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THE SECRET SPACESHIP

By Matt Bille

Mark Ryan was born looking up at the stars.

That's what his parents said, anyway. From the night he was born in a parking lot, where his mother had lost her race to the hospital, he'd always looked up. He'd tried to fly when World War II came, but nearsightedness ruled him out. Ryan ended up in the accelerated curriculum at West Point only to miss the war by months. He'd transferred to the fledgling Air Force, and here he was in 1957 with a unique task: escorting an Army general to see an Air Force project that didn't exist.

Specifically, he was escorting Brigadier General Bernard Medaris, a dapper, wiry, energetic soldier who wasn't long on patience.

“This better be damned important to take us away from Huntsville in the middle of the Jupiter-C project,” Medaris said to Ryan over the drone of the Air Force C-118’s engines. “Not only do we have to catch up with the Soviet missiles, but the Navy’s making a hopeless mess of out of Project Vanguard. The Pentagon may have thrown us out of the space business, but the Navy’s going to need a backup satellite launcher whether they believe it or not.”

The general traveled with one companion, a husky, wavy-haired civilian of about forty-five. This man had not spoken. He’d spent the entire flight reading technical reports of some kind despite the buffeting the C-118 inflicted on its passengers as it crossed the updrafts of the Rockies on its way to California. The civilian was apparently listening, since he cocked an eyebrow when Medaris mentioned project Vanguard, but his focus on his work never wavered.

“General,” Ryan said, “all I can say is that this is definitely worth your time. But Major General Schriever set very tight rules. I can’t say a word to anyone before we’re down at the project site, or he’ll have my hide.”

“Schriever’s a smart man. He’s just in the wrong service,” Medaris said, his words as sharp-edged as the creases of his uniform. “Missiles are artillery, and artillery should be Army. This separate Air Force was a bad idea to begin with.”

Ryan decided silence was the only intelligent form of valor. He nodded and let the general alone until they made a fairly smooth touchdown at Edwards Air Force Base.

An Air Force navigator, a blue-eyed young captain named Haaren, came back from the cockpit. "General Medaris, General LeMay at SAC sent me out to keep him apprised of this project," Haaren said. "So I'm at your service as well."

Medaris gave him only a nod and turned to Ryan. "Well, then let's carry on."

They descended a set of old metal aircraft stairs onto the hard surface of Rogers Dry Lake. As they halted and looked around, the civilian nodded to Ryan. "I didn't catch your name, Major." He spoke in clipped, precise English with a noticeable German accent.

"Ryan, sir. Mark Ryan."

Ryan was sure who the civilian was, but he hadn't wanted to presume. Now the man offered his hand. "Wernher von Braun."

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"Major, where the hell are we?" Medaris asked.

It was obvious they were not on the main base, but some forlorn adjunct, where nothing existed save a Quonset hut and a single hangar. Two Air Police, easily identified by their white service caps and short-sleeved khaki uniforms, sat in front of the hangar in a Jeep with a canvas sunshade.

“General, we call it East Base. It was a satellite strip they built in the war. It’s perfect for the X-3B project.”

“X-3B?”

“Yes, sir. Our X-3 Stiletto was a research jet that never really performed. Calling this the X-3B is a good cover. The project’s Top Secret, but, if anybody does hear the name, they’ll assume it’s connected to the X-3.”

“So just what is the X-3B?”

“I can show you better than tell you, General. That’s why we landed out here and skipped the usual visiting-general formalities. If you’ll follow me?”

The hangar guards were not the usual low-ranking airmen. Both were veterans, staff sergeants who carried M-1 carbines as well as pistols, and they did a thorough job of inspecting the men’s credentials.

“All right, General,” one said to Medaris. “Please stay with your escort at all times. Every place in this hangar is a two-man control area.”

“Understood, Sergeant. Let’s go see the big secret.”

The visitors entered through a small door next to the closed main doors. They could hear several men talking as they passed through a small and very dusty collection of offices. Two civilians carrying slide rules passed them, so deep in conversation that even a general didn’t register on them.

The four men stepped into the main hangar bay and stopped dead.

The disk-shaped craft was perhaps fifty feet across. It had a bulging center section, about the size of the average Chevrolet but circular and much

deeper top to bottom. That was surrounded by a large ring, looking square in cross-section, which in turn was surrounded by some sort of ducting. The disk tapered from about three feet thick next to this structure to about a foot near the rounded edges. The craft's three-legged landing gear kept the center section about three feet off the ground.

