

Journey For The Brave

By Alan E. Nourse

**Courage will be a big qualification for
the pilot who flies the first moon rocket. But
who decides if a man is brave—or a coward?...**

The base diner was hot and stuffy that night as Scotty Johnson sat with Mitch and Jack and the other boys, sipping his last cup of coffee before Zero Hour rolled around. Mitch and Jack had succeeded in sneaking him out of town before the reporters had guessed what was happening. Now they sat in silence, sipping their coffee, glancing at him from time to time as though to make sure he were still there. It annoyed Scotty. This was the time to laugh, and joke, and bull away as if nothing was going to happen at all.

The waitress trotted over with a coffee pot, and Scotty gave her his widest leer. "You know, I can't think of anything I'd rather have right now than a cup of coffee from you," he said. "How about a date in about ten days?"

The girl looked startled, and glanced away nervously. Mitch gave a tight little laugh. "Better watch out. Scotty. She's liable to be waiting on the landing field when you get back—"

They all laughed at that, and then silence fell again. They were nervous. Scotty could sense it, even though they tried to cover it up. All through these weeks of preparation in the hot New Mexico sun, the tension had been growing. But *he* should be the one to be nervous, not these lads. After all, who was the star of this show? Scotty nuzzled his coffee, and twisted his wiry five-foot-two inch

frame around so that he could see the door. "Better drink up," he said. "The jeep should be here any minute."

Mitch nodded and emptied his cup as the jeep's tires screeched on the pavement outside. The door of the coffeeshop burst open, and a head with an MP's crash helmet popped in. "All set, Scotty? Let's go!"

Scotty nodded. His blue eyes were bright as he buttoned up his jacket and winked at the waitress. Then he led the group to the door. "Love that gal," he said.

The driver raced the motor as they piled in and the jeep took off down the concrete strip with a roar. The driver turned an admiring glance toward Scotty. "All set for the big trip, man?"

Scotty grinned. "Been sleeping in a coffin all week, just for practice."

"Man, you may need that practice. You'll be good and stiff before you get out—" He broke off, horrified at the pun.

Scotty roared with glee. "You think you're kidding! That's all right—the way I see it, I'm getting ten days vacation on the Government, and plenty of pay besides. And once I get up there, I won't need much muscle to make my way around, they tell me." He lit a cigarette, peering down the strip ahead of them. Far ahead he could see the batteries of searchlights, picking out the tall, shiny spire of the ship. It stood tall in its scaffolding, pointing like a needle toward the black star-lit sky. Already the ground below it was swarming with tiny figures, moving about on the final check-down. My ship, thought Scotty. I helped to build it. And here's one

job where they need a cocky, loud-mouthed little shrimp more than anything else in the world—

Another jeep swerved in beside them on the strip. Scotty caught a glimpse of the General and a couple of official-looking civilians.

"Everybody's going to see you off," said Mitch from the back seat.

"Yeah—the whole damned crowd. My big day."

"You sure you got everything down cold?"

Scotty gave him a scornful glance. "You kidding? How could I miss?" His freckled face broke into a grin from ear to ear, and his eyes were bright with excitement. "Why I've got nothing to do but crawl in and zip things up after me. Don't even have to throw the fatal switch—they take care of everything from outside. I'm telling you, it's a cinch. Three days to tell myself sea stories—and then I'll crawl out and tell you boys what Lady Moon *really* looks like."

A crowd of reporters and photographers were waiting as the jeep sped up to the huge barbed-wire enclosure surrounding the ship. Scotty stuck his head out of the jeep and gave them a big grin. The flashbulbs popped. Then the jeep roared on toward the field shack. Scotty stepped out, staring up at the tall sleek ship. A little bottom-heavy now, perhaps, but with the first and second stages disengaged—a beauty of a ship. He stepped into the field shack, and grinned up at the General. "Final check go all right?"

The General nodded and smiled. "This is the Secretary of Defense, Scotty—"

"Well! Guess I'm rating big visitors tonight!" He gave the man's hand a jaunty shake.

"You're taking a big trip," said the Secretary. "Tell me, Mr. Johnson—how does it feel to be the first man to go to the Moon?"

