

A Near Thing

drawn by Jon Davis, from issue #50 (29 Jan 1972) of 'Countdown' comic.
Novelization by Anthony Appleyard, 28 Oct 1998.

In its various battles with aliens, SHADO remembers too well a time when it nearly lost everything. Its Commander Straker sometimes wished that they could patrol much further than the Moon and SID's orbits, instead of having to rely on long-range radars and Utronics which are blinded whenever a dense meteor shower passes, or the Sun's outsized and rather dirty onboard fusion reactor decides to aim a radioactive blowoff at Earth, what astronomers call 'solar flares'. Thus some Pentagon scientists came up with the Space Scout. It is white, flat-topped, rectangular, 30 feet wide and 120 feet long, 15 feet deep, with tapering sides and ends. They told SHADO to test it, guessing that it would be useful as a light long-range patroller. There was something else than ordinary rocket power in it, but SHADO was not told what it was. Its four crew were eager to be nearly the first Men to go further away than the Moon in Earth-made craft as they put on their SHADO-issue flight gear and fighter pilot type open helmets with anti glare and flash visors like Interceptor pilots wear; but Foster, in charge of Moonbase at the time, was not so happy as it blasted off from Moonbase into the unknown. Nor was Straker, at the extra load on Moonbase caused by supporting this expedition, but the Pentagon had to be obeyed; and the ever-present threat from the aliens did not make their minds any easier. And the perpetual need to keep everything secret; not for those four would be fame like Gagarin or Armstrong and Aldrin, at being the first into the unknown.

Earth and Moon fell far behind them as they set off towards the asteroids, as Mars was badly placed at the time. They practised various manoeuvres, to see if the ship did what they had been told it would. The expedition went as planned for two days, and the ship proved itself. Then a UFO passed. Young and eager, they shot at it as they had often done on simulators; but the aliens were getting the measure of Earth weapons, and the UFO dodged beyond their or the ship's computer's power to predict. The UFO fled, and the Space Scout chased it. Its 'black boxes' told afterwards what they could of what happened. Several thousand miles outside its intended operational range its second in command, anxious about how far they were from home, reminded his captain that "orders are to stay in contact with Moonbase!".

"My orders from General Hargreaves were to prove this craft. Now just obey orders, lieutenant!" the captain ordered.

The Space Scout pursued the alien spinner craft on and on, further and further from Earth and Moon, and always the UFO stayed a little bit ahead, until a gauge indicating low fuel gave an order that could not well be ignored. They stopped, turned, ran their computer, and made one last motor burn into an orbit that would take them home. The UFO hung off and did not shoot, and they saw no others. But their radars could not see what did not echo a signal back to their ship. Then the alien pilot of the pursued UFO called his fleet in.

"UFO's! Where did all that lot come from? It's a trap!" said a crewman.

"Likely keeping their points towards us so our radar won't bounce back to us. I thought you and that battle simulator allowed for them perhaps doing that."

"We can't dodge. That wouldn't leave us enough fuel to land. We'd whiz past the Moon so fast that nothing of ours could reach us to get more fuel to us or take us off. We'll have to fight

them here."

"Can't, except small-arms. We shot off all our missiles before. And our communications laser's no good as a gun, it wouldn't even shoot a duck's arse off, so much for Earth talk of rayguns. All the alien rifles and rayguns SHADO've captured, why couldn't they have issued us with some!?"

The UFO's converged on the Space Scout as it came to the end of its intrusion far into where only aliens had gone before. The crew wished in vain for weapons as in a dozen popular space fiction scenarios. Instead of a mighty starship they had only a small lightly-armed scout craft and their handguns. They were stranded far from home with their horse weary, and the wolves of the outer wilderness were closing in. When ever would SHADO have UFO-type craft of their own? The UFO's still closed in. Their underbelly hatches opened, and the enemy came out, the secret abductor now openly visible, in red spacesuits with silvery gear on, grey helmet with its somewhat threatening shape, filled not with natural air or oxygen but with green liquid. Foster alone among SHADO men had been in such a spacesuit running in that mode, drowned but living, shipped off. He had walked on the alien homeworld, and returned still knowing who he was. The crew watched them converge, pushed across the emptiness by backpack propulsors much more powerful for their size than anything Earth had. An electronic device that one of them had overrode the airlock's controls, and they came in. The battle was short and one-sided.