Ryan had been around the X-3B for months now, but that didn't make it any more real. It still looked like a movie prop. The unadorned, utilitarian gray paint showed no markings, but he knew where the swastikas were hidden underneath. Now there was only a small black stencil, placed near the hatch that unfolded from the bottom of the craft, which read "USAF X-3B."

Ryan glanced at the others. Medaris was clutching his swagger stick with both hands, his eyes large. Von Braun showed a moment of shock, quickly replaced by a kind of predatory intensity, as if the engineer wanted to immediately dismantle the craft.

Von Braun turned quickly to Ryan.

"Where has this been since 1945?"

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Ryan looked sharply at von Braun. "You *knew* about this, sir?"

"No. It was a myth. A rumor. All the talk of a wonder-weapon that General Hans Kammler of the SS had hidden somewhere in Bavaria or Czechoslovakia."

"The rumors were true, or partly true, sir."

“Major Ryan,” von Braun said, “perhaps it is time to tell us your role in this.”

“Doctor, General, the short version is that I’m an intel officer with an ME degree. I was assigned to a group combing through what G-2 and JOIA and Paperclip might have missed when they did the initial cataloging of all that German R&D documentation. We measured the papers in tons.”

“And that’s where you came across this project.”

“Yes, sir. We found just a little bit of documentation on this saucer thing. Nothing technical, no blueprints, no test reports. Just a couple of brief mentions of what this project was and its budget and how it was going. Our people in Europe spent eight more years looking for this prototype. They finally found an underground hangar under wreckage at the Neubiderg aerodrome that no one had ever cleared. It was in pieces, stored away pretty carefully. We just got it together a few months ago.”

“I see. So why were we invited to see an Air Force project?”

“That came all the way from the Secretary of the Air Force, sir. Secretary Quarles thought that you knew enough about German technology that you might be able to fill in some missing information. He also thought there might be technology here you could copy to help on some of your projects.”

“I must admit, Major, that I may have little to contribute,” von Braun said.

“What you need are the pilots and the engineers from Germany. Did you find any of them?”

“With one exception, sir, they were all at the Prag-Gbell airfield in Czechoslovakia, where the Russians were coming. General Kammler had them all shot by the Sicherheitsdienst.”

Von Braun looked back at the saucer and shook his head. “As I said, I heard many things. But they were fantastic. We knew we had the leading rocket technology in the world at Peenemunde. Nothing so far ahead of us could really exist.”

“That’s what we in the States said about your V-2, Wernher,” Medaris commented. “Now what’s this about one exception, Major?”

“Doctor, are you familiar with an engineer named Habermohl?”

“I recall the name only,” von Braun said. “I think he was on the V-1 program for the Luftwaffe at one point.”

“He became lead engineer on this project, sir,” Ryan said. “What’s funny is that, once we looked for him, we found he was already here. Believe it or not, he was working for your old commander, Walter Dornberger, at Bell Aircraft. He’d thought this project was destroyed. He said he did mention it in a debriefing by someone from Project Dustbin, but the officer just laughed. Once we found him, he worked to help us locate the disk and put it back together.”

“Can we meet him?” von Braun asked.

“Well, sir, I hate to say it, but he... he’s missing.”

“What?” Medaris demanded.

“He has some American family in Long Beach,” Ryan said. “We gave him a pass under escort about a week ago to visit them. One of our security people was with him. Something happened. We, the FBI, and the CIA are investigating all-out. The short version is someone started a fight with our man in a restaurant and someone else apparently hustled Habermohl out the back door.”

“That’s a whole new level of incompetence, even for the Air Force!” Medaris declared. “The only man who knows how this works, and you lost him! He could be in Moscow by now!”

“That’s... one of the possibilities, sir. General, this is a top priority. Director Dulles and Director Hoover are personally involved in the search. Our orders are to press on with the project.”

“And just what are we doing with the project?”

“We’ve had nine test flights, sir,” Ryan said. He looked at one of several men grouped scattered around the craft. “Major Weinberg, could you come here?”

Weinberg, a strikingly thin man with the dark eyes and gaze of a hawk, studied the men behind Ryan and nodded curtly. Like Ryan, he wore the standard-issue military eyeglasses apparently designed to be as ugly as possible. He waved off the enlisted technicians he’d been talking to and marched stiffly to where the visitors stood.

“General Medaris, sir,” Weinberg saluted.

“And this —” Ryan began.