"Can't say. I haven't been there yet."

"You'd better get aboard," said the General. "Everything's been checked down. You'll have half an hour to make your own checks from inside. How's your weight?"

"Down to 128."

"Fine. That's better than we'd hoped. But don't be afraid to holler if something doesn't look right—" He extended his hand, gripped Scotty's tightly. "Good luck, lad. We're with you all the way."

A soldier rode up the gantry with him, high up past the break-lines of the first and second stages, to the small open port in the final stage of the rocket. Scotty could feel the eyes on him from below as he climbed into the port—one lone man to jockey the first manned ship to the Moon. A big job, a job that really took guts. He grinned, and slid through into the passenger chamber. Carefully he reached back and slammed the port shut behind him with a farewell wave to the soldier, and gave the lock-wheel a spin, until he heard the seal click. Then he slipped down into the half-sitting, half-reclining couch which nearly filled the tiny chamber. His heart was pounding in his throat as he snapped on the radio phone. "Okay, I'm in," he said.



"Got her locked up?" Mitch's voice grated in his earphones.

"Ay, ay."

"Give her a careful check inside there. Then stand by."

Scotty nodded and checked the banks of instruments on the tiny panel before him. He was the payload on this trip; the ship was little more than an upholstered tube, with him jammed tight in one end and enough fuel to land him on the Moon and shoot him off again in behind him. The other sections, far huger than this little pellet with him in the middle, would drive him out, break the frightful hold that Earth held on her subjects. But there was nothing superfluous here, nothing he did not actually need, and he checked quickly. Then he leaned back and flipped on the forward televiewer....

The vast black expanse of space, peppered with a thousand bright pinpoints of light, suddenly appeared on the screen inches from his face. It took him by surprise; his hand jerked down on the switch again, and he wiped a line of droplets from his upper lip, and closed his eyes, his heart pounding against his ribs.

The radio blipped in his ear. "Thirty minutes to Zero," it said—

It struck Scotty Johnson, then, how very much alone he was.

He felt a chill go down his spine, and he turned his eyes about the tiny chamber. Forward, within arm's length, was the dull glint of metal panelling and coiled wires and tight atmosphere sealing. His small wiry body sank against the deep couch, and he drew the safety webbing across his chest and thighs, the chill in his mind deepening. Above him was another pad of soft material to protect his head; his feet were lodged against a solid bar at the foot of the couch. Inevitably, he thought of a cocoon. A tight, soft, warm cocoon. And he was alone inside it—

He tried to think when, in all his thirty-four years, he had been so completely and utterly alone.

He sat very still, listening. All about him was silence. A muted, deathly silence. His head-set pressed tight against his ears, and he shook his head, wondering if he had actually heard the words coming into his ears a few seconds before. Zero minus thirty minutes. Thirty minutes to wait, alone—

Suddenly, he knew that he was very much afraid—

His lips formed a sneer, and he tried to fight the idea out of his mind. He was no longer afraid of anything. Those days were gone, far away. Nothing could scare Scotty Johnson—not even being

completely alone. He reached out his hand, ran a finger over the control board. Oxygen, chamber pressure, emergency anaesthetic, blast-control—his hand trembled, and the thought seeped back into his mind again. A voice was whispering, deep in his ear, *you're afraid, little man, afraid—!* He could feel the droplets of moisture forming on his forehead, and even the sound of his breath was muted in the silent chamber.

The seconds ticked by. Still the voice whispered. He was alone—alone and afraid. No one could help him now, no one in the world. This was his own world, here in this tight little cabin, and he could die here and nobody would ever know—

He shook his head savagely. Alone? Ridiculous! At the foot of the ship were a hundred people, all watching, all thinking about him. They had built this ship, they were for him all the way. They would get him safely off the ground, and then it would be just like a subway ride—

But after the blast-off—what then? The hundred men were staying behind. There were no men where he was going. There was nothing there. Nothing but death.

