

# The War Is Over

## Algis Budrys

Illustration by Kandis Elliot

A slow wind was rolling over the dusty plateau where the spaceship was being fueled, and Frank Simpson, waiting in his flight coveralls, drew his nictitating membranes across his stinging eyes. He continued to stare abstractedly at the gleaming, just-completed hull.

Overhead, Castle's cold sun glowed wanly down through the ice-crystal clouds. A line of men stretched from the block-and-tackle hoist at the plateau's edge to the exposed fuel racks at the base of the riveted hull. As each naked fuel slug was hauled up from the plain, it passed from hand to hand, from man to man, and so to its place in the ship. A reserve labor pool stood quietly to one side. As a man faltered in the working line, a reserve stepped into his place. Sick, dying men staggered to a place set aside for them, out of the work's way, and slumped down there, waiting. Some of them had been handling the fuel since it came out of the processing pile, three hundred miles across the plains in a straight line, nearer five hundred by wagon track. Simpson did not wonder they were dying, nor paid them any attention. His job was the ship, and he'd be at it soon.

He wiped at the film of dirt settling on his cheeks, digging it out of the serrations in his hide with a horny forefingernail. Looking at the ship, he found himself feeling nothing new. He was neither impressed with its size, pleased by the innate grace of its design, nor excited by anticipation of its goal. He felt nothing but the old, old driving urgency to get aboard, lock the locks, throw the switches, fire the engines, and go--go! From birth, probably, from first intelligent self-awareness certainly, that drive had loomed over everything else like a demon just behind his back. Everyone of these men on this plateau felt the same thing. Only Simpson was going, but he felt no triumph in it.

He turned his back on a particularly vicious puff of dust and found himself looking in the direction of Castle town, far over the horizon on the other side of the great plains that ended at the foot of this plateau.

Castle town was his birthplace. He thought to himself, with sardonic logic, that he could hardly have had any other. Where else on Castle did anyone live but in Castle town? He remembered his family's den with no special sentimental affection. But, standing here in the thin cold, bedeviled by dust, he appreciated it in memory. It was a snug, comfortable place to be, with the rich, moist smell of the earth surrounding him. There was a ramp up to the surface, and at the ramp's head were the few square yards of ground hard-packed by the weight of generations of his family lying ecstatically in the infrequently warm sun.

He hunched his shoulders against the cold of the plateau, and a wish that he was back on the other side of the plains, where Castle town spread on one side of the broad hill above a quiet creek, crept past the demon that had brought him here.

The thought of Castle town reminded him of his father--"This is the generation, Frank! *This is* the generation that'll see the ship finished, and one of us going. It could be you, Frank!"--and of the long process, some of it hard work, some of it inherent aptitude, some of it luck, that had brought him here to pilot this ship into the stars.

And, having brought his reverie back to the ship, he turned away from the plains and Castle town, looking at the ship.

Generations in the building, and generations in the learning how before the first strut was riveted to the first former. The search, the world over, for a fuel source. Literally hundreds of exploring teams, some of them never coming back, disappearing into the uncharted lands that surrounded the plains. The find, at last, and the building of the pile. The processing of the fuel that killed its handlers, no one knew why.

The ship, rising here on this plateau year by slow year, at the focus of the wagon tracks that led out to the orepits and the metalworkers' shops where swearing apprentices struggled with hot melt splashing into the molds, and others tore their hands to tatters, filing the flash off the castings.

The hoist operators, hauling each piece up the side of the plateau because this had been the place to build the ship, up where the air was thin and the ground was thousands of feet below, and the patient teamsters, plodding up with new wagonloads, the traces sunk deep in their calloused shoulders.

Now it had all culminated, and he could go.

The crunch of gravel turned his head to his left, and he saw Wilmer Edgeworth coming up to him with the sealed, rusty metal box.

"Here it is," Edgeworth said, handing him the box. Edgeworth was a blunt, unceremonious man, and Simpson could not have said he liked him very much. He took the box and held it.

Edgeworth followed his glance toward the ship. "Almost ready, I see."

Simpson nodded. "The fueling's almost done. They'll rivet those last plates over the racks, and then I can go."

"Yes, then you can go," Edgeworth agreed. "Why?"

"Eh?"

"Why are you going?" Edgeworth repeated. "Where are you going? Do you know how to fly a spaceship? What have any of us ever flown before?"

Simpson looked at this madman in startlement. "Why!" he exploded. "I'm going because I want to--because I'm 'here, because the ship's here, because we've all of us worked ourselves to the bone for generations, so I could go!" He shook the metal box violently under Edgeworth's jaws.