“I know who Dr. von Braun is.” Weinberg took von Braun’s proffered hand as briefly as possible, as if it burned him.

Ryan tried not to glare. “Major Weinberg has been working guidance and control on the X-3B,” he said. “He’s flown as a test engineer several times.”

“There’s a very complex stabilization system,” Weinberg said. “There are almost no control surfaces on this beast, so you have to depend on the system. It uses a lash-up of three sets of gyros. We can see they’re adapted from the ones in the Siemens design for the V-2, but not very well. I have to tweak them myself before every flight.”

Von Braun’s face showed caution. “That is not surprising, Major. It makes sense they would have borrowed our gyros. If you are having trouble, I suggest we bring Carl Mandel up from Hunstsville.”

“We’ve got the best guidance experts in the world down there,” Medaris added.

“With all due respect, General, we’ve got it under control.”

Ryan saw Medaris’ gaze become volcanic, and he stepped quickly between the general and the Air Force engineer. “General, Doctor, Captain Haaren will give you the quick tour. Then we’ll break out the schematics we’ve created and you can see what it does.”

When Medaris and von Braun were gone, Ryan turned to Weinberg and spoke in a harsh whisper. “What the hell was that?”

“You know Wernher von Braun killed my father. Worked him to death at Nordhausen.”

“Mitch, I know why you say that, but I’ve told you I read the file. I talked to everyone. Von Braun was cleared by G-2 of any involvement in that.”

“He was cleared because we wanted him here,” Weinberg said. “Whether he ran the slave labor program or not, he was a Nazi and the Nazis killed thousands of people making those goddam *Vergeltungswaffe*. How the hell do we justify protecting these Nazis instead of hanging every one of them?”

Ryan shot a cautious glance at his guests, but they were around the far side of the saucer. “Even if they were guilty, you know what’s going on. Three million Russian troops ready to march on Eastern Europe. We know they just tested their ICBM, and our Atlas isn’t ready to match them. This is way above our heads, but you really think we shouldn’t be using the Germans if they can help us protect the free world? You’ve got to forget your feelings here. You take one more step out of line and General Medaris is going to call General Lang and have you on bread and water.”

“Yeah,” Weinberg said. “I’ll do my duty, Mark. But don’t ask me to make nice with Nazis.”

“Then fake it.”

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The Quonset hut headquarters had a small storeroom converted to a stifling briefing room, and here Ryan faced an audience of von Braun, Medaris,

and Haaren. Also present were two Air Force test pilots. Lieutenant Colonel Bonner was an easygoing man with a lady-killer smile. His tall, quiet counterpart was a major named Hendrickson.

“Have you discovered how the project originated, Major Ryan?” von Braun asked.

“Sir, it seems to have been partly an accident. Essentially, two programs--three, really--crossed paths at just the right time. There were at least two German programs looking at disk-shaped aircraft, but they were small prototype efforts. There were two nuclear programs, a civilian one out of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute and a military one run by Kurt Diebner in Gottow. We know Diebner’s group had a crude fission reactor going in Haigerloch. They were borrowing powerful electromagnetic technology from another project that was trying to create magnetically-powered artillery. One of Diebner’s people had some crazy Flash Gordon idea about using electromagnetic fields to direct nuclear particles in a kind of weapon. The guys the British interrogated at Farm Hall knew a little about this. Apparently they hit by accident on this system for creating some kind of field that could be controlled to move an object. All these projects leaked back and forth between the Army development shop headed by Erich Schumann and his Luftwaffe counterpart, Colonel General Udet, so they put them together in this new project under Udet. Then in 1944, Himmler and General Kammler grabbed the project for the SS, and it got even more secret.”

“Construction must have been very difficult at that time,” von Braun said.

“They would have needed the best in lightweight alloys and precision devices that would have been subject to conflicting demands.”

“Yes, sir. We don’t think it would have been possible if Kammler had not personally ordered that the project get anything it wanted. There’s one instance where SS men actually shot a Luftwaffe NCO to take possession of some instrumentation he was transporting for a jet fighter project.”

Von Braun didn’t seem surprised. “The SS-Gruppenführer was not a man to say ‘no’ to.” He pointed at a diagram of the X-3B tacked up on the wall. “I would like to know, why the disk shape? It’s not very efficient as an airfoil.”