His breath was coming faster, and he felt the first chill of panic stir in his mind. He tried to fight it down angrily. What was there to get excited about? Nobody had forced him into this seat. He'd begged for it! For five long years it had been an obsession, his wildest dream, to be sitting in this seat, waiting for the Zero-count to come through the headphones. Years of hoping, of pulling strings, of talking to people and dropping chance remarks, of studying and working and practicing—and finally, the note in his box, the trip down to the General's field office that day.

Inside the office the General had sat down, regarding him for a long moment with those cool grey eyes of his. Then he said, "You're sure you want to do this, Scotty? Dead sure?"

Scotty had nodded, hardly able to find his voice. "I'd give anything. You've got to let me go."

The General nodded slowly. "You might have to give your life. Does it mean that much to you? Millions of dollars have gone into this ship, but there's no way to be sure of it. It's a fearful gamble."

"I'll take any odds, General. The sheep and the chickens came back. I'll come back."

The General looked out the window, his face carved with weary lines. "I hate to send a man, alone. But what we need to know, one man can find out. Two would be a waste—a tragic waste. The sheep and chickens didn't land, they just circled. But one man must go up, to land a ship, and take off again, for the first time." His eyes caught Scotty's gravely. "I want you to know why it's got to be you alone. We can't gamble on two men's lives, when one will do. *You're the guinea pig!*"

Scotty had stood up then, laughing. "Are you trying to frighten me? Look, General—I've been working on this ship since it first started. I know it inside out and backwards. I'm not afraid of this trip. I've got to be the one to go."

The General had shifted some papers on his desk. "All right. They weighed you in at 142 pounds. Our calculations call for 135. Every ounce over that cuts a hard percentage out of your fuel. You'll have to suck down."

"I can do that."

"All right—but don't starve yourself. And don't dehydrate any more than you absolutely must. You'll have enough water for ten days, no more. Three up, three back, four there. Now then. The psych boys will go to work on your coordination for the next few days. That's critical. The first and second stages will disengage automatically, but you'll have to maneuver your own landing."

Scotty nodded. "I've been maneuvering dummies until I'm blue in the face."

"You'll need it pounded in."

"It's pounded, don't worry."

The General gave a satisfied nod. "All right, Scotty. See you at the blast-off. And remember, if you want to pull out—nobody will blame you. Right down to the last minute before Zero, you can pull out—"

"I don't think so," said Scotty. "I don't think I'm going to pull out. Not on this one."

"Zero minus twenty minutes—"

The harsh metallic voice dragged Scotty back to the present with a jolt. For a moment he had almost regained the old familiar burn of self-assured bravado he had felt as he had finished talking to the General that day and sauntered out toward the ship standing in the launching scaffold. He had even been smiling as he recalled the interview—

But now his eye caught the dull gleam of the control board before him, and his smile faded.

The voice was whispering softly, deep inside his head: *Come off it, Scotty. Who are you trying to kid?*

His hand trembled, and he leaned back, forcing his tense leg muscles to relax. What do you mean, who am I trying to kid? he thought, angrily. You're crazy. Would I be kidding myself? I quit kidding myself years ago. I know what I'm up to. This is a journey for heroes, and I'm going to be the hero, this time. *For sure.* This time there won't be any doubt. *They* won't have any doubt, and *I* won't have any doubt—

You're alone, Scotty. Remember? You can quit acting now.

He shuddered, and glanced uneasily around the tiny closed chamber. Alone? What a laugh. A man can never be alone. There are always a million memories, wheeling and spinning and roaring around inside your head. Memories of people, of hopes and dreams and fears. You can build a heavy wall in your mind to keep them back, but when you're alone, and scared, and helpless, the wall starts to crumble down—

There's nobody to fool any more, Scotty. The act is over. Admit it, you're scared, *you can hardly hold still you're so scared*—

He clapped his hands to his ears, trying to shut out the whisper. He kept shaking his head, but it came through like a heavy surf. He sat tense, trembling, with salty droplets pouring down his face, shaking his head helplessly—

You're caught now, the voice whispered. This is a one-way ride, and you know it, and you're *scared*—

"I'm not!"

The earphones clicked. "You say something, Scotty?"

Scotty took a deep breath, unclenching his hands. "No, no—nothing. What's the Zero-count, Mitch?"