Edgeworth backed several steps away. "I'm not trying to stop you," he said.

Simpson's rage fell away at the disclaimer, "All right," he said, catching his breath. He

looked at Edgeworth curiously. "What made you ask questions like that, then?"

Edgeworth shook his head. "I don't know," he said. He was not so constituted as to be able to top his first climax. His biggest bolt was shot, and now his manner lost much of its sureness. "Or, rather," he went on, "I don't know what I know. But something--Something's wrong. Why are we doing this? We don't even understand what we've built here. Listen--did you know they found little towns, like Castle town, but much smaller? With little men in them, about three inches tall, walking on their hands and feet, naked. They can't talk, and they don't have any real hands."

"What's that got to do with this?"

Edgeworth's head was wagging. "I don't know. But--did you ever look at the boneyard?"

"Who wants to?"

"Nobody wants to, but I did. And, listen--our ancestors were smaller. Their bones are smaller. Each generation, going back--their bones are smaller."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"No," Edgeworth said. The breath whistled slowly out between his teeth "It doesn't mean anything to me, either. But I had to tell someone."

"Why?" Simpson shot back.

"Eh?"

"What's the use of that kind of talk?" Simpson demanded. "Who cares about old bones? Who looks in boneyards? The ship's the only important thing. We've sweated and slaved for it. We've died and wandered away into who knows where, we've mined and smelted and formed metal to build it, when we could have been building other things for ourselves. We've fought a war with time, with our own weak bodies, with distance, dragging those loads up here, we've hauled them up and built the ship and now I'm going!"

He saw Edgeworth through a red- shot haze. He blinked his eyes impatiently, and slowly the driving reaction to any obstacle was drained out of his bloodstream again, and he could feel a little sheepish.

"Sorry, Edgeworth," he muttered. He jerked his head toward the ship as the sound of riveting mauls came hammering toward him. The filled fuel racks were being plated over, and the long line of empty-handed fuel handlers was sinking down toward the ground, resting and watching the ship being finished.

"Well, I'm going," Simpson said. He put the metal box under one arm and walked toward the ship's ladder, passing among the men who rested on the ground. None of them looked up at him. *Who* went didn't much matter. It was the ship they were interested in.

The inside of the ship was almost all hollow shell, latticed by girders converging on a series of heavy steel rings. Shock-mounted in the cylinder of free space inside the rings was a hulking, complex machine, full of hand-drawn wires and painstakingly blown tubes, all

nestled together in tight patterns, encased in fired clay, and wrapped around with swaths of silicone rubber sheeting. Heavy wiring ran from the apertures in the final shield of pressed steel, and joined the machine to a generator. Other wires ran to posts projecting from the inner hull plating. Nobody knew what it was for. A separate crew had built it while the hull sections were being formed, taking years at the job. Simpson looked at the shield seams, and realized the word for that kind of process was "welding."

Below the main compartment were the engines, with their heavy lead bulkhead. "Now, what's that for?" he remembered asking when he saw it being levered into place.

"Buddy, I don't know, and I specified for it." The crew foreman spread his hands helplessly. "The ship just . . . wouldn't feel right . . . without it."

"You mean it wouldn't fly without a ton of dead weight?"

"No. No . . . I don't think that's it. I think it'd fly, but you'd be dead, like the fuel-handlers, before you got there." The foreman shook his head. "I think that's it."

In the nose of the ship, hanging over Simpson's head as he clung to the interior ladder beside the air lock, was the piloting station. There was a couch in gimbals, and there were control pedestals rooted in the tapering hull and converging on the couch. The nose was solid, and Simpson wondered how he'd see out. He suspected there'd be some way. With one last look around, he clambered up the ladder and into the couch, moving awkwardly with the box under his arm. Once in the couch, he found a frame jutting out of its structure. The box fitted it exactly, with spring clips holding it fast.

He settled himself in the couch, fastening broad straps over his hips and chest. He reached out tentatively, and found all the controls in easy distance of his fingers.

Well, he thought to himself, I'm here and I'm ready.

His fingers danced over a row of switches. In the belly of the ship, something rumbled and the wan emergency lights went out as the operating lights came on. A cluster of screens mounted over his head, inside the gimbal system, came to life and showed him the outside, all around and fore and aft. He took his last look at the plateau and the watching men, at the sky overhead and the plains behind him. Up here in the ship's nose, that much higher above the plains, he thought he could just make out Castle town's hill.