“True. The disk structure is mainly an aluminum cover over the rotating electromagnet system. The reason it rotates is it’s basically a generator feeding energy to electromagnetic coils which have to be cooled way down before every startup. It’s complicated, but it’s ingenious, too. The part we don’t understand is how, at the right temperature and rotation of the electromagnets, you get energy that seems to come out of nowhere.”

“Don’t you dare tell me the Air Force believes in perpetual motion,” Medaris said.

“No, General. One of our physicists is looking at old publications from Nikolai Tesla, who claimed to have done something similar, and another went through some of Einstein’s work. He told me Einstein hinted at how an idea like this might work, using what the old man called residual energy. He told me

something called the Casimir effect supposedly shows energy like this is everywhere, but it's on an incredibly tiny scale. How this gadget hit just the right size or field strength or whatever to magnify that, or pull more energy out of space... Well, even Habermohl didn't understand that. They worked out the dimensions of the ring and the rpm and so on by a lot of trial and error.

"Habermohl told, us, though, he had planned out a version four times as large. Apparently if you keep all the ratios right, it'll scale up without too much loss of efficiency. The big one would carry two tons of weapons and accelerate to Mach 25."

"Orbital velocity." The excitement was plain in von Braun's voice.

"Yes, sir. My point was that, whatever's happening, it's still kind of like magic to us. But it's magic we know how to use.

"The drive system needs a power source to charge the electromagnet and get it up to rotation speed. The original engine was a Junkers Jumo 211/b, but it was missing. We used an American J-33 modified to about the same thrust profile.

"Remember that there's no original documentation left from this program. Habermohl remembers the work they did on the bigger craft, but there hasn't been time to follow up on that yet. The funny thing is, our aero engineers say this structure shouldn't hold up even going through the sound barrier to Mach 1. Nevertheless... Captain, would you turn off the lights?"

Ryan started a 16mm projector. "This film is shot from an F-100 chase plane over Muroc. They're at 30,000 feet here. The saucer gets more efficient at this altitude and higher." The X-3B disk was flying smoothly, perhaps two or three hundred yards off the F-100. After about thirty seconds, the F-100 experienced a buffeting that kept the saucer bouncing in and out of the frame. When the air smoothed out, the saucer had pulled slightly ahead.

"It's hard to see in this film," Ryan said, "but the X-3B's transition through supersonic is as smooth as you could want. It doesn't even stress the aluminum. Whatever we call the X-3 effect really is, the thing seems to keep a surface layer of nonturbulent air around it. They reached Mach 1.2 on this mission."

The film ended with the X-3B slowing to a hover and descending, slightly wobbling, onto its landing gear.

"Is what we saw here your maximum speed?" von Braun asked.

"We've had it almost to Mach 2," Bonner said. "That fellow Habermohl said they got it close to Mach 3 in the spring of '45."

"Don't tell Colonel Yeager he wasn't the first man to break the sound barrier," Haaren suggested.

"He ain't gonna hear it from me," Bonner said, with a hint of the Oklahoma-ish drawl that all test pilots seemed to have. "Good thing old Chuck's not on Edwards any more. He might have gotten this job instead of me."

"What is the craft's endurance?" von Braun asked.

“Im-pressive,” Bonner said. “Once you hit the right speed, you throttle the jet back one notch above idle and it just keeps going.”

“This brings us back to perpetual motion, General,” Ryan said. “In some ways it’s almost that, but it’s can’t be 100 percent efficient, because the X-3B propulsion is really a mechanical approximation of a physics formula we don’t actually know.”

“Habermohl found parameters that worked but he was never able to derive the equations behind them. Is that what you’re saying?” von Braun asked.

“Yes, sir. About endurance, you need the jet power to compensate for the imperfect design plus the inefficiencies and friction losses in the propulsion machinery itself. With the fuel tank it has now, though, the X-3B should be able to fly supersonic for at least ten hours.”

Von Braun’s reply was cut off when a sergeant rushed into the room. “Major Ryan, General Medaris,” he said, “we have a telex from the Pentagon. Well, it’s addressed to you, Major, but –”

“Give it to the General.”

Medaris grabbed and scanned the slip of paper. “Good and bad news,” he said crisply. “Good news is the FBI found your missing German. Bad news is he apparently left on a private ocean-going yacht from Long Beach two days ago, destination unknown. They’re roping the Coast Guard and the Navy into looking for him.”

“General, it sounds like we have two possibilities,” Ryan said. “Either he’s a spy who’s being taken home, or he was kidnapped. Either way, we need him back.”

“Damn right,” Medaris said. “Who’s the Air Force general in charge of all this?”