"Zero minus sixteen minutes. Everything set?"

"All set. I wish we could get going." Scotty twisted on the couch, feeling the silence close down around him like a stifling blanket. He was almost shouting to himself. All right, I'm scared! Wouldn't anybody be scared? Sitting here, waiting, thinking about two hundred thousand miles of nothing with a rocky world of death at the other end to land on? Why shouldn't I be scared? They can stay back here, and track me with their scopes and radar—it's fine for them. It's fine for the Secretary of Defense, too—no skin off his back if something happens. And the big boys in Hollywood can sit back at their desks and rub their fat hands together and hope their cameras work all right, hope the pictures come out good, so they can make their pile, *if I get back*. Big gamble for them. FIRST MOON PICTURES RELEASED—SEE MAN'S GREATEST ADVENTURE IN GLORIOUS TECHNICOLOR—AUTHENTIC FILMS FROM THE FIRST MOON ROCKET—PRICES ONLY SLIGHTLY ADVANCED. Big gamble. Those films will help pay for a lot of fuel, a lot of metal and man-hours spent on this ship—

But can it pay for a life?

Bitterness swept through Scotty's mind, sharply. It was *his* life they were bartering, *he* was to be the star of those films—dead or alive. He could be killed in the blast-off, and the films would keep rolling, keep churning out the yardage, and thirty years later they could pick up the film and still make their nice safe pile—thirty years of cold death for him—

But why are you whining now, little man? Why all the tears, all of a sudden? You asked for it. You made your bed, right from scratch. You wanted to be the hero, nothing else would do. Well, here you are, Hero. Tough. You asked for it—

But *why*?

And then something was tugging at his mind, seeping through the heavy wall of memory. A terrible, loathsome thought. He shook his head, desperately, trying to fight it back, but the wall began to crumble. Long-dead pictures began drifting through, long-hidden memories. A bare whisper of thought, cold, relentless, devastating. Admit it, Scotty. *You had to come*. You had to be sitting in this seat; you couldn't do anything else, could you? You couldn't let them know about you. You couldn't bear to let the boys down on the field suspect the truth, could you, Scotty? You looked into their eyes, and you were afraid they suspected, like Matty had suspected, like Dad had suspected so many years ago—You had to come here. *You couldn't help yourself, could you?*

The whisper broke into a coarse, derisive laugh, and Scotty cowered back, shaking his head in denial, his whole body trembling. *Take a look, Scotty—take a good look!* Are you trying to hide the truth from *yourself*? But you can't get away with that. You can't hide it from yourself any longer—

And then the wall of memory buckled, and split wide open. You can fool the whole world, Scotty—but you can't fool yourself, the voice screamed in his ear. You can run, and hide, and twist, and lie, but you can't ever really fool yourself. You know it's true. You always have known.

You're a coward, Scotty. A dirty yellow coward. You always have been, and you always will be—

"Zero minus ten minutes—"

It wasn't true. He shook his head helplessly as his fingers found the safety belts, tightened them down fiercely on his chest and legs. Wasn't he sitting here now, waiting for the last count, waiting to start on the greatest adventure man had ever attempted? Would he be *here* if he were a coward? He snarled and clenched his fists tight on the arm-rests. It was a lie, it *couldn't* be true. No man can stare himself in the face and call himself a coward when there is a spark of life left in him at all. He can call himself a cheat, or a liar, or a fake—those were things that could be changed, things that could be made up for. But a coward had something wrong deep inside, something that was built in, that could never be changed as long as a man lived. No man could call himself *that*.

Scotty shook his head, half laughing, half crying. He was scared, sure. Anybody would be scared. But he wasn't a coward. He was in this ship because he wanted fame, because he craved excitement and adventure. Nothing had made him volunteer. He'd done it because he was that kind of guy—

But he knew that was a lie. Its very falsehood writhed in his brain as he thought it. You're here because your cheap, cowardly little soul couldn't bear to face itself. You're here because you couldn't bear the looks of the men around you, with their barbed wise-cracks and their guarded half-smiles. They thought you couldn't see them! But the whispers were there, and you couldn't stand for them to guess—

But what did he care what *they* thought? What were they to him? *He* knew he was better than they were—quicker, smarter, braver. He didn't have to prove anything to them—

And Matty? Does Matty know how brave you are, Hero? Can you prove to Matty that you're not a coward? Matty knows about you. Remember?