But he had no time for that. His hands were flying over the controls. Ready lights were flashing on his board, and somewhere in the forest of girders behind him, auxiliary motors were working themselves up toward full song. He pulled the operating levers toward him, and the massive engines began to growl. He tripped interlocks, and more fuel canisters began sliding down their racks, slipping into place. His mouth opened, and he began to heave for breath. He felt the ship tottering, and felt panic flash through him. In the next instant, calm settled on him knowledgeably. It was all right. The ship was just breaking loose. It was all right, the ship was all right, and he was going. At last, at last he was going.

The after screens were blank with the haze of burning sand. The ship rumbled up into the sky, incinerating the watchers on the plateau behind it.

He had never, never in his life imagined that anything like this lay beyond the sky. There were no clouds, no curtains of dust, no ripples of atmosphere, no diffused glows of light. There were stars and nothing but stars, with nothing to veil them, strewn over the black in

double handfuls, forming themselves into coagulating spirals and sheets of light, gigantic lenses and eggs of galaxies, sun after sun after sun. He stared at them open-mouthed while the massive ship charged at them, completely bewildered. But when the time came to trip controls he had heretofore left scrupulously alone, he did it precisely and perfectly. The machine, nestling in the girders behind him, gulped at power from the generator, surged it through into the hull, and in an instant in which he saw quite clearly why the ship had needed so much internal bracing, he was in hyperspace. He ran through it like a man on a raft on a broad river at night, and then he was out again, with alarm bells exploding through the hollow ship, and hull after gigantic interstellar spaceship hull occluding the new stars around him.

He cut off all power except signal circuits and lights, rested one hand protectingly on the metal box, wondering what was in it and where he'd come, and waited.

Simpson pushed through the inner lock hatch into the Terran ship and stopped, looking at the two aliens waiting for him.

They were smooth-skinned and tarnish-white, with soft-looking fibrous growths trimmed into shape on their scalps. "Soft-looking" was a good general description, too. Their skins were flexible as cloth, their faces were rounded, and their features were muddily defined. Soft. Pulpy. He looked at them with distaste.

One of them muttered to the other, probably not allowing for Simpson's range of hearing: "Terran? From that? I don't believe it!"

"How'd he understand enough to get in here, then?" the other snapped back. "Be yourself, Hudston. You heard me using the phone. He's got a terrible accent, and some odd idioms, but it's Terran, right enough."

Simpson deciphered their mushy intonations. He should have been angry, but he wasn't. Instead, there was something welling up in his throat--something buried, something that had begun not with him but with generations past, bottled up for all this time and now bursting out:

"The war's over!" he shouted. "It's all over--we've won it!"

The first Terran looked at him in astonishment, one eyebrow raised. "Really? What war is that? I wasn't aware of any."

Simpson felt confused. He felt empty, too, and bewildered at what had erupted from his larynx. He didn't know what answer to make. He waited for himself to say something new, but nothing else came. Uncertainly, he offered the metal box to the Terran.

"Let's see that!" the second Terran said quickly, snatching it out of Simpson's hand. He stared down at the lid. "Good God!"

"What is it, admiral?" Hudston asked. The second Terran wordlessly showed him the stamping on the lid, which had never meant anything to Simpson or anyone else on Castle.

"T.S.N. Courier Service?" Hudston spelled out. "What the deuce-- Oh, of course, sir! Disbanded in the Twenty-fourth Century, wasn't it?"

"Late Twenty-third," the admiral muttered. "When the hyperspace radio network was completed."

"Four hundred years, sir? What's *he* doing with it?"

The admiral was fumbling with the box. The lid everyone on Castle thought was sealed sprang open. The admiral pulled out a sheaf of crumbling maps, and the leathercovered book that had been under them. Neither of the Terrans was paying any attention to Simpson. He stirred uneasily, and saw several short rods in the compartment wall swing to follow his move.

The admiral brushed carefully at the book's cover. He peered down at the gold-stamped lettering. "Official Log, TSNS *Hure*. All right, now we're getting somewhere!" He thumbed gingerly through the first few pages, silently showing Hudston the date, shaking his head, then going on. "Routine stuff. Let's get to the meat, if there is any." He stopped and looked at Simpson again for a moment, shook his head violently, and resumed searching through the pages. Then he said: "Here it is, Hudston! Listen:

"Proceeding at full speed, course for Solar System. All well," he read. "At 0600 GST, Eglin Provisional Government concluded truce pending armistice. Signatories were--' Well, that doesn't matter. They've all been dust a long time. Let's see what happened to him." The admiral paged forward. "Here we are. Here's the next day's entry. It's interrupted here, you'll notice, and finished later: 'Proceeding at full speed, course for Solar System. In hyperspace. All well. Estimated Time of Arrival, Griffon Base, +2d., 8hrs.'