“Major General Lang is here at Edwards, sir. He’s General Schriever’s deputy.”

“I know Lang. Get him on the phone. I’d like to see if there’s anything the Army can do to help pull his fat out of the fire. Now, Major.”

“Yes, General,” Ryan said. “Sir, I’m supposed to tell you one other thing. You noticed there are two extra seats. Apparently even this prototype was supposed to be able to fly some missions, taking agents behind enemy lines and such. Dr. von Braun, you can go up tomorrow morning with Bonner and Hendrickson.”

“I won’t hear of it!” Medaris said. “Wernher, you’re too damn important to us to be flying in this thing!”

“I feel somewhat less important than I did yesterday,” von Braun said dryly.

“General,” Ryan said, “this is a request from Secretary Quarles that Dr. von Braun personally observe the X-3B’s operation. We won’t be pushing the envelope with this flight. Just a basic demonstration.”

"All right, but you'll all be manning our IGY base in Antarctica if anything goes wrong." Medaris turned to von Braun. "And, Wernher, don't even *think* of trying to take the controls."

Von Braun smiled. "It never crossed my mind."

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Ryan found he couldn't even get sleepy enough to give his bed a try-out. He kept re-reading the Top Secret reports on the X-3B until he realized it was almost 0130. Still wearing his uniform, he lit a Camel and walked outside to look at the stars.

Lounging against the wall near the entrance, he found another man doing the same thing. It was von Braun.

"Are you too excited to sleep, Doctor?" Ryan asked.

"That's an understatement. This craft could change the entire world, Major. Have you been on board during a flight?"

"Yes, sir," Ryan said. He would remember it for the rest of his life.

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It had been three weeks ago when he'd finally gotten his request signed off. It had to go all the way to Donald Quarles, Secretary of the Air Force, but General Schriever had wanted Ryan's impressions enough to push it through. Ryan knew the assignment normally would have gone to someone of higher rank, and he was extremely pleased at how much the General must think of him.

The X-3B was not made for comfort. The two pilots had decent accommodations in seats originally made for Me-262 jet fighters, but behind them were crammed three seats from some smaller plane, two for passengers and one, on the right, turned sideways for a flight engineer. Ryan noted that the side vision, too, was poor. On the other hand, the fit and finish looked pretty good for a rush job built in wartime.

The jet engine sent a loud rumble through the craft. Ryan was grateful for the bulky headsets everyone wore.

He and Mitch Weinberg were the passengers. Both were strapped into their seats, Weinberg with a long checklist of things he wanted to observe, Ryan just with a notebook to jot down whatever seemed important.

The pilots and flight engineer completed their next round of checks, and the XB-3 started to move.

The takeoff was a surprise. It didn't feel at all like lifting off in a plane. Instead, there was abrupt change from the complete stability provided by the landing gear to an unpleasant instability as the craft wobbled slightly on all three axes of motion. Ryan gripped the armrests and tried not to think about his stomach.

"You have to get used to that until we get up to speed," the pilot, Bonner, called. "Airsick bags under the seat if you need 'em."

The disk picked up some forward movement. Ryan had expected a tilting of the fuselage, but there was none. After a minute the ride smoothed out. Ryan

could tell the scattered, puffy clouds were getting closer, then rushing by the X-3B faster and faster. They seemed to be making about the speed he'd expect in a transport plane. Aside from that damn jet, all was smooth and fairly quiet now.

"We're at forty percent power," Bonner said. "We'll keep it subsonic for this trip. Going to test out some nice gentle maneuvers."

Ryan grimaced at that. He knew what test pilots usually meant by "gentle maneuvers."

Once again, though, he was surprised. The X-3B only banked a few degrees in a turn, even a very tight turn, and his body seemed to have less inertia than it should. Only the clouds, seen in glimpses over the pilots' shoulders, confirmed that Bonner was making turns that were close to right angles.

"Incredible," Ryan said.

"Like that, huh?" Bonner said. "You ain't seen nothing yet."

Bonner began to combine turns with climbs and descents. Conditions in the craft, though, remained comfortable.

Mitch Weinberg elbowed Ryan in the ribs and grinned. He pointed to Ryan's notebook, in which Ryan had yet to make a mark.

Weinberg eased his headset up and put his mouth next to Ryan's left ear. "It was like that my first time, too," he said. "This thing is amazing. It's a damn good thing the Nazis didn't start on it earlier."

