But I'd have hated myself just as much for picking Tom. And if anything happened and I had to tell Tom to blast off, I'd probably be sitting here in the dome all by myself after that, waiting . . .

"Broz neggled" came over the radio in Monroe's resonant voice. He had landed the single-seater.

I didn't dare use the telephone to chat with Tom in the ship, for fear I might miss an important word or phrase from our scout. So I sat and sat and strained my ears. After a while, I heard "Mishgashul" which told me that Monroe was in the neighborhood of the other dome and was creeping toward it under cover of whatever boulders were around.

And then, abruptly, I heard Monroe yell my name and there was a terrific clattering in my headphones. Radio interference! He'd been caught, and whoever had caught him had simultaneously jammed his suit transmitter with a larger transmitter from the alien dome.

Then there was silence.

After a while, I told Tom what had happened. He just said, "Poor Monroe." I had a good idea of what his expression was like.

"Look, Tom," I said, "if you take off now, you still won't have anything important to tell. After capturing Monroe, whatever's in that other dome will come looking for us, I think. I'll let them get close enough for us to learn something of their appearance--at least if they're human or non-human. Any bit of information about them is important. I'll shout it up to you and you'll still be able to take off in plenty of time. All right?"

"You're the boss, Colonel," he said in a mournful voice. "Lots of luck."

And then there was nothing to do but wait. There was no oxygen system in the dome yet, so I had to squeeze up a sandwich from the food compartment in my suit. I sat there, thinking about the expedition. Nine years, and all that careful secrecy, all that expenditure of money and mind-cracking research--and it had come to this. Waiting to be wiped out, in a blast from some unimaginable weapon. I understood Monroe's last request. We often felt we were so secret that our immediate superiors didn't even want us to know what we were working on. Scientists are people--they wish for recognition, too. I was hoping the whole expedition would be written up in the history books, but it looked unpromising.

Two hours later, the scout ship landed near the dome. The lock opened and, from where I stood in the open door of our dome, I saw Monroe come out and

walk toward me.

I alerted Tom and told him to listen carefully. "It may be a trick--he might be drugged. . . ."

He didn't act drugged, though--not exactly. He pushed his way past me and sat down on a box to one side of the dome. He put his booted feet up on another, smaller box. "How are you, Ben?" he asked. "How's every little thing?" I grunted. "Well?" I know my voice skittered a bit.

He pretended puzzlement. "Well what? Oh, I see what you mean. The other dome--you want to know who's in it. You have a right to be curious, Ben. Certainly. The leader of a top-secret expedition like this--Project Hush they call us, huh, Ben--finds another dome on the Moon. He thinks he's been the first to land on it, so naturally he wants to--"

"Major Monroe Gridley!" I rapped out. "You will come to attention and deliver your report. Now!" Honestly, I felt my neck swelling up inside my helmet.

Monroe just leaned back against the side of the dome. "That's the Army way of doing things," he commented admiringly. "Like the recruits say, there's a right way, a wrong way and an Army way. Only there are other ways, too." He chuckled. "Lots of other ways."

"He's off," I heard Tom whisper over the telephone. "Ben, Monroe has gone and blown his stack."

"They aren't extraterrestrials in the other dome, Ben," Monroe volunteered in a sudden burst of sanity. "No, they're human, all right, and from Earth. Guess where."

"I'll kill you," I warned him. "I swear I'll kill you, Monroe. Where are they from--Russia, China, Argentina?"

He grimaced. "What's so secret about those places? Go on!--guess again."

I stared at him long and hard. "The only place else--"

"Sure," he said. "You got it, Colonel. The other dome is owned and operated by the Navy. The goddam United States Navy!"