Scotty shook his head, fearfully. That was so long ago—

But things like that are never long ago, Scotty. They stay with you as long as you live. Sure, the Army said you were a hero, they gave you a Silver Star—but what would Matty say—if he could ever say anything again? Would *he* say you were a hero?

Suddenly Matty's torn and twisted face seemed to be peering out at him from the control panel. His mind went whirling back through the years, completely out of control. In an instant he had slipped back fifteen long years, back to the hot, stinking sweaty deadliness of that little jungle island. They had been deep in the jungle that night, holed in, scared to move, afraid even to breath. For a week they had been waiting, waiting for the snipers to move in and spot them. He could remember the cold, desperate fear that had gnawed at him that night as he and Bill Matthews had clutched their rifles, waiting, creeping forward along the jungle trail through the blackness and the night sounds. His clothes had stuck to his body with sweat as they crept, the sweat of mortal fear. The mosquitoes whined in clouds around his head; his body stung with a thousand insect bites. Up ahead, somewhere in the sticky blackness, was a machine-gun, blocking them from their supplies, blocking them from the plasma and penicillin powder the patrol needed more than any food or water. They had been waiting for many days, and they

were weak with hunger and thirst—but there was a gun, and sharp, cruel eyes watching—

They had been moving in pairs, and Scotty had felt the fear clutching his chest, fear beyond any words. He and Matty were working their way down a swampy river bottom, sliding on their bellies in the muck, when they had spotted the nest. And then the fear and panic building up inside him had broken through. He had jumped up, screaming, and burst forward, gun chattering in his hand.

Blind rage and fear drove him forward as the startled gunners swivelled their gun, piercing the night with their sharp cries. Matty had shouted at him to get down, but he ran forward in the darkness, wildly. A burst of fire screamed out at him through the jungle; he slid into the mud, panting, still firing into the face of the blazing machine-gun, until he saw the last man twist, and fall, and the gun fell silent.

A hero, they said. But later he had found Matty, lying twisted with his head split open, a line of open holes cutting down through his neck and across his shoulders—

Another few seconds, another instant of control would have given them time to get the machine-gun in crossfire. But something had exploded in Scotty's brain that night—a fear greater than any fear of being shot, a fear of being exposed for what he was, what he knew he was. He had dragged Matty back, through the long miles of sniper-ridden jungle, and they called him a hero, and he had never told them who had broken first and drawn the deadly fire—

His forehead stood out with sweat now, and he tried to hide his eyes. He had spent many years forgetting that horrible night, trying

to cleanse himself of the depths of guilt that had eaten away at him—and now it was back, harsh and undeniable, intensified by years of self-deceit and self-justification and rationalization. But the chips were down now. In a few moments a great fire would explode deep in the bowels of this ship, and he would be driven forward, far out into space, along trails never blazed by man.

"Zero minus five minutes. Give her a final check, Scotty—"

He jerked in his seat as though he had been struck. *Five minutes!* His mind whirled with memories, and the cold fear cut through him like a knife. In a moment of panic his mind was screaming, get out, now, before it's too late! The General said you could pull out, right down to the last minute—well, *pull out, now, before the engines start—*

But a peal of derisive laughter roared through his mind. There had been reporters, news stories. He had said things that had been splashed across a million newspapers. Back out now? Tell the world what a coward he was? Then everybody would know—the boys down below, Matty, Dad—Dad had never actually *said* it, but it had always been there, as long as Scotty could remember. He had tried and tried to make up for his small size, for his skinny legs and bony chest.

It hadn't been his fault that Dad was such a big man, such a rugged, powerful man. Those long hunting trips up through Canada—a man had to share the load, there was no place for weakness and weariness there. And Dad had taken him along, once, until he had tired, and turned his ankle on a short portage. They had carried him out—and he knew that he had lost his Dad that day. Dad hadn't

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