"No kidding," Ryan said. "Think of this thing with guns on it. A P-51 would have been a sitting duck."

Hendrickson's calm voice came into the headphones. "Gentlemen, you can relax for a few minutes. We're heading out to a restricted area over the Pacific. We want to do some lower-level work without being observed."

Ryan pulled his mike back down, acknowledged, then pushed it away again.

"Well, we got it and the Russkies didn't," Weinberg was saying to him. "I hope to work on the next one. The American one. The Germans never could have built the bigger version because they didn't have alloys that were light and strong enough. But think what we can do with all the advances in materials and instrumentation we've made since the war. That and cooling systems," he added, pointing at the gauges to the flight engineer's left that kept track of temperatures. "Habermohl said it gets more efficient the colder you can chill the electromagnet."

"You know, when I gave you your first briefing on this project, I thought you were against using the saucer at all."

"I wondered about it. I'm against the bastards who built it, Habermohl and all the other Nazis. You know why my father was in Europe. He saw the Holocaust coming and thought he could bribe his way in and out of Germany with his sister's family. He was still trying to negotiate when everything went to hell." He gestured at the cockpit in front of them. "I still don't like using anything they built, but maybe we have to. Between their ICBM program and

what they did to the revolutionaries in Hungary, the Russians scare the hell out of me.”

“We agree on that. Maybe this UFO could be our ticket out of Armageddon.”

“And if it works, then you’ll say then we’ll all go to Mars together.”

“It’s possible. I’d like to see that.”

“I wouldn’t. Because I don’t want war with the Russians doesn’t mean we can ever trust them, any more than we can the Nazis.”

“I’m the first to agree their leaders are downright evil, and so is the whole Communist system. Doesn’t mean their people won’t someday grow out of it.”

“Evil people don’t grow out of it. Ask the people at Nordhausen who begged for some kind of humanity from the Nazis. It didn’t matter if the guards were eighteen years old or fifty. They acted the same. Hanging a few of their leaders after Nuremberg didn’t come close to real justice for that.”

Weinberg’s face had an intensity Ryan had seen before. It meant there was no point in arguing with him.

The saucer dropped sharply, and Ryan heard himself yelp as he grabbed the armrests for the second time in the flight.

“Just a little maximum-speed de-scent,” Bonner said. “We wanted to know how fast you can take this baby down.” There was a faint chuckle, and Ryan quelled his retort before it left his lips. Test pilots... they were all the same.

Ryan nodded to von Braun. "It's a little queasy at first," he said. "It's pretty loud with the jet right under you, and it's not the most stable airplane at low speed. But it's mind-blowing."

"I look forward to the flight, but there is so much more," von Braun said. "The larger craft Habermohl spoke of will be able to carry sections of space stations to orbit. It can also carry rocket booster segments to be assembled for trips to the Moon and Mars. This discovery will open to mankind the gates of heaven."

"Some people have wondered if we should use it," Ryan said.

"Your friend Major Weinberg?"

"Yes."

"I don't blame him. The government I worked for committed the most heinous atrocities of all time, and that should never be forgotten."

Ryan hesitated, but decided he wanted to see the German's reaction. "He blames you personally."

"He has a reason to." Von Braun closed his eyes for a moment. "I looked away. I knew some things, and I could have found out more. I didn't want to know. I don't know what I could have done, aside from getting myself shot, but I was far too passive in the face of evil. I will always despise myself for that."

"So we should still use this saucer."

“The evil happened. We can’t undo it. If some good comes out of it, such as protecting the freedom of Europe and the United States from the Russians, then we have the right to do that. I think we have the obligation.”

“And then there’s the space exploration part,” Ryan said. “I’ve dreamed about that since I was a kid. When I was in high school, I bugged the library until they found me a copy of Hermann Oberth’s book in English.”

Von Braun smiled at the name of his mentor. “Yes. This technology will make it routine for us to go to low orbit, and exploration beyond that will be so much simpler. Once we have secured peace on Earth, we will reach for the future. Because of this device, your children and mine will one day watch the small blue spot of Earth rise over their home on Mars.”

They spoke a bit longer of space exploration before von Braun said good night. Ryan wished him a good flight and wandered back toward the hangar.

Even at this hour, the single available entrance still had two veteran guards. Ryan held up his ID. “Sergeants, I know this is a two-man zone, but is anybody—”

“It’s okay, sir,” the senior guard said. “Two other guys are in there working.”

Ryan thanked the man and hurried in.