Moonbase radar picked up an incoming echo, and a return signal from its IFF (= Identify Friend or Foe) showed that it was the Space Scout returning. Foster was thankful for its return and hoped for an end of such interruptions to routine. A radio operator girl came to Foster and said worriedly:

"It's the scout ship, Colonel Foster, she's not responding to our call sign."

The form of the echo, and later visual sighting, confirmed that it was the Space Scout. "It'll be a comms failure." Foster said, "I'll go to the docking bay to meet them."

The Space Scout settled on its pad, and its landing jets stopped blasting. The boarding tube fitted over its port side airlock opening. Its hatch opened, and Foster prepared to greet the four crew and ask them how well the ship had performed and what had gone wrong.

To his utter shock, a large squad of aliens rushed out of it, where aliens had never trodden before except rarely a short-lived captive. The ship's original crew were not there, and Foster could guess their fate. The aliens were hard and efficient and skilled. Their leader shot Foster's pistol out of his hand as he drew it, jarring his right hand badly; he put a pistol muzzle against his forehead, while others shot out three security cameras. Foster reached for his walkietalkie, to get a warning out, but the alien pistol-whipped him hard in the face, and the walkietalkie fell, and was kicked out of reach.

"From now on *I'm* in charge here." he announced in English through an electronic and ultrasound device which scanned the shape of his liquid-filled mouth and throat. "We know that our hypnotizing device does not work on you." he continued, "but if you do not help us we will obliterate your Moonbase and all its personnel."

The control room staff were wondering what the noise in the passage was when part of his squad ran in and quickly cleared and secured the room and set switches to stop other parts of Moonbase from getting signals out or operating weapons, for they knew much about Moonbase and SHADO via their brainwashing gear from the Interceptor pilot Regan who they had captured in an earlier incident.

From promise of far exploration Man had suddenly been thrown back to being shut in

near Earth, and Foster uncomfortably remembered religious cosmologies where the appointed realm of worldly Man stops at the Moon's orbit and it is said that pushing further without permission will cause the End by bringing down the final retaliation from the Powers.

Foster had to obey him, for he was the only chance for the Earth people there, while he stayed alive. He went in with them. He could only listen to orders in alienese going out into space over a beam-aerial chosen so Earth would not hear it, and running and shouts and shots, and doors being ray-burned or blasted through, as the aliens secured the rest of Moonbase and rounded up its staff into one room. What would have happened if he had resisted and fought and fallen there, to him a short routine journey from home, but before Man had mechanized transport a distance that few men at horse or sail speed travelled in a lifetime? Moonbase used by the aliens as a servicing and resupplying base and a transit depot for abductees, the night-illuminating Moon becoming a thing of dread for people seeing it from the ground as aliens come and go with only close-in ground defences to get past and those only until they are one by one picked off, after that severe enforced restrictions on human technology to stop Man from resisting them effectively again, some tribes and groups worshipping them as gods, things even worse than if SHADO had left the aliens alone all the time to abduct as they wished.

A last-ditch scratch armed relief force comes up from Earth in as many Moon-shuttles as can be got ready in time. As they come near, the same order as often goes out from Moonbase's command room, and Interceptor pilots drop feet-first through sloping chutes into their cockpits, and Moonbase's last flight of Interceptors blasts off as their silo lid opens. The relief force hope - briefly. But the pilots behind the Interceptors' windscreens are no offspring of Earth, and as they blast the shuttles to scrap the relief party briefly see the red spacesuits and the grey helmets, and green-stained faces exclaiming in triumph.

He had to stop that from happening. If the alien commander had decided to be sure of what was sure and order his men to open all Moonbase to space to make a quick end of its staff, SHADO's story would soon have ended. But he was trying to take Moonbase in full working order and its staff alive, and other plans as well, and it would be seen whether he would succeed. Foster was determined to resist them, and, as he once said, "If it ends me up in front of an alien firing squad, then it does."