"Notice the squiggle here, Hudston--he must have jerked his arm. Now: 'Resumption of log: Chance encounter with Eglin picket boat, apparently ignorant of truce, resulted in severe torpedo damage Compartments D-4, D-5, D-6, D-7. Ship out of control. Engines and hyperspatial generator functioning erratically, and ship definitely off course, though navigation at present impossible. Have sustained superficial burns and simple fractures, right leg and left arm.'

"Here's the next day's entry: 'Ship still out of control, and engines and generator continue erratic. Almost all ship's instruments sprung or shortcircuited by explosion shock. Navigation impossible. Ship now falling in and out of hyperspace at random intervals. Attempted shut-off of generator with no success. Suspect complex progressive damage to co-ordinator circuits and tuning grids.'"

"Why didn't he call for help, sir?"

The admiral glared at Hudston. "He couldn't. The reason he was out there in the first place was because they couldn't communicate faster than light, except by couriers. He was stuck, Hudston. Hurt and trapped. And that, by the way, is the last entry in the official log. The rest of it's a short journal:

" 'Crash-landed about 1200 GST on small, uninhabited, unknown planet. The constellations don't make any sense, even by Navigational Projection. I'm down here for good.

"The ship went to hell when I hit. Now I've got two broken legs, and some gashes. Got the medkit out, though, so that's not much problem. Not right away. I'm losing blood inside, and I can't figure out how to put a Stedman splint on that.

"Did some exploring this afternoon. From where I am, this place looks like nothing but grass, but I saw some mountains and rivers before I hit. It's cold, but not cold enough to bother, unless it's summer now. Maybe it's spring. I'll worry about winter when I get to it.

"Wonder how long it's going to be before Earth finds out the war's over, now?"

Simpson's head jerked. There were the words again. He felt more and more confused, and more and more listless and empty. He should have been interested in this ship, and in these people. But he only turned his head perfunctorily, and neither the smooth, massive bulkheads, glowing with their own light, nor the two Terrans in their scarlet uniforms, seemed to be able to make much real impression on him.

He was here. He'd made it. And he didn't seem to care what happened next.

"There's not much more to the journal," the admiral was saying. "Feel pretty rocky today. Not much doubt about it--I'm losing more than I can stand. Been eating Prothrombin bars like candy, but no help. Running out of them, anyway.

"Food'd get to be a problem, anyway. There doesn't seem to be anything I can eat on this place, except for some little things that look like a cross between a prairie dog and a lizard. Take about two dozen of them to make one breakfast.

"No use kidding myself. If my AID can't hold my insides together, Vitamin K isn't going to do it either. Food doesn't turn out to be a problem after all.

"That brings me to a pretty interesting thought. I've got this piece of information, and an AID's supposed to live inside you and see it gets through. Never thought about it much, before. Always managed to deliver my own messages. But here's this thing, now, that's halfalive in its own right, living inside me. It's built so it's got to see that any information I have gets to the right people. I've even heard of AIDs jumping out of a man and crossing over to an Egg, and making him bring the message in. They're smart as hell, in their own way. Nothing stops 'em. Nothing shuts 'em off.

"Well, here I am God knows where, all by myself, where nobody'll ever find me. If I had a ship, I could just get in it and go. Bound to hit Federation territory sometime. But I haven't got a ship. I haven't even got much of me. I wonder what the AID's going to do now.' "

The admiral looked at Hudston. "That's the end of it. It's signed 'Norman Castle, Ensign, TSN,' and that's the end of it"

Hudston looked casually at the admiral. "Fascinating," he said. "That *was* quite a problem for his AID, wasn't it? I suppose, with the crude model he must have had, it simply died with him."

"AIDs don't die, Hudston," the admiral said slowly. He closed the old logbook, and his face was twisting under the cumulative impact of an idea. "If you've got one AID, you've got a thousand. And they never give up," he said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "They're too unintelligent to give up, and too shrewd."

He looked at Simpson. "Though I don't suppose that one had progressed far enough to have a time sense. Not a real time sense. Not one that could judge when its mission was

obsolete." He shook his head at Simpson. "The war's over," he told him. "It's over a long time. But thanks, anyway. You did your job."

Simpson didn't hear him. He felt empty. The demon was gone out of him, and he felt his mind closing in, losing interest in things that were important to men. He was down on the deck, on his hands and feet, tearing at his clothes with fretful jaws and whimpering.

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