The main lights were off, leaving a cavern of darkness punctuated by a few work lamps strung near the X-3B. The main access hatch—it didn’t seem

right to call it a door on such an exotic vehicle--was closed. There were two men testing the hydraulics on the nearest landing gear leg.

One, a stocky NCO named Tiller who Ryan thought resembled Jack Webb on *Dragnet*, saluted him. "Are you flying tomorrow, sir?"

"No. I wish, though. I just came in took at it again."

"Sort of like that old movie where the saucer lands in Washington and everyone keeps coming to see it?"

Ryan nodded. "It's one of my favorites. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*. It's still weird to think that we're the ones with the flying saucer now."

"I wonder if I'll ever be able to tell my wife what I worked on, sir," Tiller said.

"Me, too." Ryan's gaze traced the curved edges of what had to be the world's strangest aircraft. He envisioned it blown up to the size of a B-52 and carrying people and cargo into the dark frontier of space.

No one knew when the first program would be started to carry men into space or who would qualify to go. Once Project Vanguard put the first satellite up, Ryan thought, all three services with rocket programs would fight like cats and dogs for the right to rocket its officers into space. Those first men would be pilots, though. The engineers would have to wait, maybe for a long time.

Or maybe not. He touched one of the landing legs, feeling a kind of guilty affection for the bizarre Nazi invention. With this technology, the engineers might well be there right from the beginning.

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The next morning dawned brilliantly clear. Ryan wrapped his arms around himself as he exited the Quonset hut. Amazing the temperature extremes twelve hours could bring to the high desert. He wondered if Mars was anything like that.

He came around to the front of the hangar. The great doors had been opened, and the X-3B was being rolled out carefully with a tractor and a half-dozen ground crewmen.

Ryan turned at the sound of car engines. He started at a convoy of four staff cars arriving from the south at bone-jarring speed. When it halted in a cloud of dust, the door on the second car opened first. Out tumbled a sergeant who headed straight for Medaris.

"General!" the sergeant said. "Top priority message General Lang thought you should see."

Medaris glanced at the convoy, which was now disgorging three Air Force officers and several men in civilian suits. Rapidly, he scanned the telex.

"Damn it, Wernher," he said, "They found the yacht, but only because they just got an SOS from it. The damn thing is sinking!"

Captain Haaren, the navigator, piped up. "Where, General?"

"This gives the coordinates as longitude 147 degrees, ten minutes west, and latitude 20 degrees, 18 minutes north."

"Sir, that puts it about seven hundred miles this side of Hawaii," Haaren said.

General Lang, a broad-shouldered, nearly bald man, was on them now. All exchanged appropriate if hasty greetings and salutes.

"Bernie, we need to interrupt your trip." Lang said. "You saw the message?"

"Yes, sir."

"If they're sinking as fast as they say, we're not going to get there in time with a ship or an amphibian to get Habermohl off it. Unless –"

"Unless you use your flying saucer," Medaris said.

Lang nodded. "We hate to risk it, but there's no other option. Our test pilots will have to take it out. There's no time for fancy mission planning."

"We haven't used a navigator before," Bonner said, "but I'd want one for this. Captain Haaren, can you get us there?"

"Sir, I fly nice ordinary B-47s, and I always said you couldn't get me on that UFO if the pilot was Marilyn Monroe," Haaren said. "But navigating is navigating. Have sextant, will travel."

"You'll need a rescue ladder you can roll out of the hatch," Lang said.

"Sergeant Seymour will take care of that. He'll be your other passenger." He nodded to a hard-looking Air Rescue Service master sergeant who wore a .45.

"It's his job to get Habermohl on board."

Ryan thought that Seymour, a guy who had probably done combat rescues in Korea and maybe long before, was nonetheless trying hard not to look at the gadget he'd be flying on.

Lang continued, "Captain Haaren, you and the flight engineer borrow some carbines from the Air Police so you can cover him from the hatch."

Everyone saluted, and Bonner turned to the ground crew chief, the omnipresent Sergeant Tiller. "Sergeant, change of plans! We'll need full fuel!"

"Yes, sir."

Medaris looked at von Braun. "Don't worry. We'll stay until you get your flight."

Lang had apparently overlooked von Braun, not an easy thing to do given the German's natural presence. "Who the hell are you?" Lang asked.

Von Braun raised a hand to keep Medaris from a response. "Today, General, I am no one of significance. You need to get your man."