They ordered him to report to Earth that things were normal. At least one of them clearly knew enough English to tell what he was saying. He wondered why SHADO could not have put in a hidden alarm button like in banks and the like, and worked out a better set of codewords. He had one hope. He switched the radio to HQ on, and Straker's face appeared on the screen.

"Foster, what's been going on? We've been trying to raise you for the last 15 minutes!" he exclaimed in his deep basement hidden under a film studio in southern England.

"Sorry, commander, ..." Foster started, as if he should carry all the blame.

"I want a full report," Straker said sharply, "Your failure could have proved crucial."

"The new operative, Raymond Franklin, who took over from Osborne, threw a few wrong switches," Foster explained.

"Sounds plausible to me, Ed. A new operative could easily make a mistake," said Freeman, standing beside Straker back on Earth which Foster now suddenly felt so far from at alien gunpoint in a place where he had always been safe and respected.

Luckily Straker decided to check on a computer who Franklin and Osborne were. "I don't think he means the Franklin who's at Moonbase now." he said, "We had an incident when a SHADO man was killed by a man called Franklin who was an agent acting for the aliens and

he got in by masquerading as a SHADO man called Osborne.". He realized that some sort of pro-alien treachery had happened in Moonbase, and that Foster was under coercion; he hoped silently that Foster could give more information as soon as possible.

As soon as the aliens had secured Moonbase's defence controls, they had called the rest of their fleet in. In they came, for the first time in years able to safely come in at full deep-space speed and slow by whiplashing close round the Moon and run for Earth. Below them, Interceptors and ground missiles slept in their silos. SID warned in vain: they left it alone, for it would serve them as a useful navigation aid. For the first time the aliens were masters inside the feared enemy base which had destroyed off so many good men and craft of theirs as routinely as a man with a gun on their own world shooting desert grazing animals which have intruded into a food plantation. Two of them shoved Foster out of the control room and along a corridor. Among their talk he recognized an alienese word meaning "to the craft" which he had deciphered in a previous scrape with them. They were starting to clear Moonbase of its human staff, flushing them down their ancient one-way road where Leila Carlin, and Regan's wife, and many others, had gone down the centuries; and Foster was the first. Meanwhile, the alien fleet commander's UFO pulled away from his fleet and landed by Moonbase. He with his two assistants got out, airlocked in, went into the control room, and became the next commander of Moonbase, an alien in its command seat, while a subordinate of his in another UFO took over command of his fleet. The other aliens in there or near saluted him in their own way and exclaimed together what sounded like "Karsa zdan 'e!". It seemed to be over.

They should have handcuffed Foster. But they did not. Foster or Straker would have routinely court-martialled any SHADO guard who missed out such a well-known routine precaution when holding a combat-trained prisoner. OK, to look convincing he had to have his hands free on the radio-video link to Straker, but they should have handcuffed him after that. As they got to the Space Scout, one went ahead of Foster to open the hatch. A raygun shot went wide as Foster quickly grabbed him and shoved him against the other. In the effort a bad pain stabbed at Foster's damaged right wrist. Bordered by spacesuits, and one by a backpack propulsor also, they could not regain their balance quick enough and catch up with Foster while he slammed the hatch and secured it. Thankfully, aliens had refuelled the Space Scout from Moonbase's stores, planning their own use for it with the abductees, whether to get it to their own world somehow, or to transship them somewhere. Foster was just in time before a volley of alien rifle fire would have ended the story, and was thankful for the alien obsession with taking people alive for their organs, else the Moonbase staff certainly would already have been summarily shot or spaced (= exposed to space vacuum), after they had had a hand in the deaths of so many aliens down the years.