#

It was a quick hour later that fueling and a rushed preflight was completed and the X-3B ready to go.

"You men be careful!" Medaris told Bonner. "It may be a coincidence that that yacht needs rescuing where only the X-3B can do it, but I don't like it!"

"Relax, Bernie," Lang said. "We'll have fighters from Air Defense Command out there right behind the X-3B, so our pilots will wait for them to make sure no one on the boat gets any weird ideas. We just have to get the KC-

97s out far enough to refuel them. The Coast Guard sent an amphibian to pick up any other survivors, but that won't get there until our part's all done. I hope they have life rafts on that tub."

Bonner saluted again, turned, and entered the X-3B, and the ground crew closed the hatch. Everyone backed off as the jet engine fired up, scattering dust and debris as it taxied the craft out a few hundred yards further from the hangar.

There was a hum that rose even over the jet noise, and Ryan watched as the whole structure of the saucer trembled. Then the X-3 effect kicked in. The saucer rocked at the edges and, in its familiar wobbly way, began to rise nearly vertically. Five minutes later, it had vanished into the western sky.

"Bernie," Lang said to Medaris, "You can come back to the main base with us and follow the mission from the command post."

Medaris nodded. "Thank you, General. I hope your boys know what they're doing."

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The Army general came back four hours later as the lone passenger in a dust-covered staff car. Ryan, von Braun, and some others had remained most of the time just inside the shade of the hangar opening, talking and waiting for another telex or phone call.

Instead, there was silence until Medaris arrived. As he climbed out, Ryan thought the dynamic general had aged twenty years.

"They lost it," he told them.

“What?” Ryan said. “What the hell happened?”

The normally spit-and-polish general took no notice of this breach of protocol. “They were almost to the yacht when they started radioing something was wrong. First they were having trouble keeping their heading. Then they said something about not being able to control the pitch angle. Near as Lang could figure out, they lost all control and hit the water still going supersonic. The fighters just saw some little bits of wreckage.”

“Gyros,” Ryan said. He could feel his face go ashen. “I have to tweak them myself before every flight.”

“That’s what Major Weinberg said,” von Braun responded. “Are you suggesting the stabilizing system was faulty?”

“Not exactly, sir. Sergeant Tiller!”

“Yes, sir?”

“Who worked on this thing last? Is there a maintenance log?”

“I don’t need the log to answer you, sir. You saw Sergeant Block and me working on the hydraulics last night, then he left and I stayed as the two-man escort for Major Weinberg.”

“And he was adjusting the gyros... like on every flight.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ryan turned reluctantly to General Medaris. “Sir, I think we need to find Major Weinberg right now.”

Medaris stared at him. "Are you suggesting he sabotaged the ship? Major, who the hell would to sabotage this mission?"

"This mission wasn't planned, General," Ryan said. "Dr. von Braun was supposed to be on board."

Von Braun's eyes glinted hard. "You are suggesting he was trying to kill me?"

"I don't want to think it's possible," Ryan said. "I hope to God I'm wrong. But it dawns on me now that I haven't seen him since before the liftoff, sir."

"Then let's not just stand here. Get everyone looking for Weinberg!" Medaris said.

The search only took ten minutes. Weinberg had wedged himself into a tiny backup generator shack built onto the back wall of the hangar. The structure had apparently muffled the discharge of his .38 revolver.

#

The Camel shook in Ryan's fingers as he stood outside the Quonset hut, watching the stars.

Von Braun approached. "I thought I'd find you here, Major," he said. "We're going back to Huntsville in the morning."

"Do you think we can re-create the X-3B, sir?"

Von Braun shook his head. "I have talked to the Air Force engineers. With Habermohl and the prototype, certainly we could have done it. With either one

of them, probably. With neither of them, I don't think so. There was still so much we didn't know."

"At least the Russians don't have him, either," Ryan said. "We're still not sure what was going on, but we know he's dead." He gestured up at the night sky. "What about Mars?" he asked. "Are we still going to get there?"

Von Braun nodded slightly. "It will take longer and cost more," he said. "But we are meant to go there, and we will. We'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story takes place around September 1957, between the first R-7 ICBM test and Sputnik. All the Germans mentioned in this story are real, and, according to either history or UFO mythology, played the roles described. Von Braun's comments about his complicity in V-2 manufacture are not, as he admitted later, the whole truth, but this was the story he was sticking to in the 1950s.

Thanks to Erika Maurer, the late John Haaren, and the late Ann Crispin for their inputs.

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