Small-arms fire scarred the ship's outside as Foster blasted off for Earth. By then, UFO's were passing the Moon, and one of them was ordered to dispose of him. The Space Scout had not been re-armed, and he had no defence except dodging. As soon as he could he radioed SHADO headquarters saying what had happened, tight-beam so Moonbase and stray UFO's would not hear it. By some miracle he reached Earth atmosphere. The Space Scout was not meant to pull against Earth gravity, and he could only glide to slow his falling speed and look for somewhere to ditch in the sea or a lake, all the time dodging UFO fire. Fortunately its skin, designed to resist re-entry heat friction in an emergency landing on Earth, could take a lot of UFO plasma cannon fire before melting or holing. He aimed for a place on the east coast of Canada where he knew there was a good coastguard station, and that Skydiver was near.

When the Space Scout was in the water, it would be a sitting duck, but Sky 1 had been launched and disposed of the pursuing UFO just in time. He was down, and there was nothing much more that he could do but let them take him to hospital and put his right arm in a cast and a sling, for his pistol being shot out of his hand had broken the scaphoid bone in his right wrist.

Warned, SHADO headquarters alerted all possible airforce fighter planes to scramble, and to man any ground missiles that were ready. As the UFO's came in to systematically pick off strategic targets, they were resisted much better than expected, and lost so many ships that the alien commander called them back to Moonbase. He still had Moonbase, and wondered whether to hold it, or to destroy it and leave. But the room that they were using as a brig for the humans had many hiding places which the humans knew of better. With the Space Scout gone, the humans would have to be shipped out in UFO-fuls, and two alien guards went in to choose the first batch. Too many of Moonbase's staff than this alarm showed to be advisable, were lightly-built girls with their current fashion of wearing magenta wigs, instead of armed forces trained men who could fight back effectively; but three pilots and a repairman hid behind lockers and managed to jump the two aliens and take their rifles. With these they shot the two, and then three more aliens who ran in to restore order, and took their weapons, and a general rising of the prisoners started. During this a pilot and the repairman rushed into the control room and shot the alien commander and his assistants who were partway through a destruct sequence, and the rest of the occupiers did not last long. They found blasting charges fastened to outside walls in two places: if the rebellion had been half a minute slower the aliens would have stopped it by summarily spacing all the humans.

Even while aliens were still holding some rooms, the staff at the cost of three lives retook the room where the chutes into the Interceptor silo were, and the Interceptors took off piloted by the species that they were built by and for; and they switched the static defences on again. This was just in time as the retreating enemy fleet came with orders to destroy Moonbase with massed gunfire. They lost more ships; the rest backed away from the Moon and set off home.

When Moonbase was back to normal routine, Straker left Freeman in charge in headquarters and flew to Washington to tell those responsible what had happened to their plan to send one lightly-armed ship into the distance while the aliens are still around. Perhaps one day SHADO would make the Solar System safe for Men to explore it unarmed at will, but that was not so yet. But the alien commander's UFO was left beside Moonbase, and it did not self-destruct; perhaps men will manage to copy it some time and go wherever the aliens go.

Notes: Much of the extra matter that I have written which is not in the comic, can be sensibly deduced to have happened: for example, I cannot believe that only 3 aliens could take over and hold such a big place as Moonbase, or that it would be safe for the aliens merely to keep the humans out of the control room and let them do what they liked elsewhere. Also, I have brought a long way forward the time when Foster gets a full message to SHADO about what happened in Moonbase: the alien fleet could start to come in as soon as Moonbase's defences were switched off, and I cannot accept that Moonbase is off the air for 15 minutes, and more times passes before Foster escapes, and he flies from Moon to Earth at human spacecraft speed, and splashes down, and is rescued, and got to hospital, and his damaged arm is treated, and then he waits for Straker to ask before telling that the aliens had Moonbase, and, when Straker contacts people, such Defence staff that know about SHADO and UFO's are rounded up from wherever else they are and got to a meeting room

or to secure phones, and orders are passed on to people who also have to be rounded up from other activities, and missiles are loaded onto transporter lorries, and taken long distances along traffic-choked roads to hundreds of strategic sites, and unloaded and set up, all in less time than it takes UFO's at UFO speed to get from limit of detectability to low Earth atmosphere, that not being a long time if incoming UFO sequences in the TV episodes happen at anything like real-time.